



NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Writing *Brave Women*: An Exercise in Academic Publishing as Feminist Solidarity

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Introduction

What does it mean to be a brave woman? In 2020, we saw Belarusian women take to the streets dressed in white to oppose the violent dictatorship that had been in power for twenty-six years. In 2021, our television screens showed the Fall of Kabul, and the takeover by Taliban fighters, who overnight began to reverse decades of women's empowerment. In response, and despite the risks, women demonstrators took to the streets in Kabul to demand their rights to work, education, and political participation. And in late 2022, we saw Iranian women fight for freedom, cutting their hair and burning their headscarves as they called for women's rights in the context of brutal repression. These are but a handful of the myriad examples of women transgressing what is societally expected of them. They go out into the streets, they post on social media, they protest governments and make demands for change. Around the world, we see women being brave. They do so at great personal risk, and often when the potential benefits of being brave are infinitesimally small.

We also see women telling their stories. Their stories are powerful and important, yet they are often told by academics, journalists, or policymakers who are not necessarily involved in the day-to-day struggles for women's rights. While women activists may be featured for a snippet of the global news cycle, we rarely hear about their lives and work in depth: how did they end up on the frontlines, protesting for their rights? What happens when the cameras and news crews go home? Who are these brave women who protest and tell their stories even when they face deadly threats, and what makes them dedicate their lives to activism? What are the challenges they encounter, and how do they overcome them?

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With these stories and questions, we begin our edited volume, *Brave Women: Fighting for Justice in the 21st Century*, which is forthcoming (February 2025) with by Palgrave Macmillan (Zulver and Stallone 2025). The book takes the reader on a journey around the world, holding up a gendered lens to activism and the pursuit of justice. The chapters cover women's stories and a wide array of gendered struggles across the globe. Their stories reflect their perseverance and bravery.

For example, in Brazil, Ivone de Mattos Bernardo advocates for Quilombola women's representation in political office, battling racial discrimination and threats of violence. Inés Fernandez, a Me'phaa Indigenous woman from rural Mexico, suffered gender-based violence and went on to become an advocate for indigenous women's rights. In Myanmar, Stella Naw protested against Myanmar's military despite the risks to her own life. Yirley Velazco survived rape in Colombia's armed conflict and responded by forming a women's rights organization to support survivors of sexual and domestic violence.

Their stories teach us the importance of solidarity, and the power of women coming together for a cause. In Uganda, Fatuma Abiya and her fellow women advocates sustain their community through expressions of love, care, and generosity between women who survived abduction and forced marriage by rebels. In Peru, Ana Flavia Chávez Pedraza, a trans woman leader, supported her fellow LGBTQ community members by creating a shelter for them, while simultaneously pursuing legal activism for their rights. And, in the United States, Bianca Myrick and Nishaun Battle work with Black girls and girls of color to create mentorship opportunities to propel them forward.

In some cases, women activists are forced to flee their home countries and continue their work from abroad. This is the case of Marie Louise Baricako, who fled Burundi and now leads Mouvement Inamahoro, a transnational feminist organization. Baricako recognizes that her organization's peace activism and political stance would put her at great risk in Burundi, and thus operates strategically in exile abroad. These women leave behind legacies, inspiring others to follow in their paths. Such is the case of Ekaterine Gamakharia, who leads peace efforts in Georgia. Eka, as she is known, was inspired by her mother's activism to lead and support conflict-affected women in Georgia.

The book itself goes into much more detail about the lives of these brave women. In this "Notes from the Field," however, we describe and reflect on the more technical process of imagining, compiling, editing, and publishing a different kind of feminist academic text, one that allows the authors to tell the world what it means to be a brave woman in their own context and in their own voices. We outline how the book developed, the challenges we faced, and what we hope the book will contribute to our understanding of women activists around the world.

