WOMEN'S RIGHTS AS HUMAN RIGHTS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes women's rights as an integral part of human rights, with a particular focus on their realization in developing countries. Although the international legal framework formally guarantee equality and non-discrimination, the practical implementation of women's rights remains inconsistent across different socio-economic and cultural contexts. The aim of the study is to analyze key structural, legal and socio-cultural barriers that limit the effective enjoyment of women's rights, including unequal access to education, employment, healthcare and political participation. The research is based on a qualitative analysis of relevant international legal instruments, academic literature and selected reports from international organizations. Special attention is given to the gap between normative standards and their actual enforcement in practice. The results indicate that, despite certain progress in specific areas, significant systemic inequalities persist, largely due to deeply rooted social norms and weak institutional enforcement mechanisms. The paper concludes that stronger institutional framework, improved legal enforcement, and targeted policy measures are necessary to ensure the effective protection and full realization of women's rights as human rights.

Keywords: women's rights, human rights, developing countries, discrimination, international law

INTRODUCTION

Human rights can be understood from two diametrically opposed perspectives. On one hand, human rights are defined as natural rights, while on the other hand, they are based on a positive legal framework [1]. Human rights are inherent rights of every human being, rooted in moral principles [1]. The concept of women's rights as human rights was affirmed during the World Conference on Human Rights, where it was explicitly emphasized for the first time that women's

rights are an inalienable, integral, and indivisible part of universal human rights [2]. Women's rights refer to all rights that belong to women within the framework of universal human rights, including political, economic, social, and cultural rights [3], [2]. They are recognized as fundamental human rights in international documents, especially in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) [3].

Feminism is often misunderstood as seeking more rights for women than men, but the main goal is actually equality between women and men. The concept of women's rights implies gender equality, protection against discrimination, and the obligation of society and the state to ensure equal opportunities for women in all areas of life [3], [2]. In developing countries, the realization of these rights often faces significant obstacles. Social norms, economic barriers, insufficient implementation of laws, and weak institutional framework contribute to the fact that women are often unable to fully enjoy the rights formally guaranteed to them [4], [5], [6]. Therefore, it is important to analyze not only the legal framework, but also the practical implementation of laws and policies aimed at protecting women's rights [4], [5].

This paper primarily focuses on understanding the position of women in contemporary society and analyzing the ways in which their fundamental rights are respected, violated, or insufficiently realized in states facing political, economic, and social challenges characteristic of developing countries [4], [6], [7]. The paper is based on the premise that women's rights are an inseparable part of universal human rights, and that the achieved level of human rights protection cannot be assessed without insight into the status of women [1].

In many developing countries, women are still exposed to various forms of discrimination, violence, social marginalization, and deprivation of fundamental rights, including the right to education, healthcare, political participation, and economic security. These phenomena are most often connected to deeply rooted patriarchal patterns, lack of institutional protection, poverty, political instability, and traditions that restrict the position of women in society.

The paper analyzes various forms of violations of women's rights, including gender-based violence, forced and child marriages, female genital mutilation, restrictions on access to education, economic inequality, and political exclusion [4], [5], [7]. Special attention is also devoted to contemporary cases such as the situation in Afghanistan, where women are faced with severe restrictions on fundamental freedoms, including limitations on education, employment and participation in public life. Through this analysis, it is emphasized that women's rights represent the foundation of a stable, democratic, and just society, and that without full gender equality no country can achieve sustainable social and economic development [8].

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on qualitative legal and socio-legal research focused on the analysis of women's rights as fundamental human rights and their realization in developing countries. The research combines normative, comparative, analytical, and interdisciplinary methods in order to examine both, the legal framework and the practical implementation of women's rights protection mechanisms.

The materials used in this research include academic books, monographs, scientific articles, international legal instruments, and reports published by international organizations dealing with human rights, gender equality, and social development. Particular attention was devoted to literature related to international human rights law, feminist legal theory, gender discrimination, and the social and economic position of women in developing countries.

The research relies on the analysis of academic works by authors such as Amartya Sen [9] , Catharine A. MacKinnon [10], and other scholars whose studies examine the relationship between women's rights, equality, and development. In addition, scientific articles concerning feminist approaches to international law, gender-based violence, and women's participation in social and political life were analyzed in order to provide broader theoretical framework for the research. Special emphasis was placed on the examination of international legal documents and mechanisms for the protection of women's rights, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms

of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) [3], the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action [2], and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 [11]. These legal instruments were analyzed in order to identify international standards related to gender equality, protection against discrimination, and the promotion of women's rights.

