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# Ecofeminism in a World of BRICS: Opportunities and Challenges

By Rosita Dellios, Arundhati Bhattacharyya, and Cindy Minarova-Banjac<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

While feminism and environmentalism have long and illustrious histories in the annals of social movements, together they are less well recognised or understood beyond the academic community. Far from being an eclectic intersection of interests between women and the environment, ‘ecofeminism’ holds a wider significance for integrative sustainable development in the coming decades. This is especially so when viewed from the Global South and its ‘rising powers’, three of which – China, India and Brazil – form case studies in this article. Will the developing world, in the course of its development and especially under China’s influence, advance or squander the opportunity for an ecofeminist contribution to a better world order? Policy implications derived from this study call for a cross-sector approach that includes culture and religion. These challenge the limitations of binary thinking and promote interconnectedness.

*Key words: ecofeminism, sustainable development, culture, Global South, BRICS*

## 1. Background

Ecological feminism is not new. It was part of early feminism from the mid-19th century through women having become botanists, writers and illustrators, among other professions, as well as taking up various causes such as animal protection (Gaard 2010, p. 646). The term ‘ecofeminism’, however, made its debut in 1974 in Francoise d’Eaubonne’s *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* [Feminism or Death]. The argument here was that without a feminist rendering of the environment, there will be death from eco-destruction. The book linked women’s liberation to the liberation of nature. Both are seen as oppressed by controlling patriarchies; while nature is subject to anthropocentric practices, women are condemned to live in an androcentric world. Elaborations on this view within a growing literature include *Ecofeminism*, by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva. First published in 1993, with a new edition in 2014, the book criticises mainstream environmentalism as continuing in the footsteps of the “capitalist patriarchy” with its focus on “technological fixes” and “green consumerism” (Mies & Shiva 2014, p. 33).

The violence against women and nature is traced back to the profit motive as the quest for economic gain disrupts (or even destroys) nature’s cycles of regeneration. ‘Growth’ in mainstream development initiatives is identified with more producers, consumers and

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commodities (Mies & Shiva 2014, p. 33). The capitalist world order as we know it is no friend to the planet or to the women who recognise its destructive face. Compounding the problem is a widespread attitude of accepting the seemingly inevitable when it comes to market capitalism and the technological imperative. Indeed, the common portrayal of technological ‘disruption’ as an exciting opportunity for future innovation masks a deterministic mindset, as if there were no choices, no agency. However, having looked East to witness the rise of Asia on the 21st century horizon, one finds a ubiquitous holistic philosophy that accommodates ‘and’ and not only ‘or’. Viewed from non-Western cultural perspectives, notably Chinese and Indian, holistic or integrative thinking represents the norm. So, too, ecofeminist philosophy favours integrative approaches that work with the whole rather than the parts. With the geopolitical tilt to Asia, accompanied by a much stronger global awareness of the ticking ecological time-bomb, holistic/integrative approaches to policy are likely to spread. But first, what are the limitations of binary thinking?

## **2. The Binary Bind**

Ecofeminist critique finds fault with a philosophy of dualism in which one of the pair is deemed dominant. Hobgood-Oster (2010, p. 2) lists “heaven/earth, mind/body, male/female, human/animal, spirit/matter, culture/nature, white/non-white” as clear examples of oppositional binaries in which one is deemed superior. “As a justice advocate for the entire web of life”, she explains, “ecofeminism resists dividing culture into these imbedded separate or dualistic arenas” (Hobgood-Oster 2010, p. 3). Indeed, such divisions are social constructs, and narrow ones at that. Other ways of thinking about contrasting parts include the Chinese dialectics of complementary *yin* and *yang*. In *yin-yang* terms, the different parts are co-constitutive, and can even be described as a harmony of opposites. The complementary polarities are seen in such pairings as waning/waxing, receptive/proactive, hidden/open, and defensive/expansive. Each gives rise to the other in a cycle of renewal.

In Hindu tradition, too, the feminine and masculine principles take on a complementary duality within the unity of existence. The ‘mandala’ in Indic culture is another expression of integrative thinking, as it represents an inter-relational whole (see Dellios 2003; Dellios & Ferguson 2015). It is a cosmogram of concentric forms. Not only is there interdependence of all phenomena but also ‘emptiness’ of one’s own existence. That nothing exists in its own right but is the result of many forces and mutual influences is taught in Buddhism through the key concept of ‘codependent origination’. In this way of thinking, hierarchy loses its relevance and becomes what systems theorists refer to as “heterarchy”, which is more akin to a “fishnet” or “flat hierarchy” (Peter & Swilling 2014, p. 1601).

