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Chapter 4

Positionalities, intersectionalities and transnational feminism in researching women in post-invasion Iraq

Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt

The 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq has presented a 'gender paradox' in international politics. On the one hand, the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush claimed that one of the objectives of the invasion was to 'liberate Iraqi women', and the first parliamentary elections following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime did result in women winning 30 per cent of seats. On the other hand, as we found in our work (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009), the situation of women in Iraq since the invasion has deteriorated on various levels: socio-economic, political, legal and educational. This chapter examines why military intervention to unseat a brutal dictatorship has not led to an improvement in women's rights or in women's situation in general. In addition, we reflect upon the process of conducting feminist research on women in Iraq, including our respective positionalities and our methodological approach, rooted in transnational feminist politics.

The Puzzle: Can military intervention liberate women?

The original impetus for our research came from our involvement in the U.K. anti-war movements against the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq and the Israeli occupation of Palestine, as well as our participation in U.K. branches of transnational women's peace movements. The process of constructing transnational solidarity with people living under occupation, whilst ensuring that such solidarity is supportive of women, who are often particularly disadvantaged by conflict, is an exercise in applying our commitment to transnational feminism.

Much has been written to explain the disastrous outcomes of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, ranging from ill-conceived policies to ineffective implementation of policies (e.g., Diamond, 2005; Dodge, 2005; Phillips, 2005; Hashim, 2006; Herring & Rangwala, 2006). Yet, until our study (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009), not a single author had paid serious scholarly attention to the gendered impacts of the war on Iraq[1] -- despite the fact that the U.S. administration cited the liberation of Iraqi women as one of the goals of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Our research, conducted between 2003 and 2008, focused on understanding the consequences of the 2003 invasion for women in Iraq and identifying women's responses to the situation.

The resort to military intervention to 'liberate women,' as well as men who are suffering under repressive dictatorships, is a seductive idea because it promises success where other means have failed. In the case of Iraq, Saddam Hussein withstood over a decade of crippling sanctions, defied UN resolutions, survived assassination attempts and brutally suppressed an internal uprising in 1991. 'Liberal interventionists' have argued that it is the obligation of humanity to protect human rights and human lives, irrespective of borders (Arend & Beck, 1993, p.133). Our research examined the reasons why military intervention and occupation failed to liberate Iraqi women and how, instead, they produced a deterioration in women's circumstances and position (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009).

Background

On 20 March 2003, in the face of significant opposition, the U.S., principally supported by the U.K., launched a military attack on Iraq to remove weapons of mass destruction it allegedly possessed. Since then, the evidence for these claims has been discredited. In

addition to claims about weapons of mass destruction and threats to international security, US administration officials spoke publicly of the plight of women under Saddam Hussein, including rapes, abductions, torture and other horrors.[2] Whilst undoubtedly many Iraqi women (and men) suffered human rights abuses and gender-specific violence under Saddam Hussein, women's situation was more nuanced. Under the Ba'ath regime and previous Iraqi regimes, Iraqi women were encouraged to enter education, including higher education, and the workforce. Women were part of political parties and movements as well as more specific women's rights organizations, from the founding of Iraq onwards. The Iraqi Women's League had over 40,000 members across Iraq and was instrumental in shaping Iraq's constitution of 1959. In addition, laws governing marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance (otherwise known as personal status issues) afforded women significantly more rights than their counterparts in other Middle East countries, largely due to the influence of the Iraqi Women's League (Al-Ali, 2007).[3] From the 1960s, it was not unusual for women to work in a range of professions, such as doctors, engineers, and lawyers. Women benefitted from free access to health care and child care provided by the state. However, women's rights started to shrink considerably during the 13 years of economic sanctions imposed on Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Due to the shrinking economy, large-scale unemployment and humanitarian crisis, which unfolded throughout this period, the state's previous policies of inclusion shifted towards more conservative gender norms. At the same time, demographic factors and poverty led to an increase in polygamy, prostitution and trafficking of women (Al-Ali, 2007; Al-Jawaheri 2008).

