

How bereavement became strength: the story of an Iraqi woman working with war affected widows in Baghdad

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In 2006, the author was studying for her MA degree in English, in Baghdad. A married Iraqi woman, she was kidnapped along with her husband. She was released after eight days, but her husband was killed. In this personal reflection, she describes her own profound grief and how she found meaning in life once again while working with the International Organization for Migration. This intergovernmental organisation gave her the opportunity to provide support to other Iraqi widows. Now, as a coordinator of a project for the empowerment of female and youth headed households, she offers both practical and emotional support.

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It was in 2006 that my life took a dramatic turn, when my husband and I were kidnapped in Baghdad. This was in the heat of the civil war in Iraq. My husband was Sunni Muslim, and I am Shia Muslim. Religion had never mattered very much to me, but since the fall of the Iraqi regime, religious affiliation had become a matter of life, or death. I was 41 years old at the time, and had only been married for two years. I survived the kidnap and loss of my beloved husband, and although it is hard to write this testimony, it is also rewarding to be able to describe how the atrocities of the past, that still haunt me regularly, have

still not prevented me from developing in a positive way.

Background

I am from an educated family. My father was a lawyer and my mother had studied as well. All of my brothers and sisters are university graduates. I went to school in Baghdad, to Christian primary and secondary schools. In those days, there was nothing extraordinary about a Muslim girl going to Christian schools. I studied English at the university, and worked for 10 years as a teacher in a secondary school. I loved teaching. However, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, international sanctions against Iraq were implemented, and the economy went sour. In the end, my salary was equivalent to no more than 3 US dollars, per month. In 1996, I had to resign, no longer able to survive on those wages, and began to learn how to work with computers. I followed several courses and eventually, worked as an office manager in a Danish commercial company, until 2003 when the company closed.

I had been engaged to my husband for many years before my family finally consented to our marriage. When we were married at the end of 2004, it was wonderful. My husband was a car dealer, and at that time I was studying at the College of Arts for an

MA degree, as well as working as designer for an Arabic language magazine.

Trauma

On 28 August 2006, while we were stopped at a traffic light in the north of Baghdad, we were approached by a small group of plain-clothed men that had been standing near a police car. They asked to see our identity cards. It was my husband's surname, al-Shekhli (a common name among Sunni people in Baghdad) that seemed to trigger the response. They grabbed my husband and I, in public, in broad daylight. I was put in the boot of our car. The eight days and nights I spent in the hands of those kidnappers will never leave me. It is impossible to forget such things as the sound of my husband, and others who had also been kidnapped and eventually killed, crying and moaning while being tortured in another room. They also tortured my husband in front of me.

When they let us out, we were blindfolded, and I did not know where we were. Over the next few days we were moved several times. Everywhere we went, I saw the picture of Muqtada al Sadr, the leader of a radical political movement and militia known as the Mahdi Army. So, it is probable we were brought to their stronghold, Sadr City, a vast area in north east Baghdad. Five of those eight days were spent in an empty high school. It was summertime and there were no students. Several homeless families lived in the school. The women stared at me through the window. It was hot and when I asked for water, they were afraid to give it to me.

Our captors never told us why they kidnapped us, but I cannot think of any other reason than their disapproval of my marriage to a Sunni man. They hate the Sunnis.

On 3 September, after torturing my husband for days, they said we would be released. They imprisoned me in a family house, where the sons and daughters of the family watched me at all times. My husband had also been brought there. We were allowed to bathe, and were given fresh clothes. They promised us that the following morning, we would be freed. This was a promise that was never kept. My husband and I were separated after that, and I never saw my husband alive again. He was shot and killed. His death certificate stated there were three bullets wounds: one in the back, one in the back of the neck, and one in the back of the head. His body was found in a parking area, near a Sadr City police station.

Bereavement

My life was devastated. For eight months, I could do nothing. I stayed in the house, thinking of what had happened to me, and why? My marriage had meant everything to me. I felt such overwhelming grief.

It felt as if my whole life and future had been destroyed when my beloved husband was killed. I hardly spoke, nor received visitors. I considered myself the most pitiful woman in all of Iraq. I refused to leave our apartment, and would not move anything that had belonged to my husband. For eight months, my family and my husband's family supported me by providing me with everything that made life easier. I was convinced to wear a veil to cover my hair, for safety, and felt I had no other choice. I found life difficult without a job, and wanted to be economically independent. I was able to finish my MA degree, with difficulty, in the beginning of 2008. Then I began to look for a job.

