

Iraq's women: 'It's only us who understand each other's reality' - "Most women my age don't see a future"

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Everyone has a story and a history but in Iraq women's lives are being reduced to a label, says Shaista Aziz.

The unfolding tragedy of Iraq continues to be told through a distorted, polarised western gaze, reducing the country and its 32 million population to labels: 'Sunni', 'Shia', 'Islamist', 'extremist' and 'terrorist.'

News bulletins flash up maps coloured in red blocks and arrows as if to help viewers understand just what a bloodthirsty, barbaric nation this is, awash with terrorists. 'What can we do if these people insist on killing each other? This is their culture, their ways, we can't be held responsible. Move on. There is nothing to see here.' Except there is. If only we would open our eyes.

These maps are abstract illustrations, they never point out where life clings on, where people are trying to hold each other together.

Even now, 11 years on from invasion and occupation, the Iraqi people, faces, names and histories, are missing from the narratives.

International journalists are forced to operate from behind concrete bunkers, seldom meeting Iraqi people. Their Iraqi fixers and Iraqi journalists continue to be harassed and hounded by state actors and armed groups.

When we do see Iraqis, they are like film extras, in the background, to make the setting realistic. Unrelenting violence from Iraq, Syria and Pakistan all looks the same - a heap of broken brown people screeching from a manmade hell. Damaged children and women swamped in black. Over the decade I've lived up close and personal to Iraq, through family in the country and from travelling in and out of Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, working with aid agencies.

I'm not Iraqi, nor a specialist on the country. But I have however had unique access to some aspects of people's lives, especially women. Over the past few weeks I've been tracking down some of the women I know across Iraq, friends and former colleagues.

Many have left Baghdad in the past month and fled with family to the north of the country or to Jordan and Syria. Every woman has a story.

Maha, an Iraqi aid worker from Baghdad has been evacuated to the Kurdish north by her employers. When we spoke two days ago, I was struck by her calm and careful choice of words to describe the horrors engulfing her country.

Three weeks ago, when she was in Baghdad, a group of women had been targeted and killed by unknown gunmen in a city centre restaurant.

"The gunmen asked for the women waitresses. They then shot the women one by one. It was during the day in a busy part of Baghdad. Men walked in and killed these women to send a very clear message to Iraqi women. We should not be out in our society. We should be rotting inside our homes."

It is not clear who carried out these killings. Women I spoke to said 50 women a week on average are being targeted and killed in Iraq. There is no way to verify this figure. The UN said 1,075 Iraqis were killed and 658 injured between June 5 and 22nd. Spokesman Rupert Colville said the numbers "should be viewed very much as a minimum."

Maha said: "This is not the country I was raised in, this is no longer Iraq. Our society has been ripped to shreds and as in most societies it's the women who are carrying the burden. Women are sacrificing their lives to hold families together. They've regressed more than 50 years in the past decade.

"The tragedy is that women over the age of 50, they were the pioneers of the women and feminist movement in Iraq. They fought for women's rights and now it's their daughters, nieces, sisters and friends who are being pushed back into their homes, silenced and hidden away.

"Now we have Isis, another group that wants to push women backwards. We expect our lives and rights to continue disappearing. No good will come from these extremists but we have been living under the rule of extremists for years. Already I see fewer and fewer women on the streets - we women are holding our breath."

Irshad, a mother of three, gave up teaching over a year ago, under pressure from her family, and has set up a support group for women in her Baghdad neighbourhood.

She says Iraqi women are past breaking point and can only depend on themselves for support.

"Iraq has changed forever. There is darkness and heaviness in every home. Our women are existing like ghosts - each person carries with them burdens - some of these burdens can not be discussed openly because of our culture and because of the rules by which we live in society. We try and maintain our dignity, but behind closed doors women talk to each other and support each other. We share burdens."

"It's only us women who understand each other's reality. Our men have been brutalised and traumatised. Husbands and sons have been imprisoned by the regime and under the occupation the men suffered a lot of violence, women suffered too but in different ways. Unspeakable things happen in prisons. Shameful things. We understand our men will not discuss these things in detail. When your husband no longer desires physical relations with you, when he wakes up screaming and thumping the wall in the middle of the night, it is his wife who absorbs the pain. The wife who tries to protect her children from seeing their father like this. This has a huge impact on a woman's mental health and her confidence."

Noor, 27, talked to me from Amman, Jordan. "My family and I have been moving around over the past 11 years. We have lived in Amman, Beirut, Cairo and Damascus. We call it our refugee tour of the Middle East. My father is a businessman and we returned to Iraq two years ago. Everything has changed for us.

"Most women my age don't see a future. Many have agreed to get married to a cousin or someone

their family suggest because we are unable to study or work, as its too dangerous. I have told my parents I won't get married. You get married to have children. Iraq is like hell. I do not wish to raise my child in hell."

Shaista Aziz

P.S.

* . The Guardian. Iraq's women: 'It's only us who understand each other's reality':
[http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/she-said/2014/jun/26/iraqs-women-its-only-us-who-underst
and-each-others-reality](http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/she-said/2014/jun/26/iraqs-women-its-only-us-who-underst-and-each-others-reality)

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