

Tackling sexual violence, abuse and exploitation

by Henia Dakkak

Iraqi women are being attacked in the name of religion. The gendered dimension of sectarian conflict – derived from women's role in cultural and biological reproduction and as symbols of group identity – is exposing them to crimes which constitute an open wound for humanity.

Few now know that Iraq once had the most progressive women's movement in the Middle East, dating back to British colonial rule. Even under Saddam Hussein's despotic rule, Iraq – unlike its neighbours – adopted many international laws pertaining to the rights of women. Iraq ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)¹ in 1986, while the USA – together with Iran – is among the eight countries still to do so.²

Rather than support progressive and democratically-minded Iraqis, including members of the women's movement, the US threw its weight behind Iraq's Shi'ites, calculating that groups long suppressed by Saddam Hussein would cooperate with the occupation and deliver the stability needed for the US to implement its policies in Iraq. It soon became apparent that religious extremists would be the greatest beneficiaries of the US invasion. Already in March 2004, on the first anniversary of the invasion, MADRE, the international women's organisation, issued a report drawing attention to the sharp rise in abductions, rapes, sexual slavery and coerced withdrawal of girls from education. Their latest report, 'Promising Democracy, Imposing

Theocracy',³ shows the remorseless rise of honour killings, torture of women in detention and other forms of gender-based violence. Courageous agencies such as the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI)



and others working to opposed institutionalised, legalised oppression of women and build a democratic secular Iraq free of military occupation and religious coercion are facing unprecedented threats. Armed groups are systematically using gender-based violence to

assert dominance over one another and over the population at large.

Women are beaten and harassed for being 'improperly' dressed. Wearing trousers, appearing in public without a headscarf, wearing lipstick or shaking hands with men can be punishable by death at the hands of the Mahdi Army. Threats against male doctors who treat female patients and female medics treating men have driven huge numbers of health personnel into exile. In the

absence of the rule of law, honour killings are rising. Amnesty International has reported that women detained by US and Iraqi forces have been sexually abused or raped.

Nineteen-year-old Iraqi girl says she was forced to work as a sex worker in order to feed her younger brothers.

Accurate statistics are hard to come by but there are estimates that nearly 3,500 Iraqi women have gone missing since 2003 and that there is a high chance that many have been traded for sex work. Thousands of Iraqi women are being taken advantage of by unscrupulous sex worker traffickers. Iraqi women are being sold as sex workers abroad, mainly to the illicit markets of Yemen, Syria, Jordan and the Gulf States. Victims usually discover their fate only after they have been lured outside the country by false promises.

Sex traffickers are targeting Iraqi

families who are vulnerable as a result of insecurity, economic hardship, displacement and social disintegration. Collapse of state authority and the rule of law make it easy to trade girls by paying a small amount of money to the family and deluding them with

promises of respectable domestic employment in the Gulf.

Proliferation of weaponry has intensified domestic violence. There are reports that the US has failed to keep track of hundreds of thousands of pistols and assault rifles it has shipped to Iraq. Weaponry is freely available and virtually every Iraqi family is now armed. As tensions escalate within households the presence of weapons increases the risks of injury for women.

Another lesser-known aspect of mounting violence against Iraqi women involves encouraging or forcing young girls into what is euphemistically called a 'marriage of pleasure', a form of temporary marriage (*muta'ah*) traditionally practiced by Shi'ites. In effect, it involves providing a form of cover for prostitution. Women are offered in short-term marriage contracts, often during a trip to another city or pilgrimage to the holy cities of Najaf or Kerbala. It is not officially binding and can be terminated at any time. There are no consequences for the male partner but girls are

often left more vulnerable and emotionally traumatised. Some find themselves pregnant or succumb to a sexually transmitted infection, while their families have made only a modest financial gain.

How many more women and girls need to be killed, trafficked and raped before the Iraqi authorities and the international community take note?

A new inter-agency initiative, 'UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict', aims to support country-led initiatives that mitigate gender-based violence. UN Action brings together DPKO, OCHA, OHCHR, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIFEM, WFP and WHO to advocate at a global level for more resources to address sexual violence and to provide technical and strategic support to joint efforts at a country level. In the spirit of this cooperation, UNHCR and UNFPA are developing a programme to work with the Syrian Red Crescent and Ministry of Health to address sexual violence against Iraqi women and girls residing in Syria. It is to be hoped UN Action can become active inside Iraq.

Promoting change requires an understanding of the role of violence against women in a particular context – its origins, how it operates, the myths associated with it, and the mechanisms and attitudes that perpetrate it. It is important to explore how the victims themselves perceive this violence, and the consequences – if any – for the perpetrator. This evidence base has proved to be the most effective 'kick start' for UNFPA programmes aiming to combat the tide of GBV against Iraqi women. In this regard, UNFPA will work with partners in Syria, Jordan and hopefully inside Iraq to collect qualitative and quantitative data on sexual and gender-based violence to help formulate appropriate responses and programmes to address this violation of basic human rights.

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1. www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/states.htm
2. www.amnestyusa.org/Womens_Human_Rights/Ratify_the_Treaty_for_the_Rights_of_Women_CEDAW/page.do?id=1108265&n1=3&n2=39&n3=719
3. www.madre.org/articles/me/iraqreport.html