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QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER



HATE SPEECH VS. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines hate speech as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses [SSI] 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.”



PIPS YOUTH ACTION FOR INTERFAITH HARMONY

PIPS conducted several Social Action Plans in order to promote youth inter-faith harmony. Observers were trained by PIPS in several cities including Mian Channu, Sahiwal, Gujranwala, Faisalabad, Tharparker and Swat. Different activities were conducted by the trained observers to promote peace, co-existence and inclusion.

YOUTH INTERFAITH HARMONY: STORIES OF TOLERANCE AND CO- EXISTENCE

A Social Action Plan (SAP) is a small, locally designed and community-led initiative developed and implemented by trained PIPS observers in collaboration and cooperation with local peace actors to promote interfaith harmony, peaceful coexistence, inclusion, and diversity in the society.



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Policy Paper

Hate Speech vs. Freedom of Expression

Introduction

The UN Strategy and 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.”^[1] However, UN also suggests that there is no universal definition of hate speech.^[2] This policy brief examines how this vagueness creates opportunities for the spread of hate speech within society.

Hate speech corrodes peace and tolerance in a society.^[3] It leads to a vicious cycle of intolerance and bigotry. In Pakistan, hate speech on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (Twitter), and YouTube provokes hatred and deepens interfaith divisions.^[4] It is therefore essential to monitor the social media content because it can lead to harmful effects on society such as polarization, sectarian clashes and religious extremism.^[5]

Hate Speech vs. Freedom of Expression in Pakistan

The constitution of Pakistan guarantees freedom of expression under Article 19 of the constitution. This is the rightful way of “transmission of knowledge” in a democratic society. While freedom of press and individual freedoms are protected, the state retains the authority to impose checks and balances. This creates multiple challenges for journalists in a democratic country like Pakistan because freedom of expression becomes mere rhetoric in the presence of strict monitoring. Journalists have reported “legal pressure, content restrictions, self-censorship and threats from state and non-state actors”.

Freedom of expression is guaranteed through international law and the national constitution, but stringent checks lead to an ongoing dilemma. It creates tension between freedom of opinion, hate speech, and laws regulating sensitive forms of expression in Pakistan.

Cases of Hate Speech in Pakistan

Hate speech offenses in Pakistan are prosecuted under Section 153A and 295A. PECA (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act) also plays a role in curbing hate speech. While PECA has received its share of criticism, it remains a tool for controlling hate speech in Pakistan.

According to reports, a TikToker from Bahawalnagar was arrested by police in 2025. He was accused of “posting hate speech and sectarian material on social media”. This arrest is in line with the notice issued by Punjab’s Chief Minister who took serious action against hate speech and ordered prompt arrests of individuals responsible for spreading hate speech online. Here, we notice that the government is playing a pivotal role in controlling hate speech online. This highlights the importance of government intervention in this issue.

Hate Speech, Freedom of Speech and International Law

International law upholds that states need to protect their citizens from animosity and discrimination that result from hate speech. Pakistan's law presents both convergence and divergence from the requisites of International law. However, some countries have expressed concerns about the growing power of social media, noting that it contributes to the spread of misinformation and hate speech. This raises the question of credibility and spread of hate speech when mainstream media outlets lose influence and alternative media gain momentum. Human rights organizations observe that "governments around the world routinely imprison people – or worse – for speaking out, even though almost every country's constitution refers to the value of 'free speech'".

Hate Speech and Social Media

Social media is a tool for freedom of expression. It allows users to express their opinions and raise issues pertaining to their society. However, there is a fine line between freedom of expression and speech that can incite hostility or offend others. If the content is instigating "a person or a group on the basis of characteristics such as race, color, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or political affiliation," it is hate speech. Hate speech cannot be classified as freedom of expression because it is detrimental to the societal fabric. Therefore, social media cannot be used to instigate people on the basis of their core traits.

Research indicates that a vast majority of people have faced hate speech online on social media. The results of this are harmful because it leads to a vulnerable society where discrimination, intolerance and bigotry become rampant. It defeats the purpose of having tools such as Facebook, Instagram, X etc., which are meant to develop understanding, free speech and harmony globally.

There are different classifications of hate speech that have emerged online on social media. Some of these include "defamation, call for violence, agitation by provoking statements debating political or social issues displaying discriminatory views (Bhavnani et al., 2009), rumors and conspiracy." Any speech that falls under these domains can be classified as hate speech which can threaten peace between individuals and ruin harmony in society.

Hate Speech and Social Media

Given the hate speech can threaten social peace, it is essential to address it proactively. This includes surveillance by the government to identify accounts responsible for disseminating hate speech. Once identified, the content must be thoroughly analyzed, and appropriate legal action should be taken in accordance with existing laws.

Furthermore, sustained research on this topic is crucial to explore this sensitive issue more deeply. As several studies have noted, cyberhate and hate speech lack concrete and universally accepted definitions, which makes their identification challenging. Consequently, this ambiguity requires that each case of hate speech be subjected to thorough research and analysis.

