

# **A Nation of Widows: Why Any Honest Discussion About Iraq Must Include the Plight of Women**

Wednesday 11 March 2009, by [AGUILAR Rose](#), [Al-ALI Nadjie](#) (Date first published: 6 March 2009).

Nadjie Al-Ali: *"Now Iraqis tell me, 'We have 90 Saddam Husseins' ... I think people need to get a reality check."*

In the run-up to the March 20, 2003 invasion of Iraq, then President George W. Bush, Laura Bush, and Condoleeza Rice took to the airwaves to assure the world that their main goal was "liberation," especially for women. Almost six years after the first bombs dropped, the women of Iraq have all but been forgotten.

Last month, Nawal al-Samarrai, Iraq's State Minister for Women's Affairs, quit her job to protest a lack of resources and government support. She faced the daunting task of helping women with a budget that had been slashed from \$7,500 to \$1,500 per month.

"I think it is wrong to stay as a minister without doing anything for my people, especially in this time and in this situation of Iraqi women — we have an army of widows, violated women, detainees, illiteracy and unemployment — many, many problems. I had to resign," she said in an interview with National Public Radio.

Al-Samarrai says there are more than three million widows in Iraq, most of them with children and without a social safety net or steady source of income. Because so many men have been killed by consecutive wars, some estimates put the rate of women to men at 65/35.

As the six-year anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq approaches, the voices of the women who are dealing with growing unemployment, violence, and seclusion are still missing from the conversation about the continued occupation and President Obama's decision to keep 50,000 troops in their country.

A new book attempts to give those women a voice and examine why military intervention and occupation have failed to "liberate" them. In *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq*, authors Nadjie Al-Ali, Reader in Gender Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and Nicola Pratt, Lecturer in Comparative Politics and International Relations at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, write, "Official rhetoric puts women at center stage, but we show that in reality women's rights and women's lives have been exploited in the name of competing political agendas."

The authors also challenge the widespread held belief in the Western media and among many U.S. politicians that something inherent in Middle Eastern, Muslim, and Iraqi culture is responsible for the ongoing violence, sectarianism, and systematic erosion of women's rights in Iraq. "We argue that it is not Islam or 'culture' that has pushed Iraqi women back into their homes. Instead we blame specific and rapidly changing political, economic, and social conditions as well as a wide range of national, regional, and international actors," they write.

When the Western media does highlight the plight of Iraqi women, they almost always fail to note that Iraqi women activists have been organizing since the 1920 revolution against British occupation. The Women's Awakening Club, the first women's organization in Iraq, was founded in 1923. The Iraqi Women's Union, a feminist organization founded in 1945, tackled previously taboo issues such as prostitution, divorce, workplace issues, child custody, and property rights.

"Iraqi women were once at the forefront of the region with regard to women's education, labor force participation, and political activism," write Al-Ali and Pratt.

They argue that it is essential for antiwar movements to address the issue of women's rights and resist U.S. imperialism simultaneously. "Any analysis of what went wrong in Iraq must put gender firmly on the agenda."

***AlterNet caught up with Nadjie Al-Ali on a recent visit to San Francisco. Al-Ali is founding member of Act Together: Women's Action for Iraq, a UK-based group formed in 2000 to campaign against the economic sanctions on Iraq and since late 2001, the U.S. invasion of Iraq. On August 1, 2007, Al-Ali's uncle and 16-year-old cousin were killed in their home in Baghdad by unmasked gunmen .***

**Rose Aguilar: March 20 marks the six-year anniversary of the invasion. When you look back at this occupation, what comes to mind?**

Nadjie Al-Ali: The death toll. That's the first thing that comes to mind. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died. You have hundreds of thousands of widows. Iraq has become a nation of widows. Sixty-five percent of the population is women. You have some areas of Iraq where about 70 percent are female-headed households and there is no functioning state, so women are forced to beg. Some are forced into prostitution. Some get \$100 a month to survive.

**Rose Aguilar: What else is new about today's situation?**

Nadjie Al-Ali: We've never seen a situation where women were told to stay at home or forced to follow a dress code or told not to drive, which is happening in certain parts of Iraq. This is a totally new phenomenon. Last year in Basra, 133 women were killed by various Islamist groups for allegedly not being Islamic enough. This is not to say that things were wonderful under the previous regime, but one of the things that has been disturbing for me is the fact that some of the women and men I've talked to who suffered under the previous regime and under sanctions and wars, say it was better then than it is now.

