

## **Iraqi Sex Slaves Recount Ordeals**

**Author:** [Sahar al-Haideri](#)

Women looking for work are being tricked into sexual slavery, with some trafficked abroad. Asma's family was facing dire financial problems when a man in his 60s came to her father with an offer they couldn't refuse: he said he would hire Asma for 200 US dollars a month to help take care of his wife, who was handicapped.

Asma's mother is blind and her father is disabled, leaving them struggling to make ends meet. The man assured the couple that Asma could visit them, and that he would raise her with his daughters. The impoverished family took him up on the offer, but Asma, 17, had no idea what was in store for her.

"My work was not only in the kitchen; I had to have sex with son of the man who hired me and his four or five friends," she said in an interview after fleeing a life of sexual slavery. "I left my father's house a virgin and now I am... "

She stopped speaking. Her father said nothing except, "I put my trust in God."

The deteriorating security situation and absence of law and order has allowed sexual slavery to grow in Iraq, with traffickers able to sell victims without fear of punishment.

According to the US State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report, issued in June, Iraqi women and children are forced into prostitution and trafficked inside Iraq and abroad, to countries like Syria, Jordan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Iran.

In the volatile northwestern city of Mosul, near the Syrian border, girls and young women from poor and illiterate families are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Many of those hired as domestic servants end up becoming sex slaves.

Khaled, 45, who readily admits to involvement in the sex trade, wears jeans and a yellow T-shirt with four or five rings on his fingers and bracelets around his wrist. This reporter witnessed him speaking to a client about whether he preferred a brown or white girl or woman as a sex slave.

"I know some families who are ready to have their daughters work to earn a living for them," he said. "Some ask me if [their daughters] can only work in kitchens, while others try to close their eyes and pretend that they have no idea that their daughters are being used as prostitutes."

Other women seek Khaled out on their own, but don't always know the full extent of his business.

Zaineb, 20, is a thin and beautiful woman with light-coloured hair. She felt financially responsible for her family because her father was arrested by the US military, her mother was ill and she had younger sisters that needed support. Zaineb got a job through Khaled, but to her horror discovered that she had been forced into prostitution.

"I [have to] sleep with different men each night," said Zaineb, who managed to contact IWPR. "[My boss] and his friends always take me to a farm, where they get drunk, and then have sex with me. I cry, asking for help from my father and mother, but how can they hear me?"

Victims of sexual slavery in Iraq have little support from the police or the courts. Iraqi law only criminalises the sexual exploitation of children.

Many women are tricked into sex slavery in Iraq with the promise of a new life in the Gulf.

Khaled convinced 18-year-old Alia's family that a man in the Gulf wanted to marry her, and paid for her passport and new clothes.

"Like any other bride, I was happy," she said. "But I discovered after I travelled to the Gulf that the bridegroom was a nightclub manager who used many other Iraqi girls for prostitution. I managed to flee after 10 humiliating months.

"I was screaming when one of [the men] had sex with me; they considered me a slave that they had bought. I lost my dreams, hopes and future."

The State Department report noted that the Iraqi government did not prosecute any trafficking cases this year, nor did it offer protection for victims or make efforts to prevent or document trafficking. It also said efforts needed to be made to "curb the complicity of public officials in the trafficking of Iraqi women".

The names of people mentioned in this story have been changed to protect their identity.

Sahar al-Haideri was an IWPR journalist working in Mosul. She was murdered there in June 2007.

**Location:** Turkey  
Syria  
Jordan  
Iraqi Kurdistan

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