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## Words that Heal: The Role of Young People in Addressing Hate Speech

This policy brief was developed for the 5<sup>th</sup> European Policy Dialogue Forum (EPDF) in Rotterdam, Netherlands, held on 7-9 November 2023. The EPDF was organized by the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID), the Network for Dialogue and the European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL), and supported by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

**The European Policy Dialogue Forum** brings together religious leaders, policymakers and experts to discuss pertinent issues of social cohesion in Europe.

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**Nelson Mandela**

*No one is born hating another person (...)  
People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate,  
they can be taught to love, for love comes more  
naturally to the human heart than its opposite.*

### Executive summary

In the 'post-truth era', polarised opinions and knowledge fragmentation make it particularly challenging for young people to orient themselves and make sense of the world. Biased narratives and expressions of hate, exacerbated by echo chambers and artificial intelligence, significantly increase the risk that young social media users create or spread discriminatory content or become victims of hate speech. This can lead to long-lasting psychological and physical harm. Derogatory language often targets religious or ethnic communities, further inflamed by structural discrimination and boosted by the vicious spirals of algorithms.

Based on experiences across Europe, this policy brief reflects on how to prevent young people from becoming involved in hate speech, both as victims and perpetrators, thanks to renewed alliances between secular and religious actors. Policymakers and faith leaders are encouraged to resort to interreligious and intercultural dialogue as a powerful tool that promotes mutual understanding and appreciation over mistrust and harmful stereotypes.

## Introduction

On the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his book “Racism Explained to My Daughter”, Tahar Ben Jelloun highlighted the importance of preparing the young generation to address the challenges related to peaceful coexistence of different religious, ethnic and cultural groups. Ben Jelloun noted that although modern society talks more openly about racism, the problem has shifted: discrimination not only occurs in spaces of socialisation such as school, work and recreation centres, but also, and increasingly, online.

At risk of getting trapped in a fast-evolving online space, young people could find a suitable compass in religious and secular institutions, which, in turn, are in the position to galvanise young people’s efforts in promoting shared values of equality, human dignity and respect for diversity. The ‘No hate speech’ movement, a campaign led by the Council of Europe that mobilised youth across European cities, proves how young people are striving for vibrant opportunities to display their talents to respond to the threat of hate speech.

## Why facts do not matter

If reason is designed to generate sound judgments, then it is hard to conceive of a more serious design flaw than confirmation bias, a psychological mechanism whereby people favour information that aligns with pre-existing views. The way human nature shapes people’s perception of the world - through a continuous process of selection of information, ignoring or discounting evidence to the contrary - helps explaining how harmful stereotypes and prejudices are crystallised. Young people, whose psychological development is still ongoing, can be particularly at risk of consuming violent content, both offline and online. This exposure can interfere, up to disrupt, with the neurocognitive processes that allow for empathy. Selectively engaging with and absorbing massively such kind of information that reinforces pre-existing biased views can result in the fear and rejection of diversity, often expressed through inflammatory and violent communication known as ‘hate speech’.



### **Defining hate speech:**

*The United Nations Plan of Action on Hate Speech 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.” The Rabat Plan of Action (2012) suggests a six-part threshold test to identify hate speech: 1. context of the statement; 2. speaker’s position or status; 3. intent to incite audience against target groups; 4. content and form of the statement; 5. extent and its dissemination; and 6. likelihood to harm.*

This dynamic is particularly evident in feeding prejudices and stereotypes about refugees and migrants. As significant portions of society unite behind common misconceptions about migration, ranging from harmful stereotypes to conspiracy theories like the ‘replacement theory’, these biased views gain undue credibility. This creates a conducive environment for hate speech against refugees and migrants.



The **Observatory of Public Attitudes to Migration** at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, Italy, collects and analyses data on public attitudes to migration. Their findings help counter negative narratives, hateful expressions and violent behaviour against migrants and refugees: <https://www.eui.eu/research-hub?id=opam-observatory-of-public-attitudes-to-migration>

In addition to ethnic origin, religious affiliation is a powerful trigger of hate speech. Members of Muslim communities are increasingly becoming targets of discriminatory messages, often as a result of negative stereotyping connected with extremism. Muslim women face dual victimization due to their religious and gender identity, underscoring the importance of an intersectional approach that tackles the complex nature of discrimination. Although scapegoating individuals or groups is as old as mankind, digital technologies have dramatically increased its spread. Social media operates at a rapid pace and accelerates the spread of people’s emotional expressions of aggression, contempt and primordial fears. Algorithms foster echo chambers where like-minded individuals reinforce their own biased views, diminishing the chances for open dialogue. Simultaneously, trolls and artificial intelligence, such as chatbots, contribute to the viral spread of hate speech. In this environment, information ceases to be a means of understanding the world and becomes instead an expression of the ego, further validated by likes and shares. This cycle perpetuates prejudices, leading to toxic polarisation.



