



**CARTA**  
INTERNACIONAL

ASSOCIAÇÃO BRASILEIRA DE  
RELAÇÕES INTERNACIONAIS

ISSN 2526-9038

# The BRICS countries and the international gender equality agenda

*Os países do BRICS e a agenda internacional da igualdade de gênero*

*Los países del BRICS y la agenda internacional de igualdad de género*

DOI: 10.21530/ci.v19n3.2024.1421

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## Abstract

This article<sup>3</sup> analyzes the BRICS' stance on the issue of gender equality (SDG 5) within the 2030 Agenda, focusing on their positions in annual summits and the UN Human Rights Council between 2015 and 2022. Despite their criticism of the liberal economic order, the BRICS generally support the gender equality agenda, with an emphasis on issues such as violence prevention and human trafficking. However, China and Russia oppose topics like gender identity and sexuality, highlighting resistance to Western liberal views and a diversity of perspectives within the group regarding the promotion of Human Rights.

**Keywords:** BRICS, Gender Equality, Sustainable Development, SDG 5, Human Rights Council.

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3 We thank the Research Incentive Plan of the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PIPEQ/PUCSP) for funding this research. Grant/Award Number: 29259.

Artigo submetido em 26/03/2024 e aprovado em 07/10/2024.





## Resumo

Este artigo analisa o posicionamento dos BRICS sobre a temática da igualdade de gênero (ODS 5) da Agenda 2030, focando em suas posturas em cúpulas anuais e no Conselho de Direitos Humanos da ONU, entre 2015 e 2022. Apesar das críticas à ordem econômica liberal, os BRICS, em geral, apoiam a agenda da igualdade de gênero, destacando temas como prevenção da violência e tráfico de pessoas. No entanto, China e Rússia se opõem a temas como identidade de gênero e sexualidade, evidenciando uma resistência às visões liberais ocidentais e uma diversidade de perspectivas dentro do grupo sobre a promoção dos Direitos Humanos.

**Palavras-chave:** BRICS, Igualdade de Gênero, Desenvolvimento Sustentável, ODS 5, Conselho de Direitos Humanos.

## Resumen

Este artículo analiza la postura de los BRICS sobre el tema de la igualdad de género (ODS 5) de la Agenda 2030, centrándose en sus posiciones en las cumbres anuales y en el Consejo de Derechos Humanos de la ONU, entre 2015 y 2022. A pesar de las críticas al orden económico liberal, los BRICS, en general, apoyan la agenda de igualdad de género, con énfasis en temas como la prevención de la violencia y el tráfico de personas. Sin embargo, China y Rusia se oponen a temas como la identidad de género y la sexualidad, lo que pone de manifiesto una resistencia a las visiones liberales occidentales y una diversidad de perspectivas dentro del grupo en lo que respecta a la promoción de los Derechos Humanos.

**Palabras clave:** BRICS, Igualdad de Género, Desarrollo Sostenible, ODS 5, Consejo de Derechos Humanos.

## Introduction

Gender equality has gained increasing prominence on the international agenda over recent decades, particularly within the United Nations (UN) framework. The UN plays a key role in this area by drafting international documents and developing commissions and conventions to address the issue. One example is the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), established in 1946, which is responsible for organizing the international agenda on this topic (Guarnieri 2010). The institutionalization of this debate gained ground with the adoption





of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was established during the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in 2015, mainly through Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which aims to address structural gender inequality (United Nations 2024b).

By adopting the 17 SDGs of the 2030 Agenda, countries committed themselves to implementing internal legal, political, economic, and social measures to achieve the goals of this agenda by 2030. However, in the current context, many nations face challenges in meeting the targets set by the UN, particularly regarding gender equality (Sachs, Lafortune, and Fuller 2024). Among these countries are the BRICS members Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, which have advocated for reforms in the International System, especially in the international financial architecture (Stuenkel 2017). Furthermore, these countries have shown interest in bringing social issues to the global agenda, such as the fight against hunger and poverty. However, they also face significant domestic challenges, particularly regarding women's protection and reducing gender inequality (Lobato 2018). Recently, the group has returned to the spotlight due to its expansion initiatives (The Economist 2023).

Uncertainties remain about the extent of convergence among BRICS members, particularly outside the economic sphere (Rinaldi and Apolinário Júnior 2020; Apolinário Júnior and Branco 2022). Human rights issues have been testing this convergence, given the need for positioning within International Organizations and the political and institutional heterogeneity of the member countries (Beeson and Zeng 2018).

