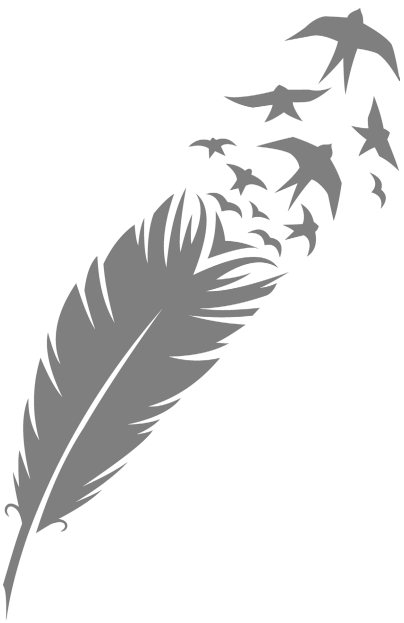
MORE THAN READY



MORE THAN READY

Be Strong and Be You, and Other Lessons for Women of Color on the Rise

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Gracias, Katty and Eduardo,
for making it all possible.

Thank you, Amit,
for bringing me joy every day.

Tina and Meera,
this is for you, with love.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I OWE A GREAT DEAL TO THE SEVEN WOMEN WHO GENEROUSLY shared their stories and insights with me as I was preparing this book. I conducted the interviews in person or by phone, and with their permission, I took detailed notes and used a taping service to record our conversations. This made it possible for me to include extensive excerpts and share the women's words with you as I heard them.

While writing this book, I gave a lot of thought to the choice of words that I used to describe the community that I am a part of. Some prefer to call ourselves "Hispanic," which refers to our ancestry in the Spanish-speaking world. Others prefer "Latino," which refers to our geographic origins in Latin America. Neither fully captures who we are, so for decades I have used both terms interchangeably, which is what I ultimately chose to do in this book.

This decision does not come without complications. Using "Latino" is problematic in particular because Spanish is a gendered language; for years, I have used "Latino" when I am referring to a man, "Latina," when I mean a woman, and "Latino/a" when

it could be one or the other. For the purposes of this book, I have traded the awkward "Latino/a" for the recently invented "Latinx," which describes the community in a gender-neutral way.

I am aware that this is a controversial choice. People who use "Latinx" make the case that we should adapt our language to be as inclusive as we can, making room for men, women, and people who don't conform to traditional ideas of gender. They point out that language has the power both to reflect the ways in which the world is changing and to pave the way for that change. Others argue that "Latinx" is a word invented outside of our community in an unwelcome attempt to change a language that many of us have fought to preserve. They rightly point out that "Latinx" is a term that most of the community wouldn't recognize and may not accept.

I am respectful of and sympathetic to both arguments, and I wrestled with the decision. I firmly believe in the power of language enough to have spent a lifetime insisting that we use it in a way that opens doors—and minds—to women. In the end, I concluded that the people in my family and community who don't conform to either gender deserve the same. I found using a new and unfamiliar word uncomfortable at first, and you might, too. We'll adjust. That's the point.

INTRODUCTION

SONIA SOTOMAYOR. ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN. MAE CAROL Jemison. Carole Moseley-Braun. Condoleeza Rice. Deb Haaland. Sharice Davids. Pramila Jayapal. Geisha Williams. Urusla Burns.

These women of color share something remarkable. They are all "firsts": the first Latina Supreme Court justice (Sotomayor) and congresswoman (Ros-Lehtinen); the first African American female astronaut (Jemison), senator (Moseley-Braun), and secretary of state (Rice); the first Native American and South Asian American women elected to Congress (Halland, Davids, Jayapal); and the first Latina (Williams) and Black (Burns) women to lead Fortune 500 companies. The other thing they all have in common is that they served or are serving in our lifetimes. We watch them as they make their way and write their own histories. Each of them is doing it without a script, with no guide to lead the way and little in the way of precedents.

I have witnessed many such firsts. I knew the late Congresswoman Patsy Mink, a Japanese American from Hawaii who was the first woman of color ever elected to the United States Congress, and I remember when the late Shirley Chisholm, the first

African American congresswoman, ran for president. I am one of few Latinas who have ever served as an assistant to the president of the United States, and the first to lead the White House Domestic Policy Council, where I served in the West Wing under President Obama. My predecessor, the wonderful Melody Barnes, was the first African American woman in the same role. As women of color, we are among a generation accomplishing firsts—whether the first in our families to attend college, enter a traditional workplace, or embark on a nontraditional path. We have forged new roads, often without role models of our own, because we had no other choice. There was nobody that looked like us or who grew up like us taking on these roles before we did. Our stories have largely not been written because they are still unfolding.

