



Putting Down (Grass) Roots in the Desert: An Examination of Women for Women International's Development Strategy in Iraq

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Following the invasion of Iraq by American forces in 2003, the number of both international and grassroots organizations dedicated to the cause of women in Iraq significantly increased. However, scholars have asserted that the programming of some international organizations has done nothing to improve the lives of ordinary Iraqi women. Using interviews and desk research, this study examines the approach taken by US-based Women for Women International (WfWI) and analyzes whether or not its approach has effectively improved the lives of Iraq women, as well as the prospects of sustainability for WfWI in the future. The study looks at the WfWI program model of one-to-one sponsorship, the one-year training program that participants complete, and Iraq program outcome data provided by WfWI's monitoring and evaluation team. It finds that WfWI assists Iraqi women by addressing an entire spectrum of needs, both short-term such as relief distribution, and long-term such as supporting and assisting female-headed households through promoting income-producing activities. WfWI provides a template for sustainable involvement of international organizations in post-conflict situations such as Iraq.

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Introduction: Putting Down (Grass) Roots

As the last convoy of American troops left Iraq early on December 18, 2011, many wondered about the fate of the country moving forward. Would the grass be greener on the other side of American occupation? How green was the grass before the Americans invaded in 2003? These questions, and many others, have often been posed regarding Iraq and its population. Much attention has been paid to the situation of Iraqi women in particular, especially in light of the occupation. Despite their high placement on the agenda of American officials prior to the invasion in late 2002, life seems to only have gotten worse for the women of this war-torn nation.

As Al-Ali and Pratt, who have written extensively regarding the effects of the American occupation on the women of Iraq, have shown, the number of both grassroots and international women's organizations in Iraq increased substantially shortly before and after the invasion in 2003.¹ However, as they have explained, not all of these organizations are created equal. In fact, Zangana, an Iraqi scholar writing on the various difficulties faced by Iraqi women during times of war, argues that certain organizations being established (particularly American ones) are ineffective and irrelevant for the majority of Iraqi women.² She finds this especially true for organizations that deal with democracy promotion and political participation. While these aspects of post-conflict reconstruction are important, organizations' focus on them is not helpful in meeting the basic needs of Iraqi women who are living in poverty or in addressing other issues such as illiteracy and unemployment.³ Furthermore, writing in 2006, Brown and Romano called

¹ Nadjé Al-Ali and Nicole Pratt, "The United States, The Iraqi Women's Diaspora, And Women's 'Empowerment' In Iraq," in *Women And War In The Middle East*, ed. Nadjé Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt (London: Zed Books, 2009), page 79.

² Haifa Zangana, *City Of Widows: An Iraqi Woman's Account Of War And Resistance* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), page 81.

³ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 82.

for the international community to assist the fledgling Iraq government in providing basic necessities and services, especially for the women.⁴ As many international development theorists have demonstrated, however, simply providing immediate aid often does more harm than good.⁵

With all of these criticisms in mind, the odds seem stacked against an American-based international non-governmental organization that wants to make a difference at the grassroots level in Iraq. Nevertheless, Women for Women International (WfWI) seems to have risen to the challenge. Founded in 1993, WfWI is an American-based organization that works specifically in post-conflict situations where women are most at risk. The organization currently works in eight post-conflict countries worldwide and has been present on the ground in Iraq since 2003.

This study stands to provide a counter-argument to Zangana's criticism, as well as that of development theorists, and argues that despite valid concerns that exist with regard to a range of American organizations that have been largely unsuccessful in their attempts at women's empowerment in Iraq, there are examples of organizations in which a holistic method is taken and has proven to be successful. A holistic method in this context includes efforts to not only address women's political and civil concerns, but also to work on critical issues of economic and social challenges faced by them during transitional and post-conflict reconstruction periods. By examining WfWI's comprehensive approach, including the one-to-one sponsorship model, this study will seek to determine whether or not this approach is successful and positively affects the

⁴ Lucy Brown and David Romano, "Women in Post-Saddam Iraq: One Step Forward or Two Steps Back?" *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2006): page 65, accessed April 23, 2012, <http://www.mcgill.ca/files/icames/womeninIraq.pdf>.

⁵ William Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why The West's Efforts To Aid The Rest Have Done So Much Ill And So Little Good* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), page 3-30; Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working And How There Is A Better Way For Africa* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), Introduction.

lives of Iraqi women. Additionally, it will explore the prospects of sustainability for WfWI following the withdrawal of American troops in December 2011.

As a young woman in the United States, a considerable portion of the author's life has been colored by the American presence in Iraq and the media interpretation of that presence portrayed in the United States. As a result, several assumptions were formed regarding the women's situation in Iraq. Since these various assumptions are discussed in detail throughout the course of the study, they will only be discussed briefly here. When the author originally conceived the idea of a research project on women's organizations in Iraq, it was heavily influenced by the fact that American troops were in the process of completing their withdrawal from Iraq. Because WfWI is an American-based organization, the author assumed that there would be more of a connection between WfWI and the US, both of a monetary and political nature. Another assumption was made that perhaps WfWI would face challenges continuing to operate in Iraq once the American troops withdrew and that the program could not sustain itself. The author also assumed that due to the fact that the American occupation brought more instability than safety and security, women (and men) in Iraq would be resentful toward any organization that was American-based, and would thus not want to participate in any of its programs.

Assumptions were also made as to the organization's effectiveness and success rate, and the author suspected that WfWI would not be as successful in Iraq as it was in some of its other programs, like those in Africa. This assumption was based on preliminary research that revealed that several of the programs in Africa were considerably larger than the Iraq program in terms of women served. After studying various other development models such as those that are aid-based or resource-based, the author also conjectured that WfWI might operate similarly to the

ways in which large government development agencies work in that large sums of money would be dispersed, but with no obvious results being seen on the ground. The findings of this research challenged these assumptions.

The study begins with a review of the relevant literature that seeks to demonstrate where a study of this nature fits in among previous contributions regarding women and post-conflict reconstruction, the frameworks utilized in women and development discourse, and the use of gender mainstreaming in development in post-conflict situations like Iraq. A historical background follows, which briefly lays out the situation of Iraqi women going as far back as the Iran-Iraq War. This scope is used to provide the reader with a basis with which to understand the Iraqi women's current predicament and their immediate needs. While not an extensive comparison, it also seeks to show the difference in the situation for Iraqi women between the three wars that have taken place between 1980 and 2003.

The analysis will then delve into WfWI as an organization and provide a brief synopsis of its founding, mission, and objectives. Specific focus will be placed on the WfWI implementation strategy, including the one-to-one sponsorship model and the one-year training program in which all participants complete. Using program outcome data and several other measures, the study will go on to attempt to determine the success of the WfWI model. The analysis will also take into consideration some of the challenges that the WfWI program faces in its Iraq operations and attempt to determine the program's sustainability for the future. Finally, the study will conclude with the author's reflections of what has been accomplished, implications for the results, and possibilities for further research in the future.

Methodology

The subject for this study is the result of a prolonged research process focusing on the women's situation in Iraq. Upon reading a significant amount of literature on the topic, research focused specifically on the large number of women's organizations that formed in Iraq post-invasion, both grassroots and international. The original intention for the project was to study the grassroots organizations that were formed post-invasion and explore their effectiveness in comparison to that of the larger international NGOs. However, it quickly became apparent that information about the grassroots organizations would be difficult to come by. Thus, the research turned to larger international NGOs that have been making a positive impact in the lives of Iraqi women, particularly in the wake of the American withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011. After exploring these larger NGOs as well, it seemed more appropriate to study one organization in detail rather than to attempt surveying several with brevity. After further review, WfWI was chosen as the most appropriate case study for several reasons. First, WfWI was the first organization providing comprehensive programs to women on the ground in Iraq after the invasion in 2003. The organization also has a high rate of visibility and is relatively well-known to the general population in the United States. Additionally, because the organization and its programs are well-developed, there is more information available for review.

This study has been conducted primarily through desk research and was complemented by an extensive interview with a member of the WfWI headquarters staff in Washington, DC. The author thoroughly reviewed the organization's available annual reports and financial statements, as well as information provided on the website regarding the one-year training program. After this extensive review, a questionnaire for WfWI staff members was created and sent via email. After one staff member answered the questionnaire electronically, a follow-up

interview was conducted to clarify answers and ask additional questions. A staff member in the WfWI office in Baghdad was also provided an electronic copy of the questionnaire. However, it was not returned to the author in time to complete this study.

The interview conducted in the course of this research was essential to gaining an understanding of WfWI as an organization before attempting to analyze it. As Kvale and Brinkmann have asserted, interviewing is an active process where interviewer and interviewee through their relationship produce knowledge.⁶ The knowledge that was produced in this case was then used to answer the questions that the study posed. While not impossible, it would have been particularly difficult to accurately analyze WfWI without the insight provided through the interview. Kvale and Brinkmann also note that qualitative interviews are increasingly employed as a research method in their own right and lead to a form of analysis called a qualitative stance.⁷ This enables the researcher to describe the subject before theorizing about it, understand it before explaining it, and see its concrete qualities before focusing on the more abstract ones.⁸ This study utilized this qualitative stance extensively in order to analyze WfWI as thoroughly as possible.

The author then attempted to conduct an analysis of WfWI's implementation model and its potential for success, as well as the program's sustainability for the future. The author does not claim to be a scholar on the issues faced by women in Iraq, nor could field research there be conducted for the benefit of this study. However, this study is more than a conversational analysis of the benefits and pitfalls of WfWI. Rather, aided by previous analysis from other

⁶ Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, *InterViews: Learning The Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2009), page 17, accessed May 4, 2012, <http://books.google.com/>

⁷ Kvale and Brinkmann, *InterViews*, p. 11-12.

⁸ Ibid.

scholars, it is a critical assessment of the strategies employed by WfWI and their impact on the lives of Iraqi women at the grassroots.

Literature Review: How the Grass Was Before

Women and Post-Conflict Reconstruction

In the wake of the American occupation of Iraq, scholarly literature regarding the occupation's effects on women and how post-reconstruction will affect them has proliferated. Some scholars, such as Moghadam, have been optimistic, claiming that American promises to liberate Iraq and Iraqi women have been realized to the extent that many more NGOs, trade unions, and women's groups have been allowed to organize and operate independently.⁹ Others, such as Brown, are more skeptical, and note that Iraqi women have been disappointed and awakened to the fact that the Americans could not deliver all that they promised.¹⁰ Rather than assume an inaccurate binary of either the occupation has helped or it has not, the truth may be that it has done both.

Many scholars have noted that the war on Iraq, under the banner of the 'War on Terror', signifies the latest phase of US empire building and is particularly detrimental to Iraqi women. Ismael and Ismael maintain that the whole affair has installed a modern form of patriarchy, in which powerful states like the US play a male role of dominance and control and expect weaker states to adopt female roles of dependence, submission, and subordination.¹¹ Al-Ali and Pratt note that notions of democracy promotion, human rights, and women's empowerment are not merely a way of duping well-intentioned people into supporting military intervention, but are also integral to empire building.¹² Easterly similarly asserts that imperialism is back in fashion

⁹ Valentine M. Moghadam, "Peace-Building And Reconstruction With Women: Reflections On Afghanistan, Iraq, And Palestine," in *From Patriarchy to Empowerment: Women's Participation, Movements, And Rights In The Middle East, North Africa, And South Asia*, ed. Valentine M. Moghadam (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), page 335.

¹⁰ Brown and Romano, "Women in Post-Saddam Iraq: One Step Forward or Two Steps Back?" p. 56.

¹¹ Jacqueline S. Ismael and Shereen T. Ismael, "Gender And State In Iraq," in *Gender And Citizenship In The Middle East*, ed. Suad Joseph (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), page 207.

¹² Nadjie Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation? Women And The Occupation Of Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), page 5.

in the form of major nations taking over developing countries to help them because they cannot survive on their own.¹³ However, the reasons for helping them may be particularly self-serving. Al-Ali and Pratt observe that neoconservatives built on the ‘democratic peace thesis’ that democracies do not go to war with one another to argue that the promotion of democracy and women’s empowerment are the solutions to terrorism.¹⁴ Merkel suggests that this use of the democratic peace thesis would have been justified, had the US been prepared to contribute to long-term sustainable state- and democracy-building.¹⁵ Instead, the US neo-imperialist venture effectively created an ‘us versus them’ mentality between the US and Iraq regarding women’s identities and roles.¹⁶

The identities and roles of both women and men are particularly important to consider during times of conflict or violence. Al-Ali notes that the differentiation and relative positioning of men and women is an important ordering principle that pervades systems of power.¹⁷ Cockburn contributes that gender power is seen to shape the dynamics of every site of human interaction, from the household to the international arena.¹⁸ Thus, gender makes an appearance in every aspect of society, including war and violence. Cockburn also points to a ‘continuum of violence’, noting that armed conflict and war should not be considered as isolated incidents and that gender is manifest in the violence that flows through times of war and violence, but also

¹³ Easterly, *The White Man's Burden*, p. 269-272.

