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Iraq: Iraqi women - the need for protective measures

Iraqi women must have an active role in shaping the future of their country, a new report by Amnesty International said today. Iraqi authorities must take effective measures to protect women and to change discriminatory legislation that encourages violence against them.

Women and girls in Iraq live in fear of violence. The current lack of security has forced many women out of public life and constitutes a major obstacle to the advancement of their rights. Since the 2003 war, armed groups have targeted and killed several female political leaders and women's rights activists. The report *Iraq: Decades of suffering - Now women deserve better* documents how women and girls in Iraq have been targeted directly, because they were women, and how they suffered disproportionately through decades of government repression and armed conflict.

"Iraqi authorities must introduce concrete measures to protect women," said Abdel Salam Sidahmed, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Amnesty International. "They must send a clear message that violence against women will not be tolerated by investigating all allegations of abuse against women and by bringing those responsible to justice, no matter what their affiliation."

Three wars and more than a decade of economic sanctions have been particularly damaging to Iraqi women. Under the government of Saddam Hussain, they were subjected to gender-specific abuses, including rape and other forms of sexual violence, or else targeted as political activists, relatives of activists or members of certain ethnic or religious groups.

The report demonstrates how gender discrimination in Iraqi laws contributes to the persistence of violence against women. Many women remain at risk of death or injury from male relatives if they are accused of behaviour held to have brought dishonour on the family.

"Iraqi authorities must review discriminatory legislation against women and bring it into line with international human rights standards. Most importantly, they must ensure that the new constitution and all Iraqi legislation contain prohibitions to redress all forms of discrimination and gender-based violence against women," said Abdel Salam Sidahmed.

A number of Iraqi women have been taken hostage by armed groups, some of them in connection with political demands. Women of non-Iraqi origin have also been held as hostages, often in an attempt to force a withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq. They have been beaten and threatened with execution, and

at least one of them, Margaret Hassan, has reportedly been killed. Italian journalist Guiliana Sgrena was kidnapped by an armed group earlier this month. On 16 February 2005 a videotape was circulated showing her in distress appealing for the withdrawal of Italian troops in Iraq. Amnesty International has repeatedly called on armed groups to immediately end the violence against women, including harassment, death threats, violent attacks, kidnapping and killing.

Amnesty International equally calls on the US-led multinational forces to improve safeguards for women in detention and investigate promptly all allegations of violence against women, including sexual attacks by their forces or other agents.

Women's rights organizations in Iraq have repeatedly called for measures to be taken in order to stop violence and to end discrimination against women. In recent years, numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other bodies working for women's rights have been formed, including groups that focus on the protection of women from violence. Women's rights activists are often faced with threats and assaults from the families of the women they support.

The report calls for women to be at the heart of the political decision-making process in Iraq, particularly when dealing with issues directly pertaining to women. It calls on for women to be represented at all levels to protect women's interests. Women in the next government and the elected National Assembly must take the lead in ensuring that Iraqi legislation and future amendments are in total harmony with international standards.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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