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YEMEN: “MY LIFE WAS COMPLETELY DESTROYED”: TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN YEMEN

Women in Yemen are facing online blackmail and harassment on the Facebook platform (hereinafter Facebook), facilitated by the failure of the authorities to take adequate measures to protect women’s right to privacy in online spaces or to provide redress to survivors, as well as the insufficient preventative action by Meta to enable and empower its users to understand and utilize individual security and privacy measures.

The authorities across Yemen must take concrete steps to address and prevent as well as provide redress and support for survivors of all forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TfGBV)¹ in Yemen. Also, Meta must take measures to meet its responsibilities to respect the human rights of its users, particularly those of women facing TfGBV and to adopt culturally sensitive policies.

Women in Yemen face systemic discrimination and endemic violence with devastating consequences for their lives. Their rights are routinely violated because Yemeni laws as well as tribal and customary practices treat them as second-class citizens.² Since 2022, the *mahram* (male guardianship) requirement has increasingly restricted women’s right to freedom of movement, their right to work, and their right to access healthcare and humanitarian aid.³ TfGBV is part of the ongoing cycle of violence and structural discrimination women face in Yemen on a daily basis.

To illustrate this, Amnesty International has examined the cases of seven women who were subjected to TfGBV on Facebook between 2019 and 2023 across three governorates in Yemen, including Aden, Ta’iz and Sana’a. All of the women were subjected to online blackmail and harassment through the non-consensual dissemination of images or sensitive information on Facebook in violation of their right to privacy.

Despite the prevailing culture of discrimination against women in Yemen and the women’s fear of victim blaming and social stigma, six out of the seven women interviewed took legal action by reporting the perpetrators to the police. Out of the six complaints, four reached the trial stage but only one ruling was issued on 30 January 2023 sentencing the perpetrator to prison and ordering compensation to the survivor, although the survivor is yet to receive any compensation. Two survivors later dropped the cases, one out of fear of being subjected to blackmail by the prosecution and the second because law enforcement authorities transferred her complaint to a distant district.

The survivors faced a series of barriers in their attempts to access justice, including physical violence from family members, stigmatization and blame by law enforcement and judicial authorities when filing complaints, and demands for bribes by law enforcement and judicial authorities to investigate abuses.

Moreover, Yemen lacks a comprehensive legislative framework as well as policy measures to recognize, prevent, document, investigate and address all forms of TfGBV. This allows TfGBV to be perpetrated against women with impunity and without proper redress for survivors.

None of the women interviewed had knowledge of how to report a complaint on Facebook in order to ask the moderators to remove the abusive content. However, all women were able to remove the abusive content through the help of local digital security experts.

¹ Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TfGBV) is any act of violence perpetrated by one or more individuals that is committed, assisted, aggravated and amplified in part or fully by the use of information and communication technologies or digital media, that disproportionately impacts women, girls and other people based on their real and/or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity and/or expression, causing physical, psychological, economic and sexual harm. Gender-based violence, including TfGBV, exists in a continuum between physical and digital spaces.

² Amnesty International, “Yemen’s dark side: Discrimination and violence against women and girls”, 25 November 2009, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde31/014/2009/en/>

³ Amnesty International, “Yemen: Huthis ‘suffocating’ women with requirement for male guardians”, 1 September 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/yemen-huthis-suffocating-women-with-requirement-for-male-guardians/>. See also: Amnesty International, “Yemen: End the male guardianship restriction for releasing women from prisons”, 25 January 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/01/yemen-end-the-male-guardianship-restriction-for-releasing-women-from-prisons/>

All the women told Amnesty International that the TfGBV they were subjected to had a severe and long-lasting impact on their socio-economic circumstances and/or mental well-being, including by causing feelings of fear, anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. One woman who was subjected to online blackmail reported attempting suicide in November 2022. Another woman told Amnesty International, “My heart burns because I lost my work and I lost my future.”⁴

Amnesty International interviewed seven survivors of TfGBV, four activists from two Yemeni digital rights organizations, two women’s rights activists, and a lawyer with knowledge of such cases. The organization also reviewed conversations on Facebook, including messages and voice notes, between survivors and the perpetrators, screenshots of Facebook accounts and Facebook posts, as well as legal documents relating to the survivors’ cases in Yemen. Amnesty International was unable to review complaints filed by SANAD for Digital Rights (SANAD)⁵ because the initiative did not keep a record of these complaints due to security reasons. All interviews were conducted remotely using secure internet-based channels of communication.⁶ Amnesty International sent letters to the Yemeni authorities on 13 and 14 August 2024, and to Meta on 15 August 2024 requesting a response to its findings and recommendations. On 29 August, Meta responded saying that they cannot share a written response within our stipulated timeline and shared links to publicly available company policies. No response was received from the authorities at the time of publication.

