

Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt

RESEARCHING WOMEN IN POST-INVASION IRAQ: NEGOTIATING 'TRUTHS' AND DECONSTRUCTING DOMINANT DISCOURSES

Abstract

Introduction

THIS PAPER REPRESENTS AN ATTEMPT and an opportunity to reflect on the research that we have been conducting on 'the role of women and gender in the political transition in Iraq.'¹ Our reasons for writing this paper stem from the theoretical and practical issues that have arisen in the course of our research and the need for us to negotiate these challenges together. This has, necessarily, led us to 'intellectualize' and articulate these issues in ways that would not have been as obvious if each one of us was working alone.

The practical issues that have arisen are perhaps self-evident. Iraq is a country that, in large part, is experiencing extreme violence. It is neither feasible nor safe for any person, particularly one who is unfamiliar with the country, to attempt to conduct research there at the moment. However, the issue of conducting research inside Iraq is not only one of 'how to dodge the bullets,' but is also shaped by the way in which our 'subject positions' influence us as researchers and influence the attitudes of those whom we interview for this research.

As feminists, we recognize the impact of dominant discourses—in academic and policy-making circles—about Iraq and about women in Iraq as reflections of existing power structures. These power structures operate at different levels and reflect relations between men and women, different ethnic, religious and tribal groups, social classes, and the Iraqi government and the occupying forces. In this paper, we examine several of these dominant discourses which neglect the social, cultural and economic complexity of Iraq, thereby ignoring, generalizing, essentializing or instrumentalizing women. If we are to avoid creating

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knowledge that reproduces these power structures, then we must find alternative ways of talking about women in Iraq. Given the destruction and violence provoked by current dominant discourses and practices, including neo-colonialism, Islamism and sectarianism, it is not only methodologically important, but also politically crucial, that we challenge them.

The paper begins by examining our respective positionalities vis-à-vis our ongoing research. Next, we consider the conceptualization of Iraqi women in dominant discourses and the implications of this with regard to external interventions, internal power dynamics as well as our actual research. We pay particular attention to diaspora political mobilization, debates about women's rights, instrumentalization of women's issues, the lack of gender perspective in reconstruction and state-building processes, and different forms of, and perspectives on, violence. Finally, we discuss the tendency to compare the situation of Iraqi women before and after the fall of the Ba'th regime.

Positionality

As feminists, our research is grounded in a feminist approach to social science. Our 'subject positions' affect more than our ability to enter Iraq. They also affect our relationships with those we interview for this research, as well as the audience for our research. In this way, our subject positions affect how our research produces knowledge and how this is received.

In feminist and other critical social science methodologies, the researcher is never an objective observer. Rather, one's relationship to the research is also a factor shaping that research—the questions asked, the nature of interactions with interviewees and even the interpretation of data. Consequently, the gender, class, religion, sexuality, political orientation, nationality, ethnicity, age and geographical location of the researcher, among other factors, may have an impact upon the research process. These identities interact to produce the positionality of the researcher. However, not all aspects of the researcher's identity are necessarily influential within the research process. Moreover, the researcher's positionality is not fixed but shaped by the subject of the research, the wider environment in which the researcher operates and also the multiple interactions between researcher, interviewees and audience. In the case of this research, one factor that has particularly shaped each of our (differential) positionalities is that of perceived belonging to a national community, amplified by perceived cultural/religious belonging.

Nicola's positionality

I feel that many interviewees and audiences of this research see me as white, British, non-Muslim and non-Arab, and ascribe certain authority to my research on that basis. I am perceived as 'other' for some because of my assumed cultural/religious belonging. My 'outsider' status brings advantages and disadvantages. As noted by others, people may tell a stranger information that they would not tell friends or family.² In the context of this research, where all interview respondents are aware of the political stakes involved in what they say, the outsider status may be equated with the status of 'neutral' observer. In addition, people often perceive me in terms of common assumptions about academics—as engaged in a positivist enterprise of an 'independent' and 'objective' seeker of the 'truth.' Consequently, some respondents may see it as politically important to grant me access in order that I may record their versions of the truth, thereby ensuring that they play a role in producing knowledge about Iraq.

However, I may be discredited because of my perceived 'outsider' status. Because I am not Iraqi, nor even Arab nor Muslim, some imply that I have no authority to speak about women in Iraq. I am often told, "you should talk to Iraqi women," implicitly creating a dichotomy between insider/outsider, Iraqi/non-Iraqi, and what this entails with regard to my relationship to the 'truth,' whose source is perceived to be the indigenous informers of my research. Whilst I believe that it is essential to speak to a variety of people, including women from Iraq, in order for their voices to be heard, I maintain that there is no single truth about what is happening. Efforts to discredit my interpretations of the multiplicity of 'truths' that inform my research represent attempts to construct a version of the truth in line with certain political interests. For example, when US officials, say "you should talk to Iraqi women," they may be attempting to discredit my authority as a researcher and my interpretation of events in order to promote their own version of the 'truth.'

This represents a type of essentialism that I find troubling. I possess several identities—anti-militarist feminist, university academic, cosmopolitan, British/Birmingham-born, woman. All of these are part of my identity and, consequently, have an impact upon my research to different degrees. However, I feel that my nationality is perhaps one of the least important features of my identity—especially as I find myself in opposition to my government's foreign policy. Yet, my nationality is the feature of my identity that is often implicitly foregrounded by my interviewees. Seeing myself as someone who seeks to transgress borders, I am concerned that other people attempt to locate me firmly within certain borders and, moreover, to ascribe certain authority to me as a result of that position.

