INTERVIEW

Leadership across cultures and borders

Sakshi Bansal
Senior Management Consultant for Arup, UK

Introduction and about the interviewee

This afternoon I have the pleasure of interviewing Sakshi Bansal who is a Senior Management Consultant for Arup, UK.

Sakshi Bansal is a Chartered Management Consultant, specialising in sustainable strategies, leadership development, organizational resilience, and capacity building, with expertise in shaping policies that drive equitable growth in emerging markets.

She has advised governments, private sector leaders, and multilateral organizations on economic strategy, Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG), and resilience-building. She has led India-UK market expansion in aviation and energy and conducted capacity-building programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Passionate about youth leadership, Sakshi founded Project LEAP, mobilising over 300 volunteers for education and career development. Sakshi served as the head delegate for the UK for the G20 Youth Summit in South Africa in 2025, and co-authored research on sustainable livelihoods, ESG taxonomies, and resilience, championing youth-driven economic policies.

The interview

Today we will explore how Sakshi became involved in leading groups of people at an early age and then honed and enhanced her leadership skills enabling others to become successful leaders with her support and guidance.

Angela: You've been involved in leadership from a young age and now are helping leaders. How would you describe leadership as a concept?

Sakshi: I have a different view from the mainstream, I feel leadership is a lifestyle choice. You don't just become a leader when you step into work. You can be a leader at work and take a backseat (or follower position) in your personal life, which is completely fine. But the traits, tendencies and competencies of being a leader follow you in every domain of your life. So that's why I say it's a lifestyle choice because you may have the natural tendencies to be a leader; but you need to step into being a leader. So how do you know that you have the qualities to be a leader; by knowing you can be a leader in the hard times. When things go wrong, or don't go according to plan, when it's inconvenient to be a leader but that is when you are a leader. This is when your natural leadership tendencies show, in the difficult times; because anyone can step up when the conditions are good and fruitful.

Angela: You have had opportunities to work in different countries, with many cultures and within different industries. How do you think those leadership skills and abilities vary within these contexts?

Sakshi: Yeah, I think these vary massively, which is part of the learning journey for a leader. I feel you are born with some natural abilities which you realise when you're first put into the leadership position, as I was at a young age. Initially you tend to display the kind of leadership that you have already seen. In my case, I was born in India, and what I saw was authoritative leadership. You know that people should fear you; people should obey you; and people should see your word as gospel.

Then when I moved to the UK, I noted that leadership seemed more collaborative. This was quite challenging for me initially, even though I thought I had the natural tendencies to be a leader, I had to adapt my style quite a bit to bring people along and to understand what their needs were. I really like what Alex Haslam says: we study what leaders do so much, but we don't study the followers. And without the followers, there is no leader (e.g., Haslam & Platow, 2001). So, for me, this should be the focus, how will my followers know what they're following, and who are they following? This is the adaptation we need to make in different cultures.

For example, I've recently been working with leaders in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Here, leadership is more authoritative on the surface level, but how you actually influence decision making and outcomes is more subtle. It's more about guiding people through showing and setting an example. Whereas, if I compare that to working with leaders on major projects in the UK I

found on the outside there is collaborative leadership, but the way to actually make changes happen is to be more direct, authoritative and outcome oriented.

But I think all the labels applied to leadership can be confusing; being defined as X, Y or Z. The reality is much more complex. The way to get things done or to influence or inspire people, can be quite different from what it says on the label. What you actually do is to adapt your behaviours at all times. But this is not done by knowing who the leader is; you adapt by learning who the follower is, and this is where people don't often place their focus.

Angela: This is really interesting, Sakshi. Most of our theories suggest everything's current state and either style A or style B works; and then you get style A + B + C; but you can't divide it like that can you?

Sakshi: No, especially now when the context is so often multilingual, multicultural and involves multidisciplinary teams. Currently I'm working on 12-year infrastructure project called Cesaro; based in the southeast of England to build the first reservoir in the UK in 40 years. Over 900 people are involved in the project working in multiple teams of different disciplines and with different experience levels. My role is to make sure that they all collaborate well, and the leaders know what they're doing. But how do you do that if you have just one type of leader! Their context changes on a daily basis based on what's in the news, what's happening politically, and what is new technically (e.g., what is viable, affordable and available). So, it's a moot point to study leadership from one particular style. More realistically, in this situation, it's about what do people need from me and how can they learn. I need to put myself in various situations and flex my style so that I can talk to all of the project team and know how to lead each one of them. So, with this in mind, when I think of being a leader, its flexibility I mainly think about.

