

A SURVEY ON YOUTH PERCEPTION ON ONLINE HATE SPEECH AND PEACEBUILDING

A Survey conducted by National Youth Services Council in
collaboration with United Nations Volunteers (UNV) Sri
Lanka, supported by UN Peacebuilding Fund.



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Abbreviations

CSO	Civil Society Organization
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
DS	Divisional Secretariat
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NYSC	National Youth Services Council
UN	United Nations
UNV	United Nations Volunteers
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNW	UN Women

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Executive Summary

Possibly influenced by the global trends in hate speech, there are several reported incidents regarding ethnic, religious violence in the post war era in Sri Lanka. The hate speech phenomena which traces back to the 1970's has seen a shift in trend using digital platforms, causing the instant, wide-spread of 'hate' amongst large networks. In attempting to understand the root cause of such violence, it demands for the prosecution of both hate crimes as well as hate speech but seemingly hate speech has increased among the youth unprecedentedly regardless of the numerous provisions contained in the Sri Lankan legal framework for its prevention.

The National Youth Services Council (NYSC) identified the need for educating youth on fair use of social media and social media security and initiated training sessions, focusing 40,000 youth attached to NYSC training centers youth clubs island wide. Further having recognized the fact that the same platform could be used to disseminate knowledge on countering hate speech, NYSC partnered with the UN Volunteers to conduct a survey on *'Youth Perception on Online Hate Speech and Peacebuilding'* as a 'needs assessment' and a 'situational study' with the primary objective of including the findings to broad base the training module of the existing training sessions. UNV provided technical inputs and assistance for design and analysis with support by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund.

The survey was conducted among 1,514 Youth from Training Centers and Youth Clubs attached to NYSC in selected districts. Some limitations were that the target audience was a predetermined sample with possibly similar identities and may not reflect the entire youth population. In addition, the geographical representation does not cover the entire country but selected focused areas.

Most of the respondents have perceived that they are aware of 'Hate Speech'. However, the survey suggests that they seem to lack understanding of potential changes in the landscape. This could reflect on the lack of proper understanding and awareness on 'Hate Speech'.

The NYSC sessions should provide a comprehensive understanding on what hate speech is and how to identify hate speech. This would support in enabling youth to identify hate speech and counter it while also supporting to ensure that they do not engage in hate speech themselves.

The Program should also focus on empowering youth to develop, promote and share more positive content. This would enable a culture of positivity through social media. This could lead towards a positive attitudinal transformation. Youth should also be empowered to develop positive narratives.

Utilize the youth perception that *“youth have a greater role in peacebuilding”* to build interest and engagement in preventing spread of hate speech. The survey clearly points out that youth perceive that young people have a greater role in peacebuilding and in prevention of spread of hate speech. It is important to strengthen youth to be able to take leadership to act against spread of hatred and act as peace builders. The sessions could be an opportunity to build interest and create engagement in countering and preventing hate speech.

Use the sessions to highlight the impact of volunteerism and mobilize them towards more active engagement as volunteers as the survey finds that majority of the respondents have a strong perception that volunteerism has a positive impact on peacebuilding. It would be an opportunity to engage youth as volunteers to support the national peacebuilding agenda. The session could also contribute as inspiration for young people to act as volunteers driving peace in their respective communities.

In general, appropriate authorities need to design and implement programs focused on holistic peace education to ensure youth have a better understanding on sustainable peace. Spread awareness on the peacebuilding processes in Sri Lanka and make it more inclusive and responsive for youth to engage in the process further. Develop more comprehensive platforms for holistic education with focus on knowledge, skills and attitudes which would also support improve employability of youth.

1.0 The Context

A legal and internationally accepted definition on hate speech is yet to be agreed upon. The characterization of what is ‘hateful’ is controversial and often disputed. Even the European Court of Human Rights has recognized the right of individuals to “*offend, shock or disturb*” others¹. Thereby, even the most offensive speech is often protected by the right to freedom of expression. On the other hand, the Court has also noted in its case law that “*it may be considered necessary in certain democratic societies to sanction or even prevent all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify hatred based on intolerance*”².

United Nations strategy and plan of action on hate speech states that the term ‘hate speech’ is understood as any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other identity factor.³

It has been identified that the impact of hate speech cuts across many areas including protection of human rights, prevention and countering of terrorism, fight against racism and discrimination, protection of minorities and sustaining peace.

The Preliminary findings of the country visit to Sri Lanka in August 2019 by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief states that ‘while all hate speech should be rejected, the likelihood of such speech causing actual violence can depend greatly on the context and the overall climate⁴. A combination of impunity, privilege, scapegoating and exclusion can form a tinderbox of hatred’.

¹ https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/FS_Hate_speech_ENG.pdf

² <https://www.thoughtco.com/hate-speech-cases-721215>

³ <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24918&LangID=E>

The findings also outline a recommendation:

'The state should develop systems and mechanisms to monitor and respond to hate speech in conformity with the international human rights standards.'

Somewhat disturbing trends of racism and intolerance – including rising anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hatred and persecution of Christians prevailed in the country, exploiting social media and other forms of communication as platforms for bigotry. This trend was clear after the violent attacks in Sri Lanka on 21st April 2019. The Center for Policy Alternatives has stated that *'Disinformation, propaganda and hate speech continues to distort the digital space in Sri Lanka.'*

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The National Youth Services Council identified the need for further understanding the status of perception of youth on spread of hate speech and steps to be taken to address hate speech, and initiated island-wide sessions on 'Fair use of social media and social media security', focusing 40,000 youth attached to youth clubs island wide. The IT Department of the National Youth Services Council partnered with the UN Volunteers to conduct a survey on 'Youth Perception on Online Hate Speech and Peacebuilding' as a 'needs assessment' and a 'situational study' on the prevailing context. The survey was led by UN Volunteers funded by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund with technical assistance from United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Women for questionnaire design.

⁵ <https://www.cpalanka.org/digital-dangers-cpa-flags-continued-use-of-disinformation-propaganda-and-hate-speech-in-sri-lanka/>

2.0 Purpose and Intended Use

The objective of the survey was to gather as much information as possible of the youth perception and understanding about online hate speech, its impact and youth perceptions on the context of peacebuilding in the country. The findings are expected to feed into a series of sessions on 'Fair use of social media and social media security', focusing 40,000 youth attached to youth clubs island wide, conducted by the National Youth Services Council. **The outcomes of this survey would further improve the design and relevance of the sessions.**

3.0 Methodology

The methodology adopted was a questionnaire-based field survey. Keeping in line with the purpose and intended use of the survey findings, the questionnaire was designed jointly by UN Volunteers, UNW and UNFPA. The questions from 1 to 5, focused on the understanding of the demographics of the respondents. The questions from 6 to 13 were directly focused on hate speech and respondents' observations and behavior on social media. The questions from 14 to 20 focused on the youth's perception on peacebuilding space. The responses were obtained in the local languages - Sinhalese and Tamil.

The data gathering was handled jointly by UN Volunteers and the National Youth Services Council. The team paid visits identified training centers and youth clubs and gathered responses. The data entry and initial data analysis was carried out by 'V Force volunteers' with expertise on data science. UNV and NYSC monitored the data analysis and collectively worked on to determine key outcomes and recommendations.

4.0 Limitations and Challenges

The study had a few limitations and challenges and are listed below:

- The respondents were entirely youth from the NYSC training centers and youth clubs. Therefore, the target audience was a predetermined sample with possibly similar identities and may not reflect upon the entire youth population.
- The geographical representation does not cover the entire country but selected focused areas.
- The Data survey commenced in March, however the process was delayed due to the Easter attacks in April 2019. Majority of the study was following the Easter attacks and it may have a direct influence on the results.
- Majority of the respondents are Non-urban youth engaged in vocational training centers. They may have limited exposure to the thematic area of 'Hate Speech'.
- The Easter attacks in April 2019 and the aftermath delayed the data collection process. Many training centers were closed at the time and there was slow recovery.
- There is no possibility to compare the responses pre and post Easter attacks.

