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Digital vicarious violence in Chile: another form of violence facilitated by technology?

Violencia vicaria digital en Chile: ¿otra violencia facilitada por tecnología?

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Abstract

In May 2023, Chile implemented the Law on Parental Responsibility and Effective Payment of Child Support Debts, registering 237,000 debtors (96% men). While the law addresses a historical debt, it generated hostility toward mothers and activists, extending to the digital sphere and their children. In this context, this study explored a possible new form of violence intertwined at the intersection of vicarious and digital violence, as well as its characteristics and the ways in which survivors resist it. Through focus groups with 10 mothers, qualitative data were analyzed with Atlas.ti, which not only corroborated the existence of this intersectional violence but also identified five expressions of digital vicarious violence: 1) Hypervigilance through technology, 2) Direct digital violence, 3) Use of technology to defame motherhood, 4) Digital relational violence, and 5) Manipulation of social media in favor of the aggressor. The results showed that the judicial system lacks the tools to address this violence and that it affects women's economic autonomy and relationship with technology. Although this study focused on Chile, it reflects a phenomenon that has been observed in various Spanish-speaking countries.

Keywords: *Vicarious violence, gender violence, digital violence, cyberbullying.*

Resumen

En mayo de 2023, Chile implementó la Ley de Responsabilidad Parental y Pago Efectivo de Deudas de Pensiones de Alimentos, registrando 237 mil deudores (96% hombres). Si bien la ley aborda una deuda histórica, generó hostilidad hacia madres y activistas, extendiéndose al ámbito digital y a sus hijos e hijas. En ese contexto, este estudio exploró una posible nueva violencia imbricada en la intersección entre la violencia vicaria y la digital, además de sus características y formas en que las sobrevivientes la resisten. Mediante grupos focales con 10 madres, se analizaron datos cualitativos con Atlas.ti y no solo se corroboró la existencia de esta violencia interseccional, sino que también se identificaron cinco expresiones de la violencia vicaria digital: 1) Hipervigilancia mediante tecnología, 2) Violencia digital directa, 3) Uso de tecnología para difamar la maternidad, 4) Violencia vincular digital y 5) Manipulación de redes sociales a favor del agresor. Los resultados evidenciaron que el sistema judicial carece de herramientas para enfrentarla y que esta violencia afecta la autonomía económica y relación de las mujeres con la tecnología. Si bien este estudio se centró en Chile, da cuenta de un fenómeno que se ha registrado en diversos países hispanohablantes.

Palabras clave: *Violencia vicaria, violencia de género, violencia digital, ciberacoso*

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Introduction

In May 2023, Chile's *Law on Parental Responsibility and the Effective Payment of Child Support Debts*, also known as the "Deadbeat Dad Law" (*Ley Papito Corazón*, Law 21,484, 2022), entered into force. This law addresses a historical problem of unpaid child support and prolonged debt owed to daughters and sons by debtor parents.

Among the measures established by the law is the creation of the *National Registry of Child Support Debtors*, which includes those parents who have failed to pay three consecutive monthly installments or five non-consecutive ones. The consequences of being entered into this registry include, among others: the withholding of bank loans requested by the debtor; the transfer of proceeds obtained by the debtor from the sale of real estate or vehicles to the person entitled to receive child support; the non-renewal of driver's licenses and passports; and the withholding of tax refunds. In addition, repeated non-payment of child support was established as a criminal offense of domestic violence (Gobierno de Chile, 2022).

One year after its entry into force (that is, by May 2024), 474,000 applications had already been filed, 172,000 asset seizures of debtors had been ordered, and 112,000 payment orders had been issued, amounting to approximately 830 billion Chilean pesos (Carrillo & Espinoza, 2024). As for the National Registry of Child Support Debtors, it currently includes more than 237,000 registered debtors, of whom 96% are men and 4% are women (Insular FM, 2024).

Behind this achievement were not only legislators and the State, but also women's organizations that fought for the rights of their daughters and sons and for dignified motherhood. Collectives such as Maternajes Judicializados, Resistencia Materna Chile, and Todas Juntas—among many other activists—struggled for this transformation of the judicial system to ensure the effective payment of child support. Unfortunately, however, this law has also generated a hostile environment toward those who demand the payment of child support, primarily mothers and activists (Todas Juntas Activismo, 2023).

As NGO Amaranta confirmed during the digital security workshop *"Seguras somos más fuertes"* held in July 2023, digital violence can be amplified at the intersection of gender-based violence and motherhood (Ananías & Luza, 2023). In this space—organized together with Maternajes Judicializados and aimed at single-mother families—activists and mothers reported suffering both intimate and non-intimate harassment through social media due to their activism or motherhood; harassment via the email addresses designated for communicating payments and visits; the installation of surveillance software on the devices of shared children during visits; and even organized harassment by fathers' organizations, including foundations.

Based on this workshop and the dialogues that emerged from it, NGO Amaranta identified what appeared to be a new form of digital gender-based violence, located precisely at the intersection of motherhood, activism, the judicial system, gender-based violence, and vicarious violence—one we decided to name *digital vicarious violence*.

Are we facing a new form of technology-facilitated gender-based violence? Before addressing this question, it is necessary to review the conceptual definitions that intersect in this term.

By gender-based violence we refer to "any act or conduct, based on gender, which causes death or physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, whether in the public or the private sphere," as declared by the Organization of American States (1995) in the Convention of Belém do Pará. This definition renders visible a historical social problem of humanity, denormalizes it, and removes the idea that attacks against women are isolated events; on the contrary, they occur within a continuum and within a patriarchal system.

