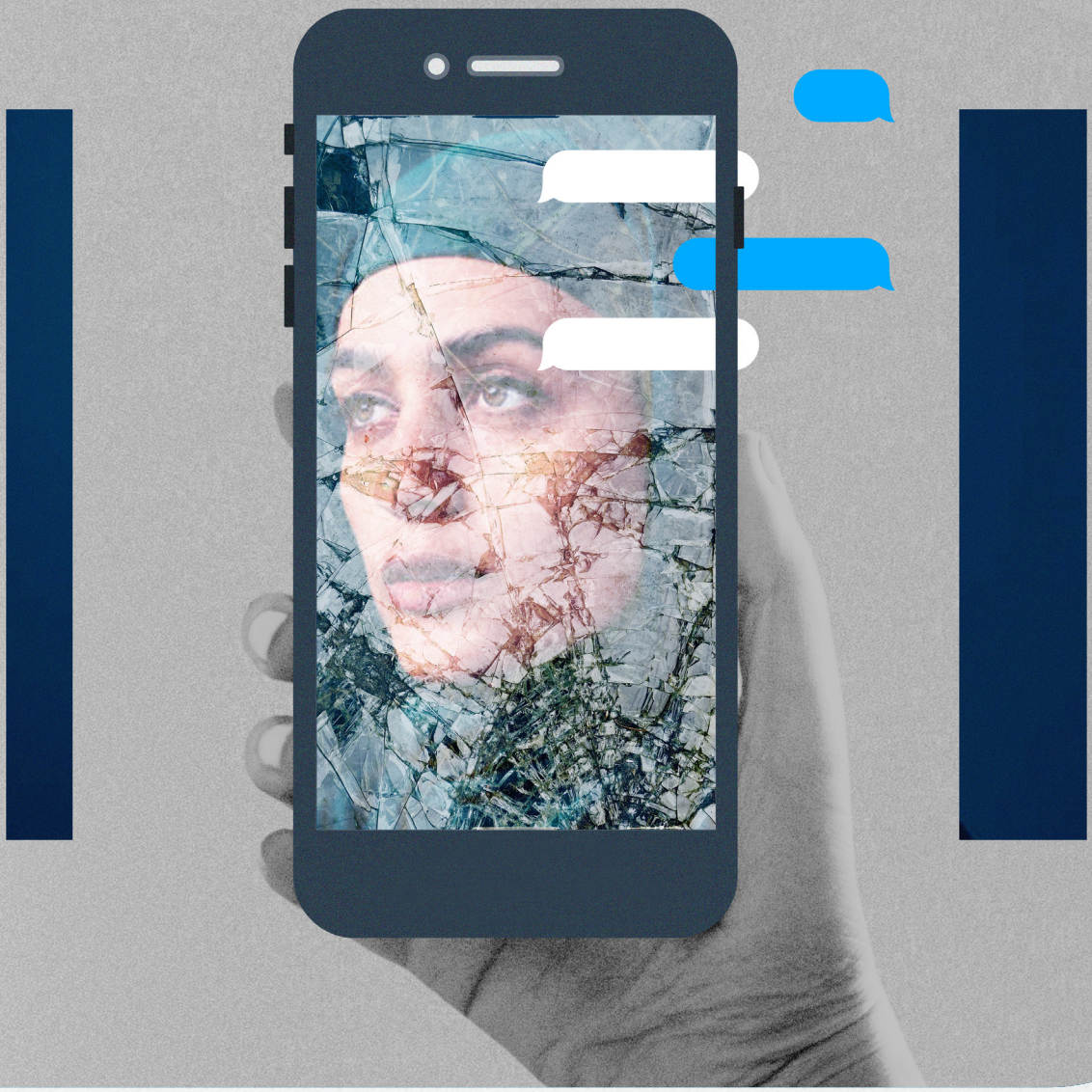
Dr. Aida Al-Kaisy

ONLINE VIOLENCE TOWARDS WOMEN IN IRAQ

February 2022



german cooperation
DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT

Implemented by

giz Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

elbarlament cultures of democracy

Women Talking Peace

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this paper represent those of the authors and not necessarily those of elbarlament. References made to the work of other authors remain solely the responsibility of the author(s).

This research paper was produced within the framework of the implementation of "Women Talking Peace, Women Leading Peace Talks" project, implemented by elbarlament and supported by *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH* on behalf of the German Government.

Table of Contents

List of Acronyms 4

Introduction 5

What is Gendered Online Violence? 7

Methodology 9

Political Context 11

Conditions for Women and Girls in Iraq 12

Online Violence against Women in Iraq 14

Who are the main targets and perpetrators of online violence against women? 15

Intimate partners 15

Social media influencers 16

Journalists 17

Activists 17

Political figures and electoral candidates 18

Types of Online Violence 18

Misinformation and disinformation 18

Cyber harassment 20

Hate speech 21

Impersonation 24

Hacking and stalking 24

Astroturfing 25

Video- and image-based abuse 26

Case study: Um Yasmin 27

Violent Threats 27

Responses to Online Violence 29

The Consequences of Online Violence 32

Conclusion 34

Recommendations 36

Bibliography 38

List of Acronyms

CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CSO: Civil Society Organisation

EU: European Union

FGD: Focus Group Discussion

GBV: Gender Based Violence

ICFJ: International Centre for Journalists

IFES: International Foundation for Electoral Systems

IHEC: Independent High Electoral Commission

KDP: Kurdish Democratic Party

LSE: London School of Economics

MENA: Middle East and North Africa

MOI: Ministry of Interior

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

UN: United Nations

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

VAWG: Violence Against Women and Girls

Introduction

On 19 August 2020, Iraqi human rights advocate and trained medic, Riham Yacoub, was assassinated by unidentified gunmen on Al Tijari Street in Iraq's second-largest city, Basra. The three other women with whom she had been travelling were also shot and injured. The murder of Yacoub was the third in a series of killings that had taken place in Basra that week. These killers had been targeting activists, in particular those who they believed had been participating in the protest movement which began in Iraq in October 2019[1]. Although Yacoub had indeed taken part in initial protests in Basra, she had withdrawn from the movement after receiving threats to her life following the circulation of pictures of her at the US Embassy on social media platforms. A fake video of her as a leader in the protests has continued to circulate even after her untimely death. She was depicted as part of a network of protestors who were promoting violent protests as a means of change, a conspiracy theory aimed at discrediting the protest movement. This narrative was further enhanced with additional pictures on social media linking Yacoub to a project funded by the US Embassy in Baghdad and suggestions of collaboration in a US strategy to coordinate violent protests in Iraq.

Online threats and violence have become entrenched in Iraq and are increasingly threatening political processes and prospects for democracy. Journalists, activists and those campaigning for change to what has become a deep-rooted corrupt political system. Individuals calling powers to account in its many forms are all facing online intimidation for their efforts. The protest movement and related political actors have been subjected to campaigns of online harassment. These consist of mis- and disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting and undermining those who seek change. With significant resistance to this change from some sectors and actors, prospects for significant change continue to diminish in Iraq.

For women in the public sphere, the situation is particularly treacherous. Misogyny, abuse, prejudice, and discrimination are punctuated with threats of extortion, blackmail, and violence. Hate speech, harassment and gendered disinformation are rife—this in a society where gender-based violence (GBV) and patriarchal attitudes have framed the treatment of Iraqi women for decades as well as informed legislative and constitutional reforms. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that such attitudes are continually playing out online. However, there is more to this growing phenomenon than misogynistic attitudes.

Much of the gendered online behaviour and violence is politically motivated, aimed at silencing dissenting voices and encouraging women to retreat from public life. This behaviour has also been seen at a more familial and community level, with what in many cases can be described as online intimate partner violence.

1 BBC (2020). Female activist killed in Basra as gunmen target protestors. BBC News online. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-53847648 [Accessed November 6 2021]

Men—husbands, brothers, and fathers—are mimicking the scare tactics seen at a macro level, emboldened, perhaps, by the culture of impunity that exists around political harassment online. As a result, microaggressions against women online are becoming dangerously commonplace.

The following report will examine the prevalence of online violence towards women in Iraq. It will begin by defining online violence. It then goes on to identify the predominant forms of gendered online violence in the Iraqi social media sphere and how this varies according to target groups. It will consider the main targets for such violence as well its perpetrators and argue that official responses to online violence are then devised accordingly. Using case studies and examples gathered through interviews with survivors of gendered online violence, it will consider the relationship between online and offline violence and its impact on women's political participation in Iraq as well as their long-term safety and security.

What is Gendered Online Violence?

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women defines gender-based violence (GBV) as 'violence which is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionality and, as such, is a violation of their human rights.' This definition includes physical, sexual and psycho-social forms of violence as well as threats of violence, control, and oppression.[2] The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) defines Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) as '[a]ny act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.' This includes the most prevalent form of violence, intimate partner violence, as well as sexual and physical violence.[3]

Online GBV occurs in comparable situations to that where violence occurs offline in the physical world. Violence and harassment of women online, mainly through social media channels and online communications platforms, includes everything from threats of physical and sexual violence, gendered hate speech, bullying, trolling, and stalking to sharing private information (doxing) or synthetically generated videos commonly known as 'deep fakes', as well as gendered disinformation,[4] each of which are often used as part of a concerted attack on women, known as a 'pile-on'. These attacks can come from unknown sources and networks, 'trolls' and 'electronic armies', or from people who are frequently personally known male partners, colleagues or family members. In some cases, online attacks are politically motivated, often driven by governments and those in power.

Although men experience online violence and harassment, when women are targeted, it becomes gendered, with misogynistic hate speech and intimidation predominant. A research study conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2021 found that the global incidence of online violence against women was 85%, but that the figure for the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region was much higher at 98%. The study also found that countries with entrenched patterns of gender inequality tended to have a higher incidence of online violence towards women. It demonstrated that in the majority of cases women knew the perpetrators of the online violence, which suggests that the lines between on and offline violence are no longer distinct.(5)

---

2 UN Women (2021) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Available at: https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm [Accessed October 25 2021].

3 United Nations (2021) Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. Available at: https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/48/104 [Accessed October 25 2021].