5.0 Demographics

The survey covered 1,514 youth in NYSC training centers and youth clubs in Central, Eastern, Northern, North Central, North Western, Sabaragamuwa, Southern, Uva and Western provinces covering the districts Ampara, Anuradhapura, Galle, Kalutara, Kandy, Kegalle, Kurunagala, Mannar, Matale, Matara, Puttalam and Vavuniya in Sri Lanka. 58% of the respondents were female while 42% were male. 77% responded in Sinhala language while 23% responded in Tamil. 91% of the respondents were in the age group of 15-23 years with 6% in the 24-26 age group and only 3% over 26 years of age.

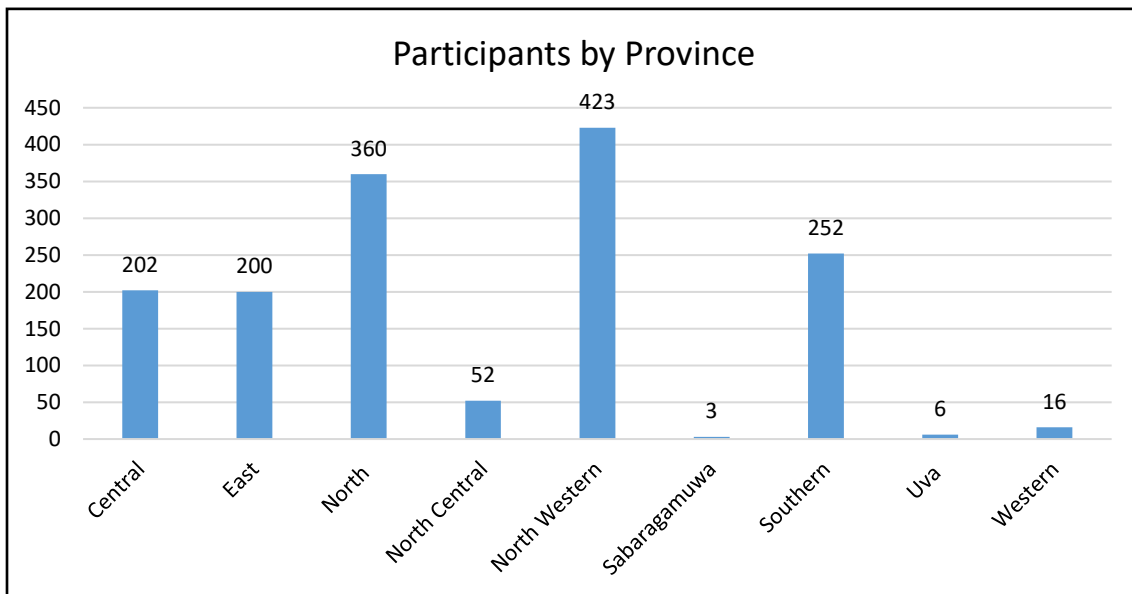


Table 1: Participants by Province

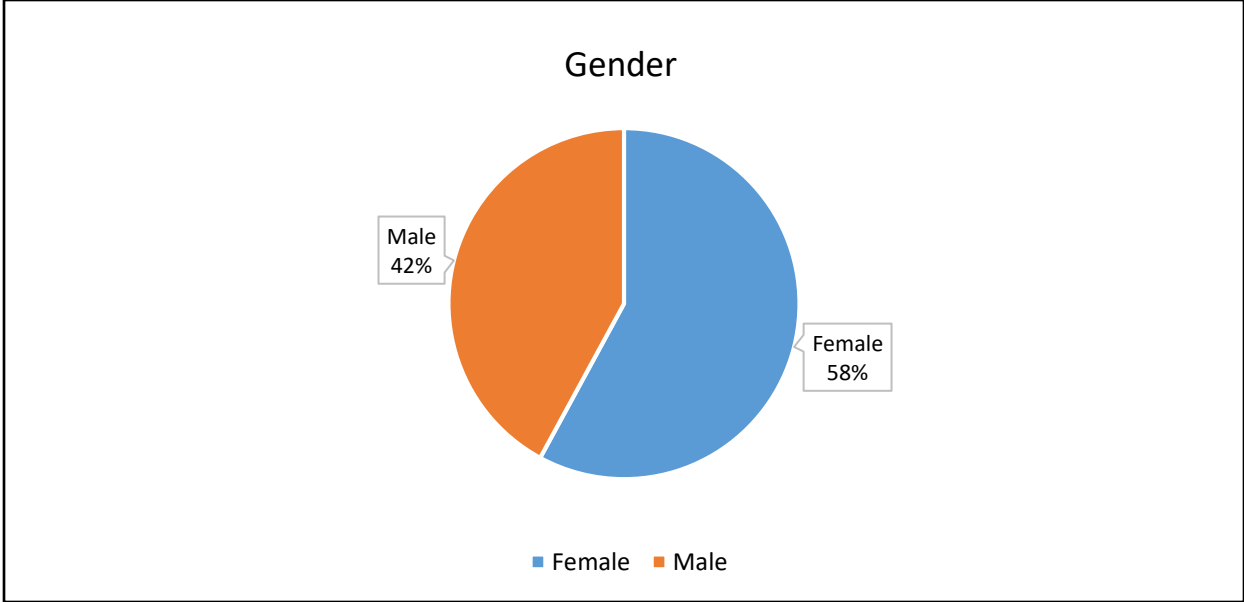


Figure 1: Gender

