

The importance of high-level advocacy for women's rights:

An HSRC expert represents South Africa at the Women 20 Summit in Indonesia

In July, Professor Narnia Bohler-Muller, divisional executive of the HSRC's Developmental, Capable and Ethical State division, represented South Africa at the Women 20 Summit in Indonesia. In most cases, the country representatives debating women's rights at these summits are diplomats and politicians, but a few countries do send scholars and activists. Also, due to the vastly different cultural, religious and social backgrounds of the participants, the resulting debates are not for the faint-hearted. You need to bring evidence to the table if you want your suggestions to be taken seriously, says Bohler-Muller, who spoke to **Antoinette Oosthuizen** about advocating for women's rights at international forums.

There are many ways to be a women's rights activist. Advocating for gender equality at grassroots levels might include speaking out, protesting, educating or getting involved in projects that support and uplift women. But change must also be driven at high levels of government and intergovernmental forums to transform global systems and policies. At this level, the HSRC's Professor Narnia Bohler-Muller advocated for women's rights when she represented South Africa at the Women 20 (W20) summit in July at Lake Toba in North Sumatra, Indonesia. The event took place ahead of the 17th Group of Twenty (G20) Heads of State and Government Summit in Bali, scheduled for November at the time of writing.

What happens at the G20 and the W20?

G20 is a major decision-making body comprising 19 countries and the European Union. It was founded in 1999 in response to global economic crises and its members account for [80%](#) of the gross world product. The G20 country leaders meet once a year to discuss issues such as international financial stability, sustainable development and climate change mitigation. W20 is one of several G20 engagement groups that meet and develop proposals and policy recommendations, which are then submitted to the G20 leaders before the annual G20 summit.

"The W20's work is focused on gender equity and its primary objective is to ensure that gender considerations are mainstreamed in G20 commitments," Bohler-Muller explains. Other G20 engagement groups focus on issues such as business, civil society, research, labour, religion, sport and the youth. Bohler-Muller has been involved with the W20 since 2018, with previous summits held in

Argentina, Japan, Saudi Arabia and Italy.

"At these summits, we focus on policy issues related to economic challenges women face. Of course, you can't separate the economic from the social," says Bohler-Muller who has expertise in the areas of social justice, international law, gender equality, disability and policy input.

A focus on disability in the workplace

This year, Bohler-Muller co-led a W20 working group focused on integrating women with disabilities into the workplace.

"The [statistics](#) are shocking. Women are far less likely to be integrated into the workplace than men with disabilities, but the diversity issue is not often spoken about. So, W20 recommended that workplaces have at least 3% of employees who are women with disabilities. That is a big ask and we're waiting to see if the G20 takes it up."

While the delegates also dealt with issues like mobility accessibility, reasonable accommodation and how women can be assisted with technology, the focus was not just on assisting.

"We want to bring women with disabilities into decision-making positions. Most countries have the right to equality for persons with disabilities in their constitutions, but very few have women in decision-making positions. It was encouraging that two of the advisors sent to Lake Toba were women with disabilities. One was a deaf woman and the other was a small person. That showed the seriousness with which Indonesia's president saw disability, to the point that he appointed women with disabilities as advisors."



A performance during the Women 20 summit in July at Lake Toba in North Sumatra, Indonesia
Photo: HSRC

Difficult conversations

Being represented at these international forums allows the HSRC to make an impact at higher levels of policymaking, says Bohler-Muller. It is unusual for a science council or academic to be a representative at the W20 or many of the other G20 engagement groups.

“It takes a lot of work, several meetings and many debates to finalise a declaration,” says Bohler-Muller, adding that cultural and religious differences may mean that delegates enter the discussions from vastly different standpoints. Sometimes, these may be surprising.

“For example, right in the middle of debates on gender equality for women, some delegates [from patriarchal countries] have asked ‘But what about the rights of men?’ or they have said that ‘men are unfairly discriminated against’. But this is where the research comes in. You overcome those questions by putting the evidence on the table.”

One year, the United Arab Emirates hosted the G20. “There was a push from some countries not to be involved in that year, but most recognised that dialogue was important if we wanted to find solutions.”

