



HOUSE OF LORDS

Revised transcript of evidence taken before

The Select Committee on Sexual Violence in Conflict

Inquiry on

SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT

Evidence Session No. 11

Heard in Public

Questions 73 - 78

TUESDAY 3 NOVEMBER 2015

5.25 pm

Witness: Ms Yanar Mohammed

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on
www.parliamentlive.tv.

Members present

Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne (Chairman)
 Bishop of Derby
 Baroness Hilton of Eggardon
 Baroness Hodgson of Abinger
 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead
 Lord Sterling of Plaistow
 Baroness Warsi
 Baroness Young of Hornsey

Examination of Witness

Ms Yanar Mohammed, President, Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (via videolink)

The Chairman: Good evening. This is Emma Nicholson speaking. How do you do? Are you able to hear us, Mrs Mohammed?

Ms Yanar Mohammed: Yes, I can hear you, but the picture is not very clear.

Now it is clear.

The Chairman: Thank you very much for joining us. We are very grateful indeed. You know the Committee. You have seen who we are. We are taking this as a recorded interview that is on the record. It will be published, but we will ask you to give us any minor corrections that you want to make. We will have a lot of questions for you. If you cannot answer them today, or if we run out of time, please write to us. We very much welcome all the knowledge that you can give us, because you are in a very important and powerful position.

Ms Yanar Mohammed: Thank you.

Q73 The Chairman: My first question is not a question; it is just to ask you to tell us a bit about yourself and your work, and what you would like us to concentrate on.

Ms Yanar Mohammed: I am a woman activist and I have been working in Iraq since 2003. I have set up an organisation where the main focus of work is on sheltering women who are fleeing gender-based violence. We started out working on honour killings and later on worked with women who were escaping trafficking. Recently, more of our focus has been on women who are fleeing ISIS violence, so for me it is very important that the future of Iraq becomes a future where women are safe, where legislation allows the protection of women and human rights defenders have a say in what happens in the country, whether it is laws in Britain, policies that are decided or the way in which women are treated by governmental institutions. For me, it is very important to reach out to the international community and find ways and mechanisms that empower us in Iraq and help the government to understand our position on women's rights.

Q74 Bishop of Derby: Thank you very much, and thank you for speaking to us.

You commented that the Iraqis are devastated now and that it will take decades for any progress to be made. Within that situation of devastation, what part does sexual violence play? Is it a major driver of the devastation, or is it just one part of a much more oppressive situation that women are in? It would help us to know the part that sexual violence plays.

Ms Yanar Mohammed: If we are looking at the landscape of women's devastation in Iraq, the most difficult spots, or if you like the hot zones, where women are hurt the most are to do with gender-based violence, where they have been violated by ISIS fighters and kept forcibly in marriages that they do not want, or if they were enslaved by ISIS in Mosul and taken to Raqqa. Those are the most difficult parts, but that does not happen only under ISIS. A similar situation happens under the Iraqi government, where orphans of the war have become the material for a highly thriving sex industry. Every Iraqi city is full of brothels and very young women and teenagers are stuck in a cycle of violence and are unable to step out of it. If we look again at the landscape of violence against women and the devastation, I would say that these two parts are the most difficult parts that need to be addressed by very clear and immediate mechanisms. Overall we are speaking of a population of 10 million or 20 million, and the displaced are a big part of it. Millions of mothers are displaced from western Iraq and living in mainland Iraq, and they do not have a single penny with which to feed their children. So some of the landscape is poverty, some of it is homelessness and not having a roof over their heads. A considerable part of it is being widowed by the war between Iraq and ISIS, which has left hundreds of thousands with no husband and sons and suffering a lot. Violence based on conflict affects the biggest numbers of women, but the ones who are hit very profoundly are those who are enslaved by ISIS and those who are trafficked into the sex industry in Iraq—something which the government are not addressing adequately.

