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Citation

Singapore Management University. Inspiring change: The roles of women and their communities. (2011).
Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/pers/362

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INSPIRING CHANGE: THE ROLES OF WOMEN AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

Published:
6 Sep 2011

'Change' is a word often employed (and frequently abused) by politicians, industrialists, artists and leaders of various domains as a rallying call. Its effects can be profound on those discontented with the status quo and perhaps uninviting for those already contented with the way things are.

For society's disengaged and lesser-than-equals, the 'change' rhetoric would appeal greatly for it promises hope of better things to come. Yet, change never seems to come fast enough, and impatience can rue the day. That was the general sentiment of participants at the Wee Kim Wee Centre's second Women in the Community conference - an annual gathering of international scholars, intellectuals and interested members of public to discuss women's participation and contributions to society.

Tackling the conference theme, 'Sustaining Change', keynote speaker SJ Rozan argued that Change does not need to be sustained; it is already sustaining. "Change is everywhere, all the time. It is who we are. It is what we are... What you had at breakfast is becoming you. This room isn't the same from instant-to-instant. People change positions. The traffic outside is different. The trees are growing."

Rozan, a New York based author of mystery novels, then examined the word, 'sustainable' - another commonly thrown-about word by those in business, government and social circles.

'Sustainability' is opposed to change, she said. People understand 'sustainability' to mean doing things in ways that will not deplete resources; "a way to keep the cycle going; a way to keep our world and our environment *from* changing."

Rozan admitted that she was, at first, intimidated by the prospect of commenting on what she had thought, was a serious and weighty theme. But the contradiction between the words 'sustainable' and 'change' comforted

her. “An impossible topic is right up my alley. Something more reasonable would require a conclusion and answers,” she joked. “(Contradiction) requires no answers... just ideas, questions, experiences and stories.”

A woman architect?

Before she became a writer, Rozan was, for 20 years, an architect. There were few women in the architecture community, she noted, and there was certainly a "retrograde sense" that this was an industry reserved for men "because architects are builders; people with muscle".

But "muscle" could not have been the reason for the gender imbalance because "there hasn't been an architect who's been asked to pick up a hammer for the last 200 years," she quipped.

Women, as with most other minorities, have to do a lot more to be taken seriously. "The people with the power, the white man, don't want to share it," she said. It is perhaps heartening then, that when women architects found themselves in business meetings – often dominated roomfuls of men – there would be an implicit effort to take each other seriously.

When Rozan left architecture to pursue her love for writing, full-time, she found herself struggling, once again, in a domain where women did not "belong". A little ironic, she said, considering that women consume far more books compared to men and consistently outnumber men at book discussion groups.

Books have also traditionally been the domain of women – at least in the Western world where novels, once known as 'romances', were a "frivolous" means by which women filled their days as men headed out to work, Rozan noted. Incidentally, the world's first novel was written by a noblewoman in 11th century Japan.

However, as soon as the masses started to celebrate great narrative prose, men suddenly became interested and were regarded as the highest practitioners and patrons. "It's sort of like cooking. (Have you ever) noticed it's sort of the women's job to cook for the family but all the great chefs in all the greatest restaurants are men?" she joked.

While things may seem bleak from the view of the marginalised, there is a silver lining. "People with less give more," she said, adding that women are remarkably generous with one another in the publishing world perhaps precisely because the publishing pie, as with many other pies, are unequally distributed.

Rozan, a crime fiction writer, is member of 'Sisters in Crime', a group started in 1987 by bestselling female writers in the field who saw it necessary to challenge the status quo. While these writers were earning and seeing just as much success as their male counterparts, it was clear that the proverbial ladder for women was far narrower, with less space for women both vertically and horizontally.

These founding women were doing well and they could have simply tended to their own careers – but they did not, Rozan said. "They looked around and they saw two things. One, their sisters were way below; they were not getting published; not getting contracts… Two, a lot of crime fiction featured women as victims; sometimes graphically, cruelly, and in a way that doesn't sustain the story."

They decided that things needed to change, that they could be agents to the change, and so "they did what women had always done" - they banded together and challenged the status quo.

Trading Rockefeller for dirt

Rozan draws inspiration from her younger sister, Naomi. Naomi read business at university and went on to work as an executive recruiter in Manhattan. “She flew around the country. She wore suits and nice clothes. She attended industry dinners, wrote articles, and had an office at the Rockefeller Centre. She was at her best,” she said.

While Naomi had much to be proud of, she had, since she was young, always wanted to grow vegetables. She wanted to feed people, said Rozan. “When we were growing up, our mother had a garden... We didn’t have the right sunlight for vegetables, but a neighbour did, around the block. In the spring, starting in high school, Naomi went over and she planted; in the summer, she tended; and in the fall, she harvested.”

