

# Digital violence against women in Iraq

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# Acknowledgment

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*This study was originally written in Arabic.*

*You can find the original version [here](#).*

## The SecDev Foundation

Since 2011, this Canada-based NGO has worked globally to promote digital resilience among vulnerable populations—especially women, youth and at-risk civil society organizations. The SecDev Foundation's Salama@ team supported this research as part of a series of 20+ studies on the psychosocial and legal dimensions of digital violence against women across the MENA region. Responsibility for any views expressed in these studies rests with the authors.

## INSM Network for Digital Rights

INSM is a community organization comprising digital activists, experts, and defenders of digital rights in Iraq. As a non-governmental, non-profit civil society organization, it was established in 2011 and is the first of its kind in Iraq. A primary objective is to safeguard digital human rights in Iraq and ensure all individuals have access to a free, unrestricted, diverse, and secure internet.

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# Abstract

According to the findings of this study, women in Iraq are universally vulnerable to digital violence, with no exception. This form of violence is not limited to women who advocate for and defend women's rights, but also extends to those in socially acceptable professions, albeit to a lesser degree. The total number of women exposed to digital violence is substantial. These women believe that they are targeted primarily because of their gender, with other intersections such as being a politician, an election candidate, a human rights activist, or a journalist. Moreover, many displaced women experience digital violence due to the publication of their personal and professional data on their digital accounts, particularly data related to their place of origin. This often leads them to conceal their place of origin or current location. In addition, these women face discrimination when reporting their exposure to violence. This is due to the belief of women who have experienced abuse that filing complaints about digital violence, regardless of its severity, exposes them to threats and danger due to societal culture. As a result, many girls avoid reporting their experiences of digital violence, taking into account the lack of legislation and legal procedures that are supposed to address this issue.

The occurrence of violence transitioning between the digital and physical realms is also observable in the situation in Iraq, as exemplified by instances of daughters being murdered by their families, as well as situations involving blackmail and threats between spouses.

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## Executive Summary

In the present era, characterized by the proliferation of the digital environment and society, a range of phenomena have arisen, including instances of digital violence. Although men are not immune to such violence, research and studies have revealed that women are disproportionately affected, facing greater levels of harassment. This takes various forms, such as threats, blackmail, and reputation defamation, simply due to their gender. Across numerous countries, including Iraq, women are targeted with hate speech, particularly women activists in the public sphere and human rights defenders. This phenomenon is sometimes attributed to cultural and social customs prevalent in society.

Based on this study, out of the 117 women who participated in the questionnaire, 81 participants reported experiencing such violence on social media, which constitutes 69.2% of the sample.

The significance of this study arises from the growing use of social media in Iraq, as indicated by Kepios analysis, which shows a rise of 7.3 million (+27.7 %) in internet users in Iraq between 2022 and 2023.<sup>1</sup> The prominence of social media in women's lives has amplified, as they serve as platforms that enable women to articulate their diverse viewpoints. Moreover, a substantial number of women own small and medium-sized commercial ventures, such as electronic stores on social networking sites. Furthermore, educational and job platforms are available on these sites, making it imperative to conduct further studies that assess the safety of the digital environment for women to engage in various pursuits.

Women in Iraq are exposed to various forms of digital violence on various platforms. This study focused on certain forms of digital violence experienced by women in Iraq, including incitement to physical or verbal violence, sexual harassment, discrimination, bullying, hate speech, defamation, privacy violations through hacking email accounts or publishing private information, false or misleading information, and blackmail through the publication of electronic audio or visual materials on the internet.

This study sought to determine the nature of this phenomenon and the underlying reasons for its occurrence. Additionally, this study also aimed to identify the most significant obstacles and strategies for addressing this form of violence.

The survey and interviews conducted concentrated on the most significant manifestations of digital violence experienced by women in Iraq. The result showed that hate speech, offensive comments, and electronic blackmail are the most prevalent forms of digital violence encountered by women of various social and cultural backgrounds in Iraq. Furthermore, the necessity of obtaining legal, psychological, and technical support in addressing the issue of digital violence was emphasized among the participants. The participants agreed that the absence of a clear legal framework to address cybercrimes in Iraq poses a real threat to the safety and security of women in both the digital realm and in real life.

This study also examined the strategies and programs organized by women in positions of authority who are dedicated to supporting women who have experienced digital violence in Iraq.

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Kemp, "Digital; 2023: Iraq", DataReportal, February 2023. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-iraq>

This study yielded several noteworthy results:

- Iraq lacks a systematic approach to addressing digital violent crimes. Government agencies generally concentrate on issuing apologies and pledges to victims who file complaints, with few pursuing legal actions to prevent further violence and ensure the victim's protection.
- The majority of victims are those lacking fundamental digital experience, leaving their devices and tools vulnerable to blackmail, hacking, and other forms of digital violence.

Accordingly, a set of recommendations were put forth to mitigate the issue of digital violence as a genuine threat to the digital security of Iraqi women, which, at times, extends to their physical security. These recommendations are as follows:

1. Enacting a just and impartial law to combat information crimes, the provisions of which concentrate on apprehending and punishing the perpetrator, rather than relying on draft laws that employ broad language, which may be exploited subsequently to suppress voices and restrict freedom of expression in Iraq.
2. Establishing platforms and venues that primarily concentrate on providing psychological support to victims, while refraining from blaming the victims of digital violence, as this has a detrimental impact on them.
3. Organizing extensive digital security training and workshops for women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in Iraq, with the aim of fostering an awareness that digital rights are an essential component of inherent human rights. This will cultivate a group of women who are aware of digital violence and prepared to confront it, regardless of the severity of the threat.

## Methodology and Limitations

The present research endeavoured to elucidate the fundamental tenets pertaining to the concepts of violence and digital violence. It investigated the provisions of the Iraqi legislation, both at the federal and regional (Kurdistan) levels, aimed at combating these phenomena. Additionally, the study addressed the social and cultural ramifications of digital violence. Furthermore, the research provided an overview of the key initiatives aimed at raising awareness of digital violence, as well as the platforms and entities dedicated to educating women on their digital rights.

This research was carried out through conducting interviews with Iraqi women who hold administrative and political positions, are active in the feminist field, or work in office jobs, primarily in government and civil society organizations. The aim was to measure the prevalence of digital violence among Iraqi women who are aware of their significance as women and the need to respect their rights in society. A total of 25 women were interviewed, and all of them, i.e., 100%, reported having experienced digital violence.

In addition, the findings of the primary research sample relied on another method of data collection, which was acquired through an electronic questionnaire that was extensively disseminated across a variety of Iraqi digital platforms and websites. A total of 117 Iraqi women, hailing from diverse governorates, including Iraqi Kurdistan, were included in the sample.

## Conceptual Framework

1. **Violence:** The World Health Organization defines violence as the intentional use of physical force or authority in a threatening manner against a person, group, or society, which is likely to result in injury, death, psychological harm, maladjustment, and deprivation.<sup>2</sup>
2. **Violence against women** refers to any act that results in or is likely to lead to physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether in public or private life.<sup>3</sup>
3. **Digital violence against women** refers to technology-related violence that is part of the violence directed against women in reality and includes violent acts that are committed, incited, or exacerbated using information and communications technology, such as the phone, the Internet, and social media platforms. This type of violence includes electronic tracking, electronic harassment, hate speech, and other forms of violence.<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International reported in 2018 that electronic violence takes multiple forms, including direct or indirect threats to use physical or sexual violence, and abuse that is directed at a woman's identity, such as racism, targeted harassment, and violation of privacy, such as uncovering confidential information about an individual with the intention of inflicting harm, particularly by sharing intimate or sexual photographs of a woman without explicit consent.<sup>5</sup> This type of violence is based on the imbalance of social roles between men and women, supported by patriarchal and authoritarian social concepts, and has dimensions and consequences in both the digital and non-virtual world.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Dr..Siham Mutashar Al-Kaabi, Gender-Based Violence...Concept and Effects, Journal of Educational and Psychological Sciences, No. 147, 2021, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Noha Al-Qartaji, Women in the United Nations System, University Foundation for Studies and Publishing, Beirut, 2006, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Violence against women online in 2018, Amnesty International, at the link: <https://www.amnesty.org/ar/latest/research/2018/>

<sup>6</sup> Nawal Wasar, Digital violence against women...the extension of the phenomenon and the expansion of forms, Al-Rawaq Journal for Social and Human Studies, Volume 7, Issue 1, 2021, p. 265.

## Digital Violence and Iraqi Legislation

### Legal Framework of the Central Government

The attempts of the Iraqi government to enact a cybercrime law to regulate the use of information networks, computers, electronic devices, and systems have been ongoing for thirteen years. The first reading of the law was presented before the Iraqi Council of Representatives on July 27, 2011,<sup>7</sup> but it was not passed. The law was later re-presented and discussed in 2019,<sup>8</sup> but the Council was unable to pass it. It was then discussed in November 2020 and November 2022.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it was met with widespread rejection from activists and civil society organizations due to its broad and undefined articles, which could be exploited to impose harsh penalties, including life imprisonment and exorbitant fines, on activists and human rights defenders.

Despite these obstacles, the effort to amend the law continues to this day. However, it still faces societal and human rights rejection, and many human rights and civil organizations consider it to be unworthy of amendment due to its clear violations of freedom of opinion and expression, which are guaranteed by the Constitution to Iraqi citizens.

Due to the delay in enacting a law specifically addressing cybercrimes, the penalties for digital violence offenses, including electronic blackmail, slander, and defamation, continue to be based on the outdated Penal Code No. 111 of 1969, which pertains to the punishment of defamation crimes. This antiquated text is insufficient to address the current threat posed by hacking and social media crimes. Although the Iraqi legislature addressed these issues in the same law and its amendments up to 2009, in articles (433), (434), (438), (363), and (403), and specified penalties including imprisonment for a maximum of five years.<sup>10</sup>

Article 433 of the Penal Code establishes that defamation consists of attributing a specific incident to another person through any means of publicity, such that, if the allegation were true, it would result in the person being punished or despised by the people of their country.

Article 434 of the Penal Code defines insult as the act of accusing others of anything that may harm their honor or reputation or cause them distress, even in the absence of an attribution of a specific incident. However, it is important to note that this provision is primarily intended to apply to traditional print media, and not to online publications.

The Iraqi judiciary has faced continuous criticism for issuing judicial rulings based on the Penal Code, leading successive Iraqi governments to take legal measures aimed at addressing the "negative phenomena" present in the country's digital space, as they describe it. The most recent attempt is the launch of the Iraqi Ministry of Interior's "Balagh" platform, which is intended to report content deemed to be "bad, degrading" and violating "Iraqi societal customs and traditions."

This platform lacks clear standards for determining what constitutes "low content," as the term is subjective and could be used to target individuals whose opinions do not align with the government.

<sup>7</sup> The Iraqi Cybercrime Law is a poorly drafted law with harsh penalties that violate the right to due process and violate freedom of expression," Human Rights Watch, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/iraq0712ar.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Saeed Al-Numan, "The Risks of Cybercrime," Iraqi Forum for Elites and Competencies. <https://iraqi-forum2014.com>

<sup>9</sup> "Amid fears of stifling freedoms in Iraq...the cybercrime law raises controversy," Al Jazeera Net, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.net>

<sup>10</sup> Iraqi Penal Code, No. 111 of 1969 and its amendments up to 2009. <http://www.arabwomenlegal-emap.org>

Additionally, the Ministry of Interior's jurisdiction does not extend to defining the content and setting the standards for "Jawdat," which has raised concerns about the platform's approach to dealing with reports.<sup>11</sup>

Notwithstanding the anticipated positive impact of government initiatives, the platform was instead utilized to focus on prominent individuals in the digital realm. This followed a period of incitement and hate speech that had an effect on the community, particularly bloggers and fashion influencers in Iraq, who were perceived as a "social menace" eroding moral values, as deemed by the attackers. In response, the Ministry commenced the issuance of arrest warrants for some of them, such as the case of 'Umm Fahd', following a surge of online attacks targeting her in the wake of a video showing her in a government vehicle amidst a crowd of fans attempting to enter the stadium during the final match of Gulf 25 in Basra. The court's decree mandated a six-month term of incarceration in accordance with Article 403 of the Penal Code, for the offense of creating and disseminating films and videos that include lewd and immoral language and images. According to Iraqi attorney Hassan Al-Zubaidi in an interview with Al-Hurra website, "There is no basis for the allegations. The content she published and shared confirms Article 403 under which she was charged."<sup>12</sup>

The controversy surrounding this platform is due to the fear that it will become a tool for silencing voices in Iraq, with a focus on individuals who have been subjected to multiple forms of digital violence, including hate speech, by society itself. The Ministry of Interior is believed to be using this platform to gain praise and support, and human rights defenders, activists, and journalists are among those who are concerned that these measures mark the beginning of a dark era of censorship and intimidation on social media in Iraq.

This confusion has arisen while the more significant issue of serious violations against women in Iraq is being disregarded. Unfortunately, the incident of the arrests coincided with the news of the tragic death of the Iraqi YouTuber and blogger, Tayba Al-Ali, at the hands of her father through suffocation. Following her murder, a campaign of hate speech was launched against her, which included defamation, incitement, and insults to her honor. The aim of this campaign was to blame the victim and justify the assault that was committed against her.

Taiba Al-Ali departed from Iraq with the intent of evading her brother, who had subjected her to repeated instances of rape and assault, as she disclosed on her YouTube channel. Following numerous efforts by her family to encourage her to return and reconcile with her past, Taiba returned to Iraq with great enthusiasm, as evident from her social media posts. Unfortunately, she was murdered when she returned.

