Enhancing Women's Participation & Inclusion in the Workforce

Issue Note prepared under India's BRICS Presidency (2026)

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Contents

I. Introduction

Women's full, equal and meaningful participation in the labour market is both a fundamental right and a prerequisite for inclusive growth, productivity and social cohesion. It is also central to women's economic empowerment – women's ability to participate in, contribute to and benefit from economic life on equal terms with men, with control over their own economic resources, opportunities and outcomes. Under India's BRICS Presidency, the Employment Working Group has identified Priority 2 – Enhancing Women's Participation and Inclusion in the Workforce – as one of four strategic areas for collective action. The ILO and the UN Resident Coordinator's Office (UNRCO) in India, acting as joint knowledge partners, have prepared this Issue Note to inform the 2nd EWG meeting in Thiruvananthapuram, Keralam. The inputs and analysis reflect the cross-cutting nature of women's economic empowerment and the UN system's coordinated commitment to this agenda.

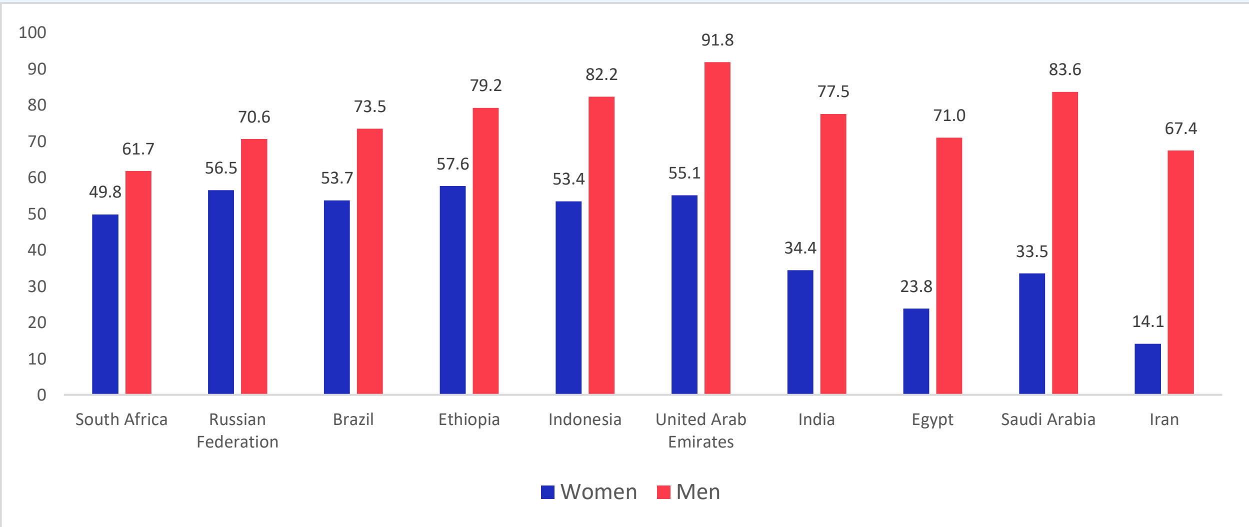
Enhancing women's inclusion and participation in the workforce has taken on increased importance for BRICS countries amidst disruptions and uncertainty facing global growth prospects. The year 2026 marks the continuation of the Beijing+30 review cycle, as set out in the Political Declaration adopted at the sixty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69) in March 2025, which reaffirmed the Beijing Platform for Action and called for concrete action on women's access to decent work, gender-responsive social protection, the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work, equal pay for work of equal value, and the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work. These commitments have been reinforced by the BRICS Labour and Employment Ministerial Meeting (2025), which flagged women's disproportionate exposure to automation and called for targeted skills, social protection and entrepreneurship measures, as well as by the G20 Brisbane–eThekwini Goal adopted at the G20 Labour and Employment Ministerial Meeting (2025), which extends to 2030 the target of reducing the gender gap in labour force participation by 25 per cent from 2012 levels and introduces a new target to reduce the gender wage gap by 15 per cent by 2035 from 2022 levels.

