

Iraq: Sex traffickers target women

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“Thousands of Iraqi women are being taken advantage of by unscrupulous sex worker traffickers seeking to exploit young girls’ desperate socio-economic situation for profit, United Nations agencies have reported.” (AND Network).

Contents

- [Thousands traded for sex work](#)
- [Gulf gangs](#)
- [Trafficked to Syria](#)

Mariam, 16, relives the day her father in Baghdad sold her off as a domestic worker in one of the prosperous Gulf nations. Instead, she was forced into the sex trade.

“I was a virgin and didn’t understand what sex was. I was told that they [the traffickers] were going to get good money for my first night with an old local man who paid for my virginity. He was aggressive and hit me all the time,” Mariam, who refused to reveal her real name, told IRIN.

In Mariam’s case, she was taken to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and kept in a house with 20 young girls, all of them sex workers, she said.

Before she left Iraq, she and her three sisters were being cared for by her father. Their mother was killed during the US-led invasion of the country in 2003.

Mariam said her father couldn’t cope with looking after the children on his own and wanted her to go abroad, particularly given the increasing insecurity and daily violence in Iraq.

In November 2005, a member of a trafficking ring offered Mariam’s father an advance payment of US \$6,000 for her, saying she would work for a family in Dubai. He was promised that his daughter would be returned to Iraq after finishing a one-year contract.

Mariam said she faced daily threats in Dubai from the traffickers, warning her not to try to leave. However, she managed to escape and is now back in Baghdad being looked after by a local NGO, the Organisation for Women’s Freedom.

Thousands traded for sex work

The teenager’s story is not uncommon. While accurate statistics are hard to come by, the Women’s Freedom NGO estimates that nearly 3,500 Iraqi women have gone missing since the US-led occupation of Iraq began in 2003 and that there is a high chance many have been traded for sex work. It says 25 percent of these women have been trafficked abroad since the start of 2006, many unaware of their fate.

“People are desperate to get money to support their families ... just to have something to eat. If the government does not act on this issue, more women will be abused outside Iraq,” Nuha Salim, spokeswoman for the NGO, said.

The Iraqi government says it is investigating cases of women being trafficked and has arrested some traffickers, but tackling insecurity in the country is its main priority.

Apart from the need for government action, women’s-rights activists say that as long as there is a market for women abroad, the problem will continue and worsen. They call for more action against countries that turn a blind eye to the sex trade.

“Women are being taken outside of Iraq and are losing what is most precious to them - their dignity,” Salim said.

Trafficking and prostitution are illegal in the six nations of the Gulf, although the region is a popular and common destination for trafficked women. An estimated 10,000 women from sub-Saharan Africa, eastern Europe, Asia and parts of the Middle East may be victims of sex trafficking in the UAE, according to a US State Department report entitled ‘Trafficking in Persons’, published in June.

Gulf gangs

Sharla Musabih is a human-rights activist in Dubai who runs a shelter for abused and trafficked women. She says sex workers in the UAE operate predominantly from hotels and organised gangs are behind much of the trade.

“It’s not organised in the UAE but there is an organised mafia outside [the country] that owns hotels in the UAE and they organise it ... But, on the other hand, the big guys [Emirati nationals] involved in immigration are really concerned and are trying to do something about it and they care about it.”

Musabih said it was common for girls to be promised domestic work and be forced into sex work. “I’ve heard the girls pay \$10,000 initially to come to the UAE. They get paid anything from 20 dirhams [\$6] to 20,000 [\$6,000] a night, depending on the client.”

According to the US State Department report, the UAE government has failed to address the problem adequately, although inroads have been made.

“Instead, many victims [of trafficking] are jailed along with criminals and deported,” the report reads. “Prosecutions for sex trafficking are extremely low relative to the scope of the problem.”

The report states that despite 100 reported complaints of trafficking for sexual exploitation in 2005, the UAE government reported only 22 convictions for sex-trafficking crimes.

However, the report praised UAE authorities for the closer screening of visa applications by its embassies in source countries; for having set up a human-trafficking division to investigate trafficking crimes; and for training police, prosecutors, judges, and other government officials in combating trafficking.

No one was available from the Dubai immigration and police department to comment on this issue.

Trafficked to Syria

The UAE is not the only destination for trafficked Iraqi women. Syria is increasingly becoming a popular destination for traffickers, according to humanitarian agencies.

A report released in May by the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), the UN's Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP) spoke of "organised networks dealing with the sex trade" in Syria. It made a correlation between the deteriorating conditions of Iraqi citizens and an increase in prostitution and trafficking of Iraqi sex workers.

"It is not possible to say how big the trafficking problem from Iraq to Syria is but we know it does exist," said Ann Maymann, a protection officer with UNHCR in Damascus. "It is something that has been kept quiet because people are afraid to talk about it."

Local activists in Syria say much more needs to be done to protect this vulnerable and increasingly exploited community.

Last September, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) co-hosted a workshop with the Ministry of Interior to raise awareness on counter-trafficking.

Maria Rumman, IOM chief of mission in Damascus, said the organisation was assisting a Syrian government committee established to draft a counter-trafficking law, and was waiting for international donor funds for a proposed shelter to assist victims of trafficking. Without such a facility, she said, surveying the number of people trafficked into Syria was impossible.

"The government agrees there is a need for new legislation and for a shelter," said Rumman. "But we have not received any reply from donors, including the US, for a year. The minute we have any donor commitment we will begin."

P.S.

* From WLUML website.