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Gendering Political Reconstruction
In Iraq

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Abstract

This paper evaluates current US policies towards political reconstruction in Iraq using a gendered lens in order to identify the impact upon women and gender relations. I will argue that, despite an apparent high-level political commitment to Iraqi women within the US administration, current policies towards Iraq are not helping to reduce gender inequalities. This is because US measures that are targeted at women alone do not consider women's position within gender relations and, therefore, do little to address the question of gender relations. Certain US policies, such as de-Baathification and the establishment of governance mechanisms along sectarian/communal lines, have exacerbated trends that contribute to increasing gender inequalities, as well as helping to fuel the current violence. These trends bring into question Iraqi women's ability to fully participate in the public sphere, despite many efforts by Iraqi women's groups to protect and promote women's rights in post-Ba'th Iraq.

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Introduction[1]

Part of the rhetoric of both George Bush and Tony Blair justifying the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 was to liberate the Iraqi people, including Iraqi women, from the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.[2] Both the US and UK authorities have stated that they are committed to ensuring that Iraqi women play an integral role in the reconstruction of Iraq.[3] The ouster of the Ba'thist regime has opened up new possibilities for Iraqi women and men and there is little doubt that liberalisation of the political sphere is very much welcomed. Yet, two years after the fall of the Ba'thist regime, there are many questions surrounding the future ability of Iraqi women to participate fully in public life. Women suffer disproportionately from the prevailing environment of insecurity, unable to go out to work, attend school/university, seek medical care or fully participate in civil and political activities; violent political groups target women who are active in public affairs, whilst ordinary women are harassed on the streets for not wearing the veil; and women's rights are threatened by the compromises of leaders negotiating political arrangements for a future Iraq.

This paper evaluates current US policies towards political reconstruction in Iraq using a gendered lens in order to identify the impact upon women and gender relations. I will argue that, despite an apparent high-level political commitment to Iraqi women within the US administration, current policies towards Iraq are not helping to improve gender inequalities and, consequently, are contributing to increasing the current violence and impacting negatively on women's ability to fully participate in the public sphere. This is because US measures that are targeted at women alone do

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[1] This paper is part of a joint project with Dr Nadje al-Ali, University of Exeter, entitled, 'The Role of Women and Gender in Political Transition in Iraq' and is part-funded by the British Academy.

[2] It is significant that none of the US declarations about Iraqi women talk about 'women's rights' per se. Rather, they talk about freedom and equality for all Iraqis.

[3] In a message to participants in the Voice of Women in Iraq Conference, 9 July 2003, George Bush said, "The women of Iraq's courage and resolve are hopeful examples to all who seek to restore Iraq's place among the world's greatest civilizations. Their efforts also inspire individuals throughout the Middle East who seek a future based on equality, respect, and rule of law".

not consider women's position within gender relations and, therefore, do little to address the question of gender relations.

Towards this end, I begin by outlining the relationship between women, gender and peace-building. Then, I examine the relationship between measures directly targeted at increasing women's political participation, the socio-economic situation and the rise in communal-based politics. It is only by examining the wider political, social and economic context through a gendered lens that it is possible to identify trends in gender relations, identities and roles that impact upon women's ability to participate.

Women, Gender and Peace-building

Successful reconstruction of war-torn countries must lead to sustainable peace. For sustainable peace to occur, there must be not merely a cessation of conflict but also an absence of those factors that lead to conflict. Johan Galtung argues that conflict is much more than direct violence. "There is also the violence frozen into structures, and the culture that legitimizes violence" (Galtung, 1996: viii). In other words, structural inequalities may generate violence. Consequently, post-conflict reconstruction should aim to construct a more equitable society in order to avoid the reoccurrence of violence in the future, rather than to re-construct what existed prior to conflict breaking out. Obviously, the encouragement of more equitable gender relations is an essential part of this process.