Building on these frameworks, this paper takes forward the Presidency's emphasis on enhancing women's participation and inclusion in the workforce, which is understood as higher labour force participation rates, as well as improved job quality, inclusion, voice and agency. The analysis draws on BRICS member country experiences, and consolidated evidence from six UN system agencies (ILO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNIDO and UN Women). Section II outlines the evidence on women's labour market outcomes and the structural barriers underpinning them. Section III distils policy approaches and BRICS good practices across six interlocking areas. Section IV proposes concrete, measurable deliverables for strengthened BRICS cooperation, anchored in a shared commitment on enhancing women's labour force participation and a BRICS Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment at Work Observatory.

II. Trends in women's participation and inclusion in the workforce

Women's participation in the labour market is essential for sustainable, stable and resilient economies as well as for social cohesion and fair societies. Important progress has been made across key indicators in the first quarter of the 21st century. Women are overall more educated, participate in greater numbers in the labour market and are better represented in leadership positions. Yet persistent gender gaps reflect deeper structural and institutional barriers that continue to shape women's access to employment, job quality and career progression. Worldwide, women's labour force participation continues to lag significantly behind that of men, with a difference of more than 24 percentage points globally (73 per cent of men vs 49 per cent of women participate in the labour force). Addressing this gender gap is critical to unlocking women's full potential for advancing gender equality and for fair and well-functioning labour markets.

Figure 1. Women participate less in the labour market than men, including in BRICS countries



Source: ILOSTAT, Labour force participation rate by sex and age (%), 2024 or latest year.

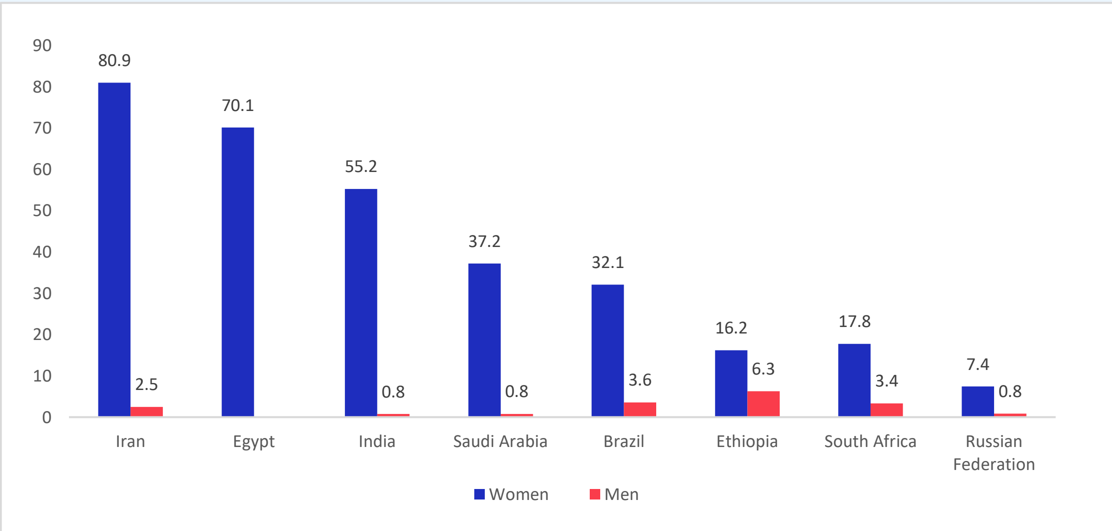
Within this global picture, BRICS countries exhibit a wide range of female labour force participation rates (Figure 1) reflecting a wide spectrum of experiences and context-specific factors influencing women's participation and inclusion in the workforce. Importantly, a number of BRICS countries have experienced important reductions in the gender gap in labour force participation rates in recent years reflecting concerted policy attention and ongoing structural economic change. This diversity within the grouping underscores that BRICS members can benefit fruitfully from sharing policy lessons on women's economic inclusion, which can serve as an analytical foundation for the proposed BRICS Observatory.

a. Structural and systemic barriers to gender equality

Persistent gender inequalities in labour markets are underpinned by a range of structural barriers operating simultaneously on the supply and demand sides. On the supply side, women remain much less likely to participate in the labour force than men due to barriers linked to unpaid care responsibilities (Figure 2), limited access to training and skills development, restrictive social norms and exposure to violence and harassment. In 2023, 748 million people cited care responsibilities as the main reason for being outside the labour force, accounting for 708 million women and 40 million men globally (ILO 2024). Women also work 6 paid hours and 25 minutes per week less than men and 3 unpaid hours and 2 minutes per day more than men, reflecting the time poverty (ILO 2025).

