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Yasmin Khodary

The British University in Egypt, yasmin.khodary@bue.edu.eg

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Women and Peace-Building in Iraq

YASMIN M. KHODARY

Iraqi women are unique in all circumstances. They remain resilient under so much pressure by different regimes starting with the Baath party and the wars that the country was engaged into, the fall of the regime and the troubled security conditions for 13 years onwards, and recently the surfacing of the evil power of ISIS “Daash,” which raped and tortured women. Iraqi women took the lead at work when men went to fight at the different fronts. The very fact that they still continue the fight is a success story by itself.

—Al Saraf, Personal Communication, 2015

Peace-building is comprehensively defined by the UN Secretary-General’s Policy Committee as a “range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management and to lay the foundation for sustainable peace and development.” Peace transformation and reconstruction processes were perceived to provide windows of opportunity to reshape existing political settlements, especially through addressing underlying power dynamics. One very prominent actor and stakeholder that should be actively engaged in peace transformations, political settlements, and state reconstructions is, by all means, women.

As O’Connell and Harcourt asserted, however, there is a lack of robust analysis and examination of both small- and larger-scale efforts and initiatives by women to promote peace-building in fragile and post-conflict contexts. It’s important, then, to illustrate women’s roles and initiatives in peace-building in Iraq, and provide lessons learned on how to improve the peace-building process while ensuring a bigger and higher quality role for women. In line with the Security Council Resolution 1325, the essay explores whether or not Iraqi women have been able to take advantage of opportunities opened up through state reconstructions and peace-building, such as negotiations over new state structures, peace agreements, and political settlements.

The following reviews the literature on women and peace-building, at large, which then moves to illustrating women’s roles and initiatives

in peace-building in Iraq in particular. In doing so, I employ a qualitative methodology that combines review of literature and documents with in-depth interviews with four activists and members of Iraqi women civil-society organizations (CSOs). Based on the literature review and the interviews, the essay draws on a set of lessons learned to strengthen peace-building knowledge and actions.

Overall, gender in peace-building is under-researched, at least analytically. Very few attempts are made to understand, for example, inequitable gender power relations within the household and wider society and their impact or relation to peace-building. This lack of understanding leads to wasting opportunities for more inclusive or sustainable peace-building. This situation becomes more difficult in the Iraqi context where the possibility of gathering practical data on the inequitable gender power-relations is even harder given the nature of the Iraqi society and the continuously erupting violence and instability.

Although under-researched, researchers managed to shed light over certain aspects of gender in peace-building. Undeniably, women have an important role in social cohesion, the promotion of peace and security, poverty elimination, economic growth, and employment creation. Therefore, some scholars attempted to explore those roles within the course of action of peace-building. Using data from the Gender Development Index, David Carment et al. found a strong correlation between gender development and stability that mirrors the relationship between development and stability. In addition, Heidi Hudson emphasizes women's roles in forming pro-peace movements, such as Mother's Fronts in Yugoslavia, Latin America, and Russia; Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared in Chile and Kashmir; and Association of Widows in Guatemala and Rwanda. Empirical evidence shows that women's informal peace-building contributions at the grassroots level have been consistently recognized, although such a bottom-up approach was not explicitly acknowledged by many parties.

Some scholars argued, however, that a good start to understand women's roles in post-conflict contexts and peace-building is to understand their stereotyped roles before or in conflict situations because the realities versus myths that prevail in such contexts obstruct the true understanding of women's contribution to peace-building or post-conflict contexts. The vast majority of research in that area perceives women as mothers and victims. Seeing women as mothers and equating mothers with care and love as opposed to violence has led many scholars and researchers to present gender roles as static and correlated with peace. According to the feminist contention, however, gender is socially constructed and both men and women can "learn" or "unlearn" certain behaviors. Therefore, few researchers such as Hudson and Desmond Olounphe George-Williams tried to identify the violence and revenge-related

roles that women played in conflicts in countries such as Rwanda and Eritrea. The bottom line is not to impose any presumptions about women's needs, priorities, or roles, but to examine the social and overall context in every situation and depict the kind of roles women play and others that need to be advanced.