As Cynthia Cockburn argues, Galtung's concept of 'structural violence' has gendered dimensions and implications (Cockburn, 2004: 30). Structural inequalities are (re)produced through gender relations, roles and identities. For example, deteriorating economic conditions may lead to both male and female unemployment amongst certain sections of the population. However, men may experience unemployment as not only the loss of income but also as a failure to fulfil their social role as the family breadwinner and, ultimately, as a threat to their masculinity. On the other hand, a reduction in the level of state welfare provision is usually disproportionately felt by women, whose

socially sanctioned roles often make them the primary care-givers and, consequently, dependent on state welfare services more than men.

The gendered reproduction of structural inequalities alerts us to the significance of considering the impact of reconstruction policies on gender relations, roles and identities. A gendered approach to post-conflict reconstruction is not merely a question of making policies that are targeted at women's roles or acknowledging women's right to participate in the reconstruction process. It is also a question of recognising that policies that are aimed at men and women will affect men differently from women with various implications for the nature of gender relations, roles and identities and, thus, for the nature of social inequalities. In order to avoid the (re)construction of sources of structural violence, it is essential that we examine the links between reconstruction policies, gender and social relations.

A part of the process of understanding the links between reconstruction policies, gender and social relations, is to identify the nature of gender and social relations prior to conflict. Saddam Hussein's regime was rooted within social networks of patronage, governed by tribal, clan and religious identities and rooted in a political culture of patrimonialism and patriarchy (Faleh, 2003). These networks made up a 'shadow state' that helped to institutionalise inequalities between different groups based on ethnic, religious and class differences. Simultaneously, the institutionalisation of these inequalities acted to construct social identities based on difference. As in the construction of all social identities, gender played a significant role in contributing to establishing identity differences between different social groups. The removal of Saddam Hussein and the de-Baathification of Iraqi institutions have not led to the dismantling of these networks nor the social relations and identities that underpin them. Indeed, the end of Ba'thist rule and the resulting political and security vacuums has created an environment in which these social networks and their accompanying identities have taken on a new significance. The readjustment of these social networks has created the structural inequalities that are fuelling violence across Iraq—not only the violence of the insurgents against the coalition forces or the terror attacks against civilians, but also

everyday criminality and, in particular, the rising levels of violence against women.

Addressing existing structural inequalities, rooted in unequal social relations, is a condition for the cessation of the current, widespread violence as well as the promotion of more egalitarian gender relations. I argue that it is necessary to examine the gendered impact of current policies towards Iraq in terms of their influence on social relations and, in particular, their impact upon either mitigating or exacerbating structural violence. The reduction in structural inequalities is linked to an improvement in gender relations and also to the building of peace and democracy for all Iraqis, regardless of sex, religion or ethnicity.

'Saving Iraqi women': measures aimed at increasing Iraqi women's participation

On the face of it, it would appear that the US and its allies are concerned with gender—or at least with women in Iraq. The Bush administration has allocated not inconsiderable sums of money to projects aimed at improving women's participation in political, civil and economic life. The issue of Iraqi women's situation is the subject of a number of official speeches and statements about the reconstruction of Iraq. However, there is evidence to suggest that the US administration views the empowerment of Iraqi women as secondary to more 'strategic' issues, such as the creation of political institutions and the establishment of security.

It is difficult to find exact figures that would identify the amount of money allocated to projects aimed at supporting Iraqi women. Much has been made by the US government of the establishment of a $10 million Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative, which provides grants to NGOs to carry out democracy education, leadership training, political training, NGO coalition-building, organizational management, media training and, that all-important pillar of democracy, 'teaching entrepreneurship'.[4] According to Under Secretary of

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[4] Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, "US Commitment to Women in Iraq", Washington, D.C., 23 September 2004

State for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky, the initiative is aimed "to help women become full and vibrant partners in Iraq's developing democracy".[5]

