



WOMEN *for* WOMEN
International

Stronger Women, Stronger Nations: 2008 Iraq Report

Women for Women International mobilizes women to change their lives by bringing a holistic approach to addressing the unique needs of women in conflict and post-conflict environments.

We begin by working with women who may have lost everything in conflict and often have nowhere else to turn. Participation in our one-year program launches women on a journey from victim to survivor to active citizen. We identify services to support graduates of the program as they continue to strive for greater social, economic and political participation in their communities.

As each woman engages in a multi-phase process of recovery and rehabilitation, she opens a window of opportunity presented by the end of conflict to help improve the rights, freedoms and status of other women in her country. As women who go through our program assume leadership positions in their communities, actively participate in the reconstruction of their societies, start businesses, train other women and serve as role models, they become active citizens who can help to establish lasting peace and stability.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report combines grassroots access and experience with international political expertise to amplify women's voices in the ongoing discussions about Iraq's future. It is the result of a partnership between Women for Women International and the Brookings Institution.

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LETTER FROM ZAINAB SALBI

Modern warfare is no longer confined to battlefields, and its consequences reach far beyond mere military targets. With its life and death political consequences, collateral economic damage and stress on the social fabric of every community in its wake, war leaves an indelible mark on the hearts and minds of every man, woman and child it touches. Because of this, we can no longer talk about post-war development, democracy, and freedom in a vacuum. When we allow the traditionally male-dominated front-line discussions of war to be segregated from the back-line struggles of women working to ensure that there is food to eat, water to drink, and hope to spare, we entrust the future to an isolated cadre of elites with little grasp of the reality on the ground.

Women for Women International believes that women's well-being is the bellwether of society, and how women fare correlates directly with how the society fares overall. We have seen that when women thrive in areas like education and employment, society as a whole benefits. When women suffer, it is only a matter of time before all of society is at risk.

In Iraq, violence against women increased within months of the March 2003 U.S. invasion. There were assassinations and abductions of Iraqi professional women, in the country and abroad. Hair salons were bombed, and there were threats to women who drove or didn't cover their hair. Soon every politician, businessperson, professional Iraqi and foreigner became vulnerable to kidnapping and attack and remains so today. This issue has become menacing enough to impede development efforts in the country. But the increasingly precarious status of women was and continues to be seen as a secondary issue, a distraction from the bigger political debates.

Since 2003, the discussion of women's role in Iraqi society and their earnest participation in reconstruction has shrunk from one of legitimate substance to obligatory quantity. In 2004, as plans for Iraq's new constitution were underway and "women's issues" were designated as a priority, the initial request of setting aside 40 percent of the seats in parliament for women was negotiated down to 25 percent. While the 25 percent figure is at least a step forward, it indicates the complexity of the question of women's participation in the political process and shows that parliamentary representation is only a possible starting point from which true, full participation can develop. If this does not occur, then the 25 percent is simply a quota being used as a proxy for real progress.

Women for Women International looks at security and post-conflict reconstruction through a lens of integrated development that meets women's needs and bolsters their rights. At the core of the vision is the belief that a nation cannot prosper, nor can peace be sustained, without the full participation of women. Stronger women build stronger nations.

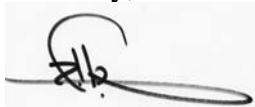
In 2004, Women for Women International conducted a survey of 1,000 Iraqi women and 90.6% of them were optimistic about the future. In 2007, we spoke with more than 1,500 women for this *Stronger Women, Stronger Nations* report to show the inextricable link between Iraqi women's grassroots reality and the potential for sustainable peace in the country overall. This

time, 88.8% expressed a great deal of concern that they or someone living in their households would become a victim of the violence occurring in the country.

Once the fighting ends, it is women who pick up the pieces of their families and mend the social fabric of their communities. Yet this crucial role is rarely acknowledged. Sustainable peace, democracy and economic development depend on women's social, political and economic participation. Unless there is a clear understanding of the obstacles and avenues to women's access to development resources and the political will to enact gender equitable policies, any blueprint for sustainable peace risks being placed perilously out of reach. Thus, the incorporation of women's views into traditionally male-dominated political processes is vital to achieving sustainable peace, democracy, and prosperity.

The segregation of front- and back-line discussions continues to marginalize women's role in creating a lasting peace to the detriment of all survivors of war, women and children as well as men. Peace—real peace—means that there are schools for children to attend, and that it is safe for them to go. Peace means having three meals a day, a job, and a home to come back to. These are the prosaic triumphs of sustainable peace in stable societies, and they would not be possible without women. The front-line and back-line discussions must be held at the same negotiating table for real peace to materialize. It is time for women to be involved, not just in symbolic ways, but through full participation at every level, from the family dinner table, to community councils, to the United Nations. Strong women lead to strong nations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'ZS', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Zainab Salbi
Founder and CEO
Women for Women International

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2003, shortly after the United States invaded Iraq, women's rights and gender equity were mentioned as symbolic issues for Iraq's new national agenda. However, as the overall situation in Iraq began to deteriorate after the invasion, the focus on women was lost in the problems and violence facing the country as a whole. When it came time to transform symbolism into action by articulating support and solutions for the most pressing national issues, women's issues were considered an afterthought at best, a distraction from the "real" issues at worst.

Since then, economic, social and political aftershocks have thrust the country into chaos. Present-day Iraq is plagued by insecurity, a lack of infrastructure and controversial leadership, transforming the situation for women from one of relative autonomy and security before the war into a national crisis. In 2004, when Women for Women International first surveyed 1,000 Iraqi women, their greatest needs were electricity, jobs and water. Nearly half of their families lacked medical care, education and housing. Top political priorities included securing legal rights for women and the opportunity to vote on the new constitution. Despite the fact that none of the women felt their families' most basic needs were entirely met, 90.6% of women surveyed in 2004 were nevertheless optimistic about the future.

As the situation in Iraq has continued to devolve into civil war and challenges to the purpose of the U.S. presence continue to mount, Women for Women International chose once again to talk to Iraqi women because of the belief that women's issues are society's issues, and that analysis of the conditions of women's lives provides reliable insight into the overall strength of a nation. In fall 2007, as part of the *Stronger Women, Stronger Nations* report series, and in association with Kenneth M. Pollack, Director of Research at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, Women for Women International gathered information from 1,513 Iraqi women about subjects that extended beyond "women's rights" or "women's issues," delving more broadly into the economic, social and political issues that affect all of Iraq.

The study began with 279 women participating in Women for Women International's program in Hilla and Karbala completing a questionnaire. Because this did not yield a large or geographically representative sample group, the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI), helped to provide access to more than 1,200 women nationwide through women's organizations under the NCCI umbrella. The results of the study were startling:

Hope for the Future

- **85.0%** of respondents described the situation in Iraq as bad or very bad, and **88.8%** expressed a great deal of concern that they or someone living in their households would become a victim of violence.
- Only **26.9%** of respondents expressed optimism for the future, saying they thought the overall situation would get better in the year ahead. While there continue to be pockets of optimism throughout the country, and the overall situation may be on a slow ascent, the situation remains volatile, and the long-term sustainability of any improvements still remains to be seen.

Security

- **71.2%** of respondents said they do not feel protected by U.S./U.K. soldiers and **65.3%** of respondents said that, overall, the presence of U.S./U.K. security forces in Iraq is making security in the country worse.
- **67.9%** of respondents stated that their ability to walk down the street as they please has gotten worse since the U.S. invasion.

Violence Against Women

- **63.9%** of respondents stated that violence against women is increasing. When asked why, respondents most commonly said that there is less respect for women's rights than before, that women are thought of as possessions, and that the economy has gotten worse.

Economy and Infrastructure

- **68.3%** of respondents describe the availability of jobs as bad and **70.5%** said that their families are unable to earn enough money to pay for daily necessities.

Social Services

- **76.2%** of respondents said that girls in their families are not allowed to attend school, and **56.7%** said that girls' ability to attend school has gotten worse since the U.S. invasion.

Political Participation

- **70.2%** of respondents thought that the citizens of Iraq have not been given a chance to contribute their input on the future of Iraq, and **52.0%** did not know if Iraqis had the right to participate in the political process.
- **43.6%** of respondents did not think that the circumstances of women were being considered by those making decisions about Iraq's future. However, in the Central Iraq cities of Fallujah, Samarra and Rawa, the number jumps to **75.1%** of respondents saying they did not think women's circumstances were being considered.
- **72.7%** of respondents said that in the future there should be one unified Iraq with a central government in Baghdad, and **88.6%** of women thought that the separation of people along ethnic/religious/sectarian lines was a bad thing. However, only **32.3%** of respondents thought there would in fact be one unified Iraq with a central government in Baghdad in five years. This is another indication that women do not feel as though their opinions are being considered in decisions about their country's future.

