



Task Force 6
Accelerating SDGs: Exploring New
Pathways to the 2030 Agenda



REIMAGINING GENDER POLITICS IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION: AN AGENDA FOR THE G20

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Abstract



Although gender equality is an explicit goal in all international processes, women still confront a systemically unequal world. This policy brief identifies five reasons for why development cooperation has failed to address gender inequality: (i) inadequate funding (ii) inadequate systems to capture comprehensive gender data to report on impacts on gender justice, (iii) shortage of adequately trained staff and resources and poor monitoring and evaluation, (iv) poor participation from local organisations in developing

countries, and (v) a de-politicised ‘smart economics’ approach to gender.


Given the G20’s crucial role in global governance, the importance of its member countries as international development actors, and the forum’s commitment to gender equality, it is the ideal platform to incite drastic change in the international development architecture to promote gender equality. Among other things, this brief recommends shedding the ‘smart economics’ approach and establishing a separate G20 track on gender.



The Challenge




1



Gender equality is an explicit goal and guiding principle in all international processes and commitments. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Despite significant efforts to mainstream gender concerns into international development cooperation, gender equality continues to be a distant goal. According to the 2022 Global Gender Gap Report, at the current pace, it will take 132 years to close the global gender gap.¹ Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has derailed gender equality by slowing down and even reversing earlier gains on women's empowerment and rights. Global evidence suggests that the pandemic reinforced existing gendered social and economic disparities, and led to increases in the burden of unpaid care work and incidences of domestic and intimate partner violence.² Women accounted for nearly 45 percent of global employment losses in 2020, while the share of women in managerial positions remained unchanged from 2019 to 2020 at 28.3 percent.³ Further, increased care responsibilities, the need to generate incomes, the suspension of social services, and school closures also pushed several children from

disadvantaged backgrounds into forced early marriages. According to the 2022 Sustainable Development Goals Report, by 2030, 10 million more girls are likely to be child brides, in addition to the pre-pandemic projected figure of 100 million.⁴ Despite being overrepresented in the agricultural sector, women continue to lack ownership rights over agricultural land in most developing countries, which increases their dependence on male members of the households. Globally, as of 2019, women represent less than one-third members of parliament in the G20 countries; additionally, 18 percent of women earn less than men in 18 of the G20 countries.⁵

Although forums like the Beijing Platform for Action, the Commission on the Status of Women, and Agenda 2030 have been useful in coalescing efforts in advancing gender justice and equity, international organisations have largely failed to bring about transformational changes in the lives of women. While significant improvements have been made in development indicators like the maternal mortality rate and primary school enrolment, little progress has been made in women's participation in workforce, governance, and asset ownership.⁶




There are several reasons why international development cooperation has failed to address gender inequality and truly empower women—(i) inadequate funding for gender specific programming, (ii) inadequate systems to capture comprehensive gender data to report on impacts on gender justice and equity, (iii) shortage of adequate trained staff and resources and poor monitoring and evaluation, (iv) poor participation from smaller local organisations in developing countries, and (v) a de-politicised ‘smart economics’/ ‘efficiency approach’ to gender.

The lack of adequate funds for gender-specific programmes is a major barrier. According to the OECD estimates, after a decade of rising, the share of official development assistance for gender equality declined from 44.5 percent in 2018-19 to 44 percent in 2020-21.⁷ Moreover, experts argue that more than 99 percent of the resources earmarked for gender programmes are directed to governments, large organisations, or to the budgets of development organisations (in the form of salaries for consultants and other administrative costs) instead of being channelled to feminist movements or grassroots organisations, which are

the real drivers of transformative and sustainable change.⁸ Further, due to the dearth of gender-disaggregated aid data, it is difficult to get a full picture of development spending on gender and actual outcomes. Gender disaggregated data is often not published in a central repository in an easily accessible manner, and is often incomplete and incomparable.⁹

Experts also argue that commitments to gender equality have not been followed by adequate staff capacity and monitoring and evaluation.¹⁰ Many sector-specific programmes miss opportunities for multidimensional action because this requires a knowledge of gender and other sector-specific or country/context-specific skills that are mostly absent in development professionals who have limited skillsets.¹¹ The composition and workings of international development organisations also affects outcomes. For instance, development officials who initiate partnerships often lack an understanding of the local realities of the countries they operate in.¹² International development organisations often operate under a clear set of binding activities, and have greater say in project design, complex




management systems and necessary deliverables, excluding smaller gender-based organisations that operate at the local level.¹³ Smaller organisations in developing countries that have a larger development footprint often lack the capability to comply with the complex procedures required by international development organisations.

