

Peace and Freedom Organization  
Rights and freedom program



# INVISIBLE THREATS:

Digital Security and Female Journalists in Iraq and  
the Kurdistan Region

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Researchers:

Aso Q. Abdullah

Sangar Y. Salih

Jihad H. Mahmood



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## [The Peace and Freedom Organization](#)

The Peace and Freedom Organization is a non-profit organization works for the protection of rights and liberties, to ensure peaceful coexistence by building trust, cooperation between different communities, and developing government and non-governmental institutions policies, to assure the rights, freedom, and social justice in accordance with the international guidelines. The organization works in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

[Aswatouna - Our Voices](#). Elevating and Amplifying Women's Voices in Iraq. Aswatouna (Our Voices) project is to empower women to participate equally as citizens and decision-makers by strengthening and expanding women's voices in Iraq. This program is designed to improve gender equality and empower women in Iraq and will also contribute to Internews' ongoing efforts globally to improve access to information as a root solution to enable women and men to make informed decisions, participate in dialogue and stand up for their rights. Aswatouna's project is implemented in Iraq by Internews in partnership with three national organization, which [Peace and Freedom Organization](#) is one of them.

## [Project's Staff](#)

[Project coordinator: Svana Zana](#)

[Rezheen Asa'ad](#)

[Shokhan Mahmood](#)

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## Executive Summary:

This assessment aims at pointing out the level of severity, sources, and types of cyber-attacks on the female journalists and activists in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. The level of capability and awareness of the journalists and civil activists with regard to the protection measures from the cyber-attacks and threats is one of the aspects that this assessment points out. Meanwhile, we want to introduce the level of the services and opportunities that are necessary for the journalists and civil activists to combat digital threats and risks. Through the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods the assessment has arrived at the following results:

- ⇒ There is a legal gap in the digital security area in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region that leads to the lack of a secure digital and cyber space for the journalists and civil activists in general and females in particular. This is reflected in increasing the rate of the violations against this category. The majority of the sample in general (%58) and (%57) of the female participants in particular reported that they experienced at least a form of violations either online or offline. When it comes to the types of violations, the majority of the participants (%41) said that they faced violations/harassment through social media and only (6%) of the sample reported that they experienced physical harassment.
- ⇒ The journalists and activists who advocate for human rights and criticize the political system and the bad governance in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region are often exposed to digital and cyber-attacks and threats. Compared to males, female journalists are more likely to face violations and online harassments. The results of this assessment showed that 27.98% of those who experienced violations and harassments through social media are females while only 13.31 of them are males.
- ⇒ The journalists in general and females, in particular, lack sufficient awareness about the protection procedures from digital and cyber-attacks and threats. The capability and awareness of female journalists and civil activists are limited to the type of communication devices,



programs, and systems they use on their devices. A considerable number of the participants both males and females (48%) mentioned that they do not have original systems on their devices, which leaves a space for the hackers and cyber attackers commit violations. Another indicator to show the lack of awareness is that % 69.18 of females and % 70.15 of male participants do not know how to codify their data to make sure they are safe from potential cyberattack or violations. This assessment also reveals that compared to males, female journalists are less likely by %12 to use the 2-step confirmation for their social media accounts.

- ⇒ The CSOs have not paid enough attention to the digital security issue, especially in terms of opening intense training courses for journalists and activists. The majority of the samples of this assessment stated that they haven't participated in a single training on digital security. What's noticeable is that compared to the males, the female journalists have less participation in such training by 4%. Similarly, the media outlets do not apply the necessary procedures to protect their journalists against cyber-attacks.
- ⇒ There is a lack of sufficient centers and institutions to provide services including empowerment, counseling and raising awareness of the journalists about digital security. As a result, journalists and civil activists must rely on themselves and some others in certain situations to combat cyber-attacks and risks rather than depending on the relative bodies. To show to what extent males and females are differently relying on experts to deal with cyberattack and violations, female participants reported that they rely more on experts by %5 when they face any harassment or cyberattack. This revealed that female journalists are more in need than males. Females are also less likely to rely on themselves to deal with the harassment and violations. According to the findings of this assessment females have less self-reliance by 8% to solve their own problems if they were exposed to cyber-attacks and threats.



## Introduction:

The wide technological advancement in the communication and data transmission that has been achieved globally is an outstanding man achievement to shorten the distance between people and reduce time as well as the fastest transmission of data. Besides the positive outcomes of technological advancement, there are also several consequences and negative impacts on the life of people that the most prominent one could be the breach of personal boundaries and to interfere with the privacy of people through cyber-attacks. One way and another, there are now few sectors and professions that do not need information and electronic technology, especially, in the media sector. Therefore; the digital security issue is globally focused by researchers and the centers of democracy and human rights advocacy as a topic related to the individual human rights, but what it should be noted in general and so far, this topic is not given proper attention by Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. In accordance with the Global Cybersecurity Index for 2017,<sup>(1)</sup> Iraq is ranked 158<sup>th</sup> for the preparedness and combating cyber-attack which is ranked 16<sup>th</sup> among those countries that have the worst systems and cyber security protection mechanisms. As per the available data and information, the rate of cybercrimes is increased by 246.2% annually including identity theft just between 2006 and 2011.<sup>(2)</sup>

The Iraqi electronic media is also in evolution as part of the current global orientation and it has an effective role in creating public opinion on the issues related to the citizens' rights and demands. The activists and journalists who advocate for human rights are increasingly using the internet network as a powerful platform to disseminate awareness, disclose the violations, advocacy campaigns, pressure the public authorities, and make change peacefully. The best indicator of this

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<sup>(1)</sup> The UN International Telecommunication Union (ITU). 2017. The Global Cybersecurity Index 2017. Retrieved from [https://www.itu.int/dms\\_pub/itu-d/opb/str/D-STR-GCI.01-2017-R1-PDF-E.pdf](https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/str/D-STR-GCI.01-2017-R1-PDF-E.pdf) [Accessed on September 15th, 2020]

<sup>(2)</sup> Aboud, S.J., 2015. Cybercrime in Iraq. International Journal of Scientific & Engineering Research, International Journal of Scientific & Engineering Research, 5.



situation is the emergence of several blogger groups and social media activists after 2003 in various cities and towns of Iraq.<sup>(3)</sup>

The electronic media and social media coverage are powerful that the political parties and figures use them for their political intentions. Therefore, they have created many anonymous accounts or they fund an army of such people who work for them in social media.<sup>(4)</sup>

The electronic and information technology advancements have extended the government and security authorities with many capacities and facilities to monitor the privacy of people, especially observing the relations and electronic messages of independents and opponents including journalists and civil society activists.

The arrest of journalists in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region over posts in social media exceeds the situation that becomes a phenomenon,<sup>(5)</sup> and this shows the truth that there is intense surveillance over their work and activities. Therefore, if digital and cyber-security protection is important for ordinary people, then it should be more important for journalists and human rights advocates.

The significance of digital security protection among journalists and civil activists is more important for some, especially, for female journalists. This to some extent is related to the risks and threats facing female journalists as a result of such a bad image has been created for them within Iraqi and Kurdistan society, rather some believe that the cultural impact and religious values have made the press function to be seen as an

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<sup>(3)</sup> International Media Support. 2011. A network for social media activists in Iraq. Available on <https://www.mediasupport.org/a-network-for-social-media-activists-in-iraq/> [accessed on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020].

<sup>(4)</sup> The Arab-European Association for Media and Communication Researchers. Social Media and Social Activism in Iraq. Available on <http://www.areacore.org/ims/iraq/social-media-and-social-activism-in-iraq/social-media-and-social-activism-in-iraq-script-en/> [Accessed on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020]

<sup>(5)</sup> Coronavirus Pandemic: An Opportunity or a Challenge for the Organizations and Freedom of Expression in Iraq and Kurdistan Region 2020, PFO. It's available on the link <http://www.pfo-ku.org/index.php/raport/2017-05-19-16-00-33/630-2020-08-06-20-56-44>



unacceptable job for females because of working for long hours, travelling a lot and her relationship and interaction with male due to her function.<sup>(6)</sup>

The lack of research and survey about the digital security situation in Iraq and the lack of sufficient data and information regarding the cyber-attacks and violations facing female journalists show the significance of any attempt or initiative in this area. Thus, this assessment has its own value as part of Our Voices Project activity which is implemented by Peace and Freedom Organization with the support of the Internews Organization. This assessment aims at emphasizing on the types, level of risk, and sources of cyber-attacks on the female journalists in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. At the same time, we want to know the answer to the question whether the awareness and self-protection level of journalists in general, including females, is it to the required level against cyber-attacks?! We also highlight the available feasible sources for disseminating awareness and self-protection. In the end, several recommendations and proposals are presented that can be used to mitigate and limit cyber extortion and threats against journalists in general and female journalists in particular.

### **Related Concepts:**

Due to the increase of electronic activities and the contacts through digital devices, the conflict getting increased between rights, freedoms and people privacy protection that the digital security concept is discussed globally as a current need.<sup>(7)</sup> There is not a conclusive definition for this concept yet which has led the researchers and experts of this field to use this concept from a different perspective that in certain situations they mix it with other relative concepts which to some extent give the same

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<sup>(6)</sup> KAISY, AIDA. 2019. A Gender Analysis for the Media Landscape in Iraq. Retrieved from [https://internews.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Internews\\_gender-analysis\\_media\\_landscape\\_iraq\\_2020-04.pdf](https://internews.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Internews_gender-analysis_media_landscape_iraq_2020-04.pdf) [Accessed on September 22, 2020]

<sup>(7)</sup> Digital Security and Data Protection, The Right to Use a Secure Network "Hardo" to support the digital expression, Cairo 2017. [The Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the context of combating terrorism, Mr. Martin Scheinin, Course 13.](#)



meaning. It's important hereto to introduce some of these concepts that have been used in this text.

Digital security / is the use of internet and computer actively without being subjected to any type of threat, extortion and monitoring private information as well as protecting the privacy of people.

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Mohammed Salem Al-Atoum. 2019. Cybersecurity in lines.  
[http://alrai.com/article/10497278/ Book / Cyber-security-in-lines](http://alrai.com/article/10497278/Book/Cyber-security-in-lines)

Right to Privacy / is considered as one of the basic human rights which has the meaning of providing independent development opportunity and the individual freedom of interacting with his environment with the exception of imposing actions far from his will and desires.

Cyber-crimes/ are these that are committed by people called (hackers or blackmailers) through the use of electronic devices to attack others aiming at stealing their personal information and use them to have financial benefits or pressure the person who is exposed to cyber-attack to intimidate him/her.

