DeShame Croatia: Student Reactions and Consequences of Online Sexual Harassment in High Schools

L.Vejmelka*, R. Matković**, M. Rajter*** and T. Ramljak****

* University of Zagreb, Faculty of Law, Department of Social Work, Zagreb, Croatia
** Institute for Public Health of Split-Dalmatia County/Department for Mental Health, Split, Croatia
*** University of Zagreb, Office for Research
**** Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Višnjevac, Croatia
lvejmelka@pravo.hr

Abstract - **Online harassment and abuse present a contemporary phenomenon with potentially devastating effect on children's lives. The aim of this paper is to explore the reactions and consequences of online sexual harassment. The data were collected within the DeShame project in Croatia in 2020. The probabilistic stratified cluster sample consisted of 2016 pupils of high schools in Croatia (53,8%M; Mean age 15,74). The results show that 20,3% of children witnessed or experienced online sexual harassment in the last year. The most occurring feeling to online sexual harassment was feeling upset (34,2%) and worried (31,1%). However, research identified group of children who didn't want to go to school or see their friends and around every 6th child was worried that this incident will be mentioned again in the future that implies the shame they are feeling because of the involvement in such an event. Therefore, students choose independent problem-solving strategies. The most prevalent reaction after the incident was ignoring followed by blocking the perpetrators, seeking for the friend support or trying to speak to perpetrators or reporting to the platform. Seeking help from adults was significantly less prevalent with speaking to parents being the most salient. The results show that the prevalence of sexual harassment is high among adolescents and the future policies should build the activistic component among adolescents and cooperation to prevent the normalization of sexual harassment.**

Keywords – online sexual harassment; national sample; higih school students; reactions and consequences.

I. INTRODUCTION

Online harassment and abuse present a contemporary phenomenon with potentially devastating effect on children's lives. The studies on non-sexual and sexual abuse of children on the internet are often focused on the prevalence and the characteristics of victims and perpetrators. However, given the high socio-cultural complexity of the problem, there is a lack of data on the help seeking behaviors from victims. The aim of this presentation is to explore the reactions and consequences of online sexual harassment in the context of the creation of adequate policies and prevention and treatment programs.

II. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PROBLEMATIC INTERNET USAGE, ONLINE VIOLENCE AND ONLINE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The virtual environment offers everyone a platform to commit various risky as well as punishable behaviors, mostly aimed at harming children and young people but it is important to emphasize that the perpetrators can also be peers, i.e. children . Risky behaviors on the Internet are even more in focus due to the fact that in the past few years after the global pandemic number of the activities "moved" into the online environment.

Problematic internet use is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of activities and all potentially problematic behaviors on the network, the use of which is advocated by numerous experts in the field of safe internet use [1]. What is particularly worrying is that most of children and young people do not perceive such risky behaviors, whether they come from known or unknown persons or their own risky behaviour, as dangerous or in most cases are not even aware of them, which greatly favors the further spread and development of such forms of harmful action. Cyberbullying is one of the most researched types of problematic internet use but there are various definition and conceptualization of this phenomena. For example, Hindjua and Patchin identify cyberbullying with classic bullying, describing it as repeatedly and intentionally harming others via a computer and a mobile or other electronic device [2]. Tokunaga considers electronic violence more broadly as *any behavior that interferes with modern technologies, in which communication between a group or individuals implies messages of an aggressive and hostile character intended to harm or cause discomfort to other people* [3]. Problematic Internet use also includes other types of online behaviors including internet addiction, internet gambling, online shopping addiction, excessive use of online pornography, and information dependence/ addiction and excessive information search. Internet gaming disorder is the first specific form of problematic internet usage included in the diagnostic manual [4,5] and it is treated as

a special form of addiction in the health system. What is specific to problematic internet use is that for a group of children and young people, this includes exhibiting other forms of risky or problematic behavior such as false identities (and misrepresenting age) and obtaining information about other people's bank cards (most often parents') for example when online gambling and compulsive shopping online.

