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Social Networks as a Means of Combating Gender-Based Violence

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Abstract

Cyberbullying of women and girls is not just a violation of human rights, it is a global phenomenon that is destroying the lives of women and their families around the world. Using a hermeneutic documentary methodology, the objective of the study was to determine the legal mechanisms for the use of social networks as a means of combating gender violence and thus outline the main problems of their application of the law. Everything indicates that social networks, as an effective means of forming positive public opinions, can form a positive image of women and the appropriate attitude of men towards them, and as well as contribute to combating violence on the Internet. The system for combating gender-based violence consists of prevention, protection, criminal responsibility, and a comprehensive gender policy. It concludes that international gender policy standards have been found to be based on a model of «real equality», which is ensured through the achievement of equal opportunities, equal access to opportunities and equal performance.

Keywords: cyberbullying; gender-based violence; gender equality; social networks; women.

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Las Redes Sociales como Medio para Combatir la Violencia de Género

Resumen

El acoso cibernético de mujeres y niñas no es solo una violación de los derechos humanos, es un fenómeno global que está destruyendo la vida de las mujeres y sus familias en todo el mundo. Mediante una metodología documental de tipo hermenéutica, el objetivo del estudio fue determinar los mecanismos legales para el uso de las redes sociales como medio de lucha contra la violencia de género y esbozar así los principales problemas de su aplicación de la ley. Todo indica que las redes sociales, como medio eficaz para formar opiniones públicas positivas, puedan formar una imagen positiva de las mujeres y la actitud adecuada de los hombres hacia ellas, y así como contribuir a combatir la violencia en Internet. El sistema de lucha contra la violencia de género consiste en la prevención, la protección, la responsabilidad penal y una política integral de género. Se concluye que se ha comprobado que las normas internacionales de política de género se basan en un modelo de «igualdad real», que se garantiza mediante el logro de la igualdad de oportunidades, la igualdad de acceso a las oportunidades y la igualdad de resultados.

Palabras clave: ciberacoso; violencia de género; igualdad de género; redes sociales; mujeres.

Introduction

According to the United Nations Telecommunication Union, the number of Internet users is growing by an average of 10% each year. The Internet is most used in the EU, at around 87%, with the lowest rate of 19% in Africa. There is a gender gap between Internet users worldwide: 58% are men and 48% are women (International Telecommunication Union, n. d.). The spread of the Internet, the rapid popularity of mobile information and communication technologies and the relevance of social networks opens up new opportunities for cyberbullying, the most common victims of which are women and girls. Violence against women and girls is a complex and global phenomenon that knows no social, economic or national boundaries. It is a serious violation of human rights, which goes unpunished in many cases.

Over the past seventy years, the United Nations and the Council of Europe have adopted a number of international instruments to combat violence against women. These are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Council of Europe Convention on the

Prevention of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. However, the established international legal mechanism is not always adhered to by countries, and services for victims remain limited or underfunded. At the same time, the norms of national legislation and the available support for victims of violence vary greatly in each country of the world.

The research is topical because gender-based violence committed through social networks, which have now flooded all spheres of human life and become an integral part of it, is a global problem with serious consequences for society and the economy around the world. Cyberbullying of women and girls is not only a violation of human rights, but also a life-destroying issue for women and their families around the world.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to define the principles of gender equality through the prism of international standards and means of combating gender-based violence committed using information and communication tools.

The aim involved the following research objectives:

- determine and describe the principles of protection of gender equality and the system of counteraction to gender-based violence.
- identify the main problems of using social networks in combating cyberbullying and suggest ways to solve them.