Amnesty International calls on the authorities in Yemen, including the Internationally Recognized Government (IRG), the Huthi de facto authorities, and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) de facto authorities to take concrete and swift action to address TfGBV as part of the urgent need to actively tackle and dismantle all forms of discrimination and violence against women.

The authorities must enact urgent measures to recognize, prevent, document, investigate and holistically address all forms of TfGBV and provide redress and support for survivors. The authorities in Yemen must also facilitate survivors’ access to justice by taking steps to ensure survivors are able to report cases of TfGBV without any social or financial obstacles and provide comprehensive support to survivors. Law enforcement officials, cybercrimes units, and judicial authorities must be adequately trained to prevent discrimination against women, including by averting further harm to survivors and adopting a genuine survivor-centric and trauma-informed approach.

Meta must adopt effective measures to improve awareness among its users with regards to individual security and privacy measures on Facebook across all markets where it operates, including Yemen, and must ensure that reporting mechanisms are accessible and culturally sensitive.

NON-CONSENSUAL SHARING OF IMAGES AND INFORMATION ON FACEBOOK

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence against women has been an increasing cause of concern highlighted by civil society actors in Yemen.

In January 2023, the Media Freedoms Observatory (Marsadak)⁷ found that 72% of women journalists surveyed were subjected to cyberbullying, primarily on Facebook.⁸ Moreover, in June 2023, Fahmi al-Baheth, cofounder of SANAD for Digital Rights, an initiative of activists and digital security experts which provides awareness on digital security and supports individuals experiencing various forms of TfGBV, told Amnesty International that they received at least four cases of online blackmailing per day, and that 95% of the survivors requesting support due to TfGBV are women.⁹ A representative from the Yemeni Organization for Development and Exchange of Technology (Yodet)¹⁰ told Amnesty International that most of the cases they received between January and September 2023 via their helpline and helpdesk

⁴ Interviews by voice call with “Maha” (name changed for security reasons), survivor of online blackmail, on 12 July and 25 August 2023.

⁵ SANAD for Digital Rights is an initiative of activists and digital security experts which provides awareness on digital security and supports individuals experiencing various forms of TfGBV.

⁶ Given limited access to internet in Yemen, some interviews were conducted via messages and voice notes and spanned over several days. All the names of survivors have been changed for security reasons to protect their identity. Informed consent was obtained by all of the survivors interviewed for this research.

⁷ The Media Freedoms Observatory (Marsadak) is a non-governmental organization which monitors and documents the crackdown against media freedoms in Yemen.

⁸ Media Freedoms Observatory, “*Cyberbullying against Yemeni Women Journalists: Causes, Consequences, and Remedies*”, 18 January 2023, <https://marsadak.org/en/cyberbullying/>. See also: SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties, “*Online Extortion in Yemen: The Phenomenon and Solution*”, 7 December 2022, https://samrl.org/pdf/4620Electronic_extortion_Report_en.pdf

⁹ Interview by voice call with Fahmi al-Baheth, digital rights defender and co-founder of SANAD for Digital Rights, 7 June 2023.

¹⁰ Yodet is a non-governmental organization based in Yemen that provides training and capacity building to individuals, activists and organizations in digital security as well as support to survivors of online violence and abuse.

were of online blackmail against women. Between 2023 and April 2024, Yodet received 115 cases of online blackmail, the majority of which occurred on Facebook.¹¹

ONLINE BLACKMAIL

Five women were subjected to online blackmail by individuals who threatened them to post or share their images, including some with or without a hijab or niqab (face covering), showing parts of their body, or fabricated images depicting them with other men, and to create fake accounts on Facebook impersonating these women if they did not satisfy their demands. Women subjected to online blackmail were targeted for various purposes, including to extort money, to coerce them into an intimate relationship with the blackmailer for the purpose of marriage, to share further images with the blackmailer, or to prevent the survivor from exposing the online abuse. In six out of the seven cases, women were subjected to TfGBV by someone they knew, including a friend, classmate, current or former partner, or former husband.

In July 2021, unknown individuals hacked the Facebook account of **“Maha”**, a 31-year-old woman living in Aden governorate, and downloaded images of herself and her friends. The blackmailers created fake accounts on Facebook and posted her images, including her ID card, images of her without a niqab, images of her friends without a hijab, and an image of her sister’s passport. She told Amnesty International, “It was as if they entered my house when they entered my [Facebook] account.”

