

Women and Honour: Cyber Violence Against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan

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Internet and mobile phone usage has contributed to the circulation of rumour and a strong appetite for gossip and desire to 'dishonour'. It matters little that the alleged reports may or may not be true, the issue is, when seemingly plausible accounts are in the public domain, the lives of these women are in danger, including from honour-related killings.

Background

The media is a powerful actor in society. Media outlets, whether press, TV, radio or internet platforms, have the capacity to inform and allow for debate and deliberation. Hence they play an important part in the process of governance, as well as the ideological and cultural formation that leads to decision-making. The media can also act as a means to raise public awareness and change people's perceptions of gender roles and the notion of honour. As such, the media constitutes a power in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), a so-called 4th estate. How this power is mobilised is of great importance to understanding the limits and possibilities placed upon the struggle of Kurdish women for freedom, gender equality and social justice.

Positive Aspects of Cyber Media for Women

In the last decade, new information and communication technology has strongly affected the lives of individuals in Iraqi Kurdistan, shaping the relationship and interaction between people. Cyber media, which includes all kinds of online publications and interaction on the Internet and cyberspace, has a double-sided effect for women. On the one side, they have created a new space for women to reach out to the outside world and to engage in a new mode of interaction. Through this new space and mode of communication, women have been able to break the silence around gender-related violence, including honour-based crimes, and go beyond their immediate geographical location, participating in online debates, establishing

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solidarity networks, getting involved in petitions and national as well as international campaigns, and above all making their voices heard.

Negative Aspects of Cyber Media for Women

On the other side, this new mode of communication and interaction has placed women in the face of new challenges, founded on the very basis of the code of honour. These new information and communication technologies have provided a space for the reproduction of structural violence, cultural norms and patriarchal modes of interaction leading to honour-related violence. It has allowed the emergence of 'anonymous actors' playing around the notion of honour and the honour-dishonour equation. Our Research concludes that Internet and mobile phone usage has contributed to the circulation of rumour and a strong appetite for gossip and desire to 'dishonour'. It matters little that the alleged reports may or may not be true, the issue is, when seemingly plausible accounts are in the public domain, the lives of these women are in danger, including from honour-related killings.

Most of the women who experienced this form of violence are well-known figures, whose credibility and image play a vital role in their public standing. In a society where reputation and public credibility are core, it is inevitable that these women and their families are put under collective pressure which can end in isolation, suicide and even murder at the hands of male members of their families seeking to cleanse their "dishonour".

The 'game' consists of publishing and circulating 'dishonourable' and 'fabricated' pictures and footage of women, through the Internet and mobile phones to the public, writing defamatory reports and articles against them posted on the Internet, hacking their personal Facebook and email accounts, publicising their private data, threatening and stalking them, and practicing emotional and psychological abuse. In the subtle politics of demagoguery, they seek to incite public emotion, outrage & anger against outstanding women.

The ultimate aim of this new form of violence is to exercise power, placing women under a system of control, surveillance, attack and extreme fear. Moreover, as such attacks target mainly prominent women in the field of politics, media and activism, the aim is to silence and isolate them. In a society where honour and reputation are seen as the most valuable capital for women, the overall aim of cyber attackers is to cause permanent dishonour as well as disgrace, which can lead to murder, symbolic or real.

Actions Taken and Actions Needed

The situation has preoccupied women's rights activists who have organised campaigns against such acts, calling on authorities to adopt new measures to protect the targeted women. In 2008, the Kurdistan Parliament voted for Law number 6, which addresses defamation and the bad use of all means of modern communication. It criminalises the misuse of such means of communications, especially if it leads to "dishonouring" and violating "the private life" of individuals and putting them in danger. However, our research concluded that it is not always easy to document evidence of such abuses and to mobilise the police and judiciary to protect those cyber-abused women; the response of the authorities, both at the

level of policy and legislation, to this new form of cyber violence has not been focussed. Our study also found that the media in the KRI has not been able to develop a progressive gender strategy integrating professional media measures with international standards, including ethical conduct, objectivity, accuracy and balanced reporting to avoid sensational and patriarchal coverage leading to the reproduction of structural violence.

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