Democracy, Gender and Political Reconstruction in Iraq

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Nicola Pratt
School of Political, Social & International Studies
University of East Anglia, UK
N.Pratt@uea.ac.uk

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Introduction

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.\(^1\) 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.\(^2\) Yet, two years after the fall of the Ba’thist regime, there are many questions surrounding the 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; political Islamists target women who are active in public affairs and who do not wear the veil; and women find their rights being negotiated away as part of the US strategy to placate conservative/religious groups in Iraq.

This paper assumes that the consideration of gender is necessary for democratization in Iraq for the major reason that women constitute approximately 55% of the population in Iraq. Therefore, women’s political participation is a necessary pre-requisite for the establishment of a functioning democracy (that is, you cannot claim to establish a democracy where less than half the population are able to fully participate). Nevertheless, I differ from many of the current approaches to promoting women’s participation in political life. It is not sufficient to create programmes that target women only. Neither is it sufficient to create liberal political institutions or to guarantee women’s equality in the public sphere. A whole host of factors pertaining to gender roles, gender identities and gender relations impact upon women’s ability to participate in public life.

This paper evaluates current policies towards reconstruction in Iraq through a gendered lens in order to identify their impact upon gender roles, identities and relations. I will argue that current reconstruction

\(^1\) 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.

\(^2\) For example, 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”, cit. in http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iraq/2004/01/iraq-040109-28015pf.htm.
policies are gender-blind with negative impacts for promoting women’s participation and building a peaceful and democratic Iraq. Indeed, current policies are fuelling gender inequalities and, thereby, contributing to increasing structural violence—the greatest obstacle to democratic transition.

**Women, Gender and Post-conflict Political Transition**

The successful political transition 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”. In other words, violence has structural roots located within the structural inequalities of a society. Post-conflict political transition 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.

Democratization in the form of establishing liberal political institutions may not be sufficient to overcome the structural inequalities that generate violence and, ultimately, block any democratization process. Indeed, cases from around the world, such as Bosnia and Rwanda, demonstrate that the formal institutions of liberal democracy may exacerbate societal cleavages, usually along ethnic lines.

Moreover, studies of Latin America and Eastern Europe demonstrate that transitions to democracy, in terms of the establishment of liberal political institutions, may lead to the exclusion of women from politics.

A focus on promoting more equitable gender relations is essential to democratising the social relations that underpin a democratic polity. Whilst feminist scholars have long identified the links between the private and public spheres, or the realms of social relations and political structures, current approaches to reconstruction address these areas separately. They apparently neglect to make the link between gender relations/roles/identities, social inequalities, violence and political transition.

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Gender plays a significant role in the (re)production of structural violence. Galtung’s concept of ‘structural violence’ has gendered dimensions and implications. Structural inequalities are (re)produced through gender relations, roles and identities and, in turn, may create sites of violence. 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 an income but also as a failure to fulfil their social role as the family breadwinner and, ultimately, as a threat to their masculinity. Consequently, men may become particularly vulnerable to ideologies that promote a militarized masculinity that enjoins them to fight for their homeland and to protect ‘thewomenandchildren’.

On the other hand, gender is central to the (re)creation of social inequalities that may prevent women’s full political participation. For example, a reduction in the level of state welfare provision is usually disproportionately felt by women, whose socially sanctioned roles make them the primary care-givers. Consequently, women may feel obliged to compensate for declining state welfare services by dedicating more time to working within the home, thereby preventing them from finding the time to participate in public. In addition, governments may seek to encourage women to ‘return to the home’ through the promotion of a variety of conservative policies and conservative public discourses endorsing women’s domestic roles, in order to reduce demand for state welfare services.

The gendered reproduction of structural inequalities alerts us to the significance of considering the impact of reconstruction policies in general upon gender relations, roles and identities and, in turn, upon the prospects for democratic transition. 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 and to lay the ground for a democratic transition, it is essential that we examine the links between reconstruction policies, gender and political transition.

A part of the process of understanding the links between reconstruction policies, gender and political transition, is to identify the nature of gender and social relations prior to conflict. Saddam Hussein’s

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7 Cynthia Enloe, Bananas, Beaches and Bases, 1990.
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.\(^8\) 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, including gender, that underpin them. These networks and social relations embody the structural inequalities that are fuelling violence across Iraq—not only the violence of the insurgents against the coalition forces, but also everyday criminality and, in particular, the rising levels of violence against women. The existence of these inequalities and violence constitute a huge obstacle to a democratic transition.

Addressing existing social inequalities, linked to gender relations/roles/identities, should be the objective of reconstruction in Iraq as a means to encouraging a democratic transition, in addition to being a condition for the cessation of the current, widespread violence. This paper examines the gendered impact of current reconstruction policies in order to evaluate their potential for mitigating structural violence and, thereby, providing opportunities for the construction of a peaceful and democratic Iraq.

