

PUTTING GENDER ON THE AGENDA FOR BRICS



Gender equality is not written or spoken about much within the context of international multilateral groupings, such as BRICS. The fact that development will not be sustainable if women continue to suffer socio-economic oppression is not a topic for discussion at high-level meetings, or even at 'lower level' academic forums.

The gendered nature of poverty and inequality across the globe barely gets a mention in the mostly male corridors of power and it appears that gender does not matter. This lack has become even more evident, and urgent, due to the intense international outrage sparked by the brutal gang rape and murder of a young

physiotherapy student in India that led to nation-wide protests within India itself and to heated debate about the status of women generally.

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Ironically, globalisation has brought to the world's attention the risk of increased violence when women break with traditional norms that contribute to their subordination. In India, for instance, the majority of women (52%) believe that it is acceptable

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for a man to beat his wife, and women who dare to break the mould by asserting their independence publicly – as the unnamed Indian victim had by travelling with her boyfriend – are perceived by the majority of both men and women to be morally 'loose'.

In preparation for South Africa's hosting of the BRICS group in Durban in March 2013, there is much debate about how effective BRICS is and how it can become more effective in future in order to attain the lofty ideals of 'peace, security and development in a multi-polar, inter-dependent and increasingly complex globalising world ... on the basis of universally recognised norms of international law and multilateral decision-making'.

Thus far, the two areas where BRICS cooperation has been most fruitful are trade and development finance. The 2012 Delhi Declaration highlights agreements within BRICS to seek the reform of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations Security Council, and members are in the process of exploring the creation of a BRICS development bank.

Since South Africa joined the group in December 2010, many questions have been raised by scholars and commentators around the effectiveness of BRICS and whether differing national ideologies, norms and values will lead to the eventual decline of this new group that is meant to counter the hegemony of the West and the North.

The flavour of the day is BRICS, especially in light of the fact that South Africa is hosting the academic forum and leadership summit for the first time in March this year. It is interesting to note, however, that gender does not feature on the agenda for the upcoming events, which is problematic as South Africa claims to pride itself on its advanced and progressive post-apartheid constitution with non-racism and non-sexism at its core, a constitution underlined by the values of dignity, equality and freedom that are meant to guide and inform the state in all its dealings, including in the global arena.

At the very least, South Africa as hosts should make a concerted effort to place gender on the agenda without fear of offending their more powerful partners, and should work towards mainstreaming women's issues, now more than ever against the backdrop of the mass protests caused by the rape and murder of the student in New Delhi.

This crisis, which is certainly not peculiar to India, places the spotlight on the fact that it makes no sense whatsoever to continue sidelining gender issues in the international arena and within the BRICS discourse. In fact, silence around issues that affect women disproportionately – including maternal mortality, unemployment and, worst of all, rampant violence against women – could be construed as carrying a conservative agenda of its own. It is of serious concern to any proponent of substantive equality and social justice that the gender question has not received the attention it deserves from emerging powers.

Even if it is argued, as it so often tediously is, that 'economics' is at the core of everything, women across the globe are confined to the bottom of the ladder when it comes to socio-economic power, and cultural essentialism is keeping them there. A central reason for the endurance of world poverty has been the exclusion of women from socio-economic development. Currently 60 per cent of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world are women, with only 20 per cent possessing land rights in the developing world, including the powerful BRICS nations. This lack of economic freedom and access to land seriously hampers women's ability to make decisions over the allocation of resources and renders them dependent on men for their survival, which in turn ensures the continued subordination of more than half the world's population.

It has become clear that the empowerment of women and girls is a fundamental prerequisite to a sustainable future for our planet. However, if we are to realise the

true potential of sustainable development, investment must be accompanied by a radical change in the status of women in the world. The empowerment of women is crucial to address poverty and prevent gender-based and sexual violence, but there is a disturbing lack of valid scientific information on the status of women in the BRICS countries.

A 2012 survey conducted by London-based TrustLaw provides some information on the status of women in the G20 countries. Unsurprisingly, India is the worst country for women to live in, and South Africa doesn't fare much better at 16. None of the BRICS are in the top 10, with Brazil ranking highest at 11, Russia ranks 13th and China 14th. The list is topped by Canada as the most gender-equal G20 country.

As women's rights become of increasing concern, and women themselves are beginning to insist on their own liberation, there is also a growing backlash, with rape and sexual violence being used as a tool to put – and keep – women 'in their place', as is evidenced especially in India and South Africa. Thus, if pundits and scholars continue to avoid these difficult questions, international relations will continue to be the domain of men and the furthering of masculine interests.

Rather, urgent transformation is needed in order to mainstream women's voices. If this doesn't happen, then we are not creating conditions for a better life for all, and if the democracies of the South don't push this agenda, who will? Taking into account the dismal status of women in the developing world, a failure to mainstream gender in the BRICS agenda at the upcoming events in Durban would be a monumental international relations failure for South Africa as the host country.

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ONE UNION

**SURVEY: WANING TRUST
IN LABOUR UNIONS**

page 7

**WHERE WHOLE LANGUAGE
TEACHING FAILS**

page 14

