



**POWERING JUSTICE:  
FEMINIST REFLECTIONS ON  
BIMSTEC, CLIMATE CHANGE,  
AND ENERGY**



**BY SHUBHA CHACKO**

POWERING JUSTICE: FEMINIST REFLECTIONS  
ON BIMSTEC, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND ENERGY

Shubha Chacko

This paper offers a South feminist analysis of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)'s emerging climate and energy governance, arguing that even though the current approaches are more attentive to climate vulnerabilities it remains anchored in technocratic, growth-oriented, and gender-blind frameworks. The paper—based on research as well as inputs from the online seminar “Powering Justice: Feminist Reflections on BIMSTEC, Climate Change, and Energy” hosted by BRICS Feminist Watch held on 10 November 2025—highlights how women’s knowledge, labour, and adaptation practices remain undervalued in regional policy frameworks.

While BIMSTEC has recently begun integrating Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) into its climate agenda, substantive institutional mechanisms and gender-responsive governance remain limited. The paper argues for a justice-centred, feminist reimagining of BIMSTEC cooperation that foregrounds women’s knowledge and experience, issues around redistribution of wealth, representation, and ecological equity, and concludes with concrete recommendations for building gender-transformative climate and energy policies in the region.

## 1. BIMSTEC, Global Governance Shifts, and the Imperative of Feminist Engagement

The shifting global order is increasingly defined by the rise of the Global South. Rapidly growing economies such as India, Indonesia, and China have reshaped the contours of global governance and created new plurilateral alliances including BRICS+ (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa with five other countries joining in), the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue – with India, Australia, Japan and the United States as members), I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE and USA), and the expanded G20 with the African Union as a full member. Beyond these, newer and re-energised southern coalitions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Mercado Común del Sur or Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), and the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries Plus (OPEC+) reflect a broader realignment of global governance and economic influence away from traditional Western centres. Prof. G. Zhou sums this up by saying that “countries in the South acted first as “rebels”, then “responsive participants” and now as “active agents” within the system.”<sup>1</sup>

Within this landscape, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which brings together Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, is growing to be another player worth watching in the arena of regional cooperation.

Established in 1997, BIMSTEC was largely dormant for nearly two decades, constrained by overlapping mandates with SAARC and ASEAN and by domestic political challenges within member states. The establishment of a permanent secretariat in Dhaka in 2014 and the adoption of the BIMSTEC Charter at the 2022 Colombo Summit signalled that it was seeking vitality and institutional consolidation (BIMSTEC Secretariat, 2022), though it faced multiple challenges. However, scholars argue that BIMSTEC continues to operate within a geopolitical landscape marked by “multi alignment” and hedging by member states, including the growing influence of China.<sup>2</sup>

Feminists must engage with regional blocs like BIMSTEC because these are the new sites where power, resources, and narratives about the future are being decided. Too often, such regional processes are shaped by neoliberal and patriarchal logics that celebrate “growth” and “stability” while masking the extraction of labour, natural resources including land, and care. If feminist voices stay outside, these spaces will continue to define cooperation in ways that depoliticise inequality and erase the contributions of those who sustain economies from below.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Zhou, G. Rise of Global South and changes in contemporary international order. *China Int Strategy Rev.* 6, 58–77 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-024-00160>

<sup>2</sup>Konwer, S., and Borah Hazarika, O. (2025). India and the BIMSTEC- regionalism, multilateral frameworks and a changing global order. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2025.2548934>

<sup>3</sup>Humayun, S., Chaturvedi, A. (2023). “Gender Security in South Asia: Does The Regionalism Approach Really Address Them?”, *IMGELEM*, 7 (12): 207-224.

