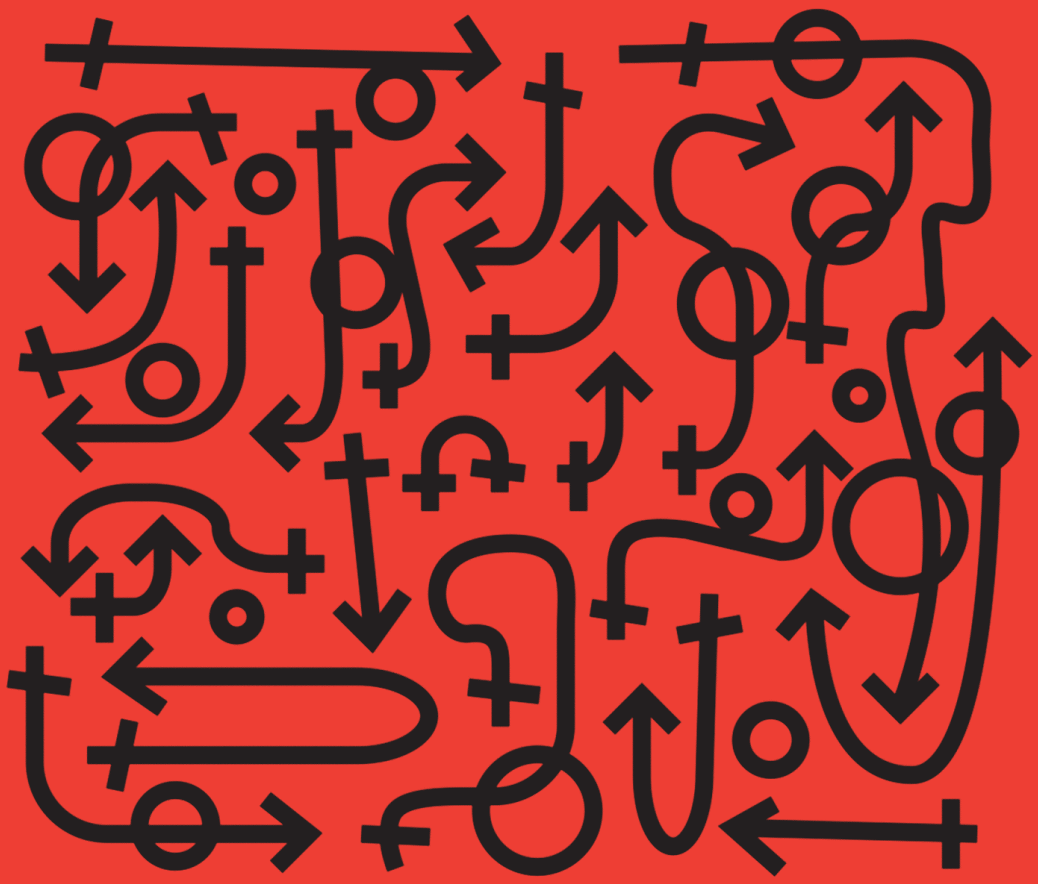
GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

Sexual rights and the internet



Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
and Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch 2015
Sexual rights and the internet

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Financial support provided by
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APC and Hivos would like to thank the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for its support for Global Information Society Watch 2015.

Sida

Published by APC and Hivos
2015

Printed in USA

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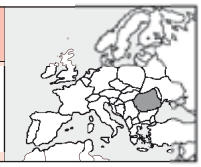
ISBN 978-92-95102-41-5
APC-201510-CIPP-R-EN-P-232

ROMANIA

CYBER HARASSMENT: BRINGING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ONTO THE PUBLIC AGENDA



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Introduction

With the rise of the networked society in the information age, patriarchy has moved online. Cyberspace – although developing a culture of its own – is not emerging in a social vacuum. Instead it reflects the fragmented and contradictory character of the "offline" world.

In this report, we provide a snapshot of a Romanian initiative aimed at bringing gender-based violence onto the public agenda through educational tools, with a focus on cyber harassment.