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Dr. Mustafa Al-Naji. 2019. Combat Cyber Crime and the Legislative Endeavor in Iraq.  
[/https://www.iqgcpp.org/cyber-law-iraq-security](https://www.iqgcpp.org/cyber-law-iraq-security)



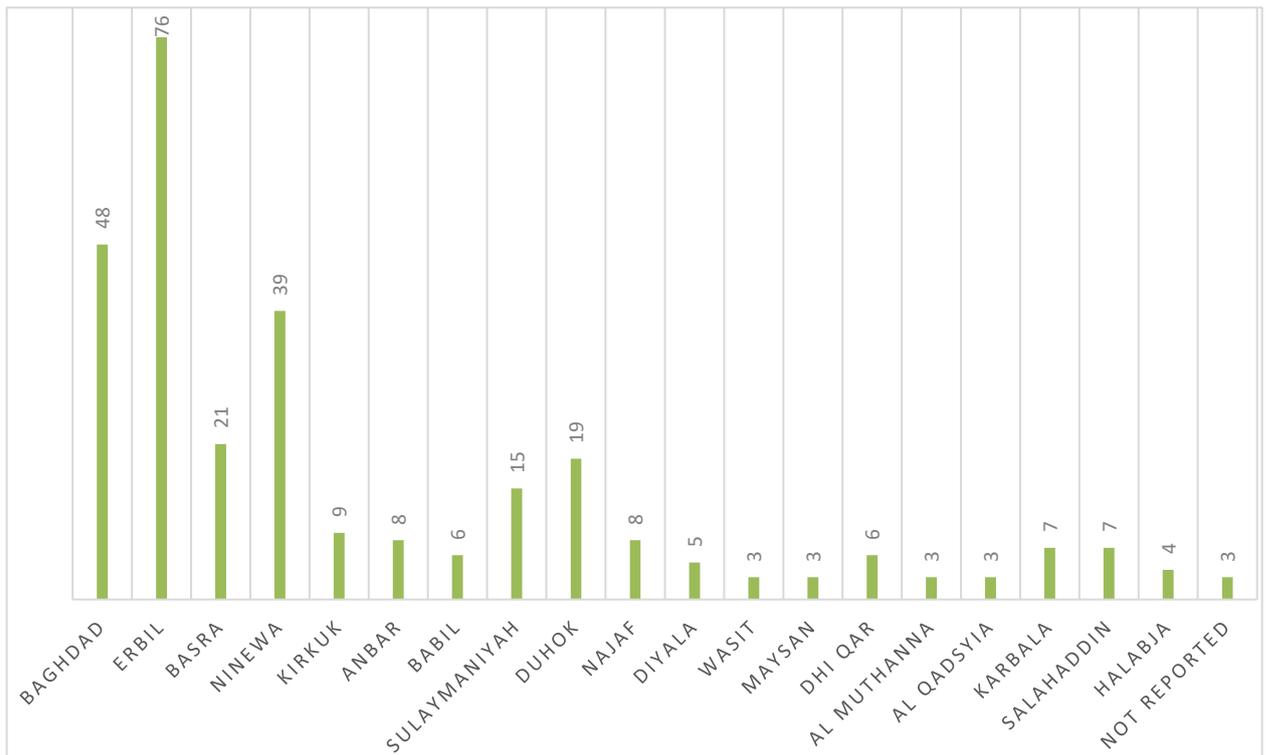
Cyber-extortion/ is also known as cyber blackmail which is a crime involving an attack mostly against gender coupled with a demand for money in which a hacker gaining access to private photos and people-related data to pressure on the victim to fulfill their unlawful and unjust demands.

### **Data and Methodology:**

The researchers have relied on the mixed methodology as one of the appropriate methods to gather and analyze the qualitative and quantitative data and information to understand the situation of digital security and achieving the goals of this assessment. The data references for this task are:

- Theoretical and document references: such as research, reports, international and local legal texts, media reports and programs related to cyber and digital security. All these together are helpful to understand and interpret the digital security and the environment where the violation and the cyber-attack take place against media professionals in general and female journalists in particular especially in Iraq.

- **Survey:** to understand the experiences of journalists about the level and type of the violations, the source of the cyber-attacks and risks, to measure and evaluate their level of awareness and interest in self-protection means, tools and procedures, and the questionnaire was used as a tool for collecting quantitative data. For this purpose, 300 journalists and civil activists participated in filling the online and offline questionnaire form as a sample for the assessment. Totally,



293 participants answered all the questions which constitute 97.66% of the assessment sample, only seven forms were completely removed because they didn't answer most of the questions. The sample represents journalists and activists from all the Iraqi and Kurdistan Region provinces as it can be seen from the chart below.

In terms of gender, 159 of the participants are females (%54 of the sample) and 134 of them are males (%46). Regarding educational level of the participants, the majority of them have university degree, which is %57.34 of the sample. Diploma degree holders (2 years university) make up %16.72 of the sample, %12.97 of them hold high school degree. % 10.24 of the sample also reported that they



have post-graduate degree, only %2.39 of them have middle school degree and %0.34 of them with primary school.

Later, the aggregated data was analyzed through the use of the Stata 13.1 Program and the conclusions are presented in the form of digital tables and charts.

- **Semi-structured interview:** to have a deeper understanding of the topic of the assessment, the researchers conducted 20 semi-structured online interviews with journalists, activists, academics, and digital security and information technology specialists. The interviewees were from Baghdad, Basra, Erbil, Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyah, Mosul, Diyala, Qadsyia, and Duhok (look at annex number 1). A questionnaire guide was made to gather rich qualitative data. The theme analysis method is adopted to analyze the data which is helpful in identifying the themes and topics that are repeated several times within the interviews.

### **International and National Legal Framework:**

The government, organizations, international and local actors are obliged to concentrate more on cyber and digital security due to negative conclusions produced by the developments of electronic and information technology, especially the increase of cyber-crimes. The arrangement and control of digital and electronic space through international conventions and laws is getting to become the day topic of the states' talks and government priorities. This is related to the protection of the data, national security and an economic dimension.<sup>(8)</sup>

Cyber and digital security are mostly related to the protection of the right to privacy. This right and the importance of its guarantee, in many of the international conventions and treaties, is mentioned and discussed.

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<sup>(8)</sup> Adonis, A.A., International Law on Cyber Security in the Age of Digital Sovereignty. Retrieved from <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/82169> [accessed on September 25, 2020]



It concentrates on two levels within the individual and personal rights; (1) it's to prevent any kind of unfair interference in the privacy of the individuals, family, environment, electronic and written posts, (2) it's to respect the privacy of humans, family, environment and their electronic and written posts. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is one of the international documents that in its 12<sup>th</sup> article clearly stipulate the personal and individual right.<sup>(9)</sup> Meanwhile, there are international documents, conventions and laws related to cyber-crimes, and digital security. Convention No. 185 for 2001 of the Council of Europe in Budapest is considered the first international convention to deal with cyber-crimes.<sup>(10)</sup> The United Nations has a set of resolutions related to cyber and digital security. The following are some of these resolutions:

The rights in which people are skillful and creative outside the internet and in real life, in the same way, they have to freely practice them online and in the digital space.

- Resolution No. 55/63 for 2001
- Resolution No. 56/121 for 2002
- Resolution No. 57/239 for 2003
- Resolution No. 58/199 for 2004
- Resolution No. 64/211 for 2010<sup>(11)</sup>
- Resolution No. 73/27 for 2018<sup>(12)</sup>
- Resolution No. 73/266 for 2018<sup>(13)</sup>

<sup>(9)</sup> United Nations. 1948. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> [Accessed on September 15, 2020]

<sup>(10)</sup> Council of Europe. Convention on Cybercrime, treaty No 185. Retrieved from [https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/185/signatures?p\\_auth=XcicXFRW](https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/185/signatures?p_auth=XcicXFRW)

<sup>(11)</sup> International Telecommunication Union (ITU). UN resolutions related to cybersecurity. Retrieved from <https://www.itu.int/en/action/cybersecurity/Pages/un-resolutions.aspx>

<sup>(12)</sup> United Nations. 2018. Developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security. Retrieved from <https://undocs.org/A/RES/73/27>

<sup>(13)</sup> United Nations. 2018. Developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security. Retrieved from <https://undocs.org/A/RES/73/266>



These resolutions highlight the protection of human rights on the internet and they stipulate that all the rights in which people are skillful and creative outside the internet and in the real-life, in the same way, they have to freely practice them online and in the digital space. Besides, certain strategic plans and procedures are developed by some governments to combat and prevent risks and threats from the internet.

There is a lack of a particular law in Iraq for cyber-crime and digital security. A draft law was prepared in 2011 with regard to this issue to organize information networks, computers, and other electronic systems and devices. The international and local organizations who advocate for human rights rejected the draft law because they believed that its content contradicts the international standards of freedom of expression. As a result, the Presidency of the Iraqi House of Representatives officially rejected the draft in February 2013 to the request of the Culture and Media Committee. Another bill "The Law of Information Technology Crimes" was prepared following the withdrawal of the aforementioned draft law and the Iraqi House of Representatives did the first reading for the bill on January 12, 2019. This bill was also rejected by human rights organizations. On March 1, 2019, an open letter was sent to the Iraqi House of Representatives by ten international and local organizations asking for the withdrawal of the bill because it's the same draft law of 2011 with slight changes.<sup>(14)</sup>

Although, the Iraqi constitution in (2005), as the highest legal document, recognizes the personal and private rights and Article 17 clearly mentions them, there is a lack of any applicable law to control the protection of this right.<sup>(15)</sup> In the absence of a particular law for the protection of the personal right and digital security, the judicial authority uses other laws such as: Iraqi Civil Law No. 40 of 1951, Iraqi Penal Code No. 111 of 1969 and the

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<sup>(14)</sup> A request letter from 10 national and international organizations to withdraw the cybercrime law. Retrieved from <https://www.accessnow.org/call-to-withdraw-the-draft-cybercrime-law-which-would-severely-undermine-fundamental-right-to-freedom-of-expression/>

<sup>(15)</sup> Iraqi Constitution. 2005. Retrieved from <https://investpromo.gov.iq/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/iraqi-constitution-En.pdf>



Law of Communication and Media Board of 2004 to resolve most of the cases (including the cases of journalists and cyber-crimes).<sup>(16)</sup>

The Journalist's Right Law No. 21 of 2011<sup>(17)</sup> is a positive legal step with respect to the working of journalists and their activities and protecting the rights of this category. But the electronic newspaper, cyber and digital crimes against journalists are not mentioned in the law at all.

