in the eyes of Iranian Internet users

By Baaroo Foundation and Simin Kargar

April 2016
Acknowledgements

We would like to appreciate all individuals who participated in this survey and trusted us with data collection. In particular, we would like to thank Soudeh Rad, Milad Hosseini, Zina Fa, Kevin Miston, Amir Rashidi and Mani Parand for their dedication and thorough feedback and insight throughout the course of this study.
# Table of Content

**Introduction**  
4

**About this research**  
6
  2.1. Objective  
6
  2.2. Methodology  
7

**Demographics**  
8
  3.1. Gender  
8
  3.2. Age  
8
  3.3. Access to Digital Devices  
8

**Survey Findings**  
10
  4.1. Likelihood of Gender-based Harassment on Different Digital Platforms  
10
  4.2. Definition of Online Harassment  
11
  4.3. Witnessing or Indirect Knowledge of Online Sexual Harassment  
11
  4.4. Experiencing Online Sexual Harassment  
13
    4.4.1. Type of Personal Experience(s)  
14
    4.4.2. Where Harassment Occurs  
16
    4.4.3. Perpetrators and Span of Harassment  
17
    4.4.4. Responses to Online Sexual Harassment  
18
    4.4.5. Users Satisfaction of Their Responses  
20
    4.4.6. History and Aftermath of Harassment  
21
    4.4.7. Trust in Rule of Law and Law Enforcement  
22
    4.4.8. Familiarity with Terms of Use and Online Community Rules  
24

**Final Note**  
25

**Recommendations**  
26

**References**  
29

**Infographic Report**  
30
Introduction

As the Internet becomes increasingly central to the human experience, new challenges arise, offline sociocultural issues extend to online spaces, and questions surface about the implications of this technology-driven shift. Among these new challenges are the legal regulation of behaviors online and the capacity to prosecute offenders. These interactions at times threaten violence and can cause distress, insecurity and discriminatory harm to targets of such behavior, a prime example being online sexual harassment.

Studies indicate online harassment is more likely to be gender-based, a condition that has specific roots in the human history. In 2006, the College of Education at the University of Maryland\(^1\) conducted a study using fictitious personas on an Internet chat system. The study found that feminine usernames would incur an average of 100 sexually explicit or threatening messages a day, while masculine names received 3.7. The study found that the harassment targeted at men was not because they were men, whereas women were more frequently threatened as a result of their gender. In addition, a Pew Research Center survey of 3,217 individuals in the United States in 2014 determined that age and gender were two key factors in experiencing online harassment. Younger women, those between 18 and 24, experienced certain severe types of harassment at disproportionately high levels. Furthermore, they are often subject to higher rates of physical threats and sustained harassment compared to their male peers and the general population.\(^2\)

These studies about the daily experiences of women underscore how their ability to live and work freely online will be shaped – too often limited by cultural norms, technological literacy, and the opportunities to address issues through private and legal channels. While the Internet is a global network, when an online attack occurs, the victim often reports the threat to local law enforcements. These bodies may lack sufficient knowledge of online spaces and how the Internet operates that would allow them to effectively address complaints. Reinforcing this iniquity, traditional gender gaps in the usage and adoption of technologies often goes in tandem with cultural norms that define harassment as a private matter that better not be publicized. In countries with histories of institutional gender-based violence and discrimination, the formal and informal barriers to remediation of harassment may become more evident and measurable.

In recent years, international advocacy groups, academics, attorneys, journalists and technology communities have come together to address and raise attention to sexual harassment targeted towards women in online spaces. A prominent example of these efforts center around the case of intimate pictures of hollywood celebrities, including the oscar winner Jennifer Lawrence.\(^3\)

Despite growing attention to online gender-based violence in the West, similar conversations on the Persian web are more subtle and do not follow the
same themes. Law enforcement entities, including the Cyber Police of Iran (FATA) appear as active players of awareness raising about the matter. FATA, in particular, tends to raise awareness about cyber crimes involving fraud and identity theft. FATA also publishes news about online behaviors that endanger privacy and reputation of citizens, and encourage individuals to directly report cases of offensive online behavior to the Cyber Police.¹

On the user side, occasional leaks of private photos of Iranian celebrities stirs similar controversy among Internet users as they do elsewhere. These debates in Persian social media often revolve around ‘respect to reputation and honor’ of celebrities. Curiously, the specific notion of harassment does not seem to be a significant part of public discourse about these leaks. Instead, it is perceived as a violation of privacy. One recent example emerged when an audio recording posted online revealed a history of sexual harassment against a Press TV news anchor, Sheena Shirani, by her former manager, Hamid Reza Emadi. Responses in online communities typically fell into one of two distinct themes: the first blamed the victim for sharing private news about the perpetrator and suspected that harassment had most likely been her own fault. The second front supported Shirani for calling the perpetrator out.

