

Iraq's women under pressure

by Nadge Al-Ali

For years the lives of Iraqi women have been framed by state oppression, economic sanctions and three wars. US-led calls for liberation may in the long term serve to further oppress them.

There is a pervasive myth that Iraqi society is just another Muslim society and similar to Afghanistan. Saddam Hussein was a cruel authoritarian dictator but his largely secular regime opened spaces for women to become educated and enter the workplace – especially when labour was in short supply during the economic boom in the 1970s and during the long Iraqi-Iranian war (1980-88). Today, four years after the US invasion, we see Iraqi women not being able to leave their homes, being very restricted in their movement and having to observe certain dress codes, and

Iraqi girls not being able to go to school. The very large number of Iraqi women who are educated are particularly being targeted. Under the auspices of the American and British forces we see women now suffering from a situation very similar to the one that women suffered in Afghanistan during the Taliban.

There are two predominant media images of Iraqi women. One is the Iraqi woman as heroine, symbol of the new Iraq, a Member of Parliament fighting for her rights. The dominant image, however, is the

poor oppressed women, veiled from head to toe. Now, of course, reality is more complex and nuanced. It should be noted that those women who are part now of the political process and who live in the Green Zone are very remote from the rest of Iraqi society. A quarter of parliamentary places are reserved for women but most of those in parliament are not the least interested in women's rights. They are the sisters, daughters and wives of conservative male political leaders. There are only five or six female parliamentarians who are seriously interested in politics and gender equality issues.

Many Iraqi women activists in the US have been working closely with the US government. Women for a Free Iraq, which then formed the

Women's Alliance for a Democratic Iraq, represented an important support for US war efforts, and subsequently received US grants to build organisations on the ground. Since April 2003, women's organisations and initiatives have been mushrooming all over Iraq. Many organisations – such as the National Council of Women (NWC), the Iraqi Women's Higher Council (IWHC), the Iraqi Independent Women's Group and the Society for Iraqi Women for the Future – have been founded by prominent professional women with close ties to political parties. Many were initiated by returnees, Iraqi women activists who were part of the diaspora before 2003. While mainly founded and represented by elite women, some have broad memberships and branches throughout the country. Their activities revolve around humanitarian and practical projects, such as income generation, legal advice, free health care and counselling, as well as political advocacy. There has also been a flourishing of locally based women's initiatives and groups, revolving mainly around practical needs related to the escalating humanitarian crisis, as well as the need for education and training. Many of the initiatives fill gaps in state health and welfare provision. The key issues that have mobilised women politically, mainly from educated middle-class backgrounds, are the attempt to replace the relatively progressive personal status law governing marriage, divorce and child custody with a more conservative law and the debate over the Iraqi constitution, mainly with respect to the role of Islam and personal status laws.

There are clear tensions between women returning from the diaspora – especially those with US backing – and those who stayed put under Saddam's rule. As one told me: "I participated in a workshop on the constitution. There was a big problem: most of the women who participated are women who have lived outside for 40 years. I was surprised to hear what they were saying. They said women had no rights before. They have not been to school, nor to university. I told them: "Look, all the women here are over 35 years old. We all have college degrees. Our education was free. I was in the college of pharmacy.

In that college, women were in the majority." They were saying all the bad things about Saddam. I said: "We have to tell the truth. Not everything was bad." "Some of the assertions made to the US media by Iraqi women's organisations in support of the invasion – including the claim that women were denied access to tertiary education – are patently absurd.

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It is unfortunate that, except for a relatively small number of secular activists inside Iraq, many Iraqi women construct their differences with the mainly secular diaspora activists as a contestation between 'authentic' culture and values on the one side and the imposition of foreign values and political agendas on the other. The trend to associate feminism and women's rights with western agendas is, of course, not unique to Iraq. However, the polarisation and construction of difference is particularly detrimental in the context of war and occupation.

