

**T**he rallying cry could easily be “YES WIE CAN!” But the passionate message from the recently-held inaugural Women: Inspiration & Enterprise (WIE) London symposium – the brainchild of one-time British TV personality June Sarpong and Dee Poku – was aptly loud and clear:

“It is time women took their rightful place in the boardroom, political space and business world, and succeed.”

And when young women like Sarpong and Poku get the backing of high-profile female leaders from a variety of fields, you know they are on to something right. The list of WIE supporters is impressive, including the likes of Donna Karan (fashion designer), Queen Rania of Jordan, Melinda Gates (wife of Microsoft’s Bill), Nancy Pelosi (US Congresswoman), Jill Biden (US vice-president’s wife), Baroness Valerie Amos (UK life peer), Alek Wek (model and designer), Rosario Dawson (actress), Vivienne Westwood (fashion designer) and Lynn de Rothschild (chief executive, E.L Rothschild LLC).

A recent article, ‘*Revealed: The best and worst places to be a woman*’ published in the London *Independent* newspaper, exposed the deepening gender gaps that persist in the world and showed that women still have a lot of work to do to achieve social equality.

The article cites Iceland as the best place to be a woman because it “has the greatest equality between men and women, taking into account politics, education and employment and health

indicators”. Rwanda is noted as the best place to be a female politician because it “is the only nation in which females make up the majority of parliamentarians. Women hold 45 out of 80 seats” and Thailand is the best place to be ‘top dog’ because it has the greatest percentage (45%) of women in senior management roles.

Dee Poku (below) leads a discussion at the WIE London symposium and, right, with co-founder June Sarpong



# Women on Top

# Yes ‘WIE’ can!

Owning your success is the message. Empowering women and building a bridge of networks among women, the mission. But passion to see other women succeed is the driving force that propelled June Sarpong and Dee Poku (both of Ghanaian heritage) to set up Women: Inspiration & Enterprise (WIE) a platform aimed at delivering social change, inspiring and empowering a new generation of women leaders and advocates. They tell *New African Woman* why women must and need to support each other.

By **Belinda Otas**

The disparity of social and gender inequality faced by women is one area of society that Sarpong and Poku want to change. “There’s a need for a platform like WIE in most countries,” says Sarpong.

Poku adds: “I worked in the corporate sector and was aware of the imbalance between men and women in terms of leadership within companies. Also, the way women interacted with each other because there were so few of them in positions of power – everyone was sort of guarding their position carefully – you were almost colluding with the status

quo because you are worried about your own position. So we wanted to create a conference where women could network and support each other, and at the same time own their success. Not in an arrogant but in a confident way... the way that men do.”

“It’s not about luck; ‘Creative people take risks’; ‘You won’t get anything sitting on the couch’; ‘Failure is the door to success and every entrepreneur has had a failure’. These and many more were some of the nuggets of wisdom shared at the inaugural WIE London conference, which followed on from a successful event in the US.

Sarpong and Poku used the opportunity in London to advance the empowerment of women with a powerful panel of business and professional women, philanthropists and activists, who provided insightful and practical advice and shared their life lessons. Among the high-profile attendees who featured at the inaugural London conference were Alek Wek, Lynn de Rothschild, Rosario Dawson and Vivienne Westwood.

The event, which

coincided with International Women’s Day celebrations, covered topics such as ‘Telling Women’s Stories’ and ‘Business Women Leading the Way’, alongside workshops that focused on practical skills, including ‘The Art of Marketing Yourself’, ‘Realising Your Goals’ and ‘Owning Your Success’. Delegates were empowered and educated with first-hand knowledge passed on from women who are at the top of their field.

Sarpong and Poku are of Ghanaian heritage, born and raised in London and now based in the US. Sarpong is a veteran of British television, with a career that spans over a decade. She has taken on some of world’s most challenging live audiences, including hosting 2005’s ‘*Make Poverty History*’

## Women Who Inspire

from London's Trafalgar Square and in 2008, alongside Will Smith, compered Nelson Mandela's 90th birthday celebrations in front of 30,000 people. In 2007, she received an MBE (Member of the British Empire) in the Queen's New Year's Honours List for her services to broadcasting and charity.

Poku is a former Hollywood studio executive, whose professional background includes senior marketing roles at Paramount Pictures. She oversaw the release campaigns for films such as Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* and the Coen brothers' *O Brother Where Art Thou*, starring George Clooney. A highly experienced branding professional, Poku has worked with some of the world's most renowned brands, including Coca-Cola.