This unequal distribution of unpaid care work hinders women's ability to enter the labour market, work full time, and advance in their careers. Moreover, more than one in five women report having experienced violence and harassment in the world of work during their working lives, highlighting the persistence of unsafe and unequal working environments. Young women were twice as likely as young men to have faced sexual violence and harassment, and migrant women were almost twice as likely as non-migrant women to report sexual violence and harassment (ILO 2022).

Figure 2. Women are disproportionately outside of labour force due to care responsibilities, including in BRICS countries



Source: ILOSTAT, Share of persons outside the labour force due to care responsibilities by sex, 2024 or latest year (%).

Time-use data from BRICS countries confirm the scale of the unpaid-care burden. Understanding the determinants of these differences in care responsibilities and their impact on the gender gap in labour force participation is important. Recent decomposition analysis in India finds that only a small share of the gender gap in labour force participation can be attributed to observable differences in education, age and household composition among women and men (UNFPA 2025). Instead, the gap can be explained by the effects of social norms, unpaid-care allocation and discrimination. Often women's observable endowments would predict higher participation than men's were it not for these non-economic constraints. Removing such constraints is therefore not only a matter of equity but a substantial growth opportunity for BRICS economies.

On the demand side, structural barriers are reflected in the lack of quality jobs and decent work opportunities, gender-based occupational segregation, and discrimination in employment, pay and leadership positions. Unequal pay for work of equal value remains a key barrier on the demand-side, reflecting the persistent undervaluation of women's work. Women are more likely to be employed in informal or vulnerable forms of work, and they continue to earn, on average, around 20 per cent less than men, with overall labour income amounting to just over half that of men globally. This gender pay gap is substantially wider for women in informal employment, where the absence of collective bargaining, labour inspection and minimum wage enforcement compounds gender-based wage discrimination – a dynamic that particularly affects migrant women and women from ethnic minority groups across BRICS countries. They also remain underrepresented in managerial and leadership positions, accounting for only about 30 per cent of managers worldwide (ILO 2025). Gender-based occupational segregation remains a defining feature of labour markets, with women overrepresented in care, clerical and administrative occupations and underrepresented in higher-paying and higher-productivity sectors, with women remaining only around 22 per cent of AI-specialist roles and 28 per cent of STEM graduates globally. At the same time, technological change poses new risks, as female-dominated occupations are almost twice as likely to be exposed to generative AI as male-dominated ones — 29 per cent compared with 16 per cent, and five times more likely to face high automation risks. Women's employment shows greater exposure to generative AI than men's, including in several BRICS countries where more than 25 per cent of female employment is already in occupations likely to be exposed to generative AI (ILO 2026).

These inequalities are deeply entrenched and often driven by multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including those related to race, ethnicity, caste, socio-economic status, geographic location, disability or migration status, which shaping women's access to opportunities, legal protections and outcomes in the labour market. Women facing intersecting forms of discrimination are more likely to be concentrated in informal, unorganised and lower-quality employment, which typically offer lower wages, fewer legal protections and limited access to social security (ILO 2026). In Brazil, for example, 40 per cent of employed white women are wage workers with a formal contract, compared with 33 per cent of black women, while informal employment affects 26 per cent of black women compared to 17 per cent of white women. Geographic location further compounds these gaps. Rural women are substantially more likely than urban women to be engaged in unpaid family work or subsistence agriculture, with limited access to formal employment, skills development, financial services or social protection. These patterns underscore that headline female labour force participation figures can obscure deeply unequal realities: policies that raise aggregate participation without addressing segmentation and intersecting disadvantage risk leaving the most excluded women further behind

b. Legal and institutional frameworks for gender equality

Legal and institutional frameworks play a critical role in shaping labour market outcomes, yet important gaps remain in many countries. Globally, women hold just two-thirds of the same legal rights as men and no country has achieved full legal equality for women (WB 2026). Even where legal provisions exist, limited implementation and enforcement capacity can reduce their effectiveness.

