IRAQI KURDISTAN: Women Human Rights Defenders Challenging a Continuum of Violence

Mission Report

Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)

*Dedicated to **Samira Saleh Al-Naimi**, committed woman human rights defender, publically executed by Daesh in Mosul, Iraq in September 2014.*

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I. Introduction

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in Iraqi Kurdistan face the same types of risks as any other human rights defender worldwide, but as women, they are also subject to gender-specific threats and violence. The reasons behind this extra layer of targeting of WHRDs are complex and have to be understood within the social and political environment, the formation of the Kurdish identity, which has been characterised through many decades by oppression and resistance, and of course in these times, by the conflict with the terrorist group Daesh (also known as ISIL or ISIS.) GCHR conducted research in Iraqi Kurdistan in January of 2016, meeting WHRDs and organisations working on women's issues in Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaimanyia, with the purpose of understanding the situation for women defenders operating in the region, to publicise the difficulties that they face, and offer solidarity and support for their work.

The work of WHRDs often focuses on challenges to the traditional notions of family, and gender-specific roles within them as well as within society more broadly. Because these challenges are very personal and intimate in their nature, they can trigger deeply entrenched hostility not only from the authorities but also from the general population.

It is now widely accepted that the family, far from being a place of safety for women, is often in fact the most dangerous place for them. This is a universal phenomenon, which holds true in Iraqi Kurdistan just as it does in the United Kingdom. In the UK for example, two women are killed by their intimate partners weekly.[1] These are universal problems; it only takes a brief look at twitter and other public comment threads online to see the visceral reactions that are very often directed at women who engage in debates in public fora. WHRDs generally then, are often the first to be criticised or ostracised by conservative community leaders and religious groups, to be stigmatised by families and communities who consider their work to be a direct threat to family honour, to religion, to culture and to the very fabric of society.

[1] Refuge for Women and Children , UK, http://www.refuge.org.uk/get-help-now/what-is-domestic-violence/domestic-violence-the-facts

II. Methodology

The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) has monitored the human rights situation in Iraq over the last five years and has received frequent reports of abuses against human rights defenders (HRDs), activists and independent journalists.[2] The research for this report is based on a series of face-to-face interviews that were carried out with WHRDs and other HRDs working on women's issues in Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaimaniyah.

Reference was also made to reports of international organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, reports of United Nations bodies, academic writing and reports in the national and international media. The accounts of each of those interviewed were internally consistent, consistent with one another, and supported by the reports of international organisations. For all these reasons the research team was left in no doubt that the accounts given were honest and accurate as to detail. Some accounts have been anonymised to protect the identity of those providing information.

III. Background

The Kurds in Iraq now enjoy greater cultural and political rights than the Kurds of Iran and Turkey, within a de facto state, effectively governing themselves through the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). However, they have also experienced, in recent decades, recurring conflict, genocide, mass deportations, executions and chemical attacks. The Anfal genocide[3] unleashed by Saddam Hussein in 1988 was the most devastating, during which 2,600 villages were destroyed and an estimated 100,000 civilians murdered. The systematic killing of young men has resulted in women outnumbering men, there being a large number of Anfal widows in particular, who lost their husbands during that genocide. Chemical weapons were also used against the wider population, the most heinous attack being at Halabja where Human Rights Watch reports up to 5,000 died.[4]

[2] GCHR Iraq, country's cases: http://www.gc4hr.org/news/index/country/8

[3] *Genocide in Iraq*, Human Rights Watch, 1993, https://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/ANFALINT.htm

[4] Ibid.

In June 2014, Daesh overran the city of Mosul, and then moved southwards towards Baghdad, routing KRG's military forces, the Peshmerga, and Iraq's army and threatening to eradicate the country's many ethnic and religious minorities. According to a UN report of 2015, civilians continue to suffer the most from this non-international armed conflict and from 1 January 2014 to 31 October 2015, the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recorded at least 55,047 civilian casualties as a result of the conflict, with 18,802 people killed and 36,245 wounded.[5]

Women have been particularly vulnerable suffering systematic killings, torture, rape and sexual slavery. Daesh's attacks on the Yazidi population in Sinjar "pointed to the intent of ISIL [Daesh] to destroy the Yazidi as a group," the UN report says, which "strongly suggests" that Daesh may have perpetrated genocide.[6]

The post-conflict federal entity of Iraqi Kurdistan was formed in 1992 and has been dominated by two main parties, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a political party that splintered from the KDP in the 1970s. The deeply ingrained militarisation of society over several generations has contributed to the continuum of violence that is seen across the region.

