Celebrating freedom: Media to empower women in Iraq

With the aim of highlighting the different aspects of the relationship between media and women’s rights, the United Nations in Iraq organized a roundtable discussion attended by international and national stakeholders, the first platform of its kind towards empowering women in and through the Iraqi media.

Part of this year’s World Press Freedom Day events, the roundtable, organized by UNAMI, UN Women and UNESCO, was held on Wednesday, 1 May 2013 at the UN headquarters in Baghdad under the theme ‘The Role of the Media in Advancing Women’s Rights in Iraq.’ It brought together media professionals, as well as representatives of the Iraqi Independent Human Rights Commission, the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), NGOs, media syndicates, the Iraqi human rights defenders federation and international partners.

The key subject of the discussions was the role of Iraqi media in promoting women’s rights and gender equality nationwide. Another hot topic was the promotion of a greater participation of women in the media particularly at the decision-making levels, with a view to strengthening women’s political participation through media.
The Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Iraq, Mr. Martin Kobler, strongly encouraged women in general and women in media to speak more forcefully about the promotion, protection and respect of human rights for all. “Where were the women in the elections? Where were the women in the Hawija events?” he asked, emphasizing the importance of women’s voices being heard in all matters that touch upon their future and the future of their children.

Ms. Louise Haxthausen, Director of the UNESCO office in Iraq, in her presentation focused on media professionals and their roles in advancing women’s rights, and more specifically on challenges faced by women working in the media in Iraq. Ms. Haxthausen stressed that “it is essential to have a media sector that allows both women and men to have equal opportunities in terms of career development”, confirming that “media can play a leading role in promoting women’s rights and empowering them”.

UN Women representative Ms. Frances Guy criticized the way women are currently depicted in the Iraqi media. She insisted on the need to overcome stereotyping of women in the media and to use images of strong women, performing important political, economic and intellectual roles.

UNAMI’s political section and the Integrated Electoral Assistance Team (UNDP, UNAMI, UNOPS), in collaboration with the IHEC, presented the challenges and achievements in ensuring greater political participation of women, in particular through the electoral process. Ms. Helga Marques, UN Public Outreach Advisor to the IHEC, emphasized how media could encourage the further involvement of women in the political sphere.

Other key topics, such as women’s under-representation in the media, challenges faced by women journalists and ways to enhance the status of women in key professions, were also highlighted during the event.

After a fruitful discussion, the participants issued a number of recommendations that will be brought to the attention of the Iraqi authorities and addressed in upcoming conferences. These recommendations include a nationwide media campaign on the rights of women and the establishment of a council of women media professionals.

The event ended with the announcement of the three winners of the first women journalism contest organized by the UN. Suha Audah, Enas Jabbar and Shatha al-Shabibi were awarded for their articles, which discuss challenges faced by Iraqi women in their daily lives. These articles are reproduced below.

"I am a free journalist, not affiliated with any newspaper, and it saddens me when men talk about giving a chance to women while the truth is different. Some editors-in-chief avoid me because I am independent and don’t work in line with their agendas, in return for money. I used to send my reports and they printed them on their newspapers’ front pages without paying me. Women should impose themselves. However, when I advocate for women’s rights in my writing, some people label me as sexist."

Suha Audah
Their manner when they entered the sports hall seemed like that of a frightened person who creeps stealthily into a place to commit a secret offence. The juvenile girls entered one after another; each was looking around herself while a female or male trainer would volunteer to close the door behind them and lock it. We were surprised that we were allowed into the hall along with the girls. Then the sound of the gate being locked was heard, announcing that this hall is exclusively allocated for women and that entry of their male athlete colleagues is strictly prohibited.

What happens behind closed doors?

In this place they are out of sight. Their number does not exceed 20. Therefore, the Section of Physical Education at the Faculty of Sport had to confine them to only one Division. Their number is small compared to the large numbers of male youth. This led them to practice their sports drills in halls that are not fit for such activities. On this point, Ms. Liqaa Abdul Muttalib, a rhythmic gymnastics trainer at Mosul University / the Faculty of Physical Education, commented that “The hall where we are coaching them in rhythmic gymnastics is not suitable due to its low ceiling and the poor condition of the floor, in addition to the lack of mats that are required for gymnastics. There are pillars in the hall which limit free movement and rotational flips. This hall was initially designed for physical fitness”. The trainer added: “The gymnastics hall is on the other side and is currently used by male students and there is no chance that it will be available because of their big numbers - they are divided into eight divisions - compared to female students.”

We knocked at another iron gate and were invited in. Behind it, we met Captain Ammar Shihab, the coach of the recently formed five-member female football team. The team comprises a number of female athletes from the various faculties at the University. When asked about the extent of women’s participation in athletic tournaments, Shihab said, “Women’s participation has shrunk following the 2003 events. However, this has not prevented them from exercising and participating in sports tournaments. Our women’s football team took part in the tournament that took place in Syria in 2010.”

About the separation between the two genders, which is currently practiced at play yards and sports halls, Shihab said, “I believe that separation between the two genders during training is a right step for both of them at the present time.”

Role of society in lack of sports activities for women

The way society in Mosul views women is reflected in the attitude towards women’s participation in sports. Some people even believe that such involvement is an inappropriate phenomenon. This is quite apparent in the opinion expressed by Nihad Mohamed Qais, a 22-year-old student at the Faculty of Art / Arabic Language. “I don’t like women’s participation in sports. It is not a civilized phenomenon. Therefore, I will not allow my sister or a female relative to participate in sports or to join an athletic club or faculty,” he said. “What makes me reject the idea is what I have heard about the presence of boys and girls together, in addition to the presence of male coaches. I also do not like the idea of women wearing sports uniforms,” he added.

While the majority of men in Mosul do not agree with women’s participation in sports, some women support it. One of them is Dhikra, a rather overweight 20-year-old young lady, who said with a smile brightening her countenance: “I do encourage women’s participation in sports, provided that they do their exercises in the absence of men so that they will feel at ease, at least with regard to wearing the sports uniform. I believe that religious considerations are the main reason behind the families’ objections to their daughters joining faculties of sport.”
Role of the Olympic Committee and sports clubs

For his part, the Deputy Representative of the Olympic Committee in Ninewa Governorate, Khalid Abdul Majeed, said that “Social conditions and families’ reluctance to allow their daughters to participate in sports, in addition to the increasing number of girls who are wearing hijab (head cover) as dictated by the customs and traditions of the society — all these factors constituted the straw that broke the camel’s back with regard to women’s participation in sports. No doubt, this has impacted on the work of the Olympic Committee in the area of women’s sports.”

“We have 32 athletic unions for men while none are found for women. This is due to the limited number of female athletes. The Girls Club which is affiliated with the Directorate of the Ministry of Sport and Youth in Mosul city, compensates for the lack of female athletic unions,” Abdul Majeed said, speaking about the role of the Girls Club in Mosul. “The club is currently managed by non-technical people from the sports point of view. It has no outputs and is fully dependent on the Physical Education Faculty,” he added, slightly annoyed. Perhaps security and social conditions have obstructed women’s participation in sports and athletic activities. However, the role of sports is more effective in Ninewa Plain. The Deputy Representative of the Olympic Committee in Ninewa Governorate elaborated on this, saying, “We have a female volleyball team which ranks second in Iraq. However, all the teams are found in Ninewa Plain because of the better security situation in the area as well as the positive social views about female athletes, which are almost free of perceptions of inferiority.”