<https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/3134161>

## 2. Climate Vulnerability in the BIMSTEC Region

Feminist engagement is essential to reclaim regionalism, even while remaining alert to the risks of cooptation. Rather than treating cooptation and resistance as a simple binary, feminists can work within these regional bodies to navigate contradictions, inhabit tensions, and open spaces for subversion and transformative possibility.<sup>4</sup>

The region is home to over 1.7 billion people and encompasses some of the world's most climate-vulnerable states, subject to erratic monsoons, rising sea levels, glacial melt, and intensifying cyclones. For example, coastal zones in Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar are particularly threatened by sea-level rise, whereas Bhutan and Nepal face glacial hazards and water insecurity. These environmental threats intersect with ongoing development pressures such as deforestation, urbanisation, and unsustainable resource use, which further undermine the adaptive capacity and ecosystem resilience within the BIMSTEC region. BIMSTEC's climate agenda has gained prominence in recent years, with the establishment of the Environment and Climate Change (ECC) sector as a priority, institutionalised through mechanisms like the Joint Working Group on ECC and the BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate. Policy focus has included biodiversity, waste management, and disaster risk reduction. "Mountain Economy" has been added as a sub-sector, recognising the critical role of Himalayan and other upland ecosystems for water, energy, and food security. Yet, despite institutional frameworks, adaptation strategies remain fragmented due to differing national priorities and regional tensions.

### Feminist Lens on Climate Change in BIMSTEC

A South feminist perspective argues that climate change cannot be addressed through technocratic, growth-centred or security-driven approaches that dominate current regional cooperation. Climate impacts are deeply entangled with histories of colonisation, resource extraction, caste and ethnic exclusion, and the feminisation of labour across borders.<sup>5</sup> Yet BIMSTEC climate frameworks tend to prioritise infrastructure, energy markets, and state-led resilience, while sidelining the everyday labour of women, indigenous communities, fisherfolk and small farmers who sustain local ecologies. Feminist scholars and movements also highlight that regional climate finance, disaster governance, and migration policies rarely acknowledge unequal care burdens, landlessness, or gender-based violence that worsen during climate crises.

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<sup>4</sup>Waylen, G. (2021). Gendering global economic governance after the global financial crisis. *Review of International Political Economy*, 29(4), 1007–1026. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2021.1888142>

<sup>5</sup> See for example Sultana, F. (2022). The unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality. *Political Geography*, 99, Article 102638. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102638>, South Feminist Futures. (2024). *South Feminist Futures Manifesto*. South Feminist Futures Collective. <https://southfeministfutures.org> and Moreano Venegas, Melissa, Miriam Lang and Gabriela Ruales Jurado. (2021). *Climate justice from the perspective of Latin American and other Southern Feminisms*. Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, Andean Regional Office. <https://rosalux.org.ec/pdfs/climate-justice-feminisms-perspective.pdf>

## Climate Change and Gender Case Studies from BIMSTEC Countries

### Himalayan Glacial Change and Women's Labour (Nepal, Bhutan, Northern India)

Rapid glacier melt and unpredictable rainfall are drying up springs and disrupting grazing and farming cycles across Himalayan regions.<sup>6</sup> Women are now walking far greater distances to collect water, fodder, and firewood, increasing time-poverty and reducing opportunities for education, livelihoods, and participation in community decisions.<sup>7</sup> Yet women's everyday adaptation practices such as adjusting crop choices, negotiating water-sharing norms, conserving seeds, remain largely invisible in regional climate policies.<sup>8</sup>

### Cyclones and Coastal Displacement (Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, Sri Lanka)

Cyclones and other coastal related disasters have deleterious impact on women. A gender analysis of a recent cyclone in Bangladesh showed that it exacerbated gender inequalities including heightened risks of gender-based violence (GBV), significant income loss for women, and challenges in accessing essential services like housing, health, and WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities and yet women often take the lead in rebuilding households and community networks.<sup>9</sup> Despite this, disaster-management committees and regional preparedness mechanisms continue to be dominated by men and reconstruction funds seldom reach women directly, despite their central role in recovery and resilience-building.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Goodrich, C. G., Hussain, A., Pasakhala, B., Bano, K., Bhuchar, S., Chitale, V. S., Bisht, S., Bastola, A., and Silpakar, S. (2022). State of gender equality and climate change in South Asia and the Hindu Kush Himalaya. ICIMOD, UN Women, and UNEP <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/state-of-ge-and-cc-in-sa-and-hkh-2d933.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Qadri, H., and Inzamam, Q. (2022, November 21). "Our life is wasted": On melting glaciers and gender roles. FairPlanet. <https://www.fairplanet.org/story/our-life-is-wasted-on-melting-glaciers-and-gender-roles/>

