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Women's Political Participation in Post- Invasion Iraq

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Nicola Pratt: My research centers on the role of women and gender in the political transition in Iraq. I'm trying to problematize women's political participation, and my starting point has been the feminist literature on women and political participation, and on women in liberal democracy. In the paper I'll be discussing today, I look at literature on democracy in post-conflict situations, and the jury is out on whether democracy is good or not in post-conflict situations. My presentation here will focus on the empirical work I've done that looks at what has been happening to women in Iraq; I will try to draw some links between the empirical work and the existing literature to ask whether this case study can tell us anything new about women and political participation in post-conflict situations. I should also say that although I'm giving this presentation on my own, it's part of a research project that I've been doing with Nadjé Al-Ali¹. Nadjé is a social anthropologist and I am a political scientist, so we have done a division of labor. I've been focusing more on the questions that deal with politics as it is usually defined, while Nadjé has been concentrating more on women activists and looking at things from the grassroots up. Together, we have written an article that was in the "Middle East Report," which is a current affairs magazine published in the United States; if you are interested in seeing how we fit together – her approach and my approach – our article was published in Summer 2006.

Main Argument

- (1) The usual focus is on women's bodies, not gender relations → 'bringing women into politics'
- (2) Instead, look at gender relations and how they are shaped by state and national processes
- (3) Women's political participation is shaped by state fragmentation, sectarianism/communalism

¹ Nadjé Al-Ali is senior lecturer in social anthropology at the Institute of Arab & Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, UK. She is specialized in women and gender issues in the Middle East, especially women's movements and activism in Egypt and Iraq. Al-Ali is a founding member of Act Together: Women's Action on Iraq, a London-based group of Iraqi and British women raising consciousness about the effect of war and occupation on women and gender relations in Iraq.

The most common approach to women and political participation in post-conflict situations tends to focus on what I call 'women's bodies,' i.e., getting more women into the political process. It is all about increasing the *numbers* of women in the political process. When I look at Iraq, and what agencies have been doing inside Iraq with regard to women's political participation, that seems to me to have been the overwhelming focus. But the idea that we need to bring more women into politics is problematic, especially with regard to Iraq. What I argue is that when we are trying to understand women's political participation in post-conflict situations, instead of looking at the *numbers of women*, we will find it more fruitful to look at what is happening to *gender relations*, and how gender relations are shaped by state and national processes.

In Iraq currently, women's political participation has largely been shaped by the state and national processes that have been going on since 2003. These processes can be briefly characterized as state fragmentation, and growing sectarianism and communalism. Seeing the importance of state and national processes leaves me wondering why so much feminist writing has been focused on women's political participation with regards to liberal democracy, because right now I'm not so sure that liberal democracy is actually the issue. I think the place to focus is the state and national processes.

Where are the women?

- \$10 million Women's Democracy Initiative
- 'There was a need to bring women into the political process immediately.'



First of all, I want to start off by saying there's been a lot of emphasis and focus within official discourses – particularly by this U.S. administration – about women's political participation in Iraq or Iraqi women in general. This picture [see above] of the woman with the purple voting stain on her finger is probably one of the most common images associated with the elections that took place in Iraq in January and December of 2005. It's interesting that if you do a Google search for "elections in Iraq," the majority of pictures will be of women. So women in Iraq have really been used to symbolize the new Iraq – not only within the rhetoric of the US administration, but also within the imaginaries of Western media. In other things I've written, I point to speeches by, for example, Paul Wolfowitz. He talks about Raja al-Khuzai, who was a member of the Governing Council (the interim body that was set up by the US administration in July 2003 as sort of an advisory body to the Coalition Provisional Authority). She used to be an obstetrician in the south of Iraq, and Paul Wolfowitz makes the link between Raja al-Khuzai – "who enabled women to give birth to many children in Iraq – and is now giving birth to the new Iraq."

