

Open Letter from the Women of Kosova to the Women of Iraq

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A cautionary tale from Kosovar women to women in post-war Iraq

This letter is being released as another war comes to an end, the war in Iraq. It is clear by now that the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein vanished under the heavy bombing of the American and British forces. Many rejoiced the day when a government that persecuted and discriminated against its own people disappeared. The big question is what comes next. To us as women's rights activists, the big concern is what will happen to women in a post-war Iraq. And, as women's groups that work in a post-conflict area, run mainly by a United Nations (UN) administration, we have a very complex story to tell to the women of Iraq.

Kosovar women started organizing in the early 1990's and worked very closely with the local parallel government that resisted the persecution of the Kosovar Albanian population by the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milosevic. When war started in ex-Yugoslavia, we became part of the regional women's networks that raised their voices against the war and provided help to women and refugees in those very hard times. When the war came to Kosova, women's rights activists became refugees themselves, but never stopped working with women and for women, this time in refugee camps in Macedonia and Albania.

We greeted joyfully the decision that put Kosova under a UN administration. The UN was to us the revered international organization that developed and passed key documents that stipulated women's rights and promoted their integration in all levels of decision-making. But, when we returned home we were,

unfortunately, disappointed by the UN Mission in Kosova (UNMIK). We were eager to work with the international agencies in developing effective strategies for responding to the pressing needs of Kosovar women, but most of those agencies did not recognize that we existed and often refused to hear what we had to say on decisions that affected our lives and our future. Some of the international staff came to Kosova thinking that this is an extremely patriarchal society where no women's movement can flourish. And there were those who wanted us to do all the groundwork for them: find staff and offices, set up meetings and provide translations, but were not interested in listening to us and acknowledging our expertise. They had their own plans and their ready-made programs that they had tried in other countries and did not want to change their plans to respond to the reality of our lives.

Instead of dedicating all our energy to helping women and their families put together lives shattered by war, we expended effort in fighting to be heard and in proving to UNMIK that we knew what was best for us, that women in Kosova were not just victims waiting to be helped - they could help themselves, as they did in the past, and they could be key and effective actors in building their own future.

But we did not give up. We raised our voice. We met with UN officials, wrote letters, went to meetings to present our ideas, knowledge and expertise, we talked to donors and built alliances with those international organizations in Kosova and abroad that genuinely saw and related to us as partners in the common efforts to advance women's cause in our country. This is part of an ongoing multi-layered struggle that women's groups in Kosova have been engaged in during the last four years, a struggle to be part of the decision-making process from day one, a struggle to get better organized and become more effective, a struggle to take the place we deserve in shaping our life and the future of our society.

We encourage women in Iraq to organize, raise their voice and be part of the rebuilding of their country.

We saw how the international media portrayed the women of Iraq. They showed only women with a black scarf . They had no voice in the media, like they are not part of Iraq. The same happened with the image of Kosovar women during the war. International media didn't show intellectual women on TV. As if they didn't exist.

We know there are strong, organized, intellectual women in Iraq as there were strong, organized, intellectual women in Kosova or in any other country in the world.

We, Kosovar women don't support a US military administration in post war Iraq. But if the UN takes on civic administration in Iraq, its time they change the principle of their work and concentrate the work in cooperating with local experts, giving space and recognition also to the women's local NGOs.

Prepared by

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