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Iraqi women looking to West for leadership role models

DRCOG forum seeks to advance political, social cooperation

**By Betty Abah, Rocky Mountain News
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Iraqi's minister for women's affairs faces a greater challenge than most of her counterparts around the world: She must give a new lease on life to more than 10,000 widows in her war-torn country.

"Iraqi women are the greatest victims in all the conflicts that have befallen our country," said Azhar Abdel Karim al-Shaikhli, a constitutional lawyer and former university teacher.

"We are working toward bettering their lives now. We want to study the role of women in the U.S. so we can apply it back home because our women still aspire to be in leadership positions."

Toward that end, al-Shaikhli and eight other Iraqi women - including government officials, members of nongovernmental organizations and university teachers - participated in a recent exchange forum under the aegis of the Denver Regional Council of Governments Baghdad-Denver Region Partnership for Peace.

In Denver, they attended the United Way America annual conference, including the National United Way of America Women's Leadership Council meeting.

The objective of the Partnership for Peace is to advance political, social and economic cooperation through training in government and nongovernmental settings.

Al-Shaikhli said the 8-year war with Iran in the 1980s, the 1990 Gulf War and the current conflict have produced thousands of widows in Iraq.

Fate has thrust leadership into their hands. These women, often left with six or more family members, have been forced to become breadwinners and leaders of their families and communities.

The country was in the throes of economic depression following a 12-year embargo imposed by the United Nations after the Gulf War. When it ended in 2003, Iraq found itself in another war. Many women turned to prostitution to get by, Al-Shaikhli said. Many still live in trauma resulting from personal losses, rapes and other forms of torture.

But they are lucky to be alive, she said. Several women were killed in cross-fire of the 2003 war, which claimed an estimated 44,000 to 89,000 Iraqis, about 30 percent of them noncombatants, according to the Project on Defense Alternatives.

"Because of the problem, many women could not work and many families could not afford to send their children to school. Others withdrew them because of the security situation," said Al-Shaikhli, 42, who has a doctorate in constitutional law.

Following the lifting of the embargo and the fall of the oppressive regime of Saddam Hussein, a ray of hope appeared.

"There are more jobs and the salaries are better."

Women are now politically active and gender discrimination is on a rapid decline, she said.

The first post-war government was elected in January 2005 and was hailed as a success for women's political participation: women make up 31 percent of the new National Assembly, exceeding the target of 25 percent outlined in the Transitional Administrative Law.

"Unlike in the 1950s and 1960s when there was only one female minister, the newly approved Iraqi cabinet has six women ministers," Al-Shaikhli said.

"Women's rights issues and gender equality are also on the front burners, and we carry out a lot of sensitization workshops" to make women aware of their rights.

For instance, Iraqi women now know that wearing a veil is no longer a matter of religious compulsion. Only four out of nine women now wear them, and they often do so for fear of harassment from religious fundamentalists.

"It's a matter of choice," said Al-Shaikhli, a Sunni. "Most of my colleagues and subordinates don't wear them, except when they are going out. I also don't wear them except when I go to the holy sites, as a practicing Muslim. I think (the wearing of veils) started as a result of the Iranian revolution and the phenomenal growth of the religious movements."

Iraqis, and women in particular, would have been dancing for joy now, but for a fundamental problem:

"Security is our biggest headache. People can't move freely about. Children have to be withdrawn from school; some cannot go out to work for fear of being killed," said the mother of three whose husband is a professor of law at the University of Baghdad.

Death tolls continue to rise, the result of violence orchestrated by militant groups and shoot-outs with occupation forces. Some areas of the country are "war fronts" and simply uninhabitable. Many more families are displaced, fleeing the violence.

Literacy has also suffered. Before 1991, female literacy rates in Iraq were the highest in the region. Iraq had achieved nearly universal primary education for girls as well as boys, but the embargo and consequent economic crunch saw the literacy level plummet.

The situation with children is not any better. A recent UNICEF report estimated that one in four Iraqi children under 5 is chronically malnourished, and one in eight children die before their fifth birthdays. The children of Iraq are caught up in war for the third time in 20 years.

So, is there hope, after all?

A shadow crept onto the minister's countenance momentarily. Then she said, "There has got to be hope - if not, we wouldn't be here."

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