4 Economist Intelligence Unit (2021) Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women. Available at: https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/ [Accessed September 19 2021].

5 Economist Intelligence Unit (2021) Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women. Available at: https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/ [Accessed September 19 2021].

Online violence differs from offline in several ways. Online violence can happen at any time or any place as the need for physical contact is removed. Social media and online tools are available to anyone, which enables a greater number of bad or malicious actors. While many perpetrators of online violence are known to their targets, it is possible to remain unknown, which can see many abusers go unchecked and puts the onus on the target to remove herself from an abusive space. While it is essential to differentiate between on and offline violence, there is evidence suggesting that the two are interconnected. Online abuse and violence often mimic the gendered language and forms of offline violence, particularly in societies characterised by structural and cultural violence through the use of newer technologies. High-profile incidents such as the murder of the British MP Jo Cox in 2016 have been linked to subsequent online abuse and have resulted in devastating consequences[6]. Although it might be farfetched to suggest that online violence leads directly to offline violence without comprehensive research, social media and online abuse are playing an integral role in the blueprint for gendered violence.

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) acknowledges cyberbullying as a form of violence against women in elections, as well as its impact on women's participation at all levels in election periods, from voting to candidacy to activism.[7] The effect that this has on enabling free and fair democratic elections and the democratic process as a whole is devastating. The predominant outcome intended of online violence in all forms is a silencing of diverse and often oppositional voices. Not only are women's rights being threatened, the implications for democracy and national security are also alarming.

6 Forster, K. (2016). Jo Cox death: Call for violent threats towards female MPs to be taken more seriously. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/jo-cox-dead-violent-threats-online-abuse-natalie-mcgarry-trolls-a7086436.html [Accessed November 6 2021].

7 Huber, J. and Kammerud, L. (2016). Violence against women in elections: A framework for assessment, monitoring, and response. International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Available at: https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/vawie_framework.pdf [Accessed September 19, 2021].

Methodology

There are several reasons for this research paper's specific focus on online violence towards women in Iraq. Social media usage is becoming prolific in Iraq, in particular among young people, and it is replacing more traditional media platforms, such as forums, where information is gathered, shared and discussed. Younger generations in Iraq are becoming more vocal in their opposition to the political system and corrupt leadership. They are increasingly seen as a threat to the 'bad actors' who wish to maintain the status quo and who are also turning to online platforms to silence such voices.[8] In Iraq, as is the case in many fragile states, women are often leading the charge for democratic and socio-cultural change, in particular against the conservative and patriarchal values that are embraced by many of Iraq's state and sub-state actors. Iraqi women are therefore facing a dual-threat to their participation in the public sphere: misogyny and gendered hate speech combined with state-sponsored gendered disinformation. This paper will contribute to the wider literature about online violence against women by providing an empirical country study of the context in Iraq.

The research framework guiding the baseline study is centred on the following research question:

What is the relationship between online gendered violence and women's participation in public and political life?

This study set out to answer this question to develop a set of clear and actionable recommendations for international development and civil society organisations who are working in this space to take forward in their programming. It seeks to answer the following sub-questions:

- What are the different types of online gendered violence that exist in Iraq? Who are the main perpetrators?
- Who are the main targets of online gendered violence? How does gendered online violence differ according to targeted groups?
- What are the different types of actions taken by women who are victims of gendered online violence? How do different targets react?
- How does gendered online violence transition into the physical space? What are the outcomes?
- What are the responses to gendered online violence at an individual level, a community level and a national/political level?
- What recommendations can be made to relevant stakeholder groups?

8 Silva, John (2019) Spotting social media 'bad actors'. Newslit.org. Available at: https://newslit.org/educators/civic-blog/spotting-social-media-bad-actors/ [Accessed September 19 2021].

The study used the following combined methods for data collection:

Desk Research: A thorough analysis and interrogation of existing literature was conducted, including an assessment of available quantitative, qualitative, academic and policy-related research pertaining to the socio-political context of the country, gender-related initiatives, hate speech in Iraq, and relevant studies or needs assessments. The consultant also drew on the data and findings collected from two key global studies which have been published recently on the subject of online violence: 'The Chilling,' a research study published by UNESCO in April 2021, which examined the growing phenomena of online violence towards women journalists around the world; and a quantitative study published by the Economist Intelligence Unit, 'Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women', which measured the global dominance of online violence against women, with a more specific regional focus on the MENA region.

In-depth structured and semi-structured Interviews: The researcher mapped and identified key informants and stakeholders across the media, policy and civil society landscape in Iraq. Interviews with 19 key informants were conducted remotely (via Skype or WhatsApp). Interviewees were identified and selected based on their experience of online harassment and gendered hate speech. A series of qualitative projective techniques, known as vignettes, were used to better understand how women react to online harassment. The vignettes technique can be useful in exploring complex topics that participants might otherwise find difficult, even traumatic, to discuss. Commenting on a story is often less personal than talking about direct experience and is therefore viewed by participants as being less hostile. Vignettes give participants better control over the interview process by allowing them to decide when they introduce their own experiences to demonstrate their responses to the stories. A focus group discussion (FGD) between 15 women journalists and activists also took place in Baghdad in July 2021, where the issue of online violence against women in the public sphere was discussed. For security purposes, the names of all participants have not been used in this paper.

These methods enabled the project to develop analysis and recommendations to combat online gendered violence in Iraq.

It should be noted here that some of the participants who were identified and approached refused to be interviewed about online violence. This was out of a combination of fear for their safety by speaking out and a sense of shame. Some commented that the subject was a sensitive one with which they did not want to be associated. This was particularly heightened amongst the women who were candidates in the upcoming national elections.

All of the names used in the case studies have been changed to protect the identities of the women who have been subjected to online violence. In some of the case studies, specific details have been altered or removed to prevent identification.

Political Context

It is clear from the events of the last 18 years that multiple forms of violence have been the key determinants in the political and social development of post-2003 Iraq. The process of state-building, which has been marked by war and conflict, has allowed a corrupt and abusive political system, one defined by partisanship and intense polarisation, to become widespread in the country. It is important therefore to take into consideration the role that war and violence have played and continue to play in the formation of identity in Iraq. Iraqis have grown up in a context where, albeit to greater and lesser degrees, physical and symbolic violence have characterised both governance and dissent. Paramilitary-led violence in post-2003 Iraq has been exacerbated by the prevailing political and socio-cultural conditions.[9] The rise of these paramilitary groups continues to sustain both state-society tensions and inter-communal cleavages. Filling the governance void left by the state, as the state continually fails to deliver security, stability, and even basic services, officially sanctioned armed groups are aggressive in their targeting and condoning of violence against activists and those working for change.

A widespread protest movement in Iraq, active since 2011, has become more unified and significant since October 2019. While protesters and activists have been subjected to multiple forms of violence and intimidation, they have actively renounced the current corrupt political system, calling for early national elections to be held in Iraq, now due to take place on October 10th, 2021. In-fighting between political parties and blocs in the run-up to the election, while commonplace in previous election periods, has been even more ferocious, with some parties calling for a boycott of the elections and withdrawing their candidates. Both traditional and social media platforms have become battlegrounds where hate speech and disinformation are rife as a means of undermining and discrediting political opponents. Disinformation against activists and the protest movement have revolved mainly around the spreading of false narratives alleging their involvement and funding from US and Gulf countries as well as being against Islamic values.

In previous election periods, gendered hate speech and misogynistic disinformation have resulted in a number of female candidates withdrawing from their campaigns. Accusations around sexual behaviour and even deviancy were common and used as a means of dishonouring women in a society dominated by conservative and religious values.[10] First reported in the 2014 elections, this situation has become more dangerous as armed groups and paramilitary forces continue to act with impunity. Fear amongst women in the public sphere is more heightened as online abuse and violence have become normalised by the political class and wider sub-state system.

---

9 Renad Mansour, 'Networks of Power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the state of Iraq', Chatham House, 25 February 2021. Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/2021-02-25-networks-of-power-mansour.pdf (Accessed October 25 2021).

10 Tajali, M. and Farhan, S. (2018). Women's candidacy and violence against women in the politics of Iraq. Jadaliyya. Available at: https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/37780 [Accessed September 19 2021].

Conditions for Women and Girls in Iraq

Decades of war and conflict, ruthless dictatorships, brutal sanctions, and failed state-building attempts have all had an impact on the environment in which women and girls in Iraq live and work. Violence and GBV are accelerated in times of conflict and the safety of women and girls became less paramount with the decimation of armies and industries through long-term wars, from the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.[11] Over time, women became less present in the workforce as employment opportunities for them decreased because of war and its subsequent economic impact. Men were given priority over women through better access to education as well as a greater presence in the Iraqi public sphere, leaving women obligated to withdraw into more traditional roles of mothers, homebuilders and nation bearers.[12]

After the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent state-building experiment which ensued, state policies and legislation, drawn up mainly by men (Iraqis and others), neglected to consider the fundamental role that women could play in the development of a peaceful and prosperous Iraq. The Iraqi Women's Movement was active at the time the constitution was drafted and lobbied the drafting committee to include a guarantee of women's rights in the constitution; their efforts were largely ignored.[13] Legislation such as the Iraqi Penal Code, which decriminalises libel and defamation, and the Personal Status Law sees gender equality continually challenged, with allowances for physical violence in marriage in the former and inadequate protections for women in marriage, divorce or inheritance in the latter. Inherent incongruities and ambiguities in the legal framework combine with a prevailing milieu of lawlessness to see women inadequately protected and continually undermined.

Violence against women (VAW) remains a clear issue in Iraqi society and culture, an issue that has been further exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic.[14] The Iraqi government acceded to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (CEDAW) in 1986 but not all gender justice aspects have been recognised and discrimination remain. While there is a domestic violence law that protects women and girls in the Kurdish Region of Iraq, there is no national law and the Penal Code remains the only source of legislation to govern VAW. [15]

---

11 Ali, Zahra. 2018. Women and Gender in Iraq: Between Nation-Building and Fragmentation Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

12 Enloe, Cynthia. 2010. Nomo's War, Emma's War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War. University of California Press: California.

