

Iraq Local Governance Program

Women and Local Governance in Iraq: Fostering Participation and Empowerment

Successful postconflict resolution and development must take into account the role of previously disenfranchised or otherwise neglected groups in society. In many societies, focusing on the role of women and seeking to promote women's participation and empowerment are among the most important issues to address. Coalition policy makers in postwar Iraq actively sought to promote women's issues and expand women's involvement in social, political, economic, and bureaucratic arenas. The Local Governance Program (LGP) sought to increase women's involvement in local governance and worked to expand women's representation in local councils and their ability to organize and advocate for their needs through civil society organizations (CSOs).

Among the core tenets of the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA's) nation-building effort was that economic progress and democratic governance depend on the effective participation of all segments of the population, including women and minorities. This meant that interventions to improve health and nutrition, get children back in school, build robust and self-sustaining CSOs, and encourage local democracy must target and engage women in the decision-making process. For the LGP, this policy translated into project activities to identify and support nascent women's CSOs, develop women's leadership skills, and encourage women to assume leadership positions in local, regional, and national governmental institutions. The challenge was to determine how to mobilize and encourage women's participation in a postconflict setting where people had little

experience with democratic participation and where cultural norms significantly constrained the ability of women to assume active and visible public roles. In the postwar period, women's economic importance grew; more women became the breadwinners for their families because many of the men were out of work. This brief describes the LGP's Iraqi Women in Local Governance (IWLG) initiative and draws some lessons from the experience.

Iraqi Women in Local Governance initiative

In Iraq, as is the case in other countries, women's roles and rights have been contested for a long time, with dividing lines between religious conservatives and those with a more progressive vision. The Ba'athist regime, at least "on paper" (although not always in practice), had provided Iraqi women with more rights and freedoms than most other Arab nations because it promoted a largely secular state. However, these rights and legal guarantees began to erode rapidly in the mid-1980s during the Iran-Iraq War, a setback that continued during the First Persian Gulf War and the United Nations (UN) sanctions that followed. Particularly in geographic areas where the regime's repression was strongest, women were increasingly marginalized. For example, in the south of Iraq, girls' education, which previously had been universal throughout Iraq, suffered with corresponding drops in literacy rates among girls and young women. Although traditionally well educated, Iraqi women have faced major barriers to participation since that time period in all areas of social, political, and economic life. No women were appointed to high government posts or to the Supreme Council that governed the country.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/Iraq LGP, implemented by RTI International,* provided training, technical assistance, and other resources that included small grants, to strengthen local administrations, civic institutions, and processes in order to establish, develop, and strengthen a participatory, democratic, subnational government that delivers effective and efficient services to Iraqis. The LGP responded to specific challenges faced by subnational governments, democratic institutions and processes, and CSOs. The program sought to empower individuals and civic groups to have a say in setting local social and economic development and investment priorities through democratic participation and interactions with local government leaders. The LGP began in April 2003 and ended in May 2005.

*RTI International is a trade name of the Research Triangle Institute.

Participation and acceptance of women in public affairs is not uniform across the country. In the Kurdish north, women, especially in the last 10 years or so, have been much more active in their region's political institutions and civic life than have women in the more traditional Shi'a communities of south-central and southern Iraq.

Under Saddam Hussein's regime, all Iraqi citizens were excluded from public participation, except for Ba'ath Party-orchestrated plebiscites that provided the regime with periodic pseudo-legitimate "consent" of the governed. Thus in postwar Iraq, both men and women, lacking experience with real democracy and citizen-responsive government, were unsure that they had a role in local government decision making and would often defer to government officials on questions of policy and administration. Few in Iraq advocate that women should be barred from running for office or voting in elections. Yet despite affirmation of this right, women have been grossly underrepresented in the political process. Among some groups, male attitudes in Iraq resist the notion that a woman can hold senior decision- and policy-making positions in the government. These attitudes are based on the belief that women are not capable of assuming public leadership.

In addition to deeply entrenched sociocultural attitudes, Iraqi women face other barriers in their efforts to participate in Iraqi government and policy making. A primary problem is a lack of self-confidence borne of inexperience and the weight of social pressures. Another constraint to participation in government decision making is a lack of information and practical knowledge among women. The LGP's activities were designed to address the self-confidence hurdles and educate all Iraqi citizens in democracy, human rights, and civil society in order to foster an attitude of empowerment among Iraqis—both men and women—by giving them the tools and the venues with which to participate.

