

Violence under the cloak of multi-culturalism



**A report of the 'Violence
Against Women-Women
Against Violence
Programme' delivered in
partnership by Kurdistan
Refugee Women's
Organisation And The
Middle East Centre for
Women's Rights
2005**

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Kurdistan Refugee Women's Organisation is a registered charity established in 1999 to support Kurdish women living in the UK to secure their basic needs and rights. Our role is to provide support, advice and opportunities for Kurdish women, enabling Kurdish women to integrate into life in the UK.

Middle East Centre for Women's Rights is a women's rights NGO established in 1999 to achieve equal rights for women within Middle Eastern communities. Our role is to raise awareness of women's rights within Middle Eastern communities and to expose abuses of women's rights through information, advocacy and campaigning work.

February 2005

Introduction

In March 2002, Kurdish Refugee Women's Organisation (KRWO) and Middle East Centre for Women's Rights (MECWR) established the 'Violence Against Women-Women Against Violence' Programme in response to rising levels of reported abuses and violations against Middle Eastern women living in the UK. This was the first project of its kind and set out with the ambitious aim of eradicating violence against women in Middle Eastern communities.

The work of the programme over the last three years has supported hundreds of women in desperate situations and has begun to raise awareness of the levels and types of violence both within the Middle Eastern communities and wider. Large numbers of women are actively involved in the activities and campaigns to end violence and information is being distributed and debated within the communities. KRWO and MECWR are not alone as they have the support of many women and women's organisations who recognise the significance of this programme.

Whilst the programme has achieved a great deal, much more needs to be done. Violence against women still takes place on a regular basis with no real accountability for the perpetrators. Sections within the communities are resistant to change and relinquishing this hold over women will require a long and hard struggle. Policy-makers and deciders need to be identified, spoken with and won over to the simplicity of our message. This has not happened yet and will be the focus of our work for the coming years. We hope that you will join us in the next phase of this programme.

Middle East Context

“men are the protectors and maintainers of women. Because Allah has given the one more strength than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in the husband’s absence. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill conduct, admonish them, refuse to share their beds and beat them, but if they return to the obedient take no farther action” (Quran, 547-548).

Women within Middle Eastern societies have suffered abuses for many years due to authoritarian regimes, societal structures and laws, religion, culture, war and oppression. To this day, women continue to be the most deprived and discriminated people within Middle Eastern communities, viewed as second-class citizens, without the fundamental human rights to which men are entitled. They face daily violence and discrimination of many forms: kidnapping and raping by military groups, ‘honour killing’, stoning, beheading of

women who work in prostitution, arranged marriages for women and children, genital mutilation, forced veiling, regular sexual harassment, financial dependence on men, discrimination within the legal system, education and workplaces. Men within many Middle Eastern countries are able to commit polygamy as many governments have legalised this practice, whilst women have no rights of divorce. In some Middle East countries, women do not have voting rights or the standard identity issued to men.

Within Kurdistan, for example, when the Ba’athist authorities were removed from power in 1991 and the Kurdish nationalist parties (PUK and KDP) began running the northern part of Iraq, the killing of women became widespread. Women were killed for ‘involvement with the Ba’ath regime’ or working as prostitutes. .



A list was prepared of thousands of women and they were killed under the pretext of clearing society of immorality and the shame they had brought upon their families. Later, families themselves were allowed to kill their daughters or their wives who were said to have committed 'honour crimes'. Many were forced to commit suicide, for example, by self-immolation, in order to escape punishment by their families. The practice of 'honour killing' continued under the rule of the PUK, and Amnesty International notes that during the last 12 years of PUK & KDP authority in Iraqi Kurdistan, more than 8,000 women have been killed.