<sup>8</sup> Goodrich, C. G., Hussain, A., Pasakhala, B., Bano, K., Bhuchar, S., Chitale, V. S., Bisht, S., Bastola, A., and Silpakar, S. (2022). State of gender equality and climate change in South Asia and the Hindu Kush Himalaya. ICIMOD, UN Women and UNEP

<sup>9</sup> Mirza, A. B. and Risha, A. N. (2021, July 10). Impacts of cyclones on women and girls and the way forward. Dhaka Tribune. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/science-technology-environment/climate-change/252027/impacts-of-cyclones-on-women-and-girls-and-the-way>

<sup>10</sup> UN Women. (2024). Rapid gender analysis: Cyclone Remal. UN Women. [https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/bd-c1453-rga-cyclone-remal-2024\\_updated.pdf](https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/bd-c1453-rga-cyclone-remal-2024_updated.pdf)

### Climate Migration and Precarity (Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar)

Climate impacts such as river erosion, droughts, landslides, and salinity drive significant internal and cross-border migration. This is a gendered process with a significantly higher percentage of men migrating. Those who remain behind shoulder increased agricultural and care work with fewer resources. Women who migrate can face loss of social networks, barriers to secure employment, and heightened exposure to unsafe labour and trafficking<sup>11</sup> but it can also be an opportunity to explore new options and loosening of some gender norms.<sup>12</sup> The feminist gap lies in regional migration discussions, which seldom acknowledge climate triggers or gendered vulnerabilities

### Agriculture, Food Security and Women Farmers and Fisherfolk (India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan)

Erratic monsoons, prolonged dry spells, and new pest patterns undermine food security in a region where women form a substantial share of the agricultural workforce but have limited land ownership.<sup>13</sup> Women farmers continually innovate. They are actively involved in practices such as seed preservation, mixed cropping, and community water management. Yet regional agricultural and climate agendas remain expert-led and top-down.<sup>14</sup> Adaptation finance continues to bypass women farmers and fisherfolk, leaving feminist agroecological and blue ecology knowledge underfunded and undervalued.<sup>15</sup>

Farida Akhtar<sup>16</sup> from Bangladesh highlighted at the online seminar how the fisheries sector—especially inland fisheries that women rely on—remains largely unrecognised. While policy and public attention tend to equate fisheries with large corporate players, lakhs of women are engaged in small-scale, local fishing. They are the ones most affected by the drying up of rivers and small water bodies. Yet the focus continues to remain on companies that use unsustainable fishing practices, rather than on protecting the livelihoods of these women.

<sup>11</sup><https://scroll.in/article/826260/in-south-asia-women-bear-the-brunt-of-climate-induced-migration>

<sup>12</sup>International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development. (2020). Migration and climate change in South Asia. ICIMOD. <https://www.icimod.org/article/migration-and-climate-change-in-south-asia-what-happens-when-spatial-diversification-of-livelihoods-is-not-an-option-anymore/>

<sup>13</sup>Hazarika, A. P. (2025, April 8). How climate change exacerbates gender vulnerabilities in agriculture. IPE Global. <https://www.ipeglobal.com/how-climate-change-exacerbates-gender-vulnerabilities-in-agriculture/>

<sup>14</sup>Paudyal, B. R., Chanana, N., Khatri-Chhetri, A., Sherpa, L., Kadariya, I., and Aggarwal, P. K. (2019). Gender integration in climate change and agricultural policies: The case of Nepal. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 3, Article 66. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2019.00066>

<sup>15</sup>International Institute for Environment and Development. (2025, June). Gender; climate change: Key findings and recommendations from research and action for climate finance institutions. IIED. <https://www.iied.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/2025-06/22654iied.pdf>

<sup>16</sup>Powering Justice: Feminist Reflections on BIMSTEC, Climate Change, and Energy, 10 November, 2025, online Seminar, BRICS Feminist Watch.

### 3. Energy Systems and Regional Transition Dynamics

BIMSTEC's report projects that energy demand is expected to more than double by 2035, driven by rapid economic growth, urbanisation, and industrialisation. It also observes that the region continues to rely heavily on fossil fuels, with large reserves of coal (331 billion tonnes) and oil (718 million tonnes). In contrast, its renewable potential (currently only at 1,359 GW) remains significantly underdeveloped.<sup>17</sup> This imbalance, combined with historical injustices, persistent structural barriers to clean-energy investment and distribution, helps explain why BIMSTEC is still among the least electrified regions globally on a per-capita basis.

