

GRADUATE WOMEN INTERNATIONAL (GWI) POLICY POSITION ON HATE SPEECH

Countering hate speech and climates of hostility leading to violence and genocide through education for all and enhanced policies.

“We know that the spread of hate is used by those who want to sow divisions, to scapegoat and to distract from real issues. Social media is a remarkably fertile ground for hate speech, providing it with both unprecedented reach and speed. And hate breeds bigotry, discrimination, and incitement to violence,” said United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk, on 18 June 2023, International Day for Countering Hate Speech.

The issue and consequences

The United Nations (UN) Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech¹ launched in 2019, defines hate speech as *“any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor”*.

Hate speech, it is worth noting, is not a legal term under international law, and, more broadly, a universal definition of hate speech accepted by consensus by all Member States does not currently exist. There are, however, three conditions that, at minimum, must be met for speech to be considered hate speech. On one hand, it can be conveyed by any form of expression (images, messages, gestures, symbols). On the other hand, the speech is discriminatory or pejorative against a person or a group on prohibited grounds, and finally, the speech appeals to identity factors such as those evoked in the definition of the UN². In addition, the Hartford Guidelines on Crimes Against Speech in International Criminal Law³, focusing on the preventive aspect of criminal law, a comprehensive survey conducted by Matthew Gillett and Richard Ashby Wilson, provides legal actors with a necessary legal framework, for the regulation and sanctioning of discourses that violate international legal norms.

The fundamental importance of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, under inter alia article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is crucial to mention. This right is sometimes argued to conflict with efforts to repress hate speech. But in fact, a human-rights sensitive approach to addressing hate

¹ https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/advising-and-mobilizing/Action_plan_on_hate_speech_EN.pdf

² <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech>

³ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3230487

speech is essential, not only to comply with international law, but also to achieve lasting impact and reduction of violative hate speech.

The development of the internet in recent decades and new artificial intelligence advancements have exacerbated and accelerated the spread of hate messages. As highlighted in 2021 by Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary General, “Social media provides a global megaphone for hate”⁴. In fact, unlike traditional media such as radio or newspapers, online hate speech is produced and shared very quickly and easily by everyone, at low cost and often anonymously, thus allowing to reach a global and varied audience in real-time.

The latest statistics on online hate speech reveal an alarming increase. Examples include: a 70% rise in hate speech among children and adolescents worldwide in early 2020⁵; an increase in traffic to hate sites and publications targeting Asians by 200% since the pandemic began⁶, 50% of Canadians have witnessed online hate⁷, 64% of LGBT+ individuals in the United Kingdom have experienced violence or abuse⁸, more than half of all hate crimes committed in the United States in 2020 were motivated by race, ethnicity, or ancestry⁹.

Let there be no mistake that the negative impact of hate speech, online and elsewhere, is severe and can be long-lasting. Hate speech dramatically impacts victims and it continues to grow in every region of the world. Hate crimes leave victims with permanent physical and/or psychological trauma, sometimes preventing them from living a normal everyday life in their country and attending school. Hate speech fosters an environment of dehumanization, marginalization, and division, creating a fertile ground for discrimination, persecution, and violence, each diminishing education opportunities.

#NoToHate

Hate speech online can be a catalyst to cruelty and violence in real life. The UN has devised “Take Action” guidelines to eradicate it urging individual and collective responsibility and accountability. See the UN #PledgeToPause.¹⁰

Such guidelines include but are not limited to:

1. In the digital world fact check to stop harmful content and misinformation. Search engines, fact checking tools and running images through search tools can be deployed.

⁴ <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2021/10/arria-formula-meeting-on-hate-speech-and-social-media.php>

⁵ https://l1ght.com/Toxicity_during_coronavirus_Report-L1ght.pdf

⁶ https://l1ght.com/Toxicity_during_coronavirus_Report-L1ght.pdf#toxicity_during_coronavirus_Report-L1ght.pdf

⁷ https://www.crrf-fcrr.ca/images/CRRF_OnlineHate_Racism_Jan2021_FINAL.pdf

⁸ <https://galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Galop-Hate-Crime-Report-2021-1.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/hate-crime-statistics>

¹⁰ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/10/1075742>

2. React, challenge and support by speaking up and against hate speech and refute misinformation with solid facts, evidence, and reliable sources. By using positive messages, images and narratives that spread tolerance, diversity, equality, and inclusion promoting human rights is key.
3. Report and file hate speech complaints to the police or prosecutors deploying tools online to raise alarms.
4. Educate by raising awareness online and offline by advocating responsible behaviour, campaigns, and educational resources.
5. Commit to positive action by joining a non-governmental organisation or civil society body that works to address hate speech such as a UN Agency, GWI or Rotary.

In Asia and the Pacific, women are particularly affected by hate speech. The political representation of women in the region is already relatively low, and hate speech and misogyny online, which have increased dramatically since the pandemic, helped create that vacuum. In fact, they constitute an additional and generalized threat to women's participation in political life and have a chilling effect on their ambition and ability to be politically active¹¹.