As a United Nations report further explains, the forms and manifestations of gender-based violence vary according to social, economic, and political contexts; therefore, "the importance of some forms of violence may increase while others decrease as societies undergo demographic change, economic restructuring, and social and cultural movements. For example, new technologies may generate new forms

of violence, such as stalking via the Internet or mobile phones" (Naciones Unidas, 2006, pp. 41–42). For this reason, this multilateral body indicates that there is no exhaustive list of forms of violence against women and that States must recognize the changing nature of this type of violence and respond swiftly to its various manifestations.

Technologies are not alien to this context of inequality and gender-based violence. On the contrary, due to their technical specificities (such as anonymity and the blurring of geographic and temporal boundaries), they may even amplify it. For this reason, it is important to speak of *technology-facilitated gender-based violence* and not to perceive it as an isolated event or something that arises spontaneously on the Internet, but rather as a continuation of the violence that women and girls systematically experience (Ananías et al., 2023) across a variety of spaces: their homes, places of study or work, the streets, the justice system, and digital environments, to name just a few.

This type of violence is defined by the Mexican organization Luchadoras as "acts of gender-based violence committed, instigated, or aggravated through the use of technologies, social media platforms, or email" (Luchadoras, 2023). The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) adopts a similar definition and adds that it "is facilitated by the design and use of existing as well as new and emerging technologies (both hardware and software), and is constantly evolving" (UNFPA, 2024). Luchadoras further emphasize that this form of violence "causes psychological and emotional harm, reinforces prejudice, damages reputations, leads to economic losses, hinders our participation in public life, and can facilitate other forms of physical or sexual violence" (Luchadoras, 2023).

As can be inferred from this definition, although technology-facilitated gender-based violence occurs in digital spaces, it has emotional and physical consequences in the lives of survivors: the digital is real. For this reason, rapporteurships of the Organization of American States have urgently emphasized the obligation of States to "promote and guarantee, for example, the full participation of women in the knowledge society in order to ensure the integration and respect of human rights on the Internet. States must ensure women's participation in decision-making processes and encourage their contribution to shaping all spheres of the information society at the international, regional, and local levels" (Lanza, 2017, p. 28).

In parallel, and turning our attention back to the home, there are specific forms of gender-based violence that affect mothers and their children. As explained by the organization Save the Children:

> Children of women who are victims of gender-based violence are also victims of that violence and, as such, must be addressed and considered by the protection system. They are victims because they often suffer direct abuse, because they witness violence between their parents, and/or simply because they live in an environment of violent relationships and abuse of power […] they see and suffer an abused mother instead of a protective one. They see and suffer an abusive father instead of a protective one (Save the Children, 2008, p. 11).

Similarly, the Council of Europe adds that every child who witnesses the violence suffered by their mother is experiencing psychological abuse (Consejo de Europa, 2010), which constitutes a violation of children's rights.

In this context, Spanish clinical psychologist and forensic expert Sonia Vaccaro went further and, after analyzing specific forms of violence emerging in the context of the end of a relationship or partnership, coined the concept of *vicarious violence*. She defines it as "a form of gender-based violence that uses daughters and sons as a means to continue the abuse and violence against the woman. Sometimes this violence is exercised against another person significant to her, and may even extend to harming pets. The ultimate goal is to harm the woman, to strike her where it hurts the most" (Vaccaro, 2021, p. 11), adding that its most extreme form is the murder of daughters and sons in order to irreversibly damage the victim.

This form of violence generally emerges when laws and the justice system place obstacles in the way of a man's attempt to harm the woman he considers his property, leading him to redirect his attacks toward their children. As Vaccaro explains:

> Every day we see how men who, during marriage, neither cared for nor showed interest in their children, at the time of divorce request joint custody—and some even request sole custody—solely in their desire to maintain contact with the woman in order to retain control and continue exercising power, now through the children (Vaccaro, 2021, p. 10).

Among the forms this violence may take are negligence in caregiving, failure to return children on time, speaking negatively about the mother in front of them, persuading them to monitor or insult their mother, and escalation to physical and/or sexual abuse and even murder, as summarized by the investigation of journalist Miriam Ruiz Salmerón (2023). Meanwhile, academics Bárbara Jalife and Yaranay López Angulo (2022) identified that vicarious violence may take direct or indirect forms.

Indirect vicarious violence refers to the harm inflicted on children and young people by witnessing aggression exercised by one parent against the mother, causing them to feel defenseless; this typically occurs during the handover or return of children and adolescents. Direct victimization refers to all forms of abuse exercised directly against the child or adolescent. The study identified seven such forms: psychological violence, physical violence, sexual violence, economic violence, judicial violence, neglect or abandonment, and relational violence (Jalife & López Angulo, 2022).

Judicial and relational violence are probably the most recent. Judicial violence is described as "exposing children and adolescents to multiple expert assessments and judicial proceedings; having them interviewed by non-experts who revictimize the child; and repeated custody or rights violation lawsuits filed against the mother" (Jalife & López Angulo, 2022, p. 15). Overall, the study characterizes the State as a bureaucratic, revictimizing, and largely ineffective entity in protecting victims. Relational violence, meanwhile, includes "speaking negatively about the mother and the maternal family, preventing contact with the mother during visits, failing to return the child, accusing the mother of abandonment, and requesting custody" (Jalife & López Angulo, 2022).

It is important to note that violence can also be exercised through pseudoscientific theories, such as *Parental Alienation Syndrome*, proposed by Richard A. Gardner. In brief, this theory "claims that the mother manipulates her children's perceptions in order to generate aversion toward the abusive father." However, this theory lacks scientific support and furthermore falls into "one of the stereotypes based on the quintessential gender construct: the inherent madness and wickedness of women" (Ruiz Salmerón, 2023, p. 15). It is through this theory—frequently invoked in courts—that continued visitation and shared custody are demanded, even when multiple forms of violence are occurring.

