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**IRAQI WOMEN: MECHANISMS OF  
OVERSHADOWING, SUBORDINATION AND  
INFERIORIZATION**

**by**

**Awatef T. Rasheed**

**A Thesis Submitted to Saint Mary's University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts  
in Women's Studies**

**at**

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**Abstract**

This thesis uses a feminist perspective to analyse the local and global conditions that affect Iraqi women's lives and the history of women's movements. It investigates the mechanisms that overshadow, subordinate and inferiorize Iraqi women in both the public and private realms. These mechanisms of women's oppression are rooted in old and new forms of patriarchy which have taken on different forms in times of war and peace.

In this thesis, I combine reflections on personal experiences as an Iraqi who lived the majority of her life in Iraq, and research in the available literature, both political and feminist. I introduce evidence of social and religious mechanisms, state mechanisms and global mechanisms which oppress Iraqi women, including sexuality as well as violence, such as rape, blackmailing, and sex trafficking. I draw attention to women's oppression during the catastrophic effects of wars and the negative consequences of patriarchal political and economic power on women's health and security. This thesis also emphasizes women's resistance and agency, the role of women's empowerment on the grassroots level and the anticipated contribution of women and women's organizations to advance women's rights and feminist scholarship in Iraq.

October 6, 2008

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## Glossary of Arabic & Islamic Terms

**Al-Da'wa Party:** The major religious/ political party in Iraq. It derived its name from the word Al-Da'wa; that is, inviting others to Islam = missionary work.

**Al-Rabita:** League for the Defence of Women's Rights.

**Anfal:** Iraqi Government's Anfal operations in the Kurdish northern area. The word "Anfal" is taken from a Qur'anic Ayah, which requires the believers to be both spiritually and materially prepared to face the enemies of Allah.

**Atthawra:** *The Revolution Newspaper*, the major newspaper in Iraq.

**Ayat Allah:** Ayah is a miracle and a sign. The Qur'an is itself considered to be a miracle. Each verse or sentence is called an Ayah or a miracle. Khumainy was given this title to suggest his superior position.

**Ba'ath/ Baa'th:** The only party that ruled Iraq from 1968 until the most recent war in 2003.

**Ba'athist:** A member of the Baa'th party.

**Dirham:** Nickel.

**Dar al – tufula:** House of Childhood.

**Dishdasha:** Men's long and wide dress.

**Eiqal:** part of the Arab men's head cover.

**Fasl:** Settlement of a dispute.

**Fasliyat:** Women given and enslaved according to Fasl marriage if the dispute involved or would have involved the shedding of blood.

**Fatwa:** Legal opinion concerning law in Islam. Fatwa is usually issued by religious clerics depending on their own interpretation.

**Feda'iyye Saddam,** A militia created in 1994 by 'Uday Saddam Hussein, used swords to execute the victims in front of their homes. Some victims were reportedly killed for political reasons.

**Fitna; Fitnah:** Civil strife; war; riots.

**Hadith:** Reports on the sayings and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad or what he witnessed and approved are called Hadith. These are the real explanation, interpretation,

and the living example of the Prophet for teachings of the Qur'an. His sayings are found in books called the Hadith books.

**Iraqi intifada:** Iraqi uprising in March 1991 after the first Gulf War.

**Istimta':** To derive benefit. Any benefit derived from a person or from wealth, property, assets, etc. According to Arabic grammar, it is the root of any word that has the meaning of seeking. Based on this lexical explanation, the simple and straight sense of the Qur'anic expression, **Istamta'tum** (you have benefited), is understood by the entire Muslim ummah (population) from the revered early elders to their successors and followers. But, Shia sec. says that it means the conventional mut'a and, according to its adherents, this Ayat proves that muta'a is halaal (lawful).<sup>1</sup>

**Jihadists: Mujahdeen:** Someone who is active and fights for Islam; A Muslim fighter.

**Khums:** One of the obligatory taxes imposed by Islam upon its followers.

**Kofiya:** The head cover of Arab men.

**Mahallah:** Residential area in Baghdad.

**Mahram**<sup>2</sup>: In Islamic *Sharia* legal terminology, a *mahram* (also transliterated *mahrīm* or *maharem*) is an unmarriageable kin with whom sexual intercourse would be considered incestuous, a punishable taboo. Current usage of the term covers a wider range of people and mostly deals with the dress code practice of *hijab*. Who is *mahram*? Anyone whom a Muslim is not allowed to marry is *mahram*, if they are of the opposite sex and have reached puberty. A woman's opposite-sex *mahrims* fall into four categories (three categories in the strict-sense definition that does not count one's spouse). Note that *mahrims* for a man can be derived in a similar manner:

1. Permanent or blood *mahrims* with whom you become *mahram* by blood relationship: Father, grandfather, great-grandfather and so on; brother; son, grandson, great-grandson; uncle, parents' uncle, grandparents' uncle and so on; nephew, grandnephew, great-grandnephew and so on.

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<sup>1</sup> This is Maulana Mufti Muhammad Shafi's interpretation of Muta'a. Islamic sec. (Mathahib) have different interpretations for this. Wahabi and Sunni sec. do not believe in Muta'a marriage and oppose it; however, they believe in Misyar marriage, which is another kind of temporary marriage.

<sup>2</sup> Encyclopaedia of the Orient: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahram>

2. In-law *mahrims* with whom you become *mahram* by marrying someone: Father-in-law; son-in-law; step-father (mother's husband) if their marriage is consummated; step-son (husband's son) if her marriage is consummated.
3. *Radha'* or milk-suckling *mahrims* with whom you become *mahram* because of being nursed by a woman. When a woman acts as a wetnurse (that is, she breast feeds an infant that is not her own child) for a certain amount of time under certain conditions, she becomes the child's *radha* mother and all said about blood *mahrims* applies here, like *radha* father/ mother, *radha* sister/brother, milk-mother, etc.

**Misyar:** Marriage institution in Islam, allowing for a lesser form of relationship between man and women than normal marriage. *Zawaj Misyar* is an official relationship between man and women. The two people in relationship neither live together nor the man is economically responsible. *Misyar* allows the man to have a normal wife in addition to his *Misyar* wife(s). The *Misyar* wife is expected to live with her parents, and her husband can visit her according to a predetermined schedule.<sup>3</sup>

**Mukhabarat:** The Iraqi Intelligence Service.

**Muta'a:** Temporary marriage in Islam, still practiced in Shi'a Islam, but abolished in Sunni. The Sunni institution of *Misyar* marriage, practiced in Saudi Arabia and Egypt has many similarities with *Muta'a*. Arab lexicographers have defined *Muta'a* as "marriage of pleasure". There are indications of temporary marriage in the Koran, which deals with the regulations when a man wishes to change one wife for another. It is clear from this ayah that the gift handed to the first wife cannot be retracted.<sup>4</sup>

**Peshmerga:** Kurdish militia (Kurdish language)

**Qadi:** Religious judge.

**Salafis/ Salafism :** Predecessors or early generations, is a generic term, depicting a Sunni Islamic school of thought that takes the pious ancestors (*Salaf*) of the patristic period of early Islam as exemplary models. *Salafis* view the first three generations of Muslims, who are Muhammad's companions, and the two succeeding generations after them, the

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<sup>3</sup> Encyclopaedia of the Orient: <http://lexicorient.com/e.o/misyar.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Encyclopaedia of the Orient: <http://lexicorient.com/e.o/muta.htm>

Tabi'in and the Taba' at-Tabi'in, as examples of how Islam should be practiced. This principle is derived from the following hadith by Muhammad: "The people of my generation are the best, then those who follow them, and then those who follow the latter" (i.e. the first three generations of Muslims). Perhaps the principal tenet of Salafism is that Islam was perfect and complete during the days of Muhammad and his companions, but that undesirable innovations have been added over the later centuries due to materialist and cultural influences. Salafism seeks to revive a practice of Islam that more closely resembles the religion during the time of Muhammad. Salafism has also been described as a simplified version of Islam, in which adherents follow a few commands and practices. Salafism is often used interchangeably with "Wahhabism." Adherents usually reject this term either because it is considered derogatory and/or because they consider Salafism a broader movement whose members are not necessarily Wahhabi.<sup>5</sup>

**Shii/ Shia/ Shi'a/ Shi'ites/ Shi'is/Shi'ism:** Shi'a Islam, also Shi'ite Islam or Shi'ism, is the second largest denomination based on the Islamic faith after Sunni Islam. Shias adhere to the teachings of Muhammad and the religious guidance of his family (who are referred to as the Ahl al-Bayt) or his descendents known as Shi'a Imams. Muhammad's bloodline continues only through his daughter Fatima Zahra and cousin Ali which alongside Muhammad's grandsons are the Ahl al-Bayt. Thus, Shi'as consider Muhammad's descendents as the true source of guidance while considering the first three ruling Sunni caliphs a historic occurrence and not something attached to faith. The singular/adjective form is Shi'i and refers to a follower of the faction of Ali according to the Shia I Shia Islam, like Sunni Islam, has at times been divided into many branches; however, only three of these currently have a significant number of followers. The best known and the one with most adherents is the Twelvers (ithna'asharya) which have a large percentage in Iran 90% and Iraq; the others are Ismaili, Sevener, and Zaidiyyah. Alawites and Druzes consider themselves Shias, although this is sometimes disputed by mainstream Shias.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia: The First Encyclopaedia:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salafi#Distinctive\\_beliefs\\_and\\_practices](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salafi#Distinctive_beliefs_and_practices)

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia: The First Encyclopaedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shi%27a\\_Islam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shi%27a_Islam)

**Sunni Muslims:** The largest denomination of Islam. They are also referred to as Ahl as-Sunnah wa'l-Jama'a (people of the example (*of Muhammad*) and the community) which implies that they are the majority, or Ahl as-Sunnah for short. The word Sunni comes from the word *Sunnah*, which means the words and actions or example of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. They represent the branch of Islam that accepted the caliphate of Abu Bakr due to him being chosen by Shurah in the *caliphate*, being the first distinguishing factor in Sunni Islam.<sup>7</sup>

**Wahabi, Wahabist/ Wahhabism:** (*Al-Wahhābīyya* Wahabism, Wahabbism) is a branch of Islam practiced by those who follow the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, after whom the movement is named. Ibn Abdul Wahhab, who reintroduced Shariah (Islamic) law to the Arabian peninsula, was influenced by the writings of scholars such as Ahmad ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyya. This theology is the dominant form found in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar, as well as some pockets of Somalia, Algeria, Palestine and Mauritania. The term "Wahhabi" (*Wahhabiyya*) is rarely used by the people it is used to describe. Some use Wahhabism and Salafism interchangeably, though this is speculative and refuted by "Salafism". Others understand Wahhabism as ultra-conservative Salafism. According to John Esposito, "Wahabism" is among the most conservative forms of Islam. Others have described the doctrine as inspiring violence and intolerance.<sup>8</sup>

**Zawaj al hibah:** Marriage of hiba (giving as a gift): hiba: is one of the means of distributing one's assets in Islamic financial planning. It may be used either in one's lifetime or in estate distribution of the deceased. Men could gift their daughters or sisters to other men through hiba marriage. Socially, women who are gifted through the hiba marriage become vulnerable to the social consequences of this degrading kind of marriage.

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<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia: The First Encyclopaedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunni\\_Muslims](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunni_Muslims)

<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia: The First Encyclopaedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wahabism>

## Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the patriarchal mechanisms that overshadow, subordinate, and inferiorize Iraqi women. The mechanisms in essence ban Iraqi women from effective participation in society and keep women invisible. They are tangled, strongly linked to each other, and mutually implicating. These mechanisms are political, economic and social. They reflect imbalances of power at various levels of analysis.

These conflicts over power are in fact “male-to-male conflicts.” Even if women are involved in the conflict over powers, their roles are functional to men. Men overshadow women, whether the women are victims or leaders, and fail to take leadership to end women’s oppression on local, national, and global levels. In addition to their negligence to women’s issues, political and social male leaders have taken advantage of women’s victimization to back up an unreliable political agenda, including creating more wars, militarizing the society, and reinforcing patriarchal relations.

The analysis of this thesis draws on reflections from my own personal journey and that of other Iraqi women, as well as from the available political and feminist literature. For this thesis, I have divided the mechanisms of overshadowing, subordinating and inferiorizing Iraqi women into three categories or themes:

1. Social/ Religious Mechanisms Subordinating and Inferiorizing Women.<sup>1</sup>
2. State Mechanisms Overshadowing and Subordinating Women.
3. Global Mechanisms Subordinating and Inferiorizing Women.

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<sup>1</sup> In Arabic social research, the concept “social” refers to the set of communal shared norms that rule the society. In the Arabic feminist literature, it is used interchangeably with the concept “cultural.”

These mechanisms are organized in hierarchical ways, which reinforce one another. Thus, women in Iraq are both uniquely and doubly vulnerable, to the taken-for-granted language and “culture power” of religion and to that of a totalitarian state. The state of Iraq, in turn, is vulnerable to global powers in a hierarchical system. In this thesis, I explore Iraqi women’s roles and position from 1900 to 2004 with more detailed emphasis on the later parts of this period when massive political and social changes have taken place.

Iraq is by majority a Muslim country: 97% Muslims, and 3 % of Christian or other.<sup>2</sup> As such, its citizens and the state have been governed primarily by Islamic laws. Iraq has, however, differed from fundamentalist Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia because secular political movements in Iraq conceptualized women’s emancipation.

The approach of this thesis comes partly from Suad Joseph who describes gender relations to states in Middle Eastern countries. With respect to Iraq, she conceives of women as being subjugated to two forms of patriarchy:

All this interaction is brought to the fore in terms of the condition of Iraqi women at the close of the twentieth century. As citizens, Iraqi women are members of two political communities: the state of Iraq and the state in Iraq. They are subordinate members of a national patriarchy that is itself a subordinate member of an international patriarchy.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, Iraqi women have suffered various complex forms of patriarchal domination inside Iraq. In addition to women having had to undergo the gender-based subordination of a male/female relationship within their societies and families, women experience other

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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopaedia: *Demography of Iraq*:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics\\_of\\_Iraq](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Iraq)

<sup>3</sup> Joseph, Suad (2000), *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press): p.211

forms of subordination and inferiorization based on “relations of ruling.”<sup>4</sup> For instance, there is an inferiorization of female/female relationships within their social order (older/younger and rural/urban), economic classes (rich/poor), and an unequal female/female relationship within women’s political organizations. Some of these relationships are based on local and cultural authority and some of them reflect politics of state. Similar to these systematic ruling relations<sup>5</sup> subordinating women inside Iraq, all those dominating powers were subjugated to the head of the state of Iraq (1979-2003), Saddam Hussein, who, in turn, was subordinate to the leading global and international powers.

After the revolution of 1958, the Iraqi communist party, for instance, lobbied and strove through its women’s organization (The Iraqi Women’s League) to reform the Iraqi Personal Law. The law was to some extent based on Islamic law, but both the population and the government for the most part tended to lean towards a secular approach, which was supportive of personal freedoms until Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. By then, Saddam was allied to fundamentalist Islamic groups and promoted a more dominant religious agenda.

Throughout this period [1990-2003], women have been politically excluded from leadership positions and kept away from advocating gender concerns. Within the system of ruling relations, overshadowing women reflects the inherited social and religious patriarchal relations, which grant superiority to men over women by virtue of their gender. Subordination, therefore, is a social order of relations that positions women as unequal to men and inferior to them.

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, E. Dorothy (1987), *The Everyday World As Problematic, A Feminist Sociology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press): p.5

<sup>5</sup> This concept has been inspired by Dorothy E. Smith.

In this thesis, I reflect on women's oppression in times of peace and war and on the historical and contemporary social processes which create and maintain this gendered oppression. The thesis points to both women's oppression and women's resilience and agency. Nevertheless, as discussed in the conclusion, women's psychology at times of war and the injustices following conflict situations have not been given adequate scholarly attention. Women who live under the horror of fighting and bombing, and have to suffer consequences of the destruction of infrastructure and lack of services, have to deal with their needs as individuals, needs of their children and families, and restrictions of their traditional communities. This health issue urgently requires further research as well as attention and action.

### **Theoretical Approaches**

This thesis research employs an integrative feminist theoretical framework combining radical feminist and Marxist elements to explore Iraqi women's oppression, the mechanisms of overshadowing, subordination and inferiorization<sup>6</sup> of women, and the absolute credibility offered to men by virtue of their gender. It also analyzes the ruling relations and unbalanced powers within the political, religious, and socio-economic realms at the national, international, and global levels.

My personal experience and the historical evidence indicate that this type of transformational analysis is the best way to address the oppression experienced by Iraqi

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<sup>6</sup> Overshadowing: refers to the superiority of men over women within the political system and parties; subordination: refers to women's lower position in the social/religious patriarchal structures; inferiorization: refers to the process of using the social mechanisms to create new mechanisms of subordination

women, as well as the mechanisms that perpetuate their overshadowing, subordination and inferiorization.

Iraqi Marxist feminists have played a significant leadership role in the struggle for women's liberation in Iraq. Their role cannot be underestimated. Marxism, however, cannot be considered totally compatible with a feminist framework given that it emphasizes class differences and economics as the main reason for people's oppression, including women. For Marxists, gender is not a major factor. Radical feminists, on the other hand, regard gender and sexuality as the main reason for women's oppression and tend to ignore class issues. The relationship between gender and class cannot be neglected when discussing women in the Middle East because the root of gender inequality is the result of a combination of socio-political, economic and cultural-religious imbalances at both the local and global levels.

Women's oppression in Iraq and the social, religious, and political mechanisms of their subordination, require an integrative analysis as it is expressed by the Canadian feminist Angela Miles, who explains how the failure to apply an integrative analysis limits some liberal, Marxist and radical views:

There are, of course, many feminists who do not see feminism as a politics, which must presume to transform and broaden liberatory struggle in general through the affirmation of a new set of female-associated integrative values and a new vision of the world. Some liberal feminists perceive their struggle as simple pressure for the extension of civil and economic rights to women. Some Marxist, socialist and anarchist feminists fail to subject existing radical politics and definitions to question. They push instead for the incorporation of women and women's issues into an already existing and presumed complete framework of analysis and struggle. Some radical and lesbian feminists refuse this male-defined framework, not to transform and transcend it in the development of a new and more universal, though feminized, radicalism, but to focus

only on women and women's issues as the necessarily separate ground of feminist struggle.<sup>7</sup>

This integration of radical feminist and Marxist feminist theories is common among some feminist researchers and activists in the Middle East. Few references to these feminists and activists from the Middle East interpret feminism from Marxist analysis as Angela Miles puts it:

Feminism is the cutting edge of (that) transformation, transcending and incorporating Marxism's earlier truths to reflect the yet more universal values expressed in a broader popular struggle waged by a redefined and feminized humanity. I have called the tendency of feminism, which most clearly articulates this integrative and feminizing project "Integrative Feminism."<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, Islamic feminists, who are on the rise in the Middle East, are pushing for reforms within an Islamic framework while adhering to the "sacred" Islamic laws (or *Shari'a*). Emerging with the rise of a political Islam, Islamic feminism makes great efforts to search within both the Qur'an and the Hadith to prove the existence of gender equality in Islam. Egyptian Amina Wadud has broken the tradition of having men-only prayers' imams by her heading to a Friday prayer in 1996. Islamic feminist Margot Badran points out:

Muslim women and men used Islamic reformist arguments to break the linkage of Islam with repressive practices imposed in the name of religion. This paved the way for changes in women's lives and in the relations between sexes. Soon feminism became enmeshed in the rising discourse of secular nationalism which called for equal rights of all Egyptians, be they Muslim or Christian, in a free and independent nation. In short, feminism and Islam were allies.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Miles, Angela & Finn, Geraldine (1982), *Feminism in Canada: From Pressure to Politics* (Montreal: Black Rose Books): p. 12

<sup>8</sup> Miles, Angela & Finn, Geraldine (1982), *Feminism in Canada: From Pressure to Politics* (Montreal: Black Rose Books): p. 11-12

<sup>9</sup> Badran, Margot (2000), *Exploring Islamic Feminism* (Washington D.C: Middle East Program, Georgetown University): URL: [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1426&fuseaction=topics.event\\_summary&event\\_id=42775](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1426&fuseaction=topics.event_summary&event_id=42775)

Marxist feminists who opposed Islam were combated brutally and issued with death threats. Dr. Nawal El-Sa'adawi, a Marxist radical feminist from Egypt who dared to oppose some of these laws, faced continual threats and her name appeared on the death list of Islamic fundamentalist groups. Perhaps because of such threats, El-Sa'adawi and feminist Fatima Mernissi have toned down their comments of late. As Miriam Cooke writes:

Djbar, Mernissi, and El-Sa'adawi speak with the tongues of their mothers and grandmothers to challenge traditional interpretations of authorities' texts. They deconstruct the discourses that have served to construct norms that exclude them as women. At the same time, they continue to defend their communities against detractors. They are balancing national, transnational, and feminist agendas in their attempts to construct a society hospitable to them.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, feminists in Muslim countries are often compelled to tread carefully to avoid violent repercussions. Their attempts to critique or question the legitimacy of the conservative *Shari'a* laws are not only silenced, but they themselves are often brutalized for daring to voice their criticism. Fatima Mernissi, who lived in Harem and questioned Islamic Law, finally avoided direct criticism of Islam and the attribution of its impact on structuring gender relations. Mernissi states:

If women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran<sup>11</sup> nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite ... not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated, but the manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies....<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cooke, Miriam (2001), *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature* (New York: Routledge Press): p. 80

<sup>11</sup> The Holy book of Islam; some interpreters write it as "Koran", "Qura'n", and "Qura'an".

<sup>12</sup> Mernissi, Fatima (1987), *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*; trans. by Mary Jo Lakeland (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company): p. 24

Like Fatima Mernissi, Asma Barlas, author of “*Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*,” presented an argument that patriarchy is not an inherent part of the message of the Qur’an but a characteristic of its male interpreter. She suggests a re-reading of the Qur’an and Hadith:

We cannot reinterpret Islam without rereading the Qur’an, and many Muslims do in fact recognize the urgency of such an exercise given its abuses at the hands of many Muslim clerics and states to oppress women.<sup>13</sup>

However, a few courageous Muslim feminists have expressed their concerns in regard to sexism in Islam and argued the uncertainty of Qur’anic and Hadith statements, especially those related to women. Voices as those of Canada’s Irshad Maniji (*The Trouble with Islam*), Somalia’s Ayaan Hirsi Ali (*The Factory of Sons*), and India’s Asraa Q. Nomani (*Standing Alone in Mecca*) are among these feminists. Muslims are not allowed to question the contradictory statements of the Qur’an. Muslim ‘obedience’ to their religion is obligatory and manifest. Irshad Maniji writes:

Since the Koran is a bundle of contradictions, at least when it comes to women, we have every reason to think.<sup>14</sup>

Marxist feminists in Iraq have attempted to work around a denial of religious and cultural sexism in society. Religion, for Marxists, does not provide equal participation for women in the labour force. For Marxism, equal participation of both men and women in the labour force promotes economic development and social equality. Religions keep women dependent on men economically and socially. Marxism, in essence, places most emphasis on an economic perspective, and it links social progress to economic

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<sup>13</sup> Barlas, Asma (2002), *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran* (Texas: University of Texas Press): p.210

<sup>14</sup> Maniji, Irshad (2003), *The Trouble with Islam: A Wake-Up Call for Honesty and Change* (Toronto: Random House): p. 40

development. Iraqi Marxists, therefore, developed policies and actions to eradicate cultural and religious sexism in order to emancipate women in Iraq. Like other Marxists in the world, Iraqi Marxists considered that Marxism is a valid theory for social change in Iraqi society, as stated by Tony Cliff:

For Marx and Engels the emancipation of women demanded not only the entry of women into social production, but also the socialisation of the care of children, the old, invalids and others. The present sexual division of labour is hierarchical, placing men in superior and women in subordinate positions. The hierarchical principle has to be eradicated, together with the division of labour between the sexes. This is a prerequisite for women to attain social equality.<sup>15</sup>

Iraqi Marxist feminists focused on women's education, employment, and social status beginning with a denial of the stereotypical Islamic-based marriage rules and rituals. Marxists called for a rejection of the Islamic dress code that covers women from head to toe. In 1958, they also called for a change in the Iraqi Personal Law. The new government of that time, which was replacing the monarchists, responded to that specific call in 1959, which led to significant success in terms of women's emancipation, as will be discussed below.

Marxist feminists also reject postmodernism since it encourages conservatism as Pauline Marie Rosenau notes:

These Marxists consider post-modernism itself decadent, politically regressive (Davis 1985:109), even reactionary (Eagleton 1981; Foley 1985: 114, 118; Malkan 1987:154). Postmodernism is said to fit with the culture and ideology of the new conservatism and the global wave of religious fundamentalism.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cliff, Tony (1984), "Class Struggle and Women's Liberation"; Chapter 15 in *Communism and Liberation of Women* (Website: Marxists Internet Archive).

URL:<http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1984/women/15-social.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Rosenau, Pauline Marie (1992), *Post-Modernism and the Social Science: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions* (California: Princeton University Press): p. 105

The emergence of fundamentalism and rejection of modernization and modernity are the most serious outcomes of postmodernism; Haideh Moghissi correctly argues:

This absurd and pathetic result explains the reaction to modernization by large sections of the population in the Middle East and North Africa and hence their call is an alternative that has given rise, in this part of the world, to religious fundamentalism.<sup>17</sup>

The integrative feminist analytical approach offers a perspective to address women's lives in Iraq, the nature of their struggle and their movement(s) as well as the challenges and complexities they currently face. To this end, I fully share the inspiring words of Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland:

Feminists have a political responsibility to tell accurate stories of the nature of violence, why it exists in the forms that it does, and how its various forms are made meaningful, have effects and interact with other social factors.<sup>18</sup>

### **Methodological Considerations**

Methodologically, this thesis is based on reflections and analysis of my personal experiences back in Iraq, and the experiences shared with other Iraqi women. This reflective and analytical approach, which combines the experiential with the theoretical, is, in my view, especially appropriate at this stage of my feminist inquiry. Subjectivity in research may not be to the liking of those who require that analysis be objective and “scientific.” However, I am in agreement with Ruth Hubbard’s comment on the importance of subjectivity in feminist research:

What I am saying is that scientists are unwilling to accept feminist insights and methods not only because of traditional gender biases, but also because feminist knowledge tends to be grounded in practice, since we

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<sup>17</sup> Moghissi, Haideh (2002), *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Post-Modern Analysis* (London and New York: Zed Books): p. 54

<sup>18</sup> Ramazanoglu, Caroline with Holland, Janet (2002), *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices* (London: SAGE Publications): p. 42

devalue the separation between theory and practice, head and hand. The kinds of decontextualized and alienated knowledge science offers are hard to reconcile with feminist principles.<sup>19</sup>

My position in Iraq as a TV broadcaster,<sup>20</sup> educator and wife of a Brigadier General in the military put me in contact with women who belonged to various social classes and ethnic groups. I was, therefore, uniquely positioned to hear the stories of gender discrimination that were varied and shocking in their scope.

As I was born, lived, and worked in Iraq, I had to be “within” the social systems, the political and economic changes, and the religious implications. My reflections are of an “insider” rather than an “outsider.” I had roles as a female in a Muslim society, as a teacher and a journalist, as an eyewitness to honour-killing and rape incidents, and as an educated woman that has both the knowledge and real experience.

However, while inside Iraq, I did not have a language or authority to speak out. I was not able to advocate my rights. As a woman, I should have received equal treatment as an equal human being in a democratic social and political environment. I was not offered the tools to advocate my rights including the language and the power.

Incidents within my own family also illustrate profoundly the subordinate position of women in Iraqi society. To belittle such narratives because they are “subjective” hardly seems appropriate. In this context, Judith Cook and Mary Margaret Fonow state:

An assumption of feminist methodology is that knowledge must be elicited and analyzed in a way that can be used by women to alter oppressive and exploitative conditions in their society. This means that

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<sup>19</sup> Hubbard, Ruth (1997), “In A Science Restructured Along Feminist Lines, Would the Laws of Gravity No Longer Hold?”; in *Doing Feminism* (Michigan: The Women’s Studies Program at Michigan State University): p. 21

<sup>20</sup> See Chapter One.

research must be designed to provide a vision of the future as well as a structural picture of the present.<sup>21</sup>

As a feminist who has gained the language and the freedom of speech, I therefore have a responsibility to tell the stories and voice the concerns of Iraqi women. Unlike myself, they do not have the privilege of education and the freedom necessary to express their oppression from a feminist perspective.

Integrative feminism offers such a perspective. In this, I do not abstract words or data outside of this context. I reflect on personal experiences through qualitative research to demonstrate the existence of gender inequalities in the cultural context in which I lived. Social science needs to listen to the diversity of experiences and cultural contexts. It is because of my gender I suffered tremendous persecution, and it is time to analyze my experiences in connection with similar experiences of Iraqi women.

### **Overview of Thesis**

As this introduction has argued, now that I have access to knowledge and analytical tools, it becomes my responsibility to document my testimony about women's lives and the situation inside Iraq. The feminist integrative theory has become my theoretical framework. I use it in conjunction with a reflective methodology of an "insider" and an analysis of the socio/political changes in Iraq gained from both experiences and the literature.

In Chapter One, I reflect on my personal and other women's experiences inside Iraq. When I lived in Iraq, my voice was silent without knowledge of feminist analysis. I had

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<sup>21</sup> Cook, Judith and Fonow, Mary Margaret (1990), "Knowledge and Women's Intersects"; in Nielsen, Joyce McCarl, ed. *Feminist Research Methods: Exemplary Readings in the Social Science* (San Francisco & London: Westview Press): p. 80

not even heard the concept of women's human rights. My involvement in both political and feminist analysis has helped in my search for the roots of women's oppression in Iraq and the mechanisms that ban women from equal social and political participation.

Upon being immersed in this sphere of feminist analyses, I could bring together the fragmented focal points of this thesis research. Although it took a considerable period of time to achieve my objective, it has given me immense pleasure to be within the socio-political conflict at this crucial time in Iraq's history. I enrolled in academic research because I realized that feminist theorizing is as essential as feminist activism to the women's movement in Iraq. As Linda Christiansen-Ruffman states:

Feminist activism and feminist theorizing have been important sources of knowledge creation. Feminists, for example, have tended to reject what were once taken-for-granted or popular dichotomies. Early feminists developed conceptualizations that later became key principles of the movement and slogans such as "personal is political" and its corollaries "the intellectual is political" and "the intellectual is personal". Only after a number of years did feminist scholarship use these movement insights to recognize and reject the dichotomous thought processes of the either/or syndrome and to associate this syndrome with patriarchy.<sup>22</sup>

Through a narration of my personal experiences, I explain in Chapter One the mechanisms of women's subordination and inferiorization in Iraq. I focus on the mutually implicating social, religious, economic, and political relationships that have contributed to a major part in Iraqi women's oppression.

Chapter Two provides historical evidence about the call for women's emancipation, the relations between women and the state, the establishment and activities of women's organizations, and the mechanisms overshadowing women's equal political participation. It reflects on the progress of feminist perspectives, activism on the grassroots level, and

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<sup>22</sup> Christiansen-Ruffman, Linda (1991), "Bridging the Gap Between Feminist Activism and Academe: The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women"; in Wine, Jeri Dawn and Ristock, Janice *Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada*; (Halifax: James Lorimer & Company): p. 266

the contribution of Iraqi progressive intellectuals to advance women's political and social participation in Iraq.

Chapter Three introduces Iraqi women's oppression and mechanisms subordinating and inferiorizing women in both public and private realms. It explores social, religious, political and state mechanisms subordinating and inferiorizing women in Iraq. Through these mechanisms, men's superiority over women is perpetuated. This chapter introduces the impact of accommodating relations between the ruling political power, tribal leadership, and a sacred religious ideology.

Inferiorizing and subordinating women in times of war causes immense oppression for women. In Chapter Four, I introduce evidence from the available literature and from personal experiences about the motivating factors and the consequences of wars on women in Iraq. I focus especially on the role of economic and strategic as well as religious, political, and social mechanisms during wars' times and the shift of gender issues to become a minor concern compared to major political and economic concerns.

Not only are women's private realms negatively influenced by wars, but also their movement is also adversely overshadowed by males' superiority on the level of political participation and activism for women's rights. Consistent links between totalitarian governments, such as the mutual relations between Saddam Hussein and the United States, and global powers such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), have engendered additional oppression to women and destruction to the social structures.

The thesis concludes that the Iraqi women's question has become part of the political- and religious-tensioned conflict in the world. The Iraqi case is a brutal example of what

women of developing countries are having to suffer in the new era. The conclusion draws attention to the urgent need for scholarly research on women's oppression and especially on the psychological health of women during wars and their aftermath. Women who live under war's destructive situations suffer extreme oppression and their exceptional contributions to the community are almost totally ignored. This needs to change and the affected women need support. As well, this thesis concludes with a discussion of how the empowerment of women at the grassroots level is therefore essential and imperative in Iraq at present. Through women's organizations, women may act collectively as agents for equal social relations and roles, as advocates for equal opportunities to participate in the political arena, and as equal voices in the governing bodies and the national law. The empowerment of women and their organizations will open doors to feminist analysis and gender studies at Iraqi universities. At present, Iraqi feminists are conspicuous by their absence from Iraqi academia. The empowerment of women will, as well, allow more freedoms to women in both private and public realms.

## **Chapter One**

### **Personal Experiences and Reflections**

Personal experience has given me firsthand, even hands-on knowledge of the oppression of Iraqi women. The mechanisms within the country that perpetuate the subordination and inferiorization of women to men by virtue of their gender have received added clout through global and international interventions, such as wars and economic sanctions visited on the country of Iraq. My experience serves as the basis for this thesis, and has encouraged and strengthened my connection to feminism. It, in turn, has enabled my voice to represent and speak about the lives of Iraqi women, especially of the middle class.

As an Iraqi woman, I was inferiorized and subordinated to men both privately and publicly, and oppressed in the extreme under Iraq's political dictatorship, fundamentalist Muslim laws, the economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations, global wars, and internal ethnic/religious conflicts. As a sensitive and well-educated woman, I became aware of the stereotypical roles that women were expected to play in peacetime and in wartime. As an Iraqi citizen and as a homeless refugee, I witnessed women's powerlessness under a patriarchal social paradigm and a totalitarian political system.

#### **Social/ Religious Mechanisms Subordinating Women**

In Iraq, I had been aware from my earliest recollections of the profound difference between female and male. Although my father was well educated, he told me about his grief and shock when I was born because he and his family predicted and desired a boy.

Such incidents echoed the tribal mentality that dominates Iraqi society. Tribes in Iraq are male-dominated and hierarchical. Their social and economic systems are bound by a sexist set of rules and count on masculine power. Statistical numbers of the tribes take into account only the male population; women are simply not counted. This allows tribes to favour male members, for a tribe's size is the mirror of the male population alone of said tribe. Women do not count.

I was a literate female living in one of the more secular of Muslim countries, especially during the period 1958-2000; but even here, occasionally, I experienced deep-rooted gender discrimination based on religious and cultural taboos. I felt the fear and horror evoked by the draconian punishments meted out to women if they committed such "sins" as adultery. Islam in Iraq, as in other Muslim countries, established tyrannizing patriarchy that manipulated women's lives and psychology. Added to this, Iraqi women and girls suffered varying degrees of gender discrimination determined by their cultural background and social class.

From an early age, I was especially aware of the discriminatory social norms, perhaps because they were foreign to me. I was treated somewhat more kindly by my family, but that does not mean I did not suffer keenly from the plight of those women close to me. My father divorced my mother when I was only four, and I lived with my father and a stepmother. I was often in tears having to live far from my mother. My father was aware of my grief, and developed an outstanding relationship with me.

