

Aisha Yusuf Speech to the 30th Session of the WGEPAD
May 25, 2022

Good afternoon UN dignitaries, civil society leaders, and distinguished guests!

I am truly honored to be able to speak before you here and to address the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent at the United Nations. I am aware that the 30th session is the first time the group is meeting in New York. I am both surprised and honored that I find myself here at the United Nations for such an important and meaningful event. The last time I had the chance to speak to UN Ambassadors, it was through a screen, so being here feels so surreal and I'm grateful to be in this historic and important building. I want to thank my teachers, my parents, the United Nations and the New York City Mayor's Office for International Affairs for giving me this opportunity. I also want to thank all of my fellow Junior Ambassadors at Liberty Avenue Middle School for showing up today to support me.

You probably are wondering who this young person is before you. My name is Aisha Yusuf. I am a 13-year-old eighth grader who enjoys law, reading and watching documentaries. I am one of four children. I was born in Nigeria and like most, my family and I migrated to the United States for better opportunities. I am a young girl that is proud to be Nigerian; where at home everyone knows each other and we are one big family. Everyone in the community helps each other when in need. We are unapologetically black.

I am also an alumni from the New York City Junior Ambassadors program at Liberty Avenue Middle school in East New York, Brooklyn. Today, I consider myself a young activist and I find myself becoming more interested in gender equality, especially dealing with my own experiences first-hand back in Nigeria. For example, there is a lot of pressure for girls like me to be able to do household chores such as cleaning, cooking, etc. I often

think about how gender equality impacts the lives of black women and girls like myself. These days, I am thinking about different ways I can advocate to bridge the gap of gender equality both in my own community and in countries where there are less opportunities for women to have careers, a sense of freedom, and choice to experience life itself. So, you all are probably wondering; *how did I get here?*

We are now at a different part of the pandemic: COVID-19 recovery efforts are happening, I have returned back to school, I can see my friends again and it is a good thing that we are moving forward.

However, I often reflect the onset of the pandemic and the whirlwind of emotions that it brought for me. Emotions that I was unable to understand. I remember how that time caused me to be more closed off, shy and uninterested. During that time, I was also deeply affected by the wrongful death of George Floyd. Watching such violence at the hands of police officers impacted myself, my family, and my community. Today we reflect on his passing two years later. I am still washed by the memory like it was yesterday. It is far too easy to witness the violence and trauma of black people throughout the world. I can still remember that uneasy feeling I felt two years ago. I remember thinking *Who will protect us? What can I do to change things?* It was also during this time, my teachers Mr. Telano, Ms. Manners and Ms. Ortiz told my class about the NYC Junior Ambassadors program and I decided to give it a try.

We were told that we were going to learn more about the City of New York and the United Nations. I only heard about the UN a few times growing up and thought it was a place for adults. I was unsure how interested I would be in a program like this. Our teachers explained the best way to understand issues around the world and the functions of the UN was through the Sustainable Development Goals.

My classmates were set on learning more about SDG # 5—Gender Equality. However, I was strongly against it. I felt as if people were already

doing work around Gender and not enough on peace and justice. After seeing constant police brutality of black people in this country and even in my own neighborhood of East New York, I thought nothing could be more important than that. Nothing could be more important than SDG # 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong **Institutions**). However, because I was so timid at the time, I didn't feel comfortable sharing my opinions. I was afraid that I would cause issues. *That would be the last time I felt silenced.*

Although I was frustrated over my class' decision, I quickly began to see there was a connection between the two goals. Thankfully for me, our class decided to focus on SDG 16 and human trafficking. We began by looking at issues related to gender that contributed to trafficking of young girls around the world. We found that beliefs about specific gender norms increase the likelihood of young girls becoming victims of violence or groomed for trafficking. We also learned about which victims tend to receive help, and which victims were less likely to find support.

For example, here in the U.S., women of color, particularly black women and girls might go much longer without receiving help than other victims of trafficking, and often are even further victimized by being treated as criminals by the justice system. This showed us that the inequities in the justice system could also go hand in hand with issues surrounding gender equality. I began to realize that all of these global issues occur in the same spaces, and that they are not separated. More work needs to be done to prevent human trafficking around the world. We can start by changing the way black girls are depicted in the media. We can also start by listening more to black girls and addressing our specific needs. It is important to allow girls like me to have opportunities where we get to experience the world in a different light and learn valuable lessons. With this in mind, I hope I can use this as an opportunity to be an example for Nigerian girls back home while still advocating for the continued progress for women, especially for women of color, in the United States.

Being a Junior Ambassador gave me a lot of **great** experiences that helped me gain a level of confidence in myself and ignited my passion for activism. My peers and I attended a meeting with the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence. We spoke with the Ambassador of the Dominican Republic and participated in an event at the United Nations Foundation where I got to recite a poem about peace, justice, and freedom. Most importantly, I was able to collaborate with my peers *on something that really felt important to me and wanted to make a difference in my community and around the world.*

For our capstone project, my fellow Junior Ambassadors and I created a website that is intended to both raise awareness, and provide a list of digital resources for victims and survivors. We also created an awareness video that generated interest from fellow students to know more about human trafficking. As an alumni, I know that I am an inspiration to our younger students at school and I encourage all of the youth in this room to do the same. All you need is a platform.

Never did I think I would experience the things that I am experiencing today. Two years ago, I went through a thick of a pandemic that significantly compromised my mental health. I also take the time to reflect on so many positives: I saw myself become more confident, and less shy. I learned that it is important to center girls like myself in conversations like these. I've met with city leaders, Ambassadors, met with the former Executive Director of UNICEF to demand my voice to be heard and now I am here today given the opportunity to share my experiences to local and global leaders who are here to listen! I am happy to hear and see everyone in this room is dedicated to work to protect and make children of African descent more visible. I am proud that you all are including us in your meetings and programs. *After all, aren't we working towards the future of all children around the world?*

I know my work as a young activist is far from over. I know that Aisha Yusuf is a work in progress where there should always be room to reflect,

improve, grow, and act. I will continue to stay positive and engaged. I will continue to learn more about the idea of solidarity and why that should be the root of our solutions to the world. If it is one thing, I have learned working with my peers is that nobody can fight inequality alone. **We must stick together and fight issues that affect all of us.** I will try to challenge myself more in events like these to draw connections between the local and the global. The SDGs were a perfect way for me to understand that.

I would like the grown-ups in this room to take a moment to reflect on my journey. I am now an eighth grader and will attend high school soon. I will continue to learn and speak on issues I care about from human trafficking, to gender inequality. There will be millions more children like me that are going to do the same. I ask these same questions to the young people in this room today:

- How will you challenge yourselves to act in the best interest of children?
- Are you working to make sure you are not just listening to some of us but all of us?
- How important is it for you to be an ally for children of African Descent?
- Are you doing all that you can to protect children of color in East New York, throughout the country and throughout the world?

If you are, let us work on our young people's future together.

I am Aisha Yusuf and thank you once again for your time!