

A case for enhanced collaboration between experts and diplomats in the United Nations to enhance girls' rights

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ABSTRACT

Women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), including access to comprehensive sexual education (CSE), are fundamental human rights recognised under international law. However, these rights are frequently restricted or denied, despite international frameworks intended to protect them. This article examines the relationship between diplomats and child rights experts within UN bodies, focusing on how diplomatic engagement either supports or undermines the work of experts advocating for girls' SRHR and CSE. It explores the political tensions and polarisation that arise when girls' rights are embedded within broader, often contentious, issues. These tensions impact how rights are interpreted and implemented at the international level. The article finds that, while UN documents increasingly acknowledge these rights, challenges remain in achieving consistent definitions and shared understanding among stakeholders. It concludes by calling for improved collaboration between diplomats and experts to ensure diplomats are better informed about SRHR and CSE developments. Strengthening this relationship is crucial to advancing and safeguarding the rights of girls within global human rights frameworks.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 January 2025
Accepted 15 July 2025


KEYWORDS

Sexual and reproductive health and rights; comprehensive sexual education; girls' rights; human rights experts; diplomats; politicisation of rights

1. Introduction

According to the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR), women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health is related to multiple human rights, including the right to life, the right to be free from torture, the right to health, the right to privacy, the right to education, and the prohibition of discrimination. Sexual and reproductive rights are thus fundamental human rights, which are enshrined in international laws and agreements. However, within the broader perspective of human rights and international relations, the sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of girls, as well as comprehensive sexual education (CSE), often appear to be ignored, limited or denied.¹ Despite impressive human rights instruments addressing gender equality, many states

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2025.2536514>.

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are still reluctant to accept the inclusion of the interrelated rights of SRHR and CSE, whether it is language in human rights resolutions, statements, reports of Special Procedures, General Comments or recommendations by human rights treaty bodies.²

The unique challenges faced by girls are refuted when their rights are subject to decisions taken by political players on their behalf in various national or international settings. Some state representatives have demonstrated an active agenda to limit and restrict these rights for girls.³ Political leaders and representatives, whilst professing the importance of gender equality and women empowerment for the development of their economies, often lack the political will to empower women and girls.⁴ This reluctance is a demonstration of the interplay between the political and ideological demands made on politicians domestically, compared to their obligations to support gender equality internationally.⁵

It is not generally the practice for diplomats to consult national human rights experts on issues addressed in resolutions prior to their attendance of Third Committee and Human Rights Council sessions. Diplomats do not engage or collaborate with human rights experts on how best to approach the negotiations on sensitive or progressive language.⁶ The experts that we are referring to in this article include human rights specialists at the national level, whether in government departments, academia or specialised institutions; or those working internationally in human rights treaty bodies, Special Procedures or specialised UN agencies. It is acknowledged that the independence of experts represented in such Bodies or Procedures must be respected, but this does not prevent consultations or discussions on issues of shared concern between the diplomats and such experts from taking place. However, in the authors' experience, such discussions are rare.

In order to understand the working relationship between diplomats and experts, a qualitative study considering the interactions within an inherently complex UN system was undertaken.⁷ The study explored the reasons for the inconsistent positions taken by states in negotiations and how, when expedient, some states prefer to adopt a narrow set of human rights in contrast to the instruments to which they have acceded. Miller and Roseman⁸ and Aylward and Halford⁹ have written on the origins, definitions and debates surrounding gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights for women and girls between the political bodies on the one hand, and the independent experts and treaty bodies on the other. Miller and Roseman state that IHRL can never go beyond what states are prepared to accept as a valid interpretation of a treaty, and that political bodies have become the 'key sites of contestation'.¹⁰

In the study, both the legal and political discourses that take place within the United Nations framework were analysed. This included a critique of the collaboration between diplomats and experts as well as the divergent positions taken by States parties within various regions when setting human rights norms and standards. The main objective of the study was to establish whether a lack of cooperation between various key stakeholders has had an impact on the realisation of sexual reproductive health and rights and comprehensive sexual education for girls.

This article commences with a clarification of the various documents studied to consider the work of experts and diplomats. Research was drawn from a rich body of literature both in the UN and in academia on these two interrelated rights as well as on the inclusion of SRHR and CSE in UN resolutions. The outcomes or research include the divergent work undertaken by experts and diplomats within the UN; the contrasting

language reflected in 95 resolutions addressing girls' rights over a period of seven years (2015–2022); the relationship between the experts and diplomats; and the diverse logic of these role-players. Particular attention is given to the negative influence of US diplomats on girls' rights negotiations during the first Trump administration, especially considering that a second term will commence in 2025. Finally, an analysis of the impact of these political dynamics on the work of experts is considered, followed by a conclusion which includes some recommendations on how the gap could be narrowed and further research that could be undertaken on the issue.

2. Research methodology

A critical analysis of the vast literature within academia, the UN human rights system and government policies and documents, all specifically related to SRHR and CSE, was conducted.¹¹ This included primary and secondary sources providing the divergent logic, processes and activities of diplomats and experts. As an interdisciplinary study, literature was sampled from both international relations and international human rights law.¹² This included international human rights documents from the United Nations as well as regional human rights documents, particularly those related to women and girls. Although the study is primarily a desktop review of the literature available in both International Relations and International Law, information is also drawn from the experiences of the co-authors who have worked in their respective fields of child rights law and diplomacy for more than three decades.

Documents were sourced from the websites of primary UN bodies such as the General Assembly (GA), the Human Rights Council (HRC) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), as well as from UN specialised agencies such as UNICEF, UNESCO and the WHO. A distinction was made between the binding, international and regional legal instruments, such as human rights conventions, and the interpretation of these conventions reflected in technical documents issued by UN treaty body committees, Special Procedures and specialised agencies addressing a wide range of child rights issues.¹³ These documents, whilst not legally binding, expand on the interpretation of various international instruments and have contributed towards the development of normative frameworks on human rights, including national legislation and policies of member states. The technical documents include, *inter alia*, Concluding Observations, Views and General Comments issued by the treaty bodies; annual reports of special procedures; and policy briefs or guiding documents produced by technical agencies and expert bodies within various UN bodies.¹⁴

The legal and technical instruments are important to understand as state representatives, officials within international bodies, civil society organisations and other relevant national institutions conduct their work within these frameworks of the UN. The Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights has a database which provides access to the jurisprudence that has emanated from treaty bodies. This database provides a large body of legal interpretation that has evolved over years and can be of assistance to the public, civil society, governments, regional mechanisms and UN bodies when requiring to interpret human rights law.¹⁵ Unfortunately, states are inconsistent and selective when deciding which of these documents to utilise, with some states accepting these additional guiding documents of the UN more readily than others.

