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# Sexual Cyberbullying in North Lebanon



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## Sexual Cyberbullying in North Lebanon

### List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
LECORVAW	Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
PAR	Participatory Action Research
ISF	Internal Security Forces

### Foreword:

Social Media outlets are applications and programs that were created to facilitate communication all over the world. These tools have solved a wide array of problems, but have also created several other ones as well, like sexual cyberbullying, which is a great social problem that threatens to ruin society at large. That’s why this problem should be approached seriously and thoroughly.

This Participatory Action Research brings together current women who participated in the Teaching Women Enhanced English Program and program alumni from the last two years. It is part of a program funded by the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and implemented by USPEaK. The women who participated in this research are themselves from North Lebanon.

### Introduction:

Bullying represents one of the most serious public health issues. It is defined as a continual, aggressive act committed by a group or an individual over time against a victim who is unable to defend him/herself. Given the rapid development and emergence of communication and information technology (i.e. text messages, smartphones, and social media platforms), new ways to take out frustrations and aggression among adolescents have emerged. Adolescents can easily form a large number of online groups, which are difficult to control, with a potentially increased risk of becoming cyberbullies. Hence, the term “Cyberbullying” refers to bullying through the internet that has emerged and grabbed the attention of researchers and communities globally.

Cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying in several key ways. Perhaps the most obvious is that it requires some degree of technical expertise – children who are not ‘plugged in’, either through computer, cell phone, or video games, do not partake in cyberbullying, either as bullies or victims. Cyberbullying also provides anonymity to the bully, which is not possible with traditional bullying. Because of this, bullies cannot see the reactions of their victims, and studies have shown that they therefore tend to feel less remorse. Cyberbullying is opportunistic because it causes harm with no physical interaction, little planning, and little chance of being caught. Despite this, 40% to 50% of cyberbullying victims report knowing who their tormentor is.





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Cyberbullying can be more pervasive than traditional bullying. While traditional bullying is generally limited to school, with home usually being a reprieve, victims of cyberbullying can be reached anywhere, at any time; the potential audience is huge. This is compounded by the fact that there is a lack of supervision. With traditional bullying, teachers are regarded as enforcers. With cyberbullying, there is no clear authority, and children express reluctance to tell adults for fear of losing computer privileges or being labeled as an informer.

Studies have also shown that there is a large amount of overlap among traditional bullying and cyberbullying behaviors. Children who act as cyberbullies report high rates of being a traditional bully, but also report that they have also been victims of traditional cyberbullying. Cyberbullying victims report high rates of traditional victimization but are also involved in traditional bullying and cyberbullying activities themselves.

Studies have also shown that the problem under investigation is rooted in a range of complex and interrelated causes that impact individuals, families, and communities in profound ways. Financial problems can lead to increased stress and tension within families, creating environments that exacerbate issues such as poor communication and emotional disconnect. When families lack effective communication, misunderstandings, and conflicts can arise, potentially amplifying other challenges.

Additionally, the absence of emotional expression within families can result in strained relationships and hinder supportive and nurturing connections. Cyberbullying presents a unique challenge, as its identification and management require awareness of its manifestations, such as recognizing signs and understanding how to prevent and stop it. This lack of understanding can lead individuals and families to suffer silently.

Traditional upbringing and customs may contribute to perpetuating problems within families and communities, particularly if they discourage personal expression or enforce rigid boundaries. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge on setting personal boundaries can lead to relationship issues, such as overstepping boundaries or experiencing violations.

Lastly, inadequate cyber security measures in the country can expose individuals to online threats, including cyberbullying and harassment, instilling fear and anxiety. Addressing these causes requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses not only individual and familial interventions but also broader community and societal measures.







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## Effects of Cyberbullying:

In addition to understanding what causes cyberbullying, counselors need to recognize what it looks like. Pacer's National Bullying Prevention Center identifies five characteristics of cyberbullying:

1. Using an electronic form of communication
2. Performing an aggressive act
3. Intending to harm the victim
4. Repeating the act or similar acts
5. Causing harm to the intended victim.

The effects of cyberbullying can often be intense for victims. Single Care identifies the negative impact cyberbullying can have on young victims:

Emotional effects include humiliation, isolation, anger, and feelings of powerlessness.

Cyberbullying is characterized by the absence of physical interaction; the victim has no opportunity to defend him/herself at all times; the chances of identifying and punishing perpetrators are pretty low. Because cyberbullying perpetrators are usually anonymous, their harmful behavior might be exacerbated-even if the victim removes him/herself from the online site, the messages can still accumulate, making it impossible to escape from this situation. Unlike direct traditional bullying, which can be identified right away by parents or teachers, cyberbullying takes more time to be identified.

## Reasons:

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected people worldwide and imposed strict restrictions such as social distancing, school closures, distanced learning experiences, and online conferences, increasing internet usage. In line with this situation, Lebanese were at a higher risk of social isolation, depression, loneliness, excessive internet use, and cyberbullying, with 49% of adolescents either "identifying as" or "being identified as cyberbullying perpetrators. Although multiple studies have addressed factors associated with cyberbullying perpetration occurrence, research thoroughly investigating the consequences of this behavior is still needed to preempt incidents. Given the high rates of mental health issues among Lebanese adolescents (28.9% suicidal ideation and 57.2% moderate to high depressive symptoms and the rising prevalence of cyberbullying found among Lebanese adolescents, and with the crisis imposing higher internet use, we realized that it is important to shed the light on cyberbullying behavior and its consequences on bullied. Therefore, this study aimed to assess the association between cyberbullying perpetration and anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation among a sample of Lebanese adolescents.

