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ACCORD – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation

Query response on Iraq: Sulaymaniyah: Social norms that regulate romantic relationships between men and women who are not married [a-11725-1]

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Please read in full all documents referred to.

Non-English language information is summarised in English. Original language quotations are provided for reference in the document or upon request.

Among the sources consulted by ACCORD little could be found on the situation in Sulaymaniyah specifically. For this reason the subsequent references will contain information about the entire Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Social perceptions on premarital relationships in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The Danish Immigration Service (DIS) and the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Center Landinfo, an independent body within the Norwegian immigration authorities, which provides COI services to various actors within the immigration authorities, published a joint report on women and men in honour-related conflicts in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in November 2018. The report is based on interviews conducted in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah from 22 to 30 April 2018, as part of which 15 interlocutors, comprising an international organisation, NGOs, authorities of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), an academic informant, a diplomatic representation as well as a lawyer were consulted. The report describes social perceptions on premarital relationships in the Kurdistan Region as follows:

"3.1 Perception of extramarital relations in KRI [Kurdistan Region Iraq]

Extramarital relationships, defined as any sexual relationship between a man and a woman who are not married to each other, are unacceptable in KRI, and people are aware that it requires discretion. Cases of 'extramarital relationship' includes 'premarital relationship' and 'adultery'. In general, unmarried couples, including young people know that they take a high risk by having a premarital relationship.

Two sources noted a change among youths in terms of sexual relationships. Firstly, it has become more common to choose one's own spouse, especially in the cities and among educated families. Young couples, especially in educated families, who have had a premarital affair, might get away with it as long as the family approves of the relationship and a marriage is arranged." (DIS/Landinfo, November 2018, pp. 12-13)

In January 2010, DIS went on a fact-finding mission to Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Dohuk with the aim of collecting information on the protection and support of male victims of honor crimes in the Kurdistan Region. One interviewee explained the role of men in illicit sexual relationships as follows:

"Dr. JwanIhsan Fawzi, Researcher/Lecturer, University of Sulemaniyah, explained that it is the norm in Kurdish society that men embark on illicit sexual relationships. Society in KRI is male-dominated and many men are ready to take on the risk that is associated with illicit sexual relationships. (DIS, March 2010, p. 4)

The Kurdish media network Rudaw, which has its headquarters in Erbil (Kurdistan Region, Iraq) demonstrates the varying perceptions on premarital relationships and public affection in the Kurdistan Region in an article discussing kissing in public from November 2013:

"Kissing in public has suddenly turned into an issue in Iraqi Kurdistan, since a couple was charged with indecent behavior for kissing in a park and posting the picture online. That kicked off a protest on Facebook, with like-minded couples posting their own kissing pictures. It also brought to light a smoldering conflict between the generations: Is kissing in public really haram – or forbidden -- in Islam? [...]

In Kurdistan's conservative and largely traditional society, family members of the opposite sex do not publicly display physical affection, and certainly do not kiss openly. Yet, Kurdish society is changing. Young people travel, they watch foreign movies. And in many parks young couples are often seen sitting together.

Shivan knows many of them also kiss – mostly in secret. 'Why should we continue lying in this way?' he exclaims. 'This shows boys and girls are not free to express their feelings.' The first kissers -- a local photographer and his European girlfriend – posted their picture online last month to protest the destruction of an abstract sculpture at Sulaimani's Freedom Park, depicting a kissing couple. [...] Although they were supported by artists, intellectuals and young Kurds, the couple was criticized strongly by Islamic politicians and imams, who say they are even considering an official complaint.

Islamic voices in Kurdistan claim that a kiss shared in public between a man and a woman is haram. Media, a 28-year-old married schoolteacher in Sulaimani, agrees. 'People who respect others do not kiss in public. You have to respect our culture and traditions. You should not bother others with your life,' she says. So does she agree with the imams that a kiss is the same as sex? 'No, but it does lead to it. If couples can kiss in public, it will lead to sex.' She points out that according to Islam neither is allowed when a couple is not married, and therefore agrees that the protesting couple will be charged in court. [...]

