

# Equal Power— Lasting Peace

Iraq. Between war and peace.



Equal Power – Lasting Peace  
Obstacles for women's participation  
in peace processes

Researchers:

Johanna Mannergren Selimovic,  
Åsa Nyquist Brandt,  
Agneta Söderberg Jacobson  
Editor: Åsa Carlman  
Reference group: Åsa Carlman,  
Lovisa Strand, Eva Zillén

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation  
Slakthusplan 3  
121 62 Johanneshov  
Sweden

Phone: + 46-8-588 891 00  
e-mail: [info@kvinnatillkvinna.se](mailto:info@kvinnatillkvinna.se)  
[www.kvinnatillkvinna.se](http://www.kvinnatillkvinna.se)  
[www.equalpowerlastingpeace.org](http://www.equalpowerlastingpeace.org)

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# intro duc tion

**H**ow are transitions made from war to peace? Who has the power to build peace? Who decides what peace should entail? Peace matters to everyone living in conflict regions, so who decides the content of that peace?

*Equal Power – Lasting Peace* is a study about women’s participation in peace processes and the particular challenges of building a gender equal peace after a violent conflict. *Equal Power – Lasting Peace* explores obstacles to women’s participation in peace and democracy processes, in regions affected by armed conflict. The report addresses the gaps between words and practice in peace building by gathering experience and knowledge from 79 female peace workers in five different contexts: Armenia/Azerbaijan/Nagorno Karabakh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, DR Congo, Iraq and Liberia. They have a wealth of concrete experience of how exclusion manifests in practice

and how windows of opportunity may open. The aim of *Equal Power – Lasting Peace* is to investigate the intimate connection between gender, power and peace and in addition contribute to a better understanding of the power gaps that prevent women from participating in peace processes.

Summaries of the five conflicts/post-conflicts have been produced, based on the study *Equal Power – Lasting Peace*. This brochure addresses the topic “Iraq. Between war and peace.”

For the complete study of *Equal Power – Lasting Peace*, please visit [www.equalpowerlastingpeace.org](http://www.equalpowerlastingpeace.org)

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# 32.7

Population of Iraq in millions  
(The state of world population 2011, UNPFA)

## Islam

Main religion in Iraq

# 78%

Percentage of Arabs in Iraq

## Arabic & Kurdish

Official languages of Iraq

# 75

Maternity mortality  
per 100.000 live births in Iraq

# 78.2%

Literacy rate in Iraq  
(Age 15 and above, 2009 UNESCO)



Article 41 in the Constitution makes it possible to choose between secular or religious courts concerning issues relating to family law.

# Iraq. Between War and Peace.

For the past 40 years, Iraq has more or less been in a constant state of war. The war with Iran, Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaign to destroy the Kurdish fight for freedom in north Iraq, the Gulf war and the latest US invasion have left hundreds of thousands dead and many more displaced. Throughout the years, Iraqi women have been living under a particular hardship. Even though they saw movement towards a more gender-equal society during the early years of Saddam Hussein's secular rule, the situation started to deteriorate in the beginning of 1990s when Saddam Hussein sought support from religious leaders to stay in power. Ever since, the Iraqi society, with the exception of the Kurdish region in the north, saw "traditionalisation" slowly taking over all walks of life.

Since the ousting of Saddam Hussein and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, sectarian violence in Iraq has been on the rise. Even though withdrawal of American military should have meant a decrease in violence, the safety and security of civilians, particularly women, still remain among the biggest problems to tackle. Different religi-

ous sectarian groups continue to fight for domination and power, including the international religion-driven Al Qaeda. This struggle between secularism and religion has been particularly difficult for women whose rights are being more and more jeopardised. Blurred lines between violence and insecurity in domestic and public settings severely limit women's possi-

ilities for participation in peace building: they are not able to move freely, and discriminatory laws and practices severely curtail their lives in countless ways. Women's rights activists are directly targeted for violence, and death threats and intimidations are almost an every-day occurrence.

