

## **Women Lawyers Gaining Ground**

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Growing conservatism in Iraqi society generates demand for female lawyers.

With Iraqi society becomes more religious and conservative, large numbers of women are turning to female lawyers for advice on marriage, divorce and inheritance.

As a result, legal practice has become a lucrative business for female lawyers.

Sumaya Jasim, a lawyer from Baghdad, estimates 90 per cent of women now turn to women to help them with their legal problems. Some now take on six to ten cases a month, charging between 500,000 and two million Iraqi dinars (300-1,300 US dollars) for their expertise.

"The religious approach in the country helped us to get more work," said Ibtihal Aziz, a Baghdad lawyer.

Aziz quit her career under the former regime because she did not want to be part of the bribery which she said used to be more important in winning a case than experience and skills.

But after Saddam was ousted, many job opportunities arose, and she was able to start over with her career.

In the past, many highly skilled female lawyers were excluded by a group of male lawyers with close ties to the officials who controlled the courts, often through dishonest means.

"Money had power under Saddam, even to get death-row prisoners released," said Fetah Shakir, 45, a notary in the al-Kharkh part of Baghdad.

She remembers a case where a colleague released a detainee sentenced to death, and replaced him with another person who was mentally ill, by bribing judges and prison officials to the tune of 300 million Iraqi dinars. "[You] were able to bribe any official," said Shakir.

Most of the cases female lawyers deal with today concern divorce, childcare and domestic violence. Aziz claims they better understand women's living conditions and problems and are good at setting out cases to judges. "Male lawyers have experience in court but can't interact with the plaintiff," she said.

Jamila Falah comes from a religious and tribal family in Sadr city, where tradition forbids that domestic affairs be discussed with men outside the family. So when she wanted a divorce, it was natural for her to turn to a female lawyer.

For housewife Aiche Saad, a woman lawyer was also the only option for her divorce case. "I cannot tell anyone but a woman about why I asked for a divorce," she said.

Some suggest that demand for the female lawyers is primarily a result of the resurgence of Islamic values and the emigration of so many members of the profession.

Lawyer Lutfi Mohammed, 38, is worried that when things become more normal, "women lawyers will have fewer chances".

Others, however, are more optimistic.

Sumaya Jasim noted that in Baghdad courts some female lawyers have started taking criminal cases. Looking back on a professionally successful year, she is ready to begin working towards her next goal - fighting for equal pay for women lawyers.

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