While significant progress has been made in adopting laws promoting gender equality, implementation and enforcement often remain uneven. In some contexts, gaps persist in legislation related to equal pay for work of equal value, non-discrimination in employment and occupation, and protection against violence and harassment. In addition, insufficient access to justice and complaint mechanisms may discourage women, especially those from lower-income groups, from reporting violations.

Legal gaps are also evident in care-related policies and services, although most countries provide a combination of parental leave policies and services. Globally, mothers are entitled on average to 24.7 weeks of paid leave compared to just 2.2 weeks for fathers—a gap of around 22.5 weeks—reinforcing unequal care responsibilities (ILO 2025). In addition, only 57 out of 178 countries mandate early childcare provision for children aged 0–2, and just 21 provide universal access, contributing to a global childcare policy gap of approximately 4.2 years between the end of leave entitlements and access to formal childcare (ILO 2023).

Gender gaps are also evident in global social protection coverage. Women's effective coverage for at least one benefit stands at 50.1 per cent compared to 54.6 per cent for men, while legal coverage is even lower at 28.2 per cent for women versus 39.3 per cent for men (ILO 2024). These disparities reflect structural weaknesses in social protection systems, particularly for women in informal or non-standard employment.

International normative frameworks set the backdrop for these efforts. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to which all BRICS members are parties, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action—whose thirtieth anniversary in 2025 was marked by the CSW69 Political

Declaration—provide the foundational commitments on women's economic rights. Further, all ILO member States have an obligation to respect, promote and realize the principles set out in the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111) - principles that are fundamental to enhancing women's labour force participation and inclusion. Implementation of these normative frameworks is an area where peer learning and South–South cooperation can accelerate progress and support capacity building.

III. Policy approaches and good practices to advance gender equality: Focus on BRICS

Addressing persistent gender inequalities in labour markets requires comprehensive and integrated policy approaches that tackle both existing structural barriers and emerging challenges. Across BRICS countries, a wide range of policy innovations demonstrates how gender-responsive strategies can simultaneously promote women's participation, improve job quality and support resilient, inclusive and equitable economic transformation.

a. Advance national strategies for women's economic empowerment

Embedding gender equality considerations into macroeconomic and sectoral policies is essential to promoting gender equality in labour markets. This includes improving working conditions in sectors where women are already concentrated such as in care sectors, while also supporting women's entry into emerging high-productivity sectors such as digital, green and care economy.

Several BRICS countries have embedded gender equality objectives within their broader development strategies, recognising that increasing women's participation is essential for building resilient, stable and inclusive economies. **India** and **Indonesia**, for instance, have set ambitious targets to significantly increase female labour force participation as part of broader development planning. **Egypt**'s Vision 2030 and National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women set time-bound indicators on economic empowerment and political participation. **China's** Outline for Women's Development (2021–2030) has similarly framed gender equality as a key component of high-quality economic development, linking women's participation to innovation, productivity and technological advancement. The **Russian Federation** adopted a National Strategy of Action for Women (2023–2030) with a dedicated economic-empowerment pillar, and **South Africa**'s Presidential Mandela Decade of Action Target on NEET explicitly addresses young women, who account for the majority of NEET in the country.