## Objectives:

1. Understanding the reality of sexual cyberbullying and emphasizing means of prevention
2. Projecting the role of Lebanese law, NGO & community institutions in defending the rights of girls and women affected by this problem
3. Suggesting a plan of action to limit these phenomena
4. Listing some solutions and recommendations



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## Methodology:

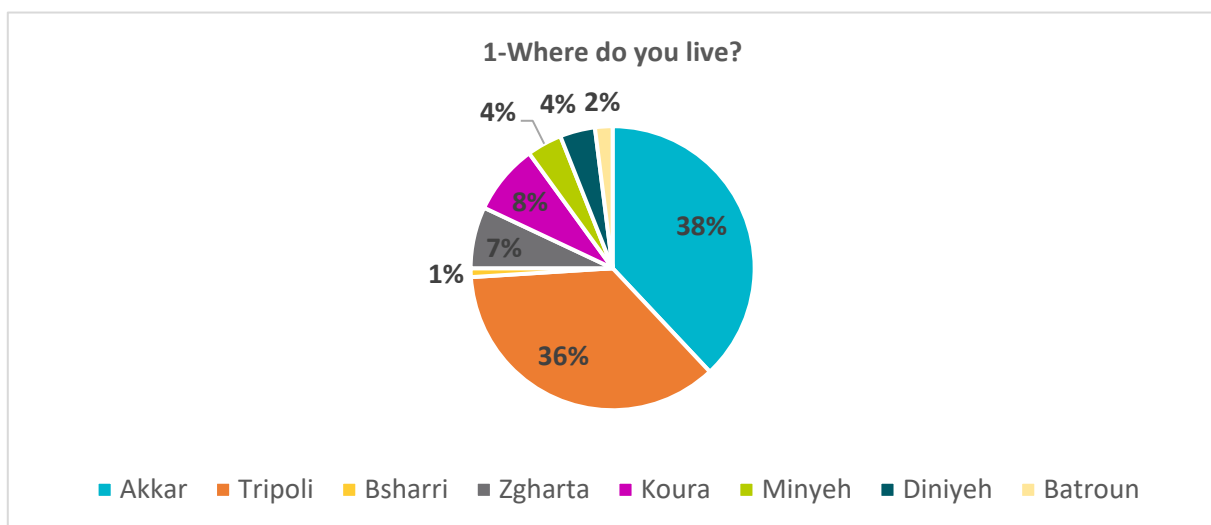
In our research on Sexual Cyberbullying, we adopted both quantitative and qualitative means; therefore, a mixed methods approach. We interviewed experts, associations, and people working in the public security sector. Moreover, we organized field interviews with the students and staff of the Lebanese University and also made and conducted a survey using a Google form.



## Survey:

### Sexual Cyberbullying in North Lebanon

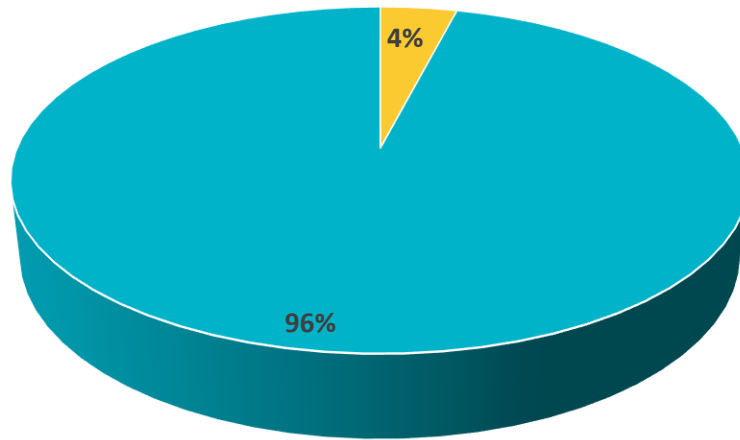
361 people from North Lebanon filled out this form: 346 women and 15 men.





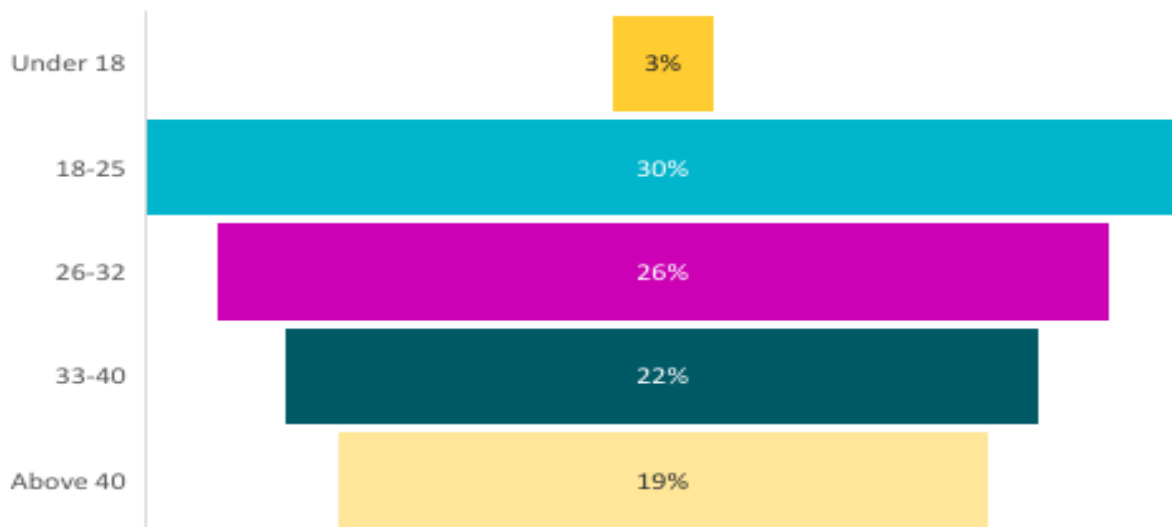
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### 2-Gender

