



Online Sexual Violence in Egypt

Documenting and Analyzing Incidents of Online
Sexual Coercion and Extortion (2019-2022)

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Digital technology and the internet offer significant potential for advancing gender equality and empowering women and children. Despite these prospects, the continuous expansion of internet and digital connectivity, coupled with the widespread availability of camera technology and online anonymity, has created an environment conducive to grooming, recruitment, and sexual exploitation with impunity(1). The prevalence of anonymity and the limited regulation of online service providers and platforms further enable exploiters to contact potential victims/survivors effortlessly.

In the realm of online sexual exploitation and abuse (OSEA), individuals are targeted through various technological mechanisms, including live-streaming abuse, online trafficking, and image-based abuse. Subcategorized within OSEA is online sexual coercion and extortion (which we will refer to as OSCE), defined as ‘the act of sharing or threatening to share sexual images or information online or through the use of digital technology.’ Motivations behind these acts vary, ranging from causing distress to victims/survivors, seeking financial gain, engaging in sexual abuse, and exploitation(2). Some perpetrators may be driven by malice or a desire for heightened social media attention. Exploring the realm of tech-driven extortion unveils the adept use of digital tools for online sexual coercion, showcasing the constantly evolving methods employed by perpetrators(3). This underscores the dynamic nature of these crimes and accentuates their profound impact on victims/survivors. Enduring consequences beyond immediate coercion reveal a deep and lasting emotional toll(4).

These crimes transcend borders, exemplifying a pervasive global prevalence. Examining Egypt's legal response to online sexual coercion reveals a multifaceted approach initiated in 2002 with the establishment of the Internet Investigation Service, designed to receive reports on Internet crimes(5). The Egyptian Constitution of 2014 underscored the importance of information security, leading to the enactment of laws criminalizing such acts(6). Additionally, in 2014, a Egyptian Supreme Cybersecurity Council (ESCC) was established, tasked with developing a national strategy against cyber threats and overseeing its implementation in line with technological developments(7). The 2017 National Cybersecurity Strategy further addressed emerging threats and outlined a comprehensive plan for the years 2017-2021, emphasizing the protection of information and communications infrastructure(8). In 2018, the legal framework was reinforced with the issuance of Law No. 175, specifically targeting information technology crimes. This law included articles (25 and 26) that delineated various forms of blackmail and the corresponding legal punishments. Article 25 addressed acts such as infringing upon family principles, violating privacy, and sending many electronic messages without consent, while Article 26 focused on the intentional use of information programs or in a detrimental way to the reputation of others (9). Subsequently, in 2021, the Ministry of Interior took a proactive step by establishing information technology departments in security directorates nationwide to facilitate citizens' reporting of cybercrimes(10). Despite these legal advancements, official data on online extortion in Egypt remains unavailable, prompting the initiation of the current study by Tadwein for Gender Studies.

Aim

The study aims to highlight the prevalence rate of online sexual coercion and extortion by documenting published incidents in the Egyptian media during the last four years, from January 2019 to December 2022.

Methodology

The study documented incidents of online sexual coercion and extortion in Egypt, which was published online during the period from January 2019 to December 2022. The study relied on the Google search engine and used a set of keywords such as “ابتزاز / يبتز / ابتزاز إلكتروني / تهديد.” A spreadsheet was designed to contain all recorded OSCE incidents during the indicated four consecutive years. The spreadsheet was divided into different columns, each containing pertinent variables related to the incident, such as the timing of its occurrence, the detailed location, the nature of the location, the purpose of extortion, and the means used, among other variables. The identified and selected news followed a set of criteria, including:

- News that was published in one of the well-known official newspapers in (Al-Youm Al-Sabea, Cairo 24, Sada Al-Balad, Al-Ahram News Gate, Al-Masry Al-Youm, Al-Watan, and Veto)
- The incidents of OSCE occurred inside Egypt, and the victims/survivors were Egyptians.
- Excluding any published incident that does not include the date of occurrence.

Challenges

Several challenges were encountered while conducting the study:

1. Most of the published news did not include detailed information about the victims/survivors or perpetrators, such as age, educational level, work status, marital status, and other important social and demographic characteristics .

