

# NOT ON OUR WATCH!

## DEVELOPING STRATEGIES TO COMBAT HATE SPEECH

A GUIDE FOR NATIONAL EQUALITY BODIES



# Introduction

Equality bodies have an important role to challenge hate speech and make it an issue at national level, using their mandate to promote equality and non-discrimination. Several equality bodies have an explicit mandate in relation to hate speech, while other equality bodies interpret their mandate to include a focus on hate speech. Others lack a mandate to focus on hate speech and although they identify it as a challenge, haven't yet started to deal with the issue. It is important to note that the legal route to challenging hate speech is not the only one and some equality bodies have been successfully using strategies building on their promotional powers.

In order to increase the capacity of equality bodies to combat hate speech and to exchange good practices in the field, an Equinet seminar was organized in November 2018 in Rome, Italy. The objective was to gather equality body staff to discuss and address how they can effectively work to combat hate speech. This document is a practical guide on how equality bodies can build strategies to combat hate speech. The content is based on discussions and interactive sessions among equality body staff and relevant stakeholders. The presented tools were emphasized during the seminar as useful in the process of combating hate speech and equality bodies are invited to consider using some or all of them depending on their capacities and national context.

This guide will cover the following topics and present necessary actions available for equality bodies:

- [Building alliances](#)
- [Developing alternative and counter narratives – The Power of Communication](#)
- [Formal and informal education to combat hate speech – Equality Bodies' Mandate to Promote Equality.](#)

## Start by defining Hate Speech – What is Hate Speech?

Currently no universal legal definition of hate speech exists – there are **multiple levels of complexity** that come with agreeing a definition of hate speech (definitional, regulatory and practical complexity, national context and history). **Equality bodies can bring valuable contributions** in addressing this issue, developing legislation and jurisprudence and identifying legal gaps.

Equality bodies **can refer to and rely on international soft law instruments in this process** (*ECRI GPR No. 15, Human Rights Committee General Comment No.34, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination General Recommendation No. 35*).

# 1. Building Alliances

Equality bodies are not the only actors who actively work to tackle hate speech. Cooperation between equality bodies and other stakeholders at national and international level is a valuable tool which can help and strengthen the work of equality bodies to combat hate speech.

Equality bodies hold extensive knowledge and experience which can reinforce and bring added value to the already existing work of other organisations and stakeholders.

## ***Why is this important?***

- **To enable an open dialogue** and regular exchange of knowledge and information with relevant actors. This can avoid duplication of already existing work on this issue.
- **To bring attention to the knowledge of equality bodies and their expertise of investigating** cases related to hate speech.
- **To assess the legal environment of hate speech and identify gaps and solutions** for regulating hate speech based on the experience of different actors in society.

## ***Relevant actors***

- Law enforcement (prosecutors, lawyers, judges)
- Media (news media, social media)
- NGOs
- Schools & universities
- National coordinators of the No Hate Speech Movement<sup>1</sup>
- National equality bodies in other countries
- European Commission
- Research institutions
- National parliaments and ministries

## ***Necessary actions – the six ‘I’s***

- **Invest** in long-term training of law enforcement to build a solid understanding of the legal provisions on hate speech among them and how it should be addressed in practice. This can also contribute to a sustainable cooperation between law enforcement and equality bodies;
- **Inform** journalists and social media managers about their role and responsibility to address the issue of hate speech. Initiate an open dialogue about their internal guidelines which shape the content and narratives presented in the media and how these can be assessed internally;
- **Interact** with various NGOs in the development of advocacy and awareness raising campaigns and projects to highlight the issue of hate speech in the public eye;

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<sup>1</sup> Visit their website to find out how you can get in contact with the national campaign in your country: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/no-hate-campaign/national-campaigns1>.

