

Women in the New Iraq

By *Judith Colp Rubin*

Iraqi women once enjoyed more civil and social rights than many of their sisters in other Islamic nations. Ironically, that was thanks in part to the dictator Saddam Hussein, although in the last years of his rule women were among those groups whose rights were eroded. Now that Hussein has been overthrown, Iraqi women are among Iraqi special interest groups seeking rights. Yet women here are not a united force as Islamist women have emerged as a political entity. Meanwhile, women remain disproportionately victims of the violence that has gripped the country.

When Iraq's long-ruling dictator Saddam Hussein was overthrown by U.S. forces in 2003, women were among the special interest groups clamoring to be heard in structuring the new regime and society. In the climate of burgeoning democracy, women started forming nongovernmental organizations--80 of them in Baghdad alone. There were suddenly programs to teach women about computers, political leadership, entrepreneurship, democracy, and the media. There were also handicraft workshops, women's centers offering free legal advice or aid to battered women, and classes in English.

Yet as the new government was being formed it remained to be seen which women's view of Iraq would prevail. Mirroring changes in the rest of Iraq's burgeoning democracy was a struggle between Islamist women versus their secular sisters.

A HUNDRED YEARS OF ACTIVISM

This is not a new struggle in the history of Iraq's women. The idea of women's rights came to Iraq at the start of the twentieth century. It began with promoting girls' education, a step even relatively traditional families had an incentive to support since an educated woman had higher marriage prospects than an uneducated one. An influential booster of girls' education was King Faisal I who bestowed awards on talented female pupils. One recipient was Sabiha al-Shaykh Daud who, in 1922 when she was only eight years old, caused a stir by reciting verses at a poetry festival, clad in a traditional dress without a veil and astride a camel.

Daud's story also shows that girls' education was only to be tolerated so far. When Daud became the first Muslim Iraqi woman to study at Iraq's College of Law she was forced to attend classes in a special box to separate her from the rest of the class. Even so her male classmates greatly ridiculed her.

However, other Iraqi men were the nation's major proponents of women's rights. Iraq's poets took the lead on social issues, including the status of women. Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi, one of the most prominent Iraqi poets, championed education for women and, far more controversially, called for abolishing the veil. "They claim that the veil protects women. They lie because in reality it is calamitous," al-Zahawi wrote. "They claim that unveiling is shameful; wrong! Unveiling is perfect chastity. A veil does not protect woman's chastity; an education does." [1]

Another Iraqi poet who wanted to abolish the veil was Zahawi's professional rival, Ma'ruf al-Rusafi, who bluntly told Iraqi women that the hijab (clothing preserving an Islamic woman's modesty by covering her, especially her head) imprisoned them. Women, he wrote, needed freedom instead.

It was not only men who were writing about women. After the women's literary movement exploded in Egypt it made its way to Iraq. In 1923, a Palestinian immigrant, Paulina Hassoun, published the first women's publication in Iraq, called *Leila*. In one of her early editorials, Hassoun wrote that "The time in which women were treated like playthings or as breeding animals, in which men were considered the absolute masters, doing whatever they liked with their women and children, is over." [2] The magazine, however, only lasted two years, and it took another 13 years for another to be launched.

The same year *Leila* commenced publication, Asma Zahawi, the poet's sister, started the first women's association in Iraq. Known as the Awakening Club, the organization provided classes in such subjects as literacy, hygiene, and child care and also sponsored social welfare projects. It attracted such prominent women as Nuri al-Sayid, wife of the then prime minister. Yet when clerics demanded its name be changed to the more innocent-sounding Women's Club, Zahawi refused to give in, so the club closed.

By the late 1940s, the situation for Iraqi women improved. One of the most prominent poets to emerge was a woman, Nazik al-Mala'ika, herself the daughter of two prominent poets. Her father also edited a 20-volume encyclopedia on Arab grammar but still found time to take over his daughter's education in Arabic after being dismayed by some of her writing errors. He drilled her in the principles of Arabic grammar and classics of literature. At age ten, Mala'ika penned her first poem in Classical Arabic.

While a student at the Higher Teachers' Training College in Baghdad, she published poems in newspapers and magazines. Her breakthrough poem was written in 1947 and dealt with the cholera epidemic that was claiming thousands of lives in Egypt. The poem received attention not only because of its powerful subject but also because of its style. Mala'ika had become one of the first in the region to reject the rigid rules about meter and verse used in Arab poetry in favor of free verse. After earning a scholarship at Princeton University, one of the few women studying at the all-male college, she worked as a university professor in Kuwait and later moved to London.