Despite the legal challenges and widespread demand for the completion of the cybercrime law legislation file, there have been several initiatives that have successfully alleviated and addressed numerous issues related to digital violence. Specifically, the community police, the cybercrime unit, and the National Security Service have played a crucial role in this regard. A dedicated hotline has been established for reporting cybercrimes, and cases of electronic blackmail can be reported by calling either the number 131 or 533 from within Iraq. According to Ghaleb Attiya, Director of Community Police, in an interview with the Iraqi News Agency, "128 girls who had fled from their families due to blackmail were reunited, and 37 suicide cases were prevented. Additionally, 1,950 cases of electronic

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<sup>11</sup> Haider Al-Moussawi, Iraqi "Balagh" platform: Fighting "low content" or silencing mouths? ", Daraj Platform, 2023  
<https://daraj.media/104375/>

<sup>12</sup> 2023, "Degrading Content" in Iraq. Fears of Using "Rubber Expressions" to "Muzzle Mouths," Al Hurra Net  
<https://www.alhurra.com/iraq>

blackmail were handled during the year 2021.<sup>13</sup> In terms of electronic blackmail appeals submitted via the hotline in 2021, there were a total of 1,310 appeals, with the highest number of appeals recorded in January, i.e., 222 appeals, and the lowest in April, i.e., 64 appeals. Of these appeals, 1,296 were successfully completed and resolved,<sup>14</sup> and a significant proportion of these appeals involved women. In 2022, the community police reported handling 1,432 cases of blackmail against women and 242 cases of blackmail against men, as well as the successful reunification of 169 runaway girls.<sup>15</sup>

While these statistics may be considered by official authorities as a success story demonstrating their responsiveness to issues affecting women, the term "treatment" mentioned in the statement of the Director of Community Police does not clarify the specific measures taken by this agency to address appeals, leaving the fate of those who seek support uncertain. The support system is open, and when compared to the case of Tayba Al-Ali, a victim who fled due to severe violence and whose case was handled by the community police, the role played by the community police may not be in the best interest of victims due to the absence of guarantees that the victim will not be subjected to violence again. The lack of effective measures to prevent recurring violence, psychological abuse, and even murder highlights the weakness of the legal authority in confronting violence against women. Signing documents does not prevent perpetrators from repeating the cycle of violence against women.<sup>16</sup>

The case of Taiba Al-Ali has undoubtedly heightened the sense of fear among Iraqi women and motivated them to engage in sit-ins to demand retribution for her murder. Additionally, it underscores the urgent need for the enactment of laws that safeguard Iraqi women from the pervasive patriarchal system that threatens them both in public and on social media. A comment from Amnesty International regarding this incident states, "Until the Iraqi authorities enact comprehensive legislation that shields women and girls from gender-based violence, we can expect to continue witnessing heinous murders like that of Taiba Al-Ali at the hands of her father."<sup>17</sup>

## Kurdistan Regional Government Legal Framework

The circumstances in the Kurdistan region appear to be comparable to those in the rest of Iraq. The legal framework employed to handle instances of electronic blackmail is Law No. 6 of 2008,<sup>18</sup> which aims to prevent the misuse of communication devices. This legislation, enacted by the Kurdistan Parliament, stipulates penalties for violations, threats, and blackmail on social media platforms, including imprisonment for a period of three months to one year, and fines ranging from 750,000 dinars (approximately \$500) to 3 million dinars (equivalent to around 2,000 dollars).

The Kurdistan region faces challenges in addressing cybercrimes due to the absence of clear legislation. To find an appropriate solution, Kurdish activists emphasize the need for updating or amending laws to keep pace with the advancements in society and establish more stringent penalties for cybercrimes, as the current Law No. 6 only addresses mobile phone usage. They view the penalties as inadequate

<sup>13</sup> Muhammad Salim, Community Police. Roles in Combating Crimes Affecting Iraqi Families and Solutions to Disintegrate the Causes, Iraqi Anbar Agency, 2022 <https://www.ina.iq/155950--.html>

<sup>14</sup> Participation of Major General Saad Maan from the Ministry of Interior during the first conference on digital rights and digital security in Baghdad, INSM Network for Digital Rights, March 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Karim Al-Qubtan, Community Police, January 2023.

<sup>16</sup> N. E. M. Bligh, "How did women not 'survive' in Iraq?!", Jummar, February 2023, <https://jummar.media/2885>

<sup>17</sup> The killing of Taiba Ali at the hands of her father stresses the need to take action on gender-based violence, "Amnesty International, 2023 AD" <https://www.amnesty.org/ar>

<sup>18</sup> Law No. (6) of 2008 Law to Prevent Misuse of Communications Equipment in the Kurdistan Region - A copy of the law can be viewed here - Laws of our Kurdistan Region - Mizanal Adala Company [https://mizanaladalah.com/yasakan\\_ar.aspx?type=2](https://mizanaladalah.com/yasakan_ar.aspx?type=2)

compared to the severity of some of the crimes committed. Social networking sites, which were not prevalent during the drafting of the law, are also seen as insufficient in addressing modern cybercrimes.

The Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Police Directorate has released its annual statistics for accidents and crimes for the year 2022, revealing that there were 2,576 cases of misuse of communications devices, which represents a steady increase compared to the previous year, when only 343 cases were recorded. It is worth noting that there was a slight decline in the rates of other crimes, such as premeditated murder, which amounted to 183 cases, and suicide cases, which amounted to 240 cases.<sup>19</sup>

Blackmails and electronic scandals that are directed towards women frequently cause acts of violence perpetrated by their families, and on occasion, such incidents may lead to physical elimination or what is commonly referred to as "shame-washing operations."

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<sup>19</sup> Kurdistan Regional Police: 455 suicides and murders last year, Rudaw, January.

## Social and Cultural Dimensions of Digital Violence

Technical development and ensuring a secure digital environment for users to utilize social media without limitations are key elements in evaluating a state's provision of sufficient internet freedom, partial freedom, or lack thereof due to imposed restrictions on users, such as content restrictions and website control. In 2022, Iraq was ranked 42<sup>nd</sup> with a partially free classification.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the significant advancements and increased accessibility of social media, which were once limited to select groups and are now available to all. The majority of social media users in Iraq continue to utilize these platforms primarily for entertainment purposes. They do not take seriously the restrictions that hinder them from engaging in a number of violations, for they do not correspond to the reality in which we exist. This attitude has unfortunately led to the proliferation of digital violence in Iraq, particularly directed at women who express their opinions or girls who share their thoughts on social media. Such behavior often results in cyberbullying, electronic blackmail, personal photo theft, threatening messages, offensive comments, and other insidious forms of digital violence.

This violence can have serious psychological and emotional consequences for the victims, and in some cases, may lead to them ceasing to use their social media accounts out of fear of digital violence. Despite this being disputed by several societal groups, it is estimated that approximately 1.32 million individuals in Iraq are at risk of digital violence.<sup>21</sup> Women and teenage girls make up more than 75% of this group. According to recent findings from the World Health Organization, 77% of incidents of violence against women are related to domestic violence. The World Health Organization (WHO) has recently released a report on the prevalence of violence against women. According to this report, it is estimated that approximately 26% of married or partnered women between the ages of 15 and 49 in Iraq have experienced intimate partner violence.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, a study conducted by the United Nations Women's Regional Office in May 2020, which surveyed women in nine Arab countries including Iraq, revealed that Iraqi women are the most likely to be subjected to digital violence, with a staggering 70.4% of respondents reporting such experiences.<sup>23</sup>

According to the International Organization for Migration, a significant proportion of Iraqi men (85%) reported that they would prevent any female family member from filing a complaint if she were to experience digital violence. Similarly, a large percentage of women (75%) indicated that they would not seek assistance from the police due to concerns about further violence or social ostracism.<sup>24</sup> This highlights the absence of strict legal regulations against perpetrators of digital violence, which is a major challenge that discourages many victims from speaking out and filing complaints against their aggressors. As a result, fear of societal blame and stigma often leads victims to remain silent and forego seeking justice.

The significant and swift rise in the population of Iraq has a substantial impact on the prevalence of digital violence targeted against women, which can be attributed to the growth in the number of male

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<sup>20</sup> Global Freedom on the Internet Report, Freedom House and INSM Network, 2022  
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/iraq/freedom-net/2022>

<sup>21</sup> Ajyal Al-Sultani, "Launching the first strategic plan for gender-based violence in Iraq," United Nations website in Iraq, 2022 AD.  
<https://iraq.un.org/ar/>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Violence against women in the digital space, UN Women, 2020, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org>

<sup>24</sup> Mustafa Hashem, Broken law and patchwork solutions. Warnings about "domestic violence" in Iraq, Al Hurra Net, 2022.  
<https://www.alhurra.com/iraq>

and female social media users. The most recent estimates place the population of Iraq at 45.00 million as of January 2023, with data indicating an increase of (+2.3%) from 2022 to 2023. Given that the population of Iraq is comprised of 49.9% females and 50.1% males, it is evident that the growing population has contributed to a higher number of individuals utilizing digital platforms.

According to Kepios analysis, the number of Internet users in Iraq was 33.72 million at the start of 2023, with a penetration rate of 74.9%. It is reported that the number of Internet users in Iraq grew by 7.3 million (+27.7%) between 2022 and 2023. Additionally, the data provided indicates the percentage of usage of popular platforms in Iraq among both women and men in January 2023.<sup>25</sup>

## Digital Violence Awareness Initiatives and Iraqi Female-Focused Supporting Platforms

Various civil society organizations and universities in Iraq have actively participated in campaigns aimed at raising awareness about digital violence and electronic blackmail. The Struggle Association for Human Rights, in collaboration with the Office of Endowments for the Christian, Yazidi, and Sabian-Mandaean Religions/Citizens Affairs Department - Human Rights Division, organized a symposium on digital protection and electronic blackmail awareness on 13 December 2022. This event, which was held at the Bureau's headquarters in Baghdad, was attended by a group of Bureau employees.<sup>26</sup> The symposium provided valuable tips and guidance on preventing electronic blackmail and maintaining the security of the electronic work environment. The participants also learned about electronic control procedures, the importance of using strong passwords, and the legal frameworks governing digital rights. In addition, the Faculty of Information at Dhi Qar University, in cooperation with the community police, organized an awareness seminar on electronic blackmail crimes and their impact on society.

Due to its recognition of the significance of digital rights as an essential component of human rights, The INSM network established a digital assistance platform and help desk to address emergency digital cases, such as the loss of accounts, digital blackmail, and the publication of private photos. From September 2019 to January 2023, the platform received over 559 cases, primarily women, with the majority of cases involving digital blackmail through images. The platform holds great importance, as per the organization's employees, in light of the numerous individuals, particularly women, who lack trust in government agencies due to various reasons, such as fear of reprisal, scandal, or family repercussions in case they find out, despite the assurances of confidentiality by these entities. In addition, the reporting procedures of government agencies, which require the victim to visit a security center to file a complaint, might be difficult and challenging for some women who cannot leave their homes easily. However, INSM's platform serves as a valuable alternative means for them to seek assistance and resolve their issues by communicating with the specialized technical team.<sup>27</sup>

Muntadhar Al-Khazraji, a digital security trainer involved in a project aimed at increasing awareness of electronic blackmail, primarily focuses on providing awareness courses for students and teachers in schools within the capital Baghdad Governorate. He frequently targets middle schools for girls, where many problems arise due to technological advancements and the influence of deceitful young men whose primary objective is often to win girls' affections and subsequently exploit their images for financial gain.

<sup>25</sup> Simon Kemp, "Digital 2023: Iraq," Data Reportal, February 2023. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-iraq>

<sup>26</sup> Al-Nidal Association for Human Rights website. <https://nahr-iq.org/page/2>

<sup>27</sup> Haider Hamzouz, INSM Network for Digital Rights. January 2023.

One of the examples cited by Al-Khazraji pertains to a young woman who was romantically involved with a young man and engages in constant communication with him through various online platforms. The young man gave her a piece of paper bearing a barcode, instructing her to print multiple copies and distribute them within the school premises. The school later discovered that the barcode enabled access to an Iraqi pornographic actress offering educational content on pornography. Although the school was able to stop the spread of the barcodes, this solution was deemed temporary and not entirely effective. Montazer acknowledged the existence of numerous challenges faced by women in Iraq, with fear of the community police and lack of trust in their ability to provide assistance being the most pressing. In this specific case, the school principal refrained from seeking assistance from the community police, fearing this would lead to repercussions for the student. Even though the community police are equipped to offer support to all victims discreetly, the vast majority of those who find themselves in precarious situations resort to anti-extortion pages, which are often managed by blackmailers.

Montazer, when reflecting on his experience in the realm of digital violence awareness, highlights the challenges he faces, stating, "My family disproves everything I do. I cannot blame them, as there exists no clear legislation to address this issue, which leaves us feeling confused." Montazer asserted that he is under imminent danger due to his efforts in supporting female victims of digital violence, in the absence of a comprehensive system that safeguards individuals like himself who work towards protecting others.

There exist several Iraqi platforms that are primarily focused on educating women about their rights and holding aggressors accountable. One such platform is (Revolution is Female),<sup>28</sup> which addresses sensitive societal topics, such as the exclusion of Iraqi women from administrative positions, their marginalization, and the lack of shelter for victims of violence. This platform frequently faces hate speech and incitement campaigns, with extremist groups threatening the moderators with death and demanding the platform be shut down if they continue to publish content.

The digital platforms that advocate for women's rights face a multitude of campaigns beyond offensive comments, incitement campaigns, and hate speech. These challenges also encompass private messages, as confirmed by the founder and director of "Iraqiya Here," a platform that supports creative Iraqi women in various artistic fields such as drawing, poetry, and writing, among others. This platform boasts a talented group of approximately 800 women, each of whom specializes in her respective field. Given that the platform's posts typically feature images of young girls, particularly their faces, the director reports that they frequently receive negative comments and messages.

The platform director expressed that a person of Arab nationality had sent her a picture of one of the girls whose activity and work was published on Iraqiya Here, inquiring about her dowry and offering her a sum of money in exchange for convincing her to marry him. The director said that she felt as though she was a broker, with women viewed by many men as mere commodities to be bought and sold according to physical criteria.

The platform director drew attention to the fact that these messages that she typically receives reflect the religious beliefs of the individuals who send them, often featuring phrases such as "haram," "shameful," and "a girl's sin is the sin of the one who posts her photos." Despite the offensive nature of these messages, the platform director has chosen to disregard them and refrain from taking any action against their senders. This is due to the belief that it is useless and any steps taken may potentially place the platform director at risk of physical harm, given that her identity is known.

<sup>28</sup> Soha Odeh, The Call of the Iraqi Woman: *Revolutionary, for the revolution is female*. The Arab Independent - November 11, 2019.

## Digital Violence Against Women in Iraq

Although the majority of social media users in Iraq deny the existence of digital violence against women, the impact of this phenomenon is no longer concealed and cannot be undone. This study aimed to demonstrate that the exponential growth in the number of social media users over the past decade has contributed to the widespread occurrence of digital violence against women, despite it not yet being taken seriously.

This research was conducted using a sample of 117 Iraqi women who were all users of social media platforms and had been subjected to various forms of digital violence. The study also highlighted a group of incidents that received public attention and conducted 25 interviews with Iraqi women who had experienced digital violence. The aim was to analyze the behavior of the participants while using their accounts on digital spaces and social networking sites. The participants were from 18 Iraqi governorates, with the majority (42%) from Baghdad, and the Kurdistan region was also included in the study.

### Results of the questionnaire for the Iraqi governorates, with the Kurdistan region

As presented in Table (1), the majority of participants are university educated or above, unmarried (58%), and fall within the age range of 18 to 49 years (94%).

**Table 1: Background Information of the Participants**

| Marital Status |         |          |       | Age group |        |        |       | Education   |        |        |
|----------------|---------|----------|-------|-----------|--------|--------|-------|-------------|--------|--------|
| Single         | Married | Divorced | Widow | 17-       | 18-29  | 30-49  | 50+   | High School | B.A.   | Above  |
| 55.76%         | 42.27%  | 1.03%    | 1.03% | 3.09%     | 54.64% | 39.18% | 3.09% | 20.62%      | 59.79% | 19.59% |

The fields of work of the participants in the questionnaire showed diversity, as the government sector accounted for 25.8%, the private sector for 11.3%, foreign organizations for 2%, and local and charitable organizations, unions, and non-governmental organizations for 21.7%. The proportion of female freelance consultants was 9.3%, and other occupations accounted for 30%.

