

Iraq: No country for women

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MADRID, 28 November 2010 (IRIN) - The improved political representation of women in Iraq is in sharp contrast to their broader disempowerment, as highlighted by the persistence of domestic violence and early marriage, according to a new report by the UN Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit.

Women may hold 25 percent of seats in the Iraqi parliament, but one in five in the 15-49 age group has suffered physical violence at the hands of her husband. Anecdotal evidence alleges that “many women are being kidnapped and sold into prostitution”, and female genital mutilation is still common in the north, the report notes.

“The situation many Iraqi women and girls face is beyond words,” journalist Eman Khammas told IRIN in a telephone interview. “Before, I was a journalist, a professional; now, I am nothing.”

Khammas noted an underlying political climate of intolerance that has become increasingly poisonous for women. She was forced to flee Iraq after receiving death threats that effectively stopped her - like thousands of other Iraqi women - from working. She now lives in Spain.

Stay home

Women’s participation in the labour force has fallen sharply since 2003. Before the invasion, 40 percent of public sector workers were women, according to a report by the Brussels Tribunal, an anti-war organisation. Some sectors, such as the teaching profession, were almost entirely staffed by women, Khammas said.

She cited the “new, fundamentalist thinking”, which emerged after the 2003 invasion of Iraq that has been aggressively imposed by the militias, armed private groups purporting to uphold religious law.

The collapse of public social services has also limited access to education, health and jobs, while a high level of insecurity has pushed women out of public life and into the seclusion of their homes, and an ineffective judicial system has created an atmosphere of impunity, Khammas said.

The conservative attitudes of public sector officials has been reinforced by a government that supports keeping women at home, according to a 2007 report by the international women’s resource network, MADRE.

“In 2006, the Iraqi Interior Ministry issued a series of notices warning women not to leave their homes alone and echoing the directives of religious leaders who urge men to prevent women family members from holding jobs,” the report noted.

“Thus, the violence carried out by militias in the streets is backed up by more respectable political leaders, who support the call for a women-free public sphere.”

Escalating poverty has pushed Iraqi families into prioritizing schooling for boys, stifling future opportunities for women.

“For every 100 boys enrolled in primary schools in Iraq, there are just under 89 girls,” the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), said in a report released in September 2010. School enrollment figures for girls have been progressively declining, while drop-out rates have gone up in every academic year.

Getting out

Factors pushing girls out of schooling included “security risks, attitudes to girls and education, the state of the nation’s schools, what is taught and how it is taught, the skills and attitudes of teachers, family poverty,” UNICEF said.

Like Khammas, many other women have chosen to leave Iraq, but asylum does not necessarily end their difficulties. Neighbouring Syria is home to the majority of what the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) considers as Iraqi “persons of concern” – people who have left their home country out of fear for their safety but do not conform to the legal definition of “refugee”.

Of the 139,000 registered Iraqi persons of concern in Syria, 28 percent fall under female-headed households, the UNHCR Protection Officer in Syria, Aseer Al-Madaien, told IRIN in an email interview.

Many do not have work permits, which compounds the difficulties female-headed households face in neighbouring countries, where they struggle to make a living, “especially paying the rent”, while still “coping with family, social and community pressure”, Al-Madaien commented.

Their vulnerability can lead to exploitation. “There is trafficking happening among the Iraqi refugees, [but] the scope and modality is not known to us,” said Al-Madaien.

According to the UN Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit report, “Victims are trafficked internally and to neighbouring countries, including Syria and the Gulf states”.

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