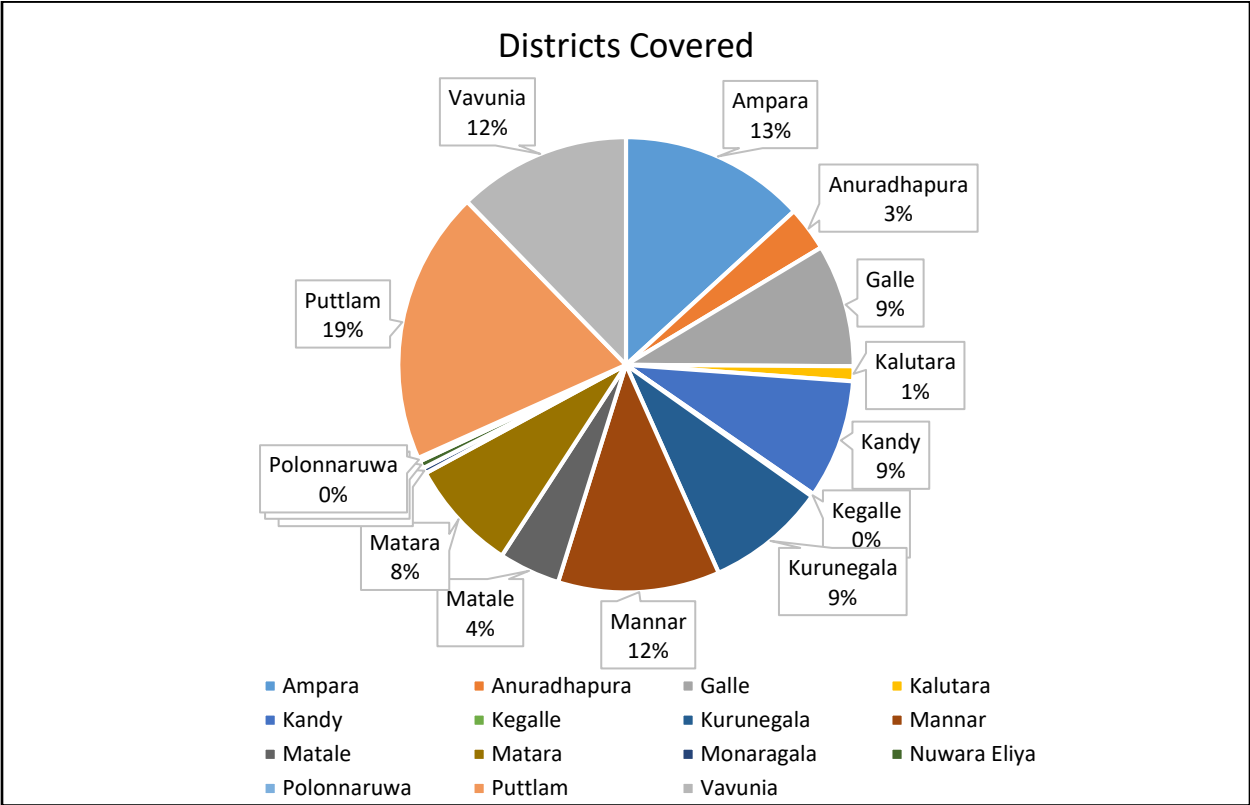


Figure 2: Districts Covered

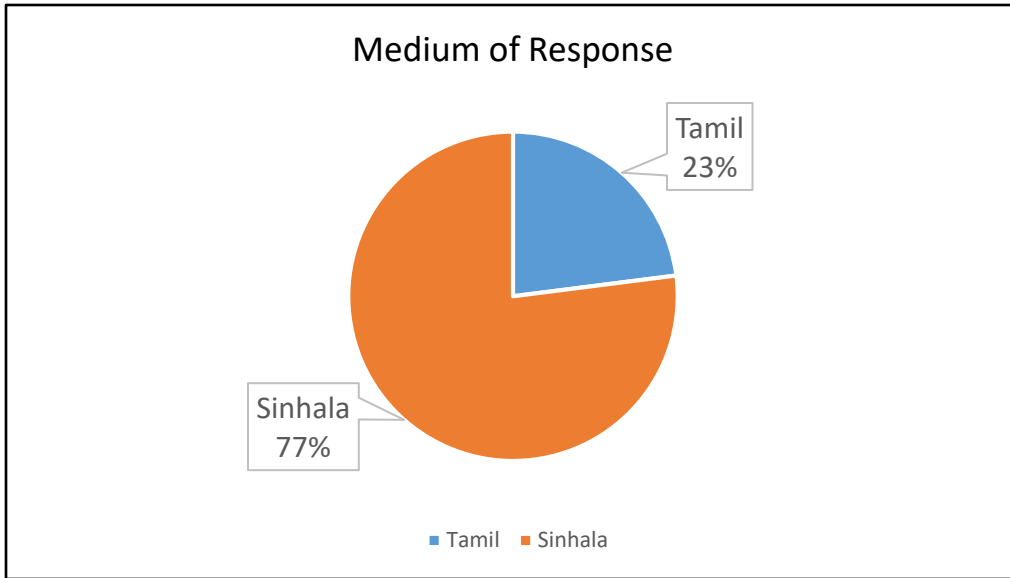


Figure 3: Medium of Response

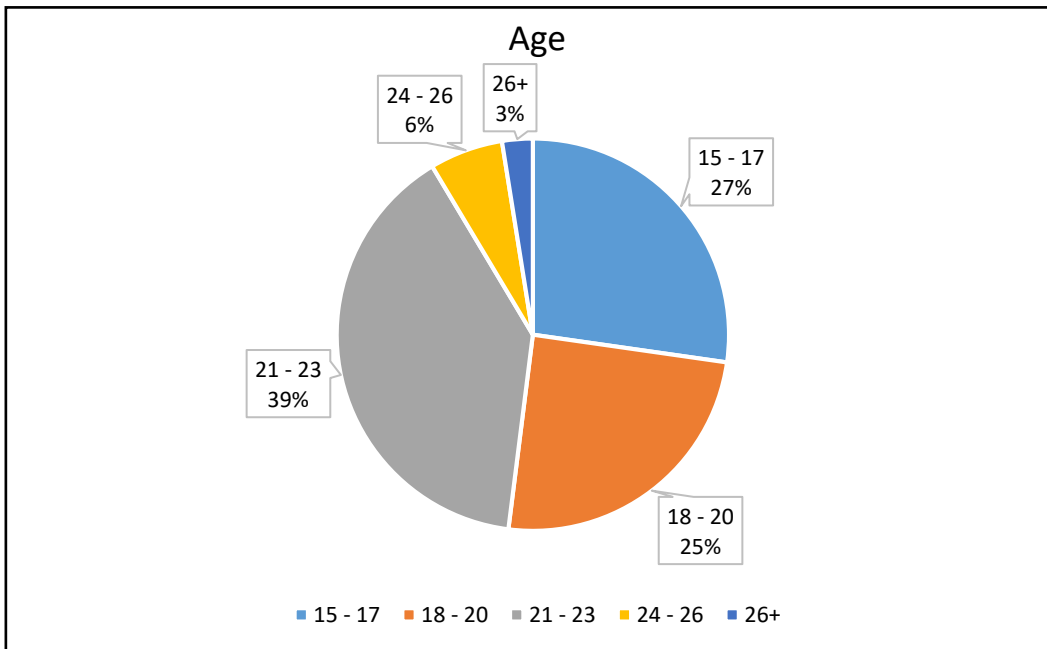


Figure 4: Age

91% of the respondents were in the age group of 21-23 years with 6% in the 24-26 age group and only 3% over 26 years of age.

5.1 Key Findings

The survey focused on understanding the youth perception on online hate speech and peacebuilding. 75% of the participants believe that they know about hate speech and only 2% of them believe that they have been victims of hate speech.

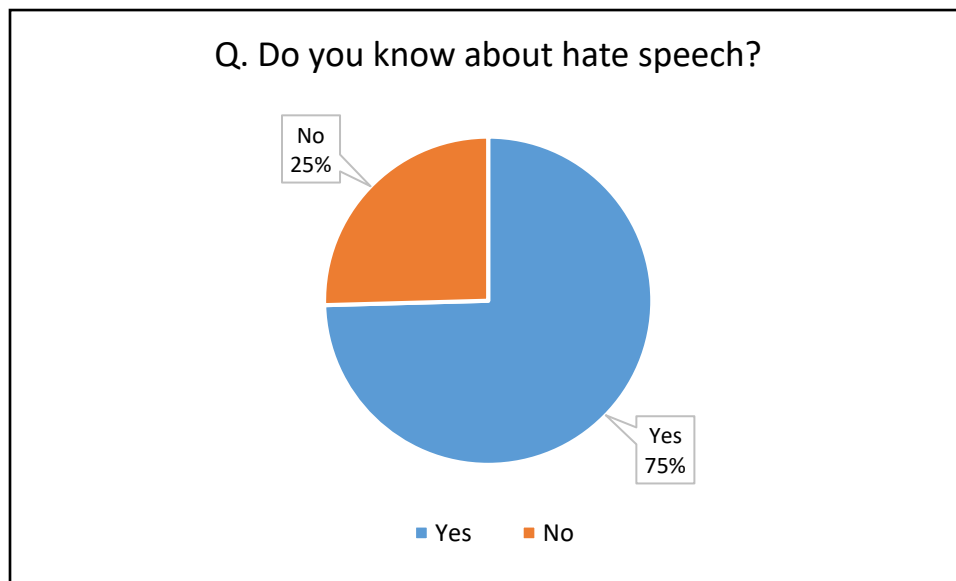


Figure 5: Do you know about hate speech?

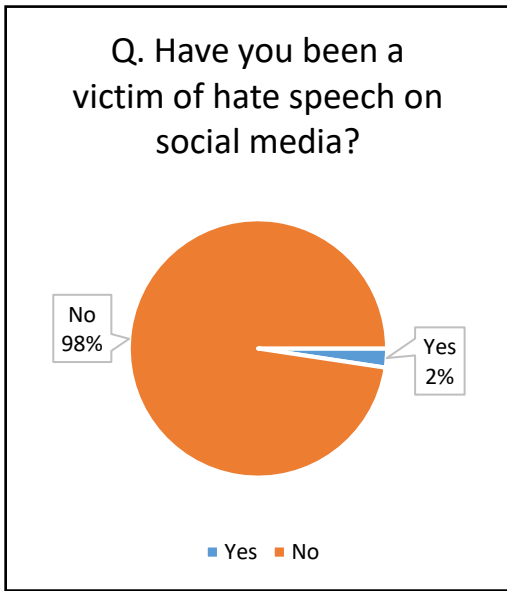


Figure 6: Have you been a victim of hate speech on social media?

