Women's Agency in Times of Oppression and Conflict

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Abstract

In, 2000, the scholarly work of Caroline Moser pointed out that "gendered causes, costs, and consequences of violence and conflict are frequently marginalized in international and national debates, so too are the gendered nature of conflict resolution." As the major body of literature denoting the gendered causes, costs, and consequences of armed conflict relatively grew, the scholarly work on the gendered nature of conflict resolution or women's active roles in conflict and post-conflict contexts did not grow equally.

This situation becomes more difficult in unstable contexts, such as the Iraqi context, where the possibility of gathering practical data on the gender roles and power relations is harder given the constantly erupting violence and ongoing oppression. This article aims to highlight the various ways in which past and ongoing oppression, violence and conflict shape Iraqi women's responses and the purpose of their struggles.

The article aims to answer the following questions: in what ways do the conflict and history on in the context of Iraq shape the nature and course of Iraqi women's responses across history? To what degree the evolution in the type and source of oppression transform Iraqi women's responses and resistance? How do the new opportunities and limitations created in the post-invasion era contribute to such responses? Iraqi women have endured long periods of violence and oppression, but even in the face of conflict and oppression, Iraqi women played and continue to play very important and diversified roles. While some Iraqi women continue to participate in parliament and local councils, as per the constitutional quota, Iraqi women's major responses remain to be articulated through civil-society activism that does not only respond to the practical local needs of women but transcends to strategic roles through lobbying, advocacy and campaigning both nationally and internationally.

Keywords: Agency, Imperialism, Oppression, History, Conflict, Iraqi Women.

Introduction

In, 2000, the scholarly work of Caroline Moser pointed out that "gendered causes, costs, and consequences of violence and conflict are frequently marginalized in international and national debates, so too are the gendered nature of peacebuilding and conflict resolution". As the major body of literature denoting the gendered causes, costs, and consequences of armed conflict relatively grew, the scholarly work on the gendered nature of conflict resolution or women's active roles in conflict and post-conflict contexts did not grow equally.

This article aims to highlight the various ways in which past and ongoing oppression, violence and conflict shape Iraqi women's roles and the purpose of their struggle. It aims to answer the following questions: in what ways do the conflict and oppression in the context of Iraq shape the nature and course of Iraqi women's responses across history? To what degree the evolution in the type and source of oppression transform Iraqi women's responses and resistance? How do the new opportunities and limitations created in the post-invasion era contribute to such responses?

Iraqi women endured long periods of violence and oppression, yet in the face of conflict and oppression, Iraqi women played and continue to play very important and diversified roles. While some Iraqi women continue to participate in parliament and local councils, as per the constitutional

quota, Iraqi women's major responses remain to be articulated through civil-society activism that does not only respond to practical local needs of women but transcends to strategic roles through lobbying, advocacy and campaigning both nationally and internationally.

This article starts with situating the literature on women's agency and activism in the face of violence and oppression within the broader literature on women in conflict and post-conflict contexts. Then, the remainder of the article illustrates, in a chronological order, the different roles Iraqi women played and continues to play in responding to oppression and violence. In doing so, the article employs a qualitative methodology that combines review of literature and documents with in-depth interviews with four activists and members of Iraqi women NGOs, such as Amal Kabashi, the member of the Municipal Council of Sadr City and the Vice President of Women for progress center (WFPC) and Hala Al Saraf, the prominent activist and Director of the Iraq Health Access Organization.

Agency and Activism in the Face of Violence and Oppression

Despite the limited literature on women's active roles in conflict and post-conflict contexts, literature managed to shed light over these roles in three different evolutionary strands. The first strand of literature viewed women's position in conflict and post conflict contexts through their traditional roles as mothers and, subsequently, victims, thus perpetuating gender stereotypes and overgeneralizing women's status.

