



Women Under Attack: The Talibanization of Iraq

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Yanar Mohammed returned to Iraq from Canada in 2003 because she thought the veil of tyranny had finally been lifted from her native country. She and two other women started the Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), with the goal of fighting for women's rights.

But since those days, her OWFI cofounders have fled the country, and Mohammed herself has received numerous death threats for her work. OWFI, one of the few remaining nongovernmental organizations left in Iraq, has been forced to operate in complete secrecy.

"We live in a state of continuous fear -- if our hair shows on the street, if we're not veiled enough at work," says Mohammed, 47. "It's a new experience for women in Iraq. After four years, it's turned into Afghanistan under the Taliban."

Throughout much of recent history, Iraq was one of the most progressive countries in the Middle East for women. These rights diminished somewhat after the 1991 Gulf War, partly because of Saddam Hussein's new embrace of Islamic tribal law as a way of consolidating power, and partly due to the United Nations' sanctions against the regime. Still, as bad as it was during Saddam's time, women's well-being and security have sharply deteriorated since the fall of his regime.

Furthermore, extremists in both Sunni and Shiite areas have taken over pockets of the country and imposed their own Taliban-like laws on the population. Women college students are stopped and harassed on campuses, so going to school is a risk. Islamist "misery gangs" regularly patrol the streets in many areas, beating and harassing women who are not "properly" dressed or behaved.

Zainab Salbi also grew up in Iraq, experiencing firsthand the oppression of Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime as the daughter of Saddam's pilot. When Hussein was toppled, she too began traveling back to Iraq to work for women's rights.

"The violence during Saddam's time was ... committed by the government, Saddam's family, people in power. Now the violence is ... being committed by everyone around you," says Salbi, who founded the group Women for Women International in 1993. That organization now operates in nine countries, including Iraq, to help women survivors of war and civil strife rebuild their lives.

But today, most of her friends have left the country. Women for Women International keeps its locations secret and takes all sorts of security precautions. Salbi herself stopped traveling back to her homeland two years ago. "At first I was able to say I knew 10, 20 women who had been assassinated," she says. "Now, I've

lost count. ... They are pharmacists, professors, reporters, activists ..."

"Often, the first salvo in a war for theocracy is a systematic attack on women and minorities who represent or demand an alternative or competing vision for society," wrote Yifat Susskind, Iraq coordinator of the international human- and women's-rights organization MADRE, in a report she authored on "gender apartheid" in Iraq. "These initial targets are usually the most marginalized and, therefore, most vulnerable members of society, and once they are dealt with, fundamentalist forces then proceed towards less vulnerable targets."

In some parts of Baghdad, like the Shiite slum of Sadr City, religious courts following strict interpretations of sharia law have become the de facto authority. "We used to have a government that was almost secular. It had one dictator," says Yanar Mohammed. "Now we have almost 60 dictators -- Islamists who think of women as forces of evil. This is what is called the democratization of Iraq."

Women make up 31 percent of the Iraq National Assembly, but nearly half of the women parliamentarians ran on the list of the Shiite alliance -- the group with major U.S. support -- and they have had to toe the conservative line of their party. Some of the women parliamentarians could be forces for moderation and progress, but the dangerous political environment of targeted assassinations has prevented them from being very outspoken.

Increased violence against women in the streets has had a parallel effect on the increase in domestic violence, including "honor" killings. In response to the rise in domestic violence, OWFI has set up women's shelters in four cities around the country. If the shelters cannot protect a woman, an "underground railroad" network helps her escape the country and set up a new life.

For those remaining in Iraq, a recent survey by the United Nations Development Programme shows one-third live in poverty and 5 percent in extreme poverty -- a sharp deterioration from before the 2003 invasion. Women generally have a harder time finding work in Iraq, and years of war have left an estimated half million widows in the country, according to OWFI.

The few women activists still in Iraq feel that time is running out. "Both violence and progress often start with women," says Salbi. "A classic example was with the Taliban -- they started with violence against women, and everyone looked the other way ... but eventually everyone suffered. We need to take this moment to raise the world's attention. Iraqi women are holding up, but they can't hold it on their own -- they need us to help."

For the rest of this story, get the Spring issue of Ms. magazine, available now on newsstands or by subscription at www.ms magazine.com. For more information on organizations assisting women in Iraq, and how you can help, visit the websites of [Global Fund for Women](#), [MADRE](#) and [Women for Women International](#).

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