



## Breaking the Mould: Working through our Differences to Vocalize the Sound of Change

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# **Breaking the Mould: Working Through Our Differences to Vocalise the Sound of Change**

**Amal Abdellatif, Maryam Aldossari, Ilaria Boncori, Jamie Callahan, Uracha Chatrakul Na Ayudhya, Sara Chaudhry, Nina Kivinen, Shan-Jan Sarah Liu, Ea Høg Utoft, Natalia Vershinina, Emily Yarrow, Alison Pullen**

## **Abstract**

This paper orchestrates alterethnographical reflections in which we, women, polyphonically document, celebrate and vocalise the sound of change. This change is represented in Kamala Harris's appointment as the first woman, woman of colour, and South Asian American as the US Vice President, breaking new boundaries of political leadership, and harvesting new gains for women in leadership and power more broadly. With feminist awareness and curiosity, we organise and mobilise individual texts into a multivocal paper as a way to write solidarity between women. Recognising our intersectional differences, and power differentials inherent in our different positions in academic hierarchies, we unite to write about our collective concerns regarding gendered, racialised, classed social relations. Coming together across intersectional differences in a writing community has been a vehicle to speak, relate, share, and voice our feelings and thoughts to document this historic moment and build a momentum to fulfil our hopes for social change. As feminists, we accept our responsibility to make this history written, rather than manipulated or erased, by breaking the mould in the form of multi-layered embodied texts to expand *writing* and *doing* research differently through *re/writing otherness*.

## **Prelude**

*“Kamala Harris Makes History as First Woman and Woman of Color as Vice President” - New York Times*

*“‘I won't be the last’: Kamala Harris, first woman elected US vice-president, accepts place in history” – The Guardian*

*“‘People like us can win’: What Kamala Harris’ historic VP role means to 6 young women in politics” – CNBC*

In these news headlines, Kamala Harris breaks the mould and takes her place in history. Although this win is not perceived as historic in all spaces around the world, because some have already ‘seen’ their ‘first’ (often white) woman as political leader, it is a historic moment for Americans and within the American context’s deeply-rooted sexism and racism exacerbated over Trump’s presidential term (Schaffner, 2020). Beyond the American context, this victory brings hope to many – those of us who still have not celebrated their ‘first’ woman political leader, to those of us who share similar visible identities with Kamala Harris (namely, gender and race), or to those of us who see Kamala as embodiment of a symbol to reclaim their voice and agency. Whether we receive Kamala’s victory with hope or scepticism, Kamala’s ‘visibility’ in the White House paves the way to generations of women, particularly women of colour, and will change how future generations think of leaders (McCluney, 2021).

Women leaders are persistently scrutinised and disadvantaged by systemic discrimination. Deriving largely from their differences to men, women leaders are often seen as inferior to men within the gendered symbolic order (Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). With respect to race, women leaders of colour are perceived as inferior to white women within the racialised symbolic order (Smith & Nkomo, 2003). Undoubtedly, Kamala Harris’ intersectionality

(Crenshaw, 1990) as an ethnic minority woman entails considerable challenges. Her multiple subordinate-group identities position her as a non-prototypical leader (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008) to experience distinctive forms of oppression and discrimination than others with a single subordinate-group identity such as white woman or Black man. Given that Kamala Harris does not fit the traditional “prototypical” norm of (white) woman nor (Black) man, this eludes the “double jeopardy” (Beale, 1979) with stereotypical attitudes directed towards both her gender and ethnic prejudice interlocked with sexism and racism.

This elusion is amplified when viewing Kamala’s nonconformist coloured body through the lens of whiteness; the white gaze (Rabelo, Robotham & McCluney, 2020) subjects her to scrutiny and control that reenforces the gendered racialised hierarchies. The hostile gendered and racialised scrutiny is evident in the social media’s response when Joe Biden announced his selection of Kamala Harris. Social media’s different platforms were mobilised and weaponised against Kamala Harris to dehumanise her coloured woman body exposing entrenched sexism, racism, and misogyny. For instance, Trump called her “*unlikable*” and “*this monster.*” Others posted T-shirts with the slogan “*Joe and the Hoe*” (see *The New York Times* - Astor, 2020). Trump said, “*I don’t want to see a woman president get into that position the way she’d do it, and she is not competent*” (Tumulty, Woodsome and Pecanha, 2020). Meanwhile, a member of his campaign’s advisory board called her an “*insufferable lying bitch*” and other racist tropes described her as the “*angry Black woman*” (Astor, 2020).

Against this background embedded in the US context, we take Kamala Harris’s appointment across our different physical boundaries as an opportunity to ask ourselves - what role can we play as women, academics, and feminists to subvert sexist, racist, misogynistic discourses around women leaders? What change can an inclusive feminist solidarity bring to this ugly scene and what challenges might we face to build such a solidarity? How can we organise,

assemble, and mobilise to rewrite a narrative that is critical without (re)producing hostility and scrutiny against women?

The authors of this text are a group of women academics from across the globe with converging/diverging intersectional identities, from different eras and spaces who have been brought together by the first author to express, relate, share, and voice our thoughts and feelings to collectively document this specific moment within and beyond the American context. In this polyphonic text, we sit together across difference and intersectionality. Our togetherness is made visible through writing intersectionality; and our individual texts provide space for the unsaid and invisible. We vocalise our multifaceted lived experiences and daily experiments as we embrace vulnerabilities and courage as writers, thus contributing to writing and doing research differently (Ahonen et al., 2020; Einola et al., 2020; Ericsson and Kostera, 2020) by re/writing otherness.

We collectively organise by embedding our texts in history as *women* writing about *other women*, within this time and space. Our autoethnographical reflections expand alterethnography not only as a way of doing research for change (Ericsson and Kostera, 2020) but also to celebrate, engage and mobilise change. As feminists, we write to rewrite the “rules of the game” that have historically marginalised, silenced and divided us. We write new rules that value inclusion, imagination, and possibilities (Harré, Grant, Locke, & Sturm, 2017) rather than established norms that lead to exclusion, labelling, self-gaze, compartmentalisation, binarism and dividedness. With feminist awareness and solidarity, we step forward to acknowledge our intersectional similarities and, most importantly, our intersectional differences for us to be able to contest and transcend them and unite around our common passion for social change.

### **Why Women Write Together?**

*“I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement” Hélène Cixous, (1976, p.87)*

With Hélène Cixous’ words, we see the importance of writing as women, for women, and about women, especially in a world that was created, sustained, and dominated by men and for men. Solidarity among women starts through bridging the existing assumptions and the structural isolation that divide us (see Enloe observations in Prasad, & Zulfiqar, 2020) across our intersectional racial, ethnic and class distinctions. Re/writing our intersectional *otherness* presents the possibility to free our marginalised selves, liberate our oppressed souls, and unchain our handcuffed thoughts. As women academics working in the same masculinity-privileging spaces, we recognise writing as a form of activism (Mandalaki, 2020; Pullen, 2018) that begins by speaking, listening, and sharing (Phillips, Pullen, & Rhodes, 2014) to develop a political voice; it is a micro-revolution (Pullen, Helin, & Harding, 2020). Writing as a feminist strategy represents an act of survival in academia’s masculinist, male-centric culture that bounds our voices and binds our bodies (Özkazanç-Pan, 2020), to subvert, confuse, resist and challenge academia’s masculine discourse (Boncori & Smith, 2019; Kiriakos, & Tienari, 2018; Jones, Martinez Dy and Vershinina, 2019) and disrupt, dismantle and destabilise its imperialist and patriarchal patterns (Silva, 2020). In so doing, our polyphonic text sits on the intersection of change and academic writing that deviates from individualisation towards collective solidarity (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019).