The paper also uses reports and statistical data published by international organizations such as United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) [4], UN Women [5], World Bank [6], World Health Organization (WHO) [12], UNESCO [10], Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) [11], and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [8]. These reports provided relevant statistical indicators and practical insights into issues such as violence against women, access to education, economic inequality, healthcare, and political participation in developing countries.

The normative method was applied through the analysis of international and national legal provisions concerning the protection of women's rights. The comparative method enabled the comparison of the implementation of women's rights standards in different developing countries and regions. The analytical method was used to evaluate the effectiveness of institutional, legal, and social mechanisms for the protection of women's rights, while the interdisciplinary approach connected legal analysis with sociological, economic, and political perspectives.

The qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate for this research because the topic of women's rights in developing countries requires a broader understanding of social, cultural, political, and legal factors that cannot be explained exclusively through quantitative indicators [8]. Qualitative legal research allows a deeper interpretation of international legal standards, institutional practices, and the social realities that influence the realization of women's rights in different regions. This approach also enables the examination of the gap between formally guaranteed rights and their practical implementation in everyday life.

In addition to legal analysis, the research considered broader social and economic factors influencing the position of women, including poverty, political instability, patriarchal norms, limited access to education, and insufficient institutional protection [4] [5] [6]. Particular attention was devoted to the role of traditional and cultural practices that often affect the practical realization of women's rights despite the existence of formal legal guarantees [5] [8]. The interdisciplinary approach therefore enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between law, society, and gender equality.

The selection of developing countries as the primary focus of the research was based on the fact that women in these states are often exposed to multiple forms of discrimination and structural inequality [4] [6]. The research includes examples from regions such as the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, where social and political conditions significantly affect the protection and realization of women's rights [4] [5]. Contemporary examples, including the situation in Afghanistan, were analyzed in order to demonstrate how political instability, restrictive legal systems, and patriarchal social structures directly influence women's freedoms and human rights [11] [5].

Although the research is primarily theoretical and based on secondary sources, the use of reports, case studies, and statistical indicators contributed to a more practical understanding of the issue [4] [5] [6]. The combination of legal analysis and socio-legal perspectives made it possible to evaluate not only the existence of legal protections, but also their effectiveness in practice and their impact on the everyday lives of women in developing countries.

Research also includes selected case studies and practical examples related to gender-based violence, discrimination, child and forced marriages, restrictions on education, and limitations of women's freedoms in certain developing countries, including Afghanistan [5] [4].

Research is primarily based on desk and secondary data analysis, using available academic literature, legal documents, institutional reports, and international standards related to women's rights and gender equality [8]. The interdisciplinary nature of the research enabled a broader understanding of the relationship between legal protection, social practices, economic inequality, and political conditions affecting the realization of women's rights in developing countries. The

selected materials and methods were used with the aim of providing a comprehensive overview of the challenges women face in exercising their fundamental human rights in different social and legal contexts.

RESULTS

Results of the research indicate that women in many developing countries continue to face serious obstacles in the realization of their fundamental human rights, despite the existence of international and national legal frameworks [9], [3], [2]. In most cases, the main issue is not the absence of laws, but their weak implementation and limited enforcement in practice.

The findings show that deeply rooted traditional norms, patriarchal structures and gender stereotypes continue to shape the position of women in both private and public life [10], [3], [5]. In many contexts, women are still primarily viewed through traditional family roles, which directly affects their access to education, employment, healthcare, political participation, and economic independence [4], [5], [6]. This suggests that legal reforms alone are not sufficient without broader social and cultural change. Another important finding relates to the economic position of women. Poverty and economic dependence remain key factors limiting gender equality in developing countries [6], [6], [7]. Women are often excluded from equal participation in the labor market, as well as from access to property, financial resources, and decision-making processes. In many cases, they also perform unpaid domestic and care work, which further limits their economic autonomy and social participation. The results also demonstrate that limited access to education and healthcare significantly affects the overall position of women [12], [7]. In rural and underdeveloped areas, women and girls often face restricted educational opportunities, inadequate healthcare services, and insufficient institutional support. Reports of international organizations show that women are disproportionately affected by weak healthcare systems, poverty, and social instability. Particular attention was devoted to the influence of cultural and patriarchal patterns on the status of women. The research confirms that practices such as child and forced marriages, restrictions on inheritance rights, normalization of domestic violence, and limitations on women's participation in public life remain present in many developing countries [3], [5], [7]. These practices are often socially tolerated despite being formally prohibited by law.