Besides these occasional stories, little evidence has been published or is available about how Iranian Internet users perceive online sexual harassment, what incidents they have personally experienced, and their potential responses to perpetrators. It is in this context that the present report is scoped and developed. This study focuses on the perceptions of Iranian Internet users about online sexual harassment, their personal experience and potential responses to what they identify as offensive behavior. The data collected from a survey of Internet users will be contextualized in light of cultural norms, technological developments, protective measures and available remedies for victims of online harassment in Iran. The report will conclude with recommendations for further studies, advocacy programs, and support mechanism to be undertaken by civil society, technology companies and other stakeholders.

¹ Gfata@police.ir is the email to which citizens can report cases of online harassment, according to the FATA Police website.
About this Research

This research was conducted by Baroo Foundation based in the Netherlands, with direct consultancy from researcher Simin Kargar. Baroo Foundation was established in 2014 to improve advocacy skills and methods applied by civil society, to build support for digital rights of users and to empower rights defenders around the world, namely in the Middle East.

Simin Kargar is a human rights lawyer with specific focus on media and communication laws and policies in Iran. She examines the legal discourse of Internet governance, as well as politics and mechanisms of counteracting online tools and communities. Kargar had contributed to several Iran-specific Internet freedom projects by prominent civil society organizations such as Internews and Internews Europe, and collaborated with Internet governance programs for the Middle East and North Africa. Kargar previously served mandate of Freedom of Expression at the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

2.1. Objective

The main objective of the present research is to introduce perspectives from Iranian Internet users on the subject of online sexual harassment. Secondarily, the study seeks to draw attention to emerging trends in the online culture of Iranian communities. The study is a first step in initiating discussion about the implications of these trends for advancing gender equality and empowerment of women in environments like Iran. Such discussion inevitably occurs within the context of Iranian culture, norms, laws and regulations. Therefore, a part of the following discussion is dedicated to an overview of existing Iranian laws in regard to privacy and harassment.

While this research recognizes the wide array of issues related to online violence, it narrowly addresses questions pertinent to users’ perception and personal experiences of sexual harassment. This focus, however, by no means negates the importance of other aspects of online harassment that are not accommodated in the scope of the report. Nor does the study claim to present a comprehensive set of solutions to online sexual harassment against Iranian women. Rather, the report outlines a user perspective on the issue and presents certain challenges in terms of responding to online harassment via the mediums through which offensive behavior often takes place.
2.2. Methodology

The study is developed based on a survey with 25 questions that was taken by 722 respondents. Survey design was partially inspired by the Pew Research Center’s questionnaire on online harassment, which was conducted in 2014. With Pew’s permission, certain questions were replicated for the sake of comparison between American and Iranian audiences. Additional questions were tailored to correspond to the Iranian context.

The survey comprised of three sections: (1) problem comprehension, (2) user experience, and (3) demographic questions. The first section posed general questions in order to identify the respondent’s attitude and understanding of online sexual harassment, while the second section contained tailored questions for those that claimed first hand experience. Lastly, we asked survey respondents for demographic information, which substantially contributes to the analysis. The survey was posted on multiple online platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Telegram channels and Balatarin (a Persian-language link sharing site) between January 17 and February 1, 2016. Over the course of two weeks, 722 individual responses were received, 623 of which were submitted and registered as complete. Only complete responses were considered for the present analysis. Percentages are rounded to the nearest tenth decimal. Margin of error is a plus or minus 4 percentage points, which is calculated based on reported number of Internet users of Iran by Internet World Stat.\footnote{Margin of error is an expression in quantitative studies that refers to a small amount that is allowed for in case of miscalculation or change of circumstances. For more information on how margin of error is calculated, see here.}

The complete dataset of questions, including all 722 individual responses is available on Baaroo website. However, to ensure the security of survey respondents and to hold on to a promise of confidentiality of responses, IP addresses have been removed. English translation of questions are available on Baaroo website.
Demographics

3.1. Gender

Between January 17 and February 1, 2016, a total of 623 complete responses were registered, 359 of whom declared as female (57.6%), 254 as male (40.8%), and 10 marked gender as “other” (1.6%).

3.2. Age

The majority of survey respondents fell into the age range of 25-40 (57.3%), followed by the 18-25 year old group, whose responses amounted to 29% of survey results. The third largest age group comprised of 40-55 year olds (8.7%), the remainder made up of less than 18 (3%) and over 55 (1.9%).

