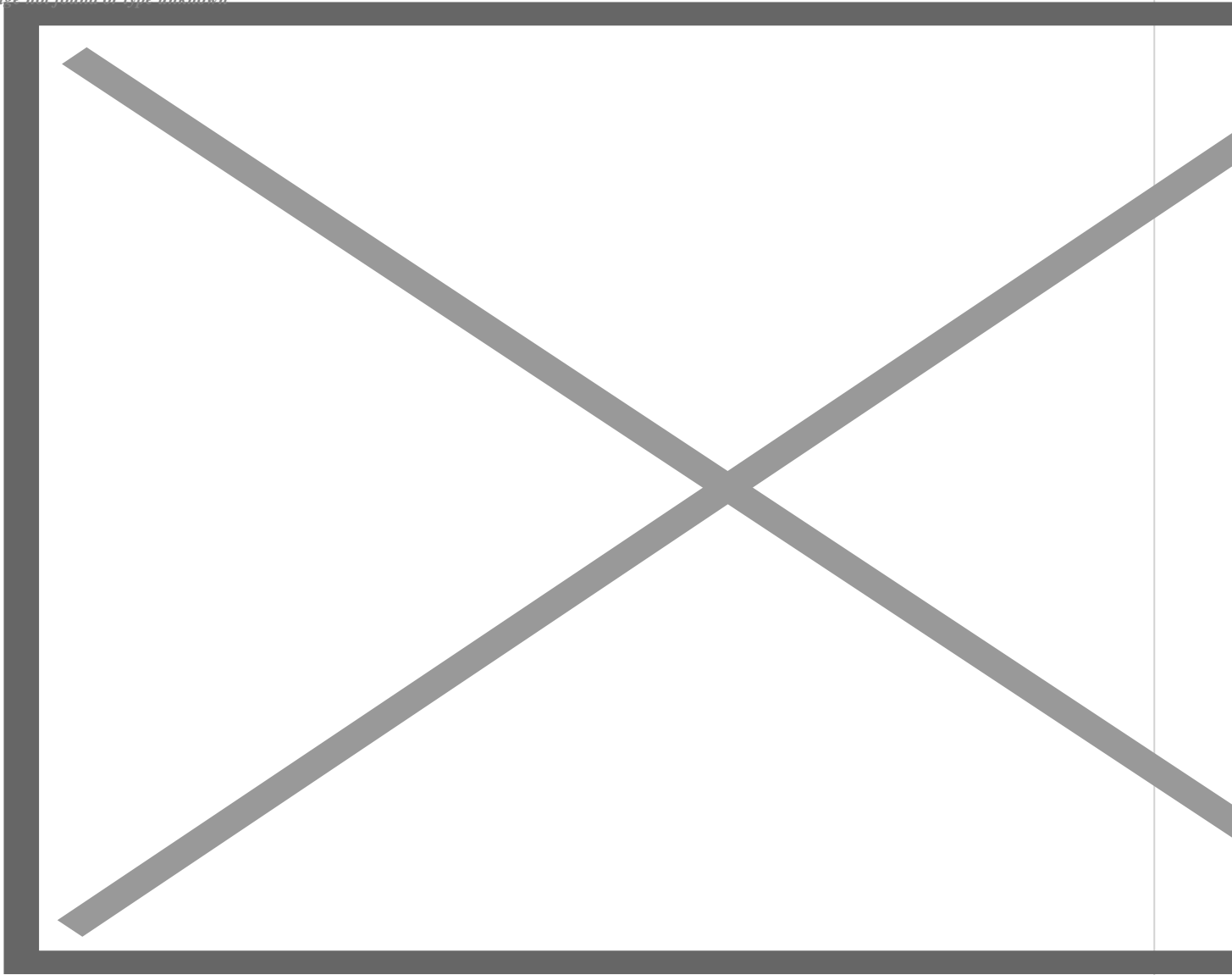


Iraqi women struggle to escape abuse as domestic violence rises

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Iraqi women protest violence against women in the capital Baghdad. [Photo: Sabah Arar/AFP]

Baghdad, February 14 (RHC)-- Dhoha Sabah had been married for eighteen years when her husband first laid a hand on her. Crowded into a modest, single-room home in Baghdad's Sadr City

neighbourhood, the couple had always struggled to put food on the table for their four children.

