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**“We Know We Are Forgotten”:
Re-Centering Women in the Study of Economic Sanctions on Iraq, 1990-2003**

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Western Washington University Honors Capstone

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March 2020

Introduction: The Myth of Liberation

On March 12, 2004, almost exactly a year after the formal beginning of the U.S. war on Iraq and during International Women's Week, George W. Bush gave a speech championing the so-called "liberation" of 25 million Iraqi and Afghani women. He emphasized the importance of promoting democracy in the Middle East so that women may be able to "take their rightful place in societies that were once incredibly oppressive and closed."¹ That a foreign invasion resulting in two of the longest wars in U.S. history qualifies as "liberation" for women is obviously questionable, and that the U.S. project in the war on terror was driven by a desire to promote "democracy" should be suspect to anyone who has seen photographs of Abu Ghraib. Moreover, feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty has argued that universal claims about the oppression of Third World women serve to write those women "outside history."² In this essay I focus on the conditions for women in pre-invasion Iraq in an attempt to historicize the specific relationships of women to the state, the family, and other institutions shaping their lived realities. I seek to both portray the diversity of Iraqi women's experiences and to emphasize their agency, rather than situating them as passive victims of the Iraqi regime, U.S. imperialism, or international policy. Refuting Bush's ahistorical conception of Iraq as an "oppressive and closed" society for women, I examine the complex reality for Iraqi women under the United Nations policy of comprehensive economic sanctions, enforced on Iraq largely due to U.S. pressure, from 1990-2003.

The sanctions on Iraq were broad reaching and were strengthened in 1991. The effect of these sanctions was compounded by the fact that U.S. invading forces during the Gulf War of

¹ "President, Mrs. Bush Mark Progress in Global Women's Human Rights," accessed October 14, 2019, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/03/20040312-5.html>.

² Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review*, no. 30 (1988): 70.

1990-1991 had bombed sanitation and water facilities across the country. This created a terrible public health crisis because the sanctions' economic effect made it impossible to rebuild these facilities. Sanctions killed thousands of Iraqis and caused widespread poverty and malnutrition. Particularly devastating were the statistics on child mortality; in 1996 it was reported that half a million Iraqi children had died as a result of sanctions policy. Though this number was later estimated to be closer to 350,000 from 1990-2000, this impact was still tragic and deeply harmful. The under-5 mortality rate rose from 56 per 1000 births to 131 per 1000 births during the sanctions era.³ Beyond just the death toll, sanctions devastated the Iraqi economy and day to day life of almost all Iraqis.

The pre-sanctions relationship of the Iraqi state to women was complex. Prior to the imposition of sanctions and under the Ba'athi government a number of legislative changes transitioned women from a private to a public social and economic role and limited the control of male family members over women, but these laws also increased the patriarchal control of the state itself over women.⁴ The Ba'ath 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. However, when we discuss the conditions of Iraqi women in the pre-invasion era, a nuanced analysis requires far more than blaming the Iraqi state. It is necessary to analyze the sanctions era to understand the changes in both legal and social dynamics for Iraqi women in the decade before the U.S. invasion of 2003.

³ Mohamed M. Ali and Iqbal H Shah, "Sanctions and Childhood Mortality in Iraq," *The Lancet* 355, no. 9218 (May 27, 2000): 1851; Richard Garfield, "Morbidity and Mortality among Iraqi Children," (report, Columbia University, 1999), 35.

⁴ Yasmin Husein Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq: The Gender Impact of International Sanctions* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 28.

This essay analyzes the broad ranging impacts of international sanctions on Iraqi women and gender relations. In this study, the changes in women's positions will be analyzed across the following categories: education, employment, family relations, marriage, violence against women, and political participation. These categories of change are explored with the understanding that the experiences of Iraqi women under sanctions varied massively based on a variety of class, ethnic, and religious considerations. By analyzing sanctions primarily through the lens of gender analysis, with attention to other compounding factors in the understanding of women's oppression, I make two arguments. Firstly, I argue that the comprehensive economic sanctions imposed on Iraq should not be viewed as a nonviolent alternative to war, but rather as a deeply violent act that continuously harmed the country's most marginalized populations, in this case women. Secondly, I argue that these sanctions effectively undermined the movement for Iraqi women's liberation not only by creating a more immediate economic concern to divert public attention from women's oppression, but by actively reversing the general social transition towards gender equity since 1968.

Literature Review: A Gender Critique of Sanctions in Development

A gender analysis of the sanctions on Iraq is a critical addition to the new and developing scholarship on sanctions and should be understood within the imperialist relationship of the United States to Iraq. Scholarly works on sanctions and on gender in Iraq have had very little overlap. Though there exists a great deal of work on the harmful effects of sanctions, these works typically focus more broadly and lack gender analysis. Conversely, the feminist and gender-focused writing on Iraq and imperial violence tends to focus on the impacts of war and not on the sanctions era. Though there is a growing body of work on the experience of Iraqi women during

the 2003 Iraq war, and even a sizeable amount of scholarship on the experience of being a woman soldier during the Iraq war, there is notably almost no scholarship specifically on the gendered experience of sanctions in Iraq. Research on the violence of sanctions on marginalized populations beyond Iraq is also expanding, but the work that does exist has potential to inform our understanding of Iraqi sanctions. The most important works on which this paper draws are case studies and oral histories that highlight the specificities of Iraqi women's experiences under sanctions through their own voices. These sources are critical to developing a feminist understanding of sanctions.

There are three primary scholars doing deep work to develop a gendered impact of sanctions in Iraq. In general, research on Iraq is highly limited because of the dangerous conditions in the country and the destruction of so many archives since the 2003 invasion. As such, much of the secondary analysis I have been able to draw on is from one author, Nadjé al-Ali, and her sometimes co-author, Nicola Pratt. Al-Ali's 2007 book *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* focuses on the period between British colonialism in Iraq and the U.S. occupation, arguing that the experience of women in the post-invasion era cannot be understood without the vast historical context of developing gender relations. Her study is conducted through personal narratives and oral histories of women who experienced the changes in Iraq firsthand. Chapter five, "Living With War and Sanctions," focuses on the experience of women during the sanctions, and argues that the sanctions not only had specific, gendered effects, but that "women and gender ideologies and relations were ... at the centre of social and cultural change during this period."⁵ This analysis is brief and could certainly be further developed.

