

Series of Online Roundtables - Dealing with Sexual and Gender-Based Violations in Iraq: A Gender-transformative Approach to Justice

Panelists

Ms. Hanaa Edwar, President, Iraqi Al-Amal Association

Colonel Hadi Nayef, Director of the Studies and Research of the Family and Child Protection Department, Ministry of Interior, Iraq

Ms. Inas Jabbar, Activist, Iraq

Ms. Amal Saqr, President of Nama Foundation for Media Training, Iraq

Moderator: Ms. Frances Topham Smallwood, Senior Program Officer, Impunity Watch

Roundtable 2: Constructing the SGBV Narrative in Iraq as a Way to Address and Prevent its Recurrence

OVERVIEW

Marking the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, Impunity Watch, Iraqi Al-Amal Association and PAX organised a series of three virtual roundtables on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Iraq. The second roundtable was held on Wednesday 28th of October 2020 to explore narratives and social constructs around SGBV and domestic violence in Iraq.

The session looked at the current state of narratives around SGBV in Iraq as portrayed by the media, the state and at the community level. Participants including representatives from the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, activists, and researchers examined the ways in which these narratives are constructed and spread, and their impact on women’s enjoyment of their human rights in Iraq. Additionally, the roundtable looked at the effects of discriminatory laws, negative dominant media discourses, and restrictive community norms surrounding SGBV, leading to a culture of fear and concealment by survivors. Throughout the session, participants explored ways to produce more productive narratives, to create safe spaces for survivors to tell their stories, and to prevent the further spread of SGBV in Iraq.

UNHELPFUL MEDIA NARRATIVES

Repeated conflict, coupled with the deterioration of the economic situation, protracted displacement, overpopulation of refugee camps, has led to an increase in SGBV cases in Iraq, compounded by the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, media and popular narratives that place the blame for SGBV on the victim rather than the perpetrator worsen the situation and contribute to a culture of silence and impunity.

Representative of the Nama Foundation for Media Training, Ms. Amal Saqr explained that media outlets in Iraq need more knowledge on how to deal with sensitive issues such as SGBV and domestic violence more professionally. Additionally, participants noted that most Iraqi media outlets are politically

affiliated, with a very low number of independent media outlets. Media outlets fail to explore the background and root causes of violence against women, and instead tend to question the morals and behaviour of women that suffered from violence. Similarly, journalists do not put enough effort into understanding the motives in cases where women are suspected of committing violence. Instead of contributing to breaking the silence around SGBV, the media usually simply presents statements by the Ministry of Interior regarding SGBV cases, with no investigative work to understand root causes or contribute to spreading more productive narratives that could serve to encourage victims to speak out or to deter perpetrators.

CULTURE OF SILENCE

Participants highlighted the prevalent culture of silence among survivors, due to stigmatising traditions, norms and social practices. They attributed this to an underlying belief in many Iraqi communities that SGBV is a domestic affair or a family secret that no one outside of the household should interfere in. SGBV crimes are regularly covered up by families and communities, and identified as so-called honour crimes or suicide. Additionally, the silence around SGBV cases is reinforced by gender roles that portray women as an object of enjoyment for men and dictate that they should dedicate their lives to the household. Such attitudes enjoy wide political and cultural acceptance, and activists that try to challenge these norms are often portrayed negatively, as acting against their own people and community.

Participants recognized and praised the role of survivors in breaking the culture of silence, highlighting in particular the role of Yazidi women in shedding light on violations committed by ISIS. Outspoken activists like Nadia Murad were praised for raising awareness about sexual violence and SGBV in Iraq on an international level.

DISCRIMINATORY LAWS

Participants shed light on discriminatory articles in Iraqi law, which are contributing to the

normalization of SGBV in the community. For example, the penal code (1969) articles need to be updated, and especially those related to the punishment of SGBV crimes. CEDAW also recommends the revision of a number of articles from the penal code, such as the punishment of sex work with the death penalty.

Participants noted that women survivors of SGBV and domestic violence feel hopeless and stuck, in the absence of legal safeguards and official bodies that can support them. Too often, Iraqi law imposes sanctions on women and blames them for their own suffering. It also allows perpetrators to escape punishment through provisions offering mitigated sentencing in so-called honour crimes.

Participants noted the absence of dedicated courts to address SGBV cases and domestic violence cases, mentioning that the high council created dedicated family courts in 2015, but they were then dismantled, due to the absence of a law to regulate their work. Participants also stressed that women should be appointed as judges at these courts. Currently, the existing civil courts prioritize security crimes, while SGBV crimes are considered secondary.

Representative of the Family and Child Protection Department at the Ministry of Interior, Colonel Hadi Nayef, outlined the efforts of his department to tackle SGBV, including by receiving complaints of domestic violence. The

complaints are received at the unit by survivors physically coming to the department, or through

submitting their case on the dedicated hotline for domestic violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- I. The need to ratify the law on domestic violence, which has been under review since 2012. Once ratified the Family and Child Protection department can establish safe shelters for victims of domestic violence, and set up dedicated courts for SGBV cases.
- II. Establish and support safe shelters for women survivors and victims of domestic violence, to help them recover through health services, psychological support, and legal advice.
- III. Judicial reforms to set up effective policies that ensure protection of survivors, and prevention of increased violence against women.
- IV. Appointment of women in official leadership roles, and especially in units that are directly in contact with survivors.
- V. Sensitizing the security services and other state bodies to SGBV issues.
- VI. Supporting independent media outlets, including capacity building to sustain their work and grow.
- VII. Amend the legal framework to protect independent media and journalists, and access to information.

To know more about SGBV in Iraq:

[Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Iraq 2013-2018: A Mapping report](#)

[Stories of Iraqi women survivors of SGBV: I Fought Back and Survived](#)