**Racism and Disability: Developing Anti-Racism Perspectives for Disabled People** Summary Module 11

Racism and racist attitudes and behaviour shaped the British Empire.

Then the Commonwealth.

Ideas of European superiority gave them a sense of entitlement during the European Age of Exploration (1500-1900) This was based on better boat building, new navigational skills and population expansion and greed.

The Age of European Exploitation was first by crude stealing of gold, silver. Next by setting up plantations and mines to extract goods such as sugar, coffee, tobacco, cotton tea and silver.

To make this happen cheap labour was needed and Africa was the used to providefor slaves to the Americas. This was seen as OK because of ideas of racism and white superiority. Later this sense of entitlement led to Europeans to lay claim to India, Malaya, South Seas, Australia, New Zealand and much of Africa. The Colonoist exploited the people and the natural resources. Where the climate suited the Europeans, they also settled in larger numbers such as South Africa, Australia, New Zealand .

The transfers of wealth to Europe and in particular Britain led to the Industrial Revolution and the modern day Global Economy. This Colonisation was built on exploitation of social class, sexism, racism and environment, leading to our current Global Problems of Inequality and devastation.

Underlying all of this was a deep negativity to disabled people who were either left to die, to survive on charity, or to perform alongside non-disabled people when they had a chance to thrive.

**As disabled people** we live our lives on the receiving end of prejudice and discrimination. This is based on generalised perceptions arising from the false idea of ‘normality’. Our identified physical or mental impairments expose us to barriers in the environment, social organisation and attitudes. Many of us with hidden impairments feel compelled by the force of prejudice in society to pretend we are not disabled and cover up our hidden impairments and the barriers we face.

Those who are ‘Black’ or belonging to an ethnic group may also experience another prejudice-racism which is generally based on visually identified characteristics and so they ‘cannot pass’ as ‘white’.

**Racism according to the Oxford dictionary is ‘Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism by an individual, community, or institution against a person or people on the basis of their membership of a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized’**.

At various places and times in history, racism has also become an ideology- the belief that different races possess distinct characteristics, abilities, or qualities, especially so as to distinguish them as **inferior or superior** to one another.

There are some more extreme versions which are backed by **false** race-science, such as under the Nazis or in Apartheid South Africa. This **pseudo-science of eugenics** has also been applied to disabled people with devastating results.

**Racism isn't just an ideology but an institution**. Its origins don't lie in bad ideas or in the human nature. Rather, racism originated with capitalism and the slave trade. As the writer CLR James put it, **"The conception of dividing people by race begins with the slave trade. This thing was so shocking, so opposed to all the conceptions of society which religion and philosophers had…that the only justification by which humanity could face it was to divide people into races and decide that the Africans were an inferior race."** As historian Eric Williams writes in his book Capitalism and Slavery, **"Slavery was not born of racism; rather, racism was the consequence of slavery."**

Racism is a relatively modern concept, arising in the European [age of imperialism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_imperialism), the subsequent growth of [capitalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capitalism), and especially the [Atlantic slave trade](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic_slave_trade), of which it was a major driving force. It was also a major force behind racial segregation especially in the [United States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States) in the 19th and early 20th centuries and [South Africa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Africa) under [Apartheid](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apartheid_in_South_Africa).

19th and 20th Century racism in [Western culture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_world) is particularly well studied and clear. Racism has played a role in [genocides](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genocide) such as [the Holocaust](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Holocaust), the [Armenian genocide](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian_genocide), the [genocide of Serbs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genocide_of_Serbs_in_the_Independent_State_of_Croatia), as well as colonial projects including the European [colonization of the Americas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonization_of_the_Americas), [Africa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonisation_of_Africa), and [Asia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_imperialism_in_Asia).

[Indigenous peoples](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_peoples) have been—and are—often subject to racist attitudes. Effectively this means that racism and the roots of racism impact in every part of the British Empire and the subsequent Commonwealth.

