Digital Safety Among Jerusalemite Children & Youth

7amleh - The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of field research conducted to determine the level of digital safety experienced by Palestinian children and youth residents of the occupied East Jerusalem. The study evaluates their use of the Internet, digital applications, and social media platforms. In addition, particular attention is given to the challenges and concerns these children and youth face while using the Internet and identifies their level of understanding of the risks, as well as explores the coping mechanisms they utilize to protect themselves on the Internet.

The research methodology included focus group discussions conducted with 15 male and female students, between the ages of 15 and 18 years old, as well as a set of key informant interviews held with 8 Palestinian mothers of children and youth residents of occupied East Jerusalem, 7 counselors, and 4 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In order to supplement the qualitative findings with quantitative data, a digital survey was also implemented. The survey results reflect the responses received from 206 Palestinian Jerusalemite children and youth internet users, between the ages of 12 and 18 years old, as well as input from 69 parents of Palestinian Jerusalemite children and youth and 34 counselors.

The overriding result of the evaluation process indicates that the majority of children and youth participants feel that they are being constantly monitored and do not feel comfortable, nor safe on the Internet. The main reasons given for their sense of discomfort and lack of safety were attributed to the restrictions that exist within their environment, including their families and relatives, their peer group and community, as well as several Israeli entities and strangers trying to entrap young people in general.
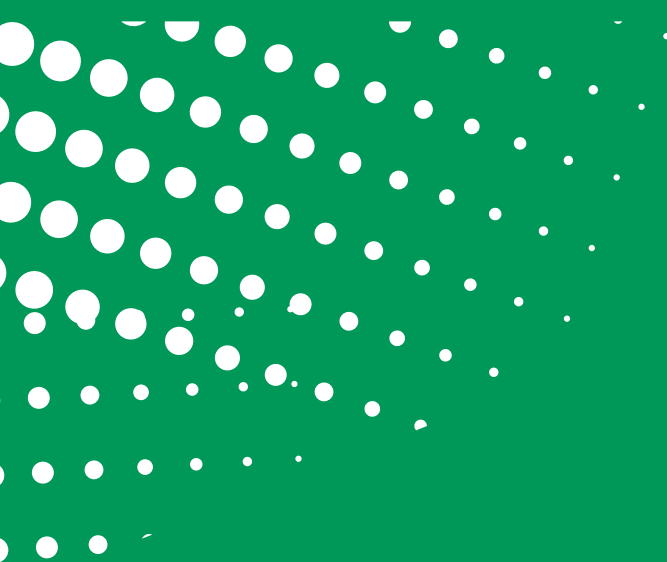
The participants discussed the means they use to protect themselves and noted specifically the risks that exist when communicating about political issues. Most of them tend not to express their views and political positions at all on the Internet, even to the extent that children and youth do not share news of a political nature or repost them. The report shows that 87% of respondents either do not engage in political topics on the Internet at all or engage in them infrequently.

As for the parents, most of them said that they face great difficulty in monitoring their children's use of the Internet. Although parents are fully aware of the Internet's positive and important aspects in today's life, they expressed several concerns about its negative aspects. Navigating the good and bad of the Internet presents a serious challenge for parents. This uncertainty is exacerbated by the fact that 51% of parents surveyed do not know ways to monitor their children's Internet use and 82% of counselors indicated that they do not know how to monitor their students' Internet use.

Additionally, the results of the study emphasize that cyberviolence and cyberbullying are extremely common among Palestinian Jerusalemite children and youth. 58% of the participants said that they were subjected to verbal abuse while using the Internet, 24% said that they were subjected to bullying, and 13% said that they were subjected to blackmail. It should be noted that 10% of the participants said that they had been subjected to sexual harassment online.

The report's most important conclusion points out the urgent need that exists for Palestinian Jerusalemites both young and old to increase their capacity and knowledge regarding digital safety methods. This includes how to maintain privacy and protect their virtual accounts across different platforms from hacking or theft.

Introduction

Introduction

Over the past several years, there have been a number of studies published that have focused on the legal, social and psychological aspects of digital safety, all of which help to inform the complex set of factors that impact the level of security within a digital environment. The increase in the number of users, hours spent on the Internet, and services provided via the Internet, have led to an increase in risks and problems that threaten users' personal security and safety, especially children and youth. This, among other things, makes it crucial to study digital safety in-depth, to understand the gravity of Internet risks including their forms, causes, and goals.[1] This analysis examines the digital safety environment of Palestinian children and youth between the ages of 12 to 18 years of age that are residents of occupied East Jerusalem. The information presented here is the result of both qualitative key informant interviews and focus group discussions, as well as quantitative analysis of a related digital survey conducted with Palestinian Jerusalemite children and youth, parents and counselors.

General Background

It is important to identify the types of Internet risks; especially the most common ones, the age and gender groups affected by them, and the various applications and platforms that enable such risks. This information helps to develop informative, educational, and awareness programs that are relevant to the variables and effective on the ground. Internet users of all types and ages are exposed to cyberbullying, pornographic material, extortion, theft of personal virtual accounts, theft of personal information, threats, social or political persecutions resulting from sharing personal opinions, sexual harassment, and other forms of abuse.

The virtual world has become the primary space from which children and youth in occupied East Jerusalem obtain information and news, and through which they interact to express their opinions and concerns to influence or even change their social and political reality. The power of such digital forms of communication have been witnessed several times throughout the last decade on both a local and global level. These efforts have even manifested in large activist movements that aim to protect the environment and warn against global warming, while still others call for social and political reforms; such as youth movements in the Arab world including Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, and others. Digital social platforms have facilitated this and made it all possible. The virtual and "real" worlds are becoming increasingly interrelated. Therefore, there is a need to safeguard and guarantee digital rights and protect users from abuses. These abuses may expose users to direct dangers or limit their freedom to express their opinions. They are also mechanisms to suppress groups calling for change and reform and have become a growing source of concern for Internet users.

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1   Farrukh, Adina; Sadwick, Rebecca & Villasenor, John. (2014). Youth internet safety: Risks, responses, and research recommendations. Retrieved from: https://www.brookings.edu/research/youth-internet-safety-risks-responses-and-re-search-recommendations/

The gravity and impact of these concerns as well as the anxiety they cause vary depending on the country and age group. For example, sharing political opinions is more dangerous in the Arab world than in western countries that have progressive democratic governments.[2] Similarly, sharing opinions on controversial social issues may lead to persecutions and arrests in Arab countries. However, other risks affect most societies to a fairly similar degree, such as cyberbullying and exposure to pornographic materials.

In Palestine, users are often afraid and cautious on social media platforms, especially when it comes to expressing political opinions.[3] This is a result of the Israeli and Palestinian authorities' long-term systematic, effective, and electronic monitoring policies practiced against Palestinians. These policies have prompted Palestinians, especially young adults, to exercise caution when using social media platforms. This fear on the ground is also reflected in the digital sphere. 7amleh - The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media, published a report titled "A Violent Network", which indicates that 3 out of 4 Palestinian women have been subjected to gender-based violence on the Internet.

