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Gender and Fundamentalism in the New Iraq: Women’s Rights and Social Change in Cyberspace

Introduction

Rights and freedoms have become minor concerns compared to the possibility of civil war, the reality of ethnic displacement and cleansing, and the daily certainty of bloodshed and death (Riverbend, Monday October 03, 2005).

The September 11 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and other American landmarks created the conditions for an invasion of Iraq. George Bush’s military and political campaign in Iraq involved a democratisation program initiating the transition from the military dictatorship of Saddam Hussein to democracy. Under new democratic conditions the Bush administration claimed Iraqis would be afforded greater freedom and that terrorist attacks would decrease. However, in 2007, four years after the U.S. lead invasion, Iraq is facing a lack of security and basic needs combined with social chaos and violent attacks against women (Efrati, 2005; Judd, 2006; Stanski, 2005: 210). Some of the most pertinent and detailed responses to the current atmosphere in Iraq may be read in the weblogs of Iraqi women. One prominent Iraqi blogger – Riverbend – states: ‘So this is democracy… Women weren’t allowed in the marketplace and shop owners were complaining that their businesses were suffering…” (Riverbend Wednesday, May 31: 2006). Many women’s responses indicate that any expectation of increased freedom and equality for women under the banner of democracy has not been realised. Iraqi feminist Houzan Mahmoud – Representaive of the Organisation of Women’s Freedom in Iraq – suggests that women in Iraq may have enjoyed more freedom under the military dictatorship of Saddam Hussein than they do under the Bush administration’s emerging democracy – a democracy that empowers women to vote and little else (Mahmoud, 2005). The purpose of this paper is to discuss one woman’s story, which illuminates transformation of women’s rights and experiences in newly democratised Iraq.

Using data available from weblogs, I will present a preliminary analysis of an Iraqi woman’s perceptions of the democratic process in Iraq. I propose that the weblog ‘Baghdad Burning’ written anonymously by Iraqi woman ‘Riverbend’ (online pseudonym) provides information which has the potential to significantly contribute to our understanding of how the cultural and behavioral values and norms of Iraqi women are affected by the United States military and political presence. In this paper I will specifically focus upon the current challenge to women’s rights presented by the new Iraqi constitution and fundamentalist groups. Women’s rights in Iraq will be understood from Riverbend’s perspective as the advanced rights women fought for and experienced under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein: the right to work; constitutionally outlined rights i.e. to inheritance; the right to free speech; and the right to enjoy safety and autonomy in the private and public sphere. Initially, I will summarise the historical and contemporary circumstances that have impacted upon decisions to ‘democratise’ Iraq taking into consideration the role of women in Islamic texts and Iraqi society. Life for women in the ‘new-Iraq’ will be outlined and compared to the social experience of women under the military dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. The growing phenomenon of ‘blogging’ as a new rhetorical space and alternative source of information to mainstream media and official government discourse will then be addressed, along with methodological problems encountered in the use of weblogs as a source for data. I will discuss how investigating responses encountered in cyberspace informs analysis of the unfolding role of women in Iraqi society today, with reference to ‘Baghdad Burning’. Abdela (2005), Efrati (2005), Human Rights Watch (2006), Moghadam (2005) and Riverbend (2006) argue that opposition to women’s rights comes from four interrelated sources: the role of religious politicians in the new Iraqi government; the lack of women’s inclusion in political processes; the incorporation of Shar’ah into the previously secular laws of Iraq’s constitution; and the rise of fundamentalist religious groups across Iraq. I will discuss each of these areas, commenting upon the impact these forces may have and the responses and activities of women’s rights movements in Iraq.

Iraqi Women throughout History

Orientalist renderings of the ‘woman question’ in the Arab and Muslim worlds have been like a baton with which to first hit Arab and Muslim cultures. Women are depicted as veiled, oppressed, nameless, invisible, and silent – when they are in fact powerful agents of change (Sadiki 2004: 253).

