28/04/2022 - Interview with Faraaz Mahomed, from UNICEF

Ana Luiza Savi [00:00:03] So just so we can have this acceptance in recording, are you okay with the recording of this conversation and sharing with UNICEF?

Faraaz Mahomed [00:00:11] Yes.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:00:12] Perfect. So at first, I just wanted to know a little bit more about your work with hate speech online and adolescence.

Faraaz Mahomed [00:00:23] Sure. I mean, so my speech was not necessarily on line. I mean, I worked with National Human Rights Commission in South Africa, where we developed a national policy strategy on how to combat hate speech related to issues like race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status. So like xenophobia, stuff like that. So, yes, I mean, my sort of experience has been less on line but more on other channels. But I think the same principles apply. Um, my role at UNICEF is focused on adolescent mental wellbeing. And so, yeah, I mean, I think there's kind of a degree of overlap between those two different areas, but they don't necessarily overlap directly. But I think that, you know, the issue of hate speech is one that kind of cuts across, whether it's online or it's off line, whether it's in person or whether it's in your community. I think a lot of the same principles apply. Yeah.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:01:51] Yeah, that's amazing, because what we've been finding, including with this phenomenon that's called this disinhibition phenomenon, is that maybe the online world can bring out a bit more of this hate speech or make it more public because people have this sense of not being somewhere that you be punished by, or maybe that it can't be information that's tracked to you. Do you see this rise also maybe in South Africa or along with the work that you're doing in UNICEF?

Faraaz Mahomed [00:02:26] I think so. I mean, I think it's increasingly... Unfortunately, we're living in an increasingly polarized world. And oftentimes I think that that's most evident in online spaces, I think because of the fact that there is a degree of anonymity that you're allowed online. And so I do think that it's probably more likely that people are engaging in the types of activities that might constitute hate speech. I suppose because of the fact that it's safer and more anonymous.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:03:08] You did mention indirect or maybe overlapping effects on mental health that hate speech can have. What are the effects that you observe in that sense?

Faraaz Mahomed [00:03:21] Yeah. I mean, I think discrimination in general has a very significant impact on the way in which people are, you know, and people's life. I mean, I think. So having worked in the U.S. and South Africa and having seen kind of the impacts of race trauma and that kind of intergenerational effects also of race trauma that, you know, sometimes you see people passing on from parents to children. I think that is something that I've witnessed quite a lot. I think it's very hard to kind of speak at the individual level as well

asthemselves as a social level. But I think that both of those exist. And at the same time, I mean, I would say that what's been very well researched is a kind of individual level, but what's less well researched, it's just kind of how it impacts on society, is how it impacts on communities and how it impacts kind of national levels, right? So in the Black Lives Matter movement in the US is a very good example of kind of how race trauma has, you know, inflamed a broader movement and has actually brought to light the pain and the suffering that, you know, racism can have at the kind of systemic level. Um, and I think that that's something that, you know, is left unhealed can actually lead to a lot of aggression, a lot of violence potentially. Yeah.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:05:10] You're telling me more on a community and social level, right? And that makes perfect sense. I think it's, from all we've been reading, and finding, and also living in our own skin is that we see a dramatic increase in the off line environment and we also see setbacks that we're experiencing, right? So here in Brazil, only this week, we had three or four events of setbacks in women sexual rights and reproductive rights based on discrimination. So what we experience is so shared. But at the same time, we have this individual effects that you're telling you there are more researched, right? So along with this increase in violence and discrimination in communities, in social, in nations, what do you see that are these effects on the individual level?

