

SIMON BARON-COHEN BUSINESS JAN 25, 2022 6:55 AM

Autistic People's Human Rights Are Not Being Met

A greater understanding of neurodiversity can and should allow more people to live in a genuinely inclusive society.



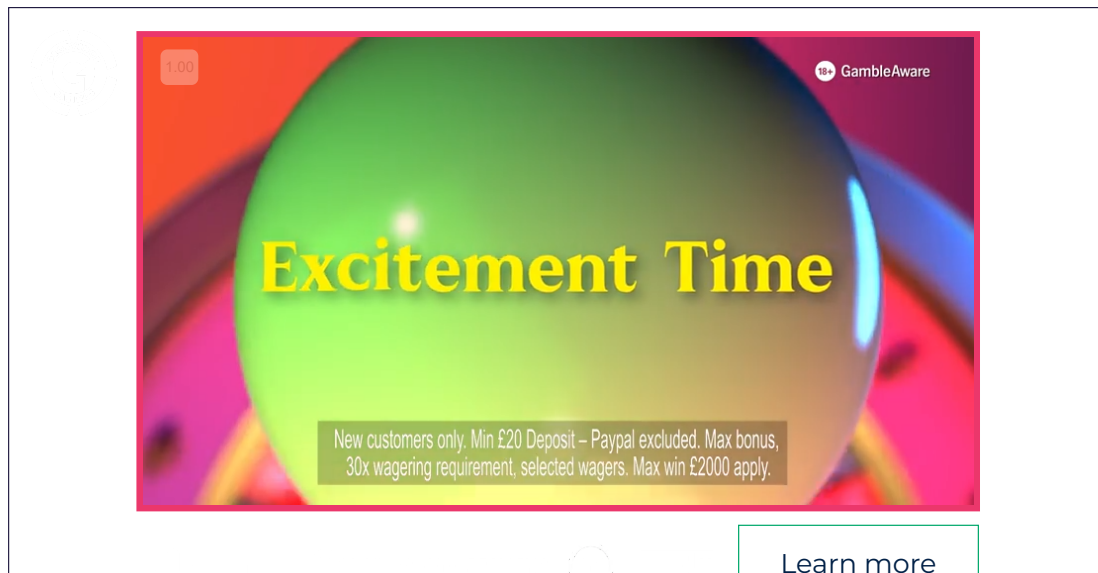
THE HUMAN RIGHTS of autistic people have typically long been denied across the world. In 2022 this will change as governments and society at large adopt the powerful idea of neurodiversity.

Autistic people are denied at least five rights that are enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. First, the right to dignity. According to the National Autistic Society, half of autistic adults in Britain report they have been abused by someone they thought was a friend. A quarter of autistic adults have also had money stolen from them by someone they consider to be a friend.

Second, the right to education. Statistics show one in five autistic children in the UK have been excluded from school. And of the other 80 per cent of autistic children who have stayed in school, half of them report having been bullied.

Third, the right to equal access to public services. One in three autistic adults experience severe mental ill health because of lack of support. In our clinic for adults seeking a diagnosis of autism for example, two thirds report that they have felt suicidal and one third have attempted suicide. In many areas of the UK, the waiting time for a diagnosis can be up to twelve months or longer.

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Fourth, the right to work and employment. Only 15 per cent of autistic adults in the UK are in full-time employment, despite many having good intelligence and even talents. Unemployment is a well-known risk factor for depression.

Fifth, the right to protection from discrimination, the right to a cultural life and to rest and leisure. Many autistic people have been asked to leave a supermarket or a cinema, because of their different behaviour. In addition, half of autistic adults in the UK report feeling lonely, while a third of them do not leave the house most days and two thirds of them feel depressed because of loneliness. One in four autistic adults have no friends at all.

Finally, the right to protection of the law. One in five young autistic people in the UK have been stopped and questioned by the police, and five per cent have been arrested. Two thirds of police officers report they have received no training in how to interview an autistic person.

In 2022, politicians will start to wake up to this injustice and call for measures to guarantee human rights for autistic people, spurred on by an increased understanding of autism and loud calls for the protection of autistic people's rights.

Legislative changes such as this are in part the result of a greater awareness and adoption of the idea of "neurodiversity" among humans, which acknowledges that human minds and brains are not all the same and that diversity should be celebrated. In 2022 we will increasingly view autism through this lens, which is strikingly different to the standard medical model of the condition.

A mark of a civilised society is how we make “reasonable adjustments” for people with disabilities, to minimise their disabilities and to promote social inclusion. In 2022, more voices will be calling for autistic people’s human rights to be met so they are able to engage fully in a genuinely inclusive society.

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