When I refused to wear the veil, that responsive relationship with my father made it easier for me to encounter less rigid rejection. He did not impose the veil on me although he imposed it on my four stepsisters. They surrendered to him impotently because their

mother wished that. Ultimately, my sisters became extreme Muslims, which, however, did not prevent them from educating themselves. Two became medical doctors, one an electric engineer, and the other a high school math teacher. My father eventually developed restrictive religious beliefs, influenced by his second wife's extremist family. As a younger man, he had a Marxist involvement.

Being unveiled did not shield me from other forms of gender discrimination. Such sexist acts as laughing with men were prohibited, or walking with those who were not *Mahram*,<sup>23</sup> or being involved in any sort of friendship with males, platonic or otherwise.

I was not immune to punishment. My father beat me severely twice in my life; the first time was when I was eight years old. I had run away from school and walked across two towns to visit my divorced mother, whom I had not seen for three years. The second time was when I was a student at university and my family discovered that I was involved with the man who later became my husband. They discovered that love relationship when I refused an arranged marriage to a relative in my tribe.

I understood well, as any girl in Iraq must, that having sex before marriage is not only taboo, but a crime that leads to killing the girl involved in such an act. As far back as I can remember, I was taught that the most heinous of crimes was having sex out of wedlock. I witnessed two honour-killings. [Dealt with in some detail in later in this chapter] These served to deepen my abhorrence of violence against women.

I long lived with the fear of losing my virginity. I had read once that girls could lose their virginity if they were exposed to specific incidental situations. But how could I know if I was still a virgin or not? My female friends shared this concern about their virginity. As teenagers, we pooled our thoughts on sex and sexual relations secretly.

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<sup>23</sup> Mahram means the person who is forbidden to marry me under Muslim Law

However, there was a critical lack of sexual knowledge among girls due to religious motivation and cultural restrictions.

One of the very central characteristics of the Iraqi family was (and is) the domination of males over females. Women are looked on as lacking in intellect, religion, and fortune. This view is based on a religious aphorism, albeit not an authoritative Qur'anic text. As a Muslim, my family tried to raise me as a "good girl." That pattern meant that I should be submissive to the patriarchal figures within the family and the society, and conform to religious restrictions and regulations. I dutifully read Al-Qur'an<sup>24</sup> seven times. Every time I read it, I identified yet another discriminatory sentence against women in the texts. I found myself wondering why women are allowed to take only a half share of their inheritance from their deceased parents, why women should be veiled and isolated from men, why women lack economic resources, and why one woman's testimony (in contrast to a man's testimony) could not be legally considered as reliable unless supported by another woman's testimony.

I read all those texts; but alas, I could not find answers to my growing doubts and uncertainties. When I was twelve years old, I became very religious because I wanted to be a perfect and obedient girl. In fact, I was silently looking for the truth. The family and our tribe's members, women and men, were happy for my being a good and religiously inspired girl. I used to spend long periods each day praying to Allah and reading Al-Qur'an, and yet, the more I read and thought about the religious texts, the deeper my questions and doubts became. I asked my father: "Who is Allah?" His answer "Allah is our creator" did not enlighten me. So I brought my question to my uncles. All of them told me: "Allah is the one and the only, and HE is our Creator." Although I pretended to

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<sup>24</sup> The Holly book of Islam; some interpreters write it as "Koran", "Quran", and "Qura'an".

agree with them, I came to realize, albeit with a feeling of deception, that their answers were quite irrelevant to my question. I wanted to find a more concrete basis for their claims so that I could comprehend Allah or God. How else could I be sure that he created people, nature and everything? Afterward, I raised another question: "I agree with you, Allah created us, but who created Allah? Where did he come from? Surely there must be a causal entity, a 'something or somebody' that created him." I was introduced to materialism and the question of God's existence, although I did not realize I was going through more complex perceptions of nature, religion, and evolution.

My father advised me to obey Allah without questioning "his" identity or whence "he" came. He told me: "These questions will lead you to psychosis; so, forget about them." Thus was born my first inner rebellion against religious rules and laws. I never accepted whatever religion tells us because of its failure to provide concrete proof. I stopped praying and reading Al-Quran for fear of coming across new questions and of becoming insane as my father warned me I could be!

Still, I went on questioning who Allah or God is, why he imposes certain restrictions only on women's lives, and why I was dependent on the "males" in my family to explain religious concepts to me. Why did Allah, the masculine identity in Islam, degrade women specifically and set up so many taboos that threaten women in the next life? Is he a man? He must be at least a "male," I thought, because he esteems only men and exhibits such contempt for women.

My experiences as a female with Islamic religious control on my life shaped my personality later. I lived with my stepmother, who was a daughter of a famous Shi'a cleric. I had to respect her family members' extremism. They were constantly visiting

and staying at our house for days on end. Some of them stayed for years. Her brother, her cousin, and her two nephews completed their higher education by staying with my family to save university residence costs, and to be well served, with meals and laundry. They were young men while I was only an elementary school student; however, I had to be watched by everybody at home so that I would stay far from those males who were not *Mahram*. I was prohibited from leaving my bedroom clad only in pyjamas. I had to wear long, wide dresses with long sleeves, which really annoyed me because I lost freedom inside my private space.

There was a contradiction between two different views within the family. My father and uncles were not rigid Muslims, while my stepmother and her family imposed their dominating Islamic rules on our lives. My father eventually surrendered to his wife's family and adhered to their restrictive Islamic views. My uncle was Marxist and he tried to introduce me to Marxism-Leninism. In addition, my Christian friends were influential in shaping my views and spirituality. I used to go to their church, and watched the peaceful, non-discriminatory relationships within their families. The freedom they enjoyed in their progressive lifestyle and clothes impressed me. I found more comfort in the Christian community where I was aware of fewer discriminatory rules. Christ was a non-dominating masculine power to me. He and his mother were even victims that called for peace and love. There were fewer threats and punishments in this Christianity. The Christian Church therefore became a shelter in which to seek tranquility. The relationship with Christ and the Virgin Mary grew silently and peacefully in my mind as a little girl. I did not question who created them; my main concern was their being victims. The Virgin Mary specifically represented for me the victimized female in our society.

These contradictory views, the feeling of enslavement to an unjust Muslim law and society, attending the Christian Church, and the bright views of Marxists about women's emancipation, made me a rebellious girl. Opposing whatever Islam imposes on women became a matter of life and death for me. The only step I could take was to go to the Christian Church in order to show my rejection of Islam and to seek more peace for my soul. My family did not oppose my attending the Christian Church because, as Muslims, they believed that Christ was one of the beloved prophets to Allah.

Hierarchical and patriarchal relationships in a Muslim society go beyond the male/female relationships. What incensed me more in a female/female relationship, for instance, was the distinction made between women whose ancestors were not religious figures and women relatives of religious clerics. Clerics' women seemed privileged because of their religious families. Their blood relation to the Prophet Mohammed and clerics seemed to entitle them to be closer to Allah. The assumption of our Shi'a society was, since their great grandfather was the prophet Mohammed, they inherently realize and apply his sacred mission of Islam among people, and this places them to be in a superior position compared to other women.

Another feature of Iraqi's hierarchical social structures offers an evident bonus to elderly women. The social position of a woman is partly determined by age. Elderly women are looked on as wise and honoured, although the relationships to their husbands are kept within patriarchal limitations. For example, my grandmother, inferior to my grandfather and totally enslaved by him, was highly respected by all younger people in the family.

### ***Marriage and Reproduction***

I closely observed the women in my community, my father's tribe, my stepmother's fundamentalist family, my divorced mother and her family, women in the neighbourhood, and my teachers. I have seen many cases of polygamy, but single out the closest example in my family for reflection. My grandfather, who lived in the same neighbourhood, had four wives living under the same roof at his house. In fact, he had seven wives in all; one died, he divorced two, and kept four. As a Muslim, he could divorce one of his wives to marry another one, and that way he had always had four wives in his household, which was within the limitation of Muslim law. I thought this was unjust, especially because all his wives had come from poor families and through arranged marriage. He was rich, which made it affordable for him to pay *Mahar* (Islamic dowry) for as many wives as he liked. Since I was a little girl, I was passionate about his wives because I observed that he never treated them equally. They fought with each other. Unequal treatment and distribution of resources took a toll on them physically and emotionally. He used to give more money and jewellery to the most recent wife. His sleeping in one wife's bedroom was a good reason for her happiness. Each night, he slept with a different wife, which meant that everyone expected him to sleep in her bedroom once every three days. While she was still formally considered as one of his wives, the fourth one was left out of a practical marital relationship. She was treated as an "expired object." Her religion was no safeguard against this. The husband's right to deny her the right to a marital relationship was written into the tenets of the religion.

In my experience, most Iraqi males keep women submissive to the limited interpretation of such concepts as "happiness," "reproduction," "dignity" and so on. Even

when I was a little girl, those interpretations struck me as male-made. My grandfather's children were also not treated equally. I felt sorry for his daughters who were not allowed to complete their elementary schooling. Only his daughters from the most recent and most favoured wife would have the privilege of higher education. He acted as the king of both his family and the tribe because he was the head of both, and therefore had social and tribal powers. No support for his wives from Islamic law, which allowed polygamy, could be expected. The devastating social inequality that was part and parcel of the right to have four wives disturbed me greatly. Statements in the Qur'an always came to mind, such as:

If you deem in the best interest of the orphans (to give them a home), you may marry their mother if you like; you may marry two of them, or three, or four. However, if you feel that you may not be equitable, then one is enough, or be content with what you already have. This may be easier for you to afford.<sup>25</sup>

I was disappointed that men did not treat their wives with equality. Taking more than one woman as a wife is allowed and accepted, but Islamic guidelines for these relationships are non-existent. I did not find a single sentence in the Qur'an or the Hadith to state a specific punishment for the unequal treatment of a wife. How she was treated was left up to the man's own devices, devious or otherwise.

I witnessed hundreds of arranged marriages, early marriages of teenaged girls, and polygamy. In my family, almost every man has more than one wife. My father and two of my uncles have two wives each. It is very easy to divorce a woman and get another one. Traditionally, men who have power and money can marry as many wives as they wish.

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<sup>25</sup> Khalifa, Rashad, (1981), *Quran: The Final Scripture; translation* (Authorized English Version); Sura 4: Women (Al-Nisa'); (Arizona: Islamic Production): p. 51

Strangely, married women do not use contraception. Birth control was not an option in the midst of the competition among wives to win their husband's heart and support. They competed to have more male children through multiple births. The more sons they had, the more respect they got. My stepmother told me that Allah does not permit contraception and "He" will throw the woman who uses them into the depths of hell. She also told me that avoiding pregnancy is religiously considered as a murder of the possible baby. It went without saying that, from a religious point of view, abortion is a sin. Nevertheless, she was not able to convince me for two reasons: first, I knew that my friends' mothers were using birth control pills, and the non-existence of such statements in Islam were immaterial to me; and secondly, Allah had lived long before the scientific revolution and could not have known about the invention of birth control pills. I knew that women like my mother, who gave birth to fourteen babies, and my stepmother, who had thirteen babies, as well as the women I saw giving birth to babies in a variety of families daily, suffered physically and psychologically from the surrounding circumstances and pressures. I hated forced multiple births, and realized that Allah controlled women's reproduction. For me, life became a nightmare because there was no way to escape Allah and his control over women's lives.

Islamic law played other roles in my life. When I sought divorce from my first husband, an alcoholic responsible for our son's death, the judge refused my female friend's testimony, but accepted her husband's. The judge stated that according to Islamic law, I needed two women eyewitnesses. This caused great embarrassment. My mother's testimony could not be considered, as a mother's testimony is unacceptable. The friend and her husband were the only other ones to have witnessed the incident. Why should the

testimony of an individual woman not be accepted while an individual man's can be? While the man was favoured, the ruling was not even quite in keeping with Islamic law, which states:

You shall have two men witnesses from among your men, or one man and two women, whom you accept as witnesses. Thus, if one woman is biased, the other would remind her.<sup>26</sup>

After marrying for a second time in 1988, I discovered that I was again totally enslaved to my husband in accordance with Muslim law. He often beat me cruelly. Once he hit me repeatedly with a metal stick, and broke my ankle, but the case was not recognized socially and religiously. The two doctors who treated my leg did not report the incident to the authorities, and I was silenced by a social system which reflects Muslim law. Muslim law sanctions the beating of wives to discipline them. I realized that a man knows that he need fear no investigation or juristic sentence for beating his wife.

From the Qur'an:

The men are placed in charge of the women, since God has endowed them with the necessary qualities, and made them bread earners. Thus, the righteous women will accept this arrangement obediently and will honor their husbands in their absence, in accordance with God's commandments. As for women who show rebellion, you shall first enlighten them, then desert them in bed, and you may beat them. Once they obey you, you have no excuse to transgress you against them. God is high above you, and more powerful.<sup>27</sup>

Beating a woman to make sure she is loyal to "him" is tacitly unreasonable. It is a clear approval of the righteousness of the "male" pure and simple, apart from his identity, his psychology and mentality, or his social background. This exposure to physical pain

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<sup>26</sup> Khalifa, Rashad, Ph.D (1981), *Quran: The Final Scripture; translation*; Sura Heifer (Al- Baqarah) (Authorized English Version); (Arizona: Islamic Production): p. 32

<sup>27</sup> Khalifa, Rashad, Ph.D (1981), *Quran: The Final Scripture; translation*; Sura 4: Women (Al-Nisa') (Authorized English Version); (Arizona: Islamic Production) : p. 55

and humiliation at the hands of my husband, with the full sanction of Islam, made me literally more painfully aware of the inequalities and gender-based injustices in Islam.

One of the most disturbing and dominating rules in Islam is the husband's control over the sexual relationship with his wife:

Your wives are a tilth for you, so go to your tilth<sup>28</sup>, when or how you will, and send (good deeds, or ask Allah to bestow upon you pious offspring) for your own selves beforehand. And fear Allah, and know that you are to meet Him (in the Hereafter), and give good tidings to the believers (O Muhammad).<sup>29</sup>

He is the one who can determine when, how, and where to have sex with his wife. If a woman did not wish to have sex with her husband for any reason, psychological or physical (health), Allah allowed men to marry other wives, and a woman who had denied husband favours was destined for hell. For me, hell was the nightmare that always threatened:

Those who reject our revelations, we will burn them in hell. Whenever their skin is burned up, we will substitute new skin to let them suffer the retribution. God is almighty, wise.<sup>30</sup>

As a wife and mother, my family expected me to be a "good woman," that is, submissive, tolerant, beautiful, courteous, pleasant and caring for everybody in the family and for other people in the community to the extent deemed appropriate by my limitations as a woman.

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<sup>28</sup> Translator's comment: "(V.2: 223): have sexual relations with your wives in any manner as long as it is in the vagina and not in the anus."

<sup>29</sup> King Fahad Complex For The Printing of Holy Qura'n (1417 h), *The Noble Qur'an: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary*; Sura 2: Al Baqarah, ( Madina Monawarh: Translation of King Fahad Complex For The Printing of Holy Qura'n): p.48

<sup>30</sup> Khalifa, Rashad, Ph.D (1981), *Quran: The Final Scripture; translation*; Sura 4: Women (Al-Nisa' (Authorized English Version); (Arizona: Islamic Production): p. 57

### ***Responsibility of Social and Family Honour: Honour Killing***

As noted earlier, I was the witness of “honour killings.” Two were typical of the grounds for such brutal slayings: a young bride summarily murdered for not coming into the marriage a virgin; and a young wife, accused of disobeying cultural and religious restrictions on sexual behaviour, executed with no proof of guilt, on a false accusation.

In the first instance, I was at the local hospital to see a doctor. A sixteen-year-old girl accompanied by two women and two men appeared at the doctor’s office, and explained to the doctor that the girl was a bride, but was found not to be a virgin. They asked the doctor to examine the girl to corroborate her husband’s claim. The doctor assured them that the girl had lost her virginity long ago. As they left the doctor’s office, one of the men grabbed the girl and slaughtered her.

A second incident happened after my graduation from university. My uncle’s twenty-one-year-old wife was suspected by him of being involved sexually with another man. Her father slaughtered her with no investigation, even though she had denied what her husband had claimed.

A third incident was during the Iraqi-Iranian war. Many Iraqi men were made prisoners of war and a million men were killed during the war. Their wives were stigmatized because, in the absence of their husbands, some were involved in extramarital relationships, and some remarried. An eighteen-year old girl, whose husband was a war prisoner, was killed and her body left on the road in downtown Ashar in Basra. Her brother caught her at a nightclub involved in prostitution.

Another teenaged girl got pregnant as the result of a secret relationship with a young man in their village. Her mother learned of it, and wanted, on her own, to solve the

problem without the knowledge of the men of the family. She poisoned dates and gave them to her daughter. The girl died, and the case was swept under the carpet.

How was it that honour killings could be proscribed by Islam? The threat was a constant concern. As a woman, I was aware of very limited space to my freedoms, and that I could potentially seduce men, and harm my family's honour. A socially authorized agreement existed among my family members, as it did in other families, that male members supervise the females' contacts, movement, and relations with friends. Brothers, even younger, were to watch their sisters and report to the family all unusual occurrences. To me, this was tantamount to a spy network within the family. All my female friends shared this concern. Despite the risks, females did their best to hide their liaisons with males, and sought out faraway places and rooms behind closed doors to meet with their partners.

In 1994, when living in Kirkuk City, I was awakened early one morning by the sound of machinegun fire. We found out that a woman in the neighbourhood, originally from Ba'aquba City, had fled with the man she loved, a man unapproved by the family. They made their way to Kirkuk, were married, had five children, and stayed hidden in the new city. Her brothers had looked all over Iraq for her for twelve years. Finally they found her hiding place and killed her, her husband, and her five children. The killer was apprehended and imprisoned for six months. Iraqi law is clear in honour killing crimes. Any male who kills a female member of the family under the code of honour killing gets a six-month sentence. Despite the fact that the "honour killing" phenomenon began to diminish in the 1960s, it existed still in the 1990s, and still exists. Women's sexuality is a major concern for both Islam and for Iraqi society.

### *Rape and Sexual Harassment*

I witnessed, and heard horrific accounts of sexual aggressiveness and rapes from the victims themselves and from other firsthand witnesses. Young girls and women have been exposed to sexual harassment as they walk downtown or in public places such as movie theatres, local markets, or on the way to school. To protect them, families impose rigid restrictions, limiting the movement of female family members and their access to freedoms in public.

Sexual harassment ranges from verbal to physical. Any female expects to hear sexually-loaded comments while out walking. Sometimes, males dare to touch females. Rape is one of the most dangerous crimes against women. In the social structure of an Islamic culture, a raped female is victimized twice: by the perpetrator of the rape and by the social system. Regrettably, families of the raped girl even favour and attempt to protect the perpetrator. A pro-forma, temporary marriage is arranged so that the rapist can escape the punishment of a court-of-law. This is an absolute tribal law, through which there are many arrangements to solve social problems or to arrange for more powerful tribal relationships, indicative of another type of rape.

A father of a young girl has the right to present his daughter as a “gift” to an old head of another tribe, who by custom would never refuse the gift. This is not called “rape” in the tribal system; it is called a “marriage,” but is virtually one and the same. During the rule of the Ba’ath regime, some heads of tribes made a “gift” of their young daughters to recognized figures in the government such as Prime Minister Izzat El-Doory, who was in his sixties and in poor health.

With regard to rape incidents in which relatives are the perpetrators, there are many stories that are kept secret. Friends of mine at high school shared stories about sexual abuse by family members such as brothers and uncles, even though talking about such incidents was taboo. In 1992, when I was living in Baghdad City, a police officer told me about a crime that he investigated in Al-Thawra town, in the suburbs of Baghdad. A mother had died, leaving eight children, female and male, in the care of their father. The eldest girl was fifteen years old and she was supposed to look after the family after her mother's death. Her father abused her sexually, and made her pregnant. To hide his crime against his daughter, he killed and buried her in the garden of their house. Then, he started to abuse a younger daughter, who also became pregnant. The girl, on discovering that she was pregnant, fled the house and went to the police station. She told the police the whole story about their father.

Rape was even embedded in the Ba'ath party policy and state mechanisms, as elaborated in the next section.

### **State Mechanisms of Subordinating Women**

Although I had read hundreds of books in Iraq, I had not heard of nor had I had the chance to read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That there was a global women's movement was unknown to me, as were women's conferences, and women's rights conventions such as The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979). When I was growing up, Saddam Hussein had dismissed the feminist radical Iraqi Women's League from Iraq after killing many members. The lack of democracy in a totalitarian political system, the absence of

gender-related issues on the social and political agenda, and the exclusion of Iraqi women's groups from the global women's movement were the order of the day.

When the Ba'ath party came to power in Iraq, I was in public school in grade six, and hardly aware of things political or social. Later in life, I could see that there seemed to be no other women's organizations inside Iraq apart from the General Federation for Iraqi Women (GFIW), and that women involved in this federation were actively recruited for indoctrination into Ba'ath ideology. Because of the party relationships between the GFIW leadership and the Ba'ath leadership headed by Saddam Hussein, such critical women's issues as violence against women, and the evolving status of women in Iraqi society were ignored. Along with other popular unions, the GFIW was in effect a political instrument of the Ba'ath party. It was expressly set up to facilitate the control of people, including control of educated women, workers, students, farmers, and so on. Representation of women became exclusive to the Ba'ath Party women's organization, an organization which simply mirrored the party's political totalitarian platform. Women's questions, issues dealing with women's realities and experiences, were swept under the carpet and ignored. The GFIW reflected female/female unequal relationships within the women's organization, and it was constructed to be a dominating political organization, to combat and prevent women's involvement in any sort of anti-Ba'ath women's group.

When the Ba'ath party had supremacy over Iraq, women were being raped with state and social sanction. Rapists could escape the punishment set down in Iraqi law (Article 220), in which the death sentence is reserved for those who rape girls under 18 years of age. Other articles impose lighter penalties for the rape of married women or girls older than 18. The rule of law fell by the way side. During the reign of Saddam Hussein and the

domination of the tribal, with its hierarchical social structure controlled by a powerful male head of the tribe, the mentality of “women as sexual entertainers for men” prevailed. Although this mentality had always been there, it became even more entrenched. Any male enjoying a high political, military, or governmental position took it as a matter of personal prerogative to force himself on women in the area under his political control. Informally, the Iraqi people were aware of Saddam’s instructions to “his men,” which empowered them to have their way at will with Iraqi women. Virtually all women were fair game in this perpetual open season on them. Systematic rape in prison was the rule for women involved in opposition political parties or exhibiting radical attitudes.

Among the painful stories that were told to me was that of Sana’ El-Baghdadi. Raped by Saddam Hussein, the rape led to her imprisonment inside the presidential palace, torture, and threats to keep her silent. Even though she was the victim, her husband divorced her. As noted above under 1.1.3, in Iraq, the victim of rape is re-victimized by society and the family. This pattern is still prevalent in present-day Iraq, as the code of honour and shame remains in place. Raped women are to be killed by family members to rid them of the shame and stigma. Sana’ states:

The intrinsic alliance in Iraqi society between Islam and the social structures keeps women under constant surveillance. A woman, as the “other” and a potential target, could bring shame and dishonour at any time. Men and women alike are trained as “social detectives,” to spy on women, especially their sexual behaviour, since it is only women who could tarnish the family’s honour. Men, on the other hand, under the protection of Islam and the state, are allowed to have as many women as they like.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Rasheed, Awatef (unpublished) *Silenced Women: Real Experiences of Iraqi Women*.

It should also be noted that many Iraqi women, when it became known that their relatives were involved against Saddam, were raped, lost jobs, and were imprisoned. High-ranking officials and Ba'ath party members were often those who raped these women, inside and outside prison. As if the social and religious subordination of women in Iraq were not bad enough, the political system was hypocritical and deceitful in dealing with them as well. Superiority of men over women is granted to them by virtue of their gender, and adding political power to the social and religious superiority of men creates a nightmarish oppression of women.

### *Education*

My stepmother was a daughter of a Shi'a cleric. He was sacred and the women in his family were glorified. I remember the women in his household, wives and daughters, used to teach other Muslim women sewing and crafts, and reading, with the Qur'an as textbook, in essence private classes run by those women. In return, all young female learners had to do the housework of clerics' wives and daughters. The women in my stepmother's family never had to wash dishes, cook, or do other housework; they always had female servants (students) to do it. Even at the age of six, I found this practice somehow not right. In the name of religion, they enslaved poor women, poverty giving the religious hierarchal system a reason to enslave them. But also to educate them. Once my father sent me to a private class, run by a *Mulla*<sup>32</sup>, to learn the Qur'an before I went to school. I stayed for a few hours, and by lunchtime had had enough, went home and never went back to that class again. The female *Mulla* had punished one of the learners of pre-

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<sup>32</sup> A religious Shi'a figure. They are mostly ignorant of the real instructions of Islam; however, they practice teaching reading the Quran.

school age with *Falaqa*<sup>33</sup> because she did not memorize the sentences of the Qur'an properly. I knew that *Falaqa* punishment was a "ratified" punishment for the children at the *Mulla* classes.

By the time I was ready to go to elementary school, contrary to the cultural and religious mainstream, my father sent me to a mixed elementary school. This empowered my personality and provided me with greater opportunities of open communication with males in the family and in the community at large. Most people considered me "a liberated and spoiled girl," "a westernized brat," and "an unbeliever in Allah."

My father taught all of his children to love work. He used to tell us that by education and work we could keep our dignity and achieve a proper life. He never discriminated between females and males in regard to their education and work. He encouraged us to be involved in hobbies, to explore scientific facts, read great pieces of literature, and to draw. My father struggled to accommodate his communist background with his religious wife, and looked for sentences in the Qur'an that supported his understanding of women's rights. When I asked him to explain the discriminatory sentences in the Qur'an, he used to laugh and leave the discussion with no further comment. I was happy with such a response from my father because it indicated that I was thinking correctly.

From elementary school on, I was encouraged by my family to read literature beyond my school readings. Consequently, I was made aware of women's despair as expressed in the literature of various cultural backgrounds, including Muslim and Arabic. Through literature and personal experience, I also became conscious of the necessity of achieving

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<sup>33</sup> A well known kind of punishment, which is done by making the child lie down on the floor, tying their legs to a hanging stick with a rope, then beating the bottom of their feet with another stick.

gender equality and the liberation of women. However, being born a Muslim, I suffered a deep inner conflict.

The reason for my special treatment by my father was my high academic achievement, showing excellence in all my classes, especially math and Arabic writing skills, about which my father was keen on. My father did not prohibit me from participation in public as long as this was under the umbrella of educational competitions. After I won a first prize in Basra City, I won first prize in literature in the national competition in Baghdad in 1974-1975. Although the Ministry of Education held it, the poetry and short story writing competitions were segregated on the basis of sex.

At university, female students came from other Iraqi cities to live in residence at Basra University. Shortly after their arrival, they discarded their scarves and modernized their dress. Obviously, the social backgrounds and patriarchal relationships that had dominated them and restricted their freedoms until then made them relish these freedoms all the more, at a far remove from their accustomed societies. However, while their relationships with male students were now ostensibly unrestricted, unobserved by their families, the university campus took over the policing role and hired female guards to monitor female students, in short, to spy on them, and to prevent them from talking to or meeting with male students after 10:00 p.m.

Because of my background, I assumed that every Iraqi family encouraged their daughters to attend university. Later, I found out that I was wrong. Many families did not send the daughters for higher education. One of my friends chose to work and to support her family so that her brother could attend university. Another got married and stopped her education. Still another friend's family prohibited her from attending university, to

avoid the mixed female and male atmosphere. Even so, there was a great number of females at the University of Basra during my time there, although the numbers were not equal.

At that time, big cities in Iraq like Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul were more modernized than they are now. Females from a variety of economic classes could attend university. Education in Iraq was free at all educational levels, including postgraduate studies. Therefore, the numbers of students, including females, increased considerably and women had greater access to freedoms. They could reject the veil and wear modern dress, even miniskirts.

As I grew older and gained more education, I came to see myself as a full human being, capable of being equal to my brothers, indeed to all men in our society. I even dared to think I was superior to males. That idea in particular brought me a great deal of criticism, and I was told: “You never differentiate properly between men and women! You treat men and women equally, how shameful! When are you going to learn how to behave like a good woman?”

### ***Employment***

When I was awarded my bachelor’s degree from the English Department/ College of Education at Basra University [1979], I was ready to be employed as an English teacher.

My jobs as a TV reporter and a high school teacher exposed me further to the reality of people’s lives. I came to understand how gender discrimination could shape the relationships within a society and define the politics of a country.

Men were expected to do their “jobs” as “breadwinners.” Men in my family and in other families as well were treated as “kings” upon their arrival home from work. I observed that working women were expected to wait on the men.

Employment laws in Iraq do not discriminate against women *per se*. I was hired by the government to teach in high schools and institutes directly after my graduation from the university. Everybody, female and male, was given an equal opportunity for government employment based on his or her academic achievement. Yet, there is gender discrimination in the workplace and among the employees themselves because they inevitably exemplify the society’s attitude towards women. Also, the political system during Saddam’s authoritarian regime forced the Iraqi people to accept new behavioural norms to which they were not accustomed. The expression of opposing political views became more risky under the dictatorship of the one-party state in Iraq. Even the relatives of those who were involved in political parties which opposed Saddam’s regime, such as the Al-Da’wa Islamic/Shi’a party and the Iraqi Communist Party, could lose their jobs.

My career as a TV journalist started when I was still a high school student, and continued during my university studies, and my first seven years as a teacher. As a woman journalist when the Iran-Iraq war began, many people considered me unsuitable for coverage of the war. Reporting from a battlefield was a man’s job. But for me, the work enriched and sharpened my vision of the impact of wars on social and political change, including the emergence of patriarchies on many levels. It introduced me to peoples’ lives and needs during the disastrous devastation of war. I swiftly came to the conclusion that war and militarism are crimes against humanity, helpless women and children bearing the brunt of the horrors.

With the onset of inflation, exacerbated by the economic sanctions, my monthly salary as a high school teacher dropped to the equivalent of three dollars. An average family needed three dollars for food per day, and we had somehow to manage for the other twenty-nine or thirty days of the month. Most people, women included, had to take more than one job. I established a small private teaching business, for English, computer, music and art, a full day's work. Psychologically and physically I was exhausted, striving to provide the basic needs for the family. My husband had retired from the military as brigadier-general, and drew a pension of two dollars a month. Yet, he was still the head of the family and a big threat to my safety. When he was still in active military service, he had surreptitiously taped five cassettes of me condemning Saddam's regime. Those tapes were held up to me as a threat to my life for years, until I fled Iraq. I had to work hard as the main source of the family's survival, and to be submissive to him. As a Muslim woman, I had no political and social voice or authority.

As to gender roles and women's unpaid work, my work at home and on the social level was unpaid, as is the norm, and considered natural by most women in Iraqi society. Although more Iraqi women now go to work outside their homes, the housework remains their sole responsibility, however strenuous their paid jobs may be. In our society, it brings shame to the man to help his wife with the housework. The rare emancipated man tried to break this social rule of gender roles, but those who did so were often mocked by relatives and neighbours.

### **Global / International Mechanisms Subordinating Women**

As already noted, my experience in Iraq was as a citizen of the country, subject to all that affected this country, globally and internationally, and as a female Muslim. Citizenship put me, as it did other citizens, at the mercy of brutal political and economic situations, including wars and economic sanctions. The suffering was compounded by the subordinate place of woman in Islamic society. As a victim, my physical and psychological health was totally neglected. As a citizen, my voice was unheard, and my political participation on the decision-making level equalled zero.

#### ***Wars and Economic Sanctions***

During the Iraqi-Iranian war [1980-1988], I held two jobs, as TV broadcaster and as a high school English teacher. Famine was expected when the war ended, and most Iraqi women rushed to the stores to stock up on dry food. Schools had been closed as soon as the war started, and I did not have to risk going to work at school when Basra became a battlefield. However, as a media person, I had to go to the frontlines to report. I was placed at the same risk as any other soldier. The Ministry of Information and Media recognized and awarded me as the first Iraqi woman on the frontlines. Face-to-face with war, I witnessed the deaths of civilians inside the city and the military martyrs on the battlefield. The Iranian party launched a brutal bombing attack on Basra city. Horror and fear spread through the city and the people living in towns near the Iraqi-Iranian borders fled their homes and came to live in the schools in Basra. People from the town of Fao turned the schools into residences, a family to a classroom. Water was in short supply. Iraqi women lost husbands and sons. Other women lost their houses and some family members. Electric power was cut off and the city sank into darkness. Crime increased,

especially the rape of women. Because Basra became a military base and frontline, thousands of soldiers from all over Iraq were in the streets of the city. Thousands of rapes were hushed up, for the accepted reason that women were just women, to be blamed, stigmatized, and tortured.

One horrific incident in Basra was when the arsenal in Shuaiba town, one of the biggest military bases built by the British during their colonization of Iraq, blew up, and rockets and bombs fell randomly on private homes. I interviewed hundreds of military people, families, and citizens, both women and men. The war was hated, although Saddam's propaganda told the opposite in the media. I was on both civilian and military fields, and discovered for myself the lies in Saddam's words. In the first days of the war, Iraq invaded the city of Muhammara. The TV crew, including me, crossed the borders, where there were two checkpoints. Not a single bomb had touched the Iraqi checkpoint, while the Iranian checkpoint was totally destroyed. When I dared to comment: "So? Who attacked whom?" the director of the show hushed me by saying: "Please, don't comment," obviously prompted by his fear of the dictatorial system under which we lived.

When the Iraqi forces occupied Muhammara, I met distraught families from the city who had left their homes and fled the devastation, only to have their belongings stolen by the Iraqi soldiers. Iranian ships in the port were controlled and unloaded by the military. The cargo on one of the ships was beer, imported to the Islamic Republic of Iran where Islam prohibits alcohol. Hilariously, Iraqi soldiers got drunk controlling that ship where the beer was free. Although the incident has nothing to do with gender issues, it indicates

the double standards of political systems that employ religion to implement political agendas and wars.

In the battle of Fao in 1986, my brother and uncle were killed. That happened only five days after my son's death. Because of the war, and because too many injured soldiers lay in hospital, my son had not received proper treatment. Losing three beloved people at the same time had a severe impact on my emotional and physical health and led to my leaving the job at the TV station and moving to Kirkuk City to seek healing, far from the sights of war.

Shortly after that, I made the trip south to Basra to encourage my family to leave the city, which was under constant bombardment. They were nowhere to be found. Basrans had fled to other cities and rural towns, my family among them. Bombs were falling around me and it was dangerous to be in the city. Exploding mortar had turned the streets of Basra into cavernous craters. It was midnight and I had no place to go. I was able to take a taxi to the rural area where I expected my family to be. When I arrived at 4:00 a.m., I found that they had been involved in an accident, and that my stepmother had three broken ribs. She was unable to breathe, and with the hospitals full of soldiers, she could not be treated. In a few hours, I was able to hire a van to take the whole family, seventeen strong, to Kirkuk, where my stepmother could get proper treatment and care in my house. My father told me: "I wish you were a man. You are more courageous and sincere than many men!" Although his statement denied me my identity as a female, it was an even greater empowerment in the context of Iraqi society.

