

# Windows *of* Opportunity

The Pursuit of Gender Equality in Post-War

**Iraq**

Women for Women International Briefing Paper

January 2005

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WOMEN *for* WOMEN  
International



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Women for Women International .....	4
Acknowledgments .....	5
Dedication .....	6
Executive Summary .....	7
Introduction .....	9
Methodology and Information Sources .....	11
Historical Context .....	13
Women's Needs and Priorities .....	15
Hope and Action .....	20
The Politics of Exclusion: Iraqi Women's Participation in the Establishment of the Transitional Government .....	22
The Politics of Appeasement: A Legislative Battle Foreshadows Future Conflicts Between Civil and Religious Authority in Iraq .....	25
Conclusion .....	28
Action Agenda for Women .....	29
Appendix: 2004 Household Survey Instrument and Demographics .....	31



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## Windows of Opportunity

Women for Women International provides women survivors of war, civil strife, and other conflicts with the tools and resources to move from crisis and poverty to stability and self-sufficiency thereby promoting viable civil societies. Since 1993, the organization has provided its tiered program of direct financial and emotional support; rights awareness; vocational and technical skills training; and access to income generation support to more than 33,000 women survivors of war.

The group launched its activities in Iraq in June 2003 when it started providing services to socially excluded women aimed at addressing their short-term economic needs while enhancing their capacity to create long-term economic solutions. In the process, an intensive training in women's economic, political, and social roles and value in society was incorporated. This strategy stems from Women for Women International's conviction that economic solutions are not sustainable if they are not paired with active participation in social and political discourse.

Since 2003, nearly 800 women from Baghdad, Hillah, and Karbala have been served by Women for Women International's programs in Iraq, indirectly benefiting more than 2,900 family members. In 2005, Women for Women International will offer services to an additional 1,000 women. The organization also provides capacity building support to local women's NGOs, and collaborates with Iraqi governing bodies and international agencies to address the needs of Iraqi women at both the leadership level and the grassroots. As the first and only international NGO with operational programs in Baghdad focused exclusively on supporting the active participation of women, Women for Women International currently has more than 40 national staff based in Baghdad, Hillah and Karbala serving both Central and South Central Iraq. In addition to its operations in Iraq, Women for Women International works in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kosovo, Nigeria and Rwanda.



## Acknowledgements

Women for Women International thanks Zainab Salbi, President and CEO of Women for Women International and Manal Omar, Country Director, Women for Women International - Iraq, for providing the vision for this report, and in particular, acknowledges the energy and leadership of Manal Omar for bringing it to fruition.

Women for Women International would also like to recognize Tahmina Rahman for conducting background research with the support of Layla M. El-Wafi; Paula Van Gelder for leading the editorial process; and Corey Oser for reviewing and editing the report. We are also grateful to the research team of the Iraq Center for Research & Strategic Studies in Baghdad for its research and analysis.

The report was made possible by a grant from The Sigrid Rausing Trust. We deeply appreciate the Trust's financial support and leadership in supporting women's rights to equality and freedom from oppression, violence or economic exclusion.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the more than 1,000 Iraqi women who agreed to be interviewed for our research, and the Women for Women International program participants who shared their personal stories.



## Dedication

*Women for Women International dedicates this report to the Iraqi women who have been murdered or kidnapped since the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime.*

*Iraqi women have been targeted merely because of their leadership activities, the positions they held, or for being otherwise visible in public life. Several women ministers have survived assassination attempts. Below are the first names of some of the women targeted and attacked between March and December 2004. There have been countless others.*

**Salwa**, Program Assistant, Coalition Provisional Authority, helped establish women's centers in the southern governorates, murdered.

**Majida**, member of Sadr City District Advisory Council (DAC), kidnapped and killed.

**Ilham**, member of Abu Ghareeb (DAC), kidnapped in September 2004.

**Dunya**, member of Abu Ghareeb (DAC), kidnapped two weeks after her colleague, Ilham.

**Rwaida**, translator for U.S. officials, murdered.

**Huda**, Outreach Department Manager, International Internet Network, killed on the way home from work.

**Liq'a'a**, staff member of Iraq's Al Sharqya TV, shot to death.

**Aamal**, consultant in an Iraqi ministry, shot and killed with two of her bodyguards.

**Dina**, reporter, Al-Hurya TV, shot while waiting for a taxi to go to work.

**Enaas**, translator for U.S. officials, shot and killed with her brother at their home.

**Zeena**, pharmacist and businesswoman, kidnapped, murdered and dumped on a highway in a traditional headscarf she never wore.

**Alham**, women's rights activist and member of a municipal council in Baghdad, kidnapped with flyers in her briefcase announcing a women's conference.

**Awatef**, women's rights activist who escaped an assassination attempt at her home that killed her husband.

**Wijdan**, businesswoman, activist, and candidate for January 2005 elections, murdered.



## Executive Summary

Iraq's post-war reconstruction period occupies a brief moment in time but holds long-lasting implications for women. During this window of opportunity, decisions are underway which will determine women's permanent roles in governance, their rights under civil law and their future status in Iraqi society. The outlook for women, and society as a whole, is diminished when individual women, and their representative NGOs, are excluded from decision-making processes.

As recent events have shown, Iraqi women have been marginalized and excluded by both the U.S.-led Transitional Governing Authority and its successor, the Iraqi Governing Council. The accelerated timetable for the turnover was one factor in women's lack of participation, but the entire process was characterized by a series of unfulfilled promises. Without direct participation in the upcoming elections, constitutional votes and parliamentary decisions, the window of opportunity for women will permanently close.

In an ominous backdrop to the political struggle, individual women have been targeted for retribution. Their profile is consistent. Women with Western dress and progressive ideas have been attacked. The abduction and murders of these prominent women have sent a ripple of fear through local communities. Though the press has covered the stories of high-profile foreign aid workers, Iraqi women have seen members of their own communities—pharmacists, lawyers, councilwomen—assassinated. The effect is chilling and threatens the participation of Iraq's most educated women.

At the grassroots, the general lack of security is also demanding a high toll. Though low-income women benefited most from the informal economy such as street commerce, the spasms of violence have driven women out of their jobs and into their homes. Fear of violence, abduction and rape has emptied

the streets of women and caused disruptions to education as children are also increasingly kept at home. Growing numbers of women are leaving the country.

During this pivotal time, with its atmosphere of societal constriction, it is vital to report the opinions and needs of women. Women for Women International spoke directly to women in their homes through its 2004 Household Survey of 1,000 women in seven cities in Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra, three governorates, which are major political and commercial centers of Iraq. The survey shows women's high degree of engagement in civic and political issues and dispels notions about tradition, customs or religion limiting their participation. The survey highlights include:

***Women believe that their legal rights and ability to vote on the constitution are the most important items on the Iraqi national agenda:***

- 93.7% want to secure legal rights for women.
- 83.6% want the right to vote on the final constitution.

***Women want the opportunity to work:***

- 56.8% thought there should be no restrictions on women's employment.
- Of those who thought work should be restricted, only 15% thought tradition or custom should curtail employment. By a 4-to-1 majority, women gave circumstantial reasons to limit work (a total of 67.6% cited security factors and job availability).

***Women support the education of girls and women:***

- 95.1% felt that there should be no restrictions on education.

## Windows of Opportunity

### *Women see direct participation in local and national politics in a positive light:*

- 78.6% believe in unlimited participation in local councils.
- 79.5% believe in unlimited participation in national councils.

Given the level of violence and the deprivation caused by lack of adequate food, water and electricity, another remarkable statistic emerged from the survey: **90.6% of Iraqi women are hopeful about their future.**

During the reconstruction process, it is crucial that women gain inclusion and see measurable progress on a variety of legal and social issues. If the window of opportunity closes and the optimism

of women is squandered, Iraqi society as a whole will suffer. If women are bystanders, their full range of potential as peacemakers, providers and educators will be lost.

Some of the most potentially damaging influences are disingenuous parties who claim to speak for women or religious leaders who ingratiate themselves through token support while advocating restrictions for women. Women can and should speak for themselves, without proxy. There is an entire generation of educated Iraqi women and a growing corps of determined grassroots women ready to step forward. The full and free participation of women is a barometer for the future health and prosperity of all members of Iraqi society.