There is a great deal of overlap in Iraq between the gender–based violence due to the present conflict with Daesh and the violence which emanates from within society itself. This continuum is demonstrated by, for example, reports from the region that in 2011, "the fragility of state institutions and the failure of the rule of law has created room for human trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation and prostitution"[7] with criminal gangs smuggling women and girls to Syria, Jordan, Qatar and other Gulf States to work in prostitution. This is highly reminiscent of the well-documented policies of Daesh in relation to many of the women and girls they captured from 2014 onwards.

Since the last Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) report[8] on human rights defenders (HRDs) in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2014, the economic and democratic crises have deepened. Parliament has not convened for months and for the past two years no financial contribution to the budget has been received from Baghdad.

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[5] http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMIReport1May31October2015.pdf

[6] http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=50369#.V0YXRiMrIy4

[7] *Conspiracy of Near Silence: Violence Against Iraqi Women* (Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt) http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2011/Conspiracy%20of%20Near%20Silence.pdf

[8] *Iraqi Kurdistan: No safe haven for human rights defenders and independent journalists* (2014-12-31) http://www.gc4hr.org/report/view/28

Political tensions have risen as the KDP sought to extend KDP leader Massoud Barzani's term of office as President of the KRG; a policy which was opposed by other political groups. Barzani has been the president of the Kurdistan region for two terms plus two more years. However, the current law did not grant Barzani any right to stay in office beyond 20 August 2015. Many in opposition are determined to bring Barzani under the observance of parliamentarians.

Barzani has publicly promised to unify the Peshmerga, consolidate financial and security institutions, bring corruptors to justice, promote freedom of speech, and end nepotism. During his reign, however, no significant steps have been taken towards radical reforms; the KDP and PUK continue to control a majority of the armed forces; both security and intelligence agencies (Parastin and Zanyari) are operating independently; and no minister or other high-profile person has faced trial for corruption. As for freedom of speech, three journalists have been assassinated during his presidency, but no perpetrators have been brought to justice.[9]

In October 2015, hundreds of public sector employees protested in Sulaimanyia and other eastern cities to demand payment of overdue salaries. In October, KDP armed militia fired at protesters in Qaladze and Kalar, killing[10] at least five and injuring others. The KDP said investigations were opened into the burning of its headquarters but no such assertion was made in relation to the killings by its militias.

It is against this background that civil society is attempting to shoulder the burden of many of the challenges facing Iraqi Kurdistan, challenges which have only been compounded by the conflict with Daesh.

During its 2016 mission, GCHR spoke to many women's organisations and groups working on women's issues and a picture emerged of a deepening crisis and a crackdown on civil society organisations. One woman told GCHR:

> "It's so much worse than last year, security wise and economically. There's a general sense of exhaustion. Women are being pushed back out of public life. The situation is unstable, scary. Parliament is not convening and they are concerned there will be a popular movement, and that's why the crackdown is worse. Basic services for women are not available and civil society is increasingly unable to fill in the gaps. There simply isn't the money."

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[9] *Ibid*

[10] Amnesty International Annual report, IRAQ 2015/2016: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iraq/report-iraq/>

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM)[11], through its Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), observed a marked increase in displacement due to on-going conflict during the months of December 2015 and January 2016, most notably in Anbar, Ninewa, Salah Al-Din, and Kirkuk. So the scale of the problems facing all agencies continues to increase and the regional government is struggling to absorb the high numbers of internally displaced people (IDP) and refugees.

In Dohuk, the Kurdistan Human Rights Organisation told GCHR:

> "There are 830,000 IDPs and refugees and a host population of 1,250,000 [in Dohuk governorate], so there are almost equal numbers by now. Their needs are immense and this affects the host community of course, it has caused practical stresses on the services. The government has had to provide for everyone and all services have gone down in quality. There is a housing crisis, and the cost of housing has increased. In the beginning there was lots of acceptance and empathy with IDPs, doors were opened, schools accepted new pupils, people were welcomed in churches and mosques and then international organisations developed the camps. There are now 22 different camps in Dohuk. Recently the situation is getting more tense between locals and refugees, especially in Akre camp. There was an attack on the camp, as result of an emotional speech in the local mosque and there have been demonstrations against the Yazidi in Acre."

