



Dr. Thoraya Obaid, W20 Chair

**W20 Presidency Opening Remarks
21 October 2020**

Dear W20 Delegates,

Introduction

It is an honour to address you today as we end W20 Saudi and look forward to 2021 under the leadership of W20 Italy.

It has been a year of hard work and much interaction, built on knowledge, confidence, creativity, negotiations, mutual trust and a growing friendship amongst us.

But it is also a year that dared each one of us to imagine a world where justice for all is affirmed and where women's equality is a reality. We know what we want and we know the main ingredients to make it happen. It is the will of the people and responsible and accountable action by governments, not only of the G20 Leaders but leaders of all countries globally.

Throughout this year, we, W20 delegates, dared each other to imagine a world where women are equal. We thought together of the possibilities to rebuild a more resilient and inclusive future, where social justice is its hallmark. We believed that our consensus in adopting our recommendations to the G20 Leaders would ensure moving forward towards closing the gap between imagination and reality, between empowered and disempowered women.

Setting the historical background

Gender equality has been part of the international agenda since the UN General Assembly declared 1975 as the International Women's Year and 1975 -1985 as the UN Decade for Women. The focus on the empowerment of women moved forward from the first women-focused conference in Mexico in the summer of 1975 to the mid-decade review in Copenhagen in 1980 and an end of the Decade review in Nairobi in July 1985. Each conference moved the gender equality agenda further and created more space for the inclusion of women in various sectors. And I am a first-hand witness of this period, as I joined the UN in March 1975 and participated in both conferences in Copenhagen and Nairobi. And I experienced first-hand both movements forward and blocks on the way.

This year we commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform and Plan of Action which was adopted in September 1995 and which represents the most comprehensive list of policy recommendations on the rights of women to equality. The Platform for Action covers 12 critical areas of concern that are as relevant today as 25



years ago: poverty; education and training; health; violence; armed conflict; economy; power and decision-making; institutional mechanisms; human rights; media; environment; and the girl child.

The review of progress in 2000 in implementing the Beijing Platform and Plan of Action indicates that though “much has been achieved, but progress has been unacceptably slow and uneven, particularly for the most marginalized women and girls who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination”. Doesn’t this sound familiar to what we are saying today, 25 years later from the adoption of the Beijing Platform and Plan of Action and 45 years from the day the empowerment of women was put clearly on the international and national conscience? Ironically, research is telling us that with the present slow speed of implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, it would take countries 200 years to achieve Goal 5 on the empowerment of women.

W20 movement and legacy

By your commitment, each W20 delegation is saying loudly and clearly that gender equality is about social justice and human rights and that it is the primary responsibility of governments, as the primary duty bearers, to take quick, determined, and cohesive action. Our W20 declared commitment is about the empowerment of women and girls and their enjoyment of their social, economic, political, and civic rights in a society that respects their agency as full participants in change and a national priority that is protected by law.

As we meet today, we know that this Summit represents the culmination of five years of work within the G20 movement towards the gender equality agenda since the W20 was founded in 2015. It also builds on decades of activism by women, men, communities, and countries demanding the integration of women in all efforts towards sustainable development. And W20 can claim some of the tangible achievements. In 2017, the W20 ushered in the creation of the Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative in Germany, which has now leveraged \$360M for women entrepreneurs around the world. In 2019, Japan added to this legacy with the Private Sector Alliance for the Empowerment and Progression of Women’s Economic Representation (EMPOWER), to advocate for the advancement of women in the private sector.

As the G20 Leaders prepare to convene at the Leader’s summit in November, the current economic crisis lies at the forefront of our minds. It serves as a solemn reminder that the economic inclusion of women is now more important and more urgent than ever.

The W20 policy recommendations for the financial, labor, and digital inclusion of women stem from the progress made over the last 45 years on the international stage to achieve gender equality. These are the legacy policy priorities that have shaped the work of the previous W20 Summits. This year’s W20 saw the need to expand these pillars to add



inclusive decision-making as a critical element for any level of empowerment from the family to the community to the highest level in governments and private sector institutions.

Agility was necessary as we crafted our policy recommendations. It was important to listen and understand the most pressing needs of women, so that we may effectively address them. Research has shown an increase in the number of self-employed women, as such, the W20 added a policy focus on women's entrepreneurship, in the formal and informal sector, with special emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises and the self-employed as a critical cross-section of the four inclusion areas.

