



Briefing Paper



ODI Global

Gender equality and the climate crisis: resolutions at the Human Rights Council

Amy Cano Prentice and Evie Browne, with Brianna Craft and Donya Khosravi

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Key messages

Certain Human Rights Council (HRC) resolutions jointly consider gender equality and climate change. Since the HRC first worked on the environment in 2008, gender equality has featured strongly in its engagement on climate issues.

Resolutions referring to gender and climate emphasise that women and girls are vulnerable to adverse and disproportionate climate impacts. While this stance might be necessary in a human rights forum, it can be disempowering, masking the structural roots of gender inequality and the agency of marginalised groups to lead climate action.

Climate-focused resolutions mention the gender–climate nexus most frequently, showing that the climate agenda is integrating gender equality considerations. In contrast, gender equality-focused resolutions are yet to engage fully with the climate agenda.

As human rights are interdependent, understanding how gender equality and climate action interact can help scholars, policy-makers and feminist civil society advance both objectives synergistically. This briefing paper provides a baseline to chart future progress on the gender–climate nexus within the HRC.

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About the authors

Evie Browne is a Research Fellow in ODI Global's Gender Equality and Social Inclusion programme.

Amy Cano Prentice is a Senior Research Officer in ODI Global's Climate and Sustainability programme.

Brianna Craft is a Senior Research Associate in ODI Global's Climate and Sustainability programme.

Donya Khosravi is a Research Officer in ODI Global's Climate and Sustainability programme.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

HRC Human Rights Council

OHCHR Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

UN United Nations

UNFCCC United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

UNGA United Nations General Assembly

1 Introduction

The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (HRC) is the pre-eminent international body for the promotion and protection of human rights (Voss, 2020). The Council has promoted gender equality and the human rights of women, girls and people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and other (LGBTQI+) since its establishment in 2006. The HRC has developed a global normative framework for gender equality by advancing rights to education, economic empowerment, political participation and freedom from violence.

Since 2008, the HRC has brought a human rights lens to climate action, leading the way in analysing and recognising the relationship between the two. The HRC pushed the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to adopt an understanding of climate impacts on human rights and to maintain a human-centred approach to climate action (Savaresi, 2018; Kirchmeier and Lador, 2018). And, within its own human rights-based approach to climate, the Council has systematically highlighted women's and girls' rights and gender equality. However, it is less clear how the HRC treats gender and climate together as a nexus issue – that is, with particular characteristics arising from the intersection of gender dimensions and climate change impacts and dynamics.

This briefing paper builds on previous ODI Global work that established a baseline of commitments at the gender–climate nexus across multilateral forums between 2022 and 2024 (Craft et al., 2025). That study assessed the content of commitments and negotiated outcomes across the UNFCCC, the G20 and the G7, while a follow-up working paper mapped the positions that blocs and countries took on gender equality within the UNFCCC between 2022 and 2025 (Craft et al., 2026). The current briefing paper documents how gender and climate have been discussed together in resolutions from all HRC sessions between 2022 and 2025 (sessions 49 to 60).

This portfolio of work¹ maps how the gender–climate nexus has been addressed in different multilateral spaces, enabling future tracking and analysis. In the current context of a polycrisis, with international commitments under pressure, it is helpful to understand how states use different forums to protect and progress collective-action problems. Increasingly, the anti-gender and anti-climate agendas are converging politically (Rodriguez et al., 2026). This makes it imperative to understand how gender and climate intersect, and how they are discussed and can be advanced in international commitments.

1 See <https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/aligning-feminist-and-climate-action/>

2 Climate and gender at the HRC

2.1 How the HRC operates

The HRC establishes global normative standards and assesses the human rights record of all UN Member States. Forty-seven Member States are elected by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) to the HRC for three-year terms, equally representing world regions. Over three sessions each year, international and national human rights issues are reported and debated and resolutions are passed. While HRC resolutions are not legally binding, they set a normative standard for international human rights.

The Council is a subsidiary body of UNGA, to whom it directly reports. Some HRC resolutions can be taken up by the UNGA Third Committee (Social, Cultural and Humanitarian Affairs), which can consider and present them to the UNGA to be adopted as an internationally recognised human right, with associated treaties, ratification and legal obligations. Council outputs are therefore part of the system that develops national and international human rights law (Voss, 2020).