Just as we are often firsts, it's not unusual for us also to be "onlies": the only woman in the room; the only person of color; and the only one bringing our particular set of experiences and expertise to our workplaces, classrooms, and teams—the various circles in which we conduct our lives. Sometimes being a first or an only means that we doubt ourselves. We wonder whether we really belong in these spaces and whether what we bring to them is enough. The moment we open our mouths, we may feel that we are not only speaking for ourselves but may be understood to be speaking for everyone like us. That's a lot of weight to carry. It can feel like a lot of responsibility.

I know this because I hear it all the time. It happens whenever I'm speaking in public, recounting my experiences as a woman of color who has spent a life in public service. When I give a speech to a group of young professionals or students, or lead a training for people in mid-career, we have the public part of the conversation, and then quietly, when the speech is over, I hear from you. You're the young African American woman who comes up to me while people are clearing out, takes my hand, and says, "Thank

you for raising what it's like to be the only woman of color in the room. I'm that person all the time, and you named what I feel." You're the Asian American woman who says, "I'm glad you reminded the crowd that we're not all foreigners. I'm from Ohio, and I'm tired of people thinking I'm not an American." You're the Latina law student who sends me an email asking, "Why can't we find a prominent Latina to come and speak to our group? Why are there so few to choose from?" You're the Native American teacher who pulls me aside and whispers, "You included us in what you said. Nobody ever does that."

Your questions and observations are what gave me the courage to begin to write this book. You made me believe that I might have something useful and maybe even inspirational to offer, that maybe by writing a book I could engage with a lot more women beginning their own journeys and creating their own paths through a world they will change just by virtue of their presence. The world won't make it easy—there will be obstacles—but sharing what I have learned might help reduce obstacles of our own making. Maybe you won't have to learn the same lessons I learned the hard way.

Whether you are just starting your journey from home or from college into the bigger world, a few years into a job you're not sure you want to make your career, or in a career and wondering what your next steps might be, this book is for you. If you occasionally hear a voice inside your head or out in the world that questions what you have to offer or sows seeds of doubt, this is your book. If you sometimes feel that you're the only one who has days when you wonder whether you're in the right place or equipped to do what's in front of you, you will find in these pages that you're not alone.

I offer you insights and advice from a career in which I have often been a first or an only in the room, and from my experience balancing that career with my life as wife, mother, sibling,

daughter, and friend. There are insights and advice that stem from my successes, but especially from my mistakes, anxieties, and missteps; the things I'm proud to have accomplished; and the things I wished I'd known how to do differently. You will make your own mistakes, too, but perhaps these insights will help you discern the lessons they offer, shake them off, and forge your own path forward.

Along my path, I have had the extraordinary privilege of coming to know some amazing women of color who have inspired me along the way. I include the results of candid conversations with some of them here. They include lawyers, educators, a public health professional, activists, nonprofit executives, and a congresswoman. These women were generous with their stories, triumphs, heartbreak, and wisdom. Sometimes their experiences provided lessons like mine and sometimes they taught me a thing or two. I am grateful that I can now pass on their insights to you, along with my own.

In this book I try to be as honest as I can about what I have experienced and overcome as a Latina in arenas dominated by white men. I share stories about first starting out and what influenced my decisions at the various points when I changed direction. I describe the times I doubted that I was up to the job or feared having to say the difficult thing when I was the only Latina in the room and I knew others wouldn't understand. I offer my own account, and accounts from the other women of color I spoke with for this book, about how we managed to get through those times when we doubted ourselves and the tactics we use to face our fears. I describe what I've learned about toughness and kindness; surviving setbacks; and balancing work, family, and life in general.

Weaving together stories from my decades of work in the Latinx civil rights movement and the eight years I spent on the

senior team of the Obama White House, this book draws lessons from some of the challenges, large and small, that are part of my story and yet not at all unique to me. I have been the short woman literally elbowing her way into a circle of tall, male colleagues; the target of criticism from within my own community; and the midwestern Latina patiently explaining my community to the senator who complimented my English. I have discovered that other women were watching out for me while I wasn't looking, and I have learned how to pay it forward. I have raised two biracial daughters who add their own voices to the story, highlighting both how far we have come and how much further we have to go.

