



**“We spent a lot of time making the private public”: Mallika Dutt, co-founder of Breakthrough, on shifting cultural norms, utilizing popular media, and scaling solutions.**

**Rollo Romig**  
**August 12, 2024**

**Rollo Romig:** Could you give me a brief introduction of who you are and an overview of what your work has been?

**Mallika Dutt:** I am Mallika, and I am the director of the Gender Equity and Governance Program at the Hewlett Foundation. I used to be the president of an organization that I founded 25 years ago called Breakthrough. Breakthrough's mission is to make violence against women and girls unacceptable. The approach that Breakthrough takes is by thinking about the ecosystems that need to be shifted into new norms to create a world where violence against women and girls is unacceptable.

Over the years, Breakthrough has experimented with many different ways into this discussion, including through the entertainment industry, through culture change, by really seeding different kinds of stories, by working with young people, parents, corporations, governments, multiple dimensions of folks that are needed to move these levers around issues ranging from early marriage to domestic violence to gender-biased sex selection, which is another way of talking

about female feticide. Over the years, that orientation has evolved into an approach that really weaves individuals, communities, systems together to focus on the education system.

Breakthrough now works on trying to transform curriculum in schools around gender, to begin to address norms at a younger age. Over the years, what we discovered was that by the time we were dealing with people who were even in their early 20s or late teens, that it was often too late to really do the norm shift that was needed around some of these issues, especially because the norm change was not coming from all of the different players being agreeable to the new norms.

For organizations or community groups or even movements to try to make these kinds of changes, the sites of intervention, if you will, had to be thought through in a more strategic way. The approach now is to work with state governments who run the largest number of schools within those states in India, and to work on transforming the curriculum so that the gender norms that are being taught through the curriculum start changing younger, and to have that also include teachers, principals, young people, community organizations, and the entertainment industry.

Breakthrough now has memorandums of understanding with four different state governments in India, and each state in India is the size of [a European country] in terms of population. What we did to have those partnerships was conduct a big research project where we experimented with a new curriculum in 150 schools, and then had 150 schools where we did not have that curriculum. A really randomized, controlled test over a three-year period to demonstrate the shifts and changes that we were able to accomplish or not.

One of the things that was really important for us in the outcomes of that work was changes in the attitudes of men and boys. One of the things that we have come to learn and realize is that often when we speak about these kinds of issues, we talk about perpetrators and victims, and then people who are stepping in to provide a remedy. The minute you create those triangles of oppression, you actually start creating more othering. You actually reproduce some of the same dynamics, because very often a perpetrator can be someone who's actually experienced abuse and violence in their own lives.

At any given point, any one individual can occupy any one of those three places in that triangle, or actually be occupying all three of them in different aspects of their life. It was really important for us to be engaging with men and boys. We're not engaging men for the sake of women. We're engaging men for the sake of men. We're engaging everybody for their own sake, because all of

us desire to live in a world where we can all thrive. That's an aspiration that all of us have. Then the norms, the structures, the systems, the individual attitudes that get in the way of that have to be addressed, and we can address those while naming responsibility and naming how those patterns are being played out, while also creating a container of belonging for everybody participating in that new state of being, that new norm, that new culture that we want to create.

I'm sharing all of that with you because even though we were not specifically working on child sexual abuse, certainly many of the issues that we were addressing were very adjacent to child sexual abuse, including what happened to girls and families, whether it was around access to food, whether it was around what they were expected to do within the home, whether it was around incest, whether it was around sexual abuse, whether it was around being forced into marriage early.

Another invitation for all of you as you embark on this is, how are you understanding and defining child sexual abuse? Is it the act of the physical sexual abuse of a child by an adult in a particular situation? Is it within the family? Is it outside? Does sexual abuse incorporate a multiplicity of other forms of abuse that sexual abuse either enables or other forms of abuse enable sexual abuse?