She also tried to promote the rights of women in Iraq and gave a famous lecture entitled "Women between passivity and positive morality." The title of that lecture indeed described Iraqi women, who were divided between the traditional and the modern. In 1957, a group of Iraqi women who had taken off their veils within the confines of an all-female company in a private home hurriedly put them back on when a man could be seen on a new gadget known as a television set. It took days before they were reassured that they could not be seen by the men on television but considerably longer before many women felt ready to be seen without their veils outside the home.

Yet during this time Iraqi women enjoyed more rights than their sisters in the Islamic world, thanks to the changing political situation. In 1959, the leftist-nationalist government of Abd al-Karim Qasim, a military officer who came to power in a coup, passed a new personal status law that, even by today's standards, was one of the most progressive such laws in the Arab world. It was greatly opposed by the nation's religious and conservative leaders. The law replaced courts that ruled according to Shari'a (Islamic law) with those making decisions on such issues according to state law. The law further set the minimum marriage age to 18, ensured equal inheritance rights for sons and daughters, and prevented men from unilaterally divorcing their wives. It also made polygamy virtually impossible by requiring men seeking a second wife to get judicial permission that was granted only if the judge believed the man could treat both wives equally.

These are measures that are considered progressive today--nearly a half century later--in many Arab countries. When they were passed, some supporters led demonstrations with slogans such as "By the end of the month there will be no dowries," [3] although that proved to be considerably over-optimistic.

Qasim also appointed the first Iraqi female government minister, albeit with a relatively minor portfolio of municipalities. The appointee was Naziha al-Dulaimi, a member of the Communist Party and president of the Iraqi Women's League, which had been founded in 1952. He also appointed the first female judge not just in Iraq but in the entire Middle East. The latter was something particularly unthinkable since under Islam women are explicitly not permitted to be judges. The woman he tapped for the job was Zakiyya Hakki, a member of Iraq's Kurdish minority, who later became the only woman in the leadership of the Kurdish Democratic Party.

Underscoring how progressive Iraq was at the time compared to many other Arab countries, one Iraqi woman recalls the reaction of Libyan officials when the Iraqi Red Crescent delegation, which happened to be all female and were clad in Western clothes, attended a conference in Libya in the 1960s. "We got off the plane and they [the Libyan hosts] said, 'Where is the delegation?....' Because we were all women, they couldn't believe we were the representatives of a country." [4]

However, in 1963 Qasim was ousted from power and soon a new army officer, Abd al-Salam Arif, took power. After an appeal by religious leaders, Arif diluted the new personal status law, reverting to traditional Islamic inheritance laws that greatly favored men.

SADDAM AS FEMINIST/ANTI-FEMINIST

Women's rights seemed once again on track when the Ba'th Party again took power in 1968. Women's equality was enshrined in the 1970 Iraqi Provisional Constitution. In January 1971, Iraq also ratified the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which provide equal protection under international law to all.

In 1979, Saddam Hussein, who had been the power behind-the-scenes for years, fully established himself as Iraq's leader. Although Saddam Hussein was undeniably a despot who terrorized the nation and created a republic of fear for both male and female Iraqis, he also---at least initially---promoted women's rights. He wanted Iraqi women to be educated, to be part of the workforce and political landscape (such as it was under the dictatorship), and to enjoy rights in marriage and divorce; and, of course, whatever Hussein wanted, Hussein got.

The promotion of women's rights fit in with Hussein's interest in building a secular, non-traditional Iraq. Women could be used to help the nation achieve their goal of rapid economic growth. Rather than rely upon foreign labor, Hussein decided to use women to deal with labor shortages.

Incorporated into Hussein's rhetorical flourishes about the great nation of Iraq were flattering references to its women: "The women of our country are the descendants of the immortal Arab women who fought valiantly side-by-side with their men folk, wrote the poetry of chivalry and glory, and participated in the great Arab heritage of civilization." [5]

Hussein, however did more than talk about women's rights. Iraqi women were among the greatest beneficiaries of his widespread literacy programs for all Iraqis. That included mandatory education for children between the ages of six and ten and literacy classes for all Iraqis between the ages of 15 and 45, of which women were a disproportionate number. By the 1990s, the female illiteracy rate in Iraq was among the lowest in the region. Female high-school graduates were encouraged to attend one of the many newly opened colleges and universities, after which they were guaranteed jobs.

Women were further lured to the workplace by promises of equal opportunity, generous maternity benefits, subsidized day care, free transportation, and in some cases, even free housing. That most of the jobs for women were in the civil service made them respectable even for traditional families. By the late 1970s, it was estimated that women made up about 60 percent of the Iraqi civil service.

In 1980, women were part of the nation's oil industry, comprising 37 percent of government oil-project designers and 30 percent of construction supervisors. By 1982, women were 46 percent of teachers, 29 percent of doctors, 46 percent of dentists, 70 percent of pharmacists, 15 percent of accountants, 14 percent of factory workers, and 4 percent of the senior management positions in Iraq.