The long history of Iraqi women's mobilization was ignored by American and British politicians. Instead, the representation of women's victimization under Saddam Hussein constituted an explicit justification for military intervention in Iraq. The invasion was

represented as investing Iraqi women with agency, transforming them from 'victims' to 'heroines'. At a press conference two weeks before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, flanked by four 'Women for a Free Iraq,'[4] Paula Dobriansky, then undersecretary of state for global affairs, declared: 'We are at a critical point in dealing with Saddam Hussein. However this turns out, it is clear that the women of Iraq have a critical role to play in the future revival of their society.'

The regime of Saddam Hussein was toppled on 20 April 2003 and by 1 May 2003 U.S. President George W. Bush declared the end of major combat operations. 'Women's empowerment', as the US administration called it, was seen as a pillar of 'democratization' and 'peace-building' in supposedly 'post-conflict' Iraq. For the Bush administration, Iraqi women would be 'helping give birth to freedom' in the post-Saddam order (Wolfowitz, 2004). In the post-invasion period, the image of the heroic Iraqi woman appeared with regularity in the US and international media (for example, holding a purple-coloured finger during the coverage of the first elections) to embody the U.S. 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.'[5] 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' (Gordan 2005). Through channels such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative, millions of dollars were allocated to projects targeting women not only as a humanitarian or developmental concern but also a 'U.S. foreign policy imperative' (Dobriansky, 2005). The then U.S. Secretary of State appointed a 'senior advisor for women's empowerment' (US Department of State, 2006) and George W. Bush stated: 'There's no doubt in my mind, empowering women in new democracies will

make those democracies better countries and help lay the foundation of peace for generations to come' (USINFO, 2006). Yet, as our research on Iraq shows, there was a huge gap between this rhetorical support for women's involvement in reconstruction and the actual outcomes for women in Iraq.

Our approach

Our research was mainly based on interviews with three groups of people: Iraqi women activists, either living inside Iraq and/or in the diaspora; US and UK government officials supporting women's empowerment in Iraq; and those working in international NGOs and other agencies in the field of gender and development/women's empowerment. For the most part, Nadje interviewed Iraqi women activists and Nicola interviewed government officials and internationals.

Our approach to interviews as a method was grounded in a feminist approach to social science. Rather than aiming to produce 'objective knowledge', we recognise that our identities, values and attitudes shape the research process throughout, including the types of questions asked, the nature of interactions with interviewees and the interpretation of data. We reflect upon our positionality in order to produce 'feminist' or 'strong objectivity' (Haraway 1988; Harding 1993). In undertaking research for our book on women in Iraq, in a context of Western invasion and occupation and increasing ethno-religious sectarianism inside Iraq, our respective positionalities with regard to perceived national, cultural/religious belonging as well as attitudes towards the 2003 invasion undoubtedly shaped the research process.

Nicola's positionality:

As a UK citizen, my opposition to the UK government's involvement in the Iraq war constitutes an ethical standpoint that has informed my engagement throughout the research process (Hesse-Bibar 2007: 17). This created particular challenges for me in interviewing individuals who could be viewed as contributing, in one way or another, to the war effort and the apparatus of occupation. Whilst feminist scholars have written extensively about the interview process, this has usually been in cases where the researcher empathizes with her interviewee or seeks to mitigate possible exploitative power relations resulting from the researcher's position vis-à-vis the interviewee. Relatively little has been written about feminist perspectives on 'studying up': that is, the process of interviewing elites.

Despite my opposition to my own government and to the notion of social science as 'objective', perhaps paradoxically, my perceived identity as a British citizen and academic researcher undoubtedly facilitated my access to government officials and other internationals. In particular, by adopting the commonly-expected role of an academic engaged in independent and objective 'truth-seeking', I was able to establish a 'positional space' (Mullings 1999) from where I could conduct my interviews. However, simultaneously, some have regarded my British citizenship and academic profession as undermining my authority to research or write about women in Iraq. Whilst I strongly resist any idea of 'speaking on behalf of' Iraqi women, conversely, I also find problematic the notion that only Iraqi women can research or write about women in Iraq, particularly in light of the diversity of Iraqi women and their experiences (as we discuss later in the chapter).

