

No Place Yet for Women in Reconstruction

By Ushani Agalawatta

Early this month, U.S. President George W. Bush proclaimed from the flight deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln that, "the United States and our allies have prevailed... And now our coalition is engaged in securing and reconstructing" Iraq.

But almost a month later, it seems that a lack of basic security continues to be the primary obstacle in improving the status of women in the occupied nation.

Although not considered a humanitarian disaster, the conditions for women are desperate, says Shannon M. Meehan, field representative for Refugees International in Iraq. "In Baghdad and other cities, women are visibly absent from the markets and shopping areas, few are out and about on the streets for regular food and necessity shopping, or if they are, they are with groups of other women or their brothers or husbands."

Meehan has travelled throughout southern and central Iraq since late April, speaking to local women.

She told IPS that the general consensus among those women was echoed in the comments of two female doctors in Basra, who said, "We want equality but within our cultural and

religious context, not like the West. We want men to have a certain religious and family dominant role, but not at the abuse or sacrifice of the status of women. We need more education. We need security and peace. The conditions are still bad now for security."

Before 1991, the female literacy rate in Iraq was amongst the highest in the region. Iraqi women enjoyed the basic freedoms of going to school, driving, dressing as they pleased and competing with men for careers in whatever fields they wished, a situation unknown to many women in neighbouring Arab countries.

"Iraqi women will certainly be better off without Saddam Hussein, but will they be better off in post-war Iraq?" asked Laura Liswood, senior scholar at the University of Maryland's Academy of Leadership and secretary general of the Council of Women World Leaders, in an article in *Christian Science Monitor*.

Not yet, according to

Meehan. "I see no evidence of the current Coalition Authority (the U.S.-led Office of the Coalition Provisional Authority or OCPA) making women's participation a priority. There is no gender focal point position, only a vaguely defined part-time position, which is currently not in place."

Because women account for 55 percent of Iraq's population, it seems obvious that they be active participants in the reconstruction of their war-battered country. But to date, they are an untapped resource living in fear in a volatile environment, say observers.

"Women still do not have enough representation in the transitional government of Afghanistan...there are tremendous obstacles that prevent women from taking a stronger place in society. The most serious of these is the threat to women's security, which makes it nearly impossible for them to participate fully in public life."

"From my interviews and research performed in order to understand the Coalition's plans for civil society, at the present moment I see no evidence of an organised plan for the participation of women and/or minorities by the current Coalition Authority," she added.

In a report completed at the end of April, Refugees International made recommendations to ensure the safety and participation of women in Iraq's reconstruction. It told U.S. officials and the OCPA they must work diligently to secure the region and guaran-

tee women access to basic rights and services.

Additionally, the OCPA should quickly appoint gender focal points in each of the 19 political regions of Iraq to ensure women's needs are incorporated into humanitarian assistance, and to guarantee they can effectively participate, consistent with Iraqi norms, in civil administration and reconstruction efforts, the group advised.

Meehan says such recommendations need support. "I do not yet see much evidence of a strong lobby advocating on women's issues in Iraq, which is a shame," she said. "Women's issues, for the international community, have been lumped together with all the other human rights issues at the moment and thus the urgent attention to women...has been lost."

Recently the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), a group that includes 24 non-government organisation (NGO) members and more than 1,000 individuals, issued an open letter to support and demonstrate solidarity with Iraqi women.

"We urge the women of Iraq to start now, as international attention is focused on the rebuilding of their country, to make sure they play a role," the AWN wrote. "And we urge them to ensure that security measures are put in place throughout Iraq so they truly can enjoy the freedoms and opportunities promised to them. The promises are not real until a system is in place to secure them."

Although Afghan women have made gains in the 18 months since that country's reconstruction began, many obstacles still exist, AWN says. "Women still do not have enough representation in the transitional government of Afghanistan...there are tremendous obstacles that prevent women from taking a stronger place in society. The most serious of these

is the threat to women's security, which makes it nearly impossible for them to participate fully in public life."

Referring to reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and Kosovo, peace agreements in Northern Ireland and constitution building in post-apartheid South Africa, Liswood wrote, "As history has shown, women's involvement in the initial stages (of reconstruction) is critical to the eventual success of any agreement reached. And, if international law carries any weight in post war Iraq," she continued, "it's important to note that the UN Security Council resolution 1325 mandates that women have meaningful participation in post-conflict resolution, wherever it takes place."

This week, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan named UN human rights chief Sergio Vieira de Mello to serve as his special representative in Iraq.

At a press briefing, Vieira de Mello spoke of his key responsibilities. "It will not come to you as a surprise, as the Secretary-General just indicated, that I consider the development of a culture of human rights in Iraq as fundamental to stability and true peace in that country."

"I shall place particular importance, as agreed with the Secretary-General, on the need to ensure women's rights and their full participation in the consultative processes—not least the political one—that lie ahead."

"I think experience has shown that an assertive policy in the promotion of the full range of the human rights of women—be they civil, political, or economic, social and cultural—can only lead to peace, stability, development and tolerance," added Vieira de Mello.

Source: Inter Press Service, 31 May 2003, <<http://www.ips.org>>.

Women in Action promotes the empowerment of women through information sharing, communication, and networking. It is published by Isis International-Manila, an international non-government women's organisation, founded in 1974. Isis has sister offices in Santiago, Chile and Kampala, Uganda. Its network reaches over 50,000 individuals and organisations in 150 countries.

Isis International-Manila acknowledges the support and financial assistance of the following partner-donor organisations: Bilance (The Netherlands), Canadian International Development Agency (Canada), Christian Aid (UK), Church Development Service (EED) (Germany), Global Fund for Women (USA), Global Ministries-The United Methodist Church (USA), Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (The Netherlands), The Minister for Development Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Netherlands, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norway), Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Denmark), Swedish International Development Authority (Sweden), United Nations Development Fund for Women, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (USA), and NOVIB (The Netherlands).

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