

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2013

Women's rights, gender and ICTs



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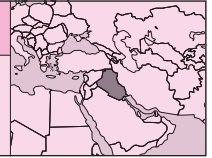
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Introduction

A decade after coalition forces invaded Iraq and toppled Saddam Hussein's rule, the country is still in turmoil. Although much of the international media's attention has shifted to conflict zones elsewhere, Iraq remains a place of extreme violence, with daily bombings, shootings and kidnappings. Over 700 people were killed in April 2013 alone, according to United Nations data, the highest monthly figure in almost five years.¹ Over the last six years, significantly more civilians died from the conflict in Iraq than in Afghanistan.²

With this as a backdrop, the issue of women's rights as they relate to information and communications technologies (ICTs) in Iraq is complicated by several other factors. Iraq as a whole suffers from a poor record of women's rights, despite ostensible improvements in recent years. Honour killings and forced marriages are not uncommon.³ Female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM) is also a significant problem. For the last several years, Iraq (along with several other notable countries) did not even appear on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report annual country ranking.⁴ Internet usage jumped dramatically between 2010 and 2012, from 1.1% of the population to an estimated 7.1%.⁵ But globally speaking this is still a low percentage, with much of this increase likely from the growth of smartphones. In fact, only 3% of households in 2012 have regular internet access.⁶ The daily electrical blackouts, even in the prosperous and more peaceful Kurdish north, make online access frustrating.

Iraq has two administrative zones, the semi-autonomous Kurdish north with its own regional

government, and the rest of the country ruled from Baghdad. Kurdistan was one of the results of the first Gulf War, when the UN declared a no-fly zone across the north, protecting the Kurds from Saddam. Since then, Kurdistan has developed separately from the rest of Iraq, establishing its own armed forces as well as judicial and political systems. Today, Kurdistan is using its energy wealth to develop economically.

Founded by Germans and staffed by Iraqis, the NGO Wadi has been working in Kurdistan since 1992, helping to build schools, provide access to electricity and clean water, as well as improve women's health. Wadi also has a radio station with programmes for and created by women and youth. Initially Wadi was not involved with the issue of FGM, but during a meeting in 2004 with female villagers, several of them mentioned medical problems associated with FGM. Wadi followed this up with a pilot study revealing that 907 out of 1,544 women across villages were victims of FGM.⁷ Since 2004, Wadi has taken a leading role in the fight against FGM, focusing initially on Iraqi Kurdistan and subsequently across many countries in the Middle East. This report looks at how an NGO incorporated the use of ICTs to put a global spotlight on a problem, which in turn led to new local laws and attitudes.

Using ICTs to expose female genital mutilation

The origins of FGM and its introduction into the region are lost in the annals of time. The UN considers FGM a human rights violation. FGM pre-dates Islam and is not mentioned in the Koran, although Iraqis who practise it claim it is an obligation for Muslim women. FGM, as performed in Iraq, is the cutting and removal of the clitoris, in the belief that it preserves the "honour" of females. Women who are uncut are considered unclean and cannot serve food or drinks. This surgery is done in a non-clinical setting with only a knife and a handful of ash to seal the wound. The procedure is so dangerous that some victims die from the pain or from infections. Those who survive suffer from psychological, physical and sexual traumas.

1 www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/05/201351951234492490.html

2 musingsoniraq.blogspot.co.uk/2013/02/iraq-still-far-deadlier-place-than.html

3 travel.state.gov/travel/tips/safety/safety_5485.html

4 www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2012.pdf

5 www.internetworldstats.com/me/iq.htm

6 www.nytimes.com/2012/04/16/technology/iraq-emerges-from-isolation-as-telecommunications-hub.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

7 stopfgmmiddleeast.wordpress.com/background/how-it-all-started

Until about a decade ago, activists and experts in the West considered FGM mostly an African problem. When Wadi began its investigations into FGM in Kurdistan and beyond, its findings were groundbreaking, revealing this violation as a widespread problem.