There is a lack of a particular law for digital security and data protection in the Kurdistan Region similar to Iraq but there is Law No.6 of 2008 which is specific to the abuse of communication means. There was an attempt by Kurdistan Parliament in relation to the electronic activity and journalism to organize electronic media, but the defects in the items and articles of the draft which was prepared resulted in the public, journalists, and civil activist's dissatisfaction and now the efforts have been stopped to precede the draft.

To expand the space of freedom of expression, despite the similarities between many of the cases related to the journalists and civil activists in the Kurdistan Region and other parts of Iraq a number of modern laws are issued in the Kurdistan Region. The available laws within this context are the Journalist Working Law No. 35 of 2007 and the Information Access Law No. 11 of 2013. Other laws are used to resolve the journalists' cases in Kurdistan Region, especially social-media related cases, despite the given legal framework. The Law No.6 of 2008 (The Law of Abusing Communication Means) and the Iraqi Penal Code are applied in Kurdistan Region, according to the reports of the CSOs and human rights activists. In most of the cases, journalists become victims due to the bad dealing of the court with their cases.<sup>(18)</sup>

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<sup>(16)</sup> Nehme, T. 2019. Impasse of Cyber laws: Iraqi Case. Retrieved from [https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/impasse-cyber-laws-iraqi-case#\\_ftnref4](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/impasse-cyber-laws-iraqi-case#_ftnref4) [Accessed on September 8,2020]

<sup>(17)</sup> Iraqi Law No 21, 2011. Retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/91407/105995/F1516111281/4206.pdf>

<sup>(18)</sup> Coronavirus Pandemic: An Opportunity or a Challenge for the Organizations and Freedom of Expression in Iraq and Kurdistan Region 2020, PFO. It's available in the link <http://www.pfo-ku.org/index.php/raport/2017-05-19-16-00-33/630-2020-08-06-20-56-44>



## Digital Platforms, Their Level of Safety and the Level of Awareness of Their Use:

The majority of the topics that have been written on cyber-security about social media and the applications are negative to large extent. But this does not mean to stop using them.<sup>(19)</sup> i.e the safety level of the internet and social media users is related to the types of platforms and the level of awareness of their users. However, the arrangement of the internet sector and the measures that are taken by the government and the institutions to control cyber-attacks and threats have a great role.

Both Skype and Facebook platforms are among the worst types of social media platforms in terms of digital safety, whereas Telegram and WhatsApp are the safest platforms, in accordance with the researchers and IT experts.<sup>(20)</sup> This is while the majority of social media users in Iraq use Facebook. Also, according to the report of the Iraqi Ministry of Planning for 2013, most of the cyber-crimes were committed to the Facebook platform.<sup>(21)</sup> These crimes are mostly committed against individuals rather than businesses and the government.<sup>(22)</sup>

In accordance with a survey by Digital Media Center, 21 million citizens across Iraq use social media. There are more than 17 million users of Facebook, 9.5 million active accounts on Instagram, 6.55 million users of Snapchat, 1.28 million users of Twitter, and one million users of LinkedIn. The same center mentions that more than 40.89 million smart-phones are used.<sup>(23)</sup>

<sup>(19)</sup> Vuk Mujović. 2019. 10 most secure social media platforms today. Retrieved from <https://www.le-vpn.com/10-secure-social-media/> [Accessed on September 15, 2020]

<sup>(20)</sup> Ibd

<sup>(21)</sup> Ali, Meidea & Manickam, Selvakumar. 2018. A Brief Review of Cybersecurity Issues in Iraq. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324650661\\_A\\_Brief\\_Review\\_of\\_Cybersecurity\\_Issues\\_in\\_Iraq](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324650661_A_Brief_Review_of_Cybersecurity_Issues_in_Iraq) [Accessed on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020].

<sup>(22)</sup> Nehme, T. 2019. Impasse of Cyber laws: Iraqi Case. Retrieved from [https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/impasse-cyber-laws-iraqi-case#\\_ftnref4](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/impasse-cyber-laws-iraqi-case#_ftnref4) [Accessed on September 8, 2020]

<sup>(23)</sup> Digital Media Center. 2020. Twenty one million persons use social media in Iraq. Retrieved from <https://dmc-iq.com/2020/04/06/digital-media-center-21-million-users/>



According to the last survey which is conducted by the Kurdistan Regional Statistics Board and the Iraqi Central Agency for Statistics and in coordination with UNFPA, 84.9% of youth use the devices like (smart-phone, computer, laptop, tablet, and iPad) in Kurdistan Region except for the areas outside the Kurdistan Regional Administration, also in the rest of Iraq 57.5% of youth use smart devices that the percentage of users just in Baghdad the capital is up to 67.5%.<sup>(24)</sup>

While the number of the users of social media, internet, and smart devices increases, but the situation of digital security and cyber-crime in Iraq is in such a condition that a person with his laptop, with a minimum cost and with a large opportunity of fleeing can become a source of threat on the others due to the current instability. i.e. Internet sector is one of the vulnerable and most unorganized sectors that needs serious legal, organizational and technical effort as well as capacity building and raising the awareness of the users.<sup>(25)</sup>

Despite some efforts to familiarize the journalists with the digital platforms and raising their self-protection awareness by the organizations and media outlets,<sup>(26)</sup> <sup>(27)</sup> it's noticed that more effort must be allocated for the capacity building and raising the awareness of the journalists in general and female journalists, in particular. And the best indicator of this situation is the increase of cyber-attacks and crimes against journalists.

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<sup>(24)</sup> Kurdistan Regional Statistics Board. 2020. Youth and Adolescents Survey in Kurdistan Region for 2019. Available on: [http://krso.gov.krd/files/articles/230820073647.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2nd1itbc\\_fwhXf63pDH0JVgM4lQcJymItxkAtr0iUqDFi6Ee8BqToAIJU](http://krso.gov.krd/files/articles/230820073647.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2nd1itbc_fwhXf63pDH0JVgM4lQcJymItxkAtr0iUqDFi6Ee8BqToAIJU)

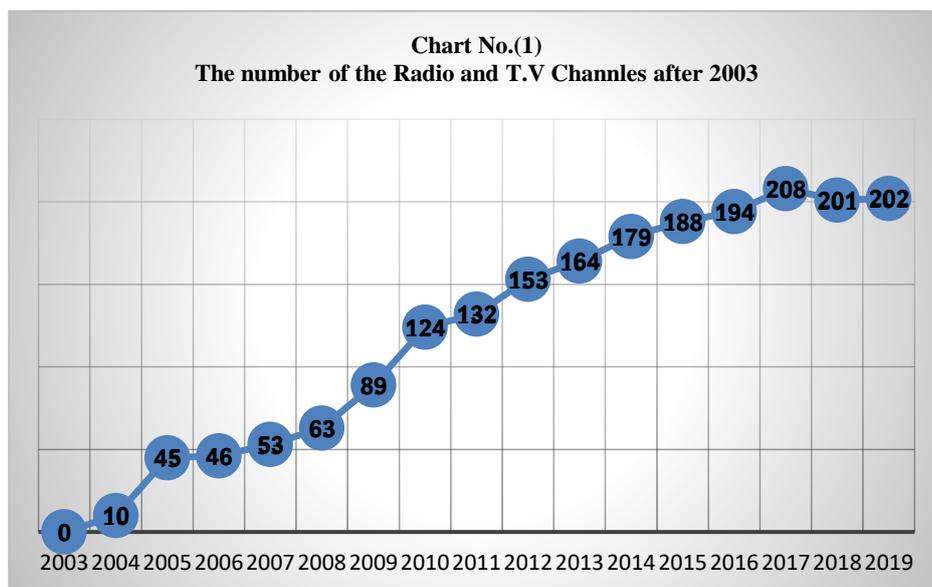
<sup>(25)</sup> Nehme, T. 2019. Impasse of Cyber laws: Iraqi Case. Retrieved from [https://www.learmy.gov.lb/en/content/impasse-cyber-laws-iraqi-case#\\_ftnref4](https://www.learmy.gov.lb/en/content/impasse-cyber-laws-iraqi-case#_ftnref4) [Accessed on September 8, 2020]

<sup>(26)</sup> Independent Media Center Kurdistan. 2017. <http://imckiraq.blogspot.com>

<sup>(27)</sup> The Digital Clinic: A New Resource to Protect Women Activists on Social Media. 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/archives/8145>

## Field of Journalism, Female Journalists and Digital Security

There was a huge openness in the sector of media following the fall of the Iraqi former regime in 2003 that hundreds of newspapers and magazines started covering and many audio-visual media agencies were established after this date. Just the number of radios and T.V channels increased



up to 200 stations between 2003 and 2019 and there was up to 10 thousand journalists who registered their names as members with the Iraqi Journalists Union, according to a survey by the Iraqi Communication and Media Agency which is clarified in chart No. (1).<sup>(28)</sup> Up to 867 newspapers and magazines were registered in the Kurdistan Region from 2009 until 2017, according to a survey by Kurdistan Journalists Union.<sup>(29)</sup> The promotion of the media sector in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region had a direct impact on the increase of female journalists' rate. The openness of the Iraqi society to the international community and the implementation of several projects by the international and local organizations to support female journalists had a positive impact. The presence of women in the media and journalism area was not an easy task but it was after overcoming many obstacles and barriers in a community which is controlled by several political, social and legal restrictions that some of them still continue and prevent female journalists to practice the job they have. The availability of such barriers made several female journalists to

<sup>(28)</sup> The Middle East. 2020. Paper Journalism in Iraq ... The lack of professionalism and a reluctance to read. Retrieved from [https://aawsat.com/home/article/1015491-الصحافة-الورقية-في-العراق-غياب-الاحترافية-وعزوف-عن-القراءة?fbclid=IwAR33ZXY\\_GoY-f\\_89ybhi6gML9d\\_kTGEiebeqbMR9yimaQuRmTmtYWzwrzhw](https://aawsat.com/home/article/1015491-الصحافة-الورقية-في-العراق-غياب-الاحترافية-وعزوف-عن-القراءة?fbclid=IwAR33ZXY_GoY-f_89ybhi6gML9d_kTGEiebeqbMR9yimaQuRmTmtYWzwrzhw) (It was available on September 12, 2020)

<sup>(29)</sup> Kurdistan Journalists Union. Retrieved from the webpage of the Union <http://www.kurdjs.com/kurdish/data> (It was available on September 12, 2020)



sacrifice their lives,<sup>(30)</sup> and some of them obliged to quit the journalism profession.<sup>(31)</sup>

The Iraqi society's view of women is also reflected in the media that this field is not free from the structural problems related to women. One of the major problems of female journalists so far is the negative and inferior view of the community to the women who work in media and the journalism profession is not seen the same as other professions. This is the reason why despite of the gender inequality in media sector, female journalists always face violations such as murder, arrest and beating, discrimination, sexual harassment, cyber-crime and attacks and libel.<sup>(32)</sup>

The electronic media expansion in Iraq and the increase of social media users as mentioned above were good factors so as female journalists to be active in this field and benefit from the digital platforms and social media. Hence, social media networks soon became a source of threat and risk for female journalists and civil activists, especially against those who are writing controversial topics and advocate for human rights.<sup>(33)</sup> The researches and press reports indicate that due to a lack of adequate self-protection procedures and facilities in digital field, the female journalists and civil activists are subjected to more cyber-attacks and they are targeted more. <sup>(34)</sup> <sup>(35)</sup>

<sup>(30)</sup> Al-Rawi, A.K., 2010. Iraqi women journalists' challenges and predicaments. *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, 3(3), pp.223-236.

