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GENERAL

# Yanar Mohammed: Freeing Mosul Could Be Death Sentence for Iraqi Women

Yanar Mohammed's organization has sheltered sex-trafficking survivors in Iraq since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. But with the arrival of ISIS two years ago – and the battle for Mosul underway – the country's women and girls need her help now more than ever.

WRITTEN BY  
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Yanar Mohammed's Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq helps women who have survived sex trafficking by offering them shelter, counseling and training. [AFP/Safin Hamed](#)

**IN 2003, IRAQI** feminist Yanar Mohammed decided she'd had enough. The war in Iraq was picking up steam, and she didn't want to sit idly in Canada as her home country's women and girls were being victimized in the turmoil. So, she packed up her bags and moved back to Baghdad to find a way to help. It didn't take long before she heard about the issue that would dictate her life's work: Girls – a lot of them – were being kidnapped from the streets and sold into sexual slavery. They were being trafficked, and Mohammed wanted to give them a way out. That same year, she founded the [Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq \(OWFI\)](#), and in 2004 she opened Iraq's first women's shelter.

With Mohammed, 56, as president, the OWFI now runs six clandestine shelters across Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan for women and girls escaping sex trafficking, honor killings and other forms of gender-based violence. But it's risky work, as the country's government considers women's shelters run by local nongovernmental organizations to be illegal. Mohammed and her colleagues have received threats from militias, and the possibility of jail time is a constant concern.

Still, the OWFI became even more vital with the 2014 arrival of ISIS, one of the most brutal terrorist groups of all time. While the organization has managed to open a psychosocial support center in Dohuk for Yazidi women who've escaped the group's slave trade, Mohammed knows they'll need lots of actual shelters to accommodate the thousands of stolen women who will be left in the street by ISIS if and when the group is expelled from the country.

Mohammed spoke with Women & Girls about the state of sex trafficking in Iraq and what the battle for Mosul means for the future of women and girls in the country.

## **Women & Girls: Has the sex trafficking trade in Iraq changed much from the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 to now, two years after ISIS swept across the country?**

Yanar Mohammed: It has evolved and taken a bigger scale. The problem of trafficking women in broad daylight has been in Iraq since 2003, and it just grew. ISIS buys and sells women like merchandise. Part of it is their political agenda, but part of it is that the mentality was already there on the ground – the idea that weak women, those who belong to the enemy or groups who are of different faiths, are like merchandise to be abused and get pleasure through. They are not counted as human beings.

“Under ISIS, it is very clear that if you are of a religion that the occupier doesn't respect or believe in, you are immediately considered a sex tool to be bought and sold.”

## **Women & Girls: What factors make women and girls in Iraq vulnerable to sex trafficking?**

Mohammed: I would say poverty is the first one. Second is the political divisions and vulnerability of certain populations. Under ISIS, it is very clear that if you are of a religion that the occupier doesn't respect or believe in, you are immediately considered a sex tool to be bought and sold. Also, the lawlessness and the political chaos that Iraq has been subject to.

## **Women & Girls: How does the trauma of sexual slavery affect the women and girls after they're free?**

Mohammed: It's hard to generalize ... because I've seen young women whose bodies have scars all over them, and I've met young women who were beaten to the point of not wanting to speak. At the same time – and their numbers are higher – there have been women who survived a short period of trafficking and were very welcoming to all the empowerment, education and care we gave them, and they turned their lives around.



Yanar Mohammed's organization runs six clandestine women's shelters in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. She and her colleagues have been the targets of threats from militias and constantly work under the shadow of possible arrest.

(Courtesy of Yanar Mohammed)

## **Women & Girls: What do the OWFI shelters offer to help victims of trafficking?**

Mohammed: In Baghdad, for example, we have three shelters. The first shelter is for women who have just arrived and are still traumatized. We try to find ways to help them. We have basic education, learning how to use the computer, and motherly care to help them get rid of their trauma.

The second shelter is for women who have passed the trauma period and are ready to learn new skills and get ready for their future lives.

The third shelter is mostly for black Iraqis who have just gotten out of trafficking situations. They mostly lack any form of education, so we focus on literacy and how it's possible for them to have their own homes and families.

## **Women & Girls: The battle in Mosul is escalating. What will happen to the women and girls there once the dust settles?**

Mohammed: In Mosul, there is a large number of women who were taken as wives by ISIS, and there is a bigger number who were raped by ISIS and not even acknowledged as wives. There's a number of Yazidi women who were kept as sexual slaves. So, there might be 10,000 women who are going to be left by so-called husbands and have to deal with the reality of a city that is so-called liberated. What does it mean for the woman who is pregnant due to an ISIS husband, the woman whose relatives might look at it as an honor issue and kill her because of it? The liberation of Mosul might mean a death sentence for a big number of women.

## **Women & Girls: What will the OWFI do to help these women and girls?**

Mohammed: The Iraqi government still doesn't allow us to open shelters for women. Some of the officials in the government – although there isn't a law that specifically outlaws women's shelters run by NGOs – are telling us that they're illegal. So, we're trying to go to the cities that are liberated from ISIS to set up shelters in collaboration with the Iraqi army in order to make it legal. My dream is to have shelters for women in every Iraqi city.

*This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*

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April 5, 2017

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