The 2022 European Commission evaluation of the application of the **“Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online”** found out that the most frequently targeted groups in Europe are victims of: anti-Roma racism (16.8%), xenophobia [including anti-migrant hatred] (16.3%) and sexual orientation (15.5%). The study also recorded significant instances of anti-Semitism (9.9%) and anti-Muslim hatred (8.7%).

The spread of hate speech poses a significant threat to Europe’s social cohesion, as online hateful narratives often spill over into the physical world and vice versa. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) has underscored the connection between hate speech and violence. The influence of political, religious, and other public figures on public discourse becomes particularly problematic when these leaders exploit religious scriptures

for their own agendas. In such cases, silence from religious leaders can seem like a tacit endorsement. On the other hand, when religious leaders actively denounce the misuse of religion, they have a strong counter influence. Their moral authority enables them to promote values of peace, inclusion, and justice, providing a firm basis for their criticism of the political exploitation of their religion or beliefs.



**The KAICIID-supported Muslim Jewish Leadership Council (MJLC)** consists of a network of over 40 rabbis and imams in Europe dedicated to build trust and fostering mutual understanding and collaboration. In one of its statements, the MJLC has publicly condemned the burning of the Quran outside Stockholm's central Mosque during Eid al-Adha. For more information, visit their statement at: <https://mjlc-europe.org/Article/mjlc-statement-on-quran-burnings-in-sweden>

In today's divisive media landscape, it is increasingly difficult for young people to find direction. Religious actors can play an important role by providing core values and creating spaces for dialogue aimed at de-constructing prejudices and promoting mutual understanding. Such efforts can enhance young people's ability to oppose misinformation and mitigate hate speech effectively.

## Bridging Divides: Empowering Young People through Interreligious Dialogue

Balancing the right to free expression with the imperative to halt disinformation, discrimination and hate speech is challenging. Effectively combating hate speech demands a strong commitment to upholding the rights of minorities and other groups at risk of exclusion.



Coordinated by **A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe (CEJI)**, the **Facing Facts Network** works to transform the understanding of and responses to hate crimes and hate speech in Europe. The network offers online training and research, as well as advocacy for increased victim support and protection. <https://www.facingfacts.eu/>

Local governments and religious leaders are in a critical position to offer inclusive spaces for youth-led initiatives that include young people from diverse backgrounds, demonstrating the power of 'unity in diversity'. This approach is crucial for various reasons: it helps dismantle harmful stereotypes; provides non-formal education opportunities to enhance critical thinking skills, including through innovative methods; increases awareness about the dangers of disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech; and reduces feelings of injustice and resentment that frequently lead to hate speech. Sustainability of

such efforts needs to be ensured by a robust anti-discrimination legal framework, promoted and supported by secular authorities, at the local and national level. This involves religious leaders taking a stand against intolerance and hate speech swiftly and decisively, as well as rejecting violence as a means to counteract hatred, as outlined in the Rabat Plan of Action (2012).



**Raise!** is a toolbox for youth workers to build resilience against hate speech. It was created by six organizations in Italy, France, Greece, Portugal, Spain and the UK <https://www.salto-youth.net/tools/toolbox/tool/toolbox-for-youth-workers-to-build-resilience-of-young-people-against-hate-speech.3226/>

Although some religious leaders have, unfortunately, played a role in encouraging division, many others have promoted reconciliation, inclusion and peaceful coexistence. Engaging diverse groups through dialogue led by committed faith leaders increases mutual understanding and empathy, helping to dismantle prejudices. Many young people struggle to articulate their grievances without loading them with offensive statements – which might inadvertently border on hate speech. Offering spaces to ensure that young people can confidently engage in discussions without fearing vilification while **nurturing emotional intelligence** can make the difference. Such efforts range from **providing a healing environment** for victims of hate speech to supporting opportunities to strengthen the emotional side of interpersonal relations, including through non-formal education.