<sup>(31)</sup> Safi Al-Yasir. The Iraqi Woman's Suffering in Journalism Work. <https://almadapaper.net/sub/05-392/p10.htm>

<sup>(32)</sup> KAISY, AIDA. 2019. A Gender Analysis for the Media Landscape in Iraq.

<sup>(33)</sup> Vilardo, V. and Bittar, S., 2018. Gender Profile-Iraq: A situation analysis on gender equality and women's empowerment in Iraq. Retrieved from <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620602/rr-gender-profile-iraq-131218-en.pdf> [Accessed on September 5, 2020]

<sup>(34)</sup> Alessandra Bajec .2019. Scores of Iraqi women victim to online sexual blackmail. Retrieved from <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2019/12/12/iraqi-women-victim-to-online-sexual-blackmail> [Available on September 10, 2020].

<sup>(35)</sup> The Digital Clinic: A New Resource to Protect Women Activists on Social Media. 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/archives/8145>

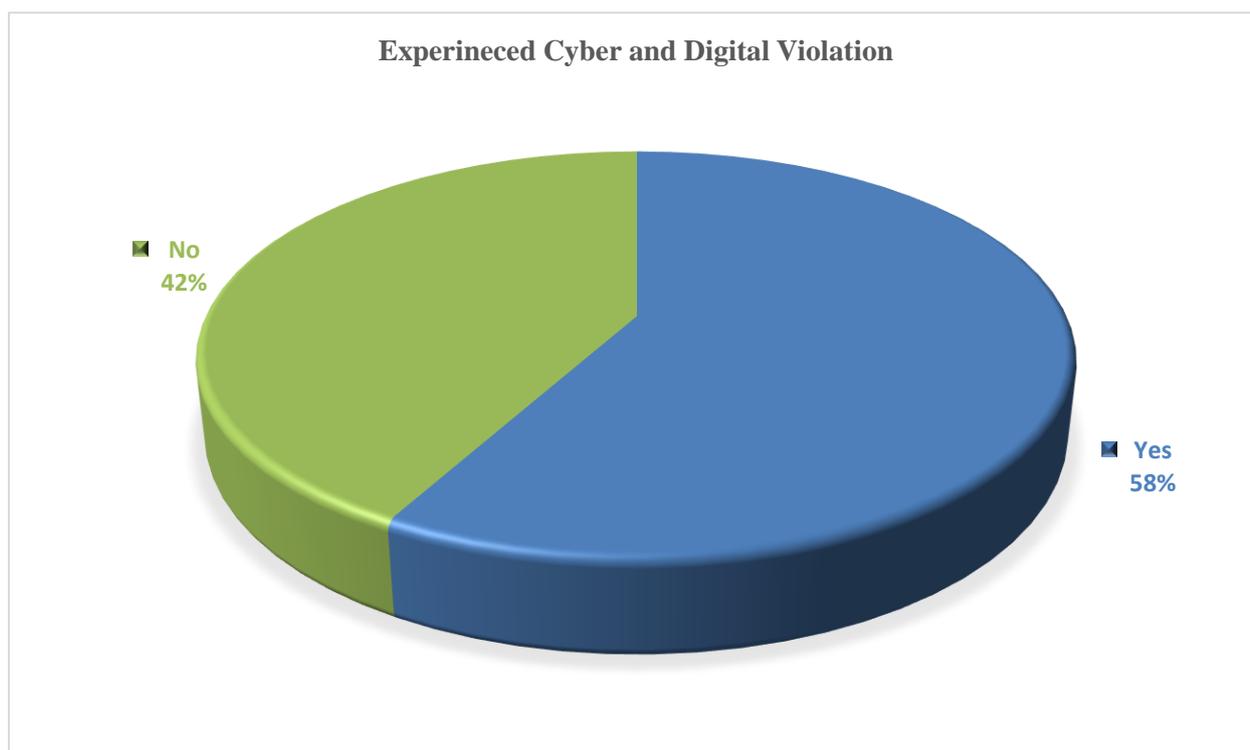
## The Result and the Analysis:

We will present in this section the result of the survey and the interviews based on the questions of the assessment. i.e. The response of several questions are placed within an area and they become the answer of the key questions of the assessment.

## The Level and Type of Cyber-attacks/ Threats on Journalists:

To realize the level of the cyber-attacks and threats, the participants of the assessment are asked about their previous exposure to cyber and digital breaches. It has been noted from the responses of the participants that majority of them have faced cyber or digital attack which constitutes 58% of the assessment sample.

**Chart No.2**

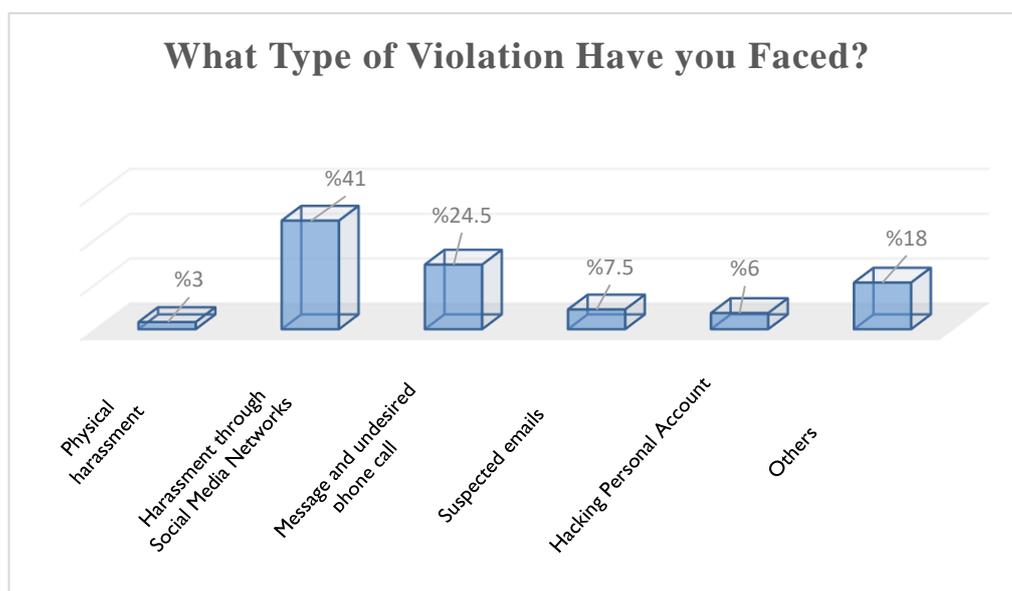


It's expected to have such a large percentage of violations against journalists in an unstable environment like Iraq and Kurdistan. It is simply because journalists have mostly relied on social media networks and electronic media after 2003 to communicate their messages through their electronic writings and posts. This is also part of the global trend especially

in countries where the environment of physical civil activity is diminished for journalists and civil activists.<sup>(36)</sup>

Concerning the same topic, participants have been asked the questions about the type of violation they have faced. The responses of the journalists in the Chart No. 3 show that the majority of the violations are committed through social media networks which it constitutes 41% of the assessment sample, then undesired message and phone call is another type of such threats and violations against journalists which constitutes 24% of the assessment sample. This is while the least percentage of the violation is the physical harassment that constitutes 3% of the samples taken for this assessment. %18 of the participants also reported other types of violations, which could be any violations that are not mentioned here including catfishing, revenge porn,...etc.

**Chart No. 3**



<sup>(36)</sup> The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).2020. Digital transformation and the futures of civic space to 2030. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/79b34d37-en.pdf?expires=1602743226&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=180F909FA5ED04D9FC67793238FA3A8C>

To know the female proportion from these violations against journalists, in the Chart No.4 the survey result shows that the majority of the female participants have faced cyber and digital violations which they constitute 57%. This conclusion is the same that has been presented in the previous reports and researches on the situation of the female journalists in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.<sup>(37) (38) (39)</sup>

**Chart No. 4**



Regarding the type of the violations according to gender, this assessment found that violating the rights of the female journalist is possibly higher through social media networks. Remarkably, male is more vulnerable to physical violation than female. Perhaps it's because the male journalists constitute the majority of the journalists who work in the field and they are

<sup>(37)</sup> Iraqi Women Journalist's Forum. 2020. *IWJF 's report for 2019-2020*. Retrieved from <https://www.iwjf.info/2020/05/03/in-the-2019-2020-iwjf-report-more-than-100-cases-of-murder-and-threats-against-journalists-have-been-recorded-and-32-women-journalist-have-been-subjected-to-blackmail-and-defamation/>

