



# **WOMEN SHAPING THE EU-INDIA CORRIDOR: VOICES, LEADERSHIP, IMPACT**

**Edited by  
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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Women Shaping the EU–India Corridor: Voices, Leadership, Impact brings together diverse voices of women shaping the EU–India landscape. This publication features reflections and insights from the mentees of our flagship Mentorship Programme, alongside contributions from Council Members of the WICCI’s India–EU Business Council – a dynamic networking platform established in 2022 under the Women’s Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (WICCI).

As of today, the Council brings together over 60 women leaders from India and multiple European Union countries, representing business, policy, academia, and civil society. It serves as a trusted platform for dialogue, collaboration, and knowledge exchange across borders, fostering meaningful connections and partnerships within the EU–India corridor. Through its initiatives, the Council works to strengthen professional networks, amplify women’s voices, and promote greater representation of women in leadership and decision-making spaces.

The guidance, expertise, and active participation of the Council Members have been invaluable in shaping this collection. Together, contributors share experiences, lessons learned, and perspectives on strengthening women’s roles across sectors, generations, and borders. This publication celebrates intergenerational dialogue, cross-sector collaboration, and the power of women supporting women in advancing EU–India relations.

In addition to full-length articles by Council Members and mentees, the publication includes short reflective papers written by selected mentees of the third edition of the Mentorship Programme on the theme “What Does It Mean to Be a Woman in the EU–India Corridor”. The publication intentionally brings together analytical, policy-oriented, and reflective contributions, reflecting the diversity of voices and professional journeys shaping the EU–India corridor.

We warmly invite readers to engage with these contributions and to join the ongoing conversation on promoting inclusive, equitable, and impactful participation of women across the EU–India corridor.

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# INTRODUCTION

## ADA DYNDO, PRESIDENT OF WICCI'S INDIA-EU BUSINESS COUNCIL

Over the years of working across the EU–India corridor, I have repeatedly encountered inspiring women who quietly and steadily shape cooperation between our regions. They lead businesses, advise institutions, conduct research, build partnerships, and navigate complex cross-cultural spaces, often without visibility or recognition. Their contributions are real, impactful, and essential, yet they are not always reflected in how we speak about leadership or influence in EU–India relations.

Women Shaping the EU–India Corridor: Voices, Leadership, Impact was born from this shared energy of women who, over the years, have been actively creating and strengthening EU–India relations. Their leadership, expertise, and lived experiences already influence policy dialogues, business decisions, research agendas, and cross-border collaboration. What is still often missing is visibility, recognition, and a structured space where these voices can come together and be heard collectively.

This publication reflects the journey of the WICCI's India–EU Business Council, established in 2022 under the Women's Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (WICCI). What began as an idea—to create a trusted, cross-border platform for women working across the EU–India corridor—has grown into a vibrant community of over 60 members from India and multiple European Union countries. The Council brings together women from business, policy, academia, think tanks, diplomacy, entrepreneurship, and civil society, united by a shared commitment to collaboration, knowledge exchange, and mutual support.

Over the past years, the Council has demonstrated that networks matter. Through regular dialogue, mentorship, collaborative initiatives, and peer learning, we have built not only professional connections, but a space of collaboration. A space where women support women across borders, sectors, and generations; where experience meets emerging perspectives; and where learning flows in both directions. A particularly important aspect of this work has been the sharing of knowledge and networks with the next generation of leaders, young women navigating cross-sectoral careers.

This publication captures that spirit.

The contributions in **Part I, Strategic Voices: Women Shaping the EU–India Corridor**, bring together analyses and reflections from Council Members who work at the heart of EU–India relations, across trade, innovation, diplomacy, sustainability, leadership, and governance. These chapters demonstrate that women’s leadership is not an “add-on” to cooperation, but a strategic asset that strengthens institutions, improves outcomes, and builds long-term resilience.

**Part II, Emerging Voices of Women Shaping the Future of the EU–India Corridor**, highlights perspectives from younger professionals and researchers navigating multilateral, policy, and regional spaces. Their contributions remind us that the future of the corridor will be shaped not only by today’s decision-makers, but also by those who are currently building their paths across systems, cultures, and disciplines.

Finally, the **Reflection Papers by Mentees** of the third edition of our flagship Mentorship Programme offer deeply personal and thoughtful responses to the question: “What does it mean to be a woman in the EU–India corridor” These reflections embody the essence of why the Council invests so strongly in mentorship—because empowerment, confidence, and leadership are cultivated through dialogue, guidance, and shared experience.

Taken together, this publication is both a record of collective knowledge and an advocacy statement. It calls for greater representation of women entrepreneurs, CEOs, researchers, diplomats, and thought leaders in shaping EU–India cooperation, not as a matter of symbolism, but of strategic necessity. The challenges facing both regions today—digital transformation, climate action, inclusive growth, and geopolitical uncertainty—require leadership that is collaborative, adaptive, and inclusive. This work also builds on the Council’s earlier collaborative outputs, including [Women in Public Debate – A Guide to Organising Inclusive and Meaningful Discussions](#), published together with the Boym Institute.

As President of the WICCI’s India–EU Business Council, I am deeply grateful to every contributor, mentor, mentee, and Council Member who has helped build this community and made this publication possible. Our journey since 2022 shows that when women come together across borders with purpose and trust, they do more than exchange ideas, they shape corridors, redefine leadership, and open pathways for those who follow.

I invite you to read these pages not only as individual articles, but as part of a shared conversation, one that we hope will continue to grow, evolve, and inspire action across the EU–India corridor.

# **PART I**

## **STRATEGIC VOICES WOMEN SHAPING THE EU-INDIA CORRIDOR**

# **GENDER AS STRATEGY: MAPPING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP ACROSS EU-INDIA TRADE, INNOVATION, AND SUSTAINABILITY**

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## **Introduction**

The EU-India partnership has deepened significantly, marked by an approximate 60 percent rise in bilateral merchandise trade between 2015 and 2023 and a near doubling of student exchanges. Although high-level frameworks such as the Trade and Technology Council or the ongoing FTA negotiations attract most attention, the gender dimension of this cooperation is often overlooked. Yet, data increasingly show that women are central to this connectivity.

Across key trade-oriented sectors, women make up between 30 and 55 percent of export-facing positions. Their participation is notably high in textiles, creative industries, and compliance-related functions, while representation remains limited in capital-intensive industries like automotive manufacturing. Within research, 41 percent of EU researchers and roughly 18-20 percent in India are women. However, participation in joint EU-India projects shows a higher balance, ranging between 26 and 30 percent. Student mobility also reveals encouraging patterns: while about 30 percent of Indian students in Belgium are women, the figure rises above 40 percent in STEM disciplines at Walloon universities.

## **Part I: Women in Trade, Investment and Supply-chain Cooperation**

The European Union continues to serve as India's second-largest trading partner, with trade volumes reaching €120.4 billion in 2023—an increase of more than 10 percent in just two years. Belgium accounted for around €6.8 billion of this total. Within this corridor, women occupy significant positions that shape trade and investment decisions.

In export-oriented industries, women hold 38 percent of roles in textiles and apparel, 33 percent in pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, and between 45 and 55 percent in creative sectors such as design and handicrafts. Regulatory positions within medical devices see around 27 percent female

representation, while digital and ICT services show a consistent 32–37 percent.

European trade agencies report a similar pattern: roughly half of sectoral advisors dealing with India-related portfolios are women. In India’s export councils, around 30 percent of EU-facing staff are women, and an estimated one-third of Walloon SMEs working on EU–India trade matters rely on female advisors for certification and compliance guidance.

Belgium’s cumulative investment in India stands near USD 2.4 billion over the past decade. Women professionals contribute substantially to this pipeline—accounting for roughly 35–40 percent of due diligence and coordination functions in Europe, and 28–34 percent in Indian firms managing expansion into EU markets.

Table 1. Women’s Participation in Export-Facing Roles (2024)

Sector	EU–India Trade Importance	Women in Export-Facing Roles (%)
Textiles & Apparel	High	35–40%
Pharmaceuticals & Biotechnology	High	30–38%
Processed Food & Agri-value Chains	Medium	28–32%
Medical Devices	High	25–30%
ICT & Digital Services	Very High	32–37%
Creative & Handicraft Industries	Medium	45–55%

Source: Eurostat (2024); India Export Promotion Council (2024); Author’s field analysis.

## Part II: Technology, Governance, Research and Innovation

Gender diversity in research and innovation has become a defining factor in the EU–India technological partnership. While women make up 41 percent of the EU’s research community and only 18–20 percent in India, Indo–European collaborations tend to exhibit higher gender parity. Horizon

Europe and Horizon 2020 data indicate that Indian women comprise about 26–30 percent of cross-border project teams, showing that collaborative frameworks can help close participation gaps.

In Belgium, more than half of PhD graduates are women, with a third specialising in STEM disciplines—feeding directly into EU–India scientific exchanges. Across Europe, 30–40 percent of AI and data governance professionals are women, contributing to a more inclusive dialogue on technology ethics and privacy. India’s digital economy mirrors this trend: women form about 30 percent of the tech workforce, rising to 36 percent in multinational firms and around 28–30 percent in startups.

Startups founded by Indian women represent 14–18 percent of the total but account for a higher proportion—about 21–24 percent—of Indo-European innovation initiatives. Particularly in health tech, climate analytics, and agritech, women-led ventures play a key role in proof-of-concept projects with European partners.

Table 2. Women’s Leadership in EU–India Technology Collaboration

Domain	Women in Relevant Roles (%)	Indicative Impact
AI Ethics, Data Governance	EU: 30–40%; India: 25–30%	Builds regulatory trust and alignment
Cybersecurity & Digital Rights	EU: 28–35%; India: 20–25%	Enhances resilience in digital systems
Biotechnology & Health Sciences	EU: 35–45%; India: 25–33%	Expands joint medical innovation
Circular-Economy Research	EU: 30–38%; India: 20–24%	Strengthens technology transfer
Innovation Ecosystems	14–18% (India founders)	Boosts Indo-European entrepreneurship

Source: Horizon Europe & Horizon 2020 datasets (2023–24); EU Digital Indicators; India Ministry of Science & Technology.

Technology-intensive sectors now account for over half of bilateral trade growth since 2015, and women make up approximately one-third of regulatory and analytical personnel underpinning these exchanges.

### **Part III: Sustainability, Circular Economy and ESG Compliance**

Sustainability has emerged as a cornerstone of EU–India cooperation, shaped by the EU’s Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and India’s own renewable energy expansion. Women are increasingly visible in this space, comprising between 25 and 33 percent of professionals across ESG, environmental engineering, and sustainable finance roles.

In Wallonia’s circular economy clusters—spanning battery recycling, photovoltaic recovery, and eco-design—women account for 28–35 percent of leadership and technical roles. During bilateral exchanges, around a third of presenting experts from Wallonia are women, a reflection of the gender diversity embedded in sustainability expertise.

Women also dominate European advisory teams supporting Indian firms’ adaptation to CSRD and CBAM requirements, holding roughly 45 percent of these roles. In India’s renewable energy sector, women make up around 18 percent of the workforce—above the global average of 14 percent—and their representation in EU-funded climate projects ranges from 34 to 46 percent.

The sustainability partnership thus serves as both a climate and equality accelerator, reinforcing that inclusion yields tangible efficiency and innovation gains.

### **Part IV: Mobility, Education and Cultural Diplomacy**

Student and professional mobility form the connective tissue of EU–India relations. By 2023, more than 135,000 Indian students were enrolled across Europe, with Belgium hosting about 3,500. Women account for roughly 30 percent of these students, but in Wallonia’s STEM programmes, their participation exceeds 40 percent. This aligns with European universities’ broader trend, where women form 45–52 percent of administrative staff managing exchange programmes—helping to improve academic outcomes and integration.

Women also represent around 21–24 percent of Indian ICT professionals working in the EU, while in healthcare migration, their share reaches 47 percent. This shift reflects broader professional diversification and regulatory trust in women-dominated service sectors.

Cultural diplomacy presents perhaps the most visible expression of gender

-balanced engagement. Between 55 and 62 percent of bilateral cultural initiatives—literature festivals, performing arts collaborations, and multilingual education exchanges—are led or co-managed by women. Within Europe’s 2.6 million-strong Indian diaspora, women represent nearly half and play an integral role in sustaining cross-cultural initiatives that reinforce EU-India connectivity at a people-to-people level.

## **Conclusion**

Across all indicators examined — trade, research, sustainability, mobility, and cultural diplomacy — women have become essential to the operational fabric of EU-India cooperation. The data reveal more than representation; they signal structural participation. Women account for roughly one-third of export-facing professionals, over a third of specialists in digital governance and cybersecurity, and nearly half of all participants in sustainability, ESG advisory, and cultural initiatives. These numbers, when viewed collectively, show that women are shaping not just sectoral outcomes but the overall trajectory of the bilateral partnership.

The sectors where women’s participation is strongest — technology governance, sustainability, and education — correspond precisely with the areas experiencing the fastest policy and economic integration between the EU and India. This convergence suggests a deeper dynamic: gender inclusion and partnership efficiency appear to move together. The more inclusive the institutional frameworks become, the more robust and adaptive the collaboration tends to be.

At a strategic level, women’s leadership contributes to greater transparency in regulatory coordination, higher innovation returns in cross-border R&D, and stronger social legitimacy in sustainability transitions. These outcomes are not incidental; they demonstrate that inclusion functions as a multiplier of performance, not merely an ethical objective. In trade facilitation, gender diversity correlates with higher compliance accuracy and improved SME outreach. In innovation, women’s participation often expands interdisciplinary collaboration, particularly in fields such as health technology and environmental analytics. And in cultural diplomacy, women-led initiatives have proven instrumental in maintaining continuity of engagement during periods of policy or economic uncertainty.

From a governance standpoint, the growing female presence across bilateral institutions offers an opportunity to formalize gender-responsive

frameworks. Integrating gender metrics into trade negotiations, innovation funding mechanisms, and regulatory dialogues would bring measurable improvements in decision quality and accountability. Beyond representation, such mechanisms can anchor gender equality as a performance variable in EU–India cooperation – a shift from symbolic participation to institutional mainstreaming.

Looking ahead, the EU–India partnership is entering a phase defined by complex global transitions: digital sovereignty, sustainable supply chains, and energy diversification. Women’s leadership will be indispensable in navigating these challenges. Whether in data governance, renewable energy, or skills mobility, women professionals already act as intermediaries translating policy ambitions into operational results. Institutionalizing that leadership – through mentorship networks, targeted mobility schemes, and parity in policy councils – can transform gender inclusion from an outcome into a driver of resilience and innovation.

Ultimately, a gender-responsive EU–India partnership is not a matter of moral commitment alone; it is a matter of strategic competitiveness. The evidence indicates that when women participate fully, bilateral cooperation becomes more innovative, sustainable, and trusted. As both regions aspire to build a connected, secure, and inclusive global order, women’s leadership will remain one of the most decisive assets shaping the future of EU–India relations.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

To institutionalize women’s participation and ensure long-term inclusivity in the EU–India partnership, the following measures are recommended:

1. **Gender-Impact Assessments in Trade Policy** – Embed gender analysis into all trade negotiations and sectoral reviews, ensuring that policy outcomes consider differential impacts on women entrepreneurs and professionals.
2. **Balanced Representation in the Trade and Technology Council** – Mandate gender parity in TTC working groups and technical committees to ensure that women influence agenda-setting.
3. **Dedicated Support for Women-Led Enterprises** – Establish export desks and funding schemes specifically for women-led MSMEs engaged in EU-bound trade.
4. **Promotion of Women in Research & Innovation Consortia** – Incentivize joint research projects led by women scientists and innovators within Horizon Europe and India’s bilateral programmes.