A challenge to social norms

Duaa Sabhan, 22, is a naturally talented and enthusiastic athlete. The hijab did not prevent her from moving around confidently in the corridors of the faculty, wearing her sports uniform. She is a member of the five-member female football team. “Since childhood, sports have been my favourite hobby,” she said, describing her athletic experience. “I started exercising when I was at the primary school and continued until I went to university. So, joining the Faculty of Physical Education was quite natural.” About not exercising with her male colleagues, she said: “I do not support the present separation between us and our male colleagues. There is nothing that prevents me from exercising with them. I don’t pay attention to society’s views because my sole wish is to learn and improve my athletic skills. My father often encourages me to get rid of the state of social shyness.”

When society constitutes a barrier, parents may support their daughters and lead them towards success and allow them to travel and participate in athletic contests. But the case of Duaa is quite different from that of Riyam Ali, a 20-year-old student at the Faculty of Economics & Administration. She is a member of the female football team. “My family did not allow me to join the Faculty of Physical Education,” she said, describing her frustration. “Therefore, at the end of the day, when my lectures finish, I join the team to attend training drills and exercises. Of course my male and female colleagues do not know about my coming here because they do not welcome the idea.”

“Religion has its say concerning women’s involvement in sport and taking part in competitions. “Women’s sport nowadays is a cause for molestation of women, particularly the sports that are covered by media and broadcast to the public,” said Sheikh Ahmed Ghanim, imam and preacher at the Islamic Awakening Mosque and a member of Iraq’s Scholars Association in Ninewa. “The aim of this is merely to export women to the West. However, women may exercise and do their drills inside confined halls, separately from men, while wearing their legal dresses.”

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Iraqi sportswomen face special challenges. Photo: Suha Auda

“The hijab hinders my drills and I feel hot while exercising. Therefore I take it off during training,” Riyam added.

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“The limited role of women in the athletic field in terms of winning medals, good results, flags and participation does not constitute any risk to the country, and female athletes winning medals and cups is not an achievement for the country and does not contribute to its development,” Sheikh Ghanim added.
Specialized gangs to smuggle them abroad; some of the kidnapped women face “honour killing” by their families

By Inas Jabbar / Baghdad

Ammar (not his real name) works in a state institution in an Iraqi governorate. Revealing financial and administrative corruption cases, he wrote a detailed report on the issue and submitted it to those concerned. As a consequence, those whose corruption he reported threatened him to prevent him from submitting the report. But he insisted on doing the right thing. A short time later his wife was kidnapped. Since he had no evidence of their involvement in the kidnapping of his wife and therefore could not make accusations against them, he resigned and did not submit the report. A few days later, his wife returned. He therefore was certain that they were the perpetrators.

Although his wife did not suffer any physical harm, she was affected by the psychological pressures resulting from tribal norms and customs. Thus, he decided to leave the neighbourhood where he lived and to start a new life, trying to leave all of that behind. However, he confirms that he is still feeling guilty for what his wife had to go through.

The victim is a woman who had to face two things: the kidnappers’ cruelty, the society’s injustice... Survivors of kidnapping face an unenviable situation.

**The kidnapper is her fiancé**

Sali, 30 – the positive story of a woman who succeeded in disclosing the identity of her kidnapper, despite being in a state of shock: her kidnapper was her fiancé, who did it for money.

"I never thought I would be kidnapped," she said. "Finding out that my fiancé was my kidnapper made it even worse. My fiancé is my friend's brother. Despite the age difference – he is two years younger than me – I saw him as a rational person with so many positives. Well, my family had a different view. They saw him as a covetous person, especially since I am the only child of wealthy parents."

"I was kidnapped while I was engaged to him," she added. My parents paid the ransom to set me free. My suffering started then. I was subjected to people's assumptions, questions and remarks on what happened to me when I was held hostage. I couldn't face all of this, so I have chosen to live in loneliness. My relationship with my fiancé and his family started to deteriorate. Meanwhile, the kidnappers were arrested, but the whereabouts of my fiancé were unknown and all attempts to contact him failed. Later, we were informed that the kidnappers confessed that my fiancé was the 'mastermind' behind my kidnapping. He did it for the ransom, as he was expecting my family to end our relationship sooner or later."

"I don't trust anyone anymore," she said, bitterly. "I have been subjected to social pressures that made me lose my mind. However, with the support of my family and close friends, I managed to overcome this and continue my studies at a different university. But I am not able to reintegrate into society. I have lost faith in people. Nonetheless, I have shaped my life so that I can work and obtain a university degree and I started a project with my father."

Women trafficking, kidnapping networks

Layla's story is not unlike others, except that the kidnappers wanted an amount of money to finance their jihadist operations, as they claimed.

"It was the worst and darkest period of our lives, as we never expected that my sister would be kidnapped by an armed group for a week under the pretext of jihad," the victim's sister said. "Following negotiations and compromises we paid a USD 30,000 ransom. We all went through difficult times. My sister was severely affected. However, the entire
family supported her and she got married to a considerate man who never made an issue of what she went through.” Fayza, a pseudonym for a student at the Institution of Teachers. Her family tells her story: She went that day to get her examination results, but she did not return. Her purse was found at one of the walls of the institution, together with the bottle of water she had been carrying. It was noon; therefore, no one noticed the incident. Her parents were rich, as they were importing commodities from China. So the parents assumed that the kidnappers would want a large amount of money as ransom for her release. Trying to reach her, the family repeatedly called and texted her on her mobile, expressing their willingness to pay a ransom. The answer they got from the gang was ‘forget her’. Living in a middle-eastern society, the family had to live with the distress they suffered. But one day, an officer in the security forces called the father to inform him that 35 kidnapped persons, including his daughter, had been freed in a security operation in the Mahaweel area – southeast Baghdad. It was found that this gang had been involved in human trafficking since 2004. As for Fayza, she is still unable to speak, almost a shadow of herself, and despite the medical treatment she receives and the assistance of her parents, doctors agree that she will need years, maybe decades to recover.

The law is in favour of the kidnapper if he marries his victim!

Professor Bushra al-Obaidi, a law professor at Baghdad University and a woman activist, clarifies that “Unlawful seizure, kidnapping and detention are subject to punishment pursuant to Articles 421 to 427 of the Iraqi Penal Code no. 111 of 1969. However, kidnapping of a female is punished in accordance with article 423 of said law, which provides: ‘Any person who himself or through another kidnaps a woman over the age of 18 with the use of force or deception shall be punished by a term of imprisonment not exceeding 15 years. If the kidnapping is accompanied by any sexual intercourse with the victim or an attempt to have intercourse with her, the penalty will be death.”

Furthermore, Article 427 provides, “If the offender mentioned in this section then lawfully marries the victim, any action becomes void and any investigation or other procedure is discontinued, and, if a sentence has already been passed in respect of such action, the sentence will be void.”

“Legal proceedings will resume or the sentence will be reinstated according to the circumstances if the marriage ends in a divorce brought about by the husband without legal justification, or in a divorce ordered by the court for wrongdoings committed by the husband, or for his bad behaviour within three years following the cessation of the proceedings,” adding, “The public prosecutor, the accused, the victim or any person who has an interest in the proceedings may, according to the circumstances, submit an application for the proceedings, investigation, procedures or execution of the sentence.”

This Article is a crime against women as it encourages crime and allows the perpetrator to enjoy impunity.

According to al-Obaidi, the first text is effective and deterrent. The second, however, voids the first in its content. Furthermore, deterrence lies in the implementation rather than in the text.