It is within this context and theoretical framework that the following questions arise: Are we facing a new form of violence embedded at the intersection of gender, vicarious violence, and technology? Can it be defined as *digital vicarious violence*? What specific characteristics does it have? How does it manifest? How do these women respond to it? And how should it be addressed by the State and by communities?

The main objective of this research was to corroborate the existence of this new form of technology-facilitated gender-based violence. The specific objectives included: defining and characterizing this violence; describing its forms of expression; examining resistance strategies developed by affected women; and evaluating institutional responses.

Methodology

To address these questions, the study was conducted from a gender perspective and within the framework of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1995). The research tool consisted of applying a semi-structured discussion guide to focus groups composed of mothers who are survivors of vicarious violence, activists for motherhood and the rights of children and adolescents (NNA), and women and mothers in

general from different regions of Chile. The qualitative data obtained were analyzed using Atlas.ti software.

It is important to note that although there was a high number of requests to participate in the study (88 responses to the registration form), only 10 participants could ultimately be interviewed. The very situation of vicarious violence they were experiencing, together with the burden of domestic and care work, prevented many women from being able to connect. In addition, requests were received from women in other countries who wished to participate, suggesting that this is a widespread phenomenon.

Ultimately, two focus groups were conducted with a total of nine participants; additionally, one participant submitted her responses in written form via email, resulting in a total of 10 research participants. The sample is therefore non-probabilistic. All 10 women reside in Chile, represent a diversity of ages and professions or occupations, and one of them is a migrant. The transcripts were analyzed using six analytical codes, detailed below:

1. Experiences of vicarious violence/"traditional" gender-based violence
2. Experiences of digital violence
3. Intersection of vicarious violence and digital violence
4. Economic violence
5. Relationship with technology
6. Recommendations for change

With regard to ethical considerations, first, it is important to emphasize that this research emerged from the expressed needs and requests of organizations of women who are survivors of vicarious violence and/or excessive judicialization. Second, prior to applying the discussion guide to the focus groups, it was reviewed by the organization Maternajes Judicializados to ensure that it was not revictimizing and that it was appropriate to the context of women experiencing these forms of violence; thus, these women are also part of the methodology—although, for security reasons, they were not individually identified by name. Finally, each participant signed an informed consent form explaining that this was a study conducted by NGO Amaranta, outlining its objectives and the personal data protection policy. There was also a commitment to return the results to the organizations in the form of a policy brief (Ananías Soto et al., 2025).

Participants signed informed consent forms authorizing the recording of the focus groups under data protection policies, the analysis of the material, and the publication of the report. They were also provided in advance with the questions to be discussed during the focus group, with the explicit option to withdraw from the space at any time should they experience any form of secondary victimization.

Below, the in-depth analysis is presented, along with excerpts from participants' testimonies. The original transcripts will not be shared in any format, as they contain details that could allow for the identification of participants, thereby amplifying the violence.

While it is acknowledged that there are women who are child support debtors and/or who may exercise domestic violence, this represents a significantly smaller proportion (in 2024, only 4% of child support debtors in Chile were women). For this reason, the researchers chose to focus their efforts on the most urgent situation and the largest affected population: women experiencing violence perpetrated by a former male partner who is a child support debtor.

Results

Experiences of Vicarious Violence

The initial analysis yielded 46 testimonies of "traditional" vicarious violence. This violence manifested in various forms, but one of the most frequent was judicial violence, followed by other expressions such as relational violence, psychological violence, and negligence.

Judicial vicarious violence was first expressed through over-judicialization. One of the ways in which mothers and their children were targeted was by subjecting them to constant complaints and legal proceedings, many of which were ultimately dismissed but nevertheless produced psychological harm, economic strain, and revictimization:

> "I got divorced six years ago, but I've spent those years in court with 13 cases initiated by my ex-husband: protective measures,

> appeals. Even though he no longer has physical access, he uses this psychological harassment through institutions, because as long as he has money, he can keep filing lawsuits."
>
> "I've been in Family Court for almost three years, and I'm struck by the constant mistreatment of women. It's as if you were there by choice; they're constantly forcing you to reach agreements."
>
> "In the end, you're forced to maintain a relationship with this man because you have an obligation toward him; because the court requires you to keep a communication channel open, when in cases of gender-based violence there should be zero contact."

This category also includes the criminal prosecution of a mother who fled from another country with her children through an unauthorized border crossing in order to escape her aggressor. Although she attempted to regularize her situation, she was charged with kidnapping and abuse:

> "I fled from Argentina [to Chile] through an unauthorized crossing because I had many problems. After separating due to physical violence, I moved to another town, and a group of women—whom I barely knew—protected us greatly [...] I had to appear at a hearing here in Chile for kidnapping, because for those matters the courts are very fast. But when I arrived in Chile and reported myself, no one took us into account."

It was also identified that many of these cases stemmed from court-ordered reunification processes between children and their father, despite documented prior episodes of violence, whether against the mother or against the children themselves:

> "The father was violent with my son during the summer. My son came back shattered—within a month he destroyed him emotionally. I reported it to the PPF program and filed a complaint, but the court did not issue a definitive ruling; it simply stated that my son could decide whether or not to see his father [...] my son doesn't want to see him; it's been two years without seeing him, without answering calls or video calls [...] and now the court is holding a hearing about reunification."

In addition, vicarious violence was deepened by gender stereotypes and biases within the judicial system. Judges and lawyers who minimized violence, questioned women's roles as mothers, abandoned cases, or subjected them to excessive expert evaluations were identified in participants' testimonies:

> "On one occasion, I decided to leave that house because I felt my life was at risk. I spoke with a technical advisor at the Court and told her I felt in danger and didn't know if my son would be safe with him. And she said, 'Just because he's bad to you doesn't mean he's a bad father. And besides, you already forgave him once. Maybe you'll work things out again.' I told her, 'But he threatened me,' and they seemed unable to understand. They said, 'If you forgave him once, you can forgive him again, and that doesn't mean he's violent toward you. He adores the children.'"

