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Iraqi Women Seek Leadership Positions

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 24 (UPI) -- As the results of Iraq's parliamentary elections began to trickle in, one Washington based group of Iraqi expatriates were more concerned with gender, than with party or ethnic affiliation.

"We want the recognition of women to be leaders, to be in the 'making decisions' positions," said Hanaa Edwar, an advocate for women's rights. "We got it -- 31 percent women in the National Assembly last year. We have got it -- women being in the queue for national elections, the first to be in elections, for women to know their rights, to be recognized in the constitution."

Edwar and dozens of other leaders from war zones across the globe gathered at a meeting of the Initiative for Inclusive Security, an international colloquium of women and other marginalized groups working for involvement in rebuilding nations torn by violent conflict.

The constitution was a triumph recognized by all of the Iraqi delegation, which included a lawyer, an engineer, and one of the drafters of the constitution.

"We should focus on the rights we have in the constitution, but we have to have some amendments," said Zakia Hakki, Iraq's first female judge. Hakki returned from the United States to be elected to the Iraqi parliament and serve as an advisor to the Ministry of Justice.

The delegation hopes for an amendment that would more narrowly define the role of sharia or Islamic law as it concerns personal status issues such as divorce, married life and legal status for the purpose of inheritance.

"One of the main achievements for Iraqi national unity and for Iraqi women's rights is the family law," said Edwar. "This is very essential for Iraq, for the future of the country, for the future of the national unity, of the social fabric of my country."

Currently the role of sharia law is open to broad interpretation and the constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. But these women feel that even the possibility of narrow interpretation of Islamic law will increase the risk of their rights being violated in the new Iraq. Activists like Edwar have taken to promoting the awareness of constitutional rights to women throughout Iraq.

"One woman at the beginning, she stood off," said Edwar as she recounted a story of her awareness campaigns. The woman asked her, "What does it mean, constitution? Tell me, is he a man or he is a woman?"

"Can you imagine?" said Edwar. "This is the level of awareness. People, they are living away from the essential things to practice their citizenship."

The implementation of the new constitution and its provisions for women is another challenge facing these leaders. Iraq's constitution guarantees the rights of women to vote and stand for office, but engineer and Iraqi voter education advocate Basma Fakri is not convinced that those provisions are enough.

"We have to fight for it, and it will be a fierce fight," she said. "Believe me, it won't be easy ... unless there was a quota for women they won't allow them."

The quota, the result of the mobilization of Iraqi women and enforcement of equality by the U.S. provisional authority, mandates that women hold 25 percent of the seats in Iraq's parliament. This number is close to the Initiative for Inclusive Security's definition of one-third as a critical mass of women needed to influence policy-making groups.

To help with implementation of the new laws stateswoman Hakki believes there should be independent government oversight on women's issues. "We need to have the high commissioner for the advancement of women," she said, stressing that if women set the bar high they maintain their political and social rights through the seemingly endless negotiation process.

There are other benchmarks too, outside of government positions that these leaders are using to judge the status of women in Iraq. The security situation in Iraq and its effect on the mobility of women is a big concern because other advances cannot be made if women are not safe to leave home.

Mishkat Al Moumin, a prominent human rights lawyer, helps organize graduate studies programs for women in cooperation with USAID.

"I think for the young women now it is very tough to work and move with the security situation without a back up," said Al Moumin. "They need an organization to back them up."

Transportation to meetings and classes, a thing that is taken for granted elsewhere, is essential to the ability of women in Iraq to participate in government forums, higher education, even sports.

"Even in the school we don't have teams for basketball or baseball. We don't have anything," said Al Moumin, who is currently a fellow at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. She is pushing for advances for women, particularly in the field of law, where even under Saddam Hussein's secularist rule she had to fight for a chance to stay in school.

"I remember when I was studying in Baghdad University. We were 12 women among 100 students and the first lecture the professor said, 'Excuse me. What are the women doing here? Go to the school of nursing,' " Al Moumin recalls.

Al Moumin is also advocating for women's entry into the New Iraqi Army. She and Fakri stressed international support in achieving real equality for women. Al Moumin hopes for scholarships and training for Iraq's next generation of lawyers, especially the women. Fakri hopes that encouragement from abroad will help Iraq's women to pursue the implementation of their rights in all societal spheres.

"Women will have more when they see the support of the international community," she said.

These leaders have immediate plans for their nation. They hope to pass amendments to the constitution and network women's groups together to make a powerful voting bloc. Still, the Iraq delegation knows that the process will take time and that a truly equal civil society is a long way off.

"It is very important to establish it step-by-step, and sometimes it is hard to balance it," said Fakri. "You are not supposed to rush it."

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