In writing together, our aim is not to produce a collective voice but rather collectively nurture solidarity through raising our own voices, raising each other voices, so our voices are louder

with the hope that they are heard. Our writing of this paper was emancipatory, and also an opportunity to listen and learn from each other. We do not presume a collective identity or voice, however we recognise the importance of re/writing to engender dynamic relations that include support, dispute, and joy (Butler, 2015). We have written and benefited from the affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012) developed among us, focusing on modes of engagement that are not rooted in identity or ego and which recognises and organises the plurality of feminism (Ozkazanc- Pan, 2018; Calás & Smircich, 2009). We practiced this affective solidarity through an openness and commitment to dialogue and multiple perspectives that creates a 'we' rather than an 'us versus them' (Littler & Rottenberg, 2020), albeit whilst recognising intersectional differences. This feminist solidarity holds the potential for resistance against the institutionalised patriarchal culture of sexism, racism, and misogyny (Itzin & Newman, 1995); it is a solidarity that expands political alliances without assuming sameness among women (Littler & Rottenberg, 2020), and instead recognises and respects differences without attempting to colonise these differences.

### **Who are we?**

We are twelve women academics at different career stages: PhD candidate, Postdoctoral researcher, Lecturers, Senior Lecturers, Associate Professor and Professors at different universities around the world. Our research disciplines diverge – politics, corporate governance, organizational behaviour, inequalities in knowledge productions, management and marketing, employment relationship, entrepreneurship, leadership diversity, workforce diversity, power and privilege, and unequal career and working lives; yet all our research intersects with a nodal focus on gender and feminisms. Many of us work in the UK whilst others live and work in Australia, Denmark, Finland, and France. We hold different racial/ethnic identities; we are American, Arab, Middle Eastern, Asian, Russian, European, and Welsh, writing from different places and spaces. With an awareness of our intersectional

differences, and the power differentials within and between these intersectional differences, we speak individually through the collective. We overcome the multiple hierarchical, disciplinary, racial, and physical boundaries to unite around our collective concern of social change.

### **How did we assemble to compose?**

Throughout the process of talking and writing, we used virtual platforms to connect, to assemble (Butler, 2015) and nurture solidarity. With online technology, we went beyond our physically isolated borders and intersectional boundaries to *write* and *do* research, practice activism and initiate a micro-revolution that invades male-dominated spaces. We transformed this virtual space into a new “field of play” (Richardson, 1997, p. 5) to engage in a conversation, develop connection and write. When we started this project, our shared goal was to express what Kamala’s appointment meant to us as women who experience varying degrees of sexism, racism and misogyny whether in society or academic domains. We reflected on Kamala Harris’ appointment through our own intersectional identities that converge around our gender but diverge with our race, ethnicity, class, age and sexual orientation. Yet, with this shared goal, we free ourselves and our texts from any constraints of a ‘unified’ theoretical lens or a specific theme; rather, we voice our (dis)embodied thoughts through our temporal embedded situated bodies. The texts, whilst disconnected, connect through readers’ meaning making.

Our individual reflections are based on the timeframe between the announcement of the Biden-Harris election in November until one day before the insurrection violently stormed the halls of the US Capitol. Two virtual meetings were held. The first meeting was one week after the announcement of Biden-Harris’s win. In this first meeting, we shared our different views on the win, and we discussed, listened, related, agreed, and disagreed. This created a



space for our affective solidarity to flourish (Littler & Rottenberg, 2020) where we could argue and disagree to learn and mobilise social change. A word count per reflection was agreed and a reasonable time with which to share our individual reflections with one another. With ongoing pandemic struggles as women, it was essential to share and acknowledge our multiple commitments and responsibilities so we could move forward with the project, together, without leaving anyone behind. Our individual reflections were shared on a Google Drive and we met for the second time after two months. During our second virtual meeting, we peer reviewed the reflections offering feedback to each other. This process enriched our conversation and further enhanced our dialogue and understanding.

After the peer review round, the lead author reflected on how to arrange the individual texts - alphabetically, thematically or in a dialogue? Ultimately, she decided to order our texts to allow a dialogue to surface among the texts to unveil the tension within and between each reflection, illuminate without resolution the commonalities and conflicts, and surface different feelings of hope, despair, optimism, frustration, anger, joy, scepticism, love, hunch, vulnerability and guilt. This organisation manifests our multiple and multi-layered complex identities. Each text writes a story constructed from a multitude of concepts, which illuminates a different facet of the complexity of our identities. Yet, before we start orchestrating our polyphonic piece, we have something to tell you first, Dear Reader.

*Dear Reader,*

*Before reading our individual pieces, we would like to share few points with you to enrich your reading experience. First, our hope is that you will see yourself represented in the plurality of our intersectionality. In reading our vignettes, you are invited to appreciate the individuality of each voice while enjoying the togetherness of our polyphony. In taking you across different spaces around the world, we hope you*

*see the world through our multiple windows. In ordering our independent melodic voices, hopefully we succeeded in sounding the discord of our complex contested feelings and (dis)embodied thoughts. We hope you enjoy reading our accounts as much as we enjoyed our assembly to compose them. Lastly, we would like to invite YOU to vocalise the sound of change, raise your voice and join the movement!*

#WeWomenWriteTogether #WWWT

*Sincerely,*

*The Authors*

Our polyphony starts here ....

***“This moment matters”: Hope for collective leadership and social justice***

***By Author One***

As a woman immigrant from South East Asia, living in the UK for over two decades, I have long been aware of my status as an ‘ethnic minority’ and how I embody this visible difference in different spaces. I am constantly told that I look ‘young’ (I am in my 40s) and that I do not sound like I am from my country of origin (a product of studying in an American international school in my formative years). Each day, I learn to resist the cultural and social scripts of being a woman *and* being an Asian woman and to navigate gender and racial power relations in all areas of my life. Today, I am in a strategic leadership role, working on equality and diversity matters. I ask myself “how did I get here? How have I been let in?” As a mid-career woman academic who embodies multiple identities of an Other/outsider, I offer my personal reflection on the symbolic significance of Kamala Harris’ vice-presidential election victory.

*“Not all of you here today will become leaders, but all of you can exhibit leadership behaviours.”* I first heard these crushing words at a “women-only” leadership development programme for women working in British higher education (HE). Encouraged by my line manager to put myself forward after my first maternity leave, this felt like an opportunity to develop and progress in the academy. Instead, the programme left me disempowered. Rather than challenge the culture, system, and structures that keep women out of HE leadership, the programme framed this underrepresentation as a ‘women’s problem’ by offering solutions to ‘fix the women’ rather than ‘fix the universities’ (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). It sought to provide women with individualistic ‘leadership skills’, based on the idea that all delegates would form a critical mass to then occupy leadership roles once equipped with the right set of tools. In one session, we were introduced to the transformative potential of ‘power posing’ for women. The take-home message was that through the adoption of certain behaviours and mindsets, perseverance, and strategic networking, we stood a better chance at becoming success stories. The programme reinforced and perpetuated fantasies of meritocracy and of growth and progress (Bal and Doci, 2018), all the while side-stepping issues of power and structural inequalities that (re)produce gender and racial injustices within higher education.