Beyond Family Courts, the National Service for Women and Gender Equity and the Focused Prevention Programs (PPF) for children and adolescents whose rights have been violated were also mentioned. Another institution frequently linked to this type of violence was the educational system. In some cases, schools served as a space of support for mothers and their children; in others, they became a weapon against them:

> "When he enrolled my daughter in kindergarten, he listed himself as the legal guardian, and also my ex-mother-in-law, but not me. That's when a series of forms of violence began, including xenophobia [...] When I went back to pick her up [after resolving my financial situation], I went to

> the kindergarten and the teacher told me, 'No, I can't release your daughter to you because you're not the legal guardian.' And I said, 'How can that be? I'm her mother.' He was recording me and said, 'We're going to mediation.' I became so upset that I pushed him, they called the police, and I was taken into custody."

Finally, cases were identified in which violence was exercised through neglect in the care of children:

> "My son came back in bad shape after the summer, after returning from vacation with his father. He came back with depression—depressive symptoms, insomnia, loss of bladder control, anxiety—everything you can imagine."

Experiences of Digital Violence

The study also explored experiences of digital violence that directly affected the women. The number of codes in this category was considerably smaller (seven in total)—not because digital violence was absent from their lives, but because it most commonly appeared interwoven with vicarious violence.

This finding is consistent with what is known about technology-facilitated gender-based violence, which is characterized by its personalized nature and by targeting, among many other factors, victims' relationships and social environments. As a result, women are not attacked solely as individual subjects, but through what they themselves define as *"what hurts me the most"*: their daughters and sons.

The testimonies recorded in this category were grouped into three main forms of attack: (1) *funas* (public shaming or denunciation on social media, similar to *escrache*), which often affected women's entrepreneurial activities or access to employment; (2) digital control while still in the relationship; and (3) hacking of devices or digital platforms:

> "One night I woke up and saw his finger on my phone—he was unlocking my phone to read my messages."
>
> "He has also hired hackers. Once he attacked my bank account—it was terrifying."
>
> "I discovered that he had hacked my email about three years later. Emails from friends were being forwarded to him to be used as evidence for a fault-based divorce." (*Fault-based divorce: a legal mechanism that allows the dissolution of a marriage when one spouse has committed a serious breach that makes continued cohabitation untenable. In this case, he attempted to accuse her of infidelity.*)
>
> "He publicly shamed me on his account, and it's still there, in total impunity."
>
> "When we had just separated, I realized on my laptop that he had searched all the places I had been using Google Maps. I don't know how he did it. And I know it was because he wanted to accuse me in a fault-based divorce."

The Intersection: Digital Vicarious Violence

One of the main questions guiding this research was whether a new form of technology-facilitated gender-based violence exists at the intersection of vicarious violence and digital violence. After identifying 53 codes corresponding to experiences of this type of violence, the hypothesis is confirmed, and it can be established that digital vicarious violence does exist, as illustrated in Figure 1.

By analyzing the 10 testimonies, it was possible to characterize the diversity of ways in which this form of violence manifests. These include:

- Hypervigilance of survivors of violence, encompassing their lives and daily activities through multiple technologies. Strategies used by aggressors include monitoring social media via third parties or fake accounts; sending emails or messages that must be answered immediately; installing spyware and enforcing geolocation, among others.
- Use of technologies—some mandated by the courts—to perpetrate violence, particularly

compulsory video calls, followed by emails designated for coordinating visits.

- Use of technologies to obtain "evidence" that women are "bad mothers", thereby sustaining over-judicialization. This includes photographs, voice recordings, videos, and screenshots taken from social media.
- Technology-facilitated relational violence, consisting of sporadic appearances in children's lives through digital means, followed by renewed withdrawal of contact.

Use of social media to alter and seize control of the narrative in the aggressor's favor, generally through personal and professional defamation, as well as the construction of a discourse portraying the aggressor as a "self-sacrificing and concerned father."

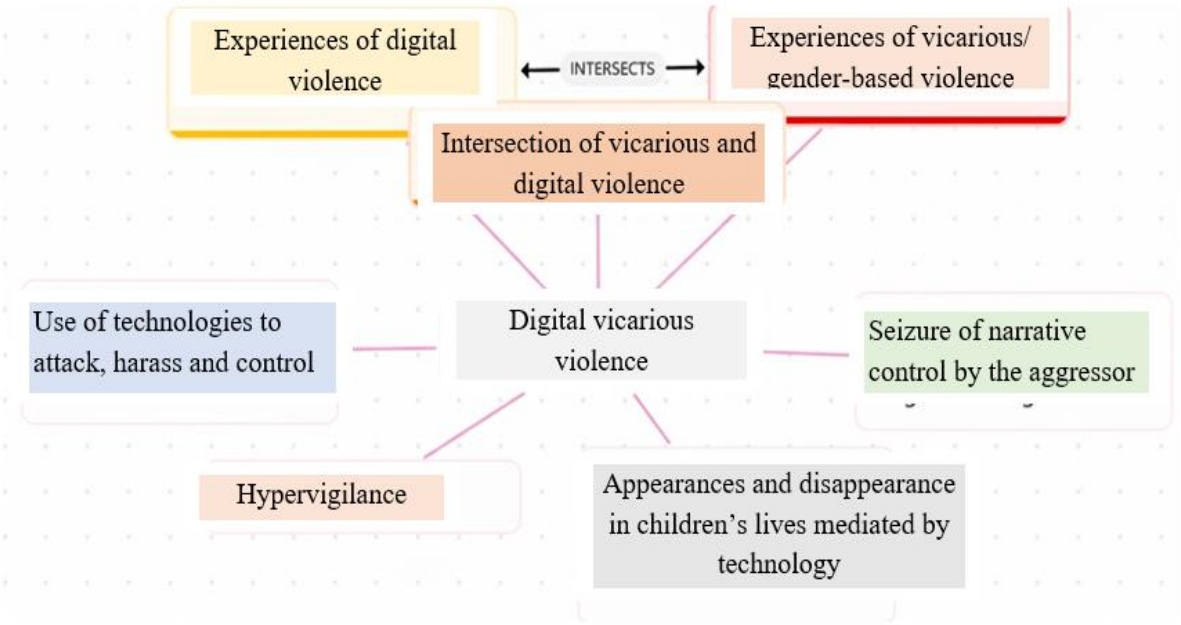

Figure 1. The existence of digital vicarious violence and its main forms of expression is established.

