



## **Women-led Development:**



## **A Pathway to Inclusive and Sustainable Growth**

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# Women-led Development: A Pathway to Inclusive and Sustainable Growth

- Shubha Chacko

## INTRODUCTION

The approach of international developmental models toward women has undergone significant transformation over the 75 years, still it has failed to recognise, support and foster women's agency, rights and contributions. International development efforts that started after the Second World War focussed largely on industrial growth, infrastructure development, and rebuilding social and other institutions; women remained invisible for these policymakers and thinkers and 'man' remained the default pattern of society.

From the 1960s, the change resulted in women being seen as part of the welfare state's remit, largely focused on their roles as mothers and caregivers. Women were included in development projects mainly in terms of health and education for maternal and child welfare. The 1970s marked a turning point with the introduction of the "Women in Development" (WID) approach. The WID approach sought to integrate women into existing development efforts by providing them with education, training and access to economic resources. Women were seen as an "economic complement". And programmes were focused on promoting economic sufficiency and diminishing poverty. This model has led women into productive roles that are simply an extension of their work

in the domestic sphere, with little profitability. Women were an 'add-on' to development rather than addressing systemic inequalities.<sup>1</sup>

Moving on to a broader approach of women and development in the late 1970s that emphasises the distinctive nature of women's work and roles in society, there was a shift from focusing solely on women to addressing the broader social relations of gender, leading to the rise of the "Gender and Development" (GAD) approach in the 1980s. GAD sought to examine the power dynamics between men and women, recognising that development was not just about including women but about transforming unequal gender relations.

The 1990s saw the rise of women's empowerment as a key objective of international development, largely influenced by global conferences like the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other international agencies began incorporating gender equality as a central tenet of human development.<sup>2</sup>

The human development approach, championed by Amartya Sen<sup>3</sup> and Martha Nussbaum<sup>4</sup>, framed development as expanding people's freedoms,

<sup>1</sup>Boserup, Ester. *Women's Role in Economic Development*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970.

<sup>2</sup>There are several scholars who have written on these issues including Irene Tinker, Gita Sen, Margo Okazawa-Rey, Amrita Chhachhi, Carmen Diana Deere Shahra Razavi.

<sup>3</sup>Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup>Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge University Press.

capabilities, and opportunities, with gender equality considered a core component of human progress. Women were no longer seen solely as beneficiaries of development but as active agents of change. The focus expanded beyond economic participation to include political empowerment, reproductive rights, and the right to education and healthcare. Development programmes began to address issues like violence against women and female representation in decision-making processes.

The turn of the millennium introduced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which included specific targets for promoting gender equality and empowering women. Gender mainstreaming became a key strategy, with international organisations aiming to integrate gender considerations into all stages of policy-making and implementation. The MDGs highlighted women's health (particularly maternal health), education, and economic participation. Yet critics pointed out that the goals were still limited in scope, failing to address deeper structural inequalities.<sup>5</sup> With the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, gender equality became a central and cross-cutting issue in global development, most explicitly outlined in SDG 5: Gender Equality. The SDGs introduced a more holistic approach to development, focusing on eliminating gender-based violence, ensuring equal access to resources, and achieving full gender parity in leadership and decision-making. SDG 5.4 calls for appropriate investments in care infrastructure, social protection systems and public services as a way of promoting shared responsibility for this essential work among the four pillars of society – the State, markets, households and communities.

In fact, the SDG declaration clearly states, “Realising gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the goals and targets. The achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities.”

Contemporary discourse has advocated for the need for an intersectional approach, acknowledging how various factors like race, sexuality, disability, and socioeconomic status intersect with gender to create unique challenges for different groups of women.<sup>6</sup>

There is also a stronger focus on local, grassroots women's movements as key partners in development,

rather than top-down interventions and the need to address patriarchal norms and power imbalances that perpetuate gender inequality.

