

In this episode, we speak to Ashwini Hingne Manager Climate at WRI or World Resources Institute.

Ashwini has a bachelor's degree in Chemical Engineering and a Master's in Public and Economic policy, specializing in Environmental and Resource Economics. Her work focuses on areas such as carbon pricing and sustainable development. So armed with an engineering background, she applies her learning in science and technology to the pressing need to tackle global warming.

Ashwini believes her science background will pave the way for others to work towards 'climate smart development'

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You can also **read** along as you **listen** to the Word to the WISE host *Shivraj Parshad* in conversation with *Ashwini*:

**Host:** Ashwini a real pleasure to have you on the Word to the WISE podcast.

**Ashwini Hingne:** Thanks, Shivraj it's a pleasure to be here. Thank you.

**Host:** Your background is a rather interesting mix of engineering and economics and climate change. Now, if you were to look back at your formative years, studying science. What led you to what you're doing today?

**Ashwini Hingne:** I wish I could say that I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and I pursued it and here I am, but, uh, frankly, it's been a series of decisions and choices at different points in time. If I were to look back at my childhood days though, I remember I was always fascinated by the sciences and particularly chemistry. So even as a child, I remember I used to read every word on the back of packets and bottles to read all these ingredients and components. I think even during engineering, in fact, I thoroughly enjoyed studying all the chemical reactions and the designing and optimizing of processes, which I think a lot of people find very boring. So, but what I think truly attracted me to the sciences and especially chemistry is how I could relate it to the real world in so many ways. But when I completed my engineering, I really wanted to work in a space where I could use my learnings and skills in ways that could make things better. So not just at the process level, but also for the society and the world around us. And that's where climate change came in. So, my first job was as a climate change and sustainability consultant, where I helped businesses improve their environmental and climate performance while sustaining and improving financial outcomes.

But a few years there just left me jaded. I mean, I felt disillusioned by the greenwashing and a lack of real actions, even where there was intent. So, what I learned was that climate actions, not just by corporates, but also by individuals, nations or societies are directly dependent on the economic case for it. And those policies that create the right incentives are what actually lead to real change. And that's why I then pursued my master's in economics and public policy at the London school of Economics. There were very few options to move from engineering to something like economics and policy in India at the time. But I think things have changed a lot now. I believe tackling climate crisis really needs not just the technical solutions, but also the ability to view things and frame things from the economic policy and people lenses. So here I am at the World Resources Institute where my job really beautifully brings together my science background, my experience of working with companies, my economics and policy skills, as well as of course, my passion for a sustainable world.

**Host:** That's so interesting. Ashwini, so while you had the option to choose this path, then went about fulfilling your passion and your mission. When you look around at your peers at the time when you were doing engineering, would you say a large number of them stuck to the science and engineering field? Or did they veer off for reasons beyond their control?

**Ashwini Hingne:** Um, well, it's hard to say, but I would say yes, but if you ask me how many of my peers are still in pure engineering jobs then probably a fewer proportion. But today the world is quite flexible, and I really believe that the sciences really laid the foundation of mine and their careers. So, I know a lot of people who are really doing great things while using what they've learned, but, but really making a difference in the world and in ways that may not appear to be purely engineering or science. But I think that that the foundation really still remains.

**Host:** But when you say in terms of proportion, you're still saying it is a lower proportion than, than what you'd hoped it would be. So, what do you think is preventing many women, scientists or engineers from taking their careers to the next level? Switching from excellence in academia. To research and careers and jobs linked to science and engineering at a later stage. What do you think is really holding back?

**Ashwini Hingne:** So, there are two parts of this. And specifically, when we talk about women, I think one is the bias against their competence and the other is the bias against their commitment to what they're doing. So just to give you an example, I graduated at the top of my batch in chemical engineering, in my college, but the top engineering companies at the time didn't even consider women for interviews. So even my grades didn't matter at the time. And that should say something right? I mean, women have gone to space, but they're not considered for plant jobs. And frankly, in my job, I have actually gone on top of wind turbines. I wandered the remotest part of the country. I've been to chemical plants and power plants, but the bias still remains, even though the exclusion is much lesser today. Even today in my field, not so much in my organization, but in general, we hear things like Oh wear a sari, or take a male colleague along for your government official interviews in order to be taken seriously. So, women have to be a certain way or dress a certain way in order to be considered experts while men just have to show up in the same group. And add to that ageism, which again, is something that is quite prevalent in the policy space. Where if you are a young female professional, you're treated very well. Almost like it's a pleasant wonder to have you there, but that's about it. Decisions are almost certainly taken by older men in the room based on the opinions of other older men. And these kinds of biases actually play a lot on women themselves because then it leads them to self-doubt. So, I think it's really plays a