Table 1 presents a comparative overview of selected developing countries in relation to key indicators of women's rights protection.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Selected Developing Countries

Criterion	Afghanistan	Tunisia	Bangladesh
Legal framework	Formal legal protections are practically non-existent	Relatively progressive; gender equality is formall recognized	Equality is formally recognized, but implementation resistance
Education	Education for women is prohibited beyond primary level	Accessible, but not fully utilized due to persistent stereotypes	Accessible, but gender-based barriers remain
Employment	Women are prohibited from working	Access to employment exists, but inequalities and gender pay gaps persist	Legal access to employment exists, but social remain
Discrimination and violence	Extreme forms of social and legal discrimination	Legal protection exists, but enforcement remains.	Legal framework exists alongside strong social resistance
Actual status of women	Among the worst globally	Social norms limit the implementation of legal protections	Despite legal safeguards, gender inequality remains significant

Source: Author's own elaboration based on general findings from UN Women, World Bank and UNESCO reports

Study additionally shows that international mechanisms such as Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women [3], and various United Nations initiatives contribute to strengthening legal standards for the protection of women's rights [2], [11], [5]. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms largely depends on the political will of states, institutional capacity, public awareness, and the willingness of societies to challenge discriminatory traditions and patriarchal norms [5], [4].

The research also indicates that insufficiently developed legal systems represent a serious obstacle to the effective protection of women's rights. Although many states have formally adopted laws prohibiting discrimination and violence against women, the implementation of these laws is often inconsistent due to corruption, lack of institutional capacity, weak judicial systems, and social tolerance of gender-based discrimination [4], [6], [8]. In many cases, women face difficulties in accessing legal protection because of financial barriers, fear of social stigma, or lack of trust in institutions [5], [6].

Collected data additionally reveal that political instability and armed conflicts significantly worsen the position of women in many developing countries [11], [4]. In conflict and post-conflict societies, women are often exposed to increased levels of violence, forced displacement, trafficking, and economic insecurity. Weak state institutions and the collapse of legal protection mechanisms further limit women's access to justice and institutional support. Contemporary examples, particularly the situation in Afghanistan, demonstrate how political and ideological systems can directly restrict women's access to education, employment, freedom of movement, and participation in public life [11], [5].

Another important finding of the research is that women in rural areas and marginalized communities are frequently exposed to multiple forms of discrimination [4], [6], [7]. Factors such as poverty, low educational attainment, ethnic background, and geographical isolation additionally increase women's vulnerability and reduce their opportunities for social and economic participation. The analysis confirms that women from disadvantaged social groups are often excluded from decision-making processes and face greater obstacles in accessing healthcare, education, employment, and legal protection [5], [6], [9].

The results further demonstrate that violence against women remains one of the most widespread forms of human rights violations in developing countries [3], [5]. Domestic violence, sexual violence, child marriages, and other forms of gender-based violence continue to affect the physical, psychological, and economic security of women. The research indicates that such violence is often normalized through traditional and patriarchal social norms, which discourages victims from reporting abuse and seeking institutional protection. In addition, the analysis confirms that improving women's access to education and economic resources has a direct positive impact on gender equality and social development [6], [7], [8].

Countries that invest in women's education, healthcare, and economic participation generally show lower levels of poverty, greater social stability, and stronger democratic development. The paper therefore suggest that the protection of women's rights should not be viewed solely as a legal obligation, but also as a fundamental condition for sustainable economic and social progress. The research ultimately confirms that the realization of women's rights is closely connected to the overall level of democratic, economic, and social development [4], [6], [8]. Without effective implementation of laws, equal access to education and economic resources, and changes in traditional social attitudes, the achievement of full gender equality in developing countries remains significantly limited.

DISCUSSION

Discussion of the research results confirms that the issue of women's rights in developing countries cannot be understood solely through the existence of formal legal guarantees and international protection mechanisms [3], [2], [11]. Although many states have formally adopted international conventions and national laws prohibiting discrimination and guaranteeing equality, the realization of these rights in practice remains significantly limited [6], [5], [6]. Findings suggest

that the gap between normative equality and actual social equality continues to represent one of the central challenges in the protection of women's human rights. It could be argued that the existence of legal norms alone is insufficient if institutional systems responsible for their implementation remain weak or ineffective.

