

Women Economic Empowerment during Covid-19 Crisis and Transition in BRICS Countries

Tinuade Adekunbi Ojo 

Institute for Pan-African Thought & Conversation
University of Johannesburg
tinuadeojo@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper reviews the BRICS policies in rebuilding economies on the basis of equity and fairness. All economies are affected by the global pandemic, which has damaged most economies and led to a worldwide public health emergency. The paper adopts a qualitative approach by exploring secondary sources to analyse the role of the BRICS community on women economic empowerment during the Covid-19 pandemic. It presents a descriptive narrative in the context of the study. The findings suggest that the BRICS community still lacks strategic policy implementation that integrates women into the BRICS economy. As a result, there is a massive gap in women's economic representativeness and the need to promote access and affordable policies and education-related initiatives that enhance gender inclusion. It recommends that BRICS communities ensure closer cooperation with various stakeholders, national organisations, private businesses, and multinationals to promote gender equality in their respective economies.

Keywords: BRICS, Women Economic Empowerment, Covid-19, Policy Change.

Introduction

Women economic empowerment has been identified as an important context to abort discrimination against women in developing countries and promote economic growth (Oshinubu & Asonga, 2021). The World Bank (2018) states that the global economy is losing approximately 160 trillion dollars in wealth annually due to gender discrimination and inequality in various economies. Women's empowerment allows disadvantaged women to make strategic life decisions relating to their economic activities, resources, and household expenditure and increases women's self-esteem and capacity training within the social context (Gangadhar & Malyadri, 2015). Women economic empowerment is a recent plan for the BRICS community. According to Khandare (2019), BRICS is a community of five developing economies growing faster than any other economy in the world. Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa are enlisted globally amongst the 25 top populated countries. In terms of land ownership. The BRICS economies have 26% but possess 46 % of the world's population. To date, BRICS contributed to global stability compared to the world's economic strength as they contributed to the world's growth by 22% between 2011-2016 (Khandare, 2019). Zondi (2021) argued that BRICS represents a significant component of the global power distribution even before the worldwide reformation. Therefore, the global power distribution possesses a residual power with the privilege of global influence. As of 2015, statistics on global economic growth reflects that BRICS accounts for 60% of the worldwide wealth and 40% of the world's population (Zondi, 2021). Accounting for more than half of the worldwide wealth, BRICS has added advantage and stable economic strength over other global communities of its financial stability in a changing global economic environment. However, most BRICS economies, except for South Africa, have struggled to initiate effective gender emancipation programs to facilitate gender equality. The Table below presents the report submitted by the world economic forum on BRICS ranking out of the global economies (145 countries) on sustainable development goals.

Table 1.1: Global Gender Gap Index for BRICS on SDGs.

Indicator	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
Overall place	92	81	112	106	17
Economic participation and opportunity	89	32	149	91	92
Educational attainment	35	1	112	100	67
Health and survival	1	1	150	153	1
Political empowerment	104	122	18	95	10

Source: (World Economic Forum 2019;Panova & Stapran, 2020).

From the Table, Russia is ranked first on the gender gap index on educational achievement, followed by Brazil and South Africa. The three countries, Brazil, Russia, and South Africa are also ranked first to achieve gender equity on health care in their communities while India and China are ranked 150 and 153 on the global scale. However, in terms of economic participation and opportunity and political empowerment, all BRICS countries need to up their game and foster gender inclusion. Overall, South Africa is still leading the BRICS community with the 17th position on the gender global gap index. Russia follows them on the 81st scale, Brazil on the 92nd scale and China on the 106th gender global gap index. The last country is India, with a rank of 112 on the Global gender gap index. The statistics indicate a massive gap amongst BRICS countries on women economic development.

The paper reviews the BRICS policies in rebuilding economies equity and fairness. All economies are affected by the global pandemic, which has damaged most economies and led to a worldwide public health emergency. The paper adopts a qualitative approach by exploring secondary sources to analyse the role of the BRICS community on women economic empowerment during the Covid-19 pandemic. The report has three sections: the first part addresses women's economic empowerment in BRICS, the second paper addresses the Covid-19 crises in BRICS countries on women empowerment, and the last part debates BRICS post-recovery strategies on women's economic empowerment. The report concludes that the BRICS community still lacks strategic policy implementation that integrates women into the BRICS economy. As a result, there is a massive gap in women's economic representativeness and the need to promote access and affordable policies and education-related initiatives that enhance gender inclusion. It recommends that BRICS communities ensure closer cooperation with various stakeholders, national organisations, private businesses, and multinationals to promote gender equality in their respective economies.