According to Tiamo (2000) and Moser (2000), wars and armed conflicts create and pose specific gender-related difficulties and constraints on women. Bunch and Carrillo (1992), Wallace (1993), Bennett et al (1995), Benjamin and Fancy (1998), Turshen and Twagiramariya (1998) and Moser and Clark (2001) highlight, for example, the various human rights abuses and violence women are exposed to during conflicts especially as refugees or during displacement. For some time, this narrow strand undermined women's agency and active roles. According to Sedghi (1994) many Third World women's movements, such as those in Algeria and Palestine, played significant resisting roles to colonial and imperial powers. Hence, in conflicts and fragile contexts, one has to look beyond the traditional roles of women, for women can play major roles in the face of oppression, violence and imperialism (Kaufman and Williams, 2010; Mazurana, 2010).

Against the first strand, scholars, such as Sharoni (2001) and Cockburn (2001) explore the roles of women in resisting oppression and responding to the gendered continuum of conflict and violence which continues from conflict to post-conflict contexts. Cockburn (2000, 2002 &, 2013) elucidates the dynamics of women civil society organizations and how civil society organizations are organized to respond to the needs of fellow women, including ensuring women economic security, combating violence against women and offering legal advice for women, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In her book From where we stand: War, women's activism and feminist analysis, Cockburn (2007) investigates more than sixty women organizations addressing war while emphasizing the reasons they are more inclined to organize separately from men. In Antimilitarism: political and gender dynamics of peace movements, Cockburn (2012) continues to explain the peaceful resistant roles of some women 'anti-war', 'anti-militarism' and 'peace' movements in Japan, South Korea, Spain and Britain and the elements and values they share. However, this assortment of literature does not fully capture other non-peaceful roles, which women play in conflict and post-conflict contexts.

George-Williams (2005) and Hudson (2006) encourage more context-specific depictions of women roles that allow for roles beyond the assumed peaceful roles of women. Their idea builds on Hilhorst and Frerks (1999)'s constructivist argument that gender differences are context-specific and not inherently peaceful as Fukuyama (1998) suggested. Hence, women's roles have to be analyzed within each context while taking into consideration the changing socio-cultural, economic and political parameters.

In Sierra Leone, for example, women were engaged in the planning and actual fighting activities (Mazurana and Carlson, 2004). In Sudan, Rwanda and Eritrea, women played violent and revenge-related roles (Bouta, Frerks & Bannon, 2004). Women were actors in uprisings, liberation movements and even combatants in countries, such as El-Salvador and Sri Lanka (Moser and Clark, 2001; Jansen, 2006).

In Algeria, South Yemen, Guinea-Bissau during the 1970s, Nicaragua during the 1980s and Palestine, women fought against colonial and imperial domination (Sedghi 1994; Sharoni, 2001). In their study for conflicts in 55 countries between 1990 and, 2003, Mckay and Mazurana (2004) found an active participation for women in 38 countries, including Macedonia, Lebanon and Uganda, not only in armed liberation movements but also in armies and guerilla forces, comprising from one tenth to one third of the combatants. In Guatemala and Bolivia, grassroots women's movements rose up against internal repression, class inequalities and capitalist oppression (Mazurana, 2013).

It is, thus, important not to impose presumptions about women' needs, priorities, behaviors or roles because these change from one context to another depending on the socio-cultural, political, security conditions. Different forms and degrees of oppression are capable of triggering a wide array and degrees of responses. According to Foucault and Gordon (1980), resistance occur when power is exercised for the sake of oppressing and repressing others. Resistance, hence, is inseparable from oppression by the powerful or dominant group which possesses more power and access to resources.

According to James Scott, resistance is exercised against material, status and ideological forms of domination. In that sense, Scott refers to a wide array of tangible and non-tangible forms of oppression. DiAngelo and Sensoy (2012) refer to another form of oppression that involves social institutions, organizations, and systems (e.g., government, media, education, religion and criminal justice system), which is institutional oppression. In this case, the policies, laws, norms, rules, and values governing institutions systematically benefit one group over others, creating and perpetuating systems of disadvantage based on social identity group membership.

