

by Elsarien Katiti • photographs Online



# THE CHANGE

**TARANA IS AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST WHO STARTED THE “ME TOO” MOVEMENT IN 2006. SHE USED THE PHRASE ME TOO TO RAISE AWARENESS OF THE PERVASIVENESS OF SEXUAL ABUSE AND ASSAULT IN SOCIETY. THE PHRASE DEVELOPED INTO A BROADER MOVEMENT IN 2017 WHEN IT WAS USED AS A HASHTAG FOLLOWING THE HARVEY WEINSTEIN SEXUAL ABUSE ALLEGATIONS. SHE IS ALSO A SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVOR. THIS PIECE WILL BEGIN WITH A LONG EXCERPT FROM A SPEECH BY TARANA.**

**T**arana Burke’s speech at the 2018 United State of Women summit is worth quoting from extensively when we want to talk about sexual harassment. Please bear with me.

*“We are the change we’ve been waiting for. There are some years that ask questions and there are some years that answer them. Like: how did we get here? And, how do we get away from here? What will history say about us in this moment? I believe we are entering a period of answers. 2017 asked ‘when will it be a reckoning against sexual*

*violence?’ And 2018 said: ‘Now!’ 2017 asked: Who will speak for the children? In 2018 the children said: ‘We will.’ The fact is we have the answers right here and right now. We are the answers. Women over all gender spectrums, black women, queer women, trans-women, disabled women, women survivors, we have the answers.*

*“Martin Luther King said: ‘The moral ark of the universe is long and bends towards justice,’ but that ark doesn’t bend on its own. The work that we do is the weight that’s provided on*

*that ark that bends it closer and closer the justice every day. So here’s the charge, we’re in a unique historic moment, ya’ll. Everybody knows that we have not been able to sustain a national dialogue around sexual violence, around women’s rights, and around equity like we have recently, ever. But I submit that we will lose that opportunity... to make deep meaningful change if we don’t recognise that we are the answers.*

*“We’re trying to build something that’s never existed. It’s going to take*

***“We are trying to build in the MeToo movement, a survivor-led movement that centres those often pushed to the margins and gives unprecedented access to resources for healing while galvanising both survivors of all forms of sexual violence and our allies to interrupt sexual violence.”***

*every single one of us doing all the things we can, at capacity, in order to make that happen. We are trying to build in the MeToo movement, a survivor-led movement that centres those often pushed to the margins and gives unprecedented access to resources for healing while galvanising both survivors of all forms of sexual violence and our allies to interrupt sexual violence.”*

*“That’s a mouthful, but in essence it just says what the poet June Jordan puts so eloquently that, ‘we are the ones we’ve been waiting for.’ So learn and join advocacy groups and campaigns that are doing the work that moves you, but know that you are the answers.”*

In our own context, we often blame culture and politics for not providing for changes we demand. We cry for free this and better that. We also demand a change in the culture of sexual harassment and an end to all forms of violence against women. In all of our crying for change there is something powerful we are missing. The majority of our population consists of women – those citizens mostly affected. Abusers are the few, the abused are the many. If we want change we can get change.

The problem is, every one often expects some other person to do the heavy work and bring about the changes they want, but if we all rally behind each other, rally behind a cause, rally behind organisations that stand for and are working towards what we want, then change should happen sooner than when we sit and wait for someone to do something.

So stop waiting on a Ms/Mr Anonymous to fight for your rights. It is time that you take over the fight, you make the change in your everyday work, you become the voice of change wherever you find yourself. Identify what you are passionate about in the fight for

women’s liberation. If it’s the abortion appeal, support organisations that have already started the work on that, or if none exists, form a movement towards the cause. There are so many things regarding equality that we still need to change or legislate. When others campaign or fight for rights, complainers and talkers often position themselves on the margins as bystanders expecting the world to change through others’ voices, but there is so much we all can do to contribute.

So here is what you can do. If you are a woman, you can begin with a “No”, whenever someone harasses you or makes you feel uncomfortable. You don’t have to smile politely until they go away or change the subject. You can say “NO.” Tell them:”, “Stop that”, “I’ll tell X about what you are trying here.” Offenders of sexual harassment normally get away with their offences because they are not stopped. No one tells them their behaviour is toxic.

For men, accept no as an acceptable response to someone feeling uncomfortable with your advances and respect others’ choices and boundaries. You can also speak up against others who are publicly harassing people. If your friend is violating a partner in a relationship, speak out or report violations.

Women who dump their babies can speak out for more safe havens, teenage girls who fall pregnant or abort unsafely can advocate the right to choose abortion as an option and demand health facilities. Let the olufiko girls speak out about the love of the tradition or of ending the naked parade of their bodies and their sexualisation. Let the women in the

Zambezi speak out against dry sex and other harmful cultural practices that put them at risk of HIV-AIDS. Use the media as a platform to confront your plights and to set the conversations in motion, because the media is not only a watchdog of the government but also of culture and all societal aspects. All marginalised groups in our society should stand up against the systems that oppress them, to name and shame perpetrators and call for nationwide support. And let the rest of us rally behind all these affected groups.

There are so many organisations working with children, women and socially marginalised groups. Find out if you cannot volunteer or assist in any way. If there is a petition going around, join by signing it and lobbying others to sign too. Change happens when we often speak about issues and help others see why the change is needed.

A statement from Zat Rana reads “By standing up for what is new and important, we can influence the cultural direction to match our dominant values... The reality is that how far we move is directly proportional to how far we are willing to push. The world we know today wouldn’t exist without risk-taking. Neither will a prosperous future.”

So it is time that we take risks, that we speak out, and actively engage in transforming our society. If those of us affected and supporting a cause speak in one accord, we can revolutionise our society. Every generation leaves a legacy behind. Let our legacy be that we fought for change in dismantling patriarchal behaviour and that we fought for equality for all. We indeed are the change we’ve been waiting for.♀

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