No MoLSA programme for kidnapping victims

For its part, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) confirmed that it has no programmes that aim to assist females who were victims of kidnapping. The Deputy Minister of the MoLSA, Dara Nour ad-Deen, exclusively told Al-Mada [newspaper] that the ministry never had such programmes. The MoLSA has rehabilitation programmes for widows and homeless women through its involvement in social correction centres under the social security programme.

“If social organizations and media receive information about kidnapped females, statistics and circumstances, we request them to provide the MoLSA with this type of information, so that it can be incorporated in the social security programme to enable the ministry and its international partner organizations to provide assistance,” Nour ad-Deen said.

Trivial role played by relevant organizations

With regard to the role of civil society organizations, al-Obaidi sees that “CSOs were very active in the provision of legal and judicial assistance to the victims, as well as in the provision of humanitarian assistance and in protecting victims from revenge by their families or perpetrators. Furthermore, CSOs provide assistance in the reintegration of victims into society and offer psychological rehabilitation to overcome the victims’ distress. However, the impact of these actions is limited due to the lack of human and financial resources.”

On the question of any mitigating legal measures in favour of kidnapped women who unlawfully engage in prostitution, drugs or gangs, al-Obaidi said, “There are no measures whatsoever! On the contrary, the law is on the side of the perpetrator rather than the victim. This is manifested in the aforementioned Article 427.”

“In addition to that, a serious problem is that when one of these women engages in unlawful activities, she is treated as a criminal rather than a victim, as the judiciary and the executive authorities are unaware of [what constitutes] human trafficking and of the provisions of the law of 2012, according to which the perpetrator kidnaps the victim for human trafficking purposes, which also include prostitution, drug smuggling and others.”

Accordingly, this law must be amended. Obaidi suggested reactivating legal texts providing penalties for this type of crime, which means nullifying those which stipulate impunity for the perpetrator, as well as providing support to CSOs to become effective partners in raising awareness on the seriousness and impact of such crimes, as well as sensitizing media on the ramifications of such crimes, the reasons behind them and the legal vacuum that encourages impunity. She also
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advocated that society should treat the kidnapped woman as a victim and not as a criminal, so that she does not suffer twice and face injustice twice. Furthermore, she raised the need to establish safe houses to host the victims, which shall provide therapy, rehabilitation and aid to help the victims overcome their plight. It is of equal importance to impose the most severe legal and social penalties on perpetrators.

Family decides to kill her because she was kidnapped!

Muna Hilali, the chairperson of the Ur Organization for Child and Woman Culture in Shatra, has organized awareness workshops and conducted field visits to meet with women victims of kidnapping. “The idea of organizing rehabilitation campaigns started in 2011, when I was invited to a two-day conference in Baghdad in one of the hotels that has a ‘night club,’” she said.

“One of the attendees directed my attention, while looking through the window, to the large numbers of young women coming late to this club. I went down to the reception and asked for an explanation. The receptionist told me that these young females come every night to this ‘night club’ and leave at 5:00 a.m.,” she said. “Thus, I decided to meet these girls. Not knowing how, I sought the assistance of the receptionist, who told me I could do this by going to the club’s restroom. The next day, I entered the restroom through a shared door with the hotel.”

“Bushra, born in 1990, told me her story. She was kidnapped by mistake. The kidnappers wanted to kidnap one of her school colleagues. Realizing the mistake, the gang released her. However, her father and uncles decided to kill her. Therefore, her mother helped her to escape to another governorate where one of her mother’s friends lives. The mother also had to run away and go to a neighbouring country without being able to take her daughter because she was under 18 and had no passport. The girl stayed with the mother’s friend until the latter kicked her out after some time. The girl found herself with the street girls and with no other option but to join them.”

“The story of Alia, born in 1987, is no different. She was kidnapped and trafficked to an Arab state where she was forced to engage in prostitution. However, she managed to escape and return back to Baghdad.”

Winning Article #3:
Hold on ... It is a moment to mourn!!! Iraqi women in the sex mafia markets

By Shatha Al-Shabibi

This is a story about murderers, victims and witnesses. The murderers are persons without virtue, but who talk about virtue all the time, and the victims are persons without vices, but the hunger has drawn a path for them and made them believe that it is the path of righteousness. The witnesses are full of fear, fear of scandal and punishment. They did not testify or give their names.

This is a story about honour crimes committed by those who pretend to have honour. These are stories about Iraqi female victims who have fallen into the traps of flesh traders in their quest to earn a living in a country that floats over an ocean of oil.

I present to you stories about women that I risked a lot to reach, in order to uncover the truth, because I believe that uncovering the truth is one of the most important moral values. So pardon me if I touch on a taboo topic and reveal the lies and deception. We have had enough and it is a shame to hide behind silence in order to avoid harm.

What I write about is part of the truth and not the whole truth, and what I present is part of reality and not the whole reality.

I have to walk down a path which I know is full of dangers, but I also know that smooth seas do not make skilful sailors. And because the topic is related to women and I am a woman, I must face the storm and tell the truth.

The stories are about Iraqi women who were caught between two hells, the hell of poverty and the hell of temptation. They were surrounded by men of murky and perverted intentions. Those women have miraculously escaped the claws of flesh traders who are wandering freely in our country and preying on women and girls who are victims of homelessness and poverty, in

http://unami.unmissions.org
the absence of social welfare, in a country that has suffered from wars, occupation and political tensions.

The strange thing is that despite the spread of this phenomenon, we have not seen any reaction from the politicians and others who are vaunting virtue and who have bored us with their resonant slogans about values and morals.

None of the Iraqi decision-makers have batted an eyelid, even though the media have touched on this subject, provoking the feelings of everyone. Some saw it as an opportunity to joke and humiliate Iraqi women.

The stories are many, but I will uncover a few to enlighten the reader. Surely, To Allah We Belong And To Him Shall We Return.

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Umm Rahaf, the first story
Umm Rahaf is a widow who has moved between three governorates with her two daughters to save her eldest one (14 years old) from the clutches of a gang that calls itself a civil society organization for human rights.

This woman refuses to file a complaint with any official because she has lost trust in all of them. She always says: “They are backed by the state. If they were not, those traffickers would not carry out their activities freely and boldly.”

I will recount her story as she told it:
My husband was killed in Baghdad during the sectarian conflict. He left us without a source of income and without a home.

I had to look for a job to make a living and secure a shelter. Initially, my efforts were focused on getting social welfare payments but then I discovered that it was an impossible endeavour.

I sold all my jewellery and told myself that the crisis would eventually pass. I tried to find a job as I graduated from a technical school. All I could get were appointments and they are many in this country of lies and procrastination.

I put my trust in Allah until one day I thought that Allah answered my prayers. I met someone who works in an organization concerned with human rights. He was good to me and offered me a job in his organization. He was kind to allow me to bring my eldest daughter, who suffered from depression because she witnessed the killing of her father.

He treated her as a father and asked me to take care of her and not to ever say no to anything she asks. He always used to tell me jokingly, “If you do something to upset this girl, I will take her to a place befitting her beauty.”

I started to have suspicions and became more suspicious when he asked for her documents and photographs to get her a passport so that she could accompany him on his many trips to overcome her mental condition.

I started to watch him closely until I reached a conclusion beyond any doubt. I became certain that the good man was linked to a network trafficking girls. Their work was facilitated by powerful and influential parties.

I knew their tactics and secrets, so I ran away. I moved to a faraway place and changed my mobile phone number. I wished I could change my name and the way I look.

I am still suffering from this shocking experience, which I never thought I would go through in my life.

Nada, the second story
Nada, 24, is a divorced woman with a six-year-old child. She provides for her family, which consists of a disabled father and four sisters. She was so happy when she found a job in an organization for widows, orphans and divorced women.