Despite these restraints, women's rights activists have contributed to some important accomplishments concerning, for example, legislation on domestic violence, gender quotas in parliamentary elections, practical support to victims of violence, and support for a plural society. Women's organisations in Iraq use a mixture of formal and informal strategies to gain influence and have developed a number of skills to negotiate the politico-religious context.





There is yet no law against sexual/gender based violence in Iraq. There are some reports claiming that rape has been used as a method for ethnic cleansing of mixed neighborhoods, and abducted girls and **women are victims of trafficking.**



## Experiences of power and participation

This part presents the findings from field research in Iraq in January 2012. A focus group was held in the city of Erbil with seven participants from key women's organisations coming from different parts of Iraq. Interviews were held with key informants from civil society and some key actors at the national and international formal levels.

### Negotiating danger. Insecurities that exclude.

“When I leave my house I have to cover myself, wear a headscarf and so on. Also the checkpoints are very dangerous places. They harass the girls and say bad things. I cannot walk anywhere. I can only drive with a driver and it limits my work, I work from home online and only go to the office once a week. When I was at college it took me two hours to get there. I had eight checkpoints to pass through where they searched my clothes and bags. My studies became very difficult. But the hardest part is that sometimes when I went to school I used to see dead bodies ... I will tell you a story. It is about my friend Moroud. She was only seventeen years old. We were sitting together and preparing for college entry exams. I went back home but she was staying at my other friend's house. A roadside bomb exploded and shrapnel got into her side. She stayed in the hospital for fifteen days and then she passed away. It happened four years ago and me and the other friend still celebrate her birthday every year. But that friend is Christian and she had to leave Iraq and go to America.”

This story, told by one of the young participants living in Baghdad, shows the everyday life of Iraqi women. Violence both at home and in public was identified as the central and most direct obstacle to women's possibilities for participation.

Even though overall violence in Iraq is decreasing, sectarianism and the rise of religious fundamentalist groups has meant heightened levels of insecurity and violence against women. After the withdrawal of American troops, the sectarian violence has sharply increased. This also means that in the struggle over political and territorial control, the respect for women's rights describes a declining curve. Participants testified that they

felt at risk as soon as they went out of their homes. They are forced to take precautions concerning their bodies and their movements in order to avoid provoking anger and putting themselves in danger: they fear abductions, rapes and killings. This danger, caused by the increase in violence, has made it impossible for women to meet regularly or engage in political activities. Several participants testified that they have been specifically targeted as members of women's organisations. They have been subjected to abuse, death threats and have had their offices vandalised.

The women in the focus group described how the public violence against women is driven by the same logic as the widespread abuse of women in domestic and private spaces. Women are seen as the bearers of the family's honour, which is why abuse or even killings of women who have “broken” the family's honour is widely accepted. As a consequence, it is thought that women must be controlled in order to protect the honour of the family – a task that male relatives are to perform:

“All the other male members of her family control her, all the time supervising. There are many people in the family who control the woman.”

The same logic is used by the insurgent groups – women are symbols and bearers not only of the honour of the family, but also of the group or the nation. According to this logic, a woman or girl who has been ‘taken’ by the enemy is ‘soiled’. As such, she should be cast out of the family, and punished by being beaten or even killed. As one of the participants said:

“When the enemy took them, only God knows what happened to them. Something might have happened to her body. And the body of the woman contains the honour of the family. And consequently of the whole nation.”

This is why, the participants thought, the line between domestic violence and public violence often is blurred. Working with victims of violence – domestic and public – is a core aspect of the work for many women's organisations. Most of them run shelters for women who have run away from the violence at home. Participants from southern Iraq told stories of women who had come to their shelters physically injured from rape by members of a militia, but whose relatives had refused to take



the practice of female genital mutilation, **forced marriages**, child marriages, sexual violence and honour killings.



A national law against domestic violence was drafted in 2012. Such a law was already passed in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2010, a law that also criminalises



A gender quota was put in place for the 2005 elections, which states that women shall occupy at least **25 percent** of all seats in parliament and other elected bodies. However, as the political climate hardens, lack of security directly affects women's possibilities for participation.

them to hospital since admitting to the abuse publicly would destroy the family's honour. In the shelters they provided the women with the chance to talk about their experiences and with legal advice.

