

A Feminist Perspective On War Through The Eyes Of Women Soldiers Served In Iraq And Syria

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ABSTRACT

War will not end while women are kept out of power and while power is governed on the historic terms that men established. Women are generally characterized as helpless and in need of protection, especially in the context of war and armed conflicts. Instead of biological factors, this vulnerability is more a consequence of patriarchal, cultural, social and political causes. Altogether, women do not have the same resources, authority and political rights to meet their personal needs or control their environments as men.

This paper is an attempt to analyze the role of women on the Iraq War through a book, *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq* written by American writer Helen Benedict. This paper offers an understanding of war from women perspective. It traces how different ideologies are present during narration of the war which ultimately effect women. It shows that war and war historians are biased by their own gender ideologies. In fact the male mythology surrounding war and the adversity of anti-war rhetoric are ideologically grounded in patriarchy. History of war is incomplete without ideological bias and it mostly affects women inside and outside the battle zone. This paper offers a history of Iraq war that is decidedly partisan and women centric.

KEYWORDS : Women, war, conflict, patriarchy, gender.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history war has commonly been associated with the actions of men and the victimhood of women. Men are the ones who decide to go to war, men do the military planning, men are the ones fighting in the front lines protecting the nation and dying in the war. On the other hand, the role of women is to be protected by the men, but remain peripheral to the war and fighting itself. The role of women in war and conflict has recently received increased attention in the political debate as well as in academia. At the turn of the millennium, women's rights gained importance with the transition to a "women in peace and security" framework which framed women's rights as a basis for maintaining international peace and security. The United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution in October 2000, which is seen as a ground-breaking culmination point in raising global attention and dialogue about civilian women disproportionately suffering during war and conflict. More than six decades since the founding of the United Nations and its Security Council, the adoption of Resolution is the first formal and legal document from the Security Council to recognize that women are particularly affected in conflicts and their neglected role in conflict prevention and conflict resolution

This paper is an attempt to analyze the role of women through a book on the Iraq War, *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq* written by American writer Helen Benedict.

The author Helen Benedict is a professor and also a journalist. She specializes in issues of social justice and war. She is the author of six novels and five non-fiction books. Her non-fiction book *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq* (2009 and 2010, Beacon Press) won her the Ida B. Wells Award for bravery in Journalism in 2013.

The aim of this paper is to offer a reading in order to understand America's engagement with Saddam Hussein's Iraq war from the perspective of female combatants. Benedict meets and interacts with women who were directly or indirectly related to the war in Iraq. Her interviews and research expose a history of war and ideology that is at variance with other kinds of war discourses. On the one hand she contests versions of war and responses to war presented in the public sphere by journalists, historians and commentators. She also critiques America's official versions on the war in Iraq while both the earlier versions are opposed to each other; they also seek legitimacy through this opposition. Benedict shows that war and war historians are biased by their own gender ideologies. In fact the male mythology surrounding war and the adversity of anti-war rhetoric are ideologically grounded in

patriarchy. She therefore offers a history of Iraq war that is decidedly partisan and women centric. She tries to prove that no history of war is either complete or free from ideological bias. In the process she exposes the horrors of war that mostly affect women inside and outside the battle zone.

THE LONELY SOLDIER: THE PRIVATE WAR OF WOMEN SERVING IN IRAQ.

The author of *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq*, Helen Benedict is a novelist and journalist specializing in issues of social injustice and war. Her most recent writings have focused on women soldiers, military sexual assaults and Iraqi refugees.

Iraq war is in a way numbers game from the point of view of female soldiers. More American women have fought and died in Iraq than in any war since World War II. Over 191,500 women have served in the Middle East since March 2003, most of them in Iraq. Yet even female soldiers have increased in numbers and they are painfully alone. Talking specifically about the Iraq war, women still only make up one in ten troops and because they are not evenly distributed, they often have to serve in a platoon with few women or sometimes none at all. This isolation combined with the military's traditional and deep-seated hostility toward women creates problem that many female soldiers find difficult to cope with war per se.

The view of women as a sexual prey rather than as responsible adults has always been part of military culture, making it hard for female soldiers to win acceptance where the question of respect is out from the scene. Military bans women from ground duties one of the reasons being that they might be taken as prisoners of war. But during the Iraq war female soldiers were thrown into jobs which were indistinguishable from all-male infantry and armour divisions.