Women Economic Empowerment in BRICS

The importance of women empowerment is multifaceted; firstly, women's empowerment enables women to reduce their socio-economic vulnerability and dependency on male figures in each household (Banuri, 2007). As a result, women should participate in household decisions, economic activities, and resources without being subordinated or excluded from society. Secondly, empowering women enables them to acquire skills that can increase their financial status and allow them to live a good life (Aluko & Okuwa, 2018). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2012, 1) argues that women's economic empowerment is needed to sustain society. Each state must implement sound policies and a long-term commitment to address gender-specific perspectives. The government must establish these policies to promote pro-poor growth and achieve active economic empowerment (OECD, 2012). Also, women's economic empowerment will increase women's rights to economic resources and opportunities such as having suitable employment and access to the right financial services (OECD, 2012; Aluko & Okuwa, 2018). The former United States President stated in a speech in September 2009 that: "Women perform 66%

of world's work and produce 50% of the food. Even with these efforts, they only earn 10% of the income of their workload and only owns one per cent of the property" (Aluko & Okuwa, 2018).

Empowering women is a significant factor in achieving a sustainable world for each economy made (OECD, 2012). Therefore, women's empowerment not only contributes to women's self-development and status in society, but it is an issue of social justice (Verdier-Chouchane, 2016). The factors restricting women's empowerment include state weaknesses, women's exclusion on all structural levels and other challenges hindering women from enjoying their rights to access opportunities, decision-making and essential services (Onditi & Odera, 2017). For Asaolu et al. (2018), economic issues, socio-cultural factors, education, and health are the underlying factors restricting women. Sell and Minot (2018) argue that the factors limiting women empowerment are diverse norms, gender-biased by-laws, lack of security or legal protection, and stereotypes. Other factors identified were unpaid household work and care and lack of access to property, technological and financial assets (Tiessen and Delaney, 2018). All these factors render women disadvantaged and marginalised, and the government must accelerate economic progress by tackling these barriers and bridging the gap of economic opportunities.

The World Bank in 2012 argued that bridging the gap of economic opportunities for women impacts society development through (i) productivity gains, (ii) international gains and (iii) positive results in the institutional and policy sectors (Verdier-Chouchane, 2016). Saeed (2019), on her part, proposes different measures such as placing women as leaders and decision-makers in gender-emancipated programmes, creating job opportunities, garnering investment in women's entrepreneurial ideas and emotions, acting against unpaid labour and mentoring women individually or in their professional careers. In support of these proposed initiatives, the African Union (A.U.) in 2015 introduced women's empowerment and development towards Africa's Agenda for 2063 (Department of Women, 2015). During the summit held in South Africa, all African heads of state made commitments to implement strategies to eliminate social, political, and economic challenges restricting women and girls by 2020. The responsibilities made at the African Union Summit (Department of Women, 2015) include:

1. The state must promote women's role and benefits in agriculture or the agro-business value chain.
2. There should be equal access to women's health.
3. Establish women's socio-economic and political empowerment.
4. Promote women's agenda on peace and security.
5. Enforce women's participation in governance.
6. Facilitate women's and girls' access to education, science, and technology; and
7. Assist women in having accountability for actions and results.

Gender mainstreaming strategies were not part of the BRICS plan; however, in 2018, BRICS academic forum formally included gender policies into the schedule. As a result, BRICS established the women business council to ensure full participation of women in all professional and social paths of life. However, despite each BRICS country setting gender equality initiatives in the individual countries before covid-19, the BRICS economies still lack this. As a result, there is a massive gap in women's economic representativeness and the need to promote access and affordable policies and education-related initiatives that enhance digital literacy. The Table below indicates the gender gap in health care, labour and women in business.

Table 1.2: Number of Women on Economic Indicators in BRICS.

Indicator %	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
Health Care	45%	71%	17.1%	56%	43%
Labour force	54% - F	54.9% - F	23.6% - F	61.3% - F	61.3% - F
	74.4% - M	70.5% - M	78.6% - M	75.9% - M	75.9% - M
Entrepreneurship	28.9%	31.2%	7.4%	25.6%	21.5%
Accessibility to Finance for Business Start-up	2.9%	13.6%	3.2%	10.8%	5.1%

Source: (Panova & Stapran, 2020).

From the Table, Russia has many women in the health sector, followed by China. However, India ranks the least amongst the BRICS community. In terms of the number of women in the labour force, all BRICS community has a wide gender gap of men dominating the workforce more than the women. The statistics of women in business in BRICS countries is worrisome, with the highest number of 31.2% in Russia and least number of 7.4% in India, bringing the average percentage of the communities to 22.92%. The result projects a low rank of gender inclusion in entrepreneurship which BRICS communities need to work upon.

Regarding accessibility to finance for business startups, the number of women is also low, with the highest number of 10.8% in China and the least number of 2.9% in Brazil. This reflects the gender gap in financial inclusion in BRICS. The results justify the reason for the objective of the study in the paper.

Women empowerment in BRICS countries have unique characteristics that bind the economies together. The first is the low involvement of women informal economic activities as compared to the developed countries. The second characteristics are the significance of inclusive development in globalisation that binds the five countries together. The third characteristics integrate gender emancipated policies to achieve the SDGs goals, an essential strategy that the BRICS government must set in BRICS economies. And lastly, the concern for the issue of insufficient literature on gender-inclusive development in BRICS economies. The remaining sections will discuss in the areas below.