"We have established a hotline. After that the women started to come to our centres, although they were afraid to come. We provide the chance for women to talk about what they have suffered. For the first time. Even for me it was very difficult to break the silence about my experiences."

It was one of the areas where it was possible to be active without too much obstruction from official actors — although a number of leading politicians accused some women activists of 'spreading prostitution'. Working with these issues was a matter that strengthened both the protection of women and their participation. As one informant put it: "if we do not combat this violence, we will never be able to increase women's participation."

"To work against domestic violence is to work for peace ... Raising awareness means raising confidence. People who are confident can be peace-builders."

### International actors. Occupation and transition – without women.

In spite of their often violent presence, most of the women in the focus group agreed that the American troops had departed Iraq too early, failing to create a secure peace during the almost decade-long occupation. They fear the emergence of militias and live with the threat of civil war. Many women thought that the arrival of American troops in 2003 would open up possibilities for women to claim their political rights. This became largely true for women from Iraqi Kurdistan for whom the presence of the American administration has been positive. The Kurdish women were increasingly worried that the sectarian violence that has been on the rise since the American departure would spread to Iraqi Kurdistan and have negative consequences on the relative freedom that women enjoy there.

On the other hand, the women thought, the American administration had not done enough to promote inclusion of women. All participants pointed to the fact that, during the transition period, international actors made too many compromises on gender issues in order to get

sectarian leaders on board in the negotiations.

A leading Iraqi women's rights activist interviewed for this study stated that the American administration failed to support women's groups on two crucial issues: blocking the inclusion of Article 41 (stipulating that each religious group in Iraq is allowed to govern its own personal status matters) in the Iraqi constitution, and the lack of support for gender quotas. She said that the Americans were initially willing to meet with women's groups, but when negotiations officially started, their demands were put aside:

"We held public demonstrations as well as inside parliament in order to try to get Article 41 withdrawn from the Constitution. We met with the American ambassador. We had a really hard time and he tried to avoid any intervention on the Constitution. I was furious. They talk about transforming Iraq into a symbol for human rights and democracy, but they do not listen when we argue that the new Constitution breaches international conventions on human rights."

The American administration also refused to stand behind the women when they began demanding a gender quota in politics. Still, thanks to women's organisations' successful lobbying, the majority in the parliament voted for the proposed gender quota system.

According to this activist, the Americans were in 'a great hurry' and did not prioritise issues concerning gender, it would slow down the process. The policy to leave these issues aside was a quick decision with long-term consequences for Iraqis, she argued.

Today, Iraq is no longer occupied but the international presence in Iraq is still great. Unfortunately, the UN mission in Iraq, UNAMI, understand their mandate to be limited to financial and technical issues, which is why they have not taken a leading role in advocating for gender equality. "I tell them that your mandate must also be, for your own sake as well, to make sure that the UN documents and conventions on fundamental human rights are abided by". The participants in the focus group maintain that the proof that the international actors can engage in women's issues is shown by the fact that other UN organisations such as UNICEF, UNESCO and UNIFEM stand behind the demand to erase Article 41 from the Constitution.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of all this, all women in the focus group ack-

nowledged that the interest and public support that they get from the international community is highly valuable. Without their presence, the women thought that it would be much harder to even bring up gender issues in Iraq in the first place. The funding that the organisations get from international civil society actors, UN bodies and governments has been crucial for networking and capacity building.

Although women's organisations have a long tradition in Iraq, civil society is now developing mostly within the parameters drawn up by the UN administration, the World Bank and the IMF. Various other donors and policymakers play a key role for the women's movement. The EU delegation in Baghdad, for example, has taken a leading role in emphasising the importance of women's participation in the reconstruction process. Gender issues are mainstreamed in all of the EU's projects. However, several EU representatives has testified about the difficulties they encounter when trying to advance gender equality issues. Issues that often are described as external ideas with little validity in Iraqi society.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, several participants in the focus group were worried about the changes in funding patterns — more and more actors prefer to fund state actors directly, who then in their turn fund local organisations. The participants were doubtful about trusting the newly formed state institutions to make informed and sound decisions on funding. They saw the new developments as a threat to their independence and their watchdog position: “now we need to get approved by government. This is bad news for civil society”.

