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VOICE OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

CELEBRATING 35 YEARS OF SERVING THE INDIAN VOLUNTARY SECTOR

"Navigating Challenges, Driving Change: A Comprehensive Review of Women Leaders from Civil Society on Global Platforms"

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
REGIONAL OFFICE NEW DELHI

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FOREWORD

Twenty-five years ago, in Beijing, China, the world made a promise: equal rights and opportunities for all women and girls, everywhere. It was the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995; more than 30,000 activists and representatives of 189 countries gathered to debate what it would take to make a gender-equal world. Together, they created the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the most comprehensive agenda to date, on gender equality and women□s empowerment. Since then, many new and powerful global platforms have emerged that provide an opportunity for women leaders to get involved in global spaces.

Women from the development sector of India, are making significant contributions to social, economic, and political development at the grassroots level. However, their participation in global platforms is limited due to various challenges. Therefore, VANI carried out a study, to analyse the scope of participation of women leaders on the global dais. This report also showcases the experiences of women leaders from civil society in India who have overcome these challenges and made an impact on global platforms.

The participation of women leaders from civil society in global forums is important for several reasons. Firstly, it provides an opportunity for these leaders to share their experiences and perspectives on issues that affect women and other marginalized groups in India. This can help to shape global policies and initiatives in ways that are more responsive to the needs of these communities.

Secondly, it allows women leaders from India to build networks and collaborations with other civil society actors from around the world. This can help to strengthen their own organizations and initiatives, and to leverage resources and expertise from other contexts.

Finally, the participation of women leaders from civil society on global platforms can help to raise the visibility and voice of Indian civil society more broadly and ensure inclusivity. By showcasing the work of these leaders and their organizations, it can help to build support and solidarity for civil society efforts to promote social justice and human rights in India and beyond.

The report presents an in-depth analysis of the engagement of women leaders from CSOs on various global platforms. The study aims to assess the extent to which these leaders are represented and their voices heard in decision-making processes at the global level.

The report also looks at the challenges and barriers that women leaders from CSOs face in accessing and participating in these global platforms. It examines the institutional and cultural barriers that hinder their participation, as well as the socio-economic and political factors that limit their engagement.

To conduct this study, the research team conducted a comprehensive review of existing literature and engaged in interviews and discussions with eminent women leaders from the sector. The report presents a detailed analysis of the findings and provides recommendations for improving the participation of women leaders in decision-making processes at the global level.

In the end, I would like to thank Heinrich Böll Foundation/Stiftung (hbs), VANI's partner organization, for their valuable support.

Sincerely,

Harsh Jaitli,
CEO, VANI

Acknowledgement

VANI extends heartfelt appreciation and gratitude to the exceptional women leaders within the sector who have played a pivotal role in shaping and enriching this study. Their invaluable participation, insightful inputs, unwavering guidance and support have been instrumental in ensuring the depth and quality of our research.

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Background

This report examines the involvement of civil society women leaders in various global platforms and their impact on policy-making and decision-making processes. This is highly relevant in today's world for several reasons.

Global platforms such as international conferences and summits provide important opportunities for civil society leaders to connect, share knowledge, and influence decision-making. However, women's participation on these platforms has been historically limited, and understanding the factors that contribute to or hinder their participation is crucial for promoting gender equality.

In addition, women continue to face significant barriers to their participation in leadership roles globally. Studying the participation of civil society women leaders on global platforms is a critical step towards understanding the challenges that women face and identifying ways to promote their participation and leadership.

The background of this study is rooted in the recognition that women's participation in leadership and decision-making positions is critical for achieving gender equality and sustainable development. Despite progress in recent years, women are still underrepresented in political, economic, and social spheres, both at the national and international levels.

Civil society organizations play a crucial role in advocating for women's rights and gender equality, and their participation in global platforms such as the United Nations and other international forums is essential for achieving these goals. The study aims to analyze the extent of women's participation in these platforms, the challenges they face, and the impact of their involvement on policy-making and decision-making processes.

The study also aims to identify strategies and best practices for promoting the participation of women leaders from civil society in global platforms and enhancing their impact on gender equality and women's empowerment. This topic is important because it can inform policies and programs that promote women's leadership and participation in decision-making processes, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and equitable societies.

Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative research approach, employing semi-structured interviews with ten civil society women leaders who have participated in global platforms. The interviews were conducted online using Zoom, and participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their expertise and experience in global platforms. In addition, a literature review was conducted including a comprehensive search of academic databases, including Google Scholar, using keywords such as "civil society," "women leaders," "global platforms," and "participation."

Barriers to Women's Participation on a Global Level

The participation of civil society women leaders on global platforms has gained significant attention in recent years. The role of women in decision-making processes and their contribution to global development has been recognized, and it has been widely acknowledged that women's empowerment is crucial to achieving sustainable development goals.

However, the datahighlighted the barriers that women face in participating in global platforms or in the civil society sector, in general. These barriers included cultural and social norms of recognizing women only as caregivers, lack of access to further education as there is a "correct age" to get married and have kids, and limited access to resources and technology. Women's limited representation in decision-making processes and their marginalization in civil society organizations were also identified as significant barriers.These challenges are often rooted in systemic inequalities and societal norms. The following section discusses some of the prominent challenges and barriers faced by Indian women leaders from the development sector, in participating on a global platform:

- **Gender Bias and Stereotypes:** Deep-seated gender biases and stereotypes limit the opportunities for Indian women leaders to be taken seriously in international contexts. Stereotypical beliefs that women are less competent or knowledgeable than men, undermine their credibility and influence on global platforms.
- **Cultural and Religious Norms:** Societal norms and expectations regarding women's roles hinder their participation in global platforms. Conservative cultural and religious norms, such as a woman is a caregiver for the entire family, a woman should not be loud or should speak less, restrict women's mobility, visibility, and voice in public spaces, including international forums.

Further, the success of a woman leaderis often associated with the open mindedness of their fathers or husbands, in the Indian context.

- **Limited Access to Resources:** Economic and resource disparities impact women's ability to participate in global events. Travel costs, professional development opportunities, and access to networks are often distributed unequally, disadvantaging women from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- **Work-Life Balance:** Balancing family responsibilities with professional commitments is a significant challenge for women leaders worldwide. Participating in international events often requires extended travel and time away from home, which creates an additional burden for women with caregiving responsibilities, especially in the Indian context.
- **Networking and Mentorship Gaps:** Networking and mentorship play a crucial role in career advancement. However, women leaders, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, have limited access to mentorship and networking opportunities that could facilitate their participation in international forums.
- **Implicit Bias and Microaggressions:** Indian civil society women leaders encounter implicit biases and microaggressions based on their gender and cultural background. These subtle forms of discrimination create hostile environments and inhibit their ability to contribute effectively on global platforms.
- **Lack of Confidence and Self-Advocacy:** Women leaders tend to internalize societal messages that undermine their confidence and their abilities. This leads to self-doubt and reluctance to speak up or take on leadership roles in international settings. The traditional roles that women are often burdened with, play a significant role in making women doubt their self-worth and capabilities, limiting them from rising to leadership roles.
- **Political and Structural Barriers:** In some cases, political and structural barriers within international organizations and platforms may perpetuate gender inequalities. Limited representation of women in leadership positions within these organizations can impact the decision-making process.

"People still think that women are weak, and they are best suited for traditional household jobs and caregiving roles."

- Interview Respondent, Secretary Level

"A married woman is able to travel and participate all over India or internationally, only because the husband/ father is open- minded and has allowed them to go."

- Interview Respondent, CEO Level

Women Empowerment

Empowerment plays a crucial role in increasing the participation of women leaders at a global level. Empowerment involves providing women with the tools, resources, skills, and opportunities they need to assert themselves, make informed decisions, and contribute effectively to various spheres, including international platforms. When women leaders are empowered, they are better equipped to overcome barriers and challenges, enabling them to have a greater impact on the global stage. According to the respondents, here are some ways in which empowerment has helped the interviewees and can contribute to even more participation of women leaders at a global level:

