

BETWEEN
ADVOCACY AND
OUTRAGE –
A STUDY ON
TREATMENT OF
GENDER ISSUES
IN SOCIAL MEDIA
IN IRAQ

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BETWEEN ADVOCACY AND OUTRAGE – A STUDY ON TREATMENT OF GENDER ISSUES IN SOCIAL MEDIA IN IRAQ

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INTRODUCTION

This study was launched with the aim to deepen our understanding of how women related topics are debated in social media in Iraq. It is based on a social media monitoring exercise conducted between April 2019 and November 2020 across two topics of interest: the kidnapping of women rights' activist Mary Mohamed and the current push for comprehensive domestic violence legislation.¹

The struggle for women's rights in Iraq underwent setbacks as well as progress in recent years. With the COVID-19 pandemic, gender based domestic violence has escalated dramatically. As early as April 2020, the head of community police Brigadier-General Ghalib Atiyah reported that since the nationwide curfew came into force the number of domestic violence cases reported to the police had increased by an average of 30%, with some areas even experiencing a 50% spike. Restraints on mobility and increased economic stress hit the most vulnerable members of society hardest. At the same time, unleashed by the political impact of the 2019 civic protests, women rights' movements have gained momentum among young people. Today, more than 130 civil society organizations actively struggle for women rights in Iraq. Women gather where possible, they support each other, and they make ample use of social media to strengthen their cause. Social media have helped women in Iraq to raise awareness, to network and to increase pressure on the (mainly male) political elites. Also in the field of journalism, gender related stories and advocacy are disseminated and spread more easily by use of social media. It is however common wisdom, that social media has also become a site of distress and fear for women in Iraq. Women and girls are targeted by violent practices such as bullying messages, hateful comments, threats, video clips through Instagram, and unsolicited pornographic videos received while they are dialing into a social event via a virtual chat room. Cyber harassment is a serious problem in Iraq and has prompted many women to withdraw from any online communication.

It is in that context that MiCT started investigating the culture of gender related social media debates in Iraq. The following report documents the findings from an in-depth examination of online debate pertaining to (1) the kidnapping of Mary Mohammed after her involvement in the anti-corruption protests that took place in October 2019 and (2) the push for comprehensive domestic violence legislation following the rapid rise of gender-based violence in Iraqi

households during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research, the study evaluates the prominent themes in online discussion relating to these topics and the key voices that propagate them, dissecting the ways in which the arguments surrounding both topics have become increasingly polarized.

¹ This MiCT study was funded by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German government.

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METHODOLOGY

With the aim to deepen knowledge about the how and by whom gender related topics are debated in Iraqi social media, MiCT selected two topics for an in-depth analysis that proxy feminism debates in Iraq and that produced ample online communication:

- **The kidnapping of Mary Mohammed:** Mary Mohammed was one of the activists heavily involved in the Iraqi anti-corruption protests which took place at the end of 2019 and which focused on calls for meaningful reform in the Iraqi government. She was kidnapped in October 2019 in Baghdad by an unknown group due to her involvement in the protests and subsequently released after 11 days of being both physically and psychologically abused. Early November 2020 a video was released of Mohammed by her kidnappers, in which she discusses an alleged affair she had with Abdullah Al-Kharbit, an MP from the Qarar parliamentary coalition.
- **Domestic violence legislation:** In Iraq, Article 41 of the Penal Code (1969) grants men the right to discipline their wives and children as they see appropriate, rendering women vulnerable to domestic violence. Due to public pressure from civil society organizations, the Iraqi parliament has recently been working on new legislation to address the problem of domestic violence against women.

Methodologically, case studies are designed as in-depth investigation of communication practices. Namely, we investigated frames and style of language, stakeholders and opinion leaders in the debate. The findings of that investigation are indicative of how related topics are commonly debated. They are assumed to represent a culture of debate, that is reproduced on other occasions pertaining to similar topics as well. The findings of this study shed light on this culture and pave the way for further research.

For the monitoring of social media debate on these two topics Zinc Network, a London based data analysis firm, was assigned by MiCT as a research partner. In the implementation, both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis were combined. Analysis was focused on Twitter and Facebook.

Zinc Network created Boolean search queries to collect data for the two topics. In order to inform the search queries a list of terms relevant to each case study and the wider context was compiled through desk research, followed

by an iterative process of data cleaning in order to ensure the Boolean queries produced relevant data. These search queries were used to collect data from social media intelligence and content analysis tools CrowdTangle and Meltwater.

CrowdTangle enabled Zinc to run category keyword searches against a pre-defined list of public Iraqi Facebook pages, to ascertain the leading posts across the platform ranked by total interactions. Leading stories for each category were qualitatively analyzed in regard to frames and style of language.

Meltwater enabled the same category searches to be set up to collect data directly from Twitter's application programming interface (API), limited to Iraqi tweets only (based on users self-locating in Iraq). This enabled Zinc to analyze the data and compare and contrast it with the Facebook insights and narratives. Specifically, Meltwater allowed to shed light not only on how Twitter conversations trended over time, but also on influential voices on the platform in terms of volume and impressions and top performing content across Twitter discussions.

Due to Facebook's API restrictions, Facebook analysis was restricted to public pages, meaning that any personal messages or posts shared in private groups remained beyond the scope of this report. The lists of publications and Facebook pages were compiled through desktop research that aimed to provide a representative picture of the Iraqi digital media space.

Particular posts were chosen for analysis of frames and style based on their performance relative to comparable posts, as determined by data produced by the social media intelligence and content analysis tools. Sentiment analysis was conducted through comment coding, for which the top 50 comments for the Facebook and Twitter posts referenced within the report were evaluated for content, tone and political sentiment.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: MARY MOHAMMED

Mary Mohammed was one of the activists heavily involved in the Iraqi anti-corruption protests which took place at the end of 2019 and which focused on calls for meaningful reform in the Iraqi government. She was kidnapped in October 2019 in Baghdad by an unknown group due to her involvement in the protests and subsequently released after 11 days of being both physically and psychologically abused. Early November 2020 a video was released of Mohammed by her kidnappers, in which she discusses an alleged affair she had with Abdullah Al-Kharbit, an MP from the Qarar parliamentary coalition.

- Mary Mohammed's kidnapping case was one that produced a deeply polarized online debate in social media. Mohammed's involvement in the October protests and her burgeoning media presence after her kidnapping solidified her for some as the face of the Sunni resistance against the Iranian backed Shia political elite, but as a threat for others.
- Interestingly, though the dominant group that partook in the October protests were Shia, with relatively limited involvement from the Sunni communities, in social media Mohammed became a lightning rod for tensions more generally between Sunni and Shia communities in the country.
- These tensions go back to sectarian divisions inside the protest movement: while the Shia protestors were calling for the Iraqi government to address mass unemployment, mass poverty, and corruption within political institutions, they perceived the Sunni resistance as calling for reform that would take the country back to pre-Iraq war Sunni supremacy.
- As such, Mohammed, a Sunni woman, was seen as a threat due to the Sunni resistance claiming her as a symbol on facebook and twitter.
- There were two prominent hashtags used across both Twitter and Facebook, #اخوة_ماري or #اخوة_ماري_ونفتخر .
- The first hashtag translates to "brothers and sisters of Mary", and the second is a variation of the first hashtag, translating to "brothers and sisters of Mary and proud."
- While these hashtags were primarily used by those who were in solidarity with Mohammed, they were also used by the Shia opposition that aimed to discredit her.
- When Sunni accounts used these hashtags, it was usually accompanied by text that depicted Mohammed as a virtuous heroine who represented the wider struggle for oppressed Sunnis to reclaim their status within Iraq. On the other hand, the Shia opposition also used these popular hashtags, but as a way to discredit this Sunni backed resistance.
- Two key tactics were used to discredit a Sunni backed movement; attacking Mary Mohammed's character and criticising the integrity of Sunni men. For the former, prominent Shia voices on social media took to framing Mohammed as a prostitute. In doing so, they only emboldened Sunnis to more vigorously defend Mohammed's honour, even going as far as to attribute saint-like qualities to her. For the latter, many Shia accounts on Twitter and Facebook took to using the popular hashtag of 'brothers and sisters of Mary' to frame Sunni men who wanted a political revolution within the country as violent extremists.
- Some Shia activists online took their criticism of Sunnis a step further, derogatorily accusing the Sunni backed resistance of using their women as political pawns, and comparing Sunni women to Jihadi brides and prostitutes.
- Mohammed's case ultimately demonstrates the way in which Iraqi women who involve themselves in political debate within the country are not judged for their political activism but instead their persona is iconized and dragged into patterns of sectarian conflict.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

In Iraq, Article 41 of the Penal Code (1969) grants men the right to discipline their wives and children as they see appropriate, rendering women vulnerable to domestic violence. Due to public pressure from civil society organizations, the Iraqi parliament has recently been working on new legislation to address the problem of domestic violence against women.