The approach of the democracy initiative projects is very much in line with liberal assumptions about women's position in society. The focus is on getting women into the public sphere, through the provision of skills and material resources. For example, one of the grant recipients, the Johns Hopkins School of Strategic and International Studies, is working with Iraqi NGOs to collect and translate national constitutions, international covenants and other conventions on women's rights into Arabic to serve as a resource for an Iraqi women's rights centre they will build. Another grant recipient, the Kurdish Human Rights Watch, will work with Iraqi women and other groups to mobilize households to vote. The Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is using their grant to train women to participate in a 'Women Leaders Program' and 'Democracy Information Centre'. The training includes topics on intra- and inter-governmental affairs, democracy building, campaigning and the role of the media[6]—but, significantly, not the role of women and gender in politics. That is perhaps unsurprising in light of the fact that the IWF was established to combat 'radical' feminism and is allied with conservative trends within US politics.[7]

In addition to the Democracy Initiative, the US has also allocated money for other projects targeted at women or which include women as beneficiaries. These include organizing and supporting meetings/conferences that discuss women's participation in politics and/or enhancing women's role in Iraq; supporting the establishment of women's centres around the country that provide vocational/business training, micro-credit and information on legal

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[5] USINFO, "Iraqi Women Receiving Democracy Training Ahead of Elections", 27 September 2004
[6] Ibid.
[7] IWF objectives include: "To counter the dangerous influence of radical feminism in the courts … Educate women on the benefits of the free market and the danger of big government …"

services, amongst other things; support for women's organizations and other groups working on women's issues (grants worth up to $6.5 million).[8]

The US administration is also keen to point out, via the State Department website, that Iraqi women occupy official political positions. The Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), signed in March 2004, stated a 25 per cent goal of female participation in the interim assembly (the Transitional National Assembly)—and indeed women ended up representing more than 30 per cent of the assembly following the January 2005 elections. In addition, the TAL assures equality for all regardless of gender, religion, sect, belief, nationality or origin. The Iraqi cabinet, announced in May 2004, contained six women ministers out of a total of 33.[9] Women are also represented on the Baghdad City Council and neighbourhood and district councils around the capital. [10] However, fewer women serve in the 18 Iraqi provinces and none have been appointed as provincial governor (Hunt and Posa, 2004: 43).

Yet, there are inconsistencies between the US administration's rhetoric on women's empowerment and its actual efforts in the immediate post-invasion period. For example, the urgency of the situation in Iraq led to USAID obtaining a waiver for a gender assessment (USAID rules make a gender assessment mandatory before working in a country). A USAID gender advisor for Iraq was not appointed until August 2004 and, as a result, in the immediate post-invasion period there was no attention paid to making policies gender-sensitive.[11] The gender advisor has been posted to Washington DC and has no counterpart in Baghdad, hindering her work. For those working on the ground, 'gender' has been conceptualised as 'women', and CPA measures targeted at women consisted of channelling money from international donors to women's groups or civil society groups providing services for women through the Office of Women's Affairs in the CPA. The CPA had no gender

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[8] Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, "US Commitment to Women in Iraq", Washington, D.C., 23 September 2004

[9] At the time of writing, a new government was being formed and a new cabinet had not yet been announced.

[10] Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, "US Commitment to Women in Iraq", Washington, D.C., 23 September 2004

[11] UNIFEM, "Gender Profile of the Conflict in Iraq.

strategy (only a stated political commitment to supporting Iraqi women) and no policy for mainstreaming gender.

The issue of increasing women's representation within governance structures was raised and promoted by Iraqi women's groups and diplomatic interventions by the UK's special representative to Iraq and the UK-funded gender advisor in Baghdad. In the beginning, The CPA appointed only three women to the 25-member Iraqi Governing Council (and there are accusations of tokenism in at least one of the appointments). At local levels around the country, the selection of members for municipal and provincial councils was organized by military personnel charged with 'post-conflict' operations. In many cases, they prioritized security over empowering women and "did not want to anger local men" by pushing for women's participation.[12] No women were appointed to the 24-member constitutional drafting committee for the Transitional Administrative Law. Only three women were appointed to the nine-member Independent Electoral Commission—the body responsible for preparing Iraq for elections in January 2005.[13] The CPA declined to support allocation of seats for women in the National Assembly, despite consistent demands by Iraqi women's groups for a 40% quota for women's representation and UK government proposals for a 25% quota, because the US administration did not want to contradict its anti-affirmative action policy. In the end, a 'target' of 25% was included in the interim constitution.[14]

