

“Who to turn to?”

Reporting, addressing, and preventing digital extortion of women and girls in South Mosul, Iraq

Since NP began its work in South Mosul in February 2022, community members have stressed how widespread digital extortion is in the area. This practice has been particularly harmful for young women and girls, whose reputation is threatened by men and boys asking for money or sexual favors in exchange for preserving their privacy. Guilt, shame and the threat of a compromised future often prevent those who were targeted from reporting and seeking the authorities for solutions. Community members shared with NP the extent to which this has been impacting the mental health of women and girls in the area and there is a belief that this kind of crime has led to cases of suicide in the recent past.

To address the issue, NP provided safe spaces for women to talk about this sensitive topic, giving them a platform to voice their concerns to duty bearers and discuss solutions. NP organized three Community Security Forums (CSFs) in 2022 to facilitate dialogue, trust building and women’s access to duty bearers responsible for handling these crimes. Key local authorities took part in these CSFs.

*“NP is the only organization that has enabled us to speak with stakeholders and managers directly and we have more freedom of expression because of NP”
Female participant Community Security Forum on digital extortion (June 5, 2022)*

The significance of the event was appreciated by many, with local duty bearers and women sitting together for the first time, discussing matters of gender-based violence affecting women in the community. During the CSFs, the women identified problems in current policies related to digital extortion as well as possible mitigation measures. The Community Police and National Security shared information on anonymous reporting of domestic violence and digital extortion. Subsequent CSFs were held to discuss further protection concerns and

assess progress on previously agreed action points.



CSF in Qayyarah Town (March 7, 2023).

NP conducted over ten training sessions with young and adult men and women to discuss types of extortion, support and reporting mechanisms. These trainings increased awareness among community members, helping prevent new cases and providing information to encourage reporting in the future. In Qayyarah, these mechanisms include, on one hand, mental health and psychosocial support services offered by NGOs and, on the other, the possibility to report cases to the Community Police or National Intelligence, whether in person or through hotlines. The trust built among participants during the sessions allowed them to share real-life experiences that would otherwise go unsaid.

Additionally, NP included digital extortion as one of the themes of a festival organized in September 2022 to raise awareness about sexual and gender-based violence in Qayyarah, creating a safe space for the community to start speaking more openly about this issue. During these sessions and events, NP shared hotlines for reporting cases of online extortion, harassment and domestic violence, and clarified that NP could provide accompaniment to anyone wishing to report a case to the authorities. Community members were thereby more aware of the consequences of

digital extortion and of existing reporting mechanisms.

After NP conducted these activities, community members started reaching out to NP requesting support in handling specific cases of digital extortion. NP responded in multiple ways depending on the nature of the cases, including providing accompaniment to some women to report the cases to authorities and to safely access services. When women had concerns about going to the authorities, NP arranged a meeting between them at NP's office, providing a safe space for the women to report their concerns. This way, NP was able to provide protective presence during the meetings and preserve the confidentiality of the women. Alternatively, NP liaised with the responsible authorities when women did not feel comfortable speaking with them directly and revealing their identity. By offering women the encouragement and confidentiality to report, NP helped ensure these cases reached the authorities and were dealt with ensuring the safety and privacy of women.

Notably, before NP started addressing the topic in the community, no cases of digital extortion had ever been reported to the authorities, indicating that without the confidence building and protective presence provided by NP, women were not feeling comfortable to discuss their situation. The effectiveness and respect for women's privacy and confidentiality with which these cases were handled by both NP and the authorities also helped build trust in duty bearers and encouraged more women to come forth.

"NP conducted several efficient trainings to our staff on protection, violence and electronic extortion. NP

collaborated with us in solving many cases. Thank you for your effort and support with us and other governmental institutions." A community police officer (September 21, 2022)

NP will continue to respond to cases brought forth by women in the community. In parallel, NP is strengthening the capacity of the Community Peace Teams (CPTs) it helped structure in Qayyarah to respond to such cases. The CPTs are young men and women from the community who, after participating in NP's trainings, decided to come together as a group to provide protection for civilians in their area and interrupt cycles of violence. NP has conducted several training sessions with CPTs members on unarmed civilian protection including topics such as, confidentiality, referral pathways, gender-based violence prevention and response, and other tools to support them in handling these cases.

NP has also facilitated linkages between them and duty bearers to support their independence and legitimacy in the community. By March 2023, the CPT had started receiving information and cases related to digital extortion. NP continues to support the CPT through mentorship and capacity strengthening on violence prevention, protection, conflict sensitivity, leadership, advocacy, gender equality and inclusive decision-making, particularly focused on women and youth. In doing so, NP supports the sustainability of the group beyond the current intervention, as well as meaningful and long-term change for the position of women and youth in South Mosul.