Society benefits when women have access to jobs, education, and legal protection of their rights. However, women's access to these development resources is directly tied to their ability to participate in formal decision-making structures. When women are not seated at the negotiating table, their interests are negotiated for them and their collective insight is squandered.

MAP of IRAQ



INTRODUCTION

Since March 2003, when the United States invaded Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein's regime and remove him as a threat to American interests in the Middle East, Iraqi citizens have struggled to survive under nightmarish circumstances. Though women's rights and gender equity had originally been identified as high priority issues for a new national agenda, the focus on women was quickly lost in the problems and violence facing the country as a whole.

Women are the glue that holds society together during war, and it is essential that their priorities and recommendations be included in formal discussions about Iraq's future. Women for Women International conducted this study of 1,513 women to raise awareness about the critical link between women's economic, social and political participation and long-term peace and stability in Iraq. The findings provide compelling constituent data for elected officials and strategic policy insight for advocates and practitioners.

Part I of this report provides an overview of Iraq's history and economic, social and political context. Part II discusses Women for Women International's presence in Iraq, the rationale behind the *Stronger Women, Stronger Nations* study and briefly describes the women who participated. Part III discusses the study results in the context of Iraq's current political, economic and social circumstances. Finally, Part IV sets forth an Action Agenda of practical steps that should be taken to ensure the involvement of women in Iraq's future, concluding that

women's full and free participation is a barometer for the future health and prosperity of Iraqi society as a whole.

I. History and Context

The territory of Iraq has seen the rise and fall of many of the most important empires of the ancient world including Babylon, Assyria, Akkad, Persia, Rome and Parthia.¹ Although the central and southern regions of the Tigris-Euphrates river valleys have effectively been part of the same political unit since their conquest by Cyrus the Great of Persia in the 6th century BCE, the modern territory of Iraq was demarcated only after the First World War. Britain and France famously chose to carve up the former territories of the Ottoman Empire even before they had prevailed in the conflict. The British were awarded the "mandate" for the territory of the new country of Iraq, which had been created from the former Ottoman provinces (*vilayets*) of Mosul, Baghdad, and al-Basrah. The British installed a branch of the Bani Hashim, the "royal" family of the Hijaz in Arabia, who had been the allies of the British via T. E. Lawrence during the war, to lead the country. Though the British granted Iraq nominal independence in 1932, they continued to maintain military forces there, controlled its oil exports, determined its foreign policy, and directed its decision-making at will.

Since the earliest periods of ancient history, the rich soil and geographic advantages of Iraq's river valleys made the region an important center of commerce and communication. This, coupled with conquests by successive empires, left Iraq with a broad array of cultures, ethnicities and religions. Kurds made up the vast majority of Iraq's northern population (the old Mosul *vilayet*); Sunni Arabs—along with significant Shi'i Arab and Kurdish minorities—were the majority in central and western Iraq (the old Baghdad *vilayet*); and the Shi'ah predominated in the southeast (the old al-Basrah *vilayet*). Southeastern Iraq not only was heavily populated by Shi'i Arabs, it also became a cultural and religious center of Shi'ism, built around the shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf and the theological seminaries (*hawza*) of Najaf. Nevertheless, despite periods of ethnic and sectarian friction during the 20th century, there was also a tremendous amount of harmonious intermingling and intermarriage, especially among Sunni and Shi'i Arabs.

Iraqi politics have been tumultuous since independence. Iraq experienced its first coup d'état in 1932, which was regularly followed by subsequent coups. In 1941, Britain intervened in force when an Iraqi military junta began making overtures to Nazi Germany. In 1958, the monarchy was finally overthrown in another bloody coup, and the British evicted along with them. For the next 10 years, Iraq was ruled by a series of military dictators, a period that eventually ended with the 1968 Ba'thist takeover. At that time, Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti was the second most powerful man in the party and the government, and by the mid-1970s had emerged as the real ruler of Iraq, formally installing himself as "president" in 1979.

A. Saddam Hussein's Rule

Saddam Hussein proceeded to build a totalitarian police state in Iraq. More than 25 years of his misrule traumatized Iraqi society in ways that continue to affect present-day Iraq. More than any other ruler, Saddam sowed the seeds of great mistrust between Sunnis, Kurds, and Shi'ah. In the

late 1980s, he waged a near-genocidal campaign against the Kurds in which his forces engaged in chemical warfare, destroying roughly 4,000 villages and causing the deaths of as many as 200,000 Kurds.² Following his defeat during the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War, both the Kurdish and Shi'i communities rose against his regime, but his Republican Guards crushed both revolts, killing roughly 30,000 to 60,000 people in each campaign.³ Following those revolts, Hussein manipulated the UN-imposed economic sanctions to starve large parts of Iraq's Shi'i population into submission, and drained the verdant marshes of southern Iraq because Shi'i insurgents had made them their refuge.

Hussein was a paranoid megalomaniac and an extreme egotist. He heavily centralized all administrative, bureaucratic and even most economic activities in Baghdad, which discouraged or prevented groups on the periphery from taking action to address their own problems. He killed, exiled or co-opted any Iraqi who demonstrated the potential to serve as a leader, and thus a threat to his rule. He presided over a corrupt system riddled with waste and incompetence, such that most of Iraq's oil wealth was simply squandered, leaving only a few favored communities to benefit from Iraq's riches. Under Saddam Hussein's rule, Iraq's governance structure and economy required direction from Baghdad to function properly; few Iraqis were willing or able to lead their communities, many lived in poverty despite their country's overall wealth, and groups lived in fear of the regime and of each other.

B. Liberation and Occupation

In March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq with the support of Coalition forces cobbled together from as many as 50 other countries to destroy Saddam Hussein's tyrannical regime and to remove him as a threat to American interests in the Middle East. Washington's motives were principally strategic, although many Americans were sympathetic because of the well-known misery of the Iraqi people under Saddam's misrule. Polls, focus groups, and anecdotal information all indicated that Iraqi public opinion overwhelmingly favored liberation from the Ba'thist regime but held a much more complicated view of the U.S. actions. Some Iraqis truly welcomed the United States as liberators. Others, particularly in the Sunni tribal community of Western Iraq who had benefited most from Saddam's reign, detested it. The vast majority fell somewhere in between. Many were humiliated that it required a foreign power—the United States—to overturn Saddam and disliked the presence of foreign troops in their country, but saw the Americans as a “necessary evil” and (at least initially) welcomed U.S. assistance in rebuilding their nation.⁴

Unfortunately, as has been well documented, the United States invaded Iraq with a set of naïve misperceptions about the country, and few plans or resources to deal with the myriad problems that it should have anticipated.⁵ Most devastating of all, the Americans had not anticipated the need to establish and then maintain security across Iraq. Too few Coalition troops were deployed to Iraq, and none were assigned to maintain order on the streets, prevent crime and looting, or otherwise secure the population. Moreover, and contrary to U.S. expectations that the Iraqi government would remain largely intact and thus serve as the foundation for a temporary American administration of Iraq, Iraq's governmental apparatus largely collapsed. The civil servants went home. Government buildings were ransacked by looters and equipment was stolen or destroyed. Many government files were stolen, destroyed or acquired for other nefarious

purposes. A comprehensive survey undertaken by the new Iraqi minister of water resources after he took office in late 2003, for instance, found that the ministry had lost 60% of its equipment in the looting, ranging from pencils to massive dredgers.⁶

The Americans compounded these pre-invasion failings with a series of post-invasion mistakes. The best known of these was the U.S. decision to disband the Iraqi army and other security forces without putting them through the kind of lengthy Disarm, Demobilize, and Retrain program that had been demonstrated to be essential in a variety of other post-conflict scenarios. The result was that nearly 1 million young men—mostly Sunni tribesmen—were turned out onto the streets without any means of providing for themselves or their families, and so became easy recruits for the various sectarian militant groups.

Arguably of even greater importance for the future of Iraq and its current state of affairs, the United States created an ill-conceived system of governance which continues to plague the country to this day.

The experience of nation-building in other states over the past 20 to 30 years demonstrated that the process of political reconstruction could not be rushed.⁷ In such a situation, the problem is typically that there is no readily available pool of leaders who genuinely represent the people. This was especially true in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, where he had effectively "decapitated" the population through his systematic efforts to kill or co-opt any potential leaders to ensure that they could not pose a threat to his rule. These nation-building experiences had also demonstrated that when the process of turning over control of the government to the indigenous population was rushed, the old elites and anyone else with guns inevitably took over the government by buying or bullying the electorate.