Regarding technology-facilitated hypervigilance, this may occur during children's visits as well as remotely, and ranges from the use of specialized surveillance software to more "rudimentary" actions, such as redirecting emails, changing WhatsApp backup email addresses to that of the aggressor, placing a finger on a fingerprint reader to unlock a device, or using fake accounts or third parties to monitor women's social media activity:

> "One day I realized that my phone was acting strange—it turned out he had installed something like a mirror. My WhatsApp messages were being read on other devices. I don't know the name of the software, and I found out when, in the lawsuit, he responded with decontextualized screenshots of things."

> "We had to file a motion because we caught him again doing the same thing with my eldest daughter [unlocking her phone with her fingerprint while she was asleep]. He did it to read messages, to see what we talked about."

> "My other son had a birthday and I uploaded a few photos to WhatsApp. I didn't do anything special because we were going through this process of not seeing my daughter […] The mistake was that I hadn't removed one of his relatives—I hadn't blocked her from my status updates. So when he responded to the lawsuit, he said, 'I have evidence that she's happy without the girl,' and it was those photos."

This expression of digital vicarious violence was closely linked to the use of technologies for harassment, control, and intimidation. The tools most frequently mentioned were the same mandatory video calls ordered by courts to maintain contact with children, which survivors identified as a major source of harm. In other cases, aggressors used the phone number or email address designated for coordinating visits:

> "I was supposed to hand over the children on Sunday at 6:00 p.m., and he would send me emails all Saturday night—21 emails, 20 emails, 15 emails. Many times it was, 'If you don't respond right now, it means you don't love the children; this is your last chance.' Obviously, I didn't read them. Eventually it escalated so much that I managed to get [the court] to cut off all communication."

> "I've had a phone for my eldest daughter since we separated. When she didn't answer, he would call me, and sometimes I explained that I wasn't with her. And he would keep going: 'But where are you? Why aren't you with the girls at 7 in the evening?' 'Because I'm at work,' I replied. And afterward I thought, 'Why do I have to explain where I am if we no longer have anything to do with each other?'"

> "I experienced a lot of violence through video calls that the father of my children had with them for two years straight, Monday through Sunday. It was like torture. I knew that every day at 6:00 p.m. that call would come, and that it could be harmful. So I had to find an environment where 'okay, child, go to your room so you can talk calmly.' And when certain rules that he believed were correct weren't followed, he took them to court."

It was also common for aggressors to use technologies to gather alleged evidence of negligent motherhood:

> "The father takes photos. He has a photo album of things like flea bites, her arriving dirty, tangled hair, pants that were too short. He always finds something wrong. Once he emailed me saying that he had documented all the 'negligence' I had committed with our daughter."

> "Once the kindergarten's page uploaded a photo. This was during the pandemic, when classes had resumed here and the children weren't wearing masks. He took that photo and submitted it to the court, claiming that everyone was endangering the child because there was a photo from the kindergarten where the child wasn't wearing a mask. That level."

> "When we went to another hearing, because he kept suing me, he got someone—or fake profiles—to view my stories and brought them printed."

Another issue identified by mothers who survived digital vicarious violence was the use of social media and other technologies to reshape the narrative in the aggressor's favor:

> "I never complain about him; you never speak badly about the children's father. But when I say something, people tell me, 'Oh, but he's such a good father, he always posts such lovely photos on Instagram.' And they're photos he stole from my account. That's how they are: they tell stories, and from the outside they look different. It's like they use social media in their favor and push you out of those spaces."

> "I'm struck by how they use social media to their advantage, socially speaking, because beyond one's close circle that knows the truth, from the outside the story is told in a completely different way. I find it all sinister."

> "My ex-partner, who is my son's father, went so far as to use social media to defame me, saying that I had kidnapped

> our child and offering a 'reward' for information. This was shared among family and friends, exposing me and generating constant harassment."
>
> "He would come to drop off my son, and I would see how he started insulting me, shouting, becoming very violent, and suddenly I realized that his partner was recording me. Clearly, they were looking for some form of evidence to file a complaint using digital means."

It should be noted that digital vicarious violence can also be exercised by the courts themselves, through over-judicialization, information overload, and revictimizing processes that are intertwined with digital technologies:

> "You get a notification by email saying that you have to submit this or that. You log into the Virtual Judicial Office website and see everything that's uploaded there, and it's extremely confusing at first. I didn't understand anything; my stomach tightened, it made me feel really bad when that email arrived […] I would see that the email was from the Family Court, see the sender, and I'd have a panic attack […] I had to read it 80 times to understand it—it was very stressful."

In this sense, it becomes necessary to rethink the digital platforms that mediate these situations of violence, so that their very use does not become stressful or revictimizing for complainants, especially those who are survivors of gender-based violence.