While scholarship and activism have pushed for international development models to more fully recognise gender equality as central to sustainable development, progress within multilateral organisations and international financial institutions (IFIs) remains frustratingly slow.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the increased acknowledgment of women's empowerment in global frameworks like the SDGs, the implementation of gender-sensitive policies continues to face significant setbacks. These bodies often adopt progressive rhetoric but fail to take substantial, sustained action. In many cases, progress seems superficial—marked by pilot initiatives or token gestures that lack long-term commitment—resulting in a pattern of one step forward and two steps back. Entrenched patriarchal norms, inadequate resource allocation, and the absence of robust accountability mechanisms further slowdown meaningful transformation. The pace of reform is exacerbated by institutional inertia and political resistance, particularly in addressing the structural inequalities that perpetuate gender disparities. As a result, the gap between policy rhetoric and reality remains wide. The 2023 Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum, for example, notes persistent disparities despite progressive rhetoric in policies.<sup>8</sup> It points to both political resistance and institutional inertia as factors slowing reforms that have stymied the chances of meeting the SDG goals around gender

equality. The UN Women's report *Progress of the World's Women 2019-2020: Families in a Changing World*.<sup>9</sup> also points to entrenched gender norms and political obstacles that limit the effectiveness of policies and explores the “one step forward, two steps back” phenomenon in gender reforms globally.

## G20 and Gender Issues

The Group of 20 (G20), a coalition of the world's largest economies, has positioned itself as a platform for addressing global challenges such as economic instability, climate change, and inequality.

There has been a continuation of the discourse on gender equality as successive G20 summits from 2012 have focused on and have emphasised commitment to promoting women's economic empowerment in the course

<sup>5</sup>Fukuda-Parr, S. (2010). *Reducing Inequality – The Missing MDG: A Content Review of PRSPs and Bilateral Donor Policy Statements*. IDS Bulletin, 41(1), 26-35.

<sup>6</sup>For more on intersectionality from a feminist lens please refer to Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gloria Anzaldúa, Nivedita Menon

<sup>7</sup>For more on this see <https://www.genderaction.org/>, <https://www.bricsfeministwatch.org/> and <https://www.pwescr.org/publication.html>

<sup>8</sup>[https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2023.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf)

<sup>9</sup><https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2019/Progress-of-the-worlds-women-2019-2020-en.pdf>

of ending all kinds of discrimination and gender-based violence, land ownership rights, access to quality education with special attention to vocational and technical education, and to labour market with decent working conditions, and reducing the gender gap in labour force participation. Some of the significant milestones along the way include:

- 2014 (Australia) As per Brisbane Goal Action Plan (2014), the G20 nations agreed to promote greater women's participation in the labour market and improve the quality of women's employment. Under the Action Plan, the nations committed to reducing the labour force participation rates between men and women by 25 percent by 2025.
- 2015 (Turkey) An official G20 engagement group known as Women 20 (W20) was tasked with promoting women's economic empowerment as an integral part of the G20 process and sought to look at translating the G20 discussions into policies and commitments that support SDG-5 (achieving gender equality and empower all women and girls) and the Brisbane Goal. It is a key engagement group within the G20 that advocates for women's economic empowerment of women. It highlights equal pay, women's entrepreneurship, and financial inclusion. The W20's recommendations have shaped G20 commitments on gender equality, urging member states to enhance women's participation in leadership across all sectors.
- 2017 (Germany) One of the most significant G20 initiatives has been the Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative (We-Fi), a partnership between the World Bank Group and several governments, including the G20 members, aiming to provide financial and technical assistance to women-led businesses in developing countries.
- 2019 (Japan) Another formation that emerged was the "G20 Alliance for the Empowerment and Progression of Women's Economic Representation (G20 EMPOWER)" in Japan to accelerate women's leadership and development in the private sector. It promotes public-private partnerships to ensure that companies in G20 countries adopt more gender-inclusive leadership practices, addressing both gender parity and economic growth.

