

FARAH MOHAMED IS AN ENABLER



SUBJECT

Farah Mohamed

INTERVIEWER

Berry Liberman

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Founder of G(irls)20

PHOTOGRAPHER

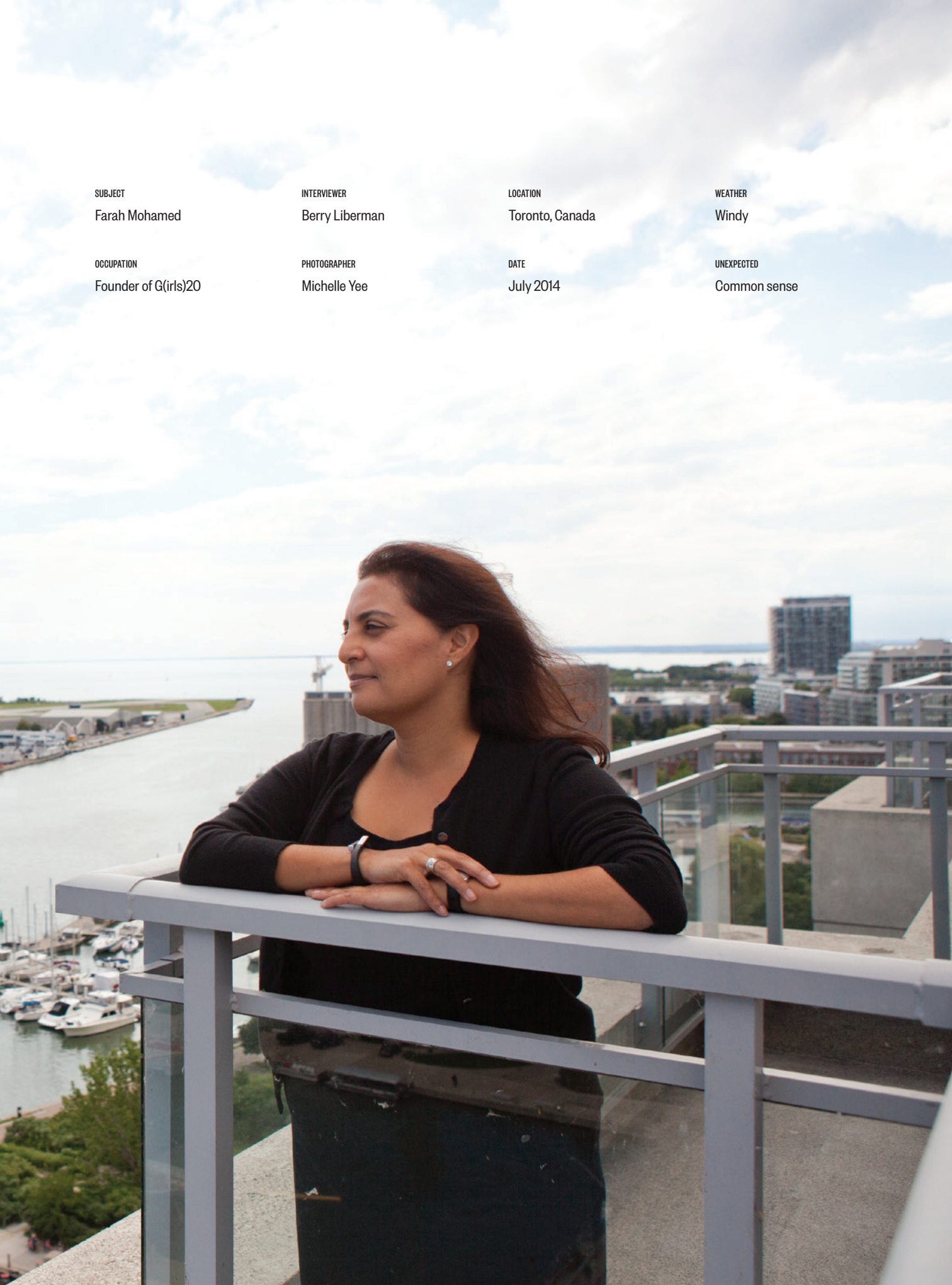
Michelle Yee

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UNEXPECTED

Common sense



In 2012, Farah Mohamed was voted in the top 25 most influential women in Canada. A far cry from her childhood as a refugee fleeing Uganda with her family, which saw them leave a life of plenty for a life of hard work and sacrifices as Idi Amin expelled all Asian-Ugandans in the early 1970s. Farah grew up aware of those sacrifices and conscious of her privileged fate. Today, her resume is a list of dazzling achievements, from politics, philanthropy and finance to climbing Mount Kilimanjaro—feats, which according to Farah, involved no risk-taking at all. That is, until she became the founder of G(irls)20, an organisation which enables young women to design solutions that economically advance girls and women around the world. For Farah, life has become a commitment to challenge the status quo, to “push that envelope, take that risk, dive into the deep end.”

I first met Farah at the Skoll World Forum in Oxford, a gathering of social entrepreneurs, thinkers and changemakers who are tackling the world’s biggest problems. Just the place you’d expect to find a person who describes herself as “disruptive.” A brief chat in the tea tent was not enough, so we planned to catch up again. Months later on Skype—it’s midnight in Toronto and midday in Melbourne—Farah is planning a trip to Australia for the G(irls)20 Summit, and I’m brimming with questions.

Every year, the G(irls)20 Summit strategically meet in the lead up to one of the world’s most powerful gatherings—the G20. Women between the ages of 18–20 are selected from the G20 nations to define the issues they feel are most important and require global attention. Make no mistake, this is a very big deal. One of the strongest arguments for solving global poverty problems is the empowerment of women. Recent studies show undeniably, that education and financial liberation of women—from land ownership rights to banking—brings measurable, scalable impact to the entire community. For the first time in history, women are being valued as core social, economic and political players.

Yet violence and prejudice continue to plague society. The road is long and for those of us impatient for change, it seems much too long and too arduous. That’s why Farah Mohamed and G(irls)20 are seating young women at the table, placing their agenda wholly in view and putting hope back into the conversation.



“Cynicism is like the death of creation.”

BERRY LIBERMAN: So, tell me, what is G(irls)20?