PECA and Hate Speech

PECA, which stands for Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, provides a legal framework for identifying and prosecuting cybercrimes and regulating online content. While it is designed to safeguard online content, it has received international criticism for curbing freedom of expression. Criticism suggests that some amendments in PECA could unfairly "target journalists, political activists, human rights defenders, and dissenting voices by criminalizing criticism of state institutions". This is where the amendments of PECA, hate speech, and freedom of expression present a tension.

Further criticism of the amendments suggests that the criteria and definitions in PECA's amendments are "broad and vague". The newly introduced terms such as "false and harmful" information leave the amendment open to "subjective interpretation". Hence, it can be said that the use of subjective terminologies in PECA's amendments creates a hurdle in identifying hate speech.

Policy Suggestions

Given that the issue of hate speech is complicated, it is essential to form dedicated analytical wings which can study online content holistically. This is critical for highlighting hate speech because of its intricate nature. The importance of a deep analysis, as opposed to generic labelling, can create a balance between hate speech and freedom of speech or expression.

Another critical step is to allow journalists to express their opinion in a safe and open environment. This can be done by creating opportunities for dialogue instead of suppressing voices of journalists. This openness will promote democracy and allow the public to be informed in a fair and just manner.

Moreover, focus group sessions with influencers, journalists, and social media users can create opportunities for meaningful discussion. The topics can include sensitive topics that may give rise to hate speech online. Open communication with authorities can create safe spaces for self-expression and nurture understanding. This can also reduce frustration among youth groups and allow them to express themselves in a moderated environment.

It would also be beneficial for authorities to keep laws on hate speech open to public debate. That will again reinforce democracy and create an environment conducive for positive discussions. Inputs from academics, analysts, journalists, and the general public will enrich the process of making laws on hate speech.

Conclusion

While the definition of the term hate speech remains open to debate, it is essential to emphasize the importance of detecting hate speech on social media. In order to successfully detect hate speech online, experts need to take into account a holistic picture of the post. They need to identify the speakers and understand the context of their statements. This prevents the confusion between hate speech and freedom of speech.

Another debate that emerges while discussing hate speech is the fine line between hate speech and freedom of speech. In Pakistan, journalists have faced consequences of the broad definition of the term hate speech. This issue points to the implications of new amendments of PECA where criticism suggests that the law is subjective and lacks narrow definition of hate speech. Due to this, the line between freedom of speech and hate speech remains blurred.

To conclude, it can be said that the topic of hate speech is convoluted. There is a need to create open spaces to discuss this topic so that the definition of the term hate speech can be narrowed down unanimously.

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Youth Interfaith Harmony: Stories of Tolerance and Co-existence

A Social Action Plan (SAP) is a small, locally designed and community-led initiative developed and implemented by trained PIPS observers in collaboration and cooperation with local peace actors to promote interfaith harmony, peaceful coexistence, inclusion, and diversity in the society. A SAP also contributes to reducing hate speech, protecting minority rights, safeguarding freedom of religion or belief, and strengthening community resilience against extremism.

Several observers, hailing from various cities throughout the country, were trained by the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) in Islamabad in November last year to carry out Social Action Plans (SAPs) in their local communities. A positive response has been received and this report focusses on describing different SAPs that have been conducted in different cities up till now.

Interfaith Harmony Workshop in Mian Channu

In Mian Channu, a town of Punjab, a workshop named, ‘Promoting Peace & Interfaith Harmony among Women,’ was conducted to promote interfaith harmony among women. In this workshop, 50 women and school students took part. The main aim of the workshop was to promote peace and tolerance among the participants. The workshop was conducted successfully and all the participants remained positive about the outcomes. The workshop was concluded with a prayer for peace in the society.





Inclusivity Session in Sahiwal

Continuing the theme of co-existence with peace in the society, an awareness session was conducted in Sahiwal, Punjab, to promote inclusivity among children. The aim of the workshop was to promote love and understanding among children. The workshop emphasized on the importance of good character. Different activities were conducted to spread the message in a child friendly manner.





Seminar in Gujranwala

Gujranwala's observers successfully implemented a SAP by organizing a seminar on bridging the gap between madrassa (seminary) and university students. The total number of participants were 30. The organizers explained that the main objective of this seminar was to promote mutual understanding and harmony between madrasah and university students. In a society like Pakistan where there may be a gap between the different educational backgrounds (traditional religious and modern education) of youth, such dialogues can bridge the differences. Research has also shown that dialogue sessions between different groups can bridge the gap and lead to mutual understanding. In this context, this project was designed to provide a safe platform for students and help them find common values despite their educational and religious difference.

The primary objective of this seminar was to promote interfaith harmony, peaceful coexistence, and peacebuilding among young people through dialogue and education. The session assessed that in today's diverse society, misunderstandings and stereotypes based on religious differences could lead to intolerance and social divisions. It promoted that educational institutions had a vital role in cultivating respect, empathy, and cooperation among individuals belonging to different educational and religious backgrounds.



