

Women's Rights in Iraq

"The widespread view that Iraq's violence, sectarianism, and systematic erosion of women's rights is inherent to Muslim or Iraqi culture just isn't true. "~Nadje Al-Ali

Overview

In this lesson, students will examine the past and present status of women in Iraq, examining both stereotypes and realities of the rights afforded to Iraqi women. Through a Power Point presentation and discussion, students will begin by exploring misconceptions regarding Islam (a religion that as written is actually favorable to women's rights) and will gain an understanding of how unjust interpretations of Islam have led to the exploitation of women in Iraq. Students will also explore the progressive erosion of women's rights in Iraq in recent decades, examining how Iraq transitioned from being a progressive Middle Eastern country, to a country where women are now denied the civil and social rights guaranteed to men. Students will exhibit their understanding of the reemergence of repressive attitudes and atrocities against women in Iraq by writing a letter to the US government that recommends how such mistreatment can be curtailed.

Grade

9

North Carolina Essential Standards for World History

- WH.7.1 - Evaluate key turning points of the modern era in terms of their lasting impact (e.g., conflicts, documents, policies, movements, etc.).
- WH.8.3 - Explain how liberal democracy, private enterprise and human rights movements have reshaped political, economic and social life in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, the Soviet Union and the United States (e.g., U.N. Declaration of Human Rights, end of Cold War, apartheid, perestroika, glasnost, etc.).
- WH.8.4 - Explain why terrorist groups and movements have proliferated and the extent of their impact on politics and society in various countries (e.g., Basque, PLO, IRA, Tamil Tigers, Al Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, etc.).

Essential Questions

- What role do stereotypes, generalizations, and ethnocentric attitudes play in our understanding of Iraqi women?
- What are the fundamental tenets of Islam in regards to women?
- In what ways have the status, rights, and equality of women in Iraq changed in recent decades?
- How did the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq affect the lives and status of women in Iraq?
- In what ways are Iraqi citizens working to improve the situation of Iraqi women? In what ways can the US government support such improvements?

Materials

- Women's Rights in Iraq Power Point; available in the Database of K-12 Resources (in PDF format)
 - To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click "View" in the top menu bar of the file, and select "Full Screen Mode"

- To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to cnorris@unc.edu
- Access to internet and speakers for playing the audio link on Slide 35; optional
- *Shattering Illusions: Western Conceptions of Muslim Women*, article excerpt and questions attached
 - Teachers are encouraged to read the full article at <http://www.jannah.org/sisters/shatter.html>, which takes a non-Western perspective on comparing the status of women in Islam and Christianity
- *Baghdad Underground*, article and questions attached

Duration

Two 60-90 minute periods

Teacher Preparation

Evaluating the rights of women in Iraq is a complicated study, as it is easy to revert to ethnocentric ideas, generalizations, and stereotypes. It is important that teachers call attention to the assumptions often made about the Islamic religion, men and women who are Muslim, and Middle Eastern culture and people in general. Thus, it is crucial that the PPT accompanying this lesson be used as a basis for *discussion* and not lecture. Encourage students to ask questions, politely correct any generalizations or stereotypes that students bring up, and acknowledge to the class the complexity of this issue. While Islam has been used to oppress women in certain areas at certain times in Iraq (as have other religions in other countries), it is also viewed by many as a very progressive religion. Though adding an additional layer of complexity, the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq is crucial to examining the rights of Iraqi women. (Arguments can be made that the United States brought democracy to Iraq and arguments can be made the United States involvement in Iraq actually set women's rights back a decade.) The point is that there are many perspectives on the issues addressed in this lesson and it is important to allow students to examine these different perspectives in an open-minded and respectful way. (Teachers should review the PPT and talking points located within the lesson prior to implementation and are encouraged to edit both as they see fit.)

Student Preparation

Students should have a basic understanding of Islam, the history of Iraq, as well as the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq. While this lesson will touch on each of these issues, it does delve deeply into them since the focus here is on how those topics relate to the rights of women in Iraq.

Procedure

Day 1

Warm-Up: Sharing Preconceptions – Iraq and Its People

1. Tell students that they are going to be discussing the rights of Iraqi women in today's lesson. Explain that in order to get "warmed-up" to the topic, you first want students to share some of their opinions regarding various statements relating to the lesson topic. Tell students that you are going to project a statement (the statements listed below can also be found on slides 2-3 of the "Women's Rights in Iraq Power Point") and that they should move to the side of the room representing their response :
 - I have traveled to Iraq.
 - I am myself, or have a close friend or family member, who is Muslim.
 - Most of what I know about Iraq has come from what I've seen on TV.
 - The information that the media provides is always accurate.

