



A Feminist Perspective on the Status of Women in India: Achievements, Issues, Challenges and Suggestions

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Abstract

The paper critically explores the status of women in India from a feminist perspective, focusing on some of the major issues, successes and new challenges in the modern society in India. The attempt is to understand the interaction between the historical events, constitutional provisions and the current socio-economic realities which affect the status of women in the Indian society. The study is descriptive and analytical, using secondary sources of data like government reports such as NFHS-5, NCRB, Census data and policy documents and existing scholarly literature.

The results showed that though there have been significant improvements in education for women, legal protections, political engagement and access to healthcare, women in India still experience many forms of inequality. Continued barriers are gender inequality, domestic violence, institutional violence, economic marginalisation, wage gap and low labour force participation. Moreover, emerging issues in feminist discourse include digital gender inequalities, cyber-harassment, and new labour market dynamics. The study found that apart from the effective implementation of legal and policy frameworks, there is a need to shift the deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms and patriarchy in order to achieve substantive gender equality in India. Women's empowerment and social justice can only be achieved through a holistic, inclusive approach.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender Equality, Women Empowerment, Indian society, Constitutional Provisions and Social Justice.

I. Introduction

Movement and ideology that seeks to impart equality and justice to women in the social, cultural, economic and political framework of the Indian society is termed as Feminism in India. It aims to question patriarchy, gender discrimination and unequal power relations that limit women's rights and opportunities. The beginnings of Indian feminism are to be found in the social reform activities of the nineteenth century that called for women's education, widow remarriage and the end of the oppressive practices of sati and child marriage.³ Feminism was strengthened in post-independence India by the constitutional principle of equality and the rise of the women's movements that spoke of dowry, violence, harassment at the workplace, etc.⁴ Today, Indian feminism has grown to accommodate a multitude of perspectives around legal change and social consciousness and empowerment. It continues to respond to past and present issues affecting women in today's fast-changing society.⁵

Concept and Definition of Feminism

Feminism is a socio-political and philosophical movement to promote gender equality and to tackle the discrimination, oppression and unequal power relations that exist within patriarchy. Feminism comes from the Latin word 'femina' (woman) and is defined as the belief in the equality of the sexes rather than the superiority of women. It stresses that gender inequalities are socially produced and reproduced in institutions like the family, the school, the religion, the economy and the state.⁶ Feminism is grounded in the fact that women's personal experiences are connected to the broader

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³ Chaudhuri, M. (2006). Feminism in India: The tale and the telling. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 13(2).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/097152150601300201>

⁴ Agnes, F. (1999). *Law and gender inequality: The politics of women's rights in India*. Oxford University Press.

⁵ Anagol, P. (2006). *The emergence of feminism in India, 1850–1920*. Routledge.

⁶ Forbes, G. (1996). *Women in modern India*. Cambridge University Press.



socio-political context, to the extent that it can be summarized by the saying “the personal is political.”⁷

Phases of Feminism in India

First Phase (19th Century – Early 20th Century):

This phase was linked to the social reform movements and aimed to combat the negative practices of Sati, child marriage, purdah and the marginalisation of widows. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Savitribai Phule were also great reformers who advocated for women's education and social rights. This time helped to pave the way for gender sensitivity and change.⁸

Second Phase (1915-1947): This phase was related to the national movement and saw women actively involved in the struggle for independence and also public life. Some leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali and Annie Besant played their significant role.⁹ The emphasis shifted to political involvement, civil rights, and self-respect, a first step towards political awareness and constitutional rights.¹⁰

Third Phase (Post-1970s – Present): Current phase focuses on legal, social and economic empowerment. It contains efforts to organise movements against dowry, domestic violence, sexual harassment and gender discrimination. This phase is reflected in legislative efforts like those on domestic violence, maternity benefits and harassment in the workplace. Women's organisations and NGOs have contributed to the progress of gender equality and empowerment.¹¹

II. Reviewed Literature

⁷ Ray, R. (1999). *Fields of protest: Women's movements in India*. University of Minnesota Press.

