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The rise of the South: Implications for women's rights

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Introduction

The first decade of 21st century marked by rise of the “rising narrative”, from Brazil, China, India, BRICS, to Africa, and the emergence of “emerging powers”. These rising or emerging powers outstood notably against the backdrop of the new phase of globalization, that Thomas Friedman illuminated as “the flattened world” (Friedman, 2005). The “rise of the South”, in UNDP Human Development Report (HDR) 2013 titled “The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World”, refers to the broad progress in human development of many developing countries and their emergence onto the global stage. Some of the largest countries have made rapid advances, notably Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, South Africa and Turkey. According to projections developed for this Report, by 2020, the combined economic output of three leading developing countries alone—Brazil, China and India—will surpass the aggregate production of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States. But there has also been substantial progress in smaller economies, such as Bangladesh, Chile, Ghana, Mauritius, Rwanda and Tunisia. Much of this expansion is being driven by new trade and technology partnerships within the South itself (UNDP, 2013). Stronger voices from the South are demanding more-representative frameworks of international governance that embody the principles of democracy and equity.

The concept “Global South” came to replace the “Third World” after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and has become a fashionable and popular expression. It appears in academia, being used among activists, and self-identified by governments too. There are still debates on who are the South, what that means – the metaphor or the substance. Talking about the South – we are talking about the countries with diverse political system, economic development stage, culture, history, demography, from the world second largest economy to least development countries, while also recognizing there is the South in the North, and North in the South.

Despite the critique and disagreement on the dominating “rise” narrative,¹ the emerging economies and rise of the South have contributed to shifting ideas, narratives, norms and practice in international development and re-shape certain aspects of global governance. Many research and analyses about “rise of the South” concentrate on how the shifts currently underway are reshaping geopolitical balance, trade patterns, the multilateral complex of governance (in particular, of financial institutions), and development models. Yet the domains of gender, sexuality, and related human rights claims are absent or have barely been touched upon in these analyses (Correa and Khanna, 2015). It is the time to unpack the “rise of the South” from the gender lens -- what is rising, when, why, how, and for whom? The series questions to be raised here: *inter alia*, what does “rise of the South” mean for women’s rights, especially for the women from South? How could possibly gender perspective be integrated in this process? And how could feminist activism influence and transform the agendas such as South-South and Triangular Cooperation, development finance, etc. and ensure the gender equality and women’s human rights are at the center of development narrative and praxis, including SDGs? This short paper could possibly be regarded as an attempt to raise, rather than to answer, these critical questions. Focusing on interrogation and reflection on the interplay of “rise of the South” with the two issues: one is the long-standing highly politicized binary hypothesis and debate of rights vs. development; the second is engendering South-South Cooperation,

¹ For example, with regards to “Africa rising” narrative, some posit that there is no agreed definition on what it means; whether Africa returns to the world center stage, or it is the arena where super powers are wrestling; while others, guided by free-market ideology, is convinced that the continent’s fortunes are on the rise based on metrics such as increased investment and growth in the banking and ICT sectors as well as the high GDP rates, in a lot of countries. The latter group has successfully managed to push its narrative forward, making it the dominant view in the continent.

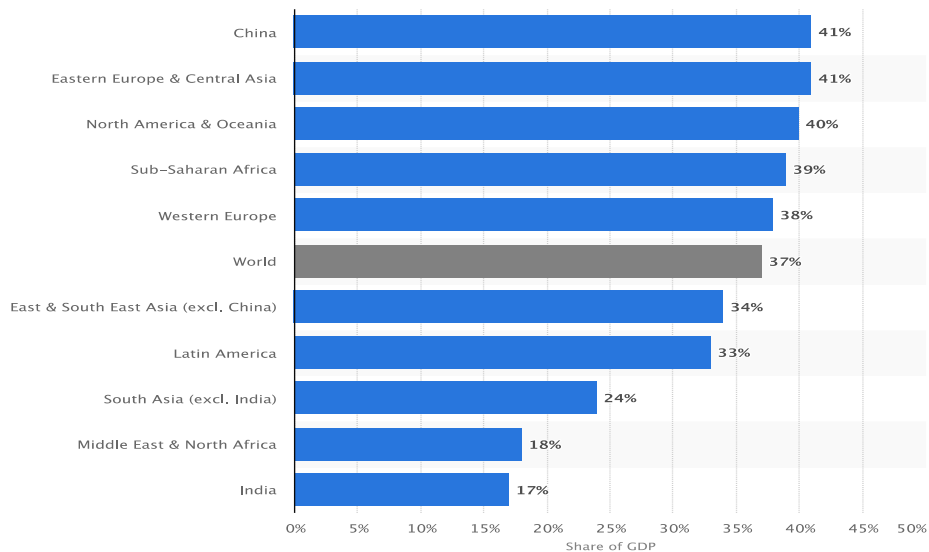
this paper concludes that rise of the Southern women's voices and activism can transform the development narrative and praxis and make the rights-based approach real.