Thus, experts on reconstruction generally urged the inclusion of Iraqi voices in the decision-making process, but not the turning over of decision-making authority to any Iraqi group. Instead, they favored a longer timeframe of building a new political system from the ground up over a period of years, during which time an international coalition, blessed by the UN and aided by local and international NGOs, would retain sovereignty and delegate authority to new Iraqi political entities only as they became ready.

Instead, the United States created the 25-member Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) and gave it an important role in guiding reconstruction. However, because Washington had not allowed enough time—let alone created the circumstances—for genuinely popular figures to emerge, the U.S. Coalition Provisional Authority simply appointed 25 Iraqi leaders well-known to the United States. Some, like the Kurdish leaders Jalal Talabani and Mas'ud Barzani, truly did represent their constituencies. Others, like Shi'i leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, were at least respected in their communities, even if they could not necessarily be trusted to speak for them. Most, however, could not even claim that. Most were entirely unknown. A State Department poll found that only seven of the IGC members were known well enough for 40 percent or more of the population to have any opinion of them, positive or negative.⁸

C. Current Situation

Many IGC members used their positions to further their own political, military and financial ends, transforming membership on the IGC into a means of stockpiling raw power in the new Iraq. The seeds of a great many of Iraq's problems lay in this arrangement. The IGC set the tone for later Iraqi governments, particularly the transitional governments of Ayad Allawi and Ibrahim Jaafari that followed. Many of the IGC leaders were corrupt, stealing from the public treasury and encouraging their subordinates to do the same. They cut deals with nefarious figures, many in organized crime. They built up their militias and insinuated them into the various security services. They used the instruments of government to exclude their political rivals from gaining any economic, military or political power.

Another problem born of the IGC was the marginalization of a number of important Iraqi communities, most notably the Sunni tribal segment of the population. The IGC itself included only one Sunni tribal leader, and he was not widely respected in his own community. As a result, the Sunnis saw the IGC as an American instrument for turning the country over to the Kurds and the Shi'ah. The Sunnis became increasingly concerned as the members of the IGC and their followers set about using their new positions to steal, expand their political and economic power, and further discredit Sunnis through de-Ba'thification—all the while filling government jobs with their own cronies. All of these strategies had been previously employed by the Sunnis themselves under Saddam Hussein; thus, the Sunnis became convinced that in the new Iraq they would be oppressed just as they had once oppressed the Shi'ah and the Kurds. More than anything else, this conviction fed the Sunni-based insurgency.

By 2006 Iraq had descended into a low- to medium-level civil war. The Sunni community was sustaining its debilitating insurgency against both Coalition forces and the Shi'ah-dominated government. Most of the country was controlled by a wide range of militias, and many of the Sunni insurgent groups became the functional equivalents of Shi'i militias like Jaysh al-Mahdi and the Badr Organization. These militias fought each other for control of territory and illegal wealth (from oil smuggling, kidnap rings and protection rackets), but the citizenry was heavily dependent on them for protection and basic services.

Meanwhile, extremists from both communities increasingly mounted attacks on one another in the form of car bombings, assassinations, kidnappings and torture, hit-and-run raids, and increasingly larger instances of deliberate ethnic cleansing against towns and neighborhoods occupied by civilians from the other sect. The government in Baghdad remained largely controlled by the largest of the Shi'i militias, which ultimately determined much of what the government of Nouri al-Maliki did and said, and controlled key ministries, using them to reward cronies with jobs and to employ the tools of the state to advance the interests of their sect or militia.

In January 2007, the United States finally recognized that its strategy for the stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq was failing. Washington replaced virtually all of the key architects of the previous policy and brought in a new group with greater experience and fewer ideological predispositions. The U.S. then announced significant changes in its policy toward Iraq. U.S. military forces in Iraq would temporarily be increased in a "surge" from 130,000 to 160,000 troops. The troops would also shift their principal focus from destroying the small numbers of al-Qa'ida fighters in Iraq to providing security for the Iraqi people starting in Baghdad and then

shifting outward to encompass other cities in a traditional counterinsurgency “oil stain” strategy. This change in military tactics would be complemented by a major emphasis on building up local political and economic structures to deliver the basic services that the Iraqi people had previously relied on the militias to provide. The Americans hoped that, over time, this would allow for political compromises among the senior leadership in Baghdad that would stabilize the country over the long term.⁹

II. Women for Women International in Iraq

Women for Women International provides women survivors of war, civil strife and other conflicts with the resources to move from crisis and poverty to stability and self-sufficiency, thereby promoting viable civil societies. Since 1993, the organization has provided more than 120,000 women survivors of war with its tiered program of direct financial and emotional support, rights awareness, vocational and technical skills training, and access to income generation tools.

Women for Women International launched its activities in Iraq in June 2003, when it started providing socially excluded women with services that addressed their short-term economic needs while enhancing their capacity to create long-term economic solutions. In the process, an intensive training in women’s economic, political and social roles and value in society was incorporated. This strategy stems from Women for Women International’s conviction that economic solutions are not sustainable if they are not paired with active participation in social and political discourse.

As the first international NGO with operational programs in Baghdad focused exclusively on supporting the active participation of women, Women for Women International also provides capacity building support to local women’s NGOs and collaborates with Iraqi governing bodies and international agencies to address the needs of Iraqi women, both at the leadership level and at the grassroots. Since 2003, more than 4,000 women from Baghdad, Hilla and Karbala have been served by Women for Women International’s programs in Iraq, benefiting more than 21,600 family and community members.

A. The 2007 Study

The current economic, social and political climate in Iraq holds long-lasting implications for women. The outlook for women, and society as a whole, is diminished when individual women and their representative NGOs are excluded from decision-making processes. As grassroots practitioners, Women for Women International has come to recognize what women have always recognized: that women’s issues are society’s issues. Yet national and international policy-makers continue to segregate “women’s issues” from the core economic, social and political agenda. In response to this pattern of exclusion, Women for Women International launched a public education and outreach campaign called *Stronger Women, Stronger Nations* to raise awareness about the connection between women’s economic, social and political participation and a nation’s overall strength.

As recent events have shown, Iraqi women have been marginalized and excluded by both the U.S.-led Transitional Governing Authority and its successor, the Iraqi Governing Council. The accelerated timetable for the turnover was one factor in women's lack of participation, but the entire process continues to be characterized by a series of unfulfilled promises. During this pivotal time, with its atmosphere of societal constriction, it is vital to report the opinions and needs of Iraqi women. The *Stronger Women, Stronger Nations* study and report made it possible to revisit important questions and issues identified in our 2004 report, *Windows of Opportunity: The Pursuit of Gender Equality in Post-War Iraq*.

In 2004, Women for Women International spoke directly to women in seven major political and commercial centers of Iraq. At that time, the women's statements showed a high degree of engagement in civic and political issues and dispelled notions about tradition, customs or religion limiting their participation. Specifically, women said that their legal rights and ability to vote on the constitution were the most important items on the Iraqi national agenda; they wanted access to economic opportunities; they supported the education of girls and women; and they saw direct participation in local and national politics in a positive light.¹⁰ Despite the level of violence and the deprivation caused by lack of adequate food, water and electricity, another remarkable statistic emerged from the 2004 survey: *90.6% of Iraqi women were hopeful about their future.*

Since then, the situation in Iraq has continued to devolve, and challenges to the purpose of the United States presence continue to mount. In 2007, Women for Women International chose once again to talk to Iraqi women because we believe that the best way to gauge the overall strength of a nation is through this type of insight and analysis.

B. Study Participants

As part of the *Stronger Women, Stronger Nations* report series, Women for Women International gathered information from 1,513 Iraqi women about their top economic, social and political priorities. The study began with 279 women participating in Women for Women International's program in Hilla and Karbala completing a questionnaire. Because this did not yield a large or geographically representative sample group, we worked with the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI), which helped to coordinate access to more than 1,200 women nationwide through women's organizations under the NCCI umbrella. The other organizations administered the questionnaire to the women they worked with throughout the country, and then returned the completed questionnaires to the Women for Women International office in Baghdad.

The Unified Women's League in Baghdad interviewed 100 women in Baghdad's Al-Bataween, Al-Sadoun Park, Al-Whda and Al-Karada districts. The study covered some of the more dangerous areas in and around Baghdad, with particular focus on Christian and displaced women from different backgrounds between the ages of 18 and 60.

The organization Asuda for Combatting Violence Against Women spoke with 200 women in the northern Iraq cities of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, which are largely Kurdish, targeting women from different cultures and education in both provinces.