FARAH MOHAMED: G(irls)20 is a Canadian-based, globally active, organisation that puts at its very heart the importance of economically advancing girls and women around the world. Basically, we took the concept of G20 and said, “If you are truly serious about growing your economies, stabilising your countries, you need to use all of your resources. Half your human resources—human resources being one of the most important resources—are girls and women. You clearly have to invest in girls and women if you’re going to reach those growth targets.” We took that concept and put girls at the centre—18 to 20-year-old girls, one from each G20 country, as well as other countries. We look at the agenda of the G20 two months before they meet so we can give recommendations back. And while we’re doing that, we invest in the girls.

If you only get together and tell stories, then all you’ve done is have a nice little “kumbaya” meeting. So we go to the host country—this year it’s Australia—we bring these girls together from different backgrounds, over the course of 10 days and spend 50 per cent of that time investing in the girls. Let’s spend two days looking at the issues the G20 leaders will be looking at, a day strategising and what the recommendations should be, and then present it to the G20 leaders. In this case, we’re in negotiations with the prime minister’s office to have it actually hand over the communiqué to the prime minister. And then—the part I love the most, the girls have new ideas and new networks, new skills—let’s send them back home and get them to start their own initiative based on what they’ve learned, with ongoing support. That is what G(irls)20 does.

That’s remarkable. Why such young women, and only in that age bracket?

It was a big decision, but we’re actually going to raise it to 23 next year. We chose the original category because after consulting with people who work in this area and looking at what was coming out of the International Labour Organization, the OECD [The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development], the World Bank—these are the developmental years for girls.

We believe that you need to engage young women at the age when they’re starting to make some very big decisions about their careers. They’re either just coming out of high school, maybe starting their first job, maybe trying to figure out what career to take. This is such an important time for young people. Now we’ve decided to raise it to 23, because we’re dealing with some pretty big issues. It’s important to adjust the age in different countries. In some countries, you might find an 18-year-old is right up there with a 23-year-old and vice versa.

I’m very concerned that politics includes just one demographic; mostly it’s older men. So I’m fascinated with the idea of crafting these really important policy documents with certain age brackets...

