

Guarantee Me a Safe Environment, I Will Protect Your Rights and Secure Your Freedoms

Safety and Protection of Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq



Shahrazad Team – Baghdad, Iraq

24 November 2017

For farther information please write to this e-mail address:

shahrazad@iraqicivilsociety.org

Table of Contents

Report Outline

I. Why Human Rights Defenders in Iraq Are in Danger

A. The Security Situation and its Effects on Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq.

B. The Social Environment and its Effects on Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq.

C. The Media Environment and its Special Impact on Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq.

II. How to Improve the Work Environment for Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq

A. Strengthening the Rule of Law and Guaranteeing Security for Everyone: Decisive Measures to Improve Protection of Men and Women Human Rights Defenders.

B. Raising Awareness of Women Human Rights Defenders and Explaining their Important Role in Protecting Human Rights for All.

C. Monitoring and Documenting Injustices Committed against Women Human Rights Defenders.

D. Role of the Media in Improving Protections for Women Human Rights Defenders.

E. Role of the International Community in Supporting Women Human Rights Defenders, Especially the European Union and the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI).

Report Outline

This study is based on the results of five focus groups that were arranged to discuss protecting Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq of all backgrounds. Sessions were convened to cover the following topics:

1 – Effects of the Security Environment on Women Human Rights Defenders.

2 – Effects of the Legal Environment on Women Human Rights Defenders.

3 – Effects of the Media Environment on Women Human Rights Defenders.

4 – Effects of the Social, Cultural, and Economic Environments on Women Human Rights Defenders.

5 – Guaranteeing Safety and Security for Women Human Rights Defenders in Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

In total, 78 Women Human Rights Defenders from the following backgrounds participated:

- 1 – Journalists
- 2 – Media Correspondents
- 3 – Civil Society Activists
- 4 – Union Representatives and Academics

The focus groups produced a number of important points on how to improve the work environment for Women Human Rights Defenders. These points were the fruit of discussions in the focus groups. This paper is a summary of these points, which fall into two fundamental sections:

1. Why Human Rights Defenders in Iraq Are in Danger?
2. How to Improve the Work Environment for Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq?

Each of these sections will be taken up in detail in the following pages.

I. Why Human Rights Defenders in Iraq Are in Danger

In 2017, Iraq weathered trying social and security conditions that left their traces on efforts to secure the freedoms and security of citizens in general, and this goes in particular for Women and Men Human Rights Defenders as well as the women who participated in the focus groups leading up to this paper. Therefore, this section is divided into three sections:

The Security Situation and its Effects on Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq

The Social Environment and its Effects on Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq

The Media Environment and its Special Impact on Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq

Each of these matters will be taken up in detail below.

A. The Security Situation and its Effects on Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq

The war against Daesh took a heavy toll on Iraqis over the past two years that was evident in every minute detail, especially the security situation. Young men went in droves to join the ranks

of the security forces and armed brigades to face Daesh, especially in the southern governorates where they formed into the Popular Mobilization Forces. Similar events took place in Baghdad and in the Kurdistan Region, where young men joined the Peshmerga. As for the western and northern governorates which had been liberated or remained unoccupied, they formed the Tribal Mobilization Forces and others to participate in confronting Daesh. At the same time, cities under terrorist occupation lived through horrifying ordeals, during which civil and human rights work disappeared completely.

The climate of militarization had a deep impact on the presence of Women and Men Human Rights Defenders on the streets and in public life; nevertheless, they were not entirely absent. Defending human rights took place in most governorates and in various capacities, among them the media, union work, rights activism and others. This presence was always laden with risks, and there were instances of threats, forced disappearances, killings, and kidnappings.

It can be said that critical factor relating to the security situation that limited the activities of the Women Human Rights Defenders was, above all else, the proliferation of armed groups amidst the weak rule of law. This occurred to the extent that some armed groups were present in force on city streets and took matters of authority into their own hands.

