



Iraq

Carina Perelli is a veteran when it comes to organizing elections in post-conflict countries. From the Palestinian Occupied Territories to Nigeria, from Timor-Leste to Afghanistan and now Iraq, she has learned that there is no single recipe for success to ensure women’s participation in the political process. Each society is unique and requires a tailored approach. It is more than just guaranteeing numbers – it is a matter of enfranchisement at all levels.

Electoral Processes

One key aspect that is often overlooked in efforts to promote women’s involvement is to provide for their participation in the institutions important to the electoral processes. Such is the case with the recently established Electoral Management Body in Iraq. The presence of women there is critical to ensure that women’s needs and participation are addressed at all stages, and that the promotion of women takes root through national policies and practices.



Carina Perelli (seated centre) with the two female Commissioners elected to the Electoral Management Body in Iraq (also seated).

“Once women are members of an electoral body, the latter becomes much more aware of the stumbling blocks hindering women’s participation and is more assertive in taking action. A female member, for example, can say, ‘If you open a registration centre between this hour and this hour, that is when housewives and mothers will be cooking and taking care of children, and no women will come to register. You need to extend the hours.’ This kind of problem,” explains Ms. Perelli, Director of the United Nations

Electoral Assistance Division, “is easier for women to detect, because it is part of our own lives.”

Women’s presence in electoral bodies also gives them the opportunity to learn the “nitty gritty” of politics – how to implement laws, how to organize, how to conduct negotiations and other essential skills. Even those women that do not want to become candidates need to be encouraged to participate in the life of political associations and in political

processes to make sure that their concerns are heard and being represented. And Ms. Perelli stresses that the interests of women can be advanced by both women and men.

When it comes to women as candidates, Ms. Perelli is critical of those who just want to count numbers, saying “women are not cattle”.

“It is extremely important to remember that while sometimes you have to take temporary measures – such as establishing quotas – in order to increase the number of women in elected positions, this is not a silver bullet or a magic solution that works everywhere. Numbers can be worthless if they don’t go hand in hand with a full programme of engagement and involvement of women in society from the voter registration level upwards,” Ms. Perelli stresses.



Quotas may provide an easy measure of progress by saying x number of women have been elected, she says, but they must be considered as part of a combination of measures. In all societies and particularly in countries in transition, the quality of women’s participation and representation and the soundness of the institutions put in place are just as important as the numbers.

More Than Just Numbers

When asked to describe a woman she has come across in her work who has particularly inspired her, Ms. Perelli describes the two female Commissioners elected by their communities to the Electoral Management Body in Iraq, which will organize that country’s elections scheduled for January 2005.



“These are examples of typical women citizens who feel all of a sudden there is a chance for them to make a difference.

They could have stayed within their comfort zone, because they are not professional politicians and neither will they be in the future, but they felt that they had something to contribute. In a very firm, camera-shy way, they decided to participate – and they are now putting their lives and their families’ lives in danger in order to organize this election. Basically they have gone through an earthquake in their lives in order to assume an extremely big responsibility just because they felt it was their duty as citizens.”

“These two women,” she continues, “are real examples of what it means to contribute to a more peaceful and democratic society. They were not elected merely because they were women, but because they are citizens with a desire to exercise their right and fulfil their responsibility to contribute to a better society.”