Iraq’s complex culture is a product of a history that is variously marked by paganism, Islam, the Ottoman Empire and European colonialism (Shadid 2005: 10). The creation of ‘Iraq’ in 1914 disregarded settled territories and fundamentally drew lines through pre-existing territories inhabited by local peoples of
different culture and ethnicity. This creation of geographical boundaries and countries such as Iraq and Iran has created intense border conflicts (Lewis 1995: 76). The role of geographical boundaries and disputes is further complicated by the numerous religious sects and ethnic groups in Iraq. There is much conjecture regarding how the various religious and ethnic groups in Iraq may be best understood. Al-Marashi (2005: 140) suggests that the popular triangulation of Iraqis into three neat monolithic blocs dangerously oversimplifies the cultural diversity of Iraq. The three groupings he refers to are: the Shiite Muslims, Sunni Muslims and the Kurds. Iraq is also home to ethnic minorities including: Turkoman, Yezidi, Christian, Jewish, Iranian and Mandean. Jabar (2003: 13). Shboul (2005: 173) suggests that while Islam has been a primary component of Arab cultural identity, it is not the only component. Many religions refer to themselves as 'a way of life', but 'secular currents need to be restated against the common assumption about Arab Islamic culture as being dominated by the religious imperative in all areas of life' (Shboul 2005: 178).

Saleh (2001: VIII) suggests that it is cultural practices which are focused upon in attempts to understand the role of women in Islam – rather than the core instruction of the faith itself. The role of women in Islamic texts will therefore be outlined in everyday life. Barlas (2005: 96) argues that many social and cultural practices of Muslim societies have little to do with Islam and more to do with who reads and interprets the instructive text:

The reason Muslims have read the Qur’an as a patriarchal text has to do with who has read it (basically men), the contexts in which they have read it (basically patriarchal), and the method by which they have read it.

Barlas (2005: 97) and Wadud (1999: 81) propose that Islam should be understood 'in relation to the greater Qur’anic principles and their ultimate intent of harmonious and equitable relationships in society', and that this is the ‘true’ spirit of the Qur’an. Mernissi (1999: 120) and Moghadam (2003) argue that the inequality suffered by Muslim women is ironic considering that the seventh century founder of Islam, Mohammad, was among the world’s greatest reformers on behalf of women. He attempted to abolish sex discriminating practices such as, female infanticide, slavery, and levirate (marriage between a man and his brother’s widow) and introduced concepts guaranteeing women’s right to inherit and control their own assets (Hanouri 1999: 122).

There are various historical accounts of gender relations within Iraqi society that highlight the nature of patriarchal structures. Wadud (1999: 80) argues that women’s role in many ancient Arabian societies has been shaped by the historical context in which the Qur’an was interpreted. Concerning authority, the prevailing attitudes and interpretations of Islamic law (Shari‘ah law) were patriarchal which impacted upon women’s legal and family status. In some cases women were not permitted to work in the formal economy or socialise in the public sphere (Hanouri 1999: 122). Hassan (2000), Moghadam (2005) and Mernissi (1991: 3) suggest that the role of women in Iraqi society varies depending upon the social and economic factors affecting household structure and the status or position of the family. For instance, wealthy families are more inclined than poorer families to educate their daughters at home and abroad.

Kapteijns (1998: 589) acknowledges both the variation of women’s experience in Iraq and within Islam:

Islam is not a monolithic and static social force, that women do not all share the same kinds of oppression or agendas for emancipation, and that ‘third-world’ women too have been actors in their own historical contexts.

