

EMPOWERING EQUALITY: UNDERSTANDING WOMEN’S RIGHTS AS HUMAN RIGHTS

Dr.G.Anbarasi,

Associate Professor / HOD,

A.D.M College for Women (Autonomous),

Nagapattinam

Abstract

This paper argues that women’s rights are indivisible from universal human rights and examines how legal frameworks, policy gaps, social norms, and contemporary global trends shape women’s lived experiences. It surveys major international instruments (UDHR, CEDAW), summarizes recent data on gender-based violence, reproductive rights, economic and digital inequalities, and political backlash, and analyses state and civil-society responses. The paper offers evidence-based recommendations for lawmakers, international bodies, NGOs, and communities to protect and expand women’s rights in today’s social and geopolitical context.

Keywords: women’s rights, human rights, gender-based violence, CEDAW, reproductive rights, digital gender divide, backlash, policy recommendations

Introduction

Recognizing women’s rights as human rights is more than rhetorical: it is a legal and moral imperative. Over the past seven decades international law has increasingly clarified that discrimination against women is a violation of fundamental human rights, and many states have adopted laws to protect women. Yet progress is uneven and in some places stalled or reversing because of conflict, austerity, social backlash and inadequate enforcement mechanisms. This paper surveys current issues affecting women’s rights globally (with recent data and examples), maps the legal frameworks intended to protect those rights, and outlines practical strategies to strengthen implementation.

Framing: Why “Women’s Rights = Human Rights”?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) established the baseline that rights belong to all human beings. Building on that foundation, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) created a dedicated treaty obliging states to eliminate discrimination in law and practice. These instruments, together with regional human-rights systems and evolving UN practice, make clear that violations such as gender-based violence, denial of reproductive autonomy, discriminatory labor laws, and barriers to political participation are not separate “women’s issues” but breaches of universal human rights norms.

Key International & Regional Legal Frameworks

- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948)** — foundational normative framework.
- **CEDAW (1979)** — the principal international treaty addressing discrimination against women; as of recent years nearly all UN member states have ratified or acceded to it, creating reporting obligations and oversight by the CEDAW Committee.
- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights / ICESCR** — protections relevant to women's civic, economic and social rights.
- **Regional instruments** (e.g., Maputo Protocol in Africa, Inter-American Convention) — add enforcement options and region-specific protections.
- **UN mechanisms & agencies** (UN Women, OHCHR, Special Rapporteurs) — provide normative guidance, monitoring, capacity building and thematic reporting.

These frameworks are necessary but not sufficient. Implementation, enforcement, resources, data, and political will determine outcomes on the ground.

Current, High-Impact Issues Affecting Women's Rights (2023–2025)

Below are the major contemporary challenges—with current evidence and recent authoritative findings.

Gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual violence

GBV remains pervasive. The World Health Organization estimates globally that around **1 in 3 women** experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime, most often from an intimate partner. This violence is both a health crisis and a human-rights violation that undermines women's security, economic participation, and agency.

Recent reporting also highlights child and adolescent sexual violence: UNICEF found troublingly high rates of sexual assault experienced before age 18 in many countries, with devastating long-term effects.

Conflict-related sexual violence and displacement

Women in conflict zones face elevated risks of rape, exploitation, reduced access to maternal health services, and securitization of humanitarian aid. UN reporting continues to stress urgent protection gaps for women near conflict zones and the particular vulnerabilities of displaced women and girls.

Reproductive rights under pressure

Access to safe abortion, contraception, and maternal care is uneven and politically contested in many jurisdictions. Loss of reproductive autonomy (through restrictive laws or resource cuts) undermines women's right to health, privacy, and bodily integrity. Human-rights bodies and NGOs continue to monitor rollbacks and restrictions globally.

Economic inequality and unpaid care burden

Women disproportionately occupy informal, insecure, and low-paid work; they also shoulder most unpaid care responsibilities. These patterns perpetuate poverty, reduce lifetime earnings, and limit political and economic participation. Global analyses underscore persistent pay gaps and legal barriers in employment and entrepreneurship. (UN Women, UN SDG data).

Digital gender divide & online violence

The gendered digital divide excludes hundreds of millions of women from internet access and digital skills, reducing opportunities for education, work, and civic participation. Online harassment and digital violence—targeted abuse, doxxing, and non-consensual image sharing—also silence and endanger women, particularly activists and public figures. Closing the digital divide is a gender-equality and human-rights priority.

Political and legal backlash

Several recent reports document **backlash**—political, legislative, or social moves that curtail rights or reverse gains. UN Women has highlighted a rise in targeted rollbacks in some states, from restrictions on reproductive rights to moves undermining gender equality institutions. This dynamic threatens progress toward SDG 5 (gender equality).

Evidence & Recent Trends (select data points)

1. **Backlash reports:** UN Women's recent reporting notes that in 2024 many countries experienced either stagnation or reversals in specific gender-equality measures and that one-in-four countries reported backlash on women's rights during that period.
2. **Prevalence of GBV:** WHO data indicate about **33%** of women face physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetimes.
3. **Child sexual violence:** UNICEF-sourced analyses show that globally **one in eight** girls and women were raped or sexually assaulted before turning 18 (with higher rates in certain regions).
4. **Legal reform activity and gaps:** While many countries have enacted reforms (+1,500 legal reforms reported in recent years in some UN reporting), significant gaps remain—labor market restrictions, inequitable family laws, and inadequate protections for diverse gender identities.
5. **Human-rights monitoring:** Human Rights Watch and OHCHR have both documented serious setbacks in specific countries and sectors (reproductive rights, civil liberties, protections for survivors), underscoring uneven global progress.

