

Commission on the Status of Women

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PANEL II

**Equal participation of Women and Men in decision-making processes, with
Particular emphasis on Political Participation and Leadership**

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* The paper has been reproduced as submitted.

Madame Chairperson, I thank you for the opportunity to speak before you about the “Equal participation of women and men in decision making processes at all levels”. Coming from Iraq at one point of my speech today I would like to focus also on the importance of women in post-conflict reconstruction.

The found mental question I would like to impose here this afternoon is:

Can there be democracy with marginalization? *No.*

There are many women in politics today. There are a fair number of women in Arab parliaments, the Iraqi assembly being a notable example with 25% of the 275-member assembly are women. But the presence of women in the halls of power is not sufficient. That is mere tokenism. What matters is the effect of that presence.

When we talk about equality we must talk about equality of opportunity rather than equivalence. The real reason women should be engaged in politics at all levels is not to emulate men but to bring a unique feminine to bear on the decision-making process. Equal rights mean being able to bring your own perspective to bear. It does not mean doing what men do, and how they do it.

Women, Human Rights & Decision-Making

Issues of women's empowerment and their full and equal participation in public life are human rights issues. Human rights norms and standards guarantee women the human rights to non-discrimination in all aspects of political, economic, and social life, and to full and equal participation in decision-making and access to power at all levels. At the same time, realization of the full spectrum of human rights for women depends on women's full and equal participation in decision-making.

The Human Rights at Issue

The human right to full and equal participation in power and decision-making includes:

- The human right to participate on equal terms with men in shaping and implementing decisions and policies affecting themselves, their families, communities, and societies, at the local, national and international levels.
- The human right to equal access to public service.
- The human right to equal access to education and information.
- The human right to freedom of expression and opinion.
- The human right to equality between men and women and to full and equal partnership in the family and society.

The other issue is: Tokenism or real participation?

In the last few months, Iraqi women have witnessed with dismay the erosion of Iraq's secular family law. There is serious pressure to replace it with a law based on Islam and religious law--a change that will impact negatively on all spheres of women's lives. The reversion to religiously-based personal law in the new Iraqi constitution could encourage Islamic forces across the region to pressure governments to slow down measures to expand women's rights.

But the last few decades have witnessed a palpable transformation in the role of women in Middle Eastern societies. Today, except for Saudi Arabia, women have the right to vote and to be elected to parliament or to local councils in all the countries in the region--from Afghanistan to Morocco.

Today, in most countries in the region, a handful of women also serve as ministers, ambassadors, deputy ministers, and even judges. Women still constitute a low nine percent of cabinet ministers in the region. Iraq has six women ministers, Jordan three, Bahrain two, and Kuwait one.

Governments in the region are increasingly ready to open educational opportunities to women at all levels and to allow women to work.

It is primarily women themselves who have pushed for wider access to education and employment, for changes in the personal status laws, and for political participation and general empowerment. Advances in women's role and rights are also due to enlightened leaders who provided support, international conventions that obligate governments to specific practices, and a multitude of conferences focusing on the improvement of the status of women around the world. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is the most important vehicle provided to women activists. Seventeen Arab countries have ratified CEDAW, though usually with reservations, especially regarding compatibility with the *sharia*.

Education, employment, and political participation have focused attention on personal status laws. Some women activists argue that women can be fully integrated and enjoy equal rights as citizens in Islamic societies even under existing personal and family laws. Others believe that these laws must be changed, or reinterpreted, if women are to be fully integrated into society and enjoy equal rights. This debate continues in all Islamic countries in the Middle East.

While advances are undeniable, much work remains to be done. Despite the opening up of the job market, for example, women in the region account for only 32 percent of the labor force--a low figure even among developing countries. Besides, women in the Middle East are no longer satisfied with what they regard as tokenism: an ambassador or a deputy minister here, a handful of women parliamentarians there.

Women are seeking representation and participation based on merit and qualification. Until that is achieved, a number of women activists have been pushing for a quota system. They note that without it, we would not have 87 women in the Iraqi parliament and 35 women in the Moroccan parliament. The quota system is not perfect, but women activists feel it can be an important instrument for breaking down barriers and furthering women's political participation and integration.

