

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

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Introduction

Kosovo was the last country to break away from the former Yugoslavia, declaring its independence in 2008. The small Balkan state, with a population of approximately two million people, is still recovering from the debilitating aftermath of its armed conflict with Serbia in 1999 and has yet to become a full member of the European Union (EU) or the United Nations.

Although women participated in Kosovo's struggle for independence as political actors, activists, aid workers and fighters, they were for the most part pushed out of decision-making roles after the conflict.¹ Kosovo remains a deeply patriarchal society, with documented struggles around issues such as domestic violence,² sexual harassment,³ rape,⁴ women's employment,⁵ equal inheritance rights for men and women,⁶ the use of contraception⁷ and the division of household labour.⁸

Similarly, Kosovo's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community faces serious and systemic prejudice and lives under the constant threat of hate crimes.⁹ Stringent EU standards for human rights legislation and the international presence in Kosovo have ensured a basic measure of legal protection from discrimination, particularly in the constitution and in anti-discrimination laws.¹⁰ However, the divide between laws and their implementation forces many members of the LGBT community to hide their identities, out of fear of attack or social stigma.¹¹

Policy and political background

Kosovo's legislation, most of which has been rewritten and adopted since the end of the armed conflict in 1999, includes protections against discrimination on the grounds of gender and sexual orientation – specifically the first article of the constitution, the Anti-Discrimination Law and the Law on Gender Equality. However, there are some inconsistencies concerning the language used to refer to gender identity and sexual orientation in Kosovo's legislation, which complicate the application of the law. For example, Article 37 of Kosovo's constitution¹² states that “everyone enjoys the right to marry,” whereas article 14 of Kosovo's Law on Family¹³ only recognises marriages between a man and a woman. Kosovo's Law on Gender Equality¹⁴ refers to women as “females” and men as “males”, complicating the division between gender and biological sex.

1 Marku, H. (2013, 8 December). No Rewards for Kosovo's Women of War. *Balkan Insight*. www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/no-rewards-for-kosovo-s-women-of-war

2 Kosova Women's Network. (2008). *Exploratory Research on the Extent of Gender-Based Violence in Kosova and Its Impact on Women's Reproductive Health*. Prishtina: Kosova Women's Network. www.womensnetwork.org/documents/20130120165614663.pdf

3 Farnsvden, U., Fansworth, N., & Qosaj-Mustafa, A. (2014). *Country Gender Profile: An Analysis of Gender Differences at All Levels in Kosovo*. Prishtina: Embassy of Sweden. www.swedenabroad.com/ImageVaultFiles/id_20757/cf_347/Orgut_Kosovo_Gender_Profile_FINAL_2014-05-08.PDF

4 Luci, N. (2002). Engendering Masculinity in Kosovo: Can Albanian Women Say No? *The Anthology of East Europe Review*, 20(2). scholarworks.dlib.indiana.edu/journals/index.php/aeer/article/viewFile/458/564

5 Gashi, A., & Rizvanolli, A. (2015). *The Cost of Patriarchy: Excluding Women from the Workforce is the Main Bottleneck to Development*. Prishtina: Democracy for Development. d4d-ks.org/assets/2015-02-16-Inactivity_web.pdf

6 Joireman, S. F. (2015). Resigning Their Rights? Impediments to Women's Property Ownership in Kosovo. *Political Science Faculty Publications*. Paper 44. scholarship.richmond.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1056&context=polisci-faculty-publications

7 Marku, H. (2013). Learning Sex in Kosovo. *Kosovo 2.0, 4 (Sex)*. hana-marku.com/2013/11/30/learning-sex-in-kosovo-one-way-or-another

8 Beilock, R., & Havolli, Y. (2005). Gender: Kosova's Other Challenge. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 7(2). vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1436&context=jiws

9 Youth Initiative for Human Rights. (2013). *Freedom and Protection for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgender in Kosovo*. Prishtina: Youth Initiative for Human Rights.

ks.yihr.org/public/fck_files/ksfile/LGBT%20report/Freedom%20and%20Protection%20for%20LGBT%20in%20Kosovo.pdf

10 US Department of State. (2015). *Kosovo 2014 Human Rights Report*. Washington: US Department of State. www.state.gov/documents/organization/236752.pdf