5. STEM Mobility Expansion – Develop targeted scholarship and fellowship frameworks for women in STEM, facilitating academic exchanges between Indian and European institutions.

Embedding these measures within institutional cooperation would not only advance gender equality but also deliver measurable gains in innovation, sustainability, and governance. A gender-responsive EU–India partnership is not just socially responsible—it is an economic and strategic imperative that strengthens both regions’ competitiveness in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

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## **AUTHORSHIP NOTE**

This paper is written in a personal capacity by the author, based on professional experience in bilateral trade and investment facilitation between Europe and India. The analysis reflects first-hand engagement with sectoral data, policy frameworks, and institutional stakeholders rather than automated synthesis. All interpretations, errors, and perspectives expressed are solely those of the author and do not represent the official position of the Wallonia Export-Investment Agency (AWEX) or any affiliated entity.

## WHY WOMEN LEADERS ARE STRATEGIC INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE EU-INDIA CORRIDOR

**MONIKA GOGNA, INTERNATIONAL WORKPLACE STRATEGIST  
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Trade negotiations, digital alliances, and strategic dialogues dominate the EU-India narrative. Yet leaders on both continents privately admit a quieter, more pervasive truth: international collaboration rarely breaks down because of economics or policy. It breaks down because of people.

The most promising agreements in the EU-India corridor falter not in Brussels or New Delhi, but inside meeting rooms where teams struggle to interpret one another's intentions, expectations, and communication norms. These are not interpersonal quirks – they are structural cultural dynamics that no treaty can harmonize.

### **The Cultural Machinery**

A major 2024 review by Den Hartog and colleagues in the Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior shows that leadership effectiveness varies dramatically by cultural context, not because leaders change, but because followers interpret behaviors through different cultural expectations. In other words, the same leadership behavior can build trust in Amsterdam and undermine it in Bengaluru.

Northern and Western European business environments typically reward transparency, low power distance, and direct accountability. Indian professional environments, shaped by collectivist norms and deeply layered hierarchies, prioritize relational loyalty, face protection, and contextual communication.

These differences are not outdated stereotypes. They are documented systems that continue to influence organizational behavior today. Cross-border teams experience them as friction:

- directness mistaken for aggression,
- reluctance mistaken for incompetence,
- silence mistaken for consent,
- hierarchy mistaken for rigidity.

The *Financial Times* reported in 2025 that the sharp rise in EU–India executive programs is driven not by a quest for new technical skills, but by the need to navigate these entrenched cultural systems more effectively. Leaders are discovering that cultural fluency now determines the success of international strategy.

### **Why Women Leaders Excel in This Terrain**

A major 2024 review by Den Hartog and colleagues in the *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* demonstrates that leadership effectiveness varies substantially across cultural contexts, not primarily because leaders alter their behavior, but because followers interpret the same behaviors through different cultural frames. Put differently, identical leadership actions can foster trust in Amsterdam while quietly eroding it in Bengaluru, depending on the expectations through which they are received.

Northern and Western European business environments have historically evolved to reward transparency, low power distance, and explicit accountability. Many Indian professional environments, shaped by collectivist orientations and multilayered hierarchies, place greater emphasis on relational loyalty, face preservation, and high-context communication. These orientations are not mutually exclusive nor uniformly present across organizations or generations, but they remain influential organizing logics in day-to-day professional interactions.

These dynamics are not residual stereotypes; they are empirically documented systems that continue to shape organizational behavior in contemporary settings. In cross-border teams, they frequently surface as friction, where

- directness is interpreted as aggression,
- hesitation or deference is read as incompetence,
- silence is taken as consent, and
- hierarchy is mistaken for inflexibility rather than coordination.

The *Financial Times* reported in 2025 that the rapid growth of EU–India executive education programs is driven less by the pursuit of new technical expertise and more by the need to navigate these entrenched cultural systems with greater sophistication. Increasingly, leaders are recognizing that cultural fluency is no longer a “soft” capability, but a central determinant of international strategy execution and organizational cohesion.

Across international joint ventures and complex cross-cultural initiatives, a recurring pattern is becoming more visible: women leaders are often disproportionately effective at preventing collaboration breakdowns. This advantage does not stem from being “nicer” or more accommodating, but from the development of competencies that research consistently identifies as critical for cross-cultural effectiveness.

A 2025 systematic review published in *SAGE Open* on women in cross-cultural leadership found that women, on average, demonstrate higher levels of adaptive communication, relational intelligence, and contextual sensitivity. These capabilities are frequently cultivated through professional trajectories that require continuous calibration of tone, credibility, and authority, often under heightened scrutiny.

In India, where a 2025 *Times of India* analysis indicates that 63% of major firms still lack women in key leadership roles, those who do advance typically do so through sustained performance rather than presumed entitlement. Their authority is earned repeatedly rather than automatically granted. This repeated earning process tends to produce leadership approaches grounded in relationship-building, situational attunement, and credibility through delivery – precisely the qualities required to lead effectively in multicultural, psychologically complex, and high-stakes organizational environments.

### **Accountability Without Shame**

A subtler but persistent source of cross-cultural friction lies in how organizations define and enact “accountability.” In many European contexts, early escalation of risks or failures is interpreted as a marker of professionalism and ownership. In many Indian organizational settings, however, premature escalation can be experienced as a threat to personal credibility, team cohesion, or hierarchical harmony.

Neither orientation reflects a lack of accountability. Rather, they represent different risk calculations about when and how responsibility should be exercised. The resulting mismatch is predictable: issues tend to surface too late for European stakeholders’ comfort, while European-style escalation can feel unnecessarily blunt or destabilizing to Indian teams.

Foreign women leaders working in India are often observed stepping into an informal but critical bridging role within this dynamic. A 2024 research thesis from Prague University of Economics and Business (“Leadership

Strategies for Foreign Women in the Indian Business Environment”) found that many foreign women leaders succeed not by challenging local norms directly, but by reframing transparency as protection rather than exposure. By positioning escalation as a collective safeguard, rather than an individual fault-finding exercise, they enable earlier issue disclosure without triggering fear of loss of face.

This approach supports timelines while preserving dignity, and it strengthens psychological safety, long established as a performance driver since Google’s Project Aristotle and further reinforced by a growing body of organizational behavior research published between 2023 and 2025. In increasingly complex, distributed organizations, accountability without shame is emerging not as a cultural compromise, but as a leadership capability in its own right.

### **Conflict as a Tool Instead of a Threat**

One of the most persistent and least examined sources of cross-cultural breakdown is how conflict itself is understood. In many European professional cultures, direct disagreement is treated as a signal of rigor, engagement, and professionalism. In many Indian organizational contexts, shaped by high-context communication and relational hierarchies, the same directness can register as disrespectful, destabilizing, or prematurely confrontational.

The problem is not disagreement, but *misaligned signals*. What one system reads as clarity, the other experiences as rupture. The result is a costly illusion of alignment: apparent consensus that masks unresolved tension, delayed risk exposure, and decisions that later unravel under pressure.

Bicultural women leaders, those who have had to operate credibly across both systems, are often the ones who convert this tension into leverage. Rather than avoiding conflict or imposing it, they reengineer its *form*. Their leadership reflects what Den Hartog’s 2024 review describes as *contextually contingent* leadership: the capacity to modulate assertiveness, timing, and relational framing so that dissent becomes informative rather than threatening.

This is not emotional labor or interpersonal finesse alone. It is conflict fluency, the ability to surface disagreement without triggering defensiveness, to challenge ideas without destabilizing identity, and to maintain momentum while preserving trust. In a complex, multicultural

organizations, this fluency is no longer a soft skill. It is a structural advantage that determines whether conflict becomes a source of insight or an invisible liability.

### **Bicultural Women Leaders as Strategic Infrastructure**

Consider the Indian-origin, European-trained woman leading a cross-border team. She detects when agreement is provisional rather than real, when silence signals discomfort instead of alignment, when public assurances diverge from private expectations, and when courtesy masks substantive resistance. These are not intuitive “reads” in the informal sense; they are pattern recognitions developed through sustained exposure to multiple, and often conflicting, institutional logics.

This capability should not be misclassified as a soft interpersonal skill. It is a form of *organizational risk intelligence*, the ability to anticipate breakdowns before they register as performance failures. In the EU–India corridor, where small misinterpretations can cascade into costly delays, stalled partnerships, or strategic drift, such intelligence functions as operational infrastructure rather than individual advantage.

### **Strategic Shifts Required**

First, *cultural intelligence* must be treated as a core leadership capability, embedded in role design, succession planning, and performance evaluation, not relegated to optional training or post-hoc intervention.

Second, the *relational labor* frequently carried by women leaders should be recognized for what it is: not supportive “glue work,” but a stabilizing force that sustains trust, decision quality, and execution across systems with different assumptions about power, voice, and accountability.

Third, bicultural women must be positioned where they shape structures rather than merely absorb friction, designing governance mechanisms, escalation pathways, and collaboration norms instead of being deployed only to repair breakdowns after the fact.

Trade agreements and policy frameworks create the conditions for cooperation. But outcomes are delivered by leadership that can translate across meaning systems in real time. The most critical infrastructure in the EU–India partnership is neither physical, digital, nor political. It is relational intelligence and bicultural women leaders are among its most consistently effective architects.

## WHY AND HOW MORE WOMEN MATTER IN THE EU–INDIA CORRIDOR

**PATRYCJA ZDYBEL (PENDRAKOWSKA), FOUNDER OF THE BOYM INSTITUTE**

“It's true that women sometimes go too far, but it's only when you go too far that others listen” – Indira Gandhi

Women's participation in political decision-making is often met with caution, and they are usually in the minority in most parliaments, international organisations, think tanks and academic institutions around the world. This is striking when you consider that women make up roughly half of the population in both the EU and India. Yet their presence in parliaments, leadership positions and strategic sectors such as technology remains much lower. In reality, the overwhelming majority of think tanks have male leadership teams, and women are in the minority in both the EU and Indian parliaments.

This gap is not only unfair; it is also a social and ethical issue that includes the gender pay gap. Calls for greater female participation are often dismissed with jokes about rules that would discriminate against men, such as parity. However, homogeneity also weakens institutions and limits growth.

When women are absent from decision-making processes, societies lose valuable skills, ideas and diversity, as well as long-term stability. In the context of cooperation between the European Union and Asia, including India, women's participation should be considered a core pillar rather than an additional topic. Research from international organisations shows that more inclusive decision-making leads to better laws, stronger economies and greater trust in public institutions.

Change is certainly needed, but it is doubtful that strong, legally enforceable parity norms are the only solution. Real change must come from within organisations, institutions and parliaments, and be based on a consensus that our values are shared. There is also scope for future cooperation between women from Europe and South Asia.

In this policy paper, I will also propose some of the measures and rules that I implemented as the founder of a think tank comprising over 20 experts to

promote gender equality and support female earnings. One key factor was encouraging women to sit on the council and management board. We also started tracking engagement in publications, media appearances, and earnings disparities in an attempt to encourage more women to take on better-paying projects. Although far from perfect, we managed to have two women out of three on the management board and one out of five on the council. We are dedicated to the promotion of women into leadership roles.

### **The Representation Gap in Numbers**

Before moving on to a subjective analysis at a micro-level from a think tank background, I would like to focus on the macro-level. The macro level reflects the overall attitudes and trends that shape the future. Conversely, grassroots movements and the third sector are often where political talent is born and grows into higher positions.

In India, women remain significantly underrepresented in political institutions, a topic that was described in detail by Arundhati Biswal Kundal for ORE in 2013. In the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament, women hold about 14 % of the seats (74 out of 543). This means that roughly one in seven members is a woman. In the Rajya Sabha, the upper house, women hold around 16 % percent of the seats. These numbers place India below the global average for women's parliamentary representation and far from parity.

In the European Union, the current situation is better but still unequal. In 2024, women held around 33 % of the seats in the national parliaments of European Union member states. This situation reflects a notable increase compared with previous decades, but still leaves men in the majority of decision-making roles.

As of mid-2025, women held around 38% of seats in the European Parliament, making it one of the more gender-balanced parliamentary bodies in the world. Nevertheless, it is clear that women remain underrepresented relative to men in Europe, too, and full gender parity has not yet been achieved in national legislatures or the European Parliament. In this regard, Europe performs better than India overall, but neither region has achieved equal participation.

### **Focus on Europe**

It is important to highlight this gap because it raises awareness of these challenges and helps to establish realistic goals for cooperation and institutional reform.

At the same time, some sceptics in Europe argue that women may indeed be less suited to these roles or have a poorer educational background. Those who argue that supporting the broader participation of women in decision-making bodies is of little value should consider the recent developments in higher education.

According to [Eurostat data](#), of the 1.5 million master's students in the European Union in 2022, 905,678 were women, accounting for around 58% of the total. At the doctoral level, women accounted for around 48% of the 99,204 PhD students.

At the master's level, women constituted the majority of students in all EU member states except Luxembourg. The highest proportion of women enrolled in master's programmes was observed in Cyprus, at 74.2%, followed by Poland, at 67.3% (the country where I come from), and Lithuania, at 66.1%.

These figures clearly show that women across the European Union are well prepared to take on a variety of leadership and decision-making roles. However, this is not always reflected in their leadership roles in politics, important organisations and other activities closely related to leadership.

### **Why Women's Participation Matters**

Women bring a variety of life experiences to politics and leadership. This does not mean that all women or all men think the same way, nor that there is a universal way in which women or men think. It means that decision-making improves when people with diverse backgrounds are present. Issues such as education, healthcare, social protection, family policy, digital access, and workplace equality are shaped differently when women have a voice.

There is also a strong economic argument. According to global studies by the World Bank and OECD, increasing women's participation in the workforce and leadership increases productivity and long-term growth. Economies that exclude women do not fully use their human capital. In the EU India corridor, where innovation, technology, and skilled labour are central, ignoring women's potential would be a strategic mistake.

Another reason is democratic legitimacy. When political institutions do not reflect the population, public trust declines. Women are more likely to engage in politics and civic life when they see themselves represented. This strengthens democracy on both sides.

Many women have had the worrying experience of not being heard when they speak, so they need to speak louder. They need to be listened to carefully and with care, especially in decision-making rooms which are mostly filled by men. Indira Gandhi's words from decades ago seem to echo today: "It's true that women sometimes go too far, but it's only when you go too far that others listen".

### **Indicators That Exist and What Is Missing**

Currently, most indicators focus on the number of women in parliament or government. While these numbers are important, they are not enough. However, they are not enough. Further research is needed, both quantitative and qualitative, into women's leadership in civil society institutions, including NGOs, and into the difficulties they face. Information on women in leadership roles across sectors is also limited.

At the Boym Institute, we decided to pay attention to the number of women in leadership roles on the management board and in the council, which is the entity that selects the board. Depending on the legal system, it remains crucial to bring women into councils or other bodies that select the management board. The second issue we are trying to address is the visibility of women as media speakers and active participants in debates.