In Civil Resistance and Conflict Transformation, Dudouet (2015) divides responses to oppression into two main analytical categories. The first category refers to conventional actions, including party politics, advocacy or diplomacy, dialogue and negotiations, litigation and institutional responses through legislation, legal action, and lobbying. Dudouet's second category is often used by an oppressed minority or disempowered majority while including violent/armed resistance, but also unarmed/peaceful resistance through protest and persuasion, non-cooperation, disruptive intervention and creative resistance (Dudouet, 2013). Instead of confining Iraqi women to their traditional roles, the following sections explore the various responses and forms of resistance deploy within different contexts of oppression.

Iraqi Women in the 1920s-1940s: Agency in the Face of Colonialism

Signs of Iraqi women's agency and resistance to oppression manifested itself early since the creation of the Iraqi state in 1920. At that time, elitist women, such as Asma' Al-Zahawi, Na'ima Hamuda, Fakhryya Al-Askari, Paulina Hassun, Hasiba Ga'afar, Okailat Al-Haidary and others, called for a greater role for women in public space, which resulted in the emergence of women journalism (e.g. Magazine Layla followed later by Al-Mar'a Al-Haditha, Fatat Al-Iraq, Fatat Al-Arab and others) and a number of women nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (e.g. Women's Awakening Club followed by the Iraqi Women's Union, the Child Protection Society and the Red Crescent Society) (Efrati, 2004 &, 2008; Al-Ali and Pratt, 2008; The Arab Women Pioneers Network, 2012).

As noted by Efrati (2008), the harsh realities inflicted upon the Iraqi society in terms of poverty, disease, and illiteracy as a result of the large-scale rural-urban migration and the new land- tenure system which converted tribal land into the property of shaykhs, have all prompted such middle and upper class women to action. Accordingly, women organizations at that time identified welfare and social work among their top priorities (Efrati, 2008).

In the 1940s, Iraqi women expressed their resistance to Fascism and Nazism through establishing the Anti-Fascism Feminist committee and later the Women's League Against Nazism and Fascism (LANF) founded by Naziha Al-Dulaimi, Amina and Sa'deya Al-Rahhal, Afifa Ra'uf, Rose Khadduri, Viktoria Noaman and Afifa Al-Bostany (Efrati, 2008; The Arab Women Pioneers Network, 2012). At the same time, Iraqi women played a significant role in resisting Monarchy and British colonization. They appealed to Gertrude Bell regarding the fate of the detainees, participated in mass funerals turning them into nationalist demonstrations, engaged alongside men in battle, carried equipment, provided support and supplies, and engaged in demonstrations against the 1948 Portsmouth treaty between Iraq and United Kingdom, which were met with wide arrests and violence (Ibid).

The League for the Defense of Women's Rights, for example, mobilized the masses of women out of their belief that the liberation of women could only follow the liberation of Iraq (Efrati, 2008). As noted by Efrati (2008), the resistance of Iraqi women reflected not only their nationalist awareness, but also their united voices demanding freedom and sovereignty and their willingness to make sacrifices for their country.

Iraqi Women under the Reign of Saddam Hussein: Agency in the Face of Oppression

Except for the Ba'th-sponsored women organizations, women's activism was highly restrained for decades under Ba'th regime, except (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2008). According to Lasky (2006), women who related to male oppositionist activists or deemed from Iranian descent were exposed to rape and sex trafficking or expelled out of the country. With 13 years of economic sanctions, additional burdens were placed upon women due to the deteriorating health care, lack of food and basic needs (Lasky, 2013). Some families in the center and south of Iraq had to force their daughters into early marriage to avoid their additional expenses, which made the age of marriage in such regions reach the ten years (NGO's Coalition of CEDAW Shadow Report, 2014).

At the same time, according to Lasky (2006), "women's legal rights and social and economic position teetered in an uneasy relationship with tradition: the overarching importance of the

traditional patriarchal family, extremist religious ideologies, and norms of family "honor" and reputation". Saddam Hussein's search for loyalty from conservative Sunni religious groups and tribal leaders also came at the expense of women's rights and freedoms (Lasky, 2013). The impact of religious and patriarchal values was greater, however, on rural and poor Iraqi women compared to more secular, rich or urban ones (Lasky, 2006). In that sense, Iraqi women were subject to oppression on the basis of gender, religious extremism and social class.

