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Faith-inspired Action on Gender Justice in the Muslim World: A Programmatic Approach to Empowering Communities in Conflict Environments

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Abstract: Literature on sexual violence in armed conflict indicates that rape and violence against women (VAW) prior to, during and after conflict is extensive in scope and magnitude. Violence 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 private or public settings. Gender-based violence (GBV) is associated with increasing 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 GBV. Girls too are disempowered because of the threat of violence when they cannot attend school, are abducted for trafficking or when their families disintegrate or must flee. In some conflicts, men are also affected by sexual violence and boys can be exploited or forced to become child soldiers. Islamic Relief (IR)¹ responds to humanitarian needs in many man-made disaster contexts, such as wars and internal strife and aims to safeguard its rights-holders² from threats emanating from such 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. 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 (Randeree, 2014a). This paper reports on a programme, consisting of three phased projects conducted by IR in Iraq, aimed at providing sustainable support for vulnerable women affected by violence in post-conflict surroundings and to raise awareness about increasing VAW in the changing backdrop of post-war Iraq. Through the lens of this programme, this paper is able to explore the broader social and economic impact of conflict from a gender perspective, the changing landscape of Iraqi society and how conflict has very markedly affected gender justice in a detrimental manner. The article also provides insight into Islamic perspectives on VAW and GBV and case studies on programme participants (rights-holders), their personal challenges as a consequence of violence within post-conflict Iraqi communities and their aspirations and hope for a brighter future.

Keywords: Islam, Gender, Violence, Conflict, Iraq, Development

Introduction

Though 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, particularly in situations where there is a need for humanitarian aid. 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 (World Health Organisation, 2009). As such, present policy focus at IR is in the area of VAW, as humanitarian aid work naturally brings the organisation into direct contact with impacted communities (Randeree, 2014b).

¹ Islamic Relief (IR) is the largest independent Muslim charity in the world. It has been operating for three decades and currently has field offices in more than 40 countries, providing humanitarian aid, responding to disasters and emergencies and helping people in crisis. IR is actively promoting sustainable economic and social development by working with local communities to eradicate poverty, illiteracy and disease. IR is registered with the UK government's Charity Commission, has consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council, works closely with institutions such as the EC, OCHA, has membership of BOND (British Overseas NGOs for Development), is a member of the Disasters Emergency Committee, is part of the global Make Poverty History coalition, is a member of the Muslim Charities Forum and the Gender and Development Network, as well as other networks and global initiatives.

² The term 'rights-holders' is used to describe beneficiaries or participants of the projects, with IR acting as duty bearer. This terminology complements IR's rights-based development framework in gender justice and their corresponding responsibilities towards rights-holders.

IR has an obligation to address this issue, because much of the impact of VAW occurs in the Muslim world and faith-based organisations have a comparative advantage within faith environments over their secular counterparts (Tomalin, 2012). 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 (Pew Research Forum, 2011). Through a unique combination of faith literacy, Islamic scholarship and development expertise (Abuarqab and Phillips, 2009; Khan *et al*, 2009), IR is in a strong position, compared to other NGOs, to advocate against VAW 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.

The project reported here³, was thus strategically focused on MDG 3⁴ with rights-holders across a number of districts in Baghdad and Fallujah in Iraq.

Defining GBV and VAW

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” (Ward, 2002). The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW) 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” (UN General Assembly, 1993: Article 1). Such violence may be extended to economic or socio-cultural dispossession (UNFPA, 2004). This definition is further extended 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/cutting 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 (UN General Assembly, 1993: Article 2).

Scale of VAW

“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.”⁵

The magnitude of VAW worldwide is substantial and is being described as a silent emergency (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2012). It is estimated that over one-third of the global female population are physically or sexually abused during their lifetimes (Heise *et al*, 1999). In Bangladesh, over fifty percent of women interviewed

³ The project was supported through Islamic Relief Sweden and entitled ‘Promoting Self Help among Vulnerable Iraqi Women.’ A second project was funded by the Norwegian Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs and entitled ‘Promoting Gender Based Violence Prevention and Response in Iraq,’ which will be reported in a future publication.

⁴ MDG 3 (Millennium Development Goal 3) is aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering women.

⁵ Statement by Ban Ki-moon, United Nations Secretary General, on International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, 25 November 2007.

in a WHO study, had experienced physical or sexual violence in a domestic setting (World Health Organisation, 2005).⁶

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 (Krug *et al*, 2002). The use of ‘honour’ to justify and explain abusive relations and practices is particularly pernicious, the very use of the term providing an ‘explanation’ that removes responsibility from perpetrators to wider social structures and communities – which may well be complicit – and to the victims themselves as ‘transgressors’ (Ahmetbeyzade, 2008).

