

Making a Difference

Investing in Women

An Interview with Alyse Nelson,
Co-Founder, President, and Chief Executive Officer, Vital Voices Global Partnership

EDITORS' NOTE *Alyse Nelson has worked for the organization for 20 years, serving as Vice President and Senior Director of programs before assuming her current role as President and CEO in 2009. Previously, Nelson served as Deputy Director of the Vital Voices Global Democracy Initiative at the U.S. Department of State. Her position aided former First Lady Hillary Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's commitment to promote the advancement of women as a U.S. foreign policy objective.*



Alyse Nelson

From July 1996 to July 2000, she worked with the President's Interagency Council on Women at the White House and U.S. Department of State. Nelson is a Member of the Council on Foreign Relations. She serves on Secretary Clinton's Advisory Committee on Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society and is a Board member of Running Start and RAD-AID International. She is a part of the Expert Group for the B Team and is on the Advisory Board of Chime for Change. She is also the author of the best-selling book Vital Voices: The Power of Women Leading Change Around the World. Nelson completed her graduate degree work at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *Vital Voices (vitalvoices.org) Global Partnership invests in women leaders who improve the world. Founded by then First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and guided by the belief that women are essential to progress in their communities, it has partnered with leaders from more than 140 countries who advance economic opportunity, increase political and public leadership, and end violence against women. Programs in strategic planning, business, advocacy, and communications build critical skills needed for creating transformational change at scale. Through its global platform, women leaders expand their connections and visibility, accelerating shared progress for all.*

Has the vision for Vital Voices remained consistent?

This year is our 20th anniversary from the first Vital Voices conference. It emerged on the heels of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, where Hillary Clinton made the famous statement that women's rights are human rights, which was very radical back then.

We have come a very long way. We were founded on the simple idea that nations, countries, and communities could not move forward without women's voices in leadership positions in business, communities, and government.

When we were founded, there was no research to show that, if women are invested in, it's not just a feel-good investment but it's also a really smart thing to do. Companies, communities, and countries can only move forward and compete in a global marketplace

if they tap those women leaders.

What has changed in 20 years is that these issues have moved from the margins to the mainstream as evidenced by the post-inauguration women's march with so many people taking to the streets to speak out on these issues.

We have a growing body of research that shows that investing in women is not just right but also smart. We should care about the moral imperative but if we don't, we should care about the economic case for investing in women's rights.

Also, the constituency alone for these issues has really grown. Given the developing body of research on this issue, more governments have taken it on because they see it as smart economics. Many corporations, international institutions, and governments have taken action on this issue. We used to have just a few

champions who were household names in the space who were willing to use their platforms as leaders to raise women around the world, but now we have many.

There is awareness. We have the megaphone, and people are listening. We have laws on the books today, but when it comes to actual change on the ground in women's lives, we haven't seen as much change as we should have by now. There is still a great deal of unfinished business, and it's really about behavior change.

As we look ahead, we realize we need to look at this issue in new and different ways. We need to think outside of the box. Leaders at the top aren't going to be the people who create that change, because laws are only as powerful as the populations of people who believe in them.

We can have a law on the books that says domestic violence is a crime but, if police don't take it seriously and respond or if there isn't funding to enforce it, or if people look away, or if judges don't understand, it won't change. It's all about education.

We have refined how we work. Vital Voices is a learning organization. As things have moved forward for women and as the environment that we're working in changes, there have been more opportunities available for women around the world. When we began 20 years ago, it was enough to just bring women together to acknowledge them and provide an opportunity to connect and gain skills training. One-off

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interventions were helpful back then. Now, we need to make strategic, long-term investments to really help a woman take her vision for change to scale.

Over the years, we have honed our work. We are “venture catalysts.” We search the world for women with a daring vision and invest to make that vision a reality. Real, sustainable change doesn’t happen overnight. These are long-term investments individualized for each leader.

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We give some grants, but that’s not a primary focus because we really want the women leaders we work with to be able to raise their own funds through the relationships they create. We also have a number of great fellowship programs that we run. Our VVGROW Fellowship, for example, is a year-long accelerator program to help women entrepreneurs grow their businesses. We continue to invest in our network of 15,000 women in 144 countries around the world that we have fostered over the past 20 years.