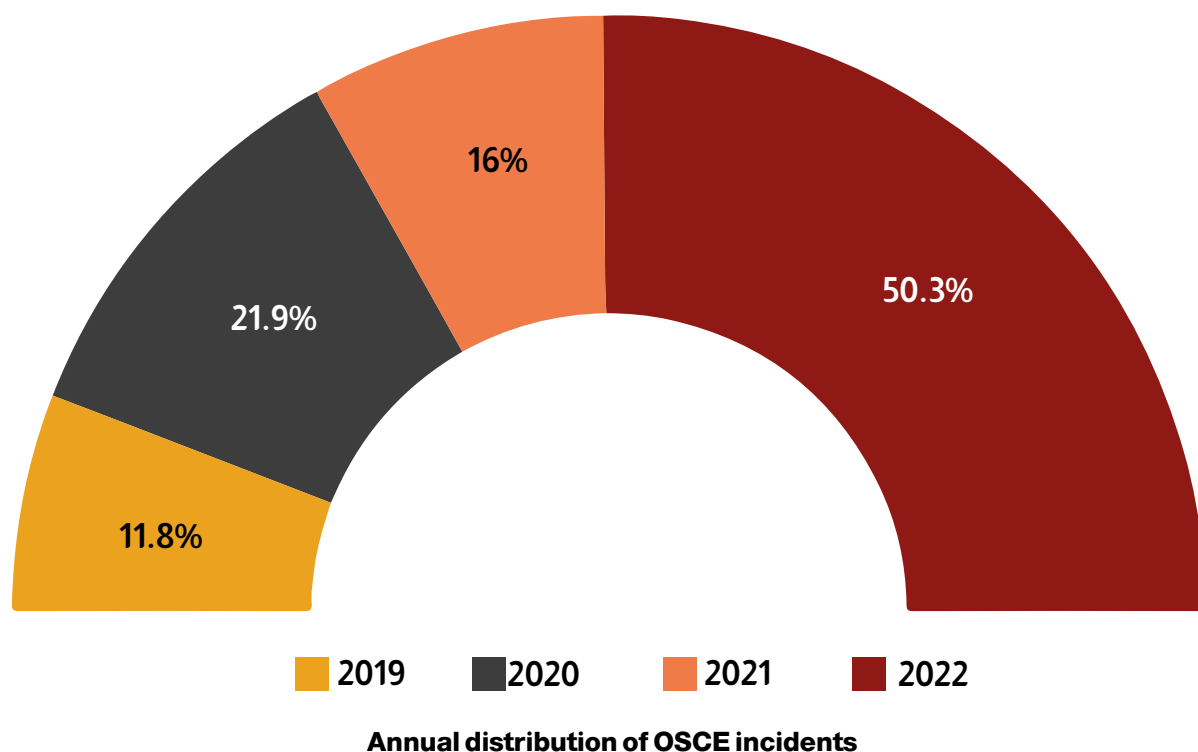
2. Difficulty determining the locations of the incidents of online sexual coercion and extortion in Egypt.

3. The majority of published news about OSCE incidents is limited to incidents reported by victims/survivors for which legal actions were taken against the perpetrators. This makes the rate of incidents observed in the press disproportionate to the actual incidents of online sexual coercion and extortion.

Study Results

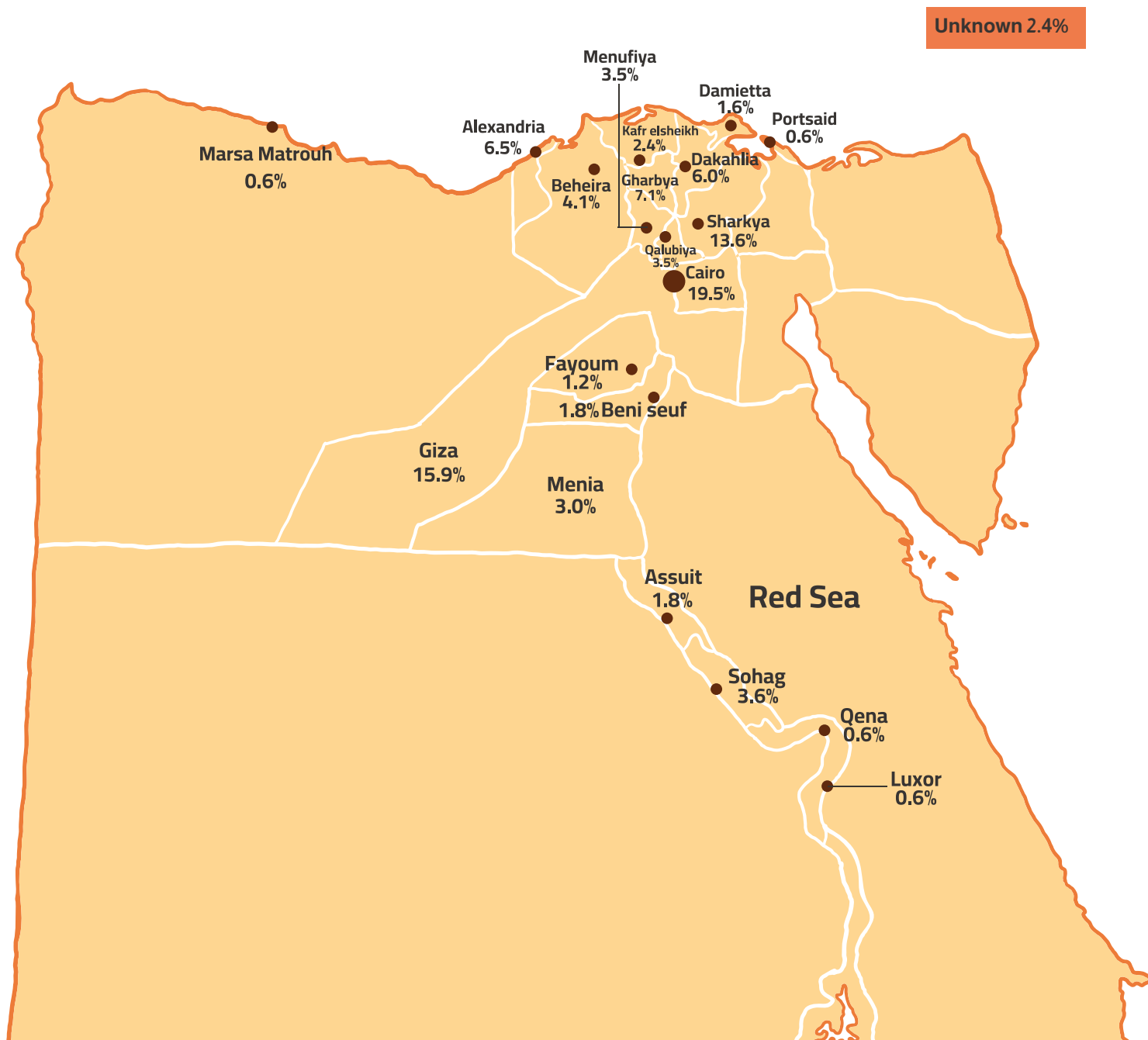
Demographic Distribution of Online Sexual Coercion and Extortion Incidents

Between January 2019 and December 2022, the Egyptian press reported 169 OSCE incidents. Around half of them (50.3%) were documented in 2022. This was preceded by 21.9% in the year 2020.