However, the most important concern is that international organisations have presented a de-politicised narrative of gender equality that is exclusively based on measurable progress. In other words, what cannot be measured has been ignored or left out. Most international development organisations and large non-profit organisations present gender equality as ‘smart economics’, with an emphasis on maximising and quantifying impacts and results. Women’s labour and productivity improvement is seen only as a tool to increase economic growth. There is a complete absence of any moral underpinnings of right to equality and justice or power imbalance in the discussion on gender equality under the rubric of smart economics. It is important to recognise that gender equality is a deeply political issue and is not a harmless concept; rather, it challenges the existing distribution of

power, advantages, and resources.¹⁴ Therefore, as a relational issue and as a matter of structural inequality, gender equality should be addressed directly by governments, development institutions, and society.¹⁵

These challenges occur alongside ever-evolving trends in gender politics and the prevalence of colonial and racial thinking, within which the international development sector is built and sustained. In the context of systemic injustices, colonial logics, racist rhetoric, rising nationalism, and emerging global crises (such as the pandemic), these challenges compound in systems, institutions, policies, and practices that continue to undermine progress in gender-responsive policies and practices. To change this current context, international development agencies and other actors in the sector can play a key role.

Although international development agencies hold a critical position in the development sector due to their ability to shape funding infrastructure and policy, their approach to gender often undermines the extent to which they can contribute practices and policies that inform transformative change.



This change requires a more robust analysis of gender as it relates to power and, therefore, the (re)production of inequities. A feminist approach to gender is instructive in this regard. By adopting a feminist perspective, international development agencies can move beyond singular narratives of gender to a more nuanced analysis

that accounts for the intersections of gender justice with other injustices, for instance, racial injustice, injustice towards refugees, violence and injustice during wars and conflicts, and caste-based injustice. A feminist approach to gender provides analytical tools and expands the possibilities for progress in gender programming and policy.



The G20's Role

2






As a forum of 19 countries and the European Union (EU) that represents about 85 percent of global GDP, 75 percent of international trade, and two-thirds of the global population, the G20 encapsulates tremendous economic and political power.¹⁶ Annual meetings of heads of states enhances its effectiveness and allows it to play a crucial role in global governance. Developed countries like the US, Japan, Germany, France, and the UK along with the EU are the largest providers of development cooperation. In 2021, the US's official development assistance was US\$42.3 billion, the UK's US\$15.8 billion, Germany's US\$32.2 billion, Japan's US\$17.6 billion, and the EU's US\$19 billion.¹⁷ Development partners from the Global South, such as China, India, and Brazil, have expanded the scale of their development cooperation programmes over the last two decades. China's development cooperation reached US\$2.9 billion in 2020, with a strong focus on Agenda 2030, including on gender equality.¹⁸ In 2020, the Brazilian Cooperation Agency contributed about US\$33.2 million for sustainable development through the cross-border transfer of resources to other developing countries.¹⁹ Although

a comparison between OECD and non-OECD donors is difficult due to major differences in definitions, data indicates the growing importance of several of the G20's developing countries as international development actors. As such, the G20 summits offer important opportunities to shape the global development agenda by enabling conversations between the developed and developing countries.

Although the G20 leaders first addressed gender equality at the 2009 London Summit, the first important step was made at the 2012 Los Cabos Summit in Mexico where the poor participation of women in social and economic activities was identified as a significant barrier to economic development.²⁰ The following summit in Saint Petersburg, Russia, focused on financial education for women and women's entrepreneurial capabilities. The 2014 Brisbane Action Plan highlighted the need for a greater participation of women in the labour force and an improvement in the quality of women's employment. The G20 leaders also agreed to the goal of reducing the gender gap in labour force participation by 25 percent in their countries based on national circumstances.²¹ The most important




step to ensure the mainstreaming of gender issues into the G20 process was the formation of the W20 (Women 20), an official engagement group, during the Turkish presidency in 2015.