Our mission – what we believe and what we’re trying to do – remains the same. We still believe that women’s voices are vital. We are guided by the belief that women are central to progress within their communities.

As women gain higher positions of leadership, more is on the line and more is possible. They can impact the lives of many.

How do you go about measuring the impact of these efforts?

We look at four core areas when we measure our impact: Did the woman we invested in implement her vision? After that, we ask, is she shifting culture? As more women get into leadership positions, their presence alone is shifting how people think about women in leadership positions, but also they’re in a leadership position where they’re rewriting the stories and changing perceptions. The third thing we measure is how this woman is seen more broadly. We look at whether her model is being replicated around the world. Is she invested in and supported by other organizations? The final thing we’re looking at is how she is working to create more leaders and acting as a role model in her community.

We do an incredible program in the U.S. in partnership with Ann Inc. called HERlead. We invest in girls in the U.S. and teach them lessons in leadership from the women we have invested in all over the world.

One of the things we look at is how women we’ve invested in give back by investing in young women and serving as mentors for them.

We’re also trying to communicate that leadership isn’t just found in Washington or New York, or in major corporations or governments around the world – it’s found in local communities and in places where people may not expect to find it. For instance, it may be found in a young girl going to school in Pakistan who is encouraging other girls to do the same.

Are all the areas you work in such as economic empowerment, human rights, and political participation separate areas of focus or do they interrelate?

We have separate departments for each of those issues, but they interrelate. It seems like wherever there are major environmental issues we also see an increase in violence against women.

We look at those linkages that aren’t always clear but that exist. As women become more economically empowered, they tend to have a stronger voice in politics, or they are able to stand up for themselves and leave violent relationships because they gain more confidence. These things are all very much interconnected.

Will you talk about the value of the corporate partnerships you have built?

When we first started our work, if someone had asked the fastest way to bring about seismic change on these issues, I probably would have said for governments around the world to implement laws they already have on the books. Today, I would say, corporations can actually play an extraordinary role around the world. For example, when Walmart decided to double the number of women-owned businesses in their supply chain, it sent a message that women-owned businesses are valuable.

Twenty years ago when we started our work, the corporate philanthropy side and the profit side of a business operated separately for the most part. That has changed significantly as people recognize that doing good and doing well are interconnected in the communities in which they’re operating around the world.

It’s not just about looking good to consumers, although that is a benefit. There is evidence that shows that as girls are more invested in, they contribute to stronger communities and economies.

As corporations get that, they’re not just writing checks; they’re bringing the full force of all the assets and strategic rigor they have to bear on their philanthropic and sustainable investments.

For example, we have a partnership with Bank of America. Our partner Anne Finucane, the Vice Chairman and Global Chief Strategy and Marketing Officer, believes strongly that women’s leadership is needed around the world to drive greater economic growth and positive social change, and that getting women into leadership positions will be extremely beneficial to move the needle.

In 2012, we launched the Global Ambassadors Program together, which brings top women executives from the bank, other companies, and other organizations around the world to serve as mentors. These are women who have achieved success at the highest levels of business, government, media, and civil society. They are women who want to give back by sharing their knowledge and expertise. They travel with us to mentor young emerging leaders and establish long-term and strategic relationships to propel them on their leadership path.

The way in which we invest in women leaders is different from traditional models of philanthropy, which are often about a “mile wide and an inch deep,” a “one-size” fits all, short-term intervention. In times of crisis, this approach is critical. However, more and more, there is also a need to make long-term strategic investments in local leadership and their vision for change. This requires a deeper commitment and bespoke approach to investing in each of these leaders.

Former White House Chief Technology Officer and Vital Voices Board Member Megan Smith calls what we do “venture catalyzing.”

We have recently gained support from Melinda Gates and her Pivotal Ventures group to conduct a deep-dive research project to look at the impact of these investments as a more sustainable 21st century approach.

We’ve seen that the impact of this model grows over time because these women lead schools, they lead companies, and they lead countries. ●