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Regendering Iraq: State Feminism, Imperial Feminism, and Women's Rights Under Sanctions

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The rhetoric of women's rights has long been appropriated by men to justify their right to continue to hold power. In the imperial context of the United States, women in the Middle East are often portrayed as unilaterally oppressed, typically by Islamic principles, with the hijab and niqab as symbols of this oppression. Particularly in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, this rhetoric has become a common thread in American society; in 2004, Bush stated that "every woman in Iraq is better off because the rape rooms and torture chambers of Saddam Hussein are forever closed."[1] There has been a great deal of scholarly work since 2003 that challenges the notion that the invasion of Iraq served to liberate Iraqi women, but it is also worth analyzing the claims by the U.S. government that Saddam was inherently anti-woman or that the Ba'th government policy towards women was one of active oppression. The Ba'th regime did indeed make tangible moves towards more egalitarian gender relations in Iraqi society, particularly in education and the workforce. But the Ba'th also created a violent security state that tortured and executed anyone suspected of opposing the regime (particularly communist opposition) and in no way discriminated between men and women. Both the Ba'thi state and U.S. imperial forces used the rhetoric of liberation of women broadly defined, ignoring that the population of Iraqi women varied dramatically in their experiences of state and imperial violence. These two seemingly oppositional forces both fail to address the specific realities for Iraqi women in different contexts and the forces that created and exacerbated violence against women. One such force was the international sanctions placed on Iraq from August 1990 - May 2003, on which there has been little analysis relating specifically to women's experiences. This essay analyzes the impacts of international sanctions on Iraqi women with regard to social and economic position and political

[1]Edward Chen and Maura Reynolds, "Bush Says War on Terror Led to Women's Freedom," *The Los Angeles Times,* March 13, 2004.

participation, as well as the way sanctions shaped both Ba'thi and U.S. rhetoric. I argue that these sanctions effectively undermined the movement for Iraqi women's liberation firstly by creating a more immediate economic concern to divert public attention from women's oppression, and secondly by actively undoing the legal strides that had been made towards gender equity since 1968.

In discussing women's rights in Iraq, it is critical to define the framework for this analysis. Chandra Mohanty writes of imperial feminist scholarship in which "the discursively consensual homogeneity of 'women' as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of groups of women."[2] This homogeneity, she continues, is regularly used to prove that if one group of women is oppressed, then all women everywhere are oppressed. This essay, then, attempts to avoid this failure, recognizing that one population of women may be disadvantaged by policies and dynamics that benefit other women. This is true both between the women of different cultures and nation states, and within the population of Iraqi women specifically. Class, ethnicity, religion, and political party factors all create layers to the experience of Iraqi women under sanctions. As much as space and research materials allow, I will attempt to incorporate an intersectional analysis that constructs Iraqi women as having agency, and not as passive victims of the regime, Iraqi men, or American imperialism. With this in mind, the primary works that this essay draws on are case studies that highlight the specificities of Iraqi women's experiences under sanctions through their own voices.

The physical toll of sanctions on the Iraqi population has been understood for many years. Madeleine Albright infamously stated in 1996 that she believed that the deaths of half a

[2]Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader,* ed. Bill Ashcroft, (London: Routledge, 2011), 244.

million Iraqi children under sanctions were "worth it."[3] Given the horrific impact on the lives of all Iraqis, there has been little analysis of the ways in which sanctions impacted women specifically. The effects of sanctions on women were certainly related to the shifting economic reality for men; for example, while there were few jobs available for anyone, those jobs that did arise were more likely to be taken by men. Women were discouraged from working both by changing social dynamics and by the elimination of government programs that had allowed women to work in the public sphere. Socially, the role of women became "*umm bait muhtarama*, the respectable housewife;" this is contrasted with images and rhetoric from the 1970s and 80s celebrating women workers, including Saddam's speech in 1975 condemning the "bourgeois ideology which assumes that the first and last role of women is in the home."[4] Additionally, while men without work often found jobs peddling food or driving taxis, these jobs were typically considered unacceptable for women.[5] On a national level, women were encouraged to resign or retire early and resignation was incentivized by the termination of government programs providing free childcare and public transportation. Women had been the primary recipients of the welfare state more broadly, and so were most affected by its collapse.[6] With the collapse of the welfare state, along with an erosion of extended family and neighborhood networks, women were increasingly required to care for their own children and thus were unable to work in the public sphere. The sanctions reduced economic opportunities for everyone, but the

[3]Rahul Mahajan, "We Think the Price is Worth It," *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting.* November 2011.