In many developing countries, women formally possess rights guaranteed by constitutions, international conventions, and domestic legislation, yet practical obstacles continue to prevent the effective exercise of those rights [4], [6], [8]. Limited institutional capacity, corruption, political instability, economic inequality, and lack of access to justice often reduce the practical value of legal guarantees. In this sense, the law may sometimes function more as a symbolic declaration of equality than as an effective mechanism capable of ensuring protection in everyday life.

Findings collectively demonstrate that gender inequality in developing countries operates as a multidimensional structural issue in which legal, economic, cultural, and political factors reinforce one another [4], [5], [6]. Research further indicates that deeply rooted patriarchal norms continue to shape the social position of women in both private and public spheres. In many societies, traditional gender roles remain strongly connected to expectations that women should primarily fulfill domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Such expectations frequently influence women's access to education, employment, political participation, and economic independence. This may explain why legal reforms alone often fail to produce substantial social change. Even where legal equality formally exists, social attitudes and cultural expectations can continue to limit women's opportunities and autonomy.

At the same time, it is important to avoid overly simplified interpretations of cultural and religious influences. Findings do not suggest that religion itself is inherently incompatible with women's rights. Rather, the problem often lies in selective and patriarchal interpretations of religious teachings and cultural traditions that are used to justify unequal social relations [5]. In many contexts, discriminatory practices are presented as part of tradition or morality, despite the fact that such practices frequently contradict both international human rights standards and the broader principles of dignity and equality contained within religious traditions themselves. Economic inequality also appears to play a major role in maintaining structural gender discrimination [4], [6], [7]. Authors such as Amartya Sen and Naila Kabeer emphasize that poverty should not be understood only as lack of income, but also as limitation of human capabilities and opportunities. Research supports this perspective by demonstrating that women in developing countries are often excluded from equal participation in the labor market and decision-making processes. In addition, women disproportionately perform unpaid domestic and care work, which further limits their economic autonomy and reduces opportunities for social advancement.

Paper additionally suggests that economic dependence can increase women's vulnerability to violence and exploitation [5], [6]. In situations where women lack independent financial resources, access to property, or employment opportunities, leaving abusive relationships or seeking institutional protection becomes significantly more difficult. This raises the broader question of whether legal protection can ever be fully effective without simultaneous economic empowerment and social support mechanisms. Limited access to education represents another major issue identified through the research [12], [7]. Education does not only affect employment opportunities, but also influences awareness of rights, political participation, and long-term social mobility. In many developing regions, girls continue to face barriers related to poverty, early marriage, geographic isolation, and traditional social expectations.

UNESCO reports showing high numbers of girls excluded from formal education indicate that educational inequality remains a persistent global issue. The relationship between education and child marriage appears particularly significant. In communities where access to secondary education is limited, girls are more likely to enter marriage at an early age, which often results in interrupted education, economic dependency, and increased exposure to domestic violence. It may therefore be argued that improving access to education could produce broader social effects extending beyond the educational sphere itself.

Healthcare inequality likewise remains an important dimension of women's rights [12]. Women living in rural and underdeveloped areas frequently face inadequate healthcare systems, lack of reproductive healthcare services, and limited institutional support during pregnancy and childbirth. Reports from international organizations continue to demonstrate that women are disproportionately affected by weak healthcare infrastructure and poverty. Maternal mortality, insufficient prenatal care, and restricted access to healthcare institutions remain particularly serious concerns in certain regions of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

The discussion also highlights the persistence of gender-based violence as one of the most widespread forms of human rights violations affecting women globally [3], [5]. Domestic violence, sexual violence, trafficking, forced marriages, and harmful traditional practices continue to affect the physical and psychological security of millions of women and girls. Although many countries have adopted legislation criminalizing such acts, implementation often remains inconsistent. Fear of social stigma, economic dependency, distrust in institutions, and inadequate victim protection mechanisms frequently discourage women from reporting violence. Particular attention should also be given to the way violence becomes socially normalized within certain patriarchal environments. In some societies, violence against women may be minimized, justified, or treated as a private family matter rather than a serious violation of human rights. Such attitudes contribute to underreporting and weaken institutional responses. In this regard, the issue extends beyond criminal law and enters the broader sphere of social attitudes and cultural normalization.

