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Review by Natesha L. Smith

Served Like a Girl

Heslov, L. (Director/Writer), Gordon, S. (Producer), Perry, L. (Producer), Baghdadi, R. (Director of Photography), Georgiev, T. (Editor/Co-Writer), Arnet, B. (Editor), Zavistovski, M (Editor), & Levine, M. (Composer). (2017). *Served like a girl* [documentary]. United States: Chicago Media Project.

According to a recent report from the US Department of Veteran Affairs (Richman, 2018), the number of homeless women veterans increased by seven percent from 2016 to 2017 compared to a one percent increase among the male veteran population; the report provided no data regarding homeless veterans who may identify as trans or gender fluid. *Served Like a Girl* (2017) by Lysa Heslov, situates discussions of the growing plight of the homeless women veteran population against the backdrop of the Ms. Veteran America pageant. The pageant, founded by Army veteran Major Jaspén Boothe, was created to bring awareness to the deficit found within existing veteran housing programs and to encourage financial support for the development of transitional services specific to the needs of women veterans. The documentary follows four pageant contestants—the master of ceremonies, the pageant director (also the first pageant winner), and the founder of the pageant—as they prepare for the 2015 competition.

The film opens with a behind-the-scenes look at contestants preparing for the start of the pageant which, at the time of filming, was in its fourth year. Quips about the application of make-up and the fit of evening wear are heard from the women as they are interacting with one another before the competition. Following, is a montage of video clips depicting women performing a variety of actions while in military service, from shooting assault rifles and carrying comrades to safety to pulling on hosiery. The video clips, taken from Hollywood productions and real-life footage, appear to be given equal representation in the montage. As there are no clear demarcations between segments of the documentary; the audience is immediately introduced to the inaugural winner of the Ms. Veteran America pageant, Air Force veteran Master Sergeant Denyse Gordon, at the conclusion of the montage. Denyse introduces the audience to her crown, affectionately dubbed “Precious,” while also describing how she became aware of the pageant and challenges experienced by the fastest growing homeless population, women veterans.

This discussion leads into the audience being formally introduced to Jaspén Boothe. Details are provided about when and why Jaspén started the Ms. Veteran America pageant, the process involved in recruiting women veterans to enter the pageant, and the national recognition her efforts have received. The latter of which is presented with statistics about the number of women veterans that may be homeless on any given day—55,000 (Boothe, 2017). Although it is shared during her introduction that Ms. Boothe was at one time homeless herself, her narrative is not fully presented until much later in the documentary. Over the course of the film, considerable time is spent introducing the audience to each of the seven women.

A strength of the documentary, is the director’s willingness to provide an unstructured platform for each woman veteran to share accounts of economic, social, physical, and emotional challenges in transitioning from deployment to civilian life. Each woman is given freedom to emphasize what she sees as the key aspects of her experiences: whether joys of service; family

tragedies; recovery from military sexual trauma; survivor's guilt; or the competing responsibilities of being a mother and servicemember. This presents the audience with a unique perspective of the women from which to better connect with what is shared about their experiences of service and civilian life. The documentary, while following a traditional narrative style of presenting each woman's experience, also connects all the women through a singular theme of challenge, both in and outside the military. All of the behind-the-scenes details and discussion of the women's experiences led to the culminating event—the pageant. The audience witnesses how contestants perform under the pressure of pageantry and learns the outcome of the competition. However, what is curious about the event, is how the winner is not a featured narrative in the documentary.

Although *Serve Like a Girl* illuminates the lack of programming to help the growing number of homeless women veterans, several issues within the documentary warrant critique. One of which arises in reviewing the background of the team producing and directing the film. One cannot help but wonder how no acknowledged technical military advisor, a lack of first-hand experience with the military, or any other connection to military service among the film's crew, affected the overall production of the documentary, especially in the presentation of the narratives.

The documentary presents the narratives in an uneven and sometimes superfluous tone, which distracts from the seriousness of the cause, for which the pageant was created to support. Additionally, the selection of narratives shared with the audience is problematic. Instead of exclusively highlighting contestants who have experienced homelessness, the film shares the narratives from a majority of women (i.e., five of seven), with no connection to the topic other than the bond of military service. However, this comment is in no way meant to be dismissive of the importance of this bond. With only one contestant and the founder of the pageant being able to share their experiences of what it means to face insurmountable economic hardships, it seems as if the discussion of supporting homeless women veterans is at times an afterthought to the existence of the pageant, instead of the cause for which the pageant was founded to support.

The same freedom of expression allowing audience members to connect with the women's narratives also creates challenges for audience members wanting to connect with the experience of homeless women veterans. A more thematic discussion of how the women's narratives are interconnected beyond the bond of military service would provide context for why the four contestants and master of ceremonies were selected for filming. Additionally, some of the details about the day-to-day struggles of the women seemed haphazardly included when considering the purpose of the documentary. In particular, the brief discussion of the murder of one contestant's father, and the reunion of another contestant with her estranged mother, seemed like a disservice to the significance of each situation in the lives of the two women involved.

At the conclusion of the film, some additional statistics about homelessness and the women veteran population are presented. However, a more thorough discussion is needed as to what the US Department of Veteran Affairs is currently doing to improve existing programmatic efforts; identification of what other organizations currently exist to provide services to this population; and discussion of how veterans and non-veterans alike can offer support beyond the pageant. Without more explicit attention to the homeless women veteran population and how their needs differ from homeless male veterans, the documentary runs the risk of failing to fully communicate the current importance and need for support to those unfamiliar with the transitional struggles of this population.

Additionally, no statistics are provided about how the intersections of women veterans' identities or experiences influence their risk of homelessness. Are women veterans who experience military sexual trauma or posttraumatic stress disorder more likely to face transitional struggles resulting in possible homelessness (Brignone et. al, 2016)? How does race and sexual identity

influence outcomes? These are the types of questions that, at minimum, should be acknowledged and discussed in the film.

Arguably, if the intent of the documentary is to use the Ms. Veteran America pageant as a springboard for discussing the serious struggles of homeless women veterans and how to support these women in their struggle, then the intent goes unmet in this production. Not enough discussion of current statistics or inclusion of intentional narratives of experience with homelessness is presented to allow the audience to connect with the plight of homeless women veterans. Instead, the film works well at presenting diverse perspectives of what it means to be a woman who serves in the military and returns home with the label of military veteran. Despite the unmet target, the documentary is not without merit. *Served Like a Girl* is a useful tool to encourage intentional dialogue regarding the role women have played and continue to play in the military, both in combat and non-combat situations. For those wanting to learn more about what is being done to support homeless women veterans, a review of Jaspén Boothe's Final Salute (2017) organization, and newer initiatives by the VA, are suggested.

Additionally, viewers of this film should look to it as a cue to question preconceived understandings of what it means to be a military veteran and what images come to mind when one thinks of a military veteran. Consideration should be given to the challenges some women may experience in deciding to use the label of veteran or when seeking support from programs catered to the male veteran population. Because there are historical challenges to people accepting that women have served and will continue to serve in the military, the film offers an opportunity to engage in critical discourse regarding the role current policies and practices may have in promoting the invisibility of women in the military. The dismantling of these policies and practices, though beyond the scope of this film, can still be influenced by viewing the women's experiences.

References

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