



“Concealment and neglect”

A report criticizes the poor state of Iraqi-Kurdistan’s women’s shelters – and emphasizes the importance of shelters at large

Women’s shelters in the autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq are in poor condition and are far from reaching their goals. This is in short the overall result of a report recently published by the local »Women’s Legal Aid« group WOLA on the situation inside Kurdistan’s women’s shelters. The group looked into the practice of five shelters and institutions that are designed to support women in distress throughout the region and found serious defects: Layout and capacities of the shelters are too small, the staff is mostly insufficiently skilled, stiff in-house hierarchies allow to corruption and effortlessness.

This is the one side of the report: A dauntless and unsparing critique of the situation inside Kurdistan’s shelters in Iraqi-Kurdistan is irreparable for the enhancement of the shelters work. But the report stresses as well, that the necessity of the shelter programme itself is undisputed. Women’s shelters do not have a tradition in the Middle-East and the shelters in Kurdistan were cutting edge in this respect in the 1990’s. The first women shelters opened their doors in Iraqi-Kurdistan by the end of the 1990’s as a reaction on the widespread phenomenon of so called »honour crimes«, domestic or inner-familiar violence up to murder designed to defend or restore the family’s »honour«.

The opening of the first shelters initiated a public debate and forced authorities to take side. Later, the shelters, that were initially run by local and international NGO, were subsequently incorporated into the public welfare programme of the Kurdish government. This was a great success for local women's initiatives since it implied a formal acknowledgement of the many Kurdish women's misery. Public recognition also helped to find acceptance inside local communities and start a debate over repressive attitudes towards women.

Here, the report shows that the transformation of the shelters programme from a grass-root and non-governmental initiative to public service has had ambivalent results. Public services work slowly and less efficient, Kurdish administrative apparatus is known for being bloated and vulnerable to cronyism. Good will, the report concludes, is not always followed by good practice. The report explicitly mentions the Directorate of »Following up Violence against Women« in Suleimaniah, which is a government agency and involves not less than 100 employees. But »only three out of these«, the report states, »are graduated« in an appropriate discipline. And all employees are male.

While administration is bloated, the shelters themselves lack resources. Several cases were reported in which women were sent away from the shelters even though they were in the danger of getting killed by male relatives. Amongst the aspects most criticized is a distinct lack of independent monitoring and the absolute nonexistence of rules and regulations or even guidelines for treatment and minimal standards for sheltering women in need. This, the report concluded, paved the ground for some grave but fortunately isolated cases of misuse and exploitation by the center's staff.

In particular, the manager of one shelter is being held responsible for the misuse of financial resources and the total neglect of helpless women consigned to the center. The report mentions cases in which women were killed after being »released« by the center. In another case, a woman was reportedly being forced into prostitution after being sent away from the shelter. Eyewitness-reports speak of ill-treatment and »psychological abuse« inside the center. Similar incidents were reported some years ago from another shelter, where inmates were being forced into prostitution by guards leading to the close-down of the center then. The latest publication of the report resulted in a massive public reaction and the subsequent resignation of the indicted center's manager.

While grave ill-treatment and misuse are isolated phenomena, distinct lacks and shortcomings are shared by all the shelters and institutions. A lack of adequate training is marked as a central problem by the report for all centers and institutions. As a consequence, the report recommends to re-involve NGO and civil society organizations; set up shared guidelines for quality; install a monitoring structure; start at-the-job training of the staff and improve their skills; establish a frequent evaluation; and put forward an efficient legislature to guarantee the financial budget of the programme.

The report was presented to the public on May 24th during a press conference. It was well received by local media and got a large coverage.

WOLA set up a Shelter Watch project and promised to follow up the development. It invited both NGOs and Governmental bodies to join in order to improve the services of the shelters and to create a legal framework how to run them more efficient in future.

The lengthy Kurdish version of the report is available upon request through Wola (wola_org@yahoo.com)

The WOLA – Women’s Legal Aid – group is a registered non-partizan and non-profit organization of jurists and human rights activists founded in 2008 to support legal equality between men and women, work for legal reform and fight gender discrimination. The WoLA group is involved in the Stop FGM campaign in Iraqi-Kurdistan and co-ordinates the work of anti-FGM teams in the region. WoLA provides legal aid to women who are in conflict with law, gives training to law enforcement agencies and legal advice to women’s grass-root groups and organizations.

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