- There are many stereotypes that exist about people who live in the Middle East.
 - People in Iraq have similar hopes, dreams, and fears to people living in the United States.
 - Women who are Muslim have fewer rights than women who practice Christianity.
2. Instruct students to return to their seats and launch into a verbal discussion by writing the title of “Women in Iraq” on a piece of chart paper and asking students to share what comes to mind when considering Iraqi women. Note their thoughts on the chart paper asking clarifying questions as needed. After students have exhausted their thoughts, integrate their verbal responses with their physical responses to the initial statements posed by discussing:
- Have any of you ever traveled to Iraq? Do you know anyone from Iraq? What has shaped your perception of Iraq and the women living there? Where do you get information about Iraq from?
 - How many of you disagreed with the statement that the information we get from media sources (TV, newspapers, internet, etc.) are always accurate? Explain.
 - How does the fact that the US invaded Iraq perhaps shape our view of the country and its people? How does this perhaps shape the information our media shares?
 - What is a **stereotype**? What stereotypes exist concerning Iraqi people or Iraqi women in particular? What are other stereotypes that exist about Iraq? Where do these stereotypes come from? (Note whether any of the things students provided in the brainstormed list are the same or similar to what they identify as stereotypical.)
 - How can stereotypes be hurtful or dangerous?
 - What does it mean to make a **generalization**? How can making generalizations about women in Iraq, or people who are Muslim, lead to inconsistent and untrue beliefs about these groups of people?
 - Does anyone know what the term **ethnocentrism** means?
 - Discuss with students that ethnocentrism refers to the tendency to believe that one's ethnic or cultural group is centrally important, and that all other groups are measured in relation to one's own. The ethnocentric individual will judge other groups relative to their own particular ethnic group or culture, especially with concern to language, behavior, customs, and religion.
 - How might ethnocentrism come into play when we discuss Iraqi people in general and Iraqi women in particular?

Overview of Women’s Rights in Iraq – Part I of Power Point and Discussion

3. Thank students for sharing their thoughts and let them know that you are going to provide an overview of women’s rights in Iraq via a Power Point. While teachers should instruct students to take notes from the power point, it should not be used as a means of lecture; rather, use the PPT as a jumping off point for discussion (see various discussion points below and within the PPT).

Before launching into the presentation, remind students of classroom expectations of being respectful and tolerant. Explain that truly understanding the cultures and religions of other countries can be difficult, particularly since we often judge that which is unfamiliar to us, or that which we don’t truly understand. There are many assumptions and generalizations often made about the Islamic religion, men and women who are Muslim, and Middle Eastern culture and people in general. While Islam has been used to oppress women in certain areas at certain times in Iraq (as have other religions in other countries), it is also viewed by many as a very progressive

religion. Likewise, when examining the effect of the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq on women, both positive and negative arguments can be made. There are many perspectives to the issues they are going to be addressing and to encourage students to consider multiple perspectives. Let students know that they should feel free to ask questions throughout the PPT. Ask them to point out if any of the thoughts they noted on the chart paper come up throughout the presentation and discussion. Likewise, politely correct any generalizations or stereotypes that students bring up.

4. **Women Right's in Iraq Power Point – Part I Talking Points:**

- Slide 4-5: After students respond to the questions on slide 5, point out that we often make assumptions about other people, their culture, their religion, etc.; we often stereotype that which we see as “foreign” or different, or make generalizations about that which we don’t truly understand.
- Slide 6: Tell students that before you focus the discussion on women’s rights in Iraq, it is important to explore a bit further the issues of stereotyping and making generalizations. Encourage students to view the images on slide 6 and share their thoughts:
 - Which type of prayer is most familiar to you? Unfamiliar to you?
 - Why do we sometimes judge, stereotype, or make generalizations about that which is unfamiliar? (Encourage students to also explore the concept of perspectives. While on one hand a particular type of prayer may seem “normal” to us, that is only because it is what we are most familiar with. In actuality, no one type of prayer is any more “normal” or “different” than any other.)
- Slide 7: Continue this line of discussion as you project slide 7. Again, instruct students to examine the images and discuss:
 - Which of these images contain people dressing in accordance with their religious beliefs or cultural practices?
 - Which religions or cultures may be represented in such dress?
 - Which forms of dress are you most familiar with? What similarities can you note between that with which you are familiar and the other images?

Again, encourage students to understand that all religions and cultures have particular traditions of dress. Again discuss the issue of perspective (i.e., why should a Christian who is used to seeing images of the Virgin Mary, whose head is always covered, view a person of the Muslim faith differently based on their choice to wear a head covering as well? Why do we not look twice at a baseball hat, but think it is odd to wear a head covering or veil?) When we actually begin examining these questions, we see that in most cases that our familiarity or understanding of other people often determines our comfort level. Let students know that it is important that they understand some facts about Islam, as it is the predominant religion practiced in the Middle East. Students should already have a basic knowledge of this religion before completing this lesson, but a few points about Islam are noted on Slide 8 to facilitate a review. (Before projecting this slide, teachers may want to first ask students to share what they already know (or think they know) about Islam.)