Appearance of sexually risky behaviors of children online can vary from milder forms of sexting to involvement in criminal offenses against children, such as online sexual abuse and online exploitation of children and online sexual extortion and coercion or revenge pornography [6]. Today number of the materials with sexual content of underage children is produced by children themselves and it is defined as self-generated sexually explicit material [7].

The concept of online child sexual abuse on the Internet is most broadly defined as a form of child abuse in a digital environment that includes various behaviors and actions directed towards the child, with the aim of achieving a certain sexual service. Furthermore, online sexual exploitation of children occurs when an individual or group exploits an imbalance of power to force, manipulate or deceive a child and encourage him to engage in sexual activity through a virtual environment [8].

Sexting (word includes words sex and texting) for children is always a high risk behavior considering that illegal production of sexual material with children occurs. Sexting can lead to higher risk of online sexual coercion and extortion (so-called sextortion). In everyday life, sexting is one of the most common forms of sexually risky behavior in the online environment, defined as sending sexually explicit images, videos or messages over the Internet or using information and communication technologies [9]. Sexting is broadly use among various age groups (smart phone users with adequate level of digital competences) but very specific dimension is legality of sending or receiving sexual content. Consensual sexting is completely legal for adults but for children is part of criminal act considering production and dissemination of material with sexual content of the underage child. On the other hand, sexting is commonly used among adolescent population, and previous research (N= 1794) shows that high school students in Croatia do sext in high percentage. More, than half of the high school students in the sample received messages (51.6%), as well as sexually provocative photos or recordings of another person (52.4%) or an acquaintance (50.5%). Those high school students who received such contents, in a larger percentage, received them more than once, that is, on several occasions [10].

It should be emphasized that some of these acts are often committed by minors to the detriment of other minors and depending on the work and period available statistical data of criminal behavior in the online environment show 15-30% of perpetrators precisely from the group of minors [11].

III. CHILDRENS EXPOSURE TO ONLINE SEXUAL CONTENT –COMPARATIVE AND NATIONAL FINDINGS

According to EU Kids Online, a large comparative survey of children aged 9 to 16 from 19 European countries, 25% of children encountered inconvenience while using the internet. These inconveniences can range from cyberbullying, through hacking and profile theft to slow internet and technical issues, but they can also include online sexual harassment. Inconveniences on the Internet grow with age, where they are experienced by 20% of children aged 9-11 years to 34% of children aged 15-16 year [12].

National sample study HR Kids Online states that nearly 2/3 of children between the ages of 9 and 17 have seen sexual photos or a naked person's video content online in the past year without their intention of seeing them. This was encountered by 3/4 of children aged 9 to 11 years, more than 2/3 of children aged 12 to 14 years and almost 2/3 of children aged 15 to 17 years. The survey results show that in 2017, just over a quarter of children were exposed to sexual content. Children who were exposed to sexual photos are more likely to have access to the internet when they want or need to and spend more time online during the work week and weekends. Children who were exposed to sexual photos of naked people without intending to do so were more likely to close the site or app and clicked the button more often but also more often reporting cyberbullying than children who intended to see such content [13].

Over 2/3 of children aged 9 to 17 have seen sexual photos or a naked person's film online without intention to see them, while nearly a fifth of them have seen such content with intent. A quarter of children aged 9 to 17 have seen photos or videos depicting sexual acts in a violent way without their intention to see such content. A third of children aged 9 to 11 saw sexual photos related to violence without it being their intention and every 12 [th] child between the 9 and 17 years old received a message with sexual content and that message may include words, pictures or video of sexual content. [13].

A. Prevalence rates of sexual harassment among children in different countires

Prevalence rates of online sexual harassment among children are diverse and not comparable due to methodological differences and different criterions for sexual harassment. Previous studies of online sexual harassment in different countries shows large scale of prevalence among youth below 10 % in northern Europe in developed countries from 15 to 40% in Spain and Chile and Germany shows as high as 68% percent of exposure to online sexual harassment [14, 15, 16, 17,18,19].

