

Valerie Elverton Dixon, Ph.D.

The Community Church of Boston

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Almighty God Have Mercy:
On Women as Victims of War

There is no such thing as victory in war.

War is a defeat. It is a defeat of reason, a defeat of compromise, a defeat of civilization, a defeat of humanity, a defeat of love, a defeat of life. War is barbarity. It is a blunt instrument that destroys body, soul and mind of both the good and the bad, both the innocent and the guilty, civilians and combatants. It destroys nature; animals die. The questions are: how deep is the defeat? How long does the horror last? When one side's defeats are less profound than the other, we call that victory. We call that success. Such is a blinding deception.

When we want to go to war, we speak of it as evil, but as a necessary evil. Proponents of this current war offered at least two reasons for the war. First, Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and was a post 9/11 threat to the United States and its allies. Second, he was a dictator who was systematically abusing his own people while he remained a threat to the region. If he could be deposed and if a democratic government established in his place, then the Iraqi people would be able to build a better country. One important aspect of the humanitarian case against Saddam Hussein was his human rights abuses against women.

However, the historical record of the Saddam Hussein regime and women is mixed. In her book In Search of Islamic Feminism: One Woman's Global Journey, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea writes of a trip she made to Iraq in 1996. She had visited Iraq in 1956 with her husband, Bob Fernea, a cultural anthropologist. She found that things had changed quite much for women. After 1958, new laws "equalized inheritance for men and women, in contrast to Our'anic law which allowed women to inherit half a man's share"(294). The Ba'athists considered themselves socialists and women were important to a secular state (295). During her 1996 trip she met with professional women. She writes: "Over the years they had served in ministries, schools, clinics, at the university. There did not seem to be any inequality here." (302). Women were educated, able to read and to interpret the Our'an for themselves (315).

Fernea also met with the deputy secretary of the General Federation of Iraqi Women, Dr. Haifa Abdul Rahman. Rahman told her there were "a million and a half members of the federation, spread out throughout the several provinces of Iraq, 222 sub-branches of the federation throughout the country" (320). Women planned campaigns "for literacy, child care, maternity leave, wages and promotions" (320). Fernea learned that Iraqi women received one year of maternity leave – six months with full pay and six months with half pay. Each family received coupons for free milk and for free orange juice. Each family received a payment when a new child was born. Women participated in the parliament, received equal pay for equal work, and health benefits. In the end, Fernea concludes: "Saddam Hussein, despite his horrendous

reputation in the West, had the best record on women's rights in the Arab world today. But the words of my dear friend, an Iraqi exile, still echoed in my head. 'What good,' she had cried, 'are women's rights without human rights'" (331).

The other side of the coin is that women suffered because of Saddam Hussein's human rights violations. In a 2007 report called "Iraq On Whose Benefit: Human Rights and the Economic Reconstruction Process in Iraq", Amnesty International recalls the history of Saddam Hussein's human rights violations against women. These violations include torture, beatings on the bottom of their feet, extrajudicial execution, and rape. In 2002, women suspected of prostitution or political subversion were beheaded. In 1988, Kurdish women were left widowed in the wake of Operation *Anfal*. Large numbers of women were also left widowed during the Iran-Iraq war or by the political persecution of their husbands. Women were and still are victims of honor killings. (This is when a woman's own family kills her because she has transgressed a social custom, usually having to do with being seen in public with a man to whom she is not related.) The report says: "The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women reported in 2002 that more than 4,000 women had been victims of such killings in Iraq since 1991" (7).

These human rights violations caused some people to argue in favor of the war. In an essay entitled "They Don't Know One Little Thing" published in the book A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq, Australian journalist Pamela Bone argues that the Iraq war is just because of the principle of solidarity with the oppressed. She says that Saddam Hussein's human rights violations were so egregious that his deposition was an imperative, even if war became the necessary means to that end. She writes: "How can you trade lives off against

each other, saying that these lives must be sacrificed to save other lives? Yet this is what war is.

Humanity has not found an alternative to physical force as the ultimate sanction against a genocidal regime” (308).