1. Literature Review

Many scientific papers have addressed some of the issues related to gender-based violence committed on the Internet and the means of combating cyberbullying. Yao *et al.* (2021) analysed the impact of time and trust on the spread of false rumours on social networks. Levak (2020) revealed the reasons for the spread of misinformation on the Internet through the prism of European concepts of combating them. Tripathy *et al.* (2010; 2013) analysed the effectiveness of the use of technical and information tools to combat false rumours in social networks. Soares and Sousa (2020) revealed the place and role of digital communications in changing the behaviour of the population and established a direct dependence of human behaviour on the influence of information flow through communication technologies. Gupta *et al.* (2018) identified the effectiveness of the use of social networks as a police tool to combat gender-based cyberbullying.

Van Laer (2014) analysed cyberbullying in the social media and identified the main preconditions for committing gender-based violence on the Internet. Sarkar and Rajan (2021) considered harassment of women on the Internet and recognized this phenomenon as a component of

cyberbullying. Zych *et al.* (2021) also studied cyber-aggression in social networks and recognized it as a component of cyberbullying. Henry *et al.* (2020) studied the phenomenon of domestic and sexual violence against adult women using digital communication technologies. Their research identified the problems of cyberbullying related to the abuse of access to digital content, cyberbullying by an intimate partner, sexual harassment on the Internet using technology and images.

Chan *et al.* (2021) studied cyberbullying on social networks and identified the preconditions for its commission against minors. Marín-Cortés and Linne (2020) considered the classification of cyberbullying among young people, where they included: data theft, online defamation, digital information theft, cyberbullying, sexual harassment, and revenge. Salih *et al.* (2019) studied the factors of cyberterrorism, as well as means of counteraction, and found that the precondition for the cyberterrorism is the inconsistency of criminal, constitutional, private, and civil law.

Analysing the support centres for victims of cyberbullying, Zou *et al.* (2021) and MacLure and Jones (2021) recognize the effectiveness of the computer security support service in helping victims who have experienced violence from an intimate partner. Fiolet *et al.* (2021), Rocha-Silva *et al.* (2021) Yardley (2021) considered the causes of domestic and intimate violence committed through information technology and determined that the anonymity generated by electronic communication technologies contributes to the cruelty of domestic violence.

The victimization of gender-based violence on social media was analysed by Caridade *et al.* (2019) through the prism of cyber dating abuse among minors in the United States; Mahoney *et al.* (2021) and Mikkola *et al.* (2020), which they associate with the dependence of daily use of digital technologies, relationship disorders and jealousy. Gender abuse in digital relationships among young people was studied by Brown *et al.* (2021), who identified a gender difference in cyberbullying committed by men and women. The activities of feminist organizations in the fight against online gender-based violence were considered. Kurasawa *et al.* (2021) found that feminist ideology contributes to the establishment of cultural and social values among young people.

Despite a rather wide range of research on this issue, the means of combating gender-based violence on social networks, as well as the causes of gender-based violence on social networks and ways to overcome them are poorly studied, which determines the research topicality.

2. Methods and Materials

The research of the chosen topic was carried out in three stages. At the first initial stage, the research topic was formulated by reviewing the current state of the problem of cyberbullying against women. Besides, the aim and objectives of the study were set based on the analysis of the scientific legal literature, legal framework on gender equality and the works of scientists on combating gender-based violence by comparing and criticizing problem information, generalization, and coverage of the issue.

The second stage involved the scientific research itself conducted through the fulfilment of the research objectives set at the beginning. The study of the topic was carried out through theoretical and experimental research. Theoretical research allowed determining the content of gender equality through the prism of international law, the principles of gender equality and the system of means to combat cyberbullying revealed through the prism of their practical application. An experimental study based on UN statistics and the Broadband Commission for Digital Development, the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, generalizing the practical application of international law in the field of gender equality helped identify models of gender equality and combating gender-based violence.

The third stage provided for the analysis and presentation of the results of scientific research. The general analysis of theoretical and experimental research, comparison of their results, and the analysis of differences identified the main problems of using social networks as an effective means of combating gender-based violence on the Internet.

