

Commission on the Status of Women

Fiftieth session

New York, 27 February – 10 March 2005

PANEL II

Madame Chairperson, I thank you for the opportunity to speak before you about the “Equal participation of women and men in decision making processes at all levels”. Coming from Iraq at one point of my speech today I would like to focus also on the importance of women in post-conflict reconstruction.

The found mental question I would like to impose here this afternoon is:

Can there be democracy with marginalization? *No.*

There are many women in politics today. There are a fair number of women in Arab parliaments, the Iraqi assembly being a notable example with 25% of the 275-member assembly are women. But the presence of women in the halls of power is not sufficient. That is mere tokenism. What matters is the effect of that presence.

When we talk about equality we must talk about equality of opportunity rather than equivalence. The real reason women should be engaged in politics at all levels is not to emulate men but to bring a unique feminine to bear on the decision-making process. Equal rights mean being able to bring your own perspective to bear. It does not mean doing what men do, and how they do it.

Women, Human Rights & Decision-Making

Issues of women's empowerment and their full and equal participation in public life are human rights issues. Human rights norms and standards guarantee women the human rights to non-discrimination in all aspects of political, economic, and social life, and to full and equal participation in decision-making and access to power at all levels. E2c,s anble examwomen thI0in Arab

Today, in most countries in the region, a handful of women also serve as ministers, ambassadors, deputy ministers, and even judges. Women still constitute a low nine percent of cabinet ministers in the region. Iraq has six women ministers, Jordan three, Bahrain two, and Kuwait one.

Governments in the region are increasingly ready to open educational opportunities to women at all levels and to allow women to work.

Post-Conflict Reconstruction: The Importance of Women's Participation

WOMEN ARE CRITICAL TO DEVELOPMENT

The promotion of women's rights is often discussed as a moral imperative. I would like to focus today on the compelling economic arguments for giving women a greater role in post-conflict reconstruction. If the goal is to improve health, nutrition or education, reduce fertility or child mortality, stem the spread of HIV, build robust and self-sustaining community organizations, encourage grass-roots democracy, and ultimately, temper extremism, successful efforts must target women.

Economists increasingly recognize that nothing is more central to development than the economic, political and social participation and leadership of women. This is particularly true in post-conflict societies, where women often make up the majority of the population and have primary responsibility for raising the next generation. A broad set of data now show that raising female education, increasing their control over resources, and lifting their political voice can have a profound impact on development.

Giving women more control over resources is also important. Simply put, women tend to invest more in the family than men. When women control income, more is devoted to education, health and nutrition-related expenditures, and less is spent on alcohol and cigarettes. The outcome is not trivial - for example, increases in female income improve child survival rates 20 times more than increases in male income. There is, not surprisingly, also evidence that women in positions of political leadership make different policy choices than men. This has broad and potentially profound implications for the way that resources are allocated at the local-level, and therefore for development and post-conflict reconstruction. The bottom line is that in many countries, women are excluded politically and their needs tend to be neglected. Giving women access to political power begins to redress that.

These findings are incredibly important to keep in mind when discussing post-conflict situations, particularly in Iraq where there are significant cultural pressures, reinforced by religious values, restricting the role of women. In Iraq, women's rights represent a line in the sand between religious conservatives and those with a more modern, progressive vision.

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.

Conclusions :

There are two opposing winds which are pulling the world in different directions. The first is the wind of destruction that is embraced by religious extremism: extremism as a mode of thinking, terrorism as a mode of conflict resolution, and enclosure as a mode of living. The second is the wind of hope that is embraced by liberal democrats: freedom as a mode of thinking, dialogue and peace as a mode of conflict resolution, and openness as a mode of living. Which wind will prevail depends on how we as citizens of this world act and take responsibility.

I call upon all women in the world who are looking for a better future for themselves and their children to work and pull together so that the wind of hope sweeps across our *world*.