There are many other issues, but I would say that these three issues are the ones that you see most clearly when you look at the landscape of the devastation of women in Iraq.

Bishop of Derby: Thank you very much indeed. That is very helpful.

The Chairman: May I turn to Baroness Hodgson, but before she asks her question, I have an additional point to the Bishop's question. What do you think the Iraqi government need to do to assist in the situation?

Ms Yanar Mohammed: Thank you. That is a much needed-question. The government are not preparing the ground to assist the NGOs to protect the women who need shelter, empowerment and protection. The NGOs are not allowed at this point to open shelters for women. Although there is no specific article in the legislation that does not allow them to do so, the officials' understanding of some of the laws is preventing organisations such as mine from having women's shelters that are legally accepted by the government. So the first step is for the government to legislate to allow the private sector, and specifically the NGOs, to have women's shelters and to have them across the country in the more vulnerable places.

The second thing is for the government to provide more help in issuing identification papers for women who are fleeing violence and who have no ID papers on them. Tens of thousands of women are stateless at this point, and they cannot get IDs for themselves because the government's policy is for women to have a male relative in order to be issued with an ID card. Although there have been some regulations to issue cards for displaced women, not much has been done on the ground. This is the second issue that needs to be addressed.

The third issue is to support freedom of speech and media for women. I will give an example. We in our organisation had a radio station for women called Radio Al-Musawat, which addressed violence against women in conflict zones and under trafficking. In June 2014, the government ordered us to close the radio station under different pretexts, and they denied us the freedom of speech to defend women and to empower those who are most vulnerable.

I mentioned that the first thing is that the government need to legislate to give us a written article in legislation to give women's shelters run by NGOs legal status. The second is to address the issue of identification papers for women who are displaced and women who have been and are trafficked and who need to have government services. The third is freedom of speech, so that women's radio stations, democratic radio stations at large and media should not be closed by the government. These are the main issues.

Of course, the protection of human rights defenders is also an issue. In Baghdad last week we tried to save a woman from a compromised situation in which her tribe was keeping her against her will, and after we saved her—the law was on our side—we were surprised that the tribes came at us with their machine guns and wanted to kill us, human rights defenders. There was not much that the security personnel were prepared to protect us with, and the government need to address this not only with governmental measures but with governmental campaigns to address the patriarchal mentality of the tribes at large in Iraq. That is doable, but the government are not moving on it.

Q75 Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: Thank you. Does your organisation receive any support from international organisations or foreign governments? For example, has the UK's Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative helped you at all? Have any of these links caused extra risks to you or your organisation and, if so, how could these be mitigated? Sorry, there are three questions in one really. Let us start with whether you receive support.

Ms Yanar Mohammed: My government receive funding from the European Union and from the Dutch government, and the funding is very helpful. We would have preferred it if we did not need to disclose to the community at large that we are receiving these funds. With the Dutch government we do not have a problem, but with the European Union, under the visibility programme, we have to announce that we are receiving the funding directly from it. That does not make us look very good to some parts of our community. As for the PSVI, we have received no funding from it. It is a very welcome Initiative, but it has not been addressed to us and we have not been contacted about it. We in Iraq have almost 12 years of NGO culture where we are supported by the international community. We do not find it much of a threat for us.

As for international NGOs, the bigger ones have not been very responsive to our very difficult work of saving women from violence. But there are some sister organisations that I would like to mention, such as the one in the US called MADRE, which has supported us with very strong training on human rights according to international human rights law and helped us put our knowledge into writing and apply it for the UN agencies, such as the Human Rights Council, the UPR and other mechanisms. The bigger ones that are connected directly to the UN or UN Women were not responsive to our needs on the ground. But we would welcome the Initiative and them, and we hope that the mechanisms for their work are more closely connected to the work of women's rights defenders on the ground in the future.

The Chairman: Did you have a supplementary question?

Lord Sterling of Plaistow: I will wait.