Kapteijns challenges the assumption of complete patriarchy in terms of everyday experience and readings of the Qur’an. There are various historical accounts of gender relations within Iraqi society that highlight patriarchal structures and challenges. Stanski (2005: 112) argues that women were integrated into the job market in the 1920s and 1930s under the – United Kingdom imposed – Hashemite monarchy. Human Rights Watch (2006) and Hanouri (1999) argue that women’s rights became apparent in modern Iraq in the 1950s, though women’s liberation groups such as the Iraqi Women’s League and then more so after the secular Ba’ath party seized power in 1968. Ba’ath party leader Saddam Hussein embarked on a program to achieve rapid economic growth by placating labor shortages with the mass inclusion of women into the workforce (Ismael & Ismael 2004: 98). Under the rule of Saddam Hussein modified Shari‘ah law was in operation. These laws denied and secured advanced rights for Iraqi women through Personal Status Law (PSL). The government promulgated laws specifically aimed at improving the status of women in public, and to a more limited extent, the private spheres (Human Rights Watch 2006). Women in Iraq benefited from one of the most permissive societies in the Middle East (Judd 2006). However women’s role in the social sphere was limited following the imposition of economic sanctions on Iraq in 1990 and the Gulf war of 1991; as women’s mobility and access to the formal sector was restricted in an effort to ensure jobs for men and to meet the social standards of conservative religious groups (Human Rights Watch 2006). Just as Iraqi women were anticipating the Bush Administrations new era of democracy and freedom in 2003, waves of violence have spread throughout the country (Al-Janabi 2006; Shadid 2003; Erfati 2005; Abdela 2005). In particular, US military and political activity has initiated violent and extreme responses from fundamentalist groups, which threaten the safety and rights of Iraqi women (Judd 2006; Abdela 2005).

The long history Iraq shares with foreign countries has been briefly outlined, however the complex relationships that have led to violent responses by radical or fundamentalist groups in Iraq, prior to invasion and following US occupation, is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say fundamentalism and radicalisation may be perceived as extreme ideological and physical responses of minority groups to invasion by foreign forces (Jabar 2003; Ruthven’s 2004), Ruthven (2004: 103) and Geddes (2004: 48) also maintain that fundamentalism often occurs when an established community recognises problems to be the direct result of foreign intervention. The answer is seen to lie in determination to ‘reform’ their communities, to reaffirm and recommit themselves to the most important fundamental understandings of life.
Juergensmeyer (2003: 10) argues that religion is brought into the picture when it is used by insurgents, fundamentalists and terrorists as moral justification for their actions. For the purpose of this paper, the word fundamentalism will be understood as ‘an orientation to the world that is anti-intellectual, bigoted, and intolerant... it is reserved for those who have the temerity to attempt to project their world-view onto others’ (Ruthven 2004: 7).

Cyberspace: Feminism, Bodies and Voices

A resource that consistently documents life in Baghdad, the impact of fundamentalist groups and the US military presence, are the online journals or ‘weblogs’ of individuals living in Iraq. In particular Riverbend provides insight into the everyday lives of Iraqi people and the effects of the occupation and democratisation for women in Iraq. Weblogs may be defined as web sites that are updated frequently; many contain links to other sites and commentary on the other sites’ content. Weblogs reflect what the author/s are interested in conveying at any given time. ‘All posts to the blog are time-stamped with the most recent post at the top, creating a reverse chronological structure governed by spontaneity and novelty’ (Gurak et al 2006). Weblogs produced a large volume of material on the war, encompassing a wide variety of positions. Research into the availability of Iraqi weblogs has located over 232, with fewer written by women than men (Iraq blog Count 2006). Riverbend’s ‘Baghdad Burning’ was identified as a primary source. The weblog is a self-described ‘Girl Blog from Iraq... let’s talk war, politics and occupation’. ‘Baghdad Burning’ commences on August 17, 2003 – five months after Iraq is invaded on the 20th of March, 2003 – and offers one citizen’s perspective on everyday life in Baghdad.

