

Ep.6 Let's Go Further

Have you, your daughter, or another woman you know ever been called 'bossy'?

If so, you might relate to this episode of Let's Go Further. We speak to two highly successful women from the fields of politics and education: Jess Phillips, Labour MP for Birmingham Yardley and Shadow Minister for Domestic Violence and Safeguarding, and Debra Gray MBE, Principal and Chief Executive of Hull College Group.

Informed by their personal lives and careers, Jess and Debra discuss the value that women bring to leadership, the structural changes needed to break down the barriers that women face, and the potential of education to transform the lives of girls and women. We also look at how women continue to shoulder the vast majority of care responsibilities and why this needs to change.

So, do join us as we aim to shift society's perspectives of women – and reclaim bossiness as a good thing!

About Debra Gray MBE

Debra Gray MBE is the current Principal and Chief Executive of [Hull College](#), a position she has held since April 2022. Before joining Hull College, Debra worked in various leadership roles in the education sector, including Principal of [Grimsby Institute](#) where, in 2017, she and her team secured an 'outstanding' Ofsted inspection report, the only college in Lincolnshire and the Humber at that point to receive the highest grade. Debra was awarded the title of MBE for services to education in the Queen's 2020 birthday honours.

About Jess Phillips MP

Jess Phillips is a Labour Party politician who became the MP for the constituency of [Birmingham Yardley](#) at the 2015 general election.

Read her bio [here](#).

Transcript

Joe Mcloughlin 0:01

Hello and welcome to Series 2 of Let's Go Further, a podcast from the Skills and Education Group that challenges the way we think about skills and education. I'm Joe Mcloughlin, Foundation Manager at the Group, and in this series, I'm speaking to people from inside and outside the education sector, about equity, diversity, and inclusion. In this episode, we're talking about the role of education

in empowering girls and young women to have rewarding and successful careers in whatever field they choose. To discuss this, I'm joined by Jess Phillips MP, the Shadow Minister for Domestic Violence and Safeguarding, and Debra Gray MBE, the Principal and Chief Executive of Hull College. Debra, I'd like to start with you. You're speaking to us today as a woman in a senior leadership role with responsibility for the education of hundreds of young women. But what was your own education like? And how did it help you get to where you are today?

Debra Gray MBE 0:55

My education was life changing and life saving. I come from a single parent family on a Sheffield council estate, with kind of generational criminality, generational alcoholism, generational domestic violence, and school was my safe place. It was the place I could go and know that that I knew what to expect. I knew there were people there who were interested in me as a human being. And the teachers there really were transformational it's part of the reason I chose to go back into education. Because what they did for me, there is no price you can put on that it was really clear how hard the teachers worked, how much they cared about their students. But I think for someone like me, with my background, what they showed me was, the end of my journey didn't have to look like the start. And you can't see something like that until you see it. So I didn't have any frame of reference for my background. So seeing those teachers, seeing them aspire for more for us made me want to aspire for more for myself. And I think my Mum was a key figure in this as well. So she left school at 15. My Dad was functionally illiterate. And although my Dad didn't value education and school, my Mum knew it was the ticket out. It was the ticket to social mobility. And I think she was desperate for me never to be dependent on anybody, and to be able to be thoroughly independent, and be able to make my own way in life. So she emphasised literacy almost from birth in a way that she didn't have for herself. So I think for me, education was genuinely life changing. The echoes of my early years, my primary and my secondary education reverberate now, in everything that I do in my current job.

Joe Mcloughlin 2:47

And thinking about your kind of current job and looking back on your past experiences, then what do you think FE in particular, and skills in particular can offer women that maybe other educational pathways don't necessarily?

Debra Gray MBE 3:00

I think we are incredibly inclusive as a sector. You know, my youngest student is three months old in our nursery, my oldest student is in their 80s in our arts department, and he's studying for leisure. And I have pretty much everything in between, irrespective of your industrial sector, whether you want to be an engineer or a hairdresser, or you simply want to learn to read, or you're an ESOL student learning English for the first time. There's a community here that can wrap around you. And I think for women who've been out of education for some time, it takes a lot of confidence to try and come back into education. It's

really scary. And I think further education colleges know that. We help wrap around particularly our Access students, around 86% of our Access students are women who are returning. So we understand those challenges. We understand what it's like to balance childcare, and caring responsibilities for elderly parents, and part time work with studies. And we make it as straightforward as we possibly can.

