

(Re)Producing Violence against Women in Online Spaces

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Abstract: Taking into consideration the emergence of the Internet and new computer technologies and their capacity of creating social alternative spaces, this paper aims at examining how and if the phenomenon of violence against women is extended from the offline into the online world. The authors applied descriptive qualitative content analysis to users' comments to online articles depicting the new legislative changes in the field of domestic violence in order to examine how online users negotiate gender, gendered positions and issues in genderless environments. The two types of discourses advanced by users with regard to violence against women highlight that gender discrimination has now a new means of manifestation, namely through online platforms.

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Introduction

The use and impact of the new information technologies can be analyzed at the socio-cultural level, given that "any technology represents a cultural invention, in the sense that technologies bring forth a world; they emerge out of particular cultural conditions and in turn help to create new social and cultural situations."³ The "new worlds" advanced through online spaces have been theorized as better alternative realities where individuals are no longer constrained by social norms and prerequisites in performing their identities. As users can develop different online personae, social identity's signifiers such as race, gender or ethnicity became invisible and neutralized.⁴ The opportunity of eliminating *visible* differences among individuals was consequently

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² This work was supported with the financial support of the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project number POSDRU/107/1.5/S/77946 with the title „Doctorate: an Attractive Research Career”.

³ Arturo Escobar, "Welcome To Cyberia: Notes on the Anthropology of Cyberculture", in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David John Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 2000), 56.

⁴ Davey Winder, *Being Virtual. Who you Really are Online* (UK: Wiley, 2008).

associated with the opportunity of eliminating gender or racial discrimination. The particular lack of gender, or the play with gendered identities in online spaces, are elements perceived as having a positive influence on liberation of gendered social constraints and stereotypes.

Consequently, through this paper we emphasize that gendered stereotypical and detrimental attitudes towards women are strongly visible in online spaces, despite the physical gendered absence of the users. How online spaces could or should eradicate prejudices and stereotypes strongly depends on its users and their already culturally-shaped attitudes and norms. Thus, despite the theoretical *emancipator* and *liberating* effects of the cyberspace, we will observe that

Rather than disappearing when one logs on, the preexisting speech communities in which interactants operate provide social understandings and practices through and against which interaction in the new computer-mediated context develops. The CMC [computer-mediated communication] use always is nested in the national and international cultures of which its participants are members.¹

In this paper, we examine how the cultural tolerance for violence against women transcends the “offline” world through the computer-mediated communication. The paper analyzes the online users’ attitudes and their discourse on domestic violence aiming at providing an explanatory framework on how gender and gendered issues are negotiated in *genderless* online spaces. As online-related activities and practices challenge dichotomies such as real-virtual, we consider it is important to research how offline attitudes are reflected by the online ones, considering that “the Internet is not creating new forms of crimes against women (...), but it is creating new ways and means for crimes to be perpetrated.”² Moreover, due to the comforting anonymity feature of cyberspace and the flexible online regulations regarding the freedom of speech, users may not follow the pattern of expressing social desirable opinions and attitudes towards sensitive issues, such as violence against women. Since the virtual spaces embed socio-cultural practices and virtual practices alike (e.g. anonymity and extensive freedoms), we consider that it is important to research what type of values and attitudes are constructed or negotiated into cyberspaces in order not only to observe how prevalent discriminatory attitudes are, but also to further design new means of changing (or combating) discrimination. Nonetheless, we strongly consider that the importance of researching the virtual-real interconnected practices and attitudes correlates with the necessity of acknowledging the Internet as a cultural and social construction which impacts (and is impacted back by) the *real* but technologically mediates lives. In accordance with Markham, we consider that

As a *context of social construction*, the Internet is a unique discursive milieu that facilitates the researcher’s ability to witness and analyze the structure of talk, the

¹ Nancy K. Baym, “The Emergence of On-line Community”, in *Cybersociety 2.0. Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, ed. Steve G. Jones (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998), 40.

² Karen Banks, “Leave the Internet Alone”, in *Gender Equality and ICT/Internet. APWIN Journal*, 3 (2001): 163.

negotiation of meaning and identity (...), and the construction of social structures as these occur discursively. (...) the linguistic and social structures emerging through CMC provide the opportunity for researchers to track and analyze how language builds and sustains social reality.¹

In order to research how violence against women is reproduced and perpetuated in online spaces, we have applied descriptive qualitative content analysis to textual comments posted in response to online news articles presenting the legislative changes brought to the domestic violence law. We based our research on the assumption that socially important events are nowadays characterized by online mediated exposure and users' access to visualize and offer feedback (or simply share opinions) to news content. Furthermore, reflecting on the evolution of the online media, we had in mind that the audience is also engaged in the news production, surpassing the status of simple consumer.² The news articles covered the national (e.g., www.adevarul.ro, www.libertatea.ro, www.evz.ro), regional (e.g., www.citynews.ro) and local online media (e.g., www.gurialomitei.com, www.mediasiinfo.ro). The sampling was purposive, including only those articles referring to the legislation change and its future consequences for the victims and perpetrators. The news articles were generated by utilizing Google Search browser and were collected until a saturation level was reached and information became repetitive. In addition, we have collected all the comments accompanying the news. Between February and April 2013, we have analyzed 446 comments posted to 57 news articles, from 36 different websites. After comments analysis and coding, we obtained the following six thematic units that frame users' attitudes and discourses toward violence against women, as it follows: a) justifications for supporting violence against women; b) the redundancy and inefficiency of legal measures against domestic violence; c) awareness on domestic violence serious effects; d) family as a legitimate violent institution; e) citizens' political misrepresentation; f) the orientalization of violence against women.

We engaged with the content of the comments as a reflection of audience's attitudes regarding domestic violence. According to the statistics revealed by Internet World Stats³, 44.1% of the Romanian population was using the Internet in June 2012. The results of a GfK research on the Romanian Internet users emphasize that men are using the Internet more often than women: 50% of men and 47% women were using the Internet in 2012. According to the results of the same study, the individuals with higher education (89%) and with ages between 15 to 24 years (83%) and 25 to 34 years (71%) are preponderantly using the Internet.⁴ We can only assume that most of the users commenting the news are young men, with higher education, from urban area, affording an Internet connection or connecting online from the workplace. Yet, as anonymity is an important impediment in establishing an online sample, in order to avoid undesirable

¹ Annette N. Markham, "Internet communication as a tool for qualitative research", in *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*, edited by David Silverman (Sage Publications, 2004), 97.

