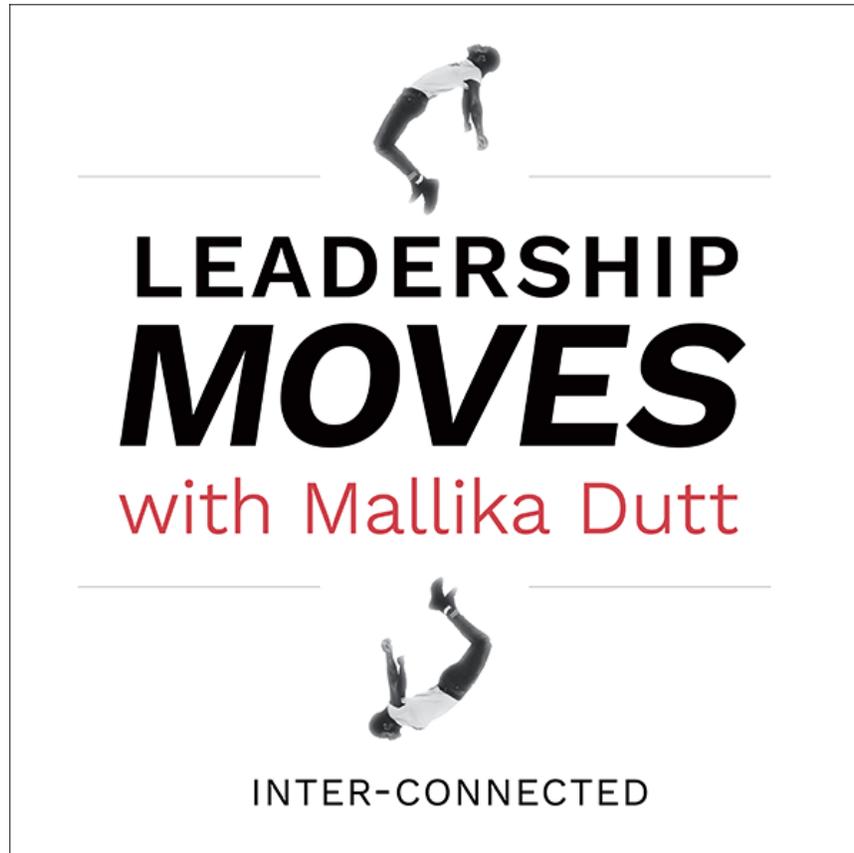


**S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader  
with Françoise Moudouthe**



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## **S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader with Françoise Moudouthe**

How do you fight for equality while naming discrimination within the very philanthropic organizations that support your work? Join Françoise Moudouthe of the African Women's Development Fund for a powerful lesson on courage and how to get out of your comfort zone in this episode of Leadership Moves.

Welcome to Leadership Moves, a podcast for visionary changemakers ready to shake up and re-envision the world. I'm your host, Mallika Dutt. Join me and my extraordinary guests as we discuss how to generate social change through leadership and the entrepreneurial, non-profit and philanthropic fields.

**Mallika:** Hi, Françoise, welcome to the Leadership Moves podcast.

**Françoise:** Hi, Mallika, thanks for having me.

**Mallika:** I am really excited today to talk to you about the Africa Women's Development Fund, an organization that's been around for a long time. And has played a very, very major role in the development and the support of African led feminist organizations and feminist leadership. I'd love for you to tell me a little bit more about the fund and what it does.

**Françoise:** Thank you, Mallika, thanks again for having me. So, my name is Françoise Moudouthe, and I am the CEO, I have been for a year of the Africa Women's Development Fund, AWDF. So, the way I would quickly present AWDF is that it's a 21-year-old fund, women's fund, also mission, the central mission is to support the work that is done for women's rights by a women's rights organization across Africa. And that support over the years has taken a more comprehensive role of, and understanding, so initially, and that's the core of our work is to support financially.

So, providing financial resources to African and women's rights organizations. So that's through our grant making at our own fund. But we do, over the year, we feel like that support has to go beyond financial support. So, we provide technical assistance and capacity building for the

## S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader with Françoise Moudouthe

organizations that we support, and increasingly for even other organizations who are not that grant-dependent. We also provide – we do a lot of work around identifying, documenting and lifting up feminists' knowledge from across the continent and making it available to the feminists and across the continent and the wider public.

And lastly, yes, we play a critical role in movement building, we're preparing and also ideating, a stronger women's movement on the continent. So, we've done quite a bit of work around the African Feminist Forum and we gotten to do [3:04 inaudible].

