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choose *better*

Power, Gender and Technology: Unmasking the Root Causes of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

A Behavioural Research Study

June 2023

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Acronyms

TFGBV ● **Technology-facilitated gender-based violence**

GBV ● **Gender-based violence**

KRI ● **Kurdistan region of Iraq**

FGD ● **Focus group discussion**

KII ● **Key informant interview**

IDI ● **In-depth interview**

BDM ● **Behavioral Drivers Model**

SBC ● **Social and Behavior Change**

GPS ● **Global Positioning Systems**

MoH ● **Ministry of Health**

DCVAW ● **Directorate of Combating Violence against Women and Families**

FPU ● **Family Protection Unit**

Executive Summary

Technology is a powerful tool for good, but can also be used for harm, particularly technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). This report explores TFGBV in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) answering three research questions: 1) What role does technology play for women in KRI?; 2) How does TFGBV manifest in KRI?; and 3) What are the psychological, sociological, and environmental drivers of TFGBV in KRI?. The report draws on qualitative research, including 12 focus group discussions, 5 key informant interviews, and 3 in-depth interviews with local social media influencers, to inform future social and behavior change programing by providing a comprehensive understanding of TFGBV and its drivers in KRI.

Technology was seen as a double-edged sword. While technology was seen as bringing benefits in the form of learning, communications, and earning an income, its negative impacts were evident as well. Women below 25 saw the negative aspects outweighing the positive, and consequently expressed a fear of being online due to the prevalence of TFGBV and the associated consequences from their families. Harassment and image-based abuse are the most common forms of TFGBV, with social media platforms being the primary venues. Perpetrators of TFGBV are often known to their targets and engage in TFGBV intentionally. Young women in KRI take precautions online, demonstrating both their understanding of technology and intention to mitigate their risk of being subjected to TFGBV.

Gender roles play a significant role in TFGBV in KRI. The highly restricted interactions between men and women in KRI are overcome using technology, which is seen as socially unacceptable due to deeply ingrained gender roles and norms. Women experiencing TFGBV are often met with severe consequences such as social isolation, deprivation of rights, and physical violence. To avoid these consequences, women are expected to commit suicide, run away, or emigrate. Women are often met with limited support and are also expected "to learn from the experience." Comparatively, male perpetrators of TFGBV are perceived to be motivated by an expected outcome, such as love, attention, revenge, money, sex, recognition, and fun, and considered to not be responsible for their actions. Instead, male perpetrators of TFGBV are often excused on the basis of their age, perceived lack of maturity, potential mental health issues, lack of employment, or the commonly held belief that "men are just like that". Male perpetrators are furthermore expected to face little to no consequences for their actions.

Family members and community members are also under societal expectations of "correcting" behavior by sanctioning women subjected to TFGBV, and peers are expected to distance themselves from individuals subjected to TFGBV, some even partake in the violence. The media and law enforcement were also directed by victim-blaming beliefs. These factors contribute to the perpetuation of TFGBV in KRI.

In a context where society sides, actively or passively, with perpetrators, change is needed. Participants provided ways in which children of the next generation can be taught the importance of non-violent behaviors and respectful interpersonal communication.

Background

Technology is a powerful tool that provides many social, economic, and political benefits to women and girls. It facilitates self-expression, access to information and knowledge, connection with others, and participation in public debates. However, technology can also be a tool for harm. The same features that allow technology to facilitate expression, connection, and access to information–specifically anonymity, ease of use, scale of connection, and speed of communication–allow technology to create environments that are conducive to online and offline violence. [1]Such violence frequently stems from the same root causes and drivers as offline violence. Both offline and technology-facilitated violence against women and girls are the results of "systematic structural gender inequality, deep-seated cultural and social norms as well as patterns of harmful masculinities." [2]

Broad Definition & Range of Behaviors

The term used to describe online acts of violence against women and girls is Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV). The UN's Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women defines TFGBV as "any act of gender-based violence against women that is committed, assisted or aggravated in part or fully by the use of information, communication technologies (ICT), such as mobile phones and smartphones, the Internet, social media platforms or email, against a woman because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately."[3]

Similar terms include "online violence against women," "cyberviolence," and "cyberbullying," although these terms refer to slightly different realities and behaviors. For the research and the accompanying project, the term "TFGBV" was chosen for the following two reasons:

☑   TFGBV encompasses all types of technology-based violence. In addition to digital violence, it includes other forms of violence perpetrated by technology broadly, such as mobile phone calls, texts, Global Positioning Systems (GPS), and Bluetooth.[4]

☑   TFGBV utilizes a gender-based approach, acknowledging that TFGBV exists on the broader spectrum of GBV, and is therefore rooted in gender inequality, abuse of power, and harmful norms.

MAGENTA understand TFGBV as referring to any form of GBV that is enabled or exacerbated via the use of technology. While TFGBV encompasses a wide variety of behaviors with distinct characteristics, these behaviors may manifest in similar ways and overlap with other forms of violence.[5]   Below are the most common TFGBV behaviors and how these behaviors may appear.[6] It is important to note that as technology evolves, so too does the expression of technologically facilitated violence. Hence, the below list is not intended to be exhaustive.

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1   UN Women, Accelerating efforts to tackle online and technology facilitated violence against women and girls (VAWG), p. 7

2   UN Women, Accelerating efforts to tackle online and technology facilitated violence against women and girls (VAWG), p. 6

3   A/HRC/38/47, Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective, 18 June 2018, paragraph 23

4   Global Protection Cluster, GBV AoR Helpdesk, Learning Brief 1: Understanding technology-facilitated gender-based violence, Learning Series on Technology-Facilitated Gender Based Violence, 25 August 2021, p.3

5   Dunn, Suzie, Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: An Overview, Center for International Governance Innovation 2020, p.5

6   Learning Series on TFGBV: learning brief #1, GBV AoR Helpdesk

Harassment

- Unwanted acts that are intrusive, disturbing, or threatening.
- Harrasment is commonly misogynistic or sexist in nature, and includes comments on appearance.
- Electronic communication facilitates harassment by allowing perpetrators to cyberbully, mob, troll, and engage in hate speech against their target.
- **Example:** Unrelenting phone calls from an unknown man sexually harassing a woman.

Image-based abuse

- Creating, sharing, or threatening to share images of a person without their consent.
- Image-based abuse commonly involves perpetrators sharing images deemed unacceptable by the community to the target's friends, family, and co-workers, or across the Internet more widely.
- Perpetrators may threaten to share such images to coerce targets into sending explicit photos and videos, engaging in sexual acts or sex, forming or continuing a relationship, paying money, among other activities.
- **Example:** An unknown perpetrator blackmailing a woman by superimposing her face onto pornographic content using deepfake technology.

Threats

- Violent, aggressive, or threatening speech or content sent via technology that expresses an intention to harm the target or their family and friends.
- Threats are commonly sexual in nature, but may also reference physically attacking, hurting or killing an individual or group of women.
- **Example:** An individual sending threatening texts and social media messages to physically and sexually assault a women's rights activist.

Stalking / Cyberstalking

- Repeated unwanted monitoring, communication, or threatening behavior online.
- **Example:** A perpetrator of intimate partner violence monitoring their target's social media accounts, emails, phone calls, and location as a tactic of control.
- **Example:** A perpetrator using spyware to monitor activities on a target's computer or phone, or sending the target numerous calls and texts.

Impersonation

- Utilizing digital technology to assume a target's identity to access private information, exploit, embarrass, discredit, or shame the target, contact or mislead them, or create fraudulent documents through the use of communication technology.
- **Example:** A male perpetrator creating a fake social media account to interact with a woman while pretending to be a former female friend in order to obtain information that will then be used to blackmail her.

Publishing private information

- Sharing or threatening to share private information about a target online to harass, embarrass and/or harm their reputation. Perpetrators can exploit, extort, or coerce their target by threatening to publish their target's private information online without their consent.

- **Example:** A perpetrator publishing a woman politician or journalists' contact information on social media or a blogpost and encouraging others to intimidate or rape her.

