



The Evolution of Women's Rights in the 21st Century: A Comparative Study of Progress and Setbacks Globally Relationships

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century has witnessed significant progress in women's rights, yet challenges persist globally. Legal reforms, increased political representation, and economic empowerment have contributed to advancing gender equality. However, issues such as wage gaps, gender-based violence, restrictive laws, and cultural barriers continue to hinder progress in various regions. Countries like Finland and Rwanda have made remarkable strides in political inclusion, while others still struggle with deeply rooted gender discrimination. The role of international organizations, including the United Nations, has been crucial in promoting gender-sensitive policies and legal frameworks. Economic disparities remain a significant obstacle, with women underrepresented in leadership roles and facing unequal pay. Additionally, access to education and reproductive rights varies widely across nations, reflecting the ongoing divide between progressive and conservative policies. Despite setbacks, feminist movements and global advocacy efforts continue to drive change. Strengthening legal accountability, enhancing economic opportunities, and fostering international collaboration are essential to achieving lasting gender equality. This study provides a comparative analysis of progress and setbacks, highlighting strategies for sustaining and expanding women's rights globally.

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Introduction

The 21st century has seen significant advancements in women's rights, particularly in political participation, economic empowerment, and legal protections. Across the globe, women have gained greater access to opportunities once denied to them, thanks to legislative reforms, international agreements, and grassroots activism. Notable achievements include rising female representation in governance, the growth of women-led businesses, and stronger laws against gender-based discrimination. Political participation has especially progressed, with many countries adopting gender quotas for legislative bodies. Women now hold leadership roles nationally and internationally, promoting gender-sensitive policies. Yet, challenges remain, as female politicians continue to face gender bias, harassment, and underrepresentation in top executive roles. Economic empowerment has notably improved, with more women joining the workforce, starting businesses, and taking leadership roles. Efforts to bridge the gender pay gap, support women entrepreneurs, and promote equal employment opportunities have gained traction. Governments and international bodies have introduced policies for financial inclusion, vocational training, and maternity benefits.

Yet, wage disparities and women's overrepresentation in informal and unpaid labor remain challenges. Legal protections have strengthened, targeting gender-based violence and ensuring reproductive and property rights. Movements like #MeToo have spurred reforms and awareness. However, enforcement gaps, societal stigma, and institutional biases persist. Gender-based violence, including domestic abuse, trafficking, and sexual violence, continues to threaten women's safety and dignity globally. Access to healthcare, particularly reproductive health services, remains limited in many regions due to restrictive policies, socio-economic barriers, and inadequate healthcare infrastructure. Additionally, educational disparities, especially in developing countries, continue to impede women's empowerment and restrict opportunities for socio-economic advancement. This article seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of both the progress and ongoing challenges in advancing women's rights globally. By exploring notable achievements alongside persistent obstacles, it underscores the need for continued policy reforms, grassroots activism, and transformative societal change to achieve gender equality. While significant progress has been made, attaining full gender parity remains an ongoing endeavor. Overcoming these barriers will require sustained cooperation among governments, civil society, and individuals to foster a more inclusive and equitable future.

Literature Review



The evolution of women's rights in the 21st century has been widely explored through legal, political, economic, and social perspectives. Scholars emphasize the role of legal reforms in advancing gender equality, yet enforcement remains inconsistent across regions (Htun & Weldon, 2018). Economic disparities persist, with women earning less than men and facing barriers in leadership (Jayachandran, 2015). Studies highlight the impact of global feminist movements, such as #MeToo, in addressing gender-based violence and discrimination (True, 2012). Political representation has improved in some countries, with gender quotas leading to increased female participation (O'Brien & Piscopo, 2020). However, cultural and institutional barriers still limit women's influence in governance (Tripp, 2018). Education has played a critical role in empowering women, yet access to higher education remains unequal in some regions (Kabeer, 2018). Scholars argue that global cooperation is essential in closing these gaps, as organizations like the UN drive policy changes (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Despite progress, challenges remain, necessitating stronger enforcement mechanisms, inclusive policies, and continued advocacy for gender equality.

