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## Iraqi women speak out against daily violence

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Women activists and UN officials testified Wednesday in Stockholm about the violence Iraqi women are subjected to in their daily lives, on the eve of an Iraq conference in the Swedish capital.

The United Nations' special representative to Baghdad, Staffan de Mistura, cited a recent UN human rights report on Iraq as saying that "in Basra 100 or more women had been killed or mutilated because they were wearing what was considered by some as inappropriate dress. The dress was not inappropriate at all."

De Mistura also mentioned the high number of so-called "honour crimes" in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq.

"Since the (2003 US) occupation we have seen a deterioration of women's rights," said Lena Ag, the secretary general of the Swedish organisation Kvinna till Kvinna (Woman to Woman).

Pakhshan Zangana, an activist and member of the Kurdistan parliament, stressed however that there had been "positive changes at the level of society."

"Now violence against women is no longer a private issue within the family, it is being discussed outside the family also," she said.

Out in society, women are subjected to verbal abuse on the streets if they are not wearing a hijab and in extreme cases face being abducted by unknown gunmen, who sexually abuse and then kill them.

Participants at the seminar stressed that it was important for more women, and civil society in general, to take part in development efforts in Iraq.

"Women are a potential factor for democratic and development processes in Iraq," said Hanaa Edwar Busha, one of the founders of the Iraqi Women Network, stressing that women represent around 55 percent of the Iraqi population.

"We have so many problems and the government cannot solve them alone ... Civil society can be an accountable partner if trained well," said Basma Al-Khateeb, also a member of the Iraqi Women Network.

On Thursday, the International Compact with Iraq (ICI) conference will review the political and security progress in Iraq since the launch a year ago of a five-year peace and development plan.

The conference, being held on the outskirts of Stockholm, will be attended by some 100 delegations and is being hosted by Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.