¹⁴ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, p. 8.

¹⁵ Wolfgang Merkel, "Democracy Through War?" abstract, *Democratization* 15, no. 3 (June 2008): page 487, accessed April 30, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

¹⁶ Michael L. Ferguson, "“W” Stands for Women: Feminism and Security Rhetoric in the Post-9/11 Bush Administration," *Politics And Gender* 1, no. 1 (2005): page 21, accessed April 15, 2012, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X05050014>.

¹⁷ Nadjie Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender: Iraqi Women between Dictatorship, War, Sanctions and Occupation," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 4-5 (2005): page 740, accessed April 1, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org.proxyau.wrlc.org/stable/3993718>.

¹⁸ Cynthia Cockburn, "GENDER, ARMED CONFLICT AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE" (Paper presented at Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence, The World Bank, Washington DC, June 10th & 11th 1999), accessed April 30, 2012, <http://repository.forcedmigration.org/pdf/?pid=fmo:5013>.

during times of peace.¹⁹ Galtung provides an explanation for this, arguing that there is violence in structures and culture also legitimizes violence.²⁰ Thus, even though the occupation has officially ended and physical violence has decreased, structural violence is still very much present and affecting the ways that women are able to participate in reconstruction.

Women are often characterized as the biological and cultural reproducers of the nation, and are employed in the task of creating the national image.²¹ During times of conflict, this can have varying effects, including the re-traditionalization of gender roles, which is held in place by what Kandiyoti describes as 'classic patriarchy'.²² As Sharoni demonstrates, conflict can also open up opportunities for transforming gender roles and relations.²³ In terms of Iraq, both effects seem present. While women have become heads of households and are participating in political activism, Al-Ali observes that the increased significance of primordial ethnic and religious identities goes hand and hand with more conservative and restrictive gender ideologies that are forming in post-invasion Iraq.²⁴ Ismael and Ismael similarly argue that the imposition of the Western model of social organization on the Arab world following conflict or occupation has resulted in the distortion, not displacement, of traditional patriarchy, thus allowing a new modern patriarchy to form.²⁵

¹⁹ Nadjie Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, "Women And War in The Middle East: Transnational Perspectives," in *Women And War In The Middle East*, ed. Nadjie Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt (London: Zed Books, 2009), page 9.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender", p. 741.

²² Al-Ali and Pratt, "Women And War in The Middle East", p. 15; Deniz Kandiyoti, "Islam And Patriarchy: A Comparative Perspective," in *Women In Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries In Sex And Gender*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), page 31.

²³ Simona Sharoni, *Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Politics of Women's Resistance* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), page 111, accessed April 30, 2012, http://books.google.com/books?id=q7bj8OGIcwoC&source=gbv_slider_cls_metadata_3_mylibrary.

²⁴ Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender", p. 741.

²⁵ Ismael and Ismael, "Gender And State In Iraq," p. 191.

Women and Development

Development is often informed by specific political and strategic goals. In Iraq, the US used the issue of women and their need for development to cover up the true motives for entering into Iraq. Stabile and Kumar argue that the focus on saving women in non-Western countries from the barbaric practices of their men shows two important characteristics of colonial/imperial domination: the protection scenario and Orientalism.²⁶ The protection scenario refers to men saving women from danger, while Orientalism stems from Said's work that portrays men in colonized countries as barbaric and women as oppressed and passive.²⁷ Spivak provides an interesting way to phrase this phenomenon, stating that Orientalism constitutes "white men saving brown women from brown men".²⁸ Al-Ali and Pratt point out that the US' actions in this case were not about the "brown women" living in oppressive conditions, but rather about the white men's masculinity and the need to assert that masculinity over other men.²⁹ Thus, the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq were used as a way to remasculinize the US international identity after 9/11.³⁰

Against the backdrop of this 'remasculinization', many Iraqi women are facing dire socioeconomic circumstances, as well as food and electricity shortages. Sachs cites several ways household income can increase, including saving, trade, technology, or a resource boom.³¹ However, Sachs does not take situations like war or sanctions into account, thus rendering his argument difficult to apply to the case of Iraq. Easterly calls for a more bottom-up approach in which development professionals find out what the reality of the situation is at the bottom, adapt

²⁶ Al-Ali & Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, p. 82.

²⁷ Al-Ali & Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, p. 83.

²⁸ Gayatri Spivak, "Can The Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism And The Interpretation Of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (New York: Macmillan, 1988), page 92.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, p. 83.

³¹ Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End Of Poverty: Economic Possibilities For Our Time* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), page 53.

to local conditions, and find solutions through trial-and-error.³² While noble, this solution also presents a problem in that the security situation in Iraq makes mobility increasingly difficult, especially for women.

The notion of international development must proceed with caution in any post-conflict setting because international aid often comes with unintended consequences. Polman asserts that the relevance, quality, and results of aid projects are almost never a priority for those executing them.³³ This has proven to be the case in Iraq, where US reconstruction plans were particularly controversial, as they entailed the privatization of Iraqi assets and special deals for US corporations.³⁴ Moghadam has also asserted that reconstruction or development should be viewed not only in terms of the repair or building of physical and social infrastructure but also in terms of establishment of participatory and egalitarian social and gender relations.³⁵ Considering the increasing difficulties facing women moving in the public sphere, this aspect of reconstruction does not seem to be occurring as quickly or as effectively as some would like. Hunt and Posa note however that even women from the most conservative regions of the country are enthusiastic about becoming involved in public life.³⁶ The difference in opinion speaks to the diversity of experience for women in Iraq.

NGO Involvement in Post-Invasion Iraq

An interesting progression in international development post-invasion has been the proliferation of NGOs both in Iraq and abroad. This growth has led to a significant amount of discussion regarding NGO effectiveness. The presence of NGOs in the Middle East is not a new

³² Easterly, *The White Man's Burden*, p. 6.

³³ Linda Polman, *The Crisis Caravan: What's Wrong With Humanitarian Aid?* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010), page 102.

³⁴ Moghadam, "Peace-Building And Reconstruction With Women", p. 337.

³⁵ Moghadam, "Peace-Building And Reconstruction With Women", p. 344.

³⁶ Swanee Hunt and Cristina Posa, "Iraq's Excluded Women," *Foreign Policy*, July-August 2004, page 44, accessed April 18, 2012, http://www.swaneehunt.com/articles/FP_IraqsExcludedWomen.pdf.

phenomenon. In an article focused on the growth of NGOs in the Middle East and North Africa, Moghadam notes that this growth accelerated either because state services were non-existent or because of widespread poverty and the inaccessibility of the poor to services that are increasingly privatized.³⁷

A US State Department report released in 2009 reveals the current NGO climate, showing that during the year activity and advocacy by the country's relatively new NGOs remained weak overall, with approximately 1,800 operational NGOs, 181 of those being women's rights NGOs.³⁸ While there has not been extensive scholarship published on the 'NGOization' of the Middle East and Iraq in particular, NGOs that have been formed by international governments or members of the Iraqi diaspora have met serious criticism from scholars. Jad notes a steady increase of NGOs in the region, as well as the consequent 'decentralization of power and politics' and argues that NGOs have 'sometimes been viewed as a tool for the West to expand its hegemony'.³⁹ In another publication, Jad argues that there are significant limitations to NGOs introducing genuine, comprehensive and sustainable development.⁴⁰ Zangana is equally critical and describes the complicity of what she refers to as 'the supply line of colonialism': NGOs, missionaries, and women's organizations.⁴¹ Furthermore, she refers to these groups as soft occupiers and stresses the importance of studying

³⁷ Valentine M. Moghadam, "Women's NGOs In The Middle East And North Africa: Constraints, Opportunities, And Priorities," in *Organizing Women: Formal And Informal Women's Groups In The Middle East*, ed. Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo, Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women (Oxford: BERG, 1997), page 29.

³⁸ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *2009 Human Rights Report: Iraq*, 2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, accessed April 15, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/nea/136069.htm>.

³⁹ Nadeen El-Kassem, "The Pitfalls Of A 'Democracy Promotion' Project For Women Of Iraq," in *Women, War, Violence, And Learning*, ed. Shahrzad Mojab (New York: Routledge, 2010), page 15.

⁴⁰ Islah Jad, "The NGO-ization Of Arab Women's Movements," in *Feminisms In Development: Contradictions, Contestations, And Challenges*, ed. Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison, and Ann Whitehead (London: Zed Books, 2007), page 178.

⁴¹ El-Kassem, "The Pitfalls Of A 'Democracy Promotion' Project For Women Of Iraq", p. 16.

the deep negative impact such groups can have on the fabric of society.⁴² This is especially pertinent to the case of Iraq, in which several women's organizations were created by the US and members of the Iraqi diaspora in Iraq both shortly before and after the invasion in 2003. Mojab also contributes to this discussion, noting that women's organizations re-orientalize women and have failed to challenge structural-patriarchal violence that continues to exist in the context of American occupation in Iraq.⁴³ These arguments seem to suggest that any American or Western NGO operating in Iraq espouses American policy and the occupation by extension. However, this is a blanket generalization and may not necessarily be true for every organization. On a more positive note, Moghadam points out that the very existence of women's NGOs, and their proliferation in recent years, challenges the patriarchal order that exists in the Middle East in rather profound ways.⁴⁴

Women's Rights as Human Rights

Much of the programming of NGOs and development programs in Iraq has focused on human rights, especially women's rights. However, Bunch posits that women's rights are not typically classified as human rights.⁴⁵ Binion provides an explanation, holding that women are often excluded from the human rights discussion because it is mainly male-dominated.⁴⁶ When questioning the state's responsibility in protecting women's human rights, the yardstick used to measure the situation sees the male as the norm, thus leaving little room for assessing the

⁴² El-Kassem, "The Pitfalls Of A 'Democracy Promotion' Project For Women Of Iraq", p. 16.

⁴³ Shahrzad Mojab, "Post-War Reconstruction', Imperialism, And Kurdish Women's NGOs," in *Women And War In The Middle East*, ed. Nadjie Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt (London: Zed Books, 2009), page 101.

⁴⁴ Moghadam, "Women's NGOs In The Middle East And North Africa", p. 43.

⁴⁵ Charlotte Bunch, "Women's Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (November 1990): page 486.

⁴⁶ Gayle Binion, "Human Rights: A Feminist Perspective," in *Women's Rights: A Human Rights Quarterly Reader*, ed. Bert B. Lockwood (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), page 71.

women's rights need.⁴⁷ Kandiyoti asserts that there is a global disparity of women's rights in what is and what should be. Because states often do not have the capacity (or the political will) to deal with women's rights issues, women then turn to tradition and religion for their rights and values.⁴⁸ Additionally, in situations of post-conflict such as Iraq, an expansion of women's formal rights cannot be expected to translate into actual gains in the absence of security and the rule of law.⁴⁹ Similarly, Al-Ali and Sow also point to the fact that an increase in conservatism and religious idealism is rooted in an attempt to oppose the occupying forces and the imposition of Western values.⁵⁰

In the wake of the invasion and its aftermath, heavy emphasis was placed on the need to increase women's political participation. As Hunt and Posa explain, greater political participation by women could provide Iraq with a stabilizing force needed to stave off the potentially disastrous division of the country into ethnic states.⁵¹ In contrast, Brems notes that policy needs to be more focused on social and economic rights instead of civil and political rights.⁵² However, Steiner et. al. explains that the implementation of economic, social, and cultural rights is the greatest challenge facing human rights activists.⁵³ Common arguments for this difficulty include lack of resources and the 'unmanageable' nature of economic, social, and

⁴⁷ Bunch, "Women's Rights as Human Rights", p. 492.

⁴⁸ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Political Fiction Meets Gender Myth: Post-Conflict Reconstruction, 'Democratization', And Women's Rights," in *Feminisms In Development: Contradictions, Contestations, And Challenges*, ed. Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison, and Ann Whitehead (London: Zed Books, 2007), page 196.

⁴⁹ Kandiyoti, "Political Fiction Meets Gender Myth", p. 197.

⁵⁰ Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender", p. 753; Fatou Sow, "Fundamentalisms, Globalization, And Women's Human Rights In Senegal," in *Women Reinventing Globalization*, ed. Joanna Kerr and Caroline Sweetman, Focus On Gender (Oxford: Oxfam, 2003), page 72-73.

⁵¹ Hunt and Posa, "Iraq's Excluded Women", p.43.

⁵² Eva Brems, "Protecting The Rights Of Women," in *Human Rights In The World Community: Issues And Action*, ed. Richard Pierre Claude and Burns H. Weston, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), page 127.