This study showed that women in Iraq are susceptible to digital violence, without exception. This form of violence is not confined to women who hold positions that advocate for and defend women's rights; it also affects women who occupy socially acceptable professions. For instance, Z. M., a resident of Baghdad who works as a teacher, has experienced digital violence due to her engagement on social media conversations expressing her thoughts and opinions. Despite her efforts to comment on certain posts, she has often been subjected to verbal abuse, insults, and dishonorable behavior, which undermines her right to express her views and warrants respect for her opinions.

This position is more severe when directed against feminist activists, as they actively engage in educating girls of all ages. Consequently, the reaction to such harassment is more complex, as evidenced by the case of T. A., a feminist activist who works with civil society organizations and

frequently addresses women's issues. T. A. experienced harassment on her private WhatsApp number, where she has received inappropriate messages and requests to open the camera and send indecent photos of herself. Despite initially blocking the numbers sending these messages, the harassment persisted, with repeated requests for video calls. Ultimately, T. A. sought help from her colleagues, and the messages ceased.

A significant number of the participants (32%) in the questionnaire were females who actively engage in writing and publishing on the internet. They frequently comment on various publications, repost content on different platforms, write posts, and share pictures. On the other hand, 15.5% of the participants were inactive, while 52.6% considered themselves active. The results revealed that women who are actively involved in digital writing and publishing face numerous forms of digital violence, a finding that was further reinforced by the interviews conducted during this study.

N.Q., a former candidate in the 2018 Iraqi parliamentary elections, created a page in her name to promote her electoral program and publicize her visits and activities to secure votes and emerge victorious in the elections. However, her efforts were met with a significant number of negative, offensive, and mocking comments. Furthermore, N.Q. relates the case of Z. H. from the Basra Governorate, who experienced digital violence as a result of her activity on Twitter and other social media platforms advocating for domestic violence law legislation. According to Z. H., her campaign was highly effective in mobilizing numerous girls in support of the legislation. Her efforts also elicited hate speech and threats from fake accounts, due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

Similarly, R. T. from Nineveh or Ninawa is a community activist dedicated to promoting community cohesion and peacebuilding, with a particular emphasis on combating violence against women in Iraq. Unfortunately, she has experienced harassment through Instagram, receiving sexually suggestive, threatening, and hate-filled messages as a result of her activism.

According to the findings of the study, a significant portion of the respondents, comprising 67% of the sample, reported experiencing digital violence due to their gender alone. In contrast, only 33% of the respondents held the opposite viewpoint.

Regarding her exposure to digital violence during her candidacy for the parliamentary elections, N. Q. asserted that her gender as a woman and her political candidacy were the primary factors contributing to her exposure to digital violence, which would not have occurred if she were a man. Another respondent shared her experience of being exposed to digital violence simply because of her gender, as evidenced by the sexist comments she receives on posts related to her hobbies, such as what I dream of is only possible for me.

One of the participants recounted that upon responding to a post advocating for physical discipline of women, she was subjected to comments such as "You lack reason, you have no right to express your opinion, you are a teenager and a feminist seeking moral degradation, and one man advised his friend to disregard her and refrain from discussing the matter further, as she is perceived to be of limited intellectual capacity."

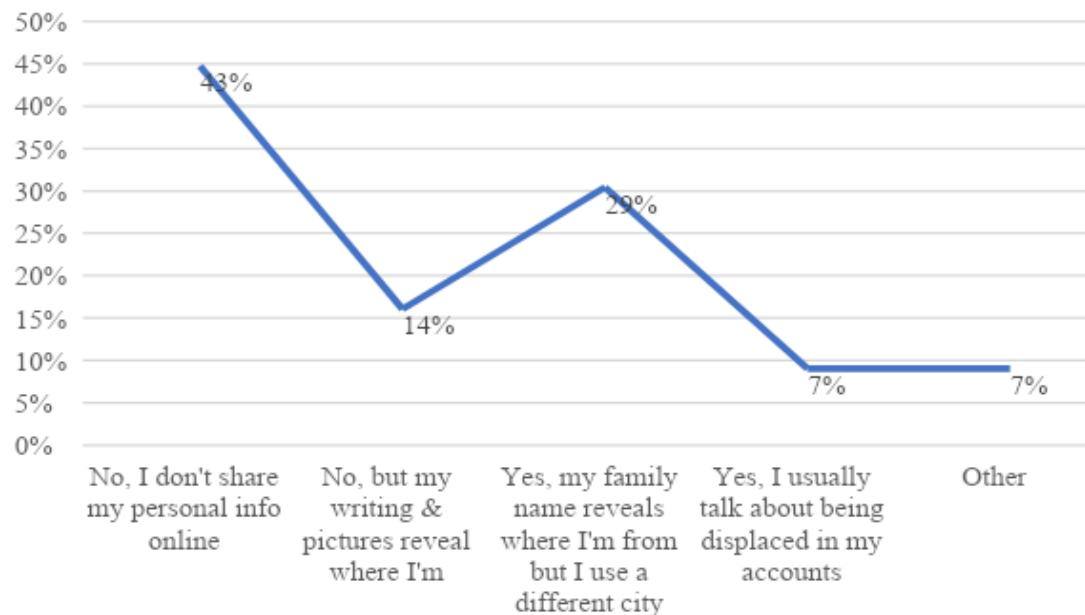
## Digital Violence Against Displaced Women in Iraq

Iraq is widely regarded as a nation that has experienced a series of armed conflicts, resulting in numerous residents leaving their original habitats, particularly during the years 2014 and the conflict against ISIS, which led to the displacement of numerous families and women within Iraq. Hence, it was deemed essential for the research sample of the study to consist of women who had been displaced

due to conflicts. We were successful in reaching 41.2% of the participants who originated from areas subjected to armed conflict and were subsequently displaced. Through our study, we discovered that this particular group faces discrimination on the internet due to their status as displaced women, as 21.4% of them confirmed this.

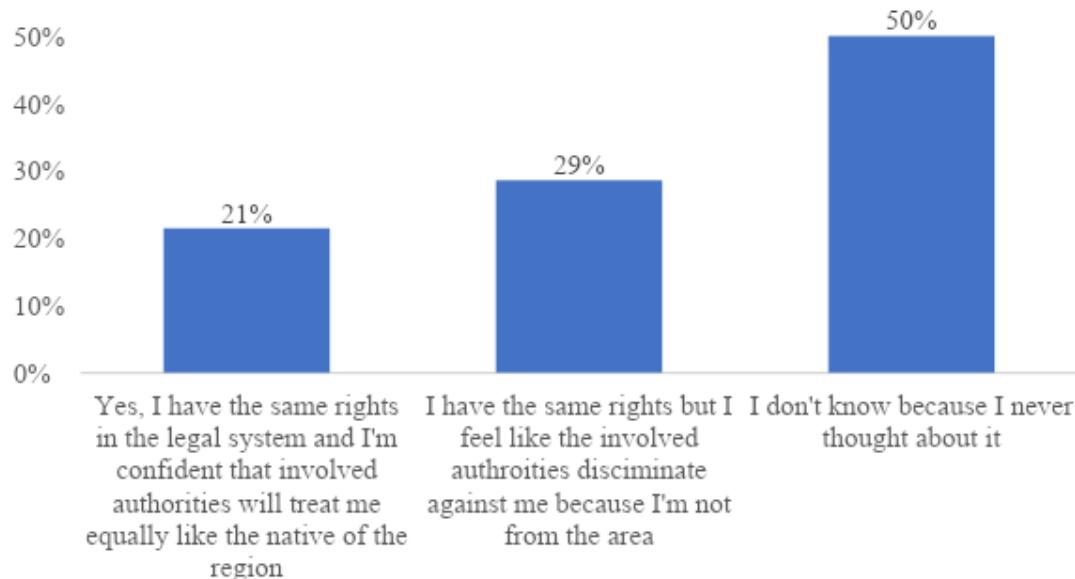
A notable proportion of displaced women have fallen victim to digital violence due to the disclosure of their personal and professional data on their digital accounts, which reveal the areas from which they have been displaced. Specifically, 28.6% of these women have experienced such violence, while an additional 43% refrain from divulging their areas of origin to avoid further digital aggression. Furthermore, 14.3% of these women do not disclose their locations, and only 7% openly discuss their experiences of displacement on their accounts. However, the quality of their writings and the photos they publish make it relatively simple to deduce the areas to which they belong.

**Figure 1: Displaced women experience discrimination and digital violence**



Displaced women in Iraq confront unique challenges, even when attempting to confront the violence directed against them. According to the survey, 28.6% of these women believe that authorities responsible for protecting them against violence will discriminate against them due to their disparate governorate of residence. Furthermore, they think that they cannot seek assistance from security authorities if they experience violence.

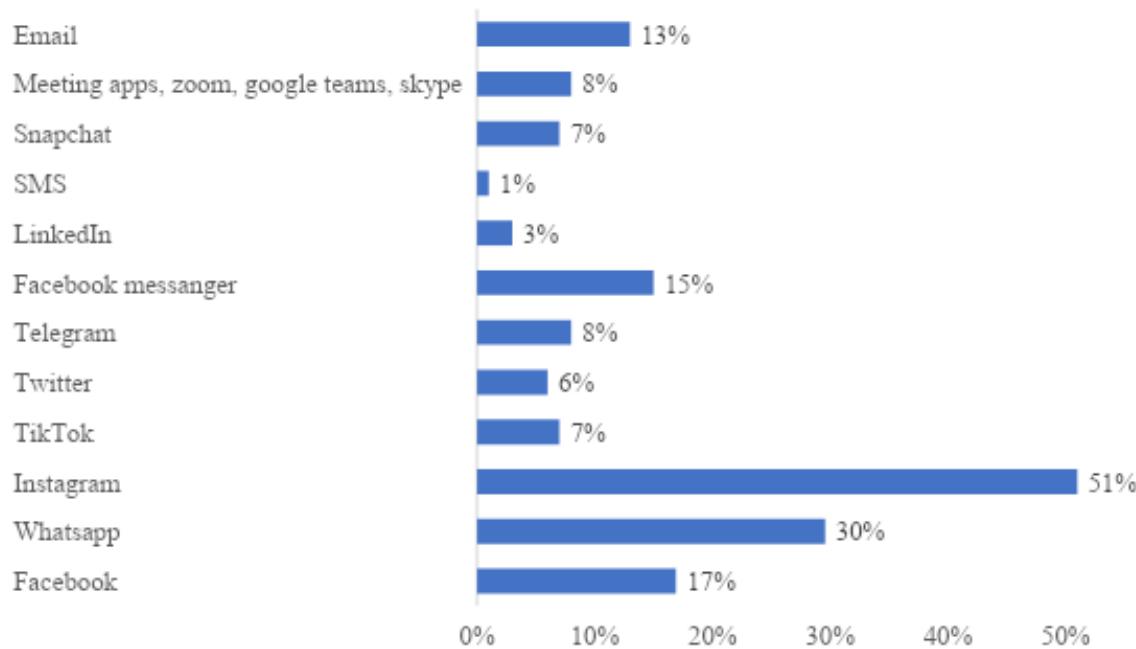
One of the participants recounted her experience of displacement and subsequent exposure to digital violence. Despite her efforts to seek assistance, she was unsuccessful. Conversely, 21.4% of the respondents expressed the belief that they enjoy the same legal rights as everyone else and have faith in the competence of security authorities, who they feel treat them fairly. On the other hand, 50% of the participants have not thought about it.

**Figure 2: How security authorities deal with the issues of displaced women**

## Channels and Forms of Digital Violence Against Women in Iraq

The majority of survey participants access the Internet through a personal mobile phone (64.8%), followed by a personal computer (12.7%).

In terms of popularity of social media platforms, Instagram holds the top spot with a usage rate of 50.7%, followed by WhatsApp at 29.6%. The use of Facebook accounts for 17%, while Facebook Messenger is utilized by 15.5% of users. Email has a usage rate of 12.7%, and Telegram is used by 8.5%.

**Figure 3: Social media platforms most and least used by women**

The findings of the questionnaire revealed the diverse nature of participants' online activities, with their tendency to write text posts on general topics being the highest, followed by posts on personal matters. Publishing public videos and sharing personal photos are the least popular forms of online activity, with only 17% of respondents writing general text posts daily, 24% doing so weekly, and 42% monthly. Similarly, 11% of respondents share text posts about personal matters daily, 24% weekly, and 42% monthly. With regard to general visual posts, 24% of participants publish them daily, 32% do so weekly, and 22.5% monthly. Lastly, 20% of respondents share personal photos on a daily basis, 27% do so weekly, and 28% monthly.

Concerning the form of violence that women are subjected to on the Internet and its prevalence, 28% of women experienced their feelings being manipulated, while 27% were subjected to insults, cursing, and slander on social networking sites. In addition, 17% of women were subjected to harassment and repeated contact, including stalking messages and malicious links. One participant reported receiving a message saying, "To the kitchen," as a response to one of her comments, and another confirmed that any opinions expressed on social media platforms in support of women who are victims of domestic violence are met with obscene words or mockery, such as, "You are a woman, and your place is in the kitchen."

Digital violence in Iraq takes on various forms, one of which is surveillance, stalking, and spying. The result revealed that 8.5% of female participants were subjected to this form of digital violence, while 12.7% of participants reported their social media accounts being hacked. These figures suggest a lack of digital awareness and a lack of interest in securing devices against such threats, with women playing a significant role.

In the course of the study, one of the interviewees recounted her experience with a link requesting extensive personal information provided to her by the administration of an organization where she used to work. Despite her apprehension regarding the authenticity of the link, the administration reassured her that it was from a reputable and internationally renowned organization. Consequently, J. N. filled out the questionnaire and was subsequently surprised to find herself locked out of all her accounts and websites the following day. It was then that she discovered that she had fallen prey to a blackmailer who had sent a copy of her conversation with her husband to her husband, leading to accusations of infidelity (because this person had access to her conversation) and threats of violence. Her husband made a remark indicating that he will be justified in killing her as he is attempting to clean his honor. The blackmailer continued to publish her personal photos and demanded that her relatives recharge his phone credit through messages. Her family and relatives urged her to delete her photos, as though she had the ability to do so. J. N. eventually sought assistance from a relative who works in the National Security Service, and the community police intervened, resulting in the capture of the perpetrator after a month-long pursuit. They found out that the perpetrator was from a region that was still grappling with the aftermath of a conflict. J. N. stated that the circumstances of displacement, war, and unemployment, along with numerous others, might be the reasons to resort to blackmail as a means of derision, amusement, and financial compensation, given the current socioeconomic conditions.

