

Consistently inconsistent: The G7 and women

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Media Centre – G7 Summit. The 2015 Group of Seven (G7) summit is being held in Schloss Elmau in southern Germany, with Chancellor Angela Merkel holding the presidency. The G7 leaders represent seven of the world's strongest economies, which meet annually and who present themselves as united by their commitments to democracy and human rights.

With Merkel at the G7 helm for the second time, the 2015 summit has addressed women in the workplace as one of four main agenda items. Nevertheless, there are questions that arise from Merkel's inclusion of gender at the G7. First, what has the G7 achieved in the past regarding women's equality? And second, what outcomes can be generated from these summit discussions and how does this represent a new leadership role for the G7 in terms of promoting the equality of women in work?

Gender and the G7/8

Between 1975 and 2008, the G7/8 [increasingly addressed women issues](#) in its communiqués, in particular following the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, which is remembered for Hilary Clinton's speech in which she famously declared, for the first time, that 'women's rights are human rights'. Since 2008 however, there have been only two notable wins on women's issues at the G7. First, the '[Muskoka Initiative](#)', proposed by Canada in 2010, sought to address child and maternal health, predominantly in the Global South, with a total investment of just over \$7 billion. Second, at Lough Erne in 2013, William Hague (the UK Foreign Minister at the time) launched a [commitment](#) to combat sexual violence in conflict zones, which led to the [Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict](#) that has now been endorsed by 122 members of the UN.

However, by the time of the Brussels Summit in 2014, women's issues on the G7 agenda had been reduced to little more than an afterthought, restricted to the vague closing lines of the [Summit declaration](#):

'We recognise the need to ...promote gender equality, to end all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls, to end child, early and forced marriage and to promote full participation and empowerment of all women and girls'.

Consideration of women's issues by the G7 has thus been consistently inconsistent. This is of course not unique to gender, but is considered to be a problem endemic within the structure of the G7 itself, with items mysteriously appearing on or slipping off the agenda year on year. Such a situation is only compounded by the lack of accountability mechanisms to impel the realisation of even those 'commitments' which are eventually agreed. With gender being explicitly addressed in other international organisations, as well as in international law, with at least three [UN Special Rapporteurs on women's issues](#) since 2004, a [Special Representative of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict](#) appointed in 2009, and [UN Women](#) created in 2010, all of which are long-term programmes, and accountable to the United Nations (the Special Rapporteur to the Human Rights Council, and the Special Representative and UN to the General Assembly), the G7 is lagging significantly behind. If the G7 is to be considered a global leader, particularly in relation to democratic and human rights commitments, its leadership must not be limited to rhetoric. It must also provide mechanisms for its own accountability and ensure the consistent application of principles across all areas of its application and operation.

Gender, international law, and Merkel's intentions

The G7 has, at this summit in Elmau, made a number of clear commitments to improve women's participation. These are however limited to the economic context, apply to the private sector rather than to States themselves, and are not accompanied by the creation of effective accountability mechanisms. As a result, the G7 has not gone far enough to genuinely assert a global leadership role in relation to empowering women in the workplace.

In the Leaders' Declaration from this 2015 summit, the G7 expresses its support for [UN Women's Empowerment Principles](#), which seek to provide guidance for businesses on how best to promote gender equality in the workplace. This is a positive step that ought to be welcomed. Even more refreshingly, the Declaration also explicitly recognises the reality that 'multiple sources of discrimination' are often experienced by women, particularly acknowledging disabled women. As a matter of global leadership, this is a remarkable start. The problem however, is that the high-minded aims of achieving women's empowerment in the workplace, espoused in UN Women's principles, are largely contingent on the compliance of private companies. International law – and particularly international human rights law – does not apply to private companies, but only to States themselves. If the G7 is to genuinely take a global leadership role with regards to women at work, they must not only advocate for the compliance of private companies, but also turn their critical eye inwards.

International legal obligations apply to States – at least insofar as those States have ratified the relevant treaties. The UN [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) (signed 1979, entered into force 1981, CEDAW) is perhaps the most comprehensive, and highest status, statement on gender equality in international law. Six of the G7 members have signed and ratified it, leaving the US in the company of other non-signatory states, including Iran and Somalia. In the context of Merkel's agenda for women in this summit, there are three main contributions of the Convention which appear to have been ignored. The result is that the commitments which have been adopted fall short of the legal protection provided by the CEDAW, do not create obligations (other than financial ones) on States themselves. Therefore, the G7 is left following behind other institutions, in particular the United Nations, rather than asserting itself as a global leader in relation to the empowerment of women at work.