Brazil women empowerment

Like any of its Southern America counterpart, Brazil reaffirmed its support to uphold equality, empower women, and achieve women's rights in all structural levels of the government. The Global Leaders pledged this initiative at the meeting held on 27 September 2015. The Brazilian President, Dilma Rousseff, pledged to ensure that women are protected and that all gender-based violence is dealt with and victims are safe and protected. Through the Ministry of women, the Brazilian government also pledged to support and strengthened women development at all structural levels and encourage active political representation (UN-Women, 2020). The government implemented a strategic health plan that assists victims of sexual violence and a healthy working group for disabled women. The government also approved six-month maternity leave for military women. The Brazilian government also put strategic policies to ensure that babies register for new births without the father necessarily being present for registration. Finally, and most importantly, a new femicide law for harsher punishment was implemented for those who kill women or girls in the country (UN-Women, 2020).

In line with the world economic forum's report (WEF, 2018), South Africa has a higher representation in gender disparity and possess a global rank of 19th position. However, the rest of the BRICS

countries are yet to achieve this, Russia is ranked number 71 on the worldwide ranking, Brazil is ranked number 90, China is ranked number 100, and India ranks number 108. Despite South Africa, exceptional ranking, the gender equality experienced by the marginalised women daily points to economic inequality that needs to be addressed (Van Staden & Mpungose, 2018).

Russia women empowerment

The Russian political system lacks gender representation and age imbalance, which affects women drastically. Russia remains a conservative country where the issue of feminism tends to be a political debate. To date, most women in leadership shy away from feminist activism to avoid challenges such as social issues serve as a stronger motivation to run political office. Even so, most of the political parties exhibit different versions of conservatism against feminist topics.

The transition of gender equality in Russia can be traced to the 19th century when social standing women began the social modernisation movement of enforcing equal gender education for women and girls (Rozhanovskaya & Pardini, 2020). The campaign led to the successful implementation of female educational institutes across the country, empowering women and girls. Other achievements by the movement were improving healthcare, training female physicians, Public Education, training on abstaining from abortion in favour of contraceptives, and reducing risky sexual behaviours. However, the campaign experienced a setback when Russia experienced a conservative turn where funding allocated for NGOs ran out. The government implemented legislative and administrative policies to restrict reproductive choices. As a result, women face conventional norms and values that plague society. Amongst many challenges, Russian women faces include 'poverty and financial debt' due to insufficient state support for single mothers; 'human rights problems' centred on violation of pregnant inmate's rights and medical challenges based on a high rate of prenatal mortality in rural areas, limited access to abortion and more adoption of C-sections usage in the hospitals. These challenges have confined Russian women from being empowered and active members of society. Literature also includes racial diversity, especially in terms of age, class, and nationality. Higher-class people tend to be less sensitive to gender bias since it is out of their sphere of concern. They believe they have the individual choice on belief systems. This ideology gives a big gap between the wealthy and the marginalised communities (Rozhanovskaya & Pardini, 2020).

The most prominent thing in Russia's politics is that the politics and economy are primarily informal. As a result, the government makes essential decisions pertinent to the economy outside the formal institutions, which exclude women from the policies entirely.

To achieve SDG5, the Russian government established the National Action Strategy for Women for 2017-2022 to bridge the wage inequality gap, which was at the rate of 72.1% difference by 2019's report. The initiative also aims to reduce gender-based violence and increase businesswomen's managerial positions. Russia prides itself as a nation with a higher human development index for women than men, with women having 0.823 compared to men's 0.808 (2017 report). The Russian government also aims to promote women's job opportunities and establish free access to education for children under three (Russian Federation, 2020). In addition, Russia needs more women and youth representation to create a new, free, equal, and unbiased political environment to facilitate social change.

India Women Empowerment

Some authors have argued that India's low developmental rate is because of its patriarchal system. The patriarchal system has constrained mobility, reduced women's job opportunities, and low participation in socio-economic and political issues. Under-development for women has led to

most Indian women living in abject poverty, disparities in household allocation, inadequate health care and engaging in strenuous physical activities for survival (Davis et al., 2015). Sharma (2016) argued that gender inequality and discrimination against Indian women and girls is a continuous, pervasive, long-running phenomenon identified in every Indian community. To date, Indian's ranking and measurements on gender equality have been disappointing, and there has been a decline in female labour force participation with a 27% gender pay gap in corporate jobs (Dadhwal, 2016). In addition, statistics have shown repeated trends of increased crime rate against women, such as rapes, dowry deaths and honour killings (Mallapur, 2015). The significant challenges encountered on Indian gender inequality is 'patrilineality' (male descendants' inheritance) and 'Patrilocality' (women living with their husbands' families or close to them). These cultural belief systems have given male children more preference than women and leaving the women in a disadvantaged situation. The cultural system also engages a dowry system where the female family pay dowry to the male family. Unlike other global regions, this cultural dowry system has made most Indian households discriminate against girls as it means they need to invest in their dowry once ready for marriage. As a result, most parents invest in the male child more than the female and use the money to educate a female child to support future dowry (Sharma, 2016).