Women have managed to win more than 30% of the seats in the Transitional National Assembly. Nevertheless, this alone will not guarantee women's rights. Women's rights are endangered by the prospects of introducing religious-based family laws. Currently, family law in Iraq is governed by the civil courts and this is perceived as providing women with a relative degree of protection in family matters (compared to many other countries in the Middle East region). Special provisions must be made in the future constitution in order to protect and build on these gains. Yet, the (current) transitional

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[12] Ibid, p. 43; interviews with members of the RTI Local Government and Democratisation Project, Kuwait, May 2004.
[13] UNIFEM, "Gender Profile of the Conflict in Iraq.
[14] Ibid, pp. 43–44; UNIFEM, "Gender Profile of the Conflict in Iraq.

constitution, despite (or because of!) its very liberal nature, does not provide these protections. Whilst guaranteeing equality between men and women, it also states that no law may contravene Islam (Cole and Cole, 2004). Experience in countries such as Egypt demonstrates that such articles may be used to attack women's rights, particularly in those matters pertaining to marriage and divorce, on the grounds of observing religion. Indeed, women's rights have already been threatened by the passing of Resolution 137 at the end of December 2003, which aimed at subjecting personal status matters to religious jurisdiction.[15] The resolution was not signed by Paul Bremer following protests by Iraqi women, and, therefore, did not enter into force. However, the attempt by some Iraqi politicians to make religion more central to Iraqi legislation threatens the rights of women particularly in areas of marriage, divorce and child custody.[16]

The above US policies towards Iraqi women's participation may be criticised for a number of reasons. An approach to improving women's position through promoting their participation in the public sphere may be considered limited in scope in light of feminist critiques of the liberal assumptions about the public/private divide. Women's public participation is not dependent upon acquiring the appropriate skills or upon the existence of legal frameworks guaranteeing formal equality. Public participation is dependent upon women's social position, which, in turn, is shaped by gender relations within the so-called private sphere. This demonstrates the need to pursue policies that target gender (which is a relational concept) rather than targeting merely women.

However, the inconsistency of US policies in terms of promoting women's position and numbers within public affairs, points not only to the US administration's conservatism in this regard but also to assumptions about the role of the US in 'saving Iraqi women'—not from the 'oppression' of Islam, as former colonizing powers once aimed to achieve—but from the barbarities of

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[15] For further details, see, for example, "Press Release: Iraqi women reject decision no. 137 passed by the Iraqi Governing Council on 29/12/2003", 20 January 2004, http://www.occupationwatch.org.
[16] Human Rights Watch, "Interim Constitution Shortchanges Women", 5 March 2004.

Saddam Hussein. The State Department's website includes a good number of statements by various high-ranking government officials (President Bush, former Secretary of State Colin Powell, Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz, Under Secretary of State for Global Affair Paul Dobriansky) that consistently link US commitment to promoting the position of Iraqi women with the liberation of Iraq from the terrifying tyranny of Saddam Hussein—where women were subject to torture in rape chambers and suffered the assassination/disappearance of male relatives.

The gendered discourse that represents women as symbols of a new post-Saddam order and, thereby, justifies US military intervention in Iraq is no more apparent than in an op-ed piece by Paul Wolfowitz (a central figure in US foreign policy making), written following his second visit to post-Saddam Iraq:

> […] Rajaa Khuzai, a 57-year old mother of seven and one of three women on the Iraq Governing Council. In 1991, when Saddam Hussein sent Republican Guards to put down a rebellion in her town of Diwaniya, Khuzai was the only doctor left functioning in her hospital. An obstetrician, she remembers performing more than 20 Caesareans working alone by candlelight. Today Khuzai remains undaunted by the challenges of helping to give birth to freedom in a country that was abused for more than three decades by a regime of murderers and torturers…" (Wolfowitz, 2004).

