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## THE FATE OF WOMEN IN EDUCATION POST IRAQ WAR: LESSONS OFFERED TO MULTICULTURAL EDUCATORS

### **Biodata:**

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### **Abstrak**

Invasi Amerika Serikat ke Irak pada tahun 2003 telah menyisakan kehancuran bagi negara tersebut. Perang telah membuat kaum perempuan Irak hidup dalam ketakutan dan akibatnya menghambat pendidikan mereka. Kini, ketika seluruh infrastruktur pendidikan seperti sekolah, universitas, perpustakaan harus dibangun kembali di tengah konflik berkelanjutan antara faksi-faksi yang terus bertikai, perhatian terhadap nasib pendidikan kaum perempuan masih sangat minim. Oleh karena itu diperlukan peran seorang pendidik multikultural dalam membangkitkan kesadaran peserta didik akan pentingnya pemberdayaan hak-hak dan pendidikan bagi perempuan. Tulisan ini menawarkan sebuah rencana pembelajaran mengenai nasib pendidikan perempuan di Iraq dengan membangun dua titik pendekatan yaitu kesedihan (*grief*) dan komunikasi.

**Key words:** *Women education, Iraq, educational opportunities, educational investment*

## **Introduction**

The political situation in Iraq after the 2003 U.S. led invasion still remains unsecured. Saphiro (2007, April 25) informed that increasing number of Americans have come to believe that the current Bush policy in Iraq is not working and that the civil war is escalating. On the other hand, it is not clear when the U.S. troops stationed in Iraq will leave the country. Saphiro also urges that setting a date for the U.S. to leave Iraq is one of the solutions since it will force the Iraqi government to handle the security problems before the U.S. troops leave.

Most ordinary Iraqis regard Americans as criminals, thieves, hypocrites, perverts, liars and foreign invaders. This hatred continues to grow even the occupation officially came to an end on June 28, 2004. Hundreds of American tanks, helicopters, humvee patrols and checkpoints, and military vehicles still station everywhere in the country (Al-Ali, 2004, October 7).

Al-Ali also describes that the three factors – economics, energy, and security – have together caused ordinary Iraqis to lose faith in the current political process. The high unemployment levels have a very depressing effect on the population as the vast majority of people are still unable to find work. The continuing failure of the electricity supply cripples Iraqis' daily lives. Most people have access to electricity far less than 50 percent of the time.

Women, along with children and elders, are the most vulnerable people during the war in Iraq. The long period of Saddam's regime, U.S. led war against Iraq, and eventually the civil war among Iraqi factions have affected the life of women, especially in education. This article gives insight about the situation in Iraq post the war led by the U.S. in particular related to women education. It is also discussed the fate of women education in Iraq along with lessons offered to multicultural educators with purpose to increase an awareness of multicultural educators in bringing this issue to their classrooms whether in the United States or in Indonesia.

## **The Role of United Nations in Iraq**

As suggested by Rubin (2007, December 19), "the extensions of the United Nations mandate for Iraq addresses a key problem of legitimacy for that world body that should not be dismissed. For while many in the West see the United Nations through the prism of the noble goals of its founding

charter, many Iraqis view the UN through the prism of Oil-for-Food program corruption and former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's warm relations with Saddam Hussein."

Therefore, restoring UN credibility in Iraq is a must, and this solution will provide more comfortable political discussion and peace talks among many armed groups all over Iraq, bring more security in Iraq when the disarmament and reintegration of various armed groups take place.

### **Education investments and infrastructures**

The Iraqi economy relies heavily on oil industry. Until now, the performance of Iraq's oil industry is far below prewar expectations due to the continuous looting and sabotage by the insurgents as well as mismanagement and neglected infrastructures. It is suggested that the problems may be solved if the Iraqi leadership learn to manage its vast oil resource in a productive way (Luft, 2005).

The literacy rate for total population in Iraq is about 74 percent with the rate for males at 84 percent and a 64 percent rates for females. Compare to other countries in the region, before the war Iraq has a well-developed public school infrastructure. During and after the war, the access to education and the quality of education declined dramatically (Iraq Country Review 2007: 200).

After the 2003 invasion, the educational situation in Iraq was very bad. Many libraries were burnt, public universities and schools do not have operable facilities. Post war programs designed to rehabilitate schools only involved a fresh coat of paint on the walls. Teaching standards and facilities have not improved in any way. Some school classrooms serve as storage facilities for debris. In short, Iraq's contemporary education system is a disaster, both in absolute terms and in comparison to what it was like before the Saddam years (Al-Ali, 2004, October 7).