- Within Iraqi online debate, there is vocal support both for ending the violence that women endure at the hands of those closest to them, and for enacting stronger legislation to deal with this problem.
- This was particularly evident on Twitter where a campaign to pressure the Iraqi parliament to pass the domestic violence legislation gained popularity at the beginning of June. Each day Twitter users participating in the campaign highlighted the number of days it had been since the start of the campaign as a way to demonstrate the amount of time which had passed without members of parliament making measurable progress to enact this legislation.
- On Facebook, there were significant conversations around the different forms that domestic violence can take, such as fathers beating their daughters, husbands sexually assaulting their wives and young girls being married off to old men. These posts then highlighted the importance for the legislation to address more marginalised forms of domestic violence.
- One strong camp opposing the legislation in social media debate is spreading the view of domestic violence as a trivial issue when the majority of the population is facing hunger, poverty, unemployment, and a lack of electricity and other basic necessities.
- There is also division in online debate traditional, Islamic norms and what is perceived as secular, Western legislation. The dominant logic is that Iraqi society has lost its moral integrity due to a Westernization of the culture, and it is only through a return to the enlightened teachings of Islam that society can be restored, and women respected. This was the case for both Kurdish and Arabic language commentary.
- Lastly, there was a clear concern that women would use this legislation to their benefit in the court of law by divorcing husbands, gaining sole custody of their children, and managing to steal most of their husband's financial assets in the process.
- Online discussions surrounding the domestic violence law were at their most positive when the law was framed less as one focused on addressing gender-based violence and more on addressing the diverse forms of violence that affect women alongside children, the elderly, the disabled, and men.
- Ultimately, any campaign focused on increasing support for such legislation ought to (1) frame the issue of domestic violence as contributing to the overall degradation of the quality of life in Iraqi society (2) frame the legislation to tackle domestic violence as being both in line with and rooted in Islamic teachings, and (3) frame it as comprehensively targeting domestic violence that affects all demographic groups.

CASE STUDY 1: MARY MOHAMMED

Introduction

Mary Mohammed was one of the activists heavily involved in the Iraqi anti-corruption protests which took place at the end of 2019 and which focused on calls for meaningful reform in the Iraqi government. The October protests were prompted by former Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi's decision at the end of September 2019 to demote Iraq's popular counter-terrorism chief, reportedly due to Iranian-backed politicians in the country feeling threatened by the popularity of Lt. Gen. Abdul-Wahab Al-Saadi. The decision sparked outrage on social media, prompting activists to call for protests on October 1st (2019) due to both the decision to demote Al-Saadi and a strong ongoing feeling amongst the Iraqi public that the government is corrupt, and failing to provide basic public services and employment opportunities.

In addition to their frustration with the government, the protesters were angry at Iran's influence over Iraq's internal affairs, accusing Iran of being complicit in Iraq's governance failure and corruption. This is largely due to the fact that Iran's influence in the country has increased since 2003, with the Iranian government having close ties to the Shia ruling elite in Iraq and backing the Shia militia-dominated Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

These are issues that have sporadically caused anti-government protests in Iraq over the past several years, but the October 2019 protests were the largest and most violent since the US-led invasion in 2003 that overthrew Saddam Hussein. The most prominent of the protests took place in Baghdad's Tahrir Square with Mohammed in attendance. It was there that she was kidnapped by an unknown group due to her involvement in the protests and subsequently released after 11 days of being both physically and psychologically abused.

Mary Mohammed's kidnapping case did not gain much media attention again until early November of 2020, when a video was released of Mohammed by her kidnappers, in which she looks visibly exhausted and emotionally distressed. She discusses an alleged affair she had with Abdullah Al-Kharbit, an MP from the Qarar parliamentary coalition. Since the release of the video, Mohammed has asserted that her kidnappers forced her to lie about having an affair with Al-Kharbit and threatened to kill her if she did not comply with their demands. She claims that she has never met the MP and only agreed to make the video because her abductors had assured her that they would only publish the video if she participated once more in the protests upon her release.

It is noteworthy that Mary Mohammed is one of many individuals that were kidnapped in Iraq due to their involvement in the anti-corruption protests, with a member of the Iraqi High Commission claiming that, since the beginning of Iraq's nationwide protests in October of 2019, at least 121 activists have been kidnapped or assassinated. There is much suspicion within Iraqi society as to who is kidnapping

these activists, with one group arguing that it is either Shia forces or Iranian-backed Shia militia that are kidnapping and torturing these women and another claiming that these women are being used as political tools by the Sunni elite to further their political interests.

Analysis

This section will analyse the conversation on Twitter and Facebook surrounding Mary Mohammed's kidnapping case.

Twitter

Looking across 2020 as a whole, the highest volume of Facebook and Twitter conversations about Mohammed occur in August and November.

In August this was due to a viral video of Mohammed herself describing an incident in which, upon entering Ramadi, the capital of the Anbar Governorate, without a hijab on, she was met with a hostile group breaking the windshield of her car. She is seen crying and yelling passionately into the camera and the circulation of the video prompted increased volumes of conversation on Twitter of her case.

While there was discussion of Mohammed's right to enter into Anbar without a hijab, with some calling the region backwards for its views on women's dress, there was also genuine surprise that Mohammed is from Ramadi. However, more importantly, discussion began to centre on the identity of the perpetrators of the abduction and whether her case and the media attention it had garnered was fulfilling one side's particular political interests.



The fact that she was from Anbar was significant because it is a heavily Sunni dominated province of Iraq whose inhabitants largely come from the Dulaim tribe. It was also notably once a significant stronghold of support for Saddam Hussein. Mohammed's Anbar origins and protest participation led to one strain of tweets appearing to suggest that she is nothing more than a political pawn used by Sunni insurgents to further their efforts against the Shia.

For example, in the post below, which garnered 282 engagements, a user alleges that the Sunnis are shamelessly exploiting their women and compromising their honour to get back political control over Iraq. He asserts his confidence that free Shia women will always be crowned by their chastity and that their men's sacrifice without them will ensure their dignity. He ends the post with the hashtag Mary Mohammed, indicating that he thinks she is one of the many women the Sunnis are using in their supposed plot to regain power in the country.



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The opposing camp to this sentiment argues that the Shia are trying to discredit Mary Mohammed due to her Sunni background. This group claims that it was likely the Iranian-backed Shia militia or an unidentified Shia group that kidnapped Mohammed and are now actively working to discredit her. These sectarian tensions were only further heightened in November of 2020 when the video of Mohammed supposedly confessing to her alleged affair with the MP was released despite Mohammed refuting the claims she made in the video and setting the record straight that she had been forced to make the video by her captors.

Reactions to this video on Twitter can be categorized into two main camps, those that support Mohammed's assertion that she was forced to make the video against her will and those who aim to delegitimize her by framing her as immoral and sexually promiscuous. Of the former, one prominent tweet in support of Mohammed, claimed that she was one of many victims of the "Iranian terrorists", claiming that there are many more activists in Al-Khameini/Sistani political prisons and asserting that Mohammed is an honourable individual.



