Kingdom of the Netherlands

LHSI Соціальні ініціативи з охорони праці та здоров'я

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# GENDER ASPECTS OF CYBER VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN UKRAINE

Kyiv - 2025

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICT) has transformed human social activity, shifting a significant portion of it to the online space. This has led to an increase in cyber violence, which manifests in various forms (such as discrimination, bullying, etc.) and ultimately results in human rights violations. The most vulnerable groups, such as women and children, are most affected. According to data from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2019), in Ukraine, one in five adolescents has experienced online bullying, and among boys aged 10–14, the rate of cyberbullying cases has even surpassed that of the offline environment (study by the NGO "Docudays," 2020).

Cyber violence has distinct gender-related aspects: girls are more often targeted by sexualized forms of cyber violence, while boys are more likely to face extortion or threats.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has further increased children's vulnerability to cyber violence due to extended time spent in digital spaces and limited access to psychological support. This study aims to analyze the gender dimensions of cyber violence against children of different ages in Ukraine, assess its manifestations and consequences, and develop recommendations to strengthen the protection of children in the digital environment.

# 2. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

***Purpose of the study:*** To conduct a comprehensive gender-based analysis of existing forms of cyber violence against children of different ages in Ukraine, identify specific gender-related aspects of its manifestations, and develop recommendations for improving the system of prevention and response.

***Objectives of the study:***

- To analyze Ukrainian legislation in the field of combating cyber violence and ensuring the cybersecurity of children of different ages, with particular emphasis on gender equality.
- To study and evaluate effective models of cyber violence prevention in the European Union and Ukraine, assessing their sensitivity to gender aspects.
- To validate the obtained data by conducting qualitative sociological research (expert interviews and focus group discussions) with specialists working in the field of cyber violence prevention, applying a gender-sensitive approach.
- To develop practical recommendations for government authorities, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to improve mechanisms for protecting children of different ages from cyber violence in Ukraine, taking gender aspects into account.

# 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a comprehensive approach that combined desk research with a fieldwork stage, utilizing qualitative methods.

- **The desk research** included a detailed review and analysis of normative and legal acts, including international legal instruments ratified by Ukraine (such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Lanzarote Convention, the Istanbul Convention, the Budapest Convention, etc.), as well as Ukrainian national legislation (laws, codes, state programs, etc.). It also examined effective international and Ukrainian models and practices for preventing cyber violence among children of different ages. Particular attention was paid to gender aspects within the analyzed documents.

- **The fieldwork stage** involved the collection of primary data through:

  - Conducting ten expert interviews with specialists working in the field of cyber violence prevention and gender equality, as well as with representatives of law enforcement agencies (including school police officers involved in the project).
  - Holding a focus group discussion with young consultants (aged 18–21) from the youth civil society organization Teenergizer, who have experience providing counseling to children of different ages on issues of violence, including its cyber manifestations.
  - Analyzing the collected information and comparing it with the results of the desk research concerning the gender aspects of cyber violence against children of different ages in Ukraine.

# 4. KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

## 4.1. Legislative Analysis

Ukraine has ratified key international conventions on the protection of women's rights and the prevention of domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention), the protection of children's rights (the Lanzarote Convention), and the fight against cybercrime (the Budapest Convention). The provisions of these instruments, among other things, aim to combat cyber violence and safeguard human rights in the online environment.

The digital sphere is regulated by general normative legal acts, such as the Laws of Ukraine "On Electronic Communications," "On the Basic Principles of Ensuring Cybersecurity of Ukraine," and "On Personal Data Protection," among others. These laws establish the general framework for cybersecurity but lack specific provisions aimed directly at combating cyber violence.

To protect children of different ages from cyber violence, in addition to the ratified Lanzarote Convention, the Law of Ukraine "On Child Protection" plays an important role. This law provides for the protection of children from all forms of violence, "including those involving the use of electronic communication tools."

Issues related to combating violence in the digital space are addressed in the State Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men, which is in effect until 2030. Its action plan includes support for victims of cyber violence through hotlines and research on the issue, including its gender-related aspects.

