

# Conspiracy of Near Silence Violence Against Iraqi Women

Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt

Shortly before the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, the administration of President George W. Bush began paying a great deal of public attention to the suffering of Iraqi women under the regime of Saddam Hussein. In speeches and meetings with Iraqi women in exile, the Bush administration implied that US military action was necessary to save women from torture, rape and sexual assault, among other kinds of mistreatment and discrimination. Eight years later, women in Iraq continue to suffer such violence—if anything, more of it—due to the social dislocation, economic hardship, ethnic and sectarian tensions, and endemic corruption that characterize the country today. As the administration of President Barack Obama pulls US troops out of Iraq, and the Iraq story fades from view in the West, there is a conspiracy of near silence about the increasing violence against women, from the international level down to the local.

## Women Under Attack

Many in the West assume that, because armed conflict has lessened, Iraq has become a safe place to live. This impression is exaggerated, at best. According to Iraq Body Count, an independent website that uses press accounts to track the war's death toll, there were 4,036 civilian fatalities caused by US-led forces, paramilitary units or criminal elements in 2010. The death rate has gone down from its peak in 2006, when by the website's tally almost 28,000 civilians were killed. Iraq Body Count's numbers are probably conservative, since not all such fatalities are reported in the press, but the decline is nonetheless significant. The Iraq Body Count figures tell an even more partial story about violence visited upon women, however. First, women are less likely than men to die in the armed attacks that draw media notice and so their deaths are less likely to be counted. They are exposed to physical, sexual, psychological and verbal abuse at the hands of occupation soldiers, Iraqi security forces, Iraqi political parties and their

militias, insurgents and criminal gangs, but also strangers on the street and family members in the home. The latter types of attacks, in particular, are associated with heightened socio-economic insecurity. Second, women are particularly vulnerable to this wider range of violence, with specific consequences for their ability to participate in public life.

Violence against women appears to be increasing, though it is difficult to be sure. Though Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and MADRE have published field reports, this violence remains one of the least studied aspects of post-invasion Iraq.<sup>1</sup> It is under-reported as well, due to the stigma, the fear of retribution and poor mechanisms of official documentation. Yet there are several indicators of a rise. According to a women's rights activist in a provincial town interviewed by phone in February 2009, "The general violence has decreased from last year, but violence against women is still increasing. Women complain of harassment on the street more than before. People comment on the way that women dress and the way that they walk. There is also violence against women prisoners. The government is not doing anything about this violence." The activist's observations concur with a 2008 survey by Women for Women International in which 63.9 percent of the Iraqi women respondents "stated that violence against women in general was increasing."

The Iraq Family Health Survey of 2006–2007, conducted by a consortium including the World Health Organization and the Iraqi Ministry of Health, also questioned women about their violent encounters. The study found that, overall, 21.2 percent of women had experienced physical violence, with a markedly higher percentage (22.7) in the center and south than in the three northern provinces under the Kurdistan Regional Government (10.9). A total of 33.4 percent of women reported at least one form of emotional violence, ranging from insults to threats. The Iraqi penal code allows men to discipline their wives "within certain limits prescribed by Islamic law (*shari'a*), by law or by custom," meaning that men are almost never arrested or prosecuted for maltreatment of female relatives. Moreover, some women do not regard domestic abuse as a crime. According to Sundus Abbas, director of the Iraqi Women's Leadership Institute in Baghdad, "Silence still marks all forms of domestic violence faced by women

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and girls in Iraq, because this form of violence is justified by the misinterpretation of religious texts.”

While religion and culture are often cited as explanations for this phenomenon, and not only in Iraq, it is more useful to look at the role of socio-economic and political conditions on the ground. Several women activists believe that male violence against female relatives is linked to high rates of unemployment and poverty among men, who carry the stress back to the household. Abbas quotes a statistic from the Ministry of Planning: 27 percent of Iraqis lived below the poverty line in 2010. Meanwhile, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the unemployment rate for males aged 15–29 is 28 percent, compared to the national average of 18 percent.