The current situation in India indicates a shift in policy initiatives for women empowerment as gender inequality has constrained Indian's economic growth. There is a call on active women representation in leadership positions since women leaders' communities presented positive affirmative-led actions than male leaders' communities. Furthermore, the women were more confident in reporting crimes that might be too difficult and stigmatising. The female leaders were also prone to enforcing educational and career aspirations to families with female children, which increased female-child education in the regions. This experiment revealed that if men are trained on gender bias and give women opportunities, it closes the gender gap in the community. Another policy change suggested was the issue of equalising land inheritance rights amongst male and female children. The policy met with mixed response in the society where those who embraced it had positive progress in educational attainment for girls and marrying at the right age. At the same time, the critics experienced domestic violence and marital conflict. Education for Indian children should be a priority for the country as it will facilitate inclusive development. The Indian government also needs to improve labour market policies that empower women and encourage active market participation and enrolment of professional training. India needs to strategise initiatives that bring parity for men and women to position itself as a global growth leader that facilitates gender equality.

China Women Empowerment

China is still predominantly embedded with the traditional and communist system that rates women as lower than men inside their homes, rural communities, media, employment, and the health sector (Davies et al., 2020). Texter (2020) argued that China is like Africa as it remains a patriarchal country believing that women should constantly subject themselves to men. And these acts and norms continue to plague society in all structural designs. With the support of the communist party of China (CPC), the Chinese government also pledged their support to the United Nations on SDG5 towards achieving gender equality and protecting the legitimate rights of women and children (Jie, 2020). The President and the new leadership of "All China Women's Federation" further collaborated to develop women's emancipated programs in the next five years. China further ensured that the policies protected women's rights and interests into laws and regulations to elevate state and internalised social norms (Jie, 2020). Special attention was placed explicitly on women's rights to equal employment, land rights, sexual assault, or harassment in 30 provincial-level regions. The government also integrated gender emancipated policies into the country's primary education, available in the 15 provincial-level regions. In supporting the global women in diplomacy and

safeguarding world peace, the Chinese state dispatched 1000 women peacekeepers for international peacekeeping operations. As of 2018, the number of Chinese diplomats has increased to 2,065, 1695 in 2015. These efforts have been remarkable with an increase in female parliamentary. Compared to their BRICS counterparts, China does not have gender education inequality as all sexes have equal representation in the system for proper education. In addition, disability support has been put in place to assist disabled citizens, and the poverty rate has reduced marginally from 16.6 million in 2012 to 98.99 million in 2018. This statistic made the Chinese government stand out in economic empowerment more than all other member countries in the BRICS. Despite these achievements, China is still at its primary stage of gender equality. The government needs to put more effort to override traditional norms and practices that subject women to an inferior element. And there must be capacity training for societal engagement and effective implementation of the policies within the system (Feng, ChaiRuGan & Davies, 2020).

South African women empowerment

To promote women's economic empowerment, the South African government committed itself as signatories of treaties and agreements regarding women's economic empowerment and equality. These treaties formulate the economic policies on financial inclusion addressed by government institutions in charge of the economic policy addressing women's empowerment.

According to the IMF report in 2014, South Africa is categorised as a middle-income country and the most developed country in sub-Saharan Africa (Stotsky et al., 2016). However, the report submitted to the Beijing+20 by the South African Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities in 2014 stated that despite the country making progress in addressing poverty and gender inequality, the gender gap in poverty and employment rate among women and men is still relatively high (Stotsky et al., 2016). The women's budget publication was initiated in 1995 to address policy prescription that specifies women's age and education issues. The magazine also projects gender issues on health care, welfare, housing, jobs and public employment, violence against women, extending time to cover revenue, donor, and intergovernmental finance issues. However, this initiative died out with the resignation of appointees in parliament and finance ministry over time (Stotsky et al., 2016).

The second initiative was initiated in 1998-1999 by the national treasury with the support of the former committee, which facilitated the women's budget scheme. This initiative became part of the Commonwealth Secretariat, endorsed by Commonwealth countries (Stotsky et al., 2016). Within the two years of this strategy's life cycle, the Commonwealth countries implemented policies surrounding gender in the structural levels of society and the (Stotsky et al., 2016). However, despite the disappearance of this initiative, some governmental departments, like the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), undertook gender budgeting-related projects. They were the first to identify the gender gap in providing a budget for women in small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs), which they tried to address. The Department of Social Development also provided five budget programs for women (Stotsky et al., 2016); the first was reducing the tax burden (zero-rating) on kerosene to assist women who rely on this fuel source. The second program provided a child support grant to primary workers and increased female SMMEs by the DTI. The fourth program was equity in time spent in prison rations by both male and female prisoners. In addition, the government made several fiscal policies or program changes at the national and provincial levels on women. For instance, the premier's office of Gauteng province in 2003 implemented a policy addressing women's needs and facilitating gender equality in the region to address gender financial exclusion (Stotsky et al., 2016).

