

WORKING WOMEN

STORIES OF STRIFE, STRUGGLE AND SURVIVAL



EDITED BY KOGI NAIDOO | FAY PATEL

书馆



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Stories of Strife, Struggle and Survival

Edited by

Kogi Naidoo and Fay Patel

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Working Women

We dedicate this book to all those women who experience pain and suffering everyday but who cannot have their voices heard and are never seen. Let us not forget them.

This book is also dedicated to our parents, to the men in our lives and to our children who supported us in our personal and professional growth and development through the many struggles in our lives. Their love and encouragement gave us strength to tell our stories through other voices.



I am grateful to my husband and partner, Siva Naidoo, and our children, Kami and Des, for their belief in me and their ongoing support. It has made all the hard work, struggles and strife worthwhile.

Kogi Naidoo



I am indebted to my husband Faisal Patel and to our son Farhaan for their patience and endurance over the past 20 years as we struggled through life's many challenges. Each one of us gave up so many of our own dreams to support the other. However, we were always blessed by the grace of God and our love endured through time and distance. Most of all, our spirit remained strong because of our faith in God and humanity.

Fay (Feiziya) Patel



Foreword

This book makes a valuable contribution of making explicit the connections between success, struggles and strife of women venturing into different work-spaces. Sometimes some studies that favour a particular viewpoint become judgemental and may even be ethnocentric, thereby disempowering or silencing alternative perspectives. This book attempts to address this problem by supporting the feminist goal of making the different voices of women heard without exploiting, distorting or trivialising their experiences. It is premised on the 'important assumption that women in specific contexts are best suited to help develop presentations of their lives and that contexts are located in specific structures and historical and material moments' (Olesen 2000: 235). The book is an interesting collection of papers with different formats—some staying within and some flowing across the academic boundaries—blurring what is academic and what is non-academic.

A key strength of this book lies in bringing together the diverse perspectives of women from very different social and cultural backgrounds. These are stories of women who have achieved success within their own contexts, and which reflect the struggles, strife and loss that women experience in order to succeed. Each chapter unfolds a different dimension of success and the associated struggles. Each form of success is equally worthwhile and challenging. Juxtaposing perspectives of women from such different walks of life has a powerful effect of creating a unified *we*. Several common themes emerge from the diverse experiences of women reported in this book, such as competing commitments in their various roles, exploitation at work, a sense of isolation, loss of health, impact on family and challenges associated with maintaining their confidence and dignity in difficult circumstances. Despite these common themes, the unified *we* that is promoted in this book is not a single *we*, in other words, it does not simplify or essentialise women's experience. Rather, it is a fluid *we* that is more encompassing, more uncertain, more

empathetic to the cultural and contextual nature of the successes, struggles and strife encountered by these women. An excellent example of this is an insightful reflection from Thenjiwe Magwaza where she deconstructs the Western notion of a 'balanced life' to contest its viability and desirability in all contexts.

The diversity of forms of success and struggles, strategies for overcoming various challenges and perspectives on morality and spirituality, as represented by different women in this book is impressive. On the one hand, it allowed me to bond with the authors and the participants whose perspectives are represented in different chapters. I could resonate with the many themes represented here, such as the isolation and struggles of academic life, loss of health, loss of relationships and a sense of failing to meet everyone's expectations. On the other hand, it had the powerful effect of helping me see through many different lenses. Each chapter highlights a different notion of success, empowerment, financial independence, emancipation, fulfilment, loss, grief, dignity and hidden costs of success. Vivid descriptions of diverse dilemmas, struggles and losses that these women went through in their pursuits of fulfilment forced me to question the artificiality of several dichotomies: among them, success and failure, good and bad, moral and immoral, and ethical and unethical.

What might success mean to a single mother? How might someone with a physical disability define success? How are women being exploited within different professions? How little time are women able to give themselves in their attempts to meet the demands of their various roles? What are some strategies that worked for these women in different circumstances? These are all very important questions addressed from multiple angles in this book.

The simplicity of representational styles adopted in different chapters makes it an easy read. It has the potential to provide a genuine feel for the struggles, dilemmas, value decisions, trade-offs that the women had to go through in achieving their independence. The book will appeal to many women from different walks of life. In particular, women's clubs, support groups and working women internationally will be able to identify with the stories in the book and will find the book an inspirational collection. Even though this book may not fall within the traditional boundaries of 'academic' work, the breadth of perspectives

represented here and the authenticity and credibility of various accounts makes it a good resource for anyone venturing into feminist studies, cultural studies and organisational communication culture.