The Chairman: I am asking Baroness Hilton to ask a question.

Q76 Baroness Hilton of Eggardon: What sort of support or security does your organisation have? Does it have any protection at all from the government or elsewhere? Presumably your workers are at risk.

Ms Yanar Mohammed: Our work on the ground has no governmental protection. On the contrary, we have been called names since we were founded and accused of encouraging promiscuity among women and tearing the fabric of families apart. These are the expressions that we hear from some officials. A few of them have become understanding and acquired an awareness of the need for sheltering women from violence, and we have a network of supporters of individuals in the security institutions who have stood at our side and are becoming the referral point for victims who need our services.

As for the policy or the general understanding of officials of the work that we do on the ground, it is not even at a basic level. Many governmental institutions need to be trained as to the importance of the protection of women and how much the NGOs can play a role on the ground; we are local, we understand women's issues and we have become experts in this matter.

We would like and welcome forums that are encouraged by the UN or the international community to deal with women in civil society as a consultative base in order to empower us in front of our own governments. There is an anti-trafficking department in the Ministry of the Interior, and another for community and policing. We are in contact with the officials who run those departments, but so far we have not got much help from them with the hundreds of women who we have helped who were suffering from violence or had been trafficked. It is still at the first stage, and most ministries and the government are not very understanding of the difficulties that we are taking upon ourselves. We need more procedures in place in order to empower us.

The Chairman: Thank you, Baroness Hilton. I come now to Lord Sterling.

Q77 Lord Sterling of Plaistow: Madam Mohammed, Salaam Alaikum. May I say that you are a very courageous lady? I happen to know that you are up against huge corruption in government and very vested interests that do not want the sort of work that you are doing being carried out.

Your organisation was established in 2003. Lady Greenstock, wife of the ambassador in 2003, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, was appointed by Bremer specifically with responsibility for the women of Iraq. It was at exactly the same time that your organisation was set up. There are two parts to my question, if it is not too indelicate. Is there a difference between the ways that the government treat Hashemite, Shia, Sunni, Kurd and so on? Is there a difference between how those various tribal backgrounds respect or treat their own women? Thank you.

Ms Yanar Mohammed: Patriarchal pressure in Iraq has been the law of the land for ever, but at the same time this period has brought sectarian conflict into the picture—a sectarian conflict in which politicised Islamist Shi'ite parties have legislated all the constitution and are

in command of the Ministry of the Interior and whichever institutions are connected with the protection of women. You would find most of the women in their own families under patriarchal pressure, but who is most subject to gender-based violence in Iraq at this point? It is the women of the minority that is oppressed: the Sunnis. If we are speaking about numbers and the political sectarian map, I would say that the Sunni women of western Iraq are subject to most of the violence. Then again, the recent lessons of history have taught us that it is the minorities who are not supported by any of the local governments who are hit the most. A stark example of that is the Yazidi women's ordeal, where the KRG—the Kurdistan Regional government—did not protect them from the ISIS fighters. The Arab government—when I say “Arab” I mean the mainland Iraqi government—did not protect them from the Sunni ISIS fighters, and they were left all alone. The women in the minorities that are not supported by the Shi'ite ruling political parties and the minorities that are not supported by the main opposition, which is ISIS, are the most threatened. I would start with the Yazidis, then go to the Turkmen Shia of the Tal Afar, where we know for sure that a population of 200,000 has been displaced and that not much is being said about how devastated those women are. The Turkmen Shia women of Tal Afar are in a major dilemma now and not much of their situation is being addressed. If you look at the map of Iraq, there is a sectarian divide. The heaviest intersectionality is where a woman is from a minority that is oppressed. When she is living in a part of Iraq where her minority is looked at in a bad way, that is when is in the most vulnerable situation.