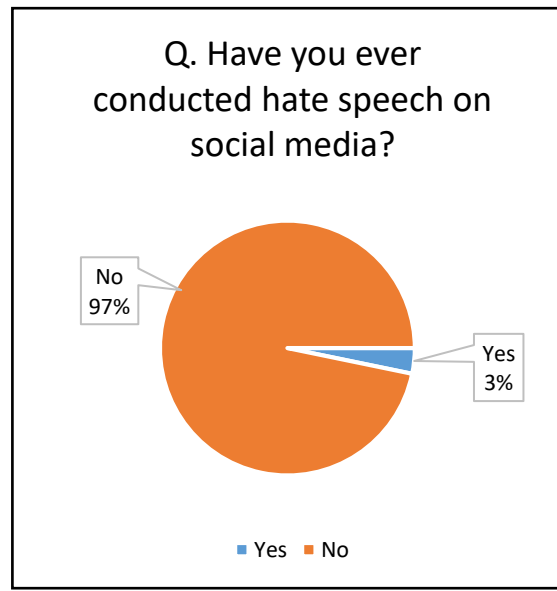


Figure 7: Have you ever conducted hate speech on social media?

3% of the participants believed that they have conducted hate speech on social media. Two thirds of the respondents who have been victimized by ‘Hate Speech’ have also conducted some form of hate speech. 31% of the participants believed that hate speech on Sri Lankan social media is increasing while only 12% believed it was decreasing.

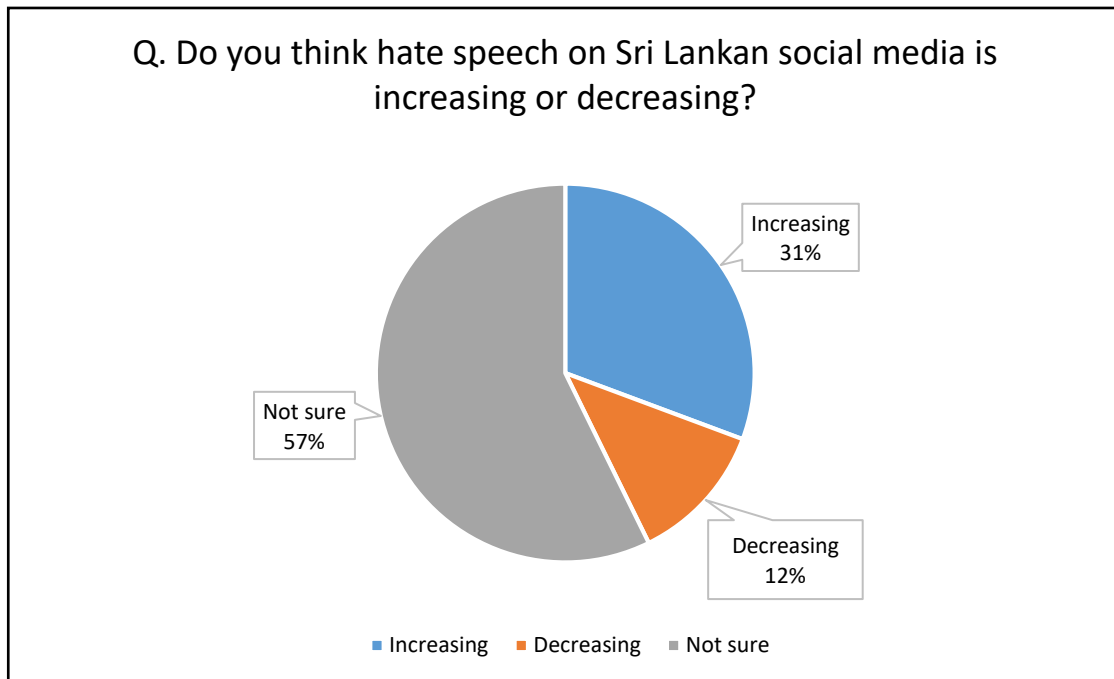


Figure 8: Do you think hate speech on Sri Lankan Social Media is increasing or decreasing?

Interestingly, 57% of the participants have informed that they are not sure of whether hate speech on Sri Lankan social media is increasing or decreasing. In analysis of the Tamil medium responses 42% believed that hate speech is decreasing while 33% were unsure of the behavior.

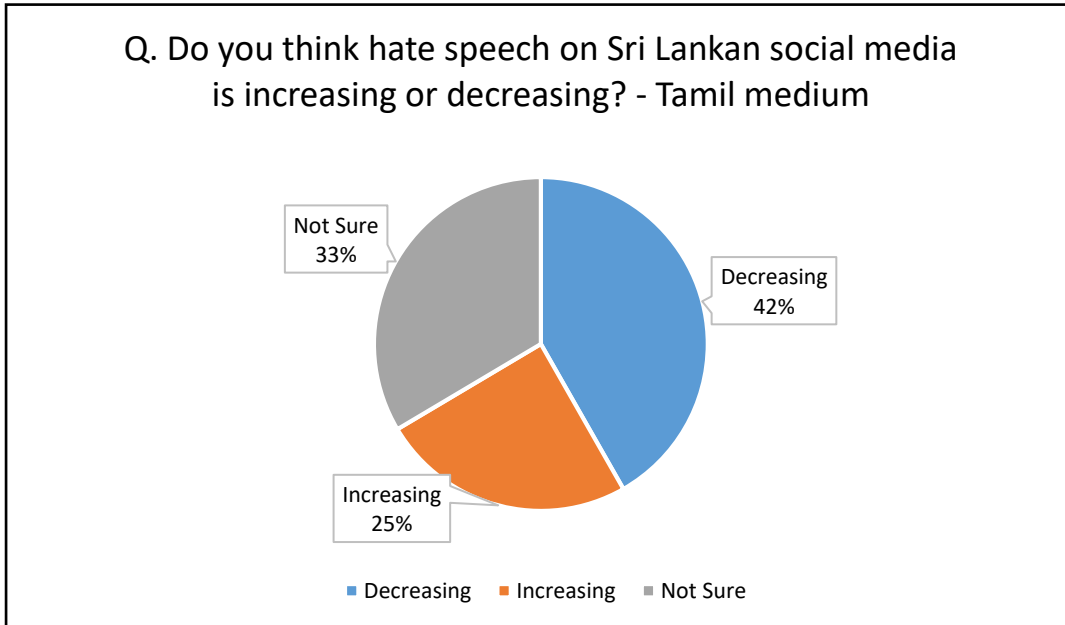


Figure 9: Do you think hate speech on Sri Lankan Social Media is increasing or decreasing? – Tamil Medium

60% of the participants believed that Sri Lankan youth should be more involved in preventing hate threats on social media while 10% said 'no', 30% was unsure on the level of youth engagement.

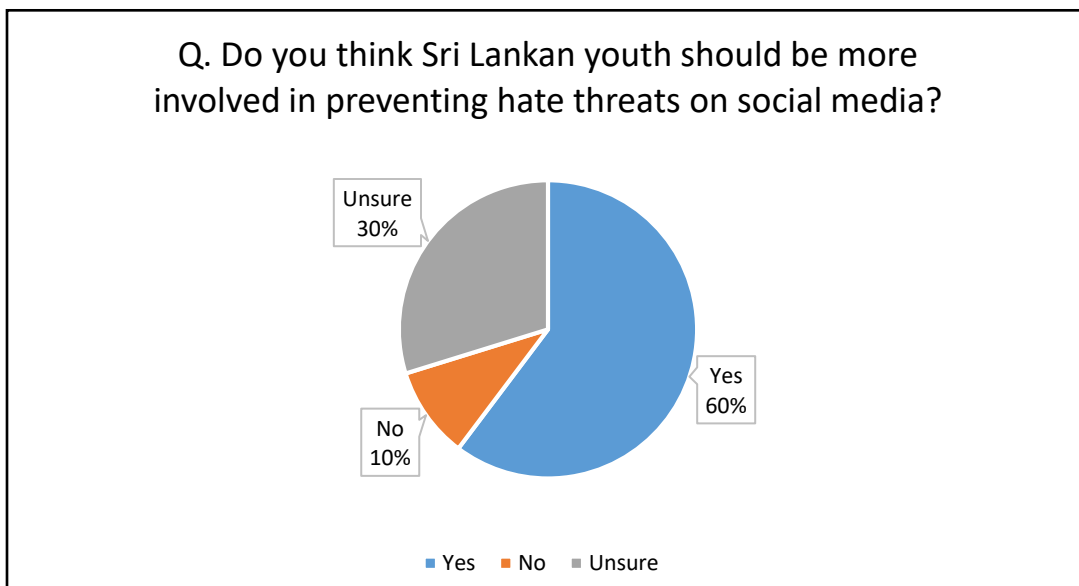


Figure 10: Do you think Sri Lankan youth should be more involved in preventing hate threats on social media?