Joe Mcloughlin 3:57

And then Jess jumping across to yourself kind of what was your education like?

Jess Phillips MP 4:01

Well, I mean, I was raised by a teacher. So the sort of importance of education was definitely, especially because I was a girl, I've got three brothers, and they're all older than me. And I think that my Mum and Dad were sort of even more so obsessive about the idea that I should be well educated. As if sort of like, I don't know, they...we were living in a Jane Austen era - we weren't it was the 1980s. Funnily enough, it's my primary education, I think set me up for the rest of my life is that I had two amazing women primary school teachers, they sort of spotted me as a clever kid and really like made education like seem like absolutely fun. And I got a lot of credit for doing well. So my education was largely happy. I went to a grammar school, where I did my A Levels and then I went on to university. I didn't get on all that well with the grammar school system. I was naturally rebellious against the elitism of it. Funnily enough, I struggled most with my education at the university end, I liked it much less, funnily enough, when I had sort of left a sort of school environment, I just it seemed less direct to my life. I think in some ways, I was studying politics, which I gave up. Because it was all about old, white men from like, the 19th century, I was like 'What the hell has this got to do with single parent benefits', which is, you know, and people's lives, that's what I came to learn here about and work on. The trouble with education is if you are if you show signs of being good and clever, it's a lovely, lovely place for you. And we have to make sure that it's an amazing experience and an enhancing and positive experience. Even if you don't feel like that. I think here's what I learned from my years of education. Funnily enough, I think that the sort of role of education as important in my life in saving the life of my family really is that of my brother, who was a heroin addict for many years, a very, very problematic drug addict. And he went to a lovely further education college in Birmingham to do an Access course, while he was still very much in the grip of drug addiction, and it totally and utterly changed his life. He's now works at Birmingham University, and is studying to become like an academic, which, you know, I would never have thought was going to happen in 1993. It can massively at the, at the adult education end can totally transform a person's life.

Joe Mcloughlin 6:50

The gender balance in the workplace is obviously something that we've...has been discussed in a lot of industries. And there's lots of industries now

publishing, quotas and facts and figures. And kind of just from a bit of prep for today, I found out that over half of Labour MPs are women at the moment. And then in college leadership, almost half of college leaders 48% are women. But when we consider that, you know, there's 650 MPs in total, only 225 of those are women, and that women make up just less than two thirds of college staff, but less than half of the leadership, it's clear that we've got a way to go in terms of kind of proportional representation. Debra just wanted to kind of come to you and ask as a woman in a leadership role, what would you like to see more of to kind of push that figure up.

Debra Gray MBE 7:35

I think for me, leadership doesn't necessarily start in the workplace, it's recognising those signs much earlier. I like seeing bossy young girls, although I hate that term. Because it's used as a derogatory term for young girls who like to take a leadership role. And I've certainly seen that in action. I've had that term used when I was a little girl at school, and in an early years setting. And I think when we value leadership skills in young men, and we apply a derogatory term in young women, it sets women on a path that leadership is not right for them, despite any inherent talent or anything they could acquire on their employment or educational journey. So I think I'd want to see the narrative change, particularly in primary and secondary. And to be fair, I don't think this is an education problem. I think this is a societal problem, where sometimes women leaders are seen in a very different way than men are, even if they demonstrate the same leadership behaviours. I think for me, as well, I'd want to see young women who show leadership qualities nurtured, I'd like to see them mentored. I think you can lose your drive to be a leader. If you experience setbacks, and you don't have someone to talk to you about that resilience that you need, because you really do need, you know, a very thick skin to be a leader in any setting, you have to be able to take tough decisions, you have to maintain your empathy. It's not necessarily about aping the behaviour, the leadership behaviours of people we might see in, you know, let's say for argument's sake, a city based setting in finance, it's about finding your own path to leadership, and that can look very different from the person that's next to you. And I think seeing a wide variety of female leaders lead differently is really important, because I think if you can't see it, you can't be it.

Joe Mcloughlin 9:28

So Debra, what are your thoughts on the targeted recruitment of women into senior roles? And what might that look like in your own sector?

