

Kvinnor
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Risk and Security for Women in Iraqi Kurdistan

A report prepared in January 2010

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1. Introduction

Women for Peace is an organization without affiliation to any political or religious associations or parties, working for peace on the conditions stipulated by women. We are working for solidarity between women across all borders, and as part of this, we have worked on the AMEZ project, a school for girls in Iraqi Kurdistan, since 2007.

We have conducted several trips to the region, together with the Network against Honour-related Violence¹. During these trips we have become aware that there are large knowledge gaps regarding the violence there, which is mainly in the form of honour-related violence. We have also come to understand that public authorities and voluntary organizations in Sweden are not aware of the difficulties and resistance faced by those who are committed to working with women's security in Iraq. Therefore, we think we have much to learn, and that is why we applied for funding to conduct a field trip and write a report based on this. We would also like to clarify that this report is not to be regarded as scientific. We are just reproducing the interviews we conducted with several key persons in the organizations in the Iraqi Kurdistan region - mainly with NGO representatives working with women's rights, protection and safety. The aim of the report is that it should be simple in design so that authorities and organizations in Sweden and Iraqi Kurdistan can easily access it, and that the participating organizations can use it at a practical level.

We have conducted nine interviews with various key persons. The interviews have been carried out by means of a pre-constructed questionnaire (see appendix) and we have adapted the questions to the activities of the various organizations. Our selection of interviewees has been both directed and random since we had scheduled appointments before the trip and other appointments were arranged after our arrival. The selection of interview participants has depended on aspects of time, geographical location and which people have had time to participate. The common denominator of the participating organizations is that they are working for and are committed to the vital conditions governing women's lives. We have also raised questions

regarding HBT, since HBT persons are also subjected to honour-related violence and oppression and are a particularly vulnerable group. The interviews have been recorded on mp3 and then transcribed and compiled. We have based the transcription on the participants' own words and summarized what they said in the interviews. As far as possible, we have tried not to interpret or make additions, but to remain true to the source. This means that some things that might come across as offensive are the participants' own words and not the authors' point of view. It should also be added that we have used an interpreter and interpreted some of the material ourselves. We ask for your tolerance in this respect

It is important to bear in mind that Iraqi Kurdistan is a very segregated society in terms of gender, there is a high level of sexual morality, and women are not able to move freely in society. For a woman it is, for example, inappropriate to walk by herself after 6pm -7 pm. It is also very unsafe for a woman to use public transport such as taxis; especially for young women, as several unpleasant incidents have been reported. In our interviews we focus on many subjects that are considered taboo and this is also reflected in the interviewees' responses. Generally speaking, we think that the interviewees have been very courageous and outspoken and in all ways helpful and supportive. This knowledge is of great benefit to organization in Sweden and Iraqi Kurdistan as well as in other parts of the world.

The division of chapters is as follows: introduction to Iraqi Kurdistan, the legal position of violence/abuse and the situation for HBT, returnees and analysis. There is also a short presentation of the participating organizations (see appendix).

2. Iraqi Kurdistan

2.1 Introduction²

Kurdistan consists of three provinces: Dohuk, Irbil (Erbil) and Suleimania. The total area is about 50, 000 square kilometres, with a population of at least four million. There are also Kurds living in bordering provinces like Niveva (capital Mosul), but many have fled or been driven away by the recurring wars and uprisings in the 20th-century.

The Kurds have been fighting for their independence for a long time and, since Iraq became independent in 1932 have striven continuously for autonomy within Iraq's borders. Their definitive goal, however, has been a state of their own. Kurdish separatism was violently suppressed by Baghdad and hundreds of thousands of Kurds lost their lives in numerous rebellions. During the 70's, a "policy of arabification" was implemented by the neighbouring oil-rich provinces, like Kirkuk (Tá'mim), which meant that Kurds living there were forced to register themselves as Arabs in order to benefit from fundamental economic and social rights, otherwise they were forced to move.

The Kurds' armed struggle was resumed during the war between Iran and Iraq during the 1980s and parts of the movement allied themselves with Iran. This resulted in consequences from Baghdad in the form of massive counter-attacks and massacres of civilians. Several thousand villages were destroyed in state offensive actions and, during 1988, an estimated 182,000 Kurds were killed. The Halabja massacre is the most widely known massacre. The Kurdish population lives in a clan-based society and has been deeply divided internally, which has meant that many Kurds have been forced to flee, either within the country or abroad, due to internal fighting.

The two largest parties in Iraqi Kurdistan see themselves as Social Democrats, but the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) is more conservative than the left-wing Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). These parties jointly governed the Kurdish autonomous region after the election in 1992. The first few years of an autonomous Kurdistan were very demanding since Iraqi military forces entered the area to arrest Kurds and other minorities, and also due to economic difficulties which

were a result of the UN sanctions. In 1994, a civil war broke out between the two largest parties, who finally agreed on a cease fire and Kurdistan was, in practice, divided into an eastern PUK area with Suleimania as the capital, while KDP had its headquarters in Erbil in the west. When the United States was planning the war against Saddam Hussein, the Kurdish region was seen as a natural base for the US forces and the addition of KDP and PUK military forces contributed approximately 50 000 perhmerga militia support forces.

In the new Iraq, the Kurds have been working for the state to be a federation with a weak central power, and in early 2005 elections were held for the regional parliament and province councils in connection with the first national elections after the fall of Saddam Hussein. In the same year, Massoud Barzani was elected regional President and Jalal Talabani became President of Iraq. Efforts to unite the parallel administrations, that governed a divided Kurdistan, did not produce results until early 2006 when KDP and PUK agreed to form a united regional government. There has been a disagreement regarding the border between Iraq and Kurdistan in the oil-rich region in the north for a long time. This disagreement mainly involves the Kirkuk province, where the population is mixed. In the regional parliamentary election in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2009, the old KDP and PUK parties remained in power, but were greatly weakened by a new opposition movement looking for reforms - Goran (Change). Massoud Barzani was re-elected as President of the region and Barham Ahmad Salih became Prime Minister of the region.

3. The violence situation

3.1 Preventive efforts

Preventive efforts to counter violence consists of educating women at a general level and in the area of women's rights, and also setting up centres where women can receive help with problems in their lives.

The AMEZ organization was established to help women to get out of the home, and only girls participate in the courses there. This organization is one of the few that deals with these issues, and it is the only one in Suleimania which is aimed solely at girls. This is because it is easier for girls to get permission to attend the centre, than it would be if boys had access to the activities. The organization receives a measure of financial support from the authorities and its work is conducted both by volunteers and by employed staff. AMEZ is conducting preventive efforts to get women out of the home and participating in society. It continues to encounter vulnerable young women with problems in their families. The staff claim that they have not encountered issues concerning violence involving children and homosexuals, but they are aware of the existence of such problems. The women/girls who need help are able to contact some of the organizations that fetch women from the school, or the woman gets there on her own. The problems that may arise are that the woman wants a divorce or that the husband has taken another wife³. There is now a special authority dealing with, for example, those who have been raped or abused and who should take legal action against the perpetrators. There is currently an ongoing educational campaign against corporal punishment, aimed at both the pre-school and university levels⁴.

The AMEZ vision is to improve their economy so they can develop their organization. The needs are substantial and today they only have enough financing to cover the courses in Suleimania, not in Halabja, even though the needs there are insatiable. The course participants have also requested a swimming pool for girls and a sauna (hamam)⁵. This would be much appreciated, particularly after gym training. Swimming pools are available for both boys and girls at different times but girls hesitate to go there since they might get a "bad reputation". Most girls/women are therefore unable to swim and they also claim to be afraid of swimming. AMEZ is working very much independently, like most other organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan. Sometimes the organizations meet in common workshops, etc. AMEZ is cooperating with two Swedish organizations, Women for Peace and the Network against Honour-related Violence. The organization believes that greater knowledge will reduce both men's violence towards women and also honour-related violence.



AMEZ in Halabja gives the women there an opportunity to leave their home temporarily. The women often bring their children to the centre since there are seldom any day care facilities.

REWAN

REWAN is a centre for information and culture for women. The background for REWAN's work was the need for women to have an organization of their own in which they could formulate what they wanted to do and which types of changes that were needed in society. Every employee or voluntary staff member is a woman who works for women in different areas of society, such as politics and the economy. Twice a week they publish a newspaper that aimed at women. The staff consists of social workers, lawyers, administration personnel and volunteers. They try to help vulnerable women. Fifty women are working at REWAN. The organization has no shelters but they have a close relationship and cooperation with the ASUDA-shelter, and also the Aram Shelter and NAWA shelters run by the government. Women are coming to them every day looking for help. They have different problems and wish to have help with legal issues, and also social or economic problems. For example a wealthy and educated woman came looking for help since here husband was beating and abusing her – in particular hitting her in the face in order to stop her from leaving the home. She went to REWAN anyway and told her story and that was shameful for her husband. They solved it by bringing the man to the shelter and explaining to him that if he continued such abuse he would end up in prison.

The politicians are positive when REWAN collects signatures in order to achieve legislative changes. Their lists often have thousands of signatures. REWAN sometimes encounters negative attitudes from the surroundings, implying that their work is making women "bad women" or making them "live a bad life". It is mostly Islamists that claim that REWAN represents the worst aspects of society and that it is influenced by the west and is becoming westernized. REWAN is trying to collect statistics over the cases that they receive and in their newspaper women are constantly telling their stories in order to get others to look for help and change.

