

In Her Own Words:

**Iraqi women talk about their greatest
concerns and challenges**

A Survey



Introduction

The plight of women in Iraq today has gone largely ignored, both within Iraqi society and by the international community. For more than five years, headlines have been dominated by political and social turmoil, the chaos of conflict and widespread violence. This has overshadowed the abysmal state of the civilian population's day-to-day lives, a result of that very turmoil and violence.

Behind the headlines, essential services have collapsed, families have been torn apart and women in particular have fallen victim to the consequences of war. The specific hardships that some of Iraq's most vulnerable individuals cope with on a daily basis, as told by them, have overwhelmingly gone unheard.

As an international humanitarian agency working with Iraqi non-governmental organizations that help civilians on the ground, Oxfam last year conceived the idea of conducting a survey of women in Iraq who have been affected by the conflict, many of who represent some of the most at risk families in the country. The largest group of women interviewed who are deemed especially vulnerable, consists of those widowed by conflict who are now acting as the head of her household, and who have been driven deep into poverty. This survey is a follow up to Oxfam's 2007 report 'Rising to the Humanitarian Challenge in Iraq,' which found that one-third of the Iraqi population was in need of humanitarian assistance and that essential services were in ruins.

At the time, there was a striking absence in the public sphere of a collective female voice from the cities, towns and villages of Iraq about the specific challenges women and their families face on a daily basis. In fact, there was very little comprehensive, detailed information available about the daily challenges of the Iraqi civilian population as a whole and their struggle to make ends meet – largely due to rampant insecurity. So a team of Oxfam-supported surveyors last year fanned out across the country, knocked on doors, and unlocked hundreds of women's voices that, until that point, had found nobody to listen.

Oxfam and the Al-Amal Association, the Iraqi partner organization that conducted the survey in the five provinces of Baghdad, Basra, Kirkuk, Najaf and Nineveh, do not claim that the information they gathered from 1,700 respondents represents the situation facing all Iraqis, or even all women in Iraq. However, it does provide a disturbing snapshot of many women's lives and those of their children and other family members. The information presented in this paper was collected over a period of several months, starting in the summer of 2008.

The women revealed that their families' everyday lives had worsened in many cases since Oxfam released its humanitarian report – and *despite* the improved overall security situation in Iraq that began in mid-2007. Not only did a large proportion of women say that access to basic services had grown more difficult, but they also told surveyors that they had become more and more impoverished over the past six years, and that their own personal safety remained a pressing concern.

Some of the survey results were:

- Nearly 60% of women said that safety and security continued to be their number one concern despite improvements in overall security in Iraq

- As compared with 2007 & 2006, more than 40% of respondents said their security situation worsened last year & slightly more than 22% said it had remained static compared to both years
- 55% had been a victim of violence since 2003; 12% of women had been victims of domestic violence; More than 30% had family members who died violently. Some 45% of women said their income was worse in 2008 compared with 2007 and 2006, while roughly 30% said it had not changed in that same time period
- 33% had received no humanitarian assistance since 2003
- 76% of widows said they did not receive a pension from the government
- Nearly 25% of women had no daily access to drinking water & half of those who did have daily access to water said it was not potable; 69% said access to water was worse or the same as it was in 2006 & 2007
- One-third of respondents had electricity 3 hours or less per day; two-thirds had 6 hours or less; 80% said access to electricity was more difficult or the same as in 2007, 82% said the same in comparison to 2006 and 84% compared to 2003
- Nearly half of women said access to quality healthcare was more difficult in 2008 compared with 2006 and 2007
- 40% of women with children reported that their sons and daughters were not attending school

After analyzing the survey results, it was also found that 35.5% of participants were acting as head of the household, primarily as a result of conflict. Nearly 25% of women had not been married. If this reflects Iraq as a whole, it is the highest rate in the larger region, a result of the loss of men of marrying age as a result of the conflict. 55% percent of women said they had been displaced or forced to abandon their homes at least once since 2003. Nearly half reported sharing their homes with other families.

