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Campaigning for Change in Conflict  
Environments

A Case Study on Islamic Relief's Development  
Programme to End Violence against Women in Iraq

KASIM RANDEREE

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# Campaigning for Change in Conflict Environments: A Case Study on Islamic Relief's Development Programme to End Violence against Women in Iraq

Kasim Randeree, Islamic Relief Worldwide, United Kingdom

*Abstract: Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is often systematically used as a 'weapon of war' and may be physical, sexual, psychological, economic, or socio-cultural in nature and be perpetrated in public or private settings. It is associated with increased instances of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV, unintended pregnancies, gynaecological problems, induced abortions, and adverse pregnancy outcomes including miscarriage, low birth weight, and foetal death. Women are often disempowered by exploitation, rape, the threat of rape, domestic violence, HIV infection, trauma, and disabilities resulting from violence. Literature on sexual violence in armed conflict indicates that rape and violence against women and girls prior to, during, and in the aftermath of conflict increases in scope and magnitude. This paper reports on an advocacy programme designed and conducted by Islamic Relief (IR) in Iraq to raise awareness about increasing VAWG against the changing backdrop of post-war Iraq. Through the lens of the programme, the paper explores the changing landscape of Iraqi society and how conflict has very markedly affected the status of Iraqi women negatively.<sup>1</sup>*

*Keywords: Iraq, Women, Middle East, Violence against Women, Conflict, Development, Inequality*

## Introduction

Islamic Relief (IR) responds to humanitarian needs in many man-made disaster contexts, such as wars and internal strife and aims to safeguard its beneficiaries from such threats of violence. As the world's largest Muslim faith-based non-governmental organisation (NGO), IR has the potential to play an important and influential role in promoting gender justice across the Muslim world. Furthermore, it is particularly well-positioned to challenge misconceptions about the position of women in Islam, as well as the misuse of religion as a justification for the suppression of women, by setting a positive example through policies, programmes and advocacy campaigns. Through its activities, it is able to highlight the principles of justice, harmony and equality of human worth that are enshrined in Islamic teachings.<sup>2</sup>

Though gender-based violence (GBV) affects both genders, with repression and violence against boys and men evident particularly in armed conflict environs, IR recognises that the vast majority of GBV affects women and girls. Statistically, women account for approximately 70 percent of all victims of GBV, with children (boys and girls) accounting for 25 percent and men 5 percent.<sup>3</sup> As such, present policy focus at IR is in the area of VAW, as their humanitarian work naturally brings the organisation into direct contact with impacted communities.

Nearly one-quarter of the world's population (23 percent), representing 1.59Bn people, is Muslim and around 97 percent of all Muslims inhabit the continents of Africa and Asia, mostly in nations that are developing or under-developed.<sup>4</sup> Through scholarly understanding of Islamic

<sup>1</sup> Kasim Randeree, "Islamic Relief's Advocacy Programme for Preventing Violence Against Women in Iraq" (Paper presented at the Sixth Global Studies Conference, New Delhi, September 5-7, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Kasim Randeree, *Islamic Perspectives on Gender Justice in Humanitarian and Development Settings: The Policy of Islamic Relief* (Birmingham: Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organisation, *Combating Gender-based Violence in the South-East Asia Region* (New Delhi: World Health Organisation, 2009), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Forum, *The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010-2030* (Washington: Pew Research Centre, 2011), 15-23.

teachings, IR is in a strong position, compared to other NGOs, to advocate against VAWG in Muslim societies and challenge much of the misrepresentation or cultural distortion of Islam that has occurred in recent times in relation to gender justice and the rights of women and has a greater obligation to address this issue, because much of the impact of VAWG occurs in the Muslim world.<sup>5</sup>

