

Providing a Vital Voice for Women

An Interview with Susan Ann Davis, Chair of the Board, and Alyse Nelson, President and Chief Executive Officer, Vital Voices

EDITORS' NOTE As its Chairman, Susan Davis has grown Susan Davis International into a global public affairs and strategic communications powerhouse. She was the first International President of the International Women's Forum, now representing 5,000 women leaders; President of the National Association of Women Business Owners in Washington, D.C.;



Susan Ann Davis

and named by the U.S. government as National Women in Business Advocate of the Year. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin, she received the Distinguished Alumni Award and was honored by the Knights Templar with their highest award as a global humanitarian. She shares the Asian Women of Influence Global Empowerment Award with Pepsi CEO Indra Nooyi and Prince Charles.

A Co-Founder of Vital Voices, Alyse Nelson has worked for the organization for 15 years, serving as Vice President and Senior Director of Programs before assuming her current role as President and CEO in 2009. Previously, she served as Deputy Director of the Vital Voices Global Democracy Initiative at the U.S. Department of State. From July 1996 to July 2000, Nelson worked with the President's Interagency Council on Women at the White House and U.S. Department of State. Nelson is the author of the best-selling book, *Vital Voices: The Power of Women Leading Change Around the World*. She completed her graduate degree work at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. In 2006, she was honored by her alma mater, Emerson College, with the distinguished speaker award.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Vital Voices Global Partnership (www.vitalvoices.org) is the preeminent nongovernmental organization that identifies, trains, and empowers emerging women leaders and social entrepreneurs around the globe, enabling them to create a better world for us all. Their international staff and team of over 1,000 partners, pro bono experts, and leaders – including senior government, corporate, and NGO executives – have trained and mentored more than 14,000 emerging women leaders from over 144 countries in Africa, Asia, Eurasia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East since 1997. These women have returned home to train and mentor more than 500,000 additional women and girls in their communities.



Alyse Nelson

What was the initial mission behind creating the organization?

Davis: It was an effort to provide a convening platform for women as Mrs. Clinton and Secretary Albright were traveling the world. The paradigm shift evolved as data began to emerge from multinational bodies and as the World Bank declared that investing in women is

smart economics. Women reinvest 90 percent of their income providing food, housing, health care, education, and jobs for themselves, their families, and their communities. The global economic crisis brought about even greater understanding. In almost every country, women are more than half of the population and the competitiveness of countries and corporations is directly linked to educating and employing women. Our mission is to identify and invest in women who have the potential for being great leaders in their villages, their cities or their countries.

How does the Vital Voices model work?

Nelson: We go into countries to find the leaders who have a bold vision for change – women who are emerging talents in economic development and building and growing businesses, and those trying to affect policy and create more transparent government or who are human rights leaders.

We invest in them so they can take their vision for change to their countries to scale. We sometimes give grants, but often, it's about investing in their human and social capital, providing training so they can grow that business; it's connecting them to a network of their peers; and it's connecting them to mentors who can guide them. We leverage our regional networks of women in business – currently in 19 countries in three regions, Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean – to provide our membership of more than 10,000 with the connections and training they need to enhance their impact.

We also provide greater credibility for the women we work with through media engagement, connecting them with top leaders, and honoring them through Vital Voices or partner organizations.

This is far more sustainable than our going into a country and trying to create and sustain the change ourselves.

Is it challenging to find those leaders?

Davis: The greater challenge is to find the resources for support because the number of emerging women leaders is growing in every country, as is our network. We initially learned of women through the U.S. embassies and multinational bodies. Now we also learn of them through the 14,000 emerging women leaders we have invested in and who have gone on to train and invest in over a half million others in their countries and beyond.

Are you surprised by the success of the program?

Davis: The women we work with have re-envisioned their immediate world and beyond. It's not our success so much as theirs – we are only the catalyst.

Are you satisfied with the support you have garnered?

Nelson: Over the past five to seven years, we have seen corporations come into this

“Over the next 25 years, nothing will do more to build a more peaceful, more prosperous, and more sustainable world than the empowerment of women and girls. As an innovative and collaborative leader, Vital Voices is making a profound and lasting difference for the better.”

-Muhtar Kent, Chairman and CEO, The Coca-Cola Company

space, looking to align their philanthropic interests with their business bottom-line interests, and understanding that women are an opportunity for long-term investment.

Corporations are coming to the table with great resources, insight, and strategy. They have been partners in developing initiatives.

When companies like Walmart, Bank of America, and Coca-Cola are choosing to make targeted investments in advancing women, we see a shift in perception and culture. A few years ago, Walmart decided to double the number of women-owned businesses that they would buy from as part of their global supply chain. This sends a message to governments and other companies that are part of that supply chain that they have to pay attention to this critical economic and leadership force. ●