These armed forces became skeptical of the movement and activity of Women Human Rights Defenders, especially the goals and issues they espoused. It was possible that as a result, they stood accused of interfering in security matters, transgressing established norms and customs and going against religion, fomenting public opinion, looting, spreading misinformation, and other accusations.

B. The Social Environment and its Effects on Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq

Iraqi society in general suffers from the hegemony of norms and customs and prevailing religious and tribal authority. This problem worsened when Daesh occupied several Iraqi cities. And as we saw in the previous section, the confrontation with Daesh emboldened armed groups

formed by traditional religious and tribal authorities. This in turn augmented the influence of religious and tribal groups on civil society and encouraged reactionary thinking in regard to her freedom of movement in public spaces and her being consigned to stereotypical roles in the home taking care of her husband and children.

The furtherance of this traditional perspective on women makes it more difficult for women to move in public places, on the street, in the market, in the city, and in government institutions, among others. This certainly makes it more difficult for Women Human Rights Defenders and exposes them to higher risks. The most salient factor limiting them is harassment and restriction of the activists' movements and the places where they can be. Women activists take numerous precautions to decrease these risks, but that affects their ability to participate in public life and defend human rights.

The traditional religious forces attempt to increase their social control over women by positioning themselves as the supreme authority in matters of personal status. Once again, there are calls for amending the Personal Status Law with the aim of inserting clauses that would put them in charge in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and determinations of personal status, on the pretext that they represent Islamic law. This poses a danger to Iraqi women and civil society in Iraq in general, and it represents a grave threat to Women Human Rights Defenders in particular, because of their being the group that defends women's rights and human rights in general.

C. The Media Environment and its Special Impact on Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq

This factor can be linked to the first and second factor, as it is the inevitable outcome of what was discussed above. It is often the case that the Iraqi media echo the present realities of security and society, with most media outlets reinforcing the stereotypical image of women and excluding them from serious or lively programming. At the same time, widely prevailing views as to women, their behaviors, and their roles in society are allowed to circulate as if they were actual reasons for a number of societal problems, such as harassment and violent reprisals.

On some occasions, slander campaigns are carried out against women journalists or Women Human Rights Defenders through the media in order to restrict the capabilities of women in general or one of the Defenders who raises issues against women. Thus, one also finds women journalists themselves restricted in their workplace capacities to a secondary role in women's and family programming. Many women employees are exposed to threats or harassment if they attempt to exceed these roles or demonstrate that they are capable of doing more. It is enough to send around a rumor against a Defender or journalist in order to make her an easy target for exploitation or breaking them down.

The volume of threats faced by Women Human Rights Defenders increases on social networking websites and in digital media outlets. A number of women are exposed to harassment or slander campaigns or are targeted through false attributions of images, articles, or other written materials on these digital media outlets. It may also be the case that risks to her reputation make Defenders easy targets socially, perhaps to the point of facing criticisms from her family and relatives.

II. How to Improve the Work Environment for Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq

We will now propose several talking points with which it will be possible to improve the work situation of Human Rights Defenders in Iraq in general and the situation of Women Human Rights Defenders in particular. These talking points have been designed so that each takes on a specific subset of issues, as follows:

A. Strengthening the Rule of Law and Guaranteeing Security for Everyone: Decisive Measures to Improve Protection of Men and Women Human Rights Defenders

It is important to emphasize that Men and Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq are citizens of this country and are no different from their peers, only having chosen to take on additional

responsibilities associated with adopting causes tied to the respect of human rights worldwide so that Iraq can be at the forefront of democratic nations safeguarding human rights.

Therefore, the first step in protecting them is to strengthen the rule of law, the separation of powers, and looking after the democratic system in Iraq. The organization and accreditation of security agencies ought to be in accordance with measures that respect human rights as an essential step in respecting the rule of law. This will lead the state and its institutions to exercise a monopoly over weapons and the use of force, and for law to be the bedrock on which that monopoly rests. Guaranteeing security and the rule of law are the first necessary condition for guaranteeing a democratic society in which Men and Women Human Rights Defenders can carry out their duties for the public good.