## Definitions and Global Extent of Gender-based Violence

GBV is “an umbrella term for any harm that is directed against a person on the basis of gender or sex, resulting from power imbalances that exploit distinctions between males and females, as also among males and females.”<sup>6</sup> The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW), article 1, defines VAW as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or in private life.”<sup>7</sup> Such violence may be extended to economic or socio-cultural dispossession. This definition is further extended in article 2, to the following:

- a) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation;
- b) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution; and
- c) Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs.<sup>8</sup>

The magnitude of VAWG worldwide is substantial and is being described as a silent emergency.<sup>9</sup> It is estimated that over one-third of the global female population are physically or sexually abused during their lifetimes.<sup>10</sup> In Bangladesh, over fifty percent of women interviewed in a WHO study, had experienced physical or sexual violence in a domestic setting.<sup>11</sup>

Patriarchal cultures offer historically gendered and oppressive constructions of the male-female relationship and contribute to culturally specific notions such as ‘honour’ and ‘saving face’, variants of which may be found globally. This includes examples of rape-victim murder by members of the victim’s own family.<sup>12</sup> The use of ‘honour’ to justify and explain abusive relations and practices is particularly pernicious, the very use of the term providing an

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<sup>5</sup> Kasim Randeree, “An Exploration of Gender Justice in a Post Conflict Environment: Islamic Relief’s International Development and Advocacy Programme on Preventing Violence Against Women in Iraq” (Paper presented at the Third International Conference on Religion and Spirituality in Society, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, March 8-9, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Jeanne Ward, *If Not Now, When? Addressing Gender-based Violence in Refugee, Internally Displaced and Post-conflict Settings: A Global Overview* (New York: Reproductive Health for Refugees Consortium, 2002), 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> “Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women A/RES/48/104. December 20, 1993,” United Nations General Assembly, accessed January 20, 2014, <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> “Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women A/RES/48/104. December 20, 1993.”

<sup>9</sup> “Say NO – UNiTE to End Violence against Women,” United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, accessed January 8, 2013, <http://saynotoviolence.org/about-say-no>.

<sup>10</sup> Lori Heise, Mary Ellsberg and Megan Gottemoeller, *Ending Violence Against Women, Population Reports* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health Population Information Program, 1999), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Multi-country study examining women’s health and domestic violence, reported in 2005 by the World Health Organisation, based on interviews with 24,000 women across ten countries.

<sup>12</sup> Etienne G. Krug et al., *World Report on Violence and Health* (Geneva: WHO, 2002), 160.

‘explanation’ that removes responsibility from perpetrators to wider social structures and communities – which may well be complicit – and to the victims themselves as ‘transgressors.’<sup>13</sup>

Ban Ki-moon (2007) states, “Violence against women continues to persist as one of the most heinous, systematic and prevalent human rights abuses in the world. It is a threat to all women, and an obstacle to all our efforts for development, peace and gender equality in all societies.”<sup>14</sup>

## Present Condition of Women in Iraq

The invasion and occupation of Iraq from 2003-2011, followed by the continuing volatile security situation, has had a heavy toll on all inhabitants of Iraq. However, hardest hit have been the most vulnerable groups, including women, children, the elderly and disabled.

The population of Iraq stands at 31.11Mn but is forecasted to rise significantly over the next two decades to 48.35Mn by 2030. This represents the second largest numerical increase in the MENA region, signifying a rise of 55.4 percent.<sup>15</sup> Although women constitute half of Iraq's population, they only represent 13 percent of the formal work force, mostly as middle-level professionals in public and service sectors and in rural areas as seasonal agricultural workers. Political instability has increased female unemployment, now estimated at 33.4 percent among young people.<sup>16</sup> This figure is higher among women in urban areas, because it is more difficult for women to venture out of their homes seeking employment. In rural areas, on the other hand, the situation is quite different, as incomes are lower, necessitating women to work to bolster spousal income. Rural women are also afforded more opportunities to work from home, particularly in process activities in the agricultural sector. These working practices are viewed as more socially and culturally acceptable within traditional Iraqi communities.

