Dialego

Gender and Politics

Edited by

Dr. Sayoni Choudhuri Patra

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING 2025-26

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DIALEGO - GENDER AND POLITICS

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING 2025-26

Edited by **Dr. Sayoni Choudhuri Patra**

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I extend our heartfelt thanks to all our contributors, and especially to Prof. Arundhati Bhattacharyya, Dr. Sreya Maitra, and Dr. Gargi Adhikari, for generously contributing their scholarly papers even after the conference, thereby enriching this volume with their insightful research.

I am deeply indebted to Dr. Sujata Chowdhury for her continuous presence, guidance, and unwavering support at every stage of this process. Her mentorship has been invaluable.

A special word of appreciation goes to the young academicians whose research contributions reflect both promise and intellectual rigour. We also acknowledge with admiration the efforts of all student contributors. Their papers underwent a rigorous process of peer review, plagiarism checks, and multiple revisions. Their perseverance, commitment to research, and willingness to refine their work stand as a testament to the spirit of academic inquiry that *Dialego* seeks to nurture.

I would also like to extend our sincere gratitude to all our reviewers for their time, expertise, and constructive feedback, which significantly enhanced the quality of this publication.

Our heartfelt thanks go to our sponsors—State Bank of India, The Apowickery Candle, Write from the Heart, Trendz Botique by Deepa Battoo, Zainab's Kitchen , Teach for India, Ravel, and Veloure Candles—for their generous support, which made the conference and its proceedings possible.

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I would also like to place on record my deep appreciation for my colleague, Dr. Sreeparna Dasgupta, whose support in the planning and execution of both the conference and the proceedings has been indispensable.

Finally, I thank everyone who, in ways big and small, contributed to making *Dialego* a meaningful academic platform and this publication a reality.

Dr. Sayoni Choudhuri Patra

Head, Department of Political Science

Loreto College. Kolkata

May 2026

Foreword

Gender & Politics

The modern world has multi-layers of colours that need diverse perspectives for understanding. Political world has certain specific approach which needs a specific viewpoint for its comprehension. Gender is one such lens through which politics can be understood. In both the everyday lives and political fields, gender and politics are interchangeably used to present the overall image. The significance of this theme is not only presented in its capacity to represent the entrenched inequalities but also in its potential for altering the political approaches toward greater inclusivity and a sense of justice. Gender continues to be an influential element across the globe, that brings forward to influence the factors regarding who are participating in the field of politics and whose voices are identified and marginalized. Thus, it becomes crucial and involuntary to investigate politics via the lens of gendered perspectives, as the modern social structures are constantly confronting with the concerns of democratic responsibilities and equity.

The connection of gender and politics is found everywhere; as is currently evident in the prolonged disparities which characterize the political agencies across the world. Women and gender-driven marginalized communities, despite having decades of advocacy and reformation, yet remain under-represented or deprived across the politically decision-making institutions. Such a deprived image of women is not only a numerical concern; but also illustrates an in-depth approach towards century-driven misalignment in

perceptions that has been engraved within social, economic and political procedures. The expectations and norms associated with gender in certain times shape such access to the resources, leadership roles along with opportunities, thus, resonating a theme of exclusion. Moreover, gender and politics is seen to be presenting crucial information across the approaches via which sustenance and operations by power is presented.

The feminist movements across the globe have been vested with the honor of playing transformative roles across challenging the conventional political representation. Initiating from the preliminary struggles for suffrage to the contemporary campaigns illustrating challenges like reproductive rights, workplace (pay) quality and political representation; highlights that these movements have evolved and expanded its boundaries of what constitutes political participation. They carry redefined citizenship for involving not only formal rights but also substantive forms of equality and dignity. By putting forward a collective dedication to bringing in advanced gender equality approaches, global guidelines and agreements have furthermore institutionalized these aspirations and preferences. Despite having such a pathway, the omnipresent nature of the gender-driven discriminatory actions and violence illustrates that these dedications might remain unevenly contested, thus, reducing the requirement for a continued assimilation and critical reflection processes.

The above-described paragraph highlights the international image, whereas, in the Indian context, the reciprocal matrix of cultural norms, traditions, democracy and social hierarchies are responsible to not only shape gender and politics but also equally present in the decision-making processes. The Indian constitutional infrastructure ensures the presence of

equality and fosters a robust foundation for gender justice-based systems. The lived realities however are presenting a different picture; showcasing that numerous women and marginalized gender groups are revealed to have relevant gaps within the legal provisions and the actual practice. The concept of political participation and leadership opportunities for women are ceremonially restricted by forwarding social-cultural norms, agency-based biases and economic situations. Even though, India as a Nation has seen notable examples of women in positions of political power, these instances are often coexisting with widespread barriers like gender-related violence, restricted presence towards resources like education and engraved gender-based stereotypes.

As per the recent development (latest as of April, 2026), the policy-based development promising for women representation in Indian politics saw a new turn; with Women's Reservation Bill/Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam the developing approach of gender politics in India is showcasing evolving changes. This legislation highlights to have a relevant impact in order to increase women's representation in the legislative agencies, resonating a broader identification of the relevance of inclusive governance. This policy at the same time also raises significant enquiries about its incorporation, the inclusion of the diverse groups of women and the potential of drastically changing the current political frameworks. These raised questions feature that the dynamic and contested nature of gender politics always have a partnership with novel complications and challenges.

Across the formal political bodies, gender is known to play a critical role which modifies the experiences and perspectives of an individual about peace, security and approach towards conflict. One of the pivotal actors in advocating peace procedures are women, who are seen to be increasing their

contributing in roles in tables of negotiations, forwarding as activists and mediators. Their participation had been assimilated towards a more sustainable and inclusive peace outcomes, highlighting the relevance of diversified perspectives in resolving conflicts. Women are seen to often bearing the imbalanced implications of violence and instability, outlining that the gender-based dimensions of international crises are still ongoing.

The modern political landscape is moreover complicated by the rise of technological expansion, globalization and the transcending dynamics connected with both the society and political presence. Another association will the inclusion of social media or digital media which has been deemed as an essential platform for advocating for expression and activism; presenting to have a crucial role in creating spaces of protest for marginalized voices and to challenge the dominant narratives across gender and political factors. However, this space is also susceptible to new form of online harassment featuring digital gap and resource limitation, essentially to women and marginalized sections.

These proceedings forward the spirit of the National Conference to create an interdisciplinary platform for dialogue on gender and politics, exploring the ways in which gender shapes political processes, identities, and structures of power. It engaged with themes such as feminist political thought, representation, corporate narratives, and globalization, emphasizing the need to move beyond conventional political frameworks to recognize everyday forms of resistance, agency, and participation. In this context, the papers presented by our esteemed keynote speakers and panelists added significant depth and perspective to the understanding of gender and politics. By connecting Indian experiences with broader global realities, their contributions enriched discussions on

authority, inequality, representation, and justice, while also encouraging critical reflection on long-held assumptions. The insights offered through these scholarly interventions ultimately strengthened the seminar's objective of fostering more inclusive, informed, and equitable approaches to policy and political engagement.

The paper by Dr. Arundhati Bhattacharyya, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Burdwan. Prof. Bhattacharyya's presentation focused on the relationship between gender and political phenomena, like representation, participation etc. It examines how gender identity shapes political processes, political institutions, power dynamics, decision-making and actions. It also discusses how men have been historically dominant in politics, which has further led to unequal power structures. Researchers study the voting behavior, campaign activities, activities and political engagement of women, in the political horizon. Today, more and more women are participating in the political field as voters and as candidates. However, women's ability to freely exercise their political right is often hampered by various factors, like illiteracy, lack of economic resources, lack of self-confidence, patriarchal societal expectations etc. Gender equality is far from being achieved. Politics is a part of society. So, the societal environment will always have its repercussions on the political scenario. Women's participation in politics is necessary in order to reflect the views of nearly half the civilization. An analysis of the nature and extent of women's participation is therefore essential in any political system, particularly, a developing one. The present lecture seeks to examine some aspects of women's political life in West Bengal. The nature of political participation by men has been analyzed to provide a comparative view.

The paper by Dr. Sreya Maitra, Assistant Professor, Jadavpur University, *Violence Against Women in Sri Lanka in the Civil War and Post-Civil War Periods* examines the multiple narratives of the women in Sri lanka . They are free citizens enjoying adult suffrage since independence, but the post-colonial political trajectory of Sri Lanka has challenged their liberty repeatedly, particularly harshly for women from minority communities. Women from Sinhalese and Tamil communities were severely affected by the civil war in Sri Lanka and the legacy of war continues to impose hardships. Seeking to set the agenda for reforms, women lack information on their missing relatives, face displacement from their land, suffer from economic deprivation, psychological trauma, vulnerability to sexual violence and exploitation, along with a militarised environment that reinforces their victimization on an everyday basis. Promises made by the central government to the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2015 have failed to materialise even as the urgent economic and psychosocial needs of all conflict-affected groups remain unmet. As women carry the legacy of war as a burden in their everyday lives, their role in shaping transitional justice policies cannot be ignored. The government largely has ignored the report of its Consultations Task Force (CTF) on national reconciliation processes, which conferred widely with women, particularly those women who reside in conflict-affected areas. This gap in expectation of rights and delivery of justice stems largely from the lack of representation of women in Sri Lanka's political affairs. For decades after independence, the proportion of women in Sri Lanka's parliament stagnated at around 4 per cent. This has contributed to reinforcing conservative and patriarchal perceptions of women in Sri Lankan society. As women continue to grapple with gender-based violence, the UN Population Fund reports that 90% of Sri Lankan women

and girls have faced sexual harassment in public buses and trains, while 1 in 4 women report having experienced physical and/or sexual violence since age 15 (Department of Census & Statistics, 2019). Efforts to end violence against women often face barriers, including legal gaps and social stigma. The lecture seeks to connect the gendered narratives of the past and present for women in Sri Lanka to find the answer to the pressing question: is the Sri Lankan democracy doing enough to ensure the rights and security of its women?