Even more recently, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq, a political vacuum was created into which Islamic groups have stepped. These individuals and groups have begun to terrorize women; issuing fatwas, announcing that women should be veiled and threatening to kill women who have resorted to prostitution as a result of poverty. On 6th August 2003, 6 women were killed together in Basra City before their children's eyes, alleged to have been involved in prostitution

These same groups are preventing women and girls from going to work or university unless they are veiled. They state that a woman's place is in the home and have started setting up Islamic courts in Al-Najaf. Men who are killing their female relatives in the name of 'honour' are receiving encouragement and support from these courts. Rape has become the norm and women are not able to report these abuses to the authorities for fear of punishment by their relatives for bringing 'shame' upon the family. Consequently, women are being raped, abducted and killed on a daily basis, yet no-one is held accountable



UK Context

Many of the same abuses exist within Middle Eastern communities in the UK: women are viewed as second-class citizens; arranged and enforced marriages are still carried out for young women; divorce is not recognised, unless a mosque oversees it; family beatings of women and threats of violence and killing take place regularly; honour killings are occurring in Middle Eastern and Asian communities as are kidnappings; women are often financially dependent on the man; women are living in fear, isolation and suffering abject deprivation. UK authorities are failing to protect these women as they view these abuses of women's rights as 'cultural' or part of 'tradition' and therefore allow the communities to continue committing all forms of violence and discrimination against women. The government has failed to construct legislation which responds to the different forms of violence which are occurring, particularly in Middle Eastern communities.





Heshu Yones
victim of 'honour
killing'

Case Study: Honour Killing in the UK

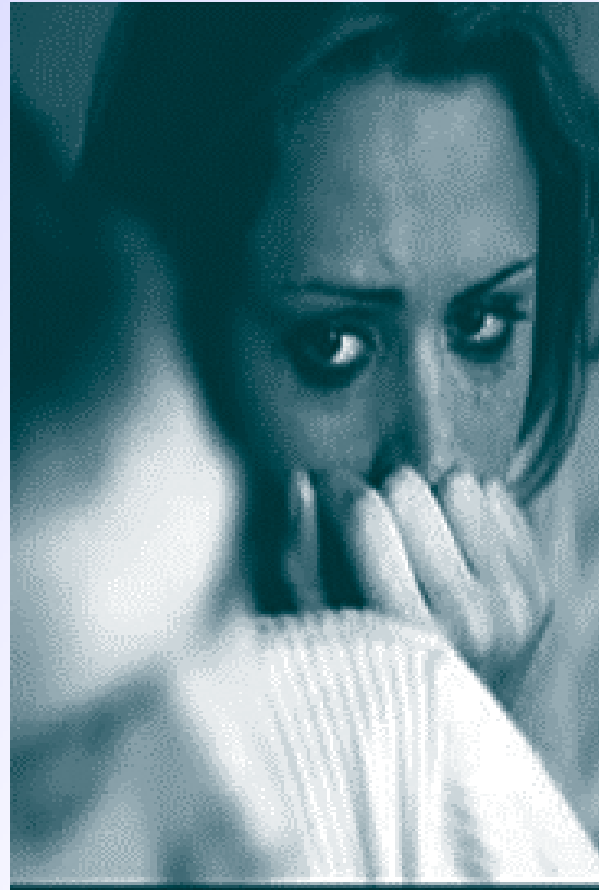
Heshu Yones, a 16 year old Kurdish girl living in London was stabbed to death by her father in October 2002 to 'protect the honour of the family'. The only crime that Heshu had committed was to have a relationship with someone she loved. What she did was unacceptable to the beliefs her father held so he killed her. This is not the first time that Kurdish women living in the heart of Europe have been killed by family members in the name of 'honour'. Subhia Nadir, Fadima Sahindal, Pela and Wafa are just some of the victims of 'honour killing' that have occurred within the 'civilized' West.



Root Causes

In Middle Eastern countries:

- Laws and legal systems which treat women as second class citizens i.e. Sharia.
- Religion and religious instructions taught in schools that it is deeply rooted in the society and reactionary towards women's equality.
- Societal structures which enforce discrimination i.e. education and employment practices.
- Customs and traditions which allow for the abuse of women rights.
- State support or consent for violence against women.
- Repressive regimes and dictatorships which deny any form of human rights Populations brutalised by war, violence and poverty.



Case Study: Women in Kurdistan working to protect one another

In 1993, the only women's organization in Kurdistan was the Independent Women's Organization (IWO). IWO was defending women's rights and struggling for the replacement of Sharia Laws with laws based on humanitarian principles. IWO opened a shelter to protect women from being killed in 1998 and from then until 2000 more than 400 women were protected in the shelter. In July 2000, the PUK closed down IWO and its shelter, which was at the time protecting the lives of 12 women and 4 children, stating that it was an immoral institution and did not comply with Kurdish traditional norms and values. They took away the women and children from the shelter and one of these women, Nasrin, was later killed by her brother. Evidence from women's activists and organizations within Iraqi Kurdistan indicate that an increasing number of women are being killed Urgent effort is needed to reopen the shelter.



