

Social Equality

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Social equality is a social state of affairs in which all people within a specific society or isolated group have the same status in a certain respect. At the very least, social equality includes equal rights under the law, such as security, voting rights, freedom of speech and assembly, and the extent of property rights. However, it also includes concepts of economic equity, i.e. access to education, health care and other social securities. It also includes equal opportunities and obligations, and so involves the whole of society.

Social equality requires the lack of legally enforced social class or caste boundaries and the lack of unjustified discrimination motivated by an inalienable part of a person's identity. For example, gender, age, sexual orientation, origin, caste or class, income or property, language, religion, convictions, opinions, health or disability must not result in unequal treatment under the law and should not reduce opportunities unjustifiably.

Social equality refers to social, rather than economic, or income equality. "Equal opportunities" is interpreted as being judged by ability, which is compatible with a free-market economy. A problem is horizontal inequality, the inequality of two persons of same origin and ability.

Perfect social equality is an ideal situation that, for various reasons, does not exist in any society in the world today. The reasons for this are widely debated. Reasons cited for social inequality commonly include economics, immigration/emigration, foreign politics and national politics. Also, in complexity economics, it has been found that horizontal inequality arises in complex systems.

A counterexample to social equality was the social inequality of medieval Europe, where a person's estate, which was usually inherited, determined the legal and social rights the person had. For example, clergy could claim the benefit of clergy to receive a more lenient punishment for a crime. Likewise, women have historically been and still are in some countries formally denied access to higher education--even if they could pay the tuition. In 19th century Europe, if female enrollment was even permitted, women had to apply for an "exemption from gender" to enroll in a university.

In apartheid-era South Africa, both blacks and whites had formal access to health care and similar public services. However, the segregated health care arranged for blacks did not meet the same standards as those for whites. That is, there was enforced social inequality.