A prominent debate in the literature on this topic is whether the BRICS' critique of the liberal economic order also extends to the international human rights regime. In the West, the prevailing view is that the BRICS challenge the economic, political, and cultural structures emanating from the U.S.-led West. Thus, the rise of the BRICS, in general, and China, in particular, is perceived as a challenge to Western liberal positions not only in economic and geopolitical terms but also in promoting democracy and human rights (Lipton 2017).

However, some scholars argue that human rights are not inherently a Western construct, as they have become fundamental global values shaped by contributions from various civilizations. Moreover, there is no clear evidence that China and the other BRICS countries oppose this agenda, suggesting that the rise of the BRICS does not necessarily hinder the global expansion of the human rights agenda, although it may undermine the West's leadership role in this area (Subedi 2015).





This article contributes to this debate by analyzing the BRICS' international stance on the international gender equity agenda by examining their official statements at the group's summits and their voting behavior on UNHRC resolutions between 2015 – the year the 2030 Agenda was institutionalized – and 2022. The central question is: How do the BRICS countries position themselves internationally regarding the gender equality agenda? The study has the following objectives: i) to analyze the evolution of the gender equality agenda at the global level, with a focus on the formulation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs; ii) to investigate the BRICS' positions on human rights and gender equality based on their official statements at the group's summits; and iii) to examine how the BRICS countries voted on UNHRC resolutions related to this issue.

Analyzing countries' voting patterns on UNHRC resolutions provides a unique opportunity to understand their stance on key human rights issues, including gender equality. These votes reveal states' formal commitments and the political dynamics, regional alliances, and strategic interests that shape their positions. In the case of gender equality, such examination allows for identifying trends in support or resistance to policies related to this issue while highlighting how certain countries reconcile their domestic agendas both with their international responsibilities as well as perceptions.

The study's conclusions indicate that while the BRICS countries, in the economic sphere, seek to challenge Western hegemony and promote a multipolar system, their approaches in the realm of human rights vary between formal support and selective resistance. Although there is overall support for gender equality, countries such as China and Russia show resistance to specific issues, such as gender identity and sexual orientation, indicating tensions between internal cultural norms and the liberal views emanating from the West.

The article is organized as follows: The next section addresses the evolution of the gender equality agenda in the multilateral landscape, emphasizing the formulation of SDG 5 within the context of the 2030 Agenda. Subsequently, it examines how the BRICS have addressed the human rights agenda and gender issues at their summits over the past decades. Then, it portrays an empirical analysis comparing the positions of these countries in discussions related to this topic at the UNHRC. Finally, the last section presents the main conclusions of the study.





## International Agenda on Gender Equality, the 2030 Agenda, and SDG 5

Although the first international conferences on women's rights date back to the 1970s<sup>4</sup>, with the establishment of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, gender issues gained greater prominence on the international agenda in the 1990s. This period was marked by significant declarations and conferences, such as Vienna<sup>5</sup> (1993), Cairo (1994), and Beijing (1995), which focused on reproductive rights, demographics, and women's rights (Lindgren-Alves, 2018; Milani, 2014). In 1996, the UN Secretary-General expressed concern over the discrimination faced by women in Afghanistan, indicating a shift in international policy toward women's rights (Reanda, 1999). In the same year, the UN Commission on the Status of Women established a working group that, in 1999, presented the Optional Protocol to CEDAW, which was adopted by the General Assembly and came into effect in 2000 (OHCHR 2024b).

The transformations of this decade laid the groundwork for the formulation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), agreed upon following the Millennium Declaration in 2000. The third goal was to "Promote gender equality and empower women" (United Nations 2024a). In 2010, the UN General Assembly approved the establishment of UN Women, an entity focused on gender equality and women's empowerment, and in 2015, adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of the 2030 Agenda, continuing the efforts of the MDGs. Although SDG 5 (Table 1) focuses on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, nearly all SDGs include targets related to this theme. The UN declaration emphasizes that justice, inclusion, and sustainable development can only be achieved by ensuring the rights of women and girls (United Nations 2024b).

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4 The First World Conference on Women in 1975 led to the establishment of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for the Decade for Women, which was later converted into the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in 1985, following the decision of the Third World Conference on Women. The Second World Conference on Women took place in 1980, and the Third World Conference on Women was held in 1985 (UN Women, 2024).

5 Vienna Conference on Human Rights (1993); International Conference on Population and Development (1994); World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen (1995); World Conference on Women (1995).





**Table 1. Goals and Targets of SDG 5 – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls**

5.1	End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere
5.2	Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation
5.3	Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation
5.4	Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate
5.5	Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life
5.6	Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences
5.a	Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws
5.b	Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women
5.c	Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels

Source: United Nations (2024b).