84% of Tamil Medium respondents perceived Sri Lankan youth should be more involved in preventing hate threats on social media.

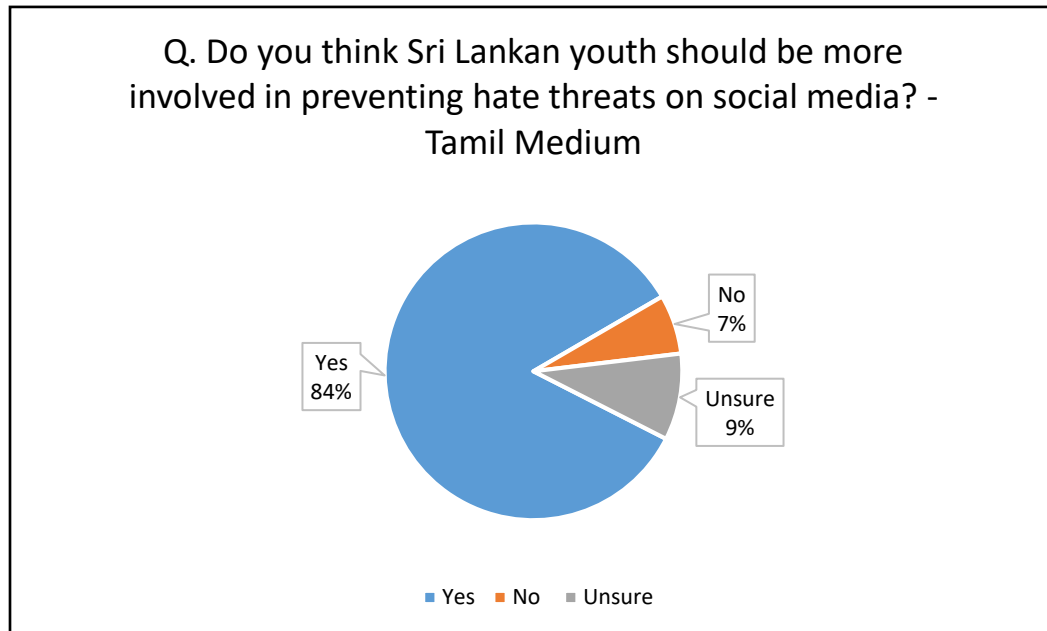


Figure 11: Do you think Sri Lankan youth should be more involved in preventing hate threats on social media? Tamil Medium

The survey also focused to study further on the engagement of youth in promoting peace on social media. Only 24% of the respondents are involved in activities related to promoting peace in their social media engagements.

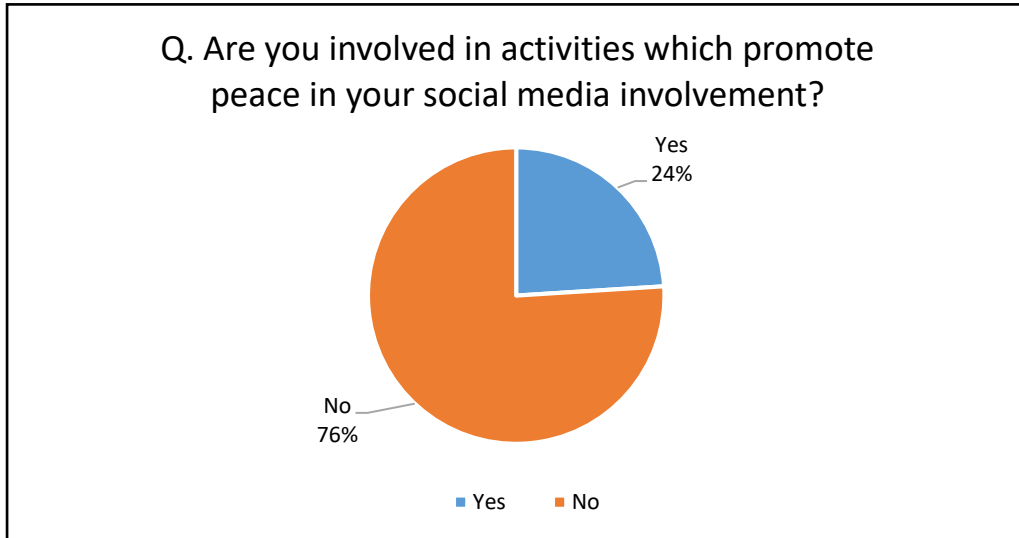


Figure 12: Are you involved in activities which promote peace in your social media involvement?

Only 44% of the respondents were interested in actively engaging in peacebuilding against hate speech via social media. Also, only 24% of them felt that they have contributed at least adequately towards peacebuilding on their social media engagements.

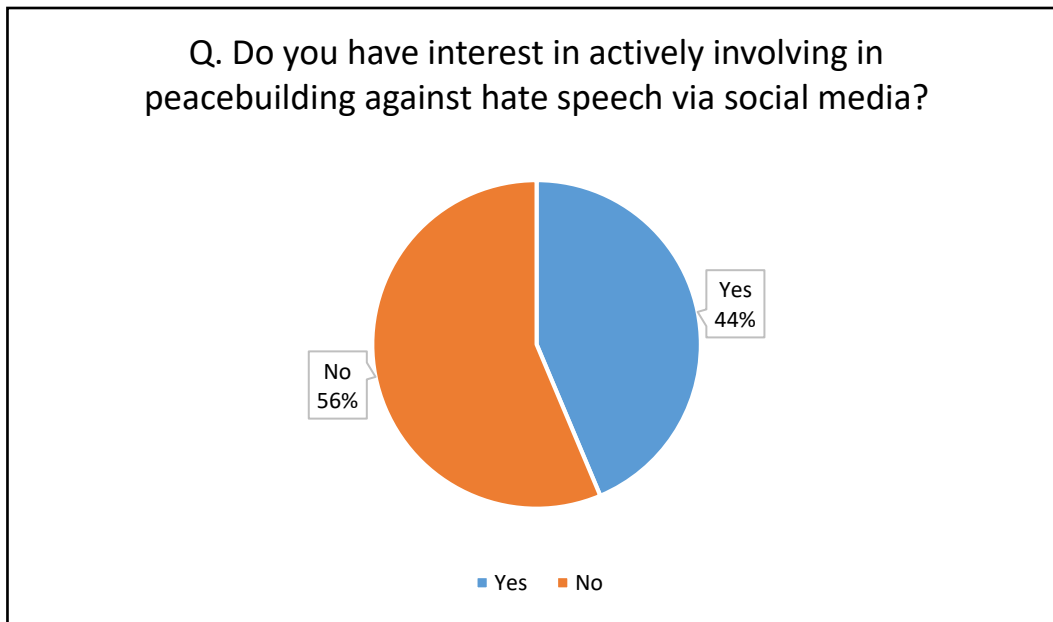


Figure 13: Do you have interest in actively involving in peacebuilding against hate speech via social media?