Creating a Book with and About Brave Women

Over the years, we — as friends, colleagues, and writing partners working in similar settings — have often asked ourselves how we can use our platforms to amplify the voices and support the brave women with whom we work. During the pandemic, many women activists' struggles became more acute. And as the

months rolled on, we heard of a shadow pandemic, an explosion of gendered violence as women were locked up with violent aggressors due to quarantine restrictions. Yet, we also saw women continuing to engage in acts of public bravery, as described in the introduction above. We knew from our own networks of women, with whom we maintained contact via WhatsApp and video calls, that they were continuing their activism in restricted settings. Even though journalists, academics, and policymakers were not there to listen and report on their stories, they pushed forward with their struggles.

The idea for this book began as a thought experiment about academics' responsibilities to research constituents. Indeed, words like "interviewee," "interlocutor," or "constituent" are highly impersonal ways to label the women we work beside during field research. These women, in addition to gifting us one of their most important resources — their time — have helped us reframe and answer our research question. They have identified and shared their contacts, lent us their cars, and shared meals at their kitchen tables, on their front porches, and in their backyards. They have made food for us, traveled from their homes to a central location where we can conduct interviews, and served as character references within their social networks when we want to expand our research samples. They bring joy and laughter between serious discussions. These women become friends, coconspirators, and allies.

Indeed, Anctil Avoine (2022) writes compellingly about feminist friendship as a method, embracing rather than rejecting the affective closeness that develops through fieldwork. Moreover, Wibben's work invites us to think about how feminist narratives can be taken seriously as security narratives; for her, "narratives both enable and limit representation — and representation shapes our world and what is possible within it" (2011, 43). Recognizing the importance of these relationships (friendships), the need for reciprocity, and the potentiality of feminist narrative, we decided to focus on brave women activists — our friends — and facilitate a unique opportunity to tell their stories in their own words to a broader public. While we are both academics who undertake ethnographic research and in-depth interviews, we are also acutely aware that our research is not accessible to all. Some of our articles are stuck behind paywalls; others follow academic conventions and use jargon and theories that make them hard to understand. We wanted this book to be — above all else — accessible, not just to academics like us, but to a much broader audience. Over a series of conversations, we decided that the only way to tell women's stories was *with* them. This is where the idea for the book *Brave Women* was born.

Sitting in Conversation, over Time

It was not long before our first challenge emerged. Few of the women we work with have extra time for writing book chapters. Some cannot read or write. We knew that in order to facilitate participation, we could not confine ourselves to the parameters of writing to academic guidelines. We also did not want to simply compile testimonies from different women. Therefore, we decided that each chapter would be written by a pair including one academic and one activist. We

wanted the process of writing this book to precipitate new conversations and new power dynamics *between* the authors. In each chapter, we invited activists and academics to partner together to write accounts of what the struggle to advance women's issues looks like on the ground and from a broader historical and political perspective.

In each chapter, the activist takes the role of the central character, narrating the story of their movement, their country, and their struggle for rights through their personal experiences of activism. The academic brings structure to the chapter, framing the activists' work in the broader political and historical context of their country, and, where relevant, drawing on academic insights to explain mobilization phenomena and women's strategic activism on the ground. Together, the pair provides unique insights into the lived experiences of being a woman activist in high-risk contexts. They reflect on how they became involved in their activism, how it has changed and developed over time, what gains and opportunities they have achieved, and what challenges they still face in a world that continues to be shaped by gendered power inequalities. Importantly, by creating a space for women to speak in their own words, we also create room to show women's intersectional oppressions — based on race, ethnicity, age, geography, ability, among others — and intersectional forms of making demands. When contacting potential contributors, we intentionally did not provide detailed guidelines. We simply asked each pair to write collectively about "brave women." In keeping our parameters broad, we hoped that each author would define what bravery meant to them and write accordingly.

All the chapters in this book are therefore collaborations, in that they were written based on in-depth conversations between the activist and the academic. In some cases, the activist directly participated in writing. In others, the chapter was born out of in-depth discussions where the activist recounted their story to an academic partner. The extent to which each activist actively participated in the writing was negotiated on a case-by-case basis. Some of the women were more comfortable sharing their stories orally. Others wanted to be active writers. In all the chapters, however, important conversations were held about how to tell these stories in a fair, equitable, and reliable way. Indeed, each of the academics has a long history working with their activist counterparts. While these bonds, developed over time, do not necessarily overcome the power differentials that exist between the pair, they generate trust. The activists developed long-standing relationships with the women they interviewed before and during the process of creating this book over several years. The resulting trust that developed is fundamental when it comes to telling these stories with the empathy and respect that they deserve.