⁵³ Henry Steiner, Philip Alston, and Ryan Goodman, *International Human Rights In Context: Law, Politics, Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), page 276.

cultural rights in terms of enforcement and implementation.⁵⁴ Alston refutes these arguments and claims the real cause of hesitancy regarding these rights is a lack of political will.⁵⁵ This is especially the case in Iraq, due to both the nature of the Iraqi government and the US, which is still very influential in the Iraqi political landscape.

The use of a Western framework for analyzing both rights and the general situation for women in Iraq has been highly criticized by scholars, including Zangana and Al-Ali. Brems contributes that the Western feminist mindset may be totally disconnected from the experience of women on the ground.⁵⁶ She observes further that Western feminists have to be sensitive to women's rights to make choices within their particular setting as well. Lewis offers a solution in the form of a 'world-traveling approach', which entails remaining respectful of women's cultural traditions and their decision to practice them.⁵⁷ While this is certainly an important idea to consider, especially in the case of Iraqi women, it is imperative that this does not give way to cultural relativism. Lewis also observes that it is especially difficult for women of color to navigate within the traditional human right system.⁵⁸ With that in mind, some kind of hybrid rights-based approach with the reality on the ground as its focus would be the most effective in the case of Iraqi women.

The subject of rights-based approaches to women's development has been another important topic of discussion amongst scholars. Tsikata points out that rights-based approaches are ineffective because states do not have the accountability necessary to encourage it. Furthermore, women as individuals are not usually taken into account and are considered as a

⁵⁴ Steiner, *International Human Rights In Context*, p. 276.

⁵⁵ Steiner, *International Human Rights In Context*, p. 308.

⁵⁶ Brems, "Protecting The Rights Of Women", p. 132.

⁵⁷ Hope Lewis, "Embracing Complexity: Human Rights in Critical Race Feminist Perspective," *Columbia Journal Of Gender And Law* 12 (2003): page 3.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

collective instead.⁵⁹ As Al-Ali and Pratt discuss, variables such as social class, urban versus rural identities, and political orientation have historically cut across religious and ethnic groups in Iraq.⁶⁰ This makes being considered as a collective particularly problematic. While there are many advantages to a rights-based approach, Uvin has argued that development rhetoric has taken up the language of rights without any substantive changes in policies or programs.⁶¹ This may in fact be the case in Iraq, where the discussion on women's rights has not had a significant impact on the improvement of the lives of everyday women.

Empowerment and Gender Mainstreaming

Arguably, the ultimate goal for pursuing development in Iraq would be to lead to women's empowerment there. According to the UN Population Information Network, women's empowerment has five components: women's sense of self-worth, their right to have and to determine choices, their right to have access to opportunities and resources, their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home, and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.⁶² Batliwala notes that empowerment should be manifested as a redistribution of power and stand as a challenge to patriarchal ideology.⁶³ Batliwala also argues that empowerment must be externally induced by forces that are objective and aware that the

⁵⁹ Dzodzi Tsikata, "Announcing A New Dawn Prematurely? Human Rights Feminists And The Rights-Based Approaches To Development," in *Feminisms In Development: Contradictions, Contestations, And Challenges*, ed. Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison, and Ann Whitehead (London: Zed Books, 2007), page 217.

⁶⁰ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, p. 54.

⁶¹ Tsikata, "Announcing A New Dawn Prematurely?", p. 214.

⁶² Secretariat of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on the Implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, *Guidelines On Women's Empowerment*, page #s, accessed April 30, 2012, <http://www.un.org/popin/unfpa/taskforce/guide/iatfwemp.gdl.html>.

⁶³ Srilatha Batliwala, "The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New Concepts from Action," in *Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment and Rights*, ed. G. Sen, A. Germain, and L.C. Chen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), page 130.

current situation is unjust and unnatural.⁶⁴ The events of the past nine years in Iraq have showed that this approach was attempted by the United States and was not particularly successful.

Kabeer maintains instead that empowerment often begins from within and involves changes in the way people perceive themselves and their capacity for action.⁶⁵ This is not to suggest that some outside assistance is not necessary. Kabeer writes elsewhere that empowerment comes through efforts of actors who have access to the funds, contacts, and information necessary to set them up.⁶⁶

Much of the international focus on empowerment has been centered on the idea of gender mainstreaming and its potential for promoting women's empowerment and gender equality. The concept and definition of mainstreaming has been heavily debated. Woodford-Berger defines it as "a long-term strategy or systematic institutional approach for promoting and/or producing gender equality as a policy outcome".⁶⁷ This, however, is not particularly helpful when it comes to strategies of implementation or measurement of success. In addition, it does not denote what kind of gender equality is being strived for. Walby identifies three different models of gender equality: equality based on sameness, equality in valuation of existing and different contributions of women and men in a gender segregated society, and the transformation of gender relations.⁶⁸ Furthermore, gender mainstreaming is made even more complicated when gender may mean something different from one place to another, eliciting a different approach to mainstreaming.

⁶⁴ Batliwala, "The Meaning Of Women's Empowerment", p. 130.

⁶⁵ Naila Kabeer, "Gender Equality And Women's Empowerment," in *Gender Mainstreaming In Poverty Eradication And The Millennium Development Goals*, Gender Management System Series (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2003), page 172.

⁶⁶ Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies In Development Thought* (London: Verso, 1994), page 256.

⁶⁷ Prudence Woodford-Berger, "Gender Mainstreaming: What Is It (About) And Should We Continue Doing It?" in *Feminisms In Development: Contradictions, Contestations, And Challenges*, ed. Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison, and Ann Whitehead (London: Zed Books, 2007), page 124.

⁶⁸ Sylvia Walby, "Introduction: Comparative Gender Mainstreaming In A Global Era," *International Feminist Journal Of Politics* 7, no. 4 (December 2005): page 455, accessed April 30, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

Eveline and Bacchi demonstrate that different understandings of gender are attached to different reform approaches, thus inhibiting the efficacy of the mainstreaming strategy.⁶⁹

Despite these criticisms regarding gender mainstreaming, the introduction of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) created a platform for engagement with women at various levels of post-conflict reconstruction, such as those that exist in Iraq. UNSCR 1325 specifically “urges member states to ensure increased representation of women in all decision-making levels in national, regional, and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict”.⁷⁰ This resolution was groundbreaking in that it committed *all* agencies of the UN and *every* UN member state to ensuring that women and their concerns became indispensable at every decision-making stage in peacekeeping and national reconstruction in any area of armed conflict.⁷¹ Additionally, UNSCR 1325 stresses gender sensitivity, gender mainstreaming, and the appointment of gender advisors, as well as legislates protection for women and works towards the full inclusion of local women’s peace initiatives.⁷² While an admirable step toward women’s inclusion in the peace-building process, Al-Ali and Pratt note that UNSCR 1325 does not guarantee that women will necessarily be empowered to participate.⁷³ In another instance of gradation, McLeod recognizes that while UNSCR 1325 is designed to operate in post-conflict contexts, ‘post-conflict’ is a discourse with

⁶⁹ Joan Eveline and Carol Bacchi, “What are We Mainstreaming When We Mainstream Gender?” abstract, *International Feminist Journal Of Politics* 7, no. 4 (December 2005): page 496, accessed April 30, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

⁷⁰ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1325 (2000)*, http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf.

⁷¹ Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist: Searching For Women In A New Age Of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), page 301.

⁷² Shahrzad Mojab, “Introduction: Women, War, Violence, And Learning,” in *Women, War, Violence, And Learning*, ed. Shahrzad Mojab (Routledge: New York, 2010), page 2.

⁷³ Al-Ali and Pratt, “Women And War In The Middle East”, p. 20.

varied temporal and spatial aspects, which raises questions about how those different perspectives affect the effectiveness of mainstreaming on the ground.⁷⁴

Objections and criticisms of gender mainstreaming in general and UNSCR 1325 in particular abound. Standing has been particularly critical, arguing that a sector bureaucracy is not the correct place for gender mainstreaming to be administered because they are not engines of social and political transformation.⁷⁵ Prugl, in examining power politics and mechanisms used by feminists in regard to the state, holds that the success of gender mainstreaming is limited and slowed down by those power mechanisms.⁷⁶ Woodford-Berger argues that gender mainstreaming is not helpful because it stems from Eurocentric development paradigms about how mainstreaming should be implemented.⁷⁷ Mukhopadhyay notes that gender mainstreaming is ultimately a political project, and requires moving policymakers into unfamiliar territory of power and social injustice.⁷⁸ In the case of Iraq, Al-Ali has focused particularly on the fact that gender mainstreaming in general and UNSCR 1325 in particular has been seen as a threat to cultural values and an imposition of Western ideas.⁷⁹ In contrast to the aforementioned authors, Moser has a more nuanced interpretation. The issue, she claims, is not so much one of the failure or success of gender mainstreaming, as it is of deconstructing the concept and its different

⁷⁴ Laura McLeod, "Configurations of Post-Conflict: Impacts of Representations of Conflict and Post-Conflict upon the (Political) Translations of Gender Security within UNSCR 1325," abstract, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, no. 4 (December 2011): page 594, accessed April 30, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

⁷⁵ Hilary Standing, "Gender, Myth, And Fable: The Perils Of Mainstreaming In Sector Bureaucracies," in *Feminisms In Development: Contradictions, Contestations, And Challenges*, ed. Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison, and Ann Whitehead (London: Zed Books, 2007), page 104.

⁷⁶ Elisabeth Prugl, "Does Gender Mainstreaming Work?" abstract, *International Feminist Journal Of Politics* 11, no. 2 (June 2009): page 174, accessed April 30, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

⁷⁷ Woodford-Berger, "Gender Mainstreaming: What Is It (About) And Should We Continue Doing It?", p. 123.

⁷⁸ Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay, "Mainstreaming Gender Or 'Streaming' Gender Away: Feminists Marooned In The Development Business," in *Feminisms In Development: Contradictions, Contestations, And Challenges*, ed. Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison, and Ann Whitehead (London: Zed Books, 2007), page 138.

⁷⁹ Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender", p. 744.

stages into a viable implementation process, with appropriate indicators to monitor or evaluate it.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Caroline Moser, "Has Gender Mainstreaming Failed?" *International Feminist Journal Of Politics* 7, no. 4 (December 2005): page 585, accessed April 30, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

Historical Background: Before the Grass Grew

To best put the current women's situation in Iraq into context, this brief historical background will begin at the very end of the Iran-Iraq War and focus mainly on the First Gulf War and the resulting sanctions. The purpose of highlighting this particular time period is several-fold. First, the state of the nation at the end of the Iran-Iraq War sets the stage for the impact actions taken during the First Gulf War would ultimately have on the Iraqi populace. Second, the First Gulf War marks the beginning of a trend of American involvement in Iraq and its ramifications illustrate the dire situation of the Iraqi population. Third, and perhaps most importantly, this period illuminates the deteriorating effect that thirteen years of sanctions have had on the entire population, but especially on the women of Iraq.

The Iran-Iraq War, while a particularly important part of Iraqi history, is mentioned here briefly and only for the purpose of setting the stage for the conflict with Kuwait and the subsequent beginning of the First Gulf War. The Iran-Iraq War served as Saddam Hussein's attempt to assert power and ultimately challenge Iranian dominance in the Middle East. The status of women in Iraq changed in varying ways during this time. While the war enabled women to take responsibility in both the public and private spheres, the war also caused a change in gender identities in which men were cast as protectors and women were deemed the essence of honor, which needed to be protected.⁸¹ Women's experiences during the Iran-Iraq War differed greatly, depending on various factors such as ethnicity and social class.⁸² Many Iraqi women have asserted that they felt the situation, while not ideal, was better in the years of the Iran-Iraq

⁸¹ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, page 37-38.

⁸² Ibid.

War than during the wars in 1991 and 2003.⁸³ However, many others' lives were inalterably changed due to the loss of husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons as a result of the fighting.

The failure of Iraq to secure a swift victory weakened the political and economic capacity of the Iraqi regime, the latter of which had a particularly detrimental effect on Iraqi women.⁸⁴ At the beginning of the war, the regime took on a "business as usual" approach and refrained from instituting any austerity measures. To the contrary, a full range of food and consumer goods was still available and health care and other services continued to be offered.⁸⁵ However, the economic situation began to plummet in 1983, making basic necessities hard to come by.⁸⁶ In order to fund this long-lasting project, Iraq had incurred great debts to several other countries, including Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, as well as the United States.⁸⁷ And yet, the economic situation was not entirely desperate and prudent policy would have helped remedy the situation. The situation with Kuwait and the subsequent sanctions may not have affected Iraq so harshly had prudent policy been undertaken in 1988 after the war with Iran.⁸⁸

Unfortunately, those policies were not put into place and Iraq came out of the conflict with Iran to find itself abandoned by the Arab Gulf States, including Kuwait. As Zangana described, the Iraqi nation and people were not given a chance to "catch their breath" after the war with Iran.⁸⁹ Only two years later, in 1990, after Kuwait suddenly demanded the return of funds given during the Iran-Iraq War that had been perceived as gifts, Iraq invaded Kuwait.⁹⁰

⁸³ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, page 37-38.