Faraaz Mahomed [00:06:10] I mean, I think that, you know, the effects can be, they can focus on things like self-esteem, I think one of the things that I've seen it's kind of like the effects of racial, racialized trauma on self-esteem. I think that there's also impacts on kind of behavioral outcomes. So, you know, it may lead to things like violence and aggression, which is unfortunate because it's also kind of, in some ways, it's kind of double victimization. You know, there's also the way in which criminal justice systems interact with race and with other characteristics like class and socioeconomic status that kind of play into the impact that, you know, this kind of trauma can have on people. And that results in greater levels of incarceration and greater levels of imprisonment of people of color, as you know. I think that that has a lot to do with the ways in which the social construct of be it race, be it gender, be it, you know, LGBTQ status, be it immigrant status. All of those things tend to kind of being othered, tends to have an impact on the way in which society impacts you. And the criminal justice system, I think is a very good example of how that happens, because people tend to be othered and then they tend to be incarcerated for their otherness, right? So we're not necessarily only talking about people who experience being othered first and then experience mental health difficulties, but it's also the opposite. So people with mental health challenges are sometimes othered as well and then are incorrectly labeled as criminal or labeled as problematized people, when really I think the challenge is the fact that there isn't sufficient engagement with what they need and what accommodations they need in society. And I think that's probably true online as much of it is off line. You know, it's probably a lot easier to do the othering online because of the fact that there's a degree of anonymity and a degree of distance, right? There's this, you're not able to see the results of the violence that you inflict directly. And I think that probably creates a degree of distance, but increasingly i think there's evidence to suggest that, you know, when it's happening online, it can also

become a behavior that occurs off line and can result in aggression, can result in violence.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:09:27] It's so interesting to hear you speak because it took me to two places. I hope I'll remember both of them along the way, but the first of them would be: when you're talking about the aggressive behavior or even increasing incarceration, what we found in some research done with adolescents is that sometimes hate speech can arise as a response to attacks, or maybe vengeance or maybe ways to protect themselves. So it's sort of this response to discrimination already been experienced. And I think it has a lot to do with what you're saying. I wanted to ask you, do you see these phenomenons also happening among adolescents or is that more related to the adult population?

Faraaz Mahomed [00:10:24] Sure. I mean, I haven't personally seen it, but I don't think that it's inconceivable that the same would apply for young people. I think that given the amount of time that young people spend online and in digital spaces, if anything, I would probably see it as being more likely that these kinds of phenomena are going to increase. I don't know the degree to which one can draw that sort of causal linkage. Right, because there are so many systemic factors at play. But certainly I would think that it's fairly likely that I would be able to see a lot of co-occurring issues. So discrimination, that sort of proclivity towards othering others and that proclivity towards kind of systemic violence and that proclivity towards possibly even hate speech, I'm not sure, but I think it's definitely likely that, you know, just given the kind of community spaces, given the kind of online spaces that young people are exposed to. I think it's definitely conceivable that the same would apply.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:11:57] And the second question would be, how do you understand or how do you see that teenagers are dealing with these effects or mental health effects from discrimination or from trauma, even intergenerational or not? What do you see that are strategies that they use to deal with the situation?

Faraaz Mahomed [00:12:21] I mean, I think young people deal with mental health difficulties in multiple ways. Occasionally, there are, you know, harmful or aggressive behaviors that might be inflicted upon others, that might be aggressive behaviors that, you know, results in harm to others. But oftentimes, I think that the level of self-harm is greater. I think that levels of self-harm are extremely problematic and we're seeing them increase dramatically. Suicide is [00:13:04]what, [0.0s] the second highest leading cause of death, I think, for boys under the age of 19. So, I mean, I think we're increasingly seeing that self-harm is one of the ways in which young people find means to cope, I think, with the level of violence that they're subjected to, whether it's in person violence or whether it's online violence. I think there's other ways in which people also engage with, you know, their their mental health needs, some of which might be engaging in risky behaviors, risk taking behaviors, whether it's substance use or whether it's sexual risk taking behavior. And I think that's something that is increasingly on the rise as well. But at the same time, I think there's also possibilities for utilizing things like online spaces and support spaces and community spaces for actually providing support. And I think that, you know, and my hope is that, you know, some of the kind of work that you're doing and some of the kind of work

that UNICEF is doing will create those kind of spaces where it's not necessarily only, you know, a source for kind of maladaptive coping. It's also a source for adaptive coping.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:14:41] Great. And well, as a psychologist myself, when I hear about self-harm and risk taking, those are, as you've mentioned, right, maladaptive coping behaviors because they're dealing with the pain itself and trying to take the pain away or stop feeling, but not necessarily dealing with the situation. And sometimes it's very difficult to know how to be dealt with. How do you see or which ones are the adaptive coping skills that they can use to deal with violence online or offline or discrimination, for instance?

