

"Old Maids" Missing Out on Marriage

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Husbands are hard to come by in Iraq, due to a combination of war, religion and economics.

Dalal and her cousin Sameer were in love and planned to marry. Then came the war with Iran. "It was like a flame that burned many Iraqi youths, and my beloved Sameer was one of them," she said. "He died in battle. They took his money, his identification and my bloody picture from his pockets."

It has been 22 years since Sameer died and Dalal, who declined to give her real name, is now 45-years-old. She never got over the loss and never married – one of an increasing number of Iraqi women who remain single, either by choice or circumstance.

Commonly known as old maids, women like Dalal have seen their youths pass them by as they waited to marry or grieved over lost loves.

Even though it is expected in Iraqi society that women will marry young and raise a family, old maids are hardly an anomaly. And whether war, economics or coincidence is to blame, they all tell a story of life turning out not at all as they had imagined.

"I wish to marry somebody who loves me. I want to establish a family, to be a mother," said Salwa Abdullah, a 40-year-old lawyer. "But this is my life and as time goes by I believe nobody will ask for my hand."

Husbands can be hard to come by in Iraq.

The country has lost hundreds of thousands of young men to war. Others have left the country to pursue better paying jobs abroad and have ended up marrying in foreign countries. There are also religious conflicts that make marriage between Muslims and Christians all but forbidden in most families. And the same is true of wealth and status. If a man comes from a poorer family than his prospective bride, he has little chance of winning over her family.

Ibtisam Khalid, 42, is well educated, attractive and wealthy yet has had no luck finding a husband. "The young men went abroad or were killed in wars," she said. "The problem is not from my side. The men of my age are lost."

However, university professor Hassan Mustafa believes Khalid's university degree and success makes her less likely to marry as educated women put conditions on choosing a partner. "But an uneducated woman, she does not pay attention to whether the person who asks for her hand is poor or rich, graduated from university or is ignorant, handsome or ugly," he said.

Likewise, some educated men are reluctant to marry a woman who has the same status, choosing instead someone who has less education or comes from a poorer background.

Another problem arises from the unrealistic demands often put on prospective husbands by the woman's family.

Batool Abdul Wahid, a 50-year-old teacher, said many men asked for her hand, but her family is wealthy and the suitors couldn't meet her father's demands.

"My father was asking them to provide a new car, a big house and a lot of gold," she said. "My father says 'One day a suitable person will come and meet my demands. This is for your future, my girls'.

"But still we are waiting for that wealthy knight who will never come. We added ourselves to the old maids' list because of my father's unreasonable demands."

Even when the expectations are not excessive, they can still be too much in a country beset with poverty.

Rajaa Rebeea, 44, fell in love with her neighbour Sahir Abdullah 25 years ago and the two planned their future. Abdullah would collect enough money to ask for Rebeea's hand in marriage and they would live a simple life together.

When war broke out with Iran, Abdullah was forced to close his carpentry shop and join the army, losing the little income he had. After eight years of fighting, he returned home to his carpentry business, hoping to save enough money for marriage, but the cost of everything had gone up.

By the end of the 1980s he had saved enough money to buy a small apartment. But after the 1991 Gulf

War the embargo against Iraq started and the value of the dinar plummeted. Abdullah's meager savings were nearly worthless, enough only for half a kilogramme of meat. He kept trying to save money, but it was fruitless. Now, said Rebeea, it is too late to wed. "I waited for so long, wishing that one day everything would get better," she said.

Given the fighting and bombings that have become so common in Iraq, and the effect they have on people's lives and mental state, some say it's no surprise so many women are growing up to be old maids.

"A stable psyche and a good economy gives people more chances to choose their partner," said Isam Ahmed, a 47-year-old engineer. "In the current situation, people lose opportunities to establish a family because of the lack of work or the constant threat of death from explosions and terrorist attacks."

To prove his point, Ahmed offered a list of examples.

His brother was killed during his wedding party when a rocket landed on the reception hall. His neighbour died on his wedding day when American forces opened fire on the slow-moving wedding caravan, suspecting it was a group of insurgents coming to attack them. And a friend went mad after his wife was killed in the crossfire between US troops and insurgents. "He can't marry another now because he's [gone] mad," said Ahmed.

For others, their future husbands simply left and never returned.

Miriem's fiancé earned a science degree in Iraq but couldn't find a suitable job, so he went abroad looking for work, promising that once he had found good work he would come home and marry her.

"Many years went by, and still I waited for him while he moved from one country to another to get a decent job," said Miriem, who asked that her real name not be used.

In the meantime, he wrote letters, telling her that he missed her and was homesick. Eventually, however, a devastating note arrived saying he was engaged to a foreigner, because she owned a factory and had given him a job as a manager there.

"He got engaged to me when I was 25 and divorced me when I was 40 without being his wife for one day," she said. "So I lost him because he lost hope of getting work in his own country. And this is my disaster."

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