- **Confidence and Self-Efficacy**: The data revealed that empowered womenhave increased self-confidence and belief in their abilities. As a result, they were able to step forward, share their ideas, and actively participate in international discussions, even in male-dominated or traditionally exclusive spaces. In addition, they were able to create that space for them in the Indian civil society, which they could leverage and get greater opportunities to be a part of the global arena.
- **Education and Knowledge**: Empowerment often begins with education. Access to quality education and information equipped these ten women leaders with the knowledge and expertise required to engage in meaningful conversations on global issues, making them more credible and influential participants.
- **Networking and Mentorship**: All the respondents had access to greater opportunities for them to build valuable networks and receive mentorship from experienced professionals. These connections helped them navigate the complexities of global platforms, offer guidance, and open doors to international opportunities.
- **Skill Development**: Women have been made to believe that their opinions do not matter and they should speak less! As a result, women often lack self-confidence and the necessary skills and therefore, considered unfit for leadership roles. In this context, one of the suggestions that was common amongst all responses, focused on the importance of training programs on building leadership skills, public speaking, negotiation, and diplomacy, thereby enhancing the capabilities of women leaders to effectively communicate their viewpoints and advocate for change on global stages.
- **Legal and Policy Support**: Empowerment also involves advocating for legal and policy changes that promote gender equality and women's participation. Legal frameworks that support equal representation and protect against discrimination can create an enabling environment for women leaders.
- **Cultural Transformation**: Empowered women challenge and transform cultural norms that limit women's roles and participation. By changing societal perceptions of women's capabilities and empowering more women,more inclusive global platforms can be ensured.
- **Advocacy and Awareness**: These empowered women leaders are often at the forefront of advocating for gender equality and women's rights. In the process, they raise awareness about the importance of women's voices on global issues, thereby inspiring others to support their participation.
- **Role Modeling**: The women leaders that were interviewed, certainly serve as role models for the next generation. Their achievements demonstrate that women can excel on global platforms, encouraging other women to pursue leadership roles and actively engage in international discussions.
- **Inclusivity and Diversity**: Empowerment initiatives emphasize the importance of inclusivity and diversity. When more diverse perspectives are represented on global platforms, discussions become richer, more comprehensive, and better suited to addressing complex global challenges.
- **Ownership of Agendas**: Empowerment allows women leaders to shape and drive their agendas on global platforms. When they have a sense of ownership over the issues they champion, their passion and commitment shine through, garnering attention and support.

Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming, which involves integrating gender perspectives into all aspects of policy and decision-making processes, was identified as a crucial strategy for increasing women's participation on global platforms. Previous studies also highlighted the need for gender-sensitive policies and programs that address the root causes of gender inequality and support women's participation.The participants also advocated for the same and shared multiple practices that could be included in every organization in order to ensure gender inclusivity.

First and foremost, mainstreaming gender within organizations involves recognizing the existing gender disparities in leadership and participation on international platforms. It also involves acknowledging, that women are often underrepresented and undervalued in such forums, and this imbalance needs to be rectified. It prompts the development of policies and programs that actively promote the inclusion of women leaders in international discussions. This could involve setting targets for gender representation, creating mentorship programs, and providing resources to support women's participation.

Such policiesalso ensures that resources, such as funding for travel, training, and networking opportunities, are allocated equitably between men and women leaders. This helps overcome financial barriers that might otherwise hinder women's participation. Capacity-building initiatives that provide women leaders with the necessary skills and knowledge to engage effectively on international platforms, must be conducted on regular basis.

This practiceof mainstreaming gender, encourages the consideration of gender-specific issues and perspectives in discussions within organizations, as well as on international platforms. This can lead to more comprehensive and relevant solutions that address the needs of both women and men. It shall also contribute immensely in countering challenges and breaking down stereotypes that can limit women's participation.

Another suggestion included, emphasizing women's leadership capabilities and highlighting their successes, thereby shifting perceptions and biases.This calls for advocating for changes in organizational culture, policies, and practices that perpetuate gender inequalities. The interviewees, who included these measures within their work space, acknowledged the shifts in attitudes and behavioursof decision makers within their organizations, that supported women leaders' engagement on international platforms.