Angela: Thank you for that great example. It is particularly difficult when you first meet a group of people who you don't know; and you don't know how to adapt to them. How do you deal with this?

Sakshi: A natural tendency for me is to be quite strategic and to look at the big picture, examining the future oriented role and dynamics. I remember the day I first met these leaders quite clearly. They were looking to solve a current problem: how do we start this team of 900 people coming together from various different organizations who now have to work together as one team. To find an identity of this one team is the challenge; and the instant answer was a collaboration day when they can all meet each other.

For me the key questions were: What do you want out of this? How long do you want to sustain this one team mindset? What will success look like for you? If this team was to look different in three years, what would it look like? So, thinking like this collaboration was needed; but it definitely wasn't a one day project!

Further, as I need to support them for the duration of the project, we needed to build a "one team" culture. So, my questions here were: What is this culture? How will people identify themselves in this culture, and how will they problem solve (as I won't problem solve for them)? What do they need from me to help them problem solve now, today and tomorrow, across the different years and phases of the project? So, I approached this challenge with a future oriented mindset and asked lots of questions, so we are visioning together.

Angela: Thank you for that explanation, Sakshi, it's in line with the effective team leadership literature (e.g., Dinh & Salas, 2017; Salas et al., 2015) and shows you in a position outside the team and acting as a resource to the team.

Sakshi: Yes, precisely, I agree 100%. I'm there to support and help, but they have to do the action. To illustrate further aspects of leadership I can offer another, but very different example. I am working with the International Forum for Economic and Trade negotiations for the 20 nations plus observer nations (known as the G20). In 2025, in South Africa, I was the UK head delegate and that was really interesting from a cultural context. I'm an Indian representing the UK as part of the British delegation. So that in itself was almost an identity crisis; how does an Indian represent UK interests on a global platform; when India is also sitting at that table? Often, I had to remind myself what I was doing and to switch my leadership style.

At the negotiation table there are a lot of countries facing each other. When there's a dilemma or a deadlock people will look at certain countries for the answer; and because of the historic nature of what UK represents, they would look at the UK or the US for these answers. This is not necessarily the right thing to do, but it's traditionally what's happened. So, when I found myself in that position I am thinking why are they all looking at me? This is because I'm representing the UK. If I was representing India during those high pressure negotiations and dilemmas, I probably would have spoken my opinions last and tried to mediate the conversation between the other nations. This is because India is often seen as a middle ground, being part of the BRICS group of emerging economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). But because I was a UK representative, I was expected to go first to set the tone and expectation.

What was going on in these negotiations was interesting because we had worked with these 20 nations over a period of six months online and then we finally meet in South Africa for two weeks where the negotiations would go on 24/7. Here, if you leave the table, you're conceding; and you can't concede as the purpose is to achieve one policy document built by consensus of the 20 nations. As you can imagine there were 20 different priorities. Everybody's in a different direction; so getting people together and negotiating on clear priorities is very difficult.

Negotiations begin at 7:00 AM and from then until 1:00 PM you are generally able to hold on to all the points being made. But from 1:00 PM to 6:00 PM you're tired and your priorities can become very short (I don't care about XYZ; I need 123). Then when negotiation goes on from 8:00 PM to 3:00 AM you really know your priorities (a maximum of one or two things).

Because you are sleep deprived you cannot keep going and hitting on everything; then you need a single priority. So that really brings out certain types of leadership.

Angela: Thank you for that fascinating insight, Sakshi. Did you find your leadership style changing over the negotiating day?

Sakshi: Very much. You start being very articulate and clear what you want; and bringing people together trying to find consensus. Then, in the middle of the day you get frustrated; you want to exert your own point and get it done with. And then when there is deadlock overnight, you just don't care; you are frustrated and need either this or that ("It's my way or highway").

In the first few days of negotiation, you're getting to know people; so you're assessing their leadership styles, and others are assessing you. This informs who you can negotiate with; and whom you cannot. You get to know what the delegate likes; and what they don't; you start to see their style and their ticks. So, by the fifth day, you know them so well; you know whether you are winning or losing. At this stage it's about managing your team's expectations and how to navigate that situation.

