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Gender Language in Multilateral Diplomacy:

Analyzing Recent Pushback in Vienna

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Executive Summary

This report examines the recent pushback by Iran against gender equality language in the multilateral forums in Vienna. As the first comprehensive analysis of this development, it establishes a record of events in the forums affected, analyses the drivers of this pushback and its impact on negotiations, studies how other countries are responding, and offers advice on preserving existing language and reducing disruption to multilateral decision making.

Pushback against Gender Language in Vienna

Despite the longstanding international consensus on gender equality since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, Iran has opposed UN gender language in Vienna for the past year. While UN Member States are divided on other issues, i.e., diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, Iran is the only country that has been blocking consensus on outcome documents to weaken or remove agreed gender language, beginning with its objection to the term “gender equality” at the 2023 IAEA General Conference.

In doing so, Iran leverages the consensus principle of multilateral diplomacy in Vienna, using gender language as a bargaining chip to exchange for concessions in other areas, prolonging negotiations until others may be ready to compromise on weakened gender language. This contributes to the inaccurate impression that 1) gender was a controversial topic that should be avoided, and 2) that countries supporting gender equality language were politicizing technical discussions. Iran has also shown readiness to sidestep procedural rules, insisting on deleting references to national statements that mention gender from reports adopted at the Vienna-based organizations, despite strong criticism from numerous countries.

Though Iranian diplomats tend to avoid detailed, conceptual discussions on gender language, they have provided different arguments to explain Iran’s position, from the incompatibility of gender equality with Iranian laws, culture, and Islamic traditions, to the potential domestic implications of agreeing to gender language at the international level, the supposed protection of traditional family values, and the view that discussions of gender equality as a human rights issue had no place in technical forums. A line of argumentation that diplomats identified as concerning because effective at garnering support from other countries is that a focus on gender equality hindered progress on geographical representation in international forums.

Another key aspect is the Iranian ambassador’s unusual participation in expert-level talks, making his involvement conditional to Iran’s agreement to gender language. Iranian diplomats often ask to pause meetings until the ambassador’s arrival, causing delays. Interviewees report attempts to bully junior diplomats into yielding to Iran’s position and, potentially, to lift negotiations to the ambassadorial level, though unsuccessfully.

Iran is mostly isolated in opposing established gender language. Russia and members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) occasionally support Iranian objections on gender but do not join Iran in blocking consensus. While Iran’s partners may view Iran imposing costs on Western countries as useful, there is increasing concern about the obstructive impact on the policymaking organs in Vienna. It is unclear to what degree Iran is coordinating its position with partners, though there seems to be more ad-hoc coordination during conferences.

While a few countries, mainly Egypt, have functioned as mediators on gender language, the perspective for compromise language is slim as any step towards Iran's position would be a step down from existing UN language. Interviews suggest that mediator countries face similar obstacles in negotiating with Iran. Overall, it appears that Western diplomats believe mediator countries have greater influence on Iran's position than those countries see for themselves.

Causes and Drivers

Diplomats agree about the significant role that Iran's ambassador Mohsen Naziri Asl plays for Iran's conduct in Vienna. With reportedly close connections in the former conservative Raisi government, diplomats experienced him to be personally opposed to gender equality as Western ideology. Descriptions of the ambassador as confrontational and short-tempered in negotiations, including with his staff and other Iranian officials, are supported by information that Iranian diplomats in Vienna are themselves unhappy with his conduct and style of work.

Despite some indications that the ambassador may have been acting against instructions from capital, Iran's behavior in Vienna may serve wider foreign policy interests. It enhances Iran's influence in negotiations, adds leverage to achieve wins on other issues, and imposes diplomatic defeats on geopolitical adversaries. Given the special role of Vienna as the seat of the IAEA for Iran's interests, diplomats concluded that Iran may be happy to accept the obstruction of multilateral decision making, including on its controversial nuclear program, as collateral damage, feeling that it has little to gain from constructive cooperation.

Iranian domestic politics are an important dimension for interpreting the situation in Vienna too. While Iran has accepted gender equality language under moderate governments, conservative governments seem to implement the Supreme Leader's rejection of gender equality more closely. For the Supreme Leader, gender equality is a morally corrupt concept that undermines a traditional order, in which women should be respected, but not made equal to men. Additionally, with the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' protests, the government may have seen gender equality increasingly as a threat to regime survival, seeking to prevent protestors from using gender language agreed by Iran at the multilateral level to support demands for reform.

The perception that Western countries were 'smuggling in' new language recognizing gender diversity or working to change the common meaning of "gender equality" is another driver for Iran's objection. Given the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights, Iran believes that Western countries no longer mean equality between men and women when insisting on "gender equality". Therefore, Iran feels no longer bound by this language. This skepticism about gender diversity is shared by several other countries. In response, these countries tend to block language that deviates, if only slightly, from UN wording. In this way, Iran's behavior in Vienna is an extreme manifestation of a broader pattern.

Responses

Responses to Iran's behavior are varied. While the group of countries committed to gender equality is broader than its frequent equation with 'the West', including Chile, Colombia, Mexico, the Philippines, South Africa, and others, official policies do not always translate into unreserved support for gender language in the Vienna forums. A lack of human resources and political capital limit how vocally smaller countries uphold gender equality language.

Still, there has been a clear uptick in coordination between countries committed to gender equality language. Likeminded countries have spent more time agreeing on starting positions and red lines for negotiations, resolving not to accept proposals that would weaken UN gender language, to vote on outcome documents more readily rather than weaken established gender language for the sake of consensus, and to work with developing countries to challenge suggestions of a ‘West versus rest’ divide on gender issues.

Indeed, differences between Western and G-77 countries play a minimal role in explaining responses to Iran as the Group includes vocal supporters of gender equality and skeptics. There is frustration among G-77 countries about the hurdles that Iran adds to agreeing joint statements between this diverse group and about Iran reopening texts in negotiations that had been pre-agreed among the G-77. However, there also is a growing readiness among some G-77 countries to accommodate Iran to prevent deadlock on other issues. Factors that may contribute to this include a lack of awareness in parts of the G-77 of UN gender language and states’ responsibilities towards it and a tendency to avoid confrontation within the G-77.

A common response among diplomats is a questioning of the consensus principle of multilateral decision making in Vienna and how it enables Iran’s approach. Diplomats stressed that countries should keep the option of voting open to maintain leverage. Still, countries value consensus, which provides legitimacy to the activities of Vienna-based organizations and underpins the concept of agreed language. In consequence, Western and G-77 countries have been working on a joint position to affirm that countries should pursue consensus as far as viable, but that voting is legitimate when the consensus principle is used in bad faith.

Recommendations

1. Avoiding re-negotiations of gender language: To prevent the creation of weakened gender language that may bleed into other UN hubs and to deter others from adopting Iran’s approach, countries could point to the lack of a mandate for the Vienna institutions to amend gender language agreed at the highest UN level. This can reduce delays and obstruction in substantive negotiations and prevent the use of gender language as a bargaining chip.

2. Not allowing gender language to be negotiated last: To challenge the false impression that gender equality was controversial and its supporters dogmatic, countries should treat gender language as a ‘day-one’ issue in negotiations, working to identify what language may be possible to agree with Iran. Others suggest a more decisive approach of reserving agreement in areas important to Iran’s partners until gender equality language has been cleared, to create further incentives for Iran not to block consensus on outcome documents.

3. Voting when necessary: Countries can maintain leverage over Iran by signaling readiness to vote on gender equality language when necessary. They should stress that, in these cases, voting aims to preserve consensus language agreed at the highest UN level, to ensure language coherence across the UN, and to protect the consensus principle from misuse.

4. Regular coordination on gender language: Countries should continue to develop shared opening positions and red lines, exchange information on attempts to weaken or delete gender language in different forums, and exchange best practices, e.g., in a working group on gender language in the International Gender Champions initiative.

5. Strengthening North/South coordination: To challenge the narrative that developing countries were disinterested in gender equality, countries from different regions can continue supporting each other in negotiations and lobby more G-77 members to support upholding UN gender language, including by vote when necessary. A priority is to challenge the construction of gender equality and geographical representation as competing objectives.

6. Clear and consistent use of gender language: Countries can support their efforts to preserve gender language by avoiding the interchangeable use of “gender equality”, “gender balance”, etc. in their own statements. References to agreed language in the Vienna forums and foundational UN documents could further support their advocacy for gender language.

7. Avoiding standalone resolutions on gender equality: Proposals to remove gender language from technical resolutions in favor of progressively worded gender resolutions would be antithetical to gender mainstreaming and constitute a significant concession to Iran. Opposed by many more countries than Iran, such resolutions would, by default, require a vote each year, which countries attached to consensus decisions would likely find unacceptable.

2. Introduction

On the final day of the 2023 IAEA General Conference, negotiations stretched long into the night as states struggled to reach consensus on the resolution “Nuclear and radiation safety”, largely due to Iran’s objection to paragraph 114, which encourages national capacity building on nuclear safety, including through “promoting gender equality and workforce diversity”.¹ This language had been adopted at every General Conference since 2018.

At around 2 AM, states eventually agreed on the phrase “gender equality or balance”. After the resolution had been adopted in the Plenary, 20 states expressed their strong preference for the term “gender equality”, stressing that they had compromised in favor of consensus on this important resolution. Iran, too, stated that it was not entirely satisfied, having wished to remove “gender equality” completely.²

The determination with which Iran worked to water down long-established consensus language on gender in an, arguably, secondary paragraph took diplomats by surprise. It had seemed unthinkable that disagreement over gender language would ever seriously threaten consensus on a resolution addressing a key mandate of the IAEA, or of any international organization. However, this was only the first instance in a continuing series of unyielding objections to gender language in Vienna. Iran has resisted mentions of “gender equality”, “gender”, and related language in all major forums in Vienna, and has demonstrated an unprecedented willingness to block consensus on outcome documents. This has hindered multilateral decision making in key areas, from nuclear nonproliferation to space exploration.

Aside from the impact on diplomats in the room, especially women, who describe negotiating gender language with Iran as “soul-crushing”, this threatens to erode gender equality as a firmly embedded principle of international relations. It risks producing weakened language that could be used to justify the denial of equal rights and opportunities for women, including in multilateral diplomacy on security and human rights in

¹ IAEA (2022), “Nuclear and radiation safety”, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc66-res6.pdf>, p. 15.

² IAEA (2023), “Committee of the Whole: Record of the Eighth Meeting”, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc67com5or8_prl.pdf.

New York and Geneva. It contributes to the inaccurate impression that gender, as an allegedly controversial, political issue, should be removed from the technical discussions held in Vienna, undermining the need for gender mainstreaming in the Vienna-based forums, e.g., to reduce the number of women dying from breast cancer by ensuring access to radiotherapy or to protect the overwhelmingly female victims of human trafficking worldwide. Finally, Iran's exploitation of the consensus principle undermines the Vienna spirit that distinguishes it from the UN hubs in New York and Geneva.

