

Building Alliances Across Differences?

Center for Gender in Organizations
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Working Toward Multiculturalism: The Case of the Boston Women's Fund

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Presenters:

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This document summarizes a presentation at the Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO) by Carmen Chan, Jean Entine, and Catherine Joseph. The presenters discussed two broad themes concerning the challenges and opportunities encountered by the Boston Women's Fund (BWF) in its efforts to implement an agenda that is inclusive of diverse constituencies and to model diversity within the organization. These themes and sub-themes are discussed below.

In addition, the questions raised by the audience are also described. There were two types of questions. The first related to the themes and sub-themes discussed by the presenters. These questions and the answers given by the presenters are described under their relevant themes. The second type of question pertained to BWF's experience as a multicultural organization. The questions and answers given by the presenters on this topic are presented in the final section.

Personal meanings of multiculturalism

The three presenters' began by each telling a story about what multiculturalism means to them on a personal level. These stories have been summarized below.

Carmen Chan

Chan began by saying that when she came to the US from China, she did not have a frame of reference for the concept of multiculturalism. She indicated that initially it meant something positive to her—i.e., when people of different cultural backgrounds co-exist harmoniously. However, her experiences in the United States have suggested to her that multiculturalism could also refer to the absence of harmonious intergroup relations. She shared two illustrative personal experiences. The first was an incident that occurred on the subway. She indicated that there was an elderly white woman in front of her in the subway heading toward a door. Chan said that she moved quickly in front of the elderly woman so that she could open the door for her. However, the elderly woman thought that she was trying to get ahead of her, and turned around and said, "You ignorant Chinese." Chan said that this experience hurt her a lot. She reasoned that while

she might have unknowingly violated some norm, she did not understand why her Chinese identity was salient and used negatively by this woman.

The second experience she shared was not an incident; instead it was a recurring observation and concern she had about being asked to participate on various committees as the only Chinese person. For instance, Chan noted that she is often asked to participate on committees concerning domestic violence in the Asian community. On such occasions, she asks herself, “Am I included because I am Chinese?” Although she might have ambivalence in response to her affirmative answer to this question, she indicated that she also recognizes that if she did not represent the concerns of this constituency, no one else would. Thus, she resolves her ambivalence by reasoning: “Maybe they invited me because I would be the only one at the table, but I might as well take advantage of it.”

Catherine Joseph

For Joseph, the meaning of multiculturalism began to crystallize in college. She explained:

I was initially oblivious to what was going on. It was when I went to college that I became aware of it. And there multiculturalism meant ‘lack of.’ When I went into a classroom in the 1970s, I was the only woman of color there. That was a period of change; people were demanding access for people of color. Living during that time we were not beneficiaries of that kind of action because change occurs very slowly. I felt lonely and disaffected from the rest of the campus, and it was a very hostile environment. That was thirty years ago. I would say things are very different [now] because of the things that went on in the form of protest during that period.”

She explained that her experience in college was one of being in a “mono-cultural, non-inclusive environment,” and she contrasted this experience with the very inclusive environment and practices at BWF. She pointed out that in most of her life, she has not seen the kind of “configuration in society” that she has found at BWF.

Jean Entine

Entine shared with the audience some of her early experiences that contributed to her understanding of difference and eventually of multiculturalism. She explained that she grew up in the US South and the environment had a strong influence on the way in which difference was lived and experienced. She spoke of a number of experiences growing up in this context that contributed to her evolving understanding of difference. She said that when she was a little girl, she was very good friends with two neighbor girls. At one point, one of the “girls said to me ‘you are Jewish.’ I said ‘you are too.’” The point here is that Entine’s family did not talk about being different, so she did not identify her “difference” based on her Jewishness as a young girl. She said, “We were trying to fit in.”

Entine explained that as she became older, her understanding of difference began to include the notion of separation. She said, “Separation was in two ways. There was the segregation of public facilities. My entire life was segregated. In high school, we were also segregated by religion. They had after school activities related to religion, and class and religion were often related.” After school, the rich kids, who were of a shared religion, stayed behind for after school

activities while the rest of the kids were excluded and went home. “My experience then was that of being the ‘other.’”

