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Women's Initiatives may strengthen Iraqi economy

By Spc. Stephanie Cassinos
MND-S

COB BASRA – The view from the window of a humvee in rural Iraq is a confusing sight. Small, broken structures disrupt the long stretches of sand inhabiting either side of the highway. Closer to town there are abandoned vehicles corroding on the side of the road, trash collected in puddles and ditches, and people herding animals mere yards away from shops on the street. Donkey drawn carts share the road with motorists, some in rusty old cars, some on motorcycles or in gleaming sport utility vehicles. It's almost as if a hurricane swept through a few centuries of development and everything landed at random. There is no rhyme or reason to the landscape and everything seems out of place.

"What can you expect?" asked Margaret Jaji, a bilingual bicultural advisor for the Women's Initiatives program. "These people have seen war for 28 years."

Photo by Spc. Stephanie Cassinos

Capt. Jennifer Glossinger, Women's Initiatives coordinator, Multi-National Division - South, learns more about the specific talents of Iraqi women at a conference in Al Zabir July 7. Glossinger hopes to find women who are willing to teach one another new skills, giving them a way to earn income.

"You want to help educate them, provide them with something nobody can take away, because they've had everything else taken away."

– Capt. Jennifer Glossinger
Women's Initiatves Coordinator, MND-S

Jaji would know. A Christian Iraqi native, she left Baghdad shortly after U.N. Sanctions were put into place in 1991 and moved to Chicago, later becoming an American citizen. She serves not only as an interpreter, but also as a cultural advisor to the provincial reconstruction teams in Multi-National Division - South. Her knowing interjections make the mission to communicate with and help assess the needs of Iraqi women easier. But easy wouldn't be the right word to describe Woman's Initiatives.

"That's the thing with Women's Initiatives; people associate it with bra burning, radical stuff," said Capt. Jennifer Glossinger, Women's Initiatives coordinator, MND-S. "They think it's like going and serving the homeless for Thanksgiving. It's a nice thing to do, but it's not really necessary."

The role of Glossinger and Jaji is to be a voice for the Iraqi women including thousands of Iraqi widows who inhabit the rural areas of MND-S whose families may be more susceptible to terrorist activities. By speaking to women from various locations, they are able to assess their needs, and in turn, develop programs to give them the tools they need to generate more income. She believes education is the most valuable thing that can be given to these women.

"They came into the eyes of the military because of security issues, but at the same time you want to help educate them, provide them with something nobody can take away," continued Glossinger, "because they've had everything else taken away from them."

Glossinger said the estimated thousands of widows in southern Iraq are the reason she and Jaji have convoyed to Al Querna and Al Zabir with pen and paper in hand. The conferences they hold in these rural parts of Iraq are why women travel in high numbers, cloaked in black hijabs, to share their life stories with them, stories that follow a similar theme of death, poverty and destitution.

How does this happen? How do so many people end up with next to noth-

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ing? Some believe it is a product of war, religious differences and cultural influence.

"When you think about our culture, if you were married and you lost your husband, nine times out of 10, if you had a good relationship with your family, you're family is going to take care of you. Your friends are going to take care of you," said Glossinger. "You're going to have a support system, a church system or something. These women don't have that."

As one Iraqi woman spoke in Al Querna of recently losing her mother-in-law, something shifted in the crowded little conference room. Women began to comfort each other. They understood the loss. Tears began to flow. The Soldiers there cried, too.

Many things wind up lost in translation, but not tears. Everybody understands pain.

Women's Initiatives are an important part of PRTs' missions, one of the most dramatic investments to ensure the success of Iraq's economy.

"If you take gender out of the equation, and you just look at bang for the buck, over 55 percent of the population is female," Glossinger said. "My hunch is that in MND-S, particularly in Basra, the population of women is greater than that."

Photo by Spc. Stephanie Cassinos

Capt. Jennifer Glossinger, Women's Initiatives coordinator, Multi-National Division - South, holds a conference with more than 30 Iraqi women in Al Querna recently. This was the first of five meetings in target areas throughout MND-S to begin developing programs to benefit them.

Glossinger, who has worked in pharmaceutical sales for the past seven years in her civilian life, feels, from a business perspective, investing money into developing the female work force is imperative to improving the economy of Iraq.

"If you ignore 55 percent of your population, you're ignoring the vast majority of where your business is. That's over half of the population," explained Glossinger. "If you take the gender out of it and you just look at the amounts of people, the greatest amounts of people are going to be women and widows."

The end goal is the presentation, approval and implementation of proposed projects to empower the Iraqi women to improve their quality of life and boost the economy.

"We've concentrated mostly on agriculture in the other eight provinces because 80 percent of the employment comes from agriculture, and 70 percent of that work force is women," Glossinger said.

"You have to be able to take everything and break it down into priorities," said Glossinger. "What are we going to do? We are never going to be able to change their culture. They have to change it on their own. The only thing we can do is provide them with more education and more economic stability."

Glossinger and Jaji will continue to speak to more women and prepare for the intricate work ahead of them. They will begin drafting programs to benefit women in each area, most likely educational and agricultural projects. Meticulous planning will be in place, picking women to represent each of the villages, determining a location to hold agricultural and educational classes and deciding who will teach what, whether it be sewing, farming, harvesting honey, weaving rugs or other skills to enable them to profit in the workforce.

Other works on the horizon include water sanitation projects, basic healthcare and first aid training, and a legal assistance program to aid illiterate women in receiving small government stipends available to them.

With diligence and patience, women may be the stepping stone to improving the economy in Iraq, enabling it to continue striving toward a future as a sustainable nation.

For more of Spc. Cassinos' stories, visit:
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