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Closing Gaps, Opening Opportunities: The G20's Progress on Women's Economic Empowerment—and What Comes Next

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In 2014, G20 leaders made a historic commitment in Brisbane, Australia, to reduce the labor force participation gap between men and women by 25 percent by 2025, in an effort to bring 100 million additional women into the workforce, increase global growth, and reduce poverty and inequality. This target—known as the Brisbane goal, or "25 by 25"—spurred a decade of policy action aimed at addressing barriers to women's labor force participation, including the development of national plans and strategies to advance women at work (e.g. Australia), provision of free or low-cost childcare (e.g. UK, Canada), and measures to improve women's earnings (e.g. Brazil).

G20 countries have consistently reaffirmed their commitment to the Brisbane goal, explicitly citing it as justification for policy measures, and reporting progress annually to the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). **However, 2025 marks the end of the Brisbane goal, and only nine G20 countries have met the 25 percent reduction goal, though the overall objective of bringing 100 million more women into the workforce has been achieved.**[1]

So, why are some countries still falling behind in their efforts to meet Brisbane? A critical yet under-addressed piece of the puzzle is the care economy: women shoulder the majority of childcare and family care responsibilities, limiting their ability to take on paid, formal, full-time employment. The fragility of this system was starkly revealed during COVID-19: when schools and care centers closed, unpaid care work by women increased, women's employment decreased, and progress on the

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1   This analysis covers the 19 individual G20 member countries, but excludes the European Union and African Union blocs, which also participate in the G20.

Brisbane goal was temporarily halted. Women's labor force participation (LFP) has since rebounded to pre-COVID trends in most G20 countries, but unpaid care continues to be a major impediment to women's participation in the labor market. Women in G20 countries perform, on average, twice as much unpaid care as men, with even higher disparities in countries such as India, Türkiye, and Mexico—countries that also have some of the highest LFP gender gaps in the G20.

While these gaps persist, awareness of the critical link between the care economy and women's labor force participation has improved in recent years, including in the G20. In 2024, under Brazil's presidency, the G20 emphasized the care economy in its commitment to implementing the Brisbane goal, while signaling readiness to set new post-2025 G20 commitments. As leaders consider what this next generation of targets will look like, it is critical to assess G20 nations' progress against the Brisbane goal and set forward goals that better address the structural factors—including care work—that continue to shape women's economic opportunities.