The disempowerment quickly turned into anger and frustration. As I looked around my institution that year, the women who occupied leadership positions were few and far between. All were White women. It was becoming difficult for me to see how the women who held leadership roles were lifting other women up as they climbed (Bell et al., 2001). My anger and frustration grew as I watched women colleagues, especially Black women, being denied progression despite their track records and years of service to students and the institution. Leadership, as I observed it, was confusing and unappealing, because it was exclusive and unjust.

Six years on, I have been given a strategic leadership role for equality and diversity. After years of disenchantment with the very notion of leadership, I want to 'do' leadership differently, collectively. Three weeks later, in August 2020, Kamala Harris became the first Black and South Asian woman to run on a major political party's US presidential ticket. I remember telling myself, "this moment matters". There is power and hope in her selection. Hope in a year like no other. A year of a global pandemic and a global racial awakening that have exposed the depths of social and racial inequalities and calls upon collective action for social justice.

On 20 January 2021, Kamala Harris will make history once again as the first woman and the first Black and South Asian woman to hold the office of the US vice president. While it is important to acknowledge her 'difficult history' as California's former prosecutor and senator (Garafoli, 2020), in this moment, I find hope in the historic and symbolic significance of her appointment as I work towards a collective leadership model for action and social justice.

### ***Tokenism or institutional change?***

#### ***By Author Two***

The recent appointment of Kamala Harris as the first woman of colour to become the vice president of the United States had been celebrated globally. While it is a great achievement to have the first woman, first Black and Asian-American to be elected as vice president, the unanswered question remains whether Kamala Harris' appointment (despite her strong credentials) was a strategic political decision to gain the minority votes (especially from within the Black community). This is a particularly relevant question given the racial division

and institutionalised racism in the United States (US) that has led to several social and political movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM). Although Black Americans have a long history of protesting against the profound systemic discrimination in the US (Nkomo, 2020), a current survey reveals that 67% of adult Americans show support for the relatively new BLM movements (Pew Research Center, 2020). The mass anti-racism movement after the George Floyd murder created implicit pressure on Joe Biden to seek the support of, and proactively aim to relate to, the African-American community. Therefore, the question whether the selection of Kamala Harris is a purely symbolic and strategic decision to win the election or is it in fact a genuine act of recognition of the significance of Black and Asian communities within the US?

Using women for political agenda is not something new. In Saudi Arabia, where I come from, recent reforms in the name of women, were introduced to improve Saudi Arabia's international image in the West. Some of these symbolic reforms have been globally celebrated, such as the ending the ban on women driving (Al-Otaibi, 2018), amendment of guardianship laws to allow women over twenty-one greater freedoms without needing a male guardian's permission (Arab News, 2019), and the appointment of several women as the 'first' females in leading positions within the government. However, these reforms and narratives have been described by critics as superficial and classified as tokenism, aimed at improving Saudi Arabia's reputation in the West and while covering up the daily violation of human rights within the kingdom (Al-Rasheed, 2019a). To some extent, the reforms introduced by crown prince Mohammed bin Salman are contradictory and confusing, for instance, the royal decree to permit women to drive was followed by the arrest of the Saudi women activists who had originally been campaigning for this right to drive (Al-Rasheed, 2019b). Al-Rasheed (2019a, 2019b) argue that lessening of restrictions and the media's focus on women were political necessities in order to redeem Saudi Arabia's reputation following

the widely publicized assassination of Saudi dissident and author Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi embassy in Turkey (Hearst, 2018). Furthermore, several cases of Saudi women fleeing the country and seeking asylum as a result of abuse generated publicity in the Western media, such as the 18-year-old Rahaf al-Qunun (Martin and Zhou, 2019). Therefore, as a feminist scholar, who strongly believes in gender resistance and advocates for social and political change, I perceive reforms in Saudi Arabia with scepticism since the problems remain deeply embedded within a still authoritarian political regime. Similarly, it can be argued that Ms. Harris' appointment is simply tokenism and does not aim to address the deeply rooted institutional racism in the US. Moreover, it might lead to the additional issue of Kamala Harris being regarded as a symbolic representative of a minority group, rather than as individual in her own right.

### **(Re)imagining together**

#### ***By Author Three***

We waited, for what felt like an eternity. In a video made popular by social media, Kamala Harris tells her great-niece, Amara: 'you *could* be president, but not right now, you have to be over the age of 35'. The hope and wonder in this statement allow us to think of possibilities through a clearly laid pathway of dialogic reimagining inscribed into a reality that could become true. Together.

I look at my little daughter, playing cheekily with her doctor toy set on the soft living room carpet, claiming to be 'a superhero', blissfully unaware of the challenges ahead. The love of her parents united different races, religions, and cultures across oceans of space and habit. We speak three languages in our home – English, Swahili, and Italian; like Kamala Harris' mother, we left our homes and families to study abroad, in search of a kaleidoscope of

opportunities and a reverberation of voices into the future. Nodes of privilege and oppression illuminate our past, the present and the unknowns of the future.

The interlocking points of individual and systemic oppression we see articulated for women in leadership – for example gender, race and class (Holvino, 2010) – and the intersection of the multiple identities Kamala Harris proudly acknowledges, together with those we do not know of, still make some people question her place more than they would a white old man. Her success today is hers, but it echoes the achievements and sacrifices of many women of colour before her and will inspire women of the future. Although I desperately wish for my work and values to motivate and inspire my daughter to be the best human being she can be, I know that she needs role models she can see herself reflected in. The power of representation embodied by Kamala Harris is crucial for my daughter, and others, to believe that they can make a difference and instigate positive change. I am still scared and confused (Plotnikof et al., 2020), for my generation and especially for hers, as the dystopian vacuum we seem to have entered since 2016 (e.g. Brexit, Trump) has fostered the magnification of inequalities (Wasdani and Prasad, 2020), the entrenchment of personal interest, and a quest for otherness that is breeding racism (Larsson, 2020).

One of the answers I see to combat this bleak terror that reverberates in the depth of my stomach is in organizing love (Vachhani, 2015), practicing affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012), and sharing of our lives and fragilities (Boncori, 2020) across individual marginalizations and systemic structures of inequality. This starts with compassion and the embracing of diversity. In our work, the path towards hope and change is chartered through (re)gaining agency via collective action (Contu, 2017; Dar et al. 2020), engaging in academic writing that is different and wants to make a difference (Einola et al., 2020; Mandalaki and

Daou, 2020), shedding light on a plurality of experiences that are embodied, emotional, jarring, disjointed, joyful, intellectual, and much more. Vice-President Harris' election and her achievements have moved and inspired millions of people, but we can all instigate change and take responsibility to advance equality in our daily lives.

