

SHAME AND EXCLUSION OF IRAQI VICTIMS - ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES OF TRAFFICKING IN IRAQ

ACHRS STATEMENT | MARTINE RØNDE BJERG



Women and children in forced marriages are vulnerable to sex trafficking and have an especially hard time finding a way out. Increasingly widespread domestic violence pushes women and children in forced marriages out on the street, thus putting perceived shame on the family by leaving their marriage. Getting expelled by one's social security leaves them very vulnerable to sex traffickers, known to use the concept of shame to trap women and girls in sex work.

Since the US-led war in 2003, instances of sex trafficking in Iraq has increased rapidly. Reports from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), various human rights groups, the International Organization of Migration (IOM), and UN agencies all point to a link between increased trafficking and post-conflict regions.

Economy and increasing power of militias

According to an article by Washington Institute, the increase in persons trafficked and the widening of trafficking networks are caused by an increase in poverty, unemployment, and general instability since 2003. Besides that, militias that control big parts of Iraq benefit hugely from the criminal networks and therefore support them by giving them security and legal protection. There are today more than a hundred militias operating in Iraq. Often partly or completely supported and armed by the Iraqi government, they exercise the authority of arrest, detention, torture, and executions.

In post-conflict regions, political instability leads to increased poverty and more power to such shadow institutions, and trends deemed illegal by the government can grow more easily.

An example of this is child marriage. According to the World Bank, the prevalence of child marriage rose from 17 per cent in 2006 to 28 per cent in 2018, despite being illegal according to the 1959 Personal Status Law, which sets the legal age for marriage at 18.

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Shame

Women and children in forced marriages are vulnerable to sex trafficking and have an especially hard time finding a way out. Al Jazeera's recent focus on women and girls trafficked in Iraq highlights similar root causes as poverty and the power of militias but also points to the existing shame and patriarchal structures.

Increasingly widespread domestic violence pushes women and children in forced marriages out on the street, thus putting perceived shame on the family by leaving their marriage. Getting expelled by one's social security leaves them very vulnerable to sex traffickers, known to use the concept of shame to trap women and girls in sex work.

After Saddam Hussein initiated his "faith campaign" during the 1990s, women's conditions worsened rapidly through the enactment of various decrees, including an anti-prostitution law that punished sex workers with execution. That law still exists today, although the execution is now traded with a lifetime prison sentence.

The criminalisation of sex work makes it very hard for women and girls to seek help, as they are at risk of having all blame put upon themselves. Besides that, the shame, and the widespread opinion of being "dishonourable" after experiencing abuse, makes victims question any change of a future outside forced prostitution.

Lack of sufficient Initiatives addressing root causes

In 2012, the Iraqi government did seek to combat the issues of trafficking by passing law No. 28 of 2012, defining and criminalising human trafficking. According to a report in 2020 by the U.S. Department of State, the Iraqi government are making serious efforts, but they remain insufficient. However, the high levels of corruption and continuous governmental cooperation with the militias give the trafficking networks space to flourish and may question how serious the efforts are.

According to OWFI activist (The Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq) Janat Al Ghazi, there are no specific institutions that help women and girls if they are experiencing violence at home. The lack of initiatives supporting one of the most important root causes of women and girls' vulnerability to trafficking is problematic.

ACHRS denounces the impact of shame and honorability as significant root causes in perpetuating the victimisation of women and girls. We encourage stronger initiatives in advocating both that and against domestic violence in combatting sex trafficking. ACHRS condemns the criminalisation and lack of justice for the victims and encourages the Iraqi justice system to implement reforms to support the victims better.

Sources: Washington Institute; Al Jazeera; Reliefweb; Al Jazeera; US Department Of State; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Iraq in the light of abuses committed by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and associated groups", Human Rights Council, 28th session, Agenda item 2, UN Doc A/HRC/28/18, paragraph 51

Picture source: Kurdistan24