Figure 1. Change in female labor force participation rates from 2012 to 2024
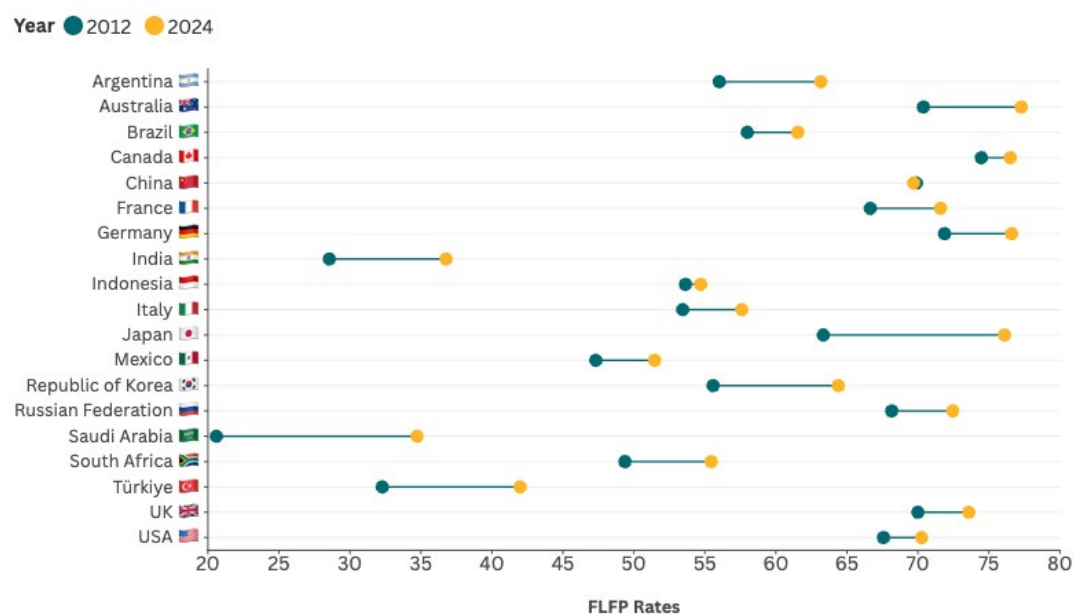
Source: Author's calculations based on data from ILOSTAT.
Notes: Labor force participation rates by sex and age (15-64) were downloaded from the Labour Force Statistics (LFS) database, ILOSTAT, using the 13th ICLS definition of labor force participation. All original downloaded data with source notes can be found here. Where data was missing, ILO modelled estimates, Nov. 2024 (ILOEST) - Annual were used, including for Argentina (2015, 2016), China (all years, from 2012–2024), India (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017), Indonesia (2024), and Saudi Arabia (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016).
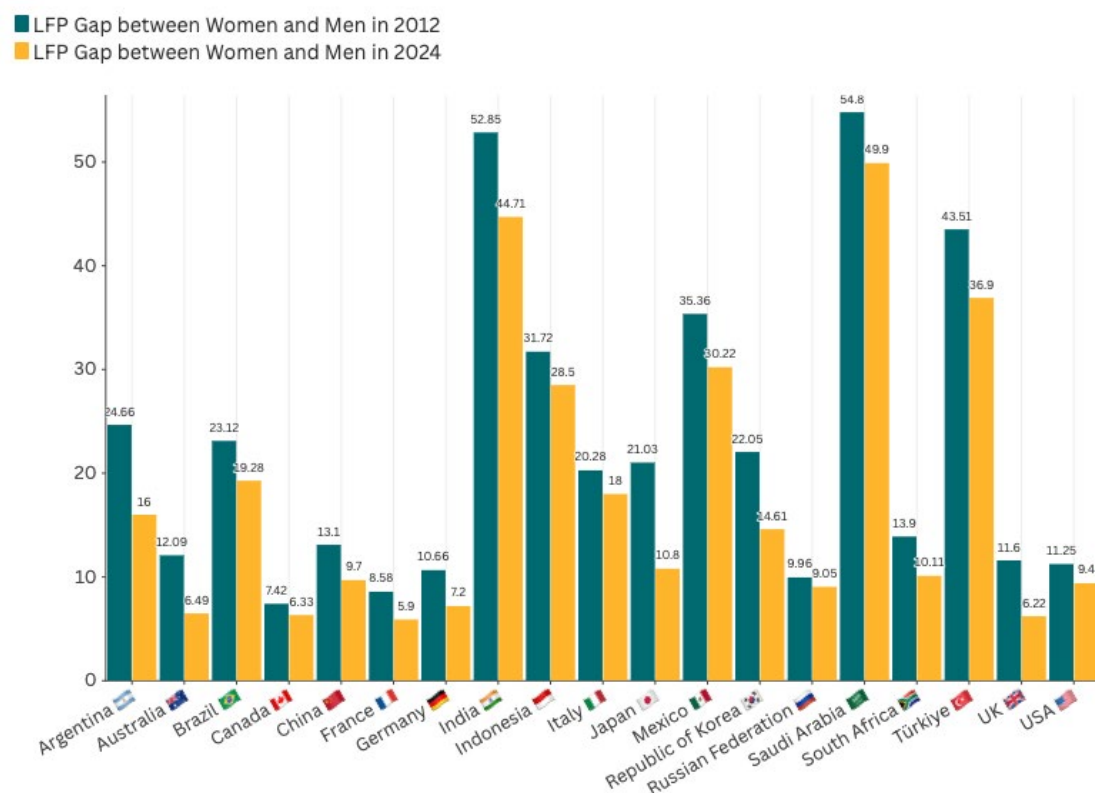
Have G20 countries achieved the Brisbane goal?

There has been significant progress towards the Brisbane goal across the G20. Since 2012:

Every G20 country has made progress towards the Brisbane goal in reducing the gender gap in LFP by 25 percent by 2025 (Figure 2).

- In 2012, the G20 gender LFP gap ranged from 7.4 percent (Canada) to 54.8 percent (Saudia Arabia).
- By 2024, the gender LFP gaps across every country in the G20 had shrunk, ranging from 5.9 percent (France) to 49.9 percent (Saudi Arabia).
- Eight G20 countries reached gender LFP gaps of under 10 percent, up from three in 2012. However, five countries still had large gaps of 25 percent or more (Indonesia, Mexico, Türkiye, India, and Saudi Arabia).