⁵ Nadjé Sadig Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (London ; New York: Zed Books, 2007), 175.

Al-Ali has also written several articles in relation to this topic, two of which are additional sources for this paper. “Reconstructing Gender: Iraqi Women Between Dictatorship, War, Sanctions, and Occupation,” written in 2008, discusses the development of gender relations and the discourse on women in the Iraqi nation-building process under Saddam Hussein. Her primary focus is the long-term trajectory of gender relations in Iraqi politics and society. This piece provides important historical context and focuses more specifically on the Iraqi state’s relationship to women as part of the nation. Though it provides less focus on sanctions directly, it helps illuminate the development of state rhetoric and action with regard to women’s rights and thus the effect of sanctions on state policy.

Al-Ali and Pratt’s 2009 book *What Kind of Liberation?: Women and the Occupation of Iraq*, and their 2011 article “Conspiracy of Near Silence: Violence Against Iraqi Women,” though excellent contributions to scholarship, focus on post-invasion Iraq, dealing less directly with the experience of women under sanctions, and so are not as relevant to this study. What they add is important perspective on the experience of Iraqi Kurdish women under sanctions, and the specificities of Kurdish governance and standing in the eyes of the international community, imperialist powers, and Iraqi government that contribute to violence against women. Al-Ali’s work has built a multifaceted gender analysis of sanctions that is situated in Iraqi and Ba’thi history, but that also carries forward the impacts of sanctions on women to paint a more complex picture of the particular struggles of women in post-invasion Iraq.

The other major scholarship on gender and sanctions in Iraq that must be discussed, and in fact the only full-length book on the topic, is the 2008 book *Women in Iraq: The Gender Impacts of International Sanctions*, by Yasmin Al-Jawaheri. Al-Jawaheri’s work is a vast study that combines statistical analysis with a comprehensive process of survey, interview, and case

studies of women from various class, family, and educational backgrounds in Baghdad. Through this work, Al-Jawaheri argues that, despite the fact that Iraqi laws regarding women's rights stayed relatively static during the sanctions era, the sanctions contributed to a reversal of the social gains for women, in large part due to the state's failure to enforce the laws guaranteeing women's participation in education and the work force.⁶ Though this work is perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of women's rights under sanctions, its geographic scope is limited to Baghdad, likely as a result of the difficulty of conducting research across Iraq. Not only does it lack a perspective on the experience of rural women and women in other regions, but it is missing any analysis on the experience of women in Iraqi Kurdistan, a semi-autonomous region with its own unique history under sanctions that is critical to understanding the broader experience of "Iraqi women."

Though the research specifically directed towards Iraq is limited, it is critical to situate the experience of Iraqi women in the international context. A. Cooper Drury and Dursun Peksen have written a cross-national study of the gendered effects of coercive economic sanctions which concludes that "sanctions are detrimental to women's rights" because sanctions reduce respect for women's rights, as quantified in the study.⁷ They analyze respect with regard to women's economic, social, and political status. The authors suggest that the unintended consequences of policy can be best understood by looking at the policy's effect on the country's most vulnerable groups.⁸ This study is a broad analysis of sanctions' effect on women; my research complements

⁶ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 140.

⁷ A. Cooper Drury and Dursun Peksen, "Women and Economic Statecraft: The Negative Impact International Economic Sanctions Visit on Women," *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 2 (June 2014): 463, 483.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 484.

this broad study by proposing specific ways in which women experience this loss of status in the context of sanctions on Iraq.

Other cross-national studies of sanctions with a focus on human rights and other marginalized populations also inform this study. Research by Peksen on the human rights consequences of sanctions and by Zhike Lv and Ting Zu on ethnic violence increases as a result of sanctions provide two important insights. Firstly, these studies illustrate that the experience of women under sanctions is not unique but rather part of the broader violence of sanctions against marginalized populations. Secondly, they are critical for understanding the intersecting experiences of women and sanctions; the Lv and Zu study is particularly important for understanding the multiple violences experienced by Kurdish, Assyrian, and other ethnic minority women.

Ultimately, this field of scholarship is continually expanding, though the existing work in the field has been strong. This paper agrees with much of the work by Al-Ali, Pratt, and Al-Jawaheri, but also aims to situate the conversation about the gendered impacts of sanctions in Iraq in a broader conversation about the catastrophic violence of the sanctions on Iraq, and the critique of international sanctions as a form of economic violence, as opposed to a non-violent alternative to war.

Sanctioning Iraq: A History of Violence

In their recent article, “Violence on Iraqi Bodies: Decolonising Economic Sanctions in Security Studies,” Mariam Georgis and Riva Gewarges, two Iraqi Assyrian women who survived sanctions while living in Baghdad, argue that understanding the violence of sanctions

necessitates decentering the state and focusing on the experience of the Iraqi people.⁹ By portraying Saddam Hussein as a security threat to U.S. civilians, the consequences of sanctions become justified; it is only by othering Iraqi bodies that the violence of sanctions can be written off as a price worth paying.¹⁰ Crucially, they also view the imposition of sanctions as an extension of colonial violence on the Global South. This article goes hand-in-hand with recent transnational data-analyses on sanctions in relation to human rights; research shows that sanctions, particularly comprehensive sanctions rather than partial sanctions, worsens human rights abuses related to “physical integrity,” defined as freedom from extralegal killing, torture, disappearance, etc., ethnic violence, and respect for women’s rights.¹¹ Georgis and Gewarges’s framework for understanding sanctions is an important part of the process of rehumanizing Iraqis in the discussion of sanctions, a precursor to understanding the gender violence of sanctions. Here I will present a brief overview of the sanctions program and the structural flaws that contributed to its violence.

