



# Women's Law Center

»WoLA - Women's Legal Assistance«  
Suleimaniyah / Iraqi-Kurdistan  
Final Report January 2008 - March 2009



Information and training session on  
women's rights in a village in Qandil.

# Women's Law Center

## I. About the Project

The Women's Law Center Project in Suleimaniyah (Iraqi-Kurdistan) was developed by a group of women's rights activists and jurists with great experiences in gender mainstreaming programs and legal aid. The Women's Law Center / WoLA was thought to answer the substantial legal and de facto inequality in dealing with women who are in conflict with law. The project was designed to support women with legal aid, train experts and laypersons in women's rights and work on a better legislation. With support of the OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE, the Women's Law Center began its work in 2008. It became a registered local NGO, officially recognized by local authorities, in May 2008 under the name of WoLA (Women's Legal Assistance).

The project focuses on the legal situation of women – in legislation, jurisdiction and every day life. Iraq's Constitution formally states legal equality (Art. 14 Iraq Constitution). Reality is different: Women find themselves not only unprotected by law but also neglected by jurisdiction. In contradiction to the Constitution's Art. 14, gender-discriminating regulations clearly remain unmodified in Iraq's various law codes. Legal practice regularly ignores the rights of women. Women usually do not have any access attorney or to legal support before court. Many women are unaware of their rights as citizens and take no legal action to protect their rights.

The WoLA-Team at the Suleimaniyah office.



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Therefore, the project addresses three aspects of the substantial legal inequality of women in Iraq:

- (a) a discriminating legislation;
- (b) a discriminating legal practice; and
- (c) a social reality that excludes women from education, labour market and the practical means to participate and administer their rights.

The strategy of the centre is multifaceted: It includes practical and direct legal aid for women in conflict with law, lobbying for a better legislation, supporting and advising grass root movements and initiatives of women, and bringing together lobbyists, activists and legal practitioners.

In practice, WoLA's programme includes:

- (i) legal aid and advice for women;
- (ii) collection and documentation of legal data;
- (iii) implementation of judicial training and skill enhancement; and
- (iv) debating legal reform towards gender equality.

The initial phase of the program has been largely supported by OSI with a fund for the non-lobbying aspects of the project.

## II. Implementation and developments

With the beginning of 2008, activities for the establishment of a Women's Law Center in Suleymaniyah started. A suitable place was found as early as January 2008. The Center opened the same month and a team of lawyers is working since. A **telephone hotline** for women in conflict with law was established.

In May, official registration and recognition by the local authorities was finally achieved for the new organization under the name »WoLA« (Women's Legal Aid). The registration is a formal precondition for any further work and took time to achieve.

### 1. Internal Developments

- In June 2008, internal disputes over the aims and methods of the center led to an *organizational change*. The majority of WoLA's team and the board members voted for a wider »inhouse-democracy« and dismissed

the then director. The team was afraid that a good proportion of time and resources would be used for organizational self-interest and didn't see a need for a »director« in an organization of equally qualified colleagues with shared aims. WoLA is run by the team and supervised by a board without director since then.

- Registration process took substantially more time than expected due to the fact, that any organization that deals with legal questions is obviously a bit suspect to authorities (see also below).
- Two colleagues from the WoLA team left the center during the implementation period but stayed supporters of the project – one for personal reasons (marriage and family), one because of another job opportunity with better earnings.
- Due to developments on the local real estate market, the WoLA was forced to change office two times during the past one-and-a-half year. Immovable property became a major value in Kurdish cities since the 2003 liberation with ever increasing rents that are capricious and incalculable. Thus, small organizations are regularly forced to search for alternative office space.
- In August, visits to the local women's prison facility in Ma'ska Salam (close to Suleymaniyah) brought to light that the detainees are in need of a constant support. Although not part of the original project, WoLA started to work in the prison from September on (see also below).
- Members and supporters of the WoLA team were involved in the no-partisan campaign for an effective and legal ban on the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Iraqi-Kurdistan. The success of the campaign were incentive for the activists and stimulated projects like the WoLA. Nevertheless, after initial successes the campaign came to a halt when the draft Anti-FGM-Act was passed to the parliament. One-and-a-half year after introducing it, the act is still not decided over. Moreover, findings of a region-wide research showed that the FGM-ratio in some parts of the region is even higher than estimated in the past. As a result, WoLA's team decided to include the fight against FGM into the centers programme (see also below - III.2).
- Corresponding to a deadlock in the Anti-FGM-Legislation, high-ranking Kurdish officials started a debate over »traditional values« against a



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liberalization of the personal status law. A draft law for a new Personal Status Law in the Kurdish region was presented by the Kurdish Prime Minister that included (amongst other things) a justification for polygamy. The WoLA initiated a campaign against this proposal and started a series of activities and protest that was widely regarded in the Kurdish media. Another aspect of these developments was that great attention was given to the question of effective media-work and public awareness inside the WoLA team (which we describe briefly in the following even though these lobbying aspects of the center's work were not covered by OSI's fund).