# Introduction

## A Window of Opportunity

War and civil strife dramatically affect women and children. Not only do they become the uncounted victims of direct injury and death, but the lives of non-combatants lose every aspect of normalcy. The path to school or the marketplace becomes a dangerous journey through the frontline of battle. With food, electricity and medical attention in short supply, misery multiplies and society's basic functions are suspended.

Although security and loss of life remain critical issues in Iraq, the country has entered an early reconstructive period which is vital for creating a foundation for women's rights and participation in the future of the country. In the case of Iraq, the impact of a brutal regime, successive wars, and economic sanctions have particularly challenged women's participation. Many women are simultaneously struggling to recover from past atrocities, deal with current economic hardship and adapt to the changes a new system brings. These layered challenges have frequently meant that the voices of female leaders and women at the grassroots have been absent or marginalized.

The post-war period offers a singular opportunity to reconstruct a nation. Not only does it include formal milestones such as a new constitution, governing bodies and a legal system, but a new social contract is formed between various segments of society. The opportunity must be seized because the post-war reconstruction of a nation is a historic series of events. If women cannot fully participate, it is unlikely that a society can make substantial gains in building a foundation of gender equality for the future.

This paper examines the forces working to shape the future of Iraq and the brief window of

opportunity that women must seize. It also presents women's own perceptions of their current situation and vision for the future. These perceptions were collected from leading female activists to the most socially excluded women who are involved in rights awareness and vocational skills training. This wide spectrum of perceptions is an important aspect of knowing how best to move forward in ensuring that women play an equitable role in the reconstruction of Iraq. We look at what women are saying about their basic needs, educational and economic opportunities, community and political participation, expectations about the U.S. occupation and other areas of their lives.

As an organization dedicated to building the strength and capacity of women survivors of conflict, Women for Women International is inspired by the courage of many of the Iraqi women we have encountered, and this report is dedicated to their strength and determination.

## The Requirements for Success

Women for Women International has learned during more than a decade of working in post-conflict societies that three things need to happen to ensure women's full participation in a new democracy: 1) a recognition throughout society that women play a critical role; 2) an active, organized local women's NGO community that bridges the divide between the grassroots and the leadership; and 3) a commitment from the leadership at the highest levels to the full inclusion of women in civil society. Commitment from leadership on these issues frequently requires strong public pressure from the populations involved. In Iraq, commitment will only come if women and women-focused NGOs have the tools to advocate on their own behalf.

### Women as a Barometer for Society

After the first six months following the March 19, 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the overall situation in Iraq began to deteriorate and the focus on women was lost in the problems and violence facing the country as a whole. Women's concerns were considered at best an afterthought, and many local organizations and interim government members began to feel frustrated that women and their concerns were being overlooked. Former U.S. Ambassador to Austria, Swanee Hunt, founder and chair of the NGO, Women Waging Peace, explains the dynamic of excluding women from reconstruction strategy sessions when organizers say: "Well, let's get this situation stabilized and then we'll think about the women,' as if thinking about the women is a marginal issue."

United States and United Kingdom policy analysts repeatedly cite women's rights as a determining factor for the success of any democracy and governance projects on the ground. In a policy brief titled *Can Iraq be Democratic?* published in

January 2004, Patrick Basham, a senior fellow with the Center for Representative Government of the Cato Institute, maintains that "countries cannot succeed as democracies if more than half their population is denied basic democratic rights. Women's rights are a key determinant of the overall vibrancy of any society."<sup>1</sup>

Naturally, all those working in the field of women's rights know that women's participation in all aspects of public life is crucial not only to democracy but to economic growth. However, this is particularly true in dictatorships, because the cycle of oppression and exclusion of the female population almost always indicates a general trend in the country. Basham maintains that "patriarchal societies in which women play a subservient role to men are also societies in which men play subservient roles to other men, and meritocracy takes a backseat to connections and cronyism."

The inclusion and progress of women serves as a barometer of the current state of political health in Iraq and a predictor for the future of the society.

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1 Patrick Basham. *Can Iraq be Democratic?* Cato Institute: Policy Analysis No. 505, January 5, 2004. <http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa505.pdf>.



# Methodology and Information Sources

Information for this report was gathered from four major sources in addition to a review of relevant literature and reports:

## ***Informal Household Visits***

Women for Women International conducted a series of consultations in Iraq shortly after the invasion in the spring of 2003 in accordance with the organization's standard protocol for opening a new chapter office. As part of that process, staff members of Women for Women International visited with local leaders, women of influence and policy experts. They also made a series of informal household visits to women in various communities in Iraq, asking them about their basic needs, economic sufficiency, and views on the current political situation and changes to come. These household visits not only guided the direction of the Women for Women International program undertaken in Iraq but provided the foundation for the formal survey conducted a year later.

## ***2004 Household Survey***

Following Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, and during the subsequent UN sanctions, the government managed to create barriers to public scrutiny. In particular, central government statistics did not render a complete or accurate depiction of the conditions women faced. It is widely suspected that the Hussein regime fabricated information to suit its purposes, and the few reliable statistics, for example on maternal and child health, were collected by relief organizations such as UNICEF.

Following the U.S.-led invasion in March 2003, there was an opportunity to create accurate benchmarks and hear directly from Iraqi women. Furthermore, women advocates needed better information to make their case and document the basic hierarchy of needs facing women.

In response to this opportunity, Women for Women International contracted the Iraq Center for Research and Strategic Studies to conduct a household survey of 1,000 women. This was particularly significant considering that no surveys of the kind existed among the resources of the previous regime in Iraq. The survey randomly sampled women in three geographic areas in order to collect the views of representative Iraqi women from different educational, economic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. The sample size was 1,000 women, conducted using Iraq's 1997 population survey, and covered seven cities in three governorates, Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra, which constitute major political and commercial centers in Iraq.

The survey was a standardized questionnaire administered by women researchers in face-to-face interviews with the female heads of households.

The survey contained 35 questions that covered the respondents' demographic information as well as their perceptions on access to medical care, education, and economic and political participation in the past year.

The Household Survey was conducted randomly; however, it managed to capture a wide range in the ages and socio-economic backgrounds of the women surveyed.

The complete methodology, including sampling techniques and demographics of the survey respondents, can be found in the Appendix to this paper.

## ***Case Work with Socially Excluded Women***

Through its core program and work on the grassroots level, Women for Women International has served 800 socially excluded women in the past year. Interviews with participants in Women for Women International's one-year program provided case study material on issues such as community action,

## Windows of Opportunity

economic development and political participation. This paper incorporates anecdotal informal and case studies from Women for Women International's field work. Program participants' names have been changed to protect their identities.

### ***Engagement with Women Leaders and NGOs***

The views and opinions of women at both the leadership and grassroots levels were gathered

through close cooperation with some of Iraq's leading women activists, grassroots community mobilizers, survivors from the previous regime, former Interim Governing Council members, and current women ministers in the Transitional Government. Women for Women International participated in many of the advocacy efforts and policy initiatives launched by Iraqi women during the past year, and this paper chronicles some of those recent political activities and trends.



# Historical Context

## Freedom and Choice

Within the region, Iraqi women have historically held a high level of educational attainment, professional accomplishments and personal freedom. Iraqi women were widely considered to be among the most educated in the Arab world.

In the 1960s and 70s, decades of expanding consciousness worldwide, Iraqi women did not feel the need to be confined to the private sphere and large numbers worked outside the home, achieving distinction in government, law, medicine, and other areas. Women moved freely about the country, and those with means traveled abroad. Traditional clothing such as the *abaya* shared the street with modern Western fashions like the miniskirt, reflecting the freedom women experienced to make personal decisions about how they appeared in public. Women's rights were given the protection of law as the Iraqi Provisional Constitution, enacted in July 1970, formally guaranteed equal rights to women and specifically ensured their right to vote, attend school, run for political office, and own property. A new constitution was drafted in 1990, but never adopted.

