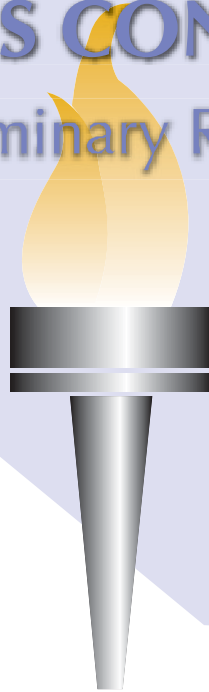


THE HEARTLAND OF IRAQ WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

Preliminary Report



University of Babylon, Hilla, Iraq • October 4 - 7, 2003

Women for a Free Iraq

The American Islamic Congress

The Iraq Foundation

The Heartland of Iraq Women’s Conference Preliminary Report

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Preparatory Committee

Salwa Ali, Tanya Gilly, Eleana Gordon, Fem Holland and Rend Rahim

Conference Hosts

Ala Talabani (Chair), Tanya Gilly, Rend Rahim, Safia al-Souhail and Zainab al-Suwaij

Primary Report Authors

Shereen Gharouf and Eleana Gordon

The speakers included Iraqi women returning from exile who talked about their experiences living

Although much has been written about deteriorating economic, health and social conditions for women in Iraq, not enough focus

Similarly, organizations such as the General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW), ostensibly created to ensure that regulations regarding women were complemented by capacity-building and literacy programs, were in fact geared towards a single goal: squash opposition and consolidate the party's power. GFIW members were forced to enroll and were spied on by the regime.

Zakia Hakki, the first woman judge in Iraq (nominated in 1959), describes the GFIW as follows:

"It was established by the direct order from the tyrant and his fascist bloody regime to be the voice of Ba'ath ideology, and as such did not reflect or represent the struggle of millions oppressed Iraqi women."

Indeed, one of the greatest obstacles in rebuilding Iraq is that civil society was totally destroyed in Iraq. As Françoise Briere de la Rivière of the *International Alliance for Justice* wrote in a statement about women in post-war Iraq on April 24:

*"All the organizations, such as women's organizations, trade unions and newspapers, remained under government control....For the Iraqi women, everything needs to be rebuilt."*ⁱⁱ

Another aspect of Saddam's legacy on Iraqi women that is often overlooked is the psychological toll of decades of repression and terror. The Ba'ath regime pitted Iraqis against each other in various ways – from ethnic cleansing campaigns in which certain ethnic groups were given property confiscated from others, to the use of civilians as informants. These policies created a general climate of fear and mistrust that extended into the heart of the family, since even children were used against their parents.

As René al-Rahim, the Executive Director of the *Iraq Foundation* explained at a State Department briefing on the "Human Rights Legacy on Women of Saddam's Regime" on April 23:

"A particular issue for women coming out of the Saddam era is their mental health – the whole Iraqi nation suffers from post-traumatic stress

disorder, but women bear the brunt of the impact of wars and repression.”

Given this legacy, it is remarkable how quickly Iraqi women organized themselves after the fall of Saddam’s regime. Hundreds of women’s organizations have popped up around Iraq. The emerging women activists we met at the conference were smart, articulate and assertive. They were hungry for information, eager to hear from the panelists, and not shy about voicing their opinions.

Iraqi women know this is a historical time in Iraq and want to be at the table building the new Iraq. Unfortunately, the women’s groups have yet to gain any leverage in the political or social arenas, and so far, the participation of women in politics has been meager. Only two members of the Governing Council are women (the third member, Akila Hashemi, was assassinated in September 2003); there is only one female minister in the newly appointed cabinet (the former minister of public works in the Kurdish government); and there are no women in the preparatory committee for the constitution.

With elections planned in the near future, women have no organizational capability to run election campaigns and compete for office. If they are appointed to any positions at all, it will have to be by a dispensation from male politicians.

The conference participants specifically asked for more training, education and support to build democracy in Iraq. But despite the stated US policy to promote the building of democracy in Iraq, little money has been allocated so far to foster democratization and strengthen Iraqi civil society, and there has been little in the way of democracy or civic education campaigns.

