



The Intersection of Customary Law and Women's Rights in Developing Jurisdictions: A Critical Analysis of Legal Pluralism and Constitutional Reform in Africa and Asia

Sangeeta Taak

Assistant Professor of Law, Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law, Punjab, India

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex intersection between customary law systems and women's rights in developing jurisdictions, with particular focus on African and Asian contexts where legal pluralism creates both opportunities and challenges for gender equality. Drawing from contemporary scholarship and recent legal developments, this study analyzes how traditional legal systems can be reformed to align with international human rights standards while respecting cultural integrity. The research employs a comparative analytical framework to examine constitutional reforms, judicial interventions, and legislative measures across multiple jurisdictions. Key findings reveal that successful integration of women's rights into customary law requires a balanced approach that recognizes customary law as "living law" capable of evolution, while implementing robust safeguards against discriminatory practices. The study identifies critical areas including property inheritance, marriage laws, and access to justice where tensions between customary practices and women's rights are most pronounced. Recommendations include comprehensive constitutional reforms that establish clear hierarchies between international human rights obligations and customary practices, enhanced judicial training on gender-sensitive interpretations of customary law, and community-based legal education programs. This research contributes to broader discourse on legal pluralism by demonstrating that effective protection of women's rights requires not the elimination of customary law, but its progressive development within constitutional frameworks that prioritize gender equality and human dignity.

Keywords:- Customary law, women's rights, legal pluralism, constitutional reform, developing jurisdictions, gender equality, inheritance rights, CEDAW

I. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of customary law and women's rights in developing jurisdictions represents one of the most complex challenges in contemporary legal scholarship and

human rights advocacy. In a typical African country, the great majority of the people conduct their personal activities in accordance with and subject to customary law. Customary law has great impact in the area of personal law in regard to matters such as marriage, inheritance and traditional authority, and because it developed in an era dominated by patriarchy some of its norms conflict with human rights norms guaranteeing equality between men and women. This fundamental tension between traditional legal systems and international human rights standards has become increasingly pronounced as developing nations seek to modernize their legal frameworks while preserving cultural heritage and identity.

The significance of this issue extends beyond legal theory to affect the daily lives of millions of women across Africa, Asia, and other developing regions. In 2024 nearly, a quarter of governments worldwide reported a backlash on women's rights, highlighting the urgent need for sustainable legal frameworks that protect women's rights while respecting cultural diversity. The challenge is particularly acute in post-colonial societies where multiple legal systems coexist, creating complex hierarchies of legal authority that often disadvantage women.

This paper argues that the intersection of customary law and women's rights in developing jurisdictions requires a nuanced approach that recognizes customary law as dynamic and capable of evolution, rather than viewing it as inherently incompatible with women's rights. The guiding principle should be that customary law is living law and cannot therefore be static. It must be interpreted to take account of the lived experiences of the people it serves. Through comparative analysis of constitutional reforms, judicial decisions, and legislative interventions across multiple developing jurisdictions, this study examines how legal systems can successfully integrate women's rights protections while maintaining the cultural legitimacy of customary law.

The research questions guiding this analysis include: How can customary law systems be reformed to align with international women's rights standards without losing their cultural authenticity? What role do constitutional frameworks play in mediating conflicts between customary practices and gender equality principles? How effective have judicial interventions been in promoting women's rights within customary law contexts? What are the most promising approaches for achieving sustainable integration of women's rights into traditional legal systems?

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Legal Pluralism and Gender Justice

The theoretical foundation for understanding the intersection of customary law and women's rights lies in the concept of legal pluralism, which recognizes the coexistence of multiple legal systems within a single jurisdiction. In developing countries, this pluralism typically involves the interaction between customary law, religious law, colonial-inherited civil law, and international human rights law. Official customary law refers to the written versions of law found in legislation, precedent and books, while living customary law on the other hand refers to the actual practices of people.

The distinction between "official" and "living" customary law is crucial for understanding how women's rights can be effectively integrated into traditional legal systems. Living customary law represents the actual practices and norms that govern communities' daily lives, while official customary law consists of codified versions that may not accurately reflect contemporary practices. This distinction is particularly important for women's rights advocacy, as living customary law may be more adaptable to change than rigid official interpretations suggest.