HRC resolutions are mostly passed by consensus, which is often expressed as a stated aim of the resolution sponsors (Smith, 2017). Member States can table amendments or push for a vote if they disagree with a resolution, although the latter is considered an aggressive blocking move and is rarely used. Amendments are a form of norm contestation (Voss, 2019) and tabling a hostile amendment may be a final resort for Member States (Khan and Michalko, 2026). Even where a resolution is passed by consensus, this does not necessarily reflect the depth of negotiations and the underlying contestation that may have occurred.

2.2 The HRC and the gender–climate nexus

The HRC has a strong history of attention to both gender and climate and has integrated a gender approach into its work on climate. It has been important in developing a human-rights based approach to climate change (Lakatos, 2023), which emphasises the need to ensure that climate policies respect, promote, and uphold state's obligations on human rights. These contributions by the HRC have shaped international climate policy and action, including the recent development of the International Court of Justice's 2025 advisory opinion confirming that states' obligations to address climate change arise not only from climate treaties but also from broader international law, including human rights principles (ICJ, 2024).

Resolution 6/30 in 2007 on integrating the human rights of women throughout the UN system established the foundation for gender mainstreaming across the HRC (HRC, 2007). The Council considers the concerns and experiences of women, men and people with diverse gender

identities to be integral to all policies and programmes (OHCHR, n.d.). Since gender issues are mainstreamed, they appear in the Council's climate-related work. Of specific interest to this study is how gender issues feature in climate resolutions.

Environmental concerns were entirely absent from discussions when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was negotiated in 1948, and also during the 1960s when the landmark International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights were negotiated. In the mid-1990s, a group of states led by Costa Rica, South Africa and Switzerland tabled the first resolution on human rights and the environment at the UN Commission on Human Rights, the predecessor to the HRC. However, the resolution faced considerable opposition and was eventually discontinued. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the position of many powerful UN Member States was that human rights and the protection of the environment should remain separate areas of UN policy (Limon, 2018).

In 2006, when the Commission was replaced by the Council, the Maldives revived international efforts to draw links between human rights and environmental harm (ibid.). These efforts shifted discursive frames from science-based approaches to rights-based or human-centred approaches that emphasised the threat from climate change to established human rights such as life, water and health (Voss, 2020). In 2008, HRC resolution 7/23 was the first UN resolution to state explicitly that climate change poses 'an immediate and far-reaching threat to people and communities around the world and has implications for the full enjoyment of human rights' (HRC, 2008: 1).

Via that resolution, the HCR also commissioned a study by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the relationship between climate change and human rights. This 2009 study details the adverse impacts of global warming on a spectrum of human rights, and it describes (again for the first time in the HRC) the effects on specific groups, including women, children and Indigenous peoples (OHCHR, 2009). The resolution on human rights and climate change has been reaffirmed every year since 2008, led consistently by Bangladesh, the Philippines and Viet Nam.

The impetus to consider gender and climate together gained momentum through the 2010s, alongside the development of other global agreements. For example, in 2014 HRC Special Mandate-holders submitted a letter to the UNFCCC to suggest that human rights language be included in the Paris Agreement (Savaresi, 2018). Although the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC do indeed refer to human rights in their preambles, some perceive these instruments to be weak on human rights obligations and feel that much more remains to be done (Voss, 2020; Kahl, 2022; Venn, 2023). Since the Paris Agreement was adopted in 2015, the HRC has also held an annual panel discussion on climate change, focusing thematically on issues such as climate and children's rights, rights to health, a just transition and gender equality. An Independent Expert on human

rights and the environment was appointed in 2012, with a title change to Special Rapporteur in 2015 and then in 2024 to Special Rapporteur on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment (OHCHR, 2026).

Significant advancements were made in 2018 for gender and climate at the HRC. In the annual resolution on human rights and climate change (resolution 38/4 – HRC, 2018), the Council recognised that climate policies would benefit from the integration of gender-responsive approaches. Also at that session, the HRC requested OHCHR to conduct an analytical study on gender-responsive approaches to climate action for the full and effective enjoyment of the rights of women (OHCHR, 2019). The following year a panel discussion was held on ‘Women’s rights and climate change: climate action, best practices and lessons learned’, which focused both on the gender-differentiated impacts of climate change and the need for increased participation of women and girls in climate decision-making processes (OHCHR, 2018). This programme of work established HRC’s baseline on gender and climate, which over time has contributed significantly to international progress on understanding the two issues together.