After graduation, Naomi would tend to her crops before work and and go again after work. “She did this because she loved it,” Rozan said. Naomi stopped planting when she went off to business school and for a long time after that, it was briefcases over shovels - until she met a man, fell in love, got married and inherited a farm in Georgia, USA.

Naomi and her husband left New York and started farming - organic, sustainable farming. Together, they transformed a derelict grassland into a prosperous farm. “My sister never looked back. She never missed Rockefeller centre. She was where she belonged,” said Rozan.

When Naomi’s husband passed away from an illness, there was talk within the family that she would give up farming, leave suburbia, and go back to work in an office - so that she would not be “all alone”. Rozan, however, believed that her sister would keep farming as that has always been her passion.

True enough, Naomi stayed and soon made friends within her community – people who supported her and worked with her. In no time, the farm was producing more vegetables than Naomi could sell and creating more work than she could do. Naomi started a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) movement in her town to get members and customers involved. She also initiated a Saturday market at a nearby city, Macon - an idea that brought business, residents and visitors back into an otherwise sleepy and quiet city.

“In that little town in Georgia, a little bit of life came back on the weekends... all because my sister knew what was in her heart and followed it. She reached out and she shared,” said Rozan. More importantly, Naomi reached out to her community and the community sustained her and the changes she had made.

Chinese ringleader

Plenary speaker Wu Qing is founder of the Beijing Cultural Development Centre for Rural Women. Her father was a politician, as was she. For more than 20 years, Wu served as a legislator, championing people’s rights in Chinese society - in particular, those of women.

Wu was nine years old when her family moved to Japan - right after the end of World War II. “I said to myself; I’m not going to learn a single word of Japanese. I hated the Japanese and I would not play with the Japanese children,” she recounted. Even as her parents made efforts to integrate with the locals, young Wu hatched plans to avenge those who had suffered under the Japanese during the war.

“I was a ringleader and so I got my friends together... six boys, and I said we should do something,” she recalled. Wu rallied her group of friends to gather on their bicycles, stake out at a corner and wait for Japanese children to pass by - so that at an opportune time, they could all, as a gang, cycle up to the children, yell and scream at the kids, scaring them.

“One day, my mother found out and she was so angry. She said, ‘How could you have done that? You are only spreading hatred. What have these children done? These children have nothing to do with the massacre.’”

Wu tells this story as it represents a pivotal moment of change in her life. Not only did she start to play with Japanese children, she also saw, for the first time, how realities are shaped. Indeed, she learnt that many Japanese had opposed the war and the country's leaders made sure to persecute anyone who dared to disagree. “No government in this world can, 100 per cent, represent its people... Education can change the world and every single one of us... and it can change how we want this world to be.”

Wu, of course, continued to be a ringleader – albeit back at her home country – and she has gotten into trouble for it. “In 1989, when my government fired at the students, I spoke against it. For that, I was not allowed to get out of the country for several years, I didn’t get my full professorship until much later, and they tried to prevent me from being a local politician,” she said. “But they failed,” she stressed.

Rights, Wu said, are never granted and given in this world. “No change will come if you don’t take action. But if you want to take action, you have to know where you’re going.” She told the audience too, that people warn her all the time for speaking too candidly. They worry that her words might land her in danger. Wu’s response to such concerns is to be bold and level-headed.

“You have to know what you really want. You have to think and you do not simply follow the mainstream... If something should come up, I always ask myself: Do I want this? Why do I want this? if I don’t want it, I ask myself what do I want? You always have to ask yourself what is important,” said Wu.

Power and patience

One of the changes that women should help along is a change in thinking, said Rozan. In a world that still largely favours men over women, men hold more power - and who wants to share power once you have it? “We have to take responsibility for showing, over and over, in every field, that sharing power enriches; that it helps with the decisions that have to be made; that it helps to draw from more resources and many different angles,” she added.

Women have a responsibility to challenge norms. “It may be unfair, but it’s our reality,” said Rozan. From Wu’s perspective, speaking up is not merely a responsibility but a duty. “You have to show your attitude. Other people might not dare say it, but when they hear it, they feel confident that at least there are people who dare to speak up. Otherwise, why do we have our mouth? Is it just to eat with?” Wu asked.

Both women acknowledged that part of what keeps them going, is knowing that their work is never complete. “In the Jewish culture, we have a saying, ‘If it’s not given to you to finish the work, neither are you free to refrain from it,’” said Rozan. The journey is the destination, and the work is to sustain sustaining change.

Sure, it may seem as if change never comes fast enough, but Rozan and Wu also believe that good, positive change requires patience; for change, when fast forwarded, is often superficial and full of casualties. “If it should rain cats and dogs, rain water washes away the top fertile soil. But if it drizzles, rain water seeps, and then seeds will take root and they will grow and blossom,” Wu concluded.