In 1980, Iraqi women were granted suffrage and the right to run for office. That parliamentary election year, women won 16 out of 250 seats on the National Council. Five years later, women won 33 council seats, representing 13 percent of the total body. However, it should be emphasized that these were strictly party-controlled elections in which only the Ba'th Party ran candidates. By 1984, 13.2 percent of the National Assembly was female.

Women were also given increased benefits in a new personal status law. Compulsory marriage became a punishable crime. A woman could get a divorce if her husband did not fulfill any of the conditions from their marriage contract. Divorced mothers could now get custody of their children until the age of ten (it had previously been seven for boys and nine for girls), and, with court approval, custody could even be extended to the child's fifteenth birthday. The child could then choose with which parent to live.

"Unjustified divorce ought to be condemned everywhere. Polygamy ought to be condemned in every corner of our society," said Saddam Hussein. [6]

Yet, as with so many other things, Hussein was untroubled by an obvious hypocrisy; he himself had two wives. There is also evidence that not all of the personal status law's provisions were enforced.

In 1986, Iraq became one of the first countries to ratify the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Yet like many Muslim countries, when it accepted this document Iraq cited reservations on the basis of Islamic law that diluted some of the legislation's effect. For example, while CEDAW guarantees a woman the right to pass on her own nationality, Iraqi law gives that right only to the father.

Moreover, the general repression of political activity prevented women from freely organizing. Hussein closed the Iraqi Women's League and made the Ba'thist General Federation of Iraqi Women the only women's organization allowed to function. By 1997, some 47 percent of all women in Iraq reportedly belonged to this organization, although other sources put the figure as lower.

By 1998, the Federation had 21 branches and ran some 250 rural and urban community centers offering job training, education, and other social programs for women. It also helped promote women in public office and initiated the changes in the personal status law. One of its most important functions was educating women about their legal rights through a radio and television campaign, and it even focused on abolishing gender stereotypes in education. A U.S. reporter who visited Iraq in 1999 was told by a federation member that after they discovered that the cover of a children's textbook showed a boy holding a pen and notebook and a girl carrying a doll, they contacted the publisher and asked that the cover be changed. Presumably, it was. The reporter was also told of how federation members run workshops for elementary school teachers to train them how to teach housekeeping and cooking classes to both boys and girls and run sports events for girls, many of which were televised. Broadcasting images of female athletes wearing shorts and swimsuits is considered nothing short of scandalous in many other parts of the Arab world. [7]

Iraq's eight-year war with Iran initially provided another boost to women's rights before creating a major backlash against them. After the war started in 1980, women were needed to join the labor force in even greater numbers as men were going off to the battlefield. In a program known as the "National Campaign to Increase Women's Participation in the Economic Development Process," women were trained to work as gas station attendants, bus conductors, and even in the army as doctors and engineers.

However, the toll the war took on Iraq was the beginning of changed circumstances for Iraqi women. In the last years of the war, women were fired from these jobs as their places were needed for returning soldiers. Women were encouraged to focus on becoming mothers who should produce at least five children as the nation needed a population boost to take on the much more populous Iran.

Yet the Iran-Iraq War was only the start of Iraq's problems. In 1991, Saddam Hussein recklessly invaded Kuwait, only retreating after he was defeated by an international coalition. Following the war, the United Nations imposed trade sanctions against Iraq, leading to an economic crisis in the country. Women were among the primary victims.

For example, indigent families kept girls at home rather than send them to school. As unemployment rose further, women were the first to lose their jobs. In 1998, the government fired all female secretaries in governmental agencies.

During this time, too, there was an increased religious atmosphere in Iraq. "When you have a problem, you need to go nearer to God," said Imam Majid, director of women's medicine at Baghdad Teaching Hospital, who began wearing a hijab in 1999. "Many of us have had many problems now, and many of us have lost someone to death. We have changed over these wars." [8]

These economic hard times also set off another wave of veiling for another reason. "When gray hair comes out, many women cannot afford to dye it. I know so many women who cover for that reason," said Wassan al-Souz, a longtime women's activist. [9]

Nevertheless, as with everything else in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, major changes always occurred primarily because of the man at the top. By then, greatly unpopular because of the national crisis, Hussein (once the great secularist) began supporting Islamic and tribal traditions. He passed a series of laws aimed at pleasing Muslim clerics, such as a 1993 decree that allowed Iraqi men to marry a second and third wife without the consent of the first wife. Another law forbade Iraqi women from marrying foreigners. In 2000, women were no longer allowed to travel abroad unless accompanied by a male relative.

