

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

AUSLANDSBÜRO JORDANIEN

June 17-18, 2011

DR NADJE AL-ALI  
DR MARTIN BECK  
PAULA KOCH

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## Linking Civil Society and Academia: The Relevance of Women and Gender Studies

Event: **Roundtable Conference**

Date/Place: June 17-18, 2011,

Kempinski Hotel

Amman, Jordan

**Organization:** Women Empowerment Organization, CARA, and KAS  
Amman

### List of Participants

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*From left: Dr. Sanaa Al-Omari, Kate Robertson, Dr. Martin Beck, Dr. Nadjé Al-Ali, and Susan Aref.*

On Friday, June 17, 2011 over 20 representatives of Iraqi academic institutions and leading non-governmental organizations, supported by some selected representatives of gender studies in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey gathered in Amman, Jordan, to continue the discussion on gender studies that began at a workshop in the fall of 2010 in Amman. The inaugural workshop focused on promoting gender issues in Iraqi higher education and establishing links with women and gender studies experts in the Middle East. This conference, the second in what will be a series of round table discussions, focused on promoting cooperation between academia and civil society in order to further women's rights and gender-related issues both within academia and society at large.

The round table was held on the basis of the Chatham House Rule. Thus, the following report will summarize the main topics and issues discussed at the event without quoting any participant.

### Background

Before delving into a discussion on women and gender studies, it is important to note the difference between women's studies and gender studies. Women's studies began in the United States in the 1960s as a reaction to the second wave of feminism. While first-wave feminism focused on women's legal status such as voting rights and property rights, the second wave of feminism sought to address issues such as legal inequalities, family issues and workplace inequalities.

Women's studies emerged as an academic discipline that supported the aims of the women's rights movement by focusing on the specific experiences and contributions of women, which had previously been sidelined. Within history, literature, politics, sociology, anthropology etc. scholars started to explore women's perspectives and women's standpoints. In contrast, gender studies emerged with the realization that "sisterhood" is not global. That is, there are other factors, such as socioeconomic status, race, and religion, which make the problems of women diversified. Gender refers to the social and cultural construct of what it means to be an ideal man or a woman and makes a distinction between a person's biological sex and their social construction. However, in recent years, gender theorists have recognized that even the so-called biological sex of a person is already mediated socially and culturally. Gender also refers to an asymmetrical and hierarchical relation of power.

In the Middle East, gender studies has occasionally had a different connotation when translated into Arabic. The Arabic translation for "gender" that is commonly used *jins* refers to sexuality and is often understood to mean means "illicit sex, i.e. extra-marital or homosexual acts." This interpretation of the term is highly problematic and has caused much offence and confusion. Moreover, it tends to discredit female academics and civil society activists who work on gender related issues. This misinterpretation and confusion is one of the reasons why it is difficult to discuss gender-related issues in the Middle East freely. Often times, the subject is seen as an export of the West and is quickly discredited or ignored on that basis. Given this context, it might be strategically wise to speak about women's studies and women's issues at first, although gender goes beyond women and addresses not only men and masculinities but also the power relations inherent in society based on gender. However, it should also be stressed that gender studies centers and programs have been mushrooming and flourishing in the

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region, with leading institutions in Turkey, Lebanon, Palestine and Egypt.

Women's rights activism in the Middle East has historically emerged as part of broader political movements, such as anticolonial and independence movements, socialist movements against class exploitation or student movements. When included in larger political movements, however, the demands of women are often seen as less of a priority than wider economic or political issues. In other words, rather than being perceived as an integral part of politics and social affairs that need systematic analysis, gender and women's issues are frequently treated as an issue of secondary relevance that may or may not be added to analysis.

### Regional Experiences

With the sensitive nature of introducing gender studies into higher education in Iraq, the conference began with presentations from the University of Jordan's Center for Women's Studies and the Women and Memory Forum about successful gender-related initiatives in Jordan and Egypt, respectively.

The presentations highlighted a number of major problems facing gender issues in the two countries including:

1. A shortage of qualified staff to teach gender studies
2. A lack of human resources and libraries
3. Difficulty finding financial support for gender and women's studies
4. A lack of clarity for the goals and visions of Jordan's women's movement
5. A gap between academia and reality on the ground
6. A systematic neglect of the social sciences and humanities in universities
7. A resistance to introducing new fields and skills into university curricula
8. A gap between civil society organizations and universities
9. Research funding goes to NGOs thereby leaving universities isolated.