Besides studying documents issued by experts in child rights, the language agreed to by diplomats and adopted in resolutions of the Human Rights Council and the Third Committee were central to the study. The texts of 95 resolutions within the Human Rights Council (HRC) and the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly which specifically address the rights of women and girls, and where references to SRHR and CSE should be expected, were analysed.¹⁶ The period chosen to analyse resolutions was from 2015 until 2022 as it was during these years that diplomats, academics, NGOs and human rights experts regularly referred to both the progress and regression of language on SRHR and CSE rights.¹⁷ Governments and NGOs of a progressive leaning which advance the rights of women and girls were concerned that a network of anti-rights actors, who are conservative in their thinking, were undermining the progress made with regard to girls' rights and influencing the outcomes of negotiations in the Human Rights Council and Third Committee.¹⁸

Balogun and Durojaye state that although the legal limitations of these resolutions are recognised, the regular consideration of the resolutions remains an important source of soft law to provide normative guidance to governments, and to hold them accountable to their obligations under various human rights instruments.¹⁹ Equally, if the language is consistently weakened in resolutions of the Third Committee and Human Rights Council over time, this language could be quoted and become the norm in other UN meetings where these rights are addressed.

Besides the documents from the United Nations, books and research papers published by academics, experts and authors providing authoritative research on the human rights system and the implementation of human rights were studied. Books and opinion pieces critiquing the human rights system; the politicisation of human rights; the disjuncture between the various human rights bodies; and the implementation of child rights in various states were of enormous value.²⁰

The research furthermore utilised government documents that are in the public domain.²¹ Documents produced by governments or NGOs outlining policies and programmes on CSE and SRHR, presenting both positive and negative opinions, provided insightful information on the position of member states on these issues. Of particular interest is the different positions taken by member states regarding girls' rights which contrast with the implementation of CSE and SRHR in their domestic environment and how some unexpectedly diverge on their positions at times.²²

3. Research findings

3.1. Human rights experts in the UN system

The study revealed that the United Nations provides numerous guiding and technical documents that provide a normative basis for SRHR and CSE rights. UN agencies, committees and Special Procedures have played an important role in advancing the SRHR and CSE rights by extensively clarifying the legal interpretation and implementation of human rights conventions.²³

Independent human rights experts have expertise in these specialised areas. According to the Human Rights Council, the following general criteria are of paramount importance when nominating, selecting and appointing mandate holders: expertise; experience

in the field of the mandate; independence; impartiality; personal integrity; and objectivity.²⁴ Similarly, members of the treaty bodies are independent experts who have recognised competence in human rights and are ‘of high moral standing or character’ and ‘of acknowledged impartiality’, as stipulated by the relevant treaties. Although States elect treaty body members, they serve in their personal capacity and it is expected that they carry out their duties with absolute impartiality and objectivity.²⁵ The treaty bodies are intended to serve as autonomous expert bodies and not political or inter-governmental bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Council or the UN Security Council.²⁶

Special Procedures (SPs), often considered as the ‘eyes and ears’ of the HRC, undertake numerous activities each year, including country visits and presenting annual thematic reports in the HRC and Third Committee. Currently, experts’ engagement with these two bodies is limited to the reading of these reports and a brief session for delegations to pose questions to the experts without any further interaction during the negotiation of resolutions. During the few Interactive Dialogues that take place between Special Procedures and state representatives in the HRC and Third Committee sessions, States parties do not always accept the opinions expressed by Special Procedure mandate holders. Whilst some states consider the findings and recommendations of Special Procedures’ reports as representing important legal and operational guidance on human rights issues,²⁷ others question whether the SPs have at times exceeded the scope of their mandate. Miller and Roseman have observed that these concerns are at times justifiable when new, overly progressive interpretations regarding child rights are presented, which subsequently result in a pushback by capitals.²⁸

In contrast, Committee members of treaty bodies do not participate in the three sessions of the Human Rights Council during the year, or in the one annual session of the Third Committee. Instead, these Committees are occupied with examining states reports and holding bilateral, interactive dialogues with delegates of States parties; the drafting of General Comments; and dealing with communications that are presented to them under their various communications procedures.²⁹ Human rights experts are, therefore generally unaccustomed to the political dynamics within the HRC or Third Committee, as they do not engage in the actual negotiation process of the two bodies where their work is questioned, and they rarely utilise the resolutions adopted in these bodies in their own work. The opposing positions taken by diplomats in these negotiating bodies lead to some states questioning the validity of the work undertaken by experts and ultimately amount to a regression of these rights and an impediment to their implementation.

3.2. Diplomats working with human rights

Diplomats working within the Human Rights Council pride themselves on their specialisation in shaping the international human rights regime. This contrasts with their Third Committee counterparts who focus more broadly on a wider range of social, humanitarian and developmental issues. However, both sets of diplomats, whether in the Human Rights Council or the Third Committee, are ultimately state representatives and therefore tend to choose a political approach, reflecting their national positions and interests.³⁰

Lyons, Baldwin and McNemar depict the politicisation of international organisations as the introduction of unrelated, controversial issues by countries seeking to further their political objectives.³¹ However, the risk exists that when issues become politicised by

diplomats, thereby overshadowing the positions put forward by technical experts, the credibility and reputation of the UN bodies, including the Human Rights Council and the Third Committee, are called into question. Instead of setting norms and standards through a transparent and inclusive process, political actors debate and negotiate issues, with the primary objective to promote and defend what they claim are their national interests.³²

Notwithstanding the inclusion of experts from all geographic regions when drafting the UDHR; and despite all UN member states developing numerous binding human rights norms and standards over a lengthy period, the fluidity of diplomacy and how state representatives are required to find pragmatic solutions within a political system to demonstrate their commitment to these obligations, is complex.³³ In contrast to human rights instruments and guiding documents provided by human rights experts, the shift in global politics over the period of the study, supported by active NGOs, has led to some state representatives persistently opposing references to CSE and SRHR language. Conservative governments continuously question the interpretation of SRHR and CSE, whilst progressive states are consistent in their efforts to include this language in resolutions to ensure the global realisation of SRHR and CSE.