In 1990, a presidential decree reduced prison sentences from eight years to a maximum six months for men who pleaded family honor as a reason for killing their female relatives. Not surprisingly, honor killings greatly increased in Iraq, claiming the lives of 4,000 women between 1991 and 2001. [10]

Even more pernicious, however, was the authorities' deliberate targeting of women. Rape of a suspected man's wife or sister was used as a way to obtain information by the police. Some Iraqi security officials openly carried professional cards that listed "violation of women's honor" as one of their duties.

Many crimes against women were committed by Hussein's oldest son, Uday, who was notorious for his enormous sexual appetite and ruthlessness. There were many stories of Uday raping and physically assaulting Iraqi women, even young teenagers and brides during their own weddings. Naturally, he was immune to punishment.

Uday also headed a paramilitary group charged with dealing with prostitution--which Saddam had banned and made punishable by death. Women anywhere could be accused and found guilty of that crime, although their real misdeed was often being themselves or a relative to someone considered to be an enemy of the regime or refusing to have sexual relations with a Ba'th official.

In front of their family and neighbors, these women would be taken away from their home, stretched out on an iron bench in the center of their village, and decapitated. Their heads would then be displayed publicly outside their family home for several hours. After the execution, the killers would fire shots of celebration. From June 2000 to April 2001, at least 130 women, some as young as age 12, were accused of being prostitutes and beheaded; human rights experts believe the number is much higher.

Those women who were put in jail were subject to great brutality such as being raped or hung by their feet while they were menstruating so that they were "poisoned by the infection generated by their own blood," recalls Affra al-Barak, who said she was put in jail after she spoke with a man authorities considered to be suspicious. [11]

Some Iraqi women were able to fight back. Women participated in the 1991 Kurdish uprising. When from 1991 to 2003 an Iraqi Kurdish area functioned as an autonomous area under international protection, women became members of the Kurdistan Regional Government and were also able to form women's organizations.

On the other hand, there were Iraqi women who participated in the system. In the last years of Saddam Hussein's rule, Huda Salih Mahdi Ammash was the highest-ranking woman in the government and the only woman in the 18-member Iraq Command that ran the Ba'th Party. Her rise in power was due to her expertise. Ammash was dubbed "Mrs. Anthrax" for having been instrumental in rebuilding Iraq's biological weapons program in the mid-1990s after the Gulf War. She took on this role even after her own father---a member of the Ba'th Party leadership and former vice president and defense minister---was killed in 1983, reportedly under Hussein's orders.

Born in 1953, Ammash studied microbiology in Texas and then obtained a doctorate in the subject from the University of Missouri-Columbia. She returned to Iraq to train with Nasir al-Hindawi, who had started Iraq's biological weapons program. She became a dean at the University of Baghdad and head of Iraq's Microbiology Society, where research was being done on biological weapons. However, she may also have paid a major personal price for her work, as she is believed to have contracted breast cancer as a result of working with depleted uranium.

After the United States invaded Iraq in March 2003, Ammash had the dubious distinction of being the sole woman on the U.S. list of the 55 most wanted Iraqi leaders. She appeared, clad in a military jacket, in the last footage released of the most prominent members of the Iraqi government and was arrested by U.S. forces in May 2003.

The U.S. authorities also abolished the General Federation of Iraqi Women because of its close association with the Ba'th Party. The Iraq Women's League, which Saddam Hussein had closed, was reopened. Many other organizations dealing with women's issues were created.

"Women pushed to be active. They didn't get anyone's permission, they just did it," said Eleana Gordon, senior vice president of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, which has supported women's activists in Iraq. [12]

Nonetheless, women soon complained that their organizations did not receive local government funding and were only receiving money from abroad. Women also felt that they were being excluded from the political scene.

At the first leadership meeting in Nasiriyah after the ouster of Saddam Hussein, there were only four women among the 123 people in attendance. At a second gathering of 250 future Iraqi leaders held in Baghdad on April 2003, there were only six women. During the 2003 local elections in Baghdad, leaflets warned women not to participate, according to Salwa Ali, an adviser on human rights issues for the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority. When she went to the polling station, the men there told her to go home; they would make sure to take care of women's concerns.

However, three women were included in the 12-member Iraqi Governing Council, chosen in July 2003 by the U.S. administration in Iraq. One of them, Raja Khuzay, an obstetrician and hospital director, described how the male members looked away when the female members spoke and held important votes only after the women had left the room. When Khuzay submitted a report to the Council about the problems of poorly paid doctors, she could not persuade most of the male members to read what she wrote.

"It is very frustrating," she later told a group of U.S. legislators. "We're pretty much ignored." [13]

Yet the 50-something mother of seven was used to managing under extreme circumstances. In 1991, during the first Persian Gulf War, she was made the first female hospital director in Iraq, in charge of a maternity hospital in Diwaniyyah. After the U.S.-led Coalition liberated Kuwait, there was a rebellion against Hussein's regime in Diwaniyyah that was quickly put down by the Republican Guard.