She reflected, “When we talk about culture, white people often feel very awkward and look at their feet. They are not quite sure what culture means for them. Now, being part of a multicultural world, I see it as being ripe with opportunities and challenges. [It is also] isolating because I represent white privilege, and I have a lot of it. So I am often so busy trying to check myself and trying to be appropriate. The way I choose to live my life is challenging but consistent with my beliefs.”

Multiculturalism at BWF

The presenters discussed six aspects of their work at BWF, as well as the challenges they encounter in these areas. Five are described here in detail.

Core values

The presenters indicated that underlying the core values of BWF is the belief that “multiculturalism, to be achieved, requires a change in the status quo. Power and influence and wealth have to be redistributed in order to achieve multiculturalism.” The construction of BWF’s core values began at a personal level. Recalling this process, Entine said, “We started [constructing these core values] individually. In an early retreat, we talked about ourselves, our understandings, our beliefs, and our struggles. The systematic change we want starts with ourselves and our understandings. This helped us get to our strategic plan.”

These core values are “very conscious,” taken “very seriously,” and have shaped the short- and long-term vision of BWF, its strategic plan, its planning processes, and BWF’s on-going work. These core values are as follows:

- We believe that change starts at the grassroots level, and systemic change is necessary to achieve social justice.
- We believe that power and wealth must be redistributed to attain equity and systemic change.
- We believe that the fight for women’s rights is an integral part of a larger struggle to end oppression based on race, class, gender, age, religion, ability, or sexual orientation.
- We believe all movements must combat racism by being racially and culturally diverse in both membership and leadership if progressive change is to occur.
- We believe that women and girls can and must be leaders within all movements if progressive change is to occur.
- We believe that educating and organizing a diverse donor base is a critical strategy for amassing broad support for social change movements.

- We strive to reflect our commitment to shared leadership, equity, and cultural diversity in all aspects of our organization's operations.

History of BWF

Entine pointed out that BWF is one of the oldest women's funds. Such funds are typically founded in one of three ways: 1) wealthy women contribute money because they want to improve something in their communities; 2) community foundations allocate seed money; or 3) community women come together.

BWF was started when community women came together. "A large meeting was called by two women, one of whom worked at the YMCA, and the other at a bookstore in Cambridge. The idea was to develop a pot of money that women controlled. This first meeting was very well attended. There were literally hundreds of ideas of what we could do. Some people left immediately, others signed on, but over time, seven people stayed on. Most of these women did not know one another. The story can be told that this group wasn't racially diverse—there were five white women, one black, and one Asian. But the white women were diverse by class. Some had PhDs [while] others were in high school. They were [also] diverse by sexual orientation."

In the process of working together, this founding group articulated a set of core values, which are reflected in the core values described above. Entine pointed out, "We wanted to honor the work of women not considered part of the women's movement around issues of choice. We wanted diversity around race. We were talking about control of money by community activists. We took an anti-racist and inclusive stance across a lot of categories."

Entine identified two challenges that BWF inherited as part of its history. She indicated, "We wanted to avoid being politically purist, where we would only take money from certain people and where we would fund everything by women regardless of its capacity to make change happen. Over time as a board we have tried to come to terms with this issue of purism. More and more philanthropy comes from wealthy people who have donor-advised funds set up and they control the funds. We are reluctant to pursue these funds because we want the community to control the money. Yet giving is growing in this arena. Another area where we have encountered this challenge is whether or not to fund particular welfare rights organizations because we believe that they are no longer meeting their objectives. It was hard for us to do this because we had a commitment to be there for them."

Another challenge inherited from BWF's history concerns decision-making power within BWF. Entine indicated that at present, there are no formal means of decision-making among the staff. There are questions about who makes decisions about what matters. Currently, decisions are arrived at through an informal process of negotiation. However, since Entine will be leaving BWF in June, there is a need to have explicit and formalized decision-making processes in place.