First, it is disappointing that Merkel's prior intention to discuss gender quotas in executive boards of public companies across the G7 countries was not realised at the Elmau summit. The CEDAW explicitly anticipates 'special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women' in Article 4 of the Convention. Formal ('de facto') equality seeks to treat different people equally. On the other hand, substantive equality, as espoused by Article 4 and also echoed in [General Recommendations 23 and 25](#) of the Committee of experts who oversee the effective implementation of the CEDAW, seeks to treat differently people who are situated differently, in order to accelerate the response to structural inequalities. According to Recommendations 23 and 25, which provide guidance for States on the interpretation of the Convention, affirmative actions such as quotas are not discriminatory, but are instead desirable short-term solutions to tackle systemic inequality. In many contexts, however, quotas are seen as extremely controversial – often by women just as much as by men. The failure of the Elmau summit to commit to support executive board gender quotas thus falls short of the substantive equality anticipated by the CEDAW Convention.

Second, Article 11 of CEDAW articulates particular substantive rights for women in the workplace, and should have provided guidance for the most effective approach that the G7 could have taken in order to comply with International Law. Merkel had, before the Summit began, demonstrated the intention to discuss part-time and informal work, as well as

supporting initiatives to engage women in the workplace across the Global South (indeed this Summit has also involved six specially invited African leaders from Ethiopia, Iraq, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal and Tunisia). In the European context, the European Court of Justice in [*Bilka-Kaufhaus v Weber von Hartz*](#) found that part-time workers are often the victims of indirect discrimination – and women constitute by far the largest proportion of the part-time workforce worldwide. Substantive equality is therefore at the heart of European as well as International anti-discrimination law. The [Leader's Declaration](#) from this G7 Summit does not mention part-time or informal work, both of which are universally dominated by women. In doing so, it appears in general to promote a position of formal rather than substantive equality.

On the other hand, the Declaration's commitment to 'improving the framework conditions to enable women and men to balance family life and employment, including access to parental leave and childcare' does appear to respond to the reality that women may struggle to enter full-time work due to family commitments.

However, despite this recognition, the focus of the Elmau summit is overwhelmingly on those steps that ought to be taken to incorporate women in the economic sphere *as it currently exists*, rather than to neutralise the dominant masculinity of many corporate environments. Although the statement in the Declaration that 'the private sector also has a vital role in creating an environment in which women can more meaningfully participate in the economy' may, on one reading, indicate a suggestion that the private sector neutralise those environments, it is more likely that it refers merely to the numerical participation of women in the workplace. As such, despite the intentions of the Leader's Declaration to promote women's empowerment at work, these commitments fall short of the CEDAW Article 5(a) requirement to '...modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women'. Rather than reshaping a traditionally male space in order to facilitate women's inclusion, the Elmau summit has instead committed less extensively to provide merely for women's access to that space. This is a position of formal rather than substantive equality, and once more falls short of the CEDAW standard, thus impairing the leadership role of the G7 by placing it behind other institutions.

Finally, and perhaps most interesting, Article 8 of the CEDAW provides that:

'State Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure to women, on equal terms with men and without any discrimination, the opportunity to represent their Governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organisations'.

Read in conjunction with Article 7, which extends the scope of the Convention to political as well as public life, Article 8 calls into question the absence (or minimal presence) of women in the G7 and in their representation within G7 discussions themselves. In the history of the G7, there have only been three women leaders: Margaret Thatcher, Kim Campbell (who only attended once) and Angela Merkel. At Schloss Elmau this weekend, of all nine leaders (composed of the seven G7 States and two EU representatives), Merkel is the only woman. Amongst the sherpas there is again only one woman: Caroline Atkinson from the United States, who works alongside seven men. Similarly, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the Liberian President, stands out beside the five other invited African leaders, all of whom are men. Consistently then, no matter which group of representatives are being evaluated from a gender perspective, women form a discernible minority.