### Norms and laws. Lobbying for reform within a religious framework.

“There are no laws to criminalise violence against women ... We have women who have been victimised and trafficked but there are no laws that criminalise this. The instability and lack of security have a bad influence on women's possibilities to live and take part in society.”

A central focus for women's organisations has been on lobbying for legal reform. At the centre stands the tug-of-war between secular and religious law. Different strategies emerged in the discussions on how to best ensure women's right to participate. Many of the organisations has been involved in lobbying to influence the writing of the new Constitution. Women successfully mobilised against Resolution 137 (that stipulates expansion of power of Muslim courts to rule in all disputes among Muslims concerning marriage and divorce), although the accepted Constitution has an overall religious framework with Islam as a fundamental source of legislation. Hence, the new constitution was described to be “full of loopholes and gaps” when it came to gender equality. Its Article 41 was seen as “a bomb implanted within the Constitution.”

Kurdish women have achieved major victories for women's legal rights. Over the last ten years of relative peace, Kurdish women's organisations changed the Mar-

riage Law that raised the legal age for girls to marry from 14 to 16 years. Through their successful campaigning, the first law against domestic violence was adopted in June 2011 — a major accomplishment in a region deeply characterised by traditional mechanisms of ‘honour’ control. One activist gave the following blueprint for the successful campaign, which includes a multitude of approaches such as selective lobbying, identifying ‘change agents’ and creating alliances with them, networking within civil society, direct action such as street theatre, and finally, providing legal expertise in writing drafts of the law:

“You always find new ways of fighting. We established a joint committee in which everyone from civil society was represented. We worked in three arenas: the political, the media and civil society organisations. It was very difficult to even start talking about honour killings. First we started with those politicians who to an extent were for women's rights, we did not go to those who were against women's rights. We lobbied among them... With the media, we applied the same logic... On March 8 we started with a role-play and a march into the centre of town ... We were two groups of women. In the first group everyone was wearing white clothes with blood on them. In the second they were chained and a man was dragging them. We presented a petition to the prime minister and requested shelters to be created for women. A resolution was issued and that was a start. We knew how to lobby the government and we could then continue with governmental officials, lawyers and prosecutors. We wrote a draft of the article on domestic violence and it was ratified in the (regional) parliament. At this time, in 2005, it was refused but we continued our struggle and in 2011 virtually all members of parliament agreed, there was only one vote against it. Even the Islamic party members agreed. This is how the law (against domestic violence) was created, and that is how, in cooperation with other civil society actors, we were successful. It was the achievements of 20 years of struggle.”

### Political participation. Strategies for decision-making.

A major victory for women's organisations in Iraq during the transitional period was the provision in the Electoral Act ensuring that 25 percent of candidates to elected positions have to be women. The women's movement worked intensely on this issue by collecting signatures and lobbying. They also campaigned to encourage women to vote, and took part in training women candidates in campaign running. The female voter turnout was great in the 2005 elections and more than a third of all elected parliamentarians were women. Although these positive results were not as good in the last election, it still means that women are present in parliament today and also to some extent as members of councils and committees that work on specific issues. One of the participants testified, however, that in spite of being in the government, women are not given much room to



promote their own ideas.

“In the beginning, many men refused to sit next to me because of me being a woman. They would leave a space between myself and themselves and say they could not be near me. But (the situation improved) when we had met several times and talked about women’s rights. I tried to change their thinking about women. Women can share with you the resources and the political space, I told them; I am an educated person, I am an engineer.”