This report provides a first comprehensive analysis of the situation. It builds on the experiences and views of diplomats, representing a diverse mix of developing and developed countries in Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, North America, and Oceania, and by officials at some of the affected international organizations in Vienna.

The forums and organizations covered in this report are the 2023 General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the 2023 General Conference of the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the 2023 Conference of the States Parties to the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization's (CTBTO) Preparatory Commission and Working Group B meetings in the first semester of 2024, the 2024 International Conference on Nuclear Security (ICONS), the 2024 meetings of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) and its Legal Subcommittee, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

The report begins with a brief overview of the evolution of UN language on gender equality. It also shows how gender equality is integrated into the mandate and activities of the IAEA as the largest UN body in Vienna. In the second part, it takes stock of Iran's opposition to gender language in the abovementioned forums. It examines the different features of Iran's behavior in Vienna, including attempts to create weakened language and remove mentions of "gender" from agreed texts, undermining the consensus principle and using gender language as a bargaining chip, the arguments Iran employs to underline its objection, and to what extent Iran coordinates and receives support for its position from other countries. Thirdly, the report considers potential drivers of Iran's position, followed by an analysis of how other states are reacting to Iran's behavior. Finally, the report assesses different measures to preserve gender equality language and minimize disruption of multilateral decision making.

3. The Evolution of Consensus Language on Gender

a) Gender Language in the UN System

The principle of gender equality in international relations, defined as "equal rights of men and women", including their unrestricted participation in the UN organs, was codified in the UN Charter, legally binding for all UN Member States.³ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, built on this principle, proclaiming equal entitlement to human rights and freedoms, regardless of sex.⁴ This language, clearly referring to equality in rights and not solely equal representation in numbers as in "gender balance", continues to be authoritative for all UN Member States.

In the 1950s and 60s, this principle was further strengthened in legally binding agreements, elaborating the

³ UN (1945), "United Nations Charter", <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>.

⁴ UN (1948), "Universal Declaration of Human Rights", <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

rights proclaimed in the UDHR, primarily in the 1966 International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights, and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was borne out of recognition that a comprehensive, legally binding treaty was necessary to ensure the protection of human rights for women, not only by abolishing discriminatory laws, but also by challenging customs and traditions, and to promote their full and equal participation in public life and international affairs.⁵ The Convention represented an understanding that removing legal obstacles to equal rights for women was not sufficient and that fundamental change in the socio-cultural roles of men and women was needed to remove deeply engrained norms and practices that disadvantage women. The essence of this concept of gender was enshrined in Article 5:

“States Parties shall take all appropriate measures [...] to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women [...].”

The term “gender” was first used in a UN text in the outcome documents of the 1985 Third Conference on Women. It was introduced to reflect the understanding that a person’s place in society is not determined by their biological sex but shaped by the social, political, and cultural norms associated with being male or female.⁶ “Gender” also became a useful umbrella term to refer to men and women at the same time, recognizing that men’s role in society is crucial to achieving equality for women, and simply “a more civilized term for the two sexes, less offensive and easier to incorporate in standard academic and bureaucratic procedures” as exemplified in gender analysis, gender gap, gender statistics, etc.⁷

At the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, although the term “gender” had already been adopted by consensus at the International Conference on Population and Development one year earlier, it was resisted by majority-Catholic and majority-Muslim countries, chiefly by the Holy See and Iran, for fear of recognition of gender identities outside the men-women binary and its association with the feminist movement and demands for reproductive rights.⁸ The idea that Western countries had always intended the term “gender” as a way to ‘smuggle’ other gender identities into consensus language remains a driver for Iran’s and other countries’ objections to gender language (see *Opposition to gender diversity*).

A group in the UN Commission on the Status of Women discussed whether this was the intention behind “gender” used at the Third World Conference, and confirmed that it “had been commonly used and understood in its ordinary, generally accepted usage in numerous other United Nations forums and conferences”, affirming that “gender” in the UN context has always referred to the socio-cultural understanding of what it means to be a woman or man, varying across cultures and time.⁹

⁵ UN Women (Unknown), “Short History of CEDAW Convention”, <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/history.htm>.

⁶ Joke Swiebel (2015), “Recognizing Gender and Sexuality at the United Nations”, *Sextant*, Vol. 35, p. 25-41, <https://doi.org/10.4000/sextant.2989>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Catholics for Choice (2013), “The Catholic Church at the United Nations”, https://www.catholicsforchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/CFC_See_Change_2013.pdf, p. 9. and Valetine Moghadam (1996), “The Fourth World Conference on Women: Dissension and Consensus”, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 28, 1, 77-81, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14672715.1996.10416191>.

With the unanimous adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, “gender” and “gender equality”, appearing countless times in both documents, had indisputably become consensus UN language. These documents are considered the most important milestone, establishing gender equality as an indispensable condition for peace and development, introducing gender mainstreaming, and creating standards for global action for gender equality with concrete objectives in 12 policy areas. Ever since, “gender” and “gender equality” have replaced the term “sex”, which is inadequate for addressing the structural causes and drivers of discrimination against women, in UN documents. This includes reports and materials produced by UN organizations and a vast number of UN resolutions, prominently, the 10 Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security.¹⁰

The latter helped to promote the recognition that women are not simply victims of inequality who require assistance, but indispensable agents of change for achieving peace, security, and development objectives. Already contained in the 2000-2015 Millennium Development Goals, UN Member States unanimously adopted Sustainable Development Goal 5 “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” along with its targets and indicators.¹¹

This underlines that, based on the UN’s founding texts, there is a legally binding commitment by all Member States to equal rights and freedoms for men and women. While introduced later, as the understanding of the causes and drivers of discrimination against women and the role of men in ending it advanced, the term “gender equality” has come to replace former expressions of this same principle and has long constituted consensus language.

b) Gender Language in Vienna

Gender equality language has been firmly anchored in the programs of the Vienna-based international organizations and the resolutions adopted by their policymaking organs. The IAEA serves as an illustrative example, not only because it is the largest UN body in Vienna, but also because of how broadly it incorporates gender language as a technical organization.

The IAEA’s mandate on gender equality originated at its 1992 General Conference with the first resolution titled “Women in the Secretariat”. It recognized that, despite a preferential hiring policy for women since 1975, their representation at higher and professional levels had increased only marginally. Member States instructed the Director General to increase efforts towards equal representation and requested a report on measures taken in this regard.¹² The resolution, evolved throughout the years, and the Director General’s biannual report have consistently featured at General Conferences since.

In the context of the 1995 Beijing Conference, the General Conference instructed the Director General to incorporate, wherever appropriate, elements of the Platform for Action into IAEA policies and programs and to establish a Focal Point for Gender Concerns to oversee the implementation of relevant points from the

⁹UN Commission on the Status of Women (1995), “Report of the Informal Contact Group on Gender”, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/198965?ln=en>, p. 2.

¹⁰IANWGE (Unknown), “Resolutions on Gender Equality”, https://www.un.org/womenwatch/ianwge/resolutions/ga_res_by_topic.htm.

¹¹UN General Assembly (2015), “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf.

¹²IAEA (1992), “Staffing of the Agency’s Secretariat”, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc36res-599_en.pdf.

Platform by the Agency.¹³ In line with UN consensus language evolving from references to biological sex towards “gender”, IAEA texts began using this language too, e.g., the 1996 resolution “Women in the Secretariat” already spoke about “gender imbalance” and “gender representation”.¹⁴ By 2001, the Director General’s report was explicitly referring to attaining “gender equality”.¹⁵

By 2005, however, the IAEA still employed the lowest share of women out of all UN bodies, leading to a renewed push from Member States to make meaningful progress. Member States instructed the Director General to develop a comprehensive “gender policy” and provided a mandate to analyze challenges, design measures, and assess outcomes of the Agency’s programmatic activities with an eye on gender equality and women’s empowerment (gender mainstreaming).¹⁶ The IAEA’s Gender Equality Policy was launched in 2008 and continues to be implemented. Its central elements are the achievement of gender balance in numbers among Agency staff, creating a work environment free from gender-based discrimination and responsive to needs like compatibility with family life, as well as gender mainstreaming.¹⁷ Member States have endorsed this policy numerous times, with explicit reference to “gender equality” in the “Women in the Secretariat” resolutions.

Since 2012, the resolution on the IAEA’s technical cooperation program has welcomed the Secretariat’s promotion of gender equality in technical cooperation efforts.¹⁸ The Agency’s work to ensure equitable access to the benefits of peaceful uses of nuclear technologies in agriculture, healthcare, industry, etc. is the most relevant area for mainstreaming gender considerations, including in how they relate to the developmental objectives identified in the Beijing Platform for Action. By 2019, references to gender equality, emphasizing the importance of diverse and inclusive workforces in nuclear safety and security programs, had been adopted in other key resolutions, on nuclear safety, security, and nuclear science and technology, and have remained anchored there since.

This shows that gender language at the IAEA, like at other international organizations in Vienna, has a long history, developing in congruence with the broader evolution of gender language in the UN context. The IAEA’s mandate to take gender-responsive action in its relevant activities on safeguards, safety, security, and the promotion of peaceful uses, and to implement a gender equality policy for its staff was created by numerous consensus decisions by Member States, reaffirmed and expanded over 30 years.

¹³ IAEA (1995), “Women in the Secretariat”, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc39res-20_en.pdf.

¹⁴ IAEA (1996), “Women in the Secretariat”, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc40res-19_en.pdf.

¹⁵ IAEA (2001), “Women in the Secretariat (Report by the Director General)”, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc45-22_en.pdf.

¹⁶ IAEA (2005), “Women in the Secretariat”, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc49res-16_en.pdf.

¹⁷ IAEA (2015), “Women at the IAEA”, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/women-at-the-iaea-2015.pdf>.

¹⁸ IAEA (2012), “Strengthening of the Agency’s technical cooperation activities”, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc56res-11_en.pdf.

4. Pushback against Gender Language in Vienna

a) UN Organizations

For the past year, Iran's opposition to gender language, particularly the term "gender equality", has had a serious impact on multilateral decision making at the UN organizations in Vienna. To be sure, gender language is a more broadly controversial topic within the international community when considering differing views on the diversity of gender identities, including non-binary and transgender people. With several countries opposing progressive views on gender, there is no consensus among UN Member States to expand the gender equality concept beyond the gender binary.

However, while other countries oppose language going beyond equality between men and women and some would prefer to restrict gender considerations to the UN's human rights bodies, Iran is the only country willing to block consensus on important outcome documents in order to weaken or remove established consensus language on gender equality. Diplomats describe today's stark contrast to previous years when, though having been a challenging party to negotiate with, Iran had not applied such obstructionism, let alone over gender language. The following section characterizes Iran's objection to gender language.

