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Task Force 01

FIGHTING INEQUALITIES, POVERTY, AND HUNGER

Closing the Women's Health Gap: Unlocking Economic Potential and Advancing Gender Equity

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Abstract

The **women's health gap** is the result of decades of persistent disparities between women and men in terms of data, intervention efficacy, and care delivery. Growing evidence underscores that closing this gap not only benefits outcomes in the healthcare sector but also proves to be an effective strategy for achieving long-term prosperity, eradicating poverty, empowering women, and fostering social, political, and economic participation, thereby positively impacting many of the SDGs. Women currently spend 25% more of their lives in poorer health compared to men, signaling an urgent need for targeted interventions (World Economic Forum 2024). Additionally, closing the gender gap in labor markets could unlock a staggering \$5.3 trillion in GDP (International Labor Organization 2017). Despite the substantial economic returns and the knowledge that women's health is fundamental to advancing gender equity, only 4% of investments in health specifically target women's health (World Economic Forum 2023).

This policy brief elevates the **crosscutting impact** of maternal, sexual, and reproductive health, outlines actionable recommendations, and offers a roadmap for G20 leaders to set forth a focused global agenda on women's health to accelerate change and **reduce inequality** at the local, national, and international levels. Recommendations feature **new research** assessing the extent to which investments in family planning technology and services contribute to reducing the **gender pay gap**. Integrated findings from relevant projects and new assessment tools like the Global Contraception Policy Atlas, help to create a comprehensive review that contextualizes equality-enhancing family planning policies within a G20 framework, contributing to a better understanding of the impact of investing in women's health and family planning in **accelerating achievement of the SDGs**, providing valuable insights for policymakers to design and implement effective strategies.

Diagnosis of the issue

Prioritizing Women's Health Makes Economic Sense

Women's health remains a critical yet often overlooked aspect of global development, with significant implications for gender equality and economic prosperity. Women spend 25% more of their lives in debilitating health compared to men (World Economic Forum 2024). Closing the women's health gap is not only a matter of social importance but also an economic imperative. It is estimated that closing the women's health gap could potentially boost the global economy by at least 1 trillion USD annually by 2040 (World Economic Forum 2024). Despite these projections, only 4% of health investments are specifically directed towards women's health (World Economic Forum 2023). Furthermore, progress toward women's health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) targets has slowed (United Nations 2024).

Aligned with the G20 priorities to reduce the labor-gender gap and drive progress toward the 2030 Agenda, there is a pressing need to prioritize women's health as an economic priority. Gender gaps in earnings remain substantial in several G20 countries, with only a modest narrowing of gaps since 2012 and the ILO-OECD annual monitoring and reporting to G20 Leaders of the progress towards the Brisbane target shows that reinforced efforts are needed to reach the '25 by 25' goal (ILO and OECD 2023).

Family Planning is Essential for Women's Economic Empowerment

Investing in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) has benefits that extend far beyond improved health outcomes, paying demographic and generational dividends for individuals, their communities, and beyond, and therefore warrants the G20's focused

attention. Family planning is a key pillar of SRH, yet social norms, restrictive laws, and external shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic can limit women’s access to essential services (OECD 2023; Oxfam 2021). Unintended pregnancies pose significant health risks to women, especially young girls and babies, contribute to higher mortality rates and complications (UNFPA n.d.) and often force girls to drop out of school, limiting their education and career opportunities and perpetuating poverty (Danielsson et al. 2001). Despite the critical importance of family planning services, COVID-19 disrupted access for 12 million women, leading to an estimated 1.4 million unintended pregnancies (UNFPA 2021).

Family planning programs have proven their health and social impact, and are demonstrated to be safe, affordable, and effective solutions – able to be deployed to **jumpstart commitments** to health equity and SDG targets. However, only 10 out of 190 countries have excellent policies enabling people’s access to high-quality supplies and services according to the Global Contraception Policy Atlas (EPF 2023a). Globally, only 57% of women make their own informed choices about reproductive healthcare, contraceptive use, and sexual relations (UN DESA 2022) and data from the Social Institutions and Gender Index highlights how some existing laws further restrict women’s reproductive autonomy (OECD 2023).