- 2021 (Italy) saw the "G20 Roadmap Towards and Beyond the Brisbane Target" that recognised that many factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly hindered the participation of women in the labour market and the improvement of the quality of their employment.<sup>10</sup>

It is within this context that we must view the idea of "women-led development" as propounded by India under the G20 Presidency in 2023. Women's leadership in development is crucial for post-pandemic recovery efforts. The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted women, especially in sectors like healthcare, education and informal economies. G20 leaders have recognised that economic recovery must prioritise gender-responsive policies, with a focus on supporting women entrepreneurs, enhancing labour market participation, and closing the gender pay gap. The G20 EMPOWER and W20 have been pivotal in advocating for reforms that advance women's economic empowerment. However, if the idea of women-led development is adopted then fundamental structural changes to the economy that centres livelihood options where more women are concentrated should be adopted. Women-led development has been articulated by the Government of India as something that "requires a comprehensive approach that addresses their needs throughout their lives. In this regard, welfare programmes have been designed to support women at different stages, enabling them to overcome socioeconomic barriers and achieve wholesome empowerment"

This idea was enunciated by the 2023 W20 communique, produced under India's G20 Presidency, which emphasised "women-led development" and provided actionable recommendations for empowering women across five key areas:

1. Climate change: The communique urged a gender-responsive approach in climate policy, emphasising women's participation in decision-making, particularly in adaptation finance and climate disaster management. It called for dedicated funding for women-led climate initiatives and policies that protect women impacted by climate-related migration. The role of women as first responders to climate change was a part of the India's G20 Presidency theme of Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE).
2. Entrepreneurship: It highlighted the need to boost women's economic contributions by supporting women-led businesses with access to finance, markets, and training. It recommended a 15 per

<sup>10</sup><https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2024/mar/doc202436319901.pdf>

cent tax break for women-led tech start-ups and targets for public procurement from women-owned businesses, aiming for 20 per cent by 2030.

3. Gender digital divide: The communique set a goal to halve the digital gender gap by 2030, with policies to improve access, affordability and digital skills for women. It proposed incentives for women-led digital start-ups and urged protections against online abuse targeting women.
4. Grassroots leadership: Advocating for at least one-third representation of women in leadership, especially at grassroots levels, it called for tailored support for women in rural areas, covering education, healthcare, and digital literacy.
5. Education, skills, and labour market participation: It underscored the need for equitable education access and promoted decent, predictable work with equitable care responsibilities. Policies to prevent workplace violence and to support women's rights in the labour market were also prioritised.

Another source of input to the final Delhi Declaration and in shaping the idea of women-led development was the Think 20 (T20), an engagement group within the G20 that was established in 2012 during the Mexican Presidency. The T20 is made up of academia and think tanks from G20 countries and its role is to generate policy proposals that help G20 leaders.

In the run-up to the G20 meetings in India, the T20 in its paper<sup>11</sup> highlighted some of the issues pertinent to "women-led development" by emphasising some of the similar concerns:

1. Recognition of unpaid care work: It stresses the need to recognise, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work, which predominantly falls on women, thereby enabling them to participate more fully in the workforce and contribute to economic development.
2. Education for girls: Ensuring that girls have access to education and addressing the factors that lead to dropouts is crucial for empowering women and enabling them to lead development initiatives.
3. Addressing gender-based violence: By implementing laws and solutions to effectively address violence against women, the document underscores the importance of creating a safe environment where women can thrive and lead.
4. Economic empowerment: The document calls for gender-sensitive social protection policies and equal

opportunities for women in the labour market, which are essential for lifting women out of poverty and enabling them to drive development.

It ends by highlighting G20's Commitment: The G20's recognition of the amplified toll the pandemic has taken on women and its pledge to prioritise gender equality in post-pandemic recovery efforts highlight the global commitment to women-led development. Overall, the document advocates for systemic changes and policy measures that support and empower women, positioning them as key drivers of sustainable development.

From a feminist viewpoint this policy brief falls short, particularly in addressing structural barriers and intersectionality. The brief emphasises actionable steps like enhancing women's access to the labour market, advancing gender-sensitive policies, and addressing unpaid care work, which feminists generally support as vital for gender equality. However, critiques by feminists argue that the policy recommendations could go further in challenging deep-rooted gender norms and systemic inequities. For example, while the brief promotes equal labour market opportunities, feminists might advocate for more transformative measures that also reshape gender roles within households and push for a comprehensive redistribution of care responsibilities between men and women, and more importantly government provisioning of support for those who need care. This involves establishing the necessary infrastructure and human resources to support unpaid work, including caregiving, in order to reduce the burden of unpaid labour on women, while ensuring that quality care is provided to those who need it. Another blind spot in the G20's approaches to gender equity is focusing on women's economic inclusion primarily as an add-on to existing structures rather than dismantling patriarchal and capitalist frameworks that limit genuine gender equality.