Debra Gray MBE 9:36

I get this is controversial, but I think when I look at, at our sector in particular, we have a lot of women employed in our support services, and they often work part time because they have caring responsibilities. And that means sometimes they don't think they have the skills or the confidence to apply for more senior roles. And we certainly take time and attention to make sure everyone feels

welcome to apply for those senior roles. But again, I don't think this is just an education problem. I think this is an employment problem in the round. I love my job, and I love what I do. But balancing it with caring responsibilities, balancing it with a busy family life can be a huge challenge. And unless you have support networks, either inside a place of employment, or outside a place of employment, it can be really, really challenging. So just last year, my mom who had been my primary support network, throughout my whole career, was diagnosed with brain cancer, and we lost her after just five months. And I'm relatively lucky in that my youngest is 13. So my family has become a little bit more self sufficient, as they as they've gotten older. But in my younger days, as an emerging leader had that happened, my career might have looked quite different. So I think we have to have mechanisms in our employment sectors, whichever sectors they are education, in my case, that help anybody with those caring responsibilities, balance leadership, and balance family, being a carer being a parent can enhance leadership skills, not reduce them. And I think we miss out on an awful lot of talent, if we don't take notice of that.

Joe Mcloughlin 11:25

And Jess, over to you to sort of thinking about that, how would you like to see some of the ideas that Debra's talking about there kind of play out in practice, how would you like to see more bossy women in, for lack of a better word, in positions of leadership?

Jess Phillips MP 11:41

I'm taking bossy back, I like to be called bossy, I'm incredibly bossy. And always have been, we can have good aspirations and models for mentorship. And all of those things are worthwhile doing, but the structural inequality that women face throughout their lives, we won't we won't see any anything other than anecdotal improvement. And so you have to use structures to fundamentally change that. So you know, citing that 50% of Labour MPs are women isn't accidental. It wasn't done through nice away weekends trying to tell women that they were good, we had a rule that said 50% of them had to be women. It was literally a rule. And it was written into the law of our land. And that made it happen. And when thinking about further education, Debra is exactly right about the issue of childcare. Bear in mind, when I was undertaking my further education, I had a child, it was so badly taken account of I have to say that when I applied to train as a social worker, when I was 22-23. And I was told that I would have to in order to get finance, I would have to be judged against my parents' income, even though I had a two year old because I wasn't married, and I'm sure that sexist rule doesn't exist anymore. However, at the time, that was the structure. And if that has changed, that has changed because of structural change.

Joe Mcloughlin 13:15

Sorry, just to understand this in terms of timings, this is in the last 20 years?

Jess Phillips MP 13:20

Yeah oh yeah in the last 20 years, my son's 18. So also, I was, I applied for the...post-university I had applied to do the Fast Track civil service programme for the Home Office, which is hilarious, because, you know, I may well end up administering this. I rang them to say...do one of the assessments. Because I had to go through a scan, because I was pregnant. And I was told not to bother to turn up again, we have to shift those structures. Because otherwise, that's an immediate barrier, isn't it? That is an immediate barrier. It basically said to me, you as a young woman with a child, you know, it's not for you. Now, somebody else that might have...as I say, I'm taking bossy back, that might have stood in their way, and set them on a completely different path. For me, it just made me absolutely determined to change the structures that we have to live in. And when I think about further education and adult education and rejoining the workforce, through training and skills, I still think that we have not even come close to getting the idea of the structures that would be needed to be put in place to ensure that that is available to women and the biggest one being caring responsibility both at the beginning of somebody's life and the end of somebody's life, which still incredibly falls entirely on the shoulders of women on a structural basis. There's always some woman doing the work so that other women can work. I think that we probably need a structure that, you know, enables that to be recognised and valued considerably better than it is, but also that it doesn't have to exist as a structural barrier.

Joe Mcloughlin 15:04

What are your thoughts on how all that plays out later in life, both in respect of, the much talked about gender pay gap. And then further down the line, when we start thinking about retirements and pensions.

Jess Phillips MP 15:15

There is undoubtedly a sectoral problem where the value of women training to work in retail, hospitality, and care, rather than men working in those environments, ends up with a sectoral divide, that just continues to embed the problem for women. So there's no point going back to work if you have two kids, and want to progress yourself, essentially, you're going to only ever have the opportunity to earn even below the minimum wage. So there are all sorts of really important structural things that we could do with the targets and quotas, that would fundamentally undermine the structure as it is today.