The paper Sustainability and Gender: A Reflection Through the Security Paradigm was presented by Dr. Gargi Adhikari, *Visiting Faculty, Symbiosis School of Liberal Arts, Pune, and the Interdisciplinary School of Science, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune.* The paper examines the concept of sustainability through the lens of human security and gender, offering a critical perspective on traditional "top-down" scientific and technocratic approaches. It argues that sustainability must be understood not merely as an environmental or technological concern, but as a deeply social issue, closely intertwined with questions of energy justice and the capabilities of individuals. Focusing on the Indian context, the study highlights how environmental degradation and energy poverty disproportionately affect women. Women, who bear the primary responsibility for unpaid care work and the collection of essential resources such as water and fuel, are particularly vulnerable to ecological stress and infrastructural inadequacies. These challenges not only reinforce existing gender inequalities but also limit women's opportunities for social and economic advancement. Drawing on the framework of feminist political ecology, the paper emphasizes the need to move beyond conventional policy approaches and instead foreground the lived experiences and traditional knowledge systems of women. It argues that sustainable development

cannot be achieved without addressing structural inequalities and ensuring the meaningful inclusion of women in climate governance and energy-related decision-making processes.

The papers assembled in this volume collectively bear witness to the richness, complexity, and urgency of gender as a category of political analysis. Spanning questions of constitutional reform, transitional justice, digital activism, electoral representation, bureaucratic exclusion, and cultural resistance, the contributions traverse disciplinary and geographical boundaries while remaining anchored in a shared commitment: the dismantling of structures that systematically subordinate, silence, and render invisible those who do not conform to the dominant axes of power. From the corridors of the Indian legislature to the conflict zones of Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, from the lived precarity of Dalit women and LGBTQIA+ communities to the symbolic politics of comic book heroines, each paper reminds us that gender is never an isolated variable but always entangled with caste, class, religion, and nationality. Together, they do not merely describe a problem — they enact a method, demonstrating that rigorous, reflexive, and intersectional scholarship is itself a form of political engagement. It is in this spirit that the present volume is being offered to its readers not as a conclusion to a conversation, but as an invitation to continue and deepen the conversation.

Message from Teacher in Charge

It is a privilege to present this volume of peer-reviewed research articles emerging from *Dialego 2025–2026*, the Annual Students' Meet and National Conference, organised by the Department of Political Science, Loreto College, which this year focused on the theme of Gender and Politics. This proceedings volume represents the culmination of rigorous academic exchange, bringing together diverse scholarly perspectives that engage critically with contemporary questions of gender, power, identity, and structural inequality.

The conference provided an important intellectual platform for interdisciplinary dialogue, where academicians, researchers, and young students came together to explore the complexities of gendered experiences across social, political, cultural, and institutional contexts. The selected papers reflect this spirit of engagement, offering nuanced and empirically grounded analyses of issues such as gender-based violence, political representation, foreign policy, digital feminism, LGBTQIA+ rights, intersectionality, and state mechanisms of governance and control.

Collectively, the contributions underscore that gender is not a singular or static category but a dynamic field shaped by intersecting structures of power and resistance. The articles included in this volume demonstrate how contemporary scholarship continues to interrogate dominant narratives while amplifying marginalized voices and lived realities.

Each paper has undergone a rigorous peer-review process, ensuring academic integrity, methodological soundness, and scholarly relevance. This volume thus stands as a testament

to the commitment of the academic community to uphold standards of excellence while fostering critical and socially engaged research.

I extend my sincere gratitude to Dr. Sayoni Choudhuri Patra, Head of the Department, whose vision, leadership, and sustained efforts were instrumental in the successful organisation and publication of *Dialogue 2025–2026*. Her commitment to advancing scholarly inquiry and academic collaboration has been central to the realization of this proceedings volume. I also acknowledge the contributors, reviewers, and members of the organising committee, whose collective dedication has made this publication possible.

It is my hope that this volume will serve not only as a scholarly resource but also as an invitation for further reflection, dialogue, and research on the evolving contours of gender and society.

Dr. A. Nirmala

Teacher In Charge
Loreto College, Kolkata

Young Academicians and Student Papers Section

Emerging Voices in Political Inquiry

The Young Academicians and Student Papers Section forms an integral part of the proceedings of *Dialego 2025–2026*. Conceived as a platform for encouraging academic engagement and critical inquiry among young scholars, this section showcases selected young scholars and student contributions presented during the conference. The papers reflect the intellectual curiosity, analytical rigor, and interdisciplinary perspectives of students engaging with contemporary debates on gender, justice, Dalit Rights, democracy, and political transformation. These contributions demonstrate the ability of emerging scholars to critically examine pressing socio-political concerns while situating their analyses within broader theoretical and empirical frameworks.

The papers included in this section have been reviewed and edited for publication purposes. Collectively, they represent the spirit of *Dialego* as a democratic academic space that values participation, inclusivity, and critical reflection.

Young Academicians:

Nirbachon Ar Iccha: Women as Subjects in the Bengali Muslim Ghoti-Bangal Divide by Bridget Teresa Joseph.

This paper examines how women's *nirbachon* (choice) and *iccha* (desire) are shaped and politicized within the Bengali Muslim Ghoti–Bangal divide. Moving beyond cultural stereotypes, it argues that women's lives become symbolic sites where communities assert modernity, piety, and moral

superiority. Based on qualitative narratives, the study reveals that choices regarding education, marriage, mobility, and veiling are socially regulated, morally evaluated, and often internalized by women themselves. Agency emerges as negotiated rather than autonomous, shaped by family and community expectations. Ultimately, the paper highlights how women's bodies and decisions sustain intra-community hierarchies while calling for a rethinking of gender justice and depoliticized autonomy.

The Ineffectiveness of UN Resolution 1325: The case of Afghanistan by Rituja Ghosh

This paper examines the limitations of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda through the case of Afghanistan. It argues that despite normative commitments to women's participation, protection, and rights, implementation remains weak due to geopolitical interests, patriarchal structures, and lack of contextual adaptation. The Taliban's return to power highlights the failure of global frameworks to ensure accountability and safeguard women's rights. Using recent data, the paper shows how Afghan women face intensified insecurity, especially during crises. It concludes that localized, context-sensitive approaches and a broader human security framework are essential for meaningful progress.

An Enquiry into Patriarchal Indian Jurisprudence in the Post-Nirbhaya Era by Samudranil Bose and Sorbani Bhowmick

The paper examines how the Indian judiciary handles rape and gender-based violence from a feminist perspective. It argues that despite post-Nirbhaya legal reforms, patriarchal attitudes persist within the justice system. Using feminist and socio-legal approaches, it highlights issues such as delayed

trials, poor investigations, and victim-blaming. Through cases like Nirbhaya, Unnao, Pollachi, and Abhaya, it shows that justice is often reactive and influenced by public pressure. The paper concludes that despite reforms, true gender justice remains limited, calling for systemic changes and a more gender-sensitive judiciary.

Kink, Crime, and the Gaze: Negotiating Gendered Power, Sexuality, Madness, and Political Resistance in Gotham's Harley Quinn and Catwoman by Srijita Banerjee

The paper examines Harley Quinn and Catwoman as political figures within comic narratives, arguing that their representations of madness, crime, and kink-coded femininity challenge patriarchal systems of control. It situates Gotham as a metaphor for gendered governance, where institutions construct female deviance as a means of discipline. Harley's madness and Catwoman's criminality emerge as forms of resistance shaped by institutional and socioeconomic inequalities. Through feminist and cultural theory, the paper shows how both characters reclaim agency by subverting the male gaze, redefining sexuality, and destabilizing normative femininity. Ultimately, their narratives transform deviance into a political tool for resistance and alternative feminist imagination.

Feminist Foreign Policy: A Comparative Analysis of The Swedish and The Indian Foreign Policies: by Tiasha Maity

This paper examines Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) through a comparative analysis of Sweden and India, highlighting how gender perspectives reshape international relations. It argues that Sweden has successfully institutionalized FFP through its Three Rs (Rights, Representation, and Resources) framework. Rights, representation, and resources embedding gender equality across diplomacy, security, and climate policy. In

contrast, India adopts a fragmented and implicit approach, constrained by patriarchal structures, security priorities, and implementation gaps. While India has made commitments through global forums and initiatives, these remain largely rhetorical. The paper concludes that despite contextual differences, integrating intersectional and inclusive gender frameworks is essential for achieving equitable and effective foreign policy outcomes.

Student Papers analyses:

Mata Hari vs the State: Inside the Androcentric Intelligence by Nasreen Sultana and Rayna Mukherjee.

The paper Mata Hari vs the State: Inside the Androcentric Intelligence analyses how Mata Hari's execution during World War I was less a matter of proven espionage and more a product of gendered scapegoating within androcentric state systems. It argues that intelligence institutions, media narratives, and nationalist anxieties converged to construct her as a symbolic enemy. Drawing on archival intelligence files, the study highlights the absence of concrete evidence and exposes how suspicion replaced proof. By examining literary reinterpretations, it further shows how her identity was reshaped over time, ultimately presenting Mata Hari as a victim of political necessity, gender bias, and institutional failure.

Gender Quotas and Political Representation: Successes and Paradoxes Across Democracies by Sambhavi Ghoshal and Banshika Neog.

