

**UNIFORMED COMBAT AND THE SILVER SCREEN IN 21st CENTURY:
THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN MILITARY WOMEN IN THE U.S. ARMY
THROUGH HOLLYWOOD'S LENS**

By

Faria Tasnim
15103058

A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in English

Department of English and Humanities
Brac University
December 2024

© FALL 2024. Brac University
All rights reserved.

Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my/our own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Faria Tasnim". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Faria" is written with a large 'F' and the last name "Tasnim" is written with a large 'T' and a dot over the 'i'.

Faria Tasnim

15103058

Approval

The thesis titled “Uniformed Combat and the Silver Screen in 21st Century – The Evolution of Modern Military Women in the U.S. Army Through Hollywood’s Lens” submitted by Faria Tasnim (15103058) of Fall 2024 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in English on December 22, 2024.

Examining Committee:

Supervisor:

Mohammad Zaki Rezwan
Senior Lecturer, English and Humanities
Brac University

Departmental Head:

Dr. Firdous Azim
Chairperson, English and Humanities
Brac University

Ethics Statement

This thesis explores the representation of modern military women in the 21st-century U.S. Army as depicted within Hollywood movies and its broader impact on the public's perception and cultural narratives.

1. Respect for Sources:

This analysis will draw from publicly available materials, including films themselves, critical reviews, and interviews. All authors are appropriately credited for their work to be used in this analysis. No plagiarism is ever engaged in; proper citation of sources and adherence to academic standards are always strictly upheld.

2. Harm-Avoidance:

Care is taken not to further stereotypes or misrepresentations regarding the U.S. Army, military personnel, or any cultural or social groups depicted in these films. The research attempts to critically engage with the material in a manner that does not contribute to undue harm or further biased narratives.

3. Cultural Sensitivity:

Sensitive subjects like war, violence, and trauma are carefully depicted. The analysis seeks to establish a proper interaction about the difficulty of such themes and acknowledges a proper respect for developing discourses.

4. Clarity and Objectivity:

This thesis is developed, wherever possible, from data interpretations, using established techniques. In this context, biases and subjective influences have also been mentioned to maintain fairness and openness in the document.

5. Institutional Standards:

This research will be done with the knowledge that all ethical guidelines by Brac University regarding academic integrity and the responsible conduct of research will be followed.

Abstract

This thesis will explore the parallel and contrasting narratives of women in the U.S. Army through the portrayals in 21st century Hollywood movies. It will analyze the roles of female soldiers in service, their real-life advancement and challenges. In comparison with cinematic depiction, the representation of women as combat and leadership integration offers a sense of understanding the interplay between the reality of women's role in the U.S. Army and media representation. Additionally, this study will investigate how U.S. Army- themed Hollywood film's characterization and criticism of women's roles in the U.S. Army influenced the stereotypical damsels in distress to intervene in the complexity of gender studies.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration.....	ii
Approval.....	iii
Ethics Statement.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Table of Content.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
1. Historical Context.....	2
1.1. Marching Through History.....	2
1.2. Women in the Early 20th century.....	3
1.3. A Legislative Milestone.....	5
1.4. Late 20th century: The New Era.....	6
2. Military Women in Hollywood.....	7
3. Modern Narratives.....	9
4. Identifying Needs and Policy Adaption.....	12
5. Findings and Analysis.....	15
6. Critique on Hollywood’s Approach.....	17
7. Framing the Narrative.....	19
8. Hollywood’s Representation Impact on Recruitment.....	22
9. Conclusion.....	23
10. References.....	25

Introduction

This thesis explores how military women interplay in the U.S. Army and how their narrative roles are portrayed in Hollywood films. Furthermore, U.S. Army-themed Hollywood films underscores the transformations in the diverse and empowering roles of military women.

Hollywood's cinematic portrayal of Women's roles in Army themed films offers a multidimensional narrative of gender, power, and equality. This cinematic portrayal has the potential to shape the public perceptions around women in military over time.

The Cinematic Evolution explores the traditional shifts of gender roles and the growing acceptance of women's positions in modern military contexts. U.S. Army-themed Hollywood films challenged the public perceptions and societal stereotypes about the traditional concept of gender roles and the limited visibility of women in a male-dominated system of military context.

Also, Hollywood films depicts the transitions of power dynamics and reformation of policies that allows women engaging in combat roles through representing "Women in the Rank" rather than women being in secondary roles in military concept. The framing of the struggles of military women serves to highlight the power imbalance within military hierarchies.

In modern films, the idea of "Women at War" provide a sense of Gender Equality and challenged the traditional perceptions about their mental and physical strength. There are dynamic role shifts of military women in comparison to historical vs. post-9/11 modern films.

Ultimately this thesis explores how Hollywood films performed as bridging gap towards the transformation and normalization of Military Women position in Military hierarchies.