How is all of this getting articulated and defined? Then what's the invitation that's being made for the shift? What is everyone being invited into doing together to change something? Is the strategy through shaming? Is it through naming perpetrators? Is it through new norms of what childhood, adulthood, and family might look like? Is it all of the above? Why is child sexual abuse the entry point? Why is that important? Why is that the thing that this initiative is putting its attention on?

What's possible to shift in a generation? [Have there been] generational shifts that remotely resemble this? What can one learn from marriage equality? What can one learn from the tobacco industry? What can one learn from COVID and a period of time where new norms or new behaviors moved into action? How long did it take for seat belts to become the norm? Who all needed to be a part of that conversation for the new norm to emerge?

I'm sharing all of this with you because we've gone through these questions and really explored all of these things, and sometimes we tend to become very narrow in our understanding of something or where we look for other ways of attending to an issue. We don't think about adjacent or even non-adjacent places that have actually led to a norm change. We've certainly seen norms change around technology.

What does one need to understand about how those norms change? What's the norm here that allows child sexual abuse? Why is that so prevalent? What is it about our current norms that allows that to happen? And then what is a new behavior that's being inculcated, demonstrated, shown, people being invited into, and are there steps along the way?

To go from one state to the new state, from child sexual abuse to no child sexual abuse or healthy families or happy children or whatever it is, is it important to name the new norm not in reference to the old norm? Because if you're naming it in reference to the old norm, are you just continuing to uphold the old norm?

**Rollo Romig: Can you tell me what you mean by that?**

**Mallika Dutt:** If the current state is child abuse and the new state is no child abuse, the new state is still referencing the new state as the old one, right? You're just creating that as still the norm. Instead of saying "no child abuse," is there something about healthy childhood or secure childhood, or something that is the invitation to the new state that is not, this norm, and then not this norm? Because the minute you do that, you're still privileging this norm, right?

**Rollo Romig: Absolutely. What's the destination that's not just "not this"?**

**Mallika Dutt:** Right. If you think about marriage equality as a frame, just as a way of thinking about it, the new destination wasn't "no more homophobia". It was marriage equality. It was going from a place of no rights to marriage equality. The invitation and the road to that then had many, many, many different [pieces]. There were policy pieces, there were education pieces, there were pop culture pieces, there were individuals telling their stories. And you might actually want to have a conversation with some of the folks who worked very consciously on that campaign.

I'm just riffing and sharing all of this because the idea [that] in a decade, we're going to end child sexual abuse—I'm like, okay, great. What happens if you don't achieve that? How do you know that you've achieved your goal? And if you haven't achieved that in 10 years, does that mean that you're going to stop working on child sexual abuse? What's the end game here? Ten billion people, [transforming] their notion of family in a decade?

**Rollo Romig: Over your years of working, you've come to the conclusion that it's most productive, at least with the problem you're tackling, to get results in schools and through curriculum-based programs. But it sounds like it might have taken a lot of trial and error to**

**come to that conclusion. Could you tell me a little bit about the path that brought you to that conclusion and some things that you tried that didn't seem as productive along the way?**

**Mallika Dutt:** Well, I don't even know whether it's productive or non-productive. If you're going to bring an ecosystem approach to something, I think the first set of questions that one needs to answer is, who are all the players in the system? Then, what kind of resources, what kind of organizations, what kinds of movements exist to engage all of those players?

We started out as a very small organization. Trial and error is also just about size, capacity, resources. It wasn't like we had billions of dollars to spend to start with the entire ecosystem.

First, even in terms of mapping the ecosystem—in this case it's the kids, it's the people who abuse the kids, it's the families within which the abuse takes place, or the school, or the church, or wherever it is that all of this is playing out, or trafficking. Then there's the schools. Where are the norms? Where are the values getting set up? Now what are the policies? What are the laws? What is the position of the state on these things? Is it something that the state cares about, doesn't care about? Where are religious institutions or other cultural institutions?

It's not even about trial and error. It's about, first of all, mapping the state of play and then figuring out who has the capacity to do what. I created Breakthrough. I was one person. It took a while to raise the resources, for us to get credibility, for us to try things, for us to learn from other people, to get to a place where we're now a 200-person organization with MOUs with four states in India.