Harsh Suri

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REFERENCE

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Preface

The contributors of this volume share various accounts of women's struggles of life and destiny, disability, divorce, abuse, family dysfunction and violence, racism, religious commitments, barriers of caste and class to name a few. Women's struggles are not yet over. How women overcome these barriers are experiences and stories that only women (and few men) know, appreciate and understand.

The purpose of inviting women to tell their stories of struggle through this book was to allow them a space to inform and educate those of us who are more privileged and advantaged. We provided an open forum to women and men to share their stories about women's struggles. Men who align themselves with women's struggles and support them may fall into the feminist category of 'male feminists and pro feminist men', according to Wood (2005: 302). Whatever aspects of feminism men may choose to support, it is important to note that there are men who believe that women deserve better.

The idea for the book was conceptualised out of our own experiences. We know what it means to be born into a society that is oppressed and confined to the dark, black spaces of the land; to be of different ('the wrong') skin colour; to be women who are even today classified according to language, race and ethnicity; and to be denied access and opportunity because of language, race, gender and ethnicity. And yet, as women who have experienced the effects of colonisation, Apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism, we continue to be chained to our past, to be conditioned into accepting the unreasonable demands of institutional and other authority while making feeble attempts to counter the oppression, only to find solace in our cultural, religious and historical roots. We remain 'educated' slaves who succumb to Western ideals and agendas.

With regard to writing styles, contributors have used multidisciplinary approaches in their writings. We hope that this book provides deep insights into women's diverse cultural perspectives and their significant

contributions to the workplace. This book follows the trend of the 'Women Writing Women' series where a forum is provided for a 'variety of women's voices, allowing women to speak for and about themselves in ways that have often been excluded from academic discourse' (Hart, Weathermon and Armitage 2006: 3). All the contributors have adopted distinct styles and approaches to tell their stories and to share their knowledge and insights. While we wanted to maintain a consistency in style and approach, we the contributors were encouraged to use their preferred writing styles. What our book demonstrates is that by providing a diverse range of opportunities for women to tell their stories encouraged more women to come forward and to tell their stories without the constraints of specific writing styles being imposed on them.

Many of the contributors to this book raise issues of defining women's work, workspaces and of the need to balance work with their roles such as mothers, daughters and wives. We began by inviting professional women to contribute to this text and found that this excluded other women. What about women who did not belong in the 'professional' category? So we extended the invitation to all women. What physical space could be regarded as 'legitimate working space' was another question that was raised. Further down the line we found that we had to make the book more inclusive of women who worked within the home and from home, as well as women and men who worked in women's and/or men's traditional spaces. We also received an enquiry from a male author as to whether the book was intended for women by women only. We then extended the invitation to men who appreciate and understand women's struggles.

The underlying goal of the book is to identify the struggles of women who are marginalised, and who continue their fight for survival, recognition, respect and dignity. The book is organised according to the broad themes outlined in the 21st century in the call for submissions and includes new emerging themes. Part One includes stories related to struggles in the workplace, while Part Two focuses specifically on exploitation and strategies for survival in the workplace. Part Three of the book moves on to stories and struggles about health and wellness and Part Four reveals the interconnectedness of spirituality and religion to women's resolve to withstand injustices. While cultural identities and spiritual immersion were not highlighted under the broad categories,

these emerged as significant themes. A deep spirituality and religious conviction guided many women through their struggles, particularly when they experienced conflict as a result of their multiple cultural identities in the workplace. Part Four takes us on a spirited journey that demonstrates how women triumph in the face of adversity. Part Five introduces us to women's strong resolve and resilience in overcoming obstacles. The hope and positive energy that one derives from these stories brings to bear on our own realities: that there are many women less fortunate than we are. In Part Six the concluding chapter pulls together the threads that spin webs around the freedoms of women everywhere and that keep them entwined in endless knots only because the richness and the significance of their cultural knowledge, identities and perspectives remain unrecognised in the workplace.

Readers will not only be educated and informed about women's struggles, but also be able to critically analyse policies and practices that create barriers, ostracise and marginalise them. Our book brings hope and encouragement to women struggling against all odds to care for themselves and their families while meeting the demands of their work and life in general.