This narrative demonstrates the robust and ever-evolving nature of the W20, where each step forward builds on years of work that have brought us to this present moment. And through this work, the W20 has become an integral part of a global infrastructure which seeks to create equal opportunity for all individuals, in all their diversity, to build societies that place the rights of their people at the core of their policymaking.

If there is anything we have learned, it is that none of us can do this alone – not as individual people or individual countries. That is the premise of the W20. That our collective voice and our consensus-driven process give urgency and legitimacy to our platform. This international platform also provides a vehicle for change at a local, country, and international level. This year, we reflected some of the recommendations and discussions of the W20 in our work here in Saudi Arabia.

Global and national linkage; the case of national dialogue

This year, Al-Nahda, which hosted W20, convened a series of [National Dialogues](#) across the country which brought together experts from private and public sector, academia, and civil society to learn more about what tangible policy recommendations we need to make to decision-makers and national leaders in order to deliver lasting change post-2020. These convenings have been an unprecedented vehicle for hard and necessary conversations. By creating a bridge between global and local conversations, the W20 plays an influential and important platform for change for national initiatives.

W20 in its 5th year commemoration

As it enters its 5th anniversary during the G20 Saudi Arabian presidency, the W20 sits on a robust foundation with a transnational network of delegates representing non-government women's organizations, civil society, female entrepreneurs, businesses, and think tanks across the G20 member states. In the course of time, the W20 has earned visibility, credibility and legitimacy among the public, but there is still a long way to go.

These are all great achievements that have created progress for women globally. They are steps in the right direction. But as the COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges on the path to a gender-equitable world, these steps are not sufficient. We must now take a

leap and seize the opportunity to enact wide-reaching reforms that will create lasting change. Amidst this pandemic and the ensuing unprecedented global economic downturn, gender equality must be on top of every governments' agenda, as women can become the agents of recovery on the way to building stronger and more resilient societies.

In this era, approaching policymaking, risk reduction and crisis response with a gender lens is the only way to bring the global economy back on track. There is ample evidence that women's empowerment can boost sustainable growth through economic engagement, increased productivity, harnessing talents and employment. The pandemic, and its social and economic ramifications, have exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities built on conscious and unconscious biases, cultural and social norms and political restrictions which prevent women from realizing their full economic potential. Eliminating all forms of discrimination against women, as W20's governments signatories of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), would globally raise per capita productivity by 40%, according to the World Bank's *Doing Business Report* in 2017.

W20 and recovery and resilience

It is telling that as the COVID-19 pandemic grew around the world and the health and economic crisis deepened, we find that our core focus areas for the W20 remained as relevant as ever. Inclusive decision making, digital inclusion, financial inclusion, inclusive labor markets and entrepreneurship are the enduring pillars of a gender-equitable future. And they are all achievable in countries built on justice and equality for all.

Throughout this year we have examined the root causes of inequality in each of our policy priority areas to refine our recommendations to the G20 Leaders and to ensure that the means to achieving a more inclusive world are undeniably clear. Yet the more we discussed each of our priority areas, the clearer their commonalities became. All W20 policy recommendations are based on two sound principles: the first, removing barriers, and the second, ensuring access and both lead to social, economic and political justice.

Equality, in principle and in practice, is not about granting people favors. Rather, it is about ensuring that all people, women and men, young and old, exercise their rights as empowered citizens. We view our policy recommendations as yet another set of enabling tools that will allow governments and communities to chart their course to gender parity.



This spirit is echoed in this year's W20 Communique. It reflects the collaboration across our network of delegates and the urgency of this present moment. The policy recommendations captured in our communique address both the long-standing, systemic inequalities that have limited women's empowerment to date, as well as the newly exposed and exacerbated trends that we see today that threaten our progress toward equality.

The urgency of the agenda: If not now, then when?

As we reiterate our commitment to the agenda for our summit, I return to where I began a few minutes ago, with an invitation to all of us, across this diverse, virtual community, to dare to imagine a world where women's equality is a reality and where social, economic and political justice are enjoyed by all.

Together we should ask ourselves, if not now, then when? If not this year, that has exposed the heartbreaking fissures in our cultures, policies, programs, and public services, then when? If not now, as the whole world is faced with the uphill climb of economic recovery, then when?

I thank you all for your committed collective efforts in creating and participating in this virtual safe space where we can be together this week. Let us continue to dare to imagine, learn, innovate, solve and empower, together. Let us call on all leaders to ensure that the human rights of all people, women and men, old and young, people in all their diversity, are respected and protected.