Report

Advancing gender rights at the Human Rights Council in times of backlash

Strategies from the 59th session

Ayesha Khan[ID] and Ján Michalko[ID]

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ADF	Alliance Defending Freedom
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	civil society organisation
ESCR	economic, social and cultural rights
EU	European Union
FGM	female genital mutilation
GRULAC	The Group of Latin America and Caribbean Countries
HRC	Human Rights Council
IE SOGI	Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity
IGO	intergovernmental organisation
LGBTQI+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and other non-normative sexual orientations and identities
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
SOGI	sexual orientation and gender identity
SOGIESC	sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics
SR-VAWG	Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls
SRHR	sexual and reproductive health and rights
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
US	United States
VAWG	violence against women and girls
WEOG	Western European and Others Group

Executive summary

This report on negotiations during the 59th session of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (HRC or 'the Council') in June–July 2025 identifies how changes to the global geopolitical context are shaping gender-related negotiations at the HRC, and how negotiators from its Member States can hold the line on gender equality. It finds that states deployed many strategies to successfully advance gender equality norms, despite often polarised positions and increasing financial and political constraints.

Methodology

The data collection involved mixed methods, including 12 key informant interviews (with negotiators and representatives from civil society and international governmental organisations), resolution text tracing and direct participant observations of the June–July informal discussions during the session. The report provides an overview of the broader geopolitical context, which involves increasing pushback against gender issues among some Member States, often connected to attempts to delegitimise multilateralism, human rights and democracy (UN Women, 2024; Khan et al., 2023; Brechenmacher, 2025).

It then turns to an analysis of negotiations for four key gender-related resolutions:

- Accelerating efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: prevention through the fulfilment of economic, social and cultural rights (VAWG) RES59/20.
- Elimination of female genital mutilation (FGM) RES/59/16.
- Empowering women and girls in and through sport (Sports) RES/59/17.
- Renewal of the mandate of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (IE SOGI) RES/59/5.

Terminology

The analysis introduces the concept of 'gender expansive' to denote states which hold positions that are commonly referred to as 'progressive', or seeking to expand the range of human rights of women and girls, to include their rights to bodily autonomy, to access sexual and reproductive health services, and to participate in decisions that affect their lives, as well as sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) related human rights. The term 'progressive' is avoided because their views on many related issues of concern are not viewed as progressive universally. The term 'gender restrictive' (Martínez et al., 2021) describes states which do not seek normative advancement for gender equality at the same pace and scale as the 'expansive' states, e.g. they often disagree with normative advancement on sexual and reproductive rights and SOGI-related rights. We also recognise some states as 'middle ground'; their stance on gender equality and rights are negotiable on specific issues.

Key successes

Overall, multilateralism prevailed during the 59th session, despite being in crisis. Member States remained engaged in deliberations. Many negotiations were seen as less polarised and more amicable in comparison to 2024 sessions, partially because of individual diplomats' skills. Achievements included successful resolutions and the renewal of Special Procedures mandates,

with evidence that penholders (the delegation responsible for drafting texts and steering negotiations of resolutions) and sponsors (states that lend their support to a resolution and participate in negotiations) prioritised holding ground that had been gained towards advancing progressive gender language.

The violence against women and girls (VAWG) resolution successfully signalled to global majority countries that the Western European and Others Group was able to incorporate the concerns of global majority countries by using the lenses of economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) to frame the resolution for the first time. The Sports resolution removed language unacceptable to gender-expansive states because it reinforced sex binaries. It even passed by consensus. The female genital mutilation (FGM) resolution, for the first time, recognised the issue as a form of gender-based discrimination and violence, a violation of human rights, a form of abuse, and an extreme form of gender-based VAWG. Through successful African Group-led negotiations, it regained political support that was lost in 2022. The renewal of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (IE SOGI) mandate was achieved with an unexpectedly large margin of voter support.

Challenges to gender equality norms

The decreasing financial support for the UN (not least from the United States), the development sector and national programmes has severely set back the institutionalisation of gender equality (Goetz, 2019, 2020; George and Gulrajani, 2023; McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023). The June session saw further pressure to cut down the Council's costs in response to the funding crisis and liquidity challenges, reduction in time for negotiation and debate, and concerns about transparency in financial decision-making.

Socially and politically conservative organisations work together with allied states at the UN in what scholars call the active 'norm-spoiling' (Sanders, 2018) of gender equality and 'reactionary anti-feminist norm building' (Sanders and Jenkins, 2025). They specifically target language related to sexual and reproductive rights and SOGI. They work across religious divides (conservative Islamic, Catholic and Evangelical Christian) to roll back commitments made in outcome documents of UN conferences, expert reviews and conventions. This trend was exacerbated during the June session, with a familiar playbook of contestations over expansive language deployed by delegates from Russia, Argentina, the Arab Group of states, and the Holy See emerging during the informal discussions. The growing influence of civil society organisations (CSOs) in support of gender-restrictive negotiation positions, such as that of the Alliance Defending Freedom International, undercut the traditionally gender-expansive advocacy influence of CSOs at the Council.

Strategies for success

The research identified five strategies that contributed to the successful achievement of the objectives for the resolutions examined during the June session, based on an analysis of interviews with all research participants:

1. **Crafting broader political coalitions of support with middle-ground states.** The co-penholder of the FGM resolution, Ghana, helped to strengthen the African Group's position on gender at the Council. Both Ghana and Burkina Faso, as middle-ground countries,

assumed responsibility during the draft preparation process to bring the resolution back to strength with African Union support, which proved essential to achieving broad-based political support on a key issue that affects women on the continent. The penholder leading the VAWG resolution negotiations, Canada, used the bilateral negotiations to achieve support from middle-ground states to ensure progressive language would be included in the text.

2. **Addressing global and systemic inequalities.** Many global majority states protest their exclusion from structures of power and access to resources by the 'hegemonic' global minority (largely Global North or western) states, which lead the gender-expansive agenda. Thus, addressing grievances related to structural inequalities in international gender diplomacy can contribute to depolarising negotiations (de Silva, 2024: 4). In an example of this, the June session saw some progress related to the right to development, including language incorporated in the FGM resolution to acknowledge the right to development as integral to the achievement of human rights. The VAWG resolution was framed with an ESCR theme to support bridge-building with Member States who argue that civil and political rights cannot be furthered without attention to social and economic inequalities.

3. **Using expertise from civil society and the UN to inform the negotiation process**. For both the FGM resolution (during the preparation of the zero draft and its revisions) and the VAWG resolution, penholders engaged with leading gender equality advocacy CSOs that advance the demands of grassroots campaigners around the world, as well as with technical experts from the UN. This helped to ensure, for example, that a focus on the prevention of VAWG and the ESCR theme supported bridge-building across states. For the IE SOGI mandate, this approach ensured that the core group received expert advice to implement a technical rollover strategy to achieve the mandate renewal, instead of engaging in debates over contested language.

4. **Bilateral outreach for constructive negotiations.** The hard work of crafting agreed language on gender took place during bilateral negotiations, permitting nuanced but candid conversations in private. Recognising that states were coming from very different positions on some language in the VAWG resolution, the bilateral negotiations ensured that discussions could remain productive. They succeeded in finding agreed language, such as on 'the family'. Recognising their differences helped diplomats craft the 'consensus', side-stepping the need to vote on the resolution and maintaining a constructive spirit of engagement.

5. **Strategic prioritising of issues.** There were two main areas of pragmatic strategising during the June session. First, there was a willingness among missions to prioritise securing wider political support for resolutions over efforts to achieve normative advancement through the recognition or expansion of rights related to sexual and reproductive health and SOGI issues. Second, many influential negotiators across the spectrum of positions on contested gender norms attempted to minimise their 'red lines' to ensure the resolutions passed, and preferably without a vote being called.

Conclusion

This study of the June session adds to the growing body of evidence that advancing normative standards on gender at the Council is highly contested and subject to fierce opposition by a growing number of gender-restrictive actors. Less apparent, however, was rhetoric to undermine multilateralism itself, with states engaged vigorously in negotiations. This suggests that the Council is still a relevant and credible space for Member States.

The playbook of contested language, while influential, is not adopted in its totality even by conservative states, suggesting there remains room for future negotiations to continue productively.

