

Kurdish Activists' Observations of Women's Rights in Iraqi Kurdistan between March 2012 and March 2013 and their hopes for the future



A report concerning the present situation, the positive developments and the areas where change is needed, to secure the safety and equality of women in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Introduction

The month of March in Iraqi Kurdistan brings many events: the anniversary of the Halabja gas attacks, the anniversary of the death of Mustafa Barzani, Nawroz, the Kurdish new year, and the little-mentioned International Women's Day on March the 8th.

Last year for 8 March, members of CPT Iraqi Kurdistan joined local women's rights activists outside the law courts of Sulaimani. They demonstrated to highlight the inadequacy of the government and the courts in implementing the new law protecting women from domestic violence. There were not more than 30 people, with an entourage



of 15 Asaish guards in full riot gear, presumably there to protect the female activists despite standing a hundred yards away between the demonstrators and the court building.

This year, things have changed. On March 8 organizers held a procession of 100-plus people, comprised of activists and regular citizens, the majority of whom were women. This included a heavy presence of female

Asaish, something CPT had not

seen before in Iraqi Kurdistan. In the evening, activists convened at the Culture Cafe to share music, poetry, and ideas. The local community of Sulaimani felt more optimistic about the possibilities for change with regards to women's rights in the years to come.

CPT Iraqi Kurdistan spoke with a handful of activists working for greater women's rights in the region. We asked about the conditions for women today, what has improved in Iraqi Kurdish society, what can still improve, and what they hope the future holds.

Improvements and positive change

The responses CPT had were mixed, ranging from an attitude that since women are still at risk; honor killings still occur; female suicide is still very high; and FGM is still practiced in many communities, then there is no positive change. However, some activists did feel that there have been

some systematic changes that could hopefully have a greater effect on the situation as a whole. For example, there are now more organizations working on issues surrounding women's rights, and there is a greater sense of organization between these groups. People are becoming more politically active, and hold more protests, actions, and demonstrations to highlight the issues women face in Kurdistan. The media is



giving more attention to these issues, with a higher level of reporting on women's rights compared to last year. Additionally, more information concerning these issues, as well as women's legal rights, is now available.

The activists CPT spoke with also reported feeling positive about the fact that more cases of abuse are reported to officials than in past years, noting that more women are coming forward with their stories. This is not due to a higher level of violence than before, but instead because women feel more confident that their situations will be heard and dealt with, and that what they have to say will be valued and not ignored.

Last year, CPT stood with activists for women's rights outside the courthouse of Sulaimani, asking for consistent and strict implementation of the 2011 law against domestic violence in the Kurdish Region of Iraq, also known as Law No.8. This law was implemented because, in the wording of the law,

“Domestic violence is a negative phenomenon contrary to the principles of divine

law and human rights. It is contradicting the fact that the family is the foundation of society, hence the family and its members have to be protected from disintegration. To take legal action for safety, stability and the prevention of domestic violence means preventative action before it can happen and it means seeking for reforms and medical treatment after violence happens. This law shall serve this purpose.”

After its launch activists hailed this law as the most progressive piece of legislation protecting women from domestic violence in the whole Middle East. Unfortunately, as CPT stood outside the courthouse on International Women’s Day on March 8th 2012, the law had been actually implemented only a very few times, despite the high level of violence that was occurring towards women. Since then, activists have observed that this trend is changing, that Law No. 8 is being implemented more, but this movement is very slow and it will take time before this law is used to its full capacity to safeguard women.



Finally, the activists we interviewed expressed encouragement at the creation of a special committee by the Prime Minister’s office to address the issues and rights of women within the court system; they felt this was a hopeful step in the right direction. However, the activists differed in their opinions regarding whether this committee

has actually been of any benefit since its creation, or if it is simply the government paying lip service to the cause of women’s rights so as to not look ineffective and irrelevant in this area.

Inaction and negative change

The activists' main complaints with regards to women's rights were specifically aimed towards the government, its inaction, its incompetence, and sometimes its detrimental actions.

Despite the government's promises to address the issues surrounding women's rights, many activists see these words as simply empty promises. They feel words are not enough, and that the government needs to take action. They feel that until Law No. 8 is fully implemented, despite how much the government says it is addressing the situation and is pushing for change, nothing will happen. The situation will remain the same and people who are guilty of honor killings and domestic violence will continue to act with impunity.

Some activists noted that in the last year there was a government-sanctioned amnesty for a large group of prisoners. Members of the activist community, encouraging transparency and justice for those wrongly accused, have seen this action as a positive thing. However among those released were a number of people who had been prosecuted and imprisoned for crimes against women, including honor killings to domestic violence. The activists we spoke with said they have little doubt of these peoples' guilt, and yet these ex-prisoners are back in their communities with the very people they had terrorized. The activists argue that if the government is serious about the rights of women, these men should not have been released. These actions send a message to men in the Kurdish region that they can act with impunity regarding their detrimental treatment of women and get away with it.



As mentioned above, the implementation of the Law Against Domestic Violence in the

Kurdish Region of Iraq, or Law No. 8, is imperative regarding the safety of women. Until this law is fully implemented there is no guarantee of safety for women in Iraqi Kurdish culture. However, activists argue that the institutions that need to implement this law, the police, the medical services, and the courts, are weak, unorganized, ineffective, and rife with corruption.