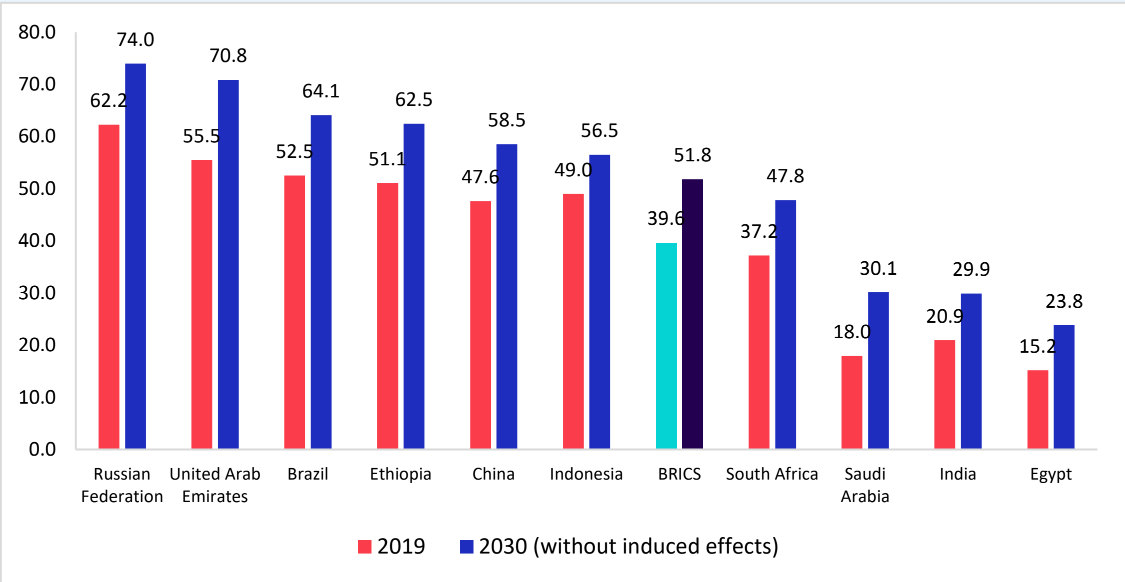
Several BRICS members are also institutionalising gender-responsive planning and budgeting. **India** has embedded a Gender Budget Statement in its Union Budget since 2005–06, with the share of allocations rising to 9.37 per cent in 2026–27, up from 8.86 per cent in 2025–26. The **United Arab Emirates** established a Gender Balance Council in 2015 and has translated this into measurable targets across ministerial appointments, boards of directors and senior public-service grades. A common thread across these initiatives is growing investment in sex-disaggregated labour-market and time-use data, an area where the proposed BRICS Observatory can add value by harmonising indicators.

b. Enhance investments in the care economy, including through social protection

Investment in the care economy has emerged as a critical policy area in enabling women's full economic participation, including by expanding care leave policies, provisions for early childhood education, long-term care and paid care work, and promoting community sensitization and social behavioral change around domestic work in the household. Social protection systems that respond to key life-course events and risks - including maternity, caregiving, illness, disability, unemployment, and old age - can support women's economic security and labour market continuity. For example, **Brazil**'s 2024 National Care Policy frames care as a triple right: to be cared for, to care for others and to self-care, while promoting shared responsibilities among the state, families, private sector and civil society. Similarly, **Indonesia**'s Roadmap on Care Economy (2025–2045) integrates care policies into long-term national development goals, prioritizing childcare, elderly care, inclusive services, parental leave, decent work for care workers and social protection. In **Saudi Arabia**, the childcare subsidy program, Qurrah, provides support for childcare services, to enable working mothers to join the labour market and maintain their employment.

The ILO analysis based on the ILO Care Policies Investment Simulator suggests that investment in a universal and comprehensive care policy package in BRICS countries could generate around 165 million jobs by 2030, of which more than 49 million correspond to direct jobs in childcare, almost 77 million to direct jobs in long-term care, and close to 39 million to indirect jobs in non-care sectors. Such investments can increase women's employment, reduce gender pay gaps, and stimulate economic growth. Women's employment rate could increase on average from 39.6 per cent to 51.8 per cent by 2030 in BRICS countries, ranging from an increase of 7 percentage points in Indonesia to 15 percentage points in the United Arab States (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Women's employment increase from investment in care in BRICS countries, 2030



Source: ILO, Care at Work, 2022. ILO, 'ILO Care Policy Investment Simulator', n.d.

