

Women's March on Washington Opens Contentious Dialogues About Race

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Four organizers of the Women's March on Washington. From left, Tamika Mallory, a gun control advocate and board member of the Gathering for Justice, a nonprofit founded by Harry Belafonte; Linda Sarsour, executive director of the Arab American Association of New York; Bob Bland, founder of Manufacture New York; and Carmen Perez, executive director of the Gathering for Justice. Credit Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Many thousands of women are expected to converge on the nation's capital for the Women's March on Washington the day after Donald J. Trump's inauguration. Jennifer Willis no longer plans to be one of them.

Ms. Willis, a 50-year-old wedding minister from South Carolina, had looked forward to taking her daughters to the march. Then she read a post on the Facebook page for the march that made her feel unwelcome because she is white.

The post, written by a black activist from Brooklyn who is a march volunteer, advised "white allies" to listen more and talk less. It also chided those who, it said, were only now waking up to racism because of the election.

"You don't just get to join because now you're scared, too," read the post. "I was born scared."

Stung by the tone, Ms. Willis canceled her trip.

"This is a women's march," she said. "We're supposed to be allies in equal pay, marriage, adoption. Why is it now about, 'White women don't understand black women'?"

If all goes as planned, the Jan. 21 march will be a momentous display of unity in protest of a president whose treatment of women came to dominate the campaign's final weeks. But long before the first buses roll to Washington and sister demonstrations take place in other cities, contentious conversations about race have erupted nearly every day among marchers, exhilarating some and alienating others.

In Tennessee, emotions ran high when organizers changed the name of the local march from “Women’s March on Washington-Nashville” to “Power Together Tennessee, in solidarity with Women’s March on Washington.” While many applauded the name change, which was meant to signal the start of a new social justice movement in Nashville, some complained that the event had turned from a march for all women into a march for black women.

In Louisiana, the first state coordinator gave up her volunteer role in part because there were no minority women in leadership positions at that time.

“I got a lot of flak locally when I stepped down, from white women who said that I’m alienating a lot of white women,” said Candice Huber, a bookstore owner in New Orleans, who is white. “They said, ‘Why do you have to be so divisive?’”

In some ways, the discord is by design. Even as they are working to ensure a smooth and unified march next week, the national organizers said they made a deliberate decision to highlight the plight of minority and undocumented immigrant women and provoke uncomfortable discussions about race.

“This was an opportunity to take the conversation to the deep places,” said Linda Sarsour, a Muslim who heads the Arab American Association of New York and is one of four co-chairwomen of the national march. “Sometimes you are going to upset people.”

The post that offended Ms. Willis was part of that effort. So was the quotation posted on the march’s Facebook page from Bell Hooks, the black feminist, about forging a stronger sisterhood by “confronting the ways women — through sex, class and race — dominated and exploited other women.”

In response, a New Jersey woman wrote: “I’m starting to feel not very welcome in this endeavor.”

A debate then ensued about whether white women were just now experiencing what minority women experience daily, or were having a hard time yielding control. A young white woman from Baltimore wrote with bitterness that white women who might have been victims of rape and abuse were being “asked to check their privilege,” a catchphrase that refers to people acknowledging their advantages, but which even some liberal women find unduly confrontational.

No one involved with the march fears that the rancor will dampen turnout; even many of those who expressed dismay at the tone of the discussion said they still intended to join what is sure to be the largest demonstration yet against the Trump presidency

“I will march,” one wrote on the march’s Facebook page, “Hoping that someday soon a sense of unity will occur before it’s too late.”

But these debates over race also reflect deeper questions about the future of progressivism in the age of Trump. Should the march highlight what divides women, or what unites them? Is there room for women who have never heard of “white privilege”?

And at a time when a presidential candidate ran against political correctness and won — with half of white female voters supporting him — is this the time to tone down talk about race or to double down?

“If your short-term goal is to get as many people as possible at the march, maybe you don’t want to alienate people,” said Anne Valk, the author of “Radical Sisters,” a book about racial and class differences in the women’s movement. “But if your longer-term goal is to use the march as a catalyst for progressive social and political change, then that has to include thinking about race and class privilege.”

The discord also reflects the variety of women’s rights and liberal causes being represented at the march, as well as a generational divide.

Many older white women spent their lives fighting for rights like workplace protections that younger women now take for granted. Many young activists have spent years protesting police tactics and criminal justice policies — issues they feel too many white liberals have ignored.

“Yes, equal pay is an issue,” Ms. Sarsour said. “But look at the ratio of what white women get paid versus black women and Latina women.”

For too long, the march organizers said, the women’s rights movement focused on issues that were important to well-off white women, such as the ability to work outside the home and attain the same high-powered positions that men do. But minority women, they said, have had different priorities. Black women who have worked their whole lives as maids might care more about the minimum wage or police brutality than about seeing a woman in the White House. Undocumented immigrant women might care about abortion rights, they said, but not nearly as much as they worry about being deported.

This brand of feminism — frequently referred to as “intersectionality” — asks white women to acknowledge that they have had it easier. It speaks candidly about the history of racism, even within the feminist movement itself. The organizers of the 1913 suffrage march on Washington asked black women to march at the back of the parade.

The issue of race has followed the march from its inception. The day after the election, Bob Bland, a fashion designer in New York, floated the idea of a march in Washington on Facebook. Within hours, 3,000 people said they would join. Then a friend called to tell Ms. Bland that a woman in Hawaii with a similar page had collected pledges from 12,000 people.

“I thought, ‘Wow, let’s merge,’” Ms. Bland recalled.

As the effort grew, a number of comments on Facebook implored Ms. Bland, who is white, to include minority women on the leadership team. Ms. Bland felt strongly that it was the right thing to do. Within three days of the election, Carmen Perez, a Hispanic activist working on juvenile justice, and Tamika D. Mallory, a gun control activist who is black, joined Ms. Bland.

Gloria Steinem, honorary co-chairwoman of the march along with Harry Belafonte, lauded their approach. “Sexism is always made worse by racism — and vice versa,” she said in an email.

Ms. Steinem, who plans to participate in a town hall meeting during the march with Alicia Garza, a co-founder of Black Lives Matter, said even contentious conversations about race were a “good thing.”

“It’s about knowing each other,” she wrote. “Which is what movements and marches are for.”

But the tone of the discussion, particularly online, can become so raw that some would-be marchers feel they are no longer welcome.

Ms. Willis, the South Carolina wedding minister, had been looking forward to the salve of rallying with people who share her values, a rarity in her home state, where she said she had been insulted and shouted at for marrying gay couples.

But then she read a post by ShiShi Rose, a 27-year-old blogger from Brooklyn.

“Now is the time for you to be listening more, talking less,” Ms. Rose wrote. “You should be reading our books and understanding the roots of racism and white supremacy. Listening to our speeches. You should be drowning yourselves in our poetry.”

It rubbed Ms. Willis the wrong way.

“How do you know that I’m not reading black poetry?” she asked in an interview. Ms. Willis says that she understands being born white gives her advantages, and that she is always open to learning more about the struggles of others.

But, she said, “The last thing that is going to make me endeared to you, to know you and love you more, is if you are sitting there wagging your finger at me.”

Ms. Rose said in an interview that the intention of the post was not to weed people out but rather to make them understand that they had a lot of learning to do.

“I needed them to understand that they don’t just get to join the march and not check their privilege constantly,” she said.

That phrase — check your privilege — exasperates Ms. Willis. She asked a reporter: “Can you please tell me what that means?”