Gurak et al (2006) argues that by perceiving weblogs as ‘rhetorical artefacts’ we are able to examine how they transform what it means to communicate online and what the social and cultural implications of these changes are. Barlas (2005: 93) and Harcourt (1999: xiii) suggests one social implication is that previously established modes of ownership, authorship, and legitimacy of content are broken down. Weblogs allow voices to be heard outside hierarchical models of information distribution and communication. Luke (2000: 521) suggests that this may pose a challenge to modernity’s grand narratives. Harcourt (1999: 21) believes the challenge is greater than this and that online communication poses a challenge to the way in which we understand the world and ourselves. Weblogs, as medium of direct expression and construction of the individuals diffuse identity and role in society may be considered a positive way of understanding subject formation. For example, the place of gender in cyberspace is ambiguous and androgynous (Harcourt 1999: 22), in the physical world gender is ‘a process of social construction, a system of social stratification, and an institution that structures every aspect of our lives because of its embeddedness in the family, the workplace, and the state, as well as in sexuality, language, and culture’ (Moghadam 2003: 15). The cost of one’s voice existing outside the mainstream realms of communication is the loss of the body as a social construction or ‘bodilessness’ (Stratton 1997: 721). This means that not only can people create new and different gender identities (consequently projecting their own cultural ideology into cyberspace) but that people who are used to live in traditional social conditions are relatively free to write about any topic. As Riverbend has states: ‘In the beginning, I decided to be anonymous because it gave me the freedom to discuss whatever and whomever I wanted without fear of retribution – this includes political parties, religious figures, common thugs masquerading as political and religious figures, etc’ (Al-jazeera 2006 c). As a result of this freedom weblogs offer insight into human thought and interactions, and have therefore emerged as an essential channel for social science research (Castells 2004: 3).

Riverbend is reported to be the first Iraqi woman blogging on the war in Iraq. Riverbend’s weblog was selected for publication here, as a result of application by the reputable Feminist Press and Mari Boyars. It is also the third prize winner of the Letter Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage and was long listed for the 2006 Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction. Methodological problems encountered through internet based research include the risk of deception, for example: credibility of information and the true location and identity of the blogger. Riverbend’s weblog is not immune to these problems; however its recognition increased its credibility. ‘Baghdad Burning’ was monitored from June 21, 2005 to August 05, 2006. This selection of entries addresses a variety of issues pivotal to the democratisation process. The most frequently discussed issues or themes in this section are: the new government; the constitutional referendum and election; the lack of infrastructure; ethnic and religious conflict and the militias and fundamentalists. The following preliminary analysis of women’s rights in Iraq employs data from Riverbend addressing women’s rights as affected by the constitution and fundamentalist activity.

Riverbend: Gender, Islam and Iraq

Shboul (in Lahoud & Johns 2005: 171) suggests there needs to be a clearer understanding of the history and role of Muslim women through the actual lives of women, rather than commentaries on, and interpretation of, their lives. The voice of Riverbend is a personal documentation of a woman’s life in post-Saddam Iraq. By nature the weblog provides information describing Riverbend’s everyday experiences, bringing us closer to an understanding of her experiences from her point of view. Recognising and locating Riverbend within the culture of religious and ethnic groups in Iraq creates a foundation for the analysis of her responses. Riverbend’s commentary mixes politics and culture with personal stories and public life. This section will analyse the voice of Riverbend and her responses to and criticism of: the role of religious politicians in Iraq and how this affects the role of women in political process; the possible implications for women’s rights due to the incorporation of Shari’ah (Islamic law) into the new Iraqi constitution; and the impact of fundamentalist violence upon women in Baghdad.

