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Lifting the ban on women's shelters in Iraq: promoting change in conflict

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Lisa Davis

There is a crisis-level need for shelter in Iraq, so why does the Iraqi government maintain a policy that stymies critically needed temporary housing and threatens the safety of those willing to provide it?

With the ISIS invasion and ensuing crisis displacing over [four million](#) people and leaving over [eight million](#) in need of humanitarian assistance, it's no surprise that local authorities and the international community are struggling to meet the critical demand for shelter. This is especially true in hotly contested cities such as Samara and Hawija, where it's too [risky](#) for most international relief workers and sparse access through ISIS-controlled checkpoints.

Yet, despite the overwhelming need, the Iraq central government policy does not authorize local NGOs to run shelters. With no end in sight to the conflict, and despite government obstacles, Iraqi women's organizations have been stepping up to meet the needs of those most vulnerable - running clandestine safe houses that operate in the shadows.

Having seen these shelters first-hand and talking with the survivors they house, has led me to question: Why, if there is a crisis-level need for shelter, does the Iraqi government maintain a [policy](#) that stymies critically needed temporary housing and threatens the safety of those willing to provide it?



Yanar Mohammed leading a women's rally in Baghdad's Firdos Square. Photo: Roj Women's Assoc.

According to [Yanar Mohammed](#) director of the Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq ([OWFI](#)), "Shelters are thought of as encouraging women to disobey their husbands and daughters to disobey their parents. This leads to the presumption that a shelter - a place where a group of immoral women reside without a male guardian - is likely a brothel." This is not the first casting of women's shelters as houses of ill repute; the notion is not uncommon to the region. In Afghanistan for example, shelter providers routinely

[face harassment](#) from officials.

Clandestine shelters, while vital, are rife with risk. They offer meager accommodations in only a few places. Without policy protections, safe houses are left vulnerable to police and militia raids. This leaves women in hiding unprotected from family members or ex-boyfriends who track them down for escaping domestic violence, forced marriage or attempted honor killings. The only option for shelter staff and residents is to routinely relocate, avoiding unwanted attention from nosy neighbors who have occasionally mistaken safe houses for brothels. This adds to a cycle of making them harder to find by those in need.

Technically, nothing on the books in Iraqi law explicitly bars local organizations from running shelters. The quasi-autonomous Kurdistan region in northern Iraq started to see a small handful of NGO-run shelters with the passage of a 2011 law prohibiting [domestic violence](#) that sparked new collaboration between women's groups and the regional government. In central Iraq, the Combating Human [Trafficking Law](#) of 2012 states that the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs should create shelters. Unfortunately, central bureaucrats have interpreted this policy to mean that *only* the government can run shelters, which either do not exist or sit vacant. An exception is made for international aid agencies.

Yet, the tide is turning, because the scale of the crisis demands it. Faced with an influx of displaced people, Iraqi NGO shelter providers have already successfully negotiated written agreements with local tribal leaders from the Karbala and Samara Governorates, permitting them to provide safe housing.

While women's rights activists are working to obtain written agreements from other affected townships, they have also turned their sights to Baghdad. A coalition of local organizations led by OWFI is advocating for the central government to adopt a national framework allowing for NGO-run shelters. OWFI's international partner organization [MADRE](#) has started working with key donor states and U.N. experts. [CUNY Law School](#) is helping to provide [documentation](#) on human rights abuses to illustrate the need. The goal is to expand temporary housing in Iraq.

This is the paradox of catastrophe. The moments of our undoing are simultaneously our opportunities to remake ourselves and our communities. The challenge lies in spotting and seizing those moments. Local activists know that changing the shelter policy, in this moment of flux, could broaden the safety net for women fleeing all forms of violence. The immediate needs generated by the current crisis create the opportunity to push for longer-term policy changes. These agreements could remain in perpetuity and work to normalize the very concept of sheltering in Iraq.



Yanar speaking at the Irish Mission to the UN in New York this week. Photo: WILPF

This year marks the 15th anniversary of passing [UN Security Council Resolution 1325](#), obligating the participation of women in peace building. On Tuesday, Oct 13th Yanar [addressed](#) the United Nations Security Council during its Open Debate on women, peace and security, where she called attention to the crisis that has ensued from ISIS and highlighted the Iraqi government's prohibition on local women's groups' efforts to provide housing.

Changing Iraq's shelter policy will save lives. It will enable local NGOs to come out of the shadows, secure new funding and spur local job creation. Women's organizations not only provide shelter for the most vulnerable, they also act as first responders providing much-needed aid and peer-to-peer support - without the sectarian strings often attached to religious groups and associations. They help displaced children get enrolled in school. They offer assistance for reunification with family members. They help to reduce illiteracy and the [spread of disease](#), and chip away at the number of women and children most vulnerable to violence. They also work to alleviate the economic burdens placed on local governorates left scrambling to address masses of fleeing people pouring into their townships.

By amending the shelter restriction to help meet the needs of conflict-related displacement, women's groups can also help to those both directly and indirectly affected by the crisis, but more notable, they reach those left most vulnerable by the conflict including women escaping trafficking and honor killings as well as [LGBT persons](#).

This is true today, it was true before the ISIS invasion, and it will be true tomorrow.

Tackling the obstacles to realizing basic rights that existed before conflict as a way of addressing immediate needs just makes sense. It leads to more effective, immediate-term solutions while also helping to dismantle long-term structural violence. The international community could take a lesson from Iraqi advocates working on the frontlines of service provisions. As Yanar points out "What is primarily lacking is political will by Member States and UN Leadership." States would be wise to heed her words yesterday.

After all, someday when the war is over, and most of the internationals are gone, their work will continue.

Read our series of in-depth articles on [UN SCR 1325- fifteen years on](#)