Extending social protection to women in the informal economy (ILO 2024) and ensuring access to adequate protection for workers in all types of employment is an essential complement to care investment (ILO 2026). In **India**, 96 per cent of rural women workers are in informal employment, and registration on the e-Shram portal for unorganised workers has reached over 300 million, more than half of them women, providing a foundation for linking workers to maternity benefits, pensions and skills programmes. **Egypt**'s Takaful and Karama conditional cash-transfer programme, which reaches several million households and is predominantly received by women, has demonstrated how gender-sensitive social assistance can support women's agency and children's human-capital outcomes. ILO, UN Women and UNICEF programmes in several BRICS countries are supporting the design of national care systems, including paid parental leave policies and affordable, accessible and quality childcare services, which are central to closing gender gaps in participation.

c. Strengthen skills development and lifelong learning, including for green and digital transitions

Ensuring that women can benefit from ongoing transformations in the world of work requires targeted investment in skills development and lifelong learning. This is particularly important in the context of technological change, including the rise of artificial intelligence, and the transition towards greener economies.

Across BRICS countries, policies have increasingly focused on expanding women's access to STEM education, digital skills and vocational training. **China**'s Outline for Women's Development (2021–2030) includes measures to promote women's participation in STEM fields and digital industries, while the **Russian Federation**'s National Strategy of Action for Women emphasises digital skills development, lifelong learning and support for transitions between sectors. **India** has also prioritised skills development through programmes such as SANKALP and the Skill India Mission, which aim to enhance women's employability in both traditional and emerging sectors. In **Ethiopia**, the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) model has been adapted to support women's participation in digital skills, environmental jobs and trade-related activities, including digital marketing. The **United Arab Emirates'** national platform for women in AI is another important example.

Complementing national skilling missions, UN-supported initiatives include UNIDO's Women in STEM (WeSTEM) programme, which supports women-led technology ventures across developing economies, and UNIDO's Workers' School 4.0 in Brazil**,** which has trained tens of thousands of women in Industry 4.0 and circular-economy competencies. UN Women's Empowerment Principles provide a useful for framework for private sector companies and enterprises to make voluntary corporate pledges to support inclusion with signatories taking part in bootcamps, job fairs and offering jobs to women, especially in higher-value, higher skill occupations.

d. Ensure equal pay for work of equal value

Addressing the gender pay gap remains a central policy priority. Several BRICS countries have adopted legal frameworks promoting equal pay for work of equal value. **Brazil**'s Equal Pay Law requires companies with more than 100 employees to report salary differences between men and women, including the publication of regular transparency reports representing a significant step towards accountability and enforcement. **Egypt** and **United Arab Emirates** have also embedded the principle of equal pay for work of equal value within labour legislation and prohibited workplace discrimination, as part of broader efforts to promote women's economic empowerment under national development strategy. **China**'s legal framework, including the Labour Law and Employment Promotion Law, prohibits gender discrimination and supports equal participation in employment.

Multilateral cooperation reinforces these national efforts. The Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC), co-convened by the ILO, UN Women and OECD, provides a platform for peer learning on pay-transparency legislation, job-evaluation methodologies, and wage-setting institutions. Brazil, the first BRICS member to chair EPIC, has used the platform to showcase its Equal Pay Law and semi-annual salary transparency reports. The G20 Summit Leaders' Declaration (2025) committed members to reduce the gender wage gap by 15 per cent by 2035, and the Fortaleza Declaration under Brazil's BRICS Presidency underscored pay-transparency as a shared priority. Expanding BRICS membership of EPIC and participation in its data work through the proposed BRICS Observatory would further BRICS pay-equity efforts with global good practice.

e. Prevent and address violence and harassment in the world of work

Efforts to prevent, address and eliminate violence and harassment at work have gained increasing momentum, guided by the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) and its Recommendation (No.206). As of March 2026, 54 countries had ratified the Convention No. 190, including South Africa among BRICS countries. Key policy measures focus on strengthening legal protections against discrimination and harassment and those promoting occupational health and safety (OSH), providing access to appropriate and effective remedies for victims, and preventive measures such as training, guidelines, and awareness programs, alongside strengthened OSH systems, aiming to create safer and more supportive work environments.