In the UK:

- The cloak of 'cultural relativism' - that in some communities a level of violence against women is more acceptable.
- The lack of women's voice and power within Middle Eastern communities Lack of proper legislation to recognize the violations against women in Middle Eastern Communities.



Programme Details

Violence Against Women-Women Against Violence is a partnership project which came about in response to both KRWO and MECWR working increasingly on issues of violence experienced by Middle Eastern women. Whilst adopting different roles, both organisations share similar aims and approaches to the subject and recognised that working together would bring an added strength and depth to effectively tackling abuses and violations.

The programme was established in March 2002 with the single aim of eradicating violence against women in Middle Eastern communities.

We recognized that this may take much longer than the initial phase of this project, but aimed to have made significant reductions in the levels of violence experienced by women within these first three years.

Objectives which guided the work were:

- * **To support women in violent situations and empower them to make informed decisions about their lives;**
- * **To involve women in the work and enable their voices to be heard within policy-making;**
- * **To develop a strong network of women who are experiencing violence**

The programme operates with two distinct strands which addresses the need to work both with women experiencing violence whilst also trying to influence the behaviour, rules and laws which lie behind these violations. The project aims to act as a holistic resource in which we support women in crisis through to influencing policy. The programme, as with both of our organizations, is a grass-roots initiative through which the women who experience violence in turn inform and drive our work. The programme anticipated that these women would become a powerful voice to change the current situation.

Supporting women experiencing violence

During the programme we have supported (304) clients in detail whilst also dealing with hundreds of telephone calls from women. We have worked with (560) women through our workshops and events and our workers are able to communicate in Arabic, Farsi and Kurdish. We provide weekly outreach sessions as part of our support for women experiencing or in fear of violence which generally take half- full day per client and involve accompanying women to different agencies i.e. hospitals, refuges, police stations, solicitors and to houses of clients. We have been providing support on a 24 hour basis and often get calls in the evening where one of our workers will go out to the woman who is in danger. As well as outreach and drop-in advice we also provide telephone and on-line advice for women who cannot come to the office because they are far away.

60% of women approach us as victims of domestic violence, with a complex range of needs including mental health needs, immigration, housing, health, welfare and language. The work takes time and we often liaise with a number of specialist agencies to ensure the best outcome for the woman concerned. In some cases we have been able to prevent violence of the most extreme forms through involving the police and ensuring women find safety immediately.

Feedback from women and our own observations show us that in some cases women have been able to find a safe place to start their lives without fear, in shelters and refuges. Others have taken up educational courses and begun to look for jobs. The majority of these women had no understanding of their rights but through the support of the programme, they have become much clearer about their rights as individuals and how to assert them. Sadly, some women return to the violent situations as the reality of leaving is too difficult.

Case Study: A typical case for the support team

Miss K.L was threatened with her life by her husband. She came to us looking for safety and to divorce her husband. We supported her throughout the lengthy divorce process and found a refuge for her and her children. We continued to support her whilst in the refuge and enabled her to be re-housed in a safe area far away from her husband. One day she called us and explained; “now I feel safe, I feel that I am a human being respected in society.” She also added that her children were so much happier as they no longer suffered abuse and beatings at the hands of their father.



Involving women and enabling their voices to be heard within policy-making.

Through workshops, seminars and events we have been able to involve many women in the work of the programme. For example, we recently we hosted a seminar for 110 people in Conway Hall to discuss rights for Middle Eastern women. Alongside these larger events, we have organized local meetings and workshops where smaller numbers of women have attended and are able to talk freely. Key to these events has been for women who have or are experiencing abuses to feel able to express their views and experiences.

Over 30 women are involved in our activities and campaigns at all levels. Of our core volunteer team, 5 are previous clients who have now moved on to assisting other women in similar situations.

We have tried to reflect the voices of these women within our work to influence policy. For example, staff, volunteers and our clients were involved in a conference organised by the GLA regarding 'honour killing'.