All states have their 'red lines' beyond which they are not prepared to compromise, with these 'red lines' changing according to the ruling party governing each state, whether progressive or conservative.³⁴ Furthermore, given the role of regional politics during negotiations, SRHR and CSE issues are often considered soft issues and therefore deprioritised or traded off when states require support on other resolutions considered of greater political or economic importance.³⁵ The opposing positions in negotiations often lead to an acrimonious atmosphere in the HRC or Third Committee, especially when certain states attempt to undo extensive work done in informal negotiations to achieve consensus. As penholders of resolutions prefer to have their resolutions adopted by consensus, without having to go to a vote,³⁶ diplomats often compromise on language in resolutions to ensure that consensus is obtained. This leads to language on girls' rights being reverted to the 'lowest common denominator'.³⁷

The role played by political officials to ignore regional and international human rights obligations and to choose domestic politics that hinder the advancement of girls' rights is disturbing. Hafner-Burten agrees with Voeten that international human rights regimes have become personal and political,³⁸ with decisions often reflecting 'a variety of biases that reflect the values and positions of the individuals making the decisions, as well as some of the ideologies and political interests of the states that appoint those individuals'.³⁹

Freedman has written extensively on how the politicisation of the Human Rights Council and the Third Committee, especially regarding the human rights abuses taking place within specific countries, has 'paralysed' the UN.⁴⁰ Freedman laments how states have sacrificed the original intentions of the drafters of the UDHR by placing their political objectives above the goal of implementing human rights. Freedman defines this phenomenon as the 'pursuit of states' national agendas or regional groups' common objectives'.⁴¹ This is noticeable when states align themselves with other states who have a common position on a particular issue and, according to Gruskin et al, 'work together to block advances from taking place at political and other levels'.⁴² Henkin explains that whilst the law is considered normative and obligatory, with legal

remedies available when not adhered to, politics on the other hand ‘suggests freedom of choice, diplomacy, bargaining, and accommodation’.⁴³ It is this bargaining and accommodation that has led to authors such as Dunnoff and Pollack expressing concern about how ‘the increased density of international norms and institutions creates both conflict and cooperation among legal regimes’ which has led to widespread concerns over ‘forum shopping’.⁴⁴

3.3. Language on SRHR and CSE in UN resolutions

When comparing the content of the 95 resolutions studied, key outcomes noted were that multiple changes occurred with language on SRHR and CSE throughout the period under study. Furthermore, disproportionate attention was afforded to the two issues of SRHR and CSE. In some resolutions, such as the elimination of violence against women and girls; the elimination of discrimination against women and girls; and human rights in the context of HIV and AIDS, strong and definitive language in support of SRHR and CSE exists. On the other hand, resolutions where one would expect to see SRHR and CSE raised as part of the solution for women and girls, the two issues are either reflected very weakly, or disappointingly, not at all. This is seen in the resolutions on the rights of the child; the right to education; the right to education by every girl; the improvement of the situation of women and girls in rural areas; as well as the two resolutions addressing women and girls in the achievement of the SDGs. The language across the Third Committee and the HRC, and indeed across the United Nations, is therefore inconsistent and demonstrates that states representatives have not reached consensus on the use of the language.⁴⁵ This leads to diplomats opening language for debate on an annual basis.

As the issue of sexual rights is evolving under international law, it is understandable that some state representatives are not certain which obligations will be placed on them should they agree to CSE and SRHR language. Even if scientifically inaccurate, certain narratives have become accepted by delegations, with some convinced that the SRHR and CSE language is a Western concept that is being imposed on them and conflicts with their cultures. The fear exists that once agreeing to this language, these rights would then lead to other interrelated rights, such as those concerning sexual orientation and gender identity, whose definitions have not been agreed to in international negotiations.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the lack of consistency demonstrated by diplomats in both the Third Committee and the HRC, with hard-won gains occasionally lost on SRHR and CSE language, has resulted in hardened positions on opposing sides.

3.4. The relationship between diplomats and experts

Evidence has shown that the role players in the charter-driven and treaty-based human rights bodies, whilst occasionally working with each other, are uncomfortable bedfellows. The lack of regular contact and collaboration between experts and diplomats in the Third Committee and HRC contrasts with other UN organisations, agencies and committees where diplomats work closely with the experts from their capitals.

The practice at UNESCO serves as a comparative counterpoint to the practice in the Third Committee and the Human Rights Council. As witnessed by the authors, national

experts either participate together with their state representatives in the various statutory bodies of UNESCO, or provide their diplomats with written inputs for national statements and draft resolutions.⁴⁷ Diplomats participating in these statutory meetings of UNESCO refrain from speaking unless the discussion becomes highly politicised. Diplomats furthermore only intervene in discussions of the statutory bodies under guidance received from their national experts who could be officials from line function government departments, specialised institutes or academics. Efforts are made to ensure that diplomats understand the work that their experts are doing domestically, as well as for experts to understand the important role of gaining political buy-in to enhance their work.

As intergovernmental bodies are essentially engagements between States parties, political discussions cannot be avoided, and differences of opinion are to be expected. The practice in the Third Committee and HRC would be improved if diplomats were accompanied by their experts, or alternatively receive inputs directly from their national experts, thereby respecting the expertise and scientific research conducted by experts and not over-politicising the discussions. Unfortunately, in contrast to the practice at UNESCO, this is not the culture or practice of the Third Committee or HRC where interventions are drafted by the diplomats with very little input from national experts, and where experts working in treaty-based bodies or special procedures do so with limited awareness of what is unfolding in the intergovernmental bodies. A shift to practice similar to UNESCO would therefore allow for greater interaction between diplomats and experts and would lead to each being better informed about the others' work, with due regard for the required independence of the experts where relevant.