⁸⁴ Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution To Dictatorship* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. Publishers, 1990), page 265.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Farouk-Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, p. 270.

⁸⁷ Farouk-Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, p. 273.

⁸⁸ Farouk-Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, p. 280.

⁸⁹ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 72.

⁹⁰ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 53-54.

To Saddam's surprise, the US and a large part of the international community came to the aid of Kuwait following the invasion.⁹¹ The United Nations Security Council passed Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 678 on November 29, 1990, which allowed the use of force against Iraq in response to the invasion of Kuwait. The US and its allies began the offensive on January 16, 1991 and the US bombed Iraq for six weeks, destroying power stations, oil refineries, water treatment plants, and contaminating the country with bombs laced with depleted uranium.⁹²

Operations were finally ended on February 28 following Iraq's announcement that it would fully accept all UN resolutions passed since its invasion of Kuwait.⁹³ The American victory was defeating in many ways and contributed to the loss of the people's independence and sense of dignity.⁹⁴ The war, while rather short, obviously caused significant physical and societal damage that in regular circumstances would have been relatively simple to repair.⁹⁵ However, in the case of Iraq, the situation was exacerbated by the enforcement of sanctions.

Sanctions were actually put in place several months before the American offensive in January. International sanctions were imposed by UN Resolution 661 on August 6, 1990, which prohibited all UN members from buying oil from Iraq and from having virtually any other commercial, financial, or military dealings with the country.⁹⁶ As many scholars have noted, the most significant feature of the sanctions regime was its extensiveness, since it prohibited not

⁹¹ Ibrahim Ibrahim, "Introduction," in *The Gulf Crisis: Background And Consequences*, ed. Ibrahim Ibrahim (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1992), page 14-15.

⁹² Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 73.

⁹³ Hala Fattah, *A Brief History Of Iraq* (New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2009), page 230-231.

⁹⁴ Michael C. Hudson, "Washington's Intervention In The Gulf," in *The Gulf Crisis: Background And Consequences*, ed. Ibrahim Ibrahim (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1992), page 74.

⁹⁵ Phebe Marr, "Iraq's Future Plus Ca Change...Or Something Better?" in *The Gulf Crisis: Background And Consequences*, ed. Ibrahim Ibrahim (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1992), page 148-150.

⁹⁶ Fattah, *A Brief History of Iraq*, p. 233.

only the sale of anything to Iraq but the purchase of anything from Iraq.⁹⁷ The sanctions had many deleterious effects on the Iraqi population, some overt and physical, others covert and intangible.

Some of these effects included child mortality, rampant malnutrition, increased rates of leukemia and other cancers, epidemic diseases, and birth defects are among the most obvious side effects of the sanctions regime.⁹⁸ Women in particular suffered from psychological effects such as depression, insomnia, weight loss, and headaches due to shock, the death of their children, anxiety, and concern for the future.⁹⁹ Many professional women had to quit their jobs because their incomes could not cover the cost of transportation to and from their jobs.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, sanctions had a horrible impact on social services such as education and health care.¹⁰¹

Some scholars would go so far as to say that the sanctions regime presents the most decisive factor in shaping the everyday living conditions, options, and restrictions of the majority of Iraqi women.¹⁰² However, the heterogeneity of Iraqi women must be taken into account. Different women have been affected in different ways by the sanctions depending on ethnic and religious differences and rural and urban residence.¹⁰³ Social class was a particularly important determining factor in measuring the impact of sanctions. Women from low-income classes in urban areas or poor women from the countryside were affected most harshly and sheer survival

⁹⁷ Abbas Alnasrawi, "Sanctions And The Iraqi Economy," in *Iraq: Its History, People, And Politics*, ed. Shams C. Inati (New York: Humanity Books, 2003), page 217.

⁹⁸ Nadjé Al-Ali, "Women, Gender Relations, And Sanctions In Iraq," in *Iraq: Its History, People, And Politics*, ed. Shams C. Inati (New York: Humanity Books, 2003), page 233; Fattah , *A Brief History of Iraq*, p. 235

⁹⁹ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 74.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 74-75; Al-Ali and Pratt , *What Kind of Liberation*, p. 47; Nadjé Sadig Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories From 1948 To The Present* (London: Zed Books, 2007), page 192-193.

¹⁰² Al-Ali, "Women, Gender Relations, And Sanctions In Iraq", p. 233.

¹⁰³ Al-Ali, "Women, Gender Relations, And Sanctions In Iraq", p. 236.

became the main aim of their lives.¹⁰⁴ Despite that, sanctions brought considerable material strain for women of all social classes.

As painful as the material strain was, women faced even greater hardship in the form of a change (for the worse) in the social climate of Iraq. The breakdown of the welfare state had a disproportionate effect on women and a shift toward greater social conservatism and more restrictive gender ideologies and relations became evident during sanctions.¹⁰⁵ Increased state Islamization also became prevalent and women were forced into conservatism.¹⁰⁶ In this changed social climate, young women felt pressured to act and behave in an entirely different way than their mothers had twenty years earlier.

The sanctions regime also had an effect on marriage and family life. Many women were forced to marry men much older than them or not be married at all.¹⁰⁷ Scholars have debated about the effect of sanctions on family. Some argue that the sanctions caused families to rely more on their extended family and turn against the growing Western trend of embracing nuclear families.¹⁰⁸ Others argue the exact opposite, citing the fact that survival of the immediate nuclear family was of top priority and that limited resources would require a decreased level of the hospitality that is expected in Iraqi culture.¹⁰⁹

Another unfortunate element of the sanctions regime was the Iraqi regime's response to it. The regime was particularly unhelpful in aiding the women of Iraq. Instead, the Ba'athist regime issued disastrous decrees against women's basic human rights, such as prohibiting women to travel abroad on their own, granting immunity to men who committed honor crimes,

¹⁰⁴ Al-Ali, "Women, Gender Relations, And Sanctions In Iraq", p. 236.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, p. 46, 49.

¹⁰⁶ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 76.

¹⁰⁷ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, p. 47; Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, p. 196-197.

¹⁰⁸ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 110.

¹⁰⁹ Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, p. 199; Al-Ali, "Women, Gender Relations, And Sanctions In Iraq", p. 238.

and other prohibitive measures.¹¹⁰ Ultimately, the state withdrew its political support for women's equality and participation in public life, adopting a more conservative and restrictive gender ideology.¹¹¹

However, women did not simply receive these changes passively. Many scholars have highlighted the strength of Iraqi women and their ability to deal creatively with their particular situation throughout the turbulence of the past three decades. Some allege that women have dealt with the turmoil better than Iraqi men.¹¹² Indeed, the campaign for women's rights in education, the workforce, and politics has been waged vigorously by Iraqi women's activists since the 1940s.¹¹³ During times of political violence and intifadas (popular uprisings), women were actively involved in delivering messages, distributing leaflets, transferring weapons, hiding printing equipment, and caring for the wounded, among other tasks.¹¹⁴ Despite this history of political participation and activism, women's autonomous political participation came to an end in the 1970s with the entrance of the Ba'ath regime.¹¹⁵ During the 1980s and 1990s under Saddam, some gains previously made by women activists were eroded; however, the personal status law, remained in effect.¹¹⁶ Put into place in 1959, the personal status law included many provisions that were favorable to Iraqi women, including restrictions for child and forced marriages, polygamy, and divorce and inheritance rights.¹¹⁷ Other more recent gains for the women's movement include the publication of magazines and newspapers that focused on

¹¹⁰ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 79; Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, p. 49.

¹¹¹ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, p. 53.

¹¹² Al-Ali, "Women, Gender Relations, And Sanctions In Iraq", p. 236.

¹¹³ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, p. 53.

¹¹⁴ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 41.

¹¹⁵ Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender", p. 754.

¹¹⁶ Noga Efrati, "Back To Square One: Women's Rights In Post-Invasion Iraq," in *Post-Saddam Iraq: New Realities, Old Identities, Changing Patterns*, ed. Amnon Cohen and Noga Efrati (Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2011), page 178.

¹¹⁷ Efrati, "Back to Square One", p. 176.

cultural and women's issues, such as *Sharazad* magazine in 2000, *Al Jandar* newspaper in 2001, Bulletin in 2001, and *Afaq* literary magazine in 2002.

Despite these gains, the women of Iraq were experiencing harsh oppression under the Saddam Hussein regime. Thus, some of the staunchest supporters of the US-led invasion were Iraqi diaspora women.¹¹⁸ These women were encouraged by the fact that notice was finally being taken regarding the danger that Hussein's reign posed to women in Iraq.¹¹⁹ Others were not particularly confident in the US rhetoric regarding the liberation of Iraqi women, but felt that US involvement would be the only way to rid Iraq of Saddam Hussein and his regime.¹²⁰ However, their decision to support the invasion might have been different had they known what an invasion and subsequent occupation would bring. On March 20, 2003, the US launched its first series of air strikes on Baghdad, destroying much of the Iraqi civilian infrastructure that had been rebuilt after the 1991 war.¹²¹ Despite a declaration of victory in May of 2003, the US continued aerial attacks on other cities, such as Fallujah in November 2004. From October 1, 2005 to February 6, 2006, US warplanes attacked at least 22 Iraqi cities.¹²²

This was surely not what liberation was supposed to look like. Indeed, as Zangana wrote four years into the occupation, the situation of all Iraqis, particularly women, was just as dire as before. Despite American rhetoric of women's liberation from oppression, the women's situation in Iraq has regressed severely since the occupation began. For example, female illiteracy is at its highest level since the 1930s and high levels of unemployment have fueled

¹¹⁸ Nadjé Al-Ali and Nicole Pratt, "The United States, The Iraqi Women's Diaspora, And Women's 'Empowerment' In Iraq," in *Women And War In The Middle East*, ed. Nadjé Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt (London: Zed Books, 2009), page 67.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 87.

¹²² Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 96-97.

prostitution, back-street abortions, honor killings, and domestic violence.¹²³ The abuse, rape, and torture of Iraqi women have been on the rise (not decline) since the occupation began.¹²⁴ In 2007, more than ninety women became widows each day due to continuing violence all over Iraq.¹²⁵ Yanar Mohammed, founder of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, has written that "Iraqi women are devastated now, and it will take decades of struggle to regain a peaceful and civilized life".¹²⁶

Obviously, US attempts at women's 'empowerment' in Iraq have been less than helpful. The vast majority of funding in support of women appears to have been directed for the training of women as participants in political, civil and economic processes.¹²⁷ As Zangana has pointed out, in order to understand Iraqi women's priorities under occupation, it is important to identify the complexity of their situation, and to appreciate it beyond a Western feminist point of view.¹²⁸ The Americans sorely failed on this account. Indeed, many scholars have noted how extraordinary it is that the US went into Iraq with a total lack of basic knowledge and understanding of Iraqi society or the Arab-Muslim culture prevalent there.¹²⁹ Due to this lack of foresight, among other things, the American invasion and occupation of Iraq at the end of 2004 appeared to have pushed the country to the brink of a sort of civil war, with a strong Sunni insurgency making security impossible in key parts of the country.¹³⁰ Mohammed adds that the occupation has planted seeds of ethno-sectarian divisions and has inadvertently blessed religious

¹²³ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 81.

¹²⁴ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 116.

¹²⁵ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 110.

¹²⁶ Cynthia Cockburn, *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism, & Feminist Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 2007), page 66.

¹²⁷ Al-Ali & Pratt, "The United States, The Iraqi Women's Diaspora, And Women's 'Empowerment' In Iraq," p. 77.

¹²⁸ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 109.

¹²⁹ Zangana, *City of Widows* p. 142.

¹³⁰ James Ridgeway, introduction to *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog From Iraq*, by Riverbend (New York: The Feminist Press, City University of New York, 2005), page xxiii.

supremacy over and against human and women's rights.¹³¹ Furthermore, as the US began to hand over administrative duties to the new Iraqi government in 2006, official discourse regarding Iraqi women's rights and freedoms modulated to reflect an attitude that Iraqi women were no longer America's problem, but Iraq's instead.¹³² In making this assertion, Zuhur confirms the fact that the rights of Iraqi women may not have been a key priority for the American occupation after all.