We have also been involved in discussions regarding the drafting of a proposal for inclusion in the Domestic Violence Bill. Our proposed demands to be included in this bill include the banning of compulsory veiling, recognizing honour killing as a crime and murder which should receive a heavy punishment.

We have met with MP's and with the Metropolitan Police on a number of occasions to raise awareness of the violence suffered by Middle Eastern women and have made presentations to domestic violence networks and fora. We were also able to meet with the strategic advisory group who produced the London Domestic Violence Strategy to try and influence the plan.

A particular focus of the programme has been around the area of 'honour killing', for which we established a campaign jointly with Southall Black Sisters in response to the murder of 16 year old, Heshu Yones.



The campaign has received considerable support from individuals and organizations both in the UK and within Europe. As a result of the ongoing campaign, we have begun to work with the Metropolitan Police around 'honour killing' and have been asked to provide training for other organisations.

The staff within the programme have used the media to raise awareness about violence against women, giving interviews to Kurdish, Arabic and English media.

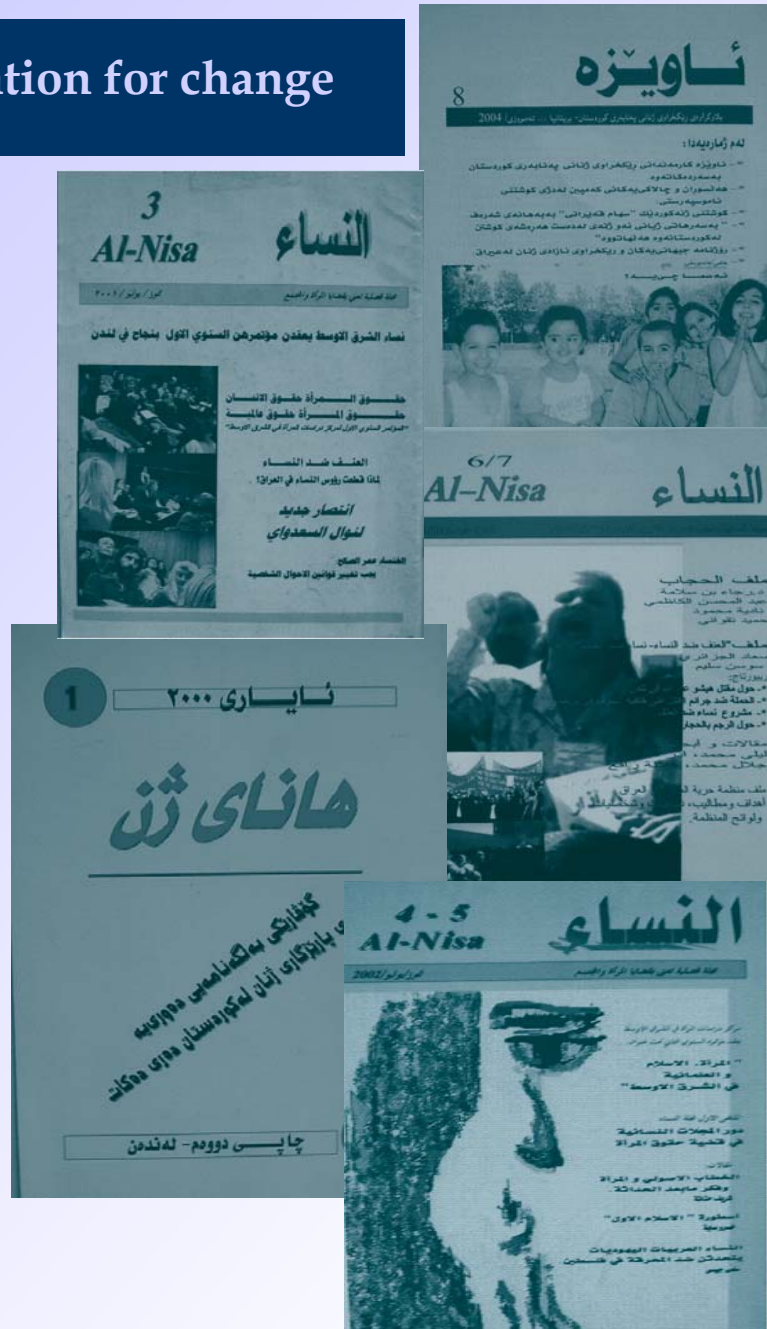
The work of the programme has been mentioned in the Guardian, Observer, Daily Mirror, Evening Standard, the Sun and Metro whilst BBC News 24, Sky News and German TV have also interviewed us.