Allocation of funds

Joseph pointed out that the "Fund is situated in the social change community. So [BWF] is involved in social change philanthropy. The objective of social change philanthropy is the empowering of disenfranchised populations, to bring them into the fold through community

organizing and advocacy. We prefer to fund social change that focuses on the redistribution of power, wealth, and resources rather than increased opportunity.”

BWF’s six constituencies are 1) low income women; 2) women with disabilities; 3) women of color; 4) older women; 5) lesbians; and 6) girls. These groups were selected because they are viewed as the most disenfranchised groups of women in society.

A crucial distinction made in the allocations process is whether a proposal is an organizing or advocacy proposal. Organizing is viewed as collective activity on the part of the members of a marginalized group to “build up their organization and challenge the status quo.” The outcomes of organizing are usually not immediate but hopefully will be visible over a period of time. Advocacy involves a group of people speaking on behalf of a marginalized group; organizing, on the other hand, occurs when the marginalized people speak for themselves.

The allocation of BWF funds is based on explicit criteria, one of which is whether the proposal is an advocacy or an organizing proposal. “A lot of organizations come under the rubric of advocacy organizations. One possible response [of an organization to a social problem] is to put a band-aid on the symptoms and causes of [poverty] in our society. We see organizing as a way to look at root causes—[to address the issue of] why a population is in the condition it is in. We always look at the proposals that look at the root causes or the structural causes of poverty. We also want to fund projects that give greater access to public power and resources, where, through organizing, people are trying to change their communities or get institutions to respond to them.”

“Grant-making occurs through the allocation committee. This committee is an intergenerational committee of twelve women: six young sisters for justice and six adult women. We look for women with community ties. This brings a rich diversity of opinion to the allocation process.”

Reflecting on the process of making allocation decisions, Joseph pointed out that unlike most foundations, where allocations are staff driven and involve board of trustees, BWF engages “in a community decision process. We somehow manage to reach consensus on the proposals. We have a few good discussions which help us to constantly fine-tune what it means to be at BWF and what multiculturalism and organizing mean to us.”

Joseph also offered some challenges and opportunities encountered in the allocations process. Referring to the six constituencies mentioned above, she noted, “We need to make sure that each area is adequately and constantly represented. We need to reach out to populations that we think are most disenfranchised. We don’t want to just respond to existing proposals. We are constantly doing outreach through information sessions in Boston and other geographic areas, we recruit people, we have ad campaigns in major newspapers and neighborhoods, and we do work on the streets in order to bring in new people and organizations.”

The audience raised several questions about the allocations process. These are summarized below.

Question: “How do you organize your decision-making process and stick to your core values?”

Answer: “We have criteria we use to set proposals. We ask ourselves technical questions, focus on the areas we want to fund, and determine if the group has strategies around decision-making

and whether it is a collective effort among a group of women who self-determine their needs and present a proposal as a group. Then we loosely rate those proposals [based] on whether or not they meet the qualifications and why. As you know it can be very subjective. So we try to stay tuned in to the criteria. We have a few differences but nothing major. We also do site visits to inform ourselves about the activities of the organizations.”

Answer: A member of the audience offered, “I served on the allocations committee for several years. There is a first cut where you go through the proposals, a quick pass through. There is an initial vote. There are a bunch of projects that everyone agrees ‘yeah’ or ‘no’ and we focus on those about which there is disagreement. These get a thorough review. Most of the time it is not thorny, but when it is, there is additional discussion and usually a compromise on money or an attempt to address the particulars of what is going on in the room so that people are comfortable.”

Question: “Shortly after you described the process you said you gain a more fine-tuned understanding about the meaning of multiculturalism and organizing. You also describe formal criteria that you use in the allocation process. Do the explicit criteria generate these understandings or how does that happen?”

Answer: A member of the audience who had served on the allocations committee responded, “You are hearing about the proposals through the eyes of people coming from very different backgrounds. For instance, it was a challenge to find young people to participate on the allocations committee. The young sisters for justice came about because BWF had a challenge to bring young people who could bring proposals from young groups and talk about them in a group of adults. The young sisters have brought a whole new perspective.”