- Slide 9-10: Tell students that you want to now consider Islam particularly in regards to Muslim women. Also, remind students that when we refer to Muslim women in general, we are not just speaking about women who live in the Middle East. There are many women and men in the United States who practice Islam, just as many American's practice Christianity, Judaism, etc.

Project the excerpt from the Qur'an on slide 9 and ask students to interpret the passage. Once students have shared their thoughts, ensure that they understand that this passage is addressing the basic equality of Muslim men and women, as well as the distinctive identity and personality women are celebrated to have. The notion of equality and sharing is the basis of family life in Islam. Yet, one of the misconceptions regarding Islam is that all Muslim women are oppressed based on the tenets of the religion itself, as well as how it is interpreted by modern day men. In actuality, as evidenced in this passage, many Muslim women live a life full of rights and privileges that they are happy with, and some Muslim feminists thus contend that in truth, Islam is a very progressive religion in terms of rights granted to women. After continuing on to Slide 10, which addresses the equality inherent in Islam, ask students if they are at all surprised to learn this information. Ask them to further share why they are surprised and refer back to the list of assumptions students noted in step 3 earlier in the lesson.

- Slide 11: Have a student volunteer read the passage out loud then have students share their thoughts regarding what message the author is posing. Teachers will likely have to take a few moments to highlight some higher-level vocabulary in the passage to ensure accurate student interpretation:
- egalitarian: belief in the equality of all people
 - inimical: unfavorable; harmful
 - patriarchal: male head of a family line or tribe; also used to refer to male head of certain churches/religions

Facilitate student understanding that Coleman is referring to the issue of interpretation of religion. While any religious book (the Bible, the Qur'an, the Book of Mormon, etc.) may say one thing, how past and present religious leaders interpret what the words say can complicate matters. In Islam, as with many religions, there have been some instances where male religious leaders have interpreted the original words to be less favorable towards women's equality. This does not mean that Islam itself is oppressive to women; it only means that it is being interpreted in an oppressive way by *some*. Ask students to share any other examples throughout history, or in modern society, that relate to this. (For example, while some fundamentalist Mormons interpret the Book of Mormon to condone polygamy and marriage at a very young age, other Latter-Day-Saints Mormons do not condone this practice. Similar examples can be shared from most all religions.) This concept of interpretation thus can complicate our impression of certain religions. (i.e., If I see on the news how Muslim women in the Kurdish region of Iraq are being forced to wear full body veils, I may wrongfully assume that this is representative of all Muslims in all countries.) The basic concept is that in all religions, as with all cultures - Western and Eastern, American and Middle Eastern - there are positive and negative examples. Thus, it is important to not make generalizations and look

at such issues on a case by case basis. Continue on to Slides 12-13, which address this issue further.

- Slides 14-22: With an understanding of Islam, the importance of refraining from stereotypes and generalizations, as well as the complexities of religious interpretation, tell students they now have a better lens through which to examine the situation of Iraqi women's rights. Let students know that the examination of women's rights in Iraq can be a confusing study, especially since the US invasion and occupation brings a whole additional level of complexity and debatable conclusions regarding Iraqi people. Again, encourage students to ask questions as they arise. Upon finishing Slide 22, discuss:
- Summarize how women's status and rights changed from the 1970s to the 1990s.
 - Why did the rights afforded to women progressively decline?
 - Based on what you learned, how would you characterize Saddam Hussein and why? What determined how his government treated women?
 - How would you characterize Iraq's women based on what you've just learned? (Encourage students to acknowledge the strength and spirit of women who continue to do the best they can even when an oppressive government limits their rights.)
 - Do you think that as Americans, we might see the situation Iraq's women are in differently than they see themselves? Explain. (Remind students of the aforementioned concept of ethnocentrism and ask students to share how ethnocentrism might be at play in the way we view women in the Middle East.
 - Just because Hussein's regime progressively restricted women's equality and rights, does that mean that all Muslim women across the world are oppressed? Explain