The organization Wassit Handicapped for Human Rights interviewed 100 physically challenged women of different ages and educational backgrounds, both rural and urban, during visits to the

women's homes and workplaces in and around the city of Kut in the eastern Wassit province in southern Iraq.

One organization that wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons spoke with 134 women in and around Baghdad in Al-Sadr City, Al-Mashtal, Al-Ameen, Al-Jadidah, Baldiyat, Al-Kamalyah and Al-Ubadi neighborhoods. Participants were identified through their previous acquaintance with the organization, which, among other things, works to prevent violence against women. For security reasons, women in Al-Sadr City, Al-Kamalyah, and Al-Ubadi gathered in groups of five in a woman's home and met with a staff member to complete the questionnaire. In Al-Baldiyat, the participants gathered at an organizational meeting place, and in Al-Mashtal and Al-Jadidah, the women respondents gathered in medical centers and schools.

A second organization that wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons spoke with a total of 200 women, 100 each in the southern areas of Basrah and Nasiriyah. Staff and board members visited women in their homes in Al-Nasrya district, Al-Shamya side, Al-Jazera side, Souk Al-Sheoukh district, Karmat Bane Saied, and Al-Shatra district, where they helped the women record their responses to the questionnaire.

The Al-Majed Women's League and the Iraq Human Establishment worked together to gather responses from a total of 400 women, 100 each in Baghdad, Fallujah, Samarra and Rawa, with particular attention to areas with a strong Sunni presence.

The Turkmen Women's Association spoke with 100 women in Kirkuk, specifically Al-Toun, Dakouk, Al-Hawejah, Khourmato district and Shoura village. Most of these women were Turkmen, but ranged in age and educational background. To complete the questionnaires, women gathered in groups in their homes and worked with organizational staff members to record their responses.

On average, respondents were 33.3 years old with four children. Many of the women are educated, with 30.6% having completed primary school, 40.6% secondary school and 22.8% university. When asked to describe the area where they live, 14.8% described it as rural, 82.1% described it as urban. Regarding religion or ethnicity, 8.6% described themselves as Kurdish, 16.5% Shi'i, 37.9% Sunni, 9.1% Christian, 4.7% Turkmen, 1.0% Sabai'i, 21.4% mixed and 0.8% Other. Finally, 60.0% were married, 23.3% single and never married, 5.9% divorced or separated, and 10.7% widowed.

The women who participated in the *Stronger Women, Stronger Nations* study are on the back-lines of the conflict, struggling to hold their society together during this trying time. Women's issues are society's issues and their grassroots reality is the foundation for Iraq's future. If peace and stability are to stand a chance, law- and policy-makers must ensure that the voices of this vital constituency are included.

III. Study Findings: Life in Iraq Today

The situation in Iraq remains grave and, despite some modest improvements from the "surge" strategy, the general lack of security is demanding a high toll at the grassroots. When women

were asked how things are going in Iraq overall, 25.6% of respondents said somewhat bad and 59.4% said very bad. Although women were asked about Iraq as a whole, when the responses are disaggregated by region, it becomes clear that geography is very important. For example, in the central cities of Fallujah, Rawa and Samarra, 93.9% of respondents thought that the overall situation in Iraq was very bad. Similarly, in Baghdad, 82.2% of respondents thought the overall situation was very bad. However, in Basrah, Iraq's second largest city, 17.2% of respondents said the overall situation was very good.

When the women were asked what they thought were the biggest problems facing Iraq as whole, the most common responses were: high/rising prices, housing availability/prices, lack of security and the U.S. occupation/presence. However, responses again differed dramatically by region:

- **Central Iraq (Fallujah, Samarra, Rawa).** Fuel shortages, housing availability, U.S. occupation/presence and rising prices
- **Baghdad.** Poor electricity supply, political instability, U.S. occupation/presence and lack of jobs
- **Basrah.** Housing availability/prices, Iranian influence, poor public services and rising prices
- **Kurdistan (Erbil and Sulaymaniyah).** Sectarian violence, poor electricity supply, high prices, and Iranian influence
- **Southern Iraq (Hilla, Karbala, Kut, Nasiriyah).** Terrorist attacks, street crime, housing availability/prices and lack of security
- **Kirkuk.** Lack of security, poor electricity supply, high prices and sectarian violence

When asked how things will be for Iraq as a country overall a year from now, 26% said about the same, 19.9% said somewhat worse and 20.8% said much worse. Only 17.6% said somewhat better and 9.3% said much better; 6.2% didn't know. Again, there was much variation by region.

Question: What is your expectation for how things will be for Iraq a year from now?

Region	Much better	Somewhat better	About the same	Somewhat worse	Much worse	Don't know
Central	0.0%	2.9%	18.4%	10.7%	67.0%	1.0%
Baghdad	2.0%	2.0%	16.5%	41.3%	33.0%	5.3%
Basrah	22.7%	30.9%	14.4%	18.6%	9.3%	4.1%
Kurdistan	9.2%	13.3%	26.6%	30.6%	14.5%	5.8%
South	15.3%	29.3%	33.3%	5.5%	9.4%	7.2%
Kirkuk	1.8%	22.0%	38.5%	13.8%	11.9%	11.9%

A. Security

By nearly every account, security remains poor throughout most of Iraq. After completing the questionnaire, a middle-aged woman explained that the Americans “gave us something but they took from us another thing. They gave us freedom and they took from us security...but if I have to choose one of them, I will choose safety and security.” In a group discussion of whether things are better now or under Saddam Hussein, the majority of women said that the situation was

better under Saddam Hussein: “there was no terrorism, better security, plenty of food, cheap gasoline and fuel for cooking, heating and driving. Life expenses were cheaper in general, and better systems in the government.” One woman explained that “during Saddam’s time, a government employee would be afraid if he or she did not do a good job. Now, they don’t care about their performance...leaving lots of chaos and lack of law and order even within the government bodies.”

Women’s survey responses confirm the reality of the situation: 45.1% described their ability to go where they wish safely as very bad and 24.1% described it as somewhat bad; 37.3% thought it would be much worse a year from now and 20.5% thought it would be somewhat worse; 46.4% described their freedom to live where they wished without fear of persecution as very bad and 18.9% described it as somewhat bad; 38.1% thought it would be much worse a year from now and 20.3% thought it would be somewhat worse.

Insecurity is also severely restricting women’s personal mobility: 86.0% of respondents said they are not able to walk down the street as they please; 67.9% of respondents stated that their ability to walk down the street as they please has gotten worse since the U.S. invasion; 68.3% of women are not able to drive a car; 53.7% of respondents say that their ability to drive a car has gotten worse since the U.S. invasion; 48.6% of respondents said that they are not able to work outside the home; and 56.7% of respondents said that their ability to work outside the home has gotten worse since the U.S. invasion.

When asked about the biggest challenges to their personal mobility, 46.8% of respondents named unsafe streets as the top challenge. Other top challenges were fear of being harmed by U.S./U.K. soldiers, and fear of being harmed by militia violence. Alarming, 88.8% of respondents expressed a great deal of concern that they or someone living in their households would become a victim of the violence occurring in Iraq; 71.2% of respondents said they did not feel protected by U.S./U.K. soldiers; and 52.2% of respondents believed that Iraq is engaged in a civil war at this time.

In and around Baghdad, various militias battle one another and the forces of the United States and Iraqi Army, who are now trying to protect the civilian populations on both sides from the militants of the other. In the Kurdish provinces in general, there is considerably greater security (and by extension, relative prosperity) than anywhere else in the country. The Kurds are protected by as many as 150,000 Peshmerga fighters, aided by a separate language and culture that make outsiders easy to spot. Nevertheless, even Kurdistan has experienced a number of terrorist attacks as outside groups try to prevent the Kurds from setting an independent course.

The impact of violence and insecurity can be seen in everything from statistics to anecdotes. In the worst parts of Iraq, the average Iraqi must worry about car bombs, random shootings, snipers; ethnic cleansing, kidnapping, torture, and execution by militant groups, as well as the potential for collateral damage from American or Iraqi security forces operations.

Even in those parts of Iraq where there is little sectarian violence, a pervasive state of lawlessness remains. Even in ethnically or religiously homogeneous cities and towns, the government typically provides little security or policing presence. This allows the militias, in

conjunction with a wide variety of organized crime rings, to assume authority in these areas, and while they may keep outright violence low, they indulge in all manner of criminal behavior against the local population. Theft, extortion, kidnapping, and the threat of random violence are ubiquitous problems for most Iraqis.