When the war ended in August 1988, the Iraqi people could not believe it was finished. We were happy that it was over, and that no further death was expected. Iraq

had already lost many souls and resources, which were associated with devastating social and economic changes. However our happiness was short-lived. Saddam, who considered himself a hero, would not stop the wars and the violence. He invaded Kuwait in 1990. I was pregnant at the time. The United Nations imposed economic sanctions on Iraq to stop Iraq from bullying neighbouring countries. This had far-reaching consequences for the population. When I gave birth, some women had to give birth on the hospital floor because of a bed shortage. No medications were supplied and the food was poor, a small piece of bread with a watery soup. Women giving birth, including those who had a Caesarean section, had to get their own food and medication. I saw poor women with no food and medication. Moreover, the power was out and patients had to resort to candles to breast-feed their babies during the night.

When my baby was forty days old, the United States of America invaded Iraq in an attempt to liberate Kuwait from the Iraqi occupation in 1991. That war was a brutal one. We were left with no food, no infrastructure, and no security. Big war operations were started in Iraq and the American bombing of the Iraqi cities never stopped for days and weeks. The sky was sparkling day and night with flying bombs. Thousands of Iraqi citizens and soldiers were killed by that war.

In the midst of that horror, I had to look after four daughters. One of them was two years and the other was forty days old. I had to breast feed my youngest two daughters because we did not have enough milk or food at home. The stores were closed. Oil was hard to get. The power had been cut and phones disconnected. Of the fate of my family in Basra, which was once again a battlefield, I had no idea. Saddam burned the oil wells of Kuwait and the air turned black all over Iraq, creating a very serious health issue. We

breathed all kinds of toxic chemicals with the smoke, and the walls of our houses turned black. My concern was for my children's health, food, and security. Actually, I was unable to provide any of these needs since it was not I, as a woman, to offer or provide them. The whole sordid state of affairs was a political issue, engineered and manipulated by the men of the USA and Iraq.

One day, I was baking bread when my two-year-old daughter burned her hand. I walked to the local clinic and found it closed, as were all of the hospitals, pharmacies, and clinics. I had to walk for hours to find a nurse's house to get treatment for my daughter's hand.

When this war finished, an uprising of the Iraqi people against Saddam's regime took place, spurring another disaster. Printed flyers calling for the uprising had been dropped all over Iraq by American aircraft. The Iraqi people thought that the American military, which was still present, would support their uprising. The uprising itself was not organized and the Iranian government exploited the mess by sending its agents to Iraq to be part of the rebellions. The Kurdish parties dominated three cities: Erbil, Sulaymaniya, and Dohuk. I was living in Erbil at the time. Again, people were randomly killed by the Kurdish guerrilla, which is called Peshmerga<sup>34</sup>. Food vanished and people started cutting down the trees to cook and heat. There was neither water nor electric power. Peshmerga shot the guard of the local water reservoir in front of my house. He shouted for help; but alas, no one dared to go out to help him. Bullets flew from all directions. My children and I lived in terror because my husband was targeted as a military leader.

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<sup>34</sup> Peshmerga is a Persian word used to describe the Kurdish guerrilla. The word means: Those who face death.

That night, around twenty Kurdish militiamen arrived at our home to kill my husband. Although he was aggressive to me and to my daughters, I still did not want to allow him or any other person to be killed. When I looked from the second floor of my house, I saw their guns in the darkness. These were critical moments when I tried to go downstairs to talk to them and my husband begged me not to open the door for them. I was sure if I did not open the door for them they were going to bomb the whole house as they had done to one of the neighbours. I knew that they were killing whole families. I broke free of my husband's grasp and went downstairs to talk to them. They demanded I hand over my husband if he was at home. Diplomatically I told them that killing him for having been a military leader, and for no specific crime committed by him, was nonsense. I then asked them to forgive him for my sake, a Basra citizen. I knew the Kurdish parties had allied with Shi'a against Saddam, and in this, I touched the core of their sensibilities – and politics. They forgave him, but only after I gave them his gun and car.

A month later, the Republican Guards attacked Erbil. By that time, Saddam had gained dominance over other cities of the south. Again, thousands of innocent people were killed. In Erbil, many people were killed and a million Kurdish people set out on foot for the border. Little children, trooping with their families, were tired and hungry. Women held their babies and luggage while they walked. It was a heart-wrenching disaster. Some pregnant Kurdish women gave birth on the trek to the border and had to throw their newborn babies into the rivers.

I sheltered a family of nine women and two men. They fled Kirkuk for fear of chemicals and walked for three days. At night, three Kurdish gunmen climbed the walls to the roof of my house and began to fight the Republican Guards (RG) of Saddam

Hussein. The RG located where the bullets were coming from, and attacked my house. My baby was crying frantically. The three militiamen jumped to the roof of another house and shot at the RG who had settled, by that time, on the roof of my house. My family and I, and the eleven people in our shelter, were imprisoned inside the house, awaiting a sure death. When the battle finished, the Republican Guards left our roof and the scene. The next morning, the corpses of two Kurdish militiamen lay on the road. With no oil to make some food for the starving people in my house, I walked to one of my neighbours to ask for one litre of oil. On my way, I saw one of the RG soldiers pulling out the body of the third Kurdish militiaman. He was still alive, but the soldier shot and killed him before my eyes. I screamed and rushed into a nearby house. The three bodies were left on the road for eleven days until the stench in the area was overwhelming. A Christian priest finally stepped in and gave the militiamen burial in the spot where they lay. Within three days of sheltering the eleven people from Kirkuk, all our food and oil was used up. Not a morsel of bread or anything else was left in the house when the family left, and banks and stores were closed.

Economic sanctions added to the oppression of those wars. No Iraqi believed that the economic sanctions were imposed on Saddam Hussein. He seemed to be exempt. We citizens watched him build palaces and mosques while the majority of the population starved. Due to the sanctions, women struggled to put food on their families' tables. Women sold their gold and furniture to buy bread, and were even forced into prostitution to survive. There were no medications and what food there was, was scarce. It was women who had to deal directly with the bigger issues of inflation and the lack of

resources. The combination of gender-stereotyped roles and poverty had women suffering on all accounts, social and economic.

Being a teacher and the wife of a military leader, mine was not the worst fate during the economic sanctions. Some women were forced into the sex trade, and then they were killed under the honour-killing code. Some women were forced to sell the windows and doors of their houses and to put blankets up instead. All women had to “invent” substantial food and recipes for their families. A woman from the neighbourhood resorted to boiling water in a covered pot to make her children believe there was food in it. Some women went daily to look in the garbage bins at grocery stores to find something vaguely edible, and many of the women quit their jobs because the payments were not worth it.

### ***Refuge Seekers***

When I fled Iraq in 1998, I was loaded down by depressing stories of women inside Iraq. I had to walk across the borders with my little daughters to seek a safer place where women are treated equally. However, I met with Iraqi refugee women who were being persecuted by the second countries that they fled to and by the officials of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Iraqi women refugees were, and are, being treated in accordance with their marital status. For instance, a single woman could find a positive response; while a married one is not considered an urgent case if her husband has no political involvement.

First of all, the United Nations offices in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, although separate from the central government, did not recognize Arab citizens fleeing the area controlled by Saddam. The Kurdish authorities did not trust Arab citizens and I was forced to leave Sulaymaniya City because I refused to “cooperate” with the Kurdish authorities. The

word “cooperation” in itself was ambiguous. As a mother of three daughters I was not able to involve myself in any political action because I had to think of my daughters’ protection and survival. The UNHCR rejected my application since I was still inside the Iraqi borders, and the Kurdish authorities forced me to leave the area. This meant a walk across the Iraqi-Syrian border. It was a walk of more than twelve hours, made more adventuresome in the company of three armed smugglers, and my daughters found it difficult. My youngest daughter was only seven years old then.

The next day, the Syrian authorities arrested us because we were illegal passengers. After investigating our case, they asked me to sign some documents to prove “cooperation” with their intelligencia, but I refused. This rejection of their offer annoyed them, and we were deported, back to Kurdistan. The hope of survival was lost, but in Erbil city I fortunately met the feminist Hanaa Edward Busha who contacted the Urgent Action Fund, and saved our lives.

In Turkey, refugees asked me to translate their appeals to the UNHCR. It was not a formal job yet I accepted it as a token of solidarity among refugees. They were able to pay less than might have been earned in a translation bureau, but at least it was an income of sorts. Through this work, I developed a greater awareness of refugee women’s experiences. Women trusted me and told me their stories as oppressed women, single mothers, women who had fled gender-based persecution, and women in politics. For the second time, I heard of a case of female genital mutilation in Iraq. The first one had been in Erbil. Both incidents involved Kurdish women. When I asked the Kurdish women about FGM practices, they assured me that many Kurdish females are circumcised, although it is kept secret.

One refugee woman, an elementary school teacher, was being forced by her brother into an arranged marriage with a cousin. When she refused to consent to the brother's arrangement, he imprisoned her in a room at their house and did not let her out, even to the bathroom. He gave her a small pail to use as a toilet. One day she wrote a note to one of the teachers in the school, and as the pupils were passing by her window on their way to school, she threw the paper to one of her little students, asking him to hand the note to the teacher. That teacher contacted Ms. Hanaa Edward Busha, who helped her to flee to Turkey after mediation failed and an argument with her brother ensued.

Another young woman was forced to marry an old man in their village. Her husband had three wives before her and had never had a child. As a young girl, she had fallen in love with a young man in the village. After a few months of secret meetings with him, she got pregnant. Everyone in the village knew that her husband was infertile. Fearing honour killing, the young woman and her young lover walked across the border to Iran and then to Turkey where she gave birth to her baby.

Other women, through political activism and from a feminist perspective, stood against Islamic law in Kurdistan. The rejection of their cases by the UNHCR left them in the unsettling situation of either being deported to an area of risk or of taking the risk of illegally travelling across the borders to Greece, where many previous Iraqi refugees had drowned at sea.

Who is to answer for the suffering of these women? As a refugee woman, who lived among refugees and translated their cases and appeals to the UNHCR, this question is about the absence of democracy, a denial of women's human rights, and a denial of women's political participation. It is also a bureaucratic response of both the UNHCR

and the embassies of third countries that could offer visas for refugees to find a safer place to live in.

## **Conclusion**

My personal observations and experiences and my familiarity with the plight of others opened doors for me to research and analyze. I had begun to clearly understand the subordination of Iraqi women. Even under the best of circumstances, it is clear that Iraqi women were, and are, inferiorized and victimized by virtue of their gender. In the absence of gender equality, Iraqi women were, and are, subordinated and positioned in the shade and shadow of men's accomplishments. In my thesis I wish to reach a clearer understanding of the mechanism which create and perpetuate this subordination.

I fled Iraq because I felt I was being persecuted because of my gender. I felt my oppression; however, I was not able to put it in a theoretical framework. Similar to my situation, most Iraqi women are aware of their oppression, although they are not able to analyze it from a feminist perspective. In my point of view, feeling the oppression is not like understanding it. In her research, Sana Al- Khayyat concludes:

Most of the [Iraqi] women I interviewed could not be called feminists. Although many of them were conscious of their oppression, they all saw this as an individual problem and their everyday behaviour merely encouraged such oppression.<sup>35</sup>

In her analysis, Sana Al-Khayyat identifies a gap between women's consciousness of their oppression and an effective feminist analysis. When I met with Hanaa Edward Busha, an Iraqi female lawyer and a secretary of Iraqi Al-Amal Association, she started a process of capacity building for me to help me understand and to become involved in a

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<sup>35</sup> Khayyat, Sana(1990), *Honour and Shame: Women in Modern Iraq* (London: Saqi Books): p. 183-184

feminist analysis. Her method was successful and helped me understand my rights as a human being, to know about the global women's movement, and to learn about feminist perspectives.

Hanaa Edward Busha's understanding of my situation, and her method in building my capacity, were reasons that encouraged me to research the role of women's organizations in Iraq. She had once been an active member of the Iraqi Women's League. Hence, Chapter Two introduces historical evidence of women's emancipation, the ups and downs of women's organizations, and mechanisms overshadowing women's political participation and activism. This research of the available literature has been a quest, which was started as soon as I arrived in the Diaspora.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Iraqi Women: Emancipation and Mechanisms**

#### **Overshadowing their Organizations**

In Chapter One, I reflected on my personal experience and that of other Iraqi women whom I knew. Chapter two provides a broader understanding of Iraqi women's lives. It answers my questions about where did, and does, Iraqi feminism stands, why Iraq was further ahead/ more secular than many other countries in the Middle East, and what have Iraqi women's organizations accomplished. This chapter provides historical evidence about the call for women's emancipation, the relations between women and the state, the establishment and activities of women's organizations, and the mechanisms overshadowing women's equal political participation.

In Iraq, which is a male-dominated society and state, women's activism is kept invisible; in fact, I was unaware of much of this history when I was in Iraq. Women's political participation is controlled by a stereotyped social/ patriarchal view of the superiority of men over women, which overshadows women.

In this chapter, historical evidence explains the background and the development of women's organizations as agents for social transformation, the emancipation of women, and women's resistance to their subordination. As this chapter points out, however, Iraqi women's organizations still reflect a variety of religious, secular, and chauvinist agendas, which undermine the possibility of a fully independent, secular, and free women's movement in Iraq.

### **Women's Emancipation: Resisting Male Superiority**

The call for Iraqi women's emancipation started as early as 1910. In the 1910s and 1920s, there was strong encouragement given to Iraqi women by Iraqi writers, female and male. Secular males who studied abroad in Turkey and Egypt, such as Kahlid Al Rahhal and Jameel Sudqi Al-Zahawi, encouraged women to call for their rights and freedoms. These secular activists defined Iraqi society as masculine, and they criticized the fact that men were granted inherent superiority over women by virtue of their gender. Therefore, the road to women's emancipation began with exposing the patriarchal paradigms, cultural practices and rituals, and the religious mechanisms subordinating women that underscored masculine discrimination against women.

According to the Iraqi public view, one of the first Iraqi poets to write about the emancipation of women was Jameel Sudqi Al-Zahawi. His liberal views, published in 1910 in an article entitled "In Defence of Women," caused such an uproar that he was dismissed from law school. But his voice was not to be silenced, and the same views on the women's question were reflected in his poetic writings.

One of his famous poems pointedly runs:<sup>36</sup>

The veil tortures and overwhelms her with pain  
The first nation punished women and imposed this sentence  
History is going to question those who so punished her, and will affirm her  
human rights.

It is notable that in this poem he explicitly affirms women's human rights. In another poem, he focuses further on the veil:

Hey, daughter of Iraq, rip off the veil, become unveiled, for our life  
together (men and women) seeks a revolution. Rip it off and burn it; do  
not hesitate. It was such a false refuge.

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<sup>36</sup> Masuh, Mofeed (2004), *Excerpts from Jameel Sudqi Al-Zahawi Poems (1863-1936) in Philosophy, Woman, and Society*; (Arabic); (Abo Dhabi: Kefaya org.)

At a time when the society was totally dominated by Islamic religious norms, Al-Zahawi called on women to rip off their veils, which was interpreted as a secular revolution against the religion and a denial of its fundamental restrictions against women. He did not stop at that point of confronting Islamic rules; in another poem, he called directly to abandon religious fundamentalism and to become more civilized. He clearly saw fundamentalism as incompatible with the possibility of creating civilized societies:

O my people, your fundamentalism makes you backward while other peoples make great strides at becoming more civilized than you.

Iraqi secular and Marxist women and men adopted al-Zahawi's calls for abandonment of veils. Iraqi Communist Party encouraged unveiling women publicly, which exposed its members to critiques of the religious clerics and conservative families in Iraq. Unlike the Iraqi Women's League, the General Federation for Iraqi Women, which started as a secular organization, changed its agenda because it had to support women's veiling when Saddam Hussein called for an "Islamic Faith Campaign" in 1991.

Al-Zahawi also exposed himself to charges of atheism when he wrote a poem judging Allah and describing his rules as unjust and prejudiced:

I wish deeply, not fearfully, that our history could go back  
I would ask Allah to change his mind and judgments, to shirk all injustice and prejudice.

More recently, the Iraqi General Federation for Women has recognized Al-Zahawi's role in defending women's rights:

Top among those writers was well-known Iraqi poet Jameel Sudqi al-Zahawi. He wrote an article entitled "In Defence of Women" (issued in the Egyptian newspaper "Al-Mu'yed" No.6138, 1910) in which he asked men to change their views about women, affirming that women are human beings entitled to the same rights as men. Their personhood should not be disdained. His article caused a furor amid Iraqi circles.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Iraqi General Federation of Women (2000), <http://the-amazing.us/uruklink/women/ep2.htm>

Simultaneous to Al-Zahawi's call in defence of women's rights and freedoms, members of the Jewish community founded the first female school in 1911. This was soon followed by a school for Muslim girls in 1913,<sup>38</sup> but broad public encouragement of women's education and employment in offices remained elusive; the exclusion of women from public life is an essential aspect of Muslim societies. As Barbara F. Stowasser states:

Much more harmful than women's work outside the home, however, is women's involvement in politics, and not only because it necessitates late working hours and intimate intermingling of the sexes. This issue is more serious because it goes clearly against the directives of the religion of Islam.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps it should not amaze us that some men took a leading public role in the first egalitarian struggle for women's emancipation, given deep-rooted patriarchal relations. Among the well-educated men and women who led the first calls for women's emancipation was the artist Hussein al Rahhal, one of the first Marxists in Iraq. His group was also involved in defending women's human rights and freedoms. He established his famous newspaper (*The Journal*) in 1924, in which he analysed the social institution as a transformational institution in nature. He deemed the women's issue as an essential part of the social crisis, and consequently, women's emancipation as essential. Some conscientious and thoughtful men started the call for women's freedoms because they concluded that prohibiting women from the public sphere critically militated against their society's overall development and well-being.

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<sup>38</sup> Daud, Sabiha (1958) *Awal al- Tariq ila al- nahdha al – niswia fi al- Iraq* (The First Road to Women's Awakening in Iraq) (Baghdad: Al-Rabita Press): p. 48

<sup>39</sup> Stowasser, Barbara F. (1993), "Women's Issues in Modern Islamic Thought"; in: Tucker, Judith E. (editor) *Arab Women: Old Boundaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press): p. 18

Suad Khairy confirms the democratic calls and campaigns launched by open-minded Iraqi men for women's freedoms:

The revolutionary vanguards called for women's liberation and releasing women's resources and talents on the national confrontational level. Hussein Al-Rahhal and his group launched a campaign calling for women's economic, social, cultural and educational emancipation in their newspaper "Al-Saheefa"<sup>40</sup> in 1924. The campaign made the point that social liberation and advancement cannot proceed without women's liberation. They, also, called for freeing women from the veil. For that reason, reactionary forces launched a severe campaign against them. In the 1920s, open-minded poets like Al-Rusafee, Al-Zahawi, and Al-Jawahiri supported Iraqi women's liberation. They also called for women's education and they wrote poems in this vein.<sup>41</sup>

Despite being accused of causing unrest among women, Asma'a Al-Zahawi, a female activist, continued empowering women, addressing, in particular, their education and employment goals. Just as the poet Al-Zahawi was confronted by fundamentalists, Asma'a also was faced with a similar difficult situation. Indeed, all of those who attempted modernization, social liberation, and women's freedom found themselves mired in an ongoing conflict with those who harshly opposed such change. Nevertheless, several small women's groups were eventually founded, encouraging women's participation in educational, social, and humanitarian objectives.

During the 1930s and 1940s, religious clerics and heads of tribes did not stop modernists from gaining momentum in their efforts to liberate Iraqi society. The modernists called for women's education, economic and social emancipation, and, of course, for unveiling women. In the middle of the 1930s, poor Iraqi workers opened a forum for political involvement with the establishment of the Iraqi Communist Party, which encouraged women's emancipation as S Khairy points out:

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<sup>40</sup> Al-Saheefa means: "The Journal" in English

<sup>41</sup> Khairy, Suad (1998), *Iraqi Women: Fighting and Giving*; (Arabic); (Stockholm: A.R.M. All-Tryck): p.3

The slogan of liberating women and women's equality didn't come to be a popular slogan until the Iraqi workers' role became more impressive after the establishment of their political party, Iraqi Communist Party in 1934, which was the first political party that asserted in its first programme the necessity of emancipating women and achieving equality for her, at the start of the 1930s.<sup>42</sup>

In the 1930s and 1940s, feminism had not yet manifested itself as a distinctive movement.

With the proliferation of schools for female children, the establishment of a female college, and the rise of political awareness among the poor working class, more women's organizations were founded with the objectives of raising awareness and offering educational opportunities, social well-being and solidarity. "In 1938, Ms. Amina Al-Rahhal, representing Iraqi women, attended the First Conference for Middle Eastern Women in Damascus. She participated in establishment of the first Arabic Women's Union."<sup>43</sup>

In the 1940s and 1950s, the first educated Iraqi women were beginning to take their places in society. For example, Ms. Sabiha Sheikh Daud became the first Iraqi female judge in 1951. She entered the College of Law in 1936 and graduated in 1940 despite an intense negative backlash against this first female presence on the university campus. Male students demonstrated at the gate of the university and delighted in illustrating her on the blackboard of the class wearing her *Aba'a* (veil) in caricature drawings. Subsequently, Ms. Miriam Nirma became the first female Iraqi journalist. She owned and established the first Iraqi women's newspaper, the Arab Girl (*Fatat al Arab*).

Al-Zahawi was not the only Iraqi writer to come to the defence of women. The poets Ma'aruf al Rusafee, Nazik al Malaikah, Lamiaa Abbas Umara, and others might be

<sup>42</sup> Khairy, Suad (1998), *Iraqi Women: Fighting and Giving*; (Arabic); (Stockholm: A.R.M. All-Tryck): p.3

<sup>43</sup> Khairy, Suad (1998), *Iraqi Women: Fighting and Giving*; (Arabic); (Stockholm: A.R.M. All-Tryck): p.4

noted. Nazik al Malaikah (1923- ), a famous Iraqi female poet and critic who started writing in the late 1940s, dealt with women's emancipation and oppression in a sexist culture. In one of her poems, she asked:

As a woman, is there a meaning for my ambition and hope?  
 Death witnessed my weakness as a human being  
 They told me that my high morals, my dream, and my sky are  
 "mere dreamlike beats of a poetic heart"  
 So, what is the meaning of my existence?  
 May fate be merciful to my depressed heart?  
 I do not want to live in the slave's valley  
 Among dead people; though they are not buried.<sup>44</sup>

Lamiaa Abbas Umara<sup>45</sup> is another female poet (1929- ) to urge women's liberation. She started to write poetry when a student at the High Institute for Teachers' Training in 1944. The opposition to women's veiling was a favourite theme. As an adherent of the Manda'ay religion, a religious minority in Iraq, there were two strikes against her, discrimination for being a woman and for being from an obscure religious group. She wrote:

Because I hate discrimination  
 All of them, each in their own way, have discriminated against me.  
 Thus from the Flood to California  
 Still I stumble in the chains they put on me.  
 If you find that my cell has no windows or doors  
 Please pardon me.  
 For I fear that the wind may wound me,  
 And that the discriminators may lock God's Gate.<sup>46</sup>

In the 1950s, the famed Iraqi female poet Nazik Malaikah<sup>47</sup> gave expression to the perennial existential quandary, especially for the woman, in the poem "Who Am I?"

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<sup>44</sup> Al-Sweedi, Aliya's Salim (2000) *Nazik al Malaikah: The First Iraqi Female Poet in Writing Free but Rhyming Poems*; (Arabic); in the website of *Nisa Arabiyat (Arabic Women)*; URL: <http://www.angelfire.com/ok3/nesa/nazek>

<sup>45</sup> Lamiaa Abbas Umara was a teacher at the Iraqi schools until the 1970s. She worked for UNESCO by the mid 1970s. She lives in San Diego/ USA now. She is known as the most liberated female poet in Iraq.

<sup>46</sup> Umara, Lamiaa Abbas (1958)/ personal contact.

The self asks who am I?  
 I, like it, am bewildered, gazing into shadows  
 Nothing gives me peace  
 I continue asking – and the answer  
 Will remain veiled by a mirage  
 I still keep thinking it has come close  
 But when I reach it – it has dissolved,  
 Died, disappeared.

Nazik Al Malaika and Lamia Abbas Umara are both part of what Phebe Marr describes as a “renaissance” in Iraq. According to Phebe Marr:

The 1950s brought an intellectual and social renaissance that shaped the new literate middle class no less than social and economic factors did. New ideas and values, imported for the most part from abroad, caused a break with the past and created a generation gap. Iraqi students who went through school in the 1930s and 1940s emerged in the 1950s with sharply different views and aspirations than their elders.<sup>48</sup>

The emancipatory tradition of poetry continues. Balkis Hameed (1956- ) calls for gender equality in much of her poetry. The focus is often on comparing the confined space of women in Iraqi Muslim culture to the freer space of women in the West. Physical transposition to Europe does not mean an escape from the brutal strictures. One of her poems is a vivid and touching portrayal of this:

When she came, she had not known the new language, nor had she a book  
 And the life in the city has too much stuff  
 In the city, women can cut their hair and wear perfumes  
 She was a prisoner in her home to cook for him  
 At a relative’s wedding party  
 The bride invited her to a hairdresser  
 The mirrors,  
 the many lights in the place, and  
 The beautiful hairdos!! She was delighted!!  
 She was excited!! As she smelled the perfumes first  
 She said: How nice the perfumes are!! They’re like the scent of Heaven  
 They’re nicer than our Hinna and incense

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<sup>47</sup> After her graduation with a Bachelors degree in Arabic Literature in Baghdad, she obtained a Master’s degree in the “Comparative Literature: Arabic/ English” from Wisconsin University in USA in the 1950s. She taught at the School of Education/Basra University later. It is significant to mention that her mother was a poet, as well.

<sup>48</sup> Marr, Phebe (1985), *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press): p. 147

And when she came back home that night  
 He smelled her perfume  
 He got mad at her  
 As a stormy sea, he yelled: O daughter of an adulteress!!  
 You have women's smell of perfume  
 Will you be a prostitute?  
 Did you meet them (women)?  
 And you dare to sleep next to me?  
 I will kill all femininity in you  
 And will kill all perfumes of prostitutes and... And... And...  
 And will kill all remains of the adulteress inside you.<sup>49</sup>

Another of her poems (1996) is about divorced women:

Your laws and Shareea are old and yellow  
 It is difficult to see the head apart from its body in the wilderness.  
 It is the head that owns kingdoms of imagination  
 It has the eyes,  
 It is my head which shrieks,  
 Where has humanity gone? Where are the human beings?<sup>50</sup>

### **Women and Iraqi Politics 1958-2004**

Women's political status during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Iraq has not been stable and has been largely dependent upon the political party or government in power. The insecurity of the situation of women reflects how totally males' power struggles dominate.

Although the call for women's emancipation had started early in the 1910s, the year 1958 marked the first real political advancement for the status of women in Iraq. In the revolution of July 14<sup>th</sup> in that year, the governmental system changed from a monarchy to a republic, and a movement was enthusiastically launched to liberate women from the yoke of male dominance.

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<sup>49</sup> Hameed, Balkis (1997), *Women Fall Down Earlier* (Stockholm: Holland); (translated from Arabic by Awatef Rasheed/(Personal contact).

<sup>50</sup> Hameed, Balkis (1996), *A Divorced Woman*; in her collection: *Mary's Giving Birth* (Stockholm: Holland); (translated from Arabic by Awatef Rasheed/(Personal contact).

Most scholars regard the revolution of July 14, 1958 as marking the first serious steps taken by an Iraqi government to liberate Iraqi women. To this end, the women's movement focused on promoting educational and employment opportunities for women. It also attempted to rid the society of patriarchal concepts such as man's superiority over women, religious authority over the personal law, and discriminatory tribal norms that affected women.

After the 14<sup>th</sup> of July Revolution, codes of personal law were changed for more equality due to the efforts of secular Marxist feminists, which as Phebe Marr describes:

He [Qasim] also helped raise the status of women. In December 1959, he promulgated a significant revision of the personal status code regulating family relations, traditionally governed by Islamic law. One of its provisions (article 3) severely limited the right of polygamy. Men were forbidden to take a second wife without the authorization of a judge, and then only for legitimate reasons. Articles 8 and 9 stipulated the minimum age for marriage as eighteen, which could be lowered in special cases to sixteen, thus eliminating child marriage. Article 35 protected women against arbitrary divorce by invalidating divorces pronounced by a man under certain circumstances. Most interesting and most revolutionary was a provision (article 74) that, through an indirect legal mechanism, gave women equal rights with men in matters of inheritance. The new code applied to both Sunnis and Shi'ah, thus bringing all Iraqis under one law. Although not as radical as laws promulgated earlier in Turkey or Tunisia, the revised code clearly showed a liberal intent. Unfortunately, it aroused considerable opposition among religious leaders and conservative elements, and did not survive intact after Qasim's regime.<sup>51</sup>

In 1962, a coalition of both Ba'athists and Nationalists toppled Qasim's regime. The coalition lasted in power for nine months and ended with a coup, in which the nationalists toppled the Ba'athists in 1963. Later, in 1968, another coup put the Ba'athists in power. During the nine-month coalition, the argument over the possibility of keeping the Personal Law No. 188 continued between the Ba'athists and the Nationalists. As Batatu relates:

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<sup>51</sup> Marr, Phebe (1985), *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press): p. 172

In March [1962], the main point of contention was the Personal Status Law No. 188, which Qasim had passed in 1959 and which, among other things, placed, by implication, female and male relatives on an equal footing with regard to intestate inheritance. On the initiative of Aref (Arabic Nationalist) and Premier al Bakr (Ba'ath Party), this and other provisions "inconsistent with the Sahri'a (Islamic) Law" were repealed on March 18 [1962]. The step was taken, Ali Saleh As-Sadi subsequently complained, while he was away in Cairo, although he had warned in the Revolutionary Council that it "would lead to a split." If the things carried through, "how could we expect the world to look upon us as a progressive regime?" he had said.<sup>52</sup>

It is significant to mention that the Law of 1959 took place because of the Marxist feminists' influence at a relatively democratic political milieu in Iraq. Dr Naziha al-Dulaimi, the first Iraqi female minister and a member of the Iraqi Women's League, was appointed by Qasim at that time. The Iraqi Communist Party and its women's organization, the Iraqi Women's League, were given more freedom by the Qasim's government. Later, the Cold War resulted in a decline in activism and influence of the Iraqi Women's League, because of politics at the global level. The Cold War resulted in the removal of a supportive Marxist power to the Iraqi Communist Party and its women's organization. Encouragement given to the religious Islamic fundamentalists was one of the Cold War's means used by the USA to deflect Marxism in the Middle East. The implications were the same for Iraq as for Afghanistan. The Nationalist and religious powers were given support in order to get rid of the Iraqi Communist Party, and consequently the Marxist feminists lost ground in any continued activism in Iraq as soon as the Ba'ath Nationalist Party seized power in 1962.

Events have conspired to ensure that women's modernization and emancipation were thwarted by politicized religious powers of domination. These powers impose a

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<sup>52</sup> Batatu, Hanna (1978), *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press): p. 1018

separation between the public and private realms of women, and they keep women as submissive to the authority of the religion, especially with respect to their marital relations. Although the Ba'ath party did not reflect a religious agenda until the First Gulf War in 1990, the religious judges were given more authority over the amended Personal Law in 1978 as Phebe Marr points out:

Urbanization, the spread of education, the changing occupational structure, and the need for skilled labour have also brought a noticeable, though gradual, change in the status of women. The Ba'ath regime in particular has encouraged the education and employment of women and improved their status through legislation. Ba'ath policy has aimed at gradually whittling down the role of the extended family and the authority of its male members while strengthening the nuclear family and women's position within it. In 1978, the Ba'ath passed an amendment to the personal status law. This amendment allowed the *qadi* (religious judge) to overrule a guardian's refusal to allow a woman minor to marry the man of her choice, if he saw no valid reason why the marriage should not take place. It also imposed stiff penalties for forced marriages, harsher in the case of relatives who were not parents. Polygamy, although not outlawed, would require the permission of a judge, who would presumably look with disfavour on second marriages. A woman's grounds for divorce were expanded, and judges were given wider discretionary power in awarding divorces. In cases of divorce, the mother was given custody of the children until the age of ten, and in some cases, fifteen. Reforming rather than radical, these steps were designed to give women more control over their personal lives without permanently alienating conservative religious elements.<sup>53</sup>

These comments have been somewhat overtaken by subsequent events. Phebe Marr wrote her book before Saddam's second marriage, and thus did not refer to the fact that Saddam Hussein, after issuing the Polygamy law, changed it (article 26, personal law) in 1984, making it easier for men to get married to more than one woman if they could prove financial competence to support more than one nuclear family. *A la* King Henry VIII of England, Saddam eviscerated his own law in order to marry his second wife, Samira Shahbender. Martha Sherrill stated:

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<sup>53</sup> Marr, Phebe (1985), *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press): p. 272

Over time, newspapers reported that Saddam had one special mistress—Samira Shahbandar. She is described as tall, blond and from an old and distinguished merchant family of Baghdad. At the time Saddam fell for her, Samira was married to somebody else—Nurredin al-Safi, an Iraqi Airlines official, who quickly agreed to step aside and let the notoriously hotheaded president claim his wife. Safi was later promoted to director of the airline.

Some believe Saddam secretly married Samira without going through the formality of divorcing Sajida. (She is described as Saddam's "second wife" in both the London Daily Telegraph and in the quickie biography of Saddam by Judith Miller and Laurie Mylroie.)

In either case, Saddam's relationship with Samira surely strained his family life. Sajida, by all accounts, was overcome with jealousy and humiliation when Saddam began making public appearances with Samira in the late '80s.<sup>54</sup>

It is significant that Arabic Muslim fundamentalists were not the only pressure groups that assumed these patriarchal attitudes. Nationalist and religious chauvinism also flourished among Kurdish, Turkmen, and Assyrian minorities. Jewish and Christian fundamentalists were also inclined to resist Arab/Muslim fundamentalism. The emergence of fundamentalism throughout the Islamic world generated negative responses and conflicts among sectarian groups at all levels. This upheaval seriously impaired the movement to modernize Islamic society and to emancipate women, inasmuch as women's emancipation is considered to be a negative Western influence, along with other neo-colonial influences, that should be resisted. Thus women were among the prime losers in these political conflicts. Fatima Mernissi states:

For the Arab countries the United Nations, with its charter and its convention, is an arena for manipulation and hypocrisy. This opinion was only reinforced, alas, by the Gulf War, in which the noble principle of the

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<sup>54</sup> Sherrill, Martha (January 25, 1991), *Bride of Saddam, Matched Since Childhood* (Washington D.C.: Washington Post): p. D01

charter and the lofty ideal of the universality and responsibility acted to legitimize the use of force.<sup>55</sup>

In concert with these political factors, Islamic fundamentalism grew powerful and imposed its regressive strictures on the social, cultural, and political aspects of Iraqi society and the state. Iraq registered the full impact of religious fundamentalism around the time of the Iraqi-American conflict. Economic sanctions led to mass starvation and death. The use of conventional, biological, and chemical weapons ravaged the environment. Saddam Hussein's dictatorship became even more brutally entrenched than it had been before. This unfortunate set of converging circumstances encouraged citizens to become more religious and rigidly Islamic. Women in particular were affected by these dire circumstances, and so became ever more vulnerable to the many critical changes that took place following the Muslim fundamentalist domination that swept the country in 1991 with the Islamic Faith Campaign, which was initiated by Saddam Hussein.

