



GENEVA CENTRE
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
ADVANCEMENT AND
GLOBAL DIALOGUE

COUNTERING HATE SPEECH AT THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGION AND GENDER: CHALLENGES AND PATHWAYS FORWARD

17 JUNE 2025
HRC59 SIDE EVENT





GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE
مركز جنيف لحقوق الإنسان والحوار العالمي
CENTRE DE GENÈVE POUR LA PROMOTION DES DROITS DE L'HOMME ET LE DIALOGUE GLOBAL
In special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
Bénéficiaire du Statut consultatif spécial auprès du Conseil économique et social des Nations Unies

Moderators

- **Dr. Umesh Palwankar**, Executive Director, Geneva Centre
- **Mr. Michael Wiener**, Human Rights Officer, OHCHR

Panellists

- **H.E. Ambassador, Marie-Thérèse Pictet-Althann**, Permanent Observer of the Sovereign Order of Malta to the United Nations Office in Geneva.
- **Ms. Adriana Quiñones**, Head of Human Rights and Development and Deputy Director of UN Women Geneva Office.
- **Dr. Saba Haddad**, Representative to the UN Baha'i International Community.



Table of Contents

Foreword	4
Moderators	5
Summary of Panel Statements and Discussions	6
Statement by Ambassador H.E Marie- Thérèse Pictet-Althann	7
Statement by Ms. Adriana Quiñones	8
Statement by Dr. Saba Haddad	9
Q&A Session	11
Question 1	12
Question 2	12
Question 3	13
Question 4	13
Future Perspectives: A Global Approach	15
Introduction	16
Gendered Impact of Hate Speech	18
Religious Hatred and Gender-Based Violence GBV	19
Inter-Faith and Inter-Cultural Dialogue	20
Combating Online Hate Speech	22
Legal and Policy Frameworks	23
Conclusion	25
Annex: Full statements of the panellists	26



Foreword

The Geneva Centre, in partnership with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), convened a side event aimed at fostering meaningful reflection, dialogue, and peer learning on combating hate speech. The Centre extends its sincere gratitude to all participants and partners whose contributions enriched the discussion.

Reflecting on a decade of sustained engagement in the human rights field, the Centre looks to the future with renewed determination. Building on its established track record, it will continue transforming dialogue into tangible action—supporting inclusive policymaking, elevating the voices of women and marginalized groups in global efforts to combat intolerance and discrimination, and proposing ways forward through analyses in its capacity of a human rights think-tank.

In regard to this panel's statements and discussions, compelling illustrations were heard of how principled, multi-stakeholder engagement can turn the tide. The Sovereign Order of Malta's humanitarian diplomacy in Lebanon, Iraq, and Nigeria is protecting women and girls while building bridges across faith lines. The valuable contributions of UN Women and the Baha'i International Community enriched the panel discussion with perspectives on gender equality and inclusive faith-based engagement. Grass-roots narratives echoed this macro-level work.

Five recurring priorities emerged:

1. Center women's leadership from humanitarian corridors to digital forums, and women of different faiths must shape the response.
2. Forge broad alliances among governments, civil society, faith actors, tech companies, and media, ensuring coordinated prevention and redress.
3. Embed robust legal frameworks that outlaw incitement yet safeguard legitimate expression, keeping international human rights law as the compass.
4. Strengthen digital literacy and safe online spaces so that women and girls can participate without fear.
5. Advance positive, empathetic narratives that celebrate pluralism and counter divisive myths.

Moving forward, the Geneva Centre will deepen its engagement with faith-based actors, civil society organizations, and national human rights institutions to promote culturally respectful and gender-responsive strategies for addressing hate speech. Special focus will be placed on creating interfaith and intercultural platforms that empower women and girls to lead in peacebuilding, challenge harmful narratives, and advance human rights online and offline. The Geneva Centre also plans to enhance collaboration with UN human rights mechanisms, particularly through engagement within OHCHR's "Faith for Rights" framework. Follow-up actions will include capacity-building programmes in synergy with partners, peer-learning exchanges, and targeted initiatives designed to implement sustainable, rights-based responses to incitement to hate and intolerance.



GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE
مركز جنيف لحقوق الإنسان والحوار العالمي
CENTRE DE GENÈVE POUR LA PROMOTION DES DROITS DE L'HOMME ET LE DIALOGUE GLOBAL
In special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
Bénéficiaire du Statut consultatif spécial auprès du Conseil économique et social des Nations Unies

Moderators

Dr. Umesh Palwankar, Executive Director, Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue. Prior to joining the Geneva Centre, Umesh Palwankar worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), beginning at HQs as Legal Adviser on humanitarian law, and later in the field in the Middle East and West Africa, before his last post as Diplomatic Adviser to the ICRC Directorate. He next worked as an independent consultant in humanitarian affairs, transitional justice, early recovery. This was followed by a post in UNDP as Senior Coordinator of the UN Peace Building Fund (PBF) three-year country programme for peace consolidation in the Comoros, involving several UN agencies, national authorities, NGOs, regional actors and key States.

Michael Wiener has been working since 2006 at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, including for five years supporting the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and now working in the Rule of Law, Equality and Non-discrimination Branch. He was also part of the core team organizing the expert workshops that led to the adoption of the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. Since 2017, he has been working on the design and implementation of the Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights”.



GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE

مركز جنيف لحقوق الإنسان والحوار العالمي

CENTRE DE GENÈVE POUR LA PROMOTION DES DROITS DE L'HOMME ET LE DIALOGUE GLOBAL

In special Consultative Status with the Economic
and Social Council of the United Nations

Bénéficiaire du Statut consultatif spécial auprès
du Conseil économique et social des Nations Unies

Summary of Panel Statements and Discussions

Statement by Ambassador H.E Marie- Thérèse Pictet-Althann



Marie-Thérèse Pictet-Althann, Ambassador, Permanent Observer of the Sovereign Order of Malta to the United Nations, with Over 20+ years of experience in Humanitarian Diplomacy in Multilateral Organizations. Expertise in Refugee Crises, Natural Disasters, Human Rights, and Migration. She is particularly interested in preserving Christian Values and fundamental freedoms in the context of Humanitarian Work.

H.E. Marie-Thérèse Pictet-Althann, Ambassador of the Permanent Observer of the Sovereign Order of Malta to the United Nations Office in Geneva, introduced the Sovereign Order of Malta as a lay religious order, a humanitarian institution, and a subject of international law with operations in 120 countries and diplomatic relations with 115 states, engaging in work ranging from healthcare to migration and refugee support.

Her Excellency stressed that religious and faith-based actors are increasingly important in humanitarian work, offering ethical and spiritual support, and that hate speech, especially when targeting individuals based on both religious identity and gender, severely undermines social cohesion. She highlighted the intersectional vulnerabilities faced by women of religious minorities, who often suffer both gender-based discrimination within their communities and religious-based exclusion externally. The misuse of religion to justify inequality, especially in online spaces, further deepens the challenge.

Drawing from the Order's field experience in regions like Lebanon, Iran, and Nigeria, she called for intersectional strategies and the promotion of inclusive religious discourse, emphasizing the vital role of women in peacebuilding and the need to amplify their participation in leadership and crisis response. Additionally, H.E Pictet-Althann cited initiatives such as the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations' Empowering Dialogue and Interfaith Networks, and Interfaith Harmony Week organized with Jordan, where the Order of Malta actively contributes to promoting diversity, dialogue, and reconciliation. She also made reference to the International Religious Freedom of Belief Alliance, which the Order of Malta joined, as an example of a collective effort to advance freedom of religion or belief, combat discrimination, and address hate speech, including in digital spaces.