11 Ibid.

12 Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo. 15 June 2008. kryeministri-ks.net/zck/repository/docs/Constitution.of.the.Republic.of.Kosovo.pdf

13 Law on Family. Assembly of Kosovo (2004/32). February 2006 www.kuvendikosoves.org/common/docs/ligjet/2004_32_en.pdf

14 Law on Gender Equality. Assembly of Kosovo (05/Lo20). June 2015 (revised). www.kuvendikosoves.org/common/docs/ligjet/05-L-020%20a.pdf

Kosovo's Press Council and Independent Media Commission (IMC) review and regulate the content of the country's media sphere. The Press Council oversees and monitors the work of both traditional press and online media. It is an independent, self-governing body, with its members forming the council and agreeing to abide by its code of conduct. The Press Council has no mechanism by which to compel media to abide by its decisions, which presents a challenge in assuring compliance to its standards – this is particularly problematic when it comes to online media, which are often maligned for poor editorial practices and shoddy reporting.¹⁵

The IMC is an independent body funded by the government of Kosovo, which oversees and monitors the work of radio and television stations. Radio and TV stations need permission from the IMC to broadcast their content, and must abide by the Code of Conduct for Audio-Visual Services to retain their licences. Both the Press Council and the IMC's codes of conduct include explicit regulations against the use of denigrating or discriminatory language on the basis of gender and sexual orientation.¹⁶

The Law on Gender Equality previously included an article on the equal representation of men and women in the media and also prohibited the denigrating or discriminatory portrayal of women; however, this was omitted after the law was revised in May 2015.

Watchdog and NGO reports on discriminatory practices in the media cite commonplace instances of hyper-sexualisation, objectification and infantilisation of women in all forms of media.¹⁷ The author has also observed the growing use of sexist language online, where an increasing number of Kosovars receive their daily news and participate in conversations on social media. Research

meanwhile points to denigrating descriptions of Kosovo's LGBT community in online media, primarily in comments on popular news portals which are posted with no moderation or editorial oversight.¹⁸ Hate speech in online comments remains a serious issue and has been described by Kosovo's media professionals as an ongoing problem.¹⁹

As Kosovo's online audience grows, online hate speech and the use of denigrating language arguably have an increasing reach. Approximately 76% of Kosovars are internet users²⁰ and 16% of Kosovars state they use the internet for news²¹ (73% of employed internet users say they go online for their news, compared to 26% of unemployed internet users).²² As the following examples will show, hate speech online – particularly on Facebook, a social media platform used by 73% of internet users²³ – remains an issue that has yet to be addressed seriously by Kosovo's justice system.²⁴

Kosovo 2.0's Sex launch and the #TakeBackTheNight Campaign

Two incidents that occurred in the past five years have served as points of conflict between more conservative elements in Kosovo's society and the country's nascent LGBT and women's rights movements. The first involves the publication of and attack against a magazine dealing with LGBT issues; the second involves the country's first Take Back the Night Campaign. Both cases unfolded online, before moving to offline protest.

Kosovo 2.0 is a current affairs website and magazine based in Prishtina, Kosovo's capital. I worked as the online managing editor for the website from 2012 to 2014. Kosovo 2.0 dedicates each biannual magazine issue to a specific topic, and has tackled themes as diverse as nation-building, religion,

15 Taylor, B. (2015). *Setting Media Standards: Public Awareness and Effectiveness of the Independent Media Commission and Press Council in Kosovo*. London: Thomson Foundation. www.thomsonfoundation.org/assets/News_Features/2015/Kosovo%20report/Kosovo_Report_new1602_setting_media_standards.pdf

16 Kodi i Sjelljes për Shërbime Mediale Audio-Vizuele (The Code of Conduct for Audio-Visual Media Services). The Independent Media Commission (KKPM-2013/07). December 2013. www.kpm-ks.org/?mod=materiale&id=907 and Kodi i Mediave të Shkruara të Kosovës (The Written Media Code of Kosovo). The Press Council of Kosovo. presscouncil-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Press-Code-for-Kosovo_alb.pdf

17 The Kosovar Center for Gender Studies. (2009). *The Image of Women Politicians in Kosovo Media*. Prishtina: The Kosovar Center for Gender Studies. library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kosovo/09740.pdf; Farnsvden, U., Fansworth, N., & Qosaj-Mustafa, A. (2014). Op. cit.; and Abazi, J. (2014). *The Media Situation in Kosovo: Gender Representation*. Prishtina: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_37921-1522-2-30.pdf?140602102458

