



A PASSION FOR *empowerment*

The founders behind Women Empowered talk friendship, feminism and self-fulfilment with Jo Payne.

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HEN REENA RANGER HAD AN IDEA FOR A WOMEN'S NETWORK THAT WOULD CONNECT AND INSPIRE PEOPLE, the first person she told was her friend and neighbour Mona Remtulla. "I am sure there is a need for this, don't you?" Reena asked, "Could this actually work?" Two years and many success stories later, the answer to that question is invariably a big fat yes, it could work and it has.

Women Empowered is a social initiative that gives women the skills, the network and the confidence to achieve their own personal goals. It aims to provide a forum for those attending to find support, mentoring and inspiration on their journey to personal fulfilment. The pair are very clear that the aim of Women Empowered is not to encourage every woman to be an astronaut, lawyer or entrepreneur, it is about inspiring personal success, whether that be in business, motherhood, or any personal goal.

The events are very accessible, there isn't a membership list or criteria the attendees have to meet – you don't even have to be a woman! The founders were very aware that men are very much part of the discussion and so every event has a male keynote speaker.

So far, Reena and Mona have organised several events, the first of which was called Ordinary Women Can Do Extraordinary Things. "Although we are already extraordinary, so I think maybe it should have been called extraordinary women can do even more extra, extra, extraordinary things!" laughs Reena. At that event, the speakers included the Government Spokesperson for Higher Education Women and Equalities Baroness Verma, the television news presenter Tasmin Lucia-Khan, and the businesswoman behind Nosh Detox, Geeta Sidhu-Robb.

Geeta had once been a high-flying lawyer married to an equally successful husband – she had it all, the house in Chelsea, the fleet of luxury cars and a private jet. When the company she had formed with her husband collapsed, her life of luxury was gone in a day. She was forced to live on a friend's sofa for six months. From this, she managed to balance setting up her business and raising her three children.

Geeta's story is a perfect example of the type of path that Women Empowered wishes to highlight. "When we choose a speaker, they often have a journey. It's that journey that's inspirational – the difficult times, how they overcame the obstacles, all that feeds into their success," explains Mona.

A recent event focused on politics and traditionally male-dominated professions. At the event, Priti Patel, the MP for Witham, enthused about the importance of women being a visible part of public life, and it being vital to ensure that community leaders and

champions ensure that the next generation of women can see politics as an avenue for them.

And it isn't just about inspiration and no follow-through. Each event has enablers, people or companies who can act as mentors after the events. At the political event, for example, the Women's Network from both the Conservative and Labour parties attended. "We're not saying that everyone has to be an entrepreneur. We're not saying everyone should want to be a politician or strive to be in the media. Those speakers are meant to inspire you and ignite something within you. So, instead of listening to this, going home and six months later nothing has happened, we have enabling partners that can give practical advice too," explains Reena, who has been inspired to run for a place on the local council herself.

This fact should not surprise anybody that has met Reena. Her passion for Women Empowered is palpable, as are her energy and ideas. After having her second child and becoming consumed by motherhood, she felt lost. "I wanted to be Martha Stewart, but without the insider trading," she jokes. "I forgot who I was and, as much as I love being a mum, I missed doing something with my brain and I didn't know how to go back into it. I'd go to the baby groups and all the women would be asking the same thing: What do we do now?"

And so, the idea of pairing women that needed inspiration with motivational figures was born. In her pre-motherhood role, working full time with her father, she would attend many lectures and be blown away by the inspirational stories she heard. If only her peers could have access to these types of inspirational

stories, Reena was sure it could make a difference.

"Sometimes, as women, you're trying to have your career, be a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, but you can sometimes forget that you're *you* as well. That's what Women Empowered is, to find that thing that makes you, *you*. Maybe it's something that you've forgotten or you've always wanted to do. It's to get that spark back," she explains.

That spark is evident when talking to Mona and Reena. They describe themselves as Yin and Yang, indeed if Reena is fire, Mona is most certainly water. Methodically spoken and efficient with her words, Mona is a calming influence on the lively Reena. "We had some negativity when we first started out" she explains. "Some people didn't understand what we were trying to achieve. There were existing professional



networks and some people couldn't see that there was a pool of women who arguably needed a network more with absolutely no access to one, or only had a network in a particular field and were finding it difficult to branch out into something new and needed inspiration and guidance.

"We knew there was a need. We put our reservations aside and thought we'd do one or two events and if it doesn't work, we'll stop. What's the worst that can happen? And it worked."

Despite their disparate personalities, it is a similar philosophy and outlook on life that binds these two self-styled "partners in crime". Mona was born in Tanzania to entrepreneurial parents who imported fabric to sell in their chain of stores. Her hard-working parents had a big impact on Mona.

"As a child during the school holiday,

I was always taken to the stores so I always saw how hard my parents worked and that work ethic was instilled in me from an early age." Mona and her husband moved to London 14 years ago with their daughter Ridhaa, and started their own digital marketing company.

Entrepreneurial spirit is also strong within Reena. Born and brought up in the UK, she also witnessed her family building up a business in her formative years. Twenty years ago her father started a freight forwarding business, and after a decade diversified into supplying goods and products. Reena started working full-time for Sun Mark on leaving university, and still works there today. She is understandably proud of her father's journey, from being the eighth and posthumous child of Sardar Nanak Singh (a political leader that protested against the partition of India, and was killed

saving the lives of protesting students in 1947), to growing his business to win the Queen's Award for Enterprise four times in a row, the only company to have done so.

Neither woman would describe themselves as a feminist in the traditional sense. "The word feminist conjures up the image of bra burning, forceful, misogynistic people, and we never want to be that," explains Mona. "A woman might want to bake all day long, and who are we to say that's just not right. I think the most helpful thing we can do is encourage women to be the best at whatever they choose to do, rather than try to impose a set of values."

"That's true feminism," explains Reena. "You should be able to do what you want to do. There is no ideal woman. In a really idealistic way, you should just be the perfect YOU – whatever that is."

When Women Empowered started, the aim was to create seven events, if they could help seven people become inspired to make a change, "to mix things up", then that would be good enough, Mona explains.

"Now, the way things are going, we're hoping we'll do bigger events and then do smaller bespoke events to cater for those people who want to take that one step forward," says Mona.

This social initiative, which started out as a conversation between friends, has gathered some high profile support very quickly. Its many champions include Kanya King MBE, the founder of MOBO, Ruby McGregor-Smith CBE, the CEO of MITIE Group, and Alpesh Patel, author and founder of Praefinium Partners.

When Reena and Mona are asked about their plans for the future, they look at each other and cackle. "World domination, empowered women and men everywhere!" they say. Joking aside, Reena quotes a Buddhist saying to explain what Women Empowered aims to do: "Thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle, (and the life of the candle will not be shortened)". The mix of the spiritual and the practical, as with the personalities of the organisation's founders, may be a heady recipe for success.

www.womenempowered.co.uk

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