Gender-based violence affects both men and women, but women are more at risk. As a European Union (EU)-wide report has argued:

> Women can perpetrate violence, and men and boys can be victims of violence at the hands of both sexes, but the results of this survey, together with other data collection, show that violence against women is predominantly perpetrated by men. This is overwhelmingly the case when it comes to sexual violence and sexual harassment. With this in mind, the majority of violence against women can be understood as gender-based violence.[1]

According to the 2014 Gender Gap Report, Romania ranked 72nd out of 142 countries, with better scores for the health and survival index, and worse for political participation.[2] There is more food than freedom, one might say. Although gender equality and civic participation have a long way to go in the country, there are local projects that connect different age groups, ideas and actions towards a freer and fairer society. A project called "Gender-based Urban Discrimination"[3] initiated by two Romanian NGOs – *Societatea de Analize Feministe* and *Asociatia Front* – has called for a series of civic actions in the capital Bucharest, which include the creation of an online map of the spaces and places where women have encountered harassment; the development of a guide to gender-based violence in urban spaces; the organisation of street activism; and an exhibition of photographs and videos on the topic. Another important and visible initiative was a coalition of 12 women's rights organisations that formed a network for preventing and combating violence against women,[4] connecting local and national advocacy actions. Last, but not least, the LOG IN Romania educational project by the ALEG Association, which is discussed below, is part of a broader initiative to bring gender-based violence onto the public agenda.

Policy and political background

Romania joined the EU, a community of cultures, values and policies, in 2007. After 50 years of communist dictatorship (1949-1989), the country is still struggling to fight corruption, advance human rights and build democratic institutions. As presented in the Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) 2013 report,[5] Romanian society has encountered a new patriarchy and a "room-service feminism"[6] – meaning top-down gender equality policies that are imposed, but lack real substance.

Research has shown that a gender-based hierarchy is a predictor for gender-based discrimination, and a basis for sexual harassment: "The more an organization differentiates the status of men and women, the stronger the incentives will be to meet sex-based ideals[7] in that organisation."[8] The "new patriarchy"[9] that emerged in post-communist Romania has risen both in offline and online contexts.

1 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey.* Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union. fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/violence-against-women-eu-wide-survey-main-results-report

2 Schwab, K. et al. (2014). *The Global Gender Gap Report*. Geneva: World Economic Forum.

3 discriminari-urbane.ro/index.php/despre-noi/despre-proiect

4 violentaimpotrivafemeilor.ro/membri-actuali

5 giswatch.org/en/country-report/womens-rights-gender/romania

6 Miroiu, M. (2004). State men, market women: The effects of left conservatism on gender politics in Romanian transition. *Feminismo/s*, *3*, 207-234. rua.ua.es/dspace/bitstream/10045/3243/1/Feminismos_3_14.pdf

7 Refers to gender-based norms of behaviour in organisations.

8 Berdahl, L. J. (2007). Harassment Based on Sex: Protecting Social Status in the Context of Gender Hierarchy. *The Academy of Management Review, 32*(2), p. 646.

9 A term that Romanian feminist organisations use to describe a return to the pre-Communist age of gender inequality.

Traditional environments for gender-based violence – the family and the workplace – are increasingly complemented by violence against women online.

A survey conducted among citizens of EU member states has shown marked differences in the level of violence against women in online environments, with Denmark and Sweden at the higher end of the cyber harassment scale (18% of the respondents above 15 years old have experienced some sort of online harassment) and Romania at the lower end (5%). However, the difference might also be due to the digital divide between EU countries. The report stated: "It is possible to exclude from the calculations those respondents who do not use or have no access to such tools as email, SMS and social networking sites. The variation, however, appears to reflect the use of the internet as a communication tool for both victims and perpetrators in the different Member States."[10]

The digital divide is still deep in the EU: while 92% of Danish citizens used the internet at least once a week in 2014,[11] only 48% of Romanians did so.[12] However, this situation seems to be changing rapidly with the expansion of 3G and 4G telephone networks – the mobile broadband penetration rate is rising exponentially in Romania, from 35.4% in 2012 to 60.2% in 2014.[13] This means cyber harassment should be on the agenda of developers and policy makers. A gang rape case and the hate speech it generated online shows how important this issue is in the country.

