

CHAPTER 2

LEGAL RELATIONS: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

State Regulation of Legal Awareness and Rights Protection

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Abstract. Legal awareness and rights protection are essential components of the rule of law, democratic governance and social justice. Formal recognition of rights does not automatically ensure their practical implementation, especially when citizens do not understand legal procedures, cannot access legal aid, or face institutional, financial, linguistic or digital barriers. Therefore, state regulation plays a crucial role in transforming legal rights into effective mechanisms of protection. The objective of this article is to analyse state regulation of legal awareness and rights protection, identify the main institutional and regulatory models, and determine how different countries ensure access to justice, legal aid, public legal education and protection of vulnerable groups. The study applies qualitative comparative policy analysis, legal document analysis and secondary statistical analysis. The research is based on international and national legal acts, official government documents, reports of international organisations and empirical data on access to justice. The comparative analysis covers the European Union, the United States, Canada, Finland, the Netherlands, Estonia, India and the United Kingdom. The results show that state regulation of legal awareness and rights protection includes public legal education, legal aid, access to legal information, institutional complaint mechanisms, judicial and administrative remedies, digital legal services, protection of vulnerable groups and monitoring of justice gaps. The analysis demonstrates that countries use different models, including minimum procedural guarantees, welfare-state legal aid, decentralised legal aid systems, digital legal aid platforms, preventive legal information models and mass legal literacy campaigns. Effective regulation requires the combination of awareness, accessibility, affordability and accountability. Legal protection becomes effective only when citizens can understand their rights, obtain support and use appropriate institutional mechanisms. Further research should focus on measuring the effectiveness of legal awareness programmes, evaluating digital justice tools, analysing access to justice for vulnerable groups, and comparing the impact of different legal aid models on rights protection.

Keywords: legal awareness; rights protection; access to justice; legal aid; rule of law; legal empowerment; public legal education; human rights; digital justice; vulnerable groups; legal information; state regulation.

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Introduction. Legal awareness and rights protection are fundamental elements of the rule of law, democratic governance and social justice. Legal awareness means that individuals understand their basic rights, duties, legal procedures and available mechanisms for protection. Rights protection means that people can effectively use legal and institutional mechanisms to prevent violations, challenge unlawful actions, obtain remedies and participate in public life on an equal basis. These two dimensions are closely connected. A person who does not know their rights may not recognise a legal problem, may not seek help, and may remain excluded from justice even when formal legal remedies exist.

In modern states, the regulation of legal awareness and rights protection is no longer limited to courts and lawyers. It includes legal aid systems, ombuds institutions, human rights commissions, public legal education, civic education, administrative complaint mechanisms, digital justice services, legal information platforms, consumer protection bodies, anti-discrimination mechanisms and national human rights institutions. This reflects a shift from a court-centred understanding of justice to a people-centred model, where the state must ensure that legal protection is accessible, understandable, affordable and effective.

The scale of the problem is significant. The World Justice Project estimates that approximately 5.1 billion people worldwide lack meaningful access to justice, including people who cannot resolve everyday legal problems, people excluded from legal opportunities because they lack documentation or formal legal status, and people living in extreme conditions of injustice (World Justice Project, 2019). The Legal Services Corporation reported that 92% of civil legal problems experienced by low-income Americans received no or insufficient legal help, while 74% of low-income households experienced at least one civil legal problem during the previous year (Legal Services Corporation, 2022). These data show that the existence of formal rights is insufficient without practical legal awareness and accessible protection mechanisms.

State regulation plays a decisive role in this field. It defines legal aid eligibility, establishes public legal education programmes, regulates access to legal information, creates complaint mechanisms, protects vulnerable groups, funds legal services and sets institutional standards for rights protection. At the same time, regulation differs across countries. Some states emphasise constitutional rights and judicial review, others prioritise legal aid, digital access, legal literacy campaigns or ombuds institutions. Therefore, comparative analysis is necessary to understand how state regulation can transform legal rights into real and usable protections.