The Order remains firmly committed to upholding international human rights law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) 1976, and calls on all states to implement legal frameworks that address hate speech while protecting freedom of religion and expression.

In conclusion, Her Excellency Ambassador Pictet-Althann emphasized that to counter hate speech effectively, we must act collectively, engage across sectors, listen to marginalized voices, and equip communities with tools for peace. The Order of Malta is committed to this mission, rooted in the belief that faith can be a force for inclusion, dignity, and healing. Let us ensure that our actions match our aspirations, and that we build a world where dignity prevails over division.

Statement by Ms. Adriana Quiñones



Ms Adriana Quinones, Head, Human Rights and Development.

Experienced Country Representative, Policy Advisor and Manager of the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and Girls. More than 20 years of experience leading efforts in the areas of Gender Equality, Elimination of Gender Based Violence, Access to Justice and Women's Economic Empowerment. Strategic Planning Specialist with a demonstrated history of working in international organization.

Ms. Adriana Quiñones, Head of Human Rights and Development and Deputy Director of UN Women Geneva Office, commended the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, a landmark framework for women's empowerment, participation, and human rights. She stressed that hate speech, especially when reinforced by religious narratives counter to gender equality, undermines the very fulfilment of this platform.

Ms Quiñones addressed the increasingly rapid rise of hate speech targeting women, especially those from religious or ethnic minorities, or challenging patriarchal interpretations of faith. She emphasized that such hate speech undermines democracy, human rights, and social cohesion. Considering that hate speech is not a new challenge; she highlighted that its reach and impact are amplified by digital technologies, political polarization, and the manipulation of religious and cultural narratives. Online misogyny often exploits religious or cultural narratives. Women who speak out—especially from minority or religious backgrounds—face intensified threats. Further, she affirmed that in order to counter hate speech effectively, we must understand its roots. At its core, hate speech at the intersection of religion and gender is driven by patriarchal norms and power structures. It is perpetuated by those who feel that their power or privilege is threatened by empowered women and girls, and who therefore seek to maintain patriarchal control by invoking religious authority. Faith can also be a force for peace and justice, as many women of faith lead positive change.

In conclusion, she highlighted 5 pathways, aligned with the UN Plan of Action on Hate Speech as well as the UN framework, to promote and protect civic space:

1. **Centring Women's Voices and Leadership:** Women's organizations, faith-based groups, and interfaith networks are already doing vital work to counter hate speech and promote inclusive narratives.
2. **Building Alliances Across Sectors:** Countering hate speech requires a whole-of-society approach. This includes working with faith leaders who are committed to gender equality, and who can use their moral authority to challenge harmful narratives and promote respect for diversity.

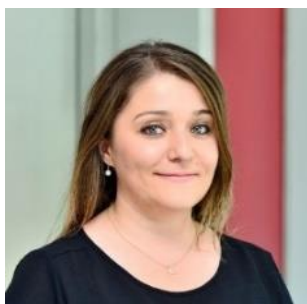
3. Strengthening Legal and Policy Frameworks: This includes ensuring that laws are in line with international human rights standards, and that they are implemented in ways that protect, rather than restrict, the voices of women, girls and marginalized groups.

4. Promoting Digital Literacy and Safe Spaces: Social media platforms must do more to prevent the spread of hate speech, and to ensure that women and girls can participate safely in digital spaces. The UN should support a new generation of digital citizens, empowered to recognize, reject and stand up to hate speech.

5. Advancing Positive Narratives: In an environment of backlash, UN Women chooses to push forward for gender equality and human rights. The voices of women and girls who are leading change within their communities must be amplified and highlighted their examples of effective faith-based action for gender justice. By telling these stories, we can challenge stereotypes, build empathy, and inspire others.

Reminding of UN Women's commitment to support women's leadership, partner with faith actors, advocate legal and policy reforms, and ensure international processes reflect the lived realities of affected women; she called for a collective action across faiths and sectors, essential to create societies where all women and girls live free from fear and discrimination. Quiñones emphasized that hate speech silences women, particularly in fragile settings and humanitarian crises, where their roles are essential not just for survival, but for community strength. She reiterated the need to view women's roles comprehensively, not only as victims but as contributors and protectors of family and community.

Statement by Dr. Saba Haddad



Dr. Saba Haddad, Baha'i International Community Representative to the United Nations. Dr. Saba Haddad is a postdoctoral academic researcher specialized in biomedicine. Dr. Haddad is engaged in social development projects focused on delivering grass-roots educational programs for young youth across Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Dr. Saba Haddad, Baha'i International Community Representative to the United Nations, offered her community's perspective rooted in the conviction that religion, in its truest form, must be a powerful force for unity to counter hatred and division.

The challenge of hate speech at the intersection of religion and gender is profound. Women belonging to minority faith communities often face dual discrimination targeted both for their beliefs and for their gender. This double marginalization seeks to render them invisible and powerless.

However, our experience shows that the advancement of women is essential for peace and prosperity. It is not a cause for women alone, but a necessity that requires all segments of society to work in full partnership. Humanity's challenges need both the spiritual strength of faith and the untapped potential of women's insights and capacities.

She stated that rather than viewing women solely as victims, we must recognize them as agents of change and peace. For example, in Yemen, despite persecution, Bahá'í women chose to stay and serve, initiating community consultations, launching health campaigns, and restoring schools to prevent girls from dropping out and marrying early. Education constitutes a profound tool for countering hate speech and empowering women.

These women are not waiting to be rescued. They are leaders, builders, and sources of resilience. This highlights the need for prevention. Mitigation is essential, but our greater aim must be to create a world where hatred cannot take root. While policies and legal frameworks are important, lasting transformation requires a change in mindsets and social norms, to foster through faith-based community work.

From the Baha'i perspective, equality between women and men is a spiritual truth, symbolized in the metaphor of a bird with two wings, one male, one female. If both wings are not equally strong, the bird cannot fly. Oppression of women is not just an injustice to women; it is a detriment to all humanity. Religion must be part of the solution. It can awaken noble qualities and must align means with ends. A just society cannot be achieved through unjust means. In this vein, Dr Haddad shared concrete examples of the situation in India, Brazil, and the UAE.

These examples give hope, and reflect the vision of General Assembly Resolution 75/309, which calls for dialogue to foster social cohesion, peace, and development.

In closing, Dr. Haddad noted that building resilience to hate speech is not a separate task; it is part of the collective effort to build peaceful and just societies. Let us redouble our efforts to unlock the latent power that lies in every human being.



GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE

مركز جنيف لحقوق الإنسان والحوار العالمي

CENTRE DE GENÈVE POUR LA PROMOTION DES DROITS DE L'HOMME ET LE DIALOGUE GLOBAL

In special Consultative Status with the Economic
and Social Council of the United Nations

Bénéficiaire du Statut consultatif spécial auprès
du Conseil économique et social des Nations Unies

Q & A Session



Question 1

Given that hate speech has historically served as a warning sign for crimes like genocide, how can international actors better monitor and respond to gender and religious hate speech before it escalates into mass atrocities?

Ms. Quiñones, UN Women, recalled the activities of UN Women. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation 40 calls for the criminalization of hate speech targeting women in public life. The first step of UN Women to combat digital hate and disinformation is to look at the national legislation.

In the digital space, she informed that concrete actions have been taken to combat online hate speech and disinformation. For instance, a conference was recently organized in Kenya focusing on hate speech in electoral contexts, with particular emphasis on digital misogyny on tech platforms. This initiative highlighted collaborative efforts with civil society organizations to tackle online abuse directed at women candidates and to ensure the protection of LGBTIQ individuals in political spaces. She affirmed that UN Women, for instance, has partnered with the UN Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) to document online hate and attacks against LGBTIQ political actors, with a specific focus on trans women. These actions are particularly timely in the context of the 2024 elections, reinforcing the call for inclusive and safe political participation.