These figures correspond to Iran’s age pyramid as well. That is 25-40 is known as the most populated age group of Iranians, according to the latest census by the National Center for Statistics of Iran.

3.3. Access to Digital Devices

We considered types of digital devices and frequency of their usage as an indication of lifestyles of survey respondents. Therefore, survey takers were asked to mark as many devices that they used on a daily basis. According to survey respondents, 88.6% use smartphones every day and 78.2% have access to a laptop or PC at home. At a much lower rate follow laptop or PC usage at work (38%) and basic cellphones (15.1%).

The larger share of smartphone usage corresponds to the boom in smartphone market in Iran over the past
decade. While Iran’s ministry of ICT reported of 27.5 million active smartphones in the country, some have estimated the number as large as 40 million devices. Such growth simultaneously signals a need for raising awareness about the challenges that new technologies pose to users’ privacy and online experience.

Which of these devices, do you use everyday?

- 86.6% smartphone
- 78.2% home
- 38% office
- 15.1% other

Figure 3. Digital lifestyle of victims of online sexual harassment
Survey Findings

4.1. Likelihood of Gender-based Harassment on Different Digital Platforms

In order to comprehend users attitudes about gender-based harassment on the Internet, participants were asked to choose only one platform that they considered most likely to facilitate harassment of women out of a list of options. The plurality of respondents, 35.1% (219 responses), selected social networks to be most prone to harassment of women. Similar portions chose online dating and matchmaking websites (26.2%, 163 responses) and messaging applications such as Telegram, Skype, Viber (25.4%, 158 responses). The least likely digital venue for harassment, in the survey respondents' opinion, are comment sections of websites and/or blogs (6.9%), followed by forums and chatrooms (6.4%). In addition, 26 clarifying comments were submitted to this question, most of which pointed out that they found it difficult to pick one answer over others. As such, most comments underscored that online harassment of women is equally likely
to occur on all these platforms. One user noted that being harassed online largely depends on victim’s choice of platform and his/her online behavior.
4.2. Definition of Online Harassment

Participants were asked to select as many choices that defined online sexual harassment. 519 respondents (83.3%) selected sustained stalking and embarrassing someone on multiple digital platforms. Closely followed 512 responses (82.2%) as sending insulting, embarrassing or sexual messages on dating and/or messaging applications like Telegram. The next most popular choice was misusing one's online information and photos e.g. photoshopping Facebook photos, etc (498 responses, 79.9%). 76.6% (477 individuals) marked contacting, or threatening to contact, one's family and acquaintances to disclose his/her private life or photos. Name calling a user and/or their family in comment sections of websites, e.g. Facebook was selected by 59.9% of users (373 responses). 56.3% (351 responses) selected threatening someone or his/her family to physical violence. Interestingly, only 42.7% of survey takers marked unauthorized access to one's email or other online accounts as an example of online harassment (Figure 5).

4.3. Witnessing or Indirect Knowledge of Online Sexual Harassment

Out of 623 complete responses to the survey, 425 individuals (68.2%) declared they knew someone who experienced at least one form of online sexual harassment outlined in section 3.3.

These users were asked to mark the nature of experience(s) that their friends or acquaintances had gone through. Responses partly followed the same pattern as users’ perception of online sexual harassment, but certain trends were worthy of note: 221 respondents (52%) know someone who constantly received insulting, sexual and embarrassing messages on dating or messaging applications. 218 respondents (51.3%) know about someone having been stalked.
or embarrassed with constant inconvenient, sexual messages (see Figure 6 for details).

In addition, 20 comments were submitted under this question. While most of these comments elaborated on the incident’s details, a few flagged specific instances which were not included in survey options. One recounted that the intelligence service of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard had called a friend’s family and warned them about her ‘feminist aberration’. Another user briefed us about a friend’s boyfriend installing her Viber account on his laptop to track down his girlfriend’s online communications. One user pointed out that her friend was sexually harassed on an unnamed job-seeking website. An instance of physical violence was reported to have followed a series of online threats.

68.2% declared they knew someone who experienced at least one instance of online sexual harassment.

My friend’s boyfriend surveilled on her through the Viber messaging application. He had installed my friend’s Viber account on his own computer and monitored all her communications.

My friend experienced...

- 52% Insulting, embarrassing or sexual messages
- 51.3% Cyberstalking on multiple digital platforms
- 36.7% Abusing his/her online information and photos
- 34% Name calling in comment section of websites

Figure 6. Witnessing or indirect knowledge of online sexual harassment

IV Viber is a formerly popular video chat application among Iranians.
4.4. Experiencing Online Sexual Harassment

The last question of this section inquired about personal experiences. Out of the complete responses, 236 users (37.9% of the total) indicated that they had previous first hand experience of online sexual harassment. A closer look at the demographics of this group shows that a disproportionately larger number of women have faced online harassment. That is a breakdown of 84.3% women (199 responses, 55% of total Female), 14.4% men (34 respondents, 13% of total Male), and 1.3% other (3 responses, 30% of total Other).

