

European Interfaith Youth Network (EIYN) WIHW Report

The Impact of Words: Countering Hate Speech as an Interfaith Effort

Hate speech as a phenomenon existed probably since the very beginning of the humanity and in different stages of human development was addressed in different ways. Today when we are connected much more than before, when countries and territories of the world are religiously diverse, some more and some less, when we are in contact with each other, know about each other and have the opportunity to learn from each other interfaith cooperation and interfaith harmony are more important than ever before.

Unfortunately hate speech represents one of the phenomena that can disturb and shake interfaith harmony. That is why EIYN within the scope of Speech4Change platform and ALTerHate campaign decided that on the occasion of World Interfaith Harmony Week address hate speech from the angle of interfaith endeavors that we, as young people see as *conditio sine qua non* in countering this phenomenon.

We decided to base our alternative narrative in interfaith approach and decided to explore various faith traditions and scriptures and find basis for positive, non-offensive speech, speech that nurtures and strengthens communication between people and we have published a poster with quotes and verses from 11 different traditions.

This campaign lasted from February 1st until February 13th, and each day we were publishing verse or quote from one tradition. On February 13th we have published the complete poster that reached 9,905 people and had 28 shares on Facebook, 751 likes on Instagram. Besides that, 1695 people were reached on Twitter with 7 retweets including from various important interfaith organizations and actors in the field.

In addition to the poster creation, we have organized a webinar titled “Enhancing Interfaith Harmony through Combating Hate Speech” where we gathered actors active in the field of interfaith dialogue. The webinar gathered representatives of various important organizations working on interfaith dialogue including Religions for Peace, United Religions Initiative, KAICIID, Scottish Ahlul Beyt Society, Center for Applied Buddhism and Enrichment Center. Webinar was diverse regarding religion, gender, and age, where we had representatives of religious leaders, women, and youth. Besides that, our speakers were coming from Europe, North and South America. The webinar reached more than 1000 people via Facebook live stream.

With our initiative “The Impact of Words: Countering Hate Speech as an Interfaith Effort” we wanted to explore the topic of hate speech from interfaith perspective, provide basis for positive and non-offensive speech from the perspective of faith and spiritual traditions and create a strong basis for future work that can be expanded to other various traditions and convictions. On the other side our strong belief is that only through interfaith, intergenerational cooperation countering hate speech can have a maximum effect, and needs to be inclusive for different actors, including faith leaders, women, and youth networks.

Quotes from the webinar speakers

“It is important for religions to come together and to combat together all sources of problems and situations including the hate speech. Hate speech is leading to dehumanisation especially to minority communities. It is important for religions to talk and to meet each other. Because when faith communities come together it is very powerful statement. “

“We can support victims of hate speech and visible engagement in terms of interfaith engagement is very important.”

“Develop friendship when we do come together, friendship leads to trust, trust leads to hope and view that one day we will leave in world of peace. Education help us to learn about each other, develop resilient society and gives us hope. Hope is what we need to live in harmonious society.”

Imam Sayed Razawi (Chief Imam and Director General of the Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society (SABS))

“Transforming hate with love is very important.”

“With compassion engagement we are much more aware how our words impact the world around us. Embrace compassion within ourselves to find the link between brotherhood and sisterhood in our communities, finding ways to come together, to work together, to be seen working together helping one another.”

2Standing together across religious, ages and gender making our differences a foundation on which we stand on. The truth is that it takes all of us to create the world in which we are, in the good and in the bad, so it will take all of us to combat that consciousness of fear that is the foundation from which hate rise.”

“When you come from place of love you are mindful of the words that you use. Hate speech is outside reflection from what is going on inside, so when we come together in compassion and in love, we can begin to help deconstruct some of those issues that cause us to be afraid of one another.”

Audri Scott Williams (Spiritual Director - Enrichment Center)

“If we are hateful to others, we are hateful to ourselves. If we are hateful to others and ourselves, we are not upholding the dignity of whole life.”

“Please, continue to build courage and compassion in yourself and encourage other people to do the same.”

“When you meet anyone, it is important, no matter how you feel about them, to try to find one thing that you think is really great about them. It starts to change our attitude toward people.”

Jamie Cresswell (Director - Centre for Applied Buddhism)

“Children don’t come to the world to hate; they have a lot of the tools in their hearts to love. They do not care about differences, they go to the part, they talk to everyone, and they play with everyone.”

“Social media at this point, at the hands of children and youth can be a wonderful tool of creation, but also tool of hatred, distance and attacking. We don’t want that to happen.”

“Use words to create an atmosphere in which all people around are included, loved and taken care of. You can create with words, let us create the world we want to live in.”

Maria Crespo de Mafía (Director of Cooperation Circle Support, United Religions Initiative)

“Religious leaders and religious actors have a key role to set an example for their own followers, demonstrate respectful behavior towards others and to be resilient and have calm reactions to provocations. Religious actors can engage their local communities and serve as early warning mechanisms as well. Religious actors in the work with youth have a particular role to play thanks to the values that they are able to inspire in their community and particularly even more so if it is happening in the interfaith context.”

Johannes Langer (Programme Manager & Team Leader, Europe Region Programme, KAICIID Dialogue Centre)

“My point is that we do not live-in closed communities, without connection to groups different than ours, today we are connected much more than ever and that requires much more joint work, that requires joint efforts and that requires multifaith approach to the issues we face. It’s simply not enough that only Muslims counter anti-Muslim hatred, or Jews counter antisemitism, or Buddhists counter anti-Buddhist sentiment etc. We all in our communities need to counter hate speech as phenomena that is not exclusively affecting our group, but other groups as well religious or non-religious, to acknowledge that and understand the complexity of this unfortunately rising issue.”

Emina Frljak (Member of International Youth Committee of Religions for peace)

Participants testimonials

“The no hate speech rule poster is a wonderful initiative.

It demonstrates at a glance that all of the world’s major faith traditions teach believers to use language in a kind and true way.

Therefore the poster is an excellent tool to strengthen young people – and people of all ages – to stand up to hate speech.

And use language consciously and with good intentions, to united, not divide.”

(Karimah Stauch, United Religions Initiative Europe Coordinator)

"Congratulations for creating such an useful NO HATE SPEECH rule poster! It is excellent tool to educate youth and teenagers on NO hate speech from interfaith perspectives. I would use it this summer during the interfaith youth camp in my country."

(Angelina Vladikova, NGO Bridges, Bulgaria)

“It is true that by enhancing interfaith cooperation and harmony we enhance the battle against hate speech. The speakers that gifted us with their valued insight really highlighted the importance of compassion, which for a lot is grounded in the faith or spiritual tradition and the role of community. Working on countering hate speech should be inclusive and leave no one behind in this conversation. From an early age, we need to be encouraged to think about our speech and what that speech really means. This is a multilayered problem and it asked for a multilayered approach, starting from our individual contributions, thought communities’ response and ending with global reaction to hate and the speech that promotes it.”

(Adel Homoras, Youth for Peace, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

“I really liked the poster, especially that it indicated its connections to WIHW with the colors and design. My biggest takeaway from the webinar was the impression that this issue is not here to stay. So many individuals, groups, organizations, communities are working on it from different sides that it feels like we are on it and it will be done. The emphasis on dialogue by one of the speakers really resonated with me as I feel we should not stop just by point at the monster that is tearing up the fibers of our humanity to one another but rather spot it and engage with it in a meaningful way. I strongly feel that those who want to use their speech for promoting hate are hurt and want attention and some kind of reaction and our task is to reach out in a meaningful and transformative way.”

(Samira Fatma Barucija, United Religions Initiative Multiregional Coordinator)