Some women choose to remain anonymous. REWAN has a dream of a house for women where women would be able to live with their children. It would not be a shelter but a place for those who are not threatened. Today they can only give them advice and no direct help or service, and their experience is this sometimes just makes things worse.

Nowadays, REWAN has four large projects concerning women in society:

- discussions regarding sexuality
- legislation
- women's participation in politics
- women in the media.

REWAN works through its own newspaper, which is disseminated in the areas surrounding Suleimania. It informs women of their right to vote and how they can affect things by voting. It also explains how women can have an impact on society by working outside their homes and how they are affected by having financial independence and so on. In addition, REWAN needs education in treatment work on social issues, guidance and media training to improve the reach and quality of its work and to improve marketing of the organization. It also hopes to change the legislation that specifically affects women. One key aspect is to establish contacts outside Kurdistan to share knowledge, but also to obtain concrete assistance, for example with women whose lives are threatened, who cannot be protected and who need shelter abroad. The organization currently has five women waiting to leave the country but they have nowhere to go; if REWAN had international contacts this would have been achieved much faster.

CDO works on education

CDO (Civil Development Organization) is an organization working with education in human rights, mainly directed at women's rights. According to CDO, the Iraqi culture is violent and this type of culture has to be eradicated. As a result, CDO is trying to educate people to accept a culture of peace and democracy. Those who reject violence and believe in human rights are all potential partners, ranging from political parties to NGOs. There has been no open resistance to the organization's work, with the exception of some workshops at which human rights or women's rights are discussed. Sometimes during these workshops ignorant men have become upset since they believe that they will lose control when they can't decide everything and the women decide everything instead, and the men lose their power. The CDO team organizing the workshop, then talks to them and explains their approach.

CDO also works with refugees from the central and southern regions of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. The refugees are often marked by the culture of their region and often human rights and women's rights do not have a high standing in these places. They have knowledge gaps in this respect. Lack of knowledge is a way to retain power for those who have knowledge. For example women in southern Iraq think that women's rights are a foreign idea and nothing that affects them. They believe when speaking of human rights or women's rights that it has nothing to do with them but with women elsewhere, in other countries. They also do not believe that women's rights fit their culture. CDO then explains

that it doesn't matter where you live, and that this affects all individuals. Some accept this but others are so "brainwashed" that they do not believe it.

Culture shapes society

"The brainwashing" is due to their upbringing; they have been brought up believing men have more rights. CDO points out that if people have been living in an old-fashioned culture for fifty years it is not so easy to change their way of thinking in a seminar or a workshop. The argument that has been presented is that human rights cannot be a right and that this is incompatible with the law. Culture shows in the way you live and the way you are brought up. Those who are old-fashioned and have lived in that pattern are also trying to get their children to live in the same way. Culture is shaped by history and culture is all about how to raise children. It is also related to politics and economics. In the Iraqi Kurdish culture, honour is connected with culture and religion. Honour is understood as only being about women and religion has made men believe this. According to the interviewee, this type of thinking about honour, as only being related to women, is something new. Only two to three hundred years ago, honour was about being proud, courageous and proud of one's country. It had nothing to do with women.

This way of thinking comes from the Arabic culture. According to the interviewee, it is very important in the Arabic culture, and openly expressed, that women are connected with honour. Some believe that religion is what makes people believe that women are connected with honour but this is a misinterpretation. The interviewee has read the Koran and studied it and there is no verse which connects women with honour. It is about controlling people and, in the Arabic culture, honour is the most valued symbol. Therefore they have connected women with honour so that they are able to control women even more in a region where men are in control.

Education is needed for change

CDO considers that in order to change the attitude towards honour, education for everyone is needed. Education for men, women, children, young as well as old. Education needs to change and not make a distinction between people - men and women need to be treated equally. There must not be laws exclusively directed towards men's rights, forgetting the women's rights. Upbringing and education teaches that there is a difference between men and women, but this has to change. The interviewee would like to see more women in politics because if they were able to decide there would be less violence. To be able to guarantee less violence there have to be more women in parliament. Furthermore, there should not be any laws that permit men to have a second wife, i.e. polygamy. There is also an evaluation linked to CDO, and every month there are reports about ongoing projects. During 2010, a ten-year report of the organization's activities will be compiled.



AMEZ and CDO work with women's education in different ways. The aim is to help women to become independent by offering both practical education, such as learning English, and theoretical education, so they can learn about their rights, for example. This picture is from AMEZ in Halabja.

The family counselling centre

The Family Counselling Centre is an organization focused on counselling and therapeutic activities. During the year the centre has existed it has dealt with 444 cases. The centre accepts men, women and children of all ages. Women are in the majority and comprise about 60% of the clients. The clients suffering from PTSD⁶ are counselled at another centre, but sometimes they come for help and are then sent to the other centre. Those who come to the centre seeking help have all sorts of problems for example they are victims of physical or psychological violence. Many women are living with men with problems of drug abuse, like alcoholism, who are wasting the family's money. This creates problems for the women. Several of the women have problems of a sexual nature that they cannot discuss with their men. Often the men are selfish and only think about themselves in the sexual context. In their culture, it is taboo to talk about these issues. In Iraqi Kurdistan, the parliament has dedicated one week every year for seminars and workshops about violence and how to prevent it. Family counselling means that you have to work with education and information in between. It has to start with school education at an early age.

According to the Family Counselling; people who have been abroad, had relationships before marriage and have had children outside marriage can not return to Kurdistan since no one can protect them against violence. No place is safe enough. In Kurdistan, it also happens that women get pregnant outside marriage but this is highly taboo and a sensitive matter to speak about. In many cases the women have secret abortions. The centre has a website (an online newspaper) where people can ask questions anonymously. One example of the people who have used this website is a young woman who had intercourse with her boyfriend, lost her hymen and wanted to commit suicide. If the family or society had found out about this she would certainly have been murdered. The Family Counselling unit usually advises the women or girls to see a doctor for surgery to fix the hymen. The people who write on the website do this anonymously since they are giving advice on taboo matters, like sexuality. The man who owns the site is Christian and has been living abroad for many years which makes it easier for him to speak openly about these issues. Muslims feel more shame with regard to such matters and do not willingly raise them, but according to the Family Counselling Centre, this has more to do with tradition than religion. The concept of honour causes much violence. It stems from an old fashioned culture and

religion, or rather; it is applied in the name of the religion. To come to terms with this, more knowledge and a receptive personality is needed. The honour concept is deeply rooted in society but small steps have been taken and progress is being made. It is important that sex education is introduced in schools.

The Centre has also encountered cases of forced marriage or cases where the girl would have been murdered if she had refused to get married. When the family disagrees, the Centre tries to help by means of family counselling or individual sessions with the girl, and things have usually worked out well. Homosexuality exists in society and this is a very difficult issue since it is seen as a disease, even by homosexual persons themselves, according to Family Counselling. They feel a great shame for their preference and they think they are committing a crime against society; usually they dare not show it and they do not come to the Centre for help.

The Centre has three child psychiatrists

The Centre currently has three child psychiatrists working solely with children. Their own centre and one called Heartland (PTSD) are the only ones of this type in the area. The Centre receives no financial aid from abroad but it sometimes receives contributions from other NGOs for seminars or workshops. Their dream is to be able to assist everyone who comes looking for help and have a published newspaper for support and guidance. The clients would be able to take a newspaper home and in this way spread knowledge and information about the Centre. They also have a dream of giving illiterates in the countryside support and help; through seminars and outreach programmes. Today the Centre does not have the funding for such a project. The main objectives are a newspaper and then a TV show. The thought behind the TV show is that people who need help can visit them in the studio or call in to get advice. An hour-long program on a regular basis would suffice. Practically everyone has a TV and you need sensible informational programs along with everything else that is broadcast. There could be educational programmes with, for example, psychologists and religious leaders, who answer questions about tough topics like the circumcision of women, rape or forced marriage. It is important to invite people in whom ordinary people have confidence. An hour a day would be sufficient to increase knowledge. Today only music and videos are broadcast on the free television services. Only wealthy people can afford the other channels. The centre thinks that technology such as the Internet is an important tool to enable them to help as many people as possible.

The Family Counselling Centre also wishes to have access to shelters for women who are threatened and come to them for help. They also think there are other things to be done such as sex education in schools and education in both physical and mental health. Most cases that are handled at the Centre are about depression caused by other family members' interference, such as forced marriages. Another problem is violence against women where men are usually the ones using violence. The women who come to the Centre are often severely depressed; they have often tried to commit suicide. Self-immolation (setting oneself on fire)⁷ also occurs. According to the Family Counselling Centre, if research had been conducted, it would show that 90% of the suicide and suicide attempts have their roots in violence in the family.