The sanctions against Iraq began in August of 1990 and continued until May 22, 2003, after Saddam Hussein had been overthrown by the U.S. invading forces. Initially, the sanctions were put in place with the goal of forcing Iraq out of Kuwait, though this goal was quickly achieved by the use of military force during the first Gulf War. The sanctions, however, were not lifted. Instead, they were reframed with the goal of forcing the Iraqi government’s compliance with ongoing UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) inspections to ensure that the government was not harboring chemical weapons in the wake of the Anfal genocide, a series of attacks on

⁹ Mariam Georgis and Riva Gewarges, “Violence on Iraqi Bodies: Decolonising Economic Sanctions in Security Studies,” *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (February 1, 2019): 320.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 327.

¹¹ Dursun Peksen, “Better or Worse? The Effect of Economic Sanctions on Human Rights,” *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 1 (January 2009): 59; Drury and Peksen, “Women and Economic Statecraft,” 483; Zhike Lv and Ting Xu, “The Effect of Economic Sanctions on Ethnic Violence of Target States: A Panel Data Analysis,” *The Social Science Journal* 54, no. 1 (March 2017): 105

Iraqi Kurdistan from 1986-1989 which killed up to 182,000 Iraqi Kurds and several thousand Assyrians. However, many researchers, political activists, and government officials have acknowledged that the U.S. approach towards sanctions was focused on the end of the Saddam Hussein regime rather than the weapons inspections. At least at the beginning of sanctions, the idea that the sanctions would remain as long as Saddam was in power was openly discussed.¹² But even after it became clear that Saddam would not quickly give up his power, U.S. officials maintained the importance of Saddam's downfall as a precursor to lifting sanctions, despite the severe impacts of sanctions on the Iraqi population. Estimates of child mortality rates initially suggested that more than half a million Iraqi children were killed by sanctions by 1996. Recently, more conservative estimates have suggested that this number is closer to 350,000 from 1990-2000, but the under-five mortality rate did increase from 56 per 1000 births to 131 per 1000 births under sanctions.¹³ In general, access to health and food resources in Iraq were fatally low for much of the population. By the mid-1990s, it was no longer possible to ignore the deadly impacts of sanctions on the Iraqi population. In 1995, the UN established the Oil for Food Program (OFF) in an attempt to mitigate the impacts of sanctions on the Iraqi public. This program enabled Iraq to sell oil in exchange for food, medicine, and other humanitarian needs. However, this program was severely limited by corruption and allocation issues. Yasmin Al-Jawaheri has written that, in part because of their control of OFF implementation, "Saddam Hussein and his henchmen, over more than thirteen years of sanctions, grew obscenely rich as a

¹² Sarah Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam: The Politics of Intervention in Iraq* (London ; New York : IBTauris in association with MERIP ; distributed by StMartin's Press, 1999), 62.

¹³ Ali and Shah, "Sanctions and Childhood Mortality in Iraq," 1851; David Cortright, "A Hard Look at Iraq Sanctions," *The Nation*, November 15, 2001. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/hard-look-iraq-sanctions/>

direct result of sanctions that were meant to punish them.”¹⁴ This wealth was also generated through smuggling of oil and hoarding of what little resources Iraq still had.

A contributing factor to OFF’s failures to mitigate the public health crisis was the separation of funds between Iraqi Kurdistan and the remaining regions of Iraq. Kurdistan received a disproportionate share of the funds per capita and the money to pay for OFF’s bureaucratic operations came only out of the Central and South budget. Purchases for Kurdistan also had to be prepaid out of the Central and South budget, with exceptionally long reimbursement periods.¹⁵ Though it is true that Kurdistan had been disadvantaged for years under the Ba‘th regime and that Kurdistan faced particular difficulty with the high number of internally displaced peoples, Kurdistan also experienced a remarkably high influx of aid and NGO support. This aid influx was not entirely effective, but the misallocation of resources meant that OFF did little to stop the humanitarian crisis in South and Central Iraq.

Even if OFF had functioned entirely as intended, it would not have fully compensated for the economic and humanitarian crisis impacts of sanctions. Dennis Halliday, former UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq, alleged that OFF “was never intended to actually resolve the humanitarian crisis,” but merely served to stop it from worsening.¹⁶ He was highly critical of the bureaucratic processes behind approving OFF purchases, which he saw as highly politicized to serve the interests of the U.S. and U.K. Hans von Sponeck, who took over Halliday’s position after he resigned in protest of the sanctions, was also highly critical of the OFF program on many

¹⁴ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 5-6.

¹⁵ Von Sponeck, *A Different Kind of War*, 18-19.

¹⁶ Phyllis Bennis and Denis J. Halliday, interviewed by David Barsamian, “Iraq: The Impact of Sanctions and US Policy,” in *Iraq Under Siege: The Deadly Impact of Sanctions and War*, ed. Anthony Arnove (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 36.

fronts, from the inadequacy of the budget to begin rebuilding the devastated water and sanitation infrastructure, to the failure to designate a specific fund for education.

From the mid-1990s onward, the sanctions continued to be enforced despite the clear human rights impacts, and the blame for the humanitarian crisis was placed entirely onto the Iraqi state. Additionally, the U.S. continued to push for sanctions to remain until Saddam was removed from office. In 1997, Madeleine Albright, the 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.¹⁷ Hans von Sponeck said that various officials under both the Clinton and George H.W. Bush governments made absolutely clear that the sanctions would remain as long as Saddam did, a policy formalized by Congress in 1998. Von Sponeck argues that this hard line policy made the Iraqi government less cooperative with the UN.¹⁸ 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.