Source: Learning Series on TFGBV: learning brief #1, GBV AoR Helpdesk

A Growing Global and Local Issue

TFGBV is a growing issue globally. In the absence of a common global definition and of an established methodology to measure TFGBV's prevalence, MAGENTA reviewed several worldwide studies to get a sense of TFGBV's global scale:

☑ A 2020 survey conducted by The Economist of 4,500 women in 45 countries found that:

- 38% of women reported personal experiences with online violence;

- 85% reported witnessing online violence against other women; and

- The percentage of women who reported witnessing online violence ranged from 74% in Europe to 98% in the Middle East.[7]

☑ A 2020 survey of 14,000 girls and women (aged 15 to 22) across 22 countries conducted by Plan International found that 58% experienced online harassment on social media platforms.[8]

☑ A survey of 4,135 girls and women, ages 14 and above, conducted by UReport[9] and the World Wide Web Foundation found that 52% have experienced abuse or violence online.[10]

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7   The Economist Intelligence Unit, Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women, 2021. Available at https://onlineviolencewomen. eiu.com/

8   « Free to be online? A report on girls' and young women's experiences of online harassment » Plan International 2020, p.16

9   U-Report is UNICEF's flagship digital platform started in 2011, to engage young people in programme priorities, emergency response and advocacy actions. It supports adolescent, youth, and community participation; and works as a tool to share information, raise awareness, and collect quantifiable data on specific areas that impact children, including the most vulnerable. The received responses are analysed in real-time, mapped, and displayed on a public dashboard, ensuring the young people's feedback can be actioned by local and national decision-makers. - https://ureport.in/about/

10 https://ureport.in/opinion/3983/

Similar trends are reported regionally across the Middle East. A UN Women report on online violence in Arab States[11] surveyed 11,497 respondents (64% male, 36% female), and found that about half (49%) of women respondents reported not feeling safe online with 16% of women respondents reporting experiencing online violence at least once in their lives.[12] The report also found that more than one in four male respondents (27%) admitted to having perpetrated online violence, with this rate increasing to one in three men among respondents between the ages of 18 and 24.[13] In light of the self-reported rates of TFGBV perpetrated by men, it seems likely that the aforementioned prevalence rate among women (16%) is an underreporting.

While understanding that these are common trends occurring at a global scale, it is important to recall that the forms in which TFGBV manifests are "shaped by the idiosyncrasies of local history, with specific manifestations of patriarchal social norms."[14] Indeed, individual instances of TFGBV often reflect specific gender power structures of a certain context at a certain time.

The availability of TFGBV data in **Iraq** is highly limited. Quantitative TFGBV data available for the region more broadly can be found in the aforementioned UN Women Report on Arab States,[15] in which around one-fifth (21%) of women reported experiencing online violence. Among these women, 43% experienced it more than once. Additionally, 27% of women reported not having experienced TFGBV personally but knowing someone who has.[16] Comparatively, almost one in three men across all ages (31%) reported perpetrating TFGBV.[17] Although currently there are no available data that are specific to KRI, it can be assumed that TFGBV's prevalence rates in the regions are comparable to those found in the UN Women Report on Arab States.

With an understanding of the scope of TFGBV at the global, regional and national level, this research outline and analyze it in the context of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

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11 The research covered Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, State of Palestine, Tunisia and Yemen.

12 UN women, Violence Against Women in the online space: Insights From Multi-Country Research In The Arab States, 2022, p.13.

13 UN women, Violence Against Women in the online space: Insights From Multi-Country Research In The Arab States, 2022, p.14

14 Hicks, Jacqueline Hicks, Global evidence on the prevalence and impact of online gender-based violence (OGBV), Institute of Development Studies, October 2021, p.8

15 1,444 respondents in Iraq completed the survey, 35.11% of them were women (n= 507).
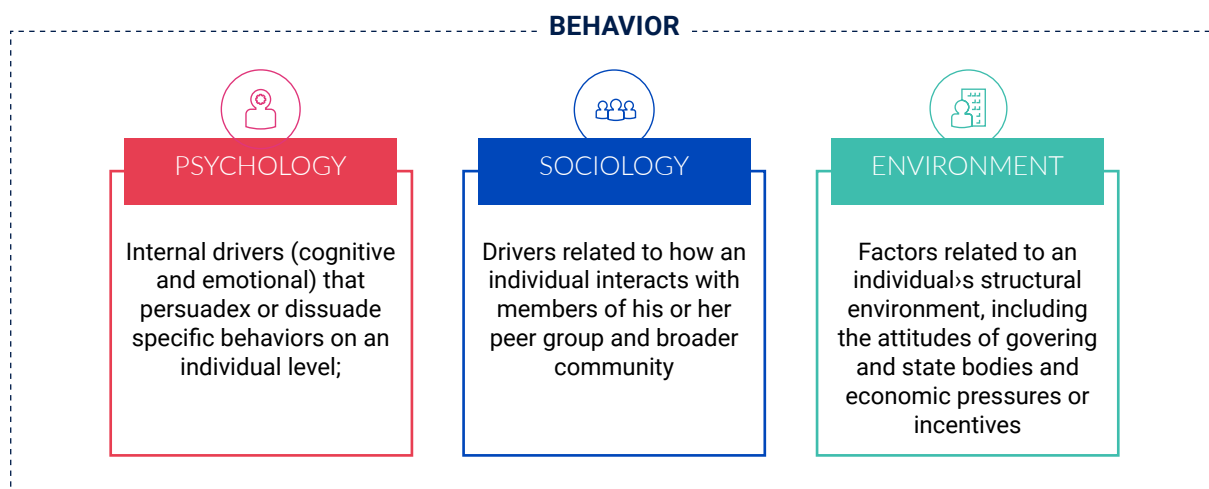
16 UN women, Violence Against Women in the online space: Insights From Multi-Country Research In The Arab States, 2022, p.29

17 UN women, Violence Against Women in the online space: Insights From Multi-Country Research In The Arab States, 2022, p.29

Methodology

To inform prevention programing that addresses the root causes of TFGBV in KRI, MAGENTA conducted the following formative research. MAGENTA utilized the Behavioral Drivers Model (BDM), a social and behavioral change framework, to improve the understanding of the behavioral drivers (such as psychological, sociological, and environmental drivers) of TFGBV.[18]

BEHAVIOR

PSYCHOLOGY	SOCIOLOGY	ENVIRONMENT
Internal drivers (cognitive and emotional) that persuadex or dissuade specific behaviors on an individual level;	Drivers related to how an individual interacts with members of his or her peer group and broader community	Factors related to an individual›s structural environment, including the attitudes of govering and state bodies and economic pressures or incentives

The research findings are intended to inform (1) a multimedia campaign on TV, radio, and digital channels that intends to transform existing harmful social norms around TFGBV in KRI; and (2) the design of community engagement interventions aimed at providing young adults in KRI with the knowledge and skills needed to prevent TFGBV and take actions as bystanders.

To achieve the research objectives, MAGENTA utilized the following four-step process:

1. Inception and Discovery ➤ 2. Tools Development and Piloting ➤ 3. Data Collecting ➤ 4. Analysis and Reporting

Research Questions

The research intended to answer the following research questions:

1. What role does technology play for women in KRI?

2. How does TFGBV manifest in KRI?

3. What are the psychological, sociological, and environmental drivers of TFGBV in KRI?

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18 V. Petit, and al, The Behavioural Drivers Model, UNICEF MENA Regional Office, 2019, available at https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/behavioural-drivers-model

Sampling

MAGENTA utilized qualitative interviews to identify the primary drivers of TFGBV in KRI. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the psychological, sociological, and environmental barriers and drivers of TFGBV in KRI, 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with female and male respondents from the target audience in Erbil Governorate. The FGDs were divided based on gender and age to create a safe place for participants to share their thoughts. Additionally, five key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with local service providers and stakeholders, and three in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with local social media influencers to provide a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of TFGBV in KRI. A list of the sample can be found in Annex 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

MAGENTA partnered with ThinkBank Iraq to conduct qualitative interviews and collect data. Local female and male moderators were selected based on prior experience working on GBV and interviewing youth. Data collection took place in Erbil under the supervision of the Field Research Coordinator and the MAGENTA team. Data collection was informed by and adhered to MAGENTA's quality control guidelines, which emphasize transparency, accountability, and participant protection measures to ensure all phases of data collection and analysis are conducted in accordance with the highest data protection standards and a "Do No Harm" approach.

To guide the subsequent analysis, an analysis plan was developed based on the aforementioned Behavioral Drivers Model (BDM). All interviews and FGDs were transcribed and translated into English, and a thematic analysis was used to identify key trends in the data. MAGENTA then developed a coding structure, coding the qualitative data in NVivo to support more effective handling and analysis of the large qualitative data set.

Limitations and Challenges

GBV is a sensitive topic with a high risk of potential participant discomfort, possibly restricting the data collection efforts. To navigate the sensitivity of the topic, MAGENTA created a fictional story of an instance of TFGBV to facilitate respondent discussion. The moderators reported that respondents found the story relatable and engaging, and shared opinions freely with others.

MAGENTA's original research plan was to conduct FGDs with KRI religious leaders. However, ThinkBank Iraq flagged that identifying a suitable time for various KRI religious leaders to be part of FGDs would be immensely difficult. Therefore, MAGENTA conducted FGDs with local journalists, who are often subjected to TFGBV and who, similar to religious leaders, hold influential positions in KRI society. Lastly, the efforts to recruit and conduct Arabic-speaking FGDs were delayed as a result of a smaller Arab population in the mainly Kurdish-speaking Erbil Governorate.