In early 2009, reports of improved security in Iraq, and even a return to 'normality,' began appearing in the media. Similar reports of diminished suicide bombs and other violent indiscriminate attacks emerged at the time of the initial data collection last year. However insecurity remains in many provinces including Baghdad, Kirkuk and Nineveh where small-scale attacks, assassination and kidnappings continue. Women in particular are less safe now than at any other time during the conflict or in the years before.¹

Beyond security, the overwhelming concern women voiced was extreme difficulty accessing basic services such as clean water, electricity and adequate shelter despite billions of US dollars that have been spent in the effort to rehabilitate damaged or destroyed infrastructure. Availability of essentials such as water, sanitation and health care is far below national averages.² Both the Iraqi organization and researcher that carried out the survey and analyzed its findings corroborated that the overall challenges facing women and the Iraqi population as a whole remained the same in early 2009 as they did in the second half of 2008 when the data presented in this paper was collected.

Women especially appear to have been hard hit by the crippled essential services sector because many have also been driven into debilitating poverty since 2003. The survey and more detailed interviews revealed that a large number of women have been left unable to earn an

¹ United Nations Consolidated Appeal, Iraq and the Region, 2009

² Ibid

income because many of their husbands or sons – the family breadwinners – had been killed, disappeared, abducted or suffered from mental or physical illness. Although there are no precise figures, it is estimated that there are now some 740,000 widows in Iraq.³

Many of the women interviewed reported that they have been unable to secure financial assistance, in the form of a widow's pension, or compensation from the government for the loss or debilitating injury of family members during the current conflict or previous ones. Of the widows that were surveyed (25% of respondents), 76% said that they were not receiving a pension from the government. As a result, women who are now acting as head of household are much less likely to be able to afford to send their children to school, pay fees to access private community generators or buy clean water and medicines.

In summary, now that overall security situation, although still very fragile, begins to stabilize, and as the Iraqi government is now benefiting from tens of billions of dollars in oil revenues (despite falling global prices), countless mothers, wives, widows and daughters of Iraq remain caught in the grip of a silent emergency. They are in urgent need of protection and – along with their families – are in desperate need of regular access to affordable and quality basic services, and urgently require enhanced humanitarian and financial assistance. Considering recent security gains, it is in the best interest of the Iraqi government to now begin robust investment into the lives of the war-battered civilian population, with the support – including technical support – of the international community.

³ New York Times, 23 February 2009

Survey Findings: The Verdicts

Security and Accessing Services

- 55% of respondents had been subjected to violence since 2003
- 25.4% of those who had been subjected to violence were victims of random 'street' violence; 22% were victims of domestic physical abuse; 14% were victims of violence inflicted by militias/armed groups; 10% had been victims of targeted abuse or abduction; 9% had been victims of sexual abuse; and 8% had been victims of violence inflicted by the Multi-National Forces in Iraq (MNF-I)
- 31% had family members who had died violently; 25% had family members injured by violence; and 17% had family members kidnapped
- 40% reported that they could not access healthcare without the threat of insecurity
- 30% of those with children said they could not reach school without security threats
- 31% said that they could not move freely in their area (visits to the market, etc) without risking their safety
- 60% said they did not feel safe travelling to other towns
- As compared with 2007, 40% felt their security situation was worsening in 2008, 38% said it was improving and the remainder said it had not changed; as compared with 2006, 43% said it was worse, 34% said it was better & 22% said it had not changed
- By province, women reported safety and security as a top concern in Baghdad, Basra and Nineveh, where it was of a lesser concern in Najaf and Kirkuk

VERDICT: Insecurity continues to have a devastating impact on the physical wellbeing of women, and greatly restricts their day-to-day lives. It has also lent to the impoverishment of many women and their families, in large part because wage-earning men have fallen victim to violence.

In her own words⁴

Firyal

"My husband's car did not make it to the petrol station so my brother and father went to pick him up. On their way to get petrol for the stranded car, the national authorities stopped them all. Their identities were checked and then they were asked one by one

⁴ Note: All of the women's names that appear in this paper have been changed to protect their identities

where they lived. My husband told them that he was from Mahmoudiyah (in the 'Triangle of Death,' a Sunni area south of Baghdad). As soon as he said this, the authorities took him into their car. My father told them that he was their guest and the husband of his daughter. They responded by pointing a pistol at his face, threatening to kill him if he didn't shut up....

