

Submission to Iraq Commission

15 June 2007

Introduction

- 1- Serene Communications Limited is a training and consultancy company that specialises in inter-personal communications especially to do with women and diversity.
- 2- We were asked to undertake a scoping for DFID in 2004 of the women's movement in Iraq. Whilst in Iraq we facilitated a number of workshops and undertook a number of interviews. In preparation for this, our consultant met with the delegation of Iraqi women attending the CSW in 2004 and remained in contact with them. After the visit to Iraq, we kept in contact with an increasing number of Iraqi women, adding to our contacts as time went on and meeting with Iraqi women in person whenever possible.
- 3- In the autumn of 2004 we undertook further workshops with key Iraqi women and continued to send international news to the Iraqi women on a regular basis and thus be in contact by telephone and email on a regular/weekly basis. In the summer of 2006 we organised an event in London for Iraqis to assist with the training of the judiciary in gender justice and co-founded the International Coordination for Gender Justice in Iraq with the assistance of the Global Justice Centre.
- 4- This submission is therefore based on personal experience in Iraq and close contact with Iraqis both in Iraq and elsewhere.

Executive Summary

- 5- Iraq has developed an experience of cross cultural and inter-religious working over the years. The women's movement that exists within Iraq and the Diaspora is a testament to the continued wish of many Iraqi women to continue a multi-cultural and accepting society.
- 6- Women achieved a high status in Iraq, with a role in all professions and government and in the law, exemplified by the Personal Status Law of 1959. When we interviewed women, they testified that there was no barrier to them to be engaged in any profession and many were active in education.
- 7- However even in 2004 many of them were concerned over the plight of rural uneducated women whom they felt might be more easily manipulated into sectarianism.

- 8- With the end of the regime of Saddam Hussein, the women immediately engaged in a wide variety of activities including capacity building, social and political awareness, ICT skills, economic development skills and so on. Despite the real difficulties they were able to achieve a great deal.
- 9- The Iraq Women's network, which had its first conference in 2004 which our consultant attended in Baghdad, has developed since then to take a vital place in coordinating the work of the diverse women's organisations within Iraq. This network, which reaches across all divides, is a testament to the continuing ability of women to work together despite increasing sectarianism.
- 10- Within the Diaspora, the Women's Association for a Democratic Iraq, (WAFDI) plays a similar coordinating role and its list serve is another example of women from a wide variety of backgrounds working together for the advancement of women united by the love of their homeland. The story of their achievements is very positive.
- 11- Women's civil society must needs be supported if stability is to be established in Iraq.

Southern Iraq's internal security dynamic, and approaches to improving stability

- 12- Working with diverse Iraqi women, it becomes evident that with little input, these feisty, courageous and able women, are enabled to overcome tremendous difficulties and positively affect the lives of women and children across the country. It is our firmly held belief that the UK would be well placed to invest resources into assisting the women's organisations in the South of Iraq to increase stability. By enabling the organisations to develop and supporting them in their efforts, the UK would be able to listen to their views and thereby gain a substantive insight into underlying issues and future possibilities. In addition, enhanced economic stability would develop greater community cohesion, apart from the unifying effect of the work of the organisations themselves.

The political and economic situation in Iraq

- 13- Since the collapse of Saddam's regime women have actively campaigned against and finally overturned Resolution 137 issued in February 2004, which would have "cancelled" Iraqi Family/Personal Status law. They campaigned for a quota of 40% in the legislative bodies and secured 25%. Women won 86 seats in the present Parliament out of 275 (31%). There are women ministers in the government and there is a ministry dedicated to women's affairs. The women were able to undertake public awareness raising



campaigns and to mobilise themselves in regard to elections and the Constitution.