These things don't just happen overnight. I think that we witness the culmination of moments where a whole bunch of things come together to make that switch happen, and we don't necessarily take into account the many decades of organizing that took for that moment and that coalescing to happen for that change, right? To say you're going to end child sexual abuse around the world in every country, I mean, quite frankly, it's an absurd goal.

What the US marriage equality movement did with its success was catalyze a whole bunch of similar endeavors in other parts of the world. And there were other European countries that were much further ahead than the US was, but the US's place in all of this catalyzed something that then allowed a ripple effect to happen, right? Then it was met with success and backlash.

People saying gay marriage is blasphemous, or against our religion. [These are still] things that you are allowed to say. You're not allowed to say child sexual abuse is okay. Nobody is going to stand up at a podium and say, "We must stop this movement to prevent child sexual abuse,

because we believe that children should be sexually abused." No one's going to do that. If you think about it that way, the norm is already where you want it.

What's the gap between the norm and what's happening? [That] is where I would begin. Because marriage equality had to deal with a norm that was homosexuality is bad. However, whether you say homosexuality is bad or not, everybody should have marriage equality. Here you're not starting with anybody [supporting] the idea that child sexual abuse should continue, or that it's anybody's right, or that there's any religious or cultural or social orientation that is going to demand for it to continue. That's huge. I mean, if you think about it from a place where you want to start movement, you're in an incredible place. What would happen if you started from not a deficit model, but a, wow, we've got the norm. What's preventing the norm from being realized? You ask a set of questions from a different perspective, right?

**Rollo Romig:** One of those obstacles is the fact that it happens in secret and is often taboo to talk about, which I'm sure is a problem that you've run into in your work, even though it's not the exact same problem. How have you confronted that, the fact that so much of the social behavior that you're tackling is behavior that happens in the privacy of home?

**Mallika Dutt:** For example, we did this big campaign called Ring the Bell, which was men ringing the bell on domestic violence. We spent a lot of time making the private public. We started out with a music video where a woman walks out of a domestic violence situation and becomes a truck driver. The interrogation of private space as a space that has immunity, that you can behave with impunity in that space, is a constant. The family is protected, et cetera. Women have always had to navigate that, and certainly children as well.

Kids have even less ability and voice agency to be able to speak to what's going on. However, what is it about the conditioning of men or of boys or of women? What is the conditioning that leads people to be abusive in the first place? Is there a way to speak to that, to start to uncover that and invite people into an honest conversation and to change that norm or that conditioning? That could have a multiplicity of approaches that you test. Is it shaming? Is it compassion? Is it new norms around masculinity and femininity and gender? What is that?

When we started working on early marriage, we had the laws in place against early marriage. We had a lot of the policy, legal, all of those things in place. Why was it still continuing? We took some time to really understand, at least in the geographic areas where we were, looking at the high rates of early marriage, what was going on. What we discovered was that usually the fathers were making the decisions. Everybody assumed it was the mothers. It was usually the

fathers. There were huge economic considerations, because the ways in which marriages happened, with dowry and things like that, the longer people waited, the more dowry had to be put into place.

It had to do with the lack of schools and access for girls. Then the question was, if we don't send the girls to school, what are we going to do with them? It had to do with the safety of girls, because if the girls were facing violence, and if anybody got raped, then they were never going to be able to get married. It was really helpful. Instead of just being in this frame that parents are bad, girls' rights are being violated, [we had to] get inside that context [and look at] what was going on. Who did we need to be working with and how?

We started doing a lot more work with fathers. We started doing a lot more work with principals of schools. We worked a lot with young people. When a girl was being coerced by her family to get married, all the kids in her class went to meet the parents. They were different. It wasn't about you're going to end up in jail and this is against the law. It was, okay, what are the local government leaders doing about this? What are the conversations that can happen with them?

You can see a change slowly happening in the age of marriage for girls in those regions. I mean, it's gone up by a year or two, because the thing is that none of us can address poverty. We're not going to make sure that everybody's living financially in a secure way, because we don't have the capacity to do that. Where are the places where our engagement can create a new set of conditions for a new set of outcomes?