Objective of the Study

- a. To analyze the progress made in women's rights globally in the 21st century, focusing on legal reforms, political participation, and economic empowerment.
- b. To identify the key challenges and setbacks faced by women in different regions, including gender-based violence, wage gaps, and restrictive laws.
- c. To compare the effectiveness of policies and initiatives implemented in various countries to promote gender equality.
- d. To provide recommendations for strengthening global commitments and policies to ensure sustained progress in women's rights.



Statement of the Problem

Despite progress in advancing women's rights, gender inequality remains widespread. Some nations have made gains in workplace inclusion, political representation, and reproductive rights, while others face setbacks due to cultural norms, political conservatism, and economic challenges. The gender pay gap, persistent gender-based violence, and restrictive laws continue to limit women's autonomy and opportunities. Even in more progressive societies, issues like workplace discrimination and leadership underrepresentation prevail. This study adopts a comparative approach to examine global progress and setbacks, aiming to inform effective policies and promote sustainable gender equality worldwide.

Rationale of the Study

The fight for gender equality remains central to global human rights efforts, though disparities continue in various societies. This study offers a comparative analysis of progress and challenges in women's rights, highlighting key factors behind both success and setbacks. By identifying best practices and ongoing barriers, it provides insights for improving policies across different socio-political contexts. Advancing women's rights is linked to broader social and economic development, fostering growth, stability, and better governance. Despite progress, patriarchal norms and cultural biases persist worldwide. This research aims to guide targeted interventions, informing policy and advocacy efforts to protect and expand women's rights globally.

Research Methodology

This study relies on secondary data to conduct a comparative analysis of women's rights in the 21st century. Data will be collected from various sources, including academic journals, government reports, international organization publications (e.g., UN Women, World Bank), and reputable news articles. Statistical data on gender parity, labor participation, political representation, and legal frameworks will be analyzed to identify patterns of progress and setbacks. Comparative case studies will be examined to understand the effectiveness of different policies. A qualitative approach will be employed to assess legal and social trends shaping women's rights globally, ensuring a comprehensive and evidence-based study.

Historical Context

The struggle for women's rights is a long and multifaceted journey that has shaped contemporary society, reflecting both resistance to gender inequality and the persistent demand for equal rights. Over



time, various movements, legal battles, and socio-political changes have contributed to the progress in achieving gender parity. The fight for women's rights can be broadly categorized into several major historical phases, each characterized by unique challenges and milestones.

A. Early Struggles and the Suffrage Movement

The origins of the women's rights movement can be traced to early feminist thought that questioned patriarchal structures and called for greater autonomy and participation for women in public life. During the 18th and 19th centuries, influential thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft, through her landmark work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), laid the foundation for gender equality by emphasizing education and social inclusion. The suffrage movement, which gathered strength in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, became one of the most pivotal efforts in advancing women's rights. The demand for voting rights was central to feminist struggles in many parts of the world, as political participation was seen as a gateway to broader legal and social reforms. Pioneers such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the United States, Emmeline Pankhurst in the United Kingdom, and Käthe Schirmacher in Germany played crucial roles in mobilizing women to demand their political rights. Key milestones in the suffrage movement include:

- a. **1893:** New Zealand became the first self-governing country to grant women the right to vote.
- b. **1902:** Australia granted women voting rights, followed by Finland in 1906.
- c. **1920:** The United States ratified the 19th Amendment, securing women's suffrage.
- d. **1945:** Many countries included women's voting rights in their post-war constitutional frameworks.

These victories were instrumental in redefining women's roles in governance and policymaking, marking a crucial step toward gender equality.

B. Post-Suffrage Legal Advancements and CEDAW

By the mid-20th century, with voting rights secured in many countries, feminist movements turned their attention to legal and economic equality. Women increasingly challenged discriminatory laws regarding property, employment, reproductive rights, and education. The 1960s and 1970s marked



the rise of second-wave feminism, addressing systemic issues like workplace discrimination and gender-based violence. A major milestone was the 1979 adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which outlined binding obligations for nations to eliminate discrimination and promote gender equality in education, employment, healthcare, and political participation. Key elements of CEDAW include: The elimination of laws and practices that discriminate against women.

- a. The right to equal employment opportunities and fair wages.
- b. Protection from gender-based violence and exploitation.
- c. Equal access to education and healthcare.
- d. Ensuring women's full participation in political and public life.