Figure 2. Percentage gap between female and male LFP rates: 2012 and 2024
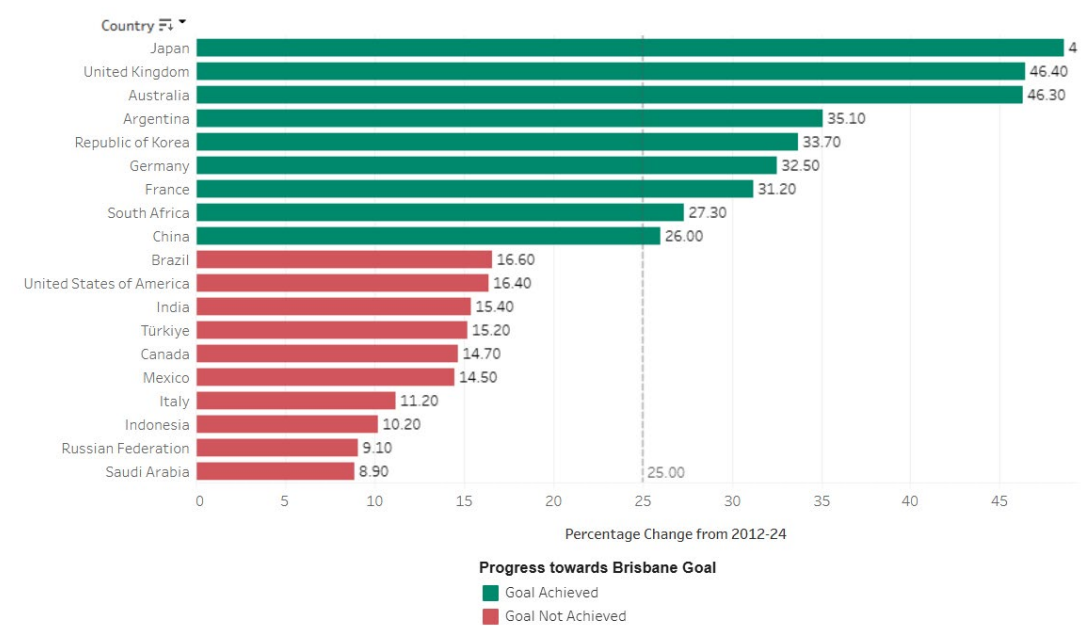

Source: Author's calculations based on data from ILOSTAT.

Despite progress, only nine out of 19 G20 countries met the Brisbane goal as of 2024 (Figure 3).

- The nine countries that achieved the Brisbane goal include Argentina, Australia, China, France, Germany, Japan, Republic of Korea, South Africa, and United Kingdom (UK).[2] The next closest country is Brazil, at 16.6 percent, far below the 25 percent goal.

- The country with the greatest decrease in the gender LFP gap is Japan (48.6 percent), followed closely by the UK (46.4 percent) and Australia (46.3 percent).

- China represents an anomaly, as China's female labor force participation decreased slightly by 0.3 percent. However, it technically achieved the Brisbane goal because the male LFP rate decreased by 3.6 percent, reducing the gender gap by 26 percent. Of note, census data is not available for China, so ILO-modelled estimates of female labor force participation (FLFP) are used for all years.

- Over half of high-income G20 countries (6 of 11)[3] achieved the Brisbane goal, while the majority of upper-middle income countries did not (3 of 7).[4] India, the only lower-middle-income country in the G20, did not achieve the Brisbane goal.

