



# W20 and Women-Led Development: The Case of Women Markets

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## ABSTRACT

Among various G20's (Group of 20) official engagement groups, the Women 20 (W20) was established during the Turkish presidency in 2015 to foster gender equality and women's economic empowerment. The concept of women-led development gradually gained momentum when it was introduced and accepted by the forum during India's presidency in 2023. Despite its broad agenda, the inclusion of gender perspectives has been inconsistent, often sidelining critical issues that affect women's socio-economic empowerment. In connection with the theme of *Women-Led Development* in the Indian context, there are two objectives of this paper: first, to critically review the existing literature on women-led development and G20 initiatives or policies related to women, and secondly, to highlight the case of Women Markets as a game changer in shaping socio-economic development in Manipur, North-East India. This paper traces the historical emergence of the idea of women-led development. Then, it also explores the potential aspects of women's markets as transformative agents for socio-economic development. By methodological design, this paper employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data. Moreover, case studies of the Women's Market are discussed to illustrate the multifaceted contributions of women in socio-economic development. The findings emphasise the game-changing nature of women-led socio-economic development in Manipur by taking the Women's Market as a pioneering agent. The study highlights the successful model of this kind of unique market and its contributions to economic diversification, job creation, and poverty alleviation.

**Keywords:** Women-Led Development, G20's Initiatives, Gender Equality, Socio-Economic Development, Women Market, etc.

## 1. Introduction

The G20 (Group of 20) comprises the world's largest economies, and it wields significant influence over global economic policies and frameworks. This powerful international forum consisting of heads of government and central bank governors from 19 countries plus the European Union and the African Union is crucial in addressing various global challenges like socio-economic disparities. Among its diverse agenda, one of the historic moves in recent years has been promoting women-led development. Neff and Betz (2017) pointed out that the G20 States have committed to lowering gender differential in their national labour markets. The G20 has transformed from a forum on global financial architecture to a platform engaging with broader developmental agendas and this transformation has been pivotal in shaping global discourses on inclusive growth. Such a changed discourse brought in issues such as gender equality and women's empowerment. Since the 2014 Brisbane Summit, the commitment to reduce the gender gap in labour force participation by 25 per cent by the year 2025 marked a major milestone. This was institutionalised with the formation of the Women 20 (W20) under Turkey's presidency in 2015 (Dutkiewicz, 2018). W20 was intended to integrate women's perspectives into G20 policies. However, critical voices (Sverdrup and Nahem, 2010; Soederberg, 2010) contend that gender inclusivity remains symbolic, often limited to peripheral statements lacking implementation pathways.

India's 2023 G20 presidency catalysed a conceptual shift through the advocacy of 'Women-Led Development'. Sachdeva (2022) explains that this approach repositions women from passive beneficiaries to

proactive agents of development. Yet, Fleischman (2018) cautions that systemic gender barriers such as entrenched patriarchy, policy blindness, and socio-legal exclusions, etc. continue to marginalise informal women workers. Studies like Labadi (2022) underscore the need to challenge dominant cultural narratives and call for intersectional, culturally embedded models of empowerment. This critique gains empirical weight in the context of Manipur's women markets, particularly the *Ema* Keithel. Roy and Rao (2021) and Ram et al. (2013) examine this historic market as a site of economic, social, and political agency, exclusively operated by women. Over 5000 women run businesses often as primary earners of their respective families. These markets not only empower economically but also serve as civic spaces for political mobilisation, resisting state control and contributing to social reforms. Ram et al. (2013) note that a significant proportion of women in *Ema* Keithel exhibit medium to high decision-making and managerial abilities, with entrepreneurial behaviours significantly influenced by education, income, and family size. Similarly, Roy and Rao (2021) document that many women entrepreneurs here operate without institutional finance, relying on personal or family resources. Hence, this grassroots entrepreneurship in a market setting exists despite limited formal policy recognitions, and it clearly shows the power of resilience and autonomy of these women.