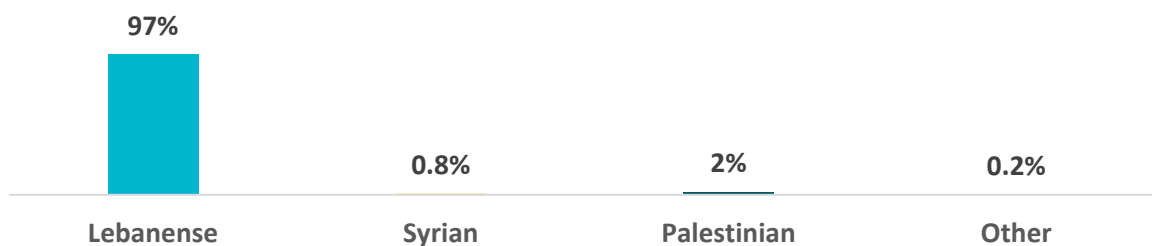


■ Male ■ Female

### 3-Age group



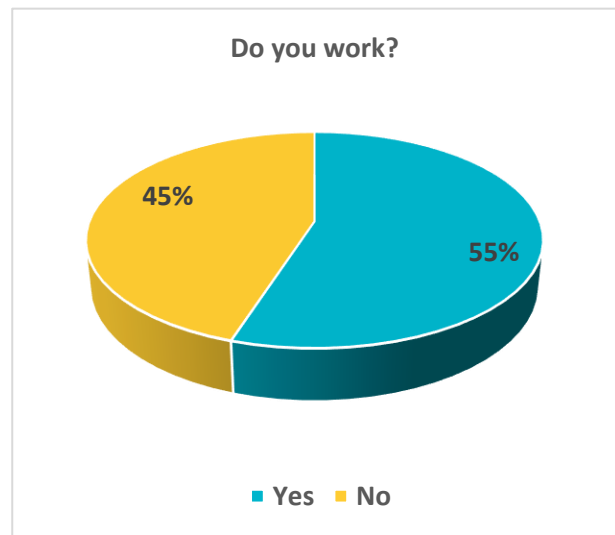
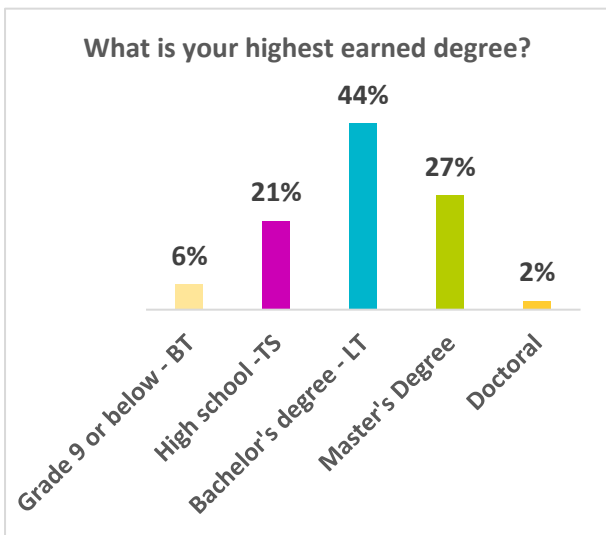
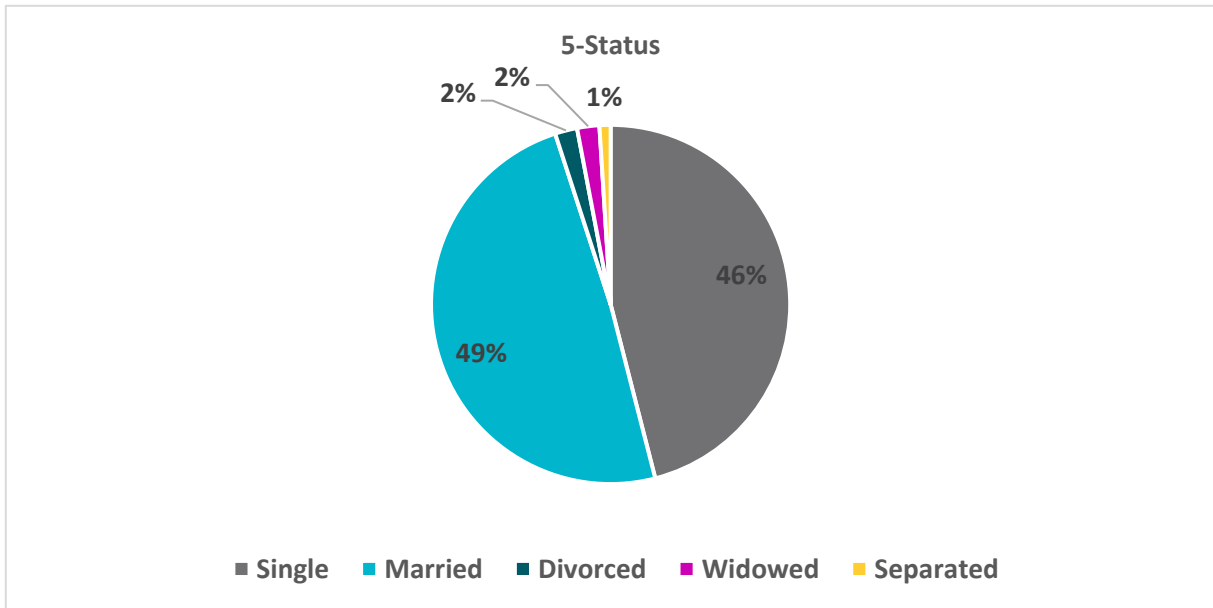
### 4- Nationality







