



Platforms, Experts, Tools: Specialised Cyber-Activists Network

Intersectional Hate Speech Online



Project funded by the European Union's Rights,
Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020)



About the Project

The EU-funded project sCAN – Platforms, Experts, Tools: Specialised Cyber-Activists Network (2018-2020), coordinated by Licra (International League Against Racism and Antisemitism), aims at gathering expertise, tools, methodology and knowledge on cyber hate and developing transnational comprehensive practices for identifying, analysing, reporting and counteracting online hate speech. This project draws on the results of successful European projects already realised, for example the project “Research, Report, Remove: Countering Cyber-Hate phenomena” and “Facing Facts”, and strives to continue, emphasize and strengthen the initiatives developed by civil society for counteracting hate speech.

Through cross-European cooperation, the project partners are enhancing and (further) intensifying their fruitful collaboration. The sCAN project partners are contributing to selecting and providing relevant automated monitoring tools to improve the detection of hateful content. Another key aspect of sCAN is the strengthening of the monitoring actions (e.g. the monitoring exercises) set up by the European Commission. The project partners are also jointly gathering knowledge and findings to better identify, explain and understand trends of cyber hate at a transnational level. Furthermore, this project aims to develop cross-European capacity by providing e-learning courses for cyber-activists, moderators and tutors through the Facing Facts Online platform.

sCAN is implemented by ten different European partners, namely ZARA – Zivilcourage und Anti-Rassismus-Arbeit from Austria, CEJI – A Jewish contribution to an inclusive Europe from Belgium, Human Rights House Zagreb from Croatia, Romea from Czech Republic, Licra – International League Against Racism and Antisemitism from France, Respect Zone from France, jugendschutz.net from Germany, CESIE from Italy, Latvian Centre For Human Rights from Latvia and the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences from Slovenia.

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Introduction

The concept of intersectional discrimination originates from the movement of black feminism. The term intersectionality was coined by American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who described the specific discrimination experienced by black women as “the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex.”¹

Since then, the concept of intersectionality has been adopted to describe different social settings where multiple grounds of discrimination intersect to create a distinct form of discrimination that is more than just the sum of its different aspects. The Fundacion Secretariado Gitano defines intersectional discrimination as “a specific type of discrimination, in which different types of discrimination intersect and interact (the intersection of gender and ethnic discrimination, for example). It is not a matter of adding discriminations, but of understanding how the intersection of these discriminations is something specific that requires a particular approach that recognizes these various factors.”² In order to understand intersectional discrimination, they propose to analyse how the discrimination would have been different if one of the intersecting characteristics had been absent. In their study of intersectional discrimination against Roma women, they conclude: “If one of these factors does not exist, e.g. being a Roma man or a non-Roma woman, the discrimination would have been different (sic)”.³

While the concept has traditionally been applied to cases of (offline) discrimination, e.g. in employment or housing, intersectionality also plays a role in hate speech online, whenever a group or an individual is attacked for more than one of their protected characteristics. For example, the project *Research, Report, Remove: Countering Cyber Hate Phenomena* found that homophobic hate speech sometimes intersects with hate speech against refugees or holocaust denial.⁴

Nine partner organisations provided input and contributed with their extensive experience to this analytical paper on intersectional hate speech:

- ZARA – Zivilcourage und Anti-Rassismus-Arbeit (Austria)
- CEJI – A Jewish contribution to an inclusive Europe (Belgium)
- Human Rights House Zagreb (Croatia)
- Romea (Czech Republic)
- Licra - International League Against Racism and Antisemitism (France)
- jugendschutz.net (Germany)
- CESIE (Italy)
- Latvian Center for Human Rights (Latvia)
- University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences (UL-FDV) (Slovenia)

Since the scope of the sCAN project does not allow the participating organisations to provide an extensive picture of intersectional hate speech on social media, we decided to focus on exemplary case studies.

¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989, pp. 139-168. P. 149. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/archive/CREDTI.pdf> (last accessed 17.01.2020).