IV. Findings

A. Overview of the Situation for Women in Iraqi Kurdistan

Although the situation for women in Iraqi Kurdistan is better in some ways than it is for women in the rest of Iraq, there are still challenges. In relation to women's participation in decision-making and legislation against gender discrimination, there has been good progress. However there are still huge challenges in social, political and economic life, in so-called "honour" killings and other gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation.

Violence in the name of honour covers a broad spectrum of practices, from policing what women wear to the denial of education, to maiming and murder.

[11] International Organization for Migration: <http://www.iom.int>

For example, GCHR was told that in July 2015 a woman went into the bazaar in Sulaimanyia during Ramadan wearing a short–sleeved shirt; she was surrounded by an angry crowd and beaten so badly that she required hospital treatment. There was a move to campaign on behalf of this woman but, we were told, it proved so controversial it wasn't possible.

GCHR was also told that "honour" killings occur frequently and women's organisations, of which there are many, continue to be inundated with calls from women who are under attack.

Asuda,[12] for example, told GCHR that between 1 and 13 January 2016 they had five referrals in relation to honour killings, three in Erbil and two in Sulaimanyia and that generally they get around 60 calls on a normal day from women who feel under threat from their close family. Another common problem is suicide by women who cannot see a way out of their family circumstances. The method used is often self-immolation. One activist told GCHR that according to her figures, in 2015, 56 women had self-immolated. Some of these apparent suicides are reported to be murders in disguise. Asuda told GCHR that in the vast majority of these honour-based cases there is no accountability.

B. Government Response to Gender Based Violence (GBV)

There is a distinct paradox in the area of gender-based violence (GBV). Civil society appears on one level to be relatively healthy; there are thousands of NGOs in existence, many working on women's issues, but they are very much dependent on political good will and have differing levels of connection to political parties. The government is officially supportive of combatting GBV and has devoted many hours and much funding to developing relevant strategies, for example, the formation of a five–year plan: the National Strategy to Confront Violence Against Women in Kurdistan 2012-2016, the formation of the Supreme Council for Women's Affairs, specialist police, police stations and courts for dealing with the issue.

UN agencies have been working closely with ministers and governmental agencies to shape these plans. This link with the UN has clearly been fruitful and many agencies have been involved from the beginning in designing policies and supporting implementation.

[12] http://www.asuda.org/

However the reality is that WHRDs working on these issues at the grassroots level are not supported or sufficiently protected. The threats and violations against WHRDs are generally not recorded, investigated or punished. Research has shown that Iraqi Kurdistan adopts better practices when it comes to gender equality in order to increase its credibility in the international arena and thereby bolster its bid to attain recognised independent status, rather than from a genuine recognition of the need for gender equality. The research also accepts however that there has been "a long history of women's rights activism in Iraq and in Iraqi Kurdistan. Momentum from below to enact change alongside a willingness to realise this change among certain sections of policy-makers has undoubtedly been vital too."[13]

GCHR visited the Directorate on Gender–based Violence and one of the designated women's police stations to gain an understanding of the sort of work being carried out. The Directorate was proud of the advances for women that could be seen in society, with women holding jobs at all levels of society, in government and in the Peshmerga, for example, and being able to prove their competence in these roles. They didn't shy away from cultural and social issues in society causing deep-rooted problems and in particular honour–based killings. The Directorate has been very active in working on the National Action Plan in response to SCR 1325 in relation to women and peacebuilding. New technologies were identified as a difficult area. Many of the honour–based crimes had been triggered by family members reading messages on their children's phones, which they interpreted as being deeply inappropriate, and had thus resulted in violent repercussions.

The Directorate operates Shelters for Women who have been victims of GBV, one in each of the main cities, Erbil, Sulaimanyia and Dohuk, and Rehabilitation Centres. They work sensitively especially in the rural areas, trying to reach out to the tribal areas and inform and educate about women's rights. They build on the tribal systems and try to bring these structures into a legal framework. It is not uncommon for tribal sheikhs to be involved in settling disputes within such a framework.