## 2. Difficulties

The project also faced difficulties esp. in its beginning phase. Problems started with registration process and continued with the documentation (and publication) of court decisions. These problems basically stemmed from the absence of any tradition of rule of law and separation of powers in Iraq. Still, the authoritarian tradition makes it difficult for government agencies or public authorities to accept a controlling or at least supervising institution outside its own apparatus. Questions of legislation and jurisdiction are regarded as an exclusive sphere of governmental competence. An initiative of independent, non-governmental jurists is consequently eyed with suspect, a fortiori if these jurists are female.

Officials at the Ministry of Interior (who are competent for the registration of associations) for instance found that the title »women's law centre« would give the wrong suggestion of a public institution and refused registration in the first step.

Of greater importance is the strict prohibition of trial documentation. When we started the documentation and met with representatives of the Ministry of Justice then, we were not allowed to publish any court decision. By this, the Ministry referred to a provision from Iraq's Procedural Law that bans public reports on court decisions with regard to the independence of the court. Officially legitimated as a mean to protect the »independent jurisdiction« it is actually designed to keep court decisions intransparent and by that controllable. The regulation

is still valid in post-totalitarian Iraq. But critique is widespread amongst jurists and shared by many judges as well (some of whom strongly supported the concept of a comprehensive collection of court decisions by WoLA). Nonetheless, when the WoLA introduced the documentation and publication project to the respective authorities it was regarded as an interference in governmental affairs and admission refused. In practice, court decision can be collected and debated amongst practitioners like the lawyers of WoLA but cannot be made public.

It turned out anyhow, that the presence at court alone has its effects on trials. Courts take more care in cases where there is a lawyer and/or an observer in the courtroom.

A general difficulty resulted from an overall backlash in democratization visible in Iraqi-Kurdistan these days. While with the liberation in 2003, the Kurdistan Regional Government gained many profits from the reputation of being a possible role model for the rest of Iraq, there was actually little progress during the past years. Leading Kurdish parties divided power and posts in parity amongst themselves and hesitate to acknowledge any reform that could possibly undermine their power or their clients interests. As a consequence, many conferences are being held on the rights of women in Iraqi-Kurdistan and many statements in favour of Iraq's women are given by officials - with only little actual results. Legal reforms are deadlocked or remain non-implemented. For years, women's groups and organizations lobby for a legal reform that effectively bans domestic violence and the so called »honour killings«. An Anti-FGM-Act, supported by the group of female parliamentarians, is on hold for now one and a half years without any explanatory statement.

As a consequence, women's organizations became again more involved in civil society movements in Iraqi-Kurdistan and less bound to official institutions. The Women's Law Center »WoLA« is actively involved in several campaigns and worked on new strategies of media-cooperation. These developments are also briefly described in the following - even though, OSI-funds were limited to the non-lobbying aspects of the programme.

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## 3. Perspectives & Continuation

By now, the WoLA Women's Law Center is an accepted and esteemed non-governmental institution in Suleimaniyah. It is an active designer of the local civil society movement and is a well-known partner of independent media.

The practical work with the legal aid and the consultancy & training programme turned out to be of great importance for the local communities. More attention will be given to remote areas in future since there is virtually no support for women.

WoLA took got involved in the Anti-FGM campaign and took responsibility for legal aspects as well as for the work with mobile (legal) teams (see also below). When the OSI funding ended, the center could achieve financial support from WADI and recently from a foundation from the Netherlands.

The WoLA center started to work in co-operation with HEARTLAND ALLIANCE. A joined internet platform is scheduled for the coming months.

## 4. The Women's Law Center in Numbers

The WoLA Women's Law Center is run by only four employed activists of which three are lawyers and one a graduate from the political science's institute. The center's practical work is supported by several volunteers. With limited means and only a handful of activists, the programme served a high number of women.

The beneficiaries of the legal aid program were women and girls in conflict with the law or their families. The consultation service at the WOLA and at the women's centers was given to 20 - 30 women/month. Of course, many of the women are returning and have need for more than one time consultation. Nearly 300 women were given legal aid consultation during the implementation period.

The consultation given to women at the court and the following of cases over longer periods served 29 cases.

