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Police Show Gaza Women How To Stay Safe Online

[Al-Monitor](#)

Rasha Abou Jalal



Palestinian women in Gaza attend a lecture on the danger of online extortion, Gaza City, Gaza, picture uploaded Aug. 23, 2017.

The Interior Ministry's security services in Gaza arrested a man accused of [luring women and girls into collaboration](#) with Israel after meeting them online and having romantic relationships with them, according to a Sept. 12 Facebook post by Gaza's all-female police unit.

The post stated that the man, in his 30s, confessed that he had been commissioned by an Israeli officer to lure [women from Gaza](#) into working with Israel by threatening to publish their pictures or recordings of romantic conversations.

Director of the unit in Gaza, Narimeen Adwan, told Al-Monitor, "This collaborator takes advantage of naive girls who chat with guys on social networking sites, and he tries to convince them that he is their long awaited bridegroom in order to exploit them and send all the information they provide to the enemy. Girls thus fall prey to the extortion of the [Israeli Security Agency]."

The announcement was part of the [Sahwa campaign](#) in partnership with the [Culture and Free Thought Association](#), which is funded by the European Union, to raise awareness of the dangers of online extortion and other [cybercrimes](#).

Speaking to Al-Monitor, Adwan said that the campaign offers a series of free awareness and educational events held in various venues such as schools, universities, mosques and

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nongovernmental organizations to teach girls the dangers of extortion and what to do in case of electronic blackmail. She added that the campaign targets not only young women but also parents and young men.

Adwan said in an Aug. 15 press release published by the Ministry of Interior and National Security that [9,065 women and girls](#) across Gaza have thus far attended these educational sessions.

Adwan told Al-Monitor that the campaign has several objectives, the most important of which is promoting a [hotline](#) for girls who fall prey to extortion and cybercrime. It also encourages them to trust the female police unit, which will ensure their blackmailer is investigated and prosecuted. After attending an [awareness lecture](#) put on by the female police unit and the Culture and Free Thought Association, Fatma al-Nunu, a 17-year-old student at the Ahmad Shawqi Secondary School for Girls in central Gaza, told Al-Monitor, "I heard things I hadn't heard before. Lecturers were talking about how girls can fall prey to online extortion and how we should protect ourselves from it. I learned how I should not trust strangers who talk to me on social networking websites and that I should not send my personal photos to anyone online so that they do not hack our accounts."

Nunu added, "I had thought that if a girl is blackmailed online, silence would be the best solution to avoid scandal, but I am now convinced that talking to the police and breaking the silence will help prevent other girls from falling into the trap."

Tahrir Ahmad, campaign coordinator for the Culture and Free Thought Association, told Al-Monitor that the association plays a central role in the campaign. It has distributed about 10,000 pamphlets containing information on avoiding extortion in various public places. So far, it has held about 50 workshops.

"We also held training sessions for journalists to urge them to write about online extortion for local media outlets and social networking sites. We produced a short film in June called '[A Call with a Stranger](#)' to raise girls' awareness about blackmail," Ahmad added.

Response has been strong, she said, and 22 complaints have been submitted to the women's unit since the campaign began on June 15. It's set to run until mid-October.

Adwan said that the police are dealing with cybercrime and extortion in a professional, legal and confidential manner so as not to harm the victims' reputations. The officers involved — most of them women — are not allowed to reveal the identities of the victims to any community member or reporter.

In this vein, Zuhair Malakha, who holds a master's degree in psychology from the Islamic University of Gaza, said that the poor conditions in the Gaza Strip caused by the [Israeli siege on Gaza](#) ongoing since 2007 have contributed significantly to the rise of online extortion and other cybercrimes.

"There are social and economic conditions that increase the chances of a girl falling victim to extortion, namely poverty, the [unemployment rate](#) that has reached 41.2% in Gaza or the need for marriage, money or love," Malakha told Al-Monitor.

Parliamentarian Jameela al-Shanti told Al-Monitor, "There are no laws that address these crimes and impose special penalties for them. This leads the extortionists to receive misdemeanor punishments such as imprisonment for several months" rather than the

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more severe sentences that would accompany a felony. Shanti said that such sanctions are not sufficient to fight electronic extortion and that legislation is needed to [protect women](#). She also pointed to the ongoing political division as a hindrance to efforts to pass such legislation.

The internal [Palestinian division](#), which has been ongoing since June 2007, has prevented Palestine's various factions from meeting in the Palestinian parliament, making it impossible to [enact new laws](#).