In Jerusalem, Palestinian residents have long suffered from the Israeli occupation authorities' practices. These practices include political persecution, systematic attacks, and economic, political, and housing restrictions. Furthermore, political activities are prohibited, cultural activities are often stopped or banned, and the Palestinians' movement is tightly controlled. These policies have created a permanent state of tension and triggered several confrontations with the occupation authorities. The digital sphere has become a space that concerns both sides of this equation. On the one hand, the digital sphere is an outlet and a less restricted safe space for Palestinians in Jerusalem than their real life in the city. On the other, it allows the Israeli occupation authorities the opportunity to surveil and monitor the movements and statements of Palestinians in Jerusalem. This creates a complex virtual reality characterized by alertness, caution, and tension, which reflects the external reality and the daily life of Palestinians in Jerusalem. In the real world, the violations of freedoms and the procedures that guarantee security and personal safety are clear, although their accessibility may be difficult. In the virtual world, however, these factors are neither clear to users, nor sufficiently studied in terms of specifics and impact on the Jerusalem community.

This report focuses on occupied East Jerusalem in order to monitor and understand the digital safety environment that exists for Palestinian Jerusalemite children and youth between 12 and 18 years old. It looks into the availability of space that allows these young people to freely express opinions, and the knowledge, tools, and skills available to ensure their protection and privacy on the Internet. Moreover, the report aims to identify specific needs to enhance Jerusalemite children and youth's digital safety and diagnose the issues and challenges they face. The report also aims at identifying the best mechanisms to deal with these issues and challenges.

The digital space is an important part of children's and youth's lives today, as they spend long hours on the Internet. According to this report, 42% of the children and youth in occupied Jerusalem use the Internet for more than 5 hours per day, while 31% use it for 3-5 hours per day. During these hours, the children and youth are exposed to the world

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2   Freedom House. "A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy" Retrieved from:
     https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democrac
3   Bargouthi, E. (2019, October). "Silenced Net: The Chilling Effect Amongst Palestinian Youth." Haifa. 7amleh - The Arab
     Center for the Advancement of Social Media.

through the Internet.[4] The digital world has been rapidly progressing and the number of applications and social media platforms has been increasing. Therefore, it is necessary to study the extent to which this space provides safety and identify the main behaviors and variables in how young Jerusalemites use the Internet.[5]

To get a broader picture of the digital safety environment in Jerusalem, the report conducted focus groups with children and youth and interviews with parents, counselors, and representatives of civil society institutions. The objective of the interviews was to learn more about the participants' perspectives on digital safety and document their needs and contributions. The parents, counselors, and civil institutions are the first educational and social references for children and youth and have the obligation to guide and raise the awareness of children and youth.

The report addresses several digital safety issues and discusses behaviors and trends in Internet use. This includes the major platforms and applications mostly used; knowledge of tools and skills that maintain privacy and safety on the Internet; technical knowledge of different platform settings; political and social control in Jerusalem; online violence, extortion, and harassment; how to deal with online attacks and abuse; and references to turn to in cases of Internet abuse.

Methodology

Research Tools

This report conducted field research and collected information and data using two basic tools. The first source of data was gathered by conducting personal interviews with youth, parents and counselors who are Palestinian residents of occupied East Jerusalem. The objective of these interviews was to identify how familiar the participants were with digital safety. The participants were also asked to share their personal experiences, knowledge, and familiarity with the subject. A set of questions were developed in advance and modified in order to ask the most relevant questions of each group. The interviews were conducted online through Zoom or over the phone.[6] The second tool for collecting information was conducting a digital survey. Three questionnaires were developed for three target groups, children (up to the age of 12) and youth (ages 12-18); Jerusalemite parents; and counselors. These two tools were designed to complement each other in terms of providing a conceptual context and an analysis of the results and trends that exist regarding the digital environment and level of safety within occupied East Jerusalem.

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4   Ibid
5   Odeh, Shahrazad. (2018, November). A Violent Network: Gender-Based Violence Against Palestinian Women in Virtual space. Haifa. 7amleh – The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media.
6   Due to the Corona pandemic, the ministries of health and governments instructed people to not gather and stay at home. Therefore, electronic meetings were organized for the groups participating in this report.

Samples

The report examined two samples; the first consisted of the following three groups:

- A focus group interview through Zoom with 15 male and female students between the ages of 15 and 18.
- 8 personal interviews over the phone with mothers of students between the ages of 12 and 18.
- 7 personal interviews over the phone with counselors and teachers from Jerusalem institutions, and 4 phone interviews with representatives of four Jerusalem NGOs.

The second sample that participated in the online survey included 309 respondents from the Jerusalem governorate, distributed as follows:

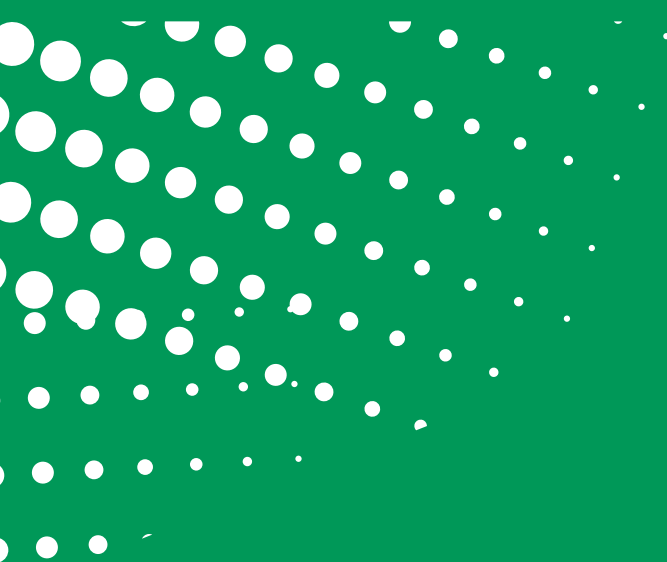| Group	Number
Children & Youth (18 - 12)	206
Mothers and Father	69
Women and Men Counselors	34
Total	309

Research Period

The interviews were conducted between May 15 and June, 2020. The digital survey was distributed between May 12 and 25, 2020.

Research Limitations

The report was developed in May 2020, at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19). This prevented us from conducting face-to-face interviews with the participants. Instead, interviews were conducted via Zoom and over the phone. In virtual interviews, participants often respond and interact differently than in face-to-face interviews. This affects the level of trust established with the participants and the degree of openness. Besides, virtual interviews lack the richness of communication and body language inherent in face-to-face interactions. Moreover, we were unable to meet with fathers to examine their educational role, and document their attitudes, opinions, and knowledge on the subject of digital safety. The parents' sample participating in the interviews consisted only of mothers.