About 97 percent of the total population embraces Islam as their religion. Iraqi Muslims are divided into two sects, Shi'a and Sunni. Shi'a Muslims are the majority Muslim in Iraq. In addition, there are also small population of Christian, Mandeans, Yazidis, and Jews (Iraq Country Review, 2007: 197).

Gharouf and Gordon (2003: 2) report that many of the Iraqi women attending the Iraq women's conference insisted that Islam and Islamic law play a prominent role in the constitution. They argued that Islam is a religion

that does not contradict democratic principles, and that does not impose itself on other religions. However, they still need to solve the situations where Islamic law might contradict principles of equal rights, for instance, when some clerics issue *fatwas* against women serving as judges.

### **U.S. led peace keeping efforts**

According to the latest information regarding the economic and political independence by the country of Iraq, the current situation does not look very promising. The question that we need to postulate is if the United States government led by President Bush is really interested in securing peace in Iraq? (Please note that due to the critical nature of this lesson, it will be best to explain to the students that multicultural educators' responsibility is to create critical thinkers and therefore critical academic pieces and research were utilized to create this lesson) "President Bush's determination to stay until all terrorist threats are eliminated appears to be an excuse to maintain American dominance in Iraq. President Bush's determination in continuing with the Iraqi war portrays the "U. S. invasion and occupation of Iraq not as an act of aggression-as most of the international community sees it—but as an act of self-defense". (Zunes, 2007: 60)

The United States agenda in Iraq seems to have economic goals instead of democratic goals. Based on the research that we conducted the reasons for U.S. invasion and the occupation of Iraq have never been justified. The original reason which was linked to Iraq having weapons of mass destruction has never been proven. Currently, the country is suffering from structural economic and political change that has been a direct result from the U.S. led invasion and occupation. The International Monetary Fund has issued the following structural outline for the Iraq economic program:

1. Widespread privatization of public enterprises, which –combined with allowing for 100 percent foreign ownership or Iraqi companies places key sectors of the Iraqi economy into the hands of American corporations.
2. The imposition of a 15 percent flat tax, which primarily benefits the wealthy and places a disproportionate burden on the poor.
3. The virtual elimination of import tariffs, resulting in a flood of foreign goods into the country: with the smaller Iraqi companies –weakened by over a dozen years of sanctions-unable to compete, hundreds of factories have been shut down, adding to the already severe unemployment.

4. Allowing for 100 percent repatriation of profits, thereby severely limiting reinvestment into the Iraqi economy.
5. The lowering of the minimum wage, increasing already widespread poverty.
6. Leases on contracts for as long as forty years, making it impossible for even a truly sovereign government to legally make alternative arrangements.  
(Zunes, 2007: 62)

The direct relationships that exist between American owned corporations doing business in Iraq and the U.S. government are extremely overt that even the American oil companies have made it clear that such overt takeover would not be recommended.

According to the new Iraqi constitution, "the Bush administration backed off on pressuring the Islamist-dominated legislature writing up the constitution to include at least some assurances regarding the rights of women, in return for including these free-market provisions, an arrangement Canadian analyst Naomi Klein has referred to as the "oil for women ' program". (Zunes, 2007: 63)

Not all is so gloomy, Iraq held elections in 2004 and contrary to the public belief, and the newly elected officials are not controlled by the Bush administration. "However, unless the Bush administration is willing to allow this democratically elected government to exercise genuine sovereignty and thereby prove its legitimacy, it will not bring this devastated country to peace and stability. (Zunes, 2007: 67; Darling-Hammond, 2003: 620)

### **Developing infrastructure and educational opportunities for women**

Since 1920s, women in Iraq have begun to work and accept positions in the job market. By 1970, the Iraqi constitution declared women and men equal before law and the former soon became among the most educated and professional in the region. By 1980, they could vote and run for election. Soon in the 1980s, women held 20 per cent of Iraq's parliamentary seats - more than the 14 per cent held by women in the US Congress

During the Saddam Hussein's rule, women status and rights were formalized through legislation and laws. By 1990, Iraqi women were considered to be among the most educated and professional and professional in the Arab world. After the gulf war in 1990, the country's economy collapsed with the introduction of economic embargoes and sanctions, and

women were severely affected on all sides. They began to lose their jobs. Girls abandoned their education. Female literacy declined sharply as young girls and women focused all their efforts on searching for food, money and clean water. Some women looked to prostitution to provide for their children and families. During this time, Saddam Hussein also imposed anti-women legislation that reversed the progressive part charted during the previous two decades. (al-Juburi, 2003, June 17)