I follow closely the work of the network Women Living Under Muslim Law¹. Iraqi women would benefit greatly from an exchange of experience with women in places such as Bosnia who have gone through a comparable situation. Unfortunately donors show little interest in enabling them to get together. Iraqi women are being brought to London or to Washington to receive training by US or British 'gender specialists' yet there are no governments or NGOs willing to facilitate encounters for women who have actually already undergone very similar traumatic experiences.

Post-2003 experience in Iraq shows the shortcomings of UN Resolution 1325², the attempt to mainstream gender into post-conflict resolution and reconstruction. If implemented at all, UNSCR 1325 frequently means simply appointing a few women to governments and ministries. In Iraq, and elsewhere, it should involve the appointment of women to interim governments, ministries

and committees dealing with all aspects of local and national governance – the judiciary, policing, human rights, budget allocation, defence of a free media. It should also aim to encourage independent women's groups, NGOs and community-based organisations.

It is all too easy in post-conflict Islamic societies to depict the stress on UNSCR 1325 as part of a 'Western plot' to destroy traditional culture and values. This is particularly the case in the context of US-led military intervention, such as in Iraq. Those who might otherwise be sympathetic to issues pertaining to women's rights and women's equality may well express strong opposition to women's inclusion in post-conflict reconstruction when this is declared to be one of the main aims of the occupying powers. Ironically, the louder political leaders in the West shout about women's rights while Iraq is occupied, the bigger the backlash against women's rights might be in the long run. Widely circulated images of the female soldier, Pvt Lynndie England, sexually abusing Iraqi male prisoners at Abu Ghraib can only worsen this backlash, as Iraqis ask themselves: "Is this what women's rights means?"

Vital role of diaspora women

Now that so many educated people have left – to join the progressive Iraqis already in exile as a result of Saddam – the role of women in the diaspora is of enormous importance for the future of the country. Since 2003, Iraqi diaspora women have been actively involved in debates about the political future of Iraq, the role of the US and women's place in the national fabric. My research amongst Iraqi women activists in the UK, the US and Jordan has looked at the different levels of political spaces and resources available within these three sites.

Not surprisingly, Iraqi women in Jordan are most limited in terms of their transnational activism because of the restrictive political spaces for civil society and the difficult economic, legal and political conditions facing refugees within Jordan. Yet, more astonishing to me have been the limitations and restrictions circumscribing the

activism of Iraqi women residing in the US in comparison with those based in the UK. Aside from the scarcity of independent women's organisations in the US – independent both from the US government and from Iraqi political parties – what has struck me most so far is the relatively narrow political spectrum of Iraqi activism within the US in contrast to the far ranging spectrum both in terms of political views and forms of mobilisation and activism found in the UK. While ethnic and religious divisions exist in both the US and Britain, the large presence of secular political parties in Britain, such as the Iraqi Communist Party and Iraqi National Accord, have contributed to the building of more non-sectarian alliances and organisations. Moreover, the post-September 11 climate in the USA has limited the political spaces and resources available for those not in agreement with US Middle East policy. Several Iraqi women interviewed in the US mentioned their fear of expressing dissent from US policy, even more so following the stringent Patriot Act of 2001. By contrast, a thriving civil society of Arab dissidents and intellectuals as well as a strong anti-

war/peace movement and a diverse women's movement have constituted the backdrop against which Iraqi women's organisations and individual activists have flourished in Britain – where there are up to 300,000 Iraqis.

The threat of Islamist militias now goes beyond dress codes and calls for gender segregation at university. Despite, indeed partly because of, the US and British rhetoric about liberation and rights, women have been pushed into the background and into their homes. Women with a public profile (doctors, academics, lawyers, NGO activists, politicians) are threatened and targeted for assassination. There are also criminal gangs who worsen the climate of fear by kidnapping women for ransom, sexual abuse or sale into prostitution outside Iraq.

It is no surprise that many of the women I interviewed remember the past nostalgically.

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1. www.wluml.org/english/index.shtml

2. See article by Jackie Kirk and Suzanne Taylor, FMR27 www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR27/06.pdf