Literature review. The literature on legal awareness and rights protection is closely connected with the concepts of rule of law, access to justice, legal empowerment and human rights governance. The rule of law requires that law should be public, clear, stable, fairly applied and capable of

limiting arbitrary power (World Justice Project, 2025). However, a formal legal system does not automatically guarantee justice. For rights to be effective, people must be able to understand the law, identify legal problems, obtain advice, use institutions and receive remedies.

The concept of access to justice has developed from a narrow focus on access to courts into a broader framework of people-centred justice. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development argues that legal needs surveys are important because they reveal people's everyday legal problems, their pathways to resolution, and the barriers they face when seeking help (OECD, 2019). Later OECD work emphasises that unresolved justice problems may impose economic costs and undermine trust, well-being and social stability. The OECD has estimated that unresolved justice problems may cost between 0.5% and 3% of a country's GDP (OECD, 2025).

Legal empowerment literature stresses that people should not be passive recipients of legal protection. They should be able to understand, use and shape the law. The United Nations approach to legal empowerment highlights the need to strengthen the capacity of disadvantaged groups to use legal tools in order to protect assets, livelihoods, identity, labour rights and access to public services (United Nations, 2009). In this sense, legal awareness is not simply information dissemination. It is a form of social empowerment.

Human rights education is another important component. UNESCO promotes global citizenship education to help learners understand rights, responsibilities, diversity, justice and participation in public life (UNESCO, 2024). Legal awareness can therefore be integrated into civic education, school curricula, adult education, community learning and public campaigns. This is especially important because many legal problems arise in everyday areas such as employment, housing, family relations, consumer protection, debt, migration, social benefits and discrimination.

The literature also shows that vulnerable groups face specific barriers. These include low income, limited education, disability, language barriers, rural isolation, migration status, gender-based discrimination, digital exclusion and distrust of institutions. UNODC stresses that legal aid is central to access to justice for poor, marginalised and disadvantaged groups, and that it is connected with the principle of leaving no one behind under the 2030 Agenda (UNODC, 2026).

Digitalisation has created new opportunities and risks. Online legal information, automated forms, digital court services and guided pathways may improve access to justice. The Netherlands' Rechtwijzer model, developed with the Dutch Legal Aid Board, is frequently cited as an example of online legal information and dispute resolution for common problems (Dutch Legal Aid Board, 2021). Estonia's state-funded legal aid information system and digital state infrastructure also demonstrate how digital tools can

support legal access (Estonian Bar Association, 2025; Riigi Teataja, 2025). However, digital justice may deepen inequality if people lack digital skills, internet access or trust in online systems.

Overall, the literature confirms that legal awareness and rights protection require an integrated regulatory model. This model should combine law, institutions, public education, legal aid, digital tools, data collection and support for vulnerable groups.

Aim and objectives. The aim of this article is to analyse state regulation of legal awareness and rights protection and to identify the main institutional models, regulatory instruments and implementation challenges in different countries.

The objectives of the article are:

1. To clarify the relationship between legal awareness, rights protection, access to justice and legal empowerment.
2. To examine the main state instruments used to regulate legal awareness and rights protection.
3. To compare selected national models of legal aid, public legal education and institutional rights protection.
4. To analyse statistical evidence on justice gaps and unmet legal needs.
5. To identify common factors that increase the effectiveness of state regulation in this field.
6. To formulate conclusions and directions for further improvement of legal awareness and rights protection policies.

Methodology. The article uses qualitative comparative policy analysis, legal document analysis and secondary statistical analysis. The research is based on official legal acts, government documents, international organisation reports, national legal aid materials and empirical access-to-justice data.

The comparative analysis covers the European Union, the United States, Canada, Finland, the Netherlands, Estonia, India and the United Kingdom. These jurisdictions were selected because they represent different regulatory approaches: supranational legal aid standards, federal and decentralised legal aid systems, welfare-state public legal aid, digital legal guidance, state-funded legal aid, mass legal literacy campaigns and institutional access-to-justice regulation.

