

European Parliament Project: The Increase in Kurdish Women Committing Suicide

Thank you for having me here today to present our work on the subject of the reported increase of suicide among the Kurdish women of Iraq and Turkey. As you will be aware, most of the information on conflict-related suicides and attempted suicides collected by the KHRP researchers was provided anecdotally. The stigma attached to suicide meant that gaining information directly from survivors of suicide attempts, coupled with the dearth of accurate Government official statistics regarding suicide in either Turkey or Iraq, was extremely difficult.

Nonetheless, we found common themes in both regions, and in deed common reasons for female suicide across the globe. Today, I will not discuss the comparative part of our report which looked at Afghanistan, but it is worth noting that violence against women and their collective treatment as second class citizens is one of the most-oft cited reasons for suicide, and particularly self-immolation.

Rather than start with the data collected, I will take the opportunity to start with our findings and recommendations, and then work backwards to support them. (Please do feel free to ask anything along the way if I am unclear).

Findings

NGOs working in the Kurdish regions of Turkey reported consistently that the issues of suicide and attempted suicide among Kurdish women is one of the most impenetrable areas of health and life. This is due to:

- a. The lack of accurate and reliable statistical data which is hampered by the pervading political, social and economic situation in the region; more specifically the lack of recognition that the ongoing conflict has on the advancement of women in society; lack of technical expertise and the unwillingness of families, clans, neighbours and the larger Kurdish community to report or discuss the issue of suicide;
- b. Therefore, the causes of suicide include:
 - The aforementioned lack of recognition of the impact of conflict and collective trauma on the family structure and specifically on Kurdish women;
 - Lack of enforcement of rule of law in the Kurdish regions, as it relates to interpersonal and family structures;
 - the patriarchal society and family pressures;

- forced marriage, honour killings and polygamy;
- mental and psychological problems;
- domestic violence;
- lack of education and language barriers;
- economic problems, unemployment and generational conflict: tradition versus modernism;
- forced prostitution;
- ongoing state and armed group violence;

With regard to Iraq specifically:

- vacuum of rule of law in day-to-day governance compounded by the ongoing insecurity surrounding Kurdistan, Iraq;
 - the absence of a common enemy has made way for clan leaders to provide social structure based on archaic interpretations of tribal concepts of 'honour', independent of the Regional leadership, judiciary or political parties;
 - spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Kurdistan, Iraq;
 - lack of clarity and understanding in civil society, law enforcement and the judiciary of the laws governing Iraq and specifically Kurdistan, Iraq
 - loss of hope and sense that life will never improve
 - shame or a feeling of 'dishonour'.
- c. The impact of the European Union Accession Process has succeeded in promoting a number of significant legal changes in Turkey. Despite this, many women's lives continue to be shaped by customary religious and tribal practices;
- d. The role of political parties, as the lack of adequate representation of Kurdish women in political life in Turkey, although not cited as a direct possible cause of suicide or attempted suicide, is essential in order to ensure a gender balance;
- e. The role of civil society and women's NGOs – NGOs, because they already have gained the trust of their local constituencies and because of their vast experience as the sole supporters of women could provide the most accurate statistics and possess the requisite knowledge, experience and sensitivity but at present, many are struggling to provide services without the necessary State support.
- f. The international community, governments and NGOs alike, have thus far failed Kurdish women under the guise of both cultural sensitivity, and as is too often the case in conflict areas, in the name of 'political sensitivity'.

Recommendations

The KHRP made numerous recommendations to the European Parliament, with a view to bringing these to the attention of European Governments, currently involved in providing assistance to Iraq and to engage with the Government of Turkey regarding the need to take action.

These are:

- Formally recognize the role the ongoing conflicts play in increasing violence against women and the difficulties they face;
- Exert pressure through the many tools available to the governments of Iraq and Turkey, including the Kurdistan Regional Government, to implement legislation consistently and appropriately across the Kurdish regions in order to not just protect women from violence, but to also promote women's rights as an integral part of human rights;
- Support international NGOs working with local partners to raise the profile of women and women's rights education in Kurdish communities;
- Provide financial support to NGOs and make violence against women a priority area
- promote research to ensure the gathering of independent and reliable data on suicide and violence against women
- facilitate the nationwide dissemination of the data and resulting conclusions
- providing technical assistance to the relevant ministries (Turkish and Kurdistan Regional Governments)
- establishing professional training programmes for police, prosecution, lawyers, judges and academic training programmes for social workers
- monitoring the implementation of projects

KHRP as a vehicle of support

At KHRP we carry out work to redress the imbalance of power and under-representation/participation of women in society and have helped those most vulnerable to abuse to access their civil and political rights. The following are examples of the work carried out by KHRP and what could be a way forward across the Regions.