Nadje's positionality

Over the past few years, I have 'become Iraqi.' This has been both an ascribed identity—how many people see and present me—and how I started to identify myself emotionally and politically. My academic focus on Iraqi women and gender relations has paralleled both my political activism vis-a-vis Iraq and my personal and emotional links to the place where most of my father's family still lives. Most of the time, my Iraqi 'origins' have opened up doors in the context of fieldwork amongst Iraqi women in the diaspora and have also increased my credibility and expert status in 'the West.' Despite this, I have frequently felt uncomfortable with the way the term 'Iraqi' is ascribed to me by the Western media, academia and Iraqi women alike, as there appears to be something very essentializing and simplistic about attaching this label. Given that I have visited Iraq on numerous occasions but never actually lived there, grew up in Germany, speak only broken Arabic (and more Egyptian than Iraqi), and received my education in Germany, the US, Egypt and the UK, I feel that I am positioned in much more complex ways than simply being 'the Iraqi anthropologist.' On the other hand, I have experienced a shift in my sense of self and belonging, of 'feeling Iraqi,' less because of my father's birth country and 'my blood' and more because of the political developments inside Iraq and my political and emotional involvement in them.

There have also been situations and encounters where, similarly to Nicola's experiences, my views, analyses and assessments have been discredited by Iraqi women and men on the basis of my Western and feminist backgrounds. Being called a 'Western feminist' is generally equated with ethnocentric, radical feminist thought that is divorced from empirical realities in the region and often ignorant about cultural sensitivities and taboos. While I can easily point to the diversity of feminist positions both inside the West and the Middle East, it is very hard to argue against opinions which are based on 'I lived it and you have not,' thereby discrediting any view that is perceived not to be 'authentic' and 'experiential.' Although intellectually I find such a position problematic, emotionally I feel humbled by people's personal experiences inside Iraq and acknowledge that there are dimensions of 'truth' and experience that cannot be grasped if not lived personally.

A few years ago I reflected on my positionality in the context of doing research amongst secular Egyptian women activists in Cairo. At the time, I was comparing my experiences to those of an Egyptian scholar, Dr Heba El-Kholy, who as a native Egyptian of upper middle class background was doing research in Cairo amongst women of lower income background. We both felt that social class background was much more

significant than nationality in shaping our respective relations with the women we interviewed. Social class has also been significant amongst the Iraqi women I have been interviewing so far. However, due to increasing sectarianism, 'being of middle class and Iraqi background' has not been a sufficient marker of identity for many of my respondents, who were particularly interested in my specific ethnic and religious background.

Another set of tensions in terms of my positionality have revolved around my dual roles as researcher and activist. I am a founding member of a London-based women's organization called Act Together: Women's Action on Iraq. The group, consisting of Iraqi, British and other international women activists, has aimed to raise awareness about the impact of economic sanctions, dictatorship, wars and occupation on women and gender relations. Although I do not believe in the notion of the neutral, objective researcher who conceals his or her political views and values, I sometimes find it difficult to engage with women in my research whose political views I find extremely problematic. For instance, I decided not to interview a woman because I could not bear to hear her extreme pro-Bush and pro-occupation views. Encounters with different women activists and organizations in the context of my research, however, made me realize that there are possibilities for common ground in terms of my political activism despite widespread perceptions of unbridgeable differences, which have prompted me to organize joint actions and events with other women's organizations.

Rather than seeing our respective positionalities as an obstacle to be overcome, we view it as a resource. Reflection upon our position in relation to different power relations obliges us to identify the different political interests that are invested by actors in relation to our research area. This, in turn, helps us to negotiate the various discourses produced by different actors who have vested interests in the events that have unfolded since the invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

Conceptualizing the category of 'woman': Homogenizing Iraqi women

One of the pitfalls of popular media and political discourses, as well as some of the contemporary scholarship on Iraq, is the tendency to present Iraqi women as a homogeneous entity. What has emerged from our respective work so far is the fact that Iraqi women exist in the plural: they are differentiated not merely by ethnic and religious background as is frequently mentioned today, but they are diverse in terms of social class, place of residence (urban versus rural), political orientation, specific experiences of the past regime and attitudes towards religion and the occupation. In reference to the present situation, we always feel

uneasy when we hear people say: “Iraqi women think . . .” or “Iraqi women want . . .,” generalizing from what is inevitably a wide variety of opinions, views and visions.

It is also important to point out that in the period before the Ba‘th assumed power, political divisions were not solely, or even substantially, based on sectarian or ethnic affiliation. Women of all backgrounds were attracted to either of the two main political trends: communism or Arab nationalism. Of course, Kurdish nationalism has been more clearly linked to Kurdish ethnicity, but Kurds were also attracted to communism and played an important role within the Iraqi communist party. Moreover, political divisions within the Kurdish movement have been linked to social class and urban versus rural backgrounds. Since the late 1970s, differences in terms of secular and Islamist political positions started to assume greater significance and to influence women’s experiences of the regime.

The divide-and-rule tactics of Saddam Hussein’s presidency increased sectarian divisions inside Iraq. There is no doubt that Kurds and Shi‘a bore the brunt of the atrocities committed by the regime, especially in terms of the Anfāl campaign in the 1980s, the deportations of Shi‘a in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, and the brutal repression of the uprisings in the north and south after the Gulf War in 1991. Yet, Sunnī Arabs in political opposition parties and, increasingly, even within the Ba‘th party were also subjected to arrests, torture and executions, as were members of other minorities, such as Chaldeans, Assyrians, Turkmen, and Mandeans, if they were part of opposition groups, or suspected of being so.

At the same time, the accounts of Iraqi women whom Nadje interviewed reveal that an urban middle class identity, especially the more cosmopolitan Baghdādī identity, continued to subsume ethnic and religious differences even throughout the period of economic sanctions (1990-2003). In other words, a middle class Shi‘ī family in Baghdad had more in common with their Sunnī Arab and Kurdish middle class neighbours in mixed neighbourhoods than the impoverished Shi‘a living in Madinat al-Thawra (renamed Saddam City and now called Sadr City), or the majority of Shi‘a in the south of the country. Indeed, Baghdādī families have frequently been multi-religious and multi-ethnic, and mixed marriages amongst urban Baghdādī middle classes were quite common.

Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, ethnic and religious backgrounds have played an increasing role in political and social life to the extent that sectarian divisions have started to cut across previously unifying variables, such as class or a specific urban identity. Simultaneously, secular versus Islamist political positions cut across Sunnī and Shi‘ī back-

grounds and currently shape political struggles amongst Iraqi women activists involved in the political process inside Iraq. Women are also differentiated by their particular attitudes to the recent war and the ongoing occupation, as well as various forms of resistance to it.

The dichotomization of 'Iraqi women'

Dominant discourses about Iraqi women tend to hide the complexity of their social backgrounds and political positions. Their experiences are selectively collected and represented in order to provide particular categories of women. Specifically, women in Iraq are typecast as either victims or heroines. The dichotomization of women is widespread in many spheres. The categorization of women as either victims or heroines has been discussed by those examining the design of public policies towards welfare.³ Within such discourses, women's identities are not only limited to a choice of two categories, but these categories are placed in a hierarchy with particular material consequences (such as, access to resources) depending upon which side of the binary division a woman is placed.

The US administration has certainly promoted the dichotomization of women's identities in Iraq. For them, women in Iraq are either victims of Saddam Hussein and/or heroines of the new Iraq. For example, as one US official told Nicola:

[T]he horrors that women experienced under Saddam—torture, repression, illiteracy. Iraqi women have been through a lot. Their story is a compelling and heroic story. The world only heard this story with the 'purple fingers' on election day. Women risked a lot to bring democracy to Iraq.

Within US discourse, the victimization of women under Saddam Hussein constitutes an implicit justification for US military intervention in Iraq. Prior to the invasion, US administration officials spoke publicly of rape, abductions, torture and other horrors of living under Saddam Hussein.⁴ Whilst Saddam Hussein had victimized women, the US would liberate them through its ouster of the regime.

The invasion was represented as investing Iraqi women with agency, transforming them from victims to heroines. As Paul Wolfowitz, then Deputy Secretary of Defence, wrote, Iraqi women were "helping give birth to freedom" in the post-Saddam order.⁵ In the post-invasion period, the image of the heroic Iraqi woman appeared with regularity in the media (for example, holding a purple-coloured finger during the coverage of the first elections) to embody the US administration's attempts to build a new Iraq. In the 2005 State of the Union Address,

Safia al-Suhail, an Iraqi woman activist, stood in the gallery with Laura Bush as the president honoured her as one of Iraq's 'leading democracy and human rights advocates.'⁶ For supporters of the administration, Safia al-Suhail represented 'the courage and determination of Middle Easterners, and in particular Middle Eastern women, to build free and just societies.'⁷

The language of women as heroines in building the new Iraq ties in strongly with the current US administration's general discourse on women. According to the director of the Office for International Women's Affairs, "Secretary [Condoleezza] Rice believes in the empowerment agenda—not seeing women as victims but as agents of change." This 'neo-conservative feminism' is embodied in the Independent Women's Forum—a non-partisan, not-for-profit, US NGO that "fosters greater respect for limited government, equality under the law, property rights, free markets, strong families, and a powerful and effective national defence and foreign policy."⁸ Despite the apparent contradictions between women's empowerment, free markets, strong families and strong national defence—at least from a feminist point of view—this ideology has strong appeal because of its refusal to see women as victims.

This characterization of women as heroines has been embraced by some Iraqi women themselves. Long marginalized by the Iraqi opposition in exile, they have seized the opportunity to be considered as active participants in the future of Iraq. At the London conference of the Iraqi opposition in exile in December 2002, only five women were present. In early 2003, a group of Iraqi women living in the diaspora formed 'Women for a Free Iraq.' They highlighted their suffering under Saddam Hussein in order to gain access to decision-making processes and funds for building NGOs inside Iraq. One of the founding members of 'Women for a Free Iraq' told Nicola: "I grew up used to the idea of fighting for political justice and for your rights. . . . We felt that women's voices were lacking in the discussions about Iraq before the war. We wanted our voices to be heard." The US administration supported Iraqi women in getting their voices heard, even if this was for the US's own war aims.

To some degree, the representation of women in Iraq as heroines is replicated by international NGOs working inside Iraq, who may see women as the builders of democracy and peace. Speaking to Nicola in March 2005, one person working for a Washington-based NGO that has been conducting democracy-promotion programmes inside Iraq, said, "Women are participating [in civil society] and they are doing all the work because men are used to not doing much at all." Similarly, in an interview with Nicola, a senior member of a US NGO that specializes in

promoting peace-building efforts and, in the early days following the invasion, held several meetings with groups of women activists from Iraq, said, "Women tend to be democrats and have a democratizing influence. There needs to be a shift in perception that women's empowerment is an aid [for peace-building] and not a burden."

Critics of the invasion have also drawn on the distinction between victims and heroines to help articulate their own opposition to US occupation. In this context, the relatively high status of women in Iraq before the invasion is juxtaposed with the victimization of women in the post-invasion period. As one woman activist says, "Before the US-led invasion in 2003, women were free to go to schools, universities and work, and to perform other duties. Now, due to security reasons and repression by the government, they're being forced to stay in their homes."⁹ A discourse that represents women as victims of the US occupation may sometimes have the effect of silencing women as women and marginalizing issues of women's rights. For some critics of the occupation, speaking about women's rights in a context of occupation is a marginal issue, as the real struggle takes place on the level of the lived day-to-day reality of passive resistance and coping strategies.¹⁰

However, equally, the Bush administration's 'empowerment agenda' does little to empower women on the ground. The rhetoric of women's rights is instrumentalized by the administration for its own foreign policy ends. The apparent acknowledgement of Iraqi women's active role has been restricted to that of symbols of a new post-Saddam order, whilst women's position within the new Iraq has been sidelined by US security concerns.