From their own personal experience, activists told us that the police have often ignored cases of domestic abuse or violence towards women when it is reported to them. If the police do investigate a case, it is not taken seriously and carried out unprofessionally: ignoring evidence, not taking statements, or allowing evidence to be tampered with. Even after this there is a probability, according to the activists we interviewed, that the police will not follow through with a case and fail to charge those implicated in the investigation. This means that if the case does get to the courts, there is little coherence from the police in regards to what has taken place, leading to charges being dropped or insufficient evidence to charge the alleged perpetrators.

Moreover, within the court system the authorities do little to prevent the intimidation of



witnesses who are willing to testify. Many people have reported cases of harassment and threats from anonymous phone calls prior to and during court procedures, telling the witnesses if they give evidence against a certain person, then their safety will be at risk.

Activists told CPT that the system works against women, that women are ignored, and when they

speak out too loudly they are threatened. This leads to many women choosing to not report cases of abuse for fear that nothing will change except putting themselves in even greater risk of violence.

However, among the community of activists CPT knows here, there is an opinion that

not of all these issues can be resolved by the government. Twenty-two years after the Kurdish Uprising of 1991 little has changed for the women of Iraqi Kurdistan. Despite the boom of international investment and subsequent rise in the standard of living, and a strong economy based on oil, the situation for women is much like it was in 1991. Honor killings, domestic violence, and FGM are strong parts of traditional Kurdish life, and it is there that the whole of Kurdish society must change. Kurdish society must shift its attitudes towards women, and recognize them as equals in an Iraqi Kurdish future, not as second class citizens who can be used, harassed, and disposed of when convenient. Until this happens, the people of Iraqi Kurdistan will continue to see a high level of violence towards women, with men preferring to face jail for murder instead of the dishonor they feel towards a disobedient wife, sister, or daughter.

Women's rights activists in Iraqi Kurdistan reported to CPT that some 90 women died in the last year from honor killings, and around 300 women set themselves on fire, in suicidal attempts to protest their families' control. Many of these women died as a result. Though these actions are seen as extreme within the culture, many activists sympathize with these women, saying that sometimes women in Iraqi Kurdistan feel so trapped and dehumanized by their families when forced into unwanted marriages, that self-immolation and suicide are their only ways out. They feel that self harm is the only way to raise their voices in this deeply patriarchal society.

What does the future hold?

It is difficult to tell what the future holds in regards to women in Iraqi Kurdistan. Some activists feel that the future does not look promising, that change is too slow and there is not enough political drive to encourage the courts to take action. Many things need to change within the democratic systems of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Activists noted that the most important area for change over the next few years is the full and consistent implementation of Law No. 8. A new budget and plan of action must be put into place to encourage this implementation, and new judges, hospital and police staff who have been fully trained regarding violence against women, need to be employed. The issues surrounding this violence, the law, and how best to implement it so that women can feel safe in their home communities, must be addressed. Women's shelters need to be improved, cases of violence against women need to be taken seriously, with more care and greater attention.

Finally, activists have called for all cases of violence against women to be followed up upon, investigated, and taken to court, and sentenced according to the laws, so that Kurdish women can begin to trust the law and not feel like it neglects them.

With the implementation of Law No. 8, society needs to learn to respect this law. The activists CPT spoke with agreed that they, along with civil society organizations, need to



work on educating this society. This work would head towards creating a change of mentality so that people no longer feel murdering a woman is preferable to losing honor. Additionally, the civil society needs to encourage positive, long-term change within Kurdish society.

The Zhyan (Life) Group, comprised of many organizations and activists, organized the 2013 Inter-

national Women's Day events and published seven points of action for the women's rights movement in Iraqi Kurdistan. In brief:

1. The Law Against Domestic Violence in the Kurdish Region of Iraq needs to be implemented by all areas of society.
2. That the outlawing of Polygamy is implemented.
3. The government must cease in giving general pardons to those convicted of domestic abuse and honor killings.
4. There must be greater gender equality and representation in the political system.
5. Gender equality must be addressed in the national budget.
6. Gender equality must be addressed in the educational system.
7. Criminalizing all actions of religious and secular institutions that encourage sexist oppressive ideologies within Iraqi Kurdish society.

CPT is continually encouraged by the activists and organizations we know here, who work tirelessly to improve the situation of women in Iraqi Kurdistan, especially given that, for many, this work has brought condemnation and threats to their lives. These activists work under stressful conditions knowing they have an uphill battle, however this has not stopped them. CPT joined many activists and organization for International Women's Day 2013, during which organizers sought to highlight many of the issues already mentioned here.

CPT thanks the efforts and observations of a number of women's rights activists in Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan for the information described here. In writing this report, CPT does not seek to make these activists' voices our own, but rather to provide those not familiar with the women's rights movement in Iraqi Kurdistan with the means to hear these activists' voices through a single source. CPT hopes to continue to work with, encourage, and support, these activists in their work to highlight and change the gender inequality and violence against women that so many experience in Iraqi Kurdistan.

CPT urges the governmental authorities to be active in implementation of Law No. 8, to make moves to reform the police, the legal, and the medical institutions so that justice and equality for women becomes more than an aspiration—but a reality.

CPT urges the media to implement gender equality within their workplaces and to also continue to highlight the issues women face in Iraqi Kurdistan, and pressure those with authority to make positive change with regards to these issues.

Finally, CPT would like to thank the activists, women and men, who have dedicated their lives to seeking justice and equality for women within Iraqi Kurdistan. They are a constant source of inspiration and encouragement for us all.