Moreover, Dhananka and Saldanha (2021) highlight the regional disparities in India's gender empowerment strategies and call for policy models that reflect ground realities. *Ema* Keithel or *Ema* market stands out as an indigenous model of women-led development which is community-based, culturally embedded, and economically self-sustaining. The study conducted by Mangang (2019) further validates this by linking traditional markets in Manipur with socio-cultural sustainability and gender roles rooted in history and resistance. Notably, the entrepreneurial motivations among women vendors vary, where some women seek financial stability, and others long for personal satisfaction or community service. Their agency extends beyond economic activity into civic engagement, particularly in socio-political movements such as the *Meira Paibi* (women torchbearers) (Roy & Rao, 2021). These intersections highlight the multidimensional nature of empowerment, blending livelihood, identity, and activism. The reviewed literature identifies two persistent gaps: the G20's weak translation of gender equity rhetoric into grounded policy implementation, and the underutilisation of local, indigenous models like *Ema* Keithel or *Ema* Market within global frameworks. By revisiting the G20-W20 agenda through the lens of this grassroots phenomenon, this paper seeks to advocate for the institutional recognition of women-led, community-driven economic systems. Thus, the objective of this study is to analyse the women's markets of Manipur as a viable, context-sensitive model of socio-economic empowerment and it is deeply informed by these theoretical and empirical insights. It calls for re-imagining global gender strategies by linking macroeconomic planning with localised, culturally grounded, and participatory approaches to development. In this context, the following objectives were framed to understand the socio-economic contribution of women vendors (or micro-entrepreneurs) in the market situation by analysing the linkages of the G20, W20 and women-led socio-economic development.

## 2. Objectives and Methodology:

In connection with the theme of *Women-Led Development* in the Indian context and G20 initiatives or policies related to women, the primary objective of this paper is to analyse the case of Women Markets as a game changer in shaping socio-economic development in Manipur, North-East India. More precisely, this paper explores the potential aspects of women's markets as transformative agents for socio-economic development, advocating for their integration into the G20's policy framework.

By methodological design, this paper employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data. It examines the relevant literature on the G20 especially its initiative towards women's empowerment. Moreover, case studies of the Women's Market are discussed to illustrate the multifaceted contributions of women in socio-economic development. Before we start to analyse the linkages of G20 and W20 towards overall gender development globally, the following sections highlight the historical background of the G20 and its associated agencies.

## 3. The G20 and its Historical Background:

The Group of 20 (G20) is the largest intergovernmental forum, which was founded on 26<sup>th</sup> September 1999 to address several global economic crises. This international organisation represented by the heads-of-state/head-of-government is the largest of its kind to gather the world's leaders from different parts of the world. The main purpose of the organisation is to bring together systematically important industrialised and economies of developing countries and to discuss key issues in the global economy. The G20 mainly focuses on international issues such as financial stability, climate change, migration, and sustainable development. The Group of 20 memberships comprises 19 sovereign countries, the European Union and the African Union, namely, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union (G20 Members). On top of these countries, each year the G20 president invites non-members of guest countries to attain the Leader's submit to discuss the set agendas.

Among the guests, Spain is one of the permanent invitees and other invitees are chosen by the respective host countries. Annually, the G20 leaders met and discussed various global issues. According to G20 Turkey (2015), the G20 is supported by international organisations, including the Financial Stability Board, the International Labour Organisation, the International Monetary Fund, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the United Nations, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization. These and several other organisations are invited to attend key G20 meetings. As far as the origin of the G20 is concerned, G20 Turkey (2015) mentioned that –

"The G20 started in 1999 as a meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis. In 2008, the first G20 Leaders' Summit was held, and the Group played a key role in responding to the global financial crisis. Its decisive and coordinated actions boosted consumer and business confidence and supported the first stages of economic recovery. G20 leaders have met nine times since 2008".

After Washington, DC's debut Submit of 2008 onwards, the G20 held twice a year (BBC News 2009). However, the Leaders' submit is held only once a year since 2011. The phase for Southern-led presidencies began with the Presidency of Indonesia in 2022, followed by India (2023), Brazil (2024) and South Africa (2025). Gradually, the number of G20 engagement groups has also increased. Now, there are many G20's official engagement groups. They are the Business 20 (B20), Civil Society (C20), Labour (L20), Tourism (T20), Youth (Y20), and Women 20 (W20), comprising business, civil society, organised labour, academia, youth and women. Among these groups, the following section deals with W20 and key initiatives for women-led development centric literature to understand the gender gaps and the way forward to overall development of any country.

