

Concept note for the building of women's leadership capacity in Iraq

Shahin Razagh

An initiative of Norwegian Church Aid

Introduction

Working with women's groups in Iraq is a challenging process on many fronts. While women the world over continue to fight against gender oppression and discrimination and while they struggle for recognition of their human rights and for spaces to occupy politically, socially and economically, Iraq women do this in a context of war and conflict. This intensifies the obstacles they face so much more intense. The terrain they have to traverse is fraught with life threatening challenges at every turn. Yet all of the groups involved in the Norwegian Church Aid programme, are determined to face these challenges at cost to them personally and to their families and their communities. It is in this light that this concept note for building women's leadership capacity is developed and funding sought to assist these brave and courageous women.

History of the project.

Norwegian Church Aid has been working with Iraqi women since the current war began in 2003. Over this time, many initiatives were undertaken in the country to address access to basic services such as water and sanitation. Key to these interventions were the inclusion of women. This was an extremely difficult task as women were facing a new surge of oppression under the interim government supported by the occupational forces and by those very same forces. While life under Saddam Hussein was untenable for the entire society, life under the current regime is had a worse effect on women and girl children. It is well documented that many women are killed in Iraq today for various reasons but more predominantly because they are women and deemed unworthy of the rights to freedom, right to choice and all other rights that men feel they are entitled to.

Achievements of this project

Norwegian Church Aid, through its almost 10 years of working with Iraqi women has made huge in roads into addressing the rights of women in this country. Firstly, a number of women's groups have been identified and brought together to work on issues critical to their wellbeing.

These groups have developed an analysis of the situation of women in Iraq and they have been able to hone in on the fact that violence against them is the most critical problem that they face. Violence against them is responsible for women not being able to fight for political space where they are able to fully take up opportunities to engage in the decision making process. In fact, women in Iraq generally have no voice in their families, their homes or the community. This impacts on their society as a whole While Iraq is now in the throes of developing a democratic system of governance, women are virtually excluded from that process.

The initial intervention by Norwegian Church Aid was to get women from Iraq to discuss violence against women in their country. The women who were brought together, could not at first acknowledge that there was any form of violence but after a number of interventions came to recognise that what their society viewed as cultural and religious practises were in fact violence against women. Extensive work was done to assist the women to develop tier understanding of the problem in their society and to being to look at ways in which they could address these forms of oppression and discrimination against women and girls.

Norwegian Church Aid has successfully assists Iraqi women to establish seven "Listening Centres" in the country. These facilities are safe spaces for women where they can report all forms of violence and abuse and where legal remedies are sought for the women experiencing such abuse. The establishment of these listening centres has brought more women into the fold for advancing women's rights.

A research project was initiated on the trafficking of women and girls and brought to finality when a regional report on trafficking was produced. This was not an easy process as the women involved had no concept of what trafficking is as a phenomenon and even denied that it was a problem in their country. Today the women have clear conceptual clarity and are very ably assisting trafficked women and girls.

Over the past four years, the work with Iraq women has grown immeasurable. The entire process of building women's knowledge and capacity on women's rights has been thoroughly documented because a dedicated documenter was appointed and attended every training and capacity building workshop. This has been a particular strength of Norwegian Church Aids intervention. The thorough documentation process has shown the growth of the women who participated in the programme.

It shows how the women who had very little understanding of human rights generally and women's rights specifically have become change agents to women who are making significant changes to their communities and their society in respect of women and girls. This is evidenced by their most recent initiative which is the development of an NGO Shadow report on Iraq which provides some critical information on the situation of women in that country at the moment and makes important recommendations on how the Iraqi government needs to change that.

The next steps are to build the leadership capacity of these women to better engage at a political level and to influence the decision making processes in Iraq. This concept is proposing the development of Iraq women's leadership capacity by exposing the participating women to South African women leaders and their strategies for women's leadership in all spheres of government and society.