GCHR visited one of the designated women's police stations. The female police commander appeared extremely efficient and authoritative and the service very well-run. But when she was asked specifically about WHRDs and any threats or difficulties that they might experience in the course of their work, she denied that there were any problems and said that they were free to carry out their work.

[13] *Women in post-conflict Iraqi Kurdistan*, OpenDemocracy, Zaynep N. Kaya, 26 February 2016, https://www.opendemocracy.net/westminster/zeynep-n-kaya/women-in-post-conflict-iraqi-kurdistan

This failure to acknowledge and record violations against HRDs is indicative of the wider KRG problem. There is a willingness to announce progressive legislation and to take innovative steps such as women-run police stations, but such innovations have to come from above and be government projects; there is little tolerance of bottom up innovation in these fields or of independent human rights work and there are very restrictive red lines around what can be discussed in the media.

C. Threats Against Women Human Rights Defenders

WHRDs are pushing the limits of what is acceptable in this conservative society and even though this police service should be very much on their side, they are obviously miles apart. For example, one of the first women's organisations to which GCHR spoke described a press conference they had organised to discuss the situation for Turkish Kurdish women just over the border, who they said were being attacked by Turkish government forces. The press conference was attacked by approximately 200 riot police because, GCHR was told, this subject matter was not allowed to be discussed in a public forum. The woman organiser was severely beaten and her phone snatched. Her photograph then appeared on a Facebook site called "Activists of Erbil", which, she said acts as a page for identifying and threatening HRDs. They put a red circle around her face to highlight her identity. The idea is to destroy reputations. She said, "Facebook is one of the main tools they use against us."

Another representative of a group working on the Yazidi issue said that:

> "There are a lot of challenges for HRDs in the region, there is no protection for us. It's true that there is a law which provides the right to receive information from the state, but in practice it doesn't work. This is a big barrier for our work, we need accurate data to campaign properly to try to improve things but the authorities harass us about this issue. For example, one of my colleagues was trying to analyse the coordination of an IDP camp and he was arrested and asked to pay a USD$1,700 fine. The arrest was suspicious, he was charged with speaking about the administration of the camp on a charge of defamation and denigrating the camp organiser. The administrator of the camp withdrew his complaint but the judge decided to proceed anyway as he felt the matter was of public concern…. we are appealing. We have many cases of our defenders being detained for a few hours and released, its happened many times. They use it as a form of harassment."

The HRD continued:

> "We need legal protection for HRDs as there is no clear policy on this, no legal space for this work. The judiciary are not experienced in this area, they need training, there is a lack of competence. The police and security services need serious training. The judge will look at the penal code only; he won't have any idea about international concepts or human rights standards. We will probably be represented by a volunteer lawyer, so we don't stand much chance. We need procedures and proper implementation; we need agencies for training. There should be a 'rights and responsibilities' chart in every police station."
>
> "We need legislation about HRDs, like defining who is a HRD? For example, journalists who are frequently subjected to very high fines effectively putting them out of business in effect, do they count?"

She concluded:

> "Freedom of movement is a huge challenge now, even given the security situation, it is disproportionate. If you are trying to do any work on the Yazidi issue, it's so difficult to move around the country with the levels of harassment at checkpoints. It is very discriminatory between different groups. We have one Arab staff member; he is disproportionately subject to harassment, related to movement issues. No Arabs are allowed into the KRG area unless they have residence now. There is also so much variation from area to area. In some areas around Dohuk for example, you will be interrogated if you have women and men in the same car. In Sulaimanyia, it's not a problem."

Another organisation focusing on the human rights of women told GCHR:

> "There are so many threats to HRDs, especially if you are female. We get constant threats by phone, threats of killing. Being threatened for this kind of work is absolutely standard. We have to live with it. We never go out on a case alone, there will always be three of us. We have proper security at our office: a guard outside, surveillance cameras. One day though, I guess someone will get through."