Islamic Viewpoint on VAW

In keeping with the coherent message of mercy and peaceful relations, the Islamic framework is clear in its stance against violence, which contravenes the core principles of justice, eradication of harm and the promotion of health and welfare (Randeree, 2008). Further, Islamic jurists have categorically excluded any form of gender-related abuse (al-Hibri, 1997), based on both primary sources of *Shari’ah* (*Qur’an* and *Hadith* literature) that unambiguously underscore the rejection of abuse in its entirety, citing, for example:

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts); verily in that are Signs for those who reflect. (Surah Al-Rum 30:21)

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (Surah al-Hujurat 49: 13)

And from the *Hadith* of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh):

"The most perfect of the believers in faith are the best of them in moral excellence, and the best of you are the kindest to their wives."⁷

The *Qur’an* further condemns specific acts of GBV prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia, most notably the cultural practice of infanticide, or gender-selective killing, carried out by burying female newborns alive:

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ حَسْبَةَ إِمْلَاقٍ سَدَّحْنُ نَرْتُفِهِمْ وَإِنَّاكُمْ ۖ إِنَّ قَتْلَهُمْ كَانَ خِطَاً كَبِيراً

Kill not your children for fear of want: We shall provide, sustenance for them as well as for you: verily the killing of them is a great sin. (Surah Bani Isra’il/Al Isra 17: 31)

This practice continues today, mostly confined to Asia, such as in India where foeticide occurs as a consequence of strong patriarchy and similarly in China, where the problem has become exacerbated through the state’s one child policy.

⁶ Study based on interviews with 24,000 women across ten countries.

⁷ Sunan al-Tirmidhi 10:11.

In summary, the *Qur'an* clearly demonstrates Islam's abhorrence of violence in all its forms and, from a gender perspective, highlights the spiritual parity (King, 2009) between both men and women and their creator.

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 (Pew Research Forum, 2011). 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 (Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation, 2005). 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*, which helped mediate against sectarianism by synthesising Shiite and Sunni interpretations of the *Qur'an* 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 is not to say that women were not victims of violence or repression (Smiles, 2008), but that they were actively and significantly contributing to society through their 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.

Sustainable Livelihoods Project Outline

The participation of women in economic activities is one of a number of strategies that contributes to their empowerment. The involvement of women in poor communities, however, particularly in conflict affected areas, is challenging (Husain *et al*, 2013), though ultimately worthwhile for NGOs to engage with, as women active in attaining independent economic prosperity, contribute towards NGO strategic goals in seeking equality and social justice (de Santisteban, 2005).

This project was focused on empowering communities and was instigated and impact assessed between 2008 and 2012 and took place in two phases. The first phase was conducted in the Al-Khadra'a and Al-Fadil districts of Baghdad, engaging 52 vulnerable women who found themselves reliant on charity as a result of the loss of 'bread-winning' family members. Many were widowed and responsible for orphaned children. This project consisted of support for the creation of 'cottage industries' and provided training in social entrepreneurship activities designed to reduce poverty through small business enterprise, develop confidence and a sense of community through engagement and teamwork with other participants and inform them and the

wider public about women's rights within a conflict ridden setting. The project consisted of small workshops, craft training courses and capacity building workshops as well as educational workshops on Iraqi law, personal law, psychological health and well-being and nutrition.

The second phase of the project impacted 36 women in Fallujah, half of whom were deaf-mute (varying degrees). Similar to the first phase, but with the additional challenge of working with poorly educated women, most of whom were illiterate and many able only to communicate through sign language.

This paper reports on the details of the project and examines its sustainability through a review in 2012, to gauge if the women continue to make a living through their established cottage industries. It further examines how the women have been empowered as a result of their involvement in the project, approaches to GBV education and analysing numerous pertinent intersections of discourse, such as GBV and disability.

Sustainable Livelihoods Project Implementation

The project aimed at empowering communities through increasing opportunities for self help and self reliance among vulnerable Iraqi women in Baghdad and Fallujah with the ultimate goal of improving their livelihoods and achieving sustainable human development. The project involved the formation and administration of small business ventures to generate income for rights-holders through catering businesses, textile production and craftwork and leatherwear industries. The project had two further components: raising community awareness of women and gender issues; and building the capacity of local NGOs working with women.

General Indicators

The project was implemented in three areas; two in Baghdad, in the al-Khadra'a and Al-Fadil districts and one in the city of Fallujah. Due to the deterioration of security conditions in Fallujah, this phase was repeatedly postponed, but eventually began in the year following the Baghdad phase.