Cairo had the highest rates (19.5%), followed by Giza (15.9%), while Luxor, Port Said, Qena, and Marsa Matrouh governorates each accounted for 0.6% of incidents.

Incidents of OSCE by governorate

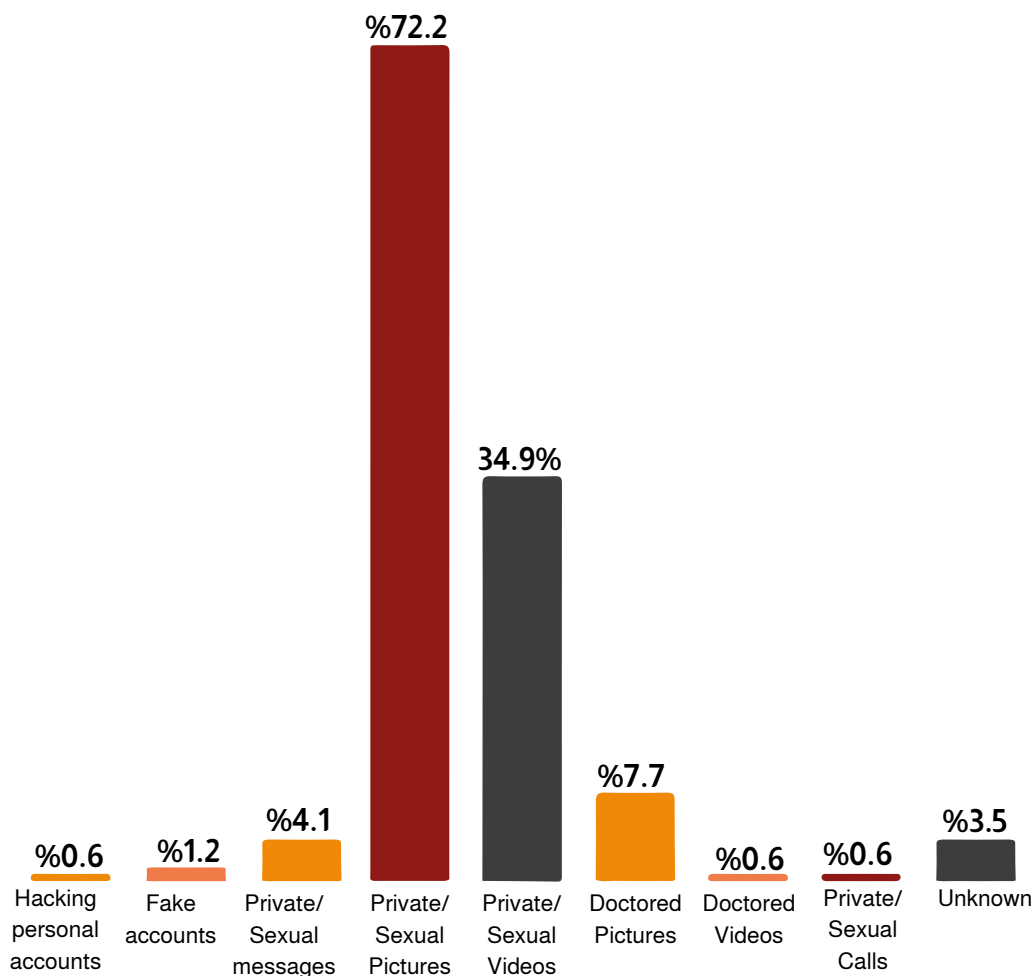


Characteristics of Online Sexual Coercion and Extortion Incidents

The data indicated that perpetrators use different methods to extort their victims/survivors.

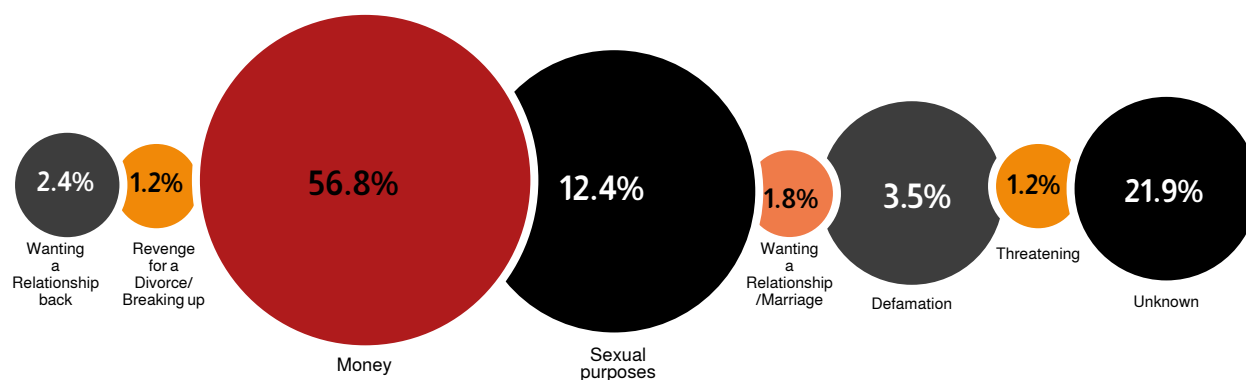
Perpetrators primarily used private/sexual photos (72.2%) to coerce victims/survivors, followed by private/sexual videos (34.9%) and doctored photos (7.7%).