Yes. We’re not just about putting together a policy document. We’re really trying to be true to our tagline, which is: “cultivating a new generation of leaders.” If we start when their ideas are already formulated, or if they’ve taken particular positions, we’ve missed that window. Right?

I think it’s great to engage elders and seniors on particular issues because they have lots of wisdom. When we’re looking at where the world should go around economic policies and opportunities, I think we have to have our pulse on what young people need, particularly as we face things such as massive unemployment. What are young people going to do? What do they want to do? Where do they see the economic benefit? Where do they see the challenges?

I have found the government of Australia in particular, over the last five summits, to be incredibly open to hearing from young people. There seems to be a desire to say, “Look, we know what we know and what don’t we know.” And that has been unusual. That has been unprecedented. At least from here...

Hah! I’m not sure if you’ll find that the case this year. We’re on rather a rocky road. Yeah, your politics are very interesting. There’s no doubt. But my communications with the Sherpa’s office and the prime minister’s cabinet have been very open and inviting. I think that speaks to Australia taking its role as the chair of the G20 incredibly seriously.

So how do you select the young women that come along for each G(irls)20 Summit? The first step, I think, is the most important: we work with more than 40 different organisations around the world. We get them to disseminate the opportunity. It’s not Farah Mohamed sitting in Toronto trying to figure out who to go. The delegates can apply in many different ways. Where they have access to technology we ask them to directly apply to us. There’s a seven-question application form. We don’t look at their socio-economic status, we do not look at their academic status. We look at how innovative are they, how creative are they, how focused they are on their community service. What are their ideas for G20 leaders? Then we ask the girls to try send in a video if they can, and they must send in reference letter. If they can’t apply through the digital way, we ask them to either mail or fax something in, or they can work with one of our 40 partners to get something in.

Why, in the last decade particularly, are we seeing this surge globally in awareness and support of women’s issues? What’s changed? I think there are a couple of factors that have created this perfect storm. One has been a change in the way women are in the workforce. It used to be unusual to have this many women in the workforce. We have created this culture where women can be great mothers and great employees and CEOs and presidents and prime ministers. And this didn’t come easy, right? But mostly, we’ve seen great success at having women in leadership positions. Success breeds success.

Then, we’ve seen great leadership on this issue. When you have people like the prime minister of Japan or President Clinton or Desmond Tutu saying, “We need to pay attention to the role of women in society,” then people start paying attention. So you’ve got that economic factor, you’ve got that leadership factor. I think the last thing you have is people saying, “Hang on a second—this shouldn’t be the exception to the rule. It should be the rule.” Girls should have every opportunity, girls can be engineers, girls can be doctors. Yes, we have challenges in certain parts of the world where women are not afforded the same access to education or jobs. But slowly, that is changing. Look at the revolution in Egypt. Women were at the heart of that.

This is where I personally struggle. Women were at the forefront of the revolution in Egypt, but it was also this time when they were raped in the streets; sexually brutalised. I share that struggle. It’s not an issue of developed versus developing. Violence against women exists and it should not exist. Period. It exists in the home, it exists at work. But you’re seeing a shift. For example, there’s a program in India called Ring the Bell. This was an India-wide community-based program that called on people to ring their neighbour’s bell when they heard women being beaten in their own homes.

We were in Mexico for our summit and every year, we choose an issue that even though it's not on the G20 agenda, we believe should be addressed. When we were in Mexico, we chose violence against women in the workplace. And what we saw was that because the government realised women cannot go to work and be productive if they were going to be in violent situations, they were rolling out a cross-country campaign.

Wow. Initiated by the G(irls)20 Summit? No, it started before we got there. What we were able to do was shine a light on it from an economic point of view.

You've got young women coming from regions of the world that are very fraught politically. If the key to economic growth and change is the empowerment of women, how do we get developing nations and countries with authoritarian regimes to understand this, or will they just follow the curve?

A bit of both. I think in places like India you see rape, violent against women. But we also see many, many women joining the workforce. There's a study that showed one billion women will join the workforce in the next decade. So if

India and China are going to keep up with growth, they've got to actually have humans able to do the work. Which means they have to employ women. They can't just do it with men alone. They're also seeing the quality of work that comes from women.

