Coronaphobia

States’ policies guide people’s behavior towards infected people

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As the world lives in an emergency due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (Covid-19), which the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic on March 11, the new virus continues to affect millions of people around the world, including hundreds of thousands of infected people, hundreds of racist footages have emerged which are equally harmful as they stem from long-term behaviors and policies that will prevail even after the end of the virus.

At a time when every effort is required to combat the virus, stop its spread, and support and assist those infected, thousands of people - sometimes encouraged by their governments - have practiced bullying, hatred and racism against coronavirus carriers and their families, and even against suspected cases, as well as Asian nationals, in the Arab world and Europe. Once individuals test positive for the novel Coronavirus, infected people are often dehumanized and regarded as source of danger, and their full names are made public along with their family details, including the number of their sons and daughters, their names, and the name of the schools they are enrolled in. These people along with all their families become restricted and isolated.

The matter is not limited to this only; the “coronavirus bullying” extends and takes its worst forms when combined with racism and ignorance, so that countries and people are regarded as the source of the virus, or even called by its name.
The tendency of some social media activists and influencers to stigmatize, whether intentionally or unintentionally, further contributes to horribly deepening and normalizing the situation in a way that a coronavirus carrier and even a suspected coronavirus case becomes accused as a criminal.
What is Coronavirus?

According to World Health Organization (WHO), Coronaviruses are a big family of viruses that cause disease in animals and human beings. They cause problems in the respiratory system, ranging in intensity from common colds to more severe illnesses such as the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). The novel Coronavirus causes coronavirus disease—also known as COVID-19. Although some say that it existed and was explored some years ago, Coronavirus was unknown until it emerged in Wuhan in China in December 2019.
Countries’ policies towards bullying

There is a huge gap between looking at the actual practice on the ground and countries’ commitment to the international human rights conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which indicated the basic rights of every person and outlined the general principals to protect them.

In the last ten years, it is noted that many of these countries started to realize the seriousness of bullying and started enacting laws and taking measures to combat the phenomenon. However, most of their efforts were centered on specific phenomena such as bullying at schools and did not include all segments of the society.

For example, the United States of America has taken legislative measures at state and local governments levels to protect children from bullying.
The UK had done the same, but on a narrower scale, obliging all governmental schools to adopt specific rules to combat all forms of bullying among students. Likewise, many countries such as Australia, Sweden, Japan, the Philippines, Chile and others have done the same.

As for Arab countries, their approach to encounter bullying has been a little different. Some countries considered established local laws, especially penal laws, to be sufficient to combat the phenomenon of bullying because they criminalize actions resulting from bullying and thus there is no need to enact new special laws to address the phenomenon. On the other hand, some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, have started to take some effective measures to counter bullying at schools and include them under fourth-degree violations that require punishment.

Likewise, Egypt amended the Penal Code by of Decree Law No. 10 of 2011 and added Article 375 bis and 375 bis (a) which punish bullying with penalties up to five years of imprisonment.

Despite the keen interest of the countries of the world in dealing with the phenomenon of bullying, it is clear that there is a large gap between theory (laws) and practice. The reality is that we are still witnessing high percentages of multifaceted cases of bullying, which have recently increased with the increasing numbers of people infected with COVID-19.
• **Forms of bullying and racism in light of coronavirus pandemic:**

With the outbreak of coronavirus pandemic, many behaviors based on hate, racism and bullying have emerged against those infected or suspected of having the virus. Sometimes, these behaviors are the result of racist policies adopted by some countries, or hate speech delivered by officials. With these aspects spreading everywhere, the term «coronophobia» has been coined to describe the fear that many citizens around the world feel towards people with Asian features.

1. «Bullying based on race»

Since the novel Coronavirus initially appeared in China, and later spread in most countries around the world, cases of bullying against Chinese nationals have escalated widely, to include stigmatization, insults, discrimination and psychological violence, and extended to policies and practices that countries
applied against the Chinese, including restricting the right to freedom of movement, discrimination at airports, the prevention of entry to their territories, etc. In many cases, these practices, on the level of individuals and governments, extended to include not only the Chinese, but also all those with Asian features. For example, the French newspaper Le Courier Picard published on its front page a picture of a woman with Asian features, wearing a face mask, under the title «Yellow Alert», prompting thousands of activists to launch the hashtag #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus (I’m not a virus) on social media in response to the newspaper’s racism.