Following the pilot study mentioned above, some in Iraq denied or minimised the existence of FGM.⁸ Activists shot a short video in 2004 documenting FGM as a common practice and placed excerpts from it online.⁹ Wadi subsequently conducted a more comprehensive survey within three major regions of Iraqi Kurdistan in 2010, which indicated that over 72% of females were FGM victims.¹⁰ These studies were led by female activists, because the victims were unlikely to openly discuss such matters with men. The female activists also met with local leaders and politicians to lobby their cause. Wadi published its findings on the internet and issued press releases to encourage local and international press to cover the problem. Realising that access to the internet is not ubiquitous within Iraq, Wadi targeted the global media with its data, in effect shaming the regional politicians into action. With the overwhelming video and statistical evidence, Kurdish politicians and leaders could no longer ignore the issue.

In August of 2011, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) enacted local laws criminalising the practice of FGM. However, Wadi subsequently conducted an even more provoking study revealing that FGM is not just a Kurdish practice but can be found among Arab and Turkmen populations within Iraq. At great risk to their personal safety, Wadi activists along with others from Pana, another local women's rights NGO, went to Kirkuk to survey 1,212 women there. Despite the end of the war, Kirkuk remains one of the most violent Iraqi cities, with its mixed population of Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen and others. Located outside the KRG's control, Kirkuk represents a smaller version of the entire nation. Kirkuk was previously thought to be a region free from FGM. To their surprise the activists found that over 25% of Arab women and over 12% of Turkmen women interviewed were victims of FGM.¹¹ Meanwhile, 65.4% of Kurdish females interviewed in the Kirkuk region were also victims. Because FGM is a taboo topic, activists speculate that the self-reported numbers, particularly among Arabs, are not accurate, and that the true figures could be even higher.¹² The existence of FGM among non-Kurds within Iraq suggests that anti-FGM laws should be national rather than regional. Again

the activists turned to the internet for global attention, hoping for international pressure on the central government in Baghdad to look into this issue.

But many Iraqi politicians continue to deny that FGM is a national issue and the activists have yet to convince the central government to enact anti-FGM laws.¹³ Activists have turned to forming international alliances and partnerships to make this struggle a wider one. In January 2012, Wadi co-created the first conference on FGM in the Middle East, with participants from the region discussing evidence of FGM in such countries as Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Using ICT tools, activists first connected the disparate experts from within the region (and even one from outside, specifically Indonesia), convinced them to come to Beirut, and then continued their dialogue after the meeting. Following this conference, Wadi was invited to speak at the US State Department in Washington D.C. regarding FGM as a global issue, and this discussion too was propagated as an online video.¹⁴ It is key for the activists to continue to get international press coverage, and only ICTs would make this possible.

Meanwhile, the struggle against FGM in Iraq continues. Despite the 2011 law banning FGM within the Kurdish region, Human Rights Watch reported in August 2012 that the practice continues and the law is widely ignored.¹⁵ Indeed, the government avoided publicising the existence of this law to avoid upsetting powerful mullahs.¹⁶ Opposition to the law also continues among midwives who perform the cutting and mothers who submit their daughters to the procedure. (In Kurdistan, fathers are often ignorant or left out of these decisions.) Clerics who support mutilation have even taken to the airwaves to fight against the law. Appearing on television, one prominent mullah claimed that the anti-FGM law is part of a Zionist plot to influence Kurdistan.¹⁷

Wadi responded to the opposition by creating a media campaign publicising the anti-FGM law using print, online tools and a key series of public information films. These public service announcements for television and online media reminded audiences of the law against female genital cutting, citing the punishments imposed for violations.¹⁸

The many successes of Wadi depended on the NGO training and enabling female activists to use

8 www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2gqoPxQXjc

9 www.stopfgmkurdistan.org/html/english/resources.htm

10 www.stopfgmkurdistan.org/html/english/fgm_e.htm#mape

11 www.stopfgmkurdistan.org/media/Study_FGM_Kirkuk-en-1.pdf

12 www.stopfgmkurdistan.org/media/Study_FGM_Kirkuk-en-1.pdf

13 www.hivos.nl/Actueel/Nieuws/FGM-not-merely-an-African-problem-high-rates-in-the-Middle-East

