



RAFTO

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RAFTO PRIZE 2016 AWARDED TO IRAQI WOMEN'S RIGHTS CAMPAIGNER YANAR MOHAMMED

The Rafto Prize for 2016 is awarded to the human rights campaigner and leader of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), Yanar Mohammed (55), for her work on behalf of women and minorities in war-torn Iraq.

A great deal of abuse is inflicted on women and minorities in many conflicts around the world today. Sexual violence is often part of battle plans, and Iraq is just one of many places where women's rights are sacrificed for political and military objectives.

Mohammed works on three fronts to secure the rights of vulnerable groups. She works with local organisations throughout Iraq to teach classes on human rights, and as a journalist she spreads the word about rights and democracy. She lobbies for human rights in Iraq and internationally, building networks and alliances in the struggle against violence, human trafficking and sex slavery. And Mohammed and the OWFI provide protection for victims of abuse committed by militia groups and others. In the words of the leader of an Iraqi LGBT organisation:

'Yanar's contribution to human rights in Iraq has been crucial for the survival of hundreds of human beings. Her work broke a lot of boundaries for women, LGBT people, and other marginalised groups. Under her leadership I have personally witnessed victims of human rights violations turn into empowered human rights activists who pave the way for others to lead as well.'

Dangerous situation for women and minorities

The conflict in Iraq since 2003 has caused a huge loss of civilian lives and a dramatic deterioration in the status of women. A series of new laws have undermined women's legal rights. Whereas the law previously granted women independence and personal freedoms (including divorce, choice of marriage partner and choice of profession, etc.), the constitution now states that 'no law shall be enacted that is in conflict with the fundamental rules of Islam', which for instance limits women's right to divorce.

There has been a huge increase in abuse and violence against women, including rape, abduction into prostitution and honour killings. There is a lack of legal and practical protection for women in Iraq, as Professor Maha Sabria of Baghdad's al-Nahrayn University put it in an interview with the Inter Press Service, adding that: 'The real ruler in Iraq now is the rule of old traditions and tribal, backward laws'.

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A recent UN report states that: ‘The violence suffered by civilians in Iraq remains staggering ...’. From 1 January 2014 to 31 October 2015 at least 18,802 civilians were killed and 36,245 injured. In the same period, over three million people became internal refugees, including at least one million school-age children. The already alarming human rights situation in Iraq deteriorated further following the emergence of Islamic State (IS). This is a war Norway is now engaged in, providing military training to groups fighting IS in Iraq and Syria. The nexus of objectives, alliances and long-term loyalties is very complex.

According to the UN, the actions of IS ‘may in some cases count as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and possibly genocide’. Minority Rights Group International reports that not only are women a large proportion of the civilian victims, they are deliberately targeted and killed because of their sex. The UN claims IS has inflicted sexual violence on as many as 3500 women and children, forcing many into sex slavery. Most belong to the Yazidi religious minority, but other ethnic and religious minorities are also targeted. Militia groups on other sides in the conflict have also used sexual violence to control and degrade opponents. And women have been killed for not complying with Islamic laws.

The Minority Rights Group reports that, at the height of the violence in 2007, militia groups killed 133 women in Basra for allegedly transgressing moral codes. The bodies of most of the women were found mutilated and showing signs of torture. Beside their bodies lay notices warning people about the dangers of ‘offending against the teachings of Islam’.

The situation for the LGBT community in Iraq is also critical. Many homosexuals are murdered in horrific ways simply because of their sexual orientation. A report on the position of sexual minorities has the revealing title *When coming out is a death sentence: Persecution of LGBT Iraqis*. It is in this extremely demanding and dangerous environment that Yanar Mohammed, her organisation and other female defenders of human rights operate.