18 Youth Initiative for Human Rights. (2014). *In the Name of Freedom of Expression*. Prishtina: Youth Initiative for Human Rights. ks.yihr.org/public/fck_files/ksfile/Hate%20Speech%20report/Anglisht.pdf; Youth Initiative for Human Rights. (2013). Op. cit.; and ILGA Europe. (2015). *Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People in Europe – 2015*. Brussels: ILGA Europe. www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/Attachments/01_full_annual_review_updated.pdf

19 International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX). (2015). *Europe & Eurasia Media Sustainability Index 2015*. Washington: IREX. https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/u105/EE_MSI_2015_Kosovo.pdf

20 Fazliu, A. (2013). *Internet Penetration and Usage in Kosovo*. Prishtina: Kosovo Association of Information and Communication Technology. web.ks.org/uploads/downloads/STIKK_raport_eng_2013_stik_o8.pdf

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Youth Initiative for Human Rights. (2014). Op. cit.

corruption, the arts, sports and migration. In December 2012, Kosovo 2.0 published the country's very first magazine issue dedicated entirely to sex and sexuality in Kosovo and the Balkans, with extensive coverage of LGBT communities across the region.

In the days leading up to the launch of the issue, titled *Sex*, a month-long social media campaign was held with sneak peeks into the magazine's content, blogs on sex and sexuality, and the promotion of the launch. The launch event, scheduled for 14 December 2012, was structured as a series of film screenings and readings in the afternoon, followed by a dance party with a DJ.

Two to three days before the event, Kosovo 2.0's Facebook page and website began receiving homophobic comments, with references to the "sinful" and "diseased" nature of homosexuality. A day before the event, a popular news portal called Telegrafi published an article on the magazine launch, erroneously describing the event as a "sex party". The homophobic comments on Kosovo 2.0's Facebook page increased in frequency and intensity on the day of the launch, which was also strongly criticised on two popular Islamic Facebook pages followed by Kosovars ("Others for Islam" and "The Protection of Islamic Identity") as well as the official Facebook page of a Prishtina sports club called Plisat. These Facebook pages made explicit calls to their followers to protest and prevent the launch of the magazine.

On the morning of the event, Kosovo 2.0 filed an official request for police protection, and two police officers were sent to the venue. At 6:00 pm, an hour before the scheduled readings, a group of 20 men pushed their way into the venue, catching the police officers off guard. They beat up one of Kosovo 2.0's male staff members, proceeded to demolish the venue's set-up, and threw tear gas into the venue. They ran away without being detained by the police. Plisat took responsibility for the attack on its Facebook page.

An hour later, police reinforcements arrived. The readings continued as scheduled, in a demolished hall, but a crowd of approximately 200 protesters had gathered in front of the venue and started preventing guests of the launch from entering the building. The crowd threw rocks at the police and the venue, chanting "Allah u akhbar!" and "Faggots out!" The police officers guarding the door called special police forces as reinforcement, but told Kosovo 2.0's staff that there was nothing they could do to remove the crowd.

At midnight, the magazine launch was officially cancelled due to the protesters outside the venue.

The guests inside the venue were escorted out of the building under police protection, in groups of four. The protesters threw rocks and spat at the guests and staff leaving the venue. The editor-in-chief of Kosovo 2.0 and two of the magazine contributors received death threats.²⁵

A day after the attack, approximately 150 people participating in an international youth summit run by a regional human rights NGO, called the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, organised a rally in support of Kosovo 2.0.²⁶ Two days after the attack on Kosovo 2.0, employees and members of Libertas, an LGBT NGO and drop-in centre in Prishtina, were attacked – an attack made even more disturbing by the fact that the centre's location was only disclosed to staff and members of the organisation.²⁷ On the evening of the attack, 20 Libertas employees and members were hosting a casual get-together. Two individuals briefly exited the centre and were physically attacked by a group of seven men waiting outside. The assailants then entered the centre, where they beat the other individuals inside and also threw an unidentified gas into the centre.²⁸