Field Research Findings

Results and Analysis of Students' Interviews

1. Group one: Interviews with male and female students (aged 15-18)

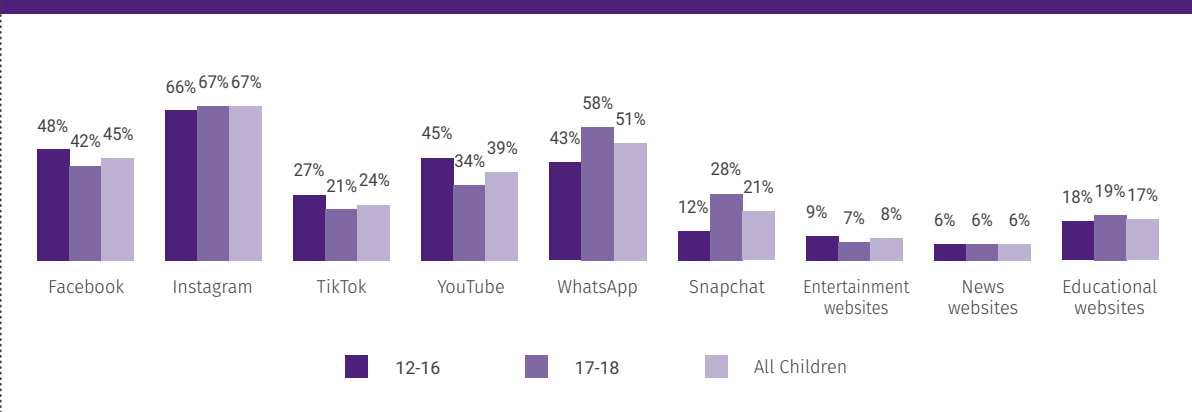### 1.1 The definition of digital safety and protection on the Internet

When asked about the term "digital safety," 80% of focus group participants had never heard of it before. Once the concept was explained through a discussion of its components, such as privacy, protection, and censorship, the group was able to proceed. Interestingly, enough, although the majority of participants indicated that they had not received any training on digital safety, all of the participants described their knowledge of ways to ensure security and privacy as "sufficient".

1.2 Websites and applications participants use on the Internet

"Instagram is our world; Facebook is for adults"

When participants were asked about the websites and applications they use most, Instagram was the most popular application for sharing photos and videos among this age group. This matches the survey results, which also indicated that 67% of children and youth residents of occupied East Jerusalem use Instagram, while only 45% use Facebook, as seen in Figure 1. When asked to discuss their use of WhatsApp, the focus group respondents agreed that it has become an essential tool for communication, which they do not consider to be an additional social media platform, but rather a basic phone application.

Figure (1): The percentages of different digital applications use among children and youth, distributed according to the age group.

The participants explained the reasons for preferring Instagram over other applications as follows:

(1)   Most of their friends see Instagram as the world of younger people and consider Facebook as a platform for adults and part of the "world of adults." They explained that they would likely move to use Facebook at some point, however, Instagram was more suitable for their generation.

(2)   The application is based on visuals (photos and videos) more than text, which makes it more attractive to them. Additionally, Instagram is the more recent of the two applications, therefore feels more up to date and innovative.

(3)   Perhaps the most important reason given was that the participants feel more secure using Instagram compared to Facebook. This is due to their ability to better control the privacy settings of their accounts, including determining who can view their photos and posts.

When asked about the type of content they share, the majority of participants stated that they share pictures of their daily lives, their feelings on certain days and in certain moments, or to share an activity or event with friends or family. They added that they share their accomplishments or those of their relatives or acquaintances.

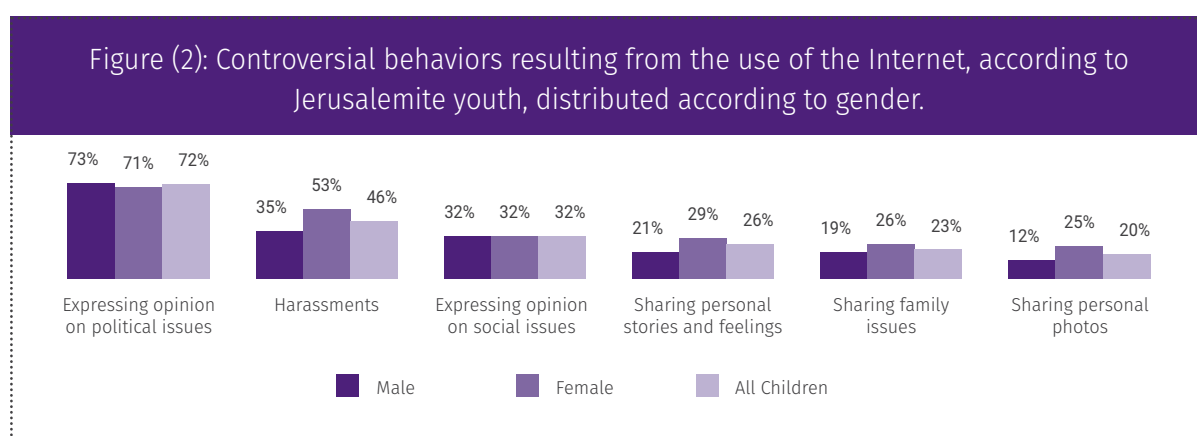## 1.3 Censorship and privacy from the children and youth's perspective

The majority of participants expressed a feeling of being constantly monitored on the Internet, which resulted in a high degree of discomfort and a lack of a sense of safety while online. Most of them indicated that this censorship is imposed on them primarily by those closest to them, in particular their families and relatives, as well as to a slightly lesser degree from their colleagues and the local community. They also feel monitored by various Israeli entities as well as threatened by the risk of strangers that may use the Internet to entrap them.

The research shows that the concern regarding surveillance is closely related to the nature and frequency of content that young people share on social media platforms (see Figure 2). We expected the participants to refer to Israeli surveillance as their main concern given the current political situation in Jerusalem. However, they made it clear that their primary concern is their relatives and the local community, especially when they share pictures and details of their personal lives. When girls posted their pictures, they were often afraid of their relatives, especially if these pictures were considered "unacceptable." This fear stems from several conflicts, disputes, and crimes that resulted from sharing pictures of girls, especially those considered "inappropriate," or posts by them, among their relatives and community members. This includes incidents of girls who wear the Hijab (headscarf) posting a picture of themselves without it, pictures that show boys and girls together, or evidence of conversations between a boy and a girl.

Although the participants expressed their obvious concerns regarding Israeli surveillance, they made it clear that they have learned ways to overcome this risk. Specifically, they avoid sharing posts or comments on national and political issues for fear of prosecution and arrest.

Although they know that this restricts their freedom of expression, the group unanimously agreed that it was safer for them to avoid raising, discussing, and sharing political issues on social media. This comes as a result of the Israeli authorities' frequent arrests of Palestinian children and youth and their detention for several months on charges related to a post, comment, share, or even alike. According to one participant: "If journalists are being arrested [by the Israeli Authorities], how about us?!!"

Accordingly, participants think the best way to protect themselves from the risks of engaging with political issues on the Internet is not to engage at all, nor to post or report any news. According to the survey, 87% of the youth do not share political content at all, or it is rare for them to share such content.

Figure (2): Controversial behaviors resulting from the use of the Internet, according to Jerusalemite youth, distributed according to gender.

