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## Iraq's desperate war widows may take shadowy path

**Ancient, dark custom of pleasure marriage offers economic net.**

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BAGHDAD – At 18, Zahraa Abdulrasool married a man 15 years her senior – a good man, she said, who never refused a day's work. To sup-

port his family, he drove a truck from Basra to Baghdad, a perilous journey amid war, sectarian violence and lawlessness.

"I pleaded with him to stop," she said, "to find some other kind of work, but there was no other work."

On a spring day in 2004, he again set off for Baghdad. He never returned. His body was found on the side of a road. He was shot to death,

his truck torched and destroyed. At 23, Abdulrasool was a widow.

"I lost my husband, father of my two boys and my only support in this world," she said.

Left alone to raise her family, she fell into despair. Her way out was to remarry for short periods – again and again and again. She betrothed herself to men who provided dowries and a sense of security and comfort, if only fleetingly.

"It has become a way of life to me," she said.

These temporary marriages – called *mutaa* or pleasure marriages – are said to be on the rise in Iraq, where the ravages of war have made widows of thousands of women. Car bombs, snipers, hoodlums and the random chaos that have gripped the country for the past four years have broken thousands of fam-

► WIDOWS, back page, A18

## Widows: Kin 'must never know'

► FROM PAGE A1

ilies.

"These women find themselves under stress from poverty and need to find some way to provide for their families," said Salma Jabou, who runs a center in Baghdad that helps widows acquire skills and job training.

*Mutaa*, which remains a clandestine practice among Shiite Muslims, dates to the early spread of Islam, during its wars and conquests 1,500 years ago.

"The security situation in the country has taken many husbands and fathers from their families," Jabou said. "We don't know the real number."

Another widow, Iman Hasan, got her first proposal to remarry six months after her husband had died. The man promised to comfort her and help her rear her two young children.

"This man told me he wanted to stop my suffering," she said.

But she considered it too soon, her grief still too fresh. The man was a virtual stranger, and what he proposed was a temporary marriage that Hasan thought disturbing. She rejected her suitor.

"Because I am a widow, they think I am an easy target," she said.

More recently, another man came knocking at her door. The courtship was short. But his proposal was for a lifetime of marriage, and she accepted.

Because *mutaa* remains largely underground due to social stigmas, few

women will talk openly about it. The temporary marriages aren't registered with the government. Sometimes contracts are written, sometimes there are verbal commitments made in front of a cleric or a sheik. In most cases, if not all, participants are Shiites.

"Some call it a pleasure marriage. I think it's a kind of prostitution," said Hannah Edward, a women's rights advocate in Baghdad.

Others disagree.

"This is a legal marriage, but in our society because so many people reject and consider it a shameful subject, the women and the men don't make it public," said Sheik Mohammed Hassan al Kaabi, a Shiite cleric and scholar at a school of religion in Najaf. "*Mutaa* marriage is a legitimate marriage if it is committed to legitimate conditions."

The intention must be pure, he said. A widow must wait at least a month and 10 days after losing her husband.

But many Muslims disavow the practice.

For Abdulrasool, now 26, there is shame.

"I hate that I have become nothing but an object for the men to have their pleasure," she said. She keeps her life secret from her family in Karbala. "They must never know," she said.

Her latest marriage will last a month, she said. The dowry was for 50,000 dinars, about \$40.

She recalled her early days of struggle

and finding a job as a cleaning woman. Slim and beautiful, she always attracted men's glances. But she resisted. One man promised to protect her. Weeks later, he proposed marriage.

She agreed, but soon was crushed. He wasn't after a traditional marriage.

"I felt humiliated. I knew that *mutaa* was permissible, but it was shameful," she said. "He told me it was the only way to give him a right to protect me, and that he wanted me to be his wife so much."

They agreed on a marriage of six months and a dowry worth \$240. They exchanged vows at a mosque. When the six months were up, he was gone.

"Then the food was gone," she said, "and I had to feed my kids."

She found her next marriage at the market when she went begging. A grocery clerk startled her with his own *mutaa* proposal.

"Since that day, I have been going into one *mutaa* marriage after another to keep food on the table," Abdulrasool said.

"I hate my life," she said. "But I don't have the willpower to break away."

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*The Bee's Bobby Caina Calvan is on special assignment for McClatchy Newspapers. McClatchy Newspapers special correspondents Sahar Issa and Jenan Hussein contributed to this report.*