Gender quotas have become a key mechanism to enhance women's political representation globally, addressing structural exclusion in democratic systems. Adopted in over 110 countries, quotas—such as reserved seats, legislative

mandates, and party quotas—have improved both descriptive and substantive representation. However, their effectiveness varies due to differences in political culture, institutional design, and enforcement. While democracies are more likely to adopt quotas, persistent patriarchal norms often limit their transformative potential. The study highlights comparative experiences across regions, emphasizing that quotas can advance gender equality but also produce paradoxes like tokenism, elite capture, and constrained participation.

The Aesthetics of Resistance: Digital Feminism, Visibility, and Backlash in Contemporary Gender Politics by Madhubanti Chowdhury and Snehal

This paper examines the paradox of digital feminist visibility, where online platforms simultaneously enable resistance and intensify repression, especially in the Global South. Using a transnational intersectional framework and mixed-methods analysis of 2,700 digital artifacts, it compares movements like #Labour and #MahsaAmini to reveal algorithmic bias, digital colonialism, and uneven amplification. While Western activism benefits from visibility without reprisal, Global South movements face surveillance, censorship, and backlash. The study highlights how digital spaces function as sites of power and "virtual statecraft," advocating for equitable governance, algorithmic transparency, and decentralized platforms to transform visibility into a tool for sustained feminist resistance.

The Weaponization of Women's Bodies: Systematic Gendered and Intersectional Violence in the Conflict-ridden Area by Aankita Roy Chowdhury and Khakshan Jahan.

This paper explores the weaponization of women's bodies in conflict zones, arguing that gendered violence operates as a systemic tool of political and social control. Using an

intersectional framework, it connects cases such as the Partition of India, the Kunan Pashpora mass rape, the Manipur conflict, and violence against Palestinian women. It demonstrates how women's bodies become symbolic battlegrounds for asserting communal honour and dominance. The study also highlights the marginalisation of Dalit women in politics through proxy representation. By combining historical narratives and contemporary case studies, the paper underscores how caste, gender, and conflict intersect to sustain structural violence while calling for justice and recognition.

Impact of Self-Help Groups on Women: Better Economics for Better Politics by Dhruva Ganguly

The paper examines the impact of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) on women's empowerment in Kolkata, arguing that economic independence is essential for meaningful political participation. Using primary data from 50 SHGs and secondary sources, it evaluates economic, social, familial, and political dimensions of empowerment. Findings show improvements in household decision-making, financial awareness, and reduction in domestic violence, alongside confidence and mobility. However, political empowerment remains limited, with low awareness and participation in governance. The study concludes that while SHGs foster gradual transformation and solidarity, stronger policy support, training, and awareness initiatives are required to translate socio-economic gains into political empowerment.

India's LGBTQIA+ Community: A Peculiar Paradox by Abhishikta Paul

The paper argues that India's LGBTQIA+ community experiences symbolic recognition without real support. Despite legal visibility, they face policy gaps, economic hardship, and social exclusion. These issues are shaped by

politics and worsened by caste, class, and gender inequalities. It concludes that true justice requires structural reforms, resource redistribution, and genuine political representation, not just superficial inclusion.

The underrepresentation of Dalit Women in Indian Electoral Politics before Mayawati: Analyzing the social response of the general mass through the lens of casteist and patriarchal structures by Aive Chakraborty

This paper examines the historical underrepresentation of Dalit women in Indian electoral politics prior to the rise of Mayawati, situating their exclusion within entrenched casteist and patriarchal structures. It argues that Dalit women faced a "triple burden" of caste, class, and gender, which restricted their political participation through social stigma, violence, lack of education, and institutional barriers. The study highlights how political spaces were dominated by upper-caste and male actors, while even reform movements overlooked Dalit women. Ultimately, the paper positions Mayawati's emergence as a transformative rupture that challenged these systemic exclusions and redefined possibilities for Dalit women's political agency.

Gender and Politics: Get Real About Power, Who's Represented, and Fighting Back by Shreya Roy Chowdhury.

This paper examines the structural links between gender and political power, arguing that women's underrepresentation is embedded in institutions, culture, and norms. Drawing on feminist theories—liberal, radical, post-structural, and intersectional—it shows how leadership remains masculinized and exclusionary. It evaluates mechanisms like quotas and India's constitutional reforms, noting gains alongside persistent barriers such as party gatekeeping, violence, and resource inequality. The paper highlights intersectional

exclusions across caste, class, and identity, and concludes that equality requires systemic transformation, policy reform, and sustained feminist resistance to democratize power.

Bureaucracy, Gender and State: A Critical Study of Women's Vulnerability in Assam's NRC Regime by Sujata Das

The paper argues that Assam's NRC process, though presented as neutral, disproportionately excluded women due to rigid documentation requirements and existing gender inequalities. Many women lacked essential records because of patriarchal norms, marriage migration, poverty, and environmental factors. It shows that bureaucracy reinforces structural inequalities and that gender, along with religion, class, and geography, intensified exclusion—especially for marginalized groups. The study concludes that NRC is a political mechanism that produces gendered vulnerability, highlighting the need to rethink citizenship to ensure equality and inclusion.

Gender and Politics

Dr. Arundhati Bhattacharyya
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Gender and politics studies the intersection between gender studies and political science. Gender and politics scholars are becoming important in the wider community of political science. They focus on the aspect that women were excluded as political actors. Women's underrepresentation needs to be corrected. The feminist political scientists were aware of the 'gendered' nature of political mechanisms and activities. The study of gender and politics is broad and impartial. It is diverse, rich and substantial in nature. "The presence of the 'critical mass' of women in the legislature expresses the legislative attention to women's issues" (Sarah Childs, Mona Lena Krook, 2016). The approach provides a platform to scientifically study the impacts of patriarchy on representation in various contexts. It is a field which also helps us to understand the reasons behind the less representation of women historically in formal and informal politics.

The present paper has provided a broader view of the relation between gender and politics. Gender and politics examines how gender shapes political institutions and actions, the processes by which the historical dominance of men in politics has aggravated the unequal power structure. Historically, gender has been the basic determinant of the manner in which resources were distributed, the ways the policies were set and the means of participation in decision-making. It has to be kept in mind that the interaction is intersectional.

The keynote lecture had been categorized into three segments: The Part I focusses on the concept of gender and politics. Part II concentrates on the role of the women members in the Indian Constituent Assembly and Part III delves into the role of Indian women in peacekeeping under the United Nations. The paper tries to show that the contribution of Indian women is very positive and they had well-grounded role, whether in the Constituent Assembly of India and in the United Nations peacekeeping force.

Part I

Gender plays a very important role in sketching the political landscape in the world, including India. Be it representation, policy making, reservation or governance, gender is applicable everywhere. Sustainable Development Goal 5 supports achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Gender and politics' area of study has broad scope. It studies the interaction between gender and formal and informal politics. It provides a platform to scientifically examine the impact of patriarchy on political participation and voting behaviour in different situations. This field helps us to understand the tools to understand the reasons behind less representation of women in politics. The whole idea of democracy and citizenship was centered on men. Historically, women were excluded from the positions of power. Their voice was suppressed. They were marginalised against in covert and overt forms. Since the 1970s, the concept of gender and women became significant. Traditionally, political participation of women was devalued and thought to be undesirable. Even now, according to Ranjana Kumari, physical presence in decision-making structures is still not the same for women like men. To Drude Dahlerup, more women in role models lead to greater encouragement of women to enter the political sphere.

S. Tharu and T. Niranjana have stated: "For all those who invoke gender.....'women' seems to stand in for the subject (agent, addressee, field of inquiry) of feminism itself.....". Again, in India, "women" as a category cannot be classified as they are very much influenced by other identities, like religion and caste (Menon, 2004). To get to understand the whole terrain of the subject is a difficult job. According to John H. Bayes, the subject tries to unmask the "male bias in political concepts and practices"; "adding women" to the current political structure which focuses on political representation and participation in the state and in reconceptualising the political framework (Bayes, 2012). Deborah Carr has observed that women prefer issues relating to the private space, instead of national defence and international relations. Women mostly remain outside national and international politics or are engaged in local politics. Women are 'risk-averse' than men, according to a section of the 'preferences' camp. Many also support the view that women remain out of politics due to their family responsibilities. Compared to men, women have less financial independence (Carr, 2008). There are certain issues that have kept women behind, but they have showed their mettle, wherever they are placed, whether as members of Indian Constituent Assembly or as peacekeepers in the daunting terrain.

Part II

India attained independence in 1947. The Makers in the Constituent Assembly were all stalwarts in their own ways. However, most of us are not aware that there were fifteen women Constitution Makers. They were equally important for the making of the Indian Constitution. Their number was small compared to the male members of the Constitution, but the women members had intellectual, moral and political influence. They did not have token presence in the

Constituent Assembly in India. They were freedom fighters, intellectuals, social reformers, lawyers, educators etc. They raised issues like equality, education, rights, reforms etc. The fifteen members in the Constituent Assembly stated that the disadvantages of history required the policy makers to provide greater opportunities for women. They reiterated the view that political independence is incomplete without "social emancipation" of women. The women members had knowledge about the realities of life. They had their voices heard among the great intellectual leaders in the Constituent Assembly. They asserted their voices in the debates in the Constituent Assembly, which became a precedent for future women leaders of India engaged in constitutional governance. The contribution of the women members laid the moral foundation for feminist jurisprudence in India.

The Constituent Assembly of India established equality in the public sphere. However, among the women members, there was difference of opinion regarding personal laws regarding marriage, divorce and inheritance. This led to a constitutional compromise. Personal laws were largely left untouched in the original Constitution of India, but gender equality was guaranteed as a Constitutional value (Shivani, 2025).