The double standards among states around addressing inequalities did generate some unresolved tensions during negotiations. But there were also efforts to address social and economic inequalities, which, if sustained, can help to reduce polarisation and encourage states to find a middle ground on gender issues.

The findings indicate that governments are adopting a pragmatic approach to human rights norm advancement which may be replacing the western-dominated model and signals possible ways forward. The emerging role of the United States as a leading global gender-restrictive state with considerable economic and political influence over potential middle-ground states in future requires close tracking.

Remaining aware of a government's political calculations, including domestic ones, around its gender positions will help to predict the behaviour of Council members in the new global context and support middle-ground states to develop gender-expansive positions.

There is still room to build broader political support for gender equality at the Council. A focus on advancing rights related to women's economic empowerment, education and political inclusion, which enjoy broader political support, can lead to normative progress despite ongoing financial and political challenges.

1 Introduction

This report responds to the multiple crises facing gender equality. These are shaped by the waning political support for efforts led by United Nations (UN) agencies, governments and feminists around the world to advance women's rights and progress norms and policies for gender equality (UN Women, 2024). The current delegitimisation of multilateralism and human rights norms, challenges to democracy, and extreme wealth inequality have strengthened the drivers of pushback against gender equality (Khan et al., 2023; Brechenmacher, 2025). Countries across the global majority world face collapsing funding for development programmes and a loss of political support for rights-based programmes and policies from long-standing western allies. The UN agencies built a global consensus over decades to advance the human rights of women, girls and people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).[1] After decades of effort, these agencies are suffering a loss of legitimacy and relevance today (Global Philanthropy Project, 2020; George and Gulrajani, 2023; Mayer and Goetz, 2023; McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023). Feminists are left to advance their claims with reduced funds and in shrinking civic spaces.

The project of gender equality has always been politically instrumentalised based on national, regional or geopolitical interests that often have little to do with the human rights of women, girls and people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (SOGI) (Chané and Sharma, 2016; Freedman and Houghton, 2017). In addition, since the 1970s, conservative opposition to this project, emanating from the United States (US), Russia and the Vatican, and including religious organisations with transnational reach, have challenged the inclusive and expanding human rights approach led by feminists, LGBTQI+ movements and liberal states (Faludi, 1991; McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023; Khan and Sharp, 2025). Their influence has grown today, generating what is now referred to as a 'backlash' against gender equality, and further polarising politicised debates. Today, 'gender' has become a flashpoint that brings together conservative political forces to create 'moral panic' among the public (Martínez et al., 2021). In this rapidly evolving context, stakeholders struggle to respond.

To counter the backlash, a first step will be to rebuild political support for gender equality based on human rights. Timely evidence of how gender is contested in policy spaces can indicate how to move beyond polarisation and build stronger bridges with allies. This report asks what strategies states used to advance gender equality norms despite polarised positions at the Human Rights Council (HRC or 'the Council') in 2025. It examines the negotiations around four resolutions at the 59th session of the Council (held in Geneva between 16 June and 8 July 2025; also referred to as 'the June session'), which features the most gender-related resolutions of the year. These are the resolutions on: (1) violence against women and girls (VAWG), (2) female

1 The terms sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) and sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) include, but are not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI+) persons (Council of Europe, n.d.).

genital mutilation (FGM), (3) sports, and (4) the renewal of the mandate of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on SOGI (IE SOGI). The analysis shows where strategies enabled some achievements, and the report makes key recommendations for policy-makers, activists and diplomats as they look ahead.

The report begins with an overview of the broader geopolitical context against which success must be assessed (Section 1.1). It then turns to the research methodology used to study the June session (Section 2). Section 3 outlines the key details and successes in relation to the four resolutions, and Section 4 addresses the challenges faced by those seeking to advance progressive gender norms through the HRC. This is followed by a detailed discussion of how the successes were made possible despite the ongoing contestations around gender issues and other challenges at the Council (Section 5).

1.1 Context

This section outlines the role of the HRC and discusses why advancing human rights for gender equality has historically been highly political.

The HRC and its challenges

Established as a subsidiary of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 2006, the HRC has an ambitious agenda, based on principles of universality, impartiality and transparency, to promote dialogue and global cooperation to advance human rights. It is also tasked with avoiding the politicisation of its precursor, the UN Commission on Human Rights, established in 1946 (Freedman and Houghton, 2017).

Today, the HRC is the leading intergovernmental human rights body globally (Sweeney, 2023). Its 47 Member States are elected by the UNGA for three-year terms, based on representation by regional groups (see Table 1). The Council runs the Universal Periodic Review to assess the human rights record of all individual UN Member States, and appoints Special Procedures, such as Special Rapporteurs, Working Groups and Independent Experts (also referred to as 'Special Procedures mandate holders'), to report on thematic areas and individual countries (Swartz and Skelton, 2025). Most notably, it adopts resolutions and decisions on human rights.[2]

As an intergovernmental body, the Council is structurally political, despite its success in advancing human rights norms. States use it for politicised objectives – for example, to protect allies from closer examination of their human rights records and to target others, or use the debates for political reasons not related to Council objectives (Freedman and Houghton, 2017).

2 The Council also has an advisory committee to provide expert advice on thematic issues and a complaint procedure for people or organisations to draw attention to violations of human rights. It also holds special sessions or crisis meetings and can hold commissions of inquiry or fact-finding missions into war crimes and crimes against humanity (OHCHR, 2025e).

Table 1 Human Rights Council Member States (by regional group) 2025

Regional group	Member States 2025	Term expiry
African Group	Algeria, Morocco, South Africa,* Sudan	2025
	Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Malawi	2026
	Benin, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gambia, Kenya	2027
Asia-Pacific Group	Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Viet Nam*	2025
	China, Indonesia, Japan, Kuwait	2026
	Cyprus, Marshall Islands, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Thailand	2027
Eastern European Group	Georgia, Romania	2025
	Albania, Bulgaria	2026
	Czechia, North Macedonia	2027
Latin American and Caribbean Group (GRULAC)	Chile,* Costa Rica	2025
	Brazil, Cuba, Dominican Republic	2026
	Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico	2027
Western European and Others Group (WEOG)	Belgium, Germany	2025
	France, Netherlands	2026
	Iceland, Spain, Switzerland	2027

Source: OHCHR (2025d).

* These countries were elected for their second consecutive mandate in October 2025 to serve until 2028.

The geographic groupings in Table 1 do not reveal the political coalitions that shape negotiation outcomes. States which belong to cross-regional groups such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Arab Group, along with the African Group,[3] do not share the same positions on human rights of women, girls and SOGI minorities that European Union (EU) Member States may advance at the Council (Chané and Sharma, 2016). States from the Group of Latin America and the Caribbean (GRULAC) cannot be easily aligned with the views of these dominant political groups and may play a mediating role on more polarising issues. The OIC may be more powerful than the EU or GRULAC due to the number of its Member States and their political and economic influence (Chané and Sharma, 2016).

States with membership in multiple groups strategically use their allies to win support and stall action (Freedman and Houghton, 2017). There is a long practice of selectively 'naming and shaming' states based on geopolitical objectives not related to the human rights norms under debate (Terman and Byun, 2022; Meyerrose and Nooruddin, 2023). Wealthier states, including some from the Arab Group, are critiqued for using their financial contributions as a tool of influence (King and Pousadela, 2025).

Political groups comprising states largely outside the Global North may use arguments based on the principle of state sovereignty to resist scrutiny of their human rights record and domestic laws. Many are criticised for seeing the Council more as a 'forum for addressing historical inequalities and rebalancing global power' than for the enforcement of human rights norms (King and Pousadela, 2025: 14). Along with China and Russia, they are also more likely to avoid discussions

3 Cross-regional groups have many shared Member States. For example, Morocco, Benin and the Gambia belong to both OIC and the African Group, while Qatar and Kuwait are OIC and Arab Group members. For full group listings, see: www.oic-oci.org/states/?lan=en; www.africanunion-un.org/africangroup; and https://unfccc.int/party-groupings

of Council reforms that would lead to greater transparency and civil society participation (King and Pousadela, 2025). Scholars have found that a growing number of states where democratic institutions are being eroded (referred to as 'backsliding', see next section) are using their influence to undermine the international human rights regime (Meyerrose and Nooruddin, 2023).