² Chris Greer, "News Media Criminology", in *The Sage Handbook of Criminological Theory*, ed. Eugene McLaughlin and Tim Newburn (Sage Publications, 2013), 503.

³ Internet World Stats – Usage and Population Statistics, "Internet Users in Europe June 30, 2012", <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm#europe>.

⁴ GfK Romania, accessed March 15, 2013, http://www.gfk-ro.com/cgi/fts_search_all.pl.

generalizations we prefer not to associate users with a specific gender, age, ethnic or class profile. Taking into account the interest for the news, we can assume that online users are in most cases adult persons seeking for information. The Romanian public mostly reads daily news from national publications such as Click, Libertatea and Can-Can¹. The news can be seen directly on the website, or can be accessed via e-mail or Facebook. Consequently, most users read regularly two-three publications, and most of the time from the work place. Some of the users are actively involved in commenting the news and interacting with others on topics they are interested in or have a vehement point of view, which they need to state. Although their identity is anonymous and their comments are not targeting specific users or persons, the perpetuation of violence and secondary victimization of women still manifests at an online, symbolic level.²

As the paper further reveals, online users subscribe to two main types of discourses on domestic violence against women. The prevalent discourse is focused on “degendering the problem and gendering the blame”: while men as accountable for perpetrating violence against women are almost absent from the users’ comments, they conceptualize “domestic violence in a way that normalizes the victim’s responsibility while ignoring the role of the abuser and of society.”³ When portraying women as the only ones responsible for domestic violence, users employ different strategies. Berns has theorized these strategies aimed at gendering the blame as it follows⁴:

- 1) “highlighting women who are abusers” – users comment how men are frequently subjected by their partners to emotional and social violence, emphasizing that violence against men is easily overlooked by society and legal institutions. Within our analysis, this strategy is intertwined with no. 3), namely “critiquing the social tolerance for women’s violence but not for men’s violence”;
- 2) “holding female victims responsible for their role in their own victimization” – women are guilty in the same measure for *provoking* the abuse, as well as for staying in violent relationships;
- 4) “blaming the battered-women advocates” – in our case, the advocates are assimilated with those politicians who initiated and passed the new law on domestic violence. The new law has introduced the protection order (which includes the possibility of evacuating the perpetrator from the house), thus *battered-women advocates* being seen as men-haters and severe opponents to the institution of family.

The second discourse, to which users engage, accentuates domestic violence as a private issue. Presenting the evolution of domestic violence legislation is important

¹ Mediafax- “BRAT a lansat rezultatele de audiență ale SNA obținute cu noua metodologie a studiului” (“BRAT released the SNA audience results obtained with the new study methodology”), accessed March 15, 2013, <http://www.mediafax.ro/cultura-media/brat-a-lansat-rezultatele-de-audienta-ale-sna-obtinute-cu-noua-metodologie-a-studiului-9234766>.

² Association for Progressive Communications (APC), “Statement to the 57th Session of the CSW - Violence against women and information and communications technology”, accessed March 15, 2013:

http://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/csw_apc_statement_final_version_0.pdf.

³ Nancy Berns, “Degendering the Problem and Gendering the Blame: Political Discourse on Women and Violence”, in *Gender and Society*, 15(2), (Sage Publications, 2001): 269, accessed March 20, 2013, doi: 10.1177/089124301015002006.

⁴ Berns, “Degendering the Problem and Gendering the Blame”, 269.

because it recognizes the phenomenon as a social problem.¹ During the communist regime, the Romanian state expressed little interest for actions with no direct political implications. Women's right to contest domestic violence was legally impossible. Until 2000, there was no legal recognition of domestic violence crime, this form of abuse being addressed through the Criminal Code. By adopting the Law no. 197/2000, amending and supplementing the Criminal Code, measures and penalties have been adopted for domestic violence cases. This way, legal recognition of domestic violence was achieved. Additionally, from 1969 and 2001, article no. 197 of the Romanian Criminal Code was offering the parties involved in a rape trial the opportunity of reconciliation through marriage. If the victim and the rapist (or one of the rapists in a gang rape trial) were deciding on getting married, then the legal charges against the rapist were dropped (applicable also to the others involved in the gang rape, if that was the case). Hence, violence against women was naturalized and normalized by the institutions of the law and through the social institution of the family.

Both discourses, the one related to degendering the problem while gendering the blame and the one concerning domestic violence as a private issue, are detrimental to women's rights and to coherent social action for combating domestic violence. Online attitudes and discourses, supplemented by inflammatory and abusive comments (for example, comments including motivation for beating or new tips on how to beat your partner without leaving visible marks) illustrate the Romanian online environment as being violent and male-dominated. Rather than being a *safe* or *supporting* environment for all users, or rather than having a mind-changing effect on its users, "cyberspace can provide freedoms of various sorts, but they are designed and constrained by powerful structured forces of assumptions and goals; they are not equally friendly environments or opportunities for everyone."²

1. Domestic Violence: Facts, Statistics and Legal Measures

Violence against women represents one of the most serious human rights abuses, with devastating effects on the victims' physical, psychological, emotional and economic well-being. Commonly perceived as an intimate problem, attitudes on domestic violence are oriented towards a resolution within the same private sphere. Eliminating society's responsibility, denying the problem as a social one and blaming the victim for remaining in an abusive relationship represent tools for separating the public and the private, the intimate and the institutional involvement.³

¹ Narcisa Mariana Radu, Júlia Adorjáni, Traian Morar, "Prevederi legislative cu privire la violența domestică", in *În spatele ușilor: Violența domestică și sistemul de justiție*, eds. Imola Antal, Maria Roth, Creazzo Giuditta ("Legal Provisions Regarding Domestic Violence" in *Behind the doors: Domestic violence and the justice system*) (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2012), 35.

² Cheris Kramarae, "Feminist Fictions of Future Technology", in *Cybersociety 2.0. Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, ed. Steve G. Jones (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998), 113.

³ Elizabeth Schneider, *Feminist Lawmaking* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 231.