In the field of engagement and crisis prevention, UN Women is promoting the integration of hate speech indicators into common country analysis. In the case of Afghanistan, the UN country office in Afghanistan is one of the largest in the world. They are working at the provincial level to make sure that women adequately receive services.

Question 2

There is a clear connection between gender and hate speech and women's freedom of religion. It focuses on the situation in the Middle East and in other countries, but what is UN Women's measure regarding the 822 anti-Muslim incidents in France, where 81% of which targeted women, especially Muslim women? When so many women sports players missed the Olympics in France because of a headscarf, what is the UN Women's measure on this?

Ms. Quiñones, UN Women, regretted that UN Women does not have offices in every country, including France, and therefore is not currently engaged with these specific incidents. However, she stated that she will look into the concern further, particularly through their national committee in France.



She emphasized that these are universal issues that must be addressed as such. While UN Women may not yet have a detailed response on this case, she affirmed that they are working with partners to ensure that such gendered religious discrimination is highlighted and taken seriously.

Question 3

A request for clarification on the role of the UN to address the oppression of Muslims in India in the name of religion, particularly when hate speech by political figures (parliamentarians) leads to real-world consequences, including violence and marginalisation that disproportionately affect the middle class and working communities. What mechanisms are in place to respond when state actors themselves perpetuate or enable this environment of hate?

Dr. Haddad, Baha'i Community, considered the construction of a new counter-narrative on hate speech and discrimination that challenges the one being spread by extremists. She added that the deep-rooted social norms need to be addressed.

H.E. Pictet-Althann, Order of Malta, drew attention to the issue of clothing and how it can become a source of discrimination. She stressed that respect for each individual and their human dignity is fundamental. By sharing concrete examples, she demonstrated that personal faith and humanitarian service can coexist in mutual respect. Such real-world examples of interreligious cooperation show us that shared commitment to human dignity transcends differences. It is vital that different religions and different communities cooperate on the ground.

Ms. Quiñones, UN Women, highlighted that the 2019 UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, has been mandated to all UN country teams, including in India. While the UN does not have all the country-specific details at hand, she encouraged reaching out to the UN Resident Coordinator's Office in India to report on the implementation of this strategy at the national level. She added that UN Women has a strong presence in India, and these issues are increasingly being recognized and addressed.

Question 4

In the last decade, we've observed that migrant workers are not only men alone, they come with families, and increasingly, we see more women involved.

The Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women Strategic Plan 2022–2025 refers to global normative frameworks, gender-responsive laws, and financing for gender equality. But unfortunately, as has already been mentioned, women are often not involved in self-employment and are typically concentrated in underpaid jobs.

How do you think we can implement legal frameworks to truly empower women through greater access to self-employment opportunities?



Ms. Quiñones, UN Women, invited the participants to join another event focused on the area of women's self-employment. That side-event will explore how to include women in safe and supportive working spaces. We will also have further conversations around women's economic empowerment.

The Representative of India reiterated the fact that the country, as a constitutional democracy, addresses all such matters through independent legal institutions and due process. Isolated legal or policy questions are often debated domestically, as in any democracy, but they do not reflect the lived reality of over 200 million Indian Muslims who participate freely in all aspects of public, political, and professional life. He respectfully suggested that such issues be understood in their full legal and democratic context, not through singular narratives. The current discussion is more about shared solutions and global cooperation.

In her concluding remarks, **H.E. Ambassador Pictet-Althann** underlined the very necessary and vital cooperation between all actors, whether it be governments, international organizations, or local and regional communities, together with religious communities and religious organizations. Many foreign ministries now have special sections for religious matters, and this includes, of course, the promotion of women's rights. Moreover, she stated the need to make sure that these values are embedded firmly at all levels, local, regional, national, and international.

Ms. Quiñones, in closing, affirmed that the efforts, the legislation, alliances, and the principles established by the human rights mechanisms, are interconnected. They all contribute to the fulfilment of the rights of women and girls in every sphere of life. And this is also why religion and religious organizations must be key partners in this work.

Dr. Haddad, highlighted the celebration of diversity. The foundation of real change is based on the implementation of policies at the grassroots level, as well as on the regional, national, and international levels. She further emphasized the need for full recognition of the role of women in advancing societies at large.



GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE

مركز جنيف لحقوق الإنسان والحوار العالمي

CENTRE DE GENÈVE POUR LA PROMOTION DES DROITS DE L'HOMME ET LE DIALOGUE GLOBAL

In special Consultative Status with the Economic
and Social Council of the United Nations

Bénéficiaire du Statut consultatif spécial auprès
du Conseil économique et social des Nations Unies

Future Perspectives: A Global Approach



Introduction

As the international community marks the *International Day for Countering Hate Speech*¹ and commemorates the 77th anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*², we are reminded that the promise of human dignity, equality and justice remains unfinished. Hate speech online and offline poses a direct threat to these principles, eroding social cohesion, undermining democratic values and, in its gravest forms, inciting violence.³ This phenomenon is particularly acute where religious intolerance intersects with gender-based discrimination, disproportionately affecting women and girls belonging to religious or belief minorities.⁴

In today's digital environment, information and disinformation circulate at unprecedented speed. While digital platforms enable participation and expression, they also amplify dehumanizing narratives that reinforce stereotypes and fuel systemic inequality.⁵ Women and girls from marginalized faith communities often experience intersecting abuses ranging from online harassment to physical violence that restricts their safety, agency and public engagement.⁶ In fragile or conflict-affected settings, hate speech can escalate tensions, deepen polarization and trigger wider human-rights crises.⁷

A sustainable response requires more than punitive regulation. A comprehensive, human-rights-based and gender-responsive approach is indispensable one that centres inclusion, interfaith and intercultural dialogue, ethical leadership and the full, equal and meaningful participation of those most affected.⁸ The Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue is committed to advancing such an approach. We seek to amplify the voices of religious leaders, educators, women peacebuilders and human-rights defenders, fostering collective resilience grounded in compassion, solidarity and mutual respect.

The OHCHR "Faith for Rights" framework⁹ offers a practical tool for translating shared ethical values into concrete action rooted in international human rights law. Complementing this, the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech¹⁰ provides a holistic blueprint that safeguards freedom of expression while countering advocacy of hatred that incites discrimination, hostility or violence. Both instruments caution against misusing hate-speech regulation to silence dissent or further marginalize vulnerable communities.¹¹

1 United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/75/309 (2021), proclaiming 18 June as the International Day for Countering Hate Speech.

2 United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted 10 December 1948 (General Assembly resolution 217 A).

3 UN Secretary-General's Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, 2019.

4 OHCHR, Gender dimensions of racial discrimination: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, A/HRC/41/54 (2019).

5 UNESCO, Social Media 4 Peace: A Baseline Study on Hate Speech Online, 2021.

6 UN Women, Gendered disinformation and online abuse: The silencing of women in political and public life, 2021.

7 Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes, 2014.

8 Human Rights Council, Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons, based on religion or belief, A/HRC/RES/16/18 (2011).

9 OHCHR, Faith for Rights Framework, launched in 2017: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/faith-rights>

10 UN Secretary-General's Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, 2019: <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/strategy>

11 UN Secretary-General's Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, 2019: <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/strategy>

Education—formal and informal—digital literacy and intercultural understanding must constitute the first line of prevention.¹² These efforts should be reinforced by:

- robust legal and policy frameworks aligned with international human-rights standards;
- corporate due-diligence obligations for online platforms, ensuring transparency and accountability¹³; and
- meaningful engagement of civil society, including faith-based actors and youth, in designing and monitoring interventions.¹⁴

This Panel event serves to reaffirm a collective responsibility: to protect those targeted by hate, to uphold the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, and to ensure that every person without distinction of any kind enjoys the full spectrum of rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration. Concerted, rights-based action today will build more inclusive, peaceful, and resilient societies tomorrow.