In the Western tradition, too, there are inconsistencies and therefore the dualities argument can be simplistic. Where do women belong in the culture/nature dualism? If equated with nature they are a foil for culture, in accordance with the logic of dualism (Campbell 2008, p. viii). Yet women are often the keepers of culture and its transmission to the next generation. Considered in this way, the oppositional binary view cannot work even in Western thought, despite it having entered the mythology of the modern West.

Another problem with binaries comes from development discourse. The use of rich/poor, rural/elite and global/indigenous implies a “closed system of identification” (Roy & Borowiak 2003, p. 84). Its ideological setting precludes an evolving dynamic. Furthermore, the link between woman and nature may apply in some cultures, but not in others. Levy (2013) points to examples, including pre-Columbian Native American women who were “not solely responsible for domestic and care-giving duties” (p. 13). Also women who live and work in the digitised world need not be in tune with the natural rhythm and seasonal cycles upon which farming people depend. However, they could be sensitised to the science of global warming and politically active when it comes to climate change concerns. There are many forms of ‘identification’ with the environment.

### ***Beyond Conceptual Stereotyping***

By replacing the binary bind with an interconnected mandalic view, it is possible to move beyond conceptual stereotyping of women and the environment. This article casts an ecofeminist eye on China, India, and Brazil, three countries representing ‘rising powers’ with strong cultural identities in the Global South. They are also members of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), an acronym for an intergovernmental organisation (IGO) that is helping to construct the future of global politics, and that of the Asia-Pacific region in particular. This is because Asia is home to two of the most dynamic of the BRICS nations, China and India, while Russia straddles Asia’s vast Eurasian trans-region. Meanwhile, South Africa and Brazil are closely tied to China’s economy (China is their biggest trading partner). Beijing’s ever-expanding Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), much like a mandala of nested interconnected circles, includes Africa and is branching out to Latin America. The BRI as an economic and development program is unprecedented. Representing a financial investment of some US\$8 trillion (Hurley, Morris & Portelance 2018, p. 1), the BRI involves more than 70 countries across Eurasia, South and Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and the Pacific Islands. China’s ‘policy banks’ are the main source of BRI funding but there are multilateral sources too and these are growing.

Rising powers are changing the Western paradigm of international development and aid, and have contributed to poverty-reduction in low-income countries (IDS n.d.), even as they remain mired in some of the same problems of patriarchy which constrain or exploit women and the environment. Further, the attempt to include women in addressing environmental issues has often resulted in ‘feminising’ responsibility for conservation, thereby adding to women’s already heavy burdens of work and looking after family. This type of gender-mainstreaming policy has been criticised as ineffective (Arora-Jonsson in MacGregor 2017, p. 293).

Gender here refers to women. But it is not so simple. That it concerns relationships of power is widely known. It is not only focused on women and men but also concerns social equality: “The structures and unequal relations that cause disadvantage to persist need to be challenged” (Arora-Jonsson in MacGregor 2017, p. 300). This, in turn, impacts on environmental policy. Some feminists are opposed to the terminology of ‘gender equality’, ‘mainstreaming’, ‘women’s empowerment’, ‘smart economics’ and other bureaucratic

slogans that do not do justice to the wider socio-cultural contexts of people's lives; others say the these slogans are a manifestation of a "slow revolution" and that "gender mainstreaming" will deepen (Arora-Jonsson in MacGregor 2017, p. 299).

The question which remains is whether such mainstreaming will be performed within the philosophy of a neoliberal paradigm, in which the individual is emphasised over group solidarity, and the environment is understood as an economic resource more than a cultural one. Considering that China is expected to overtake the United States as the leading economy within a decade, the answer would seem to veer towards what has been termed a "post-neoliberal order" (NI 2018, p. 21). India, too, has a different historical and cultural orientation, while its status as a rising power continues apace. In thinking about the rising powers that lie outside the cultural West, it is noteworthy that despite being considered the powers of the future, they are still developing economically in the present. In effect, they belong to the Global South.

### **3. The View from the South**

This means that from a Global South perspective, ecofeminism is further articulated by development. Having begun as the women-in-development approach in the 1970s, it evolved into a gender-and-development perspective in order to shift the emphasis from simply including women in development programs to focusing instead on power relations in which they were often marginalised. Thus where women-in-development ideas tinkered with the androcentric model, gender-and-development sought to dismantle the whole ideology in which women were subordinated. This was an ambitious undertaking that is still a work-in-progress.