According to Maha, the blackmailers demanded approximately USD 800 to remove the non-consensually shared content. When she said she did not have enough money, they asked her to meet them at a hotel and implied they wanted ‘favours’ to delete the accounts. She refused and paid them instead 70,000 Yemeni riyals (approximately USD 280) to get the accounts deleted. After the incident, Maha posted about the blackmailing she faced on social media. In August 2023, the blackmailers contacted Maha on Facebook threatening to post more images of her if she did not stop talking about the blackmailing incident on her Facebook profile.¹²

In February 2022, **“Afra”**, a 31-year-old activist from Ta’iz governorate received SMS messages from an unknown number, which she later discovered belonged to her neighbours, sharing her images and videos. In shock, Afra replied to seek clarification and the blackmailer demanded that she hand over her iPhone and laptop. Afra ignored the messages for a few days but then she received screenshots of her private messages with her friends and a request to transfer approximately USD 1,300. In April 2022, after Afra continued to ignore blackmailers’ requests, they posted her graduation photo on a fake Facebook account created in her name.¹³

“Aicha”, a university student living in Sana’a governorate, was blackmailed between June and August 2022 by her former partner who threatened to expose their relationship and created fake accounts on Facebook to coerce her into sending him images of herself, her classmates and neighbours. Her former partner created at least six fake Facebook accounts in Aicha’s name in which he posted her images without her consent, including an image of her graduation photo.

ONLINE HARASSMENT

The use and dissemination of images without consent is a form of online harassment, regardless of whether accompanied by particular demands, as it exposes women to abuse, especially against the backdrop of prevailing patriarchal and misogynistic norms, and it is a violation of their right to privacy. Online harassment refers to the use of online platforms to intimidate, threaten, cause distress and silence an individual or group. Online harassment can manifest in various ways, including through the use of hateful and abusive speech, targeted smear campaigns, doxing and making threats of violence.¹⁴

Two women were subjected to online harassment resulting in the non-consensual dissemination of their images and private information on fake Facebook accounts. In July 2021, the former husband of **“Hanan”**, a 30-year-old TV presenter living in Sana’a governorate, posted images of her with parts of her body showing on fake Facebook accounts at least four times and shared the posts with other users without her consent.¹⁵

¹¹ Yodet statistics on file with Amnesty International. In 2022, Yodet conducted a survey on 84 individuals, of whom 66 reported that they were subjected to online blackmail on social media, and 55% of the survivors were women.

¹² Interviews by voice call with “Maha” (name changed for security reasons), survivor of online blackmail, on 12 July and 25 August 2023.

¹³ Interview by voice call with “Afra” (name changed for security reasons), survivor of online blackmail, 20 June 2023.

¹⁴ Doxing refers to the posting of personal details such as phone number, home address, or work place online with the aim to cause an individual alarm or distress.

¹⁵ Interview by WhatsApp messages with “Hanan” (name changed for security reasons), survivor of online harassment, 13-17 July 2023.

“Bushra”, a 32-year-old saleswoman in a pharmaceutical company living in Sana’a governorate, was subjected to online doxing between June and August 2022 by her niece’s former partner who also blackmailed her niece. She told Amnesty International that after she contacted her niece’s former partner in efforts to stop him from blackmailing her niece, he began writing posts on fake Facebook accounts he created in her niece’s name, mentioning Bushra by name and identifying her place of work, as well as writing fabricated stories about her family.¹⁶

BARRIERS TO ACCESS JUSTICE FOR TFGBV

Survivors of technology-facilitated gender-based violence face numerous barriers rooted in customs and practices which detrimentally impact their access to justice. The six survivors interviewed by Amnesty International were rare examples of women who chose to file criminal complaints against their perpetrators despite the difficulty. Representatives of the two Yemeni digital rights organizations interviewed by Amnesty International highlighted that it is rare for the women who seek their technical help to agree to report the incidents to the authorities for fear of being shamed and blamed by family members, society and law enforcement agencies.¹⁷

In their attempts to access justice, these six women risked stigmatization and shame by either family members or law enforcement and judicial authorities, and the potential need to bribe law enforcement and judicial authorities to investigate their complaints.¹⁸

Despite the fact that specialized cybercrimes units exist in some governorates including in Sana’a, Aden, Hadramout and Ta’iz, only one woman in Ta’iz knew about the existence of such a unit and filed her complaint before it. However, she told the organization that the law enforcement officers of this unit had no knowledge or expertise about cybercrimes and she had to hire a private investigator to help with the official investigation.¹⁹

FEAR OF REPORTING INCIDENTS OF TFGBV TO FAMILY MEMBERS RISKS SILENCING SURVIVORS

Four women told Amnesty International that they were afraid of informing their family members that they had their images or private information disseminated online out of fear of being shamed and blamed or being subjected to further physical and psychological violence and abuse by family members.