“Winning the Peace Conference Report,” by the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars and Women Waging Peace.

The potential to transform Iraq into a democracy where individual rights and women’s rights are respected is real, but it will require much more focused and sustained support from the United States and other democracies.

“For the Iraqi women, everything needs to be rebuilt,” by Francoise Bie at www.i-a-j.org

CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

DAY 1: WOMEN IN THE NEW IRAQ

Welc ome:

Fern Holland – Conference Organizer, USAID/OTI
Donna Kerner – Senior Program Officer, USAID/OTI
Mayor Titwit – Mayor of Hilla



Op ening Remarks:

A Shared Legacy and Vision for Iraqi Women

Rend al-Rahim – Host from Women for a Free Iraq;
Executive Director of the Iraq Foundation.
Safia al-Souhail – Host from Women for a Free Iraq;
Advocacy Director for the International Alliance
for Justice.
Ala Talabani – Conference Chair; Acting Liaison for
the CPA and the Iraqi Governing Council with
Iraqi women's groups.

The hosts from the Women for a Free Iraq introduced themselves, and explained how their campaign had brought together Iraqi women from different backgrounds who shared a common goal of advocating for the removal of Saddam. Now they are seeking to engage with women inside Iraq to learn about their needs and explore how they can help.

Safia al-Souhail reviewed how Iraqi women of all ethnic and religious backgrounds shared a legacy of oppression under Saddam. Iraqi women should work together to ensure that they are protected from oppression in the new Iraq, by establishing democratic rule based on liberty and the rule of law.

Rend al-Rahim emphasized the emportance of

women's involvement in Iraq's political, social and economic reconstruction from day one. Iraqi women
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DAY 2: WOMEN'S RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY

Presentations

Each working group presented the ideas they discussed on the prior day.

Key Concepts of Liberal Democracy and Discussion.

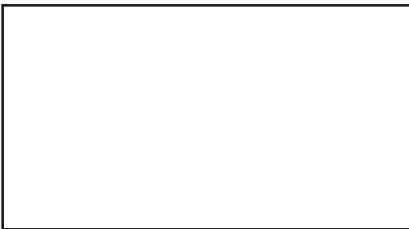
Rend al-Rahim – Executive Director of Iraq Foundation.

Mishkat el-Moumin – Professor of law at Baghdad University.

Zainab al-Suwaij – Host from Women for a Free Iraq; Executive Director of the American Islamic Congress.

Rend al-Rahim made the connection between the problems that the women identified during the workshops, and the lack of democracy in Iraq over 35 years of absolute power for the Ba'ath party. women want government to be responsive to their needs, they will need institutions that ensure that their leaders are representative and accountable, and they must have the freedom to voice their opinions and organize themselves.

Mishkat el-Moumin explained the role of a Constitution in guaranteeing women's rights by making all citizens equal before the law, and establishing protections for the freedoms mentioned by Rend al-Rahim.



Mishat el-Moumin and delegate from Najaf.

Zainab al-Suwaij triggered an animated debate about the role of Islam in the new Iraq when she described concept of separation of religion and state. Some women interpreted this to mean that religious women and men should not be allowed to participate in politics, and others feared that it meant the imposition of secularism as occurred in Turkey and Tunisia (where women were forbidden from covering their hair in public office).

A number of the conservative delegates insisted that Islam should be the official religion of Iraq,

women should cover their hair, and whether the Iraqi National Women's day should be on the birthday of Fatima Zahra, the daughter of prophet Mohammad). Kurdish women were not here to impose their views, but rather to share the lessons they had learned in building women's centers and organizations in the Kurdish self-governed areas outside of Saddam's control. She hoped their experiences might benefit the women of South-Central Iraq. She received a standing ovation.



Ronak Rauf and Tanya Gilly at Babylon ruins

Presentation by Women for Women.

Representative from Women for Women, a DC-based non-governmental organization, described the job training programs they will provide in the women's centers that CPA-South Central is establishing in each province.

