

THE NINTH CONGRESS OF THE GENERAL FEDERATION OF IRAQI WOMEN

An international congress which brought together women delegates of 75 countries and gave them the opportunity to set forth their activities and their claims which represent those of a majority of women all over the world.

The Ninth Congress of the General Federation of Iraqi Women, held in Baghdad March 11-18, 1980, was in fact an international congress, celebrating the eleventh anniversary of the Federation (founded 1969) and reviewing its accomplishments during the last two years, with the aim of seeking guidelines for new plans and further progress in the near future.

The delegates numbered over 300, representing 75 countries, besides international women's organizations. They came from all parts of the world: from the Arab countries, the Middle and the Far East, Africa, Australia, Europe and the Americas. Simply dressed, serious looking, they represented the militant class of women who are struggling to liberate themselves and their countries from ignorance, injustice and exploitation. They all spoke, and their speeches, brief or long, revolved about similar topics, reporting on women's efforts toward liberation, their problems and their claims, their faith in women's potentials and in the fruitfulness of their cooperation.

The speakers gave the audience valuable information about women abroad, but most important was the information given about the Iraqi Federation itself, whose objective is "to strive for the purpose of improving in every way the status of Iraqi women so that they may be qualified to enjoy equality with men and participate in all development projects open to the other sex."

The Federation displays intense activity in carrying out an extensive program through the coordinated action of nine secretariats branching out all over the eighteen Iraqi districts. First among them is the Training Secretariat which organizes training workshops for groups of leaders and teachers in charge of wiping out illiteracy, organizing training courses in sports, social activities, health, general culture and basic-living skills. About sixty varieties of handicrafts and vocational training courses are given to adult women, including car-driving, use of the tractor, photography, first-aid, hair-dressing, flower-making, penmanship, designing, chess, foreign languages, applied electronics, ceramics, rug-weaving, etc.

Other secretariats include the one which recruits new members by trying to reach the masses of Iraqi women and

enroll them in the Federation. A monthly women's magazine is published by the Information Secretariat, which is also in charge of television, radio and theatre programs for women, including those in Kurdish and Syriac, in addition to Arabic. Research is carried out by the Research and Studies Secretariat. Health and Child Care also have a secretariat of their own.

Besides the organized activities of its secretariats, the Federation supervises a folkloric center where folkloric costumes, crafts and arts are being revived and developed through the efforts of specialized artists and designers.

The recommendations presented by the Federation Council were inclusive and progressive in nature and aims.

The Federation decided to implement the recommendation of the United Nations regarding the establishment of an information bureau for women. It will continue the steps already made toward execution of the U.N. recommendation formulated in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Several decisions were taken with the view of improving the personal status of women through such measures as giving a woman's testimony at personal status courts the same value as that of a man, restricting arbitrary divorce and issuing a law by which husband and wife should be equal sharers of money and property earned after marriage. Improving the conditions of rural and laboring women and wiping out class differences received special emphasis in the long list of the Council's recommendations which covered more than fifty pages.

As we strolled along the streets of Baghdad, we did not come across any veiled women. The "abaya" or large black mantle is still used by women while in the streets but with no veil covering the face. Universities are co-educational. Theatre programs and folkloric dances join together boys and girls.

This glorious past of Iraq springs through the old Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian monuments that have been preserved or restored. It lives in statues and memorial sculptures recently erected for great historical figures. Its influence permeates modern Iraqi architecture, painting and music.

In spite of its attachment to its past, modern Iraq is open to foreign influences. It has recently founded in Baghdad a university of technology and established at Baghdad University a department for foreign languages and translation. The international character of the Ninth Congress already described bears witness to this progressive trend, equally experienced by the author of this article, who represented IWSAW at the Congress.