KHANZAD

The **KHANZAD** organization's activities are based both on traditional courses and on outreach programmes for women who are in prison. **KHANZAD** works independently and does not have any cooperation with other organizations, except when it comes to workshops, seminars and similar activities. However, it helps out when necessary, believing that there is a need for more knowledge about women's rights than there is today. A woman should be allowed to choose what she wants in life; whether she wants to go to school or not, if she wants to get married, and who she wants to marry and live with. One major problem is that a woman can not choose whether she wants to have children or not. It is the family of the man that makes that choice for her. The woman may also not influence or wish anything from her marriage apart from accepting the one who is chosen. It is the woman's/girl's mother, father, brothers and uncles who find out everything they can about her potential partner before the man and the woman are introduced to each other; for example if he is a good man, where he lives, who his cousins are, who he socializes with, if he can drive, his activities and so on. **KHANZAD** would like women to be able to choose for themselves what they want and do not want. Many of the women who come to **KHANZAD** do not know that rape might occur within the marriage; they think the man has the right to do so. **KHANZAD** then explains to the client looking for help what rape means. They also focus on information about women's rights.

Everything about sexuality is connected with honour. If a boy and a girl have sex outside marriage, this is looked upon as shameful in their culture and a crime against honour even if they love each other very much. There are no real laws against this since the law in the country stems from religion. The honour concept is based on religion. This is not mentioned in the civil code of laws. Abortions are not allowed and this is also related to honour. Although abortion is not allowed, people who can afford it might have one, either in private or public clinics. In the culture of the country, the concept of the hymen⁸ is very important. As a result, a girl has to bleed at the first intercourse after getting married; otherwise she might have had sex with someone without anyone knowing it. Some women don't bleed on their first intercourse and this means, according to the culture, that she has had intercourse before marriage. Questions about honour and talking about honour are still very taboo.



Young girls are often exposed to the spreading of rumours, often without any factual basis, and the slightest mistake may have severe consequences. One result of modern technology is that men have sometimes taken pictures of a girl and then used Photoshop to attach the girl's face to pornographic pictures. This has had serious consequences for many girls and, as a result, they do not want to have their pictures taken. This picture is of schoolgirls in Halabja.

3.2 The emergency situation

The first women's shelters, or the small protection houses as they were called, were created in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1994/1995 by women belonging to various liberal and communist factions or parties.

Political differences arose between these groups and the protection houses were closed but there was still a need for them. The women who had been staying at the shelters could no longer stay there and former personnel brought them to their homes instead. After the civil war in 1996 establishing any new shelters was not on the agenda but the winds changed and for example NPA (Norwegian Peoples Aid) opened a shelter in 1999. The shelters that were established at this time were linked to the various political parties but the idea of an independent shelter started to flourish within the women's union. This led to the opening of ASUDA in 2000-2001 with the support of a Norwegian aid organization; first they opened a centre for women and thereafter a shelter. The establishment of the shelter met with a great deal of resistance and several politicians wanted to close it despite the considerable need for its services. Initially, there were many difficulties; for example the staff were forced to stay at the shelters overnight since the women were fighting. Lately they have

had problems with racism amongst the women, for example when female guest workers sought help and the other women refused to eat with them.

ASUDA works like a miniature society, which makes considerable demands on the people staying there. There is room for 12 women and children but sometimes they are forced to take in as many as 20. At such times there are beds everywhere; they need at least two more rooms in view of the current situation. After a serious attack in 2009, when private armed guards were trying to take some of the women from the shelter, the shelter has taken security measures. It is staffed 24 hours a day and has camera surveillance. During the attack, the staff were threatened with guns and physically assaulted. Today, both the offices and the shelter have camera surveillance for the security of the staff and the women. After this event they also installed a direct telephone line to the police. There is also a signal system between the shelter and the office; after a couple of signals the phone connects to the supervisors and the Head of Security's mobile telephone.

Over the years, ASUDA has encountered many difficulties with the staff, from the government, from the families, and also from the women staying at the shelter. Despite these difficulties they are continuing their work. There is still no good way of protecting the women and once they leave the shelter, threats from the family often continue. Sometimes

they are kidnapped by their families and the threats are realized. There are also prejudices in society that women who are seeking shelter are helping women to escape from home and into prostitution. There are many rumours aiming to blacken their organization. The people who seek shelter often have severe social problems and some women even lie about the reason for needing help. It is very important to make thorough investigations and check the background of the person looking for help. Some women leave the shelter early before they have recovered. This makes it harder for a reintroduction to society since the problems are often severe. Another problem can be the staff. There is an unprofessional approach when work is reduced to merely a source of income. The salary is not very high and only covers necessities, and some people working there are volunteers. This is something that needs to change in order to guarantee the quality of the work.

The situation at the shelter

ASUDA has a special programme for registering the women coming to the shelter; first the woman is interviewed after she has had some rest and sleep. Then she is able to choose the name that she wants to be called during the stay. She is then informed about the rules at the shelter. During her stay, she has to cover medical expenses herself, especially if the stay is for more than a month. The women stay for up to four months, sometimes six months or longer. The woman who stayed there longest was there for two and a half years, but she ended up being sent abroad due to the threat she was under. At least eight women have been sent abroad over the years. This is because the problem could not be solved and their lives were threatened by several men. Once a woman was attacked at the shelter, but so far no one has been killed. This has happened at other shelters, however. The Directorate of Following-up Violence against Women requires a guarantee by the aggressors to leave the women alone at the shelters, but many people do not care about that. It is essential that the law is followed and that it works. Several changes have been made in the legislation but the implementation is not up to date and more knowledge is required. More than one politician needs to support women's rights. Since even judges, war heroes (peshmerga) and police are subject to the abuse of women, this is difficult; they are not brought to justice even though the legislation has been changed. There is still a large gap between the authorities and the NGO: s. ASUDA is preparing a report on women's rights which will be completed in the spring of 2010.

ASUDA is cooperating with other shelters in Iraqi Kurdistan. Apart from the shelters in the region there are also shelters for women for example in Dohuk supported by Diakonia. In all there are six shelters in the region. ASUDA wants a more thorough education of the staff working at the centres. There should be a common education programme since this would facilitate cooperation between the shelters. They cooperate internationally with The Network against Honour-related Violence, Woman to Woman and Women without borders, for example. At the local level, the governmental cooperation works well, as does cooperation with hospitals (especially good), police stations, the department of domestic affairs, courts and some taxi-drivers who drive the women to the shelter when they need help. Without good cooperation it would not work. Sometimes women who have sought help have been abused by bus drivers when travelling to the shelters. At a national and international level, it is important that



All hotels, authorities, department stores etc. have sentry boxes with armed guards for security, since the region is a post-conflict area with hundreds of thousands of weapons in circulation. The women's organization's facilities are no exception, and have at least one armed guard after the occurrence of several incidents. ASUDA for example has been the target of such an attack.

cooperation with the government works, otherwise cooperation with embassies, such as the Swedish embassy, will not work either.

Another important aspect is economic, since the shelters are very costly. Funding is difficult and demands a great deal of time and energy, for example in the form of fundraising. It is important that the government supports the activities since it is their responsibility. ASUDA also points out that other vulnerable groups in society also need protection. For example people with disabilities may be abused and exploited. One case ASUDA dealt with involved a disabled girl who got pregnant for the second time without being married. She was not a prostitute but a "family girl" (a well-behaved young girl). She gave in because she was afraid of not getting married and being placed in an institution. Help is needed for those with certain disabilities such as Downs Syndrome. Such help is not available in this society, and the situation is the same for people with mental health problems. ASUDA has dealt with one woman who had severe problems with her mental health - she tried to kill the children at the shelter. There were very few places to send her and ASUDA had to take care of her for a week since they could not just send her away. They tried to find a temporary solution, but in the end they were being forced to send her away, and she was quickly drawn into prostitution and is now in prison.

ASUDA points out that men are also subjected to honour-related threats, violations and murder. There is no protection for men; not even when it comes to threats to their lives. During January 2010, for example, there were nine honour killings in which both men and women were victims. One example of such a case was when a woman who was divorced and about to remarry, was attacked by her ex-

husband. The woman's brother, who tried to protect her, was killed instead. Another case involved a woman now living at the shelter, whose husband is in prison and has a serious threat directed at him. There are rumours of plans about liberating him from prison in order to kill him and ASUDA is sure he would be killed if he were to be released. The reason for threatening the couple is that they ran away in order to get married. It should be pointed out that it is very difficult to protect threatened people since Iraqi Kurdistan is small and it is easy to find people who are trying to hide.

ASUDA highlights that international observers sometimes receive the wrong information. One example is when a UN inspector recently visited Iraqi Kurdistan and studied a government report. In the report, honour-related violence was not mentioned at all even though there were eight cases just in January 2010. If the NGOs do not distribute the information, it does not get out. NGOs are writing the articles and talking to foreign media in order to spread the information. The greatest impact, however, would be achieved if the women's organizations could get together and disseminate information.

ASUDA is continuing to develop and is increasing its efforts with consultations for other shelters such as the governmental ones. This is an important and natural development - more cooperation and more education are needed. Hopefully another shelter can be opened for other vulnerable persons such as those with various forms of disabilities who risk exploitation or abuse. ASUDA considers that Iraqi Kurdistan is making progress, but the region has to be more focused and professional, especially when it comes to women's issues. One problem is conflicts between the women's organizations, and this has to stop.

Directorate of Following-up Violence against Women

The Directorate of Following-up Violence against Women is a completely new occurrence in the Middle East. This involves a state-owned shelter for women. The staff at the shelter are employed and consist of about 20 persons. This public authority is trying to recruit the best within the field, and only experienced professionals are employed. Media and information are important aspects of its work, as well as compiling statistics on the issues that are being tackled. A woman looking for help first must file a police report in order to investigate if there is a threat to her life before the police send her to the authority. The authority then conducts a thorough investigation to evaluate if the woman is to be sent to a shelter. The authority has received mostly positive expressions of opinion as regards its existence, even if there are persons within the government who do not sympathize with its work.