My life became unbearable after that and I felt I was a stranger where I lived. So I returned to my parents' house, devastated. A month ago, I was temporarily appointed as an inspector at one of the government departments. I am also learning how to sew, so that I can make a decent life for my son. He passed his exams and is now in the third grade. I receive no state support. We live a harsh life."

-- Firyal is a 24-year-old widow who has visited hospitals, morgues and even cemeteries in search of her husband, in vain. After he went missing in mid-2006, sectarian violence escalated in her neighbourhood, her brother-in-law was killed, and so she returned to live with her parents in another area. Because Firas' body was never discovered, Firyal has not received a widow's pension.

Nour

"This area changed tremendously. It is crowded and has no sanitary facilities. There are no services; the sewage pipes are always clogged up. A healthy person gets sick from the stench and the garbage. Especially these days it is bad. The sewage backs up into the house and even goes into the bedrooms....

Our area has been changed as a result of the constant acts of violence.... The situation here is now worse than it used to be before as a consequence of the spread of the epidemics with unhealthy water and trash and corpses in the streets."

-- Nour lives in Al-Sadr City. She supports three sons, as her husband was killed in the Gulf War, and she saves every spare dinar to pay for her sons' school fees. It is her greatest wish that they graduate and are able to improve their lot in life.

Poverty & Income

- 52% of respondents said they were unemployed
- 42% of the unemployed said they were jobless because they have never worked before; 17% were not allowed to work; 14% couldn't work because they were caregivers; and 7% said it was unsafe to work
- 46% of respondents either did not have adult sons, or adult sons who were working
- Nearly 50% of respondents did not provide an answer when asked who supported the family (perhaps because there was no support). The second highest percentage was state aid from the Iraqi Government (22%) and the third highest group said she was the provider (13.2%)

- 79% said they are receiving their monthly food ration from the government (formerly the Oil-for-Food ration pre-2003 invasion) and of those, 45% reported only receiving it intermittently
- A majority of women who did not receive food rations said their food ration registration cards had not been 'transferred' to their new area of residence after being displaced from their original homes. The next highest category was those who don't receive it because of 'security'
- 76% of widows interviewed had not received a pension from the government. 52% of those said the registration process was too complicated; 18% said they were unaware they had a right to receive a widow's pension; 14% said they were 'not allowed' to register and 9% said it was unsafe
- 33% of women had not received any humanitarian assistance since 2003; aid agencies were reported to be the largest provider of humanitarian aid at 60%, followed by local leaders at 23% and the national government at 16%
- A majority percentage group said that their income in 2008 was lower than it was in 2007 (45.9%) and 2006 (44.1%)

VERDICT: A large percentage of women have seen their livelihoods deteriorate over the course of the past several years. Incomes have disappeared, poverty has deepened, the Iraqi government has not been providing sufficient financial assistance to vulnerable groups such as widows and at risk women are in need of humanitarian aid.

In her own words

Shafeeka

"As soon as the war started, house prices rose dramatically and I could not afford the rent anymore. One day, my landlord came over, threw all my belongings out into the street and told me to leave. So I sold all my belongings, kept the small amount of money I made in my purse and moved to this area to be closer to my husband's relatives who work nearby.... I use wood to bake bread in a clay furnace that I made myself. We have so little here as you can see.... The nearest health centre is 40 kilometres away. People have died in this area because they were unable to get the treatment they needed. We have complained to the governorate offices, but nobody wants to hear us..."

I have to rely upon myself. I will work until the last day of my life; it is not shameful to work. I feel proud to be a woman capable of relying on herself. I wish I had a pension though to rely upon when I grow older and am unable to do this work. I need a home, you can't imagine how difficult it is to live in a tent but I have to be patient in the hope that one day things will become better when the situation stabilizes, the government takes control of everything and security prevails"

-- Shafeeka has not seen her husband since he was called up for service during the Gulf War. He never returned home and she does not have proof that he was killed. At the

time of her interview, she had been living in a tent for five years in an isolated area in Najaf province with no running water, electricity or access to health care. She does not receive a widow's pension and she collects straw and mud to make clay ovens, arduous and timely work, which she sells for 2,000 dinars (\$1.75) each, enough for a few meals.