The statistics for child support grants continue to rise over the years. Regarding agriculture, the government considers female farmers and tries to address the challenges facing the gender farming factor. In the energy sector, women's role in the household for lighting, heating and cooking is

accounted for, while the DTI proposed different programs to support and facilitate more women's participation in business (Stotsky et al., 2016). Another initiative implemented by the government was adjusting the tax system to suit women without discrimination. During apartheid, married women were regarded as "secondary earners and paid more tax rate than an unmarried man/woman" (Stotsky et al., 2016). However, the government amended this policy in 1995 and removed explicit discrimination against women in the tax code. Critics have reported pending concerns regarding this issue. They postulate that income tax still contains an element of bias. It does not consider the female single adult-headed households prominent in South African society since allowances for dependents accrue on the heads of households (Stotsky et al., 2016).

The Covid-19 crises in BRICS countries on women empowerment

The current Covid-19 was not just a global health crisis but also an economic crisis. Covid-19 revived the interest of the worldwide reform in achieving a more inclusive, just and fairer system of global governance. BRICS countries were affected by the virus in different ways. China was the first country to identify with the virus and curtail it speedily using strict measures. Russia had a brutal hit and had the scientific infrastructure capacity to eliminate the virus's spread immediately. Brazil and South Africa were also severely impacted, with thousands of death records. The second new variant of the Covid-19 started in South Africa, which made the economy vulnerable.

The two countries are busy focusing on finding a new vaccine that aids economic recovery. And the economies have been impacted on issues of poverty, inequality, and low employment. India was also affected and had to develop laboratories that accommodate more than 1 million testings in a day beyond the world health organisation (WHO) recommendation. COVID-19 pandemic is reversing hard-fought progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. There is a need to help ensure more the global economy, especially the low- and lower-middle-income countries, are more inclusive and sustainable in pandemic responses (UNDP, 2020). The immediate health impacts of the pandemic have been devastating, as are the effects on the economy, livelihoods, poverty, and inequalities. In lower-income countries, governments' ability to implement supportive measures and economic stimulus are confined.

The pandemic may have reduced the ability to invest in these future opportunities. Women are disproportionately affected by these significant changes due to deep-rooted inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified gender inequalities: women tend to be over-represented in the sectors most affected by COVID-19 lockdowns, they are bearing an even more unequal burden for care work, and gendered norms that disadvantage women may be strengthened during the pandemic (Rivera et al., 2020). Women-led initiatives and organisations have been central in addressing the impact of the pandemic and have the potential to play a vital role in "building back better" (Rakibul & Bahauddin, 2014). On its part, Dlamini (2021) argued that several factors contributing to the impact of covid-19 in BRICS countries on women economic empowerment vary from region to region. Brazil, Russia, and China have low political participation for women. Although South Africa had a high political charge, there were economic challenges for women in the country. Most significantly, there were health and survival issues. The common consensus on the impact of covid-19 on women economic empowerment in BRICS economies was that all five countries had low economic participation and opportunity for women. Furthermore, there are limited data on strategic policies for women economic empowerment, which remains an issue of concern (Pandor, 2021; Mosoetsa, 2021).

BRICS recovery strategies on women economic empowerment.

The recovery from the pandemic might be opportunities to address persistent gender inequalities. The International Relations Minister' Naledi Pandor', in her speech on the BRICS approach to Post Covid-19 recovery, stated that BRICS countries tried their possible best to initiate a strategy that is based on shared principles, values, mutual respect (Pandor, 2021). The approach also stipulates BRICS democracy, inclusiveness, and a strengthened collaboration that serves as a common goal for BRICS establishment. The 12th BRICS Summit held virtually in November 2020 also addressed the post-covid-19 recovery strategies. The summit strategised different initiatives such as "BRICS Strategy for Economic Partnership", "BRICS Counter-Terrorism Strategy", and "BRICS Women's Business Alliance" and the first project on "Energy Research Platform." The strategies address three key issues: health issues, economic issues, and social issues.

Regarding the health issue, South Africa was the first to suggest a vaccine centre even before Covid -19 came and pledged its commitment to establish its vaccine research and development centre. Since the global pandemic was an issue of concern, especially in BRICS economies, the nation's came together to provide better-advanced research and innovation Center to develop vaccines that enable affordable access to quality, adequate healthcare, and diagnostic tools. The development of vaccines is currently an issue of concern in Africa, making the covid-19 post-recovery a current subject of debate. Regarding environmental and social issues, women were the most gender to be impacted economically with the covid-19 pandemic and have amplified gender inequalities. Most women have lost their jobs, and as stated earlier, the government may promote gendered policies that encourage equality during the pandemic (Rivera et al., 2020). Pannova and Stapran (2020) highlighted that South Africa have the highest unemployment rate of 27.3% amongst its BRICS counterparts. The unemployment rate significantly affected women with a ratio of 29.5% as compared to men's 25.5% job loss (Panova & Stapran, 2020).