I found the above-outlined attitudes towards me as a British researcher (whether positive or negative) troubling. Seeing myself as someone who seeks to transgress borders, I was

concerned that other people attempted to locate me firmly within certain borders and, moreover, to ascribe certain authority to me as a result of that position. However, reflecting upon this research experience and my positionality vis-à-vis my interviewees is a necessary part of understanding interviews as producing 'situated knowledges' that are partial, relational and subjective (Haraway 1988). In other words, reflecting upon the researcher's positionality is not a means of improving the accuracy of our research results but rather a means of improving the accuracy of the claims that we wish to make about the results of our research.

Nadje's positionality

Over the past two decades, 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 much 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 essentialising 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 U.S., Egypt and the U.K., 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, similar 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. 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, like Nicola, I sometimes find it difficult to engage with women in my research whose political views I find extremely problematic.

Rather than seeing our respective positionalities as an obstacle to be overcome, we have viewed it as a resource. Reflecting upon our positions 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. In practice, awareness and reflexivity in the research process obliges us to engage with our respondents, especially Iraqi women activists, beyond a pre-determined set of questions. In the context of talking to Iraqi women's rights activists, it was quite apparent to Nadje that a one-off interview would not be sufficient to establish the kind of rapport and trust needed to break through the initial responses based on collective identity politics which were often articulated as a result of ascribing a specific identity to Nadje as a researcher. Only multiple encounters with a mutual exchange of views helped respondents to speak more freely and at ease.

Informed by transnational feminist politics, we were also seeking to go beyond the binaries present in much literature on gender, violence and war. We tried to apply an 'intersectional analysis', recognizing that women's oppression and struggles are constituted by a wide array

of structural inequalities linked to gender, race, class, sexual orientation, as well as nationality. As black, post-colonial and post-structuralist feminists have argued, 'woman' and 'gender' do not represent some 'essence' that is shared amongst women across time and space (e.g., Carby, 1982; Mohanty, 1988; Butler, 1999). Indeed, categories such as 'gender', 'sexuality', 'class', 'race', 'ethnicity', 'nationality' are always constructed, reproduced and resisted through intersections with one another. Such an understanding of women's identities and positions lead us to consider women's experiences of war as not only a result of their gender but also their nationality, class and other axes of social difference (such as ethnicity and/or religion) that may become significant in the course of conflict. The intersectionality of identities and its challenge to the unitary category of 'woman' presents particular challenges to feminist solidarity—whether within or across national boundaries. In this respect, our approach is based on transnational feminism.

'Transnational feminism' should be differentiated from 'international feminism'. International feminism has existed for a long time and links were established among women's movements in various countries in the early part of the twentieth century (Moghadam, 2005). Examples are the International Women's Council, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Women's International Democratic Federation, and International Federation of Business and Professional Women (Moghadam, 2005). However, transnational feminism entails going beyond the false universalism of those Western feminisms that have dominated international feminist movements to consider the particular experiences of those women on the margins of the global political economy, 'allow[ing] for a more concrete and expansive vision of universal justice' (Mohanty, 2002, p.510). In the context of war and conflict, a transnational rather than an international approach operates 'to destabilize the centrality of the nation-state as the principal unit of

inquiry into relations of conflict and to highlight dimensions of power that traverse an array of borders, including political boundaries, cultural or national identity markers, and class fractions' (Giles & Hyndman, 2004, pp.313-14). In the context of Iraq, we need to be attendant to the transnational power imbalances between the U.S., as the world's only superpower and largest military, and the Iraqi actors battling against the U.S. and how gender, race, and sexuality are implicated in those relations. In particular, the U.S. administration's military intervention in Iraq to liberate Iraqi women recalls the claims of past colonizers, who justified colonialism as 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak, 1988, p. 93).