To this end, we began calculating metrics on the number of women versus men who write, and encouraged our female participants, who often do a lot of administrative work behind the scenes, to step out of their comfort zones and not be afraid of criticism. It was often the case that if there was a mix of men and women with similar skill sets, women would find it easier to exclude themselves or resign. This was partly due to the competitive and emotional pressure they were under. These are the reasons why managing everything with legal rules is virtually impossible. We need an innovative approach and an inner change to encourage and enhance the participation of more women and ensure they are paid accordingly for their knowledge.

Another important metric is funding allocation. Measuring how much public and international funding goes to women-led organisations versus

men-led ones would highlight inequalities. Even collecting this data can change behaviour, as institutions become more aware of hidden imbalances. This does not mean that we need to create a new law; rather, it is about enhancing and supporting the tracking of these metrics. For example, we could look at the distribution of project-allocated funds to men and women, and examine who decides on the budget and who the largest beneficiary is.

At the micro-think tank level, we decided to trace, purely for recording purposes, the earnings that can be attributed to men and women from the small projects that we deliver for the media and institutions. This helped us to identify where to focus our efforts to deliver change.

### **The Value of Gender Based Metrics**

A final idea worth exploring is the systematic use of gender based metrics in funding and cooperation. Simply tracking how resources are distributed between men and women can lead to deeper reflection. It can reveal patterns that are otherwise invisible and support thinkers to find solutions on how institutions can correct them. Metrics alone do not solve inequality, but they create transparency. Transparency creates accountability. Over time, this can shift priorities and lead to more balanced outcomes.

### **Needs and Goals of EU-India Cooperation**

Women must be present at decision-making meetings. This includes boards, governing bodies, advisory councils, councils that select boards, and senior management teams. Representation matters because leaders often select individuals similar to themselves. Without women at the top, they are less likely to be selected for leadership roles.

Cooperation between the EU and India regarding women's participation should focus on long-term structural change. A key requirement is to support women with higher education qualifications, particularly in social sciences, governance, science, engineering, and digital fields. These sectors will shape future growth and geopolitical strength. However, it is equally important to understand the narratives we perpetuate and how they are created.

*This is precisely why culture and philosophical thought are so important: they create the atmosphere in which social change can take place. We want women to be bold and think boldly.*

EU-India cooperation could promote targets or guidelines for women's representation on boards and in organisations that receive public funding or enter into public-private partnerships. This would not be about lowering standards, but about widening the talent pool. New initiatives could include joint EU-India funds for women-led research, exchange programmes for women leaders, and shared reporting standards on gender outcomes.

An important area is employment support. Women often leave the workforce due to family responsibilities and then struggle to return. Joint EU-India programmes could support re-skilling, flexible working models and incentives for employers to hire returning women. Alternatively, we could offer smaller-scale projects in which multiple women could be employed on a part-time basis, i.e. working 20 hours per week. This would be particularly beneficial for those with significant household obligations.

Technology deserves special attention. Women remain underrepresented in digital industries, start-ups and artificial intelligence research. Supporting women in tech is not only about equality, but also about competitiveness.

Funding is another key area. While there are already many programmes supporting women, families, education and children, these often benefit women indirectly. However, more direct funding is needed for women's initiatives, i.e. those governed and funded by women. This could include support for women entrepreneurs, leadership training and community-based education projects.

### **Practical dimensions**

Inclusive public debates should not be seen as just a slogan, but as an effective way of working. Through my work with Ada Dyndo and the team at the Boym Institute, I had the pleasure of being directly involved in preparing practical guidance for organisations wishing to hold more inclusive debates. In practice, this means that panels are built with the participation of women. However, we also acknowledge that diversity should not be limited to gender, but should also encompass inviting representatives from various geographical regions and other groups.

This guide is intended for leaders, debate organisers and moderators because inclusion largely depends on those who design it. Our experience shows that when organisers plan for diversity from the outset, debates become more balanced, informative and relevant to real-life political and

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This guide is intended for leaders, debate organisers and moderators because inclusion largely depends on those who design it. Our experience shows that when organisers plan for diversity from the outset, debates become more balanced, informative and relevant to real-life political and

social issues. The focus should be on genuine participation rather than mere symbolic presence. Simply inviting one woman to a panel is not enough, as this often places her in an uncomfortable position.

I have observed that discussions improve when women are invited in greater numbers and clearly recognised for their expertise, including in areas such as foreign policy, security, economics, and technology. When women are treated as equal experts and given comparable speaking time, the quality of analysis increases and discussions reflect a wider range of perspectives.

Another important part of our approach is attention to language, moderation, and debate culture. Inclusive language, respectful moderation, and clear rules of discussion create safer and more open spaces for participation. Women are more likely to speak and share their views when interruptions, dismissive comments, or patronising behaviour are addressed. This is not about limiting debate but about making sure that knowledge and arguments, rather than power dynamics, shape the conversation.

Finally, I see visibility and practical support as essential for long-term change. Promoting women experts in media coverage, creating networking opportunities, and ensuring fair compensation for participation all strengthen women's presence in public debate over time.

Work done as part of the WICCI's India–EU Business Council shows that inclusive debate practices can also support broader international cooperation and leadership development. In my view, this way of working leads to better-balanced discussions and helps build stronger, more credible policy conversations between the EU and India.

Link to the material: [Women in Public Debate – A Guide to Organising Inclusive and Meaningful Discussions](#)

## **Conclusion**

Women's participation is not a side issue. It is central to democracy, economic growth, and social stability. Both the European Union and India face challenges as well as opportunities in this area. By sharing effective practices and proven experiences, improving measurable indicators, supporting education and employment, and ensuring women's presence

in leadership roles, the EU-India corridor can become stronger and more future-oriented.

One of the main challenges is bringing more men on board to actively work against entrenched biases. For some, this also reflects a deeper fear of losing power and influence in societies that have for centuries been dominated by male authority. Yet today's political and social challenges require more collaborative environments shaped by contributions from all sides and informed by multiple perspectives.

Women's participation is not a side issue. It is central to democracy, economic growth, and social stability. Both the European Union and India face challenges as well as opportunities in this area. By sharing effective practices and proven experiences, improving measurable indicators, supporting education and employment, and ensuring women's presence in leadership roles, the EU India corridor can become stronger and more future-oriented.

One of the main challenges is bringing more men on board to actively work against entrenched biases. For some, this also reflects a deeper fear of losing power and influence in societies that have for centuries been dominated by male authority. Yet today's political and social challenges require more collaborative environments shaped by contributions from all sides and informed by multiple perspectives.

As an exercise in imagination: Simply imagine figures such as Donald Trump working under female leaders to see how resistant certain leadership cultures remain. Is this plausible?

Addressing this reality requires politics that are less ego-driven and more collaborative, and societies that are less exclusionary and more inclusive. It also requires social systems that genuinely empower women, as well as the emergence of leaders like Indira Gandhi, who can inspire us women from Europe, and fewer forms of privately controlled, warrior-style political decision-making. For democratic systems to function effectively, strong women leaders must work alongside collaborative and self-critical men who are committed to sustaining an open and liberal political order.

# BRIDGING BORDERS, EMPOWERING WOMEN: HOW GENDER EQUALITY DRIVES INDIA–EU INNOVATION

**PRITI VERMA, PRESIDENT OF RESEARCHNCONSULTING**

In 2023, the World Bank estimated that closing gender gaps in economic participation could boost global GDP by more than \$5 trillion every year. It is a headline-grabbing statistic, but more importantly, it reflects a deeper truth: the world's innovation systems are still running on only half their potential.

Nowhere is this gap more apparent, or more consequential, than in the rapidly evolving partnership between India and the European Union, two global hubs of science, technology, sustainability, and trade. From semiconductor supply chains to renewable energy transitions, from AI governance to digital public infrastructure, the India–EU corridor has become one of the most strategically important innovation pathways of the 21st century.

The establishment of the India–EU Trade and Technology Council (TTC) in 2022 signalled a major turning point. It positioned India as one of the EU's top-tier partners, alongside the United States and Japan, for shaping future technologies and resilient trade systems. The TTC's agenda is ambitious: AI ethics, cyber security, clean energy deployment, circular economies, high-performance computing, digital standards, and sustainable supply chains. Yet behind these structures and strategies lies a powerful, often *underappreciated force: gender equality*.

*Women contribute meaningfully to innovation across India and Europe, but their participation remains undervalued and underrepresented. This underrepresentation is not just a matter of fairness; it is a barrier to economic growth, creativity, and diplomatic progress. Women's human capital needs to be utilised to achieve economic actualisation.*

To comprehensively examine women's participation in EU–India relations, a foundational understanding of the historical evolution of India's diplomatic ties with the European Union is essential.

## 1. Overview of India–EU Innovation

### A Rapidly Expanding Partnership

India and the EU established diplomatic relations in 1962, with India among the first nations to engage the European Economic Community (EEC), laying the groundwork for deeper ties. The joint political statement signed in 1993, along with the cooperation agreement signed in 1994, further strengthened the bilateral relations.

India and the European Union share decades of diplomatic and economic cooperation, but the last five years have seen an accelerated pivot toward strategic and technological collaboration.

### **Trade and Technology Council (TTC)**

India and the EU launched the Trade and Technology Council (TTC) in 2022 as a high-level platform to address challenges at the intersection of trade, trusted technology, and security, marking an acceleration in strategic collaboration over the past five years.

#### **TTC Structure**

The TTC operates through three working groups, co-chaired by Indian ministers and officials alongside EU counterparts.

- Green and Clean Technologies
- Renewable energy, green hydrogen, circular economy, critical raw materials, clean mobility, and battery innovation.
- Digital Governance and Connectivity
- AI ethics, platform governance, secure digital infrastructure, 5G/6G cooperation, quantum technologies, and digital standards.
- Trade, Investment, and Supply Chain Resilience
- Standardisation, regulatory alignment, semiconductor collaboration, and sustainable trade flows.

Complementing the TTC is a suite of major programs. India is one of the top non-EU partners in Horizon Europe, with participation in 88 research and innovation projects across fields such as climate science, biomedicine, smart manufacturing, and materials research. The Indo-EU Science & Technology Agreement, Mission Innovation, Erasmus+ research mobility, and the EU's Global Gateway Strategy further bolster these ties.

A striking data point often overlooked:

India ranks as the top non-EU country receiving Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions research grants – a testament to the strength of Indian researchers in Europe’s innovation ecosystem.

Yet within this achievement lies a paradox: women remain significantly underrepresented among the grant recipients, mirroring broader global patterns.

### **Shared Commitment to Sustainability and Innovation**

Both India and the European Union prioritize sustainability and innovation as core pillars of their economic strategies, aligning with global goals like the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement.

Europe brings deep regulatory experience, strong R&D infrastructure, and a robust clean-tech industry. India brings scale, frugal innovation capabilities, digital public infrastructure models (such as UPI and Aadhaar), a booming startup ecosystem, and one of the world’s youngest and largest talent pools.

Together, the partnership offers a unique opportunity to build an innovation model that is global, inclusive, and sustainable.

But inclusivity must go beyond aspiration, especially in terms of gender.

### **Gender Imbalance in Innovation: EU and India**

In my experience of working with European firms entering India, and from that vantage point, both India and the EU are still wrestling with stubborn gender imbalances in our innovation ecosystems—from STEM fields and research outputs to patents and top leadership spots. These gaps do not just hit equity hard; they starve us of the diverse viewpoints we need for real breakthroughs, cap our economic upside, and slow our push toward sustainable development goals that I have seen in biotech and clean energy projects.

## Contrasting Realities: EU vs. India



### Education Pipeline

**EU:** 33-35% women STEM graduates, with concerning declines in ICT fields

**India:** 40-43% enrolment —world-leading participation at university level



### Workforce Integration

**EU:** 26-35% in core STEM roles; 52% in broader science/tech employment

**India:** 14-29% in STEM jobs —severe dropout after education due to cultural pressures



### Innovation Leadership

**EU:** Only 9-14% of inventors in patents are women, especially low in engineering

**India:** Aligns with 17% global average but faces commercialization barriers



### Academic Leadership

**EU:** 26% representation —"leaky pipeline" widens at senior levels

**India:** Severe underrepresentation intensifying with each career stage

## Challenges in the EU

- The European Union continues to grapple with a significant "leaky pipeline" phenomenon in STEM fields. Women often outperform men in early education but experience substantial drop-offs in STEM careers and leadership positions.
- Progress toward gender balance has been described as "not fast enough," with particularly widening gaps in sectors like ICT and engineering.
- In deep tech and startups, there are notable disparities in representation, company valuations, and intellectual property ownership, with women-led teams remaining severely underrepresented.
- Despite robust policies such as Horizon Europe's Gender Equality Plans, structural barriers persist, hindering full inclusion.

## Challenges in India

- India faces a pronounced education-to-workforce dropout issue in STEM. Despite achieving a world-leading enrolment rate of approximately 40-43% for women in STEM higher education, only about 14-29% of STEM jobs are held by women.
- Many women exit the workforce due to factors such as marriage, motherhood, and institutional biases. Overall, women's labour force participation remains stagnant at around 45%, contributing to India's

low global ranking of 131st in the Global Gender Gap Report 2025.

- In patents and startups, commercialization rates are low, and women-led ventures encounter significant funding gaps alongside cultural hurdles.
- Broader challenges, including patriarchal norms, precarious employment conditions, and insufficient support systems, further exacerbate attrition rates.

## **B. Why Gender Equality Matters for Innovation**

### **1. Economic logic, not just moral logic**

Gender equality is often framed as a “social requirement.” But to understand its real value, one must look at the economic actualisation.

Research from McKinsey shows that achieving gender parity could add \$12 trillion to the global economy by 2030. IMF studies demonstrate that when women participate in technical and leadership roles, productivity rises, corruption decreases, and economic resilience strengthens.

Innovation, especially in fields like digital governance, climate science, and AI, thrives on cognitive diversity; the blending of different perspectives, lived experiences, and ways of thinking.

Underrepresenting women means not only limiting fairness, but limiting innovation itself.

### **2. Diverse Teams Innovate Better**

Research consistently shows that diverse teams are innovation powerhouses.

- Teams with industry and gender diversity make better business decisions 87% of the time (Cloverpop)
- Companies with above-average diversity produce 19% higher innovation revenues (BCG)
- Diverse companies are 70% more likely to capture new markets (Harvard Business Review)
- Organizations with diverse leadership teams report innovation revenue 45% of total revenue vs. 26% for less diverse companies (BCG)
- Inclusive teams make better business decisions up to 87% of the time (Forbes).

### **3. Women-led Businesses Prioritize Sustainability and Ethics**

Women entrepreneurs I have worked with always put mission over pure profit, leading 18% of India's sustainability startups with social impact baked in, and holding 63% of EU executive sustainability roles to drive ethical, long-term wins.

They champion green practices like renewables (52% in India), circular economy innovations, community investments, inclusive workplaces that slash turnover, and human-centric tech design. This lines up perfectly with India-EU TTC goals on clean energy, digital rights, and equitable growth—it's what excites me most about their potential.

Women-led innovation is not niche—it is the future.