Although her salary was barely enough to make ends meet, she was happy with it because the head of the organization was a woman and there were no men in the workplace.

Shortly after she started this job, she noticed a change in the manager’s attitude. She started to urge her to improve her appearance and to deal nicely with some of the men who were visiting the office, because most of them were influential.

She asked her to learn etiquette because the organization’s clients were influential people, including members of parliament.

The organization collects aid to provide relief for 500 female beneficiaries. According to Nada, the manager takes a group of nice-looking widows and divorced women to Baghdad on a weekly basis to show them to the generous influential people so that they would increase their contributions in line with the saying “hearing is not like seeing”.

The manager called her one night and asked her to be ready to go to Baghdad. She stressed the need for her to look beautiful because they were going to meet an influential person.

She went to Baghdad and the meeting took place in the Green Zone. The Commander had just returned to Iraq. From the very first moment, Nada discovered that she was the victim of a game. She was brought with three women to please the hotshot Commander.

Nada cried with bitterness as she told the story. When she finished her story, she sighed, saying “damn poverty! That snake sold me.”

“The gentleman insisted on satisfying his lust even though he had his share from the two women who came with me. I saw it with my own eyes. I did not know where to run.”

“I feel like fainting every time I remember the ugly situation with nowhere to escape. The doors were locked and screaming would only have caused a scandal.”
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**Wardah, the third story**
Wardah is a middle school student. Her mother endured a lot to raise her after the death of her father in 1991. One day a rich woman knocked on their door and asked to marry Wardah to her only son who works in the United Arab Emirates. Wardah’s mother said yes. Why would she say no to a wealthy groom? His mother was very kind and polite. What more would anyone want for the daughter? It was not long before the bride was ready to go with her kind and wealthy mother-in-law to marry her groom in the UAE. The marriage was for one night. The next day he asked her to go to work. She did not understand in the beginning. She resorted to her mother-in-law but then discovered that she was not his mother but someone who worked for this contractor and that all the documents were fake! Wardah collapsed. She screamed, cried, and begged, but to no avail. Finally, after the threats, beating and torture, she was forced to surrender and went to work.

**X**, a young Iraqi merchant, told us: “I met Wardah in one of the clubs where I used to hang out. Her sadness and beauty attracted me and when I found out she was an Iraqi I was very sad. We got closer and became friends. She drank too much and sometimes she would have severe crying fits despite my repeated attempts to prevent her from drinking too much.”

“I tried many times to find out why she cries. Wardah eventually told me her tragic story, so I decided to help her, despite knowing the risks.”

“She did not have a legal passport because she was underage. They also had all her documents and IDs. That was a problem. She was also an illegal resident. The whole situation was complicated.”

“I was a foreigner in a country where Iraqis were ill-treated, but I made a promise to myself not to leave her. I spent a lot of money and contacted everyone I could trust to help Wardah. I left no stone unturned. Eventually I was able to bring Wardah back to her family and homeland.”

**Suha, the fourth story**
Suha, 16, is the only daughter of her engineer mother, who was displaced to one of the governorates and who lost contact with her relatives who reside in Diyala. Suha was lonely in her new life because of her mother’s absence till the afternoon. She worked in a consulting and engineering designs company. Suha complained about this in front of her classmates at school. One of the students suggested that she accompany her to religious lectures given by Umm ..., a pious woman.

Her mother was reluctant but Suha insisted. She went with her friend to visit the pious woman who was very kind and well educated. The teenage girl was even more pleased when she heard the woman praise her beauty. After a while, the woman tried to turn the girl against her mother, and when she felt that things were going according to her wishes and that the two girls obeyed her after she had promised to save them from their bitter reality, she brought four documents and told Suha and her friend to sign them without reading what was in them. When her friend asked to read the paper, the woman answered angrily because she thought they were questioning her integrity.

Suha’s mother says: “I became suspicious of my daughter’s behaviour and started to watch her closely. One day, I saw her going to a house which in the beginning I thought was her friend’s. When she came back, I told her about my doubts and fears. She told me everything.”

“We found out that the woman works for a large spying network which picks beautiful teenage girls and sends them outside Iraq to use them as spies for those countries!!!!!!!!!!!”

**Lahib, the fifth story**
Lahib is a middle school student who failed school for two consecutive years due to her neglect. She finally resorted to a woman who gave religious education classes and who worked for a religious institution.

A strong relationship developed between the woman and Lahib, who started to be annoyed by her mother’s actions and the restrictions imposed on her. The woman started to turn her against her family and filled her head with ideas about the importance of personal freedom and the bright future ahead of her.

Lahib says: “Allah intervened at the right moment. I discovered the ugly truth about this wicked woman and her malicious intentions when she asked me to do indecent things. She was telling me nice words, drawing a beautiful picture of the future and promising to get me outside Iraq after signing documents that she did not allow me to read.”

“But Allah saved me at that moment and I said no to her. I went back home whispering to myself: how stupid I was listening to this wicked woman!”
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Who is responsible and what is the solution?
This phenomenon started after the 1991 economic blockade and was exacerbated after 2003 owing to the deteriorating security situation, fighting, displacement, poor parental guidance, poverty, systematic moral degeneration, lack of cultural awareness, the policy of keeping the people ignorant, absence of the rule of law, and the spread of corruption. This has made Iraq a favourable environment for trafficking “mafias” to carry out their activities under many guises, through the bribery of officials in state institutions or through the establishment of strong relationships with officials and politicians who enjoy immunity. Add to that the weak role of the media, civil society organizations and human rights institutions which keep silent vis-à-vis these crimes because they constitute a red line involving honour!
We do not want to overlook the role of neighbouring countries in bargaining with the dignity and honour of Iraqi women to achieve dirty and cheap intentions targeting the Iraqi society. It is therefore necessary to address this phenomenon. It is true that it is a difficult task, but not an impossible one. The prime and foremost responsibility lies with women representatives in the Iraqi parliament and the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in collaboration with the study centres, media, and civil society and human rights organizations to determine the causes of this tragic phenomenon.

We need swift action accompanied by studies and surveys to reveal the truth with the help of Human Rights Watch, which pinpointed the problem in reports supported by figures and dates, of which copies were provided to the Office of the Prime Minister with no reaction so far!

The question that remains is how, when, why and where is the law that criminalizes, holds accountable, punishes and even addresses this silent crime and saves the face of Iraq and Iraqi women?

Women’s Participation
Iraqi women working for peace

Close to 13 years after the UN Security Council adopted the landmark Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, urging “member states to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict”, women globally continue to remain behind as far as political participation in negotiation and mediation is concerned. Iraq is no exception.

Iraqi women have been working, and continue to work, for peace on the ground, but their efforts at the national level are yet to be fully felt. The ‘Women for Lasting Peace Initiative’ seeks to address this. In a UN-facilitated roundtable discussion held to mark International Women’s Day in March 2013, former and current women parliamentarians participating in the initiative candidly expressed discontent that they continue to be marginalized in high-level political discussions on resolving the current crisis. Participants at the roundtable called for an observer position – at a minimum – in the talks between the government and the demonstrators and advocated for a 30 percent representation of women. White scarves were distributed as a symbolic gesture of spreading the message of peace.

Similar efforts to find lasting peace and a solution to the crisis have also been seen in the work of women civil society leaders, who have been quietly meeting community and tribal leaders to share concerns and suggest ways of moving out of the crisis.

