

» BEING ACTIVE AND VISIBLE IS DANGEROUS «

Ali Al-Hindawi

Iraq has been a war-torn country for many years, giving rise to ISIS with its conservative and homophobic beliefs. *Ali Al-Hindawi's* story is that of a survivor but also of an activist promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and sexual minorities.

Since 2012, you have been volunteering at TEDx Baghdad. Imagine you were one of the speakers, what would your story be about?

It would be a survivor story, a story of resistance. We Iraqis by nature are a country of resilient people because of our history, starting from the failed kingdom, the Ba'athist Iraq, the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the following economic embargo, the US invasion in 2003, the rise of ISIS and so on. For sure this reflects my life, my parents' lives and the lives of so many others. But life is a continuous process, and we will keep trying to live a good life. I remember that even in 2003, when there was no electricity and food and we were living on the street because our house had been partially destroyed and looted, we still played cards and had tea. »Don't lose hope« would be my message.

»Gender roles are very traditional«

You graduated in 2014, the same year the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant announced the establishment of the caliphate. To what extent did this affect your work?

I remember the day ISIS came as if it were yesterday. I got up rather early to go to university – I was in the final stages of preparing for my final practical exams. On my way, my mom called me telling me that there was something called Daesh surrounding Baghdad and that I should come home immediately. I didn't know the word Daesh and I didn't take her seriously, but when I arrived at my university, I started to feel it. I saw people's pale faces; people busy with their telephones because they had already lost someone or were afraid of losing someone. On my way back home, I noticed that Baghdad was completely different. I saw tanks in the streets, the checkpoints; roads were closed. I realised that there was some kind of danger, but that didn't stop anyone of us from taking our exams the next day. These circumstances actually gave me more motivation for my voluntary work: I started to take part in missions to support some villages under ISIS control and did some mapping of people's needs in Mosul. I also assisted the internally displaced persons (IDP) in Baghdad and went to schools to play with the children, to sing and dance with them. Later on, I started volunteering for the United Nations Development Programme as well as for the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq.

ISIS reportedly executed men and women based on their »perceived homosexuality«. What is the situation of LGBTIQ in Iraq today?

Minorities, whether LGBT or religious minorities, are discriminated against and oppressed. For LGBT it is difficult being out – even though in Iraq there is no legal prohibition of same-sex sexual activity, there are cases of prosecution based on a very vague public indecency law. Iraq is a very conservative society, so gender roles are still very traditional. And they are defined by the dominant religion, Islam. A woman's role, in general, is limited to taking care of the family. I think all of the wars – and the overall instability – have pushed people to be more conservative and protective.

What could be possible next steps to a more equitable, gender-inclusive society?

We need an education reform that changes and updates our school curricula. It needs to be more secular. That would be a big step forward for girls and women but also for religious minorities whose beliefs are not represented in today's curricula. We have to include the general human rights aspects and get out toxic ideas like the oppression of girls and women and the restriction of their liberties. Of course, now is not the time to include LGBT topics in school curricula directly because this wouldn't be possible with the present society. First of all, Iraq needs stability and security.

Since 2017, you have been working as a portfolio analyst at the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) in Geneva. You might know the HeForShe-Campaign that was launched by UN Women in 2014. It invites men and people of all genders to commit themselves to take action for a gender equal world.

I attended the launch of this campaign in Baghdad in 2015. It helps women's rights but not so much the ones of LGBT. But we have to see the big picture. I think it is a great campaign, it initiated many other campaigns for women's empowerment in Iraq. I can observe a change through my female friends and networks. These days, they are feeling more empowered to be independent enough to have their own work and careers. For many young women, becoming a housewife is no longer an option. They are challenging the stereotypes and oppressions with their lifestyle, driving cars, they have jobs or are social media influencers. →

In 2015, you participated in ifa's CrossCulture programme. You worked with Schlesische27, an NGO in Berlin that supports young refugees through language training, art and culture workshops explaining cultural differences in gender norms. Which experience influenced you the most during this time?

I think the experience of coming to Germany shaped my life. I arrived in the heat of the refugee crisis and for me, it was the first time that I saw a host community working with refugees from foreign countries. I hope I was able to add some value to their projects because they needed knowledge about the cultural and religious context of the refugees. They also gave me a lot of input and insight into how projects can be realised. Project management in Iraq has nothing to do with how it's done here in Germany. In Iraq, whenever you think about a project, the main priority is security, and then comes the rest. In Germany, projects focus more on the results and how people feel about them.

»In Iraq the main priority is security«

In 2018, you held a series of lectures at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa. One was titled »The New Challenges of Diversity«. Could you give an example of these new challenges?

One challenge is the fragmentation of society, especially in societies that are rather individual than collective. Western societies usually have special interest groups for each and every issue, but this has the potential of dividing societies even more instead of creating social cohesion. In each idea, there lies an extreme part, and we need to be careful with that. It is a challenge that we need to address sooner rather than later. We need to focus on the communalities. Iraq is a very diverse society; we have many languages, ethnicities and religions. We coexisted in peace for many centuries, but because of the extremists, the invasion and imported democracy, my country took a different path. Another challenge is related to the new academia research about gender studies. On the one hand, it makes people more aware of this topic, but at the same time, those who are affected might be more ashamed of themselves. It is a very fine line between raising awareness about a topic and demeaning the people being addressed.

And sometimes raising awareness can also be dangerous in countries like Iraq. How can one find a balance between visibility and risk?

Being active and visible in general is a dangerous thing for all Iraqis. Involvement in volunteer work for international organisations, living alone as a woman, saying an unpopular opinion out loud. We are threatened *per se*. Those who openly address inequalities will be an easy target. The government is trying to do its best to establish security and safety, but it is also very difficult because of our most recent history, terrorism and all the extremist groups that don't want the society to advance. I think all these voices can shut down those who actually want to bring peace or new ideas to Iraq.

»If you want change, work with your local government«

What do you think are the most relevant abilities and skills that one needs to advocate for human rights?

From my experience in Iraq I can say: One needs to be able to collaborate, to address things constructively and to be passionate and patient. With all respect to activism – I don't like this word very much because for me it is linked to rebellion – I don't think this is how it works. If you really want change, work with your local government, even if they are the worst. Trying to change something is better than just shouting at them. If you simply put more pressure on the government and ask the international community to help, the government will be more stubborn and not listen. We can politely preach about human rights, but this alone will not solve the problem. In 2015 I was part of a project that advertised new values in education, especially soft skills since they are usually neglected in schools. We developed a curriculum that included teaching soft skills through physical education. In the beginning, it was difficult to convince the government, but we systematically addressed schools and got support from local networks. In the end, the decision-makers got familiar with the input and finally, our curriculum was implemented in ten schools.

This event brings together CCP alumni and organisations from different countries of Europe, the MENA region and Central and South Asia. What is your impression so far? What ideas will you take back with you?

If the main idea of this workshop is networking, it has been successful. Our community of former CCP participants sometimes works in a black box due to the lack of content available online and the lack of com-

munication or expertise. So, workshops like this really add value to the community. It brings people together, it makes them communicate, share experiences and develop new projects. And when you develop personal skills and your network, it will eventually contribute to society as a whole.

Interview by
Juliane Pfordte



ALI AL-HINDAWI was a CCP fellow in 2015. Born in Iraq, he became involved with local humanitarian and cultural projects at a young age. He is now working for the United Nations Office for Projects Services in Geneva where gender equality in multicultural work environments and gender mainstreaming are integral parts of his work.