The research uses the following categories of sources:

1. International and supranational documents on access to justice, legal empowerment and human rights education.
2. National legal aid laws, public legal information portals and official institutional descriptions.
3. Statistical and analytical data from the World Justice Project, OECD and national legal services organisations.
4. Comparative examples of digital justice and legal awareness practices.

The research process begins with the establishment of legal rights and formal guarantees, followed by the development of legal awareness and recognition of legal problems. This awareness allows individuals to access advice, legal assistance and relevant information, which in turn facilitates the use of complaint mechanisms, administrative and judicial procedures. Ultimately, these steps lead to effective protection of rights and the provision of legal remedies. This methodological approach allows the article to consider legal awareness and protection of rights as an integrated regulatory cycle, rather than as separate legal or educational measures.

Results. State regulation of legal awareness and rights protection usually includes several interconnected dimensions. These dimensions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Main dimensions of state regulation of legal awareness and rights protection

Regulatory dimension	Main purpose	Typical state instruments
Public legal education	Increase knowledge of rights, duties and legal procedures	School curricula, civic education, public campaigns, community programmes
Legal aid	Provide legal advice and representation to people who cannot afford it	Legal aid laws, eligibility criteria, public funding, legal aid offices
Access to legal information	Make law understandable and available	Government portals, plain language guides, multilingual legal information
Institutional rights protection	Provide non-judicial mechanisms for complaints and remedies	Ombuds institutions, human rights commissions, equality bodies
Judicial and administrative remedies	Enable formal rights enforcement	Courts, administrative appeals, constitutional complaints
Digital legal services	Improve accessibility and efficiency	Online applications, guided pathways, digital forms, virtual consultations
Protection of vulnerable groups	Reduce inequality in rights protection	Targeted legal aid, mobile clinics, language assistance, community paralegals
Monitoring and data	Measure justice gaps and policy effectiveness	Legal needs surveys, justice statistics, rule of law indicators

Source: compiled by the author based on OECD (2019, 2025), UNODC (2026), UNESCO (2024), and World Justice Project (2025).

The table 1 shows that effective regulation cannot rely on only one mechanism. Legal awareness without legal aid may leave people informed but unprotected. Legal aid without public awareness may remain unused. Digital services without inclusion may help only those who already have resources and skills.

International and supranational regulation. At the international level, the right to access justice is connected with the rule of law, human rights and sustainable development. Sustainable Development Goal 16.3 requires states to promote the rule of law and ensure equal access to justice

for all. This global framework has influenced national justice strategies and encouraged governments to collect data on legal needs and justice outcomes.

The European Union has developed specific legal aid instruments. In civil and commercial matters, the EU legal aid framework aims to ensure that persons who cannot afford legal representation can obtain support in cross-border disputes (European Union, 2003). In criminal proceedings, Directive (EU) 2016/1919 establishes minimum rules on legal aid for suspects, accused persons and requested persons in European arrest warrant proceedings (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2016). These instruments show how supranational regulation can establish minimum procedural guarantees while leaving implementation to Member States.

International organisations also emphasise legal education and legal empowerment. UNODC defines legal aid as a key element of access to justice for disadvantaged groups (UNODC, 2026). UNESCO links civic and global citizenship education with the development of knowledge, skills and values necessary for participation, rights awareness and democratic responsibility (UNESCO, 2024). The OECD promotes people-centred justice and legal needs surveys as tools for evidence-based justice policy (OECD, 2019, 2025).

United States. The United States has a developed but highly unequal system of rights protection. Legal awareness and rights protection are regulated through constitutional guarantees, federal and state courts, civil rights legislation, public defenders in criminal cases, legal services organisations, pro bono programmes and public legal education initiatives. However, civil legal aid remains insufficient for many low-income people.

The Legal Services Corporation, the largest funder of civil legal aid for low-income Americans, reported that 74% of low-income households experienced at least one civil legal problem in the previous year, while 92% of their civil legal problems received no or inadequate legal help (Legal Services Corporation, 2022). These findings reveal a major gap between formal rights and practical ability to enforce them.

