



Solidarity with Iraqi and Kurdish women trade unionists

Report of a trade union women's visit to Britain, March 2006
by Abdullah Muhsin of the General Federation of Iraqi Workers

Thanks

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Introduction

Ever since the formation of modern Iraq, Iraqi/Kurdish women have suffered terribly at the hands of successive Iraqi governments and have been socially and economically stigmatised and held back by outdated tribal traditions, beliefs and customs.

In the late 1950s, but only for a while, hopes for women's rights and gender equality rose. Women gained the Civic Status Law, a law that guaranteed women's right to inheritance, divorce and property that distinguished them from other women in Islamic countries. But that hope was soon taken away by the coup of Saddam's Ba'ath Party in 1963-1968 and again Saddam's internal coup in 1979. Saddam's regime was the worst of all. While masquerading a wider secular image, it inflicted on Iraqi/Kurdish women a bloody and brutal repression. They were traumatised by his wars of genocide and mass graves. They were routinely gang raped by his security thugs.

Like the fate of Iraqi/Kurdish trade union movement, women's movements that were (relatively) democratically formed in the 1950s were totally suppressed and brutally crushed and were replaced with state-run fronts. Those who survived Saddam's repression were forced to flee abroad, or escape to the remotest Iraqi Kurdistan mountains to stay alive. Many Iraqi/Kurdish women joined the Peshmerga.

After April 2003 women's hope for democracy and gender equality rose again. Iraqi/ Kurdish women began to organise themselves in unions and in wider women's movements. Their main objective was and is to intervene actively in the development of a free, democratic and federal Iraq where women's rights are guaranteed not only by legislation but also by culture.

Iraqi women have, theoretically, managed to secure a reasonable position in the new polity of Iraq. They have a fair number of women MPs in Iraq's Assembly, in the government ministries and in its departments and in wider civil society organisations.

However, despite this modest gain, the persistence of violence that often results in the death of women continues to occur on regular basis. So-called 'honour killings' persist despite legislation banning it at least in Iraqi Kurdistan.

It is a disappointing reality that needs to be challenged and re-addressed.

Sadly, as Iraq continues to battle against the danger posed by sectarian violence and the onslaught of extremists, trade union and women's issues are left unresolved by Iraq's new political elites.

The union delegation

The TUC hosted four women members from the Iraqi/Kurdish trade unions from 4-12 March 2006. The delegates attended the TUC Women's Conference in Eastbourne from 8-10 March, took part in the TUC International Women's Day celebration and met with relevant British trade unions. The delegation consisted of

two Iraqi women from Baghdad and Basra and two from Iraqi Kurdistan: they were from four sectoral trade unions representing the main Iraqi/Kurdish federations, the Kurdistan Workers Syndicate (KWS) and the General Federation of Iraqi Workers/Iraqi Workers Federation (GFIW/IWF – we use the abbreviation GFIW throughout): the Oil and Gas Workers Union; the Mechanics, Metal and Printing Workers Union; the Kurdistan Service Workers Union and the Journalists' Union in Kurdistan.

The delegation consisted of:

- Nazanin T. Ali, Head of Women's Affairs at the Kurdistan Workers Syndicate, Member of the Service Workers Union;
- Hoda S Rafiq, Member of the Kurdistan Journalists' Union, who works for the Kurdistan Workers Syndicate newspaper;
- Hassana Abdulsatar, member of the Mechanics, Metal and Printing Workers Union and a member of her union's Women's Committee; and
- Violet Issa Qalaab, President of the Oil and Gas Workers Union Al Zubair Branch and member of the Iraqi Women's League.

Aims of the visit

The TUC believes strongly that women's participation in public life, and in particular in trade unions, is vital to the development of a free, democratic and open society. Given the fact that Iraqi/Kurdish women today make up half of Iraq's population and some 35% of the workforce (in some industries, they are the majority, including some parts of heavy industry as a result of the need to draft women into the labour force to replace men sent to the front or killed during Iraq's bloody war with Iran) they are a key part of the development of Iraq's pluralist polity and social stability. Releasing their potential and freeing them from the shackles of outdated cultural tribal customs and traditions will not only benefit Iraqi/Kurdish women but will help Iraq's development and prosperity. For without their active participation Iraq will suffer huge social and economic deficit and probably prolonged political instability.