Research additionally demonstrates that political instability and armed conflicts significantly worsen the position of women in many developing countries [11], [4]. In conflict and post-conflict societies, institutional protection mechanisms are often weakened or entirely absent. Women become more exposed to forced displacement, sexual violence, trafficking, and economic insecurity. Moreover, women are frequently excluded from peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction processes, despite the fact that these processes directly shape future political and legal systems. Situation in Afghanistan represents one of the most visible contemporary examples of systematic restrictions on women's rights [11], [5]. Restrictions on education, employment, movement, and participation in public life illustrate how political and ideological systems can directly influence the realization of fundamental human rights. However, it is also important to recognize that Afghanistan represents an extreme example and that the status of women differs significantly across developing countries depending on political systems, institutional development, and social conditions.

Another important issue concerns the representation of women within political institutions and decision-making processes. Although many states formally recognize women's political rights, their actual participation often remains limited [4], [6]. Women continue to face barriers related to political violence, lack of financial support, discriminatory institutional practices, and pressure from family or community structures. As a result, women are frequently underrepresented in positions where decisions regarding economic policy, governance, and development strategies are made. The findings also suggest that media representation and educational systems play an important role in either maintaining or challenging gender inequality [5], [7].

Media narratives that reinforce stereotypical gender roles may contribute to the normalization of discriminatory attitudes. On the other hand, education and public awareness campaigns can gradually influence social perceptions and encourage broader acceptance of gender equality principles. At the same time, some limitations of the research should also be acknowledged [8]. The study is primarily based on secondary sources, international reports, and qualitative analysis, which means that the findings depend significantly on available institutional data and previously published research. Conditions affecting women's rights also differ considerably between regions and states, making broad generalizations difficult. Therefore, some conclusions presented in this paper should be interpreted within the broader socio-political context of individual countries.

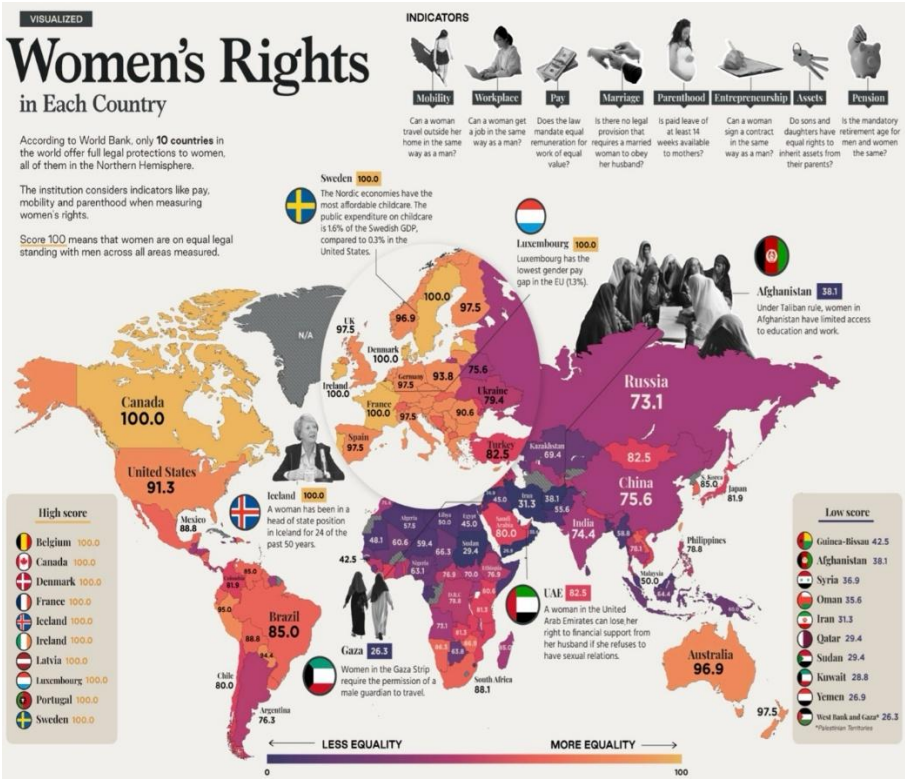


Figure 1. Global overview of women's legal rights and gender equality indicators by country. Source: World Bank, Women, Business and the Law Report.

During the research, one respondent emphasized that the only issue important to him was that his own daughters enjoy all fundamental rights and opportunities. While such a statement reflects personal concern for the wellbeing of one's family, it also reveals a limited understanding of women's rights as a broader social and human rights issue. The protection of women's rights cannot be viewed solely through individual or family circumstances, since many girls and women are born into environments where access to education, healthcare, legal protection, and basic freedoms remains restricted. For that reason, discussions on women's rights require a wider perspective that recognizes global inequalities and the structural barriers affecting women in different social, cultural, and economic contexts.