The attacks on Kosovo 2.0 and Libertas resulted in an outpouring of support by Kosovo's civil society, government officials and representatives of the international community in Kosovo.²⁹ The virulent opposition on the part of Kosovo's conservatives and religious adherents (both Islamic and Christian) forced the issue of LGBT rights to the forefront of Kosovo's public debate. The attacks were preceded and followed by a whirlwind of abuse and misinformation on social media and news portals – but were followed by frank and very public discussions about the rights of Kosovo's LGBT community in the media and among policy makers.³⁰

25 ILGA Europe. (2013). *Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People in Europe – 2013*. Brussels: ILGA Europe. www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/Attachments/annualreview2013.pdf

26 Quinones, M. (2013, 27 January). Kosovo 2.0: Defining a New Nation. *The New Context*. thenewcontext.milanoschool.org/kosovo-2-0-defining-a-new-nation

27 Shabani, A. (2013, 17 January). Kosovo Human Rights Activists Resist Attacks on LGBT Community. *Women's Media Center*. www.womensmediacenter.com/feature/entry/kosovo-human-rights-activists-resist-attacks-on-lgbt-community

28 Darby, S. (2012, 17 December). Anti-LGBT Violence Escalates in Prishtina; Kosovo Officials Comdemn Attacks. *The New Civil Rights Movement*. www.thenewcivilrightsmovement.com/anti-lgbt-violence-escalates-in-prishtina-kosovo-officials-condemns-attacks/news/2012/12/17/56650

29 Demolli, D. (2012, 17 December). Attack on Kosovo 2.0 Widely Condemned. *Balkan Insight*. www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/attack-on-kosovo-2-0-widely-condemned

30 Luci, B. (2013, 14 December). The Sex Issue One Year Later: The Debate is More Important than the Attack. *Kosovo 2.0*. www.kosovotwopointzero.com/en/article/935/the-sex-issue-one-year-later-the-debate-is-more-important-than-the-attack

Two years later, another online campaign would turn into an ideological battlefield –albeit a much less violent one – in Kosovo. In November 2014, the Kosovo Women’s Network (Kosovo’s biggest network of NGOs dealing with women’s rights) organised the country’s first Take Back the Night campaign (in Albanian: *Nata Është e Jona*). Although there are no concrete numbers on the level of street harassment that women face in Kosovo,³¹ national surveys have indicated that approximately 46% of women are aware of domestic violence occurring in their neighbourhood,³² while a disturbing number of both men and women think violence against women is justified in certain scenarios.³³ As part of the Kosovo Women’s Network’s outreach work with young women and girls, consultative sessions with approximately 200 young women and girls from around Kosovo throughout 2012, 2013 and 2014 were held.³⁴ In each consultative meeting, street harassment was cited as an everyday problem faced by young women and girls of all ages (the youngest participant who reported street harassment as a daily problem was 13, the oldest was 35), primarily harassment which takes the form of verbal abuse or being followed in public spaces.³⁵

As a first step in addressing the issue, the network put out a public call on its Facebook page on a future campaign involving street harassment, one month prior to the Take Back the Night campaign. As a result of the public meeting, the network and its supporters decided to organise a week-long Facebook campaign followed by a march in the centre of Prishtina. The Facebook campaign involved a series of statements such as “Respect is sexy” and “It isn’t a compliment, it’s harassment” followed by the hashtag # TakeBackTheNight or the Albanian equivalent, #NataEshteEJona. The online backlash was harsh, with many Facebook users responding with derision or anger at the campaign. Approximately 300 to 350 people participated in the online cam-

paigned by sharing the #TakeBackTheNight hashtag.³⁶ On the last night of the online campaign and at the end of the Take Back the Night march, three feminist activists screened a video they had filmed, which captured the experience of a young woman walking around Prishtina for eight hours³⁷ (in the vein of the popular YouTube video “10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman”).³⁸ The video was created in one night, two days before the end of the campaign, in order to address the claim that women provoke street harassment by wearing revealing clothing. Throughout the course of the video, the woman – dressed in jeans and a jacket – was harassed and followed more than 50 times. The video was picked up and reposted by most of Kosovo’s major online news portals, and was viewed more than 94,000 times.³⁹

While the march was limited to a crowd of approximately 150 people, the ferocity of online debate and the level of discussion dealing with street harassment was something new in Kosovo’s public sphere.⁴⁰

A public panel organised by the Kosovo Women’s Network was held a week after the campaign to discuss the varying reactions to the campaign, with a modest turnout. As a result of the strong online reactions to the campaign, the Kosovo Women’s Network decided to pursue a national research project on the prevalence of street harassment in Kosovo and will be organising the Take Back the Night campaign again this year.