Iraq's 1959 family law was rooted in *Shari'ah* (Islamic law), which helped mediate against sectarianism by synthesising Shiite and Sunni interpretations of Qur'anic law into one code that was applied to all citizens regardless of sect. Through its enactment, ironically from a contemporary perspective on pre-war Iraq, the nation was viewed as one of the most progressive countries in the Middle East from a gender justice perspective. However, Iraq has transformed over the past five years into one of the most repressive countries for women globally. Formerly, Iraqi women's participation was evident in all walks of life, as a highly literate and educated demographic that was contributing significantly to society through involvement in the arts, politics, economics, science and social affairs.

There is therefore, a greater need than ever before in Iraq, to increase awareness and spread knowledge among all Iraqi communities about the rights of women and the issues of GBV and VAW. Disenfranchised women in particular, need to enjoy better living conditions and be free from violence and other harmful practices.<sup>17</sup>

## Design of Islamic Relief's Advocacy Programme in Iraq

This project aimed to campaign for change against the growing trend of GBV and VAWG in communities in post-conflict Iraq and advocate for its prevention. The programme was strategically focused on MDG3<sup>18</sup> and was supported by the Norwegian Royal Ministry of

<sup>13</sup> Cihan Ahmetbeyzade, “Gendering Necropolitics: The Juridical-Political Sociality of Honor Killings in Turkey,” *Journal of Human Rights* 7(3) (2008): 187-206.

<sup>14</sup> Statement by Ban Ki-moon, United Nations Secretary General, on International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, November 25, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Pew Research Forum, *The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010-2030*, 93.

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation, *Iraq Living Conditions Survey 2004 Volume III: Socio-economic Atlas of Iraq* (Baghdad: Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation, 2005), 27.

<sup>17</sup> Kasim Randeree, “Faith Inspired Action on Gender Justice in the Muslim World: A Programmatic Approach to Empowering Communities in Conflict Environments,” *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 3(3) (2014): 56.

<sup>18</sup> MDG 3 (Millennium Development Goal 3) is aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering women.

Foreign Affairs, entitled 'Promoting Gender Based Violence Prevention and Response in Iraq.' A novel approach to advocacy in Iraq, the project used music, art exhibitions, workshops, events and media engagement to promote ending VAWG in the country. The project impacted over 1000 participants directly, including women, men, boys and girls and was implemented at schools and in university and college departments across Baghdad.

The project consisted of three phases:

Phase 1: Training - Peer educators were provided skills to deliver programmes in GBV and VAW prevention and developing response methods and targeted strategies.

Phase 2: Influence - the formation of training teams, which were subsequently organised to deliver a range of workshops in GBV and VAW prevention.

Phase 3: Advocacy - Publicity drive to raise awareness in wider society through media engagement and distribution of promotion materials.

## **Phase 1: Training**

The project beneficiaries were 95 women and men from Baghdad University, trained in GBV advocacy engagement, preventive action strategies and law. The 95 participants in the training programme were comprised from four colleges within Baghdad University: The College of Sports Education for Girls (15 trainees); the College of Fine Arts from the Department of Sculpture (20 trainees) and the Department of Music (20 trainees); the College of Nursing (20 trainees); and the Ibn al Haythim Educational College (20 trainees).

Five training events were held, two in the College of Fine Arts and one in each of the remaining colleges. Each training event was spread over four days and involved five educators, covering a range of topics, including: the definition of gender; Islamic law; the CEDAW Convention; civilian personal law and other international conventions of violence; types and reasons for violence; the psychological effects of violence on women and girls; preventative action strategies to violence; the rights of women and girls in personal and state law; and the positive and negative effects of the role of the media in Iraqi society. Further, the trainees received practical instruction in effective communication and leading role play and groups exercises. One example of a role playing exercise was carried out by dividing participants into three mixed gender groups and asking them to represent VAW through performing one of three different scenarios; a rural Iraqi family; a family suffering from an alcoholic father and a family having three siblings - an elder brother of two sisters.

