

**Hearing at the Italian Senate's Extraordinary Commission against intolerance, racism,
anti-Semitism and incitement to hatred and violence**

Statement by Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

20 January 2022

Distinguished President of the Commission, Senator Lilian Segre,
Members of Parliament

I am honoured to be invited to speak to this Commission. Your experience of the extreme dangers of hateful rhetoric and intolerance, Senator Segre – and this Commission's grasp of the importance and challenges of combating such phenomena today – make this a valuable encounter for me, personally, and for my Office.

We welcome the establishment of this Extraordinary Commission – and given the challenges and pushbacks you have faced, I want to clearly express my full support for your work.

In 2019, my Office conducted a **visit to Italy to monitor racial discrimination, with a focus on incitement to racial hatred and discrimination**. Our analysis confirmed that this trend is very much present in Italy, as it is across Europe and in so many other regions.

While our [report](#) acknowledged that many legislative, judicial and institutional measures have been adopted, it noted a number of essential gaps, and recommended specific actions.

All those recommendations remain relevant, and I will highlight some of them in my remarks.

There have been multiple incidents of hate speech and serious hate crimes against both Italians and non-nationals of many origins in recent years. The “[Map of Intolerance](#)”

study, which analysed some 800,000 tweets last year in Italy, exposed the online targeting of women, Muslims, people with disabilities, Jews, LGBTI people and migrants.

People of African descent have faced many cases of abuse, discriminatory behaviour and even physical attacks.

Migrants – people who seek only safety and opportunity, and who bring skills and hope – frequently meet with a discourse of hatred, exclusion and criminalization which has crushing impact on their human rights, including in relation to education, housing, decent work and social services. The discriminatory treatment of migrants in some sectors of the economy – which the UN Working Group on Business [reported on](#) last October – tarnishes Italy's international reputation and falls far short of international standards.

Many concrete steps can be taken. We have, for example, developed guidance on [reframing narratives on migration](#) which we have been using with parliamentarians, migrants' rights defenders and civil society in several countries, to create narratives of hope and inclusion. The [Agenda towards Transformative Change for Racial Justice and Equality](#) that we issued last June is also a very detailed outline of immediately practical – and urgent – steps towards racial justice that could be very relevant to Italy.

The Internet – and especially, social media platforms – greatly amplify the volume of hatred directed against **women, girls and gender diverse people**, particularly those who raise their voices to investigate or advocate change on economic, social, cultural and political issues. Including in Italy, women human rights defenders, women journalists and women politicians are very frequently targeted with extremely offensive and frightening threats, often involving sexual attacks. The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women has issued a [report](#) with detailed recommendations for prevention, protection, prosecution and redress for online threats against women and girls.

In 2019, the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency [found](#) that 32% of Italian LGBTI people had suffered at least one episode of harassment in the past year – and 8% one episode of physical aggression in the past five years – based on their gender identity. Only 1 in 6 victims made police reports – most, because they feared negative reactions from police and

judicial officers. Only 8% of the Italian LGBTI people responding to the survey believed that the Italian Government was effectively combatting prejudice and intolerance against LGBTI people.

I regret that this country recently lost an important opportunity to combat hate speech and hate crimes against women, girls, people with disabilities and LGBTI people, when the Senate rejected the so-called "**Zan Law**" that sought to extend protection to victims of violence and discrimination on the grounds of sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and disability. I hope that new efforts will swiftly take place to ensure that all people in Italy receive effective protection from these human rights violations, without delay.

Antisemitism and **anti-Muslim prejudice** also appear to be growing across Europe. The Fundamental Rights Agency's 2018 survey of EU countries found that 89% of respondents felt that antisemitism had increased in their country – and recent studies suggest that it has become more virulent during the pandemic, as old conspiracy theories resurface. The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief [reported](#) last year that in many countries – including Italy – Muslims experienced discrimination in accessing goods and services, including in public transport, airports, administrative offices, shops and restaurants.

Political movements that profit from hatred have gathered strength in many countries. By heightening the emotions of their supporters through campaigns of misinformation and disinformation, they gain media attention, and votes – but they also drive deep, violent and profoundly damaging wedges through societies.

The impact of hate speech on communities and on individuals is devastating. It exposes them to humiliation, violence, discrimination and exclusion – exacerbating underlying social and economic inequalities, and fuelling deep grievances. Our shared history is a warning of how dangerous these trends can become. As Primo Levi wrote in the context of the Holocaust – whose victims we remember and honour every year on 27 January – "It happened, so it could happen again".

Distinguished Senators,

We must combat such phenomena with strong **legal, institutional and policy frameworks**. In 2020, the European Union made very significant progress in this respect through adoption of the five-year [EU Anti-Racism Action Plan](#) to improve protection against discrimination; strengthen the role and independence of equality bodies; and reinforce national action against racism. The Action Plan includes specific emphasis on revealing underlying structural racism through better data collection and awareness raising. An [EU Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life](#) was also adopted.

It is essential to build new policies and narratives that prioritise our common humanity and universal rights. I call on Governments to consistently respond with the full force of the law to all forms of racist behaviour and violence. Political figures have a particular responsibility to ensure that their words do not incite violence, hostility or discrimination.