In March 2004, as part of this commitment to women in Iraq, the US State Department announced, with much fanfare, a 10 million dollar "Women's Democracy Initiative." Somebody at the State Department told me that "there was a need to bring women into the political process immediately." And what did this Women's Democracy Initiative entail? Well, it was funded,

then subcontracted to six different NGOs (all US-based but with a presence in Iraq) to do things like train women in voter education and train potential women Parliamentarians. The Initiative also included entrepreneurship skills, because the US administration considers entrepreneurship a vital pillar of democracy. Interestingly, one of the US NGOs that was subcontracted to carry out training of women in democracy was the Independent Women's Forum, which is an NGO that is very much ideologically tied to the neo-conservative agenda, and very antifeminist.

Women in the political process

- “Iraqi women's organizations got themselves organized much faster than anyone else so they were constantly in appearance, meeting with senior officials and pushing for more change.”
- 25% quota for women in Parliament

Women were already in the Iraqi political process. One of the problems is the whole attitude of the US administration: that women had to be ‘brought in’ to the political process and that there weren't any women there before the US made the effort to bring them in. This is, of course, rubbish, because Iraqi women were very much around from the beginning; as soon as the Baath regime fell, women activists were organizing. As noted by someone who was working in Iraq immediately after the fall of the Baath regime: “Iraqi women's organizations got themselves organized much faster than anyone else, so they were constantly in appearance, meeting with senior officials and pushing for more change.” So there definitely were women who were participating before the US decided – one year later – that they needed to be brought into the political process.

In fact, I should say that the Iraqi women were there *despite* US efforts, because the US – in the person of Paul Bremer, who was the head of the Coalition Provisional Army (CPA) – was very much against the idea of quotas for women in Parliament. It was through women mobilizing and lobbying that they managed to ensure that the transitional administrative law and the permanent constitution that was drafted in 2005 included an article guaranteeing a minimum of 25% women in Parliament (like a quota). So that was because of women's efforts, not because of a US effort to bring women into the political process. Understandably, if you speak to different Iraqi women activists, they will point to this achievement as very significant for them; they did get their act together very quickly and they were successful in achieving the 25% quota (they actually asked for 40%, so 25% was a compromise, but obviously much better than a lot of other places around the world, including the US and Britain).

But despite their efforts, women in Iraq have experienced an erosion in their ability to participate in the political process. So if women were there in the beginning and, despite US efforts, women managed to mobilize and achieve an important gain for their right to be in the political process, what happened? Why is it that women are now finding it increasingly difficult to participate politically?

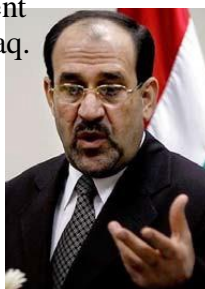
To answer that question, you need to really concentrate on what's been happening with the men....

In Relation to Men?



So here I have pictures of a man who is in a militia, and then I have a picture of the current President and the Prime Minister.

These men represent the leaders of communal politics, different communal factions within Iraq.



The Prime Minister is drawn from one of the Shi'a parties, and the President from one of the Kurdish national parties. I juxtaposed these pictures because they are two sides of the same coin, in a way. The growth in communal sectarian politics has helped to fuel the violence. The result of this is the fragmentation of the state.

The militias are linked to different sectarian groups in Iraq. It's not just that there is an insurgency against the US military. There are the Badr Brigades (linked to SCIRI, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq); there's the Mahdi Army (linked to the Sadrist political movement); there's the Peshmerga – interestingly nobody calls the Peshmerga a militia group, but basically they're Kurdish militias – and they filled the security vacuum that came about with the fall of the Baath regime, the dismantlement of the Iraqi Army, and de-Baathification. All of these created a security vacuum and a situation in which there was no law and order anymore, so militias have been able to take advantage of this. What you see now, particularly in Baghdad, is a sort of a situation similar to the Lebanese civil war, with different militias controlling different neighborhoods. There is a police force, but it doesn't operate in the interests of the security of ordinary citizens.

The sectarian politicians were politicians in exile brought in by the US (with the exception of the Kurdish leaders, who were able to remain in the Kurdish region from 1991 onwards because of the safe haven) The Shi'a parties and the party of Iyad Allawi were existing in exile, and the US brought them into government. They gave them seats in the Governing Council on a sectarian basis. There were so many seats allocated for Shi'a, so many for Sunni, so many for Kurds, and so on.... Since the Governing Council was formed in July 2003 following the invasion, this time period has sort of set the precedent for how national politics in Iraq has functioned ever since. But also, it's not only that politicians are sectarian; the state processes that have also been happening and the unraveling of the state are also linked to the way that the political process itself was staged.