The BRICS economy has initiated individual policies to address these challenges. Brazil implemented a new strategy for women empowerment through Article 461 of the Brazilian code, which enabled equal pay of work and equal value between men and women. The constitutional amendment no 72 of 2013 extended labour rights to domestic workers and established the constitutional employment rights that prevent gender inequality and make women redundant if pregnant. Policies such as maternity funding, Children's grants, free education for children under three years, amongst many, led to an increase in women leadership in 2018 from 41% - 68.9% (Panova & Stapran, 2020). They resulted in active economic participation from Brazilian women within the labour market. The Indian Ministry of women and child development oversaw gender emancipation policies. The gender policies address seven key priority areas in India: 'gender-based violence', 'governance and decision making', 'health and educational issues', 'economic', and 'environmental and climate change' (Panova & Stapran, 2020). Even though the government set these initiatives, the policies have yet to shift women's participation percentage in the labour market significantly. As of the 2018 report on Indian women labour market representation, the ratio still lies at 23.6%, with only 14% of women acting as entrepreneurs (Panova & Stapran, 2020). In China, gender policies were implemented to ensure that 40% of women occupy the labour force by 2020 to bridge the labour gender gap. This initiative increased women's economic participation in China by 35% and promoted equal pay for equal work. Currently, women own 31% of businesses in China and are 100% financially included. However, despite the policies, there is a significant huge gap in women's earnings than men. In China, women only earn 80% of men's monthly income, with a ratio gap of 2.5 % (Copley et al., 2020).

In South Africa, the Department of women, youth and disabilities handles women economic empowerment by facilitating, implementing, and monitoring gender emancipated initiatives. Although South Africa was able to close the gender gap in education in the country, there is still

a massive gap in the unemployment rate for women, with a percentage of 29.5% and low self-employment at 12.9%. BRICS countries all have a high gender percentage in education and health but lacks good representation in economic and political participation (Maasdorp, 2020).

Other strategies enforced by BRICS to promote women's economic empowerment include digitalisation, which became necessary because of the covid-19 pandemic. All the BRICS countries came together to ensure citizens become digitalised. However, challenges of access, affordability and lack of education have limited the successful implementation of digitalisation in BRICS. Also, automation because of digitalisation is an issue of concern as it has replaced human jobs. As a result, the government made concrete policies to promote women's digital skills development and digitalised employment. Secondly, the BRICS economy also initiated strategies for women in BRICS countries to improve the quality of the products and diversity of import and export trades. Even so, only 15% of women are owners of exportation firms in BRICS, indicating that there is still a long way to achieving this initiative (Panova & Stapran, 2020). Thirdly, policies were set in place by BRICS communities to promote women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Awards and prizes are given to STEM women to promote and encourage active participation in these disciplines. Since there was inequality in women's wages compared to their male counterparts in BRICS countries, the last strategy was to assist women with unpaid work the opportunity to earn something.

Conclusion

Women empowerment has been identified as an important context for aborting discrimination against women in developing countries and promoting economic growth. Women empowerment in BRICS countries have unique characteristics that bind the economies together. The first is the low involvement of women informal economic activities as compared to the developed countries. The second characteristics are the significance of inclusive development in globalisation that binds the five countries together. The third characteristics integrate gender emancipated policies to achieve the SDGs goals, an essential strategy that the BRICS government must set in BRICS economies. And lastly, the concern for the issue of insufficient literature on gender-inclusive development in BRICS economies. These issues led to BRICS economics setting up initiatives to bridge the gender gap for post-covid-19 recovery women's economic empowerment. The BRICS government implemented better education skills, professional development and access to digital technology, financial inclusion and access, entrepreneurial support systems, innovation and startup, and women's promotion in leadership to enhance women's economic empowerment programs.

Many recommendations have been proposed to promote and enhance women's economic empowerment, which has become a new initiative amongst BRICS agendas and post covid-19 recovery. The first is the current call for strategic policy implementation to integrate women into the BRICS economy. The BRICS economies are still lacking in this. There is a huge gap between women economic representativeness and the need to promote access and affordable policies and education-related initiatives that enhance digital literacy. Secondly, there should be closer cooperation with private businesses to encourage national organisations and multinationals in promoting gender equality. The world economic forums on World Economic Forum report that South Africa has a higher representation in gender disparity and possesses a global rank of 19th position. However, the rest of the BRICS countries are yet to achieve this, Russia is ranked number 71 on the worldwide ranking, Brazil is ranked number 90, China is ranked number 100, and India ranks number 108. Despite South Africa, exceptional ranking, the gender equality experienced by the marginalised women daily points to economic inequality that needs to be addressed.

