



## RESEARCH BRIEF

# SOCIAL COHESION DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC: COMBATING HATE SPEECH, PROMOTING INTEGRATED SOCIETIES

This paper is one of a series of research elements produced by the European Union funded AHA! Awareness with Human Action project that seeks to contribute to the response efforts of the COVID-19 pandemic by preventing conflict and building social cohesion in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and broader South Asia. The AHA! project is implemented by a consortium of project partners, including the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers/Finn Church Aid, World Faiths Development Dialogue, the Center for Peace and Justice – Brac University, the Center for Communication and Development of Bangladesh, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the Youth Development Foundation, and Sarvodaya.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 threatens social cohesion in South Asia, adding digital misinformation and increased economic hardship to settings with already volatile intercommunal relations. Hate speech on social media against minorities, women and young women, and other marginalized populations has significantly increased since the start of the pandemic. Without proactive measures to curb hateful online content and prevent conflict, harmful rhetoric can escalate into physical violence.

This brief examines the rise of pandemic-related hate speech and risks to social cohesion in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. It highlights the sharp rise in hate speech and derogatory messages against various populations during the pandemic, including misogynistic, anti-minority, and anti-immigrant content on social media. It offers some practical proposals to policymakers, civil society organizations, and technology corporations to combat hate speech and help strengthen social cohesion as societies transition into a post-pandemic reality.

## COVID-19'S EFFECTS ON SOCIAL COHESION

Social cohesion refers to the strength and resilience of the relationships between diverse members of a society, measured by qualities such as trust and cooperation.<sup>1</sup> Besides taking a terrible toll on health and economies, the COVID-19 crisis has damaged social cohesion across the globe.<sup>2</sup> Pandemic-related, lockdowns and social distancing have disrupted the kinds of positive, routine encounters between diverse groups that characterize cohesive societies. The effects have been most severe in conflict-affected and fragile settings,<sup>3</sup> where mistrust and societal tensions run deep due to poverty, political strife, and weak institutions. The shift from in-person to online engagement, along with waves of online misinformation, has reinforced trends of scapegoating and discrimination. Economic and political pressures have widened pre-existing rifts between different socioeconomic, ethnic, and religious communities. As countries emerge from the pandemic, these impacts will be hard to reverse.

<sup>1</sup> See the definitions at <https://www.socialcohesion.info/concepts/concept/the-essentials-of-social-cohesion-a-literature-review> and <https://www.ber-telsmann-stiftung.de/de/unsere-projekte/deutschland-und-asien/social-cohesion-asia>

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/solidarity-isolation-social-cohesion> and <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14616696.2020.1833067?needAccess=true>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.undp.org/publications/overcoming-setbacks-understanding-impact-and-implications-covid-19-fragile-and>

## HOW HATE SPEECH SPREADS

Much of the online misinformation and other incendiary content generated during COVID-19 can be characterized as hate speech. There is no universally accepted definition of hate speech, but a United Nations strategy document defines it broadly as “any kind of communication . . . that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group . . . based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.”<sup>4</sup>

Hate speech can be seen as both a consequence and a cause of social divisions and intolerance. Enmity toward or between certain groups fuels hate speech, which in turn drives conflict and more hate speech, creating cycles of escalation that often turn violent. Not all hate speech is explicit: The term “dog whistling,” for instance, refers to the use of loaded words or phrases to incite hatred and conflict. This type of speech is contextually resonant enough to be understood by the intended audience but subtle enough that those on the outside cannot hear the violent undertones.

Online hate speech takes many forms and can be intersectional in targeting various forms of identities. Ethnic or religious slurs in the text of a social media post, pejorative hashtags, fake news stories inciting fear or backlash against a minority, video rants, and memes and comics that rely on harmful identity-based tropes are a few of the ways that hate spreads digitally. These forms of hate speech coupled with gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, and other identifiers can increase the risk of an individual being targeted. Countering hate speech on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube presents large challenges to peacebuilders, since content is generated in numerous languages and can quickly reach millions of viewers. Closed messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, Messenger, and Telegram, are especially problematic, enabling inflammatory misinformation to spread unchecked through social networks.