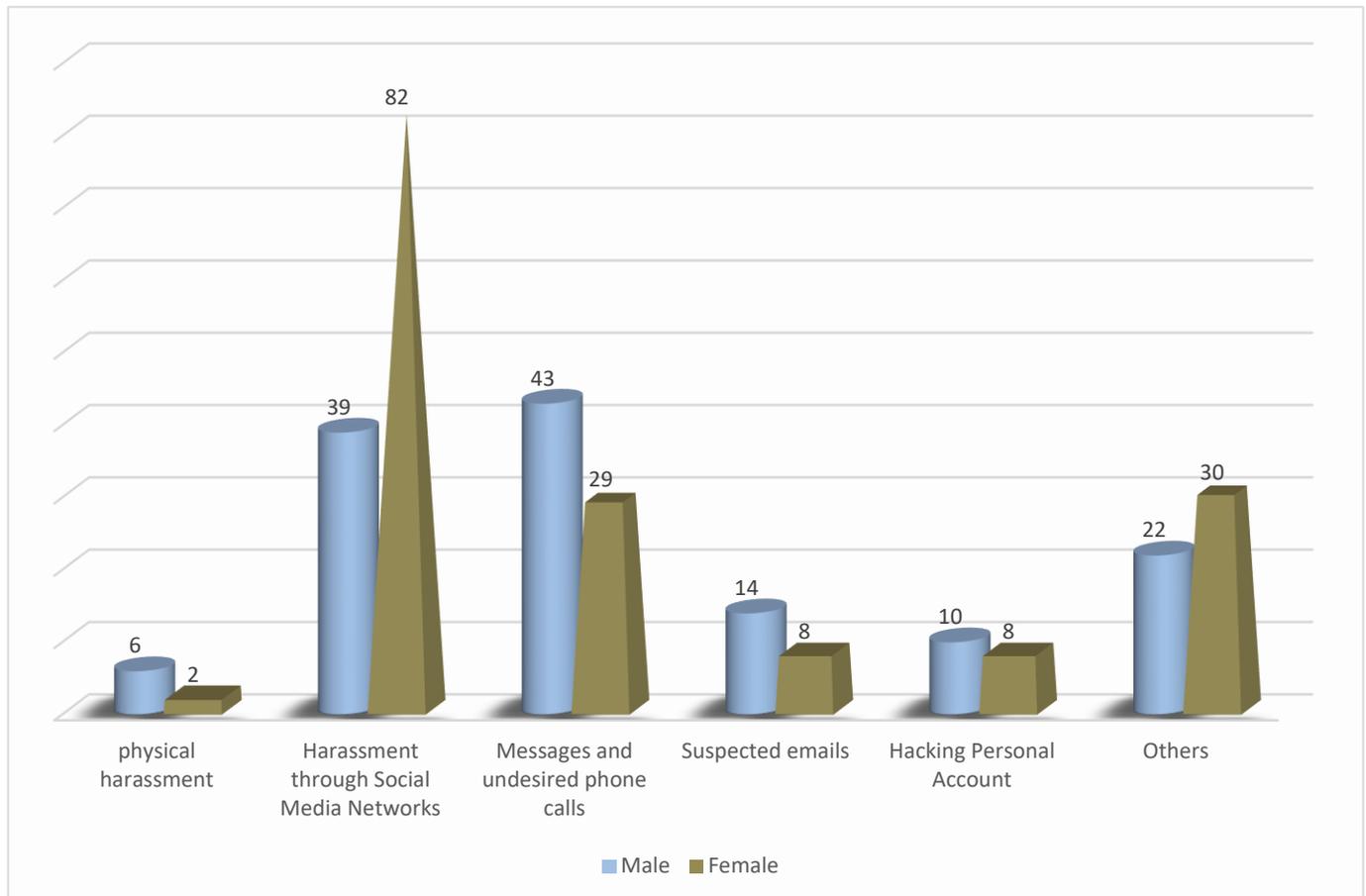
<sup>(38)</sup> Sawtuha Network for Women Human Rights Defenders . 2019. The conditions of the journalists Women and Female Human Rights Defenders in Iraq 2014-2018. Retrieved from <https://www.iwjf.info/wp-content/uploads/The-conditions-of-the-Media-Women-and-Female-Human-Rights-Defenders-in-Iraq-UPR.pdf>

<sup>(39)</sup> KAISY, AIDA. 2019. A Gender Analysis for the Media Landscape in Iraq. Retrieved from [https://internews.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Internews\\_gender-analysis\\_media\\_landscape\\_iraq\\_2020-04.pdf](https://internews.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Internews_gender-analysis_media_landscape_iraq_2020-04.pdf) [Accessed on September 22, 2020]

subjected to be arrested, beaten and wounded when covering the protests and demonstrations.

This is seen in the annual reports of the organizations who publish data and information about the violations against journalists.<sup>(40)</sup>

**Chart No. 5**



Whatever the case, it does not lessen from the fact that the female journalists and civil activists are targeted, and they are physically and sexually harassed in most of the cases. This was noted from the statements of some participants who are interviewed, and they are aware of the life condition of female journalists and civil activists very closely. Meanwhile, the participants have mentioned that even among the journalists and civil activists, those who talk about sensitive issues such as corruption or those who analyze and making follow up for the political

<sup>(40)</sup> The reports of Metro Center, PFO, Unions of Journalists and the Report of Iraqi Women Journalist's Forum for 2019-2020, they contain accurate data and information about this issue.



issues, are prime targets. The participants also mentioned that the cyber-attacks and threats get increased sometimes, especially during elections and when the political conflicts escalate.

”Although some of the cases have quitted their job before getting to actual sexual violation to protect themselves, yes, some of the cyber-attacks reached to sexual violation and sexual harassment but they have chosen silence They have made their choice to remain silent for fear of exposure by their community and relatives “

**The editor of a women newspaper, female, Erbil**

"Both sexes are subjected to attacks but female journalists and activists more. The attacks mostly target dignity and honor of the people, and they are related to the safety and rights of women. For instance, in Baghdad the case of the journalist (w) whose information which was stolen was published online and as a result, she died."

**A journalist in Baghdad, female, Baghdad**

"The cyber-attacks are mostly to defame and distort the person, especially the journalists and civil activists, and they are mostly used for sexual purposes and exploiting girls and women for sex and money."

**Journalist and civil activist, male, Erbil**

"Human rights activists and journalists whose job is following up and analyzing the political issues, including female journalists and activists are subjected to cyber-attacks more"

## Female journalist, Erbil

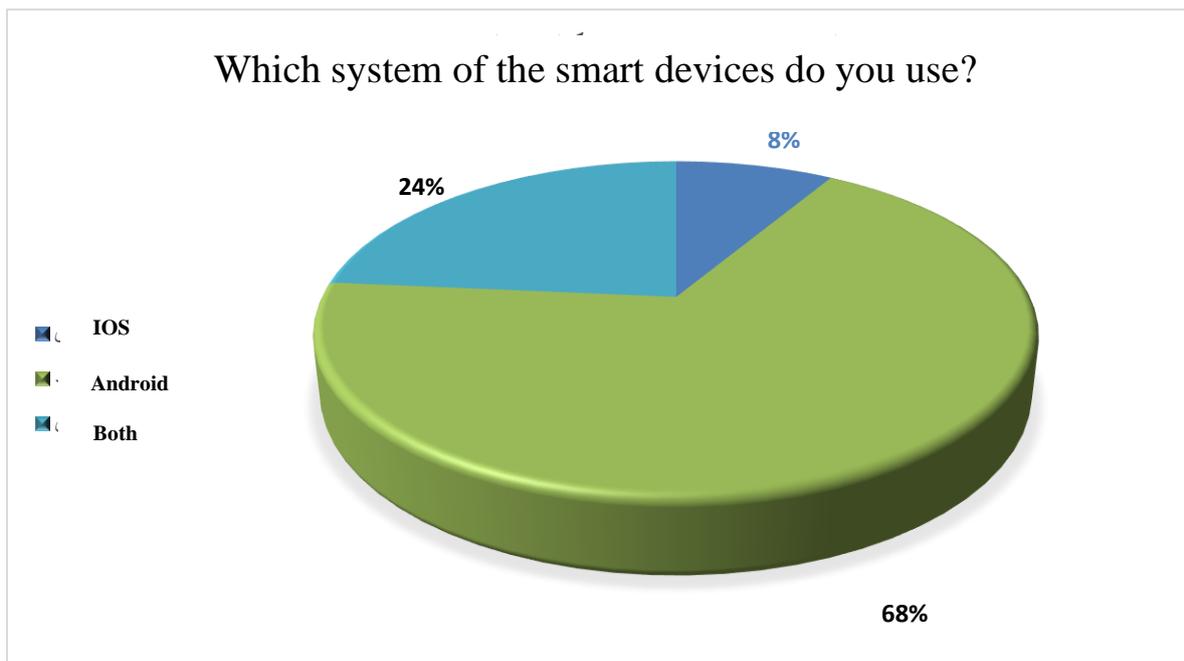
According to the statements of these participants, some of those who have been interviewed, and the conclusion of the researches and reports that have been prepared before on female journalist's condition in Iraq indicate that the sexual violation and harassment against female journalists in the media sector are getting increased. A large portion of this situation is related to the lack of enforcement of practical and legal mechanisms for the protection of female journalists in the media sector.<sup>(41)</sup>

## Journalist Awareness and the Use of Internet and Communication

### Means:

The digital and cyber-attacks against journalists to what extent related to the capacity of the attackers and the logistic resources they have, they are also related to the journalist's level of awareness and their ability for self-protection. i.e. Having awareness about digital security, the use of social media networks and the procedures necessary for self-protection from cyber-attacks are good assistance to mitigate the risks within this context. Several questions have been directed to the participants of the survey and those who have been interviewed to know the awareness level of the journalists and self-protection procedures from cyber-attacks. Some of these are factual questions and they have a direct impact on being protected during cyber-attacks. The following charts show the conclusion of several questions of this type:

<sup>(41)</sup> KAISY, AIDA. 2019. A Gender Analysis for the Media Landscape in Iraq.

