

Social Justice Leaders on What Matters: Hilary Pennington & Geetanjali Misra

This video transcript captures a Zoom conversation between Geetanjali Misra, the co-founder and executive director of Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA), and Hilary Pennington, executive vice president of programs at the Ford Foundation.

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Transcript begins.

[Geetanjali Misra, a brown South Asian woman with shoulder-length black hair, wearing reading glasses with a red top and clear-rimmed bottom and a floral blouse, sits for a video conversation with Hilary Pennington, a white woman with short blonde hair, wearing a patterned shirt and sitting on an orange chair.]

GEETANJALI MISRA: You know, when you—when you're close to the ground and when you, when you convene and you gather and you, uh, I mean, you see rays of resilience, you see—movements begin from that.

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

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

HILARY PENNINGTON: I am speaking today with Geetanjali Misra, the co-founder and executive director, director of CREA. Geeta has worked on issues of sexuality, reproductive health, gender, human rights, and violence against women from a variety of vantage points—as a program officer at the Ford Foundation, a professor at Columbia University, as president of the board for the Association for Women's Rights and Development (AWID).

And Geeta, I'm so glad to be talking with you, and let's start by you telling me a little bit about CREA. Why did you decide to found it, and where and how do you work?

[on-screen text: Geetanjali Misra, Co-Founder and Executive Director, CREA]

GEETANJALI: So, you know, 20 years ago—time has flown—but, um, at that time I was working with the Ford Foundation and had worked for many years, both in the US and India, and began,

began to feel that there were a lot of patterns that were emerging in feminist—in the feminist movement, the women’s rights movement, the violence against women’s movement in India. And CREA began to address three big things that I was observing, my friends were observing, the co-founders were observing.

The first is that there was not an investment in a new generation of leaders. You know, you would see the same executive directors at every meeting and their perspectives were very informed by a violence against women framework. Uh, whereas we as kind of middle-level leaders were beginning to talk a lot more about sexuality and gender, more as larger kind of domains of work that needed to get done.

The second was, as a program officer at the Ford Foundation, I had seen that even though there were a lot of ideas, strategies, interventions, research, knowledge, perspectives in the Global South, somehow everything was dominated by the Global North. And so CREA was definitely formed as an organization that was going to be rooted in the country where it was based, but was always going to work globally.

And the third is, you know, we’re talking about 20 years ago when issues of sexuality and justice intertwined with each other were not at the forefront of many people’s agendas. We wanted to work on people that were excluded—women that were made less worthy of protection.

HILARY: I’d love to come back to double down on this—these issues of how people view gender and sexuality, and for you to talk a little bit more about why that matters so much and how you incorporate that perspective into all your work.

GEETANJALI: From a very early stage, we, we, we—you know, you had to disentangle firstly issues of sexuality and gender. And so, you know, we—from very early on, we described sexuality as a domain through which control is yielded over many people’s lives, especially people who transgressed social norms around love, around sexual preference, around sexual identities.

So, you know, instead of thinking of sexuality as this, you know, this little narrow thing that only a few people are interested in, you know, for us sexuality is a domain in which the state has a stake, religion has a stake, medicine has a stake, health has a stake. And what this allows us to do is incorporate many, many excluded people under that domain.

And I think we apply the same principle around gender. We, you know, just like everyone has a race, we feel everyone has a gender. And, you know, we think of gender as an idea that’s 360.

HILARY: And I would love it, Geeta, if you would talk a little bit about what led to your Suspend Judgment! campaign and why you feel, uh, it is more important than ever to suspend judgment. You know, you said a beautiful thing in a blog you wrote, that CREA’s mission is to change the way people think so that we can change the way they act. I’d love to hear you just talk a little bit about, um, your sense of why that needs to be central to the work of feminism in this

moment.

GEETANJALI: One of the things as humans we all have to know is how much we're shaped, uh, by our thoughts. You know, our actions are shaped by our thoughts, and our thoughts are gendered, they're classed, they're "raced," you know?

And, and we don't wake up one day and say, "Oh my God, I'm this feminist" or "I'm gonna be—" You know, it's, it's an evolution. And those ingredients that shape us are various. It's not just a schoolteacher. It's not just your parents. It's who you read, where you travel, who you meet.

So the core business is really how do we get people to suspend their own judgments that they bring with them into many spaces and kind of be open to learning, unlearning, thinking, rethinking, uh, so that when they move into whatever intervention they move into, they are able to change the way they act in a way that is more affirmative of people's rights. Um, and, and I think the Suspend Judgment! campaign was about that. It took all of CREA's intersectional work—getting people to understand that their judgements matter.

HILARY: And what I love about my understanding of how you've done this work is you create a space for people to start to ask themselves questions and for discomfort, right? You really you really channel discomfort as a powerful force for change. Not lecturing, not righteousness but discomfort and curiosity.

GEETANJALI: Yeah. And I think that's the future of feminism, I think. You know, this critical feminist practice, which is inclusive and intersectional. You know, it centers gender, sexuality, accessibility, rights, and amplifies the voice and visibility of those that have been structurally excluded. And I think we've begun to now purposefully not use the word marginalized. Not use—you know, we are now really referring to, uh, people that have been structurally excluded.

And I think that feminism has to pay attention to the ways in which societal architecture, you know, prevents certain people, obviously not all people, from enjoying their full spectrum of rights. You know, and I think feminism has to do a lot more of that. I think we've done a good job of focusing on individual harms but less on dismantling the structures that construct and sustain these harms.

HILARY: You also write about how old binaries are being challenged. I mean, this has been partly CREA's work, right? The binaries within feminism or within activism and human rights between North and South, rich and poor, Indigenous knowledge and academic, um, kinds of knowledge. And what's so interesting to me is that you write that new, um, axes or new kinds of binaries are contesting or replacing these old ones. And, and, and therefore we risk creating new gatekeepers of who or who is not truly feminist and what is or is not real feminism. What are some of those emerging contestations you see now in the movements?

GEETANJALI: As a Global South organization, we always try to make it clear that we don't believe that there are absolutes in any of this. You know, there is a North in the South, and

there is a South in the North. Because otherwise we will be creating a world that's very dogmatic and fundamentalist.

And I know we are having a very robust conversation in CREA, even now, around the use of the word cis, because maybe the word cisgender maybe creates "cis" and "trans"—another kind of binary.

HILARY: I love that example and it comes back to so much of what you are fundamentally—it's the practice, it's the fundamental practice of how you do the work.

You know, we are living in such a complicated moment in the world right now. Um, I know the pandemic has affected, I'm sure your work and I know it's affected your country in so many ways as in so many other places. What, um, what makes you optimistic at this moment?

GEETANJALI: You know, when you, when you're close to the ground and when you, when you convene and you gather and you, uh, I mean, you see rays of resilience, you see, you know, diverge—diverse forms of resilience emerging, uh, even in more criminalized societies, more authoritarian regimes. And that gives me hope. Movements begin from that.

The strategies become more creative, you know, when you sit down together. And I think, uh, I've seen in the last two, three years, even during COVID as to the ways in which there has been solidarity across, across differently situated groups, differently excluded groups. So that gives me hope, the solidarity. I think, sharing resources, um, you know, with, uh, between movements and, uh, you know, really commitment to, uh, new forms of resilience and resistance.

HILARY: I love that, yes. So I just, I want to thank you so much for your time and for this conversation. I really appreciate the work you do and that you made the time to talk like this. Thank you.

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

[on-screen graphic: Ford Foundation logo]

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