



**Sankala
Foundation**
Voice for a sustainable planet



**WOMEN
LEADERSHIP
MOONSHOT**
Shaping the Future

Proceedings of the National Conference
on

Women Leadership Moonshot Shaping the Future

(2 May 2025, New Delhi)

In Partnership with

National Human Rights Commission, India
Indian National Science Academy
US-India Strategic Partnership Forum

Supported by

Bharti Airtel Foundation

Sankala Foundation
2025

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Acknowledgements

The idea of the National Conference on **Women Leadership Moonshot: Shaping the Future** was inspired by countless women who work tirelessly to make this planet earth a better place to live. Indian civilisation always kept women at the centre and they provided inspirational leadership. They fought for the dignity of women. Today, women leadership has taken a front seat and it will shape the future.

The conference envisioned to advance women's leadership in India and across the Global South. We thank the women leaders, changemakers, policymakers, scientists, professionals and grassroots champions whose voices and experiences have given direction to the conference.

We are grateful for the support extended by the National Human Rights Commission, India, and the Indian National Science Academy (INSA). We also thank the US–India Strategic Partnership Forum (USISPF) for their wholehearted support. The support extended by the Bharti Airtel Foundation has been admirable, ensuring the success of the conference.

Our sincere thanks to Shri Bharat Lal, Secretary General and CEO, NHRC, for his mentorship and continued guidance in conceptualising and shaping the conference. His emphasis on excellence, perseverance and purposeful work resulted in this publication.

We also extend our appreciation to all the moderators and panelists of the conference for their wholehearted participation and meaningful discussions. We acknowledge the contributions of subject-matter experts. Their insights and perspectives helped us in enriching the conference.

Special thanks to Dr Adeeba Parveen, Ms Utkarsha Rathi, Ms Abigail Simmons and Mr Saurabh Dutta of Sankala Foundation for rappoteuring at the conference. We also thank Ms Divya Rathore, Ms Shriya Saraswat and Ms Vibha Mukati from Sankala Foundation for putting this report together. We are grateful to Ms Disha Joshi, Director, Sankala Foundation, for her constant support.

Finally, we thank all participants, various organisations and young women and men, whose enthusiasm and contributions made this initiative possible. This report stands as a shared commitment to a future where women lead socio-economic development of the country.

About Sankala Foundation

Sankala Foundation is a non-profit organisation dedicated to advancing research, training, and advocacy on themes including climate resilience, public health, water and sanitation, energy and education, to improve the lives of marginalised communities. The Foundation collaborates with government bodies, NGOs, and experts to develop innovative, evidence-based solutions that address climate change, resource management, and poverty eradication.

About National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of India was established on 12 October, 1993 under the statute of Protection of Human Rights Act (PHRA), 1993 as amended by the Protection of Human Rights (Amendment) Act, 2006. It is in conformity with the Paris Principles, adopted at the first international workshop on national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights held in Paris in October 1991, and endorsed by the General Assembly of the United Nations by its Regulations 48/134 of 20 December, 1993.

About Indian National Academy (INSA)

The Indian National Academy is the apex body of the Indian scientists representing all branches of science & technology. The Academy was established on 7th January 1935, as the National Institute Of Sciences Of India, in Calcutta, in the premises of the Asiatic Society with Sir Lewis Fermor as the founder President (1935-36). Its objectives encompass promotion of science in India including its application to national welfare, safeguarding the interests of the scientists, establishing linkages with international bodies to foster collaboration and expressing considered opinion on national issues.

About Bharti Airtel Foundation

Bharti Airtel Foundation, formerly known as Bharti Foundation, is the philanthropic arm of Bharti Enterprises. Since its inception in 2000, the Foundation has been working across areas of primary, secondary and higher education in rural India.

About US-India Strategic Partnership Forum (USISPF)

The USISPF is a non-profit, non-governmental, and non-partisan organisation with offices in Washington, D.C. and New Delhi. The USISPF bridges the gap between business and government by fostering closer public-private partnerships across the two countries.

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View of the entrance to the 2 May conference in New Delhi

Overview

As the world's most populous democracy and fastest-growing economy, India's vision of Viksit Bharat—a developed, self-reliant nation by 2047—rests significantly on its ability to harness the full potential of its citizens, particularly women. The participation of women in the nation's progress and growth is no longer just about equal representation, but about inclusive leadership. Women's leadership is essential for progress.

In recent years, there has been a significant shift in the policy for women's progress, from the idea of women's development to the concept of women-led development. This rather dramatic shift appears like a 'moonshot', a high-impact, ambitious mission, envisioning a transformative leap towards gender-inclusive leadership across all sectors of national importance. It is not only about achieving parity in numbers, but also about unlocking the full potential of women in innovation, policymaking, social change, and nation-building.

Since independence in 1947, Indian women have steadily transitioned from being contributors to the freedom struggle to emerging as catalysts of change in diverse domains—politics, business, science, education, and grassroots governance. Several remarkable women at the helm have paved the way for others, their inspirational stories spurring multiple generations. Indian women head large banks, lead institutions of authority, command boardrooms, conduct cutting-edge research, steer social enterprises and have also made a name in cinema and other arts. In governance, public service or in corporate boardrooms, they are shaping narratives, policies, and futures.

Simultaneously, in India, women have also been the bedrock of family structures and community life—educating children, managing resources, nurturing inter-generational values, and forming the backbone of informal economies. This dual role—as nurturers and nation-builders—was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when women frontline healthcare workers and rural Self-Help Group (SHG) members played critical roles of care and resilience and recovery.

Inclusive and Equitable Growth

When women lead, societies transform. Research consistently indicates that when women occupy decision-making positions, policies and organizational outcomes become more inclusive, equitable, and oriented toward long-term sustainability. This pattern emerges across multiple sectors—from corporate governance and public policy to environmental stewardship and conflict resolution—with substantial empirical evidence supporting the transformative impact of female leadership.

The economic potential of increasing women's participation in leadership roles extends to broader workforce dynamics. The International Monetary Fund estimates that raising female labour force participation rates to match male rates would boost GDP by 5% in the United States, 9% in Japan, 12% in the United Arab Emirates, and 34% in Egypt. More broadly, closing the gender gap in employment could increase global long-term GDP per capita by approximately 20%.

The McKinsey Global Institute's research provides even more ambitious projections, estimating that if women participated in the economy like men do, they could add as much as \$28 trillion, or 26%, to annual global GDP by 2025.

India could increase its 2025 GDP by 16-60% by enabling women to participate in the economy on par with men.

For specific countries, the economic stakes are substantial. India, for example, could increase its 2025 GDP by 16-60% by enabling women to participate in the economy on par with men, generating approximately \$700 billion in additional GDP and increasing GDP growth by 1.4 percentage points.

The 2024 Representation Matters Report (by the global network of Women Political Leaders) suggests that countries with higher female political participation tend to perform better on indices of transparency, social welfare, and conflict resolution. Research by the United Nations indicates that when women are in leadership roles, spending on health, education, and social protection increases significantly, benefiting society. Take the Nordic countries, where women make up over 40% of their parliaments, demonstrating the impact of gender-inclusive governance.

The Nordic countries have achieved unparalleled levels of women’s political representation. In 2023, all five Nordic countries maintained women’s parliamentary representation at approximately 45% with Finland leading at 47% and Iceland at 38.1%. This represented nearly double the international average of 25.1% of women in parliament. Moreover, the governments of Iceland, Norway, and Sweden maintain gender-balanced cabinets with 40-60% of ministers being women. This exceptional representation extends beyond individual positions to create a critical mass of women in decision-making roles.

The economic impact of Nordic gender equality policies, many of which are driven by women leaders, has been substantial and measurable. In Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, increases in women’s employment have accounted for approximately 10-20% of GDP per capita growth over the past 40-50 years.

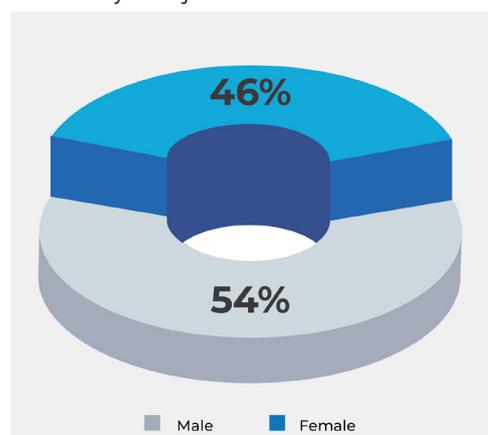
Transition to Women-led Development

India’s transition from a welfare-based model for women to one of women-led development marks a pivotal shift in its policy and social imagination. Over the past decade, the Government of India has implemented a series of reforms and flagship schemes aimed at empowering women to become active agents of change across sectors. From grassroots entrepreneurship to leadership in governance and innovation, women are now at the forefront of national transformation.

The Government has strategically promoted women’s empowerment through a multi-dimensional and participatory approach. Landmark initiatives, such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, aimed at correcting the gender imbalance and promoting girls’ education, have led to improved child sex ratios and higher school enrollment rates. Schemes like PM Ujjwala Yojana, which has distributed over 9 crore LPG connections to women from below-poverty-line households, have significantly improved women’s health and reduced domestic drudgery. The PM Awas Yojana (Urban and Rural) mandates homeownership titles in the name of women, ensuring financial security and dignity.

The Mahila Samman Savings Certificate, Stand-Up India Scheme, and MUDRA Yojana have enabled lakhs of women entrepreneurs to access credit and build micro-enterprises. Mission Shakti, an umbrella scheme for women’s safety, empowerment, and protection, integrates services ranging from legal aid to shelter homes. Moreover, under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), over 85 million women have been

Figure 1- Representation of male and female in Panchayati Raj and local bodies



Source: Press Information Bureau

mobilised into Self-Help Groups (SHGs), creating one of the largest community networks in the world. These SHGs are not just vehicles of credit—they are centres of innovation, governance participation, and local leadership. At the leadership level, policies such as the Women’s Reservation Bill 2023, which ensures a 33% reservation in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, are set to deepen women’s political participation. Already, over 1.4 million women serve as elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions, breaking stereotypes and redefining governance from the grassroots upward.

From the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1991, which strengthened the Panchayati Raj system, to the 106th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2023, which provided for the reservation of seats for women in the legislature, India has consistently advanced towards ensuring fair representation of women in government systems (See figure-1). These interventions have collectively enabled the formation of strong, supportive ecosystems for women across economic, social, and political spheres. Women are not only entering the workforce in larger numbers but are also uplifting others—mentoring, employing, and mobilising fellow women. Across various sectors, including agriculture, education, business, science, and the arts, women have established self-sustaining communities that challenge traditional norms and promote inclusive growth.

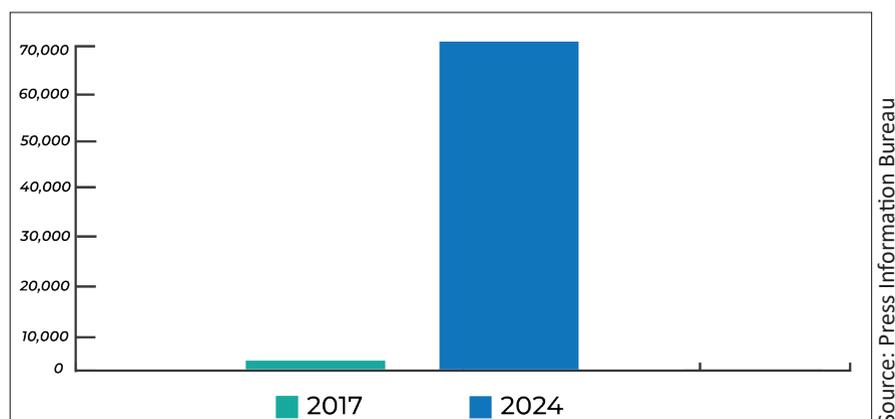
Research indicates that while legislative measures can support gender parity, structural barriers, such as societal norms, a lack of financial resources, and limited access to leadership training, continue to hinder women’s growth. Bridging this gap requires not only policy reforms but also a cultural shift that normalises women in positions of power and decision-making.

