

The institutional silence is actively encouraging online sexual harassment

The victims are multiplying while the institutions are quietly failing

Joint statement of Women Human rights activists from the Balkan region toward Gender based violence on the internet

We, the women human rights activists from the Balkan region stand together in solidarity with all women victims of digital gender-based violence¹ and demands from the relevant institutions to act according to their jurisdiction to thoroughly and promptly investigate the case of the groups on the Telegram platform (such as: Balkan Room, Public Room, GevgelijaHub, Serbian Room, Smokva, etc.), in order to sanction the perpetrators and to protect the victims from further victimization.

Exactly one year after the appearance of such a group on the Telegram Network in Macedonia, which is used for sexual harassment of girls and women by posting their photos without their consent and in a pornographic context, as well as the victims' personal data, we witness new cases of this kind of abuse not only in this country, but on a regional level as well. Although the administrators and the creators of two of these groups have been arrested, we believe this is only the first step in accessing justice that must be provided to all victims of these types of crimes. We welcome the reaction regarding child online abuse cases, but the institutional silence that we face sends a clear message that violence against women is tolerated, that is not punishable, that perpetrators are encouraged to continue with this behavior and that the victims are left to remain intimidated, ashamed and muted. The abovementioned cases in Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia have shown that only a small number of perpetrators are prosecuted and those that are prosecuted are pursued for the crime of "production and distribution of child pornography", which prevents the protection of adult victims.

Women from the former Yugoslavian countries, to whom we have provided free legal aid and other services for years, have experiences that testify numerous shortcomings in the conduct of proceedings. Often, women who suffer sexual abuse online deal with inadequate response from the institutions, so they often lack trust in the police and consider reporting to be in vain, due to the practices of inaction, disbelief and relativization of the victims' experiences. Imposing misdemeanor sanctions and warnings on perpetrators instead of documented and reasoned criminal charges, as well as inadequate enforcement of prohibitions on approaching and

¹ In order to better explain gender-based violence against women committed through the use of ICT (hereinafter information and communication technologies), we can understand it and connect it with experiences of violence in a real environment, and it can only be in a digital environment / space. It may include unlawful threats, harassment, insults, stalking or incitement to violence, unsolicited, offensive or sexually explicit emails or messages, sexual blackmail, forcing a person to view sexually explicit material, sharing or posting private images or recordings of sexually explicit content without consent. (so-called revenge pornography) or posting the listed content on sites.

contacting victims, results in continued and intensified violence, often followed by serious consequences for the victims' health, which in some cases can even cause death.

Regarding the public prosecution offices, we constantly notice an untimely initiation of indictments, inefficient or negligent management of pre-investigation and investigative procedures that resulted in untimely or in no provision of relevant evidence, as well as failure to take measures against the perpetrators to prevent continued violence against the victims. All of these institutional oversights have become even more visible with the emergence of sexual violence and harassment of women in the digital sphere, which, although is massively occurring and counting thousands of female victims in the Balkans, does not receive an adequate institutional response or an appropriate public support. On the contrary, discrediting experiences, blaming, embarrassing and double victimizing are the dominant narratives that women face today. It is obvious that the silence of the institutions is additionally encouraging the functioning and the maintenance of such groups in the digital space, while the girls continue to face danger for their personal safety and have violated dignity and health. Unfortunately, the easiest way to humiliate a woman is to portray her in a sexual scenario, which only speaks of the insurmountable stigma that still marks female sexuality as shameful and indecent, and labels victims in this context not as victims, but as women who "sought this to themselves".

Thus, the stolen photographs, combined with the misogynist, sexist and violent comments, and the treatment of women as objects without integrity, feelings, desires and traumas, speak of serious, deep-rooted misogynic values in our region that must be comprehensively and radically addressed. But, in order to begin solving the problem, we must first name it. This is not a problem of personal data abuse and it cannot be solved with such a limited approach. This is a problem of gender-based violence, with the purpose of humiliating, blackmailing, silencing and oppressing girls and women, and if it is not treated as such, the perpetrators will succeed in this goal.

Today we are aware that there is a regional network of harassers, i.e. opening and administering of Balkan groups whose aim is to humiliate and sexually harass women. Therefore we demand from the relevant institutions to seriously and with responsibility approach to this social phenomena which affect at least the half of population. We demand institutional cross border cooperation in thorough investigation and prosecution of all involved offenders from the region.

This case is a chance for the institutions from all over the region to show that they stand for women's rights and protection against gender-based violence, not just declaratively, but in practice! Hence, we ask the Public Prosecutor's Offices in the region to immediately and thoroughly clear the cases with the Telegram groups that are acts of crime. We ask the Ministries of Interior Affairs to continuously undertake preventive activities and to put a stop to the existence of these groups.

Jointly and in solidarity!