Angela: I can imagine it was very insightful. Did you succeed in some way in getting what you wanted?

Sakshi: It's a good question. I don't know what success looks like in multilateral diplomacy. But this was the first time in the history of the G20 that we did not have a consensus to communicate; and that was due to various politics and embassies getting involved. So, there was a lot of politics; but we learned a lot. On a national level, we did succeed because this was the largest consensus-based consultation the UK delegation has been involved in. On our return we were able to share the findings, stirring interest with experts and young people. But on an international front we did not have a consensus document, due to particular disagreement of three nations. This was after negotiations that went on all night! There were hard lines for people; but in some cases, these were genuine hard lines that we could not cross, or bypass. But one of the biggest achievements of this G20 conference was that there was agreement across the nations of how important gender was in the macro world economy!

Angela: These negotiations sound tough – how did you handle this?

Sakshi: It was very tough! I was called a white supremist, and I am brown; that was an attack on my leadership, and I had to express my emotions in private and not internalise this, as it's so contradicting to the person I am.

Angela: Thank you for sharing something so personal, Sakshi. Let's step back and look at where this resilience began. How did you discover and develop your leadership identity?

Sakshi: I did find myself in leadership positions quite early in life; like at 16 and 17 years of age. That's when I started my charity; Project LEAP. I was going across the different universities in Delhi, where I grew up. I was working the social networks telling people about

my ideas and asking people if they wanted to join me. Suddenly, in a month I had 300 people interested; and I realised I needed to do something with this interest. I came up with a simple design of what the charity would do. The whole model was about building the volunteers up, training them to do charitable work in a good way; an effective way with more direction, understanding, rigour and sustained enthusiasm.

Angela: Sure. How did you go about training this wide group of volunteers as this is a very different proposition to working in an organization?

Sakshi: Yes, it was different. Voluntary organizations are interesting; people typically come in out of self-interest or with some internal intrinsic motivation, but they would often leave because there were no external motivators; or because it was unsustainable to continue. This is exactly why I started Project LEAP in the first place; to support volunteer's intrinsic motivation and build an extrinsic way to sustain their effort.

My volunteers were largely people in university or schools; 17 to 30 years of age. I began by taking a geographic perspective grouping people into where they lived or where they worked. I would go to these places and explain my vision and ask what would work in their locality; how could they provide this voluntary service. They were locals, they didn't need transport; but they had to decide who they will help and how; and what skills they need to learn from the charity in order to achieve their goals.

Angela: So, the volunteers were doing a local needs analysis and then deciding what training they needed to support these needs.

Sakshi: Exactly, I would look at what they have said; we don't know how to fundraise or how to find a creative way of educating people. So, then I would go and look for trainers, speak to them, get them to come and do a free session for this group so they can gain skills and ask questions. Following the training we would reorganise how they would deliver the services in that area and then deliver and monitor how effective they were. Based on the monitoring they would come up with modifications.

The groups would self-organise and manage their service; and whoever emerged as the natural leader would lead. I would hold charity level events to bring people together so they could learn from one other.

Angela: So again, you were a resource to enable the charity groups.

Sakshi: Yes, yes, it's about being an enabler, a catalyst. It's about doing the hard work at the beginning where you assess the problem and then simply enable the group to form solutions. These volunteers would spend their own pocket money to support their work, so a common issue was about how to limit the distances travelled. Secondly, they don't have the right skills to actually volunteer properly, and finally they don't see their professional careers growing through their voluntary work. So, my job was simple, if I can help you solve these problems then you can get on with what you want to do. The difficult work was assessing the problem

and reflecting and articulating it in such a way that the group understood. Then it's about finding people and motivating them to take on the work and monitor it effectively.

Angela: Is Project LEAP still functioning?

Sakshi: Absolutely! We started the charity in 2016, and the volunteers stayed with me all through Covid. We worked until 2024 and by then the cohort had grown up and started their own charities; as well as having gone onto higher education. We educated over 1,600 families; including three generations in Delhi itself. Then in 2020 (during Covid) we expanded the model to Africa, Nepal, Sri Lanka and America providing on-line skills-based training sessions for other youth activist groups. Now we work in diverse ways; it's not an institution, but a research project where we use our learnings to talk about sustainability and sustainable livelihoods. This is where my research links with Stuart Carr (see an interview with Stuart C. Carr in InPractice's Special Issue on Humanitarian Work Psychology; Carter, 2023).

