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NONVIOLENT PEACEFORCE

Snapshot: Online Extortion in South Mosul, Iraq



Public event in South Mosul on online extortion (August 2023)

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Introduction

Online extortion in South Mosul poses a significant threat to the safety and well-being of women and girls. This harmful practice involves coercing individuals into providing money or sexual favors under the threat of reputational damage, leading to severe emotional and psychological distress and risks of violence. The impact is further compounded by cultural and social norms related to family honor, which can discourage individuals from seeking help or reporting abuse, thereby reinforcing their isolation. This snapshot outlines the current context, challenges in responding to the issue, and provides recommendations for better addressing online extortion of women and girls in South Mosul.

Risks and Consequences of Online Extortion in South Mosul

The South Mosul community reports that victims of online extortion, including female students, are at heightened risk of threat and coercion due to their participation in online platforms, such as WhatsApp groups, where they may inadvertently share personal photos. These images, which vary in nature but are sometimes explicit, can be leaked to external individuals and networks, putting at risk the women and girls featured in the images.

The repercussions of online extortion can and do extend to severe outcomes, including:

1. Risk of Suicide

Although the reasons behind suicide cases are frequently ambiguous,ⁱ online extortion can be a contributing factor. Families often conceal these incidents to avoid stigma, and instances of online extortion can manifest as honor crimes or be reported as accidental deaths. The coercive nature of online extortion can create a sense of helplessness, as victims may fear further humiliation or retaliation if they speak out. This overwhelming pressure can lead individuals to view suicide as their only option for escape, even though their families may not recognize the link to online extortion.

i. The ambiguity surrounding suicide cases often stems from societal stigma, lack of awareness about the effects of online extortion, and the tendency to attribute these deaths to other causes, thereby obscuring the true impact of online harassment and coercion on mental health.

2. Disruption of Education and Social Isolation

Such cases have prompted some families to prevent their daughters from continuing their education and participating in community life. For instance, a community member reported a case where a student's brother used a photo from such a group to extort her, underscoring the direct impact of online extortion on educational opportunities. Some women will also choose to withdraw from education and public life themselves because of stigma and cumulative pressures, undermining their personal development and limiting their involvement in their communities.

3. Forced Marriage and Relationships

Additionally, there are cases of girls fleeing due to online extortion. When threatened, extorters (often men) may compel the targeted person to escape with them to another area, where they may be forced into marriage or a de facto relationship. Such incidents damage family honor and reputation, leading to social stigma and ostracization for both victims and their families. Moreover, these forced marriages often result in a cycle of violence and further victimization, contributing to a sense of helplessness and insecurity within the community.

4. Coercion into Illegal Activities

Women who fall victim to online extortion may also find themselves coerced into illegal activities, such as drug trafficking or prostitution, to meet extortionists' demands for significant sums of money. This pressure can arise from threats to release sensitive information or compromising images, leading victims to feel immense pressure to comply to avoid exposure and associated shame. Many victims lack financial resources or supportive networks, making illegal activities seem like their only viable option.

5. Proliferation of Risk and Recruitment to other Women and Girls

Extorting parties often exploit victims by coercing them into recruiting other women, either by promising protection or threatening harm if they refuse. This recruitment can occur in various contexts, such as social circles or online communities. For example, an extorting party might pressure a victim to lure friends or acquaintances into similar situations under the guise of offering financial help or job opportunities. The fear of exposure keeps many victims silent, trapping them in a cycle of exploitation that extends beyond their own suffering, jeopardizing their safety and exacerbating the overall risk faced by women and girls in the community.

Barriers to Support for Victims

Amid the high risks facing women and girls due to online extortion, support can be complex and challenging to access. The reasons for this are multifaceted and include:

1. Cultural and Social Barriers

Cultural and social barriers, particularly concerning family honor, further complicate interventions and assistance for victims. Women and girls face intense pressure from their families and wider communities to remain silent due to fears of stigma and retaliation, preventing them from accessing legal and psychosocial support.

"We encountered a troubling case where a woman reported SGBV abuse by her husband to the police. Unfortunately, the officer disclosed all her complaints and sensitive cultural information in front of other male members of the community, violating her trust and confidentiality." - **Security Actor, Qayyarah, South Mosul**

2. Lack of Confidentiality and Sensitivity in Reporting Processes

Current reporting mechanisms lack confidentiality and sensitivity. An absence of female staff in national security systems forces women to discuss sensitive issues with male officers; a victim-blaming culture dissuades women from filing complaints; and fear of identity disclosure prevents victims from seeking help. These difficulties discourage victims from feeling safe to access judicial and protective services, as concerns about safety, confidentiality, and the risk of encountering relatives at these institutions deter women from seeking justice.

