

Reconstructing Gender: Iraqi women between dictatorship, war, sanctions and occupation

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ABSTRACT This article explores the role of Iraqi women in reconstruction processes by contextualising the current situation with respect to changing gender ideologies and relations over the past three decades. Before discussing the Iraqi case specifically, I provide a brief theoretical background about the significance of gender in reconstruction as well as nation-building processes. A historical background aims to shed light on the changing gender ideologies and relations during the regime of Saddam Hussein. The article focuses particularly on the impacts of the early developmental–modernist discourses of the state and the impacts of war (Iran–Iraq war 1980–88, Gulf wars 1991, 2003) as well as on the comprehensive economic sanctions regime (1990–2003). The latter involved wider social changes affecting women and gender relations but also society at large because of the impoverishment of the well educated middle-class, wide-scale unemployment, an economic crisis and a shift towards more conservative values and morals. It is against this historical background that contemporary developments related to ongoing conflict, occupation and political transition affect women and gender relations.

Despite the common rhetoric of democratisation, women's rights and inclusion, Iraqi women might turn out to be the biggest losers in the current and future political and social map of Iraq. Having already suffered from the steady erosion of socioeconomic rights, which had been gained in the early years of the Saddam Hussein regime, women and gender relations have been particularly hard-hit by economic sanctions (1990–2003), as well as by the recent war in 2003 and its ongoing violent aftermath. UN resolution 1325, calling for the mainstreaming of gender in all aspects of reconstruction and political state building, has taken on a tragic twist: to start with, the question of reconstruction appears premature at a time when the increasing levels of violence and conflict prevent any serious development projects and processes. Second, there has been the danger of a backlash against women's rights and gender relations as the call for the mainstreaming of gender is being linked to the wider issue of foreign occupation, neocolonial configurations and an

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interim government that lacks widespread credibility among the Iraqi population.

This political dilemma should not, however, prevent political debates and academic analyses that put gender on the map. Without doubt the differentiation and relative positioning of women and men is an important ordering principle that pervades systems of power and is sometimes its very embodiment:

Gender power is seen to shape the dynamics of every site of human interaction, from the household to the international arena. It has expression in physique—how women and men's bodies are nourished, trained and deployed, how vulnerable they are to attack, what mobility they have (Cockburn, 1999: 3).

Gender also has expression in prevailing ideologies and norms, in laws, in citizenship rights, in political dynamics and struggles and, of course, in economics—how money, property and other resources are distributed between the sexes. However, what is important to point out here is that gender does not necessarily constitute the most significant factor. Economic class, ethnic and religious differentiation, sexual orientation and political affiliation also shape power hierarchies and structure political regimes and societies. And these differentiating factors, in turn, are gendered and are part of the specific constructs of men/masculinities and women/femininities.

In this article I will first provide a brief theoretical background to the significance of gender in reconstruction and nation-building processes before exploring the role of women and changing gender relations in contemporary Iraq. A historical background aims to shed light on the changing gender ideologies and relations during the regime of Saddam Hussein. I will focus particularly on the impacts of the early developmental–modernist discourses of the state and the impacts of war (Iran–Iraq war 1980–88 and Gulf war 1991), as well as on the comprehensive economic sanctions regime (1990–2003). The latter involved wider social changes affecting women and gender relations but also society at large, eg impoverishment of the well educated middle class, wide-scale unemployment, an economic crisis and a shift towards more conservative values and morals.

It is against this backdrop that the impact of the latest war (2003), the occupation and reconstruction attempts need to be analysed. In addition to the most immediate effects of the current situation (lack of security and mobility, humanitarian crisis and political marginalisation of women), the article will explore more long-term issues related to the issue of mainstreaming gender.

Nationalism and national identities: gendered perspectives

One of the key issues in delineating gender differences is the relationship between nationalism and gender, that is, the ways in which nationalism and the nation-state are gendered as well the as various ways in which women participate in or challenge nationalist processes. Case studies of women in a

variety of geographical and political contexts substantiate the theoretical model sketched out by Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989: 7) to describe the various ways in which women can and do participate in ethnic and national processes:

1. as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;
2. as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic and national groups;
3. as actors in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture;
4. as signifiers of ethnic and national groups;
5. as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.

The most 'natural' way in which women participate in national and ethnic processes is the 'biological reproduction of the nation', which corresponds to the notion of *Volksnation*, a nation of common origin, common 'blood and belonging' (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 66). The relationship between cultural reproduction and gender relations can be articulated in terms of a *Kulturnation*. Here, gender relations are at the centre of cultural constructions of social identities and collectivities, where women tend to constitute their symbolic 'border guards'. Being constructed as carriers of the collectivity's 'honour' and the intergenerational reproducers of its culture, specific codes and regulations delineate the 'proper women' and 'proper men' (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 67). Often women are perceived to be both biological and cultural reproducers of a nation. In Iraq, for example, women were asked by the regime of Saddam Hussein to 'produce' future soldiers, while they were also increasingly being used as symbols for the honour and stamina of the nation. In post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, women are increasingly being used as symbols against the previous, largely secular regime as well as against Western cultural and political imposition.

Cockburn (1999) argues convincingly that the more primordial the rendering of people and nation, the more are the relations between men and women essentialised:

'Women are reminded that by biology and by tradition they are the keepers of hearth and home, to nurture and teach children "our ways". Men by physique and tradition are there to protect women and children, and the nation, often represented as the "motherland"' (p 8).

This process can also be observed in Iraq, where the increasing significance of primordial ethnic and religious identities goes side by side with more conservative and restrictive gender ideologies.