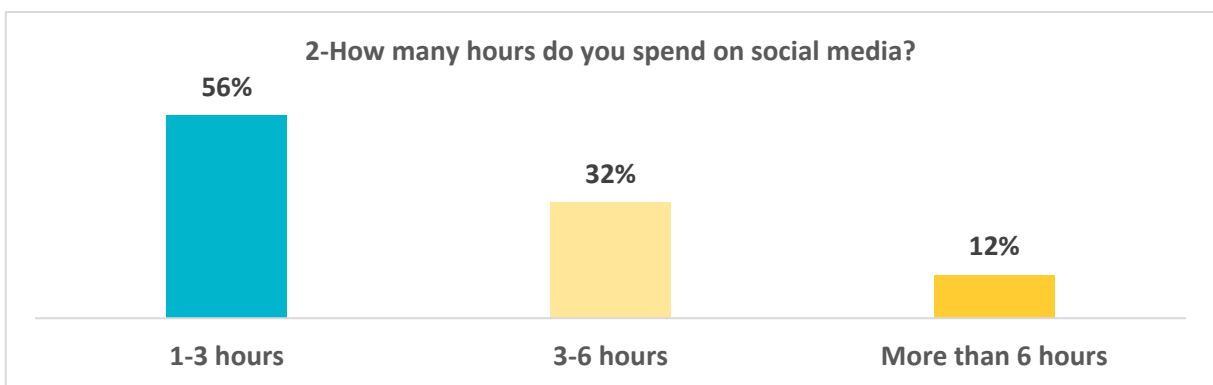
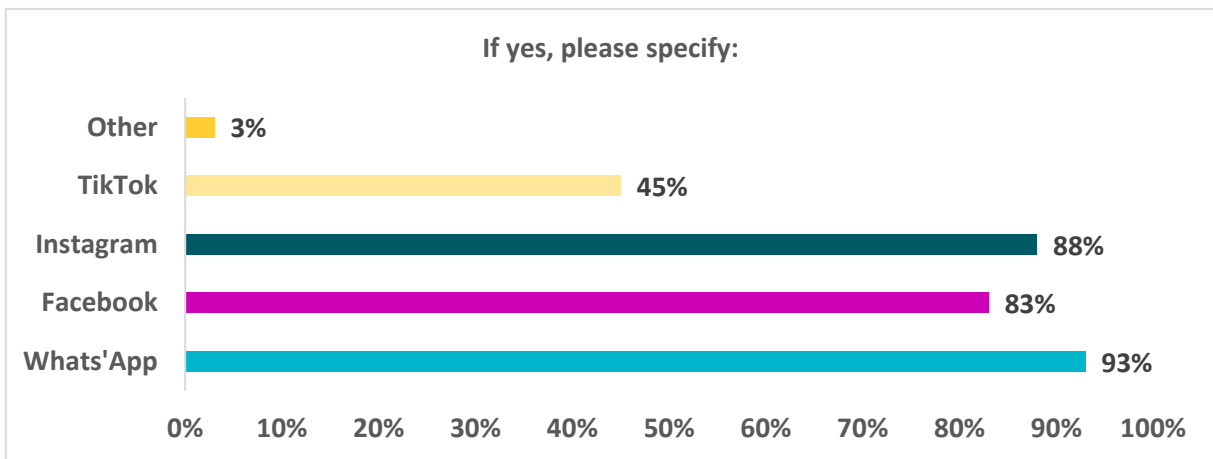
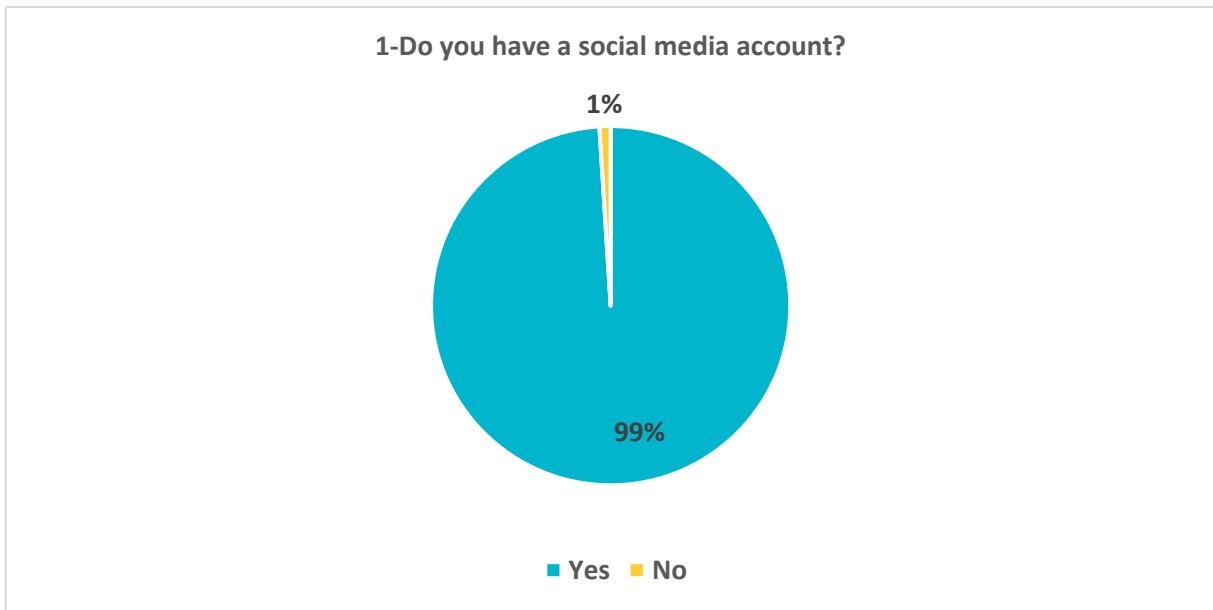
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## Social Media:



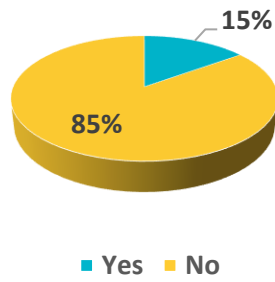
54 said that they have been exposed to Sexual Cyberbullying.



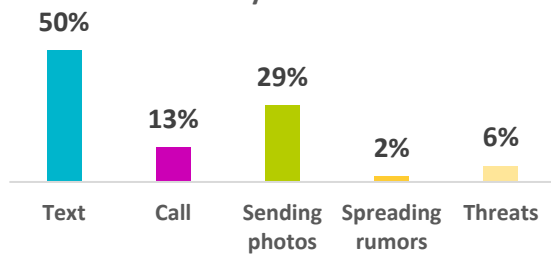


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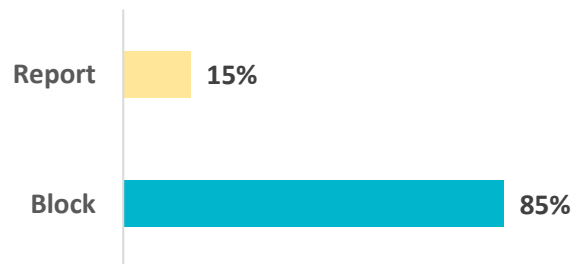
### 3-Have you ever been exposed to Sexual Cyber bullying?



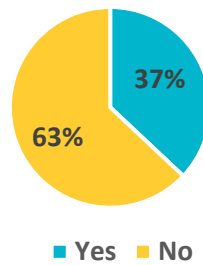
### 4-What form of Sexual Cyberbullying have you faced?