SDG 5 and its indicators represent a significant advancement by addressing various gender-related issues, such as discrimination, violence against women, and harmful practices (such as genital mutilation and child marriage), as well as promoting political representation and access to economic resources. However, despite these advancements, significant challenges remain, such as the absence of targets focused on the sexual rights of the LGBTQIA+ population (Giannini 2019).

Despite the institutional progress in gender equality globally, it is essential to recognize the limitations of the UN’s efforts in this field. This study acknowledges the constraints of the liberal framing of the international gender equality agenda. Organizations such as the UN often perpetuate unequal power structures by





neglecting historical and cultural specificities, reinforcing neocolonial dynamics (Souza and Selis 2023). It is also crucial to question the universality of human rights, which often ignores the diverse experiences of gender and sexuality (Peterson 1990). In particular, the critique of the dichotomy between universalism and culturalism is essential to avoid simplifications (Freedman 2007). Thus, this study argues that the evolution of the gender equality agenda should be analyzed through critical approaches that challenge global power structures and the epistemologies of International Political Economy (Murta 2023).

## **BRICS and the International Human Rights Agenda**

A reorganization of forces in the international system, resulting from the rise of the so-called emerging powers, marked the beginning of the 21st century (Ikenberry 2018). The BRICS gained prominence in the global economy among these countries as they presented consistent growth rates throughout this decade. These countries sought closer diplomatic ties through the formalization of the BRICS coalition and began demanding reforms in contemporary global governance institutions (Rinaldi 2021; Stuenkel 2017).

BRICS emerged as an informal multilateral group formed by countries outside the Global North. Institutionalized in 2009, following the first meeting of heads of state, the bloc included South Africa in 2011. Since then, the group has held annual meetings to deepen cooperation in various areas (Ramos et al 2018). The BRICS' international activities are characterized by a focus on reforms in the global order, particularly in economic governance. BRICS members emphasize the need for reforming Bretton Woods institutions and creating new sources of development financing (Carmo 2011; Liu and Papa 2022).

These countries actively engage in the international human rights agenda, having all ratified the establishment of the Human Rights Council (HRC) and served as members of this organization at various times, elected through regional candidacies. To become members of the HRC, countries must demonstrate their dedication to promoting and protecting human rights while obtaining support from their respective regions. The allocation of seats on the Council is based on regional divisions: Africa (13 members), Asia-Pacific (13 members), Eastern Europe (6 members), Latin America and the Caribbean (8 members), and Western Europe and other States (7 members).





However, the initial summit declarations of the BRICS countries neglected human rights and gender equality issues. The official declaration from the summit in Yekaterinburg → in 2009 did not mention these topics (BRICS 2009). Over the years, subsequent declarations began to address these issues. The first instance in which human rights were discussed unrelated to conflicts occurred at the fifth summit in Durban, South Africa, in 2013. During this summit, the group expressed interest in cooperating in this area and commemorated the 20th anniversary of the World Conference on Human Rights and its Vienna Declaration (BRICS 2013). Since then, the declarations mention this subject, attaching it to the right to development in a fair and equitable manner: “We agree to continue to address all human rights, including the right to development, in a fair and equitable manner, on an equal footing, and with the same emphasis” (BRICS 2014, 6). Additionally, in response to criticisms regarding human rights violations, the group advocates for “the need to promote, protect, and fulfill human rights in a non-selective, non-politicized, constructive manner, and without double standards” (BRICS 2023, 2), emphasizing the role of the UN and the Human Rights Council as central bodies in this regard. The most recent summit declaration, held in 2023 in Johannesburg, South Africa, highlights:

(...) the central role of the UN in an international system in which sovereign states cooperate to maintain peace and security, advance sustainable development, ensure the promotion and protection of democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, and promoting cooperation based on the spirit of solidarity, mutual respect, justice and equality (BRICS 2023, 2).

Furthermore, BRICS members reiterate:

(...) the need for all countries to cooperate in promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms under the principles of equality and mutual respect. We agree to continue to treat all human rights including the right to development in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing and with the same emphasis. We agree to strengthen cooperation on issues of common interests both within BRICS and in multilateral fora including the United Nations General Assembly and Human Rights Council, taking into account the necessity to promote, protect and fulfill human rights in a non-selective, non-politicised and constructive manner and without double standards. We call for the respect of democracy and human rights. In this







regard, we underline that they should be implemented on the level of global governance as well as at national level. We reaffirm our commitment to ensuring the promotion and protection of democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all with the aim to build a brighter shared future for the international community based on mutually beneficial cooperation (BRICS 2023, 2).