Advancing normative standards on gender equality

Advancing normative standards on the human rights of women, girls and SOGIESC minorities is a highly political process at the Council. The expansion of human rights norms related to gender has largely involved states from the Western European and Others Group (WEOG) and GRULAC, particularly in current efforts to recognise SOGI rights. These norm 'entrepreneurs' seek to advance new norms on the global and domestic policy agendas (Mulé et al., 2018; Kuteleva, 2024).

Norm 'antipreneurs' defend the 'status quo' to resist the expansion of gender-related rights by norm 'entrepreneurs' (Bloomfield, 2015). Many states resist this normative advancement, including members of all the groups shown in Table 1, often led by Russia and now supported by the US. Some governments justify their opposition based on a commitment to upholding cultural and religious values or protecting the right to national sovereignty, and, therefore, to legislating on gender-related issues domestically (Stoeckl and Medvedeva, 2018; Voss, 2018, 2019, 2022; Jordaan, 2024; Bias, 2025; Carrano Lelis, 2025).

UN Member States opposed to what is often viewed as a 'western' approach in the HRC include China, Egypt, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. They are strengthened by other actors, such as Russia, not currently a member, the Holy See, which holds an observer status, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) accredited by the UN Economic and Social Council (Symons and Altman, 2015; Bias, 2025). Most of these states are also members of the Group of the Friends of the Family,[4] a political coalition of UN Member States, and the well-known conservative civil society organisations (CSOs) C-Fam (Center for Family and Human Rights) and Family Watch International. The Group of the Friends of the Family advocates for the (heteronormative and nuclear) family as a natural social unit that is entitled to social and state protection. Many states have also joined the conservative Geneva Consensus Declaration, led by the US-based Institute for Women's Health and endorsed by the US Government (Ipas, 2024; Institute for Women's Health, 2025).

States' positions on gender issues at the global level are often linked with domestic considerations. States may resist new norms if they fear implementation could undermine their identities or interest groups at home (Symons and Altman, 2015) or they may use norm entrepreneurship to signal their identity to domestic populations (Wiseman, 2022). While some states are well known for their positions, others can be characterised as 'middle-ground states', meaning they change their positions on debates around gender equality depending on the specific resolution under discussion (Chané and Sharma, 2016). Kazakhstan, a member of the

4 The Group consists of almost 30 Member States including Egypt, Indonesia, Qatar and Russia. For full listing as of 2024, see: https://estatements.unmeetings.org/estatements/31.0010/20240205100000000/jW8wglpBGoMa/leaxasD2HYhY_en.pdf

Council 2022–2024, faces significant concern over its domestic human rights record, yet tabled a successful resolution on the elimination of domestic violence together with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan that was co-sponsored by over 60 states (Kazinform International News Agency, 2024; Atadjanov, 2025).

The political weaponisation of gender issues is associated with contemporary democratic backsliding. Backsliding states dismantle or erode the institutions that underpin democracy, such as the rule of law, judicial and parliamentary independence, media freedom, and open civic space (Meyerrose and Nooruddin, 2023). These governments also silence the voices of women and LGBTQI+ rights advocacy groups in critical policy spaces, often by directly threatening their security or restricting their work on the ground (Mulé, 2018; Voss, 2022; Pruth and Zillén, 2023).

Backsliding states may selectively focus on types of human rights issues 'that better align with their domestic interests' (Meyerrose and Nooruddin, 2023: 133). The right to development, technology transfer, and the rights of Palestinians living under foreign occupation are key examples of such flashpoints, rooted in long-standing debates around how to create a more just international order and reduce inequality (Dehm, 2018; Sweeney, 2023; King and Pousadela, 2025). These rights are often advanced by states opposed to advancing gender equality norms and strongly resisted by western states during negotiations. These contestations provide evidence of double standards in states' political practice and undermine the universality and consensual nature of Council decisions (Ghosal, 2010; Ibhawoh, 2011).

It is in this context that this research explores how diplomats navigated gender negotiations in June 2025.

2 Methodology

This study was driven by two key objectives: (1) to identify how changes to the global geopolitical context and the rise of gender-restrictive actors are shaping gender-related negotiations at the HRC; and (2) to study how negotiators from various Member States can hold the line on gender equality. It asks what strategies states used to advance gender equality norms despite polarised positions at the HRC in 2025. The data collection involved mixed methods, including key informant interviews, resolution text tracing and direct participant observations of the June–July informals.[5]

The research design was informed by 12 background interviews and discussed with stakeholders during an in-person, Geneva-based workshop. The methodology was revised based on their feedback, to ensure the research expands existing knowledge, builds on the track record of civil society, and supports diplomats with practical and actionable insights.

The research was reviewed and approved by the ODI Research Ethics Committee. To protect confidentiality, participants are referred to only by their country's regional affiliation or by the type of stakeholder organisation they represent. Insights that could negatively harm a stakeholder or their group are not presented.

The research followed a sequential process, starting with in-person and remote participant observations of the June session informals for a select number of resolutions, and observations of plenary discussions and side events. Observations were accompanied by textual tracing of resolution drafts from the earliest draft (known as 'zero draft') through to the final adopted text. Table 2 summarises the four key resolutions which are the focus of this study. Additional resolutions, such as on women's economic empowerment and education, which were also negotiated at the session, supplement this analysis.

5 Informal negotiation sessions, known as 'informals', are organised by the penholder delegation and core group members responsible for a resolution. In these sessions, the core group presents the draft text (and its revisions), and provides rationale behind chosen wording, thematic emphasis or legal frameworks referenced. Delegations declare their positions, counterproposals or support for the text. Human rights bodies, UN agencies and civil society are allowed to comment. Each resolution should, according to the rules of procedure, be read fully during informals at least once. This may require several informals, depending on the length of the text and number of comments that delegations want to raise (there were nine informals to discuss the VAWG resolution while the SOGI mandate renewal had just one). Informals are intended to increase transparency by allowing delegations to state their positions and 'red lines' in front of each other.

Table 2 Overview of case study resolutions

Full title (and shorthand title) of the resolution with resolution number	Submitted by*	Outcome: adoption and amendments
Accelerating efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: prevention through the fulfilment of economic, social and cultural rights (VAWG) RES59/20	Canada	Passed by consensus; three amendments tabled by Bahrain – all voted down; three amendments tabled by Russia – all withdrawn
Elimination of female genital mutilation (FGM) RES/59/16	Ghana (on behalf of the Group of African States)	Passed by consensus; no amendments
Empowering women and girls in and through sport (Sports) RES/59/17	Indonesia, Morocco, Qatar	Passed by consensus; no amendments
Mandate of Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (IE SOGI) RES/59/5	Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Uruguay	Passed by a vote (Y:29; N:15; A: 3); no amendments

Source: OHCRH (2025d)
* Member States that submit a resolution do not have to be current members of the Council, for example, Canada.

The second phase of the research consisted of key informant interviews, summarised in Table 3. The missions included in the study represented diverse geographical and gender perspectives, while the included CSOs had extensive track records in gender equality issues in Geneva.

Intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) came from the UN system. Existing networks were used to identify the participants and to complement the insights from stakeholders consulted during the research design.

Table 3 Summary of key informant interviews

Key informants	Number of participants
Negotiators* from GRULAC countries	2
Negotiators from WEOG countries	2
Negotiators from OIC countries	2
CSO representatives	4
IGO staff	2
Total	**12**

* Negotiators are representatives of the Member States at the Council. While some are diplomats, others are experts or local staff without diplomatic credentials.

2.1 Limitations

The study has two key limitations. First, it was only possible to follow a small number of resolutions, because informal negotiations take place concurrently. Second, the study was limited by the availability of the diplomats and their willingness to participate. Future research would benefit from further exploration of gender resistance in resolutions that are not explicitly focused on gender, and in other UN institutions.

2.2 Terminology

This report uses the term 'gender expansive' to denote states which hold positions that are commonly referred to as 'progressive', or seeking to expand the range of human rights of women and girls, to include their rights to bodily autonomy, to access sexual and reproductive health services, and to participate in decisions that affect their lives, as well as SOGI-related human rights. The term 'progressive' is avoided in describing these states, because their views on many related issues of concern, such as addressing socioeconomic inequalities or political conflict through a human rights lens, are not viewed as progressive universally.

