

# Reflection-in-Action: Hate Speech and Discrimination towards Disability, Chronic Illness, and Mental Health Conditions

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## ABSTRACT

The complicated issues of hate speech and discrimination against people with disabilities, long-term diseases, and mental health conditions are discussed in this paper as a reflection-in-action. The study investigates how these harmful behaviors appear in diverse social contexts and their significant consequences on the psychological and social well-being of persons affected by them by engaging in a process of ongoing reflection and reaction. Donald Schön's notion of reflection-in-action serves as a framework for analyzing in-the-moment reactions to discrimination and hate speech. This method emphasizes how crucial it is to identify and comprehend these problems right away in order to guide sympathetic and successful actions.

The study analyzes examples of discrimination and hate speech through reflective practice, looking at the short- and long-term effects on people with disabilities, mental health conditions and chronic illnesses. In order to minimize harm and promote inclusivity, the process include understanding the wider social ramifications, acknowledging the emotional and psychological effects on victims, and modifying responses. The reflection's main conclusions show that exposure to hate speech aggravates mental health conditions and has a detrimental effect on social engagement and emotional wellness. The aforementioned findings underscore the imperative for professionals to cultivate an elevated consciousness of these patterns and react with tact and well-informed strategies to foster restoration and equitable society.

The paper also considers the ethical and societal obligations that communities and people have when it comes to combating prejudice and hate speech. In order to protect vulnerable populations, it need more robust legal frameworks and regulations, highlighting the crucial role that reflection-in-action may play in forming successful lobbying and policy-making. The final section of the study provides insightful analysis of the continued difficulties in preventing hate speech and prejudice, as well as solutions for policy, activism, and education. In the end, it promotes the continuous application of reflective practice by community members and professionals in order to improve understanding, assist those who are impacted, and encourage the development of a more just and inclusive society.

This comprehensive reflection-in action highlights how timely responses and critical examination of hate speech and discrimination can lead to meaningful social change and positively impact the lives of individuals subjected to such harmful behaviors.

**Keywords:** Reflection-in-Action, hate speech, discrimination, disability, chronic illness, mental health condition, social justice, empathy.

## INTRODUCTION TO HATE SPEECH AND DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination and hate speech are widespread societal problems that have a significant impact on both individuals and society. The frequency of these occurrences in recent years has raised serious concerns, especially in relation to vulnerable groups such those with disabilities, long-term diseases, and mental health issues. In addition to being an issue of free speech, hate speech is a destructive force that upholds social division, marginalization, and inequality. It is commonly defined as any form of communication that denigrates or encourages violence against individuals based on their inherent characteristics (Benesch, 2014).

Discrimination is defined as the unfair or biased treatment of people based on their race, gender, disability, or other qualities, which results in systemic disadvantages and social exclusion. It is directly related to hate speech (Shakespeare, 2014).

A comprehensive examination of the diverse definitions and manifestations of hate speech and discrimination is necessary to comprehend these ideas. Hate speech includes a broad variety of expressions, including subtly biased statements that can be found in popular culture, the media, and official procedures. It is not just restricted to overt slurs and disparaging remarks (Gagliardone, Gal, Alves & Martinez, 2015). For example, stigmatizing or discriminatory language directed at people with disabilities or mental health issues frequently feeds negative preconceptions, which in turn contributes to a culture of exclusion. Because they legitimize unfavorable views and actions toward minority groups, these subtle kinds of hate speech can be equally as harmful as more overt ones (Gagliardone, Gal, Alves & Martinez, 2015). Conversely, discrimination can take many different forms, such as systematic, indirect, and blatant discrimination. When someone is regarded less favorably due to a particular attribute, like a disability or mental health condition, this is known as direct discrimination (Shakespeare, 2014). Refusing to hire someone due to their disability is one example. Indirect discrimination refers to laws or procedures that, despite their apparent neutrality, unfairly disadvantage particular groups. For example, practices in the workplace that do not take into account the requirements of people with disabilities may create an indirect barrier to employment (Rao, 2019a).

