

THE WOMEN OF KOSOVO AND AFGHANISTAN URGE IRAQI WOMEN TO
'ORGANIZE AND RAISE THEIR VOICE' DURING RECONSTRUCTION

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Two prominent women's networks in Afghanistan and Kosovo, representing hundreds of influential women activists, have pledged solidarity to Iraqi women and urged them not to be intimidated by the emergence of conservative elements in Iraq that threaten to reverse years of steady gains by women.

In separate open letters, which have just been released, the two networks also urge the occupying forces in Iraq to improve security - which poses a special threat to women - and ensure that women's rights are guaranteed in any new legal system.

The two open letters have been issued by the Afghan Women's Network (AWN) and the Kosovo Women's Network (KWN). The AWN represents 24 NGOs and over 1000 individual women in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The KWN serves as a coordinating forum for 32 women's groups in Kosovo.

"We encourage women in Iraq to organize, raise their voice, and be part of the rebuilding of their country," says the Kosovo letter, which was drafted by Igo Rogova, chair of the KWN board. The AWN letter strikes a similar note: "We write this letter in solidarity with our sisters in Iraq, as they face a similar rebuilding effort to...Afghanistan. We encourage Iraqi women to have a voice in the process."

Unlike the women of Afghanistan, who suffered atrociously from the repressive fundamentalism of the Taliban, Iraqi women were among the main beneficiaries of Iraq's secular regime. The level of education among Iraqi women is extraordinarily high. Iraq was one of the first Middle Eastern countries to have a woman judge and government minister.

There is growing concern that these gains could be threatened by the post-war chaos and by the emergence of religious conservatism, particularly in the Shiite areas of southern Iraq. According to reports, women have been apprehensive to emerge in public because of the violence and looting, and support seems to be growing for Islamic fundamentalism in the south. Equally disturbing, the US and British occupation forces appear to have made little effort to appoint specialists in women's affairs or make women's rights a priority in the reconstruction effort.

All of this seems ominously familiar to the women of Kosovo and Afghanistan, who have had to fight hard for a seat at the table of reconstruction.

It took a massive international lobby effort to get women involved at the Bonn conference that planned the reconstruction of Afghanistan. But, says the AWN letter, the lobby is now paying dividends: “Women still do not have enough representation in the transitional government of Afghanistan, but we take hope from the appointment of Habiba Surabi as the Minister of Women’s Affairs and Sima Sumar as the leader of the Human Rights Commission. Women also have been included in the Constitutional drafting process. And even more women will be part of the Loya Jirga -- the decision-making body that, in October, will approve or reject the final draft of the new Constitution. Further, once the permanent government takes leadership in Afghanistan and elections are held, 160 women representatives are guaranteed seats in the new government. Others may be elected to non-reserved seats.”

The women of Kosovo also struggled to be heard following the war, but emerged stronger for the experience: “We greeted joyfully the decision that put Kosova under a UN administration. But most of those (UN) agencies did not recognize that we existed. Instead of dedicating all our energy to helping women and their families put together lives shattered by war, we had to spend efforts in fighting to be heard and in proving to UNMIK that we knew what was best for us, that women in Kosova were not just victims waiting to be helped.

“But we did not give up. We raised our voice. We met with UN officials, wrote letters, went to meetings to present our ideas, knowledge and expertise. We talked to donors and built alliances with those international organizations in Kosova and abroad that genuinely saw and related to us as partners in the common efforts to advance women’s cause in our country.”

The AWN letter recognizes that post-war insecurity poses a special threat to Iraqi women, just as it does in Afghanistan: “Even as we make progress, there are tremendous obstacles that prevent women from taking a stronger place in society. The most serious of these is the threat to women’s security.....from husbands, fathers, fathers-in-law, brothers and warlords. These threats make it difficult for women to work, to vote, to leave their homes -- not even to mention their holding a public office.”

The Advocacy Project has supported the KWN since 2002. AP is now working with the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women Commission to promote the advocacy of the Afghan Women’s Network. Both projects received funding from the Open Society Institute.

* Visit AWN: <http://awn-af.net/>