² Fundacion Secretariado Gitano (2019). *Guide on intersectional discrimination – The case of Roma women*, p. 6. Available at [https://gitanos.org/upload/22/65/GUIDE_ON_INTERSECTIONAL_DISCRIMINATION - ROMA WOMEN - FSG 33444 .pdf](https://gitanos.org/upload/22/65/GUIDE_ON_INTERSECTIONAL_DISCRIMINATION_-_ROMA_WOMEN_-_FSG_33444_.pdf) (last accessed 17.01.2020).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴ Research, Report, Remove: Countering Cyber Hate Phenomena (2017). *Manifestations of Online Hate Speech*. Available at <https://www.inach.net/manifestations-of-online-hate-speech/> (last accessed 17.01.2020).

Intersectional hate speech against women

Women remain the group of people most often targeted by intersectional hate speech. They are usually attacked for their physical appearance - for being either too sexual or not sexual enough, too attractive or not attractive enough.

For example, when a Czech anti-Islam politician published a video of herself wearing a burqa to warn about the alleged "Islamization" of the Czech Republic, commenters attacked her for her perceived unattractiveness and suggested that unattractive women should indeed wear a burqa. Her male colleagues from the same party were attacked for their political views and perceived extremism, but their attractiveness was not an issue.

Women who belong to minority communities are especially vulnerable, for example Muslim women, Roma women or Women of Colour, are attacked based on a combination of their protected characteristics. Another target group for intersectional hate speech is women in public positions, female politicians, journalists and civil society activists. In a progression of intersectionality, female journalists or activists with a minority background are assailed for speaking out publicly, the hate speech targeting their gender and (perceived) ethnicity and/or religion.

This is illustrated by the differences between the insulting comments aimed at Carola Rackete, captain of the rescue vessel Sea Watch 3, and Rula Jebreal, an internationally renowned journalist. While capt. Rackete has been insulted based on her gender and political views, Ms. Jebreal was targeted because of her ethnic background and alleged beliefs. Both of them have been subject to gender-based discrimination, but intersectional hate speech can be found only in the reported comments against Rula Jebreal. She is targeted as a woman with middle-eastern origins and a (presumed) Muslim. On the other hand, according to online haters, Carola Rackete is just a rich white girl from Germany, but none of these comments could be considered hate speech as such.

Women from minority communities

Women from various minority communities often face intersectional hate speech targeting their gender and minority status. Sometimes, they are additionally discriminated inside their communities because of their gender.

In France, women with (real or perceived) Maghreb origins are faced with the pejorative concept of "beurette". The term "beurette" is the female equivalent term for "beur" which is the slang word for the term "Arabe" (Arab).

While the term was originally coined during the non-violent March for equality and against racism also named Beur's March ("*la Marche des beurs*") in 1983⁵, this positive connotation has changed over the past decades and is now used to label women with Maghreb origins as deviant and immoral. The term "beurette" is also one of the most common search terms on porn websites. This over-sexualised representation also brings to mind the image of the "oriental woman" during the 19th century and the French colonisation period. The sociologist Eric Fassin underlines: "*The Arab-French girl has been a social fantasy even before becoming a sexual one, defined by a double-bind: submission and emancipation*"⁶. The "beurettes" are considered as doubly "inferior" because of their gender and their ethnicity. The symbolic behind this term is racist and misogynist.

Visibly Muslim women are frequently targeted for wearing religious clothing, such as hijabs, burkinis and niqabs, in public spaces. In Slovenia, articles from a right-wing media outlet degrading Muslim

⁵ Franck J. Prial (1983). Parisians March against racism. In *New York Times*, December 4 1983. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/04/world/parisians-march-against-racism.html> (last accessed 09.03.2020).

⁶ Eric Fassin, Mathieu Trachman (2013). "Voiler les beurettes pour les dévoiler: Les doubles jeux d'un fantasme pornographique blanc", In *Modern Contemporary France* 21(2), June 7 2013. Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09639489.2013.776736> (last accessed 09.03.2020).

women for wearing niqabs or burkinis were widely shared on Social Media and commented on approvingly. In both articles, Muslim women were called “rjuharice”, a derogatory term that roughly translates to “sheet-wearers”. One article claimed that wearing a burkini in public swimming pools was unhygienic and called for a ban on burkinis in Slovenia. The article ignited hateful comments implying that Muslim women came to the pools to wash their clothes and calling them terrorists.