- **Initiate** research and studies on hate speech and keep this topic on the national agenda;
- **Involve** your equality body in the European Commission Code of Conduct on countering illegal Hate Speech online. The European Commission welcomes interested equality bodies to act as ‘trusted flaggers’ (UNAR, Italy and Unia, Belgium are already involved) at national level. Equality bodies are encouraged to share research and work on hate speech with the European Commission;
- **Invite** relevant working groups of national parliament and government ministries to discuss the role of equality bodies in the process of regulating hate speech, including an explicit mandate for the equality body to address hate speech. Use the *ECRI GPR No 2: Specialised bodies to combat racism, xenophobia, antisemitism and intolerance at national level* and the *European Commission Recommendation on Standards on Equality Bodies* to justify your position to cooperate and be part of dialogues with relevant authorities.

## 2. Developing Alternative and Counter narratives – *The Power of Communication*

By promoting a vision of respectful and inclusive societies, equality bodies can use their extensive experience of handling cases to create positive narratives and value-based messages with the aim to effectively and strategically combat hate speech and make a positive change in society. Equality bodies can address the issue of hate speech directly by telling stories based on their own experience of dealing with hate speech and interacting with victims.

### **I. Alternative narratives (proactive)**

- ❖ *Alternative narratives are built on what an equality body stands for, rather than is against.*
- ❖ *Your story should carry and engage positive values and the vision of your equality body.*
- ❖ *Tell stories which engage values such as equality, inclusion, tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy, rather than only telling “happy” stories.*
- ❖ *Your aim is to reframe the debate and shift the focus by changing vocabulary and topic.*

### **II. Counter narratives (reactive)**

- ❖ *Stopping and responding directly to a specific threat*
- ❖ *Equality bodies can challenge hate and harassment through emotion and humour.*

### ***Why is this important?***

- To evoke and engage values and emotions which reflect the notion of equality and the vision of equality bodies.
- The use of these communication tools can be very effective and does not require additional financial resources, only creative thinking.

### ***Necessary actions***

- Identify your vision. Create stories that reflect the vision of your equality body. Use Equinet's Framing Equality Toolkit to learn how to do so<sup>2</sup>!
- Make these stories public by creating videos and campaigns with real-life stories and disseminate them with the aim to evoke and engage emotions (positive rather than negative, so rather empathy and love over fear and anger).
- Be visible to show that equality bodies are relevant actors and leaders in the process of combating hate speech. Appear in the media to show that equality bodies are obvious/ relevant actors in the process of combating hate speech.
- Evaluate and assess the impact of using alternative/counter narratives. Does it contribute to a shift in societal thinking? Do you need to change your approach?

## **3. Formal and Informal Education – *Equality Bodies'* *Mandate to Promote Equality***

Equality bodies possess knowledge and experience which they can use as part of their mandate to promote equality. This soft power can proactively be utilised by equality bodies to interact with local communities, as well as informing students and teachers in schools and universities about the core issues of hate speech. Equality bodies can bring a real image of the broader societal issue which hate speech reflects.

### ***Why is this important?***

- Contribute to a shift in culture and use of hate speech.
- Create an understanding of hate speech and its effects among different groups of individuals from wide-ranging backgrounds.
- Raise awareness about the work of equality bodies on this topic.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.equineteurope.org/Framing-Equality-Communication-Handbook-for-Equality-Bodies>.



### ***Necessary actions***

- Ensure an active role in schools by offering trainings where your knowledge, information and experience about real life cases are used in a practical way.
- By cooperating with relevant ministries, equality bodies can use their power to influence the creation or development of courses about hate speech in school and university curricula.
- Community interaction: By interacting with different groups of individuals and local community organisations, as well as providing information and advice about the issue of hate speech, equality bodies can reach a broad range of actors from different backgrounds. Be creative here! Contact local sport/theatre centres or other local groups which gathers individuals from different backgrounds.

### **Before developing hate speech strategies, don't forget to identify:**

- What are your objectives?
- What are the steps and actions involved?
- Who will you work with?
- Your expected timeframe and Budget