Investing in Women

Women can play a crucial role in India’s economic and social transformation. While they account for nearly half of the population, they contribute only 17% to the national GDP. Recognising this challenge, India is transitioning from a model of women’s welfare to one of women-led development. Government initiatives, such as Start-up India, Stand-Up India, and the Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP), have collectively disbursed over \$4.82 billion in credit, making capital more accessible to women entrepreneurs.

Additionally, the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) has extended over \$3.61 million loans to women, enabling them to start and scale their ventures. Education and healthcare are the foundation of human capital development. This foundation is essential as it fuels productivity, competitiveness and overall growth. Across India, community efforts and bold policies are reshaping education and healthcare. Women are at the centre of this

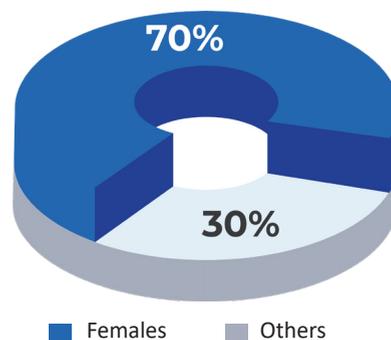
Figure 2- Number of startups recognised by DPIIT with at least one-woman director



change. Programmes like Ayushman Bharat, Mission Shakti, POSHAN Abhiyan, Samagra Shiksha, and PM SHRI Schools are making a significant impact. Over 550 million health services have been delivered. Schools are becoming increasingly inclusive, with improved infrastructure and enhanced learning outcomes. These initiatives are building a healthier, better-educated future. At a time when access to capital remains a barrier for many small businesses, India’s Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY) is rewriting the narrative on inclusive finance. The government has also encouraged startups with at least one-woman director (See figure-2).

With ₹3.5 trillion disbursed and over 70% of MUDRA loans going to women, this isn’t just financial inclusion— it’s the rise of a new generation of women entrepreneurs (See figure-3).

Figure 3- Mudra Loan Profile

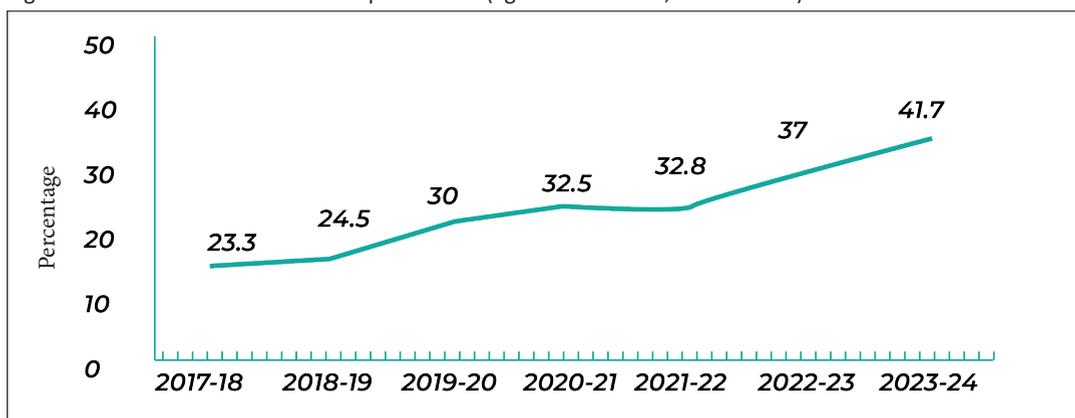


The Government of India has significantly increased its investment in women’s health and education

- » In FY 2025–26, ₹219,600 million has been allocated to the Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 schemes to improve maternal nutrition and early childhood care.
- » Around 12% of the gender budget now supports initiatives like Samagra Shiksha, which enhances learning outcomes and access.
- » The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has shifted its focus towards expanding access, enhancing workforce readiness, and promoting digital-first learning to create scalable education models.

The Government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has strategically promoted women’s empowerment through a multi-dimensional and participatory approach. India’s female workforce participation has seen a dynamic shift since the 1950s. In 1951, women made up only around 18% of the total workforce. This number rose gradually, peaking at over 30% in the early 2000s, and has fluctuated since then due to shifts in rural

Figure 4- Female Labour Force Participation Rate (age 15 and above, Usual Status)



Source - PLFS 2023-24

and urban employment patterns, access to education, and social norms (See figure-4).

Better and More Visible Work

- » Women now account for nearly 20% of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), contributing approximately ₹5.4 trillion to India's GDP.
- » The gross enrollment ratio for girls in higher education has steadily increased, reaching 28.5% in 2023, up from 7.5% in the 1970s.
- » In addition, 72 million women have been lifted out of multidimensional poverty between 2015 and 2023, thanks to targeted welfare and empowerment programs.

Prime Minister's Vision of Nari Shakti

Inspired by the vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi of an Amritkaal where Nari Shakti (the power of women) is celebrated, the G20, under the Indian Presidency, shifted the focus for the first time from women's development to women-led development.

In a historic achievement for gender equality, women empowerment and women-led development, the G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration 2023 incorporated the Chair's Statement which was adopted at the G20 Ministerial Conference for Women Empowerment in Gandhinagar on 2 - 4 August 2023. The G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration 2023 focuses on 'Enhancing Economic and Social Empowerment', 'Bridging the Gender Digital Divide', 'Driving Gender Inclusive Climate Action' and 'Securing Women's Food Security, Nutrition and Well-Being'.

India's approach has matured from viewing women as beneficiaries of development to recognising them as architects of transformation. This is evident in key policy frameworks such as the Women's Reservation Bill 2023, ensuring 33% representation in legislatures, and the growing budgetary allocations under gender-focused schemes across ministries. The country's G20 presidency in 2023 further highlighted this shift, placing women's empowerment at the heart of global development dialogue.

As India looks ahead to becoming the third-largest economy in the world, it is clear that no such transformation is possible without the leadership, creativity, resilience, and vision of its women. The Women Leadership Moonshot initiative is a bold response to this historic imperative.

A Conference Envisioning Women as Future Leaders

The Government envisions women not merely as beneficiaries but as central stakeholders in achieving India's long-term development goals. This vision aligns with India's commitments under SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and resonates strongly with the G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, which emphasised full and meaningful participation of women in decision-making. In this context, the National Conference on **Women Leadership Moonshot: Shaping the Future** became very relevant. Organised by the Sankala Foundation, in partnership with National Human Rights Commission, India, and the Indian National Science Academy, it was supported by the US-India Strategic Partnership and the Bharti Airtel Foundation.

It offered a critical platform to amplify women's voices—celebrating their achievements, addressing ongoing challenges, and charting actionable paths forward. The event brought together a diverse group of eminent policymakers, scientists, grassroots leaders and entrepreneurs who shared their vision of a Viksit Bharat driven and led by women. The eminent speakers deliberated on social and economic structures and policies that will enable



women to take charge of transformative change in India.

By convening women leaders from across domains, the aim was to help catalyse a nationwide dialogue, strengthen leadership pipelines, and lay the groundwork for more gender-responsive policies and ecosystems. It sparks a movement to co-create a future where women's leadership becomes integral to India's identity as a global leader.

G20 and Empowering all Women and Girls

The G20 member countries affirmed their quest to reducing the gender gap in labour force participation by 25% in 2030. The G20 reaffirms that gender equality is of fundamental importance, and that investing in the empowerment of all women and girls, has a multiplier effect in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

The G20 encourages women-led development and is committed to enhancing women's full, equal, effective, and meaningful participation as decision makers for addressing global challenges inclusively and in contributing as active participants in all spheres of society, across all sectors and at all levels of the economy, which is not only crucial for achieving gender equality, but also for contributing to global GDP growth.

The members reaffirmed their commitment to achieving the Brisbane Goal to reduce the gap in labour force participation and implementing the G20 Roadmap Towards and Beyond the Brisbane Goal '25 by 25' and ask the ILO and OECD to report progress annually. They have also committed to ensure equal access to affordable, inclusive, equitable, safe and quality education from early childhood through higher education to lifelong learning and support the greater enrolment, participation and leadership of all women and girls, including those with disabilities, in STEM fields and in emerging digital technologies. The conference envisioned similar goals towards gender equality.



Women Leadership Moonshot: Shaping the Future

About the Conference

The Women Leadership Moonshot is a bold and future-oriented initiative by Sankala Foundation, seeking to reimagine and accelerate the role of women in shaping India's economic and social trajectory. Inspired by the original idea of a "moonshot" as a high-impact, ambitious mission, this platform envisioned a transformative leap towards gender-inclusive leadership—across all sectors of national importance. It was not only about achieving parity in numbers but about unlocking the full spectrum of women's potential in innovation, policymaking, social change, and nation-building.

The moonshot is conceived as a movement—built around vision, collaboration, and a resolve—that brings together pioneers and emerging voices to influence systems, inspire a new generation, and engineer structural change. The conference became a platform for dialogue, mentoring, and action, where leadership is not confined to positions of power but recognised in community engagement, entrepreneurial risk-taking, technological innovation, and educational influence.

The G20 reaffirms that gender equality is of fundamental importance, and that investing in the empowerment of all women and girls has a multiplier effect in implementing the 2030 Agenda that invests in all women and girls. Encouraging women-led development addresses global challenges of enhancing women's effective, and meaningful participation as decision-makers. In recent decades, hundreds of millions of people have emerged from extreme poverty. Access to education has greatly increased for both boys and girls. Technological innovation have transformed the lives of millions in the last few years. Indeed this is a time of immense opportunity. A time to envision a great leap forward.

While the core of this initiative has been leadership, it will be equally focused on capturing and promoting the diverse aspirations of women across evolving fields. The changing global order, technological disruption, and India's rapid development have opened new frontiers for women—not just to participate in—but to lead. The Women Leadership Moonshot aimed to build a multi-sectoral ecosystem that nurtures these aspirations and supports women-led progress across disciplines.

The conference aligned seamlessly with the Foundation's mission to transform public healthcare through innovative, sustainable, and community-centred approaches. The organisation's commitment to advancing research, training, and advocacy in the fields of climate change, livelihoods, and water and sanitation plays a key role in propelling women's leadership to achieve meaningful and lasting progress across these domains.

Key Goals

The primary objectives of the National Conference on Women Leadership Moonshot were:

- » To provide a national platform for dialogue and collaboration on women's leadership across diverse sectors.
- » To foster policy advocacy, leadership development, and ecosystem building for women in governance, business, education, and civil society.
- » To highlight success stories and role models that challenge stereotypes and inspire future generations.
- » To build a network of stakeholders committed to a shared vision of gender-inclusive progress.
- » To align national initiatives with global frameworks such as SDG 5 and the G20 New Delhi Declaration.



Four sessions were convened as part of the national conference.

