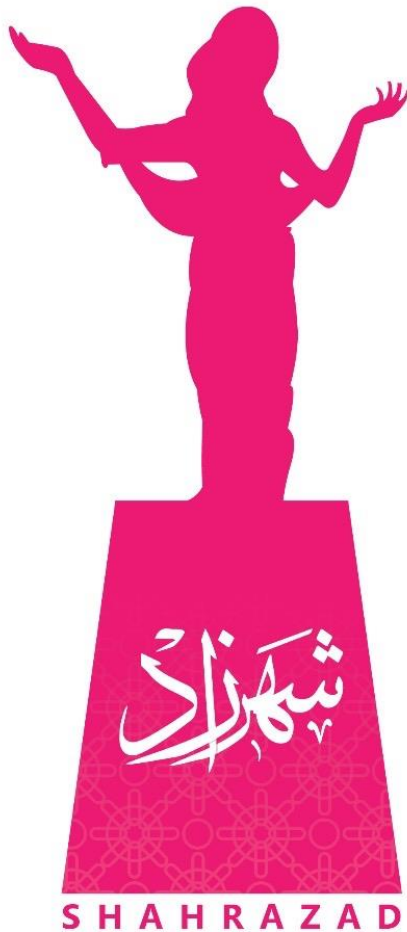


#SHAHRAZAD: MOBILIZING MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION
TO COMBAT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

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A NEW STUDY
REVEALS FACTS
ABOUT THE
PHENOMENON OF
SEXUAL
HARASSMENT
IN IRAQI SOCIETY

Iraqi Women Journalists Forum - 2015



Fondation Assistance Internationale

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BACKGROUND

The sexual harassment of women is one of the most damaging social phenomena in Iraqi society, and it is on the rise. This rate of increase comes in large measure due to the failure of Iraqi laws to recognize the phenomenon and punish those who perpetrate it, coupled with the continued power and influence of those norms — inherited from culture and tradition — which blame the women when they are harassed. In the absence of drafting a new and fair law, the only way to try to prevent sexual harassment, especially as it is born from the womb of social traditions biased towards men, has been ‘tribal compensation’.

Tribal compensation forces the harasser to pay heavy fines; he may be obliged to sell his car or home to pay. Also, given evidence that condemns the harasser, he may be forced to change his residence or place of work. But these tribal ‘remedies’ are often not applied, even when harassment has occurred, whether on the street, in the workplace, at home or at school. Many women ‘choose’ to remain silent for fear of being embarrassed or socially ostracized, which leads to the loss of their rights.

Given that the rate of sexual harassment is on the rise in Iraq, and the large number of cases recorded in hearing centers of civil society organizations by women and girls of all ages, it was thought necessary to investigate and understand better the causes of this dangerous phenomenon. To this end, the following study has gathered together systematically the views of women in Iraqi society on the issue of harassment, its causes, possible methods of prevention, and how to recover if harassment has taken place. IWJF, in cooperation with the Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative (ICSSI) within Shahrazad campaign, worked on this study which includes a survey of 200 randomly selected women from Baghdad and surrounding cities, as well as recorded sessions involving a group of victims of harassment. The study asked questions about violence, harassment, physical threats and sexual abuse, as well as some more general questions. The objective of this study was to reveal the rate at which the phenomenon of harassment in Iraq occurs, to examine its consequences, and to develop strategies organizations can use to reduce the many damaging effects sexual harassment has, not only on women, but on the entire community.

Sexual harassment really exists, but it represents a “taboo”: discussing it publicly is forbidden.

The study defines ‘sexual harassment against women’ as: women and girls exposed to targeted and unwelcome attention which subjects them to the desires of the harasser. Harassment may occur in different places: in the house, on the street, in places of work or study, or public places more generally. Harassment extends from the use of sexual or pornographic words, to touching or attempting to touch the victim. Harassment is a deplorable act by all standards, it is a form of sexism, and causes physical and psychological damage to girls and women.