C. Modern Progress and Continuing Challenges

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have witnessed significant strides in promoting gender equality through national policies, legal reforms, and global advocacy. Feminist movements, campaigns like #MeToo, and international efforts for women's empowerment have brought gender issues to global attention. Many nations have introduced laws addressing gender-based violence, workplace discrimination, and women's political representation. Gender quotas in political systems have notably increased women's participation in parliaments worldwide. Access to education and employment has also expanded, fostering women's economic independence. However, persistent challenges include gender pay gaps, widespread violence, and harassment. Cultural and institutional barriers continue to restrict equality, and the struggle for reproductive rights remains contentious, especially in conservative societies.

Progress in Women's Rights Education and Employment

Women's access to education has improved remarkably, with global literacy rates rising and more women enrolling in higher education than ever before. These opportunities have empowered women to enter diverse career fields, challenge traditional gender roles, and contribute significantly to economic development. Many nations have introduced policies to boost female participation in STEM, business, and leadership sectors. Yet, gender disparities persist in the labor market. Women often face wage gaps, earning less than men for equal work, and encounter the "glass ceiling," which limits



advancement into senior roles. Stronger policies promoting equal pay, workplace inclusivity, and leadership development are essential for achieving genuine gender equality.

Political Representation

Women have made notable progress in political leadership, with growing representation in parliaments and executive roles worldwide. Countries such as New Zealand, Finland, and Rwanda serve as global examples, with Rwanda leading in the highest percentage of women in parliament, highlighting the success of gender-inclusive policies. However, women remain underrepresented in political decision-making in many nations due to structural barriers, cultural norms, and financial challenges. To overcome these obstacles, international bodies like the United Nations advocate for gender quotas and supportive policies. Expanding mentorship opportunities, combating discrimination in politics, and providing equal access to resources are key to strengthening women's political participation globally.

Legal Reforms and Rights Protection

Many nations have enacted legal frameworks to address gender-based violence, safeguard reproductive rights, and prevent workplace discrimination. Stronger laws against domestic violence, sexual harassment, and human trafficking now offer victims greater protection and access to justice. In some regions, reproductive rights have advanced with improved access to contraception and safe abortion services. Landmark judicial decisions have further reinforced gender equality by setting powerful legal precedents. Despite these advancements, challenges in enforcement remain, especially where cultural and institutional resistance persists. To ensure meaningful progress, it is crucial to strengthen legal accountability, raise public awareness, and improve the implementation of existing laws.

Setbacks and Challenges

a. Gender-Based Violence

Despite notable legal progress, gender-based violence continues to affect women worldwide. Domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and human trafficking remain widespread, with legal protections often falling short. Cultural stigmas and patriarchal norms frequently discourage victims from reporting abuse or seeking justice. In many regions, weak enforcement, institutional gaps, and limited awareness



further undermine the effectiveness of existing laws. Survivors often lack access to legal aid, counseling, and rehabilitation services, increasing their vulnerability. Combating gender-based violence demands comprehensive solutions — stronger legal measures, effective enforcement, community education, and accessible victim support. Without sustained efforts, gender-based violence will persist, obstructing true gender equality and social development.

b. Wage Gaps and Economic Barriers

While women's participation in the workforce has grown, significant economic disparities persist. On average, women earn around 20% less than men globally, reflecting entrenched gender biases in wage structures and career progression. Occupational segregation places women predominantly in lower-paying industries, with limited representation in leadership roles. Additionally, the burden of unpaid labor — including caregiving and household responsibilities — restricts women's economic opportunities. The lack of supportive workplace policies, such as paid parental leave and flexible schedules, further exacerbates these issues. Addressing these challenges requires enforcing equal pay legislation, improving access to childcare, and promoting women's leadership and financial independence through targeted reforms.