Methods of OSCE



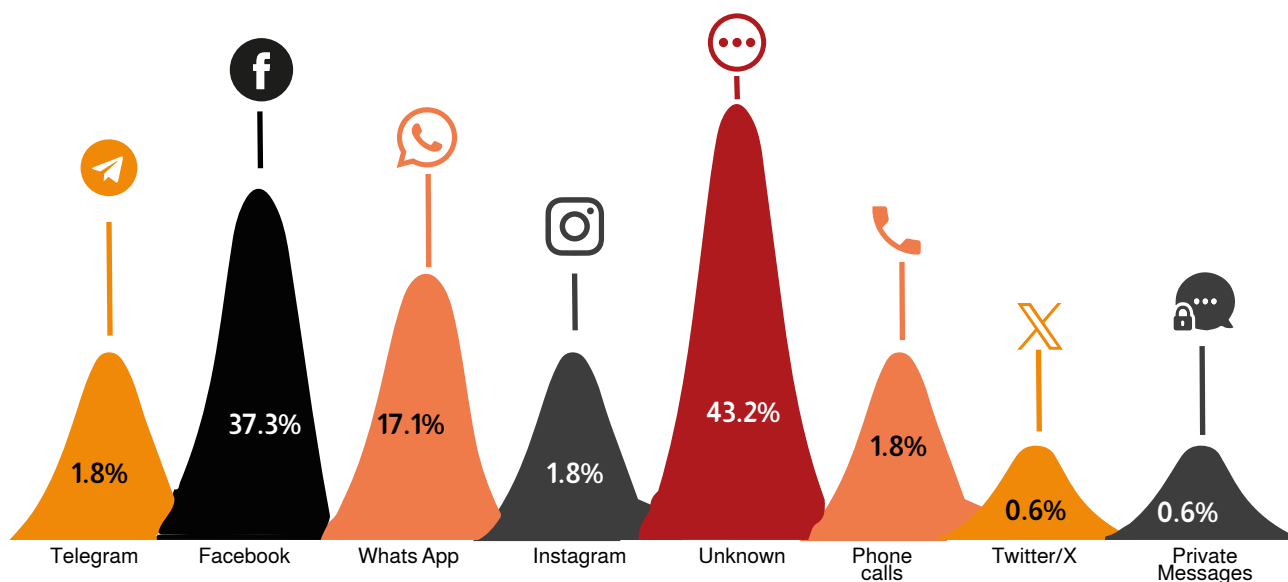
Financial gain motivated 56.8% of incidents, while sexual motives were evident in 12.4%. 3.5% aimed solely at damaging reputations.

Stated motivation behind OSCE



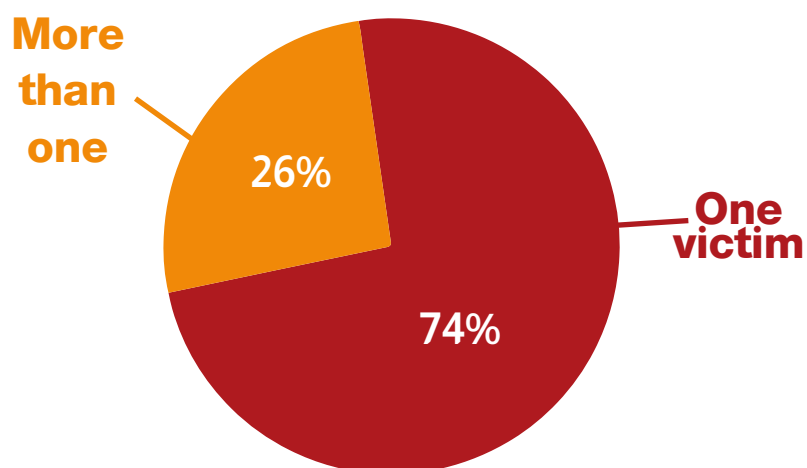
Social media platforms, particularly Facebook (37.3%) and WhatsApp (17.1%), were most frequently used for OSCE. However, the majority the incidents (43.2%) did not specify the used platform.