Gender and post-conflict periods

Peace for women does not mean the cessation of armed conflict. Women's security needs are not necessarily met in 'post-conflict' situations, as gender-based violence still remains rampant in reconstruction periods (Gervais, 2004). Enloe's definition of peace is 'women's achievement of control over

their lives' (Enloe, 1987: 538). Peace, as defined by Enloe, would require not just the absence of armed and gender conflict at home, locally and abroad, but also the absence of poverty and the conditions which create it (Kelly, 2000: 48).

In reality women often experience a backlash in post-war situations when traditional gender roles inside the home or outside are evoked. Violence against women is often endemic in post-war situations, partly because of the general state of anarchy and chaos but also as an element of heightened aggression and militarisation, and prevailing constructions of masculinity promoted during conflict. An extreme example of this situation is contemporary Iraq, which, despite the official ending of military conflict, is extremely violent and insecure. As a matter of fact, the level of every-day experienced violence is even greater now than during the period of formal military intervention. Women have particularly suffered from the chaos, lawlessness and lack of security and have been subject to increased harassment and abductions, as well as sexual abuse and rape.

For women at home and within the diaspora it often seems as if the challenges posed to traditional gender ideologies and roles during times of war have become too great for patriarchal societies to accept in peace. Women often have less political space to challenge gender relations and to contribute to political processes in the aftermath of conflict. According to Pankhurst (2004):

The ideological rhetoric is often about 'restoring' or 'returning' to something associated with the *status quo* before the war, even if the change actually undermines women's rights and places women in a situation that is even more disadvantageous than it was in the past. This is often accompanied by imagery of the culturally specific equivalent of the woman as 'beautiful soul', strongly associating women with cultural notions of 'tradition', motherhood, and peace (p 19).

Historically women rarely sustain wartime gains in peacetime. Societies neither defend the spaces women create during struggle nor acknowledge the ingenious ways in which women bear new and additional responsibilities.

Absence of women in formal reconstruction processes

In many post-conflict settings women have been sidelined or marginalised from formal peace initiatives, political transitions and reconstruction efforts. Formal peace negotiations among warring parties and their mediators serve to define basic power relations and to identify priorities for immediate post-war political activity (Sorenson, 1998). Traditional militarised gender regimes tend to endow men with the power in politics and locate women's importance within the family (Cockburn & Zarkov, 2002). However, women within conflict-ridden societies as well as within diasporic communities do find ways to work for peace and reconciliation through grassroots activism. Women from all walks of life participate in this informal peace-building work, but their activities are often disparaged

as ‘volunteer’, ‘charitable’ or ‘social’, even when they have a political impact (Ferris, in Sorenson, 1998).

Despite UN Resolution 1325 passed in October 2000 stating the importance of the inclusion of women and mainstreaming gender into all aspects of post-conflict resolution and peace operations, the reality of post-conflict situations is often quite different. If acknowledged at all, UN Resolution 1325 is frequently translated into adding a few women into governments and ministries. However, the mainstreaming of gender would involve the appointments of women to interim governments, ministries and committees dealing with systems of local and national governance, judiciary, policing, human rights, allocating funds, free media development—all economic processes. It also aims at encouraging independent women’s groups, NGOs and community-based organisations.

In some post-conflict settings, especially with respect to Muslim societies, the stress on UN resolution 1325 is perceived to be part of a Western plot to destroy a society’s traditional culture and values. This is particularly the case in contexts of US-led military intervention, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq. Paradoxically, people who might otherwise be sympathetic to issues pertaining to women’s rights and women’s equality could express strong opposition to women’s inclusion in post-conflict reconstruction if this is made one of the aims of the occupying powers. The political involvement or even return of diaspora women might evoke resentment and a backlash from local women’s rights activists. This trend has been particularly evident in the Iraqi context, where the diaspora has played a disproportionate role in the new Iraqi leadership supported by the USA. Diaspora women have tried to put their mark on emerging women’s organisations within Iraq, but have frequently been perceived as patronising and being part of a Western ploy.

It is important to point out that Iraqi women have been very much part of the ‘public sphere’ until a decade or so ago. Despite the context of general political repression by the Baath regime of Saddam Hussein, Iraqi women were among the most educated in the whole region. They were part of the labour force and visible and active on almost all levels of state institutions and bureaucracy. These days, however, women are prevented from leaving their houses by fear and a great sense of insecurity. Violent burglaries, mafia-like gangs that roam the cities at night, increased sexual violence, including rape, as well as militant resistance and US snipers have pushed women into the background. The demise of women’s gains during the 1970s and early 1980s was already evident before the war in 2003. Aside from the most obvious effects related to the atrocious humanitarian situation, there have been changes in gender relations and ideologies in the context of wider social changes related to war, sanctions and changing state policies.

Even before this last war, because of sanctions, there was a massive deterioration in basic infrastructure (water, sanitation, sewage, electricity) that severely reduced the quality of life of Iraqi families, who often had to get through the day without water and electricity. High child mortality (about

4000–5000 per month), rampant malnutrition and increased rates of leukaemia, other forms of cancer, epidemic diseases, and birth defects were among the most obvious ‘side-effects’ of the sanctions regime. However, everyday lives changed not only with respect to the drastic deterioration in economic conditions and basic infrastructure: the social and cultural fabric of Iraqi society has also been affected.