But then the coronavirus pandemic struck, sending Iraq's oil-dependent economy into a downward spiral and putting many out of work. "We don't have an income. The kids need to go to school, and I cannot afford it. Whenever I talk to him about this issue, he beats me and the kids," Sabah told Al Jazeera. On at least one occasion, Sabah had to seek medical care because of her husband's physical abuse.

Police say domestic violence has increased in Iraq by about 20 percent since the onset of the pandemic, which has pushed millions of Iraqis below the poverty line. Poor neighbourhoods like Sadr City have been most affected by mounting economic and psychological pressures.

The rise in domestic violence has highlighted the limited legal and financial support available for victims in Iraq, who often find themselves trapped in abusive households due to conservative social norms that consider it shameful for women to leave or seek justice.

Sabah thought about divorcing her husband, but like so many Iraqi women who lack financial independence, she had no alternatives. "I had decided to take my kids and run away, but where could I go? Who could take me in? My parents are also poor people," she said.

And so she turned to Iraq's community police, a unit under the interior ministry whose mandate is to resolve intracommunal conflicts before they escalate. "When a wife complains against her husband in a police station or goes to a court, for sure their relationship will never return to normal. But if the community police intervenes, solves their conflicts through reconciliation, things will return to normal," Brigadier General Ghalib Atiya Khalaf, the head of the community police, told Al Jazeera.

After several mediation sessions and with support from Sadr City's tribes, the community police forced Sabah's husband to sign a promise that he would not beat her again. For now, the abuse has stopped.

"If we can unite families and preserve the community, we will reduce crime rates," Khalaf said. "We found that most criminals came from broken families." The community police claim to have a 90 percent success rate in resolving domestic abuse cases. But critics say the unit prioritises reconciliation over justice for victims.

Violence against women is normalised in Iraqi society and laws. According to a 2012 study by the ministry of planning, more than half of surveyed women believed that beating a wife for disobeying her husband's order did not constitute violence.

United Nations statistics suggest that 46 percent of currently married women in Iraq were exposed to at least one form of emotional, physical or sexual violence by their spouse. Very few file a criminal case.

"The social values and customs consider it shameful for the woman to file a complaint against her husband or her brother. Even if she did file a case, as soon as her family hears about it, she'll drop it," said Marwa Abdul Redha, a young lawyer who used to handle domestic violence cases.

Abdul Redha could not recall a single case that resulted in a conviction of an abuser. She eventually turned her attention to other legal work, after the threats and hurdles she encountered while trying to defend victims began taking a psychological toll.

Iraq currently does not have a domestic violence law. While the 1969 penal code punishes assault that results in bodily injury with at least one year in prison, it also considers "the punishment of a wife by her husband" to be a "legal right."

A draft domestic violence law was first introduced to Parliament in 2014, but progress has stalled amid widespread political opposition from legislators who believe it would erode Iraq's social fabric. "We cannot just copy western experiences that will negatively impact our society," said legislator Jamal al-

Mohammadawi from the National Approach Block, a party that holds eight seats.

“I believe the new law will increase divorces rates and it will increase hostility between wife and husband.” One provision is particularly controversial: The right for non-governmental organisations to open shelters for victims. “We cannot allow just anyone to open a shelter,” Mayson Al Saedi, the head of the women’s committee and member of Sairoon, the largest party in Parliament, told Al Jazeera.

Currently, there is one government-run shelter in Baghdad, but it only provides accommodation on a judge’s order. That would require filing a police case, something many women are reluctant to do because of the stigma associated with entering a police station.

Some rights groups run underground shelters, despite serious legal and security risks. “We face many challenges and difficulties to operate shelters that protect women,” said Ibtisam Mania from the Organization for Women’s Freedom in Iraq, which runs several shelters for women in Baghdad.

“We often face issues with tribes. When they know a woman from their tribe is in our shelter, it’s as if they start a war against us. The police has also assaulted several of our shelters.”

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