D. The Yazidi Issue

During GCHR's research mission, it also became clear that working on issues affecting the Yazidi continues to be particularly problematic. The Union of Kurdish Women told GCHR:

> "The government doesn't want us to work on the Yazidi issue and they put bureaucratic barriers in our way. It is all related to politics and the allegations that the Peshmerga dropped their weapons and ran, abandoning the people in Sinjar [in August 2014]. The situation in the camps now is terrible, there is insufficient therapy, medical assistance, no rehabilitation for women who have suffered the very worst of abuses. In the beginning we tried to document names and numbers of people, but it wasn't possible, the authorities stood in our way. That's why there is so little specific data. There is limited help from the international community. We need them to take a position, to do something."

This was a common complaint that, although several groups were doing their best to provide services and support for Yazidi girls and women, there was no coordination. No overview of the situation was available.

GCHR spoke to a Yazidi woman who had fled an area which was still under Daesh's control. She was working with a team of three doctors, one pharmacist and a teacher, working mainly with orphans. She said that the Yazidi areas had been disputed even before the arrival of Daesh and that their problems pre-dated this conflict. She said:

> "My area was a place of conflict between Iraq and Kurdistan …. Our areas, since before the conflict, were abandoned by both governments. Sinjar is bigger than Dohuk, and yet they hadn't built schools, or developed it. Children would have to travel long distances to go to school, and there were cases of kidnappings and killings because of this. Yazidi children who were supposed to attend school in Mosul were prevented from going and any Yazidis who would go would get killed. Two years before Daesh we were threatened in Mosul. For women who were in labour, the closest hospital is in Mosul, because both governments refused to build hospitals, and due to checkpoints and harassment some women would die trying to get to the hospital."

The Yazidi woman went on to say that as Yazidis trying to work in the camps they face an extra layer of discrimination:

> "We cannot move or even speak. If we speak publicly, if we say anything we get arrested, beaten. More than 20 Yazidi activists who criticised the Kurdish government were subjected to disciplinary action, for example, arrest and beatings, then release. We are even afraid of speaking in front of Kurdish NGOs because they are part of the problem when it comes to the Yazidi issues. One of my colleagues was taken for three days and beaten because he criticised a politician in Kurdistan."

The Yazidi woman made a plea to the international community for the women and girls who were kidnapped by Daesh:

> "The Yazidis are a very peaceful people, but they are the ones who are the most oppressed right now. [Almost 2,000] Yazidi women are still in the hands of Daesh.[14] There are [many] Yazidi children who are being made into child soldiers by Daesh."

Another Yezidi organisation, speaking about the situation for Yazidi women, told GCHR:

> "Generally there were already problems with education in Sinjar. There are a large number of women suffering from illiteracy. There are schools inside the camps, but they're not enough; not enough teachers and materials. There were processes put in place by the government to deal with these problems, but now due to the economic deficit, most of these programmes have stopped. Many girls as soon as they turn 14, are married off. They get legal marriage contracts, within the federal system under Iraqi laws which are not allowed under Kurdistan laws."

A well-established women's organisation working in Erbil told GCHR:

> "After we published a report in 2014, about the harassment of refugees, all funding from the KRG was cut off. We wanted to open a centre in Khanke [an IDP camp in Dohuk for Yazidi only], but the government refused, we had to go through connections to open the centre. We have been accused of making problems due to our awareness raising campaigns. Our boss gets threatening calls, death threats when we plan protests, especially during the time of publishing the reports."

[14] According to official statistics, 1,940 Yazidi women are still being held captive by Daesh. 1,400 women were freed and the approximate number of women and girls captured in August 2014 was 3686. See also: *Yazidi Women After Slavery*, Human Rights Watch, 18 April 2016, https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/18/yezidi-women-after-slavery-trauma

Al-Misbar told GCHR that:

> "There are many short-term NGO programmes under way but the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is not coordinating them. The economic crisis will result in a lot of them being shut down so the outlook is not good. But there are some KRG legislative initiatives which help, for example, the law against domestic violence and amendments to laws about honour killings; and finally the number of suicides in the camps is going down. Refugees can work from the moment they arrive in the KRG region but it's difficult for women to find employment. There is the issue of sexual violence in the camps. Lots of the men are leaving for Europe but they can't afford to take the women with them, so the women are there in the camps unsupported.

Al-Misbar said that most of the women in the camps "have had little or no education, have no idea about their rights or the wider situation and they are living in small tents with no protection. There are no long-term programmes, and lots of people want to leave - and some people want them to leave. One of the main problems is that there are no programmes for return or reconciliation and no access to justice."