Whilst we have been relatively successful in raising awareness of violence against Middle Eastern women, we have not managed to effectively influence policy-making. We have found it hard to get our experiences and suggestions taken on board and the need to influence policy and practice must become a central aspect of our future work.



Producing information for change

The role of information has been key to all our work. We have produced newsletters, magazines, leaflets and posters aimed at raising awareness within Middle Eastern communities and wider society about the violence that is taking place on a daily basis. Information has been produced in Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish and English and has helped us to reach out to many isolated women whilst also informing and influencing mainstream agencies such as the police. The information produced has formed part of the awareness raising work within the programme. In particular, our Al Nisa magazine and Aweza newsletter are widely read publications which have devoted regular sections to highlighting violations against women.



www.womeneagainstviolence.org.uk

In October 2003 the programme launched a website (www.womenagainstviolence.org.uk), which provides information about the daily violations carried out against women in Middle Eastern communities. The website focuses on informing the community about 'honour killing' crimes and other forms of violence against women and challenges the view that these might be culturally accepted within Middle Eastern communities

Developing networks

During the programme, strong networks have been built, both of women and of women's organisations. Through the workshops, events and information, we have brought increasing numbers of Middle Eastern women together in ways that they have been able to gain valuable support and information about their rights and importantly, to recognise that they are not alone. They are in turn encouraging other women to come forward and ever more women are approaching us. These women and the work of our organization are part of an international network of women activists who are struggling to challenge the violence experienced by women within our communities.

In terms of organizations, we have built a network of women's organisations who share similar concerns and are working on the same issues, both in the UK and the Middle East. Within the UK, Southall Black Sister, Asylum Aid, Refugee Women's Association, Ashiana Project, Hackney Domestic Violence Form- sub committee, Islington Domestic Violence project, are some of the organizations with whom we collaborate.



What Next?

The Violence Against Women-Women Against Violence Programme is addressing a particularly challenging and sensitive issue within Middle Eastern communities. The work is slow and incremental but without doubt much needed. We plan to build upon the experience and activity of these first three years, yet retaining the two key strands of the programme: support and information.

In terms of the support programme;

- More resources need to be put into meeting the needs of the many women coming forward and to deal with the complexity of each individual case.
- Outreach needs to be extended.
- A telephone support line needs to be established.
- The creation of a drop-in where women can arrive whenever they wish and receive appropriate and tailored support.
- More volunteers need to be trained to provide one to one support for women within such settings.
- The provision of opportunities for women in difficult situations needs to be extended.
- The lack of bed space within refuges makes the provision of a refuge a priority, though perhaps for the longer-term.

Information has been wide and extensive yet the programme now needs to focus on using the information to create change at all levels in society.

- A debate within the Middle Eastern communities has been ignited and the Violence Against Women Programme must be centre stage in this debate, informing and influencing community members. The Programme needs to provide all sections of the community, particularly the most marginalized with information and awareness to challenge violations. The programme needs to reach out to other Middle Eastern communities beyond Iraqi and Kurdish and to highlight in particular the practice of 'honour killing'.
- Young people must be targeted through appropriate and accessible information as they present an opportunity for change.
- Voluntary/community based organisations and public sector organisations who work with Middle Eastern individuals and communities need to be made aware of the violations against women and empowered to challenge them effectively.
- Information needs to be produced and targeted at policy-makers and those in power to ensure that the mobilization of so many women results in actual change.

The Programme will involve written information in the form of newsletters, magazines, leaflets and fact sheets targeted at the above groups; accessible information through a website in Arabic, Kurdish and English; a programme of workshops and seminars; policy papers and research and resources for education at every level.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SHOULD END

We do not accept it
You should not accept it
Let us end it!

يجب انهاء العنف ضد النساء
دهبى توندو تيئى له درى زنان كوتايى بيت

If you are a woman experiencing violence and
you speak Arabic, Kurdish or Farsi, or you want
information about our work, please contact:-

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