

INDIAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE G20 SUMMIT 2017

Gendering the G20: Empowering Women in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT Women make up a majority of the four billion people excluded from the digital economy. Policy narratives assert that the digital economy has the potential to transform the world of work. Conversely, there are concerns that the existing 'digital divide' within and across nations will simply exacerbate existing social inequalities and reinforce gender hierarchies. G20 member states have repeatedly committed to bridging pervasive gender gaps in labour-force participation, financial inclusion, and more recently, digital inclusion. Given the heterogeneity of the G20 formation, it is important that they strive for coordinated action as well as localised, country-specific pathways. This brief explores the challenges and opportunities for women's empowerment in a digital age in the context of the G20.

INTRODUCTION

While estimates vary, a woman anywhere in the world today is "less likely to be online, is more likely to have low or no digital skills and is at greater risk of being socially and economically excluded by the digital disruption currently taking place."¹ Women make up a majority of the four billion people excluded from the digital economy.² Primarily due to social, cultural, and economic barriers,

women in the world's least developed countries are 31 percent less likely than their male counterparts to have internet access.³ Policy narratives assert that the digital economy has the potential to transform the world of work. For instance, the digital economy is expected to generate 30 million employment opportunities in India by 2024–25.⁴ However, estimates suggest that

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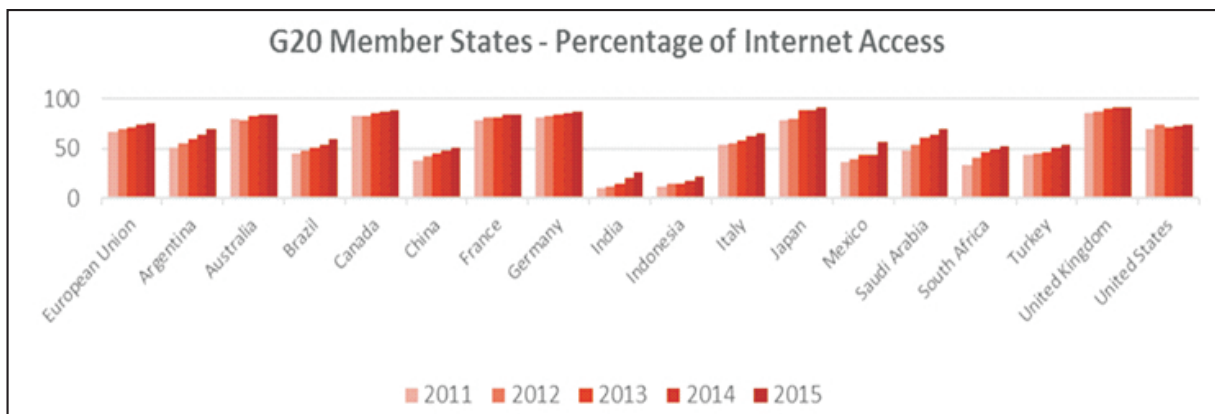
women will be one-third less likely to benefit from these opportunities accrued by the new information society.⁵ Studies indicate that the gender gap in developing countries will only continue to grow, and by 2020, over 75 percent of women will remain unconnected.⁶

Further, the “digital divide”— earlier understood simply in terms of access to new Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and the gap between the informational ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’—has since evolved. As the term “access” is often conflated with usage, there is a lack of adequate emphasis on skills, time, and opportunity required to make meaningful use of ICT. The digital divide, then, is more accurately described as a combination of skill gap and physical lack of access to ICT, with the two gaps contributing to one another in circular causation. What further contributes to the exclusion of women from the digital realm is that regardless of access and level of skills, usage depends on time, opportunity, autonomy of use, and social support. Thus, simply providing physical access is not enough. Digital inclusion must be understood in terms of those who have the skills, ability and opportunity to productively engage, mobilise, and participate in public life using

ICTs.⁷ While policy narratives focus on the enabling potential of ICT, there are concerns that without equal access and skills, ICTs will exacerbate existing inequalities and reinforce traditional gender hierarchies.

