

## Women in Conflict: violence, injustice and power



**Dr Denisa Kostovicova**, Associate Professor of Global Politics in the **Department of Government** considers the gendered dimensions of contemporary conflicts after the Conflict Research Group public lecture ‘Women in Conflict: violence, injustice and power.’

What happens when many US women join the military and serve their country in Iraq? They get sexually abused by their fellow soldiers. This shocking finding by award-winning journalist, novelist and playwright Helen Benedict, inspired a debate on Women in Conflict organised by the Conflict Research Group at the LSE.

Every day, on TV screens, in the social media and in the newspapers, we are reminded of many ways in which women are involved in conflict world over. Many are killed, injured or raped. Others blow themselves up. At the same time, ever more women are joining the military and international peace keeping missions. Do these developments tell us a complete story of women’s role in conflict? What is the real story of power, equality and justice from women’s point of view? This was the topic of a public debate organised by the Conflict Research Group (CRG) on 28 April at the LSE. The CRG is a multidisciplinary group based at the **Department of Government** that gathers scholars and researchers at the School with an interest conflict.

Tonight’s opening of the play *Lonely Soldier Monologues* at The Cockpit in London marks an occasion to bring together academia and the arts to make sense of the turmoil of contemporary conflict from the perspective of gender.

*Lonely Soldier Monologues* is based on Helen Benedict’s ground-breaking book *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq* (2009). Helen Benedict is an award-winning novelist, journalist and playwright specialising in issues of social justice, and a professor of journalism at Columbia University in New York. *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq* documents the stories of women in the US military who served in Iraq and many challenges they faced, including sexual assault from their fellow soldiers. Her writings inspired an ongoing class action suit against the Pentagon on behalf of women and men who were sexually assaulted in the military. It also inspired the 2012 Oscar-nominated documentary *The Invisible War*, in which she appears. Her work on women soldiers won the James Aronson Award for Social Justice Journalism.

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Helen Benedict joined us for the debate alongside Dr Katherine Brown from King's College, London, and **Dr Marsha Henry**, from the **LSE**. All speakers put the issue of gender at the forefront of their analysis of conflict and security.

Helen Benedict took us through her research and the story that unfolded, revealing a pattern of sexual abuse suffered by many young and often vulnerable U.S. recruits, both during the recruitment process and while they were on duty in the deserts of Iraq.

Dr Brown compared the motivation of women to join national armies and those joining guerrilla and terrorist groups, such as Al Qaeda or the IS.

Dr Henry extended the comparison further and explored the increasing numbers of women, particularly those from the global South, serving in international peace keeping missions.

The ensuing discussion involving the audience touched on a number of issues, including: What motivates young women to join the military? Should women join the military in the first instance? Should they be segregated within the forces when they do join? How are economic inequalities reproduced and reflected in greater numbers of women soldiers? Is domestic violence connected with sexual abuse in the military? Do women who join terrorist organisations follow their politics, or are they merely victims drawn into the conflict unwittingly? Complex questions elicited an equally nuanced and considered debate.

The voice of women soldiers who suffered in Iraq at the hands of their friends was brought alive in front of the LSE audience by a short preview of the play.

Prav Mennon-Johansson, a theatre producer and director whose PMJ Productions brought the play to London, queried whether the abuse of female soldiers by their own comrades-in-arms is consigned only to the U.S. army.

Bringing the play to the UK was aimed to shine the light on human rights abuses suffered by female soldiers in the UK, as the US story had been dismissed by some of Mennon-

Johansson's British interlocutors, 'It doesn't happen here!'. In 2013, two staged readings of *Lonely Soldiers Monologues* were performed at The Brixton East Theatre and Arts Theatre in the West End, London. Audiences were shocked, outraged and interested. People wanted to find out more about the topics discussed. The London play and a series of events that accompany it provide an opportunity to continue important discussions on this subject and the related issue of domestic abuse.

Lively discussion at the LSE showed us how important and challenging the issue of human rights, women and conflict is.

Yesterday's report (BBC News) of the conviction of the British army sergeant who was found guilty of 13 sex attacks on seven female recruits demonstrates how timely this debate is in the United Kingdom.

Above all, the LSE event showed that putting gender at the forefront of analysis is critical, not just for gleaning the many roles of women in conflict, but also for understanding the very nature of conflict and politics around it.

For more information on upcoming public events at the LSE, please see the School's [website](#).

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**Note: This post does not give the position of the Department of Government, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.**

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