2.2 Constitutional Supremacy and Human Rights Integration

Modern constitutional frameworks in developing jurisdictions increasingly incorporate provisions that establish the supremacy of constitutional rights over conflicting customary practices. States parties are therefore obliged to work towards the modification of social and cultural patterns of individual conduct in order to eliminate "prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women". This constitutional mandate, derived from international instruments like CEDAW, provides the legal foundation for challenging discriminatory customary practices.

However, the effectiveness of constitutional supremacy depends largely on implementation mechanisms and judicial interpretation. The reformed roles of women as discussed above signify the transformation of formal customary law and it being brought in line with the Constitution. However, it should be remembered that living customary law is not rigid, static, immutable and ossified. It too can be developed to promote the spirit, purport and object of the Bill of Rights.

2.3 Intersectionality and Cultural Relativism

The intersection of customary law and women's rights cannot be understood without considering the broader framework of intersectionality, which recognizes that women's experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping identities including race, class, ethnicity, and culture. In developing jurisdictions, women often face discrimination not only based on gender but also due to their relationship to traditional authority structures and customary legal systems.

The tension between cultural relativism and universal human rights presents particular challenges in this context. While international human rights law establishes universal standards for women's equality, critics argue that these standards may reflect Western values that are inappropriate for non-Western contexts. However, this paper argues that the solution lies not in abandoning universal principles but in finding culturally sensitive ways to implement them that respect local values while ensuring fundamental rights protection.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative legal analysis methodology, examining constitutional provisions, legislative reforms, and judicial decisions across multiple developing jurisdictions, with particular focus on African and Asian countries. The research draws on primary legal sources including constitutions, statutes, and court decisions, as well as secondary sources including academic literature, international organization reports, and empirical studies on the implementation of women's rights reforms.

The comparative approach allows for identification of best practices and common challenges across different legal systems and cultural contexts. Case studies from South Africa, Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, and Mozambique provide insight into various approaches to reforming customary law systems, while consideration of international frameworks including CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action provides the normative foundation for analysis.

Data collection involved systematic review of recent academic literature, international organization reports, and legal databases to identify current trends and developments in the intersection of customary law and women's rights. Particular attention was paid to developments since 2020 to capture the most recent legal and policy innovations in this rapidly evolving field.

IV. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Property and Inheritance Rights: The Core Challenge

Property and inheritance rights represent perhaps the most significant area of conflict between customary law and women's rights in developing jurisdictions. Under most systems of customary law, women are prohibited from owning, renting or inheriting land, property and housing in their own names, and access to and control over land, property and housing commonly depends on their relation to male relatives. This fundamental inequality has profound implications for women's economic security, social status, and ability to provide for their families.

The traditional rationale for male-dominated inheritance systems often rests on concepts of bloodline preservation and family responsibility. Apart from preserving bloodlines, the male primogeniture rule of inheritance is aimed at providing material support to deceased persons' dependants. This 'inheritance-with-responsibilities' principle is being eroded by socio-economic changes, such as urbanisation, labour migration and the diffusion of extended families, thereby causing hardship to widows, girls and younger male children.

However, empirical evidence from multiple jurisdictions demonstrates that these traditional justifications no longer align with contemporary social realities. This 'inheritance-with-responsibilities' principle is being eroded by socio-economic changes, such as urbanisation, labour migration and the diffusion of extended families, thereby causing hardship to widows, girls and younger male children. Urbanization, labor migration, and changing family structures have undermined the effectiveness of traditional inheritance systems, often leaving women and children without adequate protection or support.

4.2 Constitutional Reform and Judicial Innovation

Several developing countries have made significant progress in addressing these challenges through constitutional reform and innovative judicial interpretation. South Africa provides perhaps the most comprehensive example of constitutional intervention in customary law. Section 9 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa provides that everyone is equal before the law. As a result, everyone must benefit from and be protected by the law. This is to say, women must be treated equally and must not be discriminated against on the basis of gender, sex, pregnancy and marital status.