Faraaz Mahomed [00:15:27] I think peer support is a really important one, so talking to others who are feeling similar feelings. I think that also engaging in activities that might relieve some of the stress at the individual level, those things are really important. So self-expression, you know, whether it's through talking, whether it's through art, whether it's through music, whether it's through dance. I think all of those things can be really helpful. But at the same time, I also think that a lot depends on the enabling environment for these adaptive coping strategies. So, whether you live in a home where you're able to express or whether you're able to engage in self-expression behaviors that are adaptive, and then beyond the home, whether you exist in a community that is accepting of your ability to express yourself, and then beyond your community, whether you live in a country where there are laws, policies, etc., that enable for you to express yourself, you need to be able to live the kind of identity that you have without necessarily resorting to these types of maladaptive. I'm not sure I like that word. But, you know, I think we know what we're talking about. Yeah. I mean, I think that a lot depends on the enabling environment. A lot depends on the kind of politics of a particular place that we see politicians engaging in othering as we see in so many different parts of the world these days, that tends to filter down to their supporters and the communities in which that kind of language and that kind of behavior can thrive. So it seems to me like, you know, placing the burden on the individual is also not necessarily ideal, but also engaging with this kind of multiple layers and engaging with the many ways in which maladaptive coping can come to manifest itself.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:17:55] Yeah. That makes perfect sense. Just to tell you a little bit, this project is taking place in Brazil. And in Brazil specifically, we don't have legislation against hate speech. We do have legislation that guarantees wellbeing and honor, so those are things that can be used on a hate speech scenario. But we conducted a survey quite recently with 200 youth and what they, as victims, what they mostly answered is that they don't do anything when they encounter, when they're victims of a hate speech online situation. And the main reason why they don't do anything is that they don't believe it's going to make any difference. And I think in there, there's a lot of what you're saying. Right? So it's the regulation. It's the regulation even in the platforms, because many of them don't feel like reporting would make a difference or maybe reporting would lead to a situation where they would feel more exposed or they wouldn't be sure of their privacy. So I think that makes a lot of sense to the results that we've been finding and also how you have this feeling on the situation.

Faraaz Mahomed [00:19:09] Hmm. Yeah. And again, I think Brazil is a good example, right? Because you do have the type of politics and the political atmosphere that kind of lends itself to that type of environment. It's an enabling environment for hate speech, unfortunately, like so many others, I'm not saying South Africa is different, South Africa is the same. But I think that, you know, when you have these types of leaders and that type of behavior, I think that can contribute to an enabling environment for hate speech. I think that, you know, there's also a lot of tension in this conversation around hate speech because on the one hand, there's this issue of freedom of speech and being able to having that right to express yourself, which is something that a lot of people feel very strongly about. And then on the other side is, of course, the risk of harm that your right you are expressing can cause to somebody else. And I think that tension plays itself out at national level in courts and in, you know, all these different kind of regulatory spaces. But on a day to day basis, I think that tension plays itself out in online spaces and I think it's an area that it's done very well. (Certainly there are calls of prayer in the back, which might be loud.) But yeah, I mean, I think those tensions play themselves out in these other spaces as well where, you know, people want to be able to express themselves freely. But there isn't necessarily a clear line that's been drawn. There isn't necessarily a clear understanding of what the harm is, and there isn't necessarily a clear way to kind of deal with that. And I think this is something that tech companies are increasingly kind of struggling with.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:21:20] Definitely. Regarding the enabling behavior, I 100% agree. And even in the interviews that we have been conducting with youth. We have talked to this young girl quite recently, she lives in one of the most violent states here in Brazil against women. And what she stated is that it felt like those behaviors were asleep, and then when leaders like Bolsonaro come and enabled this sort of discrimination coming up, they sort of just arise and feel like control, right? We do have been mapping along with Safernet, which is also very important organization here regarding digital safety, some of the behaviors that can be conducted, that have to do with digital literacy, but also coping skills against hate speech. And I wanted to have a chat with you about them, just so you see how you feel about them, if you think they make sense along with your experience with adolescent mental well-being. So the first one would be, and this is something that has a lot to do with media literacy because it has to do with how the social media platforms are created and currently it's where we find the most hate speech, is strategic silence. So not engaging in order to not have this speech getting increased and also viralizing. But at the same time, what we see is that the exposing culture. Exposing can be a very interesting strategy, to expose an aggressor or maybe a hater that can be making harm. But at the same time, it leads the algorithm to engagement, and the algorithm doesn't really differentiate what's good and what's harmful in the platform. So this can increase and more people can have contact with hate speech. And this can lead to even greater mental health impacts. So how do you feel about strategic silence? Do you feel like it's a strategy that can be used and maybe if you have any any skeptical (thoughts) or difficulties around it?

