

U.S. failed its commitment to Iraqi women

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The latest effort by the Bush administration to revise its strategy in Iraq to "empower the Iraqi women ... in the hopes that they would encourage their men to fight the insurgency" is fascinating, considering it is too little, too late.

A deep belief in opportunity for women led me to Iraq, where I spent 22 months helping Iraqi women get jobs, start new businesses and undergo career training. I felt that debating why we went to Iraq was for others; I could do my part by providing the Iraqi women with a level playing field. That was my area of expertise.

Yet, the Bush administration failed to understand how important it was to include the Iraqi women in their fledgling democracy, to protect their rights and to help them achieve financial independence. Every day, my work was like pushing a rock uphill – because our own people could not see the incredible benefits of providing equal opportunities for women.

When the United States committed \$18.4 billion to Iraq for reconstruction efforts, I believed that an opportunity existed for women-owned businesses to land U.S. reconstruction contracts – contracts for any and everything, from painting buildings to rebuilding schools. But serious effort was required – not just to provide jobs – but to create real opportunities that could help Iraqi women, who made up two-thirds of the population, obtain a stake in the economy. What I found, however, was that providing Iraqi women opportunities was low on the list of priorities for our U.S. contractors as well as our State Department. Most of the people who went to Iraq had little knowledge of Iraq. They didn't understand that under Saddam Hussein's Baath Party, Iraqi women had some degree of equality. They were encouraged to get an education, allowed to work, to drive and to vote. Many had their own small businesses.

The erosion of their rights began when Hussein, who was losing favor as a result of failed wars and increased poverty, expanded his coalition to include religious leaders. In addition, 30 years of U.S. sanctions were particularly hard on the women, plunging them into poverty.

So, the day the statue of Hussein was pulled from its pedestal in Baghdad, women all over Iraq were meeting in small groups to determine how they were going to win back and protect their constitutional rights.

Yet, the future was foretold when only three were assigned roles in the Coalition Provisional Authority. Even with that setback, the Iraqi women didn't give up: They demanded 40 percent representation in their Parliament, but without the support of the provisional authority, the women ended up negotiating down to 25 percent representation – still better than our Congress, where women hold 17 percent of the seats.

Despite the pronouncements from Washington that Iraqi women were a priority, the State Department and the U.S. contractors it hired failed miserably to recruit "women-owned businesses" in Iraq or even to engage Iraqi women professionals.

From the beginning, the Iraqi women faced major hurdles. Not only did they face the "good old boy" system in Iraq – not necessarily of Arab culture, but of American contractors – with contracts going to those men who had built their businesses in the provisional authority days. Iraqi women didn't have the financial backing needed to meet the start-up requirements, nor did they have U.S. partners.

Within six months, we developed a list of approximately 350 women-owned businesses that were capable of bidding on contracts. This list was distributed every other month to anyone in Iraq who had any authority to award contracts. It bore fruit: By the end of March 2006, approximately 500 substantial contracts were awarded to women-owned businesses. However, the effort to get the State Department to set aside 5 percent of the U.S. contracts for Iraqi women-owned businesses (just as we do in the United States) stalled for 1-1/2 years, without support from either the State Department or female members of Congress.

Another big problem for those Iraqi women in government jobs – generally in the ministries that provided water and power – was a lack of training that would enable them to advance in their careers. Many had been in the same jobs for 25 years, with no hope of promotion. We provided training in leadership, management, budget and finance, as well as a series of "train-the-trainer" seminars. We had trained more than 1,900 mid- and senior-level women in the Iraqi government as of March 2006. This part of the program continues through this month.

I left Baghdad in March 2006 with a great sense of accomplishment, but also with a deep sense of disappointment in our own disrespect for the Iraqis, particularly for the Iraqi women. Now, I wonder, will we use what we learned in Iraq or will we continue to make the same mistakes?

What the Iraqi women really needed was opportunity, and – oh boy – did we fail them there. In failing them, we failed ourselves. I truly believe if we had kept our commitment to the Iraqi women, we would not be in the situation we are in today. Had we provided the Iraqi women with opportunities three years ago, Iraqi women would have stood up and said, "that's enough."

But we missed that opportunity.

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