The case of Serbia – Violence survivors’ abuse in digital surroundings

Tackling Online Gender-based Violence Through EU Laws and Policies

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IF YOU WANT PEACE, PREPARE PEACE!
"There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."

Audre Lorde
As it is known, Serbia is currently in the **accession** with the EU, and that process is long and exhausting. In 2020, these negotiations were essentially blocked (although this was not formally stated). A clear message was sent from Brussels which displays their dissatisfaction with the progress in various areas of negotiations (Serbia did not open a single new chapter in 2020, and only two in 2019; at the moment, half of the 35 chapters are open).

Chapters 23 and 24, which represent the backbone of the EU's existence, relating to judiciary and fundamental rights, as well as to justice, freedom and security, have been assessed as 'moving backwards', both in regular non-papers, as well as progress reports. This is one of the greatest **stumbling blocks** between civil society organizations and institutions in Serbia.

Serbia has been presented with a new "French methodology" according to which future negotiations will be conducted, but there is still no official position on whether Serbia will keep the current one, or move to the new way of proceeding in the negotiations.

The issues of migration, violence against women, security, access to justice are key issues that hinder Serbia's entry, due to the failure to fulfill the basic rights of vulnerable groups.
"When women support each other, incredible things happen!"
The *pandemic* has shown that life of a woman, victim of violence, is in many ways reminiscent of a permanent state of emergency due to various factors, and the problems will only begin after the pandemic calms.

Many of them were *socially isolated* even before the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

This pandemic has highlighted the position of women victims of violence in our country, society, and exposed them to additional risks and challenges, leaving many consequences for their social inclusion.

**Despite the fact that state statistics show the number of reports of violence against women during the pandemic has decreased, this does not mean that there was less or no violence.** On the contrary, it means that the victims were less sure that they would receive support.

We cannot wait for the victim to ask for help in order to react, in order to even admit that the problem exists. Unfortunately, this is still the dominant paradigm when it comes to victims of all forms of violence – we are asking whether victims receive assistance and support if they ask for them, instead of asking whether assistance is offered to victims clearly and sufficiently, and whether support reaches them at all.
“Human trafficking has been on the rise for years, which only serves to show that traffickers are adapting to changes in society faster than those who should prevent them from committing it.”

Ana, 20, member of the Advocacy Group of girls and women, human trafficking survivors
Behind the screens

Analysis of human trafficking victims’ abuse in digital surroundings
In a situation of pandemic, a large part of global communication moved to the digital space, and the risks of violence and exploitation increased, NGO Atina’s team conducted interviews with 178 girls and women, identified victims of human trafficking. The purpose of this analysis is to prevent digital abuse from becoming a “new normal” and a phenomenon to which the public, due to its frequency, becomes indifferent to, under the slogan - virtual is less real, and therefore less important.

**Contribution of the Analysis**

The importance of the Analysis lies in the fact that it was conducted on a representative sample. It serve to emphasize the importance of understanding the context of this frequent form of violence, and the significance of adding it to the agenda of all documents on the topic of combating human trafficking in Serbia. However, this Analysis also explains and introduces these new phenomena and their definitions to the public, to include them in everyday speech.
Methodology

How did we do it?

STEP 1
In direct work with trafficking survivors, it seemed to us that many forms of violence that happen to them in physical space began moving to the digital sphere.

STEP 2
Discovering this issue, we wanted to know how prevalent this violence is, and created a tool to conduct interviews with.

STEP 3
Interviews were possible due to previously established relationship of trust we have with these women and girls. The interviews were led by members of Atina's team, trained and sensitized to work with them.

STEP 4
After the interviews, we analyzed the forms of abuse in digital surroundings compared to forms, perpetrators, and violence in the context of human trafficking.