Statements by politicians or officials and influential people were way more serious, either through official speeches or by producing publications or media statements, stigmatizing Asians or foreigners, including refugees, and warning against contacting or dealing with them.

**The most prominent cases were:**

1. The US President «Donald Trump» described the virus as «Chinese» in violation of its scientific name, the Novel Coronavirus (Covid19-), ignoring the fact that it is a pandemic not related to a specific nationality or background.
2. Some Italian government officials have asked students of Asian origin not to leave their homes.
3. Calls by the head of the Lebanese Forces Party, Samir Geagea, to isolate the Palestinian and Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon, preventing them from moving and imposing a siege on them, as a precautionary measure against the outbreak of the virus in Lebanon.
These calls had **two features:**

- Using the Coronavirus pandemic to obtain internal or external political gains by attacking opponents without taking into account the values and ideals that should be envisaged and followed when approaching an issue related to health.

- Some comments and positions came on a preferential basis suggesting supremacy based on race, national origin, among others. As a result, it could exceed moral or psychological violence and amount to violence or physical abuse.

As a result, and due to the general state of phobia that has resulted from the exaggeration of some governments or their representatives of the implications that might result from the entry of foreigners into their lands, dozens of cases have been recorded in several countries around the world, in which Chinese or Asians have faced excessive racism, where they have been described as outsiders, asked to return to their home countries, and were called various nicknames associated with the virus. In some cases, the situation amounted to abuse, assault and vandalism.
• Italy: attacks and sabotage

Dozens of Chinese stores have been attacked and vandalized in some northern cities, such as Como, Brescia and Varese. Meanwhile, Chinese and Filipino individuals were subjected to serious attacks, some of which require hospital admission, marginalization and racism, and failure to provide services in public places, restaurants, hotels, and others.
• **Attacking a Singaporean student in London**

On 22 February 2020, a 23-year-old student called Jonathan Mok from Singapore was battered in Oxford Street in London by a group of people yelling: «I don’t want your coronavirus in my country.» He posted on Facebook photos of his injured face, saying that racists always find excuses to practice hatred and now the Coronavirus outbreak has been used by some as an excuse to «further project hatred against people [who are] different from them.»
On 1 March 2020, a woman assaulted two Japanese women have been living in the city of Ramallah in the West Bank for years. As a recorded video has revealed, one of the two Japanese said: «We were walking in the street, and a girl and her mother insulted us, and called us «Corona ... Corona.» She added: “We wanted to stop them, and we told them in Arabic, «You have no respect, shame on you, this is racism.» She affirmed that the girl and her mother did not stop and continued to call them «Corona ... Corona.» So, she photographed them using her mobile phone, which prompted the mother to push the women, grabbing her hair, taking her phone, and asking her to delete what she has recorded. The woman explained that the everything was over when «a Palestinian youth came and tried to end the fight,» adding that «they were very terrified because of what happened ... We were harmed and this is humiliating.» Later, police spokesman Loay Irziqat said that the police arrested the assailant.
• **Racism against Asians in Egypt**

On 9 March 2020, a video that went viral on social media platforms showed two Egyptian citizens bullying a young man with Asian features who ordered an Uber. Once the taxi driver realized that the passenger was Chinese, he covered his nose and mouth with a tissue, showing signs of sarcasm, which appeared in a video taken by the passengers of a nearby car. Once the taxi driver made it to a highway Ring Road in Cairo, the Chinese passenger was surprised that he got out of his car and left him on the road, with no car accepting to take him, with people yelling «Corona, Corona» prior to calling the police to take him.

Besides, some workers and restaurant owners hesitated to provide services to tourists or residents with Asian features, while some placed signs on the storefronts stating that there are no Chinese people inside to reassure customers.
On 13 March, the head of the Lebanese Forces Party Samir Geogea called for imposing a blockade and isolating Palestinian refugee camps under the pretext of combating the outbreak of COVID19, despite the fact that no confirmed cases of the novel Coronavirus were recorded in the camps. This situation reflects his racist views against Palestinian refugees in Lebanon who are estimated at 175,000 and who suffer from harsh living conditions in the camps. This call did not include imposing a quarantine on other Lebanese neighborhoods that did record confirmed cases of COVID19, which emphasizes his racist views.
• Bullying against a Jordanian of a Korean mother

In Jordan, one of the citizens who has Asian features resulting from a mixed marriage between his Jordanian father and Korean mother added that he was subjected to bullying while in a taxi.