An important objective of the study was to establish whether diplomats in New York and Geneva aligned themselves with the domestic positions determined by their technical or line function experts, or whether they digressed from policies and programmes in their countries. The study revealed that diplomats from some countries are consistent in their position with the implementation of girls' rights domestically. Whilst states such as the United States, Australia and Brazil have changed their positions dependent on the incumbent political party in power, other governments such as Russia, Nigeria and The Netherlands have remained steadfast and consistent in their position. In some African states where important strides have been made with the implementation of SRHR and CSE services to girls, diplomats were not reflecting this domestic progress in international negotiations. This demonstrates that some states' position on SRHR and CSE is dependent on the political party in power, whereas others remain consistent due to the long-established government policies in place.

The study has therefore revealed that the stated policy positions of governments are at times in contrast to the rhetoric and positions adopted by diplomats. Unless properly guided by their experts, diplomats sit in various meetings participating in lengthy debates and negotiations on issues which could easily be clarified by experts. Diplomats are thus not as progressive as technical and legal experts in their interpretation of SRHR and CSE rights, thereby providing outdated language and arguments during the negotiations on these rights.

Numerous intergovernmental bodies exist where collaboration is possible between experts and diplomats and where research and expertise prevail over politics. The reputation and experience of experts participating in these intergovernmental bodies plays an

important role when electing candidates as members of these bodies. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily the case during elections of candidates to human rights treaty bodies. These elections have become politicised with some committee members not having the requisite expertise to be members of the committee. Regrettably, diplomats do not always consult with their experts on who to elect to the committee but are instead politically motivated in their support to specific member states. Concern has therefore been raised regarding the influence of geo-cultural gender politics within the treaty body system and how, although considered independent experts, committee members have their own political opinions, and some are deferential to their states.⁴⁸

4. Influence of the first Trump administration

Political representatives of a more conservative persuasion are predominantly interested in maintaining their power positions and domestic interests, whereas those of a progressive persuasion are interested in promoting progressive, new positions that redefine the way we interpret human rights. Within the current geopolitical environment, the world has witnessed an erosion of progressive values and a return to conservative policies. This shift to the right, with more nationalist, conservative foreign policies has been witnessed in various geopolitical regions.⁴⁹

Within the current polarised multilateral arena, conservative states utilise the disjuncture to promote their national positions and policies. The influence of conservative domestic policies during the first Trump administration (2017–2021) significantly influenced the international system, downplaying human rights values for traditional security issues.⁵⁰ Sadinsky and Ahmed state that by leaving numerous UN organs and agencies,⁵¹ and the subsequent defunding of SRHR programmes, made the United States ‘the single greatest obstacle to progress on sexual and reproductive health’ during the four-year term of President Trump.⁵² They go further to state that the Trump administration ‘used its anti-sexual and reproductive health agenda as a rallying point for the regressive regimes of the world’.⁵³ This emboldened other states such as Russia, The Holy See, Austria, Poland, Brazil, and countries within the OIC, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Nigeria, to become unlikely allies with the USA and to advance regressive positions with regard to gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights for women and girls within the human rights arena.⁵⁴ Progressive states subsequently found themselves in a difficult position of having to protect gains previously achieved with regard to human rights principles and language.

In the fourth year of the Trump administration, it was noticeable how the opposing language put forward by the USA in each successive session intensified, revealing a hardening of position. Of concern was the growing trend by the United States and the Russian Federation to introduce amendments at a very late stage of negotiations, thereby appearing not to negotiate in good faith during the session of the Third Committee. Many experts addressing the Committee as well as delegates negotiating human rights resolutions expressed their concern at the attempts made to reverse previous gains made in advancing the rights of women and girls ‘by entrenching stereotypes around gender roles and curtailing women’s control over their own bodies’.⁵⁵ Furthermore, states supporting the amendments of Russia and the USA chose to overlook the key issues addressed in the various child rights resolutions, such as child marriage and FGM, but

rather overshadowed discussions by adopting an increasingly fractious and politicised position on SRHR and CSE.

Current socio-political developments cannot be ignored. Government policies founded in conservative ideologies and positions are not amenable to progressive positions on human rights, but instead are fundamentally opposed to them. Although the USA was not present in the Human Rights Council, the position it took in the Third Committee emboldened other states of a similar ideology to take hard-line positions on gender and sexuality issues. Gilby et al. explain how the explicit opposition to SRHR and ‘the broader politics of silencing on SRHR’ demonstrated by the Trump administration, including the reinstatement and expansion of the Global Gag Rule, alliances were formed between conservative governments and anti-SRHR groups, both regionally and internationally.⁵⁶

In the wake of regressive laws, regulations and policies adopted during the Trump administration, the Biden administration attempted to counter the impact of these decisions and policies. The USA reverted to providing funding to global SRHR programmes and remains the largest bilateral donor to global SRHR services, including addressing HIV/AIDS and improving maternal and reproductive health.⁵⁷

5. Analysis

The question of who decides on the legal interpretation of various articles within a treaty, and how binding they are across regional and international legal systems, is key to the complex debates surrounding SRHR and CSE. Aylward and Halford,⁵⁸ and more recently Gilby et al,⁵⁹ document the advances and setbacks that have been made within the UN framework from 2014 to 2019. Whereas Aylward and Halford are of the opinion that advances are still being made despite the increase in governments with conservative positions around the world, Gilby et al. demonstrate how the language has either been omitted, replaced or weakened.