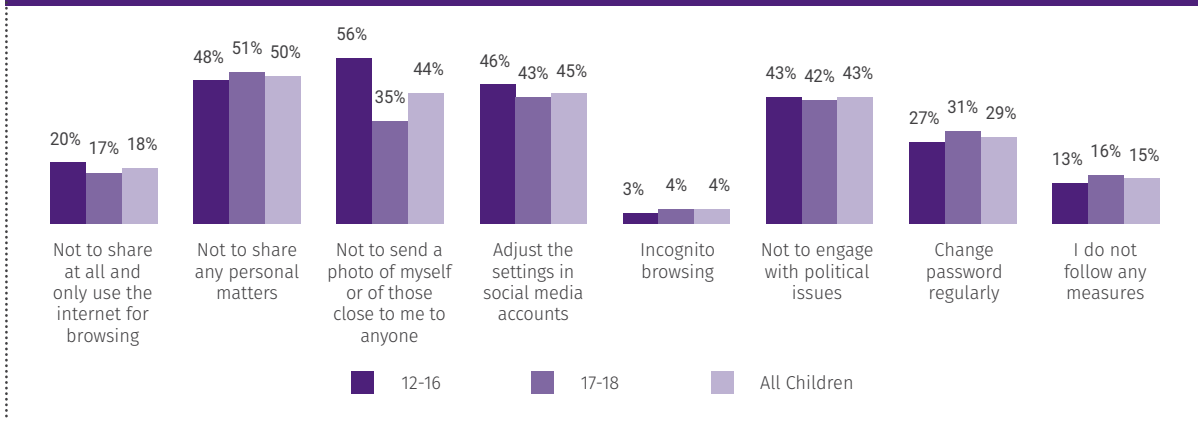## 1.4   Digital safety and privacy protection

Students were asked about what forms of digital protection they use to protect their privacy. They mentioned several ways to ensure digital safety, including:

- Not sharing personal matters on social media networks.
- Changing the passwords of different accounts.
- Not accepting friend requests from people they do not know.
- Not opening foreign files from untrusted sources.
- Checking the devices that use their accounts at the same time to see if anyone has hacked them.

It should be noted that during the Zoom call, none of the participants turned their cameras on. One participant said: "We do not always trust these platforms, so we do not turn the camera on out of caution." This explanation and group behavior helped to illustrate the high level of caution and proactive thinking the students were using to protect themselves.

The participants have a strong understanding of the ways in which they can maintain their digital safety, especially in terms of protecting their privacy, as seen in Figure 3. They know techniques to adjust settings and are aware of which topics they can share on the Internet. They are also able to detect suspicious online activities.

Figure (3): Measures youth follow to protect themselves on social media networks, distributed according to the age group.

Not to share at all and only use the internet for browsing: 20%, 17%, 18%

Not to share any personal matters: 48%, 51%, 50%

Not to send a photo of myself or of those close to me to anyone: 56%, 35%, 44%

Adjust the settings in social media accounts: 46%, 43%, 45%

Incognito browsing: 3%, 4%, 4%

Not to engage with political issues: 43%, 42%, 43%

Change password regularly: 27%, 31%, 29%

I do not follow any measures: 13%, 16%, 15%

Legend: 12-16 · 17-18 · All Children

Nevertheless, the participants indicated their urgent need to learn about more ways to maintain their digital safety on several levels, including:

■ The best way to secure accounts against theft and hacking.

■ Settings that enhance the privacy of users.

■ Ways to hack accounts, in order to prevent it from happening to them.

Despite the participants' foundational knowledge of ways to ensure their own digital security, they still feel anxious and uneasy about being exposed to dangers on the Internet. Specifically, the group explained that there are harmful people online, and therefore it is essential to continue to learn more about digital safety in order to protect themselves.

1.5 Ways to address threats, violence, extortion when using the Internet

The respondents were asked to consider how they would deal with being threatened, blackmailed, or stalked on the Internet. While some explained that they would go to the cybercrime unit of the Israeli police, none of them mentioned going to a teacher or a counselor to report the abuse. This lack of interest in confiding in a teacher or counselor was also reflected in the digital survey, where only 13% of children and youth said that they approach the teacher or counselor in such situations.

It is also remarkable that most of the participants do not see their families as a safe place to seek refuge or advice when exposed to threats, violence, or extortion. According to them, not only are they afraid to go to their families in such situations, but they also do not recommend it. They think that turning to families may make the problem worse, so they would rather try to deal with these assaults in all possible ways before relying on their family. This is particularly the case when considering how to deal with threats, violence, and blackmail related to social issues, such as relationships, the friendship between boys and girls, posting "inappropriate" photos, and other cases. Most participants expressed their fear of their parents' punishment or blame due to the conservative nature of the Palestinian community in occupied East Jerusalem. According to them, engaging with their families for

support in such issues could expose them to further danger and in some cases amount to risking their lives. Therefore considering these social and family constraints, as well as the fact that there is no Palestinian Authority that they could refer to, some participants stated that they would approach the Israeli police if the situation was serious enough and they could not communicate with their families safely.
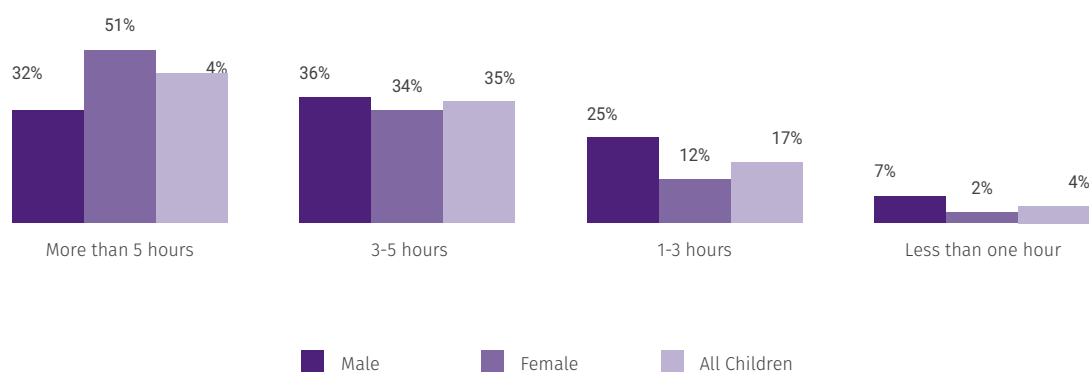
Results and Analysis of Parents' Interviews

2. Group two: Interviews with mothers of adolescents

The majority of mothers interviewed expressed their deep concern regarding their role in protecting their children from the harms of using the Internet. They also stated their deep dissatisfaction with their scarce knowledge of and lack of access to parental Internet monitoring tools, which could be used to help ensure privacy and minimizing their children's exposure to potential risks on the Internet.

2.1 Mothers perspectives on their children's Internet use

The main problem that mothers pointed out was the long hours their children spent in front of the screens of computers and smart devices (see Figure 4). According to one mother: "We wish to see children running or walking around ... I send them to the grocery store on purpose just to see them move." Mothers think that the long hours their children spent on the internet have become a source of concern. According to them, this negatively impacts children and youth's ability to interact and communicate, as well as limits movement and engagement in sports..

Figure (4): Hours adolescents spend on the Internet, according to their mothers.

	More than 5 hours	3-5 hours	1-3 hours	Less than one hour
Male	32%	36%	25%	7%
Female	51%	34%	12%	2%
All Children	4%	35%	17%	4%

Websites and applications most used by children and youth, according to mothers:

'Children use PUBG, and adults use Instagram"

This sentence is also reflected in the results of the interviews with the families. Two-thirds of the parents indicated that their children spent most of their time on the Internet playing video games and watching YouTube channels. Meanwhile, most of the parents said that their sons and daughters, youth, spend most of their time on the Internet on Instagram browsing and posting photos.