Unpack the "rise of the South" from a gender lens

The current phase of globalization is very much gendered globalization, that depends on the exploitation of women and girls productive and reproductive work, deep-embedded gender division of labor, women's low paid and unpaid care work, especially women from the Global South. Feminist analysis shows not only the impact of globalization on women, but also how women are at several points have shaped globalization. Globalization reconceptualizes and reproduces ideas about work and business that rely on dominant ideas of femininity and masculinity (Baylis et al., 2017). Globalization is gendered in the sense that its effects in the labor market and family level vary by gender. Areas of concern are when jobs are transferred to areas where low-wage female workers are readily available have been identified, as Pun articulated in her research on Chinese female migrant workers (Pun, et al., 2005, 2016).

Despite of the efforts to promote women's participation on economy, women's contribution to economy varies across globe South and has not been recognized in the process of policymaking. The following statistic shows the share of GDP in each region that is contributed by women, as of 2015. India had the smallest female GDP share at 17 percent. This is significantly less than the 41 percent female share in China. China's women labor force participation rate exceeds 70%, ranking first in the world. The participation rate among Chinese women aged 25 to 55 is as high as 90%. The participation rate of Chinese men in housework is the fourth lowest in the world, only better than that of Japan, South Korea and India. In a family, unpaid housework is mainly undertaken by the wife (65%) and the elderly (23%). A research on women in the labor market in China shows that although women's labor force participation rate in China is relatively high, both women's labor force participation rate and the employment-to-population rate have declined at a faster rate than men's (Dasgupta et al., 2015). Another research on gender equality in China's economic transformation identifies the significant gender disparities in employment opportunities and the factors contribute to the decline of the female labor force participation rate in China -- First, it is influenced by state policies and social environment. Second, it is influenced by the income gap between husband and wife. Third, housework and family care also contribute to decline of women's labor force participation. Fourth, the women's labor force participation rate is largely influenced by women's educational attainment (Liu, et al., 2014)

Percentage of GDP contributed by female workers, as of 2015, by region



Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/523838/women-share-of-gdp-region/>

Moreover, the evidence shows that economic growth and wealth accumulation in the South does not automatically bring about equitable and sustainable development results and inequality, including gender inequality, is on rising. Despite their increased economic and institutional strength, leaders of emerging powers in the global South do not challenge the North's domination of world affairs because they represent elites who benefited hugely from economic deregulation. This produces rising inequalities in the global South and inequality in emerging powers and between North and South will increase (Pieterse et al., 2008; UNDP, 2013).

From emerging market to emerging power, whether the rising southern voices can address the democratic deficit in the global decision-making process in the global governance forum and contribute to advancement of gender equality and women's human rights remain a challenge. This dues to the diverse positioning between South and North as well as among South on various related issues, especially on sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR), their prioritization of the economic social political agenda in national and global arena. This can be observed in the process of negotiation on post 2015 development agenda and SDGs (DAWN, 2012), ICPD beyond 2014, review of Beijing conference, Financing for Development (FfD), and various sessions in the Human Rights Council (HRC).² There are two concerning aspects associated with the rising voices of the South in global arena – firstly, is that the tradition and newly established southern groups do not have concerted progressive gender equality agenda as policy priorities, or it is narrowly formulated as women's economic participation and empowerment, with focus on the women's labor force participation and entrepreneurship. Secondly, these groupings, BRICS for instance, remain largely inaccessible to the public, in particular to those whose lives and livelihoods are

² The Sexual Rights Initiative (SRI) is a coalition of national and regional organizations from all parts of the world with an office in Geneva that has been advocating for the advancement of human rights in relation to gender and sexuality at the UN Human Rights Council since 2006. It has been monitoring the negotiations and country positions in HRC and producing analyses and reports on the subjects <https://www.sexualrightsinitiative.com>

affected by the decisions taken, although they themselves demand to democratize the global governance spaces for a democratic and equitable international order (HRC, 2019).