A second significant success in 2018 was the recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. That same year, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment released the Framework Principles on Human Rights and the Environment, which demonstrated that national governments, regional bodies and sectoral treaties already accepted the right to a healthy environment (CIEL, n.d.; Savaresi, 2021). These Framework Principles called for official UN recognition of the right to a healthy environment.

At that time, the Maldives, Costa Rica and Switzerland found it more feasible to specify human rights with relation to the environment more broadly beyond climate change, which has long been a highly politicised issue (Limon, 2018). They argued that environmental conservation and protection were unlikely to generate the same level of political reaction in the HRC than the issue of climate change, where so much was at stake internationally and where differences of opinion arose over responsibility (ibid.). Splitting from the core group on climate change (the Philippines, Bangladesh and Viet Nam) that pushed for more development assistance to address climate change, this new group began tabling resolutions on the less controversial issue of a right to a healthy environment (Voss, 2020). These countries wanted to drive efforts to clarify and define norms in order to understand precisely how human rights principles and commitments might be applied to international and national environmental policy. They saw it as the role of the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP) to raise ambitions in international climate policy.

As a result of the 2018 Framework Principles and the efforts of the core group of countries, HRC resolution 48/13 was passed in 2021 recognising the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment (HRC, 2021). It passed with 43 states in favour, none against and four abstentions from Russia, China, India and Japan. The HRC core group then prepared to present the resolution for adoption at UNGA to formalise the right in the international human rights system. While not legally binding, this represented an important step towards recognising climate

action as a human rights obligation. In 2022, Costa Rica presented the draft resolution at UNGA, co-sponsored by 100 states (Limon, 2024). It passed with 161 in favour, none against and eight abstentions (China, Russia, Syria, Iran, Belarus, Ethiopia, Cambodia and Kyrgyzstan). India and Japan voted in favour at UNGA. And, under President Joe Biden's leadership, the United States also voted in favour, the first new right it had supported at the UN in over 50 years (ibid.).

On the same day that resolution 48/13 passed, the HRC also agreed to appoint a Special Rapporteur for the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change. The mandate was adopted with 42 in favour, Russia voting against, and abstentions from China, Eritrea, India and Japan (Sweeney, 2023). Developing countries and civil society were in strong support (ibid.). The appointment of a new mandate was regarded as a significant win, because the creation of a mandate is more difficult than renewal and there are few examples of a mandate being terminated (Lakatos, 2023).

Finally, in 2023, the Special Rapporteur on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment published *Women, girls and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment* (OHCHR, 2023). This thematic report outlines the disproportionate harms of planetary crises on women and girls and calls for gender-transformative climate action.

It is significant that the HRC's approach to climate change has included a gender analysis since its work on the environment began in 2008. However, there has been a tendency to use protectionist language to portray women, who are described as 'vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change' (Mayrhofer, 2024). Indeed, up to the mid-2010s, discussion of women and girls in HRC resolutions primarily stressed their increased vulnerability to climate change (ibid.). Towards the end of that decade, however, the Council began recognising the role of women as agents of change. Relevant resolutions called for efforts to ensure women's rights to participate to increase the effectiveness of climate policies.

This progress has since been rolled back, with the 2020s being marked by significant and coordinated pushback on climate action and gender equality within multilateral spaces. Across the UNFCCC, the G20 and the G7, for example, advancements have been threatened by the accelerated erosion of global human rights norms related to gender and the resurgence of strategies and discourses that delay meaningful climate action (Craft et al., 2025; Craft et al., 2026). And this backlash has increasingly converged with the domestic political agendas of Global Majority countries (Rodriguez et al., 2026).

In this polarised context, the HRC has so far managed to hold its line on gender rights (Khan and Michalko, 2026) and countries continue to bring forward nuanced discussion of gender rights and climate change. We analyse this in section 4.

3 Method

We reviewed all HRC resolutions passed between 2022 and 2025 (sessions 49 to 60) that discuss the gender–climate nexus. This mirrored the methodology and timeframe of the baseline analysis (Craft et al., 2025) and the review of champions and backsliders (Craft et al., 2026) to create a comparable dataset. We selected 2022 as the start year because this was the first year that normal UNFCCC negotiations resumed after Covid-19.