2.2   The main issues that concern mothers:

Mothers expressed serious concerns and fears regarding their children's use of the Internet, especially as they have limited capacity and knowledge regarding the best way to protect and monitor their children digitally.

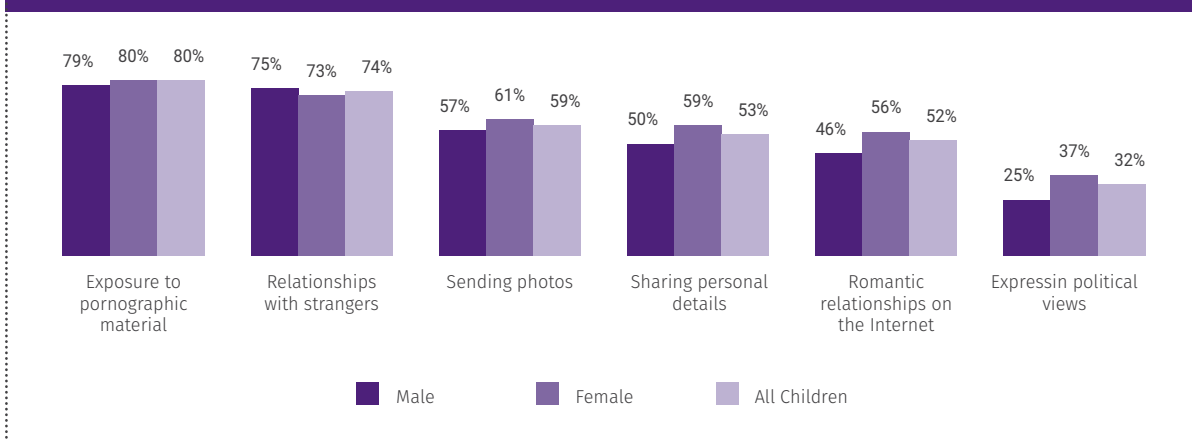The major issues that concerned mothers are as follows:

(1)   Exposure to pornographic content or inappropriate material for adolescents and children, especially those between the ages of 12 and 15. Mothers are constantly concerned about this age group's exposure to pornographic materials, which requires constant monitoring on their part.

(2)   Exposure to sexual assaults, extortion, or threats via the Internet, especially in regard to the risk of children and youth being exploited by adults.

(3)   Romantic relationships among children and youth. Palestinian parents in occupied East Jerusalem do not accept such relationships for this age group.

(4)   Expressing or sharing political opinions on the Internet under the Israeli authorities tight monitoring of Palestinian Jerusalemite's social media accounts.

Based on personal interviews, mothers are aware that the most dangerous issue facing their children is sharing political content. However, they mainly seek to protect their children from pornography, threats, extortion, and romantic relationships, as shown in Figure 5. According to some mothers, the risks and consequences of sharing political opinions and content have become a public and well-known issue at the societal level. Additionally it is widely understood that the best way to mitigate these risks and consequences is to simply not engage with politics on the Internet. On the other hand, the other risks are much harder to address, making the mothers particularly concerned about the non-political risks and challenges.

2.3   Parents' monitoring of their children's Internet activity

When parents were asked in the survey about how they monitor their sons' and daughters' Internet activity, 51% answered that they face great difficulty to do so. Although parents are

Figure (5): The behaviors and content that parents seek to protect their children from, according to fathers and mothers.

	Male	Female	All Children
Exposure to pornographic material	79%	80%	80%
Relationships with strangers	75%	73%	74%
Sending photos	57%	61%	59%
Sharing personal details	50%	59%	53%
Romantic relationships on the Internet	46%	56%	52%
Expressin political views	25%	37%	32%

aware of the importance of the Internet in daily life, they expressed many fears regarding their children's Internet activity. They stated that monitoring children's Internet activity is a serious challenge parents face. In personal interviews, mothers mentioned some ways to monitor their children, including being in close physical proximity to them, looking at the screens of their devices, talking to them, educating them, and sharing information with them. One mother suggested monitoring the websites visited in the browser history on their children's devices. Sometimes parents resorted to cutting off the house Internet access when they were unable to monitor their children as to restrict the hours they spent on the Internet. At other times, parents confiscated their children's devices or prevented them from using them when they felt that their children were in imminent danger or misusing the Internet.

The parents' inability to keep up with technological developments has made them feel helpless and frustrated. They often feel they are losing control of their children. This feeling is made worse due to parents' lack of technological knowledge and limited capacity to monitor and protect their children on the Internet. They do not know the nature of their children's Internet activities, the people with which they communicate, nor fully comprehend their exposure to various content across various platforms. The vast difference in the level of experience and knowledge of the internet between children and their families has created an urgent need for parents to learn more about digital safety.

2.4   How parents deal with threats, violence, and extortion while their children use the Internet

When parents were asked what they would do if their children were exposed to an abusive situation on the Internet, such as exposure to pornographic materials, threats, blackmail, or bullying, their answers in the digital survey were different from those in the personal interviews. In the survey, 58% of parents indicated that they would report the incident to the police. In the personal interviews, however, the majority of mothers did not mention

the police at all. The difference in the responses is likely due to the fact that dealing with the Israeli police for Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem remains a sensitive issue. It was perhaps easier for those who shared their opinions through the survey to mention going to the police as an option to address abuse on the Internet, compared to the parents who participated in the personal interviews.

During the interviews, the parents explained that they are perplexed and confused when faced with such situations. There is no Palestinian legal or governmental entity with the capacity and authority to intervene on behalf of the victim and their family due to the restrictions placed on the Palestinian Authority within occupied East Jerusalem. This lack of access is not only a concern in terms of addressing the issue legally, but Palestinian Jerusalemite parents are also concerned with issues of confidentiality when such problems arise, in particular when taking into account the conservative culture that is dominant within their communities. Therefore, parents stress the importance of prevention and awareness-raising as the best way to address children and youth's Internet activity within the city. They stated that if their sons or daughters are exposed to an abusive situation, they would try to communicate with the other party (the aggressor) to solve the problem, turn off the device and cut communication, or go to one of the private associations or clubs for guidance and advice.

2.5   The need to learn more about digital safety

Parents stated their urgent need to learn more information, ways, and means to ensure their children and youth's digital safety. This includes the ability to monitor their Internet activity to ensure they are not exposed to abuse, bullying, threats, or pornographic materials. The parents added that they want their children to be able to also access this information, empowering them to apply it directly if the parent is unable to do so. It is important to note however that some parents made it clear that even if they have sufficient information and the ability to communicate it, their children do not listen to them. According to parents, children and youth in occupied East Jerusalem do not accept parents' guidance regarding the use of electronic devices in particular and the Internet in general. Therefore, they think it is best to make this information available to both students and parents.

Results and Analysis of Counselors' and Organizations' Interviews

3. Group three: Findings of interviews with counselors and organizations

3.1 Concerns according to counselors and organizations

The counselors and staff working in various occupied East Jerusalemite institutions expressed great concern about the dangers and repercussions of students' Internet activity. During the conversations, they confirmed that their role is mostly to warn children and youth of the problems they may encounter on the Internet. They are motivated to focus on the problems, as a way to protect students from the assaults and "scandals" that are widely talked about and shared within the Palestinian Jerusalemite communities.

