The Dynamic Engagement of Women in BRICS. Their Quest for Cultural Cooperation

By Dr. Victoria Panova and Kester Kenn Klomegah
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In this insightful interview, Dr. Victoria Panova, Vice-Rector of National Research University – HSE, Russia (HSE University), head of the BRICS Expert Council – Russia, Russian W20 Sherpa, discusses the dynamics of women engagement in BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) association, and further highlights the challenges facing their empowerment and evolving women-specific initiatives.

She, however, pointed out that one of the important goals of the BRICS women community is to expand cooperation and ultimately to increase the global representation of BRICS women.

Here are the interview excerpts.

Kester Kenn Klomegah (KKK): First and foremost, what instruments are available for women's empowerment and interaction under Russia's presidency of BRICS?

Dr. Victoria Panova (DVP): Russia is going to pay considerable attention to the issues of women empowerment and interstate women cooperation during its BRICS Chairmanship. Russia is going to include a wide range of events on the topic, including BRICS Women's Entrepreneurship Forum, BRICS Best Women's Startup Competition, Meeting of BRICS Ministers for Women's Affairs, and a brand-new initiative – BRICS Women's Forum that is going to be held within the Fourth Eurasian Women's Forum. Not to forget active format of Women's Business Alliance holding a dozen of various events.

All these events serve multiple purposes: first, they enable networking among women from all BRICS States. Considering the amount and the scale of events, it won't be an overstatement to say that a full-fledged community of BRICS women has been formed over the years of fruitful partnership. Second, these events help to elaborate specific projects and

initiatives aimed at women empowerment and enhancing women's well-being.

Some initiatives and global goals of the Russian Chairmanship have already been announced. For example, there are plans to launch a common digital platform that will unite female entrepreneurs from BRICS countries: this platform will contain info about common business projects and a database of all companies led by women from BRICS countries.

KKK: Do women in the BRICS association recognize themselves also as an effective social group, a core of the new emerging world order?

DVP: Recognition of equality, mutual respect, cooperation and diplomacy, and the right to have their own interests is implicitly present in BRICS. And the same goes with any kind of equality within the BRICS. The group is committed to achieving gender equality and empowerment of women (and how they can benefit from the ongoing cooperation).

Today, it is even more vital to strengthen the role of women and to develop new mechanisms and solutions so that girls and women have more rights and opportunities. At the same time, one needs to understand that we are working together with men (not opposing them) to put forward the equality of opportunities.

Every year BRICS networking platforms gather hundreds of women. And we are talking not only about women-specific events but also about BRICS Academic Forum, BRICS Civil Forum and other events held within the BRICS agenda. Such events bring together male and female leaders, entrepreneurs, scientists, public officials, academics, civil society representatives from all BRICS states. Women from the BRICS countries are truly united: they have established communication channels and platforms, they work with each other, talk to each other, share their expertise, generate new ideas and deliver their significant contribution to the development of BRICS.

KKK: Bringing women with greater diverse cultural backgrounds, most probably, constitute the first challenge. In your view, how and to what extent can this challenge and a few others confronting them be tackled in this contemporary era?

DVP: Speaking as a representative of the Russian side, I must say that our country has substantial experience in this matter. Russia is a diverse, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural state. Successful co-existence, respect, and partnership of people with different cultural backgrounds is a part of our DNA.

Having said that, different cultural backgrounds within BRICS is hardly a challenge. BRICS is a well-established format: we have already worked with each other for years and learned each other's cultural backgrounds down to the most particular features. True, in 2024 we welcome new members to the BRICS family, yet these countries are no strangers to us and we have a longstanding history of partnership with them. This partnership includes cooperation among women too. Therefore, I believe that the integration of women from new BRICS states will be smooth and effective.

KKK: Despite all you have discussed above, in what ways would you argue that women, as a group in BRICS, are a unique force for making the necessary impact on development especially in the Global South?

DVP: Women continue to demonstrate their resilience and knowledge in tackling numerous

burning issues that are on the agenda both in their homeland and on the international arena. As I have already mentioned previously, there are various events, forums as well as platforms within BRICS where women present their ideas and protect initiatives not only regarding rights and gender parity but also issues of addressing key challenges of the World Majority.

There is no doubt that BRICS will continue to play its role to foster women's inclusion and empowerment. The BRICS members demonstrate commitment and make progress towards bridging gender divides in the economy. All BRICS members have special national comprehensive policies to facilitate women empowerment and public authorities directly responsible for their implementation.

Such symbiosis of the BRICS governments on the one hand and women's business activity on the other hand makes women of BRICS nations a unique power that brings a significant impact on development issues of paramount importance of the World Majority.

KKK: In terms of strategic outlook, can women participating in the BRICS civil society act as a unified group in dealing with dominance by Western and European countries?

DVP: First, I would like to point out that BRICS is not a group that focuses on dealing with Western dominance but rather on its own development. A new culture of respect for the differences and complex identity of each country is what we need to remember.

Consequently, one of the goals of the BRICS women community is to increase the global representation of BRICS women. It is quite obvious that women from BRICS countries and many other states are still vastly underrepresented in global decision-making. Yet, like I said before, women from BRICS are now a strong international community that has its own platforms, initiatives and global projects that make their voice heard on the global level. Everything that is done on the topic of women empowerment within BRICS contributes to closing the gap in terms of BRICS women representation in global governance.

It is important to mention that women from the developing world are not excluded from the global process of women emancipation and one of the reasons for that is the existence of BRICS.

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***Kester Kenn Klomegah**, who worked previously with Inter Press Service (IPS), Weekly Blitz and InDepthNews, is now a regular contributor to Global Research. He researches Eurasia, Russia, Africa and BRICS. His focused interest areas include geopolitical changes, foreign relations and economic development questions relating to Africa. As a versatile researcher, he believes that everyone deserves equal access to quality and trustworthy media reports.*

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