



THE NEW YORKER

Out of Sight

A former prostitute tries to rescue Iraq's most vulnerable women.

Written by Rania Abouzeid

Abouzeid, R. (2015). Out of sight: A former prostitutes tries to rescue Iraq's most vulnerable population. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/05/out-of-sight-letter-from-baghdad-rania-abouzeid>

On a Saturday night in late May, I sat in the back seat of a taxi as it drove through a shantytown in Baghdad. We were not far from Firdos Square, where, in April of 2003, invading American troops famously toppled a large statue of Saddam Hussein. A highway passed overhead, its traffic thudding, and Baghdad's tallest building, the Cristal Grand Ishtar Hotel—still widely known as the Sheraton, although the hotel chain withdrew from Iraq in 1990—rose in the distance. A forty-year-old woman whom I'll call Layla sat in the front passenger seat; she wore a black abaya, and strands of dyed-black hair fell out from under her head scarf. Her husband, Mohammad, drove.

We were headed toward a dimly lit cinder-block shack. Children darted in and out of the shadows, and a pregnant woman in a long-sleeved, turquoise ankle-length dress stepped out to see who was approaching. She was a pimp, Layla said. In 2012, Iraq passed its first law specifically against human trafficking, but the law is routinely ignored, and sexual crimes, including rape and forced prostitution, are common, women's-rights groups say. Statistics are hard to come by, but in 2011, according to the latest Ministry of Planning report, a survey found that more than nine per cent of respondents between the ages of fifteen and fifty-four said they had been subjected to sexual violence. The real number is likely much higher, given the shame attached to reporting such crimes in a society where a family's honor is often tied to the

chastity of its women. The victims of these crimes are often considered outcasts and can be killed for “dishonoring” their family or their community.

Since 2006, Layla, a rape victim and former prostitute, has been secretly mapping Iraq’s underworld of sex trafficking and prostitution. Through her network of contacts in the sex trade, she gathers information about who is selling whom and for how much, where the victims are from, and where they are prostituted and trafficked. She passes the information, through intermediaries, to Iraqi authorities, who usually fail to act on it. Still, her work has helped to convict several pimps, including some who kidnapped children. That Saturday night, I accompanied Layla and Mohammad on a tour of some of the places that she investigates, on the condition that I change her name, minimize details that might identify her, and not name her intermediaries.

The work is extremely dangerous. The pimps whom Layla encounters are women, but behind them is a tangled hierarchy of armed men: corrupt police, militias that profit from the sex trade, and militias that brutally oppose it. On the morning of July 13, 2014, the bullet-ridden bodies of twenty-eight women and five men were retrieved from two apartments, said to be brothels, in a building complex in Zayouna, a neighborhood in eastern Baghdad. I saw the bodies a few hours later, at the city morgue, laid out on the floor. Morgue workers blamed the religious militias, singling out the pro-Iranian Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, one of the many armed outfits proliferating in Iraq. Other groups of suspected prostitutes have been found shot dead, but the Zayouna incident was the largest killing in recent years, and it prompted at least fifteen neighborhood pimps whom Layla knew to flee with their girls to Iraqi Kurdistan. Layla often visits apartments like the ones in Zayouna, posing as a retired pimp. As a cover, she sells the madams abayas that are intricately embroidered with colored crystals and diamantés; they serve to identify women as pimps, rather than prostitutes, at night clubs.

As we drew near the cinder-block shack, Layla leaned out of the window and waved. “Darling!” she shouted, then turned to Mohammad and whispered,

“Be careful what you say.” The taxi came to a stop, Layla got out, and the two women greeted each other warmly. Layla had known this woman since before the invasion, when they’d both been prostitutes working and living in the area. Layla introduced me as a cousin who was briefly staying with her, and said that she was looking for another madam. The pregnant woman told her that the woman had moved her brothel, and said where. She asked Layla if she had come across a woman from Basra, in the south, named Em Ali; Layla said she knew her.

“She is doing very well with all her girls,” the woman said. “You should see the cars that come and take her girls. I sold Arwaj to her—five million dinars,” the equivalent of about forty-two hundred dollars. “Do you think that was a good price?”

“No, that was a mistake,” Layla said. “You shouldn’t have sold her. She could have been a source of regular income for you.”

Arwaj, a teen-age runaway, had been lured with the promise of safety and shelter, then held captive. The woman said that the girl had been unruly and screamed all the time.

