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Iraq

# Widows launch national initiative for rights and reconciliation

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## **Description :**

A new movement of Iraqi widows is refusing the division of the country on sectarian lines, and rapidly building a broad alliance in favour of social and political reform, with local cease-fires and reconciliation initiatives - outside the control of the Iraqi government and their American backers.

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Decades of violence and conflict in Iraq have left about 3 million women - one in six - as widows. "We Iraqi women have never known 'normal life,'" explains Doctor Fatima al Juali, from the League of Iraqi Women. "My husband was tortured and killed by Saddam Hussein, one of my brothers fell in the senseless war with Iran [1980-1988 - editors], and my sister's husband was killed by the Americans. My neighbour's husband went to Jordan to find work, and she has not heard from him in nine months."

As well as poverty, widows are socially marginalised, and are usually obliged to join the household of a brother or brother-in-law. They find it hard to remarry, as only older or more pious men are willing to consider a widow, especially if she has children (and the average Iraqi woman has four or five dependent children, parents, or invalid relatives). Not surprisingly, many widows are pushed into loveless marriages or suffer sexual exploitation by men in their wider family. "Improving the protection of widows -legal rights, job opportunities and some kind of social benefit payments - would be the fastest way to reduce poverty, strengthen the rights of women, and protect children." explains Catherine Pappas, responsible for the Middle East at Alternatives

A coalition of Iraqi women's groups, trade union and student groups has launched a campaign for a national minimum pension of about US\$100 for widows. Since there are widows in every ethnic, geographic, political, regional, religious and sectoral group - in fact, in nearly every extended family in Iraq - the campaign has the potential to unite Iraqis around a positive goal, which presents social justice and women's rights in a form that even the most conservative and religious citizen can understand.

The widow's campaign has already exposed the hypocrisy and bankruptcy of Iraq's politicians and religious elite- who despite their pious rhetoric, either neglect widows and other poor women completely, or try to restrict pension benefits to widows who fit the "right" moral criteria or belong to the "right" religious group or political party. In those towns and regions - like Kurdistan - where widows theoretically can receive social security payments, the application procedure is long and complicated. "And up to half the pension is eaten up by bribes" complains Dr Al Juali.

With the collapse of the Iraqi economy, and growing sectarian control over the hiring policies of the public sector, widows are increasingly dependent on charity. Despite a strong, religiously based philanthropic tradition, most Iraqis are themselves too poor to offer much help, especially outside their immediate family and neighbourhood. "This time last year, widows could at least hope for some food distribution during Ramadan. But this year, most of the distribution has been cancelled, for security reasons or lack of funds," says Ali Hussein of Tammuz, a secular Iraqi NGO that is providing secretariat and logistic support to the widows' campaign.

"Most foreign donors, like Canada, told their NGOs to leave Iraq at the end of 2005, for security reasons, and these groups have found it increasingly impossible to provide continued long-distance support for job creation and other programmes for women even through Iraqi local groups," complains Hussein. "That is why we say the Iraqi government must follow the example of the Kurdish autonomous region, and introduce a universal minimum pension for widows. Rather than privatising our oil wealth, the government must manage it carefully, and use the benefits for the poor majority, rather than the elite and their foreign friends."

## Widows launch national initiative for rights and reconciliation

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The widows' campaign was launched last year by the Iraqi Women's League, and other groups from the secular left pole of the political spectrum. But the coalition has grown rapidly, to include professional associations of 'high risk' workers like doctors and journalists, middle-level civil servants and local religious leaders from all parts of the country.

Because many local religious leaders are strongly supportive of protection of widows and children, the campaign has facilitated the creation of local networks and relationships that undermine the dominance of sectarian politicians and militia chiefs. In some districts, the widows' campaign has facilitated confidence-building measures, like exchange visits between Sunni and Shiite clerics, or replacement of militia barricades by patrols of community leaders - older men, who are less likely to let minor incidents escalate.

In fact, the campaign offers a unique opportunity for secular and progressive groups to work in the poor districts which have mostly fallen under the control of sectarian militias, and where the only possibility for civic or political activity has been through the Islamist parties. Iraq Rising Women /Renaissance des femmes irakiennes is one of the left feminist groups which have targeted these poor districts as the new frontier for social movements. "With this campaign, we can cooperate with women and men who are the grass roots activists of the Islamist parties, and we can win them over to secular and progressive goals, explains Alia Abdeljabbar of Rising Women. Not by some abstract debate or slogan, but by obtaining tangible benefits for one of the poorest sectors in Iraqi society."

For example, campaigners in Basra discovered that local officials were requiring widows to have their pension requests countersigned by their father or brother. With the help of local media and some liberal theologians, they forced the removal of this requirement. "It was a typical example of the 'creeping Islamisation' of our society, explains Abdeljabbar. We have a secular constitution, but we are constantly fighting new regulations that re-impose patriarchal control over women. Iraqis don't know how to react to these - allegedly Islamic - reforms. But through actions of the widows' campaign they can see that a secular approach is closer to the way Iraqis are actually living and want to live these days."

*Post-scriptum :*

*The author works at Alternatives.*