As in conflicts before, this kind of turmoil did not cause women to shy away. In fact, women's organizations and initiatives started to mushroom all over Iraq in the aftermath of the invasion.¹³³ However, a distinction must be drawn between organizations founded by the US and members of the diaspora and those established in Iraq by Iraqi women. Several US-funded Iraqi women's organizations were established immediately before and after the invasion in 2003. However, scholars such as Zangana believe that these US-funded organizations have impeded the much-needed work of genuine independent women's organizations.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, many meetings, workshops, and conferences brought together diaspora women and women from the inside in the early phase of post-Saddam Iraq.¹³⁵ While the US-funded Iraqi women's organizations focused primarily on democracy promotion and empowerment training such as that described above, independent Iraqi women activists have always used the framework of citizenship as an effective tool for addressing their unequal access to public spaces.¹³⁶

As such, this allowed for the use of many different strategies. In the early days of the occupation, women demonstrated together or on their own to demand the release of male

¹³¹ Cockburn, *From Where We Stand*, p. 66.

¹³² Sherifa Zuhur, *Iraq, Women's Empowerment, and Public Policy*, The Letort Papers, page 4, accessed May 4, 2012, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?PubID=748>.

¹³³ Al-Ali & Pratt, "The United States, The Iraqi Women's Diaspora, And Women's 'Empowerment' In Iraq," p. 79.

¹³⁴ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 81; 93.

¹³⁵ Al-Ali & Pratt, "The United States, The Iraqi Women's Diaspora, And Women's 'Empowerment' In Iraq," p. 74.

¹³⁶ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 107.

relatives being detained, to protest their dismissal from jobs, or to demand widows' pensions.¹³⁷

Iraqi women activists have also used old social networks as the main strategy to cope with the collapse of the state and the consequent mounting crises.¹³⁸ Furthermore, Iraqi women have refused to take part in initiatives organized by the US-led occupation or its Iraqi allies, thereby practicing passive resistance.¹³⁹ Most Iraqi women also refuse to take part also in political parties that have women's issues components because rather than include them to contribute to lasting change, the political parties merely add them in order to boost their credibility.¹⁴⁰

Despite their resistance to US initiatives and political parties, Iraqi women activists of all persuasions were interested in their rights. From the early days of the occupation, women activists were determined not to be deprived of their fundamental citizenship rights: they demanded their fair share of power and an influential role in shaping law.¹⁴¹ As such, most women's organizations in Iraq have mobilized around six main issues, including Articles 137 and 41 regarding the personal status law, the women's quota for political representation in the Transitional Administrative Law, the debate about the constitution with respect to the role of Islam, and assassinations of professional women and activists.¹⁴² However, women's activism in Iraq has been seriously impeded by the deteriorating security situation.¹⁴³ Indeed, the rise in sectarian and communal politics has operated to erode women's rights since fall of Saddam.¹⁴⁴ As Efrati has noted, women's rights have been sent reeling back to square one in post-invasion Iraq.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁷ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 131.

¹³⁸ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 132.

¹³⁹ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 133.

¹⁴⁰ Zangana, *City of Widows*, p. 134-135.

¹⁴¹ Efrati, "Back To Square One: Women's Rights In Post-Invasion Iraq", p. 172.

¹⁴² Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, p. 80.

¹⁴³ Al-Ali and Pratt, "The United States, The Iraqi Women's Diaspora, And Women's 'Empowerment' In Iraq," p. 91.

¹⁴⁴ Al-Ali and Pratt, "The United States, The Iraqi Women's Diaspora, And Women's 'Empowerment' In Iraq," p. 83.

¹⁴⁵ Efrati, "Back To Square One: Women's Rights In Post-Invasion Iraq", p. 182.

Women for Women International: Unusual Grass Growers

In a special issue of the *Forced Migration Review* published in 2007 focusing on Iraq, Al-Ali discusses the fact that the role of women in the Iraqi diaspora is of “enormous importance” for the future of the country.¹⁴⁶ This is no less true when Iraqi women in the diaspora found organizations that hold major potential for women on the ground in Iraq. WfWI was founded in 1993 by Zainab Salbi, an Iraqi woman living in the United States who emigrated from Iraq shortly before the Iran-Iraq War. WfWI’s website states “[it is] a grassroots humanitarian and development organization helping women survivors of wars rebuild their lives”.¹⁴⁷ Salbi was moved to found the organization after reading an article about women in Bosnia's so-called rape camps and noticed that there was a serious lack of response from the international community.¹⁴⁸ Seeking to fill this need, Salbi created WfWI in order to “help women survivors of wars and civil strife and conflict to move from being victims to survivors to activists in their own communities”.¹⁴⁹ While women face extreme challenges in conflict and post-conflict situations, the new organization identified this time as a window of opportunity for women to redefine their rights. As explained in an organization profile featured in the journal *Gender and Development*, WfWI tries to make use of this opportunity for the development of lasting change, by “making women socially aware and giving them a political voice and access to resources”.¹⁵⁰

Since 1993, WfWI has assisted 316,000 women in eight countries where war and conflict have devastated lives and communities in gaining social and economic opportunities through a

¹⁴⁶ Nadje Al-Ali, "Iraq's Women Under Pressure," *Forced Migration Review*, June 2007, page 41.

¹⁴⁷ Women for Women International, "About Women for Women: Zainab Salbi," Women for Women International, accessed April 17, 2012, last modified 2012, <http://www.womenforwomen.org/about-women-for-women/zainab-salbi.php>.

¹⁴⁸ Caroline Kennedy, "A Mother's Wish," *Time*, May 12, 2008, page 140, accessed April 17, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

¹⁴⁹ Zainab Salbi, Maryam Moody, and Karla Mantilla, "After The War: Women In Iraq," *Off Our Backs* 33, no. 7-8 (July-August 2003): page 9, accessed April 17, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20837867>.

¹⁵⁰ Liz Cooke, "Views, Events, And Debates," *Gender And Development* 17, no. 1 (February 2009): page 157, accessed April 17, 2012, doi: 10.1080/ 1355207080269703.

program of rights awareness training, occupational skills education and access to income-producing opportunities.¹⁵¹ In its 18-year history, the organization has distributed more than \$103 million in direct aid, micro credit loans, and has impacted more than 1.7 million family members.¹⁵²

WfWI in Iraq

WfWI's initial assessment to establish a country office in Iraq began shortly after the invasion in March 2003. Upon its entrance, WfWI was the first international NGO with operational programs in Baghdad focused exclusively on supporting the active participation of women.¹⁵³ The organization became acutely aware of the situation facing women on the ground there by conducting a household survey, which identified the most immediate needs of socially-excluded women.¹⁵⁴ As Brown and Romano and Al-Ali and Pratt have shown, the absence of the government (or anyone else) providing benefits caused women to turn to religious groups to meet their needs since they were willing to provide resources for physical and social security.¹⁵⁵ In return, however, women were expected to adhere to more stringent and conservative policies. Thus, the inherent fear in this situation was that women would have to give up their freedoms in exchange for services.¹⁵⁶

The entrance of WfWI into the country and their dedication to including the grassroots in the process of social change and economic development certainly helped to decrease the need to

¹⁵¹ Women for Women International, "About Women for Women: Zainab Salbi".

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Women for Women International, *2008 Iraq Report: Amplifying The Voices Of Women In Iraq*, ed. Tobey Goldfarb, Stronger Women Stronger Nations, page 14, accessed April 18, 2012, <http://www.womenforwomen.org/news-women-for-women/assets/files/IraqReport.03.03.08.pdf>.

¹⁵⁴ Member of WfWI Headquarters Staff, interview by author, WfWI Washington, DC Office, April 25, 2012.

¹⁵⁵ Brown and Romano, "Women in Post-Saddam Iraq: One Step Forward or Two Steps Back?" p. 65; Nadjie Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, "Women in Iraq: Beyond the Rhetoric," *Middle East Research And Information Project*, Summer 2006, page 7, accessed April 18, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

turn to religious groups for assistance. With this in mind, and through the conduct of in-depth community assessments on the ground, WfWI is able to tailor their program to best suit the needs of Iraqi women. In addition to its traditional programming, WfWI also offers capacity building support to local women's NGOs and works with Iraqi governing bodies and other international agencies to address the needs of Iraqi women, both at the leadership level and at the grassroots.¹⁵⁷

Additionally, WfWI works with male leaders to understand women's rights and how to promote them.¹⁵⁸ This inclusion of men in this discussion is imperative. As a UNICEF report on male roles in development has shown, achieving gender equality is not possible without change in men's lives as well as in women's.¹⁵⁹ Due to the fact that men are the so-called gatekeepers of the current social order, their minds must be changed and their support gained in order to create lasting change for women. Indeed, as a member of the WfWI staff intimated, male relatives of potential participants are often the most hostile to the idea of their women taking part in the WfWI program. By including them from the start in the recruitment process, men are made to see the benefits of WfWI's involvement in their female relatives' lives.¹⁶⁰ WfWI's attentiveness to this matter is an important step toward meeting the specific needs on the ground for Iraqi women.

¹⁵⁷ Women for Women International, *2008 Iraq Report: Amplifying The Voices Of Women In Iraq*, p. 14.

¹⁵⁸ Salbi et. al., "After The War: Women In Iraq," p. 9.

¹⁵⁹ Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, *Masculinities: Male Roles and Male Involvement in the Promotion of Gender Equality A Resource Packet*, ed. Dale Buscher, page 14, accessed April 28, 2012, http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/male_roles.pdf.

¹⁶⁰ Member of WfWI Headquarters Staff, interview by author.

How WfWI Grows its Grass

Sponsorship

As described by Zainab Salbi, the WfWI approach is both “holistic and grassroots-focused”.¹⁶¹ It begins with a one-to-one sponsorship program in which a sponsor (usually, but not always, from the United States) is matched with a woman in need in the post-conflict country. A woman cannot participate in the WfWI program until she is paired with a sponsor. In terms of the selection process, WfWI is very particular about reaching the most vulnerable women within the community.¹⁶² This definition of vulnerable and socially excluded takes into account several variables of disadvantage, including income poverty, the number of dependents in the household, a woman’s education and employment levels, age, exposure to domestic violence or abuse, and lack of participation in the institutions of society. As Lockett and others have noted, women’s experiences in conflict are often sidelined and marginalized from the historical, economic, political and social agenda.¹⁶³ This marginalization is surely magnified for those women who are already vulnerable and socially excluded. Thus, the attention paid to these women in Iraq by WfWI is especially important and valuable.

When asked about the recruitment process, the WfWI staff member provided a brief chronological overview. After completing the extensive community assessments already mentioned, WfWI can begin its outreach and recruitment of potential participants. This includes conducting meetings in communal gathering areas with interested socially excluded participants and local community representatives to discuss the program, requirements for participation, and expectations. All participants are screened prior to enrollment to ensure that they meet the

¹⁶¹ Lyle Hurd, "Zainab Salbi," *Total Health*, July-August 2002, page 17, accessed April 17, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Kathryn Lockett, "The Mechanisms of Exclusion: Women in Conflict," *Feminist Legal Studies* 16, no. 3 (2008): page 370, accessed April 28, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

eligibility requirements for enrollment and understand the commitment required. WfWI partners with local community leaders and NGOs who assist in identifying the most socially excluded women in a particular location. WfWI tries its best to convene meetings in locations that are accessible and in areas that will allow the greatest number of socially excluded women to congregate and receive information about our program.

This emphasis on including the local community from the beginning of the process is also essential for creating lasting effects on the ground for Iraqi women. Matuella and Pillers note that aid agencies and NGOs should actively engage the local people to contribute ideas and plans of their own to surmount the issues that they themselves have identified and, wherever possible, incorporate some of the locals' ideas into the master plan.¹⁶⁴ This kind of involvement lends itself to a community ownership of the program, as well as creates a viable and sustainable relationship between the community and the organization (WfWI in this case). As the member of the WfWI staff commented, the partnership with the local community and NGOs in the area is vital because they help WfWI identify women in the area in need of assistance.¹⁶⁵ In some cases, local NGOs can provide WfWI a list of potential participants because they are already receiving some kind of other assistance from those organizations. From the beginning, the identification of participants for WfWI's programs is a collaborative process between WfWI and the local community.

Once a woman has been admitted and enrolled into the program, she is matched with a sponsor. This sponsor provides a monetary donation of \$30 per month. The donation goes both to a stipend provided to the participant, as well as to tools and resources that provide assistance to the job-skills trainers and staff members that help the participants as they progress through the

¹⁶⁴ Jeffrey Tyler and Robert Pillers, "Unsustainability in Today's International Development," *USA Today Magazine*, January 2011, page 28, accessed April 29, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

¹⁶⁵ Member of WfWI Headquarters Staff, interview by author.

program. A survey conducted among WfWI participants showed that the stipends the participants received went toward helping themselves, their children and their future in the form of school tuition, clothing, food, and even savings.¹⁶⁶ This use of funds is consistent with studies that have focused on the difference between men and women's use of household funds. To this effect, Chant explains that women devote the bulk of their earning to household expenditure, often with positive effects on other member's nutritional intake, healthcare, and education.¹⁶⁷ While WfWI certainly cannot take the credit for having an effect on how the participants spend their stipend, these surveys and studies show that women in Iraq (and other developing nations) tend to be good stewards of their stipends, thus putting their sponsor's donation to good use.