If women owned more land, they wouldn't just be farmers, they'd be small business owners. In many countries, you can't own land if you're a woman. We're seeing that change. That's a very developmental issue but it's actually starting to take hold because we're seeing the economic benefit. I think when you have people, again, like the prime minister of Japan, who has said the Japanese economy can only grow if women are a part of it, that's a huge message.

I'm really glad you're doing the work you're doing and I'm not—I'd be so impatient and frustrated the whole time [laughs].

To be frank with you, I get frustrated. I think the best thing that can happen is there's no need for me

to have to empower girls or women because that is what happens. Not what needs to happen, but is happening.

Imagine if I talked myself out of a job, wouldn't that be great?

You know what I think is really striking—look at the women in positions of power. We only ever used to look at who was around G20 and say, “Oh look! Angela Merkel's there.” That's shifted. Look at the International Monetary Fund, headed up by Christine Lagarde. This is remarkable.

You sound really hopeful... Talk to me about your optimism in the light of a very frightening and often bleak political, economic and environmental climate.

I think my optimism comes from the delegates. You meet these young women who don't see gender as holding them back. The other thing is, I've seen great results. At the end of it we

say, “Go back and do something in your community.” I love that an 18-year-old girl will leave our summit, go back to Indonesia and start a mobile library. That's crazy! She's 18! My optimism comes from spending time with these young women. They see themselves as the next prime minister or CEO or farmer or whatever they want to see themselves as. They're not told what they're going to be.



There are days where I'm reading the newspapers and feel so down and out, like, How will we ever fix the world's problems? There are many of them. But I have to believe that I can continue this job and make the kind of investment that I do.

A wise friend recently said to me, "Hope is not something you have or something you wish for, it's something you do."

Yes. I think that is so wise. Every year, when I walk away from the summit, I'm dead tired. But I'm as tired as I am completely revved up. It is the most unique feeling in the world to be equally as exhausted as you are exhilarated. Truly.

I was raised by people who said, "If you don't like it, fix it. Don't bitch about it, don't complain about it." These are two people who grew up very, very wealthy in Africa, lost everything because they had to come to Canada as refugees. And guess what? Survival instinct kicks in, right?

Tell me about your parents' journey and subsequently yours... I get very emotional when I talk about my parents. I don't think that I would ever have had the strength of character to do what they did. Our heritage is Indian, but my parents were born in Africa. They lived very comfortable lives in Africa. They had my sister in London, in Wimbledon, and then they came back to Africa, and had me. In 1972, Idi Amin decided that Asian Ugandans were no longer welcome in Uganda. So he kicked them all out. They were given very little time to leave with whatever they could take. So my parents jumped on a plane and they came to Canada, because the prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, said, we'll keep it open until every last Asian Ugandan is through that door.

What leadership! It's funny, no one really knows the full extent of the relationship between Pierre Trudeau and the Aga Khan. But there was an affinity between Canada and Ismailis—they're a sect of Muslims, the Shi'ite category, very liberal minded. Canada is a country known for—or was, maybe, I hope it still is—its "humanitarian" view of the world. So if people are in danger, we have a very open policy towards refugees. So this policy allowed this body of people, 30,000 of them, in a very short period of time, to find their way to Canada. So much so that when Prime Minister Trudeau died some 10 years ago or so, the Aga Khan was an honorary pall bearer at his funeral.

Wow! Isn't that crazy? Anyway, my parents came to Canada. My father's sister was in the town that we moved to. Everyone got spread out. So some family ended up in Switzerland, some in Germany, some in Russia, some in Miami. Everyone just went wherever they could. So my parents went to Canada and they were raising two kids without much money.

We grew up without a lot of stuff. We went to Niagara Falls a lot because it was free entertainment! And my parents were very big on keeping our family together. They came to Canada speaking six different languages and they only spoke English in the house so my sister and I would learn English. My sister was only three so she had a very slight British accent. I only spoke Swahili and now I can't speak any, but my parents decided we were going to speak English so we would learn the way of being in Canada. When my sister and I were old enough, we had to go and volunteer, so we volunteered at nursing homes, my sister had a paper route. We were very civically minded. So I think it was just ingrained in us. That if you wanted to make the world a better

place you'd better do your part. And we've only recently started talking about this, but they felt pretty indebted to Canada too.