Although the quota system was deemed by all participants to be the crucial step towards breaking heavy barriers, it also brought some unexpected problems. For example, women who got elected had very little political experience and did not enter into politics to fight for women’s rights. The fact that the majority of women politicians voted for the inclusion of Article 41 into the Constitution, despite intense lobbying, was an example of this.

Because each party controls the lists of their candidates, some parties were not interested in putting strong and politically active women in positions of power. The focus group participants contended that some women with influence in their communities and interest in gender issues have not been included in the lists on purpose. This has resulted in a situation where women without a power base are present in parliament and just told to “vote and obey”. Most of the participants think that women are not to be blamed for this situation, but rather the political parties that brought this system into practice.

### Poverty and marginalisation. Socioeconomic aspects of participation.

Most participants saw a strong connection between poverty and peace.

“When the economy is weak, the joints of social connections in the community will be loosened, the psychology of the country and people will be disturbed. ... Anger ... and fear will increase. In this atmosphere violence will be created. (And the other way around) - when there is peace and stability the economy will be revitalised.”

At the same time, lack of education was identified as a factor that significantly contributes to the oppression of women: “We have illiterate women, without skills, she knows nothing, she is getting married at twelve years of age, when she is fourteen she has her first baby ...”

“Social issues are not given any priority. But socioeconomic issues are really important, this is how we change the whole society. Most women are unskilled, illiterate women ... this is not good for the country in general. When we help women to become independent and be able to provide for her children, we are not only saying that we are helping women but we are improving all of society.”

In order to escape from traditionalism and oppressive

ideas, it is necessary to address the problems of underdevelopment and lack of education: “Poverty is the core of the problem. We cannot start to say that honour killing is wrong. No, you cannot start with that”. The participants hoped that once the education levels increase, people will have more economic space and do more to change the oppressive way of thinking. While interconnections between poverty and violence certainly exist, such an understanding may also be a sign of the very limited space that women have for challenging structures of power.

Today, there are about 1-2 million widows in Iraq and their situation is particularly fragile. They have a dual status: because their husbands died defending the nation, they are considered to be heroines and sufferers for the nation. At the same time, they are locked into a desperate situation, doomed by traditions that forbid them to work and provide for their families. The same tradition prevents widows both from working and remarrying, completely disregarding the women’s sexual and psychological needs. As one of the participants put it: “the widows are heroes of the nation, and at the same time they are ruined”... “We see seven-year-old children begging, getting sucked into trafficking. They are often the children of widows. And they have to work to take care of their mother”.

Several participants thought that providing socioeconomic support to Iraqi widows is an integral part of peace building. Several of the informants run micro-credit projects specifically targeting widows.

However, the women saw that there are more levels where help is needed in order to achieve change. For example, they recognised the need of a more profound transformation of the society in order to affect the feminisation of poverty. A better gender budgeting is also needed, both at state and regional levels. Participants pointed to the fact that women had not been involved in the adoption of the ongoing five-year national economic plan. They also criticised the lack of enforcement of the already passed laws: e.g. school is mandatory for both girls and boys, but “...no one follows it up if the girls don’t turn up in school. We have no idea what is going on”. The participants pointed to one of their biggest problems:

“We have no statistics on women’s situation in Iraq. During the last fourteen years I spent all my days in court only with cases concerning women. That is why I am pointing out that it is really important to have statistics. So we need the statistics on the situation of widows, of women in general so that the government and the international organisations can target the right groups and numbers.”

### Norms and values. Negotiating the secular divide.

Many women activists continue to debate the extent to which they should cooperate with religious leaders. What is the best strategy: confrontation or dialogue?

Being religious themselves, many Iraqi women activists and politicians argue that the prescriptions on treatment of women described in the Koran should be used as a tool when approaching religious leaders: “If you look at the nature of Islam it is actually a tolerant religion that preaches good treatment of women. So it is a bad implementation of religion that is being done here”. Their tactics has been to start cooperating with imams with whom they share some common ground and from there, expand the cooperation. One of the participants talked about one of the imams who reflected on the reactions after he had started to talk about the rights of women during Friday prayers in the mosque: “After three Fridays, the women came to the mosque. They said to him, because of your speech our husbands have behaved well. So please, repeat this speech from time to time”. The cooperation with imams, explained the same participant, helps to open doors for acceptance of other issues concerning women’s rights. One example is the Ministry of Religious Affairs that used to be very averse to women’s organisations:

“To begin with, it was very difficult to even talk about honour killings. First we started with those politicians that to an extent were for women’s rights, we did not go to those who were against women’s rights.”

