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“We are all Vinícius”: Hate is taught; it can be fought

The United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Alice Wairimu Nderitu, reflects on hate speech in sports and its role in countering it, ahead of the International Day to Counter Hate Speech

Events that were both heartwarming and poignant unfolded in Madrid on Wednesday, 24 May 2023. Inside the Santiago Bernabéu, Real Madrid Football Club’s home, the home team stood in solidarity with their teammate, Vinícius Jr., all players donning ‘Vini Jr. 20’ shirts.

The Brazilian star had, just days before, at Valencia, been a victim of hate speech, directed at him through racist chants that had left him disenchanted and, consequently, expressing his desire to leave Spain and its football league, La Liga.

On that Wednesday night, however, as he walked onto the pitch before Real Madrid’s match against Rayo, he must have felt a little different.

In that match, players of the two competing teams held up a banner together that declared: “Racists, out of football”. It is, as we have come to understand, a slogan for a new campaign initiated by the country’s sports authorities this week to fight racism in football – a blight that is not unique to one sport or one country.

Not far from the Santiago Bernabéu, Madrid’s women’s team and basketball sides also wore ‘Vini Jr.’ shirts before their games – another show of solidarity with the Brazilian star.

On that Wednesday night, unlike on Sunday in Valencia, there was solidarity. There was humanity. There was promise, and hope.

Numerous sports stars have come out in support of Vini Jr. following that ugly, despicable episode in Valencia, as have sports managers and politicians.

There is recognition that if racism is not fought in football, this beautiful game will continue to be afflicted by an ugly stain.

It is the recognition that, just as this hateful stain of racism is taught, it can be fought.

It is the recognition of the need to do something to address and counter hate speech, including the one that is expressed in racist narratives and chants, and that recognition bears promise.

At a press conference, while noting that racism was everywhere, Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola, said racial prejudice and other forms of bigotry were scattered in our lives beyond gender, race or colour, noting:

“We’re all the same – with the same fears, with the same good things. We just have to accept diversity as a strength as human beings, but right now we’re far away from that.”

Indeed, we are all the same, in our diversity as human beings. But this sense of commonality can be quickly eroded by expressions of hatred on the basis of race, ethnicity religion, nationality, gender, refugee and immigration status, disability and any other form of identity.

My Office works day and night to address and counter hate speech, which was very much on display in those chants against Vini Jr. Coincidentally, I had just returned from Vini Jr.'s home country, Brazil, where people of African descent like him, and indigenous peoples, continue to face challenges that need to be expeditiously addressed.

Sport, especially football, attracts millions of viewers around the world, and because of this, hate speech uttered during a game like we saw in Valencia, reverberates around the globe. But when players united to fight hate speech directed at Vini Jr., the whole world heard about it, and it seemed to gain more traction than the original hateful chants.

Within this context, we have, together with partners, developed the **Plan of Action to Counter Hate Speech through Engagement with Sports: the GAME PLAN**, launched on 9 December last year, which we started expanding with the Eradicate Hate Sports Summit in the United Kingdom, hosted by the Liverpool Football Club in April this year. The GAME PLAN is based on the [United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech](#) and is fully aligned with international human rights law, in particular, the right to freedom of expression and opinion – a right which is to be protected, and not misused.

The GAME PLAN is informed by the knowledge that the perpetrator of a hate crime most often has encountered hate speech that dehumanized his/her target. It is also based on the fact that most perpetrators are like most ordinary people who are, like you and me, sports fans.

With the endorsement, in July 2021, of 18th June as the [International Day for Countering Hate Speech](#), the UN General Assembly recognized the need to counter discrimination, xenophobia and hate speech, and called on all relevant actors, including States, to increase their efforts to address this phenomenon, in line with international human rights law.

Throughout history, hate speech has been known to stigmatize, marginalize, and ultimately incite hate crimes and large-scale violence, including genocide. It is toxic, but it can and must be fought.