⁸ John, M. E. (2008). *Women's studies in India: A reader*. Penguin Books India.

⁹ Forbes, G. (1996). *Women in modern India*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ Anagol, P. (2006). *The emergence of feminism in India, 1850–1920*. Routledge.

¹¹ Gandhi, N., & Shah, N. (1992). *The issues at stake: Theory and practice in the contemporary women's movement in India*. Kali for Women.

¹² Dixit, P., & Yadav, V. (2026). *A systematic review of empirical research on gender inequality and women's empowerment in India*. Discover Sustainability, 7(2), 1–15.

Even though the Indian constitution and policy measures have ensured gender equality, gender inequalities still persist in India because of the deeply rooted patriarchal norms. The studies indicated that there are still challenges in the process of identity formation for women, in their employment and social participation (Dixit & Yadav, 2026).¹² Indian feminism has passed several stages, such as in colonial times through social reform movements, in the struggle for independence and in the post-independence era. Some of the early reformers introduced concepts of gender justice, such as the practice of widow remarriage and the abolition of sati, but gender inequalities persist (Jayanthi, 2022).¹³ Patriarchy is an overpowering structural phenomenon that affects women's status in India. It reinforces male dominance, creates restraints for females and works through institutions like family, religion and the economy (Chatterjee & Patra, 2026).¹⁴ Unlike Western feminism, Indian feminism emphasizes intersectionality, bringing in caste, class and colonial histories to consider gender. This broader perspective allows for a more inclusive understanding of women's issues in India (Dwivedi, 2024).¹⁵ There are disparities between women in India in terms of education, healthcare and employment. Access to opportunities and overall well-being are also influenced by socio-economic factors like caste, income and marital status (Raghuvanshi et al., 2025).¹⁶ Feminist literary studies have brought to the fore that Indian literature has been a reflection of women's struggles for identity and autonomy. Although cultural narratives can perpetuate traditional gender roles, they can also serve as tools for resistance and empowerment (Babu

¹³ Jayanthi, T. (2022). *Feminism in India: A historical perspective*. NIU International Journal of Human Rights,

9(2), 101–110.

¹⁴ Chatterjee, A., & Patra, S. C. (2026). *Indian feminism: Historical progress, impact and unresolved issues*.

Loreto College Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 5(1), 12–25.

¹⁵ Dwivedi, P. (2024). *Western feminism and Indian feminism: A comparative study*. International Journal for

Multidisciplinary Research, 6(4), 78–85.

¹⁶ Raghuvanshi, S., Nikam, S. S., Karne, M., & Kothe, S. K. (2025). *Socio-economic determinants and gender*

disparities in India's health outcomes. Journal of Social and Economic Studies, 12(1), 55–70.



& Barathi, 2019).¹⁷ There are various laws enacted by the Government of India to safeguard the rights of women but their implementation is not satisfactory. Feminist scholars argued that societal change is necessary to realize gender equality through legal reforms (Senthil et al., 2023).¹⁸ It is well established that education plays a crucial role in women's empowerment in India. It was found that the education level of women was correlated with increased decision-making authority, employment opportunities and awareness of rights. Gender disparities in literacy, however, persist in the country, particularly in rural regions (Kumar & Sharma, 2021).¹⁹ Domestic abuse, sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women based on dowry are significant issues in India. Feminist scholars argued patriarchal power structures are responsible for such violence, which must be addressed by both the law and changes in society (Kaur, 2020).²⁰ While there's been an uptick in women's workforce participation, there is still a large wage gap, especially in job availability and leadership opportunities. Women's workforce is predominantly in the informal sector, where jobs are often precarious and lack social protection (Desai & Jain, 2019).²¹ The media is very important in developing perceptions for women. In India, the media often has the power to perpetuate gender-stereotyped images of females, as in a majority of cases, though in recent times, there has been a gradual shift to a more empowered and independent female image (Singh, 2022).²²