A new Vlerick Business School (VBS) study on the population of OECD countries between 2009 and 2022 concluded that access to the full array of contraception methods (both short- and long-acting) is positively associated with gender pay gap reduction (Van Dyck et al. 2024). These findings emphasize the creation of societal value and new synergies that can be derived by investing in women’s health. Increased prioritization and investment would allow the G20 to advance on its gender equality priorities—including



Brazil's priorities for the 2024 G20 Presidency, which include closing the gender pay gap by promoting, for instance, G20 countries' accession to the Equal Pay International Coalition led by ILO, UN-Women, and the OECD.



Recommendations

Evaluate the State of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Service Provision

- Commission a G20 review of the provision, access to, and quality of, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) care, paying attention to structural, social, and legal factors that can constitute key barriers.
- Account for the intersectional role of race, ethnicity, and different needs of women more broadly throughout the evaluation process.
- Elevate the crosscutting impact of women's health on education, economic empowerment and prosperity, social inclusion, and demographic resilience.
- Address disparities in women's health outcomes, particularly among marginalized and minority communities, acknowledging that challenges are not all the same and solutions must leave no one behind.
- Utilize new tools like the **EPF Contraception Atlas** to assess the state of the policy landscape (EPF 2023b).

The Contraception Policy Atlas serves in assessing and monitoring the progress of access to contraception and family planning services. The 3 pillars of Access, Policies, and Funding are comprehensive and tailored to each region. The tool enables policymakers, advocates, and civil society organizations to identify gaps, challenges, and successes in these critical areas and provides sustainable approaches for SRH. The Contraception Atlas empowers leaders to address disparities, drive meaningful change, and make informed decisions that positively impact the lives of millions of women and their families.

Prioritize Women's Health Through Action-Oriented SRHR Commitments and Implementation

- Build on the achievements of the Brisbane Leaders' Communiqué and ensure G20 Member States act on their SRHR-related SDG commitments.

- To support this outcome, ensure that women's health priorities are strongly reflected in the 2024 Leaders' Communiqué and develop a purposeful framework using existing tools and indicators to track progress.

- Consult with various key stakeholders to ensure that commitments address the diverse needs of women and girls, and accurately measure the impact of their SRHR initiatives, ensuring that commitments translate into measurable improvements and learnings on the ground.

- Utilize evidence-based advocacy to identify the impact of disparities and ensure that commitments communicate the wider socio-economic benefits of investing in women's health.

E.g. VBS research linking family planning and closing the gender pay gap or the research by the OECD on how social institutions can limit access to SRH.

- Commit to allocating the necessary resources to expand SRHR provision and deploy targeted education programs to address the social norms and structural barriers that prevent women from accessing healthcare and achieving optimal health outcomes.

- Recommit to UHC emphasizing the inclusion of the women's health sub-targets in SDGs 3 and 5 to foster cross-sectoral collaboration and amplify the positive impact of the G20's commitments on women's health and empowerment.

Design and Implement Inclusive Evidence-based Policy Solutions

- Involve women in all parts of the program cycle, ensuring that diverse voices and perspectives are incorporated. Include input from women's health advocates, civil society, healthcare professionals, and affected communities.
- Use available data to design evidence-based and targeted programs while identifying opportunities to close the gender data gap.
- Share best practices within the G20 group, drawing on Women's Health strategies and experiences, such as the Women' Health Strategy of England (Secretary of State for Health and Social Care 2022).
- Employ a comprehensive approach that asks, listens, and acts on women's evolving health needs across their life course and develop policies and programs for their holistic health and well-being.

