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Social Sciences

The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq
Helen Benedict
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Modern times have created soldiers in both the male and female variety. Both carry heavy guns. Both are involved in firefights. Both are wounded. Both are killed. But the female version, a growing percentage of the US armed forces, is sexually harassed and abused and occasionally raped by the male version. Isolated and belittled in a military culture that is hostile, many of the women who have served in Iraq have found that they must protect themselves not just from an angry population, but from the men who are supposed to be their comrades.

Benedict, a professor of journalism at Columbia University and author of numerous books including *Virgin or Vamp: How the Press Covers Sex Crimes* and *Recovery: How to Survive Sexual As-sault*, and novels like *The Sailor's Wife* and *The Opposite of Love*, interviewed forty soldiers and veterans about their experiences in the Iraq War. She highlights five women whose stories carry them through enlistment, training, deployment, and their return home.

Since the war began in March 2003, more than 191,500 women have served in the Middle East. Most of them have been in Iraq carrying out jobs similar to their male counterparts. Because Iraq is an insurgent war with no defined front, women have participated in battles, killed and been killed, and participated fully in the risks and traumas of combat. However, the branches of the military have been slow to deal with the ramifications of the increase of females in their ranks. Women are often isolated with few serving together in any one company, unfortunately making their situation more dangerous. Jennifer Spranger, who signed up for the military police reserves six months before September 11, 2001, said, "When you're standing there with one hundred guys and ten girls, the guys are going to want to talk to you….The harassment got to be so commonplace that I didn't even think it was wrong. Anyway it went so high up the ranks there was nobody to tell."

Inadequate and unsafe bathroom facilities led to many bladder infections for soldiers

who were reluctant to use the toilets. Medical personnel, both in-country and stateside, were ignorant of women's health-care issues and exacerbated problems. A minority of female commanders and hostile or inadequately trained male commanders led to repeated rapes and sexual assaults.

Benedict's book, filled with compelling and heartbreaking stories, is a groundbreaking testament to the bravery, resilience, and almost insurmountable obstacles faced by women in stationed in Iraq.

Deirdre Sinnott