Figure 3. G20 progress towards Brisbane goal: percentage change in labor force participation gap between men and women, 2012–24
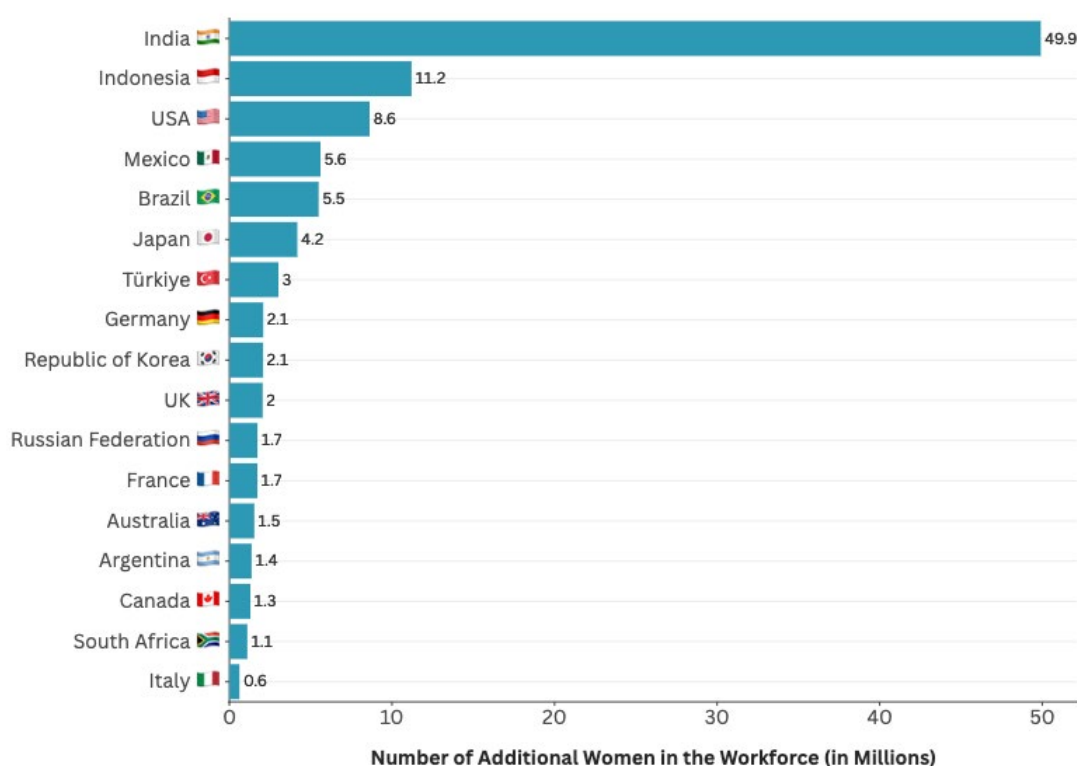
Source: Author's calculations based on data from ILOSTAT.

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2   This calculation is based on data from 2012, as that was the data used when setting the Brisbane goal in 2014. However, when reviewing data from 2014–24—10 years since Brisbane was established—the number of countries that have achieved the goal shrinks to six (Argentina, Australia, France, Japan, Korea, and the UK, with Germany less than half of a percentage point away from achieving it).
3   Australia, France, Germany, Japan, Republic of Korea, and United Kingdom achieved the Brisbane goal, while Canada, Italy, Russian Federation, and Saudi Arabia did not.
4   Argentina, China, and South Africa achieved the Brisbane goal, while Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, and Türkiye did not.

The G20's ultimate goal of adding 100 million women to the labor force has effectively been met (Figure 4).

- While full data for 2024–2025 is not yet available, ILO data indicates that between 2012 and 2023, more than 103 million additional women aged 15 and older joined the labor force across G20 countries.[5] This does not include data points for China and Saudi Arabia.
- Nearly half of this increase—around 50 million women—occurred in India alone. However, during this same period, India's total labor force grew by over 112 million people, suggesting that much of this increase may be attributable to broader population growth rather than targeted policies alone.

Figure 4. Number of additional women in the workforce from 2012 to 2023

Source: Author's calculations based on data from ILOSTAT.
Data note: Sex-disaggregated labor force data are not available for China and Saudi Arabia. Data used for calculation available here.

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5   When calculating this figure for women aged 15–64, the number of additional women in the workforce drops to 93 million, below the 100 million goal. However, as noted, this is only through 2023 and does not include workforce numbers for China or Saudi Arabia. It also does not include figures for the African Union or the European Union blocs.

Some countries significantly reduced the LFP gap between men and women, while others saw much smaller gains and still have large LFP gender gaps. However, almost every country has increased FLFP (Figure 1).

