

**SUBMISSION TO THE IRAQI COMMISSION**  
**FROM WIDOWS FOR PEACE THROUGH DEMOCRACY (WPD)**

Regarding the impact any action will have on:

- Reconstruction and Development in Iraq and the role of UK NGOs and other agencies
- Long term support for Iraq, including budgetary, policing, social services, democracy and civil society support.

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## **SUBMISSION TO THE IRAQ COMMISSION**

**From: WIDOWS FOR PEACE THROUGH DEMOCRACY (WPD), an NGO dedicated to promoting the human rights of widows in conflict and post-conflict countries.**

**Re impact of any action:**

- **Concerning reconstruction and development in Iraq and the role of UK NGOs and other agencies**
- **Concerning long term support for Iraq, including budgetary, policing, social services, democracy and civil society support**

### **WIDOWHOOD IN IRAQ: A NEGLECTED GENDER ISSUE**

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**The effects of decades of violence; the Iraq-Iran war, extra-judicial killings and now the occupation, insurgency and lawlessness have resulted in a significant increase in the numbers of Iraqi widows and wives of the “disappeared”.**

**There are no official statistics, but Iraqi women’s NGOs estimate that today, over 60% of all Iraqi adult women fall into this category. Our sources of information inside Iraq report that over 100 new widows are created every day.<sup>1</sup> Neglecting this important issue will have irrevocable consequences for Iraqi society.**

**The UK has an obligation, under international law, to set up an independent inquiry into the number of Iraqi deaths and casualties since the occupation, and to count the numbers of widows. Social policies – to support and rehabilitate families torn apart by the invasion – can only be effective if this inquiry is carried out. Recent reports (c.f. the Iraqi Body Count and the Lancet) estimate that some 65,000 civilians, mostly men have been killed since 2003.**

**The poverty, marginalisation and vulnerability of millions of Iraqi widows has been exacerbated by the prevailing violent situation, in which women, across Iraq, (whether Kurds, Shi'a or Sunnis) are now having to deal with repressive attitudes which discriminate against women, and particularly widows. They, their children and other dependants are amongst the most**

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<sup>1</sup> Email received from Iraqi women’s NGO in June.

**needy, whilst, at the same time these women hold crucially important roles as the sole supporters of their families. Without adult male relatives to protect them, and with limited opportunities for employment they are often trapped, within their homes. Honour killings, suicide, forced prostitution; trafficking, “widow-inheritance”, abductions and rape are now daily occurrences affecting widows of all ages. Many fleeing violence are internally displaced persons and refugees. Implementation of Art 41 of the draft Iraqi Constitution will only worsen their plight.**

**It is incumbent on the UK government not to abandon their commitment to gender justice in Iraq. It promised so much to the women of Iraq and these promises must be kept.**

**DFID funded the Iraqi Women’s Internship programme <sup>2</sup>from 2005 to 2006 at the WNC, and its positive achievements must not be allowed to fall by the wayside. DFID must increase its support for such programmes, as they have proved invaluable in the fight for gender equality. The UK government has a commitment to the women and the widows of Iraq, and should take the lead in this area; other major donors may then follow suit.**

**WPD was concerned to learn, in mid May, with reference to the rejection of its proposal, <sup>3</sup> under the framework of the Revised Political Participation Fund, that Iraq was no longer deemed to be a priority area in DFID’s work in the immediate future.**

**We respectfully request that the Iraq Commission give due consideration to the situation of widows in Iraq, to support an inquiry into their numbers and socio-economic status and the welfare of their children and other dependents. This would enable strategies to be developed which would ensure that they are fully able to participate in the peace-building and reconstruction process. Also, to ensure that the human rights of women as enshrined in the CEDAW, the Beijing Platform, and UN SCR 1325 are fully protected. Real reconstruction and development in Iraq depends on women being able to have equal participation. Poverty and inequality are the breeding grounds for future conflict.**

**(We believe that Lady Jay is already well aware of the situation of widows, since she was a speaker at the International Conference on International Widows Day, held last June at the FCO. We greatly appreciated her support that day and her participation in the APG on UN SCR 1325.)**

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<sup>2</sup> WNC A Journey of Discovery.

<sup>3</sup> Mapping and Profiling the Widows of Iraq. Proposal to DFID, May 2007.

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## **SUBMISSION**

### **1. Lack of statistics.**

As Lady Greenstock stressed, at the WPD/UNIFEM meeting at the UN CSW Round Table on Widowhood and Conflict, in 2004, the lack of statistics on widowhood in Iraq is a major obstacle in getting governments and donors, and the international community to address this vital and neglected issue. UN SCR 1325 requires “all actors in conflict resolution and prevention to consolidate data concerning women”. Since there is no *official* data on widowhood, the UK government should fully support efforts to gather this information. (All the previous data on widows in the census, compiled during the previous regime, is now completely out of date). Given that women are now in the majority – 60% women to 40% men, and that 60% of women fall into the category of widows or wives of the missing – the UK government must accommodate this reality when formulating policy in relation to peace building and reconstruction.