I'm guessing that you might be like me. I wasn't always sure of myself. Many times, I hesitated to put myself forward, wondering whether I would get it right. I worried about making mistakes and compensated by trying to look the part, reaching for perfection, doing the work, and being ultra-prepared. I have heard that same whisper in my ear that you likely have heard, the voice that tries to convince me that my experience isn't particularly valuable, that maybe having my voice in the room doesn't really matter, and that maybe I don't really belong there.

This book is about helping you hear a different voice—your own, strong voice—and to remind you that what you bring into any room is valuable. We can and must be seen and heard. For too long, decisions that affect every aspect of our lives have been made by others who often don't understand us or what we know about the world. It's time to step up. The world needs what we bring.

We are more than ready.

No matter what your profession, vocation, or field of endeavor, if you are a woman of color looking to blaze your own trail and forge your own firsts, and if you are wondering whether

your life and experiences matter or whether what you bring with you as you begin your journey is enough, you are not alone. May you find good company in this book, and the tools to help you make your way while celebrating—and never compromising—who you are.

Chapter 1

STARTING OUT

IF THERE IS SUCH A THING AS A "TYPICAL" LATINA, I AM NOT IT. Most of us live west of the Mississippi River; I was born in Michigan. Most US Hispanics have roots in the southwestern United States, Mexico, or the Caribbean; my family is from Bolivia, right smack in the middle of South America. People of Hispanic origin don't even come close to looking alike because we have roots in the Americas, Africa, and Europe, but we are understood in the US to be brown. I am a product of that history, but you wouldn't necessarily know that to look at me. Like many Latinx people, I have ancestors who were indigenous Americans, but I look more like my ancestors who came to Latin America from Europe, some of them centuries ago and some as recently as my maternal grandfather, who traveled to Bolivia from Spain in the early twentieth century. The ñ in my name is a marker of who I am. I have spent a lifetime explaining it, insisting on it, and teaching people how to type it. I have given up on teaching people how to pronounce Muñoz (they seem to prefer MOON-yohz. It's moon-YOHZ).

You, too, are a product of your history, whether you know much about that history or not. It shapes who you are in overt ways that the rest of us can see and in subtler ways below the surface. I consider myself lucky that I know something about my family's roots. Not everyone can say the same. And some of the history of how each of us got here—to this exact moment in the precise place where you are sitting with this book—is glorious and some of it is painful.

Those of us with immigrant heritage often carry echoes of the choices that led our families to leave their homes and strike out for a new place. So many of us descend from people who didn't leave their homes to come to America by choice at all—they were taken by force. Still others descend from people for whom America was home, and they were removed from their lands by force. We all still live with the legacy of that brutal history, especially those who are its direct descendants. Pretty much by definition, because we are women of color, we are at most only a few generations removed from people who showed extraordinary resilience and strength and who endured what seems unendurable. Our ancestors were survivors and strivers, generation after generation. That's how we got here. We are their legacy.

Dr. Maya Angelou, the poet, novelist, and all-around wise woman, once told an interviewer from *Huffington Post Black Voices* that you have no way of knowing where you're going if you don't know where you've been. "The more you know of your history," she said, "the more liberated you are." I think it matters to have a sense of where you come from, even if you don't have a lot of specific information about your forebears. We know we are the products of certain forces of history, even if we can't name many of our ancestors. And, of course, all of us bring our own personal history to every room we're in. We may be the products of a set of historical trends, or descendants of some major diaspora, or not, but each of us is also someone from a family,

neighborhood, and community. Our identity is the result of a lot of forces, but it is also uniquely our own. We bring all of it with us wherever we go.

I think of this identity as a major source of strength and a foundation from which to grow. In the moments when I am most challenged, I'm not sure if I'm succeeding, and I don't know what kind of person people are seeing when they look at me, I am conscious of my ability to reach back and know who I am in some kind of deep way. I can see the person my family and friends see when I walk into a room. Whatever your circumstances, you are the product of a great chain of people, history, and forces that led to this moment and to you. It's worth taking time to reflect on it and build it into your arsenal of things to draw on when you need sources of courage.

That is not to say that I always fully comprehended who I am. All of us go through a journey to understand ourselves and what we bring to the world, particularly when we're young adults. My own understanding of myself as a Latina has developed in stages, owing largely to the fact that I grew up in a place where there weren't many of us.