The research of the chosen topic was carried out using empirical and theoretical methods of scientific knowledge. From the perspective of external relations (regulatory and legal support, legal relations), empirical knowledge reflects the object of study (gender-based violence committed through social networks). Using the methods of analysis and a logical approach, we consider scientific, legal, and practical information on gender equality and violence, and reveal the content of cyberbullying against women and girls, its causes, principles and means of counteraction. Theoretical knowledge of cyberbullying reflects this subject of research from the perspective of universal internal, essential connections and regularities which are covered by rational processing of empirical data. The combination of these two methods of scientific knowledge generates an empirical interpretation of the theory and theoretical interpretation of empirical data, as well as provides a comprehensive coverage of cyberbullying against women and means of counteracting it.

The sample included the following objects of the research: the legal nature of gender equality, its principles, as well as the preconditions for the cyberbullying against women and girls, as well as the means of counteracting

it. The combination of these objects helped to reveal the content of the problem of using social networks as a means of combating gender-based violence. The research was carried out on the basis of information retrieval using a computer, the global computer network — Internet — and scientometric databases.

The main materials for the study are international legal acts: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Charter and the Statute of the International Court of Justice, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Council of Europe Convention on Prevention of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.

3. Results

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) establishes the principle of non-discrimination and proclaims that: all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights (Article 1); everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms proclaimed in it, without distinction of any kind, including sex (Articles 2, 5); everyone has the right to equal protection against any discrimination and against any incitement to such discrimination (art. 7). In addition, the Declaration sets out anti-violence rules. Article 5 stipulates that no one shall be subject to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

The principle of equality between men and women and non-discrimination is enshrined in both the UN Charter and the Statute of the International Court of Justice. Its preamble contains a call: “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women” (United Nations, 1945: n/p).

The main provisions of modern policies to promote gender equality in the world are set out in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (United Nations, 1979). The main theme of the Convention reflected in the preamble and articles is the formulation of calls for practical action by States to eliminate discrimination against women. They are provided in the first sixteen articles, while the remaining twelve provide reporting requirements and administrative mechanisms for implementing the provisions of the Convention. At the international level, this international document emphasizes the responsibility of governments for discrimination against women, not only in the public but also in the private sphere, that is for discrimination in the family. The structure of the Convention is based on the model of “real equality” (Figure 1).

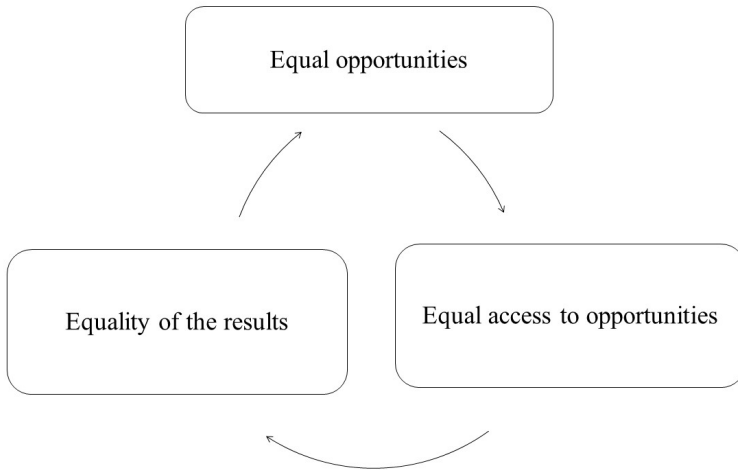


Figure 1: Gender equality model

Source: authors based on United Nations (1979).

Equality of opportunities is guaranteed by the commitment of state parties to take in all areas, including political, social, economic, and cultural, all relevant measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and progress of women in order to ensure enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men (United Nations, 1979: Article 3). That is, such equal access of women to all resources of the country should be guaranteed by the legislation, policy of the state and executive bodies.

Equality of access to opportunities is guaranteed by committing States to take appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women, and to ensure women's rights on an equal footing with men in political and social life, education, employment, health, economic and social spheres. Besides, states take measures to eliminate discrimination against women in relation to representing their governments at the international level and participating in the work of international organizations, as well as the acquisition, change and preservation of their citizenship and their children (United Nations, 1979: Articles 7-14). Such equality is guaranteed by the state's obligation to remove obstacles to the exercise of women's rights.