Along with gender severely challenging the traditional development philosophy, environment was not far behind. With the emergence of the concept of sustainable development in the early 1990s "the trifecta of environment, development and gender received more attention" (Cruz-Torres & McElwee in MacGregor 2017, p. 136). A distinguishing feature of ecofeminism in the Global South is that development is not an abstraction; it pertains to livelihoods and what the North had subsequently come to recognise as 'human security'. In Brazil it is called 'immediacy' (see below). It reflects a bottom-up approach in which resources relate to people's needs rather than corporate gains or the elevation of GDP. Gender, therefore, becomes a driver for change towards not just 'development' but 'sustainable development' in the sense of making a living within an ecologically supportive framework. It is also a framework within which the world of BRICS must abide, if its potential is to be realised.

### ***BRICS***

The acronym, created in 2001 by Jim O'Neil, from the investment firm Goldman Sachs, began with a singular BRIC comprising the four nations of Brazil, Russia, India and China. O'Neil (2001) saw these as the "larger emerging market economies" that would lead the 21st century global economy. But these countries were not merely the emerging economies of the future. When BRIC was formalised in 2009 as a multilateral organisation, it had become a

political presence as well in the global governance landscape. With the addition of South Africa in 2010, the continents of the Global South were represented. Together, the five BRICS countries account for 40% of the world's population and about a quarter of its territory and GDP. China's GDP is predicted to almost double that of the United States by 2030. (This converges with the target dates for the UN Sustainable Development Goals and carbon reduction commitments, thereby amplifying expectations for global change.) The forecast for China is \$42.4 trillion in that year compared to the United States at \$24 trillion – with India at \$20.9 trillion not far behind the US (measured in terms of purchasing power parity GDP,<sup>2</sup> Australian Government 2017, p. 26). These dynamic nations have sought to advance development through their own new institutions. Two multilateral banks stand out in this respect. One is the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) for BRI projects. The BRICS-initiated New Development Bank (NDB) is the other. NDB was first proposed by India at the BRICS summit in 2012 has been operational since 2016.

The 2017 BRICS summit held in Xiamen, China, agreed on four areas of cooperation (BRICS Leaders Xiamen Declaration 2017):

- *Development*: boosting “interconnected development” of BRICS countries, including “infrastructure and financial integration”. Other developing countries are not forgotten. Indeed, PRC President Xi Jinping was keen on “BRICS Plus” and hence closer South-South cooperation for improved “global economic governance” (Xinhua 2017). This leads to the next point.
- *Global economic governance*: fostering “a more just and equitable international economic order” and “redressing North-South development imbalances and promoting global growth”.
- *Security*: safeguarding “international and regional peace and stability” with “joint efforts to address common traditional and non-traditional security challenges”. The “central role of the United Nations” is maintained.
- *Culture*: embracing “cultural diversity” and promoting “people-to-people exchanges” as well as “mutual learning between our cultures and civilizations”.

Such sentiments and ambitions for cooperation need to be seen in relation to what BRICS is not. In other words, the negative attributes of the group can be as compelling as its positive possibilities. BRICS is not a member of the club of developed nations and, relatedly, it is not a post-World War II construct of world order. The global financial crisis of 2008-2009 offered the grouping an opportunity to distinguish itself and carve out a niche of responsibilities by establishing the New Development Bank. While making some progress as a comparatively new IGO, BRICS has its detractors. Beeson and Zeng (2018, p. 1) argue that “it will be difficult for the BRICS to maintain a unified position amongst themselves, let alone play a constructive role in preserving the foundations of ‘global governance’”. Problems include corruption, uneven power among the members with China the default BRICS superpower, and members acting in their own interests rather than that of the group.

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<sup>2</sup> PPP measures favour China but, as Paul Dibb (2017), points out, “. . . measured in current market exchange rates, US GDP is 25 per cent of the world economy and China's less than 15 per cent.”

The pursuit of individual national interests may be at the expense of each other if inherent Sino-Russian competition or Sino-Indian rivalry come to the fore.

The argument of the dominance of national interests versus the power of the organisation is a familiar one with other IGOs (such as the European Union), and leaves one with the impression that BRICS is unlikely to change the world – let alone foster a more South-friendly global governance regime. However, from an ecofeminist perspective, BRICS – whether loosely or deeply integrated – will invariably impact on governance for some of the very reasons it is criticised: (1) the strength of China and (2) the problem of becoming a great power in a world of diminishing resources and unprecedented global threats. China’s economic primacy will also entail technological mastery and this in turn will need the support of an ecologically-informed national strategy. As to becoming 21st century great powers, none of the BRICS countries individually can hope to address the transnational environmental problems that assail them. Their best chance for success is to act multilaterally, and not only within their own organisation but across a number of IGOs. BRICS, however, is special in view of its scale, its economic expansion, and its cultural diversity. It has the potential to foster a powerful ecofeminism based on holistic thinking, non-violence and practical experience. If, however, corruption and failed or feeble policies thwart such an ecofeminist turn, BRICS would indeed contribute nothing new to the governance landscape of the prevailing system – other than adding to its existing burdens.