The gains that were made in 1959 continued to be pushed back by a series of legal changes inferiorizing and subordinating women. Saddam Hussein issued regressive laws such as a law allowing honour killing (Resolution 111, February 28, 1990), a law that prohibits women from traveling abroad with no male *Mahram* companion, and yet another allowing women's execution (November 2001), including the beheading of women by the state for reasons of honour. Amnesty International states:

In October dozens of women accused of prostitution were beheaded without any judicial process in Baghdad and other cities. Men suspected of procurement were also beheaded. The killings were reportedly carried out in the presence of representatives of the Ba'ath Party and the Iraqi Women's General Union. Members of *Feda'iyye Saddam*, a militia created in 1994 by 'Uday Saddam Hussein, used swords to execute the

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<sup>55</sup> Mernissi, Fatima (1992), *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World* (Boston: Addison- Wesley Publishing Company): p. 67

victims in front of their homes. Some victims were reportedly killed for political reasons.<sup>56</sup>

In 2002, Saddam Hussein issued another law that allows husbands to beat their wives (article 41). This was illegal between 1959 and 2002. Beating women was consistent with Islamic and Shari'a law as pointed out in Chapter One. These laws, which legalized subordination and inferiorization of women, were indicators of the new connections between the religious and state's authorities. It is interesting that this religious/ state alliance has become a mechanism to shape the politics in patriarchal ways at specific times such as during wars and economic sanctions.

### **Women's Organizations and their Establishment**

As women's oppression in Iraq is caused by, and has resulted from, patriarchal relationships and long-established unequal gendered roles, I now turn to an analysis of women's organizations. Women's organizations are obviously significant for the sharing of experiences and views, raising awareness, lobbying, and being the source of political involvement for female leadership and for women's movement activism. I therefore decided to look into the development of women's organizations and their collective work in Iraq. My analysis shows the significant role that the secular women's organizations, such as the Iraqi Women's League, have played in changing the personal law and putting more pressure on the government to enhance women's education and employment.

The Iraqi women's movement has suffered patriarchal barriers on two levels: political and social. On the social level, women have been forced to coordinate their activism

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<sup>56</sup> Amnesty International, Middle East Development Team; Annual Report (2001), *Covering Events From January – December 2000* (Amman: Jordan).

cautiously due to the dominating religious and tribal patriarchal relationships. On the political level, the alliance of tribes and religious clerics and male political party members left little room for women to turn their aspirations for gender equality into practice. Yet, despite the obstacles, Iraqi women have succeeded in creating a space, though limited, for their activism.

It began with small groups; women tried to find a space for themselves with the well-being of their families in mind, while avoiding a clash with the religious institution. According to the Iraqi Federation for Iraqi Women, the first viable women's group was the Women's Advancement Society, formed in 1924 and headed by Asma'a Al-Zahawi. However, Sabiha Sheik Daud, as quoted by S Joseph, notes that the first women's group was actually founded in 1923:

The involvement of women in the public sector through their participation in voluntary associations had its roots in the education sphere. Nadi al-Nahdha al-Niswyah (Women's Renaissance Club) was founded in Baghdad in November 1923 to educate women and prepare them "to become active members of their society" (Daud 1958, 6). It concentrated its activities in three areas: literacy courses for women; distribution of clothing to poor women; protection and education of female orphans. Opposition to women's ingress into the public sphere was manifested in "complaints about the activities of the club to the government" (Al-Bilad 30 Nov. 1930). The veil, which symbolized the sequestration of women in the family, became a focus of struggle.<sup>57</sup>

The religious, local and tribal leaders opposing these women's groups and attempting to perpetuate a patriarchal system were formidable foes. Accordingly, women's organizations initially included only the elite, privileged, and well-educated women. The social institutions and structures in place during the monarchical feudal era still did not define the middle class clearly enough for these influences to percolate downward. The

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<sup>57</sup> Ismael, Jacqueline S. & Ismael, T. Shereen (2000), "Gender and State in Iraq"; in Joseph, Suad (editor) *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press): p.187-188

majority of Iraqi people were economically marginalized. Those who possessed “power” were feudalists (wealthy rural land owners), very rich merchants, governmental personnel, and religious Shii clerics. Hanna Batatu describes the situation thus:

“Classes “existed, to be sure, in urban areas, but in a rudimentary form and in parallel structures within the recognized religious communities. They also remained purely economic in character, and did not acquire a political aspect. Moreover, by reason of the fact that eighteenth-century Iraq was composed of plural, relatively isolated, and often virtually autonomous city-states and tribal confederations, urban” class” ties.

The social structures of the various town or regions, though possessing common features, differed according to differences in their historical functions or in their natural circumstances. Obviously, the social character of a purely tribal market town, such as suq-ush-Shuyukh, diverged markedly from that a Shii holy city and a centre of pilgrimage such as Najaf, or from that of Baghdad, which had long been a main seat of government and a commercial emporium of international significance.<sup>58</sup>

Religious clerics and the tribal and regional power structures of the associated institutions have continued to reject any call for modernization. It is obvious that a modernizing society would place at risk their sacred, social, and patriarchal positions. For the religious clerics, it would also jeopardize the huge revenue derived from the faithful and endanger not only the sacred power but the economic status of the “sacred” clerics, whose fortunes come from the collecting *khums*, a tax of Shii individuals and families<sup>59</sup>. Calls for enlightening the masses, especially women, were perceived by clerics as potential threats to this huge revenue, their socio-economic positions as religious leaders, their high social status, and considerable wealth as well as their potential roles in the

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<sup>58</sup> Batatu, Hanna (1978), *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press): p. 8-9

<sup>59</sup> One must keep in mind that these *khums* currently generate an approximate amount of \$US5 million per annum. In addition, these same clerics collect the monies placed in the sacred graves of Shii Imams in Najaf, Kerbala, and Kufa, which constitutes a huge fortune every year, because most Shiites believe that those dead Imams “know” about their giving, and will therefore “bless” them economically and socially. More than that, clerics own the essential tourist services in the holy cities, such as hotels, restaurants, public washrooms, and stores, which increase their revenue.

political decision-making in Iraq. Also, Muslim clerics oppose the liberation of women because such change contradicts Muslim sacred laws and moves the society to be more secular and less religious in orientation – a thin edge of the wedge, as it were.

Heads of tribes oppose social liberation because it could empower rivals and create a new class of intellectuals likely to undermine their privileged economic and social positions. Their position is necessarily precarious, given that their relation with the poor class has been essentially one of master-slave.

As mentioned above, the 1930s saw the growth of a more popularist Marxist party. As early as 1920, secular feminists confronted the religious laws head on, publicly, and built up their rejection of patriarchal relationships and gender discrimination against women.

Due to the efforts of courageous Iraqi women, several women's groups and organizations were established, especially oriented to charity giving and providing social services including housing and eliminating women's illiteracy and poverty. Only a small number of those organizations were politically mobilized. The Iraqi General Federation for Women listed these groups as:<sup>60</sup>

- 1 National Housing Society, founded in 1935
- 2 Society for Combating Social Deficiencies, founded in 1937
- 3 Iraqi Women's Union, founded in 1941
- 4 Society for Combating Nazism and Fascism, founded in 1942
- 5 Red Crescent Society, founded in 1944
- 6 Sisters of Liberation Club, founded in 1944
- 7 Society for the Protection of Children in Baghdad, founded in 1945
- 8 Society of Young Christian Women, founded in 1946
- 9 Arab Housing Society, founded in 1948
- 10 Society of Moslem Sisters, founded in 1951
- 11 Baghdadi Club of Young Women (Unknown date)

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<sup>60</sup> Some of these groups do not seem to be one hundred per cent women's organizations; Iraqi General Federation for Women listed them as women's organizations, although it did not provide historical details on the role of these groups.

- 12 Alumni of the Teachers College in Baghdad (Unknown date)
- 13 Society for Eradicating Illiteracy Among Women (Unknown date)
- 11 Society of Nuns (Unknown date)
- 12 Society of Greek Ladies for Helping the Poor (Unknown date)
- 13 Society for Prevention of Cruelty to the Poor (Unknown date)
- 14 Society of Mothers of the Anglican Assyrian Church (Unknown date)
- 15 Charitable Society for Women (Unknown date)
- 16 Society for Helping Foster Mothers (Unknown date).<sup>61</sup>

Although the political-party alliances stifled action, radical feminists and activists still searched for ways to articulate their wishes, picking what they wanted from a variety of feminist theoretical frameworks to create a common atmosphere for their activism. Marxist feminism was the main author of the map for women's demands for emancipation. Later the fundamentalist religious groups created their version of feminism under the theoretical framework of Islamic feminism.

Wars and conflicting economic issues have had an impact on women and their movement in one way or another. International relationships with other countries, the Soviet Union, neighbouring countries, and the USA included, have contributed to this impact. The women's movement in Iraq was shaped and aborted at specific times in the new history of Iraq by global/international interests and power.

### ***Major Women's Organizations***

Involvement of Iraqi women with political parties marks a visible difference between the first wave of Iraqi women's organizations (1920s to 1950s) and the second wave of Iraqi women's organizations (1950s to present). While the first wave of women's organizations in Iraq have had little affiliation with the political parties, the major organizations of the second wave, which have had more effective influence on the women's movement in Iraq, have emerged from the major political parties. My

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<sup>61</sup> Iraqi General Federation for Women (2000), <http://the-amazing.us/uruklink/women/ep2.htm>

discussion of these major women's organizations in this section is organized according to the organizations' influence on women's rights and movement in Iraq.

***Iraqi League for the Defence of Women***

The tenuous situation of women's organizations, their general lack of legitimacy and their frustrating conflict with the reactionary religious and tribal forces supported by the monarchist state, lasted until the Iraqi revolution in July 14, 1958 created a Republic. Suddenly, Iraqi citizens enjoyed more leeway to advocate divergent views, and thanks to historical circumstances, women become recognized as a political force.

Emerging from the Iraqi Communist Party, the Iraqi League<sup>62</sup> for the Defence of Women has had an effective influence on Iraqi women's rights and freedoms. Most Arabic feminists were basically communists until the 1980s. The implication of this late development is particularly pertinent to the history of the women's movement in Iraq. Until then, Marxism was the only viable option available to women struggling to eliminate sexist subordination and segregation, even though female members of the Iraqi Communist Party would not be free of sexist experiences and separation within the party itself. Analysis of their situation as women activists indicates clearly that Marxism is not necessarily feminist; nevertheless, feminists were still able to build their primary arguments on Marxist dialectical principles. Clare Burton points out:

During the early period of the recent feminist movement, anything that Marx or Engels might have said about women, the family, or the sexual division of labour, was pounced upon and quoted by people of different persuasions to prove or disprove a particular point. The fact that this material was scarce simply lent credence to the view that Marxism should be discarded along with the male left, or at least substantially modified. It is only recently that feminists have been concerned to apply the principles of historical materialism to the question of the subordination of women,

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<sup>62</sup> Suad Khairy has provided detailed description of the Iraqi Women's League. Although it is written in Arabic, I recommend it as a reference.

regardless of questions about the adequacy with which Marx and Engels dealt with it.<sup>63</sup>

The Iraqi Communist Party constituted the League for the Defence of Women's Rights in 1952. As Batatu says:

The League for the Defence of Women's Rights comprised on March 8<sup>th</sup> [1952], by its own reckoning, 25,000 members and, according to one of its leaders, 40,000 members.<sup>64</sup>

Qasim's regime, beginning in 1958 with the July 14 Revolution, was really the Golden era of the Iraqi Women's League, if it can be said to have ever enjoyed one. For the first time, members of the League were free to become involved in a popular activism encompassing poor and working women. IWL was the first women's organization to reflect a secular feminist perspective and to stand against the patriarchal religious, cultural, and economic systems.

After the Ba'ath Party nationalists assassinated Prime Minister Abdul-Karim Qasim, the Iraqi Women's League, and the women's movement in general, went into a decline.

Charles Tripp states:

Al-Rabita (League for the Defence of Women's Rights) had some successes, largely in the area of primary education for girls, but it also encountered fierce resistance from those sections of society – both male and female – which saw the advancement of women as deeply subversive of established and accepted values.<sup>65</sup>

Since its first year of establishment, The Iraqi Women League's members linked the national advocacy for women with the global women's movement. What makes it an especially powerful women's organization is the diversity of women involved. Iraqi women from a variety of ethnic, religious, class, and educational backgrounds have been

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<sup>63</sup> Burton, Clare (1985), *Subordination: Feminism and Social Theory* (Sydney: Australia Pty Ltd): p. 1

<sup>64</sup> Batatu, Hanna (1978), *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press): p. 896- 897

<sup>65</sup> Tripp, Charles (2000), *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): p. 154

struggling to gain freedom and equality under the umbrella of the Iraqi Women's League since 1952. Although they have encountered imprisonment, exile and executions, activists from the Iraqi Women's League never gave up their struggle for women's rights in Iraq. The first female political prisoners in Iraqi history were members of the League. As a properly organized group with a high membership, The Iraqi Women's League achieved remarkable accomplishments for women in Iraq. S Khairy has listed most of the known achievements of the IWL as:

Advocating women's human rights in Iraq, educating women, eliminating illiteracy, and raising legal, social, political, and health awareness among Iraqi women. Iraqi Women's League organized women's efforts for more social care for mothers and children. Its members organized sub-committees to solve family problems and conflicts. Female lawyers were working with experienced community based groups. The League had established and maintained networking with global women's movement. Since its establishment, the League was involved with the Global Democratic Women's Union. This facilitated Iraqi women's national contact with the world lobbying for peace, against the military alliances and the proliferation of nuclear warheads.<sup>66</sup>

Although the Ba'ath party encouraged and empowered its own women's organization IGFW, it prohibited the Iraqi Women's League from continuing their activism and organizational efforts, imprisoning and torturing its members, and exiling them. The Iraqi Women League's surviving members continued their activism, maintaining a clandestine relationship with Iraqi women and the global peace movements, never ceasing to defend women's human rights in Iraq and to condemn the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

Despite persecution, the Iraqi Women's League went on training and developing feminist leaders who participated actively in raising awareness among women and supporting them.

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<sup>66</sup> Khairy, Suad (1998), *Iraqi Women: Fighting and Giving* (Stockholm: A.R.M. All-Tryck)/ Arabic/ Translated by Awatef Rasheed

Exiled members of the Iraqi Women's League advocated for women living in Iraq and exposed Saddam Hussein's agenda against women. They participated in international women's conferences, supported Iraqi women fleeing gender and political based-persecution, revealed crimes against women, and called for justice through appeals and campaigns. They criticized the economic sanctions, which were imposed on Iraqi people and opposed wars.

After the USA toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the Iraqi Women's League re-opened its headquarters in Iraq and re-started its activities. Yet, the government offers most of its resources to religious women's organizations.

### ***General Federation for Iraqi Women***

In 1968, the Ba'ath Party came to power in Iraq. In 1969, it set up a government-affiliated association called the General Federation for Iraqi Women (GFIW). From Annex IV: WID units/ FAO, in selected countries:

General Federation for Iraqi Women (GFIW)... coordinates activities relating to women with the ministries of agriculture and irrigation, health, education, labour and social affairs. The GFIW is organized into 4 offices in Baghdad, with 22 branches in the governorates, 195 sub-branches and 1,317 local units scattered throughout the country. Activities are funded by the government, international agencies and membership dues.

Mandate: To empower women in general and abolish disparities between rural women and their urban counterparts; to mobilize women and further their integration into the development process; and to encourage women them to hold jobs outside the home.<sup>67</sup>

This group was rejected by other women's groups associated with other political parties, although it was recognized as the legal representative of Iraqi women by such

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<sup>67</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization (2000) "Annex IV: WID units in selected countries: Iraq" in FAO: *A Synthesis Report of the Near East Region-Women, Agriculture and Rural Development*; website: [http://www.fao.org/docrep/x0176e/x0176e16.htm#P1316\\_107238](http://www.fao.org/docrep/x0176e/x0176e16.htm#P1316_107238)

international organizations as the United Nations. However, the GFIW was able to create many small branches that organized women's activism within small communities including the rural areas. The establishment of GFIW and its branches by the Ba'ath party enabled the party to dominate the women's movement, overshadow women's participation, and impose limitations on the activism. The party also gave this organization its support and facilitated the leadership's access to the global women's conferences and to activism. Nevertheless, the patriarchal relationship between the Ba'ath party and the GFIW leadership indicated the limited space in which women could move.

As a semi-governmental women's institution, the GFIW was committed to promoting the Ba'ath Party's agenda regarding women's emancipation. From its conferences mottoes, GFIW states:

The first seven conferences (1969-1976) concentrated on means of defending achievements made for Iraqi women under the (17-30) July Revolution and consolidating the social and economic changes led by the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party.<sup>68</sup>

Consistent with Saddam's dictatorial style, the GFIW played a heavy-handed authoritarian role and excluded other Iraqi women's groups from involvement. The dictator's totalitarian regime, intensely affecting all levels of Iraqi society, harmed the Iraqi women's movement by subverting all manifestations of the emerging democratic process. The GFIW totally controlled the agenda of the women's movement inside Iraq and constrained feminist discussions, studies, and activism. Chapter four of the constitution of the federation promulgated in 1969 included contradictory measures of the election process for all leading positions as follows:

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<sup>68</sup> General Federation for Iraqi Women (2000), Publications (Baghdad: Iraq) Arabic <http://the-amazing.us/uruklink/women/ep2.htm>

Article (30):

The election term for all leading positions of the federation's organizations is three years.

Article (31):

Every member of the federation has the right to elect and apply for any of the leading positions of the federation's organizations or as representatives for the said organizations or for the highest organization conference.<sup>69</sup>

Such democratic provisions remained inapplicable because the GFIW was suspicious of non-Ba'athi women who might become involved with the organization. All members of the GFIW had to also take out membership in the Ba'ath party. Most women seeking to benefit from the privileges given to GFIW members signed up as Ba'ath members, albeit perfunctorily. Therefore, women's groups that rejected involvement with the GFIW and the Ba'ath party suffered the machinations of the patriarchal relationship on two levels: within the women's organization and within the social system.

The GFIW was one of Saddam's most typical organizations. The focus was on women's lives and activities from a conservative cultural perspective, which concentrated on family well-being rather than on revealing patriarchal relationships. Members of this federation were empowered, trained and well-funded by the government, and often sent abroad for further training on spying and getting information from and about Iraqi women. The federation was the only women's organization permitted to function in Iraq by the government after 1968, although it was not the designated decision maker in women-related issues. The government issued some positive-sounding resolutions to allow women's employment, education, and electoral participation within the Ba'ath party, but this was only done to obfuscate the ugly face of the dictatorship and the incoherent social and economic policies. For the period (1968-2003), the Ba'ath Party

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<sup>69</sup> General Federation for Iraqi Women (2000), Publications (Baghdad: Iraq) Arabic <http://the-amazing.us/uruklink/women/ep2.htm>

was the only dominating political power of state in which the GFIW did not push for any social assistance to single mothers or widows whose husbands had lost their lives during Saddam's wars. Incredibly, no victim of the systematic rape crimes committed against Iraqi women and girls could have access to GFIW. Rape became a serious and major issue that petrified the whole Iraqi population during Saddam's regime. There was no recourse through the GFIW: it simply did not listen to victims. Women who were raped by Saddam and his followers were either killed or silenced. A woman who had appealed to the head of GFIW, Manal Al-Alusi, concerning her 12-year-old daughter who had been gang-raped by high ranking men of the Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council, was abruptly told: "We cannot interfere!" and given no further comment.

The GFIW played a serious role in obscuring the plight of women in Iraq. Hypocritical state resolutions only masked the neglect of critical women's problems during the ceaseless wars and conflicts. Such issues as women's status and employment, their increasing impoverishment, the torturing of women in prisons, the sexual exploitation of women by security personnel, the raping and kidnapping of women and young girls by those in power, the encouragement of the sex trade, and the tacit support of tribal codes prejudicial to (and fatal for) women such as honour killing, these issues were all pushed under the carpet by the GFIW.

In addition, the GFIW sanctioned Saddam's regime's horrible crimes against Iraqi women in 2000 upon the specious charge of prostitution. Manal Al-Alusi, the perpetual head of the federation, and a few high-ranking members of the GFIW deserve to be numbered among the beheaded. Amnesty International states:

In October 2000, dozens of women were beheaded in Baghdad and other cities. They had been arrested on suspicion of prostitution and ill-treated in

custody before their execution. Members of Fedaiyye Saddam, a militia created in 1994 by 'Uday Saddam Hussain, used swords to execute the women in front of their homes. Several of the killings were reportedly carried out in the presence of representatives of the Ba'ath Party and the General Federation of Iraqi Women.<sup>70</sup>

In essence, the GFIW was a tool to serve the regime, rather than being a "women's organization" with any sort of feminist implications. Nevertheless, this institution trained its members to make use of "feminist" schemes and policies that served some unscrupulous women to achieve their aims. The Human Rights Watch organization reported:

Until the 1990s, Iraqi women played an active role in the political and economic development of Iraq. A robust civil society had existed prior to the *coup d'etat* in 1968, including a number of women's organizations. The Ba'ath Party dismantled most of these civil society groups after its seizure of power. Shortly thereafter it established the General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW). The GFIW grew to play a significant role in implementing state policy, primarily through its role in running more than 250 rural and urban community centers offering job-training, educational, and other social programs for women and acting as a channel for communication of state propaganda. Female officers within the GFIW also played a role in the implementation of legal reforms advancing women's status under the law and in lobbying for changes to the personal status code. On the other hand, some Iraqi women have argued that as a political arm of the Ba'ath party, the GFIW was destructive to women's issues in Iraq and "did not reflect or represent the struggle of millions of oppressed Iraqi women."<sup>71</sup>

Members of this organization enjoyed many privileges not extended to the vast majority of Iraqi women. This discrepancy between Iraqi women on the one hand and the members of this federation on the other obliged many women to engage in its activities. The GFIW reported that there were 180,000 members within its organization in 1981.

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<sup>70</sup> Amnesty International, Middle East Development Team (2005), *Iraq: Decades of Suffering: Now Women Deserve Better* (Amman: Jordan).

<sup>71</sup> Human Rights Watch (2001), *Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan: World Report: Human Rights Development* (Washington D.C: Human Rights Watch).

Women are inferior to men within social, political, and economic structures regardless of their educational or occupational backgrounds. The status of women within the Ba'ath Party reflected the status of women within Iraqi society. For the most part, women were not allowed to involve themselves in other political organizations or parties or oppose the parties of their husbands or other male family members. Therefore, Ba'athi male members pushed women in their families to become involved in the Ba'ath Party; male members of other parties did the same with women from their families. These male members were themselves forced to submit to a hierarchical male/male pecking order extending upward to the higher structures of the party.

***Iraqi Al-Amal Association*** <sup>72</sup>

Established in 1992, the Iraqi Al-Amal Association (IAA) brought together female and male feminists to be engaged in the IAA's activism for the well-being of Iraqis. Although it is devoted for the well being of all Iraqis including women, men and children, women's issues constitute the leading part of IAA's objectives and activities.

IAA is a humanitarian organization; however, it was restricted from activism and work in Baghdad until the USA toppled the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein. The first headquarters were in Iraqi Kurdistan Region. In 2003, the IAA celebrated the establishment of its headquarter in Baghdad city.

Hanaa Edward Busha, the secretary and co-founder of IAA, has put great efforts in cooperation with other women's organizations in Iraq to stand against the cancellation of the Personal Law No. 188 in 2003-04. Iraqi Al-Amal Association called for gender equalities in the New Constitution, achieved campaigns to raise women's legal

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<sup>72</sup> Al-Amal means "The Hope" in Arabic language.

awareness, established health clinics and a maternity hospital, and held building capacity programs and training.

From a secular feminist perspective, Iraqi Al-Amal Association has been leading capacity building programs for women. Economic programs include: Income generating projects in collaboration with the United Nations World Food Program WFP and Department of Labour and Social Affairs DOLSA.

In coordination and cooperation with the UNICEF, legal seminars were held by Iraqi Al-Amal Association to raise women's awareness in terms of their rights, legislation and its implementation, the impact of social traditions, and the empowerment of women. These seminars cover subjects such as the basic concepts of international instruments: Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The International Convention of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CIDAW), The International Convention of the Rights of Child. Among other subjects of these seminars are the relationship between the law, the individual and society, the family law, women's status within the civil society, introduction to the judiciary system, the impact of the social tradition of women, and violence against women.

The IAA has done survey research on violence against women. In 2004, the IAA held a national conference for Iraqi women, which brought women from all walks of life including academics, housewives, activists, women in high post, and women from rural areas. Discussions at the conference focused on areas of: Women in the decision making position, human security, influencing the social conscience, women's movement and the democratic process, and the experience of women's participation in the local councils.

As a secular organization, IAA reflects a feminist perspective and analysis. Its major objective is to raise awareness among Iraqi women on their rights as human beings. In its seminars and training projects, the IAA uses international conventions with respect to gender equality and women's oppression.

### ***Independent Iraqi Women's Organization***

Although it is called the Independent Iraqi Women's Organization,<sup>73</sup> all of its members are actively affiliated with Iraqi Workers Communist Party. IWO is the most radical feminist organization in Iraq to date. Four active women established this organization on May 14, 1993 with the aims of confronting the reactionary codes that humiliate women and degrade them, calling for women's freedoms and liberation, the elimination of honour killing, and changing the personal law of the state to give women equality. The organization quickly became the most active and courageous group at work in the northern part of Iraq.

The IWO perspective is that Islamic law as exemplified by the personal law, which enhances male domination, women's segregation, and the dominance of the honour and shame code, determines the fundamental sexist nature of Iraqi society. Gender equality is the main concern of this organization and its members have been working hard to make a change in spite of the fierce conflict they face on political, social, and religious levels.

The Independent Women's Organization IWO, which was changed to the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq OWFI in 2003, is a secular organization that calls for gender equality, democracy, and elimination of sexism in Iraq. As soon as the IWO became visible and its calls to invalidate Islamic Laws were published, its members

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<sup>73</sup> This organization's title has been changed into The Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) in 2003

faced brutal attacks. Both religious and political parties in Iraq target its active members such as Nadia Mahmoud and Yanar Mohammad. Moreover, reactionary tribal and fundamentalist Islamic groups as The Patriotic Union Kurdistan (PUK), which tracked down their organization and the women's shelter, imprisoned some of its members and forced them to leave Sulaymaniyah City. Despite this, the IWO carried on an effective campaign against honour killing, calling attention to the Kurdish parties' neglect of this issue in Kurdistan:

The region of Northern Iraq now known popularly as "Free Kurdistan" has been ruled by the leading parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the PUK. It has maintained a precarious autonomy by the grace of the "no-fly zone" patrolled by the NATO powers, largely as a punitive measure against Baghdad. Kurdistan is sometimes erroneously termed a "safe haven," but in reality it is nothing of the kind, especially for women. The women's groups have accused both Kurdish authorities, the KDP located in Arbil and the PUK in Sulaymaniya, of either lacking the will to prevent these honour killings or even of complicity in the crimes by failing to repeal the Iraqi legal code still in force that does not recognize honour killings as murders and hence prescribes only light penalties for anyone convicted.<sup>74</sup>

### ***Kurdish Women's Movement***

Political and tribal parties have dominated the Kurdish women's movement for decades. The ethnic conflict became a priority associated with negligence to gender equality and women's freedoms. Kurdish feminists opposed Islamic laws because Islam is considered to be imposed by Arabic invaders on their land. Their denial of the *Arabization* of the Kurdish area introduces the national Kurdish issue, of entering into agreements with the most hated enemy to Arabs: Israel. This created more tensions among chauvinists of both sides, Arabs and Kurds. In the midst of this political and

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<sup>74</sup>Morgan, David (2000), *Kurdish Women Take Action Against Honour Killing* (Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh views Informatics).

religious conflict, Kurdish feminists turned to reflect on their national independence more than they reflected on patriarchal relationships within the Kurdish political, tribal, economic, and social levels.

One of the most complex issues undermining the political stability of Iraq is the Kurdish situation. Inasmuch as social life is linked to political stability and peace, Kurdish women have suffered uncertainty and instability since 1919, their status directly linked to the racial problems and the unending struggle for power. The Kurds constitute 15% of the total Iraqi population, making them the main minority among ethnic groups in Iraq. After the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916 (which set up the Iraqi borders and divided the Kurdish homeland among Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria), the Kurds became disillusioned and proclaimed an independent Kurdish state. Since that time, the Kurdish separatist parties have played a critical role in destabilizing those countries by carrying on a struggle for their autonomy. As Lorenzo Kent Kimball has points out:

Unsuccessful attempts to attain an autonomous Kurdistan were made in 1919, 1937-38, and again in 1946 to no avail. However, the leader of the 1946 rebellion in Iraq, Mustafa Barzani, was allowed to return from exile in 1958 by the (Kassem)<sup>75</sup> government.

In January 1960, under the new authorization for the formation of political parties, Mustafa Barzani and his supporters presented a program to form a party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party; the program was accepted by the Ministry of the Interior and the party was legalized. During the summer of 1960, Barzani demanded full autonomy for the Kurds in Kurdistan. Premier Kassem replied by supplying anti-Barzani elements in the Kurdish tribes with arms and money. In retaliation, Barzani went to Moscow to obtain Soviet support for his position. Upon his return early in 1961 his position became firm.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Both Qassim and Kassem refer to the Iraqi Prime Minister Abdul-Karim Qassim in 1958-1963.

<sup>76</sup> Kimball, Lorenzo Kent (1972), *The Changing Pattern of Political Power in Iraq, 1958 to 1971* (New York: Robert Speller & Sons, Publishers, Inc.): p. 101-102

This conflict between successive Iraqi governments and the Kurdish parties has continued since that time despite the many attempts of the governments to implement peace policies and resolutions. In 1966, there was an attempt to negotiate a peace plan, in which the Kurdish nationality and Kurdish rights were to be recognized and confirmed in Iraq's Permanent Constitution. Those rights included the right to use the Kurdish language formally, the right of Kurdish parties to participate in parliamentary elections and administer the Kurdish areas in the fields of employment and education. Yet another peace agreement was reached in 1970 affirming more rights for the Kurdish people.

However, the Kurdish separatist parties began claiming independence and fought fiercely for that aim. These internal conflicts kept Kurdish families in critical situations anticipating the outbreak of war at any time. Inevitably, the perspective of Kurdish women became more focused on ethnic conflict and the sheer horror of war than on the struggle for women's human rights.

Because of the strong Kurdish tribal identity, the Kurdish movement has been organized on a tribal basis. Most Kurdish tribes established political parties linked to powerful and charismatic male members of the tribe. Therefore, the tribal prejudices are very pronounced within these parties. One of those parties is the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Its women's organization, the Kurdistan Women's Union (KWU), was established in 1952. It was dedicated to achieving Kurdish liberation objectives rather than pursuing a feminist agenda; women's political participation remained thoroughly dominated by the male members of the party, although its literature does affirm some feminist ideology. The issues of advancing the status and welfare of women remained nothing more than a bureaucratic paper exercise. From the Kurdistan Women's Union's publications:

The Kurdistan Women's Union (KWU) is the KDP women's organization that advocates and maintains women interests and rights within the Party and society at large. Ever since its formation in 1952, the KWU has actively participated in the Kurdish national struggle and fought for the realization of human and democratic rights for the people of Kurdistan.<sup>77</sup>

Like the Kurdistan Women's Union (KWU) and GFIW, the PUK Women's Union (established by Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), failed to play a fundamental role in making a change in women's lives. From Amnesty International's appeal in defence of Kajal Khidr, a Kurdish woman who was tortured and her nose slit because she was accused of adultery:

Women's organizations and human rights activists in Iraqi Kurdistan have reported that many thousands of women in the areas controlled by the PUK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) have been tortured or killed by relatives and others who claim they are acting to protect the honor of the family. Women who have been raped, as well as those accused of adultery - or any sort of contact with a man who is not a family member - have been among the victims, as have women who have refused to marry the man chosen by their family. Neither the KDP nor the PUK have denied that women have been the victims of so-called "honor crimes". In April 2000 the PUK announced that all laws allowing honor crimes would be abolished in the area under its control. The Independent Women's Organization in Kurdistan says that up to 4,000 women have been the victims of "honor killings" since 1991, although other groups have put the figure at 800.<sup>78</sup>

Although the PUK was not founded on a tribal basis, it failed to take steps to protect women's lives, and such an organization as the Independent Women's Organization in Kurdistan was threatened with the closure of its headquarters in Sulaymaniyah City, a PUK controlled area. According to the report of Human Rights Watch in 2001:

PUK forces arrested members and supporters of the opposition Iraqi Workers Communist Party (IWCP) in July and August in an apparent attempt to pressure them into leaving PUK-controlled areas. Thirteen

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<sup>77</sup> Kurdistan Democratic Party (2003), Website: <http://www.kdp.pp.se/women.html> (Erbil: Iraqi Kurdistan Region).

<sup>78</sup> Amnesty International, Middle East Development Team (1996), *Torture of Women: Take Action: Torture and Ill-Treatment in the Name of Honour: Kajal Khidr* (Amman: Jordan).

demonstrators protesting the cutting of water and electricity supplies to IWCP facilities were arrested on July 13 outside the PUK's Ministry of Interior building in Sulaymaniyah. Others were arrested in the ensuing days, including three IWCP leaders who were reportedly negotiating a settlement with PUK officials at the time. The premises of two organizations affiliated to the IWCP, the Centre for the Protection of Women in Kurdistan and the Independent Women's Organization, were raided on July 21. Twelve women sheltering at the centre, a shelter for abused women, were taken away and their whereabouts remained unknown. Most of the IWCP detainees were released by late September.<sup>79</sup>

### *Assyrian Women's Movement*

As an ethnic and religious minority, in spite of the patriarchal relationships within the community, the Assyrian Christian women have also been struggling to gain ethnic rights more than gender equality. Being a relatively small minority, they had been obliged to ally themselves with one of the communist parties or with the Kurdish parties. Recently, however, the Assyrians have constituted political parties similar to other ethnic parties in order to defend their ethnic rights. In spite of the fact that they are the aboriginal population of Mesopotamia, whose origins go back 7000 years, they are treated as powerless and inferior within the Kurdish parties. Assyrians have not forgotten the story of the martyr Margaret George (1941-1969) who was killed by the Kurdish Democratic Party, although she fought for it. According to the *Assyrian Star Magazine*:

Margaret George joined the Kurdish resistance movement in northern Iraq in 1961 at the age of 20 and because of her bravery and leadership qualities, she was able, within a short period of time, to assert herself as a capable commander. Throughout her eight years of active combat service, she was to take part in numerous campaigns, notably the battle of Zawita Valley.

Margaret lost favour within the Kurdish leadership when it became clear to them that she had Assyrian higher interests in her heart. She was killed

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<sup>79</sup> Human Rights Watch (2001), *Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan: World Report: Human Rights Development* (Washington D.C: Human Rights Watch).

on the night of January 26, 1969 while asleep at the village of Kala-Komereyh.<sup>80</sup>

The political agenda of the ethnic political parties varies considerably. Basically, most of the parties came into existence to secure human and ethnic equal rights from the state – not to repudiate the state. Nevertheless, and especially since the so-called liberation of Iraq by the Americans, those parties have been advocating the creation of separate states. This situation creates another dilemma: whether or not to divide Iraq into small and separate states.

Again, the American occupational agenda played a vital role in changing the parties' agendas. Adapting to it, their separation claim was changed into federalism under the domination of one government. However, in this, the Assyrians would not be given an opportunity for regional autonomy within a federal structure.

Assyrian women have felt less need to struggle for their freedoms and against patriarchal relationships (in terms of the feminist perspective) because, as Christians and compared to other Muslim women's lives, they have more power within the family and social life. However, as Iraqi citizens, they are subject to the same Islamic personal law as everyone else. Also, they must live as a minority submerged within other communities such as the Arabic, Kurdish, and Turkmen communities, which has the effect of imposing those communities' conventions and restrictions on Assyrian women.