Emman

“My son Amer graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering and was planning to get married.... On 5 November 2007, three days before his wedding, he and my daughter Basimah, along with a friend, went out to buy the wedding dress and other wedding accessories in the Al Karradah neighbourhood market in Baghdad. Two hours later, someone called us from Basimah's mobile phone to tell us that they had been admitted to the hospital as a result of an explosion.... When I arrived, I started searching among the injured patients, running from one ward to another going crazy. Then they took me to the mortuary and there I found them. I wept silently for such a long time and so all the other women around me began weeping too....

I wished I were dead when I saw their bodies in the morgue piled on top of each other. I can't forget the scene of them even for one moment.... I wish I could see them again. They were the fruit of my life and the only hope I had in this world. We have received no pension money to live on...there are so many cases of widows and others [who have lost loved ones and breadwinners] who are also not receiving anything from the government, no compensation or pension.”

-- Emman's elderly husband is ill with cancer and can no longer work. Emman said that she and her husband always struggled economically, but had enough to ensure their children attended university so they could improve the family's situation. Her daughter Basimah had a good job as a computer programmer but had resigned due to rampant insecurity shortly before she was killed.

Displacement

- Since 2003, 55% of respondents had been displaced from, or forced to leave, their original homes, the majority due to violence or in order to earn an income
- 48% had moved once, 20% had moved twice and 18% had been forced to move more than 4 times
- The largest percentage (31%) relocated within their hometown; another 25% moved to a different city and 23% moved to another location within the district
- The highest percentage (22%) moved because of 'neighbourhood insecurity'; 17% fled because of a verbal or written threat; 7% left because of a death in the family; 3.5% were displaced by a targeted attack; and 3% fled after a member of the family was kidnapped. Other reasons women left their homes included the need to find employment elsewhere to support the family as a result of the conflict
- 30% of women wanted compensation and support to permanently resettle in their new location; 20% wished to return to their original homes; 18.5% could not think

of a solution to her predicament; 5% wanted asylum outside of Iraq; and 26% gave a variety of other answers when asked how her situation should be resolved

VERDICT: More than half of the women surveyed have been displaced from their homes since 2003, often living in extremely over-crowded and unsanitary conditions with little access to basic services or an income.

In her own words

Bushara

“One year ago, I went out to buy breakfast, when I saw something written on the wall of our house. So I went back in and brought my husband out to read what it said. He was shocked with fear and told me that we had to leave immediately. He said that the graffiti told Shiites in the neighbourhood to get out.

I got my daughter dressed and veiled despite her young age and we quickly woke up the other children and ran out into the street without wearing any shoes or slippers. The weather was very cold; it felt like the coldest day of my life.... We lost all our belongings – our jewellery, clothes and furniture. We left our house only with what we had on our backs.... [The Ministry of Displacement and Migration] haven’t yet helped us. I filed an application for help but they’ve told me time and again our turn hasn’t come yet, that they have too many cases. They are not organized and there is a very long waiting list.”

-- Bushara and her family were displaced from their home in Abu Ghraib and now rely on charity from neighbours who have supplied them with some money, blankets and other essentials to live in a new rented space in a different Baghdad neighbourhood. Her husband has suffered a stroke and she cares for an ill grandson whose father – her own son – disappeared in 2005 while working as a commercial truck driver between Baghdad and Baqouba during a time of heightened sectarian violence. He is presumed dead.

Huda

“I lived with my father, mother, four sisters and my brother in the Al Dourah area close to Karkh city. We were quite a well off family. My father was a well-known businessman in the area; he was a paint merchant. We lived well without any problems....

My father’s shop was in Al-Bab Al-Sharqi in the centre of Baghdad. Just before we were about to migrate [because of the violence in Iraq] my father went back to his shop one last time. It was 16 June 2004. While he was there, there was an explosion in the street just in front of the shop, killing him and burning his business to the ground.... Immediately after my father’s death, our financial situation crumbled, he was the only person in the family earning an income. We had school fees to pay for. My mother has received no support from the government as a widow and a single mother.”