As for the lady you mentioned who came to Iraq and was assigned to address the gender-based violence, I might be mistaken, but in a women's meeting in 2004, where I put all our concerns on the table, I was advised by the British woman in charge to go back to my tribal leader or my religious leader for more help. I was very disappointed, because neither the tribal head nor the religious clerics had offered much for the women of Iraq. We lost most of our status in Iraq because of the two most powerful cultures in Iraq: tribalism and the politicised religious groups.

Lord Sterling of Plaistow: That is very interesting. Thank you.

Q78 Baroness Young of Hornsey: Could you tell us something about how the documentation of sexual violence and abuse can be of value? Clearly there are at least two ways in which you can do that. One is to document what has happened, perhaps for the sake of history—for the archive or the record. Then there is the use to which maybe some of that information, but also other documentation that is gathered, can be put to prosecute criminals who have committed these acts. Could you say something about that and the extent to which perhaps you engage in that activity?

Ms Yanar Mohammed: Yes. It is a much needed question and issue at this point. I will give examples while I am speaking so as to make the issue more real. In the area under ISIS, women are being forced into marriages and younger women are being kidnapped in broad daylight by ISIS fighters, and not much is being done about it—not that much can be done, because this is an area under ISIS. We have outreach to these areas on a daily basis to document what is happening. In the city of Hawija recently, women were ordered to divorce their husbands who are fighting with the Iraqi army and are being forced, one after the other, into marriages with ISIS fighters. In the city of Mosul, groups of women are facing public execution on the pretext that they are prostitutes, but the reality is that their

husbands are in the Iraqi army. The cities of other parts of Iraq are being attacked by ISIS, and many of the camps are in danger.

So international groups' documentation and support for the local organisations' endeavours is needed, and its purpose for the future will be to have four goals. The first is to bring the perpetrators to justice so that they get their rightful punishment at some point by means of their names, pictures and all the proof in very well built cases. The second is to offer compensation to the victims who have been enslaved and forced into compromised situations. The third is to provide protection for women who will not be safe once the ISIS cities are liberated. Maybe everybody in the international community thinks that Iraqi cities will be regained by the Iraqi government and that everybody will live happily ever after, but that will not be the situation for women who were forcibly violated by ISIS. They will be humiliated, if not killed in honour killings. Those women need to be protected. My organisation wrote a statement saying that we want safe zones for women in the cities that are liberated from ISIS, and we want them to be supervised by the NGOs who know how to keep women in dignity and safety. So the protection of women is the third goal that is needed.

The fourth is that in future wars in other places in the world, or maybe even in Iraq, we want documented all the violations against women and how they happened, whether they were committed by ISIS fighters, by militias under the Iraqi government, or by individuals who operated with impunity because there were no laws and no measures taken against them. We want all these things documented so as to bring about a new legal culture that holds them accountable in the future so that such massacres against women will never happen again. One way to address this systemically is to have laws and measures put into the legislation in Iraq and practices put into the security institutions in Iraq. The other thing is to learn lessons for the future where wars happen under the auspices and the attention of the international community, so that women's issues are addressed.

In short, I want the protection of women, the empowerment of women, compensation sometimes for the families of women who have been killed and for the children who have lived in very difficult situations, and legislative output. There is a fifth, and it is political: never again should any war in any country make tens of millions of women in that country live in devastation like the devastation that we witnessed in Iraq.

Baroness Young of Hornsey: Thank you very much.

The Chairman: Thank you very much indeed. You have been incredibly kind, thoughtful and generous with the knowledge that you have shared with us. We are enormously grateful. I think you would like to know that earlier this year we had the opportunity to listen to three young Yazidi ladies who were victims and who managed to escape. They came to London for a few days, so we have already had some of the knowledge that you have shared with us from the other side. Thank you very much indeed for all you have told us today. We have a few more questions, and if we put them in writing we would be grateful if you could answer them. For the moment, thank you. We are most grateful to you, and highly respectful of your work and your organisation.

Ms Yanar Mohammed: Thank you very much for giving me the time.