My parents came to Michigan as newlyweds in 1950. We were joined in the Detroit area by a collection of aunts, uncles, and cousins, which is how the United States became home to my family. Family was our major social circle; my school-age sleepovers were exclusively with my cousins—sleepovers with anyone else were kind of unthinkable—and they were made magical by my mother's exotic stories about growing up in the eastern part of Bolivia, which is in the Amazon basin. There were some terrific stories involving snakes and caimans, but my favorites were the tales of the way my grandmother and aunts seemed able to sense when their loved ones were in danger, even from miles away. The stories were spectacular, full of menacing jungles and lurking jaguars. But the moral of the story was always connection: we

are connected to one another no matter where we are, because we are family.

My siblings and I grew up bilingual, but like most kids in immigrant families, the Spanish began to fade as we got older and used it less. I have a distinct memory of the day I arrived at kindergarten and discovered that none of the other kids spoke Spanish. It was a startling revelation to me. Wanting to fit in, I switched to English with lightning speed. We understood ourselves as Americans—Michiganders and Midwesterners. We also understood ourselves as Bolivians—we often described ourselves as Spanish because nobody had ever heard of Bolivia and because language was a main marker for who we were, along with the exotic foods that we occasionally brought in our lunches (it's quite possible that the only empanadas in all of Detroit in that era were produced in our kitchen).

Michigan didn't offer much in the way of a Hispanic community. This was the 1980s, and there weren't many of us in the Detroit area. I don't need to use both hands to count the number of Latinx students and faculty I got to know during my four years at the University of Michigan. So, when I got to graduate school at the University of California at Berkeley, the diversity blew my mind. There were immigrants from Mexico and Central America, along with Mexican Americans whose history in the country went back generations. Suddenly, this thing that had felt so exotic and unique in Michigan—the ñ, the language, and the culture—was everywhere, even in the names of the places and the streets. Suddenly there were things that I didn't have to explain about myself because people *knew*. It was exhilarating.

I don't want to overstate it; Hispanic American culture is a very diverse and complicated thing. Bolivia is far from the places where most Latinx people have roots—the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America, or the Southwestern US—and there is a great deal that is different about the cultures, some of it trivial (a *torta*

is a sandwich for a Mexican and a cake for me, as I learned to my chagrin the first time I ordered one) and some of it profound. Nevertheless, what I found during those years was a sense of community with other people who were products of the same historical phenomena: the impact of the Spanish colonizers of the Americas and the consequences of their interactions with both the indigenous people they encountered there and the people they kidnapped from Africa and enslaved there.

The diversity of people who spring from that experience is breathtaking. And for a variety of reasons, a lot of us have roots in the United States—in some cases, roots that go back 500 years. Hispanic America may not be a monolithic thing, but we are a thing. I discovered the vastness and beauty of the US Latinx community, that I belonged to it and it belonged to me, when I lived in California. And the excitement I felt in discovering where I belonged also began to reveal to me the kind of work I wanted to do in my life beyond Berkeley.

Find What Is Yours to Do

I am fortunate in that my life and work often put me in the path of young people of color, particularly women, in forums that give them a chance to tell me what's on their minds and ask for guidance. The questions I get the most often fall into two categories.

The first is about what kinds of credentials and experience I think are the right ones to forge a particular career path, especially for people who are interested in some kind of public service and some way of making a difference. People want to know what I think should go on their resumes.

The second kind of question is broader. I get asked whether I believe change is possible and whether I think the people I am

sitting with can be a part of that change, given the distressing state of the world right now.

For me, the same answer applies to both kinds of questions. Whether you do it through your job or through some other aspect of your life, you already possess the power to make a difference in the world. And the world needs you! It is full of challenges to be met and problems in need of the right people to apply themselves to find solutions. There are as many ways to go about making a difference as there are people. Your job is to figure out what is yours to do.

To me, this job is more important than the credentials on your resume or the grades you got in school. I would never talk someone out of going to college, though I will say that some of the smartest people I have ever known did not have college degrees, starting with my mother. I have talked more than one person out of going to law school, though I think a career in law is an excellent way to make a difference. These people were asking whether that credential on their resume might propel them into the right job. The trouble was that they didn't want to be lawyers. There is no single formula for success, and there are infinite pathways to having an impact on the world, whether you do it as a career or as a passion outside of your work life. The key is knowing yourself and what energizes you enough to make you want to engage.