Platforms used for OSCE

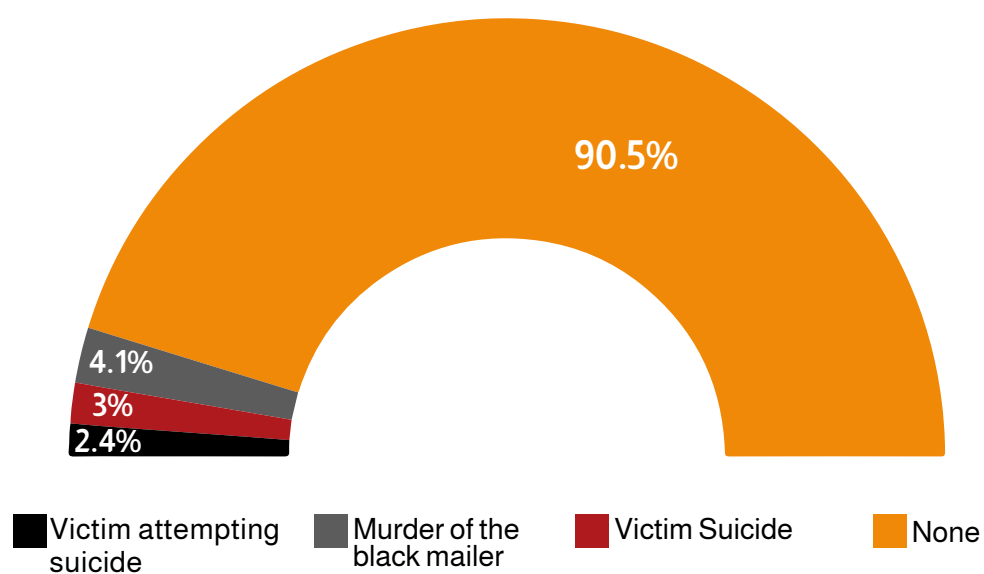


In 26% of online sexual coercion and extortion incidents, perpetrators targeted more than one victim.

Percentage of OSCE incidents by number of targeted victims/survivors



Tragically, 4.1% of victims/survivors were killed, 3% committed suicide, and 2.4% attempted suicide.



Murder/suicide attempts following OSCE

Characteristics of the victims/survivors:

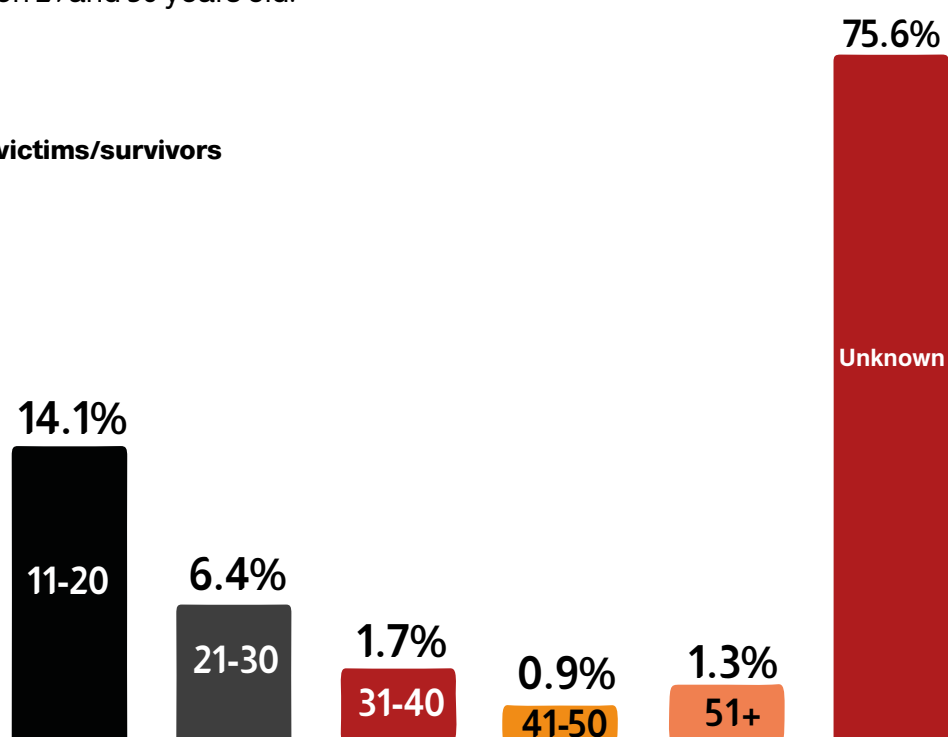
While data on victims/survivors were incomplete, females comprised the majority (82.9%) compared to males (10.3%).

Sex of victims/survivors



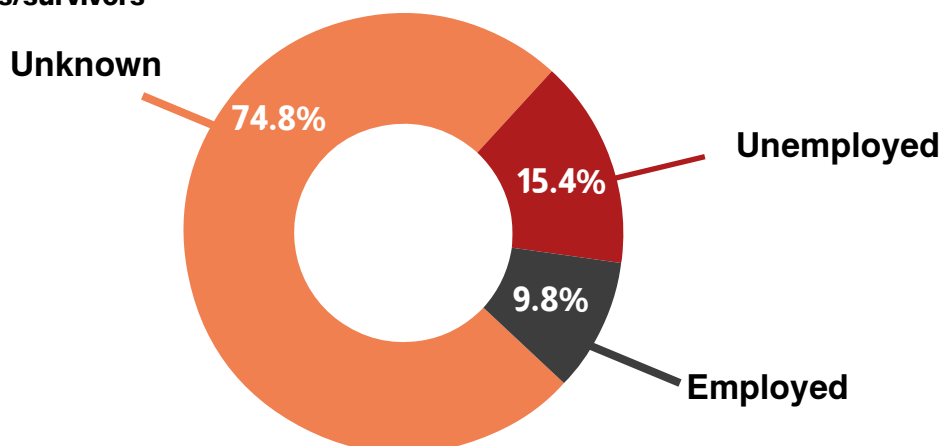
About 14.1% of the victims/survivors were between 11 and 20 years old, and 6.4% were between 21 and 30 years old.