**Rollo Romig: If you were to give advice about how to shift cultural norms, what would you say?**

**Mallika Dutt:** Hire the Harris-Walz social media team.

**Rollo Romig: Well, what do you think it is about that approach? Why do you think that they've had this immediate success?**

**Mallika Dutt:** I mean, look at the difference between what was happening with communications under Biden and what's happening with communications under Harris. There's humor. It's really funny. There's a lot of humor. It's calling out the other people, but it's calling them weird. It's using humor. It's not saying Trump is a horrible man. It's calling them out on their policies or things that they're saying. It's taking frames and subverting them, right?

Again, the question is, when you're doing norm change work, who needs to be transformed and how do you reach them? What are they watching? Are they in a manosphere? Are they watching

sports? Are they religious? All of that matters then in terms of what spaces they're in. Then, therefore, who needs to be speaking to them?

The whole Harris-Walz thing has actually transformed the conversation around masculinity in the United States. If you watch White Dudes for Harris, suddenly there's a huge number of white men who are on board for a different way of living with one another on this planet than the MAGA white men, right? Until we created a space and a platform for them to feel like they could speak and belong, we could hear those voices. There are entities that do this kind of thinking and narrative strategy really well, but first you have to get the lay of the land and figure out what the hell it is that you're actually trying to do and with whom.

**Rollo Romig:** Earlier you were talking about how in order to do this work, one of the many things that you need to establish first is what you are inviting people to do. You're working in this incredibly diverse country. Your approach must be different in different places. How have you navigated that? What have been some of your solutions to navigating the need for different approaches in different cultural contexts?

**Mallika Dutt:** What we've found is that there are some aspects of messaging that really speak to the human condition, that really speak to human aspirations around dignity, around safety, around belonging, that are just universal, period. If you look at pop-culture icons, why is Taylor Swift as popular in Japan as she is in the United States, for example? Or the popularity of Bollywood all over the country of India and also in the region. I meet Russian people who will sing Hindi film songs to me. I mean, there are ways to think about the universality of certain human desires, right?

Then there's the particularities of the location within which that is articulated. That could be met by the language that's used, the messenger that's used, the media that's used to communicate that message. There's all kinds of ways. When we created Bell Bajao [Ring the Bell], we did it in six languages, and we made sure that we got to different channels that had those many different languages.

When we're working with the gender curriculum in schools, it's not like we're coming up with a new gender curriculum for every state or every school. There are certain patterns that are very clear. Yes, of course we're working with the difference between Punjab and Odisha and wherever, and we have to navigate the political context and all of the rest of it. But the essential core values and principles that we're trying to bring into the curriculum are the same.



**Rollo Romig: What do you think makes your organization's work distinct from others working on the same problem, and why did you choose that different approach?**

**Mallika Dutt:** I started Breakthrough when I was really trying to figure out norm change and scale. When you're talking about norm change, there are many, many things that go into how one changes culture, but one of the ways in which culture gets changed is through storytelling – music, art, television, all of those things.

A lot of us in the social-justice world didn't really engage with that universe. We never thought about the advertising industry or the entertainment industry as important vehicles for transformation. We saw them as important vehicles for *critique*, because they led to so many of the norms that we were actually constantly trying to challenge and change.

Then the question of scale. Okay, we're 200 people. We're a tiny organization. How do you use vehicles that reach much larger numbers of people? The schools in these states reach millions and millions of kids. There is no way in hell we're going to be able to reach millions and millions of kids. The resources that are needed to make that happen lie with the government in this instance. Government state budgets on education are going to be significantly bigger than any budget that Breakthrough brings to the table. However, there's a relationship and a partnership there that can catalyze something.

Sharing all of that does not mean that other avenues for change are also not important. Our ecosystem approach also sits within a larger ecosystem. The folks who are working on legislation or policy or government or anti-communalism or whatever else it is, that they're all important. We're operating within that larger milieu. But if we are one organization within that larger context, then what's our piece of that puzzle and what is it that we want to try and do?