V. Legal Framework in Iraqi Kurdistan

Iraq is a party to all the major UN Human Rights Conventions and in particular, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and it therefore has an obligation to protect rights to freedom of opinion and expression.[15]

The Iraqi Kurdistan region as a federal region of Iraq is subject to the Iraqi Constitution of 2005. In article 38, the Constitution provides the following guarantees in relation to freedom of expression:
The State shall guarantee in a way that does not violate public order and morality:
A. Freedom of expression using all means.
B. Freedom of press, printing, advertisement, media and publication.
C. Freedom of assembly and peaceful demonstration, and this shall be regulated by law.

[15] Article 19(2) ICCPR

From all the reports the GCHR has received, the judicial system in the Kurdistan region appears to have been harnessed with a view to limiting discussion and the exercise of independent human rights work.

During its mission, the GCHR heard credible allegations of baseless charges, protracted court processes, and repeated court hearings at different levels of court to extend the period of time that people have charges hanging over them. The courts appear to be engaged in a deliberate attempt to restrict human rights defenders in the exercise of their legitimate and peaceful work in breach of both domestic and international obligations.

The laws as written are in conformity with international standards but the problems lie in the implementation of these laws. It appears to GCHR that for this reason it is imperative that the judiciary and all arms of the criminal justice system are fully trained and conversant with the current laws and how they should be applied. There needs to be a new approach across government in Iraqi Kurdistan in which the progressive face of the legislature is reflected in a more permissive space for grassroots organisations and campaigning on the very issues that the government claims to hold dear. There needs to be a bottom up approach to human rights work and not just a showcase of human rights compliant legislation imposed from above.

VI. Recommendations

GCHR finds that women in Iraqi Kurdistan face many challenges and that increased violence and threats to women in general makes the work of WHRD more difficult. The KRG authorities must take action to better protect WHRDs, and all HRDs, by not only implementing laws and procedures with a gender-based focus, but by also making space for them to engage in independent work, whether that involves critiquing government policy or calling into question its implementation.

The GCHR makes the following recommendations to the authorities in Iraqi Kurdistan:

1. Issue invitations to the UN Special Rapporteur on HRDs and to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of the Judiciary to visit the federal region and to report and to identify areas for improvement in order to support independent human rights work.
2. Desist from political interference in civil society organisations and allow genuine independent human rights work, which would only serve to strengthen the government's own work in the field of human rights.

3. Ensure that minorities have equal access to services and employment opportunities; establish a commission to combat discrimination to safeguard the rights of minorities.
4. Develop a national plan in cooperation with the UNHCR to provide a long term national plan of assistance and compensation for IDPs and refugees and in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.
5. Take measures to improve the implementation of provisions of the Law to eliminate traditional practices such as FGM and to investigate gender-based violence, in particular honour-based crimes.
6. Request technical assistance support from the OHCHR, through the Human Rights Office of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), to improve local human rights and accountability mechanisms.
7. Hold accountable any and all persons, whether in government or non-state actors, who target and/or threaten HRDs and civil society activists.
8. Improve cooperation between women's police stations and civil society so that HRDs are able to submit complaints without feeling under threat.

VII. Conclusion

The current political and economic crisis facing Iraqi Kurdistan - combined with the conflict against Daesh - is placing a huge burden not only on government but also on civil society. WHRDs are working to combat a continuum of violence emanating from within society and rising in the context of the conflict with Daesh. There is a sense of exhaustion among many HRDs, as under-funded organisations attempt to provide basic services for the host population and for an ever increasing number of refugees and internally displaced people.

There is an overwhelming failure by the authorities to prevent, investigate or punish attacks against HRDs, in particular women defenders who are at the forefront of the struggle to change deep-rooted attitudes and traditions which adversely affect the wider population. Violations against HRDs are either not recorded or not sufficiently investigated. They continue their work at great personal risk and with insufficient protection.

For independent human rights work to flourish in Iraqi Kurdistan there needs to be not only a strong government, subject to democratic checks and balances, and untainted by corruption, but also a strong and independent civil society supported by a free press. The voices of all sectors of society need to be heard - not only of those closely connected with the main political parties. Despite how progressive government policy may appear on the statute books, if it cannot be subject to critique and open discussion in civil society, it is not progressive at all.