Also, what I think is forgotten is the humanitarian crisis. Six years afterwards, people still don't have electricity. They need generators if they want electricity. Seventy percent of Iraqis don't have access to clean water. Eighty percent don't have access to sewage. The hospitals are in very bad shape. We haven't seen any reconstruction, really.

**RA: What about the political situation?**

NA: We had one Saddam Hussein. We had a dictator. Now Iraqis tell me, 'We have 90 Saddam Husseins. We have many dictators.' I'm in contact with scholars and university students. Everything is controlled by political parties. We had one radio station before; one TV station; one newspaper. Now we have many, but each one is pulling one specific line. That is not democracy.

I think it is wonderful that women went out to vote and in principle, it's wonderful that women ran, but what people don't realize is that many women who ran for election were not asked if they wanted to run. They were told to run. There's a 25 percent women's quota and lots of women ended

up being told by their brothers, fathers, or other male politicians that you need to run because we have to fill the quota.

**RA: What about security?**

NA: Things are better than they were last year. In 2006 and 2007, it was really bad. Almost 90 people a day died. Things are better now, but why are they better? How is it sustainable? If you look at a city like Baghdad, mixed neighborhoods hardly exist anymore, so you have a Sunni neighborhood and you have a Shia neighborhood.

**RA: Are neighborhoods still divided by walls?**

NA: I've heard that some of the walls are being taken down, but there are still walls controlled by local militias. I hope that the country is going into a more stable phase, but I don't trust the situation yet because in the first years after the invasion, the U.S. supported the Shia militia and armed them. The last few years, they have been arming Sunni groups. So now you have the Shia militias that are armed and the Sunni militias that are armed, both by Americans. What is going to happen? I don't know.

Many people are fed up with sectarian political parties, but I don't think this is the beginning of democracy. Fifty percent of the population voted. There had to be extremely high security at the polling station. Yes, Maliki is not an extremist Islamist, but he's part of the Shia Islamist political party. It's not a secular regime. What we have now is an establishment that is based on corruption. Everything is corrupt in Iraq.

**RA: In this country, when we have conversations about Iraq, we tend to focus on the military and technical aspects, which are important, but it's so rare to see the human side of the occupation. You said Iraq is not a functioning state. Talk about that.**

NA: What does a state do? It provides security. It protects the borders. The state is also involved in providing services related to education and healthcare. That is still not happening. What you have are different political parties controlling different aspects of the state. If you want anything in Iraq, you need to pay for it. You need to prove that you are part of a political party, so that party can pull strings for you to get something done. For instance, if you want to enter university or get a scholarship, you have to go to a political party's office. You pay your way through the system.

The billions of dollars that were supposed to go into reconstruction went into the pockets of American companies like Halliburton, but they also went into the pockets of corrupt Iraqi politicians. It's on all levels from your local thug to the ministry.

**RA: According to reports, the U.S. is still spending \$12 billion a month in Iraq.**

NA: I find it very strange that in the context of this worldwide crisis and the credit crunch, these connections are not being made. In terms of getting people to think about Iraq, if they don't care about the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who have died, think about your own lives. There is a connection between the money that is spent there and the money that could have been invested in your healthcare system, education system, and so on.

**RA: You interviewed 120 women for your book. Tell me about the women's rights activist you interviewed. How are they doing their work under such horrible circumstances?**

NA: In 2004 and 2005, there was a mushrooming of women's organizations in Iraq. It's important to mention that the first people to deal with the mess after the invasion and looting were women. They

tried to clean up the local hospitals and schools on a very practical level. They're not passive bystanders.

**RA: That's how they're often portrayed in the media.**

NA: Yes, they're either victims or they're the heroines of the new Iraq. Iraqi women realized that despite the rhetoric of women's liberation, women's rights were not going to be handed to them on a golden platter. They had to fight for it, so they started to mobilize politically.

**RA: In your book, you say it's important to remember that Laura Bush and Condoleeza Rice constantly talked about women's rights in Iraq.**

NA: Yes, they started to think about women's rights in Iraq a few months before the invasion. For years, many of us have been trying to point out how economic sanctions affected women's rights. No one wanted to listen, certainly not the Bush administration. All of a sudden, there's this interest in women's rights.