In addition, there was a higher rate of first hand experience of online sexual harassment among the age group of 25-40 (61.9%). This figure is immediately followed by 18-25 year-olds who constitute 29% of those with first hand experience.

Age and gender play a meaningful role in individual experiences of online sexual harassment. That makes women of age 25-40 more likely to encounter online sexual harassment. As such, women with personal experience of online sexual harassment tend to have higher education i.e. a Master’s degree or higher compared to their ‘Men’ and ‘Other’ peers, or even women with no first hand experience.

38% of the respondents indicated that they had first hand experience of online sexual harassment. 84% of them were women.
The following section delves into the reported personal experiences in more detail and identifies users' attitude towards the circumstances that they went through.

4.4.1. Type of Personal Experience(s)

236 respondents indicated experience of at least one form of online sexual harassment. The most experienced forms include cyberstalking, declared by 53.8%, followed by 47.9% having received sexual, inconvenient messages or requests over dating or messaging applications. 40.7% indicated having been called names or that their family was insulted in the comment section of websites or weblogs (see Figure 10 for details).
As Table 1 indicates, the order in which users marked their perception of online sexual harassment does not substantially differ from that of actual instances of online harassment. With the exception of ‘colloquialism’, other items fairly closely follow the same ranks across all columns. Users do not seem to recognize a top priority for colloquialism as a form of online sexual harassment, however, it is the third most commonly experienced form of harassment.
4.4.2. Where Harassment Occurs

In order to identify digital platforms with higher rates of sexual harassment, survey takers were required to mark as many answers that applied to their experience(s). Out of the 236 complete responses with personal experience, these are the platforms where online sexual harassment most commonly has occurred:

- Social networks (72.5%, 171 individuals);
- Messaging applications such as Telegram, Skype and Viber (48.3%, 114 responses);
- Name calling in comment section of websites and weblogs (29.2%);
- Notably, 19.9% indicated a pattern of simultaneous harassment in cyberspace and offline.

At a lower rate, respondents marked the following platforms through which online sexual harassment had occurred:

- Personal or work email (17.8%)
- Online forums and/or chat rooms (9.7%)
- Dating websites or applications (6.4%).

As one respondent also noted in section 3.2., the question set assumed a correlation between being harassed and user's online behavior, including the extent to which they publicized themselves. In order to test such possibility, survey takers were asked how much information about them they believed was available on the Internet. 47.8% of respondents with no experience of online sexual harassment replied as ‘Very Little’ to ‘Some’. Those with personal experience, however, chose these options at a disproportionately lower rate (29.2%) and indicated being more public i.e. more information about them was likely available online (see Figure 12).
4.4.3. Perpetrators and Span of Harassment

8% experienced online sexual harassment for more than 12 months.

In 60.6% of responses, the individual reported being subject to online sexual harassment for less than 3 months. A few users commented on this question to clarify that the figure they chose includes occasional instances of harassment, in those cases harassment might have happened occasionally did not constantly occur over the three month period. Of the remaining responses, 14% indicated that their situation lasted between 3 to 6 months, 3.4% marked 6-12 months, and 8% responded that harassment continued for more than 12 months. In addition, 14% of respondents declared that circumstances were ongoing at the time of taking the survey (see Figure 13).

Out of the 20 comments submitted to this question, 7 indicated that they have been subject to harassment for 2-3 years. One respondent explained that her email account was compromised four years ago by a former romantic partner, who threatened to disclose their private relationship to her family. She has continued to receive offensive messages over email and Telegram since that time. Another survey taker stated that she has been subject to sexual harassment for 10 years. In addition, two women considered a correlation between their gender being public on their social media profiles and the frequent offensive messages they received.

In addition, the majority (66.9%) of respondents that had experienced online harassment either could not identify the perpetrator or did not know him/her prior to the incident. Of the remainder, those who were harassed by someone that the respondent knew, the perpetrator was typically their current or former romantic partner, with a smaller portion representing professional or personal acquaintances.

Who was the perpetrator?