Findings of this research suggest that the gap between formal equality and lived reality remains one of the defining challenges in the protection of women's rights in developing countries [4], [5], [6]. While legal recognition of equality represents an essential foundation, it does not automatically dismantle the structural conditions that reproduce discrimination and exclusion [4], [6], [8]. As a result, the effectiveness of women's rights protection depends not only on the existence of legal norms, but also on the broader social, economic, and political environment in which those norms operate [4], [5], [6]. Discussion therefore highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach that views women's rights as inseparable from questions of development, education, institutional reform, and social transformation [7], [8].

Theoretical implications of the findings

Findings of this research may also be examined through broader theoretical approaches related to human rights, equality, and development [9], [10]. One of the central issues identified throughout the analysis is the distinction between formal legal recognition of rights and their realization in practice [3], [4]. Although international conventions and national legal systems

increasingly recognize gender equality as a fundamental principle, the everyday experiences of women in many developing countries continue to reflect substantial limitations and inequalities. This indicates that the existence of legal norms alone cannot automatically produce social equality or eliminate structural discrimination.

From a human rights perspective, the research supports the understanding that rights should not be viewed exclusively as abstract legal guarantees, but also as practical social conditions that individuals must be able to exercise in reality [3], [4]. In many developing countries, women formally possess rights related to education, employment, political participation, and protection from violence, yet economic dependency, social expectations, institutional weakness, and cultural barriers often prevent the effective realization of those rights [4], [5], [6]. In such circumstances, the gap between legal protection and lived reality becomes particularly visible. Findings are also consistent with theoretical approaches that connect development with human freedom and individual capabilities [9], [14], [15]. Amartya Sen argues that development should not be understood solely through economic growth, but through the expansion of people's real opportunities and freedoms [9].

Results of this study support such an approach by demonstrating that women's inequality is closely connected to limited access to education, healthcare, economic resources, and decision-making processes [4], [6], [12], [7]. In this sense, poverty and discrimination are not only economic issues, but also factors that directly limit personal autonomy and participation in society. At the same time, feminist legal theories provide an additional perspective for understanding why legal reforms often produce limited practical effects [10], [16]. Authors such as Catharine MacKinnon emphasize that legal systems do not operate separately from social power structures, but are influenced by historical inequalities and dominant social norms [10].

Findings of this research suggest that even when states formally adopt anti-discrimination laws and equality policies, institutional practices and social attitudes may continue to reproduce unequal gender relations [4], [5]. This may partly explain why reforms introduced through legislation are sometimes insufficient to change everyday social realities. Research further demonstrates that gender inequality cannot be analyzed only as an individual issue, but rather as a broader structural phenomenon shaped by economic, political, cultural, and institutional factors [4], [5], [6]. Discrimination against women often appears interconnected with poverty, political instability, weak institutional systems, and unequal access to resources [4], [6]. Because of this, the protection of women's rights should not be approached exclusively through criminal law or constitutional guarantees, but through wider social policies that address structural inequality more generally.

Another important theoretical implication concerns the relationship between universal human rights standards and local cultural contexts [3], [2]. Debates surrounding women's rights in developing countries frequently involve tensions between universal principles of equality and arguments related to cultural traditions or social values. However, the findings of this research suggest that many practices limiting women's rights are not simply cultural expressions, but mechanisms that maintain unequal power relations and social exclusion [5]. At the same time, it is important to recognize that cultural and religious traditions are not static and may be interpreted in different ways depending on political and social circumstances.

Findings additionally indicate that women's rights should be understood as closely connected to democratic development and institutional legitimacy [4], [8]. Societies in which women face systematic exclusion from education, political participation, employment, or access to justice often experience broader weaknesses in democratic governance and institutional accountability [4], [6]. In this regard, the status of women may serve as an important indicator of the overall level of social equality, rule of law, and democratic development within a state. Overall, the research confirms that the realization of women's rights requires a multidimensional approach that goes beyond formal legal reform [4], [5], [6]. Legal protection remains an essential foundation, but sustainable progress depends equally on institutional effectiveness, access to education and

economic opportunities, social awareness, and gradual transformation of discriminatory norms and practices [12], [7], [8].