Therefore, it is evident that human rights protection has become an integral part of the BRICS agenda in recent years. Not only are these countries signatories to the main international conventions aimed at safeguarding human rights, but they have also articulated consistent positions in the official documents released after their annual summits, advocating for the defense of human rights, albeit with differing conceptions and understandings compared to Western nations.

Lipton (2017) argues that BRICS has played a significant role in advocating for reforms within the global order dominated by the West, posing a challenge to U.S.-led Western hegemony. Furthermore, BRICS's ascension would represent a challenge to liberal Western views regarding the promotion of democracy and human rights. In this perspective, BRICS represents a threat to this agenda due to its opposition to intervention doctrines originating from the West, such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) (Oliveira, Uziel, and Rocha 2017; Rinaldi and Pecequilo 2021), as well as to the policies exported from the West, often marketed as “best practices”, mainly through the conditionalities attached to external aid packages (Esteves et al. 2011; Rinaldi and Apolinário Júnior 2020).

Ferdinand (2014) demonstrates that within the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the BRICS countries—in particular, Russia after Putin's rise to power, as well as China and India—express reluctance to support critiques of other nation's human rights records, emphasizing non-interference in internal affairs. These countries consistently refrain from voting in favor of motions that criticize the human rights records of foreign nations. In contrast, Brazil has frequently voted in favor of resolutions that condemn the human rights violations of other countries, particularly since its return to democracy in 1985. Similarly, South Africa, following its post-apartheid transition in 1994, has also been critical of human rights abuses in other regimes, although it tends to be more cautious regarding its former allies in the anti-apartheid struggle.

A general perception is that the UN's human rights agenda originates from the West, with Western countries leveraging their intellectual capital and financial





power to promote human rights globally. There is a particular concern in the Global North that the West's geopolitical decline will adversely affect the international human rights agenda (Subedi 2015; Lipton 2017).

Notwithstanding, this position faces several counterarguments. First, all states, including the BRICS, have accepted the UN's human rights agenda and voluntarily submitted themselves to scrutiny by the Human Rights Council. Second, while democracy and human rights protection have roots in Western political thought, they represent a global concept enriched by similar notions in various civilizations and regions, being dynamic and non-consensual. Third, except for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, the most prominent international human rights treaties were adopted after developing countries achieved a majority in the UN General Assembly, including the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Furthermore, developing countries have adopted many of the subsequent instruments of hard and soft law addressing self-determination, minority rights, equality, and the right to development (Subedi 2015).

The BRICS nations, particularly China and Russia, often criticize the Western conception of human rights, arguing that it reflects a hegemonic perspective that overlooks the Global South's cultural, political, and historical specificities (Foot 2024). According to this critique, the human rights promoted by Western powers are used as tools for selective political and economic intervention, frequently ignoring global structural inequalities (Mutua 2002). For BRICS members, this instrumentalization serves NATO's geopolitical interests, allowing human rights to be invoked as a justification for military interventions or unilateral sanctions, as seen in the recent cases of Libya and Syria (Rinaldi and Pecequilo 2021). Moreover, the emphasis on a liberal interpretation of human rights, focused on civil and political rights while neglecting economic and social rights, further reinforces the BRICS' criticisms, which advocate for a more balanced and contextually aware approach (Rivers 2015).

Thus, neither the UN nor human rights are intrinsically Western or non-Western. Human rights have evolved as fundamental global values within the international community, with no evidence suggesting that China or other BRICS countries oppose the universalization of this agenda. None of the BRICS resolutions or documents indicate an intention to rewrite the principles of International Law or alter the UN's human rights agenda. In practice, these countries have reaffirmed the foundational principles of the UN Charter, including the universality,





indivisibility, and interrelation of human rights. Therefore, while the rise of BRICS countries, particularly China, may undermine the West's role, it does not necessarily compromise the essence of the ethos underlying the UN's human rights agenda (Subedi 2015).

## **BRICS and the Gender Equality agenda**

Numerous instruments, treaties, declarations, and resolutions intersect to promote gender equality on the international stage. One of the most prominent is the 1979 “Universal Charter” for Women's Rights, known as CEDAW, which, along with SDG 5, establishes significant commitments to this cause. By ratifying CEDAW, countries agree to eliminate discrimination against women in all areas—legal, political, economic, social, and cultural—and to regularly report to the United Nations on the steps they are taking to implement these measures.