While the G20's gender commitments initially focused on increasing female labour force participation and improving working conditions for women,²² since 2015, the focus has expanded to women entrepreneurs, and farmers, and increasing the participation of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.²³ A commitment to end gender-based violence was made in 2017. In 2020, the G20 acknowledged the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and resolved to address gender inequality. Under the Indonesian presidency in 2022, the G20 emphasised greater investments in high-quality and affordable care facilities, digital technologies, and MSME infrastructure.²⁴ The current Indian presidency lays special emphasis on gender equality and “women-led development”. The three focus areas under India's presidency are: (i) Women's Entrepreneurship: A win-win for Equity and Economy; (ii) Partnership for promoting women's leadership at all levels, including at the grassroots;

and (iii) Education, the key to women's empowerment and equal workforce participation.²⁵

Still, the G20's focus on gender equality has not resulted in concrete action. For starters, the word share devoted to gender has grown from a mere 3 percent at the 2009 London Summit to 16 percent at the Rome Summit in 2021.²⁶ Between 2008 and 2021, the G20 made 80 core commitments and 39 related commitments on gender equality, but average compliance among the member countries was 62 percent (against an average compliance of 72 percent across all subjects).²⁷ This is largely due to the poor monitoring of these gender commitments. The G20 countries and development agencies have failed to make adequate investments in several important areas. For instance, as the pandemic hit women hard, the member countries pushed for digitalisation, but women's concerns around access to technology and skills were not addressed. Similarly, as the world shifted to the hybrid work culture, governments and development agencies failed to address the concerns of women in the care economy and those of victims of domestic and intimate partner violence.



Given the importance of the G20 as a forum for international cooperation, the increasing role of the member countries in international development, and the grouping's commitment to gender


equality, it is the ideal platform to spur drastic change in the international development architecture to promote gender equality.



Recommendations

3






It is vital to safeguard women's rights and promote gender equality, but international development cooperation in its current form cannot address the systemic injustices that women and girls face. The fuller participation of women and girls in social, political, and economic spheres (including in leadership roles) requires a fundamental departure from the current flawed approach of pursuing narrow economic goals coupled with modest welfare measures to a feminist approach that addresses structural problems like unequal power relations between genders, the societal attitudes, and norms governing women's lives. This policy brief proposes the following recommendations to accelerate achieving SDG 5.

- **Increase the flow of funds for gender equality:** Rising international commitments to gender equality have not been met with concurrent increases in funding towards programmes that address the issue. As such, there is an urgent need to increase the flow of funds to such programmes.
- **Maximise gains from international development through better data and investments in human resources:** Merely increasing the volume of funding towards gender equality does not necessarily fortify gender justice due to issues such as the lack of gender-disaggregated data and the shortage of trained staff to plan, implement, and monitor gender-specific programmes. Therefore, resources and efforts should be channelled towards addressing these challenges. Adequate investments should be made towards collecting and publishing gender disaggregated data and development professionals should be trained in sector/context-specific skills and on gender issues.
- **Shed the 'smart economics' approach to gender equality and focus on equity and justice:** International development organisations must shed the efficiency or 'smart economics' approach to gender equality. Gender equality should be pursued as a goal rather than a means to

improve productivity or enhance growth. International development should focus on addressing negative societal norms and attitudes that govern women's lives and hinder women's participation and leadership in social, economic, and political processes. An example of development cooperation focusing on gender equality and grassroots development rather than economic growth is India's 'Solar Mama' project. Through the ITEC Programme, the Indian government trains illiterate rural women from remote non-electrified villages to become solar engineers and bring electricity to their villages. In 2016, about 800 'solar mamas' from 78 countries, trained through 16 ITEC courses, electrified 50,000 homes in over 500 villages.²⁸ Similar efforts has also been initiated by India in 14 Pacific Island countries, where 2,800 houses were electrified by rural women.²⁹ International agencies should support and scale such low-cost development solutions developed in the Global South.

- **Greater participation from local organisations in developing countries:** One of the most effective ways to achieve transformative change for gender equality and women's empowerment is greater collaboration with local women's organisations. Countries must consider shifting resources to smaller and local grassroots organisations and simplifying processes to ensure their participation. Local organisations should also have a greater say in the design of projects.
- **Separate G20 track on gender under the Sherpa track:** Given the importance attached to women-led development under India's presidency, the G20 should set up a separate working group under the Sherpa track to discuss ways through which international development can address gender equality and bring about transformative change in the lives of women and girls.




- **Office of ‘Ambassador-at-Large for Gender-Responsive Budgeting’ in G20 countries:**

The G20 countries should also consider setting up an office of an ‘Ambassador-at-Large for Gender-Responsive Budgeting’ in their foreign ministries to respond to the proper utilisation of funds for gender mainstreaming in multilateral

development co-operation. The office of the ambassador-at-large can monitor gender budgeting and impact assessments in development assistance and co-operation programmes, and track the progress on gender equality in their country through chapters in an annual white paper.

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