Case examples and illustrative incidents

- **Policy friction & international norms:** A recent episode involved tensions between a state and UN treaty body recommendations (for example, disputes over CEDAW findings and related funding decisions), illustrating how domestic politics can intersect with international human-rights

mechanisms and sometimes lead to retaliation or retreat from engagement. (See: news on government reactions to CEDAW recommendations).

- **Conflict impact example:** UN and NGO reports show women near conflict zones experience disproportionate food insecurity, reduced access to services and increased gendered violence—factors that slow or reverse gender-equality gains regionally.

These examples underline that legal recognition alone does not guarantee protection—implementation, funding, and political commitment are essential.

Barriers to Realizing Women’s Rights

1. **Weak enforcement** — Many states have progressive laws on paper but lack enforcement, funding, or independent judiciaries to ensure rights in practice.
2. **Data gaps** — Limited, inconsistent data (especially disaggregated by sex, age, disability, ethnicity, and migration status) hamper targeted interventions.
3. **Intersectional discrimination** — Women facing multiple marginalizations (race, caste, disability, indigeneity, sexual orientation, gender identity) often suffer compounded rights violations.
4. **Backlash & politicization** — Rights advances sometimes trigger political backlash or conservative retrenchment that de-prioritizes gender equality.
5. **Resource constraints** — Insufficient investment—both domestic and international—limits services (GBV shelters, sexual and reproductive health, legal aid) and capacity building.

Responses — How International, National & Local Actors Can Act

Strengthen legal frameworks and close loopholes

- Harmonize domestic laws with CEDAW and human-rights treaty obligations.
- Remove discriminatory provisions in family, labor and nationality laws.
- Adopt specific laws addressing digital violence and online harassment.

Improve enforcement and accountability

- Fund and train police, judiciary and social services to handle GBV cases sensitively and effectively.
- Support independent national human-rights institutions and gender-equality machinery with adequate budgets and legal protections.

Invest in data, research, and monitoring

- Expand disaggregated data collection (age, disability, ethnicity, migration status).
- Support participatory research that centers survivors and marginalized groups.

Economic empowerment & social protection

- Expand social protection schemes that reduce care burdens and offer income support.
- Enact laws for equal pay, parental leave and safe working conditions in both formal and informal sectors.

Close the digital gender divide and protect online rights

- Invest in affordable access, digital literacy and safe online spaces for women.
- Enact norms and remedial systems to combat online harassment and non-consensual image sharing.

Protect reproductive rights as human rights

- Ensure access to contraception, safe abortion where permitted by law, and quality maternal health care; de-criminalize sexual and reproductive health seeking where necessary.

Support civic space and feminist movements

- Protect activists, journalists and civil-society organizations from reprisals.
- Fund grassroots women's organizations which are often most effective in local protection and prevention efforts.

Each recommendation requires resources and political will; multilateral partners and civil society can help bridge capacity gaps.

Policy Recommendations (concise action list)

For governments:

- Ratify/comply with CEDAW and implement its recommendations with clear timelines.
- Criminalize all forms of GBV and ensure survivor-centred services are funded.
- Remove legal barriers to women's economic participation (registration, mobility, property rights).

For international organizations & donors:

- Prioritize financing for gender-responsive social protection, GBV services, and digital inclusion.
- Insist on gender impact assessments for humanitarian and climate responses.

For civil society & academia:

- Produce and disseminate disaggregated data; lead community-based prevention and support programs.

- Use strategic litigation to advance rights where domestic remedies fail.

For **private sector**:

- Adopt gender-sensitive workplace policies, close pay gaps, and ensure safe workplaces free from harassment.

Conclusion

Women’s rights are human rights—not separate, not optional. The last few years have shown both progress and peril: reforms and increased representation in some places; stagnation, backlash, and new forms of exclusion in others. Addressing the contemporary crisis in women’s rights requires a multi-pronged approach: legal reform matched by enforcement; financing and services; data and accountability; protection of civic space; and attention to new domains such as the digital sphere. Concerted action by states, international institutions, the private sector, and vibrant civil society is needed now to prevent reversal and to build inclusive, resilient systems that guarantee women’s equality, dignity, and freedom.

References (select sources used)

- UN Women. *Highlights 2024–2025 / UN Women annual reporting*.
- UN Women. “One in four countries report backlash on women’s rights in 2024.” (Press release, 6 Mar 2025).
- Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), OHCHR resources and reporting pages.
- Human Rights Watch. “The State of Women’s Rights” and thematic pages on women’s rights.
- World Health Organization. “Violence against women” topic overview and data.
- UNICEF / news reporting on sexual assaults of girls and women (2024 findings).
- UN Sustainable Development / Gender Equality resources and the “Gender Snapshot” (UN Women).
- Selected press coverage on global trends and UN reporting (The Guardian, Reuters, AP).