Establishing new 'consensus' language

While Iran had begun raising concerns related to gender in late 2022 with the arrival of a new ambassador, diplomats report that Iran first objected to "gender equality" in the nuclear safety resolution at the 2023 IAEA General Conference, blocking consensus on all three important resolutions, on nuclear safety, safeguards, and security, respectively, until states agreed on the phrase "gender equality or balance". While the difference between "gender equality" and "gender balance" may seem negligible at first, gender balance is merely the equal representation of men and women in numbers. In contrast, gender equality aims to create an environment that benefits both equally, to distribute decision making power fairly, and to ensure the equal enjoyment of rights by women and men.

When Iran raised its objection at the first meeting of the Committee of the Whole, which works towards consensus ahead of the resolutions' submission to the Plenary, it provoked strong reactions from a diverse group of countries, criticizing that Iran had not brought this up in preliminary discussions and that there was no basis for significantly changing the meaning of the paragraph since "gender equality" was agreed and widely-used language.¹⁹ After the resolution had passed, 20 states underlined that they considered "gender equality or balance" a one-off compromise. In interviews, several diplomats criticized this compromise, made in negotiations between a few ambassadors, as untransparent and short-sighted.

Following the adoption of the phrase "gender equality or balance", Iran began insisting that this be the starting point of negotiations on gender, referring to it as new consensus language, for example, in negotiations towards G-77 statements. Indeed, this phrase made it into the G-77 statement at the 2024 COPUOS meeting, calling on the UN Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA) to "promote inclusivity and gender equality or balance, as applicable, in the space sector".²⁰

¹⁹ IAEA (2023), "Committee of the Whole: Record of the First Meeting", https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc67com5or1_pr1.pdf, p. 3.

²⁰ G-77 (2024), "Statement of the G-77 and China during the sixty-seventh session of the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space", https://www.g77.org/vienna/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/G77_-67-COPUOS-2024_all.pdf.

Similarly, the G-77 statement at the 2023 UNIDO General Conference spoke about “the importance of gender balance and gender equality and the empowerment of women (GEEW) in line with national laws”.²¹ Iran also attempted to insert “gender equality or balance” into the ICONS 2024 Ministerial Declaration, as explained below.

Though difficult to confirm, some diplomats interviewed for this report believe that Iran may have consciously pursued creating rival consensus language, hoping to use it to weaken gender equality language across the Vienna institutions. Indeed, while Iran had initially objected to all mentions of gender equality in the draft resolutions, it only maintained unyielding opposition to paragraph 114 of the nuclear safety resolution; perhaps there was an awareness that weakened language in one resolution would be sufficient to try to challenge established language in other forums.²² Ultimately, “gender equality” still appeared seven times as a standalone term across the resolutions and decisions adopted by the Conference.

Interviewees report that the countries involved in negotiating the phrase “gender equality or balance” now viewed this compromise negatively. Coordination meetings between countries supporting gender equality have since agreed not to negotiate compromise language with Iran if it would weaken UN language. Indeed, no other outcome document negotiated in Vienna since the 2023 IAEA General Conference seems to have used this phrase.

Another example of Iran working to eliminate “gender equality” was the resolution “UNIDO, Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women”, traditionally tabled by Norway and Mexico, at the UNIDO General Conference in November/December 2023. In preliminary consultations, Iran reportedly reacted in a way unprecedented since the resolution’s first adoption in 2015, objecting to every mention of “gender equality” and maintaining this unyielding resistance until very late in the negotiations at the Conference. While Iran was initially supported by Egypt, Pakistan, Algeria, Sudan, and Turkey, as consensus appeared less achievable, Pakistan and Egypt, but also India and South Africa tried hard to convince Iran to soften its opposition. However, once Iran offered to accept gender language with qualifiers around national laws and cultural differences, others were not willing to compromise to water down previously agreed language.

Eliminating mentions of “gender”

Diplomats observed a hardening of Iran’s position towards 2024. While Iran had previously accepted terms like “gender balance” and “women’s empowerment”, it has more recently indiscriminately objected to mentions of the term “gender”.

For example, Iran objected to language welcoming an event on women’s representation and gender mainstreaming in space affairs, organized by UNOOSA and the Canadian Space Agency, in the report of the COPUOS Legal Subcommittee meeting in April 2024. The Subcommittee’s procedural rules are such that the report captures the discussions of Member States during the meeting. Member States then hold negotiations to ensure that the report adequately reflects what was said. For this reason, diplomats underlined, there was

²¹ G-77 (2023), “Statement of the Group of 77 and China during the 20th Session of the UNIDO General Conference”, https://www.g77.org/vienna/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/LONG-VERSION_G77China_-_GC.20-Statement.pdf, p. 4.

²² Countries supporting gender equality language reluctantly agreed to replace “gender equality with “gender balance” in the resolution on technical cooperation and the “Women in the Secretariat” resolution, a compromise made between Iran and other countries in consultations led by Pakistan. This was largely because the G-77 hold the pen on both resolutions and other countries felt that they could accommodate this change if it enjoyed consensus among G-77 members.

no legitimate basis for Iran to object to the report recording a mention of the event made in another country's statement; deleting it would have meant changing the factual record and denying other states the right to have their statements included. Because Iran made clear that it would not accept any reference to the event in the report, Canada, supported by the United Kingdom, signaled that it would forego agreeing a report. In consequence, the Subcommittee did not adopt a substantive report for the first time.

A similar example of Iran's objection to "gender" was the UNCAC Conference of States Parties in December 2023, where Ghana submitted a resolution on the gendered impacts of corruption. According to diplomats interviewed for this report, the Iranian delegation requested deleting "gender" from the title and eliminating mentions of "gender equality" from the resolution's body and did not engage with the topic of the resolution, instead zeroing in on the language used.

Undermining the Vienna spirit

The Vienna spirit is the idea that, in a place where technical rather than political issues supposedly dominate the agenda, states are committed to decision making by compromise and consensus, rather than voting. Diplomats observe that Iran instrumentalizes this consensus principle to increase its influence in negotiations. One diplomat specified that Iran was only vocal and unyielding in opposing gender language when a joint statement or outcome document was being negotiated.

Interviewees report that Iran uses gender language as a bargaining chip, exchanging its agreement to gender language for concessions in other areas, e.g., language to criticize sanctions or to downplay the importance of civil society participation in multilateral forums. Diplomats said that, in their experience, Iran holds out until late in the negotiations to drop its opposition, if at all, to wear down other delegations and keep control of the talks until other countries may be ready to accept weakened gender equality language to secure the adoption of a given outcome document by consensus.

A concerning consequence of this is the increasingly common narrative that "gender dragged on the talks" or that "gender blew up the conference", etc., suggesting that gender equality language was controversial and should be avoided. This contributes to the inaccurate impression that countries working to maintain UN gender language were politicizing negotiations on technical issues, undermining the consensus principle, and standing in the way of progress on the developmental issues that matter especially to developing countries.

Interviewees said that this was embedded in a broader narrative used by Iran that, in contrast to Western countries, developing countries were not interested in allegedly fanciful pursuits like gender equality. Diplomats from countries supporting gender language pointed out that yet other countries, such as Russia, were capitalizing on this narrative by demonstratively calling on those countries to stop their alleged politicization of technical discussions in different multilateral forums.

Diplomats are particularly concerned that Iran does not soften its opposition to gender language, even when numerous countries push back, as the example of the COPUOS Legal Subcommittee illustrated. Another example of this was the report of the CTBTO Working Group B meeting in February 2024, charged with technical verification matters. Iran blocked the adoption of the report over the mentioning of a discussion about improving women's representation in the Working Group, which Iran had not participated in. Although 20 countries took the floor in criticism, Iran did not yield and vetoed the report.

While some diplomats feel that Iran reacts more strongly to gender language proposed by Western countries and more softly to proposals from fellow G-77 members, others point towards statements by the Iranian ambassador calling G-77 countries that support gender equality “puppets” of the West. One such occasion was at the 2023 UNCAC Conference of States Parties, provoking a strong reply from the Ghanaian delegation. The Iranian ambassador has reportedly suggested that he does not trust Global South representatives who support gender equality, illustrating that the North/South dimension on this particular issue in Vienna is not as significant as may be assumed.

In its objection to gender language, Iran has also disregarded procedural rules. One example was the November 2023 meeting of the IAEA Technical Assistance and Cooperation Committee (TACC), a body of Member States that reviews the technical cooperation program developed by the Agency and sends it to the IAEA Board of Governors for approval. Iran sought to delete references to gender equality from the TACC report, although it merely records statements made by states during the meeting. Given the importance of technical cooperation for the G-77, this caused upset among developing countries. Additionally, Western countries put pressure on G-77 members, especially Egypt, Algeria, and South Africa, to convince Iran to drop its resistance. Iran eventually stepped back, though, in the assessment of interviewees, largely because it would not have been able to veto the program in the Board of Governors, where it is not represented.

Finally, it appears that Iran is aware of the uniqueness of its position. Where Iran has agreed to gender language, it has often insisted on the inclusion of a line to recognize the dissenting views of several countries, although Iran is usually the only country voicing dissent. For example, Iran requested this phrase be included in the COPUOS 2024 report. In order to preserve the given language on gender, other countries have repeatedly agreed to this.

Iran’s arguments against gender equality language

Diplomats interviewed for this report voiced frustration with the lack of adequate explanation by Iran for its opposition to gender language. Over time and across forums, Iran has used different arguments to underline its position. However, Iranian delegates mostly avoid conceptual discussions on gender, not explaining their interpretation of gender equality or related concepts and rarely making counterproposals for language acceptable to them. Diplomats reported that attempts to elicit more substantial explanations with the help of mediator countries had been unsuccessful. Interviewees suggested that this matches Iran’s general approach to negotiations of raising strong objections without readiness to move or work towards understanding their opposite’s point of view.

The argument most frequently employed by Iran is cultural relativism. Iran claims that there were “differing cultural, religious and social interpretations” of gender equality.²³ By enforcing a particular reading, ‘the West’ was disrespecting cultural diversity. In this context, the Iranian ambassador often refers to a “pressure policy” and Western “encroachment” on traditional values in other countries. Interviewees criticized this as inverse logic, saying that Iran had been trying to force its views on gender onto a majority of countries.

This is the same line of argumentation that Iran and other countries employ around human rights more broadly, claiming that Western countries were forcing their socio-political ideas onto other cultures. The

²³ IAEA (2023), “Committee of the Whole: Record of the First Meeting”, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc67com5or1_prl.pdf, p. 3.

counterargument is that gender equality is a universal principle, applicable across the world and enshrined in foundational UN documents. Similar to other Islamic countries, since the 1979 revolution, Iran has stated that it will only implement human rights to the extent that they are compatible with Shariah law and Islamic traditions; Iran argues that the West created a biased human rights canon to exert pressure and control over other countries.²⁴ Interviews for this report, however, suggest that Iran’s use of cultural relativism is not effective at garnering support for its position from developing countries.

