

BRICS SHOULD ADOPT INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO WOMEN

COBUS VAN STADEN & LUANDA MPUNGOSE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The BRICS bloc has contributed to global governance by establishing multiple platforms that enhance dialogue and cooperation. In 2018 a forum dedicated to the empowerment of women will be added. Where do the BRICS countries stand in terms of gender parity? This policy insight takes stock of women's empowerment in the BRICS by looking at four criteria: political representation, healthcare, the formal economy, and education.¹ While these are crucial indicators, the BRICS bloc should avoid separating the issue of women's empowerment from the wider work of the grouping. Rather, it should use gender to enrich the bloc's engagement with a wide range of issues. The policy insight concludes with three such issues: the Fourth Industrial Revolution, peace and security, and healthcare.

INTRODUCTION

2018 is an important year for the women of the BRICS countries. For the first time the bloc will directly address gender disparities through the creation of the BRICS Gender and Women's Forum, championed by South Africa in its capacity as chair.

The breadth of the BRICS bloc's dedication to women's empowerment through the new forum was expressed in the eighth BRICS summit declaration:²

We reiterate the commitments to gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls as contained in the 2030 Agenda. We recognise that women

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DR COBUS VAN STADEN

is a Senior Researcher in China-Africa relations at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA).

LUANDA MPUNGOSE

is the Programme Officer for the African Governance and Diplomacy Programme at SAIIA.

play a vital role as agents of development and acknowledge that their equal and inclusive participation and contribution is crucial to making progress across all Sustainable Development Goals and targets.

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Such broad-based engagement with improving the lives of women is long overdue. Women work longer hours and earn less than men, face higher barriers to employment and promotion, and occupy lower social positions. They find it harder to get an education, and face far more hurdles once they are educated. According to Human Rights Watch,³ Brazilian women earn an estimated 23% less than men even in instances when women are either more highly educated than men or on the same educational level. South Africa also sees similar wage inequalities, with women earning 27% less than men.⁴ It is crucial to address the specific conditions that bar women from full participation in the economy and political processes. However, a narrow focus on gender-specific barriers only addresses some of the issues facing women in BRICS countries.

This policy insight argues that wider issues relating to development and economic growth should be viewed through a gender lens. It illustrates this point by showing how integrating gender will enrich the bloc's thinking about the official priorities of the 2018 BRICS summit: the Fourth Industrial Revolution, health and vaccination, and peacekeeping. Mainstreaming gender in policy development and programming for these issues will expand the range of tools available to BRICS countries to handle key challenges.

The policy insight first provides a baseline assessment of how the BRICS member countries are performing on key gender measures, based on the World Economic Forum's (WEF) criteria for gender parity in its annual Global Gender Gap Report, measuring 144 countries: women's access to political representation, education, equal employment, and comprehensive healthcare. It identifies trends in the BRICS bloc using a decade of WEF data.

The policy insight then shows how considering gender aspects of issues currently facing the BRICS grouping will greatly improve the success of future measures, to the benefit of the member states and the bloc as a whole.

GENDER PARITY IN THE BRICS BLOC

The WEF's annual Global Gender Gap Report provides a convenient metric of gender equality that can be applied to all countries. Gender parity is calculated according to political empowerment, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, and health and survival. These factors are then synthesised into an overall country ranking.

The 2017 report reveals wide disparities between the BRICS member states. South Africa has the highest overall ranking (19), followed distantly by Russia (71), Brazil (90), China (100) and finally India (108).⁵ The top 10 are Iceland, Norway, Finland, Rwanda, Sweden, Nicaragua, Slovenia, Ireland, New Zealand and the Philippines.

While these rankings reflect the overall gender gap, it is important to keep the complexity of gender-based exclusion in mind. Each set of numbers conceals

a myriad of real-world complexities, and occasionally a given situation looks different depending on the metric. For example, while 19% of South Africa's publicly traded firms have female board members compared to 9.4% of Chinese firms, only 0.29% of South African firms are owned by women, compared to 1.79% of Chinese companies. Two issues should be considered. First, the sheer difference in economic size between China and South Africa means the number of Chinese firms dwarfs the number of South African firms, despite South Africa's statistical edge. Second, while women in South Africa seem to find it easier to climb corporate ladders, China seems to offer more opportunities to female entrepreneurs. The complexity of these factors demands more expansive discussion than this policy insight allows. It is important to keep in mind that the brief comparison below is limited to thumbnail portraits of complex situations.