Age of victims/survivors



The employment status of victims/survivors was largely unreported, with 15.4% unemployed and 9.8% employed.

Employment status of victims/survivors

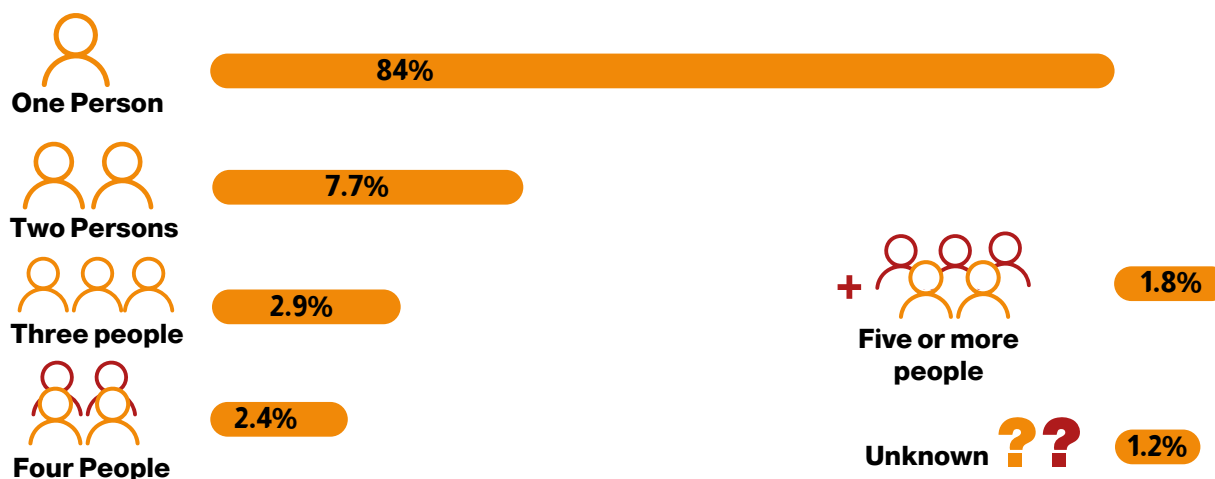


Characteristics of the perpetrators

The press reports on online sexual coercion and extortion incidents in Egypt offered scant details regarding the perpetrators' characteristics. The provided data included information on the number of perpetrators, their gender, age groups, employment status, and their relationship with the victim.

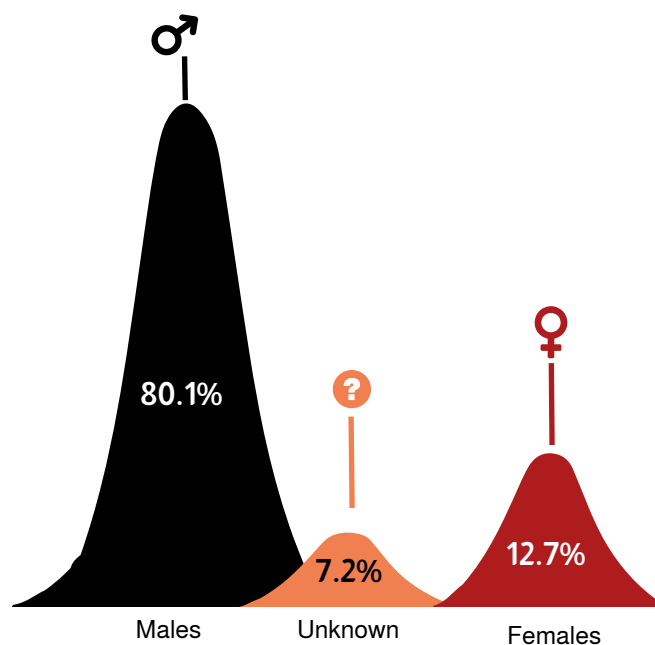
84% of OSCE incidents were perpetrated by a single individual, 7.7% involved two perpetrators, and 2.9% involved three.

Number of perpetrators involved in OSCE incidents

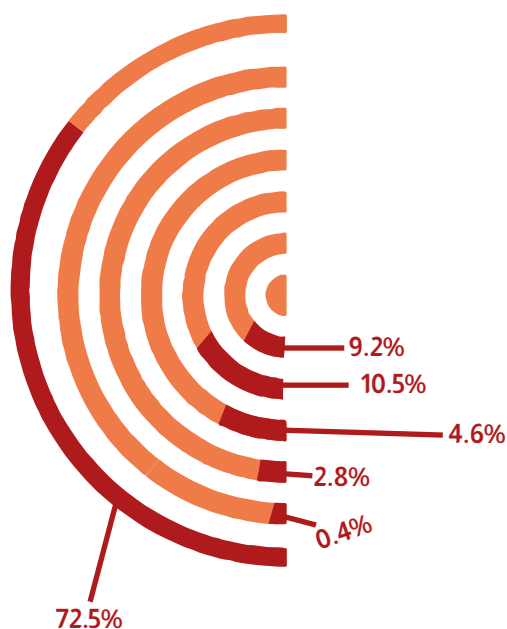


The majority of perpetrators were males (80.1%), compared to females (12.7%).

