



Can India's G20 presidency offer women transformative change?

By Bulan Lahiri

As India flamboyantly strode on to the G20-presidency stage in December 2022,¹ it marked this key milestone with a novel offering: turning the stage lights on, and thereby mainstreaming, women's empowerment as one of the focal points of the deliberations. This means that for the first time since the inception of the collective, women-led development will feature among the core cross-cutting areas identified by host country India to foreground at the Leader's Summit – the very highest level of the annual G20 meet where Heads of State discuss and debate the most pressing global challenges of the day. Although women's empowerment, gender equality and women's issues in general have, over the years, gained some momentum in G20 processes through the **Women 20 (W20)**, the Gender Working Group within Civil 20 and Empower (the G20's Alliance for the Progression and Representation of Women's Economic Representation), the gender conversation has, for the most part, remained relatively sidelined and limited, if included at all.

Now, nine months into its presidency, how is India attempting to make good its promise?

The **Think 20's (T20)**² recently released final communique³ may shed some light on the question. Instituted in 2012 during the Mexican presidency, the T20 was set up as an official engagement group of the G20: a body comprising top-tier academics, think tanks, and global experts, independent of national governments, that would serve as an 'ideas bank' for policy issues. The 2023 Communique draws on the eight-month-long deliberations, insights, and statements of the T20's seven Task Forces (framed around the Indian presidency's focus areas of **green development, climate finance, women-led development, Lifestyles for Environment {LiFE}, data for development, digital transformations, and reform of multilateral institutions**), policy briefs authored by reputed researchers and scholars as well as ruminations from the Ideas Box (a T20-India initiative to encourage the public to engage with the G20 process), to come up with recommendations for the G20's working groups, ministerial meets and, ultimately, Leaders' Summit on September 9-10 to help deliver concrete policy measures.

Asserting that **“mainstreaming women-led development”** is essential to ensuring that gender inequality no longer remains “an impediment to achieving sustainable and equitable development”, the 200 delegates from 35 nations and 110 institutions who convened at the Think 20 Summit in Mysuru reached consensus on the following over-arching pathways to achieve this goal, according to the T20 communique:

- Fostering increased female workforce participation and supporting economic empowerment; helping countries implement a comprehensive set of policies centered around improved gender budgeting; enhancing women's employability in emerging and growing sectors; promoting gender-transformative employment policies, with a particular focus on women in the informal economy.
- Working with **Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), Development Financial Institutions (DFIs), and International Financing Institutions (IFIs)** to promote a specialized fund to finance women-owned micro/small enterprises across all G20 countries, facilitated by regional and/or triangular development cooperation.
- Focusing on developing a well-thought-out, well-governed, and inclusive care system that is affordable for the poorest segments of society. Putting in place a system supported by both public and private financing and focusing on creating decent work opportunities within the care sector to enable greater economic participation of women with family responsibilities.

On the face of it, the recommendations take recourse to broad brushstrokes spread across so wide an ambit that they appear relatively tame and general. Phrases such as “improved gender budgeting, promoting gender-transformative employment policies” are problematic to pin down in terms of specific steps to be taken and equally difficult to measure. What, for instance, **would this “improved gender budgeting” look like or translate into? Or what, in particular, would qualify as “gender-transformative” employment policies?**

“Well thought-out, well-governed and inclusive” care systems are undoubtedly a necessary condition for women’s productive participation in the economy, but it is important to remember that the 20 countries currently within the G20 are at different stages and levels of development, calling for far more clearly articulated policies for them to be meaningful for women across this sweep. On closer examination, however, the background information making the case for why women’s empowerment is important is well researched and documented, but the ‘how’ needs greater focus. Making a determined departure from the one-size-fits-all idiom, each country must carefully assess what ties best with its unique needs at the present moment in its developmental story to custom-craft policies and ensure their implementation. Typically, what emerges in the absence of targeted, time-bound and precisely-profiled deliverables is their ability to get lost in translation.

The T20 adopted key suggestions from **the Women 20 2023 Communiqué⁵**, circulated ahead of the T20 summit, covering an inventory of the W20's pre-eminent concerns while highlighting National Gender Strategies that are funded and tracked using gender-sensitive and disaggregated data requiring "each G20 government to establish a national Annual Review Mechanism that brings in all key stakeholders and respective members of national W20 delegations to evaluate the progress, gaps and challenges". In addition, it stipulated an Annual G20 Reporting & Review Mechanism to track the implementation and impact of the commitments made to women and girls at the G20 level.

The **W20 communiqué** picked out **Climate Change, Entrepreneurship, the Gender Digital Divide, Grassroots Leadership, Education, Skill Development and Labour Market Participation** as core priorities, sketching out an action plan for each.