They also learned about the value of visual and aural art, poetry and communication in violence discourse. All participants qualified the course, following evaluation by two external examiners and became recognised IR facilitators in GBV and VAW prevention. The newly qualified facilitators received certification and prizes were awarded to top performers. Throughout the training programme, trainees developed their presentation skills and learned new approaches to development work and response methods pertaining to women's rights and GBV prevention.

Early on in each workshop, resistance and objections were frequently raised because of the sensitive nature of the topics discussed and feelings of suspicion for implementing such a project were brought to the surface. These were overcome through open discussion and the real testimonies and stories presented as part of the training. In time, participants began recounting their own experiences and those of relatives and friends.

On several occasions, both female and male trainees discontinued their storytelling because of the emotions relived and similarly receivers often felt compelled to leave the room for emotions stirred up through similar experiences and becoming overwhelmed through empathy.

As both women and men were present in most of the events, a dichotomy of views soon became apparent, with a number of young men expressing patriarchal views long held within broader society. Some men favoured cultural biases and discriminative behaviour, giving rise to

lengthy dialogue on equality and gender justice. One individual was notably aggressive in his posture and, through the discourse, it emerged that he had a number of familial issues that he needed to reconcile. Many of the beneficiaries were themselves victims of violence and, through this project, they were able to identify personal issues and talk about their lives and suffering in a safe space. One participant, keen to advocate against GBV stated, "I refuse to be executioner after having been a victim."

Trainees were asked to complete post event questionnaires. In their comments, many told of how they had long discussions with their families and friends around what they have learnt, with many of their parents, especially mothers, wishing they themselves were able to participate in the training workshops. The project built strong relationships between participants and friendships had clearly developed, with respect and self-confidence progressively growing over each four-day event.

As a consequence of television media coverage, advocacy work and engagement is difficult to quantify in terms of number of viewers. However, in terms of print media alone, there were several thousand recipients, across peer-groups, educational institutions, family members of beneficiaries and the general public. Overall, visitor numbers to the art exhibition over a period of one month was in excess of 2000, with attendance for the first three days being around 700.

### *Evaluation of Trainee Experiences*

Pre and post questionnaires were distributed to evaluate changing viewpoints of participants both before and after the training programme. Response rate for the pre-questionnaire was 86.3 percent and 96.8 percent from the post questionnaire. The questionnaires provided insight into the effect of the training phase of the project. A male participant from the College of Nursing wrote, "I did not imagine that the issue of violence had any relation with my duties as a nurse, the patient might not be physically ill but it might be a psychological pressure caused by violence." Another stated, "This experience is very significant and should be spread to cover more beneficiaries." Most of the participants agreed that they learned to converse about violence through the workshops; others said that the workshops gave them the courage to speak openly, freely and declare their thoughts. They valued practical role playing exercises, which helped them to empathise with victims of violence and many expressed the view that they were better able to identify signs of people who may be living in violent circumstances through indicators learned in the workshops.

The questionnaires' further revealed that only around 10 percent of beneficiaries could define gender in its broad sense before the training, compared to all afterwards; around three percent had previously participated in a workshop on GBV/VAW; around 15 percent felt that VAW was non-existent in Iraqi society before the training, compared to 100 percent afterwards and 40 percent knew victims of GBV.

When asked about what action they would take in support of women who were victims of violence, many responded saying that they would, as a consequence of the training, empathise with them in a manner they would not have previously perceived, provide assistance through informing them of their human rights, the rule of law and the legal responsibility of the wider community beyond the family.

The post training questionnaire included many strategies suggested by participants as to how to decrease violence. These included empowerment through improved education systems and enabling mechanisms allowing girls and women to complete their studies, creating more employment opportunities for women, releasing and activating laws that prevent violence not only against women, but for the entire community and community awareness programmes designed to prevent violence.

