

SWANEE HUNT AND CRISTINA POSA

The Boston Globe

Where are the women in the new Iraq?

June 22, 2004

NOW THAT the Iraqi Governing Council has been dissolved, the transitional government taking its place is being hailed as "diverse" for its multiethnic, multiconfessional representation. Yet while outsiders and Iraqi politicians are busy divvying up the future government along religious and ethnic lines, they are sidelining the single largest group of Iraqi citizens — women, the one constituency with the potential to exert a unifying effect on the country.

The political and religious climate in Iraq practically guarantees that if women are frozen out of the nascent Iraqi government today, their chances of breaking through in the near future are slim to none.

Excluding women from governance condemns Iraq to the fate suffered by its Arab neighbors: autocracy, economic stagnation, and social malaise caused by wasting the talents of the majority of the population. Ultimately, greater political participation by women could provide Iraq with a stabilizing force needed to stave off the disastrous division of the country into ethnic states. This is not to say that Iraqi women are in any way monolithic; neither are Kurdish women, or Sunni women, or Shi'ite women.

Women, however, in conflicts around the world demonstrate a shared stake in their economic and social development that often drives them to transcend regional, ethnic, and religious divides. "I detect a great spirit of unity among Iraqi women," Charlotte Ponticelli, senior coordinator of the US State Department's Office of International Women's Issues, told us recently.

Dr. Raja Khuzai, one of three women on the now-defunct 25-member Iraqi Governing Council, advocated the appointment of at least one woman to the executive quartet designed by UN Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, composed of a prime minister, president, and two vice presidents. The Iraqi interim constitution recommends that women fill at least a quarter of the seats in the future National Assembly, and Khuzai reasonably expected the executive branch to reflect the same 25 percent goal. "This is the only way we can encourage women to participate," she said. "Otherwise they'll think it's only promises."

None of the members of the executive quartet, however, are women. The Governing Council appears to have hijacked the appointment process, installing many of its own political members, including new Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. Women have been appointed to only six of the 30 Cabinet posts, which is a modest increase from the three sitting on the Iraqi Governing Council, but still short of the 25 percent goal. Yet

there is more than enough talent among professional women in Iraq to fill at least a quarter of the seats.

Unfortunately, myopic US policy over the past year has set a precedent tough for women to overcome. The United States refused to support a mandatory number of female-held seats in the future National Assembly, despite demands by Iraqi women's groups and Sunni statesman Adnan Pachachi (who was Brahimi's and America's top choice for president), because the Bush administration didn't want to contradict its antiaffirmative action policy back home. Paul Bremer, the top US administrator in Iraq, even allowed the creation of a constitutional drafting committee that was all men, although it was clear that the constitution was pivotal to establishing women's rights.

The Bush administration was not shy about using the graphic rhetoric of "rape rooms" to justify the war in Iraq on human rights grounds, and it has extolled women's advancement as a centerpiece of its Iraq strategy. Indeed, the administration has devoted millions of dollars to women's education and professional training in Iraq, but it has undermined its own good work by allowing Iraqi women to be a bargaining chip in political negotiations with powerful religious parties, making the classic mistake of sacrificing long-term stability for political expediency.

In the wake of the Abu Ghraib prison catastrophe, the last thing the United States needs is more proof of American hypocrisy in using human rights as a pretext for war. Yet failing to fully include women in Iraq's government notifies other countries in the region that women's political engagement is not, in fact, the pillar of democracy the West portrays.

If we want Iraq to set a democratic example for the region, the best way to start is by getting women involved now, before the June 30 deadline passes them by.

Swanee Hunt, former US ambassador to Austria, is a lecturer at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and founder of Women Waging Peace. **Cristina Posa**, an attorney, worked in Iraq as a legal and political adviser to Oxfam International. This column is adapted from an article in *Foreign Policy* magazine.