#### **4. China: The Dao of Eco-civilisation**

The Global South’s ‘superpower’, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), is also the world’s biggest carbon-emitter; though in per capita terms its carbon footprint is well below that of the United States. Like most countries, China ratified the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change to limit emissions so that global warming does not exceed 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. Among other actions, China is on track to meet its obligation to lower the carbon intensity of GDP by 60% to 65% by 2030 (from 2005 levels). Clearly, the Paris Agreement needs China and China, which has been so ecologically damaged by the relentless pursuit of growth strategies to elevate GDP, needs this global effort to address the problem of climate change.

The PRC has not been tardy in its determination to go green. It is the leading country to invest in renewable energy technology, having lifted its investment in renewables “by 17% to \$102.9 billion, or 36% of the world total” in 2015 (Frankfurt School – UNEP Collaborating Centre 2016, p. 11). China has also embarked on its own national emissions trading system (ETS). Launched in 2017, after a pilot program in major Chinese cities, it covers power generation and will extend to other sectors. Its newly-created Ministry of Ecology and Environment met with the EU’s European Commission in 2018 in discussions on ETS “policy design and development” (EC 2018). Moreover, efforts to control air, water and soil pollution, as well as deforestation, desertification and other dire environmental concerns need to be viewed through the lens of China’s overarching strategy. Known as ‘ecological civilisation’ (or ‘eco-civilisation’), and first introduced at the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2007, it seeks to reconceptualise what it means to be a

civilisation. Such an enterprise to redirect the whole socio-economic system represents a fitting ambition for a country that traces its civilisational roots to the legendary sage kings who first taught humankind how to cultivate the earth, and their own humanity, in the first steps towards a self-consciously evolving civilisation.

### *Eco-Civilisation*

Now with China returning to its historically central position of power, there is a desire to evolve further and ‘rejuvenate’. Its ecological civilisation ambition is described as a ‘Five-in-One’ model because it seeks to integrate five dimensions of development: economic, social, ecological, political and cultural. In his report to the 19th National Congress of CCP in 2017, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasised the “holistic approach” in implementing “the strictest possible systems for environmental protection” and developing “eco-friendly growth models and ways of life” (Xi 2017, p. 20).

The timeline for achieving the goal of eco-civilisation, described as a “socialist” one, (Xi 2017, p. 47), is mid-century. The year 2049 will mark the centenary of the People’s Republic. While eco-civilisation is given a socialist political characterisation, its philosophical orientation goes to the heart of a traditional Chinese emphasis on harmony. Xi’s speech also dwelt on the importance of ensuring harmony between humans and nature. An equilibrium and cosmic unity among nature and humans (represented in Chinese philosophy as the Human-Heaven-Earth triad) is a long held cultural perspective. It allows for a deeper appreciation of the environment as pertaining to human potential, and the expanding circles of relationships from one’s family to the planet. Filiality (*xiao*), normally associated with deference to parents and ancestors, is promoted by Confucians today as extending towards the planet. Its anthropocentric characterisation has shifted to an “anthropocosmic vision”, marked by a “sustainable harmonious relationship between the human species and nature” (Tu 2004, p. 19).

This is also the case with Daoism (Taoism) which, like Confucianism, is an indigenous Chinese spiritual philosophy. It finds ready kinship with the natural world. Illustrative are the traditional scroll paintings showing the enormity of nature. Sometimes a human figure appears as a small detail within it, but it is one which belongs to this wider rhythm. At times, it can be destructive like a storm, or a discarded ritual offering (‘straw dog’) that is blown away (*Tao Te Ching* I.5, trans. Lau 1963).

While distinctively Chinese in its philosophical roots, the idea of nature and humans forming a unity is not exclusively Chinese. It is universal, and it is logical in terms of survival. For this reason, eco-civilisation cannot stop short at China’s borders, but China can accelerate the process through its size and desire to show leadership. According to Xi’s report (2017, p. 4): “Taking a driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change, China has become an important participant, contributor, and torchbearer in the global endeavor for ecological civilization.”