The term 'gender restrictive' (Martínez et al., 2021) is used to denote states which do not seek normative advancement for gender equality at the same pace and scale as the 'expansive' states. Most do seek to expand the range of human rights of women and girls, especially as they relate to protection from violence and access to employment and education, but they often disagree with normative advancement on sexual and reproductive rights and SOGIESC-related rights. These states may also often seek normative advancement to redress socioeconomic inequality and global minority political power over other states during negotiations at the UN, which they argue addresses systemic inequalities that restrict the exercise of human rights. Thus 'gender restrictive' is a more accurate and nuanced term. It does not reinforce polarisation and recognises that these states want to advance some human rights norms related to the rights of women and girls but in limited and specific ways.

This conceptualisation permits us to identify some states as 'middle ground', whose stance on gender equality and rights are negotiable on specific issues. These states' position on the continuum of restrictive–expansive therefore depends on the specific issue. Understanding these nuances is essential, therefore, for any resolution's success. If a state is falsely labelled as gender regressive, not middle ground, it can undermine the negotiation and limit the possibility for broader issue-based, cross-regional coalitions.

The next section first summarises the achievements for gender equality in the June session, based on the objectives of resolutions analysed. It then identifies the challenges and contextual factors that negotiators faced, before examining how they shaped their strategies for success.

3 Key successes

The June session advanced gender equality through some key achievements, identified through an inductive analysis of the data. Overall, multilateralism prevailed despite being in crisis, with Member States remaining engaged in deliberations (IGO 2; WEOG 2). Many of the negotiations were seen as less polarised and more amicable in comparison to 2024 sessions, partially because of individual diplomats' skills.

Achievements included successful resolutions and the renewal of Special Procedures mandates, with evidence that penholders (the delegation responsible for drafting texts and steering negotiations of resolutions) and sponsors (states that lend their support to a resolution and participate in negotiations) prioritised holding ground that had been gained towards advancing progressive gender language.

This research focused on four resolutions, which include one mandate renewal. These are introduced in Sections 3.1–3.4 through summaries of the main objectives and markers of success for each.

3.1 The VAWG resolution

The objective of the VAWG resolution was to signal to global majority countries that WEOG states should also prioritise ESCR, focus on prevention, and engage more global majority countries in gender equality using this lens. This was the first time that a VAWG resolution used ESCR as its focus, with previous resolutions focused on specific types of violence or contexts in which such violence takes place. Because there is a strong global consensus in support of eliminating VAWG, the 2025 resolution showcased this new ESCR focus without being at high risk of being put to a vote (WEOG 2; OIC 1).

The outcome was viewed by the gender-expansive WEOG members as an advance on norms and standards at the Council (WEOG 2). The resolution did pass by consensus, although opinions about the significance of no vote being called varied among Member States. The process showed constructive spirit of engagement is possible, although some gender-restrictive states (see Section 4.2) maintain that it is overstating the success of the process to conclude it was agreed by consensus (OIC 1 and 2). For the first time, the term 'sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)' was a standalone reference, rather than used in reference to programmes only (CSO 1; WEOG 2). The term 'sexual and gender-based violence' was retained in 13 mentions throughout the resolution but reduced from 25 in the original draft (WEOG 2). The 'Preventable maternal mortality and morbidity and human rights' resolution in the 60th session further consolidated expansive SRHR references (HRC, 2025b).

3.2 The Sports resolution

From the perspective of gender-expansive actors, the objective of the Sports resolution was to hold the line and ensure that existing standards of human rights were not diluted. This meant removing language that reinforces sex binaries and undermines the concept of gender-based power inequalities, including reference to males and females or discrimination on the basis of sex. This resolution must be viewed within broader anti-trans mobilisations in sports at the HRC and beyond – see, for example, the report by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls (SR-VAWG, 2024) – or what one participant described as global trans-panic and hysteria (CSO 4). While amendments to

restrictive language, such as reference to female and male athletes, were achieved, the reference to gender was reduced to only one mention, a success from the perspective of the gender-restrictive stakeholders (OIC 2). The resolution passed by consensus and achieved some co-sponsorship from GRULAC countries.

3.3 The FGM resolution

The main objective of this resolution was to achieve wider co-sponsorship from Member States, an important signifier of global political support. In 2022, when the resolution was previously tabled, the European Union (EU) bloc brought so many issues to incorporate (e.g. inclusion of language such as 'gender-responsive approaches' and 'gender-based discrimination and violence') that significant pushback was generated. The resolution lost some political support because much of this more contentious, but expansive, language failed to be incorporated.

The theme of digital technologies as a tool to eliminate FGM was selected for the resolution because it was a less controversial entry point for a gender-related debate. The use of digital technology, relevant due its growing impact, strategically oriented the resolution from the perspective of digital inclusion. It incorporated a forward-looking approach to the use of this technology to eliminate FGM.

In June 2025, the sponsors increased to 54 from the African Group, with 41 additional sponsors (total: 97) (HRC, 2025c). The co-sponsors waited until 2025 as a more optimal time than 2023 to table this resolution, when more upheaval and pushback had been anticipated on gender resolutions (CSO 3). The final version incorporated new and stronger language, recognising FGM as a global issue (CSO 3; GRULAC 1). In a breakthrough for gender-expansive negotiators, the resolution defined FGM as a form of gender-based discrimination and violence, a violation of human rights, a form of abuse, and an extreme form of gender-based VAWG (IGO 1).

3.4 The IE SOGI mandate renewal

The IE SOGI mandate was originally established by HRC resolution 32/2 in 2016. To minimise the risk of losing the mandate, the sponsors of the resolution for its renewal at the 59th session approached it as a 'technical rollover'. This means that, unlike previous resolutions on the mandate, resolution 59/5 was not accompanied by a report; neither did it strive to achieve significant gender-expansive normative advancements. It only sought to extend the mandate.

While it was expected that the renewal would be put to a vote by OIC states, and that it would be successfully approved, many CSOs and delegations saw the success of this resolution in the large margin of the votes, with 29 states in favour, only 15 against and 3 abstaining (CSO 1; IGO 2; GRULAC 1). Additionally, some participants viewed the OIC's less combative approach to this negotiation, in comparison to previous years, as a success (GRULAC 1; WEOG 2). Many respondents generally described the 59th session as less hostile than in the past.

As the four resolutions demonstrate, the strategic objective for the gender equality agenda was to hold the line. While the VAWG and FGM resolutions sought to maintain existing norms, their objective was first and foremost to build coalitions and strengthen collaboration, especially across global minority–majority divides. On the other hand, the IE SOGI renewal sought

to preserve important UN gender equality infrastructure, while the approach of gender-expansive countries to the Sports resolution was to ensure no backsliding.

These outcomes need to be interpreted through a consideration of the highly polarised geopolitical context and ongoing challenges at the Council, outlined in the following section.

4 Challenges to gender equality norms

Political contestation over advancing progressive gender norms is at a new peak today. Existing practices and systemic features of the Council which create obstacles to expanding gender equality norms have intensified, including the Council's financial woes and contestations over gender language. Many participants found that the influencing strategies of some CSOs, which in some instances constituted harassment of negotiators, were most concerning of all.

4.1 Deepening financial crisis

The decreasing financial support for the UN (not least from the US), the development sector and national programmes has severely set back the institutionalisation of gender equality (Goetz, 2019, 2020; George and Gulrajani, 2023; McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023). The main challenges faced by the Council were recently identified as 'the non-enforceability of human rights norms, rights-violating member states, shrinking civil society access, and severe resource constraints' (King and Pousadela, 2025: 4). The UNGA review of the Council, as part of the UN80 initiative of the Secretary General to reform how the UN operates and to become more fit for the current era, are assessing its internal structure and whether it should remain a subsidiary body of the UNGA or become a principal UN body (King and Pousadela, 2025).

The June session saw further pressure to cut down the Council's costs in response to the funding crisis and liquidity challenges. This resulted in shortened discussion times, with reduced speaking time allocations for delegations and CSOs. It also led to efforts by Member States to decrease the number of new resolutions with programme budgetary implications, such as those mandating new reports and investigations. These pressures were already apparent in 2024, when the Council deferred some of its activities to 2025, as Member States delayed their payments to the Council. However, during 2025, some activities were cancelled altogether rather than postponed. While some have argued that the historical trend of the ever-prolonging duration of HRC sessions was making the Council ineffective, the current crisis is going beyond a mere course correction (Universal Rights Group, 2024; King and Pousadela, 2025).