Another potential critique is the policy's treatment of intersectionality. Feminists have recognised how race, class, and other social factors intersect with gender. While the brief acknowledges multidimensional aspects of inequality, it lacks a sufficiently nuanced approach to the varied experiences of marginalised groups, especially within G20 countries where economic, social, and legal challenges differ greatly. The priority should move beyond policy inclusion to address structural change that fully addresses root causes of gender inequality across diverse contexts.

Eventually the Delhi Declaration<sup>12</sup> October 2023. from the 2023 G20 summit in India expressed a strong commitment to the idea of "women-led development". The

<sup>11</sup>Nitya Mohan Khemka, Soma Das, and Suraj Kumar, "Tackling Multidimensional Gender Inequality in G20 Countries," T20 Policy Brief, October 2023.

<sup>12</sup><https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/G20-New-Delhi-Leaders-Declaration.pdf>

declaration, under its section Gender Equality and Empowering All Women and Girls (Section G of the document) outlines the following:

**Enhancing economic and social empowerment.** The focus includes full, equal, effective, and meaningful participation of women in the economy as decision-makers, besides access to education and employment opportunities. It also covers closing the gender pay gap, seeks to enhance the availability and accessibility of social protection, access to affordable care infrastructure, acknowledges the need to address the unequal distribution in paid and unpaid care and domestic work, and to eliminating gender stereotypes and biases and gender-based violence. It is intent on women entering the formal financial system.

**Bridging the gender digital divide.** This includes ensuring accessibility, affordability, adoption and usage of digital technologies, involvement of women in the formulation and implementation of national digital strategies, besides identifying and eliminating all potential risks that women and girls encounter from increased digitalisation. It also says it will pay attention to creating an inclusive, digital economy for women-led and -owned businesses, including micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs.)

**Driving gender inclusive climate action.** It commits to supporting and enhancing women's participation, partnership, decision-making, and leadership in climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts, as well as in gender-responsive and environmentally resilient solutions, particularly in the areas of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).

**Securing women's food security, nutrition, and well-being.** It highlights encouraging investments in inclusive, sustainable and resilient agriculture and food systems, besides by leveraging innovative financing instruments in order to support gender-responsive and age-sensitive nutrition and food system interventions.

Overall, the document points to women-led development that addresses both immediate economic concerns and broader structural barriers to gender equality, aiming for sustainable progress through collaborative and international efforts.

The Delhi Declaration, which included the concept of women-led development, is highly significant from a gender and development perspective for several key reasons. It signals a paradigm shift, formally recognising that not only economic growth, but more importantly sustainable development also cannot be achieved without

prioritising women's empowerment and leadership. This represents a clear commitment to viewing women not just as beneficiaries of development, but as active drivers of change. It emphasises the need to dismantle the systemic barriers that hinder women's full participation in the economy, politics, and society, which are often rooted in patriarchal structures. This is again a shift in approach as it moves beyond gender mainstreaming to a more transformative approach. It can be seen as a step toward more inclusive development models that address the varied and complex ways in which gender intersects with other forms of marginalisation. This is particularly critical in addressing global challenges such as climate change, where women in marginalised communities are often on the frontlines. As the G20 brings together the world's largest economies, its decisions have the potential to catalyse global policy changes. The inclusion of women-led development in the Delhi Declaration could inspire other international bodies, national governments, and private sectors to adopt this approach.

Besides this, the Women's Empowerment Working Group (WEWG) was created under India's Presidency in 2023. (It will meet for the first time under Brazil's Presidency in 2024). The purpose of the WEWG is to support countries in tackling gender inequality and boosting women's empowerment in its different dimensions. The institutionalisation of a working group on this subject is seen as achievement for women and a step towards "leap forward in the commitment made by member countries to the effective realisation of the rights of women and girls."<sup>13</sup> The WEWG was set up under India's G20 Presidency in 2023 as a direct effort to operationalise and advance the agenda of women-led development, and is tasked to facilitate the collaboration among the G20 nations to transform the commitments into actionable strategies.