The 2003 war further harmed women, who became the victims of war crimes such as abduction and rape. Although women made up 31 percent of the new National Assembly, many problems at the economic and social level prevail. All Iraqi women, regardless of their faith and sect, continue to live in fear of criminal actions perpetrated by soldiers, militants, and insurgent on all fronts. (Iraq Country Review, 2007, p. 208)

It is clear that women in post-war Iraq require help in reproductive health services, education and political participation. In order to give them an opportunity to play an active role in building a new Iraq, the US and all domestic and international donors need to address these critical areas.

Dale (2008, March 5) asserts that the Bush administration should champion the promotion of women rights in Iraq. Currently, according to the State Department, the Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative is helping to build Non-Governmental Organizations and private-sector participation in leadership training and employment opportunities for women in Iraq.

### **Future outlook of women education in Iraq**

Al-Juburi (2003, June 17) insists that women's education in Iraq needs to be addressed in order to start closing the gap between boys and girls. Appointments in government and civil service administration need to incorporate women. A report from the Iraq's Women Conference (Gharouf and Gordon, 2003: 18) recommends that the following steps should be taken in re-empowering Iraqi women in terms of their education and their rights:

- (1) The institution of compulsory education for girls, at least until 7<sup>th</sup> grade.
- (2) The educational campaigns to promote women issues along with democracy and civic education issues.
- (3) The educational curricula should be changed for most educational levels to include principles of human rights and civic society.
- (4) Deep cultural changes are still needed to truly change society and liberate

women.

- (5) Men must be educated to inform them of their rights and responsibilities, and also of women's rights and duties, especially in the context of the home.
- (6) "Awareness" and educational courses and lectures should be conducted in places of men's employment, and even in the mosque, during the Friday sermon.

There is a book written by author, Anne Sofie Roald entitled, *Women in Islam: The Western Experience*. The book engages the reader because the topics presented in this book studies the attitudes of Arabic-speaking Islamists in Europe regarding the issue of gender issues. According to Roald (2001: 8), "the position of women in Islam has always been a contentious issue". The author who is a converted Muslim of Norwegian descent uses contemporary commentaries as well as interviews with Islamists from four different affiliations in order to present the differences in views regarding women's political participation in Islam, polygamy, divorce, and child custody and female circumcision. The only setback with this book is that the author only interview people residing in Europe. Therefore, it would be difficult to state that these views truly represent the views of the people living in Iraq.

We have searched for more research regarding the Iraqi or the U.S. political and economic commitment towards the education of women but we have failed to find any true or agreement. We have found projects that are funded by private agencies or International agencies like UNICEF. For example, a pilot project started by the World Bank and is now administered by the Social Fund for development in Yemen to combat illiteracy among the young Yemeni women who live in the poorest of conditions.

According to UNICEF findings, 77% of the Yemeni women cannot read (O'Connell, 2004: 1). The program is called Literacy through Poetry. "Poetry, music, and dance were once highly valued modes of expression among Yemeni women. However, a conservative shift in cultural attitudes in the country, coupled with reformist attacks on traditional folklore, has diminished women's confidence that they can openly cherish their traditions." The goals of this pilot poetry program were met because their retention rate was high 95 out of the initial 125 students remained in the program for its duration. "Success was seeing the fact that mothers were taking this poetry session in the afternoon, and the little daughters were



helping them spell" (as cited in O'Connell, 2004, p. 3).

It will take a tremendous economic and political effort from the United States government in order to embed women's educational policies into the new Iraqi legislature. As we have read before, "the Bush administration backed off on pressuring the Islamist-dominated legislature writing up the constitution to include at least some assurances regarding the rights of women, in return for including these free-market provisions, an arrangement Canadian analyst Naomi Klein has referred to as the "oil for women ' program". (Zunes, 2007: 63) This is a dismal situation since according to Baker (2007), "few seem to notice that it is the invasion itself that turned Iraq into a training ground for criminal militants who by irrational violence attack and undermine not only the American presence but the legitimate Iraqi resistance as well" ( 24).

According to financial report published in 2004 by the World Bank, World Development Indicators that we extracted from the UNESCO Country Factsheet the Iraqi government expenditures for education finance data is not available for Iraq for the years 1991 to 2002. We find this appalling and a clear indication of the current situation in terms of education. The present concerns in terms of education are that although more money is being utilized to provide an education for children, it is often concentrated on vocational programs and women are not yet granted access. "Government spending on public education does not provide students with the critical higher-order cognitive skills and analytical skills needed in order to compete in a global market (Hossein & Noora, 2007: 9).