**The Gendered Impact of Reconstruction in Iraq**

1. ‘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. On the other hand, the US has addressed women and gender concerns in post-Saddam Iraq as an afterthought. From the beginning of US intervention in March 2003, the US has failed to incorporate women in sufficient numbers in reconstruction efforts in post-Saddam Iraq and little attention has been given to the concept of gender in policy-making.\(^9\) Moreover, on crucial issues

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such as guaranteeing women’s representation and protecting women’s rights in the transitional and future constitutions, the administration has demonstrated its conservative approach to the issue of women’s rights. These inconsistencies are not surprising if one interprets US concerns with ‘saving Iraqi women’ as another means of justifying US military intervention in Iraq, rather than a meaningful commitment to the promotion of gender equality.

At the International Donor’s Conference for Iraq in October 2003, the US pledged approximately $18 billion to reconstruction in Iraq (approximately half the total amount pledged by the international community). This money is directed at supporting economic development, training and education, health, water and sanitation, rebuilding infrastructure, local governance, community participation, Iraqi oil sector repairs and law enforcement.10 As of 22 September 2004, just over $1 billion of this pledge had been disbursed, in addition to $1 billion from the previous year’s allocation and $1 billion for the CPA operation costs.11 The security situation has led to many contractors pulling out of work in Iraq, in addition to funds originally ear-marked for infrastructure building being shifted to security.12

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’.13 According to Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky, the initiative is aimed “to help women become full and vibrant partners in Iraq’s developing democracy”.14


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—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.

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

The US administration is also keen to point out, via the State Department website, that Iraqi women occupy political office. The Transitional Administrative Law, signed in March 2004, aims to achieve 25 per cent female participation in the interim government (the Iraqi National Council), as well as assuring equality for all regardless of gender, religion, sect, belief, nationality or origin. A quarter of the members of the Iraqi National Council are women. The Iraqi cabinet, announced in May 2004, contains six women ministers and seven deputy ministers out of a total of 33. Women are also

\[\text{Ibid.}\]

\[\text{IWF objectives include: “To counter the dangerous influence of radical feminism in the courts … Educate women on the benefits of the free market and the danger of big government ….”}, \]

http://www.iwf.org/about_iwf/default.asp.

represented on the Baghdad City Council and neighbourhood and district councils around the capital. However, fewer women serve in the 18 Iraqi provinces and none have been appointed as provincial governor. Yet, it is not due to US administration efforts that women have achieved even this degree of representation. In general, gender concerns were marginalised by the CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority) in the immediate post-invasion period. The body established by the US to run Iraq predominantly consisted of current or retired US military personnel with no training in gender issues. Gender was only incorporated into CPA policy-making and implementation through the Office of Women’s Affairs, which was part of the Governance Team within the CPA. This office appears to have been principally concerned with channelling donor funds to civil society groups providing various services for women. It does not appear that the CPA had a gender strategy or policy for mainstreaming gender, and these issues were mainly promoted through the lobbying efforts of Iraqi women’s groups and the diplomatic interventions of the UK’s special representative to Iraq and the UK-funded gender advisor in Baghdad.

The degree to which women were an afterthought in post-invasion Iraq is demonstrated by the number of women that were incorporated into the transitional political structures. The CPA appointed only three women to the 25-member Iraqi Governing Council, of which only one woman sat on the cabinet (Minister of Public Works Nesreen Berwari). At local levels around the country, elections to municipal councils were organized by military personnel charged with ‘post-conflict’ operations. They prioritized security over empowering women and “did not want to anger local men” by pushing for women’s participation. No women were appointed to the 24-member constitutional drafting committee for the Transitional Administrative Law. Only two women were appointed to the nine-member Independent Electoral Commission—the body responsible for preparing Iraq for elections in January 2005. The CPA declined to support allocation of seats for female members of 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 Bush administration did not want to contradict its

18 Ibid.
20 Ibid, p. 43; interviews with members of the RTI Local Government and Democratisation Project, Kuwait, May 2004.
anti-affirmative action policy. In the end, a ‘target’ of 25% was included in the interim constitution.\textsuperscript{22} At the time of writing, there are no guarantees for women’s participation in the drafting committee for the new constitution.

The achievements in women’s representation are not only less than what was desired by women’s groups. In addition, the transitional constitution, despite (or because of!) its very liberal nature, does not provide adequate protection for women’s rights. Whilst guaranteeing equality between men and women, it also states that no law may contravene Islam.\textsuperscript{23} 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.\textsuperscript{24} 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. These areas are not explicitly protected under the current transitional constitution.\textsuperscript{25}

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 gender relations within the so-called private sphere. This points to 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 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 Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs 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.

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. …”^26

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 in part 3.