So here you can see my two passions – activism and research!

Angela: Going back to the founding of Project LEAP; you were a decade younger than some of those volunteers. How challenging was that for you?

Sakshi: Yes, to be honest it was really challenging. I was so young and, as I have said, my leadership style was what I had observed in India. People are initially drawn to it because you're a voice in the crowd; and if you have a strong voice and a good communicator; you will be seen as a leader. But people don't stay with you for that alone; they stay for somebody who shows up and is supportive. So, I had to learn the hard way getting lots of feedback from the volunteers about the way they would want to work with me; and if they were to work with me at all! I had to flex my style; and probably because it was an age thing, it was a big deal for me. People were drawn to me initially because I was so young and full of energy. But will they trust your decisions, will they trust you? Will they find you credible?

I remember l tried to look a bit older; I put my hair up and wore red lipstick! Not that those changes necessarily worked, but that's what I was doing! Honestly, I don't know how I got through it at the time, but I was very honest. I was saying: I know I'm young and don't have as much experience as you do. So, show me the way; all I'm saying is there's a problem here. So, I was honest; and willing to learn even though I was the leader. I'm still willing to learn; but some people didn't like that. Some think if you are the leader, you should have all the answers. Those people were harder to bring around. Others were OK with it; and they saw me as their pal. But that was also complicated because it's difficult to exert influence when you're seen as a pal. So, it was hard; but I grew and adapted my leadership style quickly. There were 300 volunteers at that time; and it felt like I was flexing with every single one of them when I took meetings and activated them.

When I moved to the UK, I was also young in my Masters cohort. I was the co-founder of a startup company, and again I was a youngest there. So, I've constantly been on the younger side of my cohorts and felt I was being put at a disadvantage because of my age.

But, at the same time I was also part of professional communities, such as EAWOP, working with people like yourself and Ingrid Covington (see an interview with Ingrid Covington in InPractice's issue Broadening the horizons of WOP; Carter, 2021). What I loved about these communities was that they genuinely never saw my age as an issue. They treated me as an equal, as somebody who had something to say. I was invited to do presentations, appear on panels and then keynote events. This was building tangible credibility for me. I said "Yes, I'm only 25 years old but here is the work I've produced; and here are the people that have endorsed it". So, this has been a journey; and now I'm old enough that nobody questions anything!

Angela: Thank you for your honesty, Sakshi, about how you learned to flex your leadership style in relation to the context, or the people or the task. How have you been able to use these skills to help others to be better leaders?

Sakshi: The feedback I receive from people I support consistently suggests that I am able to connect the abstract, vague and seemingly disconnected information; and help them make sense out of it. Some people are better able to work in ambiguous situations with no clear direction, or single pathway. More often than not these days things are unusual, non-traditional or new; and developing leaders find themselves in positions where they haven't been before. The direction of travel is not very clear, but they are looked upon for answers about how to make sense of situations. The challenge is how you can make sense of yourself in these situations?

So, bringing in thinking that enables leaders to become a catalyst has been helpful; helping them to inspire their teams, while not saying they can solve the problem. Not all leaders lead in the same way; and my experience tells me there are three different types of leaders. Some leaders lead the technical part of a journey; others lead the people or the business. And I think if they're able to understand what their boundary of influence is, for example, I can influence the people, then I need somebody to influence the technical work, and the business; then ways forward in complex situations becomes a lot clearer.

It is important for leaders to make sense of what they can and cannot achieve in their time as a leader. So one of the tools I use especially in the public sector or in the international development space is the Ishikawa fishbone diagram (also called the cause and effect diagram used as a quality tool; see ASQ, 2026). It's a diagram essentially that you use to break down a complex problem into its component parts; spending time exploring the problem before jumping into a solution; as many leaders tend to do. This process forces you to look at problems from multiple perspectives. Then when you design the solution you need to consider it's an iterative process; and not a fixed thing. The "bones" enable you to represent the complexity of the situation and then explore what is inside or outside of your control; knowing your boundaries of influence.

I have really enjoyed using this tool; it's appropriate to use in many different cultures (e.g., Senegal, Peru, the UK) and I'm going to use that in South Africa, so the application is versatile. It's really collaborative to use with other leaders to share a problem; and figure the answers out together. Even though it sounds small, but in high intensity, unusual situations it's really useful.