The five BRICS countries ratified CEDAW at different times: China was the first, in 1980, followed by Russia (then the USSR) in 1981, Brazil in 1984, India in 1993, and South Africa in 1995, after the end of apartheid. All BRICS members signed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 during the Fourth World Conference on Women. However, China and India have not signed the Optional Protocol to CEDAW. Another key milestone in the international gender agenda is the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, known as the Palermo Protocol, adopted in 2000. This document aims to strengthen international cooperation and establish measures to prevent and combat trafficking while protecting victims. All BRICS countries ratified the Protocol at different times (UN Treaty Body Database 2024). Table 2 below provides the dates of BRICS' adherence to each agreement.



**Table 2. BRICS and International Commitments to Gender Equality**

Country	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)	Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action	Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)	Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children
Brazil	Signature (1981) and Ratification (1984)	Signature (1995)	Signature (2001) and Ratification (2002)	Signature (2000) and Ratification (2004)
Russia	Signature (1980) and Ratification (1981)	Signature (1995)	Signature (2001) and Ratification (2004)	Signature (2000) and Ratification (2004)
India	Signature (1980) and Ratification (1993)	Signature (1995)	-	Signature (2002) and Ratification (2011)
China	Signature and Ratification (1980)	Signature (1995)	-	Ratification (2010)
South Africa	Signature (1993) and Ratification (1995)	Signature (1995)	Signature (2000) and Ratification (2005)	Signature (2000) and Ratification (2004)

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on UN Treaty Body Database (2024).

The 3rd BRICS Summit, held in Sanya, China, in 2011, marked the first time gender issues were explicitly mentioned in the group's official declarations. At this meeting, BRICS reaffirmed the commitment to dialogue and cooperation within social protection, decent work, gender equity, public health, and the fight against HIV/AIDS (BRICS 2011). Since then, the group's official statements have increasingly addressed gender-related issues. At the 6th Summit in Fortaleza, Brazil, in 2014, the declaration highlighted BRICS' commitment to tackling social issues such as gender inequality, women's rights, and youth, focusing on ensuring sexual and reproductive health for all. These discussions led to the creation of the BRICS Agenda for Cooperation on Population Issues, covering topics like gender equality and violence against women, youth, and the elderly (BRICS 2014). By the 8th Summit in Goa, India, in 2016, the BRICS Declaration emphasized the group's dedication to gender equity and the empowerment of women and girls, aligning with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (BRICS 2016). A significant initiative during this period was the establishment of the BRICS Women Parliamentarians Forum in 2016, which developed strategies to implement the 2030 Agenda (Lobato 2018).





The inclusion of these issues in BRICS summits complements the SDGs and CEDAW by focusing on areas that are significant to the bloc, such as social protection and populational issues. At the same time, it critiques the Western model, which often prioritizes civil and political rights over economic and social ones. This approach balances promoting women's rights with the specific needs of member countries, adapting global norms to local realities. In doing so, BRICS not only supplements global efforts toward gender equality but also provides an alternative to the universal application of human rights, promoting an approach tailored to the contexts of developing countries (Lobato 2018).

As BRICS cooperation continues to evolve, there is a noticeable increase in the emphasis on social issues within the group's actions and initiatives, particularly those related to gender. Consequently, the focus on social commitments within BRICS has shifted from generic affirmations supporting social inclusion to encompassing a wide array of contemporary social themes, such as poverty alleviation, universal access to healthcare and education, food security, full employment, decent work, human rights, and particularly, gender equality. Beginning with the second cycle of summits, which started with the 6th Summit in Fortaleza, working groups and collaborations in these strategic areas began to take shape. However, the practical impact of these measures still needs to be assessed (Lobato 2018).

Gender equality has gained prominence across all spheres of civil society. With the introduction of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), the significance of this topic has been amplified, particularly in the international arena, where it has become a subject of more detailed discussion in voting sessions of international bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Council (HRC). The following section analyzes how the BRICS countries have positioned themselves in these discussions, examining their voting patterns concerning resolutions related to gender equality.

## **The BRICS countries and the gender equality agenda within the UN Human Rights Council (HRC)**

This study examined the BRICS countries' votes on Human Rights Council (HRC) resolutions related to the gender equality agenda from 2015 to 2022, using the Universal Rights Group (URG) database, which compiles all resolutions since 2006. The HRC is a crucial forum for the debate and implementation of human





rights norms, reflecting the tensions between Western views and the positions of developing countries, such as the BRICS (Universal Rights Group, 2024).