Workshop: Creating Action Plans for the Women's Centers.

Kurdish women who run women's centers were assigned to each provincial delegation to discuss their next steps in establishing the new women's centers from establishing their organizational structures, to seeking sources of funding and the types of programs they would establish to provide including job skills training, women's rights and democracy education, and shelters for abused women.

Evening Visit to Hla's New Women's Center.

DAY 4: ELECTIONS

Women's Participation in Elections

A

WOMEN'S ASPIRATIONS FOR THE NEW IRAQ

During their workout session, the participants covered a wide range of issues that they want to see addressed in the new Iraq. Their specific wish-lists for the new Iraq and recommendations are summarized below.

Governance and Constitution

There was a consensus that the new Iraqi constitution should be based on equal rights and opportunities for all citizens, without any distinctions by gender, religion, sect or color." There is a great concern that the kind of economic discrimination and ethnic cleansing campaigns that Saddam instituted throughout his rule be prevented in the new Iraq:

- ¥ Racial, tribal, ethnic, sect-based discrimination should be eliminated in all sectors of Iraqi society.
- ¥ Arabs and Kurds, Turkomen, Chaldeans, Assyrian, and other minorities should be treated equally in accordance with impartial democratic proceedings.
- ¥ Resources and funds should be distributed to all segments of population equally; there should be no preferences for any particular gender or creed.

Religious and ideological freedom and freedom of expression, were specifically identified as critical liberties that should be guaranteed in the new constitution:

- ¥ The new government should be established on a democratic, pluralistic, federal basis that respects minority ethnic groups and communities, including the rights and rituals of non-Muslim minorities.
- ¥ The constitution should guarantee respect for one another's opinion as basis for dialogue and discussion; it should rely on principle of religious freedom and freedom of opinion, as long as it does not conflict with the freedom of others.

At the same time, many of the women insisted that Islam and Shari'ah (Islamic law) play a prominent role in the constitution, arguing that Islam is a religion that does not contradict democratic principles and that does not impose itself on other religions. They did not delve into how to resolve situations where Islamic law might contradict principles of equal rights (for example, when some clerics issue fatwas against women serving as judges).



Women should be included in the Constitutional Committee, which should be elected by Iraqis. The women also pointed out the critical importance of civic campaigns to educate people about democracy:

- ¥ The media must be used to teach people about the role of a constitution, the process for writing it and the most important principles that are needed for a good constitution.
- ¥ High schools, factories, cultural institutions, and government centers should feature regular lectures on the rights and responsibilities of citizens before the law, the principles of democracy and elections.

Legal Reform and Protections for Women's Rights

The women called for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women on the basis of gender, and cited specific examples of legal reforms they wanted to introduce to protect women's rights:

- ¥ Women should be able to pass on their citizenship to their children.
- ¥ The institution of *Muhram* (a woman requiring a male travel companion and guardian) should be abolished.

- ✘ Women should receive equal pay and advancement for the same work as men - without distinction by race, creed, or ethnic group.
- ✘ Women should enjoy the same privileges and opportunities as men, including scholarships abroad, employee benefits, and medical leaves.
- ✘ The minimum age for a women to marry should be 18 years old.

The participants called for protections against all forms of oppression of women in the home as well as the workplace, such as beatings, murder threats and language intended to harass and intimidate women.



Zainab al-Suwaij and women from Basra.

The delegation from Basra was particularly vocal and concerned about eliminating tribal practices in which women are considered the property of the tribe, and tribal leaders make decisions about who the women marry and divorce without their consent.

Increasing Women's Political Participation

The women debated the extent to which they should resort to affirmative action, as some women argued that quotas and other affirmative action measures contradicted the goals of a gender-blind society. Even so, they collectively agreed that there should be quotas for the representation of women in the parliament and municipal councils at a percentage rate of no less than 35%.

The participants also suggested that various institutions be created to ensure that national and local governments are accountable to women, including:

- ✘ A higher council for women in the new Iraqi government to handle women's issues at all levels of Iraqi society.
- ✘ Special committees in all government centers and ministries to track the status of women and ensure that women's rights are respected.