## Phase 2: Influence

The second phase of the project was the formation of peer education support teams, comprised of individuals from among the newly trained facilitators. After completion of the training programme, 26 of the qualified trainers were selected to deliver a series of 15 workshops and events designed to engage the target demographic on issues of GBV and VAWG. Two-thirds of the trainers were men. Part of the training process had been to encourage participants to volunteer for this phase beyond qualifying and over one quarter chose to take up this volunteering opportunity.

With direction from IR project managers, facilitators were responsible for the design, development and delivery of workshops and advocacy materials for the promotion of women's rights, to raise awareness about the prevalence of VAW in Iraq, the importance of GBV prevention and promote effective response strategies.

A total of 15 activities were created, consisting of ten workshops and five arts events, hosted at venues across Baghdad, including schools, private residences, youth centres, university colleges and an art gallery. A total of 348 people attended the ten workshops, with a further 750 people attending viewings of artwork produced by 70 students of fine art, displayed in the gallery.

Workshop themes centred on the significance and impact of VAWG in society; VAWG as a phenomenon in the lives of all Iraqis; violence as a social, political and familial construct; the long-term effects of domestic violence on children; the importance of effective childrearing and the value of functional family environments on preventing violence; parental responsibility in preventing violence; demography of violence and impact data, such as divorce rates; and understanding Islamic concepts regarding ethical and moral behaviour.

All ten workshops were overseen by IR project managers and six of these workshops were further monitored and evaluated by a representative of UNIFEM-Iraq. Furthermore, all arts based workshops and gallery events were overseen by the heads of the Department of Calligraphy and the Department of Sculpture, College of Fine Arts at Baghdad University.

Beneficiaries of the workshops included all male groups, with educational level ranging from secondary school students to university graduates (Figure 1); one all-male teenage group in the age range 12-17 years old; another aged 14-21; and another all male group made up of adult athletes. Female groups were composed of housewives (Figure 2), secondary school students and college and university students (Figure 3). The remaining groups were mixed gender adults of varying educational and social backgrounds, including one mixed gender teaching staff of a school (Figure 4). The workshops were conducted in areas of Baghdad of varying affluence and social class, including Al-Husseinia, Rusafa, Al-Taji and Al-Sha'ab districts.



Figure 1: Beneficiaries of one of the sessions.





Figure 2: Facilitator (front left) with the GBV prevention workshop attendees.

***Participant Experiences Recounted by IR Project Managers and Questionnaire Evaluation***

“I don't know what pushed me to talk to Hind; it might be her sad face. She is a picture of many women who have suffered a painful history and their futures might be even worse. Hind is a married woman who has three boys. As I approached, I asked her if she had an opinion of the workshop and if she has ever suffered from violence. She hesitated at first, and then tears began to fall as she started to tell her story. Her husband beats and insults her in front of her children and is aggressive in their intimate relationship. Though they live under one roof, he provides no support to her or their children and she bears sole responsibility for them. Lately, her elder son has begun modelling his father's behaviour and is insulting and hitting his mother. She says ‘He is punishing me for the pain he lived.’ She continues crying. ‘Your workshop has awakened me to those pains and I'll try to do something to change this situation, I have to.’ With these words, she ended our conversation.”

“Zobia is a young, well-educated woman, who married a man with whom she fell in love, though her parents disapproved. After one month of marriage, he began beating her. She sought support from her parents, but they merely remind her of their disapproval and that she must bear the consequences. Her husband, aware of her parents' stance, became increasingly violent. She said, ‘Your workshop opened my eyes to many issues and I'm now trying to solve my problems and hoping to get better results.’ He has been [trying to] prevent her from attending the workshops as he has noticed changes in her outlook, but Zobia is persistent, saying ‘I will also transfer what I have learnt to my friends and relatives to remind all women of the rights they possess but have forgotten.’”