-- Since Huda's father was killed, one of her brothers was also killed in a targeted attack in 2007 and her family has been displaced more than once. Huda, who is educated, took on two jobs, one at a government office and another with a humanitarian agency, to support her family. At the time of this survey, she was living alone in an undisclosed location (for security reasons) away from her family so she could continue to earn an income to help support her mother and surviving siblings. The remaining members of her immediate family were seeking refuge elsewhere in Iraq.

Drinking Water

- 24% of women reported having no daily access to drinking water
- 48% of those who do have access to water said that it is not potable
- Nearly 25% of women had no daily access to drinking water & half of those who did have daily access to water said it was not potable; 69% said access to water was worse or the same as it was in 2006 & 2007

VERDICT: Overall, the women saw no improvement in accessing clean drinking water. On the contrary, a majority of respondents said it was more difficult or the same in 2008 compared to 2007 & 2006.

In her own words

Jameela

“The water source at the end of our street is mixed with sewage, the pipe has been broken for some time but no one has fixed it; so we often have no choice but to drink sewage infested water. We do not have a sewage system so we discharge our wastewater into a pit beside the house and then into the street once it is full. We do this with our own hands.”

-- Jameela is a 50-year-old widow from Najaf who sells incense and candles to mourners in a local cemetery. Her son has been mentally disturbed and unable to work since a US bomb hit his barracks in 2003.

Nour

“Our drinking water is drawn by a pump which at the same time draws sewage water which we disinfect with chlorine tablets that we buy at the pharmacy...People in the area who can't afford the tablets have fallen ill with many serious diseases like cholera, typhoid, intestinal infections and renal infections, especially in the summer.”

-- Nour is a 41-year-old mother of three who lives with 20 people in cramped quarters in Baghdad's Al-Sadr City. Her husband was killed in the Gulf War in 1991. Neither the former government nor the current one have provided her with a widow's pension. She has worked as a cleaner to support her family but the month prior to taking part in this survey, she was hit by shrapnel in the eye and leg and was being cared for by relatives.

Electricity

- One-third of respondents reported having electricity 3 hours or less per day, and nearly two-thirds had less than 6 hours per day
- Only 2.3% reported having electricity more than 12 hours per day
- 75.6% have some access to a general (community) or private generator; the remaining respondents had no access at all
- Of those who don't use a generator, 45% said the reason was because they could not afford to pay the fees; 43% said there was no generator available; and 6% said they did not use one for security reasons
- One-third of respondents had electricity 3 hours or less per day; two-thirds had 6 hours or less; 80% said access to electricity was more difficult or the same as in 2007, 82% said the same in comparison to 2006 and 84% compared to 2003

VERDICT: Accessing electricity remains extremely challenging. The largest percentage group said it was more difficult accessing electricity in 2008 as compared to 2007, and the largest group said it was just as difficult in 2008 (followed closely by those answering 'more difficult') as it was in 2006, when levels of violence were much higher than those today.

In her own words

Amal

"There is no way that I can get hot water since the price for a bottle of gas has reached 20,000 Iraqi dinars which is the equivalent of my wages for 20 days of work. My house has no utilities... thankfully the owners of the factories nearby let us use their toilets. I bet an animal barn would look much better than our home. We are no longer treated as human beings; look at the state we are living in.... I want to be able to give my children cold and clean water to drink and not have to store our food in a suitcase. I want to be employed. I am exhausted but hope that I will never have to beg; our dignity is all we have left."

-- Amal supports four children and two grandchildren by selling bricks she finds at refuse sites. They live in a makeshift home on government land and have no regular access to

electricity and have no running water in their home. Because she has no electricity, Amal uses an old suitcase as a refrigerator. The entire family has suffered from bouts of food poisoning.

Nour

"The electricity has been cut off since the war started in 2003. We manage to get electricity by hiring a private generator but the cost is high; it costs half of one person's monthly salary."

-- Nour is a mother, widow and an Al-Sadr City resident who lives with 20 other people.