Anywhere from 50,000 to 1.3 million Iraqis have already died from strife since the U.S. occupation of Iraq began, including terrorist attacks, sectarian killings and deaths from criminal activity.¹¹ Approximately 2 million Iraqis have fled the country altogether, while perhaps another 2 million have abandoned their homes and moved, often by threat of violence, to another part of the country they felt safer for themselves and their families.¹² In parts of Iraq, men have formed neighborhood watches to try to limit the violence. Few factories have been able to reopen because of threats to their workers, the difficulty of moving goods around the country, and the poor provision of utilities.

When women were asked about the security situation in the village or neighborhood where they live, 20.9% described it as somewhat bad and 38.8% described it as very bad; 24.7% described the situation as somewhat good and 11.2% described it as very good.

Question: How would you rate the security situation in the village or neighborhood where you live?

Region	Very good	Somewhat good	Somewhat bad	Very bad	Don't know
Central	0.0%	12.0%	4.4%	83.3%	0.4%
Baghdad	2.5%	11.6%	20.4%	49.4%	16.0%
Basrah	35.1%	39.2%	15.5%	8.2%	2.1%
Kurdistan	20.2%	14.0%	37.3%	28.5%	0.0%
South	15.8%	41.0%	21.8%	19.7%	1.7%
Kirkuk	8.2%	30.9%	35.5%	24.5%	0.9%

When asked about the effect of the presence of U.S./U.K. security forces, 65.3% of respondents said that overall, their presence in Iraq is making security worse. A woman in Karbala added, “the thing that we distrust the most in today’s Iraq are the Americans.”

In order to avoid trouble, respondents said they did the following things very often or somewhat often over the past year:

- 74.5% avoided going out of their homes;
- 63.2% have not sent their children to school, most commonly in parts of Baghdad;
- 65.9% have avoided passing or driving by police stations or other public buildings;
- 64.5% have avoided markets and other crowded areas, most commonly in parts of Baghdad, Hilla and Karbala;
- 60.7% have avoided checkpoints;
- 74.6% have avoided U.S. and other Coalition forces;
- 57% have avoided travel, most commonly in parts of Baghdad, Fallujah and Samarra;

- 59.3% have been careful with what they say about themselves to others; and
- 53.4% have avoided going to work or applying for work.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the most optimism for security improvement in the year ahead was seen in areas where the most women described the current security situation as somewhat good or very good. In the southern Iraq, for instance, 55.0% of respondents said they thought the security situation in their neighborhoods would be better in a year. In Basrah, where control of security was recently transferred from U.K. forces to Iraqi authorities, 56.8% of respondents thought security in their neighborhoods would be better in a year.

In stark contrast, and despite claims of “surge”-related security improvements, 84.6% of respondents in central Iraq thought security in their neighborhood would be worse a year from now. This should be kept in mind if control of the area is transferred to Iraqi authorities in early 2008, as has been stated by U.S. officials.¹³

In Baghdad, 44.9% of respondents said they expect the security situation to be worse in a year and 21.8% don’t know what to expect. Opinions also differed from neighborhood to neighborhood. Among women in Al-Sadr City, Mashtal, Al-Ameen, Al-Baldiyat, Al-Kamalyah and Al-Ubadi, 63.9% thought the security situation would be worse a year from now. Among responses from predominantly Christian women in Al-Bataween, Al-Sadoun Park, Al-Whda and Al-Karada districts, 69.8% of respondents said they didn’t know what to expect a year from now.

Question: What is your expectation for the security situation a year from now?

Region	Much better	Somewhat better	About the Same	Somewhat worse	Much worse	Don’t know
Central	0.7%	5.1%	4.0%	1.1%	83.5%	5.5%
Baghdad	1.6%	13.3%	18.4%	10.4%	34.5%	21.8%
Basrah	22.1%	34.7%	11.6%	20.0%	6.3%	5.3%
Kurdistan	14.4%	23.9%	21.8%	17.0%	20.2%	2.7%
South	12.2%	42.8%	20.1%	8.3%	10.5%	6.1%
Kirkuk	10.0%	27.3%	39.1%	7.3%	7.3%	9.1%

When asked who posed the biggest threat to national security, 43.9% of all respondents said U.S. and U.K. soldiers, followed by 32.6% of respondents saying militias or other groups organized by ethnicity.

Question: Which group do you think poses the biggest threat to national security?

Region	Iraqi government, army and police	U.S./U.K. soldiers	Religious groups	Neighborhood or community watch groups	Militias or sectarian groups
Central	8.0%	90.5%	0.4%	1.1%	0.0%
Baghdad	8.9%	29.9%	7.2%	4.6%	49.3%
Basrah	3.5%	11.6%	4.7%	1.2%	79.1%
Kurdistan	17.5%	15.3%	26.8%	2.7%	37.7%

South	7.6%	61.5%	6.4%	2.7%	21.8%
Kirkuk	7.6%	22.9%	11.4%	3.8%	54.3%

While many Iraqis may have supported the U.S. presence initially, 65.3% of respondents said that overall, the presence of U.S. and U.K. forces in Iraq is making security in the country worse; 60.6% of respondents thought that bringing more U.S. forces into Baghdad and other areas would make security worse.

When asked about the political actions of other people, 58.0% said that attacks on U.S. and U.K. soldiers were acceptable, although 51.2% did not feel that attacks on U.S. and U.K. civilians were acceptable; 83.9% said that attacks on Iraqi government forces were not acceptable, and 91.4% said that attacks on Iraqi civilians were not acceptable.

B. Violence Against Women

In 2004, President Bush said that “the advance of freedom in the Middle East has given new rights and new hopes to women... the systematic use of rape by Saddam’s former regime to dishonor families has ended.”¹⁴ Clearly, the assumption was that the American-led invasion of Iraq had helped to improve the lives of its women. But this simply does not reflect reality for many Iraqi women. Much of the world may have no idea that prior to Saddam Hussein, women in Iraq “were widely recognised as among the most liberated in the Middle East. They held important positions in business, education and the public sector, and their rights were protected by a statutory family law that was the envy of women’s activists in neighbouring countries.”¹⁵

But these freedoms were restricted by the Hussein regime, and women’s status has continued to recede since the 2003 invasion. “In much of the country, women can only now move around with a male escort. Rape is committed habitually by all the main armed groups, including those linked to the government. Women are being murdered throughout Iraq in unprecedented numbers.”¹⁶ In Basrah, “[r]eligious vigilantes have killed at least 40 women this year...because of how they dressed, their mutilated bodies found with notes warning against ‘violating Islamic teachings.’”¹⁷

Indeed, 63.9% of respondents stated that violence against women in general was increasing. In Central Iraq and Baghdad, this number jumps to 91.8% and 72.0%, respectively.

Question: Do you think that violence against women is increasing?

Region	Yes	No	Don’t know
Central	91.8%	7.1%	1.1%
Baghdad	72.0%	17.1%	10.9%
Basrah	17.6%	44.0%	38.5%
Kurdistan	52.9%	15.9%	31.2%
South	56.7%	23.0%	20.3%
Kirkuk	50.0%	30.2%	19.8%

Specifically, 38.5% of all respondents said they thought that rape is increasing.

Question: Do you think that rape of women is increasing?

Region	Yes	No	Don't know
Central	0.0%	79.2%	20.8%
Baghdad	61.6%	13.0%	25.4%
Basrah	15.8%	52.6%	31.6%
Kurdistan	39.2%	12.4%	48.4%
South	54.1%	30.1%	15.8%
Kirkuk	19.3%	26.6%	54.1%

Overall, 30.4% of women said that trafficking in women was increasing.

Question: Do you think that trafficking of women is increasing?

Region	Yes	No	Don't know
Central	0.0%	79.2%	20.8%
Baghdad	53.5%	13.8%	32.7%
Basrah	14.7%	53.7%	31.6%
Kurdistan	32.4%	14.4%	53.2%
South	37.6%	42.3%	20.2%
Kirkuk	15.6%	30.3%	54.1%

Overall, 29.6% of women thought prostitution had increased.

Question: Do you think that prostitution is increasing?

Region	Yes	No	Don't know
Central	0.0%	77.7%	22.3%
Baghdad	42.2%	27.8%	30.0%
Basrah	15.8%	60.0%	24.2%
Kurdistan	34.4%	9.8%	55.7%
South	41.4%	35.0%	23.6%
Kirkuk	20.0%	30.0%	50.0%

When asked why these actions were on the rise, the most common responses were: 1) There is less respect for women's rights than before; 2) Women are thought of as possessions; and 3) The economy has gotten worse.

In terms of protection from violence, there are few viable options. Overall, 48.7% of respondents said they feel protected by the police, 45.3% said they did not, and 6.0% didn't know.

