

The Forgotten Story: Women and Gender Relations 10 Years After

Nadje Al-Ali
SOAS, University of London

Introduction

The United States argued that its invasion of Iraq would lead to greater human rights, democratization, and the liberation of Iraqi women. However, my own ongoing research in Iraq, anecdotal evidence by Iraqi women's rights activists as well as published reports by the UN and other international organizations suggest otherwise.

Undeniably, the biggest challenge facing Iraqi women in 2013 is the lack of security coupled with the lack of rule of law, both contributing to increasing and wide-ranging forms of gender-based violence. Rampant domestic violence, verbal and physical intimidation, sexual harassment, rape, forced marriage (as well as increases in *mu'tah* or so-called pleasure marriages), trafficking, forced prostitution, female genital mutilation, and honour-based crimes, including killings, have been very much part of the post-invasion experience of Iraqi women.¹ According to a comprehensive report published in 2011 by the Heartland Alliance for Human Needs and Human Rights, gender-based violence is institutionalized: violence against women is not sufficiently criminalized and victims face harsh laws and practices that treat victims as criminals. Any protective laws are rarely implemented as the police and judges treat gender-based crimes leniently and allow perpetrators to act with impunity². No doubt, gender-based violence existed before 2003. But the failure to protect women and establish proper awareness mechanisms and procedures over the last 10 years is one of the major failures and responsibilities of the international community, particularly the US and the UK, alongside the main Iraqi political actors, parties and governments.

The second major challenge relates to the ongoing humanitarian crisis and poor infrastructure that impact the majority of Iraqi women's everyday lives. The feminization of poverty is particularly apparent with vulnerable female heads of households, the vast majority being widows, but also divorcees, wives of detainees or men who have gone missing.³ Food insecurity, the lack of adequate housing, limited access to electricity, clean water and proper sanitation as well as inadequate and limited health care facilities are also daily challenges for the most vulnerable women as well as internally displaced women and men.⁴ Illiteracy rates for girls and women are high, education tends to be minimal and labour force participation is very low,⁵ this in contrast to higher literacy and employment rates in earlier decades, particularly before the sanctions regime was introduced in 1991.⁶ Around 18% of Iraq's population above 9 years old is illiterate and illiteracy rates among women (25%) are over double those among men (11%). Only 17% of women participate in the labour force of which 23%, are unemployed.⁷ Social attitudes and norms have shifted in many regions and

neighborhoods, negatively impacting on women's employment, and therefore putting them at greater risk of poverty.⁸ It is beyond the scope of this article to document in any detail either the prevalence of gender-based violence or the harsh living conditions facing the majority of Iraqi women today. In the remainder of this article, I will discuss another area where women have not fared well enough, despite the many promises and initial proclamations of success.⁹

Political participation

Ten years after the invasion, Iraqi women have very limited political influence and power to contribute to decision-making. Partly, this is a direct consequence of the re-emergence of political authoritarianism under Prime Minister Al-Maliki: all political actors experience systematic side-lining of political opposition, a lack of rule of law and widespread political violence. However, women are particularly marginalized in a context where they are perceived to be incapable to lead and strategize, where social attitudes have shifted towards more conservative gender norms, and where armed violence, political intimidation, attacks on political opponents as well as rampant corruption are shaping politics.

While there were 6 female-headed ministries from 2005-2006, no woman was appointed to a senior post in the new 44-member cabinet after the 2010 elections. Only two ministries of state were offered to women, one without portfolio lost her position as part of Prime Minister Al-Maliki's downsizing, leaving only one female Minister: Ibtihal Al-Zaidi, who was appointed Minister of State for Women's Affairs. She herself stated that her Ministry: "has no jurisdiction over the directorate of women's welfare or increasing funds allocated to widows." In fact, she argued "the Ministry is no more than an executive-consultation bureau with a limited budget and no jurisdiction on implementing resolutions or activities". Her predecessor, Nawal al-Samaraie, resigned due to lack of jurisdiction and insufficient budget.¹⁰

