



This occupation is a catastrophe for Iraqi women

What's happening to women in post-Saddam Iraq?

Iraq has the highest number of professional and working women in the Middle East. But very many of these women are today prisoners in their own homes, frightened that if they go out, they risk abduction and gang-rape. Their daughters are similarly imprisoned.

In the chaos of Coalition-run Iraq, no figures exist for how many women and girls have been attacked. But every Iraqi knows someone who knows someone to whom it's happened, and these reports alone have created what Human Rights Watch calls '*a palpable climate of fear*'.

49-year old Salma M. was abducted from outside her own house in Baghdad one night in early May. The gang that took her pulled up in a car that looked like a taxi. *'They put guns to my head and said come with us... They pulled my hair and pushed me in the car and started shooting at the house... There were ten of them in total and I was raped by all of them. They burned my legs with cigarettes and bit me on my shoulders and arms.'*

At this critical moment in Iraq's history, women and girls all over the country are in a prison of fear, frightened to walk on the street to go to work or pursue their studies. Yanar Mohammed, founder of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, told the New York Times: *'We want to be able to talk about issues like the separation of mosque and state, and the development of a civil law based on equality between men and women, but women can't even leave their homes to discuss such things.'*

Who is responsible for protecting women citizens and creating public safety in Iraq?

Coalition security forces and their civilian arm, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), are, as the occupiers of Iraq, responsible for public security and protecting the human rights of Iraqi women. Guess how seriously they take this responsibility. In September 2003 a representative of the CPA's Ministry of the Interior, responsible for the police, told the New York Times, *'We don't do women'*.

Human Rights Watch says: *'The failure of the occupying power to protect women and girls from violence, and redress it when it occurs, has both immediate and long-term negative implications for their participation in post-war life in Iraq.'*

Who is attacking women?

Criminal gangs acting simply for profit - they traffic women and children across Iraq's open borders and sell them, into prostitution and domestic service, or, in the case of small boys, into servitude as jockeys for camel-racing in the Gulf.

And other criminal gangs who claim political motives for their actions - they rape women to 'punish' them and their whole families for supposed links to Saddam (or anyone else they disapprove of). Salma M. believes she was attacked because of her supposed relations with rich business-people connected to Saddam.

Why is the climate of fear so intense?

Iraqi women don't only fear the possibility of violence against their persons. The rape of a woman stigmatizes her whole family, and under customary law a family can restore their honour and 'wash the shame' by killing the woman. This practice is not severely punished in Iraqi civil law: the maximum sentence for the perpetrator of an 'honour killing' is three years.

Women and girls live in an atmosphere where, if they are raped or even believed to have been raped, they have poor legal recourse and have well-grounded fears of social ostracism, rejection by their families, and even physical violence.

(Climate of Fear, Human Rights Watch, July 2003)

What you can do

Write to Patricia Hewitt MP, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and Minister for Women and Equality, Department of Trade and Industry, 1 Victoria St, London SW1H 0ET, asking her what measures British forces and the CPA are taking the end the blizzard of sexual violence against women.

Write to your own MP calling for British government respect of the Geneva Conventions (particularly the protection of women); an end to the occupation of Iraq and transfer of sovereignty to an elected Iraqi government; cancellation of all contracts awarded by the occupying powers; and compensation for the destruction wrought by the US/UK invasion and occupation of Iraq.