The authority views its task as difficult since, in many cases it runs counter to culture and tradition. According to the authority, there are more shelters in Suleimania and the surrounding areas, but they are NGOs, for example AWA Shelter, run by ASUDA, and Asura Shelter, run by United Women of Kurdistan. The authority has satisfactory cooperation with these organizations and hires them when its own shelter is at full capacity and, if the situation is the reverse, these organizations can get help from the authority.

On one occasion, the authority's shelter was been threatened and a woman in their care was threatened in its premises. Her husband wanted to remove her by force and

kill her. Therefore she couldn't stay at a regular shelter and the authority worked with the case until a solution was found. The women returned home when the husband had apologized and promised that nothing would happen to her. Since then they have been visiting her home and employees have reported that life has returned to normal for her. She has a phone number to the authorities so she can get in touch if problems recur since she is living in remote area where it is difficult to visit her regularly.

Shameful to be a single mother

Another example was when a young girl lied about studying when in reality she had met her boy friend and missed the bus. She couldn't transport herself to her house at night and got help from the shelter with accommodation since she was afraid to return home. It has also happened that a young girl has become pregnant after having sex with multiple partners, not knowing who the father is. Recently a young woman was in that situation and she was sent to the authority's shelter where she had a baby and she is still living there with her child. They are unsure what to do about the situation. One solution would have been if one of the boys acknowledged fatherhood and married her, which is what normally happens in this society. The young woman is unable to tell her family what has happened. Usually women have secret abortions at private hospitals. In society, a single mother is considered abnormal. Women who get pregnant and give birth to the child must therefore leave their families. It's a very difficult problem for society to solve. It would have been helpful if they had had access to reliable DNA-testing; which is not available today. It is possible to put children up for adoption to another family, but the children do not have the same rights, since they are not related by blood.

The reason for the focus on honour is the clan society that still exists, according to the interviewee. For example, if a man sees his sister or wife with another man, his honour is threatened, and his reputation is at stake. These are bad traditions that still linger. Those who commit the crime believe that their reputation is reinstated if the person who has drawn shame on them, often the woman but sometimes a man are also killed. Killing someone is considered an act of strength, but actually it is rather the opposite, a man who solves the problem peacefully is strong. According to the authority there are ideas within the culture - that men and women are not equal - that might seem strange to outsiders. It is important to have political support at governmental level to change this attitude. Every week the authority delivers reports to the relevant politicians and the media. The reports show what they have accomplished so far, how they give support to the women and how the violence can be controlled. The media bring the information to households via radio, TV and newspapers. Since many people are still illiterate, especially women, radio and TV are important channels. According to the authority many women are aware of the honour-related violence that exists, but due to the high level of illiteracy (about 50%) and lack of education, it is difficult to spread information about where to get help. The authority still has a lot to do when it comes to knowledge and information. They are doing this through national contacts with the ministry of domestic affairs. Sometimes they participate on regular TV channels and inform the public about the work they are conducting. This is something they do on a regular basis.



Iraqi Kurdistan is a very sex-segregated society, where women should not go out after 7 pm. since this is dangerous. The result is a highly male-dominated street view in the evenings.

3.3 Follow-up

Follow-up mainly consists of gathering statistics regarding the prevalence of violence but also of working with imprisoned women. The ASUDA shelter does not work solely with the shelter but also with trying to document the amount of violence.

It has investigators in every city trying to gather data regarding violence towards women, and also gathering information from the government. It is easy to collect information in Sulemania, Erbil/Howler and in Dohuk but it is more difficult in Mosul since it is a more isolated city with religious and ethnic antagonisms. The investigators, who are gathering data, are in continuous contact with ASUDA. This organization is also involved in evaluation programmes, especially regarding prostitution, empowerment for women and with UN Resolution 1325. Currently, a study is being conducted in cooperation with the university, which is studying how families of victims of honour-related violence think with regard to honour. Honour-related violence is collectively performed and the study is interviewing family members, who have committed or in other ways been involved in the criminal act which might have caused death or severe injury to someone in the name of honour. Nothing so far in the study indicates that the perpetrators regret their deeds. Rather they claim

they would do the same thing again if they were released from prison and the woman who had dishonoured them as still alive. This study is funded by the UNAMI a human rights organization. A scientist who is employed at the ministry, is compiling the report.

Self immolation occurs

The Directorate of Following-up Violence against Women compiles statistics in accordance with two criteria: simple cases and complicated cases. Simple cases involve physical abuse and unfaithfulness. The complicated cases are murders or attempted murder, hanging, burning, poisoning (sometimes the perpetrator tries to poison the victim after rape). Burning can be anything from someone trying to set the victim on fire on purpose, an accident or a suicide attempt. These are problems for which the authority is not yet compiling statistics, but it is well aware of their existence and is working on them. It is not always easy to reach the public with information regarding the problem and that makes it difficult to gather data on these issues. It is not clear how much time the authority has at its disposal concerning follow-up in the different cases. The authority is only recently established and therefore expe-

rience will show how much need there is and how much time is necessary. When a person has returned to their family, they only have contact through phone calls for a while. The authority wants to employ social workers/investigators who can follow-up the cases and they would like to have social research linked to its work. There are projects lined up in cooperation with the university. The goal is to have the results distributed to make the public aware of the authority's efforts to combat violence against women. The authority points out that the cause of violence against women differs from that in Sweden, not least due to upbringing and culture. The economic situation is another reason. Women are more economically dependent and have less education in Iraqi Kurdistan and therefore depend more on the men. When that changes it will be easier to change other things as well.

Working in prisons

As previously mentioned, the **KHANZAD** organization's work is based on traditional courses at their centre and also on active fieldwork by visiting imprisoned women. The visits to women in prison are made by a team of social workers. The organization has developed a focus on the dissemination of general information to more welfare activities. When they discovered that several other organizations were spreading information, they decided to direct their efforts elsewhere. They chose the most vulnerable group, imprisoned women. **KHANZAD** has therefore cut back on activities concerning the dissemination of information, but activities have increased in the prisons. They started by demanding better treatment for imprisoned women. **KHANZAD** spoke out for a women's right to a cell/room of her own, regular access to medical care, contacts with her children, visiting rooms and social interaction, as well as visits from social workers for those who have been abandoned by their families or are from abroad.

KHANZAD has achieved a few changes, for example, women now have their own cells/rooms and a common room with TV and air-conditioning, amongst other things. The prisons have also trained female prison guards, previously there were only men. According to **KHANZAD** they would have been unable to demand the things that they are demanding if they had been dependent on funding from the Kurdish government instead of external funding. Their independence enables them to adopt a more critical stance. They still feel that they have support in the regional parliament concerning their work, not the least in gaining access to the prisons to be able to meet the women. There are a few people working

directly with the prisons right now - one is working with custody and one is working in a female prison. There are women in prison with all sorts of problems, for example, prostitutes and women convicted of murder. They have not encountered homosexuality in the prisons, apart from male homosexuality. They have encountered imprisoned children⁹, often imprisoned for murder (for example honour killings) or theft that older persons have forced the children to commit. The older persons are using the children since the penalties for children are not as severe. **KHANZAD** does not collect statistical data.

Each case **KHANZAD** handles can take from one to two months and consists of four meetings over a period of two years or more. The women who are prosecuted are often in gaol for a long time before their trial dates. When the court steps in for the administration of justice **KHANZAD**'s staff is replaced by a hired lawyer. Today, male prisoners also ask **KHANZAD** to solve problems and this represents major progress compared to the previous situation when they had no recognition at all. Most cases in the prisons are honour related and involve murder. Unfaithfulness is also an honour-related issue. For example a woman who is being unfaithful may plot with her new partner to kill her husband. She is then sentenced for murder and if she were released she could be killed either by her own family or by her husband's family. The same goes for prostitution. It is regarded as a very shameful act, and if the woman is released she will be killed by her own family. According to **KHANZAD** almost all cases they encounter in the prisons are honour related and the most severe consequence of this is murder. Over the last few years the volume of honour-related crimes has decreased since society steps in and protects potential victims. The victims are taken care of after their time in prison by being moved to a safe place to live where they do not risk being killed.

KHANZAD's vision is to be able to get some kind of living facilities, for those who have no choice, for example prostitutes. If these women had somewhere to live most of them would leave prostitution and get a job. **KHANZAD** wants to give them a chance to start a new life, a chance they do not have today. **KHANZAD** has also prepared the "Ocean of Crime"¹⁰ report dealing with the situation concerning trafficking in Iraq. The woman who wrote the report for **KHANZAD** and who was working for the organization, was subsequently forced into exile.

3.4 Laws¹¹

According to one of the interviewees working as a legal adviser, honour is related to unfaithfulness, sexual relationships and relations involving jealousy, from which violence arises. The conception of the hymen is honour related.