Question: Do you feel protected by the police?

Region	Yes	No	Don't know
Central	0.4%	99.6%	0.0%
Baghdad	19.3%	72.9%	7.8%
Basrah	71.4%	15.6%	13.0%
Kurdistan	46.8%	36.2%	17.0%
South	86.3%	11.5%	2.1%

Kirkuk	77.1%	14.7%	8.3%
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Overall, 41.7% of respondents said they feel protected by religious leaders, but 41.4% of respondents did not feel protected by religious leaders, and 16.9% of respondents didn't know.

Question: Do you feel protected by religious leaders?

Region	Yes	No	Don't know
Central	82.2%	17.8%	0.0%
Baghdad	34.7%	56.2%	9.1%
Basrah	18.2%	42.9%	39.0%
Kurdistan	8.0%	76.5%	15.5%
South	44.4%	27.8%	27.8%
Kirkuk	26.6%	52.3%	21.1%

On a positive note, 76.0% of respondents said they did not feel protected by militia groups, while 82.4% of respondents said they felt protected by their family and tribe.

C. The Economy and Infrastructure

Immediately following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, women were optimistic that their daily socioeconomic situation would improve. In Women for Women International's 2004 survey, women's stated their greatest needs were electricity, work opportunities and water: 1) 95.0% felt that their families were not receiving enough electricity; 2) 87.3% believed that there were shortages of work opportunities; and 3) 63.5% had insufficient access to clean water

Iraq is a wealthy country with massive oil reserves, the second-largest in the world. The increase in global oil prices since 2003 has meant a considerable increase in Iraq's earnings, even though wars, sanctions, mismanagement, and the current insecurity have kept Iraqi oil production well below its theoretical full capacity. Between June 2003 and July 2007, Iraq made almost \$97 billion in oil revenues.¹⁸

Unfortunately, gross national indicators of wealth do not equate to actual prosperity for the Iraqi people, and significant improvements in the 2004 areas of concern—electricity, jobs and water—have yet to materialize. Indeed, largely because of the crippling security problems, Iraq's economy remains mostly moribund.

1. Fuel and Electricity

Of women who participated in the study, 79.5% said there is not enough fuel available for cooking and driving, 60.3% thought it would be worse a year from now, 75.7% said there is not enough electricity, and 58.3% thought it would be worse a year from now. In Karbala, the availability of electricity was relatively good—up to six hours a day. In parts of Baghdad, there is still electricity only for one hour a day. One woman explained that “Nothing can be worked without getting the electricity back.”

Nationwide, Iraq is generating almost twice the electricity that it did under Saddam Hussein. However, because demand for electricity has tripled during that time, the overall supply remains insufficient, with more and more people (and local governments, aided by U.S. military and civilian officials) increasingly turning to private or local generators rather than relying on the national power grid.¹⁹ Inflation continues to hover between 20% and 30%, and Iraqi fuel supplies have averaged about 55% to 65% of the goals set for them throughout 2007.²⁰

In the past, corruption siphoned off huge amounts of Iraq’s oil wealth and foreign aid donations. Corruption is still a significant problem, but draconian new anti-corruption laws designed by the United States have greatly curbed the worst practices. Unfortunately, these regulations have created new problems by making many government officials unwilling or unable to spend government funds. As a result, the Iraqi government now has a massive surplus of unspent funds, variously estimated between \$10 billion and \$20 billion in mid-2007.²¹ Some comfort can be taken in the fact that the money has not been stolen, and that American and Iraqi officials are working hard to disburse the funds properly, but it is hardly an ideal situation either. A few indicators, such as the proliferation of telephones and television satellite dishes and the growth of the informal electricity sector, suggest that the economic situation may be improving somewhat.

2. Employment and Income

When asked about the current availability of jobs in Iraq, 68.3% of respondents described the availability of jobs as bad; and 70.5% of respondents indicated that their families are unable to earn an income that pays for the necessities of daily life. When women were asked specifically about their own access to employment, 45.3% of women described their access to opportunities as poor and 26.6% said they have no opportunities at all.

One woman who was interviewed said, “We are dealing with a situation in which you cannot get a job anywhere without paying a bribe. During Saddam’s time, our sons used to run away from the military and he would punish them in all sorts of ways for that. Now, we have to pay all what we have in bribes for our sons to enter the army for that is the only job available in the country.”

Unemployment in Iraq is continuing to run at 25% to 40%, with underemployment unmeasurable but widely considered much higher still.²² Though low-income women have historically benefited most from the informal economy such as street commerce, the spasms of violence have driven women out of their jobs and into their homes.

3. Clean Water

Two-thirds of the women had only limited access to clean water, with 66.5% of respondents describing the availability of clean water in their neighborhoods as somewhat bad or very bad; 51.9% thought it would be worse a year from now.

Question: How would you rate the availability of clean water in the village or neighborhood where you live?

Region	Very good	Quite good	Quite bad	Very bad	Don’t know
Central	2.2%	13.3%	66.4%	18.1%	0.0%

Baghdad	1.6%	8.4%	24.9%	48.6%	16.5%
Basrah	25.8%	32.0%	25.8%	12.4%	4.1%
Kurdistan	9.8%	26.9%	33.2%	26.9%	3.1%
South	8.6%	31.8%	30.9%	27.3%	1.5%
Kirkuk	0.9%	25.5%	37.3%	36.4%	0.0%

Tahseen Sheikhly, civilian spokesman for the Baghdad security plan, has said that “Sewage, water and electricity are our three main problems.” According to Sheikhly, of three sewage treatment plants in Baghdad, one “is out of commission, one is working at stuttering capacity while a pipe blockage in the third means sewage is forming a foul lake so large it can be seen ‘as a big black spot on Google Earth.’” In a news conference, Sheikhly also said that water pipes, where they exist, “are so old that it is not possible to pump water at a sufficient rate to meet demands—leaving many neighbourhoods parched.”²³

D. Social Services

In 2004, approximately half of the women who participated in Women for Women International’s survey said that their families lacked medical care, education and housing: 1) 57.1% said that their families lacked adequate medical care; 2) 50.7% felt that access to education was not sufficient; and 3) 49.0% complained of poor or insufficient housing. These problems have persisted and worsened.

1. Medical Care

In the 2007 study, 67.9% of women described the availability of medical care in their neighborhoods negatively. When women were asked about their own personal access to medical and health care services (doctors, hospitals, clinics and medications), 46.9% of respondents described it as poor, and 21.5% said they have no access at all. And of all respondents, 50.7% thought it would be worse a year from now.

Rising prices have negatively impacted health and medical care as well. According to anecdotal reports, a doctor’s visit used to cost approximately \$1 a few years ago. Now it costs about \$10. Giving birth in the hospital used to be free, now it costs about \$800, leaving many women to seek assistance from traditional midwives. A bag of blood used in an intensive care unit used to be free. Now it costs about \$22. Medicines such as antibiotics used to be free, subsidized by the government. Now antibiotics cost as much as \$200.

In addition to the cost of care, insecurity is keeping many doctors from coming to work at all. Because so many doctors have been assassinated, many fear going to the hospital and work from their homes. When the daughter of a Women for Women International-Iraq staff member was shot in December 2007, it cost the family about \$800 just to get her the blood and the basic medicine she needed while at an Iraqi hospital for one day. According to her father, “All of that and no doctors were able to visit her. We only had medical interns checking on her, taking the report to the doctor at his home and he would then give them instructions and guidance for them to implement when they come back to her.” The young woman stayed in the hospital for about 24 hours wrapped in a blood-soaked blanket. With the tremendous help and assistance of

Women for Women International friends and supporters, she was able to be transferred to the American-run hospital in Iraq, where she received treatment but remains paralyzed from the neck down. In addition, her family could no longer go back to their home for they were threatened for having communicated with the Americans who treated their daughter.

2. Education

Although U.S. and Iraqi officials believed that the 2007-2008 school year would see a much larger number of new school enrollments,²⁴ 76.2% of respondents said that girls in their families are not allowed to attend school, and 56.7% of respondents said that girls' ability to attend school has gotten worse over the last four years. According to Women for Women International-Iraq staff, the primary reasons for this are poverty and insecurity.

Perhaps most frustrating is that while 49.6% of respondents describe their opportunities for education as poor, and 16.6% say they have no opportunities at all, 65.1% of respondents say it is extremely important to the welfare and development of their communities that women and girls in Iraq be able to access educational opportunities.

As one young woman explained, "If Iraq is indeed going to have democracy, how can we have a real democracy without educated people who can push the government? We need education so we may push and participate in building a truly democratic country." Another woman explained, "Many are saying 'Why should I waste my money or my time sending my kids to school if they can't get a job at the end of the day?'"