The G20 is not a homogeneous grouping; neither are women. The digital gender divide is relative to each member state and its accompanying socio-economic context. For instance, a 2015 Pew Research Centre analysis found that in terms of smartphone ownership, the United States (US) is at the top with 72 percent.⁸ Evidence suggests that in richer economies, age, ethnicity, and location can be bigger determinants of digital inclusion than gender. For instance, data indicates that only 49 percent of African-Americans and 51 percent of Hispanics have access to high-speed internet connections at home, compared to 66 percent of Caucasians in the United States. The variation in ICT access and usage is evident across the G20 member states. For instance, the *Effective Measure Demographic Report 2014* revealed that in South Africa, 51 percent of internet users in the country were female.⁹ This is in contrast to India, where only 29 percent of internet users and 28 percent of mobile phone owners are women.¹⁰

Figure 1



Source: Data based on International Telecommunication Union, *ICT Facts and Figures 2016, Global and Regional ICT Data*, <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

At the same time, the value of the G20 platform lies in norms-setting. All member states have repeatedly committed themselves to bridging pervasive gender gaps in labour-force participation, financial inclusion, and more recently, digital inclusion. Given the diversity of G20, it is important to analyse how the group can strive towards coordinated action, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, as well as localised country-specific pathways. Further, in the absence of an implementation mechanism, it is important to evaluate how the G20 can really cooperate to achieve its commitments. This brief aims to explore the challenges and opportunities for women's empowerment in a digital age, in the context of the G20. It is divided into three sections: The first explores the prospects and challenges of putting gender equality at the core of G20. The second section aims to unpack the implications of women's digital exclusion and inclusion in the heterogeneous context of G20 and makes a case for context-specific solutions. The brief closes with a summary.

GENDERING THE G20

Being responsible for 85 percent of the global economy, 80 percent of world trade, and two-thirds of the global population, the G20 economies are in a position to be a powerful platform for enabling sustainable, gender-equal economic cooperation and policymaking.¹¹ However, a large percentage of G20 policies tend to be gender-neutral, leading to gender-unequal outcomes. In the last few years, the push to mainstream gender across policies has grown stronger. This is crucial as contrary to common perception, global rates of female labour-force participation have stagnated, and even fallen, in recent decades.¹² A Chatham

House study of gender disparities in the G20 found that the population-weighted G20 average rate of female labour-force participation fell from about 58 percent in 1990 to 54 percent in 2013.¹³ World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index revealed that out of a total of 144, five G20 economies ranked 80 or higher—India (87), Indonesia (88), China (99), Turkey (130), Saudi Arabia (141)—where the first rank demonstrates high equality.¹⁴

The links between gender equality and sustainable economic growth are well established. It is estimated that women's empowerment can not only increase the global GDP by \$12 trillion by 2025, but also lead to more sustainable societies.¹⁵ This resonates directly with G20's primary objective of fostering overall global GDP growth.¹⁶ On paper, the G20, in addition to the rest of the international community, recognises the urgency and importance of prioritising gender equality. In September 2015, the international community came together to commit to empowering all women and girls as part of a standalone Goal (Goal 5) of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In addition, the G20 member states have committed to "women's full economic and social participation (G20, 2012); to reducing the gender gap in participation by 25 per cent by 2025; and to bringing more than 100 million women into the labour force (G20, 2014a)."¹⁷ However, given the dearth of women's voices and limited space given to in-depth deliberation on gender equality, the platform has been criticised in the past for tokenism instead of presenting tangible policy solutions.¹⁸ In response to this and to ensure thorough follow-through, the Women20 or W20 engagement group was established in 2015.¹⁹ Under Germany's current presidency,

both gender and digital economy have been central to the developing agenda. This is evident through the priority given to gender issues in the G20 engagement groups such as Labour 20 (L20), Think 20 (T20), and Women 20 (W20), and the complementary interlinkages between their communiqués.

The G20's focus on gender-based digital inclusivity and skilling is relatively new. In the past, policy conversations on technology have

been focused on infrastructure and trade. This year in April, when the first-ever G20 "Digital Ministers" meeting was held in Germany, the declaration acknowledged that 250 million fewer women than men are online today. The declaration committed to promoting "action to help bridge the digital gender divide and help support the equitable participation of women and girls in the digital economy."²⁰ Box 1 shows the gradually growing focus on bridging the digital gender divide in the G20 agenda.