When the city was bombarded, Khuzay was the only doctor left at the hospital. She had to work alone, with no electricity, to help women give birth. She performed 22 Cesarean sections by candlelight.

"At that time, I was alone in the [operating] theater," she recalled. "Now, we are many." [14]

Two months after the Governing Council was formed, one of the three female appointees became a victim of the terrorism that was becoming rampant in Iraq. Aqila al-Hashimi, who had served as a diplomat under the Hussein regime, was murdered. Khuzay and her colleague, Songul Chapuk, an engineer and ethnic Turkmen from Kirkuk, were incensed when Hashimi's replacement was named while they were away at a World Bank conference on women's issues. Their male colleagues had voted to appoint a conservative Shi'a woman, Salama al-Khafaji, in what a former U.S. ambassador and women's activist Swanee Hunt termed "clearly a railroading." [15]

RESOLUTION 137

Indeed, al-Khafaji was far from the mold of a women's activist. She proved this when she supported Resolution 137, which called for canceling Iraq's existing family laws and instituting Shari'a law in its place. Shi'a clerics on the governing council used a closed-door meeting to push through the resolution that called for religious courts to determine inheritance, marriage, and divorce. Women's activists said that under the law, women would not be allowed to leave their houses without asking permission from their husbands, custody of children would be given to men after divorce, and men would be free to take multiple wives.

"This new law will send Iraqi families back to the Middle Ages," said Zakiyya Hakki, the first Iraqi woman appointed a judge who had become an advisor to the Minister of Justice. [16]

Zainab al-Suwajj, an Iraqi-American women's activist, added, "We would have been in a worse situation than the women of Afghanistan before the American occupation." [17]

Women's activists worked hard to organize opposition to the agreement, to which they objected both on its merits and due to the way that it had been pushed through in secrecy. The fervent opposition to Resolution 137 made the proposed legislation a "blessing in disguise," said Nasreen Berwari, who later became minister of municipalities and public works.

Its passage motivated Iraqi women to organize and demonstrate, and successfully represent themselves.... The retraction brought Iraqi women together for a common cause. Cooperation and organization crossed religious and ethnic lines--Shia, Sunni, Christian, Arab, Kurd, Assyrian, Turkoman. [18]

The women succeeded. U.S. authorities stepped in to ensure the measure was scrapped, a move which women's activists hope could be repeated in the future should similar measures be passed.

However, in July 2003 the United States felt it could not side with women's activists when there was a dispute about the appointment of a female judge in Najaf, a holy Shi'a city. Although there are five female judges in Baghdad, some in Najaf were appalled by the appointment by U.S. authorities of Nidal Nasir Husayn, the city's first female lawyer as its first female judge. When Lt. Col. Christopher C. Conlin, the senior military official in charge of Najaf, showed up for Husayn's swearing-in ceremony, he was met with a small party complete with a decorated cake and a group of protestors, including some female lawyers, shouting, "No, No Women!" [19]

The cake might have been cut and the appointment completed if Conlin had not been presented with three fatwas (religious edicts) against female judges, one signed by the influential Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the other by the militia leader Muqtada al-Sadr, whose late father and namesake was a revered Shi'a cleric. An argument ensued with opponents saying that the appointment went against Islamic law since women, because they were easily swayed by emotions, were not mentally fit to be judges.

"I have an angry crowd, and there are indications that some of the senior clerics have some serious issues," Conlin told Nidal Nasir Husayn. "It is my goal to make you a judge, but I need to do better research." [20] Pleaded Nidal Nasir Husayn: "There were demonstrations against the first elementary schools for women, too, but everything needs a beginning. Don't just talk to the people who are shouting, talk to sensible people." [21] Yet Conlin indefinitely postponed the appointment.

In September 2003, only one woman--Berwari--was appointed to the 25-member provisional cabinet appointed by the Governing Council. Berwari was named minister of municipalities and public works. In June 2004, she was among six women named to the 30-member transitional cabinet (the others had the posts of agriculture, environment, displacement and migration, labor and social affairs, and women's affairs) and in April 2005 was named permanently to that post. As the top Iraqi official in charge of water treatment, waste management, environmental sanitation, and municipal facilities, al-Berwari was one of the most important figures in the Iraqi civil administration. She herself is a fascinating contradiction.

