Iraq: According to a report, in 12 years around 14,000 women have died since 2003 due to gender-based violence

Wednesday 11 March 2015, by [ARNOUS Maguy](#) (Date first published: 18 February 2015).

Gender-based violence has escalated in Iraq since the US-led invasion in 2003 until the surge of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the country, killing at least 14,000 women in 12 years, the Ceasefire Center for Civilian Rights and Minority Rights Group International revealed in a report published on Wednesday.

Contents

- [ISIS targeting women as a (...)](#)
- [Militias, Iraqi security (...)](#)

According to the report, entitled "No Place to Turn: Violence against Women in the Iraq Conflict," Iraqi women have been targeted primarily by opposing jihadist groups and militias as a war tactic often used in conflict zones. However, the male-dominated society, sectarian divides and the breakdown of the rule of law have systematized gender-based violence in Iraq, even turning authorities — who supposedly should protect vulnerable populations, including women and children, in conflict — as accomplice to violence perpetuated against women.

The report highlighted the US invasion of Baghdad in 2003, the ensuing sectarian divisions and the recent self-declared caliphate by ISIS jihadists group since June as major timeframes in which abuse against women left thousands dead and an alarming large number of women were subjected to violence — physical, sexual or psychological.

"Women have been the target of violence in Iraq for many years," report author Miriam Puttick said. "Now, with the rise of ISIS, we are witnessing the renewal of a deliberate and violent campaign to erase women from the public life of the country."

According to the report, around 14,000 women have died since 2003 due to gender-based violence.

ISIS targeting women as a "weapon of "war"

ISIS, which controls large swathes of territories in Iraq, has imposed its Salafi interpretation of Islam on areas under its contriol. The group has persecuted minorities and people from different faiths, including Sunni Muslims, who do not adhere to its strict doctrine. Across these social categories, the report said women in particular had been "deliberately singled out for assassination on account of their gender."

"In early June 2014, it was reported that armed men entered a restaurant in central Baghdad, singled out the female waitresses, and shot them one by one," the report stated as a flagrant example of gender-based violence.

ISIS's rise has also led to the systematic targeting of educated women who hold significant positions in politics and society, making it dangerous for women to work in the public sphere.

In January, the United Nations's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights warned that "educated, professional women, particularly women who have run as candidates in elections for public office, seem to be particularly at risk" of being attacked by ISIS, citing the execution of three women lawyers in the first two weeks of 2015 alone.

The Minority Rights report documented several instances between August and December 2014 where ISIS persecuted, tortured and killed women who held notable positions and reputable jobs.

28 females journalists have been assassinated between 2003 and 2013, according to the Iraqi Women Journalists Forum, and several others have either been threatened or suffered from abuse and displacement.

Lawyer and human rights activist Samira Salih al-Nuaimi was kidnapped on September 17 by ISIS jihadists. After being tortured for five days, she was publicly executed in Mosul. ISIS accused Nuaimi of criticizing its practices and its destruction of religious sites.

"This represents a stark contrast to Iraq of the 1980s, when women made up 46 percent of teachers, 29 percent of doctors, 46 percent of dentists and 70 percent of pharmacists," the report said, highlighting a time before the US military interventions when Iraqi women enjoyed relatively more rights than others in the region.

Moreover, the report also documented the abductions of women in the country in the past 12 years, while noting that the numbers remain the subject of doubt as many families hide the abduction of their female relatives due to the stigma attached to the likely sexual assault they face while in captivity.

"The Iraqi Ministry of the Interior registered 732 abductions of women between 2003 and 2006 as well as 197 cases in the year 2009 alone," the report said.

More recently, ISIS has become the primary cause of abduction on a mass scale, especially from minority groups such as the Yazidi sect, "as a method of controlling populations, spreading fear, and procuring wives for its fighters."

A list by the Sinjar Crisis Management Team included detailed information about 4,351 Yazidi hostages currently being held by ISIS, half of them women. The organization, along with Ceasefire, believes that the list to be incomplete, as other estimates put the number of Yazidi hostages at 7,000.

The report added that around 100 Shia Muslim and 300 Turkmen women are also held by the hardline group.

While in captivity, women are subjected to all sorts of physical, sexual and psychological abuse, which the report called a "weapon of war."

In areas under ISIS control, women were forced to marry militants or turned into sex-slaves, as ISIS claims "is permissible to buy, sell, or give as a gift female captives and slaves, for they are merely

property," the report quoted a manual by ISIS' "Research and Fatwa Department" as saying. At least 18 women were raped in just the first week of ISIS' sweeping offensive in Mosul.

These acts have been slammed as war crimes and crimes against humanity by human rights activists.

ISIS-captured women are not only subjected to physical and sexual abuse, but they are often killed. Reported incidents indicated that "their mutilated bodies were hanged on lampposts."

Militias, Iraqi security forces contribute to violence against women

The report mentioned that during the peak of sectarian violence in 2006-2007, women were "kidnapped, raped and killed on an almost daily basis."

The US invasion had been pinned as the primary source of Iraq's rise into an international hub for jihadists, leading to the formation of several militarized Islamists factions, most notably ISIS.

Along with the rise of these hardline Sunni groups, the situation was compounded by the creation of Shia militias.

"Militias on all sides of the conflict have been known to use sexual violence as a method exerting control and humiliating their opponents. At the height of the sectarian conflict, organizations reported that Shia and Sunni militias were taking revenge on one another by raping women from the other sect," the report said, highlighting the horrendous effects of more than 10 years of continuous conflict on Iraqi women.

In 2009, the Ministry of the Interior reported 200 sexual assault cases. But these figures are contested, as the Iraqi Women Integrated Social and Health Survey said that a mere 2.8 percent of women felt comfortable reporting incidents of gender-based violence to the police, due to the "deeply-rooted beliefs in chastity and family honor."

The stigma often means sexually assaulted women don't find support from their families, who generally take punitive action against them. This is reinforced by the Iraqi penal code, which absolves the rapist of criminal charges if he agrees to marry his victim.

The report highlighted more dangerous findings, stating that almost 31 percent of women don't trust the police to help them, while 17 percent actually believe the police might take advantage of them.

Corrupt Iraqi authorities and governmental bodies have been accused of propagating violence against women by neglecting their primary duty of protecting them.

For instance, "women who have been forced into prostitution are more likely to be treated as criminals by the justice system than as victims of trafficking," the report said.

The number of women victims of human trafficking is likely to be in the thousands since 2003, as the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq put the number of women trafficked in the first seven years following the invasion at 4,000.

"The domestic trafficking industry has been growing at an alarming rate," the organization said.

"ISIS is not the first group to be involved in abducting and trafficking women. Women have been disappearing off the streets of Iraq by the hundreds ever since the start of the conflict. The silence of

the Iraqi and Kurdish authorities on this issue must end," Puttick said, slamming the Iraqi authorities "lack of interest" in combating gender-based violence.

The report strongly recommended carefully investigating crimes committed by police against disadvantaged women; providing police units with gender-sensitivity training; and amending the Penal Code for sexual assault cases.

Maguy Arnous

P.S.

* "14,000 Women Killed by Gender-Based Violence in Iraq Since 2003: Report". Al-Akhbar. Published Wednesday, February 18, 2015:
http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/report-14000-women-killed-gender-based-violence-iraq-2003