The one-day summit was structured around the following sessions:

- » Inaugural Session: Keynote address by a prominent woman leader highlighting the vision for inclusive leadership.
- » Innovation, Start-ups and Entrepreneurship: Women entrepreneurs drive economic growth and build purpose-driven businesses rooted in community and sustainability. This theme explores how to strengthen access to finance, mentorship, and markets, while addressing systemic barriers in the startup ecosystem.
- » Research and Technology Development: With women increasingly entering STEM fields, this theme highlights their role in research, scientific innovation, and technological advancement. It emphasizes bridging gender gaps in labs, academic leadership, and tech-based solutions, ensuring women are key contributors to India's innovation economy.
- » Governance and Social Transformation: From Panchayats to Parliament, women are becoming changemakers in governance. This theme focuses on their impact in policy formulation, public administration, and community development—especially in sectors like sanitation, livelihoods, and environment—where women's leadership has led to lasting transformation.
- » Shaping the Future (Education and Healthcare): As educators, caregivers, and frontline health workers, women shape future generations and build resilient societies. This theme explores their leadership in education reform, school administration, public health systems, and equitable access to services, especially in underserved regions.
- » Valedictory Session: Summation and presentation of resolutions and commitments.



The audience listens attentively as discussions unfold at the 2 May conference in New Delhi

Programme

Lighting of the Lamp

Inaugural session

1. Ms Cynthia McCaffrey, Country Representative, UNICEF India
2. Mr Bharat Lal, Secretary General and CEO, National Human Rights Commission
3. Ms Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, Member, National Human Rights Commission
4. Mr Amitabh Kant, G20 Sherpa of India, and former CEO at NITI Aayog

Session 1: Innovation, Startups and Entrepreneurship

1. Mr Deepak Bagla, Former MD and CEO, Invest India (Chair)
2. Ms Vaishali Nigam Sinha, Co-Founder & Chairperson - Sustainability, ReNew and Founding Chair, ReNew Foundation
3. Ms Gopika Pant, Founder and Managing Director, Indian Law Partners
4. Ms Seema Arora, Deputy Director General, Confederation of Indian Industry
5. Dr Girija Bharat, Managing Director, Mu Gamma Consultants Pvt Ltd.
6. Dr Aarti Gupta, National Head, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, FICCI Ladies Organisation (FLO), Policy and Advocacy

Session 2: Research and Technology Development

1. Mr Amarjeet Sinha, Senior Fellow, CSEP, Former Advisor to PMO (Chair)
2. Prof K VijayRaghvan, Director, National Centre for Biological Sciences and Former Principal Scientific Advisor (joined online)
3. Dr Pragya D Yadav, Scientist-F at the Indian Council of Medical Research - National Institute of Virology (NIV), Pune
4. Dr Nivedita Gupta, Scientist G and Head, Division of Communicable Diseases, Indian Council of Medical Research
5. Prof Shobha Shukla, Professor, Department of Metallurgical Engineering and Materials Sciences, IIT Bombay
6. Dr Leena Srivastava, Former Deputy Director General (Science), Internal Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Vienna (joined online)
7. Dr Deeksha Gupta, Director, Global Strategy for Society Programs, American Chemical Society

Contd.



(Left to Right) Ms Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, Member, NHRC, Ms Cynthia McCaffrey, Country Representative, UNICEF India, Mr Amitabh Kant, G20 Sherpa of India, and former CEO at NITI Aayog, Mr Bharat Lal, Secretary General and CEO, NHRC, and Prof Ashutosh Sharma, President, INSA, at the inauguration

Session 3: Governance and Social Transformation

1. Mr Bharat Lal, Secretary General and CEO, National Human Rights Commission (Chair)
2. Ms Debashree Mukherjee, Secretary, Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, Ministry of Jal Shakti
3. Mr Ashok K K Meena, Secretary, Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Ministry of Jal Shakti
4. Mr Sanjiv Singh, Joint Secretary, Department for Promotion of Industries and Internal Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry
5. Ms Kanta Singh, Deputy Country Representative, UN Women, India
6. Ms Chhavi Rajawat, Former Sarpanch, Soda, Rajasthan

Session 4: Shaping the Future (Education and Healthcare)

1. Dr Vinod Paul, Member (Health, Nutrition and Education), NITI Aayog (Chair)
2. Mr Sanjay Kumar, Secretary, Department of School Education & Literacy, Ministry of Education
3. Mr Vineet Joshi, Secretary, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education
4. Ms Roli Singh, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
5. Dr Manohar Agnani, Professor, Public Health, Azim Premji University, Bhopal, Former Additional Secretary to Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
6. Dr Vinita Sahay, Director, Indian Institute of Management, Bodh Gaya
7. Ms Mamta Saikia, Chief Executive Officer, Bharti Airtel Foundation

Valedictory Session

1. Mr Bharat Lal, Secretary General and CEO, National Human Rights Commission
2. Prof Ashutosh Sharma, President, Indian National Science Academy and Former Secretary, Department of Science and Technology
3. Dr Kiran Bedi, Former Lt. Governor of Puducherry



(Left to Right) Ms Cynthia McCaffrey, Country Representative, UNICEF India, Mr Bharat Lal, Secretary General and CEO, NHRC, Mr Amitabh Kant, G20 Sherpa of India, and former CEO at NITI Aayog, and Ms Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, Member, NHRC, at the inaugural session

Inaugural Session

Keynote address by **Mr Bharat Lal, Secretary General and CEO, National Human Rights Commission, India**. Inclusive growth isn't just fair, it's transformative. For India to truly leapfrog, it needs to tap into the leadership and potential of women, which form half our population, said Mr Bharat Lal.

He pointed out that for India to move beyond its current 6.5-7% growth rate, opportunities will have to be created for active participation of women in the nation's workforce.

He acknowledged the numerous programmes and schemes already in place and expressed pride in two significant facts: first, India, while drafting its Constitution, granted equal civic and political rights to all citizens, including women, something even many Western democracies took time to achieve. Second, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was being drafted, Indian representatives Dr Hansa Mehta and Ms Lakshmi Menon played a crucial role in ensuring gender-inclusive language was adopted.

Mr Lal highlighted India's historical and ongoing legacy of women's empowerment, with many reforms and initiatives over the past 75 years. However, he expressed concern that although over 40% of STEM graduates in India are women, their participation in STEM-related jobs drops below 19%, compared to a global average of over 29%. This indicates the need for an enabling environment to support and retain women in the STEM workforce.

Reaffirming the National Human Rights Commission's (NHRC) commitment to civic, political, social, and cultural rights, Mr Lal stated that the NHRC places special focus on vulnerable and marginalised groups, particularly women. Women's rights, safety, security, opportunities, and the absence of discrimination are of central importance to the Commission.

There is a need for an enabling environment to support and retain women in the STEM workforce.

Mr Bharat Lal
Secretary General & CEO, NHRC

He emphasised the need to unleash the latent energy of women and encourage them to realise their full potential and contribute meaningfully to the vision of a developed India, as encouraged by the Prime Minister.

In conclusion, Mr Lal highlighted the success of the 73rd Amendment, which introduced reservations for women in local bodies. Today, there are 1.4 million women representatives at the village and Panchayat level, building responsive and responsible leadership. With the recent enactment of one-

third reservation in Parliament and state legislatures, he expressed hope that women will soon take on greater leadership roles, strengthening India's future.



Mr Bharat Lal delivering his address at the conference



Ms Vijaya Bharathi Sayani delivering her special address at the conference

Ms Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, Member, National Human Rights Commission. Ms Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, Member of the National Human Rights Commission, delivered a deeply personal and moving special address that traced the journey of women’s resilience and leadership, rooted in both historical legacy and lived experience. She began by acknowledging the rich heritage of India where, historically, women have played significant roles as writers, warriors, saints, and reformers.

Ms Sayani reflected on the contradiction between this proud heritage and the restrictions placed on women during her own early life. Born in a small village under the shadow of British rule, she described the severe limitations imposed on girls after puberty — a reality that she found difficult to reconcile with.

Ms Sayani shared how witnessing a nine-year-old maid who was not attending school, ignited her lifelong commitment to social justice. She began by informally educating underprivileged children, balancing her teaching efforts with her family responsibilities. Recognising the need to engage more effectively with policymakers and intellectuals, she pursued a degree in law. Over the years, she contributed to numerous social justice initiatives, published over 300 articles, delivered countless lectures, and mentored emerging activists. Affectionately referred to as “Akka” (meaning elder sister or didi), she acknowledged the many obstacles she faced, including threats, insults, and resistance. Yet, she remained unwavering in her conviction that marriage and motherhood should never be barriers to a woman’s aspirations.

She concluded her address by invoking the collective pride in India’s women leadership and called for a societal transformation where inner strength is nurtured and supported, reminding everyone that it is our duty to challenge entrenched limitations. Asking women to pursue their goals despite obstacles, she mentioned President Droupadi Murmu as a powerful example of resilience and perseverance. “For women,” she said, “anything is possible.”

Mr Amitabh Kant, G20 Sherpa of India and former CEO of NITI Aayog. In his inaugural address, Mr Amitabh Kant, India’s G20 Sherpa and former CEO of NITI Aayog, articulated the ambitious vision of ‘Viksit Bharat’, which entails India transitioning from a \$4 trillion economy to one exceeding \$30 trillion. This transformation requires a ninefold increase in GDP, an eightfold rise in per capita income, and a 16-fold expansion of the manufacturing sector.

Drawing parallels with post-World War II economic successes in Japan and Korea, and more recently China, Mr Kant underscored a common thread: the centrality of women’s upliftment. He firmly stated that India cannot become a ‘Viksit Bharat’, if 50% of its population, that is, women, are



Mr Amitabh Kant delivering his inaugural address at the conference

left behind in the nation's growth journey.

Citing the World Economic Forum's report, Mr Kant said that it will take approximately 134 years to achieve gender parity, a timeline which was far too long. He advocated instead for achieving significant parity within 15 to 20 years, emphasising that this would require bold moonshots, and ambitious, transformative efforts. He explained that nations which have succeeded economically did so by aiming for moonshot ambitions, and without such ambitions focused on women, India's quantum leap forward would remain incomplete.

From building climate-tech solutions to leading AI research and innovating in space tech, women are breaking new ground. Women are at the heart of India's development agenda, he said. Highlighting women-led innovation, Mr Kant spoke about Ayushi Mishra, a biomedical engineer whose startup, 'Drona Maps', is revolutionising 3D mapping for disaster response and smart infrastructure. He also mentioned Geetha Manjunath, a computer scientist using AI for non-invasive breast cancer detection, enabling earlier diagnoses. He also mentioned Surya Prabha, founder of Prayak, who is transforming rural AI education in Tamil Nadu with gamified learning content for children. He remarked that these are just a few examples of how women are not only contributing to economic growth but also driving innovation, sustainability, and empowerment.

Speaking about India's G20 presidency, Mr Kant revealed that "women-led development" initially met with resistance, as many countries preferred the term "gender parity" aligned with UN language. It took a full year of negotiations to achieve consensus across all G20 countries, including the African Union, to adopt the language of women-led development.

He outlined key government initiatives designed to bridge the gender gap, such as increasing the limit for Mudra loans from ₹10 lakh to ₹20 lakh for women who have successfully repaid earlier loans. Of the 30 crore Mudra loans disbursed, 70% have gone to women, with only 30% to men. Programmes like Stand-Up India, the National Livelihood Mission, and PM Vishwakarma have been scaled up to support women entrepreneurs, artisans, and self-help groups.

On financial inclusion, Mr Kant shared that over 500 million bank accounts were opened between 2015 and 2017, which is more than the population of the United States. He also highlighted that nearly 70% of these were for women, up from just 18% earlier. Government schemes have also focused on improving living conditions. Over 40 million houses have been built, more than Australia's population; along with 30 million electricity connections, 250–300 million piped water connections, and 130 million toilets which is more than Germany's population. All these facilities were provided largely in the name of women. Moreover, 110 million LPG connections have been given to women, significantly reducing reliance on firewood and improving health outcomes.