The elected members of the Human Rights Council (HRC) serve three-year terms, with no immediate re-election allowed after two consecutive terms. Between 2015 and 2022, Brazil was absent in 2016, Russia was absent in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020, and was suspended in April 2022. India was absent in 2018, China in 2020, and South Africa in 2020, 2021, and 2022 (OHCHR 2024a).

The research on the platform has identified 30 gender equality and women’s rights resolutions of the UN Human Rights Council between 2015 and 2022, following the establishment of the 2030 Agenda in 2015. Mid-year resolutions have addressed the topic more frequently (Table 3 ). Additionally, the number of resolutions on these issues has increased over the years. Since 2017, there has been a pattern of approximately three annual resolutions related to gender.

**Table 3. Resolutions from 2015 to 2022 on Gender Equality Issues**

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total Geral
MAR					1			1	2
HRC-40					1				1
HRC-49								1	1
JUN	2	6	3	2	3	2	2	5	25
HRC-29	2								2
HRC-32		6							6
HRC-35			3						3
HRC-38				2					2
HRC-41					3				3
HRC-44						2			2
HRC-47							2		2
HRC-50								5	5
SEP			1			2			3
HRC-36			1						1
HRC-45						2			2
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>30</b>

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on Universal Rights Group (2024).





A significant portion of the analyzed resolutions addresses broad themes such as: “Elimination of discrimination against women”, “Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls”, “Trafficking in persons, especially women, and children: protection of victims of trafficking and those at risk of trafficking”, and “Promotion, protection, and full guarantee of the human rights of women and girls in humanitarian situations”.

This broad scope has led countries to vote in “consensus” on most of these resolutions, as the commitment to gender equality and women’s rights is a relevant criterion for election to the Human Rights Council. Table 4 presents the votes of the five countries on the 30 analyzed resolutions.

**Table 4. BRICS Votes on the 30 Analyzed Resolutions**

	<b>Brazil</b>	<b>Russia</b>	<b>India</b>	<b>China</b>	<b>South Africa</b>
Consensus	21	9	24	22	16
In favor	3		1		1
Abstention		1	3	1	1
Against		1		3	
N/A*	6	19	2	4	12
Total	30	30	30	30	30

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on Universal Rights Group (2024).

Note: \*Absence of vote due to non-membership in the Human Rights Council.

Additionally, of the 30 resolutions, eight focus on the “Elimination of Discrimination Against Women”, highlighting the growing importance of this issue in international discussions. The countries voted unanimously on these resolutions, demonstrating a consensus on this matter (Table 5).





**Table 5. Analysis of Votes on the Themes of Elimination of Violence Against Women and Elimination of Discrimination Against Women**

Year	Resolution	Theme	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
2015	HRC-29	<i>Elimination of discrimination against women</i>	Consensus	Consensus	Consensus	Consensus	Consensus
2016	HRC-32	<i>Elimination of discrimination against women</i>		Consensus	Consensus	Consensus	Consensus
2017	HRC-35	<i>Elimination of discrimination against women and girls</i>	Consensus		Consensus	Consensus	Consensus
2018	HRC-38	<i>Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls</i>	Consensus			Consensus	Consensus
2019	HRC-40	<i>Elimination of discrimination against women and girls in sport</i>	Consensus		Consensus	Consensus	Consensus
2019	HRC-41	<i>Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls</i>	Consensus		Consensus	Consensus	Consensus
2020	HRC-44	<i>Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls</i>	Consensus		Consensus		
2022	HRC-50	<i>Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls</i>	Consensus		Consensus	Consensus	

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on Universal Rights Group (2024).







As gender issues have increasingly become a significant topic on the international agenda, resolutions have begun to intersect gender with other critical topics. In Resolution 32/17, adopted in July 2016, efforts concentrated on the intersection between race and gender equality. The resolution proposed to “address the impact of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and violence in the context of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance on the full enjoyment of all human rights by women and girls.” It recommended that States “develop and strengthen gender-sensitive multisectoral policies and programs, involving sectors such as justice, health, social services, education, and child protection, as well as relevant non-state actors, aimed at promoting the human rights of women and girls affected by multiple forms of racial discrimination, xenophobia, and intolerance”. Brazil was one of the sponsors of this resolution, while Russia, India, China, and South Africa voted in consensus (Universal Rights Group, 2024).

In the same Resolution 32, proposed by Canada, item 19 emphasizes efforts to eliminate violence against women, with a specific focus on “preventing and responding to violence against women and girls, including Indigenous women and girls”. The voting and sponsorship patterns followed the trend previously mentioned, involving various countries but without Brazil’s participation (Universal Rights Group, 2024).