So there was no continuity in ministries – one interim government was followed by another interim government, which was followed by the permanent government that we see now. Personnel changed in the ministries with each interim government and ministries were divided

up along sectarian lines, so they became fiefdoms of different political sects. As a result, no capacity-building was going on within the Iraqi state itself. This is a state that was already on the verge of crumbling after a decade of sanctions, so the state was already close to collapse, and the US basically helped to kill off the state completely.

When the US helped dismantle the Iraqi state, human rights and women's rights were also removed from the state. Although the state is often a major violator of human rights, it was necessary to have an Iraqi state to secure human rights and women's rights – without the state, there are no human rights or women's rights in Iraq.

Reconstructing patriarchy

- From: 'state feminism' (1970s-)
- To: 'state conservatism' (1990s-)
- To: authority of communal leaders (2003-)
- 'Iraqis are free in their adherence to their personal status according to their own religion, sect, belief and choice, and that will be organized by law' (devolved to regions)

I'll now frame what's happening in a longer-term historical context, and link that to state processes, and try to think about state processes in terms of gender. For this, I use the term 'reconstructing patriarchy.' Of course, patriarchy is a contested term within feminist writings, but for me it sums up the different phases of state building and dismantling that we've been seeing in Iraq, with different consequences for women.

If you look at Iraq in the 1970s, you could say there was a positive 'state feminism.' Women were encouraged to go out to work, through policies such as very favorable maternity packages and the provision of crèche facilities. And there were changes made to the personal status law, which is what governs family relations in the Arab World. It was a unified codified law so that every woman throughout Iraq was subject to the same provisions (regardless of her religion or her ethnic background), and it regulated things such as the age of marriage, divorce proceedings, and child custody proceedings. Although it didn't grant complete equality between men and women within the family sphere, it was seen as a progressive law in comparison to neighboring states.

Even so, we shouldn't think of this period as a golden age; although the state was in some way guaranteeing women's participation, it was very much within the confines of what I would call a certain type of patriarchy, and that was where the regime itself was the one calling the shots. So although the personal status law freed women from the dictates of their male relatives, now it was the state that had the power to regulate marriage and divorce. You could say this was more progressive than women being subject to the decisions of their male relatives, but it was very much about the state, the regime itself

being in control of women's lives.

While the 1970s was a time of economic expansion and women were needed in the labor market, the opposite occurred in the 1990s. There was a sanctions regime in place, a shrinking labor market, and the economic situation was deteriorating, all of which made women vulnerable and forced them back into the home. Again, it was very much the state that was calling the shots there; it was all about the regime being in control of what was happening to women.

Post-2003 we have a different situation. In many ways, we see what looks like a continuity of the conservatism of the 1990s *vis a vis* women for various reasons, but this is a different type of conservatism. Women are being caught between the extreme violence that's happening and the power of different communal leaders. What was once about a state regime being in control of women's lives is now about different communal leaders using the family as one of the terrains in which they can assert their authority. An illustration of this is the constitution's Article 41 that was passed last year about the personal status laws: "Iraqis are free in their adherence to their personal status according to their own religion, sect, belief, and choice, and that will be organized by law." This article overturns the unified codified law governing marriage, divorce proceedings and child custody. Different regions of Iraq will have the power to legislate exactly what personal status laws they do codify, so you will see regional differences. Those different regions correspond to the different political spheres of influence of different communal leaders. So basically, one of the ways in which communal leaders are attempting to divvy up political authority within Iraq is through control over the family sphere and over women's lives. This is a different sort of patriarchy that we're seeing now, with particularly negative consequences for women.

To sum up

- Struggle between communal leaders
- Narrowing margins for independent voices
- Undermining universal citizenship
- Fuelling violence



So to try and sum up all of this, my major argument is that women's political participation has been eroded since 2003, and this is a result of the processes that have been unleashed since the invasion. On the one hand you've got a **struggle between different communal leaders** trying to get a piece of the political pie. These include the leaders in Parliament as well as the ones that have been largely excluded from formal political power. Basically, unless you line up behind one of these communal leaders, it's very difficult to operate.

