



HBA ELS Speaker Q&A: Elena Rossini on representation, empowerment and determination to change the world

One of our non-pharma speakers at this year's European Leadership Summit is Elena Rossini – an Italian film director, editor and diversity advocate.

Elena's mission: to create films that empower women and girls. Her latest film project is [*The Illusionists*](#), an award-winning documentary about the marketing of unattainable beauty ideals around the world, shot in 8 countries, across 4 continents. The film has been featured in Vogue Italy, New York Magazine, Mic, Indiewire, Fox45 and NPR, amongst others. Rossini has been taking *The Illusionists* on tour, showing it at the biggest companies in Silicon Valley (Apple, Facebook, Google, Twitter) and at dozens of schools in the United States and Europe

Rossini is also the founder and editor-in-chief of *No Country for Young Women*, a website whose aim is to provide positive role models for young girls. The site features over 100 interviews of women representing five continents, seven decades, and over two dozen professions – from NASA engineers, to illustrators, architects, filmmakers and entrepreneurs.

Since 2015, Rossini has been collaborating with Irish company Arklu, maker of Lottie and Finn dolls, which inspire kids to be themselves and to think big. Rossini has made several films for them, including a documentary about Stargazer Lottie, the first doll who traveled to the International Space Station. Rossini frequently speaks at international conferences and is a 2014 alumna of the Young Leaders program by the Council for the United States and Italy.



Elena Rossini, Filmmaker & Diversity advocate

Rossini had a chance to talk to us about what inspires her work, why sometimes it's best to do things yourself and how frustrations and obstacles can turn into creative empowering projects.



Throughout your career, you have continued to provoke a debate on gender. What inspired you to make this a cornerstone of your career?

I'm incredibly passionate about the issue of representation in film: in front of and behind the camera. Film director Jane Campion once said something that really stuck with me: "I would love to see more women directors because they represent half of the population – and gave birth to the whole world. Without them writing and being directors, the rest of us are not going to know the whole story." My main mission is to change all that. Seeing yourself represented at the cinema and on TV is incredibly empowering. My whole career, I have strived to create projects about issues that affect women's lives. Most recently, my focus has been on stories about inspiring women and girls. Our media has been idolizing singers and actresses for decades, but what interests me is to show - and celebrate - women and girls who are having a big impact in their communities.

What has been your most personally rewarding project, and what has been the most impactful project, in your opinion?

Nine years ago I set out to make [*The Illusionists*](#), a documentary about body image and the marketing of unattainable beauty ideals around the world. I ended up taking care of 95% of creative roles: from fundraiser, to producer, director, cinematographer, editor, motion graphics artist, and distributor. This is totally atypical

but it was the only option I had, as regular production companies wanted to change the focus of the film. I stuck to my vision and persevered through years of daily rejections. Nobody believed I could pull it off. Fast forward to eight years later: I've been invited to show the film and do Q&As at the world's biggest companies. Employees at Apple headquarters in Cupertino called me "inspiring." I showed it at Ivy League schools, embassies, non-profits - you name it. And the day the film was released to the general public, it registered sales in over 20 countries, across 4 continents. I've gotten countless emails from viewers who said they felt more empowered and confident after watching the film.

And what would you say has been the most important decision you have made in your career and how did you come about it?

There is a saying in Italian: "Chi fa da sé fa per tre" - it means something along the lines of: "You better do things yourself rather than wait for someone else to do it." I wasted three years on *The Illusionists* waiting for external decisions: powerful producers who expressed interest in funding the project, but took little action and eventually drifted away. One day I decided I'd had enough and I took things into my own hands, resolving to produce the film myself. I'm so glad I did! I think I was fearful that I didn't have the right resources or name recognition, but all those fears were illusory. Determination and perseverance are like superpowers,



especially if you have a project whose message has the potential to help and empower many people.

What is the one behaviour or trait that you have seen derail more leaders' careers?

Self-doubt. We are infinitely more powerful than we believe.

Has being a woman ever negatively impacted your professional life? Has this changed over time?

I still have a hard time being taken seriously as a film director: whenever I'd introduce myself as a filmmaker, people would invariably ask if I'm a film student or if I'm making films as a hobby. A woman just two months ago asked me if I film interviews with my iPhone. This has been my biggest pet peeve for over a decade, but I finally decided to use this frustration

and turn it into a creative project: I just launched a line of t-shirts that celebrate the visibility of women directors. I made a sweatshirt that says "This is what a film director looks like". And I also have a project about animated GIFs - which are so popular on Slack and Twitter - creating many images featuring women directors. The response online has been phenomenal! I got thumbs up and words of encouragement from the likes of Geena Davis and Jessica Chastain.

And one final question - what should we expect from your talk at the HBA European Leadership Summit?

My talk will focus on the video campaign "Inspired By Real Kids" - a series I made for Lottie dolls, featuring extraordinary girls in STEM. These girls are phenomenal and I can't wait to share their stories with attendees at HBA.

Meet Elena on 5-6 October in London and find out more about her empowering work. She will take the stage at the HBA European Leadership Summit at the Gibson Hall to talk about the power of media to ignite social change. [Register now](#) to attend the summit and join Elena in leaving a mark on the world.

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