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Review by Mariana Grohowski

*Women Veterans: Lifting the Veil of Invisibility*

G.L.A. Harris, R. Finn Sumner, and M.C. Gonzalez-Prats | Routledge, 2018. 150 pp. ISBN

Rivaling Jeanne Holms' *Women in the military: An unfinished revolution* (1982; 1993), *Lifting the veil* (2018) is a comprehensive and historical account of the effects U.S. Military's misogynistic culture has on women. Uniquely, *Lifting the veil* focuses on the military woman as veteran—that is, what happens after women leave the military—examining the wicked problems they face socially, culturally, and systemically. The term “wicked problems” is attributed to Rittel and Webber's (1973) analysis of social problems, classifying their 10 characteristics, which include the inability to establish resolution. Indeed, while Holm and others (i.e., Stiehm 1979; Biank 2013; Burke 2004) have detailed the minefields servicewomen face on active duty or while in the reserves or guard, few works are entirely dedicated to the U.S. military woman veteran, making *Lifting the veil* an invaluable contribution to the field of veterans studies. In fact, the authors claim that there is little research “dedicated to the invisibility of military women and certainly none to date broaches the subject of the invisibility of women veterans” (p. 5). *Lifting the veil* not only synthesizes research on women veterans, but it also offers complementary theoretical frameworks for analyzing U.S. military women's experiences: The authors use the theories of intersectionality and wicked problems to frame their analysis of women veterans' lived experiences.

The book is organized into eight sections—some with a single chapter, others consisting of several chapters. The sections are titled: preface, intersectionality, on citizenship, military culture, women and power, the civil-military divide, confronting wicked problems: the role of health and violence, and conclusion. In the preface, the authors share their qualifications, two of whom are veterans; they write “while [our] experiences are divergent in kind, we offer ourselves as exemplars of ways in which invisibility as women veterans can be manifested.” (p. 3). G.L.A. Harris and Maria Carolina Gonzalez-Prats served in the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Army, respectively. Harris, a professor of public administration at Portland State University, is a commissioned officer in the U.S. Air Force Reserve who served previously on active duty. Also, Harris has twice been named a Fulbright Commission distinguished scholar. *Lifting the veil* relies on her extensive body of previously-published research on military women and veterans. Gonzalez-Prats is a PhD student in social work at Portland State University. She was in the army from 1998–2004 as an enlisted reservist and later as an active duty supply and logistics officer. The third author, R. Finn Sumner, an assistant professor of public administration at Portland State University, has no military affiliation.

The title of the book is significant in that it is a way for the authors to “attempt to unmask [a] triple denotation of [the] invisibility” women veterans face (p. 4). The three ways the authors claim women veterans are veiled, or made invisible is: 1) by authorities like the military, shielding the treatment of women in and outside the military; 2) how women veterans themselves reinforce their invisibility as a mechanism of self-protection from scrutiny and further turmoil; and 3) by the Veterans Administration. Women veterans suffer ill-treatment by the VA, as they are not believed as credible; therefore, women veterans are compelled to fight against this systemic invisibility. (pp. 3–5). In summary, the authors claim “these occurrences [are] a tripartite conspiracy and hypothesize that it is these very confounding phenomena independently and jointly that keep women veterans invisible and thus veiled” (5). Thus, the remaining sections of the book attempt to expose these three,

interconnected phenomena in order to try to “lift” or change the forces that keep women veterans invisible and therefore marginalized.

Perhaps the most valuable sections of the book are two and seven. Part two, “intersectionality,” explores the multiple roles and intersecting identities attributed to women veterans (warriors, other, supporters, caregivers, sex objects, and marginalized). While the authors discuss each of these roles individually (in separate chapters), they argue that it is the “underlying intersectionality of these roles that must also become an integral part of the discussion” (p. 6). These roles individually and collectively “continue to contribute to and/or detract from women’s enduring invisibility in the military, as veterans, and in society as a whole” (p. 6).

Whereas, part seven of the book frames military sexual trauma and women veterans’ mental and physical health as wicked problems. Defined as “incalculable biological, physiological, and social costs to society...[wicked problems are] deep-seated, interconnected, and complex afflictions...for which there are no simple solutions...one can only hope to ‘tame’ wicked problems rather than actually solve them” (p. 7). That’s not to say that the authors do not consider other subjects [see sections on citizenship (part three) and military culture (part four)] as wicked problems, too; they do. The theory of intersectionality plays a hand in explaining just how pervasive—and therefore wicked—these problems are for improving the lives of U.S. women veterans.

Given the authors’ detailed explanations and use of complementary theoretical frameworks (e.g., intersectionality and wicked problems) for discussing U.S. military women’s experiences, their work will be incredibly useful for multiple audiences—from graduate students and veterans to public health scholars and practitioners. The work has potential to inform and revise public policy for governmental entities like the VA and the Department of Defense, in order to level the playing field for both military women. In the “preface” however, the authors suggest that their argument impacts everyone and therefore should be read by everyone. They write, “we conclude that the responsibility for the state of affairs that befalls women veterans...lies within the military and civilian society. Such responsibility must become a matter of compelling government interest, which...is paramount for the sake of national security” (p. 8). From this claim, the authors echo arguments made by Klay (2014) and Caplan (2011) who call on everyone—military personnel and civilians—to broach these subjects to ensure veterans are seen, heard, and appreciated. At a minimum, acknowledging that women also serve is a simple, yet necessary responsibility all Americans should honor. Making slight changes to our speech habits to include gender pronouns when referring to veterans is one small way we can begin to make space for women veterans—helping them gain visibility. As a scholar of veterans studies who focuses on military women and veterans specifically, I found this work to be incredibly useful to my research. Until *Lifting the veil*, I lacked a similar resource with such detailed and well-researched information about women veterans.

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