Promotion change requires an understanding of the role of violence against women in a particular context – its origins, how it operates, the myths associated with it, and the mechanisms and attitudes that perpetrate it. It is important to explore how the victims themselves perceive this violence, and the consequences – if any – for the perpetrator. This evidence base has proved to be the most effective ‘kick start’ for UNFPA programmes aiming to combat the tide of GBV against Iraqi women.

In this regard, UNFPA will work with partners in Syria, Jordan and hopefully inside Iraq to collect qualitative and quantitative data on sexual and gender-based violence to help formulate appropriate responses and programmes to address this violation of basic human rights.

Henia Dakkak (dakkak@unfpa.org) is a Technical Specialist with UNFPA’s Humanitarian Response Unit.

2. www.amnestyusa.org/Womens_Human_Rights
3. www.madre.org/articles/me/iraqreport.htm

Iraq’s women under pressure

by Nadje 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 often left more vulnerable and emotionally traumatised. Some find themselves pregnant or succumb to a sexually transmitted infection, while their families have made only a modest financial gain.

How many more women and girls need to be killed, trafficked and raped before the Iraqi authorities and the international community take note?

A new inter-agency initiative, ‘UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict’, aims to support country-led initiatives that mitigate gender-based violence. UN Action brings together DPKO, OCHA, OHCHR, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIFEM, WFP and WHO to advocate at a global level for more resources to address sexual violence and to provide technical and strategic support to joint efforts at a country level. In the spirit of this cooperation, UNHCR and UNFPA are developing a programme to work with the Syrian Red Crescent and Ministry of Health to address sexual violence against Iraqi women and girls residing in Syria. It is to be hoped UN Action can become active inside Iraq.

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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.

the role of women in the diaspora is of enormous importance for the future of the country

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 1325, 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
Iraq’s children pay the price of war

by Leila Billing

Iraq’s ruinous wars, crippling sanctions and ongoing violence have had a devastating effect on children. Shootings and bombings have killed, injured and orphaned thousands but the biggest killer is illness transmitted through unclean water and exacerbated by under-nutrition.

In a statement made on the eve of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Olara Otimunnu, the then Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, stressed that “the children of Iraq are innocent, and all parties must make their protection an absolute priority ... we must now begin to put in place plans to ensure that the well-being, rehabilitation and development of the children of Iraq will constitute a central aspect of any programmes for post-conflict recovery and reconstruction.”

This has not happened. One in eight Iraqi children dies before their fifth birthday. Nine per cent are acutely malnourished – double the number prior to 2003. Hundreds of schools have been attacked and teachers killed. Unexploded ordinance and mines litter the country. Children are injured on dumps looking for metal to sell to help support their families. Unexploded ordinance and mines litter the country. Children are injured on dumps looking for metal to sell to help support their families. Thousands of homeless children survive by begging, stealing or scavenging in garbage for food. There has been a marked increase in rates of childhood leukaemia as a result of exposure to radiation from cluster bombs, the high use of chemicals in agriculture and water contamination.

The NGO War Child recently interviewed some 400 children in southern Iraq. Research also involved talking to the children’s families, to local community members and to those working with vulnerable and