Despite the patriarchal and conservative values, religious ideologies and the Saddam Hussein's tendency to seek allies among conservative tribal leaders and Sunni religious groups, women's access to education and waged labor increased with men's involvement in wars and the expansion of the rentier Iraqi economy. The oppression of women under Saddam Hussein, in terms of rape, abductions, torture and other horrors they experienced, was presented by the U.S administration as the sole discourse in order to give credibility to the military intervention in Iraq (Office of International Women's Issues, 2003; U.S. Department of State, 2003; Al-Ali and Pratt, 2006 &, 2010).

However, Al-Ali and Pratt (2006) explain that such discourse, which has been replicated by some Iraqi opposition in exile and international NGOs working inside Iraq, was used to justify the US mission to liberate Iraq through the ouster of the Iraqi regime which has long oppressed women. However, the pre-invasion Iraq did not only witness violations of women's rights but also availed some opportunities for women in light of men's involvement in wars and the expansion of the rentier Iraqi economy (Ismael, 2004; Al-Jawaheri, 2008). Female enrollment in primary education increased from, 29.4 percent to 37.4 percent and from, 24.7 percent to, 29.6 percent in secondary education between 1968-1978 and from, 22 percent to 31 percent in post-secondary and university education between 1970-1981 (Ismael, 2004).

During the interview with Hala Al-Saraf, the activist and Director of Iraq Health Access Organization, she noted that "Iraqi women took the lead at work when men went to fight at the different fronts". Iraqi women occupied civil services positions and professions that were once male-dominated, such as oil project workers, construction supervisors, engineers, accountants, physicians and scientists (Ismael, 2004; Lasky, 2006). In addition, in 1991, the creation of a safe haven in the Kurdish north of Iraq enabled Kurdish women, who have long history of activism, to increase their involvement in the political life through participating in women's unions, women's organizations and civil society (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2008). Even during the wars and the 13 years of economic sanctions under Ba'th regime which led to a serious humanitarian crisis and dismantled the fabric of the Iraqi society causing the revival of the conservative religious values, Iraqi women continued to resist or participate in underground movements linked to opposition political parties (Ismael, 2004; Al-Jawaheri, 2008).

Iraqi Women after the Fall of the Ba'th regime: Another Phase of Oppression

The role of women in post-conflict reconstruction was emphasized in the UN landmark Security Council resolution 1325 adopted in October 2000, which recommends increasing women's representation and participation in decision-making processes in conflict-affected countries. The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 emphasized women's equal participation and inclusion on the different international, regional and national levels of decision making and in peace and security efforts, particularly in peace negotiations, peace-building, and post-conflict reconstruction (UN Security Council, 2000).

Contrary to the UN landmark resolution, Iraqi women's contribution post the 2003 remained very limited at best. In the interview with Amal Kabashi, a member of Sadr City Municipal Council and the International Women's Rights Protection Group and the Vice President of Women for Progress Center, she emphasized that the Iraqi women's participation in the political process after, 2003 was very difficult. The fall of the Ba'th regime did not result in the proclaimed emancipation of Iraqi women by the U.S forces, which the interviewee Al-Saraf and the 107 Iraqi women organizations which wrote the, 2014 CEDAW Shadow Report continued to label as the 'Occupation Forces' (NGO's Coalition of CEDAW Shadow Report, 2014). On the contrary, it demonstrated the start of another phase of oppression. According to Al-Ali and Pratt (2006), it resulted in lack of security, limited mobility, greater social conservatism and increasing and broader forms of violence.

To better understand the impact of these factors, all the interviewees, with no exception, pointed at the adoption and later application of women's quota in the Iraqi parliament to exemplify the oppressions and barriers which Iraqi women are going through, which eventually contributed to undermining the value of the Iraqi gendered quota. Since, 2005, a quota of, 25 percent for women in parliament was adopted with the aim of ensuring equal rights for women and men in representation and participation in political life (Khodary, 2016). In their struggle for quota, Iraqi activists drew on the pressure by many international women and human rights organizations to introduce gender quotas and increase women's political representation during the 1990s and the early, 2000s (Enloe, 2010). However, as noted by Al-Saraf,

> "After the U.S occupation to Iraq, many ideas came to the Iraqi scene imported from the west, including women quota. For the majority, this was called a window for opportunity or so it was meant to be. Personally speaking, I had my own stand against it because the same Iraqi activists who supported the quota were unable themselves to engage in the political process by running for candidacy or even voting because of the security conditions."