Instrumentalization of women's issues

The rhetoric about women in relation to the invasion and occupation of Iraq operates to instrumentalize 'women's issues' and presents women activists with further obstacles. How do we talk about women, gender and women's rights when they are being instrumentalized by the occupying forces? Should we not talk about them in order to avoid an even greater backlash against women's rights? For anyone concerned about the steady erosion of women's rights inside Iraq, these questions pose a difficult political dilemma.

Yet, it is not only the US and UK, but also different political actors and forces inside Iraq that are instrumentalizing women and gender. Islamist political parties, militia and insurgents as well as secular constituencies are using women to gain symbolic capital and justify their political positions. Islamist political parties construct women as symbols to demarcate a radical break with the previous Ba'th regime, which was largely perceived to be secular and engaged in limited forms of state

feminism during the 1970s and early 1980s when economic conditions and expanding labour markets required women's entry into education and employment. Simultaneously, Islamist militia and insurgents perceive women as symbols of resistance not only to the occupation but to Western imperialism more generally. Conversely, certain secular constituencies use women to justify the ongoing occupation as the only protection against increasing Islamist encroachment and the linked erosion of women's rights.

Against this background, it is difficult to speak about women and women's rights without being co-opted into one discourse or another. One strategy that both academics and activists may employ is to reveal the gap between the rhetoric and actual practices with respect to the Bush administration's record on women's rights, not only in Iraq and Afghanistan but also, crucially, inside the United States. It is also necessary to deconstruct these discourses in order to uncover the voices of women inside Iraq. Towards this end, the building of solidarity links between activists in the UK and activists inside Iraq provides a resource for speaking about women's rights. Act Together: Women's Action for Iraq, for example, was hesitant about getting involved in debates around the Iraqi constitution in 2005, especially with respect to the role of Islam and the abolition of the unified personal status law. Indeed, the Foreign Office told Nicola that women's organizations in Iraq had refused UK government support for their lobbying on the constitution. Act Together worried that their intervention, coming from the UK as one of the occupying countries, might contribute towards the backlash against women's rights and women activists inside Iraq. However, they were approached by several Iraqi women activists who were involved in debates and campaigns inside Iraq. In this context, they felt that it was their responsibility to show solidarity by raising awareness of this issue amongst the British public and political decision-makers.

The implications of the categorization of women for their agency

As discussed above, the homogenization and dichotomization of women in Iraq creates an environment that limits the ability of activists to get certain issues and concerns onto the political agenda. In addition, the homogenization and dichotomization of women limits women's agency. This is highlighted by the labelling of Iraqi women activists and organizations as either pro- or anti-occupation.

The categorization of women's organizations is particularly pronounced amongst Iraqi political activists within the diaspora, and tends to gloss over the complexity and diversity of women's activism, which spans a whole range of activities and positions. In the UK, for example, which historically has been the political and cultural centre of the Iraqi

diaspora, women's organizations and activists who might otherwise share common ground on many positions, might perceive and treat each other as politically 'the other' due to their different emphases and strategies. Certain individuals or groups might be labelled as either pro- or anti-occupation, while their respective positions might be much more complex than constructed within the prevailing political discourses.

In the UK, unlike the US, women's activism represents a broad range of activities, forms of organizations and positions: women's groups affiliated to political parties (i.e. the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), the Iraqi Worker's Communist Party, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), *Hizb al-Da'wa*, the Iraqi National Congress (INC), and the Independent Democrats) exist side by side with more independent groups, such as the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, the Iraqi Women's League, Iraqi Women for Peace and Democracy, and Act Together: Women's Action on Iraq. Women activists also work through mixed groups like the Iraqi Prospect Organisation, which mainly consist of young professional Iraqi Shi'a based in and around London, or Iraq in Common, a network of young professional Iraqi men and women. In addition, women are active within their respective ethnic and religious communities, such as the Assyrian Club of London, Kurdish Community Associations and the Shi'i al-Khu'i Foundation. These various groups and organizations represent a wide range of activism—from charity to advocacy, sometimes including direct involvement with the British government, as well as with significant political actors inside Iraq.

Iraqi women's diaspora activism in the UK is extremely varied in terms of attitudes towards the recent war, the occupation and recent political developments in Iraq. Political differences are not easily attributable to specific variables, such as ethnic and/or religious backgrounds. Previous political involvement, education, actual experiences of war and conflict, socialization and experience of a current political milieu as well as personality are all part of women's political trajectories. When talking to Iraqi women activists belonging to different organizations, Nadjé found much more common ground and flux in what is often constructed as hardened, unbridgeable positions.

While women's organizations and activists in the UK tend to be polarized according to their stated positions vis-a-vis the war and the occupation, inside Iraq women activists appear to work across different attitudes and strategies towards the occupation. According to interviews with leading women's rights activists inside Iraq, US and UK military occupation constitutes only one amongst many dangers, challenges and struggles facing women activists. Islamist encroachment, violence by militias and insurgents, sectarian violence as well as a worsening

humanitarian crisis and continuously deteriorating living conditions with respect to electricity, lack of access to clean water and healthcare are amongst the pressing concerns of women activists inside Iraq. Women working in Iraq seem to be more divided between secular versus Islamist positions rather than pro- or anti-occupation, as the prevailing political discourses construct differences outside.

'Add Women and Stir' versus a gender perspective in Iraq's reconstruction

The categorizations of women, women's rights and issues and women's activism leaves little room for a deeper understanding of the diversity and complexity of women's experiences in Iraq. This has implications for the policies made, measures pursued and strategies created to address the situation of women in Iraq. By labelling women in limited ways, the dominant discourses help to provide a ready-made diagnosis for the problems faced by women in Iraq. This, we believe, explains the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of women's lives in Iraq. There exists a contradiction between 'woman,' as a symbol of efforts to construct a post-Saddam order, and 'gender,' as a nexus of social relations between men and women, articulated with religion, ethnicity, class and other social relations and identities.

