

First Post-War Survey of Iraqi Women Shows Women Want Legal Rights; Dispels Notions That Women Believe Tradition, Culture Should Limit Their Participation in Government

Despite Violence, More than 90% of Iraqi Women Optimistic About The Future, But New Government Could Open or Close Windows of Opportunity, Women for Women International Warns

Washington, DC – The first survey of Iraqi women since the outbreak of the war was released today by Women for Women International, one of the few non-governmental organizations remaining in Baghdad. The groundbreaking survey paints a vivid and even surprising portrait of Iraqi women in transition and dispels the prevailing notion that women believe tradition, customs or religion should limit their participation in the formation of a new Iraqi government.

The results of the survey of 1,000 Iraqi women in Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra, major political and commercial centers in Iraq, was unveiled in a report entitled “Windows of Opportunity: The Pursuit of Gender Equality in Post-War Iraq.” Among the key results:

- 94% of women surveyed want to secure legal rights for women.
- 84% of women want the right to vote on the final constitution.
- Nearly 80% of women believe that their participation in local and national councils should not be limited.

“History has shown that when women play a role in the formation of new governments, those nations are more stable and more successful in the long run,” said Women for Women International's founder and CEO Zainab Salbi. “Many Iraqi leaders have claimed that women do not want to be involved in the reconstruction process. This survey clearly shows that women overwhelmingly believe they should have a seat at the table.”

The most unexpected result of the survey is that despite increasing violence, particularly violence against women, 90.6% of Iraqi women reported that they are hopeful about their future. In recent months, many women who have been involved with the reconstruction efforts or women's rights work have been kidnapped and murdered. Among those murdered included Zeena Al Qushtaini, an Iraqi businesswoman known for wearing western clothing, who was kidnapped and executed. Her body was found clad in a traditional headscarf, which she refused to wear when she was alive. In December, Wijdan al-Khuzai, a candidate in the Iraqi election, was also murdered near her house in Baghdad.

“Women make up more than half the population of Iraq. This makes them enormously influential, both for the election this month and for Iraq's future,” said Manal Omar, who has been Women for Women International's Country Director in Iraq, since the organization established offices there in July 2003. “The new Iraqi government must act quickly to ensure their rights today and secure their hope for the future. If women

continue to be excluded from the new government and lose hope for the future, then the window of opportunity for women in Iraq – and hope for the country itself – closes.”

To date, women have not played an active role in the new Iraqi governing bodies. Only three women have been appointed to the 25-member Interim Iraqi Governing Council, and the three women on the Council did not have the right to serve on the Presidential Council. No women were appointed to be governors of 18 provinces in Iraq nor were any women appointed to a committee overseeing the drafting of the new Iraqi constitution.

Women for Women International warned, however, that the survey showed that more than twice as many women believed that religious institutions had done something to improve their lives in the past year (13%) than those who believed the government had done so (6%).

“Women's voting power but lack of muscle as elected officials in the current governing bodies leave them vulnerable in Iraq today,” said Salbi. “Too often women turn in desperation to extremist religious groups for help despite the long-term sacrifice of personal freedoms. These groups have historically been able to gain support when they can offer basic services normally provided by a government.”

Salbi pointed to The Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas in the West Bank and the occupied territories, and the Taliban in Afghanistan as examples of this trend.

The survey, conducted by Iraq Center for Research and Strategic Studies (CSSR), randomly sampled 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 and covered seven cities in three governorates, Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra.

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

Women for Women International was founded in 1993 to help women overcome the horrors of war and civil strife in ways that can help them rebuild their lives, families, and communities. Its Iraq program has provided services to nearly 800 women from Baghdad, Hillah and Karbala, and works with organizations and Iraqi governing bodies to address the needs of Iraqi women at the leadership and grassroots levels.