

# Equal Rights Now!

Fortnightly paper of the Iraqi Women's Rights Coalition

15 June 2003 No 2

Editorial Word



Houzan Mahmoud

In the past three months we have witnessed how America's "war against terrorism" has led to the creation of more terrorism and provoked the most nationalist, reactionary, and fundamentalist Islamic movements to create an atmosphere of intimidation and intolerable circumstances for Iraqi people and women in particular. They appear in their worst form of aggression, to get into power in Iraq by force of arms and terror against civilians. The existence of such elements or movements are obstacles on women's path to freedom and liberty because in a chaotic situation like this women will be the first victims of such a reactionary mixture. Their most basic human rights will be violated and they will be forced to stay home. The enslavement of women begins from this point, when they are told by the Islamic groups in Iraq that 'your place to be, is in your home'.

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## *Women in Iraq are under attack!*

**Iraqi Women's Rights  
Coalition**

**Statement No 2:**

**Date: 19-05-03**

Women have experienced 35 years of dictatorship, 3 wars and 12 years of sanctions. Since 9<sup>th</sup> April 2003 and in the aftermath of a disastrous situation we are now aware of the absence of Iraqi women in the mainstream. Women are being pushed back into their homes and threatened that they should not go to universities or to work, Islamists are forcing compulsory veiling, and prostitutes are threatened with death by religious clerics in Baghdad by means of a "Fatwa".

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**We condemn the  
violation of women's  
human rights in Iraq by  
Islamic groups.**

***We say Stop Taking Advantage  
of the Political Vacuum to  
Attack Women.***

We resent what some leaders and members of Islamic groups have declared and what they did in Baghdad and Basra during the last few days.

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Nadia Mahmood

**Paul Bremer is not  
convinced about hold-  
ing a women's confer-  
ence in Baghdad!**

One of the initiatives started by Patricia Hewitt, Minister of UK Parliament and number of Iraqi women, is to hold 3 days of tent meetings in Baghdad, the aim of the meetings being to promote the participation of Iraqi women in the reconstruction of the country.

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**Activities of  
IWRC:**

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## Paul Bremer is not convinced ...

The tent meeting proposal had been worked out, the agenda had been drawn up, many planning meetings were held, the areas for discussion were broadly agreed, telephone calls and e-mails had been exchanged on a daily basis. There was noticeable competition for available places at the meetings in Baghdad among women who wanted to attend them! but all that disappeared in the meeting that took place in 30<sup>th</sup> May in Baghdad. Paul Bremer addressed the women who were planning this meeting and suggested that he was not convinced about the idea of having a women's conference, which has led to the postponement of the meeting until further notice.

This response drew deep disappointment and anger, not just for those who had spent days working on this project, but for those who were outside of it, like us.

We want to address here, to what extent women have the authority to start building their movement. The postponing or cancelling of the tent meeting raised many questions:

**Why** do Iraqi women need permission from Paul Bremer to hold their conferences, while other Iraqi people and political groups carry out their work without the need for consultation with US or UK forces inside Iraq? Shia groups exercise their most bloody traditional practice in religious ceremonies, They are not prevented from doing so by US soldiers or their leaders, and **do they ask** for permission?

One justification we heard from the meeting is that the US prefer local Iraqi women rather than exiled women? Well, are not all the political parties returning to Iraq from wherever they have been functioning out-

side of Iraq for the last 35 years? In which case, why when it comes to women's issues, is the issue of whether the women are from within or without Iraq important?

So, the American concept of "civil society", "democracy" and "women rights" should be questioned again; does US want to see all that in "Liberated Iraq"? What sort of democracy would it build by rejecting the idea of having women's conferences or at least to permit them in "US conditions"?

I do not want discuss the tent meetings' aims or express my point of view in this article, simply because I have no illusions about it whether the aims were about "Equal Rights for Women" or about women's contribution in the "reconstruction" and the "Interim Government" which they are two different subjects.

However and whatever the situation is, we want women's issues to be an important subject for the society. To get out of this messy situation women live in "Iraqi Women's Rights Coalition" and other peer organisations in Iraq believe that the one and the only way to promote women's rights in Iraq is to address grassroots Iraqi women, to meet them, to go to their suburbs, secondary schools, universities and to work with them on their daily needs. When they are threatened "as it is happening just now" we have to empower them, when a criminal like "Alfartosy" issues one after another "Fatwa" to kill women if they do not wear veils regardless if they are Muslim or Christian, we have to take him to court and charge him for all his threats and abusive practice against women. When Iraqi women have not heard of the term "domestic violence" and consider the beating women a given reality, we have to tell them, it should be changed, it is not giving facts" etc, etc.