B. Raising Awareness of Women Human Rights Defenders and Explaining their Important Role in Protecting Human Rights for All

1) We call on the Iraqi government to announce its commitment to the universal declaration of human rights, to foster awareness of it in concert with concerned parties, because of its significance and in recognition of the role played by Women and Men Defenders of Human Rights in protecting and strengthening human rights for everyone.

2) We call on the legislative authority to adopt the concept and terminology of Women and Men Defenders of Human Rights and to insist on inserting them into legislation connected with rights, freedoms, and human rights in general, in accordance with the measures and principles found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We also call on them to prepare necessary amendments to related laws and laws that still ignore the protection of human rights defenders and their working conditions.

3) We call on the judicial branch of government to adopt the concept and terminology of Women and Men Human Rights Defenders, and to insist on overseeing that in judicial decision making, as it pertains to Women and Men Human Rights Defenders of all backgrounds and whenever their activism is to raise human rights awareness or monitoring or writing reports.

4) We call on the UN High Commission for Human Rights to guarantee the protection of human rights defenders in all of their activities and to adopt its protection into the Universal Declaration and the measures that it stipulates.

5) We call on the UN High Commission for Human Rights to issue a special bulletin on Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq so that Iraq may be recognized as a pioneer in this area in the Arab world and in the region.

C. Monitoring and Documenting Injustices Committed against Women Human Rights Defenders

This paper calls on the UN High Commission for Human Rights and human rights committees in the Iraqi government as well as Parliament and NGOs to work cooperatively on achieving the following:

1) Guaranteeing that Iraq communicate to the Universal Periodic Review's Department for Men and Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq the injustices committed against them and communicate recommendations that these groups see as necessary for improving working conditions and addressing recurrent risks.

2) Incorporating the concepts of protecting Women Human Rights Defenders into reports, decisions, recommendations, and other documents related to human rights in general and women's rights in particular.

Creating a network for periodic review of human rights violations or the risks that defenders (of human rights face in general and especially Women Human Rights Defenders and sharing reports as appropriate

E. Role of the Media in Improving Protections for Women Human Rights Defenders

The media are capable of playing an important role in improving the treatment of women in media and moving away from sanctioning abasement of women and treating women's issues as

trivial. They are also capable of improving the work conditions of Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq. As for Women Human Rights Defenders in particular, this paper recommends the following steps:

- 1) Urging Iraqi media networks to adopt a program of conferences on the state of women in general and Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq in which media and civil society organizations can participate in producing an Iraqi Compact that would develop media discourse on improving working conditions for Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq.
- 2) Participating in raising awareness of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights within Iraqi media institutions, and through them the Iraqi public, highlighting success stories of Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq through even-handed broadcast programs.

F. Role of the International Community in Supporting Women Human Rights Defenders, Especially the European Union and the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)

1. Publicizing support for WHRDs in Iraq and mentioning them in country-level and international reports, especially in dialogues with the Iraqi government as well as emphasizing their rights to work and freedom of movement in accordance with the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.
2. Calling the Special Rapporteur for human rights defenders to visit Iraq and arrange meetings with Iraqi Women Human Rights Defenders from all Iraqi governorates, including Kurdistan.
3. It is necessary to provide long-term support for special programs for Women Human Rights Defenders in Iraq, which can be grouped as following:
 - a. Programs for protection, empowerment, and building the capacity to reach out to young Iraqi women in particular with programs for organizing defender activities.

- b. Special aid programs including legal aid (such as the Shahrazad legal clinic) and programs for protection on the Internet (such as the Shahrazad digital clinic).
 - c. Emergency programs for improving and putting into place security measures for Women Defenders who are in grave danger.
4. It is necessary to organize and supervise dialogue meetings on the regional level between Women Human Rights Defenders so that they can share experiences and develop strategies and action plans for protecting Women Human Rights Defenders in the MENA region.