International statistics have revealed worrying data concerning domestic violence victims. 1 in 4 women is a victim of domestic violence during her lifetime¹. 40% to 70% female homicide victims are murdered by their (ex-) partners in Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa and the United States². Moreover, the risk of physical and emotional violence escalation increases when women try to exit the relationship or when they are already separated from their brutal partners. 76% to 95% women were victimized and harassed by their ex-partners after the separation³ and 75% of the violent acts are potentially lethal⁴. 36% to 39% women were victims of continuous violence after the separation.

Findings of the first national research on domestic violence and violence at the workplace concluded that in Romania domestic violence "occurs frequently, and marks everyday life".⁵ Thus, in a period of 12 months prior to the research, approximately 800,000 women were victims of various forms of violence. Data provided by the National Agency for Family Protection⁶ showed an increase in domestic violence cases, from 8,104 in 2004 to 11,534 in 2008. 3,270 cases have been reported by the same institution in the first trimester of 2009.

In response to the joint efforts of nongovernmental organizations, women's rights activists and the awareness raising campaign initiated by the TV channel Acasă TV in September 2011,⁷ in May 2012, Law no. 25/2012 was adopted with the purpose of amending and supplementing Law no. 217/2003 on preventing and combating domestic violence. The draft law was initiated by the Democrat Liberal Party parliamentarians, deputies of national minorities, members of the National Union for

¹ Council of Europe, "Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence" (2002): 2, accessed March 15, 2013, http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/equality/03themes/violence-against-women/Exp_memo_Conv_VAW_en.pdf.

² Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi and Rafael Lozano, "World report on violence and health", *World Health Organization*, (2002): 93, accessed March 15, 2013, http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2002/9241545615_eng.pdf.

³ Cathy Humphreys and Ravi K. Thiara, "Neither justice nor protection: women's experiences of post-separation violence", in *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 25(3) (2003): 199, accessed January 10, 2013, doi: 10.1080/0964906032000145948.

Tina Hotton, "Spousal violence after marital separation", *Juristat- Canadian Center for Justice Statistics- Statistics Canada- Catalogue no. 85-002-XIE 21, 7* (2001): 6, accessed January 10, 2013, [http://violenceresearch.ca/sites/default/files/HOTTON%20\(2001\)%20SPOUSAL%20VIOLENCE%20AFTER%20MARITAL%20SEPARATION.pdf](http://violenceresearch.ca/sites/default/files/HOTTON%20(2001)%20SPOUSAL%20VIOLENCE%20AFTER%20MARITAL%20SEPARATION.pdf).

⁴ Ruth E. Fleury, Cris M. Sullivan and Deborah Bybee, "When ending the relationship does not end the violence. Experiences of Violence by Former Partners", in *Violence Against Women*, 6 (12), (2000): 1363, accessed February 10, 2013, doi: 10.1177/10778010022183695.

⁵ Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate (Partnership for Equality Center), *Cercetarea națională privind violența în familie și la locul de muncă* (National Research on Family and Workplace Violence), (2003): 3, accessed February 12, 2013, http://www.cpe.ro/romana/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=27&Itemid=48.

⁶ Agenția Națională pentru Protecția Familiei (National Agency for Family Protection), "Date statistice înregistrate de agenție în perioada 2004-2009" (Statistics recorded by the Agency between 2004 and 2009), accessed May 15, 2009, www.anpf.ro.

⁷ The petition created and promoted by Acasă TV gathered 74.000 signatures and was submitted to the Romanian Parliament in December 2011.

Romania's Progress and a Liberal deputy being adopted by the Senate on 9th of November, 2010. However, the draft was placed on the agenda of the Chamber only on 5th of December, 2011. The law was adopted by the Chamber of Deputies in February 2012 and promulgated by the Romanian President on the occasion of the International Women's Day – March 8, 2012. The normative act amending the law on domestic violence was published in the Official Gazette no. 165 on March 13, 2012, and entered into force on May 12, 2012. The law was promulgated after the armed attack of a former police officer, Gheorghe Vlădan, who deadly shot his wife and a colleague of hers, and injured other six persons on March 5, 2012.¹

The most important changes provided by the new law consist of the extension of the definition of the family member, now including the ex-husbands and the persons who lived together in an intimate relationship. The necessity of informing victims about the criminal prosecution body and where they can file a complaint, their right to free legal advice and assistance, their procedural rights, are alike elements of novelty and improvement. Moreover, the new law stipulates the implementation of the protection order, one or several of the following measures, obligations or prohibitions being on the options' list:

1. temporary evacuation of the perpetrator from the shared home;
2. return of the victim and her children at home;
3. the right of the perpetrator to receive a part of the common household only when it can be shared;
4. a minimum distance from the victim, her children, relatives, home, workplace or educational institution;
5. prohibition towards the perpetrator from moving to certain neighbourhoods or defined areas where the victim is developing her or his activities;
6. prohibition of any contact with the victim;
7. ordering the abuser to hand over to the police any owned weapon;
8. custody of the couple's minor children or deciding their place of residence.

One of the flaws of the new law is the lack of procedural norms necessary for the implementation of the provisions². In the absence of clearly defined implementation procedures, the new legal framework on domestic violence could be described as an institutional attempt to prevent and combat domestic violence. From May 2012 to January 2013 only 1009 requests for the protection order have been registered³, a very small number compared to the national prevalence of the phenomenon.⁴ Moreover, the

¹ News title: "Președintele Băsescu a promulgat legea privind prevenirea violenței în familie" ("The Law against domestic violence promulgated by President Băsescu"), available online at: <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-11695565-presedintele-traian-basescu-promulgat-legea-privind-prevenirea-violentei-familie.htm>.

² Law 25/2012 on amending and supplementing Law no. 217/2003 on preventing and combating domestic violence), Published in the Official Gazette, Part I no. 165 of 13 March 2012.

³ Asociația Transcena în colaborare cu alte ONG-uri române (Transcena Association in collaboration with other Romanian NGOs), "Studiu la nivel național cu privire la implementarea ordinului de protecție – Legea 25 din 2012" (National study on the Implementation of the Protection Order - Law 25 of 2012), (2013): 8, accessed March, 20, 2013, http://www.aleg-romania.eu/images/studiu_ordin_protectie/studiu_national_ordine_protectie.pdf.

⁴ Partnership for Equality Center, "National Research on Family and Workplace Violence", 3.

fact that the law “improves” the victim’s situation through more severe, yet hardly applicable measures and punishments against the perpetrator highlights the democratic deficit with regard to solving women’s problems and protect their rights in Romania.