On the 15th of October 2005 the Iraqi people voted in a referendum to approve the new constitution. The constitution was passed on September 18, 2005 effectively making Iraq an Islamic federal democracy. The possibility of federal division in Iraq contributed to the existing social chaos of daily battles between Iraqi resistance and foreign military forces, with a violent battle for political power, land and resources between groups. Riverbend (Sunday, November 06, 2005) argues that as a result of social chaos and the influence...
of religious authorities women’s full participation in the political process was delayed. For example, no women were included in the nine-member rotating presidential council or committee working on constitutional reform (Stanski 2005: 211). Riverbend’s argument is supported by Hunt & Posa (2004) and Mahmoud (2006) who state that this was originally part of U.S. strategy to avoid preempting conservative backlash against women’s reforms and provoking conservative Muslim leaders. The Bush Administration did not want to contradict its anti-affirmative action policy by violating ‘indigenous culture’, and so ignored concerns for women’s rights. Adnan Pachachi, member of the Governing Council voiced concern: ‘they’re forcing a lot of changes on this society. Why not force this as well? Suddenly women’s rights are the red line?’ (Hunt & Posa 2004). Perhaps women’s rights are not on the Bush agenda, as Sadiki (2004: 261) argues, due to democracies patriarchal nature, and history in which women are not included in philosophical accounts of democracy’s ‘individual man’.

Hunt & Posa (2004) and Riverbend argue this policy has set a precedent that will be hard to overcome. Moghadam (2003: 2) argues this is because involving women becomes more difficult after U.S. forces entrench religious leaders in positions of power. This interpretation assumes the inclusion of religious leaders in political process to be a negative for women’s rights and assumes an underlying patriarchy which Iraqi women will be powerless against. This type of interpretation, whilst acknowledging the role of patriarchal power structures in Iraq’s history, strips Iraq women of all agency. Furthermore, this assumption does not consider the role of the state, political systems, kinship systems or the economy in the reproduction of gender inequalities; for example, ‘gendered constructions of citizenship and the dynamics of national and ethnic collectivities into modern states’ (Kandiyoti 1991: 1).

Riverbend argues that the role of Religious leaders in political positions of power will lead to the eventual phasing out of women’s hard earned rights. Furthermore, the lack of female representation in the cabinet guarantees women’s under-representation in the future. Presently, there are four female representatives in the 37-member cabinet of the new Iraqi government. Riverbend and Bechler (2006) note that the limited number of female members included in the constitutional process have also been marginalised and excluded from voting on legislation that directly affects the rights of women. For example, three female members of the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) were not present when the controversial Resolution 137 was passed. Resolution 137 sought to abolish the Personal Status Law (PSL). One of the three female members stated ‘if I had been there, I would not have let it pass’ (Stanski 2005: 212). Stanski (2005: 213) notes that Resolution 137 was eventually dissolved as a result of social outrage and women’s increased lobbying efforts, such as media campaigns drawing on international organisations for help. ‘Women have become some of the most vocal and active members of civil society to promote democracy in Iraq, perhaps because they have the most to lose in its absence’ (Stanski, 2005: 212).

Women’s Rights and Responses to the new constitution

Al-Ali (2005), Mattar (2005) and Riverbend argue that under the power of certain constitutional articles the rights of women are now ambivalent. Articles (47); (2); and (39) of new Iraqi constitution have been widely criticised by women’s rights advocates such as Yanar Mohammed (2005) Director of the Organisation of Women’s Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) and Efrati (2006). Firstly, Riverbend argues that there is no guarantee of female representation from article (47), which states that women should make up 25% of the members of the Council of Representatives. The condition states that ‘voting laws aspire to achieve women’s representation on the Council of Representatives of a ratio of not less than quarter’ (Riverbend, Friday September 23, 2005). The problem for Riverbend is the key word aspire:

This translates accordingly: it isn’t mandatory to have 25% women on the council – it is an aspiration … Instead of protecting women’s rights from those conditions, which are to be found in an Iranian style theocracy, supporters of the draft are able to refer to this condition, which claims to protect women’s rights (Riverbend, Friday September 23, 2005).

Bechler (2006: 1) notes that in the last election this legislation did not serve to uphold the percentage of women in parliament. Women lost sixteen seats, as numbers fell to the twenty-five percent minimum, and have been marginalised in negotiations for government positions. This may be compared to Saddam’s Iraq, in which women held numerous and significant political position, there was government support for women’s rights groups and a civil code that prohibited marriage below the age of 18, arbitrary divorce and male favoritism in child custody and property inheritance disputes (Constable, 2004).