- Since 2012, Japan, Argentina, and India saw their LFP gender gap close by more than 8 percentage points. Japan now has the highest total LFP in the G20 countries reviewed (Figure 5).
- While India has seen large gains in female labor force participation in the last decade, there is still a gender gap of 44.7 percent as of 2024, with the male LFP rate of 81.5 percent and female LFP rate of 36.8 percent (Figure 5).
- Women's labor force rates in Saudi Arabia and Türkiye are critically low as of 2024, hovering between 35-45 percent. All other G20 countries have women's LFP rates above 50 percent.
- Across the G20, LFP gaps still range from less than 6 percent to nearly 50 percent (Figure 2). Most of the wider gaps (and lower women's labor force participation rates) appear in lower-middle-income countries and upper-middle-income countries, with the exception of China, South Africa, and Russia.

## Figure 5. Female and male labor force participation in 2024
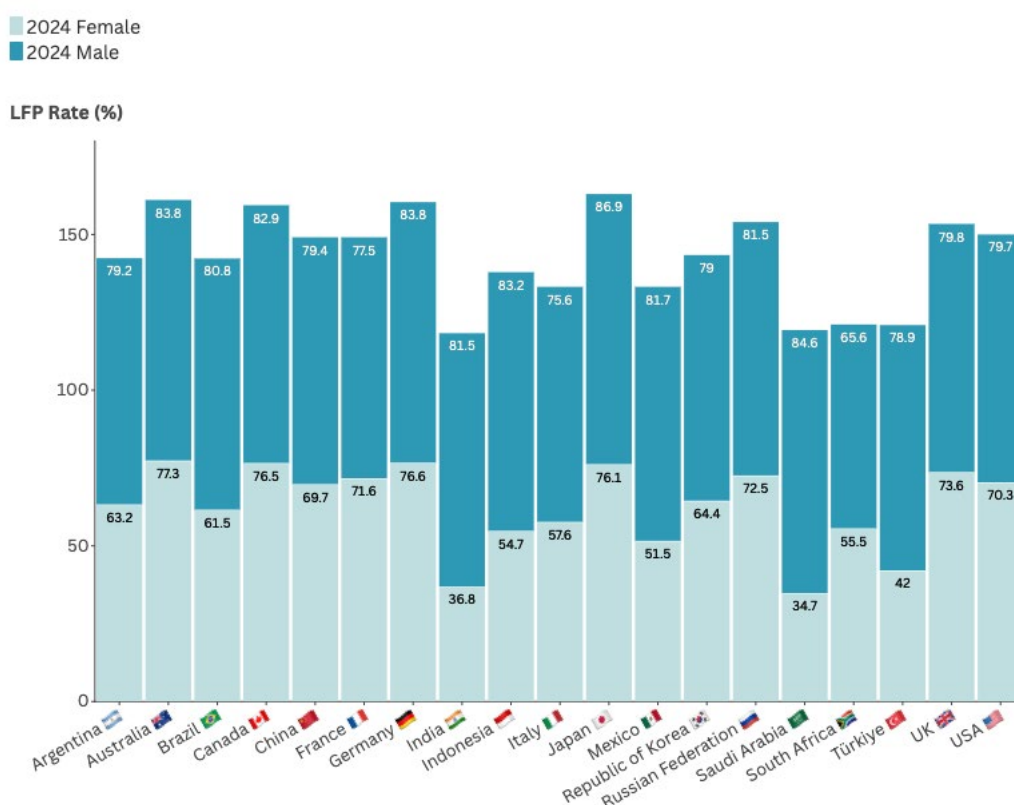
Source: ILOSTAT.

- Most of the narrower gaps (and higher women's labor force participation rates) appear in high-income countries, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, and Italy and the Republic of Korea to a smaller extent.
- Every G20 country except China has seen absolute increases in FLFP, ranging from around 1 percent (Indonesia) to over 14 percent (Saudi Arabia), as shown in Figure 1. Figure 6 shows the changes since 2012; while small fluctuations can be seen from year to year, especially in 2020, there has been a general upward trend across the G20.

The Brisbane goal has supported greater data tracking, reporting, and accountability on women's labor force participation rates in G20 countries.

- As a result of the G20 commitment to the Brisbane goal, the ILO and OECD release annual reports tracking this statistic and progress towards the 25 by 25 target, increasing accountability and visibility.
- Data on women's labor force participation is now widely available across the G20, and national reporting has improved over the last several years. The exception to this is China, where data is not available on female labor force participation rates since 2010.
- However, further data improvements are still needed, particularly regarding job quality indicators (such as pay gaps) and further data disaggregation.

