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# Konnie Huq: An exact science

What did you want to be when you grew up? A police officer? A teacher? An analytical textile technologist? The world of science can often feel mysterious, but author and ex-*Blue Peter* presenter Konnie Huq is on a mission to open up the world of STEM to the next generation. Here, we speak about the pressure to conform, the importance of visibility, and her debut children's book, *Cookie... and the Most Annoying Boy in the World*

Writing | Kathryn Wheeler

“It was a different time,” Konnie Huq says, as she reflects on her childhood, and the ways it compares to those of children in 2020. “We used to play out all day in the holidays, we’d be on our bikes and just come in to eat.”

Today’s children have a lot to contend with, from tackling the technology problem (Is it good? Is it bad? When is enough, enough?), to an ever increasing pressure to perform at school – and, of course, the age-old question: what am I going to be when I grow up? >>>







## When I was growing up, going into TV as an Asian wasn't necessarily something I thought was actually a possibility

"I was going to be an engineer," says Konnie. "I did physics, chemistry, maths, and further maths A-levels. My parents came over from Bangladesh in the 1960s with dreams of their kids being scientists, engineers, doctors, accountants, and mathematicians – because those were revered professions."

In the end, Konnie took another course, stepping into the limelight when she first appeared on our screens in 1994, presenting a Saturday morning children's TV show on GMTV, before going on to be *Blue Peter*'s longest-serving female presenter, from 1997–2007. Though, she notes that this wasn't something she did, or even realised she could, aspire to as a child.

"When I was growing up, going into TV as an Asian wasn't necessarily something I thought was a possibility because I didn't see any others," she says. "And actually I sort of fell into my job. I went to open auditions for TV presenters, but not with a view to getting a job as a TV presenter, just for a fun day out."

"I remember hearing a lady's voice on the radio when I was really young and thinking, 'I didn't realise women can do radio DJing as well.' So it's only what you're used to that you see as a possibility."

There are so many forces at play when it comes to predicting how our lives will pan out. Wealth, ethnicity, disability, geographical location, and many more variables all come together to affect the choices that we make. So often, the first step to breaking down these invisible barriers is visibility – seeing people who look, sound, and think like you, doing the things you aspire to be.

“My role model, though I don’t know if I had her when I was a kid, is Ada Lovelace,” Konnie says. “She’s the epitome of a woman scientist. She foresaw that computers had the ability to make music, pictures, and all the things they do today. Though I don’t know that I discovered her when I was at school, because she wasn’t celebrated as much as all the men you hear about.”

These days, we’re taking the time to retrospectively celebrate the women who may not have got the credit they deserved in their time. But the current gender divide in who’s going into STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects and industries is something worth talking about. Girls make up just 35% of students taking STEM subjects at school and in higher education, and just 22% of the industry workforce. Undeniably, there’s something at play here, and this issue is at the heart of Konnie’s debut children’s book series *Cookie*.

A sassy, determined girl, Cookie’s love for science takes her down a path of hilarity and the occasional sticky situation (think classroom lemonade bottle experiments gone explosively wrong). Konnie

describes the series – the second of which she is currently writing – as ‘stealth woke’, subtly expanding readers’ experiences of different people, and weaving in lessons on all kinds of systems, from solar to social.

“For instance, Cookie is from an ethnic minority family. She’s Muslim. Her best friend has two dads,” Konnie explains. “It’s the minorities that make up the majority, and the majority is more interesting for the variety. That’s what inclusivity and diversity are about.

“So I’ve got a lot of that in the book, but instead of shoving it down people’s throats it’s secondary,” she continues. “It doesn’t affect the plot that Cookie is Muslim, or that Cookie is from Bangladesh. It’s nothing to do with it. It’s like you’re saying if a character has green eyes. We’re all defined by so many things.”

But breaking free of the messages that tell us to blend in with everyone else, and celebrating who we are, isn’t always easy – and Konnie notes that the early years of her career were full of pressure to “conform” to a certain standard.

“When I was in my 20s, I was more easily led by other people,” Konnie says. “I was never really into fashion, but for work I was told that I *had* to be into fashion. I do think that when you’re in this industry you have to play the game. You have to toe the line.”

For Konnie, a lesson that she’s learned over time is that happiness can be found in the simple things in life – with the people you surround yourself with, and the things that you choose to prioritise.



*‘Cookie! and the Most Annoying Boy in the World’ by Konnie Huq is available now (Piccadilly Press, £6.99)*

“When you find friends who you really like and who you really get on with, that’s kind of all you need,” she says. “I can go have a laugh with them or chat to them, and I come back thinking, ‘That was priceless.’ Happiness comes from within, it comes from helping each other.”

At a time when questions about consumerism, technology, and the future of the planet, are all weighing heavily on our minds, it can be easy to take the dimmer outlook. But perhaps by turning our focus on to the people who matter most to us, while simultaneously broadening our horizons and embracing the limitlessness of our abilities, we can begin to make the difference that we want to see in the world around us.

As for Konnie, is she hopeful for the future?

“Just look how amazing young children are,” she says. “Yes, I am. I am, definitely.” **h**