Equality of the results is guaranteed by the obligation of states to recognize women as equal with men before the law (United Nations, 1979: Article 15). Therefore, the states undertake not only to take appropriate measures to protect the rights of men and women, but also to ensure that their equivalent results are recognized.

The principle of equality between women and men is established by the Convention on the Prevention of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Council of Europe, 2011). The provisions of the Concept oblige states to: take measures to ensure women's rights and eliminate discrimination against women; create a system of competent bodies to combat gender-based violence; identify stalking, forced abortions, forced sterilization, female genital mutilation and forced marriages as criminal acts. The Convention on the Prevention of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence reveals the content of important concepts on gender-based violence. Article 3 defines violence against women as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and means all acts of gender-based violence that cause or may cause physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life (Council of Europe, 2011: Article 3).

States are obliged to comply with the provisions of this Convention by taking measures to protect the rights of women victims of violence without any discriminatory grounds, including gender (Council of Europe, 2011: Article 4). The Convention applies to all forms of violence against women, including violence committed on the Internet. The structure of this Convention is based on a model of four basic principles: prevention, protection, criminal liability, and a comprehensive national gender policy (Figure 2).

The European Court of Human Rights (2020) identified the gender-based violence on social networks (that is cyber-violence) as a form of domestic violence against women in 2020. This was done by the judgment in *Buturugă v. Romania* related to cyberbullying. The case involved the victim's ex-husband illegally entering her web pages, including her Facebook account, and making copies of her conversations, private documents, and photographs. At the same time, the victim repeatedly appealed to the police, but they rejected her complaints, arguing that her ex-husband's behaviour was not serious enough to qualify as a crime in terms of domestic violence.

The European Court of Human Rights (2020) has ruled that cyberbullying is currently recognized as a form of violence against women and girls and can take many forms, including cyber intrusion in private life, intrusion into a victim's computer and the seizure, dissemination and manipulation of information or images, in particular private. Besides, the decision emphasizes that domestic violence, although it is physical violence, may include, but is not limited to, psychological violence or intimidation. Therefore, the European Court of Human Rights has recognized that the monitoring, access to or saving of spouses' correspondence without the right to do so must be taken into account when law enforcement agencies investigate domestic violence. The European Court of Human Rights has

ruled that cyberbullying is not just harassment on the Internet, but can also be a form of violence.

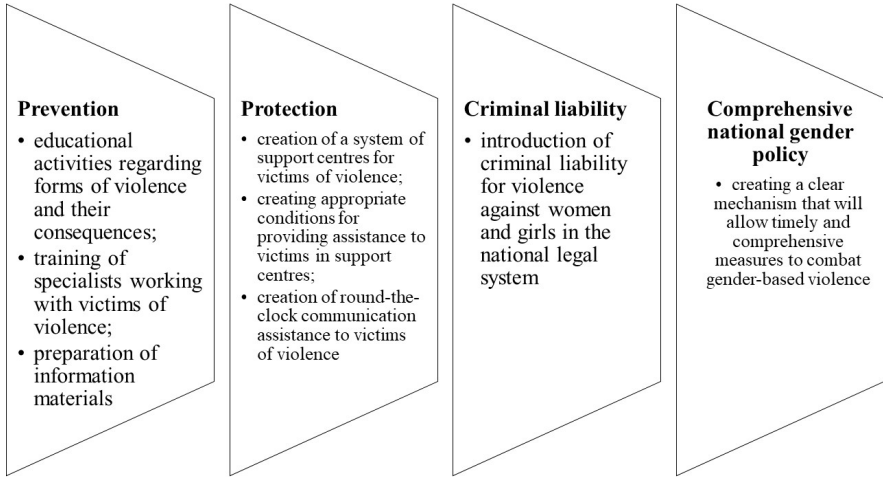


Figure 2: The system of counteracting gender-based violence

Source: authors based on Council of Europe (2011).