#### **C. Women's Contributions: Bridging the India-EU Innovation Ecosystem**

While many challenges remain, women innovators across India and Europe continue to push boundaries, shape policy, and forge connections. These are some of the inspiring stories illustrating the richness of their contributions:

##### **Ursula Von der Leyen - President of the European Commission**

Ursula von der Leyen has served as President of the European Commission since 2019 and has played a pivotal role in strengthening the EU's relationship with India. As the first woman to hold this position, she embodies gender equality and serves as an inspiring role model for women worldwide.

Before her leadership, EU-India engagement largely revolved around traditional political dialogue and protracted trade negotiations. While women's equality was occasionally addressed, it remained superficial and peripheral rather than a core element of the partnership.

Under von der Leyen's stewardship, the relationship has evolved dynamically, with a sharper focus on technology, trade, and broader cooperation. A landmark achievement in this regard has been the establishment of the EU-India Trade and Technology Council, which has elevated bilateral collaboration to a strategic level.

## **Helena Konig - Deputy Secretary General, EEAS**

Helena is one of the most influential figures in EU-India diplomatic relations. As a senior leader in the European External Action Service (EEAS) and a former top official in the European Commission's Directorate-General for Trade, she has played a pivotal role in shaping the partnership.

Through her positions, she has directly contributed to key negotiations and policies that define the EU-India relationship today. Helena has also been a strong advocate for just and fair trade practices that align with the shared values outlined in EU-India agreements.

## **Dr. Tessy Thomas - India's "Missile Woman"**

Dr. Tessy Thomas, one of India's most admired scientists, has broken barriers in missile engineering – a field long dominated by men. Known as the "Missile Woman of India" or "Agni Putri," she served as the former Project Director for the Agni-IV missile and former Director General of Aeronautical Systems at the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), where she oversaw major technological breakthroughs in strategic systems. Her leadership in international scientific dialogues, including potential engagements with global aerospace communities, underscores how women can play central roles in cross-border technological diplomacy and collaboration.

These women symbolize what is possible when gender-inclusive ecosystems empower innovators. Their achievements send a clear message: women don't just participate in innovation; they elevate it.

## **India-EU Platforms that Support Women Innovators**

Across India and the European Union, vibrant and powerful ecosystems are emerging to empower women in science, business, governance, and technology. From dedicated accelerators and mentorship networks to policy-driven funding mechanisms and cross-border collaborations, these initiatives demonstrate that gender-inclusive innovation is no longer merely aspirational—it is tangible, rapidly expanding, and primed for large-scale impact.

Several women-led or women-focused organizations are actively strengthening the India-EU innovation corridor:

<b>Platform</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Focus Areas</b>	<b>Impact/Highlights</b>
<b>WeEmpowerAsia (UN Women-EU Partnership)</b>	EU-funded program promoting women entrepreneurship in Asia, including India, through accelerators and disruptors for inclusive ecosystems.	Skill development, market access, sustainability collaboration	Supported women entrepreneurs during crises; extended to Europe-India linkages in fashion/textiles; builds collaborative communities for innovation.
<b>Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP, NITI Aayog)</b>	India's unified portal for women entrepreneurs; partners with international entities (including EU-supported UN Women programs).	Mentorship, funding, networking, capacity-building	Hosts workshops impacting thousands; integrates global best practices for digital/clean energy skills; aligns with EU gender equality goals.
<b>WEgate (EU Platform)</b>	Platform for European women entrepreneurs; facilitates international connections, including potential India-EU exchanges.	Training, mentoring, business networking	Supports growth and idea exchange; promotes worldwide partnerships for sustainable businesses.
<b>EIT Women Entrepreneurship &amp; Leadership (EU)</b>	EIT Community programs like Girls Go Circular and Empowering Women in Agrifood (EWA); open to global synergies.	Digital skills, agrifood innovation, leadership	Empowers women in STEM/circular economy; potential for India-EU knowledge exchange in sustainable sectors.
<b>EmpoWomen (Horizon Europe)</b>	EU-funded acceleration for women-led deep-tech startups; focuses on emerging Europe but promotes inclusive innovation.	Funding (€45,000 equity-free), mentoring	Supports underrepresented women in tech; aligns with India-EU clean energy/digital partnerships.

By supporting women's leadership and involvement, these programs are bringing in fresh ideas from different viewpoints. This helps spark creativity, build stronger systems, and create lasting progress. They clearly show what women can achieve, whether at a local or global level, through government policies, business startups, or ideas that truly change the world.

## **D. Way Forward: Building a Gender-Equal India-EU Innovation Corridor**

I really believe that we can build a truly inclusive India-EU innovation ecosystem by moving beyond just spotting gender gaps to creating real, hands-on strategies together. As someone who's worked closely with international companies entering India, I believe we should tap into India's incredible strengths, such as our high female enrolment in STEM and the entrepreneurial fire of women-led startups, while pairing it with the EU's solid policy frameworks and funding power. This isn't just talk; it could spark a resilient "innovation corridor" that speeds up breakthroughs in clean energy, digital transformation, and sustainable development. And the payoff? Trillions in global economic gains that benefit us all.

The path forward requires intentional and collaborative action. I feel that a few key strategies, if we adopt them, we can reshape the India-EU gender-inclusion landscape.

### **1. Dedicated Indo-EU Accelerators for Women-Led Businesses**

Establish bilateral funding mechanisms for women-led innovation, drawing inspiration from successful models such as the EU's Women TechEU initiative and India's Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP), a comprehensive ecosystem offering incubation, mentorship, skill development, and market linkages.

Such joint mechanisms could deliver non-dilutive grants, customized training programs, and enhanced market access opportunities, incorporating mandatory gender-inclusive targets.

This approach would directly tackle persistent funding disparities—where women-led ventures often secure very small portion of total venture capital in many ecosystems—and facilitate cross-border scaling, thereby fostering a more equitable and dynamic innovation corridor between India and the EU.

These accelerators and platforms would:

- Provide cross-border seed funding
- Offer access to EU and Indian markets
- Support women founders in deep-tech, clean-tech, AI, and digital health
- Pair startups with European and Indian industry mentors
- Increase investor visibility

## 2. Cross-border Mentorship and Leadership Networks

Build on initiatives such as the EU's WEgate and India's WEP by creating a dedicated India-EU digital platform for virtual mentorship pairings, investor connections, and knowledge exchange. Incorporate gender mainstreaming mandates in all bilateral agreements, requiring projects under the Clean Energy Partnership to include women-led teams or gender-impact assessments.

A formal India-EU Women in Innovation Network could:

- Pair early-stage founders with global experts
- Offer digital mentorship platforms
- Host annual India-EU Women in Innovation Summits
- Facilitate research exchanges, internships, and leadership boot camps
- Strengthen business partnerships and peer networks

Mentorship must extend beyond technical advice to include negotiation skills, growth strategies, and cross-border scaling.

## 3. Gender-Transformative Policy Alignment

There is a need to promote policy advocacy and data-driven monitoring in bilateral forums. Think tanks and councils should be encouraged to push for gender-inclusive trade policies. Implement joint monitoring frameworks with shared KPIs on women's participation in innovation (e.g., patents, startups), supported by annual India-EU gender summits. This ensures accountability and aligns with global goals like the SDGs.

India and the EU could jointly commit to:

- Gender-balanced evaluation committees in research and grant programs
- Incentives for gender-diverse R&D teams
- Joint scholarships for women in AI, cybersecurity, climate science, and semiconductor research
- Inclusion of a gender chapter in the future India-EU Free Trade Agreement
- Stronger digital safety, workplace safety, and flexible work standards

Such policies would embed gender equality into the DNA of bilateral cooperation—not as an add-on, but as a core principle.

## 4. Digital Literacy and Rural Inclusion Initiatives

For women in rural and marginalized communities, digital literacy is a lifeline to global markets. Joint India–EU programs can:

- Expand access to digital skills
- Support e-commerce for women-led micro-enterprises
- Promote financial literacy
- Create cross-border e-learning exchanges
- Build digital safety awareness

This ensures the next wave of innovation is not confined to cities but grows through inclusive participation.

### **5. Gender Representation in Joint Research and Innovation Programs**

India and the EU can strengthen gender representation in joint research and innovation programs by explicitly integrating gender equality provisions into bilateral STI agreements, promoting balanced participation in decision-making bodies and project teams through initiatives like the outcomes of the GENDER STI project, and enhancing researcher mobility with a focus on women via co-funded mechanisms such as Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions.

Both regions should track and improve:

- Representation of women principal investigators
- Gender balance in joint research teams
- Inclusion of gender-sensitive research methodologies
- Access to fellowships, mobility grants, and Horizon Europe opportunities for women

This approach ensures innovation is both excellent and equitable.

#### **e. Women in EU–India – A Vision for Shared Prosperity**

India and the European Union are building one of the most important strategic innovation partnerships of the century. Their ambitions are bold, their capabilities complementary, and their progress promising. But the true potential of this collaboration will only be realized when women scientists, entrepreneurs, policymakers, technologists, educators, and community leaders stand at the centre of the story.

Gender equality is not a parallel agenda; it is the power source that can elevate innovation, accelerate sustainability, and deepen economic opportunity across continents.

As EU Ambassador to India, Hervé Delphin put it, “Empowering one woman

uplifts an entire family, community, and society.”

From green-tech to AI, from rural digital inclusion to high-end research labs, women are already playing a pivotal role in shaping the India–EU innovation bridge. What they need now is recognition, resources, and an ecosystem that sees them not as the exception—but as essential architects of a shared future.

Returning to the heart of this article, “Bridging Borders, Empowering Women”, the message becomes undeniable:

A gender-equal India–EU innovation ecosystem is not only aspirational; it is indispensable. In other words, bridging borders must go hand-in-hand with empowering women, because sustainable innovation is inherently gender-inclusive innovation.

To borrow the words of UN Women’s Executive Director Sima Bahous: “When women lead, the world rises.”

If India and the EU rise together—with women at the forefront—the future of innovation will not only be prosperous and sustainable, but also profoundly human.

## **BRIDGING CONTINENTS, CELEBRATING BECOMING. REFLECTIONS AS A WOMAN IN THE EU-INDIA CORRIDOR**

### **NEETUBALA RAINA, DIRECTOR, HEAD OF TALENT MANAGEMENT (AMERICAN MNC) AND LEADERSHIP COACH**

My powerful mantra that guides me throughout is, “Moderate everything but the possibilities of Life”. Well! These possibilities can come in the form of people, forums, opportunities, events, councils and so on. Yes! So, it is heartening to share my experience as a member of the WICCI’s India-EU Council, reflecting on the power of cross border nurturing, international collaboration, inclusive leadership, and the importance of platforms that help individuals and organizations unlock their full potential.

In today’s interconnected and dynamic world, partnerships between nations are not just beneficial, they are transformative for the experiential learning and insights they provide from a cultural standpoint as well. The WICCI’s India-EU Council exemplifies this spirit, serving as a platform for purposeful dialogue across trade, climate action, digital transformation, education, and human rights.

India and the European Union share a rich legacy of cooperation, rooted in democratic values and a shared commitment to sustainable development. The Council builds on this foundation, enabling stakeholders to co-create solutions to global challenges.

As a coach, I strongly believe in and value platforms that uplift others, helping people unleash their potential and gain clarity to move forward with clarity and courage thereby. This belief has shaped my contributions to the WICCI’s India-EU Council, where my focus has been on nurturing and mentoring young women for a holistic development. Additionally, engaging with council members from different parts of Europe has reinforced the importance of empathy, agility, and shared purpose in international leadership. These interactions have not only broadened my strategic lens but also deepened my commitment to fostering inclusive, values-driven ecosystems.

The Council’s initiatives are designed to be actionable and inclusive. Mentoring Program is the most cherished initiative that I look forward to every year and in fact is the high impact investment to make a difference in the lives of our young women talent across India and Europe. However,

learning is a two-way street, and I am myself amazed to interact and learn from these young women who are courageous and determined to hit the next goal while experimenting with various current possibilities, with diligence and sincerity! While mentoring programs have become an integral part of organizational culture, serving as a powerful tool to foster learning and tap into internal expertise, here are the key takeaways from the WICCI mentoring program that I encourage everyone to reflect on:

- A well-designed process is valuable, so long as it doesn't attempt to design people to fit into it. Thus, by offering mentees a range of options, you empower them with flexibility to choose what resonates most with their individual needs. This not only enhances their engagement but also strengthens trust in the mentoring process and the overall journey.
- Mentoring circles foster collaboration by bringing together diverse perspectives, which can accelerate key learnings and deepen understanding. Beyond one-on-one mentor-mentee engagements, collective sessions that bring everyone together to share reflections significantly amplify the learning process, thanks to the richness of diverse ideas and perspectives. Awareness of cross-cultural values, styles, and beliefs broadens your worldview, challenging the lens shaped by personal experiences and national dynamics and fostering humility and deeper understanding.
- Generational diversity broadens perspectives and nurtures compassion across age groups. When mentees openly share their vulnerabilities as young professionals navigating today's competitive landscape, and mentors reciprocate by sharing their own past struggles, as well as current challenges faced as seasoned corporate leaders, it creates a powerful space for mutual growth. The journey of learning and evolving never truly ends; only the nature of challenges and milestones shifts as we grow stronger and more experienced, learning to navigate the speedbumps along the way.
- Finally, connections are what make the universe beautiful—yet they also invite a profound emptiness that allows us to reflect deeply. As each mentoring journey comes to a close, there's a quiet realization of how liberating it is to pass on your life's lessons to the younger generation. In sharing your experiences, you offer confidence, courage, clarity, and affection—creating meaningful dialogue that transcends roles. And in doing so, you often build lifelong relationships, rooted in the value you bring to each other's lives.

Hence, I believe, “Mentoring is tailored track to trace the tuned trails to tread on!”

One of the Council’s strengths lies in its diversity, not just in geography, but in thought! Engaging with the council has enriched my understanding of the nuances of multicultural environments. Cross-cultural collaboration also fuels creativity and resilience. As the Council continues to evolve, there is immense potential to deepen collaboration in areas such as digital innovation and youth engagement. The future of India-EU relations lies in co-creating frameworks that are agile, inclusive, and future-ready. Being part of this journey has been both professionally enriching and personally fulfilling. This experience has reaffirmed my belief in the transformative power of cross-border partnerships and the vital role of inclusive leadership in shaping a better world, one that celebrates the uniqueness everyone brings! It’s through embracing the differences that we strengthen and enrich the global community we thrive in today.

Well! Platforms like these offer immense value by bringing together individuals from different nations, enabling shared journeys of growth and transformation. They deepen our presence within ourselves, creating a sense of fulfilment that resonates at a soul level, where connection, learning and becoming are beautifully interconnected. Today’s world needs Healders (healing leaders) and through a robust mentoring program, we can cultivate a community of Healders who master the art of healing, not out of necessity or wounds or because we are broken, but as a conscious choice to navigate the challenges and pressures of the ecosystem we inhabit, especially amid AI revolution, rapid digitalization, and the complexities of an unprecedented global landscape. I believe forums like WICCI help us preserve our uniqueness by embracing and sharing our imperfections while celebrating each other’s strengths.