13 OCHA Services (2005) Iraqi women hold third sit-in demonstration to demand rights in new Constitution. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraqi-women-hold-third-sit-demonstration-demand-rights-new-constitution [Accessed October 27 2021].

14 OCHA Services (2020) Covid-19 exacerbating gender-based violence in Iraq. OCHA. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/covid-19-exacerbating-gender-based-violence-iraq-enarku [Accessed September 19 2021].

15 UNDP (2018) Iraq: Gender Justice and the Law. Available at: https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Iraq%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English_0.pdf [Accessed October 27 2021].

Conservative religious values continue to be prevalent in Iraq. Tribal and religious codes are dominant in many provinces and often inform the status and treatment of women.[16] Women are perceived through honour-based codes, which are in turn underpinned by patriarchal attitudes and social norms.[17] This leaves Iraqi women struggling to navigate themselves in a world where they are constantly deemed to be immoral and un-Islamic.

Women in the public sphere, from television reporters and presenters to members of parliament and government representatives, are endlessly having to consider how their private and personal lives might be conceived by the wider public, as they are treated as commodities or even public property. More recently, women who have been active in the human rights and protest movements have reported being subjected to harassment and abuse with insinuations of involvement with male colleagues and slurs on their and their family's 'honour'. There is no legislation to regulate this abuse—either on or offline. A recent draft of the cybercrimes law drew considerable criticism from media freedom activists and human rights organisations due to its threats to freedom of expression.[18]

---

16 UNDP (2018). Iraq: Gender Justice and the Law. United Nations Development Programme. Available at: https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Iraq%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English_0.pdf [Accessed November 8 2021].

17 CEDAW (2019). Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination against Women and Girls in Iraq. CEDAW multiple authors. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/IRQ/INT_CEDAW_CSS_IRQ_40949_E.docx [Accessed November 8 2021].

18 Human Rights Watch (2020) Iraq: Scrap Bill to Restrict Free Speech. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/25/iraq-scrap-bill-restrict-free-speech [Accessed October 27 2021].

Online Violence against Women in Iraq

There are two clear frameworks with which to assess the incidence and impact of online violence towards women in Iraq. The first is one, which views VAW, in all of its forms, as underpinned by misogynistic attitudes and discriminatory gender norms. In Iraq, empirical research has shown that both women and men hold different types of aggressive and hostile views of women which impacts the possibilities for gender equality.[19] There is also evidence to suggest that in such patriarchal societies, citizens are more likely to eschew tolerance and embrace more violent and often extremist outlooks.[20]

The second framework is that which encompasses gendered disinformation and state-sponsored attacks on freedom of expression and women's political participation. This second framework recognises that disinformation is rife in the Iraqi media landscape and used as a tactic against both men and women. However, while similar disinformation narratives are used, they become highly gendered when directed at women. The disinformation framework allows for an analysis that acknowledges that online violence in some cases can be used as a political tool by bad actors within the state and its apparatus. The two frameworks are not mutually exclusive. Both are ultimately aimed at exposing the silencing and exclusion of women's voices from the public sphere, threatening the already fragile chances for democracy and peace.

The Economist Intelligence Unit's report on global online violence identified nine prevalent intimidation strategies used to threaten women.[21] In descending order of incidence, these are: misinformation and defamation; cyber harassment; hate speech; impersonation; hacking and stalking; astroturfing[22]; video- and image-based abuse; doxing;[23] and violent threats. The researcher found that these nine strategies were clearly noticeable in Iraq. Doxing was the only strategy that was less likely to be observed in this research study, although an in-depth content analysis or quantitative exercise might reveal otherwise. Other characteristics emerged which are particular to the context of the Iraqi socio-cultural and political landscape. In the case of Iraq, it is evident that a mixture of threat tactics are being used by multiple actors in order to undermine the presence and condition of women in society, a point which will be examined further in this paper.

---

19 Al-Kaisy, Aida (2020). A gender analysis of the media landscape in Iraq. Internews. Available at: https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/2020-04/Internews_gender-analysis_media_landscape_iraq_2020-04.pdf [Accessed September 19 2021].

20 UNDP and UN Women. 2020. eds. Conflicting Identities: The Nexus between Masculinities, Femininities and Violent Extremism in Asia. United Nations.

21 Economist Intelligence Unit (2021) Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women. Available at: https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/ [Accessed September 19 2021].

22 Defined as a 'coordinated effort to concurrently share damaging content across platforms' in the EIU report. Ibid.

23 Defined as 'posting personal real world information such as addresses to perpetuate violence' in the EIU report. Ibid.

It is also evident from this research that online violence in its many forms is happening at both the personal and the public levels. In many cases, online threats are not only translating into offline dangers, but they are clearly seeing women at all levels retreating from society.

Who are the main targets and perpetrators of online violence against women?

In a society such as Iraq, where conservative and patriarchal norms are entrenched and dominate interpersonal and professional relations, women continue to face opposition and challenges to their presence outside of the household. Furthermore, there are few modes of redress available to them legally or via the state and its related institutions. This is not cultural essentialism but the product of deep-rooted systems of power, which are maintained to preserve the positions of patriarchal elites. The Iraqi legal system and penal code in particular allows for physical violence against a spouse and children and perpetuates stereotypical roles of men and women in society.[24] The struggle against VAW rests predominantly in the hands of civil society with few official institutions tasked with dealing with social issues.[25] Although a bill to combat domestic violence has been submitted to parliament on a number of occasions, it has not yet been passed, despite some support from particular parliamentary factions in government.[26] In a context where GBV is in many ways permitted by the state and where notions of honour inform social relations and roles and where digital security is low priority, it is unsurprising then that the online safety and security of women is compromised on an everyday basis, and in both the private and public spheres. While a cross-section of women and girls are targeted by online violence, it is those women who are seen to be subverting traditional gender roles in Iraqi society, observed through their online activity and presence on social media, that are the main targets.

Intimate partners

Young women who interact with men online are prime targets for online abuse, in particular cyber harassment, video and image abuse, and hacking. These women are targeted by male family members, friends or partners and as such this type of violence can be considered to be a form of intimate partner violence. Women who share private images with a man who they consider to be trusted are placed at risk through the subsequent non-consensual sharing of those images. Similarly, women who are attempting to carve out independence, or a career, or those at university are subject to online abuse. Again, the perpetrators are male and most often male relatives or friends.

---

24 Alkhudary, Taif (2020) Iraqi women are engaged in a struggle for their rights. London School of Economics. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/06/15/iraqi-women-are-engaged-in-a-struggle-for-their-rights/ [Accessed September 19 2020].

25 Foltyn, Simone (2021) Iraqi women struggle to escape abuse as domestic violence rises. Al Jazeera. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/2/12/iraqi-women-struggle-to-escape-abuse-as-domestic-violence-rises [Accessed September 19 2020].

26 OHCHR (2020) Safety at home, an illusion for far too many women in Iraq. OHCHR. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DomesticViolenceIraq.aspx [Accessed October 25 2021].

Interviewees who had experienced online abuse as well as CSO and community actors all noted that, in cases where the male perpetrator was known to the victim, the intention was to intimidate and exert control. The method, where the threat of sharing images mainly to blackmail to extort money or sexual favours, is known as 'sextortion' and is a common phenomenon in Iraq. It has also been described as 'revenge porn' by some with a predominance of ex-partners involved in this type of abuse.[27] Threats of sharing the images with male family members are common.

Social media influencers

The brutal killing of beauty blogger and Instagram celebrity Tara Fares in September 2018 brought the safety and security of women social media influencers to the attention of both the Iraqi and international communities. Fares was vocal about the domestic violence she had suffered at the hands of her husband who was known to have ties to armed groups and tribes in Iraq. When they separated, he published intimate photos of her online as means of shaming her but defiantly she continued to speak out against traditional portrays of women and men in Iraq, and violated all social norms with her appearance in the process. Fares suffered endless online abuse, from hate speech to gendered disinformation to threats, before her fatal shooting by an unknown gunman who has yet to be caught.[28] Although Fares had a very high profile, it is not uncommon for women who are active on social media and who call out social norms, corruption or exploitation to experience online abuse. The main types of abuse in this case tend to be cyber-harassment, hate speech or violent threats. In most cases, sexual harassment and predatory behaviour online are used and references to a woman and her family's honour become weaponised.

Once I posted a video from Palestine that was human-rights related and one of my relatives commented that I needed to study religion, that my father hadn't brought me up properly and that I should wear a hijab.

References to physical appearance are also common and many women noted that men would often initially comment and engage in what might appear to be innocent conversation which would then escalate into sexual syntax. Images are often doctored, with one interviewee telling of how a post with a picture of her wearing 3 rings on her hand was shared across social media with a circle around her hand highlighting what was seen as a controversial choice. The likes start increasing up to 200 if my picture is on the post. This is then followed by comments on the way I look. There is an unnatural thirst for pictures of women. They don't even read what is written, they just look at the picture and comment.

---

27 Bajec, Alessandra (2019) Scores of Iraqi women victim to online sexual blackmail. The New Arab. Available at: https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/iraqi-women-victim-online-sexual-blackmail [Accessed September 19 2020].

28 Callaghan, Louise and al- Salhy, Suadad (2019). The death of Tara Fares: the sinister truth about the Iraqi influencer's murder. The Times. Available at: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tara-fares-iraq-instagram-shot-baghdad-0v2c3r37p [Accessed October 25 2021].