Firstly, we developed with several local and international organisations, 'The Charter for the Rights and Freedoms of Women in the Kurdish Regions and the Diaspora' and launched it in Kurdistan, Iraq in early 2005.

KHRP has also held trainings in Diyarbakır on the 5 main international legal tools to be employed to implement legal obligations relating to women's rights, for which we produced/ distributed "*NGO Reports to CEDAW: A Procedural Guide*" in

Turkish. We built on this in our subsequent Kurdish Women's workshop, introducing the 'UN Millennium Development Goals' (MDGs) to Kurdish women's rights organisations working across South-eastern Turkey; the 30 attendees decided to co-submit a report to the UN on how such groups should play a more active role in reaching the MDGs.

In 2006 in response to requests for assistance with technical skills from women in Van, Turkey, about and how to better access their rights under international law, and the growing rates of poverty to which the mostly ethnic and cultural minority women there are vulnerable, we held 2 trainings specifically advocating women's rights using UN mechanisms. The first was called '*Women, Conflict and Poverty*' training on CEDAW in association with a local NGO, the overwhelming need for which was demonstrated by the 50 HRDs and CSO representatives attending. The second training was held in conjunction with two local NGOs to introduce the attendees to UN mechanisms other than CEDAW.

In early 2007, KHRP hosted a 'Women's roundtable on human rights, honour killings & suicide' in Iraq with 12 leading CSOs in Suleymania, Kurdistan, about the importance of including both women & men in advancing women's access to their human rights.

Furthermore, as part of KHRP's developing women's curriculum and efforts to develop working relationships with existing partner organisations/ affiliates, KHRP is currently organising a cross-regional seminar with the Kurdish Women's Project and the University of Kurdistan-Hawler on how women's rights go beyond 'stopping violence against women'. It will target delegates from Iraq, Syria, Iran and Turkey with an emphasis on tribal leaders.

Now, I will go through some of the key pieces of our research that lead us to the above conclusions and recommendations. Although we have been working in these regions for 15 years, we were still struck by the absence of any cohesive strategy in either Kurdistan, Iraq or in Turkey to combat violence against women and to include men in the struggle for women's rights.

First, I must note that to consider honour killings as a problem affecting *solely* the Kurdish population, constitutes a slur upon Kurdish culture and values. Given that male violence to women, honour killings and female suicides are endemic throughout Turkey and the wider Middle East, it is harmful to single out the Kurdish population as continuing to accommodate such practices. The province of Batman has experienced the highest number of disappearances in custody, extra-judicial killings, rape of women in custody and harassment from the police and Government officials in Turkey. Any emphasis upon high female suicide rates in this area by the media, or by the State, could be construed as a public relations

stunt of the office of the Governor to distract attention from other compelling social, economic and legal problems affecting the area.

I. CHAPTER ONE: The Kurdish Regions of Turkey and Increased Rates of Female Suicide

Women in the Kurdish Regions of Turkey: A Historical Overview

- **The impact of the conflict: Internally Displaced Persons and gender marginalisation**

As many will be aware, between 1984 and 1999, violent conflict between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Turkish military reigned in the southeast. Over 3,000 Kurdish towns and villages were destroyed by state security forces. An estimated three to four million were displaced from rural Kurdish villages and forced to flee to nearby cities where they had to live in dire conditions and where the men struggled to earn a living.

The hardship suffered by these Internally Displaced families disproportionately affects women and girls who, facing significant social, political, cultural and economic barriers, struggle to ameliorate their situation and frequently bear the brunt of male humiliation.

Paradoxically, although the first unilateral ceasefire was declared by the PKK in 1999 and therefore the violence decreased (though it did not disappear). This ceasefire is believed by some to have caused an increase in suicides and suicide attempts. They assert that women affected by the conflict lost hope as they realised that, post-cease fire, in their day to day lives, they would see little change.

A lawyer from the Human Rights Association 'İHD' in Batman, summarised the position of IDPs and women: "most of us are not psychologically normal in this region, none of us are really mentally healthy, living under extraordinary conditions where cease-fires are continually broken. The pressures on all of us are unbearable for men as well, but our women and girls suffer in specific ways and we need to hear their voices and respond to their cries for help".

