

## Is Racism on the Increase in South Africa?

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Picture source: SA Human Rights Commission

“Is racism on the increase in South Africa?” is the question most asked of the South African Human Rights Commission. The question arises due to the impact of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which have given voice to millions, but have, as a side effect, also complicated both the country’s attempts to address the racial discrimination of our past and our efforts at social cohesion.

In the 2012/2013 financial year, the Commission received 208 complaints

based on the infringement to the right to equality as outlined in Section 9 of the South African Constitution, specifically on the grounds of race. The number has seen a significant and steady increase since, with 297 complaints being received in the following financial year, 2013/2014 and 292 being received in the 2014/2015 financial year. The 2015/2016 financial year showed the most significant and disturbing increase, with a total of 749 complaints received based on an infringement on the right to equality and of which 505 were based on an infringement on the grounds of race.

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In light of this and the high profile incidents of hate speech and racism being expressed via the social media, the question seems contextually reasonable.

The next most-received category of complaints, being Labour Relations, constituted 10% of the total number of complaints received. However, a closer consideration of complaints trend reveals that in respect of labour related complaints, which the Commission referred to bodies such as the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), a significant majority are based on racism in the workplace.

What this data suggests to the Commission, and to the rest of the nation, is the fact that despite the significant achievements over the past 23 years of democracy, deep inequalities and unfair discrimination remain a serious concern. However, in understanding the complexities related to race relations and in turn racism, it is not good enough to simply ask whether racism is on the increase in light of social media and heightened media coverage of racism. It is far more important to look at structural challenges that remain a reality in South Africa, to this day.

The National Development Plan (NDP) envisions that by 2030, South Africans will be more conscious of what they have in common than their

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differences, irrespective of the race, gender, disability, sexual orientation and class. To achieve this vision, the NDP emphasises broad-based knowledge and support of core values contained in the South African Constitution; an inclusive society and economy; increased interaction among South Africans of different social and racial groups; and strong leadership coupled with an active and responsible citizenry. To achieve this idyllic goal thirteen years from now, it is important to understand the challenges that manifest through racism.

Racism includes both behavioural and attitudinal challenges, consisting of varying degrees of prejudice that manifest in both overt and subtle forms of conduct. While South African legal frameworks permit for the protection of rights against racist conduct, addressing racist thought that is embedded and socialised is far more complex. In addition, the institutionalisation and persisting structural forms of discrimination, which feed racist conduct, persist. The uncomfortable truth is that economic and social indicators of poverty, income inequality, unemployment and a lack of access to opportunities are all stratified along race and

despite 23 years of democracy, unlawful conduct and attitudes are embedded in South African society.

These are the challenges South Africa would have to address in its quest to deal with the racial divide in achieving the vision set out for 2030.

However, in the fast-paced digital world of the twenty first century, it is easier to look for quick answers to complex questions and to assume that the narrative of race relations exists on social media posts. The Penny Sparrow, Justin van Vuuren, Chris Hart, Velaphi Khumalo, and Matthew Theunissen matters, all of which were highlighted through social media, are arguably indicative of evolving challenges in addressing racist attitudes and behaviour throughout the country. However, it is important to caution that this is most certainly not representative of the majority or most egregious human rights violations and abuses the Commission is faced with. It should also be noted that these incidents do not necessarily represent the true landscape of South African interaction on a day-to-day basis.

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charged nor amount to hate speech based in race. Therefore, with less than a quarter of the population active on this social media platform and with the majority of users not expressing hate speech, it is clear that those who do resort to racist expressions constitute a significant minority. One admits that their conduct, which can be easily evidenced through screengrabs and further online discussion, elicits such public outcry that it dominates our public discourse. Racism on social media platforms is indeed disturbing and flies in the face of the democratic and Constitutional principles South Africa is built on, but it should not be viewed as indicative of an escalation in racism or racist sentiment nationwide.

Despite the fact that incidents of racism or hate speech being expressed via the social media are not an indictment on an entire society, the recent racism incidents on social media platforms illustrated the urgent need for intervention and leadership by the Commission in confronting discrimination and issues related to the right to equality. In an effort to deal with that need, the Commission recently held a *National Investigative Hearing on Racism and Social Media in South Africa* from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of February 2017.

The National Hearing on Racism and Social Media in South Africa brought together policy-makers, regulatory bodies, civil society organisations, researchers, academics, and social commentators to inform both the Commission and the public on the complexities of addressing racism and racial discrimination in the context of social media.

The Commission envisions the output of the National Hearing process to consolidate all of the work it has undertaken in terms of its mandate, and provide a clear position of the Commission’s approach to combatting racism and racial discrimination in the context of social media.