5. Remind students that assuming all Muslim women have no voice or no freedom is a stereotypical view. In the case of Iraq, for example, the oppression women experienced wasn't due to the religion itself; rather it was due to the government's policies and various oppressive interpretations of Islam that men in positions of power developed. In actuality, Islam achieved a comprehensive system for women's rights 1400 years ago, a fact that defies all the popular stereotypes of the oppressed Muslim woman. There are many women in many parts of the world happily practicing Islam, and it is one of the fastest growing religions in the world today (with many converts being Western women.) As stated on the Islamic Garden site (a site devoted to counteracting stereotypes regarding Islam): "Certainly these women do not choose Islam because they find it oppressive or unfair. Most female converts, in fact, are attracted to Islam for the respect and dignity that Islam demands for women. So the next time you see a veiled woman walking down the street, don't assume she is from the Middle East: she could very well be a blond, blue-eyed American who made an informed decision to enter into Islam!" (Source: <http://www.jannah.org/sisters/shatter.html>)
6. To better help students see the various perspectives on this issue, partner students up and have them read the attached excerpt from the article *Shattering Illusions: Western Conceptions of Muslim Women*. This article reminds us that even though many Iraqi women may be experiencing oppression, not all Muslim women have the same experience. The article, written by a Muslim woman herself, also offers an alternative to an American view on these issues. She also shows how one could look at popular Western religions with the same critical lens in regards to women's rights. Give students the attached response questions to discuss and answer upon completing the

reading. (It is important to discuss this article as an entire class once students have finished their partner discussions):

- What is your first impression of this article? Did it make you think about anything differently? Explain.
- Do you think the author is trying to paint a negative picture of Judeo-Christian religion? Why or why not? (Discuss with students that the author is simply showing how Judeo-Christian religions could also easily be criticized as unfair to women.)
- What is your opinion of the overall message the author is trying to convey?
- Who might agree with or be tolerant of this message and why? Who might disagree with or be intolerant of this message and why?
- If you could ask the author a question, what would you like to know more about or hear her opinion on?

7. Optional culminating activities:

- Have students repeat the warm-up activity, projecting some similar statements (to see if student opinions have changed) as well as new statements to gauge where students stand after the day's lesson. Sample statements:
 - The information that the TV provides regarding Muslims is always accurate.
 - There are many stereotypes that exist about Middle Eastern women.
 - Women in Iraq have similar hopes, dreams, and fears to people living in the United States.
 - Women who are Muslim have fewer rights than women who practice Christianity.
 - All religions can be interpreted in negative ways, but this does not mean the religion itself is negative.
 - Women should have the right to practice whatever religion they choose and should not be judged for their beliefs or practices.
- Tell students to imagine that they have been hired by the ACLU to design a campaign to counteract the stereotype that all Muslim women are repressed, or that Islam, as written, is a religion that is oppressive to women. Based on the information you have learned today, design a poster that can be placed in schools and community centers across the country correcting this misinformation. Your poster must have a visual image as well as text that convey this information.

Day 2

Warm Up: Political Cartoon

8. As a warm-up, project Slide 24 of the "Women's Rights in Iraq" PPT, which is an image of a political cartoon titled "Democracy Shuttle." Ask students to note their preliminary thoughts and observations about the cartoon down on a sheet of notebook paper then discuss:
- What do you see? What do you notice first about this political cartoon? (Encourage students to begin by simply noting all the physical attributes.) What text does the political cartoon contain?
 - What is the context of the political cartoon? (Have students note the "who, what, when, and where" of the cartoon.)
 - What symbols are used in the cartoon?
 - What do you notice specifically about the Statue of Liberty? Why do you think the artist has drawn the Statue of Liberty in this way? (as a shuttle barreling towards Iraq, weeping, appearing apprehensive, etc.)

- What message is the cartoonist trying to convey? Can you identify any biases?
 - Do you agree or disagree with the cartoonist's opinion/message and why? Who else might agree with or like this political cartoon and why? Who else might disagree with or dislike this cartoon and why?
 - What do you think this cartoon says about democracy?
9. Note student thoughts regarding the cartoon down on chart paper; the class will reexamine the cartoon and their first impressions of it later in the lesson. Instruct students to take out their notes from the previous class and complete the Women's Rights in Iraq PPT.

Overview of Women's Rights in Iraq – Part II of Power Point and Discussion

- Slide 25: Project the quote on Slide 25 of the Power Point and have a student volunteer read it out loud. Discuss:
 - What message was former President Bush trying to convey?
 - Do you agree or disagree with this statement and why?
 - How should this belief play out in the US's goal of bringing democracy to Iraq, beginning with the 2003 US invasion and subsequent occupation? (Meaning, if advancing liberty and advancing women's rights are one in the same, what should be taking place as we advance democracy in Iraq?)
- Slides 26-28: Before delving into the complicated issue of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, remind students of the focus of the lesson. The goal is not to debate whether the US should or should not have invaded Iraq. Rather, the purpose is to look at how women's rights have changed throughout recent years in Iraq. After going over Slide 28, pause and discuss:
 - Based on the information we've just discussed, how would you characterize Iraqi women? (Encourage students to focus on the incredible strength, resilience, bravery, resourcefulness, etc. that Iraqi women have possessed.)
- Slide 29: When discussing hijab with students, remind them that many women, in Iraq and in the US, make the choice to wear hijab and do so happily. The important point is choice. Based on the violence and lawlessness occurring in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, and based on various secular groups vying for power, in many instances the woman's choice was revoked.
- Slide 30-31: "Honour" (or honor) killings have occurred not just in Iraq, but throughout the world throughout history. Remind students that while in office, Saddam Hussein basically condoned honor killings in his laws. However, the strife in Iraq has led to a resurgence of such brutal and unfair violence against women.
- Slides 32-34: After discussing slides 32-34, ask students to examine what the new Iraqi government meant for women by having students note the positive and negative (in need of improvement) aspects of various governmental actions or situations. Teachers may want to do this by noting student thoughts in "T" chart form. For example:

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<p>Secular law – not based on religion</p> <p>Sharia law- based on Islam, which in written form is progressive to women</p> <p>Quota implemented requiring 25% representation of women in government</p> <p>Women are voting</p>	<p>Secular law was what Saddam Hussein’s government implemented, but this led to abuse of power</p> <p>Sharia is open to interpretation, which can lead to the restriction of rights based on who is in charge</p> <p>Women representatives initially not following own agendas</p> <p>Women aren’t necessarily educated to know what or who they are voting for</p>
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Once students have exhausted all thoughts for the chart, focus on the left-hand column that notes improvements that are needed. Ask students to share ideas for how these things could realistically be improved in Iraq, as well as what the US’s role should be in such improvements.

- *Slide 35:* Play the 7.50 minute audio (alternative/additional audio recordings are listed under “Resources”) for students, which summarizes several points covered thus far in the PPT. Teachers can provide an overview of the NPR broadcast by sharing: “Most everyone in Iraq has suffered because of violence, but the lives of women have been, perhaps, affected the most. Their right to go where and do what they wish has been dramatically restricted by the rise of Islamist parties and extremist groups. Women’s rights groups report that in the past six months [the broadcast was aired in January, 2008], more than 100 women have been killed in the city of Basra for wearing make-up or what is deemed Western clothing. Those who dare to defend them have also been attacked and, in some cases, killed.”
 - What types of restrictions are women experiencing according to the report?
 - Why do you think women’s rights have eroded even more since the US invasion? Why is war (regardless of where it takes place) often hardest on women?
 - How do the restrictions placed upon some of Iraq’s women today compare to the restrictions that used to be placed upon women in the United States (before the suffrage and women’s rights movements)?
 - What does a woman risk by challenging the rules that are oppressive?
 - Why is it not always an option or even a desire for people who are oppressed to leave their country for another?
- *Slide 36-37:* After discussing the signs of progress noted on slides 36-37, ask students to share additional ideas on what they feel it will take to change the oppressed status of women in Iraq.
- *Slide 38:* Lastly, have students reexamine the political cartoon they started the day’s lesson with. Ask students if their interpretation has changed or if they have any additional reflections.

10. Provide students with the attached article, "Baghdad Underground," for reading either individually or in partners. Students should also discuss and answer the discussion questions that follow the reading. Once students have finished reading, discuss the article as a class.

Culminating Assignment: Recommendations to the US Government

11. As a culminating assignment, tell students to pretend that they are the founder of the Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq. Based on what they have learned about the history of women's rights in Iraq, as well as the current situation, instruct students to write a letter to the United States government making recommendations on how to improve the current situation. Letters should be:
- 5 paragraphs in length/detail:
 - Introductory paragraph should state why you are writing, include a brief summary of your understanding of the situation women are faced with in Iraq, as well as an overview of three recommendations or requests you want the US government to follow that will improve the situation of women in Iraq
 - Three detail paragraphs, each detailing one of your three recommendations/requests; make sure you illustrate the need and reasoning behind each recommendation/request.
 - Conclusion paragraph that reviews your three recommendations/requests; give a final pitch for why the US government should listen to you
 - Well written, organized, and grammatically correct
 - Creative and convincing
 - Show an understanding of the complex situation of women in Iraq

Resources

Please note that while links were active as of the creation of this lesson in 2009, some resources may have been since removed.