Ultimately, the fight against hate speech is inseparable from the broader struggle for human rights, gender equality, and peaceful coexistence. As the international community reaffirms its collective commitment to the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, lasting solutions will come not from top-down mandates but from inclusive, community-driven efforts to uphold the values that unite us all. In this spirit, the international community must continue to build bridges of understanding, protect those most at risk, and ensure that responses to hate are anchored in justice, empathy, and the universal affirmation of human dignity.

Hate speech, defined by the United Nations as any communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks, threatens or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, has reemerged as one of the most acute governance challenges of the digital age.¹⁵ The phenomenon is not new; from the antisemitic propaganda of the 1930s to the broadcasts of Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines that fuelled genocide in Rwanda, hateful narratives have repeatedly served as accelerants of mass violence.¹⁶ What is unprecedented today is the scale, speed and self-reinforcing nature of contemporary hate ecosystems. Algorithm-driven platforms privilege virality over veracity, elevating provocative content that maximises “time on site.” Generative artificial intelligence (AI) can now fabricate images and audio synthetically, lowering the cost of disinformation and eroding public trust.¹⁷ Taken together, these dynamics undermine universal human rights, erode democratic governance and jeopardise the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, particularly Goals 5 (gender equality) and 16 (peaceful, just and inclusive societies).¹⁸

¹² UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Combating incitement to hatred while respecting freedom of expression, A/HRC/40/58 (2019).

¹³ Human Rights Council, Right to education, A/HRC/RES/47/3 (2021).

¹⁴ B-Tech Project, OHCHR, Implementing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in the tech sector, 2020.

¹⁵ United Nations, “UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech,” 2019.

¹⁶ UNESCO, Countering Hate Speech: International Best Practices, 2020, p. 5.

¹⁷ OHCHR & ITU, AI for Good: Risks and Opportunities, 2024.

¹⁸ UNDESA, “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” 2015.



Women and girls from religious or belief minorities are especially vulnerable, facing a triple burden of misogyny, doctrinal intolerance and digital disinformation.¹⁹ To respond, the United Nations launched the #Faith4Rights toolkit in 2020, building on the Rabat Plan of Action (2012) and the Beirut Declaration and its 18 Commitments on “Faith for Rights” (2017).²⁰ The initiative urges faith-based actors to champion universal norms and counter incitement. Complementing the “Faith for Rights” framework, the Secretary General’s UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech (2019) calls for preventive, rights-based approaches across governments, tech companies and civil society.²¹

Gendered Impact of Hate Speech

Women and girls have always suffered from patriarchal interpretations by religious leaders. This is not limited to any religion or region. The resulting male domination is a negative inheritance in virtually all cultures, even though some progress has been made in the past decades. Women’s right to vote, for example, was not recognized across the world until quite recently, including in many Western countries. Equal pay for the same work by women and men is still far from a reality in almost all parts of the world. Religious interpretations have been invoked as grounds for inequality, including through States’ reservations to human rights treaties. Unsurprisingly, many women’s rights activists have developed negative attitudes towards religion. This polarization has created a vicious circle, threatening equality and solidarity at the very nucleus level of the family itself. Most family-related issues have a faith dimension in many parts of the world, including marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance. The confusion between cultural heritage, social traditions and religious precepts adds to the complexity of handling this important intersection between religions and human rights. In addition, the ideological divide between faith groups and human rights activists on sexual and reproductive health matters adds tensions between faith and rights. Constructive engagement to search for common ground in this context should continue. Faith actors have a role to play, and women’s and girls’ rights have much to gain.²²

As demonstrated by the UN Women survey of 901 women journalists in 125 countries found that 73% experienced online violence and 25% received rape threats. Extending to influencers and politicians in 2024, prevalence rose to 79%.²³ On the one hand, Muslim and Black women in the EU experience hate incidents at almost double the rate of their male counterparts, according to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. In Latin America, indigenous women are 42% more likely to be targeted by racist, sexist slurs than nonindigenous women.²⁴ On the other hand, psychosocial and democratic harms were also sustained: online abuse drives self-censorship and shrinks pluralistic discourse. A World Bank estimate places annual revenue losses for women entrepreneurs in West Africa at US\$1.2

19 UN Women, Gendered Dimensions of Online Hate, 2023.

20 OHCHR, “Beirut Declaration and its 18 Commitments on Faith for Rights,” 2017, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/press/Faith4Rights.pdf>.

21 United Nations Secretary General, UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, 2019.

22 www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/press/faith4rights-toolkit.pdf. P 33.

23 UN Women, The Chilling: Global Trends in Online Violence Against Women Journalists, 2022.

24 UN Women, Digital Misogyny Update, 2024.

billion due to market withdrawal induced by cyber harassment.²⁵ Finally, regarding policy responses, Canada's Digital Citizen Initiative funds survivor-led counter-speech labs. A 2024 evaluation recorded an 18% drop in misogynistic hashtags six months post-intervention.²⁶

Religious Hatred and Gender-Based Violence GBV

The intersection of religious hatred and gender-based violence (GBV) represents one of the most insidious forms of discrimination, where women and girls are targeted not only on the basis of gender but also because of their religious or belief identity. This dual vulnerability has often served as a trigger for widespread abuse, including in contexts of conflict, displacement, and political instability.²⁷

For instance, between 2014 and 2017, the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) engaged in a systematic campaign of sexual violence, abduction, and slavery against Yazidi women and girls in northern Iraq. ISIS propaganda deliberately dehumanized Yazidi females through religiously framed hate narratives, portraying them as “infidels” or “spoils of war.” This ideological groundwork enabled and justified mass atrocities that are now the subject of investigations by the International Criminal Court (ICC) as potential crimes against humanity and genocide. The failure of the international community to adequately prevent such religiously motivated GBV underscores the need for early warning mechanisms that are sensitive to the intersection of hate speech, religious identity, and gender.²⁸

Outside of armed conflict, religiously motivated GBV also intensifies during political transitions and electoral cycles. In democratic societies such as Austria and France, surveys from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) show that women wearing visible religious symbols, particularly Muslim headscarves and Jewish head coverings, experience a marked increase in verbal and physical abuse during election periods.²⁹ Notably, antisemitic and Islamophobic slurs targeting women doubled in the lead-up to the 2024 national elections in both countries.³⁰ Such spikes often correlate with political rhetoric that stigmatizes religious minorities or frames migration and integration in securitized terms.

Despite these alarming trends, global monitoring remains inadequate. Only 27% of States currently collect or disaggregate data on GBV where religion or belief is an aggravating factor.³¹ This data gap

25 UNDPUN Women, Indigenous Women and Online Hate in Latin America, 2024.

26 International Centre for Journalists, Silencing Cascade Report, 2023.

27 United Nations Human Rights Council, “Gender-based violence and discrimination against women and girls based on religion or belief,” A/HRC/50/70, 2022.

28 United Nations Human Rights Council, “Gender-based violence and discrimination against women and girls based on religion or belief,” A/HRC/50/70, 2022.

29 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), “Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU-MIDIS II), Muslims – Selected Findings,” FRA, 2017.

