

It's Draining Men: Why the G20 must consider men in their 'gender perspective'

ELEANOR HARRIS

The University of Sheffield

Executive Summary

Given the increased focus on gender equality at the G20 summit in Argentina, there is great potential for global leaders to discuss and interrogate policy in a way that truly considers the structural inequality that women face in every aspect of their lives: domestically, legally, in education and the workforce. However, G20 Argentina's narrow 'gender perspective' neglects to consider how economic instability disproportionately affects men, and, how in turn, the consequences of high male unemployment ultimately burden women. Therefore, a true 'gender perspective' that considers how economic policy is mediated by, and between, both genders is paramount to addressing the inequality that women face.

Limitations of the G20's 'Gender Perspective'

One of the main priorities of G20 Argentina is '[Empowering Women](#)', with the aim being to consider 'gender mainstreaming across the whole G20 agenda'. This, in the terms of the

Argentine Presidency, would involve boosting 'women's empowerment' and eliminating 'gender disparities' throughout the workplace and in education. This focus on gender equality may seem topical, and even long overdue, given existing evidence of the [correlation](#) between the education, empowerment and employment of women and increases in economic growth. Considering the gendered impact of policies on women across a variety of topics, rather than just as a siloed section of 'women's issues' has great potential.

This 'gender perspective' is, however, not a nuanced exploration of the different ways social and economic policies are mediated by gender. Instead, it is a narrower examination of the role of women in the economy and society. As such, it neglects the disproportionate toll that many economic policies place upon men. For example, in regards to the recent global recession and rises in [automation](#), there have been disproportionate [increases](#) in male unemployment. This is compounded by the consequences of unemployment,

which are experienced more severely by men, particularly in regards to unemployment-linked suicide and domestic violence. Not only are men more affected by unemployment than women, but the social and health consequences of their unemployment are greater.

Given the relationship between market forces, economic policy, changing technology and male unemployment, it is necessary to consider men, as well as women, in any economic policy discussions. This broader focus is made even more crucial by the ways in which the consequences of these shifts are felt more severely by men. However noble the 'gender mainstreaming' focus of this G20 summit may be, if it fails to truly and meaningfully assess its economic policies in relation to complex gender dynamics, it will be women who lose out from the unintended consequences.

Gender and Job Losses

The employment situation in the USA provides an example of the disproportionate impacts of market fluctuations experienced by men. Following the Great Recession, the unemployment rate for men [rose to 11 per cent and 8.3 per cent for women](#), despite their unemployment rate being roughly equal before the financial crisis (5.1 per cent and 4.9 per cent,

respectively). Similarly, the [ILO](#) has urged a heterogeneous approach to employment policy, given the way financial downturns affect men (and particularly young men) more severely.

Rapidly advancing technology has also contributed to a higher rate of male unemployment. For example, despite the [OECD's caution](#) regarding overstating the impact of automation, it is recognised that where job losses due to automation do occur, it will be low qualified workers that bear the brunt. Given that men and women partake in different types of work – with [women more likely to be employed in social care roles](#) and [men in manufacturing and construction](#) – rises in automation will affect their employment levels differently. As manufacturing sectors are more susceptible to changes in technology and rises in automation, men have seen a further increase in their unemployment rate, beyond that of women.

Male employment, therefore, faces a compounding threat: the 2008 financial crisis affected the sectors that most readily employ men, and, as the economy recovers and investment in technology rises, increases in automation impact the very same sectors. This is only exacerbated by 'women's jobs', such as social care roles, traditionally being located in the public sector, and therefore

less susceptible to market fluctuations. Whilst it is essential that policy makers consider the many [barriers](#) to employment that women face, doing so in isolation and without due consideration of men will be ineffective at progressing gender equality.

Great Depressions: male unemployment, suicide and domestic violence

Although many of the immediate consequences of unemployment - such as financial instability - are experienced by both men and women, there are some health and social ramifications that impact men particularly severely. For them, evidence suggests that experiencing unemployment results in higher rates of suicide and acts of domestic violence. For example, [Greece](#) went from having one of the lowest rates of suicide in Europe in 1993, to seeing a significant increase in suicide rates that directly correlate with the 2008 financial crisis. This effect was gender-specific, with the study finding that fiscal austerity and negative economic growth significantly increase male suicide, whereas no significant effect of these factors on female suicide rates were found.