Young Adults and Technology in KRI

Technology is an integral part of the modern world and Iraq is no exception. Technology brings numerous benefits, including increasing ease of communication and access to information, while providing abundant opportunities for self-expression. However, and as with any other tool, technology has facilitated a number of negative developments, one of its considerable drawbacks being the rise of TFGBV. This section delves into the perspectives of the focus group participants on technology's positive and negative effects.

Technology: A Double-Edged Sword

Technology's positive and negative aspects were discussed during the FGDs. Participants focused on four different benefits of technology, the first one being the facilitation of easier and wider access to information. Specifically, participants emphasised that technology allows users to read news articles, learn new languages, and search for articles and courses for studies. Secondly, participants saw technology as facilitating connections between people, or more easily and effectively bringing people together. Participants reported that technology allows them to connect with geographically distant friends and family, while also connecting them with people who share the same interests. Thirdly, participants expressed that technology facilitates economic advantages, by allowing users to engage in activities such as starting online businesses or advertising products online. Finally, influencers and teachers perceive that technology helps facilitate the sharing of opinions to an increasingly wider audience.

> *It has given a chance to people to freely express themselves. It has contributed to building influencers and public opinion on the social cases such as killing women, domestic violence, and political cases. Through social media, for example, a young unknown girl can become a self-confident superstar.*

Teacher

However, participants also highlighted technology's negative impacts, with some stating that these negative impacts outweigh the positive. Women below the age of 25 most commonly expressed this sentiment. Upon further discussion, these women expressed that they feared being online due to the prevalence of TFGBV. Women being online was also perceived as potentially contributing to future familial conflict, due to the heightened possibility of online interaction between men and women and the ability for daughters to operate online with minimal parental oversight. Women respondents additionally reported that technology exposes them to lifestyles they cannot afford, potentially creating discontentment and pressure.

> *Technology has reduced the importance of the big world for us; if we know how to use it, it is the greatest thing to help humanity. However, today people use these technologies in very negative ways; for example, some people use it to defame or to bully others.*

Female, 35-50

Women and men participants ages 16 to 35 collectively assumed that young women do not know how to "protect themselves online". However, findings from FGDs conducted with women below the age of 25 revealed various precautions they take to combat negative aspects of being online, as respondents wished not to get exposed to TFGBV and "inappropriate content." The precautions are provided below:

☑ **Limiting shared content:** Many female participants reported that they do not post personal photos online as they fear the potential misuse of their images. Instead, they may opt for avatars or photos that depict their state of mind or use platform settings to hide their profile pictures from non-followers. Moreover, several FGD participants noted that they refrain from writing comments on social media platforms due to unrequited attention and friends requests they receive from men afterward. This cautious approach to online self-presentation is not limited to women, as some men also expressed concerns around posting personal information online.

☑ **Adjust followers and limit interactions:** Most women respondents have private social media accounts and do not accept friend requests from unknown individuals. Many filters and adjust their followers for each post, unfollowing or blocking certain users at their discretion. Even then, they may still refrain from posting photos and personal information as they perceive friends and cousins as actors who may misuse the content shared.

☑ **Avoid specific platforms:** Different levels of risk are associated with different platforms. TikTok, in particular, is avoided or used with caution by both men and women under the age of 35 due to the fear of being exposed to inappropriate content such as sexually explicit or violent content. Similarly, one influencer mentioned avoiding Facebook due to the platform's comment section being a source of harassment, specifically hate speech.

> *I don't want to share any of my photos because I trust no one, nor even those close to me. (...) I know that if someone has access to my information and data, they may want to do things that may harm me or my reputation. So, I don't feel comfortable sharing any of my things.*
>
> Woman, 25-35

This section has shown that young adults in KRI are aware of the various risks related to maintaining an online presence and have identified several precautionary measures they take while being online or using technology. It is evident that participants perceive these precautions as being necessary in mitigating TFGBV. The next section will elaborate on individual cases of TFGBV that have occurred in communities across KRI, as identified and discussed by FGD participants.

Participants Understood TFGBV

Despite a preexisting belief that residents of KRI would not be aware of what falls under TFGBV, FGD participants showed high awareness and understanding of what is categorized as TFGBV behaviors. Participants understood TFGBV to be any physical or emotional harm caused through technology that targets people due to their gender. Participants also identified most of TFGBV's different forms as being examples of violence. They identified threats, harassment, privacy violations, impersonation, image-based abuse in the form of sharing of personal images without consent, blackmailing to share photos for personal gains, or physical violence as a result of online activities as all examples of technologically facilitated violence.

The exception was "stalking in the form of monitoring" which many FGD participants did not categorize as violence. Gender Based Violence AOR, define stalking as "repeated unwanted monitoring, communication or threatening behavior causing feelings of helplessness, fear, and continuous stress."[19] In KRI, stalking in the form of monitoring was reported as commonly being perpetrated by close family members, such as parents or brothers, or intimate partners. Many participants did not perceive this behavior as a form of violence, instead considering it an expected behavior from concerned and caring family members, including parents of daughters. Some participants also perceived monitoring to be the result of parents not trusting their daughters, and as a possible solution to "protect" women from experiencing TFGBV. This specific perception among participants reflects harmful gender beliefs that suggest it is a woman's responsibility to avoid becoming a target of TFGBV, as opposed to holding perpetrators responsible. Comparatively, monitoring one's son to prevent him from committing such acts was not mentioned.

> *R4: For a girl, her father or brother can check her phone even if she doesn't allow them.*
>
> *M: Why? Don't you think, as your friend said, mobile phones are private?*
>
> *R4: She is their daughter. They don't want her to face problems. They want to protect her.*
>
> *R5: Yes, women are bearers of our honor in this society. The woman must accept that. When women are bearers of honor, men are allowed to check their phones.*

Male 16-18

Although sharing images without consent was categorized by participants as an example of violence, contradictory beliefs around the behavior appeared throughout several of the FGDs. All participants agreed that sharing images without consent was violence when asked what they considered to be TFGBV. Despite this prior agreement, when participants were confronted with a hypothetical scenario in which sharing images without consent had occurred against a female relative, participants responded that an appropriate response would be to share the photos of the perpetrator's female relatives, as a retaliatory measure. Hence, the use of the same act of violence was seen as justifiable if it was a retaliatory measure against the perpetrator. This demonstrates that knowing what behaviors constitute acts of violence does not inherently mean individuals will avoid engaging in these behaviors. In this case, violence was seen as an appropriate response to violence.

> *You can use tit-for-tat. For example, if I were Layla's [the person subjected to TFGBV] brother. I would find Ahmed [the perpetrator] and threaten him, too, by sharing photos of his sister or other family members.*
>
> *M: So, you respond to violence with violence?*
>
> *No, I don't want him to do that. I would put him in the same spot as myself. When he sees the situation from my perspective, he would never share the photo. I think this is a solution.*

Male 19-24

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19 Learning Series on TFGBV: learning brief #1, GBV AoR Helpdesk

Cases of TFGBV in KRI

TFGBV takes numerous different forms in KRI. Two common forms of TFGBV was in KRI: image-based abuse in the form of sharing images without consent, blackmail by threatening to share images in return for incentives such as more photos, money or sexual favors, and harassment in the form of cyberbullying and hate speech, where degrading comments are directed to women regarding how they dress and/or act, as well as unwanted attention through friend requests, messages, and calls.

> **You can't comment or express your opinion on social media even in the groups that are just for girls. Once you write a comment, you get 15 or 20 friend requests from boys! How they get into the group is not clear.**
>
> Woman, 25-35

Of these behaviors, participants perceived that the most severe cases of TFGBV in KRI were instances of image-based abuse in which perpetrators shared photos of women without their consent to intentionally damage her reputation, photo manipulation, and hacking devices to access photos. Instances of TFGBV in KRI have led to so-called honor killings, where family members murder female relatives as a result of the woman's online activities and in an attempt to rebuild the family's reputation.

Many participants gave examples of TFGBV incidents from their communities. One female participant between the ages of 16 to18, mentioned that her friend was subjected to image-based abuse by a male friend of hers and his friends. The survivor of this case of TFGBV was then physically assaulted by a cousin. Below is one of several similar stories that arose from FGDs:

> **I personally have a friend who sent photos to another male friend who promised not to share or do anything with it, but later she was threatened because of the photos. Not even the boy, his friends also constantly threatened the girl to send more photos, and the girl did. Later, her cousin found out! Even her cousin threatened to tell her dad about it. Her cousin had asked the girl to meet at a place, and he had abused her sexually by attacking her! But he could not rape her since it was a public place. This is actually a true story! This happened to one of my friends!**
>
> Female, 16-18

An additional example of TFGBV mentioned in many of the FGDs was "the Hwana incident," a case of harassment. A girl was physically attacked at a motorcycle event, and a video of the incident circulated online. The girl in the video received a huge amount of hate speech through comments, many of which argued she had been dressed in an "inappropriate" fashion and that she should never have attended such an event in the first place. Comments also encouraged further acts of violence against her, and supported the assaults she was subjected to. In the FGDs, many people perceived and condemned the hate speech as examples of violent behavior and TFGBV. However, some participants reinforced the victim-blaming attitudes posited by the commenters, blaming her for going to the event and not being dressed modestly.