**Mallika:** So that's quite a comprehensive agenda and quite a big agenda that you have Françoise. And in this last year we've all been addressing the challenges and opportunities that the pandemic has presented to us, which has coincided with your leadership. So, you came onboard as the CEO of the fund at the same time as COVID came onboard as a teacher for us humans on this planet. How has that affected the fund and what were some of the things that happened for you and how you had to pivot as a leader during this time?

**Françoise:** Yeah, that's very true, that we've had – it's been quite the period for everyone. I think for AWDF the whole time since the pandemic started has been the time of our transition. So, I joined at the end of October 2020. And so, it was – the pandemic was the last year of my predecessor, Theo Sowa and my first year, and we're still in it. I don't know if we can say we are post COVID. I don't know what it looks like and when that starts.

But for me personally – let me start with what is it about the organization. I think for us it was just so many things we had to adapt to. And I think for us it's rooted towards the organization, how resilient we already are. And how much we need to be grounded in our convictions around the importance of what feminists in general in African communities too have been saying. So, this is not a crisis that happens outside of the usual work that we do. It is a

## **S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader with Françoise Moudouthe**

crisis that exposes, amplifies, the things that we always said are happening in the system, and the flaws of the system.

So, for us it wasn't like the new thing that we had to address so much in terms of our mission. It's really been about how do we adapt to all the things that we want to continue doing because they have been shown as important as ever. But we don't have the ability to convene, physically to connect, personally etcetera.

Then for the leadership transition for me, one of the biggest challenges is I haven't been able to establish connections with our partners, our grant department, our donor department and others, and even the team outside, behind the Zoom boxes, uh like little black boxes on Zoom. And that for me has been the biggest challenge on a daily basis. And I think bigger picture, I think for me the challenge has been to be able to envision the future of an organization when honestly sometimes you can't tell what the next quarter is going to look like.

So, it's been an exercise in, yeah, dreaming big when we have no certainties and without it being about the guessing game. It's really being grounded in our convictions, our original mission and not try to change that. But really thinking about how do we make that a reality in a world that has changed so tremendously.

**Mallika:** So that's a pretty daunting task, isn't it, to continue to dream big in a time of deep uncertainty, to really deepen one's commitment to one's values at a time when so much around you is shifting. If you were to describe what some of the feminist values are that you think have actually been uplifted or revealed more powerfully during the pandemic, what might those be? Can you give me an example?

**Françoise:** Yes. I think for me the one that first to come mind is collective care, yes, even more than self-care, the collective care. I think we've seen how important it is through the pandemic to stay connected to each other.

## **S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader with Françoise Moudouthe**

And to care for each other in a time when a lot of us got sick, we had a lot of loss in the movement as well, a lot of fear. So that time was a time when nobody was going to take care of us so we had to take care of each other.

And I think, yeah, before I joined, I think AWDF did that in a very beautiful way by creating the sister-to-sister spaces where we had [7:56 inaudible] and other coaches support a group of African feminist leaders. It creates brave spaces for us to share how we're feeling through this. And I think we've done it as a one off but we really continue to apply the, yeah, the spirit behind that. It's something that we try to do for each other within our team but also with some of our partners, granting partners and other partners. We really need to keep caring for each other, and that's a key feminist value.

**Mallika:** What does it mean to be brave for you?

**Françoise:** For me?

**Mallika:** Yeah, how does that show up for you when you're talking about the brave spaces, creating and facilitating brave spaces, what does that mean for you as a leader? How are you brave or not brave?

**Françoise:** I think for me there's two things. One is for me to be brave is to continue to do the things that I've done always in terms of my feminist work which is to connect the big picture strategy change with the interpersonal vulnerability, that connection takes. So, I've done quite a bit of that prior to joining AWDF especially through the work I was doing with a platform, Eyala.

Which was really about opening a space for Africans, feminists to talk about what it means for them, not from a space of expertise but from a space of lived experiences to do as a feminist, to embody feminist principle, while also navigating the world as African women and all that comes with all of that. And this is something that I teach very freely when I was on my own. And I think for me being brave is keeping that in my interactions with

## S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader with Françoise Moudouthe

the team but also publicly, keeping that vulnerability in my voice when my voice is now also that of the organization.

And I allowed that vulnerability, has been a key question for me, and over the year if I'm being honest, I have been a lot quieter than usually because that question remains unsolved. And the moment when I have been the bravest around that is the moment when I knew I couldn't just keep quiet.

So, one of the examples was earlier in the year when there was rising homophobia in Ghana and across the continent where we just couldn't keep quiet. And I didn't resolve that question but I was like, it doesn't matter, we do have to say something and I personally do have to say something.