Iraqi women have experienced a number of profound social and cultural changes linked to gender relations and ideologies. These changes are not easily quantifiable and visible to an outside observer. But when war and economic hardship are brought to a civilian population, women suffer in various ways. Data on war and conflict-ridden countries such as Iraq tend to conceal gender-specific forms of hardship. In this article I focus on a number of social and cultural changes that have had an impact on women and gender relations. It is too early to address with certainty the impact of this last war, occupation and the ongoing conflict in Iraq, but some trends are already evident.

More long-term and quantitative research would be needed to provide statistical information and evidence, so I can only provide a broad sketch of certain trends and transformations. My findings are based on observations during my own visits to Iraq (the last two were in 1991 and 1997), interviews with Iraqi refugee women in the UK and Germany who have recently left Iraq, discussions with my parents and friends who have been visiting Iraq more regularly, phone contact with relatives, and discussions with my PhD student who has been doing fieldwork in Iraq.

Historical context

An analysis of the impact of economic sanctions and war on women in Iraq must be prefaced by a brief historical background addressing the general situation of Iraqi women before the sanctions regime came into place in 1990. Despite indisputable political repression in the 1970s and early 1980s, a large part of the Iraqi population enjoyed high living standards in the context of an economic boom and rapid development, which were a result of the rise of oil prices and the government’s developmental policies. These were the years of a flourishing economy and the emergence and expansion of a broad middle class. State-induced policies worked to eradicate illiteracy, educate women, and incorporate them into the labour force. The initial period after the nationalisation of the Iraqi oil industry in 1972 was characterised by economic hardship and difficulties. But the oil embargo imposed by OPEC countries in 1973, known as the ‘oil crisis’, was followed by a period of boom and expansion. Oil prices shot up and oil-producing countries started to become aware of their bargaining power *vis à vis* Western countries’ dependence on oil.

In the context of this rapid economic expansion the Iraqi government actively sought out women to incorporate them into the labour force. In 1974 a government decree stipulated that all university graduates—men and women—would be employed automatically. In certain professions, such as

those related to health care and teaching, education itself entailed a contract with the government, which obliged the students to take up a job in their respective professions.

Policies of encouraging women to enter waged work cannot be explained in terms of egalitarian or even feminist principles, however, even though several women I interviewed did comment positively on the early Baathists' policies of the social inclusion of women. The initial ideology of the Baath party, the ruling party of Iraq, was based on Arab nationalism and socialism. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore in detail the specific motivations and ideology of the Baathist regime with respect to women's roles and positions. What can be said is that human power was scarce and that, as the Gulf countries started to look for workers outside their national boundaries, the Iraqi government also tapped into the country's own human resources. Subsequently, working outside the home became for women not only acceptable but prestigious and the norm. Another factor to be taken into account was the state's attempt to indoctrinate its citizens—whether male or female. A great number of party members were recruited through their workplaces. Obviously it was much easier to reach out to and recruit women when they were part of the so-called public sphere and visible outside the confines of their homes.

Whatever the government's motivations, Iraqi women became among the most educated and professional in the whole region. How far this access to education and the labour market resulted in an improved status for women is a more complex question. As in many other places, conservative and patriarchal values did not automatically change because women started working. Furthermore, there were great differences between rural and urban women, as well as between women from different class backgrounds.

During the years of the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88) women's increased participation in the public sphere to replace male soldiers coincided with the further militarisation of society and a glorification of certain types of masculinity, ie the fighter, the defender of his nation and the martyr. Women were simultaneously encouraged by the state to replace male workers and civil servants, who were fighting at the front, and to 'produce' more Iraqi citizens and future soldiers. The glorification of a militarised masculinity coincided with the glorification of the Iraqi mother.

Only two 'peaceful' years were followed by the invasion of Kuwait (August 1990) and the Gulf war (January–March 1991). The latter was particularly traumatising, as night after night of heavy bombing not only disrupted sleep and family lives but left many in deep shock and fear. Iraqis invariably have vivid memories of the Gulf war and, even before the latest war, many Iraqis spoke about ongoing nightmares, a sense of anxiety and a great sensitivity to certain noises that could only remotely be mistaken for bombs. Unlike in other war-torn countries, eg Bosnia-Herzegovina, 'post-traumatic stress syndrome' has not been a recognised medical condition in Iraq. And even if it were acknowledged, lack of resources and expertise make systematic treatment impossible.

Impact of wars and economic sanctions

Despite common generalised depictions of Iraqis as either culprits or victims, a closer look at Iraqi society reveals the obvious fact that Iraqi women as well as men are not a homogeneous group and have been affected by sanctions and war in different ways. Among the numerous differentiating factors are place of residence (urban versus rural), ethnic (Arab or Kurd) and religious (Shi'a, Sunni, Christian) backgrounds and, perhaps most important, social class. However, the previously existing class system itself has been inverted, most notably through the impoverishment of a previously broad and stable educated middle class and the rise of a class of war and sanctions profiteers. The latter group tended to be closely related to the Iraqi regime and to constitute political and economic networks of privilege. Another extremely significant factor affecting the ways sanctions and war had an impact on daily lives is the existence of relatives or close friends in Western countries. Remittances sent by relatives from all over the world, but most notably from northern Europe and the USA, often made the difference between misery and coping.

For women of low-income classes in urban areas or poor women living in the countryside sheer survival became the main aim of their lives. There is no doubt that it was particularly the poor mothers whose children were more likely to become yet another statistic in the incredibly high child mortality rates or who suffered from disease and malnutrition. Yet even for educated women who were part of the broad and well-off middle classes of Iraq feeding their children became the major worry and focus. Hana', who left Iraq in the late 1990s and now lives in London, recalls:

I would feed my children and my husband before eating anything myself. Often I would stay hungry. I would also feed my children before visiting anyone. Before the sanctions people were very generous. You would always serve tea and biscuits if not a meal when a visitor came. Now people stopped visiting each other so that they do not embarrass each other.

