



# Women in War

ICRC

The International Committee of the Red Cross in Iraq

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Iraqi women have repeatedly been victims of the armed conflicts affecting civilians during the last 30 years. Since 2003, they are increasingly caught in the crossfire, killed or wounded in mass explosions and displaced from their homes. Women are targeted for their behaviour and role in society, they suffer from sexual violence or are victims of kidnappings and assassinations and they are especially vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.

Men have been killed and arrested in large numbers and women are severely affected by this as widows or wives of detainees or missing persons. Cultural traditions increase their vulnerability when they are separated from male relatives in a society that is not prepared for women to take social and economic responsibility on their own.

Women can also play an active role in hostilities, voluntarily or not, and be arrested and detained.

Women show remarkable resilience and courage in coping with the difficulties they face, caring and earning income for their families or taking part in community or professional life. Women in war are not necessarily passive and not necessarily "victims".

Rather than prioritising one gender over another, it is important to recognise the specific vulnerabilities of each. War affects men, women, children or the elderly, in different ways.

International humanitarian law, which grants general protection to all war victims, men and women equally, also provides extensive specific protection for women.

If the distinction between combatants and persons not taking part in hostilities was better observed, suffering faced by women would be greatly reduced.

The challenge is to identify the needs of women and address them within activities supporting all victims. When visiting prisons, the ICRC takes into account the specific needs of female detainees; when supporting health structures, the need for improved mother and childcare; when conducting relief activities, the vulnerabilities of women-headed households.

International Women's Day is the occasion to emphasize the specific needs of women. Those involved in the conflict must ensure that civilians, including women, are not attacked. The plight of women-headed households and the trauma of wives of those missing, must be more comprehensively addressed.

The voices of women affected by the war in Iraq, such as those we have collected here, need to be better heard.

Juan-Pedro Schaerer  
Head of Delegation





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## Women killed or kidnapped during conflict

### Muna, 45, Basra:

Muna, a successful gynaecologist was from a family of doctors and her two children studied medicine. Patients came great distances to see her and for 15 years she earned their respect for her kindness and compassion. "She always had time for those in need, she felt affordable medical care should be for everyone". In 2007, her husband, a surgeon and professor, was shot in front of his medical college. Her sister, also a surgeon was killed just one-month later. Muna knew she could be next but wanted to continue working; however she had to think of her children and so fearing for their lives the family fled to Syria. Although money was extremely tight, she knew she had to find a way help her children continue their studies, the thing that could guarantee their future. "At night she could not sleep for worry and by day she fought to hide her fears for the sake of her children" her friend recalls. She finally succeeded in finding a college that accepted her sons but she had to return to Basra to get the necessary documents to register them at the university. She went although she knew that as a doctor and a woman she was a particular target. The day after she arrived she was shot in the head in front of her house. As told by Dr H. a relative and colleague.

*Hundreds of women have been targeted as professionals or for their public role in Iraq. In the medical profession alone, many have fled or abandoned their work, triggering a brain drain and crippling the health system.*

### Hind, 29, Mosul:

On my way home from work, two men dressed in black put a gun to my head. I froze and my mind went blank, I was shaking. Somehow I found myself locked in an empty, dirty room. When I realized I had been kidnapped, thoughts crowded my head "What will happen? Are they going to kill me? Worse, rape me? Let me die instead". I was without food and water and there was no toilet. When they took me out, blindfolded, I thought it was the end. They threw me from a car, it took me 2 hours to find my home. As I got closer, I saw my anxious father standing by the gate but the moment he saw me, he looked away, "Why doesn't he rush to hug me?" He turned around and went inside. Later that evening my sister told me I was held for just over a day. My father quickly paid the ransom, afraid that if relatives or neighbours would notice my absence. However, he could not control the situation as the police were informed and people started talking. Ten days after my kidnapping, I left the country because it became too hard to face the rumours. Everybody assumes that a girl in such situation must have been raped. Now I am afraid, always checking behind me, I have no appetite. I had to clear my families name so I got married to someone I did not know. I have never felt happy again.