The LGP developed and implemented the Iraqi Women in Local Governance (IWLG) initiative to explicitly target women's issues in the context of supporting local governance. The IWLG initiative, introduced in October 2003, sought to enhance the economic and political participation of women through civic education and training, and assessment of the progress of women's participation in each local government. Where progress was lacking, local teams responded with actions specifically designed to overcome barriers and alleviate constraints. The IWLG initiative strengthened and supported those segments of the Iraqi population that were committed to improving the status of women and providing women with better access to leadership positions. Increasingly, in many parts of the country, women have demonstrated a strong willingness to learn, participate, and take initiative. In Al Mawsil, the IWLG helped to integrate women-owned businesses into the Al Mawsil Business Association so that

female entrepreneurs could compete successfully for reconstruction projects on equal terms with the men. Women were also elected to executive positions to lead the association.

Launching the Iraqi Women in Local Governance initiative

The IWLG initiative engaged both international and local staff to provide training and technical assistance to nascent women's organizations; organize national and local conferences to expose women to new ideas, values, and practices; and facilitate networking among women's organizations. Women were taught organizational and management skills; ways to petition government; and methods to build coalitions to mobilize and defend their civic, economic, political, and social rights. Women were encouraged to join neighborhood, district, and governorate interim advisory councils to make their voices heard. In southern and south-central Iraq, women's participation in councils was sometimes organized through separate women's committees in cases where there was social resistance to including women on the council with men.

To promote self-confidence and political activism among women, the IWLG held a series of democracy workshops across the country to train women in democratic principles in preparation for the January 2005 elections. These workshops also focused on engaging women in civic dialogue and training women how to effectively participate in the political process to promote and protect their rights in a new and democratic Iraq. Individual female candidates were mentored on political leadership skills and coached in public speaking and voicing their opinions persuasively. Their skills were put to the test in December 2003 in relation to two important issues: Resolution 137 and the representation of women in the proposed Transitional National Assembly.

Resolution 137, issued by the Interim Iraqi Governing Council in December 2003, abrogated the existing Personal Status Law and replaced it with Islamic law or *Shari'ah*. According to this decision, Islamic law would be applied to all matters pertaining to private and family life, such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Fortunately, because of the intense opposition from Iraqi women and pressure from international advocates of human rights, Resolution 137 was not signed into law by Ambassador Paul Bremer. The resolution was hotly and publicly debated by both women and men in every gathering supported by the LGP, as well as other entities. In Baghdad, for example, the LGP civil society team facilitated two all-women panel discussions, entitled "Iraqi Woman: The Law and Constitution." Approximately 100 women and several men attended each meeting; women in the audience participated in the discussions that followed the formal presentation. These public meetings

and discussions helped to defeat Resolution 137 by galvanizing women to collectively organize and voice their opposition to the proposed change.

Also, in Baghdad, on February 26, 2004, the Iraq Foundation for Development and Democracy, with LGP funding, organized and hosted a conference on the “Role of Women in the New Iraq.” More than 200 women from all over the country attended the conference at which speakers presented the views of a wide variety of social and religious groups.

In Dhi Qar, the LGP worked with local women to organize a focus group on integrating women into civil society. Attended by Ambassador Bremer, the focus group included questions addressed to Ambassador Bremer concerning the Iraqi transitional process, the role that women would play, and the CPA’s regulations concerning the registration and operation of CSOs.

The Kirkuk Women’s Network held a conference in February 2004 to raise awareness about women’s rights and to draw up a list of recommendations to take to Baghdad for inclusion in the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL). Twenty women’s groups attended the conference, which was organized by a multiethnic panel. Speakers included the governor, a senior member of the Iraqi Women’s High Council, and representatives of various women’s groups in the governorate. This was the first women’s conference ever held in Kirkuk; it also represented an important collaboration among the diverse community of women’s CSOs in Kirkuk.

In Karbala, the LGP conducted “Democracy in Action” workshops in which participants worked on sample case studies to learn how to advocate for themselves, including specific steps for participating in the political process. After an extensive discussion of women’s issues, the participants outlined specific steps they agreed to take to assert themselves with the CPA and the TAL drafting committee.

The IWLG initiative also encouraged local governments to work with women to identify the specific needs of women and their communities, as well as to design and implement projects that meet those needs. The projects most frequently requested by women included sewer and water-treatment projects and the establishment of centers for widows and orphans, preschools for children, and resource and learning centers for women.

Women were also encouraged to interact with their respective local government departments to present their needs and request assistance. These interactions included a training session held in Baghdad focusing on women’s CSOs and their ability to use public affairs strategic planning to achieve their goals.