If a girl does not bleed on her wedding night this might lead to violence, even if the girl is innocent. It might even trigger physical abuse and murder. Sometimes the husband is aware that she had not had previous intercourse even if she didn't bleed on the wedding night. In such a case they might go to a doctor to get a certificate of virginity to get rid of the criticism from the family. In Iraq/Kurdistan, a woman is considered to represent the man's honour. If something happens to the man's wife or daughters his honour is threatened. The worst thing you can say to a man is that there is something wrong with his wife or daughters. This creates rumours. Sometimes these stories are the man's fault and he feels forced to physically abuse or kill. It is mostly prevalent amongst uneducated people.

According to both *ASUDA* and *REWAN* forced marriages and child marriages exist. There may be an exception to the age limit of 18. Often the couple have an informal ceremony (religious wedding) first. There is no difference if the marriage is made legal as a result of exceptions or if it is informal, it is still a marriage with a minor, and girls are often married against their will. Forced marriages are still rather common with girls as young as thirteen. *AMEZ* points out that with regard to premarital intercourse,



Women's dress code is often dependent on which city they live in, how conservative or liberal their family is and so on. The woman's family often decides how they should dress.

the family can force the woman to marry so as not to be killed. If the woman gets pregnant before marriage she may be forced into an abortion by her family and then forced to marry the man who impregnated her. If she doesn't have an abortion before the marriage people will find out she was pregnant before the marriage. This is the way of solving the problem in more educated parts of society - in other parts of the country the girl may be murdered immediately.

Abortions are carried out secretly

According to the *legal adviser* having an abortion is illegal, but if the woman is not married and has an abortion she will only be sentenced to one year in prison. All abortions are performed at home or privately. Abortions can be performed at any stage of the pregnancy, in contrast to some other countries, where the maximum term of pregnancy is four months or preferably less. Sometimes the woman/girl is given an injection to cause her to reject the foetus. All medicines in this context enter the country illegally and so does the medication that rejects the foetus. An abortion can cost USD 100-150. Both the *legal adviser* and *KHANZAD* point out that rape also occurs within marriage, but is not subject to any punishment. Many women are unaware that rape may happen even within marriage, they believe it is the man's right to do as he wishes. When it comes to the dowry, this depends on the culture and family according to *ASUDA*. Some families demand a great deal of money and gifts, others nothing.

According to the *ASUDA* interviewee Sharia Islamic law states for instance that you must be a virgin when you get married. Virginity is directly related to honour and honour is related to the woman in the family. If a family consists of several women, they all entail honour. Sex before marriage is forbidden since this concerns honour. Under Sharia law a man does as he pleases with his wife and the woman has to obey the man. Child abuse is common, and also children witnessing violence in the home. A new family law to protect children has been implemented, but the shelters are still receiving many children.

According to the *legal adviser*, there is a political desire to reduce violence against women, but society has a long way to go. For example, the counsellor participated in a workshop and met a very religious man who claimed to be educated and knowledgeable. They talked about not killing women in honour-related issues and the informant was asked: How can you not murder a girl who has lost her hymen? The counsellor then replied: Is it OK if you have intercourse before marriage? The man was then silent. The problem is that people do not believe in gynaecologists who refute the existence of the hymen, but if a religious doctor told them the same thing, they would believe it. According to the counsellor it is written in the Koran something in the sense of that if a man has intercourse outside marriage and has a daughter, they can marry when she grows up since the man's water has no meaning. However a woman cannot do the same, since the child has grown within her. This implies that intercourse outside marriage is so much against religion that it has no meaning even if the man became a father outside marriage, but it is different for the woman. She cannot marry her son.



Children are often ill-treated in Iraqi/Kurdish society since their rights are basically non-existent. If there is a divorce they risk ending up in an orphanage if their father's new wife does not like them. Children are also subjected to abuse, which is something they do not like to talk about.

Changes regarding divorce

Both *REWAN* and *ASUDA* point out that many changes have taken place with regard to divorce. Now, both women and men are able to file for divorce. Previously it was only the man who could do this. With regard to custody, the woman is granted custody until the child is eighteen years old. If the woman plans to remarry immediately, the man will be granted custody, and also if she remarries at a later date. If he does not want custody it will pass to the grandparents. If they do not want custody, the court decides who will be granted custody. It is very common for children to be placed in an orphanage if the man marries a new woman who does not want them and if no one else can take care of them. If the mother dies before the children are eighteen then custody usually passes to her family, but sometimes to the father's family. Eighteen years is the age limit for marriage, but if the girl is fifteen and they have decided she should get married, the parents can sign an agreement to make this valid. They are then allowed to make an exception. A girl and a boy cannot live together without being married. Sometimes young couples run away from home together but this may end badly for the girl if the family finds out. She could be murdered.

AMEZ reports that there have been changes lately in Kurdistan and the demography has changed. More Arabs and Iranians are living there and another type of marriage has emerged, as practised in Iran. It is a temporary marriage. You get married for a week or so and then you get a divorce. This has become more common and is called *sicha*¹². Kurds are also using it now as legal (through the Imam) prostitution. This type of marriage is only conducted for intercourse. Sex outside of marriage is "haram"¹³ and is a punishable crime for women and it sometimes results in honour killings.

The honour concept – cause of conflicts

According to *ASUDA* thinking in terms of honour is a contributory cause of conflict in society. Most conflicts are related to honour. The existence of honour related violence needs to be acknowledged if something is to be done about it. Previously, there was a law that reduced the punishment for honour killings. The perpetrators were convicted for a maximum of six months in prison. This law was repealed in 2002 and now perpetrators are charged with murder just like other murderers, with corresponding penalties. Previously, the accused used honour as a redeeming factor since that was a reason to reduce the sentence. A man could, for example,

accuse his wife of being unfaithful, a father accuse his daughter of having a boy friend and a brother accuse his sister of seeing boys, but that is not now possible. According to Islam, you have to have witnessed what you accuse someone of with your own eyes and four other witnesses must have seen it too. Subsequently, the punishment is decided. This is also the case in crimes of a similar nature. According to *ASUDA* and the *Directorate of Following-up Violence against Women*, the law was abused and women had to suffer the consequences - they were killed. Hence, the old law encouraged violence against women. Sometimes honour is also used as an excuse for other conflicts. For example; conflicts between married couples are not always related to honour but might concern jealousy or financial issues. Prostitution sometimes stems from an unequal family economy where the woman receives no money from the man for herself or the children.

According to the *Directorate of Following-up Violence against Women* the punishment for murder can vary depending on the circumstances but, as mentioned before, honour is no longer a factor that reduces sentences. The sex of the victim is not supposed to be relevant. Murderers should be punished equally. The punishment, however, can vary depending on whether it is a planned crime, if the intention is to kill or whether it is an accident. Capital punishment - hanging - is very unusual today even though it is possible to receive this type of sentence. Today, a life sentence is more common. National law corresponds to regional law in this matter. There are discussions in parliament about changing family laws, but as the authority points out, it is very difficult to change Islamic and Arabic rules of law for Iraqis and Kurds. It also takes time to get people to understand that the law has been changed. Previously there was also a law that protected military personnel and police from prosecution and permission had to be granted in order to prosecute them, but today they can be arrested and convicted immediately.

A high degree of violence

Violence against women and children is still very prevalent and the number of rapes is very high throughout Kurdistan. *The legal adviser* dealt with around 130-140 cases a month in Suleimania alone in her time as a prosecutor. Women are also subjected to another kind of violence in their everyday life in the form of power abuse, and the counsellor was also subjected to this when working as a prosecutor. The counsellor could be questioned in a very unpleasant and harsh way by the police within her own authority and often had conflicts with them. The interviewee has used this knowledge when dealing with cases and has therefore been able to see the difficulties for the women involved. It has also made the actual work more problematic. Over the years, the counsellor has written numerous reports concerning the situation of women but has never seen a result of the complaints. The women's organizations have been some support but, apart from that, personal traits are what carry a person through the tough periods. The police have often slammed the door in the counsellor's face and when she has lodged complaints nothing happens. Iraqi Kurdistan society is very violent.

According to *the legal adviser* corporal punishment is allowed at home but only for the purpose of discipline. Physical abuse is not allowed. You are, however, allowed to pull a child's ear, for example. Previously, you were allowed to hit your wife but that is now forbidden. When it comes to

murder you may be sentenced to life imprisonment. Otherwise it is up to the wife to either forgive the husband if he has abused her or it is up to the court to decide on the punishment. All violence is not honour related. It may have other causes. Sometimes women are violent towards their children, and women can also be violent towards other people. It is not only men who are violent. In the cities, the situation is somewhat better nowadays due to the existence of shelters protecting women threatened by honour-related violence and women who are threatened with murder. Most people looking for protection there are not killed. The organizations working for women's rights help in this matter. There are three shelters in Suleimania and three in other parts of Kurdistan, but also some emergency facilities for shorter placements. In the other parts of Iraq there is only one shelter known to the counsellor, located in Kirkuk and enforced by Kurds.

According to *ASUDA* a divorced woman can today live on her own with her children but only under certain conditions - she needs a home and an income. A woman without children can sometimes live by herself but it depends on her family and other circumstances. The situation of widows is somewhat different. They receive more respect from the surrounding society than a divorced woman. The perspective on divorced women is still skewed. The legal adviser who has been divorced for many years has custody of her children. This person moves relatively freely but still receives comments, especially from people who don't believe a woman can live and support herself without a man. This has to do with economic aspects. In the last few years it has become increasingly difficult for a woman to remarry. Previously, it was relatively easy if she was a widow.

