



Women and multilateralism: BRICS and Global South in focus

By Anuradha Chenoy



WOMEN AND MULTILATERALISM: BRICS AND GLOBAL SOUTH IN FOCUS

There are four truisms about multilateralism. One, it is a critical form of global governance, essential for securing peace, disarmament, rights, socio-economic development and resolving international issues. Second, multilateral fora, since their initiation post World War II, were developed as universally applicable but envisaged, structured and administered primarily by men within patriarchal settings. Third, this format continued until women's movements pushed for women's representation and voice, but multilateral institutions remain far from gender equal as women continue to pressurise these fora. Fourth, multilateralism remains state dominated and a domain for prevailing orthodoxies. Multilateralism is in decline as powerful states assert their will and bypass resolutions of multilateral institutions that function in a framework of globalised neo-liberal. The newly independent nations, now known as the Global South, were not participants in framing the UN organisations or the Bretton Woods institutions (IMF/ World Bank). These international institutions have not been reformed to give voice to the Global South and so they remain embedded in the immediate post World War II paradigm and serve those interests that created this compact capitalism.

Simultaneously, resistances and challenges seek to shift the balance within multilateral structures. The majority of people want to live and develop in an environment of peace and security with conditions for social and economic development, for which multilateralism is indispensable. Second, women have struggled and continue to push to get equal representation in multilateral institutions, even though these institutions do not essentially espouse feminist principles. Third, women are amongst the most marginalised and face exclusions under neo-liberal capitalist structures even as they negotiate to gain advantages. Fourth, alternate forms of multilateralism like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), BRICS+ (Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Russia, South Africa, United Arab Emirates), and African Union (AU) have emerged, and civil society and women's groups seek to ensure that these groupings engage with feminist ideas. This paper examines women's history within multilateralism, feminist approaches towards multilateralism and ways forward. The paper is based on engagements with feminist writings and an online seminar: Women and Multilateralism (BRICS Feminist Watch, 2025) with focus on the BRICS and Global South.

A recent case study of the four truisms and resistances in multilateralism is the recently concluded G20 meeting in Johannesburg (23-24 November 2025). President Donald Trump boycotted the meeting in tune with the US' dismissive views on multilateralism. In the crucial run up to the over 100 meetings that South Africa hosted through the year, US officials redlined, did not attend or opposed (NY Times, 15 November 2025). As a result, consensus could not be reached on several issues like climate and sustainable health issues.

South African women's groups mobilised through the year to get women's agenda into the Final Declaration. They held a "G20 Women's Shutdown" on 21 November across South Africa with the message "this country only runs because women do" and focused on violence against women – a symptom of much larger crises of violence and valuation. (Sunday Independent, 16 November 2025, Johannesburg). The rest of the 19 countries passed the G20 declaration focusing on several concerns of the Global South like debt, climate and ecological issues, and inequality.

The Final Declaration included two important paragraphs (101 and 102) that urged nations to commit to empowerment of women and girls, urgently remove barriers to achieve gender equality, encourage women-led development, and ensure full participation and leadership at decision making in political, economic, and public life. The Declaration condemned all forms of discrimination against women and gender-based violence and sexual harassment. It recognises the role of women as agents for peace and their economic rights, urges zero tolerance for corruption, and supports migrants and migrant workers (G20 South Africa Leaders' Declaration, 23 November 2025). So the rhetoric is right and women will have to struggle harder for implementation and accountability.

WOMEN AND MULTILATERALISM: BRICS AND GLOBAL SOUTH IN FOCUS

BRIEF BACKGROUND TO MULTILATERALISM

Multilateralism is indispensable for international conversation, and for a rule-based and inclusive international order as threats to life, development, and peace are de-territorialised. From climate change, ecological and natural disasters, trafficking, terrorism to tackling structural discrimination from patriarchy to racism, we rely on multilateral and national institutions. In contrast, the responses from these institutions remain largely state-centric, territorial and having slow procedures. As a way forward, post-colonial, pacifist, environmental, and feminists call for a just, inclusive, and plural international order rather than a Western-dominated, androcentric system one, based on binary and hierarchical values of Enlightenment intellectualism (Tickner, 1997). The critical feminist approach faces a backlash with the rise of unilateralism and supremacist approaches backed by hyper-nationalism. The failure of multilateralism to stop wars, occupations, crimes against humanity and genocide, and its inability to install sustainable frameworks for social and environmental destruction, come to a consensus on climate crises and the loss of livelihoods is destroying the credibility of the multilateral institutions.