In the interview with the head of the Legal Department in the Iraqi Ministry of Justice and Social Affairs, Amnaa Muhammed mentioned that their representation (referring to Iraqi women) and participation in formal politics remains obstructed despite the inclusion of the quota for women in the new Iraqi constitution because of the security situation and the increase in sectarian strife and religious extremism. As Kabashi explained during the interview, the deterioration in the levels of safety and security in Iraq led to lower representation for us in the cabinet and public institutions and our presence was limited to the Iraqi parliament and local governments which had a set quota for women by law. As a result, while Iraqi women occupied, 25 percent of the Parliament and Provincial Councils as per the quota, they occupied only 3 percent of the Iraqi cabinet, 5.6 percent of the judiciary, 0.7 percent of the military, 1.4 percent of the police and 0 percent as governors and Deputy Governors (Cabrera-Balleza, 2014; Miller, Pournik & Swaine, 2014).

In addition to lack of security, the male dominated and patriarchal nature of the Iraqi society and politics rendered the quota less meaningful. In an interview with Aseel Al-Rubaei, a member in the Association of Iraqi Women, the Iraqi International Law Bureau and the Association for the Defense of Human Right, she reiterated that "we suffer from the restriction of our role within the Iraqi society either by fellow women or by males in the society". She continued to explain that "because the Iraqi society remains a tribal and male dominated society, our roles and the way to accomplish them are portrayed, and subsequently limited, by such socio-cultural parameters".

According to Amnaa Muhammed, "women who wish to participate actively in formal peace negotiations should be named by their male political counterparts". Most of the Iraqi women who were able to secure parliamentary positions represent traditional conservative parties which hardly believe in women's rights and women's role in policy and decision-making and many women were chosen because of their family and social ties to certain politicians within the parties (Cabrera-Balleza, 2014; Miller, Pournik & Swaine, 2014). Eventually, the political scene was dominated by coalitions associated with 'the occupiers' and male dominated political parties using the women quota to serve their strategic interest and secure seats for their parties. As noted by interviewee Al-Saraf,

> "We ended up with weak and un-deserved women taking part in the state building process because they are 'women' presented by the political powers who nominated them. We did not get the best but rather the weakest links who do not dare to challenge the political leadership and rather remain as voting powers to their parties regardless of credibility or trust. Many other colleagues still think that this is temporary and the most important thing is that we got the quota approved. I feel that we lost 13 years already with weak and miss interpretation of Iraqi women in politics. Women quota is, indeed, a proper affirmative action but only in informed societies that are capable of securing a seat for the competitive female candidates not in a society where education has been on hold for more than two decades."

In that sense, not only did the quota not improve the position of Iraqi women, but even contributed to worsening their stance. Formally speaking, Iraqi women are fairly represented in the legislature 'in number' or quantitatively but qualitatively speaking, they fail to represent their fellow women. On the one hand, because the conditioned Quota system is applied at the level of securing seats at the legislative level but not much at the other aspects of implementation level, middle class female employees are kept struggling in keeping their rights and securing positions for females in the upper level management and therefore we see less positions saved for deans of universities, DGs of institutions and Heads of Departments at implementing ministries. On the other hand, it led to divisions inside Iraqi women movement and activism. According to Al-Saraf,

> "Our Iraqi women representation is now fragmented into levels: those of the top of the pyramid who are selected to represent us in the Parliament and political parties' women quota. The women in this category face a major challenge in terms of their acceptance by the community as they stand at far distance from the actual conditions where women are stuck in". Apart from few, our 'representatives' or members of the Parliament show very little support to legislations that support women issues in parliament. At the wide end of the triangle is where the actual problems of the society appear and those are mainly affecting women. The wide base of the pyramid is where women suffer the impact of violence and wars against ISIS as it has impacted the families and the very existing of social rights of women."