**The double ‘wammy’ of racism and disabilism can be powerfully oppressive and disempowering, but can also act as a stimulus for social change. Here we hope to reflect both these forces. When sexism is added for Black disabled women it is a triple wammy.**

We will use the term ‘Black’ in the political sense to relate to all those oppressed by racism rather than relating to skin colour. Today a broarder definition of racism is used **“racism is defined as the expression of racist beliefs (stereotypes), racist emotions (prejudice) or racist behaviours and practices (discrimination) that maintain or exacerbate inequality of opportunity among an ethnic-racial group. Racism is one manifestation of a broader phenomenon of oppression which include sexism, ageism, classism (*and disabilism*)”.**

**ii. The Language the CDPF Uses**

**Disabled People:** Why we still choose to call ourselves ‘disabled people’. In the Commonwealth Disabled People’s Forum (CDPF) we call ourselves ‘**disabled people’** because of the development of the **‘social model of disability’.** In the C19th and C20th, a disabled person’s medical condition was thought to be the root cause of their exclusion from society, an approach now referred to as the **‘medical’ or ‘individual model’** of disability. We use the **‘social model’** of disability, where the barriers of environment, attitude and organisation are what disable people with impairments and lead to prejudice and discrimination.To call ourselves ‘persons with disabilities’ is to accept that we are objects and powerless.We also view ourselves as united by a common oppression, so are proud to identify as ‘**disabled people’. When we are talking about the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** we will use **‘people with disabilities’.**

**iii. Legal definitions**

Though many countries around the globe have passed [laws](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law) related to race and discrimination, the first significant international [human rights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_rights) instrument developed by the [United Nations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations) (UN) was the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_Declaration_of_Human_Rights) (UDHR), which was adopted by the [United Nations General Assembly](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_General_Assembly) in 1948.

The UDHR recognizes that if people are to be treated with dignity, they require [economic rights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_rights), [social rights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_rights) including [education](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education), and the rights to [cultural](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture) and [political](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics) participation and [civil liberty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_liberties). It further states that everyone is entitled to these rights **“without distinction of any kind, such as race,** [**colour**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_skin_color)**,** [**sex**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex)**,** [**language**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language)**,** [**religion**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion)**, political or other opinion,** [**national**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nationality) **or** [**social**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society) **origin, property, birth or other status”.**

The UN does not define "racism"; however, it does define **“racial discrimination**”. According to the 1965 UN [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Convention_on_the_Elimination_of_All_Forms_of_Racial_Discrimination):

**The term “racial discrimination” shall mean any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, colour,** [**descent**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_heritage)**, or national or** [**ethnic**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnicity) **origin that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.**

In their 1978 [United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UNESCO) Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice (Article 1), the UN states, **"All human beings belong to a single species and are descended from a common stock. They are born equal in dignity and rights and all form an integral part of humanity."**

There is no scientific evidence to establish distinct biological races. We are all human beings with different characteristics. However, even if scientists agree that race is, at most, [**a social construct**](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/race-is-a-social-construct-scientists-argue/), any cursory search of the internet reveals that the broader public is not convinced of this. After all, if an Asian person looks so different from a European, how could they *not* be from distinct groups? Even if most scientists reject the concept of “race” as a biological concept, **race exists, undeniably, as a social and political concept.**

The popular classifications of race are based chiefly on skin colour, with other relevant features including height, eyes, and hair. Though these physical differences may appear, on a superficial level, to be very dramatic, they are determined by only a minute portion of the genome: **we as a species have been estimated to** [**share 99.9% of our DNA**](https://www.genome.gov/19016904/faq-about-genetic-and-genomic-science/) **with each other**.

**The few differences that do exist reflect differences in environments and external factors, not core biology**.

Importantly, the evolution of skin colour occurred independently, and did not influence other traits such as mental abilities and behaviour. In fact, science has yet to find evidence that there are [**genetic differences in intelligence**](https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/05/why-people-keep-misunderstanding-the-connection-between-race-and-iq/275876/) between populations. Ultimately, while there certainly are some biological differences between different populations, these differences are few and superficial. The traits that we do share are far more profound.

The UN definition of racial discrimination does not make any distinction between discrimination based on ethnicity and race, in part because the distinction between the two has been a matter of debate among [academics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academia), including [anthropologists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropology). Similarly, in [British law](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_the_United_Kingdom), the phrase *racial group* means "any group of people who are defined by reference to their race, colour, nationality (including citizenship) or ethnic or national origin".

The Preamble of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities makes several pertinent points:-

*“8. Recognizing also* that discrimination against any person on the basis of disability is a violation of the inherent dignity and worth of the human person,…

*9. Recognizing further* the **diversity** of persons with disabilities…

*16. Concerned* about the difficult conditions faced by persons with disabilities who are subject to multiple or aggravated forms of **discrimination on the basis of race, colour**, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, **national, ethnic, indigenous or social origin**, property, birth, age or other status…

25. *Convinced* that a comprehensive and integral international convention to promote and protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities will make a significant contribution to redressing the profound social disadvantage of persons with disabilities and promote their participation in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural spheres with equal opportunities, in both developing and developed countries,..”