The prison legal aid and consultation recently covers the cases of 16 women and their families.

Besides the direct beneficiaries, there is a higher number of *indirect beneficiaries* who benefit from the cases of the others. The WOLA-organizations lawyers for example supported two girls who filed claims against what they said was a forced marriage last year. Both of the girls were minors. The claims by the WOLA were successful and the marriage was annulled. The case was of great public importance since it was the first time that a court annulled the forced marriage of minor girls.

The beneficiaries of the documentation and the court watch program are hard to depict. Most of them are jurists and women's rights activists. Many activists and jurists make use of the WOLA as an infrastructure.

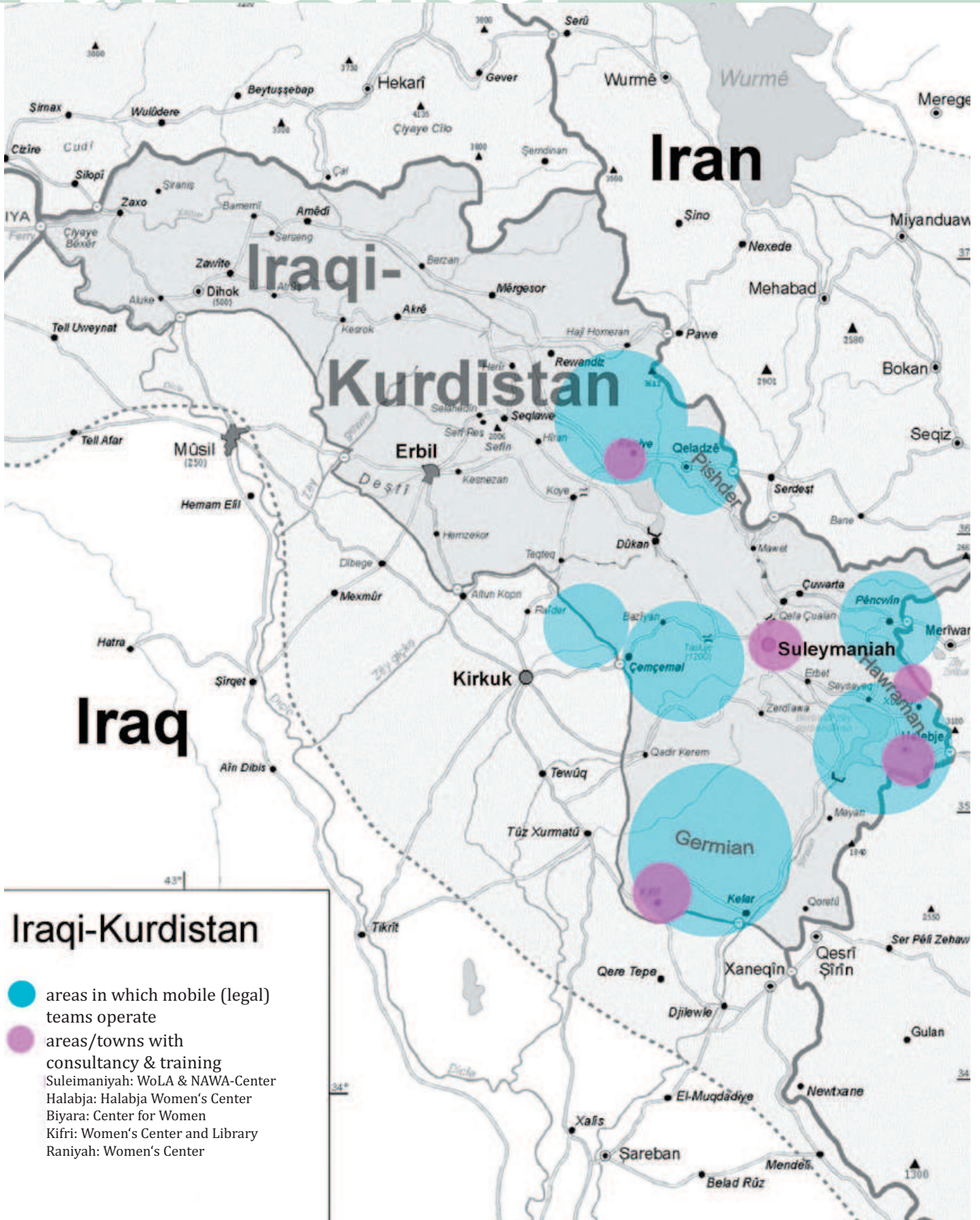
The training of non-jurists and lectures on women's rights brought information and knowledge to more than 400 - 500 women during the implementation period. The jurists and law enforcement training included 5 - 10 people every course with 12 courses held during the period.