Box 1: Existing Agreements on the Digital Gender Divide

G20 2014: Brisbane Communiqué

(Paragraph 9)

"There was commitment to the goal of reducing the gap in participation rates between men and women in G20 countries by 25% by 2025. However, the summit did not mention the digital economy or potential of ICTs." (Plan et al. 2014)

W20 2015: Introduction of Women20

The G20 under Turkey's presidency inaugurated the first W20 Summit.

G20 2015: G20 Skills Strategy

"The strategy discusses the development and better use of relevant skills" (G20 Leaders 2015b). The strategy does not refer explicitly to digital skills or digital literacy needs.

G20 2015: Antalya Communiqué

(Paragraph 26)

"There is a commitment from G20 Leaders to bridge the digital divide, but lacks any explicit references to digital skills." (G20 Leaders 2015a)

G20 2016: Hangzhou Communiqué

(Paragraph 14)

"The G20 leaders continue their commitment to foster favourable conditions to address the digital divide. Highlighted the need to address the digital divide and promote women's equal participation in the digital economy. It delivered the G20 Digital Economy Development and Cooperation Initiative, which builds on the work begun in Antalya." (G20 Leaders 2016)

(Paragraph 11, 12)

Recognition is offered to the need for skills training in the G20. This may implicitly refer to enabling digital skills training programmes.

NB: The G20 focus pertaining to the digital economy and digital divide has till now centred on digital trade, financial inclusion and infrastructure development. There are no specific agreements on measuring or promoting digital literacy.

The Communiqués from the **W20 Summit in Istanbul** (Turkey, 16–17 October 2015) as well as the **W20 Summit in Xian** (China, 26 May 2016) highlight the need to address the digital divide and promote women’s equal participation in the digital economy.

Source: Urvashi Aneja et al., “Bridging the Digital Skills Divide,” *G20 Insights*.²¹

In addition to the above, the SDG agenda commits the G20 countries towards bridging the digital gender divide. UN SDG²² Goal 4—“ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”—includes the target to increase scholarships in vocational training in ICT, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries. The dedicated gender goal (Goal 5) commits to enhance the use of enabling technology, particularly ICT, to promote the empowerment of women. Further, Goal 9—“build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation”—includes significantly increasing access to ICT and striving to provide universal and affordable access to the internet in least developed countries by 2020. Even the “agreed conclusions” of the UN Commission on the Status of Women 2016²³ (CSW60) and the New Urban Agenda²⁴ adopted at the UN Habitat III conference in December 2016 necessitates the G20 member states to work towards making ICTs accessible to women and girls and mainstreaming gender in technology literacy (CSW60). Arguably, while the UN processes adopt a rights-based approach, the very basis of G20 is macroeconomic stability. In recent years, the G20 agenda has broadened significantly because it has been acknowledged that economic prosperity depends on social prosperity. At the same time, it must be

acknowledged that a broader agenda does not necessarily yield greater results, especially in the absence of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Since the UN SDGs already present a list of comprehensive goals and targets for global prosperity, the G20 agenda should strive to add value to the existing agenda with inclusive growth-oriented tangible economic solutions, as opposed to reinventing the wheel. At present, it is not enough for the G20 to mention the digital gender divide without working towards a clear roadmap for bridging it. The engagement groups such as W20, L20, and T20 have presented “implementation plans” in addition to communiqués. The W20 plan also includes a monitoring dashboard to facilitate evaluation. It remains to be seen how individual governments respond to these plans at the Leaders’ Summit in July and, furthermore, how they integrate domestic policies with global commitments. The UN SDG experience demonstrates that sovereign nations will not be willing to abide by any external oversight mechanism. Thus, it is important for the G20 to deliberate on incentivising the process in a way that leads to more cooperation for the achievement of common goals.

As seen in the G20 President Chancellor Angela Merkel’s active involvement in the W20 Summit in April 2017—as well as W20 2017 Communiqué’s unparalleled focus on increasing investments and using ICTs as tools

Figure 2: Monitoring Dashboard

1. Female-to-male ratio of internet and mobile users
2. Female-to-male ratio of the rate of digital literacy (use of web applications, programming languages, network administration) for pupils, students and adults
3. Female-to-male ratio of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) enrolment rate in schools, apprenticeships and at university
4. Female-to-male ratio of representation in professional and technical jobs in STEM sectors
5. Number of companies with digital skill-up programmes for women of all ages and career stages
6. Gender-disaggregated data on the substitution of current jobs and the creation of new jobs via digitalisation
7. Female-to-male ratio of entrepreneurs launching STEM start-ups
8. Female-to-male ratio of patents applied for and patents received
9. Unconscious Bias Scorecard concerning girls and women in STEM, ranked by country
10. Major technology corporations with significant programmes focused on women innovators and entrepreneurs in STEM, including technology access, corporate venturing/funding, and high-profile award programmes