Rise of South in parallel with the rise of the global scale of deficit democracy and illiberalism creates the opportunity for the formation of orchestrated conservative global forces across North and South, East and West to push back women's human rights and gender equality in the global norm setting spaces, like UN, as well as in the national policy making process. The rising southern influence can be tapped by these forces to reinforce and claim the justification of the broad alliances at global, national and local level to oppose women's rights, demonize and distort the terminology like "gender", and intervene policy making. These anti-gender campaigns were considered to be influenced by US Christian right-wing groups, since they have been successfully exporting their brand of conservatism to a number of sub-Saharan African countries and most countries in Asia, especially East Asia, during the past 20 years. They have been focusing on attacking feminism, abortion rights and SOGIE issues by invoking so-called traditional local values to oppose guarantees of human rights protecting to all persons. The other religious groups as well as secular voices, including from right-wing populists, form coalitions that vary considerably according to local contexts (Girard, 2017; Correa, et al., 2018).

Marked by the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Asian Infrastructure Bank (AIIB), the rise of the South also brings new development financing in addition official development assistance (ODA) and international financial institutions (IFIs), especially on the infrastructure which urgently needed by developing countries. How to make these new South-led IFIs more accountable for gender equality in accordance with the existing environmental, social and governance standards, rather than further jeopardize it? None of the NDB or AIIB has a gender policy. A research conducted on the AIIB-funded road project in India shows that the project has a gender-neutral approach and, hence, failed to address women's specific needs in rural road connectivity that ensures equal access to opportunity and resources. Also, women's roles in production as farmers, small producers, and as economic and development agents were missing in the project (Darooka and Dand, 2019). Moreover, the blended financing model, which applied both by China and other South countries in their development cooperation and by traditional donor countries, cause the concern on the risk of undermining local ownership of development priorities and on the harmful consequences including human rights abuse, tax avoidance, and unsustainable debt burdens (EURODAD, 2018).

Last but not least, situated in the context of the rise of conservatism, populism and fundamentalism on the global scale, the rise of the South narrative is coupled with redefining the tradition, culture and identities as it is reimagining an emerging new world, which gender and role of women, sexuality are at the center of these discourse. The complex and globalized world we live in cannot be thoroughly understood without taking into consideration the long historical cycle that led to the establishment of an interconnected world system under the hegemony of the West and its multiple traces and legacies (Correa and akshay, 2015). Equally important, for us to understand the new emerging configuration, we need to interrogate the how rising South (re)discover and (re)interpret its own traditional values and practices to create social identity – from Turkey to India to Indonesia, from China's great rejuvenation of Chinese nation, to reshaping of the "Africanness" (Ngwena, 2018), to prevalence of the Catholic doctrine in Latin America. Karima Bennoune, Special Rapporteur in the field of culture rights, in her report to Human Rights Council reminds us that cultural fundamentalists often seek to erase the culture of others and the syncretic nature of culture and religion and stamp out cultural diversity. The human rights approach to fundamentalism and extremism should encompass State and non-State actors. She reiterates that cultural

rights are not an excuse for violations of other human rights, do not justify discrimination or violence and are not a license to impose identities or practices on others or exclude them from either in violation of international law, whether by state actors or private actors. According to general comment No. 28, interpreting article 3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, states parties should ensure that traditional, historical, religious or cultural attitudes are not used to justify violations of women's rights to equality before the law and to equal enjoyment of all Covenant rights (HRC, 2017). In her fourth thematic report in 2012, the Special Rapporteur Farida Shaheed proposes to shift the paradigm from one that views culture as an obstacle to women's rights to one that seeks to ensure equal enjoyment of cultural rights; such an approach also constitutes an important tool for the realization of all their human rights (HRC, 2012).