Female unemployment is also a huge problem that has deepened since 2003. The 2008 Women for Women International survey, which gathered responses from approximately 1,500 women, found 45.3 percent describing their job opportunities as “poor” and 26.6 percent saying they had no opportunities at all. Widows and other female heads of household, who make up roughly 11 percent of all Iraqi households and many of whom have been displaced by conflict, are particularly vulnerable to poverty linked to lack of employment. In February 2009, the state minister for women’s affairs, Nawal al-Samarra’i, briefly resigned her post because of the insufficient resources allocated to her office to deal with Iraq’s 3 million widows. Although the government pays widows’ pensions of \$60–100, depending on the number of children, as few as one quarter of women have been able to claim this money thanks to a complicated application process and the lack of capacity of government institutions.<sup>2</sup>

There are several reports suggesting that women in poverty are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. “The fragility of state institutions and the failure of the rule of law has created room for human trafficking gangs, especially for the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation and prostitution,” said Abbas. Iraqi criminal gangs are involved in shipping women and girls to Syria, Jordan, Qatar and other Gulf countries to work as prostitutes. Most often, the women and girls are from poor families in search of employment. Human Rights Watch found that police officers are sometimes also implicated in the trafficking networks.<sup>3</sup>

Corruption and impunity within the security services is sadly widespread in today’s Iraq. As one woman, the founder of an Iraqi NGO assisting women in poverty, lamented, “Human rights violations are one of the most important lessons that Iraqi security forces have learned from the US and British militaries.” As early as 2004, it was revealed that US forces had arrested the wives, daughters and even mistresses of alleged insurgents or Baath Party members in order to gather intelligence and it has been reported that women prisoners were sexually abused and raped by US soldiers.<sup>4</sup> Iraqi women activists interviewed for this article spoke of women prisoners—arrested for suspected links to insurgents



Sign at a Najaf rally reads, “Stop violence against women.” ALAA AL-MARJANI/AP PHOTO

or for prostitution they may have been forced into—who are still subject to abuse in Iraqi police stations. Activists are not given access to the prisoners, but believe that authorities have done nothing to redress the problem. Such ill treatment fits into the larger picture of torture and abuse by Iraqi security forces, documented by Human Rights Watch and others, after those forces were granted sweeping powers to deal with the insurgency. Women abused in jail are particularly unlikely to report the crime, due to the stigma of rape and fear that their families may kill them for motives of “honor.”

Political developments have helped to normalize this violence. Conservative or misogynistic interpretations of religious texts have become pervasive as religious parties and tribal figures have come to power through elections, with the complicity of US occupation authorities. Public morality campaigns strongly encourage women to wear the correct “Islamic” clothing, through such instruments as posters illustrating the “proper” and “improper” forms of *hijab*, or modest attire. Militias, many of which are linked to parties in government, are involved in harassment of women on the streets and at checkpoints based on how they are dressed. These paramilitaries have also intimidated and even murdered professional women with impunity.

But, increasingly, ordinary people on the street have also become agents of control and repression. One Baghdad-based academic and women's rights activist put it this way: "As a woman these days, you feel under pressure to obey all the time. People make comments about what you wear and what you do when you are out and about. It is increasingly difficult to go out by yourself. A male family member always has to be with you if you want to go anywhere." The regulation of Iraqi women's bodies in the name of culture and identity is a crucial mechanism for the consolidation of the authority of the religious and tribal leaders dominating Iraq's political institutions. In such an environment, many women stay at home and anxious parents are pulling their young girls out of school.

## Iraqi Kurdistan

Iraqi Kurdistan poses a paradox. Overall, the region, comprising the governorates of Erbil, Suleimaniya and Dohuk, enjoys far greater security than southern and central Iraq. After years of struggling with punitively limited state provisions, whether in electricity, housing or employment, the infrastructure and economy of Kurdistan appear to be on the mend. Investors have pumped in some \$14 billion since 2005, and no visitor, particularly to Erbil, can fail to notice the changes to the urban landscape. Yet corruption, nepotism and political intimidation continue to plague the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Civil society organizations, including women's rights organizations, have mushroomed since the early 1990s, when Baghdad withdrew its army from the Kurdish areas. But these groups also remain dependent on the good will of the main political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