Hate speech also spreads through other mediums. Public figures—including senior political leaders—are sometimes the perpetrators, engaging in scapegoating or pejorative language in speeches and official statements.<sup>5</sup> Even mainstream television networks and newspapers report events in ways that heighten antipathy toward marginalized groups. These sources

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://gija.georgetown.edu/2021/05/05/the-digitalization-of-hate-speech-in-south-and-southeast-asia-conflict-mitigation-approaches/>

have a symbiotic relationship with social media, drawing from and amplifying online trends while simultaneously invigorating online discourse and lending institutional authority to patterns of scapegoating and discrimination. In some cases, discrimination is highly organized, for example through official textbooks. Government policy, social media, the press, and the “real” world of in-person encounters are interconnected, not discrete with developments in each sphere constantly shaping and reacting to the others.

## DETERIORATING SOCIAL COHESION IN SOUTH ASIA

Threats to social cohesion are especially worrying in South Asia. Countries in the region have a history of sectarian violence and conditions associated with conflict, including high urban density, stark income inequalities and poverty, gender inequality, large refugee and migrant populations, and rigid group identities along lines of caste, religion, and ethnicity. Studies indicate that social cohesion has deteriorated in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh since the early 2000s and was low across South Asia prior to the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Overall social cohesion in Sri Lanka improved in the same period, but indicators such as “trust in people” and “acceptance of diversity” remained low.<sup>7</sup> Limited in-person interaction between groups and the stressors added by COVID-19 have accelerated negative societal trends.

COVID-19 has aggravated already tense group dynamics across South Asia, with different manifestations in the different countries and often sub-regions. One illustration is the tendency to scapegoat specific groups popularly identified as superspreaders (#CoronaJihad trended on social media after a large Islamic convention was thought to have been a source of infections<sup>8</sup>). In Pakistan, social media users blamed ethnic-minority Hazaras—who, as Shia Muslims, are also a religious minority—for spreading the virus after a pilgrimage to Iran, using hashtags such as #ShiaVirus.<sup>9</sup> Anti-feminist groups have shared fake news stories about battered husbands and blamed women for spreading COVID-19 through women’s rights

protests.<sup>10</sup> Other types of discriminatory and abusive language in South Asian online spaces have significantly increased. Not all of them directly pertain to the coronavirus, but the spike in hostile and partisan social media content can be seen as a byproduct of limited personal contact between groups due to the pandemic and the displacement of social relations to the digital realm. All of the mediums mentioned above have channeled hate speech during South Asia’s COVID-19 crisis.

The situation in three countries is profiled below. India, not covered here, hosts the majority of social media users in the region. Because social networks overlap, online narratives that begin in India often influence the discourse in other countries.<sup>11</sup>

## COUNTRY PROFILES

### PAKISTAN

Pakistan has a history of intense sectarian conflict. Longstanding tensions among the country’s Muslims, and between the Sunni Muslim majority and various ethnic and religious minorities—Hindus, Christians, and Ahmadis—have created a receptive climate for hate speech and violence. Accusations of blasphemy against Islam, a punishable offense, have been used to incite mob killings or assassinations during or prior to court proceedings. Shias, especially those from the Hazara ethnicity, have been targeted in bloody attacks by extremist organizations.

Monitoring of social media in Pakistan in 2019–2020 found a high volume of pejorative content aimed at Shia Muslims, and occasionally at the Ismaili sect.<sup>12</sup> By far the most hate speech was directed at the Ahmadiyya community, who consider themselves Muslims but are repudiated by many Muslims. Over a ten-week period in 2019, slurs and threats against Ahmadis accounted for more than 50 percent of all hate speech in Pakistani social media spaces.<sup>13</sup> Words and phrases like Qadyani (a derogatory label for Ahmadis), fitna (rebellion or strife), kafir (infidel), and Wajib-ul-Qatl (deserving/mandatory to be killed) are frequently used in connection with Ahmadis. The latter two are sometimes also applied to Shias and Ismailis.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/unsere-projekte/deutschland-und-asien/social-cohesion-asia>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.equalitylabs.org/coronajihad>

<sup>9</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/covid-19-fans-religious-discrimination-in-pakistan/>

<sup>10</sup> [https://data2x.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/UCSD-Brief-3\\_BigDataGenderCOVID19SouthAsianMisogyny.pdf](https://data2x.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/UCSD-Brief-3_BigDataGenderCOVID19SouthAsianMisogyny.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.equalitylabs.org/coronajihad>