Education

- 81% of women responded that they are not continuing their education (high school, university or vocational training)
- The top 3 reasons given were: no interest (27.4%); the need to work to support self and/or family (27%); and not permitted by family (17%)
- 40% of women with children reported that their sons and daughters were not attending school
- Insecurity was the predominant reason that boys were not attending; for girls, the two most frequent answers given were 'high transportation cost' and 'forbidden from attending'

VERDICT: High rates of insecurity, economic hardship and the battered education sector have prevented women from continuing their education, and prevented many children from attending school since 2003. As the security situation improved, boys began returning to school at greater rates than girls. Yet nearly half of women reported that they had children who were still not attending school. A large percentage of women and girls are prohibited by their families from pursuing an education for cultural and economic reasons

In her own words

Zainab

"I went to the government office to register [as a widow], hoping that I could get monthly salary but they didn't allow me to because my husband is neither dead or alive, sick or disabled. He was kidnapped and is considered 'missing' and there is no law addressing this. So all I can do is continue with my work [as a domestic cleaner and servant] so I can try to buy milk for my son because it is the most important thing, and also so I can

buy some food for my extended family so they can eat lunch and dinner. Sometimes we have only bread and tea to eat for dinner. I can withstand anything, but the children can't....

I can read and write because I reached the first grade of secondary school. I would like to complete my studies so I can get a better job and not work [as a domestic servant] anymore, but my circumstances prevent me from doing anything to change my life."

-- Zainab's husband was kidnapped, along with six other young men, at his place of employment in 2006. She has not seen him since. She was 19 years old at the time of interview. She receives no state aid and there is little or no chance she will be able to secure a better job without further education.

Amal

"Every morning, I go with my children to a construction refuse site. There, they search for bricks and stones to sell to factories.... They have to do this; I cannot afford to send them to school or even to feed them properly without this work."

-- Amal supports six children and two grandchildren.

Health Care

- Of the 25% of women who had not sought medical care since 2005, 45% had not done so because they could not afford to, medical services were located far away or it was unsafe
- 20% of women who visited an emergency room went as a result of a violent incident as compared to only 11% who went to give birth
- The largest percentage groups felt access to healthcare last year was both more difficult than in 2006 (40.4%) and 2007 (41.8%)

VERDICT: The largest percentage groups of women said their access to quality healthcare worsened from 2006 to 2008 due to insecurity, lack of facilities and economic hardship

In her own words

Suha

"Before the war we had a functioning health service and now, the service is not available. There is only one doctor at the health care centre but she is not on duty every day.

Before the war, health care was free. Now we have to pay for it and the prices are too high for us to afford.”

-- Suha supports her family by running a small sewing business with her two daughters from their home. Electricity cuts have greatly compromised their ability to work and they often go several days without water. At the time of the interview, the sewage system in their neighbourhood was broken. Suha said that waste often flows into the street.

Nour

“I was bleeding severely. They carried me in an ambulance to the Ibn Al-Haytham Eye Hospital but the doctor refused to treat me because they didn’t have an X-Ray machine.... Before the war the eye hospital was one of the best in the Middle East with patients coming from other countries like Egypt and Yemen.... After that they took me to another hospital and my eye was removed...”

There is nothing under my control. I wish to regain my health...so I can work again. I wish there was a charitable association to treat me since the hospitals lack even the minimum services. The hospital where I stayed in was lack of all sort of services”

-- Nour, a resident of Baghdad’s Al-Sadr City, was wounded by shrapnel during a period of rampant violence in her neighbourhood last year. At the time of the interview, she was unable to return to work as a cleaner and did not know when she would be able to return. She only received minimal health care and said that if the eye hospital had functioning equipment, her eye could have been saved.

LAST WORDS

In summary, the women ranked their top three greatest concerns

Baghdad

The largest percentage of women answered:

- 1: Safety & Security
- 2: Access to Income
- 3: Shelter/Displacement

Basra

The largest percentage of women answered:

- 1: Safety & Security
- 2: Electricity
- 3: Unemployment

Kirkuk

The largest percentage of women answered:

- 1: Electricity
- 2: Drinking Water
- 3: Safety & Security

Najaf

The largest percentage of women answered:

- 1: Electricity
- 2: Drinking Water
- 3: Unemployment

Nineveh:

The largest percentage of women answered:

- 1: Safety & Security
- 2: Shelter/Displacement
- 3: Access to Food

All Five Provinces Combined:

The largest percentage of women answered:

- 1: Safety & Security
- 2: Electricity
- 3: Shelter/Displacement

In Conclusion

A Silent Emergency

The women of Iraq have been caught in the grip of a silent emergency for the past six years. Despite fragile security gains and a decline in indiscriminate and sectarian violence over the past months, the day-to-day lives of many women in Iraq remain dire. Over the past several years, women have increasingly been targeted with acts of violence, threats and abduction. Indirectly, continued insecurity has also greatly degraded the quality of women's lives across the country, no matter their religious, economic or cultural identities.