Research Gap

Studies on Feminism in India have explored various facets of the issue, including historical developments, legal aspects, and socio-cultural aspects of gender inequality. Most of the research, however, has concentrated on individual topics such as violence, education, or employment, or on theoretical frameworks, with no attempt to combine empirical research with feminist analysis. In India, there is a relative paucity of studies that

understandably capture the historical evolution, constitutional provisions and current socio-economic indicators to offer a comprehensive understanding of women's status. In addition, less focus has been placed on the new aspects of intersectionality, digital feminism and the influence of current policy initiatives. Hence, this study attempts to address this lacuna by offering an integrated, multidisciplinary feminist study of the status of women in India, highlighting the issues, successes, and emerging challenges they face.

Objectives of the Study

1. To recognize and study the key issues confronting women in India with a feminist point of view.
2. To discuss the major achievements and developments of feminist movement in the social, economic and political arena within India.
3. To understand the new challenges and evolving facets of the Feminism Movement in today's Indian society.

III. Methodology

The approach adopted in the present study is secondary data-based research methods to investigate the status of women in India from a feminist perspective. It is a descriptive and analytical research design that uses a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. The data is gathered from secondary sources like government reports (Census, NFHS, NCRB), constitutional and legal documents, books, research journals and reports of various organizations like NITI Aayog, etc., which are reliable sources. Data collection technique is document analysis and data analysis is done through thematic, comparative and basic statistical analysis to gain an understanding of historical developments, current situation and new dimensions of feminism such as Dalit feminism, tribal feminism and digital feminism. The study is however, limited by the reliance on secondary information and lack of primary field information.

¹⁷ Babu, M. I., & Barathi, S. (2019). *Feminism in India: An Eastern perspective*. International Journal of English and Literature, 10(3), 45–52.

¹⁸ Senthil, N., Vajiram, J., & V., N. (2023). *The misuse of law by women in India: Constitutionality of gender*

bias. Indian Journal of Legal Studies, 8(2), 33–47.

¹⁹ Kumar, A., & Sharma, R. (2021). *Education and women empowerment in India*. International Journal of Social

Sciences, 10(3), 67–75.

²⁰ Kaur, R. (2020). *Violence against women in India: Issues and perspectives*. Journal of Gender Studies, 15(2),

112–125.

²¹ Desai, N., & Jain, D. (2019). *Women, work and gender inequality in India*. Oxford University Press.

²² Singh, P. (2022). *Media and women representation in India: A feminist analysis*. Media Watch Journal, 13(1), 45–60.



Feminism in India

Feminism in India represents equal rights, freedom and empowerment of women. It is not restricted to social reform issues, but is also applicable to education, work, politics and digital platforms. Women have now been given a voice and are fighting gender inequality, oppression and injustice.²³ For example, Indian women can share their stories and fight for sexual harassment cases in the workplace through the MeToo movement. Moreover, the government has initiated programs such as the “Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana” and “Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao” to empower women economically and educationally. Women have also been active in politics today. Women leaders such as Mamata Banerjee and Smriti Irani have not only played a part in the political decision-making process but also spread awareness about women's rights.²⁴

Nature of Feminist Movements in India

The feminist movements in India have taken various forms and are influenced by the social, legal, political and cultural landscape. Socially, these movements have been concerned with the elimination of child marriage, dowry, domestic violence, discrimination in education and employment. Women's and grassroots groups have been instrumental in raising awareness and promoting gender equality at the community level.²⁵ Feminist activism has also helped to bring about some important changes at the law level, such as the enactment of laws to prohibit dowry, domestic violence and sexual harassment at workplaces, etc. which shows that the law can be used as a mechanism of social change. From a political perspective, feminist movements have focused on women's role in governance and as a result, the constitution has been amended through 73rd, 74th and 106th Amendments to include the women in local self-governance bodies by reserving seats for women. Literature, media, art

and cinema are also seen as the tools of the feminist movements to question the norms of the patriarchy and to redefine women's identities culturally. In general, feminist movements in India are multi-dimensional in nature, which seeking gender justice and social equality.²⁶