The training on women's rights with the Mobile Teams reached more than 1,000 women and girls in over 40 villages.

The beneficiaries of the awareness and legal reform campaigns are impossible to number. The recent press campaigns reached thousands of women and men in the region.



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## III. The center's programme

### 1. Legal Aid

Legal aid has been provided so far in many cases. A **regular consultation-hour** at the Center gives women the opportunity to ask for legal advice and support free of charge (and – if they wish - anonymously). Dozens of women benefit from the consultation service every week. Additionally, the center's lawyers visit women in remote areas, at local women centers or with mobile teams (see below).

#### Forms of conflict:

Many of the women seeking help and support have questions concerning the Personal Status Law, others do not have strictly legal problems but face social hardships, while others are in danger and threatened to be killed by male relatives. While the cases vary, certain tendencies have become visible:

Certain problems that women face are the result of a **governmental decree** issued by the former Prime Minister *Ibrahim al Ja'fari* already in 2004. The decree states that women who apply for a new passport (the »G-passport«, which is, in fact the only internationally recognized Iraqi passport) need the approval of at least one male guarantor from her family. Hence, the decree clearly violates the constitutional rights of women. Particularly, it exposes women to serious, sometime life threatening danger, when women need to flee their families. The WoLA team followed a case of woman who applied for a passport, refusing to bring a male guarantor for her application. The lawyers held several meetings with the director of Suleymaniah's Passport Directorate who claimed that they were bound to the regulation. The WoLA currently prepare an appeal to Iraq's Constitutional Court against the government.

The gender-discriminating regulations in cases of **divorce** are another source of recurring difficulties for women. Women who ask for divorce usually face a criminal trial parallel to the divorce itself. These cases are often brought following the husband's claim that the woman committed adultery. The adultery paragraphs of the Iraqi Penal Code give men the advantage, especially when it comes to the onus of proof. As a routine, medical 'experts' testify before the court that an act of adultery had happened weeks ago. These testimonies are clearly ungrounded and provide a 'scientific' disguise social compliance in false accusations.

Violence against women is still one of the main threats to women in Iraqi-Kurdistan. **Violent acts against women** are a legal problem as well. The Kurdish authorities claim that the notorious Ba'athist legal provisions, which authorized the killing of women for so called »reasons of honor« have been annulled. Nevertheless, in the Kurdish autonomous region, various regulations are still in place, protecting violent men from legal prosecution. In practice, violent men are regularly protected by local communities, tribal structures and families who try to protect their »honor« against any legal claims. As a result, only few cases of violence against women come to court. Women who bring their case to court are widely regarded and treated as »shameless« and »immoral« - also by the court. They need intensive support and - in many cases - protection.

Another widespread problem stems from the Kurdish »zin-we-zen« practice of arranged marriage. In most cases, there is no differences between »arranged« and **forced marriage**. In rural areas, these arrangements already take place between the families when the girls are less than a year old (!), while the marriage itself takes place after the girls turn 12. Legal estimations over these cases vary, because a differentiation is made between forced and arranged marriage. Another aspect is the age of the girl at the time of her actual marriage.



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Women's rights training and anti-FGM information in a village in the *Pishder*.



Certain problems also arise from the vague legal status of **women**, who are formally married but practically **without husband**. The problem is of special urgency in Iraqi-Kurdish society because as a result of the genocide against the Kurds during the 1980s, tens of thousands of Kurdish men »disappeared«. Although it was obvious that most of them, if not all, were killed, their wives were unable to claim the status of a widow. Preventing women of this official status means various negative consequences, for example for their inheritance rights. Thousands of these women (known as the »Anfal« widows, after the name given by the Iraqi military to their murderous campaign against the Kurds) remain deprived of their rights for long years. The Kurdish authorities – quick

to ratify an amnesty for collaborators who served the security apparatus of the Ba'ath-regime already in 1991 – have never changed the personal status regulations. As a result, married women in Kurdistan require the official representation of their husbands, and are practically deprived from their legal rights in their absence.



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## The center's interventions: Cases and examples

The nature and facts of individual cases guide the course of the Center's intervention for the rights of women and their legal support. In many cases, alone the fact that a woman is represented by a lawyer before a governmental agency (or her family) brings positive results. In some cases, women need to be counselled before court, while other cases can be solved informally with the respective authorities outside the courtroom. In other cases, the Center investigates where public authorities are not interested in following violations of women's rights. Many individual cases become known to the team through the women centers, where legal training sessions with social workers and female activists as well as consultation hours for women take place.