Additionally, these films shaped the public's comprehension of the U.S. Army's strengthened policies concerning military women's roles.

01. Historical Context

1.1 Marching Through History

The revolutionary war and the exception – A historical overview of women in the U.S. Army can be seen as caregiver and supporting roles. Mostly, women participated in the war as auxiliary subjects, performing roles such as nurses and cooks during the Revolutionary War. Despite the limitations on women's participation in the war, Margaret Corbin disguised herself as a man to join the Battle of Fort Mifflin. Later she became known as 'Captain Molly' for her 'heroic' contribution against the British. Historians depicted that many women fought the Revolutionary War under the same guise and followed her footprint during further war.

The Civil War and Supporting Roles - Women's role during the war displayed more as caregiver roles. An estimated 20,000 women served as nurses, cooks, laundry workers, volunteers, and in various other support roles during the Civil War. Approximately 3000 women, including nurses served in the Union Army, and their crucial role in defending lives on the front lines made them indispensable. Clara Barton was one of them, her wartime experience encouraged her to become the founder of American Red Cross in 1881. The Union Army appointed Dorothea Dix as the superintendent of Army Nurses to enhance nurse training. Medical practitioners still consider her significant as bipartisan, role model as she worked for both Union Army and confederates.

Mexican–American War (1846–1848) – During the war, women primarily served in domestic roles and provided moral support. Despite the lack of recognition for their contributions, they significantly military forces' survival.

Spanish–American War (1898) – During the conflict between the US and Spain over Cuba’s independence, the societal expectation of women’s role evolved to include active participation in charitable and humanitarian activities.

1.2 Women in the Early 20th century

In the early 20th century during the outbreak of WWI, the women’s role in the U.S. military evolved as service-women rather than supporting or domestic roles. The war crisis demands the deployment of more male combatants on the battlefield than ever. To recognize the need, the military units reformed the military policy and recruited women in the mechanical, laboratorial, and clerical positions.

World War I (1914 - 1918) – Global conflicts centered on Europe involved the world’s great powers, characterized by significant loss of life or casualties. The World War I epidemic brought about a drastic change in the role of women’s in the military, providing them with opportunities to work in non-combat frontline roles such as translators, supervisors, communication experts. However, women were granted the right to vote. Previously, the U.S. Army considered these women serving in the war as civilian contractors and casually referred to them as “Hello Girls”. After the successful invasion of the war, the government denied veteran status to the women who served alongside the Army. They were not offered to receive the extended benefit provided for the U.S. military soldiers. It took around 60 years to grant their veteran status and finally in 1979 the Congress acknowledged their significant contributions and ‘recognized the “Hello Girls” as veterans’ (Abby, 2023). Despite societal expectations of women’s roles being limited to traditional roles outside home front, over 10,000 women served in non-combat roles, and approximately 21,000 women played supporting roles in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps (ANC), providing emergency medical

treatment to critically wounded soldiers. The courageous and dedicated contributions of women during World War I made the base for future advancement in representing women's roles in the U.S. military. Notable figures who broke the barriers during the crucial time include Opha May Johnson who enlisted the first female soldier in the Marine Corps.

World War II (1939 – 1945) – Rising tension between the Axis powers and the Allies turned into global conflict played a pivotal role in the representation of women in the military. The number of the women serving in the U.S. military has grown to over 350,000 in diverse roles and making significant contributions. Alongside their contributions, their diverse background played a critical role in the military representation of women. The wartime experiences of women who served in the military influenced and impacted by the intersecting identities such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation. The most notable and relatable incident was the formation of the 6888 Central Postal Directory Battalion in 1944 to fix the yearlong backlog of undelivered mail. A troop of 855 black women, especially African-American women successfully overcame the impossible challenge facing discrimination. This historical context laid the groundwork for a newly released film “The Six Triple Eight” (2024) by Tyler Perry. The film displays how these trailblazers overcome discrimination, racism, and sexism in war devastated country.

The accomplishments of the “Six Triple Eight” successfully convinced the U.S. government to shaping a fairer and inclusive military structure for the women in service. Former U.S. president Harry S. Truman signed legislation ‘Executive Order 9980 and 9981’ on July 26, 1948 to end the racial discrimination. The ‘Executive Order 9981’ demonstrated government's commitment to a broader societal change including equality of treatment, opportunity, and most importantly ‘Executive Order 9980’ assured equality within intersecting identities influenced by the growing civil rights movement. Establishment of

WAC (1948) allowed women to integration into the support roles, but limit their contribution in the Army mainstream.

1.3 A Legislative Milestone

Post-World War II (1948) – During the wartime women performed vital roles in the major armed forces, leading to the establishment of the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act on June 12, 1948. Under the Public Law 625, the act granted women permanent and official member to in the U.S. armed forces, encompassing the U.S. Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force. The act not only acknowledged the valuable contributions of women but also their eventual integration in the military service recognized gender equality within the U.S. armed forces.