Bone is right. Humankind has not found adequate methods for preventing and ending genocidal regimes. Still, we are left to ask: Can the evil of war overcome this kind of evil without leaving massive devastation in its wake? Can war end a genocidal regime without leaving its own barbaric footprints behind and unleashing unforeseen dangers?

Women and children are always, always victims of war. The Iraq war is no exception. In the same report I cited earlier, Amnesty International describes post conflict human rights issues. Hundreds of civilians have been killed by cluster bombs and unexploded bomblets from cluster bombs. The breakdown in security, looting, high crime rates “and sporadic clashes between armed individuals and US/UK forces”(8) make life difficult. It says further: “Security remains the main issue of concern for the Iraqi population because of the lack of appropriate policing and the wide availability of weapons”(8). In Northern Iraq, Arab families have been forced to leave their homes in revenge for earlier times when Kurds and other non-Arabs were displaced. The report says: “Women have been targeted for serious violations, including kidnapping, murder and rape. The perpetrators are believed to be members of criminal gangs. However, threats and intimidation against women by radical Islamist groups have also been reported” (8).

Further, when we read our newspapers or listen to the news on radio and television, we learn of ethnic cleansing, of people fleeing for their lives to neighboring countries or the ethnically homogeneous areas within the country. Suicide bombings are indiscriminate, killing

men, women, children, plants and animals. Recently, news reports say that two female suicide bombers may have been mentally retarded.

And, it is important to remember, that not all the female victims of this war are Iraqi women. Women serving in the United States military have died or have been severely wounded.

Some female warriors have been sexually assaulted by their own fellow warriors. Women who work for private contractors in Iraq have also been victims of sexual assault. Many of these women have no idea what laws protect them. Women in the United States who have not set a foot in Iraq are also victims of this war. As is the case with all wars, wives become widows, children become orphans and very often financial hardship follows because they have been financially dependent upon a man who is now dead. Women who are fortunate enough to have their husbands return home are victims when they have to take on the role of care giver to a man who is seriously maimed, or when they have to learn to live with a man suffering from post traumatic stress disorder. Sometimes women are victims of domestic violence perpetrated upon them by warriors who have been unable to leave the war behind. The tragedy of war expands in ways beyond imagination.

Sadly, this is nothing unique. We see women victims of war in other conflicts raging now and that have taken place in the recent past. Thousands of women have been raped and sexually abused in Darfur, Congo, Afghanistan, Rwanda and Yugoslavia. The logic of rape as a tactic of war is that women carry the honor of the community. To violate a woman's body is to violate the honor of the men in that community and of the community as a whole. It is a tactic of humiliation. In World War II, the Japanese army used Korean women for their sexual pleasure.

Amnesty International has called for such crimes to be prosecuted in the International Criminal Court. It says: “They are ordered, condoned, or tolerated by those in the highest echelons of political or military power. They persist because those who commit them know they can get away with impunity.”(Justice for Women in Conflict - A View from Amnesty International)

This is also nothing new. Humankind has been murdering itself in warfare for millennia. The victimization of women in war, in all the ways I have just described is nothing new. In her book, This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War, Drew Gilpin Faust, the current president of Harvard University, writes of the sufferings of women as civilians during the American Civil War. The war was not only fought on battlefields, but it was fought in the front yards and in the communities of ordinary people. She describes one incident where a woman was killed by a stray bullet while standing in her kitchen kneading bread. Twenty women were killed by artillery fire during the 1863 siege of Vicksburg (137).

Women were among the civilian population who suffered starvation and who contracted diseases brought into the community by sick soldiers. Women serving as nurses and other medical workers also died of the illnesses that they contracted from soldiers (140). Just as in Iraq today, the war caused a disruption of order and criminals took advantage, victimizing the vulnerable, including women and children. In the south, white women were attacked and killed by their slaves. At the same time slave women suffered increased violence. When their slave husbands walked away to join the Union army, often the women suffered violent retribution.