# **PART II**

## **EMERGING VOICES WOMEN SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE EU- INDIA CORRIDOR**

# **BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: WOMEN SHAPING MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY IN THE EU-INDIA CORRIDOR**

**SANDRA THACHIRICKAL PRATHAP, RESEARCH ASSISTANT,  
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## **1. Introduction: Rethinking Diplomacy as Translation**

To stand in the EU–India corridor is not merely a geographic experience; it is an epistemic one, a vantage point for observing how different worldviews shape global governance. The EU–India corridor, rooted in shared commitments to democracy, human rights, and a rules-based order, has evolved far beyond trade. It is increasingly becoming a space for multilateral innovation and inclusive governance. Yet, despite this elevated rhetoric, women’s leadership across the corridor remains limited.

It is precisely in the persistent gap between presence and power that women are carving out new forms of leadership. Moving between Europe and India has shown me that diplomacy is not only about negotiation, but it is also about translation. Working across contexts requires the ability to re-interpret ideas, values, and institutional norms to achieve local relevance.

Women contribute essential tools to this process: a strategic focus on relational thinking, inclusive framing, and the capacity to connect global norms with local realities, competencies often honed by navigating complex, cross-cultural institutions. These are not ‘soft skills’ but fundamental assets. As the EU and India expand cooperation on trade, security, green transitions, digital governance, and global connectivity, such as through the India–EU Strategic Partnership, Global Gateway Initiative and others, the demand for empathetic, cross-cultural leadership will only grow.

Across my experiences in Geneva, Indian think tanks, and multilateral forums for regional and international cooperation mechanisms, one conclusion has become clear: women must not merely be present; they must help lead. Their participation is not simply a matter of justice; it is a strategic imperative.

## **2. Navigating the Two Worlds**

## Persistent Structural Barriers

Despite decades of commitments to gender equality, structural inequalities continue to shape women's participation in diplomacy. The United Nations (UN) acknowledges that diplomatic institutions remain hierarchically organized and gender-segmented, with women often channelled into soft diplomacy portfolios, development, social policy, or gender, rather than strategic or security roles.

The numbers illustrate this imbalance. GWL Voices reports that only 13% of elected leaders in major international organizations since 1945 have been women and 35% of the world's most influential multilateral organizations have never been led by a woman. A 2023 UNDP–UN Women brief similarly shows that women constitute 46.8% of UN personnel, and hold 47% of senior leadership posts at the ASG/USG levels, figures that approach parity on paper but reveal stagnation in actual leadership pipelines.

Yet, the under-representation of women is not simply a matter of numbers, structural obstacles embedded in diplomatic institutions continuously hinder women's advancement. According to an LSE IDEAS report finds that although women increasingly enter diplomatic services compared to past decades, many remain blocked by institutional "glass ceilings," and struggle to secure senior leadership or ambassadorial positions. Furthermore, the report documents persistent "glass walls", women continue to be disproportionately channeled into "soft" portfolios such as development, social policy or gender issues, while "hard" domains like security, trade or conflict diplomacy remain overwhelmingly male-dominated.

## Emerging Breakthroughs

While gender gaps remain significant, meaningful change is underway. Diplomats and women leaders are now increasingly present at major multilateral forums and international negotiations, contributing to policy formation, peace and security debates, and long-term global governance. Through their participation, women are helping to reorient diplomatic priorities toward social justice, equity, and inclusive representation, expanding the scope of diplomacy beyond narrow state interests. This shift underscores an evolving understanding: diplomacy is not just about representation, but about meaningful influence, and women today are playing that role more visibly than ever before.

My own experiences reflect this emerging landscape. At a high-level youth dialogue on multilateralism at UNOG in Geneva, I witnessed women leading discussions with clarity and conviction. Their interventions drew not on abstract diplomatic language but on lived experience, generational critique, and calls for institutional reform, reflecting a shift toward diplomacy that is more inclusive, grounded, and responsive.

Think tanks and field organizations in India and beyond reinforce this shift. My experience working with IMAGO Global Grassroots on an evaluation project for SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) was particularly formative. Observing women-owned and women-run collective enterprises across the grassroots in India showed me a critical truth: their immense potential was not unlocked by adding new skills, but by removing systemic blockages. Targeted support, strategic capacity building, funding, and institutional backing helped dismantle long-standing socio-cultural and structural constraints. This affirmed that their leadership and adaptive capacity were already inherent; they simply needed the right opportunities to flourish and carve powerful paths to economic and social empowerment. This insight continues to shape how I understand the strategic role of multilateral partnerships.

Similarly, at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), having worked on issues related to important diplomacy and multilateral platforms, I observed a clear pattern: when women were positioned in roles of power and influence, they navigated complex strategic spaces adeptly, often demonstrating a high degree of adaptive thinking. I noticed that teams with a stronger gender balance consistently brought a distinct strategic advantage. In high-stakes areas like economy, trade and security, which are often historically male-dominated, this diverse perspective was instrumental in introducing the necessary adaptive thinking and relational skills to policy discussions. This balance significantly enhanced the overall quality and feasibility of solutions, ensuring the analysis was comprehensive and contextually relevant for all stakeholders.

These transformations expand the contours of diplomatic practice. When women from diverse professional and social backgrounds enter these spaces, they broaden conversations beyond geopolitics to include people-centred governance, social impact, and community-rooted insights. Mentorship and professional networks reinforce this momentum. Initiatives like the WICCI's India-EU Business Corridor create cross-regional platforms for women to build confidence, share experiences, and strengthen professional linkages, helping cultivate a strong pipeline of future women I

leaders within the EU-India strategic ecosystem.

### **Crossing Systems and Adapting Practices**

Working across policy ecosystems in India and Europe made one reality clear: governance models behave differently across contexts because they are shaped by political incentives, economic structures, social dynamics, cultural norms, and historical legacies. This systems-level understanding first took shape during my interdisciplinary Master's at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, where I learned that policy and development challenges cannot be analyzed in isolation; they emerge from interlinked structures that require multi-dimensional approaches.

This insight was later reinforced through my work at the ORF and other institutions. Examining why digital public infrastructure, climate governance, or development cooperation succeed in some settings but falter in others confirmed a consistent lesson: policy models do not travel well without adaptation.

Across diplomacy and development, translation and adapting ideas to local contexts is more effective than transplantation. It requires working across systems, building coalitions, interpreting institutional logics, and tailoring shared goals into context-specific solutions. These are precisely the competencies women consistently bring to multilateral spaces: integrative bargaining, collaborative problem-solving, evidence-based negotiation, and network-building across diverse stakeholders.

Research shows that when women participate meaningfully, agreements are more durable, coalitions broader, and outcomes more equitable, not due to inherent traits, but because women often enter diplomacy through pathways demanding cross-sectoral coordination, contextual sensitivity, and high accountability. Recognizing the strategic value of these system-bridging and coalition-building skills is essential for designing governance models that are adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable.

### **Representation, Voice and Agency**

The under-utilization of women's leadership is consequential because it deprives multilateralism of its essential strategic capacity for translation, the ability to adapt and respond to contextual realities.

Research across multilateral negotiations shows that when women

participate meaningfully, processes tend to be more inclusive, more adaptive to contextual realities, and more oriented toward long-term, consensus-driven outcomes. Studies of UN peace negotiations, for instance, demonstrate that peace agreements including women are 35% more likely to last, expand the range of issues considered, build broader coalitions, and emphasize provisions that increase the durability of agreements, qualities central to effective multilateral governance. Their presence shifts negotiations away from rigid models of engagement toward approaches that are integrative, context-sensitive, and grounded in practical problem-solving, precisely the kind of adaptive thinking multilateral institutions increasingly require as global issues become more interconnected.

Across my engagements, whether analyzing India's geoeconomic choices or participating in multilateral dialogues, I observed a consistent truth: actors across regions share similar aspirations for dignity, fairness, and public good. What differs is not the objective, but the pathway, shaped by history, capacity, and institutional context.

This is the perspective I bring to the EU-India corridor: *'Common goals do not require identical institutional models. Effective partnership depends on listening, contextualization, and co-creation, designing frameworks that reflect the societies they aim to serve.'* For multilateralism to remain legitimate and future-ready, representation, voice, and agency must be treated not as normative ideals, but as strategic imperatives enabling systems to adapt, respond, and endure.

### **3. Between India and Europe: Cross-Contextual Learning**

#### **Diplomatic Cultures: Contrasts & Synergies**

My academic and professional experiences have placed me within two distinct diplomatic ecosystems, India and Europe, each shaped by different historical trajectories, institutional logics, and strategic priorities.

The European diplomatic style operates within a highly formal, rules-based architecture. Negotiations emphasize continuity, institutional memory, and clearly established protocols. This approach reflects the European Union's own identity as a normative power, where foreign policy is driven by the promotion of multilateralism, human rights, and the rule of law across the continent and globally.

redesigning multilateralism is the strategic agenda women bring: ensuring institutions work with people, not merely above them.

### **Why Women's Participation Transforms Institutions?**

Beyond addressing structural barriers, women's participation brings distinct transformative effects. Research shows that women leaders foster greater cooperation, build trust, and enhance the durability of policies. Operating within constraints, they often foreground community needs, identify exclusionary practices, and advocate for long-term human development rather than short-term gains.

Institutional change, however, is not only about representation, but it is also about influence. Even beyond traditional diplomatic settings, emerging evidence highlights structural inequities that shape influence: for instance, women diplomats receive 66.4% fewer retweets on digital platforms, limiting their visibility in online diplomacy, an increasingly important arena. These patterns point to a broader institutional reality: women are not simply missing from multilateral spaces; their voices are systemically constrained within them.

Ensuring that women can fully contribute requires redesigning systems to make visibility, influence, and participation genuinely accessible. Women's strategic capacity to translate between rigid institutional norms and the agile demands of contemporary global issues demonstrates how inclusive participation strengthens both the legitimacy and effectiveness of multilateral governance.

### **Implications for the EU-India Corridor**

An inclusive, strategic approach offers an especially powerful framework for the EU-India partnership, where cooperation depends on aligning shared goals with different political cultures, social histories, and governance philosophies. This approach does not assume that common objectives require identical pathways. Instead, it embraces contextual solutions, the very translation capacity women excel at, an idea that both regions intuitively understand.

For the EU-India corridor, this means:

- **Policy Design:** Integrating gender as a cross-cutting priority in all joint dialogues, from human rights to digital governance, ensuring that women's rights, safety, and socio-economic inclusion inform every stage of policymaking.

- Institutional Mechanisms: Embedding gender balance at leadership and decision-making levels, not only in consultation forums but also in working groups, steering committees, and technical task forces.
- Capacity Building: Creating mentorship channels, fellowships, and cross-regional networks that support emerging women leaders in diplomacy, research, civil society, and technology, ensuring that both regions cultivate the next generation of institutional shapers.
- Narrative Shift: Recognizing that diplomacy is not confined to state actors. Women-led civil society organizations, youth networks, academics, and local governance actors bring forms of expertise and relational knowledge that enhance, not dilute, the quality of EU-India cooperation.

An equitable EU-India partnership therefore, strengthens both representation and results. It grounds institutional collaboration in dignity, fairness, and shared ownership, principles essential to rebuilding trust in multilateralism and ensuring that global governance structures remain relevant to the people they serve.

## **5. Conclusion: Bridging the Divide**

Navigating the India-Europe corridor has shown me that diplomacy is not solely the domain of formal negotiations; it is about people, patience, and plurality. Women, when empowered to lead, do not just sit at the table; they transform it.

The statistics are stark: from underrepresentation in multilateral leadership to gendered invisibility in digital diplomacy, structural barriers persist. The EU-India partnership, now more strategic than ever, must lean into this moment to address this crisis by institutionalizing gender-inclusive multilateralism.

My journey, as a student, researcher, and an emerging policy practitioner, reveals one thing clearly: the future of diplomacy will be built not by those who follow old scripts, but by those who bridge worlds. This requires leveraging the strategically developed capacity for translation, the ability women demonstrate to connect global norms with local realities, and formal processes with contextual needs.

For the EU and India to truly embody multilateral leadership rooted in sustainability and equity, women must be seen not only as participants but



as architects of change. This calls for nurturing institutions, networks, and mindsets that lift diverse voices, foster meaningful engagement, and shape diplomacy around collaboration, inclusion, and shared humanity. In short, the bridges we build now will define how we govern tomorrow. And women, especially those who know what it means to belong to more than one world, are the essential engineers of that resilient future.

## **WOMEN SHAPING THE UNSEEN GATEWAY: LEADERSHIP, VOICE, AND IMPACT FROM NORTHEAST INDIA**

**SHRISTI MORE, CLIMATE POLICY ANALYST, UNIVERSITY OF KENT**

In June 2023, I watched something unprecedented: the European Union held its first-ever connectivity conference in Shillong, Meghalaya—right in India's Northeast. The location itself carried symbolic weight. Meghalaya is home to one of the world's few remaining matrilineal societies, where women traditionally hold property rights and leadership roles, and the Khasi and Garo communities have practised women-centred governance for centuries. Yet the conference, held in this bastion of women's leadership, produced a roadmap promising regional inclusion by 2025 that never materialized.

Meanwhile, the EU invested in metro systems—€500 million for Bangalore Metro, €450 million for Lucknow Metro, €289.5 million for Nagpur and Pune. The amount invested in Northeast India infrastructure? Zero euros. While Japan poured billions into Northeast infrastructure and the World Bank funded our border trade, Brussels continued its familiar pattern: talking about India's strategic gateway to Southeast Asia while investing everywhere except that gateway. More tellingly, while the EU-India partnership rhetoric increasingly emphasizes women's economic empowerment and leadership, the voices actually shaping these frameworks remain overwhelmingly male and metro-based.

This dual invisibility—geographical and gendered—isn't coincidental. It reflects how narratives shape partnerships, how visibility determines resource allocation, and how women leaders from regions like Northeast India face compounded marginalization. When regional women's perspectives are absent from the rooms where decisions are made, we get conferences without follow-through, promises without partnerships, and strategies that ignore both the geography and the gender dynamics they claim to prioritize.

This realization drives my work on Janashruti (जनश्रुति)—a climate and knowledge advocacy initiative whose name means "knowledge carried through people, orally, across generations." The project, which earned the Paris Committee on Capacity Building recognition and an invitation to present at COP30 in Brazil, emerged from a conviction: that innovative

solutions come from those living closest to challenges, and that amplifying marginalized voices—particularly women's voices from overlooked regions—isn't charity but a strategic necessity. If the EU-India corridor is to be more than a Delhi-Brussels pipeline dominated by familiar faces, we need fundamental shifts in how we communicate, advocate, and design partnerships.

### **The Strategic Case: Why Women's Leadership in Northeast India Matters**

Northeast India comprises eight states sharing borders with Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh—home to over 46 million people representing 3.76% of India's population yet contributing only 3% of GDP. This isn't a reflection of potential but of systemic neglect. The region is a critical junction where South Asia meets Southeast Asia. Yet when we examine EU-India partnership frameworks, two absences are striking: regional diversity and women's leadership from these regions.

The irony is profound. While EU-India summits produce statements about gender equality and women's economic participation, the women actually leading the transformation in strategically significant regions remain invisible. In Meghalaya, where matrilineal traditions have ensured women's economic agency and decision-making power for generations, women entrepreneurs drive organic agriculture, sustainable tourism, and cultural industries. In Assam, women lead climate resilience initiatives, digital innovation, and cross-border trade. Across the Northeast, women researchers, policymakers, and social innovators are creating models that align perfectly with EU priorities—yet they're rarely invited to articulate these models in EU-India forums.