In education, Mr Kant noted a 20% rise in women's higher education enrolment, with women now representing 43% of all students in STEM fields, among the highest globally. More women are entering elite institutions like IITs and IIMs. India now ranks second only to the United States in terms of funding raised by women-led tech startups.

He called for a mindset shift among men, encouraging them to make space for women's leadership. He highlighted the persistent digital gender gap, with only 37% of women using mobile internet,

Programmes like Stand-Up India, the National Livelihood Mission, and PM Vishwakarma have been scaled up to support women entrepreneurs, artisans, and self-help groups.

Mr Amitabh Kant
G20 Sherpa & former CEO, NITI Aayog



compared to 53% of men, and stressed the need for technological access, health services, education, and internet connectivity to close this gap. Mr Kant urged civil society organisations and private networks to step up and encouraged women to pursue customised online learning and live programmes.

The message was clear: economic miracles are not chance happenings. They take place when a nation makes the bold choice to pole vault forward, powered by its women. He noted that to unlock this potential, India must:

- Reform credit and capital access for women entrepreneurs.
- Ensure safe spaces and digital inclusion.
- Shift societal mindsets, especially among men.
- Scale innovation ecosystems that support women-led moonshots.

Finally, Mr Kant emphasised that achieving 9-10% annual growth is critical to becoming a \$30 trillion economy. He declared this moonshot a call to action, stressing that India needs to cultivate more women leaders who can be architects of new India.



Ms Cynthia delivering her special address at the conference

Ms Cynthia McCaffrey, Country Representative, UNICEF India

Ms Cynthia McCaffrey, Country Representative, UNICEF India, underscored the importance of building on a robust foundation for gender equity—one shaped by landmark global agreements such as the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. In particular, she drew attention to SDG 5, which calls for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, highlighting its enduring relevance and the collective responsibility to accelerate progress.

Ms McCaffrey acknowledged the concrete strides made over recent decades through the joint efforts of UN bodies, governments, civil society, and community actors. These include increased public investment in universal care services that generate employment and economic independence for women, greater political representation at local and national

levels, and significant growth in digital access among women, enabling broader participation in the knowledge economy.

Turning to India's national efforts, she commended the increase in budgetary allocations for women's empowerment—from 6.8% to nearly 9% in the Union Budget 2025–26—and the historic move to reserve one-third of legislative representation for women, empowering nearly 1.5 million women leaders across the country. Furthermore, she highlighted how national and state-level initiatives are positively impacting over 100 million rural women through financial literacy, access to credit, and livelihood opportunities.

Despite this progress, Ms McCaffrey offered a sobering reminder that SDG 5 remains off track globally and in India too. She pointed to the staggering potential loss of \$160 trillion in human capital, twice the value of the global GDP, as a cost the world cannot afford, and one that is entirely preventable. One of the most pressing challenges, she noted, is the continued drop in secondary and higher secondary school enrollment for girls.

In India, enrollment declines by 73% and 43% respectively at these levels, often due to factors such as infrastructure gaps, safety concerns, long commutes, poverty, and shortages of qualified teachers. She emphasised the importance of addressing these barriers through inclusive, well-funded, and scalable policy solutions, including improvements to school infrastructure, transportation, and targeted teacher training, as well as expanded social protection schemes to keep girls in school.

In this context, she referred to India's National Education Policy 2020 as a vital framework for creating an enabling learning environment. She urged stakeholders to further strengthen its implementation in ways that support comprehensive, inclusive education pathways, especially for adolescent girls.

To bring this vision to life, Ms. McCaffrey shared an inspiring example from Chhattisgarh: Anjali and Kavita, students in grades 11 and 9, respectively, who developed a robotic pipe-inspection device to address sanitation challenges in their community. With support from Atal Tinkering Labs (ATL), Samagra Shiksha, and UNICEF, the girls translated their classroom learning into a practical innovation. Kavita's own reflection, "We used to just read about science in books. Now we understand how it works", encapsulated the transformative power of inclusive education and the importance of enabling young people, especially girls, to imagine and achieve more.

"We get incredible dividends when we invest in girls and women," she stated. Concluding her remarks, Ms. McCaffrey reaffirmed UNICEF's commitment to advancing the dreams of girls globally. She emphasised that true progress lies not only in supporting girls, but in investing in their potential to shape more equitable and resilient futures for all.

Session 1: Innovation, Startups and Entrepreneurship



(Left to Right) Dr Aarti Gupta (National Head, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, FICCI Ladies Organisation (FLO), Policy and Advocacy), Ms Gopika Pant (Founder and Managing Director, Indian Law Partners), Ms Seema Arora (Deputy Directory General, Confederation of Indian Industry, and Chief Executive Officer of CII Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Development, as well as CII Centre for Women Leadership) Mr Deepak Bagla (Former MD and CEO, Invest India), Ms Vaishali Nigam Sinha (Co-Founder & Chairperson - Sustainability, ReNew and Founding Chair, ReNew Foundation) and Dr Girija Bharat (Managing Director, Mu Gamma Consultants Pvt Ltd)

Women-led ventures are powerful engines of economic expansion. Globally, businesses founded or helmed by women generate substantial revenue, create employment opportunities, and contribute to national GDP. In India alone, women entrepreneurs have established over 73,000 recognised startups—nearly half of all ventures supported under the Startup India initiative—highlighting their critical role in driving economic vitality.

By spotlighting entrepreneurship, the conference underscores how empowering women founders can bolster incomes and livelihoods across communities. Women bring distinctive perspectives that fuel creativity and problem-solving. Female leadership in innovation spaces fosters diverse viewpoints, which are essential for tackling complex challenges. Data show that women-founded startups deliver higher returns on investment—78 cents for every dollar invested—compared to 31 cents for male-founded ventures,

demonstrating women’s exceptional capacity to translate creative ideas into market success. Showcasing this theme inspires delegates to adopt inclusive innovation practices that leverage women’s unique insights.

Despite progress, women remain underrepresented in entrepreneurship: only one in ten women globally start businesses, compared to one in eight men, often due to self-doubt and limited access to resources. By centering entrepreneurship at the Moonshot conference, the agenda confronts systemic barriers—such as funding gaps and mentorship deficits—and spotlights policies and initiatives to close the gender gap. Elevating success stories and best practices motivates stakeholders to build more equitable support systems. Empowering leadership through risk-taking and moonshot thinking—setting audacious, transformative goals—mirrors the entrepreneurial spirit.

Encouraging women to embrace bold experimentation and calculated risks equips them with the mindset to lead high-impact initiatives across sectors. Embedding an entrepreneurship theme aligns with the Moonshot’s ambition to reimagine women’s leadership: it signals that real change often emerges from daring ventures that challenge the status quo. Start-ups and entrepreneurial ventures serve as incubators for developing leadership skills, including strategic visioning, resilience, and stakeholder management. By highlighting pathways into entrepreneurship, the conference cultivates a new cohort of women equipped to launch ventures, innovate within organisations, or lead social enterprises. This broadens the leadership pipeline and ensures sustained momentum toward gender-balanced leadership in industry and policymaking.

Featuring Innovation, Start-ups and Entrepreneurship at the Women Leadership Moonshot conference was not merely a thematic choice but a strategic imperative. It reinforced the conference’s promise to break barriers and chart an ambitious futures by harnessing women’s entrepreneurial potential as a cornerstone of inclusive growth and transformative leadership.

In the session on Innovation, Startups and Entrepreneurship, speakers explored India’s transformative decade (2014:2024) and



Mr Deepak Bagla moderates a session at the conference

Women now hold 60% of all new bank accounts opened in the last decade, and in urban centres, the average balance in women’s accounts surpasses that of men.

Mr Deepak Bagla

Former MD & CEO, Invest India



(Left to Right) Ms Gopika Pant and Ms Vaishali Nigam Sinha at the conference

the road to 2047, India’s centenary of independence, discussing themes such as inclusive growth, women’s leadership, entrepreneurial resilience, technological innovation, and environmental sustainability. Emphasis was placed on equity, empowerment, visionary policymaking, and the critical role of grassroots action in building a Viksit Bharat.

In his address, **Mr Deepak Bagla, Former MD & CEO, Invest India**, pointed out that the country stands at a historic turning point—a moment of transformative opportunity. With 97% of India’s future infrastructure and capacity yet to be built over the next 8,000 days, culminating in the centenary of independence in 2047, he emphasised the magnitude of this moment. Mr Bagla noted his personal belief in India’s potential to become a \$50 trillion economy by 2047, underlining the need for visionary thinking and long-term planning.

He also highlighted the theme of ‘The Magic of Inclusion, the Power of Empowerment’. Since 2014, 250 million people have moved above the poverty line, with 32 million in 2024 alone. He noted how women have emerged as a central force in this transformation: two of the top four ranks in the latest civil services examination were secured by women; female enrollment now exceeds male enrollment at all levels of education—primary, secondary, and higher.

Finally, Mr Bagla introduced what he felt was the most compelling title of all—a symbolic and spirited one: “RRR”—referring not to the popular film, but to a framework that encapsulates today’s India. “RRR” stands for a Resolute leader, a Resilient nation, and their shared drive with Relentless zeal. This triad, he argued, makes the country’s transformation not only possible but unstoppable.

Ms Vaishali Nigam Sinha, Co-Founder & Chairperson - Sustainability, ReNew and Founding Chair, ReNew Foundation, advocating for inclusive growth, emphasised that now is one of the best times to be a woman due to increased opportunities and exposure. Drawing from her personal journey, she reflected on how girls often outperform boys in academics and exams like the IAS and noted her own unconventional choice to enter business despite a family background in bureaucracy.

She encouraged young women to embrace discomfort and take bold steps, as she did when entering the renewable



(Left to Right) Ms Seema Arora and Dr Girija Bharat at the conference

energy sector. Today, she continues to play a key role in building ReNew's 13 gigawatts of capacity and aims to dispel myths about women's place in the sector by actively promoting their involvement.

Ms Sinha concluded by reinforcing that the present is the best time to be a woman, urging women to believe in themselves. She called on men to step up especially in the care economy, hiring, and board representation, because women are equally, if not more, capable. She expressed hope that a developed India ("Viksit Bharat") would feature women not only as participants but as leaders in the nation's growth journey.

Ms Gopika Pant, Founder and Managing Director, Indian Law Partners underscored the tremendous potential of women entrepreneurs in transforming India's economic landscape. She noted that while 73,000 startups have been founded by women in India and many are receiving funding, the actual representation of women-led businesses remains low.

Ms Pant emphasised the importance of channelling this entrepreneurial energy to achieve the ambitious target of becoming a \$30 trillion economy in the next two decades. Her law firm, she said, has been working towards building an ecosystem that generates jobs and empowers women.

She concluded by drawing attention to India's demographic profile, where 65% of the population is under the age of 30, and called for strategic decentralization of work, leveraging technology to enable legal professionals to work from Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities.

Ms Seema Arora, Deputy Director General, Confederation of Indian Industry, reflecting on the national vision of Viksit Bharat, explained that industry plays a pivotal role in realising this future. She emphasised that equal opportunity and meaningful inclusion of women across all sectors must be fundamental to this transformation. The pursuit of inclusive growth, she argued, must be deeply integrated into the way businesses operate.

Turning to the micro and small enterprise (MSME) sector, Ms Arora identified it as a crucial engine for women-led entrepreneurship. She referenced findings from a recent study which showed that 99% of micro enterprises led



Dr Aarti Gupta at the conference

by women remain informal, with limited access to the structured trade and financial systems necessary for growth. She underscored the need for targeted national initiatives to help these businesses formalise and connect with global value chains. She proposed the creation of a flagship programme focused on what she termed the ‘missing middle’, the vast segment of women-led micro and small enterprises that often fall through the cracks of mainstream policy attention. She argued that such a programme should offer tailored support in skilling, finance, and market access to help these enterprises transition into sustainable and scalable ventures.