Faraaz Mahomed [00:23:46] Could you maybe explain to me again what strategic silence means? Because I'm not sure I fully understand. Is it strategic silence on the part of the person or on the part of the algorithm?

Ana Luiza Savi [00:23:59] Definitely. In this case, strategic silence would be not to engage in any way with the post or the comment that's hateful. So this could be liking, commenting, sharing. Even if you're sharing or commenting or tagging someone to expose them and to show harm, how this person is doing harm, so sort of making a report. It would be in this case. So if you don't engage in any way with the content, what can happen is that we diminish the odds of the content spreading, having more reach or even going viral.

Faraaz Mahomed [00:24:44] Okay. And is that something that an individual chooses to do or is that something that you can program a bot to kind of diminish the impact?

Ana Luiza Savi [00:24:58] This is individual. I'm not sure if you can program a bot, but it's an interesting question because what we see here, especially in election years, is that many times hate speech is conducted by bots. So especially if you identify that the user is not a real person, that is a bot behind it, strategic silence is even more important. So you don't engage with the bot, which is all it wants, and it won't even conduct a conversation, give back or maybe learn something from it.

Faraaz Mahomed [00:25:34] Mm hmm. Yeah. I mean, that makes perfect sense to me. That strategic silence could be a really useful way in which somebody can actually manage their own distress so that they're not exposed to things that might retraumatize or might cause them particular harm. If I understand what strategic silence means correctly, then I think that makes sense as a strategy for a young person to be able to, you know, engage in their own limits and boundaries. And I suppose whether or not a program can be programed to flag things that are harmful so that they're not more widely spread, I think that's something that is really difficult and really hard to kind of manage because when, you know, I am not familiar with the technological side of things, but my understanding is that somewhere, somewhere, how about still needs to be trained in order to be able to identify this type of material. That depends quite heavily on the kind of human to human interaction aspect of it. And so I think that that's still a very imperfect technology, a very imperfect solution. But I mean, my hope is that it will get better. I suppose I don't know what the alternative would be, right? It's very hard to regulate spaces that are online, that are anonymous. And I don't know what the best practices are actually at the moment. My sense is that a lot of tech companies don't have best practices in place and they haven't really given sufficient thought to the risks that are imposed. So one would hope, obviously, that they would build in some of these mitigation strategies but it's, I think it's something that is still very untested.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:28:01] Just to let you know a bit on what we've been seeing is that some of the strategies can be reporting to the platform, reporting to Safernet which goes directly to the public ministry here. It can also restrict the user and it can also restrict key words. So there's some ways that you can use to restrict the content before coming to you. But what we see is that many times you first are in contact with the content, so you already get in touch with hate speech and then you can look for alternatives for the future or even revise your privacy settings in order to not be in contact with it again or decrease the odds.

But at the same time, when we talk about strategic silence with youth in this survey, the main difficulty that they... Many of them described that this could be, this would be the way to go. So not engaging with the hater, not engaging with hate speech. But at the same time, especially for victims...

Ana Luiza Savi [00:29:35] The main difficulty that they find in order to conduct strategic silence, since it's right after the hate speech situation happens, is related to emotional regulation. So they feel like they need to give it an answer right away, they feel stressed, they feel shocked, at many times fearful with what can happen or even very sad, surprised by the content. So what we see and in the interviews that we conducted, what shows is that in many times adolescents have this more sort of impulsive behavior towards hate speech right away. And this sort of increases the chance of reaching more people and having hate speech spread. And this can be related to this specific moment of development, since we see that impulsivity can be one characteristic of adolescence. So I just wanted to hear out on this. Do you feel like this emotional regulation part or even impulsivity, can come as a difficulty in order to deal with hate speech for teenagers and young adults?