To find language that speaks to both gender equality and climate ambition, we searched for words used most frequently in international decisions. Our primary search terms were ‘women’ and ‘gender’, as well as ‘climate’ and ‘energy’. Resolutions were only included if they mentioned terms relating to both gender *and* climate. Texts addressing only one issue were excluded.

This search generated a list of 72 HRC resolutions. We analysed where and how the keywords are mentioned and excluded resolutions that treat gender and climate separately – in other words, those that do not include nexus language. Of these 72 resolutions, 28 include nexus language (see Table 1).

We analysed these 28 resolutions for their discussion of gender and climate themes. This analysis was supplemented with insights from five background interviews with civil society actors who work closely with the HRC.

3.1 Limitations

A key limitation of this study is that review of outcome documents does not capture the politics of formal and informal negotiations (Voss, 2019). The review does not analyse whether any amendments were tabled or whether votes were taken, both of which could be investigated to gain further insight into the dynamics at play after a resolution is introduced. Support for or contestation of a particular issue is informed by domestic and international politics and by national interests, and it also reflects a country’s commitment to collective action on particular issues.

Our review of resolutions also excludes where gender and climate have featured in panel discussions, in Universal Periodic Review (UPR) reports and in the reports of the Special Rapporteurs.

4 Data analysis

Our keyword search of all HRC resolutions passed between 2022 and 2025 (sessions 49 to 60) generated a list of 28 resolutions that address gender and climate together as a nexus issue (Table 1).

Table 1 HRC resolutions passed in 2022–2025 that address the gender–climate nexus

Session	Year	Title	Introduced by ²
50	2022	50/6 Mandate of Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons	Austria, also on behalf of Honduras and Uganda
50	2022	50/9 Human rights and climate change	Bangladesh, also on behalf of the Philippines and Viet Nam
51	2022	51/18 Human rights and Indigenous peoples	Mexico, also on behalf of Guatemala
51	2022	51/31 National human rights institutions	Australia
52	2023	52/22 Human rights, democracy and the rule of law	Romania, also on behalf of Morocco, Norway, Peru, the Republic of Korea and Tunisia
52	2023	52/23 The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment	The Maldives
52	2023	52/16 The right to food	Cuba
53	2023	53/6 Human rights and climate change	The Philippines, also on behalf of Bangladesh and Viet Nam
54	2023	54/7 World programme for human rights education	The Philippines, also on behalf of Brazil, Costa Rica, Italy, Morocco, Senegal, Slovenia and Thailand
54	2023	54/9 Working Group on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas	Plurinational State of Bolivia, also on behalf of Cuba, Gambia, Kyrgyzstan, Luxembourg and South Africa

2 These resolutions were sponsored by the same countries that introduced them, with the exception of: a) resolution 52/23 (The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment), which was introduced by the Maldives but sponsored by Costa Rica, the Maldives, Morocco, Slovenia and Switzerland; b) resolution 58/16 (The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment: the ocean and human rights), which was introduced by the Maldives and Slovenia, also on behalf of Costa Rica and Morocco, and was sponsored by these four countries plus Switzerland, which subsequently withdrew its co-sponsorship; and c) resolution 60/18 (Preventable maternal mortality and morbidity and human rights), which was introduced by New Zealand (also on behalf of Colombia and Estonia), Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and Uruguay, and was sponsored by Colombia, Estonia and New Zealand.

Session	Year	Title	Introduced by ²
54	2023	<u>54/33 Establishment of a regional office of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for the Caribbean Community</u>	The Bahamas, also on behalf of Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago
54	2023	<u>54/12 Human rights and Indigenous peoples</u>	Mexico, also on behalf of Guatemala
54	2023	<u>54/19 Realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl</u>	The United Arab Emirates, also on behalf of the UK
55	2024	<u>55/2 Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment</u>	Costa Rica, also on behalf of the Maldives, Morocco, Slovenia and Switzerland
55	2024	<u>55/29 Rights of the child: realizing the rights of the child and inclusive social protection</u>	Belgium (on behalf of the European Union) and Uruguay (on behalf of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States)
55	2024	<u>55/4 The right to food</u>	Cuba
56	2024	<u>56/8 Human rights and climate change</u>	Viet Nam, also on behalf of Bangladesh and the Philippines
57	2024	<u>57/31 Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change</u>	The Marshall Islands, also on behalf of Austria, the Bahamas, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Fiji, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands (Kingdom of the), Panama, Paraguay, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sudan and Sweden
57	2024	<u>57/13 The human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation</u>	Germany and Spain
57	2024	<u>57/15 Human rights and Indigenous peoples</u>	Mexico, also on behalf of Guatemala
58	2025	<u>58/16 The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment: the ocean and human rights</u>	The Maldives and Slovenia, also on behalf of Costa Rica and Morocco
59	2025	<u>59/20 Accelerating efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: prevention through the fulfilment of economic, social and cultural rights</u>	Canada
59	2025	<u>59/18 Accelerating efforts to achieve women's economic empowerment</u>	Kyrgyzstan, also on behalf of the Dominican Republic, the Republic of Moldova, Sierra Leone and the UK