Ms Arora stressed that although numerous schemes exist, there remains an urgent need to uplift women at the grassroots, enabling them to become agents of transformation.

Dr Girija Bharat, Managing Director, Mu Gamma Consultants Pvt Ltd., recounted her professional evolution from a scientist at CSIR and TERI to a faculty member in a university, followed by a tenure with the World Bank. After more than two decades in the system, she made a bold transition into entrepreneurship, founding Mu Gamma Consultants—an environmental science and policy enterprise that is now in its tenth year.

Reflecting on her journey, Dr Bharat underscored the importance of both learning and unlearning, a process critical for effective transition from academia to entrepreneurship. She structured her entrepreneurial philosophy around ten Ps, with Pollution Control being a foundational element, not in the reactive sense, but as a proactive strategy for environmental sustainability. She introduced her framework of six Ds to address low female labour force participation: Drivers, Deterrents, Determination, Dedication, Dreaming big, and the Domino effect of empowering others. Quoting Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, she encouraged the audience to keep dreaming bold, transformative dreams.

In her closing remarks, Dr Bharat urged the audience to reconnect with their roots and mentor young women from smaller towns and villages, enabling a ripple effect of empowerment.

Dr Aarti Gupta, National Head of FICCI Ladies Organisation (FLO) for Policy and Advocacy, shared her 14-year journey heading a family office and seven years of investing in early-stage startups in India, emphasising that it is the most exciting time for innovation. She highlighted India’s transformation through technology from 10-minute deliveries to 3D-printed satellites and commended the efforts of government, investors, incubators, chambers like FLO, and especially the founders for making India the third-largest startup ecosystem globally.

However, she stressed that the inclusion story hasn’t caught up with innovation. Despite progress, women remain underrepresented: only 18% of startup founders are women, funding to women dropped from 9.5% to 8% last year, and out of 24,000 angel investors in India, fewer than 1% are women. She identified this not as a pipeline issue but a perception problem, a systemic and cultural blind spot that needs urgent correction for building a Viksit Bharat.

Her advice to women founders: know your truth, know your numbers, build your network, and don’t wait to be perfect, be brave and start. She concluded by expressing hope that one day, “women, leadership, and moonshot” would no longer be seen as extraordinary but as the norm.



(Left to Right) Dr Deeksha Gupta (Director, Global Strategy for Society Programs, American Chemical Society), Dr Pragya Yadav (Scientist-F at the Indian Council of Medical Research - National Institute of Virology (NIV), Pune), Mr Amarjeet Sinha (Senior Fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress, and Former Advisor to Prime Minister Office), Prof Shobha Shukla (Professor, Department of Metallurgical Engineering and Materials Sciences, IIT Bombay), Dr Nivedita Gupta (Scientist G and Head, Division of Communicable Diseases, Indian Council of Medical Research)

Session 2: Research and Technology Development

India's research and technology space is undergoing a transformation, as evident by a steady increase in women's participation across scientific disciplines. According to the Department of Science and Technology, the proportion of women researchers in India has risen from 13.9% in 2015 to nearly 18% in recent years. Further, there is now 43% enrolment of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (STEMM) disciplines at the level of higher education, indicating that Indian women are set to take up key leadership roles in the coming years. This increase reflects the impact of sustained policy interventions aimed at enhancing gender equity in science and technology. Government initiatives such as the Knowledge Involvement in Research Advancement through Nurturing (KIRAN) scheme, the Women Scientists Scheme (WOS), and BioCARE under the Department of Biotechnology are actively supporting women's entry and retention in scientific careers. These programmes provide financial assistance, mentorship opportunities, and flexible working conditions which are key to addressing systemic barriers and enable women to contribute meaningfully to the country's research landscape.

The need to spotlight this theme at a national conference like this was both timely and essential. Despite progress, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions in research institutions, academia, and industry-led technology development. Bridging this gap is not only a matter of equity but also a strategic imperative



Mr Amarjeet Sinha, at the conference

for innovation and national development. Women bring diverse perspectives to scientific inquiry, often leading to more inclusive and socially responsive research outcomes. Recognising and celebrating persons like Dr Gagandeep Kang, India's leading virologist and the first Indian woman to be elected Fellow of the Royal Society; Dr Ritu Karidhal Srivastava, who played a central role in ISRO's Mangalyaan and Chandrayaan 2 missions, and Dr. N. Kalaiselvi, the first woman Director General of CSIR, reinforces the message that women are central to India's scientific progress.

The session on Research and Technology Development explored the intersection of science, technology, and gender inclusion, with a strong emphasis on how empowering women can transform India's developmental journey.

It emphasised women's leadership in science, technology, and community development, calling for inclusive ecosystems, equitable opportunities, and structural reforms. By creating a platform for dialogue, mentorship, and knowledge exchange, this session aimed to inspire the next generation of women scientists, researchers, and technologists. It examined existing challenges and opportunities, and identified pathways to build institutional cultures that support gender-sensitive innovation.

Chairing the session, **Mr Amarjeet Sinha, Senior Fellow, CSEP, Former Advisor to the Prime Minister's Office**, drew from decades of administrative experience and deep engagement with rural livelihoods and highlighted how technology, when combined with inclusive handholding, can become a transformational tool for economic and social empowerment, particularly for women in rural India.

He noted a remarkable increase in women's labour force participation from 23% in 2017 to 41% in 2024 alongside a dramatic expansion in credit linkage. Today, 50 million SHG women have access to credit, which has fostered the growth of micro and nano enterprises, and the next frontier, he argued, is converting these into MSMEs through science, community participation, and targeted R&D.

Citing the UNDP's report on the decline of multidimensional poverty by 415 million people, Mr Sinha attributed much of this progress to community-led, women-driven adoption of science and technology. He concluded by saying that the true power of technology lies in being both tech-centric and women-centric, capable of delivering exponential gains for India's development journey.

Joining the conference online, **Prof K VijayRaghvan, Director, National Centre for Biological Sciences and Former Principal Scientific Advisor to GoI**, reflected on humanity's resilience and advancements in Artificial Intelligence and semiconductors, highlighting the opportunity for bright, young minds to engage in critical, life-changing research, a domain where the capabilities of the human brain are paramount. He brought attention of the audience to the pertinent roles women are playing today in this endeavour.

Today, 50 million SHG women have access to credit, which has fostered the growth of micro and nano enterprises.

Mr Amarjeet Sinha

Senior Fellow, CSEP,
Former Advisor to the Prime Minister's Office



(Left to Right) Prof K. VijayRaghvan joined virtually and Dr Pragya D. Yadav at the conference

He underscored how the inclusion of women is of vital importance, as demonstrated by their leadership and representation of women within esteemed organisations such as ISRO and DRDO.

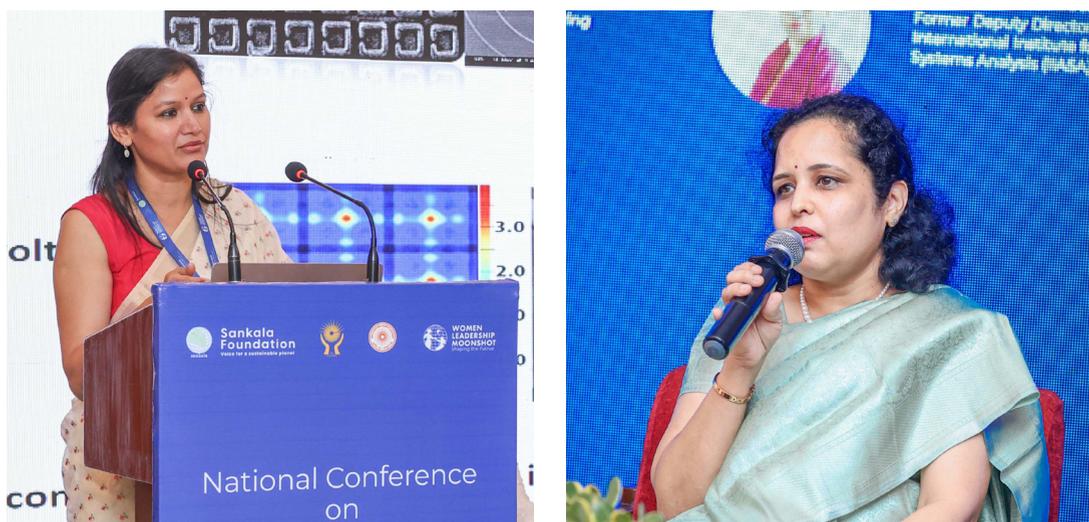
Further, Professor VijayRaghvan highlighted a significant disparity: the fact that currently, a striking 90% of research funding is channelled towards only 10% of the most prominent universities across the country. He proposed that broadening access to research opportunities pan-India, especially for women in currently underserved regions within the remaining institutions, could unlock a wealth of untapped potential.

Dr Pragya D Yadav, Scientist-F at the Indian Council of Medical Research - National Institute of Virology (NIV), Pune, reflecting on the life cycle of women in India, articulated three phases of dependency—childhood, marriage, and elderhood—emphasising that a woman’s independence requires collective community support. She praised the present generation’s greater access to freedom and opportunity, contrasting it with the challenges of her own youth. The strides made, she asserted, are the result of persistent efforts by families and, crucially, government interventions.

Dr Yadav emphasised the urgent need to reform India’s education system, particularly the hyper-competitive focus on NEET and JEE exams, which sidelines scientific curiosity and creative exploration. She also advocated for expanded job creation and industry growth, stressing that entrepreneurship, innovation, and support from all sectors, not just government, are essential for national progress.

Dr Yadav concluded by calling for sustained investment in scientific storytelling and inspiration, citing space missions like Chandrayaan and Mangalyaan as examples of how national achievements can ignite dreams among children. Only through collective, forward-looking action, she said, can India become a truly Viksit, Healthy, and Resilient Bharat.

Dr Nivedita Gupta, Scientist G and Head, Division of Communicable Diseases, Indian Council of Medical Research, emphasised that in science, technology, and R&D, there are no gender-specific roles. However, she highlighted the importance of ensuring that women are given equal opportunities and encouraged to seize them.



(Left to Right) Prof Shobha Shukla and Dr Nivedita Gupta at the conference

As a woman in leadership, she feels a responsibility to instill confidence in other women, particularly in R&D, where many lack self-belief despite being accomplished. She stressed the importance of nurturing women at all levels of society from professionals to domestic workers and sees it as a moral duty to empower them.

Sharing a story of a 30-year-old Indian woman working in AI who was recognised among the top five brains under 30 by the US government, she highlighted the need to encourage women in underrepresented scientific fields such as artificial intelligence, physics, and data sciences.

Prof Shobha Shukla, Professor, Department of Metallurgical Engineering and Materials Sciences, IIT Bombay, delivered a compelling address on the intersection of gender, innovation, and national self-reliance. Representing women in the deep tech space, she emphasised that emotional intelligence and keen observational skills, qualities often associated with women—can be powerful assets in scientific research and leadership. Her commitment to mentoring the next generation of researchers is evident, with nine of her 15 PhD students being women.

She described how she strategically expanded her research into new domains to amplify her impact, leading to several innovations in the water sector. Prof Shukla also addressed the critical importance of indigenous innovation. Citing a collaboration with Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL), she explained how her team developed cost-effective, indigenous night-vision goggles for soldiers at one-tenth the cost of the current technology imported by BEL from France, thus demonstrating how cutting-edge solutions can and must come from within India.

She concluded with the message that innovation is not optional and can't rely on other countries for second or third generation technologies. We must invent for ourselves for women and men to grow together.