Several BRICS countries have introduced complementary measures in this area. **Brazil** has advanced a comprehensive Anti-Violence Package, launched the Lilac Guide for preventing and addressing moral and sexual harassment and discrimination, and is progressing towards ratification of Convention No. 190. **Indonesia**'s updated Guidelines for Preventing and Handling Sexual Violence in the Workplace called upon employers to prevent, better monitor, and respond to sexual harassment cases by establishing a special task force. **South Africa** has adopted a Code of Good Practice on Prevention and Elimination of Harassment in the Workplace. **India** has complemented legislative frameworks such as Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act with extensive service delivery mechanisms, including helplines She-Box, one-stop centres and workplace safety provisions, aimed at addressing violence and harassment and supporting women's participation.

A growing dimension of this agenda is online and technology-facilitated violence against women, which has expanded rapidly with digitalisation of work and is increasingly recognised in BRICS discussions. UN Women, UNFPA and the ILO have supported national action plans addressing workplace and online gender-based violence in the context of **India**, **Indonesia**, **Egypt** and **Iran.** Ensuring safe work environments, offline and online, including into enterprise policies and labour inspection is a concrete area for BRICS peer learning.

f. Promote women's entrepreneurship and financial inclusion

Promoting women's entrepreneurship and improving access to financial resources remain central to expanding women's economic opportunities. Across BRICS countries, initiatives have increasingly focused on addressing barriers related to access to credit, assets, markets and business development services. **Brazil**'s National Women's Entrepreneurship Strategy provides a comprehensive framework for supporting women-led enterprises, while in the **Russian Federation**, women-led enterprises represent a growing segment of the economy, supported by policies combining education, mentoring and financial assistance. **India** has implemented several large-scale schemes to support women's entrepreneurship such as Start-up and Stand-up India Schemes supporting women from marginalized communities to start enterprises. **Ethiopia** has also made significant progress through cooperative models and microenterprise development, enabling women to transition from subsistence activities to participation in value chains and into formal economic activities. In **South Africa**, the ITC SheTrades has set up a Hub, in order to help women entrepreneurs, increase their international competitiveness and connect to national, regional and global markets through the SheTradesZA Hub. These efforts aim to strengthen women's participation in the formal economy while supporting income generation and job creation.

Other BRICS experiences further illustrate the scope for cross-country learning. In **Iran**, more than 500,000 women entrepreneurs have built online businesses through social-media platforms such as Instagram, highlighting both opportunities and regulatory challenges for women in the digital economy. **Egypt**'s Nasser Social Bank and microfinance ecosystem, with targeted products for women, have expanded access to credit for low-income entrepreneurs. The **United Arab Emirates** consistently ranks among the top economies globally on women's entrepreneurship, including in the Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs, reflecting dedicated policy support through incubators, public procurement set-asides and women-focused finance. These initiatives point to the value of a BRICS-wide exchange on digital entrepreneurship, women-focused financial products and enterprise-development services, which the Observatory could convene systematically.