Another article denigrated women wearing niqabs in public. Several photos of women wearing niqabs in everyday situations such as during a meal, strolling her baby or waiting for a doctor’s appointment, illustrated the article. Comments called the veiled women terrorists and insinuated they could be hiding explosives under their niqabs. Apart from the discriminatory context of the article, this example also raises questions of the depicted women’s personal rights and data protection.

The intersectionality can be analysed by considering how the hate speech would have been different if the targets had been Muslim men or non-Muslim women. In these examples, it was specifically female religious clothing that drew the hate of the commenters, which would not be worn by Muslim men. Furthermore, Muslim men are generally less likely to be discriminated based on their choice of religious clothing. Non-Muslim women would not “stand out” from the majority of population in Slovenia and would not have been labelled as terrorists because of their clothing. It is therefore possible that none of the women would have been targeted at all if they had not been both female and Muslim.

In Italy, Right-wing leader Matteo Salvini posted a video on Twitter in which Nibran, a well-known representative of left-wing movement “Sardine”, describes him as “ignorant”. In a comment underneath the post, a user calls Nibran a “whore” and insults her for her Islamic faith. In the Italian language, the misogynist slur “whore” is culturally only used against women and does not have a masculine equivalence. Therefore, the hateful comment targets the politicians specifically for being a Muslim woman.

In the Czech Republic, Roma women are discriminated both as women in their own communities and as Roma women as a member of Roma minority. The same can be said of LGBTI+ Roma men and women, who face an additional dimension of discrimination for not being heterosexual.

In an Italian example, a Roma woman was accused of stealing and disparaged with the slurs “Zingara” (engl: “gypsy”) and “puttana” (engl: “whore”) on Social Media. Additionally, the post expressed insulting overgeneralized statements against Roma people. As already explained above, the misogynist slur “whore” would not be used against a man in Italian. Furthermore, the woman was offended due to her ethnicity and belonging to the Roma community. Given that, the post would have been different if the target had had a different ethnic background or a different gender.

Women in public positions

Sometimes, just speaking out publicly in support of any given topic can be enough for a woman to be targeted with hate speech online. More often, however, women in public positions, such as politicians, journalists or civil society activists, become targets of intersectional hate speech. This is especially true, if those women advocate for pluralism or gender equality and feminism. Women working in the NGO sector supporting refugees could be threatened with sexual violence or accused of actually “asking for” sexual violence depending of the country context.

In Austria, a woman described her experiences with intersectional hate speech when a Facebook post on gender equality triggered a wave of misogynist and homophobic hatred against her. She also received private messages and death threats. The overlapping of those different forms of discrimination shows how much degradation and categorization of persons/groups in a system of maintaining power are intertwined.

In the United Kingdom, one noticeable pattern of intersectional hate speech is hatred against black women in positions of power. For example, British MP Diane Abbott was attacked on Twitter because

of her weight, but also her origin and skin colour. This is especially obvious in images drawing comparisons between MP Abbott and an elephant. The animalisation of MP Abbott and the obsession with her weight exemplify Afrophobia intersecting with misogyny. Women in power from minority background seems to trigger hate no matter where they come from: former MP Luciana Berger has been targeted by a series of antisemitic hate attacks and threats throughout her career.

In the Czech Republic, a female attorney and director of a well-known NGO supporting hate crime victims was attacked on Facebook. The hateful posts stood in direct connection to the director's work and public visibility, as they were published following a report by her organisation about hate speech on social media. Instead of criticising the organisation's work or the target's political views, however, the hateful posts disparaged her appearance and contained sexualized fantasies of fatal harm befalling her or her female colleagues. By contrast, the male colleagues in the organisation are hardly ever targeted with hate speech online, especially not with respect to their appearance or sexuality.