Source: Presented in the W20 Germany 2017 Implementation Plan, Berlin, Germany, 26 April 2017.

to accelerate progress towards gender equality—it is clear that Germany is set to make the case for greater focus on policies for empowering women in the digital age at the G20 Leaders' Summit in July 2017.²⁵ It is important to highlight these commitments as they demonstrate that the priorities of the G20 formation are clear and consistent. While this is encouraging, the extremely slow progress towards closing these gender gaps also highlights the procedural limitations and substantive gaps in global processes such as the G20. Although Germany has prioritised the recommendations made by the W20 and other engagement groups, the percentage of these recommendations that will be accepted at the Hamburg Summit in July is up to the other G20 leaders.

Moreover, the commitments made at the G20 Leaders' Summit are non-binding, not

unlike the SDG agenda. When Argentina takes over the presidency in 2018, it will be optional for the country to carry forward the current presidency's priorities, which can be replaced by a new set of priorities spearheaded by the new presidency. Due to this non-binding, fragmented nature of policy discussions in the process, to be truly effective, the G20 must find a way to go beyond setting norms. In the future, it will be interesting to assess the formation's potential to be a knowledge and funds facilitation mechanism.

UNPACKING DIGITAL EXCLUSIONS AND INCLUSIONS

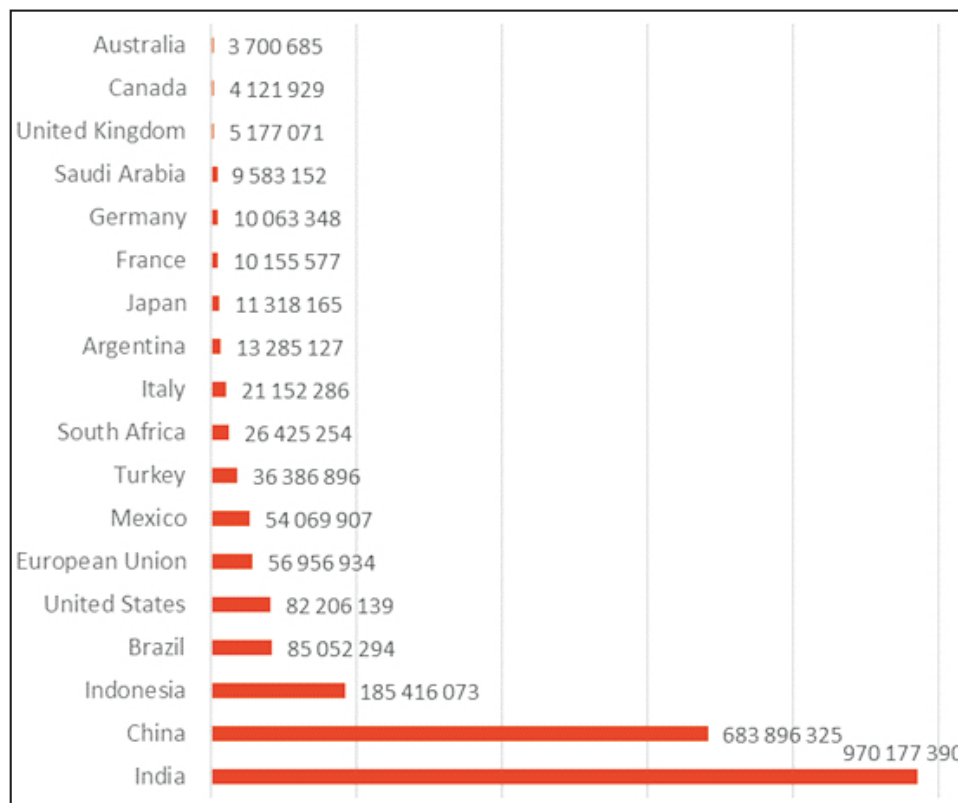
According to the World Bank's 2016 World Development Report,²⁶ new digital technologies have the potential to ease women's labour-market participation and self-employment. Further, governance is increasingly mediated