### ***A giant leap for “women”, one small step for feminists?***

***By Author Four***

I followed the US election intensely from my home in Aarhus, Denmark, and could not help but to celebrate not as much Joe Biden's win as Donald Trump's loss. Frankly, Joe Biden remains rather anonymous to me, probably because Democratic candidates who align with Danish welfare traditions (incl. high taxation, free education, and health care), such as Bernie Sanders, are generally covered more in Danish media. But Kamala Harris has had considerable attention. Upon finally hearing the election result, my reaction therefore was “*Congratulations Madam Vice President!*” creating a warm, fuzzy feeling of relief. The media's focus on Harris' status as the first female and Black VP has noticeably overshadowed information about her actual politics, strengthening a narrative of her appointment as a feminist victory. However, having dark skin does not preclude someone's capacity to pursue anti-Black policy, just as cis women may implement anti-feminist policies, which we have seen amply in my native context.

Denmark had its first female prime minister, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, in 2011. Hearing Thorning-Schmidt speak now, I believe that she does represent feminist sentiments. However, while she held office, her government, for example, never enacted the earmarked paternity leave it had promised. Denmark's second female and current PM, Mette Frederiksen, took office in 2019. The Social Democratic Party secured that win mainly



because it had adopted the anti-immigration stance which the right-wing Danish People's Party had until then occupied. Continuously, Frederiksen reproduces racist stereotypes when she, for example, declares her intention to eliminate the "*bad behaviour*" of second and third generation immigrant boys that makes (white) others feel unsafe in public.

So, while the ascension of these women into high office undeniably constitutes the breaking of the final glass ceiling (a giant leap for women), the mere presence of a female body in that office will only be a feminist victory to the extent that she undertakes feminist politics (a small step for feminists?). If she does not, for which "*women*" is her role then meaningful at all? Neither Helle Thorning-Schmidt, Mette Frederiksen, nor Kamala Harris (to my knowledge) openly identify as feminists. However, there are distinct differences in their rhetoric. In Denmark, gender equality (for white women) is taken for granted to such an extent that it almost becomes history-less, and to talk about inequality is perceived as embarrassingly passé (cf. the idea of a *postfeminist* context; Utoft, 2020). Harris' victory speech, by contrast, was ripe with feminist language of the "*generations of women, Black women, Asian, white, Latina, Native American women*" [1] who paved the way for that historic moment. Her "*while I may be the first woman in this office, I will not be the last*" abounds empowerment messages which sent chills down my spine. As a Danish feminist, I dream of the day when a person in power here publicly legitimizes (rather than snubs and ridicules) feminism in this way. However, feminist language is of course not enough. The Biden-Harris administration cannot afford for Kamala Harris to be only a symbol of progress. Having promoted racial justice as a central part of their political programme, the voters who ensured the Democratic victory will demand action. So, for now, I remain optimistically expectant.

I am in no way slighting the adverse impact of Kamala Harris' actions as Attorney General of California on especially the African-American population.[2] As a white, European outsider that would be only too easy. But I must believe in people's ability to evolve. To me, living a feminist life (Ahmed, 2017) is a process. We do our best, make mistakes, are called out and learn. But learning requires that we humbly put ourselves out there and at stake - in our research, in activism, in politics. As VP, Kamala Harris will soon assume the ultimate 'out there' with everyone watching. We will hold her accountable, as we hold ourselves, as feminists, accountable.

### ***EN-able the hidden voices***

***By Author Five***

*"I'm thinking about her and about the generations of women... Tonight, I*

*reflect on their struggle" - Kamala Harris*

2020, a foggy year with countless multiple crises that unearthed the deeply rooted gendered and racial inequalities exposing systemic fragility and hostility. The year George Floyd was killed by police brutality, destined to be the same year when Kamala Harris made history as US Vice President. The first woman not only to shatter the glass ceiling (Bass and Avolio, 1994), but also the first woman of colour to climb *over* the concrete wall (Smith and Nkomo, 2003) to the White House. I am not certain if I would feel the same amount of joy about Kamala's appointment, if it happened in any other year but this depressing year. However, I am certain that as a woman of colour, student immigrant, and a mother of a daughter, I sensed a desperately needed optimism and faith in tomorrow. Listening to Kamala's victory speech felt like a dim light of hope in a gloomy year engulfed with sorrow, pain, and utter despair. *Seeing* Kamala paving her way to a space that has been historically over-dominated by men certainly changed something within me.

*“We realize the importance of our voices only when we are silenced” -*

*Malala Yousafzai*

Visible representation matters, especially when you are at the margins of the society (hooks, 2014). Visible representation matters when you are positioned as an outsider by virtue of your gendered and racialized identities (Bhopal, 2018). In a recent speech, Kamala’s said “*see yourself in a way that others might not see you, simply because they’ve never seen it before*”, I feel the symbolic dimension of her representation as embodiment of voice visibility, to dare to dream, and to think the unthinkable. For me, it goes beyond the strategic political to the symbolic, not only as a symbol of woman in power but also a powerful woman symbol. I admired her vibrant and confident presence in the vice-presidential debate to the extent that I caught myself in front of the mirror practicing her “I’m speaking” while attempting to manage my facial impressions, my tone, and body language to reflect this toughness, confidence, assertiveness, traits that we, the feminine other, were prohibitively told, or ‘assumed’, not to possess.

*“Imperfect men have been empowered and permitted to run the world since the beginning of time. It’s time for imperfect women to grant themselves permission to join them.” - Abby Wambach*

With all the hope, I still cautiously observe, as do many others, how Kamala will move beyond the symbolic. Will she wield her positional power to bring about meaningful change in gender equality and racial justice, the longstanding items in the political agendas? Or will

her appointment be limited to the mere “first” barrier-breaker? Then I question, why do I ‘cautiously’ observe her actions? Is it my own high expectations, elevated hopes for success, or fear of failure? Do I ‘cautiously’ observe men political leaders’ actions the same way? Or am I unconsciously reinforcing taken for granted assumptions that women are ‘imperfect’ leaders who are deemed to fail? Am I subconsciously burdening women with ‘perfection’? Or contributing to the entrenched, scrutinizing, hostile environment against them? (Eagly and Karau, 2002) Then I ask myself, how many imperfect incompetent men were enabled to rule before ruining our world? Or are their failures normalized and naturalized?

*“I see myself as a foreigner in my community... My community doesn't consider me to be a real woman because they are unwilling to accept a woman who objects or defends her gender” Huda Al-Sharawy*

I cannot help myself but to take this event to the Middle East and question, would Kamala’s appointment travel across boundaries and open the door for a political, structural, cultural change? Would Arab leaders rethink and enable women’s political leadership? Or is it against the constitution for women to be Prime Ministers or Presidents in this region? It is shameful to see the land where women first ruled the world, repeatedly, with unadulterated power (Cooney, 2018) has not been led by women since ancient times. But how can women lead when they cannot even breathe under the masculinist patriarchal system restraining their agency (Moghadam, 2004; Tadros, 2016)? How can women’s social/political position flourish when they are suffocating under the male-guardianship system, considered as legal minors with no legal authority (Tønnessen, 2016)? Isn’t it the system’s responsibility to *enable* women to lead, specifically when women’s access to their own agency is denied? How can women access the public and political sphere when they do not have access to equal

legal rights in marriage, divorce, inheritance, children custody with legal limitations on their work (UNDP, 2018)? What legal and social reforms should be enacted to enable women's access to public and political spheres?