2. 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 have 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. 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 for many women. 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.\textsuperscript{27}

On the other hand, US-initiated economic policies contribute to creating structural 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\%).\textsuperscript{28} Plans to privatize Iraqi public enterprises 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 and maternity leave.\textsuperscript{29} 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:

\begin{quote}
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!\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{27} CSIS Post-conflict Reconstruction Project, “Progress or Peril? Measuring Iraq’s Reconstruction”, Washington, D.C.: CSIS, September 2004, p. 45. It should be noted that this study does not provide disaggregated data based on gender.

\textsuperscript{28} CSIS Post-conflict Reconstruction Project, pp. 46, 49.

\textsuperscript{29} Data from Egypt suggests that women state employees are adversely affected by privatisation. See Nicola Pratt, “Legacy of the Corporatist State: Workers’ Responses to Economic Liberalization in Egypt”, unpublished dissertation, University of Exeter, September 1997.

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. Meanwhile, there are criticisms that the US failed to allocate the necessary sums for the rehabilitation of the education and healthcare systems sufficiently early. 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. 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. 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 upon their families. 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. 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.

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.

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32 Ibid, pp. 77–78.

33 Ibid, pp. 69–75.


that US did not make sufficient plans for establishing a transitional security force to take over in the aftermath of the invasion.\textsuperscript{37} 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.\textsuperscript{38} Meanwhile, those Iraqi soldiers and police who have found themselves without a job due to the de-Ba’thification policies became potential candidates for recruitment by the insurgents.\textsuperscript{39}

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.\textsuperscript{40} 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 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.

3. 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.\textsuperscript{41} The growing inability of men to fulfil their traditional roles of providing for their families, coupled with the


\textsuperscript{40} Gregory Elich, “Assault on Iraqi Women”, 28 July 2004, \url{http://www.aljazeera.net}.

humiliations of defeat in war and the imposition of sanctions, no doubt impacted upon men’s own
sense of their masculinity—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.

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.

To a large extent, these trends have been consolidated by post-invasion measures. It is clear that the US
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 US selected members of the interim Governing
Council. Seats were apportioned according to religious/ethnic sect. 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 has created a de facto confessional system, in which ‘Sunni’ representation is minimal.

The communal nature of politics is reflected and perhaps amplified at the local level, where political
action is perceived as being more effective. 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

the Local Governance Program, RTI, March 2004, p. 13

43 Ibid.


45 Raad Alkadiri & Chris Toensing, “The Iraqi Governing Council’s Sectarian Hue”, Middle East

46 Glen Rangwala, ‘Democratic transition and its limitations’, in Alex Danchev & John Macmillan,
locally.\textsuperscript{47} For example, the US military was forced to rely on the cooperation of the SCIRI and Dawa (two religious Shi’ite parties, with close links to Iran) militias in order to defeat the Mahdi army of Muqtada al-Sadr in April.\textsuperscript{48} 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.\textsuperscript{49}

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 via recommendation letters from parties represented on the national level and close to the CPA.\textsuperscript{50}

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.\textsuperscript{51}

In other words, the clientalistic networks that existed under Saddam have been reproduced in the post-Saddam period and have helped 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

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{47} Interviews with RTI personnel, Kuwait, May 2004.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Diamond, “What went wrong”, p. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Rangwala, ‘Democratic transition’, pp. 174–75.
\end{itemize}
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 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 peaceful and democratic Iraq, current reconstruction policies are contributing to creating sources of structural violence with negative effects on the nature of gender relations, identities and roles. First of all, allocating large sums of money to women’s training and conferences to discuss women’s rights is insufficient in and of itself for the purpose of promoting women’s participation in public affairs. Rather, such ‘grand gestures’ become incorporated into US official rhetoric that make women symbols of a post-Saddam Iraq and help to justify US intervention there.

Simultaneously that US statements link Iraqi women to a US strategy to create a new Iraq, US policies with regard to reconstruction act 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

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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 a priority that the general security situation be improved—not by increasing military operations on insurgents but through programmes that address the disarming and demobilisation of all militia groups and the rehabilitation and reintegration of armed men into employment.

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 in the period following the invasion. 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 with regards to interactions between different political groups leads to a situation in which women’s rights and freedoms become 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 heighten the threat against more egalitarian gender relations.

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. In addition, there are many examples of women organizing and participating in politics with a conservative agenda with regards to women’s rights. This paper does not seek to deny the importance and impact of their efforts. Nor does it attempt to pretend that Iraqi women are a homogenous bloc. Yet it does attempt to identify the dangers that are posed to women being able to consolidate their efforts and make gains. Unfortunately, there are many examples from around the world in which women have lost ground in post-conflict/transition situations 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, bringing into question the potential for transition to a peaceful and democratic Iraq.