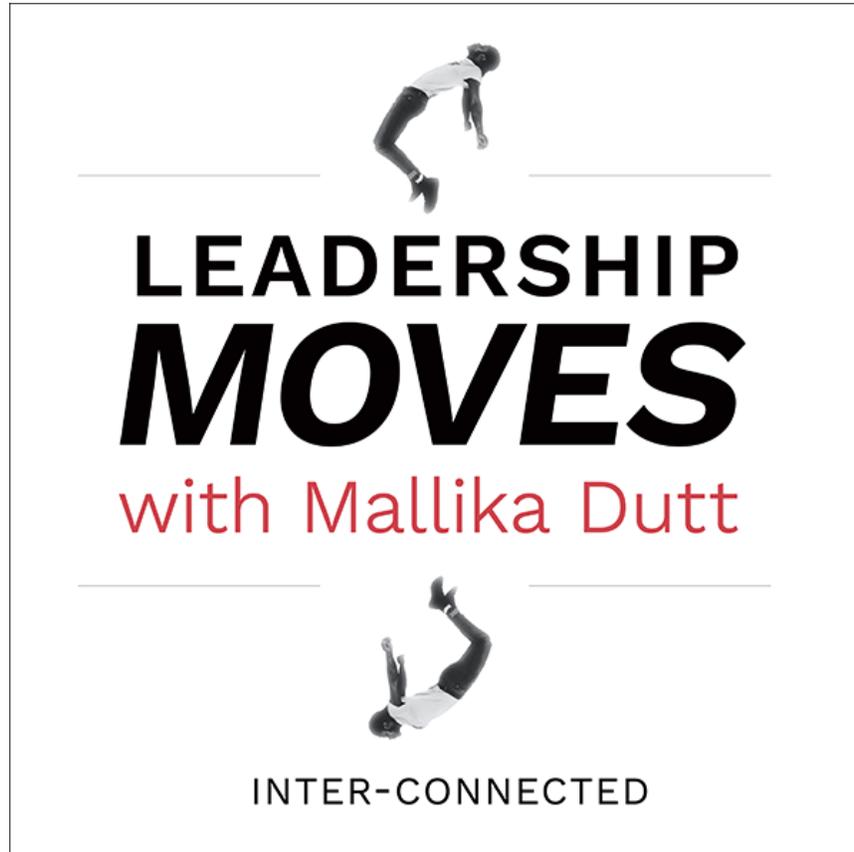


**S2 Ep12: The Importance of Fun, Joy, and Pleasure in
Advancing Justice and Human Rights with Geetanjali
Misra**



Full Episode Transcript

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S2 Ep12: The Importance of Fun, Joy, and Pleasure in Advancing Justice and Human Rights with Geetanjali Misra

What's pleasure got to do with human rights? How do we incorporate play and joy into our work to challenge violence and discrimination? Join Geetanjali Misra, Executive Director of CREA to explore how we create movements to simultaneously challenge structural exclusion and express diverse forms of desire and pleasure.

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, Geeta, this is so exciting to be speaking with you for this episode of Leadership Moves. We have known each other for many, many decades. And our journeys have taken us from creating SAKHI For South Asian Women, to being program officers together at the Ford Foundation's New Delhi office. And then embarking on creating organizations that have really foregrounded social justice and human rights in very different kinds of ways, you with CREA, me with Breakthrough. And now here we are in 2022 where the world around us is in such a place of deep transformation.

You've been at the cutting edge of so much in the leadership space especially around intersections of sexuality, justice, human rights. And I'm really, really so pleased that we're having an opportunity to speak to each other today.

Geeta: Thanks, Mallika. It's so much fun to be in a formal space with somebody who I have known so long. And it's exciting to have this conversation wherever it takes us.

Mallika: So, Geeta, there's multiple issues, multiple challenges, multiple things that those of us who are in movement space are thinking about grappling with. And I'm curious to know where is some of your energy focused these days? What are you thinking about?