Joining the session online, **Dr Leena Srivastava, Former Deputy Director General (Science), Internal Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Vienna**, drew attention to the divide between women already within the education system and those who are not, emphasising the need to focus on this disparity. She raised questions regarding the number of women in science and technology fields, their completion rates of studies, their ability to achieve their full potential, and the environments conducive to such achievement.



(Left to Right) Dr Leena Srivastava joined virtually and Dr Deeksha Gupta at the conference

Dr Srivastava highlighted women’s critical role in climate change and the need for them to step up, possessing the potential but often lacking the opportunity, referencing UN findings that indicate increased agricultural yields and advancements in many fields when women are given equal access. She emphasised the role women need to play in mitigation, as the climate crisis is already present, requiring both adaptation and a recognition of how women need to contribute to building resilience.

Dr Deeksha Gupta, Director, Global Strategy for Society Programs, American Chemical Society, highlighted the urgency of creating inclusive frameworks that enable women to play transformative roles in building a developed India.

Dr Gupta concluded with a powerful call to action. She expressed discomfort with the celebration of being “the first” woman to hold certain positions, noting that this only highlights the systemic lag in gender equity. True progress will be marked not by firsts, but by normalisation when women in leadership are no longer anomalies but part of a representative norm. She urged decision-makers and institutions to fast-track inclusive reforms and to scale up solutions so that leadership reflects the full diversity of talent and experience. She reminded the audience that privilege is not just a position of comfort but a platform of responsibility. As such, those who have made it must work not only to lead but to pave the way for others.

Session 3: Governance and Social Transformation

Governance and social transformation are pivotal to achieving inclusive growth and equitable progress. It is not just about policies and programmes; it is about how change reaches people. Effective governance shapes everyday lives, ensuring access to essential services, fostering dignity, and enabling opportunity. Women’s leadership in governance, particularly at the grassroots, drives systemic change by addressing structural barriers and amplifying marginalised voices. The Women Leadership Moonshot conference highlights governance as a cornerstone for empowering women to lead transformative initiatives, aligning with the vision of a Viksit Bharat by 2047, India’s centenary of independence. By centering women in policymaking and grassroots action, the session underscores their role in building resilient, inclusive systems that empower communities and redefine leadership.



(Left to Right) Ms Chhavi Rajawat (Former Sarpanch, Soda, Rajasthan), Ms Kanta Singh (Deputy Country Representative, UN Women, India), Ms Debashree Mukherjee (Secretary, Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, Ministry of Jal Shakti), Mr Bharat Lal (Secretary General and CEO, National Human Rights Commission), Mr Ashok K K Meena (Secretary, Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Ministry of Jal Shakti), Mr Sanjiv Singh (Joint Secretary, Department for Promotion of Industries and Internal Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry)

India’s transformative governance initiatives over the past decade (2014–2024) demonstrate measurable impact. Programs like the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) have provided tap water to over 19 crore households, with visible ripple effects on women’s empowerment—girls remain in school, women pursue income-generating activities, and overall health indicators improve. The Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen (SBM-G) has driven sanitation coverage across villages, with women constituting 50% of village water and sanitation committees, fostering local leadership and ownership. Platforms like the Government e-Marketplace (GeM) have democratised economic access, allowing small and women-led enterprises from remote areas to participate in government procurement. Access to such essential services reduces time poverty and enables women to participate more actively in community decision-making and the economy.

Yet, challenges persist. National surveys reveal that as household incomes and caste status rise, women’s asset ownership often declines, underscoring deep-rooted gendered social norms. Despite gender-responsive policies like the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) mandating women’s names on property titles, broader systemic barriers remain—ranging from limited access to professional networks and mentorship to workplace inflexibility. These gaps underscore the need for structural reforms that ensure equitable representation and meaningful participation.

Encouragingly, governance reforms at the grassroots level are reshaping this narrative. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has institutionalised women’s representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions, and policies now require 50% women representation in key village-level committees related to water, sanitation, and other development priorities.



Ms Debashree Mukherjee at the conference

diversity and aspirations.

Chairing the session, **Mr Bharat Lal, Secretary General and CEO, National Human Rights Commission**, highlighted the centrality of governance in shaping people’s everyday lives. He highlighted how platforms like the Government e-Marketplace (GeM) were a game changer, as even “a small vendor in a remote town could now do business with the government.” Similarly, schemes like MUDRA, Ujjwala, and the Swachh Bharat Mission, Grameen (SBM-G) were not just service delivery mechanisms, they were levellers, offering dignity and opportunity at scale.

Citing the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), he recounted his time as Additional Secretary and MD of the programme during the COVID-19 pandemic. “Even during that challenging time, the number of households receiving tap water connections continued to rise,” he said. “Now, over 190 million households have been covered.”

Mr Lal made it clear that such shifts have deeply transformative social impacts. “When women are relieved of the burden of fetching water, they are empowered,” he said. Daughters can stay in school, women can seek work, and entire communities can thrive. “Social transformation comes when women take responsibility and are enabled to do so with facilities and dignity.”

Ms Debashree Mukherjee, Secretary, Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, Ministry of Jal Shakti, addressed the critical theme of women’s leadership in water governance, focusing on the unique perspective women bring to leadership, especially at the grassroots, and the structural efforts required to place women in leadership roles across sectors.

Ms Mukherjee cited data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) to highlight a paradox that as income and caste status rise, asset ownership among women declines. This is despite gender-sensitive policies such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), which mandates housing to be registered in the name of the woman (or jointly) in both urban and rural contexts. This data underscores the persistence of gendered norms even amidst progressive legislation.

She emphasised three key enablers to effectively empower women in governance,

However, numbers alone are not enough. True social transformation through governance requires structural shifts—in laws, mindsets, and institutional cultures. It requires moving beyond symbolic participation to creating systems where women lead with authority, resources, and decision-making power.

The session on Governance and Social Transformation explored how women’s leadership in governance, through policy, grassroots action, and institutional reform—drives inclusive development. Speakers will emphasised equity, empowerment, and visionary policymaking, showcasing initiatives that will enable women to lead with resilience and strategic authority. By addressing barriers such as limited access to networks, mentorship gaps, and inflexible systems, governance will unlock women’s potential to transform communities and shape a future where leadership reflects India’s



(Left to Right) Mr Ashok K K Meena and Mr Sanjiv Singh at the conference

- a. Creating structured pathways for Access to Professional Networks, which can play a vital role in breaking the glass ceiling.
- b. Mentorship and Role Models, especially in non-traditional sectors, to encourage women to pursue roles previously considered inaccessible.
- c. Institutional Flexibility, recognising that many women drop out of the workforce due to caregiving responsibilities, promoting policies and structures that accommodate their dual responsibilities.

Mr Ashok K K Meena, Secretary, Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Ministry of Jal Shakti, highlighted the historical hardship faced by women and girls in water collection, often at the expense of their education. He then focused on the two pivotal missions of the government within his department: the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), aimed at providing functional household tap connections, a significant infrastructural undertaking requiring sustained functionality; and the Swachh Bharat Mission - Gramin (SBM-G), prioritised by the Prime Minister since 2016 to achieve sanitation in every village, addressing the issue of open defecation.

He highlighted the importance of the 73rd amendment in empowering Gram Panchayats and the strategic inclusion of women in village water and sanitation committees, where 50% of members are mandated to be local women. Mr Meena concluded by expressing his firm belief that with 50% of women taking charge of village water sanitation

committees and the infrastructure being prepared for their management, India is witnessing a transformation in rural areas where access to these essential services will become the norm, aligning with the Prime Minister's vision of a 'Viksit Bharat', driven by the leadership of women.

India is witnessing a transformation in rural areas where access to essential services will become the norm, aligning with the PM's vision of a 'Viksit Bharat', driven by the leadership of women.

Mr Ashok K K Meena

Secretary, Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation,
Ministry of Jal Shakti

Mr Sanjiv Singh, Joint Secretary, Department for Promotion of Industries and Internal Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, highlighted the changing face of India, where women are not only participating but also leading across sectors. Turning his focus to Startup India, Mr Singh described it as more than a policy initiative,



(Left to Right) Ms Chhavi Rajawat and Ms Kanta Singh at the conference

and a movement of social transformation.

He emphasised that Startup India is about a mindset shift among youth, investors, academic institutions, and society at large. This change has been internalised within the Startup India team itself, where over 60 percent of the staff are women, many of whom are leading critical initiatives. He proudly noted that nearly 50 percent of recognised startups in India have women in leadership roles, showcasing the inclusive spirit of the movement.

He also touched upon broader policy reforms, referencing the recently passed Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, which reserves one-third of seats in Parliament for women. This legislative move, he said, complements the ground-level impact of women entrepreneurs who are redefining sectors from tech and consumer goods to aerospace and manufacturing.

Mr Singh spoke passionately about efforts to promote women entrepreneurs from Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities. In conclusion, Mr Singh reiterated that change is the only constant, and in the new Bharat, it is women who are driving this change. He urged women entrepreneurs to apply for the Start-Up Awards, which recognise innovative startups led by women.

Ms Kanta Singh, Deputy Country Representative, UN Women, India, highlighted that there are 4.7 million women in the social sector ecosystem (SSE) and 1.4 million women in grassroots democratic roles, including frontline workers, teachers, and health workers. However, she emphasised that governance should not be measured by numbers alone. True governance means creating systems that function even when no one is actively watching like the Constitution of India, which provides protection continuously.

While women have been included in local governments and teaching positions, she called for greater representation in Parliament, the judiciary, and private sector leadership. Counting the few women in top positions is not enough in a country of 1.4 billion and that true governance would reflect equal participation. She also highlighted economic inequalities: only 13% of the world's property is in women's names, while 87% is held by men.

She concluded by stating that governments must look at structural barriers such as lack of access, awareness, and

skills. Thinking must go beyond numbers and personal interests to focus on national progress and equality.

Ms Chhavi Rajawat, Former Sarpanch, Soda, Rajasthan, as a grassroots woman leader who transitioned from a corporate career to serve in a village, shared a powerful perspective on the realities of governance in rural India. Her remarks centred on the need for systemic transformation, not just policy reforms or symbolic representation.

Transformation in rural areas, she noted, begins with listening to those living there. She called for a shift in perspective from viewing rural women leaders as ‘experiments’ to recognising them as examples. That women don’t need symbolic leadership roles but strategic authority. She further added that true empowerment is not about inclusion at existing tables but about rebuilding the table altogether. The current structures, she argued, are ‘lopsided, outdated, and ornamental.’

Empowering local leaders, giving them real support, and then getting out of their way is, in her words, the most respectful and effective path forward to build a better future for everyone.



The sessions continued with the audience deeply engaged throughout

Session 4: Shaping the Future (Education and Healthcare)

Education and Healthcare are the primary foundations of Human Capital. When it comes to women, this becomes even more important as the women make up the majority of frontline health workers and are the primary educators in homes and communities. According to WHO, Women account for 67% of the global health and social care workforce. As educators, caregivers, and frontline health workers, women shape future generations and build resilient societies.

By placing this theme at the heart of the Women Leadership Moonshot, the conference amplified the urgent need to center women's voices in reimagining the future of healthcare and education—two sectors that are deeply inter-linked. In India, women leaders at the community level—ASHA workers, anganwadi workers, and teachers—serve as the first point of contact for millions. Their lived realities make them powerful architects of change. By spotlighting their experiences and leadership, the Moonshot conference champions a future where systems are both humane and inclusive.