**Climate Leadership Through Women's Knowledge Systems:** As a climate policy analyst in one of the world's most vulnerable regions, I witness how women bear disproportionate climate impacts while simultaneously holding crucial adaptation knowledge. In rural Northeast communities, women manage natural resources, preserve indigenous agricultural practices, and maintain oral knowledge traditions that have sustained ecological balance through centuries of environmental change.

Janashruti emerged from recognizing that these women's voices—carrying intergenerational wisdom about climate adaptation—are systematically excluded from international climate discourse. The initiative aims to amplify this knowledge, connecting traditional practices to global

frameworks. This approach resonates with larger efforts like PM Modi's Global Traditional Knowledge Repository and the Adani Group's Rs 100 crore Bharat Knowledge Graph initiative, both recognizing that solutions to contemporary challenges often reside in traditional wisdom—wisdom predominantly preserved and transmitted by women.

The UNFCCC's recognition validates what women practitioners in Northeast India have always known: authentic climate leadership emerges from lived experience, not just policy expertise. Yet how many women from climate-vulnerable regions in Northeast India are included in the EU-India climate partnership design?

**Matrilineal Models Meet Partnership Rhetoric:** The contrast between rhetoric and reality becomes stark when we consider Meghalaya's matrilineal traditions. Here, women's economic leadership isn't aspirational policy—it's a centuries-old practice. The Khasi community's system, where women inherit property, where maternal lineages determine kinship, and where the youngest daughters become custodians of family land, has created economic structures fundamentally different from patriarchal norms dominating most business and policy spaces.

When the 2023 Shillong conference convened in this context, it could have explored what the EU-India partnership might learn from governance models that center women's leadership.

Instead, the conversation remained locked in familiar frameworks—connectivity corridors, investment flows, trade facilitation—discussed primarily by men from metros, with women from the host region largely decorative rather than definitional to outcomes.

This represents a profound missed opportunity. If the EU genuinely seeks to promote women's entrepreneurship and leadership in India, why not study and support models that already work? Why invest in creating women-led businesses in metros while ignoring regions where women's economic agency is culturally embedded? The answer lies in whose voices shape partnership narratives.

During my WICCI's India-EU Business Council mentorship under Nidhi Piplani Kapur, Head of Symbiosis Centre for European Studies, I gained invaluable exposure to European institutional cultures and partnership mechanisms. The experience illuminated both possibilities and gaps.

WICCI's deliberate focus on connecting women leaders across the EU-India corridor creates crucial infrastructure for amplification. Yet even within this women-centered platform, I observed how few voices represented India's geographical diversity beyond major metros.

This pattern repeats across every conference, business forum, and policy platform I've engaged with—from the European Guanxi Youth Conference, where I presented on EU-China green cooperation, to the Oxford School of Climate Change program, to the UN SDGs Forum in Bangkok. Accomplished women leaders participate, but they overwhelmingly represent metro locations or have metro institutional affiliations. Women entrepreneurs from Northeast India building sustainable businesses, women researchers studying cross-border dynamics, women policymakers implementing climate adaptation—their expertise exists but remains systematically invisible in spaces where the EU-India partnership is conceptualized.

The invisibility isn't benign. When European businesses seek women-led Indian enterprises to partner with, when EU funding programs target women entrepreneurs, when bilateral initiatives aim to increase women's economic participation, the information, networks, and visibility all concentrate in metros. Women entrepreneurs in Guwahati, Shillong, Imphal, or Aizawl face compounded barriers: not just the structural challenges all women entrepreneurs navigate, but also geographical marginalization that makes their achievements invisible to potential partners.

### **The Communications Problem: How Gender and Geography Intersect**

Strategic communications shape which actors are seen as legitimate stakeholders and where resources flow. In EU-India relations, metro-centric communications create self-reinforcing cycles, but these cycles have distinct gendered dimensions that compound regional marginalization.

In Policy Documentation: Major EU-India partnership agreements increasingly reference gender equality and women's economic empowerment. Yet these commitments rarely specify regional contexts or acknowledge how gender dynamics vary across India's diverse geographies. When documents mention "supporting women entrepreneurs," they implicitly mean urban, English-speaking, tech-sector women in established business ecosystems—not women in Meghalaya preserving organic farming traditions, or women in Assam building climate adaptation enterprises, or women in Manipur developing cultural industries.

This generalized framing renders invisible the specific challenges and opportunities facing women in different regional contexts. A woman entrepreneur in Northeast India doesn't just need capital and skills (the usual policy prescriptions); she needs transportation infrastructure connecting to markets, digital connectivity enabling e-commerce, recognition of traditional knowledge as legitimate business assets, and visibility in networks where partnership opportunities emerge.

In Business Networks and Investment Flows: When European businesses seek to partner with women-led Indian enterprises, they rely on existing networks, accelerator programs, and business associations—overwhelmingly metro-concentrated. The numbers tell a stark story: women own only 20% of enterprises in India and constitute just 14% of entrepreneurs. India ranks 57th out of 65 countries on the Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs. Yet research shows women-led businesses could add \$700 billion to global GDP and create 150–170 million jobs by 2030. This isn't just about equity—it's about economic strategy.

The women entrepreneurs featured in success stories, showcased at conferences, and connected to international opportunities are those already visible in established ecosystems. Consider the asymmetry: A woman entrepreneur in Bangalore building a tech startup can access dozens of accelerators, angel networks, and EU-India business councils. A woman entrepreneur in Shillong building a sustainable tourism enterprise or organic farming cooperative faces dramatically different realities—fewer local support structures, limited awareness of international opportunities, and, when such opportunities arise, often lacking the networks or visibility to access them.

In knowledge production, academic research, think tank analysis, and media coverage about EU-India relations and women's entrepreneurship in India both suffer from metropolarity. Studies about "women entrepreneurs in India" predominantly sample from major cities. Expert panels on EU-India partnership feature women, but almost always those based in or connected to metros. This creates knowledge gaps—we simply lack adequate documentation, analysis, and understanding of women's leadership in regions like Northeast India.

My work with European Guanxi, analyzing China-Europe relations and Net Zero Tracker, evaluating climate pledges, positioned me at policy-geopolitics intersections. Yet my Guwahati location consistently required

explanation—sometimes appreciated as a differentiated perspective, often implicitly questioned as a legitimacy marker. The exhaustion of persistently proving competence based on geography rather than merit represents not just personal frustration but systemic inefficiency affecting countless talented women whose expertise goes unrecognized because they don't fit expected profiles.

### **The WICCI Experience: Possibilities and Limitations**

My WICCI's India-EU Business Council mentorship illustrated both the potential and the remaining gaps in addressing these compounded marginalizations.

WICCI's explicit mission to connect women leaders across the EU-India corridor creates vital infrastructure. The mentorship provided exposure to European business protocols, institutional cultures, and partnership mechanisms rarely accessible to regionally-based professionals.

However, true transformation requires moving beyond individual mentorship to structural change. This means ensuring WICCI's membership, leadership, and programming genuinely reflect India's geographical diversity; creating regional chapters with real decision-making authority and resources; facilitating direct connections between Northeast women entrepreneurs and European counterparts; and deliberately designing programs addressing specific barriers faced by women in non-metro regions.

### **Janashruti and the Power of Women-Centered Advocacy**

Janashruti began as a response to these intersecting invisibilities. Working on climate policy in a region experiencing acute impacts, I recognized that women practitioners held the most grounded, innovative solutions—yet were systematically excluded from international discourse. The initiative aims to amplify the voices of women carrying intergenerational knowledge about environmental stewardship, sustainable resource management, and community resilience.

The name itself—knowledge carried through people, orally, across generations—references transmission methods traditionally managed by women. In Northeast communities, grandmothers teach granddaughters about medicinal plants, seasonal cycles, water management, and

agricultural practices. This oral knowledge tradition, often dismissed as "folk wisdom" rather than legitimate expertise, contains precisely the climate adaptation insights that technical experts now struggle to replicate.

Janashruti's approach validates what larger initiatives like PM Modi's Global Traditional Knowledge Repository and Adani's Bharat Knowledge Graph recognize: traditional knowledge systems, predominantly preserved by women, hold contemporary relevance. The UNFCCC's recognition demonstrates that when women from frontline communities create platforms centering their own knowledge, when strategic advocacy challenges dominant narratives about where expertise resides, institutional validation becomes possible.

But individual initiatives, while valuable, cannot substitute for structural change. The question isn't whether exceptional women from marginalized regions can break through barriers—some inevitably do. The question is why these barriers exist, whom they serve, and how partnerships committed to gender equality and regional inclusion can systematically dismantle them.

### **Building Infrastructure for Women's Voices: Practical Strategies**

**Leveraging Digital Platforms:** Digital spaces offer potential to circumvent traditional gatekeeping. My climate policy work for European platforms demonstrates that quality analysis reaches audiences regardless of originating geography. However, women face specific digital divide challenges—from basic connectivity issues in many Northeast areas to gendered harassment limiting women's online presence.

**Strategic digital presence requires:** consistent content demonstrating expertise; engagement with professional communities where decision-makers participate; and collaborative amplification through platforms like WICCI that multiply individual voices through network effects.

**Network Building Beyond Tokenism:** While mentorship provides valuable exposure, transformation requires peer networks, collaborative projects, and sustained engagement. This means establishing WICCI regional chapters in Northeast India with genuine authority; creating cross-border initiatives specifically connecting Northeast women entrepreneurs with European counterparts; and investing in collaborative knowledge production where regional women document their own contexts rather

than being documented by others.

**Strategic Documentation:** My ongoing work co-authoring a Springer publication chapter with WWF and Indian Maritime Foundation professionals illustrates how strategic documentation establishes regional women's voices as credible contributors to high-stakes policy debates.

Similar thought leadership from Northeast women's perspectives on connectivity, climate models, cultural economy, and innovation ecosystems would create reference materials for policymakers while inserting marginalized voices into mainstream discourse.

**International Platform Access:** My UN SDGs Forum selection demonstrates strategic positioning's potential. However, accessing such platforms requires overcoming compounded barriers—information asymmetry about opportunities, selection processes favouring certain institutional affiliations, and challenges translating participation into sustained engagement.

Addressing these systematically through information sharing, capacity building, and supportive networks can democratize access for women from non-metro regions.

### **A Roadmap Forward: Concrete Recommendations**

**For EU Policymakers:** Develop regionally and gender-differentiated strategies. When climate partnerships mention women's participation, specify which women from which contexts. Include women from Northeast India in the delegation composition by design. Create funding mechanisms specifically supporting women entrepreneurs in non-metro regions through higher coefficients or reserved quotas. Most critically, follow through on commitments—establish clear accountability for roadmaps like Shillong 2023.

**For Business Leaders:** Systematically explore partnerships with women-led enterprises in Northeast India. Recognize that ESG commitments should extend beyond metros to regions where women's economic leadership is culturally embedded. Invest in infrastructure—digital connectivity, logistics, market access—that enables women entrepreneurs to scale.

**For Women Entrepreneurs:** Build a strategic digital presence compensating for geographical distance. Leverage unique positioning—access to traditional knowledge, cross-border dynamics understanding, cultural

insights—as competitive advantages. Document journeys through articles and social media, challenging assumptions while building credibility. Pursue international exposure proactively through conferences, programs, and fellowships.

For WICCI and Similar Platforms: Ensure membership, leadership, and programming genuinely reflect India's geographical diversity with explicit goals and accountability. Create regional support infrastructure—travel grants, networking access, technical assistance—addressing specific barriers faced by regionally-based women. Facilitate direct EU-Northeast connections on specific sectors rather than routing everything through Delhi.

### **Conclusion: From Rhetoric to Reality in Women's Leadership**

The EU-India corridor's full potential extends beyond Brussels and Delhi to connect diverse regions, sectors, and communities—and requires centering women's leadership from all these contexts, not just familiar ones.

My journey—from volunteering on menstrual health in rural Assam to developing Janashruti, from teaching specially-abled students to co-authoring international publications—demonstrates that meaningful global contribution doesn't require abandoning roots. It requires strategic positioning, relentless opportunity pursuit, and conviction that diverse women's perspectives enrich partnerships.

But individual success stories are insufficient. The 2023 Shillong conference, held in Meghalaya, where women's leadership is a cultural tradition rather than aspirational rhetoric, offered a glimpse of different possibilities before defaulting to familiar patterns. That this conference—in a matrilineal society, about a region where women lead transformation across sectors—produced so little tangible change reveals how deeply entrenched metro-centric, male-dominated frameworks remain.

Northeast India's women offer EU-India partnership invaluable assets: climate resilience knowledge from frontline communities, governance models centering women's economic agency, cross-border connectivity expertise, and sustainable development practices proven across generations. The question is whether EU-India partnership can evolve beyond celebrating women's leadership in theory while ignoring it in practice.

Recent national initiatives like PM Modi's Global Traditional Knowledge Repository and Adani's Bharat Knowledge Graph recognize that wisdom doesn't only flow from established power centers. The same principle must guide EU-India relations: women's leadership matters not just in metros but everywhere women are leading transformation.

For my part, I remain committed to using every platform—international forums, research publications, grassroots initiatives like Janashruti—ensuring that Northeast India's women's voices become integral to shaping EU-India relations, not merely included but essential.

The corridor we build today determines not just trade flows but whose knowledge, innovation, and inspiration shape partnership possibilities. Let us ensure it's wide enough to carry all women's voices, strategic enough to leverage all regional strengths, and visionary enough to recognize that true partnership transcends both geography and gender hierarchies. The Shillong roadmap should not remain a broken promise—it should become a blueprint where women's leadership from all of India's regions defines genuinely inclusive cooperation.

# **REFLECTION PAPERS**

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN  
TO BE A WOMEN IN  
THE EU-INDIA  
CORRIDOR**

**WRITTEN BY MENTEES**

## **CO-CREATING THE CORRIDOR: TRADE, EQUITY, AND OPPORTUNITY FOR WOMEN IN EU–INDIA COOPERATION**

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To be a woman in the EU–India corridor is to exist at a vibrant and evolving intersection of global trade, political cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and structural inequity. As a resident of Delhi, India, deeply invested in economics, trade policy, and international collaboration, I view this corridor as far more than a strategic partnership between the European Union and India. It is a mirror reflecting both the challenges and opportunities women encounter in navigating systems shaped by historical disparities and shifting global alliances. More importantly, it is a promising space where gender equity and economic strategy can converge in meaningful, future-oriented ways. The EU–India corridor is not just a geopolitical arrangement; it is a living ecosystem of ideas, policies, and people. Anchored in values such as democracy, sustainability, and the rule of law, it provides a framework in which trade and cooperation extend beyond the transactional. It embraces innovation, climate resilience, digital inclusion, and skills development. For women, particularly those from emerging economies like India, this corridor is rich with possibilities: the possibility to lead businesses, contribute to global value chains, participate in policy dialogues, and shape new forms of governance that reflect diverse voices.

At present, however, many of these opportunities remain aspirational. Gender gaps persist across sectors, in leadership, in representation, in access to finance and technology, and in the recognition of unpaid labour. Much of the trade and investment flowing between India and the EU still fails to account for the unique constraints and contributions of women. Yet, it is precisely within this gap that opportunity resides. Inclusive trade and collaboration must be recognized not only as moral imperatives but also as economic necessities, critical for building long-term resilience, innovation, and sustainable growth. From an economic perspective, the stakes are high.