Impacts on Economic Autonomy

Although identifying economic violence was not an explicit objective of the study, it emerged repeatedly in conversations with survivors. On the one hand, it appeared in discussions of over-judicialization, which, in addition to psychological harm, also took a significant toll on survivors' finances:

> "In the end, the fact that he has economic resources is extremely frustrating. Many times, I said in hearings, 'You know what? I'm exhausted, I don't have any more money, I work extra hours to pay lawyers, I don't even see my children,' and he was like, 'Then I'll see them.' And the judge would say, 'We're sorry, we know it's unviable for him to be requesting a change in the visitation regime to fifty-fifty when his visits are suspended due to violence. For us it's also absurd. But as long as a citizen has the ability to pay for legal representation and is not legally incapacitated, he can file complaints and lawsuits as many times as he wants.' So, I had to pay for legal defense for every single case…"

In addition, some aggressors attempted to evade child support payments by arguing that their former partners earned enough income:

> "I'm a caregiver for a child with a disability, so in formal jobs I end up getting fired because I have to leave all the time to take care of my daughter. So I've built other small businesses, and when I post them on social media, he takes screenshots and submits them to the court documents, saying that I'm raking in money."
>
> "I posted that I was selling shoes and he took screenshots—I don't know how, or he found me on Mercado Libre—and said, 'I want a reduction in child support because she's profiting from this, and this was part of the marriage.'"

On the other hand, aggressors frequently used social media itself to defame women, and when they could not access or attack their personal profiles, they targeted their entrepreneurial activities:

> "It's important to talk about entrepreneurship. Many women in this same situation [of vicarious violence] have to start businesses on social media. But at the same time, you can't really use them, because everything you say or post can be used against you. I've even had to give instructions to my parents, because I use

social media for my profession—although less and less."

"We have colleagues whose business accounts get hacked. Or they can't have two phones—one for work and one for personal life—and everything gets mixed together [with episodes of violence]. That also undermines economic autonomy."

"I remembered that I also had a small business. I ultimately decided not to continue with it because I saw how my ex-husband's current partner was watching my stories."

Moreover, public shaming and defamation in digital spaces also affected their search for formal employment:

"I've been looking for a job recently, and I was afraid. I go back to those spaces because I've always worked in the judicial field. And I was afraid that someone might see my name in a public shaming post."

"We were married for two or three years, and I used to think, 'Let him say whatever he wants, I don't care.' But at some point I realized that it started working against me, even at work. Because we move in the same professional field, there aren't many alternative spaces. And I know that the environment is contaminated against me."

All these expressions of economic violence, which stem from vicarious and digital violence, place women's economic autonomy at serious risk.

Impacts on the Relationship with Technology

On June 11, 2011, the United Nations declared access to the Internet a universal right, recognizing that it enables access to a wide range of human rights, from freedom of expression to access to health and education. Later, on July 4, 2018, this same multilateral body adopted a resolution on human rights on the Internet, aimed at ensuring their promotion in digital spaces. Against this backdrop, it is particularly concerning to observe that survivors' relationships with technology are affected, shaped, and constrained by digital vicarious violence.

On the one hand, several interviewees stated that the Internet and social media have been important resources for finding support from other mothers going through similar experiences, as well as for accessing advice or useful information for their daily routines; a few also reported being immune to comments in these spaces. However, the vast majority reported posting and expressing opinions less frequently and having progressively fewer online contacts, as they felt constantly monitored, scrutinized, and judged—especially since their posts had even been used in court proceedings:

"For over a year now, it's almost like I don't exist on Instagram. My WhatsApp status is the same, because everything was used against me."

"The Internet is useful, but it has also become a space where my motherhood has been unfairly attacked, which has caused me a lot of pain. In general, I prefer to keep a more private profile. I don't usually comment on news or local issues because I worry about how my words might be misinterpreted."

"Right now, I'm afraid to use social media. Not to post anything, not to write anything. I've even changed all my passwords because I'm afraid of being hacked, because he knows a lot about technology, and that really scares me."

"It's a very uncomfortable relationship with social media, because I feel I can't express everything I'd like to. I feel everything can be monitored, and little by little I keep cutting back, pruning my networks, my contact tree."

"I can't express everything I want to express, because everything gets judged."

"I'm afraid of it. And that shows that I'm also experiencing violence, because I have to be extremely cautious about what I post."

These accounts demonstrate how digital vicarious violence has multidimensional effects on the lives of victims and survivors, progressively restricting rights ranging from economic autonomy—discussed in the previous subsection—to freedom of expression and the ability to build safe networks and communities, as summarized in Figure 2.

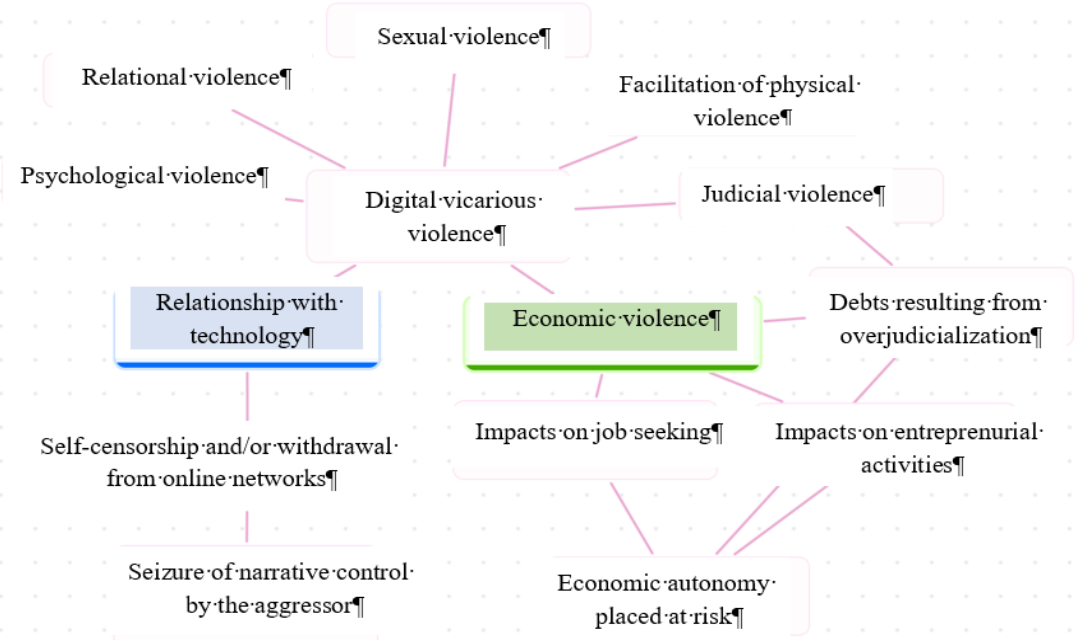

Figure 2. Effects of digital vicarious violence on the lives of survivors and victims.