A good strategy in such cases is to focus on women’s economic empowerment, to convince those nations that women are important because they help grow economies, says Bohler-Muller. One of the most popular W20 themes also focused on women entrepreneurs and their leadership of small-, medium-, and micro-sized businesses.

“In those situations, there might be little focus on the private sphere or issues such as gender violence, for example, and more emphasis on having all women involved in the economy. But there are offshoots from that. Women who make their own money become empowered and less dependent on men. So, some political and philosophical wrangling happens and not everybody agrees ... and some of the more radical suggestions may be left off the table in the process.”

It is crucial, however, that all countries reach a consensus on a declaration. “Previously, we had particular challenges while debating climate change and the environment, partly due to some persistent climate change denialism. We had to juggle with language a bit. For me, the fact that the environment, health and climate change are related might be a simple concept, but once again, the research needed to be presented for everybody to buy into the fact that, for example, human mental and physical health and the health of the environment and ecosystems are interconnected.”

“I think dialogue is important, especially with people you don’t agree with. It feels good to get to a place where we agree and move forward despite the initial ideological differences.”

Process from W20 to G20

At the W20 summit, representatives work to agree on a consensus statement, which is taken back to decision-makers in their countries who will study the document along with declarations from the other G20 engagement groups. Country leaders then choose what to take to the G20 summit as country positions. Every engagement group hopes to see their recommendations reach the final G20 declaration released after the G20 Summit.

“Often, these declarations tend to reflect what the host country wanted as the main themes at the engagement groups. This is understandable, as they have only a year to make a significant impact by hosting the events.”

Last year, Italy hosted the summits and Bohler-Muller led the W20 working group on the environment and climate change. “The G20 took up one of the recommendations around paying attention to the fact that women suffer disproportionately when it comes to the environment and climate change.” This year, Indonesia focused on two topics of priority in their country, rural women and women with disabilities.

Sometimes the immediate outcomes might be disappointing. “After days of discussion and difficult debates, you mould and edit a document, hand it over and only a couple of sentences make it to the G20 summit and declaration. But even when a specific W20 recommendation does not make it to the G20 declaration, the W20 document can still be used as an advocacy tool in countries because the W20 itself is an organisation of its own standing.”



The W20 2022 declaration focused on five priority areas.

Non-discrimination and equality

This section focused on removing discriminatory laws, policies, systems and services that hinder women and girls from advancing in areas such as education, work and health. Recommendations included reducing women's burdens of unpaid work and care responsibilities, eliminating gender-based violence and updating educational pedagogy to eliminate biases and stereotypes.

Supporting women entrepreneurs

Women must have access to finance and markets and be part of emerging opportunities such as digital innovation and green energy. W20 asked for a commitment of US\$350 million in additional funding to the Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative, launched by G20 leaders in 2017.

An equitable health response

We need to increase affordable health and welfare services for women and girls, focused on care, living conditions, water, sanitation, and hygiene. Recommendations touched on vaccine and medicine distribution, and sexual reproductive health and rights services. W20 asked that future medical research include men and women, recognising the biological and social differences. In addition, W20 wanted a guarantee that women would represent 50% of those at high levels of decision making.

Rural women's participation in the economy

W20 requested leaders to increase inclusive infrastructure investments in rural areas by 25% and to ensure women's access to transportation, water, electricity, clean energy, agricultural inputs and subsidies, connectivity, digital services, education and healthcare by 2030. By then, we also need to have halved the mobile internet gender gap in low- and middle-income countries from a baseline of women being 16% less likely than men to use the mobile internet in 2022.

Women with disabilities

Employers must make reasonable adjustments to promote the participation of women with disabilities in the labour force, for example by mandating sex-disaggregated quotas in hiring, retaining persons with disabilities in the public sector of no less than 3%, and providing additional benefits and incentives (such as tax exemptions and incentives) for private sector companies. Women with disabilities should be trained in technology, artificial intelligence, and communications, as well as have accessible spaces to learn, work and prosper. We also need educational campaigns to reduce stereotypes about disabilities in the workplace and protect the sexual and reproductive health and rights of persons with disabilities.

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