

By Rania Khalek

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In March 2004, President George W. Bush gave a speech to an audience of 250 women from around the world to commemorate International Women’s Day. His speech focused on the women of Iraq and Afghanistan who he proudly proclaimed were “learning the blessings of freedom” thanks to the United States. “Every woman in Iraq is better off because the rape rooms and torture chambers of Saddam Hussein are forever closed,” [said](#) Bush.

But on the tenth anniversary of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq—an [illega !](#) war that [killed over one million Iraqis](#) , created [4.5 million refugees](#)

, provoked sectarian strife that was for centuries [virtually non-existent](#) and empowered religious zealots—women are anything but “liberated.”

Iraq Before the Invasion

Contrary to popular imagination, Iraqi women [enjoyed far more freedom](#) under Saddam Hussein’s secular Ba’athist government than women in other Middle Eastern countries. In fact, equal rights for women were enshrined in Iraq’s Constitution in 1970, including the right to vote, run for political office, access education and own property. Today, these rights are all but absent under the U.S.-backed government of Nouri al-Maliki.

Prior to the devastating economic sanctions of the 1990s, Iraq’s education system was top notch and female literacy rates were the highest in the region, [reaching 87 percent in 1985](#). Education was a major priority for Saddam Hussein’s regime, so much so that in 1982 Iraq [received](#) the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) award for eradicating illiteracy. But the education system crumbled from financial decay under the weight of the sanctions pushing over 20 percent of Iraqi children out of school by 2000 and reversing decades of literacy gains. Today, [a quarter of Iraqi women are illiterate](#), more than double the rate for Iraqi men (11 percent). Female illiteracy in rural areas alone is as high as 50 percent.

Women were integral to Iraq’s economy and held high positions in both the private and public sectors, thanks in large part to labor and employment laws that guaranteed equal pay, six months fully paid maternity leave and protection from sexual harassment. In fact, it can be argued that some of the conditions enjoyed by working women in Iraq before the war rivaled those of working women in the United States.

It wasn’t until the 1991 Gulf War and U.S.-led economic sanctions against the regime that women’s rights in Iraq began to deteriorate. The sanctions in particular had devastating consequences for the one million Iraqi civilians who slowly [starved to death](#), over half of them children.

As Human Rights Watch [points out](#) , “Women and girls were disproportionately affected by the economic consequences of the U.N. sanctions, and lacked access to food, health care, and education. These effects were compounded by changes in the law that restricted women’s mobility and access to the formal sector in an effort to ensure jobs to men and appease conservative religious and tribal groups.”

Then came the invasion.

What “Liberation” Looks Like

The U.S.-led invasion in 2003 exacerbated the desperation of Iraqi women and girls to unprecedented levels. It left them vulnerable to an underground sex industry and subject to severe methods of punishment by an increasingly religious post-invasion government.

A comprehensive examination into sex trafficking by the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) [explains](#) , “Ousting the government and all systems of security left Iraqi cities vulnerable in the following months to gangs of men who kidnapped women and girls and assaulted them sexually.”

Many of the kidnapped were sold to nearby countries, as demonstrated in 2004 when houses used to “store” girls before they were purchased were uncovered. Though it is difficult to determine exactly how many women have been victims of sex trafficking, OWFI [estimates](#) that in the first seven years after the invasion, 4,000 Iraqi women and girls went missing, twenty percent of whom were under the age of 18.

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

Widows and Orphans

The loss of husbands and fathers over the last decade has left [2 million](#) Iraqi women widowed. Furthermore, estimates put the number of orphaned Iraqi children at [5 million](#), most of whom are growing up without an education. As a result, says OWFI, there are now “more than 3 million women and girls with no source of income or protection, thereby turning them into a helpless population” and making them vulnerable to “trafficking, sexual exploitation, polygamy, and religious pleasure marriages.”

OWFI’s President Yanar Mohammed told this writer that the greatest tragedy has been the impact on the youngest generation. “We’ve lived through two decades of war,” she said. “Eventually we reached a point where the young ones have no good memory of life in Iraq.”

Women’s Rights Set Back 70 Years

Unsurprisingly, most U.S. media outlets have failed to accurately cover the deterioration of women’s rights in Iraq. More often than not, they point to a post-invasion constitutional quota, which reserves 25 percent of Parliament seats for women, as proof that Iraq is on the path to gender equality. But, as [Haifa Zangana put it](#) in the *Guardian*, “this token statistic has repeatedly been trotted out to cover up the regime’s crimes against women.”

Nadje Al-Ali, author of the book “What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq” is also critical of the quota. She argues that the women who benefit from it are “[the sisters, daughters and wives of the male conservative leaders](#)” who vote just like them and do not represent ordinary Iraqi women.

Meanwhile, there is just one female minister serving in Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki’s government. Her name is Abtihal Alzidi and she is the Iraqi Minister for Women’s Affairs. But don’t let her gender fool you. Alzidi is an outspoken proponent of misogyny, once [telling a local news outlet](#)

:

I am against the equality between men and women...If women are equal to men they are going to lose a lot. Up to now I am with the power of the man in society. If I go out of my house, I have to tell my husband where I am going. This does not mean diluting the role of woman in society but, on the contrary, it will bring more power to the woman as a mother who looks after their kids and brings up their children.

Al-Ali argues that the Iraq War set women's rights back 70 years. Given the above statement, it's impossible to disagree.

Saddam's Rape Rooms Make a Comeback

Human Rights Watch (HRW) [declared](#) in a 2011 report that "life in Iraq is actually getting worse for women" and accused the U.S.-backed Iraqi government of "violating with impunity the rights of Iraq's most vulnerable citizens, especially women and detainees."

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

Conclusion: the War is Not Over

As for the U.S. declaration that the occupation of Iraq is over, OWFI's president strongly disagrees. "We know that poverty is here to stay, Islamist extremism is here to stay and women are the targets of this whole deal. There is absolutely no vision of when it will end and who will help us," laments Mohammed, before adding some damning words in response to President Bush's proclamation that he "liberated" the women of Iraq.

"[Bush] empowered the extreme religious parties to turn women into second-class citizens. Women are living in extreme poverty and are subject to Sharia law. The same powers that

started 9/11 in the U.S., the same Islamists are now ruling in Iraq,” she said.

“This is his legacy.”

Rania Khalek is an independent journalist whose work has appeared in The Nation, Salon and In These Times and elsewhere. Visit her blog [Dispatches from the Underclass](#) and follow her on Twitter

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