Journalists

The growth of online abuse and violence towards women journalists is recognised as a global issue. A study entitled "The Chilling", published by UNESCO and the International Centre for Journalists' (ICFJ), finds that there has not only been an increase in online violence but that these campaigns are coordinated attacks whose intention is to scare journalists and dissuade them from investigating topics which might challenge power and corruption.[29] In Iraq, women journalists are targeted for their reporting as well as their gender. Such disinformation, threats, and hate speech are all misogynistic in nature although their ultimate purpose is politically-motivated intimidation and the threat of harm. Triggers in reporting include references to Iran or the paramilitary groups which are closely associated with Iraq as well as reporting on topics which are construed to be transgressing social norms around such issues as sexuality. The perpetrators are often state or state-sponsored actors, in particular those associated with armed paramilitary groups. Intersectional abuse is also common against women journalists and misogynistic language is intertwined with homophobic abuse and hate speech designed to undermine and discredit. It is likely that women journalists, activists, and political figures are being chosen because of their gender as women are more likely to seek change, as recognised by the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals SDGs.[30]

Activists

In the October 2019 protest movement that escalated across Iraq, women played an active role in calling power to account and for an end to corruption as well as demanding better political and human rights. Many broke major prohibitions in Iraqi society such as remaining overnight in the protest squares alongside male peers, or posting pictures on social media of life and violence from the protest arena. In some cases, women were seen to be leading protests calling for gender equality and women's rights, with videos circulated of women activists from Basra and Baghdad in particular. Unfortunately, this group has been a primary target of online abuse of the most threatening and violent kind.

During the period of the October protests, we all took part and people would find you online, curse you and threaten you.

Women activists are most likely to receive violent threats from fake accounts and unknown sources demanding they remove themselves from both the public and online spheres. Disinformation against the protest movement has been rife in Iraq, focusing on anti-Islamic and pro-Western narratives as a means of discredit and intimidation, in blatant astroturfing attacks. In the case of women protestors, false accounts of women

29 Posetti, J., Shabbir, N. and Maynard, D et al (2021). The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists. UNESCO. Available at: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/the-chilling.pdf [Accessed September 19 2020].

30 UN Women (2021) Facts and figures. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures [Accessed September 19 2021].

activists having extra-marital relationships, or doctored images of them as sex workers or performing sexual acts are all common (examples demonstrated in the case studies further in this study).

Political figures and electoral candidates

With elections planned for October 2021, there is a concern that women candidates will face online abuse and attacks, as was seen in the 2014 and 2018 elections in Iraq. The case of Intithar Al Shimiri, outlined in more detail later in this report, is one of many that went unprosecuted. Deep fake videos of women candidates allegedly performing sexual acts are used a means of defamation and harassment in some cases. In others, tactics include hacking and accessing private pictures which are then shared via social media. Dr Heshu Rebwar Ali, a candidate for the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) in 2018, was subject to harassment when a video of her in a short dress at a private event circulated ahead of the election.[31] Cyber harassment is also rife and used as a means of intimidation in order to dissuade women from standing or ultimately withdrawing their candidacy if they do. Even those who remain undeterred are often asked to step down by their parties who are concerned about reputational damage. In this case, the main perpetrators are political actors, political parties and their allies although the blurred lines between the parties and armed groups mean that these perpetrators remain in the shadows.

The threats are coming from the paramilitary groups, the political class and those in power. This is linked to them not wanting women to get power. They want to keep them working at a civil society level and nothing more.

Women candidates are likely to push for women's rights and gender equality, which are not at the forefront of the agendas of conservative political parties. With a fixed quota for representation of women in the General National Council of 25% (30% in the Kurdish parliament), parties are keen to keep close tabs on the women that are elected as a result of quotas and ensure that they will serve to propagate their often religious and likely corrupt priorities.(32)

Types of Online Violence

The following section will outline specific forms of online violence in Iraq, using the types identified in the Economist Intelligence Unit report, with examples collected from interviews to illustrate their intrinsic nature.

Misinformation and Disinformation

This form of online violence towards women is rife in Iraq and evolving into a number of dangerous forms. Di Meco defines gendered disinformation as 'the spread of deceptive

31 BBC News (2018) Iraqi women election candidates targeted for abuse gain UN support. BBC. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-43894391 [Accessed September 19 2021].

32 Gender Concerns (2021) Country in Focus: Iraq. Available at: http://www.genderconcerns.org/countries-in-focus/iraq/ [Accessed October 25 2021].

or inaccurate information and images against women political leaders, journalists and female public figures, following storylines that often draw on misogyny, as well as gender stereotypes around the role of women.'[33]

Smear campaigns are a common tool used to spread false information with the deliberate intention of insulting and humiliating a woman's character based on her gender. In Iraq, as with many conservative and religious societies, smear campaigns which discredit women based on their honour. Suggestions of sexual relations are common and are used to undermine a woman's character as well as her engagement in public and political life. Women interviewed noted that gendered disinformation campaigns and tactics would follow their involvement in civil or political protests, publication of a political piece or announcement of candidacy for election. In all cases, suggestions that these women are trying to subvert traditional and Islamic values are implicit.

The use of disinformation also extends further to include political smears on the basis of what might be considered unsavoury affiliations. For example, suggesting a woman is Baathist or that she has close connections with Western governments and embassies is an oft-used device. This is in line with disinformation that is seen across the board in Iraq, aimed at activists and protestors in the main, women and men, where accusations range from receiving financial support from the United States government to contradicting Islamic values. However, a gendered element is added when women are targeted. The allegation that other women will follow suit should this behaviour be allowed to continue underpins these campaigns. This type of online violence and gendered disinformation, which targets high-profile women in the public and political spheres, employs sensational images and narratives in order to further the spread of its content. This works not only amongst social media users but also relies on the algorithms of social media platforms which rank content according to higher engagement, which ultimately then leads to more comments and shares.[34] This type of abuse therefore is likely to proliferate widely.

Case study: (Intithar Al Shimiri), former MP and academic, Baghdad

In this case study, the real name has been used due to the high-profile nature of this case in Iraq and the ubiquity of available information about it in the media.

I have a liberal point of view and wanted to build a civil country. I decided after 2003 to get involved in politics and stood with a political party. I began to make a name as being a strong independent woman who speaks out against corruption. I was eventually approached by the Dawa party to stand with them and, due to my academic background,

33 Di Meco, Lucina (2020) Online Threats to Women's Political Participation and The Need for a Multi-Stakeholder, Cohesive Approach to Address Them. UN Women. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/di%20meco_online%20threats_ep8_egmcsw65.pdf?la=en&vs=1511 [Accessed September 19 2021].

34 Meserole, Chris (2018) How misinformation spreads on social media – and what to do about it. Brookings Institute. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/09/how-misinformation-spreads-on-social-media-and-what-to-do-about-it/ [Accessed September 19 2021].

I was chosen as a candidate for the Minister of Higher Education. At one point during the campaign, I did an interview on Al Sharqiya Channel in Amman with someone else from the Sadrist Movement who asked me how I had got involved with the Dawa Party. I ended up talking maybe too much about not having connections with Iran. That was when it started. I returned to Baghdad and received a call on the mobile from a Canadian number via WhatsApp. The man's voice told me to drop out of the election. I asked him who he was and he said if you don't drop out, we will come to your house and kill you and your husband. I laughed and said, 'How do you know I will win' and he said, 'You will win'. I hung up and they called again repeating the same threat. I called the party and told them what had happened and they told me not to worry as I was protected by the mukhabarat (secret service). I then received another call from a man with a strong Iraqi accent saying I would lose my life if I carried on in the election. When I pushed back against him, he told me I would pay the price. A call the following day, this time from an Iraqi number, demanding a payment of 1 million dinar which I refused. Another call came this time demanding 750k dinar. Then the next day I got a call from my friend telling me that there was a video of me on Facebook that was compromising. It was a fake video posted by an account under the name Ahmed al Askari. When we looked into it, we discovered that the account was created in Dubai. I immediately pulled out of the elections at the request of my party. My lawyer eventually found the person who had set up the account. He was based in Ras Al Khaimah (United Arab Emirates) and admitted that he had been paid $5000 by an Iraqi political party to post the video. The video was a deep fake, suggesting that I had relations with one of my students, a Saudi man. They had put my face on the video of another person.

Cyber harassment

Harassment online takes the form of repeated messages, posts or images, which are used to intimidate women who are active in the public sphere for both political and personal purposes. In Iraq, there appears to be a high frequency of male partners using online platforms as a means of intimidation, degradation and control. This can begin with partners monitoring social media behaviour and unfolding to include abuse via social media and the threat and eventual sharing of what might be considered intimate images and video footage. Threats of physical abuse offline are common in this form of harassment. Even more prevalent is the occurrence of extortion and blackmail. Requests for large sums of money to preserve a woman's 'honour' are commonplace, as are demands for sexual favours. The term 'intimate partner violence' is used in this context and refers to a husband or male friend who is abusive online, using strategies associated with emotional bullying offline.[35] In the case of a male friend, a request for sexual favours will often accompany the threat of sharing what might be deemed to be compromising images.

35 WHO (2021) Understanding and addressing violence against women. World Health Organisation. Available at: https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/77432/WHO_RHR_12.36_eng.pdf [Accessed September 19 2021].

This practice has become so common in Iraq that a recent drama series was aired on Iraqi television called 'Virus' which followed a number of different forms of cyber harassment and examined their manifestations and implications offline. The series looked at the impact on Iraqi society and family relations, while also challenging the role of patriarchal and religious values in how Iraqi society deals with such cases. Anecdotally, it has been noted that public reaction to the series was mixed although most of the interviewees recognised that the series reflected a very important issue for the country.

Case study: Fatin, housewife

I started receiving threats from one of my husband's closest friends via social media platforms. He began by saying he would share personal photographs and details online unless I became close to him. He then came around to the house one day and tried to touch me in front of my husband. I was shocked when my husband started taking photos of what was going on. My husband then threatened to post the images online, saying he was going to divorce me. He threw me out of the house, and I had to take my children and go stay with my sister. It did go to court as he was asking for money from my family. In the end, he used the excuse of being unstable of mind and was not prosecuted.

Case study: Dina, civil servant, Anbar

It was not long after I got married when pictures of me started appearing on various Facebook accounts of people who I vaguely knew. It didn't take long to realise that it was my new husband and that he was trying to blackmail my parents for money. I left him and he then started making claims on Facebook that I was trying to steal money from him. He then approached my sister on Facebook and threatened to publish more images of me if she did not start a relationship with him. He won't accept a divorce and my parents are putting pressure on me to go back to him because of the children. I work in the public sector and divorce is not acceptable. I went to the community police and they tried to get us to reconcile. I went to court and explained everything to the judge only to be told by him that, although he understood my plight, there was no law to support me. I tried the official way and it didn't work. I even tried via friends to see if they could change his mind and that didn't work.