The percentage of women who reported receiving unwanted photos was 10%, and the percentage of women whose personal information was published was 2.8%, one of them was Sh. Sh., who worked in the private sector and faced digital violence in the form of offensive messages and indecent images from unknown men. She typically handles these incidents by blocking the sender. She has also experienced digital violence from women, and the prevalence of sending indecent images to women in Iraq can be considered a common occurrence. However, unless the situation escalates and the abuse comes from someone she interacts with regularly, she is able to block the person and mitigate the harm.

While S.A., a resident of Nineveh Governorate, stated that she routinely received fraudulent messages and links intended to compromise her account, in addition to receiving indecent images from fake profiles. She believed that it was crucial to expose the perpetrator. However, the process of reporting incidents of digital violence, regardless of their severity or nature, can expose women to threats and danger due to societal culture. Consequently, women are often deterred from reporting incidents of digital violence.

Furthermore, women are also vulnerable to defamation that can harm their honor, with 7% of female participants in the study having experienced this form of digital violence. Additionally, 5.6% of female participants reported being targeted by organized campaigns, while 4.2% of female participants were subjected to impersonation.

One of the participants disclosed that she received images of another girl's body without a face, and the sender claimed that these images were her own pictures and threatened to expose her to her friends on Instagram, whom she follows, and spread the word that she was having an electronic relationship with him. Another participant shared that she faced daily unwanted calls and received indecent videoclips merely because she published her photos and was perceived as being available to everyone.

Furthermore, 4.2% of women had their personal photos manipulated with indecent images, as narrated by M. R., a writer, novelist, and feminist activist on social media platforms. She faced threats due to her feminist intellectual activity on social media, and her photos were taken, superimposed on pornographic pictures, and published on pornographic sites by a blackmailing network on social media, including five individuals, one of whom was a girl.

Ultimately, 4.2% of the women who participated in the questionnaire were subjected to the threat of physical liquidation, which is a grave matter and has unfortunately occurred in Iraq in the past. Noteworthy cases include the killing of "Mary Sami or Iman Sami," a well-known girl on Tik Tok who was followed by many people in Iraqi Kurdistan. Some regarded her as unique and brave for embracing a lifestyle that did not adhere to societal customs and traditions. Mary was subjected to numerous campaigns of digital violence and hate speech during her lifetime, and even after her murder, her image was used to justify the murder and blame her. For instance, a picture of her wearing a hijab was published, followed by a picture of her holding a cigarette without a hijab, with the intention of directing blame towards her and justifying her killer. Comments on social media following her death were similarly condemnatory, with one user stating, "I just heard the news of her death, and it didn't even make me sad," accompanied by an applause emoji. Another commenter said, "This is the result of joining a women's rights organization." These are just a few examples of the many comments that placed blame on the victim rather than the perpetrator.

Another example of the suffering of female political activists as a result of digital violence is the assassination of Reham Yaqoub, known for her revolutionary stances and her rejection of injustice and corruption. She actively participated in demonstrations demanding a better life for residents of Basra Governorate and Iraq and continued her activism until her death. Today, her activism is remembered as part of the October demonstrations that began in October 2019 in protest against government corruption. During these protests, demonstrators were met with violence, resulting in the death of approximately 600 people. Following the protests, Reham was subjected to a campaign of hate speech by the Iranian Mehr Agency, which published a report accusing her and other Iraqi activists of being agents for the United States. This led to her assassination and silencing her voice.

Among the individuals included in the study was Rut L. L., who showed how digital violence can transform from negative digital activity to a death threat or the killing itself, as she experienced digital violence as a result of her political activism, which intensified during the October demonstrations. A wave of incitement from fake accounts in the form of negative comments and hate speech disseminated against her and other participants in the demonstrations, which consequently spilled over into reality, leading to an assassination attempt that fortunately failed.

Digital violence can manifest in various forms, with murder being the most violent and blackmail being one of the most dangerous. The latter significantly impacts the lives of those subjected to it, as evidenced by the 7.04% of participants in the study who experienced blackmail.

R. S. was subjected to electronic blackmail by one of the biggest blackmailing networks in Iraq previously known as "The Imposter" and currently known as "The Professor." During her relationship with a young man, he obtained a collection of private photographs of her. After their breakup, he contacted her with an unfamiliar account, threatening to release the photos demanding \$500 in exchange for not publishing them. When she declined his demand, he created a channel on the Telegram application and posted her pictures along with her phone number. He also established accounts in her name on the Tik Tok application.

The issue of sharing personal photos with a partner often leads to electronic and emotional blackmail, as evidenced by S. S., a feminist activist. She recounted her experience of being subjected to digital violence during her teenage years, after sharing a photo with her then-love partner while not wearing the hijab. He threatened to publish the photo and expose her after their separation. To prevent similar incidents from occurring, S. S. recommends that all women should stand up to the aggressor, rather than accepting blame for the situation. It is crucial to utilize relationships that can aid the victim in exposing the aggressor and teaching them a lesson not to infringe on the digital rights of her or other women.

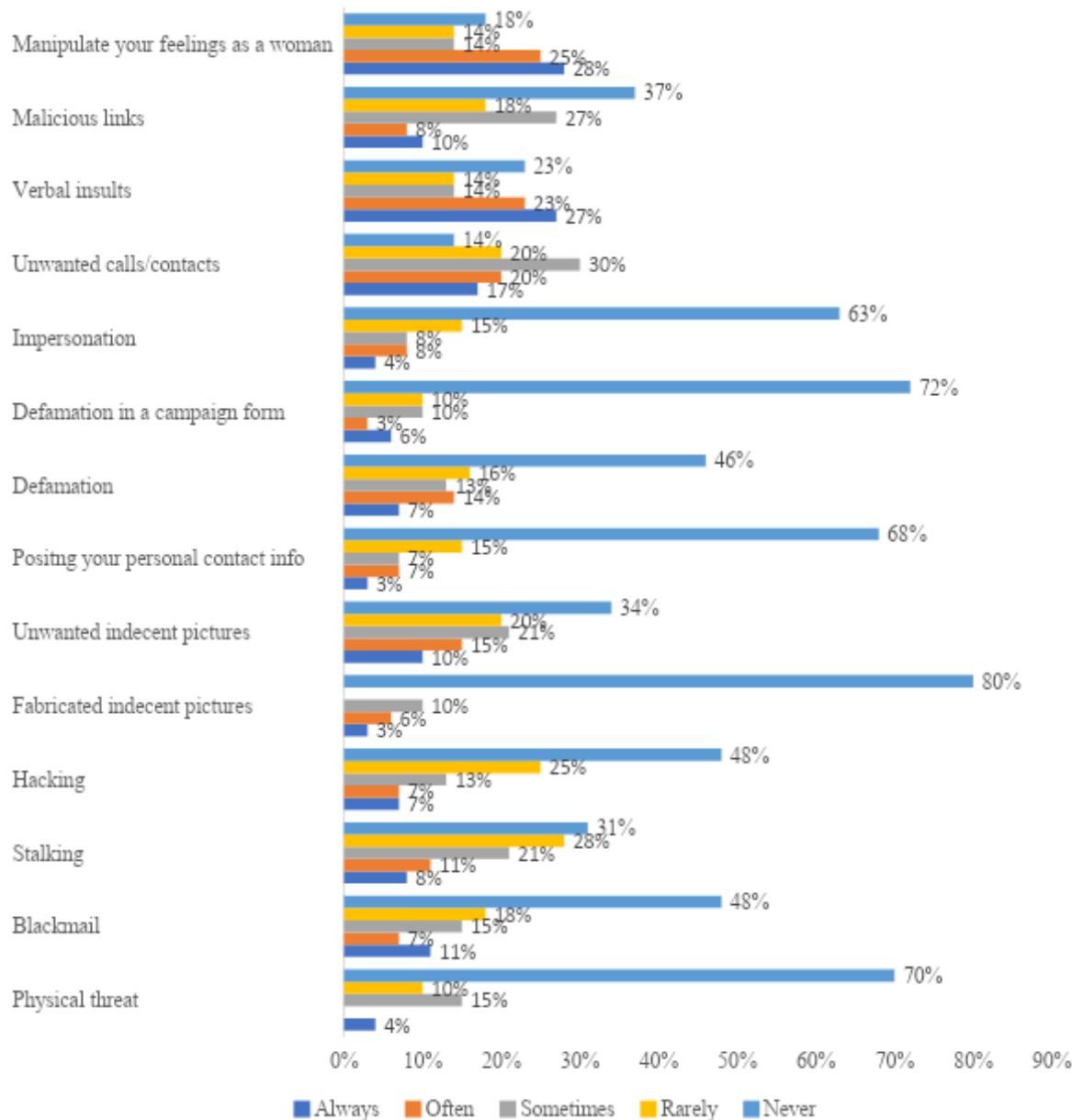
The outcomes of the survey corroborate the previously mentioned observations regarding the transfer of virtual aggression to real-world situations. Specifically, 17% of the sample population reported that the online violence they experienced had spilled over into their offline reality. Conversely, 38.5% of the participants indicated that the aggression remained confined to the digital realm. Moreover, 7% of the respondents acknowledged that the opposite occurred, namely that offline violence had shifted to the online sphere. Interestingly, 37% reported no connection between their real-life experiences of violence and the online environment.

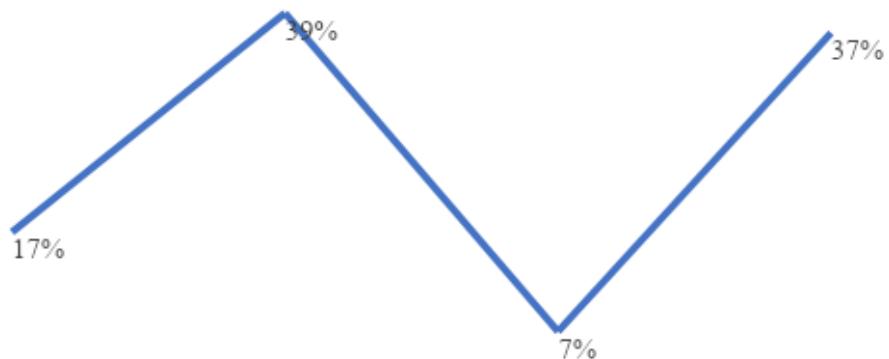
To determine the perpetrators of digital violence against women, 12.7% of the participants reported that the perpetrators are anonymous or use fake accounts, and 8.5% indicated that the harm came from people known to them in a professional or personal capacity. Additionally, approximately 10% of the harm came from relatives, and 8.5% of the harm was inflicted through private messages and public comments.

There are numerous instances of digital violence against women perpetrated by known individuals on a personal level. One such example is that of N. R., a civil activist and champion of women's rights in Mosul, who has extensive experience working with both international and local organizations. N. R. recounted her experience of digital violence, which manifested itself in her everyday life, after she became engaged to a young man who was also working with her. However, upon discovering that he had been previously married and had two sons, N. R. began receiving threatening calls and messages from the young man's family, who warned her that they would kill her if she did not break up with him. Furthermore, the young man's family began spreading rumors among N. R.'s acquaintances that she had destroyed their son's marriage and taken him away from his wife. When N. R. informed her fiancé

that she intended to file a report with the community police, he dissuaded her from doing so for fear of scandal, and expressed concern that his ex-wife would be taken to security centers and tarnish her reputation. As a result, N. R. decided to sever ties with the young man and delete all of the individuals who had threatened her.

**Figure 4: Forms of digital violence against women in Iraq**



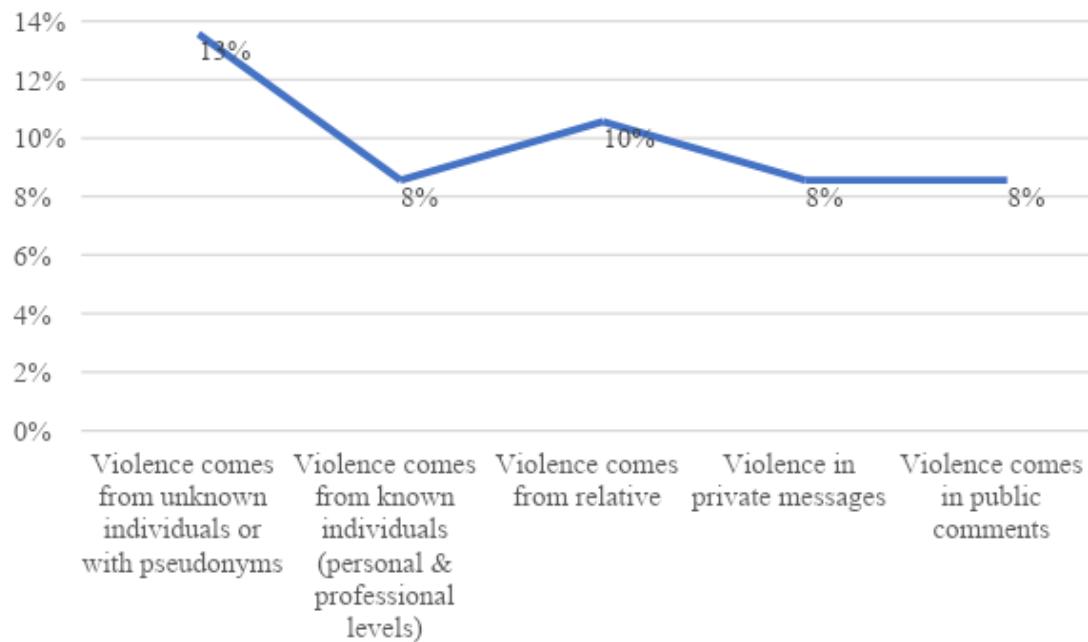
**Figure 5: Digital and Offline Violence**

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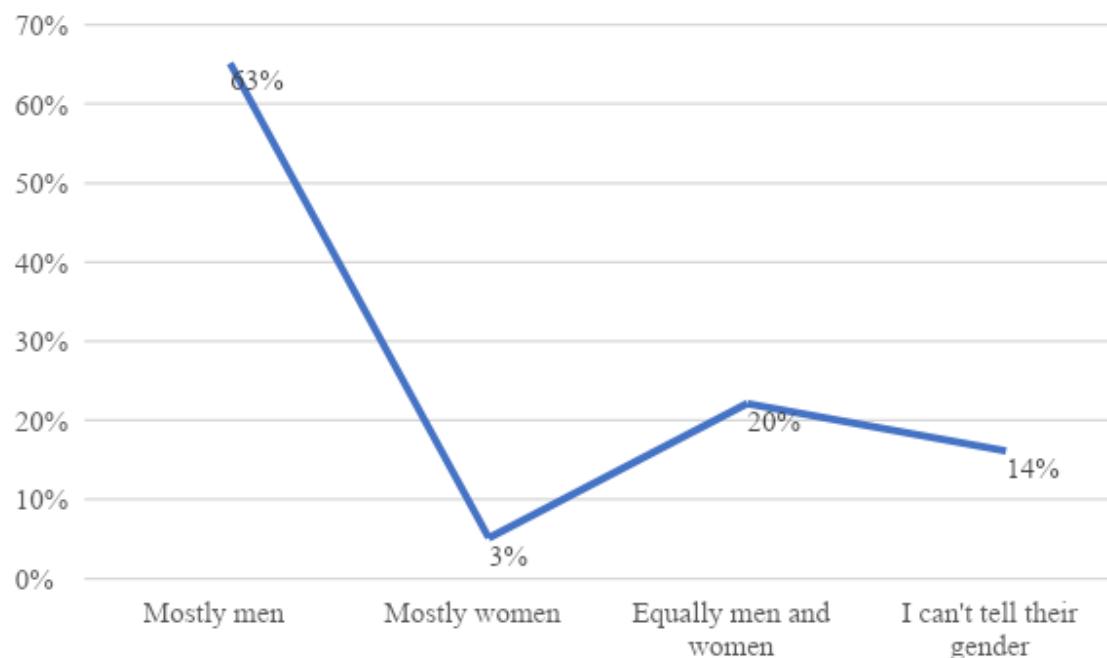
Yes, digital violence flew into offline reality    No, digital violence did not flow into offline violence    Yes, offline violence flew into digital violence    Because I'm a woman I experience offline violence and digital violence but not connected

In 2019, M. J. addressed the issue of digital violence that she had experienced personally. She was threatened with exposure and blackmail by individuals she knew, which led her to leave her job in order to put an end to the series of threats. These threats were conveyed through Facebook, Instagram, and fake numbers. Despite her desire to confront the perpetrators, M.J. refrained from doing so out of fear that the truth may not be fully revealed and that she may be further harmed.

