

The following report answers two questions: What are some of the most prominent forms of extreme violence and discrimination that women face because they are mothers? And what is the relationship between violence against mothers and violence against their children, including girls, and vice versa?

Digital vicarious violence in Chile: intertwining and amplification of violence against mothers

Original research: <https://amarantas.org/2025/02/17/violencia-vicaria-digital-otra-forma-de-violencia-de-genero-facilitada-por-tecnologia/>

Authors: Cecilia Ananías, Karen Vergara and Valentina Luza
Amaranta NGO

In May 2023, the **Law on Parental Responsibility and Effective Payment of Child Support Debts** (Library of the National Congress of Chile, 2022) ¹, also known as the “Papito Corazón Law,” came into effect in Chile. This law addressed a long-standing issue of unpaid child support and prolonged debt owed to children by delinquent parents.

Among the measures included in the legislation was the creation of the **National Registry of Child Support Debtors**, which includes parents who have failed to pay three consecutive monthly payments or five non-consecutive monthly payments. The consequences of being listed in this registry include: the withholding of bank loans requested by the debtor, the transfer of the debtor's profits from the sale of their property or vehicle to the person owing child support, the non-renewal of driver's licenses and passports, and the withholding of tax refunds, among others. Furthermore, the repeated failure to pay child support was established as a crime of domestic violence (Government of Chile, 2022) ².

As of May 2025, the registry had over 270,000 registered individuals, 96% of whom were men, affecting more than 385,000 children and adolescents. However, over 163,000 debtors have already settled their debts or reached legal agreements, representing 53% of the total registered. As a result, Family Courts have already ordered the payment of 2,496,135,793,791 Chilean pesos (La Hora, 2025) ³, equivalent to approximately US\$2.755 million.

Behind this achievement were not only legislators and the State, but also women's organizations fighting for the rights of their children and for dignified motherhood. Collectives such as Maternajes Judicializados, Resistencia Materna Chile, and Todas Juntas—among

¹ Library of the National Congress of Chile (August 31, 2022). Law 21.484. Parental responsibility and effective payment of child support debts. BCN.

² Government of Chile (2022). Learn about the scope of the National Registry of Child Support Debtors, which comes into effect in November. Gob.cl. <https://www.gob.cl/noticias/conozca-los-alcances-del-registro-nacional-de-deudores-de-pensiones-de-alimentos-que-entra-en-vigencia-en-noviembre/>

³ Paredes, G. (May 20, 2025). "Daddy Heart" Law turns two with record figures: more than 50% of those registered have paid or agreed to a settlement on their debt. La Hora: <https://lahora.cl/cronica/2025/05/20/ley-papito-corazon-cumple-dos-anos-con-cifras-historicas-mas-del-50-de-los-inscritos-han-pagado-o-acordado-su-deuda/>

many other activists—fought for this transformation in the judicial system that would allow for the effective payment of child support. But unfortunately, this law has also created a hostile environment for those demanding child support payments, primarily mothers and activists.

Many activists reported experiencing intimate and non-intimate harassment through social media due to their activism or motherhood at a workshop organized by the NGO Amaranta. This included harassment via email, the use of designated payment and visitation notifications, the installation of surveillance software on their children's devices during visits, and even organized harassment by **parent organizations**, including foundations. Amaranta thus identified what appeared to be a **new form of digital gender-based violence** at the intersection of motherhood, activism, the judicial system, and vicarious violence, tentatively termed "**digital vicarious violence.**"

Spanish clinical psychologist and forensic expert, Sonia Vaccaro, defines **vicarious violence**—the traditional one— as "a form of gender violence that uses children as a means to continue the abuse and violence against the woman. Sometimes, this violence is exerted on another person significant to her, even going so far as to harm pets. The ultimate goal is to harm the woman, to strike her where it hurts the most" (2021, p. 11) ⁴, adding that its most extreme form is the murder of children, seeking to irreversibly harm the victim.

Among the forms this form of violence can take are: being negligent with care, not returning the children on time, speaking badly of the mother in front of them, convincing them to watch over the mother or to insult her, and this can escalate to physical and/or sexual aggression and murder, as summarized in the research of journalist Miriam Ruiz Salmerón (2023) ⁵.

According to academics Bárbara Jalife and Yaranay López, vicarious violence can take direct or indirect forms (2022) ⁶. Indirect violence refers to the harm suffered by children and adolescents who witness aggression perpetrated by a parent against the mother, leaving them feeling helpless; this generally occurs during the handover or reception of children and adolescents. Direct victimization, on the other hand, encompasses all aggressions directly directed at the child or adolescent. The study identified seven types: psychological violence, physical violence, sexual violence, economic violence, judicial violence, neglect or abandonment, and attachment violence (Jalife and Yaranay López, 2022).