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Geeta: So obviously I'm thinking about a lot of things given the world today where we've all faced, the world universally has faced COVID. And we've had to rethink reimagine a world that we had not imagined before and bring it into some of our movement spaces, and our workspaces, and our spaces of our own personal lives. So, there's been a lot of thinking, scrambling, making sense of this new order of things.

And I think what helps me kind of ground myself, or the things that I think about the most is how will our movements, our spaces, our personal lives, our work hold on to things that seem, that could be rights affirming for all of us, that could help give us hope in terms of thinking about a better world, another world. And not just about bad things that have happened to many, many of us. So much of our lives have been consumed for decades thinking about harm, stigma and discrimination, human rights violations. And all that is really important.

But I think for CREA and for me personally, within these spaces can we think of little islands that we create that have to be also about the better worlds, the alternate worlds, the pleasurable worlds. And how do we then expand those islands and connect them all? I mean that's something that consumes me a lot now because even though it's time of COVID we have to figure out a way of hanging on to hope, pleasure, and fun so that we can have more pleasurable lives, better lives. But also create a world where our work is not just gloom and doom.

Mallika: So, the pleasure principle, I mean what you're saying is so important. It has been incredibly important to me as well because you're absolutely right. We have spent so much of our lives, decades really addressing and dealing with some of the most horrible things that humans do to one another, the kind of violence, discrimination, exclusion, marginalization. That so many millions of people experience on the basis of multiple identities is the core of the work that we have done.

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And yet as you say, what's the there, there? What's the vision of the world that we want to actually create? What is the world that we desire to inhabit? And if we don't start to actually practice that we'll just stay in the place of doom and gloom, of violence, and discrimination, and trauma. I think CREA has been really at the cutting edge of thinking about play, pleasure, fun, in the way in which it does its work. And I'd love for you to talk about how that has actually played out. Where are the communities with which you are able to engage in not just conversations but actual activities around pleasure?

Geeta: So, I want to give a shout out and a nod to Carole Vance whose work I read when I was really young, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Sexuality, Gender, and Rights*. And it's something that really shaped my thinking around sexuality. And I think for the longest time having been a feminist, having been a girl living in India, you were constantly seen as the poor thing. You don't have, poor thing. You're so lucky you don't have brotherhoods because you don't have to deal with being treated badly in your family. But you may be treated badly in your country.

So, I think that for me I spent a lot of my life, my younger part of my life thinking about girls and women as being people that were not entitled to thinking about pleasure, and fun. And it was something that you could do secretly, only in very private spaces. And I think bringing some of the pleasure principles into my work was really important to me. I think for me the early part of my life of being part of the women's movement, which focused a lot on issues of violence, issues of, you know, if you were talking about violence you had a space.

But if you began to talk about pleasure it was seen as something that you did only after you had addressed violence. It was a hierarchy. So, you could never talk about fun, pleasure, and violence in the same conversation. And I think I saw it play out with a lot of the work that we did where we began to document stories of women that had faced abuse and violence, including my own story. And I think the stories that we were

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willing to tell were only about violence and not so much about the pleasure that we had in our relationships, the pleasure that we had in partners we chose, the pleasure that we had in doing small things.

And I think it gave me a lot of – I had to think a lot about why. And I think it's one – we could count the stories of violence whereas pleasure seemed kind of a more abstract concept that was very subjective, it was very individual. It couldn't be counted so it couldn't be measured. And somehow it scared people to hear stories about pleasure people may have experienced and having sex with somebody from a different class, from a different cast, from a different sexual orientation.

So, it's something that has consumed CREA a lot in terms of thinking that you don't, you definitely have to address individual harms, but you also have to really constantly talk to people about the kind of world they want to live in, kind of world you want to live in. And you really fill that story out, whether it's with individuals, whether it's with movements. And I can give you many examples as we talk along as to what it has meant for different communities of people including ourselves.