Second, there is a **narrowing margin for independent voices**. You basically have to pick a patron as your protector, and these communal leaders obviously have links to the different militias. One of the women members of Parliament said that unless you are protected by a militia, it's dangerous to raise your voice and be active politically. Women are threatened directly by the violence that they might experience as a result of political participation.

Also, the fragmentation of political power as a result of the dismantlement of the centralized state has consequences for **universal citizenship**. Without universal citizenship, women's political participation again becomes increasingly difficult. This is why I have a problem with the critique of liberal democracy that feminists rightly make in some ways. The minimum standard would be the existence of universal citizenship; but in practice, that has completely disappeared in Iraq.

So women have nothing to grab onto there to give them a voice within the political sphere, and this feeds back into the **fueling of the violence**. Women are caught between competing political communal leaders who are overseeing the fragmentation of the state as they vie for political power and politics. Without universal citizenship for women, politics becomes a process of who has got the most guns and who can kill most people – it is politics by another means. Women experience that violence in particular ways because of conceptions about women's honor, and women's honor being tied to family honor or even community honor – so women are increasingly staying at home. It's not even that we're talking about an abstract political process in which women can or cannot participate; they can't even step out into the street anymore.

Basically it is not a positive picture. I think I'll stop there.

Carol Cohn: Just a quick note: some of you may have been with us at a Boston Consortium meeting about six months after the fall of Saddam Hussein when we had four Iraqi women activists with us who were speaking about the political future for women in Iraq in an extremely different, much more positive way. The meeting notes are available on our website, and some of you might find it interesting to contrast that political moment with this one.

Questions and Discussion

Q: I'm interested in the framing of your research here, before and after 2003. Do some of the dynamics you're talking about with women in relationships with communal leaders and to the state itself – do the roots of those relationships go back much further? Perhaps the disintegration from 2003 onward may have more to do with the older history of women's relationships to their tribes before the revolution in the '50s? Can you just talk about why are you calling it a disintegration, rather than a deconstruction or a reconstruction of some of the older types of relationships?

NP: The relationships you're talking about are communal/tribal relationships. You have to consider that all of these types of relationships are constantly being reconstructed. For example, one of the characteristics in the 1990s during social conservatism – although I said the regime was still very much in control – you see a devolution of power to tribal leaders. There was a re-tribalization of Iraq in the 1990s, so there was a rediscovery of tribes and tribal leaders that was linked to the problems of Saddam Hussein being able to maintain authority within the context of the economic deterioration and sanctions. And to some degree, state power was loosened as a result of that. The retribalization of Iraq definitely had a negative impact upon women's rights in general. For example, there was a reintroduction of respect for tribal laws.

So, already with some of the processes that I described that happened after 2003, you could see that in the 1990s there was a starting of devolution of power away from the state to tribal leaders (not communal leaders as much). Post-2003, those processes speed up as a result of the US invasion. The collapse of a single regime caused change, which led to something different about the nature of the state after 2003, which has to do with the importance of sectarian leaders, communal leaders. In my mind, I see things happening at the top, middle, and bottom with regard to increasing social conservatism and religiosity. Under sanctions, you saw an increase in religiosity and social conservatism. For example, Saddam Hussein brought in a law that said that women weren't able to travel without a male relative. So there were definitely things going on in the 1990s that increased some devolution of power from the state to other actors. But there is something qualitatively different about what happened after 2003, although there are lots of continuities as well.

Q: Just on that last point, when you talk about a rise in religiosity under the sanctions regime, could you talk a little more about why that came about?