One thing is very much evident from the Iraq war as the number and visibility of women as combat soldiers increased so is the hostility of male comrades against them. Several reasons can be attributed to this fact. Some of these are war always fosters an increase in the sexual violence of soldiers. Many men resent women for usurping the masculine role of warrior. Military is still permeated with stereotypes of women as weak, passive sex objects who have no business fighting and cannot be relied upon in battle. In the army being a woman invites treatment of inferiority.

It is not easy for a girl to become a soldier and with all the hostilities from their male comrades it becomes all the difficult for

them. How women are lured into joining the military is a different story altogether. The military life is different from what is generally perceived and thought of as to be true.

Mickiela Montoya is the first female Iraq war veteran to be met by the author Helen Benedict. She had a difficult childhood with her own family entangled in gangs. She herself was born from a teenage mother when she was eighteen and her mother was born from Mickiela's grandmother when she was just fourteen. Mickiela's mother is described in the book as a drug addict and neglectful of Mickiela and so she along with her sister was taken away by the Child Protective Services. This is suggestive of the fact that she had troubled childhood and did not receive proper care and love as needed.

Mickiela's introduction to the military is an interesting story which brings out the truth behind much military recruitments. Mickiela at the end of her junior year in May 2002 along with her classmates were sent to the school auditorium to take a test called ASVAB. Nobody felt it necessary to explain to the students about the test. ASVAB was the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test, the test taken to get into the military. Military recruiters armed with alluring pamphlets, promising money and adventure would call out to students as they walked by. After the 9/11 attack and the start of the Afghanistan War, the military adopted different tactics to recruit soldiers. They started looking for recruiters on the basis of the economic condition and immigration. Military recruiters enter into schools, in communities where jobs were scarce and the students who were poor or the child of immigrants. They would lure the young students with glamorous careers and citizenship to those who join.

With the advantage of 'No Child Left Behind Act of 2001' which stipulates that no public high school can qualify for federal money unless it gives the address and telephone number to the military and recruiter's access to the school, recruiters court the students, take them out for meals and promise to fulfill anything the young students want. The harsh reality is that the military recruiters in desperation to meet military quotas after a drop in enrolment after 9/11 were evidently helping high school students to forge diplomas and cheat on drug tests, threatening to arrest students if they didn't sign up, and lying.

The government system builds up wonderful stories of the benefits of joining the military which becomes the popular rhetoric. Mickiela's recruiter manipulated her by saying that she wouldn't have to serve outside the country and promised that the army would give her \$3000 just for enlisting, pay for college

education, train her in the job of her choice, and enable her to travel abroad. The reality was that the \$3000 came in instalments over the next four years of her joining which was also taxed. In 2005 a press investigation found that over a hundred young women were sexually exploited by at least eighty recruiters from the army, marines, navy, and air force. There are even incidents of rape in recruiting offices, assaults in government cars as girls were driven to military test sites and intimidation into sexual relationships.

The narrative of the book goes deeper into the treatment of women soldiers and how women feel about the military. The military has a profoundly muddled approach to women's uniforms. In the words of the author 'On the one hand, women must wear the unisex combat fatigues, on the other, their dress uniforms are not pantsuits, as one might expect, but skirts to be worn with "flesh tone nylons" and jackets tailored in an exaggerated hourglass shape'.

Basic combat training is divided into three phases called Red, White and Blue. The training is dreadful for anyone. If someone falls ill, injured or fail he/she must cycle through the entire training period again. With the starting of basic training recruits are given a fitness test to prove themselves that they can survive the challenge. The first day of the test is called Day Zero. It is the day when the recruits meet their drill instructor. During the basic training, recruits have to bear the constant yelling, screaming and insults of the drill instructors. According to Mickiela "They figure out your weak spots and try to get at you like that. Like, if you have crooked eyes, they tell you. They call it 'constructive criticism'. It does make you lose some of yourself" (The Lonely Soldier 42). Some marine instructors were also prosecuted for assaulting trainees although instructors are not supposed to hit them.

The book offers a uniform tone of description of the military with their faults and criticism from the points of view of the women interviewed. A typical day of boot camp lasts sixteen hours and in that time every task is made as grueling as possible with the constant push-ups and sit-ups.