But where does ecofeminism fit in with eco-civilisation? Within Daoism, the female principle has pride of place, and when combined with Daoism’s emphasis on the importance of nature



and the environment, a proto ecofeminism may be detected. As Laughlin and Wong (1999, p. 152) point out, women have played a prominent part in the history and belief system of Daoism: as shamans, heads of monasteries, spiritual teachers of sages like legendary Yellow Emperor, and as the enlightened beings known in Daoism as ‘immortals’. Today, Chinese ecofeminists have re-engaged the tradition by showing through painting, poetry, and performance how the environmental crisis has affected the nature-human relationship. There is a sense of loss and reversal. For example, one of Zhai Yongming’s poems substitutes *du* (toxins) for *qi* (*chi*, vital energy, breath) as the connecting force circulating within the cosmic unity (Jagušcik 2018, p. 90). Documentaries by Chinese ecofeminists have been particularly effective in attracting public attention to the environmental cause (see Jagušcik 2018, pp. 88-89). The release in 2015 of *Under the Dome* by Chai Jing caused such a furore in China that it was banned; meanwhile, the Chinese parliament (National People’s Congress) was sitting and the “war on pollution” was at the top of the agenda, alongside corruption and the economy.

Ecofeminism, when aligned to a revival of Daoism, could be seen as the crucial catalyst for realising an eco-civilisation. The moderate and eco-friendly spiritual philosophy of Daoism needs to be more fully utilised, as do the humane philosophies of Buddhism and contemporary Confucianism. Otherwise, the social engineering propensity of CCP governance may become too reliant on technology, notably facial recognition software and big data, to punish and reward citizens in the social credit system (see Myers 2018; Wright 2018). Such ‘digital authoritarianism’ risks building resistance to what would be viewed as ‘Big Brother’ rather than socialist eco-civilisation with feminist and Daoist values.

## **5. India: The Cradle of Ecofeminism**

Moving from Big Brother as a potential dystopia in China that should be avoided, another BRICS country may be introduced as ‘Mother India’ (Bharat Matā). This is a term which depicts India as a mother goddess but which hides the inequality suffered by women as mortals. Still, like Daoist China, the female principle is discernible in *Prakriti*, the divine feminine force in Hinduism that encompasses nature in an interconnected cosmos. Pioneering efforts in ecofeminism came from a nation where worship of ‘mother nature’ has been part and parcel of the Indian tradition. This is not a conflation between the nurturing qualities of human mothers and the life-giving properties of the ecosystem, but refers to an Indic philosophical approach to life. Just as China’s approach to nature also includes the idea that humans are like ‘straw dogs’ to be blown away by impartial forces (Lau 1963), so too there is a destructive side to the dance of the Hindu god Shiva – though it is of a creative motivation. Consequently, ‘mother nature’ is a facet of a larger cultural understanding of human existence. Having dispelled a conflation, there is yet a contradiction that is not so easily dismissed. This contradiction, between the worship of ‘mother nature’ and the quest for scientific and technological advancement, came at the cost of the environment and is still not properly resolved despite reforestation and other efforts.

### ***Forests***

Indeed, forests stand out in the cultural history of Indian ecofeminism. Over many decades, the Gandhian non-cooperation movement based on the principle of *ahimsa* or non-violence (a teaching of Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism) has resisted the state's encroachment on forests. Almost two-thirds of the villages adjoining India's forests are dependent on forest produce. Between 1880 and 2013, India lost approximately 40% of its forest cover (Indian government data cited in Vyawahare 2017). This is a grave matter for both the environment and the people who depend on it, with opposing demands on forest resources having often led to conflict.

While collecting forest produce, villagers have at times been arrested under the Forest Rights Act, 1927. This has been rectified by the Forest Rights Act, 2005, allowing local communities to engage in their traditional livelihoods – unless they happen to live in protected habitats for tigers, in which case their forest rights are withdrawn. Understandably, there have been calls for policy convergence and clarity, as well as “more opportunities for forest-dependent populations so they are not at the mercy of the forests and forest department, and the trees are not at the mercy of human needs” (Vyawahare 2017). Women are the greatest beneficiaries of forest rights.

People whose lives are close to nature usually support *ahimsa*, for nature nurtures them. In well-known environmental movements in India, like the Chipko movement when women clung to trees that were marked to be felled or Narmada Bachao Andolan that opposed the construction of a large dam on the Narmada River, *ahimsa* has been a mode of protest. So, too, the Silent Valley protest of 1973 is remembered for having prevented the construction of a hydroelectric dam. Had it gone ahead, the dam would have flooded the pristine tropical forest of Silent Valley in Kerala's Palakkad district, destroying its rich biodiversity. Instead, a decade later the valley was declared a national park.