Born in Baghdad in 1967 to a Kurdish family, by age 14 Berwari was already a political prisoner as she sought autonomy for her people. She obtained a Bachelor of Science in architectural engineering at the University of Baghdad in 1991 just before the failed Kurdish uprising caused her to leave the country. Yet she returned after a safe haven was created in Northern Iraq to work for the United Nations, eventually becoming head of its Center for Human Settlements field office in 1997. She obtained a Master's degree in public administration at Harvard University after which the Kurdistan Regional Government appointed her minister of reconstruction and development, one of two women among 20 ministers.

Yet in 2004 Berwari shocked many women's rights activists when she married Ghazi al-Yawar, an assembly member and former interim president. The marriage made headlines, not only because al-Yawar was a Sunni but also because he had two other wives.

"This marriage has degraded Kurdish ladies, showing one of our most educated and leading figures being opportunistic. By accepting a fat Arab sheikh for position and fame at the cost of her values and the values of other females in Iraq," wrote one Kurdish newspaper commentator. [22]

Responding to the charges of hypocrisy, Berwari points out that Iraqi women comprise more than 55 percent of the population due to the deaths of many men in wars, making multiple marriages more of a necessity. [23]

ISLAMIST WOMEN

What was acceptable to most Iraqi women was revealed in a poll taken on January 30, 2005, in which slightly more women (37 percent) than men (31 percent) said they

avored a more openly Islamic government in Iraq.

These results were borne out after the first parliamentary election to the provisional assembly in January 2005. Eighty-nine women, 31 percent of the total, were elected to parliament, thanks to a rule that every third position on electoral lists must have a woman's name. However, more than half of those elected were from the conservative Shi'a United Iraqi Alliance, which won the election with just over half the seats. Some women's activists suggested that the imposition of quotas for female candidates may have worked against them because the Shi'a parties stacked the list with women who would blindly support the party's agenda.

The woman who emerged as the new leading female politician in Iraq, Salama al-Khafaji, did not seem like a woman who would blindly follow anything. She is the daughter of a carpenter, although her parents greatly valued learning and encouraged their daughter to become a doctor. They, however, were not religious, and it was al-Khafaji who decided at age 15 to wear a hijab and later the abaya. She became a dentist and spent her spare time pursuing her interest in Islam. That led her to study with a prominent Shi'a cleric, Shaykh Fatih Kashif Ghita, who was teaching at the main Shi'a religious school in Najaf. Ghita taught a women's-only class on the same subjects he taught men, but with one difference: He taught his classes from behind a screen and never saw his students' faces. It was not only a question of modesty. Ghita was also protecting his students so that if he were arrested he would not divulge their names. In fact, in 1998, the Shi'a cleric was arrested. His mother took over his women's classes and during prison visits received scraps of paper from her son with recommended readings.

Al-Khafaji's first political involvement was as a member of the executive committee of the Dentists Union. Yet as a Shi'a woman with some political experience, al-Khafaji was tapped by the Islamic Da'wa party to replace a slain Shi'a woman on the Iraqi Governing Council.

"I did not plan on entering politics, but after the American invasion, I realized that the voice of the majority of Iraqi women--who are religious and not returning exiles--was not being heard," said al-Khafaji. "I wanted that voice to be heard." [24]

Her supporters say that because she was the only council member chosen by her fellow politicians and not appointed by U.S. officials she had more credibility than the other members. Before taking the appointment, the pious al-Khafaji requested and received permission from a senior group of Shi'a clerics.

Al-Khafaji's credibility with her supporters was strengthened after she denounced the U.S. siege of the Sunni city of Fallujah and a crackdown on the supporters of Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. In April and May of 2005, with the aid of Ghita and other Shi'a clerics, she helped pressure Sadr into accepting a ceasefire.

Still, in Iraq's new terrorist atmosphere she had her enemies. On May 27, 2005, the car in which she was driving was attacked, and although al-Khafaji was unharmed, her son and a bodyguard were killed.

"I remember the day of the attack, I thought of Sayyidah Zainab, the heroine of Karbala," she says. "After she saw many deaths, she kept taking care of the children. She was a very great inspiration for me. She did not cry in front of the others. She only cried when she was alone." [25]

The attack only increased her popularity. In a poll conducted a month later by the International Republican Institute, she was ranked as the most popular female leader in the country and the eleventh most popular among both male and female politicians. The phrase "technocrat in a headscarf" was used to describe her.

During the elections, al-Khafaji dropped the idea of starting her own list and became number 30 on the list of the United Iraqi Alliance. Soon after that decision, there were two more terrorist attacks against al-Khafaji, one of which resulted in her husband being wounded. His wife's insistence on continuing her campaign was too much for her husband, who had long been displeased with his wife's busy career. After presenting her an ultimatum to choose between the marriage and her career, she chose the latter.