[4]Nadje al-Ali, *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present,* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 189; Saddam Hussein, *The Revolution and Women in Iraq,* (London: The Malvern Press, 1978), 10.

[5]Yasmin al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq: The Gender Impact of International Sanctions*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008), 37.

[6]al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 188; Nadje al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender: Iraqi Women Between Dictatorship, War, Sanctions, and Occupation," *Third World Quarterly,* 26, no. 4-5 (2008), 747.

state and society worked to shift the loss of work onto women so as to preserve the opportunities for men, particularly by reducing state support for women workers.

Iraqi women also experienced a decline in educational opportunities during sanctions. Prior to sanctions, Iraq's education system was very advanced; education was mandatory from ages 6-12 for all children, and education was free at all levels. The regime also made major efforts to make education accessible for people of all socioeconomic backgrounds, and by 1990, female enrollment in secondary school increased to 38.5%.[7] Women's education was a key part of the state feminist rhetoric. In a 1971 speech, Saddam said "what a crime it would be against the younger generation if women were deprived of their rights to freedom, education, and full participation in… the community."[8] Indeed, women's education has also been documented as improving fertility and reducing overall child mortality rates.[9] However, under sanctions, female education declined sharply. By 2000, illiteracy rates among Iraqi women were at 71% for females age 15-24. Though primary education remained mandatory, statistics show that over 1.5 million Iraqi girls eligible for primary school were not enrolled in the 2000-2001 school year. Female enrollment in secondary school dropped to 29%, lower than it had been in the 1970s.[10] It is important to illustrate the class dynamics in this educational crisis. Though strides had been made to eliminate socioeconomic barriers to education in previous decades, much of this was reversed under sanctions. And although education remained technically free, certain school supplies were no longer covered and many families were unable to pay.[11] Additionally, many young women were expected to make money for their families in the informal economy (often

[7]al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq,* 58,61.
[8]Hussein, *Revolution and Women*, 7.
[9]al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq,* 75.
[10]Ibid, 60, 61.
[11]Ibid.

through begging, theft, or sex work) and did not have time to attend school. Those that were able to attend school experienced increasingly unmaintained school facilities and increasingly underpaid teachers. The Iraqi blogger Riverbend wrote that science classes in the universities suffered because their materials were banned under the sanctions, and many textbooks were impossible to get as well.[12] Whatever efforts had been made to make education accessible to all genders and classes were effectively reversed under sanctions.

The family structure of Iraqi society and the role of women in the family were impacted not only by declining employment and educational opportunities, but also by the medical impacts of sanctions, including the deaths of children. This was particularly pronounced for lower class families, who were more likely to experience child mortality.[13] However, women's family role began to change significantly even prior to the imposition of international sanctions, during the Iran-Iraq war when the government outlawed contraceptives and emphasized the role of women in reproducing the Iraqi population to compensate for the massive death toll of the war. This ban on family planning continued into the sanctions period, but while women were still encouraged to have many children, there was a greater reluctance to have children for the fear that children would die or that they would be unable to feed them. Additionally, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, and the rise in economic migration of men created a large number of female-headed households, in Basra as high as 60%.[14] As women were being encouraged to have more children, they were also increasingly the sole providers for these children in an economy where they were discouraged from working. Family dynamics also experienced a shift away from

[12]al-Ali, *Iraqi Women,* 192; Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq,* (New York: Feminist Press, 2005), 132.

[13]al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender," 746.