There were 52 women participants selected through interview across the two Baghdad sites. They were aged between 20 and 60 and among them, 59 percent were widows, 29 percent bore sole responsibility for supporting their families, eight percent were unmarried orphans and four percent were divorced. In Fallujah there were 36 participants, 50 percent were deaf-mute single women and required sign language to communicate,⁸ 30 percent bore sole responsibility for supporting their families, 12 percent were widows and eight percent were divorced. A further challenge was that 31 percent of participants in the Fallujah project were illiterate, with a further 36 percent only educated to primary level.

Implementation

Target rights-holders were organised into three groups, two in Baghdad and one in Fallujah. One group, comprising 27 participant women was located at the site in al-Khadra'a, where they were trained in operating a small catering business, textile production, craftwork and leatherwear industries. The second group (25 women) were based in Al-Fadil, with a focus on small enterprises in clothing manufacture and handicraft industries.

Baghdad rights-holders received training which consisted of two workshops at each site, run in collaboration with the Al-Murtaqa Centre for Human Development, who specialise in entrepreneurship and the creation and management of SMEs. They were also trained in purchasing, financial management, marketing and sales, in addition to skills workshops in their selected trade specialisation. Leadership and management skills are seen as vital in ensuring

⁸ Anwar Al-Fallujah, a local NGO in Fallujah, which works with adult women with special needs, supported this work.

development projects lead to lasting legacy and sustainability (Randeree, 2009; Randeree and Iqbal, 2009; Randeree and Malik, 2008).

In Fallujah, textile production consisted of a group of 9 women, with a few having existing skills in sewing. The team was divided into designing, sewing, ironing and wrapping sections based on their skills and personal choice. They produced clothes for newborn babies and work wear, including uniforms for cleaning staff and office workers. A further craftwork and leatherwear team consisted of 11 women, who produced cotton and woollen rugs and mobile phone cases. The catering team consisted of 14 women, with responsibilities being allocated among them by the IR coordinator, depending on product type. They proved to be a very motivated, active and cooperative team, with their products receiving orders initially from shops and restaurants across the local area, but gradually expanding to other regions across Fallujah. They also received donations, which included an industrial-scale refrigerator. The high-level of motivation of the Fallujah team ensured that they experienced very few problems, but electricity shortages in the city meant that alternative arrangements had to be made to ensure continuous electricity supply.

Rights-holders in Fallujah initially had their training needs met through a total of seven available skills workshops; one workshop in sewing, three for handicrafts and three for knitting. Coordinators were constantly on hand to deal with problems faced during the initial stages of the project, particularly as most of the rights-holders were handicapped and in need of special care and support. All sessions held in Fallujah were directly translated by sign language.

Furthermore, courses in branding and marketing were provided, as a result of which groups enjoyed branding their products. The Al-Khadra'a production site chose 'Al-Huda' as a brand name for their products, whilst the Al-Fadil site chose the name 'Al-Shoroq.' The Fallujah site selected the name 'Al-Amal' (hope) for their products, to reflect their optimism toward the project.

Once the enterprises were established, IR held regular site visits where IR project managers and field staff listened to concerns and solved problems faced by the women. Throughout the programme, local NGOs, partners or IR coordinators were available on site.

Catering proved the most profitable, with local stores impressed by the home-cooked taste of the women's products and regular orders soon followed. Gradually their products were distributed further afield as word of mouth spread. In particular, demand increased dramatically during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, where the women catered for Iftar (breaking of the fast) parties and other festive and seasonal events.

The textiles sector found it more challenging as similar merchandise on the market was very competitively priced, with particular competition seen from Chinese imported products. This was countered through intelligent product selection, targeting only those products for which a market need could be established. Usually, this meant products either unavailable or in low supply compared to demand in Baghdad. Popular among these were clothes for newborn babies, children's pyjamas and religious clothing, such as those worn for prayer or for *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). In leatherwear; mobile phone covers, leather wallets and purses proved very popular and a number of cosmetics stores sourced and sold products made by the participants.

In one act of generosity, in being familiar with the humanitarian work of IR, one merchant bought all available textile products a few days before Eid Al-Adha (the festival of sacrifice), gifted the products to the women and their families and placed a new order for production, to supply for his own stores.