As in many countries during this period, however, political turbulence accompanied the expansion of personal freedoms. The 1970s marked the rise of the Baath Socialist Party, and Saddam Hussein took power in 1979. While Iraq's oil wealth allowed for significant economic development and modernization during the 70s, Hussein's rule soon became characterized by an unyielding exercise of power and persecution of detractors.

Hussein's military pursuits, which began with the war against Iran in 1980, had many implications for women. Women remained active in the public sphere, working to support the war effort, at the same time a strong secularism was advanced in the society, and it became dangerous to wear traditional Islamic dress in public. The Hussein government began to exert strict control in Iraq's private sphere, thus setting in motion a shift toward greater restrictions and limitations for women.

## Women Under Sanctions

Before 1991, female literacy rates in Iraq were the highest in the region. However, Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, the subsequent attack against Iraq by a 22-nation coalition led by the U.S., and years of UN sanctions took a devastating toll on women, limiting their access to food, healthcare and education. According to the United Nations, the overall literacy rate for the nation has been cut in half, sinking from 80% in 1987 to 40% currently. Primary school attendance, which before 1990 was nearly universal for girls and boys, is currently estimated at 76% overall, with only 49% attendance for rural girls.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1990s, the status of women within Iraqi society deteriorated. A number of official decisions limited the access of women to senior decision-making positions and further restricted their freedom of movement. As economic hardships escalated, many women were forced back to their homes, having lost their jobs.

With an economy shattered by wars and international sanctions, the government encouraged

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2 UNICEF. "At a glance: Iraq," <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iraq.html>.

## Windows of Opportunity

people to turn toward religion, ushering in a more conservative social climate. Saddam Hussein began to give more control to Sunni-based religious groups and tribes, particularly in Western Iraq in areas such as Ramadi, Fallujah, and Tikrit, where he was generally supported. This had serious implications for women, as their rights and freedoms began to be increasingly eroded to appease religious and tribal groups. The new conservatism and exercise of religious punitive power resulted, for example, in the public execution of prostitutes.

Despite this conservative shift, Iraqi women who had known greater freedoms before this era were not completely constrained. Some members of this older generation continued to have access to the public sphere; some continued working outside the home, and others ran small businesses from their homes. In the 1990s, a generation gap emerged between older women who were literate, educated and worked outside the home, and their daughters who were not in the work force, often more socially conservative and not as educated as their mothers.

The educated and experienced older generation of women presents a valuable source of female leadership. In an editorial printed in the *New York Times*, the only two female Governing Council members, Raja Habib Khuzai and Songul Chapouk, advocate for direct participation by women because “Many Iraqi women are well-educated — doctors, lawyers and engineers who are already leaders in their communities. And regardless of education, women in Iraq are often heads of households who have kept their families and their country moving despite decades of war and severe abuse under the Saddam Hussein regime.”<sup>3</sup> They describe these

experienced and capable women as “Iraq’s Hidden Treasure,” a valuable resource that the country must tap to fulfill its reconstruction goals.

Additionally, during sanctions, middle-class Iraqi women who expressed allegiance to the Baathist party were offered opportunities including secure jobs and training. Many poor women continued working out of sheer economic necessity. Women were further divided through a system of institutionalized poverty and exclusion in which geographic areas that did not comply with the Baathist majority were punished through “ghettoization.”

### Post-Invasion Climate

In the year following the March 19, 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, women across social classes have seen their activities restricted. Older, educated, professional women who had created small businesses in their homes after losing public sector jobs, could not continue these activities due to the electricity shortages following the invasion. Poor women who occupied much of the informal sector jobs in markets and in the streets, lost their economic lifeline as they were forced to stop working out of constant fear of violence and attack. The somewhat predictable violence that was the hallmark of the Hussein regime was transformed in this post-invasion period into general violence erupting from many different directions. Fear of abduction, rape, and murder has kept women confined to their homes. Even casual observers can see the marked absence of women in the streetscape of life, particularly in Baghdad, but increasingly throughout Iraq.

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3 Raja Habib Khazai and Songul Chapouk, Iraq’s Hidden Treasures, *New York Times*, Op-Ed. December 3, 2003.



# Women's Needs and Priorities

## Basic Needs and Priorities

Very early after the March 2003 invasion, it became clear that to create any stability in Iraq, reconstruction plans must address the needs of women. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) maintained that, "If Iraq is to have a chance of progress with stability, gender considerations need to be mainstreamed into the entire reconstruction process." Although this was a commonly held position among both international and domestic leaders, attempts to understand women's needs on the ground were minimal.

In May 2003, Women for Women International's informal household visits revealed women's most immediate concerns to be security, economic opportunities, and problems with infrastructure and basic needs, including water, electricity, and phone lines. Throughout the past year, these concerns have remained consistent, with the level of importance of each area shifting only slightly. The 2004 Household Survey results show that these concerns continue to be of primary importance to women a year later.

**According to the women surveyed, none of their family's most basic needs were entirely met.**

**The greatest needs were electricity, work opportunities and water:**

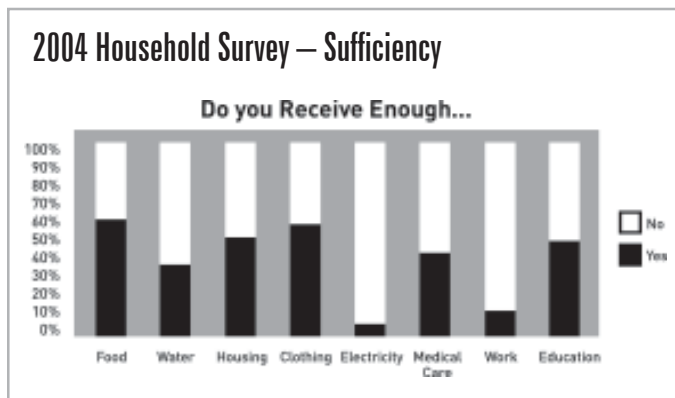
- 95% felt that their family was not receiving enough electricity.
- 87.3% believed that there were shortages of work opportunities.
- 63.5% had insufficient access to water.

**Approximately half of the families lacked medical care, education and housing:**

- 57.1% said that their families lacked adequate medical care.
- 50.7% felt that access to education was not sufficient.
- 49% complained of poor or insufficient housing.

**Some families also lacked sufficient food or clothing:**

- 42.7% did not have adequate clothing.
- 39.5% did not receive enough food.



Women are disproportionately affected when basic needs are not met. The daily demands of maintaining the household are borne by women, and the adequacy of housing, water, food and electricity is their main concern. If Iraqi women struggle with the daily demands of keeping a household together, their ability to participate in political and economic activities is diminished or impossible.

Immediately following the invasion, women were optimistic that their daily

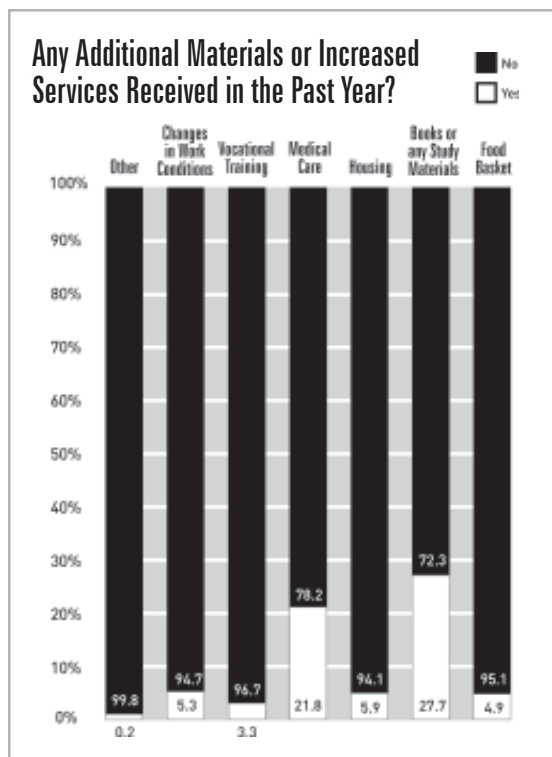


socio-economic situation would improve. A specific example that came up in numerous interviews with Iraqi women is the expectation that there would be improvements in food distribution. The majority of Iraqi families relied on food baskets to survive, originally provided through the UN Oil for Food program from 1996 to 2003 and continued by the interim government after the invasion. A few months after the declaration of the end of the war, coalition forces distributed flyers announcing that food rations would be increased and listing additional food items that would be included. Those explicit promises were not met. The Household Survey reflects that 95% of women surveyed indicated that there was no increase in the food basket items compared in previous years.