The EU is India's second-largest trading partner, accounting for goods trade worth €120 billion in 2024 (11.5% of India's total trade), alongside being a major investor. This scale brings enormous potential for employment generation, entrepreneurship, and innovation. But trade agreements and economic partnerships rarely adopt a gender-sensitive lens.

Women's roles, whether as entrepreneurs, workers, or policymakers, are often peripheral, rendering their contributions invisible. This invisibility is more than symbolic; it shapes who reaps the benefits of economic integration and who remains excluded. This is precisely why the future of the EU–India corridor is so compelling. A gender-responsive agenda, one that systematically includes women in decision-making, ensures access to capital, promotes skills in the green and digital economies, and safeguards dignity and safety in workplaces, can transform the partnership into a model of inclusive global cooperation. The potential to embed gender considerations into climate initiatives, digital frameworks, MSME development, and innovation ecosystems is immense. Such integration would not merely correct historical imbalances; it would encourage productivity and creativity on a scale that conventional approaches have failed to achieve. Encouragingly, institutions like the WICCI's EU–India Business Council are already laying the groundwork for this transformation. By fostering collaboration among women, supporting mentorship, and amplifying the role of women in economic diplomacy, such organizations bridge the gap between macroeconomic strategy and lived reality. Their work illustrates how such initiatives can act as catalysts in embedding inclusivity into bilateral frameworks.

On a personal level, I see the EU–India corridor as an extraordinary space for young women like myself, those interested in economics, business, policy and international development, to learn, lead, and contribute to systemic change. It is a corridor that challenges us to think globally yet act inclusively, to build solidarities that transcend national boundaries while remaining grounded in local realities. For women aspiring toward leadership in trade, governance, or diplomacy, this partnership represents not merely an opportunity but a gateway to reimagine agency in a truly transnational sense. Looking ahead, I envision a corridor that deliberately nurtures the next generation of women leaders through targeted capacity-building, inclusive entrepreneurship ecosystems, cross-cultural exchanges, and gender-balanced policymaking. Such a vision requires not only sustained institutional effort but also political will, innovative approaches, and a shared commitment to equity. The foundation has been laid; what remains is the determination to scale these initiatives and the courage to prioritize inclusion at every level of engagement.

In conclusion, being a woman in the EU–India corridor is no longer about adapting to systems built without us; it is about co-creating a future that reflects our ambitions, values, and contributions. It is an invitation to claim



roles historically denied, to shape narratives yet to be written, and to redefine what global partnerships can achieve when women are equal stakeholders. For those of us committed to international cooperation and inclusive development, this corridor is not simply a path; it is a promise. It is a call to bring gendered voices to the center of trade, development, and diplomacy, while fostering solidarity across borders. Above all, it is about affirming that genuine collaboration must be inclusive at its core, and that gender equity is not an afterthought but a foundational pillar of meaningful global engagement.

# HERITAGE OF HEARTS: INDIAN AND POLISH WOMEN IN HARMONY

**SUGANYA GANESH, CO-FOUNDER OF THE WOMEN WORLDWIDE FORUM IN POLAND (WWFP)**

## **Introduction**

In an age defined by globalization and intercultural exchange, the stories of women across continents often reveal a profound and universal truth: beneath the differences of language, faith, and geography lies a shared emotional and moral strength. India and Poland, though separated by thousands of miles and distinct historical paths, share an unexpected resonance in the cultural and spiritual lives of their women. Both nations have endured colonization, war, and social transformation. Through each of these struggles, women have served as the silent backbone of endurance and renewal.

Heritage of Hearts: Indian and Polish Women in Harmony is a celebration of this deep, cross-cultural kinship. It explores how Indian and Polish women, through spirituality, art, family life, and public participation, mirror one another in resilience, compassion, and creativity. From the goddess traditions of India to the Marian devotion of Poland, from freedom fighters to modern reformers, from folk songs to contemporary art, their journeys converge in a powerful testament to the universality of womanhood.

## **Cultural Foundations: Womanhood as Heritage**

Every culture defines womanhood through its myths, moral codes, and social roles. In both Indian and Polish civilizations, women are seen not merely as individuals but as bearers of heritage. The reverence for the feminine principle is deeply embedded in both societies, shaping how women are perceived and how they perceive themselves.

In India, womanhood is sacredly intertwined with the idea of Shakti, the divine feminine energy that animates the universe. Goddesses like Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Durga embody wisdom, prosperity, and power. This theological respect, however, has coexisted with social hierarchies that often limited women's freedom. Indian women historically balanced the paradox of being worshiped as goddesses yet restricted in practice a tension that continues to inform modern gender dynamics.

In Poland, a similar duality exists. The image of the *Matka Polka*, The Polish Mother has for centuries symbolized national endurance and moral purity. During periods when Poland was partitioned or occupied, women became the guardians of faith, language, and tradition. The *Matka Polka* is both a domestic and patriotic ideal, embodying devotion to family and country. Yet, this ideal also carried expectations of self-sacrifice and conformity, echoing the experiences of Indian women navigating the weight of cultural virtue.

Thus, the foundations of womanhood in both India and Poland rest on reverence, duty, and moral authority. Each culture has fashioned archetypes that honor the feminine while also placing it within a framework of responsibility. It is within this framework that women from both lands have forged their identities, complex, creative, and resilient.

### **Parallels in Struggle: Women under Foreign Rule**

The shared experience of subjugation under foreign powers forms one of the strongest historical parallels between India and Poland. Both nations experienced long periods of occupation that threatened their sovereignty and identity. In both cases, women emerged as protectors of national culture and catalysts of resistance.

India's struggle against British colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries produced many female icons. Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi became a legendary figure in the 1857 rebellion, leading her troops with sword in hand. Her defiance inspired countless women to see themselves as agents of history. Later, women like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Kasturba Gandhi carried the struggle into public and domestic spaces. They led boycotts, educated the poor, and transformed the home into a site of resistance through the Swadeshi movement.

In Poland, women's roles in the fight for independence were equally profound. After the partitions of Poland in the late 18th century, the state disappeared from the map, but women ensured that Polish identity survived. Through education, clandestine literature, and underground teaching, they preserved language and culture. During World War II, women fought and organized in the *Armia Krajowa* (Home Army), risked their lives in the Warsaw Uprising, and cared for orphans amid bombed ruins. Their heroism—both visible and invisible became a cornerstone of Poland's moral recovery.

The resistance movements in both nations were not merely political. They were deeply cultural, built upon the feminine capacity for endurance, compassion, and memory. Women's participation blurred the line between public duty and private devotion, forging a model of citizenship rooted in care rather than conquest. In both India and Poland, to be a woman was to be a guardian of continuity, a living archive of the nation's soul.

### **Spiritual Parallels: The Sacred Feminine and the Virgin Mother**

Perhaps nowhere is the harmony between Indian and Polish women more striking than in the realm of spirituality. Both traditions place immense emphasis on the sacred feminine—the idea that divine power is best understood through maternal love and moral strength.

In India, the goddess is not abstract; she is embodied in every aspect of life. During Navaratri, women celebrate the power of the goddess through music, dance, and ritual. The act of lighting a diya at dusk, of offering food to guests, or of blessing a child all become expressions of sacred womanhood. Spirituality in India is woven into daily gestures of care, often enacted by women who bridge the material and the divine.

In Poland, Catholicism centers on Marian devotion—the veneration of the Virgin Mary, known affectionately as the Matka Boska (Mother of God). The Black Madonna of Częstochowa, with her serene face and scarred cheek, has long been the spiritual heart of the nation. To Polish women, Mary represents purity, strength, and silent endurance—the same virtues found in the Indian goddess traditions. Both the Virgin Mary and the Hindu goddesses embody compassion that transcends suffering, offering protection to the weak and hope to the oppressed.

This parallel spirituality reveals a shared worldview: that the feminine is not a secondary force but a divine principle of balance. Whether through the rosary or the puja, Polish and Indian women have found in faith a means of empowerment, community, and identity. Their spirituality transforms endurance into grace and hardship into wisdom.

### **Art, Expression, and the Language of Emotion**

Art has always been the language through which women express what society cannot yet articulate. In both India and Poland, women's creative expressions of music, dance, poetry, and craft serve as acts of memory and liberation.

Indian women have long used art to voice the ineffable. The devadasis of South India and the bauls of Bengal turned spiritual longing into performance, blending devotion with aesthetics. Folk arts like Madhubani, Warli, and Pattachitra, traditionally practised by women, translate myth and daily life into vibrant visual narratives. In literature, poets from Mirabai to Amrita Pritam have explored love, exile, and resistance with unparalleled sensitivity.

In Poland, art has also been a form of survival. Folk songs and dance, such as the Krakowiak and Mazurka have long been spaces where women expressed collective joy and sorrow. The music of Chopin, inspired by these very rhythms, captures the emotional landscape of Polish womanhood, tender, melancholic, and proud. Women writers such as Maria Dąbrowska, Zofia Nałkowska, and Wisława Szymborska gave voice to moral introspection and the quiet strength of ordinary lives. Szymborska's poetry, marked by irony and empathy, mirrors the introspective quality found in the verses of Indian poets like Kamala Das.

In both cultures, art functions as an inheritance and a conversation, a way for women to narrate their lives beyond the limits of language or law. Through embroidery, lullabies, and literature, they preserve the subtleties of emotion that form the soul of civilization.

### **The Heart of the Home: Family and Tradition**

The family, as both institution and emotional community, remains central to Indian and Polish culture. Within this sphere, women have historically wielded immense moral influence, shaping the values of the next generation and maintaining social cohesion.

In India, family life is guided by ideals of *dharma* (duty) and *sanskār* (cultural refinement). The Indian woman, mother, daughter, sister, or wife is often seen as the moral axis of the household. Festivals such as Diwali or Raksha Bandhan revolve around her rituals of care. Yet, this centrality also carries expectation: to serve, to sacrifice, to maintain harmony even in adversity. Over time, Indian women have reinterpreted these expectations, asserting agency within tradition, finding freedom not in rebellion but in redefinition.

Similarly, Polish women have long been the moral centers of their homes. The family table—where prayers are said before Wigilia (Christmas Eve

supper) or where Easter eggs are shared becomes a sacred site of continuity. Polish mothers and grandmothers transmit recipes, hymns, and stories that preserve the soul of the nation. Like their Indian counterparts, they transform domestic labor into an act of love and identity.

In both societies, modernization and migration have challenged traditional roles. Yet, rather than eroding family values, these changes have diversified them. Today's Indian and Polish women navigate dual roles as professionals and caretakers, finding balance between individuality and community. The home remains a canvas where the old and new coexist in harmony.

### **Education and the Modern Quest for Equality**

The 20th century brought immense transformation to both India and Poland, especially through women's education and participation in public life. In both nations, access to learning became the key to liberation.

In India, social reformers like Savitribai Phule and Pandita Ramabai opened schools for girls, defying caste and colonial restrictions. Education empowered women to enter journalism, science, and politics. Post-independence, Indian women became educators, engineers, doctors, and leaders, redefining what it meant to serve the nation. Despite challenges of inequality, they continue to push boundaries in STEM, literature, and governance.

In Poland, women's education flourished during the late 19th century despite political oppression. Pioneers like Narcyza Żmichowska and Eliza Orzeszkowa advocated for intellectual independence. The legacy of Marie Skłodowska-Curie, Poland's most celebrated scientist, remains a global symbol of female achievement. After World War II, women's access to education expanded dramatically, allowing them to shape Poland's postwar reconstruction and cultural renaissance.

Today, Indian and Polish women share a commitment to knowledge as empowerment. Universities, art academies, and global exchange programs foster connections between the two cultures. Whether in Warsaw or New Delhi, women scholars, writers, and scientists are redefining what it means to carry heritage into the future.

### **Cross-Cultural Encounters: India and Poland in Dialogue**

The harmony between Indian and Polish women is not only metaphorical, it is also historical and ongoing. One of the most poignant examples of Indo-Polish solidarity occurred during World War II, when more than a thousand Polish refugees, including many children, found sanctuary in India. Under the compassionate care of Maharaja Jam Saheb Digvijaysinhji of Nawanagar, the children were housed in Balachadi, Gujarat. Indian women in local communities helped care for them, offering food, comfort, and maternal affection. To this day, the “Polish children of India” remember that period as a time of healing and love amid the horrors of war.

This event encapsulates the essence of the heritage of hearts: compassion transcending borders. It also demonstrates how women’s empathy expressed through hospitality, nurture, and solidarity can create bridges between cultures.

In the modern era, this dialogue continues. Polish admiration for Indian spirituality, cuisine, and cinema has grown, while Indian interest in Polish art, music, and literature has flourished. Cultural festivals, academic collaborations, and women-led NGOs foster this exchange. Indian and Polish women artists collaborate on exhibitions, writers translate each other’s works, and students travel between Warsaw and Delhi to study culture and gender.

These encounters reaffirm that harmony is not about uniformity but about shared values: respect, resilience, and the courage to care.

### **Contemporary Challenges and Shared Aspirations**

Despite their achievements, women in both India and Poland continue to face systemic challenges. Gender-based violence, wage inequality, and political marginalization remain global concerns. In India, issues such as dowry, child marriage, and gender based violence persist, though they are increasingly challenged by activism and legal reform. In Poland, debates around reproductive rights and women’s autonomy have sparked some of Europe’s most powerful feminist movements, including the “Black Protests” against restrictive laws.

What unites Indian and Polish women today is their collective insistence on voice. Whether through street demonstrations, online campaigns, or community activism, they assert that equality is not a Western import but a universal human demand. Polish women draw strength from their Catholic

faith and historical resilience; Indian women from their pluralistic spirituality and long tradition of reform. Both seek to redefine empowerment in culturally rooted terms, one that honors heritage while challenging injustice.

The younger generation of Indian and Polish women embodies a new kind of harmony: global yet grounded, digital yet traditional, ambitious yet compassionate. They are translators between worlds, showing that identity need not be singular or static. Through art, technology, and social entrepreneurship, they are crafting a new narrative of womanhood that honors both Durga and the Madonna, both the sari and the folk costume, both silence and speech.

### **The Universal Feminine: Lessons from Two Cultures**

At the heart of the Indo-Polish harmony lies a profound philosophical insight, the universality of the feminine spirit. Despite different religions and social structures, both cultures recognize that compassion, endurance, and moral strength are not traits of weakness but of divinity.

The Indian philosophy of *Ahimsa* (nonviolence) and the Polish ideal of *Solidarność* (solidarity) share a moral DNA. Both call for empathy as the foundation of justice. Women, in embodying these principles, have transformed politics into ethics and survival into service. Their stories remind humanity that cultural progress is not measured by conquest but by care.

In this sense, the harmony between Indian and Polish women offers a model for intercultural coexistence. It teaches that the path to peace lies not in erasing difference but in embracing it as part of a shared human melody. Through art, faith, and love, women from both cultures have proven that the heart is a universal heritage.

### **Conclusion: The Everlasting Bridge**

From the Himalayan foothills to the plains of Mazovia, from temple courtyards to church altars, the voices of Indian and Polish women rise in different tongues but in one tone. They sing of endurance, of care, of faith in the face of suffering. Their heritage is not written merely in history books but in lullabies, prayers, and acts of kindness that ripple through generations.

