

BRICS: Navigating Gender amidst Geopolitics, Expansionism, and De-dollarization

By Nitika Singh¹

BRICS, an acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, started as an economic alliance and has now gained significant popularity as a leading group of emerging economies with growing global impact. This alliance has been influential not just for emerging economies, but also for the developing countries, especially in the current geopolitical and highly polarized world, particularly around the war in Ukraine and post COVID recovery. Forty additional countries have expressed an interest in joining BRICS².

BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Mutually Accelerated Growth, Sustainable Development, and Inclusive Multilateralism is the theme for this year's BRICS Summit, scheduled to convene from August 22nd to 24th, hosted by South Africa. There are five priorities for 2023 which include³:

1. Developing a partnership towards an **equitable transition** to address the climate crisis.
2. Transformation of **education and skills development** for the future to tackle poverty.
3. Unlocking opportunities through the **African Continental Free Trade Area**, especially in infrastructure development.
4. Strengthening post-pandemic **socio-economic recovery** and **attainment of SDGs** through equity, fairness and a recognition of common but differentiated responsibilities.
5. Strengthening **multilateralism**, including working towards real reform of global governance institutions, and strengthening the meaningful **participation of women in the peace process**.

In tandem with these concrete objectives, the Summit will uphold the aspiration of realizing the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, thereby reaffirming the BRICS nations' unwavering commitment to addressing global challenges such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. Beyond these themes, the Summit seeks to underscore the importance of multilateralism, urging meaningful reforms in global governance institutions to ensure a more inclusive and equitable global order. Simultaneously, the Summit endeavors to elevate the role of women in peace processes, recognizing the pivotal role they play in conflict resolution and international peacebuilding efforts.⁴

BRICS Feminist Watch appreciates South Africa's vision to recognize the key role women play in peacekeeping. However, as BRICS rises as an important player in global governance, it is important for this group to ensure that gender equality and women's empowerment are at the core of all its work.

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² Bartlett, Kate . 2023. *40 More Countries Want to Join BRICS, Says South Africa*, VOA. July 21, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/more-countries-want-to-join-brics-says-south-africa-/7190526.html>.

³ BRICS South Africa 2023 , *Theme and Priorities*, July 5, 2023, <https://brics2023.gov.za/theme-and-priorities/#:~:text=South%20Africa%20became%20Chair%20of>.

⁴ Ibid.

South Africa, as the host country this year, has an opportunity to bring women to the forefront of BRICS' policy and decision-making processes⁵. The BRICS Summit should build on the work done by the G20 in Indonesia in 2022 and now, in India, around rural women, and most importantly advance the concept of women-led development further by placing women at the core.

It is also important to note the global debates and scenarios in which the 15th BRICS Summit will be hosted and its impact on the global South, and on gender equality and women in general. Some of the key issues to watch for during the South Africa Summit include:

BRICS Expansion

40 new countries^{6,7} have expressed interest in joining BRICS. The group has been aiming towards expansion for a few years now. Many discussions around rules and procedures for adding new members have taken place amongst BRICS members in preparation for the Summit. Recently, the BRICS foreign ministers and important representatives met to finalise these. The upcoming meeting in Johannesburg hopes to reveal the expansion plan and maybe even a list of the first new members. However, it's not expected to happen swiftly^{8,9}. With possible expansion, BRICS influence in global governance will surely gain momentum. This is therefore an opportunity for its leaders to ensure global South issues are more centre staged with inclusive gender integration.

De-colonial Approach:

BRICS aims to foster a multipolar and inclusive world order that allows better collaboration among nations, irrespective of their geographical location. The objective is not to reject the global North, but to work consciously on its own priorities and needs, which might be different from the global North. However, achieving this vision in a post-colonial world, which is west-centric and marked by growing inequalities, exploitation, and environmental degradation, presents challenges. BFW want to ensure women's voices, realities and leadership is at the centre of all decolonial approaches within BRICS. This is an opportunity for BRICS leaders to move beyond an ad hoc approach to gender equality to a more nuanced and integrated approach reflecting a paradigm shift such as advocating, promoting and implementing a women-led development framework as developed by the W20 India 2023 Communique.

⁵ Kavanagh, Billy. 2023. *BRICS Summit 2023: The Quest for a New World Order*. Impakter. July 17, 2023. <https://impakter.com/brics-summit-2023-the-quest-for-a-new-world-order/>.

⁶ **Countries wanting to join BRICS include:** Afghanistan, Angola, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo (D.R. Congo), Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Mexico, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, Uruguay, Zimbabwe, Algeria, Argentina, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Egypt, Ethiopia, Honduras, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Morocco, Nigeria, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Venezuela, Vietnam

⁷ Bartlett, Kate . 2023. "40 More Countries Want to Join BRICS, Says South Africa." VOA. July 21, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/more-countries-want-to-join-brics-says-south-africa-/7190526.html>.

⁸ Briefing, Silk Road. 2023, *India Wants Strict New BRICS Membership Entry Rules*, July 30, 2023. <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2023/07/31/india-wants-strict-new-brics-membership-entry-rules/>.

⁹ Bhatia, Rajiv, 2023, *BRICS Summit: Redefining International Cooperation*, Gateway House, WION. August 17, 2023. https://www.gatewayhouse.in/redefining-international-cooperation/?utm_source=MadMimi&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Connecting+Italy%E2%80%99s+Mediterranean+and+India%E2%80%99s+Ocean+%7C+BRICS+Summit%3A+Redefining+international+cooperation+%7C+China+slips+into+deflation&utm_campaign=20230817_m175289408_Weekly+Briefing+17_08_+2023&utm_term=Read+more.