The Constitution of India and Women's Rights

The Indian Constitution is well equipped to safeguard and promote women's rights. It ensures that women are treated equally in all legal proceedings by guaranteeing equality before the law and equal protection of laws under Article 14. Article 15 prohibit sex-based discrimination and gives the State the authority to provide particular measures for women in order to advance substantive equality. Equal opportunity for women in public employment is guaranteed under Article 16.²⁷ The judiciary has interpreted the concept of dignity, privacy and reproductive rights of women under the Fundamental Rights in Article 21, which guarantees the right to life and personal liberty.²⁸ The Directive Principles of State Policy are also very important in promoting women's rights. Article 39(a) calls upon the State to ensure adequate means of livelihood to the people of both sexes and Article 39(d) highlights that both men and women should be given equal pay for equal work.²⁹ Also, Article 42 requires just and humane working conditions and maternity relief. These collectively constitute the framework of women empowerment and gender justice in India.³⁰

Achievements of Feminism in India

The efforts of feminism in India have made a tremendous improvement in various social, legal and political fields. Some of its great successes include protective legislation for women, including the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013, which protect women's dignity and rights.

²³ Thaker, Y. Y. (2023). Feminism and women's movement in India. *Vidhyayana – An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal*, 8(4). Retrieved from-

<https://j.vidhyayanacjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/view/910>

²⁴ Dey, S. (2018). #MeToo movement in India: Redefining sexual harassment at workplace. *Economic and*

Political Weekly, 53(42), 17–20.

²⁵ Ray, R. (1999). *Fields of protest: Women's movements in India*. University of Minnesota Press.

²⁶ Kumari, T., Singh, R., & Mohan Ghosh, S. (2016). Feminist movements in India: A study of Stree Sangharsh,

Forum Against Oppression of Women, Vimochana, and Saheli. *Journal of Dharma*, 41(2), 181–200.

²⁷ Basu, D. D. (2022). *Introduction to the Constitution of India* (25th ed.). LexisNexis.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Deva, S. (2018). *Socio-economic rights in India*. Oxford University Press.

³⁰ Ibid.



There has been a significant improvement in the literacy rate of women in education, with the rate now approximately 71 percent (as per the Census of India 2011). Political empowerment is another significant accomplishment achieved through the 73rd, 74th and 106th Constitutional Amendment giving reservation to women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (33 percent)³¹ and some States have made it 50 percent. Further, women's health access has improved, with NFHS-5 (2019-21) data indicating that the percentage of institutional deliveries and the utilization of maternal health services have increased. The developments have been positive for women's empowerment and rights in India, thus highlighting the feminist movement.

Major Issues and Challenges of Feminism in India: This section covers several key topics and issues associated with Feminism in India.

1. Gender Inequality: The social, economic and political inequalities between men and women are still prevalent in Indian society. Women are discriminated against from birth through education, employment, health and decision making. As per the Global Gender Gap Index 2025, India has been ranked at 131st position among 148 countries, far behind other countries in terms of gender equality. There are grave instances such as son preference and female feticide.³²

2. Gender Inequality in Education: While the gender gap in literacy rate has narrowed, there are still problems in accessing education for women in rural communities, minority groups and marginalised groups. Parents invest less for girls' education and early marriage results in unfinished education. This is evident, as there is a lower literacy rate among women than among men, around 65% female and 82% male.³³ In addition, many girls leave school

between 15-18 years old because of menstrual problems, lack of sanitary facilities and conservative society.³⁴