***Is “one of us” a new role model for women leaders and entrepreneurs?***

***By Author Six***

What can an entrepreneurship scholar bring to this conversation? Kamala Harris, the first woman and first woman of colour to be elected to such an important position in the United States political arena! What an achievement! Tears in our eyes, intensified heartbeats across the world! Indeed, Kamala Harris is a role model that will inspire women, in particular women of colour and younger generations of women in the US and around the world. As a female academic I want to believe that Kamala represents new hope in the fight for gender equality for 'other women'. The simple fact is that she is the new Vice President, and people around the world will listen to her and relate to her, as representation really matters!

In a masculinised, patriarchal world where women are othered, women's knowledge is undervalued, women's work is invisible, unappreciated, and seen as unproductive, we search for successful women to learn from and to emulate their paths to success. We are exposed to stories of successful men and women in politics, business, and public sector, and as educators we teach the next generation of leaders about how to reach such career aspirations. Despite the efforts, women continue to be underrepresented as leaders of nation states, CEOs and in other management roles (Cook & Glass, 2014; Dezsö, Ross, & Uribe, 2016; Kogut, Colomer, & Belinky, 2014), as advisory board members (Ding, Murray, & Stuart, 2013), in innovation

and number of patents filed (Ding, Murray, & Stuart, 2006), as well as in entrepreneurship (Tonoyan, Strohmeier, & Jennings, 2019; Rocha and Van Praag, 2020).

Entrepreneurship scholarship offers tremendous clarity on the conditions preventing women from becoming entrepreneurs: from not being able to mobilise entrepreneurship- relevant resources (Tonoyan et al., 2019), to stereotypes and social norms shaping gender- specific role expectations and existence of identity gaps between women's domestic and entrepreneurial responsibilities (Kossek, Su, & Wu, 2017; Thébaud, 2010) resulting in perceived misfit with role expectation (Kossek et al., 2017) and gendering of specific careers (Barbulescu & Bidwell, 2013; Sauermann, 2018).

To counteract these conditions, entrepreneurship research suggests that role models are influential for career socialization of women (Kossek et al., 2017). For entrepreneurial women, role modelling involves providing mentoring, knowledge, and inspiration (Rocha and Van Praag, 2020). Specifically, in the context of women from minority backgrounds, role models and mentors have a strong positive effect on the educational and occupational choices as they are able to motivate and unearth women's beliefs about their capabilities, and influence preferences for entrepreneurial career paths (Byrne et al., 2019; Kofoed & McGovney, 2019).

Whilst we want more women as leaders of enterprises, Nadin et al (2020) critically challenges the broader neoliberal context in which women in all career roles are positioned as central to solving all ills in the society. As we continue to celebrate the positive effect of having first woman and first woman of colour to be appointed as Vice President in the United States, we will be lured by media reproducing successful femininity narrative, whereby,

Kamala will be presented as a female version of a heroine – accomplished, hard-working and successful at work and in the home domain.

As the battle for gender equality continues and the need for more women in top ranks of organisations remains an uphill battle, the representations of women as “active and powerful” continue to be ideologically and stereotypically framed (Mavin et al., 2010). For future entrepreneurs, Kamala shines a light on what is possible, as her election to the White House means her engaging in institutional entrepreneurship and forging necessary alliances with people of influence. Her appointment brings relevance to entrepreneurship, and how much this activity will shape her actions in the office. She will be seen as a role model by a lot of marginalised women, and this is great! I can rejoice in the celebration of Kamala’s achievements with the hope that in becoming an institutional entrepreneur in the White House and beyond she will not turn against ‘the girls’ (Kanter, 2006), and she will be the one helping us all achieve our best.

*“... seek out mentors, because along the way, none of us, and myself included, has achieved success without people who invested in us and made us believe we could do anything and helped us along the way. It’s a sign of strength to seek out role models and mentors.” Kamala Harris*

***“My, that was direct!”: Using legitimization and signification to resist being silenced***

***By Author Seven***

As Kamala Harris was reclaiming her time from Susan Page, the moderator who had interrupted her, Mike Pence took the opportunity to interrupt both women. With hand up,

signalling him to stop, Kamala Harris said firmly to Mike Pence, “Mr. Vice President, I’m speaking. I’m speaking.”

I cheered. I laughed. I cried.

At the highest levels of leadership in my country, women must still fight to insert their voices to overcome the silencing of patriarchy. That moment in the debate caused me to reflect on my own experiences as a woman trying to find my voice as I navigated patriarchal structures.

My first career was in the military; I’ve written about my gendered experiences and what it felt like to be held to unsustainable body image norms (Author, 2009). In that work, I used Giddens’ (1979) concepts of legitimation and signification to examine the sexual assault scandals at my alma mater, the United States Air Force Academy. In this piece, I borrow those concepts for reflecting on voice as an American woman living in the UK. In short, legitimation rules are the norms that tell us how things are supposed to be while signification rules are the signs and symbols we use in communication. In interest of space, I will give one example of each to show how I have experienced, and resisted, patriarchal culture structures that might otherwise silence me.

After I moved to the UK, it quickly became clear that my style of communicating was just not seen as acceptable to many. A common refrain in meetings was (and still is!), “My, that was direct!”. I frequently use active voice to speak truth to power by claiming for myself and naming for others. By exclaiming that I am particularly direct, my (male) colleagues are, in effect, seeking to “teach me” the signification rules that said I should be softer and more feminine in the way that I communicated. However, a colleague once commented, “Oh, that’s just [Author]; she’s American.” In response, I have used the legitimation rule of what it



means to be an American to allow me to break the signification rule of how (women) academics are expected to behave.

On the other hand, I am fully aware that I use the signification of my name to my advantage in the British context. I have long known that my name is androgynous and have experienced the surprise when someone sees me for the first time. However, it was not until I moved to the UK that I realised the power of being perceived as a man in email communications. I can say, anecdotally, that I have noticed the difference in the way that I am treated before and after someone realises that I am a woman. As a result, I have not uploaded my picture into my Outlook profile, and I do not use my pronouns in my signature block. And, yes, as a feminist, I struggle with the implications of this.

In short, I use my name (predominately a man's name here in the UK) to give me a platform to assert voice in written communication (signification). I use my nation of origin to provide cover for my direct style of verbal communication (legitimation). These are some of my responses to the subtle and not so subtle ways that women are silenced for being too bold, too outspoken, too smart, too confident. As Kamala Harris resisted being silenced during the debate, she reminded me that our strategies to reclaim our voices are worthy of being spoken—and heard—as we strive toward creating systems and structures that recognise gender equality. My hope is that Harris's presence in the White House will help chip away at patriarchal calcification, so such resistance strategies are no longer necessary.

### ***Handbags, Moomins and the first woman as President of Finland***

***By Author Eight***

When Kamala Harris was elected vice president of the United States, I have to admit that I was somewhat surprised by all the excitement, the president would still be a white man of a

certain age. More importantly, perhaps, I became more aware that I had already experienced one ‘first’. Twenty years ago, in March 2000, Tarja Halonen became the first woman President of Finland, a post she held for two consecutive six-year terms until 2012. When elected, Tarja Halonen was Foreign Secretary, a social democrat, lawyer, former chair of *Seta – LGBTI Rights in Finland*, and a single mother from a working-class background.