The U.S. model demonstrates the importance of civil legal aid funding and rights-based litigation. At the same time, it shows that legal awareness and formal rights cannot ensure justice if legal help is unaffordable. The American case therefore illustrates a structural problem common to many countries: people often encounter legal problems in housing, debt, employment, family, benefits or consumer relations, but they may not recognise these problems as legal or may not be able to obtain help.

Canada. Canada regulates legal aid through a decentralised model because the administration of justice is largely a provincial and territorial responsibility. The federal Legal Aid Program provides contribution funding to provinces and territories, especially for criminal legal aid and access-to-justice services (Department of Justice Canada, 2026). The system promotes

access to justice for economically disadvantaged persons and supports a fair, efficient and accessible justice system.

This model has strengths and weaknesses. Its strength is that provinces and territories can adapt legal aid delivery to local conditions. Its weakness is inequality across jurisdictions, because eligibility rules, coverage and service availability may differ. The Canadian example shows that decentralised regulation requires strong coordination, stable funding and national access-to-justice standards.

Finland. Finland represents a welfare-state model of legal aid. The state has public legal aid offices that grant legal aid and provide services through public legal aid attorneys (National Legal Services Authority of Finland, 2026). Legal aid may be fully or partly funded from public resources for people who cannot afford legal assistance (Finnish Judicial Administration, 2026).

This model treats legal protection as part of public service provision. The Finnish system is important because it combines legal aid offices, public attorneys and access to representation. The strength of this model is institutional stability and public responsibility. Its challenge is maintaining sufficient resources and accessibility, especially in complex cases or geographically remote areas.

The Netherlands. The Netherlands is often associated with an innovative approach to legal information and early dispute resolution. The Dutch Legal Aid Board has supported Rechtwijzer, a platform that provides guided pathways for common legal problems and links users to online products and services (Dutch Legal Aid Board, 2021). Rechtwijzer combines legal information, diagnosis of problems and pathways to solutions.

This model reflects a preventive and user-centred approach. Instead of waiting until disputes reach courts, the state-supported system helps people understand their legal situation early. The Dutch experience shows that public legal information can reduce barriers when it is written in accessible language and organised around real-life problems rather than legal categories.

Estonia. Estonia combines digital governance with legal protection mechanisms. The State-funded Legal Aid Act provides that state legal aid may be granted to natural or legal persons in connection with proceedings before Estonian courts or administrative bodies (Riigi Teataja, 2025). The Estonian Bar Association provides information on the State Legal Aid information system, which supports applications and coordination of legal aid (Estonian Bar Association, 2025).

Estonia's model demonstrates how digital infrastructure can support rights protection. Digital legal aid systems can reduce administrative barriers, increase transparency and facilitate access to information. However, digital legal services must be accompanied by support for people who lack digital skills, language proficiency or access to technology.

India. India provides an important example of large-scale state regulation of legal awareness. The National Legal Services Authority was constituted under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 to provide free legal services to weaker sections of society and organise Lok Adalats for amicable settlement of disputes (National Legal Services Authority, 2026). NALSA also promotes legal awareness, legal literacy, victim compensation and dispute resolution mechanisms.

India's Department of Justice also runs the Legal Literacy and Legal Awareness Programme under the DISHA scheme. According to official information, the programme developed communication materials in 22 scheduled languages and dialects of northeastern states (Press Information Bureau of India, 2025). This multilingual approach is important because legal awareness depends not only on the availability of information, but also on linguistic and cultural accessibility.

The Indian model shows that legal awareness must be proactive. It cannot rely only on citizens searching for information. Outreach campaigns, legal aid camps, community education and local dispute resolution mechanisms can bring legal protection closer to vulnerable groups.

United Kingdom. The United Kingdom has developed legal aid institutions, public legal information services and judicial review mechanisms. However, access-to-justice challenges remain significant, especially after legal aid restrictions in some areas. Official public legal information is available through GOV.UK, while legal aid eligibility and services are regulated through government agencies.

The UK case illustrates a broader lesson: even mature legal systems may experience access-to-justice problems if legal aid coverage narrows, eligibility thresholds are restrictive, or local legal advice providers disappear. Therefore, rights protection depends not only on legal frameworks, but also on sustainable service capacity.