Unsatisfied with examining only the roles of women in peace-building, some researchers decided to take a step forward and discover the opportunities that post-conflict situations and state-reconstructions open up for women. In a series of studies, Harcourt and O'Connell argued that state-reconstructions in conflict-affected and fragile contexts can provide opportunities for securing greater gender equality. The new post-conflict political settlements, constitution, and political regime may provide a window to re-establish gender equality principles and practices and empower women politically, economically, and socially. O'Connell investigated some cases where gender equality was strengthened and positive shifts in gender occurred in conflict-affected contexts. She found out that, in some cases like Uganda, Liberia, Afghanistan, and Nepal, women succeeded to participate in elections and formal politics and engage in small-scale economic enterprises. This was possible because women were able to mobilize themselves, communicate their views, and become more politically active in times where democratic space was opened up on the national and local levels and commitment to women's participation was a priority on national and international agendas.

This, however, was not always the case. In some countries like Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Kosovo, and Southern Sudan, women were not successful in engaging in peace negotiations and were resisted by their male dominant elites. Therefore, the opportunities opened up in peace-building for securing gender equality and equity, such as negotiations over new state structures, peace agreements, political settlements, and gender-responsive services were often missed.

Overall, the main discourse on the roles of women in peace-building was criticized by being situated either in liberal or standpoint feminist paradigms, both of which offer partial explanations for women's roles in peace-building. While liberal feminism pursues the norm of pure equality (women becoming like men), standpoint feminism with a binary lens sees men as dominating and violent, and women as subordinate and peaceful. Both paradigms overlook the fact that reality is more complex; identities overlap and experiences are contextually based. Alternative feminist notions have, therefore, emerged such as the African notion of "womanism," which accommodates African women identities and realities, and is more inclusionary than other feminist approaches. Women's roles and contributions should be nationally owned, cautiously prioritized, and tailored to the specific needs of the concerned country. With such background in mind, the focus here turns to Iraqi

women's unique experiences in peace-building and post-conflict reconstructions. The following is an overview of the roles, initiatives, and challenges involved.

The participation of Iraqi women—who represent about 64 percent of the Iraqi community—in peace-building is essential. Similar to David Carment, Heidi Hudson, and others, the interviewee Amna Hamed, the head of the Legal Department in the Iraqi Ministry of Justice and a member in the Iraqi NGO for Public-Policy and Administration, emphasizes the peaceful and mother-related roles that Iraqi women play. She mentions that women give life, and therefore, are quite aware of the value of life. She explains that learning about “peace” begins at home where Iraqi mothers coach, or “should” coach their children on peaceful communication as an alternative to violence. Eventually, Iraqi women are the victims of a series of wars, especially as being the weakest party in power-relations in society; therefore, they should play a strong role in peace-building.

In 2000, the UN Security Council adopted a landmark resolution (Security Council Resolution [SCR] 1325) on women, peace, and security, which stressed increasing the representation and participation of women on different international, regional, and national levels of decision making in fragile contexts and conflict-affected countries such as Iraq. SCR 1325 also emphasized women's equal participation in peace and security efforts, such as prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response, and post-conflict reconstruction. SCR 1325 called on the different actors and parties to take special measures to protect women (and girls) from all types of violence. SCR 1325 was a real landmark in the pathway of women and peace-building. It is, hence, important to review in line with SCR 1325 the Iraqi women's roles and initiatives, especially ones related to women's quota, Iraq's SCR 1325 strategy and action plan.

The introduction of women's quota in the Iraqi parliament in 2005 is a salient example of the role of female activists in line with SCR 1325. Since 2005, a quota of 25 percent for women in parliament has been put in place to guarantee an equal right for women and men in voting and participating in political life. Hala AlSaraf, an activist and director of Iraq Health Access Organization, however, mentions that despite the fact that the introduction of a female quota in the parliament was by external forces, the idea was taken further by female activists who pushed for the initiation of quota. According to interviewee Amal Kabashi, who is a member of the Sadr City Municipal Council of and vice president of the Women for Progress Center, Iraqi women's participation in the political process after 2003 was very difficult. Therefore, the Iraqi women's movement requested a quota for women based on SCR 1483 (2003), which emphasized equal rights and

justice to all Iraqi citizens without discrimination, through the activation of SCR 1325.

The women's quota, however, did not result in greater support or inclusion for women's needs on the political agenda. Women remained underrepresented in local and national government. Kabashi explained that the share of women in government and its institutions highly declined after 2006, and women's presence was restricted to the legislative and provincial councils as per the quota. In addition, the Iraqi government adopted in 2006 a national reconciliation program, including the formation of a National Reconciliation Commission, in order to promote the values of tolerance and nonviolence and the rule of law. Women, however, were eliminated from the formation of the commission and were instead given the Office for Women in the National Commission. The role of the office was weak and had no real program or intent to activate the role of women in reconciliation, and only helped in reinforcing the stereotyped image of women. In Kabashi's opinion, this demonstrated a lack of political will, and the absence of a national vision for engaging women in conflict resolution, negotiations, or peace-building.