*While both men and women are kidnapped, the trauma of the abduction for many women does not end with the release. The shame associated with the event is a lasting stigma. Such incidents are probably underreported by families for the same reason.*

## Specific needs of women detained

In 2008, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) visited over 45,000 detainees/internees held by the US-led Multinational Force in Iraq, the Iraqi Central Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government. The aim of the visits is to monitor conditions of detention and treatment, and to maintain contacts between detainees and their families. More than 300,000 Red Cross messages and "salamat" (greetings) were exchanged with the support of the Iraqi Red Crescent Society.

Women are a small minority of the detainees/internees visited but as most prisons are designed to house male detainees, the ICRC closely monitors their specific needs during visits. In addition to adequate conditions and treatment, women in detention must particularly be ensured privacy, safety, access to health care and hygiene. The specific needs of mothers detained with their children must be met. Regular contacts with their families during detention, and safety and reintegration following release are also a concern.

## Separated from loved ones

The ICRC also supports families visiting their relatives detained at Camp Bucca (south of Basra) by covering part of their travel expenses. Since the beginning of 2008, ICRC provided financial support for more than 69,000 visits to more than 20,000 detainees at Camp Bucca. As all detainees in Camp Bucca are male, women relatives often undertake the long journey to visit a husband or a son.

*"Tears coursed down my cheeks when I saw my beloved child enter the visitation area. I took him in my arms, wishing time would stop. I came all the way from Ramadi to Camp Bucca to visit my son who I have not seen for 3 years. I was not afraid of the long tiring trip nor the checkpoints or even the risk I was taking. I arrived very early alongside hundreds of other women coming to visit their family members. The procedures were long and the presence of the soldiers intimidating. For a moment, I thought I will never see my son again and then I was afraid. But the ICRC employees working in Bucca knew what to say to give me hope and calm me down. I saw their sorrow when I told them my story. Hours passed and then I saw the detainees coming, My eyes searched frantically, I worried I might not recognize him but my heart told me the man coming towards me was my son. I could not stop myself from crying out loud. The reunion was so emotional that even the people around us could not prevent their tears from joining ours"*

*Umm Ahmad, 73, Ramadi*



## Time does not always heal

Thousands of Iraqis have gone missing over the last decades. Wives and children are suspended in limbo, unable to mourn or to move on with their lives. Many spend years searching. In the absence of a proof of death, widows cannot obtain a pension or remarry.

### Fatma, 29, Baghdad:

*"My husband was kidnapped in 2006. He went to refuel his car and called me from the queue, saying he would come home soon. He never came back. We tried everything to get information, calling everyone we knew. We went to the morgue, and we provided a picture. Once they called us to identify a body but it was not him. A lawyer told us that he was detained somewhere, took \$5000 and we never heard from him again. I could not answer my daughter's questions about her father, so I lied. I told her that he had left the country. She fell very ill. It was nine months before I had the courage to tell her he had disappeared and I did not know where he was."*

### Gulizar, Erbil:

*I last saw my husband in March 1991. A shell hit one of our neighbours house, killing several people. My husband told me to take the children and leave the city because soldiers were coming. He went to the neighbour's house to help the wounded. I kept expecting my husband to catch-up with us, or to meet him somewhere on the road. We never saw him again. For 12 years my heart jumped at every turn of the door handle thinking it was him,, I thought he was in jail, unable to get a message to us. After 2003 I lost hope."*

### Ishaya, 59, Najaf:

*"I was married and my husband took good care of me. I lost him during the Iraq-Iran war. He is still missing. I stayed alone waiting and waiting and I will keep waiting for his return, or for news of his fate until the day I die. 22 years have passed and I do not know if he is alive or dead, because I did not see his body. Without a death certificate, I cannot get a pension. I have my work to survive but I am afraid if I lose my health, I will also lose my dignity by asking people for food."*

The ICRC attaches great importance to this issue in Iraq, assisting the authorities in clarifying the whereabouts of persons who went missing during the Iran-Iraq war and the 1991 and 2003 wars. Various mechanisms have been put in place allowing the relevant parties to the conflicts to work together to provide answers to the families of those still unaccounted for. The ICRC assists the ministries of health and human rights and supports the Medico-Legal Institute in Baghdad, by training staff involved in the exhumation, identification and preservation of human remains.



# THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN

Decades of conflict in Iraq have left an estimated 1 to 3 Million women-headed households. Thousands of families have been torn apart because a husband and father has been killed, is still missing or detained. For women left alone to care for their families, the trauma of the loss is manifold. There is the harrowing memory of the circumstance of the death of their husband. There is the loss of a home that they had to leave because of threats or lack of money. There is the daily struggle to put food on the table and pay for the doctor or schooling, because the breadwinner of the family is gone.

## Buthina, 39, Wassit

*"I'm a widow for the second time. My first husband was killed in the Iran- Iraq war when I was 16 years old. A few years later, I met my second husband Mohammed; we fell in love while we were students at college. In 2003, my husband received a threatening letter asking for US\$ 10,000 in exchange for his life. We didn't have the money; he just had a simple grocery shop. Three days later, as Mohammed carried our three year old daughter Huda in his arms, he was shot dead right in front of our house. I saw him lying there, dying, blood flowing from his chest. Huda wasn't hurt but she cried for five whole days. My attempts to calm her were useless and one week later, she started having seizures. She needs constant medical attention, but often I can't afford the treatment."*



## A society led by men

"Those suffering most in this conflict are women because they are wives, mothers and daughters", say many Iraqis, recognising that Iraqi society and its patriarchal system does not make life easy for a woman without a man. Without a male relative, a woman lacks economic, physical and social protection and support.

## Um Mohammed, 41, Falluja

*My whole life changed when my husband was killed during the events of 2004. He was returning home after work, when fighting broke out between armed groups and coalition forces. A stray bullet killed him instantly. I ran out of the house followed by my children, and I will never forget the sight of my husband lying dead in our street. I had been a happy wife, taking care of our 5 children at home; my husband had always cared for us. Suddenly everything became my responsibility. I felt lost, I had no support, and I did not know how to face the outside world alone. My 16-year-old son had to leave school to earn a living as a cleaner, there was no other choice. One day as my son worked, there was shooting and because he was just a child, he became scared and ran to the street. A sniper shot him in the head and killed him.*



# HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

Traditionally, a woman who loses her husband usually returns to her family or family-in-law. It is considered dishonourable for a widow to remain alone and families are expected to provide for her and her children. More and more in Iraq, families are no longer able to provide this traditional safety net. Families are extremely weakened financially and unable to cope with the additional burden. With the loss of many men, some widows have no close male relative to take care of them.



**Rana, 25, Baghdad.**

*In 2005, my husband and father were caught in crossfire near Abu Ghraib and were both killed. I was a student, married just four months and pregnant. Soon afterwards, my brother was kidnapped and killed and my brother-in-law was shot dead. My widowed mother, my widowed sister and I left to Baghdad. In one month, I lost my husband and all the men in my immediate family. I quit my studies. My son was born without a father and we shared a flat with another widow for a few months. Then we stayed in an empty house, but were forced to leave after a while. Again and again we moved, trying to find a suitable place with the little money we had. I sold all my belongings to pay for rent and food. I moved 10 times in two years. Three months ago, I met a lady on the bus; she is kind enough to give me money every month to survive. Women in this sort of situation only have each other to lean on.*

## Left without support

Deprived of traditional sources of income, women are forced to adopt new and previously unforeseen roles they were never raised for. The community is often unprepared for this shift. Jobs are difficult to find without previous experience or a diploma. Social barriers and discrimination limit women's access to work. There are few options left for women whose relatives do not want or cannot help as they are already struggling to make ends meet.