**“Article 5 – Equality and non-discrimination**

1. States Parties recognize that all persons are equal before and under the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law.

2. States Parties shall prohibit all discrimination on the basis of disability and guarantee to persons with disabilities equal and effective legal protection against discrimination on all grounds.

3. In order to promote equality and eliminate discrimination, States Parties shall take all appropriate steps to ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided.

4. Specific measures which are necessary to accelerate or achieve de facto equality of persons with disabilities shall not be considered discrimination under the terms of the present Convention”.

The CDPF have adopted the following statement to challenge racism and colonialism.

**Commonwealth Disabled People’s Statement on combatting Racism, Supporting Black Lives Matter and accelerating race equality and decolonization of the media, culture and school and college curricula throughout the Commonwealth.**

The Commonwealth Disabled People’s Forum representing the more than 450 million disabled people in 54 countries of the Commonwealth support the current global protests against racism. We further recognise the impact on disabled people of the history of racism in the Commonwealth and the need to challenge the impact of colonisation, dispossession, current and historical colonial acts of oppression, and continuing injustice and inequality especially to indigenous peoples. The CDPF works to ensure that measures are in place to address these issues so that reconciliation can take place.(Constitutional Object 3.i of CDPF).

We further recognize and reaffirm the Lusaka Declaration of the Commonwealth Heads of Government (1979),which helped created a climate to get rid of apartheid in South Africa, but was aimed at all countries. The Declaration committed the Commonwealth:

“United in our desire to rid the world of the evils of racism and racial prejudice, we proclaim our faith in the

inherent dignity and worth of the human person and declare that:

1. the peoples of the Commonwealth have the right to live freely in dignity and equality, without any distinction or exclusion based on race, colour, sex, descent, or national or ethnic origin;

2. while everyone is free to retain diversity in his or her culture and lifestyle, this diversity does not justify the perpetuation of racial prejudice or racially discriminatory practices;

3. everyone has the right to equality before the law and equal justice under the law;

4. everyone has the right to effective remedies and protection against any form of discrimination based on the grounds of race, colour, sex, descent, or national or ethnic origin” and ….

“We reaffirm that it is the duty of all the peoples of the Commonwealth to work together for the total eradication of the infamous policy of apartheid which is internationally recognised as a crime against the conscience and dignity of mankind and the very existence of which is an affront to humanity.

We agree that everyone has the right to protection against acts of incitement to racial hatred and discrimination, whether committed by individuals, groups or other organisations.

We affirm that there should be no discrimination based on race, colour, sex, descent or national or ethnic origin in the acquisition or exercise of the right to vote; in the field of civil rights or access to citizenship; or in the economic, social or cultural fields, particularly education, health, employment, occupation, housing, social security and cultural life.

We attach particular importance to ensuring that children shall be protected from practices which may foster racism or racial prejudice. Children have the right to be brought up and educated in a spirit of tolerance and understanding so as to be able to contribute fully to the building of future societies based on justice and friendship.

We believe that those groups in societies who may be especially disadvantaged because of residual racist attitudes are entitled to the fullest protection of the law.

We recognise that the history of the Commonwealth and its diversity require that special attention should be paid to the problems of indigenous minorities. We recognise that the same special attention should be paid to the problems of immigrants, immigrant workers and refugees”.

The CDPF recognise that 40 years of free market economics, globalisation and COVID-19 have acted to increase racism and further marginalise many social groups, especially disabled people and that false science and outdated racist tropes and stereotypes are again circulating in the media magnified by the new largely uncontrolled social media.

The CDPF calls on all civil society organisations and the leaders of Commonwealth countries to:-

* Declare their support for ‘Black Lives Matter’ and promote racial and ethnic harmony
* Work with community organisations and educators to decolonise school and college curricula
* Ensure that galleries, museums and public statues recount the real history of colonialism, slavery and empire
* Promote a spirit of peace, environmental sustainability, reconciliation and collaboration.
* Ensure reparations are made to indigenous and minority ethnic peoples wronged by colonialism
* Ensure laws are in place and prosecutions carried out to those who peddle race hatred
* Governments to challenge institutional racism in the police and other state agencies.
* Ongoing equality training is established for all Parliamentarians, civil servants, professionals and business managers.