The Assyrian women's movement, as with other women's activism in Iraq, has been integrated into the various political parties. Nevertheless, their activism exhibits a different complexity. As noted, Assyrian women enjoy somewhat more freedom than Arabic and Kurdish women, so their objectives are different in terms of gender equality

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<sup>80</sup> Assyrian Star Magazine (2005), *Margaret George: An Assyrian Combat Woman*; (Chicago: USA).

and the attainment of power within the family and community. Social researcher Hanna Batatu asserts:

... those forming part of such a *mahallah* [residential area], as with the Christians and the Jews, enjoyed autonomy in their personal and denominational affairs.<sup>81</sup>

### ***Iraqi Islamic Da'wa Party's Women's Group***

A politically and religiously motivated group of Shi'a established the Iraqi Da'wa Party in the midst of a political and religious conflict on October 12, 1957. Their aim was the total Shi'a Islamization of Iraqi society. Saddam Hussein executed its founder, Mohammed Baqir Al-Sadr, after he had written two books entitled: *Our Philosophy* and *Our Economy*, considered two of the most essential references in Shi'a literature. He was writing a third book entitled *Our Society* when he was killed.

This party attracted Shi'a involvement, and women joined in its underground activism. Like any other political party in Iraq, Da'wa women did not concentrate on women's issues, but rather on political and religious objectives. Their feminism is basically "Islamic feminism" based on the presumed righteousness of Islamic rules on the status of women and their rights as ratified by the Quran and the Hadith, as well as Imam Ali's<sup>82</sup> submissions.

This party intends to build a civil society based on male domination over women, women being relegated to a secluded environment. Veiling women and segregating them are essential to this party as these notions are deemed to be essential aspects of Islam. Nevertheless, the party condemned and rejected many cultural and tribal implications that degraded women such as closeness of marriage relations which limited marriage to only

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<sup>81</sup> Batatu, Hanna (1978), *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press): p. 19

<sup>82</sup> Ali bin Abi Talib: Cousin of Prophet Mohammed.

women's cousins and relatives, and the high dowries paid by men to women for marriage. For the women active in the Da'wa Party, their notion of feminism is similar to that of Iranian women who fought for the Islamic Revolution. Therefore, many of them, because of their party's political conflict with Saddam's regime, were imprisoned, tortured, and executed.

One of the most essential objectives of this party is support for Islamic rules governing women's roles as mothers and caregivers of their children to participate in building social relationships. Women's activism and political participation is not for women's rights and freedoms, but rather for Islam and party. In this party's view, women have already gained enough rights as asserted by Islamic Laws, and there is no need for more freedoms because unlimited freedom for women causes damage to society and set back their children at an early stage of development. This party also considers patriarchal relationships and male domination essential to women's well-being. Da'wa women rigidly follow the Islamic Shi'a sect as sacred law that should be followed for more social justice.

Many Shi'a women, influenced by their religious sect, became involved in this women's organization. Many university students, medical doctors, engineers, and others involved in this party were killed for its questionable objectives. Shi'a women are mostly attracted to join for a religious and political agenda rather than a feminist agenda.

### ***Other Organizations***

It is only after the Gulf War in 1991 that more than two hundred political parties emerged to declare a variety of political agendas in opposition to Saddam Hussein. All of these parties are male-led and controlled by the patriarchal relationships within their

structures. Women and women's issues are employed to gain consensus. Parties such as the secular Al-Wifaq al Watany tried to find popular bases for their movement through a secular agenda, but where the founder is a former high-ranking member of the Ba'ath Party, the party lost in popularity and has been excluded from political power and influence in Iraq, including any attempts to work for women's freedoms. Moreover, women involved in such parties came to understand women's rights from the family perspective. They are not radical feminists for gender equalities. For them, gender issues can be worked out by male leadership and cooperation.

### **Analysis and Conclusion**

My research and reflections have concluded that the secular women's organizations have effectively achieved remarkable changes in women's emancipation and rights in areas of education, employment, personal law, and social status. As this chapter has shown, among the important factors in promoting women's emancipation in Iraq have been poetry, the Iraqi communist party, women's secular groups, and educated women. These factors have helped to raise Iraqi women's consciousness of their oppression and promoted their active participation in defence of their rights.

This chapter has also pointed to how Iraqi women's organization and movement have been overshadowed. It has introduced historical evidence on how women's groups have emerged from secular, religious and chauvinist parties, rather than autonomous women's organizations with a feminist orientation.

On the whole, Iraqi women's consciousness of feminism remains uncertain and unclear because the political mobilization for women's issues in Iraq is male-dominated. Like the major women's organizations cited above, all other political parties have their

women's organizations that emerged from the political parties' framework. The independent women's organizations that can freely engage in defending and advancing women's human rights have yet to come into being. This is indicative of the reality that women's mentality has not yet freed itself from men's domination and therefore the nascent consciousness of the need for gender equality will need a long gestation period to be truly described as a "feminist" movement.

Iraqi women's organizations have suffered and suffer still the social, religious, and political mechanisms that keep women subordinate to men. Women's activism, although recognized, is nonetheless kept overshadowed by men: women's collective efforts and their rejection of patriarchal mechanisms are exploited for the political agenda of a variety of ethnic/religious parties, with men very much at the helm.

Under the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein, women's organizations were also afforded no space unless they mirrored the politics and agenda of the regime. This was a culture dominated exclusively by the male in social and political spheres, a culture which permitted the oppression of women and established new mechanisms to subordinate and inferiorize women.

Male leadership in both state and political parties, as well as the lack of autonomous women's organizations overshadowed women's political participation and activism. Moreover, women's emancipation and secular organizations were confronted by, and overshadowed by, patriarchal religious and tribal structures as illustrated by the analysis of the Kurdish and Assyrian women's movement.

Although overshadowed with patriarchal relations, women's secular organizations have offered capacity building tools, collective activism, raising awareness, and

promotion to women's education and employment, which are needed to resist women's oppression and mechanisms subordinating and inferiorizing women in both public and private realms. These mechanisms are the focus of Chapter Three.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Social and Political Mechanisms Subordinating Women**

Chapter Three introduces Iraqi women's oppression and mechanisms subordinating and inferiorizing women in both public and private realms. These mechanisms are social, religious and political. Through these mechanisms, men's superiority over women is perpetuated and women's oppression is reinforced and mounts up. The focus of this chapter is on the role of diverse, though tangible, ethnic and religious powers in maintaining patriarchal relations in Iraq. This role is conceptualized through both social relations, such as marriage and settlement necessities, and political conflicts, such as ethnic and religious-based armed conflicts.

This chapter builds on the previous two chapters. Chapter One was based on my personal experiences. Chapter Two provides historical evidence about the call for women's emancipation, Iraqi feminism, the establishment and activities of women's organizations, and the mechanisms overshadowing women's equal political participation. This third chapter continues to rely on the scholarly literature but returns to a focus on women's private and public realms to make an analysis of women's oppression broader than personal experiences. The first part focuses specifically on the social and religious mechanisms subordinating women.

#### **Social/ Religious Mechanisms Subordinating Women**

The overwhelming majority of the Iraqi population (97%) is Muslim. In Iraq, the social and religious mechanisms are closely linked to each other because Islam for them

is not only a religion but a key component of governing all aspects of social life. It is a sacred and indisputable ideology. Some scholars, such as Fatima Mernissi (1991), Hamid Dabbashi (2000), Nawal Saadawi (2002), argue that the real Islam is not what we see in our recent history. They think that the Qura'an and Hadith have gone through multiple processes such as re-writing, interpreting, and re-telling by both Muslims and non-Muslims until the latest version of Muslim society imposed new, but problematical, theories and applications on both political and social levels. All Muslim societies of the world, including Iraq, are forced to accept interpretations of their clerics and Islamic scholars who have historically been male, and gender may help to explain why women's standpoint is often ignored and their position inferiorized.

The fact that the vast majority of Iraq's population is Arab Muslim is, more than any other fact, an important determinant of the country's patriarchal social and state institutions. Women are looked upon as inferior to men and under control of men; therefore, men's domination over women is a social "given." Even though some of the Quranic sentences do assert an equal partnership between a man and a woman under Muslim marriage laws, other sentences contradict them, and put women in a position inferior to men. In some cases women are treated as property.<sup>83</sup>

Men's domination over women has taken different forms within the Iraqi society; for example, the Iraqi researcher Sana Al-Khayyat wrote comprehensively about the social and cultural status of women in Iraq. As a result of her in-depth research with women ranging from executives to illiterate housewives, she points to physical and mental violence against women in Iraq and to some changes in terms of violence over two generations as she concludes:

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<sup>83</sup> See Chapter One of this thesis.

The other major difference between the two generations (which applies more to educated women than to illiterate housewives) is a change in the husband's violence from physical to mental. Several women, from all three categories, stated that their father used to beat their mother and shouted at them and the children. Many of the housewives said that their husband beat them and all of them had husbands who were irritable and frequently shouted at them. While most of the educated women complained about their irritable husband, almost all revealed clearly that his violence against them was mental rather than physical.<sup>84</sup>

Polygamy has been one common feature of patriarchal societies. In the patriarchal society of Iraq, it clearly demonstrates the master-slave relationship between a relatively affluent husband and his several wives, who are necessarily dependent on him to be their breadwinner. In a polygamous family, women are required to comply with a cultural and religious package of rules such as obedience as well as economic and social dependence. Women have an unprotected future because it is the man's decision to keep or to divorce one of his wives. Therefore, women in polygamous families do not claim social and/ or economic rights because their lives could be worse if they were divorced. In her description of women's status in Yemen, which is similar by and large to that in Iraq, Helen Lackner states:

This reluctance to claim what is theirs by right is based on the possibility of their having to return to their family homes and be dependent on their brothers for maintenance. When the legacy takes the form of a share in the family house, women do retain it as they may find themselves going to live in the room, which belongs to them at some future date; but agricultural land and other income generating property are almost always left under the 'management' of male relatives. On the whole, women are extremely conscious of their dependence on males and of their need to maintain status.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Khayyat, Sana (1990), *Honour and Shame: Women in Modern Iraq* (London: Saqi Books): p. 199

<sup>85</sup> Lackner, Helen (1995), "Women and Development in Yemen"; in Khoury, F Nabil and Moghadam, M. Valentine (Editors) *Gender And Development in the Arab World* (London and New York: ZED Books): p. 81

Although women are commonly expected to be dependent on men socially and economically, polygamy dramatically highlights the stereotypical economic dependence of women on men and the critical importance of a woman's marital status in such a society. Allowing men to have more than one wife exerts an extremely negative influence on the entire society, and it exacerbates the depressing circumstances afflicting the lives of Muslim women. Although Islamic law imposes conditions on men who take more than one wife (i.e. the condition of extending fair and equal treatment to all wives), men do not pay much attention to such niceties and as mentioned below, Islamic law is silent when men violate such standards. Debating with them, Muslim men evade taking responsibility for their actions by citing Allah's permission for them to take as many as four wives. If pressed on such matters, these good Muslims typically end up accusing their critics of being atheists.<sup>86</sup>

Doris Goodrich Adams builds on this idea of women as property or commodity in her analysis of men's consideration of women in polygamous societies: As she describes:

Wealthy tradition-minded men consider polygamy a source of prestige, much as other men are proud of having automobiles. It is not to be inferred that the wives in plural marriages are usually mistreated.<sup>87</sup>

She does not restrict her focus to polygamy but describes the position of women in Islamic society as follows:

The seclusion and differential treatment of females are products of the code of morality. Although they are not in the same category as slaves – for they enjoy some certain rights, such as inheritance, under Muslim law – females are in some respects a kind of commodity belonging to the male members of the family. Thus, according to Bedouin tradition a certain number of women may be given, as an alternative for money or rice, to compensate another tribe for injury done it. If the *fasl*-woman, as she is

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<sup>86</sup> From personal experiences and from experiences of other feminists such as Nawal Saadawi.

<sup>87</sup> Adams, Doris Goodrich (1980), *Iraq's People and Resources* (New York: Greenwood Press Publishers): p. 86

called, do not bear sons, she may be sent back to her tribe and another woman demanded in her place. Among the Shi'ites a poor family may be forced by economic necessity to give a daughter in temporary marriage a number of times<sup>88</sup>

The economic dependence of a woman on her husband is evidence of the patriarchal relationship between those who offer the resources and those who depend on them economically. The man pays the marriage dowry and is normally the breadwinner in the family. Women lose power in the decision-making process within the family because they have no other choice than to be integrated into the semi-enslavement of a marital relationship. A divorced woman or a widow has to go back to her parent's home, where male members of the family are the breadwinners. Mostly, women do not have control over, or knowledge of, their husbands' savings, banking, or businesses. They are offered their daily bread and a little money for urgent needs.

The economic dependence of women on men is also explicit in such forms of marriage as "temporary marriage" *Muta'a* (for Shi'a) and *Misyar* marriage (for Wahabi and Sunni) are unique types of temporary marriages in Islam. These marriages, although temporary, allow a kind of economic satisfaction especially for uneducated and poor women. Usually, the economically secure women do not engage in such temporary marriages. Iranian Islamic scholar Sachiko Murata clarifies *Muta'a* marriage as:

The Shi'is hold that this particular term is the preferred name for temporary marriage because the Qur'an itself refers to this kind of marriage employing a term derived from the same root. In the following verse, the word *istimta'*, the tenth verbal form of the root *m-t-'*, is translated as 'enjoy': 'So those of them [women] whom you enjoy, give to them their appointed wages'. (4:24)<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Adams, Doris Goodrich (1980), *Iraq's People and Resources* (New York: Greenwood Press Publishers): p. 86

<sup>89</sup> Murata, Sachiko (1979), *Temporary Marriage in Islamic Law*; based on the MA Dissertation completed in 1974 under the direction of Professor Abu 'l-Qasim Gurji of the Faculty of Theology at Tehran

Sunni scholars identify *Misyar* marriage as:

... “relationship” between a man and a woman who does not live together, and where the husband is not financially responsible for a Misyar wife.<sup>90</sup>

To restate what is obvious from the above two forms of temporary marriage in Islam, Muslim society is sexist, a society in which women are systemically discriminated against because of their gender. Although Muslim men bring many conflated and contradictory notions to the subject of women’s sexuality, sexuality constitutes the key issue upon which feminine honour and shame is determined. Sana Khayyat analyzes the issue in this manner:

If women’s sexuality is indeed “dangerous” and more “difficult to control than that of men”, this implies that it is real. On the other hand, as revealed by the responses of my interviewees, men’s attitude denies the existence of female sexuality. These two contradictory social beliefs are both used to control women. The very fact that most Iraqi women manage to get married implies that they are honourable and that, unlike prostitutes, they are not interested in sex. However, all the forms of social control practiced over women suggest that they are “dangerous sexual beings” and must be controlled.<sup>91</sup>

It is also necessary to point to some of the old tribal traditions such as *fasl*, giving women as compensation to solve bloody conflicts among the tribes. These traditions had almost entirely vanished in the 1960s, but they were brought back into practice during Saddam’s reign. Some men, especially heads of the well-known tribes, made a gift of their young daughters, mostly teenagers, to men in high political positions, often ministerial positions. Prime Minister Izzat Ibrahim, for instance, had young wives given to him by their families. Hanna Batatu describes past practices, comparing the social position of peasant women with that of peasant men as follows:

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University (most of the Persian text was published under the title *Izdiwaj-i muwaqqat: (mut'a-sigha)* (Tehran: Hamdami, 1358/1979)

<sup>90</sup> Answering Islam Org. (2004), *Misyar Marriage*.

<sup>91</sup> Khayyat, Sana (1990), *Honour and Shame: Women in Modern Iraq* (London: Saqi Books): p.190

The lot of the peasant woman was much harder than that of the male peasant, for she not only shared his misery and his worries, but had to bear also his own arbitrariness. In certain areas she was in effect no better than a chattel: tribal disputes were not infrequently settled at her expense, herself being paid in *fasl*, that is, in settlement of a dispute which involved or would have involved the shedding of blood...

They and the other women given in *fasl* or, to use the name by which they are known, the *fasliyat*, led a particularly harsh life, their husbands normally oppressing them and holding them in contempt. Disposal by *fasl* was not the only system to which the peasant women were exposed. Sometimes, with a view to winning favour, her father offered her as a gift to one or other of the notables of the village. This went under the designation of *zawaj al hibah* or "gift marriage".<sup>92</sup>

### **Discrimination Against Women: From the Legal Framework of the Assyrian Code to Contemporary Social Mechanisms**

The root of Iraqi laws, the oldest laws in the world, was the Assyrian old code, which reflected a male perspective and domination. Sexism is apparent in this code as the following excerpts from the code of Assura in 1075 B.C. with regard to women's status makes clear:

I.7. If a woman bring her hand against a man, they shall prosecute her; 30 *manas* of lead shall she pay, 20 blows shall they inflict on her

I.8. If a woman in a quarrel injure the testicle of a man, one of her fingers they shall cut off. And if a physician bind it up and the other testicle which is beside it be infected thereby, or take harm; or in a quarrel she injure the other testicle, they shall destroy both of her eyes

I.14. If a man have intercourse with the wife of a man either in an inn or on the highway, knowing that she is a man's wife, according as the man, whose wife she is, orders to be done, they shall do to the adulterer. If not knowing that she is a man's wife he rapes her, the adulterer goes free. The man shall prosecute his wife, doing to her as he likes.

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<sup>92</sup> Batatu, Hanna (1978), *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press): p. 145-146

I.32. If a woman be dwelling in the house of father, but has been given to her husband, whether she has been taken to the house of her husband or not, all debts, misdemeanours, and crimes of her husband shall she bear as if she too committed to them. Likewise if she be dwelling with her husband, all crimes of his shall she bear as well

I.37. If a man divorces his wife, if he wishes, he may give her something; if he does not wish, he need not give her anything. Empty shall she go out.

I.40. If the wives of a man, or the daughters of a man go out into the street, their heads are to be veiled. The prostitute is not to be veiled. Maidservants are not to veil themselves. Veiled harlots and maidservants shall have their garments seized and 50 blows inflicted on them and bitumen poured on their heads.<sup>93</sup>

In regard to the incidents of rape, the Assura code stated clear articles to protect raped women. Such statements are in these articles of the code:

I.9. If a man bring his hand against the wife of a man, treating her like a little child, and they prove it against him, and convict him, one of his fingers they shall cut off. If he kiss her, his lower lip with the blade of an axe they shall draw down and they shall cut off.

I.12. If the wife of a man be walking on the highway, and a man seize her, say to her "I will surely have intercourse with you," if she be not willing and defend herself, and he seize her by force and rape her, whether they catch him upon the wife of a man, or whether at the word of the woman whom he has raped, the elders shall prosecute him, they shall put him to death. There is no punishment for the woman.<sup>94</sup>

After the decline of the Assyrians, neighbouring nations invaded and occupied Iraq at various stages of its history. These occupiers, in addition to the diverse religious groups, influenced Iraq's culture and its social structures.

The ethnic and religious diversity among Iraqi people which resulted from these historical invasions may, in fact, have some relationship to why women are not treated equally. The next part of this chapter will show how racism and tribalism, in addition to

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<sup>93</sup> Arkenberg, J. S. (1998), *Ancient History Source Book: The Code of Assura c. 1075 BCE* (California State: Dept. of History).

<sup>94</sup> Arkenberg, J. S. (1998), *Ancient History Source Book: The Code of Assura c. 1075 BCE* (California State: Dept. of History).

religious and social discrimination against women, plays a pivotal role in holding Iraqi women down. Arabs, Kurdish, and Turkmen men discriminate against each other's women although they are also Muslims. While Christian, Kurdish, Manda'ay, and Turkmen women typically enjoy a limited measure of freedom and gender equality, this freedom ironically exposed them to sexual exploitation and humiliation, especially in rural areas or in communities dominated by a tribal hierarchal and patriarchal mentality. In spite of these limited freedoms, however, the Middle Eastern patriarchal paradigms of stereotyped female/male roles constrain all Iraqi women regardless of ethnic or religious background.

The final part of this chapter will build on discussions in Chapter Two of some of the advances created by the education and employment of women. It will seek to understand how, even in these secular circumstances, social and political mechanisms within the patriarchal system create new forms of dependency of women on men. Even in the rare situation where women did have the opportunity to be educated and employed, other patriarchal mechanisms in society constrained women as will be explored below. Women were placed in a position of having to protect the family honour. To do this, they had to perpetuate the paradigm of a "good woman," that is, submissive, shy, and avoiding close relationships with male co-workers in their professional interaction. Discrimination against women, subordinating and inferiorizing them, and subjecting them to torture, has been extended to the state/citizen relationship. The state and the laws of Iraq have subordinated women as citizens as well, and these political changes in the laws are another mechanism of the pervasive discrimination against women, also discussed below.

### **Social Divisions and Conflicts within Iraq: Patriarchal Implications for Women**

Iraqi society is fractured, fundamentally, along religious and sectarian lines. Iraqi Muslims, who constitute the majority of the population, are divided into two sects: Shi'a and Sunna.<sup>95</sup> In addition, there are other significant religious groups including Christians, Jews, Manda'ay, Yezidish, and a few Alawiis. The resulting multicultural, multi-religious, and multi-social background of Iraqi society stems from the following ethnic and religious composition according to one source.<sup>96</sup>

Arabs constitute the majority, which is 75%-80%, while Kurdish constitute 15%-20%, and Turkmen, Assyrian or other 5%. Muslim 97% (Shi'a 60%-65%, Sunni 32%-37%), Christian or other 3%.

In this sectarian sense, the Iraqi social structures resemble those of Lebanon and the dominating patriarchy emerges from similar sectarian structures. Suad Joseph stated:

Many Lebanese feminists and feminist research on Lebanon often have taken sectarian pluralism as the primary source of patriarchy and gender inequality in Lebanon (Joseph in press). That the hegemony of sectarian pluralism has been seen by many Lebanese feminists as the critical obstacle to gender equality in evidence by the high legislative priority they give to enacting a unified civil family code. (Zalal 1997; Bizri 1997)<sup>97</sup>

Both Shi'a and Sunna have different civil family codes. In addition to codes promoting patriarchies, they have codes that treat women reasonably. Feminists in Iraq, in coordination with legal bodies, adopted an approach to limit and eliminate patriarchies by collecting non-patriarchal codes existing within, and accepted by, all Muslim groups in Iraq. Their analysis and efforts resulted in a unified Personal Code (188 of 1959) that was adopted by the Iraqi government. The Personal Code 188 of 1959 was a selection of

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<sup>95</sup> There are many sects. in Islam such as: Shi'a, Sunna, Shafi'ya, Malikiya, Wahabiya, Hanbalyia..etc . In Iraq, the major Muslim sects. are Shi'a and Sunna. Sunna are described in some texts and quotes as: Sunni; also, Shi'a are described as Shi'a interchangeably in this thesis.

<sup>96</sup> Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopaedia: *Demography of Iraq (2003)*:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics\\_of\\_Iraq](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Iraq)

<sup>97</sup> Joseph, Suad (2000), *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press): p.113

the best of each and resulted in creating a law that gives more rights to women in terms in marriage, custody, and inheritance. For instance, the Personal Code put restrictions on polygamy. It requires a woman's consent to marriage (articles 4 & 6). The Code included three articles to tackle child marriage. It gave equal rights of inheritance for both men and women. This Personal Code has become one of the major reasons of a conflict led by both Shi'a and Sunna clerics in Iraq. In 2003, a government of majority Shi'a clerics came to power. One of its priorities was a cancellation of the Personal Code 188 of 1959, which created an upheaval on both local and international levels. With the cancellation of this Personal Code, the sectarian conflict in Iraq increased, women lost the gained rights since 1959, and a new dilemma has been created to families under inter-marriage status in regard to the kind of court with which they should associate.

***Ethnic / Religious Diversity and Conflict: Perpetuation of Social Patriarchies because of Conflicts***

It is important to focus on the major sectarian divisions in Iraq because they have created the almost constant political conflicts. These sectarian conflicts not only have characterized Iraqi history but also have been extended into the present. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the major Muslim groups that dominate political and social sectarian divisions are Shi'a and Sunna. Shi'a constitute the majority of the Iraqi population, concentrated in the southern part of Iraq. Since Iraq's independence in 1932, Iraqi governments were composed of a majority of Sunna leaders. Excluding a Shi'a leadership resulted in serious political changes after the Second Gulf War and later in the toppling of the Saddam Hussein's regime.<sup>98</sup> The Sunna constitute the majority in the

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<sup>98</sup> After toppling Saddam Hussein in 2003, the Shi'a party "Al Da'awa" seized power and allied with Iran. One of its major decisions was the Islamic Constitution and the cancellation of the personal law.

Arabic middle and Kurdish northern parts of Iraq. Although Muslims, the mixture of Iraqi society is ethnically and religiously tangled, and more important, there is no one version of Islamic Shari'a that emphasizes a precise statement on women's equality to men. Hanna Batatu explains the tangled ethnic/religious mixture thus:

If in the south of Iraq religious and class divisions coincided to a certain extent, in the north, in ethnically mixed areas, the distinction between classes was, oftentimes, concomitantly a distinction between races.<sup>99</sup>

Politically, the Shi'a and the Kurds have been the most persecuted groups in Iraq since the establishment of the Iraqi state in 1921. Different governments and political systems marginalized the Shi'a and the Kurds and excluded them from power, assaulting their political rights. The persecution of the Shi'a<sup>100</sup> and the Kurds became more brutal during Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime. He gassed Kurdish villages and the Arab Marshes; he killed and imprisoned them, humiliated their women with affronts to their sexual honour, and deported thousands of them; however, he never could stem the resistance to his regime.

This internal conflict, in addition to the wars and sanctions, impacted the lives of the Shi'a and Kurdish women severely. Those women were forced to migrate, to abandon their homes and seek refuge in other cities or countries, enduring imprisonment and rape as well as the loss of their beloved sons and husbands. They were denied education and forced to live in poverty. Jacqueline and Shereen Ismael compare the two situations:

The war and sanctions not only devastated Iraq's civilian population generally and women particularly, they also served to reinforce and strengthen state oppression. In particular, a genocidal campaign against the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq was conducted unabated throughout the post-Gulf War period. According to the 1993 report of the Special

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<sup>99</sup> Batatu, Hanna (1978), *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press): p. 45

<sup>100</sup> Shi'a who live in Marshes have had a close relation with Iran, in spite of the war between Iraq and Iran.

Rapporteur of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, the campaign “mirrors the Government’s *Anfal* operations in the Kurdish northern area” (UNESCO 1993, 35). A 1996 human rights report to the U.S Senate Committee on Foreign Relations noted that “Iraqi military operations continued to target Arabs living in the southern marshes. In central and Southern Iraq the regime continued to divert humanitarian supplies to its security forces, the military, and other supporters” (U.S. Department of State 1997, 126).<sup>101</sup>

However, the Kurdish militia of Masud Barazani and Jalal Talabani were left free to kill Turkmens, to deport and kill Arabs in Kirkuk, and to do to other Iraqis as Saddam had been doing to the Kurdish people. The Assyrian/Christian people rejected the idea of granting either a federal or a separate state to the Kurdish parties because the Christian people realized that they would be subjected to the tyranny of a Kurdish majority.

The ethnic/religious conflicts grow deeper as the current unstable situation intensifies, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Women’s rights and social justice issues have been placed at the bottom of the pyramid of both social and state’s concerns. Issues such as violence against women, Female Genital Mutilation, honour killing, women’s education and employment, and women’s freedom of movement have become absent on the social and political agenda. Turning Iraq into a religious state, similar to fundamentalist Shi’a state of Iran, has reinstated and imposed restrictive rules on women’s lives through code of dress, early and temporary marriages, obedience to men and interpretations of religious clerics to Islam, exclusion from education, and harassment at universities. One incident took place in Basra city was an alarming bell to female students in Iraq; that was when a group of the Engineering School at the University of Basra decided to go on a picnic at one of the parks in the city. Mahdi

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<sup>101</sup> Ismael, Jacqueline S. & Ismael, T. Shereen (2000), “Gender and State in Iraq”; in Joseph, Suad (editor) *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press): p. 204

militiamen, led by Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, attacked the students, and that resulted in killing one female Christian student as Kathleen Ridolfo has reported:

Thirty militiamen loyal to Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr allegedly attacked 600 picnicking students from Al-Basrah University's College of Engineering at the city's Al-Andulus park on 17 March, claiming the students had violated Islamic norms by dressing in Western clothing, singing, and dancing. The incident sparked several days of protests and raised questions about the absence of the rule of law in the face of the religious extremism that appears to be dictating new societal norms in Iraq's Shi'ite-dominated south.<sup>102</sup>

Shi'a political parties have been fighting the Iraqi Sunni state ever since. However, their revolt came to be the most serious of all internal threats to the Saddam regime. Mostly, Shi'a from the southern cities, where they constitute the majority of the population, led the uprising of 1991. Their movement, although supported partly by Iran, was also supported by the USA administration at that time because both mutually hostile foreign powers shared a common aim with the Shi'a parties: ridding Iraq of Saddam Hussein.

After the uprising of 1991, opponent parties enforced an ethnic and religious agenda claiming rights for Shi'a and Kurdish people. At that time, Iraqi cities in the south, populated by Shi'a, and cities in the north of Iraq, populated by Kurdish, stood against the regime of Saddam Hussein. The cities in the middle part of Iraq such as Anbar, Tikrit, Baghdad, and Dyala, whose majority was Sunna, were not among the rebellious cities. Unwisely, Saddam Hussein labeled the cities of majority Shi'a and Kurdish as "Black Governorates"<sup>103</sup> and the Sunni cities as "White Governorates." His descriptions of Iraqi

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<sup>102</sup> Ridolfo, Kathleen (March 28, 2005) Militiamen Push Their Version of Islam in the Absence of the Rule of Law ; in Global Security: Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty: Iraq Report: Volume 8, Number 11 (Alexandria: USA)

<sup>103</sup> Governorates in Arabic are called "Mohafathat": The term refers to the administrative unit of the country. In Iraq, there are eighteen governorates.

cities as Black and White deepened the sectarian/ ethnic conflict and pushed both Shi'a and Kurdish to adopt parties based on ethnic and sectarian agenda. However, these parties have exploited the growing ethnic/ sectarian crisis irresponsibly.

In addition to constant armed conflicts, every ethnic and religious group maintains its cultural norms, which come in a whole package, including those norms that maintain patriarchal relations through subordinating women, marginalization of their rights, and neglecting violence against them. Women lost their voices in the crowd of men engaging in their political conflicts of gaining power over each other. In this situation, for instance, the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM), which is practiced in the Kurdish region, was neglected as being much less important than separating a Kurdish state from the central state of Iraq. This male political demand of forcing a new state based on an ethnic division of Kurdish nationality that does not belong to Iraq on both the political and social levels, resulted in neglecting the issue of FGM because the political conflict has become a priority; not only for Kurdish people, but also for other ethnicities in Iraq. In the Arabic parts of Iraq, society is not familiar with the FGM; nevertheless, there are other negative cultural practices such as early and temporary marriages. The political conflict has restored and reinforced these patriarchal norms as religious and ethnic parties seek new identities.

For the women's movement, ethnicity played a negative role in determining that women's activism be exerted more for narrow ethnic objectives than for pure and broad gender goals. The Kurdish women's organizations are not autonomous but politically aligned with whatever political parties their particular organization has emerged from. As suggested in Chapter Two, the same statement is applicable to Assyrian, Arab, Shi'a,

Sunni, and other women's groups. Typically, women's groups are submerged within political parties led by men with no awareness of gender-related issues. As I pointed out in the previous chapters, women lack awareness of the global women's movement and are constrained and limited to be active politically in a very narrow way, while tied to a perception of the nature of things that perpetuates men's domination and leadership. Gender equality is a concept that has yet to gain acceptance in any of the contemporary parties as a primary human rights concern. Indeed, the male leaders of the various political parties expect women to be the voice of their political parties, to neglect or inferiorize gender equalities, and to be active at the grassroots level without aspiring to a leadership role.

Sequences of the negative involvement of both religious and ethnic-based powers attest that these powers have upheld patriarchal relations aggressively. At the same time, the emerging secular movements have countered social patriarchies, pushing the political agenda for more egalitarian laws and more egalitarian implementation of laws, policies and programs. The following sections highlight the significant role of secular movements in improving women's education, employment, and social status in Iraq. Evidence in this chapter provides as well, a potential alternative to eliminate the patriarchal hegemony by adopting secularism for the political and social agenda in Iraq.

### ***In-Group Patriarchies and Cross-Cultural Divisions: Class/ Urban/ Secular***

Diversity of ethnicities in Iraq brought to the country a variety of cultural practices from neighbouring countries in the Middle East, especially, the different cultural practices related to gender roles and relations. For a number of reasons, every ethnic group in contemporary Iraq accuses the other of introducing patriarchal relationships and

gender discrimination. Obviously, they are each trying to harmonize their agenda with a democratic appeal because women's rights issues are considered as significant in a democratic state. Nevertheless, argument among ethnic and religious groups, and demonstration of evidence of social and religious patriarchal practices within every group, reveal the existence of patriarchies within all Iraqi communities, regardless of ethnic and religious backgrounds. For instance, Kurds are able to provide evidence to prove that Arabic communities are patriarchal and discriminatory against women. Correspondingly, Arabs provide evidence of patriarchal relations and discrimination against women within the Kurdish communities. The fact that each group is patriarchal is deep-rooted in the Iraqi society, no matter what religion or ethnicity rules. .

*Ethnic and religious diversity in Iraq reflects multi-cultural norms that perpetuate patriarchal relationships within every group, and at the same time, among the variety of groups as separate units. In addition, these social divisions are extended to involve class and other socially constructed categories such as: rich vs. poor, urban vs. rural, and religious vs. secular. While rich Iraqi communities maintain comfortable economic and educational status, the poor strive to feed their families. Similarly, urban communities differ from rural in their social norms and economic class. As for religious clerics, they enjoy both economic and social superior status. They do not respect people belonging to lower economic and religious classes.*

To avoid melting into other groups, in-groups are politically determined to keep their cultural relationships and norms unified as an identity and to keep control of their women. The shared phenomenon among in-groups is subordinating women to men, and this is happening on many different levels. Class of women, urbanism, ethnicity, and

religious background play a visible role of determining women's position in their societies.

Correspondingly, seizing power among the many ethnic/ political groups causes more ethnic/political conflicts. In addition to the indigenous Assyrian and Sumerian population, Iraqi ethnic diversity is the result of ceaseless migration and invasion from the neighbouring countries. Regardless of the motives for their migration, whether conquest or just seeking to find a place in the fertile land of Iraq, those populations have become essential parts of the total Iraqi social foundation. Ethnic conflict over tribal<sup>104</sup> and religious power is a political conflict, created by those who claimed leadership in various ethnic and religious groups. Doris Adams states:

Settled by migration from earliest times and fought over by rival empires desirous of possessing Mesopotamia's agricultural wealth, modern Iraq is inhabited by a people of diverse ethnic and religious origins. Moreover, the society of the Middle East, rather than acting as a melting pot, tends to maintain ethnic and religious differences by its organization as a number of in-groups. An individual may belong to one or more of these groups on, the basis of family village or town, religious sect, or language.<sup>105</sup>

Ethnic diversity in Iraq has shaped the social similarities among Iraqi cultures, which were formed upon specific religious, social and political codes. For instance, Iraqi women belonging to all ethnicities have similar social roles: men are treated as superior to women, women are dependant on men socially and economically, and in-group marriages are normal, especially in urbanized communities. The resulting phenomenon of majorities and minorities deprived minorities of political power. Internal conflicts were

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<sup>104</sup> In Iraqi society, tribal systems are relatively autonomous and considered to be important political spaces from which to supply leadership and organizing effective social powers and militias to support the government and the political parties. Religious and ethnic leadership find a flourishing atmosphere for their breaches among tribally organized units, both large and small, to circulate specific social and political agenda. The links among tribal, religious, and ethnic leaderships are commonly strong and cherished..