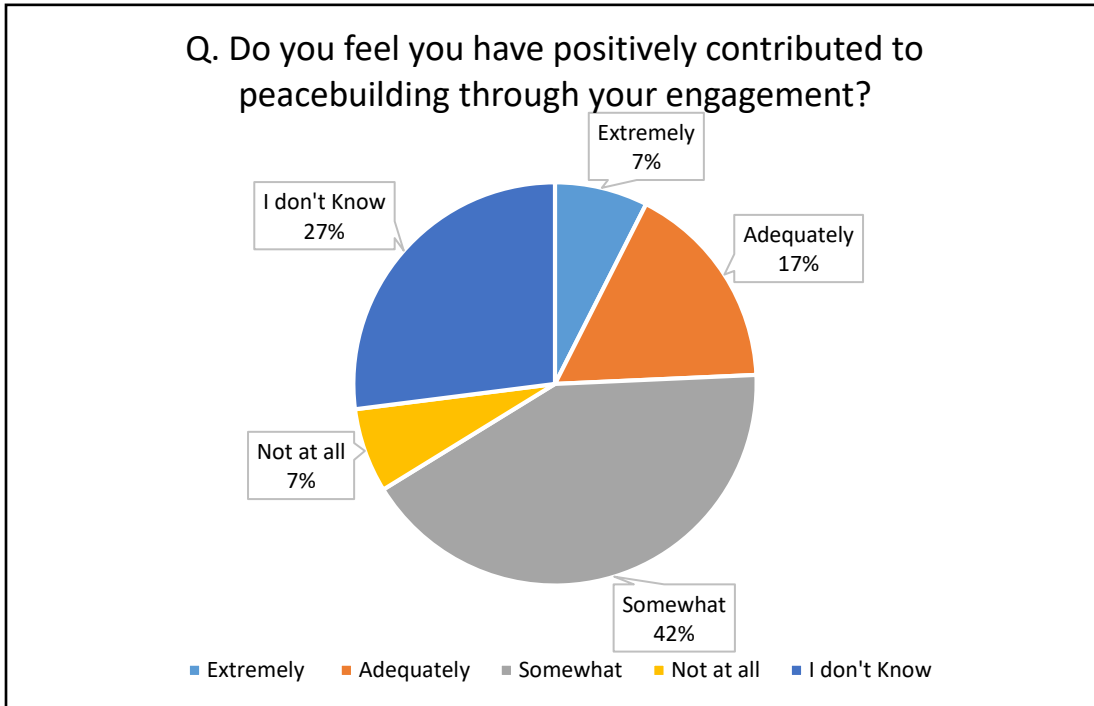


Figure 14: Do you feel you have positively contributed to peacebuilding through your engagement?

The survey also found that 56% of them believe that volunteering has a very high positive contribution to peacebuilding in the country.

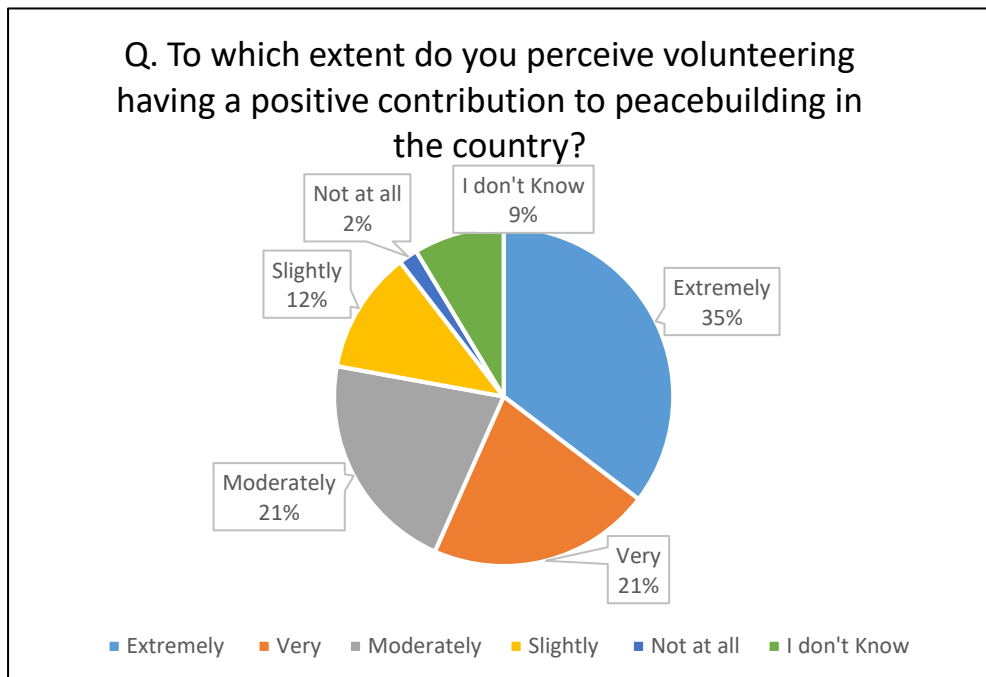


Figure 15: To which extent do you perceive volunteering having a positive contribution to peacebuilding in the country

The 49% of the respondents perceived that youth in their area were at least adequately involved in peacebuilding. Only about 32% of youth respondents who are actively engaged on social media are interested in engaging in peacebuilding activities at least on social media.

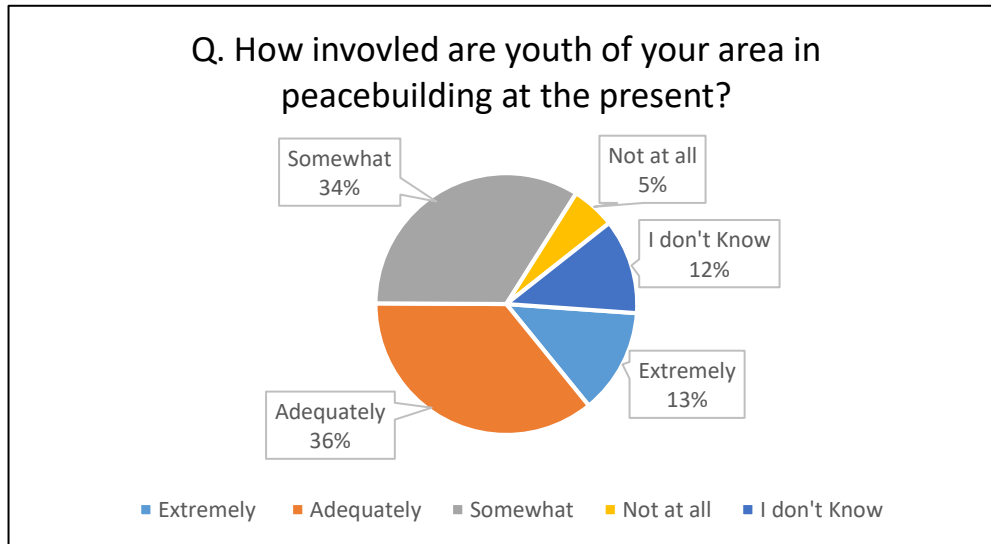


Figure 16: How involved are youth of your area in peacebuilding at the present?

76% of the respondents also believed that youth participation in peacebuilding is extremely important in peacebuilding. They also identified peace education as the most important to increase youth engagement in peacebuilding. They also identified better employability and more education also as key factors to increase youth engagement in peacebuilding.

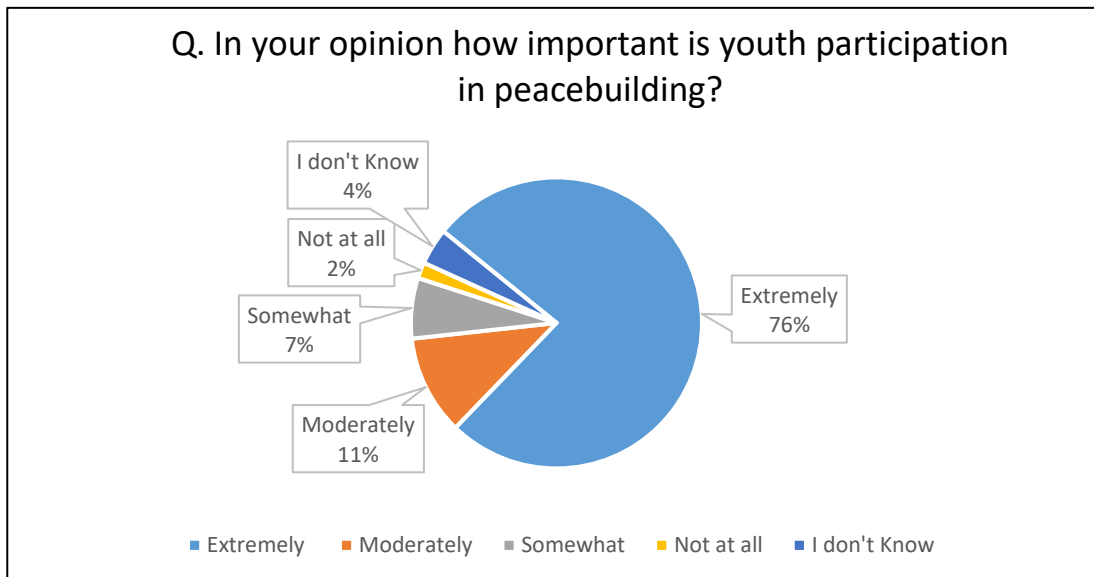


Figure 17: In your opinion how important is youth participation in peacebuilding?