NP: The increase in religiosity under the sanctions regime was partly a societal reaction to the very severe economic conditions that people experienced from 1991 onwards. It was not a natural reaction, but rather linked to people's feelings of desperation. It also had practical implications; the propriety of your female relatives became more important in a context in which you were unable to demonstrate your civility or your worth within society. If you were middle class, you were no longer able to show your status through wealth or consumption, so the propriety of female relatives became a substitute for that. There was something going on on the social level, but politically Saddam was using religion as a way of giving credibility to his regime. The so-called secular project of the

Baath party had failed to bring wealth and success to Iraqi society, so religion became an alternative project or way for Saddam Hussein to demonstrate his credibility to society and to win support from religious leaders. The re-tribalization was a way of winning support from a constituency of newly discovered tribal leaders, and religious leaders also represented another constituency. During the '70s and '80s, during the expansion of the state, the regime had been about rewarding the middle classes because the middle classes were the mainstay/support of the regime; keeping them happy and content was one way for the regime to maintain its stability and credibility. But with economic sanctions, that was no longer possible. There was a shift in regime constituencies away from the middle classes to conservative leaders.

Q: You were talking about women's political participation in the period of post-conflict reconstruction, but actually in Iraq there is no post-conflict yet, so you're talking about participation of women *during* the conflict. That's very difficult, because there are the militias with all the power, and they are not likely to share it with women. So as the country actually went into the conflict stage it became more difficult?

NP: Iraq really isn't a post-conflict situation, although all the agencies that are working on Iraq talk about it as a post-conflict situation. Other observers have said that after the invasion in 2003, there were things that the US did or failed to do that enabled the growth of militias and the general breakdown in law and order, which benefited the militias and other groups. There might be hope for women. Part of the reason this conflict is ongoing is a failure to address gender relations and to use a gendered lens in looking at the situation. One thing that troubles me as a feminist is that although of course I want to see more women in political positions, I feel that we're mistaken if we think that calling for more women at the negotiation table or in Parliament will help. Men were divvying up the political power, and creating the conditions in which violence could flourish. Women were calling for more seats in Parliament, but the political power is not in Parliament – the political power is elsewhere. Perhaps if we paid more attention in the immediate fall of the Baathist regime to the political institutions *per se*, then maybe there might have been a bigger window of opportunity to prevent the complete breakdown that we see now. The problem now is that the militias are going to carry on until they reach some sort of compromise, and certainly women's interests or human rights in general are not going to be part of that compromise.

Q: I think you're right in that there are difficulties in having any type of political participation during this type of conflict, but I am just wondering if there might be some sort of grassroots effort we're unaware of?

Audience Member: I just want to say a couple of things about the grassroots level. I think women are very active; they have a huge strength compared to what they are facing. We at UNIFEM [United Nations Development Fund for Women] are having training both in Iraq and in Jordan (bringing women from Iraq to Jordan). And women are moving, although of course it's difficult with security. But compared to the invasion period itself there is movement. First, women have representation in the Parliament; one

of the issues inside the Parliament is that they reached only 19-20% out of the 25% quota. And men put women in positions who didn't ask for that position, so you end up with women who aren't particularly interested in bringing a gender perspective. The second issue is that after the invasion, a lot of new NGOs were created. Being a women's activist in Iraq is very risky, so the NGOs are moving, but in a very secret way. They are meeting in places where nobody knows. UNIFEM has two local people in Baghdad who meet with these women; at this point it's not very easy, but I think they are doing a great job. From what I saw in Jordan in the training we had about constitution- and legislation-drafting, they really gave a lot of support. There is also a movement by men. Of course, it's a small number, but I think something is going on, but the public doesn't know it. There is hope.

Q: I used to work with some Iraqi women in politics who came to Indonesia for five weeks. Some NGO leaders were taken by the government to do voter registration in Iraq, and from our discussion they already were seeing some problems affecting the election. For example, with voter registration, it is very difficult for them to get the women registered. So my question is, you talk about women in politics at the higher level, but what about women at the grassroots level? Can anyone say the results of the election were truly representative of women?

NP: I focus on what I call the 'political process,' but ordinary women participate as voters. There are no figures available because the voting statistics aren't disaggregated, so we don't know what the gender balance was for voters, but anecdotal evidence says that there *were* women going out to vote. Of course, there were women excluded from the political process because of social exclusion, women in rural areas who in general suffer from different types of discrimination because of their situation. This argument has been made by Haifa Zangana, who is an Iraqi woman activist living in London. The point has been made that ordinary women in Iraq are not concerned with the constitution or political process because they're just trying to survive. Therefore, the priority of women activists on the national scene is not the priority of ordinary Iraqi women. As I've indicated, I don't anticipate that having women participate politically will ameliorate the situation for all women. However, women have a right to participate as citizens of Iraq. We shouldn't assume what their impact will be, in the same way we shouldn't assume what that of men in the political process would be either. My concern is not to discredit the idea that women should or shouldn't be in the political process, but more to talk about what the impact of the current political situation is on the majority of women. There's no data available to say what the situation of the majority of women is, but I believe that a system where at least there are opportunities for women to participate is better than a system where those opportunities have closed down – which is the situation that women find themselves in now.