**Zeinab, 41, Falluja**

*I can't find a job. I didn't finish my studies, I don't have any work experience and in Anbar people are conservative about women who work. I had to marry my 17 year old daughter to ease some of the burden. I can't afford medicine for my 15 year old who has epilepsy. We live in a humble rented house that my sisters and brothers help me to pay for, although they also have little to spare. My children and I can only afford to eat twice a day and I rely on charity. I took my 7 year old son away from school out of fear. I tried to apply for a welfare pension but it is very difficult because they need so many documents and it costs money and time and even then there are no guarantees you will get anything. Worst is that we recently discovered that my eldest daughter has cancer. Her husband divorced her and she is back home. I sold all my belongings to pay for treatment but she is withering away in front of my eyes.*

# THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN

Without an income or family support, women can only turn to the government for help. Not nearly enough manage to access this kind of support. In July 2008, the ICRC in cooperation with a local NGO in one district of Baghdad, interviewed particularly vulnerable women-headed households. Only 10% received a widow's pension\* and only 25% obtained the compensation for "spouse killed by terrorism"\*\*. The process to apply is complex and requires large amount of documentation, often difficult to gather. There are the usual shortcomings of the administration, limited budget, backlogs or corruption. Some women do not bother applying, knowing the difficulties and the need for time, energy and money to go through the process. At any rate the Widow's Pension is a fraction of what is needed for a family to survive.

**Rana, 25, Baghdad:**

*I don't know what to do. I don't know the ways of the city. I never learnt how to deal with people, let alone talk to strangers so I can't find a job in a shop or as a clerk. I tried to get a pension for widows, but all my papers are in Abu Ghraib and I don't have the money to return and collect them. Some kind women have tried to help me and my child, but their situation is bad too. I wish I knew how to fight for myself as there are no men around to help me since all the men in my family were killed. I know that people talk about me behind my back, because I am a widow who lives alone without a man, but I don't have a choice. My son is two years old. Sometimes when he hears other children call their fathers he too calls "Father? Father?"... I tell him "I am your mother and father now".*



## Struggle to survive

Many women-headed households live in poverty and destitution with a very low income. This was underlined during the ICRC survey, where the average income among vulnerable women-headed households interviewed was below 150,000 IQD per month (\$125) mainly sourced from relatives and charity. This is less than half the estimated minimum household expenses.

**Kurdistan, 35, Dohuk**

*"I live in a camp in Dohuk governorate with my 5 children. My husband has been detained since 2006. Luckily I have a job, packing soil in plastic bags for a local nursery. My daily wage is 7,000 IQD (6\$), but it only covers a fraction of my family needs. I think all the time of ways to put food on the table. I sold my only traditional Kurdish dress for a gas canister last week. Sometimes I barter a bottle of cooking oil for fresh tomatoes. When my children ask me for more, I tell them "maybe tomorrow", in the hope they have forgotten by the next day. The youngest keeps asking about his father saying he wants to search his pockets for sweets when he returns from the souk, he thinks he is coming back with presents".*



\* Between 50,000 IQD to 120,000 IQD per month according to the number of children (\$60 to \$100)

\*\* 2.5 million IQD (\$2300) for spouse of victims of terrorism since 2003

# HEADED HOUSEHOLDS



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The PDS (government food ration, in theory supplying half of the required food intake for a family per month) is often the main source of food, but the ability of the majority of families to buy protein, fresh vegetables and fruit is limited and most diets are insufficient. Low income affects not just food security but also the ability to afford adequate accommodation. Families live in poor conditions, facing uncertainty if they have to pay rent.

## Ishaya, 59, Najaf

*"When my husband went missing during the Iran Iraq war, I kept my job and was able to pay the rent myself, but after 2003, the situation turned from bad to worse and no laws protected poor tenants, and so the owner threw me out. He said he was not afraid of a woman alone and even if I complained, without money or contacts no one would listen. I sold all my belongings and I went to work on a farm. It took me five years to build a hut from husks and mud and straw, but thanks to my hard work and the kind help of my neighbours I have a home. I am proud of what I have done by myself"*

Low income and poor living conditions affect women's health and their capacity to access medical care. A significant number appear to suffer from anaemia and many have difficulty to pay for medicines or doctor fees. In a number of cases children's education falls victim to the economic situation. Boys have to work to support their families and girls stay at home.