### **Forced haircut in Khurmal**

Through the Halabja women's center, the case of female pupils from the town of Khurmal was brought to the attention of the WoLA team (later on, the case was also published by local newspapers without any connection to WoLA). In the secondary school of Khurmal (app. 70 km east of Suleymaniyah), 22 girls were forced to cut their hair by three Islamist teachers. The teachers blamed them of not having fully covered their hair with a headscarf. »Ansar al-Islam« and is still affected by radical Islamism. Lawyers from WoLA visited the town, interviewed the girls and met their families. It became clear, that the teachers claimed to have a right to use violence against these girls. The haircut was regarded as a cruel violence by the girls and most of their parents. The short hairs are seen as a symbol of their »shame«. The Lawyers held several intensive sessions about their rights and encouraged them to file a claim against the teachers. The teachers were dismissed from their service by the Ministry of Education. A lawsuit against the teachers was filed.

### **Monitoring investigations: The murder of Lare Nariman**

The team has followed and monitored the case of Lare Nariman, a seven years old girl murdered by her uncle. There were several indications of inefficient investigations and neglect by the police. At the beginning, the murder was obviously regarded a »family matter« and not investigated seriously. Thus, the WoLA approached the Security Department (the Asaish), with information they had gathered on the case and demanded a close and fast investigation into it. Subsequently, the case has been sent to

Suleimanyiah Criminal Court. The WoLA has sent a lawyer to the trial as a monitor. In this case, the mere fact that the Center sent a monitor - and by that showing the authorities, that their action (or inaction) does not go unnoticed - encouraged a better and faster investigation.

### **Breaking an engagement**

In August, the Law Center followed the case of Nigar S., a woman who faced serious problems with her fiancée and wanted to separate from him. Their engagement followed the wish of their families. In preparation for the prospective marriage, Nigar had to move in with her future husband's family. Within days, her fiancée started to act violently. She was beaten frequently by his family. They asked her to pay a large amount of money if she wanted to end the engagement. Nigar had no male relative to protect her. Therefore, she asked for the support of the Woman Law Center. On 14<sup>th</sup> September, the Woman Law Center brought this case to family court in Chamchamal. The court investigated and a trial began. In November 2008, the engagement was officially annulled. The family's claim for financial compensation from Nigar was turned down by the court.

### **Violent husbands and families**

At the end of October, Nasren K., 30 years old and a mother of two, contacted the special Department of Police for Combating Violence against Women in Kalar (a city 165 km south of Sulaimanyah). The department put her in contact with the WoLA. Nasren was married to her cousin in 1997. The family is poor and Nasren is illiterate. At the WoLA, Nasren reported about years of ill-treatment, violence and exploitation at her husband's house. The family of her husband sold the house, she inherited from her father. When she escaped one of the many violent attacks to a women's shelter, her husband officially asked for divorce claiming her to be »guilty« of leaving him. The Center gives legal support to Nasren and counsels her before court. If she is to be found guilty, she would lose all her property rights as well as the right of custody for her kids. In addition to representing her in the divorce case, a file was claimed against her husband and his family. The local police department started to investigate the case.

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## Mediation with families

In another case, the Center supports a 27 year old woman in Suleimaniyah who is under death threat by her brother. The brother claims that she violated the family's honour, but denies that he has threatened her. The woman was found by a neighbour when she was hiding in a construction site and later transferred by the WoLA team to a safe women shelter. After going through the case with her, the Center started to negotiate with the brother possible ways to solve the conflict. Finally, he agreed that she would live with their sister. In many cases, mediation is a better solution for women than court decisions. Women cannot live by themselves in Iraq. There is no place for women to live when a conflict with their families remains unresolved. Sometimes, women ask for the permission, to stay in a prison, where they feel safe from their families.

## Absent husbands

The Center became active in the case of Amira, whose husband was sentenced to 7 years in prison. Due to family law, she has no authority to represent her family and own the property of the family. Authorities simply ignored the case. The Center has supported her and obtained a certificate of authority for her to represent her family in all matters during the time of her husband's absence.

## Divorce

The Center supported Leila, a woman from Iran, who wanted to divorce her Iraqi-Kurdish husband. Her husband's family threatened her, claiming that she - as an Iranian - would have no rights in an Iraqi court. The Women's Law Center decided to represent her case in court. The trial took place in November.

In another case, the Center supported Khandar U., a 24 year old woman from Suleimaniyah, who was divorced without her consent. The case is pending.