COVID-19, GENDER, AND CYBER VIOLENCE IN KRI

"Not a genuine Kurdish woman": Dashni Morad, a human rights activist, singer, and gender equality advocate, was targeted with TFGBV while working with the Barzani Charity Foundation (BCF) to distribute food packages to vulnerable people in poorer areas of KRI. She received hundreds of anonymous and non-anonymous social media messages from cyber assailants, falsely accusing her of "selling herself" and receiving favors, and sexualized images and video clips accusing her of "immodesty" of not being a "genuine Kurdish woman" and bringing in "European lifestyle and perverting Kurdish norms and traditions." (Begikhani)

Platforms and TFGBV

As discussed, young adults in KRI are aware of the threats posed by TFGBV. Participants associated different online platforms with varying prevalence and types of TFGBV. For example, among both men and women under the age of 35, TikTok is perceived to be the platform where most TFGBV occurs. It is perceived that images often are stolen from Instagram and Snapchat. Specific platform functions were also perceived to further enable TFGBV, such as the live stream functions on TikTok and Facebook where trends and content are shared for financial gain, and the Facebook comment function which generates harassment in the form of cyber-bullying and hate speech. Participants also discussed organized Telegram groups where users steal and distribute women's photos to blackmail them for money, and acknowledged that the platform's structure makes blocking or reporting such groups harder.

> *You join a group and can access many photos and personal stuff. You see 100s of photos of women. The group owner threatens the women to pay him money. He threatens them to share videos and other stuff about them if they don't pay him money.*

Male 19-24

Perpetrators Are Usually Known

Participants widely believed that in most cases of TFGBV, the perpetrator is usually known by the person subjected to the violent act. Perpetrators may include friends or (extended) family members such as cousins and in-laws. Participants perceived TFGBV perpetrators to be acting with intention, incentivized by money, recognition, sex, or other gains.

> *My account was hacked once. (...)The person [perpetrator] was actually a friend of mine. He did that just to put me in some sort of problems.*

Influencer

It is important to note that both men and women perpetrate TFGBV, although there are perceived behavioral differences between perpetrators of different genders. Male perpetrators are associated with threats, assault, image-based abuse, and impersonation, while female perpetrators are associated with harassment and victim-blaming language.

> *By the way, most of the negative comments are written by women. This is usually a reaction from the women who are not given the same freedom as the writer of the post or the girl in the photo.*

Influencer

Drivers of TFGBV

A variety of individual, societal, and structural factors must be accounted for when considering why individuals perpetrate TFGBV. These drivers and individuals are strongly influenced by the meta-norms, power structures, and hierarchies present in their society. Among those meta-norms are gender "ideologies" (as referred to in the BDM), which influence individual and collective behaviors, what is perceived as acceptable, who bears responsibility for certain actions, or determines which rules become formalized in the legal framework and how these rules are applied. Therefore, a prerequisite to understanding TFGBV in KRI is a comprehensive understanding of the existing gender norms that enable these behaviors. A discussion of existing gender norms is provided in part 1 of the following section of the report.

With this understanding of gender norms in KRI, possible drivers of TFGBV were analyzed through the differentiated experience of two fictional characters (Layla and Ahmed) in a TFGBV case. Their story is based on a highly common scenario of TFGBV and served as a conversation starter in the FGDs. Such scenarios are a common qualitative data collection method and were used to encourage FGD participants to share what they perceive to be the drivers and consequences of such behaviors without talking about themselves. By presenting the parallel fictional experiences of Ahmed (a perpetrator of TFGBV) and Layla (the person subjected to TFGBV), different expectations and interpretations of their behaviors based on existing gender roles and norms will become apparent. While this story telling approach was selected to show participants how drivers of TFGBV materialize, the drivers discussed in this story are generalizable to other TFGBV cases where the same dynamics apply.

The following section will discuss how KRI gender norms influence men and women and the experience of the two characters, followed by how those same gender norms influence how networks and institutions react to TFGBV. Below is a visual summary of the scenario featuring Layla and Ahmed.
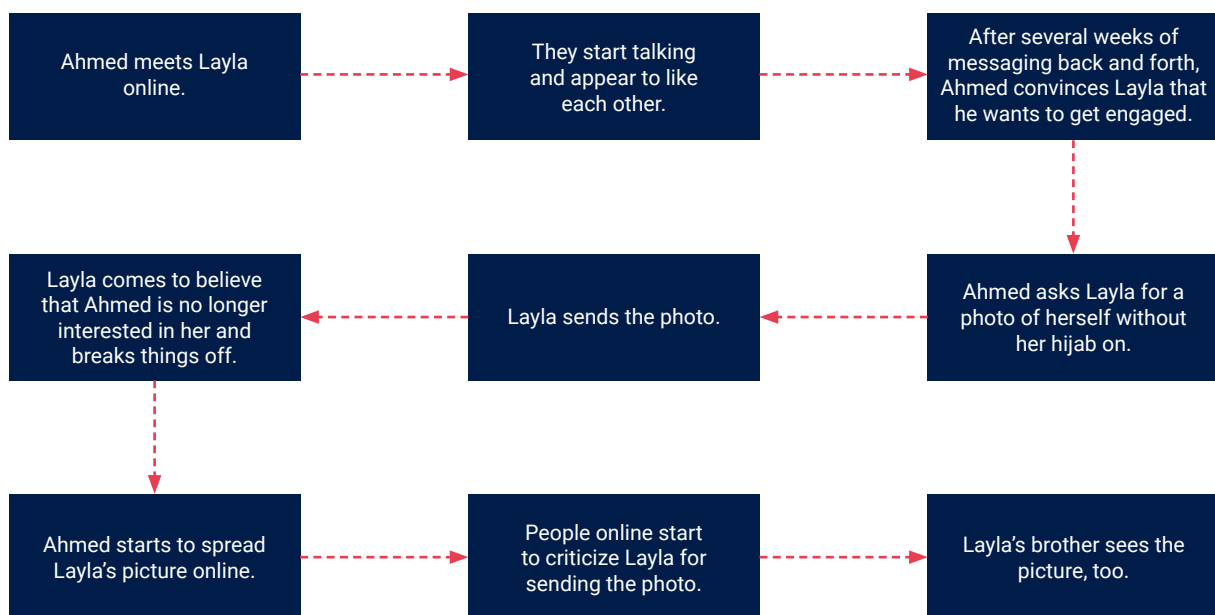

Figure 1: Visual summarizing the scenario of Layla and Ahmed as used during data collection.

Online and Offline Gender Norms

Gender plays a significant role in shaping identities and experiences, influencing the activities people participate in and the roles people assume within their families and society. Gender norms and expectations can be deeply ingrained and have far-reaching impacts on individuals and communities.

In conservative societies such as KRI, gender norms often create clear and distinct expectations, roles, rights, and responsibilities for each gender. Individuals are expected to behave in a particular manner based on their gender. In KRI, men often hold positions of authority as heads of households and primary family breadwinners. Strength, confidence, rationality, taking care of one's family, and helping others are idealized qualities associated with masculinity. While at the same time dominance, violence, and control of women are also associated with masculinity. These beliefs result in men having more freedom of action than women, and men having different, often lesser, consequences for behaviors that, if perpetrated by women, would be met with much more severe consequences. Moreover, belief in the necessity of male dominance over women is closely supported by KRI societal beliefs regarding the importance of hierarchy and respect—beliefs that can be used to justify the use of violence, particularly to "discipline" women.

> *It is patriarchal society that discriminates between men and women; men are always right no matter what the situation is.*
>
> Male, 19-24

Comparatively, women in KRI primarily hold positions at home, maintaining the household and caring for children. Respectability, loyalty, and subordination to men are generally considered to be desirable feminine attributes, and women are depicted as sensitive, fragile, and easily manipulated. Women are tasked with protecting the honor and reputation of men and family, a burden that is used to justify various harmful practices against deviant women including stigma, avoidance, gossip, violence, and sexual control. As a result, and in contrast to men, women's freedom of action in KRI is limited to behaviors deemed appropriate to their gender, with these limitations being enforced by male family members and internalized by other women.

> *Women are bearers of our honor in this society. The woman has to accept that.*
>
> Male 16-18

In this context, interactions between girls and boys, women and men, tend to be limited, with institutions such as schools and social spaces for outings being separated by gender. Nonetheless, and irrespective of the context, individuals strive for social interactions and connection with members of the other gender. Everyone wants to belong, be seen, and valued by others. Humans are social animals. Therefore, in a context where opportunities to interact with members of the opposite sex are limited, technology provides an opportunity to circumvent preexisting social barriers in relative privacy. In practical terms, interactions between girls and boys, women and men, tend to occur through social media platforms.