Q: Do you have any suggestion as to how women can overcome these problems? They are respectful of Muslim laws but also there are so many political parties now in Iraq (hundreds of them), so how can they even compete among themselves since there are too many challenges that they have to face? You say 'women in politics' – which women?

There are just so many women representing so many different parties, but are they really engaging the people?

NP: The women who are being elected into the Parliament now, many of these women are not interested in women's rights. The majority party in Parliament is the Shi'a list – which is a religiously conservative list – and women are elected on party lists. There are lots of articles about women parliamentarians supporting wife beating and supporting introduction of Sharia family law. Women do not necessarily support women's rights or what we conceive as women's rights. Women don't necessarily define their interests in terms of gender, so much as religion or sect.

Q: In my experience in El Salvador, where women had been actively involved in the conflict, at the time of the ceasefire women were already organized and becoming autonomous – and then between the ceasefire and the formation of the new government, women's NGOs saw a flood of money coming in. They were able to get a head start over men's organizations since the men were still working on negotiations. But once the political parties were able to legalize themselves, it became much more of a battle for women's organizations to push a women's political agenda. This brings to mind two questions. First: do you know of a situation where women had few rights, and then the decline of the state led to an increase in women's rights? Second: there are times in that period before parties are reinstated that women may have more room to organize and press their demands, but soon that space closes up. What does this mean in terms of opportunities for women?

NP: Georgina Waylen wrote an article about women in political transitions which addresses the gap in the mainstream political science literature about democratic transitions.² She looks at Eastern Europe and compares it to Latin American countries, and finds that in Eastern Europe, in general, women had fairly progressive rights, but those rights were lost in the course of the political transition. In contrast, in Latin America, before the transition, you had conservative social norms and legislation that was on the whole quite reactionary, but women were able to make substantial gains after the political transition. Waylen believes that women's independent organization can directly explain the difference between women's gains. In the Eastern Europe cases, women's organizations were not as strong as in the Latin American cases, But in Iraq, there *were* women organizing and there were a plethora of women's groups – so I find it problematic to just focus on women's organizations or women's participation – it doesn't give you the whole story.

Comment: I would say that in the situation in Iraq, no one can do anything right now and until there is a situation where civil society can mobilize, there's no way to evaluate how much those women's organizations can do.

² Georgina Waylen. 1994. "Women and Democratisation: Conceptualising Gender Relations in Transition Politics," *World Politics*, April, 46, 3: 327-54.

Q: What strategies do you have to get more women into politics? Developing their leadership skills? How they speak to media? Are there any exchange programs to bring these women into other countries and train them?

NP: I think that women's political participation is a bellwether for a lot of things going on within a society. When I talk about women's participation, I'm talking about the full range of things that women participate in like men: sometimes they vote, sit on local councils, or participate in NGOs or grassroots groups. I would include all of these within the term 'political participation,' almost like public participation. Quotas are insufficient; although it is important to have women in the public sphere, a strategy that only tries to increase women's numbers in the public sphere is not a strategy that works to secure women's presence in the public sphere. Because women's presence in the public sphere is dependent upon the nature of gender relations, and in the context of societal patriarchal norms, quotas are not going to work.

Gender relations are linked to state and national processes, so what happened in Iraq after the fall of the Baath regime, for me, was not a necessary outcome; the descent into the chaos that we see now in Iraq didn't have to happen. Things went on that helped that to happen, decisions were made, and meanwhile we were worrying about how many women were in the interim government. We were asking, "Where are the women?" Feminists were saying to Bremer, "Why aren't there more women in the Governing Council?" But that wasn't the issue. It was a serious indication of other things going on, but the problem with the Governing Council was that it was made up by sectarian quotas, not that there were only three women on it. That in and of itself has helped to fuel the situation we see now. The descent into conflict was as a result of a lack of gendered analysis of the state and national processes that were going on after the invasion.