Iraqi women were also subject to oppression by the state institutions and organizations which denotes clear lack of political will. In, 2006, women were excluded from the membership of the National Reconciliation Committee which was mandated to ensure rule of law, combat violence and spread social peace and values of tolerance and coexistence. Women were granted a small bureau in the committee that has no concrete roles, responsibilities or powers to mainstream gender in the reconciliation efforts and post-conflict reconstruction. On the contrary, its roles were merely ceremonial and consolidated the traditional stereotyped role of women (personal communication, 2016). Hence, refraining from challenging such stereotypes, the committee was only perpetuating and reproducing the old patriarchal culture and institutions. This was followed by limited attempt by the Iraqi government to engage women in peace negotiating teams or address their issues in the peace agreements (Cabrera-Balleza, M., 2014). As noted by Al-Saraf,

> "Though we talk about Iraq's success in launching the strategy of anti-violence against women and the launch of strategy of application of 1325 law in Iraq, we find that in reality, there has not been serious steps to set budgets to implement and/or ensure that there are enough available legislations that enhance the application of strategies to ensure success of steps taken."

Lack of political will continues to be present in the Family Statutes Law through which women were deprived from equal treatment in marriage, divorce, inheritance or custody and religious and tribal leaders were given the power to regulate family affairs in their provinces using their own interpretation of Sharia (Salbi, 2013). According to Zainab Salbi (2013), "this is not only making women more vulnerable, but it is giving women from various sects (Sunni or Shia) or religion (Muslim or Christian) different legal treatments on the same issues". The Iraqi government refrained also from applying the, 2014 NAP on UNS/RES/1325 and the 2013 National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women before it, among other national gender policies. Despite a budget of $36 million being appropriated for the implementation of the NAP, the relevant Ministries of Justice, Interior, Education, Social Affairs and the Ministry of State for Women's Affairs did not receive any of the allocated funds.

In late, 2019, the corrupt political order that has taken control of Iraq for nearly two decades resulted in massive protests sweeping across the Iraqi streets demanding. They demanded an end to corruption and patronage and called for jobs, better services and, most importantly, an end to the Iranian influence in Iraq.

Agency and Activism of Iraqi Women after the Fall of the Ba'th Regime

The limited success of the quota was met with active tendency of Iraqi women to pursue their needs and priorities through civil society activism on the local levels. The toppling of Saddam Hussein in, 2003 seems to represent a turning point in the creation of about hundreds Iraqi women organizations and networks, particularly in the center and south of Iraq (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2008). In, 2005, 80 women organizations representing different regional and ideological perspectives formed the 'Iraqi Women Network' with the aim of achieving social justice, influencing public policies and social practices to eliminate all forms of gender discrimination and ensuring woman's participation in political life (Cabrera-Balleza, 2014).

In her book From where we stand: War, women's activism and feminist analysis, Cockburn (2007) found that women organize separately from men not only because they strive to bring their particular experience during conflicts, but because in many situation they found themselves at odds with their leadership styles and methods which did not even incorporate their understandings and experiences in the decisions they take. In the interview with Al-Saraf, she explained that many women organizations took the path of law to defend rights of the vulnerable, while others worked at the humanitarian level to address widowhood, displacement and lack of economic opportunities. Such areas were hardly identified as a priority in male-dominated political parties and organizations.

Women organizations identified easing the suffering and assisting the groups most affected by the conflict situations, especially women and children, as their top priority. For example, Al-Saraf referred to the Health Access Organization, which was established by three women and have been particularly working in conflict zones for the last eight years to ease the suffering of the vulnerable Iraqi groups in the conflict areas of Iraq.