3. Economic Exploitation and Employment Inequality: Women earn less than men, are hired on temporary contracts and do not receive the same working conditions. Economic value is not given to domestic labour and care work. It is a huge feminist problem that the exploitation of women working in the unorganised sector is a problem. Women are paid less, on average, women earn 73% of men's income and this figure is even lower in many sectors.³⁵ Domestic labour and care are predominantly shouldered by women. On average, women spend 289 minutes per day on unpaid domestic work, which is almost 3 times more than men.³⁶

4. Domestic Violence and Gender Based Violence: Issues of domestic violence against women, dowry harassment, rape, sexual assault and trafficking of women are common in India. Victims lack justice in the face of laws, social pressure, police and administrative apathy and delays. Approximately 30% of Indian women have experienced physical, emotional or sexual violence at some point in their lives.³⁷ The NCRB 2022-2023 data revealed that there were 445,256 cases of hate crime registered in India against women, and the most common type was cruelty/domestic violence by relatives/husband (with around 31.4% of cases).³⁸ This is a significant type of domestic and interpersonal violence.

5. Dowry System: Dowry is one of the most significant causes of the exploitation of women and is a social evil. It results in mental harassment, domestic violence and dowry deaths. The complete removal of the dowry system is the demand of feminism. The National Crime Records Bureau has published that millions of cases have been registered under the Dowry Prohibition Act and IPC Section

³¹ Government of India. (1993). *The Constitution (Seventy-Third & Seventy-fourth Amendment) Act, 1992*.

Ministry of Law and Justice.

³²World Economic Forum. (2025). *Global Gender Gap Report 2025*. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2025> (Report shows India ranked 131/148).

³³ Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (2011). *Census of India 2011: Literacy and level of education*. Government of India.

³⁴ UNICEF. (2011). *The state of the world's children 2011: Adolescence—An age of opportunity*. United Nations

Children's Fund.

³⁵ International Labour Organization. (2018). *Global wage report 2018/19: What lies behind gender pay gaps*.

International Labour Office.

³⁶National Statistical Office. (2019). *Time use in India, 2019*. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India.

³⁷ World Health Organization. (2013). *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and*

health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence. World Health Organization.

³⁸ National Crime Records Bureau. (2023). *Crime in India 2022*. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.



498A. Moreover, between 2018-2022, thousands of cases of dowry and domestic violence were reported, which showed that the issue of dowry and domestic violence is a serious problem in India today.³⁹

6. Marriage and Family Rights: Women are not given equal rights in marriage, divorce, inheritance and property. A significant issue with regard to feminism is gender discrimination in personal law (Hindu, Muslim, Christian etc.). The debate on the Uniform Civil Code is also related to this. In 2024, the NCCW received 25,743 complaints of harassment of women, including around 6237 (24%) cases of domestic violence.⁴⁰

7. Limited Political Representation: In Indian women's political participation is confined. Women are grossly under-represented in Parliament and in State Assemblies. The Women Reservation Bill had been a prime demand of feminist movement for long. The data revealed that the representation of women in the legislatures of India, with only 14.3% women in the Lok Sabha as MPs, is barely 15 percent since independence, and the situation is no different in other states.⁴¹ Though women are proposed to be reserved at panchayat level, their participation is less at National level.

8. Health and Reproductive Rights: Women are confronted with several issues related to nutrition, maternal health, menstrual hygiene and reproductive rights. Poor access to health care services in rural areas is a factor in women's death rates. The proportion of women who would like to avoid pregnancy is 52%, of which around 27% do not have access to modern contraceptive methods, thus having an unmet need for contraception.⁴² This results in these births and unwanted pregnancies. NFHS-5 found that only 10 percent of women can make their health decisions without their husbands' advice and

just 11 percent think domestic violence is acceptable if a woman does not have sexual relations with her husband.⁴³ The total fertility rate (TFR) in India is about 1.9 children per woman, which is below the global average (2.2) and the replacement level (2.1).⁴⁴