lot, even in women's own sort of self-confidence. And then the other part, which I said is the perceived lack of commitment. So, women, have to keep constantly proving their commitment to the job. For example, early in my career, in one of the interviews that I gave at the leading consulting firm, I was asked about my marriage plans because they didn't want to hire someone who would then eventually leave the job and move to the U S where their husband might be located. Of course, the same question is never asked to male candidates and it's tragic that at the time, I didn't even realize I shouldn't have to answer these questions. Uh, and this doesn't happen just once. I mean, it happens not just at the beginning, but also mid-career when they choose to have children or at any promotion, where their commitment to the job is doubted while men's careers don't really get affected as much. And in fact, there is they're presumed to be more committed to their job when they get married or have children.

**Host:** And just looking at your career trajectory, how did you Ashwini really overcome these obvious biases? How did you tackle them?

**Ashwini Hingne:** But I think as women, we need to fight these biases and prejudices on a daily basis with every choice we make. So, what really helps me and what I think helps is to really be part of efforts, to move people in organizations in the right direction. So be through every conversation you have or discussions you have, or really pushing for better policies and practices within the space that you're working in. And one important thing is to always remember that when you end up in a decision-making place, be it as a recruiter or as a supervisor, it's important to be conscious of the effort consciously take efforts to not allow bias in choosing candidates for hiring or promotions. So, I think these are a few things that really are empowering and that that can help change things, not just for yourself, but also for those around you.

**Host:** And really speaking up. Now Ashwini coming back to your particular work in climate change, it is a rather broad area. So, what is your focus at WRI and in the field of policy change at large?

**Ashwini Hingne:** Well so our work at World Resources Institute, uh, touches upon various themes at the intersection of environment and development. So be it cities, transport, energy, climate change, simply put the overarching objective is to find ways in which we can pursue our economic goals and development goals while ensuring sustainability. So, one of the things we keep seeing over and over again, and especially we saw with COVID in 2020 is that everything is highly interconnected. You cannot isolate economic or climate actions from their social and environmental consequences. So, the biggest questions for all of us are to identify, pathways that not only ensured macroeconomic growth and conservation of climate and resources, but to also improve the quality of life at the local level through better health outcomes lesser degradation of the local environment, better jobs and better incomes for the people affected. So, my policy research really focuses on identifying policies and measures that can help us achieve our developmental and economic goals in the most efficient, equitable, and practical manner.

**Host:** And for someone listening to this podcast, if they were to get a sense of what you do, particularly to make sure that there's accountability and that policy catches up with those parameters. that you just spoke about. What is it that you do that really pushes the envelope?

**Ashwini Hingne:** So, the way we look at things is for example, when we look at an intervention such as renewable power, which is something that I'm working on right now is when we look at such interventions, which are essentially technological interventions, we only look at them from the lens of ok is this really reducing emissions, uh, and is this financially feasible? But looking beyond that, we try to objectively understand across the different sustainable development, parameters be it the social angle be the environmental angle. How does it fare when it actually is deployed at the local level? So How does it affect the people whose lands are being used? How does it affect the water availability in the nearby area? Or how does it really help the employment in the area or does not help the local employment. So, you're trying to, in economic terms, capture the value of the deployment and to understand whether at the societal level this still makes sense. And if, if it, if the returns are high enough economically, and by capturing all of these underlying sorts of impacts, then yes, then these are interventions that need to be taken forward. And if not, what are the ways in which the impact can be managed and what are the ways in which the positive impacts can be enhanced? Right. So, we're trying to, through our analysis of what's happening, you're trying to also identify ways in which the deployment can be made more sustainable. So not just the technology, but also how it is implemented matters and that's the kind of analysis that we try to bring in. And then we provide this kind of analysis in the public forum for not just policy makers, but also investors and project proponents who are actually doing this work on the ground.

**Host:** And in the past, we have seen the sector mired in a bit of controversy when it comes to being more diverse and inclusive. Has that changed or do you believe more needs to be done?