In the context of our work, we employed our transnational and intersectional analysis to understand women's experiences in post-invasion Iraq. In practice, this meant that we did not assume that Iraqi women exist in the singular, with a united voice. Nor did we privilege one experience over another. In our conversations with Iraqi activists, we tried to be sensitive to the multiple intersecting configurations of power impacting and shaping women's experiences of the previous regime, the invasion and the occupation. We avoided reducing women's diverse experiences to religious or ethnic identities and considered other significant markers of difference such as class and political affiliation as also if not sometimes more significant. Below we share some of our findings, focusing on two particular aspects: women's political participation and the increase in gender-based violence.

Our Findings

Gender-based violence and the 'continuum of violence'

Instead of thinking about warfare as an isolated instance of violence, feminist scholars and activists have alerted us to the 'continuum of violence' between war and peace, prewar and postwar:

> […] Gender is manifest in the violence that flows through all of them and in the peace processes that may be present at all moments too. To consider one moment in this flux in the absence of the next is arbitrary (Cockburn, 2004, p.43).

Undeniably, the biggest challenge facing Iraqi women after the 2003 invasion 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. High levels of domestic violence, verbal and physical intimidation on the street, 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,[6] including killings, have been very much part of the post-invasion experience of Iraqi women (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011).[7]

According to some analysts, all such violence should be situated within a 'sexual violence approach' (Jacobs, Jacobson et al., 2000, p.2) even where no overtly sexual act is involved. In this interpretation, a wide spectrum of violent acts is subsumed under a broad definition of male sexual violence rooted in masculinity, including 'Violence which takes place in the home or the workplace and on the street corner; violence involving racism, homophobia, xenophobia and other prejudices; violence on international and global levels including trafficking in women and women's experiences of war violence' (Corrin, 1996, p.1).

However, this approach essentialises men and masculinities as well as women and femininities, whilst glossing over the multiple causes of violence, which are not simply rooted in male sexuality. Iraqi men are not perpetrators of various forms of political, ethnic and domestic violence because of their sexual drives or frustrations and testosterone levels. Nor are they culturally hard-wired to be violent, as many Islamophobic and racist commentators may like us to believe. In the midst of war and 'post-war' situations, violence against women may become endemic partly due to the weakness of institutions of law, order and, justice, but also as an element of heightened aggression and militarization, and prevailing constructions of masculinity promoted during conflict. Iraq is an example, *par excellence*, for the increase in violence on all levels as a result of the ongoing occupations and militarization of societies, lawlessness, and significant role played by local and national militias.

In addition, our research found that gender-based violence was linked to the instrumentalisation of women's issues by the U.S. occupation authorities and to the resulting wider politicisation of gender amongst different actors inside Iraq since the U.S. invasion. Islamist political parties, militia and insurgents as well as secular constituencies have all used women to gain symbolic capital and underpin their political authority in relation to their political rivals. Islamist political parties constructed women as symbols to demarcate a radical break with the previous Ba'ath regime, which was nominally secular and engaged in limited forms of state feminism during the 1970s and early 1980s. Simultaneously, Islamist militia and insurgents perceived women as symbols of resistance not only to the U.S. occupation authorities but to Western imperialism more generally. As a result, these groups promoted conservative gender norms in relation to women's behaviour and dress code. Consequently, women have found it increasingly difficult to go out in public without a male

relative or without wearing the veil, which was not the case for Iraqi women prior to the invasion, particularly in urban areas. The physical violence against women, particularly those of religious minorities, has intensified in areas captured by the so-called Islamic State after the summer of 2014 (Al-Ali, 2014a). Moreover, the Islamist parties that controlled the legislature following the invasion have undermined the previous Personal Status Code (or family laws) by subordinating issues of marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance to religious authorities, opening the way for more conservative interpretations of women's rights in these matters.