The following parts of this paper will reveal how users approach the new legal provisions and violence against women as a phenomenon. As a response to unreliable legislative reforms in this field, and as subscribers to a socio-cultural framework of violence against women tolerance, individuals show low levels of confidence towards challenging or combating violence against women

2. Her Fault, Her Responsibility and His Absence: Online Discourse on Gendering the Blame and Degendering the Problem

Only 68% of Romanians consider that domestic violence is inadmissible and it should be punished by the law, in comparison to Spain, where 91% of the respondents believe the same.¹ Considering the above, we can state that the perceived causes of violent behaviour influence individuals’ attitudes towards punishments.² Consequently, this should lead to a higher level of association between provoking the partner and justification of the abuse. According to the victim blaming theory, the victim is responsible partly or totally for the suffered abuse.³ This theory states that individuals accept “correction” for bad behaviour, hence strengthening the beliefs according to which domestic violence represents a justified and deserved punishment.⁴ As we will further observe, users’ discourses underline how blaming the victim is a popular strategy of declining the responsibility of the abuser, as well as of dismissing domestic violence as a serious gendered issue.

- **Justifying violence against women: provocations, manipulations, and lies**

Violence against women is considered a justified behaviour by 11.43% (51) of the users commenting the news regarding the change of the domestic violence law. Women are described as being financially motivated and interested when they enter an intimate relation. Therefore, users consider that violence against women is fully justified as a correction brought to their materialist *nature*. Consequently, the amendments to the law regarding the protection order are presented in several comments as perfect opportunities for women to provoke men to beat them, so they can steal their properties while playing the victim role: *many women challenge you to beat them in order to take your house; [she] will provoke you, and obviously, you will beat her*. At the same time, legislation

¹ European Commission, “Special Eurobarometer 344. Domestic Violence against Women Report”, (2010): 45, accessed February 20, 2013, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_344_en.pdf

² Pamela A. Brand and Phyllis A. Anastasio, “Violence-Related Attitudes and Beliefs: Scale Construction and Psychometrics”, in *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 21 (2006): 858, accessed February 10, 2013, doi: 10.1177/0886260506288934.

³ Silvina Ituarte, “Victim Blaming Theory”, in *Encyclopedia of Domestic Violence*, ed. Nicky A. Jackson (New York: Routledge Taylor& Francis Group, 2007), 715.

⁴ Rosalie Kern, Terry M. Libkuman and Stacey L. Temple, “Perceptions of Domestic Violence and Mock Jurors’ Sentencing Decisions”, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 22 (2007): 1519, accessed at February 10, 2013, doi: 10.1177/0886260507306476.

changes, such as the protection order, are seen as the main cause for future different crimes against women, and even murder cases as an act of revenge for “stolen” properties: *This is incitation to murder!* Additionally, some users consider that women will continue to be beaten by their partners, as the formers will have the opportunity to compensate their acts with money. *Work a lot, save money and when you feel like “having fun”* (meaning when you are in the mood to beat her up), *just pay the woman and she will not go to the police.* According to these users, women will lie regarding the “real” abuse, and their false declarations will constitute a future cause for men imprisonment: *There are some women, who will lie when testifying against their men.*

Users portray women as *annoying, hysterical, stupid, irritating, caviller, lazy, liar and rude, talking all the time with their potty mouths*, and provoking men to use violence against them. The abuse against women is seen by some users as a method to calm them down. Women are also presented as having a promiscuous sexual behaviour, being unfaithful to their partners, and thus deserving to be beaten: *they are really asking for it.*

Some users blame the victims for staying with the abusers over a long period of time, instead of leaving. Their partners are pathologized in some comments, being described as men with animal features, *beasts* or *alpha males*, who cannot refrain themselves from beating their partners. In these comments, the abuse is well deserved because women choose those men: *lot of stupid women who are staying many years with the jackass they chose*, ignoring at the same time men who wouldn’t hurt them. Some users describe women as being mentally ill, in need for special help, since they are not able to leave their abusers: *A psychiatric help is required for those sluts that insist to remain for years with the savages who beat them daily.*

According to some users, men will beat their partners even worse in order to “celebrate” the promulgation of the new law: *Today I will beat my slut just because... F*** off with your anti-men laws!* Other users confess that they usually hit their partners and some of them even present methods of beating women without leaving marks (these actions are qualified by international law as torture): *hitting the woman with sand bags; drowning her in the bathtub until she becomes unconscious; hanging her in a nail and beating her soles with a rod*, etc. Some users promote moderation in the use of violence against women as a proper behaviour.

Reiterating the above-mentioned comments, we can observe that justificatory attitudes of violence are constructed in accordance with three common stereotypes about domestic violence victims: they are provocative, promiscuous, and good liars. In other words, women are simply untrustworthy as victims since the responsibility in the abuse is only theirs. Coker¹ theorizes that the social tolerance of domestic violence is based on the common denial of the negative consequences of this phenomenon. However, this tolerance is rooted in the mechanism of gender inequality, which allows and perpetuates violence against women.

¹ Donna Coker, “Enhancing Autonomy for Battered Women: Lessons from Navajo Peacemaking”, in *UCLA Law Review* vol. 47, no. 1, (1999): 39–41, accessed at March 10, 2013, <http://www.law.miami.edu/faculty-administration/pdf/donna-coker/enhancing-autonomy-for-battered-women.pdf>.

- **The redundancy and inefficiency of legal measures against domestic violence**

A national survey conducted in 2012 revealed that 68% of the respondents do not trust the Romanian criminal justice system, while 58% of the respondents have low and very low trust in the police officers and judges.¹ Low confidence in public institutions and political representatives (same study highlights that 40% of the respondents trust the Parliament) is the result of inefficient government programs, economic instability and “gross, endemic corruption”, all these being key features of pseudo-democracies.² These levels of reduced confidence are easily observed in the online comments: users consider that no major social changes will be accomplished through the implementation of the new domestic violence law. They focus their comments on the flaws and presumed inefficiency of the law, rather than on the problem of violence against women and their role as citizens in combating and reporting this problem. The law is also perceived as a measure of discrimination against men. The concern/fear that men as victims in peril of losing their houses and being convicted by a law that favours women over men is only in a small degree complemented by concerns on the victims’ position and their violated human rights.