**Ashwini Hingne:** Definitely there's always scope for more to be done, but I have to acknowledge that there is a lot more awareness now, there is a, there are a lot of, lot more efforts that are made to be more inclusive and to remove barriers. But I do think it will take time, one of the challenges that I do see in this is the tokenism, which is when there's just sort of this demonstration of a certain percentage of women in the organization or having a woman on the panel without real change in mindset and attitudes. So that is a challenge, but at the same time, things take time and organization policies would need to be designed to reduce such bias, be it in recruitment or workplace culture or promotion or incomes. And these things are sort of far off, but I think we are inching there slowly.

**Host:** And how important are more inspirational women role models? Did you have any one person or persons who inspired you and impacted your journey?

**Ashwini Hingne:** It may sound very cheesy, but to be honest, I find I have always found inspiration all around me. So right from growing up, watching my mother excel at her profession while juggling kids and her parents and other family commitments to almost all women, really. women at work who are managing personal roles to even women who are not professionally employed, but I value in the roles that they play. So, I don't want to put women on a pedestal here, but I think it's hard to find women who are not inspiring. But what I do think, we need more of are women leaders. Because despite everything, there's still fewer women at the top. And it is almost as though women who do make it are the exceptions and not the norm. And that won't change unless the gender roles are less rigid. So that is unless there's more equitable distribution of responsibilities and normalization of men also being primary caregivers at home. So, we need more role models and leaders let's say Jacinda Ardern who most recently has shown that women leaders can even get countries out of the

toughest situations. And we also need more men role models who so to say do it all in inverted quotes.

**Host:** Exactly. And like you said, more leadership positions for women, but just following on from that, what do you believe has to change in the fields of science and engineering to showcase more diverse talent?

**Ashwini Hingne:** So, like I said, I think a lot of what I already said does include that. So, one is to change policies, right from recruitment to, within the organization, work cultures. And at the end of the day, I think we need to also speak more about men who are handling multiple roles because the day that gets normalized, I think the, the burden on women to really be doing everything and excelling at work, sort of goes down. So be it for example, the maternity leave policies that companies have. I mean, women across the board now mandatorily have six months, but men rarely get that opportunity to contribute to their families. And at the same time, women suffered in their careers because of the leave that they take. And I'm not speaking from personal experience because we do come from an organization that's quite inclusive that way. But I think there is a penalty globally, which is called as a motherhood penalty. And in fact, research shows that mothers eventually end up being more productive than their peers who are, who are not mothers or parents. And I think evidence such as this needs to be taken into consideration when taking decisions at an organizational level, then I think that does apply to science and engineering because of the biases that I spoke about, but I think it also applies largely to any field or to our society as well.

**Host:** So, if I were to ask you, what is your own vision for yourself professionally? Where do you go from here?

**Ashwini Hingne:** Well, so in the field that I am things take time, impact also takes time. And so, you realize that small incremental changes matter a lot more than big bang changes. So even though it can be slightly frustrating, I think the most fulfilling thing for me is to be able to work in the space that I feel strongly about. Alongside the brightest minds in the field, uh, while bringing together all of the things that I spoke about. So, my education experience or my passion to really be part of the change that I truly believe in. What I do look forward to is moving the conversation of what I'm trying to do from just climate versus development, which is what happens, mostly in the public realm to really climate smart development. So, from finding ways to be more, to be a low carbon society while ensuring that it is improving the lives of everyone and not just a few. So that is what I am professionally sort of most excited to do.

**Host:** And if there was one message you would like to leave for our listeners, advice, insight, words of encouragement, what would that be?

**Ashwini Hingne:** Firstly, for our entire generation or millennials as we like to call ourselves or are called, I think it, it, like you said, it's an interesting mix of engineering and economics. I think all of this sort of the world right now is so flexible and so open to such different things. All it takes is a lot of hard work, patience and time things take time. Right? So that is one advice I would give everyone. That it all sounds great in hindsight, but it takes a lot of perseverance to keep moving forward. Especially to women I would say, please, don't second guess yourself. And it may not be always possible to fight bias but take every opportunity you get to speak up for yourself and for other women and men to create a more equal

workspace that we are part of and try to be part of change whenever possible, because that is empowering in itself.

**Host:** Ashwini Hingne, thank you ever so much for speaking to the Word to the WISE podcast.

**Ashwini Hingne:** Thank you Shivraj it was a pleasure. Thanks.