Mallika: One of the things that you've really been very active, and vocal, and creative about is incorporating art, storytelling, film, different forms of creative expression into how you do your political work. And you created this extraordinary gathering called Count Me In that weaves a lot of what you're talking about and incorporates pleasure, joy, and all of those values and principles into movements and social justice. Can you talk a little bit about how that came about and some examples of how that weaving takes place?

Geeta: Yeah, so I think this, the Count Me In or even just those three words came from really having worked in the women's movement and really being a [inaudible], having the privilege of being very close to people whose stories were left out, or whose stories were not being told. And thinking that even as feminists we were creating hierarchies where some

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people's lives were made worthy of protection versus some people's lives were seen as not worthy of protection.

So even some of the early work that we did on domestic violence, this question of why is it called domestic? What about women that face abuse on the streets? And I very early on having had the opportunity to meet with a lot of sex workers, where I would go to some of these sex worker collectives. And it wasn't just the gloom and doom story I had seen in media. There were little pockets of, they would play games in their neighborhoods. They would have some similar pleasures with bathing their children, or leading their kids to school.

And at the same time, I could never find any posters, or any of our own material which showed where could a sex worker go if she was raped. So, in a way we weren't telling either of those stories in the manner that were their lives. They face these issues. So, I think what it began to do for me is to really think about whose exclusion should we as feminists think about?

And of course, if you bring in sexuality, for us, people with disabilities were kind of categorized as people who are asexual, not capable of having pleasure because the pleasure they have, or pleasure people with disabilities have may look very different from able people who, you know, there was a whole ableism kind of rhetoric. Where you couldn't understand what pleasure meant for people who were, I would say people with disabilities. It could be lesbian women, could be trans people, sex workers.

So, for us, Count Me In became a way to understand better the fault lines that we as feminists needed to grapple with both on the side where we really needed to figure out what kinds of harm they face. But also, what kinds of worlds people wanted to build in. And the idea eventually was to build alliances amongst all of us.

And a very funny story, at the Count Me In conference we had everyone in the same room. And these sex workers were kind of freaking out because

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they were like, “Oh my God, people with disabilities want to have pleasure, and they’re talking about sex and they’re showing us videos of people kissing each other.” People with disabilities were like, “Oh my God, I’m sitting next to a sex worker, this person sells their body.” The trans people were like, “Oh God, there’s nobody here like me.” Or the lesbians kind of were in their own corner finding other lesbians because there were no other spaces.

And really part of having conversations around storytelling. So, I think that created this idea of counting people in. And the idea for us has always been, how do we change ourselves? How do I change my thinking? I didn’t wake up thinking that, it was a learning curve even for me, or it was even talking about one’s own pleasure. Or talking about how you get pleasure out of all kinds of things. And making that part of the official conversation, making it part of the organization, making it part of this conversation here.

It’s not easy, it’s not easy to do. And using arts, culture and media is one way to do it. Alice McDermott has this amazing little piece that we read in The New Yorker once called Enough. And it’s all about ice-cream. And it’s all about different flavors of ice-cream. It’s about her relationship with her older husband and she goes at night and has ice-cream from the fridge because her kids don’t want her to have too much ice-cream. And the whole analogy is there’s enough if you have an appetite for it, pleasure is pleasure, there’s diversity in it, there’s judgment of it.

It’s this hidden stuff and it’s a brilliant little piece. So how do you bring things like that into your conversation where everyone reading it can connect with the idea of diversity, inclusion, judgment? Because we have a lot of judgment around pleasure. We have a lot of judgment around having fun, or living on the lighter side of life because we deal with very heavy things that have to do with harm, violence, death, that many of our communities and ourselves face.

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Mallika: Geeta, one of the conversations that we have had over the years and certainly a conversation that you've been very, very at the frontlines of is the paradox that we face of claiming identity based on marginalization while we are trying to transform the structures of domination that lead to violence and discrimination. And then weaving pleasure into those conversations.