In addition to their monetary contribution, the sponsor provides support for her "sister" emotionally in the form of writing letters. Explaining the process in an interview, Salbi noted that:

It's very appealing to the public because it's a very direct way of approaching women; the money goes directly to her and you correspond directly with her. It's giving financial contributions with emotional responsibility. Every time you sit down and write the letter, you're putting part of yourself in that. Lots of sponsors say that it forces them to assess their own lives here, and to try to appreciate how others live in other cultures.¹⁶⁸

Thus, this process seems to create relationships across the divide between women living in peace and women living in conflict or post-conflict situations. However, some scholars are wary of this kind of model and assert that this really elicits pity instead of genuine compassion. Using

¹⁶⁶ Women for Women International, "Programs Supporting Women: Sponsorship," Women for Women International, accessed April 17, 2012, last modified 2012, <http://www.womenforwomen.org/programs-supporting-women/sponsoring-a-woman.php>.

¹⁶⁷ Sylvia Chant, "Dangerous Equations? How Female-Headed Households Became The Poorest Of The Poor: Causes, Consequences, And Cautions," in *Feminisms In Development: Contradictions, Contestations, And Challenges*, ed. Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison, and Ann Whitehead (London: Zed Books, 2007), page 39.

¹⁶⁸ Salbi et. al., "After The War: Women In Iraq," p. 10.

Arendt's definitions, Naylor notes that compassion can only exist between two individuals in direct, specific relation to one another, and that it is more than just sympathy, as it responds to suffering as an immediate and particular "co-suffering."¹⁶⁹ Pity, on the other hand, is a depersonalized response to the suffering of depersonalized, abstracted others and is characterized by some kind of distance between the pitied and the one doing the pitying.¹⁷⁰ Pity is obviously less desirable than compassion. As such, donors' pity simply reconstitutes another unequal hierarchical relationship that does not address the structural inequalities at the root of poverty.¹⁷¹

This analysis would argue, however, that while the relationship established between sponsor and participant in the WfWI program is characterized by a considerable geographic distance, the sponsor's feelings toward the participant does not automatically equal pity. As Salbi mentions in the above statement, the relationship forged does not only have one-way impact. Indeed, sponsors are evidently greatly impacted by their correspondence with their sister participants, which would be seemingly impossible if the sponsors were not experiencing some level of "co-suffering" as Naylor suggests. Furthermore, the impact of the relationship on the sponsor will most likely cause them to be willing to continue to sponsor other participants in the future.

Training Program

Once the sponsorships have been arranged, participants are set to take place in WfWI's one-year training program, which aims to provide access to both knowledge and resources in

¹⁶⁹ Tristen Naylor, "Deconstructing Development: The Use of Power and Pity in the International Development Discourse," *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (March 2011): page 184, accessed April 29, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Naylor, "Deconstructing Development", p. 193.

order to create lasting change.¹⁷² In terms of vocational education and training programs, an International Labour Organization report demonstrates that pronouncements often abound on the fundamental importance of skills and capacity building in the development process, but then the role of vocational education and training is largely absent.¹⁷³ WfWI seeks to counter that trend by developing its year-long programs into three stages that help women to gain that access to knowledge and resources, as well as vocation education and training. These stages include: creating awareness, promoting behavior change, and enabling action. In creating awareness, women are tuned into their value as members of society and the important of women's rights and societal roles. By promoting behavior change, women are encouraged to begin making decisions and applying their knowledge to take advantage of economic opportunities available to them. Finally through enabling action, women are provided with support and access to essential services such as microcredit loans, legal assistance, cooperative and employment opportunities and social networks.¹⁷⁴

As the participants progress through these individual stages, four outcomes are reached: women sustain an income, women are well, women are decision-makers, and women have social networks and safety nets.¹⁷⁵ Each of these outcomes is attached to a module of the program. In the first module, "women sustain an income", participants receive training in income and asset management, which includes the launch of women's rights education as well as numeracy training if necessary. The second module, "women are well", focuses on awareness, protection,

¹⁷² Women for Women International, "Programs Sponsoring Women: What We Do," Women for Women International, accessed April 18, 2012, last modified 2012, <http://www.womenforwomen.org/programs-supporting-women/programs-for-helping-women.php>.

¹⁷³ Paul Bennell, *Learning To Change: Skills Development Among The Economically Vulnerable And Socially Excluded In Developing Countries*, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING PAPERS 43, page 1, accessed April 28, 2012, <http://ilo-mirror.library.cornell.edu/public/english/employment/strat/download/etp43.pdf>.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ "How It Works," chart, Women for Women International, accessed April 18, 2012, <http://www.womenforwomen.org/programs-supporting-women/programs-for-helping-women.php>.

and prevention and includes job skills training and the opportunity to create an individual participant plan to map the rest of the participant's time in the program. Module three, "women are decision-makers", develops women's decision-making skills both in the family and community spheres. Job skills training continues and participants also complete business training. Finally, in module four, "women have social networks and safety networks", solidarity is created for support and protection. At this time, evaluations are conducted to measure the program's impact against the four key outcomes and participants graduate from the program.¹⁷⁶ This one-year program is innovative in the way that it targets a diversity of rights and needs that are faced by a country's most socially-excluded women.

Another important element of the program is that the participants do not progress through it alone. Rather, the training curriculum is designed to be both participatory and interactive, allowing for women to learn in a group setting.¹⁷⁷ Upon entering the program, each participant is placed into a group consisting of 20-25 women. In this way, the participants are able to form networks and a close sense of camaraderie that transcends any ethnic or religious divides that might exist. This group mechanism also allows for the pooling of resources and the sharing of risk in the formation of new businesses and cooperatives. This kind of structure is consistent with that of the group empowerment model described in the aforementioned International Labour Organization report, in which the primary focus is to support collective action among groups of the poor, particularly women, in order to achieve specific economic, social and political

¹⁷⁶ "How It Works," chart, Women for Women International.

¹⁷⁷ Women for Women International, "Programs: Support, Safety Nets, And Social Networks," Women for Women International, accessed April 18, 2012, last modified 2012, <http://www.womenforwomen.org/programs-supporting-women/women-for-women-safety-networks.php>.

objectives.¹⁷⁸ By placing women in groups, WfWI helps to facilitate this kind of collective action by providing women with a level of responsibility for their own development.

Therefore, when women graduate from the year-long WfWI program, they will have acquired a new body of knowledge, including information about their rights and other important topics such as money management, and resources, including their sponsorship stipends as well as micro-credit loans and other forms of support. If WfWI's core belief holds true, the women who graduate from this program will be able to create lasting change in their families and their communities.

Objections to WfWI's Growth Practices

As discussed in detail elsewhere, certain scholars, such as Al-Ali, have asserted that Iraqi women's organizations and activists based abroad lack credibility among the majority of the population on the ground in Iraq.¹⁷⁹ Moreover, these organizations should in no way be used to override locally-based initiatives. However, this study stands to argue that WfWI is more similar to a locally-based initiative than might be expected, especially considering the fact that it is headquartered in the US. As a member of the WfWI staff informed the author, each country office is actually registered as a NGO within the nation. In effect, WfWI in Iraq is an Iraqi organization. Furthermore, the country director and a majority of the training and administrative staff are Iraqi. This aspect is critical to WfWI's success in Iraq and adds to its credibility as a locally-based initiative, as well as its potential for sustainability. A model such as this one that allows for local ownership and is staffed by local Iraqi women also significantly increases WfWI's legitimacy with the members of the community. As a member of the WfWI staff explained, the ability for participants to come into a room and see an Iraqi instructor who can

¹⁷⁸ Bennell, *Learning To Change*, p. 39.

¹⁷⁹ Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender", p. 756.

relate to their challenges is invaluable and no doubt adds to the participants' enthusiasm and willingness to excel in the program.¹⁸⁰ Additionally, the fact that in-depth community assessments are conducted demonstrates that the organization is supremely interested in serving the majority of the population. Even Zainab Salbi conducted in-depth interviews and visits during her trip to Iraq in May of 2009. This kind of attention from the very top of the organization also reveals a deep concern for the situation faced on the ground.

Al-Ali, Zangana, and others have also pointed to the fact that a feminist-rights approach to women's development in Iraq is inconsistent with the specific needs and concerns of ordinary Iraqi women. Al-Ali has suggested that one way to sensitively support women is to change from a feminist-rights approach to one emphasizing education, training, and participation in reconstruction.¹⁸¹ WfWI is doing just that in its attempt to increase women's access to knowledge and resources. The one-year program not only focuses on rights awareness, which is certainly important, but it also provides women with the training and skills that they need to participate in society economically, which is a key factor in Iraq's reconstruction.

Scholars such as El-Kassem have also criticized certain international organizations and their leaders due to the fact that their approach may be skewed based on where they place blame for the current situation for women in Iraq. For example, Zainab Salbi was quoted as describing Saddam Hussein's regime as "a Stalinist regime that extracted a huge price from its citizens for more than two decades".¹⁸² While this may be true, El-Kassem has pointed out that she makes no mention of the negative impact of sanctions or of the ongoing occupation of Iraq-let alone the wider context of Western imperial interference in the entire Middle East region.¹⁸³ While the

¹⁸⁰ Member of WfWI Headquarters Staff, interview by author.

¹⁸¹ Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender", p. 756.

¹⁸² El-Kassem, "The Pitfalls Of A 'Democracy Promotion' Project For Women Of Iraq", p. 29.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

situation for women in Iraq has indeed been affected by many other factors besides Saddam Hussein's regime, the work that WfWI has been able to do in Iraq is surely beneficial, no matter the causes for the women's current situation. The most important thing is that the situation is being addressed.

Success: Has the Grass Been Growing?

The criticism that WfWI has faced would be completely worth it if their model of assistance was successful. That is, whether or not it is effectively impacting and improving the lives of the women that it works with. This section seeks to determine whether or not this is true in the case of Iraq. However, it is important to remember that success can be rather subjective and that there are several ways in which success could be measured. Additionally, it is not something that can be measured in a black-or-white kind of way. As a member of the WfWI staff pointed out:

Success can occur in many tangible and intangible forms that can be challenging to quantify. If a participant does reach our metric for earning an income but falls short in another area, that does not necessarily mean she has been unsuccessful.¹⁸⁴

According to a WfWI report on Iraq published in 2008 entitled *Stronger Women, Stronger Nation*, more than 4,000 women from Baghdad, Hillah and Karbala had been served by Women for Women International's programs in Iraq since their inception in 2003.¹⁸⁵ This report also mentioned that the WfWI programs were benefiting more than 21,600 family and community members in addition to the women participants.¹⁸⁶ The indirect benefits of the WfWI programs are an essential concept to consider because it is a reminder that development directed toward women in post-conflict situations should not be entirely focused on them as a singular unit. Women are often the backbone that holds families and communities together after serious conflict has ensued. Indeed, Al-Ali and Pratt note that women are almost universally viewed as the primary care-givers and nurturers, and thus are responsible for ensuring the day-to-

¹⁸⁴ Member of WfWI Headquarters Staff, interview by author.

¹⁸⁵ Women for Women International, *2008 Iraq Report: Amplifying The Voices Of Women In Iraq*, p. 14.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

day survival of their families.¹⁸⁷ Any development or aid that is directed at women will no doubt have some kind of effect on those closest to them. Thus, the fact that the WfWI programs in Iraq are having these indirect effects on family and community members is significant.

The most recent data that is available in the 2010 Annual Report suggests that 8,764 women in total have been served by the Iraq program since 2003 and 3,406 were served in 2010 alone.¹⁸⁸ This is a significant increase from the previous year, in which only 773 women participated in WfWI programs.¹⁸⁹ Financial statements reveal also that there was a significant increase in government funding between 2009 and 2010, suggesting that a grant or some other kind of funding was acquired that enabled WfWI to enroll more women in the Iraq program. This kind of exponential increase from one year to the next can certainly be seen as a success. However, a larger number of women in the program does not necessarily equal improvement in those women's lives. Additional measures will need to confirm how the program has impacted the women who participate in it.

A joint letter written by the Chair of the Board and the Acting CEO featured in the 2010 Annual Report noted the findings of WfWI's "newly enhanced" monitoring and evaluation (M&E) team. Through an interview with a member of the WfWI headquarters staff, the author came to find that the "enhancement" the monitoring and evaluation team underwent included an overhaul of the entire system based on the data that was needed to assess program outcomes, as well as the establishment of rigorous M&E systems in each country office.¹⁹⁰ The M&E system also benefited from the development of a field manual with guidelines and protocol for data

¹⁸⁷ Al-Ali and Pratt, "Women And War in The Middle East", p. 12.