<sup>12</sup> <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Hate-speech-targeting-minority-faiths-report-090321-EW-1.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

The COVID-19 situation has aggravated hostilities and contributed to the breakdown of social cohesion. In spring 2020, Shia pilgrims belonging to the ethnic minority Hazara community returned to Pakistan from Iran and were placed in strict government quarantine. Social media users accused them of bringing the coronavirus to Pakistan, coining the hashtag #ShiaVirus and similar slurs—a clear instance of scapegoating. A study of social media behavior during the pandemic in five South Asian countries found a significant increase in the volume of misogynistic tweets on Pakistani Twitter after lockdowns began in April 2020.

Given past trends of violence and discrimination against women and young women and minorities in Pakistan, the rise in online hate speech during COVID-19 is deeply troubling. It has the power to inspire both individuals and organized extremist outfits to commit acts of violence. At a minimum, it signifies heightened suspicion, accusations, and harmful stereotyping of other groups along ethnic, religious, and gender lines. Over time, this rhetoric can spark physical conflict.

#### BANGLADESH

Bangladesh has witnessed outbreaks of bloody intergroup conflict since independence in 1971, including attacks on the minority Hindu community. In the 2010s, members of hardline Islamist parties and extremist organizations killed secularist and atheist writers and bloggers as well as ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, attracting international attention. Calls for violence by conservative clerics and jihadist leaders preceded these acts. Activists and female public figures, including AHA! digital townhall participants, have highlighted online misogyny and abuse of women as another serious problem in Bangladesh—victim blaming in cases of rape is especially common.<sup>14</sup>

Several hate speech trends in Bangladesh have increased during the COVID-19 emergency. There has been a marked rise in misogynistic content in online spaces.<sup>15</sup> A Bangladeshi columnist cites the outpouring of abuse on social media against singer Rizwana Choudhury Bannya after the news that she had contracted COVID-19, with some posts celebrating her illness and mocking her with sexist language.<sup>16</sup> AHA! townhall

participants also noted widening class rifts: resentment toward low-wage earners and slum dwellers grew during the pandemic, since these groups could not easily maintain lockdown and social distancing requirements.

Tensions between local communities and the almost one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, most located in Cox's Bazar, have escalated during the COVID-19 crisis. Scapegoating and inflammatory claims about the effects of the Rohingya presence appeared in newspapers and on social media. Frustrations were already growing due to economic dislocation—Rohingyas taking local jobs for lower wages—and the sense that aid groups were providing generous material assistance to the refugees while ignoring impoverished locals. There were also stories of drug smuggling, human trafficking, and violent crime connected to the refugee community. With COVID-19, these fears and grievances combined with hysteria about the Rohingya camps as potential superspreader sites for the coronavirus. Refugees are stigmatized both as an economic burden and a health hazard.<sup>17</sup>

As the pandemic continues and evolves in Bangladesh, peacebuilding and policy work is needed to counter hateful, alarmist, and sexist rhetoric and to mitigate real economic sources of conflict in order to preserve social cohesion.



<sup>14</sup> “Women, Peace, and Security,” 2nd Virtual AHA! National Townhall in Bangladesh, February 28, 2021; see also <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/violent-speech-begets-violent-nation-1981445>

<sup>15</sup> [https://data2x.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/UCSD-Brief-3\\_BigDataGenderCOVID19SouthAsianMisogyny.pdf](https://data2x.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/UCSD-Brief-3_BigDataGenderCOVID19SouthAsianMisogyny.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/2020/07/06/op-ed-are-we-confusing-hatred-with-freedom-of-speech>

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/07/27/Bangladesh-Rohingya-refugee-host-coronavirus-aid> and <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Rohingya-scapegoated-as-Bangladesh-battles-COVID-19>



## SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka has maintained a fragile peace since 2009, when decades of devastating conflict between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) militants ended. However, aggressive state policies and unresolved grievances keep tensions high between the ethnic Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority. Ethnic hostilities are also crosscut by religious ones: Sri Lanka has a large Buddhist majority (primarily Sinhalese), with Hindu (primarily Tamil), Muslim, and Christian minorities. Islamophobia increased after the war's end, and the high-casualty 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, claimed by the Islamic State, drew sharp backlash against the island's Muslims. Sri Lanka has seen periodic mob violence along ethnoreligious lines.