Women have not been involved in many of the important negotiations in recent years, most recently to form a government coalition after the elections in 2010. Many women who made it into the Council of Representatives have been there to meet constitutional requirements, i.e. the stipulated quota of 25% which translated into 82 women out of 325 at the last elections. Most of the women parliamentarians are often being the wives, sisters or daughters of male politicians eager to fill the required seats with women without having to engage with wider issues of gender equality and women's rights. Indeed, many Iraqi women's rights activists I spoke to over the last years bemoan the phenomenon of female parliamentarians being often more interested in expressing partisan views – frequently Islamist and sectarian – instead of furthering the interests of Iraqi women. It is important to stress that the situation in the Kurdistan Regional Government area is slightly different for female parliamentarians and politicians, given that they have been allowed to play a more active role in shaping legislation and policy. Many Kurdish women's rights activists, however, also complained to me about tokenism and lack of proper consultation, in addition to the small number of women in decision-making positions.¹¹

Despite the systematic marginalization and side-lining of Iraqi women in the official political institutions and processes, women have not merely stood by but have mobilized at the level of formal civil society organizations, social and political movements as well as more informal community and interest groups. Women activists have been at the forefront of a growing political movement for democracy and human rights that, in line with wider political movements and processes in the region, asking for greater transparency and an end to corruption and political authoritarianism. Many Iraqi women's rights activists realize that their struggle for greater gender equality and social justice cannot be separated from the struggle against an emerging new dictatorship, the re-militarization of society, corruption and nepotism.

Women have participated in the protests on Baghdad's Tahrir Square and in the Kurdish region, particularly in Sulimaniya. In June of 2011, a group of women demonstrating for peace and democracy were physically attacked and some sexually abused on Tahrir Square. For many months, groups of students and activists had been gathering in that square, demanding government reforms, jobs, more electricity and clean water. Protesters were brutally beaten by the police, arrested, some disappeared, and some organizers were killed, in what many activists allege are targeted assassinations ordered by Prime Minister Maliki. At a human rights conference attended by international organizations in June 2011, one of the leading women's rights activists, Hanaa Edwar, stormed in with a placard to protest against the disappearance of four activists who had been demonstrating publicly against the government. She was also challenging Maliki's allegation that some Iraqi human rights organizations were fronts for terrorists.¹²

More specific mobilization around women's rights has mushroomed over the past decade, despite the many challenges and threats to women's rights activists. Women-led NGOs as well as more informal community associations have been campaigning about women's legal rights, especially with reference to the unresolved dispute over the personal status code (Article 41) - the set of laws governing marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance - as well as criminal laws that do not offer sufficient protection against gender-based violence, particularly "honour-based crimes". Women's rights activists have also been mobilizing against domestic violence, trafficking, and honour-based crimes, providing shelters and advice to victims. Given the humanitarian situation, most organizations are also involved in welfare and charity work, providing income-generating activities as well as training for women. Very few activists, however, make a link between increased privatization and neo-liberal economic policies on the one hand, and the increase in women's unemployment and the feminization of poverty on the other hand.

Conclusion

I was privileged to participate in a meeting to launch Iraq's first ever CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women)

shadow report¹³ with women's rights activists from across Iraq, initiated by the Women Empowerment Organization (Erbil), Al-Amal and the Baghdad Women's organisation, all members of the Iraqi Women's Network consisting of over 80 organisations throughout Iraq. After long and often heated discussions about the causes and solutions to multiple problems and rights violations that need to be addressed in such a historical report, consensus emerged that a report on the status of women's rights in Iraq today would have to be linked with UN Security Council Resolution 1325. This resolution calls for a gender perspective in the context of post-conflict reconstruction and political transition, which, according to all participants of the workshop, and I would argue, all Iraqi women's rights activists, has not been sufficiently considered by any of the main political actors concerned, whether international or Iraqi. Nor has it been translated into necessary legislation, institutions, mechanism or procedures. While the international community, with the US and the UK at the forefront, are eager to move on from Iraq and pursue other now more pressing "business" in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the legacy of the failure to implement international law will have long lasting consequences for the women of Iraq.