Throughout the Iraqi history, the perception that equal representation should be gradually achieved in due course as a country develops and as women's political commitment and resources increases through education and labor force participation, or what is called the 'incremental track' discourse, has led to the marginalization of Iraqi women, particularly in lowering activists' expectations for reform in the realm of personal status and women's participation in the highest levels of decision-making (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2010; Efrati, 2012). Hence, in post-invasion Iraq, Iraqi women NGOs forged a 'fast track' discourse that calls for women's representation in governments and policy-making bodies. While addressing women's practical needs, Iraqi women organizations pursued more strategic lobbying and campaigning (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2008).

In the interview with Kabashi, she pointed to the initiative by Iraqi women NGOs including the Women Empowerment Organization, the Women's Freedom Organization, the Iraqi Women's Association, the Assyrian Women's Union, Baghdad Women's Association, Iraqi Hope Association and ASODA to develop a National Action Plan (NAP) in, 2012 to implement UNS/RES/1325. The UNS/RES/1325, adopted in, 2000, emphasizes the crucial role of women in conflicts' prevention and resolution, peace negotiations, peacebuilding and in post-conflict reconstruction. NAP, which was later adopted officially by the Iraqi government in February 2014, was based on a number of pillars. One very important pillar was boosting women's participation in negotiations and decision-making. Another important pillar was protecting and assisting Iraqi women through improving their living conditions and ensuring an enabling legal environment that promotes equality and comply with international conventions. This way, Al-Saraf reiterates during her interview, "Women did shape our stand as those were mainly female activists who represented Iraq".

In addition, in response to government oppression and lack of political will, Iraqi women decided to take their battle to the national and international arenas in a more explicit manner. According to Al-Saraf, "Women organizations that are dedicated to the work on the conditions of women in Iraq are many and all have become experts in writing/editing/defending/condemning the laws related to women. Organizations like Al Amal take the lead and Iraqi Women Network as well as Baghdad Women, Women for Peace, Rafidain Coalition and many others are still very active in the areas of laws and regulations and in writing shadow reports etc."

The Iraqi women NGOs participated in preparing two reports assessing the status of women in Iraq, particularly the levels of their political participation amid conflict, violence against women, trafficking in women and prostitution, personal and marital status. One was a shadow report to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) prepared by over 107 women organizations and submitted in the 57th session in February 2014 in Geneva.

The other was Civil Society Monitoring Report for the implementation of UNS/RES/1325, which was presented at the commemoration of the 14th anniversary of the resolution in New York. In the two reports, the Iraqi women organizations assessed the status of women in Iraq, particularly the levels of their political participation. They denoted the deterioration of the percentage of women in peace negotiating teams and detailed breakdown of gender issues addressed in peace agreements.

The Civil Society Monitoring Report pointed to the Iraqi government reluctance to apply the, 2014 NAP on UNS/RES/1325 and the earlier, 2013 National Strategy to Combat Violence against

Women. Despite that a budget of $36 million was appropriated for the implementation of the NAP, the relevant Ministries of Justice, Interior, Education, Social Affairs and the Ministry of State for Women's Affairs did not receive any of the allocated funds according to the report. In the two reports, the Iraqi women organizations underscored worrying increases in the numbers and percentage of violence against women, trafficking in women and deterioration in women personal and marital status laws. Incidents of child marriage, honor crimes, beatings, torture, rape in Kurdistan, trafficking and sexual harassment increased to 3426 incidents in, 2014 compared to, 2485 in, 2010 (NGO's Coalition of CEDAW Shadow Report, 2014).

The Iraqi women organizations also asserted that the Iraqi Family Statutes Law deprived Iraqi women from equal treatment in marriage, divorce, inheritance or custody through giving religious and tribal leaders power to regulate family affairs in their provinces according to their own interpretation of Sharia (NGO's Coalition of CEDAW Shadow Report, 2014, Salbi, 2013). According to Salbi, "this is not only making women more vulnerable, but it is giving women from various religions (Muslim or Christian) or sects (Sunni or Shia) different legal treatments on the same issues".

