

G20 and feminist foreign policy: Improving multilateralism, the Indian way

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Modern-world challenges, such as the cascading effects of climate change, pandemic and territorial conflicts, have exacerbated gender inequalities, amongst other disparities. These growing gender inequalities have consistently highlighted the need for establishing transnational governance networks that provide scope for improving women's participation. The emphasis on feminist foreign policy by researchers of international relations, paired with feminist foreign policy initiatives adopted by several countries, has stirred enthusiasm about the gender-balanced foreign policy framework in India. With India taking up the G20 presidency, the dialogues on feminist foreign policy continue to gather momentum.

In line with an inclusive and action-oriented agenda for G20, scholars and theorists are motivated to ask niche questions: Could Global South, in general, and India's G20 presidency, in particular, play important roles in shaping a feminist foreign policy (FFP) agenda? Can the FFP serve as a catalyst for improving domestic gender inequalities? Given the enthusiasm and renewed theoretical rigour regarding FFP, it is about time to underscore the essence of FFP from an Indian perspective.

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Concrete efforts to bring gender disparities and gender-responsive international governance to the forefront of international dialogues were undertaken with the formation of Women 20 (W20)—an official G20 engagement group—in 2015 under Türkiye’s presidency. The agenda, herein, was women’s economic empowerment. As such, a transnational network of women entrepreneurs and academicians came into being. This step, in principle, added a new feather to G20 by including gender equality within its ambit. But, the real-time success of W20 has been limited. The ideology of W20 remains to be translated into an influential policy action.

India’s G20 presidency and gender issues

The W20 India Plan—reflecting the decentralised and inclusive stance adopted by New Delhi—accommodates voices from both the urban and the rural and tribal areas to create an enabling environment for women’s development and women-led development. While the success of the W20 India plan can be gauged through improved participation of women in Jan Bhagidari programmes, there is room for further manoeuvring by diversifying the working scope of the W20.

A special W20 focus on FFP, targeted at the construction of knowledge and subsequent translation into policy recommendations, can serve as an important first step in this regard. Including experiences of women and members of the LGBTQA+ community through the Jan Bhagidari programmes can help provide valuable inputs in shaping diplomatic endeavours. Inherent in this proposal is the assumption that gender is not equivalent to biological sex^[i]. Instead, gender is more closely associated with socially sanctioned masculine and feminine characteristics. Thus, there is not a single or uniform gendered experience of global politics but many^[ii].

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Herein, lies India’s contributions towards creating a “nuanced and inclusive” gender-balanced foreign policy—. The anticipation is that W20’s closer engagement with marginalised sections will at least help advance a non-binary foreign policy agenda, wherein, security issues occupy a major diplomatic space. These initiatives could be construed as attempts at moving beyond masculine versus feminine conceptualisations of security issues or hard and soft facets of security policy.

While engagement groups, such as the W20, can play an important role, the G20 working groups can play a strategic role as well. Present-day foreign policy portfolios, fore.g., disaster risk reduction, tourism, and health, allow scope for gender parity but on a piecemeal basis. Working groups can strategically help improve this scenario by working towards mainstreaming gender issues in all areas of foreign policy based on the inputs provided by the W20. The proposed two-tiered approach within the G20 framework could serve as an enabling condition for parity by allowing scope for including gendered experience to determine policy decisions.

What do we expect to gain from improved gender parity? A long-term expectation is countering the force of hegemonic masculinity that has thus far played a key role in lending decisive force to international recommendations for security and sovereignty. This is an important dimension to consider because feminist scholars decipher and define security in a broad multidimensional manner. In today's world, security threats are not restricted to war and territorial conflicts but also include domains like health, economy, technology, and ecological disturbances. And, India can promisingly set an example for the Global South and beyond by integrating its foreign policy with civil societies during her G20 tenure.

Gender parity, G20, and multilateralism

New Delhi has repeatedly laid stress on reformed multilateralism for addressing modern-day challenges and achieving sustainable peace, the call for which has become stronger with the Indian presidency of G20. Prime Minister Modi's vision for reformed multilateralism includes interlinkages between peace, security, and development. Although India has done an impressive job by sending women soldiers for UN peacekeeping operations, great strides can be made by addressing the gender gap within multilateral forums like G20 and BRICS. Furthermore, India could encourage the upcoming chairs to follow suit. The gradual emergence of gender-balanced multilateral institutions will go a long way in dismantling a hierarchical world order and paving the way for sustainable peace.

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Think20 (T20) and the associated TF-7, which maintains a focus on reformed multilateralism, should step in to conduct the theoretical groundwork for gender parity and reformed multilateralism. Here, members of T20 could consider maintaining close ties with researchers engaged with political psychology in the interest of deploying this alliance for furthering a gender-inspired reformed framework for multilateralism. Isolated studies, thus far, have yielded important findings on gender differences and political decision-making. For instance, men have frequently been cited as engaging in partisan politics whereas women tend to be more interested in domestic political issues^[iii]. Also, women are more likely to prioritise funding for welfare schemes^[iv]. Even though most of these studies have been conducted in the Global North, similar investigations from Global South are likely to reveal interesting differences and similarities across regions.

Conclusions

With the G20 baton in India's hand, it is about time to witness Global South imprinting on FFP and gender-inspired reformed multilateralism. Six months into the G20 tenure—at the time of writing this piece—India has been able to raise the pitch to push women's participation and economic empowerment. Moving forward, New Delhi should work

further to articulate feminist reflections on diplomatic endeavours. These efforts will have important implications for reinvigorating multilateralism and repackaging G20 as an inclusive platform.

[i] Doyal, Lesley. "Sex and gender: the challenges for epidemiologists." *International Journal of Health Services* 33, no. 3 (2003): 569-579.

[ii] Sjoberg, Laura. "Introduction to security studies: Feminist contributions." *Security Studies* 18, no. 2 (2009): 183-213.

[iii] Campbell, Rosie, and Kristi Winters. "Understanding men's and women's political interests: Evidence from a study of gendered political attitudes." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 18, no. 1 (2008): 53-74.

[iv] Campbell, Rosie. "Gender, ideology and issue preference: Is there such a thing as a political women's interest in Britain?." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6, no. 1 (2004): 20-44.

The views expressed above belong to the author(s).