India has made remarkable strides in recent years: the expansion of primary health services, the rise of telemedicine, and the initiatives like Ayushman Bharat and Poshan Abhiyan have improved healthcare access. Simultaneously, efforts like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and Samagra Shiksha have laid the groundwork for more holistic and inclusive learning. However, persistent gaps remain—particularly in rural areas, where both quality healthcare and education remain elusive. By including this theme in the Moonshot agenda, the conference directly engaged with the systemic challenges of inadequate infrastructure, limited accessibility, social mindsets, and urgent issues like anaemia, reproductive health, and mental well-being among women. It sought not only to acknowledge these barriers but to explore innovative, scalable solutions.

By exploring the solutions and highlighting pathways for women to lead at every level—from school boards to hospital systems, and global think tanks—the conference reaffirms its commitment to gender-equal leadership. Investing in women in these sectors ensures not only better outcomes for families and communities but also builds resilient systems prepared to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

This theme also aligns with the Moonshot philosophy which is bold, transformative, and future-facing leadership. Reimagining healthcare and education requires vision, experimentation, and the courage to take a leap to shape the future.



(Left to Right) Dr Vinita Sahay, Director, Indian Institute of Management, Bodh Gaya; Ms Roli Singh, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare; Mr Bharat Lal, Secretary General and CEO, National Human Rights Commission; Dr Vinod Paul, Member (Health, Nutrition and Education), NITI Aayog; Mr Sanjay Kumar, Secretary, Department of School Education & Literacy, Ministry of Education; Dr Manohar Agnani, Professor, Public Health, Azim Premji University, Bhopal, Former Additional Secretary to Ministry of Health and Family Welfare; and Ms Mamta Saikia, Chief Executive Officer, Bharti Airtel Foundation

The session on Shaping the Future (Education and Health-care) explored the intersection of education and health-care as foundational drivers of equity, resilience, and nation-building. Emphasising a “moonshot” approach to systemic transformation, the dialogue underscored the need for inclusive policies, gender-sensitive reforms, and cross-sectoral collaboration to empower women, elevate leadership, and shape a healthier, more equitable India.

Dr Vinod Paul, Member (Health, Nutrition and Education), NITI Aayog, in his keynote address, addressed the significant and often under-recognised public health challenge of anaemia in women, highlighting its far-reaching implications beyond just physical health, affecting cognitive function and overall productivity. He presented alarming statistics indicating that approximately half of India’s adolescent girls (around 59%) and women of reproductive age (around 55-57%) suffer from anaemia, underscoring the urgency of addressing this widespread issue.



Dr Vinod Paul delivering his address at the conference

He also drew attention to the often-invisible health burden of osteoporosis in elderly women, affecting around one-third of those over 50, alongside the higher incidence of mental health problems in this demographic and the significant social context of widowhood (with 54% of women over 60 being widows compared to 17% of men), advocating for a broader perspective on women’s health that extends beyond reproductive and non-communicable diseases to encompass their specific needs across their entire lifespan, including their security and social well-being.

He proposed concrete interventions including a significant and urgently needed expansion of crèche facilities (estimating a requirement of up to 4 million) across public and private sectors to provide essential support for working mothers, the mandatory establishment and rigorous enforcement of genuinely women-friendly workplace norms encompassing Vishakha guidelines, provision of safe and adequate amenities (including toilets and rest areas), and considerations for pregnant workers.

Mr Bharat Lal, Secretary General and Chief Executive Officer, National Human Rights Commission emphasised the transformative potential of education and healthcare in advancing equity, empowerment, and sustainable development. He described the session as a moonshot factory, a platform for ambitious, forward-thinking ideas aimed at enabling systemic change. He highlighted the urgent need to promote inclusive education and accessible healthcare, particularly for women and young people, to build a resilient and just society. Mr Lal underscored that foundational education is central to nurturing future leadership and bridging existing socio-economic disparities.

The Gender Parity Index (GPI) now exceeds one at the primary level, indicating that more girls than boys are enrolled.

Mr Sanjay Kumar

Secretary, Department of School Education & Literacy,
Ministry of Education

Mr Sanjay Kumar, Secretary, Department of School Education & Literacy, Ministry of Education, presented thoughtful insights drawn from his leadership in the education sector, particularly at its intersection with health, underscoring why working in education and health demands a whole-of-government approach. There is a pressing need to develop effective mechanisms that allow for



Mr Sanjay Kumar and Mr Vineet Joshi at the conference

coordinated action across sectors.

Despite structural challenges, Mr Kumar highlighted notable achievements. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) now exceeds one at the primary level, indicating that more girls than boys are enrolled. The teaching workforce has expanded from 8.5 million to 9.8 million over the past decade, and women now represent 53 percent of all teachers, signalling the feminisation of the profession. However, he warned that increased representation alone does not guarantee improved educational outcomes. Health and education are closely linked, and neglect in one inevitably affects the other.

Looking ahead to India's aspiration of becoming a developed nation by 2047, Mr Kumar stressed that education must lead this transformation supported by strong foundations in health, equality, and critical thought.

Mr Vineet Joshi, Secretary, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, citing progress in female enrollment in higher education, stated that 48.7% of total enrollments are now women, with 2.18 crore female students. States like Kerala and Haryana are leading in this regard. He noted that 43.4% of students in STEM fields are women, with female enrolment in science and medical sciences increasing by 8.2% and 14.9%, respectively, since 2018–2019.

He stressed that participation alone is not enough; there must be pathways for women to take on leadership roles in education and policymaking. Initiatives like the creation of supernumerary seats in IITs and NITs have helped raise female enrollment from under 10% to over 20%. He credited departments like UGC, AICTE, and others for contributing to this improvement.

Mr Joshi connected education and health, stating that women who complete secondary education are more likely to ensure their children are vaccinated and healthy.

Ms Roli Singh, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, emphasised the inseparable connection between education and healthcare, noting that both are foundational pillars for women's participation in the



(Left to Right) Dr Manohar Agnani and Ms Roli Singh at the conference

workforce. She highlighted the ongoing transformation of India’s public healthcare infrastructure, especially at the grassroots level.

Significant investments have been made to revitalise primary healthcare, which had previously been in a state of neglect. Today, over 100,000 health sub-centres are operational, supported by newly deployed community health officers to strengthen service delivery at the village level. The scope of services has been notably expanded to include preventive health screenings, with 12 types of screenings now available, including for cervical and breast cancer, which are critical to women’s health.

Turning to the intersection of child health and education, Ms Singh stressed the impact of menstrual hygiene management on school attendance for girls. She described initiatives such as the School Health Ambassador programme, which trained teachers to sensitise both male and female students on health issues.

Dr Manohar Agnani, Professor, Public Health, Azim Premji University, Bhopal, Former Additional Secretary to Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, delivered a comprehensive address on the multifaceted aspects of women’s health, commencing with India’s notable advancements in reproductive health. He highlighted an impressive 83% decline in the maternal mortality ratio over the preceding three decades, significantly outperforming the global average.

Dr Agnani also pointed to the achievement of total fertility rate replacement levels in a substantial number of Indian states and Union Territories, alongside the increasing adoption of hygienic methods for menstrual protection among young women, citing NFHS data. Further, he transitioned to the escalating global concern of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), which exhibit a higher prevalence and burden in women aged 40 and above, who also experience a greater incidence of mental health conditions.

He highlighted that a significant 47% of diseases affect women disproportionately, including examples such as autoimmune disorders and atrial fibrillation, resulting in a higher overall disease burden. Despite this, research and development often prioritise conditions related to mortality, neglecting those that significantly impact women’s



(Left to Right) Dr Vinita Sahay and Ms Mamta Saikia at the conference

daily quality of life, such as various gynaecological disorders and the health challenges associated with menopause, despite its potential global GDP impact of over \$1 trillion, as noted in a World Economic Forum report.

Dr Agnani mentioned that while foundational policies and commitments are in place, a more specifically tailored, rigorously implemented, and adequately resourced strategy for women’s health, spanning their entire lives, is par-amount for achieving meaningful and equitable progress.

Dr Vinita Sahay, Director, Indian Institute of Management, Bodh Gaya, highlighted the latent potential and resilience of Indian women, especially from rural and underrepresented regions, not merely as effective financial managers but as catalytic agents of transformation.

Drawing from her experience in Bihar, Dr Sahay challenged commonly held stereotypes of the state, sharing poignant anecdotes of women labourers who viewed their work not as stone-breaking but as institution-building. Dr Sahay noted that Indian youth, with a median age of 28 in a population of 1.4 billion, are a critical national asset. She advocated for systemic efforts in human capital development, especially for young girls, arguing that India cannot afford to overlook this demographic. Her address celebrated a quiet revolution underway, of women not just topping academic exams but leading institutions and transforming communities. She emphasised that leadership is being redefined by qualities like empathy, sustainability, and inclusion, which are deeply rooted in Indian culture and familial structures.

Ms Mamta Saikia, Chief Executive Officer, Bharti Airtel Foundation, emphasised that simply enrolling girls in schools was not enough; for them to succeed, the entire environment around them, including family, community, and village institutions had to support their education. Influences from parents, grandparents, neighbours, and the wider village society were all crucial.

In 10 years, gender-specific discussions may no longer be necessary as girls and women would have secured their rightful place in society.

Ms Mamta Saikia
Chief Executive Officer,
Bharti Airtel Foundation

Ms Saikia shared stories to illustrate the impact of empowerment. In an instance from 2009–2010, students from the school collectively stopped 16 child marriages in their village. She also shared an update from a recent visit to the same village school after nearly 20 years. A vocational subject—beauty and wellness—had led to several former girl students starting their own beauty parlours and running small enterprises as CEOs of their startups.

The speaker acknowledged that while these are small numbers, they are part of a larger change. With 1.5 million schools and 9.8 million teachers, half of whom are women, she believes transformation is underway through education. She expressed hope that in 10 years, gender-specific discussions may no longer be necessary as girls and women would have secured their rightful place in society.

Valedictory Session



Prof Ashutosh Sharma delivering his keynote address.

In his keynote address, **Prof Ashutosh Sharma, President, Indian National Science Academy and Former Secretary, Department of Science and Technology**, framed the conference’s objective of advancing women in STEM as a significant “moonshot” initiative, acknowledging its inherent risks but highlighting its potential for profound and transformative societal change if successfully implemented.

Drawing upon his engineering background, Professor Sharma presented a concise framework for problem-solving, encompassing “jugaad” (resourceful improvisation), “dhandha” (strategic business-oriented approaches), and “panga” (disruptive, unconventional innovation), advocating for the latter as crucial for overcoming deeply entrenched systemic barriers.

He underscored the critical urgency of the current decade for India to achieve the ambitious vision of ‘Viksit Bharat’ and effectively catch up with developed nations, particularly in the context of global demographic shifts towards aging populations, asserting that incremental, “business as usual” approaches would be inadequate.

Professor Sharma passionately called for a fundamental and disruptive shift in mindset, a “panga” in our collective thinking, to effectively tackle the persistent challenges hindering the progress of women. He stressed that meaningful and lasting change requires immediate and focused action on well-identified issues.

He addressed the persistent and concerning underrepresentation of women in strategically critical STEM fields, including science, technology, engineering, and space, explicitly noting the significant leakage in the talent pipeline from entry-level education through to sustained professional careers, despite the commendable performance of women pursuing advanced degrees such as PhDs.