30 FRA, “Antisemitism: Overview of data available in the European Union 2024,” FRA Report, May 2024.

31 United Nations Women, “Measuring the shadow pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19,” UN Women Policy Brief, 2021.



hampers both policy responses and accountability mechanisms. Furthermore, there is a lack of legal frameworks that recognize the compounded nature of these violations. While some national laws address hate crimes and others GBV, few explicitly acknowledge when religious identity intensifies the risk or severity of gendered abuse.³²

The Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence provides a normative basis to bridge this gap. Article 12 obliges State Parties to dismantle harmful gender stereotypes, including those rooted in religious or traditional norms that subordinate women.³³ However, implementation remains uneven. As of 2025, only 18 of the 46 Council of Europe Member States had adopted dedicated national action plans that explicitly link GBV prevention to combating hate speech or religious discrimination.³⁴ The remaining States either lack integrated strategies or treat these issues in siloed legal and policy frameworks.

This disconnect between normative commitments and practical action reveals a critical gap in global prevention architecture. Addressing religiously aggravated GBV requires intersectional policies that engage both secular and faith-based actors. Faith leaders must be empowered to challenge misogynistic interpretations of religious texts, while legal systems must ensure that hate crimes and GBV are prosecuted with appropriate attention to the role of belief-based animus.³⁵

Ultimately, combating religious hatred and GBV demands a holistic, rights-based approach rooted in international law, gender equality, and interfaith solidarity that affirms the dignity and agency of all women and girls, regardless of their faith or appearance.

Inter-Faith and Inter-Cultural Dialogue

Interfaith and intercultural dialogues have proved to be the most cost-effective prevention tools for hate speech and violent extremism.³⁶ Their comparative advantages lie in the moral authority of faith actors, the convening power of local authorities, and the credibility that comes from community-owned processes.³⁷ When dialogue initiatives are designed around the 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights” (notably commitment V on women, girls and gender equality), apply a gender-responsive lens, and are

32 UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, “Intersection of freedom of religion or belief and gender equality,” A/HRC/43/48, 2020.

33 Council of Europe, “Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention),” Council of Europe Treaty Series No. 210, 2011.

34 Council of Europe Gender Equality Commission, “Implementation of the Istanbul Convention: Thematic Report on National Action Plans,” 2025.

35 UN Women and OHCHR, “Faith for Rights Toolkit: Countering Gender Discrimination through Faith Engagement,” 2023.

36 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “Preventing Violent Extremism Through Inclusive Development and the Promotion of Tolerance and Respect for Diversity,” 2016.

37 United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, “Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence That Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes,” 2017.

embedded in municipal policy cycles, they can generate measurable improvements in social cohesion within relatively short timeframes.³⁸

Building on the points above, three additional paragraphs can deepen this section's analysis of how structured, policy-linked dialogue platforms translate moral authority into measurable social-cohesion gains:

First, state-led forums have transformed inter-faith outreach from ad-hoc encounters into standing diplomatic tracks. Kazakhstan's triennial Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, convened since 2003, typifies this evolution. Its seventh session (14–15 Sept 2022) gathered Pope Francis³⁹, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, and more than 100 delegations to adopt a forward-looking Declaration and a 2023–2033 Development Concept—demonstrating that sustained dialogue can survive geopolitical shocks and still produce actionable road-maps for peace and social inclusion.⁴⁰

Second, multilateral institutions now embed inter-faith engagement within broader foreign-policy portfolios. The UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), launched in 2005, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's 2006-2025 Plan of Action on "Dialogue Among Civilizations and Religions" both arose as normative counterweights to the "clash of civilizations" narrative. By mandating faith-sensitive diplomacy, these frameworks channel the convening power of governments and international organisations toward joint projects that confront extremist ideologies while advancing SDG16 on peaceful, inclusive societies.⁴¹

Third, cultural-heritage collaborations illustrate how dialogue principles can be operationalised at the municipal level. The Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA)'s partnerships with Kazakh authorities—ranging from cataloguing Arabic-script manuscripts to co-hosting conferences on pilgrimage tourism and sacred heritage (2022–2024)—showcase a replicable model: scholarly cooperation plus community programming that elevates shared history, stimulates local economies, and reinforces trust across ethnic-religious lines within 18 months of launch.⁴² This blend of faith leadership, academic rigour, and city-level policy support mirrors the "Faith for Rights" approach and underlines why locally owned projects remain the most cost-effective lever for tackling hate speech before it metastasises into violence.

Finally, to bring the analysis to life and show how these ideas work in practice, real-world examples of interfaith and intercultural dialogue have been included. These cases help illustrate the tangible impact such initiatives can have in reducing hate speech and building stronger, more inclusive communities.

38 UNESCO & UN Women, "Faith for Rights Toolkit: Integrating Human Rights into Interfaith Dialogue," 2022.

39 "Interfaith dialogue is not a luxury, it is a necessity, and only through it can we establish lasting peace." – Pope Francis

40 Astana Times, "Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue: Framework of Global Relationships," 29 Feb 2024 (reporting on the 7th Congress and its Declaration).

41 Ibid., noting the establishment of UNAOC (2005) and the OIC's Dialogue Among Civilizations initiative incorporated into its 2006-2025 Plan of Action.

42 Ibid., paras. 21–28, detailing IRCICA–Kazakhstan joint publications, heritage conferences, and other community-based projects.

One notable example of interfaith and intercultural dialogue in practice is the Kaduna State Inter-Faith Council in Nigeria, which was established as part of the implementation of the UN Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence, also known as the Fez Process. Following the adoption of the Plan in 2017 by the Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, Kaduna became a pilot location for localizing its principles⁴³. The Council brings together Christian and Muslim leaders who now deliver joint public messages during Friday and Sunday sermons to condemn incitement and promote coexistence.

In addition, it operates a community-based early warning and rapid response mechanism to de-escalate religious tensions⁴⁴. This initiative has contributed to a documented reduction in intercommunal violence and has become a model for preventive dialogue at the grassroots level. The success of the Kaduna case demonstrates how the moral authority of faith actors, combined with local ownership, can turn global UN frameworks into effective tools for peacebuilding and hate speech prevention⁴⁵.

Combating Online Hate Speech

Online hate speech has emerged as a significant global challenge, threatening peace, human rights, and democratic values. It exploits the speed, reach, and anonymity of digital platforms to spread intolerance, racism, xenophobia, and gender-based violence. The United Nations has recognized the urgency of this issue and responded with a multi-pronged approach to counter it, rooted in international human rights law and anchored by the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, launched in 2019.⁴⁶

The UN 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”⁴⁷. This definition underscores that while freedom of expression must be protected, it does not extend to incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence, as prohibited under Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).⁴⁸

The 2019 UN Strategy calls for a coordinated response across UN agencies and Member States, focusing on prevention, education, digital engagement, and support for victims. One key component is building digital literacy and empowering civil society to challenge hate narratives online. For example, UNESCO’s “Social Media 4 Peace” initiative, active in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Indonesia, and Kenya,

43 United Nations, Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes, Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, 2017.

44 United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention, Fez Process Regional Consultation Reports, Kaduna Pilot Project Summary, 2018.

45 UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development, Kaduna Inter-Faith Initiative: Lessons Learned, 2019.

46 United Nations, UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, Office of the Secretary-General, 2019.

47 Ibid.

48 United Nations, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 20(2), adopted 1966, entered into force 1976.

strengthens the resilience of local media and civil society actors to counter harmful content while promoting ethical journalism and inclusive narratives.⁴⁹

Moreover, the Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide has supported regional and national action plans that involve partnerships with tech companies, religious leaders, and educators. These efforts include the development of early warning tools that use artificial intelligence to detect hate speech patterns before they escalate into offline violence.⁵⁰ Importantly, such efforts are framed within a human rights-based approach, ensuring that counter-speech strategies do not themselves infringe on the right to free expression.⁵¹

In line with these initiatives, the UN Human Rights Council has urged states to adopt national legislative frameworks that regulate online hate in accordance with international standards, while avoiding overly broad or vague laws that may lead to censorship.⁵² Simultaneously, the Rabat Plan of Action, adopted by the OHCHR, provides a six-part threshold test for identifying incitement, offering practical guidance to assess when speech crosses the line into illegality.⁵³

These coordinated global and national efforts demonstrate that combating online hate speech requires more than content removal; it demands inclusive education, responsible platform governance, protection for at risk communities, and the promotion of counter-narratives that foster dignity and mutual respect.