“Aaliyah, a student nurse at Baghdad University, is the youngest daughter in a family of eight. Her eyes carry a hidden grief. When I talked to her, she did not hesitate to tell me her story. She told me that she has been responsible for all household chores since she was in secondary school. Her parents quarrel constantly and her father beats her mother in front of her and her siblings. I asked her if any of her relatives could provide support, but she replied that her father forbade them from visiting any relatives and even prevents them from going to mosque. An additional cause of stress was that Aaliyah was being supported for her degree programme by one of her working sisters, but that

she was soon to marry and would now naturally need her income to support her own household. Aaliyah was therefore concerned about finding work to continue paying her tuition fees. I asked her about her father's role and she replied that he wants her to stay at home rather than be educated [so refuses to support her education financially]. She concluded that the workshop gave her the strength to face the violence imposed upon her.”

Through responding to the questionnaires, which were distributed at the end of each session, participants were able to present a number of recommendations for improving gender justice in conflict/post-conflict Iraq. The key practical suggestions came from workshop delegates employed in the education sector across primary, secondary and tertiary levels, who expressed a willingness to hold awareness sessions on GBV and VAWG in schools, colleges and universities across the city for peer groups and students. Furthermore, they were keen to explore the employment of psychological professionals into the education sector, dedicated to guiding employees and students in schools and colleges. More qualitative recommendations focused on the importance of a return to the religious values enshrined in Islamic law, which participants felt was lacking within communities, in terms of moral and ethical values in human interaction and relationships.



Figure 3: Trained young women beneficiaries at a GBV workshop.



Figure 4: GBV prevention workshop for school teachers.

Broader social issues which were seen as contributing to GBV were the lack of employment opportunities within Iraqi society. It was strongly felt that finding effective measures to reduce joblessness would have a genuine secondary effect on violence in society in its broader sense and impact positively on behaviour towards women and girls.

### *Advocating Through Art*

Role playing through drama exercises involved creating participant groups who were asked to perform representations of violence against woman. The exercise was introduced through a demonstration by a facilitator who was a trained mime artist (Figure 5). The musical workshops presented pieces of music, which included messages calling for peace and preventing VAWG (Figure 6). The band, called Al-Nhrain, performed five pieces of music from Iraqi tradition, representing: the loving relationships between the Iraqi people ('Habayeb', from the artist Rawhi Khammash); a song expressing the experiences of Iraqi children living under occupation ('Remember' by Khadum Al-Saher); a traditional piece created by the artist for his wife as a message of love and respect ('Umm Sa'ad' by Muneer Basheer); an original piece, 'Remains of Hope', created by band member Bilal, representing his personal lived experience of violence; and a final piece ('Flying Bird' by Jameel Basheer), which speaks of freedom. The band concluded by dedicating their performances to the prevention of violence in all its forms and a call for peace, unity and solidarity among the people of Iraq.



Figure 5: Trained facilitator and mime artist performing at a GBV workshop.



Figure 6: Artists performing at a GBV prevention workshop.

Two further musical sessions were held with the participation of eight musicians who were students in the music department of Baghdad University and now also trained facilitators on GBV and VAWG from the earlier workshop. They presented musical compilations and occasional songs about violence in society. The pieces were intentionally chosen to focus on the plight of women in Iraq through Iraqi and Arabic traditions.

The art gallery exhibitions, titled “Violence Against Women” (Figure 7), were created by seventy students and included paintings about VAW and Islamic calligraphy. Works were produced by both male and female participants from across the four grades of the art department. The opening of the gallery was held to coincide with the official opening of the college, following its renovation through IR funding.