Maha who had her Facebook account hacked by unknown individuals who then downloaded images of herself and her friends, including images with and without a hijab, told Amnesty International: **“We were scared that our parents would kill us if these pictures were posted [on Facebook]”**.²⁰

Aicha faced severe backlash from her relatives when they discovered that she was a survivor of online blackmail. Her brothers beat her several times in September and October 2022 because they felt she had brought shame on the family for having her images posted online. Aicha’s aunt told Amnesty International: **“When Aicha’s family found out...they took her phone away, and her older brother beat her... Another brother used to tell her, ‘no one will ever marry you.’”**²¹

Huda al-Sarari, human rights lawyer with knowledge of TfGBV cases in Yemen, told Amnesty International, **“Often she [the survivor] does not want her family or husband to know [about the TfGBV] because she could be beaten or killed...Often families do not listen to their daughters. At the end, the victim is [the one] to blame.”**²²

¹⁶ Interview by voice call with “Bushra” (name changed for security reasons), survivor of online doxing and aunt of survivor of online blackmail, 19 September 2023.

¹⁷ Interview by voice call with Fahmi al-Baheth, digital rights defender and co-founder of SANAD for Digital Rights, 7 June 2023 and Interview by voice call with representative of Yemeni Organization for Development and Exchange of Technology (Yoget), 6 September 2023.

¹⁸ The payment of bribes is a widespread practice in Yemen due to the collapse of the judicial system following the conflict and is not limited to cases of TfGBV.

¹⁹ A specialized cybercrime division in Aden did not exist at the time the testimonies were collected. However, on 6 March 2024, the office of the Public Prosecution in Aden established the Specialized Division to Combat Electronic Crimes. The Attorney General in Aden announced that the division will combat online blackmail targeting women and girls and will coordinate with Noon Feminist Bloc and the PASS Foundation for Sustainable Peace and Communities non-governmental organizations. Ten members of the prosecution and judicial officers have reportedly been trained on how to deal with such crimes. Saba News, “المحامي الأول للجمهورية يفتتح شعبية مكافحة الابتزاز الإلكتروني بعن<”, 6 March 2024, <https://sabanew.net/viewstory.php?id=107889> See also: Mareb Press, “<بتوجيهات مباشرة من الحكومة...إنشاء أول وحدة أمنية خاصة لمكافحة الابتزاز الإلكتروني في اليمن>”, 19 June 2023, <https://marebpress.org/amp-news.php?sid=193092> See also: Al Ayyam, “<تعيين أممي بارز مديرا لمكافحة الجرائم الإلكترونية بتعز>”, 18 July 2023, <https://www.alayyam.info/news/9HCC1SJQ-PUKMOY-BED5>

²⁰ Interview by voice call with “Maha” (name changed for security reasons), survivor of online blackmail, 12 July 2023 and 25 August 2023.

²¹ Interview by voice call with “Bushra” (name changed for security reasons), survivor of online harassment and aunt of woman who is a survivor of online blackmail, 19 September 2023.

²² Interview by voice call with Huda al-Sarari, lawyer, 31 August 2023.

STIGMATIZATION AND BLAME AGAINST SURVIVORS OF TFGBV BY LAW ENFORCEMENT AND JUDICIAL AUTHORITIES

Two survivors told Amnesty International that police officers and members of the prosecution blamed them for being targeted with online blackmail when filing criminal complaints against their perpetrators in Ta'iz and Aden governorates.

Afra had filed a complaint before the Ta'iz criminal prosecution against her blackmailers. After she refused attempts by the judge in the Eastern Ta'iz Court to urge her to accept reconciliation with her blackmailers, which would have closed the criminal case, the prosecutor insulted her by implying that she had loose morals.²³ The prosecutor said in front of Afra:

"She is the one who exposed herself to blackmail. Look at her *abaya*, it's embellished. Her nails are long."²⁴

Maha, who was blackmailed in July 2021 by individuals who hacked her Facebook Messenger account and downloaded and shared images of her without a hijab, filed a criminal complaint against her blackmailers before the Criminal Security Department in Aden. According to Maha, an officer in the Criminal Security Department in Aden asked her, **"why did you even take photos of yourself?"**²⁵

BRIBES TO INVESTIGATE ABUSES

Three women survivors told Amnesty International that they had to pay bribes to police officers and prosecutors in order to get them to investigate the complaints they had filed. The women said that the state officials had demanded bribes to cover the cost of a variety of law enforcement procedures, including for the prosecutor to issue an arrest warrant, for the fuel of the vehicle to arrest the accused, to hire experts to extract information from phones, and for the convicted to serve his prison sentence and pay compensation to the survivor in accordance with the verdict.