This tweet generated fervent debate, with some agreeing with the author and others mocking his passionate defence of Mohammad's character. For example, one woman replied to the tweet asking what the kidnapping of Mary Mohammad had to do with Sistani. Moreover, she argued the case of her affair had been settled because she confessed to it and derogatorily calls her a "Jihadi Nika/prostitute".



المتحدة 2/2
@Surraa_2

وك انتة شدتلوص 😞
السيستاني شدخله بماري ام الموطا؟
وثاني شي هي البنت دتعترف بنفسه
وتكول ببيسي وموطا وناشره حتى المسجات
وك انتة زمااااا لو قرد؟!
وليش دتكذب وكاتب ببروفيلك موسوي وطالب حوزة، هيه مال كلاوات 😞
كول ابن الرقيقة او ابن جيهاد النيكاح 😞

That said, there was a lot of pushback to this point of view, with some tweeters arguing that those slut-shaming her were hypocritical and self-righteous and that they were attempting to undermine Mohammed by demonizing her. Moreover, there were many positive responses back to the original tweet, with individuals implying that Mohammed was a symbol of the revolution in Iraq and praising her character.

Another tweet which generated fervent debate in its defence of Mary Mohammed came from an Iraqi journalist named Basim Al-Khazraji, which generated 643 engagements.



He highlights that the video was recorded when Mohammed was kidnapped ten months ago and blackmailed, and today it was published. He argues that they have done the same thing with other activists and that this is the preferred strategy of Iranian-backed Shia loyalists as a means to destroy Iraqi women's honour and reputation. Some tweeters argued that the video released did not have the effect the kidnappers intended, because it is so clear that she was making the statement against her will. For example, an NGO called "Tech 4 Peace" had 1,579 engagements on its tweet exposing the video as filmed under duress. They primarily point to physical signs of exhaustion, such as the severe dark circles under her eyes.

Tech 4 Peace التقنية من أجل السلام @iTech4Peace

#توضيح..

الكثير من متابعينا شاهدوا فيديو ماري محمد، من خلال التدقيق بالفيديو المصور لها مع صورتها بعد الافراج تبين ان الفيديو تم تصويره اثناء الاختطاف. ونوضح لحضراتكم ما يلي:

١. وجود الهالات السود تحت العين في الفيديو والصورة التي بعد الافراج (على الرغم من انها تستخدم

(1-3)



A tweet with 878 engagements further defended Mohammed, claiming that her abductors are traitors and had forced her to make the video, asserting that it was the followers of the Iranian supreme leader. This is likely referring again to the theory that Iranian backed Shia militia that kidnapped her, because the tweet suggests that her kidnappers “licked the shoe” of the Magi, an ancient Persian tribe.

ابو زهراء العراقي @ah_hashd

توضيح مهم من ماري محمد بخصوص ماحدث من إنتشار مقطع لها من منتهكي الأعراض والخونة اللذين لايمتلكون ذرة شرف يسمون نفسهم حامين الأعراض السفلة عبدة الرهبر الإيراني وهم يلعبون أحذية المجوس

#اخوه_ماري_ونفتخر
وأيضاً اطلقوا هاشتاك لنرعب هولاء السفلة
#متضامن_مع_ماري

1:55 6.1K views

3:24 pm · 3 Nov 2020 · Twitter for Android

90 Retweets 34 Quote Tweets 754 Likes



There appears to be a deep distrust of Iran’s alleged interference in the country and Iranian-backed Shia elements in Iraq among Sunni’s in Iraqi online public spaces and this plays a dominant role in the way the Mary Moham-

med case has been politicized by the varying sides of the Iraqi public, as either being a victim of Iranian backed Shia militia or being a political pawn of the Sunnis in power. Those who support Mohammed and hold her up as a symbol of the revolution are often Sunni and like to show their support of her by using the hashtags #ماري_اشرف_منكم or #ماري_اخوة or #متضامن_مع_ماري (Maryismorehonourablethanyou or #Mary’sbrothersandsisters or #Westandwith-Mary). An example can be seen below.



On the other hand, those who are against Mohammed have been circulating various photos and videos of her speaking in a lewd manner, smoking, wearing revealing clothing, or appearing intoxicated as a means to defame her character.

One such tweet has 344 engagements and it circulates a video allegedly taken by the kidnappers, in which Mohammed speaks in a lewd and sexually promiscuous manner, smoking hookah, and exposing some private WhatsApp messages supposedly sent by Mohammed. She also describes alleged encounters with MP Abdullah Al-Kharbit in explicit detail. At the end of the video, there are screenshots of alleged WhatsApp messages that Mohammed sent to the MP, in which she is talking to him about arranging a meeting with her and her cousin, as well as bringing other girls for him to have affairs with. These screenshots are used to support the claim in the video that Mohammed engaged in an affair with the MP. The account that put out the tweet is likely from a Shia individual or group as the profile picture is of Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, the former deputy head of Iraq’s Hashd Al-Shaabi or Popular Mobilization Forces.



The majority of the replies to this tweet ridiculed Mohammed and the youth that had held her up as a face of the Sunni revolution. There was a lot of hatred towards from the Shia tweeters of those involved with the Sunni movement calling for a political return to pre-Iraq war era when Sunnis were in power in the country, with some tweeters going as far as to call the Sunni resistance extremists. Those who were supportive of Mohammed were already beginning to claim it was likely this video was taken under threat by her abductors and that this was evidenced by the fact that the opposition had used these exact tactics against other protesters before.

Diverting slightly from these camps is a Twitter thread that understands Mohammed's case as part of a larger phenomenon of both male and female Sunni activists being indiscriminately targeted, abducted and kept under inhumane conditions due to them publicly vocalizing their political beliefs, and points blame at individuals within Iraqi society. The thread was written by a journalist who asserted that he felt that due to the media attention Mary Mohammed's case had been generation, now was the right time to share the stories of a series of individuals he had previously interviewed after they were held in captivity. The thread received 841 engagements, with many of the replies sympathizing with the horrific circumstances that both Mohammed and these individuals faced.



In the first three posts, he details the kidnapping of one male victim who was arrested on Saddoun Street in Baghdad by an unknown force, then taken to an unknown location, put into one of many large cages, and subjected to incessant beatings and electrocution. He was then taken to two other locations, where he was subjected to the same abuse and starved.













The subsequent three posts detail the case of a male journalist and photographer who was surrounded by unknown forces while covering in Baghdad. He describes how ten individuals carrying weapons and driving in government cars apprehended him, confiscated his photographic equipment and started beating him, resulting in severe damage to his head, face, and hands. He then fainted and they put him in the trunk of the car in which they poured cold water over him to wake him up. They took his phone, tore his clothes off, and threatened to rape him while taking photos. They also allegedly recorded him barking like a dog while nude so as to further humiliate and blackmail him. From the tone of these posts, it is evident that the journalist's aim in writing this Twitter thread was not only to show that the Mary Mohammed case was not an isolated incident, but also to attempt to point to the Iraqi government as responsible for the abuse, abduction and humiliation inflicted upon these individuals in order to intimidate others from joining anti-corruption protests as he calls them out as being the ones responsible behind the kidnappings.

Facebook

The conversation on Facebook varied greatly from Twitter; the majority of the posts were from well-known Iraqi media outlets and their content did not take the same sectarian tone as the conversations on Twitter. Instead, they simply reported on the video allegedly released by Mohammed's kidnappers. That said, their posts prompted fervent conver-

sation, with the top ten pages with the highest traffic, yielding an impressive 308,968 engagements. This is evidence that many in Iraq were keeping a close eye on Mohammed's story and were heavily engaged in the debate surrounding the claims made in the video.

