

EQUIPPING PAKISTANI YOUTH TO COUNTER ONLINE HATE SPEECH DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: A CASE REVIEW

Project title: DigiSive – Together for Digital Peace

Implementing agency: Parindey

Central focus: Reduction of hateful and discriminating content from the digital platform and enhance youth capacity to increase digital dialogues at acceptance and tolerance.

Country/region: Pakistan

Grant amount: 10,000 EUR

Date of approval: 1 April 2021

Closing date: 30 November 2021

Main activities: Trainings and dialogue sessions on creating safe and inclusive social spaces.

Three lessons:

1. Education is a powerful tool to counter hate-driven language and narratives.
2. Efforts to combat online hate need to be collaborative.
3. Peacebuilders should make mental health awareness a key component of their work.

INTRODUCING THE CHALLENGE

Pakistan's strikingly young population represents both an asset and a source of risk: Youth under the age of 30 are by far the largest demographic group (64%). The youth bulge can aggravate tensions without equitable, empowering, and participatory youth policies and sustaining social cohesion.¹ The 2017 National Human Development Report on youth highlighted several challenges: only 6% of the country's youth have more than 12 years of education; only 39% are employed, with a very low participation of young women and girls in the workforce, and 7%; and 15% of youth have access to the Internet, with a substantial gender and urban/rural divide.² The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, with widespread school closures and lost jobs as economic activities have stalled, and it has increased barriers for young women, including increases in gender-based violence and the increasing numbers of forced marriages.

Rising social media use, an important trend in Pakistan, exacerbates several risk factors. Pakistan is experiencing a flood of anti-minority content and hate speech. Social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the related rise in online engagement and breakdown in social cohesion, have increased young people's vulnerability to hate-fueled narratives spread through social media and messaging apps. Internet users saw double digit annual increases following 2019 (17% in 2020 and 21% in 2021) and the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) estimates that more than 40 million people use social media.³ Both rural and urban youth are vulnerable to online hate speech, as they come of age in an atmosphere of fervent nationalism, religious sectarianism, violent extremism, and misogyny. Digital spaces they navigate are often toxic and young women specifically are targeted in response to their online activism and participation. Young people may be the targets of hate speech themselves or merely observers susceptible to influence.

¹ Hafeez, E., & Fasih, T. (2018). Growing Population of Pakistani Youth: A Ticking Time Bomb or a Demographic Dividend. *Journal of Education and Educational Development*, 5(2), 211-226.

² <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/unleashing-potential-young-pakistan>

³ <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/771725-new-media-and-the-youth>

CASE REVIEW Equipping Pakistani youth to counter hate speech during the COVID-19 crisis

Civil society groups are working to equip Pakistani youth to counter online hate and build peace through dialogue and education. One youth-led organization, Parindey, partnered with the Organization for Educational Change (OEC) and the Indus School of Knowledge to launch “DigiSive – Together for Digital Peace.” With support from an AHA! Project small grant, the DigiSive intervention trained a diverse group of 100 youth from across Pakistan in knowledge and skills that would enable them to be digital influencers for peace.

AHA! small grant recipients work to address specific impacts of COVID-19 in South Asia, with a focus on threats to social cohesion, the spread of hate speech and misinformation, and the pandemic’s distinctive religious and gender dimensions. This case review explores the impact and approach of one grant, highlighting lessons for peacebuilding practitioners on ways to address digital hate speech among youth in other contexts.

CONTEXT FOR THE CASE REVIEW

Social isolation has a significant impact during the COVID-19 pandemic. Across societies, lockdowns and social distancing measures curtail normal social interactions. Some people have managed to create insular bubbles of family and friends, reducing the risk of infection while maintaining a social circle. Others, however, have spent months on end with little or no direct human contact. This seclusion has driven two related trends: increased online activity and a breakdown in social cohesion.