“She was a virgin,” Layla said.

“Not anymore,” the woman replied. She had locked Arwaj in the shack with a man for three days, selling her virginity, then she sold her to Em Ali.

Mohammad offered to steal the girl back for the woman, as a ruse to find her, and asked where the brothel was. The woman didn’t know.

As we drove away in the taxi, Layla said, “This is our work. That’s how I have to talk to them to get the information I need.” She added, “If they find out what I really do, I will be killed, without any doubt, because behind every pimp are militiamen and corrupt police.” The trafficking situation was the

worst it had been in recent years, she said. “Every four or five men now are calling themselves a militia. They can do whatever they want.”

Mohammad said that the country’s woes—“the theft, crime, killing, terrorism”—were all tied to the sex trade. He explained the mind-set of the men involved: “If I get used to this life style, I need to drink, to pay for girls, for rooms, for tips, for trips. That costs money, and I’ll do whatever I need to get paid.”

Iraq was once at the forefront of women’s rights in the Middle East. In 1959, the country passed Law No. 188, also known as the Personal Status Law, which restricted polygamy, outlawed child marriage and forced marriages, and improved women’s rights in divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Equal rights were enshrined in the Baath-drafted 1970 constitution, and women’s literacy rates, education, and participation in the workforce were all actively promoted through generous welfare policies, such as free childcare. That momentum was reversed by successive wars—with Iran, from 1980 to 1988, and then the 1990 Gulf War and thirteen subsequent years of international economic sanctions. Female civil servants lost their jobs in disproportionate numbers, and welfare was slashed. As part of Saddam Hussein’s “faith campaign,” which began in the early nineteen-nineties, women accused of prostitution were beheaded, according to Amnesty International. Crimes against women only increased in the chaos that ensued after the U.S.-led invasion.

In 2005, Iraq’s new constitution mandated that a quarter of the members of parliament be women, but Saddam’s fall brought to power conservative religious clerics and parliamentarians who favored laws that would give clerics more control over personal matters. In October of 2013, Hassan al-Shammari, the Justice Minister and a member of the Islamist Fadhila (Virtue) Party, introduced a bill that contained two hundred and fifty-four articles based on the Jaafari school of Shiite religious jurisprudence. The bill, which would apply to Iraq’s Shiite majority, proposed legalizing marriage for girls

as young as nine, entitling a husband to nonconsensual sex with his wife, and preventing a woman from leaving her home without her husband's permission. Article 126 stated that a husband was not required to financially support his wife if she was either too young or too old to sexually satisfy him.

Despite strong opposition from rights groups and a few clerics, the bill was approved by the Council of Ministers in February of 2014 and forwarded to parliament, which failed to vote on it before a new house was ushered in, in April. The Fadhila Party's spiritual leader, Mohammad Yaqoobi, a white-turbaned, white-bearded marja, or religious authority, described women who opposed the bill as outcasts. The real blame, he said, lay with clerics who, in encouraging these women, were "opening the door of evil." Mohammad Jawad al-Khalisi, another marja, told me in his office in the Shiite Baghdad suburb of Kadhimiya that men like Yaqoobi were ignorant and "do not understand their religion."

Hanaa Edwar, a prominent women's-rights advocate, said that the Jaafari bill made a mockery of the 2005 constitution. Edwar, a diminutive woman with a gray pixie haircut, co-founded several organizations that address women's rights, including Al-Amal Association, in 1992. "If you don't have power to decide matters related to your children or your pregnancy, how can you contribute to decision-making in your nation, on its future?" she said. The bill "considered women as just sexual tools for men, for their pleasure." The draft law remains dormant, but Edwar described it as "a time bomb."

The lawlessness overtaking Iraq poses a more immediate threat to the nation's women and girls, especially those without the support of their families. Since June, 2014, the Islamic State has seized much of the country's northwest, including the cities of Mosul, Ramadi, and Fallujah. The Sunni extremists have beheaded their male enemies and sexually enslaved some female captives, including several thousand women and girls from the Kurdish-speaking Yazidi minority, in northern Iraq. In the October, 2014,

issue of Dabiq, the Islamic State's English-language magazine, the group boasted that "the enslaved Yazidi families are now sold by the Islamic State soldiers."