Also in the Czech Republic, MP Tomio Okamura, chair of the "Freedom and Direct Democracy" (SPD) party, encouraged hate speech against a female journalist who had asked critical questions and requested him to disclose his sources for incorrect information he posted on Social Media. Okamura's followers targeted the journalist with hate speech including rape phantasies as "punishment" for her alleged pro-immigration stance. Thus, the target was attacked both as a journalist asking critical questions, but also with a specific misogynist component that would not be applied to male journalists.

In another Czech example, Nina Špitálníková, a "white" female candidate for the European Parliament, became a target of a large amount of hateful comments and death threats online. She was accused of being a "traitor" and "disrupting the traditional white family", because of having a child who was not considered "white". It is interesting to contrast this treatment of Špitálníková with the Czech public's treatment of Tomio Okamura (see above). Mr Okamura is of Czech-Japanese origin and has made Czech nationalism the backbone of his political career. As the Czech sCAN partner reported, he has never been criticized, let alone targeted with hate speech, for engaging in romantic relationships with "white" women. On the other hand, Špitálníková's choices regarding her family have earned her death threats.

In Germany, Berlin State Secretary for active citizenship and international affairs, Sawsan Chebli, is frequently targeted with misogynist and anti-Muslim hate speech online. She has stated that she is routinely filing 20 to 30 criminal complaints per week for online hate speech and threats. In 2018, a picture showing her wearing a Rolex watch was widely discussed online. Some commenters suggested that as a politician from the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and a Muslim with migration background, she should not be wearing such expensive accessories. However, male politicians are not usually harassed online for wearing expensive watches and business suits or driving sports cars.⁷

In Austria, new Minister of Justice, Alma Zadić, was subjected to hate speech and death threats online based on her new position, her origin and perceived Muslim faith. Another female politician was attacked following her election to deputy district manager for the Inner City of Vienna. The hate speech focused on her skin colour and visible migration background, but also on her gender and political affiliation.

Women who counter hate speech online or campaign against extremism in general, are also subjected to online hate speech. An example is the Austrian movement "Omas gegen Rechts" (engl: "grandmothers against the right"), who are frequently targeted on the grounds of their political views, but also their age, gender or perceived sexual orientation.

⁷ Eva Reisinger (2018). *Sollten Politiker*innen auf Statussymbole wie eine Rolex-Uhr verzichten?* Available at <https://ze.tt/sollten-politikerinnen-auf-statussymbole-wie-eine-rolex-uhr-verzichten-sawsan-chebli/> (last accessed 09.03.2020).

Intersectional hate speech against LGBTI+ persons

Apart from women, LGBTI+ persons are also frequently affected by intersectional hate speech. This hate speech targets not only their sexual orientation, but also other identity categories like skin colour, ethnic origin, religion or political affiliation.

In 2019, well-known Austrian newspaper “Der Standard” published an article on personal pronouns and gender-sensitive language. Many perspectives on living realities were portrayed. Only a few hours later, dozens of hateful postings were posted in the online newspaper’s discussion forum. Those hateful contents were deeply LGBTI-phobic as well as racist, misogynist and sexist.

In Croatia, a couple registered as same-sex union under Croatian law was denied their foster-parents application on the grounds of their sexual orientation. They went to court and eventually the Constitutional Court ruled refusal to register them as foster-parents was discriminatory and that the couple is to be put in the procedure of becoming foster-parents. During the two-year long court proceedings, they were subjected to numerous hateful posts attacking them and all LGBTI+ persons in Croatia. The grounds for the hatred were sexual orientation and marital status, but gender as well. If the case was about lesbian women, the public would react to this case differently, as a relationship between two women is more accepted in Croatian patriarchal society.

Also in Austria, the Austria Federal Railway Company (ÖBB) published an advertising poster featuring a gay couple, one of them being a Person of Colour, and their child. A politician from the right-wing Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) commented on the advertisement, directly targeting the depicted couple for their sexual orientation and for the one partner’s skin colour. He stated that he would no longer use the services of the ÖBB because of this advertisement.