#### 4. The G20, W20 and Key Initiatives for Women-Led Development: A Case of Women Market

The G20 recognises that gender equality and women's empowerment are essential for sustainable economic growth. As such, the G20 has launched several initiatives aimed at advancing the socio-economic status of women globally. Some key initiatives for women-led development in India are given below:

**a) The Women 20 (W20):** The Women 20 (commonly known as W20) is one of the official G20's engagement groups to promote gender-inclusive economic growth. W20 was established during the Turkish presidency in 2015 to foster gender equality and women's economic empowerment. Key areas of focus for W20 include *labour force participation*; *financial inclusion* such as the Global Partnership for Financial Inclusion (GPII); *digital inclusion* like the G20 Digital Economy Task Force (DETF) and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics); *education and skills development*; and *entrepreneurship and leadership*. In a country like India, W20 has facilitated dialogue and collaboration among women's organisations, policymakers, and entrepreneurs to advocate for policies that support women's economic empowerment. Through W20, Indian women leaders have contributed to shaping G20 recommendations, ensuring that global gender equality commitments are reflected in national policies. W20 brings together women's organisations, civil society actors, and entrepreneurs from all G20 countries to discuss and propose policy recommendations. These recommendations are then presented to G20 leaders for consideration in their official communities. In Manipur, W20's advocacy can help highlight the successes of women-led markets like *Ema* Keithel, promoting these models at national and international levels. Women-led development is increasingly recognised as pivotal in achieving sustainable growth and equity. Among women-led markets across the globe, Manipur's women's markets have a unique history. The contribution of female folk from small-scale to large businesses helps to shape the socio-cultural, political and economic development. However, many studies highlighted the challenges and grievances of businesswomen. The W20 can advocate for policies that support and expand women-led economic activities in Manipur by fostering dialogue among local women's organisations, policymakers, and entrepreneurs.

**b) The G20 EMPOWER:** Launched in 2019, the G20 Alliance for the Empowerment and Progression of Women's Economic Representation (EMPOWER) initiative aims to promote women's leadership and decision-making in the private sector. This initiative brings together private sector companies, governments, and international organisations to create a more conducive environment for women's economic participation. The EMPOWER initiative focuses on identifying and promoting best practices, developing metrics to track progress, and fostering partnerships to support women's leadership in the business.

**c) Financial Inclusion:** Financial inclusion is critical for women's economic empowerment. The G20 has made significant strides in promoting financial inclusion through initiatives such as the Global Partnership for Financial Inclusion (GPII). GPII works to increase access to financial services for women, particularly in developing countries, by addressing barriers such as lack of financial literacy, limited access to credit, and gender biases in financial institutions. By promoting digital financial services and microfinance, GPII aims to empower women entrepreneurs and enhance their economic opportunities. The G20's Global Partnership for

Financial Inclusion (GPII) has influenced India's approach to enhancing women's access to financial services. Initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) have significantly increased the number of women with bank accounts, providing them with greater financial autonomy. Additionally, the expansions of microfinance and self-help groups have enabled women entrepreneurs in rural areas to access credit and grow their businesses. In Manipur, initiatives such as microfinance and self-help groups (SHGs) have been instrumental in providing women with access to credit. Strengthening these initiatives through G20's frameworks can further empower women entrepreneurs in Manipur, enabling them to scale their businesses and contribute more significantly to the local economy.

**d) Digital Inclusion:** Digital technologies offer immense potential for women's socio-economic development. The G20 has emphasised the importance of bridging the digital gender divide, recognising that access to digital tools and skills can significantly enhance women's economic participation. Initiatives such as the G20 Digital Economy Task Force (DETF) focus on promoting digital literacy, expanding internet access, and encouraging women's participation in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. By leveraging digital technologies, the G20 aims to create more opportunities for women in the digital economy. The G20 has highlighted the importance of digital inclusion for women. In India, this has translated into programs aimed at bridging the digital gender divide. The Digital India campaign and the G20's emphasis on digital skills have led to initiatives like the *Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan* (PMGDISHA), which aims to make rural households digitally literate. These efforts have empowered women to leverage digital technologies for education, entrepreneurship, and accessing government services. In Manipur, digital literacy programs and initiatives to improve internet access can empower women to leverage digital technologies for business and education. The Digital India campaign, inspired by G20's focus on digital skills, can be tailored to address the specific needs of women in Manipur, providing them with the tools and knowledge to participate fully in the digital economy.

**e) Education and Skill Development:** Education and skills development are fundamental to women's economic empowerment. The G20 has launched several initiatives to promote girls' education and women's access to quality education and vocational training. These initiatives include scholarships, mentorship programs, and partnerships with educational institutions to provide women with the skills needed to thrive in the modern economy. By investing in education, the G20 aims to equip women with the knowledge and tools necessary to participate fully in economic activities.

**f) Entrepreneurship and Leadership:** Promoting women's entrepreneurship and leadership is a key focus of G20 initiatives. In Manipur, schemes similar to the national Stand-Up India program, which provides financial assistance and mentorship to women entrepreneurs, can be tailored to the local context. Additionally, the G20's EMPOWER initiative can inspire efforts to increase women's representation in local leadership roles, encouraging more women to take on leadership positions in business and community organisations. Promoting women's entrepreneurship and leadership is a key focus of G20 initiatives. In India, schemes such as the Stand-Up India program provide financial assistance and mentorship to women entrepreneurs also. Additionally, the G20's EMPOWER initiative has inspired efforts to increase women's representation in corporate leadership roles. Very encouragingly, Indian companies are increasingly recognising the value of diversity and implementing policies to support women in leadership positions.