I place these two cases side by side for several reasons. They are both instances in which the tensions between Kosovo’s feminist and pro-LGBT communities and their anti-woman and anti-LGBT counterparts unfold publicly, giving exposure to both ends of the spectrum. Both cases represent “firsts” in Kosovo: the attack on Kosovo 2.0 and especially the ensuing attack on Libertas represent the first public attack on LGBT rights in Kosovo. As noted by Vlora Krasniqi,⁴¹ a Kosovar LGBT activist and organiser, the Libertas attack represented the first public attack on the LGBT movement as a whole, as opposed to individual cases of hate crimes. The

31 The Kosovo Women’s Network will be publishing Kosovo’s first national report on street harassment in Fall 2015, and Kosovo’s Ombudsperson is also expected to present a report on possible policy responses to street harassment in September 2015.

32 Kosova Women’s Network. (2008). Op. cit.

33 Kosovo Agency of Statistics. (2015). *Kosovo: Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2013-2014 Key Findings* (Prishtina: The Kosovo Agency of Statistics. [https://mics-surveys-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/MICS5/Central%20and%20Eastern%20Europe%20and%20the%20Commonwealth%20of%20Independent%20States/Kosovo%20under%20UNSC%20res.%201244/2013-2014/Key%20findings/Kosovo%20\(UNSCR%201244\)%202013-14%20MICS%20KFR_English.pdf](https://mics-surveys-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/MICS5/Central%20and%20Eastern%20Europe%20and%20the%20Commonwealth%20of%20Independent%20States/Kosovo%20under%20UNSC%20res.%201244/2013-2014/Key%20findings/Kosovo%20(UNSCR%201244)%202013-14%20MICS%20KFR_English.pdf)

34 Interview with Donjeta Morina, Capacity Development Coordinator at the Kosovo Women’s Network, 13 December 2014.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4VWREjwXyK>

38 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1XGPvWnoA>

39 Marku, H. (2015, 4 January). Stares, Whistles and Shouts: K2.0 Interviews Oda Haliti. *Kosovo 2.0*. kosovotwopointzero.com/en/article/1512/stares-whistles-and-shouts-k20-interviews-oda-haliti

40 Marku, H. (2014, 26 December). A Small Step to Reclaim Kosovo’s Streets. *Balkan Insight*. www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/a-small-step-to-reclaim-kosovo-s-streets

41 Email correspondence with Vlora Krasniqi, the former executive director of the Center for Social Emancipation (QESH), an LGBT NGO based in Prishtina, Kosovo, 25 August 2015.

Take Back the Night campaign, on the other hand, was the first organised and clearly articulated campaign against street harassment, and provided a platform for women and girls to share their daily experiences of harassment in public spaces. In both instances, people took offline action after heated (and sometimes aggressive or threatening) debate online, primarily on Facebook and on online news portals. However, in both instances, the potential of the internet to articulate feminist and pro-LGBT positions, and to be used as a way to organise protest and resistance, has also yet to be thoroughly tested. For example, an online/offline campaign calling for LGBT rights or women's rights with a longer time span and national scope has yet to be attempted, and presents a potential new phase for Kosovan activism. The Take Back the Night campaign in particular suggests a greater potential for the internet to mobilise protest and resistance than seen so far.

Conclusions

The sexism and homophobia already present in Kosovar society find ample room for expression on the internet. Online hate speech is rarely investigated – the online media sphere has a high tolerance for denigrating and hateful language towards feminists, members of the LGBT community and their allies. Kosovo's numerous anti-feminist and anti-LGBT supporters drown out other voices which threaten their world view, and as the Kosovo 2.0 case demonstrated, organised physical attacks represent a disturbing reality that activists must face in Kosovo. Only three people have so far been convicted of their involvement in the Kosovo 2.0 attack, each given suspended sentences.⁴² No suspects in the Libertas attack have been apprehended, and the case was dropped due to lack of evidence.⁴³