But, at the same time I also think it's really helpful to challenge. I push back a lot; I'm the person who will show up in a meeting and not say "Yes" to the client or the leader. I'll say, "I don't think that's right" or "I think you need to consider XYZ". It's important to explain what you are seeing, because others might not be seeing it that way.

Angela: So, with leaders you're taking a coaching stance to explore the issues, as well as literally sharing the discomfort with them. Leadership is a lonely position particularly in uncertain environments, and you can say I'm here for you; we can figure this out together.

Sakshi: Yes, exactly. When I was young people would say the path, you're taking is quite lonely. I thought to myself, I don't know what that means; but now I understand. The loneliness is very apparent; not only because you're going somewhere you have never been, but also because you don't know if you can get there. That kind of thought is hard to share with people when you're also trying to inspire and motivate them. It's also lonely because it's hard to find people like yourself. They probably don't exist, as nobody is taking the same path as you. But from what I have found out I can be on this mountain; and what will give me comfort is to have someone else on the top with me, even if we are on different peaks we we're facing the same storm.

Angela: Wonderful insights, Sakshi. Could we now look back to earlier in your career and the impact of your master's education. You were several years into Project LEAP before you came to the UK and studied Occupational Psychology. Did learning about leadership have impact on you?

Sakshi: Oh, so much! The education was two twofold: what was happening inside the classroom; and then outside. Obviously, I came from India, so the idea that I'm able to put my hand up in the middle of the lecture itself was revolutionary; I was always asking questions. The opportunity to meet people from different cultures and hear their perspectives on leadership was amazing; particularly the social identity theories (e.g., Hogg, 2001). I had a good understanding of psychometrics, because of my first job; but learning about the power of data and statistics in areas such as organisational design and development was quite fantastic.

At the time I was also studying Indian psychology, which is basically an indigenous branch of psychology with its own theories of psychology (e.g., Dalal & Misra, 2010). For example, looking at the different models of emotions Indian psychology talks about nine basic emotions as compared to the Western theories that focus on four basics. This helped me see why individualistic and collectivistic societies are the way they are; and I was internalising these impressions when experiencing the different models of education. This understanding helped

me tremendously when I started working in the International Development space as I was using both types of theories and pulling them out of my toolkit as and when needed (also merging them and seeing the sort of shortcomings of both).

Angela: Could I ask you to pick one emotion that contrasts in Western style and Eastern styles and talk about that.

Sakshi: I think the western concept of the tabula rasa (see Duschinsky, 2012) was quite interesting (the absence of preconceived or predetermined goals; the mind being in its empty state before receiving outside impressions). Growth uses innate ideas, knowledge and schemas that build mental content so that you can influence the external world through your internal perspective.

Whereas in Indian psychology there is a trichotomous view of the world, the other and the self. There's an outer self, and there is also an inner self. But there is also another that's shining a light, which is your super conscious, and when you turn to the light it becomes a truth. So, there are three players on the stage; it's not just you and the others. There is a cosmic consciousness that becomes your reality.

I remember I used this concept in a workshop for change management practitioners in Berlin using an image of a horse and chariot. With a Western psychological perspective you would focus on where the horse is going; what is its direction and who is leading the horse somewhere. But in Indian psychology, you would also consider the ground the horse is running on and the visor controlling the horse. So, if we ask the question "who is running the chariot?" is it your sense of self; or another (the horse perhaps, or spectators spooking the horse). So, the Indian perspective brings this image together in a fuller way; allowing you to explore the things that are motivating / or detracting from the journey of the chariot.

Angela: Thank you for that rich example illustrating different cultural perspectives. Returning to leadership theories with have talked about several different models such as authoritarian and servant. Do you find these useful descriptions?

Sakshi: In hindsight, I was using these models while navigating through my leadership roles using whatever style suited the people and the situation. One theory I really like is the social identity theory of leadership; defined by Alex Haslam (see the beginning of the interview). I find this theory helpful because it suggests it is not charisma, or authority that attracts people to a leader. It more about people being attracted to someone who is advancing a shared sense of "us" that the followers can identify with. So, this is not about the leader influencing you to do this or because this is their vision. What we are saying is that we are acting together because this is our project; and this is our identity. This resonates with my style so well. When you are asking people to follow, you can't be a leader unless people are liking what you're saying. So, as a leader, you need to know all about your followers.