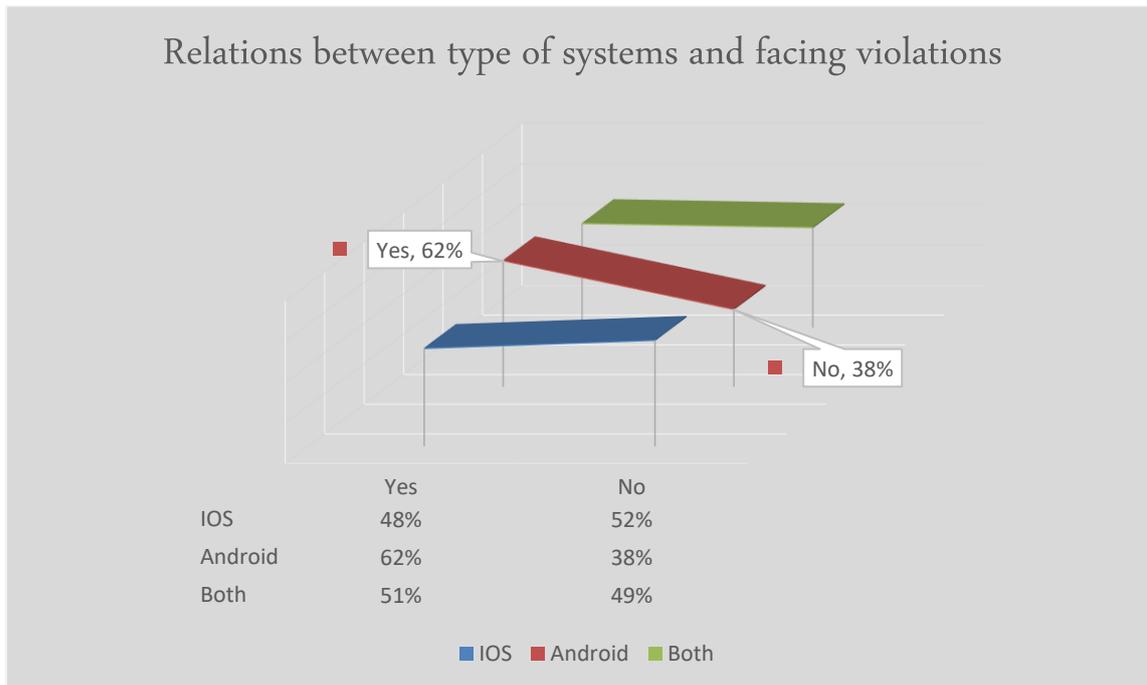
**Chart No. 6**

The response of survey participants shows that the majority of the participants use the Android system which constitutes 68% of the assessment sample, whereas a minority of the participants uses the IOS system which constitutes 8%. Although there are lots of controversies on the difference between these two systems in terms of safety, many of the IT experts believe that the IOS system which operates on the Apple company products are more protected to some extent because they provide fewer opportunities to hackers and blackmailers to penetrate the system.<sup>(42)</sup> Perhaps the IOS system is safer for self-protection from the cyber-attacks, but Apple products are more expensive, therefore, most journalists are unable to purchase such products due to their bad financial condition.

To know the relationship between the types of the system is used and being affected by the digital and cyber-attacks, chart No.7 shows that the users of the android system are more affected by cyber-attacks which constitutes 62% of android system users. In return, IOS system users face fewer cyber-attacks which constitute 48% of the system users.

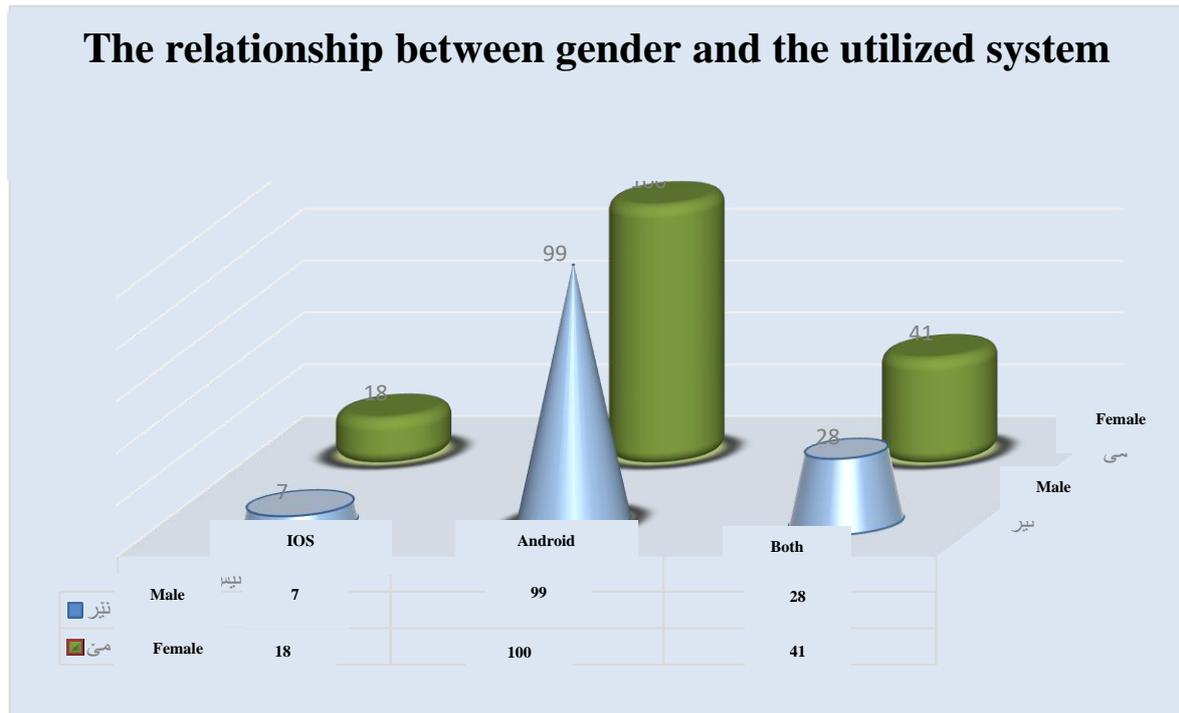
<sup>(42)</sup> Dan Rafter. 2019. Android vs. iOS: Which is more secure? Retrieved from <https://us.norton.com/internetsecurity-mobile-android-vs-ios-which-is-more-secure.html> [Accessed on September 26, 20

## Chart No. 7



To show the relationship between gender and the type of system is used, chart No.8 shows that there is not a big difference between male and female with respect to the use of the android system which is not a safe one for cyber-attacks. It was also found that the majority of the IOS users are female. This could be the first activity in Iraq to focus on gender relations, the type of system used and cyber-attacks. Therefore; more working on this issue is necessary, especially it's not known yet how far the journalists in general and female journalists, in particular, choose their smart devices and their systems intentionally for their own protection.

Chart No.8

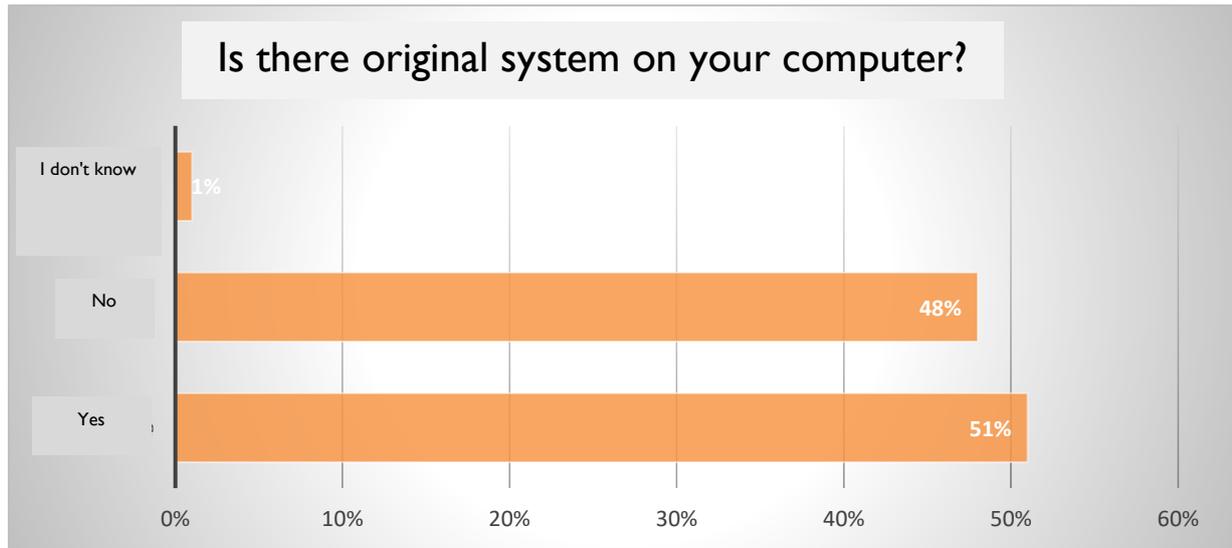


One of the other variables that could be dealt with as the self-protection procedure against digital and cyber-attacks is the availability of the original system on the computer which is used by the journalists and civil activists. It was found that though the majority of the participants use the original system on their computer which constitutes 51% of the sample, and the percentage of those who don't have such system on their computer is high and it's up to 48% of the participants. Whereas, the digital security and IT experts believe that the availability of the original system and its update of the programs and applications have an effect on preventing or mitigating the impact of the cyber-attacks.<sup>(43)</sup>

<sup>(43)</sup> Ava TV. 2020. Private Information Protection Program on the smart device.  
<https://web.facebook.com/watch/?v=323778465416940>

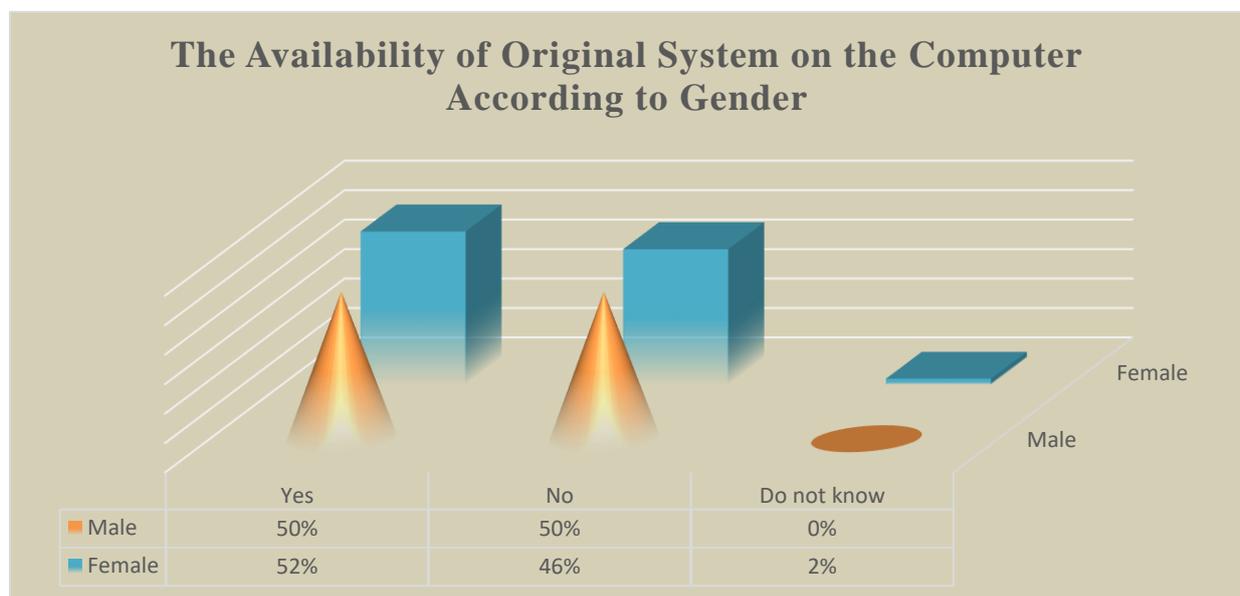


**Chart No. 9**



To know the relationship between gender and the availability of the original system on the smart devices, chart No.10 shows that 52% of the female participants have the original system on their computers, while this rate is 50% for the male. Whatever is the difference between male and female in this regard, the responses to this question show that many of the female journalists and civil activists still do not have the original system on their computers and smart devices, and this increases the potential of losing their data and information more easily or to be attacked by cyber attackers or blackmailers more easily.