The majority of the users consider that the new law against domestic violence will produce no change: women will continue to suffer aggressions and perpetrators will not be sanctioned. This opinion is backed up by offering several examples of breaches observed within the justice system, such as insufficient number of employees, work overload or the inefficiency and corruption of some professionals. Moreover, several users mention that the police will still not intervene, despite the new legal provisions. *I bet that by tomorrow at least 20-30 women will be assaulted in Romania and aggressors will not be sanctioned. Or nobody will find out about them* – one user comments. Another user mentions that *until the court decides something, you can be killed*. These opinions confirm the results of a press and justice monitoring research project, according to which there is a failure to solve cases within a reasonable time within the Romanian justice system.³

The new law is considered an abuse against men by *taking them from their homes and throwing them in the street, in the rain, in trenches, in temperatures of -20 Celsius degrees, without medication, without the possibility of taking with him the most elementary things!* Apparently, due to women’s deviant and provocative behavior and the new law’s provisions, men are at risk of becoming homeless or even show up dead. Other users mention that this is a violation of the constitutional right to property: *Totally unconstitutionally and illegal (see Constitution)*. Another user mentions: *explain to us the method by which an owner may be prevented from having access to his own*

¹ “După Referendum. Efecte ale Crizei Politice” (After Referendum. The Political Crisis Effects), Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie (The Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy), accessed at March 12, 2013, <http://www.ires.com.ro/articol/210/efectele-crizei-politice-asupra-increderii-n-institutii-profesii-%C8%99i-partenerii-romaniei>

² Larry Diamond, “Assesing Global Democratization a Decade After the Communist Collapse”, in *Polsci, Romanian Journal of Political Science*, 2 (2) (2002): 5.

³ Adela Dinu, Angelina Tufariu, Marian Odangiu, Corina Onescu, Carmen Tufariu, Cristina Trifa, Ștefan Mihăilescu, Alin Gavreliuc, “Woman’s Rights between Use and Abuse- Monitoring the Press and the Local and Regional Justice”, (Timișoara: 2006), 109.

property, considering the Constitutional rights? According to the provisions of the Law 25/2012, police officers have the legal permission to enter the family premises only for the execution of the protection order. Additionally, the Romanian Constitution states that police officers have the permission to enter the victims' house for "removing a risk to someone's life, physical integrity, or person's assets" (article 27).

Violence against men perpetrated by women is brought into discussion, the cases being described as many and hidden as men are ashamed to report the abuse: *I know so many cases where men don't even have the permission to look around, why cannot the roles be reversed? Think about it!* Even though the law doesn't refer explicitly to women as victims, and it is presented in rather gender - neutral terms, most of the users point out that this law is a legal form of discrimination against men. The inclusion of the emotional and psychological abuse as forms of domestic violence is perceived as problematic. Considering the difficulty in proving these crimes, users fear the new provisions will provide some women the perfect legal tools to frame "victimizing" scenarios. Western states (such as United States of America, Sweden or Canada) are perceived as having biased and exaggerated laws for women protection, which offer no opportunity for men to defend themselves against accusations: *in the USA, there are thousands of men destroyed by false accusations of rape or abuse.*

Conversely, users who agree with the aggressors' punishment, consider that in this way the perpetrators will be taught a lesson: *Abusive husbands should be sent to jail for at least a week or two, in order to come to their senses.* Other users advocate an increase in punishments so that perpetrators can be intimidated. There is another category of users who consider that abusive partners should experience the same treatment they are applying to their victims: *I think that only beating them until they turn black and blue you can teach them a lesson or aggressors must be sentenced to death.*

Some users consider the protection order will not constrain the perpetrators from abusing their partners. Other users emphasize how police officers will be overloaded with work and that they don't own enough authority in order to act immediately. Users further propose alternative punishments, such as community service, considering that convicts do not change their behaviour as prisons are not positive environments. Still, a marginal comment emphasizes the fact that education on human rights and dignities could represent a solution for combating domestic violence.

The idea of women leaving their homes and going to shelters with their children is rejected in some comments, due to the material and emotional costs implied. In 2008 in Romania, there were 56 shelters and a total of 11.534 beneficiaries.¹ The evacuation of the aggressor is also rejected as there are no location alternatives for them. Due to the high possibility that the aggressors will stay around the house and harass the victim, users observe that the outcome may be unsatisfactory: *and where will the husband go with a restriction order? Where will he sleep? On the streets? No way! He will accommodate himself in front of the door until his wife will take him back in the house.* These comments reflect the reality: accommodation centres for family abusers do not

¹ The Ministry of Labour, "The Evolution of the Domestic Violence Phenomenon" (2009:172-173), accessed at March 12, 2013, http://www.mmuncii.ro/pub/imagemanager/images/file/Statistica/Buletin%20statistic/2009/famile1_65.pdf.

exist in Romania. The new law mentions day care centres for abusers' assistance, but these centres do not exist yet (excepting a few nongovernmental programmes).

The criminologist James Messerschmidt suggested that in order "to curb crime we do not need to expand repressive state measures, but we do need to reduce gender inequalities."¹ We consider "repressive state measures" equally important along with engaged political actions aimed at combating gender inequality. Individuals acknowledge the existence and the extent of domestic violence against women. Yet, they consider that the law is discriminatory to men because it provides more severe punishments for a serious crime and it grants the victim enhanced protection against the perpetrator. When women's rights protection is perceived as dangerous and challenging the masculine status quo, it is easily observed that (male) users still consider women as inferior, second-hand citizens whose rights and dignity are not equal to theirs.

• Cry for help – violence effects on victims

Several cases of domestic violence are described in the articles and comments. These examples are portrayed as desperate situations in need for help and accentuate the trauma of the victim or their reasons for continuing the abusive relationship. None of these comments have received responses from other users. Similar to the real world, violence effects and victims' stories were ignored. Stoltenberg observes that the "unconsciousness of ethical accountability is a core component of the masculinity that a lot of men grow up believing they should strive for."² But ethical accountability towards the victims should not only be apprehended by perpetrators, but also by men and women who chose to ignore what is happening with their neighbours, friends or relatives. The lack of responses to women's stories show that their cry for help in online spaces (other than those precisely dedicated to women's rights and issues) remain unheard and the opportunities of empowerment are reduced.