Studying this phenomenon is difficult because figures and statistics represent only a small part of the suffering experienced by women, especially working women and students. The phenomenon of sexual harassment in the world, and Iraq in particular, is considered a sensitive issue, many of the victims of harassment are afraid of scandal, of tarnishing their reputation. In Iraqi society, the accusing fingers points first to the victim herself, so the majority of harassment victims prefer not to talk about their suffering.

SURVEY RESULTS

The study indicated a very high rate of harassment, where 77% of the women responding claimed to have been subjected to harassment, and 12% said that they had been harassed "sometimes". As to the type of harassment, 56 % of respondents indicated that they had been verbally harassed, while 20% had been subjected to harassment by "touch". The highest proportion of women who had been sexually harassed were within the ages of 31-40, and most were employees and students. The places of harassment are varied: 55% of the respondents were subjected to harassment in the street and the market, and 5% of respondents had been subjected to harassment inside their own homes! Another 7% were subjected to harassment on websites. 48% said that they were subjected to pressure to do sexual favors in exchange for advancement at work. The study indicated further that the lack of any supportive role for a social researcher in workplaces, schools and especially, in government institutions, departments, and educational institutions, directly impacted the rate of non-disclosure on the part of the victims. This was confirmed by 84% of the sample.

THE IMPACT OF HARASSMENT ON THE VICTIM

The study showed that the impact of harassment on the victim could be physical, psychological, economic or social. 12% of respondents claimed that harassment caused them physical harm, and 58% of those respondents who had been harassed asserted having experienced profound psychological effects. 22% of women who had been subjected to harassment had their salaries cut because they failed to respond to the desires of their managers. 79% of the respondents indicated that they remained dutifully at work, despite their vulnerability to harassment, for fear of losing their jobs. The study thus concluded that to ask that harassment in the workplace be recognized could have serious consequences: some victims were afraid of losing their jobs because of their resistance to the abuse and harassment of their managers. Also, to report harassment in a school, college or university could result in the interruption in one's course of study or even cause its definitive end. In general, the study found a prevalent conviction among victims that the offender would not be deterred by a fear of punishment, either in the law or by the community.

Harassment causes social problems for the victim which often leads them not to report it. 35% of the respondents kept their experience of harassment to themselves for fear of scandal, and 26% said that the community did not legitimate the claims of women, nor did it support them. 22% of respondents claimed that the offender usually went unpunished.

THE CAUSES OF HARASSMENT

The study has shown that there are multiple reasons for the growing rate of harassment of women and girls in Iraqi society, the most important of which are:

The negative impact of the policy which separates males and females, from early childhood into adulthood.

The study showed that the policy which isolates males and females in schools and universities, as well as in public places, seems to lead directly to the creation of a culture of gender segregation, in which young and old are separated from members of the opposite sex. Normal and natural relations therefore cannot develop between girls and boys and men and women, rather their interactions — when they finally are allowed to occur — are strained, full of fear and tension. The policy of isolation is thus counterproductive — because of it, children cannot learn that the public places are common and shared, and that they must respect each other. 60% of the sample said that the adoption by the Ministry of Education of the policy to segregate the sexes has directly impacted the rising rate of sexual harassment. 69% asserted that the existence of discrimination on the basis of gender in government institutions also contributed to the rise in sexual harassment.

Security decline and the loss of safety

The study pointed out that the current situation within Iraqi society has become a chaos which has, in turn, caused a growth in sexual harassment. There simply has been no punishment for the perpetrators of harassment. 78% of the respondents asserted that the deteriorating security situation has led to a high rate of harassment. The increase of sectarianism in Iraqi society has directly affected the reality of women, exposing them to harassment on the basis of religion and sect. 49% claimed that the sectarianism of some people affected the rate of harassment.

Poverty and the deterioration of the economic situation, and the reluctance of young people to get married.

The study suggests that the deterioration of economic conditions and high poverty rate have impacted the capacity for young people to meet and develop relationships that might lead to marriage, thus contributing to the rising rate of harassment. This was confirmed by 70% of the respondents.

