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## Women and War: Reclaiming a Feminist Perspective

By **Huibin Ameer Chew**  
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*Women are prominently involved in the US anti-war movement, but a gendered analysis of war is usually ignored. Political commentators occasionally make note of "women and children" as war's victims—but few dare to sharpen their critique into an indictment of systemic patriarchy and sexism. In this article, Huibin Ameer Chew breaks down how US imperialism and militarism affect women, both in the US and in occupied Iraq.*

The relation between imperialism and gender is not just a matter of macho talk and fashion, it is about who dies, about economic sexism and sexual exploitation. It is not just ideological, but material, institutional, and psychological.

Mainstream feminism today has been co-opted and cheapened into the narrow struggle to fill men's shoes—while preserving capitalist, racist, imperialist, and even patriarchal inequalities. "Feminism" is bombing Afghanistan to liberate women. "Feminism" is breaking gender roles by wearing heels and joining the military. "Feminism" is even becoming a power-CEO or Condoleeza Rice.

This shallow vision of gender justice has so permeated even progressive circles, that our very definition of sexism is circumscribed. Too often, sexism is merely seen as a set of cultural behaviors or personal biases; challenging sexism is simply seen as breaking these gender expectations. But sexism is an institutionalized system, with historical, political, and economic dimensions.

Just as it was built on white supremacy and capitalism, this country was built on patriarchy—on the sexual subjugation of women whether in war or "peace", slavery or conquest; on the abuse of our reproductive capacity; the exploitation of both our paid and unpaid labor. Truly taking on an anti-sexist agenda means uprooting institutional patriarchy.

A deep analysis of how patriarchy operates is typically absent across progressive organizing in the US—whether for affordable housing, demilitarization, immigrant rights, or worker rights. In all of these struggles, women are heavily affected, and moreover, affected disproportionately in gendered ways, as women. Yet too often, organizers working on these issues do not recognize how they are gendered. In the process, they prioritize men's experiences, and perpetuate sexism. Gender is ghettoized, rather than fully integrated into radical struggles. Appended to the main concerns of other movements, it is at best engaged on a single-issue, not systemic basis.

The result is that conservatives (and free-market, war-mongering liberals) have a field day claiming to stand in women's interests, while denying the experiences of most women in the US and around the globe. Let's not treat women's experiences and the issues affecting them as "special," but instead use them to perceive systemic forces at work we might otherwise not see. Let's understand that patriarchy cannot be uprooted in isolation from capitalist exploitation or white supremacy, and vice versa, because in our political context, these systems require each other. A better world depends on our understanding of this.

The US anti-war movement has primarily fixated on the deaths of our own troops. So much so that describing war as "sexist" returns blank stares—aren't men most of the people who die in battle? In the 20th century, 90 percent of all war deaths have been non-combatants—mostly women and children. The weapons of modern war—"Shock and awe," white phosphorus, depleted uranium—are as likely to kill and maim women and girls as males. Worse, long-distance weapons that help preserve our troops' lives by maximizing "collateral damage," are our government's deliberate strategy. Prolonged

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engagement between our military forces and civilians has resulted in war crimes, like the checkpoint slaughters wiping out whole families.

Our disregard for “enemy” lives has been reinforced by both racist and sexist ideologies—can we call our boys anything less than heroic? Do we see these other deaths as mere deviations from the supposedly mainstay targets of male “terrorist insurgents”?

### Unpaid labor

Women are disproportionately affected by the economic harms of war, both in the US and Iraq. Globally, women make up 70 percent of those starving or on the verge of starvation. Imperialism helps intensify the gender gap in poverty, a situation reflected in indicators from health to literacy.

During the sanctions period, female literacy in Iraq plummeted disproportionately. After the 2003 US invasion, women were the hardest hit by unemployment, since men are preferred for the few available jobs. Formerly 72 percent of salaried Iraqi women were public employees, and many lost their jobs when government ministries were dismantled. The destruction of basic infrastructure, like food rationing, impacts the indigent most—including poor women, many of them widows or single heads of households. Iraq’s economic woes will stretch far into the future, under the regime of IMF Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that industrialized nations plan to impose on the country because of its sovereign debt. Feminist scholars have documented how SAPs disproportionately harm Third World women across the globe in terms of health, education, and overwork.