This text is a humble attempt to add to the already vast literature on women's ways of knowing and their contributions to their personal and professional lives. We also hope that reading clubs and women's groups would use this book as a point of departure to encourage women to share their unique contributions to the social development of their communities. This book is directed at a wide readership that includes multiple fields of interest including organisational culture in the global workplace. Fields of interest may include, for example, contexts related to human resource management, organisational culture and communication, international communication, development communication, women's and gender studies, sociology and cultural studies, governmental and non-governmental organisations. The book would also appeal to communities that live and work in a developing context and those who would like to have an insight into women's struggles in a developing context. Contributors originate from New Zealand, Australia, United Kingdom, United States of America, South Africa, Canada and India, and identify with multiple histories. Sadly, this book mirrors our current reality, however much we wish to deny it.

It is time that women reclaim their right to respect and dignity, and to fair space in the workplace. The right to participate in a free and fair democracy must be equivalent not only to the right to be employed in a range of workplaces on an equitable level. More importantly, workplaces must integrate women's cultural perspectives and approaches so that women can participate in an environment that respects their knowledge. It is important that democracies empower women by integrating policies and practices that support and nurture women's cultural identities and perspectives in their place of work.

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- Wood, J. 2005. *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender and Culture*. 6th edition. Canada: Wadsworth, Thomson Learning, Inc.

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Editing a book such as this is no easy feat when you consider the challenges of working across time and space coordinating with the authors and the publisher spread across seven countries. However, the asynchronous nature of new communication technologies such as the Internet and e-mail made this enormous undertaking look easy as we worked harmoniously in a mutually respectful manner.

We would like to thank all contributing authors without whom this book would not have become a reality. Thank you for sharing your stories and ideas. We are indebted to you for the warm support and encouragement through the three year process of gathering the material and working with our publisher. Your patience and kind words were especially heart-warming. Many of you generously showered compliments and blessings which certainly kept us motivated. Working with a wonderful team of authors made this a treasured experience.

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We are grateful to Dr Harsh Suri for agreeing to write the Foreword. Harsh has also survived several personal and professional challenges of her own.

Our sincere appreciation goes to Dr Sugata Ghosh and Ashok R. Chandran and to SAGE Publications for their confidence in our abilities to produce this book. We are also grateful to Rekha Natarajan for her editorial assistance, advice and recommendations on improving the quality and style of the text. We thank Sushmita Banerjee and the team of editors for their gentle prodding to keep us on track during the final stages of preparation.

We treaded carefully through our own challenges which life threw at us over the three years. We both commuted across three countries (Canada, New Zealand and Australia) to get from home to work. We cherished our hours and days with our spouses and children who also sacrificed so much. Our spouses went through incredible health issues on their own as they shared this dream in completing an important project—our first book. These two men in our lives are exceptional human beings who themselves broke through barriers of gender, race and culture to allow us to fulfil our life's ambition. Both men are gentle, loving souls who have always stood by our side. If more men were like the men in our lives, we would achieve a harmonious balance in the home and the workplace as well in the spaces in between.

We also thank all our friends and colleagues who offered their valuable advice over countless cups of coffee and many corridor chats.

Kogi Naidoo

Fay Patel

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PART ONE

Struggles in the Workplace

Women experience pressures in a number of contexts: cultural, domestic, work and professional. Despite women professionals having the requisite qualifications and experience, they are continually undermined, undervalued, unsupported and marginalised. The stories from our contributing authors reflect their personal struggles in the workplace. Women find themselves in situations which they do not recognise as unfair and unjust. Many remain trapped and finally succumb.

The stories in Part One of the book bear testimony to the struggles that women face in the workplace.

Thenjiwe Magwaza interrogates the Western concept of ‘balancing work and life’—not about how to balance but questioning the need to comply with Western norms of balance. There are tensions between the women’s personal identities and work roles. Which balance is more important—the externally driven balance or the internal balance? Heide Kaminski projects the dilemmas of a single mother in America and candidly addresses some of the highpoints of her struggle. Millicent Daweti analyses and questions the ‘meaning of self’ in relation to the number of cultural roles that women experience from childhood to maturity. Maureen Lewis raises pertinent questions about the rightful place of migrant women in the workplace.