The Cold War Era (1947 – 1991) – The 1950s political tension and military rivalry arose between United States’ NATO allies and the Soviet Union allies. This period characterized by technical and strategic advancements in the military. In the Cold War era women continued participating into auxiliary roles including administrative sectors. Women played a significant role in maintaining the military’s operations and strategies during this era.

The Korean War (1950 – 1953) – The conflict between North Korea supported by the Soviet Union and South Korea supported by the United States, resulted in the division of the Korean Peninsula. Statistics from the war depicts that women’s participation and enlistment in the military continued to increase and a large number woman around 120,000 were deployed in the overseas for the first time in the military. Traditionally, society expected women’s roles in the military to be domestic and supportive, but women’s intervention in the Korean War challenged these expectations.

The Vietnam War (1955 – 1975) – Despite challenges and discrimination, the Vietnam War witnessed the significant shift of women’s roles while serving as intelligence officers and

direct combat support. It was estimated that around 11,000 military women participated in the conflict, and Anna Mae Hays declared as the first female General in the U.S. military.

1.4 Late 20th century: The New Era

The 1970s was a milestone for significant policy reformation in the military and set an equal stage for the female members in service ensuring the same education, training, and opportunities as male members. This era marked for significant advancements regarding gender equality and providing leadership roles to military women in the military compound.

The U.S. government passed a Public Law (94-106) in 1975 which authorized female's admission into the U.S. military service academies such as West Point institutions. Further in 1976, this policy opened the opportunity for women to enroll in the Naval and Air Force Academy. By 1980, the military service academy produced nearly 4,000 first-time female graduates, demonstrating success and effectiveness of policy change. This boarder structural changes in the military policy expanded women's role in the military and influenced the Equal Right Amendment (ERA) that ensured equal right regardless of sexual orientation in the military.

1978 was a critical turning point for the military women in the U.S. Army, while President Jimmy Carter signed the Public Law to dissolve the WAC and integrate female soldiers into the regular army. Disbanding the WAC reinforced institutional barriers, limited career opportunities, and unequal treatment within ranks.

In 1994, the military imposed the 'Risk Rule' imposed on women, restricting them from direct combat positions due to the risk of exposure to hostile situations. The policy questioned the physical and psychological ability of female soldiers contributing into combat roles. The policy failed to consider the risks associated with combat positions while women were contributing in non-combat roles in modern warfare. Subsequently, the policy faced

criticism for reflecting gender stereotypes and societal biases, which prevented career advancement opportunities for women in the U.S. military service.

The Global War (Terrorism: Iraq and Afghanistan) – During the early 21st century, the United States engaged in two major conflicts or military rivalries: The Afghanistan War in 2001 started to force out the Taliban, and the Iraq War in 2003. The 9/11 attacks fueled the Global War on terrorism, leading to an increased deployment of female soldiers in direct ground combat roles. The development of women's role in the U.S. Army during the post-9/11 era played a significant role in shaping and organizing this content.

02. Military Women in Hollywood: Cinematic Evolution and Real-world Counterparts

This section of the paper examines how 21st century army-themed Hollywood films portrays modern military women and their real life significance.

1. Gender Roles- “Women at War”: Challenging the Reinforcing Stereotypes

- Hollywood's role in Addressing Gender Bias – The period of late 20th century undergo a dynamic cultural and narrative transformation. Hollywood's action drama film G.I Jane directed by Ridley Scott in 1997 starring Demi Moore as Lt. Jordan O'Neil the first woman undergo official combat training. Modern films like G.I. Jane (1997) showcasing a deeper understanding around resilience, societal change, and challenging societal

stereotypes about women's emotional vulnerability, incapability of handling physical and mental demands of military life.

- Real -life Parallels – The cinematic evolution of 'women in a combat role' explored how Hollywood's gender narrative transformed alongside the military policy reformation. As the late 20th century witnessed significant policy reformation where women in service allowed to integrate into massive combat positions and provide a sense of gender equality in workplace. The filmmakers tried to mirror real-world progress and identifying audience expectations through their cinematic portrayals of these shifting narratives.

2. Gender Roles- “Women at War”: Representation of Leadership

- Cinematic Evolution on Power Disparity – The 9/11 events had a profound effect on modern U.S. Army structure. There was a number of films that plotted on 9/11 attacks concentrated on the theme of commitment, dedication, PTSD, sacrifice within modern U.S. military context. The film *Zero Dark Thirty* was a political action thriller film plotted on the post 9/11 era while the filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow represented the character Maya, a CIA agent navigating hyper-masculine U.S. military troop to track down the mastermind of 9/11 attacks Osama bin Laden. The representation of women in decision-making positions
- Shifting Realities – The characterization of Maya as intelligence analysts represents the growing acceptance of female authority and leadership in modern military context. The portrayal of Maya also depicted women's increasing presence in the intelligence operations, security and defense sector draw a parallel with advancements for women serving in the military. The involvement of women in combat and counterterrorism, aligned with the advancements in military inclusion policy.