"Destroying a family is very hard," she said. "If you are divorced, you will be criticized. It's something seen very negatively in our society." [26] At the same time, she believed she had a duty to remain in public office:

I have Islamic ideas on justice, but I am moderate. I have optimism. I can speak with people who are liberal and with those who are from the Islamic party.... If I leave, other women may not come and take so burdensome a job... so leaving the job to stay at home, cleaning the shoes, cleaning the clothes, mopping the floor, that was not something I wanted, or felt I could do.

She contends that Islamic law protects her better as a divorced woman than secular law and that polygamy is necessary in a society filled with fatherless households. "We speak about what is really happening in our community," she says, "not for bringing in extremist, liberal ideas." [27]

Still, other Iraqi female parliament members disagree. "We should think about fixing these gaps, not going backward," said Azhar Ramadan Rahim, a Kurdish assembly member from Baghdad. "I am a Muslim too, and Shiite, but rules written 1,400 years ago cannot be applied now." [28]

In the drafting of the permanent constitution, these two views of women's rights clashed. Although there were no women on the committee to draft the interim constitution, the new committee had eight women, five from the Shi'a United Iraqi Alliance, two Kurds, and one independent--Raja Khuzay.

The schism between the female members of parliament was perfectly illustrated in an incident described by a New York Times reporter. In April 2005, around 40 female parliamentarians clad in Western-style business suits met with newly designated Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Ja'fari and presented a list of demands. They wanted the constitution to guarantee that women would be placed in at least ten of Iraq's 30 government ministries and would make up 40 percent of the members of Iraq's parliament, and they wanted a statement indicating that respect for women's rights would be guaranteed. [29]

Not long after the group had left, Ja'fari greeted a second group of female parliamentarians. These women were clad in black abayas and wanted to make sure that Shari'a law became part of Iraq's legal code, which would give men the right to take multiple wives and would see that women received half the inheritance of men.

It could be said that the view of both sides prevailed during the drafting of the constitution in late 2005. The equality of men and women is enshrined in the new constitution, and there is a quota for women in parliament, although it is 25 percent, not the 40 percent women's activists had hoped for. However, the constitution allows Iraqis to choose whether they will follow secular law or Shari'a law in family matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Unclear is how the law will address differences between a husband and a wife or a father and a daughter over which law to follow.

Women's activists were also disappointed by an article that did not make it into the final draft in which the mother would be permitted to pass citizenship on to her children rather than only giving the father that right, which is dictated by Islamic law. Its passage would have made Iraq one of the few countries in the region (along with Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt) to have such a measure.

In the December 2005 parliamentary elections, the number of women elected fell short of the goal of 25 percent because there were many small parties that won less than three seats. Yet the fact that women comprise about 19 percent of the seats is still impressive, certainly in the Middle East and even compared to many Western countries.

Ironically, it was the conservative Shi'a-led United Iraqi Alliance that gave the greatest percentage of its seats to women--23 percent--while the more liberal Kurdish Alliance only gave 17 percent of its seats to women; and one Sunni Arab list, the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue, had no women among its 11 parliamentarians.

In May 2006, Iraq's new government was formed, and four women were among the 39 cabinet ministers given the portfolios of housing and construction, the environment, human rights, and women's affairs--not one of them a major post. Also, there were two fewer women than had been in the previous cabinet.

Among the new female ministers, two were Kurds, one was a Sunni representing the Accord Party, and the third was from a secular party, Iraqiyyah. One of the two Kurds was Environmental Minister Narmin Othman, whose uncle and brother-in-law were executed under the Hussein regime and whose husband was also imprisoned and tortured. She had seen democracy first-hand while living in exile in Sweden from 1984 to 1992. She and her family returned to the newly formed independent Iraqi Kurdistan Region, and as a former high school teacher, she became minister of education. She had been minister of women's affairs in the interim government.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Othman, like many other prominent Iraqi women, escaped several assassination attempts. Other women were not so lucky. These included Amal Mamalchi, who worked at the Iraqi Ministry of Public Works and was a prominent member of the Iraqi Women's Network, an umbrella organization for 80 Iraqi groups; another victim was parliamentarian Lamia Abed Khadouri al-Sagri, a member of the Iraqi List party.

Other women were targeted because they were not considered sufficiently Islamic. Zina al-Qushtayni was a divorced mother who owned a pharmacy and was known as "Lady Zeena" because of her preference for flamboyant Western clothes and friendships with female activists and members of the U.S. forces. After being abducted, her dead body was found dressed in a full-length black abaya and headscarf soaked in blood. A film was later released of her murder at the hands of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al-Qa'ida's leader in Iraq.

In March 2006, it was estimated that 2,000 Iraqi women had been kidnapped since the collapse of the Hussein regime. Human Rights Watch reported that at least 400 women and girls, some as young as eight years old, had been raped during this period, although they believe the figure is likely higher.

