

# Making gender equality a reality

We need concrete policy action, substantial funding and multilateral cooperation

The author:



**Juliane Stein-Zalai**

Research Associate,  
Kiel Institute for the World  
Economy

The institution:



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How many years will it take to achieve gender equality? According to the World Economic Forum's latest Global Gender Gap Report, at the current rate of change, it would take 99.5 years to close the overall global gender gap. To achieve gender equality in economic participation and opportunities, it would require as much as 257 years.<sup>1</sup> These projections are sobering for all girls and women who suffer injustices because of their gender on a daily basis. They are also bad news for the economy, as equal access between men and women to opportunities and life changes is not only a moral and social imperative but would also bring considerable economic benefits. A 2015 study by the McKinsey Global Institute found that if women played an "identical role in labor markets to that of men" in terms of labor-force participation, hours worked, and the sector mix of employment, up to 26 percent could be added to global annual GDP in 2025.<sup>2</sup> For countries to remain competitive, they need to make gender equality an integral part of their economic strategies. This is why equality needs to become both a top priority and a core issue on the agendas of the G7 and the G20, the main economic

forums of the world's most powerful economies. This article begins by summarizing the 2019 French Presidency's approach to advancing gender equality and the results it achieved. It argues that it is time for the G7 to increase policy action in this field and then offers recommendations for how the G7 can accelerate progress towards women's empowerment and gender equality within the G7 and beyond.

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## THE FRENCH G7 PRESIDENCY 2019

Setting the ambitious goal to make gender equality a global cause, the 2019 French G7 Presidency rightly placed gender issues high on its agenda. To ensure that gender equality would feature prominently in the G7 discussions, three months prior to the summit, the French held a ministerial meeting dedicated to this theme. This followed the example of the Italians, who were the first to organize a G7 ministerial meeting on gender equality in 2017. Furthermore, French President Emmanuel Macron extended and renewed the Gender Equality Advisory Council (GEAC),

which was established during Canada's G7 Presidency the year before. The GEAC issued the "Biarritz Partnership",<sup>3</sup> a report which identifies 79 laws worldwide that advance the rights of girls and women and calls on the G7 members to improve their legislative frameworks to promote gender equality. Giving special weight to the report, Macron invited prominent GEAC representatives to present their recommendations to the leaders of the world's major advanced economies at the Biarritz Summit. Moreover, to ensure gender equality was not only treated as an issue in its own right but prioritized throughout the entire G7 process, the French Presidency included gender-related topics in the agenda of all ministerial meetings.

Overall, it seems that the considerable efforts made by the French G7 Presidency led by President Macron paid off, as the Biarritz Summit yielded meaningful results for gender equality. The exclusion of gender equality in the principal G7 Leaders' Declaration adopted in Biarritz should not be given too much weight, since only a brief list of issues was produced instead of a comprehensive final communiqué. In fact, gender-related issues found their way into a number of G7 documents issued at the summit in Biarritz. What is more, separate declarations and statements on the subject, such as the Declaration on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment as well as a statement on the promotion of women's entrepreneurship in Africa, were issued. By joining the Biarritz Partnership on Gender Equality, G7 members committed to individual legislative measures that advance gender equality and to support non-G7 countries to improve their legislative frameworks as well. The scope

and ambition of the political and financial contributions in the fight against gender inequality, however, vary widely among G7 countries. While some countries, notably France, have defined significant concrete financial commitments, the US, for instance, has not announced any concrete funding pledge.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, several measures listed in the Annex for the Biarritz Partnership on Gender Equality lack ambition. Attempts to include reproductive rights in the G7 documents, that is the basic right to freely decide whether and when to have children, failed once again; according to close observers of the negotiations, this was mainly due to US resistance.

#### FROM RHETORIC TO ACTION

What then are the prospects for advancing gender equality worldwide if even a fully committed presidency of a small group of comparatively like-minded countries is unable to stimulate all its members to take strong and determined action to strengthen women's rights? As a club of liberal democracies and major economic powers, G7 countries have both the responsibility and the capacity to advance equal rights. The uncomfortable reality is, however, that breakthrough progress by the G7 in furthering gender equality is unlikely as long as equal rights continue to be viewed as a "niche issue" in many public administrations, most notably, but not exclusively, in the US. Transforming the traditionally "soft" issue into a generally acknowledged "hard" economic one is possible but requires time and political leadership, which are both scarce resources. Despite all these difficulties, however, achieving substantial progress on gender issues comes within reach if the G7 countries, or

at least a critical number of them, speed up their individual efforts and translate the commitments they have made into action. What it really takes to empower women and make gender equality a reality are not more and more rhetorical commitments and ambitious strategic frameworks but the concrete implementation and close monitoring of existing schemes as well as the provision of robust long-term funding. In the last few years, the G7 has delivered workable strategies, programs and initiatives to fight gender inequality, such as the Biarritz Partnership and the Affirmative Finance Action for Women in Africa (AFAWA) initiative. Furthermore, there are numerous international regulations, roadmaps and projects, such as the 2030 Agenda and the International Fund for Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, which require the political and financial support of the G7 to produce tangible results. Where overall G7 action is not manageable, coordinated and individual actions by those willing to lead are the right way to go.