At the time, having a woman president was both ground-breaking and glass ceiling shattering, but also mundane and ordinary. Things were as they should be. Finland is a nation where women have equal opportunities and we gained equal voting rights already in 1906, and a woman president just proved it, didn’t it?

While the Halonen presidency speaks about gender, it was also a story about class. To President Halonen, it was important to remain ordinary, hard-working, and part of the people. There is not much of an ivory tower for the political elite in Finland anyway, but you could see her walking the streets of Helsinki, having a coffee on the market square, swimming at the local pool. An ordinary life.

However, I want to write about her handbag as it appeared in public discourse. What did the Finnish cartoon character Moomin Mother and the first woman president Tarja Halonen have in common? According to Swedish media, a big handbag.

The handbag probably already appeared during Halonen’s time as Foreign Secretary, but it is in relation to her presidency I remember it. Halonen ‘always’ had a big handbag that she wore over her arm. On president Halonen’s first foreign visit, which traditionally always is to Sweden, Swedish media labelled the handbag as the handbag of cartoon figure Moomin

Mother. I imagine this was written as a kind and appreciative gesture, but this seemed to mark a change in how the media wrote about Halonen.

And that is where it gets interesting. The Moomin characters appear in comics and novels written and drawn by the Finnish author and artist Tove Jansson. Tove Jansson wrote in Swedish and was herself part of the Swedish speaking cultural elite of Finland. In the novels, Moomin Mother is a calm and kind woman and she is dressed in a red and white striped apron and she has a big black handbag, which holds important items that can be needed in times of crises.

President Halonen's handbags came in different sizes and colours over the years but from then on, they were always 'wrong'. Her big handbags were too big to be feminine, too ordinary to be fashionable and I suspect they were not really talking about the handbag.

This was part of the immediate transformation from the person Tarja Halonen to the institution and the symbol of the presidency.

For twelve years, we followed the struggles between the institution and the person while our president did recognise the symbolic value that she embodied.

For twelve years we had a woman president. A woman who was both ordinary and extraordinary. In her own way, Tarja Halonen irreversibly shaped the mould of the presidency. A generation of children grew up with a different image of the presidency, a version of the Finnish dream where education and hard work make it possible for anyone to become president.

Representation matters, symbols matter. It matters that Kamala Harris is vice president. But symbols matter even more within the community and the society from which they emerge. From a Finnish perspective, the United States is not necessarily where we turn for inspiration on issues of gender equality and human rights, particularly as we have already had our first woman president. Tarja Halonen as president was important and it paved the way for our current coalition government where all five parties are headed by women. But unfortunately, it did not dramatically change our country and it will take time before we have people of colour in prominent positions. But it was an important step in the right direction, although I suspect Tarja Halonen the person did not much enjoy becoming Tarja Halonen the symbol, with or without a handbag.

### *A note towards collective responsibility*

*By Author Nine*

It is summer school holidays, in the days following a hard year and an unusual Christmas. The New Year brings hope even as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to spread, widening pre-existing inequalities. As I reflect on Kamala Harris 'breaking the mould', my body feels dislocated, unable to travel to visit family in the UK. Overwhelmed by the state of global events I watch the movie *Suffragette* (2015), a blockbuster account of the women's suffrage movement in the UK. The scale and depth of women's lack of rights angers me and forces me to think through my situatedness in terms of geography, education, as well as gendered, raced, and classed experiences. The film depicts the struggles between working- and middle-class women in mobilising resistance to achieve rights for women and the responsibility of moving forward despite the inherent struggles between intersectional differences. I am

reminded of the collective power of women and the need to organize as women in history did to pave the way for feminists today.

Enloe's observations (2019; see also Prasad and Zulfiqar, 2020) of the ways in which patriarchy works to fragment women's collective organising by introducing conflict between women keeps whispering to me. Solidarity through difference can become possible especially when progress becomes visible. Feminists today are responsible for remembering women, especially those who have been invisible. I grew up in a working-class Welsh coal mining village and was the first person in my extended family to go to university. I became interested in women's equality witnessing first-hand the structural barriers women experienced. It begs me to ask: which women are seen and heard?

Barrier-breaking Kamala Harris has a history of firsts, now the first woman to become Vice President elect of the USA. Harris has negotiated gendered leadership and power structures, with expertise albeit against predictable patterns of sexism and racism. Writing about Harris makes me pause because a commentary on Harris will situate me in relation to her; subject positions will be attributed to us both. I am mindful to offer a pragmatic note on an extraordinary, exceptional woman far removed from the life I have lived. Harris' success is not entirely unpredictable. She was born into a high caste and middle-class family (Rani, 2020) in the USA and this afforded privilege including education. Harris herself recalls her mother raising and readying her as Black (Rani, 2020) and the Democratic party has benefited from her difference to President-elect Joe Biden. Harris seems to have negotiated the boundaries between campaigning for equality most especially women and race rights whilst maintaining her conservative values (Umi, 2020). Nevertheless, Harris represents progress for women of colour, a sign that women can reach the highest positions of political leadership if they are afforded class privilege. Harris has also benefited from the grassroots

collective organising of other women of colour including Stacey Abrams. Harris is an exemplary political leader and woman of color.

Harris enters the White House at a time when global eyes are watching and waiting for changed leadership. Yet, Harris carries a burden from being cast as an extraordinary woman, the world waiting for her to be able to achieve where others have failed (See also Pullen and Vachhani, 2020). This recognition of women, for themselves and other women, is central to feminism in the future, a feminism that continues to struggle across intersectional differences. Let us recognise Harris' value and achievements, without casting her on a pedestal. Let us also ask whether the future might include a capacity for us to be inclusive of focusing on individual women as well fighting for the structural changes required for all women to have the opportunities that remain restricted to the few.

### ***Reflecting on women in power, and reclaiming women's agency in the post-Cambridge Analytica era***

***By Author Ten***

Data scandals- the abuse, manipulation, and mis-use of data on and from social media and other platforms is a contemporary form of social, political, and psychological warfare on society, which skews and shapes political outcomes around the world. Cambridge Analytica, the now defunct data analytics firm which harvested the Facebook data of over 50 million users (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018) contributed directly to the election of Trump, and the Brexit outcome (Wylie, 2020).

The election of Kamala Harris as vice president-elect of the United States is a triumph not only for women around the world, but also for the relationship between data harvesting, data abuse, and election outcomes. Not only before the election were there racist and sexist smear

campaigns and attacks on Kamala Harris (Tumulty, Woodsome, Peçanha, 2020) but a misogynistic Facebook post about Harris went globally viral. I remember scrolling and trawling the internet at home, wondering whether this alone would be enough bait for data hacking and the creation and spread of further fake news, and politically motivated disinformation campaigns (Chen, 2015). Whilst this did happen to an extent in that there were numerous Facebook, and right-wing blogs spreading fake news, what was clear was that in the post-Cambridge Analytica era, without the further involvement of data manipulation and misinformation spread, that a triumphant outcome prevailed for Kamala Harris.