Patriarchy and revenge culture: The case of a gang rape

On 10 November 2014 an 18-year-old girl from a Romanian village was gang raped by seven men aged between 18 and 28. The court case focused mainstream media attention on the incident and exposed the rapists, the victim and the local community where the sexual assault took place. "The girl is to blame," local community representatives declared.[14] An online media campaign was launched in July 2015 by the mainstream media portal adevarul.ro to support the victim, who had been blamed by the rapists' families and the local community. Meanwhile, an aggressive online counter-campaign was launched on Facebook by the rapists' mothers, and the rape victim became the target of cyber bullying by a friend of the perpetrators. Mainstream online media named and shamed the seven rapists under investigation, while social media gave space for inflamed comments and online clashes between the patriarchal establishment and human rights defenders, between rural community representatives and younger urban netizens. The outburst of hate speech online on both sides shows a lack of dialogue in our cyber culture, and the need for more civic action towards gender equality in online and offline contexts.

LOG IN: A civic initiative against gender-based violence online

A local Romanian association called the Association for Freedom and Gender Equality (ALEG)[15] developed a project[16] aimed at combating and preventing online gender-based violence among teenagers. The initiative, suggestively called "LOG IN", consisted of workshops based on a peer-to-peer education methodology and organised in schools and other public spaces used by teenagers. The project consisted of four key activities:

- Developing two training modules: one targeted at youngsters aged 14-18, and the other at parents and educators.
- Testing training activities on 250 high-school students, with the support of project personnel, and then on 750 high-school students through peer-to-peer education. Meanwhile, 400 parents and educators were targeted by the project team in order to raise awareness on the topic of cyber harassment. A series of creative and interactive methods were used such as developing a project slogan collectively, creating short videos, and designing content for online social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.
- Evaluating the pilot activities via questionnaires before and after key events.
- Dissemination: students' public performance.

The project has been implemented in the central Romanian city of Sibiu, with EU funding of EUR 44,647.08 (USD 49,608.04),[17] and the partnership

10 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). Op. cit.

11 https://joinup.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ckeditor_files/files/eGov%20in%20Denmark%20-%20January%202015%20-%20v_17_0_Final.pdf

12 https://joinup.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ckeditor_files/files/eGov%20in%20Romania%20-%20January%202015%20-%20v_12_0_Final(1).pdf

13 https://statistica.ancom.org.ro:8000/sscpds/public/files/89

14 adevarul.ro/locale/vaslui/acasa-cele-sapte-brute-violat-lesin-eleva-asa-i-trebuie-plans-i-au-arestat-fata-e-vina-poveste-terifianta-satul-depravatilor-1_55a6839ef5eaafab2c99889b/index.html

15 Asociatia pentru Libertate si Egalitate de Gen (ALEG), an NGO from the central Romanian city of Sibiu. The word "aleg" also means "I choose".

16 aleg-romania.eu/wp-content/themes/Aleg/login.html

17 Though the European Comission's Daphne Funding Programme, January 2013-December 2014.

Gender-based violence and responsible use of social media. Cover of a booklet for the LOG IN project. Source: ALEG Association.[20]

of local authorities and multistakeholder support from three countries: Cyprus, Italy and Lithuania.

The main tangible result of the project was the high participation of teenagers in training activities and in the creation of videos on the topic of gender-based violence online. In addition, youngsters from the Romanian city of Sibiu got involved in a global campaign against sexual violence called One Billion Rising, organised on 14 February 2014.[18] Meanwhile, parents and educators were acquainted with the opportunities and challenges of social media environments and given tips and tools on how to initiate a conversation, give support and be there for their children or students. A comprehensive booklet – dealing with gender-based violence and the responsible use of social media – was designed for them.[19] The educational material developed for the project contains short and practical advice on how to tackle cyber bullying, how to protect personal data, how to talk with children and youngsters on cyber security, and on cyber bullying issues.