Iraqi women have been calling for a seat at the peace-table for years. They have been vocal in the past not only on representation in political dialogue, but also in governance structures. In 2005, for example, Iraqi civil society...
organizations successfully lobbied for the adoption of a 25 percent quota provision for women in the Council of Representatives. However, the work that Iraqi women within and outside parliament continue to do in advocating for peace needs to be supported by male allies in the political elite circles and among religious and tribal leaders. A real commitment is needed, for example, to ensure that the inclusion, representation and consultation of women in any political dialogue become part of the rules of the game. The participation of women goes beyond counting their numbers at the table to acknowledging that women can make a positive, qualitative difference in political dialogue and can create opportunities to bring about a genuine transformation of the political and social environment that will enable lasting peace to take root in Iraq.

Faces of the five pillars: Integrating women and elections in Iraq

The United Nations Integrated Electoral Assistance Team (IEAT) takes a five-pillar approach to integrating women into the electoral process in Iraq.

“Women’s involvement in elections must be mainstreamed at all levels,” explains Mr. Jose María Aranaz, head of the IEAT. “The Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) has really taken the lead to work on this, and the UN is lending its usual support and assistance.”

Since 2005, the UN has consistently expressed concern that women’s rights have been receding in Iraq. “Even though there are many positive stories, there are also many shortcomings, many challenges ahead, and a serious risk that any gains made over the past few years will be lost. For this reason, gender issues must be foremost in our everyday efforts, and elections are an excellent place to start,” Mr. Aranaz added.

So what are the five pillars, and how do they work? What have they achieved, and what important challenges still need to be overcome?

1. POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

26.4% of candidates elected in Governorate Council Elections in 2013 were women held on 20 April, women not only reached this one quarter marker, but topped it, achieving an overall 26.4 percent representation.

“Getting women into local councils is the foundation for more balanced representation at other levels of Government,” says Mr. Aranaz. “Local issues and local affairs should not be run without women’s input.”

In the lead-up to the GCE, under the leadership of IHEC, a mechanism was developed to embed a minimum 25 percent quota in IHEC regulations. When submitting their candidate lists for validation, each political party had to ensure that at least one quarter of its candidates were female.

Iraq introduced women quotas at 25 percent back in 2005, becoming a model for other countries in the region. However, the concept is often questioned by politicians in Iraq. “After eight years the system of quotas is far from perfect, but the alternatives that are put on the table always seem destined to lead us to the systematic exclusion of women from political representation,” Mr. Aranaz commented. “Quotas are still the best way to assure that women are included.”

“Role-modelling for Iraqi women is also important in this instance,” explains Mr. Aranaz. “The more women political figures we have in this country, the more the up and coming women of Iraq will see that they too can have this opportunity, to represent their communities, and to work to make a change for Iraq.”
2. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

42% of voters in Governorate Council Elections were women

The 20 April elections also introduced another important initiative; for the first time, polling station staff kept a record of numbers of male and female voters. By the end of the counting process, IHEC announced that 42 percent of voters who cast a ballot on 20 April were women.

“I came to vote because I want to take my chance,” said a voter who visited a polling centre in downtown Baghdad with her husband and two small children. “Democracy is new in our country, and slowly, slowly, it is improving,” she said. “We are getting better at it, and I want to be part of that.”

Special women-focused voter education and outreach were integral to optimizing the rate of female participation. The IHEC produced brochures, a calendar and a range of media spots that encouraged women to vote.

“Recording the number of female voters is important to identify the real level of female participation in the elections. The data collected this time will guide IHEC in the production of materials for the next elections with an aim to increase women's participation,” says Mr. Aranaz.

3. ADMINISTRATION

12% of voter registration centre staff in Governorate Council Elections were women

At the head of the IHEC is a board of nine commissioners. Commissioner Gulshan Kamal is a woman and member of Iraq’s Turkmen community. She is also the head of the IHEC Gender Team, a cross-departmental working group that can be credited with producing IHEC's voter education materials for women. While it is good news that at least one woman is sitting on the current Board, this is actually indicative of a decline in numbers of women at the helm of IHEC. “It is symptomatic that in the first Board there were three women, in the second two, and now in its current composition, only one woman,” says Mr. Aranaz. “It has not helped that the requirement to include a minimum of one woman in the board was removed from the IHEC law.”

The IHEC is not the only public institution that is not living up to expectations on appointments of women in leadership roles; most senior appointments in Iraq, from the Council of Ministers to the judiciary, are held by men. “Within the IHEC, it is a great shame that none of the 20 heads of IHEC offices is a woman,” Mr. Aranaz continued. “These examples show why it is so important that we insist on meaningful representation of women at all levels.”

Part of these efforts is the establishment of the IHEC Gender Team, a new concept in the Middle East. The IHEC Gender Team works to empower female staff within the commission, organizing training sessions, and highlighting the importance of gender mainstreaming in recruitment. At administrative levels in IHEC, there has been a significant increase in numbers of women working in the data entry centre, voter registration centres, and media section. In 2013, 12 percent of Voter Registration Centre staff were women.

Arazoo works for IHEC's training section. In the lead-up to the Governorate Council Elections she helped to deliver...
training sessions for polling centre staff from governorates across the country. “I like being a trainer because I get to see the results of my work on election day,” says Arazoo. She also translates electoral procedures from Kurdish into Arabic, and says it is very gratifying to see the procedures that she translates or teaches turn into action.

4. THE UN’S INTEGRATED GENDER ELECTIONS TASK FORCE

3 levels of UN engagement on gender issues in elections

In November 2012, the UN established an Integrated Gender Elections Task Force (IGETF). It includes UNAMI Electoral staff, the UNAMI Gender Advisor, electoral and gender experts from UNDP, and is co-chaired by the UNAMI Chief Electoral Officer and the UN Women Country Representative for Iraq, Ms. Frances Guy.

The IGETF engages across three levels:

a) Capacity-building, institution-building, procedures and methodology, including support to the work of IHEC’s Gender Team. In 2013, the IEAT will for the first time implement a quota system for its capacity-building activities, ensuring that a minimum number of IHEC’s female staff are counted amongst their beneficiaries.

b) Liaison and advocacy with external partners, such as civil society, media, and other Government actors, with a view to creating awareness and building support for women’s roles in elections.

c) Development of the legal and regulatory framework to ensure women’s participation in elections, including engagement on the 25 percent quota for women’s representation.

“We need to constantly keep women’s needs in our sights in preparing for elections,” says Mr. Aranaz. “Half the population is concerned by electoral events in this country, and half the population should be involved. By engaging across these three levels, we are on track to improve representation, participation, and women’s role in the electoral commission.”

5. UN STAFFING

50/50 gender parity is the goal for the UN’s workforce

The UN’s IEAT seeks to lead by example with a dedicated focus on the recruitment of qualified women candidates when staffing its own office. This policy is in line with the UN’s overall selection policies, which favour the recruitment of suitably qualified women, and aim to achieve 50/50 gender parity in the UN workforce. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has repeatedly expressed his commitment to ensure a working culture at the United Nations that leads by example in the recruitment and representation of women.

The IEAT includes women from a variety of different backgrounds, who work out of the IHEC headquarters in Baghdad on a daily basis, transferring their expertise to their IHEC counterparts on operations, media, outreach, training, and more.

“It is important that we show that our own team is balanced, and that we too have women in leadership roles,” says Mr. Aranaz. “But it is not only about roles and numbers. Internally our challenge is to make sure that everyone in the team thinks in terms of gender mainstreaming when advising IHEC.”

