

## Int'l Women's Day in UK Parliament, WFWP UK: More Men Need to Participate

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On the one hand, it was encouraging to see a committee room at the House of Lords filled to capacity with women of all ages and backgrounds to observe International Women's Day (IWD). Ironically, however, the participation of more men is essential for such discussions to make a more meaningful impact. This was noted by a number of panel speakers and comments from the floor, during an event hosted jointly by Baroness Verma and Mitty Tohma, (President of WFWP) on behalf of the Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP).

In spite of concerns about the spread of Covid-19, interest in this event had resulted in oversubscription. Baroness Verma, who has a background as a government minister tackling violence against women and girls, introduced the event by pointing out that IWD should reflect the conversations that are taking place throughout the year, not just on that particular day, and that men need to be involved in the conversation together with women.

Often, however, problems emerge when conversations take place without the involvement of women. Preet Gill MP, the first Sikh woman member of parliament, asserted that the inclusion of women is essential for lasting solutions in any peace process. She also argued that we should aim not at reducing gender-based violence in conflict zones but the prevention of conflict altogether.

Two of panel speakers at this event were previous participants and winners in the Young Women's Speech Contest (YWSC), an annual event to encourage young women to find their voice and receive guidance and encouragement to participate in public discourse.

Sherifa Carr emphasised the need for women to prioritise developing themselves by finding their purpose.

Too often she has seen women, in their brokenness, turning to men as father-figures or saviours to rescue them from their problems, all too often with regrettable consequences. Women cannot be both pitiful and powerful, she declared, so a choice must be made between the two. It is important, Sherifa Carr explained, to have a victor-mindset rather than a victim-mindset.

This sentiment was echoed by another YWSC alumna, Wiam Jafer, who offered that to make success, we need to observe our minds and become allies in each other's healing, which requires the virtues of generosity and compassion. Reflecting on the current response to the spread of Covid-19, Mrs. Jafer that rather than looking to blame people for conflict, the focus should be on mutual healing. She also identified the crucial role that women play in peace-building which starts in the home, by raising children, and not just one's own children, but also supporting the raising of children of one's neighbour and one's society.



Contributing to the discussion were two men, Councillor Mohamed Seedat, from Sherifa Carr's local council, and Dr Michael Balcomb, chair of the Europe and Middle East region of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. Cllr Seedat reflected on the scale of abuse against women and lamented the dearth of reliable data on the matter. He opined that violence against women is an issue on par with climate change and eradicating poverty, and challenged everyone to consider what they were doing locally to tackle violence against women and girls.

Dr Balcomb went further, calling men – especially young men – to get involved. For the men in the room, he set a challenge to get to learn more about 3 women present and to ask how to support them.

Within the constraints of the available time, Baroness Verma invited members of the floor to offer their perspectives. The heartfelt outpouring of personal stories about abuse and overcoming challenges provided a profound conclusion for everyone to ponder. Nevertheless, more men need to hear these stories and be moved to respond to them.

Only through cooperation will men and women together be able to elevate women to their rightful status as equals in society.