Likewise, in the US, most families in poverty are headed by single mothers, and poor women bear the brunt of public service cuts. In Massachusetts, for example, most Medicaid recipients, graduates of state and community colleges, welfare, and subsidized childcare recipients, are women—and all these programs have undergone budget slashes as the war budget has grown.

The economics of women’s unpaid labor, performed in their traditional gender roles, must also be considered. As hospitals are destroyed or become unavailable, it’s women in both Iraq and the US who disproportionately shoulder responsibility for their families’ healthcare. Childcare, healthcare, homemaking all become heavier on women without public sector aid—whether due to economic collapse in occupied lands, or budget austerity in the aggressor nation. Mass incarceration increases the burden on women of color, who manage households alone while workfare-welfare programs keep an underclass from decent jobs. Military wives and mothers are saddled with double duty to enable soldiers’ extended tours.

### Sex trade

Unsurprisingly, economic hardship and oppressive gender relations combine to fuel sexual commodification. Following a pattern observed across different conflict regions by feminist scholars, Iraqi women have faced increasing pressures to earn their subsistence from men by bartering their sexuality. The United Nations Development Fund for Women documented that in Baghdad, prostitution became widespread between the fall of the Hussein administration in April 2003 and November 2003, as women disproportionately suffered growing poverty. By 2005, reports surfaced of Iraqi teens working in Syrian brothels, after being displaced from Fallujah, where US forces had launched brutal offensives and chemical weapons attacks on civilians.

US bases foment a sex trade around the globe that often draws poor, rural girls and women. Military leaders play a role in informally managing this industry to motivate their largely male workforce, exploiting global wealth disparities. Recently, reports have surfaced of contractors shipping in Filipinas to work as prostitutes at US bases in Iraq—for \$200 per month. Women have returned home pregnant, unable to track down the fathers. GABRIELA, a mass women’s organization in the Philippines, has decried how the country now has the largest number of prostituted women and children in Southeast Asia—a direct legacy of its use as a “rest and recreation” base for GI’s during the Vietnam War.

Imperialism enables collusion between foreign and indigenous patriarchies in aggravating women’s oppression. Sexual violence, as well as the trafficking of Iraqi women and girls, rose horrifically after the invasion, and continue unabated to this day. While these initial rapes and abductions were perpetrated largely by



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to this day. While these initial rapes and abductions were perpetrated largely by Iraqi men, the occupation force's disruption of security and disregard provided them the occasion—the US priority, after all, was to secure the oil. Moreover, the international women's human rights organization MADRE has reported that since at least 2005, the Pentagon has armed, supported, and trained "death squad-style" militias in Iraq, known to use sexual violence and targeted femicide as tactics for consolidating their power. As the occupation persists, and contact between military forces and civilians grows, sexual brutality at the direct hands of both US troops and Iraqi police under occupation authority has proliferated.

In March 2006, 14-year-old Abeer Qassim was gang raped and murdered by US soldiers; her family and 7-year-old sister were executed in the next room. Soon after, several other women publicly came forward, reporting gang rapes by US-trained Iraqi police. Sadly, it took over three years of occupation to break the mainstream media silence on atrocities which are truly just the tip of the iceberg as reported by Chris Shumway in *The NewStandard*.

### **Detained women**

Unbeknownst to the US public, the Abu Ghraib debacle included the torture of female detainees also, as covered by Chris Harding in the UK *Guardian*. In fact, the first evidence of abuse was a letter from a female prisoner reporting gang rape. Our own Congress has perused the photos documenting such atrocities, though the only images widely disseminated involve male victims because Congress refuses to release the other pictures. Interestingly, the only pictures of US soldiers assaulting Iraqi women to circulate were hard-core pornography images, later discredited as frauds; the rape of women abounds in our consciousness, yet has no "real" existence.

The total number of detained women in Iraq is unknown. In 2005, Iman Khamas of the International Occupation Watch Center reported 625 females in Al-Rusafah Prison and 750 in Al-Kadhmiya alone, ranging from age 12 to 60. Women are subject to torture and degrading humiliation; they are dragged by their hair, burned with electricity, forced to eat from dirty toilets, and urinated on. Haifa Zangana wrote in the UK *Guardian* that according to Iraqi MP Mohamed al-Dainey, there were 65 documented cases of women's rape in occupation detention centers during 2006.