These comments belong to victims or to persons aware of the abuses of other persons. The lack of police involvement is presented as a security breach for the victims in receiving real protection against violence: *me and my 4 year-old daughter are victims of domestic violence and I think this law is just formal, because the police is not helping at all. [...] I have pressed charges against him, and the police call me a drama queen. I wonder if they expect to find me dead.* Absent or inefficient interventions reiterated in these comments do confirm the results of feminist studies regarding the criminal justice system's improper approach on domestic violence cases, and the system's failure in protecting the victims.³

Some comments provide e-mail addresses of users who need to be contacted and receive information and advice regarding their situation. Other users are just exposing the violence they endured while being in a relationship with their ex-partners, expressing their feelings of relief and peace for not being exposed to danger anymore.

¹ James Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and Crime* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), 185.

² John Stoltenber, *Refusing to be a Man. Essays on Sex and Justice* (London: UCL Press, 2000), 179.

³ Melbourne F. Hovell, Arlene G. Seid and Sandy Liles, "Evaluation of a Police and Social Services Domestic Violence Program: Empirical Evidence Needed to Inform Public Health Policies", *Violence against Women*, 12 (2006): 155, accessed February 10, 2013, doi: 10.1177/1077801205277723.

Women's reasons for staying in violent relationships are also mentioned in user's comments: keeping the children together with their father, the promises of change, and the shame that everyone will know their drama. *He came to me and he said he has changed, that he will stop drinking and hitting me. For the sake of the child, I got back to him, so the child can have a father. (...) He stayed sober two weeks. After that, the drinking and beatings were back.* According to specialists working with victims, there is a correlation between the duration of the relationship and the difficulty of separation from the abuser. Children and/or common assets make the separation decision even harder. We need to mention that many victims want to put an end to violence while maintaining their relationship.¹ Lack of housing options, financial resources and unemployment are the most recurrent leaving impediments.²

Comments also present the long term perpetuated emotional and psychological effects of domestic violence: *It has been years since I divorced, and I currently live abroad, but I am still sleeping with the TV or with the light on.* Threats from ex-partners are other problems faced by victims: *frankly, it is awful to hear 50 times a day: if you do not get back to me, I will kill you!* After the separation, motivation for harassment and abuse stems from the fact that the aggressor observes he no longer retains control over his ex-partner (and children), and he tries to reinforce his power through amplifying his violent behaviour and through stalking.³

• The uncivilized society and orientalizing of violence

Comments within this category emphasize that domestic violence is a problem in our society, where *Romanian brutes grow up as violence victims* and become abusers. Some users mention that the lack of civilization is specific for this country, characterizing Romania as one of the countries where domestic violence has a very high prevalence, with a lagging medieval mentality and lack of societal reforms, where human rights are violated, and a country where *rudeness and the tribal lifestyle of gypsies are models*. Switzerland is given as a model of good practice in the matter of combating domestic violence. We observe how the causes of this phenomenon are assigned either to the lack of civilization of the country and its *medieval mentality*, or to the ethnic minorities who are seen as deviant and negatively influencing the behavior of the majority. The degrading society, in the absence of leading examples for children and adults, is considered another cause of violence. Two users consider that the Orthodox Church and its anti-women discourse are a cause of violence against women and children through their dismissing discourse and justification of violence, thus proposing the outlaw of this *barbarian and primitive church*.

¹ Rosa Logar, *From good interventions to good cooperation- The DAPHNE PROJECT- Bridging Gaps*, (Vienna, 2006), 22, accessed February 15, 2013, http://www.wavenetwork.org/sites/default/files/homepage_bg_manual_fromgoodinterventionstogoodcooperation_0.pdf.

² Deborah K. Anderson and Daniel G. Saunders, "Leaving an Abusive Partner: An Empirical Review of Predictors, the Process of Leaving, and Psychological Well-Being", *Trauma Violence Abuse* 4 (2003): 185, accessed March 10, 2013, doi: 10.1177/1524838002250769.

³ Peter G. Jaffe, Nancy K. D. Lemon and Samantha E. Poisson, *Child Custody & Domestic Violence – A Call for Safety and Accountability* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 9.

The abusers are considered *savages, drunks, scamps, cads, mentally ill individuals, sadists, animals and worse than animals, ancestral individuals, monsters*, who will not react positively to anything, and who are treating their victims as *animals and servants*. The conceptualization of domestic violence perpetrators as pathological individuals also correlates with degendering views: since they are “incurable”, they cannot be socially perceived as responsible for their acts.

The adoption of the new law is seen as a proof of overcoming the Islam condition of the woman: *this means that we are out of Islam, where the woman has no value. We will apply the law for the following 200 years for Romania to be finally able to reach civilization*. The association of domestic violence with the Islam ignores many factors, which are contributing to the Muslim violence against women together with different schools of interpretation of the Qur'an, the Prophet's excerpts, traditions and shari'a. According to one school of interpretation, the words from Qur'an were misinterpreted and mistranslated, the *idribhunna* meaning wife separation in crisis situation, and not wife beating.¹

These comments denote how users tend to orientalize violence against women: inefficient domestic violence legislation and mentalities supporting and promoting violence are expected to be common in *uncivilized, barbaric* countries, not in a Europe Union member state. A civilized society protects its citizens, while Romania fails to accomplish this democratic goal, along with *third-world countries*. As scholars theorized, “this discursive violence storage process produces imaginary violent (violently imaginary) geographies, (non-European?) alterities and is inherently colonialist and Orientalist.”² Associated with elements like delinquency, insanity, poverty and violence against women, the Oriental identity is described as best as unusual, weak and underdeveloped, considered a problem that must be solved and taken over.³ Moreover, “(...) the arbitrariness with which violent, non-European identities, gendered, ethicized 'deposits' of violence creation are constructed is opposed 'only' by the superficiality with which the European identity is constructed as a symbol of combating violence against women.”⁴

This type of discourse focused on women's guilt and men's irresponsibility highlights how domestic violence is perpetuated through undermining attitudes toward victims / women. Not surprisingly in a culture of violence, the man as the abuser is rather absent from users' statements: the process of blaming the victim is obsessively focused on **her** behaviour, **her** fault, **her** decision to stay. As Kimmel notices, the “invisible privilege”⁵ of masculinity places women in oppressed positions of victims and

¹ Nawal H. Ammar, “Wife Battery in Islam: A Comprehensive Understanding of Interpretations”, *Violence Against Women*, 13 (2007): 523-524, accessed March 15, 2013, doi: 10.1177/1077801207300658.