Secondly, Riverbend notes that the Personal Status Law (mentioned earlier) is included in the new constitution; however it is outlined as an option next to Shariah interpretations of the PSL. Article (39) addressing personal status, states that Iraqis are free to choose between civil or religious family law; the religious option has been firmly secured with article (2):

Article (2); Islam is the official religion of the state and is a basic source of legislation, and no law that contradicts its fixed principles and rules may be passed. No law can be passed that contradicts the principles of democracy, or the rights and basic freedoms outlined in this constitution (Riverbend, Saturday September 17, 2005).

However, the phrasing in article (39) does not refer explicitly to the alternative of recourse to civil family law (Efrati 2005). Riverbend, Efrati (2005) and Mattar (2005) argue that due to the combined meaning of these articles the rights of women are ambivalent. All details involving family law have been deferred to future legislators and interpretation by Islamic jurists. For, Riverbend (Saturday September 17, 2005) ‘the problem is not with Islam, the problem is with the dozens of interpretations of Islamic rules and principles by Islamic jurists’. Moghadam (2003: 4) states that through these interpretations the meaning of the Qur’an has been ‘ripped from its historical, linguistic, literary, and psychological contexts and then been continually recontextualised in various cultures and according to the ideological needs of various actors’. In short, Hunt
& Posa (2004); Efrati (2006); Moghadam (2005) and Riverbend (2006) argue that women's rights may be challenged by patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law.

Riverbend's concern regards which standpoint (i.e. andocentric or liberatory) Muslim religious scholars or jurists will adopt in their interpretation and implementation of the law. She claims that this is crucial, as they will be deciding whether certain Islamic rules regarding women’s rights are part of Islamic legislation and thus immutable or, part of Islamic jurisprudence and thus presumptive (subject to interpretation) in nature. The greatest fear Riverbend has for women’s rights, is that they will be subject to a similar theocratic religious-moral code (i.e. ‘traditional’) that subverts the rights of Iranian women, in 2005 she states: “Congratulations Americans – not only are the hardliner Iranian clerics running the show in Iran – they are also running the show in Iraq” (Riverbend, Sunday November 06, 2005). Riverbend states that the final draft of the constitution brings Resolution 137 back to life and that women's rights won't be apparent until the Personal Status Law is defined clearly (Riverbend, Saturday September 17, 2005). Riverbend's view is supported by the Iraqi Women’s Movement (IWM), who want the constitution to recognise women’s human rights as mother, worker and citizen (Deen 2005).

**Women’s Rights: the Streets of Baghdad**

Riverbend's documentation of life in post-Saddam Iraq reveals that the rise of fundamentalism and social chaos in Iraq has challenged the role of women not only in the realm of politics but in civil society. Stanski (2005: 198) argues that women's involvement in civil society is integral to the democratic process, as they will be key actors in transforming Iraqi political and social culture, through the formation of NGOs such as Women’s Alliance for Democratic Iraq (WADI). On the streets of Baghdad, women's rights activist Nada Synca (in Al-Janabi July 17, 2006) argues that the situation for women is worsening by the day. This section will discuss Riverbend’s claims that women’s rights have declined significantly since the democratisation process was initiated in Iraq in 2003. Riverbend also notes that discussion of women’s rights has been pushed to the periphery of local concern:

Women's rights aren't a primary concern for anyone, anymore. People actually laugh when someone brings up the topic. “Let’s keep Iraq united first…” is often the response when I comment about the prospect of Iranian-style Sharia (Riverbend Monday October 03: 2005).

