


Roundtable report

*“The digital dimension of violence against women:
recognising and combating the phenomenon”*

11 May 2022
Pristina





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Pristina, Kosovo*

Hybrid Roundtable "The digital dimension of violence against women: recognising and combating the phenomenon"

The Embassy of Italy in Pristina (representing the Italian Presidency of the Committee of the Ministers of the Council of Europe) and the Council of Europe Office in Pristina marked the 11th anniversary of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) by organizing a hybrid roundtable on violence against women in the digital dimension.

The roundtable had a three-fold objective:

- Raise awareness in recognising and identifying the alarming phenomenon of the digital dimension of violence against women in its various forms.
- Initiate dialogue among stakeholders into taking action in providing a holistic response to digital violence against women.
- Provide concrete recommendations and best practices on measures to combat the digital dimension of violence against women.

The hybrid roundtable gathered around **30 participants in person and 20 remotely**, representatives of local authorities, local civil society, experts, academics and international organisations.

The Istanbul Convention is the most far-reaching international treaty to tackle violence against women. It defines the various forms of violence including physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence, which includes among others stalking, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, forced abortion and forced sterilisation. The advancement of technology has enabled new means of manifestation of these forms of violence against women. A [report](#) published by Laxton/ Women's Aid shows that 45% of domestic violence victims reported experiencing some form of abuse online during their relationship and 48% reported experiencing harassment or abuse online from their ex-partner once they had left the relationship.

Violence in the digital dimension affects women and girls disproportionately, which often goes unnoticed and is underreported. The Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) adopted [its first general recommendation on the digital dimension of violence against women on 20 October 2021](#). GREVIO calls on States parties to the Convention to recognise the gendered nature of violence and abuse perpetrated through technology and that it requires a holistic response.



AGENDA

10:00 a.m. Welcoming Remarks

- **Tankut Soykan**, Deputy Head of Office, Council of Europe Office in Pristina
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10:05 a.m. Keynote Speakers

- **His Excellency Antonello De Riu**, Ambassador, Embassy of Italy in Pristina
 - **Dr. Nita Shala**, Deputy Minister of Justice/ National Coordinator against Domestic Violence
-

10:20 a.m. Expert panel presentations

- **Maria-Andriani Kostopoulou**, GREVIO second vice-president
“GREVIO General Recommendation No.1 on digital dimension of violence against women”
 - **Olivia Soave**, Senior External Relations Manager at Kaspersky
“Technology solutions for combating online gender-based violence”
-

11:00 a.m. Panel Discussion: “How to combat the digital dimension of violence against women – the way forward”

Moderator: **Kaltrina Ajeti**, Journalist and Editor in Chief

Panelists:

- **Nazlie Bala**, Political Advisor to the Minister of Justice
 - **Sevdije Morina**, Deputy Chief Prosecutor, State Prosecutor Office
 - **Edi Gusia**, Executive Director, Agency for Gender Equality
 - **Luljeta Demolli**, Executive Director, Center for Gender Studies
 - **Mentor Hoxhaj**, President of NGO “Cybersecurity and Privacy (CSP)”
-

11:50 a.m. Open discussion

12:10 p.m. Closing remarks

- **Tankut Soykan**, Deputy Head of Office, Council of Europe Office in Pristina
-

10:00 a.m. | Welcoming Remarks

Tankut Soykan | Deputy Head of Office, Council of Europe Office in Pristina

Mr. Soykan welcomed participants, expressed his gratitude to everyone who joined the roundtable and introduced the aim of the event which was organised jointly by the Embassy of Italy in Pristina under the Italian Presidency of the Committee of the Ministers of the Council of Europe, and the Council of Europe Office in Pristina as part of the project "Reinforcing the fight against violence against women and domestic violence in Kosovo*¹ - phase III".



"The advancement of technology has enabled us to connect, share important information, speak up and raise awareness on human rights violations. But it has also provided additional fertile grounds for gender-based violence against women and girls to an alarming extent, and with little accountability. That's why this year the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) adopted the first general recommendation for online violence against women"

Mr. Soykan introduced the expert panel and the discussion panel of this roundtable and its objectives.