Figure 13. Life span of online sexual harassment

Figure 14. Perpetrators of online sexual harassment
4.4.4. Responses to Online Sexual Harassment

Respondents with personal experience of online sexual harassment were asked whether they had responded to the offensive behavior. Of those targets, the minority (45.8%, 108 individuals) replied that they had responded to harassment, whereas more than half (54.3%, 128 respondents) had not. Although the greater half of respondents were not interested in responding to harassment. This is particularly worthy of note as sexual harassment in the context of Iran often goes unrecognized. Reduced in-person interactions in online spaces seem to have eased Internet users, namely women, to take measures to somehow address the situation. This may explain why nearly half of respondents chose to take at least one form of action towards their harassers, whereas the remainder decided to ignore it.

When asked about the nature of their response, gender specific responses corresponded with the overall pattern. As Figure 16 highlights, a disproportionately larger percentage of those with experience of online sexual harassment opted to react by removing perpetrators off of their contacts on social media, or by blocking them all together (82.4%). This figure was followed by reporting abuse to the online platforms where harassment occurred (34.3%). Three other online ways of responding to harassment closely followed one another:

- 26.8% pursued confronting the perpetrator online;
- 25% of respondents spoke out about the harassing behavior on their profiles to draw support of others;
- 24% avoided further issues by changing their usernames or deleting their profiles.

Responding to online harassment in 21.3% of cases extended to their offline lives such as refraining from attending certain events or spaces. Additionally, 11.1% declared that they had withdrawn from an online forum or chat room to avoid further harassment. 9.3% also indicated that they recruited an attorney or sought legal advice about the circumstances. Only 4.6% (5 individuals) mentioned that they had to fulfill their harassers’ wish to protect their reputation and

54% did NOT respond to online sexual harassment.

34% reported abuse to website or online service moderators.
honor. The 20 comments submitted to this question highlight a trend of seeking help from or mediation of family members. Such attitude potentially implicates a strong role of family in resolving matters of honor and reputation, even when they occur in online spaces.

A culture of avoidance prevails across these responses. That is the majority of users chose to abandon the situation by unfriending or blocking users online, becoming less accessible through changing usernames, and deleting profiles. A significant percentage altered their behaviors or succumbed to the harassment – refraining from attending certain offline events, withdrawing from online forums, or even fulfilling wishes of their harassers. These choices are arguably an extension of the same avoidance and do not necessarily constitute proactive responses. Extensive user education and technological support are required to encourage proactive responses than simply avoiding the unhealthy circumstances of harassment. Response to harassment generally differs by personality and the context in which harassment occurs making the attempt to drawing further conclusion challenging as variants change in every case.

How did you respond to harassment?

- **82.4%** Unfriend or blocked the person
- **21.3%** Stop attending certain offline events or places
- **34.3%** Reported the person responsible to the website
- **11.1%** Withdraw from an online forum or chatroom
- **26.9%** Confronted the person online
- **9.3%** Recruited an attorney or sought legal advice
- **25.0%** Discussed the problem online in order to draw support
- **4.6%** In order to protect my reputation I fulfilled harasser wish
- **24.1%** Changed my username or deleted my profile

Figure 16. Responses to online sexual harassment

“I changed all my passwords to avoid further harassment.”

“I sought help from my family, and eventually from the Cyber Police.”
4.4.5. Users Satisfaction with Their Responses

To develop an understanding of individuals’ satisfaction, survey takers with personal experience of harassment were asked to self-evaluate their responses – or inaction – to perpetrators. No neutral option was given in order to encourage respondents to mark their inclination towards either end. The results surfaced particular patterns:

A strong majority of the 108 individuals (84.3%, 91 individuals) who responded to harassment felt comfortable with their decision. These individuals agreed – to different degrees – that confronting the perpetrator generated favorable results. Those who looked unfavorably about their decision constituted a much smaller fraction (15.7%). ‘Confrontation’ is used in its broad sense as a measure of perception of self-re-empowerment, hence including any type of response to harassing behavior.

Moreover, breakdown of the level of satisfaction by gender generated significant results. Only 13.2% of women consider confronting perpetrators to have worsened the circumstance. A strong majority (86.9%) of female respondents and all three ‘others’ indicated satisfaction about their responses. The divide was narrower among men (see Figure 18).

In contrast to the positive perceptions about responding, those who chose to ignore the harassment closely divided about their decision. That is 46.9% agreed – to different degrees – that not responding to harassment was the right choice, whereas the remainder indicated some level of regret in not having confronted the perpetrator as early as the harassment began. Overall, those who opted to not confront their harassers feel less satisfied about their silence.

84% were satisfied with their responses to online sexual harassment.
In order to capture the frequency of harassment against a given respondent, we inquired whether those with personal experience had faced online sexual harassment prior to that incident. More than half (57.2%, 135 individuals) responded that they had previously been subject to online harassment before.