The Criminal Code of Ukraine provides the primary legal protection for victims of cyber violence. Relevant articles include Article 120 (incitement to suicide), Article 126-1 (domestic violence), Article 129 (threat of murder), Article 153 (sexual violence), Article 182 (violation of privacy), Article 189 (extortion), and Article 301-1 (child pornography). While these provisions may be applied to cyber threats, sexual harassment, and the dissemination of prohibited content, their use specifically to address cyber violence remains indirect and requires improvement.

Administrative liability for related offenses is regulated by the Code of Ukraine on Administrative Offenses. Article 173-2 addresses gender-based violence, which may include cyberstalking. Articles 173-4 and 173-5 regulate liability for bullying and mobbing, which may also take digital forms.

Ukraine's national legislation contains provisions that can be used to address cyber violence; however, it lacks a unified and comprehensive approach to preventing and responding to cyber violence. There is a clear need to strengthen legal acts governing the prevention and counteraction of cyber violence against children of different ages.

### 4.2. Effective Models of Cyber Violence Prevention

An analysis of European experience — including the Better Internet for Kids initiative, the activities of the INHOPE and INSAFE networks, and programs aimed at combating cyber violence and supporting victims (such as KiVa, deShame, CyberSafe, etc.) — highlighted the importance of a comprehensive approach to cyber violence prevention. This approach encompasses educational programs, hotlines, and the development of interactive tools.

In Ukraine, several civil society initiatives (e.g., StopSexting, CyberSafe) are effectively and systematically engaged in the prevention of cyber violence, with attention to gender aspects. In particular, the CyberSafe program focuses on raising awareness among adolescent girls and boys about sexualized cyber violence, its consequences, and methods of protection. The program aims to equip adolescents of all genders with the skills to recognize situations involving cyber violence, understand their legal and psychological implications, and develop safe and responsible online behavior.

It also includes the training of various specialists. It is the first comprehensive program in Ukraine to combine theoretical instruction (awareness-raising sessions and training) with modern, interactive online tools designed to teach adolescents how to behave safely online.

### 4.3. Results of the Field Study (Expert Interviews and Focus Groups)

As a result of the field stage of the qualitative research — which included a focus group with young consultants from the NGO Teenergizer and in-depth interviews with experts — the main forms and characteristics of cyber violence against children of different ages in Ukraine were identified:

- The most common social media platforms where cyber violence occurs are *Telegram, Instagram*, and *TikTok*.
- The primary forms of cyber violence include cyberbullying, sexualized cyber violence, phishing, and cyberstalking.
- Girls are more likely to be exposed to sexualized cyber violence and cyberstalking.
- Boys are more often subjected to cyberbullying related to gender stereotypes (e.g., norms of masculinity).

The key challenges in preventing and responding to cyber violence in Ukraine include:

- Low awareness among children of different ages about what constitutes cyber violence and where they can seek support.
- Reluctance among victims to speak out about the issue due to fear, shame, or lack of trust.
- Lack of systematic, gender-sensitive prevention programs in educational institutions.
- Insufficient training for teachers, psychologists, and parents in the effective prevention of and response to cyber violence.
- Parents play a critical role, but often lack the knowledge and skills needed to protect their children online.
- Absence of regular monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of prevention programs.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

1. Ukraine's legislative framework requires substantial improvement to combat cyber violence effectively. This includes introducing a unified and clear terminology related to cyber violence and strengthening liability for its gender-based manifestations. In particular, amendments are needed to several key areas of legislation:

- Child protection legislation — to address the prevention of gender-based violence, especially in digital environments.
- Education legislation — to support the development and implementation of programs educating children of different ages about cybersecurity and the prevention of cyber violence.
- The Criminal Code of Ukraine — to enhance accountability for cyber violence, including by specifying penalties for offenses committed using information, communication, and digital technologies.

2. The gender-sensitive approach to preventing and combating cyber violence is currently underutilized both in legislation and in practice, which limits the effectiveness of interventions aimed at protecting children of different ages.