Kosovo's online activists have an inhospitable – but not completely unreceptive – online world to penetrate. If the Kosovo 2.0 attack demonstrates the frightening ability of hate to mobilise, the Take Back the Night campaign demonstrates the power of an organised campaign involving little more than a hashtag and a YouTube video to spark a long-delayed public conversation. The #TakeBackTheNight and #NataEshteEJona hashtags provided a platform for young women to share their stories of fear and

harassment in public spaces, and to demand an end to it. The community-building potential of the hashtags grew beyond the limited scope of the Facebook campaign, particularly after the launch of the “Eight Hours in Prishtina” video. The hashtags #TakeBackTheNight and its Albanian translation #NataEshteEJona, used in combination with statements in colloquial Kosovar Albanian, addressed street harassment in a way that was intensely local, while also suggesting a connection to the global feminist movement.

Since the explosion of debates on LGBT rights in Kosovo's public sphere following the attacks in December 2012, Kosovo's LGBT NGOs have taken steps to become more visible, and more accessible online – all have active Facebook pages, engage in online outreach public events, and make media appearances. The online presence of these NGOs is particularly important in Kosovo, where many LGBT individuals hide their identity out of fear of attack or condemnation from their families and their friends, and may not have direct access to or knowledge of the resources and safe spaces at their disposal (particularly in rural parts of the country). The most promising development in Kosovo's LGBT movement has been the second annual celebration of the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT).⁴⁴ On 17 May 2015, Kosovo's LGBT community organised a march and dance event, in which the rainbow LGBT flag was prominently displayed in the centre of Prishtina, accompanied by a crowd of approximately 200 LGBT supporters, activists and allies.⁴⁵

The next step that the nascent LGBT movement could take online is a more coordinated approach to outreach, education and protest – preferably with as much overlap as possible between themselves and feminist groups, which share experiences and knowledge of marginalisation and can act as natural allies and supporters of pro-LGBT issues. A well-articulated collective programme can build an online activism which is both organised and, most importantly, intersectional and inclusive.

42 Pecì, E. (2014, 4 March). EU Court in Kosovo Convicts Magazine Attackers. *Balkan Insight*. www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/eulex-convicts-kosovo-2-0-attackers

43 ILGA Europe. (2014). *Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People in Europe – 2014*. Brussels: ILGA Europe. www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/Attachments/annual_review_2014_web_version.pdf

44 dayagainsthomophobia.org

45 Mari, C. (2015, 20 May). Kosovars Walk With Pride Against Homophobia. *Kosovo 2.0*. www.kosovotwopointzero.com/en/article/1663/kosovars-walk-with-pride-against-homophobia

Action steps

The lessons that can be taken away from the two cases described above include the following:

- Document and archive instances of hate speech and threats online in order to be able to criminally prosecute perpetrators. Do not dismiss any threats.
- Use existing mechanisms, such as local press councils, to address instances of sexist or homophobic language on online media. For example, the Kosovo branch of the Swedish NGO Civil Rights Defenders successfully filed a complaint with Kosovo's Press Council regarding homophobic comments published in an article on a popular news portal, which reported on Albanians going to Belgrade to support Serbia's Pride Parade. The news portal was condemned by the Press Council⁴⁶ and the offensive comments were removed, although without any further disciplinary action.⁴⁷
- In an online media sphere saturated with sexism and homophobia, it is important to create a media counterweight in the form of platforms such as blogs or specialised news portals. For example, "Gender Politics Online",⁴⁸ a gender issues blog supported by the University of Prishtina's Gender Studies Programme, is a promising initiative, as is the Albania-based website "Historia Ime"⁴⁹ ("My Story") which regularly reports and comments on LGBT news and current affairs in Albanian.

⁴⁶ Kosovo Press Council. (2012, 19 December). Opinion Ref: 05.11.2012\140-2012. presscouncil-ks.org/opinion-pck/?lang=en

⁴⁷ Koha Ditore. (2012, 19 December). KMSHK hedh poshtë pretendimet ndaj disa gazetave (Press Council Denies Allegations Made Against Newspapers). *Koha.net*. koha.net/?id=8&arkiva=1&l=128130

⁴⁸ genderstudies.uni-pr.edu

⁴⁹ historia-ime.com

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 (LGBTQ) 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.

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