Prevalence of online sexual prevention is as low as 4 or 5 % in the north developed countries as Netherland or Sweden. In a Swedish-based sample of adolescents (N = 594, 12–20 years old), 9.26% of the girls and 5.73% of the boys had been called a fag or pussy against their will, or

someone had been commenting on their private life in a sexual manner in the last six month [14] Furthermore in a Dutch-based sample (N= 1,026, 18 – 88 years old), 5.6% of male adolescents and 19.1% of female adolescents had been sexually harassed online in the past 6 months [15] Online sexual harassment is common among youth in United States (from 13–18 years old), with prevalence rates for the past years ranging from 4 to 38% [20, 21]

Higher percentages were found in the large Chilean-based sample of adolescents (N= 18,872, 12 -17 years old) where 16.23% reported being online sexual harassed [16]. Study of Spanish-based sample of adolescents (N = 3,897, 12 - 17 years old) found online sexual victimization (sexual coercion, sexual pressure, online grooming by an adult, unwanted exposure to sexual content and violation of privacy for 39.5% of the participants [17] In German-based sample (N = 9,000, 10 – 50 years old) numbers are even higher with 68.3% participants identifies with experiences of online sexual harassment as a direct answer on one variable (receiving pornographic material or being asked intimate questions) [18, 19]

B. Gender differences in experiences of online sexual harassement

Previous research shows that gender makes a difference in the experience of exposure to sexual content. Boys were almost twice as likely to see sexual photos as girls and the experience of exposure to sexual content online also grows with age. Boys and older children talk more often about exposure to sexual photographs on pornographic websites. Thus, 12% of children aged 15 to 17 and 3% of children aged 12 to 14 saw photos on pornographic sites at least once a week. Messages with sexual content are received almost equally by girls and boys. Found based on age, with older children receiving such messages more often. Three-quarters of the children who received such messages received them via social networks, almost half as a message sent to a mobile phone, and a third via pop-ups and media platforms (YouTube, Instagram, Flickr) [14].

Some other research also points that exposure to sexual harassment is higher for girls and for other vulnerable groups as LGBT adolescents [21]. Study on 477 Croatian female adolescents indicates that female adolescents are more likely to experience online sexual harassment and find it more upsetting then their male peers. Their study explores the role of resilience in explaining the association between online sexual harassment and negative mood (i.e., depression and anxiety symptoms) among female adolescents and their results shows that overall 42.6% of female participants experienced online sexual harassment at some point [22]. Other study from Egypt also points the gender differences in the experiences of online sexual harassment. They suggest that cyber sexual harassment has become a problem of great concern since 79.8% of the female students (N=2350 female students mean age of 19.9±1.3 years) reported exposure to cyber sexual harassment at least once in past 6 months, and 69,9%

students experienced cyber sexual harassment more than once during the same period [23].

C. DeShame research project

The national quantitative, research of DeShame Croatia continues the international comparative research conducted so far in 3 countries[1] and enables international comparative data in the field of sexually risky online behavior and exposure to sexual content and sexual harassment in the online environment.

Given that one of the project's goals was to encourage systematic research in other countries, the Center for a Safer Internet in Croatia[2] formed a national expert team with experts in the field of research safe use of the Internet. The purpose of the research with high school students DeShame Croatia is to deepen knowledge about the risky behaviors in high schools and to find out how much students are exposed to harmful content and sexual harassment in the online environment. This paper will present the results of the national data set for the variables of student reactions and consequences of online sexual harassment in high schools in Croatia.

The aim of the research sequence presented in this paper was to explore student reactions and consequences of online sexual harassment among high-school students on national sample and to address findings and practical implication for the practitioners and experts who works in direct everyday practice with children promoting evidence-based approach in detection, prevention and treatment of online sexual harassment.

IV. METHODS

A. Sample

The research was conducted among secondary school students in Croatia. In order to achieve a national sample, one high school was randomly selected from each county (total of 21) and three first and three third graders were randomly selected in these schools. The data was collected anonymously and using online questionnaires in classrooms. A total of 2,016 students participated, making 81.06% of the planned sample. The average age of the respondents is 15.74 years (min: 14; max19), and 53.77% (N=1084) are male and 43.9% (N=885) are female, and 2.33% (N=47) of the respondents did not want to answer the question about gender.

