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Toward democracy ■ By Noeleen Heyzer

For Iraq, women are the key

NEW YORK

As Iraqis meet to talk about creating an interim authority to govern their country, they will need to overcome divisive ethnic, religious, tribal and political barriers. Experience elsewhere shows that one sure way to achieve the necessary consensus and compromise is to involve women extensively. Women have the collaborative outlook needed to deal with Iraqi society's complexities and the pragmatic organizing expertise needed to cut through the current chaos.

Iraqi women are among the most educated in the Middle East and are capable of assuming strong leadership roles. Yet we have not seen clear evidence of a concerted effort to involve women in discussions to establish a pathway to a democratic society. Simply put, it will be more difficult to unite Iraq if women are excluded from this process.

The United Nations Development Fund for Women, known as Unifem, commissioned an independent study last year to examine the impact of war on women and women's role in peace-building in 14 locations in Europe, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. The report highlights numerous examples of women charting new ways to reconstruct their communities in such diverse places as the Balkans, Cambodia, East Timor, and Rwanda.

Women often have informal social service systems already in place that can serve as a foundation for reconstruction. During Taliban rule in Afghanistan, for example, women ran clandestine schools for girls, provided health care for women and set up home-based work to support their families. These experiences supported the delivery of aid and resources effectively and fairly.

Such efforts can be replicated and adapted to the challenges in Iraq. First, women must be given space to come together and speak openly about their needs and priorities. A primary requirement is typically personal and family safety and security, followed by access to water, food, health services and education as well as a voice in rebuilding their country. It is through these meetings that women will emerge who can play a leadership role in planning for an interim government.

Second, the international community must ensure women's participation in the planning and distribution of aid, as well as sustained resources for the needs identified by women. At this critical juncture, when the needs for basic services are so overwhelming, it will be easy to overlook funds targeted specifically for women. But it is the women who can ensure that these basic services are handled effectively, fairly and efficiently.

After the genocide in Rwanda, when the country was in a shambles and the international community remained paralyzed in inaction, 50 women, both Hutu and Tutsi, organized widows to support each other and the war's orphans, regardless of ethnicity. Today the group they formed, the Avega Association, numbers more than 10,000 widows and provides social and health services and sustainable economic support for its families. This model of reconciliation not only strengthened the women involved, it has bolstered the rebuilding of Rwandan society.

Third, support is necessary to help women translate their pragmatic expertise into participation in national governments. This may consist of equipping women with the skills to gain seats in Parliament, which Unifem helped to do in East Timor, or training women in drafting a constitution, which the agency did in Rwanda and is supporting in Afghanistan.

Iraq has signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, as well as the Convention of the Rights of the Child. If women's leadership and civil society organizations are supported, these mechanisms and others will not be discarded along with the regime, but will give meaning to the term "rule of law."

From humanitarian relief through reconstruction of public services to the building of a democratic foundation in postwar Iraq, women's skills and perspectives can bridge divisions and provide models for rebuilding based on their ingenuity in caring for their families amid repression and conflict. If a truly democratic government is to be built in Iraq, women need to be integrated into every step of the process.

The writer is executive director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women.