### ***There were clearly no gains in vocational skills training, employment or housing:***

- 96.7% indicated no expansion of vocational skills training.
- 94.7% reported that there had been no change in employment opportunities.
- 94.1% cited no increase in housing.

The only perceived gains were minimal. Of the women surveyed, 25.8% reported that medical care expanded in the year since the end of the war, and



27.7% saw an increase in the availability of books and educational materials.

A discrepancy between the expressed needs and the perceptions of unmet expectations has affected not just women but everyone throughout Iraqi society. This has created a breeding ground for the spread of rumors and conspiracy theories, thus perpetuating the same cycle of distrust of those in power that had existed under the Hussein regime.

## Education

A common element of dissatisfaction expressed by many Iraqis in the last year has been the lack of visible investment in school reconstruction. School administrators, teachers, and members of various communities have claimed that they have witnessed only cosmetic improvements to schools, such as painting, while investment in teacher training, salaries, or curriculum has been almost non-existent.

### ***An overwhelming majority of 95.1% of women surveyed asserted that it is important to educate women and girls.***

Of the women interviewed, 50.7% do not feel that their families have sufficient educational opportunities. Another 71.1% of participants believe that educational opportunities for all groups have not increased in the past year, and 73% believe this is the case for children's education in particular.

Because of pervasive violence and fear, the school year was delayed in 2004 and attendance overall is down. Out of concern for their safety, young girls and even boys were pulled out of school. As a result, the mother or oldest female in the household had to leave her job to stay at home with the children. The lack of school security causes both women and children to lose opportunities.

### ***For the small percentage of women who believe that it is necessary to limit educational opportunities, 55.1% cite security concerns as the primary reason.***

## Economy

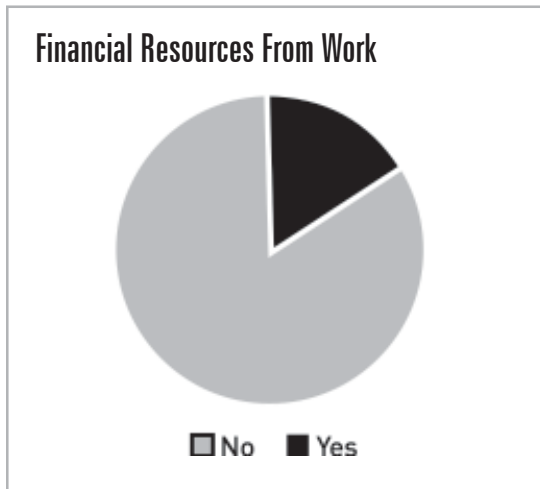
For 30 years before and under Saddam Hussein, Iraq was a largely secular nation and many women participated in its economy. Today, women comprise approximately 20% of the Iraqi workforce, holding a range of technical and professional jobs.



## Windows of Opportunity

The infrastructure and security situation has negatively impacted women's economic opportunities. As violent conflict continues, female heads of households in particular face a significant economic burden as the availability of work in the formal sector has diminished. Women are currently most likely to work in the informal sector, selling products from home, catering, or engaging in small-scale agriculture. However, the overwhelming majority of women are not earning any income.

**According to the women surveyed, 84.3% reported that they do not receive any financial compensation for their work.**



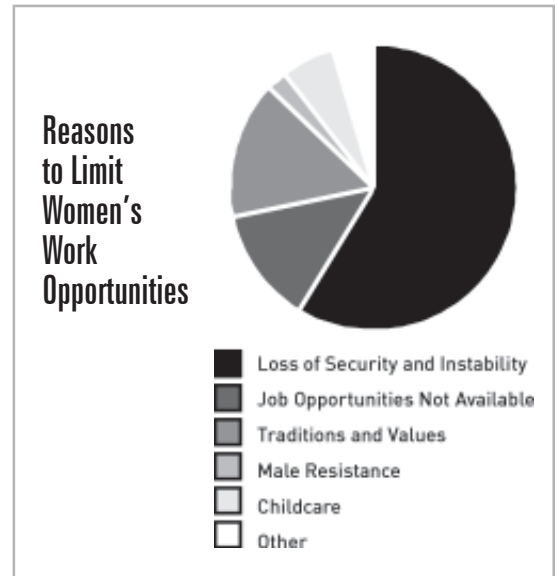
This statistic conveys an important unmet need in the economy. A large percentage of Iraqi women are widowed, divorced, or abandoned as a result of multiple wars. A significant number of Iraqi women are heads of households and their lack of income has serious consequences for the viability of their families and the economy as a whole.

**However, 43.2% of respondents indicated that they believe women's work opportunities should be restricted.**

- The primary reason for this belief was lack of security and stability (54.5%).
- The second reason, given by a much smaller percentage of survey participants, was Iraqi traditions and customs (15.5%).
- The third reason cited by participants was a lack of work opportunities (13.1%).

It is worth noting that of the top three reasons given to limit women's participation in the workforce, current circumstances (security, stability and job availability) outweigh cultural concerns (Iraqi tradition and customs) by more than four to one (67.6% to 15.5%).

More than half of the women surveyed saw no reason to limit their participation in the workforce, but willingness and opportunity are different measures. The overwhelming majority (87.3%) of women felt that they or others in their families did not have enough access to work opportunities, and



most (62%) felt that there was no change in access to job opportunities in the past year.

Women's work in Iraq was not a new concept, and both men and women were generally open to the idea of a woman working outside of the home if the security situation is stabilized. In a survey conducted by Physicians for Human Rights from June to July of 2003, more than 70% of those interviewed supported work opportunities for women, although similar to the results obtained in the Household Survey, more than half thought it should be restricted.<sup>4</sup> The overall view towards women working is generally positive, but Iraqis are waiting for an indication that the situation is stabilizing.

In most of the rural areas, it is the norm for

4 Southern Iraq: Reports of Human Rights Abuse and Views on Justice, Reconstruction and Government. A Briefing Paper by Physicians for Human Rights. September 18, 2003, <http://www.phrusa.org/research/iraq/docs/iraqsurvey.pdf>.

women to work. During a Women for Women International visit to Baa'qoobah in the governorate of Diyala, a group of men enthusiastically listened to a description of the vocational skills training program and were eager to learn how women in their families could participate. One man who was a farmer stated that the women in his area did most of the work, and if it were not for the women, the farms would never be productive. In fact, during recruitment for women to enter Women for Women International's rights awareness classes and vocational skills training, it is not uncommon for fathers to encourage their oldest daughters to join the program.

### Political Participation

The survey results show that a strong majority of women believe in the importance of women's participation in both local and national governing bodies and in other avenues to guarantee them a political voice.

#### ***Iraqi women see direct representation in local and national politics in a positive light.***

- 78.6% of the women believe that there is no reason to limit women's participation in local councils and centers of decision-making.
- 79.5% hold the same belief for the national government.

For those respondents who would limit women's local political participation, 37.1% attribute this to Iraqi customs and traditions, while 36.1% cite lack of security and stability as the primary reason. Similar reasons for limiting national political participation were given, with 39.3% citing tradition and values, and 30.1% giving lack of security as the primary reason.

When asked for an opinion on the most important items on the agenda for Iraqi society, 69.8% of the women surveyed believe that taking part in the national government is important. In terms of local advisory roles, 68.2% believe that women should join consultative and municipal councils.

Among the areas of highest agreement on issues for the national agenda are the establishment of laws protecting women's rights (93.7%) and having a vote on what is included in the final Iraqi Constitution (83.6%).

It is Iraqi women themselves, from all levels

of society, who have raised the most consistent cry, calling on male counterparts not to marginalize women in the reconstruction and stabilization process. Many women have attended their local councils demanding to be integrated into the decision-making process and seeking direct action.

Iraqi women have signaled their interest in local and national issues and desire to participate in the political process. However, an uneven effort by the interim government, and the Coalition Provisional Authority before it, has led many women to fear that they may be shut out of important decision-making processes.