Despite the positive rhetoric of Iraq's new political elites towards women, there is persistence of negative cultural expectations that sees a woman's place at home, and that seeks to regulate women's rights to work to a narrow range of jobs. In other words, tribal customs dictate what work is not appropriate for Iraqi/Kurdish women.

The TUC has hosted several delegations of Iraqi/Kurdish trade unionists, including a recent visit by the Iraqi/Kurdish Teacher Unions (see www.tuc.org.uk/international/tuc-11305-f0.cfm). All delegations have urged the TUC to assist them by offering training and education, in particular for women who are constrained by gender issues and workplace discrimination.

The TUC has sought, and in line with Congress policy on Iraq to encourage and support the building of free, independent and democratic Iraqi unions, with

particular reference to women's involvement and women's rights as enshrined in ILO conventions.

This visit sought to contribute to the above objectives and was also designed to:

- increase awareness of women's issues in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan such as equal access to jobs, equal pay, and maternity pay and leave;
- identify issues that hinder women's progress and seek to encourage them to campaign for legislation that guarantees their rights and increases their participation in the decision making bodies of unions and the state;
- support the campaign and activities of organised labour in Iraq for a Labour Code that adheres to the ILO core conventions, and to show solidarity with the Iraqi labour movement against Decree 8750¹;
- assist Iraqi/Kurdish unions to develop practical programmes of trade union education; and
- strengthen links and effective cooperation between the TUC Women's Committee and Iraqi/Kurdish trade union women's committees.

The programme

The TUC agenda for the Iraqi/Kurdish women's delegation consisted of five full working days, which included: taking part in the TUC International Women's Day celebration, the TUC Women's Conference and meeting with relevant British unions. It also included:

- a meeting in the House of Commons with MPs and Ministers;
- a meeting at the FCO's Iraq policy unit;
- a seminar on women's rights and gender issues hosted by the FCO;
- a formal dinner hosted by the TUC for the delegation; and
- two free days over the weekends at either end of the visit for sightseeing and rest.

¹ The Government of Prime Minister al Jaafari issued this Decree in September 2005, restricting trade union control over their finances and authorising a virtual state takeover of the trade union movement. The TUC and the ICFTU immediately protested to the Iraqi government, and the TUC has led (at the request of the GFIW) a worldwide protest against the decree. In January 2006, the ICFTU and the TUC supported an ILO complaint filed by the GFIW against this Decree.

The delegation's itinerary

Monday 6 March 2006

TUC

Simon Steyne, TUC International Officer and Worker Member of the ILO Governing Body, welcomed the Iraqi/Kurdish women's delegation formally to the TUC's Congress House headquarters. The delegation also briefly met TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber. Caroline Smith from the TUC Organisation and Services Department outlined briefly the TUC's policy on women's vocational education and training.

Simon then introduced the TUC's history - unlike other trade union centres, the TUC had enjoyed an uninterrupted period of development ever since its creation in the 19th century, which accounted for some of its characteristics. The TUC played a significant role in the development of public policy post 1945. It has also supported technical and educational programmes that encouraged and supported the development of democratic and independent unions in all continents after the end of World War II, especially in Germany. He outlined the challenges facing the TUC of declining membership, privatisation and globalisation.

Simon concluded by referring to Decree 8750. He informed the delegation of the continuing TUC efforts to provide solidarity and support in cooperation with ICFTU, and at the request of the Iraqi labour movement, in taking a leading role to mobilise the international labour movement to exert pressure on the Iraqi Assembly and the incoming Iraqi government to repeal this anti-union Decree. He also informed delegates that the TUC supported the ILO complaint filed against this Decree by the GFIW.

PCS

The PCS women's forum invited the delegation for lunch and a meeting. Pat Compel and Sue Bond greeted the delegation formally to the PCS women's forum and reiterated their union's opposition to the war and occupation of Iraq. They affirmed their union's commitment, working with the TUC, to assist Iraqi unions in their endeavour to build genuinely independent and democratic unions.

The forum listened to a brief introduction by each of the delegates, and then Sue Bond opened the meeting for questions and comments. Questions about the privatisation of Iraqi oil, the presence of foreign troops and how the PCS and the wider British labour movement can help were asked.

Violet said: "the Oil and Gas Workers Union want to encourage foreign investment in the Iraqi oil industry in order to bring very much needed new technology and machinery, to train and re-skill oil workers." But she added that oil must remain publicly owned property in order to pay for the rebuilding of Iraq. She said we oppose privatisation but we support foreign investment, as we see them as two completely different things.