The central themes, during the Brazilian Presidency, will be on equality, which will be discussed along two axes – equality and autonomy, and work and care policies – combating misogyny and violence and climate justice.

Carrying on with the framing of the issue as women-led development the W20 Communiqué 2024 emphasises the central role of women in all development processes. It calls for G20 leaders to:

1. **Fulfil commitments:** Ensure that women are at the centre of all development processes, as committed by G20 leaders.
2. **Entrepreneurial support:** Increase access to financing, capital, and markets for women entrepreneurs, which can drive economic growth and innovation.

<sup>13</sup>[https://www.g20.org/en/tracks/sherpa-track/womens\\_empowerment#:~:text=The%20Women's%20Empowerment%20Working%20Group,empowerment%20in%20its%20different%20dimensions.](https://www.g20.org/en/tracks/sherpa-track/womens_empowerment#:~:text=The%20Women's%20Empowerment%20Working%20Group,empowerment%20in%20its%20different%20dimensions.)

3. **Care economy:** Prioritise investments in the care economy to support caregivers and promote gender equality, which can enhance women's participation in the labour force.
4. **STEM participation:** Increase women's participation in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields to close the gender gap and foster economic growth.
5. **Climate justice:** Ensure women's representation and leadership in climate action and decision-making processes.
6. **Ending violence:** Develop and enforce policies to protect women and girls from violence, which is essential for their empowerment and participation in development.

By focusing on these areas, the communiqué aims to create an environment where women can lead and contribute significantly to economic and social growth, thereby achieving gender equality and empowerment.

The conclusions of the W20 Communiqués from 2023 and 2024 emphasise the critical role of women in driving development and achieving gender equality. Following this, for the first time in G20 history, the concept of **women-led development** was explicitly integrated into the global agenda, going beyond the traditional focus on women's empowerment.

Despite this strong push, if we examine a press release that outlined how the Government of India will actualise the idea of women-led development, we realise it remains a list of some of the schemes that it considered as drawing from the women-led development approach. Unfortunately, most of this fall either on focussing on women's traditional roles as mothers, nutrition related and cooks, or are attempts to bridge gaps between women and men (to include women) and only one that is aimed at greater political participation.<sup>14</sup>

When examining the discourse surrounding women-led development, it is essential to apply a critical lens to the G20, as this is the platform advocating for this concept.

The G20 plays an important role in shaping and strengthening global architecture and governance on all major international economic issues. However, critics argue that the G20's policies and decisions often reflect neo-imperial tendencies, where the Global North continues to exert disproportionate influence over the Global South. Tom Chodor argues that it is a space for "the socialisation of 'systematically significant' countries from the Global South into the neoliberal world order".<sup>15</sup> Through economic

structures, trade policies, and climate agreements, the G20 perpetuates power imbalances and pushes models and norms that often favour the interests of wealthier nations at the expense of developing economies.

### The Importance of Women-led Development

However the idea of women-led development can be a liberatory framework if it embodies the following values:

**Agency and empowerment:** Centring women's autonomy and decision-making power, allowing them to drive their own lives, communities, and societal contributions. This principle emphasises women as active agents of change rather than passive beneficiaries.

**Rights-based approach:** Grounding development initiatives in the framework of universal human rights, including economic, social, and political rights, and recognising the state (and non-state actors) as duty bearers.

**Participatory approaches:** Involving women directly in the design (going beyond being just beneficiaries), implementation, and evaluation of development policies and programmes. This principle emphasises that policies affecting women should be informed by their experiences, insights, and leadership.

**Equity and inclusion:** Ensuring equal access to opportunities, resources, and rights, while recognising and addressing intersectional inequalities that may further marginalise certain groups of women (e.g., women with disabilities, rural women, trans women, or those from minority backgrounds).