Sex of perpetrators



Perpetrators aged 11-20 years and 21-30 years accounted for 9.2% and 10.5%, respectively.

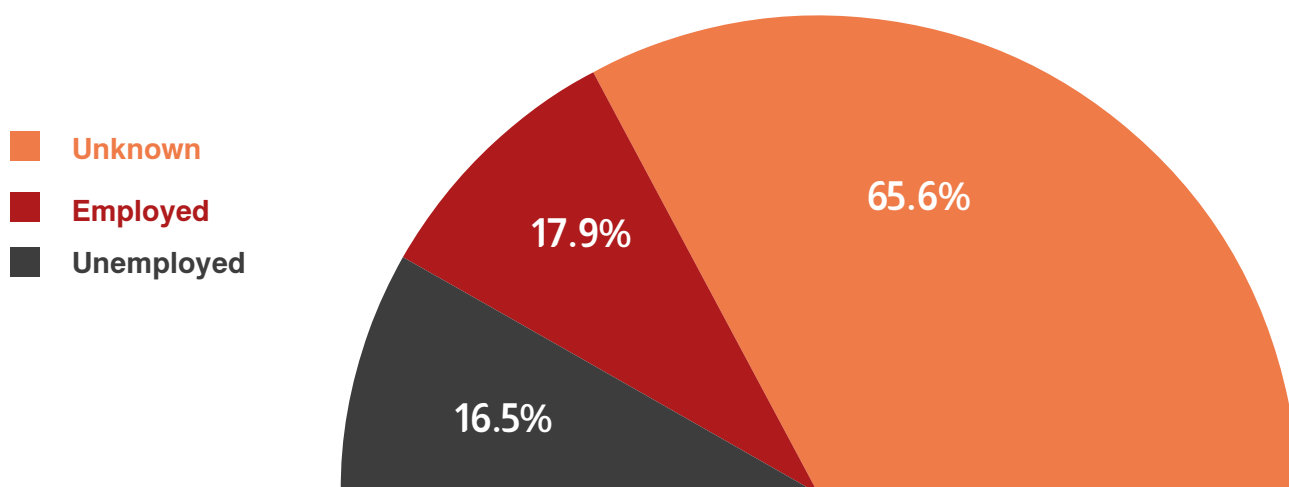


Age of perpetrators

11-20	9.2%
21-30	10.5%
31-40	4.6%
41-50	2.8%
+51	0.4%
Unknown	72.5%

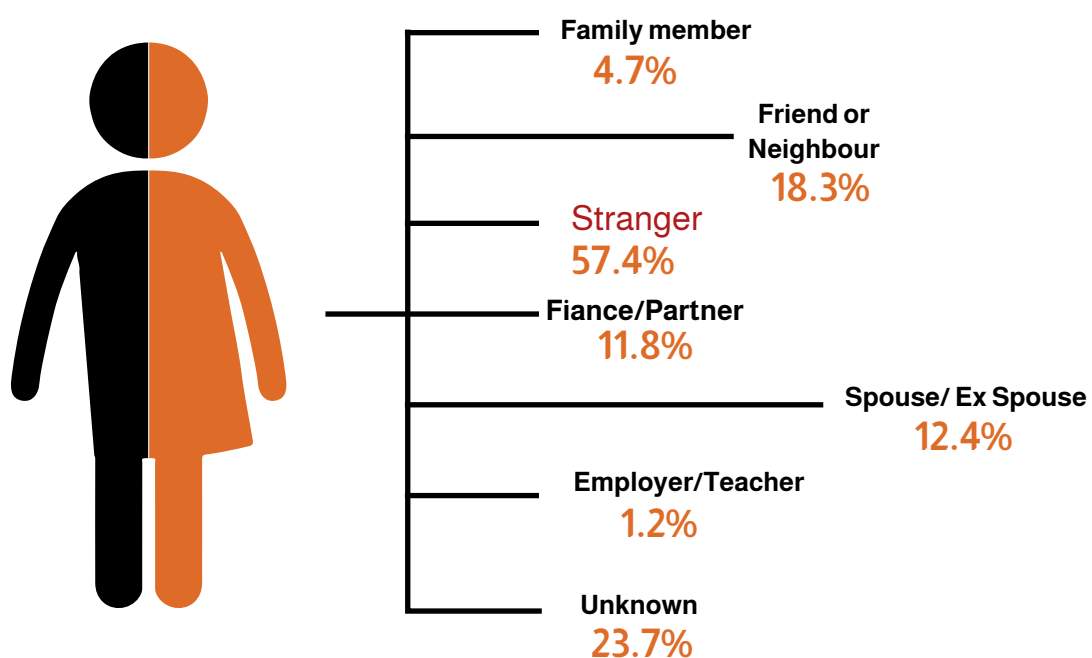
The employment status of perpetrators was largely unreported, with 16.5% noted to be unemployed and 17.9% employed.

Employment status of perpetrators



Strangers accounted for more than half (57.4%) of perpetrators, while 18.3% were friends or neighbors of the victims/survivors.

Relationship of perpetrator to victims/survivors



Discussion

The data contained in press news about OSCE crimes represents the only source of information about such crimes in light of the lack of official data about them from the competent authorities in the country. Although journalistic sources are not considered comprehensive nor representative statistics, they are an open source of data that can be relied upon at any time and contribute to providing indicators about the rates of spread of these crimes in our society.