B. Instruments

This research used a questionnaire developed by the Childnet project team based on a review of existing literature, policy documents and the team's professional experience. With the consent obtained that the questionnaire may be used, the Questionnaire was

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translated into Croatian, adapted and piloted (Vejmelka et al., 2021).

Demographics contains questions such as age, gender, type of education, class, school success, sexual orientation, family environment, relationship status, etc. It also contains questions about whether the respondents have special educational needs, a diagnosed physical or psychological health problem or a disability.

Psychological experiences and impacts. In the introductory part of this question, sexual harassment is described in detail, and the question was: "*During the last year, have you seen or experienced sexual harassment on the Internet?*". Based on self-assessment, the participants could answer one of the three offered answers: 1- *Yes, I have seen or been the target of sexual harassment on the Internet; 2- No, I have not seen or experienced any of the above; 3- I do not want to answer.*

Participants who indicated that they had experienced online sexual harassment were then directed to a specific set of questions about the related psychological and social impacts. Participants who experienced sexual harassment on the Internet described their feelings through 12 statements (e.g. *I was scared, I was ashamed, I was worried about what my family would think of me, I didn't want to go to school*) and answered on a scale from 1-Strongly disagree to 5 - Strongly agree.

Exposure to online sexual harassment assessed how often, in the past year, other Internet users treated students in the ways described through 10 statements (e.g., "*My naked, half-naked, or inappropriate photos were shared with other people without my permission," "Someone constantly sent naked, half-naked or inappropriate photos or messages of sexual content, even though I did not want them*"). While the experiences of observers witnessing online sexual harassment are measured thorough experiences of how often respondents have seen other young people behaving on the Internet in the last year, across 22 different behaviors. Students answered both scales on a frequency scale from 1 = never to 5 = all the time.

Furthermore, participants had the opportunity to state what they did when they experienced sexual harassment on the Internet (e.g. *I didn't tell anyone, I ignored it, I told a parent, I told a teacher/school staff, I told friends, I reported it to a social network on where it happened (e.g. Facebook, Snapchat), I reported it to the police, etc.*). 11 statements were offered, and participants could choose multiple answers.

C. Etics

The research was conducted with the consent of the Ministry of Science and Education (CLASS: 602-01/21-01/00628; URBROJ: 533-05-21-0004) and the consent of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, and in compliance with the Code of Ethics for Research with Children [28]. After the principals of the schools gave their consent that the research could be carried out in their schools, the parents of the selected classes received detailed information about the aim and purpose of the research and could express their disapproval of their child participating with their signature. Before conducting the research, it was emphasized to the students who participated in the research that the research is anonymous, that their participation is voluntary, that they can withdraw at any time, and that the data can only be seen by members of the research team. For students who did not participate in the research (with the signature of their parents or who did not want to participate themselves), have been prepared content about sexual harassment, an online quiz and suggestions where they can seek help if they or someone close to them experiences sexual harassment., Professional training (before the research) and presentation of research results were organized for professional associates in schools.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In DeShame Croatia study we asked high school students directly, during the last year, have they witnessed or experienced sexual harassment on the Internet? The results show that 20,3% of children witnessed or experienced online sexual harassment in the last year and quite high percentage of 7,2% of children didn't want to answer on this question. This leads to conclusion that a number is even higher.

Graph 1. Answers on the question have you been witnessed or experienced online sexual harassment in a last year

Table1. Consequences of online sexual harassment

	N	M	SD	I completely disagree	I mostly do not agree	I neither agree nor disagree	I mostly agree	I completely agree
				%	%	%	%	%
I was scared	409	2,3	1,35	44,7	14,4	20,0	12,5	8,3
I was upset	409	2,6	1,50	36,2	13,7	15,9	19,3	14,9
I was worried	409	2,6	1,48	37,4	13,9	17,6	16,9	14,2
I blamed myself	409	1,9	1,29	60,6	13,2	13,2	4,6	8,3
I was ashamed	409	2,1	1,37	53,5	12,0	17,1	7,6	9,8
I felt lonely	409	1,9	1,29	60,4	12,0	12,7	7,8	7,1
I didn't know what to do	409	2,1	1,36	52,3	10,3	18,3	11,0	8,1
I was worried about what my family would think of me	409	1,9	1,36	63,3	6,1	14,2	8,1	8,3
I didn't want to go to school	409	1,6	1,06	73,3	6,8	13,0	3,4	3,4
I didn't want to see my friends	409	1,6	1,10	73,3	6,4	12,7	3,4	4,2
I was worried that it might be mentioned again in the future	409	2,0	1,36	59,2	8,3	15,6	8,6	8,3
I didn't mind	409	2,5	1,57	43,0	10,5	19,1	7,6	19,8