On the question of the presence of foreign troops, the delegation said that Saddam is to blame for the war and occupation of Iraq. Iraqi and Kurdish unions want to see Iraq fully sovereign and free from foreign troops. But they said this must happen with approval of the UN and in consultation with Iraqi Assembly. No other authority has the right to sanction such decision.

The delegation thanked the PCS for its moral and political support.

TUC Women's Reception

TUC Assistant General Secretary Kay Carberry opened the International Women's Day reception at Congress House that evening. She welcomed the Culture Minister Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP and international guests. Sister Sarah Mansaray, from the Sierra Leone teacher's union spoke to meeting and applauded the TUC for solidarity and support of the trade unions in her country. Then Sisters Violet Eassa Qalaab and Nazanin Ali were called to address the reception (see annex for speeches).

Messages of support from the Canadian and Nigerian and many other trade union centers, including the AFL-CIO, were read by Rajeswari Raman from the Malaysian Trade Union Congress and Assumpta Clikamba from the Zimbabwe Council of Trade Unions. The reception was concluded with music and songs from the Mercury prize nominee Suheela Ramen.

Tuesday 7 March

Unison

Unison invited the delegation for a meeting and lunch. Nick Crook and Mairin Power of the International Department and Liz Snape, Head of the Policy Unit at Unison, welcomed the delegation to Mabledon Place. A brief introduction to Unison's history and structure was provided. Unison has since 2004 been actively involved in assisting Iraqi fledging unions with practical support and training programmes. Nick informed the delegation of Unison's wish to continue in its solidarity work with Iraqi/Kurdish unions and asked the delegation what kind of programme they wished to see being conducted in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan? Literacy classes for women workers and assistance in producing materials highlighting women's issues and rights were raised by the delegation. Nick Crook and Polly Jones took the delegation for lunch before seeing them to Amicus Head Office.

Amicus

Tony Burke, Amicus Assistant General Secretary, and Simon Dubbins and Harriet Eisner from Amicus' International Department welcomed the delegation to their Head office. After brief greetings and introductions Simon explained the union's history and structure, which he said, consists of 23 sectors ranging from printing and finance to energy with membership at over one million. Simon also touched on the on-going negotiations of a merger between Amicus and two other major British unions. He talked about the union's European and international

engagement and international solidarity work with unions in Colombia, Burma and Venezuela. Then Brother Tony Burke presented Sisters Huda and Hassan with posters of 150-year-old certificates of the union's membership card. Brief discussion and questions followed. The delegation asked why Amicus feels the need to create a big British union. The answer was having greater bargaining power when negotiating with governments or big business (both local or global). They were asked in turn about the daily life of ordinary workers in Iraq and how Amicus could assist.

House of Commons

The delegation visited the House of Commons for a Labour Friends of Iraq briefing chaired by Dave Anderson MP, former President of Unison and Chair of LFIQ, in which Sisters Huda and Violet spoke to the meeting. The Rt Hon Foreign Secretary Jack Straw sent a message of support. The Rt Hon Ann Clwyd MP, the Prime Minister's Envoy to Iraq on Human Rights attended and addressed the meeting (see Annex). In welcoming the delegation, she said in reference to Decree 8750, "the new government of Iraq, when it is formed, must understand that strong trade unions are vital in Iraq."

Violet talked about the formation of her union in Basra after the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003 and her union's determination to build a genuinely independent and democratic union that can contribute to Iraq's economic and political stability. She also stated her union's commitment to a secular, federal and fully sovereign Iraq. She concluded by referring to the impact of corruption and terrorism and emphasised the need to expose the former and eradicate the later.

Huda talked about women's experience in Iraqi Kurdistan. She said that Iraqi Kurdistan is relatively safe and more secure than the rest of Iraq. But she said Kurdistan women are often held back by stigma and prejudice. This prejudice is sustained by tribal traditions and customs.

The Women's Minister Meg Munn MP spoke and backed the call to increase women's representation in the Iraqi Assembly and wider fields. Former Labour MP Harry Barnes asked the delegation how Iraqi unions could tackle religious and gender divisions?