STEP 5
The Analysis was created as a result of recognizing a problem, and highlights some of the new forms of abuse closely connected to human trafficking.
Findings of the Analysis

WHO ARE PERPETRATORS OF DIGITAL ABUSE?
Unknown persons 40%, partners 20%, wider social group 8%, family members 8%, police officers 4%

WHO ARE PERPETRATORS OF CYBERSTALKING?
Acquaintances, 45%

WHAT IS THE CONTENT OF ONLINE THREATS RECEIVED BY THE VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING?
Threats aimed to intimidate the victims to change/withdraw report/statement or testimony in criminal proceedings, 59%

WHICH CONTENT WAS MOST COMMONLY DISTRIBUTED WITHOUT CONSENT?
Content with elements of pornography, 64%

The results of this analysis confirm high prevalence of abuse in digital surroundings these girls and women have been exposed to prior, during and after the trafficking situation. Specifically, 42% of respondents survived some form of digital violence (such as cyberbullying, vengeful distribution of explicit/pornographic content, impersonation, etc.), while for 31% of them digital violence was directly related to the trafficking situation, both for the purpose of recruitment and exploitation. Of the total number of respondents, 65% were also exposed to digital threats, which were most often aimed at intimidation in order to change or withdraw a testimony or statement in criminal proceedings (a total of 59%). In addition to the high frequency of violence in a digital sphere, the analysis also shows that this specific type of violence has become an almost indispensable form of coercion used by perpetrators of violence and traffickers to blackmail, threaten, belittle the victims, unauthorizedly record, or distribute pornographic material including children.
This form of cybercrime includes human trafficking, i.e. live transmission of sexual exploitation. Cyber trafficking deserves to be found in the plans and strategic documents in the field of protection of human trafficking victims in the context of the fight against human trafficking and the transition to the online sphere of functioning and interaction, particularly fueled by the global COVID-19 pandemic. This type of abuse differs from other forms of human trafficking in that traffickers are abusing victims both in the real and digital space, forcing them to perform sexual acts by themselves or with other people, and keeping them in sexual slavery. Another form of such abuse is rape in front of the cameras, which is often committed by a trafficker or another person who paid the trafficker for it. This form of human trafficking can take place in real time, or it can be recorded and posted on the internet as a type of pornographic content. Similar cases have already been recorded in Serbia, in which scenes of sexual abuse of a child are broadcasted through “cyberdens” live and with monetary compensation.
RECRUITMENT & EXPLOITATION

RECRUITMENT VIA THE INTERNET

30% of human trafficking victims were recruited via the Internet.

70% of girls and women later found themselves in the situation of sexual exploitation

ADVERTISING EXPLOITATION THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA

46% advertising pornographic content which includes victims of human trafficking

50% advertising sexual exploitation
Digital content as means of coercion

Of the total sample, 50% of human trafficking victims stated that, while they were in a situation of exploitation, the person who trafficked them possessed content used to blackmail them and force them into various types of exploitation. As many as 29% of the total number of respondents stated that they were blackmailed by being told that the explicit content they are in, or information about them, will be sent to their family members, and 21% of them were threatened that the content would be published on public portals.

Other forms of abuse victims have been exposed to in digital surroundings

Of the total number, 15% of girls and women stated that they were also victims of impersonation (imitation of another person), while catfishing was present in 5% of the cases, and doxing (targeting) in 3% of these cases. Furthermore, cyberbullying was experienced by 32% of respondents, while 57% of surveyed trafficking victims experienced cyberstalking. When it comes to hacking unauthorized access to other people’s data), 42% of them encountered this phenomenon. Digital abuse recognized as vengeful distribution of explicit content, such as videos and photographs with pornographic elements (revenge porn), but also messages (sextortion), was experienced by 31% of respondents.
Fear of the use of Information and communications technology

Life after trafficking situation

The context in which human trafficking victims live even after exiting the trafficking situation, and even years after the court rulings is centered around the fear of using digital media – anything from opening a profile on social networks with their full name, posting photographs or videos that reveal their place of residence; posting photographs with people close to them, so as not to expose them to potential revenge of traffickers; taking photos in public places, events; answering calls from unknown numbers, and the like.
LESSONS LEARNED:

What is illegal offline should be illegal online, too.
Values we cherish in the offline world also to be respected online.

Internet companies have to take responsibility for the manner in which they disseminate, promote, and remove content.

New laws have to be proposed which would require tech companies to explain their algorithms, take down illegal content, be transparent about advertising, and share data with rivals and regulators.

Social media enables lies to spread fast. There are concerns that online misinformation can undermine democratic institutions and even trigger violence.

It is important to nurture democracy every day and defend citizens against the corrosive power of hate speech, of disinformation, fake news and incitement to violence.

Serbia needs to be a part (even if it is not official part of EU still) and close to European lawmakers which are seeking to balance freedom of expression with protecting people’s right to privacy.
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