



USAID | **IRAQ**
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



Iraqi Civil Society Advocates Against Harmful Practices

In rural areas of Iraq’s northern provinces, female genital mutilation (FGM) is thought to be practiced on 20% or more of the female population. In some areas, the practice is widespread. Wadi, an Iraqi Civil Society Organization (CSO) with an office in the Kurdish district of Germian, conducted a study of over 1,500 rural women and found that an alarming 60 percent of respondents reported having undergone the procedure.

Although FGM is largely an inherited practice from ancient tradition, many in rural areas consider it required by Islamic law. Wadi, with training, technical assistance, and grant support from the USAID-funded Iraq Civil Society Program (ICSP), is helping combat this harmful practice by raising awareness of the health risks associated with FGM in 20 villages located in and around Erbil, Mosul, and Kirkuk.

At a January 2006 workshop for women from the villages of Kardiz and Mala, Wadi’s intervention yielded immediate results. Following a format developed in part during project design sessions between ICSP and Wadi, a social worker explained the practice and dangers of FGM. She then showed a documentary produced by two local filmmakers, which included the testimonies of both a doctor and a Muslim cleric advocating against the practice. Finally, the social worker opened up discussion. Two women participants, Laaly and Khadija, confessed to having performed this operation on girls in the village of Kardiz. Laaly commented:



“My job was performing [this] on girls and I was doing it as a charity... We collected a group of girls from 5-7 years of age as required by their families, and chose one room in the village for doing the operation in group. But after I saw this documentary, it was clear that message was effective—especially the sermon of a religious man and the advice from [a village doctor].”

“I promise that I will not do this deed, and I will not *only* stop this work, but I will advise all women in the village to protect their girls and support them against this horrible operation.”

In addition to outreach through two female-led intervention teams, Wadi intends to expand the reach of its awareness raising efforts through television and radio programming, and will include Zhian Health Organization as a new partner in taking the pilot project to scale. The outreach is even being felt beyond Iraq’s borders: women’s groups in neighboring countries, such as Syria, have become aware of Wadi



efforts and are beginning to undertake their own investigations. This is just one positive spillover effect of USAID and other donor support to Iraq's nascent democratic institutions and civil society networks. For perhaps the first time, women and civil society organizations in the Middle East are becoming aware of and acting against this violation of human rights and peculiar form of gender-based violence.

Combating FGM by overcoming the inertia of tradition and misunderstanding is no easy task. But with USAID's support of civil society organizations (CSOs) committed to advocacy and awareness raising, the people of Iraq are combating this harmful practice, one woman at a time.

Leveraging USAID technical assistance

Wadi has benefited from a strong relationship with the Erbil Civil Society Resource Center, one of ICSP's four regional hubs providing CSO capacity building services to indigenous groups. The Erbil center is charged with serving CSOs in Iraq's northern provinces of Tameem, Ninawa, Dahuk, Erbil, and Sulaimania.

In May 2005, representatives of Wadi attended a skills building workshop to increase organizational capacity in areas such as general and financial management, advocacy capacity, and internal governance. In July and September 2005, in anticipation of the October 15 referendum on the constitution, Wadi attended ICSP awareness raising events in order to promote and advocate for women's guaranteed legal, political, economic, and social rights. The Women's Advocacy unit in the Erbil resource center delivered a dedicated technical assistance session to Wadi on awareness raising and project design in October 2005.

The result of ICSP's training and technical assistance is apparent in Wadi's evolving role from recipient of training and technical assistance to full partner with the Erbil resource center. It was collaboration between Wadi and ICSP that helped identify and engage Zhian Health Organization as a new partner in expanding the FGM awareness campaign. Additionally, the Erbil resource center was a cooperating partner with Wadi in organizing a conference on combating FGM in February 2006.

About Wadi

Wadi is a German NGO founded in 1991 to support democratization and civil society development in Middle Eastern societies, with special emphasis on improving the social and economic situation of women. Wadi has been active in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq since 1993, with a home office in the city of Suleimaniah.

In June 2003, a group of women from the Khanzad Shelter for Women, a Wadi beneficiary, decided they wanted to expand their women's empowerment activities to other fields and geographical areas. They



USAID | **IRAQ**
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



were already familiar with Wadi's activities and mission and, rather than register as a newly-created NGO, thought to incorporate as an independent branch of Wadi in the city of Erbil.

Wadi-Erbil went on to open a women's center in Mosul, began working in the Erbil women's prison, and created Mobile Female Teams to support women and children in rural areas. Wadi has also participated in a variety of conferences and seminars, and in February 2004 helped organize a national women's conference in Baghdad with grant support through a USAID local governance initiative implemented by Research Triangle Institute (RTI).

Since 1993, Wadi Mobile Female Teams in all branches have assisted thousands of vulnerable women and children through women's shelters, kindergartens for the children of displaced persons, a radio show for women's and youth issues, and other initiatives. In addition to USAID support through the ICSP Erbil resource center, Wadi has worked with USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), and donors such as the Rosello Foundation, International Rescue Committee of Spain (RESCATE), and Optimists Austria.

About Iraq Civil Society Program

The Iraq Civil Society Support Program (ICSP) is a \$40 million U.S. Government initiative to promote an informed, sustainable, and active Iraqi civil society participating within a democratic system of governance. ICSP is implemented by America's Development Foundation (ADF) on behalf of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

ICSP builds the organizational and advocacy capacity of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) through four Civil Society Resource Centers (CSRCs) to serve as regional hubs for the delivery of training and technical assistance and help Iraqi CSOs serve their constituents and mission. The resource centers are entirely Iraqi staffed and operated, and provide a full range of capacity building assistance. Special efforts are paid to Iraqi CSOs engaged in civic education, women's advocacy, media, anti-corruption, and human rights. A small grants fund is reserved for specific actions in support of these issue areas.

ICSP has engaged approximately 2,000 Iraqi CSOs, awarded 391 grants worth over \$6 million in small grant support, and delivered roughly 3,600 training and technical assistance sessions reaching over 30,000 CSO members. ICSP awareness raising activities – forums and regional and national conferences – have reached another 13,000 Iraqis. Thirty-eight percent of all Iraqis reached by ICSP activities are women.

The impact of ICSP is manifest in the independent actions of Iraqi CSOs in response to training or technical assistance from ICSP resource centers, small grant assistance, or both. As of March 2006, ICSP has officially documented 449 instances of CSOs exercising their right to assembly, awareness raising, and advocacy that is the hallmark of a vibrant civil society within a pluralistic and democratic Iraq.

Iraq Civil Society Program
Basrah • Erbil • Baghdad • Hilla