### 5-What action did you take?

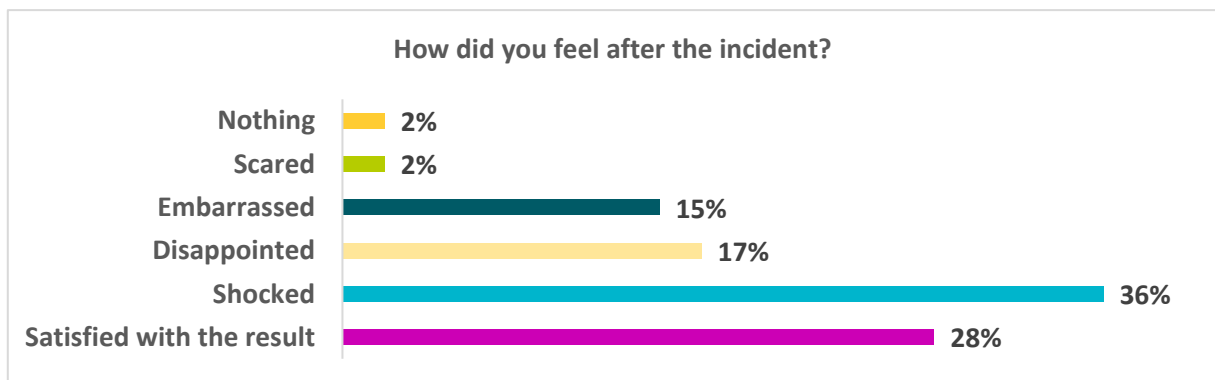
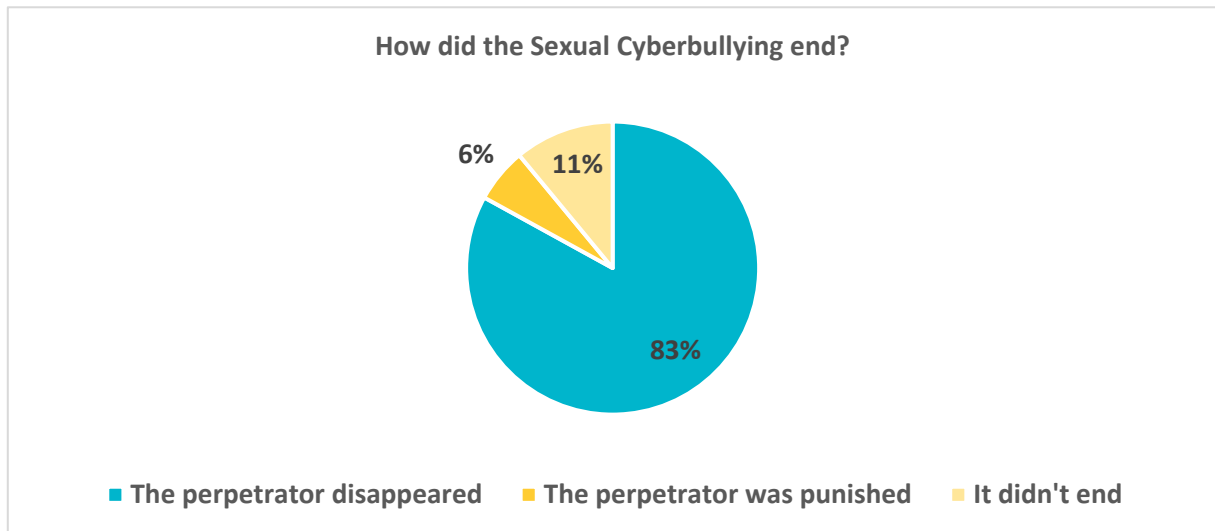
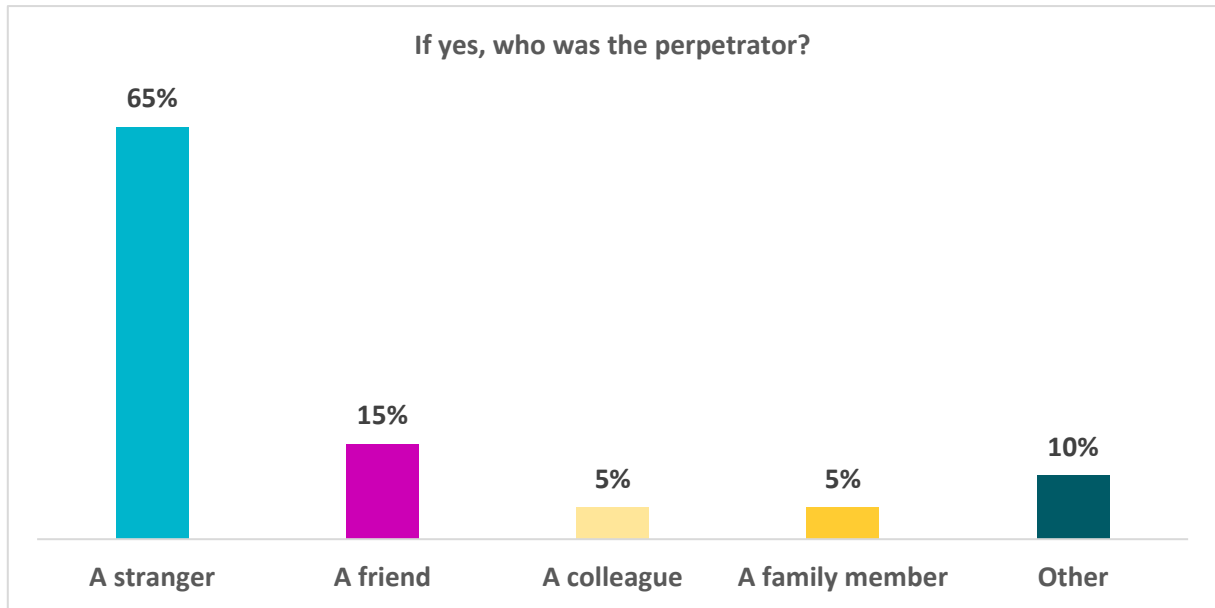


