

Meet the creator of a secret network of women's shelters in Iraq

By Benedetta Argentieri



Women who escaped from captivity by IS militants. (Reuters/Ari Jala)

When an Islamic State fighter stopped their car in Anbar Province, Iraq, Safiyah knew something terrible was about to happen. Her husband, a soldier in the Iraqi Army, had been executed days earlier in Tikrit, and she knew the only way to protect their four daughters now was to flee the city.

They had been heading for the city of Kirkuk when their escape was cut short. An armed man forced Safiyah's driver from the car. Then, with the help of other Islamic State fighters, he dragged the four girls,

between the age of 16 and 23 years old, to a truck. Safiyah was left behind, too old to be sold in the bride's market in Raqqa, Syria.

That was back in September 2014.

In the weeks after her daughters' abduction, Safiyah tried to kill herself, recounts Yanar Mohammed, a 55-year-old from Baghdad, to Quartz. Then Safiyah decided to travel to Raqqa to find her daughters.

"She is still in the process of finding them," says Mohammed.

(Safiyah's last name has been withheld for her security.)

Mohammed is the president of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, a Baghdad-based NGO. Since 2003, OWFI has used an underground network of shelters in secret locations across the country, to help hide and protect women from traffickers and domestic violence.

The organization also seeks to promote human rights, and to raise awareness about women's safety in the country. OWFI has branches throughout the country and it partners with international organizations such as MADRE, Human Right Watch and Amnesty International under the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security.

In early October, Mohammed traveled from Baghdad to New York, to shed light on the issue of women's security in Iraq. While the exact figures are unknown and many families do not report missing relatives, Mohammed tells Quartz that she has the names of at least 600 women kidnapped in the city of Mosul since June 2014, when ISIL overran the city.

On Oct. 13, Mohammed spoke before the Security Council of the United Nations to raise awareness of their plight, and to demand a

stop to the violence against women, girls and LGBT persons and other marginalized groups:

To understand the crisis for Iraqi women today, you cannot ignore what has happened beginning in 2003. A government was formed as a result of politics of division based on sect, ethnicity and gender. This government failed to uphold basic rule of law, allowing extremists to take up positions of power.

Ten years ago, Iraqi women spoke to the Security Council about the situation for women. What would Iraq look like if you had heeded those calls then and promoted an inclusive process in which women and minority groups were fully engaged?

And while Mohammed blames the spread of ISIL militants for [a large part of violence against women](#) and kidnappings, she also blames the Iraqi government for not doing enough—and sometimes even impeding OWFI's work.

Iraqi authorities do not allow women's organizations to provide shelter to the thousands of women fleeing conflict-related violence, and independent radio stations that promote peace across sectarian divides, dispel misogyny and combat homophobia have been shut down.

Discriminatory laws and policies prevent women who are fleeing armed conflict, honor crimes, trafficking, abductions, sexual and gender based violence, or forced marriage from obtaining legal identification without a male family member. Perpetrators of honor killings receive mitigated sentences, if they are punished at all.

“At least a quarter of million of women are currently in danger,” she tells Quartz. “And the [Iraqi] government isn't acknowledging that.” The national government has always opposed OWFI's activities,

according to Mohammed. “Since the beginning, [the Iraqi government] said that a ‘woman will only be protected by her father or her brother, otherwise she should not be taken anywhere else,’ and it stood against OWFI very violently.”

While OWFI is keen on continuing to offer its clandestine services to women in danger, Mohammed also urged the UN Security Council to take action, by speaking out against violence towards civilians, and offering more support for women’s organizations in particular.

By creating an open, global conversation about the dangers faced by Iraqi women, she hopes, Iraq’s government will be moved to actively protect them—in peacetime as in conflict.