14 www.stopfgmkurdistan.org/html/english/updates/update013e.htm

15 www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/29/iraqi-kurdistan-law-banning-fgm-not-being-enforced

16 www.eyeseonline.com/2011/11/iraqi-kurdistan-free-yourself-from-fgm-%E2%80%93-a-new-approach

17 www.youtube.com/watch?v=8p816HKU6xs

18 www.stopfgmkurdistan.org/html/english/updates/update015e.htm

multimedia presentations in their visits to women in the villages to discuss health issues, tap radio or television broadcasts to promote their cause, access the internet to communicate with key influencers within Iraq and abroad, as well as use ICT tools to gather and analyse statistical evidence. While these activists are using ICTs to engage in participatory democracy and citizenship, we do realise that these women represent an educated minority in this public sphere. In a country where ICTs and indeed even electricity are not consistently available to all, an NGO is fortunate to have dedicated activists and volunteers who can be trained with the right ICT tools to reach out to their communities. These core members facilitate an NGO building a women's movement. As the world's media continue to take notice of their tireless work, the issue of FGM within Kurdistan and surrounding regions has attracted the attention of filmmakers and international broadcasters. A feature-length documentary film that would expose the problem to a global audience is currently in production. An international spotlight on this issue can ultimately only help the cause.

In defying opponents of the new law, Wadi can also report on its major recent success in convincing seven Kurdish villages to abandon the practice of FGM. Collectively, the women and the leaders in these villages pledged to end FGM. Since the beginning of this programme, there has been no evidence of the villages failing to keep their promise. Wadi aims to spread this approach to other areas of the country. Mobile teams of female activists approach remote villages where, besides the multimedia presentations mentioned above, they screen a short film about FGM using a portable projector and laptop. They hold discussions with women and village elders. The decision to end the practice is never coerced but rather encouraged through education. The activists also help with small development projects such as installing a small electrical generator or a portable classroom for the village. They also teach the women sewing, computer and literacy skills as well as provide first aid training, since many of these villages are far from medical centres.¹⁹ It is with this kind of multi-pronged commitment that the locals grow to trust the Wadi activists and their push to end FGM.

Conclusions

There are several conclusions to make regarding Wadi's experience using ICTs in their fight against FGM. Wadi's struggle to end FGM in Iraq has been

a long and as yet incomplete journey. Wadi realises that success comes in incremental steps. First, they disproved sceptics within Iraq and abroad to show that FGM is a problem. With video and statistical evidence, they got the attention of the world's media as well as Kurdish politicians. Second, Wadi also realises that local laws are not enough, as the issue is a national problem. Through their surveys and documentation, they proved FGM exists outside Kurdish communities within Iraq. Efforts to lobby the central government to enact national laws are a crucial development. Third, Wadi needs to continuously train a strong team of activists in using ICTs to conduct educational outreach to women throughout their region. Fourth, for the women and the villages to trust the activists, Wadi must work on a long-term basis with them through education, development and assistance. Fifth, the involvement of international partners should not be understated. Receiving global support for their work would lead the central government in Baghdad as well as politicians in Kurdistan to pay particular attention to the dangers of FGM.

Action steps

NGOs seeking to use ICTs to further the cause of women's rights should consider implementing the following steps:

- Recruit and train activists to use not just online but also other varieties of ICTs. Realising that the internet is not always available to all, activists found that knowing how to present a radio programme, edit a video or use multimedia presentations in remote villages are examples of the many ICT skills that work with or without internet access.
- Use ICT tools in all aspects of work, from communication and implementation to research and management.
- Lobby governments to enact laws protecting women but realise that the passing of new laws is not enough. Activists must also lobby to have governments implement the laws as well as encourage the public to change their attitudes. In all these efforts, ICTs can be very helpful.
- Whenever necessary and possible, add international components to the project by tapping the internet. Whether these components are international funding, publicity, lobbying or training, external help can elevate the importance of some projects. Sometimes international press coverage and outrage can shame politicians into action. ■

¹⁹ www.stopfgmkurdistan.org/html/english/updates/update017e.htm