Positive Behaviour Sessions in Faisalabad

PIPS trained teams in Faisalabad conducted three Social Action Plans. Their first SAP focused on raising awareness on bullying and hate speech among children aged 8-14 years. They conducted poster competition; and, the themes around this were peace, unity, kindness, religious harmony and anti-bullying. They also aimed to create a peace pledge wall where messages of peace and harmony would be displayed for reminder in future. Their SAP aimed at improving understanding of peace concepts and increasing creativity and participation. This activity created an opportunity to spread positive messaging through artwork.

The second SAP focused on peace building through dialogue. The main objectives included promotion of peace, tolerance and co-existence; developing communication and conflict resolution skills; encouraging respectful dialogue among participants; and, spreading awareness about the importance of social harmony. This SAP was also conducted successfully and participants learnt a lot through this exercise.

The aim of the third SAP was to use role play/drama as an engaging method to highlight the harmful effects of bullying and encourage positive behaviour. The target audience included school students, teachers and community members. The SAP was successful in delivering its message of peace and tolerance through drama. Real life situations were reenacted to display a realistic picture of harmful effects of bullying on individuals and society.

Social Cohesion Activities in Tharparkar

PIPS observers conducted SAPs in far-off, resource-constrained and economically disadvantaged Tharparkar district of Sindh and combined tree plantation with social cohesion in the area that is part of the Thar Desert. According to 2023 Census, Tharparkar comprises of 45 per cent population of the Hindu community, which is otherwise a religious minority in Pakistan.

In their first SAP, observers carried out a plantation drive and included members from diverse backgrounds. They carried out mobilization meetings with youth leaders, which served as a critical point for dialogue and discussion about interfaith harmony. For the plantation drive, they took 10-15 youth from different communities and procured native trees such as Neem, Moringa and Kandi.

For the second SAP, they hosted an outdoor community cinema featuring short films on coexistence, social issues and culture. This was another innovative way of bringing the community together. As a result of this, youth participants expressed greater confidence in discussing sensitive topics respectfully.

Fundamental Rights Session in Swat

The Social Action Plan from Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, focused on fundamental rights awareness. The session aimed to enhance students' understanding of fundamental rights, constitutional responsibilities, peaceful coexistence and responsible citizenship. A total of 80 students actively participated in the event. The session successfully created awareness about fundamental rights and responsible citizenship.

The implementation of SAPs in various cities indicated a positive step towards achieving the goal of a peaceful society. The observers were trained and they delivered. Pak Institute for Peace Studies ensured that they were facilitated in the execution of activities.

Community Voices: People behind Social Action Plans



As part of the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) Social Action Projects initiative, Ms. Kiran successfully designed and implemented four community-based interventions in Tharparkar and Hyderabad, Sindh. Primarily focusing on peacebuilding, interfaith harmony, environmental sustainability, and youth engagement. The projects included Shades of Tomorrow, a plantation drive promoting climate resilience and collective responsibility; Desert Cinema for Peace, which utilized film and dialogue to encourage coexistence; Unity Through Dialogue, a youth peace gathering fostering empathy and meaningful conversations; and Chai, Stories and Humanity, an interactive art-based and creative reflection session centered on human connection and shared experiences. Collectively, these initiatives engaged more than 70 young people and community members, creating inclusive spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and learning. By combining creative methodologies with community participation, the projects strengthened youth leadership, encouraged cross-community understanding, and demonstrated the potential of grassroots action to contribute to peaceful, resilient, and socially cohesive communities.

Ms. Kiran Jewraj is a youth development and community engagement professional with experience in peace building, social cohesion, public health awareness, and youth empowerment initiatives. Through the design and implementation of social action projects, dialogue-based interventions, and participatory learning activities, she has engaged diverse communities in promoting inclusion, empathy, civic responsibility, and positive social change. Skilled at facilitation, project coordination, and stakeholder engagement, she is committed to creating meaningful change, and contribute towards building resilient, inclusive, and peaceful communities.

About PIPS

Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) is an Islamabad-based research and advocacy organization. The Institute offers a range of consultancy services through a combination of independent research and analysis, innovative academic programs, and hands-on training and support that serve the following basic themes: Conflict analysis and peacebuilding, dialogue, prevent/counter violent extremism (P/CVE), internal and regional security, and media for peace and democracy. PIPS conducts structured dialogues, focused group discussions, and national and international seminars to understand the issues listed earlier and also strengthen partnerships. The outcomes of PIPS research and planned events have extensively been reported in the mainstream media which adds to its credibility as an active and well networked civil society organization. PIPS policy reports and recommendations on security and CVE have frequently been cited in various works and included in state policy debates and documents. Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) conducted a research study in 2024-25 under the title “Building Bridges, Fostering Tolerance and Inclusivity among Youth”. The program was particularly designed to engage Pakistan's youth from diverse backgrounds. The participants belonging to Madrassas, universities, media and social activists were engaged to strengthen their support for freedom of faith, and religious tolerance and harmony. It builds upon the philosophical approach that youth are part of a solution to challenges thrown by violent extremism and communal and sectarian discord.



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