From Silent Valley in Kerala in the south to the “silent springs” (IWMI 2016) of the Himalayas in the northeast, environmental movements come alive when disaster looms. Saving the Himalayan spring waters is a more recent objective, as over the past decade spring water has been disappearing in the Himalayan region. Women have to walk further in order to acquire water for daily use, as “less and less spring water makes it down the Himalayan ridges and valleys to the remote villages that depend on it the most” (IWMI 2016). The cause for the drying up of spring water is not clear, though climate change and deforestation are thought to be contributing factors. According to the International Water Management Institute: “Despite their role as a major—and sometimes the only—source of freshwater for the many mountain villages that dot the 2,400 km, five-country expanse of the Himalayas, our knowledge of spring hydrology seems as elusive as the vanishing waters themselves” (IWMI 2016). The Institute advocates research into the issue followed by policy action to alleviate the problem of water scarcity. It recommends documentation of springs via up-to-date maps and manuals as a start.

India has a tradition of women playing a constructive role in ecological movements. The Bhopal gas tragedy stands out. This was the 1984 Union Carbide gas leak that killed 20,000 people and injured more than 150,000 in Bhopal. Women victims, led by Rashida Bee and

Champa Devi Shukla, understood that they had to fight for justice and rehabilitation of the children who were born with disabilities, due to the impact of this mega industrial disaster on humans and the environment. Their sensitivity and concern eased the lives of many and provided “a powerful validation of women’s role on the frontline of India’s civil society” (Goldman Environmental Prize 2004). Moreover, that they are of different faiths (Hindu and Muslim) shows the power of women’s quest for justice in a land of religious tension.

Indian ecofeminist scholars try to understand the connecting link and holistic relation between women and nature. A sustainable living is possible only by balancing and reinforcing the relationship between nature and nurture. Recognition that women are an important and indispensable part of society, culture and the environment is well identified in the tenets of ecofeminism (Porselvi 2016). This awareness is spreading to the wider society so that cultural discrimination against girls is being challenged and, moreover, it is linked to saving the environment. The slogan, ‘If a baby girl is born, plant a tree’, is slowly becoming a norm to protect both. The state of West Bengal has sanctioned a scheme to this effect. Electric funerals are being arranged, so that the felling of trees for cremation can be contained. From birth to death, Indians are engaging themselves in protection of the environment. School children are being presented as ‘warriors’ for protecting the environment. India has about half of the 20 most polluted cities in the world, according to the World Health Organisation Report (Joshi 2016). So change towards a cleaner environment can rely on the interlinkage of ecology and feminism to support the platform for a green future. Any planning on this must consider women and ecology in a close relationship.

## **6. Brazil: ‘Immediacy’ in a *Machista* System**

The same applies to another BRICS country, Brazil. Women, like nature, are undervalued and overworked within a strongly patriarchal society. Even though women on average have higher levels of education than men, about one-third of working females are employed in domestic work and rely on water as a tool and determinant for their working conditions (de Melo 2005). As the main caretakers of the land and family, women make decisions about energy, water consumption, and waste management; thus potentially they can make more sustainable choices when it comes to preserving the environment (Manjunath 2015). Yet women have little say in development efforts that affect them directly. This comes from a historical emphasis by development theorists on over-population and women’s reproductive roles, rather than focusing on economic support and women’s productive roles in agriculture and farming. Such analyses have ignored the links between structural poverty, gender and class inequality, and environmental degradation (Jacobsen 1992; Mehra 1995).

To solve this issue, during the 1970s and 1980s, Latin American women liberation theologians focused on the struggles of the marginalised and began to recognise and identify the patriarchal oppressions existing within their Christian traditions. One of the most influential theorists and women’s liberation advocates who emerged during this period was Catholic nun, Ivone Gebara. Through her writings on women in Christianity, poverty, and the environment, Gebara attempted to counter the hidden forms of oppression within a hierarchical ideology. By seeing the female body as a site of abuse and injustice, partly

coming from the *machista* system, capitalism, and environmental degradation, Gebara pointed to the multiple forms of inequality that existed for women living at the margins, leading her to problematise what she called ‘immediacy’. Immediacy refers to how actions, behaviours, and beliefs are determined by people’s immediate physical and material needs. For example, during her involvement with Christian Base Communities in rural areas, hunger (*fome*) was one of the main concerns that stopped many people from attending educational programs, contributing to poorer cognitive functioning and increasing pressure on individuals to provide for their families in difficult conditions (Nogueira-Godsey 2013). Immediacy creates barriers for women as the preoccupation with basic survival potentially affects women’s civic engagement, economic stability, and ability to understand and transmit environmental and health information to their families. Furthermore, the widely held Christian belief that maleness is associated with rationality and soul, while femaleness is linked to the body and inferiority was another factor that reinforced sexism and exacerbated women’s struggles by institutionalising their carer roles (Young 2004).

