

## IRAQIS WANT WOMEN'S RIGHTS SECURED IN NEW CONSTITUTION

*Conference Held on Women's Rights in Post-War Iraq;  
Iraqis Make List of Recommendations to Constitutional Committee*

June 29, 2005, AMMAN, Jordan-Iraqi women want their rights clearly defined in their country's new constitution, according to recommendations released today from a historic conference sponsored by Women for Women International. The two-day conference brought together male and female members of the Iraqi National Assembly, including members of the Constitutional Committee, Iraqi civil society leaders and women's rights advocates.

As the deadline looms to complete the new constitution, the conference focused on discussing strategies for enshrining women's rights in the new constitution. In closed-door sessions, conference participants said they wanted women to have equal rights with men and for there to be a bill of rights protecting all Iraqis. They also recommended that at least 40 percent of the seats in the National Assembly be reserved for women. They recommended making Islam the official religion of Iraq, but they agreed that there should be an independent supreme constitutional court that would protect Iraqi citizens' rights under the constitution. A list of draft recommendations is attached.

"This is a critical stage for women in Iraq," said Zainab Salbi, CEO and President of Women for Women International. "After wars and conflicts, there is a window of opportunity for women to help set the direction of their country and to protect their rights in a constitution. As the constitutional drafting deadline nears, that window is closing for women."

The conference created a secure environment to open a dialogue about women's rights in Iraq and to share knowledge about the various ways women's rights have been enshrined in other post-conflict constitutions, particularly in Islamic countries, Salbi added.

Women for Women International does not advocate for specific language in the constitution. Instead, its staff works with Iraqis to help them decide for themselves what they want and to learn how to advocate effectively for women rights. For over a decade, the Washington, D.C.-based group has worked with women survivors of war to rebuild their lives on a personal, economic and political scale. Its mission is to help move women survivors of war from crisis and upheaval to self-sufficiency and stability so they can become active participants in their communities and rebuild their countries.

"Women are a bellwether for future of a country," said Salbi. "When women prosper, the entire country prospers. But if women are oppressed, like they were under the Taliban, it's a sign of bad things to come."

Because of security concerns, the conference was held in Jordan and its location was not disclosed. Journalists were not permitted to attend and a list of conference attendees will not be released. Insurgents have repeatedly targeted Iraqi women, particularly educated middle-and upper-class women. Since 2003, women's rights leaders, women candidates and a woman Iraqi Assembly Member have been assassinated. On Tuesday, the conference attendees learned that a male Iraqi Assembly member was assassinated as well.

The workers' strikes at the Baghdad airport almost doomed the conference before it started. Because of the airport closure, many participants drove from Iraq to the conference, an extremely dangerous way to travel. Nearly sixty Iraqis attended the conference, with almost even representation of both men and women. The group represented a broad range of religious beliefs and ethnic groups.

While the Constitutional Committee was kept at a standstill for weeks to determine the ethnic representation on the committee, fewer than 17% of the committee members are women, even though they make up over a third of the National Assembly. A record number of women flocked to vote in parliamentary elections in January 2005. After years of war and high death rates of men, women constitute 60 percent of the population, a larger percentage than any single ethnic group, but their representation has been largely ignored in the reconstruction of Iraq.

Discussions behind closed doors were vigorous and sincere. The conference topics included the importance of women in post-conflict areas, identifying issues that may need to be addressed, how to build consensus, and effective ways to advocate and increase grassroots awareness. Conversations included the role of Islam in the government, the structure of local and federal governments and the looming deadline for the constitution.

Experts from South Africa, Rwanda and Malaysia spoke about the successes and lessons from their constitutional processes. Several of the experts warned the Iraqis about trying to develop a constitution in a short period of time without forums for public input.

Some Iraqi men and women expressed concern about the deadline for the Constitution; the first draft is scheduled to be finished by August 15th. They feared that the lack of public engagement could hinder progress, particularly for women's rights issues. However, other Iraqis argued that the security situation forced them to need to move quickly and would prevent them from being able to hold public forums. The group recommended more public forums to discuss the new constitution but did not make a formal recommendation on the deadline for its completion.

There was also much debate about whether the constitution should be broad or very specific. Members of the Constitutional Committee explained to the group that because of the impending deadline - just six weeks away - they would only have time to address broad issues in the constitution.

Iraqi participants learned that the constitutions of South Africa and Malaysia allow religious and cultural laws to co-exist side by side. South African citizens may choose to be governed under cultural laws as long as they do not infringe upon certain basic rights like dignity, equality and the right to privacy.

In Malaysia, Shari'a, or Islamic family law, governs Muslim citizens for issues relating to family matters. To protect women's rights, Malaysian advocates have worked to make domestic violence qualified as a criminal - not family - matter, which ensures it is governed by the secular federal government rather than Shari'a. They have also sought to ensure that interpretations of Islam are open to public discussion. While the text of the Qur'an is considered divine, according to the expert, interpretations of Islam are made by humans and are fallible. Malaysian women's right groups advocate for progressive interpretations of Islam that include women's equality.

A Rwandan expert shared the story of her country's success in protecting women's rights. After the genocides in the 1990's, women composed the majority of Rwandans. Rwanda has the largest number of women in the legislature of any country in the world. She discussed the importance to engage women in the constitutional process and to have commissions that ensure gender equity.

Women for Women International will release a full report on the conference and formal list of recommendations in the coming weeks.

<http://www.womenforwomen.org/>