Although these bodies of research refer to the inclusion of SRHR and CSE in various UN documents, Aylward and Halford explain that a definition of ‘sexual rights’ has previously not been included in any negotiated, consensus-based UN text. As a result, ambiguity continues to exist between states regarding the terms ‘sexual rights’, ‘reproductive rights’, ‘sexual and productive rights’ and ‘sexual and reproductive health and rights’.⁶⁰ Gilby et al. concur that the major contested areas in resolutions are abortion, CSE and references to ‘sexual and reproductive health’ and ‘sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights’.⁶¹

Whilst some resolutions from 2015 to 2017 had SRHR or CSE language successfully included,⁶² in May 2021, the World Health Assembly passed a resolution on violence against women and girls where language from the core group of sponsors referring to CSE was removed from the resolution.⁶³ A number of countries including Kenya, Syria, Egypt, Bahrain and Iran disagreed with the language of the draft resolution, particularly with the inclusion of the term ‘sexuality education’ for children. Similarly, during the June 2021 HRC session, diplomats witnessed the weakening of CSE language in the text of the resolution addressing the right to education for girls.⁶⁴ Aylward and Halford conclude that greater normative advances are made within the technical and legal streams by experts vis-à-vis the opposition encountered in political streams due to political interests and agendas.⁶⁵

Some academics are convinced that due to the politicisation of human rights, ‘watered down language would become the new normal’.⁶⁶ However, beyond the period of this study and during the 56th session of the Human Rights Council in 2024, a significant advancement in SRHR language was incorporated in the resolution on ‘Human rights in the context of HIV and AIDS’. The resolution was adopted by consensus for the first time since 2019, despite specific reference made to sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and not sexual reproductive health and reproductive rights (SRHRR).⁶⁷ States were urged ‘to develop sexual and reproductive health services as well as education programmes on sexual and reproductive health and rights’ for adolescents and young persons, especially girls and young women, in the response to HIV.⁶⁸ This is in contrast to many of the other 95 resolutions studied which lacked any specific reference to ‘sexual rights’. The outcome of negotiations on these resolutions contradict the argument that diplomats should simply ‘preserve and defend the system as it currently exists and prevent further setbacks’.⁶⁹ Although acknowledging that it is important to defend language currently existing in the resolutions, diplomats should continue to advance progressive language on behalf of girls’ rights where possible.

During the same session, the resolution on the ‘Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women and Girls’ was adopted which urged states to repeal ‘all laws and policies that criminalise or restrict the exercise of sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights’ and reaffirmed the rights to bodily autonomy, sexual and reproductive health, reproductive rights, access to safe abortion and comprehensive sexuality education. For the first time a UN resolution also addressed the issue of menstrual poverty.⁷⁰ Other resolutions that were considered for the first time on girls’ rights included a resolution ‘Accelerating progress to prevent adolescent pregnancy’ and ‘Technology-facilitated gender-based violence’, as well as an updated resolution on ‘Menstrual Hygiene management, Human Rights and Gender Equality’.⁷¹

These recent developments are promising and demonstrate once again that the resolutions are not static but undergo change each year. The concerns by some experts, academics and NGOs that SRHR and CSE language is not being sufficiently advanced in resolutions cannot therefore be attributed to all resolutions. Whilst appreciating their high expectations and disappointment at the lack of explicit reference to SRHR and CSE, references are included in some resolutions, with advances taking place through consensus.

These unexpected advances in language are a result of numerous factors and influences. One of these factors could have been attributed to the change in position by the USA towards girls’ rights when, under the Biden administration, the United States returned to the Human Rights Council in January 2022 after an absence of four years. Unfortunately, the influence of the preceding years meant that due to its absence, other countries were able to entrench conservative positions in the Human Rights Council, similarly reflected in Third Committee negotiations. Based on the USA position towards SRHR and CSE rights during the first Trump Administration, it will be interesting for diplomats and experts alike to observe the position adopted by USA and to detect whether the language weakens once again under the second Trump Administration.

Another determining factor includes the personalities of diplomats serving in New York or Geneva who are more flexible in achieving consensus based on developments in their capitals. It is interesting that history is often determined by the

personalities of those in power.⁷² This can equally be said for multilateralism where the role of personalities participating in negotiations can play both a positive and negative role. Important decisions that affect the lives of girls are at times made in multilateral arenas by state representatives who possess a strong, patriarchal mindset. These diplomats reflect a continued stance by certain governments to maintain the status quo regarding the advancement of rights for girls; and the fear of progressive interpretations of rights linked to LGBTQ and SOGI. A sense exists among certain delegations that the liberalist policies of some governments have progressed too far, resulting in questions being raised about the scope of the global human rights project.

This is particularly noticeable when considering the policies and programmes adopted by some countries nationally and regionally in implementing CSE curricula. Despite advances in some states, their diplomats appear hesitant to support CSE language in a resolution. An example of this are the huge gains made in CSE curricula in the Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) region which contrasts with the reluctance demonstrated by the diplomats from Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) or the East African Community (EAC) to take principled positions on this issue.

Some states adapt their positions on these issues dependent on the governing party of the day and dependent on the 'group politics' at play. This contradiction can often be attributed to state representatives not wishing to lose political support they would require in negotiations on other issues or result in negative measures imposed on them from dominant powers such as the US, potentially having an economic impact on these states.⁷³ Often the realist position of dominant powers plays an important role in influencing state representatives to agree to weaken their language, despite the very positive initiatives taken by their governments to address SRHR and CSE domestically. Correa and Parker use the United States as a key example of 'confused positions' when demonstrating how it 'cherry picks' part of the definition on SRHR dependent on the various administrations.⁷⁴ This is confirmed when Gilby et al. show how dramatically the position of the United States on SRHR language changes from the Obama Administration to the Trump Administration.⁷⁵

State representatives are thus prepared to 'sacrifice' a strong position on an issue such as SRHR or CSE to ensure support in another. This has resulted in many middle-ground states from the Global South disengaging from the discussion on these issues in their efforts to avoid any penalties from the two opposing sides. The 'high stake politics' of the Third Committee in New York compared to the more 'technical' approach of the Human Rights Council in Geneva has led to contrasting positions in human rights bodies on the same issues. It is therefore disappointing to witness the weakening of the human rights system due to the threat of 'revenge politics' where a state cannot take a progressive position in negotiations.