Workshops

Workshops on women's rights in Iraqi law and constitution, the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), VAW and psychological health for women were held (Figure 1). Further training involved lectures about self-confidence, self-reliance and coaching sessions on how to manage life beyond a husband's death, or after divorce. Through the workshops, the women were able to explore definitions of gender, gender roles in

society, civil structure and enabling mechanisms for women to be engaged in employment. Seminars on nutrition were also presented covering nutrition for female children, teenage girls, pregnant and elderly women. General health advice pertaining to chronic diseases and drug abuse was also provided. Participants also raised questions about inheritance rights from husbands and parents in Islamic and state law. A two-day health awareness workshop, facilitated by two female doctors and informed through IR policy (Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2008) was held, covering general health and wellbeing, child healthcare, gynaecological diseases and dental care. For many of the rights-holders, this was their first opportunity to ask questions about their personal welfare and was the first project of its kind in Fallujah, benefitting women through challenging and informing against cultural stereotypes prevalent in the region.



Figure 1: GBV workshop facilitator at the University of Baghdad, introducing a session on psychological well-being.

One participant commented, "We did not know anything about our rights or the importance of the [new Iraqi] constitution in regards to women, but now we have understood, we have changed the way we look at ourselves and we [now] feel more [empowered]."

Newsletters were published in Arabic and English (Figure 2), promoting the activities of the project and were distributed within the local community, among regional and international organisations, to educational institutions and across Iraqi government departments.



Figure 2: Newsletters (Arabic and English) advocating Islamic Relief’s position on VAW and detailing the promoting self-help among vulnerable Iraqi women project.

Naturally, the security situation was of particular concern to the project and the existence of scores of street checkpoints and resulting traffic jams affected transportation for rights-holders and support staff to and from the sites. This was especially acute at the Al-Fadil site and a few women were forced to withdraw during the course of the project due to varying security circumstances, as a result of which, some of them were obliged to relocate their places of abode to other areas of Baghdad, making it impossible to continue.

Oral Testimonies of Rights-holders⁹

Oral testimonies of women taking part in development programmes in conflict environments are important as they enhance the qualitative understanding of field project effectiveness (Rodgers, 2011). Participants expressed a sense of achievement in attaining economic independence and spoke of their desire to continue working beyond the remit of the current programme. In terms of the effect on their personal circumstances, some participants positively cited a decline in reliance on relatives for financial support and, in some cases, total elimination through income generated from the project. Others highlighted that, although dependence on family and community was still the main contributor to household income, they felt a changing power balance within their familial settings, particularly in terms of patriarchal authority, such that male relatives acknowledged the ability of the women to contribute to household income and valued the paradigm shift. In several cases, the improvement in economical wellbeing allowed the rights-holder to live independently, rather than in accommodation provided in a supporting relative's house, with women describing the sense of freedom experienced as a consequence.

One rights-holder stated, “I feel happy when I find money in my purse and I can buy things for my kids.” Another, who has a partially-sighted child and was recently widowed, said that she felt embarrassment from having to ask her father for money to treat her son’s condition. She expressed a newfound sense of empowerment from being able to meet her son’s medical needs from her own income as a result of the entrepreneurship opportunity provided by IR.

⁹ Case study respondent names have been changed to preserve anonymity and quotations have been edited to improve readability only.

An IR project manager noted the changing attitudes and behaviour of the women over the first six-month period. She stated, “The project clearly built self-confidence among the participants and [helped them to] realise their important role within their families and society.” She continued, “I used to see sadness in their eyes when I first met them, but this sadness began to disappear with each [project appraisal] visit, where [sadness] was replaced with smiles and closer relationships [among one another], as if they were one family.”

Two cases further encapsulate the feelings of accomplishment and value of the project. Dana summarises, “I am a widow with young dependents and one of the participants in the IR project in the Al Fadil district of Baghdad ... I benefited from this project, by being able to work, [even though my] children are still young. I gained experience in selling and marketing, working as a [member of a] team and I gained a large family through [building] relationships with the [other] participants.”

Huda reviews, “I am one of the participants in the Al Fadil project. This project was a turning point in my life [and completely] changed my daily life. IR made efforts to teach us how to handle small businesses and [I learnt] sewing. I also gained skills in marketing and selling [through which I built] self-confidence. [Before the project] I knew nothing about work, except housework and raising children. I'm a widow, responsible for a boy and a girl in school. [Before this project,] I had no source of income except for IR sponsorship. The profits [from the] sewing project have helped me a lot in [resolving] my [financial] problems.”

The project was thus unique, in that beyond the creation of small enterprises, women engaged with the process at all levels, building teams, forging lifelong relationships and empowering themselves and each other to become independent and confident individuals. Moreover, raising awareness among the participants about gender justice, VAW and women's rights, began a transformative process for the rights-holders, their families and relatives and prompted them to make changes in their lived realities.

