



United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)

Speech of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq, Ad Melkert, delivered at the International Conference on “The Role of Women in Peace-Building, Reconciliation and Accountability held in Iraq

Erbil, 27 January 2011

“Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

There are many reasons to congratulate Iraqi leaders for accomplishments towards a new beginning for Iraq. However, there is also another reality facing Iraq and its international partners at this time which cannot, and should not, be overlooked even as we praise landmark achievements made in recent years and months.

Despite women’s heightened public and economic responsibilities during the conflict in this country and specific injustices they have suffered, despite also the fact that Iraqi women were leaders in their own right in recent history, and that in 1958 Iraq had the first female Minister in the Arab region, power brokering today in the new Iraq is predominantly taking place without the presence or input of women.

Yet it is generally accepted that women should be included in all steps of peace-building, reconciliation and nation building. This should ensure that the concerns of the other half of the population will be addressed in every stage of development.

The need for greater involvement of women in peace building and reconciliation is not specific to Iraq alone. Security Council Resolution 1325, introduced in 2000, became necessary because the nature of war and peace-building had changed – globally - increasing the impact on civilians, especially women. Despite their long-held, informal roles as successful peace-builders, women were not formally recognized or credited for their valuable role in post-conflict settings.

However, 1325 extends beyond women’s participation in the peacekeeping process. It is also about ensuring that women are part of the political sphere and that their contributions and concerns are institutionalized and translated throughout governance and legislative issues and processes. It is about equipping governments to better prevent future conflict and guard against situations that further inflict disproportionate harm on women and girls. It is also about recognizing the role of civil society in nurturing and maintaining peace.

We know, based on research, that corruption is reduced where both men and women are equally represented in decision making positions. We know that the economy improves when both men and women are given the opportunity to participate. We know that literacy for both boys and girls increases the health status of the citizens of a country. If Iraq is to successfully move forward as a prosperous, democratic and inclusive society, women must be fully empowered to be a part of the process.

While the United Nations continues to prioritise the empowerment of women throughout its programming, in line with UNSCR 1325, it is clear that new ideas and new efforts are required, specific to Iraq’s context at this pivotal time of national transition. As a former Minister for equal opportunity and a delegation leader in the landmark 1995 Beijing Conference on Women, I have witnessed firsthand the importance of women and men working together to identify and implement strategic interventions that make a difference in the lives of citizens.

Equally, it is important to remember that a sustainable process for institutionalising women’s participation “at the top”, requires prioritized national investment “at the bottom”. We owe it to a new generation of Iraqi children whose education system has been severely degraded by decades of conflict, sanctions and social upheaval.

A rural girl in Iraq is nearly five times less likely to receive a secondary education than a girl in an urban area. This disparity impacts Iraqi women's involvement in economic and political life and, if not reversed now, will continue to undermine important national achievements into the future. These girls are the mothers of tomorrow, and they play a crucial role in the development of the next generation of both boys and girls.

I very much look forward to the recommendations that will emerge from this conference and reiterate the United Nation's commitment to assist government and civil society in empowering Iraq's women to be full partners in the country's peace-building, reconciliation and development process.

Thank you