### 6-Did you manage to know the identity of the perpetrator?





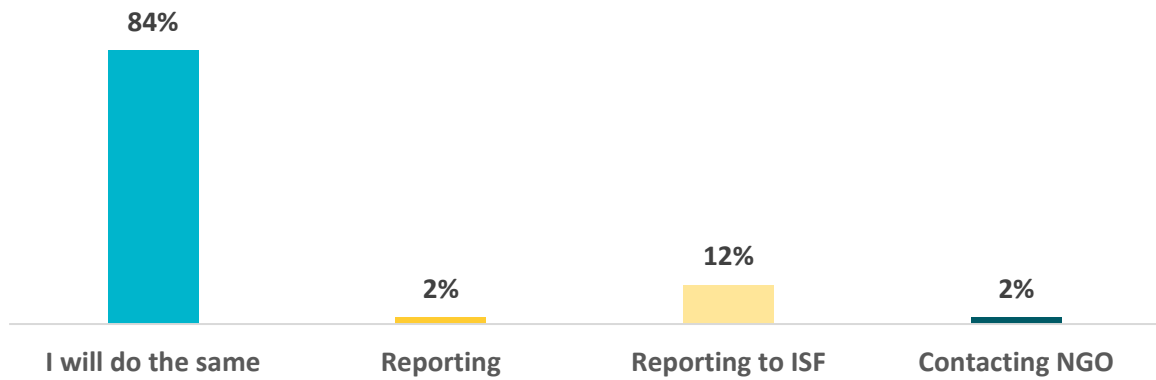
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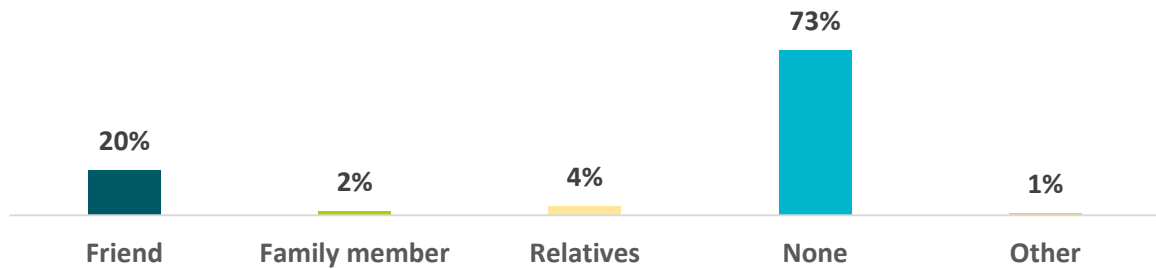


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### How will you act if you face the same situation in the future?

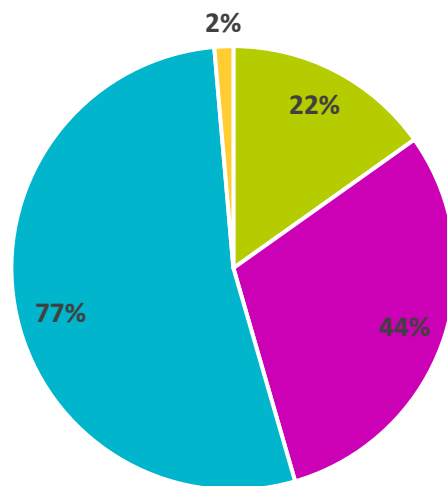


### Do you know anyone among your friends, family members, or relatives who has experienced sexual cyberbullying?



### What is sexual cyberbullying?

- Sexual harassment through digital means
- It refers to the use of digital platforms to perpetrate sexual harassment or abuse against an individual, often involving explicit messages, images, or threats.
- Sexual cyberbullying encompasses any form of online behavior aimed at sexually harassing, coercing, or exploiting someone.
- Other







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## What can be done to protect women in North Lebanon from becoming a victim of Cyberbullying?

To protect women in North Lebanon from becoming victims of cyberbullying, a comprehensive approach combining education, legal action, and community support is essential through:

1. Conducting awareness campaigns and providing education on online safety and privacy practices.
2. Utilizing the expertise of educated, yet jobless, women with psychology degrees by establishing centers where they can assist in cyberbullying cases and maintain direct contact with the police.
3. Raising awareness about cyberbullying laws and offering resources for legal recourse to deter perpetrators.
4. Providing emotional support and sharing strategies for dealing with online harassment.
5. Schools and workplaces create clear policies and reporting mechanisms to address cyberbullying incidents promptly.
6. Fostering a culture of respect and accountability online, educating women to be smart online, learning the signs and symptoms of cyberbullying, and encouraging open communication.
7. Involving parents in monitoring online activities that will further strengthen efforts to protect women from cyberbullying.



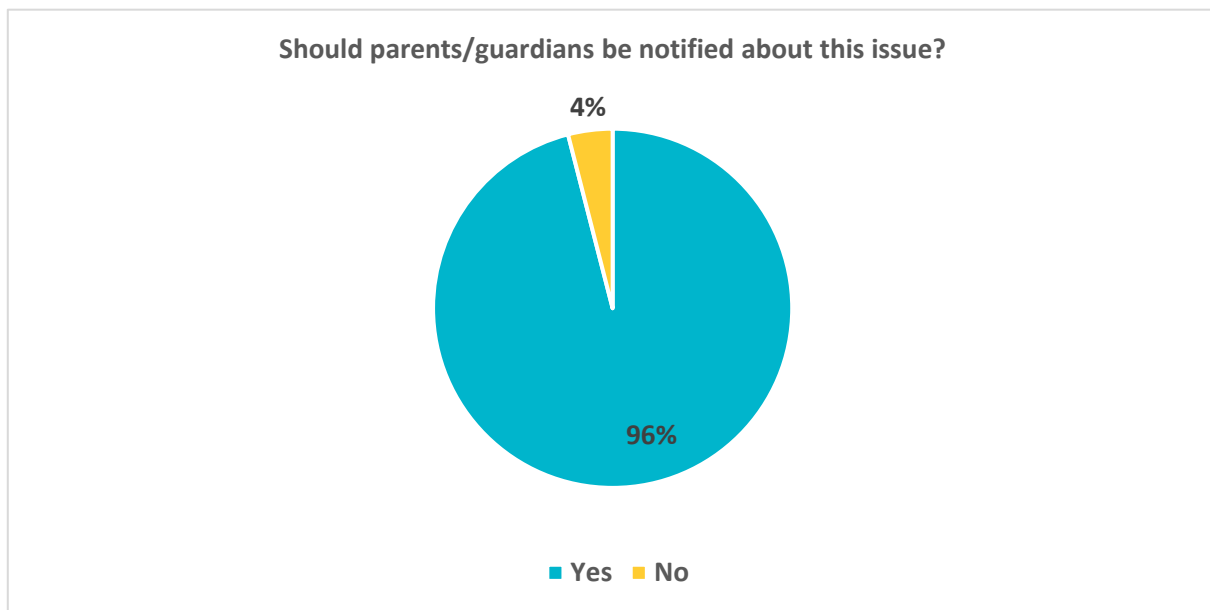


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In your opinion, how do we stop cyberbullying without giving up access to the internet?