### Religious Influence

The degree to which women look to religious groups rather than to the government to effect changes in society also points to a potentially disturbing trend. As women see a rise in religious influence, they may be drawn in by promises made by fundamentalist religious institutions, which may later seek to limit their rights and freedoms. This is particularly a factor when religious groups usurp the role of government in the provision of social services that women and their families need to survive.

***Of women surveyed, 16% stated that the government has done something to make their lives much worse over the past year, and only 8.4% of women blamed worsened conditions on religious institutions.***

***Only 5.5% of women surveyed said the government had done something to improve their lives in the past year, while 12.7% said that religious institutions had done so.***

Mindful that women are more than half the population, their potential voting power is something that no aspiring politicians can ignore. Perceiving this opportunity, religious organizations also frequently offer their direct support to women. Even within the NGO community, it is difficult to find a women's group that is not financially supported by a political or religious party.

With the many promises that women are being offered, and little muscle behind them, they may perceive no other choice than to follow and support those they feel can deliver. In desperation, women sometimes turn to religious groups with extreme

## Windows of Opportunity

viewpoints without recognizing the long-term sacrifice of personal freedoms. These groups are able to gain support more readily when they are also offering basic services normally provided by a government. The Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas in the West Bank and the Occupied Territories and the Taliban in Afghanistan offer contemporary examples of this trend.

### Insecurity as a Barrier

All the major areas covered by the 2004 Household Survey point to the continuing insecurity in the country as the major impediment to women's long-term progress. Women are unlikely to benefit if they can't be at the negotiating table, in the workplace or in the classroom. The day-to-day levels of violence may vary, but if women perceive that activities are too dangerous, they will curtail their participation.

The full costs of insecurity emerge when the results of the 2004 Household Survey are viewed as a cross section of issues:

- For the 43.2% of respondents who thought that women's work opportunities should be restricted, the primary reason was loss of security and stability (54.5%). This was considered a more powerful deterrent to economic participation than Iraqi customs or

culture (15.5%) or lack of job opportunities (13.1%).

- For the respondents who believe that it is necessary to limit educational opportunities, 55.1% cite security concerns as the primary reason.
- For those respondents who would limit women's political participation, they cite lack of security and stability as the primary reason to limit both local participation (36.1%) and national participation (30.1%).

The security problem is characterized not only by the direct assaults and constant bombings of the war itself, but also by an increasing climate of fear. Reports of the types of assaults which have a disproportionate impact on women such as rape and kidnapping have made women fear for their personal safety. Although the number of such incidents is relatively low, rumors of such crimes alone are enough to cause women to stay at home.<sup>5</sup> Security problems also restrict access to transportation and thus constrict overall daily mobility for women.

The net results of the lack of security can be tallied not only as a personal loss for individual women but also as a societal loss for Iraq during this crucial time. The country will need all of its resources to succeed, which will not happen if half of the population is immobilized as reconstruction commences.

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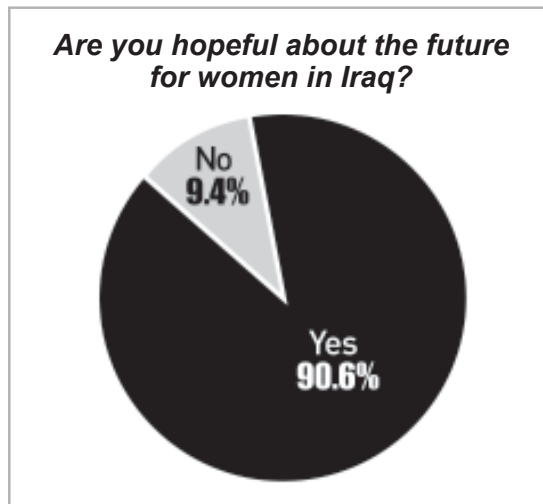
5 See *Climate of Fear: Sexual Violence and Abduction of Women and Girls in Baghdad* by Human Rights Watch, July 2003. [www.hrw.org/reports/2003/iraq0703](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/iraq0703).



## Hope and Action

Despite continued violence and insecurity and a growing wellspring of disillusionment with the Coalition forces, **a remarkable 90.6% of the women we surveyed are hopeful about the future for Iraqi women.**

This hope must be captured and channeled before the window of opportunity closes. Many women are already disappointed about the current situation and the extent to which their opinions have been excluded in post-war decision-making. Once hope for the future is lost, the active social, economic, and political participation of a broad spectrum of women becomes much more difficult.



Women for Women International's experience on the ground confirms that Iraqi women must have sufficient support to turn their hope into action rather than disillusionment. As women step forward and become entrepreneurs and community leaders, they blaze a trail for others to follow. These Iraqi women, and many others like them, face daunting problems. With only a small amount of targeted

support they can not only provide for their own families, but raise public awareness for grassroots women over the long term.

### Women as Entrepreneurs

An overwhelming number of Iraqi women have demonstrated an interest in learning some vocational skill that will generate an income, and some women have proven what they can achieve with minimal assistance. These women are the embodiment of the spirit of hope in the face of difficult circumstances.

#### Haifa

*As a divorced mother, Haifa had a number of responsibilities, including caring for two sons, one with epilepsy and the other with asthma, and a mentally ill daughter. She was unable to afford a much-needed operation for an enlarged spleen. Previously able to earn some income by selling fuel near a gas station, age and illness prevented her from continuing this work. Once she started receiving direct financial aid and business skills training from Women for Women International, she was able to begin work that she could conduct from home. She made a deal with a supplier in a nearby governorate to purchase straw-made sweepers, fans, and baskets at a wholesale price, which she then sells. She has doubled her initial goal and is now regularly able to save the amount of two months rent from the profits.*

#### Maryam

*Maryam is an older woman who lives in a socially and economically excluded area of Baghdad. She had no source of income and is the primary caregiver for her granddaughter. Knowing how to make bath sponges, she was able to use this skill to start a small business from home. With the*

money she receives for aid, she is able to purchase the raw material needed to produce these sponges. She started her enterprise by selling to people in her Baghdad neighborhood, but was able to expand to become one of the suppliers for the larger shops in the area.

### Women as Grassroots Leaders

Some of the most socially and economically excluded women are demonstrating leadership in their communities and were among the first citizens to combat official corruption.

#### **Fatima**

*Fatima lives in the district of Al-Zafarnya, a socially and economically excluded neighborhood where people depend on fuel for heaters and stoves in the winter months because electricity is not consistent. The district city council is responsible for providing fuel for the residents. The person in charge of distribution began to sell the fuel, however, rather than distribute it to residents of Fatima's neighborhood. In response, she gathered women in her neighborhood to go to this man's house and demand that fuel be delivered to them. When the man saw the number of women outside his house, he agreed to give them their share of fuel and supplied it the next day.*

#### **Nawal**

*At 52, Nawal was the sole provider for her household. She previously had employment in a canned food factory until it, like many other factories, was closed. The main complaint that she and her neighbors shared was a lack of water in their area. She demanded a meeting with the official authorities in charge of water in her province. The manager she spoke with agreed to work on the water pipes and sent her to meet with the main engineer. When a foreman refused to allow her to meet the engineer, she persisted until she was able to hold the meeting. Impressed with her tenacity, the engineer agreed to do work in the neighborhood. Nawal needed the foreman's approval for the work to begin, however, and he demanded 175,000 Iraqi dinars (ID) for the job. She was able to raise 100,000 ID from her neighbors. She was plagued, however, by the notion of contributing to the cycle of corruption, and despite the risk, returned to the original manager she had spoken with and explained the situation. The manager wrote an official administrative order for work on the pipes in her neighborhood to begin, and Nawal was able to return the 100,000 ID to her neighbors. Now much respected in her neighborhood, she has turned her attention toward the problem of the supply of electricity for her area.*



# The Politics of Exclusion: Iraqi Women's Participation in the Establishment of the Transitional Government

*Despite a high level of qualification and active preparation, Iraqi women have struggled to be included in the formation of the transitional government. This section, based upon experience on the ground, chronicles some recent events in the battle for gender equity.*

## Where Are the Women?

Although Iraqi women anticipated support during the early stages of the transitional government, as early as May 2003, most major U.S. newspapers predicted that women would possibly lose more than they gained in a post-Hussein Iraq. Headlines such as the *San Francisco Chronicle's* "Women losing freedoms in chaos of postwar Iraq—Shiite Clerics move into power vacuum"<sup>6</sup> or BBC's "Where Are Iraq's Women?"<sup>7</sup> commented on the absence of women in the political arena.