Another participant who is employed in higher education disclosed that a fellow college staff member unauthorizedly accessed her personal accounts and gained access to all her data. This resulted in the perpetrator being able to impersonate her and issue threatening statements about publishing inappropriate conversations in her name. Similarly, another survivor, who is married to a person with psychological issues, reported that she was threatened by her spouse by publishing her photos online if she did not return to live with him and did not receive any assistance or support from the authorities.

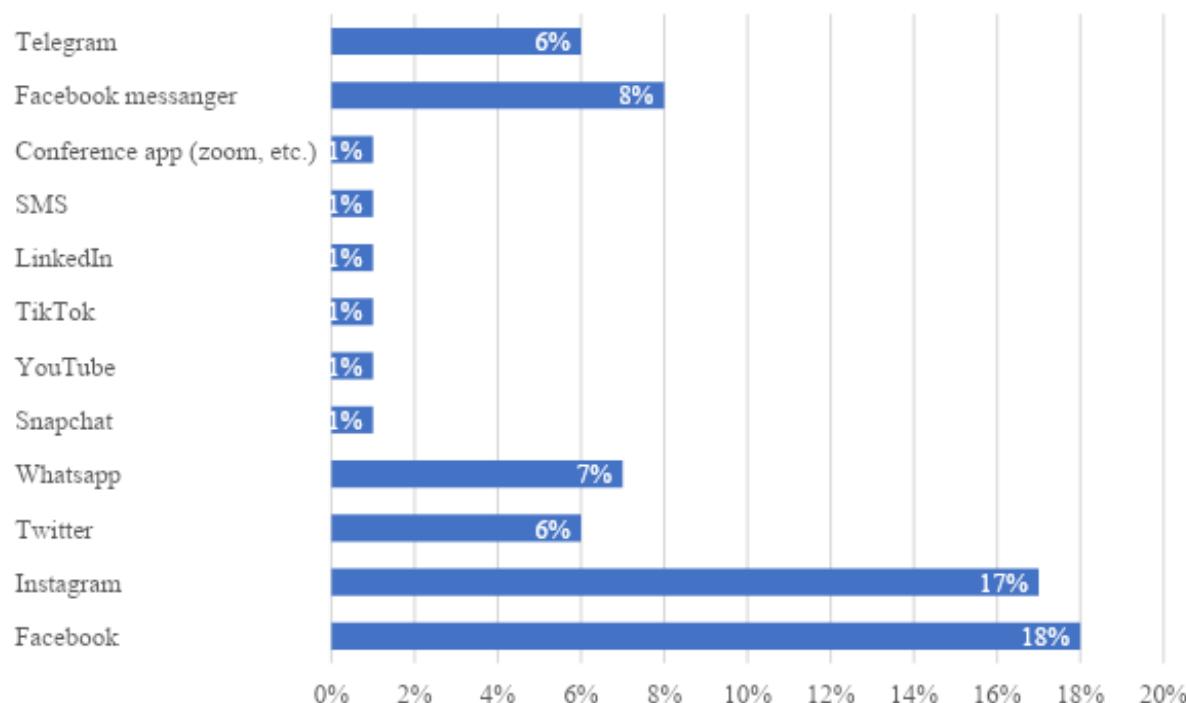
**Figure 6: Sources of digital violence**

According to Figure (7), it has been found that the perpetrators of digital violence against women are not limited to males. Although men accounted for 63.4% of the total instances of digital violence, women reported facing violence from both males and females at a comparable rate of 19.7%. Furthermore, the percentage of violence that women are exposed to from other women amounted to 2.8%, while 14% of the respondents were unable to determine the gender of those who perpetrated violence against them.

**Figure 7: Sources of digital violence by gender**

The study demonstrated that digital violence against women is pervasive across numerous communication channels. Facebook emerged as the leading platform for digital violence, with an incidence rate of 18.3%, and its Messenger service accounting for 8.5%. Instagram followed closely with a rate of 17%. The percentages for other applications were comparable, including WhatsApp at 7%, Telegram and Twitter at 5.6% each.

**Figure 8: Platforms where digital violence is widespread**



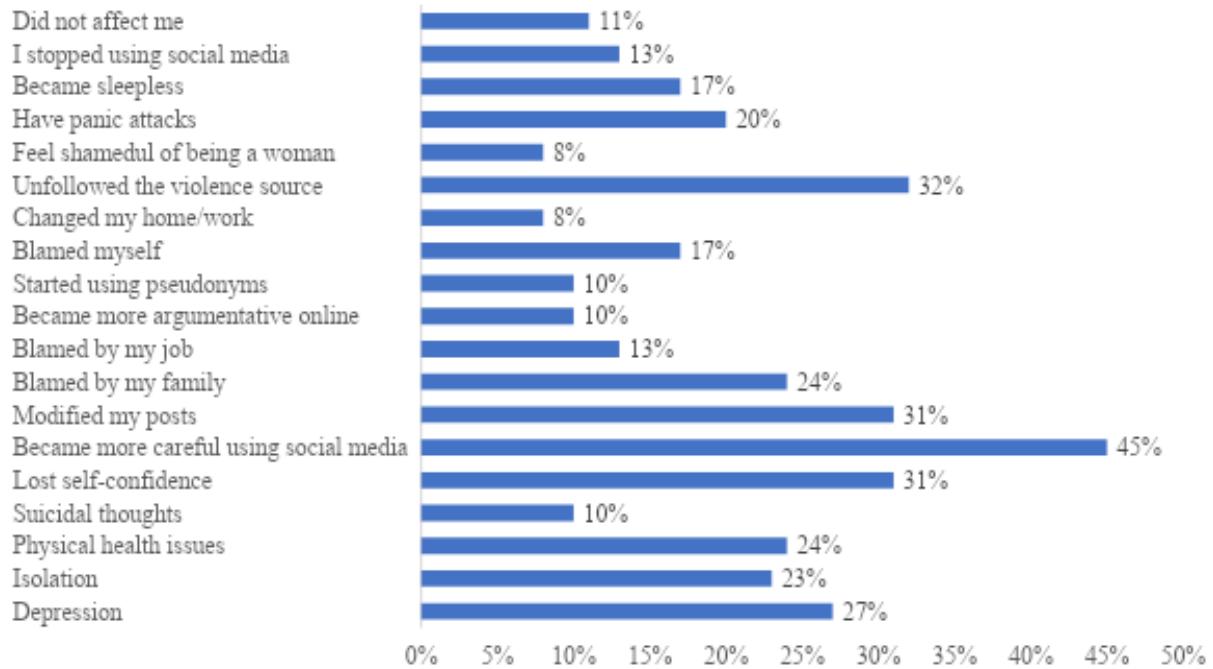
## Combating Digital Violence and its Consequences on Women

The study revealed that a significant percentage of women who are exposed to digital violence suffer from severe psychological pressure. According to the research, 31% of the respondents experienced a loss of self-confidence, while 26.8% entered a stage of depression. Additionally, the physical health of some participants was affected by 24%, and 22.5% became more isolated in their lives. Some participants also experienced psychological disorders, including panic attacks (20%), difficulty sleeping (17%), and tendency to blame themselves for what was happening (16%). Furthermore, 12.7% of the participants faced blame from their families, while 11.3% confirmed that they were not affected psychologically by the digital violence they faced. Notably, 10% of the participants reported thinking about suicide, with the same percentage (8.5%) feeling shame for being women due to the digital violence they experienced. Similarly, some participants were forced to change their place of residence or work, such as L. L., who was forced to leave her governorate and home for fear of being killed after receiving threatening messages from fake accounts.

On the other hand, certain survivors took technical measures to safeguard themselves against digital violence. A notable 45% of respondents became more cautious in their usage of social networking sites. Moreover, 32.4% of women unfollowed channels that engaged in digital violence against them. Additionally, 31% of respondents altered their method of writing and expression, while 13% ceased using social media platforms altogether. Lastly, 10% of respondents resorted to using pseudonyms as a protective measure.

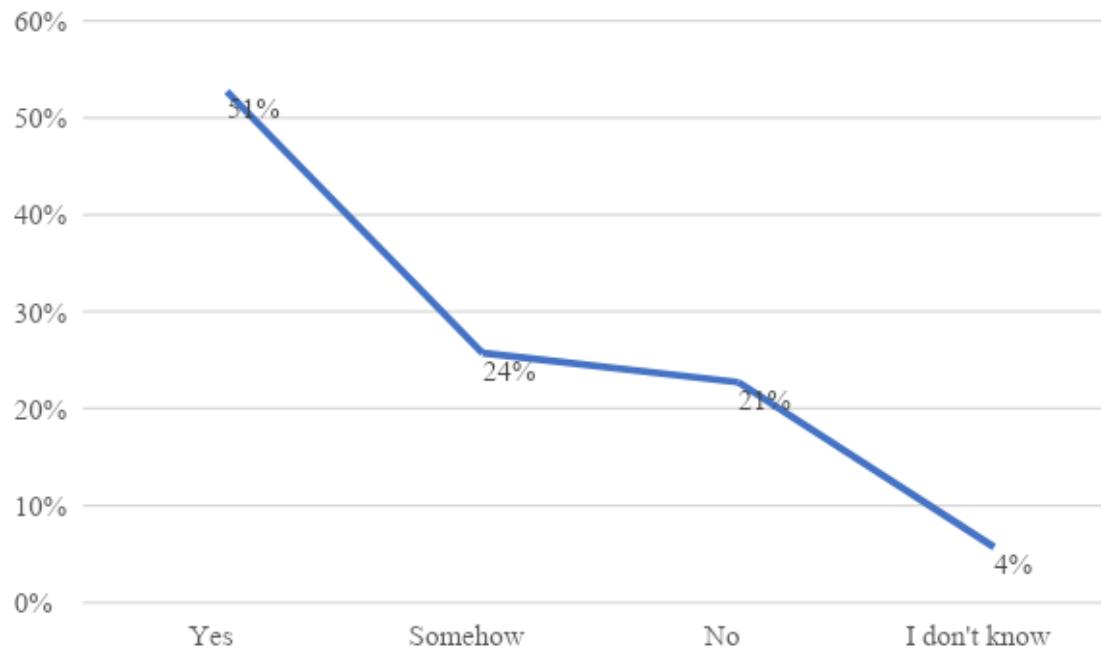
In both the questionnaire and interview responses, participants highlighted the significant psychological impact of violence against women. Despite society's tendency to blame the victim without finding a solution, survivors continue to suffer from a range of physical and mental health issues. One survivor stated, "The incident I experienced caused me physical health problems that are not appropriate for my age. Upon becoming highly sensitized, even casual conversations appeared to possess the potential to provoke emotional responses that pertained to me personally. Consequently, I experienced difficulty in both sleeping and eating, which subsequently led to complications in my esophagus and stomach." Another participant reported, "Digital violence made me afraid and anxious about the potential harm it could cause me and my family and friends. I felt ashamed, tired and fed up." A third participant, who was involved in a political movement, confirmed the negative effects of digital violence confirming, "As a result of the assault and ongoing digital violence, I fell into a deep depression and sought help from a psychiatrist and therapist." Despite moving from her hometown of Basra to Iraqi Kurdistan to escape the violence, the participant continued to experience harassment through her father's Facebook account, with the perpetrator sending messages that included insults and threats due to her political activity.

Another individual expressed, "the blackmail I endured resulted in my spouse threatening me to kill me, my relatives disrespecting me, and my family boycotting me due to feelings of embarrassment. Despite being innocent, they persistently blamed and accused me. Now, my family members do not want to accompany me in pursuing legal action against the perpetrator, despite the authorities having identified their website. This unfortunate situation has also led to the loss of my employment and access to personal accounts."

**Figure 9: The impact of digital violence on women in Iraq**

When the participants were asked if their response would have been different if they knew the perpetrators. The majority of answers comprised 51% indicating "yes," 24% responded with "somewhat", while 21% answered with "no," and 4% stated "no".

The participants provided justifications for their responses, such as "The confrontation on the ground is stronger," "I could have negotiated with the abusive person," "If the person was known, I might have filed a lawsuit against him," and "I would have been able to confront and block the person and sever any connection between us," which suggests that confronting the perpetrator may have a positive impact on the survivor's psychological well-being. However, one participant argued the opposite due to societal pressures, "Whether I know him or not, I am the one who will be punished. The subject of confrontation and complaint may harm me more than it benefits me, because in a country like Iraq, even the law can be manipulated due to relatives, and even if I knew the identity of the harmful person, I would not be able to report it because everyone wants to maintain their reputation or social relationships."

**Figure 10: Would your reaction be different if you knew the perpetrator?**

In the context of combating digital violence, a survey found that 14% of the participants were familiar with their legal rights regarding digital safety, while 42.3% had knowledge of these rights but did not utilize them, and 43.7% were unaware of their legal rights.

According to the available data, a significant percentage of individuals are aware of the official channels for reporting digital violence, such as the National Security Agency's hotline 131-533. Specifically, 17% of the participants indicated that they are aware of the hotline's existence. Moreover, a substantial portion of respondents, comprising 49.3%, reported that they are aware of the hotline but have yet to utilize it. However, a considerable portion of respondents, amounting to 33.8%, indicated that they are not aware of the hotline's existence.