To stop cyberbullying without giving up internet access, a multifaceted approach is needed, including education, technology, and community involvement through:

1. Educating users, especially young people, about responsible online behavior and digital etiquette that can foster a more respectful online culture.
2. Setting privacy and security settings on all accounts, blocking fake accounts, and not responding to strangers as essential steps.
3. Enforcing strong policies and laws against cyberbullying, with clear rules and consequences for online harassment.
4. Offering easy-to-use tools for reporting, blocking, and flagging abusive content.
5. Teaching individuals to protect their online privacy and manage their digital presence can reduce their vulnerability.
6. Provide community support, open dialogue, and resources for emotional support that are crucial for victims.
7. Parents using parental controls and staying involved in their children's online activities.
8. Collaborating with tech companies to develop algorithms that detect and remove harmful content to help create a safer online environment.



Are there women who are more vulnerable to electronic sexual bullying?

1. Women who lack knowledge of technology and social media tools, those who share personal photos and information online, and those with a public presence are more vulnerable to electronic sexual bullying.
2. Younger women and girls are especially at risk due to their frequent social media use and limited experience with online safety.
3. Women from marginalized communities, such as minority ethnic, racial, or religious groups, face additional targeting due to stereotypes and discrimination.
4. Women with disabilities encounter further challenges in protecting themselves online and are often targeted because of ableist attitudes.





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5. Public figures, including politicians, activists, journalists, and influencers, attract more online attention and are targeted for their work or opinions.
6. Women experiencing socio-economic hardship may lack access to resources for legal recourse or mental health support.

### Analysis of the Interview with Major Charbaji

Based on the discussion with Major Charbaji, we can conclude the following:

- The enactment and reliance on laws from the year 2020 during the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic, and the subsequent general lockdown led to an increase in these crimes. This is because social media has become the only means of communication, and some people use it negatively, leading to an increase in electronic sexual harassment crimes.
- It has been revealed that these crimes pose a significant danger when the victim does not report the harassment initially, as they fear that members of their family or community might view them negatively. This could lead to the victim being blackmailed, complying with the harasser's requests, and possibly reaching the most dangerous point-suicide. Therefore, ISF (Internal Security Forces) has increased awareness campaigns in the communities, especially targeting young women, to raise awareness and education about the seriousness of these crimes.
- As for minors, they might be more hesitant to report cyberbullying than adults because they think they need parental consent to do so, which plays a crucial role in the process of reporting.
- Regarding electronic sexual harassment crimes, Major Charbaji indicated that the reported percentage is low, attributing it to the culture of the community, which tries to hide any crime that might expose the family's members.

*Sexual cyberbullying has had a significant impact on society, especially on women.*





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## **An interview was conducted with Miss Aya Al Merehbi, a project officer at ‘FEMALE Organization ‘ concerned with women ‘s rights.**

- She revealed that working online, conducting massage sessions, and engaging in inappropriate photography, in addition to the quarantine and poor economic situation, have all been used as justifications for sexual harassment. Through various means including fake accounts, fake job offers, and hacked links, a large number of women and girls between 12 and 67 years, old have been exposed to electronic sexual harassment.
- As a result of this act, the emotional and psychological effects have varied, including social isolation and behavioral changes, such as refusing to eat, turning to drug use, deviating towards prostitution, or becoming harassers themselves as a reaction. In some cases, it has even led to suicide. The victim faces many challenges due to a lack of sufficient awareness about the issue, not to mention the fear of disclosure and possible subsequent scandal.
- Hence, we must highlight the importance of the role of families and schools, which can either support or discourage the victim. The victim or their family should reach out to the relevant authorities, such as the Internal Security Forces, specialized associations, the Ministry of Education, the Bar Association, and relevant healthcare institutions to provide the necessary support.
- The FEMALE association has resorted to holding awareness sessions in schools and universities, as well as consultation sessions with the Bar Association and the National Commission for Lebanese Women, which itself has established a psychological support hotline with specialists.
- Finally, the victim should first inform their family or the school, if relevant, then an association if available, and finally, the Internal Security Forces. Additionally, it is necessary to enact and/or update laws and ensure their enforcement to address this growing phenomenon.

## **Summary of the Legal Dialogue Meeting on Sexual Cyberbullying with Lawyer Zamzam Zaria**

### *Overview*

The report documents a legal dialogue meeting with lawyer Zamzam Zaria on the subject of sexual cyberbullying, focusing on electronic harassment and extortion under Lebanese law. The meeting aimed to clarify the legislative stance on these crimes and discuss the implications of recent legal developments.

### *Definitions and Legal Framework*

**Harassment:** Historically not criminalized, harassment is now defined under Law 502/2020. It is characterized by any repeated, unwanted behavior violating the victim’s body, privacy, or feelings. This law underscores the necessity of criminalizing harassment to protect victims’ dignity and privacy.

**Extortion:** Defined as using technology to threaten to disclose embarrassing or harmful information to obtain a benefit. Lebanese law does not explicitly define extortion but penalizes it under Article 516 of the Penal Code.





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## Penalties

**Harassment:** Imprisonment from one month to one year, and fines ranging from three to ten times the minimum wage. Aggravated penalties apply if the crime occurs in educational institutions or the public sector, with imprisonment from six months to two years, and fines from ten to twenty times the minimum wage.

**Extortion:** Similar penalties as harassment, with imprisonment from two months to two years, and fines up to 600,000 Lebanese pounds. The report suggests that the fines are outdated and need revision to reflect current economic conditions.

## Aggravated Penalties

Penalties increase for crimes against vulnerable individuals (minors, people with special needs), those in positions of authority over the victim, or when the crime involves multiple perpetrators or results in significant harm. This highlights the law’s intent to impose severe punishments for more egregious offenses, particularly in educational settings where perpetrators betray their roles as educators.