c. Reproductive Rights and Healthcare Access

Women's reproductive rights continue to face significant challenges globally, with disparities in healthcare access remaining widespread. In many countries, restrictive laws and cultural taboos limit women's access to contraception and safe abortion services, often leading to unsafe practices that jeopardize their health. This lack of reproductive autonomy undermines women's social, economic, and personal freedom. Conversely, progressive nations have expanded reproductive healthcare, providing comprehensive services that enable women to make informed choices. The divide in reproductive rights highlights broader issues of gender equality and healthcare justice. Addressing this requires legal reform, inclusive sex education, and increased investment in women's health services

d. Resistance to Feminist Movements and Gender Equality



In recent years, increasing resistance to feminist movements has resulted in setbacks for gender equality. Political and cultural conservatism in several regions has triggered backlash against women's rights, undoing advancements in legal protections, workplace inclusion, and societal perceptions. Some governments have reversed policies on reproductive health, equal pay, and safeguards against gender-based violence, often citing traditional values. Additionally, anti-feminist narratives, both online and offline, spread misinformation and reinforce harmful stereotypes. These developments underscore the fragile nature of progress, highlighting the urgent need for sustained advocacy, education, and policy reforms to protect and advance women's rights.

F. Regional Comparisons

1. Gender Equality in North America and Europe

Western nations have made significant progress in promoting gender equality, particularly in areas such as workplace rights, political participation, and legal safeguards. Women now have improved access to leadership positions, education, and economic advancement compared to many other parts of the world. Nevertheless, challenges persist, including wage disparities, workplace discrimination, and sexual harassment. Despite existing laws, women in North America and Europe still face obstacles to equal pay and career progression. The #MeToo movement has brought global attention to the prevalence of gender-based misconduct, emphasizing the need for accountability and stronger legal protections. Continued efforts are essential to eliminate systemic inequalities and foster safer, more equitable environments.

2. Gender Equality in Asia and the Middle East

Progress in women's rights across Asia and the Middle East varies significantly, reflecting diverse cultural, political, and religious influences. In countries like Japan and South Korea, workplace gender policies have improved, with efforts to close the wage gap and promote women in leadership. However, deep-rooted societal norms and work cultures still hinder full gender equality. In contrast, many Middle Eastern nations continue to impose legal and social restrictions on women's rights, limiting their autonomy in areas such as employment, education, and personal freedoms. Recent reforms in Saudi Arabia, such as granting women the right to drive and easing guardianship laws, mark slow but positive change. Despite these advancements, gender-based discrimination and unequal legal protections persist, highlighting the need for continued advocacy, policy reforms, and cultural shifts to achieve meaningful progress.



3. Gender Equality in Africa and Latin America

Many African and Latin American countries have made notable progress in advancing gender equality, particularly through increased political representation. Rwanda stands out with one of the world's highest percentages of women in parliament, reflecting strong political will for female empowerment. Similarly, several Latin American nations have adopted gender quotas to boost women's involvement in governance. Despite these successes, significant challenges persist. Women in both regions continue to encounter wage inequality, limited financial access, and restricted career growth. Moreover, issues like domestic violence, femicide, and human trafficking remain widespread, often worsened by inadequate law enforcement. Sustainable progress requires comprehensive legal reforms, targeted economic initiatives, and robust social protection measures.

G. The Role of International Organizations and Policies

Global institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in promoting gender equality worldwide. These organizations advance women's rights through policy advocacy, financial assistance, and grassroots initiatives. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5, emphasize gender equality and encourage countries to implement empowering policies. International frameworks like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) influence national legislation and drive legal reforms. The World Bank supports gender-focused economic initiatives aimed at fostering financial inclusion and reducing employment disparities. NGOs also contribute significantly by providing education, healthcare, and legal aid to marginalized women. Nonetheless, sustained global cooperation remains essential to achieving lasting gender equality.

H. Future Prospects and Recommendations

To advance women's rights, governments, civil societies, and international organizations must take comprehensive action. Key recommendations include enforcing equal pay laws, improving access to quality education, and expanding economic opportunities for women. Strengthening legal protections against gender-based violence and ensuring reproductive rights are also critical. Governments should implement policies that support work-life balance, such as parental leave and affordable childcare. Furthermore, encouraging women's involvement in political decision-making and leadership positions can foster transformative change. Ongoing international collaboration and advocacy are essential to



dismantle discriminatory practices and policies, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable future for women around the globe.