Country study visit to South Africa

South Africa is a new democracy and has worked for only 16 years to develop its democratic society based on human rights and responsibilities. However, the country has made huge gains in the political, economic and social arenas particularly in respect of advancing women's rights. In the struggle for freedom and the right to govern, the oppressed black African people faced a seemingly insurmountable problem. History has shown, that the most oppressive form of government the world has ever known, was successfully overcome through concerted effort by all the affected citizens of the country with support from the international community. A turning point in the country's history was a resistance campaign initiated by women in 1956 when they organised themselves across the country and marched on the Union Buildings which was the seat of the Apartheid government to great success.

The Women's March as it has become known, heralded a new phase in the liberation struggle but also established South African women and serious contributors to the struggle for liberation. Women's leadership became entrenched as an important mechanism for moving the struggle forward.

When the apartheid government finally gave in to negotiating a transition to a democratic form of governance, the negotiating team was comprised of men only. Women, having developed their analysis of what was required for a peaceful transitional process, vehemently opposed the structure of the negotiating teams and insisted that the process could not continue without them included. They won that battle and the rest is history.

Women have been included fully in all political, cultural and social processes so that South Africa now holds sixth position for equitable political participation globally.

Norwegian Church Aid, together with Masimanyane Women's Support Centre will bring Iraqi women to South Africa in the first quarter of 2011, to exchange experiences and to build the capacity of the Iraqi women by meeting women leaders in South Africa and learning from them how they developed their struggle for the advancement of women's rights and how they continue to do this in South Africa.

The principles guiding this initiative are based on the understanding that effective leadership is critical to advancing women's rights. That such leadership relies on the ability of women to build consensus across all spheres of government and civil society so that a collective vision for women and girls is achieved. Women must be able to manage the internal and external dynamics in respect of the growth and development of their organisations but also their country. Furthermore, building mutual trust and respect amongst women's groups is vital to accepting a shared vision which will drive women to take up actions that assist in achieving their goals. Building leadership capacity is critical to developing self confidence of the women and in ensuring the sustainability of the work they do.

The objectives of the proposed programmes are:

- To enhance women's knowledge and understanding of leadership and gender equality.
- To develop their analysis on gender equality and the integration of these into the political, economic, social and cultural spheres of their society.
- To enhance women's access to and control over political spaces in government and civil society
- To encourage networking amongst Iraqi women's groups as well as with their government
- To enhance women's access to and control over spaces in government and civil society.

Norwegian Church Aid has drawn on the expertise of many global organisations to assist with this programme. This included a partnership with Masimanyane Women's Centre based in South Africa.

Masimanyane has provided training and capacity building expertise throughout the four year period of this programme. Masimanyane has offered to assist with the women's leadership development programme by arranging a study visit to South Africa.

Masimanyane will assist in setting up meetings with key stakeholders in government and civil society who will share their knowledge and experiences with the Iraqi women.

Masimanyane is proposing the following programme for the leadership study exchange.

- Meeting with the Ministry of Women and youth and people with Disabilities
- Meeting with the National Human Rights Commission
- Meeting with the Commission on Gender Equality
- Meetings with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against women.(currently a South African).

It is expected that the group will spend 3 days in Cape Town meeting with the relevant institutions listed above. They will then travel to the Eastern Cape where Masimanyane has its head office. They will meet with women's groups there and study the model for working on violence against women and girls that Masimanyane is world renowned for.

Participants

The proposed participants will include 12 women from five areas within Iraq. These are Basra, Baghdad, Nasjif, Erbil and Khudustan. They are all women

who are active in the women's movement and in women's organisations. Two of the women are civil servants with considerable influence in their areas of work.

Expected outcomes

- ❖ Iraqi women will have expanded their knowledge base on women's rights and the advancement of those rights.
- ❖ They will have a better understanding of how to engage with their governments and be able to influence the political processes in their country.
- ❖ They will build a common understanding and possibly a vision for their collective work on women's rights generally and violence against women specifically
- ❖ They will have grown their networks internationally
- ❖ They will be inspired, energised and motivated to continue the struggle for the liberation of the women in Iraq.

Conclusion

The South Africa experience has shown that such study visits enhance women's knowledge of leadership and build their capacity to engage politically in the countries transitional process. Such a programme builds women's self confidence while developing their networks and their links across their country's borders. Women learn new ways of working. Develop effective strategies for addressing a variety of aspects of women's rights.