The book shows how military views women and the hollowness of American claims which try to paint a picture which is beautiful. But this is not the case. During training some even develop suicidal tendencies. All recruits are under intense pressure during boot camp and many women have the additional pressure of sexual harassment. Women had to change their personality to cope with harassment. Mickiela altered the way she talked, and even the way she walked.

In addition to the sexual harassment that female soldiers have to cope up with they are also up against a military that demands they perform on a par with men while simultaneously assuming they are inferior. This drives many to become obsessed with proving themselves, especially in the face of the differential standards of physical fitness.

Miriam Barton, an army sergeant from Oregon, who served in Iraq as a heavy gunner with an engineering unit from 2003 to 2004, says "We're all trying to prove ourselves bad enough to play with the boys. You got to be twice as bad as they are in order to get half the recognition" (*The Lonely Soldier*, 48). This indicates a story at an individual level trying to highlight the reality of the combined consciousness of the military.

The military is never out of controversies as is evident from history and from this book *The Lonely Soldier*. The different standards for men and women have been a subject of controversy ever since sex segregation in boot camp ended under President Clinton in 1994. The book says "In the army, for example, both men and women must be able to do eighty sit-ups, but men also have to complete seventy-five push-ups, while women are asked to do forty-six" (*The Lonely Soldier*, 48). These have become an instrument to argue that easier measures for women bring down the fitness standards for all soldiers. The women have a different perspective on this. They say that every unit has women who are able to meet the male standards; when adjusted for size and weight the regime is equally challenging; that some women can shoot as well as men, if not better, and that much of modern warrior prowess isn't about strength but quick thinking and technological skills. According to the author a recent study has discovered that women sustain twice as many injuries as men in basic training, especially in stress and bone fractures.

Military distorts the truth with language. The last phase demands more physical training and obstacle course. The author stresses on the point that Mickiela's experience of basic training does not reflect everybody's, as boot camp is many things to many people. For some it is a satisfying challenge, for others a grueling test. Some consider it as hell. Regardless of how one sees it and however much the military portrays it as being about building discipline and esprit de corps that is building a sense of pride and mutual loyalty. The truth is that boot camp is about training people to kill.

The book offers historical evidences and mentions that killing has not always been easy for soldiers as one might think or assume. In World War II, only 15-20 percent of soldiers were shooting to kill; most were either deliberately missing or not shooting at all.

‘Military historians decided this was because no amount of conventional drill could overcome a human being’s revulsion toward murdering his own kind, even in the face of life-threatening danger to himself or his comrades’. The military so as to condition the soldiers to kill reflexively and dispassionately concentrated on developing a psychological approach to achieve this objective. The results of this psychological approach were visible by the Korean War where about 55 percent of soldiers were firing to kill, and by the Vietnam War the rate had risen to over 90 percent.

In the present times this deadly training is mixed again with a mix of technology. Soldiers are deprived of sleep to make them susceptible to suggestion and keep her too exhausted to rebel. Mickiela was screamed at by her superiors and made to shout ‘Yes, sir’ in reply to humble her and accustom her so that she can function in an atmosphere of constant aggression. Humiliation, made to obeying capricious commands, arbitrary punishments to stoke her anger while at the same time prohibiting her from venting it lead to building up of aggression. She was treated like a child to give the drill sergeant the authority of a parent. She was even kept aloof from the news to keep her ignorant and malleable. The military to erase her civilian identity limited to calling her by her rank not by name or the last four digits of her social security number.

The book tries to show the view which women form of the male soldiers as the enemy within. The fact that misogynist language is deeply engrained in the military culture can be gauged from the age-old butts of military contempt, women and homosexuals. Military language is filled with contempt all the time. Instructors are evidently reported to denigrate recruits with words like pussy, girl, bitch, lady, dyke, faggot, and fairy. Even the everyday speech of ordinary soldiers is still riddled with sexist and homophobic insults; and soldiers openly pursue pornography that humiliates women and sing the misogynist songs that have been around for decades. “This is my rifle, this is my gun [penis]; this is for killing, this is for fun” (51). The misogynist language serves as a constant reminder to women that, even as they are winning honours and advancing in numbers and positions in the military, when it comes to the group, they are alone.