Facebook Engagements

Page Name	Total Interactions	Interaction Rate	Total Posts	Video Views	Post Performance	Page Likes
 Al Hadath Iraq الحدث العراقي	161,722	11.48%	1	3.19M	223.0x	1.41M
 Tech 4 Peace التقنية من اجل السلام	37,506	1.88%	2	—	4.5x	996,033
 Yalla يلا	32,081	1.06%	1	543,902	7.3x	3.02M
 Qanaa Al-Falouja قناة الفلوجة	28,676	0.34%	3	786,640	14.8x	2.79M
 اعلاميات العراق	25,325	2.62%	2	254,514	3.3x	484,190
 Utv	11,998	1.12%	1	274,080	22.5x	1.07M
 Irfaa Sawtak ارفع صوتك	4,281	0.07%	2	17,416	3.0x	2.87M
 بغداد	3,921	0.14%	1	151,057	1.5x	2.71M
 Alhurra Iraq الحررة عراق	1,856	0.07%	1	—	15.3x	2.60M
 AnchorWomen اعلاميات العراق	1,602	0.14%	1	33,410	6.9x	1.15M
 Haider Al-Musawi حيدر الموسوي	786	0.8%	1	25,602	1.2x	98,529
 Al Arabiya Iraq العربية العراقية	434	0.06%	1	12,893	6.0x	684,473

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The most engaged-with post came from the media outlet Al-Hadath Iraq, receiving 161,722 engagements and 3.2 million views for sharing the video of Mohammed.



This post likely had the highest number of engagements because Al-Arabiya/ Al-Hadath had the opportunity to immediately interview Mohammed following the release of the video. She reiterates in this interview that she was forced into making the claims because her kidnapers threatened to kill her if she did not comply. In the interview she stresses that she has never met the MP or anyone else she references in the video and that she would never had made such claims had she not been terrified. The outlet appears to take Mohammed's side in the story, as the caption above the video reads "Watch - What did the kidnapers bargain for with civil activist "Mary Mohammed" in exchange for her release ...Mary Mohammed, in an exclusive interview with Al-Arabiya / Al-Hadath, about the circumstances of her kidnapping from Tahrir Square by unknown gunmen."

The overwhelming majority of the comments in response to the post were sympathetic towards Mary Mohammed and fully believed her account of events, suggesting God would bring her justice. For the minority of commenters that were against Mohammed, they expressed their distaste towards the Sunni resistance of which she was a part, and a particular hatred of those who took part in the October anti-corruption protests in 2019.

The second most engaged-with post was from Tech for Peace, the same organization that prompted a significant conversation with their tweet defending Mohammed's version of events, received 37,506 interactions on its Facebook post. They posted the same content on Facebook as they had Twitter, with the post reading,

"Many of our followers watched Mary Mohamed's video, by checking the video of her with her photo after release, it was found that the video was filmed during the kidnapping.

We explain to you the following:

1. The presence of black circles under the eyes in the video and the picture after release (although she uses make-up in the pictures and videos when following her Instagram) and this is evidence that she was filmed in the video and does not have time to completely put makeup on to get rid of the dark circles.
2. The same colour of T-shirt in the video compared to the picture after its release.
3. The appearance of acne on the jaw from the side, as in the video, as well as in the picture after its release, which also indicates that the video was filmed during the kidnapping period!

Can you find any other signs or evidence?"



It is evident that Tech 4 Peace was central to the conversation surrounding the timing of the video and that they were working very hard to defend Mohammed by using photo evidence to prove that the video was taken during her kidnapping by her abductors. On their Facebook page, they identify themselves as an organization dedicated to "building awareness on current events in Iraq and across the Middle East in an effort to stop terrorist propoganda and the spread of false rumours through social media, which is disguised as real news." An overwhelming majority of the commenters on this post asserted that they already knew the claims Mohammed made in the video were inauthentic, because there were signs that she was forced to make it by her kidnapers at gunpoint.

Additionally, a few commenters mentioned the fact that the reason why they immediately knew that Mohammed was forced to make the video against her will was because they had witnessed others who were kidnapped for their partici-

pation in the October protests being forced to make similarly incriminating videos.

Interestingly, there were some who critiqued the outlet for sharing the story, claiming that even in refuting the video's authenticity they were adding fuel to the story and further ruining Mohammed's credibility and reputation. Lastly, there were a minority of commenters that purported to know the identity of the kidnappers, largely insinuating that it was the Shia government. The majority that supported Mohammed enthusiastically wanted revenge against the kidnappers and vehemently tried to frame Mohammed as an innocent heroine. Comments from Sunni accounts attempted to frame Mohammed as saint-like to counter the narrative peddled by Shia accounts that she was promiscuous as a means to ensure that she remained a respectable symbol for the Sunni resistance.

The remaining popular posts were simply reporting on the interview that Mohammed gave to Al-Arabiya/ Al-Hadath, defending herself.

Yalla posted a video.
1 month ago · 3,018,375 Likes · 3:06

أول رد من الناشطة "ماري محمد" عن فيديو علاقتها بأحد النواب: الفيديو صُوّر تحت تهديد السلاح



544K Post Views 616.7K Total Views

Why did this match the search?

👍👎🗨️ 20,655 🗨️ 10,829 🔄 596

قناة الفلوجة posted a video.
1 month ago · 2,788,192 Likes · 4:57

ماري محمد "تخرج عن صمتها وترد على مقطع الفيديو وماحصل لها #هذا_المساء"



693.2K Post Views 727K Total Views

Why did this match the search?

👍👎🗨️ 22,243 🗨️ 3,349 🔄 495

العراق posted a video.
1 month ago · 484,190 Likes · 1:13

ماري محمد توجه مناشدة للكائني وللشعب العراقي بعد انتشار مقطع الفيديو



183K Post Views 207.9K Total Views

Why did this match the search?

👍👎🗨️ 13,338 🗨️ 6,397 🔄 357

utv posted a video.
1 month ago · 1,070,214 Likes · 1:12

ماري محمد، بمقابلة خاصة تشرح كيف أنها سجلت المقطع الذي انتشر مؤخراً أثناء عملية خطفها وإرغامها على ذكر أنت_UTV #عراق_UTV #أسماء_سياسية



274.5K Post Views 285.7K Total Views

Why did this match the search?

👍👎🗨️ 8,293 🗨️ 3,434 🔄 266

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It is evident from the sheer scale of interactions that these four posts, with a combined 102,237 of engagements, that there was serious interest in the Mary Mohammed case across Iraq.

The comments under the first post from Yalla TV showed a similar sense of anger and outrage as the preceding posts, with the majority of commenters seemingly Sunnis that were calling for justice for Mary Mohammed, perceiving her case as an example of the corruption that they felt was plaguing Iraqi society and indiscriminately impacting Sunni civilians.

There was an overwhelming sense of hopelessness in the comments, with the majority of Sunnis seeing her case as just one example of why Iraqi society was beyond repair.

Conversely, the second post from the Fallujah page had the most polarized comment section, with half of the comments vehemently defending Mohammed, holding her up as the face of the Sunni resistance in the country and others accusing her of having been financed by the Sunni elite to galvanize Sunni youth into joining political demonstrations. Lastly, the comments under the third post from the Anchors of Iraq Facebook page solidified how polarized both sides are on the case of Mohammed. Those who are supportive of Mohammed unquestioningly defend her honour and claim her as a sister or a daughter. Those who are against the Sunni resistance in the country, see her as a threat and as such, wish to delegitimize her in any way possible through framing her as either an actress, a prostitute, or both.

The significance of these findings will be discussed in further detail in the pathway mapping section below.