3. Security Actors as Perpetrators

Security actors themselves have been reported as perpetrators of online extortion, further inhibiting survivors from reporting their cases and creating distrust among victims.

4. Inefficient and Ineffective Reporting Processes

When victims do seek to report their cases, the reporting mechanisms in place are also slow and ineffective.

Responses

There are a number of actions that can be taken by different actors in addressing the challenges of online extortion. Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) has notably advanced efforts to combat online extortion in South Mosul, fostering a safer environment for community members, particularly girls and women. Through protective accompaniments, NP facilitates survivors' access to National Security Services (NSS) and local authorities, building trust that encourages reporting of extortion cases. Community-led initiatives, such as Community Peace Teams (CPTs) and Community Safety Forums (CSFs), have enhanced local resilience by raising awareness and addressing barriers to reporting. These forums have opened dialogue between community members and duty bearers, resulting in increased responsiveness from security actors and empowering survivors to take action.

"If it weren't for NP, we wouldn't have known the reporting mechanisms or the role of community police." - **Community Member, Qayyarah, South Mosul**

Moreover, NP's emphasis on advocacy and capacity-building has highlighted crucial gaps in the decentralization of digital extortion cases to local courts, making reporting more accessible. While this shift poses challenges regarding confidentiality, NP and Community Peace Teams (CPTs) have successfully engaged with local authorities to advocate for measures that ensure sensitive cases are handled with care. The positive shift in community dynamics is evident, with an increase in reported cases of violence and online blackmail, indicating that the culture of reporting is taking root. Ultimately, NP's integrated approach has empowered individuals, strengthened community mechanisms, and fostered a collaborative environment where trust is built and maintained.

Looking Forward: Recommendations

Despite the efforts and progress done during the implementation of the project, it is important other actors working on online extortion consider the following recommendations:

Enhancing Accessibility and Support

1. Women Inclusion in Decision-Making

It is necessary to ensure that women and girls are actively involved in discussions and decision-making processes related to addressing online extortion. Their perspectives are essential for shaping effective strategies and policies.

2. Confidential and Safe Access to Support Services

It is crucial to provide women and girls with direct and confidential access to support services within security institutions. This includes establishing dedicated channels specifically for handling online extortion cases, ensuring that victims can seek help without fear of exposure. Additionally, secure and anonymous reporting mechanisms must be developed, ensuring they are well-publicized and easily accessible. These efforts will encourage victims to come forward and seek the assistance they need.

3. Promotion of Support and Response Mechanisms

Many stakeholders can play a role in enabling easy access to information about reporting mechanisms and support services for online extortion. This includes the promotion of contact numbers for humanitarian service providers, Community Police (CP) hotlines to flag known perpetrators, and the National Security Service (NSS) hotlines for unknown cases. These awareness campaigns should also aim to de-normalize online extortion, combat victim-blaming, and encourage responsible technology use.

4. Cultural Sensitivity

Service providers and stakeholders working on online extortion can improve their support by ensuring security and justice practices are culturally sensitive, addressing specific challenges faced by women and girls in South Mosul. This includes collaborating with local leaders to develop culturally appropriate responses.

Enhancing Digital Capacities of Communities

1. Digital Security in School Curricula

Integrate digital security education into school curricula to equip students with the skills to protect themselves from online threats.

2. Community Police Workshops for Parents

Host engaging workshops for parents, led by Community Police, to explore digital security and practical tools for managing app access and screen time. These workshops will foster a collaborative environment, helping parents understand online risks and encouraging them to guide their children in safe technology use.

Strengthening Response to Confidentiality, Sensitivity & Effectiveness

1. Training for Security Actors

Offer specialized training for law enforcement and judicial personnel on handling online extortion cases, focusing on maintaining confidentiality and avoiding re-traumatization of victims.

2. Increase Presence of Female Personnel in Security Institutions

Promote and resource the presence of female personnel in security and justice institutions to facilitate a more comfortable and approachable environment for women and girls filing complaints. This should extend beyond authorities themselves to include mental health and psychosocial support for victims navigating these challenges.

3. Improve Hotline Response Times

Streamline and resource processes to enhance response times for hotlines, as online extortion cases often require urgent attention.



Drawing by a Women Peace Team Member (September 2022)

**IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS EXPERIENCING ONLINE
EXTORTION OR A FORM OF RELATED VIOLENCE, WE
ENCOURAGE YOU TO CONNECT WITH THE BELOW RESOURCES:**

**Community Police
Hotline – 497**

**National Security
Services Hotline – 131**

**إذا كنت تعرف الشخص
المبتز، فبلغ الشرطة
المجتمعية على الرقم- 497**

**إذا كنت لا تعرف الشخص
المبتز، فبلغ الأمن الوطني على
الرقم- 131**