### Pillars of Women-led Development

The following could be some of the pillars that women-led development should be based on:

**Community-driven, sustainable solutions:** Women-led development in the Global South often emerges from the ground up, driven by local knowledge, experiences and needs. In sectors like agriculture, health, and education, women are pioneering initiatives that prioritise sustainability over exploitation, creating more resilient and self-sufficient communities. For instance, women in rural parts of Africa and Asia have been central to the promotion of sustainable farming practices that resist the industrial agricultural models pushed by global corporations.<sup>16</sup> A report from the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGAIR) details initiatives led by women across Africa in climate-smart and sustainable agriculture. It highlights case studies where African women have promoted soil conservation, water-

<sup>14</sup><https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2024/mar/doc202436319901.pdf>

<sup>15</sup><https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786432650.00012>

<sup>16</sup> See for example **Agarwal, B. (2014)**. *Gender and Green Governance: The Political Economy of Women's Presence Within and Beyond Community Forestry*. Oxford University Press. And **Doss, C., Meinzen-Dick, R., Quisumbing, A., & Theis, S. (2018)**. *Women in Agriculture: Four Myths*. *Global Food Security*, 16, 69-74.

saving techniques, and resistance to industrial agriculture models, demonstrating the importance of traditional practices and community resilience in farming.<sup>17</sup> These efforts not only protect local ecosystems but also challenge the extractive development strategies that often characterise G20-led global initiatives.

**Resisting extractive economies:** Women's leadership has proven particularly effective in resisting the expansion of extractive industries such as mining, deforestation, and large-scale agribusiness, which are often promoted through G20-backed development policies. Women in countries like Brazil, India, and the Philippines have led movements to protect their land and resources from exploitation by multinational corporations.<sup>18</sup> By advocating for the rights of indigenous and rural communities, women's movements are helping to forge a new development model that prioritises environmental stewardship and community well-being over profit. The analysis by Mendes and Motta of struggles against extractivism shows that “in addition to denouncing the impacts of this development model, these struggles seek to construct alternatives that, although they could be essentially local, have been multiplied and articulated throughout the Latin American and the Caribbean territory, as part of a broader resistance to the dominant extractivism in the region.”<sup>19</sup>

**Empowering grassroots economies:** Women-led development also offers an alternative to the top-down, profit-driven economic models supported by the G20. Women entrepreneurs and cooperative leaders in the Global South have been at the forefront of creating inclusive, grassroots economies that prioritise social well-being, local control, and equitable distribution of resources. These initiatives are often more attuned to local realities and less reliant on the volatile global markets that can be destabilising for developing countries. In places like Kenya, India and Bangladesh, women's cooperatives have successfully mobilised to improve livelihoods through community-owned enterprises, promoting economic self-reliance.<sup>20</sup>

**Fostering inclusive governance:** Women-led development also advocates for more inclusive and democratic governance models that resist the G20's centralised decision-making processes. In contrast to the G20's often hierarchical structures, where decisions are made by a small group of powerful nations, women in the Global South are advocating for participatory governance systems that involve all members of society. This includes greater representation for women, indigenous communities, and other marginalised groups in policymaking. By reshaping governance structures, women-led initiatives challenge the undemocratic nature of global economic governance and promote a more just distribution of power.<sup>21</sup>

**Recognising women as experts and holders of knowledge:** The women-led development paradigm redefines women as significant knowledge holders, valuing their lived experiences, expertise and innovative contributions across diverse fields. It challenges traditional hierarchies that have marginalised women's voices by recognising both formal knowledge, and informal knowledge, including in caregiving, and community leadership. This points to localising solutions and underscores women as active agents in knowledge creation and dissemination.

**Reframing the care economy:** The paradigm recognises the centrality of the care economy —comprising unpaid and undervalued caregiving work—as a vital driver of societal well-being and economic growth. It advocates for policies that value, redistribute, and reduce the burden of unpaid care work while calling for investments in childcare, eldercare, and health services, along with social protection systems that support caregivers. This not only benefits the caregivers but is important for more inclusive and equitable growth.

**Addressing gender-based violence (GBV):** The women-led development paradigm positions women as leaders in both prevention and response strategies, leveraging their lived experiences and insights to shape effective interventions. It prioritises survivor-centred approaches, ensuring that women's voices drive legal reforms,

<sup>17</sup> Nyasimi, M., Amwata, D., Hove, L., Kinyangi, J., & Wamukoya, G. (2014). *Evidence of Impact: Climate-Smart Agriculture in Africa*. CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture, and Food Security (CCAFS).