It was expected that Constituent Assembly of India would craft a democratic system, which would inspire India and other nations. The Constitution Framers in India were aware that the famous Western democracies like United States even did not include minority groups and women, so that an inclusive democratic structure can be created. Hansa Mehta supported "social, political and economic justice" in the making of the Indian Constitution, which would benefit all women. The fifteen women members supported public political life for women. These women Makers recognized the need to address the question of gender. Renuka Ray went a

step further in convincing other members of the Constituent Assembly to accept that equality provisions should be part of every personal law of every community. Renuka Ray's words were not taken seriously and she was turned down (Keating, 2007).

The fifteen Constituent Assembly women members in India had been lawyers, social reformers, freedom fighters and they were the ones who fought against the British and the male-dominated political framework. They were fifteen exceptional women members in the Indian Constituent Assembly. It is rather sad that it took so many years of India's independence that now their contributions are being praised and acknowledged. However, the positive aspect is that at least now their contributions are being acclaimed. They were stalwarts and India has been very lucky to have such progressive women as the Makers of the Indian Constitution. With other male members, they worked tirelessly to frame the Indian Constitution, which soon became a model for other Asian and African countries. The women members were, however, not members of the drafting Committee chaired by Dr B. R. Ambedkar, which would have strengthened their contribution. The women members of the Constituent Assembly were Ammu Swaminathan, Annie Mascarene, Begum Aizaz Rasul, Dakshayani Velayudhan, Durgabai Deshmukh, Hansa Jivraj Mehta, Kamla Chaudhry, Leela Roy, Malati Choudhury, Purnima Banerjee, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Renuka Ray, Sarojini Naidu, Sucheta Kripalani and Vijaylakshmi Pandit (Indulia, 2024). The most active women members in the Indian Constituent Assembly were all members of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC). Kamladevi Chattopadhyay, Hansa Mehta and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur were among the founding members of the AIWC. They regularly served in Standing Committees. Hansa

Mehta was the President of AIWC during her election to the Constituent Assembly while Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was a President more than once in the AIWC. Qudsia Aizaz Rasul was the Vice President of AIWC. Renuka Ray led the legal reform movement of AIWC (Chetan, 2023). Here are some of the contributions of the women framers of the Indian Constitution.

Srimati Ammu Swaminathan supported gender equality in the provisions of the Indian Constitution. She was the most vocal regarding rights of women, among all the women Constituent Assembly members. She was a social worker, who was very courageous. She was also a political leader. Ammu Swaminathan contributed to the setting up of the Women's India Association. She held up the reforms for succession, inheritance and marriage. She contributed in the debates in the Constituent Assembly regarding Part III and Part IV of the Indian Constitution.

Srimati Annie Mascarene contributed towards federalism and state integration. She was the representative of Travancore and Cochin Union. She supported the integration of the princely States. She was a lawyer. She supported and promoted the movement for independence of India.

Begum Qudsia Aizaz Rasul was a member of the Constituent Assembly. She was the only Muslim member who represented from a seat in the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council from a non-reserved seat in 1937. She supported secularism. She vehemently opposed minority reservation. She became the voice of the marginalised by contributing to their upliftment. She was also the supporter of inclusive national identity.

Srimati Dakshayani Velayudhan was also a member of the Constituent Assembly. She was the youngest among all of them. She was a Dalit member. She opposed untouchability

and was a staunch supporter of the rights of the marginalised communities. She stood for decentralisation of power in the governance structure of India.

Shrimati Durgabai Deshmukh promoted education of women, social welfare policies and social justice in the early days. She had significant part in leading and organising the Civil Disobedience Movement against the British. She was behind the bars, thrice. She was a staunch supporter for the rights of women. She also voiced her support for separate family courts in independent India, which was enacted in 1984, which was quite late after independence.

Shrimati Hansa Jivraj Mehta emphasized gender justice as part of core debates regarding the Constitution. She played an important role in drafting India's fundamental rights. She was a strong social activist. She founded the Desh Sevika Dal. She was a member of several sub-committees. Fundamental Rights' Sub-committee was a very important sub-committee, of which she was a member. She was a very important supporter for women's rights. In 1946, she was the President of All India Women's Conference (AIWC). It was during this time when she supported the Charter for Women's Rights and Duties. She also handed over the national flag to the Constituent Assembly.

Srimati Kamla Chaudhry had the background and quality of story writing in Hindi. Kamla Chaudhry was part of the Civil Disobedience Movement. She was behind the bars for a number of times. Girls in villages and backward areas were encouraged by her to educate themselves. Till 1952, she served in the Provincial government after India attained independence.

Leela Roy was a distinguished social worker and freedom fighter. She had the distinction of being the only woman who

was elected from Bengal in December 1946. But, soon she left. Her resignation was to protest the partition that was taking place in India. She spent her life in serving for the refugees, their rights and their rehabilitation.

Renuka Roy was elected from West Bengal. She contributed to the minority rights and rights of women. She also supported the legislature, which would have two houses. She vehemently supported the inheritance rights of women in the parental property. Renuka Roy stated a particular and unique fact that the women members opposed the reservation of seats for female population (Rajput & Thakkar, 2023). She forcefully observed that reservation of seats "was an impediment to our growth and an insult to our intelligence and capacity" (Ray, 1947).

Malati Chaudhury was an elected representative of the Constituent Assembly from Orissa. She had the distinction of being the President of Utkal Congress Pradesh Committee. She emphasized on adult education. Malati Chaudhury was imprisoned a number of times. Her contribution to the freedom movement has been appreciated.

Purnima Banerjee was part of the Satyagraha movement. She was the Secretary of the Allahabad Committee of the Indian National Congress. She was from the United Provinces. She encouraged the farmers and trade unions to join the Indian freedom movement. She was a good singer. So, she steered the chorus of "Jana Gana Mana," when it was adopted for the first time as the National Anthem on 24th January, 1950.

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur laid the foundation of the modern healthcare system in India. She is said to be the architect of the public health policy of India. She became the first Health Minister after India got independence. She also supported social and political rights of women. She represented

the United Provinces. She participated in the Quit India Movement. She led, guided and steered protests and processions against the enemies of India. In the Constituent Assembly, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was part of minority's sub-committee (Prasanna, 2023). She had identified the concept of 'constructive citizenship'. It is the 'daily exercise of these rights and duties and in the opportunities which the state affords to the individual of developing his or her faculties' (Chetan, 2023).

Srimati Sarojini Naidu was an ardent supporter of civil liberties. She supported the innate democratic values of India. She had earlier become the President of the Indian National Congress. She supported that ladies should join the struggle for independence against the British. After independence, she became the Governor of the United Province.

India attained independence was vocal regarding labour rights and reforms of governance. After Indian attained independence, she became the first woman Chief Minister of India. She formed the women's wing in the Indian National Congress in 1940. In the Constituent Assembly, she was elected from the United Provinces. She sang "Vande Mataram" in the Constituent Assembly.

Srimati Vijaylakshmi Pandit supported the role of India in global governance. she braced up for international cooperation. She was an ambassador, a diplomat, an activist, a minister etc. She was among the first leaders who had asked to summon a Constituent Assembly to draw up the Constitution of India. It was India's pride that after India's independence, she became the President of the United Nations' General Assembly. So, she was the first lady to be the President (Allen, 2025).

The women members made positive contributions. Rosabeth Moss Kanter in her writings has mentioned that when the

number of women increases in corporations, they may form groups. They may form close alliance, refusing to turn against each other. They will have identification of the feminist cause and with other women. It is expected that there will be greater cooperation among them on feminist issues (Sarah Childs, Mona Lena Krook, 2016). The women members of the Constituent Assembly did play a very constructive role. Their cause became more important than their identity. It is the pride of Indians that they got an opportunity and framed the Indian Constitution side by side with the men.

Nivedita Menon has remarked that the early feminist works in India in the 1960s has seen the law to become the source of equal rights and emancipation for women. The society was still steeped in patriarchal values and the law was the source of emancipation for women. Later, women's movements in India reacted to violence against women. They demanded legislative action. However, it has to be remembered that even when the law is equal, it is discriminatory against women because men and women are positioned hierarchically unequally in cultural, social and political aspects. Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah held that women's groups believe that law is a total transformative instrument. The Female members of the Constituent Assembly tried to create a Constitution, which is equal and not discriminatory (Menon, 2004).

Quota has been prescribed in order to enhance women's representation in the constitutional bodies in many countries. The aim is broader wide-ranging, women-friendly policy change. Many individual women lobby for the support from the male politicians in their own political parties (Mahbub Alam Prodip, Helen Ware, 2023). But, the women Makers of the Constitution did not support reservation for women regarding seats in the Parliament and state assemblies.

These show that the fifteen women members had a mind of their own. They were very 'modern' in their outlook. They knew that the Indian Constitution would be a milestone in history. So, they tried their best to contribute in it, so that the future Indian would have a better India to live in.

Part III

The third part of the chapter deals with Indian women in the United Nations peacekeeping force. Peacekeeping is the most visible activity of the UN. The United Nations is not the only institution conducting peace operations. However, it is the single most important institution in the field. The Women, Peace and Security Resolutions 1820, 1888, 1889 and 2242 reinforced that leadership of women is very necessary in peace efforts. Adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 of 2000 formalised the demand for participation of women in peace and security (Sharma, 2025). The women can prevent conflict-ridden sexual violence. Accountability is a strategic necessity. Gender balanced team has broader stance and outlook. They can challenge the conservative traditions. Women play an important role in conflict resolution. India's has high standard of the selection process of the Indian peacekeepers. It is ensured that they lead the way in their actions and direction. The peacekeepers prove their worth at the assigned appointment (Goswami, 2025).