## Conclusion

As final thoughts, these are additional points for discussion if the teacher believes that the student audience is sufficiently mature to handle the content.

- **Grief**—According to author Judith Butler—*Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004) as cited in (Kuhn, 2008: 190) the act of grieving can be very beneficial to effect positive political change. "Butler points to the problematic features of the distinctions between those whose lives are grievable and those whose lives are not" (p. 193). Butler also argues that the lives of those killed in the September 11 tragedy was acceptable, and understandable. However, Butler also

proposed that the thousands of Iraqis killed by the U.S. in the “years since the first Gulf War, and the “hundreds of thousands” of Muslims killed over the last few decades either through U.S. supported efforts or while the U.S. willfully turned away, as lives for whom we do not grieve, or for whom grief is not acceptable” (p. 193).

- **Communication,** Thousands of lives have been lost in Iraq whether American, Muslim, or Arab or any other ethnic or nationality group. The important point is that as young students in any high school classes begin to comprehend and critically analyze the cruelty and true intentions of any war, they will become better and stronger citizens of their country.

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## APPENDIX

### **Lesson Plan-Women in Iraq**

(Lesson Cycle will be presented by Maria de Lourdes Viloría and Muhammad Thalal-Multicultural Educators at the Secondary Social Studies Teacher Inservice)

Audience-11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students

Concept-Understand the lack of educational opportunities for women in Iraq

Estimated time- 65 minutes

### **Introduction**

- **Objective**

The purpose of this activity is to assist high school social studies teachers present a culturally responsive lesson on the current educational crisis of the women in Iraq post war.

Tell the class that they will watch a short film entitled *Women at the Forefront* by filmmaker Roshini Thinakaran who was born in Sri Lanka and raised in the United States. Thinakaran received a B.A. in communication and a minor in journalism from George Mason University [www. nationalgeographic. com/field/explorers/roshini-thinakaran.html](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/field/explorers/roshini-thinakaran.html).

[www.womenattheforefront.com](http://www.womenattheforefront.com).

(The teacher will need to access this hyperlink and once you have found the hyperlink click on the country that you would like to present) \*Although this website is still under construction these researchers believe that by the time the lesson is presented to the class the short film on the country of Iraq will be available.)

- **Materials**

Teacher Reference Materials enclosed (It is imperative that the classroom teachers previously prepare by reading all the enclosed reference materials (see enclosed outline)

Computer and internet access in order to view the Women at the Forefront film (make sure that you have great audio since the narrator Roshini Thinakaran narrates the whole film and the sound effects are important to create an insider-outsider effect)

Chart tablets for discussion groups

Markers, Notepaper, and pencils

Screen and projector

World Map

- **Learning styles**

Visual Learners: short film and world map

Auditory Learners: short film audio and class discussions

Kinesthtic Learners: students will move around the class to discuss content

- **Key vocabulary**

democracy	Islam	Middle East
invasion	U.S. American foreign policy	globalization
sectarianism	Muslim	occupation
American	empire/imperialism	education

- **Homework**

The day before the lesson, assign reading on related topics.

- **Focus**

Ask the students if they can remember making a bad decision. Did it seem wrong at the time? When did you know it was a bad decision? Give a personal example of a decision that had long term effects.

- **Guided instruction**

Explain how the United States invasion of Iraq has affected the both

countries (U.S. and Iraq). Present the pros and cons about initiating a war in foreign soil and how the U.S. military is being affected (family and loyalty to our country is being put to a test). Ask students if they believe that this Iraq war should end and if the reasons for beginning the war have been justified? Students should be given an opportunity to think about solutions to end the Iraq war.

- **Independent practice**

Divide the class into 4 groups and assign each group one of the following questions:

1. What is the most important and immediate need in order to increase the education of women in Iraq?
2. How can a the religious culture of a country change in order to allow for women to get an education?
3. What does the future hold for orphans, women and in general for children in Iraq, if this war continues?
4. How can the United States make the current war situation better in order to improve the living conditions and educational opportunities for the people of Iraq, especially women?
5. Can the war damage be repaired?

- **Assessment**

Evaluate the groups with a teacher made rubric to look at group discussion and overall participation as well as delivery of their answers.

- **Closure**

Have each group present their responses to the whole group