## Procedural Aspects

Victims are advised to gather evidence and file criminal complaints with the judicial police. The Ministry of Internal Affairs “Report” service facilitates confidential coordination with the Office of Combating Information Crimes. Victims may also approach the Public Prosecution, which can initiate public lawsuits independent of personal lawsuits.



## Role of Judicial Aid

Victims unable to afford legal representation can seek assistance from the Tripoli and Beirut judicial aid centers, which provide legal support and cover fees based on verified financial hardship.





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### *Preventive Measures*

The Internal Security Forces recommend cautious communication with strangers, avoiding sharing personal information, and activating privacy settings on social media. Emphasis is placed on using long, complex passwords and downloading applications from trusted sources to mitigate the risks of cybercrimes.

### *Evidentiary Challenges*

The report highlights jurisprudential differences regarding the admissibility of electronic evidence. With advancements in technology and AI, proving the authenticity of such evidence has become complex, necessitating legislative clarity and expert involvement.

### *International Implications*

Crimes involving foreign perpetrators pose challenges due to the lack of international agreements on cybercrime. International law can offer some recourse, but national legislation must address these gaps to ensure comprehensive protection for victims.

### *Statistical Insights*

There has been a significant increase in reported electronic blackmail cases in Lebanon, with 663 cases in 2017 and 1,229 in 2018. The low number of arrests relative to cases points to systemic issues, including prison capacity, victim withdrawal due to societal pressures, and insufficient security personnel.

### *Case Example*

A minor, T., was extorted by a young man she met on Facebook. The case, resolved through the Internal Security Forces' intervention, underscores the importance of not remaining silent and seeking legal recourse.

### *Recommendations*

- Use complex, periodically changed passwords.
- Download applications from reputable sources.
- Avoid sharing personal information online.
- Educate children on safe online practices.
- Encourage victims to report crimes and pursue legal action to ensure perpetrators face justice and reduce the stigma associated with victimization.

This summary captures the essential insights from the legal dialogue, emphasizing legislative definitions, penalties, procedural guidance, and the importance of prevention and victim support in tackling sexual cyberbullying in Lebanon.

### *Analysis of the Legal Dialogue Meeting on Sexual Cyberbullying with Lawyer Zamzam Zaria*

The legal dialogue with lawyer Zamzam Zaria provided a detailed examination of the legislative landscape concerning sexual cyberbullying in Lebanon, specifically addressing electronic harassment and extortion.



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### *Key Insights:*

- 1) Legislative Differentiation:
  - a) Harassment and Extortion: The dialogue clarified that Lebanese law treats harassment and extortion as distinct crimes, each with specific definitions and penalties. This differentiation helps in accurately addressing and penalizing each crime appropriately.
- 2) Legal Developments:
  - a) Law 502/2020: This law criminalizes harassment, defining it as repeated, unwanted behavior that violates a victim's body, privacy, or feelings. This significant legislative step underscores the necessity of protecting individuals' dignity and privacy.
  - b) Extortion Penalties: Although not explicitly defined in Lebanese law, extortion involves using technology to threaten and disclose harmful information for personal gain. It is penalized under Article 516 of the Penal Code, indicating the law's recognition of the severity of such threats.
- 3) Penalties:
  - a) Harassment: Punishable by imprisonment from one month to one year and fines ranging from three to ten times the minimum wage. If committed in educational institutions or the public sector, penalties increase significantly, reflecting the law's intent to protect vulnerable environments.
  - b) Extortion: Carries similar penalties as harassment but with an emphasis on the need to update fines to reflect economic realities. This insight highlights a gap in the legal system that needs addressing.
- 4) Aggravated Penalties:
  - a) Crimes against vulnerable individuals, those in authority, or involving multiple perpetrators attract harsher penalties. This indicates the law's focus on protecting particularly vulnerable victims and holding those in positions of trust to higher standards.
- 5) Victim Support and Procedures:
  - a) Evidence Collection and Reporting: Victims are encouraged to document incidents and file complaints with the judicial police or through the Ministry of Internal Affairs' "Report" service for confidential handling.
  - b) Judicial Aid: Victims with financial hardships can seek support from judicial aid centers in Tripoli and Beirut, ensuring access to legal assistance and justice.
- 6) Preventive Measures:
  - a) Emphasis on cautious online behavior, such as using complex passwords, avoiding sharing personal information and downloading applications from trusted sources. These measures are crucial in mitigating risks and protecting against cybercrimes.
- 7) Evidentiary Challenges:
  - a) The admissibility of electronic evidence is debated, especially with the advent of AI and technology that can alter evidence. This underscores the need for legislative clarity and expert involvement in evaluating electronic evidence.



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8) International and Statistical Context:

- a) The difficulty in addressing crimes involving foreign perpetrators highlights the need for international agreements and robust national legislation.
- b) Increasing cases of electronic blackmail, coupled with low arrest rates, point to systemic issues, such as limited prison capacity, societal pressures on victims, and insufficient security personnel. This calls for enhanced resources and support systems for both law enforcement and victims.

9) Case Example and Recommendations:

- a) A real-life case of a minor being extorted underscores the importance of victims not remaining silent and seeking help. Recommendations include the use of secure passwords, cautious online interactions, and the importance of reporting crimes to reduce stigma and ensure justice.

Overall, the dialogue emphasizes the critical need for robust legal frameworks, victim support systems, and preventive measures to effectively combat sexual cyberbullying and protect individuals' rights and dignity in Lebanon.



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## Recommendations:

Accordingly, we have come up with the following recommendations:

1. Enhance security and privacy settings on social media platforms- failure to do so will subject platforms to being disabled from further use.
2. Enforce legislation That criminalizes these acts.
3. Activate and enhance the role of security forces operating in this sphere of cybercrime.
4. Establish mechanisms of compensation for the victims of sexual cyberbullying (financial, medical, and physiological assistance, or even change of place of residence (relocation)).
5. Guarantee the implementation of laws and exert all needed efforts to criminalize perpetrators.
6. Support digital numeracy campaigns to spread awareness among interested users.
7. Organize awareness campaigns to educate all social classes. Encourage victims of sexual cyberbullying to report and ensure the application and needed procedures are available and clear.
8. Enhance cooperation and collaboration between organizations, security forces, and local communities to fight and prevent this phenomenon.
9. Establish a crisis unit to study the social/physical/psychological aspects of the victims and support the rehabilitation process.







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