6. Conclusion

This tension and politicisation of thematic rights pertaining to girls is resulting in a regression in the norm setting of these rights, and a stagnation in the full realisation of SRHR and CSE rights. This is attributed to a conservative position in contrast to a progressive position, or a political position versus an expert position adopted by states; all of which are independent of geographic regions or status of development.⁷⁶

The study confirmed the need to reform human rights bodies to ensure greater collaboration between the diplomats and experts in charter- and treaty-based bodies.⁷⁷ Conservative NGOs provide very effective training and speaking points to conservative countries, thereby encouraging states to support these firm positions.⁷⁸ States with an alternative policy position are thus more vulnerable when not provided with the necessary information to counteract conservative viewpoints on SRHR and CSE. It is therefore particularly important for diplomats to receive regular briefings from national experts, whether in the public or private sector, and specialised UN agencies. This will ensure that they are kept updated and abreast with the interpretation of human rights obligations; the implementation of the conventions in their domestic environment; and academic research pertaining to SRHR and CSE.⁷⁹

The excellent analysis and progressive interpretation of human rights conventions that is undertaken by Special Procedures, treaty bodies, academia and child rights institutions needs to become embedded in diplomacy. As important decisions in the United Nations are determined by diplomats, an integrated system is required where diplomats are briefed on the current developments taking place in research, with expert advisors placed within foreign ministries. This integration of the social science community with government will assist diplomats in appreciating the advances made and how best to promote solutions within their country, both in bilateral and multilateral contexts. It would furthermore promote evidence-based policy making, especially as the social sciences can at times be more difficult to discuss than natural science topics.

The study furthermore found that this is already taking place in some UN agencies, with diplomats in UNESCO working very closely with their national experts in various statutory bodies of the organisation. As many of UNESCO's intergovernmental committees and commissions are expert driven, diplomats recognise that they require the inputs from their national experts. Further research could therefore be conducted on the collaboration between scientific experts and diplomats in various other UN agencies and organisations addressing their specific mandates and issues.⁸⁰

Regular contact between diplomats and child-rights experts, whether national or international, regarding proposed resolutions in the HRC and Third Committee will furthermore assist diplomats to negotiate more effectively by proposing language which supports developments in the field instead of remaining with a standardised, and possibly outdated, position. In some statutory bodies of the UN, experts and NGOs provide support to the diplomats in likeminded countries by drafting interventions for them. This interaction is required between experts and diplomats to uphold and afford priority to these 'soft human rights law issues'.

The claim by some academics and NGOs that language does not exist;⁸¹ has weakened substantially over time; or is weak in all resolutions, although confirmed in some resolutions, does not appear to be substantiated throughout all resolutions on women and girls.⁸² Whilst acknowledging that the anti-rights lobbying groups are highly influential and that the language does fluctuate each year, positive language does exist in many resolutions; is consistent in many; and even improves in some of the resolutions. However, whilst the development of norms and standards has assisted States parties in further clarifying and advancing the rights of girls in the text of resolutions, more political will is required by governments to ensure the practical realisation of girls' rights.

The alignment of positions by the USA and Russia demonstrates that, when addressing the rights of girls, unusual alliances are formed which are often to the detriment of girls and reinforce the strong patriarchal and conservative positions still present in some societies, including those in the West. Although witnessing the return of more progressive political parties in the USA and Brazil during the study, this has subsequently changed with the return of conservative political parties to power in many countries. The influence of changing political rulers to either strengthen or weaken the human rights of girls means that these states can no longer be considered long-term, reliable partners.⁸³ Mr Trump has proven to be skeptical of international multilateral organisations in his first term, and so it can be expected that the second Trump Administration, commencing in January 2025, will confirm and reinforce this position.

Notes

1. Numerous UN agencies have reported on the negative statistics pertaining to the reproductive health and rights of girls. See UNICEF (2022). Early childbearing can have severe consequences for adolescent girls. data.unicef.org/topic/child-health/adolescent-health/; UNAIDS (2023). HIV and adolescent girls and young women; and OHCHR. Child and forced marriage, including in humanitarian settings. ohchr.org/en/women/child-and-forced-marriage.
2. See Rodley (2012, pp. 320–355). Gilby et al. document the advances and setbacks that have been made within the UN framework from 2014 to 2019 and demonstrate how the SRHR language has either been omitted, replaced or weakened. See Gilby et al. (2021, pp. 1–10).
3. See Amnesty International (2024, pp. 17–18). The 2024 report of Amnesty International states that whilst some progress was made on SRHR in certain countries, others have undermined these rights, reinforced discrimination and failed to tackle violence against women and girls. See also Footnote 18 that provides a definition of the contrasting ideologies of conservative and progressive actors.
4. The first major study was conducted by Esther Boserup in 1970 entitled ‘Women’s role in Economic Development’. Specifically for this study, see Kanin (2015). More recently, see Kelly et al. (2023). The Population Institute explains how policy makers fail to recognise that gender equality and economic empowerment of women are directly linked to sexual and reproductive health services.
5. See Landman (2005), wherein he refers to the ways in which domestic political arrangements may have an impact on the international behaviour of states; and how the notion of Putman’s ‘two-level’ games has helped scholars understand the constraint of democratic institutions on state behaviour.
6. There are some exceptions where a close working relationship exists between the diplomats of a government’s Foreign Ministry and a state’s national experts working in UN organisations and agencies Djazouli provides the example of France and other European countries that have made CSE and SRHR a key element of their feminist diplomacy. France in particular aims to increase its advocacy efforts in favour of SRHR on an international scale. See Djazouli (2023). See also Footnote 85 below referring to the training provided to US diplomats.
7. See Swartz (2024). This article draws substantially on the study undertaken for doctoral research, the first author being doctoral candidate and the second author the supervisor.
8. See Miller and Roseman (2011, pp. 102–118).
9. See Aylward and Halford (2020, pp. 160–174).
10. See Miller and Roseman (2011, pp. 102–118).
11. Allen states that a critical analysis ‘interrogates how language reproduces power and social inequality’; ‘attempts to expose hidden power and taken-for-granted assumptions’, and ‘enhances multiple perspectives, gives space to unheard voices, and stimulates social criticism’. See Allen (2017, p. 2).

