

WFWP UK's Annual Young Women's Speech Contest National Finals

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Theme: "Career, Marriage, Motherhood and I"

On Saturday, 5 October, the Annual Young Women's Speech Contest (YWSC) crescendoed with the National Finals in Central London, with seven finalists sharing their powerful, raw, and relevant stories in front of 80+ people, as well as many words of wisdom for all gathered.

Indeed it was a long-awaited culminating point for the finalists, as they had each undergone a rigorous process in qualifying for the National Finals. This is the first year that the contest began at the regional level, taking place in various cities around the UK, with the regional finalists moving on to the national level. All regional finalists submitted their original written compositions and were telephone interviewed, and from there seven finalists were selected to go on to the national finals. There, each finalist was evaluated in their speaking skills, content, presentation, and QandA responses to judges.



Each speech was powerful and vastly different from each other - in personality, character and experience - and yet, there were many relatable common themes, including issues with social media and how it portrays an image of a "perfect life" that often pressures and confuses girls and young women to "have it all" without knowing how or what they themselves really want. Other strong themes that came up included battling contradictory expectations placed on women in the workplace, dealing with gender inequality face to face, and exploring our female/feminine identity.

To begin, excited audience members milled about the lobby, colourful refreshments in hand, conversations booming, and a bake sale supporting the WFWP UK's refugees in Jordan project in full swing.

Ms. Sharon Kabubi, the contest's MC, then welcomed everyone and explained that this contest is to

provide participants with the opportunity to express their truths, and for the audience to be inspired by today's generation and tomorrow's leaders.

The first speaker, Ravinder Kaur Basra, began with a quote from Mother Teresa: "If you want to change the world, go home and love your family." She beautifully expressed the difficult journey her parents took as Sikh immigrants, becoming successful against all odds. After observing and experiencing the hardship she saw her parents go through, at the age of 5 years old Ravinder decided she wanted to help people by becoming a solicitor, which she accomplished in her early 20's.



She admitted that the road to becoming a sound legal adviser was difficult - the commitment and hard work - more than her 5 year old self could have ever imagined. As a way to encourage her young self, she told herself to "Eat the 3 P's": perceive, prepare, persevere. Success is not born overnight, it takes consistency and these 3 P's. Through this, one can surpass any limitations and expectations.

Ravinder also described her personal worry about the gender pay gap in the workplace, and how 33% of women returning from maternity leave experience a downward shift in their jobs.

Finally, Ravinder slightly adjusted the original Mother Teresa quote to: "If you want to change the world, go home and love yourself," as she believes

that self love and mental health are very important - that we need to reflect on and better ourselves so to better help others. She urged the audience to believe in change, because "change will happen."

The second speaker, Kate Surala, talked passionately about her experiences in the male-dominated financial services industry - "where gender equality is a utopia." She explained her life motto, "Unleash The Day, Be Your True Self," in that it serves as a reminder to change the system, break the mold, break the rules if necessary, be yourself, and not join the "boys club" or go with the flow. And just as important as all these is the need for support of girls and women to be themselves in such environments.



Kate shared her favourite quote from Margaret Thatcher: "Don't follow the crowd, let the crowd follow you." She urged women of all ages to be themselves and actively seek out and break the barriers holding them back. She reflected on her own career that "what worked for men didn't work for me." She asserted that women do not need to be fixed, because they were not broken in the first place. They need the right environment in order to flourish, just as a freshwater fish cannot flourish in saltwater. Women are different and need to embrace, nurture and harness that uniqueness.

The third speaker, Tracy Musyoki, also works in a male-dominated company in global logistics where she regularly and directly experiences gender inequality. She described the "impostor syndrome"

phenomenon in her workplace, where she and her other female colleagues and seniors feel like they do not belong in their positions.

Tracy expressed that she tries not to be problematic - to keep calm and hold back her real thoughts. She described her intersectional identity, in that she is both black and a woman, and the challenges of that combined identity not being understood or respected.

She urged the audience to be clear with what they want and not to worry about others' expectations, as society's expectations are contradictory and does not compare to expressing your unique self. She found that identity, self worth and peace of mind are the answer to dealing with these expectations and to finding your niche and being yourself. Embrace the uncertainty, be yourself, take your time, don't rush or try to "tick all the boxes."