Her point illustrated the fact that since the first ceasefire was called by the PKK, the conflict has continued. In 2006 alone there were a reported 210 deaths as a direct result. While there are no official and accurate figures on the number of people killed during the conflict, millions of Kurdish girls are without fathers, whilst women who have become widows and lost sons have lost their traditional supporters in later life within the patriarchal social systems they live. Further the rate of homicide and death through violence, as well as problems such as post traumatic stress have increased the tension in families as issues concerning

bereavement, grief, the traumas of having witnessed brutal killings and torture are rarely addressed. Further, gender issues are sidelined as state violence towards Kurds, which is often only seen as state violence toward Kurdish men, is considered to be of far greater seriousness than Kurd on Kurd violence in the domestic sphere.

One of the limited steps taken by the Government to address problems faced by those internally displaced, but not specific to internally displaced women, is the Return to the Villages and Rehabilitation Project which intends to secure the economic infrastructure for return and the Law on Compensation for Damage Arising from Terror. However, it is generally felt that these measures are not sufficient to solve the problem and have proved ineffective in granting the redress necessary to improve the severe situation of IDPs.

There has been a mixed reaction as to whether or not proper implementation of the Return to the Village Project and adequate compensation would reduce the number of suicides and attempted suicides among women in Kurdish regions. Many believe that the problems concerning suicide would decrease if women were allowed to return to their villages whilst others believe that it would not reduce the suicide rates as the lifestyles of many women have now changed irrevocably.

The European Union accession process, the limited implementation of Turkey's international obligations and domestic legal reforms

With the EU accession process, the actions and advocacy of the women's movement have succeeded in promoting a number of significant legal changes in Turkey. These efforts have been reinforced by the rise of a global women's movement, greater attention to gender equality and women's human rights at the global level, through United Nations conference and treaties.

Despite these legal reforms, many women's lives in Turkey continue to be shaped by customary and religious practices such as early and forced marriages, polygamy and honour crimes. Although the Turkish Civil Code banned polygamy and granted women equal rights in matters of divorce, child custody and inheritance in 1926, some 80 years later 'customary and religious practices continue to be more influential in the daily lives of the majority of women living in Turkey than the civil code; this is especially the case for women living in Eastern Turkey'. Rural and internally displaced women who often lack formal education are often considered as 3rd or 4th class citizens by the state, and as such are often forgotten or blatantly ignored by law enforcement. They are classed as terrorists or terrorist sympathisers, or simply 'sub-human' and therefore lacking entitlement to their right to live free from intimidation or violence. Gender inequality, violence against

women and lack of education are endemic problems that result in collective lack of confidence and depression.

Women's position in Kurdish Society

The 'majority of women are not allowed the space to be an individual whether in the legal, social, economic or cultural domains. Rather, they are constantly faced with norms and practices forcing them to resign their right to be an individual and instead live as secondary citizens in the service of their families as a 'girl-child', 'wife' or 'mother'. In this context, family/ social pressures on women constitute one of the main causes of suicide and attempted suicide.

Root causes of suicide

i) State violence

Kurdish women in Turkey, many of whom are IDPs, are particularly vulnerable to state violence. Many Kurdish women have themselves been torture victims as well as having been forced to witness the torture or killing of their relatives. They have also been victims of rape, sexual, emotional and psychological torture at the hands of the police, security forces and village guards. The honour of the family and the subordinate position of women often means that these victims are forced to suffer in silence. These problems, coupled with the minimal provision of health and lack of long-term assistance, are capable of generating extreme and desperate actions.

ii) Violence in the family

Domestic violence coupled with the lack of possibility for escape from it, is one of the main causes of attempted suicide and suicides among women in Kurdish communities in Turkey. Domestic violence in Turkey 'affects up to half of all Turkish women' and 'remains rooted in traditional patriarchal conceptions of femininity and the proper role of women. It is a pronounced problem in the Kurdish regions. Perpetrators are rarely investigated or charged and women are rarely protected neither by their family/ social network nor by the police against aggressive husbands or other male relatives'.

An NGO based in Hakkari believes that the issue of domestic violence has become more visible within society in the past 3-4 years. The most affected group are IDP women and almost half the population of Hakkari consists of IDPs.

▪ What has been done

The Governor of Van has recently started developing a provisional action plan to deal with violence to women and children, this includes the opening of a women's shelter in Van in the near future. The municipalities are obliged by law to establish

shelters, but they are under great financial pressure concerning the distribution of available funds.

Currently in Van, there is only one shelter within the municipality, which can accommodate seventeen women for a maximum period of two months. This shelter was established by the UNHCR and is funded by the United States Embassy in Ankara.

Shelters can only accommodate women for a maximum of 3-6 months and at present cannot accommodate girls under the age of 18, nor the children of the victim of violence.