One of the representatives of the Islamic Scholar Union confirmed the growing relationship between imams and women’s organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan. With 5,000-7,000 imams active in Iraqi Kurdistan, more than one million people are reached every Friday:

“From the humanitarian perspective, we cannot be silent if a woman is going to be killed ... The biggest problem here is that people practice traditions. But they say it is religious. For example, a man kills a woman and thinks it is a good job. We believe that society will not be improved if we do not get rid of this violence. We show examples of verses in the Quran that the Prophet says and show the respect he treated his wives and daughters with.”<sup>3</sup>

While some women were enthusiastic about cooperating with imams, others were more sceptical. They insisted that, while it is possible to find a common understanding about domestic violence, the issues of marriage, divorce or inheritance are more sensitive and would probably mean the end of cooperation. Still, they thought, they can either choose to remain ostracised, or they can accept the present framework and try to change them from within. The women have become very skilled in finding loopholes and using innovative strategies to get some more space for themselves:

“One of the officials said to us, what do you want, you women, do you want to be equal to men? He answered himself – no! Then the organisations may actually do some tricks to achieve their objectives, otherwise you cannot succeed. It is a highly sophisticated game that

is going on. We told the officials that we want to be business women. No, no, we don’t want to be equal, we just want to be traders. We tell them that one of the Prophet’s wives was a trader, so if she could be a trader, why not me?”

Another example was provided of a project designed for informing women about health issues. It was considered a ‘safe’ project that many women would be ‘allowed to participate in’, go to workshops, etc., to learn about health issues. However, while learning about these issues they would also get insights into legal issues: “So we can indirectly achieve our objectives, through health awareness we also provide legal awareness.”

### Women against sectarianism. Laying the ground for reconciliation.

Divisions in Iraq run deep and are multifaceted: between religious groups, between secular and religious sectors, between regions – and between men and women, and between fluctuating insurgent groups. One of the participants depicts the sometimes chaotic situation: “Even if you want to have reconciliation, the question is with whom should you talk?” The participants believed that they as women’s organisations might hold the key to restoring the social fabric. Making a connection between gender inequality and sectarianism, one of the participants explained that, since Article 41 gives precedence to a person’s religious/ethnic identity over their status as an Iraqi citizens, it will not only disadvantage women, but also “disintegrate the family and then destroy the community as well”:

“It means that we will have one Shia court, one Christian court, one Sunni court and so on. ... People will not be treated the same and hence their religious identities will take precedence.”

They believed that sectarianism is driven by political struggles between the government and the different factions and their violent militias who get weapons and funds from neighbouring countries. On the grassroots level, they thought, people don’t differentiate between Sunnis, Shia, Arabs or Kurds. For ordinary people, the reasons for siding with one or the other group are often trivial: “Sometimes people believe the Al-Qaeda is better because they protect them from Al-Mahdi militia, so it is a very simple story really”.

In addition, it was pointed out that during the American occupation, sectarian interests gained in strength while those working for a unified Iraqi identity were marginalised:

“Before the Americans came we did not use such terms as Kurds or Shia. I worked for many years, and not ever did anyone at work say that you are Christian, etc. I had many friends and I did not know if they were Sunni, Shia, Christian or whatever, but now after this sectarian focus, I know. I was lucky to be elected as one member of a particular council. The Americans distributed forms

in this council and one of the questions you had to tick was: Are you Shia, Christian and so on... And I wrote: I am Iraqi.”