In the past months, as my work in the neo-liberal academy has moved largely online, I often think about the long-term data and privacy implications of this; the platforms with which we have had little alternative but to actively engage with and use, our ideas and intellectual property being in a domain around which there are still many legislative grey areas, and in turn implications for critical voice. I have however felt hope and a newfound comfort in that socially-just election outcomes can and indeed do still happen and may be more likely when there is less gendered and racialized data manipulation occurring at the macro global scale. The election of Kamala Harris has personified this for me, and serves as a feminist symbol of the post-Cambridge Analytica era, and a form of regaining feminist agency in the context of data manipulation and manipulation of social media metadata (Acker, 2018). I am inherently fascinated and at the same time frightened by the power that technology and also user data shapes and reproduces social inequalities and feminist politics of knowledge, particularly given that the dominant group in data science are men. The election on Kamala Harris also serves as an important starting point for thinking about the relationship between election outcomes, data science and intersectional feminist thought (D'Iganzio and Klein, 2020) and the role that data feminism may play in future feminist power in an increasingly data and metadata driven world.

When we think of the intersectional feminist struggle and reclaiming women's agency, we must now also think about how big data increases inequality and threatens democracy (O'Neil, 2016). The US' first Black and South Asian vice president-elect brings hope, and commitment to truth in the White House. Despite Harris having been subjected to around four times more misinformation than the white men who have campaigned for the job in the last four years (Marketwatch, 2020), Harris has defied, and triumphed over the weapons of math destruction, and social media manipulation.

***The politics of language, the language of politics***

***By Author Eleven***

*'...man is by nature a political animal...endowed with the gift of speech...'*

*Aristotle, Politics I, 2, Jowett translation, 1885)*

Kamala Harris as the United States' vice president-elect represents many indelible and celebratory firsts – the first Black and South Asian female in the White House; building on a long journey of firsts (for example, she was the first Black woman to be elected as California's attorney general) (Tensley & Wright, 2020). In a time of 'fake news', unethical data mining and manipulation and increasing popularity of right-wing rhetoric (and subsequently policy), and in a year of unprecedented global turmoil, Kamala's win has rightly so been under-written by a language of hope and resilience. She has been heralded as a feminist icon and an ambitious immigrant helping to rebalance systemic gender and racial injustices and civil rights' abuses (Lerer & Ember, 2020).



However, Kamala Harris has also displayed ideological ambivalence on a range of issues at the heart of the struggles of women, immigrants and people of colour. For instance, in 2011 Harris implemented legislation on truancy (i.e., a child missing school) in California which had a disproportionately negative impact on single parent households, the poor, families of colour and homeless mothers; a policy which was repackaged during the run up to her presidential campaign to project her as a progressive prosecutor intent on changing the system (Redden, 2019). Furthermore, as the district attorney she opposed reform of the three-strike law (whereby life sentences can be meted out to repeat offenders even for minor offenses) (Freedberg, 2004), promised to enforce capital punishment and resisted release of prisoners despite prison overcrowding (Lopez, 2020) against the backdrop of California incarcerating ten times more African Americans as compared to white people (Harris et al, 2019).

Looking at Kamala Harris and her win from the specific perspective of language offers some interesting reflections. The origins of language can be traced back to a predominantly political agenda whereby the human ‘gift of speech’ helped build coalitions, identify potential allies and express disagreement (Joseph, 2006; Dunbar, 1996). In today’s world this intrinsically political nature of language highlights an additional duality. On the one hand, language governs interpersonal relations, impacts the (formal and informal) distribution of power, and informs identity narratives and therefore, *‘the politics of language’* can wield considerable influence within society at large. On the other hand, we have specific patterns of language and rhetoric within the world of politics – and currently *‘the language of politics’* is increasingly divisive, discriminatory and dehumanizing (Amnesty International Human Rights Report 2016/17), deployed by many politicians such as President Donald Trump (US), Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage (UK), President Duterte (Philippines), President Erdogan

(Turkey), Prime Minister Orban (Hungary) and so on to further their political agendas (BBC, 2017).

Therefore, from this *'language of politics'* perspective Kamala Harris' election hopefully heralds a shift to more inclusive language in the arena of politics, underpinned by her championing of key issues such as the right to abortion for women and the right for medical care for all. However, applying the more general *'politics of language'* perspective turns the scrutiny inwards and highlights our very human tendency as minorities, as females, as the disenfranchised and under-represented members of a decidedly androcentric society to embrace the positive narrative around her and in the process become blind to her ideological ambivalence regarding legislative reform and public policy. As a Pakistani I grew up with a female Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, a much loved and key political player. However, despite Pakistan being a decidedly patriarchal society Bhutto's gender was surprisingly irrelevant within both positive and negative narratives on her political leadership. Therefore, with Kamala Harris' historic win I hope that going forward we focus on her policy initiatives, political leadership, and advocacy on issues of injustice and inequality rather than her gender and ethnicity.

### ***Moving beyond the Election of Kamala Harris: What Challenges do we still Face?***

***By Author Twelve***

Historically, women have been underrepresented in politics across the globe. Women, especially women of color, face multiple barriers when seeking election, such as party nomination, media biases, online harassments, and voter prejudice (Haraldsson and Wangnerud 2019; Krook and Sanin 2019; Liu 2019), Kamala Harris' victory signals that a second-generation migrant woman of color can overcome these challenges.

As women have always been less confident about pursuing a political career (Piscopo and Kenny 2020), Harris has given many girls, especially girls of color hope – the hope that they, too, can play in a game dominated by white men. As the world perceives her victory as a step towards gender and racial equality; is her victory merely symbolic? When examining the current state of white masculinity and supremacy development in the U.S., it would be far from the truth to call the election of Harris a milestone. Moreover, it would be dangerous to see the election of Harris as a win over misogyny because patriarchy is still alive and vibrant in our daily lives.

As a migrant woman of color living and working in the U.K., perhaps my perception of Harris' election is somewhat more bleak than others because I am well aware that an individual success can mean a lot but also very little at the same time. When Harris was elected, the Black Lives Matter movement was (and still is) at the backdrop where Black people experienced brutal police killings. The pandemic has fuelled anti-Asian xenophobia and racism worldwide as East Asians have also been the scapegoats for COVID-19. Many sectors are experiencing an economic turmoil while some corporations, such as Amazon and UberEats, benefit from vulnerable people's participation in the gig economy.

As much as we may want to celebrate Harris' victory, these fundamental problems of race and gender cannot be ignored. These collective experiences of hatred, discrimination, and prejudice based on race will also not disappear because one individual woman of color was elected. Some people wonder if Biden has used Harris as a token to draw support from the racial minorities. We will never know for sure as all politicians make strategic calculations. Nonetheless, we need to hold both Biden and Harris accountable for their promises, such as

racial equality, police reform, reduction in gender pay gap, universal healthcare, protection of women's reproductive rights, and climate change. Although these issues affect everyone, they particularly shape the lives of the marginalized in the U.S.A. As these inequalities and injustices continue to exist, we cannot say that we live in a post-feminist/post-racist society.

How can we move forward and leverage Harris' election? We need to see these struggles as a product of systematic racism and sexism and more importantly, consider these struggles intersectional. A failure to acknowledge racism is a failure to make a change (Bhopal, 2018). It is not enough to claim that Black lives matter and that we need to stop Asian hate unless institutions instigate changes themselves. How can we dismantle the institution? Political parties need to be more diverse and more inclusive, which they can start by actively recruiting women of color. Only when women of color occupy powerful positions across all levels of governance can their political presence be normalized. Politicians as well as political entities need to be held accountable for their practices. They need to take concrete actions, such as supporting equality bills, to demonstrate their willingness to systematically improve the lives of racial minorities.