Furthermore, and more to the point, shelters do not and cannot provide an end to violence against women or protection of their rights. They are but a step in the process of redress. Nevertheless, to date, Turkey has failed to respond adequately to calls from women's groups for the erection of more shelters for women fleeing abuse. In July 2006, there were only 8 state shelters to cater for Turkey's population of 70 million. In addition, police who deal with the reporting, investigation and treatment of domestic violence have not been adequately trained to address the situation sensitively and appropriately.

iii) Honour crimes

Honour killings occur when a woman is murdered for supposed sexual, marital or cultural offences, with the justification that the offence has violated the honour of the family. 'Honour' in Turkey has been described as 'a woman, a woman's body, sexuality, and the control over women'. Moreover 'within this framework, a man's wife is his legal honour'. This is true for his sister and his mother too, in fact all women in his family, and in his close circle. The male is then in the position of looking out for all of these women.

▪ No reliable State data

Women's advocacy groups in Turkey report dozens of honour killings every year, mainly in conservative Kurdish families in the southeast or among migrants from the southeast living in large cities.

A 'Custom Killings Report' prepared by the Turkish Parliamentary Investigatory Commission in November 2006, reported that between 2000 and 2005, 1091 murders were carried out in the name of custom or honour, although data collecting methods were considered to be unreliable and therefore actual numbers may be higher. The data clearly indicates that honour killings are not a problem only affecting the Kurdish regions of Turkey.

It has been reported in recent media that, every few weeks in a Kurdish area of southeast Anatolia, a young woman tries to take her life. Although Turkey has tightened the punishments for 'honour crimes', the report claimed rather than preventing deaths, different means are used to end lives. Parents are trying to spare their sons from the harsh punishments associated with killing their sisters by pressing the daughters to take their own lives instead, 'Others have been stoned to death, strangled, shot or buried alive. Their offences ranged from stealing a glance at a boy to wearing a short skirt, wanting to go to the movies, being raped by a stranger or relative, or having consensual sex. Local women's groups claimed evidence suggested that a growing number of 'dishonoured' girls were being locked in a room for days with rat poison, a pistol or a rope, and told by their families that 'the only thing resting between their disgrace and redemption was death'.

Professor Ertürk, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women has recommended that more should be done to discover the true cause of death. She noted that medical autopsies undertaken by a specialised forensic institute should be standard procedure, as this was not always the case. Furthermore, she did not find that psychological autopsies, whereby the victim's mental state at the time of death is determined, were being performed following apparent suicides.

iv) Forced marriage

Forced marriages, the continuing practice of *'berdel'* (the exchange of brides between two families), *'beşik kertmesi'* (marriage arranged from infancy), honour killings, polygamy and a prohibition of choice in marriage have been cited frequently as root causes of suicide in a society where divorce is not an option, given the resulting shame it brings to the family unit.

In an NGO report published in January 2003, 16.3% of women living in the Eastern and South Eastern regions of Turkey were married under the age of 15, the minimum legal age for marriage under the old Civil Code. One out of ten women was living in a polygamous marriage even though these have been illegal since 1926. At least half of the women were married without consent, despite the consent of both the woman and man being a precondition for marriage according to Turkish law.

v) Access to the political process

Although the lack of adequate representation of Kurdish women in political life has not been cited directly as a possible cause of suicide or attempted suicide, it is clear that fair representation of women in political life is essential in order to ensure a gender balance and the raising of issues concerning the status of women at all levels of decision-making. However, as is clearly illustrated in Iraq, the presence of women in Parliament does not guarantee advocacy for women's rights.

More importantly, it is critical to note that women Kurds, as with their male counterparts are not only underrepresented in government, but they are also more often absent from the political processes. This is due to education, but also because of the ongoing branding of Kurds in Turkey as either 'backwards, illiterate villagers' or terrorists, or at the very least, non-patriots who do not deserve the benefits of citizenship. Kurdish women's lack of representation either at the polls or in parliament is directly linked to their lack of progress in family/ professional life, which has been cited as one of the main reasons for attempting suicide.

vi) Access to healthcare

Psychological problems suffered by women in the Kurdish communities in Turkey and the inadequacy of health care, social care and mental health services have been cited by numerous NGOs as root causes of suicide and attempted suicide.

▪ Barriers affecting access to healthcare

There are both political and administrative obstacles which prevent the poor from receiving free health care (the 'green card' system). Applicants who are members or have family members in the DTP are often not given a green card; whereas if an individual has good relations with the ruling party, access to a green card is usually facilitated. Further, applicants must obtain documents certifying the requisite level of poverty from seven different institutions before qualifying for a green card, which must be renewed annually.