New militias have sprung up to counter the Sunni extremists, and existing ones have expanded. Human Rights Watch, following its 2015 World Report, accused some Shiite militias of engaging in "unfettered abuses against civilians," including summary executions, torture, and the forced displacement of thousands from their homes. After twelve years of conflict, there are more than three and a half million internally displaced Iraqis, as many as two million war widows, and a million or more orphans. The U.S. State Department noted, in its 2015 "Trafficking in Persons" report, that the vulnerability of women and children to trafficking had "gravely increased" in the past year, and that security and law-enforcement officials, as well as criminal gangs, were involved in sexual slavery.

"I never imagined that we would reach this level of chaos, this degree of complete disintegration of the state," Edwar told me. "You don't see that there is rule of law, that there are national institutions. You just see militias, gangsters. There is no respect for diversity, for human rights in this country."

In 2004, Iraq created a State Ministry for Women's Affairs, but it was largely a ceremonial body. An engineer named Bayan Nouri assumed the post of minister in October of 2014. When I met Nouri in May, she was working on the eleventh floor of a parliamentary office building, in Baghdad's International Zone. A soft-spoken woman in her fifties, she wore a long, belted overcoat and a hijab that was pinned under her neck. She said that, if it weren't for the current war against the Islamic State, the situation for Iraqi women would be "better, over all, than before 2003." Nouri expressed concern about the Islamic State's kidnapping of the Yazidis, but she dismissed the claim that sexual violence was increasing: "They say it is

present, but this isn't obvious, it's limited. It existed during Saddam's time, too, but the media doesn't talk about that."

Nouri's ministry had twenty employees, who helped to map out policies, programs, and strategies for other ministries to implement, but it had no budget. "Obviously, if we don't have money or the authority to implement things, it's catastrophic, it's a challenge ahead of us," Nouri said. She and her three predecessors had asked the cabinet and parliament to upgrade the status of the ministry in order to secure a budget. Instead, in August, as part of a government downsizing, the ministry was abolished, along with the Human Rights Ministry, and several others were merged. A former ministry spokesperson told me that Nouri has retired from politics.

Layla grew up in a city in southern Iraq, in a family of seven daughters and two sons. In 1991, when she was fifteen, her brothers were arrested by Saddam's troops, after a brief Shiite uprising. When she went to the prison to plead for their release, she was spotted by a major—she still remembers his name—who said that he would spare them from execution in exchange for her virginity. When she returned home, her mother and brothers refused to believe that she had been raped. Ashamed, hurt, and angry, she left home for the anonymity of Baghdad and turned to prostitution to survive.

She was pimped in Kamaliyah, a rough, predominantly Shiite neighborhood in eastern Baghdad. She married briefly but continued working for herself. In 2003, she was a prostitute in Dora, a neighborhood in the southern part of the city, when the U.S. military arrived in Baghdad. In 2006, she and four other prostitutes were detained by an American patrol on suspicion of being militia informants, because different men were seen coming and going from their apartment. After two weeks in an American detention facility, they were transferred to Iraqi police, who put them in the Kadhimiya women's prison, where Layla spent the next six months. She was released without charge, but her experience in prison persuaded her "to stop being a prostitute who is

part of this world of violence and crime.” She became determined to help girls and women like her.

In 2009, Layla met and married Mohammad, who worked as a taxi-driver and, after the Islamic State took over Mosul, joined a Shiite militia as a volunteer. When they married, she refused to wear a white dress, feeling that she didn’t deserve to. He often offers to buy her one and to hold the ceremony again, but she declines.

“I was comfortable enough to tell him my story, all of it,” Layla said, as we rode in the taxi. “I told him, ‘Will you still accept me?’ He told me, ‘The past isn’t important to me—’ ”

“—the future is,” Mohammad said, finishing her sentence.

Mohammad is a tall, gentle man, with a neatly trimmed brown mustache. He and Layla usually spend Thursday nights, the start of the weekend in Iraq, at night clubs, talking with pimps and the girls they prostitute. But for several weeks the threat of raids by militiamen had kept them away. A month earlier, Layla had been at a club called Memories, in the heart of the capital, when a group of militiamen entered and fired off a number of rounds, killing several prostitutes and capturing others. Layla, who fled through the kitchen, watched as young women were dragged by their hair into cars. Six are still missing, she said.