Professor Sharma emphatically stated the necessity of implementing targeted and impactful intervention programmes to effectively address these systemic issues, citing the Vigyan Jyoti initiative as a successful model that provides crucial support and encouragement to girls in higher secondary education, aiming to reach a substantial 200,000 potential students by not only bolstering their confidence and aspirations but also actively engaging and



(Left to Right) Mr Bharat Lal, Secretary General and CEO, National Human Rights Commission; Dr Kiran Bedi, Former Lt. Governor of Puducherry and Prof Ashutosh Sharma, President, Indian National Science Academy and Former Secretary, Department of Science and Technology

building confidence within their parents and teachers, alongside the provision of essential financial scholarships. Professor Sharma stressed that India's aspiration to become truly Atmanirbhar (self-reliant) and Viksit (developed) cannot be fully realised until every single citizen is empowered to reach their full potential. To proactively cultivate a culture of diversity and inclusion among younger generations within the scientific community, he highlighted initiatives such as the associate fellow programme at the Indian National Science Academy (INSA), which actively seeks to create visible and inspiring women role models, proudly noting that 350 of INSA's 1000 current members are women.

In his concluding remarks, he powerfully asserted that achieving meaningful and sustainable change within the societal system necessitates the active and collaborative engagement of both the creators of knowledge (the scientific community) and the crucial individuals who translate and apply that knowledge for tangible socio-economic impact, with a particular focus on dismantling persistent gender-related barriers.

Dr Kiran Bedi, Former Lt. Governor of Puducherry, in her valedictory address, emphasised the critical intersection of public administration, water access, and women's leadership in achieving inclusive governance. She shared and stressed upon a 10-point agenda in executing the vision of Viksit Bharat.

Dr. Bedi drew attention to the under-recognised care industry,

The under-recognised care industry is largely driven by women. There is greater need for policy support and the encouragement of startups in sectors such as home care for the elderly.

Dr Kiran Bedi
Former Lt. Governor of Puducherry

which she said is largely driven by women. She called for greater policy support and the encouragement of startups in sectors such as home care and elder care, noting that “every working woman creates another working woman.”

On the topic of elder care, she added that rooms for parents should be constructed in the family home. To support working mothers, she recommended integrating childcare infrastructure into schools and Anganwadi centers. Teachers could bring their own children, and Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) could be mandated to provide space for childcare facilities.

She spoke about patriarchy, advocating for joint family living or proximity-based arrangements as support systems for working women. In cases where such support is lacking, she encouraged women to stay in their parental homes and have their husbands adapt accordingly.

She underscored the urgent need to make bureaucracy visibly accountable by mandating that senior officials—such as collectors, DGPs, and department heads—start each day by engaging directly with field institutions.



Dr Kiran Bedi delivering her valedictory address at the conference



Ms Mamta Saikia, Chief Executive Officer, Bharti Airtel Foundation, inspired participants with fresh insights

10-point agenda for Viksit Bharat

- **Field Visibility of Bureaucracy**
Ensure every senior official like Collector, DGP, HOD, to begin their day on the ground. Visibility and direct engagement will improve implementation and public trust.
- **Decentralised Gati Shakti Implementation**
Embrace the Gati Shakti model at every level of governance to foster inter-departmental coordination, cost-effectiveness, and efficient policy execution.
- **Enhance Rural Women's Mobility**
Provide female sarpanches with independent transport (e.g., scooters) to reduce reliance on male counterparts and increase public presence and decision-making autonomy.
- **Strengthen Beat Policing**
Scale up the beat policing model as a national women's safety initiative to ensure localized law enforcement and safer public spaces for women.
- **Formalise the Care Economy**
Recognise and support the informal care economy, where working women hire other women (e.g., for childcare, elder care). Encourage regulated care industry startups.
- **Leverage School Infrastructure for Childcare**
Utilise existing school buildings to establish crèche facilities for both teachers and community members. Integrate with Anganwadi centres where possible.
- **Promote Day Schools with Extended Hours**
Expand school schedules to include extracurricular activities and homework support, reducing after-school childcare burdens on working parents.
- **Redefine Patriarchy through Joint Living**
Encourage joint or nearby family living for working women, offering supportive ecosystems especially post-childbirth. Consider policy and architectural incentives.
- **Handhold and Upskill Rural Women Entrepreneurs**
Provide rural women with consistent mentoring, entrepreneurship training, and NGO-based support systems to facilitate local leadership and enterprise.
- **Redefine Human Rights Bodies to Include Responsibilities**
Transform the Human Rights Commission into a Human Rights and Responsibilities Commission, aligning individual rights with social accountability.

This, she noted, would bring governance closer to the people and restore trust in public systems.

Ms Disha Joshi, Director, Sankala Foundation, delivered the Vote of Thanks. She expressed gratitude to all speakers, participants, and partners for making the event a success.



Learnings and Way Forward

Today in India, women are playing a pivotal role in driving social progress and fostering economic growth. Across diverse sectors such as education, science, technology, innovation, entrepreneurship, finance, governance, and public service delivery, women are emerging as change-makers. A strategic shift from ‘women empowerment’ to ‘women-led development’ is catalysing this transformation, serving as a beacon of inspiration for women around the world, particularly in the Global South.

The Government of India has implemented a range of women-centric policies aimed at promoting education, skill development, entrepreneurship, safety and security, and financial inclusion among women. At the grassroots level, women are demonstrating strong and empathetic leadership in local self-governments. In a historic move to bolster women’s representation, the Parliament has passed a bill reserving one-third of the seats in Parliament and state legislatures for women. To accelerate this momentum in a country as vast and diverse as India, sustained efforts are essential to nurture and advance women’s leadership across all sectors and levels. This calls for sustained collaboration, continuous dialogue, and active sharing of experiences and best practices.

To achieve these goals, the National Conference on **Women Leadership Moonshot: Shaping the Future** brought together thought leaders, policy makers, change agents, scientists, entrepreneurs, and aspiring young women to shape a forward-looking strategy for promoting women’s leadership. The conference served as a platform for in-depth discussions on leadership development, policy innovation, and the creation of an enabling ecosystem that helps women to realise their full potential. This conference marked the beginning of a series of initiatives designed to reimagine and actively shape the future of India. Key focus areas included innovation, start-ups and entrepreneurship, research and technology development, governance and social transformation, and education and health-care – all essential for building a prosperous and modern India. By reinforcing a supportive environment and further advancing women-centric policies, this initiative aimed to contribute in national development through women leadership moonshot.

The National Conference on Women Leadership Moonshot: Shaping the Future, organised by the Sankala Foundation, supported by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), India, and the Indian National Science Academy (INSA), saw a diverse group of experts deliberate on social and economic structures and policies that enable women to take charge of transformative change in India.

From panchayats to Parliament, women’s leadership needs to be mainstreamed through institutional reform and social change. The conference positioned women not as beneficiaries but as architects of national transformation.

Instead of waiting for a token seat at the table, they must rebuild the table and shape the dialogue.

Some outcomes of the conference

- i. A strategic roadmap for women-led development, endorsed by multi-sector stakeholders.
- ii. Strengthening of networks of women leaders, mentors, and supporters.
- iii. Tangible policy recommendations to inform national and state-level gender strategies.
- iv. Emergence of a dynamic platform for showcasing leadership models and inspiring new initiatives.
- v. Greater visibility and momentum for women-driven economic and social transformation

India’s aspiration to become a \$30 trillion economy hinges on unlocking the power of its women. With only 18% GDP contribution from 432 million working-age women, the gender gap is not just a social issue—it is a critical economic barrier. The way forward involves bold reforms in access to credit, capital, markets, mentorship, digital inclu-

sion, and shifting societal mindsets, especially among men. Women-led startups must be integrated into the formal economy with targeted investments, especially in underserved sectors like care work, rural enterprise, tech & AI. India's journey toward progress is inseparable from investments in health and education. With 59% of adolescent girls facing anaemia and 48.7% female enrollment in higher education, targeted initiatives are needed to convert education into employment. Crèche facilities, mental health services, digital skilling, and gender-responsive school-to-career pathways must form the new development compact.

Despite progress, digital exclusion remains stark—only 37% of women use mobile internet compared to 53% of men. Financial literacy and digital fluency must be treated as rights, not privileges. Initiatives like Mudra Yojana have shown what's possible, with 70% of loans going to women. The next step is embedding women deeper into fintech, e-commerce, and innovation ecosystems—both as users and creators.

From government and industry to civil society and academia, collaboration is key. When women lead, societies don't just change—they transform. Policies must reflect the realities that women face, dropping out of the workforce due to care responsibilities. This calls for mandatory, genuinely women-friendly workplace norms, which can come together through mentorship, cross-sectoral alliances, flexible work policies, and second-chance systems.

Roadmap

This national conference is the first in a series of annual and biennial events that will evolve into regional, national, and international summits over the coming years. The design of the conference includes:

- i. Annual National Conferences in New Delhi and tier-1 cities.
- ii. Thematic Dialogues in universities, rural innovation hubs, and corporate institutions.
- iii. International Collaborations with gender-focused forums, embassies, and multilateral institutions.
- iv. Publication of Reports based on outcomes and case studies.

The National Conference on Women Leadership Moonshot presented India's commitment to women-led development through collaborative and continuous dialogues. Sankala Foundation's initiative to host this one-day summit on women's leadership in New Delhi reflects a multifaceted strategy aligned with India's domestic priorities and global aspirations. By amplifying women's voices and leadership across business, policy, science, and community development, Sankala Foundation seeks to create a ripple effect of empowerment and innovation. The Foundation aims to steer the momentum towards an inclusive future where women are not just participants but pioneers of India's economic and social transformation.



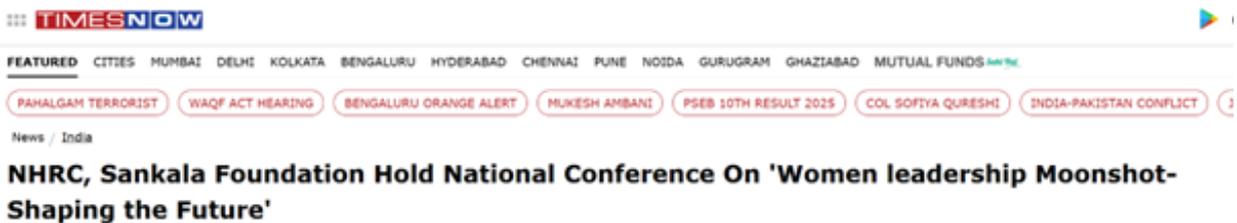
Reflections in the Media

Times Now, NDTV, Startup Times, CSR Universe, and Ink Quest, among others, covered the media coverage of the National Conference on Women Leadership Moonshot: Shaping the Future, organised by the Sankala Foundation and held on 2nd May 2025 in New Delhi.

New Delhi, May 2, 2025:

TIMES NOW

www.timesnownews.com/india/sankala-foundation-holds-national-conference-on-women-leadership-moonshot-article-151585743/amp



NDTV

<https://x.com/ndtv/status/1918957180751147414?s=46>

Indian Startup Times

<https://www.indianstartuptimes.com/policy-press-release/viksit-bharat-requires-india-to-transition-from-a-4-trillion-economy-to-exceeding-30-trillion-says-amitabh-kant/>

Indian Startup Times | May 6, 2025

‘Viksit Bharat’ Requires India To Transition From A \$4 Trillion Economy To Exceeding \$30 Trillion, Says Amitabh Kant



The CSR Universe

<https://theCSRUniverse.com/articles/national-conference-on-women-leadership-moonshot-leaders-experts-draw-vision-for-women-led-development-in-india>



Ink Quest

<https://inkquest.in/news/Hidden-diseases-of-women-are-becoming-a-national-challenge>



"वमन लीडरशिप मूनशॉट सम्मेलन: महिलाओं की छिपी बीमारियाँ बन रहीं राष्ट्रीय चुनौती, नीति आयोग और विशेषज्ञों ने दी चेतावनी

By: DM

New Delhi | 5/12/2025, 7:53:35 AM





WOMEN LEADERSHIP
MONSHOT
Shaping the Future



Sankala Foundation

Voice for a Sustainable Planet

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