Kurdish individuals encounter further problems once access to medical care has been secured, as most hospital employees speak Turkish, not Kurdish. Further, since Kurdish has been forbidden as a language in Turkey, many recent medical concepts have not been grasped by Kurdish speakers. As such, patients may be unable to describe their symptoms.

▪ Limited access to mental healthcare

There is limited availability of psychological and psychiatric counselling. In some areas such as Hakkari, there are no psychiatrists, psychologists or sociologists because trained professionals will not relocate to the distant southeast. The training of individuals from the south-east to provide counselling and family counselling, in particular to women, is urgently required.

In Batman, a counselling centre was established in 2005. According to Government statistics, Batman has the highest suicide rates, although researchers have not been able to confirm the accuracy of this information. Yet, according to the Woman's Consultancy Centre (SELİS), there are only three psychologists, four psychiatrists and two social workers in the province.

There is therefore an urgent need for the training of more social workers in order to be able to provide outreach services to women in remote areas and for more social workers and psychologists who speak Kurdish.

The training and deployment of more social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists, and the provision of more shelters for women fleeing domestic violence, while essential, will take many years to realise. Furthermore, in the climate of conflict, danger and poverty, it is questionable as to how effective these initiatives may be, since the crucial issues of stated and armed group violence, culture, patriarchy, feudalism and language likely represent insurmountable obstacles.

vii) Access to education

The lack of education among Kurdish women has been cited by a number of interviewees as one of the main causes of suicide and attempted suicide. Restricting women's right to education denies them the access to information about their rights, especially their right to choose how they live, their right to be free from violence and their access to justice. Yet more than 640,000 girls in Turkey are not receiving compulsory education, although women have the right to equal education in law. This problem places disadvantaged Kurdish females, in particular, at greater risk of attempting or committing suicide due to the following factors:

▪ Illiteracy

While an average 6.1 per cent of men and 19.4 per cent of women in Turkey were reported illiterate in a 2000 population census, the corresponding rates for the southeast were 12 and 35 per cent respectively.

Illiteracy and lack of competence in the Turkish language not only prevent women and girls from learning about their legal rights, but it also means that for many there is no hope of a life alternative to forced marriage, motherhood and grinding poverty.

▪ School enrolment

Girls from the Kurdish regions of Turkey are less likely to be enrolled in schools compared to the rest of Turkey.

- In some provinces of the southeast, 62 per cent of girls were reportedly enrolling in primary education and 50 per cent in secondary school in 2004.
- In east and south-east Turkey, and a district of İstanbul that is largely populated by migrants from those regions 62.2 percent of the sample had never been to school or had not been permitted to complete primary education. Only 9.8 per cent had completed middle school.

- In south-east Anatolia the ratio of female to male enrolment in primary and secondary schools to be significantly lower than the ratio for Turkey as a whole: the percentage of women who had attended primary and secondary school in the region was 75.2 per cent, and for men 96.9 per cent, compared to 92.3 per cent and 98.4 per cent respectively for Turkey as a whole.

There are a variety of reasons for this reduced enrolment rate:

- It is a common attitude in traditional Kurdish families that girls are not worth educating as their destiny is simply marriage and motherhood.
- In south-east Turkey, extreme poverty caused by forced migration, loss of assets and unemployment makes families dependent on child labour.
- Kurdish families are often fiercely protective of the 'honour' of females and may view schooling in Government institutions as a means of forcing them to assimilate with mainstream society and abandon their customs.
- In addition to opportunity costs, the practical expense of sending children to school is often too high for families to afford.

According to NGOs in Van, September is 'the crisis month for suicides, as it is the time when the school year begins and family rows erupt into violence as decisions are made as to which child or children must be removed from school, in order to work.

In response to this low level of school enrolment, in 2003, the Ministry of National Education and UNICEF launched projects focusing predominantly on the south-eastern region and entitled, '*Haydi Kızlar Okula* ('Let's go to school, girls!') and 'Daddy, please send me to school'. According to the latest report of the UN Special Rapporteur, UNICEF has stated that the 'Let's go to school, girls!' campaign resulted in the 'enrolment of some 177,000 girls and 87,000 boys'. This was however, 'considerably less than the target set' and only '5 out of 33 participating provinces recorded a positive and statistically significant change in the gender gap in education'.

- **Linguistic discrimination**

Language has been cited as a barrier to Kurdish girls accessing education. While private language schools can teach Kurdish, the only language of instruction in mainstream schools is Turkish. There are no provisions for teaching Turkish as a second language to Kurdish children starting school.

