

Creative escapes

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Marjorie Yang

Poverty is debilitating. Because of women's standing in many traditional communities, they are often the ones who bear the brunt of the effects. This year's Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation summit on women and the economy underscored the importance of women's role in breaking out of poverty and improving economic realities for themselves and their communities. In the session 'The New Wave: Women and Innovation', we discussed how innovation could meet these challenges.

Many companies struggle to find innovative solutions to one problem: how to be successful while being socially responsible in a sustainable way. At Esquel, a company in the traditional, labour-intensive garment industry, we touch the lives of the less privileged and are in a position to bring about positive change. Through the years, we have found that innovation holds the key for this to happen.

There is a myth that the garment industry is low-tech, and that innovation, often technology-oriented, is an unaffordable luxury as competition is centered on lowering costs. If the garment industry continues to base its competitiveness on employing low-skilled, cheap labour, it will never make a significant social contribution by improving the lives of the less privileged. In fact, technology-driven change is the way forward. We have, over the years, adopted management systems that used information technology to improve worker productivity, providing them with training that expands their skills in the process.

Yet innovation is not just about technology. It requires management vision and a nurturing corporate culture embraced by everyone. In our experience, as workers absorb and share our values and passion for social change, they become enthusiastic participants in our mission. We have always encouraged and empowered employees to propose and drive changes, creating an environment for internally driven innovation and initiatives, rather than relying on importing them from outside.

We try to enlist everyone, especially supervisors and junior colleagues who are most in contact with our workers. It is important to get them to understand our mission. Often,

through constant questioning, observing and experimenting, they are the ones who find new solutions to old problems. By encouraging creative problem-solving at this level, we can be assured of their decision-making capabilities once they reach senior management positions.

Innovation is also about looking at old problems from new perspectives. As the council chairman of Hong Kong Polytechnic University, I have taken a keen interest in a joint project by PolyU and Yunnan University. PolyU created an access to markets for ethnic minority women in Yunnan province who wouldn't have had the opportunity on their own. Design teams from PolyU help these women market their designs and crafts, allowing them to earn an income, attain financial independence and consequently improve their social standing.

Skills that the indigenous women already possess are utilised to bring about meaningful social change. One of the women I met even took up a leadership position within her community following her newly acquired status. It is encouraging to see how rigid, deeply entrenched social structures can be influenced for the better through such projects. Another example is the story of two girls from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government who wanted to start a social enterprise to alleviate poverty in Tibet by using already abundant resources in the region. They founded Shokay, making use of yak down with its cashmere-like fibres. They have come a long way since 2006, when they began, with little knowledge of the textile industry; today, Shokay's products can be found in more than 100 stores in 10 countries. Many Tibetan families own a yak, resulting in a wide net of participants. This resource has been around for hundreds of years, but it took innovation to turn it into a force for change in economically underdeveloped communities.

Such examples exemplify how women can play a much more active role in incubating and promoting change. Women's keen abilities in observing, relating and questioning are important skills for an innovator. Society needs to provide women with an empowering environment with opportunities for exposure, networking, taking risks and experimenting with new ideas and initiatives.

In the long term, at a macro level, education is key for innovative environments. Much is done to foster creativity at college level, but this will only have a limited effect if the effort is not extended to education at secondary and even primary levels.

Fortunately, bright innovative minds are working to address this problem. One project of note is Scratch, computer software developed by MIT Media Lab, that allows young

children to create programs and multimedia content. It is now used by many schools worldwide. Education systems should seek to nurture and reward the creative, problem-solving mind.

Those who innovate hold the greatest potential to bridge societal gaps. In particular, women, who are the core on both domestic and professional fronts, are in a position to build a culture for innovation at home, work, and across society.

Marjorie Yang is chairwoman of Esquel Group and a non-official member of the Executive Council. This article is part of a monthly series on women and gender issues developed in collaboration with The Women's Foundation