3. Equality – “Bridging the Gap”: Abuse of Power and Inequality

- Hollywood’s Progress in Roles Representation – *The Invisible War* was an Oscar nominated investigative documentary directed by Kirby Dick. *The Invisible War* showcases the epidemic of sexism and rape culture imbalance of power within the U.S. Army hierarchies. To acknowledge the seriousness of this rising social epidemic of sexual violence within workplace, “Rep. Jane Harman commented that, a female soldier serving in combat positions is more likely to be sexually assaulted or raped by a fellow soldier than killed by the enemy fire” (‘Female’,2008).
- Breaking the Silence – The film highlighted the military sexual assault mirroring the abuse of power within the U.S. military hierarchy. The film’s focus on providing the opportunity for survivors to courageously share individual’s experiences of sexual violence, injustice, and facing retaliation in workplace. Through breaking the silence, the filmmaker calls to action for raising awareness, policy reformation, and empowering survivors in the military service.

03. Modern Narratives: Exploring WPS in the 21st Century U.S. Army Through Hollywood

The 21st century witnessed a growing recognition of WPS framework, while the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017 became a significant piece of legislation. The core principle of WPS Act was to acknowledge women’s critical role in all aspects of global peace and security operations. This act provided a profound impact and successful implementation on the U.S. Army, including-

Women Making Modern Military History – Increased focus on gender integration authorized women into combat and leadership positions. Women always played a significant role in U.S. military history. Policies and prejudice kept women from participating fully in combat roles during wartime until the late 20th century, when all branches of the military formally allowed women to enlist. In the early years of 21st century, there was a significant shift in the dynamics of power marked by a number of firsts for women in the service. It took decades for a female soldier to overcome their struggles, transitioning from front-line combat to strategic planning. The U.S. military has evolved and addressed women's potential to significantly contribute in the defense and security realm. Overcoming gender stereotypes, military women embody a spirit of resilience, strength, professionalism, adaptability, and leadership, defining them as modern warriors. Breaking the barriers women started serving in elite units such as Rangers. Capt. Kristen Griest- became the first infantry officer in 2016 and made the nation's history. Colonel Eileen Collins became the first female Space Shuttle pilot and commander. Throughout the evolution of modern military women's roles, they always demonstrated their exceptional warrior and leadership skills under challenging circumstances. With the advancement in leadership roles, Lieutenant General Laura Richardson became the first woman leading U.S. Army North. They are the trailblazers who set the higher boundaries and inspired the next generation of soldiers to put determination beyond perceived limits. Women's roles in the military were limited and always compared to the male counterpart. Limiting women's role during wartime could not confine these real-life heroines to breaking the rules and taking the ultimate risk to serve the country.

Women as Agents of Security – The U.S. military prioritizes structural reform and collective advancement of women's representation through enhanced training and education on gender-based violence, conflict resolution, and security operations. The Gender Advisors

(GENAD) courses provide expertise and guidance in military units on integrating gender perspectives into strategic operations. The U.S. army can monitor women and girls affected by conflict through improved data collection and analysis. The Civil Military Cooperation (CMC) works closely with civil organizations to address the needs. On the other hand, a group of female soldiers, known as Cultural Support Team (CST) deployed in special operations to engage with local communities, particularly women, in areas where social conservatism had restricted male soldiers. CST played important roles in counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Binary view of gender roles – In 2001, during the Afghanistan War, the U.S. military units trained and deployed female soldiers alongside their male counterparts, defying the military policy that prohibited women from direct combat ground assignments. Ironically, the U.S. military used their feminine identity as an intelligence asset. All female counterinsurgency teams were deployed to collect intelligence where they played an invisible role or in other words, their deployment depicted as to “win the battle for heart and mind”. The U.S. military’s mistreatment of female soldier arouses complexity and questions their claim of providing feminist opportunities for the U.S. military women.

Accuracy and Dramatization: Hollywood’s representation ‘Women in the Army’ emphasizes the interplay between historical accuracy and cinematic evolution. The film *Zero Dark Thirty* arouses a lot of controversies and was removed from the Oscar nomination list because of historical inaccuracies and political fall. The depiction of torture as interrogation techniques aroused outrage and considered misleading. Judicial Watch made allegations against the government, claiming that Obama administration disclosed classified intelligence to aid in the filmmaking process, which could potentially pose a political threat. Critics also

questioned and criticized the link between filmmakers and CIA, accusing it of being President Barak Obama's propaganda tool in the election.

