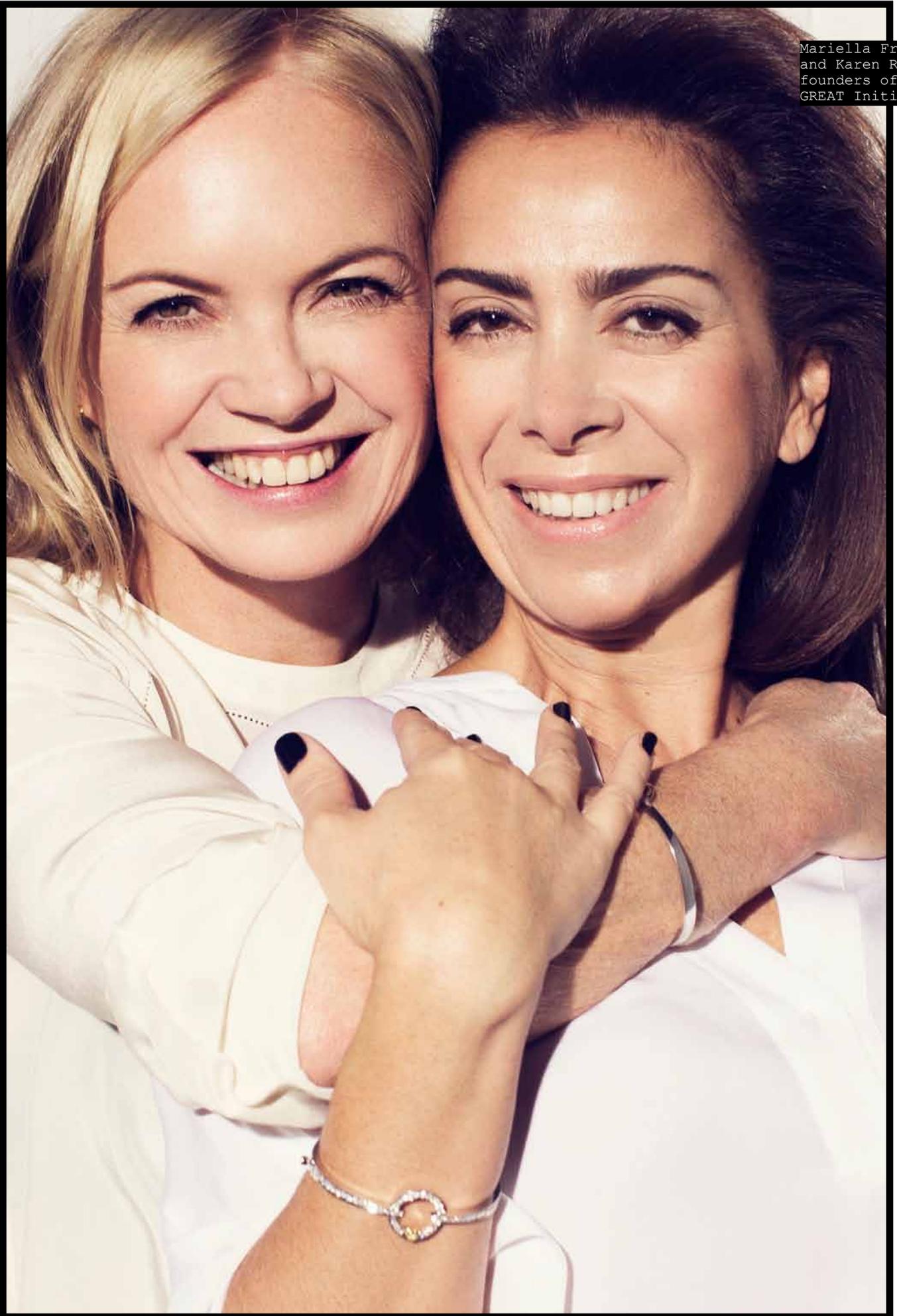


Mariella Frostrup  
and Karen Ruimy,  
founders of The  
GREAT Initiative





# GREAT MINDS

*Mariella Frostrup and Karen Ruimy talk about their charity The GREAT Initiative and bringing the fight for equality to young men's doorsteps*

Words KAT HOPPS

**K**aren walked into my life looking like a completely unlikely partner. She was tottering as she always does on heels that defied gravity, with a very expensive designer handbag, and I thought, 'ooh, I'm not sure if this is going to work', admits Mariella Frostrup.