To address the potential intersection between this violence and technology, the research was conducted from a gender perspective and situated knowledge (Haraway ,

⁴ Vaccaro, Sonia (2021). Vicarious violence: An irreversible blow against mothers. Study on the analysis of data from cases of extreme vicarious violence. Feminist Psychology. https://psicologiafeminista.com/wp-content/uploads/AMPF-Informe_V_Vicaria-DIGITAL.pdf

⁵ Ruiz Salmerón, Miriam (2023). Vicarious violence: Children as the most powerful weapon of an abuser. University of Seville Research Repository. <https://hdl.handle.net/11441/151168>

⁶ Jalife, Bárbara and López Angulo, Yaranay (2022). Vicarious violence in the context of gender violence: A descriptive study in Ibero-America. *CienciAmérica*. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=8272886#:~:text=Describir%20las%20percepciones%20de%20las%20madres>

1995)⁷. The research tool was the application of a script to focus groups composed of mothers who had survived vicarious violence, activists for motherhood and children's rights, and women and mothers in general from different regions of Chile. The qualitative data obtained were analyzed using Atlas. Ti software .

It is worth noting that, although there was a massive number of applications to participate in the study (88 responses on the registration form), only 10 could ultimately be interviewed. The vicarious violence they experienced with the burden of domestic work and caregiving, prevented many from connecting. It is also important to point out that there were applications from **women in other countries** who wanted to participate, suggesting that this appears to be a widespread phenomenon.

Finally, this study by the NGO Amaranta (Ananías, Vergara and Luza, 2025)⁸ **established the existence of a new form of digital violence, digital vicarious violence**, which lies at the intersection of technology-facilitated gender violence and *offline vicarious violence*, as documented by experts such as Sonia Vaccaro. This reveals how problems inherent to our society—inequality and gender violence—are intertwined with technologies—which enable instantaneity, the blurring of geographical boundaries, viral dissemination, and anonymity—amplifying violence, which particularly affects historically vulnerable groups, such as mothers .

As with other forms of gender-based violence facilitated by technology, these attacks are characterized by their personal nature, seeking to "hurt where it hurts most." In fact, most of the digital attacks suffered by mothers target their motherhood, rather than other aspects of their identity. Furthermore, in all cases, there was prior gender-based violence in the relationship, so this violence becomes a strategy to continue attacking them even after the sexual and emotional bond has ended. The attacks are directed at what hurts them most: their relationship with their children and their well-being. In this way, technology becomes the tool through which aggressors erase physical distance.

Based on the testimonies, it was possible to characterize **5 ways in which digital vicarious violence is expressed**:

1. **Hyper-surveillance of the survivor of violence using technologies:** review of social networks using third parties or fake accounts, sending emails or messages that must be answered automatically, installation of spyware and forced geolocation programs are some of the strategies used by aggressors.
2. **Direct violence based on technology:** Especially mandatory video calls by Court, followed by emails designed to coordinate visits.
3. **Use of technologies to collect "evidence" of "bad" or "incorrect" motherhood:** This includes photographs, voice recordings, videos, and screenshots taken from social media.

⁷ Haraway , Donna. 1995. Science, Cyborgs , and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. Madrid: Cátedra. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0eSNzKvGUMNWINhc0xCRIZYYWM/view?resourcekey=0-gxLoi7jseejAcSC0ieeWYw>

⁸ Ananías, C., Vergara, K., & Luza , V. (2025). Digital vicarious violence: another form of gender violence facilitated by technology? Amaranta NGO: <https://amarantas.org/2025/02/17/violencia-vicaria-digital-otra-forma-de-violencia-de-genero-facilitada-por-tecnologia/>

4. **Relationship violence through the use of technologies:** Isolated appearances in the lives of sons or daughters through technologies, only to then cut off contact again.
5. **Use of social media to change the narrative in their favor:** Generally, through personal and professional defamation, as well as the construction of the story of a "selfless and concerned father" as opposed to the "crazy mother".

These acts of violence were expressed through both rudimentary techniques and tools—such as forwarding emails, unlocking devices using the sleeping person's fingerprint, and using third parties to monitor social media—and more advanced ones—such as hacking bank accounts and emails, and installing surveillance software. As these anonymous testimonies from survivors summarize:

“One day, I realized my phone was acting strangely, and it turned out someone had installed something on it that was like a mirror. My WhatsApp messages could be read on other devices. I don't know what that software is called, and I only found out when he responded to the lawsuit with screenshots taken out of context.”

“We had to file a complaint because we caught him doing the same thing again with my eldest daughter [unlocking her cell phone with his finger while she was sleeping]. He did it to read the messages, to see what we were talking about.”

“My other son had a birthday and I uploaded some photos to WhatsApp. I didn't do anything extraordinary because we were going through this process of not seeing the girl [...] The mistake is that I hadn't removed a relative I had of his, I hadn't blocked her statuses. So, when he responded to the lawsuit, he told me 'I have evidence that she's happy without the girl' and it was those photos.”

In general, this violence tended to become intertwined with the judicial system itself, turning stories, posts, and photographs into weapons to be wielded in their favor. Several victims had endured processes of over-judicialization, bombardment with legal information, and revictimization.