And that is probably one of the bravest choices from this year, yeah, I said. I think the other thing about being brave is about understanding that my role is not about being liked, but also doing what needs to be done for the organization. Even though sometimes, as one my colleagues, sponsor also says, "It's like short term pain for a long-term gain, and being brave enough to do that short term pain, and sometimes cause that short term pain, is this relevant, but yeah, it requires courage."

**Mallika:** There's so many things in what you just said that I want to jump into and amplify. And I'm just reflecting on my own journey which is in the reverse direction of yours, which is I used to run a very large organization. And then I left to really do my own inner healing and my own inner work. And then I'm now sort of playing more of an individual role in the world rather than an organizational role.

And I was reflecting on what you said about going from running an organization where it was you and you were the person in charge of whatever it was that was happening with the platform. To now being a part of an organization that has a history that's more than two decades old.

## **S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader with Françoise Moudouthe**

Coming in at the time of a pandemic and learning both how to be brave around when not to speak and learning how to be brave when to speak.

And the being brave to speak in the face of growing homophobia at a time when there is so much increased persecution in the world of communities, of various marginalized communities. It's such an important example of remembering when we are quiet and when we need to speak. I think the other thing that you said about learning to have courage to do things even if it makes you unpopular, short-term pain for long term gain. I'm going to write that as a mantra on my phone because that's also a really challenging thing for people to do.

I mean such important wisdom, Françoise. As leaders now and in your own leadership, what are some of the examples of things you think we should be looking at to make decisions that may not be popular now but which we need to make so that we can have longer term gain?

**Françoise:** Sorry, can you repeat the question? What are the examples of?

**Mallika:** Of decisions that we need to make as leaders right now that are a short-term pain?

**Françoise:** I think that some of the decisions are about taking a stance, taking a stance on some controversial issues, including controversial within our movements. And I think that the same example I was sharing earlier about homophobia. On the continent, it's so vibrant, it's such an issue that's really alive at the moment. But honestly, the response from the movement has not been as strong as it should have been. Which is also why I felt like we couldn't just afford, not because of who I am but because of who we are in the movement and where we are situated.

If we say nothing then we're saying it's okay to say nothing. And so, I think taking a stance is one of them on tough issues. And also naming the power dynamics and the discriminations within our own movements. And being, yeah, brave enough to say, we don't have answers to those but if we don't

## S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader with Françoise Moudouthe

name them, we're never going to even open the spaces for a connected discussion about how to go about those. And lastly, I think we need to make some strong positions and brave positions around how we talk to the powers that be.

And in my case, a lot of my work is talking to donors. It's really like you talk to them and the conversations are guided by am I or am I not getting this money that you have. And at the same time, I think my role is also to say that there's some money that comes with some strings attached. And we do this for ourselves at the organization but we always say, "This is applicable to us but it should be applicable to all women's rights organizations." So having those tough conversations, even though it might cost us the funding that we so badly need, I've found it to be very important, yeah.

**Mallika:** Talking to donors and raising the resources that we need as movements, as organizations has always been such a fraught and challenging issue, even as the resources that are available have increased. If I think about 20 years ago and I think about where we are now, certainly the women's movement and all the organizing that we have done has opened up many more resources for us.

And yet we continue to be challenged in this way around money that comes with strings attached or is given to us in ways that actually undermines the mission and that we're actually trying to implement in the world. And I wonder about donors that continue to hold on to old ways, that have been proven over, and over, and over again to not work. That it's really time to change the way in which philanthropy operates in the world. What have been some of the conversations that you've had with donors to try and make these shifts? And have you lost any donor as a result?

**Françoise:** No, we haven't lost any donor. We've been very focused in that regard. And I think some of it is also because of the flexibility that our organization has developed over the years. I think for me the most

## S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader with Françoise Moudouthe

important and also difficult conversation with donors is about naming when some of those issues are coming from a place of bias. And so, one of the things that we hear as subtext in some of the – the conversations we have with donors is, “Doesn’t AWDF have enough? Aren’t you big enough for an African Women’s led organization?”

Because nobody’s asking those NGOs, or organizations, or funds that are based in California if they’re big enough. Nobody’s asking, and I mean I was reading this human rights funders network report that came out this year about the trust that exists in organizations that are based in the north, just have to jump through much fewer hoops that we have to every single year with the same donors all the time. And at some point I’m like, how many times do we have prove ourselves?

We spend so much time trying to prove ourselves to donors when we need to put that energy into supporting the movements and the women that we are supporting. So, I think those are the toughest conversations. And I think with all the decolonizing discussions that we’ve had, donors are more open to that. But it stinks every single time, it stinks for them to hear, it’s hard for us to say. That is the hardest most important conversation I think to keep happening.

