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**COVID AND HATE SPEECH**

***The Youth2Unite project has become even more relevant during the Coronavirus pandemic due to a significant rise in hate speech. To understand each partner context, we have undertaken research to determine the effect of the virus on hate speech to understand how we can respond proactively as a project***

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified existing concerns related to the spread and use of hate speech globally: scapegoating, stereotyping, stigmatization and the use of derogatory, misogynistic, racist, xenophobic, islamophobc or anti-Semitic language. Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, commented recently on the fact that the pandemic has led to increased hate crime targeted to social groups related to the virus through media reports.

It has also created new vulnerable groups or exacerbated the exist one as violence against women.

In France, there has been a marked increase in reports of violence against women during the containment. Between mid-March and mid-May, the phone number for women victims of violence received 44,235 calls. An increase that peaked in April 2020, with almost 30,000 calls for the month, three times more than in February or March. However, studies in France on the subject make it clear that "Confinement has not been a trigger for violence, but rather a revealing, even aggravating factor" (MIPROF, July 2020).

Greece has recorded a 6,4% increase of incidents of domestic violence, according to the Hellenic Society of Forensic Medicine, in comparison to the same period of 2019. Moreover, three murders of women, connected to the lockdown situation in the country were reported to the police. According to data provided by the General Secretariat for Family Policy and Gender Equality, the emergency line for incidents of violence received a total of 1.070 calls in April 2020, while in March, prior to the lockdown; the number of calls was 325. In particular, the calls for domestic violence were four times more in April than in March, reaching the 648 calls. In most cases, the victims were women (61%), while an alarming percentage of 10% were children (77 children).

In the case of Cyprus, during the pandemic an increase of domestic violence, and particularly against women, was recorded (30%). According to the data released by the Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family since March 9 to March 17, were recorded: 750 calls for domestic violence, 5 new requests for admission to women’s refuges and 4 new requests for individual counselling.

Additionally, in the UK, incidents of revenge porn have increased, sharing private sexual material without the consent of another person both on and offline. Susan Williams, the Home Office minister for countering extremism has said that extremism generally has not increased but there has been a significant rise in hate crime.

Since the pandemic emerged, individuals perceived as ethnically Chinese or Asian have faced backlash and racist attacks, due to either conspiracy theories or pure fear that they might be transmitters of the virus. Or belonging to certain ethnic and religious minorities (Jews, Muslims, Christians or Bahia’s), migrants, and foreigners have been blamed for spreading the virus. Conspiracy theories have led to further discrimination towards Jewish people, due to their supposed link to the virus.

In the absence of ethnic statistics in France, it is difficult to highlight ethno-racial discrimination on exposure to coronavirus. On the other hand, the over-representation of immigrants and descendants of immigrants in infected persons can be established. The often precarious jobs that immigrants occupy (cleaning staff, domestic workers) and the regular use of public transport are all risks, which, when combined, expose them to greater risk of the disease. The correlation between poverty, ethnic or racial discrimination and increased risk of the virus have therefore been demonstrated by the National Institute of Demographic Studies. The excess mortality rate of 134% reached in Seine-Saint-Denis, France's leading region in terms of immigration (the immigrant population represents 30% of the region's residents, compared to 9% on average in France), compared to a rate of 99% for Parisians, and is a sign of this correlation. According to the same report, the over-representation of minorities among the victims is the consequence of health inequalities (access to healthcare, quality of hospital facilities, etc.).

In Greece, refugees are currently also being targeted with hate crimes and speech, with the attackers claiming that they pose a health bomb ready to explode due to their poor living conditions because of their status as immigrants.

In the case of Cyprus, the rights of hundreds of migrants who were confined in the Pournara Immigrant Hospitality Centre were violated, as they were forcefully confined (amid awful living conditions) despite the lifting of movement restrictions. As a response to them protesting, a violent police repression of peaceful protests by the migrants within the camp took place.

The UK has seen a significant increase in hate crime directed towards South and East Asian communities during the coronavirus crisis. With the virus originating in Wuhan, China, Chinese and East Asian communities have suffered from racially motivated hate crimes. AI-based start-up ‘L1ght’ recorded a 900% increase in hate speech directed towards Chinese people. One NHS nurse, Reizel Quaichon, experienced hate crime, she was pushed and elbowed in the rib on her way to work a night shift. Currently, Muslims are being scapegoated, due to fake news stories claiming that they caused the virus and are breaking lockdown rules. Katie Hopkins, Tommy Robinson, and UKIP leader Gerard Batten are just some of the people sharing these racist allegations, which are then used to justify attacks. One woman reported an incident where a man coughed in her face and swore, claiming he had coronavirus. Likewise, similar incidents have happened to Jews and other minorities.

In some instances, journalists, whistle-blowers, medical and health care professionals, human rights defenders and peacebuilders – are also being subjected to unlawful attacks as a result of their work in addressing or reporting on the pandemic.

COVID-19 related hate speech has serious implications; it made those targeted more vulnerable to violence, exposes them to political and social exclusion, isolation and stigmatization, inhibits them from expressing themselves and participating in public debate, and deters them from accessing medical care and other vital services.

In so doing, it heightens the disproportionate effects of the disease on certain communities and exacerbates underlying social and economic inequalities, aggravates drivers of violent extremism while undermining the social cohesion, solidarity and trust necessary to effectively tackle the spread of the virus. It also triggers social unrest and intergroup violence, possibly enhancing the conditions conducive to conflict and atrocity crimes.

For example, in many cities in Germany, people regularly gather to demonstrate against the government's Corona measures. Also, right-wing extremists use the demonstrations, and also the social media, to spread their inhuman theories. In the context of Corona, for example, they mention a world conspiracy in which small elite wants to control or decimate the entire world population and blame Jews or Muslims for this. Observers in Germany speak of a "hate and racism pandemic" that is spreading in Germany (Matthias Quent, Director of the Institute for Democracy and Civil Society in Jena). The Chancellor and the Minister of Health were publicly wished dead in social media. There were also physical, racist attacks against Asian-looking people in the context of the Corona pandemic. In March 2020, for example, an Asian-looking woman was sprayed with disinfectant and threatened in Munich.

Ensuring that hate speech is effectively addressed and countered at both national and global level will help improve our responses to the pandemic in the short term. It will also give us an opportunity to “build back better” by addressing the root causes of this phenomenon in our societies through promoting inclusion, solidarity and our common humanity.