

**COVID and
Women and Girls'
Safety (C-WAGS):
Emerging themes
from Iraq**

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SVRI 2022



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Population, Refugees,
and Migration

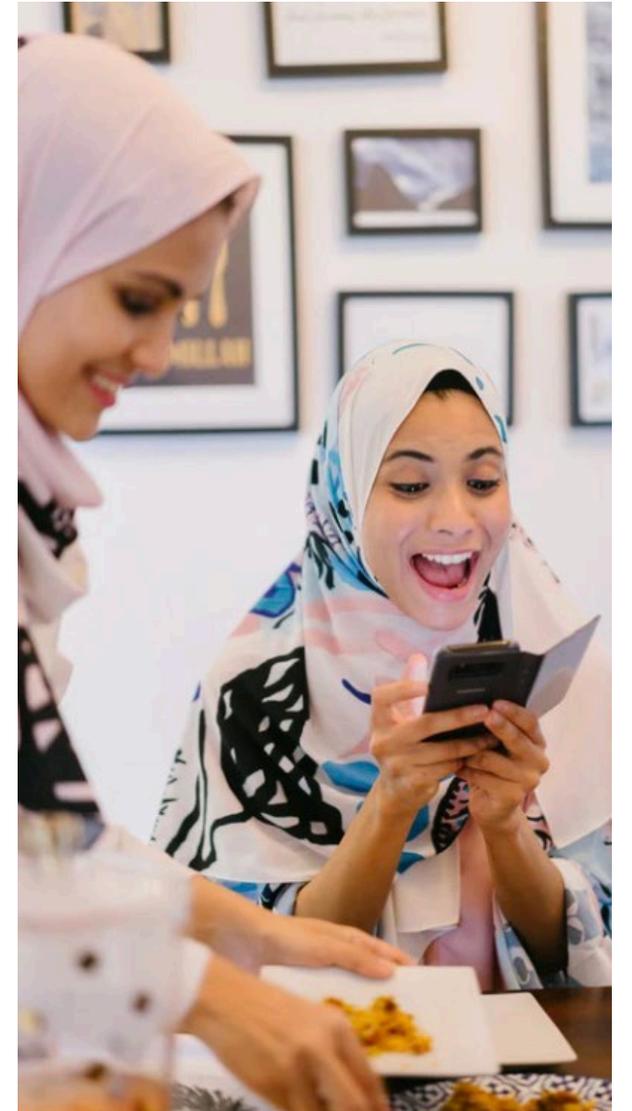
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What is C-WAGS?

- Multi-country study: Guatemala, Italy, Brazil, and Iraq
- Impact of COVID on:
 - Women and girls' safety and experiences of violence
 - Access to, availability and quality of GBV services
 - How service providers adapted

C-WAGS Iraq

- U-report poll
- Survey
- Key informant interviews
- Focus group discussion with young women from Youth Advisory Committee



Key informant interviews in Iraq

- Conducted in Arabic or English
- 15 interviews, lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1.5 hours
- Range of sectors:
 - Human rights activists
 - Justice system
 - Child protection
 - Psychosocial support
 - Gender-based violence
- And topics:
 - Impact of COVID on services, virtual services, mitigating challenges
 - Women's changes in safety, child marriage, schooling, and coping strategies

Themes emerging from data

- COVID within the economic-sociopolitical context of Iraq
- Increase in digital violence
- Digital space as a double-edged sword
- Shrinking world for girls → increase in forced and early marriage
- Impact on mental Health



COVID within the sociopolitical context of Iraq

- Wars
- Sectarianism
- Conflict areas: ISIS
- Political conflict, invasion and occupation
- Rule of law
- Economic situation and job market
- Internally displaced population IDPs

*"We as women and as Iraqi citizens are used to seeing crises locally. We are **used to experiencing crises** related to conflict areas, areas that ISIS controlled and the aftermath of the liberation, and battle zones. Now covid is a global crisis that has helped us learn lessons from other countries and other societies. I mean it was an experience rich with positives as well as negatives." (KII 8)*

Digital space as a double- edged sword

- KIs shared their experiences in shifting GBV services to a virtual format, including:
 - Benefits and disadvantages of digital tools as platforms of services delivery
 - Positive and negative effects of social media utilization by women and girls
 - Implication of online schooling on women and girls' educational opportunities