Afra told Amnesty International that during the proceedings against her blackmailers, she had to pay around USD 400 to cover the arrest of the accused, pay for *qat* for the investigators, transfer one of the accused to the prosecutor's office, and hire an expert for the prosecutor to extract information from the phone of one of the accused blackmailers.²⁶ Afra told Amnesty International that if she had not made these payments, her case would have been ignored.²⁷

According to lawyer Huda al-Sarari, requests by law enforcement and judicial authorities to pay bribes to initiate and proceed with investigations can be attributed to the collapse of the judicial system in Yemen due to the ongoing armed conflict.²⁸

Although the dysfunctional judicial system impacts the right of all Yemenis to access justice, it has a disproportionate impact on Yemeni women who do not always have the financial capacity to pay such bribes and are therefore discouraged or altogether prevented from seeking justice.²⁹

According to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, obstacles which impede women's access to justice constitute "persistent" violations of women's human rights.³⁰ The Committee has previously held that states parties should remove all discriminatory barriers to access to justice, including the "stigmatization of women who are fighting for their rights by active participants in the justice system."³¹

²³ The Eastern Ta'iz Court is under the control of the Internationally Recognized Government of Yemen.

²⁴ Interview by voice call with "Afra" (name changed for security reasons), survivor of online blackmail, 20 June 2023.

²⁵ Interview by voice call with "Maha" (name changed for security reasons), a survivor of online blackmail, 12 July 2023 and 25 August 2023.

²⁶ Qat is a stimulant plant. Its consumption is widely prevalent in Yemen.

²⁷ Interview by voice call with "Afra" (name changed for security reasons), survivor of online blackmail, 20 June 2023.

²⁸ Interview by voice call with Huda al-Sarari, lawyer, 31 August 2023.

²⁹ The UN Group of Eminent Experts (GEE) has documented the fragmented and "paralyzed" nature of the Yemeni justice system which has led to prosecutors and courts not functioning in some areas of the country and lack of responsiveness by the authorities. Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, Report: *Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014*, 29 September 2020, UN Doc. A/HRC/45/CRP.7, para 386, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/A-HRC-45-CRP.7-en.pdf>

³⁰ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), "General recommendation No.33 on women's access to justice", 3 August 2015, UN Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/33, para 3.

³¹ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), "General recommendation No.33 on women's access to justice", 3 August 2015, UN Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/33, para 25(a)(ii).

LACK OF COMPREHENSIVE MEASURES TO ADDRESS TfGBV

All interviewees expressed the urgent need for passing a law protecting women from TfGBV in Yemen. Amnesty International's research has also found that the biggest challenges these women faced was the lack of comprehensive measures that encourage women to report violence and ensure that they are not subjected to further abuse and violence in their attempt to access justice. This allows TfGBV to be perpetrated against women with impunity and without proper redress for survivors.

Yemen lacks a comprehensive legislative framework and policy measures which prevent, address, redress and provide support and reparation to survivors of TfGBV. Instead, prosecutors and judges resort to Criminal Code provisions, including Articles 313, 254, and 257 which cover blackmail, threats, and threat with dissemination of private secrets respectively.³² However, these articles do not specifically reference online crimes, making it more difficult to prosecute and giving judges more discretion not to pursue such cases.³³

Out of the six complaints that were reported to the police, four reached the trial stage and two complaints were later dropped by the survivors. Among the four cases that reached trial, only one perpetrator was convicted and ordered to pay compensation to the survivor.

"Najla's" university classmate had been blackmailing her on Facebook in efforts to pressure her into marriage and had physically threatened her with a weapon. On 30 January 2023, the West Ta'iz Court sentenced him to six months in prison and ordered him to pay a fine and a compensation of one million Yemeni riyals (approximately USD 4,000) under Article 254 of the Yemeni Criminal Code.³⁴ However, the perpetrator never paid the compensation and following tribal mediation, the court postponed his sentence for several months in order to allow the convicted to finish his university exams.³⁵ By February 2024, the perpetrator was serving his sentence but did not pay the compensation. Deferring the perpetrator's sentence and the failure to ensure that Najla received proper reparation for the harm inflicted on her shows the judiciary's leniency when dealing with cases of TfGBV.

In another case, the perpetrators faced trial before the Eastern Ta'iz Court on charges of blackmail under Article 313 of the Criminal Code.

In a third case, the perpetrator, who targeted two women living in Sana'a who are relatives, was brought to trial before a court in Ma'rib governorate. According to one of the survivors, their male relative prevented the complainants from following up on the case because of their family's "honour." They were only informed that the perpetrator was on trial but they have no information on the charges brought against him and have no access to the lawyer hired for the case.

Two cases were closed after two of the survivors dropped the cases, one out of fear of being blackmailed by the prosecution in Aden and the second because the criminal security department in Aden, where one of the survivors initially filed her complaint, transferred the case to a police station in another district which is an hour drive away. She was unable to attend the police station due to a car accident which affected her ability to move.