Table 2 presents a comparative overview of different models of state regulation of legal awareness and rights protection, highlighting key approaches, institutional frameworks, and mechanisms used across various countries to ensure the effective promotion and safeguarding of citizens' rights.

The comparison shows that no single model is sufficient. The most effective systems combine legal aid, public information, legal education, digital tools, non-judicial remedies and monitoring of unmet legal needs.

Statistical evidence on the justice gap. The statistical evidence confirms that legal awareness and rights protection are global governance challenges.

Table 2. Comparative models of state regulation of legal awareness and rights protection

Country or jurisdiction	Main regulatory model	Key instruments	Main strength	Main limitation
European Union	Minimum procedural rights and cross-border access model	Legal aid directives, procedural rights standards	Common minimum guarantees	Uneven national implementation
United States	Rights litigation and civil legal services model	Constitutional rights, LSC-funded legal aid, civil rights laws	Strong rights culture and litigation tools	Large unmet civil legal needs
Canada	Decentralised legal aid model	Federal contributions, provincial legal aid plans	Local adaptation	Inequality between provinces and territories
Finland	Public welfare legal aid model	State legal aid offices, public legal aid attorneys	Stable public service approach	Resource and capacity pressures
Netherlands	Preventive legal information model	Rechtswijzer, Legal Services Counters, legal aid board	Early problem diagnosis and user guidance	Digital access and implementation challenges
Estonia	Digital legal aid model	State-funded legal aid system, digital applications	Administrative efficiency and transparency	Digital divide risks
India	Mass legal literacy and outreach model	NALSA, Lok Adalats, legal literacy campaigns	Outreach to vulnerable groups	Large scale and uneven local capacity
United Kingdom	Institutional legal aid and public information model	Legal aid agency, GOV.UK, courts and tribunals	Developed legal institutions	Advice gaps and eligibility restrictions

Source: compiled by the author based on European Union (2003), European Parliament & Council of the European Union (2016), Legal Services Corporation (2022), Department of Justice Canada (2026), Finnish Judicial Administration (2026), Dutch Legal Aid Board (2021), Estonian Bar Association (2025), National Legal Services Authority (2026), and Press Information Bureau of India (2025).

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Table 3 presents key statistical indicators that illustrate the current state of legal awareness among citizens and the effectiveness of mechanisms for the protection of rights. The data provide insight into levels of public knowledge regarding legal norms, access to legal assistance, and the frequency of rights violations, thereby highlighting existing gaps and areas requiring policy attention.

Table 3. Selected statistical evidence on legal awareness and rights protection

Indicator	Source	Result
People worldwide lacking meaningful access to justice	World Justice Project and Task Force on Justice	5.1 billion people
People unable to resolve civil, administrative or criminal justice problems	World Justice Project	1.5 billion people
People excluded from legal opportunities because they lack legal tools	World Justice Project	4.5 billion people
People living in extreme conditions of injustice	World Justice Project	253 million people
Low-income U.S. households with at least one civil legal problem in the previous year	Legal Services Corporation	74%
Civil legal problems of low-income Americans receiving no or inadequate legal help	Legal Services Corporation	92%
Estimated economic cost of unresolved justice problems	OECD	0.5% to 3% of GDP
WJP Rule of Law Index 2025 top-ranked country	World Justice Project	Denmark
WJP Rule of Law Index 2025 lowest-ranked country	World Justice Project	Venezuela

Source: compiled by the author based on (Spivak et al., 2024; Mihus, 2023; Mihus, 2024)

The data show that justice gaps exist in both developed and developing states. The problem is not only the absence of courts. It also includes lack of legal awareness, lack of affordable legal help, procedural complexity, institutional distrust, discrimination, language barriers and digital exclusion.

