

Gender equality for a sustainable future

G20 governance of the gender equality-climate change link

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The G20 Research Group is a global network of scholars, students and professionals in the academic, research, business, non-governmental and other communities who follow the work of the G20 leaders, finance ministers and central bank governors, and other G20 institutions. It is directed from Trinity College and the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto.

INTRODUCTION

Scientists, stakeholders and the public largely recognize the intense connection between climate change and human health. For many G20 members, wildfires, flooding, extreme heat and Arctic thaw are consistently harming the health of their citizens. The integral role of gender and its intersection with climate change and human health are also now widely recognized. Women and girls are the most vulnerable to the associated health harms of climate change in the Global South and also experience gender-differentiated harms in the Global North. This vulnerability is driven by women's confinement to traditional roles as the primary users and managers of natural resources and as primary care givers. It is exacerbated by other intersecting factors such as poverty and indigeneity. Traditional food sources are increasingly at risk, which is leading to the increased onset and prevalence of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes. Extreme weather events increasingly cause displacement, death and stress-related mental illnesses.

Yet, despite their unique lived experiences and vast knowledge, women do not participate fully in climate change

decision-making. Although the G20 has addressed climate change, gender equality and health, it has done so in separate, siloed ways. Addressing the intersection of these issues and prioritizing the participation of women in climate change decision making will lead to more equitable and effective governance. It will also help contribute to meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to which the G20 remains committed. The G20's 2020 Summit in Riyadh has an opportunity to make progress on the link between gender equality and climate change, as it aligns with Saudi Arabia's two priorities of "Empowering People" and "Safeguarding the Planet."

THE CHALLENGE

Climate change is the defining challenge of our time. Rising temperatures cause deadly extreme weather events at an increasing and alarming rate. Public opinion polls now indicate that the majority of people in all countries surveyed consider climate change a "major threat to their nation," which makes it a truly global concern. The impacts of climate change, however, are not equally distributed. Women and girls are disproportionately vulnerable, largely due to socially constructed norms that make them poorer and confine them to traditional caretaking roles. This is particularly true in the Global South, where women make up a large percentage of the agricultural labor force, and also in the Global North and specifically for Indigenous women who often experience the impacts of climate change first and at a more rapid rate.

Changing patterns of rainfall, increased drought and scarce natural re-

sources increase the workload of female farmers as it becomes harder for them to secure household essentials. Consequently, girls are the first to leave school to help manage the workload, thus decreasing school enrollment rates for girls. Changing animal migration patterns and loss of biodiversity are increasing food insecurity and reliance on unhealthy, store-bought foods. The resulting chronic undernutrition leads to higher rates of obesity and non-communicable diseases such as diabetes. Weather-related crises and disasters also increase rates of gender-based violence, with women and girls most at risk.

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Because women tend to be poorer, have lower levels of access to financial information and services, and have restricted de-

cision-making ability, they are less able to adapt and respond to climate crises. The existing barriers to women's full economic, political and social participation limit their ability to make decisions not only at the individual household level, but also within the international frameworks governing climate change control. Given their unique knowledge and experience, women must be empowered to lead in addressing climate change at the global level.

G20 PERFORMANCE ON GENDER EQUALITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Since the G20 first met at the leaders' level in Washington, DC, in 2008, it has increasingly broadened its focus to include issues beyond its original purpose to contain and control financial crises. Over the years, as experts and the broader public began to recognize the adverse economic implications of gender inequality and climate change, the G20 has expanded its attention to these two issues. Despite this increase and the evidence that women across the globe are disproportionately affected by climate change, the G20 has failed to acknowledge the connection in its public deliberations. As such, the following two sections assess the institution's performance on gender equality and climate change separately.

G20 performance on gender equality

G20 leaders first addressed gender equality at the London Summit in 2009, by referring in their communiqué to building a fair and family-friendly labor market for both men and women. This was an indirect recognition that expanded social policies would enable women to participate more fully in the labor force. References

to gender equality were absent altogether from the next summits in Pittsburgh and Toronto. They appeared again in Seoul in 2010 with references to promoting gender equality in the context of development and acknowledging the gender gap in health. During this time, the G20 failed to translate its deliberation on gender equality into real, actionable commitments.