## Forced/arranged marriage

In a more remarkable case, the Woman's Law Center represented two minor girls who were married according to a traditional »zin-we-zin« (bride for bride) custom in Suleimaniyah district. The girls did not want to live with their adult husbands and claimed that they were forced to marry them. The Center brought the case before the Suleimaniyah court. The Center's lawyers argued that it was an unlawful forced marriage. The court accepted - in both cases - the argumentation of the Center's lawyers and annulled the marriages. The judges found, that the marriages were unlawful. The decision is groundbreaking in a region where arranged/forced marriage of minors is commonplace.

## Legal Investigations

In addition to providing legal aid for women, the WoLA team investigates cases in which the rights of women and girls have been violated. Discriminating jurisdiction and legal action is often the result of jurisdiction that deviates from written law, of ignorance and neglect of cases of crimes against women and girls.

The WoLA filed a complaint to the Ministry after a case of sexual harassment of a female detainee in Suleimaniyah prison became known to them. A young woman, imprisoned for prostitution, became subject of sexual harassment by an officer. The officer was later dismissed by the Ministry in charge. This case made it clear that there is a specific need to work in the prisons.

In another case, the Center's team started to investigate a case of a woman who was shot to death in Rania in September. In Rania, village violence against women is notorious: between January and August 2008 alone, 132 cases of murder attempts were reported with 40 women dead.

## 2. Mobile Teams & anti-FGM work

As a result from the close cooperation and legal advice for the Stop FGM Campaign in Iraqi Kurdistan, the WoLA Women's Law Center started to participate in a programme of Mobile Teams to support women and girls in remote areas. These teams provide practical help (medical treatment, medicaments and sanitary goods), life coaching and concrete help for women in distress on the one hand while discussing matters of sexuality (and especially FGM) and women's rights on the other. While women's rights and FGM are at the core of the sessions, practical help and psychological support are indispensable as well. Medical treatment and basic health education provided by the teams are both: a practical need in rural areas and an entrée billet into the local community. All teams work in close collaboration with local women centers and rescue shelters.

Since 2005, the Mobile Teams are generally focused on FGM and women's rights. The teams Mobile Teams show a documentary film that has been produced for the (mostly illiterate) women at the villages. The film shows experts like physicians but also an Islamic cleric, who condemns the practice of FGM. The film

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serves as source of information and as an occasion to get into a discussion with the women at place. The experience shows that in many cases, women are all too willing to stop the practice but lack support. Speaking about FGM and their own experiences, about the pain and agony they experienced and let their daughters experience, is only a first but an important step. It is usually the first time they ever got the chance to speak about it.

Speaking about women's rights is an essential part of it. The teams soon discovered that first hand legal information as well as mediation is needed. The situation of women and girls in remote areas is marked by an extreme discrimination. Women have no access to education or professional health care. Knowledge about their rights is consequently low. A women's rights training is part of every visit in a village.

Four teams were working in the Mobile Teams programme during the implementation period. The WoLA supported the teams' work in the regions of Halabja/Hawraman, Germian, Suleimaniyah/Cemcema and Pishder/Qandil (a) by sending a lawyer with the teams and (b) by training the teams to hold women's rights sessions themselves. Others care for the medical part of the programme.

In October, the WoLA was asked by the involved organizations to become responsible for the training and as well as for the planning of the mobile team programme. Since then, WoLA is holding training sessions with activists and social-workers from the Mobile Teams and from the respective areas. WoLA participates in the campaign against FGM and published - in collaboration with NAWA and others - an information on FGM and women's rights.

## Background: FGM in Iraqi-Kurdistan

The abbreviation FGM stands for Female Genital Mutilation. Sometimes called female circumcision or female genital cutting, FGM is the cutting of the clitoris of girls in order to curb their sexual desire and preserve their sexual honour before marriage. The practice has a tremendous cost: many girls bleed to death or die of infection. Most are traumatized. Those who survive can suffer adverse health effects during marriage and pregnancy. Women and girls are enclosed by a wall of silence.

In 2004, members of female lead Mobile Teams (teams that were sent to villages to support women with health care, educational courses and social work) reported the existence of FGM in several villages of the Germian area in the South of Suleymaniah. A subsequent study resulted in a horrible discovery: a huge proportion of the women had been mutilated. Members of the Mobile Teams questioned around 1,500 women and young girls. 907 of them are victims of FGM. A similar study in the Erbil region came to the same results: Of 440 women 380 were circumcised.