Their main concerns include the following:

(1) Sharing political opinions: The counselors expressed the need to clearly convey to students the importance of not sharing political content on social media, in order to avoid possible arrest and prosecution, as a large number of young Jerusalemites have been arrested in connection to their social media activity, as the Israeli intelligence systematically monitors and hacks their social media accounts. Interestingly enough, the counselors showed more concern regarding the danger of sharing political opinions, as compared to both parents and students.

(2) Blackmail and gender-based violence: The counselors indicated the second most important issue when it comes to digital safety is violence against girls. This violence includes threats and attempts to blackmail them by men, in addition to bullying among girls themselves. Several counselors complained about these issues and considered them as a distressing phenomena facilitated by social networks. According to them, these issues are more commonplace online, and less evident in the real world. Some counselors explained that the boundaries regarding girls' behavior are clear in the real world, which include speaking manners and what is socially acceptable/ unacceptable. However, these boundaries do not exist in the virtual world and girls often experience more violence online.

(3) Romantic Relationships: The counselors explained there is a big difference between the expression of personal freedoms and socially acceptable behaviors within Palestinian Jerusalemite communities and what can be expressed more openly online. As a result, the moment a romantic relationship that exists online is revealed, this often causes the people involved problems and crises with their families and society, particularly for girls. Counselors also fear that children and youth engage in

romantic relationships based on virtual correspondence, only to find out later that one or both of them is completely different (physically and mentally) from what they portrayed in this virtual relationship. Claiming that virtual relationships develop a "distorted" concept of relationships that are based on virtual experiences rather than practical ones. These distorted relationships are not suitable for the students' age and lifestyle, and are different than relationships in reality.

(4)   Protection, surveillance, and cameras: Several respondents expressed their fear of the possible hacking of their accounts, especially hacking cameras and turning them on without the user's permission. This fear is an extension of the daily oppression felt by Palestinian Jerusalemites every day, and the real possibility of being under the occupation authorities' constant surveillance. This fear is projected onto students in the form of notices and warnings. Counselors seek to educate students on the necessity to exercise caution and protect themselves. However, the counselors recognize the need for clearer tools and messaging in order to better ensure students' protection.

3.2   What the counselors do in cases of extortion, threats, and stalking:

'Students rarely go to counselors about ways to use the Internet.'

This sentence was repeated by several counselors when asked about the extent to which students would ask their help in cases of blackmail or threats. This response helps to bring to light that students tend to not rely on the adults in their life to cope with problems that arise as a result of their Internet activity. The parents' answers in the personal interviews and the online survey also indicate similar results. The counselors also explained that there is a big gap between them and the students when it comes to communicating openly about students' experiences online.

44% of the online survey respondents said that their students infrequently ask their help in matters related to digital safety on the Internet. 18% said that their students approach them frequently. 18% stated that the frequency of students going to them is moderate, and 21% said that their students do not turn to them at all.

The counselors think that students do not ask their help when it comes to digital safety issues due to the lack of an open dialogue between them and their students. They indicated that students rarely share their private matters, especially when it comes to experiences on social media. Students take their privacy in their virtual world seriously, especially since they consider that world "far-off" from the adult world. However, some counselors indicated that this matter is largely dependent on the counselor's relationship with their students. In cases of a close relationship and open dialogue between the student and the counselor, the former shares their experiences and tells the counselor about the problems they face on social media.

According to one of the counselors: "The conversation about experiences in the virtual world cannot be separated from what happens in the real world." She indicated that she believes that there is an urgent need for the life skills programs that are already part of the curriculum, and also include awareness-raising of digital safety principles and information about the various uses of the Internet. Furthermore, she recommended that in addition to training sessions that focused on the technical aspects related to maintaining privacy and digital safety, she saw an additional need to raise awareness and teach the importance of clear boundaries when engaged in intimate conversations online. Particularly as it relates to sharing personal matters, managing conversations, confronting bullying, dealing with crises, and seeking help. All of these issues are relevant in the virtual and real world, therefore, in order to properly address such issues, it is essential that it take both contexts into account. As a result, such an approach would empower children and youth residents of East Jerusalem to build their capacity to deal with various social situations regardless of the platform or place.

Most counselors expressed difficulty in dealing with cases related to Internet threats, violence, or extortion when students seek their help. This difficulty is due to the lack of knowledge of the procedures that must be followed in these cases and the lack of tools available to protect the student.

The counselors mentioned two main points:

(1)   The lack of access to the protection provided by a representative governmental authority leaves Palestinian Jerusalemite who are victims of cybercrimes highly vulnerable. This vulnerability is made worse due to the fact that it is socially and politically unacceptable and uncommon among most Palestinian residents of occupied East Jerusalem to report such incidence to the Israeli police. This is noted in contrast with the fact that residents of the occupied West Bank can refer such cases to the Palestinian Cybercrime Police. While some Jerusalemites turn to the Israeli police as a last resort, generally this is only done in criminal cases, as approaching the Israeli police for political cases is considered to be against the Palestinian boycott of the Israeli government and unlawful occupation of East Jerusalem and the Palestinian territory.

(2)   The counselors do not have the technical knowledge and skills necessary to deal with digital safety. The majority of counselors prefer to refer students to the school management, an educational counselor, social worker, or parents, as they do not feel that they have sufficient qualifications to help in such situations. According to the online survey, 59% of them indicated that they would inform the school, while 53% would inform the student's parents.

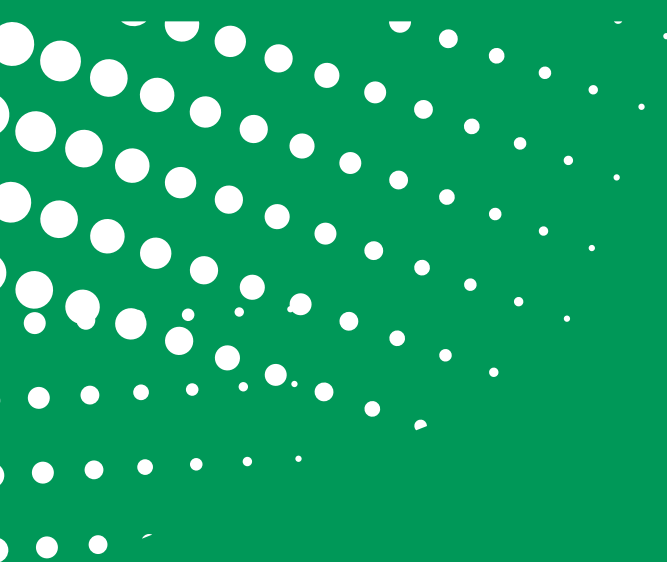## 3.3   Counselors knowledge of digital security tools and technologies

'We do not know, what we do not know'

The counselors clearly expressed the urgent need to develop their knowledge of digital safety. Only 6% stated that they are highly satisfied with their information and knowledge on the subject of digital safety. 44% said that the level of their satisfaction is moderate, while 50% said it was low. Although 35% of counselors indicated that they participated in a lecture or workshop on digital safety, the vast majority expressed an urgent need to receive additional workshops in order to enhance their knowledge in this field that not only affects the lives of their students but also theirs.