A conference of the National Council of Women in early 2004 invited about 2,000 women, of which 1,750 attended, from all over

Iraq and gave them the opportunity to meet representatives from a number of ministries (Education, Health, and Agriculture, among others) and solicit their help to expand and improve services to women.

Iraqi Women in Local Governance initiative results

The IWLG initiative significantly increased women’s participation in local governance. By March 2004, more than 300 women were serving on neighborhood, district, and governorate councils all across Iraq. In Baghdad alone, with LGP assistance, more than 88 women were serving on various councils.

The IWLG provided women’s CSOs with capacity-strengthening training on topics such as how to organize; how to conduct fundraising; and how to establish women’s information centers, libraries, and meeting places. In addition to supporting and organizing women-focused conferences, the IWLG also supported the establishment of a number of women’s development centers: the Maysan Governorate Women’s Development Center, a women’s student forum at the University of Diyala, and the As Sulaymaniyah Women’s Center. Several rapid-response grants were provided for women’s groups and for activities targeting women.

In addition to encouraging women to serve as members of local councils, the IWLG was instrumental in ensuring that the TAL set a quota for the representation of women in the Transitional National Assembly. Although women lobbied for a guarantee of 40% representation, the TAL provided for “no less than 25%” women’s representation in the assembly. This provision was respected in the January 2005 election. Of the 275-member National Assembly, 87 members (or 32%) are women.

Lessons

The LGP worked throughout Iraq to increase women’s political participation and empowerment by helping women to build the skills they needed to play an active role in local governance and to advocate for their needs. LGP assistance enabled women to speak their minds and communicate their desire and willingness to take an active role in building the new Iraq.

This ability to express themselves freely was a first-in-a-lifetime experience for many Iraqi women and required them to overcome serious educational and cultural stumbling blocks. As the women in Iraq eagerly enter the next phase of rebuilding their nation, they come to the task newly equipped with the knowledge, tools, and confidence they need to effectively participate in governance.

LGP leadership training and mentoring was critical for women's participation in local, regional, and governorate councils.

After receiving leadership training and follow-on mentoring, women who previously lacked courage and self-confidence became strong activists for gender equality, presented themselves in front of male-dominated councils, and argued effectively as to why they should be selected to be part of the council. They articulated their visions and stated what they would contribute to their community and country. In countries where women have not had broad opportunities to play social activist roles and engage in public speaking or advocacy, training and hands-on mentoring can be effective in helping them to assume new, more visible and active roles.

Participation in national and regional conferences helped to reduce women's inhibitions and raised their self-confidence.

Conferences held in Baghdad, Al Basrah, Kirkuk, As Sulaymaniyah, and Salah Ad Din, which assembled participants from all across Iraq, demonstrated the increasing self-confidence and participation by women. Each subsequent conference attracted more participants and included more vocal and assertive women. Increasing numbers of women declared their readiness to serve on local councils and committees. These conferences also brought together women from parts of the country that had been separated under Saddam Hussein's regime and allowed these women to share experiences and learn from one another.

Using female international and local staff to interact with women respected Iraqi social and cultural norms.

One of the lessons learned from early in the project was that Iraqi cultural norms for the most part dictated that only female staff could work effectively with women in Iraq. The IWLG's hiring of

international staff of Iraqi origin and a cadre of female local staff was significant in broadening and deepening the reach of the initiative in all regions of Iraq. IWLG female staff served both as role models and mentors. Others inspired program participants by sharing experiences from other societies.

Sustained protection and expansion of women's roles and rights depend on legal and institutional reform, supported by long-term changes in attitudes.

The LGP saw heartening progress over the 2 years of activity in support of expanding women's roles and protecting their rights, but it is important not to overestimate the impacts of such capacity-building efforts. Lasting results will depend on legal and institutional safeguards, as well as on attitudinal changes. If a conservative majority government proceeds to institute elements of an Islamic theocratic state, the incipient gains made through the LGP and other USAID-funded projects are likely to be fleeting. In addition, women's issues will require a strong indigenous constituency, capable of framing those issues in terms that avoid the perception of an imposed external agenda. This is a major challenge not just for Iraq, but for women's rights throughout the Islamic world.

Women and Local Governance in Iraq: Fostering Participation and Empowerment was written by Samuel Tadesse and Derick W. Brinkerhoff, based on LGP project documents and input from Amal Rassam, Suhair Al-Mosully, and Hind Haider.

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