Policies targeted at Iraqi women constitute an element of a discourse that constructs Iraqi women as symbols of US efforts to create a post-Saddam order. In this way, women's participation is not an end in itself but rather a means to a (US-defined) end. Conversely, US policies and statements concerning Iraqi women have contributed towards making Iraqi women a symbol of the definition of the post-Saddam political order for all political forces within Iraq. This representation, and its implications for gender relations and identities, is examined again later.

The impact of socio-economic conditions on gender relations

Approaches to reconstruction that focus on women's role in the public sphere assume that the only barrier to women's participation is the availability of opportunities and an adequate framework of legal rights. In any society, women's ability to participate outside the home is constrained by what is happening within the home— degree of care-giving responsibilities, of work involved in performing household chores and of support from relatives (particularly, male relatives) for the idea of women participating in the public sphere. The nature of gender relations, roles and identities shapes the nature of women's participation in the public sphere. In the context of Iraq, women are further limited from leaving the home because they feel vulnerable to attack.

Gender relations in Iraq have changed over the years in relation to Iraq's changing political and socio-economic circumstances—themselves a result of national and international factors. The Iraqi women's movement dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century and was active in the struggle against British colonialism. In the post-independence period, the Iraqi women's movement was successful in lobbying to achieve a relatively progressive personal status law compared to other Muslim countries.

Iraqi women's mass participation in the public sphere is associated with the oil boom of the 1970s (after Saddam Hussein came to power). State policies were designed to encourage women's participation in the labour force and to eradicate female illiteracy in order to contribute to state development. University graduates, both men and women, were guaranteed state employment and a large number of women entered professions such as medicine and education. Women's employment was supported by paid maternity leave of up to one year and free crèche facilities. During the war with Iran in the 1980s, women entered the labour force in even greater numbers to take the place of men who were sent to fight or were killed. However, simultaneously, a pro-natalist discourse also encouraged women to give birth to more children to replace the large numbers of soldiers killed.

Since 1991, with the imposition of sanctions, Iraqis in general and the middle classes in particular have experienced a profound deterioration in their living standards and access to employment and education. This has impacted upon women differentially from men. Under sanctions, overall economic conditions declined and infrastructure was not maintained leading to a decline in basic services. Women have borne the brunt of the worsening socio-economic situation as those traditionally responsible for household management and care-giving (Al-Ali, 2003). Moreover, as a result of war, political persecution and male out-migration, many women have found themselves the heads of households. Women have also suffered from the collapse of the welfare state, which guaranteed employment and other benefits (ibid). The number of women turning to prostitution to make a living increased. Meanwhile, women's illiteracy rates climbed as families chose not to send girls to school for economic reasons.

Since the fall of the Ba'th regime, women's socio-economic situation has improved in some respects but not others. On the one hand, incomes in some sectors of the economy, particularly state employment where women are well-represented, have risen and more goods are available and affordable (CSIS, 2004: 45)[17]. CPA economic policies have failed to address the question of structural inequalities within Iraq and, in some cases, have actually exacerbated some inequalities. First of all, employment creation was not a priority of the CPA and unemployment in the post-invasion period has remained high (between 25 and 60%) (CSIS, 2004: 46, 49). Women, elderly people and people with disabilities make up a large portion of the unemployed. Plans to privatize Iraqi public enterprises also threaten to exacerbate unemployment as the public sector workforce is down-sized to make companies more attractive to private buyers. Women, in particular, are disadvantaged by a reduction in public sector employment, since this also entails them losing access to benefits such as workplace crèches.[18]

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[17] It should be noted that this study does not provide disaggregated data based on gender.
[18] Data from Egypt suggests that women state employees are adversely affected by privatisation. See Pratt, September 1997.

Simultaneously, men, and in particular young men whose education suffered under sanctions, are unable to find work and, as a result, become key constituencies for different radical groups, many of whom are violent. For example, Muqtada al-Sadr has managed to mobilise a large number of young men from one of Baghdad's poorest areas—Sadr City.