There were those within both the UN and the U.S. government who felt the long-term enforcement of these sanctions was inhumane. Questions were raised, even fairly early on in the sanctions period, about the effectiveness of U.S. enforcement of sanctions against Saddam and the toll it was taking on the Iraqi people. In 1991, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State David Mack said in an interview that he believed the U.S. government had underestimated both the

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Hans-Christof Sponeck, *A Different Kind of War: The UN Sanctions Regime in Iraq* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 266.

ability of the Iraqi government to survive sanctions economically and “the degree to which the regime was willing to make its people suffer.”¹⁹ Three UN officials also resigned over the prolonged sanctions. Dennis Halliday, former UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq resigned in 1998 after a 34-year career with the UN, said that the sanctions amounted to genocide of the Iraqi people.²⁰ Hans von Sponeck, another long-term UN official who took over for Halliday, resigned in 2000 along with Jutta Burghardt, head of the UN World Food Programme, over the sanctions. Von Sponeck has since published a book detailing his experiences coordinating sanctions and the Oil-for-Food Program (OFF). He takes issue with the UN’s human rights reporting on Iraq during the sanctions era, particularly the reporting of Max van der Stoel, stating that these reports routinely emphasized the right to food and health as critical areas of human rights failures in Iraq, but placed the blame for failing to meet these needs entirely on the Iraqi government.²¹ Von Sponeck believed that a critical and recurring failure in UN reporting was its inability to see its own sanctions regime as a factor in Iraqi human rights conditions.

The failure of the UN to address the human rights consequences of sanctions, despite widespread critique, was also clear with regard to women’s rights. That sanctions had a disproportionate effect on women was understood; the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the World Conference on Women lists as an action to be taken by governments, international, and regional organizations in paragraph 145 (i): “Take measures in accordance with international law with a view to alleviating the negative impact of economic sanctions on women and children.”²² Both the 1994 and 1998 Periodic Reports from Iraq on the Convention

¹⁹ Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam*, 62.

²⁰ Mark Siegal, “Former UN Official Says Sanctions against Iraq Amount to ‘Genocide,’” *Cornell Chronicle*, accessed November 11, 2019, <https://news.cornell.edu/stories/1999/09/former-un-official-says-sanctions-against-iraq-amount-genocide>.

²¹ Von Sponeck, *A Different Kind of War*, 257.

²² “Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,” (Report from The Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995), 62.

on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) strongly emphasize the sanctions as the primary barrier to improving women's status and rights.²³

It is in this context that we now turn to the specific experiences of Iraqi women under sanctions. It is important to understand the structural flaws of the sanctions and the OFF program, as well as the failures of the UN to take responsibility for worsening human rights situations, as we discuss the daily realities of Iraqi women. The program of sanctions, violently and unjustly conceptualized without considering the violence that would be inflicted on Iraqi bodies, also inflicted gender-specific forms of violence on Iraqi women.

Women and Work

It is impossible to understand the impacts of sanctions on the lives of Iraqi women without also understanding the conditions created by the Iran-Iraq war and the 1990 Gulf War, which further exacerbated the damage. The 8-year Iran-Iraq war ended a mere two years prior to the start of sanctions, and the shifts in Iraq's economic, family structures, and gender relations clearly carried over into the sanctions period. The Gulf War at the opening of the sanctions era caused direct damage to the population and infrastructure of Iraq that also continued to impact the country during sanctions. It may never be possible to fully disentangle these catastrophic events from each other, nor any of them from the effects of the 2003 invasion. The sanctions regime sometimes doubled down on bad existing conditions for women during the previous decade, and sometimes initiated a shift away from the realities of wartime.

²³ "Concluding Observations" on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, (United Nations Report, 1994), 33; "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.

The Iran-Iraq war contributed to a rise of women in the workplace simply because so much of the male population of Iraq was either conscripted or volunteered to fight in the war. Women increasingly became the primary breadwinners as their male relatives fought and died in the war. The state simultaneously lauded women as workers keeping the nation afloat and as mothers of the new nation, emphasizing the importance of childbirth in the face of massive population losses.²⁴ These dual expectations often conflicted for women, who bore many burdens of keeping the nation together during wartime.

The sanctions era opened in a context where men were returning from war in search of work and women were increasingly encouraged to turn to motherhood as their national role. As sanctions began to take effect and further harm the Iraqi economy, women were increasingly discouraged from working. While there were few jobs available for anyone, those jobs that did arise were more likely to be taken by men. Men without work often found jobs peddling food or driving taxis, jobs typically considered unacceptable for women.²⁵ The pressure for women to leave work occurred both through changing social dynamics and through 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 represents a sharp change from the rhetoric of the 1970s and 80s celebrating women workers. In 1975 Saddam gave a speech condemning the “bourgeois ideology which assumes that the first and last role of women is in the home.”²⁶

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

²⁴ Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 168.

²⁵ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 37.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 10.

transportation. Women had been the primary recipients of the welfare state more broadly, and so were most affected by its collapse under sanctions.²⁷ Iraq's 1998 report to the UN on the Convention to End All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) discussed the impacts of sanctions on women's work participation. 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." This shifts the blame onto the sanctions, but 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.²⁸ 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 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.

Women's Political Participation and the General Federation of Iraqi Women

One specific example of the declining income opportunities for women was the stratification of the General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW) under sanctions. The GFIW was essentially the women's branch of the Ba'ath party and was controlled and funded by the state. This group was a key space for women's political participation towards the goal of promoting

²⁷ Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 188; Nadjé Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender: Iraqi Women Between Dictatorship, War, Sanctions, and Occupation," *Third World Quarterly*, 26, no. 4-5 (2008), 747.

²⁸ "Second and Third Periodic Reports," 8.

women's equality. It is critical to note that women's political participation, like that of all Iraqi citizens, was severely limited throughout the Ba'ath era because Iraq was a one-party state. Information on the political participation of women outside the Ba'ath party is therefore limited because these groups were forced to hide their operations from the regime. However, the role of women in the Ba'ath party was a key point of Ba'athi rhetoric, and the GFIW was the key state mechanism for mobilizing women.

The experience of women in GFIW represents only a small section of Iraqi women, as it was only open to Ba'athi women, but it did serve as a critical source of income for many women prior to sanctions. Some members were able to use the funds allocated by the state to mobilize Iraqi women and change their lives, and the GFIW was often in tension with Ba'athi leadership, pushing them on issues of women's equality.²⁹ However, after sanctions, the conditions changed dramatically. 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; she said, "now there are a few women who gain from being employees here, while the rest get nothing."³⁰ She also describes how high ranking GFIW women received millions of Iraqi Dinars as well as "valuable gifts from the delegations." These gifts were typically humanitarian aid, intended for the population, but stolen and distributed to friends of the regime, according a GFIW informant.³¹ Meanwhile, women like Soha, who had previously held a relatively privileged position as party members, were forced to take up informal work for secondary sources of income. The 1998 CEDAW report, speaking of women's political participation, claimed that "any diminution in the role of women is due to the embargo and to their preoccupation with

²⁹ Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 138.