“Sex fuels militias, because it is a source of money,” Layla told me. “There are two options facing pimps—either they work with the militias or the militias kill them.” Mohammad, fearing for Layla’s safety, usually accompanies her into the clubs, posing as a customer who is her friend. Prostitution is also conducted out of private apartments; Layla visits these alone. I asked Layla and Mohammad how many prostitution dens they frequent, “If I were to show you every one, you wouldn’t be able to see them all in twenty-four hours,” Mohammad said.

Cartoon

“My opponent hasn’t answered one of my e-mails.”

BUY THE PRINT »

As we drove around Baghdad, Layla and Mohammad pointed out dozens of brothels. Many had boarded-up or blacked-out windows, Arabic music blaring from within, and police vans parked outside. Layla rattled off the prices for girls of various ages. The most expensive were “rosebuds,” thirteen or fourteen years old, at three hundred to four hundred dollars a night. Those between twenty and thirty years old ranged from eighty-four to a hundred and sixty-eight dollars a night, and as little as forty dollars for a brief sexual encounter.

We turned off Al-Nidhal Street, in central Baghdad, into an alley jammed with traffic, car horns blaring, and stopped in front of a club. Its front door was an open archway bathed in dark-red and green light. As we sat in the taxi, two young girls—sisters, Mohammad said—rushed out of the club. The older one was fourteen, he said; she wore heavy makeup, a tight red dress, and a thin, pistachio-colored veil over her hair and upper body. The younger girl was nine, her olive skin plastered with face powder several shades too light for her complexion. Bright-red lipstick extended almost clownishly beyond the contours of her lips.

Layla yelled out to the girls, “Come, come here! Where is your mother?” They approached the car, hugged and kissed Layla, and said hello to Mohammad. “Where are you running to?” Mohammad asked. They pointed to a nearby building that held several brothels. “Our house is over there,” the older girl said. They chatted for a few moments before scurrying away. Their mother was a pimp, Layla said, who prostituted the fourteen-year-old and her two older daughters. The younger girl’s job, Mohammad added, was “to draw in the customers from the street, to stand at the door and invite people in.”

Mohammad and Layla hesitated when I asked if I could enter the club. Inside, I would be as vulnerable as any other woman there to the men who show up. “Any girl they see at a night club, they grab and take,” Layla said. “Even if you go in with a policeman, somebody higher than him—a militiaman or somebody—will take you if he wants.” Layla asked Mohammad, “How many have we seen them just take? I don’t want her to go in. If men from Asa’ib come in . . .” Mohammad agreed, and we drove away.

Two days later, I visited Abu Muntathar, the spokesman for Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq. The group’s headquarters is a complex of walled villas in Jadriya, a neighborhood tucked into a loop of the winding Tigris River. Most of the men in the compound were dressed in dusty, mismatched military camouflage and lounged around clutching Kalashnikovs. Abu Muntathar, who is forty-four, wore a crisp white-collared shirt, a navy pin-striped suit, and polished pointy black shoes.

Asa’ib formed in 2006 as a breakaway faction of the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army. Asa’ib is engaged in several key battles against the Islamic State outside the capital, and it has a reputation for combatting al-munkar—activities, including consuming alcohol and engaging in extramarital sex, that are deemed counter to Islam—but Abu Muntathar denied that this was so. “Personal freedoms are permitted for Iraqis,” he said. “Whoever wants to go to a night club or to drink alcohol, we have nothing to do with them. Today, the name of Asa’ib terrifies many, so some people say they are Asa’ib when they are not. If I walk down the street, nobody knows if I am really Asa’ib or not.”

He said that the group was trying to root out impersonators, and that it had detained some, although he wouldn’t say how many or what they were doing. The group’s television station, Al-Ahad, broadcasts two phone numbers for people to call if they have been threatened by men claiming to be members of the militia. The numbers are flashed intermittently at the bottom of the screen. When I asked about the Zayouna killings, Abu

Muntathar denied that his group was involved. “Where is the evidence that says we were?” he said. “You can’t just accuse somebody without evidence. Show me the evidence that it was us. It’s not true.”

