

Iraqi women see upheaval as a chance to advance their rights

by Heidi Kingstone

Iraq is a patriarchal society, and since the war, the situation is more precarious, with women being kidnapped and too afraid to go out on their own. Even going to a restaurant can be problematic.

Yet Ghofran, a female lawyer based in Nasiriyah in the south, felt it was important to make the arduous trip to Baghdad. She had recognised there were no facilities for women in her village, and so she sought out Mandana Hendessi, an Iranian-born Briton seconded from the British government's department of international development, based in Baghdad.

"I remember her coming into my office," says Hendessi, deployed to Iraq from September 2003 to April this year to work with the Coalition Provisional Authority. Hendessi's role as a senior expert in gender issues has been to steer programmes and women to the forefront of Iraqi politics and civil society.

After much planning and negoti-

ation, Ghofran may soon open a centre for women, giving them the opportunity to learn computing skills, how to run their own businesses or even how to sew.

Hendessi, and the many Iraqi women she has worked with across the country, see this as a seminal time for women, and Ghofran's battle symbolic of the challenge women in Iraq face. They are crossing those barriers with enthusiasm, hope and a smattering of success.

The worry is what happens next. The new Iraqi interim constitution suggests that a minimum of 25 per cent of seats should go to women in the legislature. The future will begin to deal with the important question of what role women will play.

Women are positive, and polls have shown that they see this time of upheaval as an opportunity to advance their roles, and despite the politics, take a pragmatic view.

But Hendessi worries that there is no sustainability strategy and that women will be deprived of the use of resources, especially as the security

situation worsens. At a site designated as a women's centre in Basra, men who wanted the building for their own purposes just came in and squatted. The British army got involved and, despite a battle, could not dislodge them.

Under Saddam Hussein, says Hendessi, the only functional official organisation was the Iraqi Women's Union. With those women out of favour after the war, there was not much foundation, and women realised that being attached to political parties was not going to help.

Some progress has been made. Starting with no structural foundation in the country, Hendessi witnessed women become far more proficient at lobbying, at influencing the government in their favour, and at focusing on the critical needs, many of which include ending the endemic violence against women.

Honour killings still sweep across Iraq, and as a result, women become victims of mutilation and death. Merely on the whisper of suspicion of adultery or thought not to be a

virgin on marriage, women can be murdered by their family.

"In many cases their ears and noses are cut off to restore the honour not only of the family, but also of the community," Hendessi says.

Women have been drawn together from all religious and ethnic denominations to start talking about development. Before sanctions took hold (and under Hussein) the public sector was the biggest employer of women. Under Paul Bremer, the head of the coalition authority, everything except oil was privatised, freezing employment – lethal for women. But in a patriarchal society where unemployment is rumoured to run as high as 70 per cent, just how effective can women be? How seriously can they be taken when chauvinism is so deeply rooted?

What Hendessi saw was a growing awareness of women's movements and women helping other women. Age is an advantage in being taken seriously, and so is coming from an important family and having professional qualifications.

"Women are more likely to be listened to if they have good family connections with men to back them up."

On her arrival, with limited contacts, just through word of mouth, hundreds turned up at her office.

Violence and inequality pose huge problems for society. During Hendessi's time there, the first crisis shelter opened in Baghdad, set up and run by Iraqis. Only a month before her arrival, the United Nations headquarters had been blown up; they were in retreat, so a vacuum existed in terms of development.

If the country splits up into three regions, as Hendessi and others feel is a real possibility, this may also work against the unity that women are just beginning to cultivate.

Many hurdles remain, and after the elections next year, it is possible that all the advances made will be repealed by a new, more traditional government. But, she says, there's a critical mass of women attempting to overhaul society against the odds, and that is cause for celebration.