

The Sociological Cost of Democracy: A Comparative Study of Arab Women's Rights Using Iraqi Women Pre- and Post-2003 as an Illustrative Example

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Abstract

This article examines Arab women's rights with special reference to Iraqi women pre- and post-2003 as an illustrative example. Using content analysis of Saddam Hussein's speeches delivered to the General Federation of Iraqi Women in 1971 and *Woman* magazine in 1975, it explores the claim that "The liberation of women...has been the most dramatic achievement of Saddam's regime" (Aiyar, 2013). A literature review of various works involving NGOs, governmental agencies, field reports and the United Nations will provide a contextual framework, in addition to statistical data used within a cross-regime analysis during Iraq's "transition-to-democracy". This article will contribute to a greater understanding of the moral imperative of human rights protection during phases of post-occupation national reconstruction.

Key words: Sociology; Democracy; Arab women; Women's rights; Post-occupation; National reconstruction

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INTRODUCTION

Before beginning with a content analysis of Hussein's speeches, it is necessary to provide a brief description of the General Federation of Iraqi Women- the Arab Socialist

Ba'ath Party's feminist revolutionary army. In *Women in the New Iraq*, Judith Colp Rubin describes the historical progress of the GFIW in writing,

By 1998, the Federation had 21 branches and ran some 250 rural and urban community centers offering job training, education, and other social programs for women. It also helped promote women in public office and initiated the changes in the personal status law. One of its most important functions was educating women about their legal rights through a radio and television campaign, and it even focused on abolishing gender stereotypes in education." (Rubin, 2008, p.5)

Indeed, essential to understanding women's rights as entrenched within the political philosophy of Saddam Hussein is a working knowledge of the GFIW, as it was the only legitimate vehicle for social transformation recognized by the Ba'ath Party.

On April 17, 1971, Saddam Hussein addressed the Third Conference of the General Federation of Iraqi Women; he began his speech, *Women – One Half of Our Society*, with a brief historical overview of the condition of Iraqi women during the pre-revolutionary years, stating,

Throughout the pre-Revolution years, the women's organization (of the Party) had various militant duties and specific forms of struggle in which women joined men in the political and social fields. There was no organizational framework capable of absorbing and expressing the aspirations of millions of Iraqi women and mobilizing their energy in the fight against imperialism and Zionism and in the struggle for freedom and a better life. (Kishtainy, 1979, p.13).

He moves on to describe how the General Federation of Iraqi Women was created as a vehicle for the social, economic, and cultural transformation of Iraqi women, continuing,

Under the aegis of the Revolution which was led by our Party, the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party, circumstances were created for the building up of some social organizations, which included an organization for women- the General Federation of Iraqi Women- in addition to other associations for students, workers, peasants, members of the professions, doctors and writers. (Kishtainy, 1979, p.13).

Hussein continues by providing examples of the progressive roles Iraqi women have played in championing social progress- such as during the Revolution of 1920 (Kishtainy, 1979, p.13), when “the Women’s Organisation of the Arab Ba’ath Socialist Party undertook the active task of maintaining contact between the leadership and all Party organizations as well as between those comrades who had been arrested and those outside prison” (Kishtainy,19979, p.14), as well as in describing how the

women’s organization was also a mobilizing force among the people, channeling their protests and anger against the methods of imperialism and persecution and despotic actions practiced by the reactionary dictatorships against the Arab Ba’ath Socialist Party strugglers and all patriotic and progressive fighters. (Kishtainy, 1979, p.14)

Two notable themes are persistent in the opening of this speech as well as in the one subsequently analyzed; one, Hussein always places the General Federation of Iraqi Women within the framework of a pan-Arab struggle- i.e. as a struggle for Arab women’s rights rather than solely Iraqi women’s rights; secondly, the aims of the organization are always connected with those of the Ba’ath Party; moreover, the revolutionary character of the Party as well as its organizations is always clearly aimed at struggling against imperialism and Zionism.

