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How can we prevent genocide?

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The aftermath of the Rwandan genocide

Genocides have happened all over the world throughout history. Nevertheless, most people do not even hear the word 'genocide' until they get to university and study a social science degree. The only mass murder of a people everyone has probably heard of is the Holocaust, although not every school teaches that either. Unfortunately, the Holocaust is just one example of the phenomenon. Genocide means the killing of a group of people for who they are, not for anything they have done. Examples of such events include Cambodia (1975), Guatemala (1982), Rwanda (1994), Bosnia (1995), Darfur (2003), and arguably the currently increasing persecution of the [Rohingya Muslim minority in Burma](#).

I volunteer for [Aegis Students](#), the youth arm of [Aegis Trust](#), an international NGO that works to prevent genocide. They run two training programmes for university students throughout the academic year: the Speaker Programme and the Campaigner Programme. In the Speaker Programme, we were trained to give an anti-prejudice workshop in schools to pupils around the age of 13-14 in order to fill the obvious gap in most curricula with regard to teaching about genocide. In the workshop, we talk about what genocide is and give several examples of such events, with a focus on Rwanda as a case study that we discuss in detail. We explain the political situation in Rwanda in 1994 and then put the pupils into three groups – the Hutus, the Tutsis, and the Twas –and try to make them imagine how each group felt at that time.

When the pupils say that they are 'angry' or 'annoyed' about the situation and have hostile feelings towards the other two groups, we move on to discussing the five steps that lead to genocide. The slide towards mass extermination starts with something as simple as words. We ask them what they would do to a group of people who have been described as 'dangerous', 'uncivilised', and 'pack of wolves'? Most often the answer is that they would avoid those people. Then we show them headlines of newspaper articles in the UK that use those exact words to describe young people – i.e. the pupils themselves. We want them to understand that the dehumanization process starts with words. For example, the Tutsis in Rwanda were labelled 'cockroaches', as the Jews in Nazi Germany were called 'vermin'.

The second step is avoidance – what the pupils said they would do to that 'dangerous' group of people we talked about in the exercise. We ask them to name groups of people that we often hear being stereotyped or avoided, and they usually mention gypsies, gay people, disabled people, black people, Muslims or Jews among others

The third step, active discrimination, is the intentional unfair treatment of someone because of the group they belong to ; for example, preventing them from having the same opportunities, segregating them, or passing a law to deny them the same rights. When all these processes are allowed to happen unchecked, it is easy to see how it can lead to physical violence, the fourth step down the slide to genocide.

The last step is extermination. The [example of Rwanda](#) shows that, because people believed all the negative things they had heard about the Tutsis and their discrimination had become a normal part of life, very few Hutus tried to stop the genocide.

In the last part of the workshop we explain that when any type of discrimination or bullying occurs there are always three types of people involved: the perpetrators, the victims, and the bystanders. Bystanders can be individuals or countries who are aware of what is happening to the victims and have a choice to either do something to stop it or do nothing and allow it to happen. The point is that each and every one of us has a responsibility to say or do something when we witness discrimination. If more of us speak out against intolerance we can collectively prevent genocide from ever taking place again.

This is why Aegis Students are running the Campaigner Programme that aims to raise awareness about the persecution of the [Rohingya Muslim minority](#) in Burma, a situation that is dangerously close to turning into genocide. Every one of use has the responsibility to speak out when we learn that atrocities are taking place, even if in other countries. One way to do so is by getting involved in Aegis' [Voices for Rohingya](#) campaign.



The most important lesson I take away from my volunteering experience with Aegis is that even the slightest form of discrimination must be taken seriously. You may think that innocent jokes or banter about someone's ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexuality, gender or even accent have nothing do to with such a serious crime as genocide, but the slide towards extermination starts with something as simple as words. My grandfather was a Holocaust survivor in Hungary. Even though racist, anti-Roma, and anti-Semitic jokes and sentiments are constantly expressed in Hungary today, I still do not want to believe that an event like the Holocaust could ever take place again. However, Jobbik, an openly racist and anti-Semitic party, [has just won 20% of the vote in my country](#). Who knows what is next. All I know is that I have the responsibility to fight all forms of

intolerance and prejudice if genocide is to remain history.

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