➤ **Audio Recordings**

- What Kind of Liberation? Women and Iraq
<http://www.radioproject.org/archive/2009/0909.html>
- Status of Women in Iraq, Part I: Baghdad
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=3375003>
- Iraqi Women Face Greater Danger, Fewer Rights:
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18518858>
- Iraqi Women's-Rights Activist Yanar Mohammed
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18183959&ps=rs>
- In Iraq, Activist Struggles as Women's Rights Shrink
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10543975&ps=rs>
- Iraqi Women Fight for Rights in New Constitution
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4785286&ps=rs>
- Concern Grows over Iraqi 'Honor Killings'
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5043032>

➤ **Articles**

- Shattering Illusions: Western Conceptions of Muslim Women
<http://www.jannah.org/sisters/shatter.html>
- An Islamic Perspective on Violence Against Women

<http://www.mwlusa.org/topics/violence&harrassment/violence.html>

- Wave Of Violence' Against Women In Iraq Undercuts White House's Claims Of Success:
<http://thinkprogress.org/2007/11/24/women-iraq/>
- Hidden victims of a brutal conflict: Iraq's women
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/oct/08/iraq.peterbeaumont>
- Four Arrested in Iraq Honor Killing
<http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/05/18/iraq.honorkilling/index.html>
- The battle against brutality
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/jan/28/iraq-women-rights-us-news>
- We have not been liberated
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/mar/06/iraqiwomenempowermentunder>
- Women's rights at risk in Iraq
<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/01/16/MNG3S4BAUP1.DTL&type=printable>
- Fighting for women's rights in Iraq
<http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/06/26/pysk.mohammed/index.html>
- The Talibanization of Iraq
<http://www.msomagazine.com/spring2007/taliban.asp>
- Restoring Peace & Hope to the Women of Iraq
<http://www.womenforwomen.org/global-initiatives-helping-women/help-women-iraq.php>
- Saddam wasn't a feminist.
<http://www.opinionjournal.com/federation/feature/?id=110008230>
- Coleman, Isobel. "Women, Islam, and the New Iraq." Foreign Affairs.

Excerpt from: "Shattering Illusions: Western Conceptions of Muslim Women"

by Saimah Ashraf

"Rose Hamid is as American as they come. She drives a Ford station wagon, leads a local Girl Scout troop, shops at the Gap and just attended her 20-year high school reunion" writes Laurie Goodstein in a recent New York Times article. From this brief description of Rose, readers may have formed a particular picture of her in their minds. If they were told, however, that "Rose Hamid wears a head scarf in keeping with her Muslim faith," that picture might take a drastic turn. She's Muslim? Images of suppressed, meek, black-enshrouded women submitting to the demands of their dominating husbands race through some readers' minds. But why is this the case? Would we see Rose any differently if she were Christian or Jewish? The answer is probably no, but since she is a Muslim woman, it is difficult not to have some preconceptions of her.

I don't understand why, in the West, Muslim women are clumped into one large group and viewed as homogenous clones of one another, while their Christian and Jewish counterparts are rarely ever stereotyped in this way. Many people don't realize, due largely to biased media interpretations, that there are a large variety of Muslim women around the world, from areas such as the Middle East, South Asia, South East Asia, Yugoslavia, Northern Africa, and the Southern parts of the former USSR, just as there are Christian and Jewish women in various countries. For instance, one probably wouldn't classify a Mexican woman with a French woman, though both may be Roman Catholics and hold the same beliefs. In the same way, American Muslim women are different from Pakistani Muslims, who are different from Saudi Muslims. In these three countries, women are accorded different rights and privileges because of the government and customs in the area. For example, many American Muslim women are discriminated against because they cover their heads; Pakistani women have political rights but are often exploited by men; Saudi women have no public role, yet they are "protected" by Saudi men.

The negative stereotypes of Muslim women probably arise from this varying treatment of women. The Western media, for some reason, latch on to a few examples of unjust behavior in the Islamic world, brand Islam as a backwards and "fundamentalist" religion, especially in its treatment of women, and ignore that it was the first religion to accord women equal rights. While Christian and Jewish women were still considered inferior, the originators of sin, and the property of their husbands, Muslim women were being given shares in inheritance, were allowed to choose or refuse prospective husbands, and were considered equal to men in the eyes of God. However, through time, slowly changing customs, and the rise of male-dominated, patriarchal nation-states, Muslim governments began placing restrictions on women which had no grounds in the Quran, the Islamic holy book, or the hadith, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. On the other hand, Christian and Jewish women in the West have slowly been awarded rights not called for in the biblical tradition.

Traditionally, Judeo-Christian women were thought to be inferior to men and were given a low status in society. These negative attitudes toward women arose because Judaism and Christianity placed

such a heavy emphasis on Eve's role in the expulsion from Paradise. Because Eve, rather than Adam, was the first to be seduced by Satan and eat fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, she supposedly caused the fall of mankind. Therefore all women, as the descendants of Eve, were thought to be morally weaker than men. These early prejudiced attitudes gave rise to discriminatory treatment of women.