Brazil has eliminated gender gaps in the fields of health and education, thanks to structural changes in its national health service that expanded coverage,⁶ and possibly owing to a 2016 educational reform that tailored content to different learners.⁷ That said, 2017 saw it backsliding on gender parity, with the country's overall gender gap at its widest since 2011. From 2011 to 2016 Brazil's ranking was buoyed by the presidency of Dilma Rousseff, as the only BRICS member state with a female president since the inception of the grouping. The end of the Rousseff era coincided with a decline in the political empowerment of women (down from 86 in the world in 2016 to 110 in 2017), which lessened the impact of small improvements in their economic empowerment. Even with these improvements, men frequently earn up to 50% more than women, a 10% wider gap than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average.⁸

Russia has largely closed the gap in health and life expectancy for the first time in 10 years and has achieved some improvement in female representation in parliamentary and ministerial positions. That said, the country's overall ranking in women's political representation remains low when compared with other countries in the grouping (121 out of the 144 countries ranked by the WEF). Russia has been criticised for recruiting women but lacking measurable and substantive policy frameworks. This is seen as a numbers game to check boxes rather than meaningful inclusion.⁹ Despite being one of the first countries to grant women the vote, and despite offering high access to education and moderate economic opportunities, Russia seems stuck with a middle ranking. However, if viewed across the four criteria, Russia displays a similar pattern to Brazil: high levels of education and health access with moderate economic opportunity and very little chance of political representation.

While *India* outranks Brazil and Russia in terms of political representation, gender inequity in terms of political empowerment as well as in healthy life expectancy has worsened, compared to 2016. Women constitute 49% of the population yet India's rankings in female parliamentary and ministerial representation fell by 6 and 26 places respectively. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian constitution (in 1993) saw the allocation of 33.3% of seats to women in rural and local municipal bodies. Subsequently, the Women's Reservation Bill (the 108th amendment) of 2008 further proposed that one-third of seats in Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament) and Rajya Sabha (the upper house of Parliament) be allotted to women. This amendment has, however, failed to pass, with resistance from (the majority male) members of Parliament.¹⁰ Despite its being the BRICS

country that has had the most female heads of state (two), female representation remains a problem. For example, in the 2013 elections only six women made it to its 224-seat Parliament.¹¹ In the health index, India continues to rank fourth-lowest in the world, falling from 86 to 110 in the past 10 years. However, it has managed to fully close its primary and secondary education enrolment gender gaps for the second year running, and, for the first time has nearly closed its tertiary education gender gap.

BOX 1 A CLOSER LOOK: THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN INDIA

In an interview, Dr Sushmita Rajwar of Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi¹² highlighted that women in India experienced double discrimination because of the caste system and patriarchy, which both structure social stratification in India. Caste¹³ refers to the division of people into social groups based on colour and notions of purity and contamination linked to economic sectors. This system tends to privilege certain classes over others. Caste operates in tandem with traditional patriarchal divisions to limit women's access to the formal economy. For example, some communities view property, residence and decision-making as the domain of men while women remain caregivers.

Although some Indian women participate formally in the economy, there is still pressure on many of them to play an outsized role in the household. The impact of caste and traditional patriarchal gender roles is compounded by the fact that India favours male babies. The use of sex-selective abortion has tuned women into a demographic minority. The government has taken steps to curb the skewed sex ratio through the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao campaign.¹⁴ However, the problem is still prevalent in rural areas where the caste system and patriarchy remain predominant.

Traditional attitudes might be slightly less powerful in India's cities, but they still result in women lacking access to the highest echelons of power. Despite the country's having had two female heads of state, female politicians find it hard to gain political traction: 'Women's participation in politics is usually a gimmick and tokenistic, as women do not contribute formally in the decision-making processes,' said Rajwar.