### **2. Independent Inquiry into Iraqi deaths and casualties.**

This is an obligation under international law, including UN resolutions. HMG should ensure that such an inquiry accommodates investigations into the numbers of widows and orphans.

### **3. Alternative methods of gathering information on widowhood.**

At present we have only rough estimates from our Iraqi NGO partners, in Kurdistan, Basra and Baghdad. The Iraq-Iran war, the atrocities under Saddam Hussein, (including the Anfal and Halabjaja massacres and gassings), and now the daily killings of Iraqis through the insurgency have created vast numbers of widows, many of whom are young mothers. Unofficial estimates suggest that between 100 and 150 new widows are created every day.<sup>4</sup> Many women are wives of the disappeared, not knowing whether they are widows or not. Some still hope for the return of their husbands, but in this situation their personal status is unclear leaving them with complex problems and unable to find closure and move on with their lives. For example, there are still mass graves to be identified and excavated. Women are extremely vulnerable in this situation.

### **4. A project to map and profile Iraqi widows.**

WPD has devised an alternative method of gathering such vital information which has been successfully used in Nepal. Using this method, it would be possible to identify Iraqi widows' numbers and ages, and other useful indicators such as numbers and ages of dependants, health, economic and education status, life-styles, basic and long-term needs, support systems, legal status, access to justice system, coping strategies, and experience of violence. Women's NGOs are the key to this process, it is they who are the custodians of this vital

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<sup>4</sup> Email correspondence received from Iraq women's NGOs throughout 2003 to 2007. The last in June, 2007.

knowledge, and who can be supported and trained to carry out simple surveys which can inform policy development. Such a project enhances the capacity building of women's and widows' organisations, furthermore supporting such an initiative in Iraq accords with UN SCR 1325.

#### **5. The UK's role in promoting gender equality and democracy in Iraq.**

The reputation of the UK government would be greatly enhanced in the region and internationally if it could take a lead in addressing widowhood issues, since no other donors are engaged with the topic. Moreover, since widowhood is a grossly neglected issue in almost all conflict-afflicted countries, programmes initiated or supported by HMG could be adapted in other regions. Iraqi widows' organisations could become leaders in the Middle East for putting widowhood issues on the map. In addition, a focus on widowhood would bring together women across Iraq, irrespective of ethnicity or religion. All widows, from the old to the very young, share common experiences and have common needs. As such, they can play their part towards the peace building and reconstruction of Iraq and be regarded not merely as helpless victims, but rather as playing key roles in their communities and as agents of change.

#### **6. Political representation and political participation of widows.**

The UK government needs to recognise, that women are *not* a homogenous group, but have diverse and complex needs. The most vulnerable and needy women, such as widows, are often not represented in the decision-making process. Despite the fact that 33% of the Iraqi government is comprised of women, their limited power base has meant they have been unable to fully represent and articulate the needs of their female constituents. With the increase in fundamentalism, female MPs have been unable to protest against the inclusion of Art. 41 in the draft constitution. Few women's NGOs speak out against the many issues of vital concern to widows such as inheritance rights, custody, forced remarriage, "temporary marriage", child marriage, or lack of social and financial support. Thus, there is a real need to promote, by all means, the establishment of a national federation of Iraqi widows, as an umbrella organisation for widows' associations across the land. Given that women now form a majority of the Iraqi population and that a majority of these are widows or wives of the "disappeared", the UK should take steps to ensure that the needs and rights of such women are protected and recognised. In this way widows' voices will be heard and appropriate policies developed in consultation with them.

#### **7. Why this issue is important.**

Widows as female heads of households, sole carers (of children, wounded, sick, traumatised and the elderly), are likely to be amongst the very poorest in their communities. The human rights of Iraqi women pre-1990's were far advanced compared to the position of other women in the region. Today, discrimination, oppression and increasing marginalisation has totally changed their lives. The poverty of widowhood, in an environment of violence, has had dire

consequences for their children, also entrapping them in poverty. WPD receives constant reports of children begging in the streets in order to support widowed mothers, and grandmothers. Children not in school are vulnerable to all manner of exploitation and abuse which will affect Iraqi communities for years to come, if not addressed now. Child marriage, relatively uncommon before the overthrow of Saddam, is now prevalent. Widows may be forced, through poverty, to give away, sell, or arrange child marriages for daughters they can no longer support. Children, denied education and training, are vulnerable to being recruited for terrorist activity, for prostitution and for trafficking. Lack of attention to the issues of widowhood in Iraq will increase poverty and inequality and create the environment for future conflict.