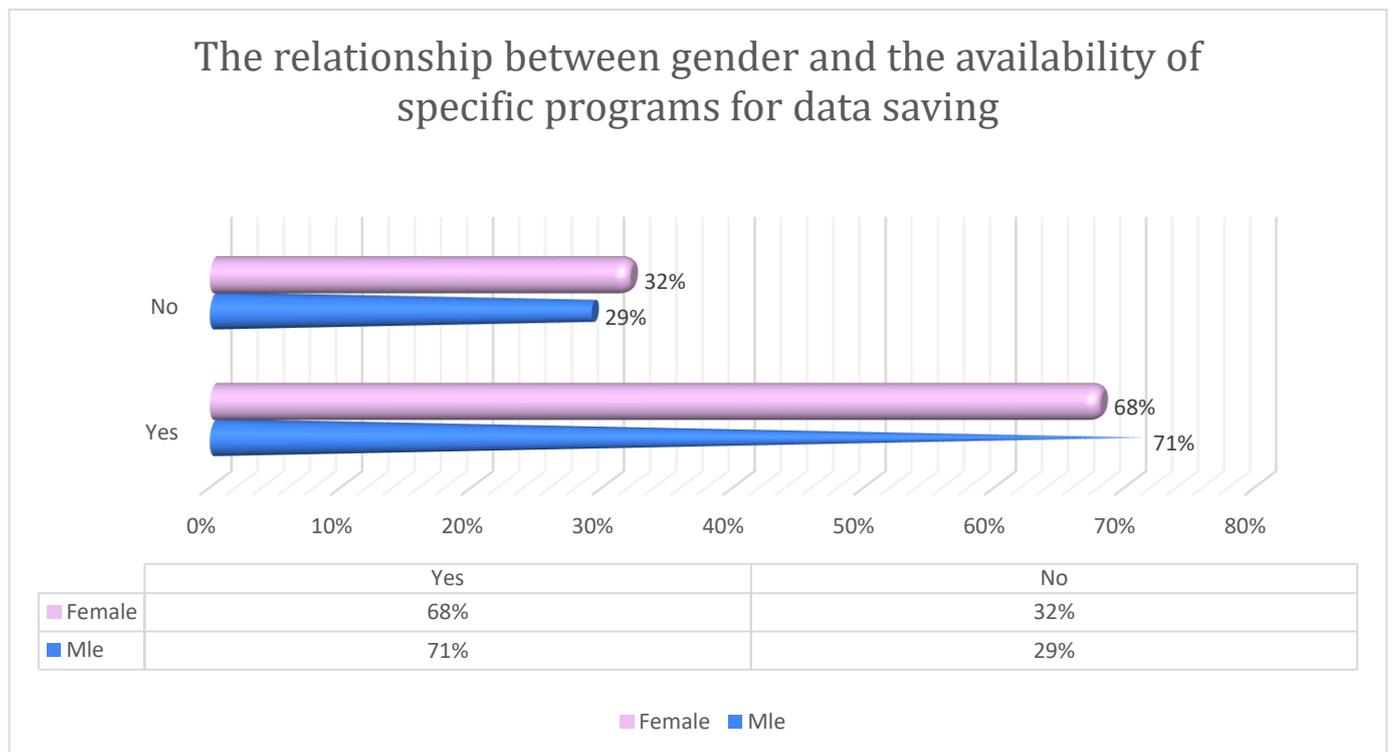
**Chart No. 10**





In relation to the specific programs for saving data and information, the participants of the survey are asked the question "**Do you have specific programs for saving data of photos and files?**" from the answer to this question, it's found that yes, most of them have specific programs for this purpose. Chart No. 11 shows that female journalists and civil activists less use such programs as compared to males. This is while the female journalists are still subjected to data and information theft or electronic extortion. Though there is a lack of accurate data about such programs that how far they protect journalists and activists and it is an effective mechanism for protection, they can be dealt with as one of the self-protection measures.

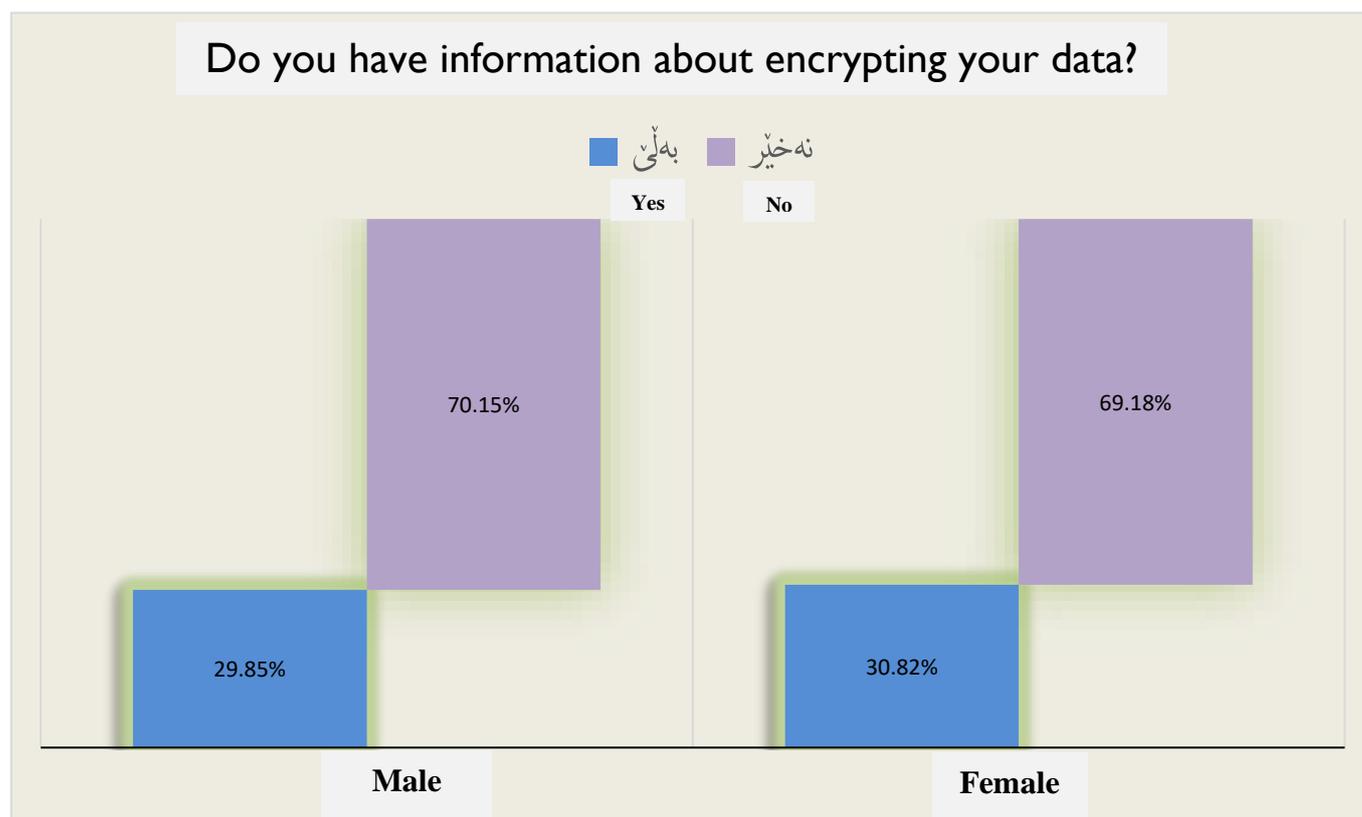
**Chart No. 11**



Another question that is related to the awareness level of the participants and self-protection procedures from cyber-attacks is if the participants have information on how to encrypt data and information in their devices. Chart No. 12 shows that the majority of the participants from both genders have a lack of information. 69.18% of females who have answered this question have mentioned that they don't have information on how to

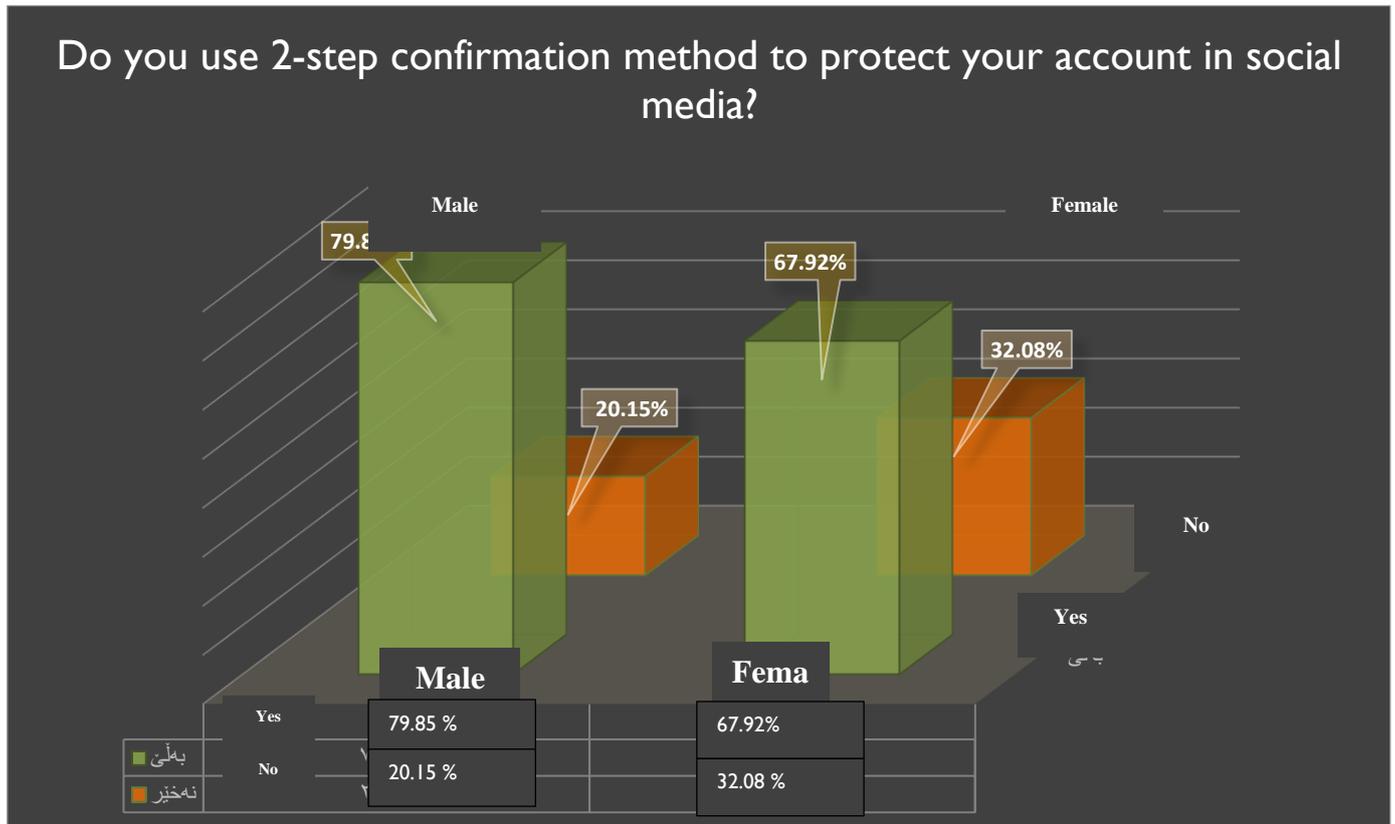
protect their data by encrypting them. This situation is not so different for the male also that 70.15% of them have the same answer. The availability of encryption features on some programs and systems is a clear indication of the importance and effectiveness of this procedure for self-protection, although there is not any accurate research and report to prove that to what extent this procedure mitigates the level of attacks and risks against the journalists and civil activists.