Forced to bolster his waning legitimacy Saddam Hussein spent the 1990s turning to fundamentalist religious leaders for support. The American occupation also had a focus on religious and ethnic representation as a key to consolidating peace. Although this may have been a good strategy to satisfy sectarian interests, as the quote above illustrates, it has deeply divided the ordinary Iraqis.

The informants talked about how the increasing divisiveness and decreasing contact between different identity groups is making it more and more difficult to meet across borders and work with peace and reconciliation. “Prejudice grows daily in a climate of fear”, one participant concluded. They stressed that women can play a significant role in reconciliation being “more peaceful than men”. “If women are decision-makers the world will be peaceful”, they maintained. While male leaders are driven by hunger for power and influence, women can work more across religious and ethnic borders, which would strengthen their identity as peace-builders.

At the same time, they did not think it is possible, with the ongoing violence between different factions, to reach out to violent militias and attempt to act as bridge-builders, especially since the presence of women in politics and negotiations actually is one of the points of contention. In Iraqi Kurdistan however, women’s organisations are part of a recently constructed reconciliation commission set up to bridge the gap between the regional government and opposition groups, which, at the time of writing, has been paralysing politics in the northern region for some time.

Finally, the deepest divide in Iraq today runs between men and women themselves. Bridging this divide, the participants thought, will be crucial in achieving peace and reconciliation. A coherent and stable society greatly benefits from gender equality and an active participation of both men and women. One informant said that, apart from directly aiming to end the ongoing violence, the dialogue between women and religious leaders described above have long-term effects and support the building of societal peace.

“We need to have many sessions with men and women together to work on how we can become closer and accept each other. We can play the role of mediation between men and women, and work on how to solve the problems among them. We can work on building reconciliation between men and women.

All awareness-raising projects, both among women and men, were seen to be beneficial for peace in the long run. As the participant quoted above said: “People who are confident can be peace-builders.”

## Analysis

### Exclusion

Iraq is an example of how violence can continue long after peace is officially installed. Women are deeply affected by violence and insecurity in both domestic and public spheres, particularly limiting their possibilities for participation. Domestic violence and military violence are intimately connected, and men tend to use women’s bodies to release their own frustrations in war as well as in peace. In Iraq, violence against women is used to “shame” the enemy, whereby women’s honour is linked not only to the morals of her family, but of the entire community.

While laws on domestic violence have been successfully adopted in Iraqi Kurdistan and are on their way to be adopted in the rest of Iraq, many other discriminatory laws and practices continue to suffocate women’s rights and freedom. To emphasise how domestic issues are extremely political for Iraqi women, we only need to remind ourselves that several of the laws that women have fought against concern violations of their rights as private persons.

Most of the Iraqi women are poor and as such excluded – they cannot work, their movement is restricted, and their possibilities to decide over the household economy are often limited.

When it comes to the international exclusion of women and gender issues from the reconstruction of the Iraqi society, the feminist researcher and writer C. Enloe explains it best: “Iraqi women’s legal status became one of the spoils of war”.<sup>4</sup> In order to avoid alienating any of the negotiation counterparts, gender issues easily get swept under the carpet with the promise that they will be pulled out once the situation has stabilised. Unfortunately, when the loaded moment between war and peace passes, it is very difficult to add gender as an afterthought.

### Achievements

In spite of their very limited possibilities for participation, women’s organisations have made some spectacular achievements. They have shown great negotiating skills in the religious-political context tackling some of the most sensitive issues for women. Although they only manage to reach a very small percentage of the millions of victims of violence, they have started to build up a network of shelters and have come up with a method for combining physical protection, legal and psychosocial aid.

Iraqi women have also succeeded in changing some of the most discriminatory legislations. One of the successes is pushing through gender quotas for elected positions. They have worked with international organisations and cooperated with women activists in other countries who have experiences of quotas. They recognise that the quota system is in danger of being hijacked by party

strategists, which is why they have defined strategies to strengthen women politicians to formulate their own politics.

The laws passed on domestic violence that women's groups fought for in the regional parliament in Iraqi Kurdistan are another example of determination and excellent planning and coordinating skills. They are slowly changing honour bound traditions by cooperating with religious leaders who share the same understanding of issues such as domestic violence and honour killings.