Queers of colour are also subjected to specific hate speech in France. For decades, this community has suffered from a lack of visibility and representation including from civil society organisations. Since 2016, the Paris Black Pride is organised in order to raise awareness about the issues of intersectional discriminations.

However, some events that offer more visibility to this community adversely result in a spread of violent intersectional hate speech. For example, the French candidate for the 2019 Eurovision Song Contest, Bilal Hassani, has been a target of homophobic, queerphobic and racist hate speech. He was targeted because of being gay, queer as well as having North-African origins. In the study “Cartographie de la haine en ligne” from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, the authors also note: “*Bilal Hassani emerged as a significant figure in misogynist hateful speech as well as hateful anti-LGBTQ language, demonstrating the extent to which these types of hateful speech overlap, and the extent to which gender and sexuality are often conflated, particularly in hateful speech*”⁸.

In 2018, DJ Kiddy Smile and his voguing dancers had been invited to the French presidential residence, the Elysée palace, for the annual music festival “Fête de la musique”. Kiddy Smile positively describes himself as “homosexual, suburban [banlieusard], Black, fat” and supports the intersectionality movement. A photo posted on Instagram showing the French presidential couple with DJ Kiddy Smile and his group of dancers, triggered violent homophobic and racist hate speech, alleging the picture showed a “degeneration of French values”.

Another element of this intersectional hate speech is the existence of a racist hate speech amongst the LGBTI+ community. The Instagram account “Personnes racisées Vs Grindr”⁹ (Racialized people vs Grindr) created by the journalist Miguel Shema, identifies and collects the racist messages sent to users on the private platform and denounces a “fetishisation” of People of Colour on the dating app.

⁸ Cooper Gatewood, Cécile Guérin (2020). *Cartographie de la haine en ligne*. Available at <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Cartographie-de-la-Haine-en-Ligne-eng.pdf> (last accessed 09.03.2020).

⁹ https://www.instagram.com/pracisees_vs_grindr/?hl=en

Intersection of ethnicity and religion

Another combination of identity categories often targeted by intersectional hate speech is ethnicity and (perceived) religion. Especially people of Arab origin, refugees and Muslims are often lumped together in hateful comments that assume that all Arabs are refugees and all refugees are of Muslim faith. In these cases, hate speech is based on the targets' ethnicity, race and religion. They include harassment and racial slurs in public, for example regarding skin colour and depending on the visible religious affiliation that targets mostly women. Often, refugees and (perceived) Muslims are also generally depicted as "terrorists".

In Italy, a social media user attacked undocumented migrants arriving in Italy, alleging that those people are illegal and pose a serious threat to security. The terms used are offensive and express defamatory overgeneralizing statements that assume all migrants are dangerous criminals. In the post, migrants are considered "terrorist" just for being undocumented. In the same way, the expression "clandestino" has turned into a xenophobic offense and is often used to generally refer to undocumented third country nationals and especially black people coming from Africa.

A similar intersection of ethnicity and religion can be found in examining the cases of hate incidents against Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina who are citizens of Croatia - non-denominational Muslims and Sunni Muslims – who have their political, social and economic rights guaranteed under the Constitutional law on national minorities, as well as by other legal documents. However, when the mosque was to be built in the city of Rijeka during first half of 2010's, there were protests organized by the citizens. Nowadays, similar protests are being held and petitions are being signed against building mosques in the cities of Pula and Dubrovnik. Other examples of recorded hate incidents against Muslims in Croatia include spreading lard over the obituaries placed in public space in Zagreb.

In Latvia, hate speech towards migrants occasionally intersects with hate speech towards Russian speaking residents of Latvia. The posters of hateful comments allege that there are already too many migrants living in Latvia from the period of Soviet occupation. Comparisons are drawn that similar to Russians, dark-skinned migrants will not integrate in the society.

In Croatia, intersectional hate speech also targets the Serbian minority. It is often paired with historical revisionism. For example, the Croatian partner reported vandalism of property of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Croatia with insignia of the Independent State of Croatia, a puppet state of Nazi-Germany.