This is not to deny the continuum of violence—that is, the relationships between forms of violence within the home, on the street and within society at large, and the violence occurring during pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict situations (Cockburn, 2004). But it is important to recognize the complex causes of violence, which, whilst gendered, cannot be reduced to gender. Women are not always victims and men are not always perpetrators of violence, rather men and women can both be active agents in perpetrating and resisting violence (Lentin, 1997; Moser & Clark, 2001). As our research demonstrates, Iraqi women in the diaspora played an important role in lobbying for U.S. military action against Iraq, whilst some women inside Iraq have supported political parties implicated in sectarian violence as well as armed groups fighting U.S. occupation forces (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009). Conversely, men can also be victims of gender-specific violence during wartime, where sexual violence is used to undermine the 'enemy's' masculinity and morale. In Abu Ghraib prison, in Iraq, sexualized torture was perpetrated by U.S. female soldiers against Iraqi prisoners based on racist assumptions that Muslim men would suffer more shame because of their assumed hostility to gender equality (Nusair, 2008).

Women and Political Participation

Contrary to policy and mainstream media accounts, Iraqi women have very limited political influence and power to contribute to decision-making in post-invasion Iraq, and this situation has worsened over time. While there were six female-headed ministries from 2005-2006, no woman has been appointed to a senior post in the new 44-member cabinet since elections in 2010. During the last years of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, only two ministries of state were offered to women: one was without portfolio and she lost her position as part of a previous downsizing of government in 2011 (in an attempt to placate protests against ineffective government), 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.[8] In addition, women have rarely been involved in important political negotiations leading up to and since the ousting of Saddam Hussein.

Partly, this is a direct consequence of the re-emergence of political authoritarianism under former Prime Minister al-Maliki since 2006, in which all political actors have experienced systematic side-lining. In turn, there has continued to be a lack of rule of law, widespread political violence and rampant corruption, which have a negative impact upon politics. However, women are particularly marginalized in a context where security and military measures continue to be prioritized as solutions to ongoing political violence and social attitudes have shifted towards more conservative gender norms (as discussed above), with women being perceived as incapable of leading or strategizing, or as vulnerable to political

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intimidation and violence (Pratt, 2011).

A women's quota of 25 percent exists for the legislature, which translated into 82 women elected to parliament out of a total of 325 seats in the 2010 elections. Unfortunately, this has not necessarily translated into a greater voice for Iraqi women. What has clearly emerged from our intersectional feminist lens 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 US occupation. 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 Sunni and Shia backgrounds and currently shape political struggles amongst Iraqi women activists involved in the political process inside Iraq.

Most of the women parliamentarians are the wives, sisters or daughters of male politicians eager to fill the allocated seats with women without having to engage with wider issues of gender equality and women's rights. Indeed, many Iraqi women's rights activists with whom we have spoken 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 all Iraqi women (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2008a).

Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi (appointed in 2014 to replace the unpopular Maliki) tried to reform the existing corrupt and authoritarian political system, largely due to pressure from the

Iraqi population as evidenced in large-scale protests all over the country in the summer of 2015. A boost to women's political representation was the appointment of Baghdad's first female mayor Dr Thikra Alwash in February 2015. Yet, women have continued to be side-lined in both parliament and government with only one female minister, Dr Adila Mahmoud Hussein, appointed as Minister of Health.

The situation in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is slightly different for female parliamentarians and politicians, given that they have played a more active role in shaping legislation and policy, partly as a result of the KRG leadership wishing to appear more progressive to its Western allies and also because of Kurdish women's history of participation in the Kurdish nationalist struggle (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011). Many Kurdish women's rights activists, however, have also complained about tokenism and lack of proper consultation, in addition to the small number of women in decision-making positions (Al-Ali & Pratt 2011).

Looking at Western media representations, speeches by Western politicians and policy documents, we found that dominant discourses[9] 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 reduced to either victims or heroines, as we briefly highlighted above (see also, Al-Ali & Pratt, 2008b).

