



## Women's rights

**In recent years, governments across the world have been accepting more legal human rights obligations to combat gender inequalities. Despite this, discrimination against women is still widespread, and the severest of human rights violations are persisting in many countries.**

Over the last seventy years there have been several international declarations and treaties conferring equal rights on men and women. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights conferred equal rights on men and women. In 1968 the Tehran Human Rights Conference further enshrined the right to family planning for individuals and couples. This was followed by other human rights treaties, such as the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

### *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*

Signed in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly and effective from 1981, this was a key international agreement regarding women's rights.<sup>1</sup> Under CEDAW, nation states are required to eliminate gender-based discrimination, not only by making sure that there are no existing laws that directly discriminate against women, but also by allowing all necessary arrangements to be put in place that will allow women to experience civil and social equality in their home countries.

### *Conflict and peace*

The UN Security Council recognizes that women's exclusion from peace processes contravenes their rights, and that including women and gender perspectives in decision-making can strengthen prospects for sustainable peace. This recognition was formalized in October 2000 with the unanimous adoption of resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.<sup>2</sup> The importance of women's involvement in both conflict prevention and resolution has unfortunately still not been fully appreciated, and they are still especially vulnerable to all forms of violence during such times.

### *Violence against women*

Countries have made some progress in addressing violence against women and girls. According to the UN Secretary-General's 2006 *In-Depth Study on All Forms of Violence against Women*, 89 countries had some legislation on domestic violence, and a growing number of countries had instituted national plans of action.<sup>3</sup> Marital rape is a prosecutable offence in at least 104 states, and 90 countries have laws on sexual harassment. However, in too many countries, gaps remain. In a 2015 study, the World Bank found that 46 countries still have no specific laws protecting women from domestic violence.<sup>4</sup> In some parts of the world, forced marriages are also still widespread, endangering the health and well-being of millions of underage girls.<sup>5</sup> In other regions, including developed

countries, other women live under the threat of human trafficking and forced prostitution.<sup>6</sup>

### *Gender inequality and population*

In many countries and cultures, women experience higher rates of poverty, malnourishment and illiteracy than men, even within the same communities. These inconsistencies contribute to high birth rates and are equally a consequence of them, leading to a cycle of poverty and oppression. Recent research made by UNICEF showed that women's literacy rates in the least developed countries were just 70 per cent of those of men.<sup>7</sup> The lack of education and literacy of women correlates with a high birth rate.



A 2010 United Nations study in more than 20 sub-Saharan countries with very high population growth rates shows a clear correlation between low use of contraception and both poverty and a lack of education. In the poorest households, only 10 per cent of women and girls who lacked schooling had been using modern contraception, but the rate of use was four times greater among those with higher education. A recent study has fortunately projected that contraceptive methods are going to be more commonplace in this region over the coming decade.<sup>8</sup>

Better-educated mothers are likely to know more about hygiene and health care, and to be better-equipped to protect their children against an unhealthy environment. With higher child survival

rates, women are less likely to seek high birth rates as a defensive reaction against high child mortality.

In many cultures, women's basic rights are being denied when they wish to use contraception but are prevented from doing so. Surveys show that more than 225 million women worldwide say they would like to use modern contraception but are unable to, either due to lack of access or opposition from others.<sup>9</sup> In Pakistan, for example, a recent study indicated that husbands' opposition to contraceptive methods was the leading contributor to women's failure to use them.<sup>10</sup>

### *Women in the workplace*

Women still face drastic limitations in the world of employment. In developed countries, women often receive lower rates of pay than male workers in equivalent positions, with those in other regions even requiring permission from their husbands to work.<sup>11</sup> Women are hugely underrepresented in government and other high-powered positions, preventing a genuine and much-needed strengthening of women's position in society. The expectation that all women will inevitably choose to have children has even led to gender-based discrimination during the hiring process, with some employers avoiding the recruitment of young women so as to circumvent maternity leave issues.<sup>12</sup>

### *Possible solutions*

It is clear that there is still a huge distance to travel before gender equality can be attained. The improvements to policy regarding women's rights are limited by the burgeoning population, especially that in developing countries. The strain of poverty prevents real progress being made in all aspects of human rights, and any increase in population will further exacerbate it. There is much evidence to suggest that empowerment and education of women in all parts of the world will allow for more effective family planning. Initiatives should be taken to eradicate all regressive government policies which discriminate against or fail to protect women. The UN has stated its intention to include gender perspectives

in budgeting processes, and to promote the collection and use of sex-disaggregated data in public policy formation.<sup>13</sup> This will ensure that resources are allocated in areas that will benefit and empower women. Accounting for gender-based differences in data collection will also lead to the formation of policies that further diminish inequality. Efforts must also be made to strengthen women's rights to land and inheritance and to increase their access to credit and decent work. Fundamentally, the issue of

women's rights can never be solved unless societies start to recognize that a woman should not be seen first and foremost as a potential mother. This mentality has already had a hugely negative effect on both women's rights and the global population.

Read more about [contraception and lack of reproductive health](#).

Read more about [rights and responsibilities](#).

## References

(Internet references accessed 13/04/2016)

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cedaw2015.org/index.php/about-cedaw>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw/SGstudyvaw.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://wbl.worldbank.org/~media/WBG/WBL/Documents/Reports/2016/WBL2016-Key-Findings.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.canadianwomen.org/sites/canadianwomen.org/files/TraffickingMessaging\\_FINAL\\_Oct8.pdf](http://www.canadianwomen.org/sites/canadianwomen.org/files/TraffickingMessaging_FINAL_Oct8.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.unicef.org/sowc07/report/report.php>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/family/trendsContraceptiveUse2015Report.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <http://who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs351/en/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21732869>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/sep/09/women-business-and-the-law-2016-getting-to-equal-world-bank-report>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/money/2014/aug/12/managers-avoid-hiring-younger-women-maternity-leave>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.unwomenuk.org/un-women/strategic-goal-4/>