**Mallika:** Decolonizing philanthropy, yeah, and decolonizing philanthropy. I feel like certainly in the United States we are in such a deep shift around conversations that have to do with race, and racial identity, and diversity, and equity, and justice. I mean really, it’s a time when there’s huge discussions, huge transformations and a lot of rupture actually that’s also leading to organizations shutting down, blowing up, falling apart at multiple levels. And sometimes I think that the virus, that the coronavirus is kind of a moment where all the band-aids are being ripped off.

All of the ways in which we’ve continued to try and do things in old ways that are just not sustainable and that continue to oppress people, that all those band-aids are being ripped off. I am curious to know what steps as a

## S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader with Françoise Moudouthe

leader we could be taking as a movement. What do you think as a leader we could be taking as a movement to really confront this issue of colonization around this question of the Global North and the Global South?

Because that's really what you're speaking to, how we continue to perpetuate these stereotypes around aren't you big enough for who you are? Or as resources for a Global North NGO can be much, much larger than for a regional organization that's actually addressing more challenging issues, closer to the community and all of these different ways. So, I'm curious to know what other measures we could be taking as a movement to address some of these issues?

**Françoise:** I'm not sure it fully answers the question you're asking. But for me the biggest and also very difficult thing for me as a leader is to keep refusing to be tokens, and refusing for our organization to be tokens. I'm saying this because in this context, between COVID that is making donors feel that they must have intermediates to work with. And also, the more decolonizing philanthropy discussion that donors are walking on eggshells around some of those issues.

I have a sense that one of the go to reflexes for some of the Global North based organizations and donors is to identify organizations they already trust and just focused on those. And often, honestly, AWDF is [21:38 inaudible]. So, for us it's an opportunity sometimes to grow faster as some of the relationships that we would have, have more challenges growing so fast. However, the risk of being tokenized is always there. And so sometimes I am like, "I'm excited you're talking to us, but why are you talking to us?" Yeah, on the issue of LGBTQI rights.

There are focused African LGBTQI rights funds, that, "Have you spoken to them or are you just coming to us because we're part of the comfort zone?" So, I'm just saying, don't shift your comfort zone, get out of it. And sometimes it's a conversation that doesn't end up in AWDF getting more

## S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader with Françoise Moudouthe

funding. But it gets in close to other funds, other organizations and ultimately the movement getting more funding which is our goal.

So, I think, yeah, I think refusing to be tokenized, refusing to be on these panels being the Black face in the sea of white faces on Zoom. And knowing, always asking why am I here. Am I being tokenized? I mean I did an interview [22:56 inaudible], and I remember [22:57 inaudible] saying to me, “As a Black woman you will always be tokenized.” So sometimes you have to just accept it. And sometimes even see how you can work with it. But sometimes the risk is too big.

And so, making a stance, calling it out gently sometimes, not so gently at times, but always calling it out and weighing the pros and cons of doing that and the cost what you’re ready to pay for. That for me has been top, especially as a new younger leader, sometimes I’m like, “Did I just ruin something really big?” But I’ve never regretted having to do this.

**Mallika:** That’s a lot of courage, Françoise, that’s a lot of courage. In the way in which the funding world operates, representation operates, so many of us who are of color get invited into spaces as tokens. And then deal with this question of why am I here? And have to make these difficult choices like you said of, do I stay and do I speak to make sure that these issues get addressed? Do I name this and leave? Do I decline? And then when that leadership is connected to having to raise resources for the organization we lead, it can get even more complicated.

And so, what you just said about the tokenization, that’s also about then remembering to stand in solidarity and in solid alliance with other organizations and other aspects of the movement. And not fall into our own power traps of feeling like we are now the intermediaries or we are now going to be the gatekeepers. Or of course we’ll receive all of this money because we know what to do with it and we know how to share it with the LGBTQI+ communities or any other community that we’re being the gatekeeper for.

## S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader with Françoise Moudouthe

It's both our relationship to philanthropy and to white spaces as well as our relationship to ourselves. And what you said earlier about how do we also keep naming the ways in which power lives in our own organizations and within us? And I'm connecting that to what you said earlier about your leadership magic, your personal leadership magic that I heard you say earlier is how to connect big structural issues to the interpersonal. And how to do it in a way that you stay honest and vulnerable in, while also understanding that you have to make hard decisions or short-term pain for long term gain.

So, a really complex and very powerful leadership landscape that you've laid out for us already in this conversation. I'm wondering, given everything that you've shared, your first year as the leader of the fund, the pandemic around you, these challenges. Is there something that gives you joy? Is there something that makes you feel passionate? What continues to animate you to do what you do?