Gender at Play: Layla's and Ahmed's Journey with TFGBV

The story of Layla and Ahmed allowed participants to identify and discuss drivers of TFGBV and its consequences. In the story, Ahmed, 26 years old and Layla, 24 years old, have been exchanging messages online. At the request of Ahmed, Layla shared a picture of herself without her hijab. The relationship ends when Layla realizes that Ahmed is not interested in a serious relationship. In retaliation, he threatens to share the picture of her without a hijab online, eventually making good on this threat. As a result, online attacks and harassments ensue against Layla.

While both parties willingly took part in the interaction and breached the societal separation between men and women, their experiences are significantly different.

Layla's Journey

Bearing the Blame

Participants initially held Layla responsible for being subjected to TFGBV. Layla's actions, such as talking to the opposite sex and sending a photo without her hijab, were interpreted as being the result of flaws endemic to her status as a woman. Such flaws include being naïve, weak, and fragile. FGD participants also claimed that "she should have known better" than to engage in such behavior. This is a common sentiment in discussions of gender-based violence, where the person subjected to TFGBV's behaviors are scrutinized more than the perpetrator's actions. Such societal norms perpetuate victim-blaming and make it difficult for individuals subjected to TFGBV to seek justice and support.

Other participants justified Layla's actions by saying she has not received enough love from her family and is resorting to risky behavior to get love and attention. This perception completely neglects the human need for love and attention, indicating a possible misunderstanding of the types and sources of love that human beings tend to seek throughout their lives.

❝ *Because it is a blasphemy to chat with a boy and it does not matter if the boy is bad and the girl had a good intention; in the end it is the lady that should pay.* **❞**

Male, 19-24

Participants viewed Layla's actions as socially unacceptable because they violated gendered expectations and norms. As a result, participants perceived Layla as being responsible for the resulting violence against her, demonstrating strongly rooted victim-blaming beliefs. Participants placed the blame on her and retrospectively interpreted all her actions as socially reprehensible: "she shouldn't have removed her Hijab", "she should not have sent a picture," and "she should not have been talking to the opposite sex from the start."

> *Layla was mistaken. She did this first and nobody forced her.*

Female, 35-50

Patriarchal values and beliefs in KRI society are upheld by both men and women. Indeed, female participants demonstrated an internalization of their alleged limitations as women, referencing these limitations to explain Layla's behavior.

> *R6: Because the girl is weak. Because girls are not brave enough to face the challenges they face, that is why they make mistakes.*
>
> *R4: Yes, by nature, girls are not powerful enough to face those problems.*

Female, 16-18

Female participants also used victim-blaming language towards other women and individuals subjected to TFGBV, further confirming their role in upholding the patriarchal beliefs in KRI society. Women's roles as agents of patriarchy and perpetrators of TFGBV, mainly through victim-blaming and hateful comments on social media, was frequently mentioned among both men and female participants.

> *I think Kurdish women have accepted patriarchy themselves. Women are not united; they even compete on who is more submissive to patriarchy. Most of the negative comments on social media against women are actually written by women!*

Teachers, 35-50

Interestingly, female participants acknowledged that the current structure of KRI society is not safe for women due to its patriarchal nature. They also viewed men as a potential source of violence, suggesting that many recognize the overall risk of GBV. However, some viewed men as a potential ally and a source of "protection" against GBV. It is important to note that this perception of men as possible allies and protectors differed between individual participants. While some perceived men as protectors, others perceived them as being part of the problem, contributing to KRI's patriarchal structures by undermining women and making women dependable on men.

> **R4 :[...] Your family, particularly the male members, made you feel weak, so you relied on them all the time [...].**
>
> **R6: No, my family loves and respects me, and I feel safe with the protection they provide; they are like a mountain in my back.**

Female, 25-35

Severe Consequences for Layla

By breaking societal rules regarding interactions between men and women, Layla was expected to face severe social consequences that would significantly impact her life. Possible sanctions range from the deprivation of her rights, such as going to school, having freedom of movement, and phone usage; social marginalization such as the loss of friends; being disowned by her family; to forced marriage or even physical violence, including so-called honor-killing.

All of these potential consequences are dire. To avoid them, Layla was expected to either commit suicide or to run away (including emigrating). Participants held different points of view regarding whether suicide was Layla's first option or not. While the severity of these consequences may vary depending on the personal circumstances of each individual subjected to TFGBV, the belief among participants that Layla could end her own life (notwithstanding suicide being prohibited in Islam, the majority religion in KRI) as a "remedy" to the violence she experienced strongly demonstrates the impact of victim-blaming beliefs.

> **If someone cannot take the idea of killing herself, they will expect her to disappear.**

Female, 35 +

Limited Interpersonal Support...

Furthermore, Layla may face significant barriers to receiving support in the aftermath of her experience. Individuals subjected to TFGBV are often met with limited support from both friends and strangers, who may avoid being associated with them out of fear of social sanctions against themselves. This lack of support can further isolate individuals subjected to TFGBV and reinforce the idea that they are responsible for the violence that they have experienced.

> **Normally women would not be supportive because they would fear for their own reputation. They are afraid to be blamed by their family for commenting on Layla.**

Male, 25-35

And Limited Institutional and Family Remedies

Participants seldom discussed seeking support from the police and judiciary system as a viable remedy for Layla. Instead, participants mentioned the shortcomings of KRI law enforcement, such as corruption, limited sentences, and the duration of investigations, in addition to established gender biases and victim-blaming beliefs held among security personnel and judges.

Participants also discussed that instances of family support for Layla and other people subjected to TFGBV were likely dependent on the individual family, adding that true familial support would likely be rare. Despite this, participants acknowledged that that in some instances people subjected to TFGBV could receive support from their family, particularly if the family is considered "supportive" and "educated." If that is the case, the one subjected to TFGBV is expected to seek their family's assistance. Participants described familial support as the family being open to listening to the target's side of the story. However, there was agreement that disclosing the violence to the family may lead to additional violence against the target, ranging from depriving the person subjected to TFGBV of their rights to physical violence and murder. These are the risks of seeking support from an "unsupportive" family.

> **Girls are very afraid when they face problems to talk to their parents, even when they have never directly or directly known the perpetrator.**
>
> Female 19-24

This absence of familial and institutional remedies further isolates individuals subjected to TFGBV and places the burden on them to resolve the situation individually.

No Right Answer for Layla

Although Layla, and other individuals subjected to TFGBV, have limited remedies and avenues for support, the actions or remedies she decided to pursue were often interpreted (by both male and female participants) in terms of her gender's perceived flaws. For some participants, Layla seeking support from her family or the authorities was associated with her being "smart" and "educated," suggesting that her not using those remedies makes her "stupid." This appears to contradict participants' prior discussions of the punitive treatment women face from both the justice system and their family, and contradicts the belief that seeking institutional and familial support could be considered a "smart" decision. This appear to be another display of harmful gender and victim-blaming beliefs.

Participants suggested that if Layla were to decide to commit suicide, this would be an example of a woman being "small minded," in the sense of having lesser intellectual capacity. However, if Layla chose to not commit suicide, participant discussions suggest that she would be perceived as having "failed" to clear the dishonor brought to her family, thus another way in which Layla and other targets of TFGBV could also be construed as having a "smaller mind." These findings suggest that people subjected to TFGBV are unable to make an entirely correct decision, demonstrating harmful gender and victim-blaming beliefs in action.

> **With all due respect, women have smaller minds than men that is why some of them resort to committing suicide.**
>
> Male, 35-50

Participant interpretations of Layla's actions as being innate flaws of her status as a woman, rather than a consequence of the societal pressures and expectations placed upon her, highlight the importance of addressing and challenging the gendered expectations and norms that underpin TFGBV in KRI.

TFGBV as a Learning Experience

Despite being subjected to TFGBV, participants expected Layla to bear the burden of responsibility for the actions of her abusers and learn from the experience. They expected her to focus on "rebuilding herself" by taking actions that will "cancel out" such behavior. It is interesting to note that language around "self-development" was used by participants who expected Layla to "learn her lesson." In other words, participants expected her, after having broken the (gendered) rules, to return to "her place" as a woman. This expectation among participants was particularly troubling, as it can further perpetuate the cycle of violence and further reinforce the idea that Layla, and other targets of TFGBV, are responsible for what happened to them.

> " *If she is smart, she will learn from her mistake and disconnect from all social media in order to focus on herself and her health; only great success can make people forget about scandals.* "
>
> Female 25-35

Participants also suggested that to "rebuild herself," Layla should consider expressing her side of the story over social media. However, participants believed it would be necessary for her to "admit that she made a mistake" before explaining her side of the story. Thus, participants' preexisting victim-blaming beliefs caused them to expect Layla to take responsibility for the situation. However, participants suggested that while this action may result in support for Layla, it may cause further harassment. Based on the discussion above, it is important to note that it is likely that the benefit of this course of action depends on having a "supportive family," particularly supportive male family members. Some FGD participants referenced Layla's "intentions," mirroring preexisting perceptions of people subjected to TFGBV as only truly being victims if they "have done nothing wrong." For example, women subjected to TFGBV are considered to have "done [something] wrong" if they were dressed in certain ways or had previously interacted with the perpetrator.