The counselors seemed confused when asked about the digital safety topics, stating that they wish to learn more in the future. However, many confessed that the field appeared to be very broad, making it difficult to determine the approach they should take in order to promote digital safety among their students. Additionally, they stressed that they did not know what they wanted to learn in terms of topics, tools, and skills. They said they needed an introduction to the digital environment and to learn more about technology as a first step, then they would be better able to acquire the necessary skills and information to pass along to students and their families.

They suggested that any future training program must prioritize providing them with the ability to pass the information on to students and families, as well as be mindful of the local context. According to them, the workshops should combine empowering counselors to both lead generative discussions and sessions related to digital safety, as well as provide needed technical information related to settings, ensuring privacy, securing accounts against hacking, and developing the ability to tell reliable sources from fake ones. The counselors prefer to hold training workshops that integrate information, interaction, and experience, rather than attending a lecture or reading a manual.

Discussion of Findings

Occupied East Jerusalem is facing a major crisis in terms of the overall sense of safety felt among its Palestinian residents. The Israeli authorities are actively increasing their control over and surveillance of Palestinian Jerusalemites, as well as have intensified the prosecution and political arrests of Palestinian children and youth within the city. The expansion and encroachment of illegal Israeli settlements within occupied East Jerusalem has had a negative impact on Palestinians living there, resulting in their expulsion and the demolition of their homes. Additionally, Palestinian Jerusalemites live in distress due to the deteriorating political and economic conditions as a result of the Jerusalem Israeli municipality's restrictive occupation policies. The Palestinian Authority is unable to defend Palestinian residents of occupied East Jerusalem nor provide them with basic services. This contributes to Jerusalemites feeling less safe and leaves them to fight Israeli oppressive policies on their own.

The aforementioned circumstances contribute to the anger, tension, and repression felt by Palestinian Jerusalemite and increases their sense of helplessness regarding the possibility for a change in the difficult political situation. The Israeli police and army's efforts to enforce the restrictive policies on the Palestinian population and their control over the land have deterred Palestinians from participating in any political activism or even expressing any political opinions. This was evident in the report in how Jerusalemites avoid engaging in politics on social media.
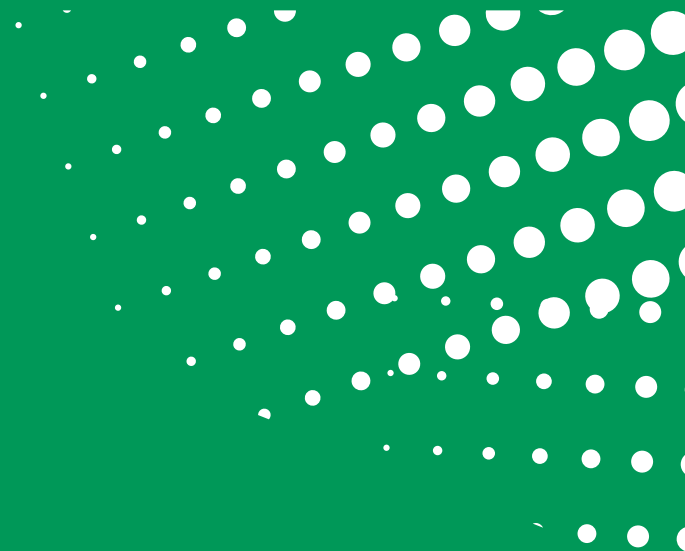
However, the pressure and tension caused by the occupation and the difficult conditions under which Palestinian residents of occupied East Jerusalem live, often manifest in the form of violence, harassment, and bullying, among the children and youth. Despite the severity of these acts, these behaviors often appear among the most oppressed peoples.[7] According to this report, these behaviors are also reflected in the digital environment and the majority of respondents indicated that they had been exposed to violence or bullying on social media. Parents, counselors, and youth expressed great concern about harassment, fraud, and bullying. Bullying among girls was remarkably high. The youth indicated that when it comes to persecution and censorship, their first concern is the local community and then the Israeli authorities, which points to a pattern of oppression imposed on Palestinian Jerusalemite children and youth by their local community that has become the primary source of fear and abuse.

Jerusalem children and youth, their parents and counselors share the feeling that there is no one that can protect them. The Israeli law is used to restrict them, and there is no official Palestinian authorities to which they can resort. Therefore, people often solve problems through the Atwa, a tribal truce, and reconciliation committees-- as a last resort. This feeling of losing the ability to protect oneself contributes to Palestinian Jerusalemite children and youth vulnerability within the digital environment. As aggressors take advantage of this lack of protection, parents and teachers have become more anxious and fearful. This is especially concerning for parents and teachers as they know that there is no Palestinian legal mechanism they can turn to for protection. The situation is made even more concerning due to the fact that parents and teachers do not know the new digital protection mechanisms that could enable them to protect their children, even to a small degree.

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7   Freire, Paulo. (1996). Pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: Continuum.

Finally, due to the lack of access to services by the Palestinian Authority within the city, Palestinian Jerusalemites are limited in terms of their capacity to address existing threats related to digital safety. Additionally, even when new programming is presented it is not easy for the Palestinian Jerusalemites to trust a new framework that provides this knowledge. Often, there are several questions and a great deal of skepticism when new initiatives are presented to the community. This resistance stems from political, cultural and religious concerns. Therefore, there is a need to bridge the gap between the distrust and the lack of information and knowledge in the field of digital safety, and the desire expressed by the residents of occupied East Jerusalem to urgently obtain tools and information that enhances their sense of digital safety and ability to protect children and youth.

Conclusions

There is an urgent need to develop a deeper understanding of digital safety among Palestinian Jerusalemite children and youth, as well as their parents and counselors in order to promote a more protective digital environment in occupied East Jerusalem. Specifically, more information is needed in terms of maintaining privacy, protecting accounts against hacking or theft, better control over settings, and awareness about the risks and possible negative impact on the level of safety within the digital environment. Although students, parents, and counselors possess different levels of knowledge, all expressed the desire to learn more about this field. Additionally, all groups are also aware that digital safety is one of the major issues that must be addressed.

While the majority of Palestinian Jerusalemite children and youth are spending a great deal of time online, there is a significant gap in terms of their understanding about how to be safe and protected users. This gap is due to the fact that there are very few workshops and training provided by public and private schools and institutions to prepare, enrich, and train children/youth on how to deal with the risk and challenges within the digital world.

There is a knowledge gap between parents and children and youth, which is made more significant due to a general lack of communication within families about digital safety. Jerusalemite children and youth have more knowledge than their parents on issues related to technology. However, parents do not believe that their children's knowledge is sufficient, which leads to high levels of anxiety and concern about digital safety. These worries are exacerbated by the stories that are shared throughout the city about problems and abusive situations that harmed children and youth within the society. Parents' lack of technological experience and understanding has made them feel fearful and helpless to support their children and youth to navigate the risks that exist within the digital environment. Parents want to acquire the tools and means needed to properly monitor how their children use smartphones, verify the identities of the people their children are messaging, and control the time their children spend on the Internet. They also want to learn more about how to download appropriate applications designed to help parents prevent their children and youth's exposure to pornographic materials.