This paper provides a wide-reaching overview of human rights issues Iraqi women have faced over the past ten years, focusing on political exclusion, and touching as well on gender violence and poverty. It includes the important caveat that while women have suffered during these years, they have not responded passively to these problems.

Endnotes

¹ Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights, *Institutionalized Violence Against Women and Girls in Iraq*, 2011, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/49420024/Institutionalized-violence-Against-Women-and-Girls-in-Iraq>; Basma AlKhateeb, *Persistent gender-based violence an obstacle to development and peace*, Social Watch Report 2010, http://www.socialwatch.org/sites/default/files/iraq2010_eng.pdf; IWPR, *Temporary Marriages Stir Iraqi Sensitivities*, 23 September 2010, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4c9c63e42.html>; HRW, *At a Crossroads*, February 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/iraq0211W.pdf>. UNHCR, March 2012; IAU, *Violence Against Women in Iraq Factsheet*, November 2010, http://www.iauiraq.org/documents/1149/Violence%20against%20women%20Factsheet_Final.pdf.

² Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights, *Institutionalized Violence Against Women and Girls in Iraq*, 2011, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/49420024/Institutionalized-violence-Against-Women-and-Girls-in-Iraq>

³ ICRC, *Households Headed by Women in Iraq: A Case for Action*, August 2011, pp. 1, 3, <http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/2011/iraq-women-survey-2011-08-eng.pdf>. See also HRW, *At a Crossroads*, February 2011, p. 22, <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/iraq0211W.pdf>.

⁴ Mercy Corps, 'Fallen off the Agenda? More and Better Aid Needed for Iraq recovery', Policy Brief, July 2010.

-
- ⁵ Ibid.; 2006/7 Iraq Family Health Survey, http://www.emro.who.int/iraq/pdf/ifhs_report_en.pdf; Ministry of Youth and Sport/COSIT/KRSO/UNFPA, *Iraq National Youth and Adolescents Survey 2009*, Summary Report, 2009, http://cosit.gov.iq/english/pdf/2010/youth_nys.pdf.
- ⁶ Al-Ali, Nadjie (2007) *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present*. London & New York: Zed Books.
- ⁷ The United Nations Interagency Information and Analysis Unit in Iraq (2009) *Iraq Labour Force Analysis 2003-2008*. http://www.iauiraq.org/reports/Iraq_Labour_Force_Analysis.pdf
- ⁸ Mercy Corps, 'Fallen off the Agenda? More and Better Aid Needed for Iraq recovery', *Policy Brief*, July 2010.
- ⁹<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/george-bush-the-day-safia-taleb-alsuhail-was-finally-able-to-vote-6153204.html>; <http://merln.ndu.edu/merln/pfiraq/archive/wh/20031117-4.pdf>; <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2005/feb/3/20050203-125019-2769r/?page=all>; <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2005/feb/3/20050203-125019-2769r/?page=all>;
- ¹⁰ NCCI, *Iraq's Female Face*, Op-Ed 15 November 2011, http://www4.ncciraq.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=31&lang=en; Reuters, *Nuri al-Maliki, Iraq Prime Minister, Trims Seize Of Cabinet*, 30 July 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/30/nuri-al-maliki-iraq-prime_n_914034.html; Michael S. Schmidt and Yasir Ghazi, *Iraqi Women Feel Shunted Despite Election Quota*, *New York Times*, 12 March 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/world/middleeast/13baghdad.html>;
- ¹¹ Al-Ali, Nadjie and Pratt, Nicola (2011) 'Between Nationalism and Women's Rights: the Kurdish Women's Movement in Iraq.' *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 4 (3). pp. 339-355.
- ¹²http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/06/06/has_the_iraq_experiment_failed; <http://iraqidinarnews.net/blog/2011/06/06/human-rights-group-fight-back-after-maliki-terror-jibe/>; <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/10/06/world/meast/iraqi-women>
- ¹³ Al-Ali, Nadjie; Suzan Aref & Martin Beck (2012) "CEDAW Shadow Reports: Process, Method, and Content" Workshop Report (KAS Amman, WEO)http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_31901-1522-2-30.pdf?120829170520