In a society that is booming economically and developing rapidly – but where so-called 'honor killings' still happen when fathers and brothers hear daughters and sisters have been seen with a boy – it is no wonder that the kiss and its aftermath have become so controversial. [...] Shivan hopes the protest action will continue and grow to fight the taboos, and vows to do his part. 'I will kiss my girlfriend in front of my family,' he promises after giving the matter some thought. 'But only a kiss, of course, no more,' he laughs. (Rudaw, 4 November 2013)

Possible consequences of premarital relationships

The DIS and Landinfo joint report on women and men in honour-related conflicts in the KRI from 2018 describes possible consequences of premarital relationships as follows:

"4. Consequences of extramarital relationships

4.1 Premarital relationships

Women who have had a premarital affair known to their families, or who get married without the acceptance of their families, are at risk of being killed. [...]

In few cases the family will manage to contain the story within the family and find a solution, e.g. restoring the hymen. If marriage is not possible and the relationship continues, the family will in some cases kill her. [...]

If the relationship is revealed to a wider circle of people outside the family, there is an even higher risk that the family will kill her. The source further noted that killing a female family member is sometimes done to send a signal to the community that the men of this family are able to save their family's honour." (DIS/Landinfo, November 2018, p. 14)

"Men as victims in honour-related conflicts in KRI [Kurdistan Region Iraq]

Heterosexual men

Men who engage in extramarital relationship are not perceived as staining the family honour. A man in this situation can often easily escape the conflict. Nevertheless, men are still under pressure to get married and there are cases of killings. When a man is killed in an honour conflict, it has to do with revenge or a consequence of a blood feud rather than the honour of the family. Normally in these cases, both families agree to the killing. The sources did not know of any cases where only the man in such a couple got killed and not the woman." (DIS/Landinfo, November 2018, p. 22)

DIS and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) published a report in April 2016 based on a fact-finding mission to the KRI from September and October 2015. The report describes marriage as a possible outcome of a dispute relating to a premarital relationship:

"Some cases of honour related disputes are easier to solve than others. If a teenage girl and a teenage boy have a relationship outside marriage, it could sometimes easily be solved by reaching an agreement about marriage between the two parties." (DIS/DRC, April 2016, p. 138)

'Honour crimes' committed as a result of premarital relationships

In 2020, three organisations working for the promotion of women and human rights, the Human Rights and Gender Justice Clinic (HRGJ) of the City University of New York, MADRE and The Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), submitted a report on gender based violence in Iraq to the United Nations Committee Against Torture, elaborating that so called 'honour crimes' might be conducted in case of dating a person of choice:

"'Honour' crimes refer to violence or killings, primarily of women and girls, committed by family or tribal members, for perceived transgressions of societal norms, including patriarchal gender norms, which are said to bring shame to their families. Women or girls may be killed for adultery (including perceived adultery), for having been raped, refusing forced marriage, seeking a divorce, or seeking or being perceived to date or marry someone of their choice." (HRGJ et al., 2020, pp. 4-5)

The EKurd news portal, which is specialised on Kurdish topics, published an article in May 2019 describing the killing of a Kurdish woman because of a love relationship:

"A young Kurdish girl was hanged to death earlier on Saturday in Iraqi Kurdistan region reportedly after her father found out about her love relationship." (EKurd Daily, 7 May 2019)

Reuters news agency wrote about a failed honour killing of a woman from Dohuk in 2015 after being seen in the car of a young man:

“Lava, whose ‘crime’ was to be seen in the car of a young man after leaving her job at a hotel in Dohuk in February 2015, said two of her three brothers and a cousin threw her into the newly-dug grave and covered her with soil so only her head stuck out. ‘You dishonored us. This is your punishment in this world and you should expect worse in the other world,’ she said her brother yelled before the men disappeared into the darkness.” (Reuters, 12 July 2017)

Daraj, an Arabic digital media platform, based in Beirut, in May 2021 reported on a cemetery in Sulaymaniyah, which contains approximately 1,000 graves of women who were killed as a result of honour killings or whose family relations are unknown. The graves are at the back of the cemetery and without identification marks of the person buried. The article from May 2021 details the case of a mother who goes to the cemetery in secret to visit her daughter's grave, who was killed by her own brother after he discovered that she had a love affair with a neighbour in a village in Sulaymaniyah province. The parents were consequently forced to leave their village and to move to the centre of Sulaymaniyah to escape the stigma. According to women's rights activist Bhir Munther, who was interviewed for the article, honour killings against men are seldom in Kurdish society. (Daraj, 17 May 2021)