A similar but distinct argument is that gender equality was incompatible with Iranian law and that approving this language in an international context could have domestic implications, though this argument was made less frequently and less publicly, interviewees stressed. One diplomat provided second-hand information from consultations with Iran, in which women’s right to an equal inheritance was named as an example that could be affected. Under Iranian law, women are entitled to only half the share of assets as men with the same relation to the deceased.²⁵

Congruently, Iran has sometimes requested to limit commitments to gender equality in agreed texts by inserting language, such as “in line with national laws”, as in the G-77 statement at the 2023 UNIDO General Conference.²⁶ Iranian resistance against “gender equality” out of concern for domestic implications is a recurring theme, already observable at the 1995 Beijing Conference, where Iran suggested “gender equity”, understood as fair but not equal entitlement, to replace “gender equality” in negotiations on women’s economic and inheritance rights in the Beijing Platform for Action.²⁷

Other arguments include that gender language was incongruent with Iran’s commitment to traditional family values and that, as a human rights issue, gender equality was neither relevant nor appropriate to be discussed in technical forums. This is a frequently employed narrative across multilateral forums. Rather, these topics should be reserved for negotiations at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, it is argued.

A tactic that diplomats have identified as more effective and therefore more concerning is an attempt to frame gender equality and equal geographical representation as competing objectives. Equal representation in multilateral forums and among staff at international organizations are key objectives for developing countries. Interviewees felt that there was greater potential for rallying G-77 countries around this cause, which was at the core of the Group’s mandate, compared to gender equality, for which support was more muted.

Not only does this framing lead to an inaccurate impression, in which gender equality is a Western interest and geographical representation is a G-77 interest – several G-77 members, like Chile, Colombia, the Philippines, and South Africa, strongly support gender equality - it also helps Iran be perceived as being *for* rather than *against* something, downplaying its obstructive impact on multilateral decision making. As other countries have conveyed, intersectionality means that gender equality and geographical representation are

²⁴ Berfe Yaşar (2022), “Examining the Universality of International Human Rights from an Iranian Perspective”, TRT World Research Centre, <https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Iran-Human-Rights.pdf>.

²⁵ United States Institute of Peace (2023), “Iranian Laws on Women”, *The Iran Primer*, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/dec/08/part-3-iranian-laws-women>.

²⁶ G-77 (2023), “Statement of the Group of 77 and China during the 20th Session of the UNIDO General Conference”, https://www.g77.org/vienna/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/LONG-VERSION_G77China_-GC.20-Statement.pdf, p. 4.

²⁷ Valetine Moghadam (1996), “The Fourth World Conference on Women: Dissension and Consensus”, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 28, 1, 77-81, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14672715.1996.10416191>.

closely linked. Data shows that women of color are the most marginalized group in many contexts.²⁸ Recruitment and capacity building programs should reflect this.

The following example shows how Iran has used procedural arguments. At ICONS 2024, Iran prevented the adoption of the Ministerial Declaration because it did not include language to condemn attacks on civilian nuclear installations. From the Iranian perspective, this is related to potential attacks against facilities involved in Iran's nuclear program.

However, diplomats stated that Iran had made clear that it also rejected the gender equality language in the Declaration, the same as consensually agreed at ICONS 2020, and that it was ready to block the Declaration even if other issues had been resolved.²⁹ Claiming that there must be coherence between the Declaration and IAEA language, Iran insisted that the Declaration should use the phrase "gender equality or balance" from the 2023 nuclear safety resolution. Other countries pointed out that the Ministerial Declaration is not only independent from General Conference outcomes but also a high-level political statement with a more aspirational style than the operational paragraphs in General Conference resolutions. Iran itself did not take a consistent approach to proposing language based on IAEA resolutions.

Hindering expert-level talks

A key feature of Iran's recent behavior is that the Iranian ambassador participates in talks that are usually held at expert/working level. Interviewees described that, soon after gender language is raised in consultations at expert level, Iranian diplomats ask to pause the meeting – sometimes causing long wait times - until the arrival of the ambassador to take charge of the Iranian delegation.

Next to his strong personal views on the topic, which interviewees described, the chief reason for this unusual participation in expert-level talks may be to prevent Iranian diplomats from softening the opposition to gender language as the purpose of open-ended consultations at expert level is typically to collect input for writing draft resolutions, iron out minor issues, and identify principal areas of disagreement to support building consensus. The ambassador underlined the indispensability of his involvement on one occasion, saying that nothing would be agreed on gender language if he was not in the room.

Another reason for the ambassador's presence may be deference to his diplomatic rank. Diplomats said that, despite what they described as intimidation and insult tactics, other representatives tolerated his interventions and responded with courtesy, accepting that this delays negotiations. While the Iranian ambassador may hope to pressure more junior diplomats into accommodating the Iranian position, interviews suggest that this has not been successful.

One diplomat intimated that the Iranian ambassador may wish to lift negotiations on gender language to the ambassadorial level to take advantage of what they described as a generational difference between junior/mid-level diplomats and ambassadors. They explained that, because senior diplomats were less likely to have a thorough understanding of conceptual differences between "gender equality", "gender balance",

²⁸ UN Women (2022), "Racially Marginalized Migrant Women: Human Rights Abuses at the Intersection of Race, Gender and Migration", https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/Racially-marginalized-migrant-women-en_0.pdf.

²⁹ The [ICONS 2020 Ministerial Declaration](#) states: "We commit to promote geographical diversity and gender equality, in the context of IAEA's nuclear security activities, and encourage Member States to establish an inclusive workforce within their national security regimes, including ensuring equal access to education and training."

“gender diversity”, etc., of how gender language is anchored in the UN, and why gender is an important dimension to the issues covered in Vienna, they were more likely to yield to Iran’s pressure and accept weakened or deleted gender language to agree text on other issues. However, other delegations do not respond by putting their ambassadors forward.

Support for Iran’s position

In its opposition to established gender equality language, Iran is widely isolated. This is noticeable when compared to other areas. Iran works with a handful of countries, chiefly Russia, to implement its interests in negotiations. A cross-cutting example is that Iran often puts forward language condemning “unilateral coercive measures”. It receives vocal support on this from other countries subject to international sanctions, like Russia and Venezuela. The dynamic on gender equality is different. A diplomat described that Iran is usually the first country to raise issues with gender language. Countries like Syria or Russia may then support Iran’s position, but neither do so vocally or with detailed explanations nor do they signal readiness to block consensus over gender equality language.

Furthermore, diplomats report a shift in the sentiment of Iran’s partners. While they may view Iran imposing costs on Western countries as useful, diplomats stated that Iran’s partners were frustrated with its obstructive impact on outcome documents, which they would like to see adopted. One diplomat recalled Russian colleagues complaining about suggestions that Iran *and* Russia were torpedoing negotiations over gender language, wishing to distance themselves from Iran’s approach.

While Russia occasionally makes misleading suggestions – it has insisted on prioritizing merit in paragraphs on gender-sensitive recruitment because it was a “principle that risked being lost as the Agency pursued workforce diversity”, suggesting that women hired with a view of equal representation were not up to the job – it does not assume Iran’s position on gender issues.³⁰ While it appears unlikely that Russia or Syria would side publicly against Iran, they may be able to influence Iran to stop blocking consensus on outcome documents they regard as important.

Iran also receives support from fellow members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). They share Iran’s rejection of more inclusive gender language and its skepticism of perceived attempts to expand gender equality to include non-binary and transgender people. They prefer to use language that explicitly mentions men and women or refers to rights on the basis of sex, not gender. More details on this are available under *Opposition to gender diversity*. The crucial distinction, however, is that these countries are not prepared to risk the adoption of outcome documents over gender language. This has been illustrated by Egypt and Pakistan in particular lobbying Iran to drop its vetoes against gender language at several forums, including the 2023 IAEA and UNIDO General Conferences.

There is some uncertainty about the degree to which Iran and other countries skeptical of gender language are coordinating on this issue. Diplomats report that there seems to be mostly ad-hoc coordination, much of which takes place on WhatsApp. Often, those opposing gender language seem to ‘find each other’ as a meeting unfolds, supporting each other in statements when gender issues are raised.

³⁰ IAEA (2022), “Committee of the Whole: Record of the Fifth Meeting”, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc66com.5or5_prl.pdf, p. 7

Mediators

A few countries, including Algeria, Namibia, and Pakistan, but principally Egypt, have functioned as mediators between Iran and others on gender language. However, a diverse range of interviewees explained that these mediation efforts have had limited success. Some diplomats described a trust deficit on the part of countries with more progressive views vis-à-vis mediator countries given their own, more conservative positions on gender issues. Others stressed that mediators' dedication to finding an acceptable compromise depended on what was at stake for them, e.g., interviewees observed greater efforts to resolve disagreements over gender language when the mediator country chaired the meeting in question.

Several diplomats also reported complaints from colleagues from mediator countries that they faced the same stalling techniques Iran was using with Western diplomats, despite being closer to Iran in some cultural and political aspects. In general, interviews suggested that other countries see a more influential role for mediator countries in softening Iran's opposition than mediator countries do for themselves.

In any case, the potential of mediators to achieve a sustainable compromise between Iran and other countries appears to be slim. As one diplomat pointed out, relying on mediators is unattractive to gender equality supporters because, while they may be more successful at negotiating compromise language somewhere between "gender equality" and Iran's position, the result would, by default, be weaker than established language.

Inconsistency with Iran's international commitments

It is worth noting that Iran's conduct in Vienna not only diverges from that in other multilateral hubs - where, according to interviewees, Iran does not oppose gender equality language as adamantly and its position is closer to that of the gender-skeptical countries - it is also at odds with gender language that Iran has accepted in other forums, including gender equality as anchored in the UN Charter and the UDHR, the 1966 International Covenants, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the countless references to gender equality adopted by the policymaking organs of the international organizations in Vienna that Iran agreed to.

At the 2023 IAEA General Conference, Iran supported its stance against "gender equality" by saying, "Many countries in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation had said that they did not share the opinions coming from certain corners of the world".³¹ However, OIC Member States, including Iran, made numerous references and commitments to "gender equality" in outcome documents at their most recent Ministerial Conference on the Role of Women in the Development of OIC Member States in 2021.³²

Another example from G-77 talks is the declaration adopted by high-level representatives, including Iran's First Vice President, at the Third South Summit in Kampala in January 2024. The declaration contains strong language committing the Group to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment.³³ When asked about this, the Iranian ambassador reportedly responded that his government had agreed to the text because it did not want to obstruct the high-level Summit, but that Iran did not consider political declarations made in

³¹ IAEA (2023), "Committee of the Whole: Record of the Seventh Meeting", <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc67com5or7.pdf>, p. 3.