All of the survivors who filed complaints told Amnesty International of their feeling of disappointment at the failure of law enforcement and judicial authorities to take their cases seriously.

These cases reflect the urgent need for authorities to adopt comprehensive measures that ensure that law enforcement officials and members of the judiciary adopt a gender-responsive and trauma-informed approach to violence and other violations of women's rights, and that women who are subjected to violence are not re-victimized because of blackmailing and other gender-insensitive practices.

Yemen has international human rights obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) by virtue of its ratification of both treaties in February 1987 and May 1984 respectively. These obligations guarantee individual rights including freedom from gender-based discrimination, protection from arbitrary and unlawful interferences with an individual's privacy, and unfettered access to justice.

³² Interview by voice call with Huda al-Sarari, lawyer, 31 August 2023.

³³ Interview by voice call with Huda al-Sarari, lawyer, 31 August 2023.

³⁴ Article 254 of the 1994 Yemeni Criminal Code: Whoever threatens another by any means to commit a crime, a harmful act or even an act committed against him or his spouse or a relative up to the fourth degree shall be punished by imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year or a fine if the purpose of the threat is to cause panic among the person who received it.

³⁵ Interview by Whatsapp messages with "Najla" (name changed for security reasons), survivor of online blackmail, 19-21 July 2023; Interview by Whatsapp messages with Mukhtar Abd al-Moez, digital security expert and activist at SANAD for Digital Rights, 28 September 2023. As of February 2024, the accused was serving his sentence, according to SANAD for Digital Rights.

The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has also recognized that the CEDAW is applicable to technology-facilitated spaces.³⁶ In 2016, the UN General Assembly in its resolution 71/199 recognized that women were particularly affected by violations of the right to privacy in the digital age, and called upon all states to further develop preventative measures and remedies.³⁷ This was also reaffirmed by the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in its resolution 34/7.³⁸ The HRC held in its Resolution 32/13 that human rights afforded to individuals offline must also be protected online.³⁹

MENTAL HEALTH AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF TFGBV

Amnesty International found that technology-facilitated gender-based violence has a devastating impact on the survivors' mental health and consequentially on their professional life and relationships. All women interviewed by the organization reported significant psychological harm and suffering as a result of the online abuse, as well as an impact on their professional and social lives. This demonstrates the all-encompassing and long-term consequences of TfGBV on survivors and their immediate relationships, including their families.

The non-consensual dissemination of images and information online risks stigmatizing, isolating and exposing women to further violence and abuse in the offline world. Speaking about the all-round impact of TfGBV, Kawkab al-Thaibani, gender expert and founder of She4Society, told Amnesty International: **"We know if one photo is leaked, her [the survivor's] life could be completely destroyed."**⁴⁰

Six women reported the devastating psychological impact of TfGBV on their mental health, including feelings of fear, anxiety, paranoia, depression and isolation. These feelings were often tied with fear of their families or friends discovering that they were being subjected to TfGBV and had images of themselves posted online. Three women told Amnesty International that they began psychological treatment to cope with the mental toll of the online abuse. Two women reported having suicidal thoughts, and one woman reported that she attempted suicide as a result of the TfGBV.

Afra, a survivor of online blackmail, attempted suicide as a result of the overwhelming pressure and threats she was facing by the blackmailers. In December 2022, the Ta'iz prosecution charged Afra with "attempting to commit suicide" but she was only made aware of the charge in April 2023. According to Article 236(2) of the Yemeni Criminal Code, attempted suicide is punishable with up to two years imprisonment or fine. Her trial is still ongoing before the Eastern Court of Ta'iz. Afra told Amnesty International: **"The blackmail is the thing that has stopped my life, stopped all my work. It is what made me think about killing myself."**⁴¹

Five women also reported the impact of TfGBV on their professional life, including three women losing their jobs and becoming unemployed. **"Amira"** used to own a beauty salon in Aden governorate but she stopped working as a result of the emotional distress. Amira told Amnesty International:

"He [the blackmailer] created Facebook pages and posted my pictures and fabricated pictures. From that day, my life was completely destroyed. I started psychological treatment and of course, my relationship with my husband's family, my family and most of my friends was destroyed. I did not go back to my job...I became an outcast from society and my career that I built for 11 years was destroyed."⁴²

A study by UN Women on TfGBV in several countries in the Middle East and North Africa region in 2022 similarly found that "Online violence takes a toll on women's mental health, with 35 per cent of women who had experienced it reporting

³⁶ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), "General recommendation No.35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No.19", 26 July 2017, UN Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/35. See also: UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Report: *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, UN Doc. A/HRC/38/47.

³⁷ UN General Assembly (UNGA), Resolution 71/199: The right to privacy in the digital age, adopted on 25 January 2017, UN Doc. A/RES/71/199, operative para 10.