This results in what Lailufar Yasmin and Mohammad Atique Rahman<sup>18</sup> describe as an 'energy trilemma', i.e. ensuring energy security, affordability and sustainability, which is stipulated as Goal No.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and in order to resolve this trilemma, the South Asian countries "must ensure regional cooperation and build energy corridors and implement the vision of the Energy Ring." However, since the declaration of building the Energy Ring network among the South Asian countries in 2004, little progress has been achieved so far. An analysis of other regional organisations such as ASEAN, European Union, Southern African region, and Central America shows that they have built a regional power grid transformation mechanism to ensure access to energy.<sup>19</sup>

Energy cooperation has been central to BIMSTEC since the First Summit Declaration (Bangkok, 2004), which prioritised power trade and hydropower coordination. Subsequent developments, particularly the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection Master Plan (2008) and the 3rd Energy Ministers' Meeting (Kathmandu, 2022), have emphasised the need for cross-border electricity trade (CBET) and renewable integration. However, most policy documents still privilege energy security and macroeconomic growth while under-emphasising issues of justice, displacement, gender, and inclusion. The gap between ambitious regional plans and on ground implementation remains considerable.

#### Feminist Lens on Energy Transitions

A feminist analysis foregrounds that energy transitions are not just technological shifts but social processes that reshape labour, land, and unpaid economies including care. Feminist scholars and movements in South Asia have long pointed out that extractivist approaches to development, through project such as coal, hydropower, or lithium mining, reinforce patriarchal and class hierarchies, often excluding women and marginalised groups from decision-making.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>BIMSTEC Energy Centre. (2024, June 21). BIMSTEC Energy Outlook 2035. <https://bimstecenergycentre.org/documents/bimstec-energy-outlook-2035>

<sup>18</sup>Yasmin, L., & Rahman, M. A. (2024). Energy Geopolitics in South Asia: Bangladesh's Role as a Central Energy Enclave. In *Global Political Transitions* (pp. 245–272). Springer Nature. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6595-9\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6595-9_10)

<sup>19</sup>ibid

<sup>20</sup>See for example The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI). (2024). Establishing women as critical stakeholders in India's just energy transition: Evidences from Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. TERI and Kumar, A., Höffken, J., and Pols, A. (Eds.). (2021). *Dilemmas of Energy Transitions in the Global South: Balancing Urgency and Justice*. Routledge.

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Energy systems in South Asia are structured by gender, with gendered patterns of labour, access, and benefit distribution. Men typically dominate both high-level policy spaces and technical energy jobs, while women are concentrated in unpaid or informal roles related to energy use and provision.<sup>21</sup>

### Energy and Gender Case Studies

#### Hydropower in India:

Large and small-scale hydropower projects in Uttarakhand have increased women's workload (water, fuelwood and fodder collection), reduced their access to resources (fodder, fuelwood, fish), and disrupted livelihoods (livestock, agriculture).<sup>22</sup> Hydropower sector employment and management remain heavily male-dominated, marginalising women's voices and interests.

#### Coal in Myanmar:

While the shift away from coal and closure of coal-based industries may be desirable, the process surrounding this disproportionately adversely impacts women due to their exclusion from formal employment and retraining schemes.<sup>23</sup> The resulting economic displacement increases their unpaid care burden and "increased levels of domestic violence, food insecurity, and decline in customary status"<sup>24</sup>

#### Renewables and Local Adaptation (Nepal):

While household energy transitions to renewables remove drudgery and health risks for women (e.g., reducing time spent collecting fuelwood), policy frameworks often ignore women's equal participation and rights to the benefits of renewable energy projects, particularly as entrepreneurs or stakeholders. Gender-transformative approaches are rare, despite evidence that women's control over energy resources and market entry can substantially improve outcomes for communities.<sup>25</sup>

Govind Kelkar<sup>26</sup> from India focused on the gender-energy nexus in South Asia. Although the region is rich in energy resources, women's access remains severely limited. She explained that women face heavy domestic energy burdens, time poverty partially due to the need to gather energy sources, they are exposed to health risks from biomass cooking and yet are excluded from energy-sector jobs (often as low as 3-15% participation). While individual countries have taken steps towards gender-responsive energy policy, BIMSTEC as a region "has not moved." She mentioned that the Vienna Energy Forum (VEF)—a platform for showcasing solutions and discussing strategies for sustainable energy and climate action, organised by the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO), the Austrian Government, and the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA)—has now a separate track on gender and also highlighted the issue of the need to accelerate gender equality in the energy sector, from ensuring women's access to clean cooking technologies to increasing their participation in leadership and technical roles.

