



PRESS RELEASE

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The United Nations¹ Calls for a Renewed Commitment to Promote Women's Rights in Iraq

Baghdad/Amman, 8 March 2009 - On the occasion of International Women's Day, the United Nations calls for both commitment and effective practical measures to protect and promote rights of Iraqi women. Years of violence, internal conflict and wars have slowed progress towards equality for Iraqi women, and compromised their fundamental rights to education, healthcare, work and full political participation.

"A major UN priority for 2009 is to improve conditions for women and girls who have yet to feel more than the full benefits of Iraq's recovery." Said **David Shearer, UN Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq**.

"There are some promising signs. One in four of those elected in the recent provincial elections are women. We now need to build on this achievement by joining forces with Iraq's government and civil society to further improve women's opportunities and human rights. There is still much to do", he added.

One in 10 Iraqi households are headed by women — more than 80% of whom are widows. Women comprise 17% of the Iraqi labour force (compared to 81% of men) excluding them from many economic opportunities.

Illiteracy has contributed to the weak participation of women in the labour force – 24% of women and girls above the age of 10 are illiterate compared with 11% of boys. Many Iraqi girls in recent years have been afraid of the high levels of violence to attend school.

Women's health indicators are also a particular concern: maternal mortality rates are 84 per 100,000 live births compared with 41 and 65 in Jordan and Syria respectively.

"Most of children and women mortalities in Iraq can be prevented through simple interventions – from ante-natal and emergency obstetric care to breastfeeding and safe hygiene at home", said **Sikander Khan, UNICEF Representative in Iraq**. "We have to work hand in hand with, and in support of, Iraq's health system to prevent further loss of precious lives", he added.

The theme of this year's International Women's Day is "**Women and Men: United to End Violence against Women**," and the UN's Secretary General has called for action to underpin a global campaign to tackle violence against women. In Iraq, one-third of married women experience psychological violence and 21% have been physically hurt by family members.

"The UN remains concerned about the high rates of violence against women in Iraq. We are putting more resources into initiatives to address this problem – to raise community awareness, increase support and strengthen legislation to protect women's rights," **David Shearer** concluded.

The UN is partnering with local and international organisations to implement more than 30 programmes to improve women's lives through protection, shelter, health and nutrition, governance, food assistance, education and economic reform and increased social and legal protections across every governorate of Iraq.

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¹ OCHA, WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNOPS, UNIFEM, UNHABITAT, IOM, UNDP, WFP, UNHCR, UNFPA

Data Sources: UNICEF, WHO/ Ministry of Health Iraq Family Health Survey (IFHS), UNESCO, The Interagency Information & Analysis Unit (www.iauiraq.org)