10. Socio-Cultural Norms: Women are still perceived as 'confined to home' because of patriarchal thinking. Feminism fights for women's freedom, is governed by principles of honour, respect and modesty. Social bias is highly pervasive in India, as per the social norms data, around 99% of the people in India have some sort of social bias – educational, economic, political against women.⁴⁵ The NARI survey (2025) shows that around 40% of the female population feel unsafe in the cities, which is due to sexual harassment, gang violence, domestic violence, etc.⁴⁶

10. Women's Image in Digital and Media: The objectification of women in media and social media, cyber harassment and trolling have become a new feminist issue of modern times. To be a feminist, one must portray women with dignity and empowerment. Women's participation in mobile internet in India is about 33% lower than men, and there is a gap in their access and use of the digital world.⁴⁷ Only about 33% of women use the internet, there is a huge gender difference, according to a report by the United Nations. Digital access is biased towards gender.⁴⁸

IV. Suggestions

To improve feminism in India, it is important to have a multi-dimensional approach instead of just giving legal equality to women; the social attitudes, economic structures and inclusive representation are equally important. The Indian Constitution has established provisions for gender

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ National Commission for Women. (2025, January 2). *Dowry torture, domestic violence remain serious worry:*

NCW data. The Times of India.
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/dowry-torture-domestic-violence-remain-serious-worry-ncw-data/articleshow/116864914.cms>

⁴¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2024). *Women in national parliaments: Situation as of 1 January 2024.* Inter-

Parliamentary Union.

⁴² International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) & ICF. (2021). *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-*

5), 2019–21: India. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ United Nations Development Programme. (2023). *Breaking down gender biases: Shifting social norms towards*

gender equality (Gender Social Norms Index 2023). UNDP.

⁴⁶ NARI Foundation. (2025). *NARI survey report 2025: Women's safety and lived experiences in Indian cities.*

NARI Foundation.

⁴⁷ GSMA. (2023). *The mobile gender gap report 2023.* GSMA.

⁴⁸ United Nations. (2023). *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2023.* United Nations.



equality in Articles 14, 15, and 16, but there is still a gap between law and practice, that has constrained the impact of feminists. An important one is the shift in mindsets, which should occur in the process of education and socialization, from a patriarchal perspective. UNESCO (2020) highlights that introducing equality and challenging stereotypes in gender-sensitive education at school and college levels can help.

It is also critical that women-related legislation be effectively implemented. Though the introduction of new laws like the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013, their implementation is weak and there are low rates of conviction (NCRB, 2022). Enhancing institutions and sensitising police and judiciary can enhance justice delivery.

Economic empowerment is essential for feminist gains. Skill development, equal pay, safe workplaces and childcare support can help increase the participation of women in the workforce and lower dependency and promote inclusive growth (World Bank, 2023). However, Dalit, Adivasi, minority and rural women also need to be represented, and India's feminism needs an intersectional approach for this (Rege, 2006). Moreover, bridging the digital gender gap can strengthen feminist activism and awareness (GSMA, 2023). Overall, it is necessary to keep reforming and transforming society so as to put the ideals of feminism into practice.

V. Conclusion

The study remarked that the status of women in India has changed significantly over the years, thanks to social reform movements and the constitutional protection as well as feminist activism. Despite progress in education, legal rights, political participation and healthcare, gender inequality remains in different forms, such as in the economy, in society and in terms of gender-based violence. The analysis showed that Indian feminism is unique in its intersectional nature, which is influenced by caste, class, religion and regional differences and can only be effectively realised in policy action with context-based approaches. Furthermore, new issues, like digital inequalities, new employment market trends and new forms of gender discrimination require an additional feminist involvement. The study concluded that substantive gender equality could be achieved in India not only through legal and institutional changes but also through changes in society's attitudes and structures. Policy action, education and social awareness need to be integrated

approaches that are holistic and inclusive, in order to improve the empowerment of women and achieve sustainable and equitable development.

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