[14]al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq,* 22; al-Ali, *Iraqi Women,* 198-199.

broader family networks and towards the importance of the nuclear family.[15] Here it is important to address that, though the nuclear family holds a particular importance in Western modernization, it should not be viewed as such in the Iraqi context. Indeed, in Iraq, the shift away from extended networks may have led to more oppressive patriarchal relations. Yasmin Al-Jawaheri argues that women who lacked support from both the state and a broad family network under sanctions were further subordinated because they developed "high dependency ratio on a single male provider."[16]

Given the importance of support from a male provider for many women, marriage became increasingly important for young Iraqi women under sanctions, at the same time as it became harder to find a husband due to the gender imbalance in Iraq following the Iran-Iraq war. Hamdiya, a woman interviewed by al-Ali, stated that, whereas it had once been considered taboo to not get married or to enter a polygamous marriage, "among my generation, there are many women who either did not get married… or became the second wife of someone."[17] She also noted that many women married older expatriates. Polygamous marriages, which had been sharply reduced and condemned by the regime in previous eras, were revived in the 1990s. In a 1976 address to the General Federation of Iraqi Women, Saddam had stated the importance of "strengthening and expanding the conditions which prohibit polygamy."[18] And yet under sanctions, polygamous marriages increased dramatically, largely out of economic necessity. The desirability of a husband was no longer based on love and family reputation, but instead based almost entirely on whether he could provide for his wife. As such, class dynamics of marriage also shifted. Increasingly, middle-class women from important families who had suffered under

[15]Ibid.
[16]al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq,* 97.
[17]al-Ali, *Iraqi Women,* 196.
[18]Hussein, *Revolution and Women*, 29.

sanctions came to marry nouveau riche sanctions profiteers, primarily Oil-for-Food contractors and oil smugglers, despite the fact that marriage below one's family status had previously been very uncommon.[19] This indicates that money came to surpass family name in determining social status. However, the limited number of husbands who could provide economic protection also meant that many lower class women were either not able to marry as middle class women were, or were not able to use marriage as a source of economic protection.

Under sanctions, Iraq also saw a revival of "honor killings" and domestic violence. Economic crisis and war have been well documented as key contributors to gender-based violence. The revival of "honor killings" in Iraq occurred not only on a popular level under sanctions but was also supported by state legalization. In 1990, Saddam issued a decree granting immunity to men accused of committing honor crimes (i.e. crimes against women suspected of having violated codes of social conduct.)[20] Though this ruling was appealed two months later, this law seems to have somewhat legitimated honor crimes, as the UN tracked an increase in honor crimes during the 1990s compared to previous decades. It is unclear why this law was passed, though al-Jawaheri suggests that it was a tactic to gain the support of conservative tribal and religious leaders in preparation for the invasion of Kuwait.[21] The desire by the regime to acquire the loyalty of tribal leaders continued during the sanctions period, and men who killed female relatives for the purpose of preserving family honor were regularly acquitted.[22] The legal system clearly came to increasingly favor those who committed honor crimes rather than the victims of these crimes.

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[19]al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq,* 53; al-Ali, *Iraqi Women,* 197.
[20]Ibid, 202.
[21]al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq,* 113.
[22]al-Ali, *Iraqi Women,* 209.

Related to the rise in honor crimes was the increased violence against those engaging in prostitution. This coincided with a rise in prostitution given the limited opportunities for women to make money under sanctions. Iraq saw, for the first time, the development of luxury brothels, the patrons of which were primarily sanctions profiteers and members of the regime. Sex work quickly became a critical source of income to many women.[23] Given its complicity in the sex work sector, the regime initially supported, or at least failed to interfere in the rising industry. However, beginning in 2000, the regime reportedly beheaded more than 300 people accused of engaging in or facilitating sex work. There is a general consensus among historians that this attack on sex workers, like the legalization of honor crimes, was an effort by the regime to gain the favor of tribal and religious leaders in a period of increased social conservatism under sanctions.[24] The sanctions contributed to both a rise in prostitution as a means of economic survival and a rise in social conservatism which punished women, violently, for acts of survival.

In tracing gender-based violence, it is further important to highlight the differential impacts based on women's class status. Nadje al-Ali writes that "for educated, middle-class women from urban areas, it was not so much honour crimes they feared as diminished marriage prospects."[25] It should be noted that violence against sex workers and women accused of violating honor codes impacted working-class women far more than middle or upper class women, in part because these women were more likely to be driven to sex work as a means of survival. Additionally, marriage was increasingly a means of economic and social protection, but it was deeply based in class dynamics and many middle-class women struggled to find husbands, making the marriage prospects for lower-class women even smaller. Violence against women in

[23]al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq,* 114.
[24]Ibid 115; al-Ali, *Iraqi Women,* 200-201.
[25]Ibid, 202.

the name of social conservatism most often impacted working-class women, who were also the greatest victims of sanctions more broadly.