12. Landman states that political scientists utilise the ‘content found in the international law of human rights as a useful starting point for research’, and that research undertaken by political scientists on human rights ‘uses documentation, monitoring reports and evidence of human rights practices for systematic analysis that seeks to explain global variation in human rights protection’. See Landman (2005, pp. 553–554).
13. The international legal instruments include human rights covenants, conventions and treaties, whereas the technical documents providing normative frameworks include recommendations, general comments, policy briefs, annual reports, guiding documents and negotiated resolutions. The reports and recommendations fall within the technical process referred to by Chrichton et al. See Chrichton et al. (2015, p. 3).
14. The 2016 Report of the Secretary-General on collaboration within the UN system refers to actors across the UN system supporting the drafting, implementation and monitoring of relevant treaties and international standards to continually strengthen the normative framework. See A/71/277 (2016, p. 5).
15. See the website of the OHCHR that is a source of human rights recommendations and findings produced by human rights treaty bodies, <https://juris.ohchr.org/>.
16. See Annexures A and B which provide a listing of all the resolutions studied. As will be noted on the Annexures, a few resolutions were not tabled during the COVID-19 crisis.
17. See Gilby et al. (2021). See also Correa and Parker (2018, pp. 8–36). See European Parliament (2018). Furthermore, NGOs particularly refer to the battlegrounds that the resolutions become when references are made to gender, sexual and reproductive health and rights and comprehensive sexual education. As examples, see [International Service for Human Rights](#); and the Joint statement NGOs on 77th GA Third Committee (2022). See also Sexual Rights Initiative which is referenced in Chapter Five, Footnote 84, on their concerns regarding proposed amendments in the resolutions related to sexual rights and the voting outcomes on each amendment. See Sexual Rights Initiative (2022).
18. Kirova explains that ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’ are two opposing political ideologies which inform the policies, beliefs and actions of those who subscribe to them. Kirova defines ‘conservatives’ as those who wish to preserve traditional family values, with a strong emphasis on personal responsibility and limited intervention from government. In contrast, ‘progressives’ emphasise the importance of government intervention to address social and economic issues and have a strong emphasis on protecting individual rights and freedoms. See Kirova (2023). The [Merriam Webster Dictionary](#) also describes conservatism as a political philosophy based on tradition and social stability, stressing the importance of established hierarchies and institutions (such as religion, the family, and class structure). This contrasts with a progressive philosophy which calls for government to meet social, political, economic, and environmental needs and demands and to advance rights and protections for marginalised groups. See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/>. See also Shameen who provides the concerns of the influence of conservative ideologies on the realisation of rights. Shameen (2021).
19. See Balogun and Durojaye (2011, p. 379).
20. See Gilby et al. (2021). See also Correa and Parker (2018, pp. 8–36). See European Parliament (2018). Furthermore, NGOs particularly refer to the battlegrounds that the resolutions become when references are made to gender, sexual and reproductive health and rights and comprehensive sexual education. As examples, see [International Service for Human Rights](#); and the Joint statement NGOs on 77th GA Third Committee (2022). See also Sexual Rights Initiative on their concerns regarding proposed amendments in the resolutions related to sexual rights and the voting outcomes on each amendment. See Sexual Rights Initiative (2022). See also Gruskin et al. (2018, pp. 8–36).
21. The Minimum Information and Security Standards (MISS) determines the utilisation and protection of confidential or sensitive information within the public sector.
22. See Jizeng (2014, p. 20). Jizeng refers to data as providing the possibility to compare ‘different outcomes across similar countries and similar outcomes across different countries’.

23. See Lagon and Kuminski (2017, pp. 6–7). Independent human rights experts report systematically on the human rights situations in various countries, as well as monitor global progress on broad, thematic human rights goals.
24. See the Annex to Human Rights Council resolution 5/1 of 18 June 2007.
25. The independence of members is integral to the credibility of the treaty bodies. The Chairs of the human rights treaty bodies held their twenty-fourth meeting in Addis Ababa from 25 to 29 June 2012 during which they developed guidelines on the independence and impartiality of members of the human rights treaty bodies, known as ‘the Addis Ababa guidelines’ – A/67/222.
26. See [International Service for Human Rights](#).
27. <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/strengthening-international-human-rights/un-special-procedures>.
28. See Miller and Roseman (2011, pp. 10–12). The authors explain how in 2010 numerous states aligned to the OIC states challenged the General Comment of the CESCR and the reports of two Special Rapporteurs (the Right to Health and the Right to Education) of exceeding their mandate and not having these reports adopted by the HRC for referral to the GA.
29. See the site of the OHCHR addressing treaty bodies: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/what-treaty-bodies-do>.
30. See Donnelly (1986). Donnelly explains that the HRC is a body of state representatives, not independent experts, and although most Council members are relatively non-ideological when compared to their counterparts in the Third Committee of the General Assembly, they are still instructed political delegates.
31. See Lyons et al. (1977, p. 88).
32. Freedman states that ‘states hide behind the idea of dialogue, effectively doing little else other than talking about human rights. Dialogue becomes a positive outcome rather than demanding human rights protection’. See Freedman and Houghton (2017, pp. 753–769).
33. Shameem who to these political relations as an ‘unholy alliance’ where conservative actors from Catholic, Evangelical, Mormon, Russian Orthodox and Muslim work together for a common cause. Shameem (2017) in Toronto and Mexico City.
34. This was seen in the diametrically opposed positions of the United States based on whether the Republicans or Democrats are in power.
35. Sabatini discusses the justiciability of economic and social rights, including health care and education, and that it is often related to a state’s capacity to implement these rights and therefore not directly enforceable. Sabatini also explains that in the USA’s relationship with China, human rights regularly has to compete with a number of other issues. Furthermore, China is the largest trading partner of most of the world’s economies and therefore has confidence in promoting its own political-economic model which has had an impact on its position in human rights diplomacy has well. See Sabatini (2023, p. xiv).
36. According to Sommerer & Talberg ‘unanimity or consensus is an invitation to gridlock, as any state can block reform by wielding the veto’. See Sommerer and Talberg (2016, p. 13). Blake and Payton also explain that

The need to find a universally acceptable outcome means that unanimity is often associated with gridlock, hindering the ability of IGOs to respond quickly and effectively to the shifting demands of their members. This is particularly so if those demands require ‘deep’ cooperation involving significant adjustments in states’ behaviour as the need for full approval leads to lowest common denominator outcomes and ‘shallower’ cooperation.