Although taking a somewhat moralising tone, the ALEG initiative was timely and practical, with a highlight on trending issues such as online dating, privacy protection, cyber harassment and gender-based violence. For example, the project material recommends: "When posting and tagging photos with friends and acquaintances, ask yourself whether or not you are intruding on their privacy."[21] Several myths related to bullying in general, and cyber bullying in particular, are busted: "Myth: Victims of bullying are usually weak persons… Myth: Bullying someone on Facebook is not so serious as doing it face-to-face…"[22] Meanwhile, important data is presented on the impact of the internet on children and teenagers in Romania: "Statistics show that 81% of children aged 12-15 use the internet to do their homework, and nearly 50% of them for online gaming."[23]

The video-contest "Respect, not only likes!" was perhaps the most creative part of the LOG IN Romania educational project. Students worked in teams and created short films presenting stories of gender-based violence in online and offline contexts. The most creative videos were celebrated and posted online. An example can be seen in the screenshot included here.

18 www.onebillionrising.org/about/campaign

19 aleg-romania.eu/wp-content/themes/Aleg/documents/Brosura%20pentru%20parinti%20si%20cadre%20didactice_RO.pdf

20 aleg-romania.eu/wp-content/themes/Aleg/documents/Brosura%20pentru%20parinti%20si%20cadre%20didactice_RO.pdf

21 Ibid., p. 9.

22 Ibid., p.19.

23 Ibid., p.24.

Gender-based violence storified. Screenshot of an award-winning video from the LOG IN project. Source: ALEG Association.[21]

Conclusions

Romanian post-totalitarian society is patriarchal, both online and offline. Gender-based violence is not consistently discussed and debated in public spaces. However, EU norms and policies on one hand, and local civil society initiatives on the other hand, offer opportunities for bringing the issue to the forefront of public discourse.

The LOG IN project is a positive example of mobilising local resources using EU funds and international connections in order to educate key stakeholders – teenagers, educators and parents – on the topic of gender-based violence in general, and cyber harassment in particular. The implementing NGO, an active advocate of gender equality and freedom of expression, is developing further projects on the topic of gender-based violence, connecting local and global, and online and offline contexts. It is the result of a new generation of activists socialised in a free society.

Meanwhile, the 2014 gang rape case and the cyberstorm it generated shows the need for more educational civic actions targeted at the young generation in Romania.

Action steps

- Projects such as LOG IN should be promoted in the mainstream media, and replicated by other local, regional and national organisations concerned with tackling gender-based violence in general, and cyber harassment in particular.
- Civil society organisations, governmental agencies and businesses should act in partnership to promote a safe, harassment-free society. Education and civic action that use art and other creative outputs are useful tools to reach this goal.
- With the disseminating power of the interactive web, the social impact of civic action can be enhanced significantly.

24 Video contest for teens: Respect, not only likes! https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=90&v=1IByNCf8zr8

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

Sexual rights and the internet

The theme for this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) is sexual rights and the online world. The eight thematic reports introduce the theme from different perspectives, including the global policy landscape for sexual rights and the internet, the privatisation of spaces for free expression and engagement, the need to create a feminist internet, how to think about children and their vulnerabilities online, and consent and pornography online.

These thematic reports frame the 57 country reports that follow. The topics of the country reports are diverse, ranging from the challenges and possibilities that the internet offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LBGTQ) communities, to the active role of religious, cultural and patriarchal establishments in suppressing sexual rights, such as same-sex marriage and the right to legal abortion, to the rights of sex workers, violence against women online, and sex education in schools. Each country report includes a list of action steps for future advocacy.

The timing of this publication is critical: many across the globe are denied their sexual rights, some facing direct persecution for their sexuality (in several countries, homosexuality is a crime). While these reports seem to indicate that the internet does help in the expression and defence of sexual rights, they also show that in some contexts this potential is under threat – whether through the active use of the internet by conservative and reactionary groups, or through threats of harassment and violence.

The reports suggest that a radical revisiting of policy, legislation and practice is needed in many contexts to protect and promote the possibilities of the internet for ensuring that sexual rights are realised all over the world.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH
2015 Report
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ISBN 978-92-95102-07-1
9 789295 102071