



‘Mother Nature’: The Role of Women in Addressing Climate Change

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Executive Summary

With members accounting for 75% of greenhouse gas emissions, climate protection endures as an inescapable priority for the G20. However, the challenge is compounded by pressures within each country to secure sustainable agriculture and equal work opportunities. Believing that the G20 has so far missed an opportunity to harness the value of women in combating climate change, this policy brief presents a case to transform political rhetoric about female empowerment into actionable steps.

The Gender-Climate Nexus

Evidence makes clear that actions to promote gender equality have a multiplier effect on sustainable development, so enabling equal opportunities for women is intrinsically linked to achieving future sustainability. Yet, despite both women’s empowerment and tackling climate change being consistently present on the [G20’s agenda](#), the interconnectedness of the two themes has gained a disappointingly low level of recognition.

Women comprise 51% of humanity, so creating an environment where they are economically active through access to education, employment and healthcare, and amplifying their voices in the political sphere, not only delivers a fundamental human entitlement, it realises wider-reaching benefits to 100% of the world’s population. While providing equal opportunities for women does not necessarily or intentionally contribute towards resolving climate change, the crafting of sustainable environmental solutions will have a catalytic effect on empowering them.

Déjà vu

By proposing an “ambitious effort to combat climate change” and keep the global temperature rise below 2 degrees Celsius, the [Paris Agreement](#) was a landmark development. Unfortunately, “ambitious effort” remains the appropriate expression given that G20 countries are not living up to their commitments regarding the phasing out of fossil fuels – only [six](#) are predicted to meet the targets of their 2020 climate action plans. During its [2018](#) summit in Argentina, the G20 recognised the crucial role of energy in

shaping the future, yet with such a low proportion of countries meeting their targets, this remains a continuing challenge and makes it especially pertinent to the 2019 summit.

Discussions in [Argentina](#) built on actions that empower women, and separately confirmed action to invest in infrastructure that is resilient to extreme weather events. But, despite being areas that are intrinsically linked, climate change and female empowerment continue to be treated as separate entities. Where there are benefits and crossovers, actions should be taken to develop holistic climate change policies that acknowledge the role of women in creating a sustainable environment. These policies should address inequality through considering the following recommendations.

Investment

Representing more than 80% of global GDP, the G20 members are equipped to invest in the development of existing agricultural land by considering the environmental benefits of supporting farms run by women.

In Asia (excluding Japan) women comprise 42% of agricultural labour. If female-run farms were provided with the resources to yield as much as male-run farms, approximately [2 billion tons of carbon dioxide](#) would be prevented from entering the atmosphere between now and 2050. Such investment would reduce deforestation through maximising the efficiency of existing farms.

In an age of technological advancement, providing women with equal access to education can provide access to the latest developments in agricultural practice. The [G20 Agriculture Ministers'](#) meeting emphasised the need for innovative agriculture through the use of artificial intelligence, alongside the need for all farmers to have access to the knowledge and skills to embrace such technology. Fostering female inclusion in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) was a prevailing theme of the 2018 summit, but more than 130 million women world-wide are still denied access to education. By shifting the focus to women's empowerment, the G20 could explicitly take steps to improve the productivity of agricultural land while simultaneously providing equal opportunities for women.

Political representation

Countries with higher female representation in parliament are [more disposed to ratify international environmental treaties](#). So, the G20 should work to amplify women's voices within the political arena.

The US is one of the biggest culprits for pollution, and not only has the Trump Administration [withdrawn](#) from the Paris Agreement, but the number of women in congress also falls below the global average at 23.5%. Alternatively, Rwanda boasts a share of 61.3% women in parliament and was one of the first countries in the world to ban plastic bags as well as adopt the

[Kigali Amendment](#) to the Montreal Protocol, which phases-down the use of a potent greenhouse gas common in refrigerators and air conditioning. Evidence suggests that women are much more influential in securing commitment to environmentally proactive policies and that female representation has resulted in greater engagement with action to address climate change.

There are many implicit actions that need to be openly addressed that build the basis on which women can participate equally in the decision-making process. These inform the third recommendation of this brief.

Countering discrimination

One (of many) examples of discriminatory action against women is the impact of period poverty. If the G20 is to be successful in empowering women in labour and leadership, the wider agenda of reproductive and sexual healthcare regimes that discriminate against women demand attention. The prevailing stigma associated with menstruation and a failure to provide effective sex education means that young girls in many countries are missing school as a result of tainted misconceptions and the inability to access sanitary towels.

Despite being the fifth largest economy in the world based on GDP, in the UK more than a quarter of women have [reported](#) missing school or work because they cannot afford sanitary towels. Period poverty is a global issue that impedes female access to the

labour market, and policies to counter discriminatory treatment of women are central to enabling equal opportunities.

During the Osaka summit, during a Press Briefing on the Leaders Special Event on Women's Empowerment, Gerald T. Rice stated that 90% of countries have legal barriers to women's economic empowerment. Throughout the developing world women have insecure land rights, limiting their economic opportunities and leaving them vulnerable to poverty, gender-based violence and displacement. Research shows that when women own land they gain status and derive greater income.

This demonstrates the importance of land as a resource for women, yet securing women's land rights is ignored as a key piece of climate action. Adopting legislation to ensure that women have equal access to land ownership could be instrumental in empowering them while contributing to ending the cycle of poverty that is currently working against their economic and social capital. The effect of this will be an increase in agricultural productivity through improved management of natural resources. In turn, this will contribute towards reducing the impact of climate change.

A Mixed Bag in Osaka

Interestingly, the Japanese government has reactivated nuclear energy as an alternative to fossil fuels instead of

promoting renewable energy. As a result, its emissions are significantly greater than the G20 average. The host of this year's summit would have been expected to show strong commitment to previous pledges but this practice suggests there is little substance behind the desire to explore sustainable energy sources.

However, by placing the aims of the Paris Agreement high on the agenda and showing responsibility towards [reducing plastic pollution](#), Japan has shown commitment to policies incentivising the need to combat climate change. Japan is the first country to host a G20 Ministerial Meeting on Environment, Climate Change and Energy and has also invited the UN as a guest. This suggests an attempt to navigate discussion at the summit towards environmental issues. In addition, at his press conference on the first day of the summit, UN Secretary General António Guterres called out G20 countries for "lagging behind" in both their climate change and Agenda 2030 agreements. He noted the worsening situation and appealed for a stronger commitment by G20 members as well as an increase in international solidarity.

[As expected](#), French President, Emmanuel Macron further emphasised the need for multilateral agreements and thanked the Japanese presidency for its commitment to climate change. All G20 members but the US reached an agreement regarding the full implementation of the Paris Agreement.

Alternatively, while discussion of women's empowerment gained momentum in the media centre, the [Leaders' Declaration](#) paid little attention to the issue. It does not appear in the preamble and the document merely reiterates previous pledges with no indication of how these will be achieved.

Conclusion

The Leaders' Declaration emphasised the importance of "collecting international best practices and wisdom from around the world". If the G20 is sincere in this intention then it should utilise the knowledge and expertise of women who currently remain an untapped resource.

Ultimately, members of the G20 appear to be working towards a checklist by which they have addressed key issues without providing any substantial solutions.

As the scheduled host of the 2020 summit, Saudi Arabia was expected to host a press conference this year in Osaka but Mohammad bin Salman neglected to follow this protocol. Considering Saudi Arabia's attitudes towards women it seems unlikely that gender equality will be a "cross cutting issue" at future summits as proposed by the 2019 Leaders' Declaration.

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