Think of a straight horizontal line made up of an infinite number of points, and each of those points is a way to make a difference. There are career-focused ways to make a difference, like teaching at a school, joining a firm that is pioneering clean energy, working in a hospital, or leading your company's effort to develop effective diversity and inclusion efforts. I think of those as being at one end of the horizontal line. On the other end are other ways of making a difference that aren't how you make your living: joining your block association, participating in a group

that is trying to change a law by writing to your legislature, taking a turn when your congregation organizes meals for people in need, or showing up at a march or rally. All of it matters. We need good people at every point on the continuum. The question for you is, which point feels like the work that you're meant to do?

As someone who has hired a lot of people in the past thirty years, when I see someone who really loves the work they are engaging in or hopes to take on, it shows. It practically shines right through them. In that situation I'm much less concerned with what's on their resume except insofar as their experiences give them a chance to tell me the story of why they love this work. The inverse is also true: it's not hard to spot someone who is looking for a credential on their resume but doesn't have that spark of enthusiasm for the work.

I don't mean to suggest that this determination is easy. It isn't. Sometimes it takes a little experimentation to find what feels like yours to do in the world. Sometimes following your heart means taking on an unconventional path and doing something that nobody else is doing. Especially if you feel like you're swimming against the tide, it can help to know you're trying to be true to your spot on that continuum and doing what is yours to do.

Learn by Doing

I not only built a connection to my own community during the years that I lived in California but also stumbled upon what would become my career path, though I don't think I knew it at the time. This may sound like unconventional career advice, but I highly recommend being open to discovering what you are meant to do by accident. This strategy has worked for an astonishing number of people I know, including me.

My pathway into my life's work started through service. I was fortunate enough to get a scholarship to support two years of graduate school, which meant that I didn't have to wash dishes or shelve library books to support myself anymore. I could invest that time doing community-focused volunteer work. I found the Office for Hispanic Affairs, a tiny Catholic church–sponsored organization in the Fruitvale area of Oakland, and talked my way into a volunteer job supporting a lawyer and a paralegal who represented immigrant clients. I interviewed immigrants we were defending in their deportation proceedings and helped people fill out forms to bring in relatives and to become US citizens. This was my first exposure to immigration issues beyond my own family's experience, and I have been engaged in immigration policy ever since. Like many others in the immigration policy world, I don't think of myself as having chosen the issue. It feels as if it chose me.

I don't remember being aware of that at the time, though. I thought my volunteer work was interesting, but I didn't think it was leading me to my life's work. At twenty-two, I was pretty sure I wanted some kind of job at an organization that provided social services to needy people, and my volunteer gig gave me useful insight into what that might be like. I didn't really have a vision for what kind of services I was interested in providing, and I didn't intend to pursue a career in immigration. I suppose that if I had had that kind of clarity, I might have gone to law school. Instead, I was getting a degree in Latin American studies and diving into things that interested me like Chicano literature, while also learning about how immigration laws and policies affect people. I had no idea how important this would ultimately be.

My point is that there's value in what you learn in school and in what you learn in the course of your life. And if you are paying attention to what really interests you, the stuff that feels the least like work to you and more like something you want to be doing

because it feels engaging, interesting, or important, the greater the likelihood that you are finding markers that will set you on your path. At least that's how it worked for me.

Discover What You're Good at, Even if It Means Failing Along the Way

They say that one learns a lot from failure. This adage has been true for me. In fact, the whole trajectory of my career began when I set a course for myself that turned out to be a terrible fit. When I was getting ready to leave graduate school, I was confident of two things. First, I wanted to be back in the Midwest, closer to home. California had opened my horizons, taught me a lot about myself, and connected me more closely to the Latinx community. But it also didn't feel like home, and the pull of home was strong for me. I wanted to be someplace where it would be easy to visit my parents and extended family.

My older sister had started her career in Chicago, which I knew to be a vibrant city only a four-hour drive or train ride from home. Chicago has an enormous Latinx population, so it seemed like a place where I might find work that would allow me to be of service in some way, which is the second thing I was sure of. I wasn't particular about what kind of work it was, as long as it connected to the Hispanic community and felt as if I was helping address challenges like the high school dropout rate, which was high at the time, or access to health care, which was low. I also had a boyfriend who had just gotten a job there, so the planets seemed to be aligning. Chicago it was.

Aside from the boyfriend and one friend from college (my sister had long-since relocated to Michigan), I knew absolutely nobody in Chicago. I perused the yellow pages (that's what we did before the Internet) looking for Latinx-focused social service