Virtual interaction often replaces face-to-face engagement during the pandemic. With health-related restrictions in place, many of the routine, positive encounters between diverse communities that make for cohesive societies were suspended. This widened rifts between different ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic groups, that had borne the health and economic impacts of the pandemic unevenly. Bonds within groups during the pandemic were often strengthened, but the lack of inter-group exchange weakened bridges between diverse communities.⁴

The significant rise in online hate speech in Pakistan reflects a global trend. The United Nations defines hate speech as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language” based on an “identity factor” such as ethnicity, religion, gender, or nationality.⁵ The UN identifies hate speech as both a precursor to and a product of violence and abuse, linking it to many of the world’s worst crimes and atrocities.⁶ Hate speech invariably accompanies ethnic cleansing, terrorist acts, and gender-based violence. With rising use of social media, hate speech now travels faster and further than more traditional forms. Youth are especially vulnerable to this spread, as a digitally active population in the process of identity formation—searching for belonging and purpose, and thus more likely to heed radical messages based on grievance.⁷ Young people can be targets of online hate speech due to their identity, or they can be perpetrators, embracing divisive language and narratives and inciting hate.

Again globally, violent extremists seek to influence and recruit young people through social media, but even less strategic messaging can still have insidious effects. Videos, memes, and discussion threads on popular platforms are awash with discriminatory and pejorative content, stoking conflict and shaping young audiences’ perceptions of gender, ethnic, national, and religious identities. Exposed to this content regularly, youth can internalize hate-driven messages without being fully aware of it.

⁴ See, for instance, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/solidarity-isolation-social-cohesion>

⁵ <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf>, p. 2.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ See <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/policymakr.pdf>, pp. 20–22.

YOUTH AND DIGITAL HATE DURING PAKISTAN'S COVID-19 CRISIS

Pakistan is riven by religious and ethnic sectarian divides. With an estimated 80–85% Sunni Muslim population,⁸ the country's Shia, Hindu, Christian, Ahmadi, and Ismaili minorities face frequent discrimination, hostility, and backlash. The rise of Islamist fundamentalist political parties and violent extremist groups since the 1970s, accompanied by repressive government policies, have fostered an increasingly intolerant climate for minority religious communities. Social class and gender also play important roles in targeted social media attacks. This is an environment where hate speech can flourish.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws—which authorize punishments including the death penalty for “offences against religion”—are often weaponized against practitioners of minority faiths.⁹ Blasphemy allegations can stir up mobs and inspire vigilante killings, shortcutting due process. The past decade has witnessed flashpoints of controversy over blasphemy laws and accusations, including high-profile assassinations, protracted legal battles followed internationally, and mass protests by fundamentalist parties that have shut down cities and sparked deadly violence.

Pakistan has witnessed bloody sectarian attacks. Extremist groups have carried out bombings and mass shootings targeting the Shia minority, notably ethnic Hazaras.¹⁰ Christians have also been targeted¹¹ and mobs have opposed the building of Hindu sites of worship with violence.¹² The Ahmadi community—self-identified as Muslim but repudiated by other sects and in Pakistan's Constitution—also faces violence and hostile rhetoric.¹³

The conservative mainstream in Pakistan frequently condones and celebrates such religiously motivated violence. Hate speech in mosque sermons, TV broadcasts, newspapers, online videos, and social media posts demonizes minorities and inflames intercommunal tensions. Elected officials sometimes make public statements that incite hatred and reinforce existing prejudices. In online discussions, discrimination and xenophobia are closely linked to nationalism: Pakistani digital spaces feature a high volume of anti-India rhetoric, and minorities and critics of the state are often denounced as being anti-Pakistan or pro-India.

Facebook and Twitter monitoring in late 2019 found just over half (52.8%) of hate speech directed at the Ahmadi religious community, with frequent use of terms such as kafir (“infidel/apostate”), Qadyani (a pejorative label), wajib-ul-qatl (“eligible/mandatory to be killed”), and fitna (“strife/rebellion”) in connection with Ahmadis. Social media users encouraged or glorified violence against the group, asserting that Ahmadi beliefs are a “perversion” of true Islam. Much hate speech (13.4%) was directed at progressive Muslims, with targets called un-Islamic, polytheists, or Indians in disguise for their tolerant attitude toward other faiths—specifically in relation to a Hindu temple being built in Islamabad. Shia Muslims garnered 11.5% of hate content on the social media platforms, witnessing similar pejorative terms as those used for Ahmadis and accusations of apostasy. Other recurring terms included lanat (“curse”), kute (“dogs”), and choora (“untouchable”), the last of these a slur against Christians, referring to their pre-conversion Dalit Hindu status.¹⁴

⁸ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/pakistan/>

⁹ See <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Pakistan-On-Trial-Blasphemy-Laws-Publications-Thematic-Reports-2015-ENG.pdf>

¹⁰ Reuters. “Islamic State Claims Responsibility for Attack on Pakistan's Shi'ite Hazara Minority That Kills 11,” January 3, 2021, sec. APAC. <https://www.reuters.com/article/pakistan-killings-minority-idUSKBN2980HH>.