through the digital, such as online grievance redressal through social-media platforms and online government form submissions.^{27,28} Thus, women's disproportionate digital exclusion also excludes them from the labour market, public life and political participation. While the digital divide exists in varying degrees across the G20 (Figure 3 demonstrates the disconnected populations of the G20 in 2015), poorer communities and rural women in the developing world tend to be the least digitally included. As mentioned above, only about 29 percent of internet users and 28 percent of mobile phone owners are women.²⁹ However, the gender dimension of digital exclusion can have varying manifestations. For instance, even in the US, where age, ethnicity and location are bigger determinants than gender in terms of digital access and usage, women's under-representation in STEM fields is a

growing concern: only 18 percent of women earned a bachelor's degree in engineering in 2012.³⁰ STEM jobs are estimated to grow faster than any other US sector, with technology companies alone needing to hire 650,000 new people by 2018.³¹ In addition to widening the existing deficit of women in high-skill technical jobs and research,³² the deficit of women in STEM fields is leading to new technologies being developed almost exclusively by men.³³ Consequently, in-built sexism in artificial intelligence and robotics is already visible. If the present situation persists, it is likely to exacerbate existing inequalities in work opportunities and outcomes.

Moreover, the data on "being disconnected" paints an incomplete picture. For instance, a report by Women and the Web revealed that in 2012 one in five women in India thought

Figure 3: Disconnected Populations of the G20 (2015)



Source: Data based on International Telecommunication Union, *ICT Facts and Figures 2016, Global and Regional ICT Data*, <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

internet usage to be inappropriate, non-beneficial and something that their families would disapprove of.³⁴ Further, 40 percent of women in this study expressed discomfort or a lack of familiarity as a reason for not using the internet.³⁵ Another survey conducted in semi-rural Madhya Pradesh revealed a similar trend. A majority of the women who owned a mobile phone did not know how to operate it, given their lack of textual literacy.³⁶ Their usage was limited to pressing the green button when the phone rang, reducing the technology to a tool for control and surveillance rather than empowerment.³⁷ Skills-based digital exclusion is not an exclusively Indian phenomenon. In South Africa for example—another G20 nation—it was revealed that 35 percent of households saw no relevance in accessing the internet.³⁸ Further, while the digital gender divide in South Africa is not pronounced, Accenture’s “Getting to Equal” survey on digital fluency in women ranked the country a low 21, out of total 31 countries.³⁹ This re-affirms that while usage guarantees access, this alone does not guarantee usage.

In addition to the high cost of access to new technologies combined with the low level of female purchasing power, infrastructural constraints—the determining aspects of gendered digital exclusion in developing countries—are the impact of gender-biased belief and value systems that impose restrictions on the education and free mobility of women, indirectly exacerbating the digital skills divide.⁴⁰ For instance, the 2011 Indian Census data indicates that only 65.46 percent of women are literate, compared to over 80 percent of men.⁴¹ Further, 23 percent of girls drop out of school before they reach puberty.⁴²

Patriarchal attitudes and sexual division of labour also restrict women’s access to public spaces, keeping them out of co-ed training facilities and community internet centres outside the household.⁴³ Yet, policy conversations tend to provide generalised solutions and fail to address ICT-specific strategies independent of the overall sociocultural context in individual nations.

Thus, in order to tackle the digital gender divide, the G20 must address two crucial issues: first, the limited access to digital technologies due to high costs and lack of ICT-enabling infrastructure, which includes intermittent supply of electricity; and second, the limited access to opportunities that shape digital skilling, as well as opportunities that allow the free use of access and skills – both are shaped by sociocultural perceptions. Policy narratives within the G20 have tended to focus on making infrastructure available and, indeed, that is a crucial step. However, the focus on the digital-skills divide and its sociocultural drivers has been inadequate. Addressing barriers that implicitly and explicitly discriminate against women’s and girls’ access to equal education and digital training is essential for harnessing the transformative potential of ICTs.