² Andra Mirona Dragotesc, *(Non)European institutional and identity constructions in (re)presentations of violence against women in Romania*, PhD Thesis Summary, (2012): 21, accessed April, 10, 2013, http://doctorat.ubbcluj.ro/sustinerea_publica/sustineri_teze/?let=D

³ Edward Said, “Latent and Manifest Orientalism” in *Contemporary Sociological Thought: Themes and Theories*, ed. Sean P. Hier (Toronto, Ontario: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.), 427.

⁴ Dragotesc, *(Non) European institutional and identity constructions*, 36.

⁵ Michael S. Kimmel, *The Gendered Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

sole responsible for males' behaviour and actions. Pathologizing femininity and women's provocative/promiscuous behaviour is becoming a way of reinforcing the idea that women *deserve it*, while male violence against women is assumed as normal, natural and, at the same time, a normalizing method of womanhood's deviance.

The second type of discourse observed in our analysis addresses family as a core value of the Romanian society. Since domestic violence happens within the family, the former is envisaged as normal. Gelles notices that "our desire to idealize family life is partly responsible for a tendency to either not see family and intimate violence or to condone it as being necessary and an important part of raising children relating to spouses, and conducting other family transactions."¹ However, we have noticed users do not idealize family life as much as they idealize the extended powers conferred to the husband over his wife through marriage.

3. The family crisis discourse

Family appears to be a very important Romanian social institution. As the *basic unit of society*, the family, in its traditional or nuclear form, exclusively heterosexual (since gay marriage is illegal in Romania) is perceived as a socio-political-cultural promoted central value. Therefore, the concept of femininity is still associated with notions such as marriage, family and motherhood – "the attitudes and conceptions on women are fundamentally inter-linked with notions about marriage, family, household, children (...)"² – while the concept of masculinity is associated with power, protectiveness and, as we will further observe, violence.

Another shot to the family, the only institution able to provide people's independence from the rapacious and aggressive state, from the aggressive financial institutions after the well known "divide and conquer"! The provisions of the new law challenge the family unity. According to some users, *we will assist more often to family breakups*. Meanwhile, the number of marriages will decrease by discouraging those men who are willing to marry, together with a decrease in the birth rate: *In this way, no silly will ever marry! You shall seek for positive birth rate, welfare and happiness! In family, like in society and politics, there must be a leader! [...] We are heading to matriarchy and families composed by mothers and children!* All these opinions ignore the victim's right to a life free of violence in any of its forms and point out that marriage is not an equal partnership, but an institution where men are entitled to exercise violence.

There is a common belief among the users according to which a woman deserves legal protection as long as she is abused by *others*, by *strangers*. Whatever happens in the family is legitimate and should not be treated as a legal matter.

¹ Richard J. Gelles, *Intimate Violence in Families* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997), 1.

² Herietta L. Moore, *Feminism și Antropologie, (Feminism and Anthropology)* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Fundatiei Desire, 2005), 39.



Aleksandra Chaushova, *Stage I*, 2011, pencil on paper, 25 x 32,6 cm

• **In whose interest? Political representatives vs. Citizens**

Political decisions and actions are not gender-blind, and the national representation of women is currently approximated to 11.5%: from 588 parliamentarians, only 68 are women. Research conducted in Central and Eastern Europe's post socialist countries has shown that "the absence of a visible feminist culture, movement, and discourse in post socialist societies robs elite political women of arguments that could directly challenge the male-gendered world of politics and provide space for the articulation of women's interests in the political sphere".¹ Users did not expect politicians to position themselves differently to gendered issues, and to be the main voice on women's problems and

¹ Yvonne Galligan and Sara Clavero, "Prospects for Women's Legislative Representation in Postsocialist Europe: The Views of Female Politicians", *Gender and Society*, 22(2) (Sage Publications, 2008): 168, accessed September 12, 2010, doi: 10.1177/0891243207312268.

needs. The fact that the new law approaches a crime mainly perpetrated by men against women offended users and led them conclude the legal provisions as illegitimate.

Many users present the adoption of legislative changes regarding the domestic violence as the expression of Traian Băsescu's campaign (Romania's president), and of the political party he used to represent, the Democrat-Liberal Party. *This was probably a political declaration because he - the Superman - will come to rescue them [the women]*, is one's user opinion. Other users are outraged by the association of the political campaign with the tragedy occurred at Perla Salon in Bucharest: *Was this tragedy needed, so that our distinguished president could move a finger? He thinks that after dozens, or thousands of people had died, partially because of the negligence of authorities, he will clean his sins, and gain some more imagined popularity if he signs this document, after so many years of presidency?* Following the same political argument, some users consider that parliamentarians' reactions would not have been so delayed, if this kind of incident had happened to some of their relatives.

The comments also emphasize users' discontent regarding the corruption and lack of president's achievement, demanding his resignation: *the most beautiful present on 8th of March would be Băsescu's resignation*, altogether with the dissolution of his former political party: *Death to the orange chupacabras!* [Orange is the colour of the Democrat-Liberal Party]. The comments also refer to the corruption of the entire political class, in which the population lost trust: *you all steal from the Romanian public budget, regardless of the political colour*. The president is accused in 13 comments that he beats his wife, Maria Băsescu, issue that is perceived as unfair by some of the users, since he will not be sanctioned according to the provisions of the law. Nevertheless, this information is unproven; there is no evidence that the Romanian president is abusing his wife. Other users recall former situations in which the president used offensive words against women: *the great defender of women, who forgot he was naming them "pussies", "dirty gypsies" etc. How much shabbiness can this sinister character store?*

Cristina Pocora, one of the female politician initiators of the new legislation project is attacked in two sexist comments reproaching the lack of her life experience, and the negative consequences of the law against family unity. In the same manner, Raluca Turcan (another female politician initiator of the law) is advised, first of all, to get a husband in order to be legitimate in initiating these types of laws.

Kimmel states that¹ "violence against women is more common in those households in which power is concentrated in the hands of husband" and as we have observed, users claim that in a family the man must be the *leader*. Claiming that domestic violence is a private matter and should not be subjected to legal regulations underlines "society's acceptance and perpetuation of that violence [that] helps maintain it and make it difficult to control or eliminate."² The lack of confidence in legal institutions and the traditional family values perpetuation, according to which the family is sacred regardless of the abuses, are factors which constrain women in reporting the domestic violence acts. Furthermore, as long as the problem is ignored by others or covered by the victim, it may conduct to violence escalation. As researchers have

¹ Michael S. Kimmel, *The Gendered Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 261.

² Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 120.

theorized, “men often kill wives after lengthy periods of prolonged physical violence accompanied by other forms of abuse and coercion.”¹ If protection of the family institution does not involve protection of its members, then the concept of family represents an oppressive discursive category against women’s well-being.

4. Conclusions

The results of our research support the perspective according to which the structural inequalities are transferred into virtual platforms from the offline social life.² The two main discourses identified within the comments of the users, *degendering the violence and gendering the blame* and *domestic violence as a private issue*, are largely supporting and perpetuating a tolerant framework for violence against women. A third discourse, sustaining women’s empowerment, is marginal, illustrating through very few comments the need for a law that protects the victim and promotes her rights.

Blaming the victims and justifying violence are two main tendencies identified in the users’ discourses. Violence is also justified within this discourse through the pathologization of perpetrators and the orientalizing of violence, considering it specific to the Romanian retrograde culture and mentality. The attitude considering perpetrators as responsible for their violent behaviour is rare. Men are portrayed as future victims of the new law’s exaggerated provisions in an attempt to reinforce patriarchy. Also, the new legal provisions are described as the perfect opportunity for women to take advantage in different ways. It is considered that the new legislation will not produce real effects in the victims’ lives because of the existing gaps in the criminal justice system and in the social services. Moreover, it is considered that the property rights will be violated, lacking constitutionality. The perspective according to which the penalties should be increased or made more efficient so they produce a real change in the behaviour of the perpetrators is isolated. The lack of alternatives and services for perpetrators is also mentioned in the comments as a barrier in the implementation of the measures established by the law.

Asking for help and advice, several women describe the violence they are confronting with. Others are just expressing their relief because they are no longer involved in a violent relationship or describe the consequences of the abuse they are still confronting with. Under the condition of anonymity, they feel free to admit the violence they are or were subjected to, even though they receive no answer and/or no advice from the other users.

The new legal provisions are considered an attack to the family unity, birth rate and the independence of the individuals in relation to the State. We can conclude that violence against women is considered to be forbidden up until the boundary of the kin private space. The private space is ruled and governed by men and no state intervention is considered to be appropriate. Furthermore, the new law is perceived by the users as the result of the political campaign. The law is perceived to be oriented towards the state

¹ R. Emerson Dobash, Russell P. Dobash, Margo Wilson, and Martin Daly, "The Myth of Sexual Symmetry in Marital Violence", *Social Problems Journal* 39 (1992): 81, doi: 10.1525/sp.1992.39.1.03x0064l

² Pamela Abbott, Claire Wallace and Melissa Tyler, *Feminist perspectives on sociology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 360.

and the political class and not to citizens. The association of politicians with the promotion and promulgation of the law decreases its credibility in the context of a country with a low degree of trust in political parties and their representatives.

Considering how the information on legislative changes has been presented in the online media sources analyzed, we have observed that the majority of news articles do not include the positions of the feminist activists or specialists working with the victims of domestic violence, nor the positions of the legal professionals. Over 80% of the articles focus on the introduction of the protection order and the related new “obligations and interdictions”. The victims’ rights, including the possibility of receiving legal and psychological assistance, are mentioned in only one third of the online news. In our opinion, a greater attention should be offered to this type of information, considering that in many cases victims do not know their rights.

Access to new media facilitates and online spaces enhance knowledge transfer and opinion sharing. Some websites present particular acts of violence (included in the new law), as minor acts of violence, creating the image of an irrational legislative framework based on unmotivated measures and sanctions for unserious actions. Hence the information is manipulative and distorted, rather than objective and critical. Consequently, the users’ outraged reactions can be correlated with the influence of media partial and biased portraits of the phenomenon. Due to the fact that articles are mainly focused on the political actors in charge with the promotion and adoption of the new law, users can easily perceive the new law as a political and not citizen’s oriented one, and as a deceiving consequence. Also, the explanation of domestic violence as an escalating pattern of behaviour and the warning signs of domestic violence¹ are missing. As long as news coverage or online depictions, in our case, “fail to report the views of women judges, women parliamentarians, or women business leaders, but always report on violent crimes against women, then it is hardly surprising that the public fail to realize that women do in fact occupy significant roles in society (...)”²

The recognition of domestic violence as a crime has a major importance, given that it is the only legitimate way that contributes to its public disapproval, as Fineman and Myktuik highlight in their book *The Public Nature of Private Violence*.³ In these conditions, what the discourses fail to emphasize is that domestic violence is a crime and must be punished accordingly. Rheingold advanced the hypothesis of the democratic potential of the cyberspace and computer-mediated communication:

The political significance of CMC [computer-mediated communication] lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy’s monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen-based democracy...Which scenario seems more conducive to democracy, which to totalitarian rule: a world in which few people control communications

¹Iowa Domestic Abuse Death Review Team, „Domestic Violence: A Guide for Media Coverage”, 4-5, accessed February 15, 2013, http://www.idph.state.ia.us/bh/common/pdf/domestic_violence/guide_media_coverage.pdf.

² Carolyn M. Byerly and Karen Ross, *Women and Media: A Critical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 40.

³ Quoted in Mandy Burton, *Legal Responses to Domestic Violence* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 7.

technology that can be used to manipulate the beliefs of billions, or a world in which every citizen can broadcast to every other citizen.¹

The main idea underlying this article is that violence against women thrives and it is (re)produced in new, unrestricted environments which represents a danger especially considering its potential perpetuation. The reactions of the users regarding domestic violence restore their offline attitudes and beliefs under the protection of anonymity. What the democratic improvement CMC has brought for the Romanian citizens is rather the opportunity to freely express their opinions on politicians and social problems, than the exploration of the possibility to get engaged in the social change processes. The online spaces should not be used as means for perpetuating violence against women and a first step towards the women's rights regime reinforcement would be represented by the exclusion of violent and discriminatory comments and interventions. As long as users exclude women as equal rights citizens from their discourses and further promote attitudes based on tolerance for violence against women, it is difficult to conclude that online spaces and the new technologies play a central positive role in women's empowerment and gender equality mainstreaming.

¹ Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 14.