

Sad Fate of Battered Women

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Conservative values and poor protection laws leave abused women facing a grim future. Attiya spends the few moments she has alone every day in tears.

She has endured a violent 20-year marriage, and the misery this has caused her is etched out on her face. When IWPR interviewed Attiya, she found it hard to speak because her husband had recently choked her.

Attiya, 38, who asked that her real name not be used, says she entered hell the day she married. She has four children, and her husband often beats her in front of them in their house in Sulaimaniyah. And even though she is the breadwinner in the family - her husband is unemployed - she said of her marriage, "I have become a slave."

Her husband, Ahmed, agreed, saying that women are slaves to men. "When I ask for something [from her] I need it immediately, otherwise I become furious," he said.

Domestic violence is a difficult issue to tackle in Iraq, according to women's advocates and victims. They maintain that due to conservative values and weak protection laws, this kind of abuse tends to be kept quiet, while the authorities often do not take it seriously.

Many women living with domestic violence don't want to talk about their abuse for fear that their abusers will retaliate for making their problems public. And when they resort to the courts, they often find proving their case difficult.

According to Iraqi law, a woman can take legal action against her husband when there are marks on her body or when there are witnesses to the abuse, which makes it hard to get a conviction, say women's advocates and victims.

They point out that serial abusers know the law well and often hurt women without leaving marks.

Nigar Mohammed, a social researcher in Sulaimaniyah's personal status court, estimated that 80 per cent of domestic violence cases involve abuse against wives.

Some lawyers are pressing for protection laws that rely on personal testimonies rather than physical or witness evidence of abuse.

Rewas Fayaq, a lawyer, said witnesses are particularly difficult to find because beatings often take place in private. She said the law needs to be changed and that there should be greater awareness of domestic violence.

"The laws have not been successful in stopping abuse against women," she said.

But not all in the judiciary think like Fayaq. Gashaw Mohammad, a female judge with Sulaimaniyah's personal status court, said, "If the beating hasn't broken a bone and there isn't a mark on [the victim's] body, then it's not a beating. It's being taught a lesson."

Jwan Fatah Kareem, a lawyer, said that there are more domestic violence cases in villages than in cities, due to lower educational levels and social restrictions.

Women's organisations claim that they have been able to help decrease domestic abuse cases, but more of an effort needs to be made to support women and deter men from resorting to violence.

Saywan Rostam, a leading member of Kurdistan Women Union, said that they have a shelter for women who face violence - a place they can go while they wait for their case to come up in court.

But in Kurdistan's tight-knit, family-oriented society, many abused women who have their family's support rely on relatives rather than social or governmental organisations.

But wherever they choose to stay, they face a long and frustrating wait for their case to come to court.

Sargul, a mother of two, who also did not want to use her real name, has sought to divorce her husband for three years because of domestic violence, but her case is continually postponed.

Recently, she stormed out of a Sulaimaniyah court after being told that her case had once more been cancelled.

"I want to get divorce," she said. "Why is this court bringing me back and forth?"

Attiya said she has friends who have tried to take their husbands to court for domestic violence to no avail. She said that is why she has decided to stay with her abusive husband.

"I'm tired of my life. Physically, I can't take it anymore," said Attiya. "I have lost myself, and I feel like I could have a breakdown at any moment."

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