Feminist theoretical perspectives

Feminist theoretical approaches help explain why formal legal equality does not necessarily translate into real, substantive equality [10], [16]. Feminist legal theory challenges the idea that law is neutral. Instead, it argues that legal systems develop within existing power relations that have historically tended to favour men [10]. Because of that, even laws that clearly prohibit discrimination can still operate in ways that reproduce inequality in practice [10], [16].

Liberal feminist perspectives tend to focus on legal reform, education, and increasing women's participation in institutions, with the assumption that removing formal barriers will gradually lead to equality. More critical approaches, including radical feminist theory, are less optimistic about this [10]. They argue that inequality is embedded much more deeply in social structures and cultural norms, so legal change alone cannot really address the problem. Findings of this research sit somewhere in between these positions: legal reforms are clearly necessary, but they are not enough on their own if broader social patterns remain unchanged [10], [16].

Structural economic and social barriers

Economic inequality remains one of the most persistent barriers to the realization of women's rights [4], [6], [14]. In many developing countries, women are still more likely to be in low-paid, insecure, or informal forms of work, and more likely to experience poverty [4], [6]. This kind of economic dependence limits their autonomy and affects almost every aspect of life, from education and employment to health and personal safety [9], [14], [15]. Large part of women's work also remains unpaid, particularly domestic work and caregiving. Although this work is essential for households and for society more broadly, it is rarely recognised in formal economic systems [14]. As a result, it does not provide financial independence or social protection, which reinforces existing inequalities. This economic vulnerability also has direct consequences when it comes to violence and exploitation. When women do not have their own financial resources, leaving abusive situations or seeking protection becomes significantly more difficult [5], [6]. For this reason, economic empowerment should be seen not only as a development objective, but also as a core part of human rights protection [9], [14].

Cultural, social, and normative frameworks

Social and cultural norms play a central role in shaping gender relations and often act as deeply rooted barriers to equality [5], [10]. In many contexts, women are still primarily expected to take on domestic and caregiving roles, while their participation in public and economic life is limited [5], [16]. These expectations are not formed overnight. They are passed on through families, education systems, and community practices, which makes them resistant to quick change. In some cases, discriminatory practices are even seen as socially acceptable or "normal", despite clearly conflicting with international human rights standards [1], [3]. At the same time, culture is not fixed; it changes over time and can be influenced through education, policy, and wider social awareness. This helps explain why legal reforms alone rarely produce immediate or visible social change. Even when equality is guaranteed on paper, social expectations can continue to shape behaviour and limit women's opportunities in practice [10], [16].

Role of international law and implementation gap

International legal instruments form an important framework for the protection of women's rights [2], [3], [11]. Instruments such as CEDAW, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 set out global standards for gender equality and non-discrimination [2], [3], [11]. However, there is still a clear gap between international commitments and their actual implementation at the national level [4], [5]. Many states have ratified these instruments, but the extent to which they are incorporated into domestic law and effectively

enforced varies significantly. This gap is especially visible in countries with limited institutional capacity and weak governance structures [4], [8].

Ultimately, the effectiveness of international law depends not only on formal ratification, but also on political will, administrative capacity, and social acceptance of gender equality principles [1], [3]. Where these elements are missing, international norms risk remaining largely symbolic. Even so, they still play an important role in shaping policy debates and supporting advocacy efforts by civil society actors [5].

Intersection of law, development, and governance

Women's rights are closely linked to broader issues of development and governance [4], [8], [9]. Countries with stronger institutions, better access to education, and more stable political systems generally show higher levels of gender equality [4], [7], [8]. In contrast, in contexts marked by poverty, conflict, and weak institutions, women are more likely to face exclusion and insecurity [4], [11]. This suggests that gender equality cannot be treated as a separate policy issue, but rather as something that is closely tied to wider processes of economic and political development [9], [15].

Policy implications

In practice, there is often a noticeable gap between what laws say and what women actually experience in everyday life [3], [4]. Although most legal systems formally prohibit discrimination and violence against women, the way these rules are applied is often uneven and inconsistent. In many contexts, institutions struggle with issues such as corruption, political pressure, limited funding, and weak accountability, which all reduce how effective legal protections are in reality [4], [8]. Access to justice is still a serious problem, especially for women living in rural areas or in lower-income communities [5], [6]. Even when legal options technically exist, they are not always realistic to use. Costs, lack of information, fear of social judgement, family pressure, and distrust in institutions often discourage women from reporting violence or discrimination [5].