This is apparent in international efforts to include women in Iraq in the political transition and reconstruction. As a result of the way that women in Iraq are categorized, combined with the instrumentalization of women's rights, 'Iraqi women' appear not only in the discourses of various officials but also in measures taken towards women in Iraq. For example, the US government has channelled money towards women through programmes aimed at enhancing the political process and supporting civil society and improving education and healthcare. In most cases, this money is not specifically for women, but women are often targeted as a key constituency in terms of making up a percentage of the beneficiaries.¹¹ From these grants, some 'women-specific' activities have been funded, such as holding meetings and conferences that discuss women's participation in politics and enhancing women's role in Iraq; supporting the establishment of women's centres around the country that provide vocational or business training, micro-credit and information on legal services, amongst other things; and support for women's organizations and other groups working on issues such as voter education for women (grants worth up to \$6.5 million).¹² Similarly, the UK government has targeted funds for supporting the participation of vulnerable groups, including women, through support to specific initiatives by civil society organizations, principally inside Iraq (grants worth \$6.5 million). As a result of these efforts, women have been 'educated' as vot-

ers, 'trained' as parliamentary candidates and selected as members on local councils, electoral commissions and election monitoring groups, whilst women's groups have been funded as a means of strengthening civil society.

As 'victims' of years of dictatorial rule, Iraqi women have become the objects of various measures to ensure their involvement in building a post-Saddam order. This presupposes that Iraqi women need 'bringing into the public sphere.' Whilst certain sectors of women were excluded from public participation under Saddam Hussein, "the main misconception [of the US administration] is to perceive Iraqi women as silent, powerless victims in a male-controlled society in urgent need of 'liberation.'" ¹³ Following the oil boom of the 1970s and during the Iraq/Iran war in the 1980s, the Iraqi government encouraged women to enter the labour force, either to meet the needs of a rapid economic expansion or to replace the men who were called up to fight. Meanwhile, an illiteracy programme in the 1970s promoted female education for all sectors of the population.

In addition, the measures aimed at promoting women's participation are based on the assumption that 'adding more women' into the public sphere will necessarily translate into ensuring women's rights and interests. As one person interviewed by Nicola at the World Bank in April 2005 said, "if women are present then their concerns will naturally come out." Yet, such beliefs reduce women to their gender and assume that women constitute a homogenous bloc of interests—something which has been heavily criticized by certain strands of feminism, such as post-colonial, Marxist and black feminisms.

The example of the women's quota in parliament demonstrates how the equating of women with gender equality is problematic. Following sustained lobbying by women activists in Iraq, and despite the lack of US support, the Transitional Administrative Law (signed in March 2004) stipulated that a target of 25% of seats in parliament should be occupied by women. This target was exceeded in the elections of January 2005 by ensuring that every third person on a party's list was a woman. Given the success of the conservative, mainly Shi'i, religious United Iraqi Alliance list—in both the January 2005 and December 2005 elections, the majority of women in the Iraqi parliament are from the UIA list. These women, on the whole, do not support gender equality and even seek to overturn the relatively progressive unified personal status code. ¹⁴ Some women activists who supported the establishment of a women's quota in parliament now qualify their support for women's quotas in parliament as a direct means of protecting women's rights (such as rights in marriage and divorce). Iraq's former and first female ambassador to the US said, in response to a question about guaranteeing women's partici-

pation in decision-making bodies:

The issue lies somewhere else. First of all, do you have women who truly believe in women's rights, believe in the empowerment of women, believe that women should have a place in public life? That's one. The other question is, are the 25 percent women who are on any council or committee, are they simply 'yes women' for their political parties and the political bosses or do they have their own mind? And thirdly, do these women have the clout; the moral courage, really; and the leadership ability to make their voices and their views heard? That is what I would like to look for rather than just numbers.¹⁵

These sentiments have been echoed by some other women activists who see themselves as part of the secular woman's movement. Meanwhile, other (secular) activists voice support for women's participation in parliament as a first step towards promoting gender equality, but feel that it will take time before women define their own political position and not just follow male leaders. The point that is essential to make is that ensuring gender equality does not entail bringing more women into the public sphere. Rather, it means looking at gender relations, roles and identities in all political, social and economic processes.

Gender considerations in state-building processes and security concerns

Unfortunately, dominant discourses about women in Iraq fail to locate women within structures of social relations shaped by articulations of gender, ethnicity, religion and class. The consideration of women is limited to those programmes aimed at bringing women as an undifferentiated category into the public sphere. Yet, gender permeates all aspects of social, political and economic life. Indeed, those areas considered 'gender neutral' or where gender is made invisible have huge implications for gender equality.

An important way in which gender equality is being denied in Iraq is by the increase in power of communal leaders and the ensuing fragmentation of the state. This has also increased sectarianism in Iraq. These processes are closely tied, but it is rarely noted that they are also gendered in their implications.

The rise in power of communal leaders has been greatly facilitated by US actions since the invasion. The US administration has perceived Iraqi society in terms of a collection of communal identities: Sunni, Shi'i, Kurdish, Christian, Turkmen, etc. This is reflected in the way that the CPA selected members of the Interim Governing Council (IGC) formed in July 2003. Seats were apportioned according to religious/ethnic sect. Even the three women who were chosen for IGC membership were

selected for their apparent ethnic/religious affiliation, rather than their gender. Subsequently, sectarianism has largely determined political behaviour in Iraq (Alkadiri & Toensing, 2003).¹⁶ Political parties formed in preparation for the January 2005 elections vied for power not on the basis of ideological distinctions, but on the basis of sectarian affiliations. Indeed, those groups that failed to get any or almost no seats were those who shunned sectarian politics. This trend was amplified in the December 2005 elections.¹⁷ A *de facto* confessional system has emerged, becoming apparent in the long discussions over the constitution of the cabinet in early 2006. For example, top leadership positions (president, prime minister, deputy prime minister and speaker of parliament) were divided between Shi'ī, Kurd and Sunni parties.