It is believed that the concept of women-led development gradually gained higher momentum when it was introduced and accepted by the forum during India's presidency in 2023. Neff and Betz (2017:1) highlighted the neglected gender issues at the past G20's submits. However, gender justice was featured more prominently under the German presidency. Further, the authors mentioned that the 2014 Brisbane Declaration represented a watershed moment. There, the G20 states committed to reducing the gender gap in the labour market participation rate by 25 per cent by the year 2025. Chaturvedi and Kumar (2022) highlighted the key factors contributing to the success of the Summit and the way forward for India in particular and the global community in general. If we analyse the earlier presidencies; historically, the G20's agenda did not always explicitly include gender equality. However, over the past decade, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of integrating gender perspectives into economic policy. This shift was notably marked by the G20 Leaders' Declaration in 2014, which included a commitment to reduce the gender gap in labour force participation by 25 per cent by 2025, known as the "25 by 25" goal (ILO, 2019). This target aims to bring more than 100 million women into the labour force across the G20 countries, significantly boosting global economic growth. Despite its broad agenda, the inclusion of gender perspectives has been inconsistent, often sidelining critical issues that affect women's socio-economic empowerment.

## 5. Women Markets as Game Changer amidst Women-Led Development:

The G20 states are at least in the verbal agreement that gender justice is fundamental to sustainable and socially just economic growth. However, the increase in women's labour market participation should be seen as just one step in the right direction. To help in creating vital jobs in India, Germany should advocate for



holistic political measures in the context of its G20 presidency. The EU and the G20 countries should support India in its attempts to open markets and attract direct investment. In this connection, this paper explores the potential aspects of women's markets of Manipur as transformative agents for socio-economic development.

### ***Women's Market as Game Changer: Impact and Potential***

The G20's focus on women-led socio-economic development can have a significant impact on Manipur. Financial inclusion efforts can provide women with the resources needed to expand their businesses. Similarly, digital inclusion initiatives can open up new opportunities for education and entrepreneurship. By promoting successful models like *Ema Keithel* (Mother's Market), the G20 can help replicate these initiatives in other parts of the country and beyond, showcasing the potential of women-led markets to drive socio-economic development. Moreover, support for women entrepreneurs can lead to the growth of women-owned businesses, and this will contribute to economic diversification and job creation in Manipur. These efforts can not only improve the economic status of women but also enhance their social standing and decision-making power within their families and communities.

### ***Challenges and the Way Forward:***

Women-led development is increasingly recognised as pivotal in achieving sustainable growth and equity. Among women-led markets across the globe, Manipur's women's markets have a unique history. The contribution of female folk from small-scale to large businesses helps to shape the socio-cultural, political and economic development. However, there are many challenges and grievances of businesswomen/ micro-entrepreneurs. Socio-cultural barriers, limited access to education and healthcare, and gender biases in the labour market etc. continue to hinder women's full economic participation. To address these issues, sustained efforts and innovative approaches are needed. The G20 can play a crucial role by prioritising gender equality in its economic agenda and supporting member countries like India in implementing gender-responsive policies. Enhanced collaboration between the government, private sector, and civil society will definitely create an enabling environment for women's socio-economic development.

### **6. Concluding Remarks:**

The findings emphasise the game-changing nature of women-led socio-economic development in Manipur by taking the Women's Market as a pioneering agent. The study highlights the successful model of this kind of market and its contributions to economic diversification, job creation, and poverty alleviation. These markets stimulate local economies by enhancing supply and distribution chains, and it also promotes sustainable practices, and creates job opportunities. Furthermore, women markets significantly enhance women's economic autonomy, social status, and participation in decision-making processes. In other words, women markets and its vendors are micro-entrepreneurs leading the socio-economic growth of the State and are playing the role of a crucial game changer in the quest for a sustainable state economy. Finally, the paper proposes actionable recommendations for the G20 to enhance the sustainability and scalability of women-led markets. In conclusion, women-led development represents a crucial game changer in the global equity and sustainability quest. The G20's role is critical in amplifying this impact through targeted initiatives and robust policy frameworks. Today, the G20 is an apt model for global co-operation. So, the policy agenda should promote *'Think Globally, Act Locally'*.

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