In fact, from the beginning, evidence was emerging of the threat of women being excluded in Iraq. The first meetings held in the West before the invasion with the objective of developing a constitutional future for the country had more than 250 delegates. Only six were women. The U.S. administration acknowledged that this was a problem and spoke of trying to rectify the situation. Directly after the invasion, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage stated, "If there's an area where I feel thus far we've fallen short, but having realized that, we're going to correct it, it is in the representation of women."

One of the first attempts to rectify the situation was a Women's Conference held on July 9, 2003. The conference was under the auspices of the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), and gathered women from various governorates representing different ethnic and religious groups. Soon after the conference, the Interim Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) was established. Because they were among the most active and vocal women in Iraq, the July 9<sup>th</sup> Women's Conference organizers expected some of their number to be appointed to the IGC. They were astonished when the three women appointed to the IGC were names and faces they did not even recognize. As the months began to pass, more and more Iraqi women wanted to know when the rhetoric about women's participation would be transformed into reality. The patterns that were emerging left Iraqi women leaders to face the fact that their expectations were not going to be met.

Their displeasure culminated with a coalition of women's groups and leaders sending a letter to U.S. Ambassador Paul Bremer listing their disappointments and cataloging what they called the shortcomings of the CPA in its treatment of women. Among the shortcomings the women's groups listed in the letter was the fact that there were only three women on the 25-member IGC, and that these members did not have the right to serve on the Presidential Council. In addition, they listed: the CPA's failure to appoint any women governors in any of the 18 provinces, to assure any

6 Anna Badkhen and Danielle Haas. Women losing freedoms in chaos of postwar Iraq—Shiite Clerics move into power vacuum. *San Francisco Chronicle*. May 24, 2003.

7 Kathryn Westcott. Where are Iraq's Women? *BBC News*. May 8, 2003, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3007381.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3007381.stm).



women were appointed to the Fundamental Law Committee, to assure women's appointments to head government ministries, with only one out of 25 ministries led by a woman. The letter concluded that "these facts demonstrate pervasive sex discrimination in the government structure established, appointed and supervised by the CPA... It would be a real tragedy if the Coalition were to leave Iraq with a government less intent on equal rights for women than the previous regime."

The letter received a great deal of support from women's groups across the world, including countries such as Kosovo and South Africa where women's rights activists were veterans of the need for women's involvement in post-conflict nation-building. In addition, the largest coalition of women's groups in the U.S., the National Council of Women's Organizations, spoke in solidarity with the Iraqi women, and followed up with a letter to Ambassador Paul Bremer stating, "Clearly Iraqi women have been shortchanged, and the situation must be corrected immediately. President Bush has expressed strong support for equal rights for women in Iraq, and the U.S. government is obligated to make that a reality." In a January 2004 meeting between U.S. Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi in Baghdad and a group of Iraqi women leaders, most of whom had been at the July 9<sup>th</sup> conference, one woman stated clearly that if Iraqi women continued to be marginalized, it was a direct result of the U.S. government's inability to fulfill their promises.

Many female leaders have expressed concern that the U.S.-led Coalition did not guarantee representation for women but relegated this issue to the discretion of the political parties. As human rights activist and advocacy director of the International Alliance for Justice, Sofia Al Souhail, said, "They have seats for Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds, Assyrians and they didn't think that they should have a seat for [half of] the country?"<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Besma Fakri, President of Women's Alliance for a Democratic Iraq, stated in an open letter to Ambassador Paul Bremer, "The coalition has been careful to represent all ethnic and religious groups in Iraq's governing bodies. Women deserve the same consideration."

### The Strength of Women's NGOs

Despite the setbacks on a political level, the debate over inclusion of women provided an opportunity for women's groups to step forward as one of the most active elements in the newly-developed Iraqi civil society. According to A. Heather Coyne, currently Chief of Party for the United States Institute of Peace and previously the Baghdad Region's Civil Society Officer of the CPA, explained, "While most of the new NGOs were waiting for international funding to materialize for proposals that were mostly outside their capability to implement anyway, the 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. According to Coyne, a major part of women's success was "their willingness to exchange information and coordinate amongst each other."

### Representing Women

Initially, some women leaders did not lobby for broader gender representation or women's rights. For example, Minister Nisreen Berwari was universally recognized as one of the most qualified Ministers in the Interim Governing Council. An engineer by profession, she was dedicated to making the Ministry of Municipality one of the most effective ministries in the new government. Indeed, she won the respect of all her peers and launched a number of successful projects. She did not see herself as a female representative, but as an engineer who had many challenges before her. However, many of the women's groups saw her as a potential champion of other women and the perfect role

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8 Annia Ciezadlo. Iraqi Women Shut Out of Politics by Tribal Leaders, CPA. *Christian Science Monitor*. December 17, 2003.

model for women hesitant to enter senior management positions. The women approached Minister Berwari and enlisted her in their cause. She subsequently agreed to chair the Gender Advisory Committee that directly reported to Ambassador Bremer. 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.

### The New Glass Ceiling

By the time the United Nations began taking a more active role in Iraq, there was little hope that action would replace promises for women’s role in the interim government that would come into power after June 30, 2004. UN Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi met with women’s groups on more than two occasions, but many did not feel that their concerns about inclusion were being taken seriously. This concern was justified when no women were appointed to an “executive quartet” designed by Brahimi with U.S. assistance (including a prime minister, president, and two vice presidents) to serve on an interim basis until October 2005. The interim constitution includes a provision calling for a target of 25% representation for women in the Transitional National Assembly, and it was expected that the executive branch would reflect the same 25% goal. Although women succeeded in June 2004 at having six women named to the 30-member transitional cabinet, and two to the nine-member Electoral Commission, a glass ceiling had been placed on women’s political participation without access to the “executive quartet.”





# The Politics of Appeasement: A Legislative Battle Foreshadows Future Conflicts Between Civil and Religious Authority in Iraq

*The Iraqi Governing Council's first civil law, Resolution 137, permitting religious clerics to rule on family issues, could have been disastrous for women's rights. Although it was successfully reversed, the struggle over Resolution 137 has become a landmark in defining the civil and religious governance of post-war Iraq. A battle was won, but the war continues.*

## Women Take Action

The strength of women's action was proven in early 2004 when intense opposition by women's groups successfully prevented the passage of a measure entitled Resolution 137. Passed on December 29, 2003, by the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), Resolution 137 would have overturned Iraq's 1959 personal status laws and allowed religious clerics to rule on rights that deeply affect women and children, governing areas such as marriage, inheritance, divorce, and child custody.

Judge Zakia Hakki of the Ministry of Justice promptly prepared an analysis of Resolution 137 on January 7, 2004. Under this sweeping resolution, the uniform civil laws that had served all citizens of Iraq fairly for nearly 50 years would be replaced by a patchwork of religious interpretation by different sects, which could allow regressive measures such as these:

- Laws permitting multiple marriages, child marriage and forced marriage by guardians
- Divorced women forced to leave their houses
- Mothers losing custody of male children at age two and female children at age seven
- Female inheritance rights lost, with property passing to other male relatives.

Whereas women had been fighting for the opportunity in Iraq to leap forward, they suddenly found themselves in the unenviable position of fighting to maintain the status quo. Women were alarmed that the very first civil law to be addressed by the IGC contained broad changes enacted without thorough study or debate. Because the new laws would be administered by clerics from the country's different religious sects, there was potential to create more friction between religious factions. Since the laws of the country would not be uniform, they would be nearly impossible to enforce equitably.