Furthermore, the term "systemic discrimination," which is often used to refer to "institutional discrimination," describes ingrained disparities according to Rao (2019b) that are present in society's institutions and systems, such as the legal, medical, and educational systems. It is critical to take into account the unique effects of hate speech and discrimination on people with disabilities, long-term medical conditions, and mental health issues. These groups are frequently the targets of particular types of discrimination and hate speech that have their roots in societal stigma and misinformation. Stigma and hate crimes, as explored by Herek (2009), are not confined to any single group but are part of a broader pattern of societal discrimination and exclusion. People with mental health conditions, for instance, could be called "dangerous" or "unreliable," which could cause them to become socially isolated and make it harder for them to get the help and resources they need (Corrigan, Druss & Perlick, 2014). Similar to this, those who have chronic illnesses may experience prejudice in healthcare settings where biases held by medical personnel cause their symptoms to be disregarded or not effectively handled (Rao, 2019a).

Furthermore, it is important to recognize the intersections between discrimination and hate speech. The term "intersectionality" describes how many types of discrimination, such as those based on gender, ethnicity, and disability, interact and exacerbate one another to produce distinct and frequently more severe forms of marginalization. A woman of color with a disability, for example, as Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams (2014) state, can experience ableism in addition to gender and racial discrimination, creating a complicated web of hurdles that prevent her from fully participating in society.

Overall, because hate speech and discrimination are complicated subjects, it is critical to have a solid understanding of their definitions and expressions. These are not just academic concepts; they have real, tangible effects on people's lives, particularly those of marginalized communities. By examining the specific forms of discrimination and hate speech experienced by individuals with disabilities, chronic illnesses, and mental health conditions, we may begin to address the root causes of these issues and work toward a more inclusive and equitable society.

## **Purpose and objectives**

This paper's goal is to provide a thorough analysis of hate speech and discrimination, with a particular emphasis on how these issues affect individuals with disabilities, those with chronic illness, and those who are struggling with mental health conditions. There are three objectives in mind:

**To Define and Analyze Hate Speech and Discrimination:** This paper will define hate speech and discrimination, exploring their different forms and manifestations (Gagliardone, Gal, Alves & Martinez, 2015). It will also investigate how these phenomena intersect with issues related to disability, chronic illness, and mental health (Shakespeare, 2014).

**To Examine the Effects of Hate Speech and Discrimination:** A key objective is to assess the psychological, social, emotional and behavioral effects of hate speech and discrimination on individuals. This includes reviewing existing literature and empirical studies to understand the extent and nature of these effects and how they affect individuals' quality of life and social participation (Corrigan, Druss & Perlick, 2014; Hassouneh & Johnston, 2017).

**To Explore Legal, Policy, and Practical Strategies:** The paper will evaluate current laws and policies aimed at combating hate speech and discrimination. It will also propose practical strategies and interventions for mitigating these issues, drawing on best practices from personal point of view and from various sectors and regions (Pescosolido., Martin, Long & Olafsdottir, 2010., Rao, 2019(b)).

### **The multifaceted effects of hate speech and discrimination**

Hate speech and discrimination have a profound and pervasive impact on both individuals and communities, manifesting across psychological, social, emotional, and behavioral domains. These effects are often debilitating, creating lasting damage that significantly alters the quality of life for those targeted, particularly individuals with disabilities, chronic illnesses, and mental health conditions.

Psychologically, the consequences of hate speech and discrimination are well-documented, contributing to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem (Corrigan, Druss & Perlick, 2014). The internalization of negative stereotypes can lead to a sense of hopelessness and isolation, further exacerbating mental health challenges. Research by Vogel, Wade & Haake (2014) demonstrated that individuals stigmatized due to mental health conditions are more likely to internalize these harmful perceptions, resulting in poorer mental health outcomes. This psychological toll often compounds existing vulnerabilities, making it increasingly difficult for these individuals to seek help or engage in treatment.

The social ramifications of hate speech and discrimination are equally significant. Discrimination frequently leads to social exclusion, marginalizing individuals from vital societal activities such as education, employment, and access to public services (Hassouneh & Johnston, 2017). Barriers to public spaces, such as inadequate infrastructure for individuals with disabilities, further limit participation and restrict opportunities for social integration. Shakespeare (2014) notes that this exclusion not only isolates individuals but also perpetuates cycles of poverty and disempowerment, thus reinforcing systemic marginalization. As access to societal structures diminishes, so too does the capacity for professional and personal advancement, leaving many individuals trapped in a continuous cycle of disadvantage. (Hassouneh & Johnston, 2017).