10:05 a.m. | Keynote Speakers

His Excellency Antonello De Riu | Ambassador of Italy in Pristina



Ambassador De Riu thanked everyone for their participation in the roundtable and highlighted the rapidly evolving rate of all forms of violence against women, including the digital dimension of it that needs our attention and fast reaction.

Ambassador De Riu emphasized "One in two women in EU has experienced physical or sexual violence since the age of 15, one in two experienced sexual harassment, one in twenty-five has been raped, and one in five women experienced stalking."

Ambassador De Riu highlighted that the multidimensional aspect of this phenomenon can be efficiently solved only through inter-institutional partnership and cooperation along governmental and non-governmental actors acting at all territorial levels.

Dr. Nita Shala | Deputy Minister of Justice/ National Coordinator against Domestic Violence

Dr. Shala expressed high appreciation for the event and specifically the topic, taking into account an increased presence of the violence against women in the digital dimension, in particular during the Covid-19 pandemic. Dr. Shala emphasized the commitment to raise awareness on this dimension of violence, increase the limited information we have about it, and undertake more coordinated initiatives to identify concerns prior to the occurrence of the harm and ensure that the local legislation applicable is being implemented. Dr. Shala highlighted that the cooperation of institutions with other actors remains of utmost importance.

"The National Strategy for Protection from Domestic Violence and Violence against Women 2022-2026 approved in January of this year, has included several activities that involve the media in the prevention and identification of violence. Only by working together we can end violence against women online and offline."



¹ *All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

10:20 a.m. | Expert panel presentations

Maria-Andriani Kostopoulou | GREVIO member: GREVIO General Recommendation No.1 on the digital dimension of violence against women

GREVIO is the independent expert body responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Prevention and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention).

In November 2021, GREVIO published the General Recommendation on the digital dimension of violence against women, offering a new and specific set of recommendations. The Recommendation is rooted in the Istanbul Convention, and it proposes specific actions to be taken based on the four pillars of the Istanbul Convention - Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Coordinated Policies. In addition, many forms of violence against women perpetrated through digital means require to be criminalised, including stalking.

Ms. Kostopoulou emphasised that psychological violence (covered in article 33 of the Istanbul Convention), is very much linked to all forms of digital and online psychological harm. A report commissioned by Women's Aid shows that 45% of domestic violence victims reported experiencing some form of abuse online during their relationship and 48% reported experiencing harassment or abuse online from their ex-partner once they had left the relationship. Around 38% reported online stalking once they had left the relationship, and 75% reported that the police did not know how to respond to online abuse and harassment.

Stalking (covered by Article 34 of the Istanbul Convention) in the digital dimension is conducted by spying, stealing the victims' passwords or hacking their accounts. The modern form of stalking is installing spyware or using connected devices to stalk the victim.

Some of the proposed actions of GREVIO General Recommendation No.1 on the digital dimension of violence against women include:

Prevention: *Education and training of professionals, challenging the stereotypes and harmful practices; enhance the digital literacy in society but especially among women and girls; Capacity building of health-care providers and judges and prosecutors on manifestation of online violence; Take actions to develop awareness raising campaigns; Incentivise media organisations and journalists in banning victim blaming attitude.*

Protection: *Accessibility of services across the country; Develop and disseminate information on legal mechanisms on digital violence; Equip women support services with financial and human resources including psychological counselling and legal advice; Establish mechanisms that will provide robust moderation of the content that goes against the principles of the Istanbul Convention. For example, they could remove the content or the account.*

Prosecution: *International co-operation and mutual legal assistance capacities of criminal justice actors in matters related to the digital dimension of violence against women should also be enhanced with a view to ensuring simplified access to evidence held by service providers, including subscriber information to identify the owner of an account or of an IP address used in the commission of an offence; Encourage private and ICT sector to participate in devising, and implementing policies and setting guidelines and self-regulatory standards in line with relevant human rights provisions to prevent and combat violence against women taking place in the digital sphere.*

Coordinated policies: design and implement comprehensive and co-ordinated policies at all levels of government and by all relevant agencies and institutions, involving government agencies, NGOs, national, regional and local parliaments and authorities; allocate appropriate human and financial resources to national and local governance bodies, as well as to legal aid, healthcare and social protection institutions, including women's organisations, to effectively prevent, protect from and prosecute violence against women perpetrated online and through technology.