Session	Year	Title	Introduced by ²
59	2025	59/12 Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons	Austria, also on behalf of Honduras and Uganda
59	2025	59/25 Human rights and climate change	Bangladesh, also on behalf of the Philippines and Viet Nam
60	2025	60/18 Preventable maternal mortality and morbidity and human rights	New Zealand (also on behalf of Colombia and Estonia) and Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, the UK and Uruguay
60	2025	60/13 Human rights and Indigenous peoples	Mexico, also on behalf of Guatemala
60	2025	60/20 Sea-level rise and its effects on the full and effective enjoyment of human rights	The Dominican Republic, also on behalf of the Bahamas, Cabo Verde, Cyprus, Ecuador, the Maldives and Malta

Gender equality is well-referenced in the dataset; as the HRC mainstreams gender, strong attention is paid to women's and girls' rights and to gender-based inequalities. References to climate are weaker, except where the topic of a resolution clearly relates to climate or environmental issues. These climate-focused resolutions therefore contain the strongest references to the gender-climate nexus. This indicates that the climate agenda is integrating gender-equality considerations well, but the reverse is not true – gender equality-focused resolutions have not yet engaged fully with the climate agenda.

It is important to recognise the frequency and breadth of resolution topics where both gender inequality and climate change appear. Topics include internally displaced persons, Indigenous peoples, the right to food, child rights, safe drinking water, violence against women and girls, women's economic empowerment, and maternal mortality. Most of the resolutions use climate change to frame the topic in question, recognising and laying out climate change as a problem to be addressed.

The most important HRC resolutions on climate change all include treatment of gender equality, even if some are light-touch. This shows a commitment to address the impacts of climate change on women and girls. Most frequently, resolutions emphasise the differing impacts of climate change on women and girls, drawing out their specific vulnerabilities in terms of health, livelihoods, violence and access to services.

The annual resolution on human rights and climate change and the regularly reaffirmed resolution on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment are the two most significant climate change resolutions that also refer to gender equality. Both have associated Special Rapporteurs, whose mandate renewals also appear in the dataset. We discuss each in turn.

4.1 Resolution on human rights and climate change

The resolution on human rights and climate change is reaffirmed every year in the HRC's June session. Since 2008 it has been sponsored by Bangladesh, the Philippines and Viet Nam. The resolution emphasises the urgency of international cooperation in accordance with states' common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities and their social and economic conditions. It stresses that human rights principles can inform and strengthen climate policy-making, and that climate change has implications for the enjoyment of human rights.

The resolution aligns with the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement adopted under the Convention, reaffirming the commitment to its implementation and underlining the urgency of enhancing climate ambition to also encompass mitigation, adaptation and finance to developing countries. Each year the resolution has a different thematic focus. For the scope of our analysis the themes were climate finance (2025), a just transition (2024), loss and damage (2023) and the right to food (2022). These topics draw on the overarching themes of the UNFCCC COP, demonstrating a certain coherence between multilateral processes.

The core text of the annual resolution has remained similar across the four years under review, with a strong commitment to addressing gender equality alongside other inequalities, inclusion and a just transition. The resolution texts from 2022–2025 reaffirm that climate change adversely affects the full enjoyment of human rights and they call on states to take effective measures to address these impacts as part of their human rights obligations.

Each text from the four-year review period includes the following in the opening paragraphs:

Recalling that the Paris Agreement acknowledges that climate change is a common concern of humankind and that Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, the empowerment of women and intergenerational equity, and acknowledging the need to respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on the right to life, the right to food, the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, the rights of children, youth, peasants, and people living in developing States, least developed countries and small island developing States, and in conditions of water scarcity, desertification, land degradation and drought, as well as the empowerment of girls (resolution 59/25 – HRC, 2025).