Her advice to women in a similar situation as herself is: the key to being understanding while being on the brunt end of microaggression or discrimination is to try and see the bigger picture - why is this person

pressuring me or thinking like this? In this way, it's less likely to be confused or pulled in other directions. You must define your own terms whilst remaining respectful to such people.

The fourth speaker, Miranda Hanna, began charmingly by reading from her diary from when she was 10 years old, where her sister responds in the diary as well. Doing so reminded her of her childlike openness and willingness to seek encouragement from her family.

Miranda spoke elegantly about the nature of womanhood and how she has become the woman she is now. She shared how captivated she is by women's beauty and their unique stories, which she believes lifts all women up to become women of integrity.



On the flip side, she described how social media breeds insecurity and unconfidence in girls and young women, what with the "perfect life" on display everywhere rather than genuine face to face contact, storytelling, and personal experiences with each other. Miranda asserted that we want to protect young girls' futures, but that we should not judge them on what they are currently doing on social media. We can instead try to be clean and supportive images ourselves, not looking down on the girls but rather encouraging them to succeed in life.

Miranda also expressed how her faith connects her to something more meaningful and that the principles she lives by now were learned from her parents. As such, she chose to wait for her future spouse whilst practicing abstinence and focusing on self-growth.

Her passion for encouraging and protecting young girls and young women, and promoting true womanhood and good values, was evident. She

closed by stating the meaning of her name "Miranda," saying that it is what she feels every woman should feel about themselves: "Worthy of Admiration."

The fifth speaker, Sanjana Poddar, spoke eloquently about her vision of how women are meant to experience and balance all four topics within the overall contest theme: "Career, Marriage, Motherhood and I."

She first described how generally women have this illusion that in their early 20's there is a fork in the road where they need to choose a path, whether it is marriage, career, or other. But then contradictorily, there are images and messages that say women need to try to "have it all," which for the most part seems impossible.

Upon reflection, Sanjana realised that motherhood and marriage might actually be able to complement each other, as can a career. Rather than seeing this period in life as a fork in the road then, it is more like a long diverse path with lots of different kinds of terrain. And, she explained, along this grand path we have interchangeable "shoes," meaning the mindsets we adopt that can make or break our journey along that path.

Sanjana urged us all to think more open-mindedly about what gender equality really means for women, that on an individual level they must also think honestly and creatively about what works for them and decide to live the kind of diverse, full-of-different-terrain path, if they so desire.

The sixth speaker, Viola Dirnhofer, shared vulnerably and deeply about her experience with having scoliosis, being in and out of hospital while her mother took care of her. She expressed that this long term experience helped form her character to have more empathy and compassion for people. She was also moved by the unconditional love she saw her parents have towards their children, such that she never heard her mother complain, and this inspired her to become that kind of person herself.

Viola shared a favourite quote, "Love your neighbor as yourself," but she realised that we do not actually love ourselves - or others - enough. Even on social media there is an image or expectation of what we should be like, but there is not enough messages or genuine images of loving ourselves or others.

How Viola loves herself is through music, as that is her guiding light in life. She shared beautifully how just like she needs to love herself before she goes on stage, she has to believe in and love herself in life.

She had struggled with self-confidence in the past, but music has helped her feel like her best self. She encouraged everyone to find that thing that helps us to love and believe in ourselves.

The seventh speaker, Zaharan Sofi, started out with describing her passionate feelings towards the contest theme, as she felt there to be a lot of misunderstanding and mistreatment around each topic within the theme: "Career, Marriage, Motherhood & I."



She explained that, at least in her hometown of Somalia, women have largely been raised to think that marriage/motherhood is something to aspire to. However, there is a lot of focus on studying and preparing for a career for young girls as well, but only until the age of marriage and motherhood, after which they are pressured to marry and have children, potentially abandoning their career. Contradictions like this are everywhere, Zaharan explained. And these are the pronounced gender differences and expectations at play.