References

- Akhilgova, J. (2020). COVID-19 Conversations: Russia is Failing to Protect Victims of Domestic Violence. Equality Now. Available at https://www.equalitynow.org/covid_19_russia_dv (Accessed 22 April 2021).
- Aluko, Y. A. & Okuwa, O. B. (2018). 'Innovative Solutions and Women Empowerment: Implications for Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria', *African journal of Science, Technology & Development*, 10(4), pp. 441–449. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20421338.2018.1471028>
- Asaolu, I. O., Alaofe, H., Gunn, J., Adu, A., Monroy, A., Ehiri, J., Hayden, M., & Ernst, K. (2018). 'Measuring Women's Empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa: Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analyses of the Demographic and Health Surveys', *Frontiers in Psychology*. Frontiers, 9, p. 994. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00994>
- Banuri, T. (2007). 'Twelve Theses Sustainable Development Agenda for Climate Change', *Stockholm Environment Institute*. Available at: http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/cdp/cdp_news_archive/egm_climatechange/banuri.pdf (Accessed: 23 August 2017).
- Copley, A., Decker, A., & Delavelle, F. (2020). Supporting African Women Through the Economic Consequences of Covid-19. Available at <https://blogs.worldbank.org/africacan/supporting-african-women-through-economic-consequences-covid-19> (Accessed: 11 April 2021).
- Dadhwal, P.V. (2016). India suffers from huge gender pay gap: Monster Salary Index. Available at https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/jobs/india-suffers-from-huge-gender-pay-gap-monster-salary-index/articleshow/52306658.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst (Accessed 23 April 2021).
- Davids, N. (2020). Covid-19 could derail Gender Equality Progress in South Africa's Labour Market. Available at <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2020-11-17-covid-19-could-derail-gender-equality-progress-in-sas-labour-market> (Accessed: 16 April 2021).
- Davis, L.M., Schensul, S.L., Schensul, J.J., Verma, R., Nastasi, B.K. & Singh, R. (2015). Women's Empowerment and Its Differential Impact on Health in Low Income Communities in Mumbai, India. *Glob Public Health*. 2014; 9(5): 481–494. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2014.904919>
- Department of Women (2015). *Status of Women and Girls in South Africa 2015 Towards the United Nation General Assembly Meeting on the New Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*. Available at: http://www.gov.za/sites/www.gov.za/files/Status_of_women_in_SA_economy.pdf. (Accessed 24 February, 2019).
- Dlamini, V. (2021). Covid 19 and the Impact on the World, For Better or Worse, in BRICS: Post Covid-19 Recovery. BRICS Academic Review. National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS). Available at https://www.nihss.ac.za/sites/default/files/BRICS/BAR_5_e-version.pdf (Accessed: 11 April 2021).
- Du, Jie. (2020). Progress of women empowerment in China. *China Today*, 25 September. Available at http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctenglish/2018/zdtj/202009/t20200925_800221877.html (Accessed 22 April 2021).
- Feng, H., Cai Ru Gan, C., & Davies, S.E. (2020). Can Covid-19 Enhance Gender Equalities in China's Health Policies? The Interpreter. Available at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/can-covid-19-advance-gender-equality-china-s-health-policies> (Accessed 22 April 2021).
- Fibig, V. (2020). The Impact of Covid-19 on Female Entrepreneurs in MENA. Available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/impact-covid-19-female-entrepreneurs-mena> (Accessed: 11 April, 2021).
- Gangadhar S.C.H. & Malyadri, P. (2015). 'Impact of Microfinance on Women Empowerment: An Empirical Evidence from Andhra Pradesh', *Entrepreneurship & Organization Management*, 4(2), pp. 1–8.
- Holder, A. (2019). BRICS countries can do more to improve Gender Equality. *USNews*, 6 June 2019. Available at <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2019-06-06/commentary-brics-nations-can-do-more-to-improve-gender-equality> (Accessed 13 April, 2021).
- Khandare, V.B. (2019). 'International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research, 04(05), pp. 3319–3334. Available at: <http://www.ijsser.orgimpactfactor:2.173> (Accessed: 30 August 2020).
- Klapper, L., Singer, D., Ansar, S. & Hess, J. (2017). *The Global Findex Database*. Washington DC.
- Maasdorp, L. (2020). How Multilateral Development Banks can lead through a Crisis. Available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/brics-new-development-bank-leads-member-states-through-the-covid-19-crisis/> (Accessed: 11 April, 2021).
- Mallapur, C. (2015). Crime against Women Reported every Two Minutes. Available at <https://www.indiaspend.com/crimes-against-women-reported-every-two-minutes-84240> (Accessed 23 April 2021).

