

SESSION CONCEPT NOTE - PLENARY SESSION

Women Leadership and our Common Future

Day: 17 February, 2022

Time: 6:15 pm to 7:30 pm IST | [Click here](#) for time in your location

Introduction

As we reeled under the impacts of an unprecedented virus that took the world by storm, our eyes and hopes were fixed on our leaders and how they would navigate us through the crisis. In this unforeseen test of strength, fortitude, commitment and leadership, a certain section of the society fared significantly better than others.

While analysing the available data for 35 countries, focusing on several variables related to the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences in their article, ‘Women in power: Female leadership and public health outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic,’ the authors found that countries governed by female leaders experienced ‘1.6-times fewer deaths per capita than their male-dominated counterparts.’ Furthermore, these countries were also much ‘more effective and rapid at flattening the epidemic’s curve, with lower peaks in daily deaths.’ A further analysis by the authors indicated that countries led by women leaders were ‘also those with the highest global standards in terms of social progress’ (Coscieme, et al., 2020).

Beyond the aforementioned study, scholarship on gender and leadership has on several instances reaffirmed that women and men leaders differ in terms of leadership style and organizational priorities. Research has consistently found that women leaders in contrast to their male counterparts tend to be more innovative and egalitarian in their view of firm strategy. Furthermore, women leaders are also more likely to pursue innovate initiatives and less likely to conform to traditional practices (Glass, Cook, & Ingersoll, 2015). In a world whose common future (if things continue to go ahead as it is) would be an assortment of climate change induced conflicts, waves of pandemics, extreme weather events, and plummeting socio-economic indicators and unending humanitarian crises, listening to, acting by, and enabling voices of the marginalised becomes imperative. As women leaders are more likely to pursue innovate initiatives and less likely to conform to traditional practices, their involvement and role in participatory policy making for climate action becomes all the more imperative (Glass, Cook, & Ingersoll, 2015).

Beyond hard science and technological solutions to climate change impacts, we need to address the symptoms of the problem—the ones that continue to keep large sections of the society vulnerable. In chalking our way out of climate change impacts, it is time we start drawing our paths that cut through the social and ideological barriers to climate action.

With great power comes great responsibility

IPCC findings suggest that communities and sections of the society that are already vulnerable will experience the worst impacts of climate change (Osman-Elasha, n.d.). The pandemic has already shown the disproportionate impacts that it had on women and vulnerable groups. Given that climate change is a threat of an entirely different scale not much imaginative capacity is needed to fathom the impacts it will have on marginalised communities.

In her essay ‘Ecofeminism and Climate Change’, Greta Gaard highlights that women (and upon extrapolation, other marginalised communities) are not intrinsic victims of the impacts of climate change but rather manufactured victims of the systematic “inequities produced through gendered social roles, discrimination and poverty” (Gaard, 2015). Thus, to draw them out of climate change induced vulnerability, warrants collaborative governance, policy, and decision making guided by principles of collective wellbeing, such as the successful case of women leaders handling the COVID crisis.

However, beneath this doom and gloom is a sense of positivity and a way forward. With more and more women taking up leadership roles, there has been an evident shift in communication and representation of voices from the margins. Women leaders like Greta Thunberg, Sheikh Hasina, Jacinda Ardern and many more have been working to leverage their positions to bring to the forefront long existing problems that lie in the intersection between gender discrimination and impacts of climate change.

Women Leadership in the Global South

The realm of women leadership, however, is interpreted differently by the global north and global south. As we join forces to move together collaboratively, it is important that we recognise and accept different worldviews on women leadership as perceived in different parts of the world. A growing body of literature points out that women’s leadership starkly differ in the context of ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries. In ‘developed’ countries, women’s leadership is considered in the context of boardrooms, banking, finance and business, whereas in developing countries, and especially rural communities, women’s leadership is considered in the context of public services such as schools and healthcare, entrepreneurship related to microfinance and small and medium enterprise (SME), and women’s participation in local governance (Barrios, Prowse, & Vargas, 2020).

Moreover, studies have shown that social norms, along with a range of other socio-political factors have reinforced gender inequalities in communities, especially related to use and protection of natural resources. For instance, even though women are key users of water resources and play a crucial role in their conservation in Malawi, equitable participation or women’s empowerment did not necessarily happen, according to a study (Adams, Juran, & Ajibade, 2018). Studies also conclude that women and their male allies need to work together to change structures and perceptions of women’s leadership.

