



International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination – March 21

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In 1966, the United Nations designated March 21 as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. It was meant to commemorate the 1960 massacre that took place in Sharpeville, South Africa, where a demonstration that started off as peaceful, ended with shots fired by police. That day, 69 South Africans were killed and over 180 were injured. The demonstrators took to the street to protest and called on the apartheid government to abolish laws that required all black men and women to carry reference books containing their personal details. If someone was found in a public place without their book, they would be arrested and detained in prisons.

Canada was among the first countries to support the UN resolution designating March 21 as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Our nation first observed the day in 1989.

However, 49 years later, there is still much work to be done to wipe out racism. Every day, people are subjected to racist comments and stereotypes in the media, schools, public spaces and workplaces.

Continually putting the spotlight on race, ethnic background and skin colour creates an atmosphere where racial discrimination can thrive. Whether intentional or not, actions towards people based on their race, ethnic backgrounds or skin colour can have a negative impact on the day-to-day lives of racialized members of society.

I am often asked:

- “Where are you from?”
- “What is your background?”
- “Where did you learn English?”

I am often subjected to unsolicited comments such as:

- “You don’t look Chinese.”
- “You speak good English.”

I recognize that questions are often asked out of curiosity, but it’s the manner in which questions are asked that is key! If the questions are asked as a means to get to know me and are asked in a respectful way, then, in the spirit of open dialogue, they are welcomed. If questions or comments pander to racial stereotypes, then please do not ask them or state them.

I am ethnic Chinese, but I am not from China (yet I have been told to “go back to China!”). This a common remark made to racially-visible persons.

I am a Canadian with two children born in Canada. Imagine how you would feel if your children were told to go back to a country they were not born in! Would you feel that your children were welcome and respected in their birthplace?

We live in a country of great diversity – one where everyone should be treated equally and with respect. So why do some of us have to work so hard to get people to look beyond our ethnic backgrounds, our places of origin or our skin colour? Why can’t people look at our skill sets, our abilities, our education, our experiences, and, most importantly, at our worth as individuals instead? It’s sad to see that racial discrimination still exists. The only thing that will make a difference is when each and every individual is treated with respect and dignity – when we are all accepted on the basis of our own unique merits. In order to actively eliminate racial discrimination, we have to continue to educate and speak up. And we must actively work on racism, both on a personal and institutional level, for our children and for future generations.