Promoting Gender Equality- The U.S. Army collaborates with international organizations, such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325, with the broader goal of advancing WPS principles to ensure the protection of women and girls from all forms of gender-based violence. The 21st century U.S. Army faced critical challenges and systemic issues to address gender-based violence. The Sexual Harassment / Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) strengthened reporting systems and took greater accountability against those who failed to address the abuse.

Challenges in Addressing Gender-Based Violence – *The Invisible War* explored the extended culture of sexual violence within the U.S. military, highlighting institutional failure to protect the survivors and hold perpetrators accountable. The documentary also showcased potential reforms to the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The Vanessa Guillen Tragedy in 2023 underscored the unrealized and unrecognized progress in addressing gender-based violence. However, there are still implementation gaps because of cultural resistance against gender integration, lack of accountability, limited ability to get around institutional barriers, and a lack of women in leadership positions.

04. Identifying Needs and Policy Adaption

Formation of Ground Combat Exclusion Policy - Women were allowed to serve for the first time in combat around 11 years ago on 2013 when the Department of Defense

announced a historic decision at a Pentagon press conference to rescinded the “ground combat exclusion policy” (October, 1994) which restricted female soldiers’ positions below the Brigade levels to engage and assign directly on the units of ground combat. This was one of the major reasons that Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs) were closed for female members serving in the military. On 2012, Congress and American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) worked on the exclusion of ground combat policy. They filed a lawsuit against this policy and claimed that female members who meet the qualifications of the job have the right to serve military regardless of gender or sexual orientation and race.

On 2013, the Joint Chiefs of Staff addressed the struggles faced by women in military contexts and the formal allowance of women in combat roles. Simultaneously, after analyzing the casualties from the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, which resulted in the sacrifice of 177 women in uniform, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended the repeal of the policy.

The U.S. military decided to enlist female soldiers in combat jobs in 2015, acknowledging and highlighting the importance of women’s role in modern military operations. These jobs included occupational specialties, infantry, armor, special forces that previously restricted for women.

By 2016, the Military Services and the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) had successfully implemented the reformed policy. The fight continues to achieve gender equity within the United States military in the next decade.

Women’s History Month- Every year, the U.S. Army celebrates this month with a unique significance, honoring courageous women, their remarkable achievements, and their contributions to the Armed Forces. The Women’s History Month has a historical backdrop of challenges and societal expectations rooted back to the early 20th century. The pioneers

holding the combat and leadership roles set the stage for 21st century's modern military women. Their struggles and triumphs inspire them to break down the barriers and challenge the societal norms regarding gender roles in the military context. Regardless of gender, Women's History Month is the opportunity to celebrate the unity and diversity, share mutual respect, and appreciate the dedication and commitment towards duty, enhancing collective capabilities to strengthen the military.

AUSA (The Association of the United States Army) – hosted a meeting on October 16, with the U.S. Army Women's Leadership Forum panelists, who list highest-ranked female and women military personnel discussed healthcare and equality of women in active duties, reserves, and veterans. The panelists emphasized the recent advancements in women's leadership roles within the U.S. Army, particularly gaining support for reproductive health. The mention about successes of implementing the holistic health program and policy reformation. Through continuous feedback, we have learned that women in the U.S. Army have had the opportunity to utilize a wide range of facilities throughout their careers over in the past few years.

War within or sacrifice - They also discussed how military concept presents a unique set of challenges for the women in service, balancing the demands of leading successful careers and family planning. Biologically, women serving in the U.S. Army face a crucial period from late teens to late 20's when they are serving at the tactical levels, during which pregnancy is considered a hindrance to their career development. Addressing this issue U.S. Air Force General (ret.) Lori J. Robinson states that, "We need more women in the senior ranks of the military; it is not enough just to do better with the younger and more junior demographics, which means finding ways for women to return and continue their careers after they have

children” (Robinson & O’Hanlon,2020). Modern military career advancements offer more practical avenues for returning to service and want further development.

They shared their individual experiences on the military hierarchies and existing ostracism while serving in the combat positions. They affirmed their continued work and dedication towards accepting the changing infantry model and achieving equality for all stages as military women.

The U.S. Army Airborne & Special Operations Museum Foundation (ASOMF)

published an article “CELEBRATING WOMEN’S HISTORY MONTH: ANN DUNOODY SPOTLIGHT” on their official website. They shared a short biography about Ann E.

Dunwoody who ranked as the first female four-star general in the entire United States Army.

Through this article, they portrayed her exceptional career of successfully serving for 38 years. In addition to her significant contribution, the article highlights her early challenges as a leader in a male-dominated hierarchy, as well as her deep passion and gratitude for the U.S. Army. This non-federal and the official U.S. Army website for the ASOMF promoted her book titled “A HIGHER STANDARD”.

05. Findings and Analysis

Rape Culture and Gender Dynamics – Film *The Invisible War* addressed a social problem rooted in the lack of a military criminal justice system. Moreover, the prevalence of gendered power dynamics in the military context often prevents women from disclosing. Reporting, or taking action against assaults. The lack of awareness about the prevalence of sexism and rape

culture in military compounds creates a surprising discrepancy between the reality and societal expectations.