Hate speech

According to UNESCO, '[h]ate speech online is situated at the intersection of multiple tensions: it is the expression of conflicts between different groups within and across societies; it is a vivid example of how technologies with a transformative potential such as the internet bring with them both opportunities and challenges; and it implies complex balancing between fundamental rights and principles, including freedom of expression and the defence of human dignity.'[36]

36 Gagliardone, I., Danit, G. and Alves, T. (2015). Countering online hate speech. UNESCO. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000233231 [Accessed September 19 2021].

The targets of online hate speech are more likely to be women and minority groups. It is used as a means of normalising hate towards a particular group or community.

The rise of hate speech online has been recognised in a number of reports and studies on Iraq. Over 50% of the Iraqi population are active on social media, which has become an integral part of the Iraqi public sphere and a key forum for debate and the exchange of views.(37) The relative privacy of the Internet and anonymity that virtual interactions can offer has seen a growth in online dialogue from vulnerable groups. However, the response to this has been the proliferation of hate speech, harassment, and threats in the digital space in order to silence those voices which are seen to challenge entrenched and accepted socio-political narratives. Much of this online abuse has been targeted at activists in the protest movement. Protestors have been accused of political affiliations with Western and American interests with no loyalty to Iraq. Activists are threatened via their social media accounts and YouTube where false information and accusations are deliberately propagated in order to discredit their intentions. Gender often plays a role as women activists are targeted. According to a report by the Tahrir Institute for Middle East policy,

Militia affiliates turned the popular trending hashtag #بناتك_يا_وطن ("the homeland's daughters")—launched in solidarity with the February 13 women's marches—into #عاهراتك_يا_وطن ("the homeland's whores"). Militias also fabricated baseless accusations online, alleging promiscuity at protest sit-ins and tents. Sexual defamation has dangerous consequences, especially for women and girls who are at risk of "honour killings."(38)

The same report also found that online attacks on those who are active in the Iraqi public sphere can result in physical violence. In August 2020, an online smear campaign against the television channel Dijla ended in the burning down of their offices after calls to attack the station were published online.(39) There have been similar instances where protestors have been kidnapped or abused following published abuse and calls for violence.(40)

---

37 France 24 (2021). Misinformation thrives in Iraq's virtual battlegrounds. Available at: https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210528-misinformation-thrives-in-iraq-s-virtual-battlegrounds [Accessed October 26 2021].

38 Shea, J. and Al-Hassani, R. (2021) Hate speech, social media and political violence in Iraq: virtual civil society and upheaval. Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. Available at: https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/hate-speech-social-media-and-political-violence-in-iraq-virtual-civil-society-and-upheaval/ [Accessed September 19 2021].

39 Dijla TV is Amman-based, owned by Jamal al-Karbouli, an Iraqi politician who is head of the National Movement for Development and Reform party (Alhal). It is one of the more popular news channels in Iraq and has experienced a number of attacks on its offices and threats towards its journalists as well as revoking of its license to broadcast by the CMC in September 2020 for broadcasting a concert during Ashura and therefore allegedly offending Iraqi Shias.

40 OHCHR (2021) Human Rights Violations and Abuses in the Context of Demonstrations in Iraq October 2019 to April 2020. UNAMI. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/Demonstrations-Iraq-UNAMI-OHCHR-report.pdf [Accessed October 26 2021].

PeaceTech Lab in Iraq[41] recently produced a ''Lexicon of Hate Speech Terms' from Iraqi social media.[42] Through media monitoring, the glossary referenced a number of terms which can be classified as hate speech, amongst them Eahira (Whore) which is used to undermine women by questioning their and their family's honour and 'Emo' as a homophobic term to belittle those who are considered to be LGBT+. It is also a common tactic to associate or accuse women of being sympathetic to and representative of LGBT+ communities in Iraq in order to undermine them and position them as subverting traditional and Islamic values and, by extension, Iraqi society. Another common form of online hate speech is sectarian in nature, aimed particularly towards those who might be considered to be Sunni. Again, the use of the term Baathist as an insult is a common form of hate speech as it suggests an unsavoury past affiliation with the former regime.

There are no laws that adequately address the prevalence of hate speech in Iraq. A report by Human Rights Watch in 2020 called on the Iraqi government to reform its legal system in relation to freedom of expression, claiming that 'vaguely worded laws...allow prosecutors to bring criminal charges for opinions they object to' rather than minimising the use of hate speech.[43] The report claims that the government's reliance on archaic laws which have remained in place since the Baathist regime continue to be used to silence opposition.

Case Study: Halima, activist, Basra

I was active in the Tishreen protests in 2019 and had posted some pictures of myself on social media. The UN got in touch with me and asked if they could use one of my pictures in a report that they were writing on the protest. I gave them my permission and it was published. The next day, the picture began circulating on social media. Some people commented positively but the majority of the comments were negative. They said I was a Baathist and that my father was a Baathist. They suggested I had 'taken my clothes off' for the UN. Then rumours began to circulate that I had connections and was working with the United States and British embassies. I have no links to either of these embassies and was working for a civil society organisation at the time. It carried on. They posted a photograph of me wearing civilian clothes and without a hijab and said that I want to be an American. Sometimes the videos of my work from television also go on social media. They also posted an old video of me talking about Iranian intervention in Iraq. I then got so many messages, threats, for example 'we will step on your head with our shoes', attacking my honour. The messages were mostly on Facebook but also via Facebook

41 PeaceTech Lab is an initiative of the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) which according to their website is 'working at the intersection of technology, media, and data to devise effective means of reducing violent conflict around the globe.' More information is available at: https://www.usip.org/programs/peacetech-initiative [Accessed October 26 2021].

42 Peace Tech Lab (2021) Social media and conflict in Iraq. Available at: https://www.peacetechlab.org/iraq-lexicon [Accessed September 19 2021].

43 HRW (2020). We might call you in at any time: free speech under threat in Iraq. Human Rights Watch. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/06/15/we-might-call-you-any-time/free-speech-under-threat-iraq [Accessed November 8 2021].

Messenger and also on the telephone. After the last video they came and slashed my car tyres outside my house. This was after a message had arrived with a picture of Sadr but they could have just been doing this to scare me.

Impersonation

Inventing false online profiles in a woman's name with the intent of causing harm and distress is another form of online violence, which is commonly used and is seen in Iraq. While impersonation can be used for a number of reasons, from identity theft for financial gain to discrediting public personalities, in Iraq it appears to be used mainly for political motives and to put the person in question, and their inner circle, at risk.

Case study: Maysoon, journalist, Mosul

It was in 2014 when we were under Daish when I posted a comment regarding the Sunni leadership and their treatment of IDPs. I received a number of comments including one asking why I had not targeted the Shia leadership in my post. I then noticed that a number of personal photographs of me began to appear across the Internet. Further investigation led me to find that the same person who had commented had created two Facebook accounts in my name. On one of the accounts, he started attacking the Hashd Al Shaabi in my name. He had sent friend requests to all my contact groups and, without realising, my friends were liking political posts that they thought were mine. I contacted Facebook to take the account down but they did not reply. I was so scared. I stopped posting for a while and then changed my name on Facebook. I kept trying to close the page and then suddenly someone showed me a way to close the page after about 9 months.

Hacking and stalking

While the incidence of online stalking appears to be low in Iraq, possibly due to the lack of knowledge around geo- and location tracking, the frequency of digital surveillance, of activists and journalists in particular, is unrecorded and therefore unknown. There is some evidence to suggest that the government and related armed groups deploy cybersecurity technology to track protests and activists, although none of the women interviewed for this report recounted such behaviour.[44]

Hacking into electronic accounts is more widespread and this is reflected in the draft of an anti-cybercrimes law. It was eventually rejected by parliament and criticised by freedom of expression and civil society organisations, as it included imprisonment terms of up to 3 years plus a large fine for anyone sentenced for hacking.[45] Again, the hacking

44 Freedom House (2021) Freedom on the Net 2021: Iraq. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/country/iraq/freedom-net/2021 [Accessed October 26 2021].

45 Mena Rights (2021) Iraq's new draft Law on Combating Cybercrimes still contains problematic provisions restricting fundamental freedoms. Available at: https://menarights.org/en/articles/iraqs-new-draft-law-combating-cybercrimes-still-contains-problematic-provisions [Accessed October 26 2021].

of accounts of protestors has been widely reported, as is evinced by case studies below. Hacking into the accounts of women in Iraq is common, in particular to steal personal or intimate images for the purpose of blackmail and extortion. Facebook and Instagram are the most common applications which are hacked with some suggesting the reason being that they can often be used as a way to develop romantic relationships.

Community Police Case Studies

Under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior (MOI), community law enforcement officers and police forces are given some jurisdiction to deal with crimes at a local level. Women police officers work with local victims of online abuse, hacking, and blackmail to help find the perpetrators of the online violence and bring them to justice. They do face-to-face work in schools and universities, raise their profile amongst women and girls and provide both legal and moral support where necessary. A report by the London School of Economics (LSE) examining the changing role of community enforcement since ISIS found that there was increased acceptance that the needs of Iraqi women should be better addressed by a more gender representative community police force.[46]

1. We worked on a case with a girl who had just started university when she received messages from a man saying he had taken all of her photos from her social media accounts. He wanted sexual favours in return for not sharing the images. He saw how smart she was and got jealous we think. Her mother knew what was going on but blamed her and threatened to tell her father until we managed to convince the mother not to do so. The girl was nearly going to leave university but luckily a social worker got involved and they kept her place at university for her. She changed her numbers and changed everything about the way she used social media.

2. Not long ago, there was a woman who posted on social media that she was a widow and that her account had been hacked. All of her photos were stolen and they told her they were going to send her photos to family unless she cooperated. She offered money which they then tried to negotiate for a higher amount. Her account wasn't protected properly and this is an issue.