So, we are in this peculiar situation where the way in which we have found voice, we have found power, we have found ways to actually articulate what is happening to us in society at the hands of dominant paradigms is the identity that allows us to take a seat at the table. And yet that same process can put us into boxes, can start undermining our wholeness, our complexity as human beings. And because most of the identity assertions have to do with our marginalized status, pleasure then becomes an even more challenging conversation to have.

So, I'd love to hear your thoughts about how we might be thinking about identity in different ways as we embrace the creation of pleasure spaces going forward.

Geeta: Yeah. So, I mean I think we will always have to deal with identities and foreground, one identity at one point of time over the other. When I lived in the US my immigrant identity got more foregrounded than some of my identities. And I think what identities allow us to do is claim rights that have to do with the harm that the collective we face. So, I don't want to take away from the identity, but I think what's happening now I feel is we are also one identity is pitted against the other. And we're not having as many cross identity conversations.

And that I think is really the crux of getting to the stage where we can actually not talk about marginalization. And we are trying to change that language from marginalization to structural exclusion. Because if you get the structural exclusion, many identities face exclusion from the same structures, they may face them differently. So, if we can begin

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conversations that focus on identity but also think of the groupings as structurally excluded people, it's a bigger umbrella. It's a bigger umbrella.

And how do we create these umbrella terms which may be terms and they will, you know, I'll never say I'm a structurally excluded person because that's not necessarily an identity. But it allows my identity formation to connect with other forms of exclusion that I might face. And it also allows people to think about how even those identities have to figure out ways to connect with, I don't know, common forms of violence, stigma, and discrimination.

So, your context shapes one part of your identity but your structure also shapes one part of your exclusion. The thing is I think we've divided pleasure and harm too much. We kind of either have this conversation about violence or we say, "Let's bring in pleasure." And my conversation is how do we interweave all these things all the time? So that we don't create this idea that somehow when I'm working with my NGO that works on violence against women, there is no space to talk about pleasure. And I don't mean just wellbeing, I mean really.

Or we don't say that "This meeting is about arts, culture, media and therefore more about pleasure." The trick I think is in really holding onto both. And I think in a lot of the arts culture work we do, there are glimpses of a pleasurable world too. And I'll give you an example, I mean it's an example from a film that Shohini Ghosh's made called Tales of the Night Fairies. And it is about a sex worker collective in Kolkata. And they talk a lot about the violence they face from the police.

But there's one scene in there which is about all these sex workers, they're playing the game where they sit on chairs. You run around and round, and there's one chair empty. And that scene goes on for a really long time where you see them laughing, running, they get out, they get in. And I remember whenever we have used the film to discuss this, even in the office, and even my own reaction to it the first time was like, oh my God,

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the scene is so long. As if, did I want to jump [inaudible], did I not want to be in that world because it was making me so uncomfortable?

What is it about pleasure? So how do we kind of experience that? So, another example is having worked with many people with disabilities, I remember a friend of mine who has a disability telling me, "For me the elbow is my most sexual organ." And I'm like, okay, and I mean I was lucky, she was a friend, she was willing to talk to me about this conversation, but many people don't have that ability. And we have just talked about some abuse that had gone on and some stigma because ableism is such a big part of our world.

But just kind of this one little word led us into this whole conversation about people with disabilities being sexual beings. And why aren't we foregrounding some of that work even as we advance the convention on the rights of people with disabilities? So, I think this link between identity, structure, pleasure, also has to kind of be deconstructed and constructed not so much in these boxes. And then we might make some headway. I mean this is my own theory.

Mallika: No, actually really deeply appreciate what you're saying, Geeta. There's this incredible artist at Yale, a young Indian woman called Bhasha Chakrabarti. And I was telling you about the work that she does where she's painting these giant gorgeous brown bodies, brown women who are pleasuring themselves. And connecting that pleasuring to all kinds of structural issues and identity issues in some of the most profound ways. And I started to research a little bit of her work. And she refers to her work as brown jouissance.

