

Throughout history people have been persecuted because they are different. The difference might have been their race, faith, sexual orientation or something else. Persecution is a strong word, but people are being discriminated against today for the very same reasons.

So this is what you need to know about equality, diversity and inclusion.

Let's start with equality. Equality is about making sure people aren't disadvantaged, discriminated against or excluded from full and fair participation.

Although we often think of discrimination in terms of employment, it also concerns how we are treated when we are customers, and the way we treat others.

But treating everyone equally doesn't necessarily mean treating everyone in exactly the same way, some people might need more help to get the same chances.

The legislation which protects and supports us in this area is the 2010 Equality Act. A key part of this Act is what's known as the protected characteristics. There are nine in total, we'll have a look at each of them and then see some of the different ways people discriminate against others.

Age is a protected characteristic. Perhaps a job applicant wasn't accepted as they were thought to be 'too old' or 'a bit past it' – or they 'didn't have enough experience'. An example of discrimination would be an employer stating the applicant must have ten years' experience, so as to discriminate against younger people.

A disability could be to do with the senses, like a visual or hearing impairment, or a physical disability perhaps something that restricts a person's movement, and there are also mental disabilities such as schizophrenia, anxiety or a disability caused by depression.

Race includes colour, nationality, citizenship and ethnic or national origins.

There are lots of cases where people have been discriminated against because of their religious or philosophical beliefs, but it's also illegal to discriminate against someone because they have no religious or philosophical beliefs.

A person's sex, or gender, and also gender reassignment – both during and after the reassignment process are protected as is a person's sexual orientation and marital status –whether they're married, divorced, in a civil partnership or single. And finally, pregnancy and maternity so for example, a woman can't be asked to leave a restaurant because she's breast feeding a child.

Let's have a look at three different types of discrimination.

Perhaps the most obvious is when people are directly discriminated against.

This is Jake he's got plenty of experience of working in restaurants and felt he had a good chance when he saw that waiting staff were needed - so he applied for the job. The manageress wanted to employ a woman because she felt women attracted more customers. This is an example of direct discrimination. Jake was discriminated against because he's man. His sex, or gender.

Let's say the manageress was happy to employ male waiting staff, but she didn't employ Jake because she thought that, as he was friends with a lot of gay people, he might also be gay. In this case, he would have been discriminated against by perception or association of the protected characteristic – sexual orientation.

This restaurant has a dress code which says that staff in customer facing roles mustn't use headwear. It's the same rule for everyone, but what this means is that staff who use headwear as part of their culture or faith are being discriminated against. And this is an example of indirect discrimination. The owners would have to have an objective reason to justify this policy for it not to be discriminating against those members of staff.

So people can be discriminated against for all sorts of reasons and in lots of different ways. But differences are also used to tease, mock, harass or bully. People who do this will often say things like they were 'only having a laugh', or 'it's just a bit of fun', 'it doesn't mean anything'. The victims use words like degrading, humiliating, intimidating.

If someone feels threatened, upset or disturbed by a particular behaviour, then that's harassment, whether it's intentional or not.

As individuals we have different values, attitudes, beliefs and abilities - we come from different backgrounds and form a diverse culture. Understanding the legislation is part of ensuring that everyone is included and can fully participate, and making sure we're all on a level playing field and treated fairly and equally.