Zaharan noted that in the workplace, women constantly feel incompetent and experience "impostor syndrome," feeling like they don't belong in the positions they are in. And even in schools, education regarding female anatomy is

neglected, showcasing the critical need for better and more equal education in schools and homes starting at a young age.

In Somalia, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) affects 98% of women - Zaharan shared that she is fortunately among the 2% that did not have it, thanks to her mother. She shared that her mother had strongly refused to her daughter having a female circumcision, going against the cultural trend. Her mother wanted her to be happy with herself because "there are no second chances" in life.

In this journey of getting to know and owning her unique femininity and feminine rights, Zaharan realised in the workplace that she should not try to act more manly to get the job she, as herself, deserves. Likewise, she realised that in life, she cannot live in a box that society regularly places on her - she, and all women, need to recognise that box and break out of it.

The Winners of the YWSC 2019 National Finals are:

1st Place - Sanjana Poddar

2nd Place - Zaharan Sofi

3rd Place - Tracy Musyoki

Runner-ups:

Ravinder Kaur Basra

Miranda Hanna

Kate Surala

Viola Dirnhofer

After the winners and runner-ups were announced, the heads of the YWSC committee and the judge panel all came up to offer words of wisdom and encouragement to the finalists and the audience.

Mrs. Taeko Duckworth, Former Chair of the YWSC UK, gave a moving closing statement, sharing about her debilitating battle with Rheumatoid arthritis for several years, almost coming to a point of despair. However, she had a strong faith in God, the Creator, and His/Her spirit and energy that created this earth, and she believed that this energy could turn her illness around.

She expressed that in her life she had rejected God's love and taken it for granted. She had complained about problems instead of being grateful. This is often a strong defense mechanism most of us have, because of upbringing, experiences, etc. But she urged us all that it was time to break down this barrier and connect with God directly. It is not about religion, but about this original relationship with the Creator being restored as a way to help the body to stop attacking itself.

Mrs. Duckworth believes she can cure herself one day, but that forgiveness is also a key to breaking down that barrier to healing and fulfillment within ourselves.

Asmah Ahmed, Co-Chair of the YWSC Alumni Network, shared from the perspective as a previous YWSC finalist herself that what you take away with you from participating in this contest, regardless of the outcome, is the journey of reflection within yourself.



She shared that the purpose of the YWSC and the alumni network is for the participants to engage in a journey of self reflection and to express personal views on issues; to empower young women to continue this venture and support in their development; and to raise public speakers and community leaders.

YWSC Senior Judge, Mr. Timothy Miller, said that it is extremely meaningful to put your mind to something, such as creating and delivering a speech, as it helps to get to something you yourself are passionate about. It reinforces what is important to you, deepening your own conviction, and this leads you to help facilitate change and lead people.

He urged all winners and runner-ups to not step back from taking on this kind of challenge again - to take it whenever possible. To advocate for things they think are important.

YWSC Judge, Dr. Christina Sharff, described her own life as similar to "having it all" but more like "juggling it all" - in that she is raising a family

while pursuing a strong career - and that it can be a struggle, but also a real joy.

YWSC Judge, Rev. Kim Plumpton, urged the winners and runner-ups to "be the person you are called to be." She shared that God had called her to be a Minister, and she herself had encountered gender discrimination, which almost blocked her from fulfilling that calling. But she said that no matter the obstacle, you must fulfill that calling within yourself - "be encouraged to live your life with greater vision."



The YWSC is wholly beneficial to whoever readily takes on the challenge. Sanjana Poddar, 1st Place YWSC National Winner, agreed that the process of the speech contest is beneficial in itself: "You learn about yourself, what you take for granted, and you put your beliefs into your own words and are challenged to have the confidence to present it."

The YWSC now has an Alumni network of participants and finalists from 2015 till now, as a way to network, provide further leadership education, and open the way to work together and empower each other in their great works.

A very special thank you to all the wonderful volunteers who made this event and all regional events leading up to it a success! And a huge heartfelt thank you and recognition of the YWSC committee whose countless hours of sincere effort made all this possible: Mitty Tohma, Christa Rennie, Sharon Kabubi, Asmah Ahmed, Gloria Acuna Velasquez, and Keishin Hoshiko. Thank you!

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