Gender-based violence is a manifestation of cyberbullying against women and girls through electronic means of communication and the Internet. Although cyberbullying can affect both women, girls and men, men are less sensitive to various forms of cyberbullying. The peculiarity of cyberbullying is that it has no boundaries and no time limits, because information can be spread instantly around the world. This type of violence is manifested by the manipulation of a person's psycho-emotional state and behaviour through the imposition of erroneous and dangerous ideas, beliefs, worldview. Unfortunately, the most common victims of cyberbullying are children, especially adolescents, as they spend a lot of time on virtual communication, entertainment and learning.

Cyberbullying of women and girls can take many forms, including: distributing pornographic material without the person's consent; gender-based abusive remarks; cyberstalking; messages with threats of harassment, hatred, coercion to sex, rape and murder; human trafficking online, etc. Besides, the manifestations of cyberbullying include: sending e-mails to intimidate and blackmail; dissemination of false information and false rumours; hacking of social network accounts, e-mail; discussion of people in public chats and forums in order to discredit and humiliate

them; use other people's passwords to change the account profile, etc. The main gender differences in terms of abuse on social networks are shown in Figure 3.

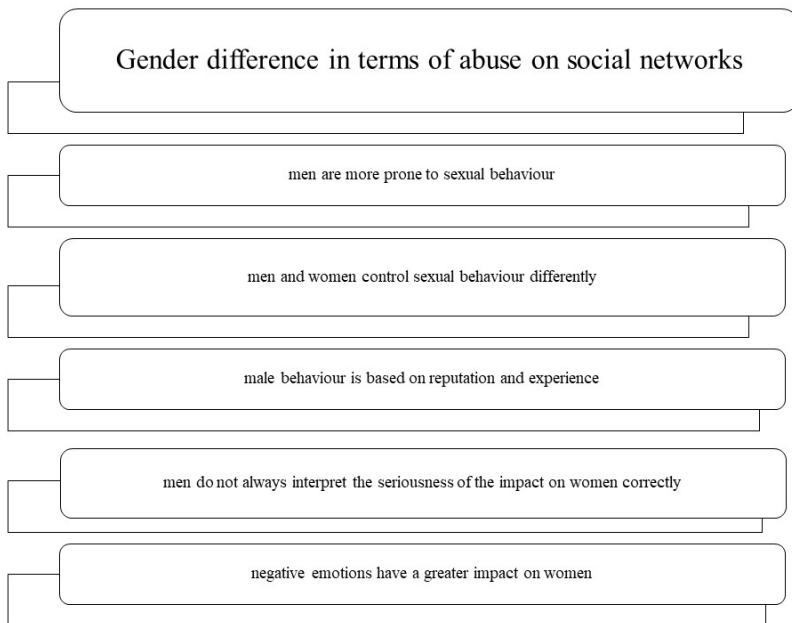


Figure 3: The main gender differences regarding abuses in the information space

Source: authors based on Brown *et al.* (2020).

According to the UN, every third woman in the world has suffered from violence. Every second woman killed in the world is killed by her partner or relative. Cyberbullying of women and girls can significantly increase this data, as Broadband Commission for Digital Development reports show that almost 73% of women have suffered from some form of online violence (Broadband commission for digital development, 2015). At the same time, some women and girls hide the fact of injuries from various forms of cyberbullying. This situation is explained by the fact that most of the content on the Internet and social networks is aimed at aggression against women or is a manifestation of it, for example, almost 94% of all content in adult films contain scenes with aggressive actions against women.

