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REVIEW

The Painful Visibility of *The Invisible War*

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The Invisible War (2012)

Genre: Documentary Film

Director: Kirby Dick

Screenwriter: Kirby Dick

Cinematography: Thaddeus Wadleigh and Kirsten Johnson

Music: Gary Calamar and Dondi Bastone

Runtime : 97 minutes

Being a girl in any society is tough, in one way or another. Last year Facebook's Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg's (2013) book *Lean In* took the internet by storm where she says that girls rarely make a big decision about career anticipating work/family conflict long before they are even in the process of having a family. The arguments of both Sandberg and her critics are worth considering but how do you think girls feel when they lean in to give their best into a career which was previously considered a male zone and within a year or two find themselves forced out with nothing but long term physical and mental disorder while the people responsible for these conditions go unpunished? To realize that you need to watch *The Invisible War*, a 2012 documentary film written and directed by Kirby Dick which is a thrilling expose of sexual assault in the United States Military. This is certainly not a new topic but Kirby's work is unique in the sense that previously on this aspect

of the military there had been no feature film as revealing, powerful and groundbreaking as *The Invisible War* is which uses the government's own statistics to support its claim. Unlike most other works of this genre, this documentary does not only inform; it has the ability to leave the audience emotionally stunned and to challenge the military to do something about it. It is a perfect balance between the emotional experiences of the survivors of the rape and the shocking little-known statistics with an analysis of the disturbing picture of the U.S Army's criminal justice system. It will not be right to say that this is an anti-military film as at the outset, most of the participants of the film really loved the armed forces. Rather, I think though the focus is on women, it is a call for justice for the victims-both male and female, who were rebuked and reprimanded and through its intriguing nature, the film wants to save the lives of hundreds of thousands of other women and men in the military workforce.

Kirby Dick started his career studying art and according to him this arts background influenced his work (D. West & J. West, 2012). It is his efficient use of the tools of the documentary- testimonies of the victim, interviews of some high officials of SAPRO(Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office) and the armed forces, footages from some tv networks, motion pictures capturing the grandeur of the military, advertisements for recruitment and ridiculous posters to stop sexual assault, which makes the documentary very simply yet extremely well done. One important fact about *The Invisible War* is it also brings forth the issue of sexual assault upon men, though the focus is mostly on women. The timing of the film is perfect since it came out at a time when finally people started to realize that "rape culture" (the notions and practices which trivialize and normalize sexual assault and puts the blame on the victim) is a real thing. Here's a couple of examples of the U.S government's internal statistics that are used in the film-about 20% of women in the armed services have been sexually assaulted ,80% of such assaults are never reported and the Department of Defense reveals that there were 19,300 service members sexually assaulted in 2010

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alone! A navy study cited shows that 15% of men have raped or tried rape prior to entry into the service. Tell me these are not horrifying figures! It is known in the film that rapists are mostly heterosexual men and it is about power and violence. About 40 years ago Susan Brownmiller (1993) wrote that “rape is not a crime of lust, but of violence and power” and *The Invisible War* reinforces this idea. You will be totally horrified when you will see the U.S Marine Corps Recruiting Ad in the film which is heavily violently masculine. The process through which reports of sexual assaults are investigated, interrogated and litigated in the military is heavily masculinized and dominated by men. Masculinity is not something which can be victimized and if you are not masculine then you are weak. That’s the reason may be we learn in the movie that rape cases are usually handled by men, as women are considered “too sympathetic” (Ziering & Barklow, 2012) for the task. And this probably also influenced Michael Matthews of the US Air Force who kept silent for thirty years until he opened up to his wife. He was raped by two of his fellow male soldiers.

Kirby Dick says in an interview that research was done pretty thoroughly and finding subjects initially proved very difficult. Kori is the central subject of the film whose jaw was broken when a fellow Coast Guard Officer raped her. With the small camera given to her by the filmmakers, she captured the nine month’s struggle she had to go through ((D. West & J. West, 2012) to convince the Department of Veterans Affairs to pay for the medical difficulties caused due to the rape and finally they ended up denying her treatment and money for it. The truly shocking part is how similar each survivor’s story sounds. One of the most heartbreaking moments of the movie comes when a dad who himself was an officer in the U.S Army bursts into tears recalling the moment when her daughter in the U.S Navy called and said, “Dad I’m no longer a virgin...I was raped” and he had to go on saying, “Hannah, you are a virgin because he took something from you that you didn’t give” (Ziering & Barklow, 2012). She got several bad injuries to her neck, leg and hips but after some initial investigations she was told that

the committee had lost all evidences she had given to them. In Marine Barracks of Washington, D.C the “best of the best” corps go but going there Ariana was informed that female marines there “are nothing but objects for the marines to fuck” (Ziering & Barklow, 2012). She was assaulted by a senior officer. Her husband recounts the anguish of dialing 911 with one hand while trying to prevent his wife from killing herself with the other. Several interviewees including Trina talk about their trauma, depression and the allure to suicide.

The Pentagon Officials declare in the film that that reports of sexual assaults are fully investigated but the stark contrast between their claim and the painful reality is impossible to miss. Almost every question asked to Dr. Kaye Whitley, former director of SAPRO, seems to have only one answer-“That’s out of my area of expertise”(Ziering & Barklow, 2012). Sergeant Myla Haider of Army Criminal Investigation Division was herself raped by a C.I.D agent. Instead of treating the accused men as suspects she was ordered to treat the girls as criminals accusing them for false statements when she knew that they were not lying. Through its representation of the posters and ads by the military which promote ideas like “ask her when she is sober” (Ziering & Barklow, 2012) and women should always be cautious about being raped, the documentary questions whether these have the slightest possibility to discourage violence. There is a reference to a court case which found that rape is an “occupational hazard” of being in the military and a video footage from a television network which reveals that the congressional committee repeatedly pressured the armed forces to take crimes of sexual assault seriously. The film moves back and forth in history to prove that sexual assault in the military is an age-old problem which was there from the beginning. It also includes some motion pictures capturing some glorified moments of the military which is definitely polemic but I would say that compared to many other documentaries though it can be considered a less aggressive work, it has the power to get under one’s skin. The viewers will feel happy at the end of the film knowing that the after watching the film, the

Secretary of Defense took away the ability of commanding officers to be brutally harsh judges and juries when people file complain against harassment which is definitely a good beginning but this should never be the end.

One common criticism against this film is that it does not discuss false statements but in a place where true statements are considered as false I think the inclusion of false statements would have made the main argument lighter. There could be a little discussion though.

“Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressors, it must be demanded by the oppressed”-some great words by Martin Luther King (1963) which seem to match up to *The Invisible War* to a great extent. More power to the women who were brave enough to speak in front of the camera. After you watch the film you will not be able to look at the photos of the victims and their family without any emotional impact. This film just left me wondering if this was the case with the U.S Army in 2012, only God knows how many incidents like these happening around the world we are unaware of!

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