Returnees risk their lives

Divorced women who return from abroad or who have had children outside marriage run a risk of getting in to trouble according to *the legal adviser*. It is not possible to hide, the country is too small and rumours spread fast. Iraqi Kurdistan has only three cities and it is not possible to hide there. It is not possible to arrange protected identities, as is possible in other countries. It has happened that women have been found at shelters and shot. It would be desirable to send some women abroad. If, for example, the ex-husband has returned before the woman, the rumour has already spread, and the cause is lost.

The legal adviser started working with honour-related violence in 1991. At that time, women were being murdered on a daily basis. The legislation works better now, which is noticeable particularly in the cities. It is not as easy to hide or protect the perpetrator in an organization as it was before. Sexual violence outside marriage is regarded as rape according to Iraqi law and the courts, but not if it occurs within marriage. Nonetheless, pornography is very prevalent in Iraq. Some men watch it and then practise what they have seen on their wives. The level of sex education is very low in general, and there is a need for improvement. More action needs to be taken to stop violence against women and honour-related violence but not necessarily via the central governing body. The counsellor has attempted to recruit women into politics. The minister for women was forced to resign after the election in 2009 and all efforts had to start again from scratch. However, the ex-minister is a part of the team helping Dr Barham (the Prime Minister of the Kurdish region of Iraq). Several new laws have been passed to counteract the violence.



Many of the people interviewed pointed out the importance of women becoming financially independent in order to secure their rights. One example is women in Halabja who learned how to use a sewing machine in an AMEZ sewing class. The women subsequently started their own businesses to improve their economic situation.

A great deal needs to be done to enhance women's rights. The legal adviser points to more justice for women, women's rights to their own financial situation, a sustainable economy, counteracting rape, increasing the number of shelters (not least for women who have been forced to prostitute themselves)¹⁴, education for women who are imprisoned and health care and social and political changes to benefit women as areas that call for improvement. The laws need to be implemented. More research is needed within these areas in Kurdistan. Current research is almost non-existent. Efforts to promote women's rights need to be documented and archived and used in research and made available at the universities. All papers written within these areas also need to be put in a database and made available to students in order to disseminate knowledge. If this is to be feasible, Kurdistan needs peace and political stability.

When it comes to homosexuality, this is strictly forbidden according to Islam and the law is based on the Koran. According to *the legal adviser*, homosexual relations are punished by three to five years of imprisonment. This has to be supported by medical examination immediately, otherwise it is difficult to prove. Education programmes, primarily medical, have deteriorated and become problematical for practical

reasons - it is for example difficult to learn about the human body by studying it since the law prevents this. The law still has not changed concerning the possibility of touching the human body until it is buried. You cannot study or research a human body - you are forced to assume or adhere to strictly theoretical knowledge.

The legal adviser points out that the religion doesn't permit killing. Culture has mixed religion and ignorance which makes people interpret religion in a way that permits stoning, for example. The culture has more influence than religion. There is a verse in the Koran that reads something like "he who kills a person in society is the same as he who has killed Allah in society". Men have written the laws that allow a man to kill his wife for being unfaithful. The counselor thinks that this has more to do with the couple's financial situation: the man takes care of and supports the woman and therefore he thinks he has power over her and he can do whatever he wants. Many religious leaders are still uneducated and say what they please, which people believe. Nowadays more religious leaders are educated and are making correct interpretations of the Koran, but it takes time for people to change their views.

The legal adviser, who has worked as a prosecutor, also said that working with women's rights also involved working with resistance in the legal field. Such resistance has also come from religious persons who have scrutinized the counsellor critically. On one occasion the counsellor was subjected to an attempted murder when a car followed and attempted to run over her. The counsellor considers that such threats are common, which is understandable since her commitment challenges society.

Several of the interviewees consider that political goodwill helps especially exposed women but also state that a secular civil law is important for women's rights. Religion and civil law need to be separated. The civil law is supposed to protect women as well as men. It calls for considerable

courage on the part of the people in power to accomplish that, and it is also essential that more women are elected into the decision-making branches of the governing body. *ASUDA* pointed out that international support is needed to push these changes through. Follow-up and evaluation are required, and also implementation of the statutory changes, otherwise no practical changes will occur. The government also needs to collect knowledge from the public regarding what is good and bad for women rather than relying exclusively on advisors who have no experience in the field.

3.5 HBT¹⁵

Homosexuality is still a topic that is very taboo in Iraqi Kurdistan. Several of those who were interviewed had never even heard of homosexuality and had never been in contact with a homosexual person.

The Family Council Centre was one of the few organizations that had been in contact with and tried to help homosexuals. According to them, homosexuality occurs in society but it is very difficult since it is regarded as a disease even by the homosexuals themselves. They feel ashamed of their preference and think that they are committing a crime against society. Often they dare not show their preference and they do not look for help. It is difficult to find a solution for homosexuals of both sexes, there is nothing that the organization can do.

There is also no protection for homosexuals and it is very dangerous to talk about these matters. *ASUDA* once had a woman who they thought was lesbian living at the shelter and it caused problems, but no one dared to talk about it. No one cares about them or can manage to help them. *ASUDA* indicated that if they need protection they should be able to stay at the shelter without their sexual inclinations having any significance - the need for protection comes first. For men, there is no such protection, however, and not when it comes to honour killings either.

According to *the legal adviser* homosexuality does occur in secret and is a sensitive issue. Those who rape other men are convicted, but it is not regarded as homosexuality. Homosexual women may be encountered in prison due to the absence of men. In society at large, homosexuality does occur but it is very secret. Homosexuality is forbidden in accordance with Islam, and also in the law based on the Koran. Homosexual relations can be punished by three to five years in prison. A medical exam, however, has to prove that a homosexual relationship has taken place. The medical examination has to take place immediately, otherwise it is difficult to prove. The counsellor said that since homosexuality is still very taboo and it is far too soon to bring up this topic for discussion. Marriage between homosexuals which is permitted in some other countries is completely unthinkable in Iraqi Kurdistan, and it is not compatible with the current level of knowledge. Several of those interviewed believe that changes will occur in this issue too, mostly through enlightenment and changes in the legislation.



Almost all restaurants in Erbil (Hewler) are gender-segregated and therefore have one section for men and one for families (men and women who are together). In this restaurant, by the Bazaar, women and families are separated from the rest of the restaurant by a folding wall/partition.

4. Returnees

The Red Crescent Aid for Returnees (in cooperation with the Red Cross Sweden) started in October 2007 and the main purpose is confined to helping people who return voluntarily from Sweden to their residence of origin in northern Iraq.

Aid for returnees has no obligation to help people who have been deported from Sweden. Since they started they have had about 30 cases that they have interviewed, investigated and reported. Apart from that, around 100 persons have received counselling and then managed on their own. Sometimes Aid for Returnees encounters problems, but they are usually solved as soon as they get in contact with the right person. On the whole, there are relatively few complications. The number of returnees is expected to increase drastically over time and the project is preparing for this. It is not as alarming as it might sound, since many will also have housing in Sweden. They prefer to reside in both countries. Usually they are just residing in Iraqi Kurdistan for up to six months. These are the people the Red Crescent helps in the main. Hundreds of people are, however, returning without contacting the Aid for Returnees organization since they can manage by themselves. Those who stay permanently in Kurdistan are usually people who have had their application for asylum rejected and don't have a chance of returning to Sweden. These people are not the responsibility of the Red Crescent, since they have not returned voluntarily. Deported refugees have no one who can defend them when they are back in Iraqi Kurdistan. One problematic issue which no one has looked at more closely is the Mandaean¹⁶ situation in Iraq.

In accordance with an order by the ministry in Erbil/Hewler, people deported from Sweden are sent to Baghdad International airport. The ministry has directed the airport in Erbil not to accept these refugees. The refugees are being accompanied to Baghdad by the Swedish police. They are left there and have to get back to Kurdistan by themselves by car. Despite its specific tasks, Aid for Returnees has, handled some cases of people who have been deported. They were severely disabled, in wheelchairs or on crutches. One of the persons was left in a wheelchair at the airport in Baghdad when the Swedish personnel returned to Sweden. During the night someone stole his wheelchair and for two days he was left completely at other people's mercy at the airport. The Aid for Returnees organization then contacted the ministry of health to help him with a special electronic bed and medicines. They sent a team of medics to take care of him. Aid for Returnees does not know what happened to the man subsequently - he had his leg amputated in Sweden and is in a condition that requires specific medicines and treatment that are difficult to obtain in Iraq.

Those who return of their own free will sometimes have difficulties in adapting. The most difficult task is to help women and children in this situation. In particular, people who have never learned Kurdish and only speak Swedish have severe difficulties in adjusting to the Kurdish system. Aid for Returnees is trying to help them to adjust as smoothly as possible to their reintegration into society. This may involve schooling, work or housing. The Kurdish school system is very different from the Swedish equivalent and there are no special classes where pupils can slowly integrate themselves

into the system. A number of international schools are starting to surface and are easing this problem but they are private and very expensive. On several occasions, Aid for Returnees has tried to alert public authorities, organizations, employers and ministries to this problem and they are trying to help as far as possible. Young people who start school in Kurdistan after growing up in Sweden have no respect for the current system. This does not apply to all returnees from Sweden since different families have different traditions and norms. A young person who needs help and respects the system is welcome to contact the Aid for Returnees organization.