41% of the respondents believed that peace education could support youth engagement in peacebuilding and 26% of them identified better employability as a step to be taken in order to increase youth engagement in peacebuilding.

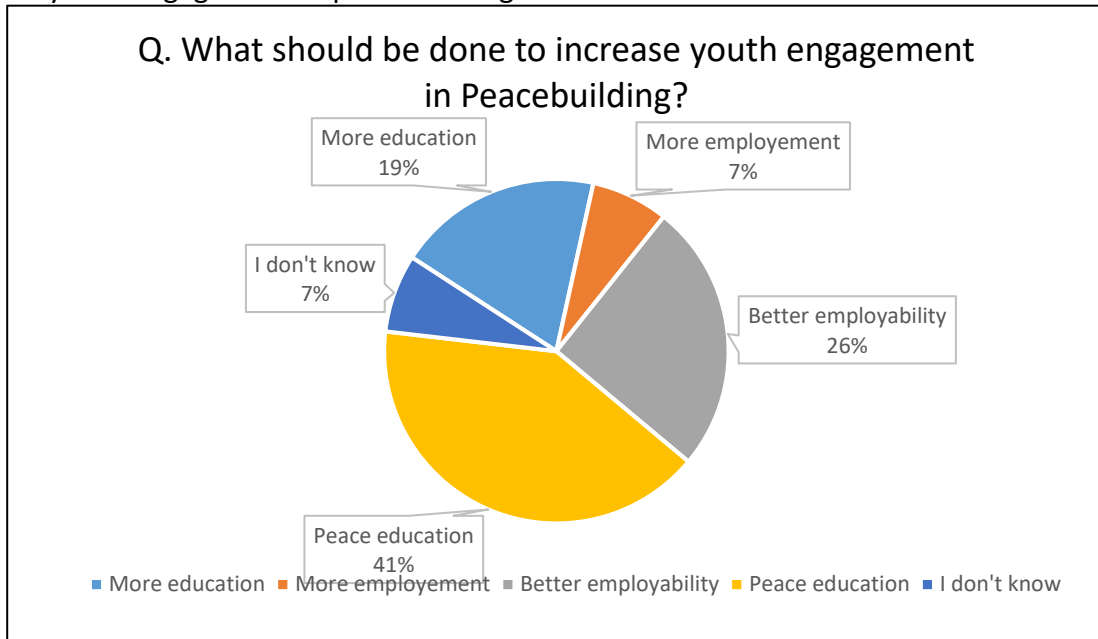


Figure 18: What should be done to increase youth engagement in peacebuilding?

Most of youth felt that they were not aware of the peacebuilding process with only 4% perceiving that they are extremely aware and only 16% perceived that that they were very aware of the process. 51% believed that they were moderately aware about the peacebuilding process.

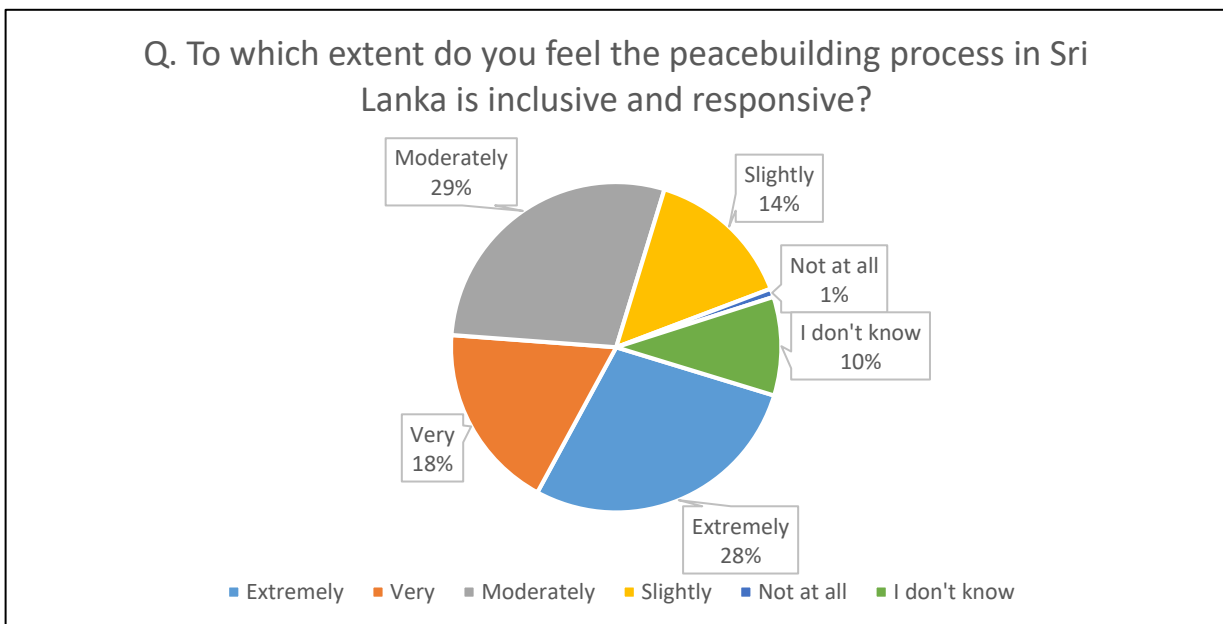


Figure 19: To which extent are you aware of the peacebuilding process in Sri Lanka?

The 46% of the young respondents believe that the peacebuilding process is both extremely or very inclusive and responsive in Sri Lanka. Only 1% believed that it was not inclusive and responsive while 10% perceived that they do not know.

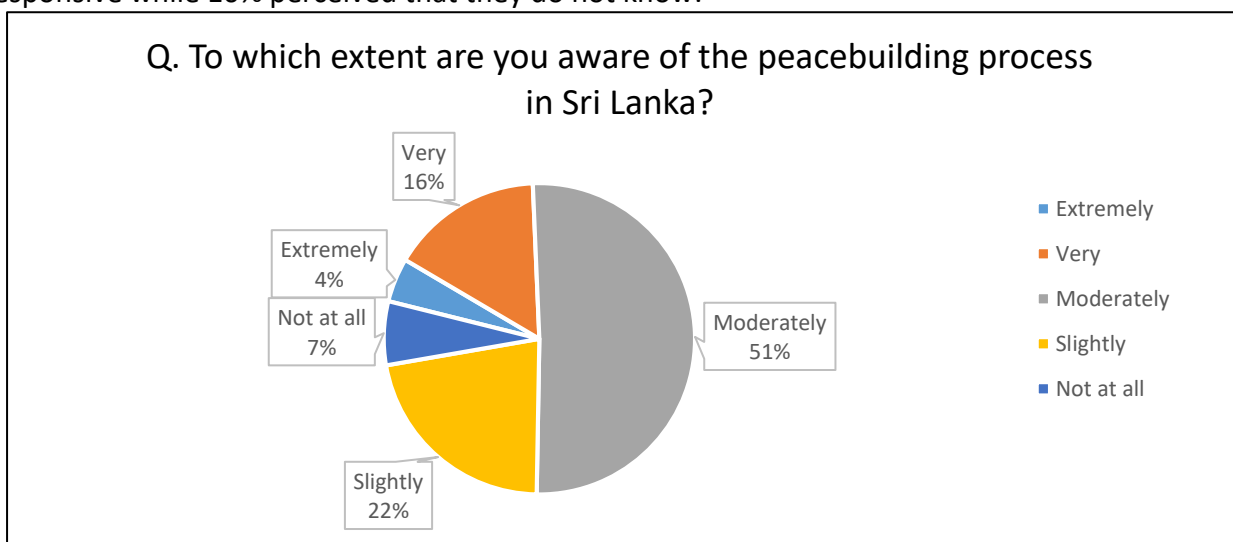


Figure 20: To which extend do you feel the peacebuilding process in Sri Lanka in inclusive and responsive?