Women's Role and Systemic Sexism – *The Invisible War* illustrates the susceptibility of female service members in a hyper-masculine environment, portraying their dual role as both patriots and victims of the system. The disparity between equality and experience is evidence of institutional sexism in the military. In a scene where a veteran, Kori Cioca was interviewed about her personal experience in military, it highlighted the gender-based violence, struggles for power positions, and triumphs of a military women in service. She recollected how a superior officer brutally assaulted her and how that incident left her with physical injuries and severe trauma. The military authority's lack of accountability and reluctance to intervene underscores the systemic the systematic suppression of women's voices. This personal interview section effectively illustrates the systemic sexism within the military hierarchy, discourages female soldiers from reporting due to the fear of targeted retaliation or career sabotage.

Gender Roles – *The Invisible War* showcased the testimony of a Marine officer Ariana Klay, who experienced sexual assaults at the hands of colleagues in the Marine barracks. This interview revealed the concept of rape culture, where abusers are often facilitated by their rank. She also shared "I was told that this was just the price of being a woman in the military" that exposes that how a toxic practice of rape culture normalized in the military hierarchy. Besides, this statement illustrates how the disparity between gender and power allows a toxic culture to flourish.

06. Critique on Hollywood's Approach

Breaking stereotypes or reinforcing norms – The tension between progress and persistence of new limitation by confronting masculinity' The cinematic evolution and shifting narratives highlight the difficulty of balancing progressive values and storytelling. Because the film *G.I. Jane* reveals the growing complexity around the representation of women's empowerment that often comes at the cost of suppressing individuality in the military context. The film *G.I. Jane* depicts Lieutenant O'Neil's individual journey as she battled against obstacles and institutional resistance within a male-dominated environment. Her struggles for gender identity and equality reflecting the broader 90s feminist discourse. The formation of this role contradicts and redefine femininity. The success of reexamined societal and cultural norms deeply rooted in the adoption of traditional masculinity, like emotionally impassiveness and physical strength. In both *G.I. Jane* and the historic concept of the Revolutionary War, it symbolizes the adoption of masculine traits as a survival mechanism and urges acceptance within hyper-masculine power dynamics.

Heroism – Both the Revolutionary War and the film *G.I. Janes* reveal the complexities of heroism for women serving in the military. The military narratives deeply embed heroism with the themes that redefine traditional gender roles. These themes confront military women with challenges that extended beyond the combat role, and forcing them to navigate a traditionally male-dominated compound and societal expectations. In the film, Lt. O'Neil's journey underscores the incompatibility of femininity within the military context, as well as the persistent peer pressure to renounce their identity. Moreover, this film portrays how military context and society equate heroism with masculinity to confront systemic sexism. Similarly, women during the Revolutionary War exemplified heroism by concealing their femininity and

stepping into the traditionally masculine roles in the battle field. In this contexts, women demonstrated heroism by making direct contributions and redefining courage according to their own terms. Both the historic context and cinematic portrayal imply that heroism is not only about physical acts of bravery but rather challenging the cultural norms and adapting diversity within the military. Similarly, *Zero Dark Thirty* depict Maya in a hyper-masculine counterterrorism unit symbolizes progressive power shift and the promotion of ‘macho’ culture. Jessica Chastain, who played the character Maya got the Oscar for her role associated woman leading intelligence operation.

Feminist Criticism - These critiques questioned the portrayal of ‘women in the rank’ as intelligence officers, as well as the wider implications of feminist discourse. Feminist critiques highlighted the limitation of Maya’s characterization that reflects empowerment and determination regardless of facing systemic challenges in a militarized power structure. Her empowerment relied on morally ambiguous actions such harsh torture as a means of pursuing and achieving professional success. The film got most of the criticism because of ‘normalizing torture’. Though it is a counter argument that, torture is an interrogative technique for intelligence department where the crime rates in extreme. Although, Maya’s relentless focus on mission symbolized the obsessive dedication for revenge and “there is nothing feminist in revenge” (Zillah,2013). By the end of the film, Maya was crying after a successful special operation, this scene illustrates a sense of ‘emptiness’.

Militarized Feminism and Imperial Feminism – Success and validation of the character Maya reflects expanded roles and evolving positions for women in the U.S. military and intelligence operations. Placing a woman at the center of highly male-dominated military-

context, challenged the traditional gender norms and reshaped societal expectations. The film depicted transformation of gender roles in contemporary military narratives, which portray the militarization of feminist ideals. Critiques argued that, the portrayal of ‘women in power’ served a narrative tool. Moreover, the film faced criticism for weaponizing women’s empowerment using feminist narratives to justify U.S. military actions and to fulfill imperialist agendas. According to the feminist theorist Zillah Eisenstein, the characterization of Maya is a symbol of ‘imperial feminism’.