Although the survey in no way provides an absolute and complete assessment of the challenges that women in Iraq face today, its findings have presented a strong indicator of the realities on the ground for women in general, and in particular, the most vulnerable women.

Perhaps surprisingly, in spite of reports of a decline in violence in Iraq as a whole, nearly 60% of women surveyed said that security and safety remained their most pressing concern. The survey importantly illustrated that the ripples of conflict have washed over almost every aspect of many women's lives – and those of their families. The conflict and entrenched violence have driven women into abject poverty, displacing them from their homes, creating great challenges to accessing basic services where they exist at all, and cutting them and their families off from an liveable income.

Women continue to struggle on a daily basis to find ways to feed and educate their children, access clean water and electricity and receive medical treatment. This is seriously compromising not only the wellbeing of women today; it is also jeopardizing the future generations of Iraq. A staggering 40% of mothers surveyed said that their children were not attending school. This is not only because of economic hardship, discrimination against girls and insecurity; it is also a result of the destruction and deterioration of education facilities.⁵

Women-headed households have been driven deep into poverty as a result of the war. This has occurred for various reasons, including the death of the family breadwinner and displacement. Now these women who have little or no source of income continue to spend what meagre resources they might have on meeting their basic needs, be it connecting to a neighbourhood generator, buying water-purification tablets or being able to afford medicines that treat water-borne illnesses. Others who spoke with Oxfam's partners simply don't have the money to cope.

The challenges that lay ahead in tackling the worrying trends revealed in the survey – entrenched poverty, abysmal access to basic services overall and targeted violence against women – are indeed immense. Yet these challenges must be addressed if the lives of ordinary women, Iraqis in general, and Iraq as a whole are to again prosper after years of reversed development.

⁵ OCHA Iraq/UNAMI (Information Analysis Unit), Access to Education in Iraq: A Gender Perspective, 2008

A 'Surge' of Investment in Iraq's Future

Since 2003, Iraq's infrastructure, which was already compromised after years of economic sanctions, has been systematically pummelled, with many essential services almost grinding to a complete halt. Not only has the conflict and widespread violence constrained the Iraqi government in efforts to rebuild the country and restart the provision of the basics of modern life, such as drinking water, sewerage, electricity and adequate health care. A lack of sufficient capacity needed to revive these services has also proved a monumental obstacle.

The devastating drain of technical expertise has greatly weakened Iraq's ability, thus far, to reconstruct the country's deeply damaged infrastructure and revive its essential services sector. Those previously holding positions of technical know-how on the delivery and application of basic services are now largely absent from the Iraqi equation, as are many high-level professionals such as medical doctors who have fled the country due to violence. Furthermore, for 25 years under Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi government was highly centralized, and as a result, there are gaps in capacity at lower levels of governance. This makes the decentralization of government and the important role that process plays in delivering basic services particularly challenging.

However, it is perhaps more important today than ever before that these great challenges are addressed, now that Iraq has arrived at a fragile crossroad. An opportunity to begin effectively investing in the provision of basic services has arisen after billions of dollars of reconstruction funds were either misused or spent in vain in the face of rampant insecurity over the past several years.

Countless vulnerable women and their families living on the brink of destitution depend on such investment after years of upheaval and neglect. Widows need pensions paid out so they can begin to pick up the pieces of their broken lives, starting with the ability to afford the basic things they need in life. New methods for protecting women need to be implemented as the security situation shifts from widespread violence to more targeted attacks, to which women are particularly vulnerable.