<sup>21</sup> Kolantharaj, J. (2024). Managing gender-inclusive, just energy transitions in South Asia. Oxford Open Energy, 3. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ooenergy/oaie006>

<sup>22</sup> Buechler, S., Sen, D., Khandekar, N., and Scott, C. (2016). Re-linking governance of energy with livelihoods and irrigation in Uttarakhand, India. *Water*, 8(10), 437. <https://doi.org/10.3390/w8100437>

<sup>23</sup> Lahiri-Dutt, K. (2022). Just Transition for All: A Feminist Approach for the Coal Sector. World Bank <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/extractiveindustries/publication/just-transition-for-all-a-feminist-approach-for-the-coal-sector>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> CGIAR. (2025). Moving from gender policies to gender equality in the South Asian energy sector. CGIAR News. <https://www.cgiar.org/news-events/news/moving-from-gender-policies-to-gender-equality-in-the-south-asian-energy-sector/>

<sup>26</sup> Powering Justice: Feminist Reflections on BIMSTEC, Climate Change, and Energy, 10 November, 2025, Online Seminar, BRICS Feminist Watch.

## 4. Gender in BIMSTEC's Climate and Energy Governance

BIMSTEC's engagement with gender has evolved from a limited focus on protection toward a broader commitment to gender-responsive regional cooperation. The Fourth BIMSTEC Summit Declaration (Kathmandu, 2018) explicitly identified women, children, the elderly, and marginalised groups as populations requiring attention within the human security and inclusive development agenda. This framing was reinforced in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meetings (2018), which referenced women and children mainly in the context of preventing human trafficking and strengthening protection mechanisms.

However the approach to gender is changing with BIMSTEC and by 2023 and 2024, gender considerations began entering sectoral work. Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) concerns were flagged into its climate governance: this shift is evident in its convening of targeted events such as the UNOPS–BIMSTEC Roundtable on the Impact of Climate Change on Women and Girls (Dhaka, December 2023) and a Side Event on Integrating Gender and Poverty in Climate Finance during the Asia-Pacific Beijing+30 Review (Bangkok, November 2024) where regional leaders and experts discussed how climate finance can better serve women and marginalised groups. Going forward, the plan was to set up a peer-learning platform, develop institutional strategies, and leverage regional initiatives such as the EmPower: Women for Climate-Resilient Societies programme to scale gender-responsive climate financing.

Furthermore, in July 2025, BIMSTEC organised a regional capacity-building workshop in Kathmandu with partners including UN Women, UNEP, and ICIMOD explicitly to strengthen GESI-responsive climate action.<sup>27</sup> While earlier policy assessments, such as ICIMOD's report on gender and climate change in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region, criticised BIMSTEC's earlier climate plans for lacking social-inclusion objectives, these more recent initiatives suggest growing institutional appetite in BIMSTEC to embed gender-sensitive and inclusive perspectives into its climate policies and frameworks.

These events highlighted that women in the region face disproportionate climate impacts, fewer assets, limited access to finance, exclusion from energy planning, and higher care burdens and emphasised the need for integrated gender responsive climate finance and institutional reform.

The shift in BIMSTEC's positioning became explicit in the Sixth BIMSTEC Summit Declaration (Bangkok, 2025), which committed to cooperation with UN Women and called for gender-sensitive approaches across sectors. It was echoed in the statement by Nepal at the 20th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting (2025) advocating for shared strategies on women's empowerment and the creation of an Expert Group on Women. Collectively, these documents indicate that BIMSTEC is moving toward mainstreaming gender across social, economic, and environmental areas, with emerging attention to gender-climate linkages and institutional mechanisms for coordination.