07. Framing the Narrative – A Public Persuasion Approach to Drive Action

In 2023, negotiations commenced for the film’s airing in North America, specifically addressing the digital rights for television. The filmmaker and producer’s strategic and political approach for the premiere through arranging the festival. This film got huge support for highlighting the social issue of sexism and rape culture within modern military context. The film’s screenings profoundly influenced and left the audience emotionally stunned, inspiring a social action campaign.

The subjects of the documentary *The Invisible War* made successful appearance and awards, but reached only \$60,000 in the domestic box office. Though this award winning documentary had an immense impact on policy reformation still scored the highest reviewed ‘rotten tomatoes’. The box office determined that the depressing context of severe social issues discouraged the audience from making it to the theaters.

The filmmaker chose to produce a documentary based on research instead of investing it in a cinematic approach. They unveiled that it is one of underreported casualties which lacks the awareness around the damaging psychological effects on military women. In addition, this rampant problem has the gaping absence of media coverage. This film implements methodological research through, interviews with active military women, victims, veterans.

It is quite challenging to make a documentary film on military women's disparities within a hyper-masculine context. The filmmaker took a strategic move to work with a female producer, with the intention to emotionally connect with the survivors and them to speak out about the systemic gender-based violence within military context. Eventually, his plan proved to be helpful as primary subjects in the film were women.

Through the personal experiences the film exposes how sexism, rape culture, gender inequality persists in the U.S. military narratives. The normalizing attitudes toward sexual violence urged systemic change in the military hierarchy. Jessica Hinvies, a crew chief in the U.S. Air Force recounts her military experience and the dismissal of her assault report by the chain of command. In the military code of justice, the decision to investigate and prosecute of sexual assault cases belongs to the commanders. Her experiences demonstrated how power dynamics played a crucial role in the military hierarchy and shielded the perpetrator in ranks. Her statement "I felt like this is a threat to justice and this is so wrong" resembles how power is weaponized to undermine justice. This flawed structure incorporated gender inequality in the U.S. military. The absence of meaningful representation and marginalization of military women contributed to a culture that devalued their voice and worth.

The filmmaker and producers organized several private screenings for the Congress, military policy makers, advocacy organizations, journalists, and politicians. Their approach to making difference was successful as the private screenings highly impacted the Secretary of Defense. He held a press conference to announce military policy reformation where ‘the unit commanders are not allowed to make decision whether sexual assault and rape charges should be investigated and prosecuted, rather the judgement is referred directly to the chain in command’. Before the theatrical release, the filmmakers raised a social campaign named ‘Invisible No More’ seek the public awareness regarding cultural shifts in the military context and as healing space the military sexual assault survivors. They put into their best effort organizing public campaigns such as talk shows, festivals, and raising awareness through online campaigns on social platforms.

The director of the film suggested how filmmakers could improve the representations through adopting more realistic narratives and including veteran’s perspectives. The Oscar-nominated filmmaker Kirby Dick advised showcasing short screenplays among small groups of target audiences while the editing process is ongoing. The audience’s reaction could be beneficial and prove an advancement for the film screenings. Sometimes filmmakers become so deeply engrossed in the material and obsessed with the subject that they neglect to focus on audience perception, eventually leading to a loss of connection with target audience. Regarding this director Kirby said that “ranging from overall themes to small details, there are always dozens of surprise that come up – you think something is working one way and it’s working completely another way ... it is also a way of polishing the film from multiple perspectives” (Case,2013). He also recommended that filmmakers prepare their films for festival showcases or submit them to Film Sprout, which organizes panel discussion and Q/A sessions on social issues.

08. Hollywood's Representation Impact on Recruitment

- Films often offer a complex and contradictory picture of the U.S. Army that influences the recruiting process in the 21st century by both attracting and alienating potential female recruits. While both the films *G.I. Jane* and *Zero Dark Thirty* influenced potential recruits' expectations through emphasizing leadership and advancement in the highly male-dominated military concept despite the intersecting identities.
- In contrast *The Invisible War* exposed the darker side of the military which might discourage potential women from considering challenging military careers due to concerns about safety and mental well-being.
- The evaluation of cinematic depiction's influence on social and cultural attitudes towards army women underscores the troubling underrepresentation of women's role in modern war films of 21st century. Even the modern films often confine the role of women to 'victim narratives' within the U.S. Army-themed films. Hollywood films often portray women in the U.S. Army differently from their real-life counterparts, where they have increasingly taken on diverse and significant leadership roles in the military.
- Explaining how Hollywood's portrayals encouraged or discouraged recruitment and retention – Partially, the mission 'Women in Army' seems unfinished, as the gender integration are still in the early stages and make up only 18 percent of women in active-duty service. Although we saw a tremendous stride in the last 11 years, the recruitment and retention rates are below average among women. While women's role in the U.S. military have evolved significantly, Hollywood's portrayal of women is lagging behind advancement in the modern military structure. The films often overshadow women's contributions, resulting in a slow evolution and progression of women's positions in the modern military context, which in turn slows down the enlistment of female soldiers in the U.S. military.