E.g., Utilize the outcomes of the 'What Women Want' survey conducted by WRA to ensure that women's perspectives are integrated into policies and strategies.

"What Women Want," in collaboration with the World Health Organization, is mobilizing women from diverse age groups and regions to express their health and well-being priorities (White Ribbon Alliance 2022). By directly involving women in this process, stakeholders can design interventions and innovations that better cater to their needs, yielding improved outcomes. When women's voices are heard, decision-makers are more likely to act on their demands, leading to tangible changes and improvements in health systems.

This initiative builds on previous successful efforts, such as the "What Women Want: Demands for Quality Reproductive and Maternal Healthcare," which led to significant

investments, policy changes, and improvements in health facilities based on women's preferences.

Sustainably Fund Women's Health Initiatives

- Increase investment specifically for Women's Health research, education, and services.
- To support this outcome, facilitate cross-sectoral discussions to explore and promote innovative solutions for allocating resources and funding to ensure sustainable services.
- Leverage collective resources, expertise, partnerships, and financing mechanisms to increase sustainable funding for Women's Health programs within national health budgets, fostering an infrastructure for care that enables and empowers women and new economic opportunities.
- Utilize evidence-based advocacy for increased public and private investment in women's health to accelerate women's economic integration and close the gender pay gap, leveraging the triple return in the economy when investing in women.
- Consider sustainable financing mechanisms to increase available resources for executing Women's Health mandates.
- Accompany adequate resources with tangible commitments for procurement and effective implementation. For example, support the expansion and long-term sustainability of women-centered organizations that provide SRH services.
- Prioritize funding for research on women's health issues, including barriers to informed decision-making in health. For example, actively challenge misinformation and



ensure that health professionals are trained and well-informed in their discussions with female patients.



Scenario of outcomes

The G20 agenda has continuously prioritized population health and gender equality. By recognizing the social and economic impacts of women's health, G20 leaders will set a focused global agenda to accelerate change. Building on Indonesia's and India's G20 Presidency priorities, Brazil's G20 Presidency can promote progress and champion significant advancements in the G20's commitment to women's health and well-being.

The proposed scenario envisions a Brasilia Declaration by G20 leaders that commits to closing the Women's Health Gap to unlock economic potential in all Member States in addition to other elements of the Declaration. Key priorities would integrate the importance of overcoming persistent women's health barriers as an enabler for reducing the gender pay gap while incorporating a broader stakeholder discussion that considers other aspects and policies that enhance or detract from women's labor force participation and economic empowerment.

A G20 commission would evaluate the state of women's health and SRHR service provision and call on G20 Member States to incorporate a women's health strategy within the framework of a broader national strategy for health while utilizing evidence-based advocacy to ensure that commitments capture the wider economic and social impact. The proposed scenario largely focuses on SRHR and is thus not comprehensive of all women's health issues and interlinkages with socio-economic opportunities. Moreover, women's health issues can be context-specific, and SRHR may not always be the key priority – although it is always an important aspect of women's health. Additionally, we must acknowledge the outstanding need to close the gender data gap so that future data

generation more broadly supports the holistic evaluation of the unique needs of women and the advancement of innovation.

The deployment of funding and resources for the expansion of family planning programs can be used to jumpstart commitments to health equity, related SDG targets, and UHC more broadly while nations proceed to empower women's voices in policy solutions, improve women's health outcomes, and address the historical underrepresentation and underfunding in women's health research. Without a G20 Declaration, Member States faced with resource constraints and competing priorities may be more inclined to deter significant commitments to women's health research and services, ultimately perpetuating disparities and negatively impacting demographic resiliency.

In this scenario, Brazil's G20 Presidency seizes the opportunity to bring together cross-sectoral leaders from Health, Labor, Finance, Women's Ministries and beyond to align on action-oriented commitments that include allocated resources and measurable outcomes to accelerate achievement of the Brisbane Target and SDG sub-targets 3,5, and 8, generating lasting positive impact for generations to come.

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