Early in the pandemic in Sri Lanka, senior government officials, news outlets, and social media users claimed (incorrectly) that infections were concentrated in the Muslim community. Social media users accused Muslims of recklessly disregarding health precautions and deliberately infecting others. Some called for boycotting Muslim businesses. The government mandated that COVID-19 fatalities be cremated rather than buried, contrary to WHO guidelines. This was widely seen as an attack on Muslim and Christian burial practices. Research into hate speech in Sri Lanka between March and June 2020 found that burial rites were a frequent subject in anti-Muslim rhetoric. About 58% of hate speech incidents from this time targeted the Muslim community, while 30% targeted Christians.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> <https://minorityrights.org/trends2021/sri-lanka/>

Sri Lankan women have experienced increased discrimination and violence during the pandemic. Workers in the textile and apparel industry, most of whom are women, were stigmatized on social media as COVID-19 spreaders after news of infection at a factory.<sup>19</sup> As in other South Asian countries, social media spaces in Sri Lanka saw a dramatic rise in misogynistic content. Besides abusive and derogatory language toward women and young women, a common theme was rejection of feminism as an empty Western ideal undermining national culture.<sup>20</sup>

As Sri Lanka brings COVID-19 under control, the damage to social cohesion during the pandemic will be hard to undo. Discrimination and hate speech against Muslims are especially concerning, since they are backed by policies and legislation that target Muslim leaders and restrict the freedoms of the Muslim community.

## CONCLUSION AND PATHS FORWARD

COVID-19 has taken a serious toll on social cohesion in South Asia, threatening bonds that connect diverse communities and aggravating an already tense environment. Health risks, economic hardship, and psychological pressure during the pandemic have heightened anxiety and frustration. Lockdowns and social distancing precautions replaced routine in-person

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.ft.lk/opinion/The-COVID-19-second-wave-and-the-apparel-industry/14-708902>

<sup>20</sup> [https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2020/10/ap-wps-brief-covid-19-and-online-misogyny-hate-speech\\_final.pdf?la=en&vs=2206](https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2020/10/ap-wps-brief-covid-19-and-online-misogyny-hate-speech_final.pdf?la=en&vs=2206), p. 4.

exchanges with online interaction, where distance and anonymity make it easier for social media users to perpetrate hate speech and engage with content that will fuel inter-group conflict. Misinformation is rampant in these digital spaces. Religious minorities and women are among the groups that have experienced the worst backlash—both online and in terms of physical violence.

Engagement, dialogue, and collaboration are vital elements needed to prevent conflict and repair and strengthen social cohesion. Top-down measures to monitor and regulate hate speech are needed along with practical strategies at the grassroots. Some priorities are noted here:

**1. Civil society organizations (CSOs):**

- ■ Equipping community leaders to identify online hate speech by providing fact-checking resources and trainings on distinguishing hate speech and misinformation.
- ■ Creating rapid-response systems to address hate speech incidents and defuse inter-group tensions by appointing “peace liaisons” in diverse neighborhoods and communities, to engage in online and in-person dialogue across social divides.
- ■ Lobbying social media platforms with a presence in South Asia to do more to monitor and restrict hateful content.
- ■ Raising awareness about online violence against women and girls, including through news media outlets, to raise the visibility and understanding of the issue, its root causes, and its impacts. Provide tips, tools, and resources on how to identify, document, and report online harassment and other forms of ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls.

**2. Policymakers:**

- ■ Joint task forces with representatives from government, CSOs, and technology companies could monitor and review speech legislation and online hate speech.
- ■ Evidence-based policy measures and responses are needed to address online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and young women.

**3. Technology companies:**

- ■ Policies on hate speech, content violations, and penalties for offenders need review and reforms to prevent the viral spread of harmful content on social media platforms.
- ■ Multilingual peacebuilders can provide insight on community conflict dynamics and quickly identify hate speech trends on platforms.
- ■ Create permanent, open communication channels with local peacebuilding organizations so that they can rapidly alert platform administrators to worrying incidents and online trends.
- ■ Technology companies can challenge online gender stereotypes, discrimination, inequality, and harmful gender and violence norms by creating and amplifying messaging that promotes prosocial and equitable behavior.