³² OIC (2021), "Resolutions of the Eighth Session of the OIC Ministerial Conference on Women", <https://new.oic-oci.org/Lists/ConferenceDocuments/Attachments/349/8-mcw-res-en.pdf>.

³³ G-77 (2024), "Third South Summit Outcome Document", https://www.g77.org/doc/3southsummit_outcome.html.

other forums to have relevance for its position in Vienna.

b) Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

Since Iran is not an OSCE Participating State, the OSCE is a useful comparison against the other Vienna-based organizations to test whether resistance against established gender equality language is a broader phenomenon or closely tied to Iran's position.

As gathered in an interview, disagreements over gender language have never seriously impeded negotiations related to the OSCE's core mandate, and there have been no serious attempts to roll back consensus gender equality language, as anchored in the 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality.³⁴ The Action Plan includes similar provisions as the gender strategies of other organizations in Vienna.

However, there is resistance from Russia and the Holy See against the full and effective implementation of the OSCE's gender equality mandate. They, for example, block the approval of funds under the regular budget for the expansion of the OSCE gender team or the elevation of the OSCE Senior Advisor on Gender Issues to the director level, although this has been recommended by an internal oversight body. Both countries also contest the relevance of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda in their statements at the OSCE Permanent Council.

Like the other Vienna-based organizations, the OSCE has no mandate on gender equality beyond the binary of men and women. Reportedly, no suggestions to this effect have been tabled by OSCE Participating States because there is no consensus on gender diversity. In the absence of consensus decision making due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, no actions on gender issues are currently being tabled.

5. Causes and Drivers

There is some confusion among the Vienna diplomatic community about the reasons for Iran's sudden, strong opposition against gender equality language, seemingly at any expense. Diplomats have questioned why Iran would choose to fight a concept that enjoys broad support from a wide variety of countries and is firmly anchored in the UN, rather than a topic on which there is greater debate. Combining insights from across the Vienna-based organizations, this report illustrates how different factors are shaping Iran's behavior.

The role of the Iranian ambassador

All diplomats interviewed attested to the significant role that Iran's ambassador to the UN in Vienna, Mohsen Naziri Asl, is playing for Iran's conduct. It was their impression that the ambassador was personally opposed to gender equality, reportedly based on moral convictions and informed by the perception that Western countries were attempting to 'sneak' gender diversity into outcome documents. They elaborated that the ambassador is connected to conservative political forces in Iran and had a close relationship with former Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian, who served in the conservative Raisi government (for more on this, see *Iran's domestic political situation*).

³⁴ OSCE Ministerial Council (2004), "Decision No. 14/04: 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality", <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/d/23295.pdf>.

The priority that the ambassador places on gender language and his strong personal influence on Iran's position in Vienna is not only underlined by his sidestepping of expert-level colleagues but also by interactions with Iranian officials from capital. For example, when CTBTO Member States discussed the report on the February 2024 meeting of Working Group B, the Iranian ambassador is reported to have had a verbal altercation with capital-based technical experts, who represented Iran for most of the meeting. While the experts were ready to accept the report, the ambassador insisted that Iran block its adoption because it mentioned a discussion on improving the representation of women in the Working Group, from which Iran was absent. The report was not adopted.

Diplomats who have experienced negotiations with the ambassador describe him as short-tempered and a confrontational negotiating style. Some reported attempts by the ambassador to bully expert-level diplomats in G-77 consultations into yielding to his demands, contrary to their own national positions.

What further underlines the ambassador's influence on Iran's position in Vienna is information about similarities as ambassador in Geneva between 2013 and 2018. A diplomat who worked in Geneva at that time described negotiations stretching long into the night with lengthy monologues by the ambassador, often without being able to agree outcome documents due to his opposition. He frequently cited the West's alleged mistreatment of Iran as the reason for his position; the interviewee also suggested that the ambassador took issue with gender language at that time.

Second-hand information that diplomats at the Iranian mission are themselves unhappy with the ambassador's insistence on being involved in expert-level discussions and his general conduct adds to his relevance in explaining Iran's behavior in Vienna. Interviewees reported that the deputy head of the Iranian mission left his posting irregularly some eight months after the ambassador's arrival. At least two other, more junior officers at the mission left their postings irregularly with one of them naming the ambassador's difficult management style and confrontational conduct as the reason.

Several diplomats and a capital-based official with insights into gender issues across multilateral forums highlighted the contrast between Iran's behavior in Vienna and elsewhere. While Iranian diplomats in New York and Geneva are opposed to language recognizing gender diversity, only the mission in Vienna treats established gender equality language as an end-game issue, readily blocking consensus over it. It may indeed be that the ambassador, at least in parts, acts against instructions from capital. Second-hand information about complaints to this effect from Iranian diplomats in Vienna supports this.

While it is difficult to confirm to what extent Iran's conduct in Vienna is based on instructions from Tehran vs. the ambassador himself, it is worth considering how his conduct in Iran may be supporting Iran's foreign policy objectives.

Furthering Iran's wider foreign policy interests

Iran's behavior in Vienna can be contextualized with the observation by a Tehran-based diplomat that there is a strong sense in the Iranian government that Iran should have more influence on the global stage, that it should have more input into multilateral decision making, and that its views should carry more weight internationally. Iran's conduct in Vienna could be seen as contributing to this objective.

Not only does Iran's behavior enhance its role in negotiations, with delegations being more attentive to the Iranian position, but it also increases its leverage to achieve wins on other priority issues for Iran, e.g., to

insert language that criticizes sanctions. Iran's use of the consensus principle exerts pressure on countries supporting gender equality to propose weakened gender language, it contributes to the impression that gender equality was a controversial issue to be avoided and that countries supporting gender equality were politicizing technical discussions. Iran also appears to be using gender language to give the impression of a North/South divide on gender equality and to assert that Western countries were trying to hinder progress on the issues that developing countries care about.

Several interviewees highlighted the special role that Vienna as the seat of the IAEA plays for Iran's foreign policy. They suggested that its perception of undue international pressure and sanctions on its nuclear program may drive Iran to inflict diplomatic defeats on Western countries wherever possible. Knowing that gender equality is an important objective for many Western countries, interviewees believe that Iran has chosen this topic to impose costs in terms of time, diplomatic resources, and political capital on adversaries. Interviewees concluded that Iran was happy to accept the obstruction of multilateral decision making as collateral damage, sensing that it feels it has little to gain from constructive cooperation.

A relevant example is the Iranian representative's statement during the 2023 IAEA General Conference that they had received instructions from capital to oppose "gender equality" and that "the application of psychological pressure would not lead others simply to submit [...]. If a country received instructions, a text must be discussed or reopened in order to improve it".³⁵

In these ways, Iran may be trying to influence the general discourse in Vienna, diverting attention away from the international criticism of its nuclear program, inflicting reputational damage on Western countries, and undermining their relationship with the developing world.

Given the recent change towards a more moderate government under President Masoud Pezeshkian, there is some speculation that the ambassador may receive instructions to temper his behavior in Vienna or may even be recalled to capital.

Iran's domestic political situation

The domestic political situation in Iran is an important factor for understanding the current situation in Vienna. It suggests that Iran's opposition to gender language may not only be a means to further its foreign policy objectives but also a way to implement its views on gender at an international level.

Iran's position on gender equality in multilateral forums somewhat fluctuates with the government in power. For example, Iran's 2019 National Report on the Status of Women contains numerous references to "gender equity", "gender justice", "women's empowerment", etc. across 200 pages.³⁶ It uses wording that would be unacceptable to the Iranian ambassador in Vienna today. This divergence may be explained by the political differences between the Rouhani (2013-2021) and Raisi (2021-2024) governments. Whereas Ebrahim Raisi was described as a "hard-line cleric close to Iran's Supreme Leader",³⁷ who suppressed protests for women's rights, leading to Iran's expulsion from the UN Commission on the Status of Women,³⁸ his predecessor Hassan Rouhani had been regarded as a moderate who ran on a promise of gender equality,

³⁵ IAEA (2023), "Committee of the Whole: Record of the Seventh Meeting", <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc67com5or7.pdf>, p. 3.

³⁶ UN Women (2019), "National Report on Women's Status in the Islamic Republic of Iran", <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/National-reviews/Iran.pdf>.

passing family law reforms, and appointing more women to senior government roles,³⁹ though his achievements have been criticized as slim.⁴⁰

All the while, Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei has maintained a clear position against an equal place for women in society and against the term "gender equality" in particular. Khamenei has characterized gender issues as an area of geopolitical and ideological competition with the West, claiming that gender equality was a Western concept used to turn women into "tools to gain profit and pleasure",⁴¹ and to undermine a traditional order, in which women's innate qualities as mothers, wives, and caretakers were being corrupted. Khamenei has described gender equality as "planned by Zionists who aim to create chaos in the human community and annihilate it completely".⁴²

The dynamic between the Supreme Leader and conservative vs. reformist governments can be observed going back to the 1995 Beijing Conference. Despite Khamenei's rejection of the term, under the reformist President Rafsanjani, Iran agreed to "gender equality" in the outcome documents with the following reservation: "[...] although women are equal in their human rights and dignity with men, their different roles and responsibilities underline the need for an equitable system of rights, where the particular priorities and requirements of the woman in her multiple roles are accounted for".⁴³

A former Iranian official saw the basis for Iran's recent rejection of UN gender equality language in a divergence between the Rouhani government and the Supreme Leader over Iran's agreement to Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality. The Supreme Leader took particular issue with the UNESCO 2030 Education Agenda for promoting gender equality as this was incompatible with Iranian culture.⁴⁴ While the Rouhani government had agreed at the international level, the implementation of SDG 5 by Iran was prevented and government ministries were cautioned to, in future, not use or agree to language that was incompatible with the aforementioned view on gender equality.

The Iranian government may have become especially attentive to gender issues, viewing them increasingly through a lens of national security and regime survival, after the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' protests broke out in September 2022. Not only did the protests pose a serious challenge to the government's authority at home, but they also exposed Iran to sharp international criticism.

³⁷ David Gritten (2024), "Ebrahim Raisi: The hardline cleric who became Iran president", *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-57421235>.

³⁸ UN News (2022), "Iran removed from UN Commission on the Status of Women", <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/12/1131722>.

³⁹ Maysam Bizaer (2021), "Iranian women fear setbacks in hard-earned rights under Raisi", *Middle East Eye*, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-women-rights-fear-setbacks-raisi>.

⁴⁰ Fariba Parsa (2021), "After eight years as Iran's president, what is Rouhani's record on women's rights?", *Middle East Institute*, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/after-eight-years-irans-president-what-rouhanis-record-womens-rights>.

⁴¹ Nour News, "Supreme Leader: West sees women as tools to gain profit, pleasure", <https://nournews.ir/en/news/159897/Supreme-Leader-West-sees-women-as-tools-to-gain-profit,-pleasure>.