³⁰ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 49.

³¹ Ibid.

shouldering the burdens of the household.”³² This claim is clearly inaccurate considering that certain GFIW women were able to materially benefit from sanctions. 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 structures.”³³ The women who had used the GFIW to mobilize for legitimate social change were severely disadvantaged under sanctions, while women who facilitated the continuation of oppressive class, gender, ethnic, and political structures benefitted materially. This stratification had negative implications both for the continued political participation of women and for their income.

The GFIW can be partially understood as an effort of “state feminism,” a process by which the state coopted feminist struggle in order to control its progress, while simultaneously suppressing other, non-state sanctioned feminist activity. The stratification of wealth in the GFIW reflected the broader issues with state control of funds and programs during sanctions; Saddam and other leading party members gained vast personal wealth through criminal activities such as smuggling.³⁴ The GFIW thus served as a microcosm for understanding Iraq at large and the implications of the one-party system during this time. Women lost avenues for social mobilization as well as access to work and pay, along with the rest of the Iraqi population. This example also illustrates the importance of adding a class and political analysis to the gendered experience of sanctions. The shifts in the GFIW benefitted some women as much as they disadvantaged others.

³² Ibid, 9.

³³ Nadjé al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?: Women and the Occupation of Iraq*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 53.

³⁴ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 5-6.

Women's Education

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. By 1990, women's education had increased rapidly; female enrollment in secondary school increased to 38.5%, and though young women came from families where most of their mothers were illiterate, in higher education women were a majority of students.³⁵ 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."³⁶ Improving women's education rates also has serious implications for women's health, increased fertility, and reduced overall child mortality rates, so the state project also served a public health purpose.³⁷ However, a study of women in Iraq conducted prior to sanctions and published in 1990 suggests that, socially, education for women was still perceived as a way to improve one's status for marriage.³⁸ Though the improvement of women's education existed within a social context that still limited women's full participation, its rise in the decades prior to sanctions can still be seen in relatively positive terms; women (especially working class women) had greater access to resources that had previously posed a barrier to education. While the social context remained limiting for women's full pursuit of educational goals, class barriers to education were at least minimized.

³⁵ Ibid, 58, 61; Sana Khayyat, *Honour and Shame: Women in Modern Iraq* (London: Saqi Books, 1990), 196.

³⁶ Saddam Hussein, *The Revolution and Women in Iraq*, (London: The Malvern Press, 1978), 7.

³⁷ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 75.

³⁸ Khayyat, *Honour and Shame*, 197.

However, under sanctions, female education declined sharply, and the class and public health improvements were effectively eliminated. 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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ Additionally, many young women were expected to make money for their families in the informal economy (often through begging or theft) and did not have time or funds to attend school.⁴¹ 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.⁴² Whatever efforts had been made to make education accessible to all genders and classes were effectively reversed under sanctions.

The effects of this educational decline were crucially not limited to the scope of education. The loss of subsidized educational resources had serious implications for both class stratification and public health. Working class women and girls were kept out of education by the reconstruction of financial barriers. With regards to public health, studies have shown that in

³⁹ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 60, 61.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 192; Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, (New York: Feminist Press, 2005), 132.

Southwest Asia and North Africa, education is a critical factor for improving women's planning for childbirth and raising the age of marriage and first childbirth. Under sanctions in Iraq, fertility rates rose to 5.4 births per the average woman by 2003, which is nearly the global high, while child mortality and morbidity simultaneously rose to the highest regional rate.⁴³ The collapse of women's education cannot be disentangled from the public health crisis under sanctions, nor from the lasting psychological and physical trauma experienced by so many women who gave birth while experiencing malnutrition, anemia, or other health crises, many of whom subsequently lost their children. The violence of sanctions extends beyond the failure to take responsibility for human rights crises; it lies also in the inability to connect the wide range of human rights impacts. When we discuss the violence of the public health crisis, we cannot separate this from the crisis of women's education and work, the re-emphasis of women's role as mothers, and the long-term psychological impacts.

Family and Marriage

Nuclearizing Family Structures

The family structure of Iraqi society and the role of women in the family were affected not only by declining employment and educational opportunities, but also by the medical impacts of sanctions, including the deaths of children. By 1996, it was estimated that sanctions had killed over half a million Iraqi children, a death toll that UN representative Madeleine Albright infamously said was "worth it."⁴⁴ More recently, some studies have called into question the extent of child mortality and proposed that child death estimates were inflated by the regime.⁴⁵

⁴³ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 75; Dyson and Cetorelli, "Changing Views on Child Mortality," 4.

⁴⁴ Rahul Mahajan, "We Think the Price is Worth It," *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*. November 2011.

⁴⁵ Tim Dyson and Valeria Cetorelli, "Changing Views on Child Mortality and Economic Sanctions in Iraq: A History of Lies, Damned Lies and Statistics," *BMJ Global Health* 2, no. 2 (July 1, 2017), 4.

However, several studies, using more conservative estimates, have still found remarkably high child mortality rates. Under-5 mortality in south and central Iraq were found to have increased from 56 per 1000 births in 1984-1989 to 131 per 1000 births in 1994-1999. In Kurdistan, under-5 mortality actually decreased from 80 to 72 per 1000 births in the same period.⁴⁶ Case studies of Iraqi women show that the fear of child death had strong social impacts on Iraqi women and the family experience. The impacts of these deaths on Iraqi families was particularly pronounced for lower class families, who were more likely to experience child mortality.⁴⁷ 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 fear that children would die or that they would be unable to feed them. Additionally, the mass casualties of Iraqi men during the Iran-Iraq and Gulf Wars, as well as rising economic migration of men, created a large number of female-headed households, in Basra as high as 60%.⁴⁸ 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.

