

# How the US Occupation of Iraq Destroy and Undermine Women's Rights

By [Dahr Jamail](#) and [Abdu Rahman](#)  
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BAGHDAD – Under Saddam Hussein, women in government got a year's maternity leave; that is now cut to six months. Under the Personal Status Law in force since Jul. 14, 1958, when Iraqis overthrew the British-installed monarchy, Iraqi women had most of the rights that Western women do.

Now they have Article 2 of the Constitution: "Islam is the official religion of the state and is a basic source of legislation." Sub-head A says "No law can be passed that contradicts the undisputed rules of Islam." Under this Article the interpretation of women's rights is left to religious leaders – and many of them are under Iranian influence.

"The U.S. occupation has decided to let go of women's rights," Yanar Mohammed who campaigns for women's rights in Iraq says. "Political Islamic groups have taken southern Iraq, are fully in power there, and are using the financial support of Iran to recruit troops and allies. The financial and political support from Iran is why the Iraqis in the south accept this, not because the Iraqi people want Islamic law."

With the new law has come the new lawlessness. Nora Hamaid, 30, a graduate from Baghdad University, has now given up the career she dreamt of. "I completed my studies before the invaders arrived because there was good security and I could freely go to university," Hamaid tells IPS. Now she says she cannot even move around freely, and worries for her children every day. "I mean every day, from when they depart to when they return from school, for fear of abductions."

There is 25 percent representation for women in parliament, but Sabria says "these women from party lists stand up to defend their party in the parliament, not for women's rights." For women in Iraq, the invasion is not over.

The situation for Iraq's women reflects the overall situation: everyone is affected by lack of security and lack of infrastructure.

"The status of women here is linked to the general situation," Maha Sabria, professor of political science at Al-Nahrain University in Baghdad tells IPS. "The violation of women's rights was part of the violation of the rights of all Iraqis." But, she said, "women bear a double burden under occupation because we have lost a lot of freedom because of it.

"More men are now under the weight of detention, so now women bear the entire burden of the family and are obliged to provide full support to the families and children. At the same time women do not have freedom of movement because of the deteriorated security

conditions and because of abductions of women and children by criminal gangs.”

Women, she says, are also now under pressure to marry young in family hope that a husband will bring security.

Sabria tells IPS that the abduction of women “did not exist prior to the occupation. We find that women lost their right to learn and their right to a free and normal life, so Iraqi women are struggling with oppression and denial of all their rights, more than ever before.”

Yanar Mohammed believes the constitution neither protects women nor ensures their basic rights. She blames the United States for abdicating its responsibility to help develop a pluralistic democracy in Iraq.

“The real ruler in Iraq now is the rule of old traditions and tribal, backward laws,” Sabria says. “The biggest problem is that more women in Iraq are unaware of their rights because of the backwardness and ignorance prevailing in Iraqi society today.”

Many women have fled Iraq because their husband was arbitrarily arrested by occupation forces or government security personnel, says Sabria.

More than four million Iraqis were estimated to have been displaced through the occupation, including approximately 2.8 million internally. The rest live as refugees mainly in neighbouring countries, according to a report by Elizabeth Ferris, co-director of the Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement.

The report, titled, ‘Going Home? Prospects and Pitfalls For Large-Scale Return Of Iraqis’, says most displaced Iraqi women are reluctant to return home because of continuing uncertainties.

The Washington-based Refugees International (RI) says in a report ‘Iraqi Refugees: Women’s Rights and Security Critical to Returns’ that “Iraqi women will resist returning home, even if conditions improve in Iraq, if there is no focus on securing their rights as women and assuring their personal security and their families’ well-being.”

The RI report covered internally displaced women in Iraq’s semi-autonomous northern Kurdish region and female refugees in Syria. “Not one woman interviewed by RI indicated her intention to return,” the report says.

“This tent is more comfortable than a palace in Baghdad; my family is safe here,” a displaced woman in northern Iraq told RI.

The situation continues to be challenging for women within Iraq.

“I am an employee, and everyday go to my work place, and the biggest challenge for me and all the suffering Iraqis is the roads are closed and you feel you are a person without rights, without respect,” a 35-year-old government employee, who asked to be referred to as Iman, told IPS.

“To what extent has this improved my security,” she asked. “We have better salaries now, but how can women live with no security? How can we enjoy our rights if there is no safe place to go, for rest and recreation and living?”

*Abdu, our correspondent in Baghdad, works in close collaboration with Dahr Jamail, our U.S.-based specialist writer on Iraq who reports extensively on the region*

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