The general understanding that familiarizing about the culture, people and language of a place is important to work better is lacking among the military in Iraq is shown. Although Mickiela was given all the training like bombing, lobbing grenades, kicking open doors, riding horses and searching and arresting the inhabitants; she was told that she was going to Iraq to give the Iraqis freedom

and help them recover from Saddam Hussein's brutal rule. The only training she was given on Iraqi culture was two briefings and a DVD. She was taught no Arabic and was not even given a map to know about the place better.

The military does not disclose about the duties and the places to serve to the recruits properly. Jennifer Spranger thought that she was trained to police unruly soldiers on home bases. She only later came to know that her unit's mission was EPW: Enemy Prisoner of War operations. She was told that they were going to be peacekeepers. She even became an unwilling object of an obsession. The man in this case was a sergeant, older and married with children. When this obsession of the sergeant grew worse she called the navy police and he was put in the psych ward of the hospital for two days.

Power corrupts people and ill can be done to anyone when a man is in power. Unluckily for Jennifer Spranger the same sergeant was in charge of promotions in her unit, and she found her every attempt at advancement blocked. If all these were not enough, soldiers had to go through painful, dangerous, smallpox and anthrax shots. These shots were known to be dangerous especially for women. The anthrax vaccine given in a series of six injections is very painful. When Jennifer Spranger, Mickiela Montoya, and Abbie Pickett were in training, they were threatened with military prison if they refused the shots.

The military is filled with instances of sexual assaults which is evident from the case of Abbie Pickett. She was one of only five women in her platoon among forty or so men and she came face to face with the hostility and suspicion of her male superiors. A lieutenant colonel sexually assaulted her. Women soldiers on the other hand are not friendly to each other in the military as is told by Mickiela Montoya. Some women soldiers see rape victims as promiscuous women. Rumours of promiscuity are also a way of blaming the rape victims and denigrating women in general.

Abbie's case is common in the military where more than 88 percent of officers are male. Many officers abuse the women, either by using their rank to coerce the women into sex or by punishing those who reject their advances. As punishments women are forced to do push-ups till they vomited, they are put on twenty-four hour shifts with no sleep day after day. They are made to imitate the walk of chickens or march with clocks around their necks and are assigned to extra- dangerous missions. These are done by senior-ranking men whose advances the women have refused.

Although the use of rank to coerce someone into sexual relations, whether with threats or bribes, is legally defined as rape in the

military but the men who do this seldom face any consequences if at all because of the fear of the victims to report and also because the military protects them.

The book also shows official rhetoric on war being overtaken by collective understanding of war. Abbie had doubts about the reason USA was going into war with Iraq which was also fuelled by the fact that she was hearing from people that any war with Iraq will be a cynical grab at oil. She also heard that Saddam had no Weapons of Mass Destruction and that Iraq had no connection with 9/11 attacks. Abbie was also of the view that they were also not given adequate information about the Iraqi people. Abbie also reveals that the thing which troubled her most of the time was the fact that certain members of her unit were stealing, getting drunk, and illicitly trading in army property.

The underlying crave for possession of power is shown in the book. Sergeants and commanders are constantly jostling for power and bickering in front of their soldiers. The sergeants quarrelled and contradicted each other's orders.

Victimization of women as prey is evident clearly in the text. Eli Painted Crow who served twenty-two years in the military. Her story is about her fight back against sexual assault. She had to face sexual assaults and deal with it. While she was at Honduras two major and a lieutenant tried to sexually assault her. She showed courage and grabbed the major and warned him that if he tried to touch her she would tell about the incident to his wife. The other major just tried making advances according to her and she thought it was too subtle to report it to anyone. The lieutenant, however she had to physically fight. He took her as a prey and he thought Eli as weak. She got even with the sexual assaults in her own way but she never reported them although some succeeded in sexually assaulting her because according to her nobody believed.

Eli's unpleasant experiences brings to the fore the prevailing attitude in the military, from women as well as men, to regard a women who reports sexual assault as a traitor, a weakling, a slut, or a liar, and soldiers treated such a woman through punishment by ostracizing her. They would turn their backs when such woman walks into a room or refusing to speak or listen to her. In general, female soldiers who served with a good portion of other women tend to be less vulnerable to sexist discrimination of any kind than those who are vastly outnumbered. Some women leave the military unable to cope up with sexual assaults and their dreams are shattered.