Social reasons

The study suggests that social background plays a large role in the growing rate of sexual harassment. Iraqis society is a male dominated one, and the perception of women as inferior persists deprives them of their rights. Cultural norms and customs, traditions of tribal groups all support gender inequality, which plays a significant role in the growth of sexual harassment. Many people intimidate girls and boys, rather than engage in open dialogue. Also, the curricula in schools are almost completely devoid of subjects that push for greater awareness of others, the need to respect personal freedoms, and to share common and public spaces equally and civilly between males and females. 81% of respondents said that Iraq needs to change the curricula in schools for the purpose of raising awareness and reducing the phenomenon of harassment.

SOCIOLOGY EXPERTS: "SEXUAL HARASSMENT IS ON THE RISE". LEGAL EXPERTS: "THE LAW ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH"

Sawsan Jameel Al-Rifai, a prominent sociologist says: "Research carried out by students in the Department of Sociology at the University of Baghdad confirms the high rate of harassment in public places over the past ten years". She added: "The majority of women who were surveyed affirmed their vulnerability to harassment on transportation or at the workplace, and said that they didn't report it to the police for fear of being accused of being the cause of the harassment".

Nevertheless, 63% of surveyed women claimed that the presence of police near girls' schools would limit the occurrence of harassment. 98% of respondents noted the importance of enacting a law that punishes the harasser.

The Iraqi judicial expert, Tareq Harb, in turn stressed that over the last year, Baghdad's Rusafa courts received only four lawsuits brought by women against men on grounds of sexual harassment. He stressed the point that this does not indicate that the phenomenon is not widespread in society, but rather that in Iraq, as a traditional and religious community, women find it difficult to appear in court to file a harassment lawsuit, for they believe that this might affect their reputations. Harb noted further that most cases of harassment in Iraqi society end with an informal/non-legal 'reconciliation' between the two parties and do not ever reach the courts, underlying the idea that the law alone is not enough.

VICTIMS: SOCIETY DOES NOT BELIEVE US, AND WE ARE FORCED TO KEEP SILENT

Hearing sessions (names are aliases for the protection of victims):

Noor case

Signs of tension were clear in her movements, she tried to overcome them with a smile that soon disappeared while she told of what happened to her from her father, who took advantage of her in the absence of the rest of the family one morning, entering her bedroom, and trying to rape her.

Once her family members returned, Noor was quick to tell them. However, she was surprised with their negative reaction, asking her to keep silent, and saying: "What will people say if you talk? They will blame you, not him". So she swallowed the bitter pill of discrimination and forced silence. Afterwards, she felt abandoned by her family.

Noor says: "Home was the only place I feel safe, but after what happened, I lost the meaning of home, and any sense of safety, either outside or inside my home.

Abeer case

Abeer is a girl of 26, who admitted being exposed to harassment. She told us her story with misty voice: "I am an employee in one of the ministries, and I have been subjected to harassment by the Minister. He asked me to come to his office more than once, and offered me money and jewelry, and when I refused, he began to put pressure on me through work. He stopped giving me vacation time, and punished me constantly under the pretext that I was often late,, or generally reluctant to work, even though I tried as hard as I could not to give him any justification for these accusations. I was made a fool in front of my colleagues because the head of the department was the voice of the minister, and treated me hurtfully, and in an improper way. I requested to be transferred to another ministry, but my request was rejected and so I remained there for more than a year until I resigned and left my job. Abeer concluded her speech by saying "society will not believe us and silence is better than a scandal."

Najlaa case

Najlaa, a 20 year old college student, recounted her story saying: "I am a third year student in the Faculty of Physical Education, I had been molested by a teacher who alluded more than once to his admiration for me, and said that he was ready to help me in the examinations, I did not expect that a professor, for whom I have the highest respect, would make such advances, especially given the difference in our ages. More than once, he asked me to come to his office under the pretext that there were college lectures or activities that I should participate in, but the talk about exams and activities

turned into sexual innuendos, and hints about having a relationship". Najlaa continues: "I could not then respond or to ask him to stop because I was scared, especially due to his position in the college: if I tried to talk to the dean about what he was doing, I was sure that he would not believe me. So after informing my mother about it, she advised me to record his voice and what he said during our meetings. I was actually able to record our conversations more than once, and I also was able to record his threat to dismiss or fail me in his subject if I didn't respond to his requests". Najlaa adds: "Because of this recording I was able to protect myself. My mother told him that we had a recording that condemned him, and if he didn't stop harassing her daughter, it would be handed to the dean and Ministry as a complaint filed against him.