Gebara (1996; 2002) approached this problem by arguing that there was a need to expose the inadequacy of Christian theological thought that separated God from the earthly realm and naturalised hierarchical oppression. She went on to overcome this binary bind by developing a unifying and multi-dimensional perspective that not only placed women at the centre of analysis by focusing on women’s issues and needs, but also identified with and reaffirmed images of the feminine divine. Gebara and Bingemer (1989) explain that the indigenous belief systems that worshipped the mother-goddess merged with the conquistador faith as the Virgin Mary. This stood as a symbol for hope and strength after indigenous cultures were destroyed and replaced with Christian symbols of the male Father-God. Gerbara’s intercultural translation between Christian and indigenous faiths connected indigenous peoples to the debates on gender and class inequality in order to change the conditions of disempowerment in Christian Latin America. Thus, Gerbara’s praxis concerns people’s immediate needs and working towards liberation on earth to build a better future for all. Such an approach identifies poor and indigenous women as active agents and knowledge producers who are intimately linked with eco-justice (Aguinaga et al. 2013).

Gebara’s holistic principle of inter-relationality, where humans are “relationalité” or beings in relationships (2002, p. 34) with “the earth and with the entire cosmos” (1999, p. 79), is similar to Chinese philosophy’s correlational viewpoint. By working in communities where religion functions as an instructive part of the culture, Gebara found that focusing on the feminine divine as a symbol of creation, strength, and community was an important step to reversing the image of women as naturally inferior to men. Liberation, in this case, remains a cultural affair as much as an economic and political one.

### *Water*

Just as saving forests provides an apt case study for ecofeminism in India, water management serves to illustrate Brazilian women’s efforts. Brazil is said to have one of the most progressive and participatory water management systems in the world, where civil society representatives participate in decision-making on issues in watershed committees (Ministério

do Meio Ambiente 2005; Moraes & Perkins 2007). Yet women, being the worst affected by structural inequality, continue to lack access to resources and power. This paradox can be explained by Wallace and Coles (2005, p. 1) who state that “water is gendered in every society”, since governments often assume that only men are farmers and fail to provide women with assistance and opportunities in water irrigation and management. Moreover, since many water management committees in Brazil are specialised in engineering and fail to provide subsidies in childcare, transport, and convenient meeting times, women fail to be included in these discussions (Moraes & Perkins 2007; Moraes & Rocha 2013). The result is that women are confined to a culture of immediacy: lack of assistance and recognition maintains the status quo of women in domestic roles preventing them from participating in decision-making.

In response to this dilemma, one program stood out in its attempts to address structural barriers and include women in water development. It was the ‘One Million Cisterns’ Program (P1MC) in Brazil’s Northeast Semi-Arid region, organised by the NGO and civil society network, the Articulação do Semi-Árido Brasileiro (ASA). The program entailed the building of plaque cisterns for more than one million families in the region with selection criteria that prioritised households headed by women. However, when the program was later reviewed by a non-governmental feminist group, the Casa da Mulher do Nordeste, problems were found with how the cisterns were being built and distributed. For example, because building cisterns was seen as male work, women were not given the opportunity to participate directly in the program or put in leadership positions within the organisation. Moraes and Rocha (2013) note that when the Casa asked why women were not considered as potential trainees, the response was that women simply had no interest. So women from the area were asked as to whether they would be interested in becoming cistern builders. Casa found that many women responded that they would (Casa 2014).

The outcome from this meeting was that the Casa became an additional support network in the program and started teaching women to build cisterns in their own states and to transmit knowledge to women in other states as well. Based on Gebara’s writing about the invisibility of women’s experiences of marginalisation in their socio-economic immediate realities, what was found with the Casa’s involvement in the Cistern project was that direct engagement with rural women works. This is done by putting them in positions of power and recognising their roles as active agents in water management.

The results from the project were significant. Since 2002, more than 400,000 cisterns were built to collect rain water throughout the region. The number of regional management units increased every year, and in 2010 the organisation trained more than 5,500 builders (Adelphi 2018). Although only 5% to 10% of trainees were women, the involvement of the Casa feminist organisation was important in mobilising women in the region.

