Speech at the United Nations

Fareed Khan/AP Images

Malala Yousafzai

SPEECH

This version of the selection alternates original text with summarized passages. Dotted lines appear next to the summarized passages.

NOTES

Malala Yousafzai was born in Pakistan in 1997. In 2007, the area in which she was born was invaded by a radical Islamist group called the Taliban. This group outlawed education for girls. In response, Yousafzai spoke out and publicly supported education for all. When she was fifteen years old, she was shot in the head by a member of the Taliban. Incredibly, she survived and was not frightened off or silenced. Since her recovery, she continues to speak publicly about universal education and gender equality. In 2014, she became the youngest person to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Yousafzai gives a speech to the United Nations on her sixteenth birthday. She begins by thanking everyone who supported her and wished her well as she recovered from the shooting, and the doctors and nurses who helped her. The United Nations calls the speaking event "Malala Day" to honor her. However, Yousafzai says that the day does not belong to her—it belongs to every woman, boy, or girl who has spoken out for her or his rights. The day honors those who work for "peace, education, and equality." And she reminds her listeners that thousands of people have been killed by terrorists and millions have been injured by them.

So here I stand ... one girl among many.
I speak—not for myself, but for all girls and boys.
I raise up my voice—not so that I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard.

Yousafzai explains what she feels are basic rights: the right to peace, to dignity, to equal opportunity, and to education. She recalls being shot and notes that the Taliban thought that bullets would silence her and people like her who speak out for human rights. But, she says, the Taliban failed, and the experience only made her stronger.

Next, Yousafzai tells her listeners that the purpose of her speech is not to call for revenge against the Taliban or other terrorists. Instead, she wants to give voice to "the right of education of every child." She includes the sons and daughters of terrorists among them. She says that she has learned compassion from spiritual and historical figures who serve as role models, such as Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Muhammad Ali Jinnah,[1] Gandhi Jee,[2] and Mother Teresa.[3] And she emphasizes the desire for peace in her heart.

1. **Muhammad Ali Jinnah** (moo HAM uhd AH lee JIH nah) politician who fought for a Muslim state separate from India during the early twentieth century. He became the founder of this state, now known as Pakistan.
2. **Gandhi Jee** (GAHN dee) Mohandas "Mahatma" Gandhi, a religious leader who fought for India's independence from Great Britain during the early twentieth century.
3. **Mother Teresa** (tuh RAY suh) Catholic nun who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for her work helping poor and sick people in India.

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I do not even hate the Talib[4] who shot me. Even if there is a gun in my hand and he stands in front of me, I would not shoot him. … This is what my soul is telling me: Be peaceful, and love everyone.

Yousafzai says that the expression "The pen is mightier than the sword" is true. Terrorists are afraid of the power of education—just as they are afraid of women and the power of their voice. She lists several recent terrorist attacks on female students, teachers, and social workers. She says that terrorists commit these acts because they are afraid of change and of equality.

Yousafzai next explains that terrorists misuse the name of Islam, saying that Islam is "a religion of peace, humanity, and brotherhood." She clarifies that in Islam, education is not only a child's right—it is his or her "duty and responsibility." She addresses the UN Secretary General and says that peace is necessary for education. She notes that in many places, including her country of Pakistan, "terrorism, wars, and conflicts" prevent children from going to school. She provides other examples of how women and children are suffering in the world. She includes victims of child labor in India, the destruction of schools in Nigeria, and the forced marriages of young girls in Afghanistan. She then explains why her focus is on women.

Dear fellows, today I am focusing on women's rights and girls' education because they are suffering the most. There was a time when women social activists asked men to stand up for their rights. But this time, we will do it by ourselves. … I am focusing on women to be independent to fight for themselves.

Yousafzai says it's time for both women and men to speak up, and she calls upon world leaders to take action. Peace deals, she says, must protect the rights of women and children. Governments should make sure that education is free and required for every child. To protect children, governments should also fight against terrorism and violence. And educational opportunities for girls should be expanded in the developing world.

Yousafzai wants all women to flourish, or develop in a healthy way. She continues her call to action.

We call upon all communities to be tolerant; to reject prejudice based on … color, religion, or gender; to ensure freedom and equality for women so that they can flourish. We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back.

She gives special encouragement to her female listeners.

We call upon our sisters around the world to be brave; to embrace the strength within themselves and realize their full potential.

Addressing the UN audience as "brothers and sisters," Yousafzai expresses the desire for schools and education for every child. She and her listeners believe in the power of their words and know that words "can change the whole world." Yousafzai realizes how important it is to be united when fighting for the cause of education.

4. Talib (tah LEEB) *n.* member of the Taliban.

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… If we want to achieve our goal, then let us empower ourselves with the weapon of knowledge, and let us shield ourselves with unity and togetherness.

Yousafzai then asks her listeners not to forget the millions of people who suffer from "poverty, injustice, and ignorance" or the millions of children who are not in school. They are all waiting, she says, for a time when they can live in peace and for a brighter future.

Let us pick up our books and pens. They are our most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world. Education is the only solution. Education First.

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