Women's NGOs and the lack of state support

At present, NGOs provide the best source of statistics on the issue of suicide and attempted suicide, and they also possess the requisite knowledge, experience and sensitivity to be able to deal with vulnerable women in providing shelters,

counselling and other health and social services to thousands living desperate lives.

However, at present, many women's NGOs are struggling to provide services without the necessary state support. Women's NGOs all have experience of harassment by the police in response to peaceful protests against male violence, honour killings, and the non-implementation of domestic and international laws. There is brutal repression from state authorities, who tend to view Kurdish NGOs as agents for terrorism and Kurdish separatism.

Nevertheless, there have been numerous formal announcements from the Government referring to possible future liaisons with NGOs concerning women's issues. However to KHRP researcher's knowledge, no such meetings have taken place.

Women and economic problems

The majority of the women who attempt or commit suicide are IDPs or women who have economic problems. The acute underdevelopment of the south-east and the resulting mass unemployment are often cited as potential causes of suicide.

- **Lack of inequality in employment**

Although there is no data for Kurdish women specifically, in Turkey generally women's salaries are between 20 and 50 per cent of those of men, while men own 92 per cent of all property and approximately 84 per cent of gross domestic production. This low level of female participation in urban labour markets is due to women's responsibility for unpaid domestic work in addition to cultural and customary restrictions on women's freedom of movement outside the home.

Statistics and Examples of Suicide

Despite the absence of concrete and reliable Government statistics concerning suicide rates in the Kurdish regions, a small number of women's NGOs and regional human rights organisations possess a limited amount of data. However, the ability of these NGOs to provide reliable statistical information is severely hampered by the pervading political, social and economic situation in the region and the unwillingness of families, clans, neighbours and the larger Kurdish community to report or discuss the issue of suicide. In the current climate, it is impossible for many of these organisations to accurately assess the number of female suicides and attempted suicides and whether or not there had been an increase in recent years.

- **Van**

According to the information collected by the women's NGO VAKAD between 2000 and 2005, 93 women committed or attempted suicide in the 'Van Central' area. The information records that there were 15 suicides in 2000 and 27 suicides in 2001. After 2001, the number of female suicides recorded by VAKAD decreases until 2006, with 17 female suicides in 2002, 12 suicides in 2003, 11 suicides in 2004 and 11 suicides in 2005. In 2006, there were 21 female suicides.

The statistics provided by VAKAD relating to 2006 record that there were 21 suicides, 40 attempted suicides and 8 recorded cases of poisoning. The most common methods of committing suicide and attempting suicide were 'taking pills' and 'hanging'. The geographical breakdown of the location of the suicides and attempted suicides provided by VAKAD for 2006 has not been provided for 2000-2005.

- **Diyarbakır** According to a study carried out in 1998, the overall suicide rate in the centre of Diyarbakır was 4.5 suicides per 100,000 people and that the rate of women committing suicide was nearly double the rate of men. More recent data compiled in 2006 by İDH saw 111 suicides and 69 attempted suicides.

- **Batman**

Batman was become widely known in the international press as the 'City of Suicides'. One NGO in İstanbul suggested that the peak of women's suicides in the province of Batman occurred between 1999-2000, after the ceasefire in the region and the dismantling of Hezbollah. However, this NGO rejected the notion that there had been an increase in the rate of female suicides among Kurdish women in recent years.

SELİS informed KHRP researchers that in 20 days in 2007, 5 women had committed suicide in the province of Batman. Fifty per cent of the female applicants to the SELİS counselling service in Batman have considered suicide or attempted suicide. The most common age group is women aged between 15 and 25. In 2006, there were 9 female suicides in the province, all of whom were aged between 14 and 25. In the last 5 years, 402 men and women have attempted suicide in the province, 281 of whom were women.

However, due to the lack of reliable and up-to-date statistics, it is difficult to confirm whether or not there has been any actual increase in female suicides or attempted suicides in the province of Batman.

- **Hakkari**

Hakkari is a particularly tense area, especially since the occupation of Iraq. The police and military presence is very strong, with check-points outside the town

and obvious police surveillance. NGOs indicated that the same problems exist in Hakkari as in Batman and Van, but that women's issues concerning domestic violence tend to be more hidden, as the state's concern over security in the public was more visible.

Conclusion

Due to the dearth of reliable and independent statistical data, it is difficult to provide a conclusive answer as to whether or not there has been an increase in female suicides and attempted suicides in the Kurdish regions in Turkey. However, it is clear that Kurdish women and girls in Turkey experience multiple disadvantages, over and above those experienced by women in Turkey generally. These additional disadvantages are specific to their position within a patriarchal society that is subject to mistrust by the state. In such circumstances, women and girls in the forcibly displaced IDP community are especially prone to depression and desperation leading to suicidal tendencies, and actual and attempted suicide.

