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### Under fire both in combat and back on the home front

By Sue Hutchison  
Mercury News

When Pfc. Lori Ann Piestewa was killed last month during the ambush of her Army company in the Iraqi desert, she was honored as a hero with her fallen comrades. But after news circulated that she was the single mother of two preschoolers, the carping began.

What was she thinking, joining the Army when she risked leaving two children motherless? Isn't this a clear sign that women shouldn't serve in the military, especially if they're parents? Where were her priorities?

Single mothers are used to coming under fire on the home front because they don't have jobs, or can't get jobs that pay enough, or have good jobs and aren't staying home to take care of their children. Even when Piestewa found herself under real enemy fire and gave her life for her country, the message still rang loud and clear that she was doing something wrong.

#### Another Catch-22

Army Spec. Shoshana Johnson, one of the seven POWs rescued this month, also is a single mother, and she caught flak, too. But criticism of both women was overshadowed by the POWs' ordeal and by the dramatic story of Pfc. Jessica Lynch, who survived the ambush that killed Piestewa, her close friend. (In a column last week, I meant to say that Lynch fired at Iraqi soldiers even after she had been shot at, not shot. She didn't suffer bullet wounds.)

Regardless of the heroism of Piestewa and Johnson, those who oppose having women serve in the military are already using them as symbols of The Problem.

The statistics tell a different story. According to the Military Family Resource Center's 2001 Demographic Report prepared for the

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Department of Defense, single mothers are hardly a presence in the military today. Single parents make up barely more than 6 percent of all men and women on active duty, but the numbers don't show how many parents are raising their children alone.

Women, who constitute 15 percent of the total active-duty force, are disproportionately represented in the group, accounting for about 30 percent. Still, that's just 23,112 single mothers to the 64,363 single fathers in the military.

So why all the outrage over women risking death in battle? Why is it seen as more traumatic for children to lose a mother than a father? It makes more sense to question whether any parents of young children should serve in combat than to divide the debate along gender lines.

### **Better breadwinners**

Many young women and men enlist in the first place for a job with good prospects. And, in the absence of a husband and father, many single mothers sign up to become better breadwinners.

"Society is uncomfortable with the image of a mother with a gun," said Shelley MacDermid, co-director of the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University. "But the biggest risk to single mothers is poverty, and the military offers all kinds of support, from health care to child care to education, so they can be upwardly mobile."

Should they be denied that opportunity, yet another Catch-22 for single mothers?

Piestewa left her children in the care of her parents and her Hopi Indian tribe. She did not abandon them. All signs are that she thought she was doing what was best for them.

Many who are serving in Iraq did not believe when they enlisted that they'd end up risking their lives. But when they were asked to, they did. Piestewa deserves better than to be second-guessed for making the soldier's sacrifice.

Her death should be a reminder of the horrible cost of war, not a symbol of her failure as a parent. To her children and community, she will always be a heroine.

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