A closer look at demographics indicates that women have a longer history of experiencing online sexual harassment: 124 women (62.3% of 199 women with personal experience) had encountered online harassment before. The figure drops to only 23.5% for men (8 out of 34). All three individuals in the ‘others’ sample group had experienced harassment before.

Had you experienced online sexual harassment before?

Additionally, respondents with personal experience(s) of online sexual harassment were asked of their perceptions and concerns about the incident. In order to assess their dominant concern about harassment, survey takers were able to only choose one answer. A strong majority marked the experience as being upsetting with other answers marked at a far lower rate. The second most common response found the incident a violation of their privacy, only 16.1% of respondents. This set includes those whose online accounts were compromised or information was misused. This observation may implicate a lack of understanding of what online privacy is and what constitutes its violation. As such, it underscores the need for user education about tools that are designed for protecting digital safety and privacy of individuals.

Online sexual harassment is often recurring; 57% were not new to online sexual harassment.
Despite Iran’s reputation as a conservative society, few respondents found their experience detrimental to their honor or their family’s. Such a low rate is somewhat surprising. It may, however, relate to the perceived distance that online spaces often create from offline lives. The Internet facilitates anonymity and reduces in-person tensions. This may incentivize victims of harassment to fight back by responding to the perpetrators without fear of their honor or reputation being affected. This is particularly important in the case of Iranian women given their history of avoiding countering or even reporting sexual harassment. (see Table 2 for breakdown by gender).

4.4.7. Trust in Rule of Law and Law Enforcement

As previously noted, online sexual harassment is often left unresponded (54.3%, see §4.4.4). Where individuals respond, it typically occurs in a form of avoidance, e.g. unfriending or blocking users, changing usernames or deleting profiles. Only 10 out of the 108 individuals who responded to harassment had either sought legal advice or recruited an attorney to pursue prosecution of perpetrators. Such narrow interest in seeking legal protection and turning to law enforcement may signal a lack of trust in these institutions and the role they can play to mitigate unfavorable circumstances.

To investigate such little interest, the survey proposed two statements and asked respondents to weigh their attitude towards both. The first addressed user’s knowledge of existing laws and regulations that apply to sexual offenses on the Internet. The second pointed at the expertise of law enforcement in prosecuting cases of online sexual harassment. The absolute majority of respondents indicated that they did not find law enforcement, including the Cyber Police, to have sufficient expertise in properly addressing cases of online harassment. Nor did survey takers self-report being well-informed about existing laws that apply to cases of online sexual harassment (See Figures 24 and 25 for details).

Table 2. User attitude towards experiencing online sexual harassment by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Upset</th>
<th>Distress</th>
<th>Interpersonal</th>
<th>Family reputation</th>
<th>Affected romantic life</th>
<th>Affected professional life</th>
<th>Unimportant</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only 22% agree that Iranian law enforcement have the expertise to appropriately tackle online sexual harassment.
As Figure 24 highlights, only 22% agree that law enforcements have the expertise required to appropriately tackle online sexual harassment. The other 78% express trust in Iranian law enforcement’s expertise when it comes to incidents that occur in cyberspace. This percentage also includes 80% of those who had in fact turned to an attorney for legal advice or prosecuting the perpetrator. In addition, not a significant difference was detected when data was broken down by gender (see Figure 25).

Despite respondents’ take on existing laws against online sexual harassment, Iran’s Cyber Crimes Law criminalizes certain acts with implications for ‘honor and reputation of citizens’. In particular, the following acts are a few examples of offensive behavior that are punishable: producing and dissemination of pornographic content (article 14); attempts at theft of data and electronic fraud through digital devices (articles 12-13); and taking advantage of one’s online information and its dissemination with the intention of incurring damage to the reputation of victims (articles 16-17). Moreover, a dedicated court has been assigned to prosecuting cyber crimes in Tehran. Legal punishment for these acts may seem inadequate compared to the extent of damage that certain offensive activities can incur. For instance, producing revenge porn files can impact individuals for a lifetime whereas the punishment provided by law does not exceed 24 months and/or 135,000 US dollars.

“Law enforcement, including the cyber police, have sufficient expertise and experience to efficiently prosecute cases of online sexual harassment.”

“I am aware of the existing laws of Iran that protect me against sexual harassment.”
4.4.8. Familiarity with Terms of Use and Online Community Rules

Lastly, survey takers were asked to mark the extent to which they were familiar with rules of social platforms and reporting abuse or harassment. Most respondents themselves more comfortable with the rules of social platforms and reporting mechanisms. Notably, average weight that those who actively responded to harassment, e.g. blocked or reported the perpetrators, came to 4.01. Furthermore, weighted average was 3.56 for those with less assertive responses to harassment i.e. fulfilling wishes of the perpetrators, deleting their own profiles, leaving online forums, or avoiding certain offline events. This figure was closely followed by the weighted average of 3.49 by those who opted to ignore harassment in its entirety.