<sup>105</sup> Adams, Doris Goodrich (1980), *Iraq's People and Resources* (New York: Greenwood Press Publishers): p. 13

the consequence. The patriarchal relationship among the majorities and minorities controlled the decision-making process on the political level. It resulted in a visible political patriarchy, and it aborted any attempts to make changes on the social level. The political conflict remains as a priority for the decision makers in Iraq, which left the social changes as a postponed issue until a political resettlement takes place. Economically, much capital and many resources were lost in military expenses, to say nothing of the loss of human lives.

Discrimination against women in Iraq has resulted from the sexist religious and cultural structures in which women's sexuality is the business of every one. Discrimination against women takes many forms; the most hazardous form is the one that uses women's sexuality as a revenge tool, and as the family's honour-assessment tool. The interconnection of patriarchal Islamic law and the existing mixture of dominant multi-cultural norms trigger this social problem and perpetuate violence against women under the accepted cover of religious statements and cultural norms.

The conflict produced patriarchal relationships, and, where the gender issue was not considered as a priority, put women in a position of having to accept male domination on both the social and political levels. For that reason, the impact of this conflict on women is twofold: women became victims of the ethnic armed conflicts, and the ethnic issues overcame and took priority over gender-related issues.

### ***Reinforcing the Power of In-group Patriarchies***

Iraq's history has witnessed many political ethnic-based conflicts and bloody actions. Mostly, the conflict is about political involvement of tribal and religious powers. More to the point, patriarchal relations on the social level were perpetuated by the influence of

political and tribal powers. Under the hegemony of an alliance between religion and culture derived from religious laws, all manner of physical and psychological violence has been (and is) visited on Iraqi women. Among cultural and political practices that stem from this religious-cultural alliance are: sexism, punishment of women for adultery, whether proven or not, veiling, eye-witnessing, inheritance in court, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), honour killing, early marriage, and the domination of men over women, all blatant proof of the sufferings of Iraqi women.

### **State and Secular Mechanisms Affecting Women's Education and Employment**

As pointed out in the previous chapter, most researchers such as Phebe Marr, Elizabeth Fernea, and Hanna Batatu agree on secular progress being made to women's rights, employment and education after the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 1958 Revolution. They credit the influence of the Iraqi Women's League on enhancing women's status, education, employment, and safeguarding the republic.

#### ***Women's Education***

State-sponsored education in Iraq began in the 1920s. However, virtually no emphasis was placed on the pressing need for female education. Patriarchal cultural and religious systems segregated women and excluded them from the public space.

A little education had been offered to women via private schools that taught the Qura'n and Islamic studies before the few schools were launched in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such education was, however, exclusive to upper class and the emerging middle class; the majority of the population did not have access to the public schools. The definition of the middle class was unclear since it did not wholly depend on economic

status. Hanna Batatu, considered one of the best social and political researchers documenting recent Iraqi history, refers to the increase in student numbers without reference to gender, which is a potential failure in recognizing women as an equal sector in the society:

The process of expansion of school system, begun in the twenties, could not be reversed. No little prestige had come to be attached in the society to the earning, particularly, of a university degree. Once some Iraqis had received higher training, others, in ever-larger numbers, pressed for similar opportunities. The government could not now plead lack of funds. The needs of a moving society had also to be met. Anyhow, the number of state college students increased from 99 in 1921/22 to 1, 218 in 1940/41 and 8, 568 in 1958/59, and the number of state secondary school students from 229 to 13, 969 and 73, 911 in the same years. Elementary education made similar progress. On the other hand, qualitatively the advance on all levels was not as impressive. Moreover, in 1958 more than six-sevenths of the population was still illiterate.<sup>106</sup>

This does not mean that women in Iraq were totally denied access to education and school systems as the first college for women in Baghdad was established in 1946. A few women from the higher social and economic class in Iraq did get their university degrees early in the twentieth century.

With the dawn of the new Republic of Iraq in 1958, women were strongly encouraged to enroll in the educational system. This was due to the efforts of the Iraqi Women's League, the women's organization of the Iraqi Communist Party, which pressured the government to apply more egalitarian policies and to eliminate the reactionary concepts that retarded the mental development of the Iraqi people, and to encourage women to enroll in the work force. The numbers of female students rose significantly.

As discussed above, the four years of Qasim's reign profoundly influenced Iraqi society in that female education became gradually accepted as a practical necessity. Most

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<sup>106</sup> Batatu, Hanna (1978), *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press): p. 34

urban people began sending their daughters to school; nevertheless, social class still played a vital role in determining female education.

For most poor and rural families, the education of females remained elusive. Some females abandoned their education willingly to help their mothers to raise sisters and brothers at home; some girls were forced to leave school to get married. Traditional gender roles were kept and perpetuated especially among the poor and tribal families.

By the time the first Ba'ath regime came to power in 1962, the people were already aware that educated and accredited women would have better employment opportunities that would give them economic independence.

The Ba'ath party's enduring contribution to the development of Iraq was the encouragement of females' education and employment in the first years after the July 17, 1968 Revolution. It was the policy of the Ministry of Education, for instance, that there be no gender discrimination in terms of access to education, taking into account that education in Iraq has been free from kindergarten to the PhD degree. The fifth article, "The Woman," of the Educational Strategy asserts:

1-allowing equal opportunities for both sexes in education and enhancing more objective conditions for women's education and allowing a suitable compensation to her whatsoever she missed from education opportunities.

2-revealing the reactionary and backward tendencies and opinions which degrade women, eliminating those strange opinions and practices, and replacing them by disseminating more progressive and correct concepts and relevant practices of the Ba'ath Party.

3-women are considered as a base in supporting social linkages and relations to serve the country and society.<sup>107</sup>

Also, in describing the Quantitative Objectives of High Schools' Plan in 1978:

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<sup>107</sup> Iraqi Ministry of Education (1978), *Education Under the Wing of the Revolution/ Arabic/ Translated by Awatef Rasheed* (Baghdad: Printing Department of the Ministry of Education): p.34

4-Increasing the numbers of female students at the high school and vocational levels, and mobilizing (50%) of them to attend Institutes of Teacher Training.

5-Giving priorities to female students at the high school and vocational levels and mobilizing (50%) of them to attend Institutes of Teacher Training.<sup>108</sup>

With this encouragement given to women's education, the numbers of women enrolled at schools increased as shown in the following table:<sup>109</sup>

Type of educational Institution	1979	1988
Kindergarten	33156	40604
Elementary	1714866	1341253
High school	271112	379075
University	3001	62368

Unfortunately contemporary comparative data are not available.

### ***Women's Employment***

As did their educational prospects, women's employment in Iraq underwent various conflicts due to cultural, political, and religious factors. Before the revolution of July 14, 1958 it was rare for women to obtain paid work, and the percentage of employed women was 4% of the number of men employed in public places and institutions. As Doris Goodrich Adam states:

Of the 101,518 occupied women, who were only 4 percent of the female population, 59 per cent were engaged in agriculture and 26 per cent in the two other largest categories, service and manufacturing. It will be noted

<sup>108</sup> Iraqi Ministry of Education (1978), *Education Under the Wing of the Revolution/ Arabic/ Translated by Awatef Rasheed* (Baghdad: Printing Department of the Ministry of Education) : p.199

<sup>109</sup> Iraqi Ministry of Planning (1988), *Annual Abstract of Statistics* (Baghdad: Printing Department of The Ministry of Planning)/ Arabic/ Translated by Awatef Rasheed

that, aside from rural employment, women were used primarily in work where they do not come in contact with men. The segregation of the sexes has made education the major opportunity for Iraq's educated women. They remain virtually excluded from many types of employment.<sup>110</sup>

Iraqi women's employability witnessed a remarkable improvement after the revolution of July 14, 1958. At that time, secularists pushed the agenda of the Iraqi government to advance women's education and employment. Suad Khairy provides information about the types of positions that became available for women. As she writes:

[T]he big change in women's employment situation happened after the 14<sup>th</sup> of July Revolution, since women could gain a ministerial position for the first time in Iraq's history. Besides, it marked the first woman's gaining high management positions like heads of governmental departments. They could gain the position of female judge in some courts for the first time. Also, women became involved in popular militias and military organizations to defend the Iraqi Republic.<sup>111</sup>

With the advancement of women's education, comprehensive progress in women's employment rates became discernible within a few years after the Ba'ath Party took power in Iraq in 1968. Phebe Marr points out:

Women also advanced in the work force, but progress was uneven. In 1977, 17 percent of the work force was female, but the bulk of female workers were in agriculture, where women constituted 37 percent of the labour force, almost all unpaid. Seventeen percent of those employed in manufacturing in 1977 were women. Some were unpaid workers in family establishments, but almost 14 percent of the paid workers in large industrial establishments were women.<sup>112</sup>

The surge in economic growth that took place after the nationalization of Iraq's oil companies (1972) stimulated people to allow female education, training, and work at factories, schools, hospitals, and other governmental departments. Equal employment and

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<sup>110</sup> Adams, Doris Goodrich (1958), *Iraq's People and Resources* (Berkeley: University of California Press): p. 53

<sup>111</sup> Khairy, Suad (1998), *Iraqi Women: Fighting and Giving* / Arabic / Translated by Awatef Rasheed. (Stockholm: A.R.M. All-Tryck).

<sup>112</sup> Marr, Phebe (1985), *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press): p. 272-273

equal wages were applied to both men and women. Employment of graduate university students did not require applications; graduating students, females and males, were getting letters from the government to start their jobs at certain departments. More than that, employed mothers got a maternity leave, which was fully- paid for the first six months and half- paid for the next six months.

During the Iraq- Iran war, women got more employment to replace men going to war. For the first time in its history, Iraq witnessed women in military positions such as medical doctors and engineers. Some women got high ranks in military hospitals, as well. Because of the wars of Saddam Hussein, scientific women were employed in Saddam Hussein's biological program such as the microbiologist Dr. Rihab Taha, who was called "Dr. Germ" and named as the most dangerous woman in the world by the United Nations Weapons Inspectors in 2003.

In 1991, the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq by the United Nations had even more drastic consequences for women. Inflation caused by the sanctions, and restriction's on Iraq's legal trading in oil, brought the average payments of Iraqi employees to be less than US\$ 5 a month, which pushed women to leave their jobs. All these horrendous conditions coming together resulted in impoverishing the women of Iraq on a grand scale, costing them their jobs and economic independence. Mechanisms responsive for these changes are the focus of the next chapter.

### ***Education and Employment within patriarchy***

The remarkable advancement in women's education and employment did not put an end to the patriarchal practices on both social and political levels. Politically, laws were, and are, being changed in accordance with the changing political agenda of Iraqi

governments. Indeed the subordination of women is also reflected in the ways in which women's employment opportunities become associated with the needs of the state. Women become desirable employees when they are needed by the state for economic development or to fill necessary labour shortages because of both wars and economic sanctions. Then the state often casts women out of jobs when the male troops return home from war.

On a social level, women's education, employment and career opportunities continued to be dominated by such traditional issues as "family honour and shame," and the perfidious notion that the "security" of a woman could only be based on the presence of a male family member in her life. Also, some jobs, such as nursing, were considered as a taboo for women. For example, even Iraqi families that encourage their females to be medical doctors do not encourage them to do nursing jobs. Other jobs such as media, journalism, movie industry, fashion industry, music and singing were restricted for most of Iraqi females.

Dependence of women on men is a deep-rooted scheme of femininity in the Iraqi society. No matter how well a woman succeeds in obtaining secure jobs and economic independence, a man "must" be there so that she feels secure. Sana al-Khayyat explains:

The Iraqi woman's life is a series of conflicts. There is the conflict between, on the one hand, the desire to be independent and have a career and, on the other hand, the wish to appear dependent and weak to fit the stereotype of "feminine behaviour".<sup>113</sup>

However, women do understand that their economic independence secures their lives and future in some way. Some of them understand that their education and jobs are extra virtues to shield their marital relations. The conflict between social patriarchy and

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<sup>113</sup> Khayyat, Sana (1990), *Honour and Shame: Women in Modern Iraq* (London: Saqi Books): p. 189

women's struggle to acquire economic independence sheds light on social mechanisms perpetuating women's status as inferior to men.

On a political and state level, women's education and employment are priorities on secularists' agenda; therefore, conflicts between them and the traditional religious and tribal leaders are severe and frequent in Iraq. Secularists use non-religious slogans and applications in democratizing the society, emancipating women, and building a secular society. To some extent, the conflicts were related to gender equality and the application of the Personal Law (No. 188, 1959), which is identified as a serious challenge to Islamic Laws.<sup>114</sup> These conflicts put women in an insecure and vulnerable position because religious clerics could occasionally gain more authority over Iraqi people and more influence on the Iraqi government. As a result, women could get only an insufficient support in regard to their education and employability. Secularists struggled against religious clerics and tribal leaders willing to segregate women, limit their education, and restrict their employment. Unfortunately, the conflict between these two powers, social/religious patriarchies and secularists, has gone through several ups and downs. When secularists could have some influence on the Iraqi government, they could make remarkable changes in relation to the laws and applications of employment equality. At other times, the religious clerics and tribal leaders have more influence on the government than secularists did; thus, they put pressures to retain more regressive laws and applications that limit women's access to education and employment.

Above and beyond, the economics of Iraq played a critical role in the advancement of women's education and employment; for instance, the Nationalization of Oil in 1972 led to an extraordinary raise in numbers of schools and job opportunities. With non-

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<sup>114</sup> See chapter two of this thesis as well as earlier in this chapter.

discriminatory laws of education and employment, numbers of employed Iraqi women increased significantly. Nevertheless, the economic impact of wars and economic sanctions led to regressive labour laws and the dismissal of women from their jobs to make room for the military coming back home after the war. Political patriarchy, through inferiorizing women in a state-citizen relationship, empowered men over women on the social and economic levels, and promoted stronger patriarchal relationships within the social and political spheres.

### ***Women's Political Participation***

In Muslim states, religion-based political parties and other political institutions demonstrate a hierarchal system and patriarchal relationship with unbalanced power within their systems, and discrimination against women. Patriarchal alignments within parts of these structures perpetuate the inferior position of women. Even though some left-wing and secular parties, such as Communist parties, encourage women to participate within their organizations, leadership is always held by male members, leaving females subordinate to men while the political party gives the façade of women being in a leadership role. This failure in applying gender equality of leadership roles within the Communist and Marxist parties caused a separation between Communism, Marxism, and feminism. Most of Iraqi radical feminists were members of the Iraqi Communist Party in the 1950s and 1960s.

Patriarchal structures dominate Iraqi women's lives on all social, political, and religious levels. Up until now, no Iraqi party has been led by a female regardless of the female's activism within these parties. The status of women within the Ba'ath Party is reflected in the status of women within Iraqi society, on the lowest rung.

Even female Communist Party members must bear this patriarchal dominance. In addition to the sexist treatment accorded to women by most of its members, many of them were treated as “sex objects” rather than being treated as equal members entitled to full political participation. The Iraqi Workers’ Communist Party allows more equality to female members relative to any other left-wing political parties.

For the Islamic religious parties, there is a tacit agreement by both male and female members concerning the inferiority of women to men to the extent that female members even campaign for men’s right to have four wives and other discriminatory privileges. Women members of the Da’awa Islamic party lobby in support of such privileges for men, although they impact other women’s status, just as is happening after the so-called “ liberation war” of 2003.

The last type of political party in Iraq is the tribe-based political party such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which has noticeably patriarchal relationships and gender discrimination. Nesreen Berwary, an active female member in this party appointed to the position of Minister of Municipalities and Public Works in the interim government in 2003, married Ghazi A’ajeel Al-Yawar president of the interim government, becoming his third wife. Iraqi women were frustrated by her step since it allowed political permission for the law of polygamy to be affirmed in the new era. Berwary, neglecting her claim as a women’s advocate, declared that her marriage was political for the sake of a separated Kurdistan (land of the Kurdish). She concluded that she prioritized her political party over women’s rights in Iraq, even though she obtained her position in the name of Iraqi women. Male members of her party applaud her, as Professor Goran Nowicki asserts:

The fact of the matter is that Nasrin's bold and brave decision helps the interests of the Kurds in a federal Iraq or for an independent Kurdistan in the region, but by this she is sacrificing many things. In the best scenario, if Yawar continues to be president, she may be the first lady in Iraq. But in case Iraq disintegrates or Yawar fails to be the president, she will continue to be treated as an outcast by some Kurds. One should note that these types of character assassinations against Nasrin and Yawar are against the interests of Kurds in Iraq and it will damage the past friendship between Yawar and Kurds. Kurds have enough enemies in the region and they don't need more.

In conclusion, one should remind the Kurdish men that they should blame themselves for their failure to meet the standards of Nasrin as a candidate for marriage. They had around 2 decades to meet her expectations and they missed the opportunity.<sup>115</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Chapter Three offers analysis of social, religious, and political mechanisms subordinating and inferiorizing women in both public and private realms. Through these mechanisms, men's superiority over women is perpetuated and women's oppression is increased. With a few exceptional periods, gender equality in Iraq was, and is, absent from the agenda because of these allied mechanisms. In Iraq, ethnic and religious diversities have played a critical role in perpetuating the patriarchal relations that jeopardize women's rights and lives. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the wars of Iraq have perpetuated the old traditional patriarchal relationships, and created new models of patriarchal relations. Wars in general put women's lives at more hazard. Thus, it is significant to research Iraqi women's lives under war situations. Chapter Four discusses wars of and/or on Iraq and explores the impact of these male-led wars on

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<sup>115</sup> Nowicki, Goran (2004), *On Bravery of Berwary*; Kurdistan Observer Com (Erbil: Iraqi Kurdistan Region

women's lives and rights, including my experiences at wars, in the recent history of the years (1980-2003).

## **Chapter Four**

### **Impact of Wars on Women in Iraq: Mechanisms of Creating New Forms of Patriarchy and Perpetuation of Women's Subordination**

Inferiorizing and subordinating women in times of war causes immense oppression for women. Chapter Four builds on the analysis in Chapter Three about how conflict and the social, religious, and political patriarchal relations impact women's lives. It explores the new models of patriarchal relations which are created under wars' situations. Using evidence from the available literature and from personal experiences, it examines the impact of the three recent Iraq wars on women. It also analyses how the priorities of war shift gender issues so that they become minor among other issues of insecurity in Iraq. Chapter Four begins with global mechanisms because of the severe impact of global interferences and wars on Iraqi women.

Not only women's private realms are negatively influenced by wars; women's movement is also adversely overshadowed by males' superiority within the level of political participation and activism for women's rights. Links between totalitarian governments and the global powers have engendered additional oppression of women and destruction to the social structures.

#### **Regional and Global Interferences**

Regional and global interferences in Iraq have created mechanisms that subordinate and inferiorize women through constant wars and conflicts.

### ***Iraqi Wars and the Overshadowing of Women***

Middle Eastern countries, including Iraq, have been involved in historical wars aimed at the expansion of their empires. These include the Islamic Arabic Empire (*Islamic Dawla*), the Persian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire. As chapters two and three indicated, there were internal ethnic and religious conflicts, and military revolutions and coups. Since 1980 Iraq has been engaged in three wars.

War is one of the major reasons for the oppression of Iraqi women, and this chapter will provide analysis of the impact of these recent wars on Iraqi women. In the consequences of war, women have to bear large social, economic, and political burdens. Apart from large death tolls and the physical impact on the infrastructure, women's health and status have been endangered crucially. The wars have also allowed women's rights and urgent needs to be cancelled. During wartime, the priority on the list of demands goes to the country and the nation, and women's needs fall to the bottom of the list. In wartime, violence against women increases, the sex trade flourishes, women are impoverished and malnourished, their physical and psychological health deteriorates, and their rights vanish.

Politically, the wars of Iraq reflect the interconnected relationships between both local and global powers, creating new forms of patriarchy. On the national level, the dictator Saddam Hussein acted as a super power, the only decision maker inside Iraq. This went along with decisions that have destroyed the national political and social infrastructures. Saddam Hussein assumed power in July 1979, and in September 1980 Iraq became involved in the first of the three wars. The war against Iran lasted for eight years, from September 1980 to August 1988. The First Gulf War occurred in 1990 as a consequence

of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. This resulted in thirteen years of economic sanctions against Iraq. The Second Gulf War, which broke out in April 2003, was ostensibly to confiscate weapons of mass destruction and to eliminate terrorism.<sup>116</sup> Saddam's regime may have been ousted by this war, but the only mass destruction that took place was of Iraq's total infrastructure, social, economic, and political.

According to many observers, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 indicates that the only issue that the global powers really cared about, and which elicited their engagement, was Iraq's oil. The rescue operations and security all had to do with the oil industry, while people, their lives, security, and urgent needs were totally neglected. In fact, power and oil were related also to the militaristic actions of Saddam Hussein and to other actors in the other two recent wars as well.

Saddam Hussein had taken to himself the role of the protector of Arab national identity in the Middle East, and to this end, strengthened Iraq's defence forces. He allocated vast funds to the Ministry of Defence, which resulted in catastrophic economic disaster in Iraq. In order to appear democratic, however, he promoted some social policies and a sense of collectivity among the Iraqi people, frequently claiming that he was creating a "Modern Iraq." However, Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp point out:

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<sup>116</sup> The major stated aim of dismantling Saddam's purported weapons of mass destruction appears to be without foundation as reported both by the United Nations and by Imad Khadduri (2003), an Iraqi scientist who had been hired to work on the sites of those weapons. He asserted that Iraq did not have any nuclear weapons at the time of the 2003 war. Khadduri (2003, p 122) states:

In total, we were, in my estimate, about 10-20 percent of where we should have been had Iraq had a nuclear weapons. It would have required further several years.

Khadduri, as a scientist, was also fully aware of the danger of a reactor so close to the residential areas of Baghdad. Khadduri still wonders what would have been the impact of such a bomb if it had exploded:

What if the "smart" Americans' bombs missed their target, breached the containment of the Russian reactor, and released devastating radioactivity? A mini Chernobyl would have afflicted Baghdad (p. 122).

Although Saddam did not achieve his nuclear goal completely, he initiated it before 1991. He was probably thinking of building a military power in the Middle East, one which initially might have been supportive of American interests and Israeli security but then, by 1991, appeared to be a threat. .

The trappings of modern statehood were correspondingly more important to Saddam Hussein, the more the reality of his power was founded on a social reality and political perception which antedated the modern state, and in many senses militated against it.<sup>117</sup>

Fourteen months after Saddam seized power in Iraq, he attacked Iran with claims of defending the Iraqi and Arabic borders, and of stopping Iranian violations of Iraqi sovereignty and their interventions in internal national issues. By that time, the Islamic Revolution in Iran was attempting to spread the paradigm of an Islamic Sh'ia fundamentalist state throughout the Middle East. Accordingly, Iran was interested in strengthening the Shi'a Da'wa Party, a force (in addition to the Kurdish militias) antagonistic to a strong Iraqi national power. As John Amos points out:

Even before Khomeini left for Paris, both Iraq and Saudi Arabia had become increasingly worried about the spread of militant Shi'ism in the Gulf area and had moved toward a common policy of blocking it. As early as November 1978, at the time of the Baghdad Summit, they had agreed on a joint policy for containing Iranian-sponsored violence.<sup>118</sup>

The eight-year war between Iraq and Iran, which began in September 1980, had severely affected the international community as well as the Iraqi people. Identifying the reasons for wars highlights the political entities that dominate the world and its constituent civil societies. This is particularly true in the case of Iraq. Wars, which have destabilized the country and resulted in the current situation, have brought more oppression to women and social insecurity.

Although Saddam Hussein claimed that Iran started the war against Iraq, the reality is much more complex. A potential international conflict was looming in the area. While the American involvement is the most obvious piece of the puzzle, France and Russia

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<sup>117</sup> Chubin, Shahram & Tripp, Charles (1988), *Iran and Iraq at War* (Westview Press: USA): p. 19

<sup>118</sup> Amos, John W. (1984), "The Iraq-Iran War: Conflict, Linkages, and Spill Over In The Middle East"; in Daruis, Robert G, Amos, John W. and Magnus, Ralph H. (editors), *Gulf Security Into the 1980s: Perceptual and Strategic Dimensions* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press): p. 57

also played critical roles in perpetuating the war because, for them, that war was good business in terms of selling weapons to Iraq. Meanwhile, Israel was selling weapons to Iran, behind the façade of the media in both countries showing extreme dislike to each other.

Although Saddam Hussein relied on oil to perpetuate Iraq's dynamic economy, the war damaged the oil industry and compromised Iraqi development projects and programs on all levels, especially on the social level. Saddam was very proud of being the first to use oil (representing wealth) as a weapon to win the national battle against Zionist and imperialist powers, the forever-declared enemies of the Arab people. He said in an interview with a correspondent of the Athawra newspaper on 1<sup>st</sup> of June 1973:

We must establish a historical fact. Iraq was the first state, which called for the use of oil as a weapon in the battle. It was the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party and no other organization in the Arab homeland or the world, which bore this slogan. This is an historical fact beyond dispute.<sup>119</sup>

As we see below, Saddam diverted money and resources away from services supporting women. Instead of utilizing Iraq's money and oil profits for development projects and improving the social conditions of the Iraqi people, he wasted those benefits and resources on weapons, wars, and military industrialization.

The wars of Iraq were also a business issue on the global level as far as the West was concerned. Before the start of the Iraq-Iran war, Saddam was protecting American, Saudi and Kuwaiti interests in the Middle East. Competition among OPEC countries, however, led to the invasion of Kuwait because those countries did not show a sufficiently firm attitude towards raising prices and restricting the produced quantities of oil. Describing

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<sup>119</sup> Kishtainy, Khalid (Translation) (1977), *Saddam Hussein on the Current Events in Iraq*; (London: Longman Group LTD): p.70

the conflict over oil prices, Eric Laurent and Pierre Salinger first explain Saddam Hussein's approach and then quote him in the following passage:

Although the summit's topic was Soviet-Jewish emigration to Israel, this was clearly not his [Saddam's] theme at this private meeting. His target was the Gulf States. "They are extracting too much petrol and helping to keep prices at too low a level. Every time the price of a barrel drops by one dollar, Iraq loses \$ 1 billion a year. You're virtually waging an economic war against my country."<sup>120</sup>

In the first Gulf War in 1991 which took place because of Iraq's invasion of the independent country of Kuwait, there was an international coalition covering that war under the United Nations. As discussed below, that war shows clearly how women and other vulnerable persons in a patriarchal society have no say in determining the course of war nor are they in any way beneficiaries. On the contrary, those who cause and direct these conflicts chronically prejudice women's lives. Regardless of the damage to women's lives and the predictable destruction of Iraq's infrastructure, social services and norms, the international community agreed to take part in that war because of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait.

Therefore, as we see from all of these three wars of Iraq, the real conflict is about political power and control of resources. It is a masculine conflict, while women and their children suffer the horrendous costs of wars. The disastrous situations that damage and destroy human lives are not a concern of those in power on all sides during wars. In *Women and War*, Jeanne Vickers states:

Whether Iraqi women under bombardment or displaced from their shattered homes, trying to feed and care for their families amid the devastation of the war, Kurdish women fleeing into the mountains with their children, Kuwaiti women under Iraqi attack, Asian and Palestinian women trying to keep their families alive in refugee camps in Jordan, or

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<sup>120</sup> Laurent, Eric & Salinger, Pierre (1991), *Secret Dossier: The Hidden Agenda Behind The Gulf War* (Toronto: Penguin Books): p. 30

Palestinian women suffering under curfew in the occupied territories, the major victims of the Gulf War were there for all to see. Many lost lives when the vehicles in which they were fleeing from Baghdad to Amman came under direct Allied bombing attacks.<sup>121</sup>

The wars and sanctions not only destroyed the nation's economy, they led to the rise of religious fundamentalism and created new forms of patriarchy. Although the secular women's movement has been playing a vital role in drawing maps for gender equality, the male-dominated culture in Iraq remains at odds with the feminist agenda, especially on the subject of women's political participation.

In Iraq, women were and are inferior to men in both the social and political decision making realms. They did not have a voice in sanctioning wars or political decisions regardless of how directly and severely they were affected by these events. In this regard, the experience of the Iraqi women is not that different from women's experiences on a global level. Women are not expected to achieve success in politics and decision-making processes, although Iraqi women have challenged this point of view through political participation within political parties. M. E. Hawkesworth argues, depending on research of political scientists, that women's political participation is not limited to their domestic roles:

Within the discipline of political science, efforts to produce a revised, non-sexist version of the canon have generated numerous studies challenging the received view of women as less interested and less active in politics than men; they have challenged views that women's political behaviour is directly related to their domestic role and hence is restricted to interest in a narrow range of issues involving health care, education, children, and family policy; they have challenged explanations of under-representation of women in elective and appointive office that emphasize women's self-selection out of the political realm. They have challenged the belief that women make bad candidates and the belief that voters will elect women; they have challenged the notion that women are "temperamentally"

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<sup>121</sup> Vickers, Jeanne (1993), "Lessons of the Gulf War" in *Women and War* (London: Zed Books): p. 59-60

unsuited to politics and the notion that women necessarily perform differently in public office.<sup>122</sup>

An investigation of the inferior position to which women have been relegated by men must, in an historical perspective, take into consideration the interferences from other invading and dominating cultures.

### ***Women and the Militarization of Iraq***

Global powers seeking a mass control over oil states have spotted a perfect ally within the Iraqi opponent parties to legitimize their wars on Iraq (1991 and 2003). Although both allies have held a different agenda, no one of them has actually sought human rights and freedoms for Iraqi people. Iraqi opponent parties have focused on toppling Saddam Hussein in order to gain power over Iraq for themselves. Global powers' focus was, and is, oil in Iraq. The emergence of a deal between the global powers and Iraq's national patriarchy has ruled out gender equality claims in Iraq because gender issues have been neglected on the governing agenda except for rhetorical and media purposes. Empowerment of opponent parties has resulted in strengthening patriarchal and male-dominated religious and ethnic powers.

As has been the case of women in other countries occupied by military powers, Iraqi women are vulnerable to the economic decline, physical insecurity and political instability. Saddam's regime and the new government were, and are, perfectly aware of the exploitation that women undergo, but they cast a blind eye upon it because women's sexuality touches very sensitive social, religious, and political norms.

The militarization of Iraqi society since 1980 meant that violence, as an aspect of militarism and autocracy, dominated the governmental bureaucracy and political

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<sup>122</sup> Hawkesworth, M. E. (1990), *Beyond Oppression: Feminist Theory and Political strategy* (London: The Continuum Publishing Company): p. 120

structures of the regime. On the social level, the Ba'ath party members, both men and women, tended to wield illicit power and domination over those who were not involved with the Ba'ath party by wearing military uniforms, carrying guns, and evoking fear among citizens. Jill Steans stated:

Militarism can be defined as an ideology which values war highly and, in so doing, serves to legitimize state violence. Alternatively, militarism can be viewed as a social process, which involves the mobilization for war through the penetration of the military, its power and influence, into more and more social arenas. Militarism can be defined as the subordination of the civil society to military values and the subordination of civilian control of the military to military control of civilians.<sup>123</sup>

### ***Global Markets of Weapons***

Changes in the political and social norms in Iraq and the subordination of women, which were caused by militarizing the society and wars, took place with global blessings and support. For some countries, wars offer good business opportunities, selling weaponry merchandise to warlords, never mind the impact of these wars on human lives and environmental conditions. During the Iraqi-Iranian war, a variety of countries took part in arming both Iraq and Iran. From an article written by Joyce Battle of George Washington University:

The U.S. was officially neutral regarding the Iran-Iraq war, and claimed that it armed neither side. Iran depended on U.S.-origin weapons, however, and sought them from Israel, Europe, Asia, and South America. Iraq started the war with a large Soviet-supplied arsenal, but needed additional weaponry as the conflict wore on.

Initially, Iraq advanced far into Iranian territory, but was driven back within months. By mid-1982, Iraq was on the defensive against Iranian human-wave attacks. The U.S., having decided that an Iranian victory would not serve its interests, began supporting Iraq: measures already underway to upgrade U.S.-Iraq relations were accelerated, high-level

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<sup>123</sup> Steans, Jill (1998), *Gender and International Relations: An Introduction* (New Jersey: Rutgers University press): p. 113

officials exchanged visits, and in February 1982 the State Department removed Iraq from its list of states supporting international terrorism.<sup>124</sup>

In 2003, the International community led the war against Iraq because Saddam Hussein did not respond to the UNISCOM (United Nations Inspection Committee for Mass Destruction Weapons). From the “House Acts on Resolution Critical of Saddam Hussein”:

U.S. Rep. Henry J. Hyde (R-IL), chairman of the House International Relations Committee, said the House resolution was prompted by the growing threat to international peace and security posed by Saddam Hussein’s refusal to comply with the terms of the cease-fire agreement ending the Persian Gulf War. Those terms were incorporated by the U.N. Security Council into Resolution 687 of 1991, and into subsequent resolutions addressing the situation in Iraq.

The House resolution (H. J. Res. 75), amended in Committee by Hyde and U.S. Rep. Tom Lantos (D-CA), the committee’s senior democrat, was authored by U.S. Rep. Lindsey Graham (R-SC). The resolution also calls for the U.N. to reject any inspection protocol that does not give its teams “immediate, unconditional and unrestricted access to any and all areas, facilities, equipment, records and means of transportation.” The House resolution also accuses the Hussein government of being in “material and unacceptable breach of its international obligations.”<sup>125</sup>

This flouting of the International Community generated various reactions throughout the world. France tried resolutely to stop the war on Iraq in 2003, but even its position was conditioned by self-interest linked to the oil of Iraq. It is disillusioning to find out that even states urging peace are possibly pursuing their own business and economic interests as they have been known to do in the past. Acting as if they seek peace and democracy, while casting a shadow on plans for globalized economic interests, has

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<sup>124</sup> Battle, Joyce (February 25, 2003), *Shaking Hands with Saddam Hussein: The US. Tilts Toward Iraq, 1980-1984* (National Security Archive: George Washington University: Electronic Brief Book No. 82: USA)

<sup>125</sup> House Acts on Resolution Critical of Saddam Hussein (December 19, 2001), *Failure to Permit UN inspections in Iraq Poses “Mounting Threat” to US. Allies* (Washington D.C: House International Relations Committee).

indicated that the question of women's rights is not included in the agenda of weapons' traders, and patriarchal powers jeopardize the national security of Iraq. As Timmerman points out:

French president George Pompidou was happy to welcome Saddam Hussein in June 1972 to discuss helping the Iraqis wriggle out of the Soviet embrace. Like Britain and the United States, the French had been angered by the Iraqi announcement that intended to complete the nationalization of the IPC that year, consummating three years of delicate negotiations secretly orchestrated by Kosygin's top trouble-shooters, Valentin Chachin and Ivan Arkhipov. But Pompidou demanded guaranteed oil deliveries from Iraq at concessionary prices. "Already" the French daily *Le Monde* noted, "there was talk of secret negotiations for an arms sale estimated at 6 billion FF." In exchange for oil, Saddam wanted arms. It was a deal the French simply could not refuse.<sup>126</sup>

The global preoccupation with Iraqi oil and the lucrative weapons trade does not concern itself with the social consequences for the people of Iraq. These global relationships engendered Iraq's wars, technically a conflict among those who are powerful and masculine. As the complete factual assessment indicates, women were conspicuously absent not only on the decision-making level, but also, in the whole business of conducting global relationships. But it is Iraqi women who suffer the full consequences of these actions. After the war in 2003, the vulnerability of Iraqi women to the insecure and unstable situation has been accentuated. They have been exposed to rape at the hands of both the American soldiers and the Iraqi local gangsters. Again, the cozy relationship between the new Iraqi government and the occupation forces obscures the extent to which women's human rights are being violated.