She is talking about her friend, Karen Ruimy. On paper the two women make an unlikely partnership. One is the husky-toned journalist and book fanatic who, at 17, left behind her modest roots in Ireland for a new start in London; the other is a glamorous former banker and philanthropist who started life in Morocco before spending her childhood in picturesque Paris.

Yet, first appearances are tellingly shallow; Mariella and Karen are far from worlds apart. The complex make-up of both women: their ambition, passion, intelligence and desire for good are strong unifying forces. It is what brought them together to create the charity, The GREAT (Gender Rights and Equality Action Trust) Initiative in 2010, founded on the belief that the fight for equality needs the full support of women – and men.

The pair were introduced by friends having both expressed a desire to set up similar charities. 'I was

tired of seeing women as victims of this myriad of situations across the world, whether it was the fact that they weren't being educated or that they were the primary victims in war,' Mariella explains.

'I thought ultimately at the bottom of all of these things there is one salient fact, which is that without equality, the world can't operate to its full capacity.'

In a competitive sector where a million other causes are shouting for our attention, the pair soon realised that the charity could be most impactful through a targeted programme of advocacy and campaigning. Working together with Bill Cash, the Conservative MP for Stone, other charities and officials at the Department for International Development (DFID), a private members' bill was proposed – one that would place a statutory emphasis on the

UK government to consider its spending on overseas aid in reducing gender inequality, from provisions in emergency disasters to long-lasting policies involving political representation. The bill received royal assent in March 2014, coming into force two months later. 'It's such a simple thing but it has a huge effect and a domino one too,' says Karen. 'We are very happy and content but it's only the beginning.' >

*The pair realised that the charity could be most impactful with advocacy and campaigning*



Rapper, actor and Great Men Ambassador Doc Brown has proved a hit with the schools he has visited

This is why the charity has focused specifically on young men for its latest campaign, Great Men, in which boys are challenged to question stereotypical gender norms in a safe, supportive environment.

During three-hour workshops encompassing discussions and drama, they are given the tools to express their feelings on gender, equality and masculinity. The hope is that by encouraging an open dialogue, a new narrative can be established. Karen says the sessions have a profound impact on the boys, the school and the wider culture. 'You see those eye-opening moments when they suddenly realise that bullying women is a real problem, and that defining yourself as a cruel man isn't the right way.' For many, she adds, the workshops come as a relief, a chance to talk honestly for the first time.

I ask how the campaign came about and the answer is a lovely surprise. Great Men was born from a boy, Karen's son to be precise, who came home from school one day and said, 'well it's all very well talking to girls but there some total idiots in my school who talk about women really badly. Why aren't you talking to them?' Mariella says it was a lightbulb moment.

The rapper, writer and brother of Zadie Smith, Doc Brown, is already an Ambassador and Mariella

*Charity is always on the agenda but a concrete relationship has also developed*

applauds his good rapport with kids and his innate understanding of their backgrounds, 'he got everyone cheering and did an amazing job.'

Such has been the success of the scheme of the pilot running in London schools – it exceeded its year one Big Lottery target of 1,400 boys, reaching 1,495 – that the charity has been asked back several times, and now hopes to roll out the campaign on a national scale, funding permitted.

Mariella and Karen still meet once a month to focus on their plans, their conversations continually weaving change. Charity matters are always on the agenda, but a concrete relationship has also developed, which means it's not all business. 'We have a great relationship,' says Karen proudly.

'Working-wise, we're both very passionate on the same subject. We have a lot of fun too, and honestly it's been such a pleasure.'

It is fun that over-spills into the pair's private lives. Not only do their families holiday together, there is a mutual understanding of one another's lifestyles. They may

live in different parts of London – Karen in Sloane Square, and Mariella in Notting Hill – but they embrace the differences. Karen laughs saying that when she wants to be a bit more bohemian, she visits Mariella's patch. It's clear the two are genuinely at ease with each other.

As I write this, the actress Emma Watson's UN speech, which has also called on male support for gender equality, is being championed by the online masses. It feels like the new mantra of togetherness is permeating what was once seen as a women's only issue. 'I'm happy that we're managing to take small steps towards a global gender equality that is long, long overdue,' Karen says. 'The ideal situation would be that one day we don't talk about gender.' Until then, these two will be found in a corner together: talking, sharing stories and supporting one another in the differences that make us all human.

To support Great Men or The GREAT initiative visit them online at: [great-men.org](http://great-men.org) or [thegreatinitiative.org.uk](http://thegreatinitiative.org.uk); contact the charity on 020 7922 7853