³⁸ UN Human Rights Council (HRC), Resolution 34/7: The right to privacy in the digital age, adopted on 7 April 2017, UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/34/7, operative para 27.

³⁹ UN Human Rights Council (HRC), Resolution 32/13: The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet, adopted on 18 July 2016, UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/32/13, operative para 1.

⁴⁰ Interview by voice call with Kawkab al-Thaibani, gender expert and founder of She4Society, 8 June 2023.

⁴¹ Interview by voice call with "Afra" (name changed for security reasons), survivor of online blackmail, 20 June 2023.

⁴² Interview by WhatsApp messages with "Amira" (name changed for security reasons), survivor of online blackmail, 23 June – 26 June 2023.

that they felt “sad/depressed”, 35 per cent stating that they “lost trust in the people around them” and 12 per cent indicating suicidal thoughts.”⁴³

META’S ROLE IN PROTECTING ALL USERS FROM TFGBV

All seven women told Amnesty International that they did not report abusive posts or fake accounts to Facebook themselves because they did not know how to do so. All the survivors interviewed resorted to SANAD,⁴⁴ whose activists and experts helped raise their cases to Meta to remove the content from Facebook and end the abuse.

Five women reported that they either stopped or reduced their use of Facebook after they were subjected to technology-facilitated gender-based violence out of fear of further abuse. This form of self-censorship creates a chilling effect and restricts women’s right to freedom of expression and participation in public life, including in online domains, and further narrows the spaces available for women’s voices in Yemen.⁴⁵ Describing the impact online blackmail had on her life, “Fatma” told Amnesty International:

“I became a fearful and anxious person...I am really scared of social media platforms. I am scared of its use, and it makes me anxious, honestly.”⁴⁶

Meta has a role to play in protecting and educating its users, particularly women in societies where gender discrimination is rampant such as in Yemen. By failing to raise effective awareness and promoting online safeguarding, survivors of TfGBV are left feeling discouraged from engaging in public life through social media platforms. Moreover, Meta must ensure that Facebook’s Community Standards take into account the different countries’ contexts and the cultural sensitivities.

Although SANAD helped women remove the abusive content, the initiative’s co-founder explained to Amnesty International that the reporting process takes time because Facebook’s Community Standards do not take into account the different cultural norms across its markets including in Yemen. He said:

“Even if we report a case to Meta, their team gets back to us with no understanding of the Yemeni context. They do not understand that images posted online of women without a hijab can create problems for them. So, I have to keep providing context [about Yemen].”⁴⁷

Facebook’s Community Standards regarding Adult Sexual Exploitation require images to be considered “intimate” in order to justify them being removed from the platform. In addition, the platform fails to provide a definition for “intimate” imagery⁴⁸ which takes into account cultural sensitivities in different markets. Yodet, a member of Meta’s Trusted Partners Programme, also told Amnesty International: **“If an image is posted of a woman wearing a hijab and we report this to Facebook to be removed, they consider this as a normal thing as the woman is in a hijab....”⁴⁹**

Even if the image disseminated shows a woman in a hijab, this can still create grave socio-economic damage to the woman in certain highly conservative Yemeni contexts.

Like all companies, Meta has a responsibility to respect all human rights, wherever it operates in the world. This is a widely recognized standard of expected conduct as set out in international standards including the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises. This corporate responsibility to respect human rights is independent of a state’s own human rights obligations and exists over and above compliance with national laws and regulations protecting human rights. The responsibility to respect human rights requires companies not

⁴³ UN Women, *Violence against women in the online space: Insights from a multi-country study in the Arab States*, 2022, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/07/violence-against-women-in-the-online-space-insights-from-multi-country-research-in-the-arab-states>, p.17

⁴⁴ The co-founder of SANAD for digital rights, Fahmi al-Baheth, is a member of Meta’s Trusted Partner Programme, an initiative by Meta which aims to provide selected civil society groups with a designated channel to alert Meta to harmful content on its platforms and to help the company better understand the impact of its operations and the context that its products, including the Facebook platform, operate in.

⁴⁵ UN women found in its report published in 2022 on online violence against women in the Middle East and North Africa region that “Women who have experienced online violence said they found little support. This may contribute to self-censorship or exclusion from online spaces. Of those who experienced online violence, 22 per cent deleted or deactivated their social media accounts, while 26 per cent reported being careful about what they put online.” See: UN Women, *Violence against women in the online space: Insights from a multi-country study in the Arab States*, 2022, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/07/violence-against-women-in-the-online-space-insights-from-multi-country-research-in-the-arab-states>, p.17

⁴⁶ Interview with “Fatma” via Whatsapp messages (name changed for security reasons), survivor of online blackmail, 21 June 2023.