During the time of sanctions about 60% of the population was dependent on the monthly food rations given out by the government and paid for by the oil-for-food programme. In the aftermath of the downfall of the regime, most of the Iraqi population have become dependent on food aid, which currently needs to be distributed by the occupying forces (UNICEF, 2004). Sanctions and war have led to massive impoverishment and insecurity, which have subjected women of various social backgrounds to considerable material strain. Household management in the context of electricity cuts and water shortages has been time-consuming, exhausting, and frustrating.

Widespread unemployment, high inflation, and a virtual collapse of the economy have affected most women in their daily lives. For a population used to plenty and abundance—one oft-quoted example are the well-stocked home freezers—scarcity has come as a shock. Many women have had to revert to or learn homemaking skills practised by their grandmothers. For example, bread had been too expensive to buy on the market and many Iraqi

women had no choice but to bake their own bread on a daily basis, using the flour ration distributed by the government. Furthermore, for many women, especially those living in the countryside or in the south of Iraq, food storage has been largely impossible because of the frequent electricity cuts.

Aside from the more obvious effects related to basic survival strategies and difficulties, the sanctions and war have also left their mark on the social and cultural fabric of Iraqi society. Without doubt Iraqi women have lost some of the achievements gained in the previous decades. They can no longer assert themselves through either education or waged employment, as both sectors have deteriorated rapidly.

The breakdown of the welfare state had a disproportionate effect on women, who had been its main beneficiaries. Women were pushed back into their homes and into the traditional roles of being mothers and housewives. From being the highest in the region, estimated to be above 23% before 1991, women's employment rate fell to only 10% in 1997 (UNDP, 2000). Monthly salaries in the public sector, which, since the Iran–Iraq war, had increasingly been staffed by women, dropped dramatically and did not keep pace with high inflation rates and the cost of living. Many women reported that they simply could not afford to work anymore. The state withdrew its free services, including childcare and transportation.

There has also been a sharp decrease in access to all sectors of education for girls and young women because many families have not been able to afford sending all children to school. Illiteracy, drastically reduced in the 1970s and 1980s, rose steadily after the Iran–Iraq war and grew between 1985 and 1995 from 8% to 45%. The drop-out rate for girls in primary education reached 35% according to the United Nations Development Fund for Women Report of 2004 (UNIFEM, 2004). According to UNICEF, 55% of women aged 15–49 are illiterate.

The deterioration of the general education system was already evident in the early 1990s. Wadat, an educated middle-class woman in her late forties, had worked as a teacher in a high school until 1995. She told me:

We did not feel it so much during the first years of the sanctions, but it really hit us by 1994. Social conditions had deteriorated; the currency had been devalued while salaries were fixed. Many women started to quit work. Some of my friends could not even afford transportation to the school. Before the sanctions, the school made sure that we were picked up by a bus, but all this was cut. For me, the most important reason was my children. I did not want them to come home and be alone in the house. It has become too unsafe. And then, I know from my own work that schools have become so bad, because teachers have quit and there is no money for anything. So I felt that I have to teach them at home.

Because of the bad conditions in schools as a result of the lack of resources and teachers, many parents have felt that they had to contribute to their children's education.

Higher education has virtually collapsed and degrees became worthless in the context of widespread corruption and an uninterrupted exodus of

university professors in the 1990s. Monthly salaries in the public sector, which had paradoxically become increasingly staffed by women, had dropped dramatically and did not correspond to high inflation rates and the cost of living. During the period of economic sanctions even the few academics who were still employed were often not paid their salaries. In the current post-Saddam period salaries have risen considerably. However, unemployment rates are still very high and, because of the lack of security, women are extremely reluctant to take up work again. There have also been numerous reports of absolute chaos at universities, looting of libraries, professors being forced to step down; many have been threatened to be killed by students as they were perceived to be Baathist.

Working women like Wadat suffered from the collapse of their support systems. One previous support system, funded by the state, consisted of numerous nurseries and kindergartens, along with free public transportation to and from school and to the women's workplaces. The other major support system was based on extended family ties and neighbourly relations, which helped in childcare. Ever since the sanctions regime, women have become reluctant to leave their children with neighbours or other relatives because of the general sense of insecurity.

Crime rates have been on the increase since the Gulf war in 1991. Many women reported that before the imposition of sanctions they used to keep all their doors open and felt totally secure. During the sanctions regime there were numerous accounts of burglaries—often violent ones. And, in the current situation of occupation, looting, burglaries, killings and rape are widespread. With mafia-like gangs roaming the cities at night, most Iraqis do not want to hand in the weapons they have as they feel they have to protect themselves and their families. In light of the failure by US and UK soldiers to protect hospitals, museums, libraries, etc the only people perceived to have provided security in a systematic way are the religious authorities, especially local imams at the mosques.

Changing family and gender relations

Although Iraqi families used to be very close-knit and supportive of each other, family relationships have been strained by envy and competition in the struggle for survival. In the past children grew up in the midst of their extended families, often spending time and sleeping over at the houses of their grandparents, uncles and aunts. These days nuclear families have become much more significant in a context where people have to think about themselves and those closest to them first.

Some women reported that they had stopped visiting their relatives, as they did not want them to feel embarrassed because they could not provide them with a meal. Hospitality, especially where food is concerned, is a very important aspect of Iraqi culture. During the sanctions period most Iraqi families could not provide their guests with full meals because of widespread unemployment and low salaries. The same holds true in the current context of chaos, lack of security and widespread unemployment during occupation.