In terms of legal support agencies for victims of digital violence in Iraq, it has been observed that 11.3% of the participants were aware of these agencies, while 48% were cognizant of their existence but have not availed themselves of their services. On the other hand, 40.9% of the participants were not familiar with the existence of such agencies.

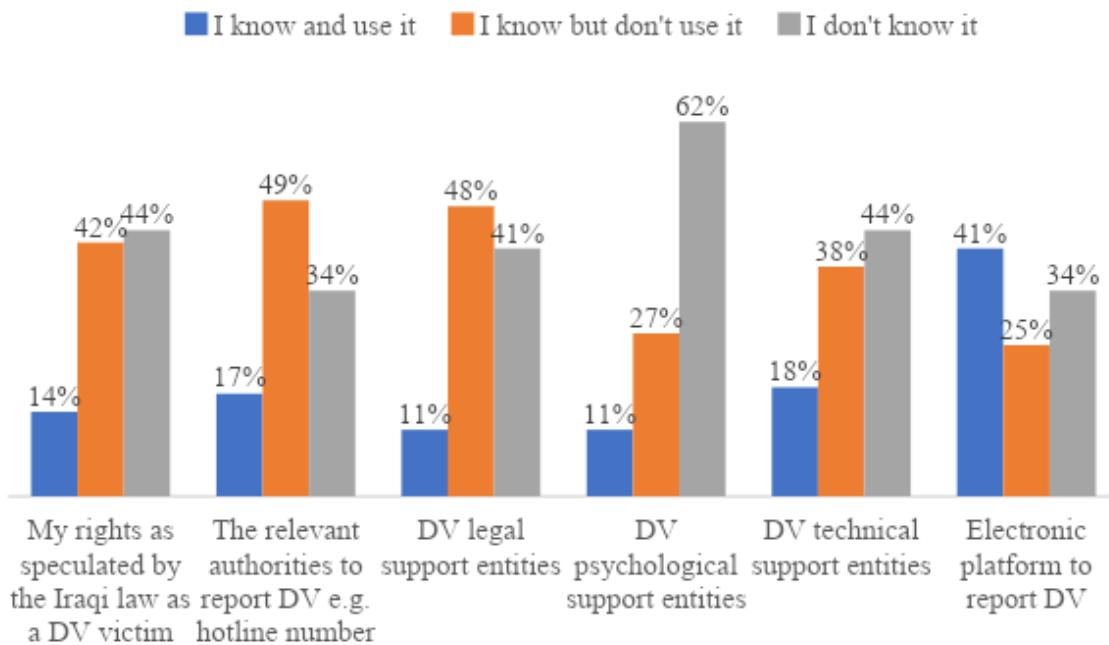
It is important to note that among those who were aware of the existence of psychological support agencies for victims of digital violence in Iraq, 11.3% were actually knowledgeable about these organizations. Additionally, 26.8% were aware but have not used their services. On the other hand, 62% were not aware of the existence of these services.

According to the data, 18.31% of the participants were aware of and utilized the technical support offered by civil society organizations to victims of digital violence, such as the INSM Network for Digital Rights in Iraq. Meanwhile, 38% were aware of the support but did not use it, while 44% were not aware of it altogether.

The findings indicated that the percentage of the participants who were aware of the technical mechanism for reporting via social platforms was 40.85%. Of this group, 25.4% were aware of the mechanism but did not utilize it, while 33.8% were unaware of its existence. One participant expressed their lack of knowledge regarding laws and authorities due to the absence of guidance and advice.

According to these findings, there is a significant proportion of women who do not utilize available support services in the face of digital violence. This may suggest a lack of confidence in these agencies and a fear of societal repercussions for the survivor if she reports the incident. Moreover, a substantial percentage of women are unaware of the agencies that provide support to them, highlighting the need for increased awareness and training on digital security among women.

**Figure 11: Entities concerned with combating digital violence**

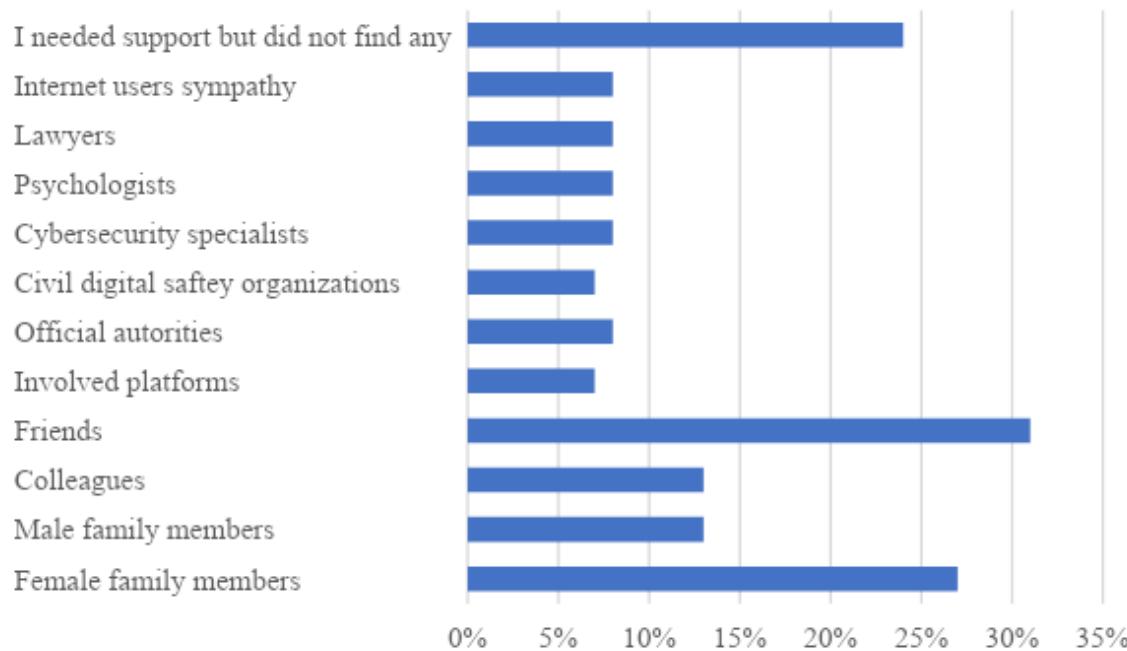


## Supporting Victims of Digital Violence Against Women in Iraq

Regarding the actual level of support received by women who have experienced digital violence, it is noteworthy that some of the participants reported receiving more support from their family female members than from men. Specifically, the percentage of support received from women was 26.8%, while that from men was 12.7%, and from male and female colleagues at work, it was 12.7%. Interestingly, the percentage of support received from friends and girlfriends was found to be 31%, and it decreased in the platform where the violence occurred by 7%.

A small percentage of participants, amounting to 8.5%, turned to official bodies such as the community police<sup>29</sup> and national security. Additionally, 24% of the participants indicated that they needed support but were unsure where to seek it. One respondent noted, "I know that there are no comprehensive services in any country, but in Iraq there are none even for basic needs. How can we expect support for less significant topics, such as the well-being and survival of Iraqi women?" Another participant shared, "I was hesitant to share my experience with anyone, but I told my family I need psychological support and treatment, but they refused."

<sup>29</sup> Community police is an institution affiliated with the Ministry of Interior, but it plays a community role in resolving problems in a friendly and educational manner without having to resort to police stations or the judiciary. But if this is not possible, a return is made to legal institutions. <https://www.ina.iq/155950--.html>

**Figure 12: Support women received when exposed to digital violence**

There are numerous specialized agencies in Iraq that offer assistance to victims of digital violence, but the efficacy of these agencies is not always evident, as indicated by the responses of the survey participants. Only 5.6% of the participants claimed to have benefited from the services of specialized authorities in combating digital crimes, a figure that is not particularly encouraging. Furthermore, only 7% reported receiving technical and psychological support from specialized organizations, while 12.7% turned to social media platform administrations for assistance.

L. L. reportedly approached the local government and police department after she faced digital violence, but the response was not prompt. She subsequently filed a complaint with the police following the publication of an inflammatory report about her and other female activists on Al-Ahed TV during the October protests. The report led to an assassination attempt, but the police did respond to her complaint indicating that they could not accept her complaint since a case could not be opened solely on the basis of a report submitted by a television channel. Another participant mentioned that one of her friends was deceived by an account promoting spirituality, which subsequently blackmailed her. When she attempted to file a complaint with the official authorities, they informed her that the procedures were lengthy and time-consuming.

One of the victims chose to handle the offensive comments by designating a person to delete the comments and ignoring the authors of these comments. In contrast, N.R. enrolled in digital security courses offered by the INSM Network for Digital Rights, where she gained knowledge on how to safeguard herself digitally and how to protect other women as well.

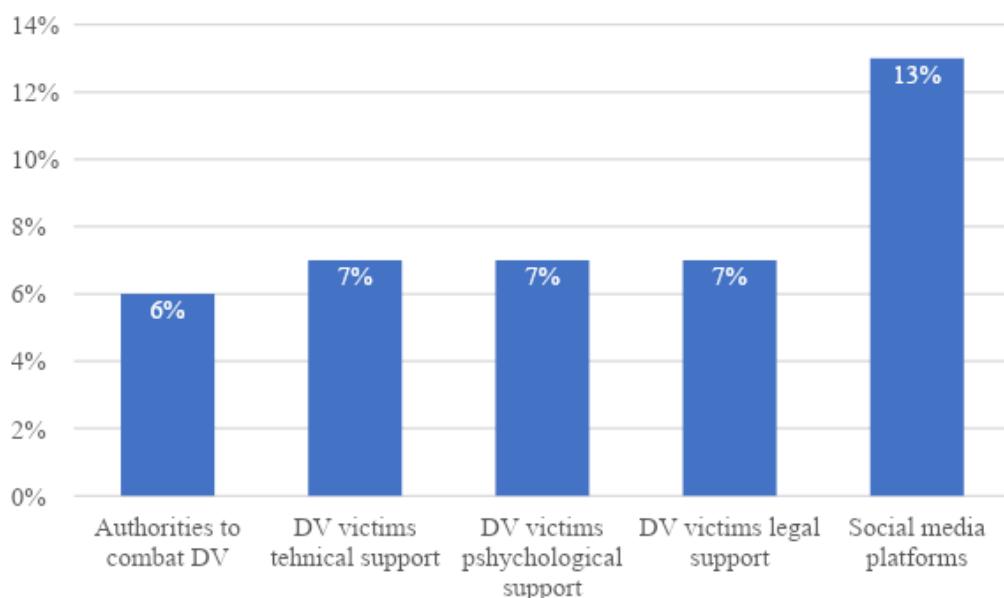
A participant indicated that her personal phone number was disclosed due to the assistance she provides through her platform, and as a result, she was contacted by an individual who blackmailed her, fabricated conversations with her via WhatsApp, and sent her a copy of these conversations containing indecent and inappropriate language and threatened to publish these chats and expose her. Recognizing the importance of resisting the blackmailer and not allowing him to intimidate her, she pursued legal action against the owner of the number, and the local police successfully identified and

apprehended him. In her case, the police response was highly commendable, and a lawsuit was filed against the perpetrator, who subsequently pledged not to harass her again, and she exercised her legal rights to seek justice.

A prominent feminist activist recounted her experience of being blackmailed by an organized group of blackmailers, which included a young woman who superimposed the activist's photos onto pornographic images and threatened to publish them. The activist filed a lawsuit against the perpetrators and, upon discovering their identities, learned that some of them were minors. Despite the slow and cautious handling of her case by the competent authority, the activist refused a reconciliation offer and eventually reactivated the lawsuit. As a result, two adult members of the group were imprisoned, and the activity of the responsible girl ceased. The activist noted the presence of underage individuals within the network.

Another participant, who experienced digital violence, chose not to pursue a legal remedy or file a complaint due to her reluctance to visit the police station unaccompanied and her inability to divulge her situation to her family for fear of reprisals, such as restrictions on her freedom of movement and internet usage. She believed that the most efficacious solution lies in a woman's understanding of her rights and ability to defend herself against such attacks. Furthermore, she advised against being unduly influenced by the hate speech often directed against women on social media platforms.

**Figure 13: Competent authorities to support victims of digital violence**



## Measures to Combat Digital Violence Against Women in Iraq

According to the findings of the study, a significant majority of the participants, constituted of 80%, agreed that the most effective measures to combat digital violence is to incorporate educational programs on digital security within school and university curricula. In addition, they recommended providing training in this regard for both public and private sectors. On the other hand, 75% of them consider the establishment of an institution that provides legal support to be useful. Additionally, 73% of the participants viewed community awareness campaigns as useful in eradicating the culture of blaming women and encouraging families to support women in speaking out and seeking assistance.

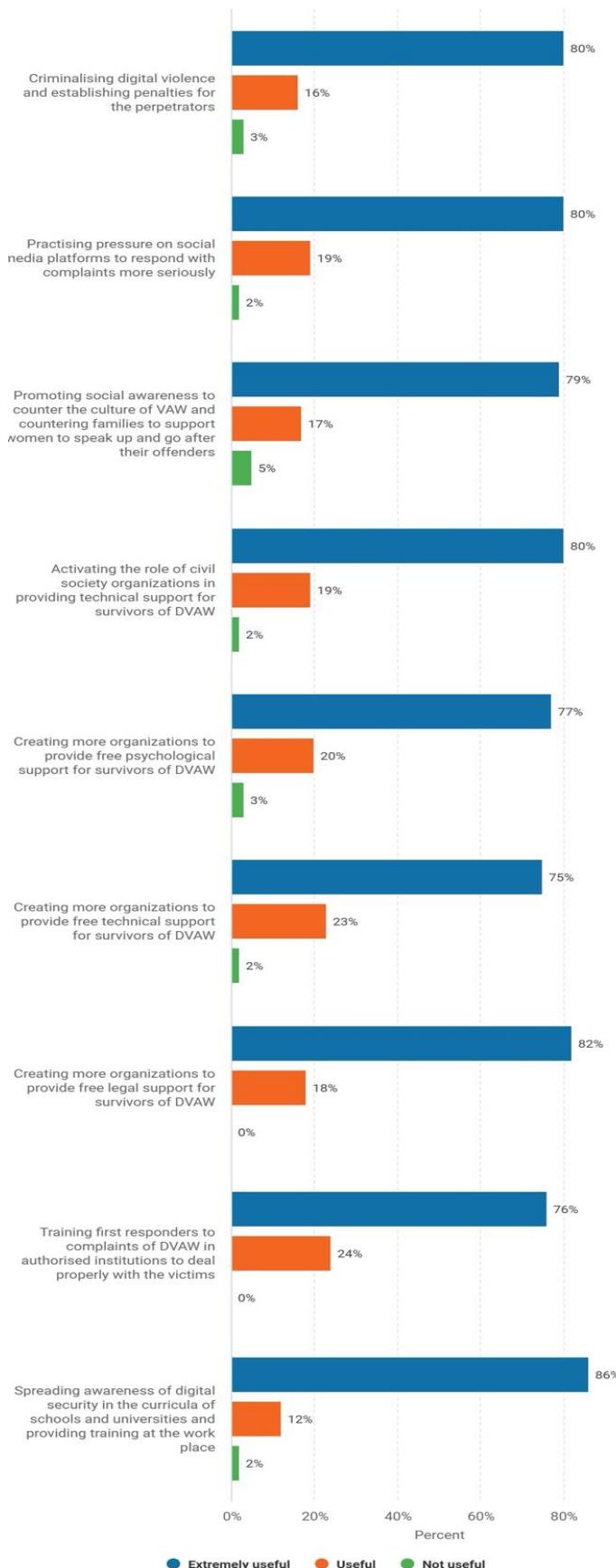
According to two-thirds of the participants (71.8%), it is equally beneficial to apply pressure on social media platforms to improve their handling of complaints and to engage the role of civil society in providing technical support to women.

