

A Role for Iraqi Women

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, May 7, 2003

At the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, women living in exile were invited to meetings with President Bush and his top advisors, including Vice President Dick Cheney and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. The women told of their forced flight from a tyrannical regime whose despot spread chemical gasses to kill his own people. They were photographed with the President, and their stories were used by the administration to drum up support for the war. How can you argue against the protection of poor, suffering women and children? After the fall of Saddam, Iraqi women exiles met again with administration leaders, including Secretary of State Colin Powell. They shared their horror stories once more, only this time they thanked the administration for ridding their country of a despised Saddam Hussein.

But as Iraq takes faltering steps toward a new democracy, the US civil administrators implementing the peace apparently have no use for the country's women. Iraqi women make up 55 percent of the adult population. They are among the more highly educated and professionally skilled women in the entire region. However, only a handful have been invited to planning meetings for a transitional government. At a recent meeting of 80 Iraqi opposition leaders orchestrated by the US, there were only five women. It seems women are more acceptable as victims than as agents of change.

Women's success as planners, organizers, and leaders of reconstruction programs and civic projects is evident in Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Sudan, Cambodia, and Kosovo. They draw upon their professional skills—as doctors, lawyers, judges, journalists and business owners—and their relational skills, to create dialogue and understanding. In order to secure a lasting peace, women need to be fully included in all stages of transitional planning and governance. According to United Nations Development Fund for Women, Director Noeleen Heyzer, "Women can break through obstacles to reconstruction through shared objectives that supersede ethnic, religious, and tribal differences. ...In addition, women often have informal social service systems in place that can serve as a foundation for reconstruction."

At a forum entitled "Winning the Peace: Women's Role in Post-Conflict Iraq," I had the privilege of working with more than two-dozen Iraqi women professionals eager to play a role in their country's rebirth. The meeting was organized by Women Waging Peace, a global initiative, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The women hammered out ideas on governance,

constitutional reform, and economic strategy, with scores of experts from the US Agency for International Development, State Department, World Bank and United Nations.

One of the million Kurdish refugees who fled Iraq in the early 90s, Nasreen Mustafa Sideek is determined to help rebuild her country. An engineer by trade, Sideek returned years later to work on United Nations assistance programs. As Minister of Reconstruction and Development in northern Iraq—and one of the few women currently in a top leadership role—she oversees relief services for rural families. There are three women ministers in Kurdistan’s regional cabinet; half of the engineers in Sideek’s ministry are women. Sideek credits civil and social progress in part to women’s collaborative nature. “Women have a key role in rebuilding a sense of community. Their work is essential. It is women who try to bridge differences.”

Globally, women are indispensable in the demobilization, reconstruction, and economic development of their countries. That argument is clearly supported by recent resolutions from the UN Security Council and other major international bodies, which call for the inclusion of women in all efforts to prevent, manage and resolve conflict. Women often bring fresh, workable solutions to long-standing problems. We need their voices now as the drafting of a new constitution that protects minority rights is being overshadowed by an internal struggle for political control. Bringing them in reasonable numbers to the policy table will, in and of itself, be an antidote to the extremism of some of those jockeying for power.

US planners and Iraqi opposition groups will meet in a few weeks to name an interim executive council or prime minister to lead a new government. Only a few women are involved in these efforts to create a pluralistic, free, and stable state. Their exclusion will imperil the creation of a sustainable and representative democracy.