Astroturfing

The term astroturfing is used to describe organised campaigns online where specific messages are disseminated in support of a particular agenda. Politically motivated astroturfing is a growing issue, as seen for example in the 2016 US presidential election campaign, the Brexit referendum in the UK, and the Russian-Ukraine conflict where the use of social bots to flood social media with disinformation and propaganda is employed.[47]

---

46 Watkins, J., Bardan, F. and Al-Jarba, A. (2021) Local policing in Iraqi post-ISIL. LSE Middle East Centre. Available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/111567/2/LocalPolicinginIraqPostISIL.pdf [Accessed September 19 2020].

47 Lorenc, Katarzyna (2021) Political online astroturfing in the 2020 United States presidential election campaign. European Consortium for Political Research. Available at: https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/57652 [Accessed October 27 2021].

In Iraq, the terms 'electronic armies' or 'electronic flies' have been employed to describe the troll farms and bots that have been created by political and armed forces to spread disinformation against those who are seen to be acting against the status quo.[48] Astroturfing against women journalists and activists is common and incorporates other forms of online violence such as gendered disinformation, video and image abuse as well as gendered hate speech.

Case study: Mona, activist

It began after 2018 when I took part in a protest in Basra. I started getting threats via social media and fake accounts flooded social media with a photograph of me at the US consul from 2018. The threats came that I should 'watch myself as we know where you live'. This carried on into 2019 as I was involved in the protests then. Fake accounts on Facebook and Instagram started posting false information about me. They photoshopped a video and put my face on that of a sex worker saying that I was trying to ruin Basra and its women. They posted things attacking both my and my family's honour. In 2019 I was reporting live from the protests and they hacked my Instagram account and started posting unsavoury sexual messages. I closed the account and opened another one but they did it again. I then started getting death threats in the square. An unknown man came up to me in my tent and said to me 'If you aren't scared for yourself then you should worry about your family.' In January 2020, I started getting phone calls with similar threats. In August 2020, there was an assassination attempt on my life. After I was released, some of the pages linked to the armed groups attacked my honour again. They said that I was lying and that it had not been an assassination attempt but that in fact my father had shot me in front of my house because I was having an illicit relationship with a man. I have now left Basra for fear of my life.

Video- and image-based abuse

As noted in the previous examples of online abuse outlined in this report, images and videos are frequently shared online for pernicious reasons and malicious intent. In the main, images are personal, often intimate, and at times sexual. In many cases, the images have been doctored or deep fake videos have been created to implicate a woman in a sexual act. Blackmail is often involved and sexual relations as well as money are often requested in order to prevent the images from being shared online and thus the woman's honour being besmirched.

48 Freedom House (2021) Freedom on the Net 2021: Iraq. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/country/iraq/freedom-net/2021 [Accessed October 26 2021].

Case study: Suhair

I became close to a family friend who used to take me to university and who said that he wanted me as his wife. As we got closer, I sent him photographs of me via WhatsApp. One day I was at an engagement party and overheard someone say that he was engaged to be married to someone else. When I asked him what was happening, he told me that his mother did not want him to marry me. He then began the blackmail and when I ignored his requests, the pictures that I had shared with him began to be published.

Case study: Um Yasmin

A man started a relationship with my daughter asking for her hand in marriage. We eventually discovered that he was already married. He had been using a separate telephone to communicate with my daughter and his wife found the phone and some photos that had been shared between them. She began by sending the photographs to my son who wanted to kill his sister. Then she began posting on Facebook and Telegram. She would open an account, post the photos, then close the account and open a new one, posting the images again. It went on for a year. My daughter wanted to commit suicide. I did go to the community police and put an order against her and took her to court but I had to stop fighting because of the financial cost. I am a seamstress and had to sell my machine to get the money to pay for the court. My emotional state was so awful. I couldn't even sleep at night.

Violent Threats

Although violent threats online are the less prevalent form of online violence against women globally, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's study, they are omnipresent in Iraq.

Case study: Shireen

I use Facebook as a platform and have a large number of followers for my live broadcasts and opinion pieces. About two years ago, I started working, writing and posting about politics, the government, and the militias calling them all to account as well as on topics such as sexuality, non-traditional relationships, and human trafficking of women. Again in 2019, I posted something about the government and the prime minister and the growing power of the militias. Heads of the paramilitary groups (names redacted for security reasons) both posted a video mocking me. I began to get threats via Sabreen news.[49] When I met the Canadian ambassador, pictures were posted even though we were talking about press freedom. They called me bint al safarat, daughter of the embassies, which is an insult. They said my mother was Baathist and that I took money from the embassies. I was

49 Sabreen News is a Telegram account which is associated with the paramilitary group Asaib Ahl Al-Haq. According to a recent report published by the Washington Institute, one of its key objectives is to spread disinformation against the Iraqi government and the protest movement.

eventually kidnapped near the BBC offices and Sabreen News said that I was fabricating the threats and had my own agenda. I was a candidate in the upcoming election but I have withdrawn my candidacy; so many of my colleagues have been killed or at the very least have closed their social media profiles.

Case study: Siham

I am a university professor in law at Mosul University. I did stand in the elections in 2014 but then Daesh took over Mosul and I left the university as they said what I was teaching was unreligious. In 2016 I started working on freedom projects in Mosul with IDP camps. Then I returned to university but I carried on working in women's and human rights. I began to get threats, mainly videos via Facebook. They would send me videos of women being killed and beheaded and say this is your fate. I closed my Facebook page. The videos were posted after I stood for the elections even though I didn't win. They were from Daesh for sure.

Case study: Zeina

I had posted a picture of the Yarmouk hospital and how dirty it was, and I said Yarmouk hospital is one of the worst in the capital of Baghdad. It was my opinion on my social media page. I also wrote that most sick people around the world go into hospital with an illness and come out recovered. In our country, a sick person goes into hospital with one illness and comes out with many more illnesses. My page is quite prominent with lots of health officials following me. Someone took a screenshot of the post and they took it to Yarmouk hospital who claimed the picture was from 2007. I then heard that they were going to put a daawa out against me (take legal action) as an activist and they put my name and picture on their website. I checked and verified that the picture I had posted was definitely a recent one. So, I contacted the hospital and asked them to take my name and picture off their website. I work for the electricity ministry which is run by the same party as the health ministry and I didn't want any problems. Then their head of media started attacking me and suddenly various media channels were contacting me asking for interviews. This was a government institution attacking me, a citizen, for posting online.

Responses to Online Violence

With little by way of legislation to deal with the escalating threat of online violence against women, the onus has mainly fallen on the individuals who are targets of abuse to deal with the situation. At an individual level, there are a number of key actions common across the different groups, none of which are solution-driven or dealing with the issues at hand. Firstly, women are adapting their online habits. They refrain from using their own images on social media and in some cases reported using cartoons or children's images as an alternative. They often self-censor and consider the types of content they are posting and sharing. Many do not use their given names when posting or publishing pieces that might be considered to be politically controversial.

I have been working in the media for over ten years and I never write anything that puts my life in danger ... I have written on Iran, America, child marriage and divorce. When I write anything that might point towards a certain party or political agenda, I don't use my name because if I did, I would be open to threats and killing. And they don't forget; once it's online it becomes history. Our country is a country of partisan politics and nothing is going to change.

When threats escalate, the majority of women close their accounts on social media for extended periods of time or open new accounts under different names. Journalists and activists who were interviewed who decided to continue posting saw the scale of the threats intensify significantly and eventually move offline. Leaving jobs, with the drastic damages to livelihoods and independence which that brings, were courses of action cited by many. Blocking accounts is also a popular individual action by women.

It is of significant concern that the technology companies who own the main social media platforms, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, appear to be taking little responsibility for abuse and offensive content shared on their platforms. Despite the fact that globally, the social media giants have developed content moderation policies intended to be applied in the case of online abuse and gendered harassment, the methods by which they are applied and enforced are unclear and leave wide scope for interpretation. A report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), which examined the scale of online abuse against US congressional candidates during the 2020 presidential election, found that social media platforms lacked transparency with regards to the application of their content moderation policies and processes. It also found that moderation decisions driven by algorithmic content analysis were opaque and at times inaccurate; yet technology companies were overwhelmingly relying on artificial intelligence for financial reasons.[50]

50 Guerin, C. and Maharasingam-Shah, E. (2020). Public figures, public rage. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Available at: https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Public-Figures-Public-Rage-4.pdf [Accessed September 19 2021].

As a result, gendered online abuse was going unnoticed and unchallenged. The ICFJ/UNESCO report 'The Chilling', which deals with online violence towards women, stated that social media platforms are seen as the biggest enablers for online violence against women journalists but cast as (largely) failed responders to the problem.[51]

There is a concern that the technology companies see the rise in online violence as a reflection of the issue of violence in society and that what is happening online is not fostering offline violence. Evidence to the contrary—from the murder of Brazilian feminist and politician Marielle Franco on March 14th, 2018 to the storming of the White House on January 6th, 2021, both incited by posts on social media—is mounting around the world.[52] In Iraq, women found the tech companies unresponsive to their claims and a clear link between on- and offline violence was discussed by many (see below for more details).

I contacted Facebook to take the (fake) account down but they did not reply.

What is the point of reporting on online harassment as they might close the profile down but he will just make another one.

At a global level, there has been some movement from the technology companies to deal with intimate partner violence online but anything which might be seen to have a political dimension appears to be left unscrutinised according to key stakeholders in this arena. This response is also seen in Iraq at a policing level. The community police force currently operates covertly to maintain privacy and protect the women involved in cases of online harassment. According to one community police officer in Anbar, 'While we share everything, we have with the central security services in Baghdad, when we do find the perpetrator, we tell them we put them in front of the community.' Interviewees who had turned to the community police for help said that their aim was less to prosecute abusers and more to reconcile differences between the two parties. Another interview with a community police officer confirmed this position saying 'We try to give a good picture of women and change social attitudes and the community. We want to raise the role of women.' Unfortunately, this approach, whilst well-intentioned and providing one-off short-term solutions, does little to resolve the overriding issues of misogyny, conservatism, and impunity as perpetrators can expect lenient penalties for their actions. Rather, victims are advised to talk to their abuser and find a solution between them. In the small minority of cases where convictions did take place, there is little transparency around which laws were used and a lack of any definable due process.