»We cannot wait another century to close the gender gap.«

#### CONCRETE POLICY ACTION, SUBSTANTIAL FUNDING AND ENHANCED MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

So where to start? First, all G7 countries should follow the recommendation by the

GEAC and the Women 7 and ratify the relevant international gender equality standards such as the Istanbul Convention and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and push other states to follow suit.<sup>5</sup> Second, all G7 states should rigorously review their legislative frameworks with a view to gender equality, abolish discriminatory laws and enact and implement new ones,<sup>6</sup> drawing on the legislative package put forward in the Biarritz Partnership and going beyond the not-too-ambitious individual commitments made in Biarritz. In order to continuously track and assess the G7's efforts to advance gender equality, the G7 should implement a comprehensive accountability framework as proposed by the GEAC. In addition to this, the G7 should actively assist developing countries in initiating similar legislative processes. Third, G7 members should provide financial support to women's rights organizations and initiatives promoting women's economic empowerment on a regular basis. This requires increasing financial resources in both domestic budgets and development assistance.<sup>7</sup> By setting the goal to devote 50 percent of its development aid to projects to reduce gender inequalities,<sup>8</sup> France has taken a first step in that direction. Fourth, the G7 need to better integrate their initiatives into the work of the United Nations (UN), in particular the 2030 Agenda, by aligning their policies with the targets defined under the Sustainable Development Goal 5 and continuously checking progress against these targets.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the G7 should intensify and improve collaboration and coordination with

the G20 to increase both the outreach and legitimacy of their efforts. The G20 is the natural platform to create international momentum, as the G20 countries have made many commitments and started several initiatives related to gender equality, which are complementary to G7 actions. Above all, the G7 states need to comply with the commitments they have made at the G20 level, such as reducing the gender labor force participation gap by 25 percent by 2025 compared to 2012, and should encourage and help other G20 states to follow suit. In three of the G7 countries, namely Italy, the US and Canada, the decline in gender gap is not in line with the expected progress towards meeting the "25 by 25 target".<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the G7 should leverage their influence in the international organizations surrounding the G20, such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the OECD. These institutions are important partners for building networks and knowledge on the one hand, and for implementing and monitoring specific policy action on the other.

To make a proportionate and overdue contribution to making gender equality a reality at the global level, G7 countries need to step up their engagement by backing up their commitments with both funding and concrete policy action and by using their influence in the G20 and international organizations. As we cannot wait another century to close the gender gap, it is time to turn rhetoric into action. While costs may appear high in the short term, investing in gender equality will have high returns for both women and men around the globe.

<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum (2019): "Global Gender Gap Report 2020", available online at [www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> McKinsey Global Institute (2015): "The power of parity: How advancing women's equality can add \$12 trillion to global growth", available online at <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth>

<sup>3</sup> See Gender Equality Advisory Council (2019): "Biarritz Partnership for Gender Equality", available online at <https://www.elysee.fr/admin/upload/default/0001/05/cfb1e2ba2b9aa09c1660f1b6df2cabb815eccc2.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive list of G7 commitments under France's leadership in 2019, see Ruthrauff, J., Thompson, L. and Cahill, M. (2019): "France Called for a Feminist G7, but Did the G7 Deliver? A Report Card on the 2019 G7 Commitments to Gender Equality", Washington, DC: International Center for Research on Women and Center for Democratic Education, available online at <https://www.icrw.org/report-card-on-2019-g7-commitments-to-gender-equality/>

<sup>5</sup> See Gender Equality Advisory Council, p. 2, and W7 (2019): "G7: Women 7 Alternative Gender Declaration", August 23, 2019, available online at <http://www.feministscount.org/assets/presse/18%20-%20G7%20-%20Women%20%20Alternative%20Gender%20Declaration%20-%20August%2023%202019.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> This recommendation has been prominently put forward by the Gender Equality Advisory Council.

<sup>7</sup> For a similar recommendation, see Women 7 (2019): "Towards a truly feminist and transformative G7. General recommendations of the W7", May 9, 2019, available online at <https://www.feministscount.org/assets/presse/7%20-%20EN%20-%20Towards%20a%20truly%20feminist%20and%20transformative%20G7%20-%20General%20recommendations%20of%20the%20W7%20-%20May%209%202019.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (2018): "France's international strategy for gender equality [2018-2022]", available online at [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/meae\\_strategie\\_-\\_en\\_cle076525.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/meae_strategie_-_en_cle076525.pdf), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> A similar point has been made by Kulik, J. (2019): "Advancing Gender Equality at the G7 Biarritz Summit: Good Steps Taken, Big Opportunities Missed", November 12, 2019, available online at <http://www.g7g20.toronto.ca/comment/191112-kulik.html>

<sup>10</sup> See OECD and ILO (2019): "Women at Work in G20 countries: Progress and policy action", available online at <https://www.oecd.org/g20/summits/osaka/G20-Women-at-Work.pdf>, p. 6.