The KRG is officially supportive of combating violence against women and has developed a strategy to counter it, working closely with politicians, women's rights activists, academics and international experts, and often with international funding. Nevertheless, the KRG encompasses an array of voices on gender issues, from secular-oriented, pro-women's rights politicians with links to the Kurdish women's movement and international organizations to more conservative politicians with links to religious and tribal leaders. With the debates between these camps unresolved, the situation on the ground continues to be critical. The Iraq Family and Household Survey found that 61.6 percent of women in Kurdistan had experienced controlling behavior by their husbands, 17.6 percent had suffered from emotional violence and 10.9 percent have experienced some form of physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner. In particular, the phenomenon of so-called honor killings remains endemic. The case of Du'a Khalil Aswad, who was stoned to death in the street by a group of men in April 2007 at Bashiqa, near Mosul, made headlines internationally. Aged 17 and a member of Iraq's Yazidi religious minority, her offense in the

eyes of the men in her family and community was that she had formed an attachment to a young Sunni Muslim man. Her murder was filmed by an onlooker on his cellular phone and then widely circulated on the Internet. In 2002, under pressure from activists, the KRG amended the penal code to remove the "honorable motives" clause in cases involving crimes against women. Since then, killings in the name of honor are reported much more widely, but many cases still go unremarked. Moreover, Kurdish women activists say that only a very few men have been prosecuted for killing their female relatives.

While the killings are certainly its most gruesome form, violence in the name of honor encompasses a broad spectrum of practices, from policing of attire and comportment to denial of education to maiming. Violence and repression within the family have resulted in a high rate of suicide among women, who frequently do not see another way out of their plight. A comprehensive, in-depth report on honor-based violence by a group of researchers questions the official designation of several deaths by immolation as "accidents."<sup>5</sup> Some of the cases so classified were actually suicides, but others counted as "suicides" were actually honor-motivated murders, according to several Kurdish women's rights activists interviewed for this article.

There are also concerns among civil society groups about widespread female genital mutilation in northern Iraq. A 2009 survey by the Iraqi Kurdistan Ministry of Human Rights suggests that in one district over 40 percent of women and girls aged 11–24 years have been subjected to such operations. A Human Rights Watch report surveying a wider geographical area gives even higher figures.<sup>6</sup> Female genital mutilation can be a life-threatening procedure, particularly in places that have no emergency health care facilities, as in many rural parts of Iraqi Kurdistan. Some girls and young women have bled to death after being cut.

Despite the progress made by some sections of the government, the media and women's rights organizations, there are huge challenges ahead, particularly beyond the cities of Erbil, Suleimaniya and Dohuk, where the sway of tribal leaders often exceeds that of the KRG. A backlash can be detected in the more conservative tribal and Islamist quarters, including those within the KRG itself. In May 2008, the Suleimaniya-based Asuda shelter for victims of domestic and honor-based violence came under attack with gunfire. Although disgruntled family members make most such threats, there is a vocal strand within Iraqi Kurdish society that objects to the notion of gender equality. According to *Rudaw*, a private English-language newspaper published in Erbil, the KRG's minister of religious endowments and affairs, Kamil Haji Ali, opposes a new law that will promote the concept. He and others are outraged by the law, which in their view will spread "immoral behavior" by "legitimizing homosexuality and illicit sexual relations." Sozan Shihab, leader of the majority Kurdistan Alliance in the KRG's legislature, challenges this interpretation,

arguing that the law merely aims to decrease social injustice against women in Iraqi Kurdistan: “The phrase ‘gender equality’ means social equality between men and women in terms of rights and duties,” she said. “Women and men are equal and have no differences.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, and aside from the problem of hostility to homosexuality, the conflation of gender equality with “illicit” (meaning extramarital) sex has often proven an effective tactic for discrediting the work of women’s rights activists all over the Middle East.

Sundus Abbas argued, “We can see clearly a denial of this phenomenon [of violence against women]. The government considers any discussion of it as an attempt to ‘harm’ the society.” One might even contend that the Iraqi government is contributing to the increase in violence against women by failing to crack down on armed militias, criminal gangs and Islamist groups who have been targeting women systematically. Neither is the government acting to curb domestic violence, which is rarely prosecuted through the legal system. Iraqi



**Sirwa Hama Amin, 27, was shot in an “honor” attack by her family members that left her husband dead.**

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## Little Remedy

In 2010, the Iraqi government, in partnership with the UN, participated in the global campaign called 16 Days of Activism to End Violence Against Women, which runs annually from November 25 to December 10. Under the slogan “Unite to End Violence Against Women in Iraq,” Iraq’s first such national effort aimed to increase awareness of gender-based violence among Iraqis and to highlight the positive role that can be played by Iraqi males, especially decision-makers and community leaders. According to Khuloud Sami, then state minister of women’s affairs, the “landmark campaign” would inaugurate a four-year national strategy culminating in a reformed family protection law.