The full GREVIO General Recommendation on the digital dimension of violence against women can be found [here](#).

Olivia Soave | Senior External Relations Manager at Kaspersky: Technology solutions for combating online gender-based violence

Ms. Soave presented technology solutions, by providing examples from the perspective of Kaspersky security company. Kaspersky works closely with the public and private sector and engages multiple players in its activities. The company deals with tech-facilitated abuse and specifically "Stalkerware", that enables a perpetrator to secretly spy on another person's private life. She emphasised that technology companies can and should be part of the solution in combating the digital dimension of violence against women.

Stalkerware is a popular software used for spying and cyberstalking. Although illegal in most countries, it is still easy to buy, install and use. The Coalition Against Stalkerware estimates that its usage exceeds 1 million incidences per year.

The Coalition Against Stalkerware aims to address and respond to Stalkerware by combining its partners' expertise in domestic violence survivor support and perpetrator work, digital rights advocacy, and cybersecurity to address the criminal behaviour perpetrated via stalkerware. The Coalition addresses this issue with more than 40+ members from all over the world, by creating cooperation where diverse players including IT security companies, academia research, law enforcement agencies, Interpol, and raising awareness on the issue.

The Coalition Against Stalkware works in three directions:

- 1. Awareness raising & Training:** by sharing knowledge, collecting data and discussing terminology with NGOs and other players. Last year, Kaspersky provided a technical training to more than 20 law enforcement officers, in cooperation with Interpol. Kaspersky and other members of the Coalition are also part of the DeStalk project, a European funded research project. In the framework of the project, a training on stalkerware and cyberviolence was developed for public entities, and organizations supporting victims of domestic violence.
- 2. Technology-based solutions to fight Stalkerware:** an example is the free open source Stalkerware detection tool called Tiny Check. The goal of Tiny Check is to help non-profit organisations support victims of violence against women or domestic violence and protect their privacy. The tool does not inform the perpetrator about the scan, checks all devices possible and is affordable and open source. It's also being implemented by law enforcement, judiciary bodies and others around the world.
- 3. Providing Privacy Alerts:** Providing more detailed warnings to users through antivirus solutions.

11:00 a.m. | Panel Discussion: “How to combat the digital dimension of violence against women – the way forward”

Nazlie Bala | Political Advisor to the Minister of Justice

Ms. Bala emphasised that all forms of violence are sanctioned by law and criminalised by the Penal Code, including when it occurs in the digital dimension. The data base on domestic violence at the Ministry of Justice has no specific category for online violence, therefore there are no data available for the cases nor the number of sentences.

The National Strategy for Protection from Domestic Violence and Violence against Women 2022-2026, which is based in the Istanbul Convention, addresses the issue of digital violence in its action plan.

Sevdije Morina | Deputy Chief Prosecutor, State Prosecutor Office

Ms. Morina expressed concerns about this complex phenomenon and that it affects disproportionately women and girls. She mentioned that even her female colleagues are part of the offensive comments attacks on social networks, which makes them hesitate to participate in media.

The word digital is rarely used in the Penal Code, but harassment via the internet, violence via the internet, intimidation which is done through words actions and gestures, blackmail and other forms of telephone harassment by frequent calling, messages and letters, and harassment are known as criminal offenses. When such cases are reported and the investigation begins, the first step is to obtain the perpetrator’s electronic equipment. As a challenge she mentioned that a case cannot be prosecuted if it does not match exactly the description of the criminal offense.

Ms. Morina also expressed concern about the lack of available psychologists specialised in domestic violence in such cases, which are of utmost importance during the interrogation.

Edi Gusia | Executive Director, Agency for Gender Equality

The absence of women in political and public life, gender-based stereotypes and patriarchal mentality have influenced violence to disproportionately affect women and girls. Education of young people on the prevention of violence should be addressed starting from primary school, while the aim is to prevent violence and not to remedy it.

The Agency for Gender Equality (AGE) conducted research on the role of the media on the impact of stereotypes on fostering sexism and results show many situations where women are victims of media attacks. AGE has also held specific trainings on basic concepts for the prevention of sexist approaches and information based on gender equality principles with central and local information officers; media companies; and journalism students.