**Françoise:** Yeah, it's a great question. I have to say I've been so focused on – I've been in survival mode a lot this year. And the question of joy has been a really hard for me - joy, self-care, all that to be honest. And also, I've had a lot of personal, you know, life is going to keep happening, so you have to deal with that as well. I have learned to find joy in the things that I already have. For example, the time I spend with my family. So as an introvert I'm always saying that I connect with peopling, including with my family, with people a lot at work.

Talk to people, reply to email, then go home, my kids' favorite word is mama, which they say 101 million times per day. And that for me is also peopling. So, I find it really draining, parenting. And what recharges me is time alone. I haven't had any time alone. I haven't had any time alone in forever. And so, I have been intentional about the time I spend with my family, reminding myself, well, where are the joy points in it? And it's got to – it's been a bit odd for me because I have been also – there's a lot of guilt

## S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader with Françoise Moudouthe

or shame because the good mothers, they do this instantly, it's natural to them.

And yeah, I'm like, yeah, not quite. But I think it's been great actually, to be forced to have [27:58 inaudible] to work with. And so, focusing on that. Having honest conversations with my five-year-old has been like boundaries. So that when we are together we can really enjoy that. And all the things that we enjoy doing together, "What do you love about spending time with mommy?", all of those things. It's kind of new for me to be intentional about finding joy, but instead of only focusing on the responsibility, or the weight of the responsibility. That's been it really.

And apart from that, I think finding – it's not been about finding joy but also reducing pressure. And in that reducing pressure alone there's some kind of breathing space that comes, it's not quite joy, but it's a good step on the way.

**Mallika:** I am learning so much from you today, Françoise. I mean I'm just thinking about how do you create boundaries with five-year olds, that remind you about what's joyful about being with that five-year-old. I mean I think that's so big especially since so many of my friends who are parents have been with their kids a lot in this last year. It's a really good way of managing the situations that we're all in right now, boundaries with not just five-year old's but with pretty much anybody that is in our familial structure that we've been inside our homes with for really long periods of time.

And then you talked about reducing pressure and that not necessarily being about joy but at least allowing you to breathe. From this place of this incredible leadership ability to look at the big picture, the global picture, the regional picture, down to how to navigate familial situations, what advice would you have for leaders right now? Is there some wisdom that you would like to share with us in terms of how to be the leaders that the world needs right now?

## S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader with Françoise Moudouthe

**Françoise:** I don't know about advice because I feel like I need a little advice. But the piece of advice that I would give to my one year ago self is to trust my instinct. Every single decision, conclusion that I'm reaching after a year I spotted it within the first six weeks. And I did have a six-week period of a handover with my predecessor, Theo, who is amazing. And just being able to be around but not be in charge, talking to – I had six weeks, I literally had 40 plus discussions with every staff member. I did a lot of reading, a lot of talking, thinking, all of that.

And I did write a letter to myself saying, look, this is what I'm getting for that. And I shared that with the team when we started the year, this is what I'm hearing from you, from the board, from everybody. When I go back to this now which I did last week, I'm like, "Wait, no, no, the things I'm struggling with now I didn't see the." What has happened in the meantime is I doubted everything that I had seen. And I'm still now struggling with things that I knew, I knew clearly within six weeks.

And I'm now thinking I've done full circle, going back to that conclusion. So, trusting instincts, intuition and trusting that we didn't get here by chance, which also I think for me as a younger CEO, was a huge deal for me, impostor syndrome how many times I don't know, trusting that guts, trusting that instinct and trusting my vulnerabilities. For me, yeah, best advice I would give, yeah, one year ago, Françoise.

**Mallika:** Well, Françoise, I am really grateful that you trusted your instinct and your intuition and that you had the guts to step into this leadership role at the fund and to be this young, young leader in this older organization. And I am so appreciative of this conversation because I've learned a lot from what we've shared, what you've shared in this past half hour. I always have amazing conversations with you. So, this is yet another one. So, thank you so much, Françoise, and here's wishing you less pressure and moments of joy.

## **S2 Ep05: Choosing Courage and Finding Joy as a Leader with Françoise Moudouthe**

**Françoise:** Thank you so much, Mallika, for this conversation and other enlightening conversations we've had since we've connected. Thank you so much for having me.

Thanks for listening to the Leadership Moves podcast which is made possible by the BUILD program of the Ford Foundation. If you want more information or the resources from today's show visit [mallikadutt.com](http://mallikadutt.com), [M-A-L-L-I-K-A-D-U-T-T.com](http://M-A-L-L-I-K-A-D-U-T-T.com). Until next time.

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