I hate being seen as a saviour; you know, coming across as an expert. For me it's much more; I'm here with you. I'm sharing the discomfort. Let's figure this out together. This maintains long-term credibility. Central to all these topics are concepts of fairness, legitimacy and sustainability; but not to use fluffy language. This is about real stuff and particularly about how we will actually get this project done.

Currently I work in the private sector; finance, sustainability and technology. These are very fast paced industries and, as psychologists, we can feel a bit removed from their reality. Our language might be technically correct, but it doesn't translate too well because it doesn't mean much in other contexts. Some of our psychology makes political work or profit the enemy; and this is in total contrast to what these industries are trying to do; build profit, and the leader is there to exert influence and also advance their career. So, I think it is important to be honest but do it in a way that is realistic and trying to build something sustainable.

Angela: Yes, I can see how realism bridges gaps between person centred and output centred contexts. In your current role how do you advise your clients about important aspects of leadership?

Sakshi: Currently, as a senior management consultant I work across different assets or industries. Typically, I work in water, aviation and energy industries. I advise them on their people strategy based on organizational design or designing an operating model for them or capacity assessment and building. Also to develop resilience by organizational and leadership development. It's really interesting because as the industry changes, my context changes; but the application is often the same.

Another hat I wear for Arup is working with the aviation industry in India developing and growing that market. Other work, for example, in South Africa is varied; whether it's at governmental level exploring what impacts on the UK or other governments; or large scale projects in these nations. It is interesting work, quite full on but the common thread is helping leadership.

I am building a toolkit for the leaders who are in charge of multidisciplinary multi-specialist teams in mega projects. By this I mean the projects involve billions of pounds of investment, are operating globally, lasting over 10 years or more; and are highly visibility and high-risk projects. We set up the teams, so they operate as one team and support the leaders through the project journey.

Angela: So, what are the features in this toolkit?

Sakshi: A set of building blocks needed to set up a project correctly; things like capability development. We start at the beginning with onboarding; how to find the right people? How do you bring them up to speed. What will the project values be? How will you create a sense of new identity for people who all have different identities, and what will their normative behaviours be? How will people collaborate and have clarity in their own roles. There are

challenges to transfer and share knowledge across the project as well as continuing to innovate. The team needs to be transformed into a high achieving delivery unit. And, of course, during these processes we must make sure that equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is considered along with maintaining peoples' well-being.

The building blocks may change at different stages of the project; with some being ramped up, and others ramped down. Mine, and others' roles are to act as a sort of catalyst; being one step removed from this team. We offer advice to this team throughout the project life cycle and make changes to help them to succeed.

Angela: Thank you Sakshi, for these insights. To finish can I ask you about an address you gave in 2025 at the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) in London about gender equity and justice. Could you tell us some of the points you were wanting to communicate.

Sakshi: Yes, it was about EDI and what it means in the current setup of the world. I was coming at it from a position of how we can make a lasting impact. It was a simulcast about gender equity and justice. For example, how do we make sure that these strategies stay current. There were three of us in London and others in Osaka, Japan at the International Expo 2025 (RSA celebrates UK-Japan ties at Expo 2025 – The RSA). The panel was rather like a news show; answering questions from different perspectives. My key topic was intersectionality (Gender equity and justice | RSA & UK AT EXPO 2025 | RSA REPLAY).

Gender equity should address inequalities based on race and disability; and on immigration status as well. We explored these issues and looked at how lived realities can be translated into the policy (rather like the policy work for I was doing for the G20). Lots of questions come up about what we have seen in the policy world. What kind of policies are geared towards gender? What kind of policies are anti-gender and how do we work with countries like Japan, where gender and gender roles have a different meaning to that in the UK? So, we have different types of challenges when it comes to gender.

Angela: So, the issue was about having more encompassing policies that can embrace both nations?

Sakshi: Yes, this is the challenge. So, one of the things I wanted to get across was how we look at language and the barriers we have when it comes to designing solutions around gender equity. It's not just about the spoken or the written word, but about symbols and the way we look at data. One of the key points for me is that if we don't have data, we can't design solutions that will be sustainable. I've seen this happen in practise often when data does not look anything like what the theorist has modelled.