¹⁸⁸ Women for Women International, *One Woman Can Change Anything: 2010 Annual Report*, page 13, accessed April 20, 2012, <http://www.womenforwomen.org/about-women-for-women/assets/files/2010-annual-report.pdf>.

¹⁸⁹ Women for Women International, *2009 Annual Report*, page 9, accessed April 19, 2012, http://www.womenforwomen.org/sponsor-a-woman/assets/files/WfWI_2009_Annual_Report.FINAL.pdf.

¹⁹⁰ Member of WfWI Headquarters Staff, interview by author.

collection and the training of staff in proper data and analysis systems.¹⁹¹ This kind of protocol is no doubt essential to standardizing the measurement of progress across the different WfWI programs.

In terms of data collection, M&E staff use several methods of evaluation, including surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews. These methods presumably allow the participants as well as staff members to provide their feedback directly to the M&E staff member, leading to greater accuracy and honesty. The frequency with which the team collects data is also very important. Baseline data is collected at enrollment and evaluation data is collected once a participant graduates.¹⁹² Additionally, post-graduation sample surveys are conducted one-year and two-years post graduation to further analyze program quality, outcomes, and sustainability.¹⁹³ The attention to detail shown in this enhancement reveals the commitment of WfWI to documenting the progress that they are making in each of their programs. This is not only important from an accountability standpoint, but also provides feedback for how the programs could be amended to best fit the needs and progress of the participants.

WfWI's approach to monitoring and evaluation seems to go above and beyond what is normally expected or seen from NGOs. Livernash comments that once a project is completed, most NGOs pay little attention to its impact or whether it provided any lasting benefits.¹⁹⁴ The criticism goes further to note that donors are reluctant to insist on independent monitoring and evaluation.¹⁹⁵ While WfWI does execute its monitoring and evaluation in-house, this study argues that it is very concerned as to whether its programs are providing lasting benefits. As the

¹⁹¹ Member of WfWI Headquarters Staff, interview by author.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ R. Livernash, "The growing influence of NGOs in the developing world," *Environment* 34, no. 5 (June 1992): page 18, accessed April 28, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

¹⁹⁵ R. Livernash, "The growing influence of NGOs in the developing world," p. 18.

member of the WfWI staff interviewed observed, monitoring and evaluation is a continuous process. Due to the constantly evolving nature of the participants and the environments in which they are living, changes to monitoring and evaluation will need to be made constantly.

With that in mind, the monitoring and evaluation team reported promising figures in the 2010 Annual Report. According to their estimates, graduates reported that their income had increased to \$1 per day from \$0.50 at enrollment, 71% were practicing healthy behaviors relative to just 18% at enrollment, and 89% participated in family decision-making compared to 50% at the beginning of the program.¹⁹⁶ However, these figures represented participants from across WfWI's eight country programs and were not particular to Iraq. The Iraq Country Report featured in the 2010 Annual Report provides statistics that are specific to the women participants in Iraq. The data collected demonstrated that of the Iraq program participants and graduates, 92% reported improvements in their economic situation, 88% reported improvements in both physical and mental health, 90% were actively participating in key household decisions, 92% left the program with knowledge of their legal rights, and 87% voted in recent local or national elections.¹⁹⁷ These estimates are certainly very impressive and provide support for the fact that the WfWI program in Iraq is indeed having a positive impact on the women who participate in it.

More recent figures provided by a member of the WfWI staff are even more convincing. Outlining the program outcome data for Iraq as of January 2012, the graph demonstrates that the average daily income for women has increased from \$0.02 at enrollment to \$1.76 at graduation. Additionally, 60% of women were saving part of their income at graduation, compared to the 3% that were saving at the time of enrollment.¹⁹⁸ Both of these figures provide important indicators

¹⁹⁶ Women for Women International, *One Woman Can Change Anything: 2010 Annual Report*, p. 4.

¹⁹⁷ Women for Women International, *One Woman Can Change Anything: 2010 Annual Report*, p. 13.

¹⁹⁸ *Program Outcome Data for Iraq (as of January 2012)*, chart (Washington, DC: Women for Women International, 2012).

of how impactful the WfWI program is in the lives of its participants. Considering the dire socioeconomic situation that many of the participants in Iraq face, the ability to earn a significant daily income and provide for their families is of utmost importance.

The graph also indicates that there has been a large increase in the percentage of women who are aware of their rights (from 31% at enrollment to 94% at graduation), as well as the number of women who are voting and participating in community activities (from 72% to 87% and 4% to 71%, respectively).¹⁹⁹ This provides further evidence for Brems' contention that policy needs to be more focused on social and economic rights instead of civil and political rights.²⁰⁰ While WfWI does not necessarily place one kind of right over another in terms of program implementation or importance, it is evident that once women's immediate social and economic needs are met, they will be more able and willing to participate in rights awareness and political participation.

There is no doubt that quantitative statistics are important in measuring the success of any organization, particularly those that are working in developing countries and are being held accountable by those who continue to provide funding. Indeed, some scholars such as Murtaza find that current accountability approaches prioritize accountability to boards and donors and give weak accountability to communities despite strong rhetoric to the contrary.²⁰¹ WfWI, however, seems very concerned in being held accountable to its participants and their communities. This is evident in its attentiveness to the participant's progress as well as its commitment to serve the community long-term.

¹⁹⁹ *Program Outcome Data for Iraq (as of January 2012)*, chart (Washington, DC: Women for Women International, 2012).

²⁰⁰ Brems, "Protecting the Rights of Women", p. 127.

²⁰¹ Niaz Murtaza, "Putting the Lasts First: The Case for Community-Focused and Peer-Managed NGO Accountability Mechanisms," abstract, *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary & Nonprofit Organizations* 23, no. 1 (March 2012): page 109, accessed April 28, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

Positive participant testimonials further reflect this attentiveness and provide another way in which success can be measured. These testimonials are particularly helpful because the women can tell their story and speak to their development better than anyone else. The WfWI website introduces Hind, a woman whose father was killed and her mother injured when a missile destroyed their home in Iraq.²⁰² Upon joining WfWI, she was able to take various classes and eventually joined a candle-making initiative. Of the WfWI program, she said, “You give me new hope, you help me see the light at the end of the tunnel,” she says. “I want to learn to be able to help myself and help other women.”²⁰³

The website also features another Iraqi woman named Haifa, a divorced mother caring for three children with various health constraints. While she was previously able to earn an income selling gasoline, her health prohibited her from continuing. After receiving direct financial aid and business skills training from WfWI, she was able to begin work that she could conduct from home, allowing her to both make an income and care for the various health needs of her children. Haifa’s story is particularly representative, considering the large increase in the number of female-headed households in Iraq in recent years. However, as Chant point out, it is important, especially in the case of Iraq, to note the heterogeneity of female-headed households.²⁰⁴ Of particular importance here is the route to headship-Haifa is a divorced mother and may be choosing to remain single. Other widows in Iraq have been made so involuntarily, possibly through the death or fleeing of a spouse. These details aside, WfWI’s programs are obviously helpful for Iraq female heads-of-household, regardless of how they came to be so.

²⁰² Women for Women International, “Where We Work: Iraq,” Women for Women International , accessed April 19, 2012, last modified 2012, <http://www.womenforwomen.org/global-initiatives-helping-women/help-women-iraq.php>.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Chant, “Dangerous Equations?”, p. 38.

In response to the use of these first-person accounts, one might argue that they are poor examples of success because they are on the WfWI website and are thus placed there as a strategic device to convince individuals to donate money and sponsor another woman. While it is no doubt true that these stories are used in a strategic way, it does not make them any less true. These women, and countless others, clearly benefited tremendously from the skills and resources they were given access to by the WfWI program.

Another display of success is demonstrated by the group updates available on the Iraq program website. There are updates for two different groups which detail the process of each group voting for president, president's assistant and treasurer. Each of the three women running spoke and then they all voted. At the end of the process, many of the women remarked that they enjoyed the elections, especially because they came away with the knowledge of how important it is to vote for someone who represents your specific interest, whether in a small group or in society in general.²⁰⁵ This demonstrates an important step in the progress for these women. Since the women that WfWI provide for are some of the most socially-excluded members of society, the fact that they realize that they can and should have the ability to participate in making decisions about who represents them is significant. This is especially important as political conditions become direr on a national level. As Hunt and Posa suggest, greater political participation by women could provide Iraq with a stabilizing force needed to stave off the potentially disastrous division of the country into ethnic states.²⁰⁶ This is not to say that WfWI programming made them come to this conclusion exclusively, but that participation in the

²⁰⁵ Women for Women International, "Iraq: Field Updates," Women for Women International, accessed April 19, 2012, last modified 2012, <http://www.womenforwomen.org/global-initiatives-helping-women/support-women-iraq-update.php>.

²⁰⁶ Hunt and Posa, "Iraq's Excluded Women", p. 45.

program no doubt added to their sense of importance and worth as members of a community and Iraq as a whole.

An idea previously unmentioned in this analysis has been the difference between WfWI working in an urban area such as Baghdad versus more rural areas such as Hillah and Karbala. Development literature has often focused on this urban versus rural divide and how different the conditions can be in each of these environments. Momsen indicates that in the case of rural situations, men are often the favored recipients of education and technical assistance.²⁰⁷ An Iraq Field Update highlights this tendency in the rural areas of Hillah and Karbala and notes that WfWI's entrance into those areas was the first time many of the women had access to or received any kind of education.²⁰⁸ This was mainly due to traditions, customs and financial burden in those areas. Additionally, because women typically work in farming or animal husbandry, they did not complete their studies, if they received any kind of formal education at all. Thus, success can be found here in the form of providing access to education and knowledge to women who have not had this kind of access or opportunity before.

Women in urban areas such as Baghdad also face difficulties in finding and securing employment. Hardship brought on by the occupation aside, women also endure marginalization in the workplace. Momsen provides several reasons for this, including perception of physical weakness, women's employment being predominantly in the informal sector, certain jobs become overly feminized and receive low status, and overall instances of economic inequality.²⁰⁹ Confronted with these challenges, many women in developing countries turn to the informal sector of the labor market. The production arrangements in this sector allow for self-

²⁰⁷ Janet Henshall Momsen, *Gender And Development*, Routledge Perspectives on Development (New York: Routledge, 2004), page 152.

²⁰⁸ Women for Women International, "Iraq: Field Updates".

²⁰⁹ Momsen, *Gender And Development*, p. 173.

employment, which enables women to work from their homes and combine the demands of their reproductive and productive responsibilities.²¹⁰ Recognizing the importance and prevalence of these factors, WfWI's programs allow predominantly for women to become entrepreneurs, thus allowing them the flexibility that is needed to both earn an income and tend to their various household tasks, which can certainly be termed a success.

Before any kind of success for women participants can occur, WfWI must be successful in attracting the funds necessary to provide for its different programs, as well as awareness generation. A key contributor to this accomplishment has been various forms of media. The 2010 Annual Report expounded upon the many ways that WfWI's work had been featured or mentioned in news outlets throughout the year. One major instance of exposure was a feature of WfWI on the Oprah Winfrey Show. Development scholars such as Dambisa Moyo would assert that the addition of famous individuals in the mix brings on an element of 'glamour aid', in which an aid-based model ends up doing more harm than good.²¹¹ However, the sponsorship model that WfWI utilizes is significantly different from a typical aid-based model in which money is just donated in large amounts to government ministries or aid agencies. Thus, the recognition of WfWI on Oprah was most likely more helpful than harmful.

Additionally, staff members made any number of public appearances on television, radio, and even at major conferences such as the Clinton Global Initiative.²¹² WfWI's awareness extended to the federal government as well, as Zainab Salbi testified before the United States Senate about the link between women's rights and national security.²¹³ Another outlet that WfWI and other international development organizations have utilized more as of late is social

²¹⁰ Momsen, *Gender And Development*, p. 177.

²¹¹ Moyo, *Dead Aid*, p. 26.

²¹² Women for Women International, *One Woman Can Change Anything: 2010 Annual Report*, p. 24.

²¹³ Ibid.

media. WfWI features various social media outlets on its homepage, including Facebook and Twitter. A post featured on the USAID Impact Blog last year highlighted the importance of using social media for as a way to actively engage the public on development issues.²¹⁴ The post further commented that social media tools were an important way for organizations invested in providing solutions in the developing world to dialogue with one another.²¹⁵

All of these outlets are extremely important in not only generating funds, but also in raising awareness about what the organization does and how women's rights and development needs to be given more attention in all levels of society. However, a question that arises in this instance is whether or not all of this media attention focuses too much on the organization as an entity rather than on the women in post-conflict situations that the organization is trying to assist. While there is not room to discuss this question at great length here, it is an important one to ask.

