

Iraq's Progressive Policies Towards Women

What has become of the Iraqi woman after the war? What has become of powerful women's groups like the General Federation of Iraqi Women? How did the war affect the rights and conditions of Iraqi women?

These are but a few of the questions that are being asked. Researchers are earnestly corresponding with each other and with concerned centers to get current data. The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World has received numerous requests for up-to-date news. Unfortunately, very little information is coming out of Iraq. What is known about the aftermath of the war is that thousands of refugees, the majority of which are women and children, are fleeing through the southern part of the country. Undoubtedly and customary during wars, Iraqi women must be desperately trying to rebuild their families and homes and anxiously searching for stability. We tried to approach some Lebanese or other women who fled Iraq recently for eye-witness reports about what Iraqi women experienced and how they are coping with the war. We were hoping to draw parallels between the war traumas and survival patterns of Lebanese women and Iraqi women (although the two wars are very different). Unfortunately again, the refu-

gees seem reluctant to speak-out or know very little having fled in a state of total chaos and terror.

Therefore, the only reliable and available data concentrates on the regime's support to women's rights before the war. Once again we are abridging and giving excerpts of an outstanding article written by Andrea W. Lorenz (1) which is published in the May/June 1991 issue of Ms. magazine.(2)

According to Lorenz, the Iraqi regime has backed policies towards women that are the most progressive in the Arab world. These progressive policies and the economic growth of the 70's, encouraged women to participate in the country's development. Iraqi women were traveling overseas for higher education. Local programs to eradicate illiteracy were established all over the country. Regional and interregional migration for rural to urban areas and the cities for education increased. "In 1979, 51 percent of Baghdad University medical school's first year were women, as were 75 percent of students in the English translation department at Mustansiriyeh University."(3)

According to Lorenz it was a time of relative politi-



Illustration taken from the Newsletter of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, March 1991 issue, p.20.

cal freedom and there was an influx of technology. Iraq became one of the countries of the Gulf likely to experience an influx of foreign labor from labor surplus countries in the Middle East and Asia.. But the general policy of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party was to train women in specialized fields and managerial positions rather than import labor. Consequently, female labor force participation of Iraqi women increased; unlike other booming Gulf countries where traditional restrictions were tightened in order to control interaction between the increasing number of men and women (migrating from rural to urban regions for employment) in the work place. "A survey conducted in Kuwait by Al Thakib (1975) to assess societal attitudes towards the education and employment of women, found that 96 percent of the respondents were in favor of women's education up to the secondary level. With respect to employment, the majority (90 percent) indicated their approval of women working in governmental agencies, preferably in teaching, because it provides minimal chances of interaction between the sexes."⁴

Hence, "by 1980, Iraqi women formed 37 percent of oil project designers working for the Ministry of Oil, and 30 percent of construction supervisors. By 1982, they 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"⁵ In addition to equal opportunity for education and high positions, Iraqi women enjoyed equal pay. Iraqi women were enlisted in the army during the Iran-Iraq war. It is said that at one point, Iraqi women were selling their jewelry to support the army.

However, the Iran-Iraq war still made things difficult for women.. Lorenz reports that as men went off to the front, marriage plans were deferred. In April 1982, the government passed laws prohibiting married women to travel without their husbands, and single women were required to have written permission from their guardians. According to Lorenz, this stemmed the growing number of Iraqi women who were leaving to complete their education abroad.

"Women's participation in the formal labor force

more than doubled, filling up jobs that had been vacated by the men who went to the front. . . . Women were told that it was their patriotic duty to bear five children each, in order to narrow the population gap between Iraq's then 15 million people and Iran's 47 million. In 1986, birth control devices disappeared from the market; even condoms were declared illegal."⁽⁶⁾ In the spring of 1989, newspapers in the region reported that a new decree acquitting the man who commits a crime of honor (killing his wife, daughter, sister or mother for adultery) was passed. According to some analysts, the purpose of this law was to, coercively, prevent the women, whose men were on the front, from violating traditional codes of honor and committing adultery.

It seems like war always succeeds in destroying what little progress is being made. The Iraqi women have made gains during the Iran-Iraq war, despite the problems. Now, they are facing the aftermath of a more destructive war. A war which destabilized the country's infrastructure, educational and employment facilities, not to mention the once progressive political regime, which supported women's rights. Aisha, An Iraqi woman told Andrea Lorenz : "My country is being destroyed. It's tearing me apart. . . . still, I feel confident that even after the war, women's rights will remain strong."^{*}

(1) Andrea W. Lorenz is publication manager at the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations; she has an M.A. in Arabic Studies and has visited Iraq several times.

(2) Andrea Lorenz, "Ishtar Was A Woman", *Ms. magazine*, Editor: Robin Morgan, New York: May/June 1991. p. 14-15.

(3) *Ibid.*

(4) Abu-Nasr, Lorfin and Azzam, "An Overview of Arab Women in Population, Employment and Economic Development" Abu Nasr, Khoury and Azzam (Eds.) *Women, Employment and Development in the Arab World*, New York Mouton Publishers, 1985.

(5) Statistics from *Iraq: The Contemporary State*, edited by Tim Niblock, Taken from Andrea W. Lorenz, "Iraqi Women Preserve Gains Despite Wartime Problems," *Al-Raida*, Vol IX, No. 51, p.9.

(6) *Ibid.* Lorenz, "Ishtar was a Woman" *Ms Magazine*.