Emotionally, those subjected to ongoing hate speech and discriminatory practices often experience a range of negative emotions, including anger, sadness, and frustration. In the immediate aftermath of an incident, victims of prejudice and hate speech frequently feel more stressed and anxious. When faced with perceived dangers or antagonism in social settings, this emotional response is a typical response. In addition to emotional upheaval, physical signs of stress and worry include breathing difficulties, elevated alertness, and a racing heart (Cozolino, 2017). Due to the fact that hate speech and discriminatory behavior indicate exclusion from or acceptability within social groups, victims may also feel alone and alienated (Levy et al., 2016). In the near term, sufferers may find it difficult to interact with people or to trust social situations due to these strong and sudden emotional reactions. The emotional toll can become overwhelming, leading to an erosion of personal relationships and overall life satisfaction. Perry (2017) highlights how the persistent nature of discrimination fosters a sense of victimization, which can undermine emotional resilience and disrupt daily functioning. Schmitt et al. (2014) also emphasize that individuals who experience discrimination are likely to report higher levels of emotional distress, which can strain interpersonal relationships and further contribute to emotional instability.

According to the behavioral point of view, victims of prejudice and hate speech frequently create coping mechanisms in response, however these aren't always helpful. Short-term coping strategies that involve avoidance behavior are prevalent and include things like withdrawing from social contacts or avoiding places where discrimination may occur (Meyer, 2013). On the other hand, avoidance can cause longer-term emotional harm by keeping the victim from confronting or processing their experience. Conversely, heightened hostility could emerge as a defensive response, when the victim snaps to regain control or defends oneself against more

injury (Kross et al., 2011). Reflective practice, which encourages people to analyze their behaviors and create healthier coping mechanisms for controlling their emotional and psychological responses, can help address these immediate behavioral changes.

The evidence supporting these claims is robust and consistent across various studies. A longitudinal study by Link et al. (2006) revealed that individuals facing discrimination due to mental illness showed poorer mental health outcomes over time, including increased depressive symptoms and lower life satisfaction. Another study by Williams et al. (2014) established a link between chronic discrimination and heightened systemic inflammation, which exacerbates both psychological and physical health problems. Moreover, Herek (2009) demonstrated the pervasive barriers faced by individuals with disabilities and mental health conditions in accessing social and economic participation, highlighting the need for targeted interventions.

Furthermore, research conducted by Corrigan, Druss, and Perlick (2014), analyzed the impact of mental illness stigma on seeking and participating in mental health care. The study used a sample of 1,230 adults with mental health conditions, finding that 68% of respondents reported experiencing discrimination due to stigma, with 45% indicating that stigma led them to avoid seeking necessary care. The authors emphasized that perceived discrimination significantly reduces treatment adherence, contributing to poorer mental health outcomes ( $p < 0.01$ ).

A key finding from Blanchard and Lurie (2004) is that "16% of patients reported feeling disrespected in healthcare settings, and those individuals were more than twice as likely to avoid seeking care in the future." This emphasizes the critical impact of perceived disrespect on patients' willingness to engage with healthcare services.

In summary, the impact of hate speech and discrimination spans multiple dimensions, from mental health to social integration and cognitive function. The extensive psychological, social, emotional, and neurocognitive damage calls for a comprehensive response, including legal reforms, public education, and supportive interventions, aimed at alleviating the harmful effects of discrimination and fostering a more inclusive society.

## Societal Implications

Hate speech and discrimination have important wider societal ramifications that impact not just individuals but also shape relationships and society systems, with long-term effects on social integration and equity. A result of hate speech and discrimination is:

**Effects on Social Cohesion:** By dividing people into groups and sustaining social injustices, they erode social cohesiveness. When particular groups are singled out or ostracized, it creates a hostile environment. This division erodes the social fabric and makes it more difficult to work together to promote diversity and community building (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017). For example, pervasive discrimination against people with mental health disorders or disabilities can cause them to be socially excluded, which diminishes the diversity of contributions and viewpoints in communities (Hassouneh & Johnston, 2017).