Media can be used to inform young people about the legal framework that ensures gender equality. Ms. Gusia mentioned that UNESCO indicators that would inform the media about the elimination of sexist language against women are missing.

AGE has also drafted a manual on educating young generations in the spirit of gender equality and conducted research to improve educational curricula containing sexist language.

“Local institutions are functioning slowly in cases of digital violence against women reports, thus causing fear and insecurity to women for reporting violence.”

Luljeta Demolli | Executive Director, Centre for Gender Studies

The NGO “Centre for Gender Studies” conducted a research in 2012 asking young people about how much they control each other on the internet, and the findings are alarming. The usage of the technology is very widespread, according to Kosovo Agency of Statistics over 93% of households regularly use the internet.

Ms. Demolli emphasised that the middle-aged women using social media networks are especially vulnerable. They are less informed about safe use of the internet and very often can be victims of online violence. Another major concern is violence and harassment of women in politics. These women are being attacked by cyberbullying and this is not being addressed enough.

Institutional cooperation is crucial in preventing this phenomenon and local authorities should enhance the cooperation with the civil society. Women's NGOs are often considered more credible from the victims and very often they report violence directly to the NGOs before going to the police. Moreover, NGOs conduct research and have considerable data of the field, which could be used by the local authorities.

Online threats need to be taken more seriously and responded quickly by the local authorities. If someone threatens online to take your life, the risk is high that this person will actually do it in real life. We must keep in mind the rapid circulation that takes place through the internet and the violence caused in digital form can spread very quickly, therefore the reaction should be much faster.

Mentor Hoxhaj | President of the NGO “Cybersecurity and Privacy (CSP)”

Mr. Hoxhaj highlighted the political challenges in the use of online platforms and social media networks and the negative impact that they bring in preventing and combating violence through digital platforms. Due to the fact that Kosovo* is not recognised by digital platforms, neither by Google nor by Microsoft, the possibility of reporting the online violence that these platforms offer cannot be done.

We need to ban the digital platforms where photos and videos are distributed at extremely high speeds. Social networks are not safe, not even those like Snapchat which promote that photos and videos are destroyed instantly, this is not true. The TikTok platform is very hard to be controlled and is used widely by teenagers even children. A software was offered to Kosovo Police which identifies nude images and cut short the spread of identified photos on the Internet, there is no information on the usage of this software.

“The most important part in prevention is education and that there is a need for continuous institutional cooperation on national and local level.”



Recommendations and next steps for local authorities identified during the panel and open discussion:

GENERAL:

- Enhance the multi-agency and multi-institutional cooperation in combatting digital violence against women.
- Include the digital component of violence against women in all related legislations and mechanisms, and establish a national forum that would address online violence.
- Provide extensive education at the local level targeting young generations on the safe use of technology and the internet.
- Include trained psychologists specialised on violence against women and domestic violence in courts and prosecutor offices during the interrogation.

SPECIFIC:

- Develop a protocol on cases of online violence to gather the online evidence effectively.
- Conduct awareness raising campaigning on digital violence against women, targeting duty-bearers such as from the education, health and social services.
- Include online violence in the free hotline support, this would make the reaction to the phenomenon faster rather than going first to the police and undertaking a long procedure.
- Include the online violence in the existing “zero tolerance to harassment” policy within the local authorities. Each institution should have an email address where complaints can be directed anonymously or not anonymously.
- Prosecute religious personalities with influence who incite hatred or violence against women via online platforms (mainly via Youtube channel).

12:10 p.m. | Closing remarks

Tankut Soykan | Deputy Head of Office, Council of Europe Office in Pristina

The vivid discussion that took place during this hybrid roundtable shows that this is a very present phenomenon and needs a holistic response. We learned a lot during this discussion and identified concrete steps on addressing and combating the violence against women in the digital dimension. Mr. Soykan expressed his gratitude to all participants who were present and contributed to the discussion.

The Council of Europe project "Reinforcing the fight against violence against women and domestic violence in Kosovo* - phase III" aims at defining a concrete roadmap for strengthening Kosovo's* legal and policy frameworks as well as building institutional capacities to prevent and counter violence against women and domestic violence in line with the standards of the Istanbul Convention.

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