A 2017 study by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy and Emerging Market Sustainability Dialogues, titled “The Effects of Digitalisation on Gender Equality in the G20 Economies,” discusses this transformative potential of ICTs.⁴⁴ According to the study, the fourth industrial revolution—characterised by machine learning, big data, mobile robotics and cloud computing—will contribute to enhancing women’s inclusion both financially and on the labour market, if it is complemented

by holistic policies to enable equitable access and capacity building. Strategies, therefore, must focus not only on stopping existing biases from seeping in but on enabling women to lead in the digital age. Digitisation is also expected to create new entrepreneurial activities; with higher education, digital and financial literacy, entrepreneurial skills and mentorship, and access to finance, women can thrive in the digital age. The study also found that efforts to inculcate women's social skills and 'learnability', which includes analytical thinking and creative problem-solving skills, should be prioritised.⁴⁵ Another study has suggested that automation can relieve women from the burden of unpaid housework as basic household tasks become automated.⁴⁶ However, in India, where there are approximately 4.2 million domestic workers—most of whom are women⁴⁷—automation of housework, in the absence of alternative employment creation, will put their livelihoods at risk.⁴⁸

Unless urgent and focused efforts are made to tackle the digital-access and digital-skills divide, the digital economy will likely exacerbate existing political and social inequities within and across the G20 states. While some member states have a more pervasive gender digital divide, others have a significantly narrower one, where gender may not even be the key determinant. Despite huge variations, there are opportunities for exchange of knowledge and best practices. It is clear that the digital divide is a global concern, even if its determinants and levels are varied. The G20, however, must refrain from adopting a dominant narrative of digital transformation that unintentionally leaves behind the last woman in countries such as India.


MOVING FORWARD

The G20 formation has committed itself to bridging the digital gender divide. There is nothing inherently empowering or discriminatory about technology. At the same time, due to the existing gender gaps, the digital age will impact men and women differently. Moving forward, equitable and affordable access to ICTs along with robust ICT infrastructure are crucial for bridging the digital gender divide. However, digital inclusion does not end at physical access: education, digital skills, and overcoming patriarchal value systems are paramount for meaningful engagement. Without these, the digital revolution will exacerbate current gender hierarchies. Further, 'online' and 'offline' are becoming increasingly intertwined with digitisation. Therefore, G20 policy measures aimed at women's empowerment, and those aimed at technological innovation, must not operate within silos.

Efforts to put gender equality at the centre of the G20 process has been growing stronger as evidence suggests that G20's past gender-neutral policies have led to gender-unequal results. Given its heterogeneity, moving forward, the G20 must find ways to integrate country-specific pathways with broader common goals. To create more impact, solutions must strike a balance between local and global, as overgeneralised Eurocentric policy narratives will not lead to desired results in countries with distinct sociocultural characteristics. For instance, in developed economies, technology is a skill-provider itself; it is often embedded in classroom learning. Consequently, many G20 conversations on digital inclusion take this for granted. On the

other hand, there are countries within the G20 where constant supply of electricity and high-speed internet connectivity are not guaranteed. In addition, women are often unable to access or complete formal schooling. This chasm must not be ignored, and there should be equal focus on alternate strategies for life-long learning for women and girls.

Further, most studies on women's empowerment and digital inclusion in the G20 context have remained anecdotal. At present, there is a dearth of gender-disaggregated data on women's access and usage of ICT, as well as of qualitative studies on attitudes and stereotypes that shape unconscious bias. The Digital Opportunity Index (DOI) was introduced in 2005 to track digital inclusion. However, the DOI does not collect gender-disaggregated statistics. There is an opportunity to undertake empirical research to map out future policy pathways.⁴⁹

Lastly, the efficacy of G20 as a platform must be re-evaluated. The group has been successful in highlighting crucial issues of global importance. Its agenda has broadened significantly as the formation acknowledges the inter-dependence of economic and social stability, and engagement groups such as the W20 have become more influential. However, at a time when the UN SDGs already bind the international community with a comprehensive list of goals and targets for global development, the G20 should refrain from reinventing the wheel. It is important for the platform to add value to the existing agenda by using its influence to devise tangible, inclusive, growth-oriented solutions. At present, it is not enough for the G20 to mention "digital gender divide" in its deliberations without working towards a clear roadmap for bridging it. Given the existing procedural and substantive limitations, in the future, the platform must strive to ensure greater cooperation, monitoring, evaluation, and incentivised implementation. 

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