Gender mainstreaming has the potential to create lasting change by embedding gender equality principles into the fabric of organizations and institutions. This will fosters a sustainable environment where women leaders' participation becomes the norm rather than an exception.

Networks and Partnerships

The women leaders in the sector and the literature emphasized on the importance of networks and partnerships in increasing women's participation on global platforms. Collaboration between CSOs, governments, and the private sector was identified as a crucial strategy for enhancing women's representation and participation in decision-making processes. These collaborations provide women with access to resources, support, mentorship, and opportunities that can significantly impact their ability to engage effectively on the global stage.

Networks and partnerships expose women to a wealth of information about upcoming international events, conferences, and opportunities for participation. This ensures that women are aware of relevant platforms where their voices can be heard. In addition, established networks and partnerships often include experienced women leaders who can provide mentorship, guidance, and advice to emerging women leaders. Mentorship fosters skill development, confidence, and a sense of belonging in the international arena. They also offer training, workshops, and capacity-building programs specifically tailored to enhance women's skills in areas such as public speaking, negotiation, diplomacy, and policy advocacy. These skills are essential for effective participation in international forums.

Moreover, networks provide a platform for women's voices to be amplified collectively. Through collaboration, women can leverage the strength of their network to advocate for their perspectives and ideas to be heard and taken seriously on the global stage.Collaborative networks can amplify the influence of women leaders collectively, enabling them to engage with decision-makers, shape policies, and contribute to global agendas more effectively. Opportunities for women leaders to connect with other influential individuals, organizations, and stakeholders on the global scene, also open up. This expands their professional networks and opens doors to collaborations and partnerships.

They serve as catalysts for increasing women's visibility, influence, and participation in international fora.

Impact of Women's Participation on Global Platforms

Several studies highlighted the positive impact of women's participation on global platforms. Women's participation was shown to increase the effectiveness and legitimacy of decision-making processes, promote gender equality, and contribute to sustainable development goals.Some of the key positive impacts of women's participation on global platforms include:

- **Diverse Perspectives:** Women's participation adds diverse viewpoints to global discussions, offering insights that might otherwise be overlooked. This diversity enriches the quality of debates and leads to more comprehensive and well-rounded solutions.
- **Inclusive Policies:** Women often advocate for policies that address the needs of marginalized groups, leading to more inclusive and equitable outcomes. Their perspectives contribute to policies that promote social justice, human rights, and sustainable development.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Women's participation is associated with improved conflict resolution outcomes. Their emphasis on collaboration, empathy, and communication helps to de-escalate tensions and foster understanding in challenging situations.
- **Gender-Sensitive Solutions:** Women leaders are more likely to advocate for gender-sensitive policies and programs, which directly benefit women and girls. This leads to better healthcare, education, economic opportunities, and protection for women worldwide.
- **Social Norm Transformation:** Women's participation challenges traditional gender norms and stereotypes. By demonstrating leadership and expertise, women inspire change in perceptions about women's capabilities and roles.
- **Economic Growth:** Greater women's participation leads to more inclusive economic policies that tap into the full potential of the workforce. This, in turn, boosts economic growth and development on a global scale.
- **Improved Governance:** Studies indicate that women's participation in governance leads to reduced corruption, increased accountability, and improved public service delivery. Their presence contributes to more effective and transparent governance systems.
- **Educational Advancement:** Women leaders serve as role models for girls and women, encouraging them to pursue education and leadership roles. This fosters a positive cycle of empowerment and educational advancement.

Conclusion

The literature review and interviews highlight the significant barriers that women face in participating in decision-making processes on global platforms. Strategies to increase women's participation include empowerment strategies, gender mainstreaming, networks and partnerships, and creating enabling environments that support women's participation. The literature also emphasizes the positive impact of women's participation on global development and the need for increased representation of women in decision-making processes.

