



The geopolitics of oil gains a new constituency

Posted by [Yankee](#) on July 19, 2006 - 9:09pm

Topic: [Policy/Politics](#)

Tags: [afghanistan](#), [iraq](#), [taliban](#) [[list all tags](#)]

The [issue of Ms. Magazine](#) that just hit the newsstands has a cover story called "Crude Awakening: How US war policies sell out women in favor of Big Oil". The main thrust of the article is that in order to gain control of the oil supplies in many Middle Eastern countries, the United States is willing to overlook how these countries consistently violate women's rights. The article isn't online, but here are some snippets to give you an idea.

Whether or not this blood-for-oil scenario is the whole story, the new Iraqi constitution and laws already passed there contain far stronger guarantees for major U.S. oil interests than they do for the women of Iraq. Women's rights deteriorated rapidly after the first Gulf War, when Saddam Hussein sold them out to religious fundamentalists in order to consolidate power. The U.S. had the opportunity to restore much of what was lost after the 2003 invasion. But in the period leading up to the election of the National Assembly, our government ignored demands by Iraqi women's organizations to create a women's ministry, appoint women to the drafting committee of Iraq's interim constitution, pass laws codifying women's rights and criminalizing domestic violence, and uphold U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325-- which mandates that women be included at all levels of decision-making in situations of peacemaking and postwar reconstruction.

The author, [Martha Burk](#), goes on to say:

In contrast, Big Oil is well protected in the constitution and through laws. The constitution guarantees the reform of the Iraqi economy in accordance with "modern economic principles" to "ensure...the development of the private sector"--essentially abolishing Iraqi state dominion over its petroleum reserves. Corollary laws guarantee that foreign companies will have control over at least 64 percent of Iraq's oil, and possibly as much as 84 percent.

I'm very glad to see the issue of the geopolitical implications of oil spread to as many new constituencies as possible, but I just find the link between American oil lust and the trampling of women's rights a little tenuous. The author doesn't convince me that there's a direct connection between oil policy and the US turning a blind eye to women's issues, though it certainly is the case that (a) women's rights are being violated left and right in many Middle Eastern countries and (b) many [US decisions regarding the Middle East](#) revolve around oil.

The question we must ask is the following: if it weren't for the abundance of oil in the Middle East, would the US do anything about their women's rights violations? It seems a foolish question, since

if it weren't for the oil, we wouldn't be involved in a war in Iraq to begin with, hence obviating the need for discussion about the role of women in the Iraqi constitution. But to answer the question, we need only look at any other country with an abysmal record on women's rights: [Nigeria](#) (which has oil, but we're not currently trying to nation-build there), or [Uganda](#), for example. Does the US government work toward women's rights reforms in these countries? Not exactly. So it is possible, and even likely, that the US government doesn't care about women's rights violations in the Middle East because they don't care about them anywhere, not because they're consciously choosing oil interests above women's rights.

While any magazine has the right to take any angle they want on their articles, I can't help but feel that this is a missed opportunity. Peak oil is an issue with a feminist angle, and it would have been more valuable for there to be an argument pointing these links out and giving readers material to work with. A couple of months ago, Energy Bulletin reran an article originally published in [Adaptation Blog](#) called "[Post Petroleum Woman](#)". The article, written by Carolyn Baker, is a different flavor of feminism to be sure. It's also considerably more alarmist than the Ms. article, but Baker, as well as a [blog post by jewishfarmer](#) at Relocalize.net, bring up some points that I would like to see raised by a more mainstream feminist magazine. For example, from jewishfarmer:

The way women live now in the Western world is almost entirely a result of cheap energy and its byproducts. I think it would be easy to lose track of how much contemporary feminism, with its focus on women in the workplace, and on the politics of equality is shaped by cheap energy in the forms of birth control, easy access to medical care, formula, breast pumps, drive-to daycare, Social Security, etc... I am a feminist, and enormously grateful for what feminism has given me, but I also feel that women have not carefully enough interrogated the degree to which their options are dependent on carbon exploitation.

It has been noticed here on TOD before that there are (apparently) not many female contributors. It will be nice to see that change someday soon, though I'm unfortunately not optimistic that the Ms. article will be a catalyst for that change.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 United States License](#).