This crisis has exacerbated two long-standing issues in Council gender negotiations. First, several participants argued that gender-restrictive states used the informals to frustrate delegates and exhaust negotiators by dominating the reduced speaking time. This has resulted in a general feeling of gender-related fatigue among some negotiators, making it more difficult for them to defend their countries' positions. Second, due to the shortened time frames, some representatives of middle-ground states and smaller missions did not have time to receive directions from their capitals (CSO 2). With limited staffing in the ministries and time zone differences, negotiators may have to act independently of their ministries. This may lead to changes in their positions during negotiations, making the process more unpredictable for core groups and penholders.

Some states consider there to be a lack of transparency in the decision-making around cuts to activities. Council decision 59/1 calls on the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to share more information about the

parameters that determine what activities receive funding (HRC, 2025a). The lack of transparency exacerbates an ongoing sense of western neocolonial 'behind the scenes' domination of the UN system and weak democratic accountability within the Council. Such debates make it more vulnerable to efforts to dismantle the international rules-based order (Tuominen, 2024; Sanders and Jenkins, 2025).

One research participant suggested that cost-cutting implications were 'instrumentalised' by various missions to remove content they oppose (CSO 1). For instance, some gender-expansive states questioned the need for the (women and) Sports resolution, given other existing resolutions on sports adopted in previous sessions. Evoking the financial constraints of the Council, they sought to push back against it. Similarly, gender-restrictive negotiators opposed the language proposed by gender-expansive states (as outlined in Box 1). They argued that tightening the scope of the resolution and not adding more gender equality issues would avoid unnecessary overlaps and inefficiencies.

4.2 Contesting gender language

Socially and politically conservative organisations work together with allied states at the UN in what scholars call the active 'norm-spoiling' (Sanders, 2018) of gender equality and 'reactionary anti-feminist norm building' (Sanders and Jenkins, 2025). They specifically target language related to sexual and reproductive rights and SOGI (see Table 4). They work across religious divides (conservative Islamic, Catholic and Evangelical Christian) to roll back commitments made in outcome documents of UN conferences, expert reviews and conventions. They often support alternative frameworks, such as the anti-abortion Geneva Consensus Declaration (Ipas and Empower, 2023a, 2023b; Ipas, 2024).

The two most powerful states that hold these positions are now the US and Russia. The US has flipped its position from leading gender equality norm expansion to resisting this under the current administration. The impact of this shift began in gender-specific frameworks, resolutions and outcome documents at the multilateral level. It has now extended to contesting gender language in multilateral agreements and institutions related to food security, intellectual property, education, climate and trade (Schott, 2024; Prentice and Craft, 2025).

Following Donald Trump's re-election, in 2025 the US left the Council and withdrew from the Universal Periodic Review. While this still leaves some Member States in the Council who support gender-expansive agendas (CSO1; IGO 2; WEOG 2) there is now a vacuum where the US used to provide technical resources and negotiating power to support them. Newly vocal states and CSOs actively promoted the restrictive views of the current US administration on gender and other human rights issues (CSO 1, 3 and 4; GRULAC 2). Some participants noted that had the US remained, it may have repeated disruptive behaviour evidenced during the Third Committee at UNGA in October 2025, from which it disengaged (US Mission to the UN, 2025b). The absence of US representation at the Council in 2025 was therefore seen as contributing to a positive environment (CSO 4; WEOG 2; GRULAC 2). It created room for other pro-equality actors to exercise leadership based on more equitable relationships with other countries (OIC 1).

At the same time, negotiators navigate several further challenges. Gender debates are highly polarised, with other key states withdrawn from effective and credible leadership for expanding gender equality norms. The capacity constraints of negotiators, particularly among missions with fewer delegates, restricts their ability to engage with the content of resolutions (Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2017). They must represent their governments' positions across a wide range of thematic areas and resolutions in meetings that have reduced the time for discussions due to funding cuts (de Silva, 2025).

Another feature of the 59th session was the continued use of technical and legal strategies to shape gender equality norms. While research about the Council tends to focus on these tactics, our participants did not identify legal battles to be particularly new but a standard feature of their work. Skilled negotiators across all missions selectively used human rights resolutions, outcome documents from key UN conferences, and references from Special Procedures and other UN reports to make their case (CSO 4; WEOG 2).

Participants noted, however, a shift in the body of international human rights law and related agreements that gender-restrictive actors accept as consensual (GRULAC 2; OIC 1; CSO 2). Consensus is highly desired within the Council, as it strengthens the power of the resolutions and the universality of norms they establish (Swartz and Skelton, 2025). In one instance during the June session, Argentina disputed the consensual nature of the Sustainable Development Goals, following the Trump administration's denouncement of them (US Mission to the UN, 2025a; CSO 2 and 3; WEOG 2). The Sustainable Development Goals were adopted through a resolution by UN Member States in 2015; however, they are not legally binding (UN, 2015). Similar arguments were made to disavow the International Labour Organization's Violence and Harassment Convention (2019), the general recommendations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and UN regional conference outcomes. These agreements are often rejected because they are not ratified or adopted by all states, passed by a vote or accepted with disassociations of specific paragraphs and clauses – or because conference outcomes and general recommendations are 'soft law' and not legally binding on states.

Negotiators may underscore their positions by insisting that certain topics are controversial and therefore likely to be called to a vote, thus undermining the penholders' preference for passing resolutions by consensus. Should this strategy not work, some states table 'hostile' amendments to draft resolutions to signal their opposition and intentions to subvert the draft's objective (UNRISD and UN Women, 2025). For example, a member of the Arab Group tabled three amendments to the VAWG resolution, all of which were voted down. This argumentation is often used to contest SOGI-related terminology in resolutions.

As a result, delegates are increasingly pushed to rely only on legally binding documents. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, CEDAW, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. However, these instruments often use categories of 'men and women' and legal practitioners contest whether they are based on biological sex or gender. This reliance on a limited number of conventions leads to the exclusion of texts that refer to gender that have evolved through UN processes and outcome documents since the 1980s.

Gender-restrictive actors also used other strategies, including the principle of national sovereignty and references to their cultural, religious, legal or economic contexts. They sought to block mentions of gender-expansive concepts in operating paragraphs of resolutions, which obligate states to act. Nonetheless, even mentioning issues in preambular paragraphs, which help to justify the purpose of the resolution, can be highly significant. For example, recognition in the resolution's preamble of FGM as a 'form of extreme gender-based violence against women and girls' for the first time was considered a landmark achievement in the global campaign to end the practice (IGO 1).

Contestations over feminist and gender language follow a well-established pattern and are used by multiple actors across multilateral spaces. The contestation can therefore be seen as a 'playbook' routinely deployed against established human rights language from UN conferences, research reports and human rights frameworks. Table 4 summarises how this playbook manifested at the June session (for additional terms that are often contested, especially regarding SRHR and bodily autonomy, see Schott, 2024). Some participants described these contestations as 'business as usual', as they have been an expected feature of the negotiations for several years (IGO 2; WEOG 2).