The South African Constitutional Court's decision (*Bhe v. Magistrate, Khayelitsha*, 2005) fundamentally transformed customary inheritance law by declaring the principle of male primogeniture unconstitutional. This landmark decision established that customary law must conform to constitutional principles of equality and human dignity. The arguments presented and largely accepted by the court in *Bhe v Magistrate, Khayelitsha*, was that the version of customary law applied in the case was a distortion of the law as practised. Thus, customary law practices could be challenged as inconsistent with authentic traditional values.

4.3 Legislative Responses and Implementation Challenges

While constitutional frameworks provide the foundation for reform, legislative implementation presents significant challenges. The South African experience illustrates both the potential and limitations of statutory reform. The Recognition of Customary Marriages Act and the Reform of Customary Law of Succession Act represent comprehensive attempts to align customary law with constitutional principles. The Recognition Act addresses the limitations imposed on women and provides that spouses have equal status and capacity ending the minority status of women and the impediments to their ownership of property. Similarly, the Reform Act gives effect to the Constitutional Court's declaration that male primogeniture is unconstitutional and allows for the equal inheritance by males and females.

However, implementation challenges remain significant. Many people in South Africa are subject to customary law, but often people are not aware of or do not understand the laws and their rights as developed by the Constitution. The unavailability of the new legislatively reformed laws threatens to reduce the reformed laws to paper rights that are of little, if any, real benefit to the majority of women.

4.4 Regional Variations and Comparative Experiences

Different regions have adopted varying approaches to integrating women's rights into customary law systems. In Rwanda, post-genocide reconstruction provided an opportunity for fundamental legal reform. The new inheritance law eliminates discrimination against women and establishes equal inheritance rights regardless of gender. In post-apartheid South Africa, the new Constitution is formally committed to gender equality, the right to housing and to land reform. Within the land reform legislation there is specific commitment to gender equity and the Department of Land Affairs has established a sub-directorate responsible for gender affairs.

Mozambique's approach demonstrates how customary law can be preserved while ensuring constitutional compliance. In Mozambique, the new Land Law of 1997 confirms the constitutional principle that women and men have equal right to occupy and use land. It also states that women have the right to inherit land. For the first time since national independence, it recognizes the right of local communities to secure a collective title to their lands, including cultivated, grazing and common lands, and it foresees that such land may be governed according to customary law, so long as these laws do not contradict the Constitution of Mozambique.

V. CRITICAL EVALUATION AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The Limits of Legal Reform

While constitutional and legislative reforms represent important progress, their effectiveness depends heavily on implementation mechanisms and social acceptance. The South African experience demonstrates that formal legal equality does

not automatically translate into substantive equality for women. The extension of common law to customary law problems introduces complex and foreign legal procedures that are peculiar to customary law dispute resolution mechanisms and most people living under customary law and as a result, render these new laws as explored above, inaccessible to ordinary South Africans.

This finding suggests that successful integration of women's rights into customary law systems requires more than constitutional proclamations or legislative enactments. It demands comprehensive strategies that address cultural attitudes, economic structures, and institutional capacity.

5.2 The Role of Traditional Authorities

Traditional authorities play a crucial role in the interpretation and application of customary law, yet their relationship with women's rights reforms remains complex and often contradictory. The resistance and backlash from the traditional leaders is still robust. As a result, women in customary marriages face what Claassens calls a "double whammy" since both apartheid and customary laws deprive them of property rights through the customary practice of handing down land only to male children (Claassens, 2011).

However, some jurisdictions have found ways to engage traditional authorities as partners in reform rather than obstacles. This approach recognizes that sustainable change requires the buy-in of traditional leaders who continue to wield significant influence in rural communities.

5.3 International Framework and Local Implementation

The international legal framework, particularly CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action, provides important normative guidance for reforming customary law systems. To date, 189 States have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and 114 have ratified the Optional Protocol. However, the translation of international obligations into effective local implementation remains challenging.

The UN Secretary-General's report on the 30-year review and appraisal of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action reflects global, regional, and national reviews of 159 countries, summarizing progress and priorities for further action. It finds that many countries have made strides on gender equality and women's empowerment, from banning discrimination in employment to adopting gender-responsive climate action plans. Innovation is accelerating progress, and opportunities are opening to scale up proven strategies. Yet gender discrimination remains deeply embedded in all economies and societies, imposing chronic constraints on the rights and hopes of women and girls.