After watching pornography, men more often: report a decrease in empathy for rape victims; have a tendency to aggressive behaviour; believe that women who dress freely are more likely to be raped; feel angry at women who flirt but then refuse to have sex; experience a decrease in sexual interest in their girlfriends or wives; there is an increased interest in forcing partners to have sex. And given that boys aged 12 to 17 are the largest group of consumers of Internet porn, the first pornographic images they viewed will form their perceptions of sex and intimate relationships with violence against women (Broadband commission for digital development, 2015).

However, social networks can be not only a negative side contributing to cyberbullying of women and girls, but can also be a means of combating gender-based violence, as social networks as a source of information have a significant level of trust among the audience. Their versatility, associated with the ability to structure the communication space and objectively contribute to the development of civil society, make them a specific source of information. Social networks are increasingly becoming to some extent an informational imprint of civic activity, which uses such a communication channel to spread ideas, unite like-minded people in the community, organize events, and so on. Currently, almost all socially significant events leave certain information on social networks.

Law enforcement agencies actively use social networks not only to report the indicators of their activities, but also to form a certain awareness and social behaviour aimed at not committing illegal acts, which in turn will improve the crime rate. In order to combat fakes and misinformation, the competent authorities and developers of Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube, Reddit, Microsoft and LinkedIn must provide society with adequate access to the safe use of social communication networks. Therefore, in the fight against gender-based violence, there are effective social networks that can form a positive image of women, girls, mothers, wives, colleagues, girlfriends, as well as the proper attitude of men to them.

4. Discussion

Problems of using social networks as a means of combating cyberbullying against women and girls are associated with the lack of a coherent system of coordinated measures to combat gender-based violence and effective action of competent bodies to combat violence, as well as support centres for victims of domestic violence, which promote preventive and educational activities in the field of gender equality. Combating cyberbullying can be implemented through social networks by forming the basic values of gender equality through their content.

Social networking websites provide a platform for the rapid exchange of information, which can be a platform for spreading baseless rumours that are potentially harmful. Yao *et al.* (2021) believe that rumours can repeatedly change people's beliefs depending on their greater plausibility. Trust is used to spread false rumours, which allows measuring the influence of one person on others. People often hope to find people who have the least trust, but are able to achieve maximum impact. The impact of time and trust on the spread of anti-rumours on social networks was investigated by R.M. Tripathy, A. Bagchi, S. Mehta. According to them, time and trust are the main indicators that contribute to the emergence of false rumours on social networks.

An effective means of combating the spread of such rumours on social networks is the introduction of agents on the Internet, even if they do not transmit information (Tripathy *et al.*, 2010). Reputable methods of combating rumours on the social network have largely failed, because people do not obey the same authority. Therefore, to combat rumours, using the trust that people have in their friends is effective (Tripathy *et al.*, 2013). Levak proposes to apply methods of recognizing, preventing, and combating the phenomenon of misinformation on the Internet (Levak, 2020).

Soares and Sousa argue that digital social communications with the media have a positive impact on people's awareness, change their behaviour and awareness (Soares and Sousa, 2020). Their effectiveness, according to Gupta *et al.* (2018), is manifested in the activities of law enforcement agencies, which form certain content on the Internet to address the ticklish problem of modern society — combating domestic violence. According to Zou *et al.* (2021) and MacLure and Jones (2021) computer security support services should also counteract violence committed by an intimate partner on social networks. The competence of those services depends on the knowledge of employees who are able to provide effective assistance to victims and monitor the prevalence of such cases (MacLure and Jones, 2021; Zou *et al.*, 2021). Kurasawa *et al.* (2021) believes that feminist organizations, which are a model for the formation of epistemological, cultural and socio-political values, can make the contribution to the fight against gender-based online violence (Kurasawa *et al.*, 2021).

Cyberbullying can have negative consequences for social media users, in particular emotional stress, which not only leads to the refusal to use social websites but can also lead to suicide. Marín-Cortés and Linne (2021) singled out six main manifestations of cyberbullying: information theft, defamation on the Internet, impersonating another person, cyberbullying, sex harassment and porn in revenge (Marín-Cortés and Linne, 2021). According to Van Laer (2014), countering cyberbullying on the Internet should be realized in the form of video stories, rather than a selection of

analytical factors, and informing about the existing experience with which users associate themselves (Van Laer, 2014). Chan *et al.* (2021) believe that cyberbullying on social media should be counteracted by analysing the relationship between perpetrators, victims and bystanders.