⁴² Ali Khamenei (2018), "Gender equality or gender justice? What is the viewpoint of Islam?", <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/5589/Gender-equality-or-gender-justice-What-is-the-viewpoint-of-Islam>.

⁴³ UN (1995), "Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women", <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/Beijing%20full%20report%20E.pdf>, p. 164.

⁴⁴ Iran International (2024), "Iranian Education Minister Criticizes UNESCO's Gender Equality Agenda", <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202405033888>.

Though the protests had largely subsided within a year, the matter continued to be a priority for the Iranian government as it worked to restore the status quo ante, adopting harsher sentencing for criticism and violations of hijab laws, continuing arrests and the use of force, and installing a video surveillance system to identify offenders.⁴⁵ The subsiding of the protests, resumption of patrols by the morality police,⁴⁶ and the advent of harsher sentencing between July and September 2023 roughly coincided with the IAEA General Conference, where Iran first raised gender equality language as an end-game issue.

Several diplomats suggested that Iran's increasingly staunch rejection of any gender language may be to prevent government critics from using language agreed to by Iran to support their demands for reform. Indeed, interviewees reported instances of Iranian diplomats in Vienna explaining their opposition to gender equality language with its potential implications for the domestic situation in Iran, e.g., Iran's representative at the 2023 IAEA General Conference argued that "Gender equality in his country's culture was completely different from gender balance and the empowerment of women, and had legal and cultural connotations".⁴⁷ Considering the serious conflicts in Iran over women's right to participate fully in all aspects of public life, it is worth taking this reasoning at face value.

It is yet unclear whether Iran's objection to gender equality language in Vienna might soften under the more moderate Pezeshkian government that took office in July 2024. One encouraging sign are reports that, in preliminary negotiations towards the nuclear safeguards resolution at the 2024 IAEA General Conference, Iran has withdrawn several of its initial objections upon instructions from Tehran.

The Permanent Mission of Iran in Vienna was contacted for an interview to hear their perspective on the matter but did not respond.

Opposition to gender diversity

Another driver for Iran's objection identified by interviewees is its perception that those supporting gender equality, and particularly Western countries, were attempting to 'smuggle in' new language that conceptually surpasses the gender binary, such as "gender diversity", and promotes the inclusion and protection of LGBTQ+ people. Relatedly, Iran is concerned that Western countries are trying to change the meaning of consensus language on gender equality to include recognition of non-binary and trans people.

A former Iranian government official explained that the advancement of freedoms and inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in Western countries played a key role for Iran's position. They said that there was a perception that Western countries no longer intended equality between men and women when using gender equality language and were working to change the common meaning of the term. Consequently, Iran felt no longer bound by this language. Out of concern that this was a "well-organized plan against traditional Muslim values" and "the West's prescription for other developing countries", Iran considered it necessary to oppose language that allowed for progressive interpretations.

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch (2024), "Iran: Chokehold on Dissent", <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/11/iran-chokehold-dissent>.

⁴⁶ David Gritten and Laura Gozzi (2023), "Iran's morality police to resume headscarf patrols", BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-66218318>.

⁴⁷ IAEA (2023), "Committee of the Whole: Record of the Seventh Meeting", <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc67com5or7.pdf>, p. 3.

These concerns, which have been litigated before in the UN Commission on the Status of Women (see *Gender Language in the UN System*), are shared by other countries, referred to as the “non-likeminded”, including OIC members as well as Russia, Hungary, the Holy See, and others. Their advocacy against progressive gender language, concerns about evolving interpretations, and the arguments they employ have a longer history:

In 2008, OIC states responded to a joint statement of 66 countries on “Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity” at the UN General Assembly, which highlighted the human rights violations committed against LGBTQ+ people.⁴⁸ The response criticized that countries were trying to introduce explicit protections for queer people. It argued that sexual orientation and gender identity had no foundations in human rights law and that LGBTQ+ people were undeserving of human rights protections because their status was based on choice rather than identity.⁴⁹ Two particular commonalities between this and Iran’s position are the alleged threat to ‘traditional family values’ and the allegation that discrimination based on gender was taken more seriously than discrimination based on race and ethnicity, related to Iran’s claim that geographic representation was a competing priority with gender equality.

In consequence, these countries tend to block language that deviates, if only slightly, from wording agreed in the UN context, for example, in SDG 5.⁵⁰ They also put forward language explicitly referring to men and women, including “women’s empowerment” or “women’s participation”, or refer to “sex-based rights” to tie the debate to biological sex rather than the social roles expressed in “gender”.

Recalling the example of the 2023 UNIDO General Conference resolution on gender, the penholders started consultations in early September, reaching out to countries for reactions to the draft resolution. Certain countries were eager to ensure that the interpretation of “gender” was limited to the male-female binary. They suggested including a glossary, footnote, or annex to define “gender equality” to definitively exclude any notion of gender diversity. Others objected to the mention in the UNIDO Director General’s report of an internal training held for UNIDO staff on sensitivity to LGBTQ+ issues.

A capital-based official with insights into gender issues across multilateral forums explained that negotiating gender language with a broad constituency had become more challenging in the past two years. They described a greater readiness from “non-likeminded” countries to challenge gender language across many forums, with their stances reportedly becoming more adversarial and positional. Whereas conceptual discussions about differing understandings of gender issues with Iranian and other delegates had been possible in the past, the interviewee observed a lack of willingness to engage.

It should be stressed that, although several countries call for the global inclusion and protection of people with different gender identities and sexual orientations, diplomats from such countries explained in interviews that there have been no hard-driven attempts to expand the concept of gender equality or to adopt language covering other gender identities since there is no consensus among UN Member States on this issue.

⁴⁸ ARC International (2008), “2008 Joint statement”, <https://arc-international.net/global-advocacy/sogi-statements/2008-joint-statement/>.

⁴⁹ UN General Assembly (2008), “Note verbale dated 19 December 2008 from the Permanent

⁵⁰ Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations”, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/645342?ln=en&v=pdf>.

UN (2024), “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”, https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5#targets_and_indicators.

Diplomats from other countries support this assessment, saying that, when challenged, countries do not press for such language. For example, Costa Rica, Brazil, Austria, Colombia, New Zealand, and Malta supported adopting the phrase “all genders” in the draft outcome document of the 10th NPT Review Conference, but given its rejection by other countries, the proposal was dropped.⁵¹ Other interviewees confirmed that new gender language or an expanded definition of gender equality have not been discussed among the G-77 in Vienna either.

An important nuance, mentioned by diplomats interviewed for this report, is that some gender language feels vague and amorphous to the countries opposing it. Indeed, there is a deficit in the clear and consistent use of gender concepts by those countries that support progressive language. More on this issue can be found under Clear and consistent use of gender language.

A handful of countries also took issue with the 2023 UNIDO draft resolution on gender using “gender-transformative”, rather than “gender-responsive”, for example, in relation to industrial development and recruitment at UNIDO. Elsewhere in the UN, gender-responsive actions are defined as trying to reduce gender inequalities within communities, whereas gender-transformative actions are meant to tackle the root causes for these inequalities, achieving greater and more sustainable impact for gender equality.⁵²

Diplomats who participated in negotiations on the resolution reported strong opposition to this term not only from Iran, but also from Pakistan, Egypt, and Sudan. Part of their objection were concerns about a potential relation of “transformative” to “transgender” – an unfortunate but possibly unintentional misunderstanding of the term.

One interviewee criticized that Western countries were trying to exploit the comparative lack of human resources in the missions and foreign ministries of other countries to ‘sneak past’ new language that explicitly or implicitly goes beyond existing language. They explained that they themselves could not participate in negotiations on gender language because, having to cover a large portfolio of issues, they lacked the expertise to navigate the different terms and concepts. This was why, when they received notice from their ministry or from colleagues representing other countries that a particular term deviated from existing language, they blocked it without feeling able to negotiate compromise language.

An official from another country challenged this perception, saying that diplomats from “non-likeminded” countries often had a sophisticated understanding of gender terminology and knew precisely which amendments to propose to water down progressive proposals.

6. Responses

This section examines how other countries view and have been reacting to Iran’s behavior and which responses they are considering going forward.

⁵¹ Ray Acheson (2023), “Mobilizing Feminist Action for Nuclear Abolition”, *Arms Control Today*, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-03/features/mobilizing-feminist-action-nuclear-abolition>.

⁵² UNFPA (2021), “Joint Evaluation of the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation: Accelerating Change Phase III (2018-2021)”, https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/admin-resource/thematic%20note%201_gender_final.pdf.

Different levels of support for gender equality

There are differences in how actively and consistently countries uphold gender equality language. Though often equated with ‘the West’, the group of countries supporting this language is much more diverse. Next to European countries, the United States, Canada, and Australia, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, the Philippines, and South Africa are among the countries that diplomats identify as vocal supporters of gender equality language.

Indeed, a European diplomat described Latin American countries as the clear leaders on gender language in Vienna, saying that many European countries had begun taking gender equality for granted and were less invested in the topic. At the same time, ‘the West’ is not as united on further developing gender and diversity language to be inclusive of LGBTQ+ people as is often portrayed. For example, Hungary and Bulgaria have opposed progressive gender language in the EU, hindering the adoption of the Gender Equality Action Plan III that guides EU foreign policy until 2025.

One diplomat highlighted that a country’s official policy, e.g., in the form of a feminist foreign policy, is no guarantor for unreserved support for gender equality language, noting differences between some countries’ official government policies and their representatives’ conduct in Vienna. They also pointed out that a country’s position in Vienna can be strongly influenced by individual diplomats, providing the example of one country, whose previous, female representative would consistently and effectively argue against Iran’s demands, but was replaced by an older, male colleague, who was more ready to accommodate the Iranian position to secure consensus on other issues.

While the vast majority of countries support consensus gender equality language, as anchored in the UN, their support is more tacit and passive. One interviewee explained that many smaller countries with limited political capital and fewer human resources feel restricted in how vocally they can support gender equality, while principally sharing the views of the more outspoken states. Diplomats at most smaller missions cover several of the nine UN organizations in Vienna, making full engagement in the mandatory processes of these organizations a challenge. Being a vocal and consistent supporter on any particular issue requires human resources, coordination with capital and other diplomats in Vienna, and political capital, e.g., being willing to block consensus to achieve an objective. Typically, smaller countries will choose one or a few issues like that and remain more passive on others.

Relatedly, diplomats explained that many, especially smaller countries, feel unable to block group statements or outcome documents in the same way that Iran does. Because they value the multilateral system and depend on the cooperation and goodwill of other countries, they cannot afford to earn a reputation of being obstructive. The narrative that countries upholding established language were being unreasonable puts additional pressure on those countries.

