



Fighting for freedom in a war zone

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STAMFORD - In front of a crowd of nearly 100, Iraqi women's rights activist Yanar Mohammed spoke yesterday about the challenges of trying to organize a women's movement amidst war, constant death threats and strict Islamic law.

"Why all the talk about women's freedoms now, when everybody is getting killed?" she said. "Now is the time, because, whatever you get immediately, that's what you get."

Mohammed, who grew up in Iraq and moved to Toronto in 1995, was sponsored by the Women's Studies Department of the University of Connecticut in Stamford. She spoke about her work as president of the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq.

Challenges for Iraqi women are much different from those facing American women, she said.

"We are speaking about basics; my right to eat what I want, my right to drink what I want, my right to wear what I want," she said.

Though she is now a Canadian citizen, she said she felt compelled to return to Iraq in 2003. She now spends about six months of each year in Iraq.

Mohammed and two other women founded the group because they saw that women were becoming victims of violence and were losing freedom as religious groups worked to impose sharia, or Muslim law, on Iraq after Saddam Hussein's overthrow.

Mohammed distinguished Islam as a religion from what she said is the strict political interpretation of it under which she believes women lose their rights.

Under versions of sharia, women must cover their entire bodies in veils, or hijabs; men could be allowed to take multiple wives; and women are limited in the extent they are in public or work to support their families, she said.

Mohammed said she has heard stories of women who became targets of violence when they refused to follow sharia; of widowed mothers being forced to commit violence, or prostitution; and of women being slain in "honor killings" by relatives when they were thought to have brought dishonor to their family.

"Sectarian violence took its revenge on women," Mohammed said, and members of her group are not excluded. She and others from the organization have received death threats.

Though Hussein was a bloody dictator, things have deteriorated since his fall, she said.

"So what did we gain out of this so-called liberation?" Mohammed asked.

The organization now employs about 40 activists, has hundreds of volunteers, and 7,000 members who donate to the organization.

The group has an operating budget of \$120,000, mostly donations from Dutch and American institutions.

Activists run women's shelters out of their homes, and the group has organized rallies and protests, including one that drew 1,000 people asking for women to be represented in Iraq's constitution.

The organization operates a newspaper with an Arabic name that translates to "Equality," and runs outreach programs for women in prisons and violent parts of Iraq.

Marilyn Ribadeneira, 20, a senior English major and women's studies minor at UConn, said she has read about violence against women in Iraq, sometimes committed by American troops, in news stories and a book called "Monsterring: Inside America's Policy of Secret Interrogations and Torture in the Terror War."

"We only hear 'Support our troops,' " she said. "But things like this do happen."

Mohammed's organization also holds poetry and arts events for youth, called "Freedom Spaces," where young people from some of the most violent parts of Baghdad write poetry, draw, paint, sing, and dance.

Mohammed said she believes organizing young people is key to a successful movement, and she wanted the group to do more than just react to problems.

The dangers of working in Baghdad still present themselves at gatherings meant to be peaceful, she said. The first Freedom Space drew 20 young people, and the most recent drew 200. Mohammed is afraid to let the events get much larger, fearing they will be targets for bombing.

Still, attendees were positive and happy, she said.

"By the end of the event we couldn't hold them down," Mohammed said. "They were dancing; they were feeling very free."

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