China's 1992 Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women stipulates equal rights with men in all aspects of political, economic, social, cultural and family life. The WEF also points out that China has fully closed its gender gap in professional and technical employment. However, its overall rating remains in the lower third globally (declining from 99 in 2016 to 100 in 2017) and it seems as though its momentum towards gender parity has slowed. Human Rights Watch¹⁵ observes that while the constitution prohibits gender discrimination, these laws are frequently not enforced. China faces the most disproportion when it comes to sex ratio at birth, owing to a cultural preference for boys in the context of the One Child Policy. While China's sex imbalance peaked in 2004 and the One Child Policy was liberalised in 2015, the structural gender imbalance will distort gender parity for generations to come and will lessen the impact of gender equity legislation.¹⁶

In *South Africa*, women constitute the majority (51%) of the population. South Africa has seen an increase in the share of female legislators and senior officials. Women hold 42% of parliamentary seats – a progressive score globally, but still below the desired (non-mandatory) 50% national quota, promoted through voluntary party quotas and the proportional representation electoral system.¹⁷ South Africa was ranked eighth in political empowerment in the 2006 Gender Gap Report but dropped 10 places by 2017 because it had closed only 78% of its gender gap. In terms of economic empowerment and opportunities, there has also been a drop from a ranking of 79 in 2006 to 89 in 2017. Wage inequality is also worsening, and only 44% of skilled jobs are held by women.

INTO THE FUTURE: ISSUES REQUIRING A GENDER APPROACH

The WEF data outlined above provides a benchmark to compare the relative empowerment of women in the different BRICS countries. However, this very convenience carries its own dangers. In only focusing on issues that affect women directly, it risks corraling ‘women’s issues’ separately from the pressing concerns facing the global community. As the remainder of this policy insight shows, the ramifications of this approach go far beyond the immorality of social exclusion. It can affect a wide range of factors with implications for the future of the entire BRICS community. While there is a clear need to focus attention and energy on the issues that affect women directly, the BRICS bloc should draw in women as widely as possible. The forum could provide much-needed perspectives on the conundrums facing the BRICS bloc, and these should be rethought to include gender perspectives. Three such issues are the coming Fourth Industrial Revolution, peacekeeping and vaccinations – all prominent agenda items for the 10th BRICS summit in 2018.

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THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

The future growth or decline of the BRICS countries will be shaped by the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This term is shorthand for the impact artificial intelligence, robotics and blockchain and other technologies will have on the world of work. These developments are widely expected to make many jobs obsolete and to change the nature of work, and will affect different societies in different ways. South Africa has named the Fourth Industrial Revolution one of the themes of the 2018 BRICS summit.

However, little attention is being paid to how the coming change will affect women in BRICS countries. This is a serious gap, because the approaching technological disruption will have a disproportionate impact on women. China is an example of both the positive and negative aspects of this challenge.¹⁸ Coming automation will eliminate millions of assembly jobs from the factories that supported China’s economic rise, and women occupy a high proportion of these doomed jobs.¹⁹ Yet Chinese women are also profiting from the opportunities offered by technological revolution. Of the 88 female self-made billionaires in the world, 56 are Chinese, and women have set up 55% of the new Internet companies in China.²⁰ While the coming labour revolution threatens the livelihoods of women working in factories, women with technological skills have a lot to gain.

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The BRICS can prepare by empowering women to enter the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. The more empowered women become in these fields, the more their talents will grow national and regional economies. However, even when women have managed to gain STEM education, that does not necessarily translate into equal economic gains compared to their male counterparts. BRICS preparation for the Fourth Industrial Revolution should include strategies to overcome workplace discrimination and boost entry-level employment for women.²¹

PEACE AND SECURITY

While theories of peace and security previously ignored gender, the UN Security Council's Resolution 1325 in 2000 altered this traditional view of conflict resolution and prevention by acknowledging the key role of women.²² The 2018 BRICS summit will mark the establishment of a working group on peacekeeping. This has a key connection with the work of the UN, because several BRICS members contribute significant numbers of troops to UN peacekeeping missions, and China and Russia are UN Security Council members. The establishment of the peacekeeping working group presents a historic opportunity to shape the BRICS vision of peacekeeping, and to align it with the UN-mandated focus on female participation. The UN has found that a peace initiative is 20% more likely to last two years, and 35% more likely to last 15 years, when women are involved in its negotiation and implementation.²³ However, peacekeeping initiatives aimed at fostering the energies of women are still underfunded and female mediators and negotiators are rare.²⁴ The new BRICS peacekeeping working group presents an opportunity to address these gaps. Proactive inclusion of women will improve its chances of success.

