Arab Spring Doesn't Curb Trafficking of Women
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October 2011
Policy Mic

In light of the Arab Spring, women’s rights throughout the Arab world have been under deep scrutiny. However, one issue that has had little coverage is that of human trafficking within the region. Not only has the issue been neglected but it has also worsened considerably as Arab governments have done little to nothing to ameliorate it, and often simply deny that it exists at all.

A recent report, launched by London-based NGO, SCEME (Social Education in the Middle East through Education) has shown that since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, over 5,000 women have been trafficked from the country into the rest of the Middle East for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

Trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and girls has existed for a long time in Iraq, as has forced marriage and domestic servitude. However, since the U.S.-led invasion and the subsequent instability that reigned over the country, the number of women being trafficked has increased significantly. Many women were forcefully transported to neighboring Middle Eastern countries, most notably Syria, but also as far afield as the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Tragically, Arab authorities have done too little to tackle this issue. “The neglect of authorities to deal with this problem effectively, has fostered a state of impunity in which crimes against women are neglected and offenders go unpunished,” states the report compiled by SCEME.

Remarkably, SCEME’s report quotes a representative from Kuwait’s Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, Mohammed Al-Kandari, who publically stated that “there is no human trafficking in Kuwait.” This shocking lack of recognition of the problem means that Kuwait is a long-way off implementing any measures that might help women. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, government officials have barely acknowledged that Iraqi women continue to be trafficked into the Kingdom.

A leaked U.S. diplomatic cable has even reported on the increasing number of Iraqi child brides that continue to be trafficked into the country: “The girls, usually between five and 12 years-old, are married off to wealthy Saudi men in exchange for hefty price tags for brides.” One of the biggest problems, explains SCEME’s project coordinator Jamila Boughelaf, “is that there is a taboo surrounding these issues, and what is vital is that we work towards breaking down the social barriers that make it difficult to talk about these subjects.”

Yet these things are even happening in Arab countries that consider themselves forward-thinking. For example, in Jordan, where the government has implemented plans to protect victims of trafficking, there still remains a severe lack of essential victim
assistance, insufficient punishment of traffickers, and minimal cooperation with source countries’ embassies.

According to the Project Manager at SCEME Sarah Barnes, “whilst we appreciate we are dealing with sensitive subjects, we hope that we may create an active and useful dialogue about the issue of sex-trafficking in the Arab World. It is only through progressive dialogue that we can promote NGO involvement, advocate to governments, and aid the victims of human-trafficking.”

Barnes went on to add that whilst “the Arab Spring had brought increasing focus to the women’s social standing throughout the region, it has failed to address these much more complex issues. Therefore, we feel that by addressing these problems at first hand, we can work towards solving them.”

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