It was also necessary to assess the viability of establishing legal repercussions for digital violence and implementing penalties that serve as deterrents for perpetrators (69%), as well as establishing institutions that offer free technical support in equal measure. Additionally, it was determined that providing training to the recipients of complaints from employees in the relevant authorities is of significant importance, with a proportion of 67.6%.

The participants in the interviews, who were women in administrative positions and engaged directly with diverse segments of society, agreed that the absence of legislation and legal frameworks designed to address and mitigate the issue of digital violence represents a significant impediment for activists, as L. L. explicitly stated her commitment to assisting her in overcoming the challenges she confronts and enabling her to resume a normal life in her hometown.

Concerning the proposed solutions and recommendations to mitigate the challenges posed by digital violence, N. Q. believed that enhancing women's awareness of their digital rights and imparting them with the proper and safe utilization of technology will contribute significantly to mitigate this issue. Moreover, the role of community police in addressing various aspects of digital violence is acknowledged and appreciated. However, it is emphasized that considerable efforts are required to encourage victims of digital violence to report the offenses committed against them. A major barrier in this regard is the fear of retribution and societal blame.

As Sh. Sh. Stated, the necessary steps must be taken to ensure that the awareness programs currently provided to women by the relevant authorities are sustained and extended to all governorates. This is to prevent women from being subjected to such incidents and to ensure that all women in Iraq have the necessary knowledge and skills to handle instances of online harassment.

**Figure 14: "How important are the following measures to protect women on the Internet?"**

## Case Study: Digital Violence Against Women in the Kurdistan Region

The primary language of communication utilized to contact Kurdish women was Kurdish. A total of 20 women from the Kurdistan region took the survey as part of this study. Subsequently, the research team conducted in-depth interviews with seven women who held prominent administrative, scientific, and political positions, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges women encounter in the digital realm.

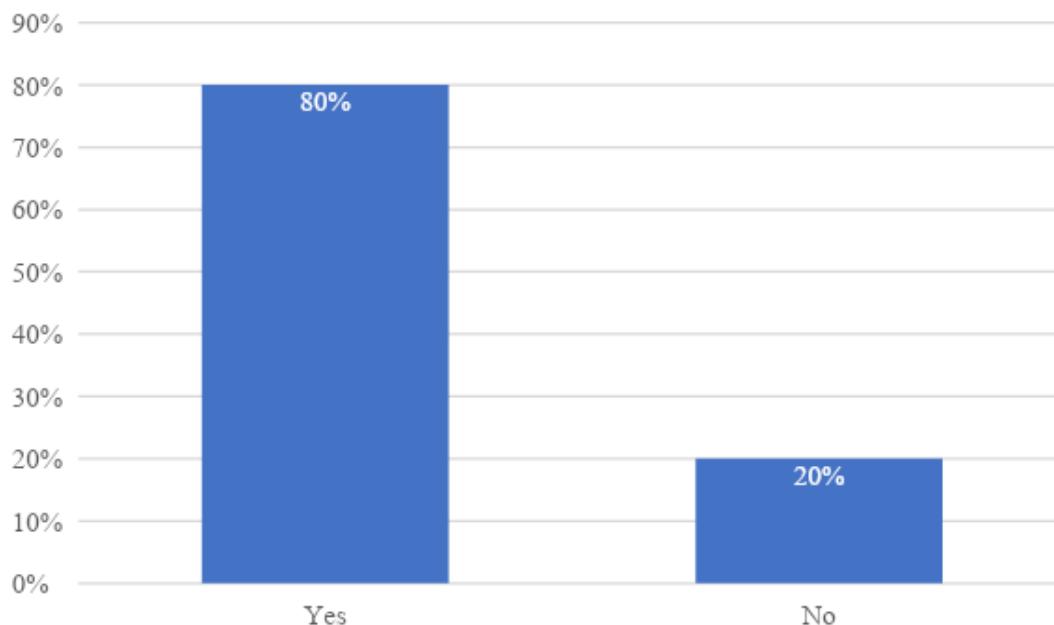
In light of the findings regarding the devices utilized, it is noteworthy that 57.14% of women reported using a personal mobile phone to access the internet, while 21.43% indicated that they shared the same device with their family.

The research sample indicates that 60% of the participants engage in writing and publishing on the internet. Among these participants, 25% reported moderate activity in publishing, while 15% are not active in publishing.

Regarding the social media platforms most commonly used by women in the survey, WhatsApp was the most popular with a usage rate of 71.5%, followed by Instagram at 57%, and Facebook at 43%.

It was found that 80% of the women from the Kurdistan region who participated in the survey experienced some form of digital violence, such as insults, blackmail, stalking, privacy violations, threats, and harassment, due to their gender. On the other hand, only 20% of the sample reported not experiencing digital violence.

**Figure 15: Percentage of women exposed to digital violence in the Kurdistan region of Iraq**



One of the participants served as the editor-in-chief of a feminist magazine and is an activist for women's rights in Kurdistan. She has a consistent online presence on Facebook, which has exposed her to various forms of digital violence, including account hacking and hate speech through comments or

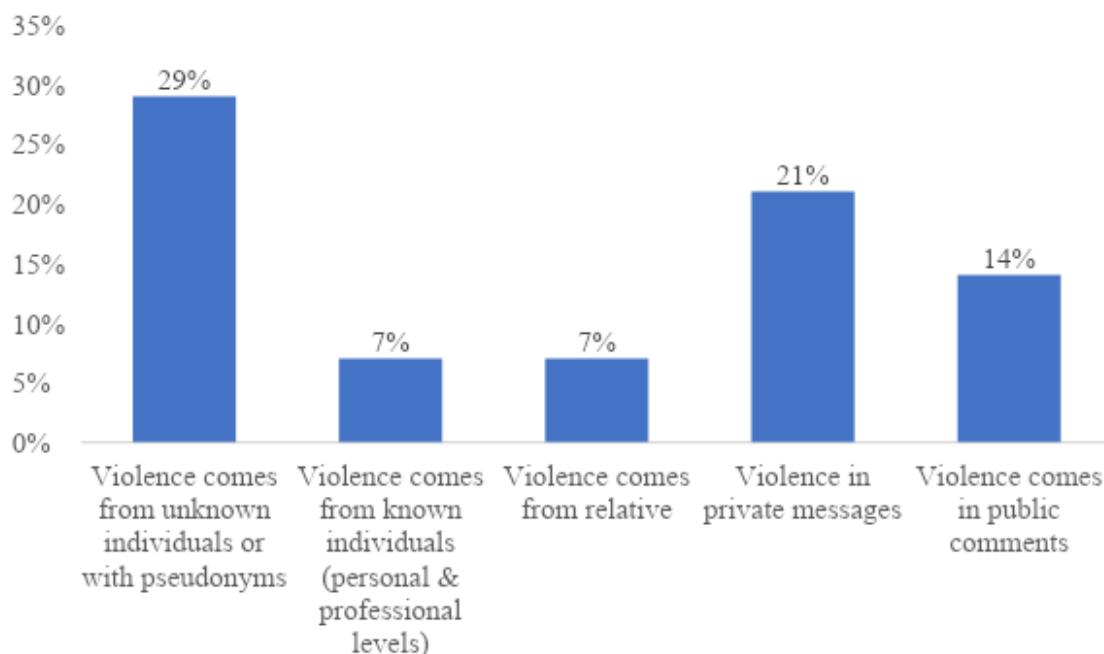
messages containing threats. However, the most significant issue she has faced was the unauthorized use of her personal photos by unknown individuals on Facebook pages.

As there is currently no specific legislation in place to protect digital rights in Kurdistan, A. J. attempted to report the incident to the 119 hotline for violence against women. However, she claimed that they dismissed her concerns, stating that she should expect such treatment since she had posted the photos in question. Despite her efforts to seek a solution, the police refused to take action on the case, citing the attacker's ability to change locations and suggesting that it was her fault for taking such photos, even if they were taken at family events.

A. J. was regarded herself fortunate due to her supportive family and favorable relationship with the regional government. As a result of her friends contacting government agencies, the government was able to force the offending party to remove the post in question. However, A. J. acknowledged that had she not had these connections, she may not have been able to resort to the government or police for assistance. Consequently, she chose to address the issue by collaborating with the Women's Alliance in Kurdistan to draft legal legislation aimed at protecting women from hate speech and blackmail in the digital realm. Currently, A. J. is working on this project with over 20 women activists in Kurdistan.

The proportion of women who reported experiencing violence in both offline and online contexts was 28.6%. Meanwhile, 21.4% indicated that the violence they encounter online does not spill over into their offline lives, and 7% claimed that they do not experience violence in the real world due to their identities, with their online experiences being unclear.

**Figure 16: Digital violence and reality**



L. A., who is a university professor in Erbil - Kurdistan, has been utilizing the Internet since the year 2009. Initially, as a student, she employed an anonymous name and image to conceal her true identity. Upon graduation, she chose to reveal her true self and began sharing visual content on social media, documenting her travels beyond Iraq's borders and academic pursuits abroad.

Utilizing Instagram, L. A. shared blogs and images documenting her travels as a public figure. As part of her endeavors, she provided guidance for those seeking to travel and study abroad. However, during her use of social media, L. A. encountered numerous threats from unknown individuals. On one occasion, she received threats from an individual who claimed they would reveal her photos, which she had already been posting openly. In response, L. A. sought assistance from the community police, who were supportive and advised her to report the account and block it. Eventually, the threats ceased.

Several months ago, L. A. discovered that someone was posting her photos in an improper manner. This discovery caused her great distress, as it was brought to my attention that the images were being viewed by college students and educators. Upon further investigation, it was revealed that the individual responsible was one of my students. Consequently, she adhered to the established protocols and reported the matter to the college administration, who subsequently took disciplinary action against the student. The experience left her feeling deeply hurt, as such incidents can have serious consequences for any woman.

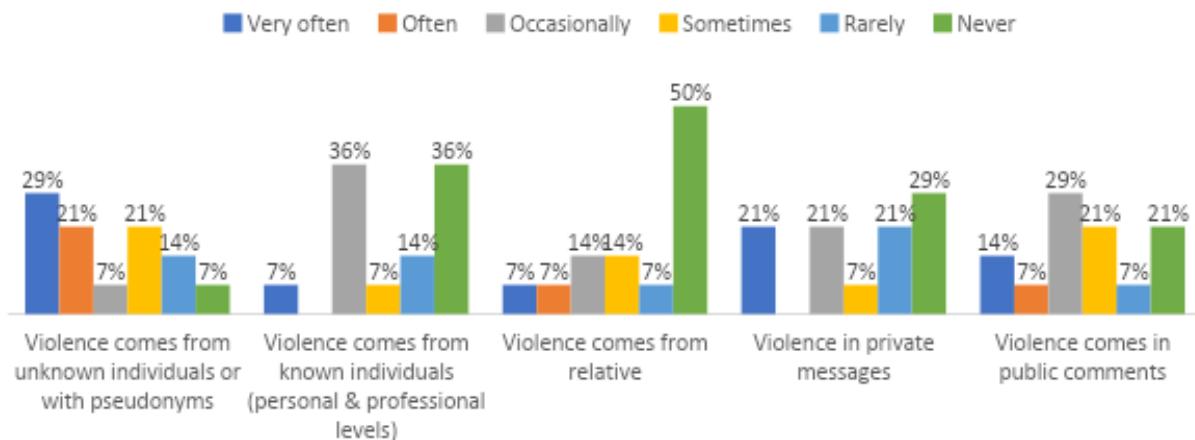
Per the sentiments expressed by L. A., she opted to protect her own interests due to her recognition that societal norms were dictated by male perspectives, and thus her lack of input would have detrimental consequences for her. Consequently, she urged students to exercise caution when engaging with digital media, including social media, as she believed that many individuals were unaware of their rights and how to assert them.

B. F. serves as a supervisory director within the Kirkuk Education Directorate, while simultaneously functioning as a Kurdish political activist and social media influencer. She regularly shares her daily activities on her various social media platforms, which have garnered her a substantial following and thousands of comments. Despite her success, B.F. faced numerous challenges, particularly as a woman in a leadership position. She was viewed as a threat by some individuals within various political parties, due in part to her past candidacy for parliament. Unfortunately, B. F. also experienced personal security breaches, such as the theft of her mobile phone, which contained cherished family photos and personal information. In response to these incidents, B. F. recognized the importance of protecting her personal devices and information, especially in light of the online violence she regularly encountered, including the creation of fake social media pages in her name and the sending of fraudulent messages to her family and colleagues. B. F. was fortunate to have the support of her husband, who understood these situations and helped her to cope with her fears.

B. F. stated, "Generally, I am aware that assaults are orchestrated and executed by individuals whom I do not know. Nonetheless, I have not reported any of the cyberattacks I encountered to the authorities. The reason for this is that I do not trust anyone. Many individuals defend me online on my account when they notice posts intended to attack me. However, I am tired of posting apologies and cautions, emphasizing that this page has no connection to me. Despite the digital violence I endured, I remain steadfast in my commitment to continuously publish my activities. This is because I have great confidence in myself, and I believe that every woman should possess such confidence in herself as well."