Women, as those who usually hold primary responsibilities for household management, are also particularly disadvantaged by the slow pace in the rehabilitation of basic services. For example, electricity supply, although up from pre-war levels, is still not meeting demand. One Iraqi woman recounts how sporadic energy supplies impacts upon her daily life:

> On Friday, a day of rest, I get busy as soon as the [electric] current comes on, and sometimes, I even get up at six in the morning to do the wash and vacuum. Sometimes, I've only accomplished half the cleaning when the current is interrupted. If I have the strength, I continue the wash by hand … All that leaves little room for intellectual activities. Reading has become an out-of-place luxury! (Ahmed, 2005)

Women's caring responsibilities are also increased in light of the poor sanitation situation and difficulty of access to healthcare. There has been an increase in water-borne diseases since the fall of Saddam. In certain parts of the country, people are dependent upon polluted water sources (CSIS, 2004: 59–61). Meanwhile, there are criticisms that the US failed to allocate the necessary sums for the rehabilitation of the education and healthcare systems sufficiently early (CSIS, 2004: 77–78). In addition, the actions of both US soldiers and the insurgents has increased the numbers of dead and wounded, thereby increasing demand on the healthcare system.

The lack of security compounds women's burdens. Women find it dangerous to travel to healthcare facilities, to work or even to leave the house to do shopping (CSIS, 2004: 69–75). Violence against women has increased since the immediate post-invasion chaos, when an alarming number of cases of sexual violence and abductions of women and girls were identified in Baghdad

alone.[19] Women are abducted by gangs, raped, beaten and their bodies dumped or they are sold into prostitution. If they manage to survive the ordeal, the stigma attached to rape deters women from coming forward to report cases of sexual violence. They could be killed by their families as a result of the shame they have brought. Moreover, it acts to prevent women from leaving the house alone in fear that they could be accused of bringing this shame on their own families (Elich, 2004). In addition, women in public life have been threatened or killed. For example, Governing Council member 'Aquila al-Hashimi was killed in September 2003 and many women's rights organizations have received death threats.[20]

The poor security situation is the responsibility of the US as an occupying power according to the Geneva Conventions. In the immediate invasion period, a security vacuum opened up because of the de-Baathification policies of the CPA. The existing police force became ineffectual since many senior police officers were removed from their posts and the Iraqi army was completely dissolved. It is argued that the US did not make sufficient plans for establishing a transitional security force to take over in the aftermath of the invasion (Traub, 2004: 32). Recruitment and training for a new police force has been slow and police officers are under-resourced and unable to make an impact on improving general security for ordinary Iraqis (Cordesman, 2004). Meanwhile, those Iraqi soldiers and police who have found themselves without a job due to the de-Baathification policies became potential candidates for recruitment by the insurgents (Diamond, 2004: 11).

Those women who do venture out find themselves under increasing pressure to wear the veil, both to avoid 'inviting rapists' and also to avoid harassment by religious groups. At many universities around the country religious groups monitor girls' clothing to ensure that it is suitably modest (Elich, 2004). The pressures felt by women to behave and dress more modestly are a reflection of an upsurge in religiosity that goes back to the days of Saddam's rule. However, the growth in power of religious groups is very much a product of

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[19] Human Rights Watch, July 2003; Amnesty International, 31 March 2004.
[20] *Feminist Daily News Wire*, 26 March 2004.

the political and social climate of post-Saddam Iraq. US policies have contributed to a climate of social conservatism and an upsurge in the power of religious groups in several ways with disastrous results for gender relations and gender identities in Iraq. The next section will examine these factors.

Women Losing Ground

The most serious long-term impact for women's position within post-Saddam Iraqi society comes as a result of growing social conservatism and increasing communalism. Both these trends are influenced by US reconstruction policies and the response to continuing US occupation. As a result of these trends, gender relations and gender identities are being reshaped in ways that restrict women's freedoms and threaten women's rights.

The rise in social conservatism may be traced back to the 1990s when Iraq was under sanctions. Economic hardship fuelled growing religiosity and social conservatism amongst ordinary Iraqis (Al-Ali, 2003). The growing inability of men to fulfil their traditional roles of providing for their families, coupled with the humiliations of defeat in war and the imposition of sanctions, no doubt impacted upon men's own sense of their masculinity (Belhachmi, 2004: 13) – as, no doubt, did the use of sexual abuse and torture on male political activists and their female relatives. In such situations, men attempt to reassert their masculinity and control over their environment through control of female relatives and even through violence towards them (Belhachmi, 2004: 13).