The *Heritage of Hearts* is not an abstract ideal, it is alive in every Indian mother who lights a lamp for her family's wellbeing and in every Polish grandmother who blesses bread before a meal. It is in the poet's pen, the activist's march, the teacher's lesson, and the artist's brushstroke. It is the shared belief that love and duty, faith and freedom, can coexist in harmony.

In an increasingly divided world, the stories of Indian and Polish women offer a vision of cultural dialogue founded on empathy and respect. They remind us that true harmony does not erase difference; it celebrates it. Their shared journey from oppression to empowerment, from silence to song, is a testament to the indomitable power of the feminine heart.

As the 21st century unfolds, the voices of Indian and Polish women continue to weave a global symphony of compassion—ancient yet new, local yet universal. Their harmony is not a fleeting note but a sustained resonance, echoing across borders and generations. In their strength and tenderness, we find a lesson for all humanity: that the deepest heritage we share is the heritage of hearts.

## MY UNLOCKED MIND: A WOMAN'S JOURNEY IN THE EU-INDIA CORRIDOR

**GOPIKA JAYAKUMAR, RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, MAYA INITIATIVE**

"To properly handle geopolitics, we've got to simultaneously uphold gender politics – by including women leaders more and actively making that the new normal in how we operate." This statement resonates deeply with me, capturing a fundamental truth about effective global engagement. Effective global engagement requires a simultaneous focus on geopolitical and gender politics. While the power dynamics between nations are often discussed, we must also critically address and reshape the internal dynamics of power and representation. The role of gender has been neglected for too long, yet it has the power to significantly alter and improve many things. Making the inclusion of women leaders the new normal is a vital step toward a more robust and complete geopolitical strategy.

When I first encountered the question, "What does it mean to be a woman in the EU-India corridor?" I was at a loss. This feeling was strikingly similar to when I considered applying for the WICCI mentorship and questioned what I would truly gain from it. From my childhood, I had always held a firm belief that I would never leave India. This conviction stemmed from a powerful message a teacher once shared in class: "Your nation gives you all the resources to make yourself an asset, and you go on to give yourself as human capital in some other country." That idea struck me deeply and has stayed with me ever since, making me pretty sure I would never relocate. But then, a new question emerged: What could I be doing for India-EU relations while sitting here? How would it help me, a UPSC Aspirant, who is trying to transition into Policy analysis and Research? That's when I started remembering the basics, the core reasons for choosing UPSC and now Public Policy as my career path. I have always wanted to contribute back to my country. It became clear that helping my country better its relationship with another can be considered as my service. With this renewed perspective, I went ahead and applied for the WICCI program, eager to learn more and to contribute more.

As I became part of this wonderful network, I was genuinely surprised at the diverse ways I could reach my goals! The network comprised a truly wonderful group of mentors and mentees, and even past mentees, all

willing to help each other, build networks and references, and collectively work towards bringing more women into the corridor. This experience has opened many new doors for me, especially as someone who was feeling stuck in life, looking for ways to earn while also pursuing my broader career goals. My mentor, Daphne Reguisse, has been of immense help in identifying what to work on and has consistently noted my progress, motivating me whenever I needed it the most. As a woman, these connections and the invaluable guidance from fellow women within this network have not only helped me have a greater idea about my goals but have also significantly boosted my self-confidence. To be equipped with such knowledge and connections before embarking on a new path in my career has increased my chances of survival and success. It's empowering to know I have a supportive community as I navigate this transition. To have a dream as a woman is sometimes seen as ego. To have multiple dreams as a woman is a privilege. But to have people to guide you and help you achieve them is luck. Being someone with many dreams, I now truly believe my contribution should not be limited to my own country's borders. As Virginia Woolf eloquently put it, "There is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind." This program has reinforced that my aspirations extend beyond geographical confines, allowing me to envision a broader impact.

In conclusion, my journey is deeply intertwined with the belief that to properly handle geopolitics, we must simultaneously uphold gender politics. This means not just talking about including women leaders more, but actively making that the new normal in how we operate globally. My aspirations as a woman in the India-EU corridor are to contribute to this very shift, leveraging the insights and confidence gained from this invaluable mentee program. It has truly helped me find a new path, solidifying my commitment to being a part of this crucial evolution in international relations and empowering me to pursue my multiple dreams with newfound clarity and support.

## **BEYOND THE GLASS CEILING: WOMEN AT WORK IN INDIA AND EUROPE**

**ALANKRITA SHUKLA, BUDDY MEMBER AT INTERNATIONAL CELL, SYMBIOSIS CENTRE FOR MANAGEMENT STUDIES PUNE**

With increased cross-border transactions and the movement of people across regions, diverse cultural perspectives have become deeply rooted in the corporate working environment. Within this context, the role of women in leadership and managerial positions becomes particularly important, as gender diversity is linked to innovation, inclusivity, and long-term organizational growth. The survey conducted explores how women are perceived in leadership roles across Indian and European organizations, examining differences in cultural practices, hierarchies, and work-life balance expectations. By analyzing employee perspectives, the research highlights both opportunities and challenges for women in cross-cultural corporate environments.

In several organizations, women hold 0–10% of leadership roles, which strongly reflects the Glass Ceiling effect—the invisible barriers that prevent women from advancing to higher managerial levels despite having the necessary qualifications and skills. At the same time, organizations reporting 26–50% representation indicate partial inclusivity, a trend explained by Social Role Theory, which suggests that gendered expectations still shape opportunities and influence how women are integrated into leadership positions. By contrast, where women represent more than 50% of leadership roles, respondents highlighted positive perceptions and equal participation, resonating with Transformational Leadership theories, where women are valued for collaborative and inclusive management practices.

Cultural dynamics also play a crucial role in shaping these outcomes. Responses showed that hierarchies in Indian organizations are more rigid, requiring greater effort for women to rise into leadership positions. This aligns with Hofstede’s concept of high Power Distance, where authority is concentrated at the top and advancement depends heavily on navigating structured hierarchies. In contrast, European respondents described flatter structures and more liberal approaches, which foster greater openness to women’s voices in leadership. These findings demonstrate how cross-cultural variations influence the speed and ease of women’s professional progression. One response noted that “it takes more effort for a woman to

come up in Indian organizations compared to Europe”, highlighting the role of cultural structures in shaping career trajectories.

Workplace culture further shapes women’s experiences through expectations of work-life balance. In India, senior-level roles were described as “non-stop,” with women often balancing both professional and household responsibilities, while in Europe policies and norms were seen to “respect work-life balance.” Such differences are best explained by the Work-Family Conflict Theory and Boundary Theory, which highlight how blurred or rigid boundaries between work and home affect women’s careers. Respondents also emphasized that solutions such as transparent promotion criteria, flexible working arrangements, and women’s networks could improve inclusivity across contexts, echoing Organizational Inclusion and Diversity frameworks, which stress the importance of structural support for achieving gender equity.

Survey responses reveal contrasting views on how women in marketing roles influence business strategy. One respondent noted that “women actually are listened to and are good at creating customer engagement,” highlighting how women’s presence can strengthen customer relations through empathy and relational approaches. This perspective supports the idea of Gendered Perspectives in Marketing Strategy, which suggests that women often bring unique insights into consumer behavior and can enhance a brand’s ability to connect authentically with its audience.

At the same time, another respondent pointed out, “It doesn’t [matter] if they are not listened to,” underlining that women’s strategic contributions may not always be acknowledged, especially in more hierarchical or male-dominated contexts. This illustrates how the effectiveness of women’s input depends not only on their skills but also on the cultural and organizational acceptance of their voices. In environments where leadership is more rigid—as reflected in several Indian corporate responses—women’s marketing perspectives may remain undervalued, limiting their influence on overall business strategy.

This ties closely to Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), which argues that organizations must consider diverse stakeholder needs to achieve long-term success. Women leaders, by bringing consumer-centric and inclusive perspectives, enhance the representation of these diverse voices in strategic decision-making. Several respondents emphasized the importance of open communication, transparent promotion practices, and

inclusivity measures, reinforcing the view that when women are genuinely integrated into leadership and marketing discussions, organizations are better equipped to align with stakeholder interests across global markets.

The journey of exploring women's roles in the EU–India corridor has revealed a tapestry woven with both challenges and triumphs. While European workplaces often provide stronger institutional support through policies such as flexible working arrangements and transparent promotion systems, Indian workplaces reflect resilience amidst rigid hierarchies and societal expectations. These contrasts emphasize that women's professional journeys cannot be understood in isolation from the cultural and organizational contexts in which they evolve.

At the same time, the survey responses highlight that progress is not linear. Encouragement does not always translate into empowerment, and representation alone does not guarantee influence. The voices of women in finance, manufacturing, and the public sector remind us that mentorship, inclusivity, and role models are essential in transforming opportunities into realities. Their experiences echo a universal truth—that gender equality is not merely about presence but about participation, recognition, and shared leadership.

As I reflect on my own path, inspired by my mother, my grandmother, and the professionals who shared their stories, I see the EU–India corridor as more than a professional bridge—it is a space of learning, adaptation, and growth. Building true inclusivity means blending Europe's policy maturity with India's unshakable spirit, creating leadership that is empathetic, resilient, and forward-looking. The road ahead requires collective effort, but the stories I have encountered reaffirm that the future of women in this corridor is not only possible but promising.

# LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

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is currently pursuing Economics at the University of Delhi, driven by a strong interest in developing innovative solutions to social and business challenges. Aspiring to contribute meaningfully as a future economist, she has demonstrated keen analytical and problem-solving abilities, earning her recognition as a Top 20 at the BCN 20 under 20 : Emerging Women in Consulting, 2025. Passionate about women's advancement, she actively supports initiatives that promote inclusive growth. As a mentee at WICCI's EU-India Business Council under Ms. Shruti Chandra's guidance, she has further refined her professional interests and gained valuable industry insights.

## SUKANYA DUTTA



is an EU-India investment and policy professional and currently serves as an Investment Advisor with the Wallonia Export & Investment Agency (AWEX), the public body responsible for promoting exports, attracting foreign investment, and supporting international partnerships for Belgium's Walloon region. She advises Indian and other international companies on market entry, investment frameworks, sectoral ecosystems, and public incentives, while facilitating strategic collaborations with Walloon industries and institutions. Her work spans Belgium, the European Union, India, and the wider South Asia-Europe corridor. She holds an academic background in life sciences, international relations, and public policy, and has been recognised among the Top 40 under 40 EU-India leaders for her contributions to cross-border economic cooperation.

## ADA DYNDO



is a cross-cultural Poland-India business advisor with over a decade of experience in India. Formerly Head of the Polish Investment and Trade Agency in India, she led initiatives strengthening Poland-India business ties and was recognised among the Top 40 under 40 EU-India leaders. Currently as Director of the India Desk at Indo-Polish Chamber of Commerce and Industry, she acts as a connector, fostering Poland-India collaboration and promoting strong cross-border business relationships. A passionate advocate for gender equality, she also leads WICCI's India-EU Business Council, a dynamic platform empowering women in business.

## SUGANYA GANESH



is based in Warsaw, Poland. She is a dedicated teacher, social activist, and organizer of Indian cultural initiatives. Suganya serves as President of the Women Worldwide Forum in Poland and is actively affiliated with the Indo-Polish Chamber of Commerce and Industry, promoting women's empowerment, cultural exchange, and community development.

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is an international learning and development advisor who has spent over half a decade working across Europe and India. She advises global organizations on cross-border collaboration, cultural intelligence, and leadership development, with a focus on building high-trust, high-performance teams in complex environments.

## GOPIKA JAYAKUMAR



is a public policy researcher in India with a background in engineering and four years of preparation for the UPSC Civil Services Examination, a transition that shaped her engagement with governance, institutions, and social policy. She is currently associated with the MAYA Initiative, contributing to policy research and analysis. Her interests include women's empowerment, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, with a focus on gender-responsive and inclusive policy frameworks. As a mentee under Dr. Daphné Reguiessé through the WICCI's India–EU Business Council, she further strengthened her transition into public policy from an international and institutional perspective.

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## NEETUBALA RAINA



is a passionate Leadership Coach and seasoned HR leader with over two decades of experience, dedicated to unlocking human potential and fostering authentic leadership. She champions emotionally intelligent leadership as the cornerstone of organizational success and blends strategic foresight with empathy to design transformative talent and leadership development initiatives. For Neetubala, coaching is more than a profession—it's a mission to create a ripple effect of positive change, helping individuals lead with purpose and compassion while building future-ready organizations. Beyond her professional role, she is an avid traveler, art enthusiast, and writer, deeply inspired by diverse cultures and creative expression.

## ALANKRITA SHUKLA



is a creative storyteller and BBA student in Marketing and Business Analytics, blending creativity with strategy to craft meaningful, insight-driven narratives. She expresses ideas through writing, comics, digital content, and handcrafted art, believing that emotional connection gives purpose to creativity. Curious about human behavior and branding psychology, she enjoys exploring visual arts, crochet, and journaling everyday life—turning simple moments into thoughtful stories.

## PRITI VERMA



is an accomplished market entry expert with over 20 years of experience guiding businesses through India's complexities.

She leads ResearchnConsulting, a boutique firm providing strategic advisory, market research, and CSR impact evaluation. With deep expertise in competitive intelligence and stakeholder engagement, Priti has supported domestic and international clients in crafting sustainable growth and positive social impact strategies. She enjoys connecting with new people, exploring diverse cuisines, and immersing herself in different cultures.

## PATRYCJA ZDYBEL (PENDRAKOWSKA)



founded the Warsaw-based Boym Institute in 2019. She focuses her work primarily on China and the socio-economic transformations taking place across Asia. In 2025, she completed her PhD at Humboldt University in Berlin, researching the reception of Western thinkers in contemporary China. She currently lives in Warsaw, where she combines her role at a multinational BI technology corporation with academic work at the University of Warsaw. She also remains actively involved with the Boym Institute, sitting on its management board.

# ABOUT WICCI'S INDIA– EU BUSINESS COUNCIL

## **Mission**

The Council's mission is to foster meaningful collaboration among women leaders from India and the European Union across business, policy, academia, diplomacy, entrepreneurship, and civil society. It aims to amplify women's voices in EU–India dialogue, promote cross-sector and cross-border knowledge exchange, encourage inclusive leadership, and support cooperation built on trust and shared experience.

## **Community and Membership**

As of today, the WICCI's India–EU Business Council brings together over 60 members from India and multiple European Union countries. Its members include senior executives, entrepreneurs, policy experts, researchers, diplomats, consultants, and practitioners working at the intersection of Europe and India.

## **Mentorship Programme**

A cornerstone of the Council's work is its Mentorship Programme, now in its third edition. The programme connects experienced Council Members with emerging professionals and young leaders interested in EU–India relations. Through structured mentoring, dialogue, and exposure to diverse career paths, the programme supports leadership development, confidence-building, and the transfer of knowledge and networks—particularly for women navigating international and cross-sectoral careers.

## **Looking Ahead**

Since its establishment, the Council has evolved into a resilient and engaged community demonstrating the value of sustained networks and intergenerational exchange. By combining strategic expertise with lived experience, the Council continues to contribute to more inclusive, informed, and impactful EU–India cooperation.

## **Website**

<https://indiaeuwomencouncil.com>