HEALTH AND VACCINATION

Africa will benefit from the 2018 BRICS summit's commitment to establishing a research platform focused on developing and disseminating vaccines.²⁵ Improving vaccination will allow people to live healthier lives across the developing world, but it is crucial that this work includes a focus on gender. Women overwhelmingly care for children and make healthcare decisions affecting them. Women also disproportionately fill nursing and primary care occupations. Drawing on their influence in communities could help the global implementation of vaccine regimes. The World Health Organization has found that, while globally there is relatively little difference between the vaccination rates of girls and boys, country-to-country rates vary widely. Maternal education levels directly correlate to vaccination rates, and any mass vaccination campaign resulting from the BRICS initiative must take this into account.²⁶ The wider economic and social welfare of women plays a key role in the success of (especially early childhood) vaccination campaigns, which has a major impact on development more generally. The new BRICS research platform on immunisation should reflect this centrality and maximise it by making gender a vital variable in its work.

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CONCLUSION

There is a temptation to see the establishment of the BRICS Forum on Gender and Women as a solution to the lack of attention paid to issues of gender in the BRICS bloc. While the forum will undoubtedly do much to raise issues affecting women, its work should not stop there. Rather, the launch of the forum should draw more attention to the ways in which subjects not generally seen as ‘women’s issues’ are fundamentally shaped by gender. In order to promote gender neutrality and bridge the gender divide, BRICS policymakers should focus on the consistent improvement of gender parity in their countries and pay attention to cases where improvements and upward trajectories are not consistent. Secondly, while the establishment of such a forum is the first step, policymakers should follow it up by prioritising the implementation and enforcement of gender parity and mainstreaming gender perspectives of recommendations in their countries. Thirdly, gender perspectives should be considered in their deliberations on the official themes of the 2018 BRICS summit: the Fourth Industrial Revolution, vaccination and healthcare, and peacekeeping. Fourthly, the BRICS should include gender equality as part of its norms and guiding principles. All BRICS endeavours and themes should integrate a gender perspective beyond 2018. Finally, gender equality should be exercised in BRICS institutions such as the New Development Bank (NDB). Women need to form part of the NDB strategy and qualified women should be appointed in senior positions.

In this way, the forum can contribute to a wide range of issues confronting the BRICS community and its international partners. Using gender to frame broader subjects will ground BRICS initiatives in a more complete, realistic view of the world, by taking into account a fuller range of human experience. This will allow more well-rounded and sophisticated measures that will benefit the bloc as a whole.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The matrix used to measure the indicators are as follows:
Political empowerment: females with seats in Parliament over males, females at ministerial level over males and number of years with female head of state over male.
Economic participation and opportunity: female labour force participation, wage equality between women and men for similar work, female estimated earned income over male value, female legislators, senior officials and managers over males, and female professional and technical workers over males.
Education attainment: female literacy over males, female net primary and secondary enrolment rate over males and female gross tertiary enrolment ratio over male.
Health and survival: sex ratio at birth and female life expectancy over male.
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Jan Smuts House,
East Campus,
University of the
Witwatersrand

PO Box 31596,
Braamfontein 2017,
Johannesburg,
South Africa

Tel +27 (0)11 339-2021
Fax +27 (0)11 339-2154
www.saiia.org.za
info@saiia.org.za



Jan Smuts House, East Campus, University of the Witwatersrand
PO Box 31596, Braamfontein 2017, Johannesburg, South Africa
Tel +27 (0)11 339-2021 • Fax +27 (0)11 339-2154
www.saiia.org.za • info@saiia.org.za