The armed conflict and violence accompanied by the culture of stigma, silence and tendency to solve such issues through customary laws and within family have all contributed to the deterioration of women's security and safety and the impunity of perpetrators (Cabrera-Balleza, 2014). As Jenkins and Goetz (2010), Anderson (2010) Pankhurst (2016) emphasize, failing to address such acts of violence against women in post-war reconstruction, beyond the legal and moral issues, raises security concerns and undermines government legitimacy, especially with continuing impunity for perpetrators. Such failure causes major ruptures in society among men as well as between women at a time when it is hoped that families can contribute to social stability. As a result, Iraqi women organizations have campaigned against the attempts to replace the relatively progressive personal status law governing marriage, divorce and child custody with a more conservative law and to include constitutional guarantees ensuring compliance with international conventions, including the CEDAW (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2008).

In late, 2019, as vibrant protests swept across the Iraqi streets, women played an important role in these uprising. Most of the women who participated in the Iraqi uprising explained that their participation in the uprising was to denounce the violence which swept across Iraq (Al Ammar, 2020; Ali, 2022). As with major women contributions to nationalist struggles in developing countries, Iraqi women aligned with the main slogan of the protests, *Inryd watan* (we want homeland/country).

Iraqi women did not present a feminist/women-centered agenda but rather supported the goals of the ongoing uprising. Women's voice was declared as *'awra* (shameful) and the women's 2020 protests' slogan *#Banatek ya watan* (Your daughters, country) was turned into *#'Aheratek ya watan* (Al Ammar, 2020; Ali, 2022). By forbidding gender mixing and declaring women's voice as *'awra*, Islamist political groups aimed to disqualify the uprising, stimulate gender-based violence and return women back to what they see is their 'original place', thus restoring their masculinity (Khodary, 2022).

Female protestors, in return, responded *La mu 'awra sawtech thawra* (No it is not shameful, your voice is a revolution) and writing on the wall of the tunnel leading to Tahrir Square, 'Women of the October revolution are revolutionaries not whores.' The slogan Sawt al-mar'a thawra (A

woman's voice is a revolution) became key to all following protests (Al Ammar, 2020). Their bodies and massive corporeal presence were central to the protection of the uprising and the process of citizenship-making through becoming agents of collective action and transformation (Ali, 2022).

As hundreds of activists were killed during demonstrations, the Iraqi women mobilized calling for justice for the murdered activists. Shahla Younis or Umm Muhanad, for instance, blamed the Shi'i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, for the murder of her son Muhanad al-Qaisi during a protest in the southern city of Najaf. Samira Abbas, known as Umm Ehab, whose son was also killed in the protests filed a lawsuit against Mosleh, from the Iranian-backed militias. Despite providing evidence supporting her case, Mosleh was released (Yasin, 2021). As litigation proved ineffective, Abbas protested in front of Karbala court demanding the arrest of her son's murderers. In November 2021, Abbas took part in a demonstration called "The March of the mothers of martyrs to end the impunity from punishment" in Karbala, with other mothers protesting the impunity from punishment. She was then labeled by protestors as "the Face of the Revolution", thus, emphasizing the role women play in the face of oppression and corruption and signifying their agency (Khodary, 2022).

Concluding Remarks

In conflicts and fragile contexts, one has to look beyond the traditional and stereotyped roles of women towards more context-specific roles. Despite ongoing oppression and domination, on the household, community and also international levels, women can play major roles (Kaufman and Williams, 2010; Mazurana, 2010). Iraqi women suffered imperialism and staggering amount of oppression and violence in the past and they continue to suffer from the state corruption and lack of political will and capability of providing security, services and adequate humanitarian assistance. Yet, in the face of such violence and oppression, Iraqi women employ many tactics and strategies that resemble Dudouet's two categories of agency and responses to oppression. They engage in what Dudouet (2015) classifies as conventional actions, including party politics, advocacy, litigation, dialoguing and lobbying both nationally and internationally while taking advantage of the national and international windows of opportunity.

Finally, they employ intuitional or contentious actions in the form of nonviolent/unarmed/peaceful resistance through protest, disruptive intervention and creative resistance. They voice their resistance through street protests and wide civil-society activism, which not only responds to the practical local needs of women. In this sense, only context-specific depictions of women's roles in each country can give an accurate profile of what they face, but also their responses to what they face.

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