Introduction

According to the United Nations, domestic violence is a widespread issue in Iraq, with 46% of women reporting abuse at home, a third of which is reported as being either physical or sexual assault. That said, over the past year with the global COVID-19 pandemic, gender based domestic violence has significantly escalated in Iraq. As early as April, the head of community police Brigadier-General Ghalib Atiyah, reported that since the nationwide curfew came into force, the number of domestic violence cases reported to the police had increased by an average of 30%, with some areas even experiencing a 50% spike. Moreover, the United Nations in Iraq (UNAMI) reported several brutal domestic violence cases during a single week of April, with spousal abuses, sexual harassment of minors, immolation, self-inflicted injuries and suicides due to spousal abuse being reported during this week. More specifically, according to an Iraqi Ministry Official the COVID-19 pandemic and general curfew enforced in the country to confront the virus has seen more than 300 incidents of domestic violence recorded, with at least 6 of those resulting in the murder of wives and 4 in the murder of young girls by their family members.

According to a well-known women's rights advocate in Baghdad, Hana Edwar, the reason for the significant increase in domestic violence is that families are spending an unprecedented amount of time together under one roof where something insignificant can prompt conflict that turns violent. This is aggravated by the fact that extended families will often live together in Iraq, and by the continued dominance of tribal customs and conservative religious beliefs around violence against wives and daughters. In Iraq, Article 41 of the Penal Code (1969) grants men the right to discipline their wives and children as they see appropriate, rendering women vulnerable to domestic violence with no ability to report or file complaints against the perpetrators. That said, the Iraqi parliament has recently been working on new legislation to address the problem of domestic violence against women due to public pressure from civil society organizations (CSO). A coalition of CSOs and local NGOs started a campaign to push members of Parliament to revitalize efforts on drafting domestic violence legislation and even held a meeting in Baghdad to draw up a law on domestic violence.

One of the major roadblocks to passing this legislation has been conservative Islamist parties and other more traditional voices who oppose the law and have made active efforts to block it, due to their apprehension at several of its stipulations. For example, they are reportedly concerned that it would include granting young girls and women the right to seek help in the event of domestic violence, that it would build shelters for domestic violence victims, grant them financial rights separate from their husbands and fathers, and make them essentially independent of men by gaining them greater education and employment opportunities.

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Ultimately, these voices within the country argue that they oppose the legislation because it would result in the disintegration of Iraqi families and the westernization of Iraqi society as women realize they can use the legislation to bully their husbands, divorce them, and gain their assets and children in the court of law. One parliamentarian, Hussein Al-Uqabi has summed up his opposition to the legislation by arguing “Is it reasonable for my daughter to leave the house due to a family dispute and be under the care of the police or the judiciary? Are they going to care for my family more than I would care for them? These legal articles are foreign to our Arab, tribal and religious societal reality, and have no connection to our reality [...] we will continue to reject it at all and will not allow it to be passed.”

Proponents that support the law have attempted to counter this argument by asserting that those who oppose it are misrepresenting the legislation as one that solely addresses the protection of women, when it in fact is focused on protecting all family members from domestic violence, namely men, women, children, grandparents, and the disabled. Moreover, they argue that the legislation has been designed with Islamic law and principles at its core, and that it could not possibly be against Islam when the Islamic faith itself calls for the dignity of every human being. These arguments were highly prevalent in the conversation on social media surrounding the draft domestic violence legislation as seen in the sections below.

Analysis

The Case of Malak Al-Zubaidi

Across 2020, the months of April, August, and November stand out as having the highest volume in engagement around issues of domestic violence. In April, this is likely to do with the wide media circulation of the story of a woman named Malak Al-Zubaidi, who was physically and mentally abused by her husband for months before he burned her alive. She was in hospital for several days, where she eventually died. The case sparked widespread outrage in Iraqi society, and many flocked to social media to express their anger and demand that parliament pass domestic violence legislation to protect victims of gender-based domestic violence. One of the tweets with the strongest engagement on Twitter was from the Ambassador of the United Kingdom to Iraq, Stephen Hickey, who expressed his solidarity with Al-Zubaidi and expressed his support for the United Nations working with the Iraqi government to address the issue of domestic violence through legislation. His post garnered 4,077 engagements and the majority of replies commended him for speaking out about the matter.














The UK Ambassador to Iraq tweeted expressing his sadness over the brutal murder of Malak Al-Zubaidi, with a note reminding people that domestic violence, be it psychological or physical abuse, is a worldwide problem. He asserts that Iraq is facing challenges regarding this issue, with an increase in the number of calls on help lines from domestic violence victims during the isolation period.

The replies can broadly be split into three categories: those who claimed the UK was hypocritical as it had its own problems with domestic violence, those who claimed that the UK should invest efforts into improving what they destroyed in Iraq through colonization and the war, and those who were pleased with the Ambassador's tweets but urged him to ensure that the money he was promising would not go into corrupt Iraqi politicians' pockets. This tweet displayed a flurry of replies particularly directed at the Iraqi parliament's inactivity in addressing domestic violence through comprehensive legislation, with many arguing that the government was offering lip-service to the issue with no genuine efforts made to pass this legislation. Overall, the comments were either incredibly critical of the UK and its legacy in Iraq or critical towards the Iraqi government. In general, however, it seemed that most people were not receptive to admitting there was a problem with domestic violence in Iraq.

The posts in April with the highest number of engagements on Facebook were similarly almost exclusively focused on the case of Malak Al-Zubaidi, with dozens of Iraqi media outlets linking to their coverage of the story, many of them garnering tens of thousands of engagements. In fact, as observed from the statistics below of the top 10 Iraqi Facebook accounts discussing the issue of domestic violence in Iraq during the month of April, there were a staggering 302,705 engagements:

April Facebook Engagements

Page Name	Total Interactions	Interaction Rate	Total Posts	Video Views	Post Performance	Page Likes
 الخوة النظيفة	84,738	1.53%	2	—	1.6x	2.77M
 قناة الفرات - Alforat TV	81,554	0.51%	3	114,972	13.8x	5.38M
 يلا Yalla	39,869	0.17%	8	414,914	-1.2x	3.01M
 بغداد	22,492	0.21%	4	—	1.7x	2.71M
 الاعظمية نيوز	14,179	0.64%	3	76,062	3.9x	741,751
 قناة السومرية Alsumaria TV	12,084	0.08%	4	—	1.2x	3.80M
 المربد AL-Mirbad	11,582	0.14%	4	—	2.1x	2.11M
 الحرة العراق - Alhurra Iraq	10,594	0.05%	9	75,353	2.1x	2.60M
 تلفزيون الشرقية AlSharqiya	9,969	0.1%	2	—	-3.6x	5.15M
 د. حنان الغتلاوي	9,116	0.14%	3	—	-1.7x	2.20M
 الحدث العراقي Al Hadath Iraq	6,528	0.16%	3	125,929	1.8x	1.40M

The “Clean Brotherhood” was the media outlet with the most interactions on their Facebook posts, a total of 84,728 across two posts. The first got 30,042 engagements and it showed graphic images of Al-Zubaidi in the hospital with the burns she suffered from the incident.



In the post, they outline that Zubaidi's case is the second assault affecting Iraqi women within hours of the country setting a national curfew, with the first case being that of a woman from the Kirkuk governorate that was raped by two members of the Security Forces who knocked her husband unconscious then proceeded to film themselves sexually assaulting her. The media outlet claims that it was Malak's sister that accused the husband of the crime, asserting that the man, a colonel in the Iraqi military, beat Zubaidi, burned her alive and left her to die without bothering to extinguish the flames.

Her story gained traction after the video of her screaming in the hospital was widely circulated on social media platforms. The outlet claimed that at that point in time the Iraqi government had not issued a statement about Malak's case, except for a statement given by the Ministry of Interior. The post concludes by highlighting a warning issued by the United Nations a few days prior to the curfew of a significant surge in domestic violence cases during COVID-19 quarantines and the fact that the Najaf court had indicated that the investigation into al-Zubaidi's sister's allegations would take some time.

The Clean Brotherhood outlet then proceeded to post another story later on (below), announcing that Al-Zubaidi had died after her internal organs had been poisoned, due to 50% of her skin being badly burned. The post earned a significant 54,699 interactions, indicating just how much traction this brutal and sombre story had gained.