The analysis of the results revealed the following issues related to the way the Egyptian press presents incidents of sexual coercion and extortion:

Centralization of Detection: Most journalists focused on covering events occurring within major urban governorates, while the remaining governorates did not receive the same attention. This seemingly explains why most OSCE crimes are concentrated within the governorates of Cairo (19.5%) and Giza (15.9%).

Detection Seasonality: There is a notable discrepancy in the volume of press published about incidents of OSCE across the years represented in this report. The annual distribution of OSCE incidents sharply increased to 50.3% in 2022 as compared to 16% in 2021. This increase in publicized incidents could be explained by the “Heidi and Basant” case when two Egyptian girls committed suicide in early 2022 after being subjected to OSCE(11)(12) , Despite issuing the coercion law in 2018, the Egyptian press’s increased publications of OSCE occurrences correlate to sensationalized events with strong public opinion. After the death of Heidi and Basant, Egyptian media covered several OSCE incidents, which could have potentially had an impact on both the future incidence and report submissions.

Lack of Gender-Sensitive Language: It has been shown, through published news about cyber-extortion crimes, that journalists use nuanced words in formulating news and press reports that contribute to reinforcing stereotypes and misconceptions and increasing bias against marginalized groups (women or survivors of violence in particular). It has been noted that the language used in press releases when addressing female victims/survivors of OSCE blames or shames her as a victim, in contrast to male victims/survivors, who, when published, are written about with respect, ambiguity, and occasionally a degree of praise. Below are some of the translated headlines of OSCE narrated reports assessed for this study:

**When the victim/
survivor is a woman**

3 years imprisonment for a male accused of extorting his fiancée by publishing her lewd immoral pictures

A girl residing in haram commits suicide after she was blackmailed with her sexual pictures by a footballer in a famous football club

He threatened her with her naked pictures ... a girl accuses a guy of blackmailing her after their secret marriage in Matrouh

A Woman files a report against her ex-husband from a secret marriage accusing him of blackmailing her with exposing pictures of hers

**When the victim/
survivor is a man**

A man arrested for blackmailing another with private pictures of his son on Facebook

Ongoing investigations regarding a worker and his wife blackmailing a young man in Giza

The defendant accused of blackmailing a doctor with videos and photos was referred to felony court

Giza's stud .. interesting confessions about having sexual relations with different women and filming them

Women are more likely to experience online sexual coercion and extortion: The study found a consistent pattern, with 83% of victims/survivors being female and 80% of perpetrators being male, aligning with well-documented structural inequality trends in sexual violence (13). This mirrors broader societal dynamics observed in various studies. Despite a digital gender gap (48% of women using the internet versus 58% of men worldwide), women still face a higher likelihood of cyber violence(14). In 2023, a global assessment of tech-facilitated violence reflected these gendered results, with 58% of OSCE victims/survivors being women and 43% men.

Relation of Perpetrator to Victim: The study also revealed that a majority of perpetrators (57.4%) were strangers to their victims/survivors, consistent with existing literature. In a 2020 survey in Egypt, 92.6% of cyber-violence perpetrators, often involved in harassment and cyber-stalking, were unknown to the victims/survivors(15). Similar findings were observed in a 2020 study in Nepal, where 62% of identified abuse originated from strangers or anonymous sources(16). A 2022 comparative study on digital sexual violence in post-COVID Egypt showed that only 17.3% of participants knew their perpetrator, highlighting a sharp contrast with physical sexual assault, where most perpetrators are known to the victim.(17)(18) , This distinction underscores the impact of anonymity, removing protective factors for victims/survivors and contributing to an increased prevalence of OSCE.

In the realm of digital platforms, safeguarding against the non-consensual sharing of sensitive information, particularly intimate images, is imperative. Implementing protective mechanisms is crucial to shield individuals from potential harm. However, it is vital to recognize that attempting to solve this problem by advising women not to share sensitive content online reinforces patriarchal discourses and unfairly places the burden on women. Such a narrative risks undermining women's rights to express their sexuality and exercise freedom over their bodies. Instead of restricting these freedoms, our focus should be on fortifying the protection of individuals, acknowledging them as equal citizens with the right to express themselves without fear of violation, as per the Egyptian Constitution's commitment to achieving equality between women and men in all civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights (Article 11) (19). Central to this discussion is the concept of bodily integrity; we must reject the normalization of shaming women for expressing their bodies but rather reinforce the importance of respecting and safeguarding their autonomy in the digital space.

Recommendations

In light of the study's findings and data collection methodology, the following recommendations are proposed:



Conduct qualitative studies on online sexual coercion and extortion

to provide in-depth data on women's response, mitigation strategies, and received support and protection.



Incorporate online sexual coercion and extortion

as a form of violence in relevant country surveys to provide nationally representative data.



Production and wide

dissemination of periodic data on online sexual coercion and extortion by relevant governmental authorities.



Establish victim/survivor support programs

to assist individuals and families in healing and seeking justice through civil society initiatives.



Conduct national trainings for law enforcement

personnel on ways to address and manage incidents of online sexual coercion and extortion in a gender sensitive manner.



Conduct gender-sensitive language trainings

for journalists and editorial teams to ensure representative and responsible reporting.



Including definitions of sexual coercion and extortion in educational modules

for all relevant learners. This includes addressing the topic, consequences, and resources within sex education curriculums.



Expand existing awareness campaigns on sexual coercion and extortion laws

to equip the public with an understanding for both the crime and the steps needed to file a report.

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