Despite the backward conditions which wasted most of their potential,” he says, “women in our country have truly played a noble and prominent role in our people’s struggle for freedom from imperialism, dictatorship and reactionary regimes and for achieving the pan-Arab aims of unity, liberty and socialism. (Kishtainy,1979, p.13)

Hussein emphasizes the exemplary progress Iraqi women have made in comparison with their Arab counterparts, especially in terms of their strength in the workforce as well as their high literacy rate, discussing higher education as well as Iraqi women’s deep involvement in every career field. He states,

Education of women is not restricted in our country at the primary stages, nor has women’s employment been restricted to minor responsibilities. Iraq’s five universities include a large proportion of female students and a number of women have acquired high qualifications in medicine and engineering. Some women are now teaching in the universities. Women in Iraq have also reached high positions in the government and become ministers and directors general. Others are vigorously working in such fields as the judiciary, the arts, literature, research and journalism. (Kishtainy, 1979, p.14)

Previously mentioned is Hussein’s notion of women’s conditions as being ‘backward’ as a result of inhibiting cultural and historical factors; indeed, he continuously argues for the progressive emancipation of women and the full release of their potential within a national and pan-Arab framework. Moreover, he stresses that the true freedom of women cannot be actualized *except* when the party goals of ‘unity, liberty, and socialism’ are requisitely achieved. He declares,

The complete emancipation of women from the ties which held them back in the past during the ages of despotism and ignorance is a basic aim of the Party and the Revolution. *Women make up one half of society. Our society will remain backward and in chains unless its women are liberated, enlightened and educated.* (Kishtainy, 1979, pp.14-15, italics added for emphasis)

Connecting his theoretical ideals with practical advice and advocated methods of implementation, he charges the Federation and all organizations within the country with the task of working toward the progressive emancipation of women in all areas. Arguing that women face a more formidable social existence than men, he recommends solutions to their struggle in stating,

We are all- in the Party and the Government, and in the social organizations- expected to encourage the recruitment of more women to the schools, government departments, the organizations of production, industry, agriculture, arts, culture, information and all other kinds of institutions and services. We are called upon to struggle tirelessly against all the material and psychological obstacles which stand in our way along this path. The obstacles which stand in the way of women in the various areas of life are greater than those which are facing men. This fact makes it incumbent on all the awakened elements in society to support woman in her natural and legitimate endeavor to occupy her place in society. Those who still look on women with the mentality and ideas of the ages of darkness and backwardness do not express the aspirations and ambitions of the Revolution. They are at variance with the principles of the Party which are essentially based on freedom and emancipation. Indeed, they are in opposition to every true desire for progress. (Kishtainy, 1979, p.15)

Hussein’s advocacy of freedom for women might bring one to question the underlying notions thereof- simply put, what type of freedom does he mean? He answers this question, as he does all others, by connecting, once again, the idea of women’s emancipation with the overall aims of the Ba’ath Party and the advancement of the Arab Nation as a whole. Moreover, he does so with Kurdish women in mind- pointing to the fact that his framework is not simply one meant for Iraqi women alone (in that it is pan-Arab) nor for Arab women alone (in that it is Iraqi/non-Kuridsh); rather, it is truly nationalist, in the sense that it is inclusive of Kurdish women as Iraqi non-Arabs and of non-Iraqi women of the pan-Arab nation. He expresses this in stating,

The women of our country are the descendants of the immortal Arab women who fought valiantly side by side with their menfolk, wrote the poetry of chivalry and glory and participated in the great Arab heritage of civilization. Thanks to their conscious commitment to the Revolution and the ideals and interests of the masses, and their correct understanding of the national characteristics of our civilization and heritage, *the Arab women, together with their Kurdish sisters and all other women of Iraq*, are capable of following a correct path and playing their pioneering role in the construction of the revolutionary society. (Kishtainy, 1979, p.16, italics added for emphasis)

As regards the nature of the freedom he seeks for the Arab woman, he describes this as a moral freedom, a freedom based on enlightenment- adding that not only

would a stifling of women's freedom be an injustice to women themselves but would inhibit the potential of the nation as a whole.

The struggle against the camp of imperialism, Zionism and reaction, with all their modern means of science and destruction, requires committed, educated and free human beings. Any segregation of women or anything less than their full participation in society deprives the homeland of half of its citizens and half of its intellectual, productive and fighting potential...The bourgeois concepts of women's emancipation will not bring her any genuine freedom or either moral or material progress. The commitment to the Revolution and the defence of its ideals and gains, together with the maintenance of the interests of the toiling masses, are the only way to the liberation of women. (Kishtainy, 1979, p.16).