In one account, Dalal S., a 23-year-old woman, said she was walking with her mother and relatives to a social event when about six armed men abducted her from a crowded Baghdad street and drove off with her in their car. She was taken to a farm outside the city. One of the terrorists told her that he was a former prisoner who had been sentenced to 80 years' imprisonment but had been given amnesty by Saddam Hussein in October 2002. She recalled

When they took me, at first they said it was because someone wanted to marry me but my parents hadn't consented, then another said I looked like his sister-in-law, who had caused him big problems.... The third one said that it was because I was wearing trousers. He said, "Why are you wearing trousers, the American soldiers are looking at you." But really, they just wanted to deceive me, to take what they wanted.... They wanted to kidnap anyone, they had [it in] their mind to take four girls waiting for a taxi, I think they wanted to rape them, but they couldn't take them so they took me instead.

It is highly likely that she was raped.[30] Many women were harassed for not adhering to what was considered a proper Islamic dress code. Acts of violence against Iraqi women who do not wear headscarves more than tripled in the three years since the U.S. invasion, according to the Women's Rights Association in Iraq. Some government ministries set a religious dress code for female employees. Other Iraqi women said they were warned by individuals in their neighborhoods to dress properly.

One of the results of the violence was that school attendance plummeted, with only 50 percent of children--especially fewer girls--going to school, as fearful parents cited the very real threats of kidnapping or rape. Other women stopped working for the same reason. Of no assistance with such cases was the Iraqi police force, which had received no training on sexual abuse of women or was at best indifferent and sometimes hostile to victims. Even the few new Iraqi female security forces could not escape sexual harassment. One woman training for the Iraqi police filed a complaint against a male superior for punching her in the face but was ignored. Major Huda Angham said she was fired for complaining about the condition of women in the force.

"A woman in my team was kidnapped and we have heard nothing more about her," said Angham. "Another was shot and our leaders have not done anything for us, even though we have paid the same price as our male colleagues through attacks by insurgents." [31]

The violence against women was not only perpetrated by strangers. From 2003 to 2006, there were 80 attacks and four "honor killings" by family members, compared to 22 attacks and one death in the previous four years.[32]

There was also an increase in cases of female genital mutilation. Sixty percent of some 1,554 Iraqi women and girls over ten years old interviewed by a German charitable local medical team said they had had the operation. Girls under the age of 15, even as young as 12 years old, were forced into marriage.

Iraqi women who are Shi'a are also victims of so-called "temporary" marriages, known as Mut'a, a custom among Shi'a Muslims, which had been banned under the Hussein regime. Some 300 such marriages occur daily in Kerbala, Najaf, and Basra. Under such unions, an unmarried Shi'a woman temporarily marries a man--he can be married or unmarried--for a period ranging from a few hours to an entire lifetime in return for a payment, usually about \$1,000. Men may also have several Mut'a arrangements simultaneously. Some women have turned to such marriages as a way out of poverty. The marriage, however, has risks. After the temporary marriage dissolves, the woman can end up pregnant with no right to seek support and is often branded as a prostitute.

One woman who experienced intimately all the threats of violence was Yanar Muhammad, an Iraqi who returned from exile in Canada to found the Organization of Women's Freedom. After going on television to speak out against the proposed change in the personal status law she received a blunt email: "Stop speaking out for women's rights, or we will kill you." [33]

"They said, because of my psychologically disturbed ideas, they would have to kill me and crucify me," Muhammad recalled. "It sounded to me like a serious warning." [34]

Muhammad began wearing a bulletproof vest and canceling all appearances; then she stopped. "After the war, groups from Iran and Saudi Arabia have funding to come in and teach these ideas that women's rights are less than men, that they can be harassed on the street," she said. "I'm living with fear every day, but I cannot wear a bullet-proof vest any more." [35]

It is largely because of such violence that many members of NGOs dealing with women's rights concluded that they were better off under the regime of Saddam Hussein, according to a survey put out by Muhammad's organization. "The results show that women are less respected now than they were under the previous regime, while their freedom has been curtailed," said Mohammed.[36]

Not surprisingly, however, given how divided Iraq is on women's issues, other women's activists vehemently disagree with the reports' findings. They say such findings

were published by "radical, feminist anti-war groups,"[37] as A.Yasmine Rassam, who runs international policy at the Independent Women's Forum, puts it.

"Much of the anti-war propagandists' defense of Saddam as a champion of women's rights rests on his willingness to allow women to vote (for him), drive cars, own property, get an education and work," writes Rassam. "What they choose to ignore, however, is the systematic rapes, torture, beheadings, honor killings, forced fertility programs, and declining literacy rates that also characterized Saddam's regime..... A brutal dictator who tortures his own people cannot be a champion of women's rights." [38]

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