One such woman was Halimah, a 20 year old war widow and mother interviewed by Al-Jawaheri, whose case shows the collapse of kinship and neighborhood networks as a mechanism for survival. Under sanctions, families shifted away from broader kinship networks and towards the importance of the nuclear family.⁴⁹ Here it is important to address that, though the nuclear

⁴⁶ Ali and Shah, "Sanctions and Childhood Mortality in Iraq," 1851.

⁴⁷ Al-Ali, "Reconstructing Gender," 746.

⁴⁸ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 22; Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 198-199.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

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. In Halimah's case, her neighborhood network of support no longer existed because everyone had become extremely poor under sanctions. "We feel we have been abandoned and that nobody can help us. We know we are forgotten."⁵⁰ Halimah's desperate condition forced her to turn to her brother and brother-in-law for support, but both were highly aggressive towards her and attempted to control her and her daughter. 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."⁵¹ Halimah's case is one example of how the deterioration of broad family networks created more oppressive family relations for women.

Marriage as Survival

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."⁵² 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

⁵⁰ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 84. The title to this essay is also drawn from Halimah's quote.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 84, 97.

⁵² Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 196.

1976 address to the General Federation of Iraqi Women, Saddam had stated the importance of “strengthening and expanding the conditions which prohibit polygamy.”⁵³ And yet under sanctions, polygamous marriages increased dramatically, largely out of economic necessity.⁵⁴

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 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.⁵⁵ 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. Whereas middle- and upper-class women focused heavily on marriage as a source of survival, and thus were often forced into harmful or difficult marriages, lower class women were more likely to experience very direct forms of gender-based violence through “honor” crimes or were forced into sex work for survival. Changing marriage expectations should be understood as a highly class-specific gender impact of sanctions.

Violence Against Women

“Honor” Killings and Domestic Violence

⁵³ Hussein, *Revolution and Women*, 29.

⁵⁴ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 102.

⁵⁵ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 53; Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 197.

“Honor” killing describes a particular circumstance; that is, the murder of women, typically by family members, as a reaction to the perception that the woman has “dishonored” the family.⁵⁶ The acts that are considered “dishonorable” are rooted in restrictive heteropatriarchal social boundaries for women. Under sanctions, Iraq saw a revival of “honor” killings and domestic violence; economic crisis and war have both 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 encouraged by the state effectively legalizing “honor” crimes. 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.)⁵⁷ Though this ruling was appealed two months later, this law granted legitimacy to “honor” crimes beyond the scope of its existence, as the UN tracked an increase in “honor” crimes during the 1990s compared to previous decades; approximately 4,000 women and girls were murdered between 1990 and 2002 in so-called “honor” killings. It is unclear why this law was passed, though Al-Jawaheri and Al-Ali both suggest that it was a tactic to gain the support of conservative tribal and religious leaders in preparation for the invasion of Kuwait.⁵⁸ 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

⁵⁶ It is necessary to explain my stylization of “honor.” Though the term “honor killings” has been criticized for many years, Southwest Asian and North African feminists have more recently taken issue with the term and continued practice of “honor” killings in the wake of several murders of this type. These feminists make compelling arguments and, given the feminist framework of this paper, I am inclined to agree with them: there is no “honor” in killing. Still, there exists a certain lexical gap; though the term leaves much to be desired, it also describes a particular type of crime that cannot yet be adequately described with other terms. I therefore use quotations to separate this phrase from ideas that women’s bodies and actions are responsible for a family’s honor.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 202.

⁵⁸ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 113; Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 202.

acquitted.⁵⁹ The legal system clearly came to increasingly favor those who committed “honor” crimes rather than the victims of these crimes.

The rise in “honor” crimes contributed to real fears and changes in social dynamics for young girls. Fifteen year old Zeinab described the changes women had to make in daily life to prevent social criticism that could potentially damage a family’s “honor,” including increasingly conservative dress; “Most people are somewhat pressured to change their lives in order to protect themselves from... talk about family honour.”⁶⁰

Domestic violence, too, was increasingly a product of economic insecurities. Both men and women encouraged and perpetrated this violence against other women; al-Jawaheri interviewed one woman, 20 year old Fatima, who was physically abused by her husband when she fought back against his plan to take a second, older, wife from a wealthy family in order to improve his economic position. Fatima’s mother in law encouraged the abuse and also took control over her children. In her interview, Fatima said “My children are not mine. They are hers.”⁶¹ Though al-Jawaheri notes that it is very difficult to understand the extent of domestic violence in Iraq because it is not openly discussed, she believes that relationships like Fatima’s with her mother-in-law were increasingly common during sanctions, as older women sought a “stake in the system of domination” while opportunity for the family’s economic stability diminished.⁶² Violence against women was not merely a result of the economic stress of men, but of the broader stresses placed on the entire community.

⁵⁹ Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 209.

⁶⁰ Nadjé Al-Ali and Yasmin Hussein, “Iraq,” in *Teen Life in the Middle East*, ed. Ali Akbar Mahdi (Westport CT; London: Greenwood Press, 2003), 46.

⁶¹ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 112.

⁶² *Ibid*, 113.

Violence Against Sex Workers

Related to the rise in “honor” crimes and domestic violence was the increased violence against those engaging in sex work. This coincided with a rise in sex work 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.⁶³ 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. One such incident occurred in November 2000 when two sex workers in Baghdad were beheaded in front of their homes. This public murder occurred in the morning and was witnessed by several neighbors, including children who were on their way to school. Those living nearby said that the entire area was left in a “shocked state.”⁶⁴ It was well known that the clients of these women had been high-ranking government officials. To the populace witnessing these acts of violence, the general perception was that it was an attempt on the part of the state to reassert its control over women and the social order. There is also a general consensus among scholars 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.⁶⁵ The sanctions contributed to both a rise in sex work as a means of economic survival and a rise in social conservatism which punished women, violently, for these particular acts of survival. This form of violence, committed by the state against women whose “crimes” depended on the

⁶³ Ibid, 114.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 115.

