

Iraqi Women Preserve Gains Despite Wartime Problems^(☆)

Despite the pull of conservative tradition and the nation's goal, since the war with Iran, Iraqi women today have more economic and social opportunities than women in most other Arab countries. It can also be argued that Iraqi women have more opportunities and legal rights than women in many Western countries.

During the past 20 years, Iraqi women have entered practically every profession, including the army. In 1980, according to the statistics in **Iraq: The contemporary State**, edited by Tim Niblock, 37 percent of oil project designers working for the Ministry of Oil, and 30 percent of construction supervisors were women. By 1982, women comprised 46 percent of teachers, 29 percent of doctors, 46 percent of dentists, 70 percent of pharmacists, 15 percent of accountants, 14 percent of factory workers, and four percent of senior management positions.

How did Iraq do it? One might assume that it is the product of a feminist movement, as in the United States, or a struggle, as in Egypt. Actually, a number of unusual factors reinforced Iraqi women's efforts to transform political support into practical measures. The two main factors are:

The first is the country's geography. Modern Iraq is a large oil-rich country with a relatively small population of 17 million. Per capita income is approximately \$2,298. To solve its severe shortage of manpower, Iraq chose to train women rather than import huge numbers of foreign guest workers, as did Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait in their initial stages of rapid development.

The second factor that has simplified matters is the current regime's attitude towards dissent. Iraq's secular government, modeled on socialist principles, has unhesitatingly implemented measures at which a regime more sensitive to religious opposition would have balked. For instance, there is stress on education as «a matter of the elementary rights for women».

With the establishment of the General Federation of Iraqi Women, the current regime has carried out its promises energetically and methodically. The federation was founded by Nawal Hilmi, Manal Younis and Ramzia Al-Khairou, twenty-one years ago (April 4, 1969). It began as one office, the Baghdad office. Now, the federation incorporates five regional subdivisions which in turn are divided into 21 branches, one in each governate (except Baghdad which has four). Each branch has smaller subunits based in each province. More than

300,000 Iraqi women now belong to the federation.

Challenges facing the federation

One of the serious challenges the federation is facing is how to prepare women for the return of thousands of Iraqi prisoners of war. How to help the wives of men who have suffered immense psychological and emotional trauma, possibly including brainwashing, and how to reintegrate them into normal day-to-day life are the challenges facing Iraqi women. The federation's department of family assistance has trained psychologists on its staff, and many non-members, including men, seek counseling there.

The wives of «martyrs» also receive a great deal of attention from the federation. In addition to an acre or more land, cash stipends, scholarships for the children and a car, the federation offers driving lessons as well as adult education classes. The purpose is to train widows in marketable skills which help them become self-sufficient.

A second challenge the federation faces is changing attitudes about women's roles that have been ingrained in traditional Iraqi society for centuries. Thus far, they have changed the covers of children's books such that sex roles stereotypes are not reinforced. They also teach housekeeping and cooking classes to **both** boys and girls.

One of the federation's main activities is in the area of health education. Thus, federation members spend several months in rural villages in teams of two. Team members identify village women who possess leadership skills and train them to lead classes in basic hygiene, nutrition and health care. When team members are satisfied they move to another village.

The women's federation is also trying to help Iraqi working mothers balance between careers and their families by establishing nurseries and day-care centers at minimal costs throughout the country.

Hence, Iraqi women are not only basking in the support they receive from the government. They have escalated their efforts, activities and efficiency to put the skills of women into practical use •

(☆) Source: Andrea Laurenz. «Iraqi Women Preserve Gains Despite Wartime Problems.» **The Washington Report On Middle East Affairs**, July 1989, p. 4-5.

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