Post-Conflict Reconstruction: The Importance of Women's Participation

WOMEN ARE CRITICAL TO DEVELOPMENT

The promotion of women's rights is often discussed as a moral imperative. I would like to focus today on the compelling economic arguments for giving women a greater role in post-conflict reconstruction. If the goal is to improve health, nutrition or education, reduce fertility or child mortality, stem the spread of HIV, build robust and self-sustaining community organizations, encourage grass-roots democracy, and ultimately, temper extremism, successful efforts must target women.

Economists increasingly recognize that nothing is more central to development than the economic, political and social participation and leadership of women. This is particularly true in post-conflict societies, where women often make up the majority of the population and have primary responsibility for raising the next generation. A broad set of data now show that raising female education, increasing their control over resources, and lifting their political voice can have a profound impact on development.

Giving women more control over resources is also important. Simply put, women tend to invest more in the family than men. When women control income, more is devoted to education, health and nutrition-related expenditures, and less is spent on alcohol and cigarettes. The outcome is not trivial - for example, increases in female income improve child survival rates 20 times more than increases in male income. There is, not surprisingly, also evidence that women in positions of political leadership make different policy choices than men. This has broad and potentially profound implications for the way that resources are allocated at the local-level, and therefore for development and post-conflict reconstruction. The bottom line is that in many countries, women are excluded politically and their needs tend to be neglected. Giving women access to political power begins to redress that.

These findings are incredibly important to keep in mind when discussing post-conflict situations, particularly in Iraq where there are significant cultural pressures, reinforced by religious values, restricting the role of women. In Iraq, women's rights represent a line in the sand between religious conservatives and those with a more modern, progressive vision.

WOMEN'S CRITICAL ROLE IN IRAQ

There is a widespread perception that under Saddam Hussein's secular regime, gender equality in Iraq was the norm. This is simply untrue. Yes, women made up 19% of parliament, and 20% of the workforce, but the large gender gap in education immediately reveals the problem with this perception. According to UNESCO data and the World Development Indicators (WDI), less than a quarter of Iraqi women are literate, whereas literacy for men is 55%. This is the second largest gender gap in literacy in the Middle East (after Yemen), and one of the largest in the world. Although women in Iraq clearly start from a higher educational level than women in many neighbouring countries, and there is a more substantial existing educational infrastructure, there is a pressing need to close that country's large gender gap in literacy.

Another pressing issue for Iraqi women is to ensure that in the new political structure, the rights guaranteed them by the provisional constitution are protected. It is critical that the international community use its leverage in the run-up to the scheduled constitutional review process in the coming months to ensure protection of women's political and civil rights, even if that should conflict with other strategic objectives. Women should have a prominent role in the constitutional process going

forward. It is emblematic of the gulf between rhetoric and reality on women's rights in Iraq that there were only a few women included in the 24-member constitutional committee that drafted the interim constitution. Women should also be well represented in the judiciary.

It is also important that the international community use every opportunity to empower women in Iraq by channeling economic opportunities to them. Laws restricting women's employment should be abolished. Women should be well-represented in all economic planning and decision-making processes. And small business loans and business training resources should be targeted toward women.

Closing gender gaps in Iraq and many other countries will take many years, but the stakes could not be higher. We must stay the course on promoting women's rights if it hopes to reap the benefits of democracy and economic development.

The Strength of Women's NGOs

The debate over inclusion of women provided an opportunity for women's groups in Iraq to step forward as one of the most active elements in the newly developed Iraqi civil society. Women's groups started to push their issues with what resources they had, mainly their own time and energy. They began outreach and mobilization efforts in their communities, and started to actively lobby government officials, including the Governing Council, to support women's rights. Women's groups quickly mobilized, and as early as August 2003, more than 50 groups were able to come together to initiate a coordinating council between women's NGOs with the objective of avoiding duplication and assisting one another. The coordinating council elected a seven-member NGO steering committee, which later developed into the Iraqi Women's Network. A major part of women's success was "their willingness to exchange information and coordinate amongst each other."