- Maluleke, R. (2020). Covid-19 Pandemic in South Africa: Demographic Volume. Statistics South Africa. Available at <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report%2000-80-05/Report%2000-80-052020.pdf> (Accessed 15 April 2021).
- Mosoetsa, S. (2021). 10 Years in BRICS: South Africa Holds its own and looks into the Future, in Post Covid-19 Recovery: BRICS Academic Review. National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) 2021. Available at https://www.nihss.ac.za/sites/default/files/BRICS/BAR_5_e-version.pdf (Accessed: 11 April, 2021).
- Mphambukeli, T. (2021). Quality Infrastructure and Sustainability post Covid-19 in BRICS, in Post Covid-19 Recovery: BRICS Academic Review. National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) 2021. Available at https://www.nihss.ac.za/sites/default/files/BRICS/BAR_5_e-version.pdf (Accessed: 11 April, 2021).
- OECD (2012). *Women's Economic Empowerment*. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/povertyreduction/50157530.pdf> (Accessed: 1 September 2017).
- OECD (2012). *Gender Equality in Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship: Final Report to the MCM 2012 C/MIN(2012)5*. Paris. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/employment/50423364.pdf> (Accessed: 6 September 2017).
- Ojo, T.A. (2020). A Study of Financial Inclusion for South African Women: A case study of women Entrepreneurs in Gauteng. Doctoral Thesis, University of Pretoria.
- Onditi, F. & Odera, J. (2017). 'Gender Equality as a means to Women Empowerment? Consensus, Challenges and Prospects for Post-2015 Development Agenda in Africa', *African Geographical Review*, 36(2), pp. 146–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376812.2016.1185737>
- Osinubi, T., & Asongu, S. (2020). Globalisation and Female Economic Participation in MINT and BRICS countries. *Journal of Economic Studies*. European Xtramile Centre for African Studies (EXCAS) Working Paper WP/20/058. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JES-08-2020-0381>
- Pandor, N. (2021). BRICS Approach to the Post Covid-19 Recovery, in Post Covid-19 Recovery: BRICS Academic Review. National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) 2021. Available at https://www.nihss.ac.za/sites/default/files/BRICS/BAR_5_e-version.pdf (Accessed: 11 April, 2021).
- Panova, V. & Stapran, N. (2020). Women Economic Empowerment in BRICS: Policies, Achievements, Challenges and Solutions. National Committee on BRICS Research, Russia. Available at http://www.nkibrics.ru/ckeditor_assets/attachments/600a8a8e6272697eb4070000/toolkit_women_in_brics.pdf?1611303566 (Accessed: 11 April, 2021).
- Parker, A., Maree, G., Gotz, G., & Khanyile, S. (2020). How Covid-19 puts Women at more Risks than Men in Gauteng South Africa. *The Conversation*. Available at <https://theconversation.com/how-covid-19-puts-women-at-more-risk-than-men-in-gauteng-south-africa-150570> (Accessed on 15 April 2021).
- Rhozanovskaya, N. & Pardini, V. (2020). The Status of Women in Russian Society. Kennan Institute Live Virtual Conference, July 21-23. Available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Status%20of%20Women%20in%20Russian%20Society%20Conference%20Report.pdf> (Accessed 22 April 2021).
- Saeed, H. (2019). *5 Ways We Can Empower Women Globally*, *Atlas Corps*. Available at: <https://atlascorps.org/5-ways-we-can-empower-women-globally/> (Accessed: 6 August 2020).
- Sell, M. and Minot, N. (2018). 'What Factors explain Women's Empowerment? Decision-Making Among Small-Scale Farmers in Uganda', *Women's Studies International Forum*. Pergamon, 71, pp. 46–55. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2018.09.005>
- Sharma, S. (2016). Achieving Gender Equality in India: What Works and What Doesn't. United Nations University. Available at <https://unu.edu/publications/articles/achieving-gender-equality-in-india-what-works-and-what-doesnt.html> (Accessed 23 April 2021).
- Stotsky, J., Shibuya, S., Kolovich, L. & Kabihaj, S. (2016). 'Trends in Gender Equality and Women's Advancement', *IMF Working Papers*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2754925>
- Textor, C. (2020). Women in China, *STATISTA*. Available at <https://www.statista.com/topics/4860/women-in-china/> (Accessed 21 April 2021).
- Tiessen, R. & Delaney, J. (2018). *Inclusive Development Practice for Women*. IVCO-2018 Paper. Canada. Available at: https://www.entwicklungsdienst.de/fileadmin/AKLHUE_Relaunch/IVCO-2018-Theme-Paper-2.pdf (Accessed: 6 August 2020).

- UNESCO. Gender Equality and Culture. Available at http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/pdf/RESOURCES_Informkultura_Russian_State_Library_Gender_Equ.pdf (Accessed 22 April 2021).
- UN-Women (2020). Brazil Commits to Realise Women's Rights on All Fronts. Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/get-involved/step-it-up/commitments/brazil> (Accessed 17 April 2021).
- Van Staden, C. & Mpungose, L. (2018). BRICS Should Adopt Inclusive Approach to Women. *SAIIA Policy Insights, No 63*. Available at <https://saiia.org.za/research/brics-should-adopt-inclusive-approach-to-women/> (Accessed 13 April, 2021).
- Verdier-Chouchane, A. (2016). *Review Essay Women in Inclusive Development: An Overview, Région et Développement*. Available at: http://regiondeveloppement.univtln.fr/en/pdf/R44/3_VerdierChouchane.pdf (Accessed: 24 February 2019).
- Zondi, S. (2021). Can the BRICS be a catalyst for Transformation of Global Governance, in Post Covid-19 Recovery: BRICS Academic Review. National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) 2021. Available at https://www.nihss.ac.za/sites/default/files/BRICS/BAR_5_e-version.pdf (Accessed: 11 April, 2021).