Yanar Mohammed – activist and organiser

Yanar Mohammed was born in 1960, grew up in Baghdad and trained as an architect before she and her family went into exile in Canada in 1993, where she worked for women’s rights in Iraq. On her return to Iraq after 2003, she was supported by American and Dutch women’s groups. In 1998 she founded the Committee for the Defence of Iraqi Women’s Rights (DIWR), and in 2003 she set up the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq (OWFI).

An important part of the OWFI’s work is education. Since 2003, Mohammed has been editor-in-chief of the OWFI newspaper *Al-Mousawaat* (Equality). She is also editor-in-chief of OWFI radio, which broadcasts information on human rights issues and democracy. The OWFI also arranges seminars, music and theatre performances and lectures informing people about the rights of women and minorities. The organisation’s head offices are in Baghdad and Samarra in western Iraq.

Mohammed is also a researcher. Miriam Puttick, author of the report *No place to turn: Violence against women in the Iraq conflict*, thinks widespread ignorance of these issues makes Mohammed's documentation of human trafficking invaluable.

Mohammed has a vision of Iraq as a secular state with a secular constitution, but she does not reject religion as such. Mohammed and the OWFI define themselves as a movement that opposes the violent forces that have been gaining ground in Iraq and combats tribal and patriarchal structures and a ruthless political elite. Mohammed is critical of all parties in the conflict, Iraqis as well as the international community, including the United States.

Nationally, the OWFI is part of a left alliance that has historically stood in opposition to Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party and is now critical of Islamic fundamentalism, and the forces of conservatism in many Iraqi tribal communities, in addition to the American occupation of Iraq. Mohammed herself is a member of a Marxist party which rejects the communist experiences of the Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe for a more humanist communism founded on the teachings of Karl Marx.

Mohammed has received international recognition for her work. She was awarded the Gruber Foundation's Women's Rights Prize in 2008, and in 2015 she made a speech at the UN Forum for Women, Peace and Security in New York.

As a human rights activist, Mohammed's life is at risk. She and some members of her organisation live in hiding. The homes of OWFI activists are regularly ransacked and their families threatened. This underscores the relevance of the UN's 1998 Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the 2013 Resolution on Protecting Women Human Rights Defenders.

Women's refuges and underground networks

Some of Mohammed's assistance to the most vulnerable members of Iraqi society is provided in secret, like refuges for women fleeing from sexual violence. The latest refuge opened in January 2016 and was set up specifically for Yazidi women fleeing from IS. The largest women's refuges are in Baghdad, but the OWFI has a network of refuges throughout the country, mostly in private homes. They also provide emergency counselling for women, and women are informed about their rights. As Mohammed herself said in an interview, they are 'transformed from victims into defenders of women'.

Human trafficking is a growing problem in Iraq, and the OWFI has been working actively on behalf of women who have been abducted and sold into the sex industry, offering shelter in women's refuges. For many, these are the only places they can find safety. Many women returning home after being subjected to sexual violence have been rejected by their families, or even become victims of honour killings.

The OWFI also runs an underground network that organises flight for individuals whose lives are at risk from militia groups, IS, or their own families and tribes. Women are smuggled into refuges where they are given assistance before being relocated to safe areas.

National lobbying

NGO-run refuges are illegal in Iraq. They are subjected to police raids and attacks from extremists who accuse them of encouraging women to turn against their families. Residents are frequently moved so as not to attract the suspicions of neighbours. The OWFI is therefore lobbying the Iraqi parliament to legislate for women's refuges. Now that IS is losing territory to Iraqi forces, the OWFI is asking for refuges to be set up to protect and assist women who have been victims of sexual violence and sex slavery in IS-controlled areas.

Mohammed and the OWFI are working actively for amendments to the Iraqi constitution and family laws enacted since the fall of Saddam. The OWFI is demanding changes to these laws, for example article 41, which allows Islamic Sharia to prevail over personal status law, and articles in the penal code which states that a sex offender can avoid punishment if he marries his victim and remains married to her for at least three years, and that rape within marriage is legal. They are also demanding the abolition of legal provisions that permit or justify 'honour-based' violence against women.