¹¹ BBC News. “Why Are Pakistan's Christians Targeted?,” October 30, 2018, sec. Asia. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35910331>.

¹² Abi-Habib, Maria. “Islamists Block Construction of First Hindu Temple in Islamabad.” The New York Times, July 8, 2020, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/world/asia/hindu-temple-islamabad-islamists-pakistan.html>.

¹³ “Amid Bullets and ‘Blasphemy’, Pakistan's Ahmadis Struggle on.” Accessed February 21, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/26/ahmadi-persecution-pakistan-blasphemy-islam>.

¹⁴ <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Hate-speech-targeting-minority-faiths-report-090321-EW-1.pdf>

CASE REVIEW Equipping Pakistani youth to counter hate speech during the COVID-19 crisis

Misogynistic hate speech is a major concern in Pakistan’s online spaces. Pakistan ranks in the bottom quarter of countries globally on the Gender Inequality Index (GII).¹⁵ Threats, sexual harassment and assault, domestic violence, and “honor” mutilations and killings are among the forms of antagonism that Pakistani women experience. Those who express feminist sentiments face severe backlash, as opposition to the annual Aurat March demonstrates.¹⁶ This hostility carries over to the digital realm, where misogyny manifests itself in victim-blaming in rape cases, discriminating slurs, malicious sharing of women’s personal information or intimate content, and direct threats of death or sexual violence against female influencers, journalists, and activists.¹⁷ Twitter observation has also found an increase in misogynistic content since pandemic lockdowns began.¹⁸

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, Pakistan has seen a rise in multiple forms of hate speech. In early 2020, officials placed Shia Hazara neighborhoods under quarantine, citing the risk of COVID-19 spread by pilgrims returning from Iran. The hashtag #ShiaVirus and related slogans—dangerously linking the coronavirus to a specific religious and ethnic identity—trended on Twitter. These events came amid a surge in virulent anti-Shia rhetoric across Pakistan. A few months later, mass rallies by hardline Sunni parties denounced Shias as “unbelievers” and “blasphemers” worthy of beheading.¹⁹ In the spring of 2020, monitoring organizations also documented a spike in anti-Ahmadi digital hate speech following rumors that the new National Minority Commission would include an Ahmadi representative.²⁰

Youth are central to the issue of online hate speech in Pakistan (about one-third of Pakistanis are between the ages of 15 and 2).²¹ Rapid digital integration has created a large and engaged youth culture on social media, with young Pakistanis active on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and other platforms. Pakistan’s younger generation is also at the forefront of political and civil society trends, ranging from leadership of nonviolent activist organizations like the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)—demanding justice for the ethnic Pashtun community—to the ranks of fundamentalist parties like Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP), agitating for stricter enforcement of blasphemy laws. Surrounded by fierce debates and struggles to reshape society, Pakistani youth thus are affected by online hate speech—as victims or as potential subscribers to divisive and violent ideologies.

THE “DIGISIVE – TOGETHER FOR DIGITAL PEACE” INITIATIVE

Parindey is a youth-led organization that promotes empathy, mental health awareness, and social cohesion through creative programs and education²². In partnership with the Organization for Education Change (OEC) and the Indus School of Knowledge, “DigiSive – Together for Digital Peace” is an initiative that has worked to prevent and counter the growth of hate speech in Pakistan’s digital spaces during the COVID-19 emergency. Through trainings, dialogues, and social media campaigns, DigiSive has equipped a diverse group of youth to combat hate and build peace in their communities, using online platforms.