More generally, Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Opinion and Expression, points out in her latest report¹² that hate speech is disproportionately used to paralyze women's freedom of expression and that Member States failed to respect and protect women's equal right to freedom of opinion and expression. Women journalists, politicians, and human rights defenders are even more targeted by this trend, which aims to scare them and prevent them from carrying out their activism work.

Apart from this undeniable link between hate speech and gender discrimination, it is all minorities who are high-profile targets. Indeed, national, ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities are recurring victims of hate speech online: 70 percent or more of those targeted by hate crimes or hate speech in social media are minorities¹³.

Hate speech not only results in personal prejudice for the victims but also undermines global security, human rights, inclusion, and cultural diversity. As a matter of fact, hate speech online has been linked to a global increase in violence toward minorities, including mass shootings, lynchings, and ethnic cleansing¹⁴. The examples are not only in history books but

¹¹ <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/04/eliminating-online-hate-speech-to-secure-women-s-political-participation>

¹² <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/212/17/PDF/N2121217.pdf?OpenElement>

¹³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-minority-issues>

¹⁴ <https://www.cfr.org/background/hate-speech-social-media-global-comparisons>

are unfortunately current; this is, for example, the case of Rohingya in Myanmar, Igbo people in Nigeria¹⁵, Roma and Sinti or Afro-descendant people in Europe¹⁶, among many others.

It is important to note that hate speech played a major role in the persecution and violence against the Rohingya in Myanmar. Further, the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) is an investigative body established by the UN General Assembly in 2018 to collect, preserve, and analyse evidence of the most serious international crimes committed in Myanmar since 2011. Reports from the IIMM documented instances of hate speech and incitement to violence. Social media was a significant channel for spreading hate speech, worsening the conflict, and contributing to human rights abuses against the Rohingya¹⁷.

History has shown that hate speech has been used as a precursor to one of the most terrible crimes recognized by the international community: genocide. Whether we take as an example the genocide of Jewish people during the Second World War by the Nazis hate speech propaganda or the Rwandan genocide of 1994, one of the first steps of these mass exterminations was the spread of hate speech.

Henriette Mutegwaraba, a survivor of the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda and founder of the Million Lives Genocide Relief Fund, recalls the sinister hate speech broadcast over national radio stations across Rwanda, triggering the start of 100 days of genocide that left more than one million people dead. The calls to hatred broadcast through all the national radio stations and now in the digital age make her feel the same fear at the time¹⁸. Justice, in the Nahimana Appeal Judgment of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, three accused were convicted for direct and public incitement to genocide because of their hateful public comments on the radio waves and in press.

Recognizing the dangers of hate speech, many countries are striving to strike a balance between the complex challenge of freedom of speech and the prevention of harm. However, the links between hate speech and genocide have historically been so evident that in 1966 UN General Assembly adopted the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) multilateral treaty¹⁹. Article 20 of the ICCPR focuses on the prohibition of hate speech and incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence including incitement to discrimination or genocide, and denigration or negationism of genocidal events, which were already present in part of national legislations.

¹⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2017/08/nigeria-un-experts-denounce-ultimatum-and-death-threats-targeting-igbo?LangID=E&NewsID=21994>

¹⁶ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/04/1089232>

¹⁷ <https://iimm.un.org/>

¹⁸ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/04/1135902>

¹⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

It is important to note that the ICCPR seeks to strike a balance between the right to freedom of expression and the prevention of hate speech that can lead to harm or violence against individuals or groups.

GWI regrets that not all Member States have retained the lessons of the past on the dramatic consequences of genocides and the factors that provoke genocides, and fully supports the activities of the UN Under-Secretary-General for the Prevention of Genocide, and its Special Adviser Alice Wairimu Nderitu²⁰. Wairimu Nderitu's recent and worrying statements concerning, for example, the increased genocidal risk of the Rohingya²¹, the revisionist incidents and genocide denial in Herzegovina-Bosnia,²² and the escalation in fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo²³ show us that the fight against hate speech and genocide unfortunately continues.

Hate speech online and offline spreads divisive rhetoric globally, threatening world peace. This strikes at the heart of the UN mission to maintain international peace and security and protect human rights. Its mission is to deliver humanitarian aid, support sustainable development and climate action.

The UN is committed to combating hatred, racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslimism, persecution of Christians, inequality, and discrimination as essential principles. In 2021, the UN General Assembly passed a Resolution declaring June 18 as the International Day for Countering Hate Speech.²⁴

Graduate Women International Position

GWI is dedicated to advancing gender equality through education and empowering women and girls worldwide. GWI strongly condemns hate speech in any setting, including educational institutions and beyond and operates under a zero-tolerance policy. Hate speech harms individuals and communities and prevents the creation of an inclusive society, hindering quality education. GWI acknowledges that hate speech perpetuates discrimination and violence, creating significant obstacles for women and girls to access quality education. This policy position paper offers recommendations for promoting education for women and girls through the actions GWI endorses to combat hate speech directed towards them within educational environments.