India is among the largest contributors of United Nations peacekeeping force. For the female police forces in the UN peacekeeping force, India follows Bangladesh and Nepal regarding its number of contribution (Freese, 2018). In 2023, India received the highest peacekeeping honour of the United Nations. Since the 1960s, Indian women had started serving in the Indian Armed Forces Medical Services. They

served in Congo. The UNSC Resolution 1325 of 2000 brought in a revolutionary change. The UN peacekeeping chief has remarked, "Indian women peacekeepers are redefining peacekeeping itself". India has deployed 20.45 per cent women among the military observers and staff officers. In 2007, India became the first country to deploy all women contingent to Liberia. In this manner, India made history. The police unit played an important role by providing 24 hour guard duty. They conducted night patrols in Monrovia. They had better access to the local community. They built better trust position. They are welcomed by the local population. Their humane approach helped in connecting with the local population. Once peacekeepers are accepted by the local population, their work becomes easy (Goswami, 2025). Many young girls in Liberia were inspired seeing the Indian women in the police contingent perform. They were inspired to join the security forces. The Indian women peace keeping force organized medical camps for Liberians. In 2016, the all-women unit left Liberia. Then, the Liberian President had observed that the Liberian women and girls were encouraged with the spirit of professionalism. The then Liberian President E. J. Sirleaf stated that the Indian police officers were "role models" who encouraged "Liberian women, imparting them in them the spirit of professionalism and encouraging them to join operations that protect the nation" (On, 2017).

For their feat in the United Nations peace keeping forces, in 2023, Major Radhika Sen received the Military Gender Advocate of the Year 2023. This reflected capability of Indian women in peace keeping endeavours under the United Nations. In February 2025, India had 150 women peacekeepers serving in six critical missions, like Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Lebanon, Golan Heights, Western Sahara and Abyei. In Abyei, Indian women went

for patrolling routes. They supported the marginalised groups. They tried to create a safe environment for women and children. They inspired local women to participate in peace processes. Women peacekeepers reduce conflict and confrontation. Indian women have the ability to understand the cultural sensitivities better. In Abyei (UNIFSA), the Deputy Commander of the Female Engagement Team led by Seema Gowdhar, strengthened community trust. The Under Secretary General of the Peace Keeping operations has appreciated the role of Indians "who have risen to new challenges & continue to participate meaningfully" in the efforts "to protect vulnerable civilians".

However, the path of UN peacekeeping for women is not easy. It is very complex and it requires physical and mental strength to conduct those operations. There is asymmetric warfare for the women peacekeepers. They face armed combatants. There are security risks and logistic barriers for women peacekeepers. The peacekeepers face the challenges of crime and serious threats while they operate in dangerous areas. There is need for gendered approach for training, which should be taught to all peacekeepers. This will increase the overall capability of the soldiers, including the lady soldiers (Angela Alchin, Amanda Gouws, Lindy Heinecken, 2018).

Conclusion

While women want to make a difference in politics, they are stopped to do so in many situations (Sarah Childs, Mona Lena Krook, 2016). Women have still not achieved their due, according to many experts. In order to overcome worldwide injustices, "fast-track" approach of gender quotas can be adopted. There is a need to sensitise men that they need to share power with women for overall development. Women's equal representation in the power elite would sooner or later

transform the power relationships in the public sphere and it would have its implications in the private sphere also. It would soon correct the social and economic inequalities. When there would be an equal number of men and women, it would gradually transform the patriarchal values that are rooted in discrimination and violence (Nanivadekar, 2010). By participating in the UN peacekeeping forces, Indian women have showen that they are being idealized by the local girls and community. The United Nations has also played the role of women peacekeepers. However, Nitin Pai and Sushant Singh in *Indian Express* have remarked that participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions is not commensurate to its result of obtaining permanent seat in the UNSC, on behalf of India.

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Violence Against Women in Sri Lanka in the Civil War and Post-Civil War Periods

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Abstract

Women in Sri Lanka hold multiple narratives. They are free citizens enjoying adult suffrage since independence, but the post-colonial political trajectory of Sri Lanka has challenged their liberty repeatedly, particularly harsh to women from minority communities. Women from Sinhalese and Tamil communities were severely affected by the civil war in Sri Lanka and the legacy of war continues to impose hardships. Seeking to set the agenda for reforms, women lack of information on missing relatives, face displacement from their land, suffer from economic deprivation, psychological trauma, vulnerability to sexual violence and exploitation, along with a militarised environment that reinforces the victimization on an everyday basis. Promises by the central government to the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2015 have failed to materialise even as the urgent economic and psychosocial needs of all conflict-affected groups remain unmet. As women carry the legacy of war as a burden in their everyday lives, their role in shaping transitional justice policies cannot be ignored. The government largely has ignored the report of its Consultations Task Force (CTF) on national reconciliation processes, which conferred widely with women, particularly those women who reside in conflict-affected areas. This gap in expectation of rights and delivery of justice stems largely from

the lack of representation of women in Sri Lanka's political affairs. For decades after independence, the proportion of women in Sri Lanka's parliament stagnated at around 4 per cent. This has contributed to reinforcing conservative and patriarchal perceptions of women in Sri Lankan society. As women continue to grapple with gender-based violence, the UN Population Fund reports that 90% of Sri Lankan women and girls have faced sexual harassment in public buses and trains, while 1 in 4 women report having experienced physical and/or sexual violence since age 15 (Department of Census & Statistics, 2019). Efforts to end violence against women often face barriers, including legal gaps and social stigma. The lecture would connect the gendered narratives of the past and present for women in Sri Lanka and seek to find answer to the one pressing question: is the Sri Lankan democracy doing enough for the rights and security of its women?

Keywords: *Sri Lanka, women, Sinhala women, Tamil women, civil war, violence*

Introduction

Sri Lanka has the distinction of electing the first woman Prime Minister in the world as early as in 1960. Despite a post-colonial nation, with a history of three successive colonial powers ruling the island-the Portuguese (1505-1658), the Dutch (1640-1796) and then the British (1796-1948), it has never legally subjugated its womenfolk to political subordination. However, the experiences of gender-based violence through the years of its internal civil war created a socio-economic schism in society, disempowering women across ethnic communities and dividing women across ethnicities based on their scales of victimization. In other words, Tamil women (Christians, Muslims and Hindus) were persecuted based on their 'Tamil-ness', along with their alleged or actual affiliation

to the LTTE. Sinhala women were affected as family members of the Sinhala military who became collaterals in the crossfire of the civil war.

This paper offers an analytical insight into the categories of victimization of women during the civil war and the continued injustices against them in the post-civil war period as well. The paper ends with certain normative recommendations for the future of civil society in the current left-leaning regime of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake. This paper essentially classifies these violent experiences of women into two temporal phases: the years of the civil war (1983-2009) and the post-civil war (2009 onwards). The paper broadly shows that during the period of the civil war, the violence unleashed on women scarred them as victims, unsettled them as survivors, pushed them into the role of peace activists, breadwinners of households (Sinhala and Tamil), and also created their agency as perpetrators of violence (mainly Tamil women). In the current period, Tamil women continue to be arbitrarily subjugated to atrocities and social marginalization. Additionally, women across ethnic categories experience exclusion from politically and socially empowering roles and suffer from inadequate public representation in real terms. There is significant participation of women in the transitional justice process (to amend war crimes), but the process itself continues to churn gendered notions of justice.

The key argument of this paper is that though women in Sri Lanka have enjoyed equal rights since independence, they have been conservatively envisioned since time immemorial and kept confined to the private sphere in terms of social roles. Rigid patriarchal norms have resulted in their suffering from lack of political and social opportunities. Within Tamil society, women were historically valued as the bearers of culture, responsible primarily for maintaining the home.

Parents carefully "protected" or controlled women from childhood until marriage, when authority over them would get transferred to their husbands. Since historically women's domains did not typically extend beyond their households, they were generally excluded from the political process. Society rigorously maintained the image of women as sacred bearers of family and community, utilizing females as symbolic markers to measure purity and respect. This cherished image of women rendered the violent experiences which women faced during the war traumatic not only for them as individuals, but for the entire society as well. (Manoranjan, November 2014). In a way, it created a double dilemma for women; they were pushed out of their traditional roles as well as subjected to an abrupt public gaze.

When the country was in the throes of the civil war, the government, representing a Sinhalese majority was fighting the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was striving for an autonomous Tamil homeland. Women on either side of the linguistic divide (Sinhala/Tamils) did not have agency when the war began; they were uniformly victims, either directly or as collateral casualties. But as the war unfolded, Sri Lanka's internal/civil war created a unique situation for its women. On the one hand, it gave Tamil women an opportunity to participate in the violence against the state for their rights and for the sake of gaining ultimate independence from a Sinhala-Buddhist majority government, and from political, social and cultural repression. On the other hand, for both Sinhala and Tamil women, it was a compulsion to step into the role of breadwinners for the family, as their male counterparts joined the war, died or simply could not cope with the acute political instability. The coexistence of these dual facets, which women across the country were forced to embrace, ultimately shaped the gendered narrative

of the Sri Lankan civil war, bearing consequences for all women in the country. As the civil war ended, women were awaiting peace, justice and reparations. They were trying to be agents of reconciliation by participating in the process of transitional justice. But due to lack of political empowerment and the existence of social misgivings, women are still seen as ad-hoc agents facilitating the day-to-day functioning of a society on a temporary basis, as the hope of their male counterparts taking the reins soon still lingers. This points towards a lingering gender bias in society despite political equality. Narratives around war and peace are dominated by gendered expectations and representations of women. Transitional justice processes include public testimonies by women survivors. But it often brings forth re-traumatization in the wake of testifying in courts and public offices. They relive the disrespect and humiliation suffered, uncovering conditions of psychological ill-health and new post-war insecurities. This would be explored in a subsequent section in the paper.