This positions gender equality and women's rights as fundamental considerations in climate action (alongside the other groups and rights mentioned) and it highlights that states have obligations to protect women's rights. The rest of the resolution text aligns with the Paris Agreement and calls for specific technical climate goals and measures.

References to gender equality and women’s rights in the resolution texts from 2022 to 2025 also emphasise the disproportionate impacts of climate change on vulnerable people:

Expressing concern that, while these implications affect individuals and communities around the world, the adverse effects of climate change are felt most acutely by those segments of the population that are already in vulnerable situations owing to factors such as geography, poverty, gender, age, race, ethnicity, Indigenous or minority status where applicable, national or social origin, birth or other status, and disability, among others (resolution 59/25 – HRC, 2025).

Women are repeatedly characterised as being made vulnerable by their identity (analysed more fully in section 4.4) and as experiencing negative impacts of climate change.

4.2 Resolution on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment

The importance of gender equality is repeated in the resolution on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. This passed for the first time in 2021, led by Costa Rica, the Maldives, Morocco, Slovenia and Switzerland. The resolution was not discussed at the HRC in 2022 as it was under consideration at UNGA, nor in 2024 when the Special Rapporteur Mandate was renewed instead.

This resolution takes a broader environmental perspective instead of focusing narrowly on climate change, but it does recognise the detrimental impact of climate change and environmental degradation on women and girls. It largely follows the same framework and language as the annual resolution on human rights and climate change – it recognises the disproportionate impacts of environmental damage on vulnerable people including women and girls, and it calls for greater investment in grassroots women’s environmental organisations and accelerated gender-responsive action plans.

4.3 Women’s participation in gender-responsive climate policy

The above two resolutions also call for women’s participation in climate decision-making and in national and international policy. They note the need for women’s participation in climate decision-making spaces and in climate response activities, and they stress the need for gender-responsive climate policy.

Welcoming the latest report of the Special Rapporteur, on the issue of women, girls and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and recognizing the intersectional forms of discrimination that women and girls face, the importance of gender equality, gender-responsive action to address climate change and environmental degradation, and the empowerment,

leadership, decision-making and meaningful participation of women and girls and their role as managers, leaders, environmental human rights defenders and agents of change in conserving, protecting and restoring the environment (resolution 52/23 – HRC, 2023a).

Goals on women’s participation in climate and environmental action align with the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement. While the HRC cannot mandate women’s participation, it makes strong recommendations on taking a gender perspective in policy and on facilitating women’s engagement as a pathway to more effective climate action. Of the resolutions reviewed, these recommendations appear most strongly in the annual resolution on human rights and climate change and in the resolution on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Women’s participation is less clearly recommended in the rest of the dataset.

4.4 Critique of the vulnerability narrative

The resolutions emphasise a protectionist approach to addressing gender and climate issues and therefore invite feminist critique. All resolutions on climate change and human rights reviewed for this study characterise women and girls as victims and as vulnerable to climate change (Mayrhofer, 2024). This is true even where the resolutions also identify women’s leadership as a pathway for more effective climate action.

The leverage of victimhood has been criticised by feminists, who have pointed out that this does not address structural inequalities nor promote women’s agency (Hefti, 2024; Mayrhofer, 2024). Vulnerability to climate change is used in the resolutions to imply suffering, distress, risk and possible abuse.

Recognizing that livelihoods in rural areas, particularly of rural women and girls, are disproportionately affected by poverty, violence and climate change, as well as by a lack of development, access to safe drinking water and sanitation, access to scientific progress and recognition of peasants’ contribution to science (resolution 54/09 – HRC, 2023b)

This resolution on the rights of peasants recognises the risk posed by climate change specifically to women and girls. The positioning of climate change next to poverty and violence suggests a vortex of compounding negative effects. 24 out of the 28 resolutions passed in 2022–2025 that address the gender–climate nexus (Table 1) emphasise the vulnerability of women and girls in the context of climate change.

Leveraging vulnerability is to be expected in a forum that calls for attention to human rights violations, but this is a protectionist and disempowering gender analysis. Although it is necessary to establish victim status to bring legal cases on climate change impacts to court, care must be taken to empower marginalised groups rather than to stereotype them (Hefti, 2024).

