



The Boston Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights

Women Organizing in Iraq

Lina Abood
Sawsan Al-Barak
Ala Talabani
Maha Muna

November 8, 2003

Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy
Tufts University

Lina Abood is a medical doctor, a human rights and women's rights activist, and part of several organizations, including Awakening Iraqi Women and the oldest organization- the Iraqi Women's League. The activists transferred to Kurdistan after being abolished before the war and just began working again in Baghdad. The organization's focus is on making women beneficial members of society, and giving them the rights and tools to be in high positions and make decisions within society. Among other things, they provide centers for orphans, literacy programs and computer training.

Sawsan Al-Barak represents women from the middle and south of Iraq, and was trained as a chemical engineer. Currently, her mission is to establish a center for women's rights. The center is to prepare Iraqi women to take a shared role in society and participate in all activities of life. To these ends, the center teaches principles of democracy, education, peace processes, rights and duties of women in society, as well as a computer skills section, and an internet café to enable

women to network with other activists and sources of information around the world. The center is aimed especially towards the younger generation, “who are the foundation of our society”.

Ala Talabani is an advocate for Kurdish and women’s rights, who has worked with women’s issues for 14 years. Former vice president of the Kurdistan Women’s Union, under Hussein’s government Ms. Talabani was fired from engineering and teaching positions for being Kurdish and for not being a member of the ruling Baath Party. Following 1991 Persian Gulf War, she and her family fled Iraq, eventually arriving in the United Kingdom. Since returning to Iraq, she has organized and chaired three conferences on women’s political participation in post-war Iraq and co-founded the Iraqi Women’s High Council in October 2003.

Maha Muna is the Peace & Security Program Manager at UNIFEM. She was in Iraq in June as part of UNIFEM’s ongoing efforts to support Iraqi women’s organizing. During this time she met with both the CPA and many Iraqi women’s organizations.

[Editor’s note: for reasons of security, names are not attached to specific comments.]

Q: Could you give us a brief summary of women’s conferences since the start of the war?

A: The first conference was on July 9th, organized by Voices of Iraqi Women. The focus was on the constitution and broader issues of democracy. The stated goal of the conference was the inclusion of women in the political process. The women wanted a 40% representation of women in the government, and discussed how to create a quota for women, and how to get women to participate at all different levels. Another issue was the need for the Council to find funds for NGO projects.

The second conference, in Babylon, concentrated more on civil society and educating organizations about the available legislation, such as CEDAW or 1325. This occurred in part because the suggestions of the first conference were entirely ignored by all authorities to whom they were presented. At this point, women activists were disappointed in the matter of choosing representatives in the nascent government (only 3 out of 25 were women, and an assassination eliminated the most active and vocal champion of women’s issues, Akila al-Hashimi).

The focus during the third conference (Oct. 22-23), therefore, once again shifted to political participation.

The conferences have grown dramatically and reveal the strong interest and commitment of women activists in Iraq. The first meeting began with about 80 participants, the second brought about 180 together, and the third swelled to about 250 leaders and activists. Participants were contacted through e-mail, through USAID, through international organization mailing lists, etc., with organizations then being asked to choose their own delegates after spots were assigned.

Maha Muna on UNIFEM's role: UNIFEM has been in Iraq since 2000, and has supported Iraqi women's participation in women's conferences in the region. Iraq had ratified CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, and often described as an international bill of rights for women). The current worry is that some of these gains will be lost in the post-conflict.

Most recently, UNIFEM had been working in Iraq to set up a National Women's Symposium. One meeting had already taken place in Baghdad, but after the August 19th 2003 attack on the UN headquarters, further meetings have to be organized at the local, regional level due to both security and financial concerns; with security allowing, a national symposium for women activists under the auspices of the UN will be organized. It would be important to hold such a conference when we can guarantee the safety of the women and their families to attend.

In the meantime, UNIFEM will support local women's organizations - formal and informal groups – and civil society organizations that work at the community level. These organizations offer services during the current insecurity, they help women to better link to humanitarian assistance that is available through the UN and they organize training and income generation programs. Women's leadership will also be fostered, so that women who would like to play an active public role can receive training and support to organize and participate in Iraq's reconstruction.

Q: There seems to be some confusion about whether the situation of women improved or worsened under Saddam, and some of you mentioned the progressive role of activists in the 1970s and 1980s. Could you clarify the time-line?

A: The 1970s and 1980s were a Golden Era, for the entire society, with required education and literacy campaigns. For political reasons, Saddam was using these social issues in order to get the population behind him to gain support in the war in Iran.