Najlaa says that she asked her mother to reveal what he had done, but she refused, saying that the community that we live in is ruthless, and my reputation would be damaged. She even refused to inform my father. Najlaa stressed that her colleagues had been subjected to the same thing: "Some give in to the intense pressure, either to shorten the road to graduation, or to escape from failing exams, while others suffer from bargaining. There is always a professor who awaits their agreement, otherwise success in exams remains elusive.

Lamiaa case

Lamia is a 40 year old, married woman and employed. She used to take her children to school every day, and told us her story, saying that when she drives in her car she is exposed to various types of indecent speech. The incident which remained most firmly in her mind was that day that she was with her oldest son (18 years old), and was taking him to his school. A passer-by called out to her, shouting inappropriate and vulgar words. Lamiaa added: "after this, my son refused to let me take him to school anymore, because these men would make him hear more harassing language. Even now my son refuses to let me take him anywhere, even though I tried to explain that this kind of abuse has become normal and expected on the streets.

In the discussion that followed this story, one of Lamiaa's friends, Haneen, 30 years old, said: "Verbal harassment in streets has become a common thing, I do not know why some men do this, despite the fact that their words are offensive to everyone, and do them no apparent good. She added that there is harassment on public transportation (buses), and confirmed that she was subjected to verbal harassment more than once, both in the market and the street.

SET OF SOLUTIONS AND REMEDIES OFFERED BY THE STUDY IN ORDER TO CONFRONT THE PHENOMENON OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

A - Social solutions:

1. In public work places and official departments and universities: Establish a clearly defined role for the social researcher for the purpose of psychological rehabilitation and to encourage women to report harassment and develop practical solutions. Conduct regular dialogues about the phenomenon, and propose solutions that promote civilized co-existence between the sexes on the basis of equality and respect for personal freedoms.
2. In schools: stop the separation of male and female children and teaching faculty and direct a new strategy designed to promote equality and coexistence between males and females in educational institutions.
3. Change the school curriculum in order to promote equality and respect for personal freedoms and coexistence in public places between males and females, and the addition of subjects that include sexual education among students.
4. Open safe places for women who are exposed to harassment within home, and with support from parents, and implement rehabilitation programs for harassers.
5. Provide hotlines with psychologists to help victims to overcome the psychological and neurological effects of sexual harassment.
6. Launch a wide media campaign to reduce the phenomenon of harassment, and to urge media organizations to deal with harassment issues in their programs and not to shy away from them under the pretext of 'cultural sensitivity'. Launch programs to encourage the family to support the victim and abandon language of intimidation, and adopt a more flexible approach in raising awareness and guidance within the family.
7. Stay away from tribal compensations and traditions that do not fit with developments taking place in society, and adopt a civilized approach to understand and address the problem of harassment.

B - Legal solutions:

1. Revise and activate what has been stated in the Iraqi Penal Code no. 111 of 1969 in articles from 400 to 404, because it currently includes too weak definition of criminal conduct, and a punishment that is not an effective deterrent to harassment in any form, and so will not help to prevent sexual harassment
2. The application of those articles that work to resolve issues surrounding the harassment of female workers in labor law which was recently passed in the House of Representatives.
3. Ratify the draft law of Protection from Domestic and Sexual Violence that is currently in the Iraqi Council of Representatives and in the process of approval.
4. Amend the law for government employees on the issue of discipline (No. 14 for the year 1991), as it is devoid of any meaningful penalty against an employee who might harass his colleagues on the job.
5. Organize workshops to raise awareness among law officials and the police force, and encourage women who are subjected to harassment to file a complaint and to call upon support from the law.
6. Harmonize national laws, policies and practices to conform to international standards and obligations of human rights, including the repeal of all legislation that includes discrimination.

C - Economic solutions:

1. Organize government programs to support young people who wish to marry, ease the burden and costs of marriage.
2. Adopt public policies which raise the economic level of people, and intensify efforts to reduce unemployment, especially for young people.