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Book Review: Women In Iraq: The Gender Impact of International Sanctions

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Women In Iraq: The Gender Impact of International Sanctions.

Yasmin Husein Al-Jawaheri; 2008. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. 228 pages; contains index.
\$25.35 (Paperback). \$70.88 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Amber Guthrie, Christina Arrington, Kesser Mohammad
and Esther Rothblum¹

“I felt as though the earth was shaking under my feet. Things were getting out of hand so suddenly. I started to realize that there was nothing that could help me through this again. My work at the school had become worthless. When there is no value in the work you do, it becomes a burden on you. However, I still hoped that the world would not let us down. First, I did not believe that more than thirty countries would bomb us, but it happened! Then, I did not want to believe that the sanctions would last for very long, but this has also happened! I realized that nothing is a history except our dreams for better lives”

Halimah (82-83)

Few social scientists embark on fieldwork in a nation at war; nonetheless, Yasmin Husein Al-Jawaheri's recent book is the culmination of five years spent interviewing 227 women in the battle-torn nation of Iraq. The interviewees ranged in age from 15 to 55 and represented a variety of educational, income, and family backgrounds. Al-Jawaheri extracts common threads from their stories to create a coherent narrative describing the various ways in which the economic sanctions on Iraq, in place from 1990 to 2003, affected women's labor force participation, education, psychological conditions, and family relationships.

Prior to sanctions, the Iraqi government injected a substantial portion of its oil revenue back into society through state-funded building projects, creating a welfare state that was “until recently among the most comprehensive and generous in the Arab World” (7). Since private employment was deemed socially unacceptable for women, the emergence of this extensive public sector in the 1980s opened up a myriad of new opportunities that profoundly shifted their economic outlook.

The nation also embraced education, proclaiming it within the exclusive purview of the state and taking steps to ensure equal access for all. Although the Iraqi government succeeded in raising the standards of education across the board, special attention was paid to female education; female illiteracy declined, while female enrollment in primary, secondary, vocational, and higher education institutions increased dramatically. As a result of the state's efforts, education was transformed “from a privilege into an entitlement” for all its citizens (58). This period also saw the passage of

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increasingly progressive legislation regarding marriage, maternity leave, polygamy, and divorce, and other issues directly affecting women's roles in society.

Unfortunately, however, the United Nations' imposition of sanctions against Iraq signaled an end to this era of liberalization. The monetary crisis that followed plunged the entire Iraqi economy into chaos, but the negative repercussions struck women in the labor force more harshly than their male counterparts. Women still faced social restrictions against participation in private sector employment, but exorbitant inflation rendered government pay virtually useless. In addition, as the state found itself unable to support its labor expenditures it was forced to curtail previously-provided services like transportation, maternity leave, and child care, making public employment for women an untenable proposition.

The sanctions also directly affected women's access to education. In the immediate aftermath there were no monies allocated to education, and even when funding was reinstated later it never reached previous levels. The lack of finances created a brain drain as teachers and university professors left the country to seek employment elsewhere, and books and equipment soon became equally scarce.

With the government's ability to provide educational services to its citizens compromised, the private sector stepped in to fill the gap for those whose families were both willing and able to afford it. These lucky few (usually male) students were able to hire private tutors, while their less fortunate peers were forced to give up their education and find jobs to support their families. As Al-Jawaheri states, "In the vast disorder that had befallen the country under sanctions, women's rights were the easiest to sacrifice" (75). By 2000, the illiteracy rate among adult females was 77 percent.

In addition to these structural effects, the economic sanctions also directly impacted family relations in Iraq. The traditionally strong connectivity within Iraqi families degenerated as relatives separated through emigration and internal migration to less expensive regions. In addition, although many eligible men found themselves unable to support a spouse and children, marriage was still an important social expectation for women. This created pressure to marry Iraqi men living abroad, who were often strangers to the family and completely unknown to the woman in question. It also increased the practice of polygamy which, given the circumstances, seemed a more viable option to women seeking economic security and also served to address the growing gender imbalance as many Iraqi men either moved abroad or were killed in the wars.

Patriarchal control also intensified under the sanctions, resulting in increased violence across the board. The rise in domestic violence was a result of the economic uncertainty and left women more vulnerable than ever before. Since responsibility for divorced women reverted back to already-struggling relatives, there was additional family pressure to remain in abusive relationships. Many families were unable to support their more vulnerable members, and structural violence increased as women were forced into prostitution and begging for survival. Street violence, including abductions and gang activity, also became more common. This state of fear and violence affected women's psychological well-being and many women began to veil themselves or wear shapeless garments as protection against being harassed or attacked. The lack of basic essentials causes high levels of stress "resulting from the inability of people to act upon their circumstances to remove or mitigate the source of such tensions" (121)

In short, in every category she reviewed Al-Jawaheri found the imposition of sanctions to have dramatically reduced the position of women in Iraqi society. Examining the range of harm resulting from the international community's actions, she concludes that the only reason no Western country tried to stop these sanctions was that none of them felt the adverse effects suffered by the Iraqi people. She concludes with the disheartening realization that, although the sanctions were ultimately unsuccessful at removing Saddam Hussein from power, "if they were aimed at destroying the economy and the people of Iraq, they have very definitely succeeded" (131).

Women in Iraq is an impressive book, providing an insightful and sobering look at the unintended consequences of this particular decision by the United Nations as well as the more general perils of overlooking societal impacts when considering action against state actors. It is also a moving testament to the perseverance of the women affected by these sanctions, in addition to the steadfast dedication and commitment of Al-Jawaheri herself. Lastly, it is a tribute to the life experiences of courageous Iraqi women under such harsh realities brought on by the outside world.