Council of Ministers Approve the Domestic Violence Law Draft

While the case of Al-Zubaidi sparked a fervent debate online about the legislation in April, there was a more pronounced focus on the issue of domestic violence legislation during the first couple of weeks of August. This is likely due to the fact that, after persistent efforts from activists and NGOs to pressure the government, the Council of Ministers approved the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence and sent it to parliament's Women, Family, and Childhood Committee for voting to take place.

In fact, during the time period of just August 3rd to August 10th there were approximately 1,180 tweets on the matter with an average of 147 posts a day on the subject. A significant number of these tweets were celebratory, such as for example the ones below, which had 3,489, 742 and 457 engagements each:



Retweeted by **ibn Aliraq**  2



علي ثنسي 
@alithesecond1

...

▼ ومن بعد طول أنتظار .. وأخيراً
- مجلس الوزراء يصوت على مشروع قانون الحماية من العنف الاسري
بالمصادقة عليه وإرساله إلى مجلس النواب
- لجنة المرأة والأسرة والطفولة النيابية تشيد بتصويت مجلس الوزراء اليوم على
مشروع قانون الحماية من العنف الأسري

12:57 pm · 4 Aug 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

31 Retweets 7 Quote Tweets 678 Likes



Retweeted by **مريم حليم**



جواهر 
@zahraamazin8

...

بعد كفاح و نضال "110" يوم من المطالبة بـ
[#تشریح_قانون_العنف_الاسري](#)
مجلس الوزراء يصادق على قانون الحماية من العنف الاسري ويرسله إلى مجلس
النواب للتصويت

شُكراً لكل شخص ساندنا ولو بتغريدة وحدة، راح نضمن حق النساء و الأطفال!
❤️
🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏

12:23 pm · 4 Aug 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

37 Retweets 18 Quote Tweets 364 Likes



There was also an uptick of conversation around the topic of the domestic violence law on Facebook during the first couple of weeks of August, with the top 10 pages during this time period having a total of 97,173 interactions on their posts.

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August Facebook Engagements

Page Name	Total Interactions	Interaction Rate	Total Posts	Video Views	Post Performance	Page Likes
الخوة النظيفة	24,830	0.9%	1	—	-1.0x	2.77M
AlSharqiya تلفزيون الشرقية	16,032	0.31%	1	—	1.0x	5.15M
بغداد	15,334	0.19%	3	—	2.3x	2.71M
Iraqi Women Rights - حقوق المرأة العراقية	13,084	0.52%	10	187,338	3.7x	252,222
Government of Iraq - الحكومة العراقية	10,186	0.33%	2	—	1.6x	1.52M
Alsumaria TV قناة السومرية	5,654	0.04%	4	41,596	-1.3x	3.80M
Yalla يلا	5,418	0.09%	2	64,748	-2.5x	3.01M
شبكة العراق الاخبارية	2,252	0.23%	1	—	1.6x	987,937
Alforat TV - قناة الفرات	2,227	0.04%	1	—	-1.4x	5.38M
قناة الرشيد الفضائية	2,156	0.11%	1	—	-2.6x	2.04M

The Clean Brotherhood was once more the outlet with the most engagements, with their single post earning an impressive 24,830 interactions. The outlet was amongst the first to report that the Council of Ministers had approved the draft domestic violence law, arguing that this was a definitive sign that the country was headed towards criminalizing domestic violence and that this meant that Iraqi men could no longer act with impunity when it came to abusing and violating women.



The overwhelming majority of the comments on this post were negative, with approximately 75% of the comments being against the legislation and using humour and satire to distract from the news that the legislation was now being

seriously considered by Parliament. There was little to no sympathy expressed for women who had experienced domestic violence and as such, only a quarter of the commenters even saw a need for such legislation.

Interestingly, Al-Sharqiya was the outlet with the second highest number of engagements, despite the fact that with the Malak Al-Zubaidi case they had performed significantly less impressively. They had 16,032 engagements on their post announcing that the Council of Ministers had now approved the draft domestic violence law and passed it onto parliamentary committee to vote on, but unlike the Clean Brotherhood, they did not reveal any political opinion on the matter.

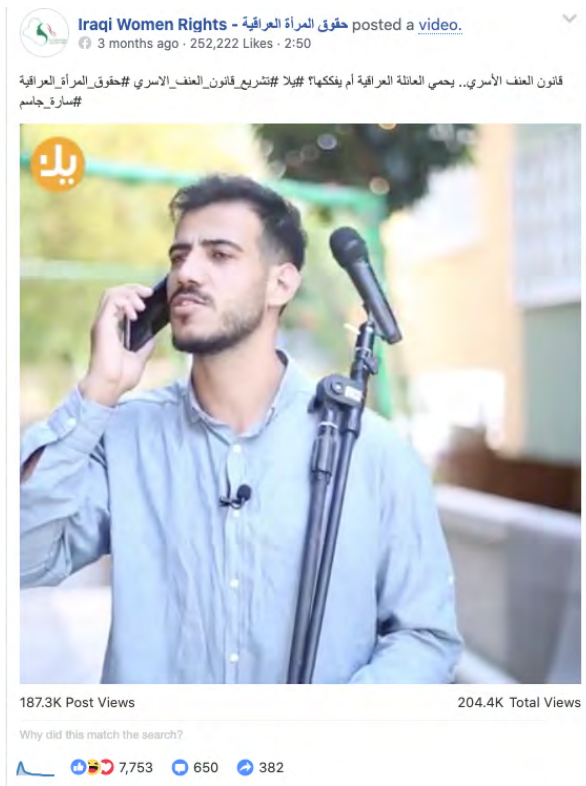


Al-Sumaria TV similarly published a post on the transfer of the domestic violence legislation from the Council of Ministers to Parliament which garnered 2,769 engagements. The post was also non-political in tone as the case with the Al-Sharqiya post, but it interestingly attracted far more compelling and inflammatory comments. The majority of the comments were negative in tone, with individuals calling for the government to focus instead on what they considered to be more pressing issues, such as violence inflicted by the military, police, and the government on its own citizens. There were also calls for the government to address serious issues, such as a lack of electricity, mass hunger, mass poverty, mass unemployment, and overall a low quality of life within Iraqi society.



Overall, analysis of the comments on the selection of posts highlighted above demonstrated that for many, domestic violence feels like a trivial and unimportant issue for the government to be dealing with, in comparison to the seemingly larger and more pressing issues Iraq is facing. There was a strong sense that more life-threatening issues such as violence by the military should be addressed first. In addition, even amongst those who were supportive of the legislation there was a strong cynicism prevalent in the comments around the ability of the Iraqi government to actually enforce the legislation.

Women's rights groups took a much more political stance on the matter, contrasting with the relatively neutral positioning of major news outlets. For example, the NGO 'Iraqi Women's Rights' had 13,084 engagements on a post sharing a video from the outlet Yalla TV, which attempts to raise awareness about the domestic violence law, captioned "Domestic Violence Law ... protects or dismantles the Iraqi family? # Yalla # Domestic Violence Law # Iraqi Women's Rights." The title of this video is clearly aimed at capturing the audience's attention and refers to a prominent argument in opposition to the domestic violence law: that it will corrode Iraqi family dynamics and values, because it attempts to replace Iraqi societal norms with a Westernized way of thinking. The speaker in the video goes on to refute the opposition's arguments and argues for the benefits of the law.



This post yielded the most diverse range of comments, largely rooted in the fact that the video frames the domestic violence law as being essential to preventing not just gender-based violence, but violence against children, old people, men, etc. As such, there was an almost equal division of opinions. Those who were emphatically in support of the legislation argued that anyone that abused their children or wives deserved to go to prison. There were also those who supported the legislation and argued that it was in line with Islamic law despite what many were saying.