**Chart No. 12**



With respect to the same topic, the participants are asked the question do you use the 2-step confirmation method to protect the account you use in social media? Chart No. 13 shows that the majority of the participants use the 2-step confirmation in which 79.85% of male and 67.92% of female constitute the answer to the survey sample. What's noticeable is the difference between males and females. The difference is females less protect their accounts using two steps by 12% than the males. Perhaps this could be related to certain situations that the phone number is requested in addition to the email address which may push the females to think twice to register their phone number on their social media account.

Chart No. 13



In relation to the conclusion of the interviews, most of the interviewees mention that the journalists and civil activists in general do not have the sufficient information about digital security and the source of the current cyber-attacks. Despite a minority of the participants believed that the cyber-attacks in Iraq and in general haven't become a phenomenon, they stressed that electronically monitoring the journalists has become a phenomenon and its expected that to continue in the future and developing to cyber-attacks. All the indicators show that the absence of digital security law and the lack of taking necessary action, these attacks will diminish the freedom of expression and withdrawal of women in electronic media. The participants clearly indicated to the significance of a specific law for the protection of digital security, and at the same time they described that the capacity building of journalists and activists about digital security is an inevitable need. This situation will oblige journalists and civil activists to pay more attention to cyber and digital security.



"We have very little information about the digital security and the available programs and mechanisms that are used to combat such cyber-attacks"

A webpage editor, male,

"I don't have enough information about using electronic programs for my safety. Also, activists and journalists have lack of awareness about self-protection or using electronic programs for self-protection."

A journalist, female, Mosul

"In fact, I don't have information about the type of the cyber-attacks because I didn't dive to the subject, it's very important but unfortunately, I haven't paid attention to it."

An activist, female, Erbil

"Immunity must be guaranteed to community individuals against cyber-attacks through a specific law"

A journalist, female, Erbil

## Capacity-building Initiatives and Services in the Field of Digital Security:

In relation to the effort of the media centers and CSOs to build the capacity of the journalists and civil activists, the participants are asked about their participation in the digital security training courses. As it is clear in the chart No. 14, the majority of the samples of this assessment point to that they haven't taken part in any of the cyber and digital security training. What's noticeable is the female journalists have less participated in such training by 4% compared to male journalists.





"Awareness on self-protection from cyber-attacks is very low; therefore, the awareness level of journalists and activists must be raised through specific trainings"

**A civil activist, male, Sulaimaniyah**

"Although, I have some information about the digital security, I haven't participated so far in any training about this topic."

**A journalist, female, Baghdad**

"Training and opening courses to raise the awareness of the journalists and civil activists about the self-protection from cyber-attacks is important, the competent organizations must open specific trainings for journalists."

**A journalist, female, Erbil**

"I use social media networks as platforms to advocate for human rights....I don't have sufficient information to combat cyber-attacks and I don't find any initiative or providing trainings in my town to get information about digital security."

**A journalist, female, Diyala**

The people who participated in the interviews have explicitly felt the gap in the field of digital security in Iraq and Kurdistan Region, therefore, they talked about the defects and issues of this area as well as they proposed specific ideas and suggestions that could be helpful to mitigate the cyber-attacks on one side and on the other side, to service those people who are exposed to cyber-attacks and threats.

"We don't have so far a suitable legal framework to protect the digital right of journalists and activists and unfortunately; there is a lack of competent organization to protect these categories from cyber-attacks. If they're found, they are weak."

**A civil activist, male, Erbil**

"The competent bodies including profession unions have a weak role in spreading the awareness and providing services for digital security, and this ultimately will become a strong factor for the increase of the barriers."

**A journalist, female, Mosul**

"Because I participated in a meeting with one of the foreign countries ambassador, I was exposed to cyber-attack, I didn't complain because I don't believe in the government, I believe they are themselves who perform such threats and attacks."

**A journalist, female, Baghdad**

"People normally go to the security services to complain when they're exposed to cyber-attack, but this is improper for journalists to protect the information and due to the lack of trust on the security agencies, therefore; we notice that journalists don't take their claim to security agencies."

**A journalist, female, Halabja**



"The coordination between the organizations and journalists' unions is a must, there should be a hotline for the journalists to have emergency access, there must be legal and psycho-social advisory clinics for the cases have been subjected to cyber-extortion."

A journalist, female, Erbil

In response to a hypothetical question which says, **"What are you going to do if you were exposed to digital and cyber-attack?"**. The majority of the participants in both genders point to that they will rely on digital and IT experts and specialists. In the chart No.15, it's found that 61.01% of female and 56.72% of male rely on the experts. Compared to male, female journalists and civil activists rely more on experts by 5%. This shows that providing digital security experts and specialists for female journalists is more important and usable. But females have less self-reliance by 8% to solve their own problems if they were exposed to cyber-attacks and threats. Therefore; we can say that the capacity building in digital security has more significance for female journalists and civil activists.

**Chart No. 15**





## **Conclusion:**

The conclusion of this assessment showed that due to the lack of specific laws for digital security and necessary action against cyber-crimes, female journalists and civil activists are subjected to several violations and threats on the internet and through communications means. i.e. social media networks and digital platforms have become sources of threat to female journalists and civil activists and extort them for sex and defame them socially. The journalists and civil activists who work in the field of human rights and they are against corruption, the bad political system, and governance are more vulnerable to be subjected to threats, violations, and even murdering them. This situation will lead to diminish the space of freedom of expression and the promotion of female journalists in the media sector.

Regarding the capacity and the awareness level of the journalists and civil activists, this assessment pointed out that whether they are aware of or not, the journalists and civil activists don't apply self-protection procedures from digital and cyber threats. Some of these procedures are related to the type of the electronic devices used by journalists and civil activists as well as their dealing with their systems and programs. Some others are related to the lack of the opportunities that the media outlets and the organizations can provide them to raise their level of awareness to combat digital and cyber-threats.

Lack of services and initiatives in the field of digital security is another problem that the cyber-attacks and threats are increasing against female journalists and civil activists. There is a lack of advisory services through experts and specific centers to digital security. The lack of specific facilities and mechanisms as well as the lack of trust on the relative bodies obliged female journalists and civil activists to combat any cyber-attack and threat depending on themselves, experts and specialists rather than institutions. This is one of the indicators that in certain situations the institutions themselves, especially, security services are seen as the source of the cyber-attacks and threats.



## Recommendations:

1. The parliament and legal structures must work to promote the legal framework of the digital and cyber security in Iraq and Kurdistan, also to issue the law of cyber-crimes as soon as possible provided that to be in line with the international standards of privacy and human rights protection.
2. The governmental and security institutions must allocate specific offices to provide digital security services and to develop the systems and programs which the journalists and civil activists can use them very easily, such as providing a hotline for the victims of digital and cyber-attacks. There must be competent and skillful staff and experts in these offices to become the source of building relations and strong trust between the official bodies and the journalists.
3. The media outlets, CSOs working in the field of women and journalists must pay more attention to digital security that they must have a guidance or a digital security policy, to design plans and actions for capacity building, raising awareness of female journalists and civil activists and at the same time, they must have emergency services for female journalists when exposed to digital and cyber-attack and threat such as the establishment of special clinics for the female journalists who become victims of cyber-attacks.
4. The academic institutions and the universities must seriously work to pay attention to the digital security issue through supporting the researches and researchers related to the digital security area to provide as many scientific sources as possible and preparing experts and specialists in this field.
5. The journalists in general and female journalists in particular must take the digital security attacks seriously and to practice the self-protection procedures as following:



- a. Utilize the devices have IOS system, because the system defensive capability is more than the attacks and they are less targeted by hackers and blackmailers.
- b. Download the applications from the original source especially Apple Store and Google Play.
- c. Update the systems with the latest version which principally these updates are performed to prevent the new attacks.
- d. Use of strong passwords for online platforms including emails and social media accounts.
- e. Download the applications and programs that protect the users of social media networks and communication devices from cyber-attack such as Orbot and Virtual Private Network (VPN).
- f. Continuous effort to recognize and make use of the documents and resources related to digital security and taking into consideration the self-protection steps to prevent any potential cyber-attack and threat that could happen any time.
- g. Require and pressure the media outlets and institutions to provide digital security services and conduct training courses to be familiar with the self-protection procedures and to deal with the cyber-attacks and risks.
- h. Paying more attention to digital security issues and cyber-crimes and report the cases and violations that are considered within cyber-attacks and threats on the female journalists and civil activists.



## Peace and Freedom Organization



Email:

[pfo@pfo-ku.org](mailto:pfo@pfo-ku.org)

Tell:

+9647707600575

Website:

<http://pfo-ku.org>

Facebook Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/Peace-and-Freedom-Organization-PFO-484637138366425/>