“On Sunday I had to hand over the children at 6:00 p.m., and he was sending me emails all Saturday night. 21 emails, 20 emails, 15 emails. It happened many times that I'd say, 'If you don't answer me now, it means you don't want the children; this is your last chance.' Obviously, I didn't read them. Eventually, he exploited it so much that I managed to get the court to cut off all communication.”

“I experienced a lot of violence through video calls that my children's father had with them for two years straight, every single day. It was like torture. I knew that every day at 6:00 p.m. there would be that call, and that call could be harmful. So I had to find a place where I could say, 'Okay, son, go to your room so you can talk in peace.' And when certain rules that he thought were right weren't followed, he would take it to court.”

“Her father has taken pictures of her. He has a photo album of, I don't know: flea bites, her coming home dirty, her tangled hair, her pants being too short. He always finds something wrong. He once wrote me an email saying he had documented all the “negligence” I had committed with our daughter.”

“When we got to another hearing, because he kept suing me, he would get someone or fake profiles to see my stories and he would bring them printed out.”

Another key finding of this research is that this same violence can affect women's economic autonomy in a variety of ways, highlighting the multiple impacts it has on the lives of women and their children. The following anonymous testimonies reflect this:

“Ultimately, the fact that he has financial resources is incredibly frustrating. I often said in court, ‘You know what? I’m tired, I’m broke, I’m working extra jobs to pay the lawyers, I don’t even see my children.’ And the judge would tell me, ‘We’re sorry, we know it’s practically impossible for him to be asking for a 50/50 visitation schedule when it’s already suspended due to violence. It’s ridiculous to us too. But as long as a citizen can afford legal representation and isn’t legally incapacitated, they can file complaints and lawsuits as many times as they want.’”

“I would post that I was selling shoes and he would take a screenshot, I don’t know how, or he would find me on Mercado Libre and say ‘I want a reduction in alimony because she is profiting from this and this was part of the marriage’”

“I’m a caregiver for a child with a disability, so I keep getting fired from formal jobs because I have to be out all the time looking after my daughter. So I’ve started other businesses, and when I post them on social media, he takes a screenshot and adds them to the court documents, claiming I’m getting rich.”

“We have colleagues whose business accounts are hacked. Or who can’t have two phones, like, one for work and one for personal life, and everything gets mixed up [the episodes of violence]. So that also undermines their economic autonomy.”

Finally, we highlight that women experiencing this type of violence identify that their online networks have been cut off and their voices silenced, which isolates them and prevents them from exercising other rights, such as freedom of expression. They stated that they felt constantly watched, scrutinized, and judged.

“For over a year now, I’ve practically disappeared from Instagram. My Whatsapp status is the same, because everything was being 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 maintain a more private profile. I don’t usually comment on local news or issues because I worry about how my words might be misinterpreted.”

“Right now, I’m afraid to use social media. I won’t post anything, I won’t write anything. In fact, I’ve changed all my passwords because I’m afraid you’ll hack me, because he knows a lot about technology and that scares me.”

In this context, and based on the same reflections and recommendations raised by survivors and victims of digital vicarious violence, **we recommend the following to the State of Chile:**

1. Ongoing training for workers and professionals in the judicial system on gender perspective, with an emphasis on reducing sexist biases.
2. Make progress on laws and public policies that address vicarious violence and digital violence, given that both remain in a legal vacuum.
3. Incorporate education and awareness-raising on digital violence and vicarious violence into both the judicial system and the police, even though there are still no specific laws on the matter.
4. Generate mechanisms that prevent the over-judicialization of mothers who have suffered gender violence, detecting cases of vicarious violence in a timely manner.
5. Improve the current spaces where women survivors of gender violence can seek legal advice and psychological support, given that SERNAMEG has become insufficient.
6. Incorporate sexual and non-sexist education across the Chilean educational system, in order to progress towards a more equitable society regarding care work and to eradicate gender violence.
7. To be able to expedite restraining orders while there are judicial processes (through the Domestic Violence Law No. 20.066) that cover contact and communication through digital means.
8. Create monitored communication platforms between parents and children if necessary, or outsource this.

Finally, although this study was based in Chile—with one case that included a crossing from Argentina and a respondent of Venezuelan nationality—, when the registration for the focus groups was publicized, dozens of requests to participate arrived from countries such as Colombia, Mexico and Spain, so it would be a phenomenon that crosses borders and nationalities.

To name just one public case from popular culture, this is reflected in situations like that of the Argentine urban music singer-songwriter Cazzu, who has suffered this violence at the hands of her ex, the Mexican singer Christian Nodal. Despite not being present in the life of their daughter, Inti, he has used measures such as legal custody battles and denying travel permits as a form of control and violence (Rojas, 2025, web)⁹. This widespread phenomenon poses challenges—especially regarding funding—for future research.

⁹Rojas, Sandra (September 4, 2025). The story of Cazzu and Nodal exposes how vicarious violence operates. In: La Caldera de Eva. <https://lacaderadeeva.com/moda/por-que-cazzu-es-victima-de-violencia-vicaria-por-parte-de-nodal/14976>