

## Social Justice Leaders on What Matters: Hilary Pennington & Tynesha McHarris

This video transcript captures a Zoom conversation between Tynesha McHarris, co-founder of the [Black Feminist Fund](#), and Hilary Pennington, executive vice president of programs at the Ford Foundation.

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### Transcript begins.

[Tynesha McHarris, a Black woman in her 30s with black curly hair, wearing a black shirt and a gold necklace, sits for a video interview with Hilary Pennington, a white woman with blonde hair, wearing a white shirt and gold earrings, sitting in an orange chair.]

**TYNESHA MCHARRIS:** I think, when you find yourself on a cliff, the scary part is, you know, you feel the dangling. I think that's when the things that we thought was never possible happen because what else do we have to risk? And I think we're in that kind of moment. So I am deciding to be hopeful. I think we might break some things we never thought could be broken.

[on-screen graphic: Social Justice Leaders on What Matters, Hilary Pennington with Tynesha McHarris]

[on-screen text: Hilary Pennington, Executive Vice President of Programs, Ford Foundation]

**HILARY PENNINGTON:** Tynesha McHarris is a Black feminist from the United States. She brings over 15 years of experience advocating for racial, gender, and youth justice and social movements in organizations and philanthropic institutions. And one of her primary roles is as a co-founder of the Black Feminist Fund. And, Tynesha, I would love to start there. Tell us about the Black Feminist Fund, why it was created, and why it is so transformative.

[on-screen text: Tynesha McHarris, Co-Founder, Black Feminist Fund]

**TYNESHA:** So the moment you and anyone asks me about the Black Feminist Fund—and I mean it sincerely—um, my heart jumps a bit. And I'll tell you a little bit about why.

So back in 2013, where most important conversations and decisions and radical world-changing things happen, it was at a kitchen table, uh, with my dear friend and colleague in the work, Hakima Abbas. And we were both frustrated and concerned about how difficult it was to move resources to our movements, and specifically for Black women to move resources to our work in ways that acknowledged and understood our full humanity. And we spent, I think, hours that day just, like, dreaming up what a vehicle would look like that would move resources to Black women's work.

We spent eight years deciding to say that this does not have to be an alternative universe. We can actually build a vehicle that would move resources to Black feminists in ways that not just understood their humanity or the power of movements and what it can do to transform societies, but really move resources in ways that felt like we loved them, um, and move resources that were in solidarity. And so we spent eight years taking a dream seriously, and now here we are. It's actually in the world.

**HILARY:** That's pretty amazing. I would love to hear you outline your definition of Black feminism and why it matters to be supported as its own school of thought, right—a lens that is influencing many of the social movements today. So, tell me, how would you define Black feminism?

**TYNESHA:** Black feminism is my church. And so, um, so if I get a little too preachy—

**HILARY:** Take me there!

**TYNESHA:** I know. That's right. I, um, so Black feminism, as you're right, is its own school of thought. At the heart of Black feminism is acknowledging the inherent value of Black women, Black femmes, Black nonbinary people, Black trans people. So the idea of the inherent value, um, is core and central to Black feminism and its analysis and the way of being. Um, and so the analysis around Black feminism is the, the core belief that we can't separate out racial injustice, gender injustice, multiple different forms of class, that class oppression that—in the words of Kimberlé Crenshaw, that these are all intersections that need to be held, understood together. Because if, because if we try to fight one battle—so if I'm trying to fight racism at the cost of sexism—we all lose. We're actually not fighting racism well.

And so Black feminism is about starting with the last first. So that's a core principle. And not that we're the last because of our humanity. It's the last because it's often considered the least. So if you start with the last, not only are you able to start, um, with folks who are often most vulnerable and harmed but you start with folks who are actually able to see the entire way and see the way these systems harm people. But also you get to start with people who have been whose genius has kept them not just alive but whose genius has been able to really, um, create foundations for, for multiple movements. So, that's Black feminism.

The Black part, you know, it is about, you know, folks who—uh, Blackness is complicated, right, um, based on context and geography and history. But it was important for us to acknowledge that there is a shared struggle with folks, um, across the African continent, across Afro-descendant people everywhere, and our shared struggle unites us. Um, and so when you take the Black feminist, um, movements and leaders across the world, the idea is saying that we have a shared struggle, while it is unique depending on your context. And when we are together, when we fight together, when we build together, and when we dream together, we are, we are stronger and more able to win together.