Challenges to Women Leadership

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development rightly calls for ensuring women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. Women have led sustainable development actions as activists, advocates and scientists and yet, men outpace women in leadership roles across every sector—corporate, non-profit, government, politics, law, education, and security establishments.

Though gender equality between women and men is a fundamental right, women still face challenges in achieving leadership positions based on discrimination, social stereotypes and violence. The implications of such prejudiced leadership, which constraints women empowerment, is cause for both concern and discussion. What is causing this multifactorial and deep-seated gap and keeping women and the under-represented groups from advancing to the top including in corporate boardrooms?

In this session, our efforts are directed towards facilitating a platform with a strong panel of women leaders from across the globe to come together and deliberate on the path to a sustainable future for all genders, across all sections of society. Our discussions will revolve around ways to address the many challenges confronting women in leadership positions, including poor access to social and economic capital, constraining gender culture, paucity of role models/mentors, and inadequate positive attitudes about their own personal capacities. As marginalised voices find representation in leadership roles, with their causes of vulnerability often becoming areas of targeted focus, the object of this session is to hear from women leaders about their interventions to destabilise the status quo around climate change impacts. Adding to this line of deliberation, we hope to hear from women leaders about their efforts of reaching out to the voices from the ground through the positions they command in an attempt to act as the mouth piece of those who are often unheard.

Key Questions

1. How are women leaders using their positions to question the status quo and bringing more voices from the ground to the forefront?
2. What are some of the challenges faced by them in their quest to tackle climate change and work towards a sustainable future? How have these challenges helped shape their leadership style?
3. What kind of platform need to be created to address the four types of barriers to leadership and empowerment for women—structural barriers, institutional mind-sets, individual mind-sets, and life choices?
4. What more can be done to expand social capital and attract, retain and advance women leaders at political, economic and public life?
5. Do changes in legislation address structure of power and create an enabling environment to promote women empowerment to achieve leadership positions across the board?
6. What norms and paradigm shifts are being promoted by countries/organizations to promote greater leadership role of women? Any good practices?

Format

The session will be a moderated discussion, which will start with remarks (2–3 minutes) by the moderator. This will then be followed by the Leadership Addresses wherein each speaker will then get 7–8 minutes for delivering the Leadership Address. Strict time management is to be followed. There will be an on-screen timer for the same. After the addresses, the co-moderator will sum up the discussions.

Session Line-up

Moderator

- Dr Vibha Dhawan, Director General, TERI

Co-moderator

- Mr Shreyas Joshi, Young Professional, TERI

Leadership Address

- Ms Sanda Ojiambo, CEO & Executive Director, United Nations Global Compact
- Prof Laurence Tubiana, Chief Executive Officer, European Climate Foundation
- Ms Rachel Kyte, Dean, Fletcher School, Tufts University
- Ms Helen Clarkson, Chief Executive Officer, Climate Group

- Ms Kate Hampton, Chief Executive Officer, Children's Investment Fund Foundation
- Ms Mercy Wanja Karunditu, Deputy Executive Director, The Green Belt Movement
- Ms Xiye Bastida, Co-founder, Re-Earth Initiative

Endnotes

Adams, E. A., Juran, L., & Ajibade, I. (2018). 'Spaces of Exclusion' in community water governance: A feminist political ecology of gender and participation in Malawi's urban water user associations. *Geoforum*, 133–142. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.06.016>

Barrios, L. M., Prowse, A., & Vargas, V. R. (2020). Sustainable development and women's leadership: A participatory exploration of capabilities in Colombian Caribbean fisher communities. *Journal of Cleaner Production*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.121277>

Coscieme, L., et al. (2020). Women in power: Female leadership and public health outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic. *medRxiv*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.07.13.20152397>

Gaard, G. (2015). Ecofeminism and climate change. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20–33. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/J.WSIF.2015.02.004>

Glass, C., Cook, A., & Ingersoll, A. R. (2015). Do women leaders promote sustainability? Analyzing the effect of corporate governance composition on environmental performance. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 495–511. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.1879>

Osman-Elasha, B. (n.d.). *Women...In The Shadow of Climate Change*. Retrieved from UN Chronicle, United Nations: <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/womenin-shadow-climate-change>