Many Iraqi women inside Iraq decided to take things into their own hands. They said, 'We had to keep the country together during these difficult times, during wars, during dictatorships, during sanctions. We want to be part of this new Iraq.' But they knew they had to fight for it. So they started to mobilize. There was a mushrooming of women's organizations that worked on humanitarian and political issues. In 2005, you saw women demonstrating on the streets. There were even sit-ins. People started income generating projects. There was a lot of activity. But in mid-2005, there was an outbreak in violence and women were targeted. Women's rights activists received death threats. Many had to leave the country. Many stopped working. Despite the difficulties, many organizations continue. You still have over 100 women's organizations throughout the country involved in providing basic services and lobbying politically. I don't feel very hopefully about the political struggle. The first thing that is compromised is women's rights.

In the current constitution, one of the outstanding issues is Article 41. It relates to the personal status code, which is a set of laws that govern marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Very few people know this, but in 1959, there was a new constitution. Iraq had one of the most progressive personal status codes. For instance, a man was not allowed to say, 'I divorce you. I divorce you. I divorce you.' He had to go through court. A man could not just marry a second wife or third wife. He had to get the permission of the wife. It was a codified set of laws that applied to all Iraqis, whether you're Sunni or Shia, which allowed for mixed marriages. Now in the current constitution, Article 41 states that all Iraqis follow their specific set of laws depending on their ethnic and religious background. There is no law that is actually spelled out. It just says it's up to interpretation. It's not that Islamic law is inherently bad. If you had an egalitarian person interpreting Islamic law, you can come up with relatively egalitarian laws. But when I see the people who are controlling the streets of Iraq, I'm not very hopeful.

**RA: What are you hearing from the Iraqi women's rights activists about the occupation?**

NA: Their views have changed quite drastically over the years. They had very divergent views in the beginning. Some women were pro-invasion. Many were not keen on the invasion. One woman said, 'It happened. We're hopeful.' Some were vehemently against it, so there was quite a range of opinion when I started out. In 2005, there was a shift. Women who were optimistic in the beginning started to rethink their position and became much more critical of the occupation. Until 2007, some Iraqi women's rights activists would tell me, 'We don't like the occupation. We want them to go. But they cannot go quite yet because we are more worried about the militias linked to the government and the Islamist insurgents. As long as they are targeting women, we need the Americans to protect

us.' Even they have changed their opinion. They are very disillusioned.

For a long time, they were still hoping that the Americans would somehow help them in their struggle for women's rights, which in the beginning they [the Americans] were at least paying lip service to it. Now they're not even saying that anymore. They're not even pretending to be interested in women's rights and there's a great sense of disillusionment and disappointment among the women, who until a little while ago, were willing to go to the Green Zone and try to get support. But even they have realized that the American occupation is not helping in terms of security. If anything, they have worsened sectarian tensions and have been arming militias and insurgents. And they are not being serious about women's rights and not even pretending to be.

**RA: There were massive demonstrations in this country in the lead up to the invasion, but they've died down. There will be a big march in DC on March 21. As you speak in this country, what goes through your mind?**

NA: When I entered the San Francisco airport, the immigration officer asked me, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I'm here for a book launch for What Kind of Liberation.' He said, 'So women's lives are really good now in Iraq?' I told him, 'No, actually they're not.' And he was really surprised. It's not that I like to be the conveyer of bad news, but I think people need to get a reality check.

This idea that because there was an election and women participated, Iraq becomes a model. Even when the violence stops, the implications for women's rights and women's roles are long term. They are the biggest losers in all of this because they are being used by everyone, whether it's the Iraqi government using women to show they are different from the previous regime, or the resistance who see women as resistance to imperialism and therefore women should wear certain clothes and behave in a certain way. Women are caught between all these different forces. The irony of the situation is the louder we fight for women's rights while the occupation is going on, the greater the backlash against women's rights inside Iraq.

---

**P.S.**

\* From Altnet.org:

<http://www.altnet.org/waroniraq/1...>

\* Rose Aguilar is the host of Your Call, a daily call-in show on KALW 91.7 FM in San Francisco, and author of Red Highways: A Liberal's Journey into the Heartland.