Layla’s work takes her all over Iraq, but there’s one area in Baghdad, called Bataween, that is so rough that she won’t enter it. “I’ve drawn a red line around it,” she told me. Bataween was once an upscale, predominantly Jewish neighborhood, with elegant, intricately carved brick buildings and Juliet balconies, but the creation of Israel, in 1948, and the turmoil that followed prompted an exodus of Jewish communities from Iraq and across the Middle East. The façades have crumbled, and the neighborhood is now considered one of the most crime-ridden in the city and an epicenter of prostitution. Still, in the heart of Bataween, and unknown to residents, is a safe house run by the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq. The O.W.F.I., which is based in Baghdad, has a staff of thirty-five and receives financial support from MADRE, an international women’s-rights group.

The O.W.F.I. runs eight safe houses across the country and is looking to open one for Yazidi women, in the north; it is the only organization outside Iraqi Kurdistan to operate such facilities. The Bataween safe house, a squalid two-bedroom apartment, serves as a sanctuary for victims of sexual abuse and for women who have nowhere else to go. Since it opened, in September of 2014, more than a dozen women have stayed there.

The apartment belongs to a young woman with dark skin, a broad smile, and a squeaky voice; I’ll call her Amira. In 2005, when she was about thirteen, her mother died, leaving her to care for her two younger brothers. (Her father was divorced from her mother and she was estranged from her stepfather.) Amira did the only thing that she thought would protect her: after the traditional forty-day mourning period, she married one of her stepfather’s friends, a man in his forties, on the condition that he also take in her two brothers. Soon after, during the Iraq war, Amira, several months pregnant, was walking to the store with neighbors, when a car drove past and its

occupants shot and killed the men accompanying her. She was taken to the Kadhimiya women's prison. "The neighbors said I set the men up to be killed by a death squad, because I am Shiite and they were Sunni," she said.

Amira remained in prison for two years, during which time she gave birth to a daughter, Mariam, and divorced her husband. (She voluntarily granted him custody of Mariam.) A judge finally heard her case and dismissed it. While in prison, she met Dalal Rubaye, a grandmother who works for the O.W.F.I., and was distributing clothes and other items to the inmates. "She used to say that they would help anybody who needs it," Amira said. "When I was freed, I went to find her, and she took me in." Since 2009, no one from the O.W.F.I. has been permitted by Iraqi authorities to enter the women's prison. Rubaye continues to push for permission, and is told each time that the visits are indefinitely postponed.

I first met Amira in 2008, shortly after her release from prison, in an O.W.F.I. safe house in Baghdad. She smiled when I reminded her recently of our first encounter, when she was quiet and shy. "I used to be afraid of everything, of everyone. Now I'm not," she said. "I am proud that I have helped—that one day, whatever happens, somebody might say, 'There used to be a girl called Amira who helped women.' "

The location of the shelter is such a closely guarded secret that only a few O.W.F.I. employees know where it is. It is not officially called a shelter; Iraqi authorities forbid nongovernmental organizations to operate shelters outside Iraqi Kurdistan. (A domestic-violence bill that is currently before parliament includes provisions for shelters, as does the 2012 anti-trafficking law, but no state-run shelter has opened.)

Amira leaves her front door ajar until ten o'clock or so every night. She stepped over a permanent puddle of water at the threshold and led me up uneven concrete stairs into her apartment. The main room was dimly lit, with several tattered red armchairs; a noisy air-conditioning unit filled the one

window. Amira has a five-year-old son, who sat on the floor eating roasted pumpkin seeds. She divorced the boy's father, her second husband, although she's not sure when; she can't read or write and often muddles dates.

Girls hear about Amira's apartment through the O.W.F.I. or from Amira and other activists who carefully approach them on the streets and let them know that there's a safe place if they need it. I stayed there for several days in May, and there were four residents, including Nisrine, a lithe twenty-two-year-old with hair cut short like a boy's. Her mother had brought her in, because she couldn't look after her and was worried that the girl's stepfather would molest her. The three other girls were sisters. (I have changed their names.) Noor, the eldest, was twenty-one, with two children in diapers. She had arrived at the shelter two months earlier, penniless, after her marriage ended. Sabine, the youngest sister, who was fourteen, came with her. She had been living with a physically abusive stepfather who, she said, forced her to beg on the streets and would beat her if she didn't make at least twenty Iraqi dinars, or about seventeen dollars, a day. "Sometimes I'd sleep in the streets instead of coming home, because I was scared of him," Sabine said.