3. While some effective practices exist in Ukraine for the prevention of and response to cyber violence against children of different ages and genders, these efforts are often fragmented, fail to cover all social groups of minors, and do not always take into account gender-specific needs.

4. There is an urgent need to enhance digital literacy and raise awareness of the risks of cyber violence among children of various age groups, their parents or legal guardians, educators, and the general public.

5. Children — especially adolescents — tend to place more trust in their peers or familiar bloggers/influencers than in adults. However, they are often excluded from the development and implementation of peer-to-peer educational initiatives, which reduces the effectiveness of efforts to address cyber violence awareness.

6. Effectively combating cyber violence requires coordinated action by all stakeholders at both the national and local levels. These include: government authorities, the education and child protection systems, law enforcement bodies, ICT businesses, civil society organizations, and international partners.

# 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

## 6.1. Improving Legislation and Policies to Meet International Standards:

6.1.1 Harmonize national legislation with international norms and standards (e.g., Directive (EU) 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence, the EU Digital Services Act (2024)).

6.1.2 Introduce the following amendments to the State Targeted Social Program on Combating Human Trafficking until 2027:

- Involve children in the development of educational programs to prevent cyber violence, including in the context of sexual exploitation and the dissemination of pornography;
- Organize and conduct educational activities involving children of different ages to raise awareness and prevent cyber violence related to sexual exploitation and pornography.

6.1.3 Ensure the integration of a gender-sensitive approach across all strategies, programs, and measures aimed at preventing and combating cyber violence against children.

6.1.4 Develop and implement a national strategy for protecting children of various age groups from cyber violence, with clearly designated responsible institutions, measurable indicators, and effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

## 6.2. Developing the Education and Prevention System

6.2.1 Conduct age-appropriate training sessions for children on gender equality and non-discrimination as foundational elements for addressing cyber violence.

6.2.2 Integrate digital literacy, cybersecurity, and cyber violence prevention programs — with a focus on gender aspects — into the school curriculum.

6.2.3 Introduce systematic training and ongoing professional development for teachers, school psychologists, social workers, and law enforcement personnel on effective methods for preventing, detecting, and responding to cyber violence involving children.

6.2.4 Develop and distribute gender-sensitive information and educational materials for girls and boys of different ages and social backgrounds, as well as for parents, educators, and child protection professionals, on how to recognize, prevent, and respond to cyber violence.

6.2.5 Conduct regular nationwide awareness campaigns to educate the public on cyber violence and its gender-specific dimensions.

6.2.6 Promote and adapt innovative digital tools (e.g., CyberSafe) that support the development of safe online behavior among adolescents.

6.2.7 Create simple and accessible mechanisms for reporting cases of cyber violence (within educational institutions, on digital platforms, and to law enforcement agencies), and ensure timely and effective investigation of such reports.

6.2.8 Actively involve children of different ages and genders in the design, implementation, and evaluation of cyber violence prevention programs. Engage them as contributors to decision-making and as peer mentors and trainers for other children, using peer-to-peer methodologies.

### 6.3. Strengthening Coordination and Research:

6.3.1 Strengthen inter-agency coordination and cooperation among government institutions responsible for child protection, education, and digital safety; educational institutions; civil society organizations; ICT businesses; and international partners. The Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine and relevant regional departments should consider the following:

- Organize and implement training programs to prevent cyber violence against girls, including sexual violence, bullying, and the intimidation of female political and civic leaders;
- Involve children in the development and implementation of regional and local action plans and initiatives on cyber violence prevention.

6.3.2 Establish a national resource or database for collecting and monitoring data on cases of cyber violence against girls and boys of various ages (disaggregated by gender, age, and form of violence), for example, by building on the Unified State Register of Cases of Domestic and Gender-Based Violence. This would serve as a basis for evidence-based policymaking.

6.3.3 Engage IT companies and online service providers in developing and implementing technical solutions to enhance online safety for girls and boys of different ages and social backgrounds, including tools for content moderation, user protection, and simplified reporting mechanisms.

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