**Public Attitudes:** They have a big impact on public opinion and frequently reinforce unfavorable preconceptions and biases. Hate speech can normalize biased beliefs and increase the social acceptability of discriminatory actions when it is widely used (Benesch, 2014). The persistence of stigma and exclusion is facilitated by this normalcy, which makes it more difficult to promote understanding and empathy for excluded groups. For instance, recurring negative representations of people with mental health issues in the media might cause misunderstandings and stigmatize mental illness (Corrigan et al., 2014).

**Impact on Policy:** Policy development is impacted by discrimination and hate speech. Widespread discrimination can influence legislative decisions and help pass laws and policies that either unintentionally worsen the problems or do not sufficiently address them (Hepple, 2014). For example, poor policy responses and assistance may arise from a lack of awareness or understanding of the difficulties faced by people with disabilities, resulting in inadequate legal safeguards for them (Rao, 2019b).

**Social and Economic Costs.** The wider societal effects of prejudice include financial expenses linked to lower

productivity, higher healthcare costs, and the requirement for social interventions. According to Wilkinson and Pickett (2010), marginalized people may face obstacles to work and educational prospects, which can result in unstable finances and a lower standard of living.

### Historical and Cultural Factors

The effects of prejudice and hate speech are often exacerbated by historical and cultural variables. Prejudices that are deeply ingrained in societies that have experienced colonialism or marginalization in the past frequently shape attitudes and policies in the present. For instance, systemic hurdles and long-standing preconceptions that still exist today are the result of historical discrimination against individuals with disabilities (Shakespeare, 2014). In a similar vein, cultural elements like conventional ideas and values can support discriminatory behaviors and attitudes, making it difficult to effectively address these problems (Perry, 2017).

Discrimination and exclusionary cycles can be sustained by past injustices and cultural narratives. For example, historical beliefs and cultural taboos are at the basis of the stigmatization of mental health illnesses in many cultures, and they persist in shaping public attitudes and treatment (Gagliardone et al., 2015). It may be more challenging to question and alter deeply ingrained society norms and practices in light of this historical background.

In summary, discrimination and hate speech have a significant impact on public opinion, legislation, and social cohesiveness. A comprehensive strategy that promotes inclusivity and understanding while taking historical and cultural contexts into account is needed to address these difficulties. Societies should strive toward better social integration and justice by addressing the underlying causes and symptoms of prejudice and hate speech.

### Legal and Policy Considerations

#### Current Laws and Policies

Addressing hate speech and discrimination involves a range of legal and policy frameworks designed to protect individuals from unfair treatment based on attributes such as disability, chronic illness, and mental health condition.

Internationally, the European Union provides robust legal protections through directives such as Council Directive 2000/78/EC, which establishes a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation (EU, 2000a, 2000b.). This directive mandates that member states implement laws to prevent discrimination based on disability, ensuring equal opportunities in the workplace.

In Albania, there are laws aiming to promote equality and protect individuals from unjust treatment across various sectors, including health, employment and education.

**Anti-Discrimination Law (No. 10221/2010):** Albania's primary anti-discrimination legislation prohibits discrimination based on disability, chronic illness, and other grounds. It establishes mechanisms for reporting and addressing discriminatory practices and aims to promote equality and non-discrimination in various sectors, including employment, education, and public services (Republic of Albania, 2010).

**Law on the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (No. 93/2014):** This law focuses specifically on the rights of individuals with disabilities, including provisions for accessibility, reasonable accommodations, and protection against discrimination. It aligns with the CRPD (2006) and seeks to ensure equal opportunities and integration for people with disabilities (Republic of Albania, 2014).

**Law on Mental Health (No. 44/2012):** This law addresses mental health issues, including the rights of individuals with mental health conditions. It emphasizes the need for respect, dignity, and non-discrimination in the treatment and care of individuals with mental health conditions (Republic of Albania, 2018).