- Recent data from 2022 highlighted a growing involvement of women in active-duty 17.5% of the Army and 21.6% of the Army National Guard including Army reserves (Department of Defense, Demographic Profile).

09. Conclusion

However, we often overlook modern U.S. military history when commemorating the contributions of American veterans, largely because the nation would not be the same without female service members. While progress has been made, challenges and obstacles are the reminders that the journey towards equality is ongoing. The overcoming of adversity from gender bias to stereotype allows to fostering an environment in the military context that has broader implications including diversity, inclusivity, and resilience. Cinematic reflections have played a critical role in shaping and influencing the narratives around modern military women in the 21st century U.S. Army. Films portrayals are also relevant to understanding the societal perception of internal challenges gender roles and equality within hyper-masculine power dynamics. Military women are no longer considered an auxiliary subplot or traditionally expected domestic and supportive role.

G.I. Jane fictionalized a powerful image of military woman capable of thriving in a combat role challenging traditional gender norms. This film symbolizes empowerment and the fight for equality in a male-dominated culture which has contributed to growing interest in military careers among women. Similarly, *Zero Dark Thirty* dramatized the intellectual contribution and portrayed the importance of women's role in elite operations. This film glorified and redefined power structure in the modern military spaces, making it appealing to recruits, particularly women who are interested in strategic and specialized roles. On the other hand,

The Invisible War exposed internal critical issues like systemic gender-based violence and inequalities that persist within the modern military hierarchy. These portrayals hold the institution accountable to reform ensuring a safe and equitable environment for women in service. Hollywood films require significant effort in depicting progression within the military structure and the essence of contemporary warfare.

Simultaneously, these films reflect the evolving role of women and the internal struggles which fuel the discussions around gender roles, equality, power dynamics, and feminism. Through showcasing these concepts, they reshaped the societal expectations and encouraged the modern U.S. military towards adaptive inclusivity. Eventually their courage, dedication, and resilience in the face of adversity significantly contribute to reshaping the perceptions of women's role in the contemporary military history.

The rising number of women in the military and their unwavering quest to achieve gender equality have considerably fostered the progress of this idea within the U.S. armed forces. The focus on maintaining military readiness, expanding opportunities, and fostering 'women breaking the barrier' in a traditionally male-dominated military compound contributes to the evolution of women's role in the 21st century modern U.S. military.

References

ABC News. (2008, September 10). *Female Soldiers More Likely to Be Raped than Killed in Action, Says Rep.*

<https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?id=5760295&page=1>

ASOMF. (2023, May 25). *Celebrating Women's History Month: Ann Dunwoody Spotlight.*

<https://www.asomf.org/ann-dunwoody/>

FILM INDEPENDENT. (2013, January 17). CASE STUDY: THE INVISIBLE WAR - Film Independent. Film Independent.

<https://www.filmindependent.org/blog/case-study-the-invisible-war/>

Gorbulja, A. (2024, March 8). *Trailblazing women in the U.S. military: An all-voluntary service historic timeline.* The American Legion.

<https://www.legion.org/information-center/news/honor/2024/march/trailblazing-women-in-the-us-military-an-all-voluntary-service-historic-timeline>

Gorbulja, A. (2024, March 15). *Women warriors' evolution, challenges, and triumphs.* The American Legion.

<https://www.legion.org/information-center/news/honor/2024/march/women-warriors-evolution-challenges-and-triumphs>

Greenburg, J. (2023, May 22). *Women's secret war: the inside story of how the US military sent female soldiers on covert combat missions to Afghanistan.* The Conversation.

<https://theconversation.com/womens-secret-war-the-inside-story-of-how-the-us-military-sent-female-soldiers-on-covert-combat-missions-to-afghanistan-205669>

Gutierrez, A. (2024, October 16). *AUSA hosts U.S. Army Women's Leadership Forum*.

DVIDS. <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/483269/ausa-hosts-us-army-womens-leadership-forum>

McRobie, H. (2013, February 6). Women in the US military – uncomfortable power.

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/women-in-us-military-uncomfortable-power/>

Strong, A. (2023, March 13). The history of women in the U.S. military. Charlie Mike.

<https://charliemike.org/2023/03/13/the-history-of-women-in-the-us-military/#:~:text=During%20WWI%2C%20women%E2%80%93who%20did,the%20Army%2C%20were%20valuable%20assets.>

Rosenberg, M., & Phillips, D. (2015, December 3). All Combat Roles Now Open to Women, Defense Secretary Says. The New York Times.

<https://nytimes.com>