

2-1 Cavalry Division's Kirkuk Province Women's Initiative: Promoting Women's Rights One Step at a Time

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In early 2009 Multi-National Division–North (MND–N) directed its brigade combat teams (BCTs) to begin a women's initiative program. The program's goal was to empower Iraqi women to improve their own lives and the lives of their families. Captains (CPTs) Erin Barrett and Kimi Damassia were given this mission for 2-1 Cavalry Division (CD) within Kirkuk Province. Armed with their commander's intent, the two CPTs began their task, setting a course through uncharted territory, with an end result that was extremely positive.

Though the new Iraqi Constitution guarantees women's rights, change has been slow. There are many issues facing women in the male-dominated Iraqi society such as high rates of domestic abuse, illiteracy, and the restriction of unaccompanied movement. These issues are more problematic in the more strict Arab rural tribal areas rather than the ethnically diverse and more open-minded Kirkuk City.

The CPTs developed an aggressive plan for success and looked forward to their challenge. They decided to work with several spheres of influence: the provincial council women's committee, the rural women's organization, and several women's Iraqi non-governmental organizations, (NGOs). In keeping with 2-1 CD's method of operation, which is to put an Iraqi in the lead, the first meeting of the Kirkuk Provincial Council Women's Committee was an eye-opening experience resulting in several obstacles for the CPTs.

The first obstacle the CPTs had to overcome was the cultural curiosity of how a Soldier wearing full Army gear could actually be a female because many Iraqi females truly thought the female CPTs were males. After the CPTs shed their gear and opened their souls to the Iraqi women's inquisitive questions they were accepted as equals. The Iraqi women were very impressed that the American officers held leadership positions and could give orders to subordinate males. This is a stark role reversal for the Iraqi women to see, which provided the females with great role models. The CPTs quickly identified their second obstacle; the Committee members and NGOs were congregating strictly by ethnic group and would barely acknowledge one another. Further compounding the Committee's development was the fact that a leader could not assume the title of chairperson as this would skew the number of reserved provincial chairperson positions per ethnicity (Kurd, Arab, and Turkman). Seeing the disarray, CPTs Barrett and Damassia realized they must first help the Committee develop basic leadership skills and focus on capacity building with the NGOs.

Though hesitant at first to take such a direct leadership role, CPT Barrett persuaded the women to agree on a monthly rotational committee leadership position, and instructed them on the concepts of meeting management (agenda preparation, meeting minutes, report publishing, goal setting, and measuring progress). CPT Damassia focused her attention with the NGOs in developing their goal-setting and attainment skills, especially in developing realistic and achievable goals early in the process. Both the Committee and NGOs were energetic and very receptive to the instruction. After just a few months, the Iraqi members took control of their own meetings.



Figures 1a and 1b. CPTs Barrett (Figure 1a) and Damassia (Figure 1b), provide meeting instruction to the Kirkuk Provincial Council Women’s Committee members and Iraqi women’s NGOs.

As the Committee and NGOs began to synergize; they agreed on the areas they wanted to affect change by identifying several goals. One of the goals was to ensure female detainees were being treated well in the detention facilities. Through the help of the Iraqi Security Forces, a contingent of Committee members visited the detention facilities and provided the female detainees with companionship and hygiene kits. In addition, the NGOs conducted a survey throughout the province and determined the biggest issues females faced and how they might affect positive change for the future. The survey results showed the two main areas of concern were social and economic.



Figures 2a and 2b. Iraqi NGOs conducting an assessment survey

Though the new Iraqi Constitution guarantees women's rights, thousands of years of oppression cannot be reversed overnight. Many Iraqi women are unaware of their new constitutional rights and still face high rates of domestic violence, suicide, and illiteracy. Economically, women face high rates of unemployment and daunting challenges when trying to start a small business.

Though the Division wanted to see large construction projects demonstrating U.S. commitment to the women's initiative campaign, CPTs Barrett and Damassia and Sergeant First Class (SFC) Betty Ortega (3-82 Field Artillery [FA] S-9 [civil-military operations]) realized the greatest effect was going to be their capacity building with the Iraqi women. Change would not come with a new building or spending large amounts of money attempting to fix a problem, but instead with small targeted programs and helping the Iraqi women build the necessary skill sets to affect change on their own through other provincial councils and methodologies. Through their capacity building classes, the Iraqi women's NGOs developed their plans and started to bring about change.