Resolution 137 was overturned in February 2004 by an uncomfortably close margin. When the 15-to-10 vote calling for the repeal of the resolution was announced, the sound of women in the lobby celebrating was juxtaposed with the rush of members of the IGC, including traditionally liberal members such as Ahmed Chalabi of the Iraqi National Congress, walking out. Women were disturbed to find that their supposed allies had supported the measure. Although the resolution did not stand, women's groups saw this debate on the Muslim legal code, or Sharia, as a foreshadowing of what to expect in the future.

Resolution 137 is still discussed in circles concerned with the future of women in Iraq, reflecting that the battle was won but the war looms on. Basma Fakri, President of Women's Alliance for a Democratic Iraq, stated in a letter delivered to Ambassador Paul Bremer on January 23, 2004, "We understand that you have refused to ratify the resolution. But we are concerned about protecting religious freedom and women's rights from similar actions by religious parties after the coalition transitions to sovereignty in June 2004."

### Gender and the Constitution

In the next battle for inclusion faced by Iraqi women, Iraq's interim constitution was developed without the participation of women's advocates. On February 18, 2004, women took to the streets in Baghdad and at least 10 other provinces, demanding representation in their country's new political future. Hanaa Edward, a lawyer and chairman of an NGO called Al-Amal, is recognized as one of the pioneers of the women's movement in Iraq. Edward explained in an interview, "It is a decisive time for Iraqi women to be represented in the democratization of our country... we have to have a guarantee in this law that the representation of women will not be less than 40% in all political decision-making." This goal of 40% representation was inspired by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly. Often described as an international bill of rights for women, CEDAW recommends at least 40% representation of women in any decision-making body in public or political life.

The protest and activism of the women did have an impact. Overall, the interim constitution, commonly referred to as the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), which was adopted on March 8, 2004, clearly took gender concerns into consideration. The interim constitution will serve as the country's fundamental legal framework until a new permanent constitution is put in place by the end of 2005. The TAL contains certain equal protection clauses including the provision granting Iraqi women 25% of seats in the parliament. Due to the nuances of the Arabic language, the TAL explicitly states that any references made in the masculine tense will apply to both men and women. The statement on gender equality in the TAL is significant, and in fact, many are quick to point out that it goes further than U.S. law, which never ratified the equal rights amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

However, the TAL does not specifically guarantee equality between men and women in at least three critical areas where women in the Middle East have historically suffered

discrimination. It does not guarantee that women will have equal rights to make decisions regarding marriage and divorce, that women have the right to inherit property on an equal basis with men, or that Iraqi women married to non-Iraqis have the right to confer citizenship to their children. These are the same areas that were cited as the reasons women opposed Resolution 137. Although Resolution 137 may not have prevailed, women's opposition to its underlying principles was never truly addressed.

Although the provision for gender equity in the TAL is clear, common practice in the region has shown that inclusion in the constitution is not the same as implementation. For example, a similar provision exists within the Kuwaiti constitution, yet Kuwaiti women are barred from voting, and it took over 30 years before this practice was challenged in the courts. Even then it was never resolved.

### Securing Women's Rights

Other provisions in the TAL may potentially conflict with the provision on gender equity. For example, the TAL bars laws that would directly contradict with Sharia that are agreed upon "in consensus." Unless the drafters of the law are banking on the idea that an Islamic legal consensus could not be gained in Iraq because of the divisions between the Sunni and Shia sects, then once more the result would be the same as under Resolution 137. If a conservative religious party were to come into power, it could wield religious consensus to block the 1959 personal and family law. For example, the 1959 law had set the age of marriage for girls at 18 (or in some cases 15 with parental consent). This could be deemed to contradict with Islamic law since certain groups maintain that girls can be married as young as nine. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that if Islam were to be the dominant source of law it does not necessarily result in a decrease in women's rights. In fact, many interpretations of Islam offer liberal views and secure women's rights more so than a legal system embedded in tribal or cultural customs.

Regardless of the outcome of the elections, the interim constitution is a starting point for

## Windows of Opportunity

drafting a permanent Iraqi constitution, and concerns have been expressed that the constitutional process has gotten off to a weak start in ensuring women's rights, equal stature and protection. The challenge therefore is to ensure that Iraq's future constitution explicitly guarantees women's equal rights in the family and in society more broadly,

and that equal protection clauses are not circumvented by the imposition of discriminatory family and personal status codes.

It is also important to recognize that laws are not enough. In order to ensure women's vital role in all sectors of Iraqi society, awareness programs need to be incorporated on all levels.



## Conclusion

From the very first months of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraqi civilians maintained that they would be willing to give the Coalition one year to demonstrate changes on the ground. They would withhold issuing a positive or negative opinion until they were able to see if services were delivered. Indeed, more than one year later, it is clear that the Iraqi people are ready to pass judgment, and despite the justifications for the lack of delivery of tangible results, Iraqis are demanding an explanation for the gap between what was promised and what was done.

Further, building a foundation for women's future participation in government has been characterized by haste and insufficient consultation. Because of the rushed timeline imposed by the Coalition to meet the June 2004 deadline for the official transfer of power, the commitment to fully include women in the development of civil society could not be adequately secured before the changeover.

A long-term investment in capacity building is crucial to cultivate the full participation of women. At the same time, however, crucial decisions that will affect women for decades are

currently being made within a tight timeframe and without sufficient involvement of women. In addition, the ongoing insecurity and violence have made it virtually impossible for active women representing particular population bases to stand at the forefront of these discussions. As a result of this exclusion, despite official verbal commitments, the status of women's critical concerns remains vulnerable in the formation of the new government.

Historical experience has shown that trends which eventually impact an entire society often start with women. Whether these are dangerous developments, such as the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, or positive ones, such as women's success with microcredit programs, the opportunities, rights and freedoms available to women are crucial indicators of the health of a civil society. In this light, the indicators for women in Iraq—targeted violence, limited inclusion in political bodies and processes, and increasingly, visible absence from the public sphere—are all warning signs that could have serious long-term implications for Iraq. The future of gender equality in Iraq rests on building an organized and powerful response to these warnings.



## 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.

## Windows of Opportunity

### ***Education opportunities for women and girls must be expanded.***

Investment in girls' education is essential in fostering a younger generation who will be able to assume active social, economic, and political roles. Special attention must be given to the needs of girls in rural areas, who have traditionally not had the same opportunities as those in urban centers. Training in basic skills and literacy is also essential in particular for socially excluded women who have not had the advantage of a formal education.

### ***Religious and tribal groups that threaten women's rights and freedoms should not be appeased.***

The appeasement of religious and tribal groups during Saddam Hussein's regime has continued in the new government and was institutionalized under the U.S.- and UN-led governance structure. Women's rights should not be used as political currency. Laws protecting women and families should remain in the civil sphere where protections have equitably served all Iraqis for 50 years.

# Appendix

## 2004 Household Survey Instrument and Demographics

### Sampling

The quantitative data was gathered by the Iraq Center for Research and Strategic Studies (ICRSS), contracted by Women for Women International to conduct a population-based national survey in August 2004. ICRSS is an independent, scientific, non-governmental and non-aligned research institution. It has been operating for more than a year since the fall of the Hussein regime. The center is one of the only research institutions that received official approval by the Coalition Provisional Authority. In addition to special contracts, the ICRSS conducts monthly opinion polls throughout Iraq and has been a source for Iraqi public opinion reported in all major newspapers.<sup>9</sup>

The survey randomly samples women in three geographic areas in order to represent the views of Iraqi women across different educational, economic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. The sample size was 1,000 women, conducted using Iraq's 1997 population survey, and covered seven cities in three governorates, Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra. The sample was distributed and weighted according to the population in each region. In each governorate, the *Mahalas* (districts) were chosen randomly, followed by the *Nahia* (region), and finally the *zūkak* (street), according to the multi-stage, random probability sampling design. The margin of error was  $\pm 3.2\%$  with a confidence interval of 95%.