Participants offered several suggestions to combat these challenges and move forward with women's and gender studies:

1. Gender studies should be introduced in universities.
2. Non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations should seek out allies in universities in order to know who is sympathetic to women's issues
3. Junior faculty should be targeted for training and funding so that they will take knowledge of women's issues back to their respective universities.

### Women's and Gender Studies in Iraqi Higher Education



*Ms. Suzan Aref participates in a working group discussion.*

After hearing from presenters from Egypt and Jordan, the roundtable's focus shifted to gender and women's studies in higher education in Iraq. Through three presentations and the discussion that followed, thoughtful insights and concerns were raised about the current status of gender studies in Iraq.

First, while there are 25 universities and 16 resource centers in Iraq, there does not exist a specialized center on either women's or gender studies. A few years ago, a center was created by the government. However, the academics working within the center not only lack the relevant training but are also pursuing very traditional research topics that work to reinforce existing gender stereotypes rather than challenge them. Several participants stressed that it was important to first engage in capacity building (training academics in relevant theories and methodologies) before

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engaging in institution building (starting women studies programs and or centers).

Currently women's rights and gender issues are included as a subtopic of a broader curriculum on human rights. However, the section dealing with gender and women's issues may or may not be taught depending

make acceptance of the subject more welcomed by leaders and decision-makers in Iraq.

6. Within gender studies courses, women need to be educated on their rights and how to pursue these rights. Courses should address women's rights with the intention of starting a discourse in life outside of the universities in an effort to change the way society views women.



*Dr. Hamadi (left) and Dr. al-Dulaimi (right)*

on the decision of the instructor. Therefore, current efforts to introduce gender into wider curricula and to introduce women's studies into university courses rely on the efforts of individual professors. When women's issues are covered, students have difficulties discussing sensitive topics that are considered taboo, such as sexual harassment and temporary marriages.

Participants had several suggestions for way in which to further gender studies in Iraqi higher education:

1. A network of interested academics needs to be trained in relevant theories and methodologies.
2. Iraqi-based academics need to engage in information and experience exchange. Many academics work in isolation and are not aware what their colleagues are doing in other disciplines and institutions.
3. Iraqi academics working on women's and gender issues need to be in contact with relevant civil society organizations to build a discipline that is relevant to societal concerns.
4. Iraq-based academics should take advantage of the experiences of their colleagues who have worked on women's and gender studies regionally.
5. Gender studies should be introduced first under the umbrella title of "women's studies" so as to

### Gender Training in Iraq

With the difficult nature of discussing gender issues in an academic setting, it is clear how much more difficult the discussion becomes in the public sphere. There are challenges to even mentioning the terms "gender" or "women's studies" in Iraq where the terms connote ideas of women's sexual liberation and homosexuality. However, these common misconceptions make the work of gender trainers even more important. The goals of training include the dissemination of information on the concept of gender, the promotion of human and women's rights and the questioning of the idea that men have control over women.

Judges are targeted in an effort to change laws relating to women such as property laws and divorce laws. While the judges are highly educated, they approach the workshop discussions from their cultural background rather than with an academic or anthropological mindset. Those judges who do come to sympathize with women's and gender issues often believe that they lack the power make changes and therefore defer to legislators.

Participants suggested that in order to change the cultural perceptions of gender-related issues, the issues should be broached at an early age. Discussants also noted that because changing civic laws is much easier than changing religious laws, efforts to address legal grievances should start in the civic sector. Finally, there was the belief that many women buy into the patriarchal system because they feel as though they cannot change it and therefore make the best of it.

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### Researching Gender-Based Violence

The second day of the workshop focused on gender-based violence. Among the most extreme forms of this type of violence are honor killings, forced suicide and female genital mutilation. Gender-based violence occurs most commonly in communities where women are representations of family honor. While, for instance, the Kurdish regional government has taken steps to combat honor-based and gender-based violence, there remain concerns about ongoing violence of this type in the region. Specifically, there are concerns about deficits in the investigation system. For example, investigators often do not believe women's reports of harassment or abuse. Moreover, police tell women that they must have done something wrong to deserve the abuse. Additionally, women who are able to find protection in a women's shelter often do not have access to qualified social workers to help them.

Then the discussion turned to Turkey with a presentation from Sebancy University about their research project entitled "Domestic Violence and the Struggle Against it." A nation-wide survey that targeted women who had been in relationships with men sought to address three questions:

1. What do women think about the legitimacy of domestic violence?
2. What are women's experiences of domestic violence?
3. How should domestic violence be prevented and penalized?

The survey results showed that 9 out of 10 women believed there is never a valid reason for being beaten and 92% of women surveyed believed that men should be punished for domestic violence. Since the completion of the research, the survey has been widely distributed and published. The

results have been used by women's organizations to affect policy and demonstrate women's demands of the government.