All violations not only violate the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights conventions ratified by these countries, but they constitute clear violations of local laws that address the phenomenon of bullying and actions resulting from it. The local authorities’ indolence and leniency in approaching the phenomenon of bullying and not making the necessary efforts to combat it incomprehensible.
2. Cyberbullying

Racist practices against Asians, people infected with Coronavirus COVID19 and their families have not been limited to racism on the ground, but they extended to cyberbullying, which was encouraged by the speeches of political officials and activists who exaggerated warnings against foreigners and linked the origin of the virus to Asians.

• Racism and mockery of the Chinese

After the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, some linked its origins to eating some animals by the Chinese, most notably bats. A massive mockery campaign swept through social media outlets against them, in which hundreds of users of different nationalities participated. Social media users shared sarcastic posters that reflected the Chinese tendencies to eat «everything in motion», in a widespread racism that touched all Chinese. Besides, social media users shared various experiences in which they spoke of fears of the Chinese in public places or their distance from those with Asian features or other publications that stigmatized and ridiculed the Chinese.

• New Zealand: abuse of the first Coronavirus case

After declaring the first cases of Coronavirus in New Zealand, some social media users abused and bullied the family of the infected, prompting the Auckland Public Health Service to issue a statement urging people to stop abusing and bullying.
• **Egypt: Stigmatizing a nurse**

A nurse infected with Coronavirus COVID19 in Egypt spoke of her recovery after being quarantined for 10 days and the society’s view of her after she was infected with the virus. Wafaa said, «Our hospital was receiving suspicious cases, the positive ones were being taken to quarantine, the negative ones were being sent home, and my result come out after three days. Doctors took blood samples from me and discovered that my case was positive. I entered a quarantine for 10 days, and with treatment, my case turned negative.» She added, «I did not suffer from any symptoms and for ten days I did not feel anything, but the main problem was people’s perception, I felt that the disease is a disgrace.»
In the West Bank in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Alaa Ali Muhammad Salih from the village of Sarta recounted what happened with him. «I did not want to speak about it, but people›s oppression and harm made me want to write my story. I am a worker in in Israel. Three days ago, on March 21st, 2020, I got sick while at work. It was a serious flu. I thought that it is going to lessen but nothing changed. On March 24, I decided to go home because I was tired. I picked the first bus on line 55, the line that goes to Salfit governorate. I got off the bus at Harith Crossroad because I am responsible and fear for my country. I told the responsible authorities that I came back from work and told them about my illness. They actually showed a great deal of care. An ambulance came and took me to Bedia then they took a blood sample. After that they sent me home. I stayed at home for two weeks without seeing my family, my wife, or my daughter. Later, unfortunately, I found that most people attack, curse and harmfully comment about me on social media!»
The state of emergency in most countries around the world requiring the imposition of quarantine and curfews in some areas has led many companies, profit institutions and business owners to take actions that resulted in violations of workers’ rights, by dismissing workers, forcing them to sign their resignations, granting them leaves without pay, forcing them to use annual leaves or to come to work while safety regulations require staying at home.

The most affected by these actions were private sector workers, in which the employer and the worker do not sign contracts, such as agricultural workers, street vendors, market and restaurants workers, and others who receive their wages on a daily or weekly basis. The following are some of the violations faced by workers in a number of countries:
• **France: workers without preventive tools**

At a time when most companies and institutions were closed due to the outbreak of the Coronavirus COVID19, some agencies continued to operate, especially those cannot work remotely, such as supermarkets, banks, postal services and police stations, but many of these agencies have not provided workers with the necessary protection against the virus, including supermarkets and other major companies.

For example, many workers at supermarkets in different regions of France complained about employers’ indifference to their presence in the front lines where they deal with hundreds of citizens everyday despite the risk of being infected with the Coronavirus COVID 19. Workers were left in the shops without providing them with adequate protection, including masks, gloves and alcoholic sterilizers, while their bosses ignored their demands for protection, forcing them to do so themselves.

• **Jordan: Forced Resignations and Unpaid Leaves**

Since the Jordanian Ministry of Labor had decided to suspend the work of all public and private institutions, granting paid leaves for all employees, on March 2020, and in response to the exponential spread of the coronavirus, the Tamkeen Institution for Human Rights and Legal Aid has recorded 195 complaints from workers in all sectors about violations of their rights.