Figure 6. Female LFP rates from 2012 to 2024
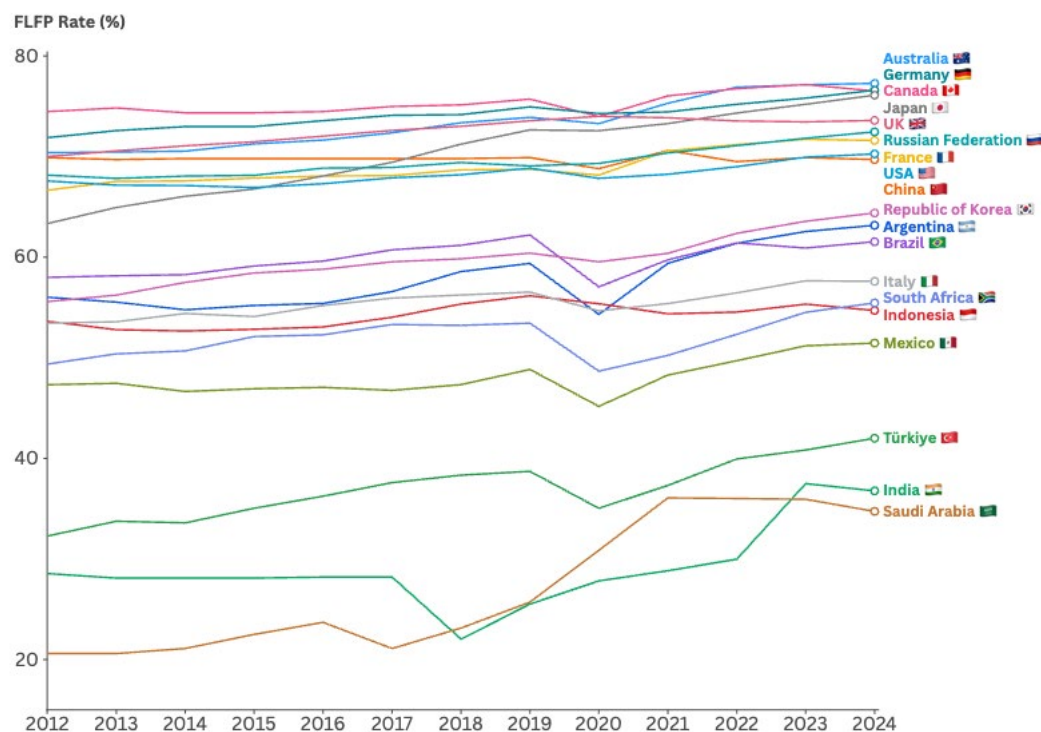
Source: ILOSTAT.

What's next for G20 South Africa and the Brisbane goal?

Discussions on post-2025 G20 targets and commitments are currently underway. The G20 Employment Working Group is considering a new collective target, currently referred to as the "Brisbane-eThekwini Target," which would extend the Brisbane goal. At a June 2025 meeting, the Working Group endorsed a draft target to reduce the gender labor force participation gap by 25 percent by 2030 and introduced a parallel discussion on a potential 15 percent reduction in the gender pay gap by 2035, with an option to revisit and possibly increase that ambition mid-decade.

In parallel, the Empowerment of Women's Working Group has identified the care economy, particularly the measurement of unpaid care work, as one of its three key priorities and has focused on this issue during ongoing technical meetings.

These developments suggest that G20 leaders are open to refining and expanding gender equality targets. However, the discussions on targets appear to have remained centered on labor force participation and wages, with less emphasis on the underlying structural constraints—such as unequal care responsibilities, gaps in childcare provision, and access to supportive social infrastructure.

As the G20 Leaders' Summit in November 2025 approaches, there is still an opportunity for policymakers to broaden the scope of post-2025 commitments. A new generation of targets that incorporate care-related indicators, alongside employment and pay measures, could offer a more comprehensive framework for achieving inclusive labor markets, greater economic empowerment and well-being for women, and equitable economic growth.