**HILARY:** That is so profound and so eloquent. And now, for a second, to the way the Black Feminist Fund is going to operate, because you will also be funders.

**TYNESHA:** Yeah.

**HILARY:** Um, so I'd love to hear you talk about how you think about your relationship with your partners.

**TYNESHA:** We often say, what does it look like to fund movements like we want them to win, right? And if we want movements to win, we know that it takes a long time to build power, to strategize, to vision, to organize, to mobilize, to build bases. Um, and so one of the ways that we are hoping to do that in the structure of how we want to move and redistribute resources is by long-term core flexible support. Our ultimate goal is to get to the place where we can give grants to organizations in eight-year cycles.

The second is, you know, one of the things that we are hopeful for—and it's a part of a Black feminist principle—is that we want to disrupt the concentration of even decision making on how resources get moved. So as we, like, democratize decision making, that means a lot of people have to be involved in the process. And so we have a board—we call it the Movement Leadership Council. There are Black feminist movement leaders from around the world who are going to help us think through and be in conversation around priorities.

**HILARY:** What a standard to set for the field to, to think the way you're thinking. I love that.

**TYNESHA:** And I think that the idea is that the Black Feminist Fund will move resources to movement partners. But our real job is to, one, not be permanent, like not for, not forever and ever. It is to—

**HILARY:** But for long enough—

**TYNESHA:** For long enough, like, “Yeah, we ain't goin' away for a little while.” But can we be, um, can we be grounded for at least a generation and move resources to movements and then be able to catalyze even more support beyond the fund to be able to model what it looks like to be in true solidarity with Black feminist movements and move not just more resources but continue to move healthier resources, better resources, and resources that actually come along with believing in movement. And going back to that principle that I shared earlier, believing in the inherent value of Black women and Black femmes and Black nonbinary people.

**HILARY:** I think that that's just so important. So let's talk about the Global South. We know we need to shift power from the Global North to the Global South—although that binary also needs to be contested now, given the movement of so many people across borders, where they belong to multiple places at the same time. But how is the growing diversity of the Global South contributing to advancing movements for social justice and rights and opportunity?

**TYNESHA:** Movements and leaders and Black feminists in the Global South have been generous, um, to, one, support my own learning and support the learning of a lot of us, um, around the world. So I just honor them, um, yeah, because the Black Feminist Fund would not be possible without Black feminists in the Global South period. Whether it's the organizing and activism happening in Ghana and in Nigeria, organizing happening in South Africa, whether it's organizing happening by Black feminists across Latin America that some of the most creative and genius approaches is coming from the Global South.

Black feminists in the United States are challenged by thinking about how we address and respond to state violence, how we keep folks safe from patriarchal violence and harm, and the models around what safety can look like and what peace can look like. We are looking to our sisters and siblings in the Global South who have incredible experience at creating and innovating and responding to multiple forms of violence but also responding to multiple forms of brilliance. And I will tell you that we are looking to the Global South for leadership and direction

because some of the most thoughtful and creative models and possibilities is coming out of the Global South.

**HILARY:** Those are going to be really, really important transfers of knowledge and, and sharing, you know, I think of expertise and insight.

So I want to ask you a last question. What makes you hopeful? What keeps you going?

**TYNESHA:** My family, uh, my great-grandmother's memory, um, Black feminists, the Black Feminist Fund team. And I find myself to be more hopeful than I've ever been, because I think it's in moments of fear that we see what we're made of. And I am finding that in moments of fear and uncertainty that I am seeing many of us rise to an occasion, and I've seen it—we've seen it around the world. And while I don't want my hope to be rooted in pain or struggle that's not what I'm saying but I am, I am my hope is rooted in people who find beauty and possibility, even when it's hard. That's what's giving me hope. I think, when you find yourself on a cliff, the scary part is, you know, you feel the dangling. I think that's when the things that we thought was never possible happen because what else do we have to risk? And I think we're in that kind of moment. So I am deciding to be hopeful. I think we might break some things we never thought could be broken.

**HILARY:** Oh, I just want to thank you for that and, and the “leader-full” way you operate in the world. Um, I feel so lucky to get to see you in several different contexts as, uh, as that kind of a creator and, and mover and transformer. Um, so thank you.

[on-screen text: What's your take? Join the conversation]

[on-screen graphic: Ford Foundation logo]

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