Bechler (2005), Al-Janabi (2006), Cole (2006) and Judd (2006) report an increase in fundamentalist activity, which is having a negative impact against women’s freedom and human rights. Hourani (1991: 443) and Riverbend note that women’s rights and participation in the public sphere are considered by fundamentalists to be ‘Western’, that is, capitalist, individualist and a gateway to the derogation of moral society and therefore at odds with the traditional Islamic religion. Ruthven (2004: 103) argues that fundamentalists view the relative liberty and freedom women enjoyed prior to the U.S. led occupation as a threat to personal male authority in the home and communal primacy in the Muslim state. This minority group ideology when combined with the pressure of ongoing presence of foreign occupation in Iraq has led to increased focus upon the role of women, as a symbol of stability and Islamic honor in a time of uncertainty (Moghadam 2003: 4). However, Mernissi (1991: 5) argues that the Qur’an and Shari’ah do not forbid women’s participation in public life. Riverbend states it is only extreme interpretations of these Islamic texts that challenge the role of women in public life. Riverbend’s argument is supported by Mernissi (1991: 5), who argues that fundamentalists are a minority within Iraq and do not represent the opinions or desires of Sunni or Shia Muslims, Kurds or Christians in Iraq.

I will briefly discuss three of the major, interrelated outcomes of fundamentalist activity upon women, these include: restricted movement; forced veiling and employment discrimination. Riverbend describes the effect of heightened fundamentalist activity upon everyday life in Baghdad:

Sadr’s militia control parts of Iraq now. Just a couple of days ago, his militia, with the help of Badr, were keeping women from visiting the market in the southern city of Karbala. Women weren’t allowed in the marketplace and shop owners were complaining that their businesses were suffering. Welcome to the new Iraq (Riverbend, Wednesday May 31, 2006).

Women's movement in the public sphere is a historically sensitive issue, which Riverbend claims is now largely determined by their willingness to veil. Veiling has become an important historical issue in the rights of Muslim women through Western discourses of othering. The veil and the laws of hijab have come to signify the sum total of traditional institutions governing women’s role in Islamic society” (Stowasser 1994: 127), when women’s role within social systems is far more complex. In many Western feminist texts the fusion of Muslim women’s issues with the symbolic veil led to the degradation of Islam and misunderstanding the nature of Islam (Stowasser 1994: 128). Riverbend claims that prior to the fall of Saddam women had increasingly begun wearing the hijab (veil) out of choice as a sign of empowerment, however women are increasingly being forced to veil. Riverbend argues that she and other women (friends and family) have been forced into wearing the hijab for the first time in their life. This is to comply with the demands of fundamentalists and ensure one’s own safety:

For me, June marked the first month I don’t dare leave the house without a hijab, or headscarf… Going around bare-headed in a car or in the street also puts the family members with you in danger... you risk being attacked (Riverbend, Saturday August 04, 2006).

Riverbend’s argument is supported by Mahmoud (2006) (head of the Organisation of Women’s Freedom in Iraq) who reports that the hijab has become compulsory attire. Bechler (2006) reports that very few women outside Baghdad now walk the streets without it and are being encouraged to adopt the veil by Iraqi ministers. Riverbend states that there are no laws that state women must veil, however:
You no longer want to be seen... it's easier to blend in with the masses shrouded in black. If you're a female you don't want the attention (Riverbend, Saturday August 05, 2006).

Busha (in Bechler 2006) reports that activists have been targeted and killed over the issue of women's rights and the veil. Riverbend states that female bodies have been recovered, some with the veil attached as a warning to other women who refuse to comply with demands of fundamentalist groups.

Susskind (2007) and Mahmoud (in women's space, 2007) argue that a lack of security and proper policing have contributed to increasing rates of crime against women. Crimes committed by US military personnel and Iraqi security forces often go unreported by the mass media. The Feminist Daily Newswire (2007) reports incidents of gang rape of Iraqi women by national security forces, US forces and by Iraqi soldiers. Susskind (2007) suggests that crimes committed by US and Iraqi military forces are linked to the involvement of private US contractors DynCorp. DynCorp’s history of service is tainted by a record of violence against women, including sex crimes such as slavery and rape.