Joe Mcloughlin 16:04

I just wanted to pick up on something you sort of mentioned there, Jess, about the work that women do that enables the work of other women to get on and do. I've found getting that balance between working and family commitments, a challenge, but I think I'm very aware that the pressure on me to do that is less than my partner has experienced, I'm acutely aware that she's dealing with much more noise in the background than I am if that makes sense.

Jess Phillips MP 16:30

It's an emotional labour that women have to do. That is never taken account of like my husband is, you know, practicably the absolutely the full time carer of my children and always has been throughout their lives. However, he doesn't feel any of the same social pressure to be an amazing Dad, if anything, he gets annoyed with people going on about what an amazing Dad he is, just because he did the basics. He's a great Dad, don't get me wrong, but like only as good as I'm a good Mom. But he gets oh my god, the pedestal he gets put on is unbelievable. The logistics, I don't think people understand that like, even though my husband was their primary carer, like making sure that we'd applied for their schools and things like that. There was no division of labour where we sat down and decided it but form filling and just knowing the patterns of how things, how people have to progress through society is still the burden entirely on women. If my husband...if I'd relied on my husband to - and he's a perfectly capable man - to be applying for their schools and stuff, it would have been considerably more stressful and panicked, but it's just inbuilt in me, I just think it's my responsibility.

Joe Mcloughlin 17:37

And Debra kind of thinking about your own family and thinking about what you were saying there a little while ago about how having a family can make you a kind of stronger leader, a better leader. What was your experience like of balancing the kind of the career aspirations and the working aspirations with the sort of family structure?

Debra Gray MBE 17:54

It was really hard. I think Jess is absolutely right. When she talks about, there's always a woman enabling somewhere because that woman for me was my Mum. And had she not rolled her sleeves up and given me every bit of her time she could to enable me to do what I needed to do. I wouldn't be sitting here now having this conversation with you. My Mum picks the kids up every day for kind of 20 years, effectively, because of the age gap between mine she took care of them while I was at work because my husband also works full time. You know, Jess is absolutely right about there's always a woman supporting somewhere. I'm very, very grateful to have had my female support network. But it shouldn't be like that, because not everybody has that support network. And how much talent are we losing because of that? Because there isn't a support network for those people who need it. Hull is absolutely incredible. But it has severe pockets of economic and social deprivation. And what can we do there? How can we intervene in those communities to support those women, so that if they are able to better their lives economically, that will give their children a better start. And some of those generational issues that have blighted my family's life might be solved for them. Like Jess, I have anecdotes that I can tell you about all kinds of social mobility, about female success in any number of areas, but they're

individual cases, it's not the case across the board. And I worry more about the talent we lose than the talent we gain.

Joe Mcloughlin 19:30

So just reflecting on that loss then and kind of reflecting on the structural challenges that you've both mentioned, what kind of policies or new approaches would you be keen to kind of put in place at your respective workplaces to help those young women and help those young working mothers?

Debra Gray MBE 19:47

I think the first thing for me is funding for adult education is in a very, very dire state. And it has been eroded significantly over the last decade. And that for me just will not do. Because if we're hoping to make a more productive society, it's not always about new entrants to the labour market. It's about people who want to return to the labour market. It's about people who want to upskill or even change professions. So I think adult funding is absolutely mission critical. And at the minute, it is not good enough. I think surrounding that are the policies regarding adult learners, and how they can come back and what other wraparound services are available for them. So we're able to offer nursery provision for a limited number. If I could improve my nursery provision, could I bring more women into the college? That's a genuine open question, if we were able to fund after school clubs, if we were able to fund summer holiday and non term time clubs, could we bring more women in for their exams or their revision, or for their personal CPD and development. It's about some of the industries that we work with, and their gender balance, having more female engineers, and having engineering education, much more structurally used in careers education to young women. So by the time they get to us at 16, they've often chosen what they want to do. And that's, that's absolutely fine. We have to respect their autonomy. But careers education is also quite weak, and careers education needs to start really early years, you know, how do we get young girls involved in playing with robotics? You know, let them make a robot, let them see a whole range of careers. And on the flip side, how do we get our young men involved in traditionally non-male professions? I, I would love to see male dominated care courses, because actually, there are lots of elderly men in the care sector who might genuinely prefer to have their care handled by a man and there just aren't enough in the sector. But I think adult funding is mission critical. I think the wraparound services structurally to support adults back into education, are crucial. And then I think it's looking at how we deal with careers education for our younger students.