⁶⁵ Ibid; al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 200-201.

participation of state actors, is merely evidence of the blatant double standard in morality for a patriarchal state structure. Regardless of the state's efforts to promote women's liberation and equal rights in previous decades, the intensity of the violence committed on women's bodies by state actors during sanctions shows that the state was interested primarily in maintaining its control on women.

Violence Against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan

Kurdish women experienced the violence of sanctions differently because of their position in a targeted ethnic minority as well as their gender. Kurdish women are certainly not the only ethnic minority to face ethnic and gender violence under sanctions, and in fact because of their geographic separation and autonomy from Central and Southern Iraq, are not necessarily representative of the experiences of other ethnic minority women, on whom there is unfortunately little data or study. It should also be noted that many non-Kurdish ethno-religious minorities, including Yezidis, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Christians, and Turcomans, often identified themselves as Kurdish when no other option was presented and many resided in the northern regions designated as Kurdistan.⁶⁶ Ethnic minority women, like poor women, faced particularly difficult conditions under sanctions.

Certain specificities of the sanctions era in Iraqi Kurdistan should be noted. Iraqi Kurdistan, located in the North, had been a target of state violence as an ethnic minority region. The UN did not view Kurdistan as the primary target of sanctions, especially given that the Kurdish population had been the targets of chemical attacks, and some UN aid programs attempted to mitigate the effects of sanctions on Kurdistan, but Kurdistan was not exempt from

⁶⁶ Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam*, 218.

sanctions. The sanctions era in Kurdistan has been described as “double embargo” because of the impacts of both international sanctions and the Iraqi central government’s economic targeting of the region, including power blackouts and currency manipulation which forced Kurdistan to abandon the Iraqi dinar.⁶⁷ This is consistent with the conclusions of Lv and Xu that economic sanctions increase ethnic violence, in this case the violence being economic neglect.⁶⁸ However, Kurdistan also experienced a much higher rate of international aid than the rest of Iraq, as well as a cash component to the OFF program not granted to the Central and South regions.⁶⁹ In part this aid was related to the international perception of the Kurdish population as victims of the regime after the chemical attacks during the Anfal campaign genocide, though the same effort at protecting victims of the regime did not seem to apply to other ethnic minorities, marginalized populations, or, for that matter, most of the civilians who suffered under sanctions while the regime escaped virtually unscathed. In addition to large amounts of aid, the de facto establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1992 allowed some regional autonomy, though Kurdish autonomy was not recognized by the Iraqi state until Saddam was overthrown in 2003. Furthermore, Kurdish autonomy has done little to foster Kurdish women’s liberation.

The particularities of the sanctions era in Iraqi Kurdistan included a marked rise in “honor” killings, beyond that of Iraq at large. Although Kurdish women had long been central in the Kurdish independence struggle, the growth of aid allowed them to participate in large numbers in the emerging civil society, strengthening women’s political organizing around issues

⁶⁷ Ibid, 222.

⁶⁸ Lv and Xu, “The Effect of Economic Sanctions,” 105. This study does not include data on Iraq, but studies data from 46 other countries and thus provides convincing support for the idea that ethnic violence is typically exacerbated by sanctions.

⁶⁹ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 50.

of gender and violence. However, these women's rights groups depend on the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) for their continued existence.⁷⁰ This helps explain why the presence of humanitarian groups and the rise in women's organizations has actually corresponded with a rise in "honor" killings and domestic violence in the so-called "safe haven." The KRG has made little headway in terms of improving the position of Kurdish women and has often actively worked against this goal. Zouzan, a 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."⁷¹ Zouzan ultimately exiled herself and continued her activism from abroad because of this harassment. 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.⁷² As Saddam's legalization of "honor" crimes was an attempt to consolidate support from conservative tribal leaders, so can the KRG's failure to prosecute murderers for "honor" be seen as an attempt to consolidate power in a newly formed autonomous parastate. Additionally, after violent conflicts between the KDP and PUK in 1994, efforts to consolidate tribal support increased even further.⁷³

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 of domestic violence.⁷⁴ Kurdistan also experienced high rates of female headed households, exacerbated by the ethnic

⁷⁰ The KDP and PUK were the two dominant political parties in the KRG and, until 2003, were strongly oppositional and fought each other for maximal control

⁷¹ Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 207.

⁷² Nadjé al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, "Conspiracy of Near Silence: Violence Against Iraqi Women," *Middle East Report*, no. 258 (2011): 36.

⁷³ Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam*, 218.

⁷⁴ Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 207.

violence it has suffered and the disappearances of Kurdish men; some relief workers estimated between 3000 and 3500 female heads of household, or “Anfal widows,” in the Barzan valley alone.⁷⁵ Many women who lived through Anfal had also been raped, and over 700 girls were kidnapped and sold to neighboring countries as a part of the violence; the Anfal widows suffered compound traumas to their bodies and their families, as well as social ostracization for losing their “honor” as survivors of rape.⁷⁶ The struggles of these widows were perhaps somewhat mediated by the large concentration of relief workers, many of them focusing on supporting female headed households. Still, as with honor killings, widespread aid did not seem to correlate with widespread relief of women’s problems. As late as 2007, 83% of these women had housing problems.⁷⁷

Final Considerations on Violence Against Women

The various types of gender-based violence described above are by no means a comprehensive picture of the many forms of violence experienced by Iraqi women at alarming rates during the sanctions era. Iraq also experienced a rise in street violence, including robbing, rape, kidnapping, and murder, often targeting women. Women and girls sometimes disappeared from in front of their own homes, and women who could afford to took taxis to and from home for fear of leaving their home, even within their own neighborhoods.⁷⁸ Essentially, sanctions created widespread social chaos that produced lasting psychological damage for the entire population of Iraq. Batuol, an Iraqi social scientist interviewed by Al-Jawaheri, described this well: “It’s hardly surprising that economic deprivation and impoverishment have caused such

⁷⁵ Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam*, 237

⁷⁶ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 44.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 43.