DIS consulted representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) authorities, a university lecturer/researcher, and an independent newspaper as part of their fact-finding mission to Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Dohuk in 2010. Informants consulted by DIS stated that men, just like women, would be at risk of honour crimes committed against them and that such a threat does not diminish over time:

"Hassan Berwari, Country Representative, Diakonia, Dahuk, stated that women, as well as men, are victims of honour crimes, and both are being killed for honour offenses. It was emphasized that men are equally at risk of becoming victims of honour crimes as women. Honour crimes against men are common in KRI [Kurdistan Region of Iraq]. It was added that conflicts arising from sexual relationships between young men and women are not as numerous [as earlier].

Edrees Salih, Erbil, stated that honour crimes have been significantly reduced in KRI [Kurdistan Region Iraq] during the recent years. However, still, in some cases, the threat posed to such men involved in offenses, exists up until a reconciliation being reached.

Dr. Jwan Ihsan Fawzi, University of Sulemaniyah, informed that she had heard of men being victims of honour crimes. [...]

Ari Rafiq, Director, and Huda S. Zangan, Member of Advisory Committee, Directorate to Follow-up Violence against Women (DVW), Erbil, informed that the risk of falling victim to revenge because of an honour-related offense is real and can be long-term. Reference was made to an incident in Sulemaniyah where a man still fears for his life 18 years after he wronged a family's honour. It was added that the offended father or husband would often prefer imprisonment for having committed an honour crime rather than face society and the shame associated with not having re-established the honour of his family." (DIS, March 2010, p. 3)

„Sardasht Abdulrahman Majid and Aree Jaza Mahmoud, DHRD [Democracy and Human Rights Development Center], Sulemaniyah, explained that anyone violating traditional values and rules, by having an illicit sexual relationship, will be at high risk of being punished [by their family or tribe]." (DIS, March 2010, p. 4)

"As an example of how a dispute could be solved Hassan Berwari, Diakonia, Dahuk, referred to a particular case: A young man ran away with his girlfriend, however, as the situation escalated, he sought the protection of the police as he feared becoming a victim of an honour crime. All the while, 18 armed members of the girl's family were after him, and the police decided to contact the tribe to settle the matter which was finally solved through the tribal leaders." (DIS, March 2010, pp. 5-6)

"Ari Rafiq and Huda S. Zangana, DVW [Directorate to Follow-up Violence against Women], Erbil, stated the risk of retribution for an honour-related offense is always there. The matter of a tarnished honour of a family not yet rectified is eternal, and if a lasting reconciliation is not accomplished, the offender of that family honour will be at risk at all times. Even if a man responsible for threats against a man who has offended his family's honour is imprisoned, there is a serious risk that another member of the offended family will undertake the revenge, including the killing of the offender." (DIS, March 2010, p. 7)

„Hassan Berwari, Diakonia, Dahuk, stated that sexual relations between an unmarried couple is considered a crime according to tribal tradition. Should a male offender fear revenge from relatives of the woman with whom he has had a relationship approach the police, he would most likely be offered protection. However, the only possible way for him to be protected would be to be kept in police custody. At the same time, the police would most likely try to solve the issue by requesting the tribal leaders to settle the dispute." (DIS, March 2010, p. 10)

„Hassan Berwari, Diakonia, Dahuk, informed that there are examples of men being protected by close relatives, for instance an uncle that is more influential and respected than the man's own father. However, an offender will never be able to be protected against the revenge of the girl's family. Honour is eternal and even after time has passed, the honour of the offended family will still have to be protected. Even after many years, the offender can still be at serious risk of becoming a victim of an honour crime." (DIS, March 2010, p. 13)

"In contrast, in the opinion of the WADI representative, boys and men are 'not very likely' to become victims of honour-based violence in Iraqi Kurdistan, and when they are affected, 'most' of the time it is due to 'supposed homosexuality' (WADI 25 Jan. 2016)." (IRB, 15 February 2016)

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