The workers said that their employers either fired or forced them to take unpaid leaves. This included workers at clothing stores, coffee shops, cleaning services, hotels, and restaurants. Also, some schools coerced teachers to
resign and come back on new work contracts after the quarantine is lifted. On the other hand, a private company in Amman required its employees to come to work despite the imposed quarantine. The Jordanian Ministry of Labor later received countless complaints from workers saying that their employers pressured them to work until late hours. After that, the Jordanian Ministry of Labor launched an online service to receive complaints from workers and to report the companies that do not abide by the government’s lockdown decision amid the spread of the virus.

• United Arab Emirates: Mass resignations and a pressure to come to work
Several major companies in the UAE, some of which are owned by the government, have imposed measures that constitute grave violations of labor rights. This included unfair and arbitrary dismissals of employees in large numbers, depriving them of their rights. This also extended to imposed forced unpaid leaves and cuts of salaries down to %50. Moreover, thousands of Asian workers were forced to work in unsafe environments without any protective gear. In the meantime, these migrant workers had no choice but to obey their hirers because of the sponsorship system, which prevents them from leaving the country without their consent and imposes punishments on them such as fines and jail sentences if they try to escape. However, the most serious violation of migrant workers’ rights was forcing them to continue working on the construction of Dubai Expo Exhibit, which is supposed to held in October of 2020. Meanwhile, in this time of crisis, governments around the world are doing their best to enforce social
distancing and stop all projects and businesses to contain the virus. After one worker at the Expo Exhibit caught the virus, fears of a widespread infection are on the rise, especially with many restrictions imposed on movement.

- **Qatar: Labor Camps Lack of Proper Safety Measures**
  Migrant workers in Qatar remain the most vulnerable to catching the virus in their communities. This is especially because of the overcrowding of the labor camps. This makes it even harder to follow safety measures and social distancing and increases the infection rate of the pandemic after hundreds of workers have been infected. After hundreds of confirmed cases were recorded among workers, the government rushed to issue a complete shutdown of the industrial region while concerns about the lack of medical care in the camps have grown.

- **Israel: Blatant discrimination against Palestinian workers**
  Due to the spread of the virus, tens of thousands of Palestinian construction workers are suffering severely after the complete shutdown imposed by the Israeli government which prevents them from going back to their homes in the West Bank. The fate of these workers remains unknown after their employers violated the terms of contracts signed upon hiring them, including proper accommodation. Meanwhile, responsible authorities don’t carry out their duties to ensure that employers stick to the terms. Many Palestinian workers found no place to sleep except uninhabitable and abandoned construction sites with no blankets. On top of that, Palestinian workers say that Israelis treat them as “viruses”.

In an incident of pure discrimination against Palestinian workers during this time of a global crisis, the Israeli police arrested and handcuffed a Palestinian man named Malek Ghanem at a checkpoint near Ramallah after he was suspected of having caught the virus. The doctors advised that should be transferred to the West Bank under the pretext that his work permit has expired. Then, he was thrown into an army vehicle and stranded at Bier Seer checkpoint and ordered to walk back alone to the West Bank while he was extremely sick and had a high temperature.
Consequences:

- Many governments’ policies refrain from taking legal action in cases of bullying and discrimination, in addition to the racist discourse that many politicians spew, which led to a drastic growth of racist incidents against Asians, specifically Chinese, and those who have the virus.
- The lack of spreading awareness about the virus and overstating the fears of getting infected contributed to this mass-bullying situation against confirmed or suspected cases.
- Bullying people infected with COVID19- will discourage others from reporting symptoms when they appear, which would lead to more spread of this plague.
- The spread of the coronavirus revealed a gross inability to distinguish between freedom of speech and verbal bullying. The latter includes violating and invading the privacy and freedom of others.
- Migrant workers are most exposed to catching the virus. Many of whom fall victim either to the policies of the host countries, which, most of the time, marginalize and dehumanize them or to the bullying of the people around them and the condescending look upon them as “viruses”.
In **conclusion**, it is clear that combating bullying requires all countries to exert greater efforts and to make combating bullying a high priority due to its serious consequences, most notably the disintegration of societies, tendency towards violence, aggression, and increase in suicide rates. These are the most important steps that countries could take to combat bullying:
- Intensifying awareness campaigns to alert societies of the dangers of bullying in all its forms, and not to rely entirely on NGOs and civil society organizations to undertake these efforts as opposed to relevant official authorities.
- The measures taken to combat bullying should go beyond schools and children and include the other groups by creating a collective awareness of the risks of bullying.
- Countries should intensify efforts to enact special laws applying modern deterrent sanctions to combat bullying and to raise awareness about it to be able to combat them in an optimal manner.