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Between 2012 and 2016, attention to gender equality in communiqués gradually increased in both size and scope. The focus was predominantly on the full economic participation of women, with references to skills training, equal pay for equal work, fair and equitable treatment in the workplace and financial inclusion. The 2014 Brisbane Summit produced arguably the most well-known G20 gender equality commitment — to reduce the gap between men and women in the labor force by 25% by 2025. This was considered a major achievement, as it was the first time leaders committed to meet-

ing a specific target with a built-in, multi-year timeline on gender equality.

In 2017, at the Hamburg Summit hosted by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, gender equality had its biggest surge. It received priority placement in the chair's preamble. It carried forward references to gender equality and development, as they related to the SDG agenda. It also mentioned labor market inclusion and equity. It made new references to the importance of education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and of digital skills for girls. It expanded attention to female entrepreneurship. It also paid particular attention to female employment in Africa, supporting financial inclusion for female farmers and rural women, and ending gender-based violence.

The Hamburg Summit was an effective example of gender mainstreaming, something that gender equality scholars and experts have been advocating for many years. Attention plunged, however, at the 2018 Buenos Aires Summit. The summit documents did refer to Canada's adoption of the "Gender Results Framework," which tracks performance on gender equality and identifies what is needed to move forward. Attention rebounded at the 2019 Osaka Summit, where leaders reaffirmed their commitment to increasing female labor force participation, addressing the gender gap in unpaid care work, supporting girls' and women's education in STEM, and empowering women in the agro-food sector.

The G20 has made significant progress in expanding the scope of its attention on gender equality. Most notably, the 2017 Hamburg Summit, which made a major effort towards gender mainstreaming. And

yet Hamburg did not link gender to climate change. Nonetheless, the G20 has made commitments that will contribute to addressing the challenges within that link. These include empowering rural women and girls by increasing their access to finance and increasing the representation of women and girls in STEM.

G20 performance on climate change

The G20 governance of climate change also had a slow start. Much of the attention paid between 2008 and 2010 came in the context of the global financial crisis, including green growth and climate finance. The G20 also noted the importance of supporting the negotiations under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. During this period, the G20 made significant commitments to phase out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies over the medium term and to support investments in alternative sources of renewable energy.

From 2010 to 2016, G20 summit attention expanded by including the concepts of green transportation and green cities. Other subjects of note included low-carbon infrastructure, environmentally sustainable food production and vehicle emissions. During this period, the G20 leaders committed to climate finance with a pledge to support the operationalization of the Green Climate Fund.

Attention to climate change spiked at the 2017 Hamburg Summit. It referred to an extensive range of subjects including support for the UN's Paris Agreement, energy efficiency, climate resilience, disaster risk insurance and climate finance. However, the 2018 Buenos Aires Summit failed to make any significant progress on expanding the scope and level of ambition of its

commitments on climate change. In fact, the United States reiterated its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the G20 retreated from its commitment to end fossil fuel subsidies. At the 2019 Osaka Summit, very little was done to help control climate change, apart from expressing support for innovative clean energy technology.

Over the last 12 years, the G20 has failed to recognize the unique and differentiated impacts of climate change on women in its summit communiqués. It has also failed to connect climate change to human health in any significant way, even despite historically high levels of heat since 2019, which caused deaths across France, India, Canada and, most recently, Australia.

PROPOSAL

This policy brief recommends that the 2020 G20 Riyadh Summit acknowledge and act on the link between climate change and gender equality. If it is committed to taking real action on the priorities Saudi Arabia outlined when it assumed its presidency, including “Empowering People”

and “Safeguarding the Planet,” the Riyadh Summit could make real progress. It should do so in the first instance by reiterating its commitment to women’s full and equal economic, political and social inclusion, with a specific reference to their equal participation in climate change negotiations and related decision-making. A component of this commitment should be a report on progress made since the G20 began making such commitments in 2012. Second, G20 members should promote public understanding of the issue through the collection and dissemination of gender-disaggregated data on the impacts of climate change. Third, the G20 should recognize the impact of unsustainable population growth by integrating family planning into its climate change commitments, including access to contraception and the protection of sexual and reproductive health rights and education. Fourth, the G20 should reaffirm its commitment to educating girls, particularly in STEM, which can contribute to greater female participation in the renewable energy sector.

¹ Fagan.

² UN Environment Programme.

³ Women Deliver.

⁴ Kulik.

⁵ Kirton and Warren, “G20 Climate Change Governance” and “The Missing Link.”

⁶ Kirton and Warren “G20 Climate Change Governance: Performance, Prospects, Proposals.”

⁷ Women Deliver.

⁸ Hawken.

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