

Why do women oppose the Iraq war?

By Anuradha M. Chenoy,
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Indian perspectives on the war in Iraq [Aranyani Bhargava](#) [0] Hoping For Hope, [Anuradha M. Chenoy](#) [0] Why Women oppose war, [Tani Bhargava](#) [0] India's new anti-Americanism, [Ruchir Joshi](#) [0] Be very afraid

A staggering 86% of Indians oppose [1] the war on Iraq. Civil society groups like the women's and labour movements, students and rights movements form the backbone of this protest. The element that unites their collective opposition is a common understanding of global politics, power, violence and society, and how it links with a particular worldview based on peace, democracy and human rights.

A people already crippled by a decade of sanctions and now in the thrall of an onslaught by the most powerful nation in the world with its limitless capacity to kill, have now suffered well over a thousand civilian casualties as a direct result of the bombing – with many more likely as a result of the collapse of health services and food distribution. Protest is all the more urgent in the face of maimed women and children in precision-bombed marketplaces and maternity hospitals, and (according to the Red Cross) of wagonloads of mangled bodies being moved to burial sites.

Unequal contest

It is widely believed that the former Iraqi regime no longer possessed [2] weapons of mass destruction. It certainly did not use them in the latest war, as might have been expected. Moreover, it has few proved links with terrorist organisations. Both the main reasons cited for the war by the 'coalition of two' thus fall.

America and Britain have attacked Iraq in flagrant violation of the UN Charter and international law. They claim to be the liberators of the Iraqi people and partners in their struggle for regime change and democracy in Iraq. Yet even the assertion that oppressed Shi'a groups [3] have unequivocally welcomed the occupiers has proved embarrassingly false.

Throughout its history, the US has supported dictators as long as they remain its clients. It has tossed aside any number of democracies in favour of pliant despots and complicit dictators. There is every prospect that this pattern will continue in Iraq. A non-resident Iraqi, with a face friendly to Washington will replace the deposed one.

Peace activists [4] fear that, by allowing the US unlimited access to Iraqi oilfields, this war advances American hegemony and dominance in the Middle East and Central Asia. Iraq, due to its unambiguous support of Palestine and ability to oppose Israel, is nevertheless an easy target because its dictatorial regime (once blessed by the US) is now effectively denuded by ten years of economic and military sanctions. The US policy of unilateralism and pre-emptive strike as a template for war, first in Afghanistan and now in Iraq, is opposed by powers like France, Germany, Russia and China despite their deep engagement with the world's only superpower.

For the occupation of Iraq is primarily about the imposition of might, force and the establishment of a global hegemonic order, as opposed to reason and law. In this contest, unequal, unjust and unfair as it is, it is evident that unilateralism will appear to 'prevail'. This will significantly set back, even if it does not defeat, democratic movements and the struggle for an equitable international system.

The Bush-Blair argument that force is essential only in the international system and has nothing to do with liberal law-based democracies is false, simply because the international is structurally linked to the national and the domestic. If hegemony, pre-emptive strikes, and political support won by cash prevail in the international realm, it will surely be replicated at regional, national and domestic levels. All over the world, ordinary people – poor women especially – will feel the brunt.

Democracy, after all, is a result of the collective will and movements of people. It is linked to institutions and political culture. It cannot be imposed by brute military force. Iraqi resistance to occupation, including from the *Shi'a*, will persist long after world attention and the glare of television cameras turn away.

The real heroes are women

During any war [5], the discourse of 'masculine' qualities permeates the entire social fabric. Physical force prevails over rationality and non-violence. During war, the traditional definitions of gender dominate social relations. Wars as virile action are exclusive to male subjects or to those select women who support patriarchal methods. War strictly allocates the gendered roles of all members of society, whether or not they are combatants. Women and children, those without agency and at the mercy of others, are forced together in shared victimhood.

Global leadership is culturally 'tough' at the moment. Peace is for the wimps, those not fit to rule. Roles that men and women are expected or directed to play in society congeal and become immutable. These stereotyped roles are reinforced during wartime. Men with force have power and women are relegated to the status of those who sustain the familial and social infrastructure.

Women's movements have been moved to join in worldwide opposition to this war, understanding the much wider degradation to which it has subjected women. Many of Iraq's women and children have been killed or injured. During and after it, humiliated women grovel for water and aid, their homes shattered by precision bombs. They are impoverished and made refugees. It is hardly surprising, then, that feminists see in this Iraq war the rise of militarisation [6] and a macho patriarchy.

The role of women in the war indeed deserves especial attention. Women have not been passive in relation to this war: they have played multiple roles in it, as aggressors, planners, policy-makers and combatants. They have covered, commented and written about it. They have been victims, resistance fighters, protestors, leaders and more.

Yet on every television channel – though there is interminable talk about strategy, gains, targets, victims, martyrs and combatants – scarce thought or airtime is given to the suffering of Iraqi women. Even protests focus on their effect on troop morale, the popularity rating of leaders or the fate of governments. The complexity of the war, the horrendous chaos and structural violence it unleashes, and its impact on ordinary people – all are somehow only concealed by the relentless noise that surrounds it.

Before the war, thousands of Iraqi women [7] had emergency caesareans, because they knew they would have no access to doctors. They saved and stored up resources for war at their own cost. With little access to water or food, women in Iraq today huddle up in their bunkers with their children, having endured US precision missiles, thousands of bombs raining down on their cities and smoke rising from their burning homes. They are the real heroes.

Long after the war is over

After the war, men will talk peace and rebuild the state. Women will bury the dead and rebuild lives. They will care for the sick and wounded. Many will be refugees, most will be destitute providers for their families. Many with 'missing' husbands will be denied assistance from officials. Such situations only re-enforce and harden traditional notions of gender, nation and family. The oppression of women, and the condition of conflict which envelops women, continues long after the war is over.

We know this from the previous war in Afghanistan, where the US was widely said to have liberated women [8] from the Taliban. Indeed, some women are freer than before and a few professionals have returned to the workplace, but the majority remains veiled and faces violence and rape as large parts of Afghanistan are left at the mercy of warlords.

This helps to explain why so many women protest against all wars and are the backbone of any peace movement. Feminist theory provides an irrefutable argument against the notion that military power can be a substitute for political power, and that a military victory can ever be a political or moral one. Women around the world have already condemned America and Britain for destructive and degrading failure in the war on Iraq.

Their message is not just the protest in a peace march; it is a call for non-violence, justice and a lasting peace before, during and after war.

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[1] <http://www.antiwar.com/bidwai/bidwai-col.html>

[2] <http://www.ips-dc.org/iraq/primer4.htm>

[3] <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/countries/iraq/opposition.htm>

[4] <http://www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=15429>

[5] <http://www.vedamsbooks.com/no23124.htm>

[6] <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Users/hafa3/war/7.htm>

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