

Assuming the mantle of Benazir Bhutto

The 16-year-old who was shot by the Taliban vows to overturn corruption in Pakistan as part of her mission to ensure that everyone is educated.

WHEN MALALA YOUSAFZAI [addressed](#) the [United Nations General Assembly](#) last year on 12 July—her sixteenth birthday—she wore around her shoulders a white shawl that had once belonged to Benazir Bhutto. It was, she tells us in her book *I am Malala*, one of two that Bhutto's children sent her as she lay recovering in a British hospital after she had been shot in the head by the Taliban.

At the time, in choosing on this momentous occasion to adorn herself with a garment once worn by the slain Pakistani leader, Malala appeared to be doing no more than drawing a connection, albeit one freighted with enormous significance, between herself and another famous Pakistani woman. Within a few months, however, her reasons for doing so would become chillingly transparent.

Malala Yousafzai is now an internationally renowned figure. She has met with President Obama, with Queen Elizabeth, and been interviewed by CNN's Christine Amanpour and the *Daily Show's* Jon Stewart. She has published a bestselling book and established [the Malala Fund](#), a non-profit initiative that invests in education projects around the world.

Malala seems to have all the hallmarks of an international "product", someone whose awful story had been carefully packaged into an aspirational message and assiduously promoted via the book, the charitable organization and the carefully orchestrated public appearances. How many other sixteen-year-olds have a chief of staff and an international public relations firm?



Extraordinary: Malala Yousafzai. SOURCE: SOUTHBANK CENTRE

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These somewhat cynical views were swept away when I heard Malala speak, at a packed Royal Festival Hall in London, on International Women's Day this year. Malala was a keynote speaker at the Women of the World (WOW) Festival, now an annual event at the Southbank Centre. She addressed the 2500-strong audience for fifteen minutes and then took part in a [half-hour Q & A session](#) with WOW Festival director Jude Kelly.

Malala is an extraordinarily articulate young woman, and her ability to command the attention of an audience does not rest entirely on her status as a survivor of a horrifying attack. After just a few moments of listening to her, what happened to her is



Malala at Girls Prep School in the Bronx, New York, which has a classroom named in her honour. [WWW.FLICKR.COM](http://WWW.FLICKR.COM)

no longer front of mind. No matter how much she has been managed and “packaged”, her self-assuredness cannot be faked. Nor can the spontaneity with which she responded to Kelly’s questions.

At times, she sounded like the teenager she still is. The girl who, behind the closed doors of their home in Birmingham, bosses her brothers: “I become a dictator, they have no freedom of expression or choice”. The girl who, while living in purdah in the Swat Valley, read the *Twilight* series of books and dreamed of being a vampire. But if you closed your eyes while she spoke, the calm assurance with which she articulated her mission to bring formal education to the world’s children made her sound older and authoritative.

It is clear that history has conferred the mantle of leadership on Malala Yousafzai. She was already an activist—she’d won a national prize at eleven for championing peace, and wrote a regular diary for the BBC—when she was shot. Now, she has apparently decided, the course of the rest of her life has been mapped out for her.

It is not hyperbolic to say that listening to Malala

speak of what she plans to do (and to some extent is already doing even as she finishes high school at a private school in England) brings to mind leaders such as Gandhi, Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King, all of whom devoted their lives to championing justice and equality for their people.

All of these were men. It is difficult to think of female leaders of comparable stature. Joan of Arc, who was just twelve years old when called to lead an army to drive the English out of France, is perhaps the closest. But a fifteenth-century martyr is a hardly a relevant role model for a twenty-first-century girl who Skypes her friends and who, while not herself a devotee, is familiar with Facebook and Instagram.

Malala Yousafzai’s mission is primarily directed at the female sex. Initially her focus was on the girls and women who were cloistered and clearly oppressed at the hands of the Taliban. But since coming to live in England she has been surprised, she told us, to learn that women in the west are also denied equality, even if they are allowed to drive and to walk around unaccompanied by men.

“In Pakistan, it’s clear to everyone that women are not treated equally,” she said. “Here, it’s hidden.”

It was a coincidence that 9 October 2012, the day that Malala was shot by the Taliban, was the very same day that Julia Gillard, the Prime Minister of Australia, delivered her famous “sexism and misogyny” speech. Both events were to reverberate around the world, and to have lasting consequences for the championing of women’s equality.

Had Malala not been airlifted to England it is doubtful that she would have survived her shocking injuries. As it was, part of her skull had to be removed and a moulded titanium plate fitted instead, as well as a cochlear implant because her hearing was permanently damaged by the gunshot blast.

She appears perfectly recovered now when she speaks. Even close up, on television and when she addressed the UN, she seems fine but “I will never be exactly the same,” she writes in her book. “I can’t blink fully and my left eye closes a lot when I speak.”

**T**HE TALIBAN HAS WARNED that if she returns to Pakistan she will be killed but Malala Yousafzai is undaunted. “I don’t want to be thought of as ‘the girl who was shot by the Taliban’ but ‘the girl who fought for education’”, she writes in her book.

That Saturday morning in London she told us she had abandoned her earlier plan to be a doctor. “I want to go into politics so I can help a whole country,” she said. “A doctor can only help one community.” It is “my dream that people would vote for me”.

A few months earlier, in a lengthy interview with the *Financial Times*, she first indicated her intention to become Pakistan’s second female leader, after Benazir Bhutto. When reminded that Pakistan is effectively [governed by the military](#) that allows civilian leaders only limited powers, Malala said, “As a politician I am going to change that rule.”

It is easy to dismiss Malala as not just ignorant of the risks but as reckless: by returning to Pakistan and seeking to become a politician she would be a target not just for the Taliban but also, potentially, the military. (Pakistan’s former leader, General Pervez Musharraf, has been formally indicted with Benazir Bhutto’s murder in 2007.)

Yet Malala insists she will go back to the land of her birth, and she will fight against the country’s corruption. “Pakistan needs true and honest politicians,” she told her London audience.

Listening to her, I felt a sense of dread. How could she not know the risks? Surely her minders—not to mention her family—would not permit such a foolhardy ambition? Yet if they had a mind to do so, why are they allowing her to even voice these plans?

Perhaps they believe the glare of the international spotlight will protect Malala. One can only hope that they are right. The history of Pakistan suggests otherwise, but maybe we are unwise to underestimate the girl who told Barack Obama to his face that his use of drones in her country was wrong. And whose talismanic attachment to Benazir Bhutto’s shawls is as much a mark of her courage as the way she has responded to the act of violence that changed her life.

**Anne Summers**



## Can you hack it?

New technology tools are letting us monitor every single thing we do, enabling a trend that has some serious consequences.



Australian artist Stelarc’s third ear. SOURCE: STELARC.ORG

IT IS THE LATEST TREND in health for those who want the most from their minds and bodies: body-hacking, or the attempt to “hack” and improve the way one’s body functions. The subculture has its roots in both technology and art: self-described body-hackers often have computing backgrounds and a hacker mentality,