Faraaz Mahomed [00:30:56] So is the question about the impulsivity, or is the question about the strategy?

Ana Luiza Savi [00:31:02] I think that the impulsivity itself, even this sense of "I need to do something right away".

Faraaz Mahomed [00:31:12] Okay. I mean, I think that, you know, impulsivity is part of kind of neural development. So it's not necessarily something that can be regulated. I mean, I think what UNICEF has tried to do in the past is kind of develop sort of filtering type technology, I know that that's been created in this Kindly app, which you probably know a lot about. Where, you know, people are asked to first kind of look at what they're saying a second time before they're they post something or before they reply. And I think that could be a very useful way in which to kind of just double check so that young people are able to check themselves. And then I think what's useful about that is also that it doesn't necessarily remove the agency from a person, right? So you're not necessarily saying to somebody: "you can't say this". You're just saying "can you think twice about what you're saying?" "Can you think twice about whether you're actually causing harm to another person before you say this?". So I think that that's something that would be a really useful add on to a lot of technology. But again, I think it's quite imperfect, right? So you have to yeah, you have to find a way to kind of train a bot to monitor what everybody is saying at all times, which is a really difficult thing to do. But I personally think that, you know, there's some kind of risk benefit analysis that needs to be conducted every time a post is being made and every time there's a possibility of harm. And I think if the possibility of harm outweighs the possibility of, you know, something being just purely benign, then one would have to err on the side of caution, so that, you know, that the possibility of harm was reduced to the maximum possible extent.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:33:33] And are there any strategies or maybe interventions that you know, that can help the adolescent maybe deal with this think before

you act part, which would be maybe this the second check that they do with this app but could be done in a more general basis.

Faraaz Mahomed [00:33:59] You mean offline?

Ana Luiza Savi [00:34:02] Either. It could be it could be just a maybe keeping calm or a breathing exercise, I don't know. But just thinking in the sense of, um, I understand that impulsivity has to do with this neurological trait of development. And I'm just wondering, if there are skills or maybe interventions or maybe behaviors that we know that they can take in order to help deal with this neurological trait of development.

Faraaz Mahomed [00:34:36] Um. Yeah, I mean, I think so. There are sort of strategies such as like stop, think, go is a good example, you know, where you actually have to sort of train your brain to problem solve around certain behaviors. That's a very cognitive technique. Um, and I think part of the challenge for young people is that, you know, these are not moments when cognitive techniques are ideal because it is a very emotional response that's usually happening. So I mean, I definitely think that there might be opportunities to engage in things like, um, mindfulness based techniques. Whether it's a breathing exercise or it's something else. But I also think that there's probably a degree to which it needs to be regulated on the side of the host, um, such that there might be some kind of delay so, you know, if, if a young person wants to retract it. Well, they are able to.

Faraaz Mahomed [00:36:03] (brief loss of connection) Both of those people require some sort of support, require some sort of engagement. I think one thing that we have to realize is that even if a person is a hater, they're still a young person who might be needing some kind of support in their own right. And I think that's something that is really lacking at the moment. So ideally, one would want for a more kind of holistic approach where it's not only the person who is seen as the victim, but also the person who is seen as the aggressor, who's also receiving some kind of support or intervention.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:36:50] Yes. That make perfect sense and also involve the other stakeholders that are involved in the tech companies or even legislation. Right. I think we're always talking about this very big and broad sense. But I do understand and since we had discussed, as we had discussed before at many times, a young person that's seen as the aggressor, they've might have been a prior victim of hate speech, for instance. Unfortunately, we didn't have any responses of perpetrators of hate speech. We did receive responses from observers and victims. But when you were talking about this difference between cognitive and emotional response and you mentioned mindfulness-based techniques, I was wondering because we are very inclined into offering a self-compassion intervention, which would be mindfulness-based, since it's one of the pillars of self-compassion, but also of self-kindness and shared humanity. So they could have some sort of exercises that they could do to just calm and soothe and embrace themselves, give themselves some love or even provide support they need or find the needs that they're feeling at that moment. I wanted to know if you feel like that would be an interesting strategy to deal with a violent situation.