35 by 35: New targets for the next decade

The Brisbane goal has demonstrated that G20-level targets can catalyze policy attention and reform and keep FLFP on the international agenda. Yet, despite measurable progress, large gender gaps in LFP persist, and most G20 countries are unlikely to meet the 25 percent target by 2025. Where the goal has been reached, deeper constraints—such as unequal care responsibilities, limited access to quality jobs, and wage disparities—remain.

Therefore, the next phase of G20 commitments should build on current momentum but go further and better incorporate key structural labor market issues. Though the Brisbane goal catalyzed critical progress, simply renewing the 25 percent target is not sufficient to address persistent gender gaps. A bolder goal of a 35 percent reduction to the FLFP gap by 2035, coupled with complementary and ambitious targets to reduce unpaid care and improve job quality, would better capture the

interconnected drivers of gender inequality in labor markets and promote sustained progress both for women and economies over the next decade.

Three recommendations follow to guide forthcoming G20 targets.

1. **Prioritize the care economy.** ILO estimates suggest that investments in the care economy in G20 countries could create nearly 203 million jobs, boost women's employment by 6.7–11.9 percent, and reduce the gender pay gap by 2–20 percent by 2035. Additionally, the ILO estimates an average increase in GDP of $3.87 per dollar invested in the care economy, with ranges from $1.27 to returns of more than $5 in countries such as Italy and the Republic of Korea. Targeting unpaid care through the following goals would address structural barriers while supporting inclusive economic growth:

   a. **Reduce unpaid care work 35 percent by 2035.** Care responsibilities are the primary constraint to women's economic participation. Reductions can be driven by expanded access to care services, infrastructure, and paid leave. Unpaid care in the G20 currently ranges from 27 percent of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work for women in Mexico (compared to 11 percent for men) to 12 percent of women's time in Brazil (compared to 5 percent for men).

   b. **Reduce the childcare policy gap 35 percent by 2035.** This refers to the time between the end of paid parental leave and the start of free, publicly supported early childhood care and education. Closing this gap through quality and affordable childcare has been linked to higher maternal employment and improved earnings continuity. As of 2021, only four G20 countries (Brazil, Germany, Mexico, and Russia) report no gap; in others, the gap ranges from six months to a staggering six years in the United States.

2. **Re-establish targets on employment and pay equity.** The G20 should build on the progress achieved by the Brisbane goal and go further by targeting not just the quantity of jobs, but also the quality. As recommended by the Women20 (W20) the G20 can agree to:

   a. **Reduce the gender labor force participation gap 35 percent by 2035.** This would represent a meaningful step beyond the 25 by 2025 goal. Some countries are already on track to achieve this at current rates of progress, and others could approach this benchmark if paired with other efforts to improve care services, social safety nets, and labor market policies.

   b. **Close the gender pay gap 35 percent by 2035.** This is an important indicator of gender inequality and job quality that has not yet been enumerated as a target by G20 leaders. Across the G20, gender pay gaps range from as low as 6 percent to over 40 percent, with an average of 21 percent.[6] While these figures have declined over time, they remain wide and persistent.

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6   These figures utilize the unadjusted gender pay gap measured at the median monthly wage for full-time employees, methodology for which is described here.

3. **Strengthen data collection and reporting for accountability.** To ensure progress, new targets should be supported by clear reporting mechanisms and publicly available, sex-disaggregated data. The ILO, OECD, World Bank, and UN already provide many of the necessary statistical frameworks, but national-level data gaps—particularly in low- and middle-income G20 members—remain a challenge. The G20 should:

   a. **Commit to reporting of sex-disaggregated data.** This includes regular labor force and pay data in addition to time-use surveys to measure unpaid care work. This data should be in line with international standards, such as the 2016 International Classification of Activities for Time-Use Statistics. In some cases, data is already being reported, but the frequency and the comparability can be improved upon. For example, SDG 5.4 on recognizing and valuing unpaid and domestic work is tracked through an indicator on the proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work; 74 percent of G20 countries have reported data for this indicator since 2014, which establishes a strong baseline across most of the G20 but also points to the need for improved time use data to effectively track this statistic.

   b. **Set a mid-point review in 2030.** This moment could assess implementation, identify lagging areas, and recalibrate target ambition if necessary.

By incorporating these dimensions into its 2025 commitments, the G20 can shift from simply tracking participation to addressing the systems, policies, and norms that determine women's access to quality, sustained employment and, ultimately, more equitable economic outcomes.

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