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## [Introduction to] Audacious Voices: Profiles in Intersectional Feminism

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# AUDACIOUS VOICES

**PROFILES IN INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM**

Holly J. Blake  
and Melissa D. Ooten



## INTRODUCTION

**Audacious.**

*Adjective*

**1. showing a willingness to take surprising or bold risks.**

The word *audacious* originated in the sixteenth century, its definition rooted in concepts of boldness and daring. Its meaning evokes grit, nerve, spunk, and being gutsy. It is often defined in opposition to meekness, timidity, and fear.

Audaciousness is what this collection of stories showcases: twelve ordinary people who have had the determination and boldness to make their communities better places, who take an activist approach to living their personal and professional lives. Despite distinct backgrounds and experiences, they are all graduates of a four-year, feminist-driven university program called WILL\* that challenged, informed, and strengthened their views about justice and equity, a program that motivated them to act on their values in the larger world around them.<sup>1</sup> We hope that these stories will encourage and inspire you; perhaps you will see some of your own experiences reflected in them.<sup>2</sup>

Read on if you want to learn how a diverse group of individuals continues not only to think deeply about societal problems after graduation, but also to act on that knowledge in their daily lives. Read on if you are interested in cultivating a similar educational program or curriculum to develop engaged citizens, everyday people who share an enduring commitment to making the world a better place in both unexpected and ordinary ways. Read on if you want to find inspiration to work for bettering your own communities or, for those who are already doing that work, to find solace and reassurance in the fact that many others are laboring alongside you in neighborhoods around the world.

This collection of personal narratives serves as a partial antidote to the distressing times in which we live. As we finish writing this introduction, a known misogynist and xenophobe sits in office as the forty-fifth president of the United States, having defeated Hilary Clinton, the first female major party candidate for president. Since that time, we have seen a resurgence of feminist movement-building, starting with the Women's March in January 2017 and continuing with an historic number of women elected to Virginia's legislative body in November 2017, an election considered by many to be one of the first referendums on Trump's presidency. This book captures the renewed spirit many feminists have exhibited as they have made their activist work more visible and communal. By showcasing the hope and resiliency of twelve feminists who incorporate social change work into both their professional and personal lives, this anthology offers a respite and a call to action in the midst of widespread fear-mongering and anxiety.

Trump's ascendancy reflects many deep-seated and entrenched problems that were present long before November 2016. There are numerous pernicious ways in which people living in poverty and people who represent historically marginalized genders, sexualities, and races face suffocating inequity in our country. Consider these facts:

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- Congressional representation by women is abysmal. Women comprise slightly less than 20 percent of the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress. While that's the highest proportion yet, it still means that in a nation that is majority female, less than one in five of our Congressional representatives are women. Nations around the world have bypassed the US on this measure. While the US ranked 52<sup>nd</sup> in terms of women's representation in government worldwide in the 1990s, it now ranks 97<sup>th</sup>.<sup>3</sup>
- The wage gap remains stagnant. Most women with jobs similar to men make only about 80 percent of what men make. And that gap grows when we compare women of color to white men. In the largest gap, for example, Latina workers earn only 61 percent of what white men make.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the basic issue of equity and fairness, income determines people's ability to support themselves and their families. Scholars have long noted the feminization of poverty worldwide: as many as 70 percent of people who reside in poverty are women and girls.
- Being a mother has become such a disadvantaged position in the workplace that sociologists have coined the term "motherhood penalty." The motherhood penalty acknowledges the systemic inequalities in pay, promotion, benefits, and perceived competence that mothers face in relation to non-mothers.<sup>5</sup> In terms of money, mothers lose about 5 percent of their pay per child while men often receive a fatherhood "bonus," seeing their pay boosted by 6 percent per child.<sup>6</sup> The United States also provides no paid parental leave for workers; it remains one of the only countries in the world not to offer paid leave to new mothers.<sup>7</sup> Keep in mind that 40 percent of all US households with children under the age of eighteen have mothers who

are the sole or primary breadwinners, making this issue even more pressing.<sup>8</sup>

- Access to reproductive services is constantly under attack, both through the continual threatened defunding of Planned Parenthood and increased restrictions on abortion procedures. Access to safe abortions is much more restricted today than it was in the years following the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing it. And as research shows, increased restrictions don't lower the number of abortions. They simply make them more difficult and dangerous for women.<sup>9</sup>
- Trans women of color are being killed at an incredibly alarming rate. A report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights documented at least 594 LGBTQ people who were killed over a fifteen-month period across the Americas. Nearly half of those murdered were trans women of color. Because the study only included people known to be part of the LGBTQ community, those numbers are likely much higher.<sup>10</sup>
- The #BlackLivesMatter movement is a powerful response to entrenched anti-Black racism in our society, but its founders, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, three queer women of color, have repeatedly noted how mainstream media has focused on the leadership of straight men within the movement. Within Black communities, Garza emphasizes, "we also want to be having the conversation about the leadership of women, and the leadership of queer folks, and the leadership of trans folks, as folks who are often left out of the narrative but who are also often doing most of the actual work."<sup>11</sup>

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Clearly, societal problems abound. But the people in this book refuse to accept these existing conditions as the norm. Through a multiplicity of actions, they live their lives with courage and conviction, bringing about change in small and big ways, using the power of a feminist education to help them realize their visions. Their stories, told in their words, illustrate how they have taken the concepts they gained through the WILL\* program and applied them in their work, in their personal relationships, and in the communities in which they live. Not surprisingly, they offer very different narratives. But what they share is a commitment to making positive social change.