

## **Call to Strengthen Laws Protecting Women**

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Conference presses government to combat abuse, honour killings.

A gathering of rights activists and legal experts has called on the Iraqi government to introduce legal reforms to help eliminate abuse against women.

Activists at conference in Sulaimaniyah this week presented evidence of discrimination, domestic violence and gender-related crimes that persist despite Iraq's inclusion in international women's rights agreements.

The conference concluded with recommendations for the government to offer women better protection.

"Violence happens against women in every form, in every class of society. Women face forced marriage, honour killing, pressure to commit suicide, beatings, prostitution and a lack of freedom that greatly impairs their lives as members of society," Kurdistan Daloye, chief of party for the International Human Rights Law Institute, IHRLI, said.

The organisation sponsored the conference under the slogan "Fighting Violence Against Women Through Law's Supremacy".

The conference, which was held on April 17 and 18, presented research about violence against women as documented by human rights researchers and explained the existing laws for tackling these crimes.

The event was attended by senior tribal leaders, prominent rights activists, Iraqi and American officials, domestic and foreign NGOs and the Kurdistan Regional Government's minister of social affairs, Asos Najeeb Abdullah.

It has been hailed as a nearly unprecedented show of unity from Iraq's women's rights activists and organisations.

"We are witnessing violence against women on a daily basis. Women are killed every day and no one ever asks why," Raz Rasool, director of human rights training projects for IHRLI, said.

"It is important that officials know that these are the realities on the ground. This conference is important to show the evidence and reports that have been gathered by human rights researchers and to make recommendations so that the next government can work on these issues and gather international support."

The conference demanded stronger laws to punish those who commit violence against women, and called for a new law to prevent arranged and forced marriages. Activists urged the Kurdistan Regional Government's parliament to pass proposed legislation against domestic violence and female genital mutilation.

"Unfortunately, part of the problem is the Iraqi laws that allow gender discrimination even though Iraq has signed international treaties on women and human rights, such as The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which protects the rights of women and girls," Daloye said.

CEDAW, established by the UN in 1982, is composed of 23 experts on women's issues from around the world. The committee, of which Iraq became a member in 1986, monitors progress for women in countries that are signatories to the 1979 convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

Under CEDAW, a member country accepts the "legal obligation to counteract discrimination against women, and the committee monitors the implementation of national measures to fulfill this obligation".

Among the problems that women face in Iraq is the so-called honour killing of women deemed to have brought shame on their families by breaking religious and cultural taboos.

"Honour killings, forced marriage and domestic violence are just some problems facing women in Iraq and the Kurdistan region," Daloye said.

The activists recommended the government rally international support for women's rights, and stressed that the authorities should strengthen laws to protect women's rights and prevent gender discrimination.

"Violence against women is a crime which we all should work to fight," Andrew Snow, head of the United States embassy's regional reconstruction team in Kurdistan, said in a speech to the attendees.

Daloye said projects are in place to improve education and training in human rights as well as women's leadership programmes and an ongoing campaign to reform laws and raise awareness of gender issues within the ranks of government.

"It is very painful when we see that we still have so many women's problems in our society. The government needs to take more responsibility, especially by reforming the legal system," Rasool said.

IHRLI, which is part of DePaul University in Chicago, has been working on human rights in Iraq since 2003.

**Aziz Mahmood is an IWPR-trained journalist in Sulaimaniyah.**

**Location:** [Iraq](#)

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