Despite the systematic marginalization and side-lining of Iraqi women in official political institutions and processes, women have not merely stood by but have mobilised 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 since the end of 2010, are asking for greater transparency and an end to corruption and political authoritarianism (Al-Ali 2013).

Women have participated in the protests in Baghdad's Tahrir Square and in the Kurdish region, particularly in Sulimaniya. In June 2011, a group of women demonstrating for peace and democracy were physically attacked, including sexually, in 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 and arrested; some disappeared and some organizers were killed, in what many activists allege are targeted assassinations ordered by former Prime Minister al-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 al-Maliki's allegation that some Iraqi human rights organizations were fronts for terrorists.[10]

More specific mobilization around women's rights has also 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 against Article 41 of the 2005 constitution, which undermined the previously existing Personal Status Code, that is, the set of laws governing marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance, as well as against the penal code that does 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.

Iraqi women have been able to build on a long history of women's rights activism since the turn of the 20th century as well as many years of political mobilization in opposition movements against the regime of Saddam Hussein. 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. Very few activists, however, make a link between increased privatisation and neo-liberal economic policies on the one hand, and the increase in women's unemployment and the feminisation of poverty on the other hand. Only those linked to leftist political parties articulate a critique of women's empowerment as promoted by many donor agencies, especially those linked to the U.S., such as USAID. There seems to be a widespread acceptance amongst women activists of a liberal rights approach, in which legal rights, women's leadership training and economic entrepreneurship, are seen as the pathways to Iraqi women's empowerment.

Reflecting on our work
As transnational 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 intersecting 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, Iraqi society, and the occupying forces. In our wider

research on Iraq, we have examined several of these dominant discourses, which neglect the social, cultural and economic complexity of Iraq, thereby ignoring, generalising, essentialising or instrumentalising women. If we are to avoid creating knowledge that reproduces these power structures, then we must find alternative ways of talking about women in Iraq that goes beyond simplistic binary categories of 'victims' versus 'heroines', recognizing that Iraqi women are vulnerable to gender-based violence and discrimination but that they are also active in mobilizing and campaigning against such injustices, as well as the reality that many Iraqi women may identify according to their religious and/or political affiliation before their gender. 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.

Pointing to the long history of Iraqi women's rights activism and the wider context of women's and feminist movements in the Middle East and other predominantly Muslim societies challenges the idea that women's rights – or human rights for that matter - belong to western civilizations. In the Iraqi context, just as in so many other places, historically, the argument that women's rights belong to "the West" is put forward by those actors seeking to resist Western encroachment. Yet, Iraqi women's rights activists are not merely mimicking 'Western agendas' but are responding to issues relevant to women within a specific national and local context. As many non-western feminists have argued, women's rights activism and feminism have been part of the national political landscape of many formerly colonized countries as well as those experiencing neo-colonial ventures today (Nayaran 1997). Cultural contexts are internally contested and women's rights activists all over the world challenge patriarchal and authoritarian interpretations of what a specific culture should be. This is also evident in the Iraqi context where contestations over Iraqi and/or Muslim culture is an

element of the wider struggle over power, control and resources, complicated and intensified by US involvement. Conservative Islamist and tribal leaders are engaged in often violent contestations about resources and control which are regularly fought in the name of religion, culture and traditions. Control of women's bodies, gender norms, and relationships between men and women become core to these struggles.

Many people would argue that we cannot understand the processes and developments inside Iraq without paying attention to neo-liberal agendas and globalising capitalism, neo-conservative notions of empire building and the so-called War on Terror. Many people also recognise the logic of the arms industry, which creates a perpetual demand for war and armed conflict. Inspired by the works of feminist scholars like Cynthia Cockburn (2010) and Cynthia Enloe (2004), we argue that gender ideologies and gender relations are part of the bigger picture of war and violence. As Cynthia Cockburn argues: '[G]ender relations are right there alongside class relations and ethno-national relations, intersecting with them, complicating them, sometimes even prevailing over them, in the origins, development and perpetuation of war' (2010, pp. 231-232). Throughout our wider work, we have shown not only how the construction of particular types of gender identities and relations are central to war and violence in Iraq, but also how particular gender identities and relations are constructed in intersection with other axes of difference and inequality, which are a result of geopolitical competition in post-invasion Iraq.