VI. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Constitutional Design Principles

Based on comparative analysis, several key principles emerge for constitutional design in developing jurisdictions seeking to integrate women's rights with customary law systems:

- **Clear Hierarchy of Norms:** Constitutions should establish clear hierarchies that place fundamental human rights, including gender equality, above conflicting customary practices while preserving space for cultural expression that does not violate these rights.
- **Living Law Recognition:** Constitutional frameworks should recognize the dynamic nature of customary law and provide mechanisms for its evolution in line with constitutional principles rather than treating it as static tradition.
- **Implementation Mechanisms:** Constitutions should establish specific institutional mechanisms for mediating conflicts between customary law and constitutional rights, including specialized courts or tribunals with expertise in both areas.

6.2 Judicial Reform and Capacity Building

Effective protection of women's rights within customary law systems requires significant investment in judicial capacity building. To arrive at the best interests principle, judges should be guided by two factors. The first is the manner people have adapted or are adapting to the changed social structures in which the male primogeniture rule emerged. Since living customary law constantly changes, the determination of this adaptation could be aided by the foundational value of the customary law.

This approach requires judges who understand both constitutional principles and customary law traditions, and who can navigate the complex task of developing customary law in line with constitutional values while maintaining its cultural authenticity.

6.3 Community-Based Legal Education

Successful reform requires comprehensive community-based legal education programs that inform both men and women about their rights under reformed legal systems. All actors – men and women, grassroots organizations, women's groups, lawyers, government officials, judges – should be educated about the importance of rights to land and property for the survival of women, families and communities. In particular, it was suggested that government officials and politicians be further encouraged to develop the political will necessary to draft and adopt laws and policies which promote and protect women's rights to land and property.

6.4 Economic Empowerment Integration

Legal reforms must be accompanied by economic empowerment programs that enable women to exercise their newly recognized rights effectively. Access to credit, technical assistance, and market opportunities are essential complements to legal equality.

VII. CONCLUSION

The intersection of customary law and women's rights in developing jurisdictions represents both a significant challenge and an important opportunity for advancing gender equality while respecting cultural diversity. This analysis demonstrates that successful integration requires a nuanced approach that recognizes customary law as "living law" capable of evolution, rather than viewing it as inherently incompatible with women's rights.

Key findings from this comparative analysis reveal that constitutional supremacy provides an important foundation for reform, but effectiveness depends heavily on implementation mechanisms, judicial capacity, and social acceptance. The experiences of countries like South Africa, Rwanda, and Mozambique demonstrate that significant progress is possible when legal reforms are accompanied by comprehensive strategies addressing cultural attitudes, economic structures, and institutional capacity.

The research confirms that the most promising approaches involve engaging traditional authorities as partners in reform, investing in judicial capacity building, implementing community-based legal education programs, and developing economic empowerment initiatives that enable women to exercise their rights effectively. However, the analysis also reveals that formal legal equality does not automatically translate into substantive equality, and that ongoing vigilance and adaptation are required to ensure that reforms achieve their intended objectives.

Looking forward, the global commitment to gender equality enshrined in international instruments like CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action provides important momentum for continued progress. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is the world's most comprehensive, visionary plan ever created to achieve the equal rights of ALL women and girls. Agreed by 189 governments in 1995, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Platform centres on 12 areas of action – referred to as "critical areas of concern". However, achieving these goals requires sustained commitment to legal reform that is both principled and pragmatic, respecting cultural diversity while ensuring fundamental human rights protection.

The evidence suggests that the future of women's rights in developing jurisdictions lies not in abandoning customary law but in fostering its progressive development within constitutional frameworks that prioritize gender equality and human dignity. This approach offers the possibility of achieving gender justice while maintaining cultural authenticity, creating legal systems that are both rights-protective and culturally legitimate.

Ultimately, the intersection of customary law and women's rights in developing jurisdictions illuminates broader questions about the relationship between tradition and modernity, universal rights and cultural particularity, and legal formalism and social transformation. The ongoing evolution of this intersection will continue to shape the prospects for gender equality and human rights protection in much of the developing world.

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