Table 4 Playbook for contesting gender language at the 59th session (a selection)

Contested expansive language	Restrictive argumentation and preferred alternative language
Gender	
Gender	• Replace with 'sex' • Replace with two biological sexes only (e.g. males and females) or 'between women and men' • Remove because it is not legally defined
Gender-responsive or transformative approaches	• Remove
Sexual and gender-based violence	• Replace with 'VAWG', or 'all forms of violence' or sex-based violence
Gender-based violence and/or discrimination	• Replace with 'VAWG', or 'all forms of violence' or sex-based violence
Harmful/discriminatory/negative gender norms	• Replace with 'social norms' or gender stereotypes
Diversity	
All women and girls	• Remove 'All' because it is implied or does not make grammatical sense
Women and girls *in their diversity*	• Remove 'in their diversity' because it is not consensual and legally defined language
Multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination	• Replace 'multiple and intersecting' with 'aggravated forms'
Sexuality	
Comprehensive sexuality education	• Remove • Replace with 'evidence-based, scientifically correct, age-appropriate education'
SRHR	• Replace with 'all health services' or healthcare
Bodily autonomy	• Remove because it is not consensual language
Girls	
Girls' equal and meaningful agency or leadership	• Remove because girls, as children, cannot play leadership roles or have equal and meaningful participation in decision-making
Adolescent girls	• Remove because there is no legal definition of adolescent girls (only children and women) – adolescent girls do not have specific rights
Other issues	
Online/offline violence	• Replace with 'digital space' or 'digital contexts', or 'digital and physical environment' • Rationale unclear, may be linked with concerns over association with gender-based violence, particularly tech-facilitated gender-based violence

Families in all their diversity/all forms of family	• Remove references to 'families in all their diversity' and 'all forms of family' • Remove reference to family as a site of gender-based violence; if referencing violence, use alternatives such as 'households' and their role in preventing VAWG • Include references in texts to 'family-oriented policies' to reinforce traditional gender norms (motherhood in particular) • Recognise the importance of traditional heteronormative family
Equal inheritance	• Remove 'equal' or refer to provisions under national laws as caveat • Replace with reference to equal inheritance between men and women, but do not include girls

A growing contestation that features in the playbook is the call to replace 'gender' with 'sex'. The HRC Working Group on discrimination against women and girls (2024) recently defended retaining gender language, because it explains systemic oppression of women. The protection of women's rights would be severely undermined if analysis of their oppression were to be solely tied to sex. Achieving the equality of women in their diversity is reliant on addressing socially constructed unequal norms, roles and expectations that are encompassed in the concept of gender.

The argumentation provided in Table 4 indicates that the implicit and deeper issue behind much of the contested terminology is recognition of the rights of SOGIESC minorities. For example, gender-restrictive states reject the phrases '*all* women and girls' or 'intersecting multiple forms of discrimination'. These same officials tend not to object to language that recognises the negative impact of racism, that advances the rights of women and girls to education and employment, or that recognises the rights of women and girls with disabilities and those living in rural areas, impacted by climate change, or by conflict and occupation. As respondents underscore, their central objection is to expanding the rights of SOGIESC communities and particularly trans women (OIC 1 and 2; CSO 4). Some penholders are cognisant that SOGIESC language would not be accepted, thus did not introduce it in draft texts observed through this research (WEOG 2). Therefore, the playbook of contested language from the 59th session (Table 4) does not list SOGIESC or SOGI as a key term of contestation on its own but incorporates it throughout.

4.3 Increased influence of gender-restrictive actors

Advocacy organisations working for gender equality at the Council find their influence and support to negotiators impeded by new resource constraints (King and Pousadela, 2025) but also countered by a growing vocal gender-restrictive lobby. These restrictive organisations include CSOs such as Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) International, Family Watch International, C-Fam and CitizenGo, referred to by many feminist scholars and activists as 'anti-gender'. This is due to their opposition to gender as a concept, their positions on SRHR and SOGI issues (Schott, 2024; Brew et al., 2025), and their use of misinformation (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023). Drawing on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they actively promote the 'family' as a key theme in human rights norm-setting.

Box 1 ADF International at the HRC

ADF International has become a leading Christian strategic litigation CSO. Originating in the US, it has deployed legal teams and political advocacy to challenge women's SRHR, including the US Supreme Court case of Dobbs vs Jackson on the right to abortion. It also claims to defend freedom of speech and religion, parental rights, and other issues. It has evolved into a global actor with activities in Africa and Latin America, where it represented the state of Chile in a case against an openly lesbian teacher, whose victory in the case was described as a failure to protect the rights of the parents.

ADF International has a growing presence in Geneva and other European capitals, and it has close ties to missions of the Holy See, the OIC and others. During the 59th session, it participated in numerous informals, including on sports and VAWG. During sports discussions, it defended the sex-based language of CEDAW in opposition to the use of gender; and in VAWG negotiations, it defended prenatal sex-selective abortions as a form of VAWG and raised concerns around surrogacy and sex work. Several participants denounced one ADF representative's hostile attack towards a delegate from a gender-expansive state.

Source: Datta (2025); D'Angelo et al. (2024); Schott (2024).

Gender-restrictive CSOs, particularly ADF International, have expanded their staff and volunteers (WEOG 1) and convene more side events with the support of aligned missions (see Box 1). Together with other increasingly active gender-restrictive actors, especially the Holy See, these organisations' participation in negotiations in the June session was more intense than ever (CSO 1, 2 and 4; IGO 2; WEOG 2). Gender-restrictive states also collaborate with these organisations. Qatar and other states hosted a two-day expert workshop at the Council in May 2025 (OHCHR, n.d.) and numerous events in June 2025, organised in partnership with conservative Christian groups and organisations, such as the Sovereign Order of Malta (Making Mothers Matter, n.d.). These activities indicate concerted efforts to entrench conceptualisations of a heteronormative family and traditional gender roles (as outlined in Table 4), heightening the ongoing disagreements among states over the recognition of diverse family formations and gender roles in human rights frameworks.

Several participants were concerned by new dangerous levels of intimidation and disruption during the June session. Some recognised these practices from meetings at the UN in New York (such as the Third Committee of the UNGA) and other multilateral organisations (CSO 1; GRULAC 1 and 2). These tactics include accusing diplomats of misrepresenting their government positions, undermining delegates' effectiveness (GRULAC 2 and 3; WEOG 2; CSO 1–4). For instance, the CSO CitizenGo ran a campaign, #YouBetrayedUs, in response to Kenya's vote in support of the IE SOGI mandate renewal. It sought to influence the Kenyan Ministry of Foreign Affairs to change its supporting vote at the Council (ADDO, 2025).

The attempts to intimidate and harass delegates from some states is thus a direct threat to the work of the Council, as it breaks the established practices of CSOs influencing negotiations. The growing disregard for the procedural norms of the HRC, as one informant put it (CSO 1), places gender-expansive civil society and allied states in a conundrum over how to effectively respond (e.g. GRULAC 1 and 2). While research showed that some states, such as China, try to constrain independent CSOs at the Council (Dukalskis, 2023), many gender-expansive states are wary of taking action that could be interpreted as limiting civil society participation, which they generally support.

Finally, the SR-VAWG, Reem Alsalem, has taken clear gender-restrictive positions in her statements and reports. Several participants believe her work, especially reports on women in sports (SR-VAWG, 2024) and the role of 'sex-based violence' (SR-VAWG, 2025), strengthens the position of states and CSOs that seek to replace 'gender' with biological sex terms only (CSO 2, 3 and 4; GRULAC 2). Her defence of biological determinism thus weakens the normative protections for intersex and trans individuals (CSO 2 and 4). In response to her report (SR-VAWG, 2025), a group of states issued a statement defending the concept of gender (OHCHR, 2025c; GRULAC 2; WEOG 2). Forty-seven other Special Procedures mandate holders also issued a joint statement to defend gender as a 'broader and more salient analytical lens, encompassing the socially constructed identities, roles, and expectations that shape individuals' lives' (OHCHR, 2025b). Gender-expansive states are therefore driven to challenge her position on sex, but they must do so without undermining the credibility of Special Procedures. Thus, the SR-VAWG has contributed to the widening of political divides in the Council.

5 Strategies for success during the June session

The research identified five strategies that contributed to the successful achievement of the objectives for the resolutions examined during the June session, based on an analysis of interviews with all research participants. These were: (1) the careful crafting of broader political coalitions of support, (2) engagement with urgent issues of systemic inequalities, (3) use of expertise from civil society and the UN to inform the process, (4) the practice of equitable inclusion and respect during bilateral negotiations, and (5) prioritising of issues.

5.1 Building broad coalitions of political support with middle-ground states

The co-penholder of the FGM resolution, an African state, Ghana, helped to strengthen the African Group's position on gender at the Council (GRULAC 1; WEOG 1). Ghana, as a middle-ground country, assumed responsibility during the draft preparation process to bring the resolution back to strength with African Union support (WEOG 1). Other African states did not further contribute to negotiations once the zero draft was agreed. Even though many individual states are usually more restrictive in the use of 'SRHR' and 'gender-based violence' language, an African Group compromise position was successfully achieved with the zero draft.

During the informal negotiations, gender-expansive countries pushed to have some SRHR language added back, with only Russia and the Holy See opposing. The FGM resolution did not attract priority attention because the penholder was not among the states traditionally considered more progressive, which tends to attract more pushback attention from other missions (CSO 3).