Rather than reconstructing the state, Coalition policies have helped to construct a system of patron/client relations that link communally-based parties to Iraqi citizens. Networks of patron/client relations took on a new significance in the wake of the collapse of the Iraqi state under sanctions (from 1991 onwards).¹⁸ This disintegration of the state was hastened by the de-Ba'athification policies pursued by the CPA from May 2003, which removed management-level staff from the state apparatus. Many of those chosen to sit on the IGC and in the interim cabinet used their access to goods and services unavailable through other channels to construct patron/client networks through which to mobilize a support base. Given the high level of unemployment, one important mechanism of patron/client relations has been access to jobs via recommendation letters from parties represented at the national level.¹⁹ The significance of IGC members in distributing much-needed resources placed them at an advantage within the political process and helped to boost the popularity of communally-based politics—despite the fact that many Iraqis were highly suspicious of these leaders that had been in exile previous to Saddam Hussein's fall. The emergence of new patron/client networks has further weakened state capacity. In addition, the series of deadlines imposed upon the political transition process led to a frequent change of personnel within the state as new cabinets were formed at different stages and new ministers brought in 'their own people' to fill jobs.

The failure to rebuild state capacity has been one of the factors exacerbating violence in Iraq. The lack of security is linked to the failure of the state to impose a monopoly over violence. The security vacuum left in the wake of the fall of Saddam Hussein has been filled by various militias—some of whom are linked to Shi'ī and Kurdish parties, whilst some have sprung up to defend their neighbourhoods from lawlessness and the death squads operating under the cover of the Ministry of the Interior. The lack of security has an impact upon men and women, but in particular ways that increasingly operate to prevent women and girls

from going out to work, to school or even for shopping. Within this context, it is increasingly difficult for women to remain active within the public sphere. One woman activist says: "There is a lot of pressure on our personal freedoms. None of us feels that we can have an opinion on anything any more. If she does, she risks being killed."²⁰

The targeting of women who dare to enter the public sphere and the rise of communal identities are interlinked. Communal leaders (whether religious, ethnic or tribal) aim to consolidate political power by promoting a homogenous, communal identity that does not allow for, or even tolerate, internal differences or dissent. This creates pressures to conform, not only making political dissent difficult within the community, but also dissent from socially constructed norms about gender roles and relations.

The power that leaders assert over their communities (however these are constructed) is rooted in their control of 'their' women—both symbolically and practically. In the negotiations between different communal leaders over the Iraqi constitution, women's rights were sacrificed in the name of a political compromise between those who sought to enforce the Islamic nature of the state and those who envisaged a more secular state.²¹ Significantly, the constitution fails to grant women equal rights within the family. Article 39 states that, "Iraqis are free in their adherence to their personal status according to their own religion, sect, belief and choice, and that will be organized by law." By devolving family law to the regions, the state accommodates social and religious differences, while encouraging the loyalty of communal leaders to the state. Family law becomes part of a 'social contract,' trading communal autonomy for women's rights.²²

Against the background of the rise to power of communal politics, mounting lawlessness and violence and the fragmentation of the state, women find it increasingly difficult to participate publicly, unless they are linked to one of the major political groupings (which are all communal in nature). Within such a political terrain, women's rights are marginalized—unless they can be instrumentalized for symbolic gains by competing political groupings. Violence against women by different actors has become part of the battle for political control of the future Iraqi polity.

Violence against women

Iraqi women, men and children have been victims of many different forms of violence by different actors within the ongoing conflict. Political activists and politicians commenting on the ongoing conflict and violence have the inclination to stress one source of violence and dismiss others, depending on their specific political viewpoints. While

some commentators tend to stress violence by the occupation forces, for example, others stress violence at the hands of Islamist militias and insurgents. Yet Iraqi women suffer from gender-specific violence by all concerned parties. In addition to the killing of innocent civilians through air raids and random shootings, the occupation forces have also been engaged in other forms of violence against women. There have been numerous documented accounts about physical assaults at check-points and during house searches. Several women with whom Nadje talked reported that they had been verbally or physically threatened and assaulted by soldiers as they were searched at check-points. American forces have also arrested wives, sisters and daughters of suspected insurgents in order to pressure them to surrender.²³ Female relatives have literally been taken hostage by US forces and used as bargaining chips. Aside from the violence related to the arrests, those women who are detained by the Coalition troops might also suffer from the sense of shame associated with such a detention. There has been mounting evidence, not just of physical assaults and torture, but also of rape, such as the well-known case of 14 year-old Abeer Qasim Hamza al-Janabi from Mahmudiya. Women who have been detained by occupation forces might in turn become victims of so-called honour crimes by their own families, who fear that their female relative could have been raped by these forces.