At the same time, women need to take the initiative as well by creating women's organizations, groups, and centers outside of government to advocate unprogrammed women.

Other specific recommendations for increasing the political participation of women included:

- ¥ A comprehensive media campaign around election to increase awareness of female candidates.
- ¥ Training and opportunities for women to gain legal and diplomatic experience and thus obtain higher positions in government and end the monopoly of men in those areas.
- ¥ Access for women to courses and higher education abroad (on equal par with men).

Economic Empowerment of Women:

Programs to promote women's financial independence featured prominently on the women's wish list. Employment and integration in society reinforce the self-confidence of women and faith in their abilities.

They identified an important role for women's centers to provide training in a craft or a vocation that would enable them to enhance their financial situation, such as:

- ¥ English language and computer training courses;
- ¥ Sewing, knitting, and embroidery, as well as handicrafts like ceramics;
- ¥ Sweets and pastry-making, and pickling.

The women should be encouraged to form cooperative markets to sell their products and thereby fund their women centers. Many women understood that financial self-sufficiency was also an important goal for the women's centers so that they wouldn't be dependent on government funding.

WOMEN WANT FROM THE ERAWA GOVERNMENT RESULTS OF WORKS OPS BY DEEGATO

Diwaniyah

- Legislation to improve the status of women in the work place and in the community and to ensure that women are able to work and earn money on an equal basis with men
- The government should provide training and opportunities for women to gain legal and diplomatic experience and thus obtain higher positions in government and end the monopoly of men in those areas
- Equal opportunities for women to access courses and higher education abroad (on an equal par with men)
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Other recommendations were more general and hard to implement, such as calls to eliminate men's unemployment which places a burden on wives; or to improve the general economic situation and increase women's income.

Education and Civic Information Campaigns

The participants called for the institution of compulsory education, at least until 7th grade, especially for girls.

The women emphasized the critical need for educational campaigns to promote not only women's issues, but also democracy and civic education:

¥ The educational curricula should be changed for most educational levels to include principles of human rights and civic society.

Deep cultural changes are still required to truly change society and liberate women:

¥ Men must be educated to inform them of their rights and responsibilities, and also of women's rights and duties, especially in the context of the home.

¥ Awareness and educational courses and lectures should be conducted in places of men's employment, and even in the mosque, during the Friday sermon.;

¥ Specific family and social programs on radio and television should address family rearing and parenting.

Social Programs for Women

The participants' main requests from the government were in the areas of health and childcare, including:

¥ The distribution of health information to rural women, either through television or town and village forums focusing especially on contagious diseases, chronic disorders, the dangers of early marriage and motherhood, as well as lectures about child rearing, sexual health and family planning.

¥ Access to day care centers and kindergartens near places of employment to assist working moms.

- ¥ Public transportation from home to work.
- ¥ Nursing homes for seniors, centers for orphans.
- ¥ The rapid return of street children to schools.
- ¥ The restoration of safety and security.

The participants also looked t women's organizations to address issues such as:

- ¥ Sheltering victims of assault or abuse.
- ¥ Housing homeless widows to prevent them from peddling or engaging in prostitution.
- ¥ Providing leadership training

They hoped that linkages could be created between women of different areas of Iraq, through exchanges, visits and conferences, to share experiences and perspectives

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE HOSTS

Women for Free Iraq is a group of women who came together in February 2003 to speak up about the suffering of Iraqis under Saddam's brutal rule, and rally support for the liberation of Iraq. Today they continue to advocate on behalf of a free, pluralistic Iraq that is based on equal rights, the rule of law and representative democracy. They are supported by various Iraqi-American organizations. www.womenforiraq.org.

The Iraq Foundation is a non-profit, non-governmental organization based in Washington D.C. with offices in Iraq that is working for democracy and human rights in Iraq, and for a better international understanding of Iraq's potential as a contributor to political stability and economic progress in the Middle East. www.iraqfoundation.org.

The American Islamic Congress is an organization dedicated to promoting Islamic values and principles in America. www.aicongress.org