This same [relationship](#) has been identified across four other Eurozone countries; Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Outside of Europe, [Japan](#) has also found that

unemployment is significantly associated with male suicide rates. The same effect has not been found with female unemployment. This demonstrates that, not only does unemployment impact men more frequently, but, as a consequence of their unemployment, men are more likely to take their own lives. As such, to have a 'gender perspective' that only focuses on women's employment issues, is to overlook the contribution that male unemployment has on the current suicide [epidemic](#) in men.

It is evident, therefore, that in order to achieve a true 'gender perspective' across a plethora of global policy, we must extend our analysis to include both men and women. The problem does, however, extend deeper than merely considering both genders. Indeed, it is not as simple as just including 'men's issues' in a gender perspective, but it is necessary to consider the power relations *between* genders. In this respect, even a policy focus that included discussions of the differential experiences of men and women in regards to economic situations and policies would be insufficient. In order to address this oversight, I will examine some of the ways policies aimed at empowering women, particularly in the workplace, have actually contributed to their disempowerment.

Focusing on women and their liberation, without due consideration of how these policies will be received by men and change the social and material conditions of their lives too, can have unintended negative consequences for women. For example, in an instance of truly cruel irony, initiatives that seek to liberate women may lead to them experiencing [domestic abuse and disempowerment](#) at the hands of their partners.

The commitment to [‘promoting women’s economic empowerment’](#) contained in G20 Argentina’s Declaration does not consider the potential for these unintended consequences. This, coupled with [research](#) that indicates how rises in male unemployment lead to increases in domestic violence, highlights a deeper oversight of the G20’s gender perspective: empowering women in the marketplace can disenfranchise them at home.

To consider gender equality only in relation to women is to ignore the pervasiveness of [male power](#); achieving true equality between men and women is, ultimately, negotiated, mediated and determined by men. The G20 is, of course, [no exception](#) to this. Argentina’s presidency has made great strides in asserting the importance of gender equality and the roles that women can, and should, play in the economy and society. However, much of the discourse is

still constrained within ideas of ‘women’s issues’ and with a narrow focus on the labour participation of women, without considering the material and social conditions in which those women find themselves.

It is, nevertheless, promising to see leaders such as the Prime Minister of the Netherlands – Mark Rutte – [highlighting](#) the need to consider gender equality as more than just ‘women’s issues’. It is clear that further consideration of gender dynamics and power are necessary if global policy is to truly empower women.

Getting There: a step in the right direction in Argentina

Despite the limited focus of the ‘gender perspective’ at G20 Argentina, it is necessary to stress the vast increase in attention issues of gender equality have received at this year’s summit. Previous G20 summits successfully [established a consensus](#) on the importance of job creation and supporting financial recovery, without highlighting any need to consider gender as a mediating factor. In this respect, G20 Argentina is unique in giving gender equality such a prominent focus.

Only a limited number of the past Leaders’ Communiqués have even included a

commitment to gender equality and those that have do not manage more than a passing sentence. The [2015 G20 in Turkey](#), for example, commits to ‘monitoring...our goals to reduce [the] gender participation gap’. Yet this is the sole reference to gender in the entire Leaders’ Communique. With the Women 20 (W20) only being created in 2015, it is clear that world leaders are only beginning to consider gender as integral to successful global policy making.

This year’s G20 [Declaration](#) is, admittedly, only marginally better. Despite this, the Declaration does, at least, reaffirm its commitment to ‘a gender mainstreaming strategy across the G20 agenda’. Yet, it only goes on to mention the word ‘gender’ or ‘women’ on two of its eight pages - which one can hardly consider ‘mainstream’. In neither the W20 Communique nor the G20 Declaration are men mentioned in specifically gendered terms. And, although at first glance this

may seem like an obvious and necessary fact of discussing gender equality and women’s policy, I have demonstrated how just a narrow approach to gender equality discussions only manage a superficial exploration of the problems facing women today.

In order to create a strong foundation from which to create global policy on gender equality, we must fully acknowledge the significant impact that men have in the lives of women; as spouses, fathers, employers, politicians and policy makers. To promote the participation of women in the labour force, without acknowledging or exploring how such policies will impact upon men too, will be insufficient in addressing the G20’s goal of [‘Empowering Women’](#).

***Eleanor Harris** is a MSc in International Social Change and Policy student at the University of Sheffield.*