Advantages and disadvantages of virtual services

Advantages

- Switch to virtual platforms enabled continuation of services for many women
- Enabled *some* women to complete higher education online

Challenges

- Poor internet quality
- For women who lived with their abusers, accessing virtual services at home could be dangerous
- Digital divide

Leveraging social media

Social media for good:

- An **alternative space** for women to share experiences of violence and other taboo topics

*“There are groups that talk about violence, for example, if a girl burned herself in a governorate, you would find her picture and her story published online, **many cases are discussed online now** especially the ones that are published on public Facebook groups, violence is no longer a **hushed subject**....The activists, and it could spread in a very wide range if many people were tagged, murder and suicide cases are rapidly widespread, after COVID and the use of social media **people speak up about violence**, many people now fear misbehaving in public because now people take videos” (K1,2)*

Digital risks

Increase in online harassment and blackmail

- Electronic blackmail related to “reputation and honor”
- Lack of knowledge on how to tackle among lawyers

“[E-blackmail] is a very big problem that has increased during Covid. Many women were exposed to e-blackmail during the pandemic and that is because many young men stayed at home without a source of income or a way to get money and e-blackmail was the only way to get money. We tried to help women, for example, we communicated with a page called the E-Blackmail Warriors page and other pages and they helped women who had been blackmailed by trying to close the blackmailer's page, and sometimes they were communicating directly with the blackmailer.” (KII 15)

Digital divide

Socioeconomic factors

*"[Communicating by phone] has its limitations because there are a lot of women, specifically domestic violence victims, who **do not have access to technology or technological skills.**" (K1114)*

*"During Covid, it became difficult for [women without phones] to reach out, so they used the **neighbors' or used a relative's phone**, but communication was very low and was not like communication before Covid." (K1115)*

"Those that can't access the services are the women who live far away, and the most poor of them, and the women who don't know how to use social media platforms." (K1113)

- Some providers, whose clients had no access to live TV or internet, shifted to door-to-door services where possible

Digital divide

Controlling women's access to technology

*"There are also women who do not have a personal phone as a result of family customs that **do not allow women** to have their own telephone and number... Some schoolgirls... would be prevented by their fathers from using the phone. The fathers often prevent the use of phones due **to belief that their daughters will use the phone for "bad" purposes**. There was a case where a girl... didn't have a phone and couldn't complete online school without it and so...ended up having to **withdraw from school** because her parents would not allow her to use or get a phone."* (KII 8)

Another KII noted:

"Many fathers refused to allow their daughters to open the camera which caused many girls to fail as they could not complete the exams as required, the refusal of the fathers due to the customs and traditions prevailing in society." (KI,13)



Diminished access to education

Diminished access to health and GBV services

Increase in early marriage

Heightened mechanisms of control (control over online activities and phone/cellphone use)



Impact on mental health

Service providers observed a deterioration in women and girls' mental health

- In some cases, resulting in suicide ideation or completion

*Women and girls—they want to get back out and get engaged into activities. And they have a lot of **stress** from the, during the pandemic. I mean, there were a number...of cases of self-harm. Cases of suicide ideation—so thinking about **suicide**. We had one case of actualized suicide; It was very difficult.
(K1,7)*

*Especially this week, two girls **committed suicide** who are from the area where we work. One is 17 years old, and the other is slightly older. These cases fall within the early marriage cases. This is now an important issue which we are trying to research. Workers reach out to families to find out why these girls committed suicide. (K1,8)*

Implications for future programming

Mitigation strategies as suggested/implemented by KIs:

- Providing internet credit to those who had phones but no access to internet
- Educational workshops about e-blackmail
- Build trust with caregivers before conducting sessions with adolescent girls
- Integration of GBV services in women-permitted spaces (e.g., food distribution stations)
- Use an alert object or code word to signal abuse in predetermined public spaces, such as pharmacies, markets, and others,
- Utilization of 'No dial or chat' phone options

A special thank you to all the service providers, women, and girls who shared their time and voices.

Extra slides

Focus group discussion

- Four participants ages 21-29, two translators, one facilitator
- Discussion in English and Arabic; 90 minutes
- Participants discussed the following topics as they related to COVID:
 - Daily lives and family dynamics
 - Virtual learning struggles, access to tech, social media
 - COVID impact on friendships
 - Mental health
 - Early marriage, divorce and domestic violence
 - Particularly vulnerable groups (LGBTQ, etc.)