In Resolution 47, also proposed by Canada, item 15 reinforces efforts to eliminate violence against women, highlighting the need to “prevent and respond to violence against women and girls, including women and girls with disabilities” (Universal Rights Group, 2024). In this case, the voting pattern shifts, with Brazil’s participation instead of South Africa. This resolution indicates a growing effort to eliminate inequalities affecting all women without discrimination based on other forms of prejudice (Table 6).



**Table 6. Resolutions that intersect gender issues with other subjects**

Year	Resolution	Theme	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
2016	HRC-32	<i>Addressing the impact of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and violence in the context of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance on the full enjoyment of all human rights by women and girls</i>		Consensus	Consensus	Consensus	Consensus
2016	HRC-32	<i>Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women: Preventing and responding to violence against women and girls, including indigenous women and girls</i>		Consensus	Consensus	Consensus	Consensus
2021	HRC-47	<i>Accelerating efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: preventing and responding to all forms of violence against women and girls with disabilities</i>	Consensus	Consensus	Consensus	Consensus	

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on Universal Rights Group (2024).

The issue of women frequently appears in resolutions related to combating human trafficking. Between 2015 and 2022, three resolutions addressed this subject. In each of these votes, one of the BRICS member countries was absent due to not having been part of the Council at the time, while the other four





voted in consensus, as shown in Table 7. Combating human trafficking also involves addressing sexual violence against women, especially considering that the majority of victims are vulnerable women in Global South countries, including the BRICS themselves. These resolutions also extend to the protection of children, in addition to women.

**Table 7. Votes on the issue of women trafficking**

Year	Resolution	Theme	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
2016	HRC-32	<i>Trafficking in persons, especially women and children: protecting victims of trafficking and people at risk of trafficking, especially women and children in conflict and post-conflict situations</i>		Consensus	Consensus	Consensus	Consensus
2017	HRC-35	<i>Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children</i>	Consensus		Consensus	Consensus	Consensus
2020	HRC-44	<i>Trafficking in persons, especially women and children: strengthening human rights through enhanced protection, support, and empowerment of victims of trafficking, especially women and children</i>	Consensus		Consensus		

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on Universal Rights Group (2024).

New issues have emerged in the documents, such as Resolution 38, “Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls: preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts”. This





resolution addresses the safety of women and girls in digital environments, ensuring they can freely exercise their right to expression and participate in political, economic, cultural, and social debates. Additionally, terms like ‘empowerment’ and ‘leadership’ are appearing more frequently, expanding beyond fundamental rights such as health, education, and nationality to include property rights and the promotion of political participation, among others (Universal Rights Group, 2024).

Another significant shift was the recognition of gender inequality as a structural issue with historical origins, as mentioned in paragraph 35/10 of the resolution entitled “Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women: engaging men and boys in preventing and responding to violence against all women and girls.” This resolution also highlights the role of men and boys in fighting discrimination and violence, emphasizing the importance of education and engagement in social struggles (Universal Rights Group, 2024).

According to the collected data, Brazil voted in consensus 70% of the time, Russia 30%, India 80%, China 73%, and South Africa 53%. India had the highest abstention rate, while Brazil was the country most frequently voting in favor of the resolutions, with 10%, followed by South Africa and India with 3% each (Table 8).

**Table 8 – Percentage of BRICS Votes on the 30 Resolutions**

	<b>Brazil</b>	<b>Russia</b>	<b>India</b>	<b>China</b>	<b>South Africa</b>
Consensus	70%	30%	80%	73.3%	53.3%
In favor	10%	0%	3.3%	0%	3.3%
Abstention	0%	3.3%	10%	3.3%	3.3%
Against	0%	3.3%	0%	10%	0%
N/A	20%	63.3%	6.7%	13.3%	40%

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on Universal Rights Group (2024).

Moreover, regarding the percentage of opposing votes, China registered 10% and Russia 3%. Consensus positions are generally linked to broad, generic resolutions, many of which align with the goals of SDG 5. The following section discusses the resolutions with opposing votes for a deeper understanding of the divergences between these countries. These opposing votes are connected to resolutions addressing issues of gender identity, sexuality, or sexual orientation (Table 9).



**Table 9 – Resolutions with Opposing Votes**

Year	Resolution	Theme	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
2016	HRC-32	<i>Protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity</i>		Against	Abstention	Against	Abstention
2019	HRC-41	<i>Mandate of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity</i>	In favor		Abstention	Against	In favor
2022	HRC-49	<i>Recognizing the contribution of human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in conflict and post-conflict situations, to the enjoyment and realization of human rights</i>	In favor	Abstention	In favor	Abstention	
2022	HRC-50	<i>Mandate of Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity</i>	In favor		Abstention	Against	

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on Universal Rights Group (2024).