Listening to your story of coming into a liberal, pluralist, humanitarian country like Canada—which Australia once was—makes me think of what we're experiencing here at the moment: violence, aggression and enormous xenophobia towards refugees and asylum seekers, who come for solace and often feel so indebted to the nation that welcomes them.

Yeah. And many nations are built on that. Typically, refugees or immigrants work very, very tough jobs. They build communities and countries and become the backbone of them quite often. Canada's a country made up of refugees, it's a country of immigrants.

As is Australia. Yes! Very much so! But I've been to Australia three times in the last year and I've noticed there doesn't seem to be a great openness towards people who are from "away," if I might put it that way.

"People who are from away." That's the way we should put it and it would be less aggressive. I think being isolated and affluent has somehow dimmed the Australian sensibility to struggle. This week, the Australian Government sent a boat of Tamils back to Sri Lanka. I think this country is in crisis, a moral crisis.

Wow. Well I hope it hasn't turned the tide. When you have political shifts, when somebody comes in and changes the way your social fabric works, people can't just assume that that's okay. It will

start to take over, slowly. It'll creep into your social fabric; it'll creep into the way you do immigration.

And that's what we're seeing. Well I worry that Canada has the potential to go down that path and I'm glad we haven't yet, we still understand that we're a nation made up of immigrants.

You've come from such an interesting background. And you've been called a social entrepreneur—I want to talk about that term. I want to know what that means to you.

Well, I don't think I ever thought of myself as an entrepreneur, until I was in the back seat of a cab in Mexico City and this woman turned around and said, "So when did you figure out that you were going to be an entrepreneur?" And I looked at her and I'm like, "What?". She said, "Yeah Farah! You might not think of yourself that way, but you are in fact a social entrepreneur." The way I think about being a social entrepreneur is first of all, I'm out to change the term "not for profit." I hate being defined by what I'm not. So when people say, "Oh you're not for profit!" I'll stop them. Dead stop them. And say, "Actually I'm a social profit."

I think the reason it took me a while to get used to the label "social entrepreneur" was because when I think about what I do through G(irls)20, I don't necessarily think about it as what you would normally see an entrepreneur do. That's more aligned with business. And when people think about charity, and then you put the word "business" in there, it makes people uncomfortable. I finally figured out that I like to create that level of discomfort.

I like to be a disrupter.

I want to change things. So I became very comfortable with the word "entrepreneur." Entrepreneurs by definition don't let things stay the same. I think that's what I really identified with. I don't think the status quo, when it comes to women, is good enough. I don't think that equality is enough—why should we stop at 50/50 when in

some places it should be 80/20? So I became very comfortable with the idea of being an entrepreneur. And then I thought, *Why shy away from being a social entrepreneur? You are in fact driving a profit.* The profit in this case, is a people profit. Somebody once called me a “disturber”; someone who thrives in chaos. I don’t need chaos to do a good job! But I need to know that the status quo can be disrupted and can lead to good change. And that’s the charge. That’s why I think the words and the term “social entrepreneur” fit what G(irls)20 does.

We’re looking at something like the G20, which is established, and we’re saying, “Hang on a second. We want to use the structure that exists but we want to change the impact that structure is having.” You don’t need to blow things up to make them work better. You can actually work with something that is structurally there but redefine it.

What impact do you think G(irls) 20 has had so far? This will be our fifth year. I think we are part of a global community that has been able to really knock on the door of the G20 and other leaders and say, “You will only succeed in meeting your economic goals if you strategically invest in girls and women.” We’ve now started to really articulate that women need to be part of every aspect of that equation. You can’t just say, “We’re going to allow more women to have access to capital.” Nuh-uh. Not good enough. You can’t do this in a piecemeal approach. I think one of the best things we’ve done is, every single year, enabled a young woman to do something, to see her own potential, to take that potential, go back to her community and start something. For me that domino effect is incredibly powerful. People say to me all the time, “Farah, 24 girls, 21 girls, 20 girls, really?”