Lack of information about online community rules does not seem to be causing the varying responses towards online harassment. Therefore, other variants such as context, relationship to perpetrator, and personality of victims could be more likely to play a role in the type of responses that users choose when harassed through an online medium.

43% expressed unfamiliarity with rules of social networking and other online platforms. They did not know how to use ‘Report Abuse’ buttons.

“I am familiar with rules of social platforms about online sexual harassment and know how to use report buttons.”
Online violence targets Internet users of different gender, ages, educational level, and location. The diffused nature of the Internet facilitates damaging the integrity, reputation and mental health of Internet users even from afar. Perpetrators in real world are often limited by physical proximity, time restraints, fear of reprisal, and legal considerations. However, the Internet provides numerous venues for simultaneous personal attacks against the same individual with a perceived lack of threat of responsibility. Therefore, online harassment has the potential to be accurately targeted, more efficient, persistent, and more complicated to combat.

Anonymity on the Internet provides further opportunities for perpetrators of sexual harassment through removing culpability and introduces legal complications for prosecuting gender-based hate crimes in cyberspace. In the context of Iran, lack of citizen's knowledge of laws, mistrust in the judicial system, and a history of suppression complement the complex set of the new challenges that online spaces carry everywhere. As the survey underscored, most of instances of online sexual harassment go unreported, even by Internet users who feel comfortable with rules and tools of online communities. Possibilities are far narrower when it comes to reporting such instances to law enforcement.

Furthermore, this survey shed light on parts of the ongoing struggle that the growing number of Iranian individuals face as they more closely embrace new technologies. Iranians' use of technology has been on rise, and so have been their online challenges. Among these is the extension of offline violence to online spaces. In theory, anyone could be subject to online sexual harassment. However, as the dataset indicated, online sexual harassment occurs against women at a higher rate and more frequently by severe forms of harassment, such as cyberstalking and threats of physical violence. While men encounter harassment, these incidents are relevant milder versions, like name calling and sexual slurs. In overcoming the new online face of gender-based violence, awareness-raising, empowering, and educating women should be a matter of utmost importance to media, tech companies, and law enforcements.

Violence in cyberspace may not even be considered as a form of action that maintains legal implications by Internet users. Per the report’s findings, online sexual harassment is often seen as upsetting rather than violating one’s privacy, damaging to professional development, or even detrimental to romantic lives. Despite this perception, users report having taken measures to end the harassment that constitute a change in their daily lives, such as avoiding offline spaces. This may indicate an urgent need to educate users about the nature of online harassment and its consequences, and to equip them with knowledge and tools for countering such circumstances. Legal challenges of seeking redress for cases of online harassment, particularly in minor forms, can be intimidating and time consuming with questionable return on effort. Yet, technologists and online communities, as well as other stakeholders of cyberspace, can work together to compensate for the challenges that increasingly emerge and impact lives – online and offline.

**Final Note**
Recommendations

This survey aimed to investigate the perception of Iranian users of online sexual harassment and study the nature of their experiences. In order to apply the survey findings and enhance the literature on the topic, further statistical and qualitative research is required. Comprehensively exploring the issue requires hybrid, interdisciplinary methodologies. Based on the present study, the report makes the following recommendations and hope to take further measures in the future to explore this topic in more depth.

Academic research

Studying issues of cyberspace requires expertise in new technologies, as well as knowledge of other disciplines. Cyberspace as the venue where cases of online sexual harassment occur provide a unique opportunity to approach the topic from different angles. It relates to the online behavior of humans from different social, cultural and political environments with technology at its core. There can be numerous research questions to design and address through lenses of psychology of online behavior, philosophy of technology, semantics and content production and moderation, product design, etc. The list goes on. There is, therefore, unique opportunities for academics to study cases of online harassment from different perspectives in order to share and produce more extensive literature on this issue.

Technology companies and startups

The nature of online harassment requires willingness and dedication from major tech companies to address the issue, at the risk of users disengaging due to the hostile behavior directed against them. Twitter, Facebook and Google have developed rather detailed documents outlining rules of these platforms. In recent years, they have offered some mechanisms for flagging online abuse and harassment. However, it is unclear how they evaluate the reports received in languages other than English. Moreover, users may struggle to comprehend their available options for reporting abuse. While Google's integrated translation service enables Persian speakers to read rules in their mother tongue and report a problem, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter do not offer such an option by default yet.