In some situations, the social consequences of speaking up can feel more difficult to deal with than the original problem itself. Available reports and case studies indicate that in some instances, women who report domestic violence may still face severe consequences, including lethal outcomes, even when protective measures such as restraining orders are in place. Such cases have been documented across different contexts, including both developing and European countries, suggesting that the enforcement of protective measures may not always be effective in practice.

Education plays a key role over the long term, not only in terms of employment and income, but also in shaping awareness of rights and the ability to make independent decisions [7], [9]. In many developing countries, girls still leave school earlier than boys, often because of poverty, household responsibilities, or early marriage [7]. These early limitations tend to follow them later in life and restrict their opportunities. Economic dependence is another factor that increases vulnerability [6], [14]. When women do not have financial stability, it becomes significantly harder to leave abusive relationships or to take an equal role in society. Because of this, economic empowerment should be seen not only as a development issue, but also as part of broader protection of basic rights [9], [14].

Support systems for survivors of gender-based violence are still often underdeveloped [5], [12]. Even where laws exist, they have limited impact if there are no shelters, legal aid services, healthcare support, or psychological assistance available in practice. This is particularly visible outside of major urban centres, where services are often scarce. At the same time, legal reforms alone rarely lead to real, long-term change [10], [16]. Deeply rooted social attitudes and traditional views about gender still strongly influence behaviour in many societies. For this reason, broader social change is just as important as legal and institutional reform, with education and public awareness playing a central role [5], [7].

Overall, improving the position of women requires more than formal legal equality [1], [9]. Law, institutions, education, economic conditions, and social norms are closely connected, and progress in one area often depends on progress in the others [4], [8], [15].

CONCLUSION

Women's rights, as an integral and inseparable part of universal human rights, represent a fundamental precondition for equality, dignity, and sustainable development [3], [4], [5]. Despite the existence of extensive international legal frameworks, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and other UN human rights instruments, the analysis shows that the practical realization of women's rights in many developing countries remains limited and uneven [3], [6], [7].

Research confirms that the central problem is not the lack of legal guarantees, but the persistent gap between formal equality and real-life conditions [6], [8]. Although most states formally prohibit discrimination and violence against women, implementation is often weak due to insufficient institutional capacity, lack of accountability, and limited access to justice [6], [8], [12]. This results in a situation where legal norms exist, but their effect in practice remains significantly reduced.

Key finding of this study is that structural and deeply rooted social factors continue to represent the main barrier to full realization of women's rights [6], [7], [8]. Patriarchal norms, traditional cultural patterns, and socially accepted gender roles still shape the position of women in many developing societies. These norms are reinforced through family structures, education systems, religious interpretations, and broader social expectations, which makes them difficult to change solely through legal reforms [7].

This paper also highlights the strong connection between economic inequality and the vulnerability of women [6], [8], [10]. Limited access to education, employment opportunities, property ownership, and financial resources significantly reduces women's autonomy and reinforces dependency. In such conditions, women are more exposed to discrimination, exclusion from decision-making processes, and various forms of violence and exploitation. In addition, weak institutional frameworks and underdeveloped legal systems further limit the effectiveness of existing protections [6], [8], [12].

Even when laws against discrimination and violence exist, their enforcement is often inconsistent, while access to legal remedies remains difficult, especially for women in rural and marginalized communities. Political instability and conflict situations further intensify these challenges, as they weaken state institutions and increase women's exposure to violence, displacement, and social insecurity [5], [6]. At the same time, cultural and traditional practices, when combined with patriarchal interpretations, continue to justify unequal treatment and restrict women's rights in both private and public spheres [7]. Despite these challenges, the research emphasizes that education and economic empowerment remain key long-term tools for improving the position of women [9], [10]. Strengthening access to education, increasing participation in the labor market, and ensuring equal opportunities contribute directly to greater independence and social inclusion of women. Equally important is the role of international cooperation and civil society, which provide support, monitoring, and advocacy for the implementation of gender equality standards [7].

In conclusion, the realization of women's rights in developing countries requires a comprehensive and multidimensional approach that goes beyond legal reforms. It demands institutional strengthening, economic empowerment, social awareness, and cultural transformation [6], [8], [12]. Only through the combined efforts of states, international organizations, and civil society can formal legal equality be transformed into substantive equality in practice. Ultimately, the level of protection and realization of women's rights represents a key indicator of the overall development, justice, and democratic maturity of a society [6], [8], [12]. Ensuring these rights is therefore not only a legal obligation, but also a necessary condition for sustainable development and long-term social progress.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors affirm that there are no conflicts of interest to declare in relation to the research presented in this paper.

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