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### **Economic Empowerment of Women in Iraq The Way Forward**

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**May 2006**

A UN/World Bank survey conducted after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime revealed that even though women represented about 55 percent of Iraq's population, they made up only 23 percent of the workforce.

Although the international community and Iraqis have since devoted considerable attention to boosting the status of women in Iraq, most of these efforts have focused on the social and political empowerment of women. Full democratic consolidation in Iraq can only be achieved by guaranteeing, in addition, a leading economic role for women in Iraq.

The United States Institute of Peace (USIP), in coordination with the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), hosted meetings on February 1, February 22, and April 19, 2006, to discuss the current economic progress of women in Iraq and to identify challenges and options for the future.

A wide range of governmental and nongovernmental representatives, as well as Iraqi women activists, were in attendance. [Beth DeGrasse](#), senior program officer in USIP's [Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations](#), moderated the discussions.

This USIPeace Briefing summarizes the views expressed by participants in the two meetings.

### **Women in Iraq Do Not Live in a Vacuum**

[Rend al-Rahim](#), executive director of the Iraq Foundation and former representative of the Iraqi Governing Council in the United States, opened the first meeting by observing that although a large amount of work on women's issues has been undertaken in Iraq, women continue to be deeply affected by underlying social and political structures in the nation.

"Women in Iraq do not live in a vacuum," she said. In order for the economic empowerment of women to proceed in Iraq, al-Rahim stated, "Society as a whole needs to be empowered."

Aside from the daily violence faced by women, serious impediments, in her view, include patriarchal customs that accord women an inferior status in Iraq. "Disparities in levels of education, economic advancement, and social standards" also arise from this socio-cultural heritage.



An Iraqi woman in the southern city of Basra, Iraq, walks next to posters promoting women's rights in the new constitution on Aug. 22, 2005. (AP Photo)

Nevertheless, the main tenets of Islam do not prevent women from working and acknowledge women's property rights, al-Rahim said.

As a result, in Iraq today, many women are engaged in government, health professions, and universities. However, despite this engagement, "We see few women involved in the private sector, although great effort was made to award grants to women-owned businesses."

According to al-Rahim, the most important barrier to women's participation in the private sector is the lack of basic information about lending opportunities, access to credit, and loan requirements, as well as a deficiency in business skills. Iraqi women do not have the business skills that would enable them to enter the banking sector or to manage private sector enterprises.

Al-Rahim recommended that "[future] training be organized around issues that involve time management and the personnel and business skills that are much needed for the development of a major role for women in the private sector in Iraq."

### **What Has Been Done So Far**

U.S. governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and the UN have launched a variety of programs designed to assist women-led private sector initiatives and boost the employment of women in underrepresented sectors and activities.

The Army's Project and Contracting Office (PCO) focused on supporting women-owned businesses directly by promoting the use of Iraqi women-owned businesses in reconstruction through direct contracting or subcontracting outlets. The efforts of the PCO led to wide-ranging contracts with women-owned businesses, from large-scale construction projects to the delivery of materials and services.

In addition, the PCO developed the Subcontracting Excellence Program Database as a web-based management tool to monitor the overall progress of these contracts. The database enables PCO to track the numbers of subcontracts going to Iraqi women-owned businesses and the progress by each of a dozen major contractors in hiring and training Iraqi women.

As of February 2006, over 250 contracts have gone to Iraqi women-owned businesses totaling over \$250 million.

The PCO developed a unique women's initiative program in the water sector that provides Iraqi women from the Ministries of Municipalities and Public Works and Water Resources with the tools they need to develop their skills and ultimately advance their careers within their respective ministries. Through this program, a total of fifty-four seminars for over one thousand junior, mid, and senior level women in the ministries have been completed, with 64,228 training hours conducted.

USAID focused on making all of its Iraq programs, including public sector, private sector, and agriculture programs, gender inclusive. Through these programs, it has managed to train Iraqi women in accounting, entrepreneurship, financing, and management. USAID is also launching microfinance activities that will target women and women-owned businesses and will train women in lending as part of these activities.

The State Department's Iraqi women's democracy initiative is training women in democracy building, political participation, economic empowerment, and media relations through U.S. NGO partners working on the ground in Iraq.

In the coming year, the initiative will provide more emphasis on training women throughout Iraq in business and economic skills, developing their ability to start businesses, establish credit, and form partnerships with U.S. business leaders as mentors. The Iraqi women's democracy initiative will continue to facilitate the participation of Iraqi businesswomen in international economic conferences, providing them with the opportunities they need to interact and network with other business leaders from around

the world.

NGOs are also playing a role. Spirit of America, for example, has sought to advance Iraqi women's economic empowerment by focusing efforts on equipping women's centers in Iraq with computer training and daycare centers and on establishing sewing centers. They provide Iraqi women with the skills to participate in the economic life of Iraq.

### **What Remains to Be Done**

Participants noted that most projects conducted so far have been focused mainly on empowering educated women, and not on supporting the larger number of women who are illiterate, handicapped, or marginalized by their location in remote areas. They argued that projects should extend beyond major Iraqi cities into rural areas to reach out to marginalized women.

Participants cautioned against duplication of efforts and expressed concern that some organizations have delivered similar training targeting some of the same participants.

U.S. government participants emphasized the steady decline in government funding available for these activities and urged greater private-sector involvement for training. Partnerships between public and private sector entities need to be nurtured, and networking and mentoring efforts should be encouraged and supported. Access to credit and financing should be made more accessible to Iraqi women.

Finally, participants agreed that the legal framework that ensures respect for the rights of women in Iraqi society needs to be protected. Any erosion of the political and legal status of Iraqi women will set back efforts to empower women economically.

### **Of Related Interest**

- [Iraq Programs: Training and Education Leaders for a Democratic Iraq](#)
- [Strategies for Promoting Democracy in Iraq](#)
- [Iraq at a Juncture: Constitution, Referendum and Elections](#)  
USIPeace Briefing on the rights of women in the new Iraq, September 2005
- [Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Workshop for Iraqi Women](#)  
USIP Training Program, July 2004
- [Women, Human Rights, and Islam](#)  
Peace Watch, August 2002

This USIPeace Briefing was written by Ylli Bajraktari in the [Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations](#) at the United States Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policies.

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