Riverbend proposes that this climate of fear affects women’s ability to travel to work (or any destination) safely. The right to work has also been undermined by government officials. Synca (in Al-Janabi, July 17, 2006) states that the Ministry of Transportation has denied women entrance to their workplace because they are wearing make-up – even if they are veiled. Riverbend worked as a computer technician, however after the U.S. led invasion she was informed that there was no longer work for her. She states that she was dismissed because she is a woman. Women’s rights advocate Busha (in Bechler 2006) states; those women returning to work are encouraged to veil by some new ministries. Iraq’s Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki pledged in July 2006 to improve women’s rights in response to continued pressure from Women’s Rights activists and female political representatives such as, Maysoun al-Damalougi to clarify the rights of women (Al Awsy 2006). However, al-Maliki’s response to a recently publicized gang rape of two Iraqi women by national security forces was to punish the victim and honor the accused.

Corbett and Tranovich (2006) argue that women’s organizing efforts are crucial to the development of Iraq's secular resistance. Iraqi women are mobilising in organisations which utilize religious and feminist discourses to resist the occupation and the downgrading of women’s rights. Many secular women’s groups are in operation, these include the Women’s Alliance for Democratic Iraq, Iraqi Women’s Higher Council and Organisation of Women’s Freedom in Iraq (Stanski, 2005: 213). Organisations such as the Iraq Freedom Congress claim that the presence of women in their movement is a precondition for achieving equality and freedom. The congress boasts a high rate of women leaders and activists all visible to the public (Weinberg, 2006). Islam is also the foundation of many women’s resistance movements, in January of 2004, the Fatima A Zahra Women’s Association in Hillah mobilized for a national petition advocating the inclusion of 40 percent women in each body of the Interim government. The SCIRI has also made pledges to establish a feminist organisation in Iraq (Stanski, 2005: 213).

Conclusion

This review offers a critical, historical perspective on the effects of democratisation on the women of Iraq by bringing together the literature on Iraqi history, religion and culture prior to and after the U.S. lead invasion and democratisation process. The information and responses to the democratisation process in Iraq encountered in weblogs often disagree with the official commentaries of the Bush administration on the progress of democratisation. Analysis of Riverbend’s weblog ‘Baghdad Burning’ shows there is fear amongst Iraqi women that gender equality in Iraq may deteriorate in the coming years due to the US led occupation and support for extreme or patriarchal interpretation of the new constitution. In sum, women’s rights have been sidelined in political processes due to: chaos and civil war in Iraq, the delay of female participation in the political process; and the possibility of interpretation of constitutional law. This research highlights two findings; that women in Iraq both Muslim and non-Muslim, experience fewer human rights and freedoms under the Bush Administration’s Democratic Iraq than they did under Saddam Hussein's military dictatorship. Furthermore, Iraqi women not conforming to strict dress and behavior are not protected by the new Iraqi constitution from violence perpetrated by fundamentalist groups and foreign military forces.

The battle for legalised women’s rights is taking place on many fronts and Iraqi women such as Riverbend illustrate that women are still at the centre of new social movements for equality in Iraq’s civil society through democratic process in cyberspace and in ‘real life’. The liberating potential of weblogs not only offers women an additional space for ‘disembodied’ communication outside the traditional and national political environment; but due to the immediacy of information communication, ideas and opinions are provided instant space and recognition.

Notes

1. The so called divide between Sunni Muslims, Kurds and Shia is well documented, but does not represent the important internal divisions of Islam. Jabar (2003: 63) states the variance in the group known as Shia is understated. “Shi’is do not form a monolithic, homogenous, cultural/social identity… imbued with a unity of interests and purpose, but are rather diverse, even sundry groups adapting and reacting to their changing reality and subscribing to various ideological constructions” (Jabar 2003: 36). Prior to invasion Sunni Muslims held a position of authority enforced by the Sunni dictator Saddam Hussein. Iraq’s current government is held by Shia majority.

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