Of course, the leaders themselves are democratically elected, and it may not be reasonable to directly criticise the dominance of men amongst them. There is no reasonable justification however, for the consistently low numbers of women who are appointed as sherpas. In addition, the G7 has not, either at previous summits or in Elmau, explicitly acknowledged its own gender imbalance. Given that the agenda for this particular summit was decided almost a year in advance of the Elmau meeting, and women in the workplace was one of the four key topics to be addressed, alternative steps could have been taken in order to fulfil the CEDAW requirement to take 'all appropriate measures'.

At a minimum, policy conversations about women should involve women. Yet the Elmau summit, which discussed not only women in G7 countries, but also throughout the Global South, involved only one woman leader, one woman sherpa, and one woman among the invited African leaders. Appropriate measures might have been taken by actively engaging civil society organisations involved in women's empowerment at work – particularly in informal and rural work throughout the Global South – in dialogue, and then referring explicitly to the outcomes of those talks in the Leader's Declaration in order to legitimise the leaders' subsequent decision-making. In pursuit of fulfilling a global leadership role, the G7 might have gone even further, by committing to a gender quota for their own sherpas at future summits. In the absence of such a quota, or extensive women's civil society engagement, the G7 missed an opportunity to genuinely lead on the inclusion of women in policy-making, in accordance with the international legal obligations which apply to six out of the seven States under CEDAW, and thus falls short of its aspirational position as a global leader in this field.

Gender at Schloss Elmau 2015

There are four major gender developments that were designed at this 2015 G7 summit. They pertain to entrepreneurship, vocational training, the gender gap in workforce participation, and the creation of a working group on women. Details of all of these areas can be found in the [Leaders' Declaration](#) and [Annex](#) to the declaration of the Elmau summit. All four are steps in the right direction. But the failure to address the internal gender dynamics of the G7 itself, and the heavy focus on private companies rather than state leadership, means that the G7 is stepping towards but not yet fully occupying a global leadership role with regard to gender equality policy.

The first development is the creation of six 'G7 Principles on Women's Entrepreneurship' contained in the Annex to the Leaders' Declaration. In general, these principles are laudable. They seek to pursue goals of substantive equality, such as countering 'gender stereotyping', which directly meets the objective of Article 5(a) of CEDAW to '...modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices', and also by increasing visibility of female entrepreneurs and addressing 'the specific needs of female entrepreneurs'. While these aspirational principles are desirable, it is extremely unclear, from the wording of the Declaration, to whom these principles will apply. As I have argued, if the G7 is to take a genuine leadership role in gender equality issues, it must undertake direct obligations and commitments to promote that equality within its component States, rather than merely asking for those commitments from the private sector. Until these principles are endowed with legally binding meaning, the leadership of the G7 on women's empowerment remains somewhat limited.

The second development is the commitment to increase 'the number of women and girls technically and vocationally educated and trained in developing countries through G7 measures by one third' before 2030. Although this pertains to targets located outside of the G7 itself, pleasingly it is mirrored by the third commitment to 'reduce the gender gap in workforce participation within our own countries by 25% by 2025' and the fourth pledge, to establish a new working group on women within the G7. All three of these commitments mark a change of direction in the G7 towards a genuine leadership role in the field of gender equality, at least in the context of the workplace. Most notably, the targets on vocational training and reducing the gender gap provide measurable figures against which the success or failure of the G7 might be assessed, albeit not until 2025 and 2030 respectively.

However, once more, with the exception of the working group to be established, these commitments, if they are to be fulfilled, apply more to the private sector than they do to States or the G7 themselves. If the G7 is truly to take on a global leadership role, they must not only match the action of other international organisations of States – they must better them. Commitments to improve the status of women in the workplace, alongside earlier pledges in the fields of maternal health and sexual violence in conflict zones, are respectable first steps. But the G7 States, with the exception of the United States, are under international legal obligations, embodied by the CEDAW, to promote and protect gender equality right across the private, public, and political spheres of society. The G7 leaders profess to be committed to 'foster access to quality jobs for women', and yet only one State has a female sherpa. The success of the working group on women to be established following Elmau will depend entirely on its remit, its resources, and the degree to which it is supported directly and proactively by the G7 leaders. Committees can be effective, but they can also be talking-shops designed to merely provide the appearance of action.

Consideration of gender issues has been, and continues to be, consistently inconsistent in the G7 context. Until they are addressed more reliably, and in direct fulfilment of CEDAW obligations, the G7 will not be leading the way on gender; it will be following behind other international organisations which are proactively prioritising the realisation of gender equality in both policy and practice.

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