Ms. Helga Marques is a UN media advisor who works with the IHEC Media Section. “The women I work with are so motivated to do something, and so keen to make a difference,” she says. “They tell me all the time how much they appreciate the close support and guidance that I am able to give them. Iraqi women are strong and smart and deserve career opportunities, as do all the women who work around the world for the cause of democracy.”
May 2013 was a premiere month for Iraqi women: The first all-female police officer delegation travelled from Iraq to the United States to attend a three-week training programme. It has been a long journey for the 10 women working in a male-dominated environment, which started in 2009, when they began their training with the Iraqi Police.

Ms. Nanna Zerlang, a Police Advisor seconded by the Danish Foreign Ministry to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Iraq, has worked with these women since the beginning of the project. She remembers when, in February 2009, the first group of 50

Women police officers: Pushing their own limits and those of society

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Ms. Nanna Zerlang, a Police Advisor seconded by the Danish Foreign Ministry to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Iraq, has worked with these women since the beginning of the project. She remembers when, in February 2009, the first group of 50 female police cadets – who all held Bachelor degrees - embraced their new careers at Baghdad Police College. “This was a first for the Police College, a first for the women of Iraq, and a first for me, since I had to design my whole frame of work,” she recalled.

Being a pioneer is never easy

In Iraq, as in many other countries, ‘police officer’ is not a traditional job for women. A lot of work had to be done inside, but also outside the classroom, to educate and convince resisting elements within Iraqi society. Nanna Zerlang still remembers all the attention that was given to the female students four years ago, just because they were studying an unconventional subject. “A lot of issues specific to women also needed to be addressed at the time; for example, maternity leave. The particular needs of women had not been considered prior to their admission to the programme,” she recalled. The Baghdad Police College gradually implemented some reasonable measures to accommodate its female students, later emulated by their employer, the Ministry of Interior (MoI). Allowing women to bring their mobile phones into the classroom and giving them an extra day off to attend to their responsibilities at home were among the adjustments granted by the authorities.

The importance of equality within the police forces was, and still is, of great concern. Even though men and women are earning the same wages, several gaps remain. “There is still an outstanding issue that isn’t solved and it’s the salute. A woman is not entitled to be saluted by a man, even if she is higher ranking than him,” deplored Ms. Zerlang. “This was a concern for many women who feared it would have a negative impact on their job and lead to a lack of respect.”

Even as fully qualified police officers, women can face harassment and discrimination in their working environment. This is partially why the vast majority of the policewomen are working for the Ministry of Interior, at Baghdad International Airport and at the Police College where it is considered safer, rather than inside police stations.

The first group of women police officers graduated on Police Day in January 2010. “The women were so proud - and so was I,” Ms. Zerlang remembered. A second class of 85 women followed them and started their training in April 2010; they are now all lieutenants.

UNDP: Advocating for more policewomen

Five years after the first class, an estimated 135 female police officers are working for the Ministry of Interior. Of those, eight were also trained under the UNDP programme on issues related to domestic and gender-based violence, aiming at ensuring better access to justice for victims. “If we include the 5,000 women with basic training hired to do searches at checkpoints across the country, women represent only 1 percent of the 500,000 Iraqi police forces working on different levels,” stressed Ms. Zerlang.

“The Ministry of Interior is taking remarkable steps to support women in Iraq,” said Ms. Nahid Hussein, Project Manager for the Rule of Law, Human Rights and Access to Justice with UNDP. The establishment of the Family Protection Units has indeed contributed to an increased number of reported cases of domestic and gender-based violence. “Still, there is a need to raise the number of female police officers within the MoI to promote gender equality and gender-related issues,” Ms. Hussein emphasized. UNDP is supporting the MoI towards this goal.
Despite considerable efforts in recent years, Iraq is still striving to ensure the right to education for all its citizens. Once a leading nation in education, illiteracy rates in Iraq are today estimated at 20 percent. Women are particularly affected by this situation, especially in rural areas, where close to 50 percent of women aged between 15 and 24 are illiterate, compared to 28 and 20 percent of women living in urban and metropolitan areas, respectively.

The UNESCO Iraq Office, together with the Government of Iraq, is firmly committed to fight illiteracy, and important breakthroughs have been achieved during the last years. In addition to the enactment and approval of the new Literacy Law in September 2011, a National Literacy Agency for Iraq has been established, and the Ministry of Education endorsed a National Literacy Strategy prepared in cooperation with UNESCO. Furthermore, a National Literacy Campaign was launched with the aim of achieving the fourth ‘Education for All’ goal of reducing illiteracy by 50 percent by 2015.

Within the framework of the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) for Iraq, a pioneering project funded by the Office of Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, First Lady of Qatar and UNESCO’s Special Envoy for Basic and Higher Education, UNESCO is targeting vulnerable communities with a special emphasis on women in rural areas. For example, realizing the importance of providing women with literacy and life skills in order to empower them economically, UNESCO launched the NGO Grant Literacy and Life Skills Programme for the establishment of 118 community learning centres in these vulnerable areas; among the 6,750 beneficiaries were 4,960 women.

With the support of local NGOs, UNESCO also launched advocacy campaigns at the community level; disseminated awareness raising materials, including through the screening of TV spots; and launched a booklet, ‘The Power of Literacy: Stories from Iraq’, with a collection of stories that document the impact of literacy and its psychological dimension: the building of self-esteem and hope that is often disregarded in favour of more tangible, measurable impacts, but that is, in fact, an essential foundation for economic, social and political development – the actual end goal of literacy programming.

Sixty-five-year-old women who have just learned how to write letters. Eighteen-year-old girls now back in school after years of conflict. Mothers who dream of a better life for their children. The stories tell of the profound impact that literacy has had in the life of students:

“Now I am like a blind person who has regained his sight” - Rand

“I got divorced 10 years ago. I have been criticized by society due to the injustice that prevails. I used to go to hospital but was not able to read the signs. I also had difficulty asking others. Now, I can read and write. We educate ourselves and change many preconceptions about women in society. Now I am a new person” - Suad

“My hobby is composing poetry and prompting thoughts in standard language. When I needed to memorize these, I sought the help of my friends to get them written down on paper. Now I am trying to complete all of the stages of the literacy programme to understand the first step in the field of poetry and prompting thoughts. I want to compile what I compose to be a reference for all” - Zahraa

“We are twins. Our family is poor. We worked in farming and raising livestock. Due to the harsh living conditions we did not go to school as it would have kept us away from the house. My sister and I have always dreamed of learning to read and write like other girls do. Now we have learned reading and writing. Our intention is to complete our learning because education is interesting and adds value to human life. We have learned drawing and now participate in a drawing contest. We thank whoever contributed to helping us enjoy this status, because an educated person is powerful and accepted by all” - Roua and Hala, sisters

“Customs and traditions in our society prevented girls from going outside of their homes. Females had to learn cooking and
In the impoverished and informal settlement of Kurani Ainkawa in the Kurdistan Region’s capital, Erbil, many of the women and girls have dropped out of school, are illiterate, and deprived of social and economic opportunities. Despite these challenges, the women of Kurani Ainkawa are working to improve their lives and the lives of their neighbours.

With a focus on women and youth, UN-Habitat and UNDP launched a project to pilot the integration of neighbourhood improvement with community empowerment in Kurani Ainkawa. The project supported the establishment of a Kurani Ainkawa community organization, which is now registered as an NGO. Eighty percent of its board members are women. The Kurani Ainkawa NGO will be responsible for addressing the different needs and fulfilling the ideas of Kurani Ainkawa’s youth, women and men, through the operation of a multi-purpose community centre and incorporation of the Kurani Ainkawa community into Erbil’s wider civil society network.