**Rollo Romig: How do you get governments to sign on to your program? How do you convince governments that yours is the program to take?**

**Mallika Dutt:** We did the RCT [randomized controlled trial], so we had the data that people pay attention to. Then we had to build relationships. Then we had to make sure that we had an education minister that was ... This is the work of organizing. This is the work of advocacy, the work of having enough strategic insight to know who, what, where, when, how. That's why these silver-bullet ideas that foundations have, that in 10 years we're going to end child sexual abuse, is like, okay, great. I mean, seriously?

It's relationships on the ground. If you look at the early-marriage initiative, the big collaborative Girls Not Brides—that might be something to look at in terms of how they took that specific thing. Now they decided their approach is like the global approach with all of the global players, and then they partner with lots and lots of organizations, and Breakthrough is one of them, to mobilize in different ways. But in 20 years, have they ended early marriage? No.

**Rollo Romig: Speaking of collaborations, can you speak a little more about how collaborations have been a part of your work and how you've managed and cultivated collaborations?**

**Mallika Dutt:** It depends on who you're trying to collaborate with. Ogilvy, which is an advertising agency, has been a partner in helping us think about our multimedia. They're the ones that developed the Bell Bajao campaign, for example. That collaboration is of a particular kind. Our relationships and partnerships with the entertainment industry require one set of ways to be thinking about collaboration.

Working with other organizations across the states that we are operating in is another set of collaborations. Being a part of global partnerships and networks is another set of collaborations. It really depends on who one is trying to collaborate with and for what reason. It's not a one-size-fits-all situation. All of this requires resources, people, time, building relationships, being trustworthy, having those alliances, not being the one to try and hog the limelight all the time, so other people trust you.

Marriage equality wasn't owned by a particular organization. When you think of marriage equality, you don't immediately think of GLAAD, for example. It allowed many, many, many, players to become a part of that. However, there was a group of core people that really did the strategic thinking. Same thing with Black Lives Matter.

Marriage equality had a very specific end game. The idea was that marriage equality then allows a different norm around the acceptance of homosexuality in our society, which turned out to be true. But there were plenty of people who thought that this was capitulating to heterosexuality and norms that were patriarchal. And what was being sacrificed when adhering to this other thing? All of these conversations happen. With child sexual abuse, again, you're starting with the norm already established. Think about what then needs to happen in a slightly different way.

**Rollo Romig: Who were your own inspirations? Looking at other organizations or movements working in effecting social change, who have you looked at as your inspirations and why?**

**Mallika Dutt:** Honestly, when I started Breakthrough, I was inspired by Bollywood. I was inspired by the fact that people engaged with culture in this way that cut across language, identity, class, all of these different things.

I was coming out of the Beijing conference. I had a legal background. I had created an organization that worked with South Asian battered women in New York City. After the Beijing Conference on Women, I moved to India with the Ford Foundation. I was deeply engaged through a human rights lens with so many organizations, and my questioning began with [the fact that] we're constantly dealing with the violations after the fact. We're constantly dealing with the problem after the fact. How do we get to a place where we prevent the violation from happening in the first place? This way we just turn every single home into a shelter for battered women.

I was funding movements and amazing organizations. The thing about being in India was that scale just meant something else. When you're working with a billion people, you are just operating at a whole other level.

I was really inspired by the entertainment industry. The first thing I did was produce a music album and a music video, which was just this mad experiment, which ended up becoming this big hit. This music video became iconic and ended up in the Top 10. And we started having a conversation nationally in India about domestic violence that no amount of organizing on my part could have possibly resulted in. That then led to the creation of Breakthrough.

Then, along the way, we were really inspired by the advertising industry and [its] strategy and storytelling. How do we get men to engage in challenging violence against women? We ended up with a 60-second ad. You're having a cup of coffee. You hear somebody beating his wife down the corridor. What do you do? You put down your coffee, you go and ring the bell, and you ask for a cup of milk. Bring domestic violence to a halt. Ring the bell.