²⁰ <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/special-adviser-prevention-genocide.shtml>

²¹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/statement-ms-alice-wairimu-nderitu-special-adviser-prevention-genocide-her>

²² https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/USGNderitu_Statement%20BiH_23Feb2023.pdf

²³ https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Statement_DRC_FNL.pdf

²⁴ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/countering-hate-speech>

Hate speech's impact cuts across the UN's areas of focus, such as the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Notably, at the core of GWI's 2023-2025 triennial Renew and Rebuild strategy, is SDG 4, ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. While SDG 4 primarily focuses on education, it indirectly addresses the issue of hate speech by promoting inclusive and tolerant learning environments.

GWI impresses that media education is a crucial solution for young girls, adolescents, and adult women when it comes to combatting hate speech. It can help them understand the concept of hate speech and its manifestation in various educational and online settings. With media literacy skills, they can analyse and evaluate media content, identify bias, and comprehend the potential impact of hate speech. Additionally, this education enables them to develop resilience and the ability to challenge and counter hate speech, whether online or offline. With knowledge of online safety, privacy, and ethical use of media platforms, they can navigate online spaces with confidence, make informed choices, and protect themselves from the harmful effects of hate speech.

Definitively, GWI affirms that media education empowers women and girls by equipping them with knowledge, skills, and confidence to navigate media landscapes, recognize and respond to hate speech. Media literacy fosters critical thinking, empowering women and girls to be active participants in shaping a society that values and promotes equality, respect, and the right to education for all.

Moreover, GWI believes the fight against hate speech and its consequences can only be achieved through a joint international collaboration involving all the public, private, academic, and legislative actors. Indeed, in an increasingly global world with a dominant Internet and growing artificial intelligence tools that ignore borders, isolated national legislation will have only a limited impact.

GWI notes that women and girls are particularly vulnerable targets for hate speech and online harassment. The distinctions are often blurred, but the impact is devastating to young minds, effectively toxic and paralytic in effect on young girls and LGBTQ groups who bear the brunt of such social media hate speech on girls and impact. The greater the dependence on technology and social media the greater the impact and isolation in the reverberations of constant toxic messaging. Particularly as perpetrators are well shrouded in walls of anonymity hence hard to identify and remove with any degree of consequence. Advances in cyber science, internet, social media, and artificial intelligence has yielded a dark aspect that needs greater control and surveillance.

GWI Recommendations

To combat against hate speech and harmful aftermath such as genocide, GWI urges Member States to:

1. Invest in education systems to promote inclusivity and diversity. Education not only educates but exposes students to different perspectives and experiences, which can break down stereotypes and prejudices and prevent harmful outcomes.
2. Establish government training and awareness-raising programmes that inform on hate speech and the serious consequences in contemporary history.
3. Promote and make use of UN mechanisms and tools to combat hate speech, such as the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech which includes the UNESCO and the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect (OSAPG) Addressing Hate Speech through Education: A Guide for Policymakers that provides guidelines for policy makers and teachers to explore educational responses to hate speech.
4. Implement strict penalties to punish the perpetrators and propagators of hate speech.
5. Establish or strengthen cooperation with key national and international news reporting platforms to jointly combat hate speech.
6. Develop with educational institutions comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies that explicitly address hate speech. This should include teaching about the consequences of hate speech.
7. Develop mechanisms for safely and confidentially reporting incidents.
8. Create education programmes that involve families and communities to prevent hate speech. By engaging parents, community members, and leaders, educational institutions and communities will reinforce values of respect and tolerance at home and in society for now and for future generations.
9. Strive towards an Internet that increases the capacity building of regulators and judicial operators as advocates for enhanced transparency of Internet companies.
10. Coordinate a community outreach programme to educate and celebrate International Day for Countering Hate Speech annually on 18 June.
11. Collaborate with local, non-governmental organisations, such as Graduate Women International, to develop programmes that address local root causes and nationally targeted advocacy strategies to reduce hate speech.
12. Target high profile information technology (IT) apps and games that enable or promote opportunities for hate speech to build surveillance checks and controls.
13. Urge IT companies to have better AI driven vigilance against hate speech towards girls and children. Mandate all such protective measures.
14. Increase Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) training for teachers on techniques to identify IT and technology driven bullying and speech in the classroom and playground. Including social practices and tell-tale signs.
15. Better STEM opportunities for girl to understand technology so they can protect themselves and expose perpetrators of hate content.

About Graduate Women International (GWI)

GWI is a membership-based international NGO based in Geneva, Switzerland, with presence in over 60 countries. Founded in 1919, GWI is the leading girls' and women's global



Graduate Women
International (GWI)

Policy Position

organisation advocating for women's rights, equality, and empowerment through access to quality education and training up to the highest levels. GWI is in special consultative status with ECOSOC since 1947 and is an NGO maintaining Special Partnership Status with UNESCO and is in special relations with the International Labour Organisation.

About Policy Paper Partners [add later]

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