

## **Push to Prepare Women for Referendum**

**Author:** [Heidar Masawy](#)

As ballot on constitution approaches, efforts are made to ensure women are equipped to make informed choice.

Ruqia Ali says she's doing her bit for her country. The 32-year-old Najaf resident teaches children during the day, and after work prepares ice cream, cookies and tea for women who gather to learn about the country's constitution.

"Iraqi women are well-known for their patience and faithfulness to their country.....they want to express themselves [in the upcoming referendum on the constitution]," she said.

As Iraq prepares to vote on the draft constitution, women's groups in Baghdad and Najaf have been staging seminars and workshops to educate women about the document and encourage them to turn up for the nationwide ballot on October 15.

Suad al-Khafajy, 50, director of the Um al-Mujahida Organisation in Baghdad, said her association had "a responsibility to inform and educate women on all political and cultural initiatives affecting Iraq's future".

Participants in her workshops include housewives, university students, physicians and workers. "These are women from all walks of life," she said.

Kawther al-Musawy, 35, is director of the al-Massawat (Equality) Organisation for women in Najaf, which organises courses to involve women in community affairs. The relatively calm security situation in Najaf makes it easier to hold such events here than in Baghdad.

"Women must know everything about the constitution because they sometimes are accused of being [politically] incompetent and uninvolved," said al-Musawy, whose group has educated 5,000 women and expects to increase its sessions as the referendum approaches.

Those organising the seminars are not encouraging participants to take a position on the draft constitution, but rather aim to ensure that they understand it fully so that they can make up their own mind on election day.

But they may have something of struggle on their hands. Many Iraqis remain apathetic about the referendum. One United Nations study found awareness of the content of the constitution was alarmingly low [See Public Unenthused by Constitution Poll].

Musawy says donor countries, private citizens and a number of political parties and other groups are funding the women's workshops, with some wanting the educational initiatives to influence women to vote a certain way. "But impartiality is paramount," she insisted.

Women's organisations decided to work on these education initiatives whether the constitution was deemed secular or Islamic. The charter in some respects is good for women - for instance, it stipulates that they hold at least 25 per cent of seats in the National Assembly. But, at the same time, there's concern that the inclusion of Islam as a source of legislation will undermine their rights.

Zakiya Khalifa, an official from the Iraqi Communist Party and director of the Women's Renaissance Organisation in Baghdad, is hopeful that women will go to the polls. She would not say whether she has tried to influence them to vote one way or the other, but her party recently endorsed the constitution.

"We encourage women to vote despite weak points [in the document] that contradict our goals and of course favour the Islamists," said Khalifa. "But it is important that this experiment is successful, and with hard work we can change many things."

Hamsa Moufaq, a 22-year-old Baghdad university graduate, said she attended a week-long seminar on the constitution at a women's organisation near her house in the capital.

Moufaq said she learned the difference between a secular and an Islamic constitution and the meaning of federalism and women's rights in the document. She said she relayed the information to her relatives, both female and male.

"It was a brilliant experience," said Moufaq. "We have to have this for every (political) event."

Hasma's father, Hatam Moufaq, a 47-year-old businessman, said he asked his daughter to attend the courses so that she could learn more about the constitution. "Her parents' knowledge isn't enough for her" on this topic, he said.

"She should know about her rights and duties from women's affairs specialists. It's strange - my wife envies my daughter and would love to go herself. I told her, 'Next time.'"

Heidar Masawy is an IWPR trainee journalist in Najaf.

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