WIE is an inclusive platform irrespective of race or social background. Poku and Sarpong are keen to stress that inclusiveness is a core of what WIE is about. "It's all about bringing women from different walks of life together – women who probably didn't think they had anything in common but actually had a lot to offer and learn from each other."

The WIE co-founders want every woman who walks through their conference doors to be a vital part of the discourse. Poku elaborates: "June and I were in positions where we had some great people who supported and helped us on our journey to success. Lots of women don't have that. Hence, it's important for us to create a democratic conference and every woman has a chance. There are so many women who are left behind because they don't come from the same background or don't have the same education opportunities and a lot of undiscovered talents are going to waste. Hence, it's vital that anyone who has a drive and passion and wants to succeed is able to attend." She adds: "We are both black women of Ghanaian heritage and we are aware that there's racism in the world and it's important to us to see more women who look like us achieving."

One of the key topics of discussion in London was the ability of women to tell their own stories. Hannah Pool, author and journalist, was one of the panellists during this session. She said: "Stories are our foundations,

they give us solid ground. Without them we fall like a tree without roots. Sharing is a two-way thing, you both learn and grow. Women are too often told to be wary of each other, when in reality if we unite and share we are an unstoppable force."

Challenging the one-sided narrative about women, Sarpong emphasises why it is crucial for women to tell their stories because "we need a balanced view. How can we have only one story being told or stories about women through the lens of men? It makes no sense".

Poku brings a robust analysis to the need for women to own their narrative. "I was very struck by how the movie industry is driven by men. Though you get a few women in leading roles, men are often the stars of the movies and women are just the sidekicks and wives."

She adds: "There are so few women behind the camera, whether it's writers or directors, and what you end up with is this certain bias towards a certain kind of movie and those are the stories we are telling our daughters. It's a very subliminal, subtle thing, but if a young girl is always seeing a woman as a secondary role and character, those are some of the values we are instilling in the next generation and that definitely applies in the media."

Likewise, building a strong support system for women is another factor Poku and Sarpong want to encourage through WIE. Poku says the need to build a stronger sense of sisterhood among women is a fundamental part of WIE. "We instil those values in women that if you win, we both win. The funny thing is that men do it naturally and that's where the old boys' network comes from. I know it's a generalisation because there are lots of women who are supportive of other women. But I think in the professional world there certainly isn't enough of it. I think the reason for this is because we are still finding our place and some of it comes from that protective instinct women have. Hopefully, the more we talk about it, the more women will see the need to support each other women in their profession." To this effect, Sarpong and Poku plan to build an online network for women, which according to Sarpong will be "a space that's safe to be honest about the difficulties we face as women, support

each other and not necessarily see each other as competition, because your success is my success. That's one thing we don't do well as women. Usually, women are the first to be back-biting and what we need to do is change that."

WIE's presence in London resonated with highly supportive delegates. For example, Roby Spens, an international etiquette consultant, educator and speaker whose expertise is specific to the issues faced by professional men and women, says she attended based on feedback from colleagues in New York who went to the US event and were impressed by the quality of speakers. Spens says

Sarpong and Poku (below) stress that WIE is an inclusive platform. Pictured right: Alek Wek, Rosario Dawson and (bottom) Vivienne Westwood



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she gained the most insight from discussions centred on making your business work and the importance of building a power base from which to leverage. She adds that the need for women to respect and support each other "stood out with great importance, because your people skills play a great part in your success. Women need each other as mentors, role models and business partners. As an ambitious woman embarks on her journey, it's important for one to remember the art of civility, trust, respect, support and acknowledgement of her fellow woman".

For two women of African origin, WIE could not claim to be a global platform if Sarpong and Poku did not lay a foundation in Africa.

Poku says they take the potential of an African conference very seriously: "We are both very proud of our West African heritage and it's really important to us that we can give back in a constructive way. I think the needs of Africa are obviously very different to the needs of the West. So we can talk about empowerment but it will mean something different to the African woman." She adds that "what's crucial for us is that we want to present Africa from a position of strength. There's a very one dimensional view of Africa, which is poverty, starvation, disenfranchisement, but there are men and women doing incredible things. It's paramount to us that we show Africa from a multidimensional view. We want to show bustling cities and economic development, as well as presenting the issues at hand." At present, they are considering Ghana as the venue for an African conference, though it is not set in stone.

It remains to be seen what impact WIE will have on an African audience, but one cannot deny that having two women of African descent who have successfully created a platform that speaks to the core of womanhood is no ordinary feat.

NAW has always been about the empowerment of the African woman and a platform such as WIE reiterates that African women, young and old, at home and in the diaspora, have a lot to offer beyond the dictates of patriarchy. Sarpong and Poku are living proof that women can succeed and have every right to own their success. ■