Wednesday 8 March

TUC

The delegation met Maggie Foy, the TUC's South East Regional Education Officer who gave an introduction to the work of the TUC educational programme for women. The TUC provides training for 14,000 women a year in her region alone, she said. She made special reference to the TUC Education Work Book for working women. In addition to highlighting the TUC agenda in defending women's rights for equal pay, against sex discrimination and for pension, maternity and childcare rights, she mentioned the TUC's courses for union representatives and the campaign "Breaking the Silence on Domestic Violence".

FCO International Women's Day Seminar

The delegation was invited to attend an International Women's Day seminar organized by the FCO. The Rt Hon Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary, opened the seminar and it was closed by Kim Howell MP who made special reference to the presence of Iraqi/Kurdish women trade unionists. The seminar talked about the UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and the leading role the UK is taking to implement it.

The delegation then travelled by train to Eastbourne for the TUC Women's Conference.

Thursday 9 March

TUC Women's Conference

At the conference, the delegation made contact with delegates and forged many links – teachers' union NASUWT took them to dinner one night. The delegation also addressed the conference as official guests and spoke at a TUC fringe meeting. *End Violence Against Women* was the appropriate Conference slogan.

Both Violet and Nazanin addressed Conference and received a warm reception. Nazanin, wearing Kurdish traditional clothes spoke in her native language. Their speeches are reproduced in the Annex.

Sue Rogers, Chair of the TUC Iraq Solidarity Committee, chaired a TUC Fringe meeting on solidarity with women trade unionists in Iraq. In welcoming the delegation she drew attention to the long history of trade union activity in Iraq, which had been suppressed by Saddam Hussein's dictatorship and was now hindered again by Decree 8750.

Sister Hoda from the journalists noted that due to the relative stability of Kurdistan since 1991, trade unions have had the opportunity to flourish and grow. However, she said that there were nonetheless major problems for women due to the persistence of traditional 'tribal customs' and traditions which curtail women's freedoms. At the extreme end of this spectrum she referred to the persistence of 'honour killings', which despite legislation banning them, result in the death of women on a regular basis in rural areas.

Hassana explained that her union, formed in 2003, has a high percentage of women members and an active women's committee. The high number of male deaths in the wars initiated by Saddam Hussein has resulted in many women entering non-traditional skilled jobs such as printing and engineering. Wages and conditions are the major issues in the printing industry. Outdated and dangerous machinery is the norm and has resulted in major health and safety problems - one of the union demands is for danger money. Thus while the union is strongly opposed to privatisation, they are very much in favour of foreign investment to improve and modernise machinery. In addition they demand protection from a labour code and are campaigning for Iraq to sign up to the ILO's conventions. She added that her union is aware of the possibility of anti-unionism on the part of

potential foreign investors, which is why they are committed to working with the ICFTU and relevant Global Union Federations to forestall union busting activities.

Both speakers emphasised the enormous threat to the trade union movement posed by decree 8750 and also to the sectarian violence, which threatens the lives of ordinary workers. They urged British trade unionists to do all in their power to campaign for the repeal of Iraq's anti union legislation and at the same time to offer assistance in the training and education of Iraqi women trade unionists.

Friday 10 March

FCO

Niki Velamati of the Iraq Policy Unit welcomed the delegation to the FCO. She asked about life generally in Iraq and about their week's programme in the UK. She asked them whether they knew of UNSCR 1325 and about issues facing Iraqi/Kurdish women. In reference to Decree 8750, Velamati informed the delegation that the FCO has contacted the Minister of Civil Society to protest.

Fire Brigades Union (FBU)

Brian Joyce, the FBU's Treasurer and Executive Member, and Val Salmon, also a Member of the FBU Executive met the delegation at Congress House. Val asked whether women earn the same wage as men in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. The delegation answer was that Iraqi/Kurdish women are campaigning to achieve equal pay for women both in the private and public sector. Val and Brian asked about the conditions of Iraqi/Kurdish firefighters, who need more modern protective clothing, appliances and most importantly training in practical firefighting and operational procedures. Brian and Val informed the delegation of several projects that are currently being organised by the FBU which will support firefighters and the trade union movement in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. They asked about the current political situation within Iraq including their views on a federal Iraq, the war/occupation and withdrawal of British troops. The message from the delegation was the wish for peace combined with a free and democratic, federal and fully sovereign Iraq free of foreign troops. The FBU then hosted a farewell dinner for the delegation.

Conclusion

The aim of the delegation was to raise the profile of women in the Iraqi/Kurdish trade union movements, both among British trade unions and in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. It also provided four Iraqi/Kurdish women trade unionists with the chance to see how women in the British trade union movement organise themselves.