The linking of antisemitic conspiracy theories with xenophobic or other hate speech is another trend in intersectional hate speech reported by our partners. Whenever there's an event or a public speaker who online haters disagree with, they find ways to blame it on Jews "controlling" the speakers' actions. This conspiracy theory is built upon, combined with other forms of hatred and punctuated by events of the day.

In Belgium, an online meme depicted youth activist Greta Thunberg as being controlled by "the Jews". The young climate activist is additionally targeted on grounds of disability, because of her Asperger's syndrome. The meme not only discredits Greta's activism and suggest that she cannot speak in her own terms on a pressing issue, but it also propagates antisemitic stereotypes.

In Germany, an article and accompanying picture of a tourist killing a swan for a selfie sparked antigypsyist and antisemitic hate speech. A commenter not only claimed that the tourist was of Roma origin (which was not evident from the article or the picture itself), but also stated that "gypsies are genetically modified Jews" and therefore Jews were to blame for the death of the swan.

In Latvia, migrants and refugees from Middle-Eastern and African countries are perceived not only as a burden, but also as threat to "white" or Christian Europeans and ethnic Latvians. According to one of the narratives, the goal of the influx of asylum seekers is an "Africanisation" of Europe and "colonisation" by Muslims. In this context, anti-migrant hate speech is occasionally mixed with antisemitism

and homophobia, linking it with the conspiracy theory of the “Great (white, ethnic) replacement”.¹⁰ The message of this conspiracy theory is that Jews, in particular George Soros, promote “ethnic replacement” and the “propaganda of LGBT” in order bring down European nations.

This narrative was also deployed in a more extreme example, when a commenter condoned the recent terror attack in Hanau, Germany, and tried to justify it with the “Great Replacement” theory combined with the antisemitic conspiracy theory of Jews controlling the migration flow in order to destroy Western societies.

¹⁰ For more information on the theory of the “Great Replacement” see <https://www.ny-times.com/2019/08/06/us/politics/grand-replacement-explainer.html> (last accessed 20.03.2020).

Conclusion

Intersectional hate speech is common in practically all countries in Europe and beyond. The most frequent targets women, LGBTI+ persons, ethnic and religious minorities based on a combination of their identity categories. Particularly affected are people with public visibility or in public positions.

Government departments must enshrine the principle of intersectionality in all equality policies, to avoid overlooking the experiences of the most marginalised groups. Further, governments should put in place strong consultation mechanisms with a wide diversity of stakeholders to inform policy making in order to ensure it is as inclusive as possible. It is noteworthy that the Czech Government operates with the term intersectionality in its Strategy for Equality of Men and Women for 2014-2020, in which it warns that persons exposed to intersectional discrimination face multiple types of pressure¹¹.

Political authorities should firmly condemn hate speech and promote counter-speech by politicians and high-ranking officials. All political parties should also condemn discriminatory, inflammable or hateful speech and call on their members and followers to abstain from using it. It is one step from using hate speech and thus creating the atmosphere of intolerance and undesirability of one group in our society to violent incidents.

Besides adequate and timely investigation that takes into the account all circumstances of the hate biased speech or incident, the law enforcement authorities should strengthen their cooperation with minority groups and communities in order to better understand the nature and dynamic of the community. When combatting hate speech it is important to take into account important dates, figures, symbols and practices of the targeted communities.

Intersectional hate speech is harder to classify and fight against than hate speech targeting only one characteristic. We tend to use counter-hate tools designed for a certain type of hate speech. When there are many types, some expressions of hate speech might be underreported, simplified or even ignored. Civil society organisations should strengthen their efforts to report and counter intersectional hate speech.

¹¹ The Office of the Government of the Czech Republic (2014). *Government Strategy for Equality of Women and Men in the Czech Republic for 2014 –2020*. Available at https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/dokumenty/Government_Strategy_for-Gender_Equality_2014_2020.pdf (last accessed 09.03.2020).

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