The third sister, Maya, who was eighteen, had arrived at Amira's two weeks earlier. She kept her head down, rarely spoke, and flinched when approached; when another person walked into the room, she seemed to disappear into herself. Only Noor knew what had happened to her. "If you open this subject, you cut her open," she told me.

When Maya was ten, she voluntarily entered a state-run orphanage in Baghdad, telling the administrators that her parents were dead. Five years later, her mother found her and took her back home. "My mother's man would watch her when she showered," Noor said. "He would sexually molest her." A month later, Maya moved into Noor's one-room rental in Bataween, but it wasn't long before a pimp approached her with the offer of free food, shelter, and stability. "She ended up taken by the people behind the red door," Noor said. "They sold her."

The brothel with the red door is a few streets from Amira's shelter. Written above the door is a Shiite religious inscription, "Ya Hussein," which invokes the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson in Karbala, Iraq, one of the defining episodes of Shiite history. Noor said that Maya was sold to a brothel in Basra, three hundred and forty miles away, for two million Iraqi dinars—about seventeen hundred dollars—where she was locked in a room with five other girls. Two weeks before my visit, she had been sold for a full night to a man outside the brothel. She waited until he fell asleep, then escaped, borrowed a phone, and called Noor, who told her to come to Bataween by bus. "She was scared because they all know each other, the red-door people and the people in Basra, but she made it here," Noor said.

Since Maya escaped, her pimp has called Noor several times to demand the return of the money she paid for Maya. The pimps don't know that the sisters are in an apartment just a few streets away. They also don't know what Noor or Sabrine looks like. Noor said that she was not afraid of them, even though she said they have connections to the police. Once, she filed a police report against the brothel, which prompted a call from Maya's pimp. "She told me, 'We know you went to the station and what you said. Do you think they didn't tell us?' Everything I told the police, the woman repeated to me. I told her, 'Fine, if the police won't help, I'll go to the militias.' That scared her."

The anti-trafficking department of the Iraqi police force is situated in a small office within the vast maze of concrete blast walls, topped with coiled razor wire, that divide and subdivide Baghdad's Interior Ministry complex. Since the department opened, in 2012, it has investigated sixty-eight cases of trafficking, most involving foreign-labor exploitation and the illicit organ trade. Captain Haider Naim told me that only five cases involved sex trafficking or prostitution, but he conceded that the figure wasn't reflective of the size of the problem. Naim, who is thirty-five, is one of five officers in

the department; two of them are posted in hospitals to supervise the paperwork for organ transplants.

The department does not have any patrol cars or any officers out on the beat, but several committees meet regularly, and there is a free hot-line number—533—that Naim said was designed to accept reports of trafficking. When I asked a friend to try the number from a cell phone and a landline, it didn't work. I told Naim that human-rights activists and nongovernmental organizations seemed to be attacking the problem of sex trafficking more actively than his department was. He noted that the department's director, a brigadier general, had been transferred to Anbar province after Ramadi fell to the Islamic State. "We are doing what we can," he said. "But, you know, the sudden emergencies . . ."

Naim wouldn't say where most of the trafficking was occurring, because it would mean admitting the department's many inadequacies. "I could tell you this area and that area," he said. "And then I'll hear, 'Why didn't you combat it there? Why didn't you post people there?' We don't have the ability to put people in these places. If we did, we would have eliminated these crimes. We would have dismantled them. We don't have the means."

Layla maintains a small network of tipsters whom she pays for information. One afternoon, while we were sipping sugary tea at the home of a mutual friend, she got a call from an acquaintance in Sadr City, an impoverished, mostly Shiite suburb of northeastern Baghdad. A woman had been dragged from her home and shot dead in the street. Layla quickly headed to the scene, insisting that I stay behind, because she didn't know if the situation was safe. The victim was the third woman who had been murdered that week, Layla heard.

From neighbors, Layla learned that the woman had been killed by a man belonging to a militia, although it wasn't clear which one. Nearby brothel owners told her that the woman was a pimp, and that one of her girls had

informed a militiaman about her activities. "Sometimes I think it can't be stopped," Layla told me a few days later. When she sees victims, she said, "I feel like my insides are ripped open. I am hurt witnessing this." Still, she would continue her work. "I am now confident and strong," she said. "I know that I am a person, not an animal. My wound, my deep wound, is also my strength, because it makes me help others, to be around these pimps, to take them on. Those who bear scars must help the wounded."