And I'd never heard the word jouissance before, so I went into doing some research around it. And I discovered that there's a whole French feminist movement around this. And I'm just going to read this little description. And the French feminist writer, Hélène Cixous uses the term jouissance to describe a form of women's pleasure or sexual rapture that combines

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mental, physical, and spiritual aspects of female experience, bordering on mystical communion, explosion, diffusion, effervescence, takes pleasure in being limitless.

She maintains that jouissance is the source of a woman's creative power and that the suppression of jouissance prevents women from finding their own fully empowered voice. And so, as I listen to you talk about this interweaving of self, structure, pain, pleasure in this redefinition of the world that we want to create, I find this term jouissance to really give me a little bit of a map.

One of the things that I've been thinking about more recently is that some of us have really deeply embedded trauma maps from the harm that we have experienced. And we don't necessarily have imprints for how to practice, experience and do pleasure. So sometimes there's a desire for that but there's no neural pathways in our bodies even that enable us to go there. And so, the work that you're doing and sort of insisting that we bring these conversations into the same space and not think about them as these polarities that have to be in two different spaces.

Or that there's shame or somehow we're not supposed to be talking about pleasure if we're talking about important things like human rights is so absolutely critical. I am wondering if you can share some of the wisdom, the lessons that you've learned about trying to do this work, about trying to do this weaving if folks want to step into embracing this approach, their own activism, is there any advice that you would have for them?

Geeta: I mean not advice, but I would say that so much of what you've said, Mallika is also about our own inner selves, not being scared and not being able to tell our stories in the way that we want to. And I think one thing is how do you take some of these individual stories and make them not just about the individual but about movements at large? How do we tell stories of what pleasures through the lens of a large body of people? Because then the diversity of it can come through.

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And I think you can do this through a lot of – I mean for me I think a lot of it comes also from reading a lot about the kinds of pleasure people can experience from many, many different things. There's an amazing article that an author whose last name is Rifaat, and it's called Distant View of a Minaret. And it's about her experiencing violence in her home. But she has the view, a very distant view of a full minaret. And as urbanization, and as neighborhoods grow, and as people build her view of the minaret becomes smaller and smaller and she faces even that little pleasure she has erodes.

And she writes about it. And I think one way to do it is to write a lot more, or to speak a lot more, or to create a lot more and to integrate that into your everyday life and your work. I mean sometimes I think people laugh because even through work, how do you every day have some place where you laugh, your people laugh, you're able to have some thoughts about the other side of it, the informative side of rights, the pleasurable side of joy. And I think that practice of every day at the end of a day saying, "Oh my God, what gave me pleasure today and what within my work?"

So, we do the many practices through work, music. And we have many staff meetings where everyone just brings one song that they love, and they say why. And that has a lot to do about their experience of that music is pleasure. And for some people it's erotic songs, for some people it's plain and simple, for somebody it was a nursery rhyme. But I think that collection of the diversity because it is very diverse. The experience of pleasure will be very different for people.

But I think once you take it to a movement level at least we will be able to recognize that people do experience pleasure. People have an idea of the kind of world they want. We don't want a world where we just won't face harm. We want more than that. We want more than that. And I think everybody does and I think that's what I kind of push everybody, I would say push yourself to ask the question about pleasure, about wellbeing, about joy every day.

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Mallika: Well, Geeta, here's to asking that question of ourselves every single day. And certainly, you have been the source of an enormous amount of joy, laughter, play and pleasure in my life for the many decades that I have known you. So, I thank you for that and I thank you for the incredible work that you continue to do in the world with CREA and otherwise. And I look forward to hanging out with you soon.

Geeta: Yes, and here's to much, much more pleasure, Mallika, we have just started living our pleasure and joy to the maximum. So, thank you, this has been wonderful and very, you know, I mean when I began this conversation I didn't know what it would be about. But you couldn't have made it more pleasurable for me to have addressed this issue of pleasure. And we all need to, I guess, pleasure each other safely and with a lot of joy, and fun, and I don't know, being careful, being wonderful. So, thanks, Mallika.

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