

The Human Rights–Based Approach to Combat Cyberbullying Against Women and Girls

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INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying against women and girls has become more prevalent when the Internet and mobile technologies become more widely available and accessible in terms of cost. The use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) by an individual or group to intentionally embarrass, taunt, harass, threaten, torment or humiliate a woman or a girl takes places in blogs, on chat rooms or social networking sites, through emails, voice mails, texting, instant messaging, photo or video-clip sharing. This has led to multifaceted consequences that negatively affect the woman's or the girl's self-esteem, physical and mental health, behaviours, relationship with other people and motivation to live, study and work. At present, actions taken to combat cyberbullying against women and girls remain inadequate because of insufficient attention and support and deeply held prejudices against women. In order to have an in-depth investigation into this issue, this study examines what cyberbullying is, its causes and consequences, and a human rights based approach to combat cyberbullying against women and girls.

BACKGROUND

Women and girls have long been victims of physical violence and sexual violence. According to the 2013 Global Estimates published by World Health Organization, about 1 in 3 (35 percent) of women worldwide “have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime” (World Health Organization, 2017). Violence against women and girls “is prevalent in every society in the world” (UNiTE, n.d.) that it “cuts across boundaries of wealth, race and culture” (UNiTE, n.d.). It “is rooted in gender-based discrimination and social norms and gender stereotypes that perpetuate such violence” (UN Women, n.d.). Although some measures have been taken by governments across countries to end such violence, the continued prevalence of violence against women and girls is “yet to be tackled with all the necessary political commitment, action and resources” (UNiTE, n.d.).

Over the past decade, cyberbullying has become a new form of violence against women and girls. Cyberbullying refers to the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) by an individual or group to intentionally embarrass, taunt, harass, threaten, torment or humiliate a person through a range of hostile and aggressive behaviours, such as trolling, stalking or doxing. Trolling disturbs or harms another person by posting irrelevant, unpleasant and offensive messages online while stalking causes a person to fear for his or her safety or suffer other emotional distress by willfully tracing, following and monitoring

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such person online without his or her consent. Doxing involves revealing identifiable information about someone online without his or her consent, including one's real name, home address, phone number and email address (Amnesty International, 2018, p.29). Over the past decade, cyberbullying has become more prevalent when the Internet and mobile technologies become more widely available and accessible in terms of cost. It takes places in blogs, on chat rooms or social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. It also takes places through emails, voice mails, texting, instant messaging, photo or video-clip sharing. "As the bullying process continues, the frequency and intensity of the aggressions tend to increase" (Forssell, 2018). Cyberbullying involves an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim due to the perpetrator having the expert knowledge of the Internet (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004), the anonymity of the perpetrator, the aggression directed towards the victim and the fear created in the victim (Betts, 2016, pp.15-16). Cyberbullies are able to "hide their identities by using screen names and well-hidden internet protocol addresses, leaving the target vulnerable and unsettled" (Hoff and Mitchell, 2009, p.653). While most of the time the identities of cyberbullies are unknown to the victims, cyberbullies can be someone from the victim's social circle, such as a close friend, a classmate, a co-worker, a current or former boyfriend or girlfriend. In the virtual world, the removal of geographical and time constraints allows the acts associated with cyberbullying to be witnessed by an unlimited audience (Betts, 2016, p.39). This has the effect of the victim "experiencing repeated humiliation because although the act is not repeated the negative experience associated with it is" (Betts, 2016, p.38).

In recent years, cyberbullying has become alarmingly common among women and girls. A study that examined cyberbullying risk among teenagers in the United States (U.S.) found that adolescent females were more at risk for cyberbullying than adolescent males (Navarro and Jasinski, 2012, pp.89-90). A study that examined cyberbullying among 1,928 German, Dutch and Thai adolescents found that girls were more likely than boys to be victims while boys were more likely than girls to be bullies (Wachs et al., 2015). Another study that examined cyberbullying among 6,260 students aged 11-23 from six European countries found that girls were victims more often while boys were perpetrators more often (Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2015). Similar results can also be found in Canada (Li, 2006; Ronis and Slaunwhite, 2017), Sweden (Låftman et al, 2013), Israel (Heiman and Olenik-Shemesh, 2015), Belfast (Savoldi and Ferraz de Abreu, 2016) and Nigeria (Olumide et al., 2016). A study that examined over 5,300 students aged 11-15 in the United Kingdom (UK) found that girls were twice as likely as boys to report being cyberbullied (Public Health England, 2014, p.4). A study that examined cyberbullying among university students in Canada found that more female than male students experienced cyberbullying by a friend or acquaintance at the university and "female students were much more likely than males to report having experienced cyberbullying over social networks and via text messages" (Faucher et al., 2014). A large-scale study on cyberbullying among 31,148 teenagers found that cyberbullying victimization was more prevalent in females than males and female adolescents were more vulnerable to emotional and behavioural problems as a result of cyberbullying (Kim et al., 2018, p.669). In 2017, a survey conducted by Amnesty International revealed that about a quarter of 4,000 women surveyed across eight countries had experienced online abuse or harassment at least once and over 40 percent of them said that such experience threatened their physical safety (Amnesty International, 2017). The problem of cyberbullying against women and girls is a serious problem that deserves an in-depth investigation.

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