

Violations of 'Islamic teachings' take deadly toll on Iraqi women

- Story Highlights
- Crimes against women in Iraq's south have included killings and amputations
- Police chief: "Two women were killed in front of their kids"
- Not wearing headscarves, other violations of "Islamic teachings" bring crimes
- Woman tells CNN "fear is always there," but "we don't know who to be afraid of"


By Arwa Damon
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BAGHDAD, Iraq (CNN) -- The images in the Basra police file are nauseating: Page after page of women killed in brutal fashion -- some strangled to death, their faces disfigured; others beheaded. All bear signs of torture.

The women are killed, police say, because they failed to wear a headscarf or because they ignored other "rules" that secretive fundamentalist groups want to enforce.

"Fear, fear is always there," says 30-year-old Safana, an artist and university professor. "We don't know who to be afraid of. Maybe it's a friend or a student you teach. There is no break, no security. I don't know who to be afraid of."

Her fear is justified. Iraq's second-largest city, [Basra](#), is a stronghold of conservative Shia groups. As many as 133 women were killed in Basra last year -- 79 for violation of "Islamic teachings" and 47 for so-called honor killings, according to IRIN, the news branch of the U.N.'s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

One glance through the police file is enough to understand the consequences. Basra's police chief, Gen. Abdul Jalil Khalaf, flips through the file, pointing to one unsolved case after another.  [Watch Khalaf show evidence of the brutality »](#)

"I think so far, we have been unable to tackle this problem properly," he says. "There are many motives for these crimes and parties involved in killing women, by strangling, beheading, chopping off their hands, legs, heads."

"When I came to Basra a year ago," he says, "two women were killed in front of their kids. Their blood was flowing in front of their kids, they were crying. Another woman was killed in front of her 6-year-old son, another in front of her 11-year-old child, and yet another who was pregnant."

The killers enforcing their own version of Islamic justice are rarely caught, while women live in fear.

Boldly splattered in red paint just outside the main downtown market, a chilling sign reads: "We warn against not wearing a headscarf and wearing makeup. Those who do not abide by this will be punished. God is our witness, we have notified you."

The attacks on the women of Basra have intensified since British forces withdrew to their base at the airport back in September, police say. Iraqi security forces took over after British troops pulled back, but are heavily infiltrated by militias.

And tracking the perpetrators of these crimes is nearly impossible, Khalaf says, adding that he doesn't have control of the thousands of policemen and officers.

"We're trying to trace crimes carried out by an anonymous enemy," he says.

Amnesty International has raised concern about the increasing violence toward women in [Iraq](#), saying abductions, rapes and "honor killings" are on the rise.

"Politically active women, those who did not follow a strict dress code, and women [who are] human rights defenders were increasingly at risk of abuses, including by armed groups and religious extremists," Amnesty said in a 2007 report.

Sometimes, it's just the color of a woman's headscarf that can draw unwanted attention.

"One time, one of my female colleagues commented on the color of my headscarf," Safana says. "She said it would draw attention ... [and I should] avoid it and stick to colors like gray, brown and black."

This extremist ideology enrages many secular Muslim women, who say it's a misrepresentation of Islam.

Sawsan, another woman who works at a university, says the message from the radicals to women is simple: "They seem to be sending us a message to stay at home and keep your mouth shut."

After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Sawsan says, the situation was "the best." But now, she says, it's "the worst."

"We thought there would be freedom and democracy and women would have their rights. But all the things we were promised have not come true. There is only fear and horror."

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