Any analysis of what went wrong in Iraq must put gender firmly on the agenda, from challenging the very premise that military intervention will lead to women's liberation to exploring the various ways war, violence, occupation, armed resistance, humanitarian crisis and poverty affect men and women. A gendered analysis subverts state-centered notions of

security, which mostly disregard human rights and human welfare, and focuses our attention on the security of individual men, women and their families. It demonstrates how the security concerns of one state (the US, in the wake of 9/11) can create unimagined insecurities for ordinary people of another state (whether Iraq or Afghanistan). It also shows how these insecurities can fuel gender and other social inequalities, with devastating consequences for society.

Given the level of violence and lack of security, the cessation of armed conflict must be a priority and a first step for establishing a more lasting peace. However, the cessation of armed conflict does not in and of itself signify peace. Cynthia Enloe (1988) famously stated over two decades ago that peace for women requires more than the cessation of armed conflict; there must also be an end to gender-based violence and freedom for women, including freedom to participate in all levels of decision-making.

A gendering of peace and post-conflict reconstruction does not merely focus on women's legal rights or counting the number of women in parliament. Our intersectional and transnational feminist approach diverges from an imperialist feminist, or even a liberal feminist, approach by paying close attention to the intersecting structures of power and inequalities and our own involvement in them. In the Iraqi context, this has meant paying attention to the impact of neo-colonial and imperialist policies; exploring the significance of neo-liberal economics, particularly privatisation and the role of multi-national companies; analysing the ways in which sectarian and communal differences intersect with gender to produce particular consequences for women; and finally looking carefully at the newly emerging political authoritarianism and militarism in Iraq. Given our findings on Iraq, real peace cannot be achieved without an end to the global and local inequalities that are linked to

imperialism, neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and militarism. A legalistic focus on rights or gender quotas, as happened under the U.S. occupation of Iraq, allows politicians to give lip service to 'women's rights', whilst ignoring whether such measures lead to tangible improvements for women on the ground.

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[1] The Iraqi woman blogger Riverbend and the writer-activist Haifa Zangana published

personal reflections and observations of the impact of the US-led occupation on Iraqi women

(see Riverbend 2005 and 2006; Zangana 2007). Other books that address women in Iraq in the modern period include Efrati 2012, Al-Khayat 1990, Mojab 2001, Al-Ali 2007 and Al-Jawaheri 2008. Cynthia Enloe's 2010 book explores the impact of the Iraq war and occupation on Iraqi and US women.

[2] 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>.

[3] See Efrati, N. (2005) and Al-Ali, N. (2007) for more details.

[4] Women for a Free Iraq is a group of Iraqi women living in exile, formed in January 2003 to raise awareness of women's experience of persecution under Saddam Hussein. The campaign received funding from the Washington-based Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. Though the foundation is nominally non-partisan, its president, Clifford May, is a former Republican Party operative and its board is stacked with prominent neo-conservatives.

[7] State of the Union Address, 2005. Accessed on 31 March 2006,

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/print/20050202-11.html>

[6] A so-called honour-based crime is an act of violence against a woman perpetrated by a family member as punishment for what the perpetrator believes to be the woman's transgression of sexual propriety, ranging from refusal of an arranged marriage to speaking to a male who is not a relative. For example, see Welchman and Hossain 2005 for further details.

[7] See also Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights, *Institutionalized Violence Against Women and Girls in Iraq*, 2011, http://www.scribd.com/doc/49420024/Institutionalized-iolence-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*

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[8] NCCI, *Iraq's Female Face,* Op-Ed 15 November 2011,

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http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/world/middleeast/13baghdad.html.

[9] Here, we approach discourse in its Foucauldian sense as both an expression of and

constitutive of social relations of power (for example, see Cook 2008).

[10]http://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