Specific activities to empower women are conducted through partnerships with well-established NGOs, the KRGC heads, and the Ministry of Culture and Youth and UNAMI. They include literacy courses, awareness building sessions on legal rights, legal and social counselling through a help desk in the community, small business development training courses accompanied by interest-free microfinance loans, awareness sessions on health and the environment, and awareness sessions on human rights, conducted separately for young men and women.

One 45-year-old female board member, who only attended primary school, commented that she had “tried many times to find an opportunity to start studying, but unfortunately, before UNDP’s project, there were no institutions or NGOs to support programmes that were suitable for me or for the people from Kurani Ainkawa. Today, I am honoured to be one of the board members of Kurani Ainkawa association and I am more than happy to work for our community and to serve Kurani Ainkawa community members.”

“The [human rights] awareness sessions are very important for me,” she continued. “I particularly enjoyed two documentaries which showed the ability of women to succeed even when facing obstacles, proving that everybody can volunteer and improve their ability to work and serve the people. I shared all of these experiences with my family and other

The “Power of Literacy: stories from Iraq” booklet can be downloaded at: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002169/216922m.pdf
members of the community. We talk about the movies and I like to share the experience with the people who cannot attend the sessions."

"I have always been a very shy person, quite isolated from the rest of the community," a 21-year-old woman said. "However, thanks to this programme, I had the chance to interact with my community, to go outside the household and discuss issues and find out things. Because I am a house girl, I never had an opportunity to get this kind of information. Now, after this programme, I started to realize that it was partly my own fault that I was so isolated, and also the community’s. All the traditions and religious rules prevented me from communicating more. But now that I’ve started coming to the centre and attending the sessions, I feel that I have changed. My behaviour and attitude towards life are different. Now I appreciate volunteerism, and in the future, I would like to work for the Kurani Ainkawa centre."

**Faiza Mohammad Ismaeel: A woman empowered to help her community**

At 47, Faiza is a mother of six children - one daughter and five sons. Her only daughter, whom she had at a tender age of 18, is now married and raising her own family. Faiza is still busy with the five sons, the last one only 10 years old. With such a busy family life, one would expect Faiza to be a housewife contented to raise her children and run her large family as expected in a conservative society. However, Faiza’s involvement with UN-Habitat changed all that, and empowered her in ways she did not expect.

Faiza graduated from Erbil Technical Institute. Her involvement with the UN-Habitat Iraq Programme started when she joined the Local Facilitation Unit (LFU), a unit consisting of members of the local community to provide a link between the community and UN-Habitat.

Faiza and her team were involved in the enhanced neighbourhood upgrading component of the project in the Kurani Ainkawa high-density suburb of Erbil. When she first joined the LFU, Faiza said that she knew “nothing about the UN, housing strategy, or slum upgrading, apart from living in a dilapidated neighbourhood myself.”

"The idea of working with so many highly educated engineers, architects, politicians, most of them men, was intimidating at first. But after the Housing Facilitation Unit (HFU) built my technical and social skills, I was able to do my work and help my community,” said a smiling Faiza.

Speaking in Kurdish, Faiza talks effortlessly about the work she does. "I have lived in Kurani Ainkawa all my life. It is easy for the people to trust me, and give information required about the living conditions in our neighbourhood and how to upgrade it. I have been able to arrange meetings in mosques, community halls and schools. It is rare for a woman to address men in our society, let alone an imam. But I am able to do it, thanks to empowerment by UN-Habitat."

Faiza was also trained to use computer software necessary to transform collected data from the field into spread sheets and maps.

The whole process is a unique experience not only for Faiza and the team, but also for Erbil institutes tasked with improving the living conditions in the city.

The community trusts Faiza because she is one of them. Through her and a number of other women from the society forming the LFU, engineers and architects of the HFU were able to access the community, take actual measurements of streets and houses to reflect them on the existing maps, and to prepare the Master Plan of Kurani Ainkawa with other colleagues. In the words of Mand Ibrahim Aziz, the consultant on the project and a professor at the University of Salahaddin in Erbil, “without people like Faiza, the project would not have been accepted by the community, and would not have scored the success it did in upgrading the neighbourhoods of Kurani-Ainkawa. Faiza is a remarkable empowered woman who has made a tremendous contribution to the upgrade of the neighbourhood.”
Ala’a’s story: Someone to believe in you

Ala’a Hamdi laughs as she continues: “I quickly recovered from the ‘shock’ and agreed with my father as I never liked the fading yellow colour on our walls. I knew that my mom had wanted to refresh the apartment with a brighter colour for a long time, but we had been unable to afford it.”

Thanks to IOM’s Community Revitalization Program (CRP), Ala’a is now able to contribute financially to not only brighten up her family’s home, but also to her family’s well-being. In October 2012, Ala’a started her first job ever as an archivist with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) in Anbar, after completing a two-month-long vocational training, organized by IOM, on computer hardware and software.

“Exhilarated I Would Finally Be Working”

“There were 15 students in the course, and as soon as it was done, MoLSA offered jobs to both me and my colleague, Hamid, as we were the best students in that course,” Ala’a explains. “We learned a lot from the training and are constantly using all the skills we learned to do our jobs.”

“The Saturday night before my first day, I was really excited and couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned that entire night in bed. I was scared I wouldn't be able to do the job, excited to meet new people, and exhilarated that I would finally be working.”

After a few weeks, Ala’a felt at ease carrying out her job. “If I had any technical problems, I would phone my course instructor, Ziad, and seek his instructions to help me work out those problems. He is extremely knowledgeable and always very helpful.”

“My Life Has Changed So Much”

Ala’a has four sisters and one brother, all living together with her parents in a small rented house in Anbar. “I’m the second oldest; my younger sisters and brother are still in school, and my older sister stays at home. My father works as a taxi driver to support us all,” Ala’a continued. “My life has changed so much since I got this job. It’s an excellent feeling to wake up in the morning and go to work. Before I started working, I was mostly bored as there were plenty of hands around the house to help with the housework. And having grown up in Baghdad, I didn't have many friends or relatives in Anbar.”

Ala’a explains to us that, in 2006, her family had to leave Baghdad due to the sectarian violence, and they sought refuge in Anbar. But she is uncomfortable talking about that time and reluctant to discuss the ordeal her family went through. Yet she is hopeful that, someday, the situation in Baghdad will improve and she can return to her home city.

“Thanks to God, my parents and my siblings are luckily still alive, and that’s the most important thing. I don’t like even remembering that time.”

Making a New Life

Before Ala’a was forced to flee Baghdad, she had different goals for her life. She was training to be an Arabic teacher in primary school when she left Baghdad. In Anbar, she suddenly found herself in a much smaller city with fewer opportunities to get a job as a teacher.

“Maybe one day I’ll have the chance to work as a teacher, but this job and vocational training will enable me to also teach computers and IT. Now that I’m in this field, I’m really keen to extend my knowledge of it.”

“Before I started this job, I always felt alienated here. People here would say that I couldn’t be a refugee in Iraq, in my own country. We were refugees, though,
and alone here. I didn’t know many people here in Anbar before I started working,” Ala’a recounts. “Thanks to this job, I made friends and am slowly starting to feel at home here. In the mornings, I chat with my colleagues in the kitchen and they tell me the latest gossip from around the city,” she admits to us with a laugh.

Ala’a’s face lights up when she tells us about her plans for her salary. She explains to us that while she gives most of her salary to her parents to help support the family, she is also putting aside a portion of it in savings, as she plans to enrol part-time in a web design course next year. “My training with IOM opened an entirely new world for me, and I really want to see more of it,” Ala’a explains.