This analysis becomes clear when filtering the resolutions. A search using the keyword “women” resulted in more resolutions passed by consensus, focusing specifically on women’s issues while excluding other marginalized groups. In contrast, a search using the keyword “gender” identified only four resolutions





between 2015 and 2022, all explicitly aimed at “protecting all individuals regardless of gender identity”. The opposing votes from Russia and China on LGBTQIA + rights-related issues reflect their conservative and restrictive viewpoints on sexual and gender rights. Russia, for instance, is well-known for its legislation and policies limiting LGBTQIA + rights, such as the “anti-propaganda” law, which prohibits the promotion of homosexuality (Nuñez-Mietz 2019). Similarly, China has a history of repressing LGBTQIA + identities, with the government often curbing visibility and the rights of this group (Wang et al. 2019). These positions contrast sharply with Western human rights standards, which emphasize the protection of LGBTQIA + rights.

Over the past few decades, Brazil has positioned itself as a leading advocate for the rights of LGBTQIA + groups and women on the international stage, consistently supporting UN resolutions that condemn gender-based discrimination and violence. However, between 2019 and 2022, the Bolsonaro administration sought to reshape Brazil’s foreign policy on global gender equality (Kyrillos and Simioni 2022). Notably, in the formal submission of Brazil’s candidacy to the UN Human Rights Council in 2019, the government omitted references to gender issues, inequality, torture, reproductive rights, and sexual orientation—an evident departure from the candidacies submitted in 2010, 2013, and 2015 (Gênero e Número 2019). Despite these changes in rhetoric, Brazil continued to vote in favor of gender equality resolutions in the Human Rights Council. Nevertheless, the administration repeatedly objected to the language used in these documents, notably asserting that the Bolsonaro government “considers gender synonymous with biological sex” (Globo 2019). Following the fall of the Bolsonaro government, Brazil has resumed its traditional positions in support of these issues within international organizations (UOL 2023).

In summary, the analysis of BRICS votes at the UNHRC reveals significant alignment with resolutions promoting gender equality, particularly on broad issues such as the elimination of discrimination and violence against women and girls. However, divergences emerge in resolutions addressing more specific issues like LGBTQIA + rights. This analysis reflects the tensions between a progressive, liberal human rights approach (Sanders 2016) and the more conservative positions of some BRICS members, especially on issues related to sexuality and gender identity (Nunes-Mietz 2019; Wang et al. 2019).





## Conclusions

This study investigated the BRICS countries' positions on the international gender equality agenda by analyzing the group's official summit statements and their voting patterns on UNHRC resolutions between 2015 and 2022. The findings reveal that while there is explicit criticism of the liberal economic order, this does not necessarily translate into a direct challenge to the promotion of human rights on a global scale. Rather than outright opposition to the gender equity agenda and other human rights issues, BRICS nations demonstrate a more pragmatic and varied approach. This finding is significant for the literature, as it suggests that BRICS' influence on the global human rights agenda is more about redistributing power and amplifying diverse voices on the international stage, rather than directly opposing the promotion of human rights.

However, the analysis revealed that while the BRICS countries generally support advancing the gender equality agenda within the international normative framework—particularly on issues related to the prevention of violence and human trafficking—their stances diverge significantly on specific topics such as gender identity and sexuality. Notably, China and Russia demonstrate a more pronounced opposition to these areas, reflecting a resistance to the liberal human rights vision often associated with the West. This position suggests that, despite overall support for the human rights agenda, there is an underlying tension regarding the acceptance of values that challenge the traditional cultural and social norms prevalent in some BRICS countries. This resistance to the gender identity and sexuality agenda indicates that, even within the BRICS group, there is a diversity of perspectives on what constitutes the promotion of human rights. Thus, the rise of BRICS not only reflects a redistribution of power in global governance but also underscores the internal complexities and conflicts over how human rights are interpreted and implemented within a pluralistic global context.

Although this study did not examine the domestic implementation of the gender equality agenda within BRICS countries, it is evident that, despite the international commitments made through SDG 5, these nations face significant challenges in executing effective policies at the national level. Future studies could examine the effectiveness of gender equality policies in BRICS countries and compare them with those of other regions and groups to better understand the variables influencing the fulfillment of international goals. Additionally, further investigation into how international commitments impact domestic policies,





alongside specific case studies, could provide valuable insights for improving the global approach to gender equality.

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