One of the IR facilitators narrated examples of experiences of some of the participants attending her workshops. She recalled, “Ayesha, a 29 year-old widow and mother of three, recounted her experiences. She stopped me as I was talking to the group. You could see misery in her eyes. She told us that she can't see her children except at weekends because they live with her parents on the far side of Fallujah, while she [is forced, due to the security situation to] live with relatives close to her place of work. Other colleagues [in the workshop] empathised with her situation. She had lost her six-year-old son in a bombing in the Al-Amel region [early in the conflict] and her husband followed [a similar fate], being killed in 2005 by armed paramilitaries. She now is the sole provider for two daughters, aged seven and nine and a son aged four. She also suffers from poor kidney health and recollected [a time] when she had kidney failure, having to sell her clothing to be able to afford to go to the doctor. She continued how she enjoyed the project and working with the catering team. She added that she was very happy to work with others and the income helped support her small family.”

The IR facilitator further recounted the case of Suha, an eighteen year-old woman who is deaf-mute, “Suha lives in a house with a ceiling made of palm leaves. When she started working in the kitchen on the catering project, she was remote, secluded and refused to mix with the other beneficiaries (rights-holders). We were concerned about [the extent of] her isolation, but as the project progressed, I saw her laughing and communicating through sign language with the other participants. I wanted to take a photograph of her and she smiled at me. I realised then that her earlier isolation had gone and working with her colleagues had given her hope, through the realisation of shared experiences with other colleagues.”

“Hafsah is married with one child. Her husband has been unemployed for a number of years. Unable to find a job [and unwilling to allow Hafsah to work], he felt compelled to put their nine year-old son to work, which created further tension as her son told her that he was considering running away from home. Since Hafsah joined the Fallujah project, her circumstances have dramatically improved. Hafsah [concluded], ‘I wake up early to go to the [Fallujah] centre and what I have gained from my work has helped us so much, that my little boy has now been able to leave his work. Thank you for your help - you have changed my life.’”

Specialist Pastoral Support

Given the special needs of rights-holders in Fallujah, it was decided to provide pastoral support sessions for this team. These proved to be very distinctive, almost surreal occasions, since the sessions were held in near silence, sign language being the dominant form of communication. A sign translator was employed to assist with these sessions. Rights-holders expressed how the project takes them away from otherwise disheartening personal circumstances, with many having feelings of being ineffectual in their lives as a consequence of being deaf-mute. In contrast, the project gave them a sense of belonging and togetherness as well as supporting them financially. Many spoke of how family members would prohibit them from going out because they were concerned for their safety as young women with disability. IR coordinators reported how they had seen improvements in the psychological conditions of rights-holders over several pastoral care sessions.

Furthermore, the rights-holders, most of whom were young single women, became more conversant as these sessions progressed. Many articulated the difficulties of finding marital partnership because they were deaf-mute and felt very strongly that the likelihood that they would find life-partners was poor, which would, moreover, impact negatively on their long-term economic well-being. Many felt disadvantaged through physical disability as they felt the issue of women's rights came secondary to meeting their physical needs and rights, such as social mobility, employability and overcoming matrimonial inequity.

Fallujah's conservative tribal society further meant that the nature of IR's work was challenging. The environment is one in which it is very difficult for women to speak about their lived experiences unless they had absolute confidence in the receiving group. As such, trust and confidence in IR and its gender related work in Iraq had to be built, which was both time consuming and complex. However, through providing safe spaces for communication, applying no pressure on rights-holders and being available to listen to their needs, they were encouraged to reflect on and communicate about their lives over time.

Conclusions

Women and girls are the most vulnerable demographic in developing countries, particularly those in which conflict is present or has recently ended (McDonald, 2013). In order to impact such environments positively, where GBV and VAW are rife, steps need to be taken both by NGOs such as IR and through the collective responsibility exercised through government. "Conflict can thus become a foundation for positive change." (Randeree and El Faramawy, 2011)

IR, for their part, is evidently striving to eliminate GBV and primarily 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 (Randeree, 2013a). 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 (Aminu-Kano, 2012). This project has served to highlight how IR is capable of achieving this through its values, policies and practice. Through this project, IR has successfully demonstrated its proactive approach to implementing its principles in combating GBV.

IR is committed to continue monitoring and supporting activities on both Baghdad sites and in Fallujah. In the long-term, there is the expectation that more women will join the venture; local NGOs will be encouraged to adopt similar projects and support the development of new concepts within their own communities; to have a positive and measurable impact on female unemployment and qualitative improvements in the lives of the women and their families (Randeree, 2013b).

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