To address the lack of knowledge of their new constitutional rights, one of the NGOs was able to secure meeting space and female lawyers to conduct women's rights awareness meetings. These meetings are now a regular occurrence in Kirkuk City.

To combat the high rate of illiteracy among the Iraqi women, another NGO approached the Kirkuk Provincial Deputy General of Education with a plan to use the adult illiteracy centers at night specifically for a women's program. Through innovative marketing ideas derived at the women's NGO workgroup meetings, the women's literacy classes have been well attended and are a fixture in Kirkuk City. Several of the women's committee members also serve on the provincial education committee and were able to secure funds and teachers for the women's literacy campaign. Combating illiteracy helps to improve the social and economic life of the women. Change is occurring slowly, one step at a time, but most importantly through the actions and plans of the local Iraqi women.

In an attempt to promote better economic opportunities for the Iraqi women, 3-82 FA, under the command of LTC Terry Cook, empowered SFC Ortega to search out micro grant opportunities for Iraqi women. SFC Ortega enlisted the help of the local NGOs to find female-owned businesses in need of working capital. Through her persistent work, SFC Ortega provided 18 of micro grants worth approximately \$64,000 that provided 30 long-term jobs. Follow up visits confirmed the money was spent according to their plan and they have hired additional long-term female workers. Through the illiteracy program and a few well-placed micro grants, positive change is occurring for women in the Kirkuk Province.



Figures 3a and 3b. A Kirkuk City micro grant recipient

Throughout the summer months, the Committee and NGOs continued to gain momentum, and the strict ethnic divisions began to blur as participants often arrived early to socialize. Leadership positions rotated without conflict, and goals were planned and acted upon. Though the women's committee lacked a working budget, the women were affecting change through knowledge and opportunities.

SFC Ortega was tasked to head up a women's equality conference on Forward Operating Base (FOB) Warrior celebrating the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which granted suffrage rights to women in 1920. SFC Ortega used this opportunity to invite 16 female Iraqi Committee members to participate in the celebration. There were several U.S. female speakers who highlighted the great strides in women's rights. The speakers reassured the Iraqi guests that change takes time, but through perseverance they can make a difference. Ala Noori Talabani, a local influential Iraqi, gave a short speech on how much she appreciated the support and guidance given to the Committee and NGOs as they strive to improve the lives of women in Kirkuk Province. All attendees were impressed on how the U.S. Army celebrated women's equality day and the support provided by their male counterparts. The speakers were additional role models for the Iraqi women to emulate.



Figures 4a and 4b. Women's Equality Day celebration at FOB Warrior

The culminating event for the 2-1 CD women's initiative was the Kirkuk women's seminar held at the government center on November 5, 2009. This seminar was broadcast on local television and addressed the findings of the of the women's survey and how the 14 NGOs were affecting change for women in the community. The event was entirely planned and executed by the Iraqi women; CPTs Barrett and Damassia and SFC Ortega quietly sat in the back admiring the positive transformation that occurred in just six months.



Figure 5a and 5b. Kirkuk Women's Seminar

As 2-1 CD prepares to rotate out, the foundation is already in place for the new U.S. unit to continue to mentor and advise from the sidelines to ensure the Committee remains focused on its goals. Furthermore, inviting local Iraqi women to women's leadership and equality conferences on the FOB helps to solidify the positive goals that can be achieved over time. The Iraqi women are eager to learn and are planning even more women's initiatives to better the lives of Iraqi women.

Lessons Learned

When developing a women's initiative program in a Middle Eastern country, one needs to temper their expectations. The Army idiom of "crawl, walk, run" is very applicable when initiating new women's initiatives in a historically male-dominated society. CPT Damassia, CPT Barrett, and SFC Ortega tempered their approach and focused on capacity building. This capacity-building effort will continue to empower the Iraqi women as they develop skill sets to make future gains through their increased knowledge of how to organize and plan a meeting, set objectives/goals, and ultimately achieve their goals.



Figure 6. The agents of change (pictured from left to right): CPT Kimi Damassia, CPT Erin Barrett, Helen (a local Iraqi), and SFC Betty Ortega.

Through the hard work and commitment of the above U.S. Army Soldiers, the Kirkuk Provincial Council Women's Committee and Iraqi women's NGOs blossomed from directionless and divided organizations and transformed into one team that is all-inclusive, focused, and has the foundation to provide change that will continue to improve the lives of women in Kirkuk Province.