Coordination among countries supporting gender equality

While countries supporting gender equality had been unprepared for Iran’s behavior at the 2023 IAEA General Conference, allowing Iran to exploit differences between what countries were willing to accept, diplomats reported that their coordination efforts had increased since, not least because of an awareness that other countries were watching closely whether Iran would be successful in unreservedly opposing gender language. The UNCAC Conference of States Parties in December 2023 was identified as a trigger for greater coordination as influential countries, including the United States and France, struggled to see their resolutions

adopted due to Iran's objections.

Diplomats confirmed that coordination on gender language ahead of major conferences is now part of most meetings between like-minded countries. More time is spent on agreeing shared starting positions and red lines for negotiations. Likeminded countries have reportedly agreed not to accept any proposals weakening established language on gender equality, to make greater use of voting procedures if necessary, and to maximize collaboration with countries from the Global South to uphold gender language to dismantle the 'West versus rest' narrative.

A great deal of informal coordination takes place in the various Groups of Friends of Gender at the international organizations in Vienna. Some diplomats also reported that the situation had prompted them to coordinate gender language increasingly with their missions in New York and Geneva. Another such group, focused specifically on gender language, may be formed within the International Gender Champions initiative. The group might host regular meetings to exchange updates on developments around gender language in the Vienna-based forums, discuss best practices for maintaining agreed language, and provide information to support missions in responding to objections to gender equality language, for example, on texts using relevant language adopted elsewhere.

Despite its benefits, interviewees recognized that the need for increased coordination imposes costs on like-minded countries. One diplomat reported that even the diplomats of wealthy countries were stretched slim, with many missions overworked and under-resourced, making it more difficult to find a country willing to lead these coordination efforts.

Reactions within the G-77

As mentioned above, the North/South divide plays only a limited role in explaining countries' responses to Iran's position. Not only are there vocal supporters of gender equality language along with a larger group of tacit supporters in the G-77, but the Iranian ambassador has also not differentiated his position vis-à-vis Western versus developing countries that support gender equality. Therefore, reactions from G-77 countries are mixed.

Diplomats report that G-77 members in Vienna are frustrated with the additional hurdles that Iran imposes on the already challenging process of agreeing statements between this diverse group of countries, and with its refusal to engage constructively. Indeed, although Iran promotes the narrative that the gender issues allegedly imposed by the West were distracting from urgent developmental progress, it is Iran's unyielding objection to gender language that hinders the G-77 from focusing on its core mandate of advancing the sustainable development agenda. At the time of writing, negotiations towards the technical cooperation resolution at the 2024 IAEA General Conference have stalled due to Iran's objection to previously agreed mentions of "gender equality" and the International Gender Champions.

Diplomats also report that there is upset about the disregard Iran has shown for the integrity of the Group's consensus decisions. For instance, at the 2023 IAEA General Conference, Iran insisted on renegotiating gender language in the G-77-tabled resolutions "Strengthening of the Agency's Technical Cooperation Activities" and "Women in the Secretariat", although it had agreed to the draft resolutions when they were negotiated in the G-77. Since the former resolution instructs the IAEA on expanding access to peaceful uses of nuclear technology, it is critical to developing countries.

Diplomats described that, while G-77 members had been more inclined to do so in 2023, their willingness to work with Iran on gender language had decreased. Especially those strongly supporting gender equality were no longer willing to compromise on weakened UN language. At the same time, one diplomat observed a degree of disengagement by some members, saying that they were more ready to accommodate Iranian demands for weakening or deleting established language. G-77 members that uphold agreed language then come under pressure, including from those chairing negotiations, to make concessions because others are aware that their priority remains to agree a joint position and that they cannot afford to be seen to be blocking a text indefinitely, while Iran is happy to forego agreed outcomes. This creates an environment, in which Iran's conduct is rewarded and incentivized.

Interviewees said that a key problem within the G-77 was a tendency to avoid confrontation between members. This led G-77 statements to frequently feature the fringe views of only one or a few members. Inclusion in the G-77 statement then added weight to these perspectives in the different policymaking organs in Vienna. One factor contributing to this was the lack of awareness among many G-77 diplomats of long-standing language on gender equality in the UN and what exactly it contains.

Other diplomats stressed that the Group's purpose was the promotion of developmental interests and the representation of developing countries in multilateral decision making. These continue to be the priority objectives for many members. While some appreciate that achieving gender equality itself is a developmental objective with multiplier effects for socio-economic development, others feel that gender equality should be treated as a separate, and perhaps, secondary issue.

Rethinking the consensus principle

Diplomats interviewed for this report emphasized that Iran's behavior is enabled by the consensus principle in multilateral decision making in Vienna and that a continued, unquestioned attachment to this tradition strengthened Iran's position.

This is illustrated by the way that countries with often fringe positions, such as Iran or Russia, try to dissuade voting. For example, once it became clear that, despite lengthy negotiations, consensus on the nuclear security resolution at the 2022 IAEA General Conference could not be achieved, several delegations suggested voting. Russia and Iran pressured delegates to continue discussions, saying that "those who refused would kill the consensual spirit of the nuclear security resolution"⁵³ and that "If the Chair decided to move discussions to the plenary, his report should mention who had refused to continue negotiating and why".⁵⁴

Interviewees agreed that countries should keep the option of voting open to maintain their leverage vis-à-vis Iran, providing the example that, when Ghana signaled that it would not call a vote on its resolution on gender at the 2023 UNCAC Conference of States Parties, it lost significant leverage to achieve its adoption. Especially on a personal level, many diplomats expressed frustrations with the consensus tradition in Vienna. Those with experience in other UN hubs, where voting is commonplace, criticize that negotiations under the Vienna spirit were lengthy and often produced poor compromise results.

⁵³ IAEA (2023), "Committee of the Whole: Record of the Ninth Meeting", https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc66com.5or9_prL.pdf, p. 16.

⁵⁴ IAEA (2023), "Committee of the Whole: Record of the Ninth Meeting", https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc66com.5or9_prL.pdf, p. 15.

Interviewees suggested that countries supporting gender equality may more readily move to voting, especially on G-77-led resolutions, because of the deepening divisions within the G-77 over gender language. With the G-77 increasingly unable to build consensus on gender language, there was less pressure on other countries to accept compromise language put forward by the Group. This also reduced the prospect of success in last-minute consultations led by the G-77 to achieve consensus on a given resolution. With no serious perspective for consensus given Iran's position, voting may become more frequent in Vienna.

As an indirect response to Iran's behavior, some Western and G-77 countries have been working on a joint statement to affirm that countries should seek to build consensus as far as viable, but that voting procedures are legitimate and necessary in cases when countries use the consensus principle in bad faith.

At the same time, this shows that, despite its drawbacks, countries continue to place importance on consensus. Interviewees explained that consensus decisions provide maximum legitimacy to the work of the organizations they concern. Increased use of voting could invite further disruption, possibly from more countries, who oppose the majority opinion and feel emboldened to question and undermine the organization's activities. Diplomats also stressed that consensus decisions underpin the concept of agreed language; with increased voting, countries may feel less bound by agreed language, perhaps triggering frequent renegotiations of texts without safe fallback options that may result in more cases when an outcome document cannot be agreed.

It should also be noted that international organizations retain a degree of autonomy from Member States in pursuing gender equality. UN organizations are directed to implement gender-inclusive workplace policies and gender mainstreaming by UN-SWAP, the UN System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. Additionally, international organizations have some discretion over their human resources policies. This means that the organizations' current work for gender equality in recruitment, retention, and gender mainstreaming is likely to remain unaffected by Iran's position, although significant conceptual changes or expansions in scope may require an updated mandate from Member States and budget approval. Indeed, diplomats confirmed that Iran has, so far, refrained from challenging the Vienna-based organizations' gender strategies. Another illustrative example is that UNIDO's gender strategy adopted the term "gender-transformative" for 2024-2027 despite objections to this language in the gender resolution at the 2023 General Conference.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, the following considerations could help countries that support gender equality in preserving existing gender equality language, reducing disruptions of multilateral decision making, and safeguarding the ability of the policymaking organs in Vienna to guide global action on vital issues.

Avoiding re-negotiations of gender language

As interviewees highlighted, it is not in the interest of countries supporting gender equality to engage with Iran on gender language in Vienna unless Iran accepts established UN language as the baseline. Any negotiations that might create weakened language are likely to produce damaging results while still requiring extraordinary time and effort to be agreed. Instead, countries committed to gender equality language could, as they have done on several occasions, clarify that there is no scope for altering this language as it has been standard language, agreed at the highest UN level and commonly used across the UN system for decades.

Since there is some precedent for recording dissenting views or to add qualifying phrases, such as “in line with national laws”, even in international human rights instruments, countries may wish to reserve the option of accepting such suggestions on a case-by-case basis if brought forward by Iran in an effort to reach consensus. In trying to understand Iran’s position, diplomats should recognize that the reasons cited, chiefly, the incongruence of gender equality with Iranian laws and culture - as in the Supreme Leader’s view - are authentic, but point out that Iran has agreed to the same language many times in the Vienna forums and elsewhere under the same leadership.

Refusing to re-negotiate gender language with Iran is unlikely to change its position. However, given Iran’s readiness to forego agreed outcomes and generally disapproving view towards multilateral decision making in Vienna as has been suggested by diplomats, it is not certain that meeting Iran’s demands on gender language would resolve the broader issue of it hindering diplomatic processes. Indeed, Iran has blocked important outcome documents over different issues, e.g., the 2024 ICONS Ministerial Declaration and the Chair’s summary of the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting.

Avoiding re-negotiations of gender language could, however, help to reduce the destructive, delaying, and demoralizing impact on negotiations and diplomats in the room, and remove part of Iran’s leverage to secure wins on language in other areas. It could further help to deter observers from similarly using the consensus principle in Vienna.

In contrast, one interviewee argued that supportive countries must be prepared to compromise occasionally on gender language, focusing on retaining those mentions that are critical to the mandates of the international organizations and which powerfully illustrate that gender considerations have real-world impact. They argued that this would demonstrate to spectator countries that countries supporting gender equality language were not politicizing international forums and were not responsible for failing to reach consensus by holding the line on gender language that was not essential. They offered an example from the IAEA: While an isolated reference to gender equality in nuclear safety or security may be secondary, retaining references to gender mainstreaming in technical cooperation was critical because of its real-world benefits, i.e., expanding radiotherapy for breast cancer patients in Africa.

However, more interviewees agreed that it was poor diplomatic practice to give up consensus language without any concessions in return or certainty that this would appease Iran and/or sway spectator countries. They also cautioned that agreeing to remove mentions of “gender” from substantive texts undermined gender mainstreaming and invited questions about its relevance in other places. Skeptics might ask, “If you were willing to drop gender language there, why insist on it here”. This might motivate attempts to eliminate gender language from further texts.

Several diplomats also cautioned against the risk of continuing to negotiate gender language in Vienna, saying that, Geneva and New York, equipped with more relevant subject matter experts, were not only more suitable places of multilateral decision making on gender language but also that Iran’s behavior in Vienna may produce regressive language that could bleed into other forums and be used to further undermine gender equality across the UN.