Looking forward – rise of Southern women for stronger global feminist movement

Unpacking the rise of South from the gender lens, the most important and unneglectable phenomenon is the rise of Southern women. Despite the shrinking space, the women of South is mobilizing and organizing for the rights, justice and equality, which is on rising – from women workers from Bangladesh garment factory on strike for decent work, to Argentinian women on the street demanding the abortion right, to indigenous women leading the struggle for land rights, to the rally against gender-based violence in South Africa, to Chinese #metoo (“rice and rabbit” in Chinese) movement led by young women...women farmers, Dalits women, LBT women, women with disabilities... there are in the workplace, on street, in community, in parliament, in university, on internet, in UN, and everywhere... this rigorous southern feminist movement is an integral part of the rise of south picture in the world stage now and will define what rise of South really mean for women, and for the world.

The global South continues to face some of the rudimentary development challenges which range from poverty to gender inequality and from social exclusion to poor health-related infrastructure. I want to conclude my paper by proposing some opportunities and momentums that the rise of South entails, which can be seized to promote the women's human rights and gender equality.

Rise of South and living experience of Southern women provides an opportunity to revitalize the right to development and rethink the longstanding debates in the area of international human rights law -- rights vs. development; rights-based approach vs. needs-based approach; first, second and third generation of human rights, etc. etc., which are highly contested in the academia, as well as politicized in the multilateral spaces like UN. Women's rights cannot wait till the consensus to be reached to be realized – their civil and political rights, their social, economic, culture rights, their sexual and reproductive rights cannot be separate and cannot wait and demand the immediate actions. The right to development (RTD) is contested in international law, politics and practice. This remains the case, despite the 30-year existence of the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development (UNDRTD), the many substantive leads that current international law provides. The Article 22 of the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. To date, that Charter remains the only hard law document bestowing an individual and collective RTD with binding and enforceable obligations imposed on States. The renewed inspiration that can be drawn from Agenda 2030 and its sustainable development goals (Arts and Tamo, 2016). If the SDG 5 to be achieved, mobilizing existing provisions of international law and building on momentum of implementation of other SDGs would be equally important.

Rise of the South and Southern women's movement requires South-South and triangular cooperation to be revamped to mainstream gender perspective and promote gender equality. The Outcome Document of the BAPA+40 Conference "recognize the contribution of South-South and triangular cooperation in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in sustainable development and encourage further efforts to mainstream gender perspectives in these modalities of cooperation". Unfortunately, it does not provide the step-by-step manual on how to mainstream gender perspectives in the modalities of cooperation. To mainstream gender perspectives in SSC would make contribution, not only to South-South Cooperation (SSC) and Triangular Cooperation (TrC), but also transform the way of thinking on sustainable development and human rights. Firstly, gender perspective helps to transform from state-centric to people's centric development cooperation. Since its emergence, South-South Cooperation has been remarkably state-centric. Most of the Bandung principles refer to the states (except "Promotion of mutual interests and cooperation" that can be interpreted in different ways). In 1978, BAPA took a similar approach mostly focusing on state-to-state cooperation, even though it acknowledged the multidimensional nature of TCDC (bilateral or multilateral in scope, and sub-regional, regional or interregional in character). Secondly, it can enhance the rights-based approach by mitigating the false divide between needs vs. rights; human-rights based development and rights to development, as mentioned above. We should keep in mind that gender equality does not mean to be the conditionality, as many researcher and advocates have already pointed out (Alemany and Dede, 2008), but a goal, in the cooperation. Thirdly, gender perspective in SSC would enhance the accountability. Comparing to four decades ago, current SSC and TrC involve more players – not only the government and the state – are the mainstay of South-South cooperation, but also include commercial enterprises, civil society, charities and other participants. In particular, development should fully involve the participation of the people of the affected communities, and development should be consistent with human rights standards. Needless to say, this accountability mechanism would not be possible without efforts and collaboration of the women and feminist movements in those countries involving in SSC and TrC.

The rise of South and Southern women's movement and solidarity will contribute to building the stronger women's movement in global and national levels, therefor can strengthen rule-based multilateralism to re-balance the unequal power relations in global governance arena and put women's rights agenda at the table. Despite various obstacles and obstructions – political, financial, language barriers, technology, etc. -- they have been actively participated in series global conferences on human rights, on women, on population and on environment and on SDGs. Their critical voices and analyses crystalize the paradigm shifts in global norm setting spaces. They will continue to do so by making greater use of the international and regional and national human rights mechanisms of including UN, CEDAW, UPR -- as a platform for advocacy. They can hold their governments accountable to champion women's rights and gender equality in the global level.

Southern women will continue to rise!

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