However, the larger proportion of comments came from people who were against the legislation, but rationale was more nuanced than observed on some other posts. Some commented that domestic violence legislation is already in place and, as such, the problem is not the lack of legislation, rather a lack of implementation and enforcement from the responsible authorities. In addition, some argued that the legislation that is being promoted is flawed and needs to be far more comprehensive to address the problem.

Unsurprisingly, there were also comments from those who staunchly opposed the legislation, either because they feel it will destroy the Iraqi family unit, making it no longer the centre of society, or because they think that women will take advantage of the legislation to divorce their husbands, falsely accuse them of abusing them, and rob them of their finances.

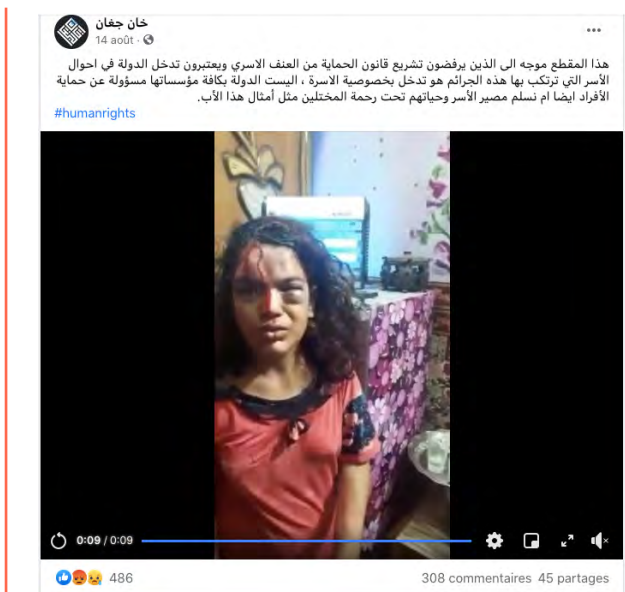
Conversely, a Facebook page, called Baghdad, published a post with 6,327 engagements that took a far bolder approach with its messaging, using a cartoon of a man holding a woman by her hair as she kneels on the floor,

with a black eye and blood gushing from her face. The man is ironically saying that the domestic violence law will harm family life in Iraq and the caption above the picture reads, "the Domestic Violence Law is a step in the direction of building a civilized country and a conscious society." The post is clearly designed to shock the viewer, so that they take a moment to reflect on the brutality of gender-based domestic violence.



Interestingly, as opposed to other posts, approximately 60% of the comments agreed that passing domestic violence legislation would benefit Iraqi society, with the caveat that they wanted the legislation to be balanced to ensure that it would not destabilize the Iraqi family unit and that it would also account for other forms of violence. That said, there were still approximately 35% of comments that were against passing the legislation, the majority of them citing that this legislation was nothing more than western values encroaching on Iraqi society to destroy conservative Islamic values. Moreover, there were those that expressed fear that wives would take advantage of the legislation to get the upper hand on their husbands when it came to divorcing them, gaining custody of children, and stripping them of their financial assets.

Interestingly, the topic of domestic violence against young girls also began to gain traction during the month of August, with the Facebook page, Khan Jggan publishing a post looking at the problem of excessive physical violence against girls in the Iraqi household. The post contained a harrowing video clip of a young Iraqi girl with her face completely bruised up and swollen, crying and screaming into the camera:



The caption above the video argues that those who oppose the enactment of the law because they consider it to be the state interfering in private family matters should reconsider their flawed logic. The post received 839 engagements and the majority of the comments were incredibly sympathetic to the young girl in the video. That said, the majority of commenters did not explicitly show support for passing legislation to protect children from domestic violence. While there were some that made the argument for this legislation, there were more who made the argument against it because they felt the situation was a private matter that ought to be dealt with on a family level.

There was also a strand of comments that sought to dismiss the issue in a nuanced way – commenting that Allah would bring justice to the girl through smiting the father. Whilst these comments were sympathetic to the girl, they deflected from a more constructive conversation on addressing the causes of the problem. Moreover, a small but loud group of commenters heavily criticized this Facebook page for posting such a graphic and disturbing video, with insinuations they were using the young girl as a pawn in their politicized messaging.

During the month of November, Facebook showed similar patterns to Twitter in that there was now far more of a focus raising awareness of specific forms of domestic violence in comparison with recent prior months. Moreover, as opposed to the most engaged-with posts of previous months coming largely from media outlets, there was a greater presence in November of NGOs and non-media campaigns dedicated to raising awareness of the issue of gender-based domestic violence.

The post with the highest level of engagements during the month of November came from the Baghdad Facebook page. The post garnered 5,260 engagement and raised the issue of child marriage, a topic which is widely controversial within Iraqi society.



The post shows a middle-aged man stood with his arm around a young teenage girl, and the caption reads "There was a tone of strong resentment on social media after it was revealed that a man in his fifties married a 14-year-old girl in Duhok. Child marriage is one of the types of violence against women, and there is an urgent need for a real law to protect the family that guarantees the rights of the individual according to humanitarian standards."

This post marks an interesting trend whereby, as society became more aware of the severity of the problem of gender-based domestic violence in Iraq, largely due to the pandemic and coverage of the subsequent rise in cases, those who champion solutions to the phenomenon appeared to speak more openly and confidently about the different forms of domestic violence that are plaguing Iraqi women and girls.

The NGO Girlsnotbrides argues that child marriage within the country has become more of a commonly occurring phenomenon in the last few years in the country largely due to Iraq's post-conflict context whereby there are currently 1.8 million internally displaced persons and 250,000 refugees from Syria that are facing extreme insecurity, poverty, lack of access to education, employment, and social opportunities. As such, these internally displaced families and refugees see child marriage as a way to deal with economic hardships, as well as protect their daughters from the increased violence they might face. This is largely because these families are still scarred by armed groups strategically kidnapping their girls and women, sexually assaulting them, and forcing them into slavery and marriage during the conflict.

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That said, while the conflict has aggravated the problem of child marriage, it is a phenomenon that has been around prior to the conflict with Iraq experiencing one of the highest rates of child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa. In fact, in various communities, child marriage is culturally and religiously practised, and this is justified by Sharia law which dominates the realm of family law in the country. Interestingly, despite this, the Iraqi Law on Personal Affairs No. 188/1959 sets the minimum age of marriage at 18 years and only allows the marriage of children between the age of 15 and 17 if their legal guardians approve of the union and the situation is considered urgent.

However, some Imams have disregarded this law, continuing to conduct child marriages between young children and older men without formal registration, leaving these young girls in a vulnerable situation where they have no legal rights or protection and are completely at the behest of their husbands. Moreover, some families support child marriage due to this belief that marrying off their daughters will ensure both the girls and their family's preservation of honour, because it prevents the girl from growing up and becoming promiscuous, bringing great shame to the family.

Thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, approximately half of the comments on the above post were poking fun at the situation and showing very little genuine concern towards the phenomenon of child marriage in Iraq. Additionally, approximately a quarter of the comments supported the marriage, arguing that for an impoverished young girl, it was a far better prospect to marry a wealthy older man than a younger man who could not afford to care for her and who would likely eventually abuse her out of frustration.

Finally, while half of the comments expressed sadness and frustration for the young girl's situation and for any other young girls being forced into child marriage, they pointed to the source of the problem as these girls' families. They argued that this was due to the fact that some Iraqi families looked at their daughters as nothing more than business propositions that they were happy to marry off to the highest bidder to avoid having to actually raise and support them. In fact, the majority of the commenters that expressed sympathy towards these girls focused on placing the blame on their families rather than the importance of passing legislation to put a stop to child marriage in Iraq. There were a minority of commenters that agreed with the post's assertion that legislation needed to be enacted to criminalize child marriage and ensure young girls were able to hold on to their childhood.

The Iraqi Women Rights group had similar posts during this month, but with an even more explicit focus on the nuanced and intersectional forms of domestic violence that Iraqi women experience. For example, in one post that garnered 526 engagements, they depict the real case of a young Iraqi girl who ultimately chose to get married at the age of sixteen to escape the constant emotional abuse that her father wrought on her and sisters.