Islamist militants and terrorist groups pose a particular danger to Iraqi women as well. Many women's organizations and activists inside Iraq have documented the increasing Islamist threats to women, the pressure to conform to certain dress codes, the restrictions in movement and behaviour, incidents of acid thrown into women's faces and more and more targeted killings. Early on in 2003, many women in Basra, for example, reported that they were forced to wear a headscarf or restrict their movements for fear of harassment from Islamist men. Female students at the University of Basra reported that since the war ended groups of men began stopping them at the university gates and shouting at them if their heads were not covered.²⁴

In 2004, reports from several cities around Iraq stated that Islamist extremists were targeting universities by threatening and even attacking female students who were wearing Western-style fashions, setting off bombs on campuses and demanding that classes be segregated by sex. Thousands of female students decided to postpone their studies after bombs exploded in several universities. According to a number of women Nadje talked to, pamphlets found on several campuses declared: "If the boy students don't separate from the girl students, we will explode the college. Any girl student who does not wear a veil, we will burn her face with chemicals." Female students have been abducted as

they are leaving the campus, threatened with death if they do not wear 'Islamic dress' and if they continue to mingle with male students. Even non-Muslim women, who are not normally expected to cover their heads, do not escape the threats, students said.²⁵

Not only students, but women of all ages and walks of life are nowadays forced to comply with certain dress codes and to restrict their movements. By 2006, the threat posed by Islamist militias, as well as the mushrooming Islamist extremist insurgents groups, goes far beyond imposed dress codes and calls for gender segregation at university. In the British-occupied south, where Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army retains a stranglehold, the situation has been extremely critical for some time as women have been systematically pushed back into their homes. One Basra woman, known as Dr. Kefaya, was working in the Women and Children's Unit at the University of Basra Hospital when she started receiving threats from extremists. She defied them. Then, one day a man walked into the building and murdered her.²⁶ Many other professional women have been shot in Basra since the invasion. Similar pressures and threats apply to women throughout Iraq, except for the Kurdish controlled areas in the North.

Aside from Shi'i Islamist militias, such as the Mahdi Army linked to al-Sadr, or the Badr Brigade linked to of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), there are numerous Sunni Islamist groups that have been mushrooming since the invasion. Amongst the many different groups are, for example, Al-Fārūq Brigades, a militant wing of the Islamic Movement in Iraq (al-Ḥaraka al-Islāmiyya fi al-ʿIrāq), the Mujahideen of the Victorious Sect (Mujāhidin al-Ṭāʾifa al-Manṣūra), the Mujahideen Battalions of the Salafi Group of Iraq (Katāʾib al-Mujāhidin fi al-Jamāʿa al-Salafiyya fi al-ʿIrāq), Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Jihad Brigades.

Leaders of these groups issue *fatāwa* (singular *fatwa*: legal pronouncements in Islam) banning women from leaving their homes, from driving and from working. According to several women's rights activists Nadje spoke to in 2006, incidents of women being killed on the streets have risen over the past months and have started to become a noticeable and extremely worrying pattern. "Even veiled women who are seen to be out alone or driving a car have started to be targeted," Zeinab G. told her. She continued:

Women are being assassinated, just because they are women. And we don't even know whom to turn to. The police is scared itself by the militia and many units are actually infiltrated by the Mahdi Army or Badr Brigade. Others would like to help but are not in a position to do so because they are just not enough and they are ill-equipped. The

Islamists are targeting women who have a public profile even more, but they have started to even kill women who are not in any way politically active or work in an NGO. Those of us who do, live in constant fear. Several of my colleagues have already been shot, and I received several death threats.

In addition to the violence aimed at women who are perceived to diverge from the Islamists' specific narrow interpretations of Islam, women are also victims of the increasing sectarian violence that has, more and more, taken hold over Iraq. The main perpetrators of sectarian violence and killings are also militias and Islamist groups. Both the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army have taken over several ministries and infiltrated the security and police apparatus, and have used their positions to target, attack and kill Sunni Iraqis. Sunni Islamist groups, on the other hand, have been involved in the targeted killing of Shi'a. By 2006, whole neighbourhoods had been 'ethnically cleansed' as militias and militant groups have taken control over particular areas. Although sectarian violence is so far largely limited to extremist groups, sectarian sentiments have spilled over into the general population as the 'tit-for-tat' killings have increased and hatred has started to grow. There have started to be accounts of neighbours and previous friends turning against each other, as well as violence between ordinary civilians.

The violence and threats posed by Islamist militia and insurgents defy simplistic calls for alliances in the name of resisting the occupation. As Nadje has argued elsewhere, "the enemy of my enemy is not my friend."²⁷ This does not only hold true with respect to Islamist militias and extremist groups, but also with respect to remnants of the previous Ba'ath regime. Processes of de-Ba'athification have been highly problematic and often counter-productive as technocrats and professionals of the lower party echelons have been targeted. Yet, equally problematic are the political alliances with previously shunned Ba'athi political activists and intellectuals in the name of fighting the occupation.

Comparing the past and the present

Many Western and Iraqi commentators alike tend to compare the current situation in Iraq with the situation under Saddam Hussein. We ourselves, when asked, have often argued that the situation for women is much worse now than it was in the past. Lack of security, increasing and diverse forms of violence, greater social conservatism and extremely limited mobility, a worsening humanitarian crisis and deteriorating living conditions can easily be used to back up this argument. Yet, such comparisons might run the risk of even further alienating those who suffered badly under the previous regime. Political dissidents and opposi-

tion activists of all ethnic and religious backgrounds, not only Kurds and Shi'a, who were targeted in the past might not feel represented in these accounts, further jeopardizing national reconciliation. On the other hand, some pro-war and pro-occupation activists argue that women were systematically repressed and had no rights under the previous regime, to the extent that they were not allowed to go to schools and university. While there is no doubt that the regime of Saddam Hussein was an authoritarian dictatorship which systematically oppressed the Iraqi population and did not tolerate any opposition, the track record on socio-economic as well as women's rights is much more mixed and nuanced. Nadje's research on the modern history of Iraqi women from the 1950s to the present shows different women experienced the previous regime differently.²⁸ What for many women represented a period of economic boom and 'days of plenty,' i.e., Iraq in the 1970s and early 1980s, simultaneously represented a time of repression and suffering for others. In terms of women's rights, the policies of the previous regime varied greatly from decade to decade, starting with a form of state feminism, albeit limited, to encourage women's education and labour force participation in the 1970s. This was followed by a period of pushing women to produce future citizens and soldiers in the 1980s, and a shift to greater social conservatism and the call for women to return home in the context of economic sanctions and high unemployment rates in the 1990s. Sadly, however, even some of those who suffered or were arrested and tortured under the regime of Saddam Hussein, maintain today that life is no better now because of the extreme insecurity and lack of basic services. This does not mean that the situation was good before, but reveals how dismal it has become now.