This has had a damaging impact on family and social life in contemporary Iraq. Aside from sadness, depression and sometimes anger, Iraqi women and men of all ages have become remarkably fatalistic and have built up an incredible resistance to deal with pain and suffering.

The loss of loved ones has become a common aspect of the pool of experiences of Iraqi women. Three wars, political repression, widespread disease, malnutrition and a collapsed health system account for the great number of deaths occurring in Iraq. According to UNICEF 4000–5000 children were dying each month since 1991 from malnutrition and water-borne diseases, but also from various forms of cancer, which have been related to the impact of depleted uranium.

The demographic cost of two wars, political repression and the forced economic migration of men triggered by the imposition of international sanctions accounts for the high number of widows and female-headed households. In Basra up to 60% of all households were female-headed in 2003, according to the October 2003 UNICEF report. The Human Relief Foundation estimates that there are roughly 250 000 widows in Iraq. A recent UNDP-commissioned study on widows in Baghdad found that, in one small district of Al-Sadr City (Hai'our), almost every multi-family household had one widow. It is not only widows who find themselves without husbands, but also women whose husbands went abroad to escape the bleak conditions and find ways to support their families. Other men just abandoned their wives and children, being unable to cope with their inability to live up to the social expectations of being the provider. During the 1990s female-headed households, rural areas and poor households had the highest rates of infant and child mortality. While those whose husbands were killed in battle have received a small government pension, those whose husbands were killed by the former regime for political reasons have received no benefits and have been left to fend for themselves.

But even those women who still have husbands alive are struggling: the difficult economic and political situation seems to have taken its toll in terms of relationships between husbands and wives. There are no concrete figures, but it seems that the divorce rate has increased substantially. A caseworker working with Iraqi refugees in London reported that there is a very high divorce rate among couples who have recently come from Iraq. About 25% of Iraqi refugees in the UK are either separated or divorced. A few women stated that their husbands have become more violent and abusive during the past decade. Widespread despair and frustration and the perceived shame of not being able to provide the family with what is needed evokes not only depression but also anger. Women are often at the receiving end of men's frustrations.

Family planning has become a big source of tension and conflict between husbands and wives. Before the Iran–Iraq war all kinds of contraception were available and legal. During the war contraception was made illegal as the government tried to encourage Iraqi women to produce a great number of future citizens to make up for the loss of life during the war. Many incentives were given, such as the extension of paid maternity leave to a year,

of which six months were paid. Baby food and articles were imported and subsidised.

After the Gulf war in 1991, contraceptives were still not available, but women's attitudes towards children had changed because of the material circumstances and the moral climate. There has also been fear of congenital diseases and birth defects, which have been incredibly high since the war. Unlike in previous times, Iraqi women are now reluctant to have many children. Abortion is illegal so many women risk their health and their lives to have illegal abortions in back alleys. The director of an orphanage in Baghdad stated in 1997 that a new phenomenon had emerged in Iraq: women abandoning newborn babies on the street. These babies may be a 'result' of so-called illicit relationships, but, according to the director, they are often left by married women who just can't face not being able to feed their children.

Despite the overall strain on marital relationships, some women state that their relationships with their husbands have improved. Aliya, a housewife in her late thirties, says:

My husband never did anything in the house before the sanctions. He used to work in a factory outside of Baghdad. Ever since he stopped working, he helps me to bake bread and to take care of the children. We get along much better than before because he started to realise that I am working very hard in the house.

While families and marriages are affected in multifarious ways, many Iraqi women can only dream of marriage and having their own families. One of the numerous consequences of the current demographic imbalance between men and women is the difficulty for young women to get married. Polygamy, which had become largely restricted to rural areas or uneducated people, has been on the increase in recent years. There is also a growing trend among young women to get married to Iraqi expatriates, usually much older than they are. This is largely for economic reasons, as most Iraqi men will not be able to provide for a new family. According to some respondents there are numerous cases of women who have not been able to cope with living abroad, and who feel totally alienated from their husbands and the new environment in which they find themselves. Others are being married off to older men within Iraq, often to settle a debt within the family.

A further common phenomenon is what one Iraqi woman called 'marrying below one's class'. Iraq has traditionally been a very class-oriented society where one's family name and background might open or close many doors. Now one can detect greater social mobility and less rigid class barriers. This is partly because of the uneven demographic situation between men and women but it also relates to the radical inversion of class structures mentioned above. The impoverishment of the previously well off middle classes goes side by side with the emergence of a *nouveau riche* class of war and sanctions profiteers.

While the majority of the Iraqi population has been impoverished and has suffered greatly from the policies of its own government as well as war and

sanctions, a small percentage of people have actually managed to profit from the situation. These people are mainly working in the black market economy, engaging, for instance, in smuggling goods across the Jordanian, Syrian, Iranian or Turkish borders. These profiteers used to have close ties to the Iraqi regime. Living in luxury in the midst of widespread suffering and poverty asks for envy and contempt. But it also guaranteed greater marriage prospects and access to social circles previously exclusive to the educated middle and upper middle classes.

Islamisation and increased conservatism

At the same time that marriage has become a relatively difficult undertaking, young women in particular feel pressured by a new ‘cultural’ environment that is marked simultaneously by a decline in moral values like honesty, generosity and sociability and an increased public religiosity and conservatism. Many women I interviewed concurred with one of my female relatives in Baghdad when they spoke sadly about the total inversion of cultural codes and moral values. I will never forget when one of my aunts told me: ‘You know, bridges and houses can easily be rebuilt. It will take time, but it is possible. But what they have really destroyed is our morale, or values.’ She, like many other Iraqi women I talked to sadly stated that honesty was not paying any more. People have become corrupt and greedy. Trust has become a very rare word and envy even exists among closest kin.