⁴⁷ Interview by voice call with Fahmi al-Baheth, digital rights defender and co-founder of SANAD for Digital Rights, 7 June 2023.

⁴⁸ Meta, “Adult sexual exploitation”, Facebook Community Standards, <https://transparency.fb.com/en-gb/policies/community-standards/sexual-exploitation-adults/>, accessed on 15 August 2024.

⁴⁹ Interview by voice call with Yodet, 6 September 2023.

to cause or contribute to human rights abuses through their own business activities, and address impacts in which they are involved, including by remediating any actual impacts.⁵⁰

Meta's Corporate Human Rights Policy explicitly states that the company is "committed to respecting human rights as set out in the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights."⁵¹

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE AUTHORITIES IN YEMEN AND META

All types of technology-facilitated gender-based violence require adequate responses from the authorities in Yemen and Meta. Amnesty International calls on all relevant entities to act on the following recommendations:

TO THE INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZED GOVERNMENT OF YEMEN, THE HUTHI DE FACTO AUTHORITIES, AND THE SOUTHERN TRANSITIONAL COUNCIL DE FACTO AUTHORITIES:

- Take steps to recognize, prevent, document, investigate and address all forms of TfGBV;
- Provide effective remedies in line with international human rights law and standards to survivors of TfGBV that are trauma-informed, survivor-centric and adopt an intersectional feminist approach, including by ensuring access to information about human rights abuses against them, guaranteeing equal and effective access to justice and providing appropriate reparations based on consultations with survivors;
- Proactively remove structural and systemic barriers to gender equality, including through public sensitization campaigns, social policies and educational programmes to eliminate gender stereotypes, negative social norms and discriminatory attitudes against women and girls and create awareness about the phenomenon of TfGBV, its consequences and intersectional harms;
- Ensure that women and girls are able to freely and safely exercise their right to freedom of expression in digital spaces, without fear of discrimination, harassment, intimidation and violence, in line with international standards and safeguards;
- Ensure meaningful consultation with civil society organizations, human rights defenders and activists working on women's rights, gender and sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) issues and feminist approaches to technology, especially those from marginalized communities, in the process of any policy development, and its implementation and monitoring;
- Ensure access to comprehensive support services for survivors, including mental health support, shelters, protection orders and helplines specifically designed to address TfGBV;
- Provide capacity building and training to all staff within law enforcement agencies, judicial authorities and cybercrime units to ensure they adopt a gender-responsive, trauma-informed, survivor-centric and intersectional feminist approach in dealing with survivors. Law enforcement agencies must be provided with necessary human and financial resources to provide all necessary support to survivors;
- Increase public awareness through public education campaigns on the different forms of TfGBV and available mechanisms for survivors to report it to authorities and to access protection and support services;
- Adopt the necessary oversight mechanisms to prevent, investigate and punish misconduct of law enforcement officers, including for discrimination against women, corruption and/or bribery.

TO THE INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZED GOVERNMENT OF YEMEN:

- Enact and implement comprehensive legislative and policy measures to recognize, prevent, document, investigate and address all forms of TfGBV and provide redress and support to survivors, in a manner that does not curb or harm rights to freedom of expression in online spaces;
- Adopt legislation addressing and protecting women from discrimination, violence and abuse;
- Ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

TO META:

⁵⁰ This responsibility was expressly recognized by the UN Human Rights Council on 16 June 2011, when it endorsed the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and on 25 May 2011, when the 42 governments that had then adhered to the Declaration on International Investment and Multinational Enterprises of the OECD unanimously endorsed a revised version of the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises. See Human Rights and Transnational Corporations and other Business Enterprises, Human Rights Council, Resolution 17/4, 6 July 2011, UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/17/4; OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, OECD, 2011, <https://www.oecd.org/corporate/mne>. 95 UN Guiding Principles, Principles 11 and 13.

⁵¹ Meta, "Corporate Human Rights Policy", 16 March 2021, <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/03/our-commitment-to-human-rights/>

- Enable and empower users to understand and utilize individual security and privacy measures such as blocking, muting and content filtering to provide survivors with recourse and protect themselves from harm;
- Ensure that human rights due diligence processes take into account country context and cultural sensitivities;
- Amend Facebook’s Community Standards under “Adult Sexual Exploitation” to ensure the non-consensual sharing of content which may be considered “intimate” within specific cultural contexts is considered “prohibited” under Meta’s Community Standards;
- Increase staff capacity with country-specific expertise involved in content moderation;
- Ensure that Facebook’s Trusted Partners programme in Yemen allows civil society organizations and human rights defenders to have more meaningful input into content-related decisions;
- Ensure equality and consistency between jurisdictions in terms of the resourcing of content moderation, policy and human rights teams globally.