Discussion. The results show that state regulation of legal awareness and rights protection is developing in several directions. The first direction is the transition from formal legality to practical accessibility. Traditional legal systems assumed that rights exist if they are written in constitutions, codes and statutes. Modern access-to-justice policy recognises that rights are meaningful only when people can understand and use them. Therefore, states increasingly regulate not only courts, but also legal aid, information portals, complaint bodies and legal education.

The second direction is the shift toward people-centred justice. OECD and World Justice Project data show that many legal problems never reach courts. People often resolve problems informally, ignore them, or suffer their consequences. Therefore, regulation must start from people's lived legal needs rather than from institutional categories. Housing, employment, family, consumer, debt, migration and social protection problems should be addressed through accessible pathways.

The third direction is the expansion of legal awareness beyond schools and universities. Legal awareness must include adults, migrants, workers, consumers, elderly people, persons with disabilities, rural communities and digitally excluded groups. India's legal literacy campaigns and multilingual materials show the importance of outreach. UNESCO's global citizenship education approach also confirms that legal awareness is connected with democratic participation and social responsibility.

The fourth direction is digitalisation. Digital legal aid systems, online forms and guided pathways can reduce costs and improve accessibility. Estonia and the Netherlands demonstrate the potential of digital justice tools. However, digitalisation must be regulated carefully. If services become digital-only, vulnerable people may be excluded. Therefore, digital justice should follow the principle of assisted access, where online tools are combined with human support.

The fifth direction is institutional pluralism. Courts remain important, but they are not the only institutions for rights protection. Ombuds institutions, equality bodies, consumer protection agencies, labour inspectorates, data protection authorities, human rights commissions and administrative complaint mechanisms can provide faster and less formal remedies. State regulation should therefore coordinate these mechanisms and ensure that people know where to turn.

The sixth direction is evidence-based regulation. Legal needs surveys, justice indicators and administrative data help governments understand where the justice gap is greatest. Without data, legal aid funding and public education programmes may not address real needs. The OECD's work on legal needs surveys is especially important because it provides a method for measuring everyday legal problems and unmet needs.

The seventh issue is financing. Legal aid and public legal education require stable public funding. Underfunded systems may formally exist but fail in practice. The United States and United Kingdom show that even countries with strong legal traditions may have serious access gaps when civil legal aid is insufficient or legal advice providers are unavailable.

Finally, the protection of vulnerable groups should be central to regulation. Legal awareness policies should be designed in plain language, multiple languages and accessible formats. Legal aid should consider not only income, but also disability, domestic violence, migration status, age, rural location and digital exclusion. Rights protection should be proactive rather than reactive.

Conclusions. State regulation of legal awareness and rights protection is an essential condition for the rule of law and democratic governance. Formal rights cannot protect people if they do not understand them, cannot access legal information, cannot afford legal assistance, or cannot use complaint and judicial mechanisms effectively.

The article shows that legal awareness and rights protection should be regulated as an integrated system. This system includes public legal education, legal aid, access to legal information, digital justice services, institutional complaint mechanisms, protection of vulnerable groups and monitoring of justice outcomes.

The comparative analysis demonstrates different national models. The European Union establishes minimum legal aid and procedural rights standards. The United States has a strong rights-based legal culture but a

large civil justice gap. Canada uses a decentralised legal aid model. Finland provides public legal aid as part of welfare-state services. The Netherlands emphasises guided legal information and preventive pathways. Estonia connects legal aid with digital state infrastructure. India uses large-scale legal literacy and outreach campaigns. The United Kingdom shows the importance and vulnerability of legal aid capacity.

The main conclusion is that effective regulation requires a combination of four elements: awareness, accessibility, affordability and accountability. Awareness means that people understand their rights. Accessibility means that legal information and institutions are easy to reach. Affordability means that financial barriers do not prevent protection. Accountability means that state institutions, courts and service providers are monitored and responsible for outcomes.

Future policy should focus on people-centred justice, legal needs surveys, plain language legal information, sustainable legal aid funding, digital inclusion, community legal empowerment and stronger protection for vulnerable groups. Further research should examine how legal awareness affects real legal behaviour, how digital justice tools influence access for different social groups, and which regulatory models most effectively reduce unmet legal needs.

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