Often, the discrimination against females began immediately upon birth since baby girls were thought to be shameful, a view found several times in the Bible: "The birth of a daughter is a loss" (Ecclesiasticus 22:3). Jewish rabbis also expressed displeasure at the birth of a female, saying that boys brought peace into the world, whereas girls brought absolutely nothing (Sherif 4). This unhappiness at a female's birth arose partly because of the large dowry that had to be given to a Jewish or Christian girl's husband upon marriage, a tradition adhered to until recently (Sherif 8). Hence, a girl was often thought to be a "lia

Additionally, as Kevin Harris, senior lecturer at the University of New South Wales, puts it, "women are portrayed in the bible quite consistently as appendages of men; as possessions of men; as goods which may be sold, disposed of, given away, traded, or just ordered about by men" (30). When a woman was married, in which she usually had little or no say, she became the property of her husband rather than her father, and he then had the right of "purchasing and selling" her (Schmidt 127). He owned not only her person, but also all of her property. "The household articles, even the crumbs of bread on the table [were] his. Should she invite a guest to her house and feed him, she would be stealing from her husband" (San. 71a, Git. 62a). A woman could regain her property only upon divorce or her husband's death, but she was never allowed to inherit any of his property (Sherif 8). In fact, Western women had no property rights at all until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Judeo-Christian practices also often ignored women's rights in cases of divorce. In original Christianity, divorce was expressly forbidden, and Jesus supposedly said that "anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery" (Matthew 5:32). This harsh view failed to take into account the possible incompatibility of a man and woman and condemned unhappy couples to stay together against their wills.

Suffering such blatant discrimination, it seems amazing that most Judeo-Christian women have overcome the odds and achieved equal rights with males. However, this has been a fairly recent development, largely occurring in this century. Within the past hundred years, women began to be considered citizens of states, were given voting rights, property rights, and easier access to divorce. Now many Muslim women hold the former position of Judeo-Christian women, but generally all they receive from the latter is scorn, derision, misunderstanding, or pity. It is ironic that the religion which significantly improved the status of women as compared to both Judaism and Christianity, and indeed was the first religion to grant women equal rights in all areas of life, including religion, sexuality, inheritance, and law, is now regarded as one that oppresses women.

I can't think of any country that really treats Muslim women the way they are supposed to be treated as stipulated in the Quran and hadith. Most Muslim countries' approach to women falls between the two extremes of complete oppression and encouragement to behave like Western Judeo-Christian women, which is certainly not what Islam intended. I have dealt, to some extent, with the former case and believe that most people who read this paper will sympathize with the plight of these Muslim women. Their solutions might involve the "modernization" or "Westernization" of these women, but this is not at all what I am advocating. It's true that Western Judeo-Christian women have achieved freedom and independence for themselves, but has this necessarily been beneficial for them or society? One look at the ever-rising statistics for rape, sexual harassment, divorce, broken homes, latch-key kids, teenage pregnancies, and AIDS cases in the West indicates that something is definitely not right in society. Rather, the solution for achieving true freedom, independence, and happiness must come from within from the teachings of the Prophet, from the depths of the Quran, and from the wealth of rich Islamic tradition.

Source: www.jannah.org/sisters/shatter.html

Name: _____

Response Questions for "Shattering Illusions: Western Conceptions of Muslim Women"

1. In the first paragraph, why does the picture of Rose change once she is described as a Muslim wearing a head scarf? What message is the author trying to convey with this example?
2. The author notes that there is a large variety of Muslim women around the world. What are the various examples of this diversity (positive and negative) that she notes?
3. What does the author say instigates the negative stereotypes of Muslim women?
4. According to the author, why are some Muslim women's rights limited?
5. What evidence does the author give in explaining that the Muslim faith is actually more progressive than other religions (such as Judeo-Christian religions)?
6. The author notes various examples from the Bible in which women were viewed or treated as inferior to men. What do you think her reasoning for including this information is?
7. What role does interpretation play in all religions? What can be positive or negative about such interpretation?
8. How would you describe the rights of women in America today? How does this compare with the rights that were afforded to women in America 100 years ago? In what ways were women's rights restricted throughout history?
9. Why do American women have the rights that they have today?
10. How can we combat making assumptions about people who practice various religions, be they Christian or Muslim?

Baghdad Underground

A “railroad” of sorts helps Iraqi women escape servitude, abuse and even death

Wednesday, 26 August 2009 20:10

On a bullet-scarred side street in Baghdad’s downtown, where U.S. Marines famously helped tear down the statue of Saddam Hussein in April of 2003, an inconspicuous entryway tucked between a steel-shuttered shop and a rickety candy stall leads to a flight of steep concrete stairs. Rusted water pipes run precariously over and across the poorly lit top step, tripping first-time visitors. The second-floor landing bottlenecks into a dark, empty hallway. Women in black abayas hurry across the buckled floor tiles in silence and quickly disappear through an unmarked plywood door on the right.