Jess Phillips MP 22:11

We have a nation who are, by and large, and women more so than men, under-employed, so have the ability and skills to be working for far higher wages, for example, but can't necessarily access the qualifications to allow for that. And funnily enough, when the Labour Party has started talking about the sort of five

missions for government, the education one isn't about educating children, it is about opportunities for the whole of your life, sort of to try and recognise that. And so much of the conversation recently has been about like the over 50s, dropping out of the workforce and how devastating this is for the productivity of our country. If we don't have a proper and targeted policy and strategy for exactly why that is, and what we're going to do about it, we're just going to keep on getting the same result. So that is absolutely as Debs says, mission critical the idea of adult education, being more than just like you go to night school to learn Spanish.

Joe Mcloughlin 22:14

Another thorny issue for working parents is of course, the cost of childcare. And as you've both rightly pointed out, not everyone has a Mum close by, who will provide that support, mostly free of charge. So what needs to be done there?

Jess Phillips MP 23:26

We are the most expensive place to have childcare in Europe my brother has twins, he lives in France. And it was almost like he'd won the lottery when he had twins. He was paying something I'm not joking, something like £30 a month for two children. And it was just for their lunches to be in full time childcare. That is, you know, it's not accidental then that France has higher productivity than the UK, we've got to sort out what happens in childcare offer and also to understand a changing workforce. You cannot paste a 9.00 to 3.30 childcare onto a country and expect that anything is going to happen other than that women pick up the slack of doing that work. And then again, at the other end of the spectrum, with regard to care work in older adult and disabled care, we're at the absolute breaking point.

Joe Mcloughlin 24:26

What are some of the benefits of being a woman in the workplace that you that you don't think men would have as easily or have access to as easily if that makes sense?

Debra Gray MBE 24:37

For me, it's not just about being a woman in the workplace. It's having diverse views in the workplace. Because I see things from a very particular political background, very particular social background, and my views aren't always accurate. So you need to be able to interface with a team of people who can see 360 degrees round a problem. So as a woman, and I served on almost entirely male leadership teams, and I've served on mixed leadership teams and I've served on female dominated leadership teams, the teams that were most successful, were actually the mixed ones. And I don't just mean mixed in terms of gender, but I mean, mixed in terms of socio economic background, ethnicity, history, nationality, because what I might see as a two dimensional square

someone else sees as a 3D cube. And you need to understand that problem in the round, because otherwise, something will come and bite you on the backside. So I think what being a woman has brought to me in the workplace has been a different viewpoint from colleagues, which I think has usually been very valued, not always listened to, but usually valued. I think what's been good about being a woman, certainly in my sector, is I've also been surrounded by incredible women who helped me and, and taught me the craft of being a senior leader, as well. And I come back to Jess's point about there's always a woman because there have always been women in my career, as well as my personal life, who gave me my start, who gave me a leg-up, who believed in me or saw things in me that perhaps at that time, I didn't see in myself. And I'm the product of all of those women, not just the women who raised me. Diversity of thought is incredibly powerful. And as a woman, I bring that to the table at the risk, again, of perhaps being a little bit controversial here, but that there's an emotional intelligence that goes along with that, I think sometimes, where you have more empathy, it doesn't mean you change some of your leadership decisions. But you can sometimes see more easily where the root of an issue comes from, and perhaps deal with it in a less confrontational way, while still getting a really great result at the end.