In addition, Saddam Hussein began to use religious symbols as a means to legitimize his rule. He introduced new laws that supposedly boosted the regime's Islamic credentials, such as the imposition of the death penalty for prostitutes and preventing women from travelling abroad without a male relative. Simultaneously, he promoted and manipulated tribalism as a way of creating a support base for the regime. Tribal leaders began to wield increasing power through the use of customary courts, which provided no protection for women's rights (Tripp, 2000).

To a large extent, these trends have been consolidated by post-invasion measures. It is clear that the US administration perceives Iraqi society in terms of a collection of distinct communities: Sunni, Shi'a, Kurd, Christian, Turkmen, etc. This is reflected in the way that the CPA selected members of the interim Governing Council. Seats were apportioned according to religious/ethnic sect (Alkadiri & Toensing, 2003). Subsequently, sectarianism has largely determined political behaviour in Iraq. Political parties formed in preparation for the January 2005 elections vied for power not on the basis of ideological distinctions but on the basis of sectarian affiliations. Indeed, those groups that failed to get any or almost no seats were those who shunned sectarian politics. Consequently, rules for allocating seats in the National Assembly along proportional lines have created a de facto confessional system.

The communal nature of politics is reflected and perhaps amplified at the local level, where political action is perceived as being more effective (Rangwala, 2005: 172). Actions of coalition forces in the immediate post-invasion period helped to develop this trend. They depended upon 'local leaders' to fill the political vacuum left by the fall of the Ba'th regime and to contribute to the provision of basic services and security. This enabled religious groups and tribal leaders to come to the fore, thereby consolidating their power locally.[21] For example, the US military was forced to rely on the cooperation of the militias of the SCIRI and Dawa (two religious Shi'ite parties, with close links to Iran) in order to defeat the Mahdi army of Muqtada al-Sadr in April 2004 (Diamond, 2004). The growing power of religious groups in Shiite areas has enabled them to ban alcohol sellers, harass women for not covering up and even to introduce the shari'a in some courts (Wong, 2005).

Moreover, political parties root their support in networks of clientalism—in their ability to provide goods and services that are unavailable through other channels to their local support base. Given the high level of unemployment, one important mechanism of patron–client relations has been access to jobs

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[21] Interviews with RTI personnel, Kuwait, May 2004.

via recommendation letters from parties represented on the national level and close to the CPA (Rangwala, 2005: 174-5). In addition, those parties with their own militias (the SCIRI, the Kurdish parties) have been able to provide security in communities where they are based, as well as potential employment for young men. Through the provision of basic goods and services, communally-organised parties have mobilised support not only amongst young, unemployed youth but also amongst women, who see the benefits of the provision of social services and security in their communities.[22]

In other words, the clientalistic networks that existed under Saddam have adapted and have been reproduced in the post-Saddam period, thereby helping to consolidate the power of local tribal, ethnic and religious leaders, to the detriment of gender equality and transparency of political institutions. In situations where communal identities come to the fore, encouraged by the political economy, women and democracy are the losers. Community leaders (whether religious, ethnic or tribal) aim to consolidate political power by promoting a homogenous, community identity that does not allow for or even tolerate internal differences or dissent. This creates pressures to conform, not only making political dissent difficult within the community, but also dissent from socially constructed norms about gender roles and relations.

The power that leaders assert over their communities (however these are constructed) is rooted in their control of 'their' women. Women feel pressures to bear 'the burden of representation' of their communities (Mercer, 1990). This often leads to social restrictions on women's sexuality and their public roles/behaviour. As male sectarian leaders battle it out in the coming months to draw up the Iraqi constitution, it is very likely that women's rights will be sacrificed in the name of political compromise between those who seek a more Islamic state and those who envisage a more secular state.