Avipsha Rayamajhi from UN Women Asia-Pacific<sup>28</sup> said that in UN Women's engagement with BIMSTEC, gender-responsive climate action is a core institutional priority, but regional engagement is still at an embryonic stage. "Our main focus has been getting political buy-in. The next step is engaging women-led and grassroots organisations," she said.

She noted several opportunities such as the strong gender-forward climate policies in Sri Lanka, Nepal, the potential for a regional gender task force, the need for a cross-country knowledge-sharing platform and a need to explore the scope for embedding gender and social inclusion across BIMSTEC's climate and energy programmes. She emphasised that long-term institutionalisation is essential if gender is to become more than an afterthought in BIMSTEC's agenda.

<sup>27</sup>Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. (2025). Workshop on Gender-Responsive Climate Action: Regional Capacity Building and Consultation Workshop for Inclusive Climate Policy and Planning, Kathmandu, 14–15 July 2025  
<https://bimstec.org/event/268/workshop-on-gender-responsive-climate-action>

<sup>28</sup>Powering Justice: Feminist Reflections on BIMSTEC, Climate Change, and Energy, 10 November, 2025, online Seminar, BRICS Feminist Watch.

## 6. A South Feminist Critique

Feminist scholars criticise the technocratic and growth-oriented approach of regional policy frameworks, observing that such approaches reinforce gender-blindness and distributive injustices. The critique calls for a paradigm shift that recognises women as agents, not just victims, and presses for redistributive measures, community control, and substantive inclusion in climate and energy governance.<sup>29</sup>

Scholars argue that global climate frameworks, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), that are reliant on data from academic or official sources often reproduce power hierarchies that marginalise Global South voices and overlook historical ecological debt and colonial extraction.

Aditi Kapoor<sup>30</sup> from India emphasised this by talking about the exclusionary knowledge systems that devalue knowledge that is produced by less powerful countries, especially in their vernacular languages. Aditi urged BIMSTEC to value grounded, local knowledge and embed feminist analysis in every aspect of regional cooperation. She also emphasised the importance of using a range of formats, particularly oral mediums like podcasts, to break the elite slant to the production and consumption of knowledge on such important issues. “This is therefore a political project and we have to understand and approach it in that manner” she said.

From a Global South feminist perspective, BIMSTEC offers a potential—though as yet unrealised—challenge to Northern-dominated climate and energy frameworks. Mainstream global climate governance, shaped by institutions like the UNFCCC and multilateral finance mechanisms, often reproduces hierarchies of power where the North dictates the terms of transition through conditional finance, carbon markets, and technocratic solutions.<sup>31</sup> Feminist thinkers from the Global South argue that these frameworks depoliticise climate injustice by ignoring colonial histories and the unequal ecological debt owed to the South.<sup>32</sup> A re-energised BIMSTEC could serve as a platform for Southern solidarity—reclaiming policy space for countries to articulate their own pathways rooted in equity, care, and redistribution. However, this requires deliberate feminist engagement to ensure that BIMSTEC’s cooperation agenda does not simply reproduce Northern models of “green growth,” but instead forges alternatives grounded in ecological justice and collective responsibility. As Melanie Gunathilaka<sup>33</sup> from Sri Lanka said: “This is not only about carbon, it is also about biodiversity loss and pollution. The triple planetary crisis is inseparable from debt and inequality.” Sri Lanka, she pointed out, has progressive policies “on paper”, including commitments to traditional knowledge and gender inclusion. But implementation rarely follows. There is also a strong push towards the commodification of nature. This results in the loss of access to the commons for poorer communities, especially women.

<sup>29</sup> Guedes, W. P., Branchi, B. A., Sugahara, C. R., and Ferreira, D. H. L. (2024). Gender-based climate (in)justice: An overview. *Environmental Science and Policy*, 162, 103934. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2024.103934>

<sup>30</sup> Powering Justice: Feminist Reflections on BIMSTEC, Climate Change, and Energy, 10 November, 2025, online Seminar, BRICS Feminist Watch.