60 seconds. There's no way in hell any of us in our nonprofit brains could have taken our whole big song-and-dance of analysis and engaged men with a 60-second ad. But the 60-second ad was not enough. It needed boots on the ground. It needed the work on the ground for it to have traction and movement. But that 60-second ad created an entry point to millions of people. When we went into a village, we were the Mann ke Manjeeré people. Everybody had seen the music video. Everybody had seen the ad. The invitation to be a part of something bigger than themselves was already there.

It was not enough, though. There were all these things that had to happen. There were a bunch of people in other parts of the world that were [using similar strategies]. They had all these names, like entertainment-education. A lot of that had happened in the public health context, with very specific health outcomes that people were trying to get to. There were different kinds of interventions and ideas around entertainment-education, like telenovelas, that we then discovered and we learned from and experimented with and explored and developed our own methodology.

For us, it was always important to speak to more than the obvious. As social justice people, we can often become very narrow in understanding who we need to be speaking with, and we can also become very self-righteous. We won't speak to this one because they're this. We won't speak to that one because they're that.

We'd done three campaigns on women and HIV/AIDS. Before that, it was the women that we'd been working with who said, "You know what? Stop talking to us. Talk to the men." That's how the Bell Bajao came about. That's how the Ring the Bell campaign happened.

It was an iterative process that kept leading us in different ways. I mean, I left seven years ago. Breakthrough has gone through its own iterations. I don't think that we're leveraging the power of the entertainment industry in the ways in which we could. I'm no longer running the institution. It's our 25th anniversary. I'm going to India in October. We're going to be talking to the guy who did the music for the album and the guy who made the music video. I'm going to be talking about 25 years later, what happened? What did we learn? What did we influence? Since that time, social media has emerged. There are things that exist now in terms of communication that did not exist 25 years ago. That's why I'm like, study what's happening right now in real time with the Harris-Walz campaign.

**Rollo Romig: Could you speak a little more specifically about what made Bollywood a site of inspiration for you? What do the movies do right that activists can learn from?**

**Mallika Dutt:** Well, they tell universal stories that engage you. I mean, at the time that I made the music album, MTV was just coming to India. We already had a tradition of Bollywood songs. We already had a tradition of songs with a routine. Then MTV came along and made it possible for the song to live outside of the movie. The music video then became a mini movie, a four-minute movie within a song, and we were already primed.

I think we forget that people engage with stories. People don't engage with data, right? You need all of the data to back things up. We did the RCTs with the state governments to get in. But if you're trying to do a mass engagement with people, chapter and versing them about the statistics on child sexual abuse is going to do shit. I shouldn't say that. I don't mean that so completely. Or there's a way we should use the data to actually tell a story.

When I was thinking about India as the locus for this first idea that I had, we already had a cultural tradition. It was already available for us to engage with and invoke.

I can talk about all of these things with great insight 25 years later. Quite honestly, at the time, I had no idea what I was doing. You can ask me the questions and I can tell you now what I think was happening, but at the time I was like, I have no idea. I want to experiment. Let me see what's possible. Here's what I'm observing. I wandered around Bombay chatting with people in the entertainment industry. Then I had to persuade a music director and a lyricist and people to come on board. Everybody thought I was a little bit crazy. I had to raise the money. There were no resources. The whole thing was a big, fat experiment.

Now I can give you chapter and verse, then this happened and then that happened. But at the time I had no idea what was going to happen. We had no idea what was going to happen when Harris became the nominee. When people embark on these kinds of things, yes, do all the research and understand everything that you're doing, and then just throw in a bunch of experiments and possibilities. You have no freaking idea what's going to stick, what's going to be the thing that switches. I mean, who the hell thought that Walz saying they're weird would become the window through which the whole frame would shift, right? And the minute that became available, there was a group of people doing social media who were ready and went, because now in this world of social media, if you're not operating in real time, forget it.

**Rollo Romig: It has been a pleasure speaking with you. I really appreciate you taking the time.**

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*\*\*This conversation has been edited and condensed.*