Young Iraqi women frequently speak about changes related to socialising, family ties and relations between neighbours and friends. Often a parent or older relative was quoted as stating how things were different from the past, when socialising was a much bigger part of people’s lives. Zeinab, a 15-year-old young woman from Baghdad, spoke about the lack of trust between people. She suggested the following as an explanation for the change in dress code for women and the social restrictions she and her peers experience constantly:

People have changed now because of the increasing economic and various other difficulties of life in Iraq. They have become very afraid of each other. I think because so many people have lost their jobs and businesses, they are having loads of time to speak about other people’s lives, and they often interfere in each other’s affairs. I also think that because so many families are so poor now that they cannot afford buying more than the daily basic food, it becomes so difficult for them to buy nice clothes and nice things and therefore, it is better to wear *hijab*. Most people are somewhat pressured to change their lives in order to protect themselves from the gossip of other people—especially talk about family honour (Al-Ali & Hussein, 2003).

In addition to increased responsibilities and time restrictions related to economic circumstances, teenage girls in particular complain about the increasing social and movement restrictions. While the parents of the predominantly middle-class young females who were interviewed used to

mingle relatively freely when they were the age of their children, today's young Iraqis find it increasingly difficult to meet each other. Schools are often segregated, but even in co-educational schools interaction between boys and girls has become more limited. Girls are extremely worried about their reputation and often avoid situations in which they find themselves alone with a boy. These fears may have been aggravated by the not uncommon occurrence of so-called 'honour killings' during the past decade. Fathers and brothers of women who are known or often only suspected of having 'violated' the accepted codes of behaviour, especially with respect to keeping their virginity before marriage, may kill the women in order to restore the honour of the family. Although this phenomenon is mainly restricted to rural areas and uneducated Iraqis, knowledge of its existence works as a deterrent for many female teenagers.

Others may be less worried about the most dramatic consequences of 'losing one's reputation'. For educated middle-class women from urban areas it is not so much death they fear as diminished marriage prospects.

The most obvious change that has taken place over the past decade or so is the dress code for young women. Aliya (16 years old) is clearly unhappy about the changes:

I do think that our life was much more easy and happy in the past than it is now. My father used to be so open and believe in women's freedom. He would let my mother go out without covering her hair when they visited our relatives in Baghdad. We only had to wear the *abbayah* in Najaf because it is a holy city.¹ Some years ago, he started to change his attitude to many things. And lately he has become so conservative that he thinks covering the hair is not enough, and he demanded that my mother wear *abbayah* everywhere outside the home. He said that I also should keep the cover on my hair when I go to Baghdad. I am now not even allowed to go out with trousers outside our home. My mother and I have to wear long skirts with a long wide shirt covering the hips when we go outside our home (Al-Ali & Hussein, 2003.).

As much as Aliya detests the imposed dress codes and her father's new conservatism, she understands the underlying reasons. She explains:

I know why my father is doing this and I am not angry with him. I discussed this issue with him many times, and I really do not blame him for this change in attitude. I think it is not only my father who is doing this, but that it may be all fathers in Iraq. They are doing the same in order to protect their daughters from the risks of becoming victims of bad rumours. (Ibid)

These days there are numerous reports of unveiled women being harassed on the streets by Islamists who demand that all women wear a headscarf or *abbayah*.

Increased social conservatism and the threat of gossip that would tarnish one's reputation are a common complaint among young Iraqi women. Girls especially suffer in a climate where patriarchal values have been strengthened and where the state has abandoned its previous policies of social inclusion with respect to women.

Economic hardships have pushed a number of women into prostitution—a trend that is widely known and subject to much anguish in a society where a woman's 'honour' is perceived to reflect the family's honour. In the mid-1990s the government condemned prostitution and engaged in violent campaigns to stop it. In a widely reported incident in Iraq in 2000 a group of young men linked to Saddam Hussein's son Uday singled out about 300 female prostitutes and 'pimps' and beheaded them.

The drastic increase in female prostitution does not stop at the Iraqi border, however. Most of the female prostitutes in Jordan, for example, are Iraqi women. The imposition by the government of the *mahram* escort for females leaving Iraq did not succeed in stopping this trend. This law does not allow women under 45 to leave the country unless they are accompanied by a male first of kin. It was enforced after the Jordanian government complained to the Iraqi government about widespread prostitution by Iraqi women in Amman.

Men often feel compelled to protect their female relatives from being the subject of gossip and from losing the family's honour. The increasing social restrictions imposed on young women have to be analysed in the context of wider social changes, particularly with respect to the increase in prostitution, significant numbers of female-headed households, rampant unemployment, the appropriation of Islamic symbols by the Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein, the general religious revival within Iraqi society and the rise of Islamist forces in contemporary Iraq.

Processes related to Islamisation of society and Islamist politics are not only leading to increasing conservatism in gender relations, but are also dominating Iraqi political power struggles in the post-Saddam era. One example of the increased impact of Islamist tendencies was the attempt in December 2003 to scrap secular family laws in favour of *sharia*-based jurisdiction (Islamic Law) by the Iraqi Governing Council under its then chairman Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, head of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. The secular code established in 1959 was once considered the most progressive in the Middle East, making polygamy difficult and guaranteeing women's custody rights in the case of divorce. Although unsuccessful, the attempt to change the law and the discussion around it reveals the current climate and the possible dangers lying ahead. This is particularly important in a context where women's rights and equality are perceived to be part of Western agendas to impose an alien culture and morals. Many Iraqis, who under different circumstances might have been sympathetic to or even supportive of women's rights, view women's roles and laws revolving around women and gender relations as symbolic of their attempt to gain independence and autonomy from the occupying forces.