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<sup>126</sup> Timmerman, Kenneth R. (1991), *The Death Lobby: How the West Armed Iraq* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company): p.13

### *Women as Victims of Regional Interferences*

The divisive complexities bearing on the lives of Iraqi women go far beyond the ethnic/religious conflicts within Iraq itself. Intense regional conflicts going on also have an impact on women's lives and status. The hostility between the Iranian and the Saudi Wahabism is deep-rooted. Each sect warily attempts to prevent expansion of the other into Iraq. The current situation in Iraq is characterized by a ruthless conflict between these two sects, each attempting to take over the country and to stop further expansion of social freedoms. They are both anti-democracy and anti-freedom; women's freedoms are not on their agenda, and they both aim at gaining political power via the Islamic state and the perpetuation of patriarchal powers. The new government attempts to reach an agreement with both sects including neglecting gender equalities and the "woman's question."

Wahabists resist the American occupation for they claim they have regained the power of state after toppling Saddam, who was initially the Americans' ally in actual fact. The Shi'a groups, in alliance with the Iranian state and the Americans, try to combat any advance in the Wahabists' situation. Samir Haddad and Mazin Ghazi have investigated the Iraqi resistance to the American occupation and find that:

These groups and small cells started to grow gradually, until they matured to some extent and acquired a clear personality that had its own political and military weight. Then they began combining themselves into larger groups.

The majority of these groups do not know their leadership, the sources of their financing, or who provides them with weapons. However, the huge amounts of weapons, which the Saddam Hussein regime left behind, are undoubtedly one of the main sources for arming these groups. These

weapons include mortars, RPGs, hand grenades, Kalashnikovs, and light weapons.<sup>127</sup>

Wahabist fundamentalists lead most of the resistance operations, while the socially insecure situations are being exacerbated primarily by an overflow of Iranian Shi'a into Iraq. However, many Iraqis, especially those secularly oriented, do not favour such interventions. The Wahabists bring with them their fundamentalist rules that impact women viciously. In the name of Islam and the Jihad they oppose democratizing Iraq. The change they hope to bring about would result in a system similar to that in Saudi Arabia, where women are discriminated against severely. Women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed even to drive cars. Miriam Cooke analyzes the Saudi system and women's status as:

Why focus on Saudi Arabia and its women? First of all, Saudi Arabia is the emblematic Muslim nation. It is the direction of prayer for observant Muslims five times a day. It is a polity that has organized itself around Islam and has taken responsibility for the guardianship of Islam's two most holy sites, Mecca and Medina. It is the legal and political system that derives directly from scripture. It is a radically sex-segregated society that insists on the importance of appearance.

Cooke continues:

Within this system women are cast as symbolically important. They are the physical markers of social norms. The more visible their otherness, the more they must remain within the moral boundaries. One key element has been the physical absence of women from public space occupied by men.<sup>128</sup>

The other Islamic fundamentalist sect is Shi'a, which relies on the Iranian Islamic revolution. The Shi'a led by political parties allied with Iran is hazardous to women's freedoms and gender equalities since the Islamic ideology and social organization

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<sup>127</sup> Haddad, Samir & Ghazi, Mazin (September 19, 2004), *An Inventory of Iraqi Resistance Groups: Who Kills Hostages in Iraq?* (Al-Zawraa newspaper: Iraq).

<sup>128</sup> Cooke, Miriam (2001), *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature* (New York: Routledge Press): p. 117-11

comprise the constitution for the state. Iran attempts Islamic leadership from a Shi'a point of view. That was one of the reasons for the Iran-Iraq war in 1980. As Phebe Marr states:

The most serious Shi<sup>129</sup> opposition came with the Iranian revolution and the installation of the militant shii government of ayat Allah al Khumany. Fears of organized shii opposition and attempts at subversion by Iran of the Iraqi shii community were a major contributory factor in the Iran-Iraq war of 1980.<sup>130</sup>

The Iranian Shi'a movement has also gotten involved in the Iraqi post-war situation. Religion is manipulated to parcel out the political interests in the region. In addition to arming and mobilizing some Shi'a militia to disseminate violence in the country, the Iranian regime exploited the wide-open borders to export drugs to Iraq. It overloaded the Iraqi market with various kinds of previously unknown drugs. Involvement with drugs is one of the primary causes of the high rates of crime and escalating insecurity inside Iraq, especially crimes committed against women, the easy target of rape and sexual assault. The Iranian Shi'a put forward the new Islamic constitution, which cancelled significant articles of the old constitution, as pointed out earlier, especially those articles related to women's status and rights.

Although the Iranians wish to stem the expansion of Wahabism into the Arab countries, the status enjoyed by women under their dogmatic brand of Shi'sm is equally appalling. The dominance of the Shi'a groups in post-war Iraq has given rise to many regressive procedures that oppress women, such as imposing veils on women and prohibiting them from attending work or schools.

Notwithstanding the Israeli and the Iranian/ Wahabists interference, Syria, Egypt, Kuwait, and Jordan also offer their own versions of interference. The Arab nationalists

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<sup>129</sup> Shi refers to Shi'a.

<sup>130</sup> Marr, Phebe (1980) *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press): p.237

and the Islamic Jihadists are key players in resisting the American occupation of Iraq. Most of these forces oppose Westernized democracy, considering it as a threat to the very existence of an Arab nation and to Islam as a religion of the vast majority in the Middle East.

Muslims, well-served by postmodernism, believe that Islamic democracy better suits their countries, cultures, and identities. In principle, Muslims reject an “imported” democracy, considering that they already have a “superior” ideal of democracy. As Amin Saikal affirms:

A Western process of democratization may not be the ideal for either Iran or Iraq, or for that matter for other Muslim countries in the Middle East or elsewhere in the world, given the cultural, social, and historical factors that set them distinctively apart from the West. The Iranian experiment at least shows that a Muslim country does not have to follow the Western model in order to achieve a civil, virtuous, and decent existence for its citizens. It can draw on its own intellectual and cultural traditions, and has the means and possibilities to construct a process of change whereby it can provide its citizens with those opportunities that may not take them down the path of democratization as required by Western democracies, but will enable them to achieve political liberalization within the framework of promoting a civil society based on Islam.<sup>131</sup>

Fundamentalist Muslims believe that their religion and morals are worth dying for. They sacrifice their lives to the Jihad readily and joyously. Moreover, they believe that Iraq has become “the land of Jihad” where they should go to defend their religion and nation. Yet the Iranian/Shi’a elements and their Arab counterparts, including Wahabists, fundamentally oppose one another. That is the hypocrisy and contradiction of the Islamic fundamentalist movement in the world today. In the midst of this intense religious and

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<sup>131</sup> Saikal, Amin (2003), “Democracy and Peace in Iran and Iraq”; in Schnabel, Albrecht and Saikal, Amin, editors (2003), *Democratization in the Middle East: Experiences, Struggles, Challenges* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press): p.181

ethnic conflict, the tasks of building a civil society in Iraq and women's rights are totally neglected.

### ***Economic Impact of War on Women***

Wars have triggered an economic impact on civilians in Iraq on two fronts, the expenses of militarism and economic sanctions. By the end of the Iraq-Iran war, Iraq's economy was totally ruined. As Abbas Al-Nasrawi puts it:

When the war was finally ended in 1988, Iraq had incurred some \$452 billion, nearly ten times its average GDP during the war period, in explicit economic cost. Even if the actual economic cost is lower than the figure cited here, it would still be several times its GDP. Therefore, it would be no exaggeration to say that Iraq started the postwar period with its economy in ruin and its people impoverished.<sup>132</sup>

The business of wars and oil trade embargoes impacts women most severely because it caused wars, and allowed negligence to women's issues because the state and the nation were busy with greater issues of wars. On the political level, women in Iraq were exploited to demonstrate support for Saddam's decisions regarding wars and fighting; many of them were dragged from home, school, or work to join staged demonstrations. Like Algerian women, Iraqi women had to donate their gold jewellery to support Saddam's war. Each woman had to donate at least 10 Grams of gold, while jewellery stores had to donate many kilograms. Munira M. Charrad writes about a similar experience in Algeria of donating women's gold for the nation's sake:

The story of women donating their gold and silver jewellery – often a woman's dowry and only possession – to help build the Algerian nation is a poignant one. In 1963, President Ben Bella asked women to donate their gold and silver to help the National Bank of Algeria develop its resources. Marnia Lazreg describes the response: “At televised public meetings throughout the country, women walked up to party leaders and gave them

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<sup>132</sup> Alnasrawi, Abbas (1994), *The Economy of Iraq: Oil, Wars, Destruction of Development and Prospects, 1950-2010* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press): p.135

their eighteen carat gold chains (some of which were made of nineteenth century coins), bracelets, anklets (some weighing half a pound), rings, and earrings. How much gold and silver was collected is not known accurately.”<sup>133</sup>

However, the Iraqi donations may be considered to some extent different in nature in that Iraqi women were forced to donate their gold for a war that they did not believe in, albeit the Iraqi media televised Iraqi women and jewellery store owners meeting with Saddam, happily donating gold.

From their unforgettable and painful experience of the Iraq-Iran war, Iraqi women were aware of wars and the resulting death. During the bombing of many cities and suburban areas, the people had nowhere to take shelter. In Baghdad, a modern and well-constructed shelter at Aamerya was destroyed by an American shell; hundreds of people inside it were killed during the first Gulf war.

Iraqi women also know about hunger and lack of food and security during wartime. Politics played a horrific role in endangering the Iraqi women and their families by placing them in the direct line of fire causing death. Women who took part in the uprising, and those whose male relatives took part in it, fled Iraq to the Turkish, Jordanian, and Saudi borders on foot. More than two million people, including women and children, walked for days until they reached the borders. Meanwhile, Saddam's military bombed the refugees. Some pregnant women who gave birth on the way to the borders, threw their babies in rivers to save them from the horrible situation. They gave birth with no medical support, using their clothes to stop the bleeding, and then walked on to the border. Other women had to carry children that could not walk, especially those

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<sup>133</sup> Charrad, M. Mounira (2001), *States and Women's Rights: the Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco* (California: University of California Press): p. 189

whose ages were 1-6 years. Starvation and fear of death from Saddam's chemical weapons dogged their steps. They ate leaves from trees to stave their hunger.

That was a typical situation in the Kurdish north. In the Shiite south, General Bernard E. Trainor and Michael R. Gordon describe a similar situation:

By day, refugees were streaming south, looking for medical aid and shelter, seeking protection in the shadow of the American Army and telling them tales of atrocities in Basra, Karbala, and An Najaf. At Checkpoint Bravo, which Ron Griffith's soldiers had established along the highway, the tales at the medical tent had a common theme: indiscriminate fire at men, women, and children, the destruction of Islamic holy places in which Shiites had taken refuge, helicopter and rocket attacks, and threats of chemical weapons attacks.<sup>134</sup>

After the uprising of the Iraqi people against Saddam Hussein in 1991, the annihilation of his relationship with the USA, and the damaged social norms and infrastructure because of the wars, Saddam realized the need for another organizational framework to secure Iraqi support of his regime. He twisted his policies to ally with heads of tribes and religious men. To accomplish this, he had to change social norms to reach an agreement with the tribal and religious fundamentalist ideas. Under an earlier heading, I have mentioned the reinstatement of some suppressed cultural practices, honour killing among them. The veiling of women was permitted and the numbers of veiled women increased dramatically. Some other practices that humiliate women, such as giving women to rich and prominent men, regardless of age differences, were also restored.

The most dreadful issue and impact of the war were the economic sanctions imposed on the Iraqi people, impoverished since 1991, to punish Saddam Hussein! Although the

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<sup>134</sup> Gordon, Michael R. and General Trainor, Bernard E. (1995), *The General's War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (London: Little, Brown & Company): p. 449

United Nations and USA attempted to convince the world that these sanctions were imposed on Saddam Hussein to slow his "weapons of mass destruction," they actually played an essential part in imposing a globalized economy upon the world.

Iraqi women along with most other women in the third world have been negatively impacted by the globalized economy. The conflict over oil, not only in Iraq, but also in other Middle Eastern countries, has impoverished women and exposed them to wars, starvation, and unstable political and social systems and hindered the peace process.

### **State Mechanisms at Wars**

#### ***State Policy-making during and after War and Implications for Women***

Iraqi state's policy-making (1979-2003) reflects on a war- mobilized country through avoided peace policy, establishment of weapons' factories, establishment and development of biological and mass-destruction weapons, development of huge rockets, expanding military training to involve civilians, and spending most of the Iraqi revenue on wars and strategic defence plans. Jeffery Richelson has stated:

From 1988 to 1990, Iraq was involved in an unusual weapons program, codenamed Project Babylon. The project's objective was the development and production of several large caliber guns, including a 1,000-millimeter-diameter supergun. In addition, the project included development of both conventional and rocket projectiles for the gun. The gun was intended to deliver the explosive devices to military and economic targets up to 620 miles away. The project was being managed for Iraq by a foreign company, Space Research Corporation, headed by Gerald Bull.

By early 1990, a 350-mm-diameter version of the gun had been successfully built and tested. In addition, many of the components for the 1,000-mm. gun and two other 350-mm guns had been delivered to Iraq. In March 1990, Bull was murdered. The following month, the United Kingdom customs service seized the final eight sections that were to be used in the 1,000-mm. gun barrel. Other nations followed by seizing other components of the supergun. The seizures prevented Iraq from completing

the project. In July 1991, after initial denials, Iraq acknowledged the project. In October 1991, Project Babylon components were destroyed under U.N. supervision.<sup>135</sup>

In addition to state's focus on militarism, Saddam Hussein has restored the power of the Iraqi tribes to guarantee their armed support during the wars and internal conflicts. This alliance between the state and Iraqi tribes strengthened the authority of heads of tribes over male members, deepened the authority of maleness in their communities, and allowed more gender discrimination against women because tribes do not consider women as effective members of their tribes.

Regardless of the cost of wars on Iraq, Saddam has extremely preferred military actions and aggressiveness. One of the serious consequences of the Gulf Wars was, is and will be, the contamination of the Iraqi environment by Depleted Uranium (DU). After the 1991 war, and although there was a recognition of the impact of DU on people's lives and their environment, very little has been done to clean land, rivers, and other environmental spheres where the dust of DU was dispersed. The American and Canadian soldiers who participated in the Gulf War of 1991 and their families opposed the use of DU in wars, and they called for urgent action to cleanse the war theatre. However, this remains the most seriously neglected environmental issue in Iraq. The Iraqi government, led by Saddam Hussein, did not take any step to support victims of the DU or to cleanse the contaminated spots, although the government was building palaces for Saddam in every city in Iraq, and actually, during that time Saddam built the largest mosque in the world.

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<sup>135</sup> Richelson, Jeffrey (edt.) (September, 2002) Iraq and Weapons of Mass Destruction: National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 80; From Central Intelligence Agency, *Prewar Status of Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction*, March 1991, Top Secret. Source: Freedom of Information Act (Washington, D.C: George Washington University)

In addition, there was (and is) acute shortage of health care, medical supplies, medications, and food. Hospitals have been looted and destroyed, the same as with schools. UNICEF confirms that:

70% of child deaths are due to diarrhea and respiratory disease  
 The incidence of preventable disease has increased more than 100% since 1990  
 5 million people lack access to safe water.<sup>136</sup>

Pregnant women were (and are) particularly vulnerable to war and the resulting postwar instability in Iraq. In addition to the looting of hospital beds and supplies, power and sewage systems are not being reconstructed at an adequate rate. Given this situation, pregnant women often prefer to give birth at home, often depending on midwives who may not be properly trained or certified. The United Nations Population Fund was specially concerned with Iraqi pregnant women during the war of 2003. A CNN news report has stated at the end of the 2003 war:

The main surgical hospitals in Baghdad now rely mostly on their backup generators for electric power....The ICRC said Baghdad's 650-bed Medical City hospital complex has neither water nor power, and just six of 27 operating rooms are usable. The U.N. Population Fund made a special plea for pregnant women, saying they are in particular danger as hospitals deal with war casualties and low medical supplies.<sup>137</sup>

A group of doctors and consultants appealed to the British Medical Association to help the Iraqi people who face these disastrous health situations. They state in their call:

The BMA and the BMJ cannot be neutral and should deplore the massive loss of life and civilian casualties. The BMA should do everything in its power to assist the medical profession in Iraq and help to improve the medical situation there.

The oil ministry was guarded while the hospitals were looted. Many weeks after the US and British forces took over towns, they were without water supplies and electricity, endangering the health of their populations.

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<sup>136</sup> UNICEF/ (2003), *Iraq: Fact Sheets* (Baghdad: UNICEF).

<sup>137</sup> CNN news (April 10, 2003), *Iraq 'Chaos' Hinders Aid, Group Say* (Baghdad: CNN).

Amnesty, Medecins sans Frontieres and the World Health Organization, all testify to the contempt for human life displayed by the occupiers, who left the hospitals bursting with injured Iraqis and very little means for caring for them. People are still suffering and dying.<sup>138</sup>

Again, women have been impacted more for their specific needs: maternal hospitals, special care, and food during pregnancy. Women exposed to violence, including rape, also cannot find reliable social and medical institutions to care for them before notifying the police. Insecure conditions put women at a hazardous situation to report such incidents to the police because of the honour code.

Although the American administration and war lobbies promised a more democratic participation by women, the occupation authority has in effect accepted the status quo endured by women in Iraq. No less than Saddam, the current government in Iraq has clearly demonstrated that it has not considered women's rights as essential to the democratic process. Albrecht Schnabel's analysis of democracy in the Middle East runs as follows:

His [Saddam's] tragic and misguided decision to attack Kuwait, and the subsequent Gulf War, robbed Iraq of most of its sovereignty, weakened its domestic structures, and is still continuing to impose great pain on Iraq's population. Even if Saddam is removed from power, the prospects for democratic reform are scant after decades of suppression and the virtual extinction of Iraq's former middle class.<sup>139</sup>

As well, numbers of raped women under the insecure post-war situation have increased and women have become more vulnerable to a militarized, insecure, and male dominated situation. As Marie-Laure Colson from La Liberation points out:

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<sup>138</sup> British Medical Journal (May 21, 2004), *A call on the British Medical Association and British Medical Journal* (London: British Medical Journal).

<sup>139</sup> Schnabel, Albrecht (2003), "A rough Journey: Nascent Democratization in the Middle East"; in Schnabel, Albrecht and Saikal, Amin, editors (2003), *Democratization in the Middle East: Experiences, Struggles, Challenges* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press): p.17

Security has become an obsession in Baghdad. In this chaotic parenthesis the capital is experiencing under American tutelage, women feel particularly vulnerable. According to a Human Rights Watch report published in mid-July, there were at least 25 rapes and kidnappings of women between the end of May and the end of June in Baghdad. Before the war, the police recorded one case every three months on average. "Since the beginning of the war, more than 400 women have been raped, kidnapped, and sometimes even sold," asserts Yanar Mohammed, of the Organization for the Freedom of Women in Iraq. "Family and clan ties have become so suffocating, they prefer to hide or disappear."<sup>140</sup>

In addition, religious clerics as a ruling political power in post war Iraq impose strict sexist rules on girls' schools and force women and girls to wear veils, which is a new phenomenon in Iraqi society. Religious clerics had limited influence within the governmental institutions before this war, not only during Saddam's regime but also during the tenures of other governments since Iraq became independent in 1932.

Similar to Saddam's neglect of social and political infrastructure in Iraq, the new government (2003-present) is adding to the damage that Saddam created. As soon as the new governing council was given power over the political systems in Iraq, it declared the cancellation of the Iraqi Personal Law No. 188. As discussed in chapter Three of this thesis, this reformed Law has been considered as the most significant gain made by women during Qasim's reign in 1959. The insecure and unstable situation created since March 2003 has left women, as already noted, in a hopeless situation, with rape, prisons and torture, deprivation of jobs and schooling the order of the day in the lawlessness pervasive in Iraq since the war. Iraqi women have lost what little voice they had gained through decades of struggle.

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<sup>140</sup> Colson, Marie-Laure (September 2, 2003), *Iraqi Women Have Lost the Post-war: Rapes, Sequestrations, and a Return to the Veil Develop* (Iraq Occupation Watch: Baghdad)

### *Women's Education and Employment*

A report, prepared with the assistance of the International Labour Office, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (Beirut), and the United Nations Fund for Population Activities and entitled "Women, Employment and Development in the Arab World," explained the typical cultural codes that impact women's employment in Arab countries, including Iraq. Julinda Abo Nasr, Nabil F. Khoury, and Henry T Azzam who edited this report states:

Arab countries are still in the early stages of the process of the economic development and could use the contribution of every member of society to speed up the process. Women are the Arab world's unutilized and unrecognized human reserve. Policy measures should be designed at all levels to enhance female labour force participation.<sup>141</sup>

Although this book was published in 1985, women's employment declined during the late 1980s until the 2006. This decline in women's employment resulted from the ending of the Iraq-Iran war in 1988, when men "came home" from the front lines and large numbers of them were released from the military services. They had to go back to their jobs, which had been filled by women after their joining the military. Saddam issued an edict dismissing women from their jobs and giving their jobs to the men. This resolution is evidence of a patriarchal and sexist state system; it is a gender discriminatory resolution. Although Saddam continued to articulate women's equality and publicly praised women, at the same time, he undermined women's employment rights. On Iraqi TV, he made fun of women spending money for clothes and shoes, treating their use of their money only for selfish luxuries. Iraqi women felt Saddam humiliated them with his denial of their right to buy clothes or shoes, while his wives and daughters got their

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<sup>141</sup> Abu Nasr, Julinda, Khoury, Nabil F., and Azzam, Henry H. (1985), *Women, Employment, and Development in the Arab World* (Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter Publishers): p. 31-32

clothes and shoes from the most famous fashion houses in France. The IGFW neglected his resolution to dismiss women from jobs, and ignored his comments on the TV; this case was kept quiet, but generated more silent opposition to IGFW representation of Iraqi women. This comment by Saddam ignored the needs of many low-income Iraqi families and women that needed income to support their families.

The Iraqi-Iranian war had, also, a particularly negative effect on women's educational and occupational opportunities. As reported by Human Rights Watch:

...as the economy constricted, in an effort to ensure employment for men, the government pushed women out of the labour force and into more traditional roles in the home. In 1998, the government reportedly dismissed all females working as secretaries in governmental agencies. In June 2000, it also reportedly enacted a law requiring all state ministries to put restrictions on women working outside the home. Women's freedom to travel abroad was also legally restricted and formerly co-educational high schools were required by law to provide single-sex education only, further reflecting the reversion to religious and tribal traditions. As a result of these combined forces, by the last years of Saddam Hussein's government, the majority of women and girls had been relegated to traditional roles within the home.<sup>142</sup>

Therefore, women's traditional social position, the incessant wars and masculine conflicts over power, the priority on accumulating military strength and weaponry, aggravated by the USA's interests and interferences, and patriarchal international relationships, were all main factors militating against the flowering of women's education and employment in Iraq.

Another consequence of the invasion of Kuwait and the two Gulf Wars was less financial support for education. The Iraqi educational infrastructure and services to its population were scaled down drastically. Moreover, poverty pushed families to reduce the number of their children attending school because they could not afford money for

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<sup>142</sup> Human Rights Watch (2003), *Background on Women's Status in Iraq Prior to the Fall of the Saddam Hussein Government* (Washington D.C: Human Rights Watch).

uniforms, school bags, stationery and food during the school day. Female students were the first casualties of this process because, traditionally, the education of women is considered not as necessary as it is for men. Women are not considered as the primary breadwinners and they could depend on their husbands economically, while men as the breadwinners needed education to get better jobs – according to the patriarchal rationale. Also, men have the priority in the allocation of family resources. So, if the family has little disposable money, then sons are prioritized for educational opportunities.

Under Saddam's regime, schools became institutions for deploying youth to serve the political interests of the government. In 1997, all schoolteachers and students had to leave classrooms for two hours every day for military training in the schoolyard. Those who trained both teachers and students, males and females, were veterans who had been retired after the Iraq-Iran war. All students in Iraq, in every city, town and village, at every school were trained on how to use machine guns, in addition to other physical training such as running, marching, and shooting. Some families stopped their daughters from going to school because of this militarization process.

In addition, war conditions boosted inflation, which harmed women disproportionately. Salaries during the inflation were kept as they were before, while the buying power declined radically. A typical monthly salary for a medical doctor, an engineer, or a teacher was 4000-6000 Iraqi Dinars in 1998. Equal to US\$ 3, a worker might spend it in one day for food for the family. For instance, I was teaching at the High Institute of Teachers' Training, when I got my payments for the whole month. I got 4,500 Iraqi Dinars. So, I thought what could I buy with my monthly salary. On my way home, I stopped by the stores up the road and bought one eyeliner, one kilogram of potatoes, one

kilogram of tomatoes, and one kilogram of oranges. With that, I had no money left. This was one of my jobs to survive. A good many women left their jobs, preferring to stay home to look after their children and families. As Claudia von Werlhof states:

The so-called “globalization” obviously is not a movement towards more democracy, peace, general welfare, wealth, and ecological sustainability, as its propagators are pretending everywhere. On the contrary, the opposite is true: Never in history are so many people dying from hunger and thirst, environmental destruction and war, most of them women and children.<sup>143</sup>

Those who could start small businesses could hope to survive and support their families. There was a recognized expansion in women’s businesses such as food trade and trade-aimed food products, educational courses, hairdressing, sewing, and handcrafts.

Because food production became more important than other types of businesses as Iraq struggled with sanctions and the lack of food, many farmers hired women from the cities to work on their farms. They had to travel any way they could every morning to the farms to work there. The government’s employment agencies did not supervise this work, and women suffered poor working conditions along with sexual exploitation, and they had to accept very low wages.

Inevitably, some women and young girls were forced into the sex trade in order to survive, given the harshness of the economic sanctions. Entertainment nightclubs mushroomed in Iraq, especially in Baghdad. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis points out:

Women who did not have husbands who could support them financially were obliged to work for low wages in factories. Some women found these wages so inadequate that they resorted to prostitution, which was a well-paid and popular ‘service.’<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Werlhof, Claudia von (2004), *Capitalist Patriarchy and The Struggle for A ‘Deep’ Alternative* (Innsbruck: Women’s Studies at Innsbruck University, Austria): p.2

<sup>144</sup> Groothuis, Rebecca Merrill (1994), *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture of War Between Traditionalism and Feminism* (North Dartmouth, MA: Baker Books): p. 10

Again, sex work is not protected by law in Iraq; therefore, those women suffered bad treatment and exploitation, in addition to the social humiliation. However, they did obtain better financial remuneration than other poor women.

Unfortunately, there are no sufficient statistical numbers about women's employment after 1995. Lack of such statistics came about, first of all, because of the Iraqi government's strained resources, and secondly, because women were simply not a priority.

### ***Rape and Blackmailing***

The roots of patriarchal relationships and masculinities go far deeper than the social constructs that form a political patriarchy between the state and its citizens. Leaders in Muslim countries hold deep-rooted social and religious sexist concepts with which they were indoctrinated. In Iraq, masculinity is well accepted as a social, religious, and political norm. Therefore, it is not difficult for a leader to build a relationship of semi-enslavement with the citizens. The basic motivation in such patriarchal relationships is fear. An Arab leader, especially Saddam Hussein, should guarantee that his citizens fear him, with panic of his system as a priority<sup>145</sup>. Lack of democracy is a major part of the state/citizen relationship. Therefore, women suffer a twofold fear and weakness, within the family structure, and within the state. They are kept alarmed even though they are not guilty.

Under dictatorial regimes such as Saddam Hussein's, the torturing of women in prisons is different from the torturing of men. As noted earlier, the rape of women for the involvement of a relative in the resistance movement is not uncommon. Women's torture

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<sup>145</sup> See Makiya, Kanaan; "Republic of Fear" for a detailed information on how those leaders establish and empower their security systems to disseminate fear among their populations.

concentrates on sexual abuses as tools to humiliate and dishonour them. It is often characterized by rape during investigations and torture to the sex organs. Former military general Najib Salihi<sup>146</sup> is a well-known case. His sister was imprisoned, raped, and videotaped so as to pressure him to relinquish his involvement with Saddam's opponents and to force him to go back to Iraq. Iraqi writers do not openly report incidents such as this because the victims either prefer to keep their honour or the victims' relatives belong to a different political party. However, Salihi's story is well known by most Iraqis:

The UK Sunday Times recently reported allegations that Iraqi dictator is using rape to intimidate opponents of his regime living outside of Iraq. The charges come from former Iraqi general Najib Salahi who fled Iraq in 1995 and now lives in Jordan.

According to Salahi, somebody sent him videotape depicting an Iraqi intelligence officer raping one of Salahi's female relatives. Salahi claims, and the Times quotes unnamed Washington sources as confirming, that other high ranking Iraqi defectors outside of that country have received similar videotapes depicting the rape of close female relatives.<sup>147</sup>

The huge security system that Saddam Hussein built routinely tortured masses of people in Iraq. Women were, and are, sexually tortured more because they are "females" in addition to their political accusations, and because they represent the honour of their families and male members.

Rather than his excesses and cruelty being an exception, Saddam Hussein typifies Arab men exercising absolute political power. Such an indictment could be applied to just about any other Arab leader, president, or king in the world today. Most of them overlook gender equality in their relationships, although they often pay lip service to it. Kanan

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<sup>146</sup> Although spelled incorrectly as Salahi, the correct spelling is: Salihi. It refers to a famous Iraqi tribe.

<sup>147</sup> Carnell, Brian (2000), *Saddam Hussein Allegedly Using Rape for Political Purposes* (Equity feminism organization: USA)

Makiya attributes this cruelty to Arabs, as a cruel nation, especially when women are the targets. As he states:

There are two faces to cruelty: a public and a private one. Even when the physical act of cruelty is undertaken publicly – for instance, if it is inflicted by the machinery a state or by a crowd on the rampage – it is preceded by a web of private moral assumptions, which make the particular violation possible. From this point of view, a study of cruelty in the Arab world must begin with its most ubiquitous target: the Arab Woman.

... The barbarism of a state that employs people as rapists and what goes on in the mind of a man like “Aziz Ahmed”<sup>148</sup> are important questions. For the moment, however, I am concerned with what a document like this tells us about how widespread the practice of rape must have become in order for such paperwork to be routinely generated.

... Every major prison seems to have had its own specially equipped rape room (replete in one case with soft-porn pictures stuck on the wall opposite the surface being used.)<sup>149</sup>

Those who wrote about women’s freedoms and modernization in Iraq during Saddam’s era reached a rosy, misguided conclusion because the vulnerable women who suffered the impact of Saddam’s regime were not the ones they spoke to. Elizabeth Fernea, for instance, one of the few who seemed to care about the plight of Iraqi women, met with female Palestinian personnel of the United Nations. Fernea had lived in Iraq in the 1950s and was influenced by the rural area in which she lived. When her Palestinian friend, Nejliah, told her that Saddam supported women, she revisited Iraq in 1996 and met with some privileged women, who were high ranking political female members of Ba’ath Party. Thus, Fernea writes:

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<sup>148</sup> Aziz Ahmed was hired formally by the government as a rapist in prisons according to documents found by the Iraqi Communist Party. See Makiya, Kana, “Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising, and the Arab World” for more detailed information on formally hired rapists.

<sup>149</sup> Makiya, Kanan (1993), *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising, and the Arab World* (USA: W. W. Norton & Company): p. 287- 288

I decided to write a thank-you letter to my friend Nejlah in Geneva, for shaking up my long-held ideas about what was happening to women in the Arab World. I had come to the reluctant conclusion that she was more or less right: Saddam Hussein, despite his horrendous reputation in the West, had the best record on women's rights in the Arab world today. But, the words of my dear friend, an Iraqi exile, still echoed in my head. "What good, "she had cried," "are women's rights without human rights?"<sup>150</sup>

During Fernea's visit to Iraq, there were thousands of women prisoners in Saddam's underground prisons. Ms. Layla, a professor at the College of Law at Baghdad University, decided to flee Iraq, and unfortunately was caught on her way to Iraq's Kurdistan region, an area not under the control of the Iraqi central government. I and my daughters took the same route, with neither passports nor male companion when we fled Iraq, and we could have suffered the same fate as this brave law professor. We were allowed to pass the checkpoint. Layla, not so fortunate, was tortured and raped in prison by one of her students at the university. After an imprisonment of a few years, she managed to escape the country and told her story to Amir Badr Hassoun. It was published in Arabic Language under the title *The Book of Brutality: An Attempt to Spoil What Is Left of Your Lives*. Her challenge is stirring: "Shout even into empty space because that is much better than silence. People still react to calamities; they may even scream and demand that the cycle of terror and violence in Iraq be stopped."<sup>151</sup> In this narration, Ms. Layla describes her miseries and the brutalities:

Well, that's what opponents are exposed to in the Third World. In my prison, there was neither a Third World nor opponents. There was not a government in the prisons! Inside those prisons, there were human beings under the control of brutal and wild animals. Does the world allow that?

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<sup>150</sup> Fernea, Elizabeth Warnock (1998), *In Search of Islamic Feminism: One Woman's Global Journey* (New York: Anchor Books): p. 331

<sup>151</sup> Cooke, Miriam (2001), *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature* (New York: Routledge Press): p. 19

I am here now. I am far from those women; however, I know all about what it is going on there. Tomorrow is Tuesday and those women are living in circumstances that nobody in the world could endure. Tuesdays of each week are assigned to the execution of female prisoners.

They will not go to bed tonight. I know that. How could a woman go to bed when she knows that she, or her sister, or her friend, is to be lynched tomorrow? I am not going to tell you more. Everything disappoints me.<sup>152</sup>

Obviously, Fernea and UN agencies could not visit the prisons where women were being tortured and executed. Unfortunately, women's human rights and development are measured by statistical indicators such as the numbers of females attending school and employed in different jobs, or by representation in national legislation. No weight is given to the absence of a democratic atmosphere that those women need to become full human beings.

Actually, the debate over the application of democracy in the Muslim and the Arab countries is considerable, taking its rise from how democracy is defined. Let us listen to another victim of Saddam Hussein:

His [Saddam Hussein] hands were moving on my body without hesitation. Why he thought he owned my body? Being a Prime Minister in any country does not mean he can enslave the population. Frankly speaking, I was not a hero to stop Saddam Hussein from having me as Hareem. That day, I realized that the politics of the Middle East was a continuation to Caliphs era, to Islamic wars against the unbelievers, and enslaving their women and young boys at Hareems' Palaces.

But, I am not enslaved at one of those wars and my body is mine. He did not own me, and of course he would not save my life and reputation if people out there in my community knew he raped me. I was his victim that was ready to be re-victimized by her culture. Crying badly, I saw a dirty swine seeking after a quick-fix sex pleasure in him.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Hassoun, Amir Badr (1994), *The Book of Brutality: An Attempt to Spoil What Is Left of Your Lives* (Damascus/ Syria): Arabic; partially translated by Awatef Rasheed

<sup>153</sup> Rasheed, Awatef (unpublished) *Silenced Women: Real Experiences of Iraqi Women*

Except for Sanaa, who talked to me privately, few Iraqi women can bring themselves to speak out about a rape committed by Saddam Hussein. It is this fear of the political power of the regime, and the fear of the culture, which re-victimize the victim of rape. Sanaa and many others were victimized by two patriarchal systems: the social mechanism and the state terrorist system. It was known publicly that Saddam and his circles, officials and relatives, raped women systematically. However, women were threatened not to speak out. Also, their families would kill them to “purify” the family’s name and to keep its honour if they did. For the Ba’ath party, rape is an appropriate means to put their opponents down, to get sexual pleasure for free, and to blackmail and hire women for their security intelligence forces by videotaping them while they have sex with security men.

