

Iraqi Women Seek Greater Rights

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Group photo of women leaders who participated in the Initiative for Inclusive Security Colloquium which this year focused on Rule of Law

By Margaret Beesher
Washington, D.C.

As final results of January's election for a four-year parliament are announced in Iraq, women there are calling for a larger voice in their country's future. Women make up more than half the country's population and say their role in its rebuilding cannot be ignored. They are seeking constitutional guarantees of their political, economic and social rights.

Iraqi women enjoy broader rights than many of their sisters elsewhere in the Arab world, but they want to expand and develop those rights further.

Under the new Iraqi constitution, ratified in October, women are guaranteed a quarter of parliament's 275-seats. But Zakia Hakki, who was the first female judge in Iraq, says political negotiations over forming the new government are a prime example of how women have yet to be fully integrated into the political process.

"There is very, very important negotiation and dialogue inside Iraq by the leaders of all the political groups. But there is not a single woman with them," Hakki said.

Lawyer and former interim Environment Minister Mishkat al-Mounir says excluding women from the political process is a mistake.

"If we start our process by excluding women from the process of decision making, then we will end up excluding other social groups. We will end up having another dictatorship," she noted.

Iraqi women's rights advocate Hanaa Edwar says women suffered as much as men under Saddam Hussein's regime, and they have earned the right to equal participation in the political process.

"We have the equality. Equality in imprisonment, equality in executions, equality in displacement, equality in such a bloody, bloody and miserable life that we have shared with our brothers," said Ms. Edwar.

Edwar and the other women were in Washington Thursday to discuss their hope of amending the constitution to expand and guarantee women's rights.

Mishkat al-Mounir says it is very important to have one set of laws that apply to all Iraqis, regardless of their religious or ethnic background. She explains that since 1959, women's rights have been granted under the country's personal status code.

"It was issued before Saddam Hussein's time," she added. "It was driven from Sharia law. It is not in contradiction with Islam. It was drafted by collecting and gathering the best opinions from all Muslim scholars and Muslim schools in favor of women."

The women support the 1959 law, which they say protects both the rights of women and the family, especially in marriages where one partner is Sunni Muslim and the other is Shi'ite. These sects can interpret family law differently, whereas the 1959 code applies a single standard.

But one of the articles in the new constitution is troubling to women's rights advocates. That article states that no law can be passed that contradicts the "undisputed" rules of Islam. They fear clerics could narrowly interpret this language and limit women's rights, particularly with respect to marriage, divorce and inheritance.

Al-Mounir says the women's movement hopes to abolish that article and come up with a constitutional amendment.

"If we could not achieve that, we will try to adopt the personal status code issued in 1959 to the federal level," she explained. "As you are all aware, Iraq is now a federal state. So we would like to adopt that law to the federal level so we will have a unified code that will be applied all over Iraq."

The women say Iraq cannot be rebuilt using only steel and cement, it needs a new mentality, one that is open to the participation of women at all levels and guarantees them social, political and economic equality.