Multilateral institutions were framed in a period of patriarchal dominance of the 1940s and 1950s, by men victorious in the war against fascism. The ideals of the United Nations Charter and the basis of international law claimed universalism that feminists argue has exclusions reflecting a symmetrical gender and race relations. At the same time, empirical evidence, especially from the Global South, shows that women's engagement results in sustainable solutions and mitigating various conflicts (Darooka 2025).

More than a century-long engagement of feminist discourse with international relations has resulted in an international gender regime based on mandates such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and, the UNSC Resolution 1325. However, the representation of women, marginalised geographies, and groups in the decision-making bodies of multilateral institutions and platforms remains underwhelming.

For example, out of the total 79 leaders of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) since 1946, only four have been women. Most of the international financial institutions never had a woman head, while only 7% of the total ambassadors to the UN by the member countries since 1947 have been women, and 73 countries have never sent a woman permanent representative to the UN (GWL Voices, 2025). At the same time, there has been a move from multilateralism to multi-stakeholders as part of the multilateral process because of increased corporate influence over global governance (Guttal, 2025). So women's struggles to have their voices heard remains challenging.

TOWARDS A FEMINIST MULTILATERALISM

A multilateralism grounded in feminist and ecological framework places care, justice and planetary well-being at the heart of international cooperation. It challenges dominant vectors and structures of continuity of Eurocentric multilateralism that has been static and has left out people without states and of colonised territories, enslaved population, indigenous nations and women as political subjects (Williams 2025). Feminists were not part of that compact. From a feminist and Afrocentric perspective, Europe ensured its own protection but intervened, enslaved and extracted in the Global South. This paradigm continued in ways through the liberal and neoliberal regimes framing an international political economy structured around northern industrial dominance, commodity dependence and technological gap. Since neither women nor feminists were included in this destruction, issues of care, rights of women and work, labour and natural resources barely figured. Further, despite feminist research and literature these aspects are wilfully ignored.

Clearly, neoliberal multilateralism has contradictions that intensified social reproduction and ecological crises, which is a challenge for many southern thinkers. At the same time, international cooperation has provided a site for global feminists to be able to bring our points of view that renewed multilateralism must redistribute voice, resource, knowledge, and link towards a feminist ecological multilateralism.

GLOBAL SOUTH WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH MULTILATERALISM

Women from many countries of the Global South have struggled over decades to get the women's agenda included into multilateral bodies. In the case of India, for example, the Indian women's movements collaborated with the nationalist movement for independence and social and political reform to uplift women in India, bringing the intersectionality of anti-colonial struggles, peace activism, and women's rights to the global feminist movement (Jaiswal, 2019). Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949), poet, activist, and one of the leaders of the Indian National Movement, was a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). She emphasised the role of women in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and moral leadership, arguing at a forum in the US in 1928: "I claim a place for Indian womanhood in the world's councils."

India and other newly independent countries initiated the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that became a platform for converging voices outside the bipolar international system of the Cold War period. They coordinated to support self-determination and oppose racism in the UN in the 1960s, developed an agenda for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in the 1970s, supported the idea of Third World media networks and debt relief in the 1980s. Later regional multilateral forums like the G77, the Latin American Free Trade Association (LAFTA, 1960), the Organisation of African Unity (1963), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (1967), and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (1989) emerged to foster regional and south-south cooperation for development. These initiatives are precursors to plurilateral groups like Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR or the Southern Common Market, 1991), BRICS+ (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa plus new members Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the Forum for the Progress of South America (PROSUR), established in 2019.

The issues of gender justice and women's emancipation were addressed only indirectly in most of these organisations, and gender equality became in focus primarily after the UN Decade for Women (1975–1985) and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) of 1995 prompted multilateral institutions to adopt language on "gender mainstreaming". The idea of women's rights as an international issue and agenda on multilateral tables developed gradually.