Jess Phillips MP 27:05

Yeah, I would agree with that, in my job, I have to be incredibly empathetic, I deal on a daily basis with people who are at their very worst moment in their life, somebody in their family has been killed, or they're facing homelessness, and poverty and hunger, but I am able to in a way that I'm sure lots of my male colleagues certainly have a go at, but I'm able to reach around a table and give somebody a cuddle. And a very frightened, vulnerable woman will trust me in a manner that they just simply won't trust my male counterparts, not because of their own behaviours, but because of their lived experiences. And so I think that that's a gift that I'm able to provide that as a woman, and that just that we are raised, that we are raised to be more caring. I wish it wasn't the case. But it is. And I have to use that to the advantage that it provides for me. As Debs said, you need to have the mix in order to make the wheels work. Women are half the population. In fact, more than half the population of our nation, the idea that you can have any institution that makes sort of life and death decisions about a populace where you are ignoring half of them is you should expect to fail, you should expect to monumentally fail and my job in Westminster. So much of my time is not even just to say anything particularly insightful, or empathetic, it's just to remind people that women exist. I'm just like, 'Oh, can I can we just stop for a second and think how this is going to affect homeless women? Because this is a great policy, but actually, it won't help homeless women at all. It will only help homeless men.' I'm just constantly there just to be like, 'Oh, can we remember people have wombs?' So you know that that's the importance of having women in your workforce is just the reminder that the vast majority of your customer base will be women.

Joe Mcloughlin 29:15

If we were recording this episode in 10 years' time, just as a final thought, what progress would you like to see? And what challenge would you like to be addressing in sort of 10 years' time?

Jess Phillips MP 29:26

Okay, the progress that I would like to see is, and actually I think I will see it in the next 10 years' time is a revolution in attitudes towards care and the value of care both childcare and adult care in our society. I think we've hit a wall now and the 1950s social policy that we live by no longer is...it's starting to look ridiculous that that's what we're expected to live by continuously. So I'd very much expect my children when they have children to be far closer to the experience that my brother and sister had in France, rather than the experience that I had when I had them. And so I do think that that is changing. My push goal, I would say, and I've given up long, long, long ago from probably about the age of 18, given up the idea that I will see the equality of men and women in my lifetime, what I would really like to see as my stretch goal is the recognition and it's not something actually that we've touched on yet on that some of the work that women have to do, that means that their time and capacity is limited is that of safety. And being safe and £13 billion worth of productivity is lost every year to violence against women and girls, I would like that £13 billion back and for women not to have to do all the work in keeping themselves safe. And actually, as you know, specifically thinking of the transition at the age of sort of 16 to further education is a sort of absolutely critical time in young women's lives where they are at such great risk of harm and danger. And also the idea of their value being in what they can, you know, they look like.

Debra Gray MBE 31:24

I'd love to see a well funded, valued and coherent adult education system, which has been de-bureaucratized and does what it is supposed to do. I think I'd like to see world class and affordable childcare and elderly care, and the pay and status of those professions transformed. Because they are female dominated professions, which is why typically they earn minimum wage, and that just, they are the most vital jobs in our society. And they enable so many other people to be productive. We have to value those. I think I'd like to see leadership prioritised for young women from early years, you know, I heard Jess reclaim the 'bossy' moniker. And I think why not, let's value it, let's celebrate it. And female contributions valued at exec level in whatever field of industry that is, and structural change, to enable women to get a seat at the table in the first place. In 10 years, I'd really like for my two daughters to wonder why this was ever a conversation. And for my son not to be part of the problem. I want their rights upheld, I want them to have every possible opportunity. And you know, like Jess, I can now speak from a middle class perspective. You know, my children live in a safe area, they have a safe home, they are well fed. But I know what it feels like to not have that. I want us collectively, as a society to fight that every woman who doesn't have that, because the collective value of what



those women can bring to our society just can't be measured. You know there is the next Einstein out there. There is the next builder of rockets there is the next science fiction writer. There is the next vaccine developer out there in our communities. But they might not get the chance to be the person they could have been without us and without those coherent policies. And as a child survivor of domestic violence I'd back Jess wholeheartedly...it is destructive and generational trauma costs. Let's take those costs and let's invest them in those women being safe in the first place.

Joe Mcloughlin 33:44

Thank you to my guests, Jess Phillips MP and Debra Gray MBE, and to you for listening. We hope you enjoyed the conversation and that it's got you thinking about the connections between women, education and wider society. You can keep up to date with the podcast on social media. Follow us on Twitter @SkillsEduGroup or search Skills and Education Group on LinkedIn and Facebook. Do remember to subscribe wherever you receive your podcasts and let's go further together.