The fact is that media attention is most definitely necessary in generating awareness, which hopefully compels individuals, corporations, and government agencies to donate. Between 2009 and 2010, there was an increase of more than \$3 million in individual donations, \$500,000 in corporate contributions, and more than \$1 million in government grants.²¹⁶ These increases are important and significant because they enable WfWI to enroll more women and expand its programming. Thus, while some attention may be taken away from the individual women and their situation, funding that is generated from media attention will be benefiting them in the long-run.

Another successful aspect of the WfWI model has been the ability to partner with outside organizations, as well as NGOs inside Iraq. Once again, WfWI stands in exception to the norm,

²¹⁴ Laura Rodriguez, "Social Media In International Development," *Impact Blog*, September 23, 2011, accessed April 27, 2012, <http://blog.usaid.gov/2011/09/social-media-in-international-development/>.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Women for Women International, *Consolidated Financial Statements and Supplemental Information*, page 3, accessed April 27, 2012, <http://www.womenforwomen.org/assets/files/WFWI-2010-12-AUDIT-Final.pdf>.

as an International Labor Organization report notes that attempts to forge training partnerships with other organizations and groups have been rare.²¹⁷ These partnerships assist in various aspects of the program, but most importantly they provide facilitation for vocational training. A pilot program conducted with Prosperity Candle in 2009 demonstrates this kind of partnership. The program included custom-candle kits and a guide as to how to make the candles, which once made would be sent back to the US for sale.²¹⁸ The pilot program seemed to be a success, as 50 women were able to become entrepreneurs and start their own businesses. This partnership was successful also in that it provided exposure to the work that WfWI was doing and served as an outlet for some of WfWI's participants to engage in the production of items for global retail trade.²¹⁹

However, partnerships such as the one between WfWI and Prosperity Candle also create some challenges. For example, this partnership in particular only engaged a select number of participants (50 women). In terms of the number of women in Iraq who could benefit from entrepreneurship and starting their own business, 50 women does not seem like very many. Additionally, a program like this one could have the effect of creating a vocation that holds a certain level of exclusivity, possibly causing women who are not participating in the program to feel left out. However, as a member of the WfWI staff pointed out, there is an issue of scale and program capacity. If there are too many women in the program and not enough demand for the product, the income that is produced will be spread amongst a greater number of women.²²⁰

²¹⁷ Bennell, *Learning To Change*, p. 26.

²¹⁸ Prosperity Candle, "Pilot Project In Iraq," Prosperity Candle, accessed 2012, last modified 2012, <http://www.prosperitycandle.com/about/pilot/>.

²¹⁹ Member of WfWI Headquarters Staff, interview by author.

²²⁰ Member of WfWI Headquarters Staff, interview by author.

Sustainability: Can the Grass Take Root?

When the author originally conceived the idea of a research project on women's organizations in Iraq, it was heavily influenced by the fact that American troops were in the process of completing their withdrawal from Iraq. Because WfWI is an American-based organization, the author assumed that there would be more of a connection between WfWI and the US. Thus, another assumption was made that perhaps WfWI would face challenges continuing to operate in Iraq once the American troops withdrew and that the program there would not be able to be sustained. However, through research and interviews, this study has discovered that WfWI will indeed face challenges in continuing a sustainable operation in Iraq, but it has nothing to do with an American presence there. As a member of the WfWI staff asserted, "the presence of a foreign military force has not had an impact on whether women enroll into our program".²²¹

The 2010 Annual Report makes mention of the organization questioning whether or not the operating model of WfWI would be able to achieve scale, not just in Iraq but across the different country programs. Statistics seem to suggest that the organization can indeed achieve scale, as 14,000 new sponsors were acquired in 2010, along with a major, multi-year grant geared toward enhancing WfWI's programs in Africa.²²² The 2010 Report also highlighted the fact that despite, and perhaps because of, the economic downturn, WfWI was still able to carry out its mission and objectives during a time when individuals have to make difficult decisions about their discretionary finances.

In terms of Iraq, funding is a crucial element in the equation regarding WfWI's program sustainability. As already mentioned, there was a significant increase in the number of women

²²¹Member of WfWI Headquarters Staff, interview by author.

²²² Women for Women International, *One Woman Can Change Anything: 2010 Annual Report*, p. 4.

that participated in the program from 2009 to 2010. While individual donors certainly contributed to this growth, a large grant was also received from the US State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor that amounted to more than \$970,000.²²³ Nunnenkamp and Öhler have remarked that the effectiveness of NGO aid may be compromised if aid allocation involves both official and private donors.²²⁴ However, this grant enabled WfWI to provide programming for a total of 2,500 women. Certainly this could be considered a great feat of effectiveness for the organization. Furthermore, a contribution of this kind annually would certainly enable the Iraq program to continue and expand for some time to come. This would assume however that a grant like this would be available from year to year. Additionally, despite optimism regarding the economic downturn exhibited by WfWI executives, the one-to-one sponsorship model lends itself to a significant amount of volatility from year to year because it relies on the ability of sponsors to donate. At any given time, sponsors may have to amend their spending behaviors, and unfortunately, voluntary donations to a woman who they do not truly know will most likely be one of the first expenditures to be cut.

Funding, however, is not the only factor that will determine WfWI program's sustainability in Iraq. Security may be an even more important factor and could determine single-handedly the success of WfWI in the future. As previously discussed, the issue of security in Iraq has been paramount since the invasion in 2003 and will continue to be an issue, especially since the American troop withdrawal in December of last year. Security or the lack thereof is particularly important to WfWI's operations, since it requires women to be traveling from one place to another. As Al-Ali and Pratt have explained in several publications, the

²²³ Women for Women International, "Iraq: Field Updates".

²²⁴ P. Nunnenkamp and H. Öhler, "Funding, Competition and the Efficiency of NGOs: An Empirical Analysis of Non-charitable Expenditure of US NGOs Engaged in Foreign Aid," *Kyklos* 65 (2012): page 81, accessed April 28, 2012, ScienceDirect.

lawlessness, chaos, and widespread violence in Iraq is a direct consequence of the US occupation and has had a detrimental effect on Iraqi women.²²⁵ Women who work or are in positions of authority have been increasingly targeted, making it difficult for women to participate in life outside of their homes. If women participating in the program perceive that traveling to WfWI programs may put them in danger, they may decide not to continue with the program. In a similar way, the security issue can impact how WfWI schedules and coordinates daily operations and training activities.²²⁶

Security can also hinder the expansion of WfWI programs into other areas of Iraq. As a member of the WfWI staff mentioned, “If there are security concerns, then delivery of our program can be attenuated, reducing the number of women we can reach”.²²⁷ There are certainly women in other large cities such as Najaf and Basra, as well as various smaller rural cities, that could benefit from WfWI’s programs. However, if the situation in those various areas is not stable enough to sustain an operation, WfWI cannot reach those women. A greater level of security would no doubt allow WfWI to expand the scope of its work in Iraq.

If funding levels were to remain consistent and a more stable security situation was in place, WfWI would be able to enroll a greater number of women, at least in the areas they are already operating. However, another concern for sustainability that WfWI currently faces is the logistical challenges that are faced by staff in the country office, according to a member of the WfWI staff.²²⁸ This is no doubt affected by the issues of funding and security already mentioned, but also by the rules and regulations that must be followed when operating in a post-

²²⁵ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, p. 158.

²²⁶ Member of WfWI Headquarters Staff, interview by author.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

conflict nation such as Iraq. Additionally, due to certain constraints involving funding and logistics, the staff in Iraq may not be able to handle increased service levels.

Another important challenge to the sustainability of the WfWI program in Iraq is the outside threat from the overall view of women's issues in Iraq as a whole. Al-Ali and Pratt emphasize that women's participation in the public sphere is seen by extremist forces to symbolize Western cultural encroachment, so they are take steps to combat it.²²⁹ Efrati points to the struggle between women activists and Shi'i clerics and religious politicians regarding the personal status law.²³⁰ These accounts and others demonstrate the precarious nature of the Iraqi atmosphere regarding women's rights and participation in society. This atmosphere can indirectly affect WfWI's programming simply because it is training women to be more active members of their society. If their presence in that society is not readily welcomed, some women may come to the conclusion that it is not worth it. Even worse, their participation in the program may contribute to their vulnerability in a hostile situation. While this is unlikely since WfWI has already operated in the country almost ten years, it is an issue that should at least be touched upon.

Despite the various challenges that WfWI's programs face in terms of sustainability, they do have one very important aspect in their favor. One particular element of WfWI that makes it unique and different from other peer organizations working abroad is its mission of working in communities long-term. Zainab Salbi described the organization's long-term orientation this way:

²²⁹ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, p. 159.

²³⁰ Efrati, "Back To Square One", p. 180.

For us, it's as important that we keep paying attention to these countries who faced war not only a year ago, but ten years ago. These countries still need help, and the women there still need a lot of issues to be addressed.²³¹

In this way, WfWI seems totally dedicated to staying in a particular country as long as is necessary to provide for the needs of women there. WfWI still operates in Bosnia, despite the fact that there has not been actual conflict there in some time. The Bosnia program was the first country for WfWI and its continued presence there signals that this is a truly devoted model of long-term development.

The notion of long-term development often seems unfeasible, especially when there are more immediate matters to tend to. Former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali explains this perfectly, noting that because short-term emergencies claim the attention of states, the longer-term work on development priorities often goes unnoticed.²³² Even if various organizations attempt long-term development, it is ineffective. Matuella and Pillers highlight this fact in their assessment that the manner in which the industrialized world helps its poorer brethren in long-term development often is counterproductive to the sustainability of that development.²³³ WfWI has realized the reality of long-term development, however, especially as it relates to women. Development is a painstaking and delicate process that takes years or even decades. With this in mind, there is no reason to suggest that WfWI's long-term commitment will not apply in the case of Iraq as well.

²³¹ Salbi et. al., "After The War: Women In Iraq," p. 11.

²³² Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "A New Departure On Development," *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1995, page 44, accessed April 28, 2012, Academic Search Premier.

²³³ Tyler and Pillers, "Unsustainability in Today's International Development," p. 28.

Conclusion: Redefining Grassroots

This study set out to provide a counter-argument to the criticism that American organizations have been largely unsuccessful in their attempts at women's empowerment in Iraq. These criticisms focused particularly on the fact that many American organizations that have been established are far removed from the issues faced by Iraqi women at the grassroots level. The analysis of WfWI provided here seems to refute that assertion and demonstrates that WfWI is very aware of the issues and conditions faced by Iraqi women on the ground. The question then becomes whether or not that awareness can be turned into success and long-term presence in Iraq.

As shown in this analysis, success can be measured in any number of ways, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The indicators for success used here seemed to point to the fact that WfWI's programs are indeed positively affecting the lives of Iraqi women. In terms of sustainability and a long-term presence, there is significant potential for WfWI to continue putting down roots in Iraq. However, the organization certainly faces challenges that could impede that potential, including funding availability and the lack of stability and security.

The implications for the results of this study are numerous. To the author's knowledge, this is the first extensive outside examination of WfWI's operations in Iraq. An objective study of an organization's work of this nature can be helpful in keeping them accountable and effective. By demonstrating that an American-based organization can indeed be successful at the grassroots level in Iraq, critical scholars may be more open to the work of other organizations operating in Iraq and more optimistic as to their potential for success. The success of WfWI's development strategy in Iraq as presented here also provides a useful model for other international development organizations to follow as they venture into Iraq or any other post-

conflict situation. WfWI's holistic approach could also be adapted to other development situations that do not necessarily stem from conflict.

There is great possibility for further research in the future. With greater resources, field research could be conducted to glean a truly authentic perspective from both women who participant in WfWI programs, as well as administrative staff and trainers working in the Baghdad office. Field research on the ground could also be used to compare WfWI's programs with those of other development organizations currently operating on the ground in Iraq, both grassroots and international in nature. Further research into WfWI's activity in Iraq could also address the criticisms held by scholars that suggest NGOs present in Iraq are merely perpetuating Western hegemony and re-orientalizing women. WfWI's efforts in terms of gender mainstreaming could be examined in more detail as well. While UNSCR 1325 strictly endows UN agencies and UN member states with the responsibilities of gender mainstreaming in post-conflict reconstruction periods, an examination of an independent organization's efforts to this end would be instructive, especially since organizations such as WfWI tend to have more contact with individuals on the ground.

Grassroots organizations are usually characterized by a totally indigenous movement that comes from a need recognized on the ground in a particular situation. However, this examination of WfWI and its development strategy in Iraq has showed that that might not always be the case. The results presented here seem to suggest that the definition of grassroots could and should be expanded to those organizations that recognize a need on the ground in a particular situation, develop a strategy to provide for it, and remain there until and even after success has been realized. In this way, WfWI has shown that it is capable of putting down grassroots in the desert, one Iraqi woman at a time.

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