As Americans (and the world) feel reenergized by Harris' win, we need not forget that long journey is still ahead of us. We must not let the election of a woman of color mask the lack of progressive agenda. Thinking that equality and justice have been achieved because of one win would only deter us from paying attention to the institutional issues that significantly influence the lives of the marginalized who experience multiple forms of oppressions. It would also deter us from achieving a truly inclusive and equal society.

Our polyphony ends here ....

**Outro-Solo**

***By Author Five***

This project brought back the 10-year-old girl who only found her voice and negotiated her agency within and through writing. In an almost faded memory from my eighth grade, our English teacher asked us to think about a writing project to work on. I had an idea of creating a monthly school magazine, using art, coloured papers and cardboards, to write about school news (e.g., trips, events), Egypt's top headlines (which we cut and pasted from newspapers) as well as writing short stories. My teacher was so excited about the idea, she encouraged me to do it. I did not wish to work alone, especially since I was newly transferred to this school and spent most of the time alone; I wanted to use this project to connect with others. I started to search for others in my class who would be interested to share this writing space with me so we could think, share, learn, grow, and speak out loud together. Interestingly, but unsurprisingly, all the boys in my class refused to join this project. They perceived this 'kind' of collaboration to be less masculine; they explicitly said: "this is only for girls". At this point, I did not think much about the meaning of "this is only for girls". I moved on with the search. A few weeks later, five girls joined the magazine team. All we cared about was to *show* how this "only for girls" space could be bright, inclusive, colourful, collaborative, egalitarian, and most importantly, how we--girls—used this magazine as a space to imagine, dream, aspire and to raise each other voices so that we are heard. This project became home, a place to belong. Across different times and spaces, the same 10-year-old girl, who is now a woman, wanted to bring back this memory of this home after 25 years.

As many others, I closely followed the US elections in November 2020, from Newcastle, UK. I still remember one day before counting the electoral votes started. I was having my PhD supervision meeting when I said that although I am not American, I was worried, and I pessimistically predicted that Trump would 'ensure' he won the election simply because he would not let go of the seat of power easily. Then, a few days later, the US elections map

started getting more blue than red, and Biden-Harris's historic win was announced. When I listened to Kamala Harris' victory speech, especially when she talked about women's struggle, it sparked this project idea. It brought back the memory of the 10-year-old girl who was longing for connecting, to find and share a writing space with others, a space to call home. The only difference is that my early gender socialisation informed my conscious choice this time to have this "only for girls" space. I felt an urging need to write collectively with women to document and celebrate other women. To write for hope and about hope; the kind of hope that enables imagination, dreams, visualisation, seeing, believing, and feeling alive; breathing. It was this desperate feeling of hope in finding home that pushed me to start this project.

I was certain that there are other women in this world who would share similar feelings. These "other women" made me question: is Kamala Harris's win an American woman win? Is Kamala Harris's win, a win for women of colour? Is Kamala Harris's win a South Asian woman win? OR, is Kamala Harris's win, a win for WOMAN? This is not to assume that we are a coherent or homogenous category, but shouldn't we first work through our intersectional differences to build alliances with one another as women before we ask men to be our allies? Then I wondered, how can we go beyond this intersectional dividedness, as women, *together*? And I started to imagine how this *togetherness* of women can subvert systematic patriarchal patterns that flourish on binarism; Western – non-Western, Black – white, cis - trans? These questions informed who to invite to this project. My hope was to acknowledge and reflect that we are in plural; yet, however, with our feminist awareness and solidarity, we can transcend these differences and unite around our common passion for social change.

Stemming from my thoughts above, I started to contact women in my network to invite them to the project. There were a few of whom I knew in person and the majority, I knew only

through their texts. My imposter voice initially made me hesitant, “Of course they will say NO”, my wise voice replied, “even if they said no, I would try”. Interestingly, and surprisingly, they said YES! Every enthusiastic excited “yes” I received encouraged me to invite more, and reassured me that there are other women, regardless of their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, longing for the same space. This project started with addressing and documenting Kamala Harris’s historic win, but it went far beyond this. It was a journey that started with hope in a hope in finding a space that we can all call home. These amazing women, for whom I read and from whom I learn, are the hope and home.

With these extracts from *The Hill We Climb* for Amanda Gorman, I end my reflection.

*We close the divide because we know to put our future first,*

*we must first put our differences aside.*

*We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.*

*That even as we tired, we tried.*

*That we’ll forever be tied together, victorious.*

*Not because we will never again know defeat,*

*but because we will never again sow division.*

*We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover.*

*The new dawn balloons as we free it.*

*For there is always light, if only we’re brave enough to see it.*

*If only we’re brave enough to be it.*

**Coda**

In Laurel Ricardson's words: "How do the specific circumstances in which we write affect what we write? ... how do contexts affect our writing?" (1997, pp. 1 & 5). As we reflect on Kamala Harris's appointment in this specific time and space, we view this historical moment through our own intersectionality which mirrors our circumstances and contexts (Abdellatif, 2020). Our intersectional differences, temporalities and situatedness shapes how we make sense, see, interact, and speak with ourselves and others while constructing our texts that are "responsive to the moment and retrospective and anticipatory" (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012). Making sense of Kamala Harris breaking the mould, we offer an archive of temporal intersectionalities through re/writing. Our (dis)embodied texts, which house our spoken and silent, visible and invisible intersectional differences, have weaved struggles and contested dialogue of writing otherness.

In this contested space of polyphonic intersectional voices, we recognise glimpses of our potential complicity in heroicising Kamala Harris. For many of us, she is a vessel of hope, embodying our aspirations for women, people of colour, America, and even the world. Like pennies cast into a well, the weight of our individual wishes is slight; collectively, though, the projected burden of our hopes may be too great for any one individual to bear<sup>1</sup>. Herein lies the power of our polyphony. As Biden began his inaugural address, he called for hope and unity. Answering that call, we organised with hope for unity across our differences. In re/writing polyphonically, we document and celebrate change, and underscore possibilities for change, without claiming to be unified or homogenous.

Our multi-layered polyphonic texts re/write otherness and expand alterethnography not only as a way of doing research for change but also to celebrate, participate and mobilise change. This text is a micro-social movement in which its authors are united without seeking

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<sup>1</sup> We thank the anonymous reviewer who raised our consciousness to the implications of the tension created between the individual and collective.



uniformity and mobilised our identities without being identical (Chun, Lipsitz, & Shin, 2013), it is our gathering that signifies “persistence and resistance” (Butler, 2015, p.23). Writing has liberated our feminisms, through collectively organising our texts in history as *women* writing about *other women*. Now, we invite you to join us and vocalise the sound of change. Join our micro-revolution to raise your own voice with our voices, so that these voices vibrate louder and are heard. #WeWomenWriteTogether #WWWT

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[1] Full transcript of Kamala Harris' victory speech found here:

<https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/news/read-full-transcript-kamala-harriss-022600804.html>

[2] See articles: Thabi Myeni, 13 Sep 2020:

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