## **7. Policy Implications**

Each of the key topics engaged by this article – the environment, feminism, development, the Global South and BRICS – is complex and broad in its own right. However, in their

mutuality they produce a unique picture. It is a unifying mandala that elicits certain lessons for policy and planning. The Western policy framework has been criticised for treating gender in an instrumental fashion for economic goals (Arora-Johnsson in MacGregor 2017, p. 295). This is not a philosophy of change but the status quo+gender+environment as a bureaucratised formula. Moreover, a policy of including women in organisations that manage natural resources does not change the system in which they operate. The wider social context defines how gender is perceived. Cultural systems which structurally disadvantage women, treat daughters as less worthy than sons, wives as subservient to husbands and women as free labour, need to be changed through education and community efforts, supported by a legal framework that is implemented. Global governance shapes the norms of a wider political community. In this arena economic planning, trade and investment need to be better integrated with the Paris Agreement and ecofeminist development perspectives, inclusive of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Indeed, ‘inclusive’ is the operative word in this worldwide mandala: “Universal, inclusive and indivisible, the Agenda calls for action by all countries to improve the lives of people everywhere” (UN 2018).

Supranational actors are particularly well placed to do so. They need to act with even greater political will at a time when deadlines for achieving goals for tackling climate change and promoting sustainable development are drawing closer. It is also a time when the leading nation in the prevailing world order, the United States, is distancing itself from global governance issues that pertain to free trade and climate change. In the post-Paris Agreement world order, climate-friendly trade agreements will likely become the norm. The EU is forging ahead on this front. For example, negotiations in 2018 on an EU-Australia free trade agreement have shown that the EU “will attempt to prioritise the environment” (Riordan 2018).

BRICS brings cultural diversity to the governance table and a strong commitment to each of nation’s traditions – cultural, spiritual and religious – which themselves offer teachings of environmental consequence. China continues to expand its influence and investments worldwide, particularly to developing countries within the massive Belt and Road Initiative. This provides Beijing with an opportunity to advance an eco-civilisational ethos. It has many ways to do this, including through cultural and educational means (see Dellios 2017). A Daoist ecofeminism would go a long way in strengthening China’s appeal as an eco-civilisational sponsor.

Another possibility of integrating different sectors for the common good is a policy of debt-for-nature swaps (DNS). This is a “voluntary transaction whereby the donor(s) cancels the debt owned by a developing country’s government” so that “savings from the reduced debt service are invested in conservation projects” (UNDP 2017, p. 1). It has been in place since the 1980s and was used by the United States and multilateral funds. Hurley, Morris and Portelance (2018, p. 25) have suggested that DNS would address the problem of indebtedness to China while also accruing benefits to the environment.

## 8. Conclusion

From Chinese artists who mourn the loss of their muse – the natural world – and the *qi* that sustains it, to *ahimsa* modes of protest in India and integrative thinking, and finally to a Brazilian ecofeminism that is theologically inspired, this article has provided a glimpse into the sources of a future ecofeminism in the Global South.

A Chinese ecological civilisation speaks with the female voice of Daoism, though it may not be clearly heard in the chaos of its creation. Much still needs to be done to overcome the deleterious side-effects of the once famed ‘factory of the world’, all the while restoring the “invaluable assets” of “lucid waters and lush mountains” (Xi, 2017). While this is the challenge, the opportunities created by China’s greening policies are also considerable, and they are not confined to China alone as its Belt and Road Initiative unfolds. Underpinning success is the cultural power of a humanist-environmental orientation found in China’s three key spiritual traditions of Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. Without these, China risks entering a dystopian phase of technologically-dependent social control. This cannot bode well for feminism, be it ecological or otherwise. China needs its cultural wellsprings to revive a tolerance and creativity that allows ‘a thousand schools of thought to bloom’.

In India, the problem is perhaps too much ‘culture’ – not of the ‘thousand schools’ variety but in the constraining negative sense. Not only is this oppressive to women but it can be used to advance religious nationalism. This cannot bode well for India’s political stability or democratic credentials. Rather, the non-violent approach of *ahimsa*, as demonstrated by Indian ecofeminists, represents a more sustainable strategy and aligns with an integrative mentality of inclusion rather than ideological confrontation. Moreover, as shown in the case of Brazil, preoccupation with basic survival means that people’s immediate needs are at stake. ‘Immediacy’, paradoxically, calls for long-term solutions based on a comprehensive approach. This shows that ecofeminism remains a cultural affair just as much as an economic and political one. In the expanding world of BRICS, women and the environment require a supportive system that is grounded in liberating values that are both ideational and material, and according to each nation’s spiritual traditions.

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