The TUC will continue to support women trade unionists in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, but in particular, this delegation has led the TUC to conclude that:

- there is a pressing need to provide trade union training for women in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan as part of a wider programme of trade union training;
- men in the Iraqi and Iraqi Kurdish trade union movements need to be trained about equality and women's rights – why they are important and how to deliver them;
- help is needed for literacy classes for women and in particular for young women, targeting those especially in rural areas;
- there is a need for assistance in producing materials highlighting women's issues and rights; and
- the TUC should take up the issue of honour killings as part of its campaigns on violence against women, in association with Amnesty International's "Stop Violence Against Women" campaign.

Annex: speeches and messages

Speech by Violet Issa Qalaab of the Oil and Gas Union/South of Iraq

On behalf of Iraqi women and the struggling women in all fields of work I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you on the celebration of Women's Day and your Conference.

First allow me to give a brief history of misery and pain that Iraqi women had to endure.

Before Saddam's regime and all the wars that he caused, Iraqi women were enjoying rights that distinguished them from other women in the Islamic countries.

According to the Iraqi Civil Affairs Law of 1959, women had the right to assume any post in trade unions, judiciary, factories, universities and diplomatic core.

This right was achieved through years of struggle and perseverance, but wars and Saddam's dictatorial regime changed all this.

The amount of suffering Iraqi women had endured and their marginalization from the workplace, as well as family responsibilities had made Iraqi women move away from achieving their goals.

This occurred despite the fact that Iraq was one of the first countries to sign international treaties ending discrimination against women.

The former regime prevented Iraqi women from continuing their education and gave them immense responsibility as the main breadwinner in the family.

With the country in deep crisis and with a shattered economy Iraqi women were forced to take any work to feed her family.

This situation left women confused and desperate and forced the engineer to leave her profession and the doctor to accept being the second wife.

The situation in post-Saddam Iraq has not improved a great deal because of lack of security.

Women began to leave their work for fear of terrorism and frequent and random attacks.

And the rise in prices of goods and rent and fuel, put more pressure on women and their families. Many Iraqi women now live in abandoned and destroyed buildings while living in desolation, scarcity and poor health.

However, despite all these difficulties they are nevertheless still active and play their role to develop the society.

Many Iraqi women became members of trade unions to defend the rights of women workers and women in particular.

Many began to attend international meetings so they gain some experience and the knowledge from the women in the developed world.

Iraqi women also took part in awareness campaigns which have been organised by civil society organisations in order to make known their suffering and their rights to officials.

Iraqi women need all moral help to enable them to regain a sense of initiative and will, to solve their problems.

There is an immediate need to have workshops to look into issues regarding Iraqi women specifically and women's rights, health issues, etc

I hope the day will soon come when the world will witness the motivation, determination, and resolve of Iraqi women in the process rebuilding Iraq.

To end my speech, please allow me to say a few words about my union, the Oil and Gas Workers Union and its struggles:

- for a Labour Code that adheres to the ILO International Standards;
- for social provision such as health, housing and pensions;
- to keep oil publicly owned although we support foreign investment to bring technology and skills;
- to see Iraq fully sovereign and free from foreign troops;
- alongside other forces, to build a democratic, united and federal Iraq; and
- we seek your support to reverse Decree 8750.

Speech by Nazanin T Ali, of the Kurdistan Workers Syndicate

I extend to you warm greetings from Kurdistan women workers and we wish you a successful conference.

The invitation you have extended to us, the Kurdistan Workers Syndicate, to take part in this conference, which began on the 8th of March, International Women's Day, conveys a message of solidarity, unity and the shared aims of women around the world in general and women trade unionists in particular.

The universal message that unites us all is our struggle to improve better living conditions for workers and to realise their rights through securing the rights of women to equality and eliminate social injustice, though its advancement differs between one society and others.

The courageous and tireless Kurdistan women have been relentless in their contribution to the national liberation movement of the people of Kurdistan.

Every Kurdistan woman played a heroic role in the long struggle of the Kurdistan people for federalism with Iraq. As a mother or a peshmerga or an activist, Kurdistan women endured political repression, imprisonment and torture.

Kurdistani women suffered untold tragedies brought upon them by Saddam's wars of genocide such as the Anfal operation, chemical attacks and the mass graves.