Violence and Tamil women

Despite being one of the first Asian countries to gain Universal Adult Franchise in 1931, Sri Lanka's women do not enjoy a legacy of empowered roles in public places. Due to prolonged exposure to conflict, traditional gender relations have also shifted dramatically in the Tamil community. The violence which was unleashed by the war jeopardized minority Tamils because of their aspirations for independence from the state and possible links with the nascent LTTE. For the Tamils, war brought large-scale displacement from homes through forcible take-over of land, destruction of homes, loss of family members, physical injuries, deaths and numerous incidents of gender-based sexual violence.

"Tamil women have suffered disproportionately throughout Sri Lanka's decades-long ethnic conflict. They have faced both the structural collapse of communities as well as the erosion of societal norms. In response, an increasing number of women joined the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) starting in the 1980s and throughout the years prior to 2009, and became an integral part of the armed resistance against the government" (Manoranjan, 2014).

Many evidentially joined the LTTE to avenge use for violence against them and their families.

Women as state and anti-state combatants

The Sri Lankan Women's Corps which was established in 1979 mainly performed non-combative and supporting roles (clerical in nature). Women began to receive weapons' training in the Sri Lankan military in 1984. Women were deployed in the combat operation in Operation Vadamarachchi in 1987. In the LTTE, Tamil women started joining the revolutionary movement from the early 1980s and received their first combative training in 1985. In Operation Vadamarachchi (1987), LTTE also used women fighters for the first time. The first female LTTE fighter Malathi was killed in action in face-off with the Indian Peace Keeping force in 1987. A brigade was named in her honour. The LTTE established the first all-women unit, the Sothiya Brigade in 1989. Women used violence as freedom from social confinement and socially ascribed roles. In fact, the women's wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) - Suthanthirap Paravaikal (Birds of Freedom) had acquired almost as much notoriety as their male counterparts since a female suicide bomber killed the then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (May 1991). Though female cadres had different personal reasons for enlisting, many joined after experiencing some form of

injustice at the hands of the Sri Lankan Army. Most women came from the heavily militarized north (Alison, 2003) The permanent insecurity of this environment inculcated a desire for freedom and statehood, which included the motivation to take up arms. Although most women initially joined the LTTE to find respite from this suffocating physical insecurity, their involvement in the armed movement had unintended, yet profound, cultural and social consequences. Violence was liberating as they stopped conforming to social expectations:

"Joining the militants [was a] liberating act, promising them more freedom and power…. Tamil society had always suppressed women into a subservient position… it was the war that has had a liberating role." Many of the female Tamil cadres with whom I spoke expressed their desire to fight for the liberation of both their ethnicity and also their subservient position in Tamil society" (Response by a LTTE women combatant in Manoranjan, 2010).

Women had to demonstrate their strength and competence to earn the respect of male LTTE cadres; one cadre confessed that women were "challenged to lift bigger bombs" to prove themselves?. Female cadres eventually prided themselves on performing all tasks completed by their male counterparts. Women were not only responsible for protecting their own physical integrity, but also that of their children. Thus, initially women were seen as survivors of the war, as widows or mothers who had lost their sons. But in the 1990s, Tamil women were fighting for their liberation from any kind of subjugation and assertion of rights and security. Interestingly, in both phases, women were 'masculinized'-their hair was short, bodies trained for physical combat and they were devoid of any overt markers of femininity.

War widows

Women also experienced violence as survivors-as widows and son-less mothers. The continuous context of violence has produced an unprecedented number of war widows and concomitantly women-headed households. While women-headed households are not an uncommon phenomenon in Sri Lanka, they increased in large proportions because of the decimation of the male population that has occurred as a result of ethnic riots, civil war, and anti-state violence. While such households are scattered across the entire country, the largest concentrations are found among displaced populations in the districts of Puttalam, Jaffna, Wanni, Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Ampara.

There was a three-fold victimization of women in that they were not only traumatized by the violence they witnessed and the loss of their loved ones, but in that they also had to support their families financially and emotionally and nurture similarly traumatized and devastated offsprings who sometimes turned on their own mothers. The social stigma that surrounds widows in all ethnic communities has not made these women's tasks any easier and is a key contributor to their own lack of self-worth and confidence and their sense of guilt (for being alive, for being bad mothers) and victimhood. This sense of victimhood is also re-inscribed upon these women through relief and rehabilitation measures as well as programs on social health and trauma interventions in the conflict zones.

Social stigmatization of widows

The majority of widowed heads of households in Sri Lanka face a constant battle for economic stability, privacy, physical safety, and most importantly, self-worth and social dignity. In a society that has convinced itself that men

are the breadwinners and sustainers of their families and women ideally suited to the roles of housewife and mother, women-headed households are perceived as temporary aberrations that must soon be rectified through remarriage or consolidation within a male-headed extended family. Because of such assumptions, women-headed households have not become a topic of national concern or debate in the same way that women run garment-factory workers or women as foreign domestic aides have.

Warrior mothers

The 1980s and 1990s also witnessed the political mobilization of "motherhood" as a counter to violence, both in the context of the civil war in the north and east as well as the second Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (1989) uprising in the south for establishing socialism. In 1984, the Mothers' Front was formed in Jaffna to protest against the mass arrest of Tamil youth by the Sri Lankan state. This organization was controlled by and consisted of women from all classes. They organized mass rallies in huge numbers and picketed public officials demanding their removal. Although the members of the Mothers' Front had spontaneously mobilized their maternal identity in the face of state repression, they were also quick to criticize the blatant manipulation of such an identity when Tamil militant groups put up posters inciting women to have more babies in order to further the cause of separatism. The Mothers' Front also inspired Tamil women in the east to inaugurate their own branch. In 1986, the Eastern Mothers' Front took to the streets with rice pounders to prevent a massacre of members of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) by the LTTE. In 1987, one of its members, Annai Pupathi, fasted to death to protest the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) on Sri Lankan soil. She was subsequently immortalized by the LTTE, who went

on to offer a scholarship in her memory. It was finally the increasing hegemony of the LTTE and its suppression of all independent, democratic organizations that did not "toe the line" that pushed the Mothers' Front in the north and east into political conformism and reduced its wide appeal and pushed it towards militancy (*Tamil Guardian*, April 2020).

Women for Peace

Since the 1980s, women feminists in Sri Lanka have also spent a great deal of energy on promoting a peaceful and politically negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict. Various feminist peace groups have spoken out against the increased militarization of Sri Lankan society, published articles and books on the ideological underpinnings of ethnic conflict, documented and protested human rights violations by the state as well as militant groups, set up peace education programs in schools, organized peace demonstrations, pickets, and vigils. The committed efforts of several feminist groups to call for an end to the war and to highlight the shared suffering of both Tamil and Sinhala women as a result of this war led to their stressing the shared histories and cultures of the Sinhalese and Tamils - through articles, songs, and videos and fostering greater understanding between the two groups by offering free Tamil classes, organizing goodwill missions to the north and east, and setting up various trauma-counselling and income-generating projects in the conflict zones (Hyndman and Alwis, 2003).

Women in post-conflict scenario

In 2015, the Sri Lankan government under Maithripala Sirisena promised to implement a range of measures to address the history of past abuses; to pursue truth, justice, and accountability; to provide redress to victims. These measures include four transitional justice processes:

(i) a mechanism to search for the disappeared,

(ii) an office for reparations,

(iii) a truth commission,

(iv) and a judicial mechanism.

The government's promises were affirmed in the United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 30/1 of 2015. Till date, only one of the four promised transitional justice processes, the Office of Missing Persons (OMP), has been established. The OMP is significant because it is the first permanent body to address the issue of the missing and disappeared in Sri Lanka (Jayakody, 2017). However, its creation come after a series of commissions were established to investigate cases of missing or disappeared persons, but proved to be unsuccessful and failed to contribute to accountability (International Commission of Jurists, May 2024). The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in a report released on 17 May 2024, titled "Accountability for Enforced Disappearances in Sri Lanka", notes the near total impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of widespread enforced disappearances over four decades and a systematic failure to account for the fate and whereabouts of victims (United Nations Human Rights, May 2024).

The final phase of the armed conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was replete with serious international humanitarian law and gross human rights violations constituting crimes under international law by all parties. So far, the authorities have failed to conduct independent, impartial investigations into these crimes with a view to ensuring accountability. A draft Bill proposing the establishment of a Commission for Truth, Unity and Reconciliation which was gazetted in

January 2024 lacked transparency and was not adequately consultative, gender-responsive or victim-centered. Despite growing debate and discussion on reconciliation in Sri Lanka, Tamil women, including Christians, Hindus and Muslims, continue to be sidelined, with their perspectives not having been fully integrated into the mainstream discourse on justice and peace (Human Rights Watch, January 2024). There have been arbitrary seizures of land and Hindu religious shrines by some members of the Buddhist clergy with the support of the military and other government authorities. The Prevention of Terrorism Act continues to be deployed in violation of the rule of law. In the north and east, many families of the disappeared, former LTTE combatants, journalists, and human rights defenders have continued to face harassment, intimidation and surveillance in an atmosphere of heavy militarization. Women held in internment camps in 2009 and 2010 were subject to sexual violence. There have also been an estimated 3,000 captured or surrendered women LTTE fighters—many of them forcibly recruited—sent to military-run rehabilitation centers, where, again, there are credible allegations of rape and sexual abuse (Human Rights Watch, 2026). Ongoing militarization across the conflict-affected north and east has again put former LTTE female fighters at risk of sexual abuse and extortion. The wives and mothers of the disappeared, who have led years-long continual protests for truth and international justice, have faced threats, violence, and sexual harassment.

The environment of threat and insecurity prevails heavily for women, especially widows and single women in Sri Lanka. Successive Sri Lankan governments have failed to hold security force members accountable for wartime sexual violence or for other serious human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and enforced disappearances. Due to decades

of impunity in Sri Lanka, Tamil victims and advocates have lost faith in the domestic justice system and started looking for justice elsewhere (Manuel, May 2025).