The organisation is also pressing the Iraqi government to improve conditions in women's prisons. It is estimated that half of all inmates in women's prisons in Baghdad have been jailed for prostitution; many of these women are probably victims of human trafficking. Mohammed has documented conditions in women's prisons. Many of the women have been raped or tortured. This has also been highlighted in the Human Rights Watch report *"No one is safe": Abuses of women in Iraq's criminal justice system*. In an interview, Mohammed talks about a visit to one of the juvenile prisons in Bagdad where she met two twelve-year-old sisters imprisoned for prostitution: 'How can a twelve-year-old girl decide to prostitute herself? It turned out that they had been sold through trafficking networks,' says Mohammed.

Networks and LGBT rights

Mohammed works locally but mobilises internationally, bringing together national and international organisations. A good example is the 'Strategies for Change' conference, which saw Iraqi and Syrian women come together to cooperate in the fight against violence and extremism. The OWFI is one of 10 partners in MADRE, an international organisation for human and women's rights.

To boost their work, in 2014 the OWFI launched an Anti-Trafficking Coalition of 40 Iraqi organisations in response to the growth and spread of human trafficking and sex slavery in the country. These organisations assist the OWFI by for instance transporting women safely to refuges.

The OWFI is the only human right organisation in Iraq that champions and supports Iraq's extremely vulnerable LGBT community. OWFI radio confronts negative attitudes that stigmatise and encourage violence against survivors of sexual abuse and sexual minorities in Iraqi society. Their programmes provide information about the protections afforded such individuals by human rights legislation, and promote new perspectives in an effort to change negative attitudes

and violent practices against members of these vulnerable groups. They champion positive examples of tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

Women's rights during conflict and after

Mohammed has stated that Iraqi women are victims of the political disintegration and rising violence that came in the wake of what was called the liberation of Iraq from Saddam Hussein. For her, the purpose of the OWFI is true liberation. She points out that women's rights were infringed under Saddam Hussein, but that the war has brought a combination of permanently high levels of violence, new constellations of power, the dismantling of legal protections, and the reintroduction of tribal and patriarchal rules that make women particularly vulnerable. For very many women, life is worse now, and the OWFI's efforts to protect women and minorities will remain important for a long time to come.

Mohammed and the OWFI are fighting a struggle on a broad front for the rights of women and minorities: long-term lobbying for legal reform; documenting human rights violations and bringing them to international attention; strengthening and bringing together human rights organisations; and sheltering and protecting victims of abuse. They risk their lives to do this work.

Mohammed speaks out publicly and fearlessly on behalf of human rights and equality. She challenges the authorities to do more for Iraqi women and is not afraid to point to violations of fundamental human rights locally and internationally.

By awarding Yanar Mohammed the Rafto Prize for 2016, the Rafto Foundation wishes to highlight the serious human rights violations occurring in Iraq, the lack of legal protection that affects women and vulnerable groups in particular, and the crucial importance of providing protection to human rights defenders.

Human rights violations are committed by many different parties. IS is one group that has come in for attention, but rights violations are also committed by the Iraqi authorities and groups supported by the international community. Human rights and women's rights cannot be set aside in conflict; they must be protected. Responsibility for securing basic human rights and enabling organisations to provide assistance to victims of violations lies with the Iraqi authorities.

We call on Norway and the international community to raise human rights issues, and especially issues of women's rights, in their exchanges with the Iraqi government. These issues must also be taken into consideration when deciding which groups are to receive military support and training, and such groups must be required to respect human rights. In this work, Norway must seek the advice of Iraqi women's organisations. Women must never again be sacrificed in the pursuit of military victory in the short term.

The Rafto Foundation, Bergen, Wednesday 17 August 2016

The Rafto Prize will be presented at 18.00 on Sunday 20 November 2016 – Grieghallen, Bergen/Norway.

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