Reflections and Recommendations from Survivors

On the one hand, the dialogue and exchange of experiences among participants fostered a series of reflections on the violence they were experiencing, which are presented in this section. In parallel, they were also asked for their own recommendations to authorities, which are incorporated into the closing of this report.

One of the reflections that emerged repeatedly in both focus groups was the striking similarity among their experiences of digital vicarious violence, as if the same strategies were systematically being used to attack them:

> "I was moved listening to them because [the way they perpetrate violence] is like a manual, like a recipe. It's like reading a recipe for making a stew. The difference is that the food tastes good and you enjoy it. This doesn't."

> "It surprises me to hear you both. How this is so common among us, and how much we normalize it. Just yesterday I was talking to my current sister-in-law and she went through the same thing."

This was accompanied by conversations about how difficult it is to denormalize and render visible these forms of violence—forms that, at times, do not even have a name within the courts themselves:

> "I'm from a generation that has a higher tolerance for violence, I think. Being controlled feels normal […] my daughter would tell me, 'This is digital violence, what they're doing to us, and we can't let it slide,' and I would say, 'Oh, let it go, that's just how your dad is, he's odd.' And I still feel like I'm overreacting."

> "It took me seven years to understand that I didn't have to explain myself."

More broadly, there is fear, anguish, and disappointment regarding the actions of the courts and other judicial entities, which end up revictimizing them and affecting both their own quality of life and that of their children:

> "I feel like I have to confront the court, because I see it as the enemy. It's horrifying."
>
> "The judicial system is violent when one party has money and the other is in a different position."
>
> "I return to this premise that Bárbara Porter illustrates so well: we go to court with one problem and come back with 234 problems."

Another important reflection concerned how constant exposure to violence affects women at a profound psychological and emotional level, impacting their capacity to parent:

> "Living with violence also affects your parenting abilities. I could be a better mother, I could be more available, happier, more fulfilled—but I'm completely overwhelmed, and it has been very hard to come to terms with the fact that this motherhood I desired so much has turned into my greatest nightmare."

Regarding their recommendations for transforming this scenario, the interviewees primarily mentioned the following:

- Effective incorporation of a gender perspective into judicial practice, including the denormalization and proper recognition of violence, especially psychological and digital violence.
- Specialized training in vicarious violence and digital violence for professionals working within the judiciary, with particular emphasis on judges, lawyers, and guardians *ad litem*. In the case of the latter, consideration should be given to having them work in pairs rather than as a single representative.
- Creation of mechanisms to prevent over-judicialization, as well as responses when it is detected that an individual is initiating legal actions based on false information or with harmful intent.
- Community education and awareness-raising regarding vicarious and digital violence, as well as greater public understanding of how the judicial system—especially the Family Court system—functions.
- Safe spaces for accessing legal advice and psychological support (some participants reported positive experiences with the National Service for Women and Gender Equity, while others did not).

  Support programs that address psychological, digital, and economic violence experienced by mothers.

Discussion

This study establishes the existence of a new form of digital violence—digital vicarious violence—located at the intersection of technology-facilitated gender-based violence and offline vicarious violence previously documented by experts such as Sonia Vaccaro. This finding illustrates how problems inherent to our societies—inequality and gender-based violence—intersect with technologies—which enable immediacy, the blurring of geographical boundaries, virality, and anonymity—thereby amplifying violence, particularly against historically marginalized groups, such as women who mother.

As with other forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, these attacks are highly personalized, seeking to "hurt where it hurts the most." Indeed, most of the digital attacks experienced by mothers target their motherhood itself—which explains why only seven codes of digital violence directed exclusively at them were identified. Moreover, in all cases there had been prior gender-based violence within the relationship; thus, this violence becomes a strategy to continue the abuse after the sexual and affective bond has been severed, redirecting attacks toward what causes the greatest harm: women's relationships with their children and their well-being. In this way,

technology becomes the tool through which aggressors erase physical distance.

Based on the testimonies, five forms through which digital vicarious violence manifests were identified:

1. Hypervigilance of survivors through the use of technologies.
2. Direct violence mediated by technologies.
3. Use of technologies to gather “evidence” of “bad” or “incorrect” motherhood.
4. Relational violence exercised through technologies.
5. Use of social media to reshape narratives in the aggressor’s favor.

These forms of violence are enacted through both rudimentary techniques—such as email forwarding, unlocking devices using the fingerprint of a sleeping person, or using third parties to monitor social media—and more advanced methods, including hacking bank accounts and email addresses or installing surveillance software.

Overall, this violence tends to become entangled with the judicial system itself, transforming stories, posts, and photographs into weapons used against survivors. Several participants had undergone over-judicialization, legal information overload, and revictimizing processes.

Another relevant finding of this study is that this violence can also undermine women’s economic autonomy in multiple ways, highlighting the multidimensional impacts it has on the lives of women and their children.