As we wanted a more reliable measure for determining witnessing and experiencing online sexual harassment, we calculated the scale results on the corresponding scales. The extent to which young people are exposed to sexual harassment was measured through 22 behaviors to which young people answered whether they had witnessed these behaviors in the past year. These results show that only 6.9% of young people in Croatia state that they have not seen such behaviors on the Internet, while 93.1% state that they have witnessed online sexual harassment behaviors. Exposure to sexual harassment in Croatia was investigated through measurement of 10 forms of experiencing online sexual harassment in the past year, and by this criterium 41.2% of high school students in a nationally representative sample experienced online sexual harassment at least once. One of the studies showed that the engagement in risky sexual online behavior was related to perceptions of peer involvement, risks, benefits, and vulnerability of this behavior. Adolescents who engage in sexual online behaviors perceived that more of their friends are also engaged in similar behaviors [24]. Opposite of this, at the DeShame Croatia research students were underestimated the involvement in the online sexual harassment. These results suggest that young people do not identify every behavior they experience under the online sexual harassment as such, pointing out to widespread character of the phenomenon and normalized behavior among high school population.

Table 1 presents consequences of the online sexual harassment and most occurring feeling to online sexual harassment was feeling upset (34,2%) and worried (31,1%) or ignoring (27,4%). However around 7% of children didn't want to go to school or see their friends. Online violence involves a wide circle of observers, which means that the victim bears far more severe and long-lasting consequences. Electronic violence and traditional peer-to-peer violence, for example in the classroom, are often connected and there is a transfer of one form of violent behavior and setting where it occurs to another [26] .16,9% of children were worried that this incident will be mentioned again in the future. Results of the comparative European research states that half of the children felt somewhat guilty after unwanted exposure to sexual photos. A 1/3 of children who were exposed to sexual photos in a violent way online, and that was their intention, felt somewhat guilty [25]. Furthermore, in our research when asked what they did after the incident, the most prevalent reaction in total sample was ignoring (N= 104, 51,3%), blocking the perpetrators (N= 89, 47,9%), speaking to friends (N=67, 36,4%), trying to speak to perpetrators (N=43, 22,7%) or reporting to the provider (Graph 2.)
Comparative european research Eukidsonline points out that one in 10 children who have been exposed to sexual photos think their parents know nothing about their online activities. No child has tried to seek adult help or tried to report a problem online. From the results obtained, it is evident that a certain number of children who are disturbed by the experience remain silent about it and avoid seeking the help of adults [25].