The analysis revealed critical insights into the challenges, opportunities, and transformative potential of their engagement in international discussions. As we reflect on the findings of this study, several key conclusions and a forward-looking perspective emerge:

Key Conclusions

- **Significant Impact:** The participation of civil society women leaders on global platforms has a profound impact on policy discussions, decision-making processes, and the advancement of gender equality. Their diverse perspectives and experiences enrich the quality of debates and lead to more holistic and effective solutions.
- **Overcoming Challenges:** Despite facing numerous barriers, including gender bias, cultural norms, and limited resources, women leaders from civil society exhibit remarkable resilience and determination. Their ability to navigate these challenges demonstrates their commitment to driving positive change on the global stage.
- **Advocacy for Inclusivity:** Civil society women leaders play a pivotal role in advocating for more inclusive spaces that accommodate diverse voices. Their advocacy efforts challenge traditional norms and encourage the creation of environments where women's participation is not only encouraged but also celebrated.
- **Role Modeling:** The achievements of civil society women leaders serve as powerful role models for aspiring women leaders, inspiring them to overcome obstacles and pursue leadership positions. These role models contribute to a ripple effect, fostering a new generation of confident and empowered women.
- **Collaborative Power:** Networks, partnerships, and collaborations amplify the impact of civil society women leaders. These connections provide women with the resources, mentorship, and support needed to engage more effectively in global platforms.

Way Forward

- **Enhancing Visibility:** To further the participation of civil society women leaders on global platforms, it's essential to prioritize their visibility through platforms, recognition, and media coverage. Their stories and accomplishments can inspire wider audiences and demonstrate the value of gender-inclusive leadership. It is therefore necessary to document their journeys and make it reach a wider audience, facilitating positive behavioural change with respect to women participation at the global level.

- **Capacity Building:**Very little investment is made in the Indian civil society organizations, when it comes to capacity building of the employees. A very prominent reason for this might be the lack of funds and limited resources available. However, continued investment in capacity-building programs tailored to civil society women leaders will equip them with the skills necessary for impactful engagement on global platforms. These programs should focus on leadership development, communication, negotiation, and policy advocacy. Organizations must conduct relevant workshops and ensure women participation in such programmes.

- **Network Strengthening:** Strengthening networks and partnerships that support civil society women leaders, both at national and international levels, will foster a sense of community, provide mentorship, and facilitate the exchange of knowledge and best practices. These networks can serve as a valuable source of support throughout their global engagement journey.

- **Research and Data:** Further research is needed to continually assess the impact of Indian civil society women leaders' participation on global platforms. Collecting and analyzing data on their contributions, experiences and lessons learnt, can provide evidence of their influence and contribute to broader discussions on gender equality, inspire the youth in India to choose the development sector as a career choice and break the stereotypes.

- **Partnerships with International Organizations:** Collaborating with international organizations committed to gender equality can amplify the reach and impact of Indian civil society women leaders. Joint initiatives can address global challenges more effectively through the combined efforts of diverse stakeholders and also provide more opportunities for an equal participation at the global level.

- **Youth Engagement:** Encouraging the engagement of young women in Indian civil society initiatives can ensure a continuous pipeline of women leaders who are poised to participate on global platforms. Mentorship and skill-building opportunities can help groom the next generation of leaders. The challenge of a dearth of a second line of leadership within Indian CSOs, can be tackled by preparing the young leaders from the day they enter this sector.

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About Heinrich Böll Stiftung

The Heinrich Böll Stiftung is a German foundation and part of the Green movement that has developed worldwide as a response to the traditional politics of socialism, liberalism, and conservatism. We are a green think-tank and an international policy network, our main tenets are ecology and sustainability, democracy and human rights, self-determination and justice. We place particular emphasis on gender democracy, meaning social emancipation and equal rights for women and men. We are also committed to equal rights for cultural and ethnic minorities. Finally, we promote non-violence and proactive peace policies. To achieve our goals, we seek strategic partnerships with others who share our values. Our eponymous, Heinrich Böll, personifies the values we stand for: protection of freedom, civic courage, tolerance, open debate, and the valuation of art and culture as independent spheres of thought and action. Our India Liaison Office was established in 2002 in New Delhi.

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About VANI

As a platform, it promotes voluntarism and creates space for voluntary action. As a network, it attempts to bring about a convergence of common sectoral issues and concerns for building a truly national agenda of voluntary action in the country. It also facilitates linkages of various efforts and initiatives of the voluntary sector.