A May 2004 Red Cross report disclosed that 70 to 90 percent of 43,000 Iraqis detained in the last year were arrested by mistake. Today, US forces continue to routinely imprison the female relatives and even alleged lovers of male suspects—as hostages and bargaining chips, in a form of collective punishment. Women are physically and sexually abused at checkpoints and during house searches.

Even after Abeer's grisly murder came to light, coverage in the US press repeatedly insulted and devalued the victims' humanity, focusing instead on the "tears" of their US attackers! Anti-war organizers cannot allow these acts to be treated as mere aberrations. We must oppose the hierarchy of lives that glorifies rapists and murderers in US uniform—and that ignores the systemic forces producing them.

Women may serve as soldiers, but the US military is a misogynist, homophobic institution that relies on patriarchal ideologies and relations to function—with far-reaching effects within US society as well as in occupied lands. The US military conditions men to devalue, objectify, and demean traits traditionally associated with women. Furthermore, soldiers are purposefully trained to eroticize violence—from a heterosexual, male-aggressor perspective. As reported by Kari Lydersen on *Alternet* in *Rape Nation*, the widespread sexual abuse of female soldiers by male colleagues, with overwhelming impunity, is a symptom of this institution's workings.

After brutalizing Iraqis, soldiers often bring rape and domestic violence home. Phoebe Jones of *Global Women's Strike* has traced a prison-military complex of abuse—torture in Abu Ghraib was outsourced to personnel from US prison companies, and former soldiers return to become abusive guards. The connection extends to both sides of the bars: in 1997, the number one reason for veterans to be in jail was for sexual assault. A full exploration of the effects of militarism on gendered violence in the US is out of the scope of this essay. However, such violence cannot be understood in isolation from economics, racism, and state violence.

## Reproductive injustice

The denial of reproductive healthcare is an issue of women's equality—affecting women's control over our labor, bodies, and futures. Over 340 tons of depleted uranium were dropped on Iraq during the first Gulf War; Iraqi feminist anthropologist Nadjie Al-Ali writes that the radioactive agent is linked to birth defects, pregnancy complications, and maternal mortality. Just months after the 2003 invasion, increased back alley abortions were reported in Baghdad as women lost access to healthcare and contraception.

In the US, budget stringency, justified by war priorities, means universal reproductive healthcare will remain a distant possibility. Moreover, in our historical context, limiting women's control over their reproduction is ideologically connected to the US imperial project. The Christian conservative movement has reframed debates on morality around the abortion issue; and, as Andrea Smith has observed, emphasizing women's place in the private family is used as an excuse for disinvestment from public supports.

The conflict in Iraq has restricted women's public access, shaping the trajectory of their political participation. And what's more, besides constraints on physical space, imperialism has hampered both Iraqi and US women's ability to organize against their own oppression.

The US occupation is not capable of bringing democracy or liberation to Iraqis. Its bottom line is maintaining the political and military power necessary to guarantee the economic interests of a US elite. Toward that end, occupying authorities have proved perfectly willing to barter away women's rights, time and again. At best, they have played two sides of the fence—appearing to respond to women's needs only to attack their status when convenient. But inevitably, an agenda based on despotic military brutality and the plunder of a nation is best carried out by public relations stunts, rather than actual accountability. Occupation is waged by perpetuating hierarchy—that is, by offering perks to certain segments of the occupied population because they help subjugate the rest.

Unfortunately, the occupiers' pretensions at "feminism" and posturing at defending women's interests has created an even nastier predicament for those in Iraq and the US who actually do care about women's rights. Iraqi women's groups risk attack for any foreign ties or evidence of being agents of occupation. Indeed, these groups are being targeted by Republican organizations and pro-occupation interests for co-optation. Our support for Iraqi women's groups may only help discredit them or lead to their opportunistic attack—both by those who would construe that support as imperialist, and those who would use Iraqi women's predicament to justify further military aggression. As US residents, any political solidarity must be predicated on demanding an immediate end to occupation—military, economic, and political. The longer we stay, the worse we make the situation.

The primary role of US feminists is taking on US imperialism, and the US patriarchy it requires and rejuvenates. Like Iraqi women, US women find themselves in a fraught position, because imperialism has pit a supposedly "feminist" agenda against other progressive politics. Yet this quandary of divide and conquer, of being caught in between, is not purely the work of "imperial feminists"—leftists who fail to grapple with gender are also in part responsible, and thus must be also be part of the remedy.

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