Yet women’s rights activists complained that very little is being done at the official level in central and southern Iraq.

NGOs in several governorates have tried to address this problem by providing legal aid, family mediation and medical services to women who are victims of violence. Women’s shelters do not exist in south and central Iraq. Women subject to domestic violence are left with little remedy but mediation, which will often encourage them to return to the family home.

For several years, the No Violence network, made up of NGOs and women’s rights activists, has mounted its own campaign called Stop Violence Against Women, built on a wider non-violence and democratization platform. These groups face an uphill battle, however. Many government officials deny the existence of violence against women and fellow civil society activists do not see the issue as a priority—and can even be hostile to raising it. One woman who is active through her

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NGO in assisting women in poverty objected to a question about violence against women, saying, “Some ‘rented’ NGOs focus on ‘violence against women,’ and they mention a few cases as if this is the biggest source of suffering for Iraqi women.... This distracts public opinion from the real violence and problems.” Among these sources of suffering, she cited corruption, poverty, food insecurity, poor health and education services, and human rights violations—all of which afflict Iraqi women and men equally. Yet research shows that, while the humanitarian catastrophe in post-invasion Iraq has been indiscriminate, women have been hurt in ways that men have not.

## Averted Eyes

Between 2003 and 2008, amidst talk of a “new Iraq,” the Bush administration and international NGOs were eager to place Iraqi women at center stage. It now appears, however, that Iraqi women’s rights has dropped off the Western agenda altogether. While a number of international NGOs continue to work in Iraq, and a few have programs aimed at combating violence against women, overall assistance for the Iraqi population has decreased dramatically since 2008. Moreover, according to an OECD

report, only 5 percent of aid allocated to Iraq in 2008 (excluding the United States) was earmarked for gender equality programming.<sup>8</sup> In early 2011, the website of the State Department’s Office of Global Women’s Affairs contained scant mention of women in Iraq compared to the days of the Bush administration. While the State Department granted \$5 million to NGOs in 2010 to “provide direct support and training to Iraqi widows, female heads of household and other vulnerable women in Iraq in the areas of literacy, entrepreneurship and vocational skills,” there is no attention given to the issue of violence against women in Iraq, despite the fact that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s International Fund for Women project lists combating violence against women as one of its goals.

The hyper-visibility of Iraqi women in the early years of the US-led occupation applied a progressive gloss to the destruction wrought by the occupation authorities and their Iraqi political allies. Today, the invisibility of Iraqi women in the Obama administration’s discourse, eight years after the fall of Saddam Hussein, operates to conceal the utter failure of the US project in Iraq.

Most Iraqi women activists agree that violence against women in Iraq has risen noticeably since 2003. Yet the increase is little known, much less the scandal that it

should be, because so many of the victims and their families keep mum out of fear. Meanwhile, US officials avert their eyes. Iraqi authorities deny the problem and accuse those who raise the issue of “dishonoring” Iraq. The failure of the US and its Iraqi allies to address the phenomenon of violence against women is not surprising, for it is linked to the deterioration of the Iraqi economy, the corruption of national institutions, the lack of social services and the rise of ethno-religious political leaders that have accompanied the sanctions, war and civil strife that the US and its proxies have inflicted upon the country. Combating violence against women in Iraq means combating its structural causes. ■

## Endnotes

1 Another exception is Haifa Zangana, *City of Widows: An Iraqi Woman's Story of War and Resistance* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007).

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6 Human Rights Watch, “*They Took Me and Told Me Nothing: Female Genital Mutilation in Iraqi Kurdistan*” (New York, June 2010), p. 2.

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8 OECD-DAC, *Aid in Support of Gender Equality in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States* (Paris, 2010), p. 16.