Another complicating factor directly tied to women's legal rights and status is that when a husband is kidnapped or a woman is divorced, she does not have the right to register her children, which means they cannot attend school. By some estimates, there are currently 2 million widows in Iraq and 6 million orphans, which in a country of 27 million people is nearly a third of the population. Unless this situation is remedied, the country will be faced with a generation of uneducated children.

3. Housing and Basic Necessities

According to respondents, one of the biggest problems in Iraq is the availability of affordable housing, especially in central Iraq, Basrah and the south more generally. This problem may also be compounded by the fact that, as mentioned in our 2004 report, 65.3% of respondents described their freedom to live where they wished without fear of persecution as quite bad or very bad, and 58.4% thought it would be worse in a year.

Beyond actual housing, many of the necessities of daily life are simply not available or priced out of reach. Food is one example: the price of tomatoes has quadrupled and the price of bread has quintupled. Everything is being imported. Most farmers in Iraq have been forced to abandon their farms because water, electricity, gasoline and basic agricultural inputs like seeds and fertilizer are either too expensive or altogether unavailable. One woman who was interviewed said, "Iraq today has no regulations on any imports in terms of taxes and things like that, so

much so that it is hurting our local market. Our local farmers started trying to join the army for better income.”

E. Political Institutions and Participation

At the time of the study, 70.2% of respondents thought that the citizens of Iraq have not been given a chance to have input on the future of Iraq.

Question: Do you think that citizens of Iraq have been given a chance to have input on the country’s future?

Region	Yes	No	Don’t know
Central	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%
Baghdad	8.4%	91.3%	0.3%
Basrah	47.4%	51.6%	1.1%
Kurdistan	45.1%	54.9%	0.0%
South	50.8%	48.3%	0.9%
Kirkuk	32.1%	67.9%	0.0%

1. Governance

Nearly half the respondents, 48.0%, thought that the United States controls things in Iraq, and 38.6% of respondents thought that Iraq’s national government has done a very bad job of carrying out its responsibilities.

Within the central government in Baghdad, Iraqi politics are largely deadlocked. The current government is made up largely of Shi’i politicians closely tied to various militia warlords. The Sunnis are not well represented in the government or the parliament, and tribal sheiks of Anbar, Ninawah, and Salah al-Din provinces tend to view the government as a front for Iran. Even among the Shi’ah, many believe that the politicians in Baghdad are working for the best interests of the militias, not the best interests of the Shi’ah as a whole, let alone all Iraq.

The problem derives in large part from the flawed decisions that went into the creation of the IGC in 2003 and the interim government of 2004. Having brought exiles and militia leaders into the government and given them positions of power, it became virtually impossible to get them out, and even more difficult to convince them to make compromises. The militia leaders used their positions to maintain and expand their power at the expense of their rivals outside the government as well as in the central government itself.

As a result, each ministry in Baghdad is wholly captive to the militia that controls it. Corruption and sectarianism are rampant. Many ministries will not provide services to Iraqis from a different sect or who merely live in an area controlled by another militia. In others, provision of services requires some kind of demonstration of loyalty to the controlling militia or political party. In addition, the majority of the ministries are at least as over-centralized, inefficient, and unresponsive as they were in Saddam Hussein’s day—arguably more so.

Respondents expressed the greatest, albeit somewhat ambivalent, confidence in the Iraqi army, with 49.8% expressing quite a lot or a great deal of confidence. In addition, 42.4% expressed a great deal or some confidence in the national government of Iraq, but 53.0% said they had not very much confidence or no confidence at all. Interestingly, only 31.2% expressed a great deal or some confidence in local community leaders, with 61.4% expressing not very much confidence or no confidence at all. However, 45.6% described the local government as somewhat good, and 42.4% thought it would be somewhat better a year from now. Finally, 69.7% expressed not very much confidence or no confidence at all in the local militia.

Question: How much confidence do you have in your local leaders?

Region	A great deal	Some	Not very much	None at all	Don't know
Central	2.6%	54.3%	20.4%	22.7%	0.0%
Baghdad	2.2%	8.0%	30.4%	54.2%	5.1%
Basrah	6.3%	6.3%	44.8%	28.1%	14.6%
Kurdistan	3.8%	18.5%	38.6%	23.9%	15.2%
South	10.2%	24.6%	37.2%	20.6%	7.3%
Kirkuk	21.4%	30.1%	17.5%	20.4%	10.7%

The power of Iraq's central government is heavily dependent on Coalition military forces, particularly U.S. forces, and where they are not present, as in most of southeastern Iraq, the central government has little influence. However, to the extent that politics can be said to be improving in Iraq, that progress is largely to be found at provincial and local levels. In a number of towns, neighborhoods and even cities throughout Iraq, local leaders are trying to force workable accommodations that can allow members of their communities to put the violence behind them and begin to rebuild their lives. In nearly every case, the provision of some degree of security by U.S. and Iraqi forces has been crucial to these arrangements, even though, as discussed earlier in this report, security improvements in many areas have not yet trickled down to the grassroots.

Many local leaders suggest that a more decentralized form of governance, with most authority and revenue expenditure being devolved to the provincial or municipal level may be the only realistic solution to the problems of Baghdad. That being said, 72.7% of respondents thought that there should be one unified Iraq with a central government in Baghdad, and 88.6% of respondents thought that the separation of people along ethnic, religious and/or sectarian lines was a bad thing. Discouragingly, only 32.3% thought there would be one unified Iraq with a central government in Baghdad in five years.

2. Legal Rights

When women were asked if they knew if citizens of Iraq have any of the following rights, they responded as follows:

- 70.5% did not know if they had the right to move freely,
- 52.7% did not know if they had the right to an education,
- 52.0% did not know if they had the right to political participation.

When women were asked whether the circumstances of women were being considered by those making decisions about Iraq's future, 43.6% of respondents said no, and 42.1% of respondents said yes. Differences were more pronounced when disaggregated by region.

Question: Do you think the circumstances of women are being considered by those making decisions about Iraq's future?

Region	Yes	No	Don't know
Central	24.9%	75.1%	0.0%
Baghdad	31.3%	57.6%	11.1%
Basrah	31.5%	54.3%	14.1%
Kurdistan	25.4%	35.3%	39.3%
South	69.1%	21.1%	9.8%
Kirkuk	40.0%	25.5%	34.5%

Among those respondents who thought the circumstances of women were being considered, the most common reason given for this was the belief that women's opinions matter. The next most common reason was that women's rights benefit everyone in Iraq. Of those women who thought women's circumstances were not being considered, the most common reason given for this was that officials do not need women's votes to get elected.

Gender and religion both affect how women perceive their rights. Regarding gender, 73.3% of respondents stated that they felt their rights are different because they are women. Of these women, the primary ways that they feel like their gender affects their rights is not feeling secure and not being able to participate in public affairs. It should be noted that 77.4% said that legal protections for the rights of women were either very important or extremely important to the welfare of their communities.

For women who said religion affects their rights, 67.2% of respondents stated that they felt rights differed based on religion. Of these women, the primary way that their religion affects their rights is that they do not feel secure, and 43.4% of respondents said that their communities have been separating along religious or sectarian lines, with Sunnis moving to live among Sunnis and Shi'ah moving to live among Shi'ah. As mentioned above, 88.6% of respondents said this sort of separation was a bad thing.

When women were asked where they would go to get information about their rights, their responses again differed by region. Women in Fallujah, Rawa and Samarra said they would most often go to religious leaders. Women in Baghdad, Kurdistan, Hilla and Karbala would go to schoolteachers or other sources such as television and radio. Women in Basrah and Nasiriyah would go to government and local officials. Women in Kirkuk would go to the Internet, and women in Kut would go to the police.

IV. Action Agenda

A group of women in Karbala was asked what they would do if they were in charge of the country. They said, "We would first ask the Americans to leave immediately. Second, we will

address the poverty situation in Iraq which is impacting us the most.” One woman added, “If I was the president of the country, I would make filling the stomach of the people as my utmost priority.”

When asked what was needed, 70.0% of respondents said that rebuilding infrastructure such as roads, wells, drains and public buildings was necessary for the welfare of their communities. Other priorities included programs designed to help communities take care of their own needs and emergency relief such as food, shelter and emergency medical services. Only, 31.4% of respondents said that the Iraqi government is the primary source of development assistance in their communities, emphasizing the importance of international humanitarian aid, civil society and private donations.