The decrepit two-bedroom apartment behind this unassuming portal is an essential junction of what activists in Iraq and their U.S. supporters call the Underground Railroad. This Railroad is a small, clandestine network of several shelters, located mostly in Baghdad, for the countless but commonly overlooked victims of the war in Iraq: women who have been raped, battered or forced into prostitution, or women who, accused of bringing dishonor to their families by having been abused, have been rejected or even threatened with death by their relatives.

In a country ravaged by war and fractured along sectarian lines, these shelters serve women who have nowhere else to turn for help. Operated despite recurring threats and lack of government support by a team of 35 Iraqi activists who call themselves the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), the shelters offer a glint of hope for civil society.

The Underground Railroad was founded in 2004 by Baghdad-born architect-turned-feminist-organizer Yanar Mohammed, head of OWFI, along with MADRE, an international women’s rights group based in New York. It provides the only sanctuaries for victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence outside the quasi-autonomous Kurdistan region in northern Iraq, where the local government and NGOs operate several similar shelters. In addition to providing temporary asylum, it helps women resettle in places where their abusers cannot find them easily. Since its inception, says MADRE Policy and Communications Director Yifat Susskind, the Railroad has helped thousands of women. Several have been transferred to Turkey, at least two now live in the U.S., but most of the rescued women have remained in Iraq.

Saddam Hussein’s regime persecuted political dissidents but allowed women personal rights and freedoms; assaults on women were rare. But when violence engulfed the country after the U.S. invasion, women became “the easiest targets,” says OWFI member Dalal Juma. Violence against women is rampant and goes virtually unchecked by Iraq’s new legal system, which is influenced by conservative clerics now dominating the country’s politics, and which follows tribal and Islamic Sharia law more closely than it ever had during Hussein’s harsh but secular rule.

Rape has always been a weapon of war. If rapists don’t murder their victims, the women’s own relatives might. The rise of radical Islam after the fall of Hussein’s dictatorial rule has helped resurrect reactionary values that stigmatize abuse of women and its victims. Although no statistics exist, Mohammed estimates that a third of rape survivors are killed by relatives who believe the women have disgraced their families.

Like rape, these so-called honor killings go virtually unpunished, reports Amnesty International. A typical sentence for such killings runs about six months, the judicial equivalent of wagging the finger. MADRE estimates that the Railroad has helped more than 300 women escape honor killings.

The cheap apartment is all the organization can afford; Mohammed tells me that it costs about \$60,000 a year to operate a shelter this size. That includes rent, security, utilities, food and clothes for the women staying at the shelter. With the squalor comes anonymity, and the inherent promise that, at last, the women are safe. Shelter workers believe that the shelter’s inconspicuous nature protects them from religious militias, which, Amnesty International reports, routinely target women’s rights advocates. Mohammed has received death threats in her

email; she carries a Glock pistol in her leather purse, although she admits she's not a very good shot. The Railroad's shelter locations are kept secret from angry husbands and male extended family members.

Samira (not her real name), a Sunni widow from the restive eastern province of Diyala, will stay at the shelter for several months, until it's safe for her to move on. She arrives early in the mornings at OWFI's downtown Baghdad headquarters, located behind a stucco fence fortified with coils of razor wire to ward off intruders, and doesn't leave until after dark. Surprisingly, activists make no attempt to disguise that official location: In March, the white metal gate of the compound was adorned with two brightly colored posters depicting a woman screaming through prison bars, emblazoned with the words "Speak out and struggle for women's freedom and equality."

For now, Samira spends most of her evenings cleaning the shelter: her safe haven, and her chance for a future without abuse.

"If it weren't for this shelter I would have become a prostitute," Samira said. "Now I feel I have a family around me."

By Anna Badkhen

Link to original article: http://www.msmagazine.com/summer2009/baghdad_underground.asp

Discuss and answer:

1. What is Iraq's "Underground Railroad"? Summarize its purpose and services.
2. What are members of the OWFI risking by assisting women in danger?
3. How would you characterize the women who started and operate this organization?

Culminating Assignment:

Pretend that you are the founder of the Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq. Based on what you have learned regarding the history of women's rights in Iraq, as well as the current situation, write a letter to the United States government making recommendations on how to improve the status, equality, and rights of women. Your letter must be:

- 5 paragraphs in length/detail:
 - Introductory paragraph should state why you are writing, should include a brief summary of your understanding of the situation women are faced with in Iraq, as well as an overview of three recommendations or requests you want the US government to follow that will improve the situation of women in Iraq
 - Three details paragraphs, each explaining one of your three recommendations/requests; make sure you illustrate the need and reasoning behind each recommendation/request.
 - Conclusion paragraph that reviews your three recommendations/requests; give a final pitch for why the US government should listen to you
- Well written, organized, and grammatically correct
- Creative and convincing
- Clear and concise - show that you have an understanding of the complex situation of women in Iraq