**What Is Fairness**?

A dictionary definition of fairness is the quality of treating people equally or in a way that is right or reasonable.[[1]](#footnote-1) Treating people the same regardless of their gender, ethnic background, religion, sexuality, disability or age is a legal requirement. The Equality Act 2010 is an act of parliament which protects people from discrimination in the workplace and elsewhere.[[2]](#footnote-2) Apart from it being illegal to discriminate people, I think it is right to treat people in a fair manner. If you treat people equally without discrimination, you hope that people will treat you in the same manner back. In an ideal world everyone would be treated equally, which would lead to everyone being happy, this is called egalitarianism. But we don’t live in that kind of world, we live in a world where I believe many individuals and countries strive to have more than their neighbour.

We see people being treated unfairly – with inequality in different areas of our lives. Some children being favoured by teachers, parents with pushchairs or cyclists not being allowed onto busy buses. Recently it came to light that female journalists working for the BBC were being paid less than their male workmates. This was despite doing the same job[[3]](#footnote-3).

Sometimes treating people differently is the right thing to do. Elderly people living in the UK get given £200 per year towards the cost of heating their home[[4]](#footnote-4). This is because older people are more likely to get ill from living in cold conditions. They need more help and protection than other groups of people.

Maybe fairness is about everyone getting what they need. In developed countries more people live above the poverty line which means that they have shelter (a home) and food. In other parts of the world a greater percentage of their people live below this standard. In the UK, living in poverty is defined as ‘relative poverty’ where a person can’t afford an ‘ordinary living pattern – they are excluded from activities and opportunities that an average person enjoys.’[[5]](#footnote-5) Those living in poverty need more, so get benefits to enable them to live more comfortable lives, whilst those who earn more money, pay more tax. This is how social justice works in the UK, the rich pay a high percentage to help the poor. Those in need are provided for by those who have more.

Another way of looking at fairness is that we get what we deserve, from how hard we work. So, a business leader like Sir Alan Sugar, who has worked hard and invested his time and money into his company, deserves his success and his wealth. Why should he share what he has earned with those who have perhaps worked less hard? If a student studies hard, they deserve to get a good exam result. This way of looking at fairness centres on the individual rather than society. Not everyone sees inequality as a bad thing; in a speech in January 2014, Mayor of London Boris Johnson, claimed that inequality was useful- it rewarded the most able and encouraged wealth creation.[[6]](#footnote-6)

None of us choose which country we are born in, but where you live can affect the kind of life you will have. We can’t look at fairness in just what happens in our country as countries affect each other in terms of trade. An example of this is bananas, which are the fourth most important crop and are grown in many countries.[[7]](#footnote-7) The life of banana plantation workers is hard with some workers earning about £1 a day, which is not enough for them and their families to survive on. When UK supermarkets were competing to lower prices on bananas, this would have affected the price the small producers got. In 2008 one in four bananas sold in the UK was fair trade. Fair trade ensures that the small producers get a fair price for their produce. In turn, workers get better working conditions and a better wage; ‘in Columbia farmers saw an increase of 34% to their income.’[[8]](#footnote-8) What if they UK government and other governments took the decision to only allow fair trade products to be sold? Hopefully this would change the lives of the workers and farmers in these countries. It must be assured that CEOs of large producers were not getting huge salaries and that all the elements of the supply chain such as distribution costs were reasonable.

When people live in poverty, they may have poor housing and not enough food or heating and it must feel difficult to change their lives. I have seen the fundraising programme Comic Relief where they show children who can’t get an education because they must work or care for their families. Without education it must be even harder to get a job to earn good money and have a better life. Peter Singer argues that well-off people have a moral obligation to donate money to save the lives of some of the world's poorest people if they can do this without sacrificing anything very significant[[9]](#footnote-9). I am lucky that I can help others by giving money without it affecting my life. It would be harder to give my food to someone else who is hungry if I didn’t know when I would next get fed. Depending on your own situation, it can be harder to show fairness to others before thinking of your own needs. John Rawls looked at this is his ‘Veil of Ignorance’ theory[[10]](#footnote-10), where he asked us to think about fairness, without knowing what our own situation is. For example, it could be fair for everyone to live in a two-bedroom house, those who are homeless or living in smaller homes, would see this as a positive thing. Those who live in bigger homes would see it as negative. If we had to be fair without knowing the impact on our own lives, it would be much harder, in fact almost impossible to do.

In conclusion, I believe fairness means that everyone should get what they need and have the same chance as others to get what they deserve. At the start of this essay I would have argued that everyone should get the same, however, I have come to realise that fairness is about equal opportunity. I think we have a duty as individuals to make the right choices, such as buying Fair trade, sharing what we have with others and to see fairness from other people’s perspectives.

1. https://dictionary.cambridge.org [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/bbc-gender-pay-gap-women-female-presenters-sue-lawsuit-male-colleagues-salaries-jane-garvey-emily-a7852311.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.gov.uk/winter-fuel-payment [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://fullfact.org/economy/poverty-uk-guide-facts-and-figures/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/video/2013/nov/28/boris-johnson-wealth-envy-inequality-margaret-thatcher-video [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. http://inafrica24.com/modernity/bananas-from-africa/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://www.fairtrade.org.uk/~/media/FairtradeUK/What%20is%20Fairtrade/Documents/Policy%20and%20Research%20documents/Impact%20reports/Fairer%20fruit%20%20Fairtrades%20impact%20in%20the%20banana%20industry%20%20April%202016.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/charity/duty\_1.shtml [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/introducing-humanism/1/steps/298783 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)