### Effectiveness and Limitations

Although these legislative frameworks are a huge step forward in the fight against discrimination, a number of

issues may restrict their efficacy. Anti-discrimination laws are frequently difficult to enforce because of a lack of funding, uneven application, and a lack of knowledge about the rights of those who are impacted (Hepple, 2014). Here are some instances of actual cases from Albanian real life:

### **Case of Disability Discrimination in Employment**

In 2016, a public case emerged in Albania where an individual with a physical disability was denied employment despite meeting all the required qualifications. The individual filed a complaint with the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination (CPD), claiming that they were not hired solely because of their disability. After an investigation, the CPD ruled in favor of the individual, recognizing the employer's actions as discriminatory under the *Law on Protection from Discrimination*. This case highlights the pervasive barriers individuals with disabilities face in the workplace, despite legal protections (Albanian Parliament, 2010)

### **Hate Speech Against Mental Health Patients**

During the 2016, several cases of hate speech were reported on social media (local or national) in Albania, where derogatory terms were used to describe individuals with mental health conditions. Activists in the mental health community addressed to this behavior as contributing to stigma and the marginalization of individuals living with mental illness. The negative stereotypes perpetuated by such language make it harder for people with mental health issues to seek help or integrate into society. While no legal action frequently does not occur, the cases sparked discussions about the need for stronger enforcement of anti-hate speech laws.

### **Direct Hate Speech Against Individuals with Disabilities**

One notable example of hate speech against individuals with disabilities is the case of **AM**, a young man with a physical disability (nanism) who was targeted by a direct harassment. He, a person who wanted to advocate for his disability rights, the right to be married, faced a barrage of derogatory comments and threats including on social media platforms. These comments included offensive slurs and false claims about his capabilities, which not only impacted his mental health but also his occupation. The case highlights how direct hate speech can be particularly harmful and pervasive, affecting the victim's personal and professional life (Schmitt, et al., 2014)

### **Discrimination in Employment**

**EK**, a man with a chronic illness, experienced discrimination in the workplace. EK's employer failed to provide reasonable accommodations for his condition, leading to job termination after EK requested adjustments to his work schedule. This case illustrates systemic issues where employers may not fully comply with legal requirements, resulting in significant personal and economic consequences for the affected individual.

### **Structural Discrimination in Healthcare**

A study by Wilkinson and Picket (2017) explored inequality in healthcare settings against individuals with mental health conditions. The case involved **EI**, a girl with nanism who was given access to necessary physical health services due to her condition but was not provided auxiliary aids and services, such as an interpreter from the hospital. The discrimination EI faced in accessing appropriate care demonstrates how systemic biases can negatively affect individuals' health outcomes and overall well-being (Blanchard & Lurie, 2004)

Furthermore, newer types of discrimination, such those that happen online, are not adequately covered by current legislation. The swift advancement of digital platforms has resulted in a surge in online hate speech, which may not be sufficiently addressed by the existing legal frameworks. This disparity emphasizes the need for revised regulations that deal with emerging forms of discrimination and guarantee complete protection for every person (Gagliardone et al., 2015).

These case studies highlight the practical difficulties that people in Albania who are disabled, have mental health issues, or suffer from long-term illnesses encounter. Legal frameworks notwithstanding, there are still substantial obstacles to enforcement and societal attitudes.

## Strategies for Addressing These Issues

Combating hate speech and discrimination requires a multifaceted approach that includes both preventative and reactive measures.

### Preventive Measures

**Education and Awareness:** In order to stop discrimination and hate speech, it is essential to promote knowledge on these topics. To promote tolerance and respect for people with disabilities, long-term diseases, and mental health issues, comprehensive educational initiatives should be put into place in communities, businesses, and educational institutions. Campaigns for awareness can dispel bias and dispel stereotypes, fostering an atmosphere that is more inclusive (Gagliardone et al., 2015).

**Inclusive Policies:** Preventing discrimination requires the creation and implementation of inclusive policies. Institutions and organizations should implement policies that support accessibility and equal opportunity. This entails providing accessible public areas, putting in place appropriate accommodations for workers with disabilities, and attending to the requirements of people with mental health and chronic illnesses. Good policies should be evaluated and revised frequently to take into account new requirements and industry standards. Shakespeare (2014).

### Reactive Measures

**Legal Recourse:** It is imperative to offer easily accessible legal channels to those impacted by prejudice and hate speech. Making sure victims are informed of their rights and the procedures for submitting complaints is part of this. Strict adherence to legal requirements is necessary, and sufficient funds should be set up for the investigation and resolution of discriminatory incidents. To help people navigate the legal system, support services including counseling and legal aid must to be offered (Hepple, 2014).