Indeed, the multilateral forums in Vienna do not have a mandate from a body like the UN General Assembly to negotiate language that amends or diverges from current UN language. Under the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as well as successive UN resolutions and SDG 5, the Vienna-based forums have an

obligation to contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment. It could be argued that failing to implement gender equality and gender mainstreaming in their work contravenes those international political agreements. This may serve as a persuasive incentive to other countries not to accommodate Iran's objections to UN gender language, such as deleting references to gender from technical resolutions, which means rolling back gender mainstreaming, or reducing "gender equality" to "gender balance", which does not meet the standard adopted by UN Member States in 1995.

Refusing to re-negotiate gender language with Iran would also reduce the role of mediator countries. Not only are the compromise outcomes they are likely to be able to facilitate not in the stated interest of countries committed to established language, but interviews also suggested that mediator countries may not be interested in assuming this role regularly and face similar hurdles in negotiating constructively with the Iranian delegation. The emphasis that some countries place on the role that mediator countries should play may needlessly strain the relationship between countries supporting gender equality language and the supposed mediators, as happened with the IAEA TACC report. While Western countries risked political capital by threatening to hold up other paragraphs unless Egypt and others convinced Iran to drop its opposition to gender language, it was likely the fact that Iran lacked any real leverage without a voice in the Board of Governors that eventually led to the report's adoption.

Not allowing gender language to be negotiated last

Diplomats described Iran often holding up gender language until very late in the negotiations, keeping it as a bargaining chip to exchange for concessions in other areas and creating pressure on delegations wishing to see gender language adopted to propose weakened language. This has repeatedly stretched negotiations long into the night, creating frustration among those countries less invested in gender language and contributing to the inaccurate impression that gender equality was a controversial topic and that countries supporting it were being inflexible. Countries committed to gender language should seek to avoid this.

Diplomats suggested replicating Iran's tactic and reserving agreement to language in other areas until gender equality language has been cleared. For this, they argued, it was important to keep open language that matters to Iran's partners like Russia, China, and Syria, in the hope that they might persuade Iran to soften its objection to gender language. Diplomats stressed that it was key to keep as many countries as possible engaged in the negotiations to prevent a situation, in which only Iran and countries committed to gender language are left in the room to break the impasse on gender while others are waiting in the plenary.

Another approach that has produced an encouraging result and would complement the principle not to re-negotiate gender language with Iran in Vienna is to treat it as a priority issue from day one rather than waiting for Iran to raise objections in negotiations. At the CTBTO Preparatory Commission meeting in June 2024, in separate consultations with Iran and other countries, it was proposed to retain previously agreed language to not jeopardize the adoption of its report, which gives effect to all decisions agreed at the meeting. All sides agreed to retain the previously agreed paragraph and did not debate gender language.

Voting when necessary

The logical consequence of the previous recommendations is the increased use of voting in Vienna. Most interviewees felt strongly that unquestioning adherence to the consensus principle offered only advantages to those seeking to cause disruption. To maintain the viability and integrity of consensus-based decision

making in Vienna, countries should clearly state their intention to put standard gender equality language to a vote wherever procedural rules allow it, once it becomes clear that Iran will not accept UN gender equality language despite good-faith engagement from other countries.

Countries may find it useful to highlight that, in these cases, voting is a mechanism to preserve consensus language agreed at the highest level of the UN, to maintain coherence between gender equality measures across the UN system, and to protect the integrity of the consensus principle in Vienna from misuse, as expressed in the recent understanding reached between Western and G-77 countries in Vienna.

At the same time, countries should accept that some may continue to abstain out of long-held aversions against voting procedures in Vienna. This may give the impression that those countries do not support gender equality language. Wherever possible, those countries should be encouraged to explain their abstention to prevent the misrepresentation of their reasons for abstaining. Iran has repeatedly tried to inflate the number of dissenting countries recorded in negotiated texts.

Regular coordination on gender language

A prerequisite for the aforementioned actions is enhanced coordination between countries supporting gender equality language. As shown in late 2023, regular coordination is key for preventing ‘rival’ consensus language and the impression that decisions on gender language are made in a non-transparent fashion by a small group of countries, as was the case after the 2023 IAEA General Conference.

Missions in Vienna should continue to develop shared opening positions and red lines ahead of negotiations in the policymaking organs. One interviewee highlighted that a benefit of agreeing at which point countries are no longer willing to discuss gender language with Iran would be that countries committed to gender language are seen to prevent the long nights of negotiating on gender that diplomats from all countries dread.

This coordination would be supported by an improved exchange of information on attempts to weaken or delete gender language in different forums and by exchanging best practices for dealing with such attempts. Creating a working group on gender language in the International Gender Champions initiative would be an important step for making this coordination more regular and accessible to a broader range of missions.

Relatedly, as the experience of some countries has shown, Vienna-based missions can benefit from exchanging information on gender language negotiations among their diplomats covering the different forums and connecting more frequently with colleagues in New York and Geneva. As gender language has become a major point of contention across issue areas, ministries of foreign affairs should consider creating dedicated coordinator positions in capital. Not only can they provide the subject matter expertise that diplomats focusing on other portfolios often lack, but they also help to ensure consistency in the language used and the stance taken by their government across the board. Such coordinators scan texts under negotiation for inconsistencies in gender language, helping to prevent the creation of ‘rival’ consensus language. They can also work with diplomats in different forums to identify suitable compromise language if required.

Strengthening North/South coordination

Interviews showed that it is an objective for Western and developing countries alike to dismantle the narrative that developing countries were disinterested in gender issues, denying the high priority that countries across the globe place on achieving gender equality, especially in the context of sustainable development. Countries

from different regions that are committed to gender equality should continue to visibly support each other in negotiations on gender language and coordinate their positions and red lines. Responding to the narrative that Western countries were pushing their ideology onto others, countries should point out how Iran has tried to deny other developing countries like Ghana their political agency by denouncing their proposals as Western propaganda.

Beyond this, there is an opportunity for Western countries to work with their partners in the G-77 to lobby the more passive supporters of gender equality among developing countries to support the preservation of UN gender language and to vote accordingly when necessary. In doing so, they may benefit from considering the principles many developing countries hold dear. For example, Iran has disrespected the integrity of G-77 positions, undermined the integrity of high-level G-77 statements and the principle of coherence across international bodies, has tried to erase other countries' statements from factual reports, and does not accept gender language adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly.

Interviewees agreed that countries should work to raise awareness of the existence of UN language on gender equality and highlight its relevance for the technical mandates of the Vienna-based organizations. One welcome initiative in this regard was a workshop on gender language for diplomats, organized by UNODC with the Philippines and Australia.

Given the particular concern interviewees voiced in this regard, countries may wish to focus on countering the attempt to construct gender equality and geographical representation as competing priorities. Not only are they both about reducing inequalities and distributing influence and opportunities more fairly, but they also reinforce each other as women of color are the most marginalized group in many contexts. What is more, countries supporting gender equality regularly call for equitable geographical representation, and there is no indication that international organizations were unduly prioritizing one over the other. As an example, the IAEA Director General produces a comprehensive biannual report on gender and geographical representation, showing significant progress in increasing job applications, hired staff, and interns from developing countries.⁵⁵

Clear and consistent use of gender language

The emphasis by countries supporting gender equality language that there are large conceptual differences between terms like “gender equality” and “gender balance” that cannot be used interchangeably is somewhat undermined by a deficit in the consistent use of these terms in their own statements. Statements by such countries in the Vienna forums in 2023 and 2024 have referred not only to “gender equality” but also to “gender balance”, “gender parity”, “gender equity”, and “gender representation”. In principle, these are legitimate terms, expressing elements of the principle of gender equality anchored in the UN. However, their interchangeable use at conferences where gender language is hotly debated does not support the position that “gender equality” is indispensable language.

Countries would benefit from a more consistent use of the language they wish to preserve in outcome documents. They might also consider basing their use of this language more explicitly on precedent in the Vienna-based forums and on foundational consensus documents like the UN Charter, the UDHR, and the

⁵⁵ IAEA (2023), “Staffing of the Agency’s Secretariat: Report by the Director General”, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc67-18.pdf>.

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Additionally, countries might strengthen their position by reiterating what concretely the language at hand, such as “gender equality” means, i.e., equal rights, opportunities, and representation for men and women, fighting discrimination in socio-cultural norms and practices, and gender mainstreaming. Good examples can be found in several statements:

*“Numerical parity, however, is just the beginning. As we know, gender equality goes beyond numbers, to address the need for equal ease of access to resources and opportunities and an organizational culture that values different needs of perspectives. This definition has been understood and accepted in IAEA and UN documents for years [...]”.*⁵⁶

Where states wish to introduce more nuanced language that is not as firmly established in the UN as “gender equality”, for example, “gender-transformative”, they should do so with straightforward explanations of what this language comprises, why it is useful, and where else it has been used successfully.

Together, these measures may help to prevent misunderstandings and alleviate concerns about implicit deviations from the gender equality concept as enshrined in the UN on the part of skeptical countries. At a minimum, they can help dispel allegations made by certain countries and demonstrate to the international community that those supporting gender equality are doing so respectfully and transparently.

Avoiding stand-alone resolutions on gender equality

One proposal floated in Vienna is to create stand-alone resolutions on gender equality and remove mentions of it in technical resolutions. It is argued that this would allow countries supporting gender equality to draft strong, progressive language, potentially expanding its scope to include the full diversity of genders, without having to accommodate more conservative interests, and preventing disagreements over gender language from blocking technical resolutions. While this may sound like an easy fix to a complex problem, many view this proposal critically.

Diplomats voiced concerns that this would constitute a significant win for Iran without any concessions. Creating a resolution with forward-leaning language, such as “gender diversity”, would also invite opposition from “non-likeminded” countries, and possibly others. This would risk exacerbating the current dynamic, in which Iran is usually a single opposing voice. While such a resolution could be brought to a vote and may be adopted, this would upset those strongly attached to consensus decisions and fuel the narrative that Western countries were pushing their views on gender onto others. Many countries would find a resolution which, by default, had to be voted on each year to be incompatible with the Vienna spirit.

Finally, removing a gender perspective from the paragraphs on the substantive mandates of the Vienna-based organizations would be antithetical to gender mainstreaming, as mandated by the UN System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment and as anchored in the gender equality strategies of the Vienna-based organizations.

⁵⁶ US Mission to International Organizations in Vienna (2024), “Remarks – “Gender Equality in Nuclear Security: Achievements and Challenges” Panel Discussion – ICONS 2024”, <https://vienna.usmission.gov/remarks-gender-equality-in-nuclear-security-achievements-and-challenges-panel-discussion-side-event-icons-2024/>.



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