Conclusion

This article has identified some of the dominant discourses that exist with regard to women, women's rights and women's agency in post-invasion Iraq. Following a reflection upon our positionalities, we have attempted to identify and deconstruct the different discourses and, in so doing, to uncover the diversity of women and the complexity of their experiences in Iraq. In addition, we have outlined the ways in which these dominant discourses label issues and problems in ways that are counter-productive to finding just and lasting solutions for women in Iraq—particularly in building a peaceful and stable Iraqi nation state, which can guarantee rights for all its citizens. In situating different discourses—those of the US, different communal leaders, those who are for and those who are against the occupation, militias and different Iraqi women—within the power relations that produce them, we hope we have identified both the limitations and the possibilities of researching

women in Iraq.

NOTES

¹ This paper is based on the experiences of conducting research on 'the role of women and gender in the political transition in Iraq.' The research is funded by the British Academy.

² Georg Simmel, "The Sociological Significance of the 'Stranger,'" in *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, eds. R. E. Park and E. W. Burgess (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921), **Page number**.

³ For example, Iman Bibars, *Victims and Heroines: Women, Welfare and the Egyptian State* (London: Zed, 2001).

⁴ See, for example, the State Department's Office of International Women's Issues fact sheet distributed on 20 March 2003, accessible online at <<http://www.state.gov/g/wi/rls/18877.htm>>.

⁵ Paul Wolfowitz, "Women in the New Iraq," *Washington Post*, 1 February 2004.

⁶ State of the Union Address, 2005. Accessed on 31 March 2006, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/print/20050202-11.html>>.

⁷ Eleana Gordan, "Our Friend in the Gallery: Safia al-Suhail and the new Iraq," *National Review Online*, 4 February 2005. Accessed on 31 March 2006, <<http://www.nationalreview.com/script/printpage.p?ref=/comment/gordon2005020407>>.

⁸ About the Independent Women's Forum. Accessed 7 October 2006, <http://www.iwf.org/about_iwf/default.asp>.

⁹ IRIN, "Iraq: Women were more Respected under Saddam, Say Women's Groups," *Payvand's Iran News*, 14 April 2006. Accessed on 18 April 2006, <<http://www.payvand.com/news/06/apr/1118.html>>.

¹⁰ Haifa Zangana, "Why Iraqi Women Aren't Complaining," *The Guardian*, 19 February 2004; Haifa Zangana, "Chewing on Meaningless Words," *The Guardian*, 17 August 2005.

¹¹ For example, programmes of the United States Institute for Peace, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute and the Center for International Private Enterprise all include stipulations that a certain percentage of beneficiaries should be women. However, when Nicola spoke to members of these organizations in March 2005, there was no obligation to meet targets for women's participation in these various programmes. The only money that was specifically ring-fenced for Iraqi women was \$10 million of the allocation to the CPA budget. This was announced in March 2004 and channelled through the State Department's Office of International Women's Affairs in Washington, DC for the 'Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative.'

¹² Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, "US Commitment to Women in Iraq," Washington, DC, 23 September 2004.

¹³ Haifa Zangana, "Quiet, or I'll Call Democracy," *The Guardian*, 22 December 2004.

¹⁴ Farnaz Fassihi, "Iraqi Shiite Women Push Islamic Law on Gender Roles," *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 March 2005.

¹⁵ Rend Rahim Francke, speaking at the seminar, "Countdown to a Constitution," Center for American Progress, Washington DC, 22 March 2005.

¹⁶ Alkadiri, Raad and Chris Toensing, "The Iraqi Governing Council's Sectarian Hue," *Middle East Report*, August 20, 2003, **page number**.

¹⁷ Patrick Cockburn, "Iraq's Election Result: a Divided Nation," *The Independent*, 21 December 2005, 1-2.

¹⁸ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), **page number**.

¹⁹ Glen Rangwala, "The Democratic Transition in Iraq and the Discovery of its

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Limitations," in *The Iraq War and Democratic Politics*, eds. Alex Danchev and John Macmillan (London: Routledge, 2005), 174-75.

²⁰ Peter Beaumont, "Hidden Victims of a Brutal Conflict: Iraq's Women," *The Observer*, 8 October 2006.

²¹ Nicola Pratt, "Reconstructing Citizenship: The Battle over Women's Rights," paper presented to the Middle East Studies Association meeting, November 2005.

²² Lisa Hajjar makes this argument with regard to Israel and India in "Religion, State Power and Domestic Violence in Muslim Societies: A Framework for Comparative Analysis," *Law and Social Inquiry* 29/1 (Winter 2004).

²³ Those suspected of being involved in either resistance or terrorist activities are regularly detained without their families being informed about their whereabouts and their well-being. People disappearing, random arrests, as well as torture and abuse in prisons are, ironically, common phenomena in post-Saddam Iraq.

²⁴ IRINNews.org, "Iraq: Female Harassment from Religious Conservatives," April 14, 2004.

²⁵ **Article title?** *Washington Times*, 17 October, 2004 <<http://washingtontimes.com/world/20041017-013506-9889r.htm>>.

²⁶ T. Judd, "For the Women of Iraq, the War is Just Beginning," *The Independent*, 8 June 2006.

²⁷ Nadjé Al-Ali, "The Enemy of My Enemy is Not My Friend: Women's Rights, Occupation and 'Reconstruction' in Iraq," in *The Situated Politics of Belonging*, eds. Nira Yuval-Davis, Kalpana Kannabiran and Ulrike M. Vieten (London: Sage, 2006), **Page numbers.**

²⁸ Nadjé Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from the 1950s to the Present* (London and New York: Zed, 2007).