Clearly, it is a *new kind of freedom* that Hussein seeks for the Iraqi woman- one that is revolutionary in nature and moral in scope, one that is progressive and constructive, benefitting not only the Iraqi woman herself but the Iraqi nation as a whole; his concept of women's emancipation strategically makes persuasive an argument that- to the opponent of women's freedom, who might yet be patriotic- frames women's liberation as essential rather than optional- necessary for not only the progress of Iraq, but the Pan-Arab Nation as a whole. He skillfully articulates this in exclaiming,

An enlightened mother who is educated and liberated can give the country a generation of conscious and committed fighters. 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 life of the community! (Kishtainy, 1979, p.16)

In his closing statement, he reaffirms the Federation in its task of serving as a vehicle for the social, economic, and cultural transformation of Iraqi women, emphasizing the importance of its role in terms of macro-level objectives. This speech set the framework for the many that would be addressed in the future to the Federation, in years to come which would see the practical application of his theoretical advances- illustrated in his last charge-

May this Congress become an important turning point in the work of your Federation so that its activity will cover every farm, factory, school, office and every part of society. In this way, your Federation will be able to spread among women the principles of freedom and struggle for unity and socialism, to combat illiteracy and ignorance among women, to arouse their enthusiasm for more learning and knowledge, to instruct them in the methods of community work and to encourage them to participate extensively in the life of the community and the new revolutionary construction. (Kishtainy, 17)

In April, 1975, Hussein gave a statement to *Woman* magazine in response to "International Woman's Year". Approaching women's rights from a more practical rather than theoretical position, he begins, once again, with placing the struggle for the emancipation of women within the framework of party goals as well as within the framework of the fight against imperialism and Zionism. In terms of the premises of party ideology, he describes "the human being, whether man or woman, as both the good and basic instrument of the struggle" (Kishtainy,

1979, p.21). Similar to the previously analyzed speech delivered to the General Federation of Iraqi Women in 1971, he discusses how the total social, cultural, and political freedom of women cannot be achieved except within the framework of complete revolution on both a micro (Iraqi national) and macro (Pan-Arab) level. Moreover, he emphasizes the need to avoid passive reliance upon circumstance in advocating, rather, for progressive action on all fronts in leading to social change for women, pointing out the need to be wary of two ideological traps, or "erroneous tendencies"...

The first- to define the role and importance of women in society on the basis of feudal or bourgeois ideology which assumes that the first and last role for women is in the home and treats them as second-class citizens. Thus women are stripped of their humanity and deprived of their creative spirit and mental powers. The second, to accept certain superficial aspects of what is called modernization in those societies and countries which are advanced in this field as if they were models for the freedom and development of women. By rejecting both tendencies we can abandon the feudal and bourgeois mentality and retrogressive tyranny and emphasize at the same time our refusal of the false and superficial kinds of development which do not penetrate to the essence of the problem but only deal with its surface. (Kishtainy, 1979, p.22)

Hussein moves on to emphasize that legislation alone is not enough to ensure the objective conditions necessary for the full realization of women's rights. Moreover, revolutionary progress must be made in light of the current situation of backwardness that prevails with a 'proper balance' that leads not to the detriment of the struggle's progress but rather- in order to avoid risk as a result of uncalculated haste, to the slow but sure liberation of the Iraqi woman (Kishtainy, 1979, pp.1-22). He adds that while the country's social organizations as a whole are charged with the task of ensuring the conditions necessary for the realization of women's rights, Iraqi women themselves must play the essential role of becoming more active in all fields.

