

Iraq: Abduction of Women on the Rise

By [Dahr Jamail](#) and [Ali Al-Fadhily](#)

Global Research, December 12, 2006

Abduction of Women on the Rise 11
December 2006

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#),
[Women's Rights](#)

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BAGHDAD, Dec. 11 (IPS) – Women face increased risk of abduction by militias and criminal gangs as lawlessness takes over the country.

Nobody is safe. Taysseer Al-Mashadani, the Sunni woman minister from the al-Tawafuq political party was abducted by members of the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi army militia July 1 this year. After being held for nearly three months, she was only released after much pressure was applied from both the U.S. and Iraqi governments.

Thousands of other women have not been so lucky. Many have been executed, assaulted, or released only after their families paid considerable ransom money.

Few women like to talk about what they have to go through. "I was taken by Americans for three days recently," Um Ahmed told IPS in Baghdad. "They told me they would rape me if I didn't tell them where my husband was, but I really didn't know."

She said that she was turned over to the Iraqi National Guard "who were even worse than the Americans."

Her husband eventually surrendered to the U.S. military, but she continued to be held "to apply pressure on him to confess things he never did," she said. "They told him they would rape me right in front of him if he did not confess he was a terrorist. They forced me to watch them beat him hard until he told them what they wanted to hear."

The Organisation for Women's Freedom in Iraq has estimated from anecdotal evidence that over 2,000 Iraqi women have gone missing in the period from the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 until spring 2006.

But numbers are not always reliable here. Thousands of cases of abduction of women are never reported for fear of public disgrace.

According to a study published by the Washington-based Brookings Institute Dec. 4, between 30 to 40 Iraqis were being kidnapped every day as of March this year. "The numbers on this table may be lower than the actual number of kidnappings as the Iraqi Police suggest wide underreporting," the study noted.

These estimated numbers have drastically increased from a reported rate of two kidnappings a day in Baghdad in January 2004, and are up from the 10 a day reported in the capital city in December 2004 according to this study.

Untold numbers of women, believed by many to be in the thousands, have been abducted for money, and others have been abducted for sectarian reasons. "My family had to pay 30,000 dollars to have me released," a 25-year-old woman told IPS, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Several abducted women have later been found dead, sometimes beheaded. Others are never seen again.

Fifty-two-year-old Um Wasseem from Baghdad was abducted by U.S. forces and held at the Baghdad airport detention camp, her family said. She was eventually released after political pressure from family and friends who had some political muscle.

"I wish she had not been released," her 20-year-old son told IPS. "Militias then abducted her, and we found her body torn to pieces in March this year."

Many Iraqi academics and aid workers say most of those being kidnapped now are women.

"Women in Iraq used to go to work, participate in social activities and even take part in politics," sociologist Shatha al-Dulaimy told IPS in Baghdad. "Iraqi women studied and worked side by side with men, and they formed at least 35 percent of the national working power in various fields of work until the U.S. occupation came. The occupation has brought nothing but suffering, death or kidnapping to women here now."

The U.S. administration promised Iraqi women a better life with new opportunities, but the reality after three-and-a-half years of occupation is far different. Iraqi women were promised 25 percent of the seats in parliament. As it turned out, the Iraqi National Assembly has 85 women in a total of 275 members following elections held Dec. 15, 2005. But that has not translated into more rights for women across Iraq.

"We are just a part of the décor arranged by Americans who wanted to convince the world of the 'tremendous' change in Iraq," a female member of the Iraqi parliament told IPS on condition of anonymity. "Our (women's) voice is never heard inside or outside parliament."

Female members of the new Iraqi Parliament take little part in major political decisions or when it comes to forming committees. Many female members were elected for religious or tribal reasons, she said.

The MP expressed concern over a rise in "religious extremism" because people are being "led by clerics who spent their lives learning how to make women obey their orders and present them with the best services at home." Such extremism has been a large factor in the rising number of women being kidnapped, she said.

"What women's rights," said 38-year-old schoolteacher Assmaa Fadhil. "Those who talk about it are ignorant people who want women to be slaves and concubines rather than partners in life. They are using old traditions to crush women and keep them away from any real participation in society."

Fadhil says lack of respect for women's rights has increased the threat of women getting abducted simply as they step out of their homes.

"Most of us now stay at home unless we absolutely must go out for food," Fadhil said. "Because we know so many women who have been kidnapped, it is only a matter of time for

us if we continue traveling around the city.”

Denial of rights for women in the name of Islam is not what Islam is all about, Sheikh Ahmed of the Sunni religious group, the Association of Muslim Scholars, told IPS. “Muslim women are granted full rights of work and social participation. It is tradition that limits women’s activity nowadays, rather than religion.”

Most Iraqi women are fearful about their future as long as the country is led by Islamists.

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