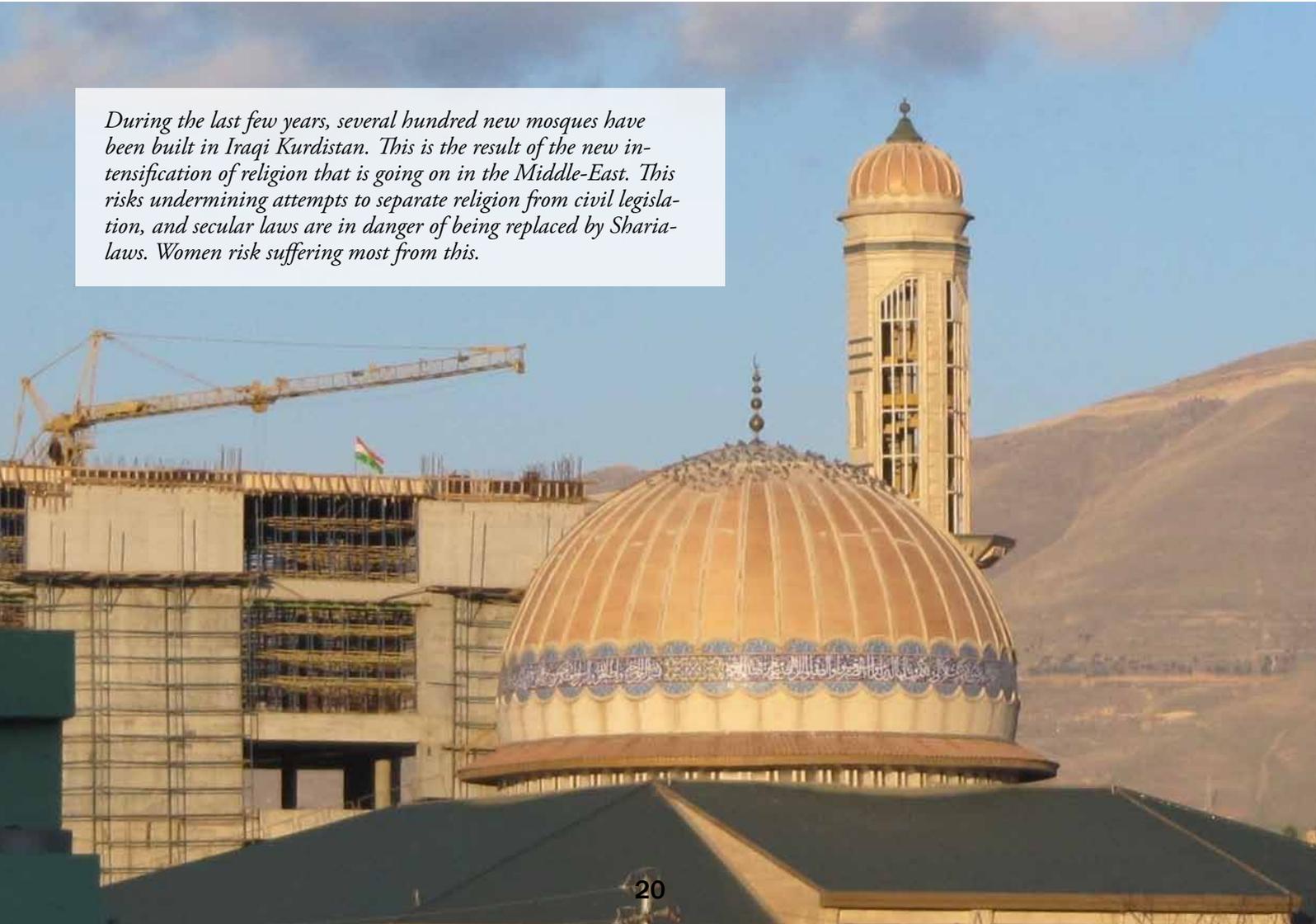
Aid for Returnees helps women looking for assistance, but they have never heard of a case where a woman was threatened by violence. They are aware of honour-related violence and if such a situation arose there are organizations that they can contact, or a party working with this kind of social issue. The woman concerned can also contact the ministry of foreign affairs for help, since these issues are within the ministry's jurisdiction. Aid for Returnees points out that if women are subject to such a threat, returning is a great risk. The organization therefore advises such women not to return. The background is that, in Kurdistan, there is a social order involving many restrictions in what young women can do. They cannot, for example, have a boy friend, smoke, ride a bicycle, dress the way they want, walk the streets by themselves or sit outdoors and talk to people - especially not to boys. These girls are living under pressure and, if they go against this or have done it in Sweden are exposing themselves to risks and pressure.

A woman who has divorced abroad is considered shameful and it will be difficult for her to return. A divorced woman can live on her own today, but the surrounding soci-

ety will talk of her as "the divorced woman" and spread rumours about her as if she was a bad woman and also blame her for the present situation. She will not be accepted by society and rumours will be spread, both by her ex-husband and her family, sometimes even before she has returned. The woman is often viewed as a second-class citizen and she will be dishonoured. She must have done something "wrong in regards to honour" in order to make the husband divorce her. They think she has had sex with another man (often the claim of the ex-husband). All these rumours hurt her. The Red Crescent cannot help women who are threatened on the grounds of honour and the spreading of rumours. They advise such women not to return, due to the risks involved. It is extremely dangerous. They also pinpoint the lack of protection for those who are at risk of honour-related violence and advise them not to return. In isolated cases these people will have to turn to the ministry of domestic affairs for help. No NGOs can guarantee their safety.

According to the person interviewed, the traditions concerning the honour concept have Iraqi and Arab origin - "the traditions of the Eastern peoples". The roots comes from the Prophet, but have been mixed. They are thousands of years old. The largest influence comes from the Islamic rules. The organization also points out that women's living conditions vary depending on which part of the country they come from. For example, in Suleimania the women are more modern and open. In Erbil/Hewler and Dohuk they are more reserved and withdrawn. The culture differs between the cities and the person interviewed thinks this is because Suleimania has more trade and communications with Iran, while Erbil/Hewler are more influenced by the south and central Iraq and Muslim and Arabic culture.

During the last few years, several hundred new mosques have been built in Iraqi Kurdistan. This is the result of the new intensification of religion that is going on in the Middle-East. This risks undermining attempts to separate religion from civil legislation, and secular laws are in danger of being replaced by Sharia-laws. Women risk suffering most from this.



5. Summary

It is important to bear in mind that the region has been ravaged by war and colonization. There have been civil wars, ethnic cleansings, attacks from abroad and occupation which, of course, have affected the development of the region and the development of women's rights in a negative way. Religious fundamentalism is still thriving and antagonism is still prevalent.

Several of our interviews have confirmed that violence against women is common but that honour-related violence is the form most often mentioned. Many of the women who are abused are under the age of eighteen and are therefore to be regarded as children. Men are also subjected to this violence and do not have access to any type of shelter. Many have stated that honour-related violence is almost the only existing form of violence. The fundamental reasons for this vary between the interviewees but the recurring theme is related to control of the woman's sexuality. The woman's potential breaches of societal norms are causes for "punishment", where murder is the ultimate form. The connection between the honour concept, a clan-based society and religion - Islam (which is the dominating religion) - and the basis for the legislation, is also a recurrent factor. Lack of knowledge in society is also given as a cause, where illiteracy¹⁷ adds obstacles which make often unsubstantiated rumours, sometimes a life-threatening truth. Several organizations state that women who are living with a threat to their lives cannot remain in the country and need protection abroad. On the other hand, many of these organizations do not, have international cooperation, which is something they desire. We are also discussing the issue of homosexuality and HBT in general. The consensus on this topic seems to be that this subject is still too taboo and people who are homosexuals are very secretive and try to go abroad since they risk being revealed. They will be sentenced to three to five years in prison if they are dealt with by the legal system, if they are not discovered by their family, which might result in honour killings. Homosexuality is forbidden both by law and religion and many regard homosexuals as diseased.

Several organizations consider women who have divorced while living abroad or who have had relations or children outside marriage should absolutely be advised against returning to Iraq. No one can guarantee their safety and the rumour often arrives before they themselves do. The shelters are under threat and have been attacked on several occasions. Once a woman was shot inside a shelter, and on other occasions they have been attacked by family members. Staff have been threatened or physically assaulted. This has resulted in the installation of various security systems, alarms and direct alarms to the police and the Directorate of Following-up Violence against Women. One woman has even had her life threatened inside the Directorate of Following-up Violence against Women.

Women who give birth to children outside marriage have to be sent abroad unless they can marry the person who impregnated them, with the family's approval. Rape or not makes no difference. Many women are too afraid to return to their families and instead head for to poverty or prostitution. Others have more understanding families and there might be a possibility of mediating the conflict, but it is never a guarantee for their continuing safety, especially when it comes to honour-related violence. Lack of social workers who can

follow up the work carried out is also mentioned as a factor. The shelters still need of education and more resources. There are totally six shelters in the whole of Iraqi Kurdistan and they cooperate as often as they can. It is very difficult to hide if you are subjected to severe threats since the social system is built on family-constellations ("clans") which often means that people know who you are even if you change your place of residence. A secrecy system is not feasible.