Besides lack of political will and absence of a national vision, there were various obstacles to women's political participation and representation in Iraq. The prevailing insecurity remains a significant obstacle to women's political engagement. The continuation of armed conflicts in Iraq reflected negatively on women's representation in decision making. This was emphasized again in the interview with Al-Saraf, who mentioned that "due to lack of security, many of the female activists who initially pushed for the initiation of quote left or quit, and the whole movement was taken by the partnering coalitions to the occupiers and the political parties led by men to impose a share of quota secured for their parities under the female quota."

In addition to the prevailing insecurity, women's participation in decision making and peace-building in Iraq is met with other challenges, including social and cultural barriers and the extremist religious sectarian violence. According to Nader Said-Foqahaa, social and cultural gender barriers in Iraq, including the culture of violence and the patriarchal culture, inform decision-making processes on all levels starting with household, and reaching the higher levels of decision making. With such social and cultural constructions and barriers still prevailing and informing decision making, existing gender power inequalities are perpetuated and strengthened into the post-conflict reconstructions and political settlements.

Social and cultural gender constructions and barriers in Iraq are not supported solely by men and undemocratic leaders. They are reproduced by the whole society, including both men and women, and both power-holders and subordinates. Only 67.7 percent of Iraqi women believe that women should participate in political elections as candidates, and 84.8 percent believe that

women should vote. In addition, 41.5 percent do not “want” to participate in political affairs claiming it is a “man’s business.” Furthermore, it becomes clear from the interview with Amna Hamed that women who want to actively participate in formal peace negotiations must be nominated by their male political counterparts.

According to interviewee Aseel AlRubaie, a member of the Association of Iraqi Women and the Association for the Defense of Human Rights, the contribution of women in the peace process in Iraq is curtailed and restrained by both men and women themselves, given the patriarchal and tribal nature of the Iraqi society, as well as the spreading control of fanatical religious classes across the Iraqi community. Women’s roles, as AlRubaie stresses, are set within the confines of certain social, cultural, and religious parameters and regulations that determine, limit, and shape women’s roles and the way to accomplish them.

Apparently, the norm-building nature of SCR 1325 was a real breakthrough. It leaves untouched, however, the social and cultural constructions and the environment that inform those decision-making processes, including the culture of violence and patriarchal political systems that strengthen and perpetuate existing gender power inequalities. According to AlRubaie, women’s attempts to participate in Iraq’s peace-building and post-conflict reconstructions through membership in the legislature or the executive branch, relies completely on partisan support rather than their capabilities or “deservedness.” The same conclusion was reiterated by interviewee AlSaraf, who stated:

in a state-building process many ideas came to the Iraqi scene imported from the west, including the quota. For the majority, this was called a window for opportunity, or so it was meant to be. Personally, I had my own stand against it because by quota, we ended up with weak and un-deserved women taking large selections of state-building process because they are 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. I feel that we lost 13 years already with weak and misinterpretation of Iraqi women in politics. Quota is accurate for informed and educated nations who can secure a seat for the most competitive women but in a community where education has been on-hold for too long, quota places power in the wrong hands.

Women’s engagement on the local levels through CSOs is as important as is their engagement on the national and formal levels such as the government or parliament. CSOs working on local levels appeal more to the people, and are able to include more women than can be found in the more-formal processes. In addition, CSOs are capable of mobilizing people toward more women’s engagement in decision making and mobilizing decision makers for gender-sensitive actions or decisions. According to interviewee AlSaraf,

“Iraqi women CSOs played a vital role at the local levels in easing the suffering women and children’s from conflict, being the most affected groups of such situations.” She explained that some activists and civil workers chose to defend the rights of vulnerable women by pursuing legal and court channels, while others decided to work on the ground at the humanitarian level to address widowhood, displacement, and lack of economic opportunities. For example, since 2004, the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq has been working on preventing violence against women by providing shelter for women and girls seeking to escape the so-called honor killings and sexual slavery.

Another Iraqi nongovernmental organization, Women Empowerment Organization (WEO), increased the awareness of rural and marginalized women of their rights and the laws protecting them. WEO also cooperated with religious leaders and the Ministry of Religious Affairs to reduce violence against women through direct dialogue and debate with actors that are most influential on Iraqi people in order to create a positive change in mind-sets.