A first step was conduct (by OEC and Indus) of online surveys and interviews to select a cohort of 100 youth, ages 18 to 28, from across Pakistan to take part in the initiative. Over twelve hours of trainings, participants learned to identify online hate speech, reflected on the issue in their surroundings, and developed strategies and tools for countering hate and creating safe digital spaces. During events, bloggers, influencers, activists, and community leaders shared their expertise with participants. The initiative had a goal of replication, with youth from the trainings collaboratively designing peace projects which they would then roll out online—reaching a larger audience and passing on skills and knowledge to their peers on social media.

¹⁵ See <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/PAK.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/3/22/pakistans-feminists-say-will-persevere-amid-increased-threats>

¹⁷ See <https://bytesforall.pk/publication/technology-driven-violence-against-women>

¹⁸ https://data2x.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/UCSD-Brief-3_BigDataGenderCOVID19SouthAsianMisogyny.pdf

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/21/pakistani-shias-live-in-terror-as-sectarian-violence-increases>

²⁰ <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/hate-speech-monitoring-helps-raise-alarm-for-ahmadis-in-pakistan/>

²¹ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/unleashing-potential-young-pakistan>

²² See https://www.facebook.com/FeelFollowFly/?timeline_context_item_type=intro_card_work&timeline_context_item_source=100002841835135&pnref=lhc



Figure 1 Parindey with its initiative DigiSive, organized a training at Khairpur among youth and women. The training was subjected to understand the social cohesion and the use of cyber space with responsibility. (September 3, 2021 / Source: <https://www.facebook.com/DigiSive>)

Parindey leader Sonal Dhanani described Pakistan’s social media atmosphere as “toxic.” Minorities fear false and malicious accusations of online blasphemy, and the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority even urges internet users to report “blasphemous content.”²³ DigiSive’s challenge was to create an environment where minority participants felt safe enough to express themselves freely; some participants were fearful about potential backlash from peace projects on social media, but DigiSive addressed these challenges by encouraging youth to work in teams instead of alone, providing moral support and drawing from a broader collective skillset. They also organized several online workshops and seminars on critical issues such as the religious divide at digital platforms (May 21, 2021), and youth, social media, and peacebuilding (June 25, 2021). These events were livestreamed on Facebook for a wider audience. DigiSive’s digital campaign “Your Comment Matters” brings attention to the importance of speaking up against hate speech on social media platforms such as Facebook.

DigiSive partners plan to sustain the project’s momentum by collaborating with schools and colleges, integrating media literacy and hate speech awareness into school curricula so that students are equipped to create safe online spaces.

BUILDING RESILIENCE: TAKEAWAYS AND LESSONS

Trends towards discrimination and division in Pakistani society make peacebuilding among youth a daunting challenge, especially in the digital realm, where it can be hard to break through the noise of viral content and sensationalism. Hate speech is pervasive, and COVID-19 has exacerbated isolation and social fragmentation. Interventions like DigiSive point the way towards effective approaches to combatting hate speech among youth.

The project highlights successful principles and elements that peacebuilders in other contexts can learn from:

- Education is a powerful tool to counter hate-driven language and narratives. DigiSive’s focus on media literacy, awareness, and reflective engagement with participants’ specific contexts reinforces the finding—noted by researchers on radicalization²⁴—that education plays a central role in building youth resilience to hate and extremism. Youth need broader and more nuanced information than what they encounter on social media.
- Efforts to combat online hate need to be collaborative. Working in teams instead of as lone individuals, as DigiSive participants did in their projects, has multiple benefits: it reverses the trend of isolation aggravated by COVID-19, builds social cohesion by bringing members of diverse communities together for a common task, and provides moral support and a sense of solidarity when peacebuilders face backlash.

²³ See <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-blasphemy-online-regulatory-body/4101325.html> and <https://www.pta.gov.pk/en/media-center/single-media/public-notice---report-blasphemous-content-to-pta>

²⁴ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000266105>

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Peacebuilders should make mental health awareness a key component of their work. Pandemic isolation, the volatility of adolescence, and the known negative mental health impacts of heavy social media use create a vulnerable audience for online hate speech. DigiSive skillfully addressed the link between hate speech and mental health by creating a safe space for minorities to share their experiences and focusing on the emotional wellbeing of participants.



Image source: Unsplash <https://unsplash.com/photos/IgUR1iX0mqM>

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