The Red Cross has a service for returnees in cooperation with the Red Crescent. It is only aimed towards those who return voluntarily, and even the Red Crescent says that those who are threatened by honour-related violence should be advised not to return. People who are deported have no protection or assistance. Help in social terms is usually implemented within the family network but when it fails, as in the above examples, a major part of the work is conducted by voluntary forces, which are fragile. There is a lack of a functioning social network outside the family sphere. Women, who are most often subjected to this, and also HBT persons, are totally exposed if they are rejected by their families. Women can get a certain degree of protection, which may mean years of living at a shelter, but if the threats are too severe, they need to go abroad. Several of the persons interviewed have pointed out that it is important that women can become financially independent, as a result of education and the possibility of working outside the home, since most of them are completely exposed to family control. This means that if, for example, a woman flees from a violent situation at home she is bound to return, even if it means risking being murdered due to honour-related issues. The only alternative for a woman, who has lost the protection of her family and risks being murdered, is to be forced into prostitution since there is no other way for her to support herself.

The trafficking situation is disastrous

The trafficking¹⁸ situation is disastrous, partly a result of the after-effects of conflict. Since it is taboo to talk about sexuality and sex education in schools is forbidden, the issue of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS, is a ticking bomb. Abortions are performed at home or in private clinics at your own expense and they are illegal. The punishment, if discovered, is one year in prison. Polygamy is legal and this makes it difficult for many women. If the mother is dead and the children are staying with the father they can be dumped in an orphanage if the new wife does not want to have them around. This is quite common. In addition to women/girls rejected by their families, the organizations have highlighted other vulnerable groups who currently have no form of effective protection in case of abuse.

These are:

- Physically or mentally disabled
- Guest workers (a new group which is becoming increasingly common)
- Victims of trafficking/prostitutes
- HBT persons regardless of sex
- Boys/Men
- Children

Statistics, evaluations and research on this topic are still lacking. We would like to conclude this report by, once again, pointing out that the people who are working against violence and honour-related violence, via preventive measures or protection, in Iraqi Kurdistan are very brave and deserve all our encouragement and support. Since many have requested this report we hope to be able to translate it into the languages requested. This is a rigorous non-profit task and we hope it will help professional and voluntary workers in fields related to the issues dealt with in this report.

6. Thanks

We would like to thank everyone who has contributed to a very informative and exciting trip to Iraq/Kurdistan in January 2010. Our hope is that the knowledge we have gathered can be of considerable help for both individuals and organizations in Sweden involved in these matters. We want to thank Women for Peace as an organization and especially Bibbi Steinertz, our organization's secretary, who has encouraged us in our project application and the realization of the trip. Further we would like to thank Mideto Feza Kalala and Maria Sundbom Ressaissi, the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs, for their help in connection with our applications. We want to thank the Network against Honour Related Violence which, as a result of years of work, has established the network of contacts that we have benefited from.

Apart from all friendly organizations and friends we would also like to thank the following who have helped us with contacts; Atta Muhammad Ahmed at CDO, Mahabad Qaradaghi, Gelas Ali at Amez. We would also like to thank Bengt Westerberg and Hugo Rickberg at the Red Cross Sweden for the contacts with the Red Crescent and also Awaz and Dilan Delani who have helped out with the practical preparations. We would especially like to thank Biza Barzo Ali who has functioned as our interpreter throughout the whole trip. She is fluent in both Sorani and Swedish but also knows how both the Swedish and the Kurdish society function. Biza did a splendid job despite the fact that this was her first time as a professional interpreter.

Also thanks to our families and friends who continue to support and inspire us. Last but not least, thanks to all the brave women, and some men, who have participated as informants and have shared their knowledge, but also taught us a lot which we now intend to convey to others.

Maria Hagberg and Karin Jonegård 2 February 2011

Organizations interviewed

Sleimani (Suleimania): AMEZ, ASUDA, CDO, The Directorate of Following-up Violence against Women, Family Counselling Centre, REWAN - social counselling bureau, a legal counsellor for the minister of state and KHANZAD

Halabja: AMEZ

Hewler/Erbil: Red Crescent (cooperating with the Red Cross regarding returnee issues)

Interview guide Shelters/Other Organizations

How long has the shelter existed?

How many people work here: employees, volunteers?

Educational background?

How many places do you have? What do you do if there is a queue to the shelter?

What was the reason you started?

Who took the initiative for starting?

Are there other shelters in the country? Who administer them?

Have any decision makers given support to the shelter?

Have you met any difficulties/resistance in conducting your work? From whom?

Have you received positive responses? From whom?

Do you compile statistics on women exposed to violence?

HBT people exposed to violence? Children exposed to violence?

Do you compile any statistics on honour-related violence?

What do you see as the cause of honour-related violence? How is the prevalence of honour-related violence in comparison to other violence?

Are the perpetrators prosecuted? What is the relevant legislation? Age of consent? Sex outside marriage? Right to abortion? Right to homosexual relations? Divorce?

Child custody? In the event of death? Age for marriage?

Co-habitation without marriage? Violence within marriage?

Rape within marriage? Dowry? Corporal punishment?

Who are your partners in civil society, NGOs and other authorities? Internationally?

How do you fund your organization's work? Is it enough?

What other resources do you need?

How are you working to solve the situation of women under threat? Do you work with other groups and if so, how?

What do you think is necessary to come to terms with men's violence against women and honour-related violence in terms of preventive work, emergencies and follow-ups?

Do you have research connected to your organization's work? Is it needed? What do you want it to study?

What do you think of the future and development of your organization?

Further reading

You can contact Women for Peace (Kvinnor för Fred) to receive the original interviews both as transcripts and the entire reworked interviews since this report is a summary. You can also receive a more extensive version of this report. You can contact Kvinnor för Fred to receive the complete unedited version of "Ocean of Crimes" about trafficking produced by KHANZAD.

Web links

www.ungdomsstyrelsen.se

www.kvinnorforfred.se

www.minheder.nu

www.rfsu.se

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Fotnotsförteckning

¹ For more information regarding Women for Peace and The Network against Honour-related Violence please see www.kvinnorforfred.se and www.minheder.nu

² This is a summary of the history of Kurdistan based on the Swedish Institute of International Affairs Country Guide 909 Iraq, 2007 p. 36-40 and updates from the Institute's web database <http://www.landguiden.se.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/> 2010-01-05

³ In Iraq, a man is allowed to have four wives

⁴ The staff is uncertain whether there has been a legislative change, i.e. whether corporal punishment has been forbidden or not

⁵ Turkish bath with a wood-fired sauna

⁶ Post-traumatic stress disorder

⁷ Self-immolation means that the person concerned or someone else has attempted to set fire to themselves by soaking themselves in fuel and setting their body on fire

⁸ The myth surrounding the hymen is central to the honour culture and is based on the false assumption that women have a hymen that breaks the first time they have sexual intercourse and thus they bleed. According to RFSU (an organization working with information about sexuality etc) there is no hymen but instead a vaginal corona which varies from individual to individual. Most girls do not bleed during their first intercourse. Regardless of the visual aspects of the corona, less than half of the women bleed when they are penetrated for the first time. Those who do bleed do not normally bleed because the corona is too narrow but for other reasons, for example they lack sexual excitement and are tense, nervous or not sufficiently lubricated. If this is the case, small cracks in the corona can cause bleeding, but this does not depend on the number of times she has had sex (many women often bleed on their wedding night because the sexual act is not voluntary – not because the hymen is ruptured). For more information, see RFSU's report "Vaginal corona, Myths surrounding virginity – your questions answered" - see appendix

⁹ Persons under 18 years old

¹⁰ This report can be ordered from us. See information about how to contact us at the end of the report.

¹¹ This section is mainly based on an interview with the legal counsellor.

¹² Seghe in farsi

¹³ Shameful, ugly or against the religion

¹⁴ Female prostitutes are imprisoned, but men and pimps are not.

¹⁵ HBT = Homosexual Bisexual Transsexual

¹⁶ Mandeans are an Iraqi minority

¹⁷ In Iraq, the literacy level was around 40% in 2003 according to the Swedish Institute of International Affairs Country Guide 909 Iraq, 2007 p.5

¹⁸ You can contact the authors to receive the report "An Ocean of Crimes" on the trafficking situation, prepared by the KHANZAD organization

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Risk and security for Women in Iraqi Kurdistan

Women for Peace (Kvinnor för Fred) is an association that is not affiliated with any political party or religious organization. It works for peace on women's terms. Since 2007 we have been working with a school for girls in Iraqi Kurdistan. In our cooperation we have become aware of the knowledge gaps in Sweden regarding the violence there; first and foremost known as honour-related violence. This has led us to choose to write a report regarding women's security situation in the region. We have interviewed a number of volunteer organizations and authorities who are working with everything from courses and educational work to women's shelters. Our report focuses on the situation of violence from a preventive perspective, an emergency perspective and a follow-up perspective. The report touches on the issues that these organizations experience in their work, but mostly how women, and also HBT persons and children, are affected by a society in which honour issues are ever-present. The purpose of the report is to have a simple structure so that both authorities and organizations in Sweden and Iraqi Kurdistan can use it, but also so that the organizations interviewed can make use of the report in practice.

Karin Jonegård and Maria Hagberg

Women for Peace (Kvinnor för Fred)