In 2007, a wide scale research in all three Governorates of Iraqi Kurdistan began, interviewing more than 1,800 women from various areas and social levels to collect data on the base of a profile of Kurdish women. Still, the research is not finally evaluated but preliminary findings show, that FGM is (i.) widespread amongst women and girls (60 % up to virtually 100 % affected in some regions) and exists (ii.) in nearly all parts of the Kurdish region of Iraq (with the only exception of Dohuk governorate where FGM-rates are down to 10 %). **FGM is thus an essential aspect of today's reality for women and girls in Iraqi-Kurdistan. A significant percentage of women and girls are affected, especially in rural areas where a rigid moral code, tribal and primordial belonging, prevails, mixed with poverty and un-education.** Most affected are those who live in remote areas without access to health services, education and media.

FGM is not a medical problem firsthand. It is a social praxis that violates the most fundamental rights of women and girls. The WoLA Women's Law Center's aim is to support these rights: The right to self-determination, and the right to physical and mental integrity and health.



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## The campaign: Stop FGM in Kurdistan

Thus, the WoLA joined the campaign »Stop-FGM-in-Kurdistan« (<http://www.stopfgmkurdistan.org/>). In 2006, the campaign was launched by Women's Groups and Human Rights Organizations. The campaign managed to initiate a public debate on FGM in the region. »Stop FGM in Kurdistan« aims on an **effective legal ban on FGM** through public awareness campaigns and educational programmes on the physical and psychological consequences of FGM.

On occasion of the International Women's Day in March 2007, an open letter to the Kurdish Regional Parliament was published in all regional newspapers demanding effective steps to ban FGM. In only a few days, more than 14,000 signed the letter -- among them many prominent artists, actors, journalists and writers of the region. Subsequently, an expert-conference in April 2007 prepared a draft for an Anti-FGM Act. Among the experts were lawyers, physicians, women's and human rights activists as well as representatives from the respective ministries of the region. The draft schedules a ban on the practice of FGM in general, a separate prohibition of »commercial« cutting by mid-wives, the particular protection of minors and children, an obligation to report for hospitals and public institutions and the appointment of a special state attorney for crimes against women.



## A new campaign & a narciss

Eventhough, lobbying aspects of the project were not included in the OSI fund it seems worth to report about because of its importance for the overall programme.

In autumn, WoLA and other NGO inside the anti-FGM network in Iraqi-Kurdistan prepared a new media campaign after the anti-FGM Act at the parliament was obviously on hold. The campaign includes the

two biggest independent newspapers in the region Hawlati and Aweena. A common design and logo was developed (a Narciss-flower which is a symbol for spring (new beginning) as well as for beauty in Kurdistan), badges and poster printed and awareness-clips were aired in radio and television. The campaign was **funded by a local telecommunication company** (Asia Cell) - and by that it was **the first private corporation funded** political and social **initiative in Kurdistan** ever.

## Homepage: Stop-FGM

WoLA is one of two responsables for the [www.stopfgmkurdistan.org](http://www.stopfgmkurdistan.org) internet platform. The platform is the only online-documentation about FGM, the legal background, the reasons and medical/social impacts and has attracted a wide attention.

## 3. Cooperation & Networking

The cases underline the importance of cooperation and networking among women's groups and NGOs - but also with public authorities. Many women in conflict with the law need protection. Thus, the members of the Woman Law Center visit frequently women's centers in Suleimaniyah. An official agreement over cooperation was made with the Nawa Center and Asuda Shelter for combating violence against Women in Suleimaniyah. Women threatened by their families or simply need a place to stay, find support at these places.

In August, the lawyers of the WaLA participated in a national conference against violence against women in Erbil. The main topics were the so called »Honor Killings« and the possibilities in law enforcement against it. For years, women's groups have campaigned to change legislation to finally ban Honor Killings, violence against women and female genital mutilation.

Also in August, the Women Law Center joined the »Campaign for Civil and Legal Rights for Women«, a network consisting of 30 local NGOs in Suleimaniyah. The Center's team took part in workshops on human trafficking in Kurdistan. Since September, the WoLA Women Law Center is member of the campaign's legal committee.

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Since September the Law Center works in close cooperation with the recently inaugurated »Department for the Prosecution of Violence against Women« inside the Ministry of Interior. This department collects data about violence against women and publishes a bi-annual report on the situation of women in Kurdistan. According to the latest data, 504 cases of violence against women were reported in Suleimaniyah district alone; 204 women committed suicide, 84 cases of Honour Killing were reported, in 52 cases women were threatened. The numbers only reflect officially known cases and underline the necessity for legal support for women. The department and the WoLA Women's Law Center agreed that women who appeal for the Department's help will be referred to the Center for legal advice. The department is also ready to share data with the Law Center's lawyers - a groundbreaking move in the government's policy towards NGOs.

