

BY EILEEN E. PADBERG

rebuilding Baghdad

One woman trades a career in California for life in a war zone – so Iraqi businesswomen can thrive.

IT ALL STARTED BACK HOME in Laguna Niguel, Calif., in southern Orange County. I was watching the news and thinking how tough the war in Iraq must be on women and children there. I had to do something. Just then my friend and colleague called to ask for my help bidding on a huge construction project in Iraq. It was to involve Iraqi women in the reconstruction effort. I wrote the plan and the client won the contract. She then hired me to implement the plan.

We recruited Esra, a 24-year-old Iraqi-American woman, to work with me. Her family had fled the Saddam regime in 1991 and had lived in a refugee camp for two years before moving to the U.S. Having her along raised my comfort level. She spoke fluent Arabic and understood the culture.

We flew from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., and on to Kuwait, where we were issued flak jackets, helmets and gas masks. We then boarded a C-130 military flight to Baghdad. Little did I know a C-130 and Black Hawk helicopter would become my normal means of travel. We managed to find our way to the military bus going to the Green Zone with a secure convoy.

The Green Zone (also called the International Zone) is a small slice of Baghdad protected by huge concrete barriers on two sides and the Tigris River on the third. Security is very tight. Entry into the Green Zone is restricted to just

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a few checkpoints. Our office is across the street from our living facilities – both heavily guarded. In the mess hall everyone eats at the same table: generals, enlisted men, our guards and the contractors. There are three or four Iraqi restaurants within the Green Zone, but all are off limits except one, The Blue Star. The food is typical Iraqi – kebobs, rice or French fries, and hummus. Since last September, when a suicide bomber walked into one of our favorite restaurants and blew the place up, we are not allowed into any of the other restaurants. It's too dangerous.

The Project

Our program focuses on creating equal opportunities for Iraqi women – jobs, career development programs, and build-

ing and expanding small businesses. We make sure any technical training made available includes women. We provide career development seminars, from gender mainstreaming to budget, finance and basic computer skills. These programs, meant for women of the Ministry of Public Works and the Ministry of Water Resources, will enable women to advance in government positions too. Each seminar trains 20 women. To date, the women's initiatives have trained 448 Iraqi women with a total of 11,566 training hours. Our Train-the-Trainer program teaches a selected number of women to train others, furthering the sustainability of our efforts.

We put together “bidding seminars” for Iraqi women-owned businesses across the country. These attract women who



PADBERG (LEFT) IN HER NORMAL MODE OF TRAVEL - A MILITARY C-130



PADBERG (FAR RIGHT) DISCUSSES CONTRACTING OPPORTUNITIES WITH IRAQI WOMEN BUSINESS OWNERS IN BASRA



BRIG. GEN. THOMAS BOSTICK, COMMANDER OF THE U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS, WAS GUEST SPEAKER AT THE WOMEN'S BIDDING SEMINAR IN DIWANIYAH, IRAQ.

own their own business but don't know what to do, as well as women who want to start their own businesses. Our first seminar in Baghdad brought in a total of 58 women-owned businesses. Typically 20 to 40 women business owners show up everywhere we go.

Women like Shatha, who has an office in Baghdad and one in Amman, Jordan, reap the benefits. She fled to Jordan after her family received death threats. Initially Shatha struggled to get contracts because of Baghdad's old-boy network. We had worked with her to start a new company that focuses on training. Her company has since won several organizational contracts, each worth about \$20,000. Today her company is thriving.

Nada didn't know how to find information on what construction contracts were available and was very intimidated by male contractors. After

our training seminar she won several contracts to build police stations. She is meeting her deadlines and coming in on budget, and as a result she is on everyone's list to bid. Nada tells me the seminars boosted her self-confidence while giving her the ability to care for her family's future.

As best we can tell, more than 100 substantial contracts have been awarded to women-owned businesses here. And two months ago we got approval to include "voluntary set-asides" for women-owned businesses and had "women-owned business" added as an evaluation criteria when awarding contracts, giving these women an additional advantage.

The Challenge

Despite this success, life is not easy here. My family wasn't too happy when I moved to a war zone. Yet I didn't hesitate. I had been involved in politics, particularly women's issues, for years. As a political junkie, I have been on the front lines of the hot issues - ERA and choice. As a consultant, my paying clients have included Clint Eastwood (elected mayor of Carmel, Calif., in 1986) and George H.W. Bush (elected president in 1988).

But I needed a new challenge.

I put my 35-year political consulting and corporate strategic development business on hold and moved to Iraq to help the Iraqi women get a piece of the reconstruction pie.

I left my 3,100-square-foot home a half mile from the Pacific Ocean to live in the Iraqi desert. At first we lived in a high school converted into living quarters, five women to a room. (We spent six months in the high school and then moved into trailers - four women to a trailer with one tiny bathroom.)

We work 72 hours a week, 11 hours a day. We have Friday mornings off. I spend this time at the Tigris River enjoying a little fly-fishing. Car bombing near a checkpoint is an almost daily occurrence. Gunfire and mortars are common noises, as are the helicopters.

Still, I love what I'm doing; it is a great challenge. The Iraqi women are very entrepreneurial and very funny and honest. I believe so strongly that unless women like Shatha and Nada have a stake in the economy, democracy will fail in Iraq. What we do now will impact this country and these women and their families for years to come. **X**