Honor killings were also particularly pronounced in Iraqi Kurdistan, and it is worth noting the particularity of the experience of Kurdish women under sanctions. The sanctions era in Kurdistan has been described as "double embargo" because of the impacts of both international sanctions and the refusal of the Iraqi central government to assist the Kurds, but Kurdistan also experienced a much higher rate of international aid than the rest of Iraq.[26] Additionally, the establishment of Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) allowed some regional autonomy, though this has done little to mediate Kurdish women's liberation. Though there have been many women's rights groups created in Kurdistan since the early 1990s, these groups depend on the KDP and PUK for their continued existence. Because these groups represent a wide range of perspectives on women's rights, the KRG has made little headway in terms of improving the position of Kurdish women. One Kurdish activist fighting against honor killings in the 1990s stated that "both political parties, the PUK and the KDP, gave us a hard time. They really harassed us."[27] In relation to honor killings, the specific language of "honor" was removed from Kurdish law in 2002, but Kurdish women's rights activists still report that these crimes go largely unpunished.[28] Because Kurdistan operated under a semi-autonomous legal structure, the development of legal rights for women is different than in the rest of Iraq, but the sanctions period disadvantaged women in this region as well. Indeed, following the creation of the KRG and establishment of Kurdistan as a "safe haven," Kurdish women saw an increase in instances

[26]Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?: Women and the Occupation of Iraq,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 50.

[27]al-Ali, *Iraqi Women,* 207.

[28]Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, "Conspiracy of Near Silence: Violence Against Iraqi Women," *Middle East Report,* no. 258 (2011): 36.

of domestic violence.[29] It is worth noting that, while honor killings and other gender based violence increased during the sanctions period, they increased even further after the 2003 invasion. In the sanctions period, the Iraqi government was actively allowing these crimes in order to maintain loyalty ties with tribal and religious leaders. In the post-invasion period, the increased sectarianization of rule (by U.S. occupation forces) and decentralization of power left tribal and religious leaders with greater control, further contributing to violence against women.

Yet another critical impact of sanctions was on the political participation of Iraqi women. In this realm, it is critical to note that women's political participation, like that of all Iraqi citizens, was severely limited throughout the Ba'th era because Iraq was a one-party state. Information on the political participation of women outside the Ba'th party (e.g. women in the Communist Party) is therefore limited because these groups were forced to hide their operations from the regime. However, the role of women in the Ba'th party was a key point of Ba'thi rhetoric, and the General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW) was the key state mechanism for mobilizing women. The GFIW, a prime example of state co-optation of feminist struggles, was, of course, only open to Ba'thi women, but it was also a critical source of income for many women prior to sanctions. One employee, Soha, told al-Jawaheri that her salary was $320 USD per month prior to sanctions. However, during sanctions, her salary dropped to $3.50 USD and, as she said, "'now' there are a few women who gain from being employees here, while the rest get nothing."[30] The GFIW saw not a unilateral loss of benefits, but rather an increased stratification between the top ranking members and the larger base of employees. These leading members of the GFIW were, as al-Ali puts it "themselves part of oppressive political and social

[29]al-Ali, *Iraqi Women,* 207.
[30]al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq,* 49.

structures."[31] The women who had used the GFIW to mobilize for legitimate social change were severely disadvantaged under sanctions.

