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Is this what they told us we were going there to do?

Joan Chittister | Apr. 7, 2006 From Where I Stand

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The expression of their agony, their frustration, lingers in my mind
ttmore a wail than a cry: “We are a civilization of 7,000 years,” said a delegate to the U.S.-Iraqi Women’s Conference sponsored by the Global Peace Initiative of Women, March 29-31 in New York. “You are a country of 200 years.” She drifted off into the unsaid. But the message was plain: You are a young country. What have you ever lost? Who are you to tell us how to live?

The lament came out of a well of agony. While the West struggles with
ttits uncertainty about the implications of veils and burqas for the full
ttdevelopment of women in Islamic cultures, these women, some in hijab or head
ttscarves, some in trim pant suits, some in abayas, are struggling with what it means to stay alive, to rebuild an entire country, to keep their families safe, to be safe themselves.

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There are now, the women told us, 1.5 million widows in Iraq and the
ttnumbers are rising daily as men disappear.

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“Before the war, women constituted almost half of the college
ttpopulation in Iraq,” one woman pointed out. But after the invasion women had no chances for either the jobs an education could bring or the independence it promises.

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“After the overthrow of the tyrant,” a doctor said, “shortages of fuel, medicine, and food got even worse than before.”

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It seemed that the litany would never end. “Forget about the
ttpast,” the speaker said. “Anyone can start a war; only a few can stop it. And only time and life can measure the

outcome of it."

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Being able to tell who the real "victors" are in Iraq is
ttbecoming more difficult every day. Women, helpless in the face of war, have yet to learn what this situation means for themselves. So far, life has only gotten worse for women.

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"Now we have corruption, damage to lines and power stations. It is
ttdifficult to live in Baghdad. We are on electricity 3 x 3. Three hours on;
ttthree hours off. Only a few have generators."

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Another woman, a business woman made the basics plain: "We need $7
ttbillion to fix the sewage and water systems. That will not be available for
ttfive years. And the pipes are already out of date before they even begin to put them in again."

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"Some areas have putrid water," another woman said.

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"Food rations got us through the sanctions," a fourth woman
ttsaid. "But now these are reduced till 2006 and will probably end
ttthen."

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It got more and more difficult to listen to the almost rote recitation
ttof living conditions that most of us have never even seen, let alone attempted to cook in and clean in and raise children in and care for old parents in while finding ourselves more and more under siege every day.

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"We must learn the facts," a woman researcher told us.
tt"Women are a large part of the economic sector in Iraq but education and employment opportunities are directly linked to one another.

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“In 1970, the Iraqi government increased its focus on education.
ttThis had a significant effect on girls. But the drop in educational
ttopportunities now has been disastrous:

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- 50 percent of women above 15 years old have never been enrolled in
  tt school.
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- 64 percent of rural women above 15 have no elementary education.
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- 40 percent of girls in rural areas are not in primary school.
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- 47 percent of women are illiterate.
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- 50 percent of women in urban areas are literate.
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“Most victims of honor crimes -- women who have been raped,
ttmolested or slept with their lovers -- are women and girls,” an enraged woman reported. “In every case, the perpetrators are protected -- by legislation!” she said. I thought of all the women who have been burned or stoned for the sins of men while the fathers and uncles and brothers who killed them for “dishonoring” their families would go free.

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And that’s where the whole emerging future of women becomes
ttunclear. The new Constitution, the one crafted after the fall of Saddam and
ttguaranteed to guarantee democracy, does not guarantee it for women.

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On the contrary. Young women pointed out, in fact, that the new
ttConstitution, for all intents and purposes, rescinds the Personal Status Law of 1959 and now makes women subject to the religious laws of every region.

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To satisfy regional and religious agendas, the new constitution, having
ttpromised women full civil rights, turned around and gave regions sectarian

ttcontrol over marriage laws and women's civil rights. The majority party in each region, as a result, will determine how women are treated in that area, regardless what the federal constitution supposedly allows.

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It's a very neat political trick. On the one hand, the Constitution
ttlooks like it's committed to equality. On the other hand, each region,
ttthanks to the Personal Status clause of the document, can determine whether
ttthey will function under federal or *sharia* (Islamic) law where women are concerned. The effects of such a statement are to put marriage law with its personal rights and understandings of abuse, divorce law with its conditions and compensation, and inheritance rights for women under the judgment of a woman's sect or religion rather than the federal laws of the land.

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It's the equivalent of saying that a woman has a right to divorce
ttor marry or seek protection from abuse or financial support as long as her
ttreligion will grant it to her.

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"We had to do this in order to preserve the family," one of
ttthe older women, now a parliamentarian of the new government, told us.
ttSomeone's -- anyone's -- definition of "family," it seems, twill trump the civil rights of women every time.

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"Democracy will never be done by troops, guns and random
ttshooting," another woman told us ominously.

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From where I stand, it looks as if that insight is clearly correct, at
ttleast this time. At least here. At least where women are concerned. Is this
ttreally the world we said we were going to create in Iraq when we went in there to destroy a tyrant and abolish tyranny? Or are we now only the unwitting creators of more of the same?

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For all these women, too, will there finally be a resurrection? And will
ttwe even bother to care?

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*[**Program Note:** Erie Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister was a*
ttpanel member on the special Easter Sunday edition of NBC television's
tt"Meet the Press" public affairs program. The program aired Sunday, April 16 at 10 a.m. (eastern time). The

“Meet the Press” Web site,
ttHREF="http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3032608" style="text-decoration: none">www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3032608,
tt*carries a video and written transcript of the program.*

Editor’s Note: *From Where I Stand is normally*
ttposted to
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tt*Thursday afternoons, but Sr. Joan Chittister’s heavier than usual*
ttschedule of speaking engagements in April has disrupted our posting routines.
ttWe are sorry for the delays and ask your patience.]

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