When comes to designing a solution, it's always the hard data that is looked for; and that does not always give us the nuances; which is why some of these solutions don't work. So, we need "warm data"; complex data that lives in stories of peoples' lives that is often ignored when it comes to designing actual solutions (e.g., gender equality solutions, pay gaps). Let me give you

an example. I worked with an international initiative that was explicitly built on eastern philosophies – concepts of collectivism, being, and belonging drawn from traditions that are deeply embedded in cultural and religious life across Asia, Africa and other parts of the world. And yet their data collection process filtered out any knowledge that lacked formal research evidence. This meant that the very traditions they were drawing from: oral histories, spiritual frameworks, lived cultural knowledge, were being discarded because they hadn't been published in western academic journals. In many cases that knowledge exists only in spoken form because the texts were destroyed. The irony was striking: eastern wisdom was shaping the vision, but western research standards were deciding what counted as truth. I pushed strongly for them to find a way to incorporate what I'd call warm data – the knowledge that lives in stories, cultural practice and community experience. We explored using a digital platform to gather this more inclusively from the general population, which showed promise. But ultimately, I wasn't able to shift the core design, and I moved on.

So, building on this the second point I wanted to make was that policy should be co-designed with the groups it affects. This should be done by actually listening to lived experience and not just engaging in consultation (e.g., how often the male and female toilets are used, but asking why). That way it is possible to translate experience into strategy. Qualitative research is very important to move beyond the generic metrics and targets. There are so many other data points that we don't explore thoroughly (e.g., is a building accessible to females, males and other genders; how are people interacting within your building on a daily basis). So, this is an engineering design lens which I've grown accustomed to since working at Arup.

So, these are the big world problems, that engage me. If you think about transition to net zero carbon, sustainability or systems change these are the complex world problems that we're trying to solve and if we don't have gender equity then we won't be able to achieve the solutions to any of these problems. It's counterproductive to not have half of your workforce engaged because it impacts on climate risks as well as solutions. So, an important point I wanted to make was about transparency of the data that is being used in legislation and policy work (e.g., what's working / not working and for whom?).

In all these discissions issues of gender kept coming up. When I was at the G20 focusing on trade economy; none of that works without gender equity. This is a big, and difficult topic that is treated very differently across countries; with some countries refusing to put the word gender in their policy documents. So there remains disagreement that genders actually have a role to play in macroeconomic levers. This denies a large percentage of the country's population, whether or not they're within the workforce, or not having a part to play in the economy. So, we can't just leave the word gender behind. We have to explore why this is such a big problem for them? So, as we found at the G20 and in this panel we can't leave gender out of policy; and it is not just a single issue.

So, to focus on the biggest and most complex problems the world has right now we need to have: a) high quality, consistent time sensitive data; b) financing for solutions; and c) sources where we share knowledge and build capacity and on an open, sharing basis.

Angela: Thank you Sakshi, that's a really strong and personal insight into global issues based on your extensive negotiating experience. To end is there anything else about leadership and its practice that you would like to discuss?

Sakshi: I'd just like to say that we need to look out for people who are working at the intersection of these complex problems. Their work today might not make a lot of sense, but they're integrating more than one or two types of industries or thinking styles; they are appreciating complex problems from different perspectives and are developing solutions; they are comfortable with ambiguity. These people will be leaders, or leaders in the future, and they need support and development to build them up, because the intersection is a very lonely place. Nobody's there with you; nobody gets it. It's hard to articulate, but we need those leaders as they will drive the future.

Angela: That's a wonderful insight Sakshi. It reminds me of systems theory and those people who can span the boundaries of different systems: boundary spanners (e.g., Richter et al. 2006). Because they see multiple perspectives people don't really understand them and they need to be protected and nurtured.

Sakshi: Exactly, they're not understood by anybody. People will feel "Oh, you're too much hard work. I don't know how to deal with you; I don't know how to grow you". But they need the most nourishing because they have the solutions. I really agree with the notion of boundary spanning; we need to open up our perspectives and integrate different aspects of knowledge; like psychology and economics, to deal with these complex problems. I'd like to think that I'm trying to do just that, particularly bringing sustainability, finance and technology closer to psychology. I've dedicated the last few years to this work and will continue to do so.

Angela: Many thanks, Sakshi for this wonderful discussion.

Sakshi: Thank you as always, Angela.

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