Ala’a also keeps some of her pay for her own purchases. “When I get paid I take Rasul, my youngest sister, out shopping. Usually she wants fancy notebooks and pens for school. And every time she thanks me over and over.” Ala’a pauses for a second, then continues. “Such small things make me happy. But I also want her to see what she can strive for. For me, having a job has opened up a freedom I didn’t know. It’s made me feel more grown-up and confident. And now my father seeks my advice on financial matters. He really values what I have to say.”


“Someone to Believe in You”

Nearing the end of our conversation, we cannot resist asking Ala’a about her personal life. “At the moment, I have no immediate plans to get married,” she admits timidly. “I would like to continue with my education and hope that one day I’ll have a family. Also, I hope that once I get married, I’ll continue working. Nowadays things are changing, and many husbands prefer wives who can help support the family.”

As Ala’a finishes her lunch break and the time for our conversation runs out, we start packing our cameras and notebooks. She stops us for a second and asks us to “Please send my regards to Zaman, Muthana, and Firas from IOM Anbar office. We became friends along the way, and I want to tell them that this course changed my life. Sometimes, you just need someone to believe in you, so that you can believe in yourself. This is what happened with me.”

UN supports Iraq in efforts to eradicate gender-based violence

The launch on 12 March 2013 of a Violence Against Women Data Gathering and Monitoring System by the Ministry of Planning marked the successful conclusion of a joint effort by different ministries and non-governmental organizations, with the technical support of the United Nations, to establish a system to provide public and updated data to promote evidence-based planning to eradicate violence against women.

It is the first time that such a system is implemented in Iraq, and it was designed to fill a gap. Whereas almost half of married women (46 percent) say they have experienced one form or another of violence at home, only 2.8 percent of them are willing to report violence to the authorities. They lack confidence in the police or fear damaging their reputations, according to data from UNFPA.

“Measurement will help us show the range of problems that women face in Iraq,” said Ms. Frances Guy, UN Women Representative for Iraq, about the new monitoring system. “As government services meet the identified needs, we will be able to measure progress.”

UN Women and UNAMI joined forces in 2012 to develop a transparent and public system with indicators that would allow for accurate reporting on violence against women in Iraq. The system now needs to be populated with data, a responsibility that has been taken on by the Government of Iraq through its Central Statistics Organization.
Iraq is trying to cope with large numbers of uprooted people and returnees, and nearly half of all persons of concern to UNHCR are girls and women. Female heads of households, women and girls in informal settlements and girls involved in child labour are at heightened risk of exploitation, abuse and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), which includes child and forced marriages, domestic violence, rape, sexual violence and exploitation, female genital mutilation, harassment and trafficking. In 2012, UNHCR’s partners in Iraq reported that they had counselled 6,011 SGBV victims and referred 4,138 of them to the appropriate service providers.

UNHCR and its partners provide a range of services with a particular focus on women:

- Legal and psychosocial services as well as empowerment activities: Provided in 18 Protection and Reintegration Centres (PARC), which are located in each Governorate of Iraq and accessible to asylum seekers, refugees, stateless persons, returnees, displaced persons, as well as to the host population.
- Listening centres: Located within urban IDP settlements in the Baghdad, Dohuk, Kirkuk and Babel governorates, and staffed by social workers and lawyers, the six centres offer psychosocial support, case management, legal advice services and safe homes for women in need.
- Protection hotline: UNHCR supports a 24-hour hotline in Baghdad, directing SGBV survivors to appropriate care and scheduling appointments with social workers or lawyers. In addition, UNHCR Erbil also operates a dedicated protection hotline and a dedicated country-wide email account.
- Community mobilization: The Norwegian Refugee Council has facilitated the creation of 45 women’s committees in 45 informal settlements in Baghdad. The Islamic Relief Worldwide works with women in the Palestinian refugee community in Baghdad.

In addition, UNHCR pays particular attention to women as part of its response to the Syrian refugee emergency:

- Listening Centres to provide free psychosocial and legal support services have been established in the Al Qa‘im and Domiz refugee camps in cooperation with various partners. The centres conduct awareness sessions and life skills workshops for women.
- UNHCR supported the establishment of women’s committees in the Al Qa‘im and Domiz camps.

Refugee Voices

Wafa and Sennah are proud to show visitors their greenhouse just 20 metres away from their house in Al-Kabasi village, some 20 km east of Basra. Both sisters were born here, but in 1990 their family fled to Iran, escaping violence and discrimination. Wafa and Sennah grew up in Iran and could return to their native village only after 13 long years of exile.

“When we returned home in 2003, we found nothing left here. No house, no belongings, and our land was taken by others. We had no place to live, no job, no means to support our families and feed our children,” recalled Wafa. Several years were very difficult for the returnees, but in 2006, the family was allowed by the owner, who left Iraq, to settle on this piece of land, and work and look after the land in exchange. “We started life from the beginning,” said Sennah.

When a UNHCR mobile team came to do a needs assessment, the women said they would like to work on the land, as they had been for years, and asked for support in building a greenhouse. Wafa, who has five children, and Sennah, who...
Training Syrian refugee women to provide gender-based violence services in Domiz camp

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), in cooperation with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the General Directorate of Labour and Social Care (DOLSA) in Duhok, organized the first training workshop on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Core Concepts, Case Management and Referral Pathways in Duhok between 8 and 10 April 2013.

The workshop’s 18 participants included 15 women volunteers from among the Syrian refugees in Domiz camp and social workers from DOLSA. The aim was to acquaint them with the conceptual framework of GBV, and violence against women in particular, and to provide them with the skills for case management and the referral of cases to other relevant facilities that exist within the camp area.

Two or three of the trainees will be recruited to observe and run day-to-day activities inside the DOLSA-managed safe spaces for women and girls that UNFPA recently established in Domiz camp.

Women’s reproductive health in Domiz: Supporting deliveries and new beginnings in the camp

Abu Mohammed and his family used to live in Damascus. He and his wife, Um Mohammed, have two children: Rojin, who is five, and Mohammed, who is two and a half years old.

With the violence reaching Damascus in the summer of 2012, the family decided to leave for the Kurdistan region of Iraq, and they did so in late August. Around the same time, Um Mohammed discovered she was pregnant, which frightened her, as her last two pregnancies had been very complicated and the deliveries had been accompanied by heavy bleeding and blood loss.

After a month and a half in Domiz, she was advised to have antenatal care in the newly established Reproductive Health Clinic, which is part of the intervention of the Department of Health in Duhok, and is supported by UNFPA through reproductive health kits. The clinic receives 35 to 50 women per day who are seeking reproductive health information and services related to family planning, antenatal and prenatal care and gender-based violence.
Clinic staff, supported by UNFPA, followed up with Um Mohammed throughout her pregnancy.

On 14 April, at 7:00 a.m., a Sunday morning, Um Mohammed started to feel some contractions. She reached the clinic at 8:00 a.m. and was seen by the midwife, who confirmed that she was in labour. The ambulance was contacted and the midwife was ready to head to the hospital with Um Mohammed for delivery. However, the gynaecologist, who had just arrived, immediately determined that Um Mohammed was in the second stage of labour and therefore could not be transferred to the hospital.

In no time at all, one of the rooms inside the clinic was transformed into a makeshift delivery room, using reproductive health kits provided by UNFPA. The doctor and the midwife assisted in the delivery, and by 9:30 a.m., a beautiful, healthy baby boy was born. His mother took advantage of the family planning services offered at the clinic and is now an advocate of the health services provided there.