<sup>18</sup> See for example Campbell, M., & Ananya, R. (2018). *Extracting Accountability: Natural Resource Governance and Indigenous Rights in Brazil*. In *The Routledge Handbook of Indigenous Development* (pp. 167-186). Routledge. Shiva, V. (2005). *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*. South End Press. Tauli-Corpuz, V. (2016). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. United Nations Human Rights Council.

<sup>19</sup> Mendes, I. & Motta, R. (2015). *Social Movements and the Struggles for Rights in the Amazon: Feminist Perspectives on Extractivism in Brazil*. *Latin American Perspectives*, 42(5), 70-88.

<sup>20</sup> See for example Kabeer, N., Mahmud, S., & Tasneem, S. (2011). *Does Paid Work Provide a Pathway to Women's Empowerment? Empirical Findings from Bangladesh*. IDS Working Paper 375. Institute of Development Studies. Mwangi, M., & Kariuki, S. (2015). *Factors Determining Adoption of New Agricultural Technology by Smallholder Farmers in Developing Countries*. *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development*, 6(5), 208-216. And the WEIGO website <https://www.wiego.org/>

<sup>21</sup> See for example Kabeer, N. (2005). *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millennium Development Goal 1*. *Gender and Development*, 13(1), 13-24. Tauli-Corpuz, V., & Lalunio, L. (2018). *Indigenous Women and the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues: Transforming Global Governance from the Margins*. *Development*, 61(1), 62-68. Cornwall, A., & Goetz, A. M. (2005). *Democratizing Democracy: Feminist Perspectives*. *Democratization*, 12(5), 783-800.

community safety programmes, and shelter and other efforts. It addresses GBV as both a social and systemic issue and pushes for enhanced accountability mechanisms.

At the practical level women-led development can lead to

- 1. Economic growth and poverty reduction:** Going beyond women's participation in the workforce, which it is established contributes to national economies, this paradigm would suggest that when women control resources and decision-making, it benefits entire communities. In many regions, women disproportionately invest in their families and communities, improving health, nutrition, and education. This contributes to breaking cycles of poverty, which affects not just women but entire populations.
- 2. Social and political empowerment:** Women-led development often includes women's active participation in decision-making at all levels, from local governance to national politics. Ensuring women's voices in policy creation leads to laws that address the needs of marginalised communities, such as the promotion of health, education, and anti-violence measures. Women in leadership roles tend to advocate for policies that benefit society as a whole, fostering inclusive decision-making and more accountable governance.
- 3. Addressing global inequalities:** Within the G20, women-led development is a crucial mechanism for addressing global inequalities. Gender inequality

remains a significant barrier to economic growth, particularly in developing countries. Women continue to face obstacles in accessing education, healthcare, financial services, and leadership positions. G20 member states have a responsibility to leverage their platforms to create policies that reduce these disparities, especially in the context of global labour markets, trade, and international aid. The G20's Compact with Africa initiative, for example, has emphasised the role of women in economic development as part of broader efforts to ensure inclusive growth in Africa. Supporting women-led development in low-income countries ensures that global growth benefits all. The G20's emphasis on sustainable development, particularly through the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, highlights the need to include women as key actors in these global efforts.

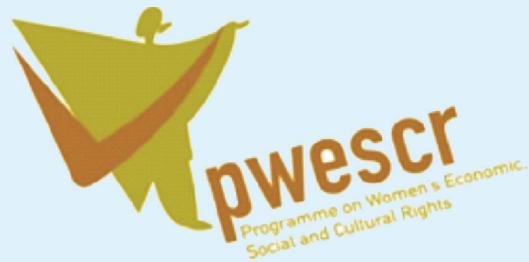
### Conclusion

If truly embraced, women-led development can offer a radical, grassroots response to the G20's neoimperial approach to global governance. Rooted in community-based approaches, women-led initiatives focus on sustainability, equity, and inclusivity, particularly in regions that have been marginalised by global power structures. By centering local knowledge, resisting extractive industries, and promoting more inclusive governance models, women in the Global South are providing a hopeful alternative to the top-down, market-driven models that have long dominated international development.

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