In addition, content moderation is core to evaluating reports of abuse or even copyright. Bilingual and/or multilingual content moderators can significantly contribute to these cases. This can fundamentally improve the experience of those who find it challenging to communicate their problems in a language other than their mother tongues.

Undoubtedly, there are numerous challenges to implementing such a recommendation. Hiring moderators, policing comments and other logistics can be expensive. The constantly changing nature of human communications over new technologies makes it even more complicated. However, technology companies have assumed responsibility towards their
users who – decidedly or unintentionally – apply these technologies to receive and share information in their daily lives. Concerns for user vulnerability have become core to technology development. It is time that any discussion about vulnerability contain questions pertinent to online sexual harassment. It is important to protect users against surveillance and cyber crimes, but so is shielding them from harassing behavior. Such discussions need to begin in early stages of product development.

As such, particular attention should be paid to domestic startups as fledgling service providers to Iranians. As Iran's economy slowly opens up to international investment in the aftermath of its nuclear deal with major world powers, opportunities for domestic startups will likely emerge. However, attention should remain on these business' ethical conduct. New technologies have immense potential for shaping the online culture. Mitigating violence in cyberspace is only possible through collaboration among different stakeholders, including developers of new technologies, to address and resolve user vulnerabilities to abuse across online platforms.

Civil society

Seeding new online norms will take time and is not an easy task. This makes collaboration among civil society, advocacy groups, gender specialists, security experts, and tech companies a significant venue to explore. Unfortunately, no extensive work by Iranian diaspora or advocacy groups has been done on this topic yet. Among the few examples, Macholand’s Telegram stickers on online sexual harassment is worthy of note. These stickers are designed to call out perpetrators over Telegram in a rather friendly manner, hence indirectly helping users raise their voice against the issue. Given the intense popularity of this messaging application, the move is considered a constructive first step to equip numerous users for unpleasant experiences that they may face while using the application.

There are larger numbers of non-Persian examples that Iranian advocacy groups can adopt and localize. Examples include Blocktogether, a service developed by Electronic Frontier Foundation that enables Twitter users to block accounts that they do not wish to have as followers or to receive Twitter mentions from. Civil society will also have a place collaborating with startups that have limited experience in addressing issues of sexism and harassment, and technology companies that plan to enter Iran with little experience of working in the field and the cultural challenges it entails. This requires extensive advocacy work by those who are well familiar with the offline culture and local language. In doing so, particular attention should be paid to sexual minorities (LGBTQs), who may generally be more vulnerable towards harassment.

Online sexual harassment is a hodgepodge of issues that can be tackled from different perspectives, including online privacy. Educating users about online privacy remains a prime mission for digital security experts to minimize risks and mitigate potential harm of new technologies. It is time that civil society approach online sexual harassment through the lense of digital safety and security.

Media

Over the course of this study, we noted a striking lack of Persian literature and media reporting on

---

**V** Macholand is an online advocacy group with longstanding history of fighting sexism and harassment in Persian media.

[VI](http://macholand.org/fa/stickers1/)

**VII** [https://blocktogether.org/](https://blocktogether.org/)
the topic of online [sexual] harassment. Iranian mainstream media has historically approached the topic from a public interest perspective to place specific emphasis on extended consequences of online fraud and identity theft. Occasional reporting about cases of online sexual harassment is often done by local press, or websites with limited reach, and within boundaries that Iran's legal system sets forth. Therefore, larger scale, comprehensive, consistent and investigative reporting, and showcasing studies, by Persian media will set the ground for their peers. More importantly, it will educate audience and raise awareness about the issue.
References


4. Internet users by country, Internet World Stats, Available at http://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#ir.


Online Sexual Harassment
Key findings of an online survey of Iranian Internet users in Jan 2016
Experiences of individuals who were sexually harassed on the Internet are depicted here. Read full report here (ENTER URL HERE)

Total Respondents: 623
38% were sexually harassed on the internet

What Happened?
22% online photos or information were taken advantage of
22% I was consistently stalked across online platforms
54%
48%
41%
12%
My family or I was threatened with physical violence
My family or I was called offensive sexual names
Total:
10% online accounts were accessed without my consent

Where did it happen?
22% Agree
78% Disagree

Who was the perpetrator?

Harassment affected my...

Previous experience?

Did you respond?

“I’m AWARE of LAWS that protect me against online sexual harassment.”

“I TRUST in LAW ENFORCEMENT expertise in prosecuting sexual offenses on the Internet.”

3% <18
29% 18-25
62% 25-40
6% 40+

42% Master’s
43% Bachelor’s
11% Associate’s
4% High School

Men
Women
Others
15% 84% 1%