

On 25<sup>th</sup> November hundreds of Iraqi and international female artists, activists and academics met to passionately discuss how culture can address the particular issues, challenges and strengths of the women in Iraq.

In no small measure the interest was heightened because it was the first women's conference to be held in Iraq, the date chosen to coincide with many others held internationally marking the UN Day to Eliminate Violence against Women.

The three-day event, organised by Artrole, a UK organization founded in 2004 by activist, artist and curator Adalet Garmiany, discussed, examined and explored women's rights issues through arts, culture and education.

Since the 1991 Gulf war, according to Human Rights Watch, the position of women in Iraqi society has deteriorated significantly. Women and girls were disproportionately affected by the economic consequences of the UN sanctions, and this was compounded by changes in laws, which restricted women's mobility and access to work.

Going forward, how can Iraqi women contribute towards the development of a peaceful, intercultural and democratic society when social, political and economic pressures reduce the ability of a woman to express herself in public? Especially as the patriarchal system restricts a woman and males decide what activities take place in society.

There are specific challenges to Iraqi women who live in a society where violence appears culturally sanctioned. Most offences are made with impunity by families, the community, the militias and the government.

However, the point was well made though that problems maybe different in other countries for women, but the fundamental issues remain the same.

A major discussion point was the challenge to move the issue of violence against women from words into action through education and the arts. "Art is a very good platform for women to get involved," said Gazzia Khan, actor, director and writer from Sulimaniye. in her opening speech.

To underline this, two exhibitions, "Women's Voices" and "Women's Hidden Voices", were also organized by Artrole. The former featuring contemporary art, photography, paintings, sculptures, performances, films by Iraqi female artists, the latter with handicrafts from women in shelters or refuges, in prison or are disabled.

Despite the hardships since 2003, it is obvious that women have managed to express their message and make their voices heard through art and participate in society.

Twenty years ago victims of violence suffered in silence, but change started in the 1990's. The momentum must be maintained. Huma Khan, head of the UN

Human Rights team in Erbil made this important point in her opening speech that “women play a quiet role, but a very important one.”

It was noted that ironically none of the delegates represented in the conference need to be taught their rights, nor were they likely to suffer violence in silence. By definition, the delegates of the conference were self selected, educated, motivated, and had access to technology.

The challenge is to reach out and educate the older generation and those in the villages on their rights – a challenge compounded by high levels of illiteracy. How to raise awareness of women on how to break their restrictions?

Baby steps through theatre productions and poetry readings in the villages and non-violence projects for children have been started by Artrole. This and more needs to be done if Iraq is to be stable and safe for both women and men.

The conference noted that the fact that women needed a special conference to highlight our issues and problems underlines the difficulties of women. There is an urgent need to reform and create a proper environment so women can then take their place as leaders in all spheres of society.

The aim is that this is the first of an annual event by Artrole dedicated to human rights and women’s issues in different countries in the Middle East and building a cultural bridge between the Middle East and the UK through arts, culture, education and dialogue.

It was a brilliant and inspiring start.

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