It is a worrying sign that the Iraqi minister for women's affairs, Nawal al-Samaraie, tendered her resignation from her post in early February, claiming she lacked resources to implement her plans to improve women's lives. She said that there was 'an army' of uneducated women, widows, victims of domestic violence and female internally displaced persons in dire need of assistance, and that her resignation was a 'warning' to the government in protest.⁶

In light of greater Iraqi access to oil revenues today as compared to past years, improved security, new local governments in place following January's mostly peaceful provincial elections, and with US influence and presence on the wane, it is a crucial moment for the Iraqi government to begin a 'surge' of real investment into the country and its provinces. More specifically, an injection of resources and policies that better protect women's lives must be delivered, and a sustainable mechanism for monitoring women's needs must be put into place. A governmental forum must also be created so that their voices can be directly heard.

Women in Iraq today are even more concerned about sustaining their livelihoods in 2009 according to Oxfam's partners in Iraq, largely due to the fall in oil prices which they fear will

⁶ IRIN, 9 February 2009

affect their own ability to earn an income, buy food and pay for shelter and healthcare, among other basics. Now that security gains have been made, it is time for the Iraqi government to redistribute energy and finances towards throwing a lifeline to its war-affected population as a whole, and especially those women who have been hardest hit and who have suffered in silence.

Critical in the effort to save women and their families will be the support of the international community. It is vital at this juncture, as international focus shifts elsewhere in the world, that donor countries robustly back Iraq in reviving its basic and social services sectors and not turn a blind eye to the millions of ordinary Iraqis whose lives have fallen apart over the past six years. As military support has declined and continues to decline, it is important that the international community, and the United States and the United Kingdom in particular, redirect resources to helping Iraq rebuild its country.

Regional actors are also well positioned to play a growing role in pulling Iraq back onto its feet. Financial resources and private investment are necessary, but equally so is the critical technical expertise on the delivery of basic services and decentralization that could be provided from the wider region, which would benefit from a stable and thriving Iraq.

Furthermore, if the tenuous security gains hold, and especially if the situation improves further, UN agencies will have a greater ability to meet the many needs of vulnerable communities on the ground. The needs of women in particular must be assessed and subsequently targeted for assistance.

If implemented with full efficacy, such a surge of soft and hard resources would help revive Iraq's battered infrastructure and basic services sector, and importantly, begin to provide the desperately-needed support women-headed households, and the civilian population as a whole, require in Iraq today.

About the Survey

Although designed by Oxfam, the survey was carried out by an Iraqi partner organization, Al-Amal, a non-political, non-sectarian association of volunteers working in the areas of conflict resolution, human rights, children's rights and vocational and literacy training for women, among others.

The 1,700 women who participated in the survey were selected to reflect diverse ethnic, religious, sectarian, geographic, economic and social backgrounds, and come from both urban and rural areas. Al-Amal, in conjunction with local volunteers in each province, identified a sample of women in the five Iraqi provinces Nineveh, Baghdad, Basra, Kirkuk and Najaf who would represent the different groups, in order to paint the most accurate picture possible of Iraq as a whole.

The proportion of women selected in each province was in accordance with population size. Nearly 35% were from different areas of Baghdad province; nearly 19.5% were from Basra province; another 19.5% were from Nineveh; 13% were from Kirkuk; and another 13% were from Najaf province. The women ranged from 21-65 years of age.

Female volunteers working with Al-Amal, most of who hold university degrees, surveyed women in the five provinces, mainly in their homes. Al-Amal and a consultant researcher at Baghdad University carefully trained the women to identify women reflecting not only diverse backgrounds, but also advised them on ways to identify women who have been adversely affected by conflict in all areas where the survey took place.

From start to finish, the information presented in this paper was collected over a period of several months. The surveyors conducted their survey in the summer of 2008. The raw data was then submitted to Al-Amal and onwards to the researcher at Baghdad University, who analyzed the survey findings, which were presented to Oxfam in the autumn.

Following the data collection, women working with Al-Amal and another Iraqi organization that advocates for women's rights, Women for Peace, were trained to gather individual stories, a process that took several months. This decision was taken by Oxfam in order to present a qualitative, as well as quantitative, depiction of life for women in Iraq. Excerpts of these stories appear in this survey and illustrate the human face of the facts and figures presented in the survey.

Oxfam has not had staff based in Iraq since August 2004 because of security risks, but has supported partner organizations on the ground from a base in Amman, Jordan since that time.