Women activists also found a way to indirectly push through their agenda when direct actions was hindered by the hostile political environment. One organisation gave a seminar on 'unthreatening' health issues and used the occasion to raise awareness about women's legal rights.

## Challenges

In spite of the fact that the Iraqi women's organisations have managed to create policies that helped develop the civil society, there is still a daunting gap between informal and formal power structures. Strategies for getting access to decision-making are still not very well formulated, and as the participants in the focus group explained, obstacles are severe. On the positive side, women's movement in Iraqi Kurdistan has gained a great momentum. If more change agents inside as well as outside religious structures can be identified and engaged to work for common issues, the potential impact is great.

As sectarianism and traditionalisation continue to rise in Iraq, it is going to be a great challenge for women to work within the religious context. Even though many of the provisions in religious law are not compatible with basic women's rights, there are many politically active women in Iraq today who insist that women's rights and needs can be provided for within a non-secular system.

Another challenge is the gender quotas and how to get away from descriptive politics of quotas, i.e. avoid women being used as tools to legitimise certain decisions that their party wants to push through. Quite often, women politicians don't have gender issues high up on their agenda, and engaging in such issues may jeopardise their positions within their parties and make them lose what little power they have. This is why women's organisations must continue to work with women politicians, provide trainings on gender issues and be discussion partners for women who are just starting their political careers.

Any reconciliation work is challenging, particularly in Iraq where the divide is along sectarian lines as well as along liberal/secular vs. conservative/religious lines. The violence among the different groups affects women the most, and one way to unite the conflicting parties might be to concentrate on the feminisation of poverty – a concrete consequence of the violence. War widows, who are considered to be the pride of Iraq, play an important role in the construction of post-war unity. To mobilise around their discrimination and how traditions are hurting these 'heroes of the nation' is a potential platform for claiming power.

Just like in other post-war countries, the civil society in Iraq has managed to bloom thanks to direct international funding. As donors turn to other hotspots around the world, civil society may see its funds and support diminishing. How to face this will be a great challenge over the coming years.

Finally, it should be noted that the deep divide between men and women that defines Iraqi society in general is an obstacle to gender equality. Maybe the biggest challenge of all is to start building bridges between men and women who share a belief in gender equality and human rights.

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<sup>1</sup> Personal interview, Skype, 12 May 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Personal interviews, Stockholm 14 December 2012, telephone 12 February 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Personal interview, Sarajevo 7 November 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Enloe 2010, 121.

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation supports women during times of war and conflict to increase women's power and influence in society. We collaborate with over 130 organisations that empower women to participate in working for sustainable peace and rebuilding.

In wars and conflicts, violence against women and girls is used as a method of warfare. Women are subjected to mass rape, are mutilated and killed. Women are locked in their homes and girls are not allowed to attend school. Women's voices are silenced if they express what they think and feel.

But history shows that women are important actors in the struggle for peace. The world witnessed this in the Balkans, in Liberia and in Northern Ireland. Yet women are seldom allowed to play a part in deciding how to arrive at peace and democracy. This is why The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation exists. Our partner organisations educate people in women's human rights, they work with women's health issues and combat violence against women. They create meeting places for women, where it

is otherwise difficult to meet. They wield political influence and create dialogue across the borders of conflict.

Kvinna till Kvinna is a Swedish Foundation which supports women's organisations in Central and West Africa, the Middle East, South Caucasus and the Western Balkans.

The role of The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation is to provide financial support and mediate contacts between organisations, in co-operation with our partner organisations. Our mission is to participate in empowering women's movements in regions of conflict.

We influence development assistance and security policies by contributing to increased awareness of the situation of women in conflicts and the importance of women's representation in peace processes. We spread information about women in conflicts to the general public, government bodies and organisations in Sweden, and at the EU and UN levels.

We support studies and research relating to women's conditions in conflicts and the positive effects of women's participation in peace initiatives.



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