Emily Muna gives an account of an interview with Houza nam Mahmoud of the Organisation of Women’s Freedom in Iraq (OWFI).

When you meet an extraordinary person, it can be in the multitude of places.

Our interview with Houzam Mahmoud, of the Organisation of Women’s Freedom in Iraq, is with a socialist-feminist activist, was carried out in a softly-lit, sleek little café, not far from Hampstead station.

Houzam was born in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1973; she is a socialist and campaigner for women’s rights in Kurdistan, Iraq and the Middle East.

A striking woman, with lots of beautiful, dark hair, sharp eyes, and a loud, happy laugh, there is something about Houzam that makes you recognise her as someone unique from the moment you meet her.

When we first met, the conversation was light, and jovial, and Houzam introduced us to her daughter, an intelligent girl not unlike her mother.

Despite the niceties and pleasantness of being in her company, we were well aware that sat in front of us was a woman who set out to try and change one of the most corrupt, war-torn and impoverished countries in the world.

Before we started, coffees and colas were ordered, and brought swiftly by a tired looking waiter. I set aside spare knives and forks to rearrange space for my writing pad. At the women’s rights in Iraq face?

We have young girls, older women, veiled women, and unveiled women… all sorts of females united to fight for women’s freedom.

There are women, however, particularly the younger ones, who enjoy the atmosphere of secularist and socialist view.

What issues do women in Iraq face?

Many: kidnaping, pros- titution, sexual slavery, honour killings, stigmatisation and marginalisation from wider society, as well as lack of employment and poor pay; so many different issues.

Also, women aren’t the only ones who suffer at the hands of patriarchy in the country.

OWFI was the only organisation that stood up against homophobia and the murder of homosexuals in Iraq. We raised issues of homosexuality in Iraq and Shiah Muslims.

How usual is it for women to be employed?

It depends. Some places have always been deeply religious, while others are progressing towards Islamism.

If a woman finds a job, she works, but it is all about who you know. Even prostitution is now an in- come for some women, if they get paid at all.

Prostitution itself is illegal and we stand up for the welfare and employment and human rights of sex workers because they are victimised and dehuman- ised in such societies.

We took an active pro- action in actually helping them and trying to change society by making women aware of their oppression and need to liberated because they are so judgemental and conservative.

They haven’t come across any issues surrounding women’s reproductive rights. Abortions are still taboo in Iraq, and I sup- pose many women choose to have backstreet abor- tions due to the increas- ingly religious nature of a Iraqi society.

Recently, OWFI has been dealing with the rising number of children born with deformities, particu- larly near the Hawijah mili- tary base. [The town of Hawijah became contami- nated, due to the use by the American military of de- pleted uranium, a radiac- tive substance outlawed by many governments due to its toxicity, causing a number of children to be born with severe deformities and health defects.] Many have been so few casualties. OWFI put to- gether a report on a whole string of Iraqi children born deformed. The report was compiled of records from our activists when they went to the town, to find out more information, and take pictures. They vis- ited children in hospital, talked to the people of Hawijah.

COURAGE

Our organisation always come across problems. Our activists get kid- napped in Freedom Square, either were attacked, and harassed. We are intimidated, even threatened.

One of our activists, Aya Al Lamie, was kidnapped and tortured by associates of Maliki at 20 years old. She is active and outspoken, and quickly became popular. She was kid- napped and tortured for her rule and mobilisation during the Iraqi anti-gov- ernment protests during the Arab Spring. She was tortured horrif- ically by the Prime Minis- ter’s men, and they kept telling her, “you have to stop your demands.”

She refused every time she was beaten and, finally, they conceded to letting her go, but not after telling her “if you continue your activity, we will gang rape you.”

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