Legal and Policy Frameworks

International law obliges States to walk a narrow line: they must prohibit speech that crosses the threshold into incitement yet preserve the core of freedom of expression. Article 20 (2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is the starting point, requiring States to outlaw “advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.”⁵⁴ The obligation is reinforced by Article 4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), which demands criminal sanctions against racist propaganda and organisations that promote it.⁵⁵

Because neither treaty defines how to draw the line, the Rabat Plan of Action supplies an operational yardstick. Its six-factor test context, speaker, intent, content, extent, and likelihood guides courts and

49 UNESCO, “Social Media 4 Peace” Project Overview, 2021.

50 Office on Genocide Prevention, Annual Report on Early Warning and Prevention of Atrocity Crimes, 2022.

51 UN General Assembly, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, A/74/486, 2019.

52 UN Human Rights Council, Combating Glorification of Nazism, Neo-Nazism and Other Practices, A/HRC/52/L.13, March 2023.

53 OHCHR, Rabat Plan of Action on the Prohibition of Advocacy of National, Racial or Religious Hatred, 2012.

54 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, art. 20 (2).

55 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 1965, art. 4.

regulators in distinguishing protected speech from punishable incitement.⁵⁶ Successive UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of expression insist that States may restrict speech only when the Rabat threshold is met and only through laws that are “clear, necessary and proportionate,” warning that vague or sweeping bans chill legitimate dissent, particularly from women, religious minorities and political opponents.⁵⁷

Academic analysis confirms both the necessity and the difficulty of this balancing act. Natalie Alkiviadou’s 2018 study in *Politička misao* shows that, across UN bodies and regional courts, no single definition of “hate speech” has emerged; instead, decision-makers rely on contextual assessments that echo the Rabat factors. Alkiviadou concludes that States must anchor any criminal or administrative measures in narrowly tailored language and robust procedural safeguards if they are to avoid arbitrariness and protect pluralism.⁵⁸ Her findings underscore the consensus that prohibition, to be legitimate, must target only the gravest forms of speech those that “fan the flames” of real-world violence while leaving space for vigorous, even caustic, public debate.

Taken together, ICCPR Article 20, ICERD Article 4, the Rabat Plan of Action, and the interpretive guidance of UN mandate-holders provide a coherent—if demanding—blueprint. They require States to:

- Legislate precisely, criminalising only speech that satisfies the Rabat six-factor test.
- Guarantee due-process safeguards, including judicial oversight and the right to appeal.
- Collect gender and minority-disaggregated data to monitor impact and prevent selective enforcement.
- Couple legal measures with positive obligations, such as education, inter-faith dialogue and support for counter-speech, recognising that law alone cannot eradicate the social roots of hatred.

This structure helps protect free speech while also allowing action against hate speech that could lead to violence. It strikes a balance between respecting freedom of expression and stopping serious harm.

⁵⁶ OHCHR, Rabat Plan of Action on the Prohibition of Advocacy of National, Racial or Religious Hatred, 2012, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/freedom-of-expression>.

⁵⁷ UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Report on Gender Justice and Freedom of Expression, A/HRC/47/25 (2021).

⁵⁸ Natalie Alkiviadou, “The Legal Regulation of Hate Speech: The International and European Frameworks,” *Politička misao* 55, no. 4 (2018): 203–229.



Conclusion

As this important panel discussion of 17 June 2025 bears out, the corporation between the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue has reaffirmed a shared resolve: countering the surge of hate speech, especially where religion and gender intersect, through inclusive, human-rights-based action. The importance of the challenge was made plain: women and girls from religious minorities are especially targeted online and offline, their voices silenced by gender-based intimidation and distorted religious narratives. All stakeholders need to address the amplification of religious and gender-based hate speech in the digital space and should jointly explore strategies to create safer online environments and to counter online hate in line with international human rights law. The discussion during the Human Rights Council side event must be a starting point, not an endpoint. It should spark broader engagement across sectors such as, civil society, governments, faith communities, academia, and the private sector to foster inclusive narratives, strengthen accountability mechanisms, and mainstream gender and religious equity into all anti-hate strategies.

By showcasing inspiring women's voices, linking divides between faiths, and anchoring every initiative in the universality of human rights, we can replace the rhetoric of exclusion with a culture of empathy, equality, and peace.

Marking the International Day for Countering Hate Speech is therefore more than a symbolic observance; it is a collective summons to translate today's insights into concrete policies, projects, and partnerships. Let this discussion be a launching pad, not a finale. By uplifting women's voices, uniting across faiths and sectors, and rooting every measure in international human-rights standards, we can replace the rhetoric of exclusion with a culture of dignity and solidarity. Together, we have the tools and motivation to ensure that hate is answered with dialogue, discrimination with equality, and incitement with inclusive peace.



GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE
مركز جنيف لحقوق الإنسان والحوار العالمي
CENTRE DE GENÈVE POUR LA PROMOTION DES DROITS DE L'HOMME ET LE DIALOGUE GLOBAL
In special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
Bénéficiant du Statut consultatif spécial auprès du Conseil économique et social des Nations Unies

Annex: Full statements of the panellists



SOVEREIGN MILITARY HOSPITALLER ORDER

OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM OF RHODES AND OF MALTA

PERMANENT OBSERVER MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS OFFICE

AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN GENEVA

Human Rights Council –59th session

Side Event: Countering Hate Speech at the Intersection of religion and Gender: Challenges and Pathways Forward

Statement by H.E. Ambassador Marie-Thérèse Pictet-Althann, Permanent Observer

17 June 2025

Excellencies, distinguished Delegates, Colleagues and Friends,

I thank the Geneva Centre for Human Rights advancement and Global Dialogue and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for the opportunity to participate in this important discussion. Today, we come together to address a complex and urgent challenge: the increase of hate speech at the intersection of religion and gender, and how we can mobilize meaningful, inclusive, and gender appropriate responses.

For those of you who may not be familiar with the Order of Malta, allow me to provide a brief explanation on who we are and what we do.

The Order of Malta is a lay religious order of the Catholic Church, a subject of international law and a humanitarian institution. It is a transnational, global and decentralized structure which develops socio-medical and humanitarian projects in 120 countries on all continents. Through its diplomatic relations with 115 States and Permanent Observer status at the United Nations and many international organizations, it is able to express its views on issues at the core of its commitment such as peace and stability, human rights, healthcare, refugees, food security. Religious and faith-based actors play an ever-increasing role in the international humanitarian architecture, as they combine assistance and care with an ethical and spiritual dimension through inter-religious dialogue, peacebuilding, reconciliation and spiritual support to crisis affected communities.

Hate speech, especially when it targets individuals based on both their religious identity and gender, can undermine social cohesion in our societies. Women from religious minorities often face



intersectional vulnerability, experiencing both gender-based discrimination within their communities and religious-based exclusion from broader society. Religion is sometimes instrumentalized to justify inequality, distorting traditions rooted in compassion and justice. Online spaces further exacerbate this by amplifying hate speech, where religious and gendered slurs spread unchecked under the guise of free expression. And despite their vital role in peacebuilding and reconciliation, women remain underrepresented in religious leadership.