Husbands and sons were taken away never to be seen again and women were left on their own with no support. Kurdistani women suffered untold oppression from Saddam's fascist policies and chauvinistic rule.

Successive Iraqi regimes have set Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq years back and stopped any advancement in science, culture and education and above all women's rights.

In 1991, a popular uprising swept across Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan in protest against the tyranny of Saddam's regime. Kurdistani women took a leading role along with the rest of society.

It has been 15 years to this day since the people of Kurdistan have proudly been living under the auspices of their hard earned self-rule. During this time Kurdistan saw the election, the founding of the Kurdistan National Assembly and formation of the Kurdistan regional government.

Following the downfall of Saddam, a political process was adopted to create a federal Iraq governed by parliamentary democracy. Kurdish women played a key role during the referendum and in the free and democratic election in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Women participate in the Kurdistan assembly and the Iraqi National Assembly. Women have 25% seats in the Iraqi National Assembly.

Iraqi Kurdistan has just elected a president. His Excellency Masud Barzani. After his election as a president, a decision was taken with his support to set up an agency that deals with affairs of the families of martyred Kurds.

To this day the agency provides a monthly income to families and relatives of those who were killed in Anfal, irrespective of their political persuasion and beliefs, and by allocating plots of land.

Women in Iraqi Kurdistan are free to take part in political work, parliament, government, administration, judiciary and media and in wide civil society organisations.

Kurdistani women have assumed higher posts within all different agencies of the state.

But despite these achievements, women still have to address social issues such as honour killing- which is banned by law- but is still practiced in rural areas.

Finally, we would like to reaffirm the need for unity and accord between women workers and to reiterate our stance that we stand against any form of discrimination.

Yes to the struggle for working rights, better life, equality and social justice!

From the podium of your conference we send our best wishes on the occasion of International Women's Day and solidarity with workers of the world and we wish you all success in your conference.

Jack Straw's message to the House of Commons meeting with Iraqi women trade unionists

I am sorry that I cannot attend your meeting this evening. I wanted though to send you my very best wishes. I know from my regular visits to Iraq of the vital role people such as yourselves are playing in building a new future for the country. You can be assured that in your historic mission you have the support of the UK Government. I do not delude myself about the challenges faced by the people of Iraq. But just as millions of people showed what sort of future they want by voting in December's elections, so the trade union movement in Iraq is showing its determination to defy those who seek to destroy the process of rebuilding your country. In that we offer you solidarity and wish you well.

Ann Clwyd's speech to the House of Commons meeting with Iraqi women trade unionists

As the Prime Minister's Envoy to Iraq on Human Rights I am very pleased to see you all here – particularly women from Iraq - because I have a long association with you and it is important that you are here in the week of International Women's Day because you are examples of how much has been achieved in Iraq and the determination of the women of Iraq, despite all the difficulties, to fight for what you believe to be worthwhile.

Some of us were associated for a long period of time with CARDRI - the Committee Against Repression and for Democratic Rights in Iraq.

When I was in Iraq 18 months ago I met representatives of the free trade unions and I showed them a CARDRI newsletter from 1987 that had several articles on the crushing of unions by Saddam.

They said to me, oh, we used to hand that out, translated into Arabic, on the streets of Baghdad.

We in CARDRI did not then know that our newsletters were reaching the streets of Baghdad but unfortunately one if not two of those brave men who we met were subsequently killed.

It was very sad that those fighting to restore trade unions in Iraq were being attacked in that way.

That's one of the many reasons why we admire you for standing up for the thing you believe in despite the threats.

And when I was in Basra for the first election it was amazing to see so many women turn out to vote.

The polling stations were being attacked by mortars and many women were present at this particular polling station. I asked the polling clerk what did the women do. He said that they stood there and sang a song of defiance.

So we understand what problems face you and your difficulties and we obviously want to do everything we can to help you.

We know that bodies such as the TUC and the ICFTU have protested against, for example, Decree 8750 and the new government of Iraq, when it is formed, must understand that strong trade unions are vital in Iraq, in all professions, and in consolidating the freedoms and rights which Iraqis are beginning to enjoy for the first time.

On International Women's Day we say in this country that women must be represented at all levels and have equal rights with men.

We who are elected as MPs also understand how difficult the struggle is for women not only in your country but in ours too. For example, for 17 years I was the only woman MP from Wales. So because we have had to struggle ourselves in different circumstances to you, we want you to know that you have our support and solidarity and would be happy to give any assistance we can.