

An EU-wide project aims to tackle gender-based cyberviolence and stalkerware

IT security community, research and civil society organisations, and governmental authorities work together for DeStalk project

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From the beginning of 2021, five partners – the European Network for the Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence, Fundación Blanquerna, Kaspersky, Una Casa per l'Uomo and Regione del Veneto – have joined forces to work on the EU-wide “DeStalk” project, which the European Commission chose to support with its Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program.

DeStalk addresses the issues of cyberviolence and stalkerware, which represent new, widespread and hidden forms of online gender-based violence (GBV). Stalkerware is commercially available software that is used to secretly spy on another person’s private life via a smart device. Within two years, the European project team, consisting of major gender-based violence and cybersecurity experts, will jointly develop content for a training and then train practitioners in victim support services and in perpetrator programmes in health and social services, as well as train key stakeholders in regional authorities and governments to increase awareness among the general public and take action against cyberviolence.

"Taking on the lead of the Destalk project's coordination, the Couples and Family research group from the Faculty of Psychology, Education and Sports Sciences (Blanquerna), is committed to hindering GBV within such new and still unknown tools and media, which take place online but produce real damage in our communities," affirms Dr. Berta Vall, associated professor at Blanquerna. "We are addressing the issue with an innovative approach and a sound multi-stakeholder consortium, providing continuity and new developments in our effort on gender equality and gender-based violence prevention."

Gender-based violence and online abuse

In Europe, seven in ten women who have experienced cyberstalking, have also experience at least one form of physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner¹. Likewise, 71% of domestic abusers monitor women’s computer activities while 54% track survivors’ cellphones with stalking software. In 2019, Kaspersky detected a 67% year-on-year increase of stalkerware usage on its users’ mobile devices at a global level, with the most affected European countries being Germany, Italy, and France². Kaspersky will publish analysis of the 2020 findings at the end of the month.

¹ European Institute for Gender Equality. (2017, June 19) Cyber violence is a growing threat, especially for women and girls. <https://eige.europa.eu/news/cyber-violence-growing-threat-especially-women-and-girls>

² Coalition against Stalkerware. (2019). *The State of Stalkerware in 2019*. <https://stopstalkerware.org/2020/06/15/updated-report-on-the-state-of-stalkerware-in-2019-is-now-available-in-6-languages/>

“Preliminary analysis of the 2020 data shows that the situation has not much improved from 2019. The number of people affected by stalkerware is more or less on the same level as the year before. It can of course be explained by the growing integration of technologies into our lives. Sadly, the software used for stalking is becoming common and just another form of intimate partner violence. Sadder still is that this type of software has legal status. It’s quite hard to fight against stalkerware using only tech tools. However, it would really help if practitioners and users are aware that stalkerware exists, know how to recognise the signs of this software being installed on their devices, and know what to do next,” comments Alfonso Ramirez, General Manager, Kaspersky Spain.

Network capacity is the key

The DeStalk project will develop a multi-level strategy with three key milestones. Most importantly, the project team will create an e-learning package on cyberviolence and stalkerware, available in most-spoken European languages and targeting practitioners and policy-makers. Beyond that, the consortium will upgrade and test existing tools for practitioners working within victim support services and perpetrator programmes. Last but not least, there will be a test of a regional pilot awareness-raising campaign combined with replication guidelines to be used by strategic stakeholders.

“The effects of cyberviolence on women and girls are devastating, all consuming, never-ending, because they are part of a continuum of violence (offline and cyber) that deprives them of their freedom,” says Alessandra Pauncz, Executive Director of WWP European Network.

The online training, attended by 200 professionals, will enable a deep understanding of cyberviolence and stalkerware among experts. This will have an indirect but very significant impact in helping thousands of victims and those working with perpetrators of cyberviolence. Additionally, the regional training pilot will enhance capability and cooperation among victim support services and perpetrator programmes that will have a long-lasting and replicable effect on hundreds of clients in treatment.

Elena Gajotto, Project Manager of Una Casa per l’Uomo noted: “Unfortunately, stalkerware and cyberviolence are often overlooked in every day work on gender-based violence. They are currently not tackled in most treatment programs for perpetrators or support services for victims, because of the lack of both dedicated training and proper tools to deal with this phenomenon. For this reason, one of the focuses of our work will be the systematic revision and adaptation of all the materials that professionals use daily with perpetrators and victims, to provide them with an effective toolkit to address stalkerware and cyberviolence.”

Awareness of and commitment to tackling cyberviolence will be made more prominent among the public authorities participating in the e-learning training and in the pilot project which will directly reach around 700 professionals. Roundtables will allow experts and public officers to share their experience and draft guidelines for European-wide replication of further territorial campaigns against cyberviolence.

About the partnership

The DeStalk project will be run throughout Europe thanks to the collaboration of an international and interdisciplinary project team:

- Fundación Blanquerna, research and education organisation within the Faculty of Psychology, Education and Sports Sciences from Ramon Llull University, Spain – Coordination and scientific support
- Kaspersky, a leading global cybersecurity company – E-learning development and IT content expertise
- Regione del Veneto, the local government of Italy's Veneto Region – Pilot campaign and public authority perspective
- Una Casa per l'Uomo, a civil society organisation working with victims and perpetrators in Italy – Training of practitioners in victim support services and perpetrator programmes
- WWP European Network, umbrella association for perpetrator programmes – Dissemination and GBV knowledge

An external Advisory Board will supervise and support DeStalk's excellence:

- Nicolas Violland, Police Commissioner and Advisor at the Ministerial Delegation for Partnerships, Strategies and Security Innovation (DPSIS), French Ministry of Interior
- Hauke Gierow, Head of Corporate Communications at G DATA Cyberdefense
- Martijn Grooten, Special Advisor to the Coalition Against Stalkerware

To find more about more the Coalition Against Stalkerware please visit the official website: www.stopstalkerware.com



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