Working with widows

In May 2008, a friend of mine who worked with the International Organization for

Migration (IOM) called and said I might be able to work with the IOM as I spoke English well, and knew how to handle computers. I got the job and became a programme assistant with the Program of Human and Security Stabilization (PHSS). I worked as part of a team that interviewed widows, and other vulnerable groups, in order to provide them with training opportunities, according to their abilities and skills. In the beginning, it was not an easy job for me. In fact, I felt I was more of a beneficiary myself, as a widow who had lost her husband due to sectarian violence. The stories I heard shocked me. The dire conditions that widows are forced to live in, in Iraq, are almost unimaginable. I remember a Shia widow who had lived in very good circumstances, with her husband and family. She had three sons who worked with her husband in the family bakery shop. Sunni militia killed her husband, all of her sons, and her daughters' husbands, and blew-up the bakery shop. So in one moment, she and all of her daughters became homeless widows. Another Shia widow, with eight children, said that Sunni militia had asked for \$10,000 (USD) in exchange for her husband's life. She was able to collect the money from the community. The criminals took the money, showed her a DVD of them killing her husband, and then tried to rape her. She told me that she had decided to commit suicide, but in the end could not do it for the sake of her children. One Sunni widow told me about her nine-year old child who had been with his father when the Shia militia killed him.

Such a large number of horrible stories, I listened to them attentively, one by one. Sometimes, the stories made me cry. My supervisor told me that I had to control my emotions, and to behave more professionally. Of course, she was right, but it was very

difficult. When I started, I was so touched by the stories of these women that I could not sleep at night. The problems of those women, and my own sadness, kept me awake. Each, and every night, every detail of what had happened during the kidnapping returned to me. I could not help but wonder why Iraqi people had become so cruel to each other. What had happened? I was thinking about it all time, trying to find answers, but it was all in vain.

At the time, I remember being happy that at least my job filled my days. Before the job, I couldn't sleep because I remembered every moment that had passed. After I got the job, I was staying up all night, trying to fill in interview forms. Often, I fell asleep in front of the computer.

Listening to all those terrible stories has made me more patient. I realised I did not want to leave Iraq, because a lot of women were in need of assistance, and I could help them through the IOM. I gradually learned how our programme made a difference in the lives of these women, through offering them projects suited to their skills. Many widows, who had received nothing but charity from others, were now able to work; some became tailors, others joined cooperatives as grocers, etc.

Becoming a coordinator

After five years of working with IOM, I became the coordinator of two programmes; the first is the Community Revitalization Programme (CRP), and the second is the Female & Youth Headed Household Project (FYHH). We support vulnerable households headed by a woman, or by a youth, who are internally displaced persons (IDP), or returning refugees. We choose active local nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) as partners, and assist them in helping participants of the projects. One important aspect

of our work is the active cooperation with local authorities in the communities where we work. As the IOM team, we identify the most vulnerable applicants, especially households that are headed by widows, divorced women or youth, together with the local NGO, and organise meetings with the local authorities of the districts. An example of the activities we have organised are *'life skills trainings'*, in which vulnerable people receive training to assist them to make informed decisions, solve problems, communicate more effectively, empathise with others, and manage their lives in a more healthy and productive way. It is important to inform women in a way that helps them to seriously consider what they can do themselves to improve their own situation. We also invited a lawyer and a judge to one of the meetings to explain legal issues and rights. Many women are from communities that are governed by traditions and have no legal marriage certificates. Some of their children are not registered legally either. We give them the information on how to register their marriage or children.

Central to our approach are the *'Information Counselling and Referral Services'*, this allows organisations to match beneficiaries with a range of assistance and support activities, and includes their family members. This assistance can be very practical, for example vocational training to learn skills such as hairdressing, sewing and household appliances maintenance. Such skills will help the applicants find jobs and earn an income. *Focus Group Discussions* are also held within the community to discuss problems, and find solutions. These groups are made up of a variety of categories of women: IDPs, returnees, as well as women from the host community. They may be Shia Muslim, Sunni Muslim, Christian, or from any other

religion. The (invited) group discussions are open to all.

For those women who have skills and are willing to run a project, we provide a week long training, covering how to write a business plan. We provide start-up materials and active follow-up. These small projects provide urgently needed assistance to increase the income and livelihood of these vulnerable families.

For those who suffer from psychosocial problems, we invite a social worker to help them deal with their problems. In all cases possible, we avoid treating distress or grieving with unnecessary medication. Many psychosocial problems do not require clinical treatment, and are frequently rooted in lost hope, chronic poverty, displacement, inability to meet basic needs, and to fulfil normal social roles.

Joy mixed with sadness

I have been working with the IOM for five years now. I have followed various trainings, such as a training for trainers in *'Competency-Based Economies through Formation of Enterprise'* in Beirut, and a training in *'Psychosocial Intervention in Emergency Displacement'* at the University of Pisa. I want to keep developing my skills, and regularly read the notes from my courses.

Yet, I am still sad inside my heart. Six years have passed, but I still wear black clothes and still live in the same apartment, with the same memories. I have not changed, nor removed anything from the apartment. On the other hand, I feel so much more confident now. Last year, I removed the veil, in spite of growing conservatism. It has restored my confidence and pride to resist a restrictive tradition.

One source of happiness for me is to see a vulnerable woman or youth smile, and feel relieved. It can really cheer me up when a

woman I worked with calls me, and tells me that she is doing well, that she found a job through our programme and that she is able to support herself and her family financially now. I still have sad feelings about the good things I have lost, but I am also proud of

what I have been able to achieve, despite my terrible loss.

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