Development in a nation is keyed to “development” among the country’s female population, as correlations between improvements for women, such as higher school enrollment and completion rates, and improvements for the society overall, such as lower birth and infant mortality rates continue to emerge. When development among women (education, health, role in society, legal status, etc.) is progressing, it drives a wide variety of other positive developments for the society as a whole.

For Iraq, “good governance and resolution of security and political challenges are pre-requisites for progress in all other areas, including economic revival and normalization.”²⁵ In reality, good governance and improved security cannot exist without the involvement of women. Women are the building blocks of sustainable peace and women must be involved in decisions about Iraq’s future, not just in symbolic ways, but through full participation at every level—from the family dinner table to community councils to the national parliament.

Women for Women International has learned during more than a decade of working in post-conflict societies that three elements are necessary to ensure women’s full participation in a new democracy: 1) a recognition throughout society that women play a critical role; 2) an active, organized local women’s NGO community that bridges the divide between the grassroots and the leadership; and 3) a commitment from the highest levels of leadership to the full inclusion of women at all levels of society, both in institutions and decision-making.

Recognizing that each of these elements require strong public petition, this Action Agenda is meant to provide local groups, international NGOs, the media, the Iraqi government and the international community with practical strategies for cultivating women’s social capital and bridging the gap between the front- and back-line discussions about Iraq’s future.

Action Agenda for Women

- **Prove that freedom is not inconsistent with safety.**

The lack of security and the fear of violence constricts the lives of women at all levels of society. Reducing the level of violence is essential to creating a stable foundation for women’s broader social participation.

- **Restore the infrastructure.**

All of Iraq needs electricity and clean water. When basic needs are not met, the forces of resentment and retaliation are strengthened, and women in turn suffer the consequences of the cycle of violence. Solutions to these problems require a critical assessment of the status quo and a willingness to foster innovative strategies and solutions. For example, smaller-scale community generators for electricity are not only less vulnerable to attack than larger-scale power plants, their use encourages community protection of a necessary resource and creates income generating opportunities for women and other community members associated with maintenance of the equipment and usage and delivery of the power supply.

- **Address women's economic needs.**

Women must have the training and opportunity to gain formal sector employment as the economy is reconstructed. In the meantime, however, microcredit and small business loans will allow women to generate income to establish some measure of economic security. This avenue is crucial for socially excluded women who have lost husbands and other male relatives in conflict and are newly responsible for a household. The use of community electricity generators discussed above is an example of how localized economic opportunities for women can not only begin to resuscitate a local economy, but engage women in the reconstruction of their communities and break a cycle of violence as well.

- **Support women's organizations and umbrella groups.**

The collective advocacy of NGOs and community groups has amplified the voices of women and achieved some hard-fought measures of success. Internal and external support for women's NGOs is essential to building a force within civil society that can advocate for women at the grassroots, bring gender issues to the forefront of the larger political landscape, prevent the use of women's rights for political currency and propaganda, and demand transparency and accountability from elected officials and government agencies by serving as a check on corruption.

- **Strengthen democracy through education.**

Investment in girls' education is essential in fostering a younger generation who will be able to assume active social, economic, and political roles. Special attention must be given to the needs of girls in rural areas, who have traditionally not had the same opportunities as those in urban centers. Training in basic skills and literacy is also essential for socially excluded women who have not had the advantage of a formal education.

Conclusion

The state of Iraq remains precarious. A reversal in its fortunes is impossible without a major international commitment to Iraq—through mechanisms responsive to the needs of Iraqis, as expressed by Iraqis themselves—sustained over a number of years, and even then this may prove inadequate. If the international community, including the United States, is unwilling to sustain that commitment, the most likely alternative would be for the civil war in Iraq to worsen. It could easily escalate to the levels of violence seen in Lebanon, Bosnia, and Congo during the worst eras of their civil wars.

During the reconstruction and reconciliation process, it is crucial that women gain inclusion and see measurable progress on a variety of legal and social issues. If the window of opportunity closes and the hope of women is squandered, Iraqi society as a whole will suffer. If women are

treated as bystanders, their full range of potential as peacemakers, providers and educators will be lost. The full and free participation of women is a barometer for the future health and prosperity of all members of Iraqi society.

ENDNOTES

¹ One of the most important events in Muslim Shi'i history, the martyrdom of the Imam Hussein and his small band of followers, took place at Karbala in 680 AD, and three of the most revered figures in Shi'i Islam, Hussein, his father 'Ali (the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad), and his brother Abbas are all buried in Iraq. In 762 AD, the Caliph Mansur chose to move a new capital for the Islamic empire to Baghdad and, for 500 years, Baghdad was one of the greatest centers of wealth, power, and learning on the planet. In 1258, the Mongols sacked Baghdad in horrific fashion, sealing the demise of the Islamic Empire and paving the way for a series of Turkic peoples, first from the Persian heartland, but later the Ottomans from Anatolia, to rule over the territory of Iraq.

² Interview with Wafiq al-Samarra'i, "Former Military Intelligence Chief Interviewed," Voice of the People of Kurdistan, 18 December 1994, in FBIS-NES-94-243, 19 December 1994, p. 33; David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), pp. 357-360.

³ Amatzia Baram, "The Effect of Iraqi Sanctions: Statistical Pitfalls and Responsibility," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Spring 2000), p. 199n. 13; Sarah Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), p. 23.

⁴ On the complexity of Iraqi public opinion, the best accounts are actually two books written by journalists: George Packer, *The Assassin's Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); and Anthony Shadid, *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2005). Also see Kenneth M. Pollack, "After Saddam: Assessing the Reconstruction of Iraq," Analysis Paper No. 1, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, January 2004, esp. pp. 3, 7-10, 16-17.

⁵ For a summary of the failings of American policy in Iraq see Kenneth M. Pollack, "The Seven Deadly Sins of Failure in Iraq: A Retrospective Analysis of the Reconstruction," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, December 2006. For in-depth examinations of the problems in key elements of the reconstruction, see Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2005); Noah Feldman, *What We Owe Iraq: War and the Ethics of Nation Building* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2006); T. Christian Miller, *Blood Money: Wasted Billions, Lost Lives, and Corporate Greed in Iraq* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2006); George Packer, *The Assassin's Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); David L. Phillips, *Losing Iraq: Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2005); Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006); Anthony Shadid, *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2005).

⁶ Kenneth M. Pollack, "After Saddam: Assessing the Reconstruction of Iraq," Analysis Paper No. 1, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, January 2004, p. 27.

⁷ See Carlos Pascual and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Salvaging the Possible: Policy Options in Iraq," Policy Paper No. 2 at 8, September 2007. The Brookings Institution. Available at http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2007/09iraq_pascual02.aspx.

⁸ See Department of State, Office of Research, Iraqi Public Has Wide Ranging Preferences for a Future Political System. Opinion Analysis. October 21, 2003. Available at http://www.cpa-iraq.org/government/political_poll.pdf.

⁹ President George W. Bush, "The President's Address to the Nation," The White House, January 10, 2007.

¹⁰ To view the full report, visit <http://www.womenforwomen.org/nriqpap.htm>.

¹¹ "Iraq Violence, in Figures," BBC News, November 8, 2007, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/629/629/7036068.stm; Dan Ephron, "Iraq: A Growing Body Count," *Newsweek*, October 23, 2006, pg. 8; Rebecca Goldin, "The Science of Counting the Dead," STATS at George

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¹² “The Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq,” The Brookings Institution, August 9, 2007, available on the web at www.brookings.edu/iraqindex.

¹³ U.S. Department of State. Iraq Weekly Status Report, January 16, 2008, 9. Available at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/99563.pdf>.

¹⁴ Mark Lattimer. *Freedom lost*. The Guardian. December 13, 2007. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,2226439,00.html>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Sinan Salaheddin, Vigilantes Kill 40 Women in Iraq's South. Associated Press. December 9, 2007. Available at <http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5hZnChPOLBfeyJAVTm6fjcmGOiUwD8TE7EI80>

¹⁸ “The Iraq Index,” p. 39.

¹⁹ Kenneth M. Pollack’s conversations with USAID officials, Baghdad, Iraq, July 2007.

²⁰ “The Iraq Index,” p. 38.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 41.

²³ Baghdad drowning in sewage: Iraqi official. Agence France-Presse. February 3, 2008. Available at <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/KKAA-7BH5BF?OpenDocument&rc=3&cc=irq>.

²⁴ Kenneth M. Pollack’s conversations with American and Iraqi officials, Baghdad, Iraq, July 2007.

²⁵ Description of The International Compact with Iraq, *A Shared Vision, A Mutual Commitment*, <http://www.iraqcompact.org/en/default.asp> (last visited February 19, 2008).

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