The positionality of the penholders also played a role in other resolutions during the June session. For example, the cross-regional group behind the women's economic empowerment resolution, which consisted of Kyrgyzstan, Sierra Leone, Moldova, the Dominican Republic and the UK, was credited for the ability to bring along middle-ground states in their respective regions (CSO 1 and 2). This was seen as a success for some, although some key issues, such as inheritance rights, were removed (CSO 3).

With the new ESCR-focused objectives of the VAWG resolution, Canada, as penholder and a western state, positioned itself as responsive to the concerns of global majority Member States. It played a constructive leadership role in a polarised environment. The core group behind the SOGI mandate renewal adopted a similar approach towards the global majority states, which was praised by various delegations, including Kuwait and the Netherlands, prior to the vote on the resolution.

Before and during the VAWG resolution negotiations, the focus of the bilateral negotiations was on achieving support from middle-ground states to ensure progressive language would be included in the text (WEOG 2). Bilateral outreach to specific countries, such as those with limited capacity to engage in informals who often

abstain or vote against amendments, helped to bring them into the conversation. This helped negotiators to explore how the issues raised by the resolution play out in different domestic contexts and the challenges faced in overcoming them (WEOG 2), which, in turn, enabled the development of a shared understanding of where progress in norm-setting can support positive change.

The FGM resolution was due to be revisited in 2024, but this was delayed, possibly because regional political considerations may have undermined the key objective to widen co-sponsorship of the resolution. Instead, Burkina Faso established a working group to identify a topic – the use of digital technology to eliminate FGM – that would be a workable focus for achieving the objective.

The zero text, drafted in an inclusive and consultative process with the African Group, CSOs (including regional and global groups) and international organisations, involved extensive updates. The consultations included a retreat early in the year, convened by the penholders, which saw expert input and participation from African states who had not previously been involved. Original sponsors, including the EU bloc and others, understood that flexibility, such as compromising on red lines, would be needed to achieve the key objective of widening co-sponsorship (IGO 1). CSOs note it was more productive for them to provide input on language while the zero draft was being developed. This allowed CSOs to provide specific input on harms related to digital technologies and the gender digital divide, along with evidence on the positive role of digital technologies in addressing FGM (CSO 3).

During negotiations at the Council, there was no further input from African states because the penholders represented the entire African Group. This unexpectedly supported the inclusion of progressive language, to the extent that it was included, in the approved submission (CSO 3).

5.2 Addressing global and systemic inequalities

Many global majority states protest their exclusion from structures of power and access to resources by the 'hegemonic' global minority (largely Global North or western) states. As these states are also viewed as leading the gender-expansive agenda, these concerns have had a polarising effect on gender negotiations. Thus, addressing grievances related to structural inequalities in international gender diplomacy can contribute to depolarising negotiations (de Silva, 2024: 4).

In an example of this, the June session saw some progress related to the right to development. This right recognises that all human rights are interdependent and need to be achieved together through a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process. It was first recognised in the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and was adopted by a declaration of the UNGA in 1986, yet its implementation measures have not yet been outlined in a legally binding convention (Marong, 2010; Subedi, 2021). The FGM resolution added relevant language to acknowledge the concerns of advocates for the right to development as integral to the achievement of human rights. For example, it acknowledges that development is needed to address FGM, and it notes that FGM is a national development, human rights and public health priority.

The VAWG resolution was framed with an ESCR theme to support bridge-building with Member States who argue that civil and political rights cannot be furthered without attention to social and economic inequalities. The purpose was to achieve a robust resolution to address issues across sectors that underpin VAWG. The penholder reduced the risk of a vote being called by minimising language that would invite contention. Most countries today already have in place strategies or programmes to prevent VAWG and are interested in signalling their commitment to addressing this issue through this resolution by supporting it without calling for a vote (WEOG 2).

Two important issues that invoke global inequalities that are indirectly gender-related created tensions between political groups. The first involved discussions on technological transfers within the context of the resolution on access to medicines and vaccines (59/7), which was adopted by a vote called by Czechia on behalf of the EU. Some global majority states and CSOs interpreted the call for a vote as western reluctance to support their socioeconomic rights, instead prioritising the interests of the private sector and wealthier global minority states (CSO 1, 2 and 4).

The second challenge, over the term 'occupation', which many WEOG states wanted to qualify as 'foreign' when it was mentioned in different resolutions, revealed similar dynamics. Speeches throughout the session demonstrated the grave concern of South Africa, Colombia, the OIC, the Arab Group and some other states over the plight of Palestinians and the wish to express strong condemnation. During negotiations, it became clear that these WEOG states would not agree to add the descriptor 'foreign' when referring to 'occupation'. While some research participants said it was not clear why this was a 'red line' issue for these states (GRULAC 2, CSO 4), it is likely because of ongoing disagreement between western states allied with Israel and the global majority over international legal interpretations of sovereignty and the application of international humanitarian law in occupied Palestine. This reinforced the perception that the global minority is unwilling to compromise and wishes to dominate the Council's outcomes.

5.3 Using expertise from CSOs and the UN

As with the FGM resolution, during the preparation of the zero draft and its revisions, the VAWG penholder engaged with leading gender equality advocacy CSOs that advance the demands of grassroots campaigners around the world, and with technical experts from the UN. This helped to ensure that a focus on prevention of VAWG and the ESCR theme would support bridge-building across states. This enabled a pragmatic and collaborative approach to negotiations and reduced further polarisations (WEOG 2).

This increasing 'behind the scenes' involvement of feminist, LGBTQI+ and women's rights CSOs allowed for some hard truths to be conveyed to western states (Carrano Lelis, 2025). These include their double standards on contemporary genocide, refusal to recognise foreign occupation in diplomatic negotiations, and need to understand how gender relates to macro-economic and other structural inequalities (CSO 4). As one representative of an international advocacy organisation based in Geneva said, they push WEOG and others to see the flaws in talking about gender and sexuality while being complicit in genocide in Palestine (CSO 2).

Some NGOs' priorities for advocacy are defined by the themes of the resolution. There is no 'one size fits all' strategy, although in general they

want to ensure the inclusion of SRHR language as far as possible. Some NGOs will never support states' attempts to trade off on rights language and may stop engaging with those that do so (CSO 2). Diplomats who represent states with restrictive gender positions may not engage with progressive CSOs at all, or only with conservative organisations such as ADF International, particularly without instructions from their capitals to build bridges for reaching consensus during negotiations (OIC 2).

CSOs defending gender equality are essential in helping governments understand and counter the potential arguments raised by gender-restrictive actors. For example, CSOs played a pivotal role in relaying the playbook of contested terms to like-minded states (see Table 4). They also helped the core group behind the SOGI mandate renewal avoid engaging in ideological pushback, by designing the technical rollover strategy (GRULAC 2).

5.4 Bilateral outreach

The hard work of crafting agreed language on gender took place during bilateral negotiations, permitting nuanced but candid conversations in private. These negotiations contributed to successful outcomes that could be recognised by a broad spectrum of Member States (OIC 1; WEOG 2). For example, some core groups or sponsoring states successfully used their embassies to approach their ministries of foreign affairs bilaterally to explain the SOGI mandate renewal, replicating a strategy they had used on other resolutions in the previous years. This facilitated the capitals sending instructions to their Geneva missions to either support or abstain and thus enabled the resolution to be adopted. The core group followed this up with bilateral talks in Geneva, which took place well in advance of the June session, to demonstrate their genuine interest in countries' positions (GRULAC 1). The well-regarded bilateral relationships between ambassadors with opposing views on contested gender issues was also credited with the removal of sex-based binary language from the zero draft of the Sports resolution (GRULAC 1 and 2).

Recognising that states were coming from very different positions on some language in the VAWG resolution, the bilateral negotiations ensured that discussions could remain productive. They succeeded in finding agreed language, such as on 'the family'. Recognising their differences helped diplomats craft the 'consensus' and side-step the need to vote on the resolution (OIC 1). A negotiator from an OIC Member State noted that this 'constructive spirit' of engagement informed the bilaterals as well as their decision not to force a vote (OIC 1).

Many research participants commented on the detrimental effects of poor negotiation skills, regardless of positions on specific issues. During the informals, some WEOG negotiators were criticised for patronising other delegates on human rights and SRHR issues (CSO 2). This heightens ongoing perceptions among some global majority states that human rights norms are a western imposition, which in turn undermines efforts to build trust with middle-ground states. In contrast, one negotiator used less hostile rhetoric to advance their state's restrictive position than their predecessor, which made the negotiations for the VAWG resolution more amenable to considered debate.