**Support Services:** The impact of hate speech can be lessened by setting up support services for people who are the targets of discrimination. Counseling, advocacy, and practical and emotional support groups are a few examples of these services. In order to provide comprehensive support that is suited to the needs of impacted persons, organizations should work in conjunction with community groups and mental health specialists (Corrigan et al., 2014).

### Role of Individuals, Organizations, and Policymakers

**Individuals:** can have a big impact by speaking out against hate speech and taking action against discriminatory practices. Fostering an inclusive culture requires acknowledging and addressing one's own prejudices as well as providing support to those who are discriminated against. Personal advocacy and active involvement in anti-discrimination campaigns can help bring about broader societal change (Perry, 2017).

**Organizations:** All groups, including businesses and educational institutions, should implement and enforce anti-discrimination regulations. They can provide staff and students with a welcome environment and train them to spot and address discriminatory practices. Organizations should engage in partnerships and community outreach as well in order to promote inclusivity outside of their immediate domains (Gagliardone et al., 2015).

**Policymakers:** Policymakers have a critical role in creating and implementing legislation that combat discrimination and hate speech. They ought to focus on addressing new types of discrimination, bolstering legal protections, and making sure that the law is properly applied. Furthermore, legislators ought to back public awareness campaigns and set aside funds to fight prejudice and assist those who are impacted (Benesch, 2014).

### Personal Reflection

Addressing hate speech and discrimination is not only a crucial societal issue but also a deeply personal one, especially in the field of psychology. Reflecting on this topic has highlighted the profound impact that these issues have on individuals and communities, and has reinforced my commitment to fostering an inclusive and

equitable environment in my professional practice.

**Personal Insights and Observations:** As a clinical psychologist working in social and health care service, I have encountered numerous instances where hate speech and discrimination have had tangible effects on individuals' mental health and well-being. For example, clients with disabilities or mental health conditions often report experiences of stigma and discrimination that exacerbate their challenges. These experiences are not just abstract issues but real barriers to their access to care and quality of life. Observing the emotional toll that discrimination takes on these individuals has been both eye-opening and distressing. One memorable case involved a client who faced persistent discrimination at their workplace due to their mental health condition. The stress and anxiety stemming from this discrimination significantly impacted their mental health, highlighting the intersection between social factors and psychological well-being. This experience underscored the importance of addressing not only the individual symptoms but also the broader social context that contributes to their distress.

**Importance in the Field of Work:** It is crucial for the area of clinical psychology to address discrimination and hate speech for a number of reasons. First and foremost, mental health and psychologists are essential in helping anyone impacted by these problems. In addition to offering therapeutic solutions, part of our job is to advocate for structural reforms that advance inclusion and equity. Through comprehending and tackling the effects of hate speech and prejudice, we may provide more efficient assistance and endeavor to alleviate these problems on a larger level.

Furthermore, it is our duty as practitioners to oppose discriminatory practices and support laws that advance mental health and wellbeing. In order to better comprehend and handle the subtleties of discrimination in our job, this entails participating in professional development activities and contributing to conversations regarding policy reforms. Incorporating anti-discrimination policies into therapeutic settings has the potential to improve our efficacy and provide clients with more complete care. These encounters have had a significant impact on how I approach activism and clinical practice. They have emphasized how crucial it is to establish a welcoming and friendly environment for people with mental health issues and impairments. As a clinician, I make an effort to use a trauma-informed approach to my treatment, acknowledging the negative effects of prejudice and attempting to empower clients with encouraging and reassuring behaviors.

While the topic is frequently discussed in various forums, there remains a significant gap between recognizing the problem and taking action to address it. Many individuals who experience hate speech or discrimination are often hesitant or unable to file formal complaints. This reluctance can stem from a lack of awareness about their rights, fear of potential repercussions, or a deep-seated sense of powerlessness. More specifically, during this year's consultation meeting held in conjunction with the World Day against Hate Speech, the theme "Hate speech hurts: the ways we can deal with it!" developed at Regional Office of Protection against the Discrimination, Shkoder, served as a powerful reminder of the real and lasting impact that hate speech has on individuals and communities. The purpose of the meeting was not only to discuss the detrimental effects of hate speech but also to explore practical ways to address and mitigate it. By spreading a message of peace and inclusion, the meeting sought to foster a world where critical thinking and education are pivotal in challenging the hateful rhetoric that threatens social cohesion.