6.0 Conclusion

- A majority of the respondents believe that they are aware of ‘Hate Speech’ but they do not possess a proper understanding of it as they have been unable to gauge dynamics of the landscape.
- Victims of hate speech are also likely to react as victimizers.
- Youth perceive that young people and volunteers would have a much greater scope and potential in being involved in preventing hate threats especially on online social networks.
- The engagement of youth in peacebuilding on social media is limited. But they perceive that a larger number of youth are engaged in peacebuilding at some level in their communities.
- There is limited exposure to peace education in society, and this was identified as a key challenge in peacebuilding.

7.0 Recommendations

7.1 *Recommendations for the NYSC Sessions*

- *The sessions should provide a comprehensive understanding on what hate speech is and how to identify hate speech.*

Most of the respondents have perceived that they are aware of 'Hate Speech'. However, the survey suggests that they seem to lack understanding of potential changes in the landscape. This could reflect on the lack of proper understanding and awareness on 'Hate Speech'. It is important that the NYSC program focuses on giving a comprehensive understanding on what hate speech is and how to identify hate speech. This would support in enabling youth to identify hate speech and counter it while also supporting to ensure that they do not engage in hate speech themselves.

- *The sessions should have a greater focus on promoting **positive content**.*

The NYSC program should also focus on empowering youth to develop, promote and share more positive content. This would enable a culture of positivity through social media. This could lead towards a positive attitudinal transformation. Youth should also be empowered to develop positive narratives.

- *Utilize the youth perception that “youth have a greater role in peacebuilding” to build interest and engagement in preventing spread of hate speech.*

The survey clearly points that youth perceive that they have a greater role in peacebuilding and in preventing the spread of hate speech. It is important to strengthen youth to be able to take leadership to act against spread of hatred and act as peace builders. The sessions could be an opportunity to build interest and create engagement in countering and preventing hate speech.

- *Use the sessions to highlight the impact of volunteerism and mobilize them towards more active engagement as volunteers.*

As the survey finds that majority of the respondents have a strong perception that volunteerism has a positive impact on peacebuilding. It would be an opportunity to engage youth as volunteers to support the national peacebuilding agenda. The session could also contribute as inspiration for young people to act as volunteers driving peace in their respective communities.

7.2 General Recommendations

- *Design and implement programs focused on holistic peace education to ensure youth have a better understanding on sustainable peace.*

The respondents have implied their opinion that more opportunities for peace education could increase youth engagement in peacebuilding. It is important to provide access to a holistic peace education program for all young people and school students to understand that peace is beyond lack of war. A comprehensive peace education program could translate towards a movement of actions driving sustainable peace in the country.

- *Spread awareness on the peacebuilding processes in Sri Lanka and make it more inclusive and responsive for youth to engage in the process further.*

The Sri Lanka Peacebuilding Priority Plan outlines the national peacebuilding priorities and its engagements. However, it could also be made more inclusive for youth to engage and contribute more towards the national priorities making it more impactful and effective.

- *Develop more comprehensive platforms for holistic education with focus on knowledge, skills and attitudes which would also support & improve employability of youth*

Education is a key priority area in any national development agenda. The findings of the survey reflect on the lack of understanding on the basic concepts of peacebuilding, hate speech and of opportunities for civic engagement as youth and volunteers. The survey also identified education and employment as key interests of youth.

Therefore, it is important to develop an education strategy to support holistic youth development enabling them as empowered young professionals and change makers. This would primarily focus on development of a holistic education focused on knowledge, skills and attitudes beyond the limited knowledge focused system in place currently.

8.0 Annex I

8.1 Questionnaire

Survey on Youth Perception on Online Hate Speech and Peacebuilding

(Your completion of this questionnaire is greatly appreciated. All information will be treated in strict confidence)

1. Gender

Male

Female

Other

2. Age Group

12 – 14

15-17

18-20

21 -23

23-25

25+

3. District

.....

4. Do you have any disability?

Yes

No

5. Do you use social networking sites? (Facebook, Twitter etc.)

Yes

No

6. Do you know about hate speech?

Yes

No

7. Have you ever been a victim of hate speech on social media?

- Yes No

Optional: if yes, how did you feel?

.....
.....

8. Have you ever conducted hate speech on social media even as a joke?

- Yes No

9. Do you think hate speech on Sri Lankan social media is increasing or decreasing?

- Increasing Decreasing Unsure

Optional: Why did you think it would increase/decrease?

.....
.....

10. Do you think Sri Lankan youth should be more involved in preventing hate threats on social media?

- Yes No Unsure

Optional: if yes, what kind of action you would take to prevent threats on social media?

.....
.....

11. Are you involved in activities which promote peace in your social media involvement?

- Yes No

If Yes, kindly specify:

- ✓ Reconciliation
- ✓ Prevention of violence
- ✓ Building and strengthening peace processes
- ✓ Human rights
- ✓ Humanitarian action
- ✓ Social cohesion
- ✓ Local and national governance processes
- ✓ Activism at the individual or civil society level: advocacy and political impact
- ✓ Gender violence, especially sexual violence, promotion of gender equality

Other:

12. Do you have interest in actively involving in peacebuilding against hate speech via social media, if yes, please mention your reason?

- Yes No

13. If you are involved in peacebuilding, please mention the capacity/how:

- ✓ Social Mobilizer
- ✓ Conflict mediator and Dialogue
- ✓ Human Rights/Peace related campaign volunteer
- ✓ Help to rebuild infrastructure destroyed by the conflict
- ✓ Providing psycho-social counseling to people affected by the armed conflict
- ✓ Participating in local media to promote peace and denounce violence

- ✓ Leaders of political parties
- ✓ Peace related campaign participants
- ✓ Dropping arms
- ✓ By never actively participating in any conflict or revolt
- ✓ Volunteer

Other:

(Peace in a holistic understanding, could be activities ranging from reconciliation, prevention of violence, building and strengthening peace processes, human rights, humanitarian action, social cohesion, local and national governance processes, activism at the individual or civil society level: advocacy and political impact, gender violence, especially sexual violence, promotion of gender equality)

14. Do you feel you have positively contributed to peacebuilding through your engagement?

- Extremely Adequately Somewhat Not contributed at all I don't know

15. To which extend do you perceive volunteering having a positive contribution to peacebuilding in the country?

- Extremely Very Moderately Slightly Not at all I don't know

Comments:

16. How involved are youth of your area in peacebuilding at the present?

- Extremely involved
- Adequately Involved
- Somewhat Involved
- Not involved at all
- I don't know

Comments:

17. In your opinion how important is youth participation in peacebuilding:

- Extremely important
- Moderately important
- Somewhat important
- Not important
- I don't know

Comments:

18. In your opinion what should be done to increase youth engagement in peacebuilding?

- More education opportunities
- More employment opportunities
- Better employability (vocational skills, etc.)
- Peace-education
- I don't know

Other

19. To which extend are you aware of the peacebuilding process in Sri Lanka?

- Extremely
- Very
- Moderately
- Slightly
- Not at all
- I don't know

Comments:

20. To which extent do you feel the peacebuilding process in Sri Lanka is inclusive and responsive?

- Extremely
- Very
- Moderately
- Slightly
- Not at all
- I don't know

Comments:

8.2 A map of Sri Lanka highlighting the districts covered by the survey