Furthermore, together with the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Iraqi female activists represented Iraq in shaping Iraq’s strategy in line with SCR 1325, and drafting the Iraqi women stand in the Strategy Action Plan. Kabashi explained that Iraq is the first Arab country that launched a National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of SCR 1325 in February 2014. The NAP is the final product of two years—since 2012—of continuous work by women CSOs, which aimed to defend women’s rights and provide support to the Federal Government and Kurdistan Regional Government in implementing SCR 1325. Seven Iraqi women CSOs took a major role in the development of the NAP. Through providing a set of concrete actions, the NAP enhances women’s participation in negotiations and decision making, and places protectionist and precautionary measures for Iraqi women in the post-conflict situation. The protectionist and precautionary measures include improving women’s living conditions and legal surroundings through matching national legislations with international standards in order to achieve greater gender equality.

As well, Iraqi women CSOs played a role in advocacy and exercising pressure. In May 2015, the Iraqi Al-Amal Association organized the Regional Feminist Security Forum on SCR 1325 in the Middle East and North Africa. The Forum discussed the situation of women during and after armed conflict in light of the spread of extremism and terrorism, particularly after ISIS (“Daesh”) took control of large areas of Iraq and Syria. Women’s live testimonies in the Forum demonstrated the inhumane systematic practices perpetrated against women and girls, especially in Mosul city and in particular to Alaesideat women, who suffered murder, kidnapping, trading, violence, and

sexual slavery. The forum showcased examples for women's brave resistance against violence, terrorism, and extremism.

The Forum concluded by issuing the "Arbil Declaration," which stressed solidarity among women in the battle against violence, terrorism, and extremism. The Declaration also emphasized the need to activate the role of women in peace-building, conflict resolution, and negotiations. Most importantly, the forum called for a bigger role for CSOs in promoting the culture of nonviolence, and in providing full protection for violence survivors and their rehabilitation and reintegration into society through both community action and government as mentioned in the concluding recommendation, no. 14, of the CEDAW Committee report on Iraq. It also called for documenting violations and crimes, implementing advocacy, and monitoring the Iraqi government's implementation of SCR 1325 NAP and CEDAW Committee recommendations.

To conclude, women's engagement on local levels through CSOs, and national and formal levels through government and parliaments are both important. The nature and impact of women's engagement on both levels, however, can be undermined due to many factors, such as lack of security and sociocultural barriers. Adopting a women's quota in the parliament is meant to give women better opportunities to engage in decision making on the national level. Nonetheless, in the case of Iraq, the same women who called and fought for a women's quota left or quit because of security reasons and lack of partisan and societal support. Accordingly, the value and impact of quota was undermined. Therefore, AIRubaie suggested that Iraqi women CSOs collectively prioritize their objectives, plan realistic and feasible action plans to implement their priorities, and implement these action plans in cooperation with all segments of Iraqi society, especially women.

In addition to lack of security, women's engagement was barricaded by the sociocultural settings including the culture of violence and patriarchal political systems. These settings informed decision-making processes, and eventually strengthened and perpetuated existing gender power inequalities. Fifteen years after SCR 1325, it is about time to revise the heavy emphasis on "quantity" to a more balanced emphasis on both "quantity" and "quality" in fragile and conflict-affected countries, such as Iraq. Leaving gender patterns that reinforce power inequalities untouched obstructs women's ability to take up positions of power in the first place, as they will meet fierce and sometimes violent resistance in their families, communities, and wider society. Second, women who manage to get into positions of power are likely to imitate or perpetuate the dominant and patriarchal styles, and to reproduce gender stereotypes in order to have influence over the system. Therefore, genuine gender-responsive peace and state-building should aim to change the culture of power to be more supportive of gender equality and sustainable peace-

building. Change in the culture of power can occur, as Kofi Annan suggests, by introducing and establishing gender-responsive decision-making “structures” in both politics and society, and a sustainable national “infrastructure” for peace that allows resolving conflicts internally, and in a participatory manner using local skills and resources. Current structures and infra-structure need to be reformed in order to change the deeply entrenched unequal power relations toward more gender-sensitive and gender-responsive relations and less patriarchal ones.

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Yasmin M. Khodary is an associate professor in the British University in Egypt. She is an expert in governance assessments and public participation processes and a former Governance and Anti-Corruption Program Manager in the UNDP Social Contract Center in Cairo. She has two Ph.D. degrees, one in Development Studies from the American University of London and one in International Relations from Cairo University. E-mail: yasmin.khodary@bue.edu.eg