Graph 2. Reactions after exposure to online sexual harassment
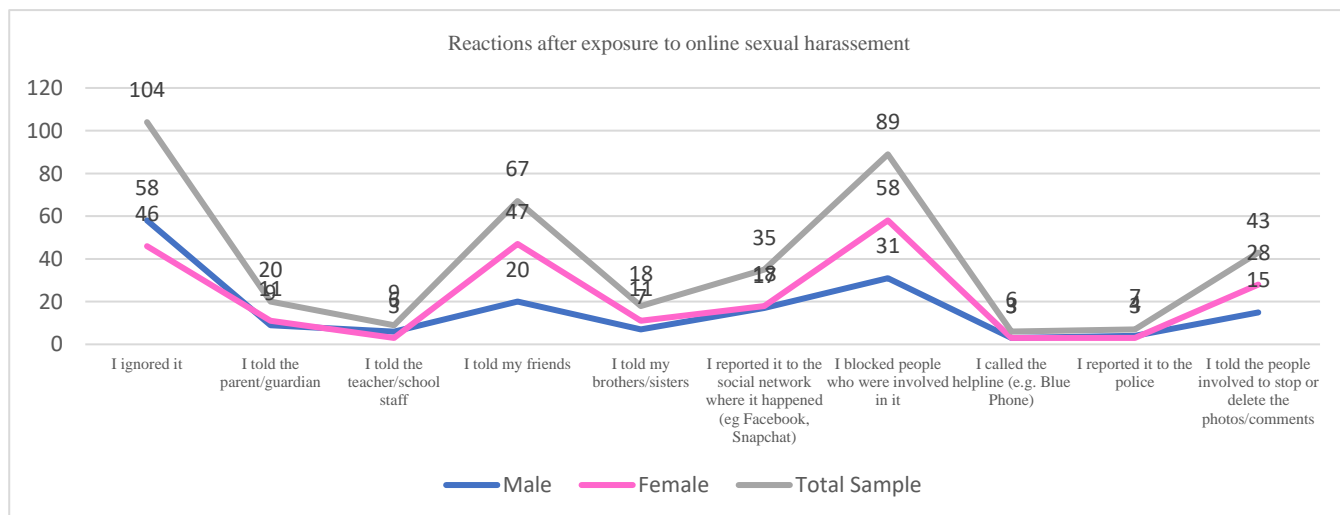
Previous studies suggests that females are especially vulnerable group and pointing out in gender differences in experiencing and reacting on online sexual harassment events [12,22,23]. Gender differences were confirmed in DeShame Croatia research but in the direction that boys use more ignoring strategies (12% difference) and talks to friends less (21,7% difference) than their girl peers. Significant differences of reactions shows that boys will block the source of the harassment more often (27,2% difference) and are less likely to try to speak with perpetrators (13,2% difference) than girls when online harassment happens. Adolescents from the qualitative study were also concerned about gender dimension of online sexual harassment on social media sites [26].

According to study amongst a US adolescents (n = 1,152, 10-18 years old), nearly 15% reported online sexual harassment experiences [27]. The adolescents in the qualitative research indicated that were engaged in victim blaming by emphasizing that risky behavior (e.g., sexting, posting provocative pictures, or accepting too many friends) initigates sexual harassment pointing that a major role in preventing sexual harassment was allocated to the individual. Both boys and girls often referred to one's "own responsibility" for receiving sexual harassment, due to accepting friend requests from unknown people, posting "provocative" pictures in public, or sending intimate pictures [26]. It is precisely these attitudes of the people, peer groups, norms and cultural content of the environment that reinforce and confirm the feeling of personal responsibility and, ultimately, that victims of online sexual harassment choose strategies for solving problems independently instead of reporting criminal acts. This research as well as the previous ones suggesting that reporting rate of online sexual harassment is low and estimation of large dark number of non-reported cases still remains.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our results show that the prevalence of sexual harassment is high among adolescents and their reactions vary. Discrepancy in the results of the involvement in the online sexual behaviors is particularly worrying when comparing student answer on direct question with scale results. Prevalence rates of online sexual harassment among children are diverse and not comparable due to methodological differences and different criterions for sexual harassment.

Given that the prevalence rates of online sexual harassment among children are not comparable and differ greatly due to methodological differences and different criteria for sexual harassment, this research additionally confirmed the confirmation for standardization in this area. It is necessary to agree on a generally accepted definition and conceptualization of online sexual harassment, which will enable the operationalization of standardized instruments, which in turn will enable comparative results and monitoring of trends. These studies should become the basis for peer-based intervention aimed at reducing online sexual harassment.

When online harassment happens, they are most inclined to solve the situation by themselves or using the peer support, while they are less inclined to seek help from adults and support services. The most worrying reaction is ignoring the incident which in terms of the prevention of sexual harassment propagates the behaviour. The future policies should build the activistic component among adolescents and cooperation to prevent the normalization of sexual harassment. This result also points at the normalization of the online sexual harassment and widespread distribution of the phenomena among high school population. Important practical implications in this field are in the direction of building awareness, continuous education and internal rules on social media use and communication in the online environment. Simple, adequate, timely and well promoted ways of reporting are also crucial in fighting against online sexual harassment.

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