- 14- Unfortunately the hope of the first days have dwindled with the current legislation in place. There are many potential hazards and little protection of women's human rights. Much of the solution lies in the implementation of the law. If judges give opinions based on international instruments – which it is open for them to do, there is every possibility that the station of women will not diminish. However, if the law is implemented on the basis of religious or cultural belief, which is also an option, there is a real possibility that the plight of women will worsen with no legal restraints.
- 15- Currently rape and crimes in the name of "honour" are increasing. In addition the poor security situation and culture of kidnapping further disadvantages the vulnerable.
- 16- There is strong support for the view that the majority of households are now female headed, due to the high numbers of men killed or disappeared through war, regime pogroms or sectarian activity. Consequently the increased restriction in independence for women, both to move out of the home and to obtain a livelihood, is having a severe impact on the economic stability of the country. In addition the inability to find reasonable employment is forcing women and girls to resort to other forms of income generation such as prostitution or to suffer increasing poverty.

The role of UK troops in Iraq, and the strategic objectives of their deployment

- 17- UK troops have engaged in community building in Iraq and these activities should be highlighted.
- 18- Training Iraqi troops in gender awareness is essential. In so doing the UK will be implementing UNSCR 1325.
- 19- Liberia has a woman only peace keeping corps from India and this has proven very successful. There are other examples of the positive effect of women in peace keeping missions. Therefore the UK would do well to consider the use of women only corps and the more full deployment of women.

The UK's wider Middle East strategy including Iran and Syria.

- 20- From the outset, women have called for secure borders. All the women we have met have held the view that the lack of border controls has enabled those wishing for continued Iraqi instability to continue to enter Iraq. Securing the borders is thus a vital goal if stability is to be established.



- 21- A great number of Iraqi refugees now stay in Syria with an increase in Iraqi prostitution. There has also been an increase in trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation. The Syrian government have recently publicly recognised the situation. It would be helpful if the Syrian government could be encouraged to prevent further trafficking and prostitution especially of girls.

Domestic political considerations in the UK including the impact on community cohesion

- 22- Increased and effective support of civil society within Iraq, continued training for Iraqi civil society in the UK and elsewhere together with the celebration of these activities in the UK media and other mechanisms would be helpful.

Reconstruction, development and the role of UK NGOs and other agencies including long term support for Iraq

- 23- The situation women and girls are facing in Iraq has led to an unprecedented increase in mental health deterioration. As the number of female headed households is so high this has a significant effect on the situation of children and young people.
- 24- The lack of security and the threats to girls has resulted in fewer numbers of girls and young women attending school and higher education. In addition the rate of illiteracy among women has grown substantially. Iraqi women are living in an environment of increasing fear and violence. They face discrimination and violence in the street, at work and at home. Girls are kept home due to fear of rape or kidnap.
- 25- This deterioration in women's rights has added greater impetus to the work of Iraqi women in changing the Constitution which they see as vital. The attached documents attest to this. Every effort should be affected by the international community to support this struggle to ensure internal legislation that includes conformity to international human rights norms.
- 26- The international community must ensure full implementation of UNSCR 1325 to ensure that women are involved in decision making in order for a sustainable peace to be established.
- 27- International organisations assisted in the training of judges of the Iraq High Tribunal in gender justice. This work requires extension to other judges and those involved in judicial and criminal proceedings throughout Iraq.

Conclusion

- 28- Civil society organisations have emerged as a strong force in the struggle of women in Iraq. Without the equality of women and men, peace and



prosperity for Iraq is not possible. Therefore any plan for the future of Iraq must include a programme of increased support to Iraqi women's organisations by providing training, capacity building, and administrative support to ensure women's human rights are advanced through all means including the legal process.

- 29- Economic independence for women results in freedom to develop their political and social rights, and exercise their responsibilities and influence. Support for civil society organisations who assist women to develop skills that enhance their civil activity, assist in poverty reduction or working on constitutional change and political awareness, is essential.
- 30- Without support for the women's organisations, the goals of the MDGs relating to Iraq will not be attained.
- 31- Serene Communications is happy to have the opportunity to present this statement to the Iraq Commission and we look forward to your conclusions. We are hopeful that these will include robust support for the work of women's organisations and the recognition of the importance of women in all areas of endeavour and at all levels. The key role of women in society needs to be understood and promoted, to enable women and men at all levels of decision making to take this into consideration when creating country action plans and allocation of resources.