Whether the meeting will take place in 8<sup>th</sup> July or not – according to the

last update - whether it will be coordinated with American-Iraqi women **or** British-Iraqi women with local women, Let us not mix "women's rights" with "women's contribution in the reconstruction". They are two very different issues, this is first.

Second: women were the first victims of the sanctions, the war and the occupation. Women in Iraq cannot even walk in the streets safely, free from fear of kidnapping, rape and the terror of Islamic groups, that are the achievement of "librating Iraq", rather than to take part in the "Political decision making".

My last word is that regardless of whether Paul Bremer is convinced or not about having women's conferences, big or small, with local or Diaspora women, he should go and pull out of Iraq all his occupying forces. The tent meeting approached the wrong person if they wanted to tackle women's rights in Iraq, they should have approached 55% of the Iraqi population, they would be the correct people to approach regarding the bringing about of change in Iraq!

12<sup>th</sup> June 03 ■

### Appeal:

Women in Iraq have been denied their rights for the last 35 years, and even now after the regime change, they are about to face the worst. They need to set up women's organisations to defend their rights, advocacy centres, refuges for protection and newspapers to raise awareness of their situation. Women in Iraq need your help and support to be able to combat the difficult circumstances they are experiencing at this time.

**Join our coalition, membership is free, help us to achieve equal rights for Iraqi women.**

**Make a donation to the following bank address:**

BARCLAYS BANK

Sort Code: 20-80-57

Account No: 80 98 15 67

Nadia Mahmoud

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## **We condemn the violation of women's human rights in Iraq by Islamic groups.**

They have imposed the compulsory veil on Basra University female students, the staff of Nasiriyah Hospital and in Kadhimiyah City in Baghdad. They declared that the prostitutes should be punished.

Islamic groups have threatened to not only impose compulsory veiling on female students and women in general but also to prevent them from returning to their colleges. These acts threaten the women in Iraq through establishing another Afghanistan. This is an intervention in the women's right to choose, and an extreme violation of human beings' dignity and freedom of choice.

People in Iraq do not welcome the Islamic movements retuning from Iran with their lances pointing at women, their rights and modernization in the society in Iraq. These are aggressions and provocation towards the citizens who could not be persuaded to a mosque, beard wearing or compulsory veil. Women who believe in human rights, and citizens in general do not want an Islamic republic in Iraq.

These opportunist acts from Islamic members provoke serious public anger and resentment inside Iraq and abroad. They are taking advantage of the atmosphere of chaos, lack of security, lawlessness, the absence of a freely elected government in Iraq and the US and allied troops lack of action.

Al Fartosy's Fatwa of killing the prostitutes, which is an open instigation to commit a murder, is no less dangerous than genocide. As a result, he should be taken to Court. Inciting his followers to execute these orders means setting fire in the heart of the

society in Iraq, bringing enmity among its strata as Saddam did when he ordered the beheading of prostitutes.

Eliminating the sex trade can be accomplished through providing work opportunities and social security for the women who have nothing but selling their bodies to earn their living, not through murdering them. In any event, Al Tabatabae nor Al Fartosy nor Al Hakeem has the right to instigate committing murder against women who do this work.

We demand that you distance yourself from these threatening and horrifying acts so that you impose your control. You, as any other political party, have the right to spread your political and religious thoughts, but practicing violence, terror, threats and killing will take you into the same class as a terrorist party and will start a new and bitter stage of the political conflicts, for everyone.

The approaches of the Islamic Republic and Taliban movement have met no success. The Iranian Islamic regime is about to fall apart and the Taliban has been sacked by the same America that brought them to power. If you think that you, through terror, suppression and spreading horror can impose your policy on women, it means that history lesson have gone

## **Iraqi Women's Rights Coalition**

03 June 2003



**No to this reactionary mixture!**

## **Editorial Word**

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These Islamic groups had issued 'fatwas' and announced from their mosques that all women even Christian women should be veiled and that those women who go out shopping or to public places without wearing a veil, should be stoned by the people, have tomatoes thrown at them and should not be sold goods in the market. They are also not permitted to get into a taxi if they are not covered. Women now are in the worst situation we could ever imagine, they are banned from education, work, and even going shopping if they don't wear 'hejab', the Islamic dress code. In practice this is like a psychological torture for those women who do not want to wear it because it is similar to being in solitary confinement to be covered and isolated in such clothing. In reality, the above restrictions placed on women in Iraq, are all means of imposing terror in and against women. The people responsible for creating this situation are the US and UK governments, who have facilitated the means for the Islamic leaders to impose these restrictions on Iraqi society. These people must be stopped and brought to justice as they are committing crimes against more than half of the population and violating the right of women to exist as human beings in their own right. Women should be given the freedom to live a lifestyle of their own choosing. ■