Action to overcome the degrading view of women which is the product of the ideals of a tribal and feudal society must be kept up through a revolutionary effort against the attitude which preaches submission to the dictates of haphazard development. Although this task is a general responsibility, there is a primary need for a distinctive participation of women as a result of the circumstances of oppression, exploitation and backwardness inflicted on women with all their negative effects that must be eradicated. The achievement of the complete emancipation of women is a revolutionary necessity for accelerating the wheels of progress. The present realities of our society and the critical challenges facing it allow no room whatsoever for excluding the woman from the Pan-Arab and national tasks. These require her participation in meeting these challenges and providing the various essentials which constitute the dynamic struggle against them. The emancipation of women is a principal basis for bringing up the new generation and the discharge of its heavy responsibilities. (Kishtainy, 1979, p.23)

Similar to his ending in the previously analyzed speech, Hussein leaves by charging the magazine's readership with the responsibility of ensuring the

implementation of conditions that will allow for the actualization of women's rights- but not without first strategically criticizing the United Nations (whose resolution had dedicated 1975 as "international Woman's Year" (Kishtainy, 1979, p.21) in saying, "Above all, we must say that restoring women to their natural place in society, especially the Arab society and many parts of the Third World, will not be achieved by holding celebrations in their honor on this or that occasion. Despite the significance of dedicating a particular year to women and calling it the "International Woman's Year", it is for the most part a reflection on the backward conditions of women which cry out for a struggle on every front for their improvement. As strugglers, I believe we all have an arduous task to perform in this field: "The task of fighting to remove the division between principle and practice so as to translate our slogans and our tenets into a tangible living reality- that is a truly advanced revolutionary society" (Kishtainy, 1979, pp. 24-25).

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In *Iraqi Women's Lives Were Better Under Saddam*, Dahr Jamail and Abdu Rahman provide a cross-regime analysis of the condition of women's rights under Saddam Hussein in comparison with the present-era, i.e. after his overthrow by invading forces. Through various interviews with Iraqi women, they describe how women's rights have suffered a loss at the hands of the occupation- particularly in light of the countless abductions that now take place as a result of a general lack of security within the region, numerous cases of internal displacement, a rampant corrosion of familial stability in light of the detention of male head of households, and the general lack of parliamentary representation for Iraqi women as a result of partisanship and Iranian interventionist politics.

Citing legislative examples such as the decreasing duration of maternity leave from one year, under Hussein, to six months, under the current regime, as well as Article 2 of the (new) Iraqi Constitution which states that "Islam is the official religion of the state and is a basic source of legislation," and that "No law can be passed that contradicts the undisputed rules of Islam," the authors illustrate the effects of the U.S.-led invasion on women's rights as a whole (Jamail, 2010, p.1).

Noteworthy is the fact that, unlike in Hussein's speech to the Third Congress of the General Federation of Iraqi Women in 1971, there is an obvious shift from a pluralistic-nationalist rights approach to one which leads the Refugees International report to state, "Not one woman interviewed by RI [from among Syrian refugees and the internally displaced women within the Kurdish region] indicated her intention to return." (Jamail, 2010, pp.2-3) Perhaps most importantly, especially in light of the overall theme of this article, the authors point out the

failure of women's rights protection in transitioning to democracy in citing Yanar Mohammed, the President of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), as "[blaming] the United States for abdicating its responsibility to help develop a pluralistic democracy in Iraq." (Jamail, 2010, p.2)

Rania Khalek, in her article, *Was Life for Iraqi Women Better Under Saddam Hussein*, similarly cites Mohammed as criticizing the effects of democracy-transition in Iraq on women's rights. Mohammed states, "more than 3 million women and girls [have] no source of income or protection, thereby turning them into a helpless population" (Khalek, 2013, p.2). Khalek moves on to discuss the implications of this lack of protection for women and respect for women's rights within a lawless political situation. She writes,

According to Human Rights Watch's 2013 Iraq Report, the torture and rape of women detainees in pre-trial detention has continued with impunity under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government, but the United States is partly responsible. "The failure of the US and UK to hold their troops accountable for abuses in detention and extra judicial killings during their presence in the country seems to have paved the way for the current government to make excuses for abuses, failure of law and order and lack of accountability," argues HRW. (Khalek, 2013, p.2)

Pertinent to the comparative analysis of regime change, which will be further discussed in the conclusion of this article, it is important to note the fact that the Hussein government was secular while the current al-Maliki regime is Shari'a-based. This could perhaps partially explain the seeming deterioration of women's rights in comparing the two eras. Khalek touches on the threat of Islamist fundamentalism- particularly with regard to the now-prevalent sex trade in Iraq- as well as U.S. responsibility for human rights protection during this critical time in Iraq's history, in writing,

As the country's leadership took a turn toward religious fundamentalism- several mass killings of prostitutes and suspected sex workers followed. As the occupying power at the time, the United States was legally responsible for protecting and upholding the human rights of Iraqi civilians. It failed miserably (Khalek, 2013, p.2).

2. RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA

This study used qualitative and quantitative analysis to assess the status of Arab women's rights using Iraqi women's rights pre- and post-2003 as an illustrative example. More specifically, it entailed content analysis of Saddam Hussein's speeches given to the General Federation of Iraqi Women and interview and public opinion polling data provided by various sources, including IRIN – UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the CRS Report for Congress - Women in Iraq: Background and Issues for U.S. Policy - and the Thomson Reuters Foundation's third annual poll

on women's rights in the Arab world.

IRIN, humanitarian news and analysis, a service of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, discusses changes in the condition of women's rights before and after Saddam, touching on aspects that affect women's freedom involving parliamentary representative power, the threat of religious fundamentalism, and unemployment. Having conducted a survey on NGOs within Iraq in order to assess the condition of women's rights, it indicates that there is presently no real opportunity for political participation for women, religious fundamentalism- noted in a similar fashion to those authors previously mentioned- is restrictive of women's daily freedoms, and unemployment is at a rise. It states,

Women's groups point to the new government, many members of which take a conservative view when it comes to the role of women. "When we tell the government we need more representation in parliament, they respond by telling us that, if well-qualified women appear one day, they won't be turned down.... (IRIN Middle East, 2006, p.1)

In terms of religious fundamentalism, it continues, "Shari'a has been misinterpreted by elements within the government and by certain religious leaders, which has resulted in the frequent denial of women's rights. This is particularly the case in matters pertaining to divorce..." (IRIN Middle East, 2006, p.1), and lastly, with regard to unemployment, "Female unemployment is now twice as high as that for males, while female poverty has also increased" (IRIN Middle East, 2006, p.1).

Aaron D. Pina shares a similar research approach in the CRS Report for Congress, *Women in Iraq: Background and Issues for U.S. Policy*, writing,

The issue of women's rights in Iraq has taken on new relevance, following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, efforts to reconstruct Iraq, and recent elections for a Transitional National Assembly (TNA). One of the major questions facing U.S. policymakers is the extent to which the United States can help Iraqi women reintegrate into the political, educational, and economic spheres after a long period of decline, exacerbated by three major wars and more than a decade of economic sanctions. Advancing the political and social position of women and committing adequate resources to girls' education have both been linked to the achievement of efficient and stable development, particularly in post-conflict regions. (Pina, 2005, p.1)

CONCLUSION

With such visibly drastic changes in the respect for women's rights, it is only natural to question the assumed relationship between democracy transition and human rights protection. Indeed, what can lead to such an observation as that found in the "Thomson Reuters Foundation's third annual poll on women's rights in the

Arab world [which] puts Iraq nearly dead last- 21 out of 22 Arab states- for women's rights" (Germanos, 2013, p.1)? Andrea Germanos, in *What Sanctions, War, Occupation Brought to Iraqi Women: Collapse of Rights*, writes,

Now, according to *Reuters*, Iraq is more dangerous for women than it was under Saddam Hussein's regime, "Although few miss Saddam's iron-fisted rule or the wars and sanctions he brought upon Iraq, women have been disproportionately affected by the violence that has blighted the lives of almost all Iraqis"... Yet the country was once at the vanguard of women's rights in the region. (Germanos, 2013, p.1)

This article has attempted to address the problem of women's rights protection during democratic transition by conducting a comparative analysis of Arab women's rights – and, particularly, Iraqi women's rights pre- and post-2003 – so as to contribute to a greater understanding of the moral imperative of women's rights protections during processes of regime change, with a particular emphasis on post-occupation national reconstruction. It is essential- if modern proponents of human rights are to crusade under its banner- that the cost of democracy is not paid by the dignity of its beneficiaries.

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