Then there was the anxiety of not knowing what happened to a loved one. The sheer numbers of casualties and a nonexistent technology of identification left many sons, brothers, husbands nameless in mass graves. The women who loved them lived with the stress of

uncertainty. Faust quotes a letter from Susannah Hampton from New York: “ if dead oh pray let me know it and relieve my anxiety. . . I have heard all kinds of rumors about him and his miseries until they have left me in a state bordering on phrensy” (115).

When a woman learned of the death of a husband, son or brother, the grief was often more than she could bear. The death caused another death, often a living death. Faust writes: “Even without the actual demise of the body, the bereaved might suffer a living death of spirit, heart, and hope” (143). Women found themselves assigned the work of mourning. They saw to the burial of the dead, both of those they knew and of those they did not know. After the war, Clara Barton led the effort to locate missing men so that their families could know their fate. Women, both north and south, bore the psychological cost of this work of death, and the cost of making meaning out of the carnage.

Looking further back in history, we see the sufferings of the Trojan Women. The play write Euripides imagines the pain of women who have had to watch their husband die and now they are taken to become the slaves or the wives of the enemy.

Hecuba says:

Think of the worst.

It will be that

A slave.

Whose? Where?

In Argos? In Phthia?

On some island off the coast?

A pitiful old woman

More dead than alive,
A useless hornet in a foreign hive,
Dragging out her last few days.

Or I will have to squat night and day
Outside somebody's door
At their beck and call;
As nurse fo some Greek matron's brats;

Or worse, stuck in their kitchen baking bitter bread;
With nothing but rags to cover the ruin of my body
And only an earth floor to lie down upon.

[Pause]

And I was Queen of Troy.

(Sartre's Euripides 15)

Looking even further back in history, the Bible gives us the story of a female victim of a war who was murdered by her own father in order to keep a vow made to Yahweh (Judges 11: 34-40). The story of Jephthah's daughter is what Bible scholar Phillis Tribble calls a text of terror. Jephthah, a warrior/ruler, makes a faithless vow, promising Yahweh that he would sacrifice the first thing that comes out of his gate if Yahweh would give him the victory in battle. It is a vow Yahweh neither demands nor sanctions. Yahweh is silent. Jephthah wins his battle and when he returns home, his only child, his beloved daughter, is the first out of his gate to greet him with dancing, celebrating his victory. Jephthah is distraught and he tells his daughter of his vow. She immediately understands her fate. She will become a human sacrifice to her father's God. She asks that she be allowed to go to the mountains with her friends to bewail her virginity. Because of her father's vow, she will die a virgin; she will never know the physical

love of her husband; she will never become a mother. After two months, she returns and her father carries out his vow. In this story, the victor in war loses his beloved daughter by his own hand. And God is silent.

The text tells us that a lamentation for the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite became a custom among the daughters of Israel. Where are our lamentations today? Where do we mourn the victims of war, especially the women victims who have not made a decision for war but pay a heavy price none -the- less? Where are our praying tears at the suffering of women, men, children, and nature? Where are the tears that shame us into thinking there must be a better way? Where are our tears that drown our fears and bring our love to the surface?

There is a contemporary gospel song that begins: "Wailing women, praying tears lay before the LORD your God, Vicki, Angie and Debbie and all you mothers in Zion; teach your children, teach your children that they must pray. They musts pray down all their fears. Lord help a sister out."

The Bible gives us many names for God. Each name reveals a certain aspect of the Divine. El Shaddai, God Almighty, is that aspect of God that is breast and womb. S/he is the fecund God, the god of new life. S/he is wisdom. S/he is comfort. S/he is the female aspect of the Divine. It is this aspect of God that we call on to help us out of our unholy mess. God Almighty, help a sister out. We call on this God to rescue us adrift on oceans of blood, drenched with torrents of tears flowing down through time and history. And each dawning day brings new grieves to grieve.

The good news is that as long as there is life, there are new possibilities. As long as we have the breath to thank and praise the God of life and of possibilities, to ask H/er mercy and forgiveness, we have the hope of creating something better. As long as we have the water within us for cleansing tears that help us see more clearly, as long as we have blood flowing through our bodies, we have the strength to lay claim to a radical love, a love that is stronger than our fears, that has the power to overcome evil with good and to give birth to a new humanity.

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