Entine added, “There is an educational component to this. Low-income young women do not often have the opportunity to develop a social justice orientation. One young woman, who was from the Dominican Republic, had no information around racism, yet she was experiencing it all the time and her family did not discuss it because they did not understand it either. Her life began to change when she had a language and way of thinking about it. A lot of young people did not know of an income pyramid and how that worked.” The learning occurs the other way around as well. “One of the young women for justice is on our staff now.” BWF thus has the opportunity to learn from her experiences.

Fundraising

Chan indicated that BWF conceptualizes fundraising in a way that demystifies the process and opens it up to constituents who would not traditionally envision themselves as donors. Part of this demystification process is definitional. Instead of using jargon terms such as “donor-advised funds, endowments, and tax-deductions,” BWF conceptualizes philanthropy as giving. Chan said that such activity is part and parcel of the daily lives of their constituents, so giving is not a new or novel concept for them. She explained, “They give money at church, help out friends and relatives.” She said that giving is a very powerful means of changing the conception that these women have of themselves and their ability to change their lives in positive ways. She explained, “Giving is power. When you are able to use the resources you have and redistribute them in the community to make change—that is power. We have donors who give ten dollars a month. Our work is about diversifying our donor base and bring solidarity to bring about change.”

Building alliances

Entine pointed out that BWF views alliances and allies differently and works in these two areas differently. She said that BWF builds alliances with other foundations in two principal ways. One aspect of their alliance work is to participate in a variety of meetings where the representatives of other foundations are also present. In this context BWF's representative tries to learn something about the guidelines of the other foundations as well as interest them in BWF's work. Alliances are also built through program initiatives. A third way in which alliance work is conducted at BWF is through its members' leadership roles in national networks of philanthropic organizations. Finally, BWF also participates in studies that are done by researchers.

BWF's ally work on the other hand is guided by the following statement, a statement that appears in the offices of BWF: "If you come to help me you are wasting your time, but if you are coming because your liberation is bound up with mine, let us work together." BWF fosters allies in the entire spectrum of social justice work, not just in women's work. In this area, BWF is an active participant, signing petitions, going to rallies, providing testimony, etc.

Questions from the audience

The audience raised a number of questions pertaining to the way in which BWF works as a multicultural organization. The audience was particularly interested in the nature of the challenges in working across differences and in the practices used to overcome these challenges. The most significant and consistent explanation that the presenters gave in response to these questions was that while there are obvious differences among the staff of BWF, their work was greatly facilitated by shared values, trust, and their commitment to work through their differences. The following is an excerpt of some of this discussion.

Question: "Was coming up with your core values contentious? Has it pushed the organization to become more multicultural?"

Answer: "I don't remember coming up with the core values as being contentious. It was not contentious at all. With all of these core values, we can see yourselves being there."

Answer: "It has to do with leadership. Having a set of core values in and of itself is not contentious; to walk it [is another matter], and who is there to remind you to walk it? The core values serve as a constant reminder. We do refer to them. Are we walking it? We might not do it all the time, but it is a point of reference. It is common ground as we come to do our work, it helps the leadership to remind the staff."

Question: "Given that you are so different, in values and who you are, how did you come up with your core values? I am surprised with how you get people to sign on to it."

Answer: "We are looking for progressive people, we are looking for some commonality. There was also one small piece of the core values we argued about for two weeks. No one disagreed with what we believe in, but we were discussing the specifics."

Question: “How do you deal with conflict and contention in your staff and in the community? Most diversity in the world is not handpicked.”

Answer: “We might agree to disagree.”

Answer: “We also agree that we will work through it. When we are at the height of disagreement, there is enough commonality and trust [that] we can come up with a basic agreement that we can get together on.”

The Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO) is an international resource for innovative ideas and practice in the field of gender, work, and organizations. Recognizing the pervasive role of work organizations in society and our individual lives, CGO seeks to advance learning and support organizations to strengthen both gender equity and organizational effectiveness. In our approach, we understand that gender works simultaneously with race, class, ethnicity, age and sexual identity in shaping organizational systems, cultures, and practices as well as individuals’ identities and experiences at work. We work at the intersection of research and practice and we pursue our mission through action learning, consultation, research, education, convening, and information dissemination.

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