Sarkar and Rajan (2021) divide violence against women on social networks into virtual and physical. Women who have experienced cyberbullying overestimate the structure of disembodied and embodied violence and are more wary of possible cases of cyberbullying in the future. Investigating cyber-aggression in social networks, Zych *et al.* (2021) consider its manifestation through interethnic relations, including the relationship between the individual and the social network user. As Salih *et al.* (2019), noted, the formation of cyberterrorism, including gender-based, is associated with the inconsistency and ineffectiveness of international legal and national mechanisms to counter it. Such a legal vacuum leads to large-scale uncontrolled consequences and losses around the world, which have no principles: age, race, religion and gender (Salih *et al.*, 2019). Harris and Vitis (2020) argue that society should create safe content of social networks and establish legal mechanisms for its regulation that will guarantee women's rights (Harris and Vitis, 2020).

Studying the phenomenon of domestic violence committed through social networks, the media and through outsiders, Fiolet *et al.* (2021) and Yardley (2021) emphasize the complexity of the abuse through the use of technology and its integral role in domestic violence (Yardley, 2021). According to Caridade *et al.* (2019) and Rocha-Silva *et al.* (2021) means of counteracting intimate violence committed in social networks should include analysis of age categories of victims and users of social networks and cyber dating abuse (Caridade *et al.*, 2019). As Brown *et al.* (2021) state, young men are more likely to face a multifaceted model of humiliation in social networks, and women are more likely to face a multidimensional model of sexual coercion. And only a multidimensional model of monitoring, control of threats demonstrates gender equality.

Mahoney *et al.* (2021) Mikkola *et al.* (2020) consider that victimization of gender-based violence on social networks is associated with jealousy, relationship disorders and the intensity of daily cell phone use. Henry *et al.* (2020) believe that in order to solve and fully understand the problems of gender-based violence in social networks, it is necessary to carry out a comprehensive study of subjects — women who have experienced abuse and violence through digital technology (Henry *et al.*, 2020).

As a result of the doctrinal analysis of the said problems of gender-based violence in social networks, we can note that scientists consider it reasonable to conduct further research on gender-based violence in social networks, provide effective recommendations for their practical implementation, which would adjust the directions of development of legal mechanisms for creating safe content on social networks.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying of women and girls is violence by a person or group of persons through information and communication tools against another person to harass, intimidate, violate the right to safe use of the Internet for education, communication, work, and leisure. This type of violence is characterized by inequality of power (men are stronger than women), systemic nature (regular sending of threats-messages), as well as asociality and anonymity (no direct contact with the victim).

The system for combating gender-based violence should be based on four basic principles: prevention, protection, criminal liability, and a comprehensive national gender policy. Educational activities on forms of violence and their consequences, training of specialists working with victims of violence and the availability of handouts will prevent violence against women.

The introduction of a system of support centres for victims of violence and the creation of appropriate conditions for aiding victims in support centres will allow protecting victims from repeated violence. The introduction of criminal liability for violence against women and girls in the national legal system will establish a mechanism for punishing such illegal actions. Gender-based violence can be effectively combated by creating a clear mechanism that will allow for the timely implementation of comprehensive and coordinated measures to combat gender-based violence. Social networks as an effective means of establishing positive public views can form a positive image of women and the proper attitude of men to them, thus will contribute to combating violence on the Internet.

The prospect of further research is to develop mechanisms to combat cyberbullying against women and girls, aimed at ensuring gender equality and protecting the rights of women and girls. Therefore, we consider the empirical study, as well as theoretical and methodological justification of effective systems for combating gender-based violence and a coherent policy on gender equality to be prospects of further research.

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