#### **8. Roles of UK NGOs in the reconstruction and development of Iraq.**

It is essential that the UK Government, through DFID and FCO programmes on gender justice in Iraq, support UK NGOs, which work in partnership with Iraqi Women's NGOs. WPD is the umbrella organisation for many widows' associations in various conflict-afflicted countries, including those in Iraq. It is also a founding member of GAPS UK (Gender Action on Peace and Security) which has helped put widowhood on the various agendas in the framework of UN SCR 1325, for example at the Wilton Park Conference on 1325 held last year. We hope that DFID would support WPD in organising a special meeting at the 2008 UN CSW, where the sub-theme is "*Women in Armed Conflict*" which could bring Iraqi widows to the UN to speak about their needs and roles.

#### **9. Special plight of the Anfal and Halabja widows of Kurdistan.**

WPD recently had meetings (through the agency of Ann Clwyd's office) with the Minister for Anfal Affairs, of the Kurdish Regional Government. The Minister asked for support from WPD to address the problem of the 50,000 Anfal widows, mirroring the concerns expressed in this submission, concerning lack of any official statistics about their numbers, life-styles, basic and long-term needs. These women, 20 years after the gassings, endure extreme economic and health problems. The small sums they receive from the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) are inadequate to sustain them.

WPD also works closely with the Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP), and has been training Kurdish women's NGOs on how to use the international human rights machinery to improve their status and participate politically and economically in development and democracy building. They also would welcome support from the UK government so that the issues of widowhood in Kurdistan could be addressed. Many widows returned to Kurdistan from Iran to live in great poverty and distress.

#### **10. Report on increasing suicide among women and girls of Kurdish population.**

Recently, we completed a fact-finding report, on behalf of KHRP,<sup>5</sup>(commissioned by the European Parliament) on “*The Increase in Suicide among Kurdish Women and Girls*”. Here again, lack of any reliable statistical information made investigation difficult. However, we were made acutely aware that suicide is on the increase, as well as honour killings disguised as suicide due to the extreme difficulties women are experiencing at the present time. Unsupported widowhood, gender-based violence, and forced marriages are seen, by our informants, as some of the causes.

### **11. Supporting the UK WNC Iraqi Women’s Internship programme.**

We would like to see more support given to the UK WNC so that it could continue to provide internships for Iraqi women and promote the “cascade” training that was such a success in 2005. It would be important, if the programme were revived, that DFID request a component on widowhood and one of the activists on widowhood issues, from Baghdad and from Kurdistan, are invited on to it.

### **12. The APG (Associated Parliamentary Group) on 1325, and its sub-group on widowhood.**

As Lady Jay will be well aware, the APG identified “widowhood” as one of the four key topics to be addressed by its 4 sub-groups. (The other three focus on Afghanistan, Iraq, and Gender Training of Troops). The widowhood sub-group, co-ordinated by WDP’s Director, identified a lack of statistics as the major obstacle – in all conflict-afflicted countries – to getting widowhood on national and international agendas concerned with conflict resolution, management and prevention. We mention this fact as it may help to persuade the Iraqi Commission that WPD is not a lone voice in expressing concern at the plight of widows. Others are now joining us with new understanding of the importance of addressing this issue if there is to be any hope of Iraq, and other countries emerging from conflict, enjoying real stability in the future.

### **13. Widows’ resource points in local and national government.**

It is vital that widows are supported, equipped, trained to participate in decision-making at all levels. The Iraqi Draft Constitution Committee did not have a single woman on its panel. There are no women speaking on behalf of the millions of widows either in the Iraqi Parliament, or in the Kurdistan Regional Government. The issues pertaining to widowhood are many and complex; therefore it is essential that those with the experience and knowledge of such women’s needs are fully consulted. As in so many countries in transition from conflict to reconstruction, the Ministry for Women is woefully under resourced. We recommend that DFID supports a separate Widowhood Office within the Ministry, with widow-focal points in local government so that widows, everywhere, have a point of reference where they can go for legal and other advice, and through which could help co-ordinate the Mapping and Profiling projects, so essential for addressing this issue.

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<sup>5</sup> KHRP “Increase in Suicide among Kurdish Women and Girls”. A report commissioned by the European Parliament. Team leader Margaret Owen.

In conclusion we would ask the Commission to take cognisance of the important and pivotal role that widows can play in the peace-building and reconstruction process in Iraq, and of the consequences, for all of Iraqi society, if their needs and roles are ignored. We would be happy to give a verbal submission to the Iraq Commission and answer any further queries you may have.

**Margaret Owen**  
**Chair**  
**Widows for Peace through Democracy**