It became clear that the future governance of Iraq was not going to automatically incorporate women, and Iraqi women of all ideologies and backgrounds were going to have to work hard to expand existing roles and create additional space for women. The preliminary plan for governance included a law that aimed to create "local caucuses" by the end of May 2004. The convening of a "Transitional National Assembly" would be based on those caucuses. The caucuses were to represent major political parties and the largest governorates nationwide. The likelihood of having women appointed to these caucuses was very bleak, and women's groups decided to fight for a quota system that would ensure women's inclusion. Due to local and internal pressure, the concept of local caucuses was dismissed, yet this triggered a second alarm for the women's groups and served as a further catalyst for them to strive towards women's inclusion in the new government. It became increasingly clear that nothing was going to be given to Iraqi women no matter what was being promised, and that women needed to closely monitor the process and be ready to organize responses to events as quickly as possible.

Action Agenda for Women

All Iraqis have been affected by the violence, deprivation and hardships imposed by war. The continued lack of electricity, clean water, sufficient food, adequate housing and medical care affect everyone. This Action Agenda views these problems through the lens of women's specific needs. However, because women hold a pivotal role as caretakers for both the family and the society, support for women is converted to wider societal benefits. The Action Agenda for Women is a prescription for a stronger Iraq.

Basic needs must be fulfilled.

Women are disproportionately affected by the lack of basic resources, as they are generally responsible for managing the household. The lack of basic resources not only places excessive burdens on women, it limits the time they have to engage in economic and community activities. When basic needs are not met, the forces of resentment and retaliation are strengthened, and women in

turn suffer the consequences of the cycle of violence.

Security must be a priority throughout the society.

The lack of security and the fear of violence constricts the lives of women at all levels of society. Additionally, some forms of violence are specifically directed against women, including rape and abduction. The general level of violence erects barriers to women's pursuit of work opportunities, education and political participation. Reducing the level of violence is essential to creating a stable foundation for women's broader social participation.

Economic opportunities for women must be increased in both the formal and informal sectors.

Women must have the training and opportunity to gain formal sector employment as the economy is reconstructed. In the meantime, however, microcredit and small business loans will allow women to generate income to establish some measure of economic security. This avenue is crucial for socially excluded women who have lost husbands and other male relatives in conflict and are newly responsible for a household.

Women must fully participate in the drafting and passage of the new Iraqi constitution.

Iraq's future constitution should reflect gender equity and define the rights and responsibilities of both men and women. It should include equal protection clauses that do not impose discriminatory family and personal status codes. Women must have a role in the process of developing and ratifying the new constitution and its articles that pertain to gender equity.

Individual women's organizations and umbrella groups must be supported.

When women have been excluded or bypassed, NGOs have created a presence in Iraq that cannot be ignored. Their collective advocacy has amplified the voices of women and achieved some hard-won victories. Internal and external support for women's NGOs is essential to building up a force within civil society that can advocate for women at the grassroots and bring gender issues to the forefront of the larger political landscape.

Iraq must tap the stored knowledge and skills held by the older generation of educated and experienced women.

Iraq cannot afford to waste the talents of the older generation of experienced women, the country's "hidden treasures." If tapped, these women can contribute knowledge and skills to the rebuilding of Iraq and bridge the gap to the next generation of women, who have not benefited from the same opportunities.

Conclusions :

There are two opposing winds which are pulling the world in different directions. The first is the wind of destruction that is embraced by religious extremism: extremism as a mode of thinking, terrorism as a mode of conflict resolution, and enclosure as a mode of living. The second is the wind of hope that is embraced by liberal democrats: freedom as a mode of thinking, dialogue and peace as a mode of conflict resolution, and openness as a mode of living. Which wind will prevail depends on how we as citizens of this world act and take responsibility.

I call upon all women in the world who are looking for a better future for themselves and their children to work and pull together so that the wind of hope sweeps across our *world*.