

Yanar Mohammed: Returned to Iraq to Fight For Gender Equality

Wednesday 12 November 2014, by [MOHAMED Yanar](#) (Date first published: 2 September 2014).

Yanar Mohammed is the President of the Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) which she co-founded in 2003. It campaigns against honor violence and other forms of discrimination against women and girls. Her family left Iraq in 1993 and moved to Canada. Yanar Mohammed returned to Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 in order to fight for gender equality. She is one of Iraq's most prominent womens rights activists. In 2008 she received the Gruber Foundation Women's Rights Prize.

She kindly agreed to be interviewed by Clarion Project Research Fellow Elliot Friedland.

Clarion Project: We understand that your grandmother was married at 14. How has that impacted your view of the position of women in Iraq?

Yanar Mohammed: I spent a lot of my time with my grandmother while I was very young. While coming of age, I would ask her about love, and she would just shrug it off and look away. During one of the nights, after I asked her the question again, she finally spoke, saying that she felt like being slaughtered every night, when he would come to her. I was shocked and did not dare to ask anymore, but was really offended afterwards while hearing her sons make fun of her ordeal.

Since that time, I felt that a woman's suffering can be overlooked by those who are closest to her. And it hurts me now to remember that her agony as a teenager was never given any importance, or mentioned as a violation. It was unthinkable for me to imagine myself in her place, as I was fourteen when she told me the story. Her husband died early on, fortunately, and she raised five children by herself. None of us ever heard her complain, and she was always the source of love to all in the family.

Clarion: Was there a specific moment that made you decide to become an activist for women's rights in Iraq? How did that process develop?

Mohammed: There wasn't one specific moment, but a build-up of emotion; while hearing the threats of my cousin to his sister who loved a man of another ethnicity, while learning that my brothers were allowed to freedoms and gifts denied to me, while hearing stories of girls who suffer from sexual harassment inside the tribe and unable to speak out.

Later in life, my knowledge and comradeship with a leftist circle who called for women's equality was the biggest encouragement, but the real landmark was while one of them called from Baghdad in April 2003 and spoke about kidnapping of women on the streets, and the need for a women's organization. I found myself volunteering for it while speaking over the phone in the comfort of my

house in Canada.

Clarion: What is the most significant part of the work that OWFI do? What impact is it having on women's lives?

Mohammed: Sheltering young women who escape honor killing is the most important work that we do. But my personal satisfaction comes from watching the process of their transformation from victims to women's rights activists. Our shelters work in combination with our organization offices, and we usually take the victims to the office in the morning, and try to keep them busy with some volunteer work. While they sit in our meetings, and assist with our campaigns and events, many have developed the desire to change the culture of women's hatred and begins their first steps into supporting us to build a new tradition of women's respect.

Many of the girls who came to our shelters had suffered while escaping honor killing, and falling victim to brothels, but are now symbols of liberation in Iraqi social circles. OWFI's shelters have many "graduates" who have become leaders of some of our programs. In general, they are our best informed activists, as they had learnt all the background of women's oppression the hard way.

Clarion: It is difficult to make progress without an end goal. Could you describe the ideal relationship between religion and state that you would like to see in Iraq?

Mohammed: I believe that the separation of religion and state is the only way to resolve the sectarian differences which have torn Iraq apart. It is also the best solution for all of us to be treated as equal citizens regardless of our religions and ethnicity. We live in a part of the world where the variety of ethnicity, religions, and religious sects are too many when compared with our population and size of the country. When the 2005 constitution decided Islam would be the religion of the state, a million people were doomed right away, as they would be treated as second rate citizens, and become a delayed project of discrimination or genocide.

Clarion: Many in the West fear supporting causes that might be perceived as anti-Islam and women's groups have suffered from this in the past. How can Westerners support the cause of feminism in Iraq without offending cultural/religious sensibilities?

Mohammed: They should empower the local Iraqi feminists and support them to achieve legislative demands, create their own platforms in media, politics and social services. Then the Iraqi women will win their own battles, while being supported by a feminist international movement. No community accepts a colonialist project which uses women's issues as a cover-up. And in Iraq, we witnessed the cancerous growth of some women's organizations which made way for Anglo-American projects of premature elections. Those organizations disappeared as soon as their financing ended, just like a balloon exploding as there wasn't real material in it.

Clarion: On the one hand we are seeing many very negative developments in Iraq, such as the rise of ISIS and their ongoing massacres against the Yazidis and other minority groups. On the other hand we have activists such as yourself who are fighting for women's rights. Are you optimistic that progress can be made in the light of such developments?

Mohammed: I managed throughout the years to build an organization of women and men who created an egalitarian small community in our workplaces, shelters, radio station, and surrounding circles. Nevertheless, our resources do not support the growth we aspire to, and fundraising for our work is taking too much of my energy which could have been used in more mobilization and growth.

While the religious and ethnic groups of Iraq had never-ending political and financial support, ours

was\is barely enough for our survival and minimal growth, which eventually shrinks when one of our funders gets Iraq- fatigue.

In my heart, I believe we are the alternative for the future, but I begin to feel the weight of eleven years of occupation, sectarian war, and ISIS war.

I am lucky to be one of those eternal optimists, willing to give all my life to the cause, while just hoping not to lose motivation with every monstrous ISIS photo which I see online. I also worry that ISIS might become the reason for a new world-wide coalition of military forces to be dumped in Iraq and Syria, as that will definitely mean the end of the left-overs of the Iraq that we know.

Elliot Friedland

To learn more about honor violence and the brave women fighting against it, see Clarion Project's latest movie *Honor Diaries* [1].

P.S.

* September 4, 2014:

<http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/yanar-mohammed-returned-iraq-fight-gender-equality>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.honordiarries.com>