

MAY 2021 SPEAKER

SALLY ARMSTRONG POWER SHIFT FOR WOMEN

No AGM dinner this year because of Covid-19 restrictions but AGM guest speaker, intrepid, crusading journalist, author and human rights activist Sally Armstrong gave us plenty of food for thought about the substantial gains yet continuing hurdles in the power shift for women.

The pandemic has been both an impetus for change and a hindrance, she said. “There’s been a resurgence in working for the common good from saying ‘Stay safe’ to strangers as well as to relatives, friends and neighbours to inspired thinking as to how to help. For example, ice cream makers volunteered to store vaccine in the requisite cold temperature. The pandemic highlighted how well women handle crises. The countries that handled it best are led by women. According to a recent Harvard Review study women are better than men in getting people to work collaboratively. But, violence against women rose 400 per cent and women suffered more job losses than men. Same old, same old: when there’s a problem, it’s women who pay the price.”

Most of Sally’s talk dealt with the power shift towards women and minorities that she believes is at an all-time high based on her many years of covering what happens to women and girls in danger spots and conflicts around the world. She attributed the shift to the realization of the importance of “personal will to change the agenda and push for reform,” rather than traditional reliance on “political will and public will.” As inspiring examples, she cited the “me-too” and “Black Lives Matter” movements, environmentalist Greta Thunberg and the determination of teenage girls to get an education in countries where men continue to believe women should be subservient.

The power shift is a long-term mission, occurring in “waves,” each a step forward but with lulls in between and “the finish line hasn’t yet been reached.” “My favourite story is what the female scientist who guided “Perseverance” in its landing on Mars this February said about her challenging experience- ‘It was like childbirth.’ Holy smokes! That word would never have been used even a few years ago.”

In the Q & A Sally was asked what she thinks will happen to Afghan women after the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the Taliban regain control. She was pessimistic: “I don’t blame the Americans for leaving; they’ve been there 20 years. There were considerable improvements in institutions, government, life expectancy and education of women. These changes are likely to be lost.” She pointed out how fast science can move compared to how peace negotiations bog down. “The anti-covid vaccine was developed at remarkable speed, just one year, but in 20 years peace couldn’t be achieved in Afghanistan,” she sighed.

Sally issued a clarion call to action: “Don’t be a spectator; get involved instead. Walk together. Show moral courage.”

In her thank you UWCNY’s incoming vice-president (2021-2022) Marian Archbold noted that the club “is advocating on these issues. An uplifting, pertinent, enlightening and challenging talk.”

Susan Goldenberg