Meaning: “Is that enough, come on, what kind of change can you expect?” Yeah. And what I would say to you is:

Nelson Mandela was one person who had incredible impact. Mother Teresa had a great impact. The world is made up of very powerful individuals.

Our girls, we’re cultivating them to be whatever they want to be, wherever they want to be, whenever they want to be it.

Sometimes I think, *If I had a big microphone and the world was listening, what would I say?* [Long pause] Apparently nothing...

Hah! It’s a big one... My mind is spinning. I would say, “Don’t invest in women because you think it’s the right thing to do.” I’m struggling with this. I don’t want people to invest in women because they feel like they have to. I want people to invest in women because it is a game-changer. I truly believe it’s a safe bet to invest in a woman. It is a calculated well-thought-out-risk to invest in a woman. When you make an investment, you look at it from a bunch of different angles. And in every single aspect, when you look at investing in a woman—whether it’s going to have a spin-off effect, an impact, be an advantage to a bottom line—the answer is yes, yes, yes. If somebody gave me one of those bullhorns, asked me to stand on a milk crate, I think I would struggle because there’s so many things that you could say about why it’s important to invest in women. I would almost stand up there and go, “Duh”



[laughs] “this is a no-brainer! Right?”. I’m not going to win any awards for being pithy. But I would say if anything’s common sense, this is common sense.

Common sense is not so common, by the way...

And you’re seeing the change when these young women go back into their communities.

Oh yes. I am. And not just in themselves. You see how hard they work in their own communities, how hard they work to get media to pay attention to the messages, meet with their ministers, to go back to their schools, to engage other girls to see the potential in themselves. So picking these young women, you’ve got to be careful. Because you’re asking them to be ambassadors for change.

Well that’s interesting because you’re bringing these young women—some of them from places where religion and state are not separate—of vastly different backgrounds together. Have you seen any conflicts between them emerge?

Yeah, I mean, I wouldn’t call it conflict. But I would say there are times, particularly in the early days when they all come together. But they don’t struggle necessarily to see the other’s point of view because they’re so open-minded and they’re so eager. Like, here’s a group of girls who know they’ve been chosen for this from 1200 applications. So they’re invested in already. They’ve had media training, access to some information they would not have otherwise had; they’ve got a bundle of reading that they’ve had to do. So they walk into the room they’re eager and excited and nervous. Where I think you see the dynamic between different cultures and the different ways that these girls have been raised, or the way that they think, is when they spend an entire day negotiating their recommendations. They will fight for what they believe in. And it is phenomenal.

Do you grapple with moving past prejudice, which can come from our narrative and the narrative of our parents and of our cultures?

Yes. And it goes deeper than that. All of these girls have access to some kind of communication. They’re all worldly. They probably all come with their own perception of what each culture is—whether it’s timid or outspoken or whatever. I don’t know how it all plays out. We haven’t seen a pattern of: “these countries hang out with these countries,” or anything like that. In the lead-up to the summit, they all have to write something, and we share it amongst them. We try to just kill all those pre-conceived notions before they even walk in the same room.

I didn’t set out to create an alumni of young leaders. But now, we’ve created this network of young women who help each other. So for example, today I was on their Facebook group, and one of them said, “I’m doing research on X, Y, Z, can anyone tell me blah, blah, blah?” Well, within like 45 minutes, she had 10 responses from 10 different girls in 10 different countries

So what originally gave you the idea?

When the woman who was the benefactor and I first met, we decided we were going to work in three areas. One of the three areas was girls and women. I struggled for about six months trying to figure out what we could do that was not going to duplicate what other people were doing, was not going to compete with other people. So I went through a number of different things we could do, none of them panned out, none of them seemed like they could be a good idea.

Canada was hosting the G20. I was reading the paper. I went to bed. Four o’clock in the morning, I woke up and went, “We’re going to have a G(irls)20!” She said, “I really like the idea but let’s pitch it to some people.” So we put together a group of six people.

I pitched the idea and six months later, of course, we had our first summit. It worked because it was great timing. I wanted to make sure we were going to work in the space between politics and economics, because I think that's where change happens. And she took a leap of faith. And boom, there we were. I wish there was something more academic to the creation of this. But truly, it was timing, thinking creatively, having someone who would believe in the idea and then just putting your head down and getting it done.