The lack of security and safety that characterizes the lives of Palestinian Jerusalemites every day, is also reflected within their digital environment. The majority of respondents indicated that they do not feel safe when using the Internet and social media, whether because of their society or the Israeli authorities' political surveillance. This feeling of being tracked is a concern not only because it threatens their right to movement and privacy, but also further enables the Israeli authorities to use such information as a tool to deny them their basic rights that threaten their stability. This could affect issuing identity cards and the legality of their residency in Jerusalem, among other issues.

The problem of information and knowledge. The report showed clear concerns among counselors and teachers in particular, about the lack of valid information available to students through social media platforms. Recognizing that students spend many hours on these platforms, educators are concerned that the information shared on social media becomes the primary source for obtaining information on the global and local levels. This age group rarely looks at news materials, social issues, or reliable scientific data. This causes the Internet and all its valuable knowledge and information to be reduced to what users communicate on social media platforms. Which is a great concern as it promotes the widespread spread of false and misleading news without verification. This misinformation is not only harmful to the learning of the students, but has also in many cases caused family and individual disputes in occupied East Jerusalem.

There is no official Palestinian governmental framework through which Palestinian Jerusalemite residents can manage and follow up on complaints related to cybercrime. Asking the Israeli police for help is considered unacceptable nationally, and uncommon for most residents of Jerusalem. However, residents of the West Bank have the ability to refer to the Palestinian Cybercrime Police for support, the lack of such a resource for Palestinian Jerusalemites has contributed to a change in the attitudes of some participants regarding the Israeli police, as they expressed their readiness to seek the Israeli police's help if necessary. However, the majority still rejects this approach or is at least hesitant about it. This matter places a double responsibility on parents and counselors in their educational role because, without a legal deterrent body, the most important measure to avoid future problems has become preventive steps and caution.
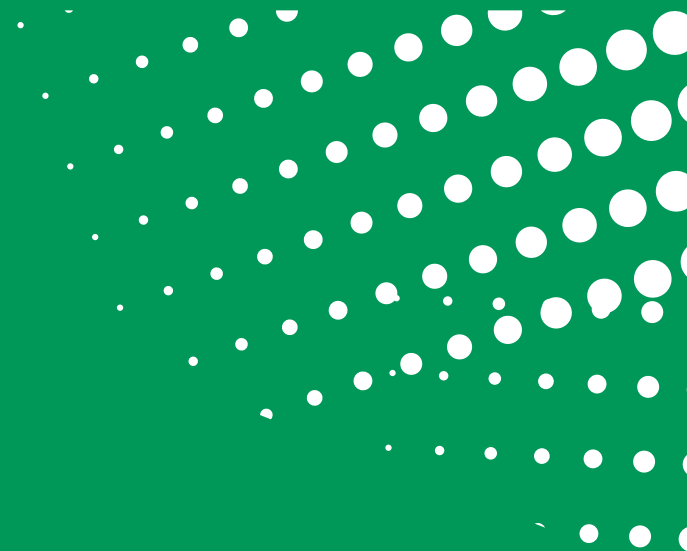
45% of Palestinian Jerusalemite children and youth change their social media accounts' settings regularly to protect themselves and enhance their privacy. The majority, however, use their accounts without adjusting or checking the privacy and security aspects. The percentage of those who change their settings is quite small, especially when dealing with websites where users share personal information.

Parents' express a growing sense of helplessness related to their inability to monitor their children and youth within the digital environment, which is largely due to their lack of knowledge and experience with digital technologies and social media platforms. The majority of parents expressed "negligence" on their part, which sometimes made them feel guilty and concerned about their children and youth's level of digital safety. Parents are aware that they are responsible for getting their children and youth smartphones and computers at a relatively young age, while at the same time recognizing these items may not always be appropriate for the children. Additionally, they do not provide their children and youth with the knowledge and tools to ensure a safe digital environment. Without the proper knowledge to address the risks and threats, parents sometimes cut off the Internet connection at home, confiscate smart devices, or question their children about what they do. None of the parents reported that they own software to detect how much time their son or daughter spends on each application. Moreover, none of the parents reported that they had installed software on their son's or daughter's devices to prevent their exposure to pornographic materials or "adult sites".

The arrests, interrogations, and threats against Palestinian Jerusalemite children and youth based on their digital activity has effectively pushed them to avoid digital political activism. This was clearly evident in the interviews and surveys, as the majority of young Jerusalemites avoid sharing political opinions and positions on social media. 87% of Jerusalemite children and youth indicated that they do not prefer sharing political content on social media. 58% believe that they are being monitored by the Israeli authorities.

Harassment, blackmail, cyberbullying, and romantic relationships are the main concerns of parents and students. These concerns also cause social conflicts that involve children and youth and are more common compared to political persecution. Parents and their children face extreme difficulty in dealing with or preventing such issues. Some of the participants expressed particular concern about trapping and blackmailing girls through fake accounts or hacking into their accounts and blackmailing them with pictures and personal information.

Recommendations

- Collaborate with parents. Parents are eager to learn more about tools and information on the subject of digital safety. They want to be empowered in their role to educate and protect their children and youth in a way that promotes proper and safe use of the Internet. Parents also suggested that the best way to communicate with them is through schools or civil associations, especially women's clubs. It is easier to reach the parents through the existing institutions in Jerusalem, which they already trust. The element of trust in Jerusalem is an important aspect of the success for any project or intervention.

- Integrate the subject of digital safety into a broader educational concept and not to limit it to technical information only. Digital safety should be incorporated into topics related to social relations, friendship, self expression, and the boundaries between what is private and public, as well as in discussions related to romantic relationships, particularly expressions of love and intimacy.

- Introduce parents, students, and counselors to basic information related to ensuring internet safety and maintaining privacy. This includes; understanding the privacy settings on each social media platform, how to prevent theft or hacking of their accounts, how to deal with suspicious files, as well as share any other relevant preventive measures.

- Explain the Israeli authorities' use of surveillance systems and discuss the right to freedom of opinion and expression within occupied East Jerusalem. It is essential to contextualize these rights, in relationship to the existing restrictions, limitations, and consequences. This is particularly relevant as it relates to the real threat of prosecution facing young Palestinian residents. The report showed that as a result of the arrests and interrogations of their peers, youth/children are aware of the restrictions they face as they grow older. However, there remains a gap in understanding of how increasingly vulnerable children, even as young as 12 years old are being arrested, therefore it is important to increase engagement with the younger generation.

- Form a guiding framework that addresses complaints of students and families concerning Internet abuse. The absence of an official framework to which Palestinian Jerusalemites can rely on to deal with these cases is currently causing a state of fear and confusion among individuals who are subjected to blackmail, threats, or bullying.

- Coordinate with students, parents, and counselors at the same time, rather than in isolation from one another. Results show that all three groups emphasized that working with only one segment is not enough, as there is a need for integrated work with all groups.

- Dedicate part of the training to understand the effect of videogames on children and youth, and provide information about how to control video game time.

- Strategically, build the capacities of private institutions and school staff in the field of digital safety, as they are the only established framework in Jerusalem that can work with both students and parents.

- Train students on critical thinking skills. This will help them understand and analyze the news and enable them to evaluate the credibility of the sources.

- Conduct research that looks more closely at the role that gender may plan into the norms of children and youth's digital engagement online.

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