Every EU Member State is expected to adopt specific national strategies by the end of 2022 in relation to the Anti-Racism Action Plan. This Commission is certainly aware of the importance of establishing such a strategy for Italy, to ensure comprehensive, “whole-of-government” and “whole-of-society” reforms, with adequate resources. I encourage Italy to cooperate with other EU States on this implementation. Neighbouring Austria, for example, has already established its national strategy regarding antisemitism, and could serve as a partner in identifying the appropriate policy mix.

Other EU initiatives aiming to promote equality and respect for diversity include the [LGBTIQ Equality strategy 2020-2025](#), the [Gender Equality strategy 2020-2025](#), the strategy for the [Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030](#), the strategy [on Victims' Rights 2020-2025](#) and [the Victims' Rights Directive](#). These important plans also need strong national efforts of implementation.

In this context, I am hopeful that the Italian Parliament will be able to rapidly ensure the **establishment of an Italian national human rights institution**. Victims, whatever their status, must be able to safely report discrimination and incitement to violence or hatred – without fear of further discriminatory treatment – and they must find effective support and remedy. Perpetrators must realize that they will be brought to account.

This country would also benefit from more robust systems to **statistically record** incidents of discrimination and hate speech, disaggregated by age, gender, ethnicity, migration status and all other prohibited grounds of discrimination. While I acknowledge resistance to identifying victims based on race, it is only possible to combat acts of racism when they are made visible – through disaggregated statistics that respect key human rights principles, including self-identification, transparency and privacy.

I also strongly recommend national campaigns of **public advocacy**, to combat stereotypes and advance respect for people's diversity, as well as to galvanise public support for human rights defenders who combat all forms of discrimination. **Human rights education** can also play a key role. Too often, school curricula focus on specifics of a nation – often narrowly defined by the ethnicity or religion of the majority, to the exclusion of minorities – rather than promoting understanding of our diverse humanity and universal human rights. By developing knowledge and skills to identify and claim human rights, human rights education helps learners to realize their own and other people's biases.

Senators,

The problem of **online incitement to violence and hatred** also calls for decisive and principled regulatory action.

There can be no doubt that narratives of hatred on social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok and Snapchat have contributed to extreme violence against minority groups in many countries – including the mass murder of the Rohingya in Myanmar in 2017 and many incidents of mass killings, such as in Canada, New Zealand and the United States. Social media are also a nexus for the abuse of women and girls, and gender diverse people.

Madame Segre, you yourself have been the target of online threats and hate speech. I share the horror and outrage of the Italian people regarding these appalling manifestations of anti-Semitism and misogyny.

We can – and we must – detoxify the Internet, and make it a safer place for everyone.

Over the past 12 months alone, Facebook has reported removing more than 100 million items as “hate speech”. My Office has been collaborating with Facebook, Google/YouTube and Twitter with a view to better protecting human rights defenders and more effectively responding to content that incites hostility, discrimination or violence.

But much more needs to be done. **All social media platforms** should be guided by international human rights standards in their content moderation, and in line with the [United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#), they must carry out regular human rights and gender impact assessments, alongside other forms of human rights due diligence, to address the abuse and incitement to hatred that they contain.

While social media companies have clear and crucial responsibilities to moderate online content, it is States that have the fundamental obligation to adopt policies and legislation that ensure the protection of human rights online.

However, combating hate speech is not always conducted in good faith or with respect for human rights. It is profoundly unfortunate that in a number of countries, laws claiming to combat hate speech are, in reality, employed to suppress legitimate dissent and restrict the democratic and civic space. Such efforts require urgent reform, to ensure that laws and regulations are laid out with full respect for fundamental freedoms.

My Office has [outlined](#) five actions that could make a big difference in regulating content in the online space:

- 1) Focus on process, not content. Look at how content is being amplified or restricted. Ensure actual people – not algorithms – review complex decisions.
- 2) Ensure content-based restrictions are based on laws, are clear and narrowly-tailored, and are necessary, proportionate and non-discriminatory.

- 3) Be transparent. Companies should be transparent about how they curate and moderate content and how they share information with others. States should be transparent about their requests to take down content or access users' data.
- 4) Ensure users have effective opportunities to appeal against decisions they consider to be unfair, and make good remedies available for when actions by companies or States undermine their rights. Independent courts should have the final say over lawfulness of content.
- 5) Make sure civil society and experts are involved in designing and evaluating regulations.

Addressing hate speech does not mean limiting or prohibiting the rights to participate, to access information, to speak out or to mobilize. It means keeping hate speech from escalating into incitement to discrimination and violence, which is prohibited under international law.

Detailed, practical guidance on this issue is available. I strongly recommend your consideration of the [Rabat Plan of Action on incitement to hatred and violence](#) that we have developed to carefully delineate exactly what forms of hateful speech merit restrictions. Its concrete [threshold test](#) is available on our website in 32 languages – including Italian – and has been used by courts, other national authorities and UN peacekeeping operations.

Senators,

Hate speech is growing world-wide, and this trend appears to be exacerbated by the economic and social impacts of COVID-19. This profoundly threatens the values that we share – values of justice, human dignity, equality, and human rights. It heightens grievances and spurs violence and conflict. By deepening discrimination, and deterring participation, it also contributes to preventing many individuals from fully contributing to the societies in which they live.

This distinguished Commission has the responsibility and the capacity to mobilize forces across the country – bringing together Government, the private sector, religious leaders

and civil society – including stigmatised minorities – to counter hate speech in full respect of human rights principles.

It takes great moral courage to undertake this work. I am confident that you, Senators, have the moral courage to stand up for human rights.

Thank you

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