**No  
to political  
Islam**

## Women in Iraq ...

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The fundamental Islamic groups are using this situation where there is lack of law and order, to impose themselves and their politics on people and in particular on women.

This will not bring a better situation for Iraqi women, indeed the future looks grim with worse living conditions. This should stop now. Women should fully participate in social, economic, political and family life.

Our Coalition believes that the continuity of occupation, and the inclination of the occupation forces to support heads of tribes, religious groups, and ethnic community leaders, will result in an extreme lack of status for women. Iraqi Women are the primary victims of this reactionary mixture.

### We are demanding:

- immediate withdrawal of the U.S. and British troops, an end to the occupation
- the intervention of the UN to create a safe environment so that people can choose their representatives to supervise the election process.
- a secular, non-ethnic, non-religious state - the separation of state and education from religion.
- equal rights for women and men, both civil and individual rights, and the abolition of all laws contravening this principle.
- the unconditional freedom of expression, beliefs, association and organisation.
- funding for organisations defending women's rights and equality.
- representation of women in all levels of government and administrative bodies. ■

## Activities of IWRC:

On 27/05/2003 **Nadia Mahmood** and **Houzan Mahmood** attended a meeting with Amnesty International's Middle East Section about the current situation in Iraq and about the circumstances of women in particular. Both parties expressed their concerns about women's issues and the discussed the possibility of seeking opportunities to work jointly in support of women's rights in Iraq

On 28/05/2003 **Houzan Mahmood** was interviewed for a documentary film by Birmingham Banner Theatre about her opposition to war, her views on the current occupation by the US/UK troops and about the women's situation in Iraq under this occupation.

On 07/06/2003 **Houzan Mahmood** was interviewed by Radio SHABANG, a Kurdish radio programme, broadcast from Sweden. The interview discussed the mission and aims of Iraqi Women's Rights Coalition and Equal Rights Newspaper. Houzan gave an overview of the situation that the occupying forces have created in Iraq for the people, in particular for women and the threat that the forces of Islam pose to women's freedom and liberty.

On 08/06/2003 **Houzan Mahmood** was interviewed by Legal Affairs Organisation Magazine on the subject of Iraqi women and international initiatives to improve their situation. She spoke about the current chaotic predicament created by the occupation and the emergence of fanatic Islamic groups who want to impose veiling on women and to deprive them of the opportunity to work and study if they are not veiled. Houzan also spoke about the differences between IWRC and other women's groups. IWRC does not accept the occupation and struggles for equal rights and the secularisation of the state system.

On 09/06/2003 **Norman Thomas** interviewed **Houzan Mahmood** for a documentary film, about the occupation and the situation of women in this political vacuum created by America.

On 03/06/03, **Sheila Mosley** delivered speech at a Stop the War Coalition meeting in Leicester, UK, about the consequences of the war, the situation of Iraqi women now and their need for support from people inside and outside of Iraq so that they have the strength to claim their human rights. Sheila urged people to contact their MPs so that they would understand more about the struggles and find ways to influence what is happening. **Sheila** wrote a letter to Patricia Hewitt, MP through her own MP – Edward Garnier – to ask Patricia to talk with women during her forthcoming trip to Iraq.

Sheila has put together a CD called 'What's it all about?' - four songs which are anti-war, so that people can learn and sing them. Information about this is on <http://members.lycos.co.uk/LeicesterFolk/>. It sells for £5 (+ postage)

## Thank you to our readers:

*Since the establishment of our Coalition and the publishing of our newspaper, we have received many supportive letters and messages from individuals and organisations, women and men, those who believe in equal rights and non-religious rule in Iraq. On behalf of the Iraqi Women's Rights Coalition and Equal Rights Newspaper I would like to thank you all for your support and solidarity. Your world-wide support and solidarity is absolutely crucial to the continuation of our struggle for the achievement of unconditional equal rights, and a better world for Iraqi women to live in.*

*Houzan Mahmood*