- See Blake and Lockwood Payton (2015, p. 383).
37. See Openshaw and Sinclair (2017, p. 30).
38. See Hafner-Burton (2012, pp. 265–286).
39. See Hafner-Burton (2012, p. 274).
40. See Freedman (2014, p. 20).

41. See Freedman (2011).
42. See Gruskin et al. (2018, pp. 8–36).
43. See Henkin (2002, pp. 183–208).
44. See Dunnoff and Pollack (2012).
45. This is supported by Gilby et al. in their research on SRHR language across the UNGA, the CSW and the CPD. See Gilby et al. (2021, p. 4).
46. See Vida (2019). See also McLaughlin in the Irish Times quoting Hungary's President Orban: 'Liberal imperialism reigns in western Europe, and they are trying to force their worldview on countries that think differently. American Democrats and often international courts are also involved in this'. McLaughlin (2020). See also the European Union's document on (2018), where it explains the origin of the ideological and popular movement against 'gender ideology' or 'gender theory' which started in 2012 in Europe but was based on religious schools of thought from the early 2000s.
47. Besides UNESCO, experts also play important roles in other multilateral bodies. See De Pryck and Gaveau (2023).
48. See Miller and Roseman (2011, pp. 6–11).
49. The Nobel laureate, Kazuo Ishiguro, in his 2017 Nobel lecture stated that 'Enormous inequalities – of wealth and opportunity – have been allowed to grow ... and the long years of austerity policies imposed on ordinary people ... have brought us to a present in which far right ideologies and tribal nationalisms proliferate'.
50. See Power (2019, p. 220).
51. The UN agencies that the USA exited from and relevant to this study included the Human Rights Council, the UNFPA, the WHO and UNESCO.
52. See Sadinsky and Ahed (2021, p. 16).
53. See Sadinsky and Ahed (2021, p. 18).
54. Aylward & Halford explain how the domestic policies of the USA, Russia and Brazil have caused them to side with like-minded countries to oppose language on SRHR and CSE in the HRC. See Aylward and Halford (2020, p. 164). See also Gilby et al. (2021, p. 2), Global health without reproductive health and rights? Analysis of United Nations documents and country statements, who write extensively on the broader politics of silencing SRHR issues by the Trump Administration and how cross border support between conservative anti-SRHR groups in the USA and in the EU has meant that these groups have been able to build strategies to undermine SRHR both at the regional level and at the UN.
55. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/third-committee-experts-denounce-uptick-violence-against-women-children-delegates-call>.
56. The Global Gag Rule, instituted by President Reagan in 1984, prevents organisations who received US Global Health aid from providing abortion services and also from providing any information or referrals to other providers which offer the service. See Gilby et al. (2021, p. 2).
57. See US Department of Health and Human Services (2023).
58. See Aylward and Halford (2020, pp. 160–174).
59. See Gilby et al. (2021, pp. 1–10); and Correa and Parker (2018, pp. 8–36).
60. See Gruskin et al. (2018, pp. 8–36).
61. See Gilby et al. (2021, p. 3).
62. These resolutions include the SADC Girl Child, RoC, CEFM, and VAW, although they have been substantially weakened or deleted in subsequent reiterations of the annual/biennial resolutions.
63. During the plenary session after the resolution had been adopted, Argentina's representative expressed disappointment on behalf of over 30 countries at the compromise that had been adopted 'in order to not break consensus on voting on technical issues'.
64. A/HRC/47/L.3.
65. See Aylward and Halford (2020, p. 169).

66. See Gilby et al. (2021).
67. See HRC (2024).
68. HRC (2024). See also the website of the NGO, *The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association*.
69. See Griffiths (2023, p. 7).
70. See UN Women (2024). Menstrual poverty is defined as the lack of access to safe and hygienic menstrual products and basic sanitation services or facilities such as menstrual hygiene education during monthly periods.
71. See 56th regular session of the Human Rights Council: Resolutions, decisions and President's statements <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/regular-sessions/session56/res-dec-stat>.
72. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once stated: 'as a professor, I tended to think of history as run by imperial forces. But when you see it in practice, you see the differences personalities make'. See Isaacson (1992, p. 13).
73. Griffiths states that diplomat's engagement on human rights is 'secondary to broader considerations of national interest, and subject to shifting calculations of whether it is worth the political cost'. See Griffiths (2023, p. 5).
74. See Correa and Parker (2018, pp. 8–36).
75. See Gilby et al. (2021, p. 3.4.6).
76. See Aylward and Halford (2020, p. 163). Divisions within the EU and WEOG blocs as well as within other regions with regard to progressive SRHR and CSE language are documented.
77. See Sadinsky and Ahed (2021, p. 19).
78. IPAS provides extensive information on the various NGOs that provide training to policy makers, political leaders, youth and local leaders, parliamentarians, diplomatic staff and government officials. See IPAS (2023).
79. The Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria in collaboration with the South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation held a training workshop on 2 May 2024 entitled 'Sexual and gender minority rights: the law and politics of international human rights'. Similarly, the State Department of the USA encourages regular training of diplomats to ensure understanding on SRHR rights. See US Department of State where USA government has instituted a strategy to elevate the human rights of women and girls as a US national security, diplomatic and foreign assistance priority. US Department of State (2022).
80. As proposed by Landman, the interplay between 'the construction of human rights norms and interaction of such norms with political power' requires further study. See Landman (2005, p. 565).
81. Gilby et al. conclude in their research that 'the global shift in politics and anti-SRHR actors at UN negotiations and conferences have removed previously agreed on language on SRHR from future UN resolutions and outcome documents'. See Gilby et al. (2021, p. 1).
82. See Correa and Parker (2018, pp. 8–36).
83. Griffiths states that in the US, 'commitment to multilateralism itself has become an increasingly partisan matter, and the durability of US commitment to the human rights system remains uncertain'. See Griffiths (2023, p. 6).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Department of International Relations and Cooperation, Bursary for Doctorate [grant number 14499398]; University of Pretoria, Bursary for Doctorate [grant number 18379509].

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