Many women in Basra, for example, report that they have been forced to wear a headscarf or to restrict their movement in fear of harassment from men. Female students at the University of Basra say that, since the war ended, groups of men began stopping them at the university gates, shouting at them if their heads were not covered. These reports are symptomatic of wider conservative trends and various ways in which women are being used in

Iraq—as in many other societies—to demarcate boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Islamicisation here fulfils two objectives: a break with the previous secular regime of Saddam Hussein and resistance to the occupying forces.

Women’s political participation

Although Iraqi women have a history of some political participation and activism before Saddam Hussein came to power, their autonomous political participation came to an end in the 1970s. Women were encouraged to join the Baath party and to run for the rubber-stamp parliament. Scores of Iraqi women contested elections in 1980 and 16 won seats in the 250 member Council. In the second Baathist parliamentary elections in 1985, women won 33 Council seats (13%). But even this sponsored participation was reduced towards the end of Saddam’s regime, as shown by the reduction in successful women candidates to 8% of members elected to the parliament in 2003.

The major vehicle for women’s participation was the General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW) founded in 1969. It had branches all over Iraq and it is estimated that about one million Iraqi women were members. Despite the fact that the Federation was a branch of the ruling party and lacked political independence, the government’s initial policies of social inclusion and mobilisation of human power did facilitate a climate in which the Federation could play an implementation role in promoting women’s education, labour force participation and health, as well as providing a presence in public life. The role of GFIW changed drastically in the 1990s when the state abandoned its policies of social inclusion and began to promote women’s traditional roles. The GFIW then concentrated on humanitarian aid and the provision of health care.

At the same time as Iraqi women were losing state support in terms of socioeconomic rights, semi-autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan allowed women there to establish civil society associations and become involved in party politics. While only two of the 20 ministers in the Kurdistan Regional Government were women in 2003, women gained employment in the civil service. But it is also the case in the Kurdish areas that women’s initiatives and political participation have been opposed by conservative male political actors. Women activists campaigning against widespread honour killings in the north have been subject to harassment and a newly established women’s shelter for victims of domestic violence had to close down because of political opposition.

Since April 2003 women’s organisations and initiatives have been mushrooming all over Iraq. Most of these organisations, like the National Council of Women (NWC), the Iraqi Women’s Higher Council (IWHC), the Iraqi Independent Women’s Group or the Society for Iraqi Women for the Future, for example, have been founded either by members of the Iraqi National Council (IGC) or by prominent professional women with close ties to political parties. While mainly founded and represented by elite women, some of the organisations have a broad membership and have branches throughout the country. Their activities revolve around humanitarian and

practical projects, such as income generation, legal advice, free health care and counselling, etc, as well as political advocacy. The two main issues that have mobilised women of mainly educated middle-class background throughout Iraq are 1) the attempt to replace the relatively progressive personal status law governing marriage, divorce and child custody with a more conservative law (Article 137); and 2) the issue of a women's quota for political representation. Although women were unsuccessful in obtaining a 40% quota in the transitional constitution, they managed to negotiate a 25% quota.

However, the actual long-term status of the transitional constitution and the decision of the Iraqi Governing Council, as well as of the Coalition Provisional Authority remain to be seen. In recent months women's organisations have been seriously impeded by the security situation, which often stop women from leaving their houses altogether. This has also prevented many women from running for elections in January 2005.

Lack of security

The fact that only a relatively small number of women have expressed their political dissent and wishes, is not only the result of the lack of democratic political culture within Iraq. It is also because the biggest problem for women in Iraq today is the lack of security. Aside from the more recent threat of militant resistance and suicide bombings, of which Iraqis have been the main victims so far, women suffer from gender-specific threats and violence. 'This violence is still a daily occurrence, especially on the streets of Baghdad, without attracting the least attention of the soldiers', Yanar Mohammed, Director of the Baghdad-based Organisation for Women's Freedom, told the press some time ago.

A Human Rights Watch Report published in November 2003 bears witness to numerous reports of sexual violence and abduction of women and girls (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Medical practitioners, victims, witnesses and law enforcement authorities have documented some of these crimes. However, many cases go unreported and uninvestigated. Some women and girls fear that reporting sexual violence may provoke honour killings and social stigmatisation. For others the obstacles of filing and pursuing a police complaint or obtaining a forensic examination that would provide legal proof of sexual violence prevent them from receiving medical attention and pursuing justice. Whatever the reason, both documented and rumoured stories of sexual violence and abduction are contributing to a palpable climate of fear:

'Women and girls today in Baghdad are scared, and many are not going to schools or jobs or looking for work', said Hanny Megally, executive director of the Middle East and North Africa division of Human Rights Watch. 'If Iraqi women are to participate in post-war society, their physical security needs to be an urgent priority' (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

According to Human Rights Watch (2003: Summary), many of the problems of addressing sexual violence and abduction against women and girls 'derive from the US-led coalition forces and civilian administration's failure to provide public security in Baghdad. The public security vacuum in

Baghdad has heightened the vulnerability of women and girls to sexual violence and abduction'. This resonates with the Organisation for Women's Freedom in Iraq, which chided coalition forces for their failure to protect women in post-war Iraq, asserting that over 400 had been raped since the end of the war.