g. Enhance women's leadership and decision-making

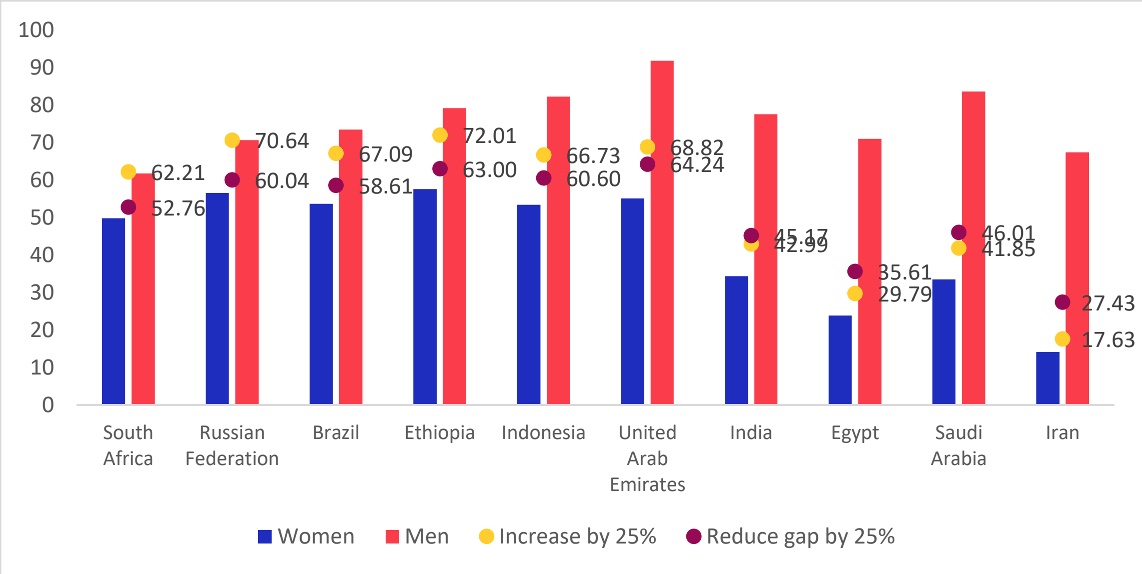
Women's access to decision-making roles is a cross-cutting marker of progress. Globally, women hold only around 30 per cent of managerial positions, and barely 10 per cent of CEO positions in large firms. Across BRICS, progress is uneven but substantive. The **United Arab Emirates** has raised women's representation in the federal cabinet to 25 per cent and on boards of listed companies to 31 per cent, following the introduction of board-quota legislation. The Islamic Republic of **Iran** has nearly doubled the share of women in public-sector managerial grades over the last decade. The **Russian Federation** records high female shares in professional and technical occupations but low representation at the C-suite level. **Ethiopia** and **South Africa** have introduced gender-representation targets in public appointments, and **India**'s Companies Act mandates at least one woman director on boards of listed companies. Closing leadership gaps is both an outcome of, and an accelerator for, women's economic empowerment – and is a critical pillar of the proposed Observatory.

IV. Looking ahead: A shared commitment

a. A shared commitment towards enhancing women's labour force participation

A shared commitment could provide an important impetus for collective action to enhance women's effective and fair labour force participation and economic empowerment, addressing both the quantity and quality of women's economic engagement, including through access to quality jobs and decent work. Such a commitment anchored in a clear and measurable target could catalyse policy action, align national efforts and strengthen accountability. The target could be framed as either increasing female labour force participation by 25 per cent by 2030, or alternatively as reducing gender gaps in labour force participation by 25 per cent by 2030 (Figure 4). The policy approaches and mixes highlighted in this paper would contribute significantly towards these efforts. A gap-reduction framing has two complementary advantages: it is aligned with the G20 Brisbane–eThekwini Goal of reducing the gender gap in labour force participation gap 25 per cent by 2030, extended under the South African G20 Presidency (2025); and it allows each BRICS member to set national trajectories consistent with its starting level, while contributing to a collective outcome. A simple BRICS dashboard, updated annually through the proposed Observatory, could track both the headline gap and a small set of underlying indicators on labour force participation, informality, pay and leadership.

Figure 4. Alternative targets for increasing women's labour force participation across BRICS countries



Source: ILOSTAT, Labour force participation rate by sex and age (%), 2024 or latest year.

b. Strengthened BRICS cooperation

Stronger cooperation amongst BRICS countries to enhance women's labour force participation could result in strengthened data collection, availability and exchange, better monitoring and exchange of policy developments, and promoting evidence-based policymaking across countries. A BRICS Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment at Work Observatory could play a central role in supporting these efforts through strengthened data collection, monitoring and policy exchange. Leveraging existing platforms and tools, including the ILO South4Care platform, ILO's GENSEC Policy Tool, EPIC, G20 Women at Work annual reports and other UN-wide initiatives, could further strengthen the cooperation and exchange of good practices. For example, the ILO South-4-Care platform provides a space for sharing experiences on advancing the care economy, showcasing policy innovations, programmes and legal frameworks, including examples from several BRICS countries. It promotes South–South cooperation, peer learning and knowledge exchange. Complementing this, the Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC) supports the exchange of good practices and coordinated efforts, including among several BRICS countries, to close gender pay gaps through improved data, policy tools and evidence-based action. A cross-cutting commitment to sound, comparable and intersectional disaggregated data – capturing inequalities by income, location, race, ethnicity, caste, disability and migration status – would ensure the Observatory illuminates inequalities among women, not only between women and men. The UN System stands ready to collaborate with BRICS countries in data production, policy diagnostics and peer learning on each of these fronts in support of the proposed Observatory.