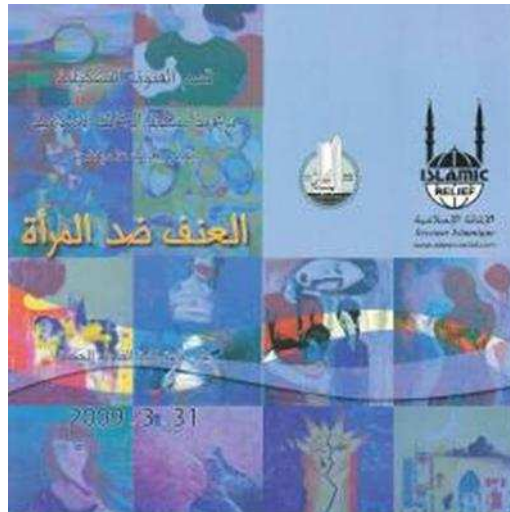


Figure 7: Art exhibition advertisement entitled “Violence Against Women.”

IR also supported each artist with the necessary painting equipment required to produce their work and a committee was formed to reward the participants with certificates of appreciation and gifts and select three winning paintings to receive pecuniary awards at the closing ceremony (Figure 8).



*Figure 8: Winning pieces (first, second and third places from left to right).*

Media coverage of the musical sessions, exhibitions and plenary events were widespread, with satellite TV channel coverage, including Al-Furat and Bilady among those reporting and interviewing participants (Figure 9).



Figure 9: One of the artists speaking to a media TV channel about his performance and its relevance to GBV prevention.

The Islamic calligraphy exhibition focused on gender justice in Islam and included depictions of Qur'anic scripture, sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and other proverbs from Arabic tradition, alluding to the fair treatment of women in society (Figure 10).



Figure 10: One of the artists introducing his calligraphy to a departmental head at the university.

One of the gallery attendees commented, “We will always be proud of our Iraqi roots, but it should not be forgotten that our society has undergone [exceptional] circumstances that has led to other changes [such as the increase in violence against women].” Another stated, “Today this dark thought [the hidden issue of VAW] was erased by the initiative of Islamic Relief, [through] its support in holding this gallery and following their previous workshops held in our [Baghdad University] colleges.”

A student artist said, “Participating [in the gallery] has given me the motivation to do something [for my community] and invest my [time into producing] artwork in defence of different issues.”

A member of the public who came to view the gallery commented, “This is the first time I have seen an Islamic organisation supporting artists.” Further written messages of support also included valuable suggestions, such as requesting that future exhibitions advocate for youth issues and promote greater awareness about concerns increasingly affecting their daily lives, such as drug abuse and HIV/AIDS.

One visitor remarked, “When you look at the paintings, you can feel the fertile imagination of the artist - In much of their work, you see the [representation of] masculine domination, while this gallery [as a whole] represents the humanitarianism required to defend a woman’s rights.”

Artistic expression depicted ‘the woman’ both in reality and symbolically, alluding to how violence is often characterised in both concepts; reality in terms of displaying the human body as a tool to express violent emotions and expressing the reality of violence in the society (Figure 11); and symbolically as seen through distorted cultural and traditional values, using iconic symbolism to communicate fear, forbidding and danger.



Figure 11: Visitors to the exhibition viewing a piece on sexual exploitation.

Several pieces presented emotional themes encompassing VAW, such as expressions of sympathy, love and suffering, whereas others depicted physical abuse through, for example, muzzled mouths, pain, torture, confinement and restrained bodies. A few works depicted various statuses of women, such as motherhood, whereas others emphasised positive aspects of advocating against violence, such as cultural progress, religious tolerance and the construction of sustainable civil society. A few paintings used icons of the daily lived reality of Iraqi society, such as concrete barriers, road blocks, checkpoints and traffic signs alerting to improvised-explosive devices.

The artwork clearly highlighted the suffering of women as a consequence of violence of differing types. Use of media and the publication of artwork were very effective in ensuring widespread coverage of the IR message concerning GBV in Arab and Muslim communities. A speaker at the closing ceremony stated, “Violence in general and GBV in particular, are major global phenomena, which are [undesirable bi-products] of conflict and economic crisis. Every effort should be made to reduce [their impact] through similar activities [to this project].”