The Iraqi Communist Party obtained documents that reveal official involvement in the “formal” raping of female prisoners. Political conflict among the parties played a vital role in revealing such incidents; however, the instances of systematic rape committed by Saddam’s regime have been exploited for gaining political advantages rather than seeking gender equalities. As the Iraqi author and human rights defender Kanan Makiya writes:

Nonetheless, there is something unique about “official” Iraqi rape. Here the state was getting away with waging war on its own population, not only through chemical warfare on Kurdish villages, but by unleashing rapists on women of every ethnic and religious group in the country. But rape is not only what was done to Iraqi women; it is in a sense what was done to Kuwait, and it is the perfect metaphor for what was done to the whole of Iraqi civil society by its own state. I think of rape as the generic form of the whole Ba’athi modus operandi in politics.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Makiya, Kanan (1993), *Cruelty and Silence* (London: W.W. Norton & Company): p. 295

### *Sex Trafficking*

Another form of violence against women has taken place in the “modern” history of Iraq: sex trafficking motivated by economic needs and wars. Internal conflicts and wars forced women to leave their homes and to live as refugees and displaced people. These refugees were driven by their economic needs to accept prostitution and sex work, although these kinds of work are not culturally accepted.

Also, widows of one million martyrs during the Iraq-Iran war, girls made poor by the economic sanctions and inflation, and victims of sexual assault who fled their families were subjugated to an organized process of sex trafficking. Although Iraq is rich in oil and resources, the masculine behaviours of Saddam Hussein mandated his wars. In addition, there was no social assistance program to support widows and single mothers. Women were left impoverished and their plight was ignored by the state, at the same time, the state’s actions created and/ or worsened their situation under the legitimacy of the “shame and honour code.”

In fact, one of Saddam’s claims to legitimize his invasion of Kuwait was trafficking in Iraqi women. Obviously, he used Iraqi women to fuel the war, which in fact did nothing to stop sex trafficking or to “save” women. Joseph Braude provides more details on Saddam’s speech on trafficking of Iraqi women. As Braude states:

The only time that the trafficking of Iraqi women made front page headlines in Iraq was when Saddam mentioned it in a speech more than a decade ago, dutifully reprinted in full, as all his speeches have been, by the country’s daily newspapers. He did so for a special reason. On the eve of his invasion of Kuwait, he delivered a litany of grievances against the little Gulf country structured vaguely like the American Declaration of Independence and including the memorable line, “The glorious Iraqi woman has come to be sold for one [Kuwaiti] *dirham*.” Ironically, Iraqi

sex trafficking did not witness hyper growth until the hyperinflation that followed the 1991 war under the international sanctions regime.<sup>155</sup>

Kuwaiti men started getting married to Iraqi women back in the 1950s and 1960s, reflecting the economic inequality and class diversity between the two countries. Kuwait, with its small population and huge reserves of oil, is one of the richest countries in the world. Therefore, the Kuwaiti individual is wealthier than the Iraqi one. Some poor Iraqi families accepted their daughters' marriage to Kuwaiti men on an economic and class basis. However, some of those Kuwaitis did not respect their Iraqi wives, and some in the name of marriage took the girls for use in the sex trade. Middle class Iraqi people were appalled by the practice; allowing such a marriage became a stigma that many people in Iraq would not accept. In addition, Kuwaiti people, after discovering oil in their country, became racists and treated other Arabs as inferior.

Since sex trafficking in Iraqi women had started a long time before Saddam invaded Kuwait, Saddam was right when he claimed that Kuwaiti men persisted in sex trafficking Iraqi women during the Iraqi-Iranian war. More than half a million Iraqi widows and single mothers had to suffer poverty and lacked economic and social security as well as respect. As Kanan Makiya points out:

Was I aware of the fact that Kuwaitis were forever crossing over the border to pick up Iraqi women in Basra? Their sole purpose in coming was to “mess about” with Iraqi women. Such issues were on many Iraqi minds in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. Men in particular felt that their honor was at stake, especially after Saddam said in a speech, by way of justifying his action, “al-‘Iraqiyya al majida saret ib-dirham Kuwaiti” (To the Kuwaiti, the glorious Iraqi woman goes for a nickel.)<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Braude, Joseph (2003), *The New Iraq: Rebuilding the Country for Its People, the Middle East, and the World* (New York: Basic Books): p. 140

<sup>156</sup> Makiya, Kanan (1993), *Cruelty and Silence* (London: W.W. Norton & Company): p. 39

Most Iraqis were upset by this prostitution of Iraqi women to Kuwaiti men, who in turn humiliated Iraqis by reminding them of their “shameful and easy to get” women and further fuelling the appetite for war. Not that Saddam was really concerned about the dignity and reputation of women. As we have seen, he and his people made a habit of raping women, encouraging their prostitution and torture by Ba’ath members. Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait, too, did not stop sex trafficking in Iraqi women; on the contrary, women were covertly removed to other countries such as Jordan, Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Iran to practice prostitution after the Gulf War and the imposition of economic sanctions on Iraq. Export prostitution flourished despite the fact that Iraq is a sexist community where sexual violation by women is a taboo that can lead to honour killing. As Makiya states:

Women’s bodies are deemed simultaneously the font from which all honor derives and a source of *fitna*, or public sedition. That is why Arab tradition feels so threatened by female independence. Women’s powerlessness is therefore the original source of all cruelty directed at them.<sup>157</sup>

Blaming women for their sexuality and because men are seduced with women’s bodies is patriarchal in essence. In 2000, Saddam Hussein used the discourse on women’s sexuality and code of honour to behead women involved in politics to uphold the honour of the nation. This encouraged the reinstatement of such traditions as honour killing despite the many attempts to abolish it by the Iraqi Women’s League and the Iraqi Communist Party. From a Fact Sheet, Office of International Women’s Issues/ Washington, D.C. in March 20, 2003:

Under the pretext of fighting prostitution, units of “Fedayeen Saddam,” the paramilitary organization led by Uday Hussein, Saddam’s eldest son, have beheaded in public more than 200 women throughout the country, dumping their severed heads at their families’ doorsteps. Many families

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<sup>157</sup> Makiya, Kanan (1993), op. cit., p. 298

have been required to display the victim's head on their outside fences for several days. These barbaric acts were carried out in the total absence of any proper judicial procedures and many of the victims were not engaged in prostitution, but were targeted for political reasons. For example, Najat Mohammad Haydar, an obstetrician in Baghdad, was beheaded after criticizing the corruption within health services. (Amnesty International Report, Iraq: Systematic Torture of Political Prisoners, August 2001; Iraqi Women's League in Damascus, Syria)<sup>158</sup>

It is not a coincidence that the United States of America has appropriated the calls of Iraqi Women's League and Amnesty International on behalf of Iraqi women. Both Saddam Hussein and President George Bush of the United States have used Iraqi women's issues to fuel their wars. In both wars, women's situations, in fact, were drastically worsened.

### ***Social Norms and Security Resulting from Wars***

Wars are supposedly fought to bring security to people in countries; and yet, as many feminist scholars have pointed out, wars differently harm women.<sup>159</sup> Moreover, as Cynthia Cockburn states:

In warfare... but also in political terror, the instruments with which the body is abused in order to break the spirit tend to be gender differentiated, and in the case of women, to be sexualized.<sup>160</sup>

The destruction of wars has left Iraqi women in a desperate condition. Describing the impact of the first Gulf War on Iraq (1991), Kanan Makiya asserts:

War is hell. But not all wars are hell in the same sorts of ways. The way in which the Gulf War was ended by the United States turned out to be far more damaging to the people of Iraq than wartime related direct casualties. By the summer of 1991, Iraq had been transformed from a modern country, with sophisticated health care, water, and sewage treatment, and electric power systems, into "one of the most impoverished countries in

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<sup>158</sup> Office of International Women's Issues (March 20, 2003), *Fact Sheet* (Washington D.C: Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs).

<sup>159</sup> Cynthia Enloe and Cynthia Cockburn.

<sup>160</sup> Cockburn, Cynthia (1999), *Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence* (Washington D.C.: The World Bank): p. 12

the world.” This was the conclusion of the International Study Team, made up of eighty-seven academics and professionals, which visited Iraq in September 1991 to study the impact of the war on the overall health and welfare of civilians<sup>161</sup>

The insecure situation created inside Iraq after the Gulf War, and especially since the last war in March 2003, has exposed women to countless rape incidents by lawless gangs and individuals. Hawkesworth confirms this fact and its consequences on victims of rape:

The serious confusion about rape in contemporary culture masks the harm to victims and imposes upon them a legacy of guilt and shame. This confusion affords great advantages to men, for to the extent that victims are blamed for the crime, rapists are freed from any pressure to assume responsibility for their actions. Imposing the burden of guilt and shame on the victim makes them far less likely to report the crime, much less likely to press charges. Thus, the widespread cultural confusion about rape affords certain immunity to men against prosecution. Men can rape with impunity, knowing that the 3 percent conviction rate in rape cases and the general proclivity to hold women rather than men accountable for rape will place their action well beyond the pale of ordinary crime and punishment.<sup>162</sup>

An additional threat to women’s security is that women now suffer worsening physical and psychological abuse within their homes and from their families. Militarism in the society, subordinating women within family relations, and religious domination of women’s lives play a critical role in threatening their security and adding to their oppression. Iraqi women are exposed to domestic violence, political inferiorization, and unending warfare. And yet, the public did not want to hear these experiences as Miriam Cooke states:

Iraqi and Kuwaiti women questioned grand narratives about medieval dictatorships confronting modern democracies, good Muslims opposing bad Muslims. These women’s different stories need to be read as testimonials, a special kind of witness that allows others to glimpse another kind of reality that challenges the absoluteness of the Gulf war

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<sup>161</sup> Makiya, Kanan (1993), *Cruelty and Silence* (W. W. Norton & Company; New York): p.202

<sup>162</sup> Hawkesworth, M. E.( 1990), *Beyond Oppression: Feminist Theory and Political Strategy* (London: The Continuum Publishing Company):p. 63

story as it has been told by those in power, whether in the United States or in Iraq.<sup>163</sup>

Since the 2003 war, there is even less on the agenda to support Iraqi women, who were already marginalized and victimized by Saddam's government. Women and women's interests have been pushed into an obscure corner as national and global interests focus on political and economic power and control.

In consequence of the wars, and the hunger and poverty that ensued, social norms in Iraq have changed. Iraqi society is becoming more materialistic and money-oriented. People are struggling just to survive with major efforts required to get enough money and food for survival.

The new materialist orientation and the polarization of Iraq's social classes into either very poor or very rich have brought about a lapse of morality for many Iraqis. There is a blatant upsurge of gangs, robberies and crimes throughout the country. Unemployment among young men, lack of resources, and the brutality of Saddam's regime have created a tendency for challenging the regime's huge security systems among some young men, which created insecure conditions on the social level.

Also, wars and militarism have left thousands of well-trained soldiers adrift in the unpoliced streets with no prospect of jobs or other resources. They have developed a culture of violence, which entitles them to initiate violence in their own communities. Unemployed ex-soldiers and men have no options but to take one of two routes. They are either hired as militiamen with the conflicting political parties and tribal fighters or with small gangs that kidnap people for bribes. This culture of gangs encourages other kinds

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<sup>163</sup> Cooke, Miriam (2001), *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature*; (New York: Routledge Press): p. 8

of crimes such as raping women and killing. The aftermath of militarizing Iraqi society has fostered an upsurge of violence and insecurity especially for women. The carelessness that the occupying powers in Iraq have shown in securing people's lives has only served to augment violence and insecurity. From an editorial "Tareq Al- Shaab" issued by the Iraqi Communist Party in July 10, 2004:

In the absence of a solution, prolonged unemployment turns into a breeding ground for various sorts of anti-democratic trends and ideologies. The unemployed would develop into a source of social tension, an easy target for recruitment in extremist groups and prone to anti-social behaviour.<sup>164</sup>

Insecurity, unemployment, and inferiorizing women, all of which breed violence, contribute to the physical and psychological pressure on women. Women's health becomes a neglected issue as a direct result of political conflict and wars.

### **Conclusion: Wars and Patriarchy in Iraq**

This chapter has shown how the inter-linked social and religious patriarchal relations within Iraq have become more dominant during the three Iraq wars because of the absence of both security and the rule of law. In addition, the state adopted new mechanisms to undermine women such as encouraging religious and tribal powers. This reconfiguration of state power reveals several patriarchal process which can be described as: the state allies with tribal and religious figures, the state gives up its power to the cultural codes and tribal figures to take the place of legislative bodies, the state ignores gender-based crimes resulting from wars, and the state encourages cultural norms to solve local conflicts and family-based concerns.

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<sup>164</sup> Iraqi Communist Party (July 10, 2004), "Fighting Unemployment is Urgent Patriotic Task"; in *Tareq al Shaab Newspaper*: No 51, year 69 (Baghdad: ICP publishing).

Insecure political and economic situations, militarism and the circulation of the culture of revenge have created new forms of patriarchy in the Iraqi society, endangering lives and the status of women. Weapons and training in the production of small explosives have proliferated among the male population, while guerrilla groups and militias have been established within political party organizations. Sexist religious laws were restored. Similarly, the global conflict over oil, regional conflicts over religious and ethnic interests, and global interferences in the application of a democratic paradigm in the Middle East have destabilized the region and created new forms of patriarchies on regional and global levels.

Women in Iraq, as well as in other Middle Eastern countries, are kept inferiorized, subordinated and overshadowed on the political agenda, leaving social reform and the application of gender equality in ruins. National independence, ethnic and sectarian separation, and restraining religious ideologies are being prioritized over individual rights, women's equality, and social well-being.

These conflicts of power on local, regional, and global levels restore a paradigm of basic survival in a cutthroat world. In this violent context, women have no place as autonomous human beings. They are subject to patriarchal power, inferiorized, and exploited to mirror the political/ religious agenda.

Despite the many yokes of oppression which women in Iraq have had to shoulder throughout Iraq's history of political and social changes, women have attempted to resist patriarchies and to strive for emancipation. They have created a collective work that should give them a strong solid united voice within the Iraqi culture. However, the

establishment of a true feminist movement within the culture of the country continues to be a long and arduous battle.

Inferiorizing women in times of war causes immense oppression for women. As this chapter has shown, war has specific gendered consequences which are shaped by history. I focused on the motivating factors and the outcome of wars on Iraq, the role of religious, ethnic, political, and social mechanisms. During times of war, gender issues become minor among the many other issues of insecurity in Iraq; at the same time, however, gendered impacts are the greatest.

Women's movement, in addition to their private and public realms, is overshadowed by males' superiority on the level of political participation and activism for women's rights at war times. Consistent links between totalitarian governments of Iraq and the global powers have engendered additional oppression of women and destruction of the social structures.

## Summary

The research of this thesis, which draws also on my own personal experiences, reflects the oppression and agency of Iraqi women living under both enduring and changing forms of patriarchal power and gender inequalities. This oppression of women by male power in both times of war and peace undermines and overshadows the previous progress made by feminism and women's activism in Iraq. In recent times, the oppression of Iraqi women has not been a priority on the Iraqi political agenda. Ironically, the Iraqi women's question has been converted into an important issue since the 2003 war to legitimize the war in the name of Iraqi women's liberation. Nevertheless, as we have seen, women's oppression has been worsened by new patriarchal forms.

When I started writing this thesis, although published literature on Iraq was extensive, the oppression of Iraqi women was rarely the focus of separate and inclusive social research. In this thesis, I introduce inclusive analysis of women's oppression, including the social, economic, political, and religious dimensions. Economic and politically conflicted realities are dealt with in detail in this thesis. Women's rights are political; therefore, these rights, and the resulting oppression, need to be analysed in reference to both local and global politics. The global mechanism and conflicts have created a new patriarchy. The emergence of this new patriarchy has had an impact on the lives of Iraqi women and produced enormous challenges to women's lives as well as to gender issues.

In this thesis, Iraqi women's issues are analyzed in the light of and against a backdrop of religious domination, wars, ethnic/ religious conflicts, totalitarian government, and global interference in Iraq's internal affairs. The basic plan in the research of this thesis

has been an integrated examination of all political, religious, and economic factors that have had an impact on Iraqi women's lives, and on gender equalities – or inequalities - in Iraq.

The major theme of this thesis is the mechanisms of overshadowing, subordination and inferiorization of women in Iraq. This thesis exposes new forms of patriarchy in Iraq under circumstances of war and economic sanctions. Women's oppression in Iraq and their subordination to men are the consequence of complex local/ national and international/ global tangle of political, religious, cultural, and economic mechanisms. The interplay and impact of these patriarchal powers and entangled mechanisms have therefore had to figure large in a feminist analysis of the Iraqi women's question.

**Chapter One** explores my personal experiences and those of some other women up to the time that I fled Iraq because of gender-based persecution. Included are my experiences as a child, a journalist, a wife/ mother and a refugee over times of peace and war. These experiences reveal women's resistance as well as gendered socialization. They detail the ways in which women's oppression is culturally and socially conveyed and the mechanisms that create and perpetuate women's subordination and inferiorization to men who, in Iraq, have been granted absolute superiority by virtue of their gender. They also indicate the importance of secular male family members in the Iraq of my childhood.

**Chapter Two** presents historical evidence of the women's movement, the call for women's emancipation, the relations between women and the state, the establishment and activities of women's organizations, and the mechanisms overshadowing women's equal political participation. It describes the work of a number of women's organizations which are part of patriarchal parties, and it analyzes the political patriarchal of this role

historically as well as ways in which women's agenda are overshadowed by the lack of autonomous women's groups.

**Chapter Three** is a comprehensive portrayal of the mechanisms of subordination, and the inferiorization of women to men. Materials drawn from the available literature underline the prevalence of multi-levelled religious, social and cultural oppression of Iraqi women as well as political patriarchy on a local level. This chapter explores the impact of ethnic and religious diversity and armed conflicts on women's lives and roles.

Islam as a religion, and as the source of state law, asserts patriarchal relations within the society and imposes a hierarchical religious and politicised-religious system. Although there are many interpretations of Quran and Hadith, interpretations of the fundamentalists and politicized-Islamists tend to treat women as inferior to and dependent on men. Cultural codes that criminalize women for "sins," and bring with them such practices as honour killing, are strongly linked to Islamic codes, which include the veiling of women, and drawing boundaries to limit their women's space and participation in the public realms.

In **Chapter four**, the effects of international wars and armed conflicts on Iraqi women's lives have been described. Wars on Iraq have created new forms of patriarchy, have perpetuated women's subordination and inferiorization, and have added to their oppression. This chapter offers evidence of the impact of the armed global interferences in women's rights and freedoms, and spells out global mechanisms that struggle to control.

Ethnic and religious diversities in Iraq have played a critical role in adding to the political conflict, and in women's subordination and inferiorization. The ethnic /sectarian

conflict is a two-edged sword: On the one hand, it prioritized the separation from the state's claim via internal conflicts and military arrangements, and on the other hand, it exploited women's efforts in having them do men's jobs in fighting for independence rather than striving for gender equalities. Those who are involved in political parties mirror an agreement with patriarchal relations within their violent political parties and in concert with their agenda.

Democracy has been absent in Iraq for decades under the political-authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussein, and now under the current totalitarian religious and tribal leadership. This is an unbroken circle. The patriarchal political system has merely been prolonged. Another, more religious and social patriarchy has taken over from the dictatorship, adding new layers and reconfiguring women's oppression.

This thesis research has examined the creation and re-creation of patriarchies amidst the applause and blessings of local and global politics. It also draws attention to the agonizing oppression created by dominant powers through males' inherited superiority and use of violence over women's lives in times of peace as well as war. The conclusion points to the need for scholarly research and feminist analysis of women's psychological well-being, especially during times of war. Recognition of the need to support women refugees is only in its beginning stages. Help and support are also needed for the women living through the horrendous and changing times of wars, women who often display incredible strength in the face of horrible situations on a daily basis, at home and among their families and communities.

## Conclusion

This thorough and inclusive study explores women's oppression in Iraq from a feminist perspective. On the national/ local level, the interconnected patriarchal religious, social, political, and economic factors have subordinated and inferiorized women in Iraq for many years. The thesis has highlighted how, on the global level, male top-secret relations carry out hostile actions that create new forms of patriarchy and perpetuate men's superiority.

Moreover, the new world order and patriarchal global relations have produced more wars, more violence, and more economic deprivation that have impacted Iraqi women's lives and movement immensely. In addition, Iraqi state's priorities marginalize gender issues, and therefore, women's lives in Iraq have been severely impacted and women's opportunities for gender equality have virtually vanished.

Revealing the deep-rooted patriarchal mechanisms on social and cultural, state, and global levels was the core of my thesis research. Patriarchal relations do not emerge from only Islam and Islamic culture; they have emerged as well from militarism, economic greed and unbalanced global powers and conflict.

Sexual violence such as rape, blackmailing and sex trafficking is rampant in Iraq. The social infrastructure is fractured, and insurgency has mushroomed. The accumulative negative outcome of wars, economic sanctions, fundamentalist religious movements, and the devastation of Iraq's social infrastructure do not hold out promise for progress in women's liberation, and an appropriate recognition of gender equalities. Women's

freedoms in Iraq have become a minor issue, in essence sidelined and overshadowed by the political, masculine agenda on local and global levels.

From a feminist perspective, I have found out that the psychological and physical impact of wars on women, as individuals and in relation to their communities has been ignored not only by politicians but by academic research and literature. As death tolls create more horror and occupy the headlines of the national and international media, women's special needs and catastrophic situations are treated as minor, if recognized at all.

Wars destroyed a high percentage of the Iraqi infrastructure, including hospitals and clinics and the pharmaceutical industry. A chronic lack of food and the sharp decline in living standards suffered by most Iraqi families were among the changes that impacted women's health most severely after the first Gulf War. Jeanne Vickers states in her description of the impact of wars on Iraqi women:

In Iraq basic health and sanitation standards deteriorated to critical levels, and devaluation of local currencies eroded the purchasing power of local population, severely affecting women's capacity to buy food.<sup>165</sup>

Although women's health is linked to specific diseases that impact women more than men, neither the Iraqi government nor the international community seem to care about women's lack of nutrition. Again, Sahni Hamilton, Barry Popkin, and Deborah Spicer point out:

The impact of infectious diseases on nutritional needs has received a good deal of attention in low-income countries, but predominantly in relation to children rather than adults. Women deserve attention in this regard since the nutritional demands of illness may exacerbate already marginal nutritional status, or be compounded by the simultaneously high nutritional demands of pregnancy or lactation. Women may be at greater

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<sup>165</sup> Vickers, Jeanne (1993), *Women and War* (London: Zed Books): p.62

risk of infectious disease since as mothers they are in contact with sick family members.<sup>166</sup>

Because of the wars and the economic sanctions, the Iraqi people have suffered acute starvation and poverty. Providing daily food for the family has been the most essential concern of women in Iraq. Prices of food have increased hundreds of times. Most Iraqi families have had to abandon eating fruit, meat, fish, chicken, salads, and white bread. Families typically celebrate the religious festival (Eid) by making a lunch (main meal in Iraq) of chicken, rice, and salads. Such a lunch cannot be repeated till the next (Eid) several months later, although before the war it had been quite obtainable on a daily basis and at affordable prices for every family in Iraq. Women have to cook meals from only one kind of vegetable such as potato or eggplant. Iraqi women have suffered brutal daily oppression because of the inability to provide their families with food, school, and medications. At night, they often cannot sleep worrying about the next day's food.

In such conditions, women often feel the need to sacrifice most of their own food intake for their children and families. In addition to food, regular visits to their doctors and even medications become prohibitive luxuries. Hospitals and clinics have ceased to be funded and maintained; therefore, women's care departments no longer have adequate services for women.

In most of the Iraqi maternity hospitals, women gave birth to babies while they lay on the floor of the hospital because there were not enough beds for them after the Iraqi-Iranian War (1980-1988). The food at hospitals, which was good and offered for free to patients before the sanctions, became unfit for human consumption after the war and

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<sup>166</sup> Hamilton, Sahni, Popkin, Barry, and Spicer, Deborah (1984), *Women and Nutrition in Third World Countries* (West Port: Bergin & Garvey Publishers): p. 30

during the years of sanctions. As a result, poor women who gave birth at hospitals were not able to eat the food of the hospital, but neither were their families able to bring them special food from home.

Because of the huge damage caused to the Iraqi infrastructure by the war and the financial crisis of the state, water and power were not available continuously, which added to women's stress as well as daily oppression. Women's traditional role and responsibility for housework was challenged, because doing it well depends on the availability of water and power. Getting clean water, especially in big cities and urban communities, became difficult. Women must wait for long hours to get water and finish their housework. Sometimes they have had to go sleepless for the whole night waiting for water.

Under these conditions of hardship, Iraqi women were and are expected to organize their family's daily lives, housework, food, and social relationships. That is the traditional role of a woman, in itself sufficient reason for sustaining a stress overload. Brauch, Beiner and Rosalind analyze women's stress caused by their roles different from that experienced by men. As they suggest:

... the distressing effects of providing support may vary with the degree of emotional involvement. Women may be socialized to feel and express a greater concern for their loved ones; women may be more likely to place the needs of others before their own (Gillingan, 1982). Men, in contrast, may be more able to provide concrete assistance while maintaining emotional distance.<sup>167</sup>

Concerning the usage of depleted uranium and its effects on the Iraqi environment, research has concentrated on DU's impact on children's health. There is not a single survey published about how DU impacted women's health, although breast cancer rates

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<sup>167</sup> Brauch, Grace K., Beiner, Lois, and Barnet, Rosalind C. ed. (1987), *Gender and Stress* (New York: The Free Press): p. 151

rose six fold after the exposure of Iraqi women to DU. Dr. Ashraf al Bayoumi, a scientist specializing in Physical Chemistry, concludes:

It is important to note that before the war [Gulf War 1991] the prevalence of cancer diseases was, in decreasing order of frequency: lung, lymphoma, larynx, leukemia, and breast. After the war in 1997-1998 the order became: lung, lymphoma, breast, larynx, skin, and leukemia. A sharp increase is reported in the incidence of most of these types of cancer diseases: lung (five-fold), lymphoma (four- fold), breast (six-fold), larynx (four-fold) and skin (eleven-fold).<sup>168</sup>

In addition, there was a dramatic increase in abnormal births and spontaneous abortions. In her report “Gravesites: Environmental Ruin in Iraq”, Barbara Nimri Aziz asserts:

Today, the entire population of Iraq is besieged by diseases. We know that waterborne parasites and bacteria and malnutrition in Iraq are responsible for many recognizable diseases, and for wasting and death. But what about reports of a sharp rise in spontaneous abortions, cancers, and other “new diseases.” The Iraqi Ministry of Health is systematically documenting some of these health problems.<sup>169</sup>

Typically, low priority is given to these women’s health issues. North American media and research give a great deal of attention to the impact of DU on American veterans – but virtually none to the impact on Iraqi women. Dan Fahey describes the effects of DU in these words:

Inhalation results in deposit of radioactive particles in the lungs and circulation of these particles via the bloodstream to various organs. DU and its decay products are alpha, beta and gamma emitters and can break the DNA or RNA in nearby cells. Because of the known mutagenic effect of depleted uranium, it is mathematically estimated that if there were a population of 100,000 people, each excreting an average of 3 micrograms of DU per day (the average for some Gulf War veterans), then 3,000-

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<sup>168</sup> El-Bayoumi, Ashraf (1999), Depleted Uranium Symposium held in Baghdad, Iraq, in December 1998; in *The Depleted Uranium Education Project of the International Action Centre: Depleted Uranium: Metal of Dishonour: How the Pentagon Radiates Soldiers and Civilians with DU Weapons* (Boston: International Action Centre): p. s 3

<sup>169</sup> Aziz, Barbara Nimri (1999), “Gravesites: Environmental Ruin in Iraq”; in *The Depleted Uranium Education Project of the International Action Centre: Depleted Uranium: Metal of Dishonour: How the Pentagon Radiates Soldiers and Civilians with DU Weapons* (Boston: International Action Centre): p. 158

21,000 additional fatal cancers could be expected. However, fatal cancers are only one expected health effect. Internal DU exposure can cause a weakened immune system response. It can damage the digestive tract, cause renal and neurological damage, and cause genetic malformations. One Iraqi doctor has reported a 7-10 per cent increase in birth abnormalities in southern Iraq. Health problems may continue for as long as the victim lives and some effects may not become apparent until several years after exposure. One of the shorter-lived decay products of uranium, thorium, is known to concentrate in breast tissue and may therefore be present in lactating mothers. Women's breast and uterine tissue is especially vulnerable to ionising radiation and women experience 1.5 times more cancers than men, given equal exposures. Thus the use of depleted uranium weapons may also be seen as a particular violation of women's human rights. Radiation damage to human DNA creates the nightmare of damage to the human genome, which is the map or seed for all future human generations, for as long as humanity exists.<sup>170</sup>

Since the 2003 war, women's living conditions and health has worsened, and with the absence of a genuine commitment to repair the damage the wars have caused to the Iraqi infrastructure and social arrangements, hope has vanished.

According to Eman Asim, the Ministry of Health official who oversees the country's 185 public hospitals:

Even at the height of sanctions, when things were miserable, it wasn't as bad as this. Supply rooms lack basic antibiotics. Children in the pediatric hospitals are dying due to shortages of such modest equipment as catheters, IVs and oxygen cylinders. According to the New York Times, 80 percent of hospital patients leave with infections they did not have when they arrived. Bechtel, the multibillion-dollar San Francisco construction company, has received huge government contracts to refurbish the hospitals. Iraqi women are asking where this money has gone. So should we.<sup>171</sup>

Most laboratory supplies and instruments were looted along with the other portable property of the hospitals. Therefore, clinics and hospitals lack essential instruments and

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<sup>170</sup> Euler, Catherine & Parker, Karen (1999), *Depleted Uranium Munitions: The Use of Radiological Weapons as a Violation for Human Rights* (Manchester: Joint Intervention by the International Peace Bureau and International Educational Development)

<sup>171</sup> Benjamine, Medea (March 8, 2004), *Gestures of Hope For Iraqi Women* (San Francisco: San Francisco Chronicle)

tools to test blood for infectious diseases or even to ascertain a patient's blood group. A report by the UNICEF describes the situation about HIV/ AIDS thus:

There is however a real danger that in the current context, this scenario of low prevalence is going to change drastically. Though the number of detected HIV cases in Iraq has been extremely low in number, the current collapse of the nation's health system, looting of medical supplies (including testing kits), absence of strict screening for all travelers at the border, active sexual behaviour and increasing drug use among young people makes Iraq very vulnerable to the rapid spread of HIV.<sup>172</sup>

In addition, numbers of patients who were infected with the HIV/AIDS virus fled the hospital during the looting process. They disappeared into the population, while fires set in the hospitals destroyed all pertinent documents. There are no extant records providing the names or medical records of those who were infected by HIV/AIDS. As Catherine Arnold writes:

Of the patients who disappeared during the looting, all are believed to be sexually active and the majority were prostitutes likely to return to their former trade. Intended to have been incarcerated until their death, they have not received any education about their condition nor how to avoid spreading it further. In a city convinced that AIDS does not exist, their partners will be unlikely to take appropriate precautions or even know what those might be. "We are worried about the spread of AIDS in Iraq, no one knows how many hidden cases there were originally or where the patients who fled have gone. There is a fundamental lack of information on every front," said Torbay.<sup>173</sup>

No matter how health status is considered, women in Iraq suffered greatly. The psychological element of Iraqi women's health has not been adequately researched, although these women are traumatized because of violence, terror and impoverishment. Emotional and psychological complexities resulting from wars and the economic sanctions have not been given sufficient consideration and treatment. One of the only

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<sup>172</sup> Ionita, George & Parveen, Jamsheeda (July 2003), *Iraq: Social Sector Watching Briefs: HIV prevention* (Baghdad: UNICEF): p.4

<sup>173</sup> Arnold, Catherine (July 20, 2003), *Denial, Lack of Information Leaves AIDS Patients Dangerously Unaccounted for* (Baghdad Bulletin: Iraq).

places where the academic literature mentions these types of consequences of war is in accounts of refugees. For example a “Report of the Health Care Committee: Expert Advisory Panel on Women and Mental Health” in Australia (1991) about Women and Mental Health:

Women who are refugees following traumatic experiences such as torture and victimization in their own country, may bring a burden of psychological trauma with them. The stresses of conflict, escape, and resettlement may add to this trauma. Allodi and Stiasny report a comparative study of men and women torture victims, and found that severity related to the intensity of their political involvement, and effects on women’s sexual adaptation. Specialized, sensitive mental health services are necessary for the counseling and treatment of these victims, and to facilitate their settlement in their new community.<sup>174</sup>

In addition to the impact of hunger and violence of wars, Iraqi women suffered the trauma of giving birth under severe conditions. The same Report of the Health Care Committee: Expert Advisory Panel on Women and Mental Health in Australia (1991) discusses the relationships between women, reproduction, stress and mental health as follows:

There are many aspects of reproduction and biological change that are potentially stressful for women, whether these are associated with social role changes, body image changes or indeed changes in physiological functioning. Biological, psychological, social and cultural parameters may all be relevant. Most women adapt well, growing and maturing with greater well-being and better mental health as a consequence. However, for some women these changes are associated with unfavourable outcomes, undue stress or other negative effects for mental health.<sup>175</sup>

In addition to an analysis of mechanisms that overshadow, subordinate and inferiorize women in Iraq, this thesis introduces evidence of what might be called "sexual violence

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<sup>174</sup> Report of the Health Care Committee (1991), “Expert Advisory Panel on Women and Mental Health”; in *Women and Mental Health* (Parkes Act: Australian Government Publishing Service): p.37

<sup>175</sup> Report of the Health Care Committee(1991), “Expert Advisory Panel on Women and Mental Health”; in *Women and Mental Health* (Parkes Act: Australian Government Publishing Service)): p.8

socialization"<sup>176</sup> and the role of political elements, both national and global, in marginalizing women's roles and needs.

The women's movement in Iraq has gone through ups and downs, as women's activism was linked to, and exploited by, the agenda of political parties led by men. Patriarchal cultural and religious relations have thus been perpetuated, a reflection of the real position of women in Muslim society. However, secular and independent women's organizations have raised awareness on women's oppression and called for women's emancipation. In the new era, secular feminists continue to struggle to assert women's equal rights in the new constitution.

The thesis draws attention to Iraqi women's issues such as the urgent need for scholarly research on women's psychological health and the resulting extreme oppression of women as they live under horrifying war situations. This thesis highlights Iraqi women's contributions to their communities at both times of peace and war. It also draws attention to the importance of the empowerment of women at the grassroots level in Iraq at present. Women's organizations build a foundation for equal political participation for women, for women's collective work to act as agents for equality of social relations and roles, and for the equality of women's voices in the governing bodies and in national law. Although feminism is absent from Iraqi academia, the empowerment of women and their organizations is the most likely way to stimulate feminist analysis and gender studies at Iraqi universities. More than that, the empowerment of women will allow more understanding for their rights, socialization of sexual violence, and more freedoms to women in both private and public realms.

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<sup>176</sup> Creating and making sexual violence socially and politically acceptable.

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