<sup>31</sup> Chakraborty, R., Rampini, C., and Sherpa, P. Y. (2023). Mountains of inequality: encountering the politics of climate adaptation across the Himalaya. *Ecology and Society*, 28(4), 6. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-14399-280406>

<sup>32</sup> Shiva, V. (2008). *Soil not oil: Environmental justice in a time of climate crisis*. South End Press. [https://collapseofindustrialcivilization.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/wk4\\_shiva\\_soilnotoil.pdf](https://collapseofindustrialcivilization.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/wk4_shiva_soilnotoil.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Powering Justice: Feminist Reflections on BIMSTEC, Climate Change, and Energy, 10 November, 2025, online Seminar, BRICS Feminist Watch.

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Melanie offered a feminist vision for BIMSTEC centred on wellbeing rather than GDP growth, community resilience over extractive trade, and women-led cooperatives over corporate-led green transitions. She spoke of financial disincentives for these destructive technologies and support for local community owned markets and to build local resource bases.

Within BIMSTEC, a South feminist critique highlights that regional climate cooperation must centre the lived experiences of women, especially indigenous communities, coastal populations, and informal workers whose realities are often marginalised in policy spaces. It stresses that energy transitions are deeply social and political processes—not merely technological shifts—and that they reshape labour relations, care economies, and access to resources. This perspective also draws attention to how extractivist development models, including large hydropower projects, coal expansion, and rare-earth mining, risk reproducing structural inequalities unless grounded in inclusive and participatory governance. Further, it argues for reclaiming regionalism as a project of solidarity rather than treating it solely as a space for state-level negotiation and urges BIMSTEC to move towards substantive engagement on these issues.

### 7. Suggestions and Recommendations for BIMSTEC

With this perspective in mind, the following are some concrete steps BIMSTEC could take to move meaningfully in that direction.

#### **Moving from Rhetoric to Action:**

The growing use of gender-responsive language in policy declarations and workshop agendas by BIMSTEC has not translated into operational action. There are still no binding commitments, gender-specific implementation plans, or accountability frameworks that would move the organisation from symbolic affirmation to substantive gender integration.

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**Institutionalising Gender Issues:** BIMSTEC currently lacks a dedicated, fully developed gender-mainstreaming strategic framework. Gender issues are not yet centralised or strongly institutionalised in its sectoral cooperation plans. Therefore, a gender policy and a mechanism in BIMSTEC (a committee, focal point, etc.) are the first steps that BIMSTEC has to take. It can adopt and better ASEAN and other intergovernmental bodies that have moved ahead on this issue.

**Women in Leadership:** Mandate institutional reforms for gender parity, such as quotas, leadership development programmes, and the formal engagement of grassroots and Indigenous women's organisations.

**Strengthen Gender-Responsive Climate and Energy Governance:** Develop an integrated gender-just regional climate and energy action plan that includes early-warning systems, resilient infrastructure, and leadership pathways for women.

**Improve Data, Accountability, and Monitoring:** Establish systematic gender-disaggregated data collection across climate, energy, disaster management, and livelihood sectors and introduce gender audits and gender-responsive budgeting in all BIMSTEC climate and energy initiatives.

**Advance Inclusive and Just Energy Transitions:** Expand technology transfer, vocational training, and financial support for women-led enterprises, cooperatives, and local energy initiatives and ensure equitable benefit-sharing and women's participation in decision-making across renewable-energy value chains.

**Recognise and Support Care Economy:** Embed care-aware resilience planning in regional climate strategies by acknowledging unpaid and reproductive labour as foundational to adaptation. Allocate resources for public services and infrastructure that reduce women's unpaid care burdens.

**Enhance Regional Coordination and Solidarity:** Promote enhancing of policies on social inclusion, gender-sensitive disaster management, and energy access by promoting learning and accountability across member states. Institutionalise cross-border feminist knowledge-exchange platforms, advocacy spaces, and monitoring forums to strengthen regional solidarity.

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## 8. Conclusion

BIMSTEC's climate and energy agenda has expanded considerably, with new institutions, sectoral plans, and growing recognition of cross-border challenges. However, gender integration remains at an early stage. A South feminist approach—grounded in empirical evidence from hydropower, coal transitions, and renewable-energy initiatives—offers a viable framework for strengthening justice-centred regional cooperation.

Embedding feminist principles across BIMSTEC's structures would enable the organisation to contribute more effectively to equitable, sustainable, and climate resilient futures in the Bay of Bengal region.

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