In the **Houses of Empathy** project, young people were involved in capacity-building activities focused on team building, communication, assertiveness, problem solving and emotional awareness. The project took place in Portugal, Spain, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and was implemented by a consortium of civil society organizations. <https://housesofempathy.eu/>

Offering inclusive spaces that encourage collaboration across generations, cultures, ethnicities, religions and social backgrounds not only raises awareness but also encourages pluralism and promotes harmony, fostering an enabling environment for resisting toxic prejudices. When city authorities support these dialogue spaces, the chance for lasting change increases significantly.



The **Youth4Inclusion** project by ODIHR offers learning opportunities for young people, helping them transform their ideas into local community initiatives, like forming coalitions or organizing dialogues. Individual coaching sessions are provided to support young people, including interaction with local authorities of the Polish cities of **Krakow, Lublin, Gdansk, Rzeszow** and **Wroclaw**: <https://www.osce.org/odhr/545632>

Due to the proximity to their community members, local authorities and religious leaders play a crucial role in the prevention of hate speech by supporting the creation of community media platforms. These platforms offer young people opportunities to showcase and develop their storytelling abilities through broadcasting and multimedia projects, including press. Community media serve as non-profit, alternative, and complementary sources of information production and distribution. They are dedicated to inclusive and intercultural practices that aim for social improvement and community benefits. Better placed to gain the trust of their local audience and confront disinformation and misinformation, community media is critical to counteracting hateful narratives and stereotyping.



*The European Commission's **CORE and Co-Inform projects** have developed digital tools like browser plugins and fact-checking dashboards to stimulate critical thinking and draw attention to misinformation while balancing freedom of speech. These tools aim to raise awareness and increase resilience of audiences, breaking the cycle of misinformation. <https://coinform.eu/>*

In this same vein, **promoting digital literacy** is key to allowing young people to navigate complex online environments, especially with the emergence of Chat GPT and other artificial intelligence tools. Digital upskilling makes young people more resistant to misinformation and derogatory language by equipping them with the digital tools necessary to verify the sources of images, text, and videos. As digital natives, they are in a prime position to create alternative narratives and more inclusive stories. In this regard, traditional methods like 'myth-busting' may not be enough on their own. However, the 'pre-bunking' strategy, which focuses on equipping audiences with the skills to identify and counter misleading arguments, shows potential for a greater impact. Local authorities and faith actors are ideally placed to involve young people in initiatives that harness the potential of cooperating with tech companies to help audiences gain resilience to manipulative content.



*The "Pre-bunking Anti-Refugee Rhetoric in Central and Eastern Europe" project, led by Jigsaw—a Google division focused on combating misinformation—created and launched a series of videos in Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL12X50gJBPRoxFWCaofWntrPj3DgDB5Jh>*

## Recommendations



### FOR POLICYMAKERS

- Develop an outreach plan for combating hate speech which includes a strategy for facilitating effective communication and bridge-building between different community sectors.
- Enhance digital and media literacy by offering community spaces and upskilling opportunities for young people, including through non-formal education.
- Establish and support systems that not only collect data on hate speech incidents but also ensure this information is shared at the national and international level. This will enable a deeper understanding of hate speech patterns and help develop more effective legal frameworks and strategies.
- Promote a robust independent media landscape at the local level. This can be facilitated by offering capacity-building opportunities for emerging media professionals and engaging with technology companies for support, particularly for pre-bunking strategies.



### FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND ACTORS

- Actively promote interreligious opportunities to convey joint messages of peace, inclusion and justice, counter polarisation and the weaponisation of religion, including by politicians and other influential actors.
- Provide safe and dynamic spaces for young people where they can improve their emotional intelligence and affective skills, including through non-formal education.
- Promote interreligious dialogue by supporting regular opportunities for interfaith meetings, exchanges and dialogues involving young people across cultural, ethnic, religious and social groups. Work towards establishing reliable and supportive partnerships with local authorities.
- Provide a healing space and offer support to victims of hate speech, derogatory language or other forms of aggressive communication.
- Utilise popular social media platforms to engage young people, including young religious leaders, as digital storytellers, providing inclusive and alternative narratives.





## FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS

- Promote non-formal education opportunities, including through mentorship and empowerment programs for young people.
- Foster safe spaces for critical thinking, by convening dialogues and discussions - including on hate speech and freedom of expression – together with faith leaders and local authorities.
- Promote religious literacy and professional media conduct by developing resources for secular institutions and journalists, enabling them to report on religious matters in an informed and sensitive manner.
- Prioritise community-led, participatory research by engaging young people in their respective communities to gather unique insights regarding hate speech and its contributing factors.

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