In the resolutions reviewed, women and girls are often described as victims in need of state protection from climate change, which is conceptualised as a problem to be addressed. Meanwhile, the perpetrators and the structures that enable the associated risks are ignored and women's and girl's agency is overlooked (Mayrhofer, 2024). By comparison, the UNFCCC, which has an action-oriented and legally binding approach, is able to make more affirmative resolutions about women's roles in decision-making and on gender equality in a just transition. The UNFCCC addresses equal participation in climate decision-making, tracks the participation of delegates in negotiations and UNFCCC elective posts, and appoints national gender and climate change focal points for climate negotiations, implementation and monitoring.

On occasion, a resolution has pushed the boundaries of language and international agreement. Resolution 54/19 on the realisation of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl is one example. Presented in 2023 by the United Arab Emirates and the UK, this resolution counters the protectionist language mentioned above by identifying girls' education as a pathway for women's participation in climate decision-making:

Recognizing further the transformative potential of access to free, safe, inclusive and quality education and lifelong learning in developing girls into powerful leaders and agents of change for tackling and responding to the impacts of climate change, as girls' education has been identified as one of the most important socioeconomic determinants in reducing vulnerability to climate change, with every additional year of schooling for girls leading to significant improvements in a country's overall resilience to climate-related disasters.

...

To recognize that discriminatory gender norms deny girls the enjoyment of their right to education, prevent them from fulfilling their leadership potential as agents of change and undermine opportunities to tackle climate change, environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity (Resolution 54/19 – HRC, 2023c).

This recognition of the transformative potential of education for women's leadership is unusual compared to other climate-related resolutions that treat gender as a vulnerability. So too is resolution 54/19's recognition of gender norms as the source of inequality. The resolution demonstrates that when there is political will and the right window of opportunity, more progressive agreements can be reached.

5 Conclusion

This briefing paper provides a snapshot of how the HRC considers gender equality and climate action together as a nexus issue, based on our review of the 28 resolutions passed between 2022 and 2025 (sessions 49 to 60) that contain keywords on both.

The HRC has successfully defended gender equality and women's and girls' rights against ongoing attacks from gender-restrictive actors. It has also been successful in bringing a human rights lens to international climate policy. Studied together, we find that gender equality features strongly in the HRC's engagement on climate and it has done since the Council began its work on the environment in 2008. Climate change does not feature so strongly in resolutions primarily focused on gender equality, however, although it is beginning to occur as part of the scene-setting of the polycrisis that impacts women's and girls' rights. This difference in coverage may exist because gender is mainstreamed in the HRC while climate change is not. When climate issues do feature in resolutions on other themes, it is because of significant political will and commitment to the cause.

However, the principal lens used in resolutions characterises women and girls as vulnerable to adverse and disproportionate impacts of climate change. While this is an expected characterisation to motivate action on human rights violations, it can be disempowering and it overlooks the patriarchal structures and gender norms that produce gender inequality. It also ignores the agency and productive capacity of marginalised groups to tackle climate change. Unless vulnerability is understood as an outcome of structural inequality, this approach potentially prompts a protectionist response rather than structural transformation.

Alongside this characterisation, HRC resolutions reviewed in this study call for women's and girls' inclusion in policy as decision-makers and for a gender-responsive approach to climate policy. These are mainstream requests, however, building on approaches in the UNFCCC and other spaces. Given the current political backsliding on both gender equality and climate action, this may be a strategic 'lowest common denominator' approach to bring together the greatest number of actors.

As backlash, delayism and norm-spoiling threaten to stall or even reverse hard-won commitments on gender equality and climate action, further research will be extremely valuable on how gender and climate are brought together by those who advocate for concerted action. This briefing paper, part of a portfolio of work by ODI Global, is a first step in mapping how the gender-climate nexus is negotiated in the HRC.

This analysis could be deepened to examine the politics of how outcomes are negotiated and which countries support and resist. Also of interest is how advocates identify which multilateral forum is most appropriate or likely to result in success, how they build alliances and how states

respond to changes in law and recommendations. It is promising to observe that unusually progressive outcomes, like resolution 54/19 on the right to education by every girl, are possible and it would also be beneficial to understand how and why these negotiations proved to be successful. Such commitments by the HRC to viewing gender and climate as a nexus issue should be extended and protected.

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ODI Global

4 Millbank
London SW1P 3JA, UK

+44 (0)20 7922 0300
info@odi.org

odi.org
www.linkedin.com/company/odi/
bsky.app/profile/odi.global