She speaks of how at the time she was so desperate to leave her volatile home, that she did not have the right mindset to consider the implications of what she would be giving up, specifically her education and career prospects. She speaks of the wider societal problem within Iraq of fathers being encouraged to be disciplinarian in their parenting, especially with daughters, with paternal affection even being framed as sinful. She argues that it is precisely this style of parenting that contributes to the phenomenon of young girls being robbed of opportunities, due to most of them not being educated past primary level.

She asserts that had she grown up in a safe and encouraging environment, she could have led a very different life. The post concludes with a message from the NGO to halt gender-based domestic violence in order to ensure the end of child marriage, further insinuating these issues are connected.

Veering away from domestic violence against girls, the Iraqi Women's Rights Facebook page exposed a more taboo form of domestic violence during the month of November. The post generated 216 engagements, 46 of those being comments.



The post touches on how Iraqi women lack both bodily and self-autonomy. For example, it explicitly mentions how husbands are legally able to non-consensually film their wives during sex and more generally sexually exploit them with impunity. The woman they have interviewed argues that the majority of Iraqi women hesitate to speak out about the injustices they face, because they are ashamed of being victimized in such a way in their own homes and by their own husbands. She argues that since the curfew measures were put into place, instances of sexual violence have increased measurably in Iraq due to women being confined for long periods of time with their abusers.

While women have been able to come forward and speak of their husbands beating them, the norms around sexual immodesty have made it very difficult for women to feel comfortable talking about the sexual violence their husbands inflict on them. The NGO describes how one of the women they interviewed, Rasha, had visible bruises on her hands and feet, evidencing the fact that her husband was shackling and beating her during sex. When asked for clarification on what had happened to her, the woman describes how she faces various forms of sexual violence from her husband who would use her in his attempts to imitate pornographic films that he watched frequently.

They finish the post with her statement, "What I have been subjected to has not been publicly disclosed, because society will not accept my words. There are no laws that protect women, and in the end, I and those who are subjected to sexual violence are victims in this society." The post is clearly designed to both destigmatize the sexual violence that Iraqi women are facing at the hands of their husbands, and to raise awareness about the necessity of enacting a law that protects women against this form of violence. The aforementioned posts evidence the pattern of both Facebook and Twitter experiencing a more nuanced focus on different forms of domestic violence that are often marginalized in

Iraqi society, with individuals and groups urging their government to work to put a stop to these forms of violence and bring justice to the women who experience them through the Domestic Violence Law.

Interestingly, the majority of the comments under this post were immensely sympathetic towards the woman describing the horrific sexual violence and non-consensual filming she experienced, they expressed this through calling the husband a sadistic animal and lamenting about how Iraqi society has strayed so far from God and its Islamic morals.

That said, very few commenters bothered directly commenting on the subject of legislation, instead focussing on the necessity of restoring Islamic morals and dignity within society. Moreover, a portion of the comments pinned the root of the problem not in a societal-wide problem of gender-based violence, but rather in men's consumption of pornography.

Ultimately, the overall tone of the comments was incredibly dismissive about a political solution for the problem, claiming that the problem lay in people straying from Islamic teachings and principles.

Kurdish language commentary

Kurdish language discussion around the problem of escalating domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide curfew focussed on specific issues and differed from the focus of Arabic-language discussions. Two issues dominated conversations; the first being the efficacy of women's rights NGOs in addressing the problem of domestic violence in the region and, the second the sexual harassment that Kurdish women experience in the workplace and in public. This is likely due to the fact that the region is autonomous and therefore conversation was not dominated by discussion of the domestic violence legislation moving through the Iraqi parliament.

The Debate over Women's Rights NGOs

One of the stories that gained the most traction on both Facebook and Twitter was that of a female artist who, in coordination with women's rights NGOs, launched a campaign to bring awareness to the issue of domestic violence by hanging the dresses of women who face this abuse in the main street of Sulaimani. The project is entitled "Feminine" and involved an art campaign where dresses were displayed over a 4,800 metre distance. The campaign prompted passionate debates in Kurdish society, specifically around the efficacy and ethical dimensions of NGOs established to address the problem of domestic violence.

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One example of how much societal attention this story attracted can be evidenced in Rudaw Network's Facebook page's [post](#) on the campaign attracting 7,932 engagements



There were many comments that expressed displeasure at the campaign itself as they felt the campaign was disrespectful in its public display of women's clothing. That said, there was a sizable camp of commenters who argued that women ought to be protected and needed space within society to be able to voice their concerns around the violence they experience. This group of commenters stressed the importance of exposing domestic violence cases as a means to expose the root of the problem, which they define as the patriarchal mentality within Kurdish society.

However, when dissecting the trends observed in the comments under the post, the overwhelming majority of commenters were critical of women's rights NGOs, with some going as far as to argue that they were contributing to the problem of domestic violence against women. The comments largely criticize the way these organizations encourage women to stand up against their husbands and male family members, which they argue leads to an increase in domestic violence. Moreover, there were a few commenters within this camp that criticised NGOs for framing the problem of domestic violence as something that men are purely to blame for. Instead of being a problem whereby men indiscriminately and mercilessly abuse their wives, this group of commenters felt that it was instead caused by the behaviour of women, leaving men no choice but to reluctantly discipline them in this way. As such, they lamented the fact that NGOs were contributing to an escalation in women filling complaints against men in courts, a trend they saw as unfair and destructive to marriages and families.

There was the insinuation with these comments that prior to the NGOs corrupting these women's minds, conflict was resolved within the privacy of homes, as it should be.

Moreover, many of these commenters worried about the long-term consequences of NGOs focussed on women's rights, fearing that they encourage younger Kurdish women to adopt westernized ways of thinking in lieu of more traditional Islamic and cultural principles.

Comments such as this resulted in criticism of the women leading the organisations, suggesting that they are nothing more than divorced spinsters who could not even alleviate conflicts within their own families.

Critique of these NGOs not only came from individuals, but also from high profile personalities, with Islamic cleric [Mala Mazhar Khurasani](#) heavily criticizing their work on various media outlets and insulting the women leading these organizations.



This demonstrates the widespread perception among Kurdish society of a long-term rivalry between religious principles and campaign efforts for women's rights. For example, one camp of commenters iterated that legislation would be futile in protecting women's right because Islam and its principles already provided all of the means necessary to protect women. As such, the problem of domestic violence could be rooted in Kurdish society straying from Islamic principles and the Islamic faith rather than one rooted in toxic patriarchal norms.

Moreover, there were a portion of both male and female commenters who expressed their frustration at the conversation on expanding women's rights, arguing that women had already been granted more rights than necessary.

The Problem of Sexual Harassment

It is critical to note that the issue of the sexual harassment that women face in the workplace and more generally in public was especially prevalent in the Kurdish case study, with several Facebook posts and tweets analysing this problem. For example, [one post](#) from the Kurdistan 24 media outlet's Facebook page published in November

details a campaign launched to prevent female harassment in the workplace.

of the previous sanctions were lifted, causing rapid societal, political and economic changes. As such, while the majority of the commenters acknowledge that were most certainly a problem of harassment in the workplace, they framed the problem as one that was inevitable. They argued that women ought to have realized that working in offices would prompt harassment because they distracted their male colleagues who in turn could not control their urges. It was thus framed as a price that Kurdish woman would have to pay if they wanted to trade their domestic duties for traditional employment opportunities.



Similarly, another Facebook post in November highlights the problem of sexual harassment in Kurdish society, arguing that this form of violence indiscriminately targets women because they are essentially forced to put up with varying levels of sexual harassment by their employers and co-workers as they fear losing their job, should they complain.



The general sense in the comments under both posts is that the escalating phenomenon of women being harassed in the workplace is an emerging trend, given that in the Kurdish region, few women worked outside the home until 2003. At this point, the Kurdish region opened up and many