Even if I told the community police or whoever, are they really going to fight for my rights?

---

51 Posetti, J., Shabbir, N. and Maynard, D. et al (2021). The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists. UNESCO. Available at: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/the-chilling.pdf [Accessed September 19 2020].

52 Di Meco, Lucina and Wilfore, Kristina (2021). Gendered disinformation is a national security problem. Brookings Institute. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/gendered-disinformation-is-a-national-security-problem/ [Accessed October 27 2021].

Even more concerning is the lack of any formal response from security services or state institutions to online violence which is politically motivated, in particular gendered disinformation, astroturfing, and violent threats. Online attacks against journalists, activists, and political figures—such as women electoral candidates—are left unchecked and perpetrators continue to act with complete impunity. Some measures have been recently introduced to provide some protection for women candidates in the 2021 elections, with dedicated hotlines for women to file complaints against abusers and avenues for reporting abuse directly to judicial agents circumventing the highly mistrusted security services. However, there is little evidence to suggest any change in behaviour online or any legitimate process of persecution. Interviewees all commented on the lack of available avenues

Women are not feeling protected by the state and its laws.

I tried the official way and it didn't work so I was forced to try the friend's way and change him but that didn't work either.

I don't tell anyone because there is no one to tell. The people that you would tell are the ones who are the abusers themselves.

The close connections between law enforcement, security services and armed groups in Iraq is highly problematic.[53] In the case of online violence against women, the lines between aggressor and protagonist are extremely blurred. In this case the possibilities for official redress are highly contested.

---

53 Renad Mansour, 'Networks of Power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the state of Iraq', Chatham House, 25 February 2021. Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/2021-02-25-networks-of-power-mansour.pdf [Accessed September 19 2021].

The Consequences of Online Violence

Internet access and social media platforms can provide women and girls with platforms which allow their voices to be heard and as such support gender equality, as noted in Sustainable Development Goal 5.[54] It is clear, however, that many Iraqi women are censoring or even removing themselves from online platforms because of the harmfulness of online violence and abuse. As noted earlier in this report, women are retreating from the public sphere and public debate. At a grassroots level, this sees patriarchal attitudes become further entrenched. Women and girls are less likely to engage online or otherwise with their male counterparts out of fear for abuse. Fear and intimidation are also seeing them reconsider their presence in schools and universities, which does not bode well for the long-term future of women and girls in Iraq. However, online abuse and harassment will only serve to further cement the gender digital divide and eventually see gendered roles become firmly established as the status quo.

Women journalists and activists are leaving cities such as Baghdad and Basra for the relative safety of cities such as Erbil and Sulaymaniyah in the Kurdish Autonomous Region. This prevents them from reporting and engaging with events that are happening on the ground in the major conurbations, such as the protest movement and elections. Alternative and women's rights perspectives are thus excluded from the general debate. Pluralism of media is undermined and at risk as women's voices become scarce and disregarded. Women journalists who have been known for their outspoken and defiant nature, as well as their willingness to transgress stereotypical norms and roles, are being condemned by their peers—women and men—such that they are themselves accused of inciting hate speech and online violence, according to some of the key informant interviews. Hate speech towards women and a predominant sentiment that 'they got what they deserved' further perpetuates online violence. This type of victim-blaming is not uncommon in other countries and is often supplemented with the regulation and monitoring of journalists' social media outputs by their employees and media organisations[55]. Public access to information and a broad range of points of view is thus increasingly compromised through the restrictions on what women journalists write or their decision to leave their profession.

There is some evidence to suggest that women in politics are more likely to challenge manipulative, corrupt and violent exploitations of power.[56] If this is the case, then online

54 ITU (2021). ICTS for a sustainable world: Goal 5. Gender. International Telecommunication Union. Available at: https://www.itu.int/en/sustainable-world/Pages/goal5.aspx [Accessed September 19 2020].

55 Posetti, J., Shabbir, N. and Maynard, D. et al (2021). The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists. UNESCO. Available at: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/the-chilling.pdf [Accessed September 19 2020].

56 Bauhr, M., Charron, N. and Wängnerud, L. (2018) Close the political gender gap to reduce corruption. Chr. Michelsen Institute. Available at: https://www.u4.no/publications/close-the-political-gender-gap-to-reduce-corruption.pdf . [Accessed September 19 2020].

violence towards Iraqi women who have political ambitions or simply wish to participate in political debate can be seen as ultimately posing a threat to all Iraqi society and not just women. As already noted earlier in this report, the online targeting of women in politics is having an impact on their willingness to run for office or engage in political debate. Those who do engage in political processes, by announcing their candidacy for political office and running political campaigns, are under pressure to self-censor to maintain their positions. Not only are women discouraged from entering political careers, but the public perception of women in politics becomes increasingly biased. With the lack of representation of different women's voices in the political sphere, the prospects for a substantive and inclusive democracy are challenged and partisan electoral procedures and practices will continue to plague Iraq. Gendered state-sponsored disinformation and harassment not only serves to silence oppositional voices and critics of those in power, research suggests that it ultimately will negatively impact the policy-making and decision-making processes in Iraq.[57]

The mental health impact of online violence towards women in all of the groups cannot be understated. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women included psychological maltreatment as a form of GBV. All of the women interviewed reported a loss of confidence, feelings of anxiety, sleeplessness, and concern over the welfare of their families. Societal pressures to conform to gender stereotypes produces fear of judgement and exclusion from their communities, which in some extreme cases saw women contemplate suicide.

Of particular concern is evidence of a direct correlation in many cases between on and offline violence in Iraq. Women in all of the groups reported how physical threats followed initial campaigns and threats online. For women experiencing intimate partner violence and blackmail, they all reported that it began electronically and then moved offline with husbands, intimate partners, wives of intimate partners, and friends intercepting them at home or school for example. Journalists and activists also reported a direct relationship between abuse and harassment on social media, which might begin as hate speech and then escalate into violent threats and harm in the physical world. The case studies in this report give evidence from tyre slashing to kidnapping. The tragic endings of Tara Fares and Riham Yaqoub provide brutal examples of the worst that can happen.

57 Di Meco, Lucina and Wilfore, Kristina (2021) Gendered disinformation is a national security problem. Brookings Institute. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/gendered-disinformation-is-a-national-security-problem/. [Accessed September 19 2020].

Conclusion

This report paints a dark picture of the situation of online violence towards women in Iraq. Online violence is taking a number of different forms and targets women across the board with little response from officials or technology companies. Women's rights and gender equality continue to be comprised as a result. Women are retreating from the public domain as well as political life, thus achieving the objective of silencing women's voices. Evidence that this silencing provides challenges to democracy and national security is particularly concerning in the case of Iraq, a country which continues to experience conflict and instability. With contested elections on the horizon and a young population that is demanding change, there has never been a more urgent time to tackle social and political inequalities in Iraq.

Patriarchal and conservative attitudes are dominant in Iraq, informing legislative and political processes, as well as social and communal interactions. Yet women continue to engage in the public sphere and there is a will for change. Accordingly, this report draws the following conclusions:

1. The digital ecosystem is echoing the prevailing patriarchal and conservative views in Iraqi society. Women are being judged and trialled based on their gender, physical appearance and alignment with stereotypical notions of women's roles in society. Gendered misogynistic language and sexualised images are commonly used to undermine women who are active online and in the public sphere. Where community initiatives are being employed to deal with online violence, patriarchal norms and hierarchies are becoming more deep-rooted as male offenders encounter little by way of punishment and the women and girls who are their victims are forced to interact with their tormentors.

2. Online violence is being used as a political tool to deliberately silence women, oppositional voices, and critical journalism. This means that political actors are amongst the main aggressors and perpetrators of online violence. High-profile cases of gendered disinformation and hate speech are left unresolved. As a consequence, microaggressions are becoming more prolific as men feel emboldened to act without any outcome.

3. Online violence is having an impact offline. The impact on women's mental health, their retreat from gainful employment and relocation to avoid physical threats are all definitive dangers to gender equality and women's rights. As women retreat from political life, chances for peace and security also become compromised. Physical attacks subsequently follow online threats and the space for safe and secure communications and freedom of expression is shrinking even further.

4. Current policies and practices to deal with online violence in Iraq are ineffective. Individual actions taken by women who have experienced online violence, which include self-censorship and complete removal from social media, are currently the only recourse that women see available to them. Official institutions are implicated in the practice of online violence, at best by their lack of response and at worse by their relationship with the armed groups who are engaging in violence both on and offline. The technology companies, also unresponsive, lack transparency and efficacy in their approach to online harassment and abuse.

Recommendations

The topic of online violence towards women has become a global concern and a more unified approach to tackling the issue is being called for by a number of key actors. With this in mind, this report makes the following recommendations that reiterate efforts which are being seen in other and similar contexts to Iraq.

Civil society, community and religious organisations

- Digital literacy and citizenship programmes in schools and colleges which educate young women and men on how to recognise and approach different forms of online violence should be developed and rolled out across Iraq. Women and men should also be taught ethical online communication practices. Possible partner: Tech 4 Peace, Iraq.
- Telephone hotlines which allow women to report incidents of online violence safely and anonymously and without having to deal directly with security services should be established and promoted. Possible partner: Free Press Unlimited.
- A unified approach to women's rights and gender equality should be established which involved religious and tribal leaders, schools and universities as well as civil society organisations. Possible partner: Al Amal/Public Aid Organisation.
- Ongoing monitoring of attacks and online violence against women is essential to raising awareness of the dangers to both women and men alike. There is a possibility to work with regional and international organisations to develop methods of monitoring and response which suit the particular context of Iraq.

Media organisations

- Digital safety and security workshops are integral to the safety and well-being of women journalists. Training on how to protect online and social media accounts as well as hostile environment training which includes how to combat online harassment should be provided by all media organisations. Possible partner: Internews.
- Reporting mechanisms and networks of solidarity should be established in newsrooms or via journalist organisations such as the National Union of Journalists, Al Naqaba Wataniya, which will encourage women to report any incidents of online abuse. Organisational policies to support women's safety and gender equality are key to the long-term success of independent media and their interventions to support women who experience online abuse is paramount.