In our field work, from the Middle East to sub-Saharan Africa and across parts of Asia, the Order of Malta witnesses firsthand how conflict, displacement, and marginalization are intensified by both gender and religious bias. We must therefore adopt intersectional strategies that recognize these overlapping forms of discrimination.

For instance, in Lebanon, Iraq, and Nigeria, our humanitarian diplomacy and operational partnerships actively seek to build bridges across religious differences, with a particular

emphasis on preserving the dignity and safety of women and girls in fragile communities. We also promote inclusive religious discourse that uplifts rather than diminishes the role of women in peacebuilding.

We must never overlook the transformative role that women play in conflict prevention and social cohesion. Across our global relief activities, we see how women, particularly from faith communities, are instrumental in mediation, reconciliation, and trauma recovery. Yet, they remain underrepresented in formal processes. We therefore promote the participation of women in community leadership and in faith-based responses to crises. Their inclusion is not just a matter of equity; it is a matter of efficacy.

Interfaith and intercultural dialogue are not simply aspirational; they are pragmatic tools for preventing hate-fuelled violence. One inspiring initiative worth mentioning is the work of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), whose programme “Empowering Dialogue

and Interfaith Networks” supports young participants, many of them women, to create social media campaigns that foster interfaith harmony across Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. These campaigns celebrate diversity, counter hate speech, and promote shared values among different faiths. The Order of Malta contributes to such activities by participating in the annual Interfaith Dialogue held during the Interfaith Harmony Week and organized by UNITAR and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, where our philosophy is reflected: compassionate service rooted in faith, but open to all.

Another initiative that the Order of Malta joined soon after its launching is the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, which is a network of some 40 member countries fully committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world. The Alliance is predicated on the idea more must be done to protect members of religious minority groups and combat discrimination and persecution based on religion or belief. It brings together senior government representatives to discuss actions their nations can take together to promote respect for freedom of religion or belief and protect members of religious minority groups worldwide.

It condemns hate speech through the promotion of a human rights-based approach and, while recognizing the growing influence of digital platforms, it is now leading efforts to address the spread of

religious hate speech online. Furthermore, the Alliance supports educational programs and partnerships with civil society organizations to promote interfaith dialogue, fosters understanding and counter hate speech.

The Order of Malta is also fully committed to upholding international human rights law in its global humanitarian action, ensuring that protection against religious discrimination and gender-based violence is not just enshrined in principle but enforced in practice. We call on all States to adopt and implement legal frameworks that address hate speech without infringing on legitimate religious freedom of expression.

It is very encouraging indeed that 174 UN Member States have ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which includes the right to freedom of religion or belief, as well as the right to freedom of opinion and expression. As emphasized at the recent webinar organised by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, these issues also intersect with the mandate of parliamentarians, who are influential public figures, with the potential to impact social cohesion through their rhetoric and behaviour. As lawmakers, parliamentarians are called upon to work towards creating more peaceful, inclusive and just societies by protecting and upholding the equal rights of everyone and the rule of law.

To counter hate speech at the intersection of religion and gender, we must go beyond condemnation, we must act collectively. That means partnering across sectors, listening to marginalized voices, and equipping communities with the tools for peace.

The Sovereign Order of Malta remains committed to this cause, grounded in the belief that faith can be a force for healing rather than harm, inclusion rather than exclusion. Let us ensure that our actions match our aspirations, and that we build a world where dignity prevails over division.

Thank you.



Countering Hate Speech at the Intersection of Religion and Gender: Challenges and Pathways Forward

17 June 2025

Room XXVII, Palais des Nations

Adriana Quinones, Head, Human Rights and Development, UN Women Geneva Office

Distinguished colleagues, partners, and friends,

It is an honor to join you today on behalf of UN Women to commemorate the International Day for Countering Hate Speech and the opportunity to address the critical issue of countering hate speech at the intersection of religion and gender. This conversation could not be timelier, nor more urgent. Around the world, we are witnessing a troubling rise in hate speech and incitement to violence, particularly targeting women and girls, especially those belonging to religious or ethnic minorities or who challenge patriarchal interpretations of faith. We gather at a moment when hate speech stands as a virulent threat to inclusive and effective governance, fueling division, undermining democracy, and inflicting devastating consequences on marginalized groups, from harassment and intimidation to violence and even crimes against humanity.

Topic 1: The Challenge: An Escalating Crisis

Hate speech is not new. But today, its reach and impact are amplified by digital technologies, political polarization, and the manipulation of religious and cultural narratives.

The Special Rapporteur on promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression has said that gender-based hate speech and disinformation are used extensively offline but also online to silence women as “in the digital age, the spate of online violence, hate speech and disinformation often compel women to self-censor, limit what they post or leave platforms”. Research shows that women, especially those with intersecting and marginalized identities including those belonging to religious groups, are being disproportionately targeted with such false or manipulated information with sexually charged or sexist narratives.

At the intersection of religion and gender, hate speech takes on particularly insidious forms—often seeking to silence women’s voices, justify discrimination, or incite violence.

We see this in online campaigns targeting women activists, in the spread of misogynistic content under the guise of religious or cultural “values,” and in the weaponization of faith to justify gender-based violence or restrict women and girl’s rights. Women and girls who belong to religious minorities, or who advocate for gender equality within faith communities, are doubly targeted—facing threats not only because of their gender, but also their beliefs or identities.

The consequences are profound. Hate speech undermines social cohesion, fuels exclusion, and creates environments in which violence and discrimination can flourish. It undermines the progress we have made toward gender equality, and it threatens the very principles of human rights and dignity that unite us. 2

Topic 2: Understanding the Roots

To counter hate speech effectively, we must understand its roots. At its core, hate speech at the intersection of religion and gender is driven by patriarchal norms and power structures. It is perpetuated by those who feel that their power or privilege is threatened by empowered women and girls, and who therefore seek to maintain patriarchal control by invoking religious authority.

But let us be clear: No religion condones hatred or violence. Around the world, women of faith are at the forefront of movements for peace, justice, and equality. Faith can be a powerful force for good—a source of resilience, solidarity, and hope.

Yet, when religious narratives are distorted to justify gender-based discrimination, the impact is devastating. It is our collective responsibility to challenge these distortions, and to promote interpretations of faith that affirm the dignity and rights of all.

Topic 3: Pathways Forward: A Multi-Level Response

How do we move forward? Allow me to highlight several pathways which are aligned to the UN Plan of Action on Hate Speech as well as the UN framework to promote and protect civic space:

1. Centring Women's Voices and Leadership: First, we must centre the voices and leadership of women—including women of faith, women from minority communities, and those who have experienced hate speech firsthand. Too often, the solutions are designed without those most affected at the table. We must change this. Women's organizations, faith-based groups, and interfaith networks are already doing vital work to counter hate speech and promote inclusive narratives. They need our support, resources, and partnership.

2. Building Alliances Across Sectors: Second, we must build alliances across sectors—between governments, civil society, religious leaders, technology companies, and the media. Countering hate speech requires a whole-of-society approach. This includes working with faith leaders who are committed to gender equality, and who can use their moral authority to challenge harmful narratives and promote respect for diversity.

3. Strengthening Legal and Policy Frameworks: Third, we must strengthen legal and policy frameworks to prevent and respond to hate speech, both online and offline. This includes ensuring that laws are in line with international human rights standards, and that they are implemented in ways that protect, rather than restrict, the voices of women, girls and marginalized groups. We must also hold perpetrators accountable and provide support to those targeted by hate.