The meeting's agenda included discussions on the awareness that hate speech incites violence, undermines diversity, and erodes the shared values that bind us together in everyday life. Participants shared cases of hate speech from their own experiences, whether during interactions in public spaces, while searching for jobs, or in their daily lives. These stories highlighted the subtle yet pervasive forms of discrimination that people with disabilities face regularly.

A key takeaway from the meeting was the emphasis on educating ourselves and others about what constitutes hate speech and how to effectively combat it. Understanding the nuances of hate speech can empower individuals to identify and stand up against it in their communities. Engaging in public discussions about the importance of combating hate speech was also underscored. These dialogues should respect freedom of expression while addressing the harm caused by discriminatory language.



Furthermore, the importance of reporting hate speech was discussed. In many instances, individuals may not realize that they have the right to report discriminatory behavior or may not know how to do so. The Regional Office of the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination plays a crucial role in evaluating and following up on such complaints, thereby protecting individuals from further discrimination. Reporting hate speech is not only an act of self-advocacy but also a step towards creating a more inclusive society.

Reflecting on the discussions from the meeting, it is clear that hate speech and discrimination towards people with disabilities are issues that cannot be ignored or justified. They are not just legal or policy concerns but deeply moral issues that affect the dignity and well-being of individuals. It is our collective responsibility to educate ourselves, engage in meaningful conversations, and take action to combat hate speech in all its forms.

The International Day Against Hate Speech serves as a vital reminder that we must continue to unite in the fight against hate speech and its consequences. We must all get involved, speak up, and work towards a world where diversity is celebrated, and every individual, regardless of their abilities, can live free from discrimination and hate.

**Reflections on the Importance of Addressing These Issues:** It is not only an ethical duty but also a professional necessity to address hate speech and prejudice. The effects of discrimination on mental health emphasize the need for a comprehensive strategy that includes both structural and individual remedies. Through proactive involvement in the fight against these problems, we may help build a more equitable and nurturing atmosphere for those who are frequently disenfranchised and neglected. These encounters have also strengthened my resolve to promote systemic change. I take an active part in policy discussions and awareness initiatives aimed at addressing the underlying causes of discrimination and advancing an inclusive society. Working with people impacted by discrimination and hate speech has given me valuable insights that have shaped my belief that resolving these issues is essential to attaining both individual justice and greater social equity. Moreover, introspective thoughts on these matters emphasize the significance of ongoing education and advocacy. It is imperative that professionals continue to be aware of how discrimination is changing and modify their methods to successfully address these issues. In order to ensure that our work in advancing social justice and mental health is still relevant and effective, we must continue to think on and engage with this topic.

In summary, I now have a deeper awareness of the serious effects that prejudice and hate speech have on mental health thanks to my own experiences and observations. In addition to helping specific clients, addressing these problems is crucial for promoting diversity and equity in our field as well as in society at large. We may work toward a future where everyone is appreciated and respected, regardless of their identity or circumstances, by carrying out advocacy and education efforts.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, combating the widespread problems of hate speech and discrimination necessitates a comprehensive strategy that looks beyond the letter of the law and into the attitudes of the public, structural obstacles, and institutional frameworks. The results of this study demonstrate the complex relationship between hate speech and prejudice, especially when it comes to those who are disabled, suffer from long-term illnesses, or have mental health issues. Hate speech has long-term effects on society and psychology because it frequently perpetuates exclusion and stigma. As noted by Benesch (2014), hate speech targets people based on their inherent qualities, perpetuating marginalization rather than being only a matter of freedom of speech. This kind of communication eventually undermines social cohesiveness by legitimizing harmful stereotypes and promoting divisiveness.

Discrimination, whether systemic, indirect, or direct, presents obstacles to equal opportunity and resource access, which serves to further solidify these divisions. Shakespeare (2014) contended that institutional procedures frequently conceal structural prejudice, which exacerbates the marginalization of marginalized groups and impedes their advancement both personally and professionally. For instance, denying people with disabilities appropriate accommodations in the workplace or in educational settings not only prevents them from participating, but also serves to further their social isolation.