During the 1980s, the momentum of the 1970s was still going. And we had quite a momentum built up. Most people don't realize that Iraq had its first woman minister in 1959, the same year as the US had its first female representative.

In the 1990s, according to Saddam's personal needs, he tried to diminish the role of women. After the end of the Kuwait war, and when there was a resistance to him in 1991 (the uprising in the south), he began to show his ugly side. Many women professionals left their jobs because of lack of encouragement and the bad economic situation (under sanctions). Religion came to play a role again. The space for women was decreased, and their role in society was decreased. Using references to the Sharia, the role of women was redefined. Another issue, a political one, was that a requirement to play an active role meant that you had to sign a charter of the Baath party before you could participate.

Many women who could afford not to work chose to opt out and step back, but many women could not afford this and signed the charter for economic reasons. The speaker, who had to keep

working, faced great resistance because of her independent status, and received no promotions. In this repressive environment, society and education regressed.

Q: How do you see the conditions of women under the occupation?

A: After the war, during the occupation, there were so many changes. Part of the democratic process for women returned. The speakers stated that the kidnapping and rape charges were exaggerated by the media; while kidnapping for ransom did occur in the early days of the occupation, kidnapping and rape have now diminished.

The greatest security risk at the moment is for civilians who get in the way of the troops. Most attacks are directed towards the occupation forces, and it is often difficult for civilians to get out of the way of these attacks.

Q: How do you view the Governing Council?

A: The Governing Council (GC) was selected by outsiders, according to tribes and ethnicity. This is wrong, because they were not elected for ability, but only for being tribal leaders and ethnic representatives. The GC of Iraq has come to be a stereotypical vision of what the occupying forces believe the country is. By imposing a government on ethnic lines, the Coalition has reinforced these divisions. This has been disastrous for women whose participation has been deemed “less important” than the requirements of ethnic balance and tradition.

Current criteria for the candidate to fill the position of the female Shi’ia leader who was killed are that the woman should be Muslim and conservative. This is particularly unfortunate since the woman who was assassinated was the only really active voice for women, and a favorite for liaison work with the UN and women’s organizations.

Women activists have no way of knowing the strategy of the GC, who are in a military compound with no phone connection or way to contact them. One speaker stated, “My uncle is the leader of the GC, another speaker’s brother is on it, and we don’t know anything - imagine the situation of the other women.”

A further problem for women activists is the division of authority resulting from the GC’s lack of power. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in fact retains control of the country, and all decisions end up being made through the US or the UK. Who, then, do activists lobby? The established ministries now have better benefits and a higher authority than the GC. The CPA has partner US Ministers for each GC Minister, and the GC has become more dysfunctional because of this structure. Paul Bremer already exercised his veto over the GC to bring in the Turkish troops. As a result of his veto, the GC twice rejected the Turkish troops and has been revealed as powerless to control politics in the country. *[editor’s note: this decision has since been reversed]*

The reason for the failure of the Governing Council is partly that the CPA disagrees with and overrides them. There were municipal council elections in each small town. After a few months,

the trend emerged that the CPA didn't like the representatives elected. The traditional way that the municipalities relate to the government through the ministries wasn't put in, and the natural link between the GC and the municipalities was broken. This has backfired because people are seeing this as a reason for opposing the CPA, because the municipalities are not serving their people. The dilemma facing activists is that it is through the CPA and USAID that things can be accomplished, but it is the GC that will be the eventual authority after Coalition forces leave the country.

The situation of women's issues in the GC is very weak. Though activists have continued to lobby everyone individually, some of the men on the GC refuse to even shake hands with the women. Efforts were made to get the support of the two remaining women on the Council, [Songul Chapook and Rajaa Habib Khuzai] but after a visit Rajaa Habib Khuzai, she refused to be identified to press as a supporter. The women in the GC did not come with a history of working on women's issues, and they are not politicians or even activists. There is a lot of pressure on them in the government, the men won't let them speak a lot, and there is therefore no representation.

The few women in the Coalition are working in USAID, civil society, they are very supportive, but they are not CPA and have no power.

Q: Do you think the assassination of the woman member of the Governing Council was connected to her stance on women's issues or the UN?

A: Akhila was a member of the Baath party- most people tend to think it was the Baathists that killed her.

Q: Are women more organized politically than men?

A: Yes, in some ways women are more organized, and "our suffering is united," whether Kurdish or from the south. The kind of ethnic divisions that come to play a role are not quite as evident among the women activists in Iraq.