4. Promoting Digital Literacy and Safe Spaces: Fourth, we must invest in digital literacy and safe online spaces. Social media platforms must do more to prevent the spread of hate speech, and to ensure that women and girls can participate safely in digital spaces. At the same time, we must equip individuals and communities with the tools to identify, report, and counter hate speech. The UN should support a new generation of digital citizens, empowered to recognize, reject and stand up to hate speech

5. Advancing Positive Narratives: Finally, we must advance positive narratives—stories of solidarity, inclusion, and hope. In an environment of backlash, UN Women chooses to push forward for gender

equality and human rights. We must amplify the voices of women and girls who are leading change within their communities and highlight their examples of effective faith-based action for gender justice. By telling these stories, we can challenge stereotypes, build empathy, and inspire others to join us. I quote Minority Rights Group - which last year released a key toolkit on addressing the hate speech crisis – because I 3

believe this wholly: “Education born from empathy remains the most effective tool in combating the spread of hate.”

Topic 4: UN Women’s Commitment

UN Women is committed to working with all of you to counter hate speech at the intersection of religion and gender. Through our programmes, partnerships, and advocacy, we support women’s leadership, building alliances with faith actors, and promoting legal and policy reforms. We are also working to ensure that global processes—such as the Commission on the Status of Women and the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action—reflect the realities and priorities of women of faith and those affected by hate speech.

But we cannot do this alone. We need your partnership, your expertise, and your courage.

A call to Action

Let me close with a call to action. Hate speech thrives in silence and indifference. It is up to all of us—across faiths, sectors, and borders—to speak out, to stand together, and to build societies in which every woman and girl can live free from fear, discrimination, and violence.

Let us harness the power of faith for good. Let us amplify the voices of women and girls. And let us work together to turn the tide against hate.



Speaker Notes: Countering Hate Speech at the Intersection of Religion and Gender

Panellist: Dr. Saba Haddad- Representative of the Baha'i International Community

I. Introduction

Good afternoon, esteemed panellists, ladies and gentleman.

I would like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to contribute to this critical discussion. On behalf of the Baha'i International Community, I hope to offer a perspective rooted in the conviction that religion, in its true sense, can and must be a powerful force for countering the hatred and division we see in the world.

The challenge of hate speech at the intersection of religion and gender is profound. We see that women belonging to minority faith communities often face a dual discrimination, targeted not only for their beliefs but also for their gender. This combination seeks to render them invisible and powerless.

However, our experience has shown us that the advancement of women is, in fact, an indispensable prerequisite for peaceful and prosperous societies. This is not an objective for women alone, but one that necessitates the proactive involvement of every segment of the population, working shoulder to shoulder, in full partnership.

If humanity is to meet its immense challenges, it needs both the hope and strength of spirit that faith can impart, and it needs, in much fuller measure, the phenomenal and largely untapped reservoirs of insight, innovation, and capacity found in the women of the world.

II. The Resilience of Women in the Face of Persecution

While we must acknowledge the severe challenges, it is crucial to move beyond a narrative that sees women solely as victims. In the face of intense persecution, we have witnessed women of faith demonstrating extraordinary resilience and acting as powerful agents of constructive change and peace.

A moving example can be seen in the Baha'i community of Yemen. For years, the Baha'is in the Houthi controlled area have faced wrongful imprisonment and persecution for their beliefs. Yet, their response has been an unwavering pursuit of peace and a persistent, selfless commitment to the well-being of their fellow citizens, regardless of background.

But this resilience is not only about endurance. It is about actively building a better future, even under the most difficult circumstances. In Yemen, Baha'i-inspired organizations have empowered young women at the grassroots. Rather than seeking refuge elsewhere, these women made the courageous choice to stay and contribute to their community's progress. They initiated consultations with village elders to respectfully gain their trust, collaboratively identified critical needs, and launched transformative initiatives—from health campaigns that benefited hundreds, to restoring school facilities to ensure girls could continue their education, a cornerstone for future progress. Their efforts have extended to being active in women-led peace networks, creating collaborative platforms for

conflict resolution and ensuring women's voices are integral to the process of rebuilding the fabric of their society.

These women show us that those targeted by hate and discrimination are not waiting to be rescued. They are leaders, builders, and sources of profound resilience for their entire communities, turning persecution into an impetus for service to their societies.

III. Pathways Forward: Prevention Through a New Culture of Equality

This brings us to the crucial point of our event, the need for prevention. Mitigating existing cases of persecution is essential, but the ultimate goal must be to foster a world where such hatred cannot take root. This requires more than policy and legal frameworks; it requires an enduring transformation within individual mindsets and social norms.

From the Baha'i perspective, this begins with an unwavering commitment to the foundational spiritual principle of the equality of women and men. Our sacred writings state: "The world of humanity has two wings—one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly." If one wing is weak, the flight is unbalanced; the bird of humanity is prevented from soaring to the heights of peace and prosperity it is destined to attain. This powerful metaphor illustrates a fundamental truth: the oppression of women is not just an injustice to women; it is a detriment to all of humanity, holding back our collective progress.

And religion, we believe, is an indispensable part of the solution. At its highest, religion awakens and cultivates the noble attributes latent in every soul. For Baha'i communities, a core belief is that the means for constructive social change must be coherent with its ends. We cannot achieve a just and peaceful world through unjust or conflict-ridden means.

We have seen the power of this approach in grassroots efforts around the world.

- In the state of Bihar, India, the family is becoming a "seedbed of change." Educational programs on the inherent nobility of every individual led communities to convene consultative spaces to explore why girls were not viewed as equal. Through courageous deliberation, they identified specific harmful attitudes, such as prioritizing boys' schooling. This new understanding spurred a cultural shift, with men joining the effort and the whole community taking ownership of the challenge. The result is a growing culture of genuine partnership between women and men, where all voices are valued.
- In Brazil, diverse communities are learning to transcend long-standing divisions by focusing on a shared identity as collaborators for the common good. In neighbourhoods once marked by social stratification and mistrust, people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds are coming together to undertake practical projects. This may take the form of creating a community garden, organizing tutoring classes for children, or launching a neighbourhood cleanup initiative. Through this shared, constructive action, they begin to see one another not as "the other," but as partners in a common enterprise. This focus on collective well-being helps to neutralize the "us vs. them" mentality that so often fuels prejudice and hate speech, replacing it with relationships built on trust and shared purpose.
- And discussions in places like the UAE, a global crossroads of cultures and religions, continue to highlight religion's indispensable role in fostering peace. These interfaith gatherings are moving beyond



token expressions of tolerance. They are creating spaces where leaders and community members can explore the deep ethical and moral principles their traditions share—principles of justice, mercy, compassion, and the sanctity of human dignity. By focusing on these unifying values, they demonstrate that when people unite around a shared commitment to higher ideals, they can overcome deep-seated differences and work together for the betterment of society.

IV. Conclusion: A Shared Endeavor

The efforts I have described resonate deeply with the vision outlined in General Assembly resolution 75/309. When it speaks of dialogue for “social cohesion, peace

and development,” it is speaking to the very heart of these community-building endeavours.

Ultimately, building resilience to hate speech is not a separate project. It is an integral part of the larger, collective striving to build peaceful and just societies. A future where women can meaningfully engage as equal protagonists in all fields of human endeavour—and where every individual is able to flourish as a co-creator of society—is the destination toward which humanity must now advance.

Let us, therefore, redouble our efforts to unlock the latent power that is released when women and men work together, in full partnership, to advance the frontiers of a more just, equal, and prospering world for all.

“When a thought of war comes, oppose it by a stronger thought of peace. A thought of hatred must be destroyed by a more powerful thought of love.”

Thank you.



**GENEVA CENTRE
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
ADVANCEMENT AND
GLOBAL DIALOGUE**

Follow us on



Rue de Vermont 37-39, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland
Tel: +41(0) 22 748 2780, info@gchragd.org
<http://www.gchragd.org/>