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Nada Saleh, manager of Women and Future Organisation in Adhmya, who facilitated the ICRC survey, sadly died in an accident in October 2008. Her commitment and compassion to help vulnerable women in her neighbourhood was an inspiration to all and the ICRC will continue to honour her memory with its work with the women of Iraq.

## Buthina. 39, Wassit.

*After my husband was killed, I went to live with my family in Wassit. All they could give me was a place to stay. All my documents were in Baghdad and I was afraid of travelling to get them. Therefore I cannot get a pension or compensation from the government. I applied for jobs as a clerk but they kept asking: To which party do you belong? Do you know how to use a computer? At the moment, we live on the monthly ration. We can just afford two meals a day. My three daughters 8, 12 and 15 years had to leave school because it's too expensive. My sons aged 11 and 16 are still going to school. But in the evening, instead of homework, they have jobs in the market. I know it is too much for my children to deal with. My oldest son is depressed and has nightmares; he sometimes seems to have no will to go on... I know I place too much on his shoulders but he is the man of the family now."*

## State responsibility

While a wide network of charity, including support from humanitarian organisations, the public food distribution system, mosques, neighbours and relatives help families to stay afloat and survive, this does not enable them to change their situation in the long term. They need independent sources of income, either through work or state assistance. Strong and comprehensive support mechanisms from the government alongside income generating activities for those who have the skills are desperately needed to alleviate the plight of many women headed families in Iraq.

# Facing the future alone

**Nyhaya, 25, Baghdad.**

*My husband and I fell in love. It was a mixed marriage and we lived in his parent's home with our two children, his brothers, their wives and six children. In 2007, our neighbourhood became very insecure so my husband and his brothers went to visit another house in a different district. On the way back they were kidnapped. The next day someone called and told me to collect the bodies in the morgue. When I saw the bodies they had been horribly tortured. What did they use? Drills, acid? How can people be so cruel? From one day to the next, all the breadwinners of the house were gone. My father-in-law could not earn enough to support us, we lived off charity from the neighbours for one year. In some ways I was lucky and I was given the government's compensation (for spouses of terror victims). I used the money to open a small shop in the commercial area of Adhamyah and I sell women's and children clothes. I make about 100,000 IQD (\$90) per month, it is not a lot, but it helps us. My sisters-in-law and I have lived through a catastrophe, but we are together and we need to go on, for our children's sake.*



**Jubaira, 70, Najaf:**

*I am old but determined to fight. I lost my husband and my only son lost his mind, following the shelling of the military base where he was serving. I could not get a pension. I don't know any powerful person who can help, I can't read or write. To survive, I run a small business in the cemetery in Najaf. Every day, I come in the early morning to sell candles and flower-water to people coming to bury or visit their dead. They give me money, food or water. The ICRC together with a local NGO will support me with a small kiosk to protect me from the burning sun and the cold, and allow me to sell more products more regularly. I am hoping it will increase my income and make my life a bit easier. I am patient and I accepted God's will. I won't give up, I will continue my fight till the end.*

## Helping women-headed households

In 2008, the ICRC in cooperation with a number of local NGOs, supported vulnerable families headed by women with ad-hoc food and hygiene items distributions. All these families had lost their male breadwinner due to the conflict. 3277 female-headed households received food and hygiene items (washing powder, soap, shampoo) or essential household items (blankets, buckets, kitchen set) depending on their needs.

In 2009, the ICRC will support income-generating projects for similar women in collaboration with local NGOs in Iraq, to allow such women to regain their economic independence.



THE ICRC HAS BEEN WORKING IN IRAQ ON A PERMANENT BASIS SINCE 1980, RESPONDING TO THE CONSEQUENCES OF ARMED CONFLICTS.

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