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Stop Violence Against Women Campaign: Correspondents' features #1

Iraq: The situation is worse than ever

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This article was written by a professional journalist who has worked as a correspondent in a conflict situation. It illustrates the issues contained in Amnesty International's report, "Lives blown apart: Crimes against women in times of conflict" (<http://news.amnesty.org/index/ENGACTION770952004>). The opinions expressed in the feature are the writer's own and do not necessarily reflect Amnesty International policy.

As a journalist, who has been mostly covering the conflict and war zones for the last three years, I have worked in Afghanistan, Iraq, etc. for some period of time. In all of these countries, what I witnessed was chaos, despair and slaughter of the people who might be described by some as the "normal" profile of a country in war. I met soldiers, I met fighters. I have seen dead bodies, had to film wounded people. Almost all of them were men. Men were in the front lines, in the streets, at the offices, they were everywhere... killing, torturing, suffering.

It is very hard to see women outside of their homes most of the time in the countries that are ruled by the radical Islamists. Women suffer more than men during wartime. They are killed, tortured as well, but most of the time they are punished just because they are women. Although they have to go through the same difficulties as the men do, women don't have the right to defend their rights.

My last assignment was Baghdad where one of the cruellest invasions of modern times has taken place. In Iraq, women, like Iraqi men, are facing the difficulties of the occupation. They have to struggle to survive; they face the shortage of electricity, clean water, food to feed their families, healthcare and many more. Every day is another challenge for the Iraqis to fight against, but women also have to deal with the unexpected consequence of Saddam Hussein regime's ouster: the lack of authority within the country that leads to more kidnappings and rapes. Another outcome of this situation is the wave of radical Islamists that is gaining power day by day.

Before I went to Baghdad, I was never aware of the situation of Iraqi women. I used to watch my female colleagues reporting from the Iraqi capital, but don't remember them wearing a headscarf or covering themselves. I thought women were freer there than the rest of the Middle Eastern countries. I was wrong, something that I realised when I went there.

The first warning came from my interpreter. He said "cover your hair; otherwise we will not be able to travel safely." I was surprised, but I realised that I did not have any other choice. Then he explained the situation; as the fundamentalist groups grew and gained more power in the country, they started applying their own rules. Their first target was the women in the society. They are not allowed into the public without covering themselves anymore. Even the ones who did not wear headscarves have to adapt themselves to the new dress-code for women because of the social pressure. The greater the pressure becomes, the more difficult and dangerous it becomes to stand against it.

We went to the University of Baghdad, where the education was hardly carried on because of the situation in the country. Universities are one of the places where you can see the clear changes in the society after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. The walls are covered with the posters of the new leaders of Iraqi society like Sadr, Sistani and many others. The student unions are more active than ever. Freedom of different thoughts and ideas is spread... but not for the women. The students and the teachers receive death threats if they don't cover themselves.

I spoke to one of the girls in the campus who did not want to give her name. She said that, during Saddam's regime, there was no freedom, but there was no danger of being killed because they were not dressed according to the Islamic code. She added the situation was getting more and more difficult for the girls at university and she was planning to quit the school because of the pressure, although she did not want to.

I met Yanar Mohammed, the founder of the organization named Organization of Women's Freedom. She said she started receiving death threats after her appearance on the television, defending women's rights in Iraq. She said the e-mail she received was saying "stop talking about the women rights or you will be killed." She added that she received one more e-mail like this and both of them were signed by a group who followed conservative Wahabi Islam. She believed it was a serious warning. She had to go into hiding, wearing a bullet-proof vest and avoiding her public appearances for a while.

Mohammed is not the only woman who receives threats because of being a women rights activist. Another woman I met was from the Women for Women organization, which was started by an Iraqi woman who was exiled in the United States. She said the organisation was founded to help women and recently opened other centres in the country. She added that they also received threats and could not go out of their homes for many days because of the poor security and half of their office staff had to leave the country for Amman.

Iman Ahmed, who is the director at Occupation Watch Center in Baghdad, also comments on the situation and says "it is very difficult to move around. The situation for women is worse than before the war."

One day I was planning to go to Najaf, the southern city of Iraq mostly populated by the Shias. My interpreter told me to wear *charsaf* this time, the black cloth which covers the whole body. He said that the Shias were more conservative and warned me not to talk to men nor have eye-contact with them either. I had to say "yes" one more time.

While we were working on the story in the city of Najaf, one of the fighters of Sadr approached us and started talking to my interpreter while pointing at me at the same time. He looked very disturbed and I realised there was something wrong about me. The temperature was more than 30°C and I was quite uncomfortable under the black cloth which was covering my whole body. The interpreter came to me and said "cover your hair". I was surprised because it was already well covered, I thought, but I was wrong. There was a small amount of hair that was seen and it was not good, not good at all...

I could not say anything nor could I think. It was the moment that I really understood how it meant to be a woman there under the control of such a mentality and yet that mentality seemed to be the future of the country.

The change of the regime promised to be a new future for Iraqi people. It was not. They are in a worse situation than ever. Every day we hear more about the horrible things that are happening in Iraq, but we don't hear much about the women there. We don't know about their struggle, their needs and sorrows as they don't know about their fate.