In conclusion, findings showed that all of the remedies available to Layla consisted of her taking responsibility, and facing severe consequences, for actions perpetrated by Ahmed.

> " *If she comes alive out of this problem, she will not make the same mistakes again.* "
>
> Male, 35 +

Ahmed's Journey

"Men will be men"

In contrast to Layla's experience, who receives blame for what happened, Ahmed's experience is different. While participants did not admire, support, or otherwise condone his actions, perceptions of Ahmed's behavior appear to be products of broader societal expectations placed on men in KRI. In many societies, as in KRI, men are socialized to be dominant, aggressive, and sexually assertive, leading to the normalization of behaviors like harassment, objectification, and violence against women. As a result, FGD participants were not surprised by Ahmed's actions, given their understanding of the societal norms and beliefs shaping his behavior.

While Layla's actions were interpreted as a result of her naivete, a perceived feminine trait, Ahmed's actions were interpreted as rational, a perceived masculine trait. Participants perceived Ahmed's actions as being motivated by an expected outcome. The possible outcomes shared by participants include:

☑ Love and attention: Some participants suggested Ahmed's actions were motivated by his desire to receive continued attention from Layla after the end of their contact. This answer was primarily given by male adolescents, who appear to consider love and relationships as logical motivators for TFGBV. This indicates a potential misunderstanding among participants of what constitutes healthy relationships and appropriate behavior in intimate relationships. This confusion between love and violence is highly problematic.

☑ Revenge: Participants suggested that Ahmed, hurt by the end of the exchange with Layla, would be motivated by a desire for revenge. This could be interpreted to be in accordance with perceived and expected masculine traits of dominance and control over women.

☑ Money: Participants frequently suggested that Ahmed may have been motivated by money. Some perpetrators of TFGBV blackmail their target, asking for money in exchange for not posting the content in their possession. This was frequently mentioned as a potential motivator for Ahmed, despite him having already released the picture.

☑ Sex: Participants also frequently suggested that Ahmed may have been motivated by sex. Perpetrators of TFGBV may use the content in their possession to coerce or blackmail the person subjected to TFGBV into engaging in sexual activity with them.

☑ Recognition from Peers: Participants suggested that Ahmed may have engaged in TFGBV to gain social status or recognition from his peers.

☑ Fun and pleasure: Participants conveyed the notion of "men will be men," and that Ahmed's actions could be explained by a desire for enjoyment and fun with no consideration of his actions' consequences.

It is important to note that the aforementioned motivations provided by participants are shaped by a complex interplay of sociological and psychological drivers, where social and gender norms influence beliefs and interpretations of behaviors.

> ❝ *He might use it against her to go out with him.* ❞
>
> Male, 16-18

Ahmed Absolved of Accountability

In the presented narrative, Ahmed was not held responsible for his actions. This is in major contrast to Layla, who incurs harsh social sanctions for her violation of gender norms that frown upon talking to the opposite sex. Although participants did not mention Ahmed's communication with Layla as being a transgression of social norms during data collection, they did acknowledge that Ahmed transgressed social norms by asking for Layla's picture. This request for a picture was perceived as reflecting his true and "bad" intentions, specifically by conversing with and asking for a woman's picture without the intent of marrying her. Although Ahmed was perceived to have bad intentions, participants placed the blame on Layla for sharing her photo, claiming that "she should have seen it coming" or "she should know better." Ahmed is not blamed for what happened.

> ## *I don't think Ahmed will behave; there are men who are gentle but if you look at the majority; it would be hard to believe that Ahmed would behave and treat the case with care.*
>

Participants often excused Ahmed's actions on the basis of his age, perceived lack of maturity (despite being 26 years old), possible mental health issues, possibility of being unemployed, and the commonly held belief that " young men are like that." While some excuses provided to deflect Ahmed's responsibility may be legitimate challenges faced by young men in KRI, it is important to acknowledge that such reasoning undermines men's individual agency. By attributing Ahmed's behavior to his age, lack of maturity, mental health issues, unemployment, and societal expectations, participants absolved him of any accountability for his actions.

> ## *A that age, young boys are stupid.*
>
> Female, 25-35

No Consequences and Behavioral Reinforcement

Contrary to Layla, who participants perceived would face severe consequences, Ahmed was perceived to likely no consequences (an option never mentioned for Layla despite her being the one subjected to TFGBV). Participants suggestions of that whatever consequences Ahmed would face, if any, was less severe compared to those mentioned for Layla. Possible consequences for Ahmed sanctions include social exclusion, legal consequences, and violence from Layla's male relatives. Although death was mentioned as one potential consequence for Ahmed, it was mentioned significantly less frequently for him compared to Layla.

It is worth nothing that participants in ages between 35 and 50 expressed confidence that perpetrators would face social sanctions, despite limited evidence to support this assertion given in responses of participants from other age groups. There was a strong consensus among all participants that Ahmed will very likely not face any consequences. This raises questions about the effectiveness of such social sanctions, and whether older participants, due to their life experience, have witnessed more instances of social sanctions in such cases or instead are more disconnected from the realities of communal responses to TFGBV.

Interestingly, some perpetrators may commit TFGBV with the explicit intention of social sanctions. For example, the family of the person subjected to TFGBV may request that the perpetrator and the one subjected to TFGBV to be married. The perpetrator may have wished to be married to their target, committing an act of TFGBV to achieve his own goals.

> ## *He just uses it as a weapon to persuade the girl and her family. This act would force the woman to accept marrying the person!*
>
> Male, 35-50

FGD participants held varied opinions about Ahmed's behavior in the aftermath of the TFGBV. While a few speculated that Ahmed, upon realizing the severe consequences of his actions, would delete the photo and abstain from repeating similar behavior, the majority of participants disagreed. According to them, he would likely not face any consequences, potentially leading him to repeat this behavior with others. Moreover, participants emphasized that repeated behaviors may lead to a perpetrator becoming desensitized to the consequences of their actions, exacerbating the issue further.

Furthermore, participants highlighted the critical role of social reinforcement in shaping Ahmed's future behavior. They opined that if Ahmed continues to receive positive feedback and recognition from his social circle, his actions may be reinforced, leading to future transgressions. Additionally, the lack of accountability, social sanctions, and legal consequences, reflective of an environment where TFGBV is not seen as being adequately harmful, may also reinforce Ahmed's behavior. Social reinforcement and lacking institutional responses may create a harmful feedback loop where a lack of consequences causes TFGBV to be further normalized, deepening the issue.

> *I think because society is on his side, he would repeat the same with other girls. That is a positive encouragement for him. This is encouraged by society, so he won't think he has done any wrongdoing!*
>
> FGD, Journalist

In conclusion, while serval participants were optimistic about Ahmed's ability to learn from Layla's experience and change his behavior accordingly, the majority of participants expressed concern over the long-term implications of Ahmed's actions. As opposite of Layla's experience, it is expected that "he [Ahmed] will come out alive of this and he will make the same mistakes."

Gender at Play: Reference Networks and Institutions in TFGBV

In any case of TFGBV, there are numerous intertwined drivers that lead to a perpetrator's behavior. While the previous section presented how drivers affected the person subjected to TFGBV (Layla) and the perpetrator (Ahmed), this section considers the role of reference networks and institutional structures in contributing and reacting to TFGBV.

Passive Acquiescence to Active Participation in TFGBV

The Family's Role

The family plays a large role in shaping individuals' perceptions of acceptable social norms and behaviors, playing a significant role in instances relating to TFGBV. In KRI, where a family's honor and reputation are social assets, a probable consequence of TFGBV was seen as damage to Leyla and her family's honor and reputation as a result of her sending a picture of herself. The head of the family may consider this an act of impropriety and immorality, potentially feeling responsible (as part of his gendered role) to restore the family's honor. The FGD participants mentioned that it was likely that he would punish Layla for her behavior. Possible punishments range from verbal abuse to physical violence or even murder (so called "honor killing"). This stems from a societal expectation that women's behavior needs to be "corrected" by male family members.

Participants said that, in some cases, other family members such as Layla's' mother and brother(s), may be viewed as having failed to control her. These family members may face similar or less severe sanctions, demonstrating once more the belief that girls and young women are irresponsible or naïve, and that close relatives are responsible for controlling them and their actions.

In contrast, the perpetrator's family reputation is typically not harmed in any significant manner, and family members are unlikely to face sanctions for their relative's actions. Some participants even mentioned the possibility of the perpetrator's father being proud of his son. This further demonstrates families' role in reinforcing and enforcing harmful beliefs and gender norms in KRI.

