



GENDERHOPES
WORKING TO END GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

**Interview of the Month
Hanna Naima McCloskey
Founder & CEO of Fearless Futures
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1. GenderHopes: You are the CEO of Fearless Futures, can you tell us about the objectives of the organization and how it works to achieve its goals?

Hanna McCloskey: We run gender and leadership development programmes for girls in school and women and men in the workplace. What makes us unique is that we explicitly support interrogation of the system, placing structural inequality at the non-negotiable centre of our work. We offer multi-week programmes in schools and the workplace that endeavour to develop grass-roots movements that take forward transformative agendas of equality within organisations.

Our participants begin by engaging with knowledge of gender, its intersecting inequalities and the often invisible and limiting power structures that maintain the status quo. However, as we know, understanding that gravity (or inequality) exists, does not allow you to launch a rocket into space. Fearless Futures programmes go on to develop participants' leadership capacities to practise positive, conscious action to drive social justice. All participants take part in 'peer power' - the cascading and amplifying of their understanding and engagement with the issues of equality to their communities, ensuring the change they want to see is deep and embedded.

We run school programmes working with 14-18 year old girls, workplace programmes working with women, and we connect different generations of women meaningfully through workplace to school programmes, creating collaborative spaces in which women and girls work together on community-focused social change projects.

By grounding ourselves in the realisation of change through collaborative, community-led social justice in schools and businesses, we ambitiously hope the need for Fearless Futures to exist will cease in the next ten years!

2. Society often puts pressure on young women to focus their efforts on their physical appearance. In your opinion, how can this situation be changed so that young women are encouraged to focus on their intellectual capacities?

If only there was just one way! I think that Step 1 would be for each of us to become conscious and aware of the omnipresent nature of the media we are inadvertently consuming, because sexism, racism, ableism are no normalized within media. The images and narratives (whether it's adverts, movies, TV, news etc.) we digest tend not to appear with a big speech bubble next to them letting us know that their content is toxic and damaging to our sense of self. Step 2 – resistance! I'm inspired by the phrase "loving yourself in a world that profits from your self-doubt is a radical act". This is so true. It takes conscious, daily effort, to accept our bodies as they are and to remind ourselves that our contribution is great whether or not others may find us visually appealing. So both challenging the narratives we hear from ourselves in our own minds informed by society (I'm not thin enough, my boobs aren't big enough...) and nurturing our female friends and family by stating as fact that they are enough exactly as they are, are essential. Ultimately, it is finding and creating communities that are grounded in "radical self love" that will sustain us and give space to our full sense of expression (including our intellectual capacities).

3. What would be your advice to a young woman entering the work force?

My advice would be to think about your economic power when considering roles and career options. Being concerned with getting a good salary is typically seen as something that women shouldn't want nor need; there is a real anxiety around even thinking that it could be important – and the roots of this are of course gender norms. However, financial and economic independence is important, though for all manner of structural reasons is not always possible. While there is much work to be done to challenge the entrenched, diminished value society places on "caring" roles despite how hugely important for society they are – we in tandem need to be ensuring that women are supported to critically think about and transgress gender norms that suggest these well-paid (traditionally male) paths aren't for them (engineering, technology, construction, for example) and in turn increase their economic power.

4. Can you share any stories from your career, where you had to overcome barriers due to your gender?

Before I set up Fearless Futures I was an investment banker (which of all places, unusually, re-ignited my social justice warrior). I was deeply conscious of the gendered nature of the environment I was in: whose voices were called on – and then listened to, who got praise and who didn't and for what, who got staffed on which projects, amongst other areas. I was presumed to be a

Personal Assistant on a number of occasions, which is not a problem in and of itself, but it was simply because I was a woman in that environment that led people to assume that that's the reason I was there at all. Women (myself included) far more than men were asked/expected to engage in office chores (planning the Christmas party or offsite, taking notes in meetings, buying leaving gifts for people and so on) – all of which are an additional demand that most men simply weren't expected to participate in. Then there is the toll of being a minority in any sense and the feeling of having to be “better than” in order not to be exposed or marked for whatever your identity is. All these items may sound small, but they add up!

Overcoming these issues – calling people out, resisting and refusing to do what you know your male peer wouldn't be asked to do – all takes courage, and energy. And where I could, I acted.

There is no doubt that working in investment banking is to operate in a world of huge power and privilege. It is also a reminder that privilege is relational and context driven, and women were generally not at the top of that particular hierarchy.

5. Gender is an important topic that people are increasingly aware of, but still may not necessarily understand how they can affect positive change. While gender stereotypes vary from society to society, in what ways can men and women work to make a difference?

The structures that inform our societies are really, really deep-rooted and go back centuries and centuries. The task of moving towards a liberatory future where we are free from the confines of assumptions around gender, race, sexuality and more requires each of us “unlearning” what society has taught us. It takes a deep and personal understanding of our power and privileges as individuals (that all people are implicated in) – because we are *all* fed a diet of sexism, racism, ableism and heteronormativity – and so even when we feel like we're being “good people” we can unintentionally begin reproducing deeply harmful behaviours. It's people who inform our culture, our institutions and in turn our society. So, if you really care, you need to educate yourself about these issues and, to use a bell hooks phrase, turn “ways of knowing, into habits of being”. Turn your knowledge into everyday action.

6. What's your vision for the future in terms of gender equality in the UK?

I think that Audre Lorde's wonderful words are really important to think about here: “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives”. To me this means that we can't just think about “gender” and at the same time give no attention to race, sexuality and class, for example: they are all connected.

So for gender equality to be a reality, it means we need to think beyond just having equal numbers of men and women on boards - where it is not inconceivable that such a goal could be achieved all the while the very same

firm doesn't pay its cleaners a living and dignified wage. The two for me are connected issues.

For equality to be achieved, we need to be challenging all forms of oppression. Sometimes I wonder what living in a truly free world for us all will be like – I'm not sure I can entirely imagine it right now – but I know once we're there, it'll be awesome.

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Hanna Naima McCloskey is the Founder & CEO of Fearless Futures. She is of Algerian-British heritage and has worked for the United Nations, NGOs and the Royal Bank of Scotland, across communications, research and finance roles; and has lived, studied and worked in Israel-Palestine, Italy, USA, Sudan, Syria and the UK. She has a BA in English from the University of Cambridge and an MA in International Relations from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, with a specialism in Conflict Management.