These insights further substantiate research on the role of diplomacy in a polarised context, and the contribution of individual diplomats' skills and behaviours to negotiation outcomes (de Silva, 2024; Tuominen, 2024).

5.5 Strategic prioritising of issues

This research identified two main areas of pragmatic strategising during the June session. First was the willingness of missions to prioritise securing wider political support for resolutions over efforts to achieve normative advancement through the recognition or expansion of rights related to sexual and reproductive health and SOGI issues. Second, many influential negotiators across the spectrum of positions on contested gender norms attempted to minimise their 'red lines' to ensure the resolutions passed, and preferably without calling for a vote.

Prioritising securing political support over normative advancement

The SOGI resolution was strategically approached by the core group to simply continue the mandate of the Independent Expert, to minimise any opposition based on ideological grounds (GRULAC 1 and 2). The core group gave a clear message to middle-ground states that were not sure about their position that the resolution did not create any new rights, nor did it interfere with state sovereignty. This mandate was designed to prevent violence and discrimination. Although some European states within the EU did not originally endorse the strategy, because they wanted to pursue normative advancement, the EU overall praised the approach to focus only on the renewal and not normative advancements (GRULAC 2).

The FGM resolution maintains human rights standards and includes language on gender-based violence and SRHR. Any resolution that does this can be viewed as a positive contribution to resisting the global pushback against gender equality. Conversely, a negative precedent in a resolution can easily escalate, because it will become harder to regain language that it lost even in one resolution (CSO 3).

Framing FGM as a global and human rights issue supports international organisations in their fundraising campaigns to address the issue. The fact that both the Gambia and Kenya co-sponsored the resolution will strengthen the feedback loop between governments and local civil society and respond to critiques that western pressure drives advocacy. It forces governments to confront the issue at home, even when some domestic policy-makers insist there is no evidence to suggest it is a problem. The resolution will be cited in legal documents filed by NGOs who provide their expert opinion in court cases related to FGM in both countries (CSO 3).

The women's economic empowerment resolution was also critiqued for not sufficiently advancing the economic empowerment framework (CSO 1 and 3; GRULAC 1). Still, it succeeded in facilitating bridge-building across the core group, including OIC member Kyrgyzstan (GRULAC 1; WEOG 2), which was one of its strategic objectives. Engaging constructively with the text, even without advancing normative standards, can be a powerful indicator of good will among negotiating parties (GRULAC 1).

Minimising red lines to achieve strategic objectives

The polarised context of negotiations benefited from realistic and constructive diplomacy to advance gender issues, based on clear goals defined by the key elements to advance in the negotiation, rather than a long list of red lines (WEOG 2). The strategy proved effective. The Arab Group proposed minimum changes to the VAWG resolution, sticking to their red lines,

for which they tried to propose amendments in a spirit of constructive engagement without being aggressive (OIC 1). Penholder Mexico used a similar approach to win support for the renewal of the mandate of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls. Reference to gender was removed from the text to minimise contention, but a reference to substantive equality was retained.

Finally, the penholders for the FGM resolution succeeded in incorporating references to FGM as a form of gender-based violence and mention of sexual and reproductive health in the draft resolution. They accomplished this by being careful not to damage their credibility with the African Group by conceding to too many demands from the EU and other allied states. These states, in turn, eventually prioritised fewer issues as their red lines, such as the demand that reference to 'sexual and reproductive health' be included in the resolution. This strategy was based on an understanding of how high the stakes were in the aftermath of 2022 negotiations, when the EU-aligned bloc had proposed so much expansive gender language that it generated pushback. This opposition led to weaker gender language in the final resolution and a drop in political support (IGO 1).

5.6 Summary of strategies

The five key strategies summarised in Figure 1 bear emphasising because they are so simple. In a rapidly deteriorating global context, the way forward for the Council may well be to reinforce these basic strategies to guide consensus-building among Member States during volatile times.

Figure 1 Strategies for success



6 Conclusion

This report began by noting how the HRC struggles to fulfil its mandate and avoid critiques of polarisation, faces challenges to normative advancement on contentious gender issues, and grapples with crises of legitimacy for multilateralism that contribute to funding and resource constraints. The research findings add insights into how this played out during the June session.

The Council's role is to advance human rights and avoid politicisation. But differences between states remain unresolved and are played out over gender contestations. States try to redress historical inequalities and rebalance global power, often while violating their own commitments to human rights. Scholars have demonstrated how many deploy gender contestation to undermine the international human rights regime and therefore the liberal democratic order itself (Meyerrose and Nooruddin, 2023; Bias 2025; Brechenmacher, 2025; King and Pousadela, 2025). Indeed, some participants in this research argued in defence of state sovereignty to critique western interference. Ongoing concern about inequality and double standards by western states promoting human rights values and commitments fuels the conservative backlash, as was evident during the June session in debates over technology transfers and foreign occupation.

This study of the June session adds to the growing body of evidence that advancing normative standards on gender at the Council is highly contested and subject to fierce opposition by norm 'antipreneurs', referred to in this report as 'gender-restrictive actors'. A possibly growing number of states are assertively advancing restrictive positions on the human rights of women, girls and SOGIESC communities. Less apparent, however, was rhetoric to undermine multilateralism itself. The study found that even restrictive and authoritarian states engaged vigorously in negotiations. This is an important finding that suggests the Council is still a relevant and credible space for Member States.

Yet, as Chané and Sharma (2016) found, some middle-ground states subtly shift their positions on specific gender language depending on the resolution. This research did not examine the domestic considerations that feed into states' positions on contested issues. Tracking a government's political calculations around its gender positions will be essential to predicting the behaviour of Council members in the new global context.

These initial findings indicate that governments are adopting a pragmatic approach to human rights norm advancement at the Council. This may be replacing the western-dominated model and, while weak on gender norm entrepreneurship, it may signal possible ways forward. Complicating any predictions, however, is the emerging role of the US as a leading global gender-restrictive state with considerable economic and political influence over potential middle-ground states in future.

The study found some encouraging signs for the gender equality agenda. The playbook of contested language, while influential, is not adopted in its totality even by conservative states, suggesting there remains room for future negotiations to continue productively. SRHR was included as a standalone reference for the first time in the VAWG resolution. References to 'sexual and gender-based violence' were retained

in the VAWG and added in the FGM resolutions. The SOGI mandate renewal and Sports resolution indicated that, where advancement was not possible, holding the line on language was.

These advancements were the result of pragmatic leadership and strong diplomatic skills of negotiators in the core groups. These negotiators minimised red lines and pursued targeted objectives for their resolutions, such as the use of a technical rollover of the IE SOGI mandate. The successful core groups also worked with UN entities and CSOs, drawing on their expertise, and adopted an open, listening approach in bilateral negotiations with middle-ground states.

The double standards among states around addressing inequalities, as discussed in Section 5, did generate some unresolved tensions during negotiations. But there were also efforts to address social and economic inequalities, as evident in the theme of the VAWG resolution and the more constructive engagement around the right to development from some WEOG states. This growing effort, if sustained, can help to reduce polarisation and encourage states to find a middle ground on gender issues.

There is still room to build broader political support for gender equality at the Council. The framing of FGM as a form of gender-based violence is a key example of African Group states, across different democratic, military and authoritarian dispensations, collaborating with WEOG states to advance gender equality and normative standards. However, there is less political support for the full expansion of the human rights of women, girls and SOGIESC communities, especially SRHR. A focus on advancing rights related to women's economic empowerment, education and political inclusion, which enjoy broader political support, can lead to normative progress in the current polarised context.

The Council session took place in the shadow of a growing financial crisis and reform process within the UN. This will continue for the foreseeable future as the UN80 reform agenda progresses. The findings suggest that further shrinking of UN operations and cost cutting may exacerbate the democratic deficit of the Council. Fewer reports and activities will take place. There will be less time and space for listening and trust-building among Member States. Without action, the power and influence of gender-restrictive CSOs that seek to undermine multilateralism, along with gender equality, will continue to grow. The changing composition of Council Member States will also introduce more proponents of both middle-ground and gender-restrictive policy positions, creating more challenges for consensus-building.

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