A significant emotional and psychological cost is associated with hate speech and discrimination. According to Corrigan et al. (2014), people who encounter stigma because of their disability or mental health are more likely to feel alone, have low self-esteem, or see their mental health deteriorate. These events can compound to lower one's quality of life and aggravate pre-existing medical disorders, which can set off a negative cycle.

While the EU and Albania have made progress in putting legal protections against discrimination into place, there are still disparities in how these rules are applied. Hepple (2014) emphasized that although laws are necessary, maintaining their responsiveness to emerging forms of discrimination, especially in virtual spaces, is a difficulty. Since anonymity frequently encourages more overt forms of prejudice, Gagliardone et al. (2015) emphasized the significance of upgrading legal protections to reflect the development of hate speech on the internet.

In recognizing the importance of ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all individuals, the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* highlights the necessity for nations to adopt comprehensive measures that prevent discrimination and promote inclusivity (UN, 2006).

Judicial actions on their own are not sufficient. To achieve true social equality, it is imperative to cultivate a culture of empathy and respect for underprivileged groups, as highlighted by Rao (2019). Society needs to put human dignity first by encouraging inclusivity and understanding at all levels, even above following the law.

In summary, a multifaceted approach involving active community involvement, policy formation, education, and law enforcement is required to address hate speech and prejudice. (Sweeney, Clement & McCabe, 2021). It is possible to create a fairer and more welcoming atmosphere where everyone can prosper without prejudice and unfair treatment by implementing comprehensive concepts and promoting cooperation among stakeholders. According to Sweeney et al., (2021) future efforts should focus on bolstering existing frameworks, addressing fresh challenges, and ensuring that everyone is protected and supported in their pursuit of justice and equality.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION AND RESEARCH

**Enhanced Enforcement and Monitoring:** To make sure that legal protections are effective, it is essential to build strong monitoring systems and enforce current anti-discrimination legislation more strictly. According to Hepple (2014), policymakers ought to concentrate on enhancing the capabilities and assets of organizations tasked with combating discrimination. Improved data gathering and analysis can also be useful in spotting patterns and providing guidance for focused treatments (Gagliardone et al., 2015).

**Comprehensive Policy Updates:** Legal frameworks must be updated to address new types of prejudice, such as online hate speech, in order to stay up with technological improvements. Provisions for addressing intersectional discrimination, which impacts people who have several marginalized identities, should also be included in policies (Benesch, 2014).

**Public Awareness and Education:** Maintaining funding for public education and awareness initiatives is crucial to dispelling myths and promoting an inclusive and respectful society. These programs ought to focus on reaching a variety of audiences and raising awareness of the negative effects of prejudice and hate speech (Perry, 2017).

**Research and Evaluation:** More investigation is required to assess the efficacy of various intervention techniques as well as to comprehend the subtleties of prejudice and hate speech. Shakespeare (2014) suggests that research need to concentrate on recognizing optimal methodologies and creating inventive strategies to tackle these concerns.

**The following amendments could be taken into consideration in order to fortify Albania's anti-discrimination laws, since they would bring Albanian law into compliance with international norms and enhance safeguards for marginalized communities:**

**Broader Definition of Discrimination:** To ensure that subtle types of discrimination are addressed, broaden the

legal definition to clearly include indirect and systemic discrimination.

**Stronger Enforcement Mechanisms:** Create specialized oversight organizations or more ombudsman offices to more efficiently monitor, look into, and enforce anti-discrimination laws.

**Increased Penalties for Violations:** To make anti-discrimination rules more effective deterrents against discriminatory behavior, stiffen the penalty for breaking them.

**Mandatory Diversity Training:** It should be required for all employees annually, focusing on implicit bias, discrimination, and inclusive communication strategies. This initiative aims to foster a culture of inclusivity and respect within the organization.

**Clearer Protections for Intersectional Discrimination:** Provide particular safeguards for those who experience discrimination on the basis of several factors, including gender, race, and disability.

**Easier Access to Legal Remedies:** Provide free legal assistance and streamlined complaint procedures so that people, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds, can report prejudice and pursue justice.

**Free Legal assistance:** To make legal assistance easily accessible to people living in metropolitan areas, centers should be set up inside district courts and city centers. Free legal advice and help could be provided in rural areas through mobile legal clinics or collaborations with neighborhood community organizations. This would guarantee equitable access to legal representation for people living in rural areas, who are frequently underserved.

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