

IRAQ: Widows Become the Silent Tragedy

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Dec. 7 (IPS) – Hundreds of thousands of widows are becoming the silent tragedy of a country sliding deeper into chaos by the day.

Widows are the flip side of violence that has meant more than a million men dead, detained or disabled, Iraqi NGOs estimate. These men's wives or mothers now carry the burden of running the families.

"The total figure of men who have been killed, disabled or detained for long periods of time adds up to more than one and a half million," Khalid Hameed, chief of the Iraqi al-Raya human rights organisation told IPS. "The average number of Iraqi family members is seven, so about ten million Iraqis are facing the worst living circumstances."

In these circumstances, he said, women have had to "search for ways to survive and support their families at a time when not much help comes from the international community."

Most international NGOs left the country by last year apparently on the advice of governments of their countries pointing to growing violence and dangers to NGO members.

"International NGOs were conducting support projects for Iraqi women before they suddenly quit and left the country in a rush in October 2005," Faris Daghistani, who was project manager at the Baghdad mission for the Italian humanitarian aid organisation in Iraq INTERSOS told IPS.

"There was a wide focus on working women and how to support them by training and providing them with necessary tools to raise income on their own," he said. "It is a pity that most of our productive projects have stopped, and we had to leave women to face their fate on their own."

The violence since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is not the first to have taken its toll. Hundreds of thousands of men were killed, taken prisoner or disabled during the 1980-1988 war between Iran and Iraq.

"We have never lived our lives as human beings should live," 42-year-old Dr Shatha Ahmed told IPS at her home in Baghdad. "The Iraq-Iran war took our fathers, and now the Bush war is taking our husbands and sons."

Women now face a long struggle surviving and bringing up families on their own, she said. "We could not even dream of developing our own skills."

Dr. Shatha's husband, also a doctor, was killed by Muqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army in September this year when he was leaving the Ministry of Health offices in Baghdad. She now has to support her family, and her husband's parents as well.

Some help is on offer to widows through groups such as the Iraqi Red Crescent, the Islamic Party, the Muslim Scholars Association and non-governmental organisations. But this support is not well organised, and is insufficient to help the growing number of widows.

The Social Affairs Office of the government has started paying the equivalent of about 100 dollars monthly to widows. But this payment cannot support whole families, given particularly the shooting inflation.

And the payment is not easy to get. "I had to pay a lot of money as bribes to government officials in order to get the monthly support payment, and that is not enough to support my big family," 47-year-old widow Haja Saadiya Hussein from Baghdad told IPS.

"Americans killed my husband last year near a checkpoint, and now I have to work as a servant in government officials' houses to earn a living for my six children. I have stopped them going to school, to cut my expenses."

Some widows have attempted to remarry in order to find support. Some second husbands, who are usually older, offer to take care of their new sons for religious reasons.

"There can be no compensation for losing a husband," a spokesperson from the Iraqi Red Crescent's social support department told IPS. "The world is responsible for these women who lost their spouses in the name of the international community."

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