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stella

Surviving Saddam

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What prompted her finally to speak out about her family's relationship with Saddam was a conversation with a Congolese woman. 'She was raped by eight men who forced her son to spread her legs. I asked her what I should do with her story and she said, "I have never told anyone this story before but you can tell the whole world if you think it will stop other women going through what I went through." That's when I realised I was not true to myself. I would tell other women to break their silence but I never dared to break mine. So I jumped.'

With Women for Women International, Salbi established a global network to help women affected by war, matching rape victims and refugees in war-ravaged countries such as Rwanda, Sudan and Afghanistan with sponsors who write to them and send donations - £15 a month - to fund employment training and rehabilitation. 'We have Bangladeshi women sponsoring Bosnian women, Saudi women sponsoring Afghan women.' Those sponsored enrol in a one-year programme that helps them evolve from victim to survivor to active citizen. Recently the organisation opened an office in London. 'We had so many responses from English women who had heard about us.'

Sometimes, says Salbi, war provides women with the means to renegotiate their role in society. 'Kosovo is a good example - the war forced women to get out of their private sphere. War and the aftermath of war provide a window of opportunity for women, and if they capture it they can cut short 20 years of struggle, but if they don't, they go backwards. In Iraq women have not managed to capture this chance and they are now retreating in their rights.'

advertisement "Before the war in Iraq, Iraqi women were in the universities, in all professions, they were driving cars, running businesses. But these "freedoms" disguised a deeper malaise: women could wear what they wanted but they couldn't think what they wanted. If you thought independently your life was in danger. My mother used to say, "I see the prison bars even though I can't touch them." Now people are not afraid of expressing their views, but you can't leave home without being kidnapped or assassinated. Women are not allowed to drive, or to leave the house without a headscarf. Women's hair salons have been targeted for bombing, women college students are singled out for kidnapping and killing, and I'm looking and saying, "This is code red; this is telling us where society is going."

Salbi believes that peace can be constructed only if women are involved. '[Women know] we need to talk not about how people are going to vote but how they are going to eat. You can't talk about women's rights, or even human rights, without addressing the issues of water, food, jobs, education and health.'

On paper, women are very much involved in politics in Iraq. 'A third of the current Iraqi parliament are women, but that's simply the first step. Most women in politics - Condoleezza Rice is one example - are not necessarily standing for women's needs, they're trying to survive in a masculine world. I take my hat off to them for surviving but I don't think they represent my values for women. We need to have women's voices truly heard.'

Governments ignore women at their own expense, Salbi says. 'Women are the bell-wether for society. Violence often enters through them, and progress, too. The Taliban is a good example; it started its violence against women and people looked the other way. But eventually every man, woman and child in Afghanistan, America and eventually the world was impacted.'

Salbi still has faith in human nature: 'My anger at the evil is what keeps me going but my belief in the good is just as important. There is enough hope and beauty in the world.'

Her fervent hope is that the women who are sponsored by Women for Women International can help society progress. 'As I always say, as a group that focuses on women survivors of war, the day we run out of business will be a good day. Will I ever witness it? I don't know. But I hope to.'

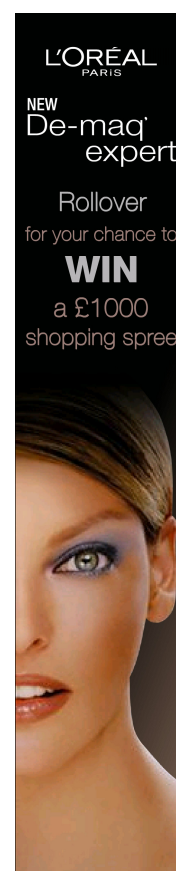
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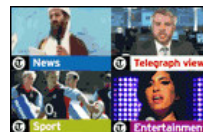
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