

# Mahmudiyah Women Seek Advancement

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**A poster written in Arabic addresses Iraqi women, soliciting their help in meeting their needs and supporting their families and communities. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Kerensa Hardy, 3rd BCT, 101st Abn. Div. (AASLT).**

**CAMP STRIKER** — Rakkasan Soldiers hosted a meeting with Iraqi women to evaluate their needs and talk about topics of interest to them Feb. 16 at the Mahmudiyah Civil Military Operations Center.

The project is part of a Task Force Marne initiative to reach Iraqi females. The event was the second in a series of meetings headed by 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), where female Soldiers talk to Iraqi women to gain knowledge about their current conditions and what they want or need.

Eleven women attended the meeting, comprising a sampling of females who live in Mahmudiyah.

Although the women receive government assistance in the form of coupons for food items such as milk and wheat, the subsidy is not sufficient to care for their families and the items are sometimes substandard. They said money is the answer.

“We’d like to work, but we don’t have the money to start businesses,” one woman said at the start of the meeting.

That one comment segued into a whirlwind discussion about their fears, hopes and dreams.

“We understand that to start your businesses, it requires money,” said Capt. Martrell Gamble, from Landover, Md., officer in charge of the women’s outreach project for 3rd BCT, 101st Abn. Div. (AASLT). “We need you to tell us what you need ... to help you take care of your families.”

Acknowledging that women in Iraq face certain cultural obstacles, Gamble posed the question, “If you could work what would you do?”

To this, the ladies answered that they would like to sew, bake, can fruit or make pickled vegetables, style hair or teach other women to do all of the above. They spoke enthusiastically about things they would like to do if they had the means.

One woman has a business of sorts with her husband where they make and package pickles to sell at the market. However, it’s not something they are able to do on a steady basis due to a lack of funds to purchase supplies.

A mother of nine said she would like to have a mini-market inside her home. “My husband doesn’t work and I need money for food,” she said.

The women agreed that many of their husbands are unemployed for fear of being targets for extremist groups.

In-home businesses seemed to be a common desire for these women who, in spite of increased security, sometimes fear going out on a regular basis. That would satisfy the need and desire to make money, as well as providing a feeling of relative security since they could work from home instead of commuting every day.

The women departed as animatedly as they arrived, expressing hope that things will look up for them in the near future and seemingly happy to be given a voice and forum where they could talk about those hopes.

“I studied and worked in women’s studies in college, particularly focused on women and development in third-world countries,” said 1st Lt. Heather Wilson, from Lusby, Md., 3rd Combat Aviation Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, who attended both meetings sponsored by 3rd BCT, 101st Abn. Div. (AASLT). “(Women are) a demographic that is unfortunately overlooked because of cultural differences; I am glad we are addressing it and can help.”

An interpreter who also attended both meetings said she has never seen Arab women so excited about women’s prospects.

“They are very brave women who are risking themselves to do this project, but they know it will mean a better future for them and their children and, thus, Iraq,” Wilson said.