Q: What would you say are the most critical issues now facing Iraqi women politically?

-- We need large representation in the constitutional assembly- 40%- and as many women actually writing the constitution as we can get.

-- How to get out from under USAID and the Congress? If we consider them a necessity for the moment, how do we juggle the conflict of authority? Who do we work with: USAID, the CPA, or the GC? There is agreement that whether US money is tainted or not, it is desperately needed, and will therefore be accepted.

-- The key is to deal with targeted funds:

USAID has 30% targeted to women, but the problem is the money targeted to Iraq is not even getting to Iraq. While there have been four expensive studies done in Iraq on education,

apparently no funds were actually allocated for educational programs. Perhaps, now that there's an Inspector-General, it is possible to advocate for an allocation for women. Of the \$1.5 million in aid, none is allowed to go for administration (which cripples NGOs who are unable to write up projects)

Q: How Do We Operationalize USAID Funds, NGO Funds, and Contractors?

A:

- demand to know the terms of the money
- seek local remedies- fund the Iraqi organizations
- ask the US to follow the local procedures
- sell it to the US as the most effective thing for US officials: follow the rules that would be followed in the US when hiring contractors, funding programs
- ask for the women's quotas, and the third woman on the GC
- draft in policy language, and say who you represent

Q: What are you most worried about in the upcoming writing of Constitution?

A: The Assembly is supposed to select a smaller group of writers to actually write the constitution -- but there are no women in this group. As it stands now, we need greater representation.

In this constitution itself, we want to work on the practical side of things -- we've identified some generic issues from the Declaration of Human Rights, and identified elements in the legal framework on women's representation, rights to travel, and family law that will be reconsidered. Everything from global to local issues is up for discussion. Obviously, having representation on the constitution writing committee that is aware of women's issues and supports them is vital.

Q: If you have the possibility to select the women, how would you select them? Often, directly following conflict, mobilization for a process like this is required during period as short as a week-- and it seems important to start thinking about that now.

A: Candidates can come from a pool...In the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, there is a post for gender. We should have a say in how that post is filled. The fact is that we have lists, and we have made recommendations and they have been ignored. Generally, those lists come from nominations of women from the Iraqi Women's Council and the conferences. There are some very obvious names.

Q: What can women outside of Iraq do to help?

A:

- Put pressure on the GC through the CPA. Your strength as Americans is that you have more influence over the government of Iraq than we do as Iraqi citizens. Some people to lobby are Ambassador Bremer, Condoleeza Rice.

- If the goal is to lobby the CPA for the establishment of a Women's Committee, with the involvement of some members of the CPA, a few liberal men, some women from the outside and some activists, then:
 - Lobby the CPA for the status of the Committee
 - Use the American networks: WWP, the Iraqi foundations and lobbies, Women for a Free Iraq, the American Islamic Congress
 - Set up a connecting listserv (what you need ideally are people with the best contacts in USAID, and Congress, and most of those are the aid organizations- if those could be used...)

Summary

MAJOR PROBLEMS

- Choices of representatives on the Governing Council and/or General Assembly made according to religious, ethnic and tribal affiliations
- Female GC nominees being forced to identify their beliefs on relations between men and women
- Unclear relations of accountability among and between the US/US governing bodies and the Iraqi governing bodies
- Need for Accountability and Transparency in the CPA and the GC
- Lack of range of NGO/IGO support and aid in country
- Security risks affect organizational meetings and momentum
- Access to Governing Council is limited and erratic
- Women's participation is not uniformly valued or pursued

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

- Increase knowledge of women's organizing efforts and goals outside of Iraq
- Develop network of organizations to lobby representative governments (US etc.) to
 - a) support women's organizing in Iraq and
 - b) apply parallel pressure within other countries (US, UK) to achieve similar goals
- Develop a listserv or web site
- Identify important and powerful partners in the US/UK
- Access to IGO/NGO groups
- Access to aid
- Continue to organize for the dissolution of CPA
- Avenues need to be opened to bypass the CPA, so that when/if the CPA disappears women activists are not left in the dark. Quote their own assessments in all arguments
- Continue to organize for transparent and effective levels of accountability within the Iraq provisional government

- Pressure on Iraq and US to conform to international treaty responsibilities
- Use those treaties as ideal forms for governance, and include their provisions in the constitution
- Use Iraqi women's strong history of organization, political and economic participation, to rejuvenate and re-educate for women's participation—to challenge those who would say that Iraqi culture does not approve or allow of women's participation
- Continue to document outcomes and power of women's organizing efforts