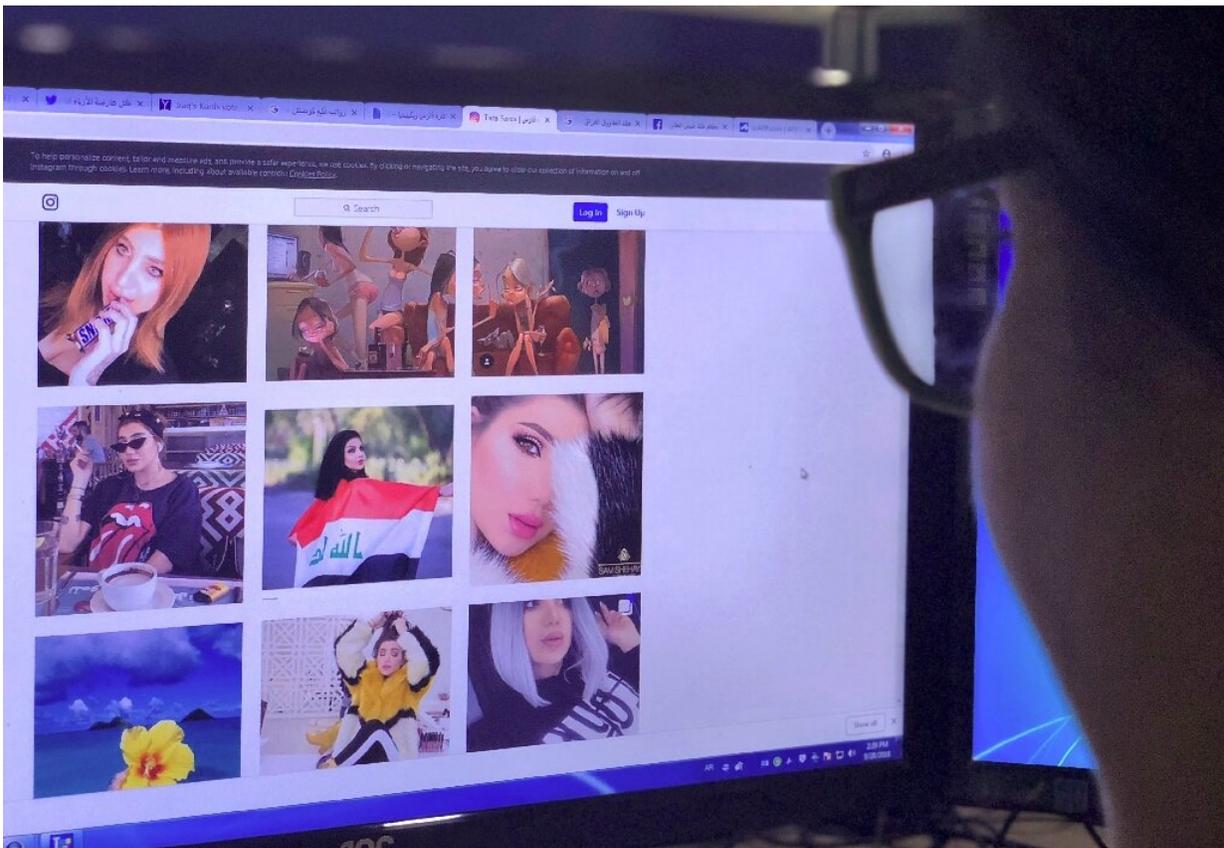


'Revenge porn,' leaked selfies: sextortion spreads in Iraq

November 20 2019, by Maya Gebeily



Iraqi model and Instagram starlet Tara Fares was shot dead in Baghdad last year, with many suspecting gunmen who were contemptuous of her comparatively liberal lifestyle

The threat came by anonymous Instagram message one late Iraqi

evening, making Hala's blood run cold: "I've got all your pictures and recordings. Shall I send them to your dad?"

The young Iraqi woman received a wave of similar messages after hackers infiltrated her Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram accounts and stole explicit images she had sent in private.

"Some of them wanted money, some wanted a [sexual relationship](#), even if it was just on the phone, others just wanted to bully me for no reason," said Hala, 25, whose name has been changed to protect her identity.

Women in Iraq say they are facing a staggering increase in online "sextortion" by both malicious hackers and former romantic partners to whom the women had knowingly sent photographs, a practice known as revenge porn.

Victims, activists and lawyers blame the phenomenon on a blend of factors: a conservative society, social media being used as virtual dating platforms, poor digital security among victims and weak laws.

The potential consequences can be devastating in a milieu as conservative as Iraq: at best, an indelible mark of shame on a family but at worst, a death sentence by "honour killing" for the victims.

Last year, Iraqi model and Instagram starlet Tara Fares was shot dead in Baghdad, with many suspecting gunmen who were contemptuous of her comparatively liberal lifestyle.

With Fares' fate in mind but unwilling to bend to her blackmailers' demands, Hala ultimately fled Iraq this year.

"But I still get threats. These people don't forget."

'Every kind of violence'

Widespread gender separation has pushed Iraqi youth to use sites like Facebook or Instagram as de facto dating platforms, said gender-based violence expert Rusul Kamel.

And in a country with no sex education at school, girls join secret all-female forums to discuss their bodies or seek advice.

The couples and groups often exchange intimate photographs—which for a woman in Iraq can be something as mild as a picture without a traditional Muslim headscarf, "considered a shame in this society," said Kamel.

These images were being increasingly exploited, Kamel and other activists said, relaying testimonies of a half-dozen victims who declined interviews out of fear their identities would be revealed.

One woman paid \$200 every month for four years to an ex-boyfriend so he wouldn't publish intimate pictures of her, her colleague told AFP.

Another had her photographs stolen by a hacker and sold her telephone and jewelry to pay him off.

A third developed an online affair with a man, who then threatened to forward her pictures to her husband unless she slept with him.

"Cyber-extortion combines almost every kind of gender-based violence—sexual, psychological, economic—and the victims rarely find social or legal recourse," said Kamel.

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