Since the police force is considerably smaller now and relatively poorly managed, there is limited police street presence. This has become worse during recent months as the newly established Iraqi police have been frequently targeted by militant resistance. The insecurity plaguing Baghdad and other Iraqi cities has a distinct and debilitating impact on the daily lives of women and girls, preventing them from participating in public life, in reconstruction processes, in the labour force and in shaping the political future of Iraq.

Conclusion

The rather bleak picture I have sketched out only touches upon some aspects of the numerous ways war, sanctions and occupation have affected women and gender relations in contemporary Iraq. I have tried to point to the social and cultural phenomena that have emerged during recent years and which have to be viewed as mainly triggered by the sanctions regime and the government of Saddam Hussein. It is too early to be able to grasp fully the complex and multifarious ways the recent ongoing war and occupation is affecting daily lives as well as wider gender ideologies.

What can be said about the current situation, however, is that, so far, women have been pushed even more into the background and back into their homes. They are suffering both in terms of a worsening humanitarian situation and an ongoing lack of security on the streets. Aside from the fact that basic needs (including water, electricity, medical care, and food) as well security are not addressed adequately, a more long-term issue is the lack of women's representation in the various political parties and emerging political constituencies. It remains to be seen whether the women's quota of 25% will actually be implemented or whether a push for women's political participation during the period of occupation might eventually backfire.

What needs to be emphasised is that involving women in the reconstruction of Iraq will not simply be a matter of 'just add women and stir'. What is missing is a gender perspective in line with UN Resolution 1325 passed in October 2000, which acknowledges the importance of the inclusion of women and mainstreaming gender into all aspects of post-conflict resolution and peace operations. Research and political experiences within other conflict areas and post-war situations, such as Northern Ireland, Bosnia Herzegovina, Cyprus and Israel/Palestine, demonstrates that women are often more able to bridge ethnic, religious and political divides and play a significant role in peace making. To my mind any future peace can only be achieved by confronting and working through Iraq's past with the help of a truth and reconciliation committee that would be sensitive to all kinds of human rights abuses, including gender violence.

The mainstreaming of gender would have to involve the appointment of women to interim governments, and to all ministries and committees dealing with systems of local and national governance. Women would also have to be present and active in the judiciary, policing, human rights monitoring, the allocation of funds, free media development, and all economic processes. There should be encouragement to create independent women's groups, NGOs and community based organisations.

Comprising both the majority of the population as well as an increasingly vulnerable and marginalised group, it is of ultimate importance to support women's political participation. However, as women are perceived to be symbols and markers of cultural boundaries and 'authenticity', any insensitive promotion of women's rights and women's equalities as part and parcel of 'liberation' will strongly backfire in the current context of occupation, as well as in its aftermath. Western feminism is negatively identified with the imposition of Western values and the eradication of indigenous culture and morals not only in Iraq, but in most other countries in the region and the Muslim world. Any women's rights initiatives and organisations promoted by the occupying forces or the Iraqi Interim Government will not only be short-lived, but will also negatively affect locally initiated women's organisations and gender roles and ideologies more generally. Similarly, Iraqi women's organisations and activists based abroad lack legitimacy and credibility among the majority of the population and should not be used either to represent or to short-cut locally based initiatives.

At the same time it is important to point out that Iraq, like other countries in the region and the Muslim world, has a history of indigenous women's rights struggle and women's movements. There are many, mainly educated middle class women, who are already involved in humanitarian assistance as well as in political lobbying and advocacy related to social justice with respect to women and gender relations. It would be detrimental for Iraqi women if they were not given special support in the process of reconstruction and political transition.

One way to sensitively support women is to change the language from a feminist rights approach to one emphasising education, training and participation in reconstruction, thereby appealing to a modernist–developmental discourse. The other major strategy is to link women with organisations, experts and initiatives in other countries in the region or in the Muslim world. Based on research I carried out among women's organisations in Egypt, for example, I found that women felt much more empowered by the exchange of experiences and training with non-Western women activists.

The current situation in Iraq leaves doubt about the intentions of the USA in terms of good governance, its commitment to human rights and democracy building. Especially where women and gender relations are concerned, I personally do not expect too much from the occupying forces, considering Bush's record of conservative policies towards women in the USA. The case of Afghanistan is a sad example of the US government paying lip service to women's rights but not actually seeing it through in the

aftermath of the war. In fact, Afghanistan is an example of how not to do it, as the mere appointment of a women's minister without resources (who subsequently had to resign) was a cynical token towards a human and women's rights agenda.

Let me finish this article on a slightly brighter note. It is very important to say that Iraqi women are not just passive victims. And here I am not talking about those women who were implicated in the previous regime or are now made token women in the current political structures. I am talking about ordinary women of various social backgrounds. Contrary to common media representations of oppressed Arab women, in many ways Iraqi women have been more resourceful and adaptable to the changing situation than Iraqi men. Small informal business schemes, such as food catering, mushroomed during the period of economic sanctions. Skills in crafts and the recycling of clothes and other materials have demonstrated an incredible creativity. In the post-Saddam period women activists have defied simple ethnic, religious and political party divisions and have pulled together to lobby around several issues. Any analysis of women and gender relations in Iraq needs to pay tribute to the dignity, humanity and courage of women despite ongoing hardship and struggle.

Note

1 *Abbayah* is the traditional black garment worn by Iraqi women. Najaf, a holy city south of Baghdad, is the location of the main Shi'a cemetery in Iraq.

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