In 2003, the African Union adopted the legally binding Maputo Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa that addressed reproductive rights and violence against women. Forty-six out of the 55 African Union countries established legal measures under the Protocol. However, gaps in implementation and enforcement continue to hinder the elimination of violence against women. Practices like female genital mutilation/ cutting are prevalent in many African countries – 56% in Gambia, 51% in Mauritania, and 45% in Guinea among the most vulnerable age group of 0–14 – and in 29 out of 55 AU members (African Union, 2023). Violence against women devalues and harms women, society and the nation. It harms the economy as a World Bank report suggests that effectively addressing gender-based violence across the African continent could eliminate economic costs of up to 4% of GDP (World Bank, 2025).

The African Union adopted the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA) (non-binding) in 2004, followed by the implementation of the Gender Policy in 2009, to institutionalise and mainstream gender within AU operations and initiatives by promoting women into decision-making and leadership roles. The aspirations of Agenda 2063 and the declaration of 2015 as the Year of Women's Empowerment and Development aimed at promoting women and youth at the centre of financial inclusion and grassroots development. The 2010–2020 period was declared the African Women's Decade, while the African Gender Scorecard was introduced in 2015 to promote data-driven accountability among members on gender development. The Gender Scorecard's report (2021) showed the performance of AU countries across four indicators of the Gender Parity Index (GPI): Violence Against Women and Girls, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, Harmful Practices, and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. The report highlighted the persistent prevalence of structural inequalities and the lack of consistent statistical data as significant challenges in ensuring accountability in these countries, along with challenges related to overall development and political and economic stability.

WOMEN AND MULTILATERALISM: BRICS AND GLOBAL SOUTH IN FOCUS

The Asian regional multilateral platform, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has formalised installed mechanisms to promote gender equality since its inception in 1967. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) formulated gender policy through the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women (AMMW), the ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW), and the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC). From its first Declaration on the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN Region in 1988 to the latest ASEAN Declaration on Gender-Responsive Implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and Sustainable Development Goals and the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, ASEAN has adopted and implemented international gender policy regimes and claimed success in the fields of education, poverty reduction and workforce participation of women. Women are represented at the ASEAN Economic (AEC) pillar. But the promotion of women's economic empowerment remains on the back seat (Oxfam, 2021). ASEAN Political-Security (APSC) pillar frames gender policies in terms of protection rather than empowerment, focusing on addressing the violence against women.

Amongst Global South regional multilateral organisations, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) has a comparatively robust feminist discourse, influenced from the Latin American women's movements. Gender features prominently in its social development agenda. The 2023 Global Gender Gap Report says that Latin America had the third-highest gender parity rate globally at 74.3%. The World Economic Forum credits Latin America and the Caribbean for having closed almost three-quarters of its gender gap. It will, however, take decades more to achieve full gender parity across the dimensions (Araujo & Baller, 2023). Argentina was the first country in the world to implement a gender quota law in the 1990s, followed by other countries, which increased women's presence in legislative assemblies (Piscopo, 2020). India passed a constitutional amendment act to reserve 33% of the total seats in the lower house of its parliament and in the state legislatures, which is yet to be implemented. The challenges remain in converting the visibility into substantial action for gender parity at all levels, as patriarchal structures remain ever-present and oppressive, reducing gender representation to tokenism.

The newly emerging multilateral platforms, such as BRICS+, and the gradual consolidation of voices from the South at platforms like the G20 and G77, are widening the scope of women's engagement in multilateral diplomacy. BRICS pledged to adopt the 2015 SDGs, including SDG 5 and SDG 8, which focus on gender equality and inclusive, sustainable growth, respectively (Hou, 2015). All of the initial five members of BRICS+ have national-level initiatives and policies in place.

Women remain the 'trickle-down' beneficiaries of the overall development cooperation initiatives of the South-South cooperation. Feminist interventions in multilateralism continually engage with these policy and implementation gaps. Radical streams of feminism have demanded the restructuring of societal and political processes to ensure gender equity, whereas the liberal streams have emphasised the representational issues. The feminist political economy is the need of the hour to address the questions of gender mainstreaming in line with global gender regimes.