Simultaneously, the on-going US occupation of Iraq, military attacks against armed militants resisting occupation and the publicizing of abuse in the Abu

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[22] Women for Women International, January 2005.

Ghrayb prison at the hands of US personnel have led to a heightening in anti-US feeling amongst many Iraqis and/or fear to be seen to be cooperating with them. In this context, women's rights become sacrificed in the name of reaffirming national sovereignty against the foreign invader. Women's rights are targeted because they are seen as 'Western' imports—championed by 'Western' politicians (as argued in section 1). It is, therefore, no surprise that women in public life and women's rights organizations have been harassed and threatened by Iraqi political groups and that Iraqi women in general feel pressures to act modestly and dress modestly. In the current climate, women are caught between a rock and a hard place. They bear the burden of symbolising a post-Saddam order—whether that is the order envisaged by the US, by secular male leaders or by religious conservatives. In all cases, the granting of women's rights and the definition of women's roles becomes the object of political struggle, with dire consequences for women themselves.

Conclusion

Rather than contributing to creating a sustainable peace and a process of democratisation, current policies towards Iraq are contributing to creating sources of structural violence and exacerbating conservative politics with negative effects on the nature of gender relations, identities and roles. First of all, allocating money to women's training and conferences to discuss women's rights is insufficient in improving the situation of women in Iraq. Rather, these measures operate to make women symbols of a post-Saddam Iraq and to help justify US intervention there. As a result, women become essentialised as instruments in the construction of a post-Saddam order, with the result that women's bodies become the terrain of struggle between different political forces within post-Saddam Iraq.

Moreover, US reconstruction policies have acted to undermine women's ability to participate in public affairs. The US has been slow to rehabilitate basic services, has not sufficiently invested in education and health, and has not prioritized employment creation. These are all areas that would make a significant impact on the quality of life of all Iraqis and, in particular, of Iraqi women who continue to bear the major burden for the maintenance of the

social well-being of their families. By freeing Iraqi women from some of these burdens through adequate provision of basic services and welfare, this would reduce some of the constraints on Iraqi women's participation in public life. Moreover, the dedication of more resources to employment creation would help to reduce the potential pool of young men without economic opportunities that are being drawn into violent groups (whether those of the insurgency or radical groups such as Muqtada Sadr's Mahdi Army).

The state of lawlessness, coupled with military operations, impacts enormously on women's ability to leave their homes—whether to work, to shop or to seek medical care. Women fear abduction and rape and all the consequences that this would bring in terms of how their families and society would treat them. It is incumbent upon the occupying powers to take responsibility for the security of ordinary Iraqis and to recognise that women are particularly vulnerable to the current 'climate of fear' generated by widespread violence. This 'climate of fear' acts to push women out of the public sphere.

The most alarming trend that we see in Iraq is that of growing social conservatism and the power of communal politics, which has been exacerbated by the policies of the coalition forces. This is clearly an area where gender-blind policies have a detrimental effect on women's lives. The failure of decision-makers to examine the gendered implications of their measures towards various Iraqi political groups leads to a situation in which women's rights and freedoms are being sacrificed for the sake of political and strategic interests. In addition, hostility towards the US occupation and the association of women's rights with Western intervention consolidates the threat against more egalitarian gender relations. Measures to promote women's rights are resisted by some political actors as a means of demonstrating resistance to US political influence.

Despite the bleak picture painted here regarding the potential for women to participate in reconstruction, there are many examples of women organising to improve their position within society. This paper does not seek to deny the

importance and impact of their efforts. Moreover, I do not want to invalidate the opportunities and democratic spaces that have opened up (for women and for men) as a result of the end of the repressive rule of the Ba'athist regime. Yet it does attempt to identify the dangers that are posed to women being able to consolidate these efforts and make gains. Unfortunately, there are many examples from around the world in which women have lost ground in post-conflict situations and political transitions due to the failure of key decision-makers to incorporate a gendered lens into their approaches to reconstruction. The current situation in Iraq signifies that the lessons learned from other post-conflict situations have not been taken on board.

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