As is clear in the legalization of certain forms of violence against women, as well as the disincentivization of women joining the workforce, the regime played an active role in disadvantaging women and reversing legal progress made prior to the sanctions period. However, the regime also clearly denied culpability for women's oppression, as is evident in the 1998 report to the UN on Iraq's progress on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This report, written by the regime, makes repeated reference to the sanctions, but uses the sanctions to justify why previous advancements for women were revoked. With regards to women in the workforce, the report states that "the difficult economic conditions created by the comprehensive embargo have also forced large numbers of Iraqi women to… devote themselves to domestic work."[32] This, of course, ignores that the regime was actively promoting the domestic role of women and removing social programs to encourage women's work. In reference to childcare for women workers, which had previously been free, the report notes that the number of facilities actually increased from 1987-1996, but ignores that the programs for subsidized childcare had ended under sanctions. The CEDAW report also claims, with regards to women's political participation, that "any diminution in the role of women is due to the embargo and to their preoccupation with shouldering the burdens of the household."[33] This claim is clearly disingenuous given that the majority of women in the GFIW suffered economically while a select few profited under sanctions. The frequent mention of the sanctions in the report indicates the regime's frustration

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[31]al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 53.

[32]"Second and Third Periodic Reports of Iraq on the Implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women," (United Nations Report, 1998), 8.

[33]Ibid, 9.

with the continued imposition of sanctions by the UN. But the sanctions were also clearly used as an excuse to pass off blame for the deteriorating position of Iraqi women to the international community, while the regime played an active role in reversing gender equity measures.

Just as the regime refused to accept responsibility for the damage done to women's rights, so did the U.S. refuse to consider the gendered impact of sanctions. One of the U.S. government's many disingenuous justifications for the 2003 invasion of Iraq was bringing "new rights and new hopes" to the women of Iraq.[34] Setting aside the fact that the 2003 invasion had devastating effects on the entire Iraqi population, women included, and that it deepened many of the existing economic and social problems faced by Iraqi women, many of the losses in legal rights for Iraqi women were a direct result of sanctions imposed by the UN and maintained by the U.S. The U.S. government was well aware of the cost of sanctions on the Iraqi population, particularly the number of lives lost. And yet U.S. officials insisted for years, against the consensus of the UN, that sanctions would not be lifted unless Saddam was removed from power. In 1997, Albright, then Secretary of State, said "We do not agree with those nations who argue that if Iraq complies with its obligations concerning weapons of mass destruction, sanctions should be lifted," despite the fact that the sanctions were specifically imposed to enforce the decommissioning of weapons of mass destruction.[35] Though the regime initially cooperated with UNSCOM inspections, U.S. policy continued to hold Iraqi people hostage as a bargaining tool for regime change, a bargain which failed to motivate a dictator to sacrifice his own power. Iraqi women suffered as a direct result of these prolonged sanctions, and then their position was used to justify further imperialist ventures in 2003. For all the rhetoric of women's

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[34]al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?,* 1.

[35]Madeleine Albright, Lecture at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 26 March 1997, quoted in Stephen Zunes "The US Obsession with Iraq and the Triumph of Militarism," in *Iraq: The Human Cost of History,* ed. Tareq Y. Ismael and William W. Haddad, (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2004), 180.

liberation, women were almost entirely absent from the provisional government following the 2003 invasion and an increasingly tribalized legal system contributed to the further subordination of women's rights.[36]

Both the Iraqi regime and the U.S. government denied their role in the reduction of rights for Iraqi women by passing off blame on the other party, a tactic applied not only in the conversation about women but more generally in the blame for the terrible cost of sanctions. While no party was willing to accept responsibility, women were being pushed out of the workforce, becoming increasingly dependent on husbands or male relatives, being encouraged to have children they could not support economically, experiencing drastic increases in gender-based violence, and losing the economic benefits they had once been able to gain from party loyalty. Sanctions are often promoted as a better, non-violent alternative to war. But in the Iraqi case it is clear that sanctions, especially such tight and prolonged sanctions, were effectively a form of violence against the Iraqi people. Furthermore, the people who experience this economic violence most intensely are the most marginalized and dependent groups, including women, lower class people, and children, who, in Iraq and many other cases, were already victimized by the regime the sanctions purported to attack. In the U.S., the history of sanctions against Iraq has been almost totally erased from collective memory by the 2003 invasion, which certainly exacerbated much of the existing devastation that occurred in Iraq since 1990 at the hands of the U.S. government. But it is critical to recognize sanctions as a form of imperialist policy and to recognize the violence of prolonged sanctions; we must be critical of the use of sanctions as an alternative to war in past and future international conflicts.

[36]Noga Efrati, *Women in Iraq: Past Meets Present,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) 166.

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