⁷⁸ Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq*, 116.

wide-scale social distortion. The Iraqi society today is a masterpiece produced by the United Nations sanctions... It's true that the whole society is suffering, but it is women who are the prime victims.”⁷⁹

In tracing gender-based violence, it is further important to highlight the differential impacts of violence based on women's class status. 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.”⁸⁰ 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 the name of social conservatism most often impacted working-class women, who were also the greatest victims of sanctions more broadly.

It is worth remembering 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 took a permissive attitude towards these crimes in order to maintain loyalty ties with tribal and religious leaders. In the post-invasion period, the increased sectarianization of rule under the U.S. occupation and the weakening of the central government left tribal and religious leaders with greater control, further contributing to violence against women.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 117.

⁸⁰ Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 202.

Conclusions: Beyond Sanctions and the Revolutionary Present

It is difficult to know how to conclude this essay given that the conditions for Iraqis in general, and Iraqi women in particular, have only worsened since the end of sanctions. The fragmentation of the country by ISIS and control of other foreign states, the endless U.S. occupation following the bloody 2003 invasion, the sanctions era, the Gulf War, the 8-year Iran-Iraq war, and the brutal policies of the Ba‘th party mean that Iraq has experienced at least 40 years of continual violence and destruction with little chance to recover. The violence on Iraq, and the further marginalization of Iraqi women because of this violence, is ongoing. This essay focuses on a specific set of policies and a specific population, women, to explore only some of the many ways that violence has manifested in Iraq. This focus deconstructs a particular narrative about the sanctions on Iraq, namely that they were a nonviolent alternative to war, and that the regime, rather than the UN or U.S., was solely responsible for human rights abuses. The scope of this essay also fits into a broader, emerging conversation about the violence of sanctions as international policy more generally, and the particular populations that experience targeted violence under economic sanctions.

My goal is not to suggest that Iraqi men have not also suffered under sanctions or in the decades since. Iraqi men have also experienced economic and physical violence, and for certain populations of men, such as ethnic minority or lower-class men, the impacts of sanctions and war may have been greater than for certain Iraqi women. But the gender focus of this paper has led to the conclusion that sanctions indeed have a variety of gender-specific, negative impacts. A policy cannot claim to be nonviolent if a consistent and severe “side effect” of that policy is an increase in violence against the target state’s most marginalized populations, including, among others, gender, ethnic, and class minority groups. If the United Nations and the international

community are genuinely interested in preventing human rights violations and ending all discrimination against women, it is no longer viable for them to continue to enact and enforce economic sanctions as they have historically been implemented.

I would also like to turn, beyond the scope of this paper, to the present, in order to understand not only the lasting effects of sanctions and war on Iraq and situate the current revolution in Iraq in relation to the ongoing impacts of sanctions on the region.

Iraq remains devastated by ongoing violence and foreign control of a fragmented state. But it is also clear that, despite the present lived reality in Iraq, many revolutionaries trace the conditions in Iraq back to the sanctions era. Reports show that 58.43% of the population of Iraq is under the age of 24, and 39.01% are under age 15.⁸¹ For these young people, their only reality has been life under imperial control. Some of them were born into sanctions, but most were born into the post-sanctions, post-invasion destruction of Iraq. It is no wonder that Iraqis of all ages are currently taking to the streets to fight for their rights to live; the most chilling element of these protests is their primary slogan: *Nureed Watan* - We Want a Country.⁸² A further characteristic of this revolution is the participation of young women and girls, whose participation is truly powerful considering that, through sanctions and occupation, Iraq has become increasingly socially conservative and opposed to women's political participation. In addition to facing the violent reaction of the state, women revolutionaries have faced threats and disapproval from families, and several female activists have been abducted or killed for their

⁸¹ "Middle East :: Iraq — The World Factbook - Central Intelligence Agency," accessed December 11, 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>.

⁸² Sundus Abdul Hadi, "Iraq is Healing: The October Revolution, Systemic Change, and Intergenerational Trauma," *Medium*, November 1, 2019, <https://medium.com/@WATM/iraq-is-healing-the-october-revolution-systemic-change-and-intergenerational-trauma-2d8bc798901e>

participation in the revolution.⁸³ And yet these women continue to show up for national liberation; they too want a country. Their participation in the revolution is also related to their oppression as women; women emphasized the poor conditions of their education and the ostracization of women in political movements as key motivators for their participation, alongside their national goals.⁸⁴ This is understandable when we take time to examine the historical intersection of imperial policy and violence against women during sanctions. The revolution that began on October 25, 2019 (sometimes called the October Revolution) is an inspiring example of a people attempting to heal their country, and the power of the women revolutionaries in particular is a direct challenge to the gendered violence of international policy.

Among other focuses of the Iraq Revolution is the need to fight back against Iranian interference in Iraqi governance, which flourished after the 2003 invasion. Iran is currently the target of U.S. sanctions and, though these sanctions are not directly comparable to those enforced on Iraq, they have had ongoing violent impacts on Iranians. The sanctions on Iran have also continued to harm Iraq; because of Iran's influence on Iraq, and particularly Iraq's economic importance to Iran, some have posited that the intensification of sanctions by the U.S. has caused the Iranian government to crack down more violently on protests in Iraq.⁸⁵

It is impossible to separate these ongoing histories from the international sanctions policies that have targeted these states and contributed to the further economic marginalization of already marginalized populations. The people of Iraq, Iran, and many other countries in the Global South are risking their lives to revolt against the conditions that sanctions have helped

⁸³ Balsam Mustafa, "I Spoke to the Women Risking Their Lives to Join the Iraq Revolution - And This is What They Want," *Independent*, November 5, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/iraq-revolution-women-protests-iran-lebanon-a9186141.html>

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ James Risen, "U.S. Sanctions are Driving Iran to Tighten its Grip on Iraq," *The Intercept*, December 10, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/12/10/sanctions-iran-iraq-protests/>

create. For those of us in the Global North, the very least we can do is follow their lead and revolutionize international relations. If, as Georgis and Gewarges suggest, we can center the people experiencing bodily harm as a direct result of these policies in formulating international policies, we might begin to approach an alternative to the senseless violence that comes from treating human suffering as unintended consequences.

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