Technology and social media companies

- A more human-centred approach to content moderation that does not rely solely on algorithms to recognise hate speech and gendered attacks needs to be considered in the short to medium term. Human moderators need to be given adequate training in order to recognise the very specific types of threats and hate speech that dominate the Iraqi online sphere.
- It is not acceptable to leave women who are experiencing online violence without a response from the platforms. More efficient means and processes for reporting online abuse which are transparent and inclusive need to be developed by the social media companies.

National government

- Extant legislative frameworks are not working to support and defend women in Iraq. Legal reform is required and the development of policies that deal directly with online harassment and violence is integral to ensuring the safety of women and girls online whilst also demonstrating the government's willingness to address all forms of violence.
- The Iraqi government needs to work more closely with civil society organisations to raise public awareness of the dangers of online violence whilst also growing public trust in a joint initiative between the public and private sector.
- IHEC appears to have taken successful measures during the October 2021 national elections to ensure that violence on the day was kept to a minimum. However, they could play a further role in providing support to women candidates, ensuring their safety as a part of its overall responsibility to reduce election violence and ensure that Iraq's diverse population is represented and can participate.
- The community police force needs more support to provide assistance to women in Iraq in all of the Iraqi provinces. Women should also be represented within the community forces at all levels, as they are more likely to be more accessible to women and girls who are facing abuse and violence.

International community and intergovernmental organisations

The international community has a role to play by putting pressure on the Iraqi government and its related state and sub-state institutions to take online violence towards women more seriously and deal with its perpetrators and consequences more effectively. The EU and other donors should consider how it allocates its grants in Iraq and reward the Iraqi government for its measure to protect women and girls online.

Bibliography

Ali, Z. (2018) Women and Gender in Iraq: Between Nation-Building and Fragmentation Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Al-Kaisy, A. (2020) 'A gender analysis of the media landscape in Iraq.' Internews. Available at: https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/2020-04/Internews_gender-analysis_media_landscape_iraq_2020-04.pdf [Accessed September 19 2021].

Alkhudary, T. (2020) 'Iraqi women are engaged in a struggle for their rights.' London School of Economics. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/06/15/iraqi-women-are-engaged-in-a-struggle-for-their-rights/ [Accessed September 19 2020].

Bajec, A. (2019) Scores of Iraqi women victim to online sexual blackmail. The New Arab. Available at: https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/iraqi-women-victim-online-sexual-blackmail [Accessed September 19 2020].

Bauhr, M., Charron, N. and Wängnerud, L. (2018) 'Close the political gender gap to reduce corruption.' Chr. Michelsen Institute. Available at: https://www.u4.no/publications/close-the-political-gender-gap-to-reduce-corruption.pdf . [Accessed September 19 2020].

BBC News (2018) Iraqi women election candidates targeted for abuse gain UN support. BBC. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-43894391 [Accessed September 19 2021].

BBC (2020). 'Female activist killed in Basra as gunmen target protestors.' BBC News online. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-53847648 [Accessed November 6 2021].

Callaghan, L. and al- Salhy, S. (2019) 'The death of Tara Fares: the sinister truth about the Iraqi influencers murder.' The Times. Available at: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tara-fares-iraq-instagram-shot-baghdad-0v2c3r37p [Accessed October 25 2021].

CEDAW (2019). Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination against Women and Girls in Iraq. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/IRQ/INT_CEDAW_CSS_IRQ_40949_E.docx [Accessed November 8 2021].

Di Meco, L. (2020) 'Online Threats to Women's Political Participation and The Need for a Multi-Stakeholder, Cohesive Approach to Address Them.' UN Women. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/di%20meco_online%20threats_ep8_egmcsw65.pdf?la=en&vs=1511 [Accessed September 19 2021].

Di Meco, L. and Wilfore, K. (2021). 'Gendered disinformation is a national security problem.' Brookings Institute. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/gendered-disinformation-is-a-national-security-problem/ [Accessed October 27 2021].

Economist Intelligence Unit (2021) Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women. Available at: https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/ [Accessed September 19 2021].

Enloe, C. (2010) Nemo's War, Emma's War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War. University of California Press: California.

Foltyn, S. (2021) Iraqi women struggle to escape abuse as domestic violence rises. Al Jazeera. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/2/12/iraqi-women-struggle-to-escape-abuse-as-domestic-violence-rises [Accessed September 19 2020].

Forster, K. (2016). 'Jo Cox death: Call for violent threats towards female MPs to be taken more seriously.' Independent.co.uk. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/jo-cox-dead-violent-threats-online-abuse-natalie-mcgarry-trolls-a7086436.html [Accessed November 6 2021].

Gender Concerns (2021) Country in Focus: Iraq. Available at: http://www.genderconcerns.org/countries-in-focus/iraq/ [Accessed October 25 2021].

France 24. (2021). Misinformation thrives in Iraq's virtual battlegrounds. Available at: https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210528-misinformation-thrives-in-iraq-s-virtual-battlegrounds [Accessed October 26 2021].

Freedom House. (2021) Freedom on the Net 2021: Iraq. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/country/iraq/freedom-net/2021 [Accessed October 26 2021].

Gagliardone, I., Danit, G. and Alves, T. (2015). 'Countering online hate speech.' UNESCO. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000233231 [Accessed September 19 2021].

Guerin, C. and Maharasingam-Shah, E. (2020). 'Public figures, public rage.' Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Available at: https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Public-Figures-Public-Rage-4.pdf [Accessed September 19 2021].

Huber, J. and Kammerud, L. (2016). 'Violence against women in elections: A framework for assessment, monitoring, and response.' International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Available at: https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/vawie_framework.pdf [Accessed September 19, 2021].

Human Rights Watch. (2020) Iraq: Scrap Bill to Restrict Free Speech. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/25/iraq-scrap-bill-restrict-free-speech [Accessed October 27 2021].

Human Rights Watch. (2020). We might call you in at any time: free speech under threat in Iraq. Human Rights Watch. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/06/15/we-might-call-you-any-time/free-speech-under-threat-iraq [Accessed November 8 2021].

ITU. (2021) 'ICTS for a sustainable world: Goal 5. Gender.' International Telecommunication Union. Available at: https://www.itu.int/en/sustainable-world/Pages/goal5.aspx [Accessed September 19 2020].

Lorenc, K. (2021) 'Political online astroturfing in the 2020 United States presidential election campaign.' European Consortium for Political Research. Available at: https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/57652 [Accessed October 27 2021].

Mansour, R. (2021) 'Networks of Power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the state of Iraq'. Chatham House. Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/2021-02-25-networks-of-power-mansour.pdf [Accessed October 25 2021].

Mena Rights. (2021) Iraq's new draft Law on Combating Cybercrimes still contains problematic provisions restricting fundamental freedoms. Available at: https://menarights.org/en/articles/iraqs-new-draft-law-combating-cybercrimes-still-contains-problematic-provisions [Accessed October 26 2021].

Meserole, C. (2018) 'How misinformation spreads on social media – and what to do about it.' Brookings Institute. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/09/how-misinformation-spreads-on-social-media-and-what-to-do-about-it/ [Accessed September 19 2021].

OCHA Services. (2005) Iraqi women hold third sit-in demonstration to demand rights in new Constitution. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraqi-women-hold-third-sit-demonstration-demand-rights-new-constitution [Accessed October 27 2021].

OCHA Services (2020) Covid-19 exacerbating gender-based violence in Iraq. OCHA. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/covid-19-exacerbating-gender-based-violence-iraq-enarku [Accessed September 19 2021].

OHCHR (2020) Safety at home, an illusion for far too many women in Iraq. OHCHR. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DomesticViolenceIraq.aspx [Accessed October 25 2021].

OHCHR (2021) 'Human Rights Violations and Abuses in the Context of Demonstrations in Iraq October 2019 to April 2020.' UNAMI. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/Demonstrations-Iraq-UNAMI-OHCHR-report.pdf [Accessed October 26 2021].

Peace Tech Lab (2021) Social media and conflict in Iraq. Available at: https://www.peacetechlab.org/iraq-lexicon [Accessed September 19 2021].

Posetti, J., Shabbir, N. and Maynard, D et al (2021). 'The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists.' UNESCO. Available at: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/the-chilling.pdf [Accessed September 19 2020].

Shea, J. and Al-Hassani, R. (2021) 'Hate speech, social media and political violence in Iraq: virtual civil society and upheaval.' Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. Available at: https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/hate-speech-social-media-and-political-violence-in-iraq-virtual-civil-society-and-upheaval/ [Accessed September 19 2021].

Silva, J. (2019) 'Spotting social media 'bad actors'. Newslit.org. Available at: https://newslit.org/educators/civic-blog/spotting-social-media-bad-actors/ [Accessed September 19 2021].

Tajali, M. and Farhan, S. (2018). 'Women's candidacy and violence against women in the politics of Iraq'. Jadaliyya. Available at: https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/37780 [Accessed September 19 2021].

UNDP (2018). Iraq: Gender Justice and the Law. Available at: https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Iraq%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English_0.pdf [Accessed October 27 2021].

UNDP and UN Women. 2020. eds. Conflicting Identities: The Nexus between Masculinities, Femininities and Violent Extremism in Asia. United Nations.

United Nations (2021) Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. Available at: https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/48/104 [Accessed October 25 2021].

UN Women (2021) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Available at: https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm [Accessed October 25 2021].

UN Women (2021) Facts and figures. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures [Accessed September 19 2021].

Watkins, J., Bardan, F. and Al-Jarba, A. (2021) 'Local policing in Iraqi post-ISIL.' LSE Middle East Centre. Available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/111567/2/LocalPolicinginIraqPostISIL.pdf [Accessed September 19 2020].

WHO (2021) 'Understanding and addressing violence against women.' World Health Organisation. Available at: https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/77432/WHO_RHR_12.36_eng.pdf [Accessed September 19 2021].

For more info, please contact:

elbarlament e.V.
Reuchlinstraße 10
10553 Berlin
Tel.: +49 (0)30 398 204 190
E-Mail: info@elbarlament.org

elbarlament
cultures of democracy