WOMEN AND MULTILATERALISM: BRICS AND GLOBAL SOUTH IN FOCUS

The Way Forward is a path toward a feminist ecological multilateralism, which would be a multilateralism based on genuine inclusion of women and the marginalised. As Mariama Williams argues that the next chapter needs to be about connection and not about control. That sovereignty could mean the right to live without fear to care and be cared for across borders. So the real frontier of world order is not territorial but relational. (Williams, 2025). It has been repeatedly established that what is bad for women is bad for the world and nature. But patriarchy perpetuates claims about gender and race supremacies. Challenging these stereotypes have been the core of the feminist agenda and remain so amongst feminists of BRICS and the Global South.

*I would like to acknowledge Priti Darooka, BRICS Feminist Watch and PWESCR. The webinar organised by BRICS Feminist Watch, “Women and Multilateralism” on 5 November 2025 has been a major source for this Paper. I wish to thank my former student, Dr. Gurjeet Kaur, who is now Assistant Professor at the Punjab University, Chandigarh, for research.

African Union. (2019). AU strategy for gender equality & women’s empowerment, 2018–2028. African Union.

ASEAN. (2025, July). Final plan of action to implement the ASEAN–India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) 2026–2030. ASEAN.

<https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Final-POA-to-Implement-ASEAN-India-CSP-2026-2030.pdf>

Darooka, Priti, (2025) quoted from BRICS Feminist Watch: Women and Multilaterals November 5, 2025

Guttal, Shalmali (2025) quoted from BRICS Feminist Watch: Women and Multilaterals November 5, 2025

G20 South Africa Leaders’ Declaration, 23 November 2025,
<https://g20.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/2025-G20-Summit-Declaration.pdf>

GWL Voices. (2025, March 10). Women in multilateralism. GWL Voices.
<https://www.gwlvoices.org/actions/women-in-multilateralism>

Hou. (2015, October 20). 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. BRICS Information Sharing & Exchanging Platform. <https://www.brics-info.org/2030-agenda-for-sustainable-development/>

Jaiswal, A. (2019). The evolution of women’s movement in colonial India. Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 79, 577–582.

Oxfam (2021) Report

Piscopo, J. M. (2020, October 22). When do quotas in politics work? Latin America offers lessons. Americas Quarterly.

<https://americasquarterly.org/article/when-do-quotas-in-politics-work-latin-america-offers-lessons/>
Tickner, J. A. (1997). You just don’t understand: Troubled engagements between feminists and IR theorists. *International Studies Quarterly*, 41(4), 611–632. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0020-8833.00053>

UNICEF. (2024). Female genital mutilation: A global concern – 2024 update (Data brief). UNICEF.
<https://data.unicef.org/resources/female-genital-mutilation-a-global-concern-2024/>

UN Women; African Union. (2023). The 2021 African Union gender scorecard report (English version, Final for Web). African Union.

Williams, Mariama (2025) (2025) quoted from BRICS Feminist Watch: Women and Multilaterals November 5, 2025

World Economic Forum, (2023) Global Gender Gap Report, at:

<https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On behalf of PWESCR and BRICS Feminist Watch, I would like to thank Anuradha Chenoy for undertaking this research, and writing the paper. I am grateful to Bishnu Singh for anchoring the online seminar and for providing all logistical support. The seminar would not have been possible without the extremely insightful presentations by all our panelists – Lucy Niu, Mariama William, Phelisa Nkomo, and Shalmali Guttal. I am additionally grateful to Priya Ranjan Sahu for his editing and to Bishnu for designing the paper. I would like to extend my appreciation to Shalini Yog and others at the Heinrich Böll Stiftung's India Office for their support.

Priti Darooka
Executive Director, PWESCR
Founder, Coordinator, BRICS Feminist Watch

Partners:



Funding Partner:



This publication was prepared with the support of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung's Office in New Delhi. The views and analysis contained in the publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the foundation.



www.bricsfeministwatch.org

Linkedin: @brics-feminist-watch

Twitter: @bricsfeminist