The United Nations human rights chief has noted the importance of states "using all potential forms of jurisdiction," including extraterritorial and universal jurisdiction, to investigate and prosecute international crimes committed in Sri Lanka to end "systematic impunity"? The UN Human Rights office's "Sri Lanka Accountability Project," which gathers evidence for potential prosecutions and other accountability processes can be another avenue. It was renewed by the UN Human Rights Council in October 2025 for two years. Tamil activists criticise the resolution by calling it hollow, government-praising and inadequate.

However, scholars have pointed out that public testimonies and even nostalgia about the civil war is largely gendered in nature in Sri Lanka. On the one hand, women who come forward are often retraumatized by recounting their experiences in public. It is not cathartic. Secondly, their historical recounting of events often does not fulfil the condition for factual evidence, which leaves them helpless in achieving justice for themselves. In minority women, recollections of traumatic events often involve blaming men from majority ethnic groups as perpetrators of violence. For example, Tamil women rarely level charges against the LTTE. They blame the Sinhalese in the Sri Lankan military for gendered atrocities. Witnesses in public truth-telling initiatives also develop expectations of reciprocity or compensation, for example in the form of reparations, which influence the stories told. However, when expectations are not fulfilled, truth-telling may reify existing power imbalances and reinforce perceptions of being marginalized (Hoguland, 2019). An analysis of the South African Truth and

Reconciliation Commission (TRC) distinguishes between two forms of testimonies by women that are common:

1. expert witnesses in relation to the men in their lives (sons, husbands, etc.), so-called secondary witnesses, and

2. witnesses as victims of sexually motivated crimes.

In essence, women testifying during transitional justice processes are likely to be influenced by the roles ascribed to women by the gendered constructs present in a particular social context. Post-war realities in Sri Lanka includes persistent militarization and manifest asymmetric power relationships between victims and perpetrators that influence witnesses also in more subtle ways. At the political level, official truth commissions with the explicit aim of contributing to reconciliation may be a means by which political elites evade accountability while still pursuing the ideas of co-existence. The launch of a public inquiry can also sometimes be a political strategy by a government, including to counter external pressure. At the individual level, individual fears of reprisal interplay with the politically polarized situation. Justice remains gendered in its notional construction and apparent or effective delivery (Hoguland, 2019).

Current political scenario

Women constitute 52% of Sri Lanka's population (UNDP, 2026). There are 22 women elected Members of Parliament in the National People's Power government of Anura Kumara Dissanayake. This is the highest number of female MPs in Sri Lanka's history, including the first female MP from the Malayagam community, which marks a historic milestone. The present government has pledged for 50% women's representation in politics. On March 8, 2026, in his message to the nation on International Women's Day, the

Dissanayake administration highlighted that International Women's Day is an opportunity to recognize the vital role of women in Sri Lanka's economic, political, social, and cultural development. He emphasized that women contribute significantly to the national economy and their appreciation should not be restricted to a single day. Beyond their unpaid role as homemakers, they are key contributors to varied sectors like garments, plantations, foreign employment, health, education, and other services. He expressed gratitude for the dedication and resilience of Sri Lankan women, noting that their efforts played an important role in the country's economic progress in 2025. He further noted that the Government is working to ensure gender equality, strengthen women's rights, and address violence and discrimination in all areas of life. The President also stressed the importance of empowering women through entrepreneurship in the digital and green economy, while commending this year's Women's Day theme, "In a Thriving Nation – She Leads with Determination," and inviting women to actively participate in building a progressive and just society (*Adaderana.lk*, March 2026). Since his swearing in as the President, Dissanayake has stressed that his government aims at providing social support for women-headed households and offering assistance to victims of gender-based violence. He plans institutionalize sexual and reproductive health rights of women and celebrate themes of gender equality like International Women's Day.

Concluding Comments

Sri Lankan women must claim agency. They must reshape the way society and the world perceive them in the present era. Their social stigmatization must be dispelled through consistent political and legal advocacy. Women must continue to demand greater representation in public spaces and active politics. Programs on empowerment and awareness must

be conducted at the levels of school and higher education to ensure development at the grassroots. Media advocacy must be carefully practised to regularly apprise the international community of women's issues and pressurize the government to take note of urgent developments. The interventions and audits by international agencies like the United Nations and Human Rights Watch must be tempered by complementary activities of dedicated local NGOs to elicit cooperation by the government for domestic requirements of women. Women must be a united force within civil society to empower themselves in a rapidly changing South Asia. Women cannot erase their past; but they can build a future for their girls which is unblemished by the patriarchal victimizations, social burdens of the previous generations and scars of war.

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Sustainability and Gender: A Reflection Through the Security Paradigm

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Abstract:

Questions of sustainability have for long had to address macro level questions of insecurity at the state level. The discourse on intersectionalities of race, caste and gender, within the scope of the interpretation of sustainability, has continued to elude policy initiatives, even when scholarship from around the world has come to recognize the need to include sustainability within the broader purview of human security concerns.

Within these parameters, gender becomes a critical analytical lens. The question of access to clean and affordable energy resources, including cooking fuel, the right to clean water, and air, has a real and tangible impact on the human security of women and the value as well as the visibility of their labour. In this context, this paper attempts to shed some light on the latitudes of energy and sustainability discourse in India by looking into the transections of theoretical and discursive paradigms and their interactions with feminist political ecology. The global frameworks defining both sustainability and development draw heavily from the liberal tableau, which has been observed to fall short by several scholars. The paper investigates the lessons for global conversations from the experience of the inclusion of the gendered perspective in policy initiatives in India.

Keywords: *Sustainability, gender, India, feminist political ecology, human security, development*

Introduction: Rethinking Sustainability through Genealogical Analysis

The fundamental discourse on sustainability today typically involves conversation dominated by two kinds of voices: the scientific, which focuses on emissions, temperature rise, climate and de-emission targets etc., along with the technocratic, which focuses on reforms, renewable transitions, global accords and the like. Though important, both discourses have major blind spots stemming from objective and decontextualized assumptions. The scientific part of the discourse, like most scientific analysis, can be said to be deterministic in nature. It is presumed that concerns of temperature rise, global warming and climate change, are experienced by everyone living in a society in varying degrees. In a similar vein, the technocratic dimension, which primarily seeks to address global de-emission targets and mechanisms to achieve them, operates under the assumption that one or a set of generic solutions can be applied uniformly across populations to meet those targets. Both of these are impractical methods of approaching the issue at hand. Sustainability is essentially a social question.

The Brundtland Commission Report of 1987 defined sustainable development as that which "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, 1987). This understanding draws from the liberal development consensus of the post-war period, of rational state action, economic growth, and universalism. It, however, carries four very generic assumptions which crumble under the analysis of the gender lens. The first assumption is that of homo

economicus rationality, whereby human beings are presumed to be perfect rational beings always seeking to maximize personal benefit. Human beings, according to this narrative, are autonomous, independent, and detached individuals. Care work, for example, which women engage in, is not "rational" in the economic sense. It operates fundamentally on different principles. While care work could be viewed to be rational and entailing emotional connections, obligations and responsibilities towards dependents, unlike autonomous homo economicus, caregivers do not act in isolation. Their decisions are shaped by the needs of others, social norms, and cultural expectations. Similar to how classical economic theory has rendered carework invisible, the Bundtland Commission Report's understanding of sustainability has not extensively determined what it means by 'meet[ing] their own needs'. What are the parameters of determining the 'needs' of human beings? Rather, can human needs, be it in the present or in the future, be simplistically determined by any means through rational analysis of competitive production?

Drawing from the above, one could also problematize the aspect of understanding people's needs from a society, with respect to sustainability. Are all humans to be considered the basic unit of homo economicus, or is it that households are presumed to be the primary object of economic analysis by means of a generic simplification? If the latter is taken to be true, then one must accept the fact that no household can be a uniform unit of analysis. There are different individuals within a household and their position within the household determines their access to power, authority, and subsequent access to resources and economic mobility. Further, even when a household is taken to be the unit of economic determination, the scope of economic decisions of a household might vary on the basis of emotions, or obligations, or capabilities. A

household does not settle upon its economic considerations simply based on requirements at all times. Even if a particular resource is available to the public, that does not mean that it would be available to all households. One must take into consideration a household's income capacity and how much of their current budget they could compromise to access the said resource (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum 2000). This is where the necessity to introduce capabilities framework in analyzing any form of development is to be brought in. An academic enquiry into the study of sustainability and its economic parameters must include as assessment of capabilities of individuals and households beyond economic determinism.

On a side note, one must also observe that the primary fallacy of the Commission Report in determining sustainability has also been with regards to limiting its scope to the vision of the environment and ecology only. Studies have found that the report emerged from the environmental insecurities that arose from the rapid industrialization of the 1960s and 1970s (Rasouli and Kumarasuriyar, 2016). The social impact of environmental degradation and the economic disparity within the social hierarchy came to be largely ignored in the first decade of the study. The social aspect of sustainability came to be recognized in international scholarship only in the latter part of the 1990s, thereby broadening the sustainability agenda and highlighting the conflict between the environment, society and economy. Rather than a quantitative analysis of what might be the needs of the future, (and how much of our current needs could be satiated by sustainable exploitation of resources, and how much, in fact, is to be left for the future,) a qualitative perspective of the social capital and its impact on sustainability can expand our understanding of sustainability. While quantitative analysis could be measured in determined terms, qualitative analysis seeks to push the boundaries of

the concept further than universal solutions can. It is rather a conundrum, since this approach problematizes the concept of sustainability rather than providing objective solutions. Sustainability becomes a means to achieve security, rather than an end in itself. This gives the concept an academic latitude whereby upcoming generations can determine what might be included within it rather than focusing merely on ordered culmination.