Both male and female soldiers commonly blame the prevalence of rape and sexual assault by soldiers in Iraq on the lack of prostitutes, this idea is not exactly discouraged by the command.

‘Even after forty years of research debunking the notion that rape is caused by pent-up lust, the military still promotes it, for to do so is useful: it keeps women fearful and blames them for provoking rape, thus letting men off the hook.’

The book *The Lonely Soldier* also brings to the surface the fact that the military uses threats and punishments to silence and expel women who report sexual violence. In 2005, army lieutenant Jennifer Dyer was threatened with prosecution for desertion because she refused to return to her post with an officer she had reported for raping her.

Personal ideology is reflected in the book. Eli never believed that the United States belonged in Iraq. She was sure that behind the veil of democracy and freedom laid racism and greed for oil.

Misogynistic undercurrents are visible in the book. Eli has seen women being ignored in the army and gives her reasons. She says it is because most women don’t argue their points, they just accept the situation or complain about it and when women do complain, it is seen as whiny. Another revelation by her is that the military does not look into the mental health of the person who’s in charge, there are drug addicts in the military, and even if there are tests to detect they are being overlooked as there is a shortage of personnel.

The book also tries to bring to the fore the treatment and view of Americans adopted by the Iraqis. Given the fact that some ten thousand civilians were killed during the first days of the Iraq invasion, aptly justifies the hostility shown by the people of Iraq to the soldiers of the United States. Jennifer was told like other soldiers that American troops would be greeted as heroes. But there were no such greetings and pleasantries. Instead children would pound on the doors of the soldiers’ trucks and try to grab their rifles through the windows, or make gun shapes with their fingers and pretend to shoot the soldiers. Jennifer said “There were no smiles and waves; it was nothing like they told us it would be. After all, we went in right after the air war. If it was me, I don’t think I’d be greeting us too happily either” (*The Lonely Soldier*, 99). This points out towards the resentment of the Iraqi people towards the American troops. It also alerts us to the feelings of Jennifer as a human being and not as a soldier.

The book tries to show the political rhetoric of war on Iraq. The United States government during the regime of President George W. Bush pretext for war was that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. It assumed the responsibility that it needed to free the Iraqi people from the clutches of Saddam Hussein. The government attitude towards the war was that the war could be run on the cheap. The wisdom within the Bush administration was

that the Iraq War would be mostly fought in the air and won quickly, like the first Gulf War. This was the reason that the soldiers on the ground were sent in without proper equipment, lack of training and in inadequate numbers. This was particularly dangerous for the 'citizen soldiers' of the Army Reserve. 'Citizen Soldiers' were ordinary citizens and not professional soldiers.

The concept of returning home from war is shown in the book. The conditions and lives of soldiers especially women soldiers returning from war is a different story altogether which merits attention and observation. Soldiers after returning from war goes through six days of demobilisation, which includes a medical examination, lectures on how to cope with being home and answering a questionnaire to reveal whether they are traumatised, the latter of which is seen as a joke by many.

Social seclusion is another aspect that the book tries to highlight. The most common conditions of soldiers returning from war are to make themselves fit in to the society. The gulf between somebody who has been at war and somebody who has not seems insurmountable. Soldiers sleep is intermittent and plagued by nightmares. They have flashbacks as in the case of Abbie Pickett. They are haunted by memories of the horrors they saw like mutilated bodies. Some veterans are required the help of psychologists. Any reminder of war, no matter how slight affects their mental states, they tend to explode with anger. Their families are not able to understand them which make them angry and alienated. Soldiers like Mickiela slept into depressions upon returning from the Iraq War. Soldiers find difficulty to get adapted to the civilian life. Some soldiers reenlist because they feel alienated from their previous lives and families. War veterans often feel worthless, numb, and withdrawn, unable to love or care about anything which can propel them into suicidal depressions. The Pentagon estimates that 18-20.5 percent of troops come back from Iraq with Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

CONCLUSION

To conclude we can say that being a women soldier is simply being in a different territory. Along with war where they have to serve they are subjected to gender discrimination, sexual assaults, troubles at home, personal problems, health problems and also Post traumatic stress disorder. Women have to deal with the alienation even from their own children after returning from war, when the children learn to live without the mother. Misogynistic attitude of the male comrades are also analyzed.

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