The three governorates of Baghdad, Mosul

and Basra were selected as they are considered major commercial and political centers in Iraq. Baghdad is located in central Iraq, Mosul in the north, and Basra, in the south, shares a border with Kuwait. According to a recent population study conducted by the ICRSS, these are also the three largest governorates, with Baghdad containing 24.1% of the population, Mosul, 9.4% and Basra, 6.6%. Baghdad is comprised of all the religious and ethnic groups in Iraq, while Mosul is predominantly Sunni, and Basra is predominately Shiaa. At the same time, Mosul has a strong representation of the Kurdish minority in Arab-dominated governorates, and both Mosul and Basra have strong Christian communities, most notably the Assyrians and the Caldeans. The three Northern governorates (Erbil, Dohuk and Sulamaniyah) of the Kurdistan region were not incorporated into the survey, as the circumstances and issues affecting women in the Kurdish region, autonomous since 1991, are significantly different than in the rest of Iraq.

### Interviewers

The surveys were conducted by 48 Iraqi researchers, predominately women, who are employees of the ICRSS, using a standardized questionnaire. The women researchers conducted the face-to-face surveys with the female heads of households. The research team was supervised by eight specialists, also from the local Iraqi staff, during the period of data collection which occurred from August 17 to 21, 2004.

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9 More information on the Iraqi Center for Research and Strategic Studies can be found on its website at <http://www.iraqcrss.org>.



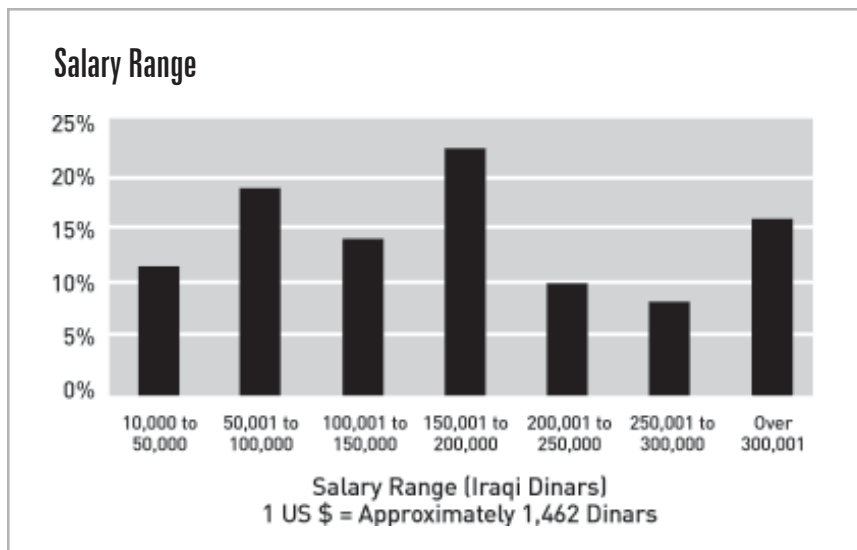
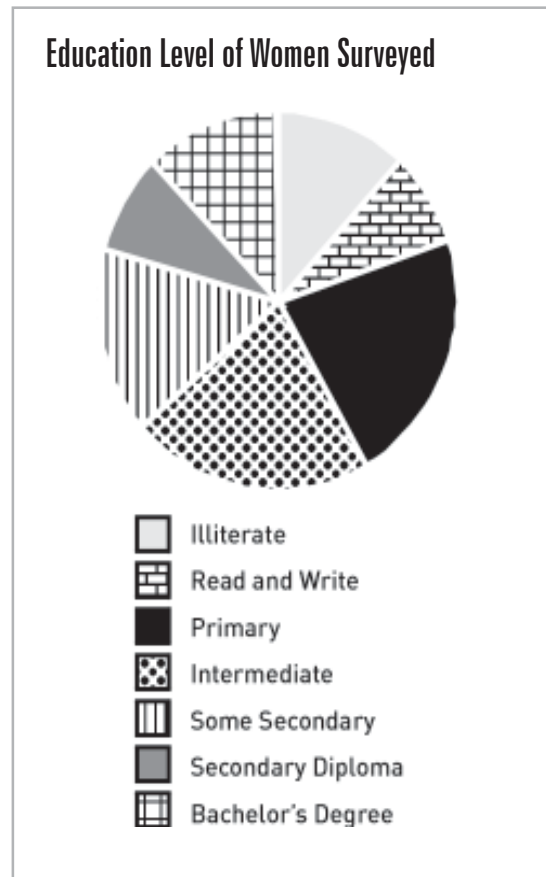
## Windows of Opportunity

### Instrument

The survey contained 35 questions that covered the respondents' demographic information as well as their perceptions on access to medical care, education, and economic and political participation in the past year. The survey also helped identify women's main needs and allowing women to rank the level of importance based on a Likert-like scale 1–5, with 1 representing not important and 5 extremely important. Women's overall perceptions were captured through a series of questions with yes or no responses. The analysis was done by the statistical analysis tool, SPSS, and allowed for a more detailed explanation of women's responses. The questionnaire was written and designed by Women for Women International researchers and translated into Arabic.

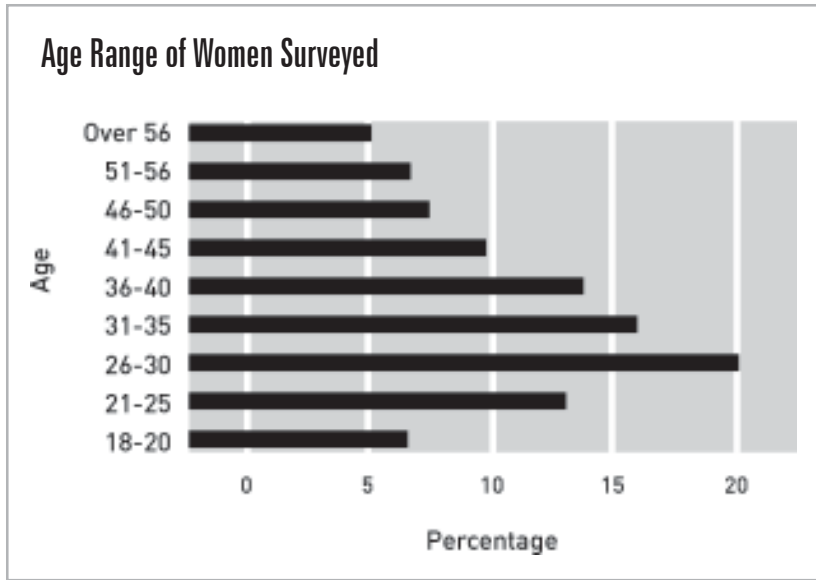
Approximately 84% of the women surveyed did not have any income from formal or informal work. Most of the women in Iraq depend on pension funds or income from a male member of the family (in most cases a brother or uncle due to the high number of widows and divorcees). The majority of women surveyed were married, and 45% were either unmarried, divorced, or widowed. For women who do have some source of income from work, it is often from work in the informal work sector (selling products on the streets or a minimal public salary). The chart below shows the salary range for the 16% of women who did earn an income from their work:

There was also a good range in terms of education level for the women in the survey. The figure below outlines the education level:



The youngest woman interviewed was 18, and the oldest was 73. There was a special emphasis on women whose age range was between 20 and 40 based on population estimates of the proportion of young adults in Iraq and in the Middle East as a whole. The chart on the next page shows the age range of the women surveyed:





### Limitations

The survey is intended to represent the three largest governorates, Baghdad, Mosul and Basra in Iraq, excluding the Northern governorates of Erbil, Sulamaniyah and Dohuk. The results are intended to help determine the perceptions of women after the war, as well as identify their main needs. The survey results assist in developing overall generalizations about the situation of women one year after the war based on the perceptions and viewpoints of the respondents and are not intended to provide scientific results. One of the primary challenges facing researchers on a regional level, particularly in regard to women's rights, is a lack of reliable data. As a result, the survey provides an important quantitative support to the work on the ground. However, the survey results are not

intended to stand alone but to complement the qualitative research and field experience in Iraq.

Because the survey aims to provide a voice for women in Iraq, men were not included in the interviews. However, the perception and viewpoints of men towards women are a crucial factor in the status of women and determining the impact of the past year. In this light, Women for Women International's field work incorporates viewpoints of men through interaction and discussion with male political, community, and NGO leaders. The organization also took into account data from a survey conducted by Physicians for Human Rights from June to July 2003 that incorporates questions regarding women. In that survey of 2,276 households, 58% of the respondents were men.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See note 3.

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