Q: I remember in 2002 a lot of Iraqi expatriate women became very active. Was there a cultural clash between these returning expatriate women and women who had stayed in Iraq?

NP: Expatriate women who went back after the invasion were greeted with, "You weren't here, you didn't live it, how can you come back and try to lecture us on what we should be doing?" My colleague Naje Al-Ali has interviewed more Iraqi women and expats, as well as those who lived throughout sanctions and before that, and she has found that there was definitely a feeling that the expatriate Iraqi women coming to Iraq were being very patronizing. However, my impression of the splits and factionalism within the women's movement in Iraq is not necessarily along lines of expat versus insider; there have been coalitions of women who have always lived inside Iraq with women who have recently returned.

Naje Al-Ali would say that she thinks the major clashes are really around secular versus Islamist women. Certainly there's a lot of evidence to suggest that when you look at lobbying of the women to overturn personal status laws. The women who are lobbying for that are what we would call secular women, and the Islamist or religiously conservative women are against the change and actually support the idea that personal

status laws will be subject to religious clerics. The other thing you have to recognize is that women who are trying to get themselves in political positions are highly ambitious women who use the language of women rights as a way of justifying their own access to these political resources. (Now it becomes less relevant because women see that participating in the political process is a hazardous job.) We shouldn't assume that just because a woman identifies herself as secular that therefore she has all women's interests at heart. She may have her own interests at heart. It's a complex picture of the different rifts amongst women activists in Iraq. I feel the least important issue now is the one of expats versus the insider.

Q: What's going on now that's going to predict what will happen later once there is a central administration? What factors are going to delineate which women serve in which positions and how they will align themselves? Why not look at how its evolving and what it will look like in the future and why?

NP: I tried to allude to what's happening with women in some ways by talking about what is happening at the state level. I'm trying to extrapolate from state processes to how they're shaping gender relations. If you have a situation where state power is fragmenting along communal lines, then this will have a certain impact on gender relations that give less space to women to operate in the public sphere, with long-term negative consequences.

An interesting comparison is Lebanon, where despite the fact that the civil war came to an end in 1990, women are still struggling against the same issues and problems that they were before the civil war started. I know that women were active in the Lebanese civil war, there were women's organizations operating; some of them were trying to build across sectarian lines, some of those organizations were even part of militia groups or they were not challenging sectarian divisions within Lebanon. Different women were doing different things, and that's what's happening inside Iraq now. The resolution of the civil war in Lebanon was a compromise between different political factions that used sectarian identities as a way of legitimizing their position within the political process, and gender relations were central to that compromise. In Lebanon, the constitution states that each sect in Lebanon is responsible for its own family law. The Lebanese state is fragmented along communal lines, which is what I see happening in Iraq. This is a problem because women's ability to participate is dependent upon the nature of the state, and the reconstruction of gender relations is important to the construction of the authority of different communal leaders. This has long-term implications for women's rights and women's ability to participate.

Comment: I see it as a combination of several factors. First is the nature of the state, the fragmentation of the state, and where authority lies. Another combination is clearly whether or not women feel empowered, what their level of education is, how they are willing to mobilize, and how they can actually move into spaces that are created. I think the organization of the state does inform the discussion, but I just think more is going on.

NP: I suppose you are seeing a greater role for agency at the level of women's organization, while I'm being a bit structurally deterministic because I'm seeing women's agency being closed down. It's never that simple, though, is it?

Biography

Nicola Pratt, Ph.D., teaches at the University of East Anglia, England, in the area of Middle East politics and Feminist International Relations. She is particularly interested in how ordinary people engage in politics and shape crucial processes, such as democratization and peacebuilding. She has written on democratization in the Arab world, and is the author of a forthcoming book examining the failure of democratisation in the Arab world (*Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, to be published at the beginning of 2007 by Lynne Rienner). In addition, with funding from the British Academy and in conjunction with Nadjie Al-Ali at the University of Exeter, she has been studying the role of women and gender in the post-2003 political transition in Iraq.