Finally, we underscore that women experiencing this form of violence report withdrawing from online networks and silencing their voices, which isolates them and prevents the exercise of other rights, such as freedom of expression. They reported feeling constantly monitored, scrutinized, and judged.

Although this study was situated in Chile—including one case involving cross-border movement from Argentina and one participant of Venezuelan nationality—when the call for participation in the focus groups was disseminated, dozens of requests were received from countries such as Colombia, Mexico, and Spain. This suggests that digital vicarious violence is a transnational phenomenon. To cite just one public and popular-culture case, this dynamic is reflected in the situation of Argentine urban music singer-songwriter Cazzu, who has reportedly experienced this violence at the hands of her ex-partner, Mexican singer Christian Nodal. Despite not being present in the life of their shared daughter, Inti, he has allegedly used legal custody proceedings and the denial of travel permissions as mechanisms of control and violence (Rojas, 2025). The breadth of this phenomenon poses challenges—particularly in terms of funding—for future research.

In this context, and drawing directly on the reflections and recommendations raised by survivors and victims of digital vicarious violence, we recommend that the State of Chile:

1. Provide ongoing training for judicial system workers and professionals in a gender perspective, with an emphasis on reducing sexist bias.
2. Advance laws and public policies addressing vicarious violence and digital violence, as both currently remain in a legal vacuum.
3. Incorporate education and awareness-raising on digital and vicarious violence within both the judicial system and police forces, even in the absence of specific legislation.
4. Create mechanisms to prevent over-judicialization of mothers who have survived gender-based violence, enabling early detection of vicarious violence.
5. Improve existing spaces where women survivors of gender-based violence can access legal advice and psychological support, as SERNAMEG has become insufficient.
6. Incorporate comprehensive, non-sexist sexual education across the Chilean education system, to move toward greater equity in care work and the eradication of gender-based violence.

7. Expedite restraining and no-contact orders during judicial proceedings under the Domestic Violence Law No. 20,066 (2024), ensuring that they also cover digital communication, or under the Law to Prevent, Sanction, and Eradicate Violence Against Women on the Basis of Gender No. 21,675 (2024).
8. Create monitored communication platforms between parents and children where necessary, or outsource these services to third parties.

Additionally, given the ongoing intersections between violence and technology that continue to generate new forms of attack, a visual support resource entitled *"The Mountain of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence"* (Luza et al., 2025) was developed. Its purpose is to make visible the different forms and interconnections that this type of violence can take. While it is neither an exhaustive nor a closed list, it constitutes an initial didactic approach to socializing the issue, as shown in Figure 3.

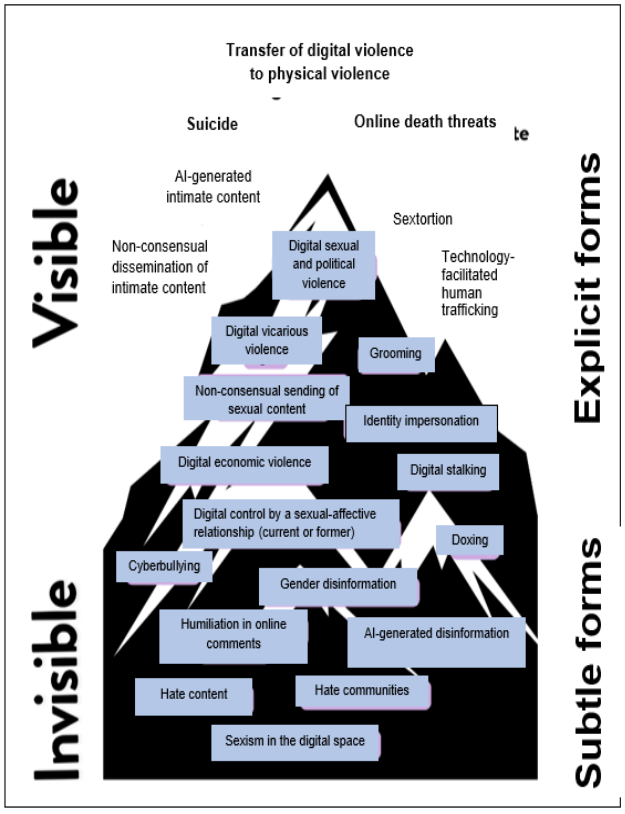

Figure 3. The Mountain of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence. Designed by Valentina Luza, with edits and contributions by Cecilia Ananías, Karen Vergara, and Ana Carrillo.

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Author contributions

Cecilia Ananías was responsible for the project. She developed the core bibliographic discussion, proposed the methodological guide, conducted one of the focus groups, and carried out the qualitative analysis of the data in Atlas.ti, producing the main results and conclusions. ananiascecilia@gmail.com

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Data availability

The raw research data are not available due to the sensitive nature of the topic addressed and in order to safeguard the safety of survivors and victims.

Peer review comments

This article underwent an anonymous peer review process, in accordance with the journal's editorial transparency policy. The reviewers, who participated anonymously in this process, gave their consent for the publication of the comments issued during the review.

Reviewer comment 1: The article constitutes an original and relevant contribution by conceptualizing digital vicarious violence as a new form of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, providing empirical evidence from Chile. The text is methodologically and theoretically sound and offers useful recommendations for the judicial field and public policy. Recommendation: Accept for publication, with the suggestion of including a more explicit ethical statement.

Reviewer comment 2: The article meets the requirements established by the journal for

publication. However, some aspects could be improved: it is suggested to avoid the use of “ibid.” in citations and to replace expressions such as “no date, web” with the abbreviation “n.d.” in accordance with APA standards. In the methodology section, it is recommended to follow APA numbering rules: write numbers from zero to nine in words and use Arabic numerals from 10 onwards. It is also suggested to maintain third-person writing to enhance academic formality. Recommendation: Publish the article once the suggested corrections have been incorporated.

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