Beyond the writing process itself, we also needed to be intentional about our audience. We sought out a trade publisher in order to extend the reach of our potential audiences and actively pushed to make the volume as accessible as possible. We didn't want to simply market to scholars or policymakers, but rather to a general audience who is interested in connecting with the stories of women around the world. We recognize that being offered this opportunity to elevate and share stories is a privilege. It is also a responsibility. Telling a story requires that there is an audience who is listening. For this reason, we wrote and curated the book — and importantly, will market it — in a way to generate the broadest

audience possible. What we, as audience members, do with the stories we listen to matters. As Nobel Prize Laureate Nadia Murad wrote in a social media post in April 2022: “mine is only one story... We must keep listening to survivors and providing them with tangible support” (2022). Survivors’ struggles are ongoing, and there are many, many more stories to be heard. Moving forward, we hope that this book is not a one-time effort, and that it inspires others to create, distribute, and pick up and read similar volumes.

Practicing Patience: Challenges in Compiling the Volume

Compiling this book was an exercise in patience and openness. Of the original invited contributors, almost none appear in the final version of the book. Such an attrition rate is understandable, particularly as the pandemic continued to grind on over months and years. Women who originally agreed to participate found that their care responsibilities became overwhelming, and that they didn’t have time to write. Others decided that the security situation had changed, and no longer felt safe participating, even anonymously. Academics and activists alike took on new jobs, new relationships, had babies, graduated, suffered burn out, or simply stopped replying to our emails.

Those who did continue to write for the book often asked us for patience. We found ourselves pushing back deadlines over and over again, while someone returned from maternity leave, someone finished their final university exams, or someone dealt with a crisis in their community. As editors, we were also to blame. There were times when we were unsure as to whether we should continue with the book, and let stretches of time elapse before we had the energy to continue. Looking back in hindsight, though, we believe that our long timeline contributed to the richness of the volume. Contributors had years to think about making edits and revisions. And as editors, we were slowly able to create a cohesive compilation of chapters that speak to each other, despite the distances and differences between each chapter’s protagonist.

We are delighted to have had a supportive editorial team at Palgrave. From the beginning, our editor Rebecca became a champion of our work. To her, we are grateful. Even despite her very open guidelines for us, though, we experienced some gentle push back against the mismatched style of our chapters from anonymous reviewers. It was suggested that perhaps we could align the chapters, so that they followed a similar style or format, for consistency. We ultimately decided, however, that given our ethos of allowing women to tell their stories in their own words, they should be allowed to control their style. For this reason, the book includes different kinds of chapters: historical narratives, back-and-forth conversations, and interview-style accounts.

Bridging Theory and Practice: Transgressing Expectations of Academia

Academia has specific requirements when it comes to publishing, and we did not follow them. As early career academics, we know that an edited volume published through the commercial branch of a non-university press will not necessarily contribute to any future tenure cases we may make. With that said, we

wrote and compiled this book as a letter in solidarity with those women with whom we work. And looking back, as the editors of this volume, we feel proud to have facilitated a space in which the brilliant, brave women with whom we work can tell their stories beyond their own communities. We hope that the book will reach policy and even philanthropic audiences who can read these stories and make decisions that will support these brave women — as they push back against dictatorships, racist institutions, religious extremists, violent armed groups, and the patriarchy itself — for gender justice.

Moving forward, we don't just want to *talk* about the importance of advocacy or “the need to support” women leaders as academic recommendations at the end of articles. We want to put our advocacy into action and push boundaries so that this type of research and storytelling is accepted and respected in academic spaces and beyond. Feminist peacebuilding and women's rights advocacy is not an exact science, but we hope this volume contributes to positive change within our profession and beyond. As Wibben writes: “narratives... are profoundly political” (2011, 43); this book is our political statement about one way academics can — and should — stand in solidarity with the women with whom we work.

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