II. Chapter Two: Kurdistan, Iraq and Increased Rates Of Female Suicide

Women's position in Kurdish Society

Kurdish society, in spite of considerable progress toward modernisation, continues to hold onto the traditional, patriarchal relations of domination where women's rights are regulated by a complex web of cultures, religion, and nationalist practices

Root Causes

i) Violence in the family

Domestic violence in all its forms occurs throughout Kurdistan, Iraq, as in all other countries and regions, but there is a lack of information on prevalence. Such abuse customarily is addressed within the tightly knit family structure.

In an effort to combat this violence, local NGOs with the support of the Regional government in Kurdistan have started shelters in Sulemanya and Erbil, however they have been rife with problems. Only one remains, now run by local government. According to all of the NGOs interviewed, lack of funding, training and qualified staff and the inability to keep the location secret from clans has caused them to question the rationale for such structures. Further, they complained that the shelters made the women leave after '2 or more years',

meaning they had to return to their families and often suffered worse abuse or death for leaving in the first place.

ii) Honour crimes

The incidence of honour killings is said to have increased since 1991 when Kurdish parties took over the administration of the territory. For the past few years, the rate has been rising. Recorded numbers stand at around 500 deaths per year, but again, this is only those that have come to the hospitals. Many experts speculate that in Erbil alone there is at least one killing per day.

In 2002, the Independent Women's Organization reported that the number of 'honour killings' in PUK territory declined from 75 in 1991 to 15 in 2001. However, Kurdish women's organisations fear that more efforts are made to conceal 'honour killings', in order to avoid the judicial consequences UNHCR states that honour killings are still said to be prevalent and escalating in the North. 'Honour killings' occur mainly in conservative Muslim families (both Shiite and Sunni, of both Arab and Kurdish backgrounds), in all areas of Iraq.' The authors consider that in addition to legal amendments, honour killings need to be rendered socially and morally unacceptable.

Observations from the KRG Ministry of Human Rights indicate that recently there has been an increase in 'honour' related crimes. Hence, in April 2006 UNMAMI reported that as many as 534 women may have been victims of 'honour'-related crimes, including killings, torture, and severe abuse, in the Kurdish Governorates since the beginning of 2006.

A man, who had killed his daughter-in-law, Gulestan, in 2001, summarised the attitude towards honour killings: 'We killed this woman to end the problem. If we did not kill this woman, two families would have got into a fight and maybe 15 people would have died over this. We have tribal customs and we do not take such cases to court... If I did not kill her I may have been told many times that I did not keep my honour... If I did not kill her, whenever I will have a family problem, the issue will be mentioned again.' An agreement, including the payment of compensation, had been reached with Gulestan's family, and the local authorities appeared to be aware of the arrangement

iii) Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is an act of violence against women as well as a serious health concern. Areas where FGM seems to be common are the poorer areas, amongst displaced people. Kurdish communities are becoming increasingly aware of the practice of FGM. New penalties have been introduced for practising FGM in Kurdistan, Iraq. However, 'activists admit threats of legal action rarely have any effect on traditional practitioners in the villages, who work in the secrecy

of their own homes'. According to their findings, the FGM though more prevalent in rural areas is also common in cities, and as many as 70% of the female population of Kurdistan have endured this violent act .

iv) Forced marriage

Under Iraq's Personal Status Law, forced marriage is prohibited and punishable by up to 3 years' imprisonment. Nevertheless, traditional and tribal customs are widespread.

The 2005 UNHCR COI report mentioned that in northern Iraq, the practice of '*Jin be Jin*' [meaning a woman for a woman] contributes to the high incidence of forced marriage. It involves the exchange of girls – the girl from one family marrying the son of another (or from the same extended) family, while his sister is given in marriage in return – to avoid having to pay 'bride prices' for the daughters. If they do not have girls of the same age in the respective families then a baby will be married from the cradle in exchange for the older girl. There is often a big age gap between the partners in arranged marriages. Sometimes fathers, and other relatives of a girl-child, who want to marry again will use her as an exchange for their new wife. This practice occurs especially in village areas where people do not have enough money to pay a bride-price. The report notes that another custom is giving a girl in marriage to another family as a compensation for a killing. The forced marriage of girls reinforces women's unequal status in society, reduces their life choices and leaves them vulnerable to violence.

v) Kurdish women in Iraq and the Law

Compared to the rest of Iraq, Kurdish women are more visible in political processes, law enforcement and in the judiciary. Nonetheless, they remain grossly underrepresented in positions wielding real power.