In November, the Women's Law Center took part in a campaign to reform Iraq's Personal Status Law. The main topic was a public discussion over polygamy. After members of the Kurdish Regional Government publicly stated that they would not support any reform that contradicts the provisions of the Sharia, several NGO called for a demonstration in Suleimaniyah. On November 25, the International Day against Violence against Women, the Women's Law Center initiated a protest against the Regional Governments official events on that day. The message that a government that supports polygamy cannot be trusted to support women was widely noticed.

## 4. Legal training

Part of the cooperation is achieved through legal training provided by the Center to others. The WoLA conducted several sessions of training courses to practitioners at the women centers in Halabja and Kifri about their rights and duties, and about the basic rights of the women they work with. They also conducted a series of lectures on basic women's rights according to Iraq's law at the Halabja women's center. Following consultation-hours, women approached WoLa's team asking for further advice and support. The consultation-hour turned out to have high demand. More frequent service will be provided in future at these centers.

## Expert training with legal experts and law enforcement personnel

When it comes to women's rights, judges often just follow to the moral codex of tribal and traditional rules or Sharia laws, even if against the law. Many jurists and especially the men have no knowledge about the situation and problems women and do not know enough about the violence and its consequences. The WoLA held 12 sessions with legal experts and law enforcement personnel. The session worked in cooperation with the »violence against women«-unit at the Suleimaniyah police. In the expert sessions, those who work as jurists with women cases were trained. The judges and state attorneys and lawyers were given information about the causes and consequences of domestic violence, forced marriage and mutilation of girls. It aims on a good legal practice that protects the women's rights. Experienced activists from the womens centers and the shelters shared their experiences with judges and jurists. The expert session were regarded as an important institution by both sides and further sessions were arranged.

## 5. Court Watch & Documentation

After initial objection of local authorities (see above: II.2: Difficulties), the team started monitoring court trials and began collecting decisions and other sources. According to a decision of the Ministry of Interior, lawyers employed by WoLA are not allowed to serve as counsels to the court in cases represented by the Center, because in such cases WoLA is »not an independent party in the process. As a consequence, WoLA needs to assign cases to other lawyers for court court representation.

The Center's lawyers obtained a status of permanent monitors at the new Special Court for Violence against Women in Suleimaniyah.

# Women's Law Center

## 6. Prison watch

Since September, lawyers of the Woman Law Center frequently visit Sulaymaniah's detention center in order to support detained women.

While some women who face a trial receive lawyer's counsel, virtually no woman has access to legal support once she had entered the prison. Legal advice, however, is especially needed there. Decisions concerning the duration and conditions of their imprisonment, leaves, access to education and medical treatment etc. usually depend solely on the decision of the prison's administration. Additionally, since imprisonment of women is regarded very shameful for the families, no one takes care for the interests of the detainees while they are in prison. This becomes relevant especially when male relatives take decision about the children of the imprisoned. But most

threatening for the prisoners is the violence that often expects them after being released. Many of the detained women fear violence and even murder by their male relatives as a result of the »shame» they brought on the family. Several of the female detainees of Ma'ska Salam prison facility ask to remain in prison whenever an amnesty is announced by the regions president: they simply fear that they are going to be killed when out of prison.

A free of cost consultation service in the prison was established by the center. A steady contact to the inmates of the women's prison has a positive influence on their treatment. Prison administrations learn that there is someone who cares for the fate of the detainees.



WoLA action against the planned legislation that allows polygamy. In the foreground: Tara Ali Aref.



# Women's Law Center

## Enlarging the program outside Suleimaniyah

Training courses and accessible lectures at women centers in remote and rural areas were already part of the overall program of the WoLA. The experience at the Halabja and Kifri women's centers shows that there is a great need to do more in these areas. Rural areas are known to be more conservative than the town of Suleimaniyah. The surrounding areas of Halabja and Hawraman were under the control of Islamist militias for several years before their liberation in 2003. Women are excluded from education and the labor market. Conflicts are regularly settled through the clan or the tribe, which still retain significant power.

The existing program with these centers was expanded. From September on, the lawyers became active in 30 cases in Halabja alone (and the surrounding villages). At the centers, they answer questions about personal law, marriage contracts and rent contracts. High on the agenda are questions of divorce and the men's obligation to pay »nafaqah«, a traditional alimony paid monthly after divorce. Due to poverty, many people are not able to pay this alimony. Another hot topic is the question of the age of marriage.

Training at the Halabja Women's Center.