After listening to the presentations, participants had several questions related to

the methodology of the two projects. Many discussants were doubtful that similar projects could be carried out in their own areas based on the difficulties of finding women willing to discuss their experiences. At the same time, however, the participants agreed that statistics and research-based data are important for policy makers to pursue change.

### Civil Society Perspectives



*The participants of the conference*

In the final set of presentations, the roundtable heard from civil society activists about three CSOs working in Iraq on women's rights and gender issues. The first of these, the Women Empowerment Organization (WEO), has three focuses: responding to gender-based violence, preventing gender-based violence and advocacy. To respond to gender-based violence, WEO has a hotline through which women and girls can seek social and legal support. WEO also has a listening and counseling center and a legal assistance scheme where women can receive free legal counseling and representation. WEO works to prevent gender-based violence through an anti-female genital mutilation campaign, a radio station that raises awareness about general women's issues and by teaching religious imams about women's issues. Finally, WEO's advocacy work centers on women's rights in family law, personal status law and political participation. In addition to these functions of the center, WEO researches issues related to gender-based violence such as the factors leading to honor killings and the extent of female genital mutilation.



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The second organization, the Women Leadership Institute (WLI), uses a human rights-oriented approach to address women's issues in Iraq. WLI hosts programs that help women understand their social roles in Iraq. In addition, WLI has established a psychological and social support system for abused women. However, it was made clear that WLI, as well as all CSOs, need the help of academics to do research and collect data in order to influence policy.

The third presentation addressed the Baghdad Women's Association (BWA). Established in 2004, BWA brought together 11 women from various parts of Baghdad to address issues such as gender equality, gender-based violence, women's employment, women's education, and women's political participation. BWA focuses on areas of Baghdad that are marginalized or poverty-stricken. Through workshops targeted at schools, BWA raises awareness among both male and female students and teachers about gender-based violence.

The discussion following the three presentations addressed the necessity of a strong link between academics and civil society organizations. According to the participants, the gap between CSOs and academia is hindering the progress of women's and gender issues in the Middle East and specifically in Iraq. The two entities can work together, for example, on research conducted by academics. The research results would then be used by CSOs to promote women's issues more effectively with the help of hard data provided by academics.

### **Translating Activist Aims and Policy Goals into Research**

For the final session of the workshop, participants split into three groups composed of both academics and civil society activists. The goal of the working groups was to probe the possibility of joint practical research projects between academics and civil society activists. Several potential research plans emerged from the

working groups. The first plan proposed using qualitative and quantitative research to address questions related to women's shelters in Iraqi Kurdistan. The research initiative would gather basic statistics about women using the shelters in addition to information about what happens to women after they leave the shelters. The second project proposed addressing women's rights in courts and police stations. By looking at gender-based inequalities in the legal system, the research project would provide statistics to assist CSOs in their efforts to combat such inequalities. The third research project focused on domestic violence in Baghdad. Through a survey and/ or interviews, this project would try to find demographic and socioeconomic trends in the occurrence of domestic violence. A fourth research project would aim to engage in an anthropological study in a specific neighbourhood in a town south of Baghdad.

### **Future Steps and Action Plans**

The two-day roundtable conference gave all participants new perspectives of the relationship between academia and civil society organizations. Through the discussions, a clear consensus emerged that there is a fissure between civil society and academia that needs to be closed in order to 1) further gender and women's issues in Iraq; and 2) strengthen civil society activists who are struggling to improve the situation for women and gender-based inequalities and injustices. Participants of the workshop had several suggestions for ways in which the gap can be bridged. For example, workshops and conferences that bring both civil society activists and academics together would create a network between the two sectors. In addition, academics can help analyze research results collected by CSOs. Participants also noted that there is a need for CSOs and academia to work together to improve research methodology. Both academics and civil society activists will need training in research methods (both quantitative and qualitative) to optimize the impact and significance of research.

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It is apparent that there has been considerable progress made since the inaugural workshop held at the end of 2010. Participants arrived at this conference ready to further the discourse on gender issues in Iraq. Through the diverse experiences and expertise of the participants, there was a mutually beneficial exchange of opinions and ideas that challenged academics and civil society activists to work together to promote gender issues. Volunteers amongst both academics and civil society activists agreed to write a working paper in which they would outline their vision of future cooperation and a future network. These two working papers will be discussed at the next workshop. Participants left the conference with the hope of sharing their successes at the subsequent workshop scheduled for November 2011.