Multilateralism:

Multilateralism holds immense significance for BRICS from the global South perspective. It provides a platform for BRICS nations to engage collaboratively with regional challenges, fostering dialogue and cooperation that can contribute to stability, development, and conflict resolution. This approach allows BRICS to counterbalance the dominance of Western-led institutions, promoting a more inclusive and representative global order that advances shared interests, economic growth, and social development across the diverse nations of the global South¹⁰. The South African Summit is expected to advance South agendas around: reform of multilateral banks (MDBs), greater representation of the global South in the UN System, relief for debt stress and increased resources for achieving SDGs.¹¹

BRICS aims to amplify its role in shaping a multipolar world order that upholds the interests of emerging economies and acknowledges the diverse voices of the global South. In the context of gender equality and women's development, it enables nations which are a part of both the BRICS and G20 to address historical imbalances, unite around common development goals, and promote solidarity¹². Additionally, multilateral platforms offer avenues to embed gender equality into policies, enhance women's representation in decision-making, and allocate resources for women's empowerment, thereby advancing social justice and inclusivity on a global scale.

De-dollarization:

The British pound dominated global financial and economic systems during the colonial period and was replaced by the US dollar after WWII. The European Union developed the Euro as an alternative to the dollar with the idea to de-dollarize global systems but did not succeed fully. The use of the dollar as a global currency is not only an act of neo-colonization in the guise of globalization but also gives the US undue advantage and a level of stability at the cost of other countries, especially developing countries. BRICS, accounting for 24 percent of the world GDP and over 16 percent of trade, must consider that de-dollarization would impact not only inter BRICS financial relations but also create a ripple effect globally¹³. Whether BRICS can de-dollarize the US-led global financial system to make itself more independent from the West's influence is an important issue to watch for at the Summit.

The decision to de-dollarize among the BRICS nations is poised to enhance their economic independence, enabling them to concentrate on geopolitical issues that directly affect them, rather than merely following or yielding to the trajectory of the US and its allies. Economic downturns, restricted access to essentials, and disrupted social services impact women's livelihoods, health, education, and safety, reinforcing gender inequalities and vulnerabilities¹⁴. These were all adversely experienced by women in the global South in the midst of the pandemic and the Ukraine War with the West imposed sanctions.

¹⁰ **Khetrapal, Neha.** n.d., *G20 and Feminist Foreign Policy: Improving Multilateralism, the Indian Way*, ThinkTwenty (T20) India 2023 - Official Engagement Group of G20. Accessed August 16, 2023.

<https://t20ind.org/research/g20-and-feminist-foreign-policy/>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ **Liu, Zongyuan Zoe, and Papa, Mihaela,** 2022, *Can BRICS De-Dollarize the Global Financial System?* Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009029544>.

¹⁴ **Jha, Manish Kumar,** 2023, *BRICS and G20 Call for Reform of UN, Global Financial Architecture on Bretton Woods Institutions: South African High Commissioner*, Financial Express. July 24, 2023 <https://www.financialexpress.com/world-news/brics-and-g20-call-for-reform-of-un-global-financial-architecture-on-bretton-woods-institutions-south-african-high-commissioner/3184589/>.

De-dollarization efforts can serve as a catalyst for addressing these disparities by promoting inclusive financial policies and infrastructure. It can stimulate the adoption of inclusive financial policies and infrastructure, helping to bridge economic disparities. By diversifying currency usage, these efforts can encourage tailored financial solutions that empower marginalized groups, especially women and girls, and promote equitable access to banking, credit, and insurance services. While de-dollarization by BRICS nations could disrupt the interconnected American financial system, it also offers economic independence and a chance to tackle geopolitical issues. Amid discussions of de-dollarization, a gender-responsive approach becomes paramount, as financial reforms should consider promoting women's empowerment and gender equality. This shift could counteract the disproportionate impact of conflicts and sanctions on women in the Global South by fostering inclusive financial policies and infrastructure. However, are BRICS countries ready? They don't have the infrastructure that European Union developed before adopting Euro. This for sure is a good beginning in the right direction.

Putin and BRICS Summit

It is disheartening to see the importance and news coverage given to Putin's participation in the BRICS Summit. As a member of the International Criminal Court (ICC), South Africa is expected to arrest Putin for alleged war crimes, creating tension between the two BRICS nations and potentially affecting peace negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv. As much as organizations such as the United Nations, ICC etc. are critical for global governance, they are also not outside global politics and therefore have worked mostly to promote western interests. The BRICS nations have not supported the West imposed sanctions against Russia but have strongly advocated for peace and want the war to end¹⁵. They also have clearly articulated the need to put the global South and its interests at the forefront in all global scenarios.

Upholding the interests and sovereignty of member countries in the global South, it's vital to shield the Summit from undue external influence, especially from the global North. Beyond this, it's pivotal to drive a strong message urging BRICS leaders to prioritize gender equality and women's empowerment across all discussions and themes, ensuring women are at the heart of the Summit's core objectives and commitments. The omission or limited inclusion of gender overlooks the transformative potential of gender-focused policies.

In conclusion, the BRICS Summit should put women at the core of all its discussions. It is imperative to create a more inclusive and transformative world order with a particular focus on the realities, leadership and voices of women from the global South. BRICS should pave the way for a brighter and more sustainable future for all.

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¹⁵ Sharp, Alexandra, 2023, *Putin to Miss Upcoming BRICS Summit to Evade ICC Warrant*, Foreign Policy. July 19, 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/19/icc-putin-warrant-ramaphosa-brics-summit-south-africa-russia/>.