Participants also mentioned that families have the potential to hold positive "supportive" roles during cases of TFGBV. If a family intervenes and is perceived as siding with the person subjected to TFGBV (especially her brothers), participants suggested that social sanctions might be lessened. However, under the guise of "education," the below quote clearly highlights how familial "support" may be accompanied by abuse and the belief that the person subjected to TFGBV must be led to a "right path."

> *People nowadays are educated enough to listen to Layla, advise her, and lead her to the right path. They will definitely blame and admonish her, but they may help her and stop this scandal. And our society is like that, if one is supported by her family, especially her brothers, they will leave her alone saying that if her family supports her, she is not to blame.*

Female, 35-50

The Role of Friends and Peers

Friends and other peer circles can also influence attitudes and behavior towards TFGBV, both positively and negatively. Participants felt it was unlikely for Ahmed's peers to hold him accountable for his actions or enact any severe sanctions. Several even mentioned that it was likely that he would be praised and supported.

Present among FGD participants was a perceived confluence between a perpetrator's behavior and how they may be influenced by their social circle. Participants suggested that individuals who surround themselves with people who exhibit positive behaviors and values are more likely to adopt those same positive traits themselves. Colloquially this could be considered the "good people being influenced by good friends" phenomenon. However, this perceived confluence was also acknowledged to occasionally have the opposite effect, during which individuals may be negatively influenced by their social circle. If someone surrounds themselves with people who exhibit negative behaviors and values, they are more likely to adopt those same negative traits themselves. When participants were asked if they think Ahmed, knowing the consequences Layla faced as a result of his actions, will behave differently in the future, they responded that they expected him to continue or accelerate such behavior in the future, adding that his peers may start threatening Layla or other women for photos. Participants perceived Ahmed, as a result of his "bad behavior," as having "bad friends" that will encourage and adapt his behavior, demonstrating the aforementioned belief regarding "bad friends" encouraging "bad" behaviors.

While attitudes and behaviors of a perpetrator's reference network are important possible drivers of TFGBV and could be positively leveraged to influence individuals against committing TFGBV, it is also possible that this belief is rooted in a desire to diffuse the perpetrator's responsibility by blaming his peers. Participants perceived Ahmed's peers as potentially trying to take advantage of the situation, suggesting they may blackmail Layla for their own reasons, whether those be money, additional pictures and videos, or sexual gains.

> *I think his friends might ask Ahmed to send them the photo so that they can threaten her to send us more photos, too!*
>
> Male, 16-18

Comparatively, participants suggested that they expected Layla's peers to provide very limited support if any at all, and discussed that the consequences of supporting her would be much more severe. In the current context of KRI, the person subjected to TFGBV is often socially isolated, as friends and peers try to avoid being associated with the person subjected to TFGBV or her behavior. This fear among bystanders further limits the support that people subjected to TFGBV may have otherwise received from empathetic individuals.

> *Some of her close friends may stop being friends with her and refrain from getting involved.*
>
> Female, 25-35

The Community's Role

The community's level of support for those subjected to TFGBV is derived from the community's social and gender norms. These norms effectively direct a community's response to all perceived offenses against societal expectations, including those based on gender. Participants perceived that Layla's community believed the sanctions imposed on her were warranted by her actions. This perception corroborates past cases of TFGBV, in which people subjected to TFGBV have been sanctioned by their communities via cyber bullying, hate speech, and victim-blaming. These communal actions increase the fear of being associated with the person subjected to TFGBV, a fear not limited to peers and friends but among members of the larger community as well.

In one TFGBV case that occurred in early 2023, a woman was assaulted on video. Afterwards, actors on social and traditional media disseminated the video of the assault, leading online users to harass and blame the woman, who they believed was wearing revealing clothing. In this case, the perceived transgression of social norms, such as wearing revealing clothing, led community members to use physical violence against this woman as a way to "correct" her behavior. Meanwhile, the online comments harassing and blaming this woman for the assault demonstrate how technology ensured that this violence was known to all other potential "offenders."

> *In Hwana; the group of youth gathered for motorcycling and they beaten a lady who went there with a rather nude outfit. It was very bad and I think social media encouraged them to do that by standing against those girls and keep fueling the anger of the youth by saying that these girls are bad.*

Male, 25-35

Institutional Failures

Role of Law Enforcement and Lacking Services

Several different views regarding the response and expectations of law enforcement on cases related to TFGBV were identified among FGDs participants and interviewees. Those who suggested reporting TFGBV to authorities were often in the age of 35-50, and this sentiment was held among both men and women. These views offer valuable insights into participant perceptions of the legal framework surrounding TFGBV. It is encouraging that participants expressed trust in the effectiveness of the legal system, particularly with regards to prosecuting perpetrators, especially given the widespread prevalence of TFGBV. Comparatively, participants below the age of 35 did not mention similar levels of trust in the legal framework and law enforcement, raising questions about the factors influencing this difference in perceptions. It is possible that older participants, due to their life experience, have seen more successful cases tried against perpetrators of TFGBV. It is also possible that they are more disconnected from the realities of the support that the KRI judicial system actually offers to individuals subjected to TFGBV.

Many other participants expressed distrust in the legal system and were concerned by a lack of laws to protect individuals subjected to TFGBV. Although participants acknowledged that progress has been made in improving the juridical system on domestic violence, they highlighted existing loopholes and implementation issues of such laws. Currently in KRI, TFGBV perpetrators are often expected to avoid imprisonment as a result of monetary resources or political affiliations.

> *When the perpetrator is arrested, he will be put in prison for a short time. They are fed well, for an amount of money, they will be released in a political way. After that, he just walks out and commits more crimes. I think the law against those people should be much tougher!*

Female, 19-24

Many of the interviewed stakeholders and influencers described police and judges as unprofessional, biased, and unable to treat sensitive cases with confidentiality. To add to this institutional mistrust, some interviewees mentioned instances where individuals subjected to TFGBV were subsequently threatened by the authorities. One influencer reported being threatened by security forces because her organization arranged an event on women's rights. By perpetrating TFGBV, security forces, as implementers of the law, severely undermine the ability of individuals subjected to TFGBV to trust them as an effective remedy to their problem.

> **The police and the people who deal with these cases look at the woman as guilty!**
>
> KII, project manager

> **There were times that the police and the security forces were actually the danger for me! How can I report to them when they are the threat themselves.**
>
> IDI, influencer

The legal process for TFGBV cases is also reported by the stakeholder interviewees to be time consuming, occasionally taking up to four years to conclude. Additionally, gathering what is considered sufficient evidence by the court is very difficult. FGD participants also saw procedural requirements that a male relative of the female subjected to TFGBV being involved in the proceedings further negates the legal system's effectiveness. Particularly, in cases where women and girls do not want their family involved. These narratives and institutional failings contribute to a sense of unreliability and distrust towards the authorities from people in need of such services.

Juridical framework in KRI

Although the Iraq constitution of 2005 states that "Iraqis are equal before the law without discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, origin, color, religion, sect, belief or opinion, or economic or social status" (article 41), it excludes some of the most important rights for women such as the right to choose a partner in marriage; and rights surrounding divorce, custody, and inheritance. The presence of this controversial article allows sectarian and religious disputes to influence laws in ways that may violate many of the rights and privileges granted by the Iraqi Personal Status Law No. 188 of of 1959.[1]

While the Iraqi constitution provides that "all forms of violence and abuse in the family, school, and society shall be prohibited" only KRI has a law on domestic violence which "prohibits physical, sexual, psychological, socio-economic violence and harmful traditional practices perpetrated within families." However, implementation of the law remains a challenge largely due to lack of political will and commitment, limited financial resources, and lacking technical capacities.[2] Efforts to pass a law against domestic violence at Iraq's federal level have stalled in recent years and are pending in the Parliament, resulting in the lack of provision and availability of an appropriate legal framework for the Family and Child Protection Unit.[3]

A law to penalize people who use cellphones to harass others was approved by the Kurdistan Region's National Council (parliament) on May 19, 2008. Anyone found guilty of using a communication device of any type to threaten, curse, or publish private conversations or images faces a penalty of six months to five years in prison or a fine ranging from one to five million Iraqi Dinar.[4]

1   The Iraq National Strategy to Combat Violence Against Women 2018 – 2030 pg. 36
2   UNFPA. Assessment of the Needs and Services Provided to Gender-Based Violence Survivors in Iraq. 2018 pg. 22
3   3. https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/22/iraq-urgent-need-domestic-violence-law accessed on 29 May 2022. The draft law was published in 2015.
4   ALJAZEERA, Imprisonment for Those Using Cellular Telephones in Kurdistan Iraq, May 20, 2008.

