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-Iraqi Women Celebrate Spirited Women's Day with PRT-

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Dhi Qar, Iraq - "The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world." These words from the famous poet William Ross Wallace are the ones that Shaza Al-Qaisi - leader of a civil society forum - chose to start off a spirited speech in front of 130 people, most of whom were women - at an International Women's Day event sponsored by the region's Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT).



Member of Iraqi women's civil society forum addresses PRT-sponsored conference in Dhi Qar Province.

An impressive number of high level provincial officials attended the March 10 celebration, including the Deputy Director of the Dhi Qar Provincial Council, who voiced strong support for equal rights for women in a speech he gave to the forum.

"It was an honor to host the Annual Women's Conference in our Training Centre," said PRT Leader Anna Prouse. The annual women's conference is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) Local Governance Program.

Increasing opportunities for political participation, opposing violence against women, providing a comprehensive education and addressing the discrimination that prevents women from participating in the economy - condemning them often to poverty - were all topics covered on this memorable spring day.

"Amazing! I could not believe my eyes when I saw that female crowd at our training centre," were Prouse's comments. "I have been in Iraq since 2003 and I should know better by now. Never underestimate the Iraqi people, especially not the women."

Musbah Eldik, the PRT cultural and media advisor added, "To see them gesticulate, raise the tone of their voices, stand up to make their point was so refreshing. Usually at conferences we listen and take notes, but this time it took a lot of self-control to be able to just sit back."

Musbah said she got yelled at by one lady with whom she disagreed on an issue but another one sitting next to her "instead agreed with me on the fact that religious leaders should be more determined to tackle violence against women."

In Dhi Qar discrimination against women increased after the fall of the Saddam regime. This forum provided a sounding board for the exceptional response from the province's women.

Without any doubt the words that made the most impact were those by forum leader Shaza: “All religions honor women. If you are told differently you are told a lie. But in spite of receiving complete recognition for our ability to love and be firm at the same time, for standing next to our men during peace and war, for taking care of the households while men are away, for sacrificing our lives for our children, the payback we get is abuse and violence!”

All eyes were fixed in the direction of this strong woman wrapped up in her black chador as she said, “We want to be able to participate actively in the political process. We don’t just want to fill empty seats in Parliament. We are more than pleasant pieces of decoration. It is time for us to be accepted and speak out our minds!”

The local TV crews who swarmed to the event had their cameras pointed on her, microphones were displayed on the podium from where she held her speech, and journalists were frantically taking notes standing on the sides of the hall.

“This is the largest gathering of prominent women to take place in Dhi Qar in a long time,” says Taleb Mousawy, assistant media director at Dhi Qar University. “More of these have to be organized. Why only once a year? Why not every four months on specific topics?”

Anna Prouse picked up on the theme of women’s self-empowerment saying, “I am treated with great respect. I sit at the same table with sheikhs, politicians and mullahs. It is time for your men to do the same with you now.

“Iraq is way ahead if we compare it to other countries. Look at the way they honor and listen to my advice. But I am a foreigner, dress like a foreigner and act like a foreigner: your men have to start treating you Iraqi women with the same respect they show me,” she added.

To make the discussions more productive the participants divided into three groups to discuss violence against women, female illiteracy, and expanding opportunities for women to fully participate in the political and economic life of Dhi Qar.

Both males and females agreed that the level of violence against women is at an unacceptable level. “Religious leaders oppose such behavior, but there is so much violence going on behind closed doors, that the change has to come within the families,” said a lady named Fatima at the roundtable on violence against women.

“If husbands treat their wives with respect this sets a positive model that their sons will want to follow. And their daughters will not accept being mistreated because they have been taught differently: they have breathed respect and love within the four walls of their homes, she told the gathering.