a. **Stronger Legal Framework**

Enhancing the enforcement of existing gender equality laws is essential to ensuring real progress in women's rights. Many countries have enacted legislation against gender-based discrimination, harassment, and violence, but weak implementation limits their effectiveness. Governments must allocate resources for legal enforcement, train law enforcement officers on gender sensitivity, and establish accountability mechanisms. Additionally, judicial systems should prioritize gender-related cases, ensuring timely and fair resolutions. International organizations can assist in monitoring compliance with global gender equality standards, pushing nations to uphold their commitments and create stronger protections for women.

b. **Economic Empowerment**

Closing wage gaps and increasing opportunities for women in leadership roles are critical steps toward economic equality. Despite notable progress, women still face wage disparities and are underrepresented in leadership roles. Enforcing equal pay legislation, establishing mentorship opportunities, and promoting women-led businesses are crucial steps toward closing these gaps. Additionally, governments and organizations should adopt family-friendly policies, including paid parental leave and flexible work options, to foster better work-life balance and support women's career advancement. Ensuring financial inclusion by expanding access to credit, training, and markets for women-owned businesses can further promote economic independence and long-term gender parity.

c. **Education and Awareness**

Promoting gender-sensitive curricula and raising awareness about women's rights are fundamental to achieving lasting gender equality. Schools should integrate gender studies into their curricula to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusivity from an early age. Public campaigns, media initiatives, and community programs can further educate societies about gender discrimination and the



importance of women's rights. Governments and NGOs must work together to ensure that women and girls, especially in marginalized communities, have access to education. Expanding scholarship programs and vocational training can also empower women to pursue diverse career paths and leadership roles.

d. Protection Against Violence

Strengthening laws against gender-based violence and providing better support systems for survivors are urgent priorities in the fight for gender equality. Many women face domestic violence, sexual harassment, and human trafficking, often with little legal recourse. Governments must enforce strict penalties for perpetrators and ensure swift legal action for victims. Support systems, such as crisis shelters, counseling services, and financial aid, should be expanded to help survivors rebuild their lives. Community engagement programs can play a crucial role in changing attitudes and breaking the cycle of violence. International cooperation is also vital in addressing cross-border crimes such as trafficking.

e. Global Collaboration

Encouraging partnerships between nations to share best practices and resources can significantly accelerate progress toward global gender equality. Countries with well-developed gender policies can support others through knowledge-sharing, capacity-building programs, and financial assistance. International organizations, including the United Nations and the World Bank, play a vital role in coordinating efforts to implement effective gender policies across diverse regions. Collaborative frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight the importance of global solidarity in addressing gender disparities. By promoting cooperation among governments, the private sector, and civil society, the world can advance toward a more equitable and inclusive future for women.

Discussion

The 21st century has witnessed notable progress in women's rights, particularly in political participation, education, and economic empowerment. Legislative reforms and global advocacy movements have raised awareness and fostered change. Increased female representation in governance and leadership roles highlights these advancements. However, challenges remain. Gender-based



violence, wage disparities, and underrepresentation in decision-making positions persist worldwide. Deep-rooted cultural norms and institutional biases continue to hinder full equality. Therefore, despite substantial progress, women across the globe still face enduring structural and systemic barriers.

Findings

This study finds that women's rights have advanced globally through legal reforms, gender quotas in politics, and improved access to education and employment opportunities. International advocacy and feminist movements have played crucial roles in highlighting gender inequality. However, setbacks endure. Gender-based violence is widespread, and wage gaps persist. Women continue to experience societal stigma, harassment, and limited reproductive rights, particularly in conservative societies. Institutional and cultural obstacles restrict full participation in governance and leadership. While progress is undeniable, achieving full gender parity remains an ongoing global challenge requiring sustained effort.

Conclusion

Despite notable progress in advancing women's rights, significant challenges remain worldwide, demanding sustained efforts to achieve true gender equality. The 21st century offers both opportunities and hurdles, as women continue to face wage gaps, limited leadership roles, gender-based violence, and restrictive social norms. Global awareness, legal reforms, and advocacy movements, such as #MeToo, have brought these issues to the forefront, pushing for stronger enforcement and accountability. Education is vital in breaking barriers, enabling women to participate fully in the workforce and politics. Economic inclusion, through access to financial resources and fair workplace policies, can narrow gender gaps. Increasing women's representation in decision-making is essential for lasting change. Continued commitment and inclusive policies will secure empowerment for future generations.

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