Your work is inspiring, but I guess sometimes it's intimidating—if you're sitting at home going, *Yeah, I don't have any fabulous ideas. I'm stuck in a job that I hate. But I really, really care about the world and I want to be a part of change. What part do we play?*

I love this question. I think change is so individual. You can be a part of it no matter what. I started off doing volunteer work. People should figure out what they are passionate about. They'll find some way to make a difference. You can be on a board, it means you can be a volunteer, it can

mean just about anything. We are not limited by access anymore. Technology has made the world a smaller place. So you could be passionate about gorillas in Uganda and do something about it.

I agree. But I spent many years personally feeling paralysed by all the things I wanted to do and no immediate awareness of the access points to do it...

We have to increase those access points. I want to create something called Girls on Boards. My vision is, by the time you're 20, you should be on a community board. It's not just about

serving on boards, it's not just about cutting a check, in fact, it should be anything but those things in some cases. People need to feel invited. People need to feel empowered. If you can create that, then people will come.

You use a word that's my favourite word in the whole entire world: "empowered." But to make someone else feel empowered, to lead a change where others feel empowered, that actually takes a great leader.

But you've got to create that space, right? I very rarely do these types of interviews that focus on me, by the

way. Because I do think the power of G(irls)20 is the delegates and our partners. And we've created that space where people can share that stage. To me that's the recipe for success.

So you might have a leader, but if you have a leader and nobody following you, what are you leading? You're in a group of one.

I can understand you feeling reticent about the Farah Mohamed show. Because you don't want to distract from all the incredible work that everyone around you is doing. But it is so inspiring to hear about your journey and what you've built, because it sews the seeds.

I appreciate that. I really do. You've caught me at an interesting time because we're a month away from the summit and I'm in panic mode. Everybody wants to come to Australia. There's a reason we had 1200 applications this year! The most we've had

any year is close to 700 for Paris. Their expectations of what they're going to get from the G(irls)20 experience is pretty overwhelming for me. Because these girls [*sighs*] their potential is great. They're giving us 10 days of their lives, and they have already said to us, 'This is what I'm going to do when I go back.' I feel like that's a massive responsibility. Forget about the fact we have people funding us, forget that we have many partners giving us content...

Incredible. So what advice would you give to 20-year-old Farah? Oh good Lord. “Don’t be afraid to take a risk.” I took my risks too late in life.

Why do you say that? The biggest risk I ever took was G(irls)20, to be honest. I graduated with two degrees, I went into politics, I moved to Ottawa, I took a job, I left that job, I went into another job. The biggest risk I ever took was when I was 40 years old. I think about the things I didn’t do that I could have done. And my life has turned out really, really nicely. I love my life. I absolutely love where I am in life. But I would say, “Don’t be afraid to take that risk. Think about all the things you want to do and the time that you have to do them. Just go for it!” They’ve got to be calculated risks. But to get up, you’ve got to fall. I would say to people, “Push that envelope, take that risk, dive into the deep end. Don’t worry about your plan B. Have a plan B, but don’t worry about it.”

I’ve always trusted my gut. It doesn’t matter if it’s about what school to go to, what job to take, who to date, who to hire... People have said to me, “I wouldn’t hire that person.” I’m like, “Well I would.” You’ve got to believe in people, that’s the other thing. We are so sceptical sometimes. It holds us back. You don’t allow yourself to actually embrace that which could be good and you’re going to pass up on it because you’re too sceptical. Cynicism is like the death of creation. It’ll kill all types of creation.

Instantly. Yeah. You might as well just put things over your ears, close your eyes and shove a sock in your mouth. Because you’re not going to go anywhere. You’re never going to move forward in society. You know, we just had a by-election—30 per cent turnout.

It’s shocking. It’s disgusting.

If anyone ever put me in charge of a country I would say, “If you don’t vote you don’t get a passport, you don’t get your health card, you don’t get your driver’s licence. Welcome to the world of Farah.”

If you’re given the privilege of voting, you better exercise it. 



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