### Phase 3: Advocacy

More than six thousand information packs were produced and distributed among the beneficiaries for distribution within their families and surrounding communities. Other marketing materials included folders containing information on the causes and kinds of violence, along with statistical data on global violence, booklets published and distributed containing postcard versions of student artwork displayed in the gallery and key chains with the phrase "women are full sisters of men" in a calligraphic style in Arabic.

### Conclusion

Women and girls are the most vulnerable demographic in developing countries, particularly those in which conflict is present or has recently ended. In order to impact such situations positively therefore, steps need to be taken both by NGOs such as IR and through the collective responsibility exercised through government.

At the national level, this programme identified that engagement with wider post-conflict Iraqi society is essential. Advocacy is a critical component in raising awareness across society and can help remove iniquity and injustice through empowering women to access their rights, as well as promoting that the responsibility for gender justice falls to all society, including men (Figure 12).



Figure 12: IR Project Managers discussing GBV prevention with male participants.

From the outset, it became clear that this programme was going to be very challenging, given that in depth exploration of VAWG was novel to Iraqi society. As such, significantly greater scope is required for future work, involving a breadth of NGOs, to see future tangible success in a new Iraq. A commitment to broader society is also required, through government support and positive media engagement.

Another salient feature that emerged through the programme was the recognition of the diversity of opinion in Iraqi society as to what constitutes VAWG. Achieving a common understanding across the country is, in this regard, affected by age, education and environment of upbringing and also by a gulf in cultural viewpoints, traditions, customs and beliefs. This leads to the realisation that finding common ground on the presence, impact and policies for dealing with VAWG will take time and occur gradually. It is therefore the responsibility of NGOs at this stage, to proactively advocate for long-term change in Iraq and have a commitment to sustainable change programmes. Strategies for this kind of implementation is therefore required, such as discourse on the concentration of efforts on youth awareness, investment in religious instruction that sheds light on positive teachings around the relationship between men and women and the need for fundamental gender justice research coupled with applied practice.

Due to sectarian differences prevalent in Iraqi society, dialogue facilitated during the workshops was invaluable in moving individuals toward accepting or empathising with viewpoints expressed by others. The positive impact, on youth in particular, is extremely valuable for long-term development. Thus the introduction of VAWG advocacy training and development for youth and student groups had the impact of transforming long-held traditional attitudes and views inherited from their families and surrounding community.

Iraqi society is strongly religious and Muslim clergymen play a central role in the daily lives of many people. However, a lack of gender sensitive religious instruction appeared widespread through this programme, which is further manifested through evidence of diminution of relationships between men and women and an increase in violence in the general public.

What has been achieved through this programme of education, training, workshops, art and advocacy, is that it is clearly not itself sufficient in tackling Iraq's post-conflict circumstances in relation to VAWG and answering her problems, but it has been a step in campaigning for change. However, the very real impact on enriching individual wellbeing of the participants and the improvement in their familial relationships is proven to be worthy of emulating through replication and expansion across Iraq and, perhaps, other post-conflict environments impacted by VAWG.



IR is evidently striving to eliminate VAW in communities within which it works, through implementing programmes of action and advocacy, such as those reported here, which work to inform communities, based on IR's Islamic values and aim to transform Muslim societies in particular. This is further achieved through communities recognising that all humanity has rights and responsibilities and that every person is valued and deserves respect, irrespective of their gender. This project has served to highlight how IR is capable of achieving this through its values, policies and practice. Through this programme, IR has therefore successfully demonstrated its proactive approach to implementing its principles in combating VAWG.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Dr. Kasim Randeree:** Head of Research & Development, Islamic Relief Academy; Associate Fellow, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford; University Chaplain and Lecturer in Islamic Law, Coventry University. Formerly Senior Policy Advisor (Gender), Islamic Relief Worldwide, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

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