What has the W20's track record been so far? Established as the G20's official engagement group during the Turkish presidency in 2015 to ensure that gender considerations found consequential mention in the Leader's Declaration and were then translated into policy and commitments, the W20, after having made significant headway in the initial years, appears to have lost focus somewhat, according to experts, for reasons as disparate as changes being made to its structure (such as **EMPOWER**) to not being accorded a serious hearing. However, with the Indian presidency providing heft to women's concerns through a seat at the main table this year, the W20 and other key stakeholders should leverage this to dial up efforts to not only press for their tasks but secure the action of these. **India's leadership has repeatedly reiterated its "unconventional approach to the G20 presidency" and a "strong and sustained commitment for women's concerns"**. Having center-staged this issue, India also needs to put its weight behind garnering the right kind of international support to convert aspiration into action. Analysts suggest a three-pronged push for optimal efficacy involving the **Indonesia-India-Brazil troika**: identifying the main thrust areas based on all that was not achieved during the Indonesian presidency, course correcting in 2023, and ensuring targeted implementation during the G20's tenure in Brazil. Without that, the agenda is likely to mirror New Year resolutions that stay frozen on a to-do list!

The W20 communiqué, for instance, highlighted the Guaranteed Equal Representation and Meaningful Participation of women in climate decision-making mechanisms, e.g., COP 28 et seq., and **a gender-responsive approach in all climate change policies, including Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), pointing out that climate change and gender are inextricably linked thereby rendering the placing of women at the heart of climate justice decision-making non-negotiable**. The climate crisis emerged, unsurprisingly, as a burning issue on all three registers – the **W20, T20, and G20**. Unfortunately, in a disappointing turn of events, despite days of intense negotiations, the inability of the **G20s Energy Transition Working Group** to produce a joint communiqué or agree on key points left a trail of dashed hopes ahead of the **G20 Leaders Summit** in September and the **UN Climate Change Conference** in Dubai later in the year – demonstrating that there's many a slip twixt the cup and the lip, more so in the face of the expectations that had been vested in the Indian presidency. This illustrates the need to redouble efforts and create clear outcome-specific action plans to bring about the desired change.

Following the then President of Argentina, Mauricio Macri, giving the W20 policy recommendations the honor of being ratified on stage in 2018, with the late Prime Minister of Japan, Abe Shinzo, following suit in 2019, each successive year has witnessed each new G20 presidency taking some innovative step or the other to accord women's issues growing ascendancy. EMPOWER⁶ was launched in 2019 in Osaka based on a recommendation from the Canadian Sherpa to help accelerate women's leadership and empowerment in the private sector, while Saudi Arabia committed to substantial resources in 2020. However, **the Indian presidency under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken the women's agenda to a whole new level by providing access to the highest levels of G20 policymaking.** This is an opportunity that ought not to be squandered.

Now, with the pick of **Women 20** and **Think 20** ruminations and celebrations having found their way into their respective communiqués, it's time for intrepid action with the final G20 Leaders Summit just a few weeks away. The fact that women's empowerment is a good thing for all concerned is, hopefully, no longer a question but instead a fact that has been established beyond doubt. **Also, given that women account for roughly 50% of the world's population, it follows that every issue on the G20 agenda impacts women, making their entitlement to be a part of every conversation indisputable.** However, although there is parity in terms of numbers, this is not reflected in access to opportunities or resource allocation. According to **the World Economic Forum's latest Global Gender Gap Report⁶**, the gender gap score in 2023 for all 146 countries surveyed stands at 68.4% which, at the present rate of progress, will take about 131 years to close! The current reality continues to be one in which women continue to be disproportionately adversely affected by negative global events (according to research, for example on Covid⁷), especially at the marginalized and underprivileged end of the scale. The focus that the G20 host country, India, has trained on the issue of gender at the present juncture, however, presents politicians, diplomats, academics, policy experts, and knowledge partners a chance to seize this opportunity to right history's wrongs.

In a crisis-ridden global order—marked by the climate crisis, the continuing consequences of Covid, cross-border conflicts and more—that has left multilateral organizations overwrought, the G20 has been growing in clout. **The collective accounts for 80% of Global GDP,⁸ including 78% of global GDP growth over the past 10 years and is home to over 4.9 billion people with an average life expectancy of 78 years and a current median age of 39 (against the global average of 30), making it a group uniquely poised to effectively confront global challenges.** Addressing gender inequities, in particular, by making women active agents in economic and political processes will vastly improve the prospects of humankind rising to the challenges posed by the current age of polycrisis—laying all hands, both male and female, harmoniously on deck!

The Indian presidency's laudable initiative to transmute women's empowerment into the G20's core agenda is an important step that could, properly harnessed, sow the seeds of far-reaching change. By just the act of directing the attention of an influential group to women's concerns India could be providing a leg's up and fast-forwarding the much-needed process of rewriting the narrative for women, but it is a moment that all concerned should grab by the forelock. The problem with ambitious goal setting and sweeping statements at major global events is that, without definitive timelines and well-orchestrated follow-up measures, these can fade into the backdrop once the moment has passed and the more immediate demands of the here-and-now take over. Till a new year comes around and another G20 presidency reframes the agenda with the stage lights being re-trained on a new set of PR-driven iterations while, like in a relay race, the baton is handed over from one country to the next with very little tangible impact! **It is important to remember that the devil is in the details and that transformative change calls for transformational action so that promises don't end up as just lip service or mere bluster.**

Our tomorrow depends on what we do today!

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