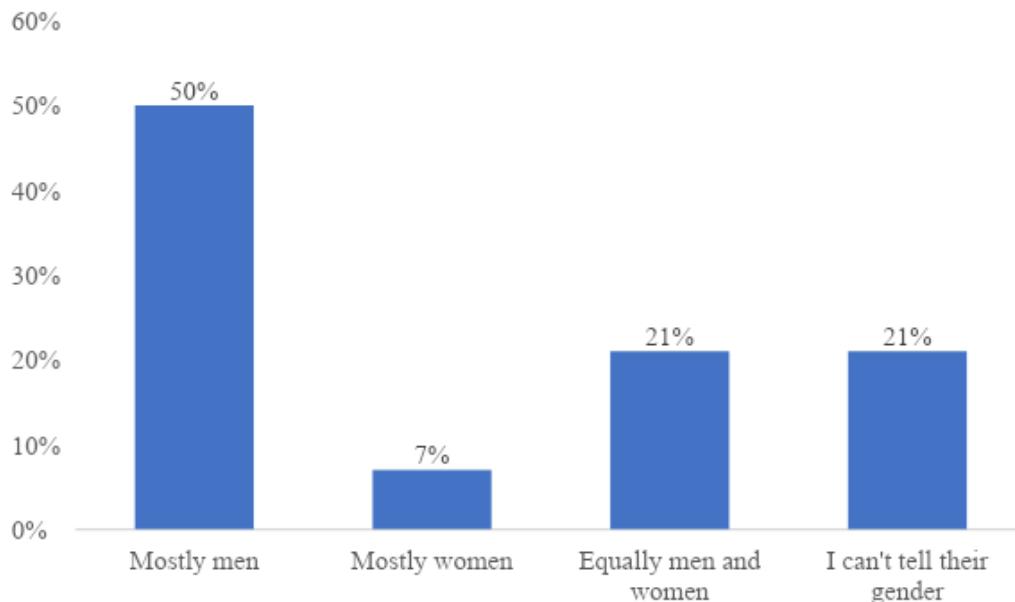
Regarding the factors contributing to this digital violence, 28.57% of the participants indicated that they attribute harm to individuals they do not know and who typically conceal themselves behind false accounts. Additionally, 35.57% of the participants reported that harm occasionally arises from people they are familiar with on both a professional and personal level. Lastly, 50% stated that they have never experienced harm from members of their own family.

Figure 17: Sources of digital violence



According to the data collected, it was revealed that the gender distribution of the perpetrators was 50% being men and 21.4% being women. Additionally, 21% of the participants indicated that they were unaware of the gender of the violator.

Figure 18: Sources of digital violence by gender



## Consequences of Digital Violence on Women in the Kurdistan Region

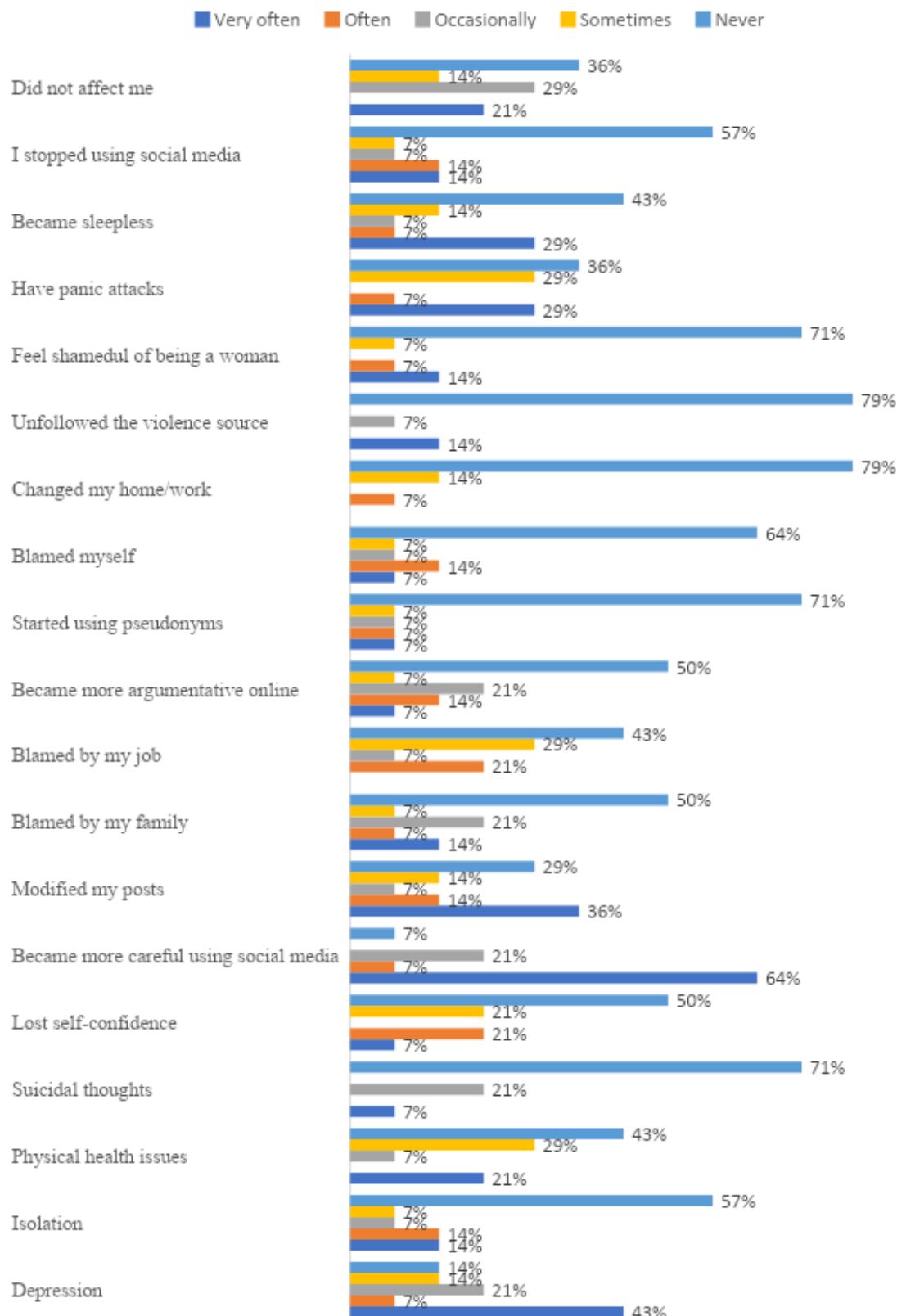
The negative consequences experienced by women who participated in the questionnaire and personal interviews in Iraqi Kurdistan are not dissimilar to those encountered by women in other Iraqi governorates. They reported being subjected to significant negative impacts as a result of digital violence, including a marked decline in their psychological well-being, characterized by excessive depression, psychological oppression, and a loss of self-confidence. These issues were further compounded by physical health problems, such as stomach pain, eye weakness, severe headaches, and even heart attacks. The negative impact of digital violence extended to their personal and family relationships, causing family problems to worsen and emotional bonds to weaken. Furthermore, the psychological pressure resulting from digital violence made it difficult for them to concentrate on their daily affairs and negatively affected their financial situation due to decreased ability to work and think.

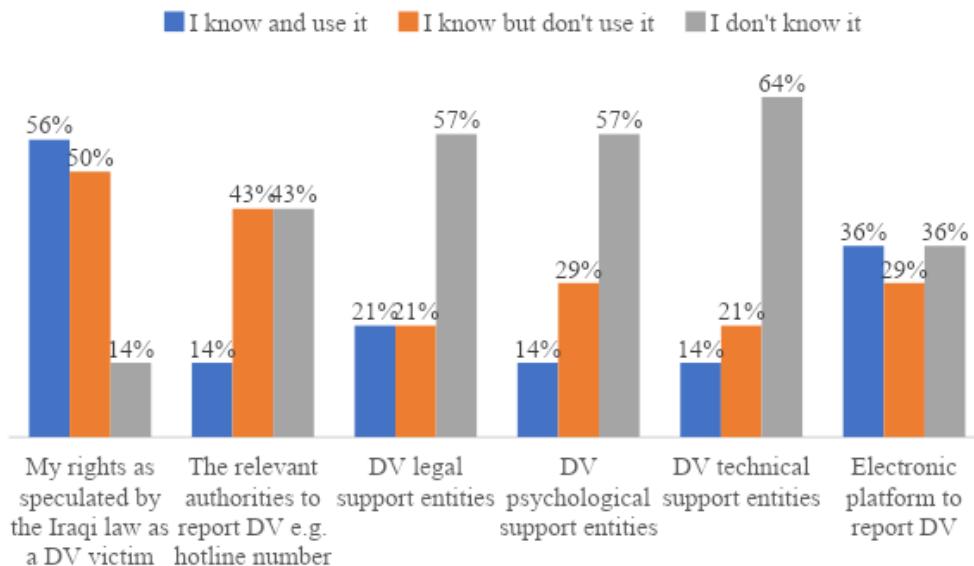
According to the survey, 50% of the participants indicated that their reaction would vary if they were aware of the identity of the abuser or violator, as they would have the option to pursue legal action or confront the individual directly. On the other hand, 35% of the participants stated that their reaction would differ if they knew the identity of the violator. Furthermore, 14.3% of respondents reported that their reaction would remain unchanged under any circumstances.

Regarding the support options accessible to victims of digital violence in the Kurdistan region, a significant proportion of the participants who experienced digital violence did not utilize legal, technical, or social media support channels. Specifically, 57% of the participants did not know about the availability of such services, and consequently, they didn't seek assistance through these means. Moreover, 71.3% of the participants were not aware of psychological support platforms or centers and were unable to access these resources. This lack of awareness highlights the need for increased public education and outreach regarding the support services available to victims of digital violence.

As per A.N.'s account, she is a legal practitioner and activist who focuses on women's rights, and her work frequently involves delicate women's issues. She stated, "I used to be quite active on social media and television, and I consistently advocated for gender equality. Consequently, I encountered numerous online and offline threats." What alarmed her was the sheer number of accounts that disseminated her words in a negative light, suggesting a highly coordinated movement. She began to feel apprehensive about posting comments and opted to stay offline for a while, but eventually realized that this was not a solution and that she had to stand up not only for herself, but also for other girls in her community. Therefore, she contacted the police and made efforts to support those who were unable to file complaints due to societal barriers. She discovered a hotline designed to receive complaints, but the community, especially the girls, were unaware of its existence. Hence, she began to work as a volunteer and conducted several awareness campaigns in girls' schools on how to file a complaint when confronted with digital problems, especially when they were reluctant to inform their families. She worked on various issues and was instrumental in establishing a connection between most girls' schools and the community police.

Figure 19: The impact of violence on women



**Figure 20: Percentage of Usage of digital, legal, and psychological support**

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The research indicated that Iraq is among the nations where women are particularly vulnerable to digital violence. Even those who have endured physical violence may be susceptible to digital violence, even if they use social media under a pseudonym. Digital violence is not exclusive to women in positions of authority; it affects women who advocate for women's rights and those in socially acceptable occupations as well.

The incidents of digital violence that women in Iraqi governorates and the Kurdistan region were subjected to exhibit a striking resemblance, despite the linguistic disparity between the two areas. This similarity can be largely attributed to the shared environmental and cultural factors that exist in both regions. The social and cultural framework in most Iraqi regions imposes constraints on women, rendering them susceptible to a variety of challenges and pressures, whether in urban or rural settings. The rise in digital violence cases in Iraq and the Kurdistan region can be attributed to a number of factors, including the growth in social media usage and the diverse cultural backgrounds of users, as well as the proliferation of unemployment, poverty, lack of education, and ongoing wars in society. These factors may have driven some individuals to engage in electronic blackmail as a means of earning a livelihood, despite the potential harm to victims and the tendency of certain segments of society to condone the perpetrator's actions and blame the victim.

The abuse of power, gender inequality, and disregard for human rights are among the key factors that leave Iraqi women vulnerable to digital violence. Despite the significant number of women who have fallen victim to such violence, many refused to discuss their experiences or believed that taking action would bring about a resolution. They faced a variety of challenges, including fear of societal judgment, lack of awareness of available governmental or non-governmental resources for reporting perpetrators, and self-blame, leading them to doubt the validity of their complaints.

Despite the growing number of female victims of digital violence, there is an ongoing need to educate women about their digital rights. The urgency of this issue cannot be overstated.

Based on the findings of our research and interviews, the following are some of the pivotal recommendations:

1. The Iraqi Parliament and the Iraqi Kurdistan legislature are in the process of enacting specialized laws to regulate the digital space. These laws aim to guarantee women's digital rights while also ensuring freedom of expression of opinion. The current Iraqi Penal Code, which is used to regulate cybercrime, is deemed insufficient due to its outdated nature and lack of relevant texts. This outdated law fails to adequately address the continuously expanding concept of cybercrime.
2. Initiating and adjusting the operational mechanisms of hotlines to report incidents, particularly those that may pose a threat to the victim's life, cooperation with community police. In addition, relying on promises alone needs to be refrained, but rather taking measures to reduce the percentage of women subjected to digital violence at all times. On the other hand, the participants emphasized that government procedures for addressing their grievances tend to be sluggish, and that the administrative bureaucracy employed by the relevant authorities hampers the victim's rights. Furthermore, some cases require prompt resolution, such as electronic blackmail, where a protracted period may exacerbate the problem.
3. Ensuring that the cadres responsible for providing support services to victims of digital violence are competent, trained, and responsible is of utmost importance, as many participants reported that their complaints to the relevant authorities were not handled appropriately, and they often encountered instances of blaming the victim.

4. Enhancing the digital literacy of personnel employed in educational and pedagogical establishments by offering educational programs that will equip individuals in supervisory roles with the necessary knowledge to support female students who may have experienced digital violence, rather than concealing the incident and placing blame on the victim.
5. Updating the educational curricula for both male and female students in schools, with a focus on cultivating knowledge about the digital realm, in order to foster a generation that is proficient in navigating the virtual world in an appropriate manner.
6. Establishing psychological support centers, staffed by specialists in the field, is crucial for providing assistance to victims of digital violence in order to alleviate the psychological stress they experience.
7. Activating the Bar Association to defend the rights of victims of digital violence in Iraq, particularly women who lack the financial means to hire legal representation and cover legal fees. To address this issue, a voluntary approach should be adopted by lawyers in collaboration with the Bar Association to provide pro bono assistance to victims of digital violence.

Despite being an extensive and thorough study, the research team has identified several future trends that they would like to investigate further, including the following:

1. An in-depth examination of the actuality of community police in addressing victims of digital violence in Iraq is necessary to identify the term "treatment" that community police employ as a means of resolving any digital violence incident reported on their platforms, as the participants claimed that government measures may exacerbate the psychological state of the victim in particular circumstances.
2. A challenge was encountered by the research team during conducting the interviews, wherein many digital violence victims, upon recounting their experiences, revived the negative emotions they experienced during the event, leading the research team to delete these interviews out of consideration for their well-being. Therefore, the research team deems it crucial to investigate the reasons behind the scarcity of psychological support for digital violence victims in Iraq, and to determine if there is a favorable impact on those victims who were able to obtain adequate psychological support.
3. The scope of the study needs to be broadened to include the influence of real-life violence on women and how abused women project this problem onto their digital behavior (do they initiate advocacy and awareness campaigns? Do they disclose more about the psychological pressure they face? Or do they refrain from publishing personal stories due to fear of retribution?).