Faraaz Mahomed [00:38:31] Yes, I do. I mean, I think that engaging in self-compassion is something that we, so we're currently working on an adolescent intervention. And it's one of the tools that we think would be really useful and might actually be a really useful way in which to not only, you know, not only engage with people who might necessarily be victims, but also might be perpetrators. I think that use of self-compassion techniques also has a way of separating the problem from the person. And I think that that's a really important intervention to undertake because, you know, we're not talking about, sort of judging the whole person. We're talking about separating out the behavior from the individual and recognizing the fact that maybe this behavior is rooted in some other form of trauma or some other way of thinking that might be able to be, that there might be some kind of intervention that might be useful. So I like the idea of utilizing self-compassion in those sorts of situations, both for people who are exposed to hate speech, but also people who are perpetrating it, while at the same time recognizing that, you know, self-compassion on its own might not be the only thing, that there might be some other kind of trauma informed engagement as well. So yeah, I mean, I think Both of those events happening in tandem would be ideal.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:40:20] What would be a form of trauma informed engagement. Not sure if I know what it means.

Faraaz Mahomed [00:40:31] I mean, I think a trauma informed engagement would be more kind of like looking at what are some of the experiences that are young person's feelings. So we're looking at the physical symptoms of the, you know, the trauma, whether and if there are physical symptoms, obviously engaging with that. So if it's something like anxiety or stress, then they could also do some stress management or coping mechanisms, develop some coping mechanisms or be supported to do that. But I also think that beyond that, it could also do narrative exposure type work. So narrative exposure work has been shown to be really helpful for young people who have been exposed to trauma. And I think that's something that can be really helpful and can actually be adapted to an online type space, because it is about storytelling. It is about being able to, you know, expose yourself to the experience in a way that is less intense and less emotionally charged than it used to be. Or than it was in the first instant. It's something that I think needs a lot more kind of building out, but it's one technique that I think can can be of use and can have some potential. Yeah.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:42:05] Perfect. It's so interesting you mention that because the third one that we're working on is actually the creation of counter-narratives. So this would literally be selecting a content that's more diverse, but that has to do with inclusion, but also listening to people that tell their stories on maybe experience that they've lived and how they coped with them, or even in get that engaging, stimulating the young person to tell their own story and to share their own story with other people, or even in a safer space, even if it's online and creating a community or engaging with organizations or communities that are working in this cause, it's when it has to do with these discrimination situations against specific groups. So would that be more or less what narrative exposure means or no?

Faraaz Mahomed [00:43:11] Narrative exposure is a very specific technique where you try and sort of break down the experience into more manageable pieces. So yeah, I mean, I think that's part of what you're describing, but I think it's also about making sure that the exposure is limited to a manageable amount. So not necessarily focusing too heavily on the whole narrative all at once, but making sure that you break it down into a series of maybe smaller pieces so that it doesn't overwhelm the participants. I think it depends quite heavily on the participants. So they are being asked to expose themselves to what they're comfortable with. And the same is true of the person who is listening. So, I mean, I think the counter-narrative is a really great idea. I think that makes a lot of sense and definitely I think it's something that is really useful because one thing that people aren't doing right now in the, you know, in the in the current sort of political climate of the world is listening to each other. And so I think developing those kind of counter-narrative spaces makes a lot of sense.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:44:36] Great. And the last question I would have for you is that would you and add any strategies or remove any strategies when it comes to this project or dealing with adolescents and young people directly?

Faraaz Mahomed [00:44:59] I suppose I would maybe just a kind of more projective approach where you ask the young person what they need. Yeah. I mean, it's it's really hard, I suppose. I don't know where exactly your process is or whether you have any sort of whether it's possible to kind of engage with young people themselves to figure out what their needs are. But, um, yeah, I always think that that's probably a useful addition type of intervention design.

Ana Luiza Savi [00:45:39] Perfect. Yes. So that would be a related for them to finding their needs and maybe looking for strategies that are adapted to those, but also hearing young people out in order to know what they need in these situations, right? In the development and co-creating with them.