Figure 2 Juridical Framework in KRI

Media Representation

The media can also be a negative force in preventing and destigmatizing TVGBV. Several participants referred to instances of the media amplifying past and facilitating future instances of TFGBV by circulating visual accounts of violence. One example included the role of media outlets and social media in "the Hwana incident" (previously described on page 19), during which a woman at a motorcycle event was attacked due to what she was wearing and her presence at the event. Some young men participants perceived media outlets' circulation of the attack video and images of the woman as an "indirect encouragement" of TFGBV, which manifested as harassment in comment sections. Hence, the media contributes to and enables instances of TFGBV and ensuing social sanctions against those subjected to TFGBV.

An interviewed social media influencer similarly considered media outlets to be "irresponsible" and "wanting to attract clicks, likes and comments," even if doing so enables future cases of TFGBV. She provided an example in which she commented on a Facebook post while GBV was being debated in the Parliament of Kurdistan. Media outlets took and quoted her statement without her consent, and harassment followed in the comment section.

> **I think it was not only about the people, but the media outlets were very helpful for them to incite violence against me.**
>
> IDI, influencer

This perception among participants that media outlets will try to receive more views, even if that means facilitating additional cases of TFGBV, likely acts as another deterring factor for those subjected to TFGBV and others, who may adjust their behavior as to avoid the media spotlight.

As presented in this section, existing gender norms in KRI contribute to the perception (and reality) that perpetrators of TFGBV will likely not face consequences for their actions, while the person subjected to TFGBV may face extreme consequences, including the loss of life. These same gender norms influence how reference networks and institutions react to TFGBV, with the majority of such networks and institutions implicitly and explicitly taking the side of the perpetrator. Change is needed.

Way Forward

Change is Needed

TFGBV in KRI is a matter of concern for many individuals and organizations alike. Participants agreed that there is an urgent need for change, and that this change needs to start at home or within the education system. Participants believed that the values that can help prevent or limit TFGBV in the community need to be taught from an early age, serving as a foundation for behavior and interactions later in life. Participants suggested that harmful gender beliefs may be learned through primary socialization at home and then can be addressed and reformed through secondary socialization at school and with peers.

> *I believe it begins in the home; parents should teach their children not to be treacherous and to respect other girls as they do their sisters and mothers.*

Female, 25-34

Furthermore, participants suggested that parents, teachers, and community leaders have a responsibility to create safe and supportive environments for children to grow and develop. By providing positive role models and opportunities for children to learn and develop positive values, the community can help create a more peaceful and harmonious society where instances of TFGBV become decreasingly frequent.

> *I would educate my child to have some values, but it takes some time. I think we can try to decrease, but we cannot eradicate these problems. I think if we started blaming Ahmed instead of Layla, that would be some sort of solution.*

Male, 35-50

Conclusion

Technology is a double-edged sword: one side fosters learning, communications, exchange of ideas, and economic opportunities; while the other side contributed to the development of another category of gender-based violence, causing some women in KRI to believe that technology's negative aspects outweigh the positive.

Despite the absence of data regarding TFGBV's prevalence, our qualitative findings demonstrate that TFGBV is a frequent occurrence in KRI, and that awareness and knowledge about TFGBV is high. The cases of TFGBV perceived to be most common in KRI are harassment and image-based abuse, with the most severe cases being damage to a woman's reputation through nonconsensual sharing of photos and so-called "honor killings."

TFGBV is driven by the same root causes as other forms of GBV: rigid gender norms and power. When gender roles and what is perceived as societally acceptable for men and women are rigid, consequences of stepping outside the gender "box" are severe but unequally applied based on the gender of the "transgressor."

These gender norms are subsequently internalized, informing the "glasses" people use to view the world around them and what behaviors they decide to exhibit. Gender norms inform who is seen as responsible for instances of transgressions, what consequences transgressors should face, and support they may or may not receive. In the case of TFGBV in KRI, the blame and ensuing consequences often fall on women. Male perpetrators, while not praised, are likely to not be blame and face no consequences. Families, peers, communities as well as institutions and media (the latter two being populated by individuals) share the same gender norm "glasses," ensuring that women are perceived to bear the brunt of blame and responsibility for TFGBV across all levels of KRI society and institutions.

For change to take place, such as adequate legal reforms and service provision for those subjected to TFGBV, it is imperative that these "glasses" be changed. Transforming harmful gender norms must be the priority, to ensure women and girls in KRI and elsewhere live in safe and equitable societies where technology expands their opportunities, rather than inhibits them.

Recommendations

The following recommendations, based on this formative research, are provided to inform TFGBV prevention and responses in KRI and Iraq.

Research: While this research provides insights on the drivers of TFGBV, it does not establish TFGBV's prevalence in KRI and Iraq. Additional research is needed to establish the prevalence of TFGBV in both KRI and Iraq, with a representative survey of different segments of the population. Such data would establish a baseline of TFGBV's prevalence, allowing authorities and civil society to track behavioral changes over time.

Practitioners and researchers may wish to consider incorporating TFGBV into pre-existing GBV data collection efforts. For example, TFGBV may be considered in the IWISH survey conducted by the Iraqi Federal Ministry of Health, to institutionalize this phenomenon and behavior as being of interest to the ministry.

Transformative Programming: Although our research demonstrated a high level of knowledge and awareness of TFGBV among participants, participant discussions suggest high instances of TFGBV in KRI. This implies a need to go beyond awareness raising and to instead tackle the root causes of TFGBV via gender transformative programming. All governmental, civil society, international organizations, and media institutions can contribute to this programing by implementing and/or funding projects intended to contribute to the following desired results:

☑ Families support their female relatives who experience TFGBV irrespective of the circumstances and hold their male relatives who perpetrate TFGBV accountable;

☑ Peers support individuals subjected to TFGBV irrespective of the circumstances and take a public stand against perpetrators;

☑ Communities challenge harmful attitudes and norms that excuse perpetrators and blame individuals subjected to TFGBV;

☑ Peers do not directly or indirectly encourage perpetrators of TFGBV;

☑ Men acknowledge and challenge their underlying assumptions about women and their position of power; and

☑ Women acknowledge and challenge their internalization of harmful gender beliefs and norms.

MAGENTA will contribute to this collective effort by 1) leading a SBC campaign aimed at bringing the root causes of TFGBV to the forefront of public discourse via media and community outreach and 2) implementing a young adult empowerment project to provide a space for self-reflection on harmful gender beliefs and norms and provide skills to take collective and individual action.

Policy and Legal Reforms: The adoption of an adequate legal framework to address TFGBV at the KRI and national levels is imperative to ensuring adequate penalties for perpetrators and may a serve as a deterrent for potential future perpetrators. MAGENTA emphasize that such pieces of legislation must not be used to curtail freedom of expression, noting the concerns raised on previous drafts of the Iraqi Cybercrime law. It is important to remember that because TFGBV is a multifaced issue, the sole amendment and implementation of a TFGBV legal framework without societal change is unlikely to lead to a significant decrease in instances and severity of TFGBV.

Any policy and legal reforms would need to be accompanied by mandatory participation of judges and law enforcement personnel in gender transformative programing. This programing will provide them with the necessary space to challenge gender biases and victim-blaming beliefs that may hinder their ability to implement and enforce legal reform.

Additionally, reforms may be accompanied by expanding the mandates of existing services relevant to GBV (such as DCVAW in KRI and FPU in Federal Iraq) to improve TFGBV prevention and responses.

Advocacy Towards Social Media Platforms: Social media platforms' user reporting systems and procedures must be adapted to the Middle East context. The reporting processes should be easily accessible within the platform, and appropriate action taken expeditiously.

Service Provision: While various relevant actors are addressing the underlying root causes of TFGBV via existing GBV prevention and response programing, the provision of specialized social services to individuals subjected to TFGBV (such as counseling, legal aid, and other forms of assistance) is necessary and can mitigate TFGBV's effects. Counseling can be especially important for those subjected to TFGBV, as it can provide a safe and confidential space for them to process their experiences and emotions, develop coping strategies, and rebuild their self-esteem and confidence. Comparatively, legal aid can help those subjected to TFGBV report the case, acting as an additional deterrent for potential future perpetrators.

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Annex 1

FGD sample

No.	Age	Gender	Language	Employment type
1	35-50	Male	Kurdish	
2	16-18	Female	Kurdish	
3	16-18	Male	Kurdish	
4	19-24	Female	Kurdish	
5	35-50	Mixed	Kurdish	Teachers
6	25-35	Male	Kurdish	
7	19-24	Male	Kurdish	
8	35-50	Female	Kurdish	
9	35-50	Mixed	Kurdish	Journalists and Company Managers
10	25-35	Female	Kurdish	
11	35-50	Male	Arabic	
12	35-50	Female	Arabic	

KII sample

No.	Organisation	Role
1	Service Provider	Technical
2	Service Provider	Management
3	Service Provider	Technical
4	Service Provider	Management
5	Service Provider	Management

IDI Sample

No.	Gender	Employment type
1	Female	Social Media Influencer
2	Female	Journalist and social media influencer
3	Female	Social Media Influencer