The Iraqi Constitution fails to guarantee rights for women in Iraq, including those in Kurdistan. For example:

- The Constitution asserts that Iraqis are equal before the law "without discrimination because of sex" and that "no law that contradicts the principles of democracy may be established." However, the Constitution also enshrines Islam as the official religion of the state and as a basic source of legislation—no law, it states, can be passed that contradicts the "established rulings of Islam";
- With regard to 'personal law', the new Constitution declares Iraqis as 'free in their personal status, according to their religions, sects, beliefs or choices'. However if family matters are to be judged according to the law practiced by the family's sect or religion, the Constitution may nullify much of Iraq's personal status law, which provided women with some of the broadest legal rights in the Middle East.

Conversely, positive aspects include:

- The Constitutional guarantee that 25% of the seats in the National Assembly are reserved for women, although this does not necessarily produce 'women-friendly' legislation;
- Ministries, both at national and regional level, specifically devoted to women;
- Formal women's committees in both Parliament's
- The Kurdistan Regional laws have given women more rights

vi) Access to healthcare

Along with difficulties in receiving appropriate medication for common diseases, Kurdish women face even more severe problems in finding treatment for disorders resulting from violence, displacement, war and torture. Gender violence and generally high levels of insecurity continue to prevent access to healthcare for women. A lack of freedom of movement for women, combined with other restrictions on women's human rights, has had adverse health consequences for females.

Availability of mental health care is almost non-existent and women treated for attempted suicide are often considered crazy or on return to their families, are physically abused or killed.

vii) Access to education

There is a large gap in access to education between those living in urban areas and those living in rural areas. The gap is greater for females, and even greater when discussing secondary or higher education. However, at the primary level, it is generally accepted that girls should go to school, and in some secondary schools and higher institutions of learning, female enrolment is greater than male enrolment. Nonetheless, it is evident from the research carried out by KHRP that far too many girls and young women are prohibited from their families from attending or continuing their education and/or are required to drop out when they reach a 'marriageable' age.

viii) Access to justice

One of the most distressing finding of this report's mission was to learn of very few available resources for women to seek redress or protect themselves from abuse. Law enforcement and judiciary often neither understand nor embrace concepts of gender sensitivity and women's rights as human rights and often return victims of abuse to their homes. As an example, a highly educated woman in her thirties, with full-time reasonably paid employment, who had divorced her

abusive husband, found that she had to live with her parents because her father would not give his permission for her to rent her own accommodation.

Statistics and examples of suicide

The Independent Women's Organisation of Kurdistan (IWO) and others have reported extensively on the large numbers of women who have killed themselves, often by self-immolation (self-burning), after suffering years of abuse within the family. All parties interviewed agreed that self-immolation is by far the most common method for women to attempt suicide.

The Rewan Women's Information and Cultural Centre in Sulemanya reported 119 cases of self-immolation in 2002. This shows an increase of the reported cases from 2001 when 105 women were admitted to the Sulemanya Training Hospital after apparently burning themselves intentionally, 63 died and 42 survived. According to the Medico Legal Institute, 191 women in Sulemanya died 'suspicious deaths', which is how suicide and honour killings are classified, but the authors reiterate that the statistics provided give no accurate reflection of the actual number of suicides per year. Alarming, self-immolation and suicide is not only an act of forced-suicide or desperation amongst rural dwellers but has also increased amongst educated, urban professional women.

Conclusion

For Kurdish women in Iraq, they are living with a legacy of trauma from the Iran-Iraq war, the Baathist regime's repeated repressions, displacements and mass killings, and torture. In addition, Kurdish women IDPs, refugees and single parents continue to far outnumber their male counterparts and they are living in a perpetual state of uncertainty in a region on the cusp of conflict. Finally, as perversions of religious practise continue to be validated by religious & tribal leaders, women's freedom of movement, expression and right to basic rights such as the rights to live without violence, to life and to freedom of movement will be under threat. As long as village, community and religious leaders are left to maintain social control without educating men and women about women's human rights, the mission is of the opinion that there is little that will improve the situation of women in Kurdistan, Iraq in the near future. The Kurdistan Regional Government will necessarily continue to focus its attention on fighting insurgency and securing its borders, but it must also find a way to strategically approach internal governance and personal security beyond 'regional security'. The international community can and should play an important role in helping the KRG achieve this. By providing consistent strategic training, support and advice on unifying and correcting legislation and harmonising it with central government and international law, international agencies could make a positive contribution to

the advancement of women's rights and bring a halt to the escalation of self-immolation.