The second assumption of the liberal development apparatus is to view the state as a neutral actor. Be it in developed economies, and more so in developing economies, the state constitutes only a section of the society. Society, for example in India, consists of various groups and sections that occupy different locations within the social hierarchy. The capabilities of groups and households are determined by these hierarchies and social realities. While most modern civilized societies ensure democratic electoral mechanisms to choose the body politic, a cursory study of developing economies show that not every echelon of the society finds representation in the state. The state (read government also) despite democratic elections in most societies act as arbitrators rather than representatives of various interests. It is in this context then that an intersectional study of the state reveals that it cannot be value neutral. The state consists of human actors, who bring with them bias towards or against the interests of certain sections of society. Thus, altruistic expectations from the state towards the deliverance of universal welfare would be farfetched to say the least.

Thirdly, the Commission Report determines that environmental degeneration affects all groups equally. This idea presumes that any progress moves in a linear fashion. This is also known as progressivist teleology. However, this ideation of direction omits social hierarchy and contextual

disparities in society. As has been explained, social hierarchies determine capabilities of individuals, households, and communities. In the same light, progress must also address unequal distribution of capabilities (Graham, 1997). This presumption also suffers from the fallacy of Eurocentrism, that infers all societies to be homogenous. Even European societies in the modern context are not homogenous. Assuming developing societies like that of India to be homogenous in any regard will be an academic fallacy. The impact of environmental degradation also must be seen from the same viewpoint. Not only are there social disparities in Indian societies, but geographical divergences as well. Some parts of the country experience the wrath of climate change more than some other parts. Townships and villages closer to the sea are more in threat of destruction rising from rise in sea levels than other non-coastal parts of the country. Similarly, the concrete scape of urban settlements might face a rise in temperature on any given day of the year differently than woods, wildlands, or verdant settlements. Thus, just as the concept of sustainability cannot be seen to be an end in itself, the progress and effects of climate change cannot be understood to be unidirectional as well.

Lastly, the Commission's definition of sustainability also assumes that economic solutions and technological solutions to environmental concerns will automatically benefit society as a whole. This is clearly a statist perspective at the very least. When the subject is heterogenous, no single policy initiative can overarchingly resolve varied environmental communities of the society in a uniform manner. This argument of the Commission is predicated upon an understanding that the society that we live in is essentially equal in nature. Studies have sought to demonstrate the how problematic such assumptions are (Agarwal, 2010). Determining justice in an

unequal society is bound to be fraught with problems. The questions of who controls the resources in the present society, who can voice their needs to access these resources and why, or who has the decision-making power to voice these opinions determine the varying gradations of capability in society. A mere tertiary understanding of economic welfare cannot correctly ascertain the decentralized and micro-level insecurities of communities, households and individuals.

In other words, it is inarguable that there exists a profound incongruity between the global language of sustainability, climate change, energy justice and poverty, economic progress, development and environmental impact of global warming, and the local realities of social capital, social, political, and economic capabilities of communities, groups, individuals and households. If sustainability is to be a means to achieve the ends of wellbeing, then it must be viewed beyond environmental parameters, for it to be socially just. This is where the concept of human security comes in.

Sustainability from the Human Security Lens

According to Barry Buzan, security itself has come to be viewed from the perspective of the state (Buzan, 1983). It has been understood to cater to the territorial integrity of a country. This is a rather limited, military perspective of the term, wherein the state determines its very goals. The Human Development Report in 1994 brought in a major shift in the security discourse. It determined that the referent object of security must be the individual rather than the state. It argued that security must be seen as an individual's freedom from fear, want, and indignities of all sorts. This is the first time the scope of security came to include individual aspirations, whereby what humans could determine to want and need came to be included in the study. This placed everyday

concerns of individuals including health, bodily integrity, dignity, and environmental security at the very forefront of the security paradigm. Rather than asking what modes of freedom could the state offer to its citizens, critical exploration shifted to understanding what freedoms can individuals actually exercise in their daily lives (Sen, 1999).

Just like availability of freedom does not determine what freedoms individuals can access, mere availability of resources does not determine whether individuals can actually access those resources. This brings in the question of sustainability within the human security paradigm, bringing the normative unit of sustainability to bear upon the secure body of individuals. Thus, sustainability drawn from a preoccupation with human security does not flow from a mere measurement of the carbon index, but from daily access to sustainable resources. A community, individual or household cannot become sustainable only if they have access to water, for instance. The human security paradigm requires that water be clean for human consumption. Similarly, households and communities cannot be demarcated to be electrified if only one government building of a village is electrified. Human security paradigm demands to take into consideration the reliability of electricity, the quality of electricity. Only when each household has access to electricity from a reliable and sustainable source, can that household be deemed to be electrified. If in a household one individual has to pay the individual price of collecting and gathering resources, then that household cannot be considered to be a sustainable household. In most cases, as this article seeks to assert, such costs accrue in the form of unpaid household labour by women, whose wellbeing and freedom from indignation of all sorts fall through the cracks in prevalent security paradigms and development narratives.

This parameter exposes the gendered nature of sustainability as well, whereby its concerns become an extension of human security. Studies have elaborated how the cost of unsustainability is paid overwhelmingly by women in society, and more so in a developing society (Tickner 1992). When a drought hits, the territorial integrity of the state is not threatened. It is women who have to trek farther from their households to gather fresh water, compromising on their health, labour, time, and opportunities of education. This time and labour could be used otherwise for personal interests. When forests are felled, men of households that have generationally depended on forest resources, have to migrate to urban areas for employment, while the responsibility of maintaining household security as well as familial wellbeing falls disproportionately on women. As explained earlier, women already reside in an unequal society. Environmental degradation acts as a threat multiplier to the bodily integrity and wellbeing of women, exacerbating pre-existing gendered inequalities. Thus, any policy initiative that overlooks the gendered nature of sustainability remains incomplete and perhaps ineffective to a large extent. A sustainable policy initiative must come from those relegated to the margins of society.

The Question of Energy Justice: Gendered Parameters of Sustainability

Energy security has evolved as a modern discourse within the security paradigm. Energy security, in the line of economic development and sustainable progress, has come to be viewed from the human security paradigm as well. Energy security, when viewed within the sustainability framework takes the shape of energy justice. Energy justice, expands the study of energy security by bringing in the question of equity and jurisprudence within the security paradigm. Scholars have

observed that the basic principles of justice and fairness must be applied to understand existing inequalities of people in accessing sustainable resources?. To comprehensively address the questions of sustainable development, considerations of energy justice must inalienably be included as subjective parameters (Guruswamy, 2010). Here, the inequality in accessing energy resources in lieu of sustainable development is attendant with the energy poverty of communities, and individuals (Guruswamy, 2010).

From the perspective of the state, energy security is defined in terms of energy grids, the need to develop renewables capacity, the development of energy storage systems and infrastructures, as well as the refinement of energy transitions. From the perspective of individuals, on the other hand, the assurance of being able to prepare a meal, the health implications of preparing a meal indoors, the responsibility and burden of collecting fuel to cook a meal, the affordability of accessing this fuel, etc., constitute the concerns at the heart of the human security perspective of energy security. Energy policy initiatives not taking these parameters into consideration while formulating said policy, risks falling short of understanding structural inequalities in the society impacting access to energy resources. When climate burdens, like energy burdens, are not distributed justly in a society, energy policy initiatives become unequal, unfair, unjust in nature.

Over the years, scholars have defined three criteria to examine energy justice (Jenkins et al, 2016). Firstly, there is the question of who gets clean energy, which brings in the notion of distributive justice. As any society is hierarchically tiered, its access to clean energy remains skewed as well. Energy policy of any state that does not consider the margins fails to adequately cater to the actual energy poverty of the

masses. There are several layers to understanding access to energy as well. Even if access to energy in the initial instance might reach the populace, energy justice requires ensuring continued access to reliable energy for the people. A case in point that enumerates gaps in this regard can be elucidated with the Pradhan Mantri Ujwala Yojana in India, an initiative to provide LPG (Liquid Petroleum Gas) as clean cooking fuel to every household in India. While the Yojana (project) has created a drive towards several new connections, the subsidy required to access this connection has been limited to only the first cylinder of LPG. After the first cylinder, subsequent charges have been set at a range of 900 to 1100 INR (Indian Rupee). For most households, that brings in the question of affordability (Cabiyo et al, 2021). Also, the prices of these cylinders fluctuate depending on the global energy market. Thus, even when the first cylinder is accessed via subsidies, it may remain unused subsequently (Jha, 2025). Most families return to using traditional mechanisms of accessing readily available cheap fuel. The gender equity point here comes through an interrogation of the actual cost of gathering and using unclean fuel in the absence of clean LPG. In most Indian households, women are the primary caregivers, as has been ascertained in this study. Cooking and tending to the family's nutritional needs falls under this caregiving category. It is women who have to spend hours gathering wood for their traditional ovens, and who spend hours inhaling smoke from the burning wood during cooking. Even when families want a refill, delivery trucks do not reach remote areas regularly, if the distribution centre is far from the household. There is the matter of transport cost along with the surplus labour, which then have to be performed done by women. Multiple studies confirm that a connection does not amount to its sustained use (Rao & Pachauri, 2017). In fact, government research has

found that the Pradhan Mantri Ujwala Yojana has encouraged households to restrict LPG use to on an average of three refills only (The Hindu, 2025).

With respect to electricity, again, sometimes, a village or a taluka is considered to be electrified for example, if only one or a couple of buildings in that village receives electrification. It could be the local post office, the local school, the houses of the panchayat head or maybe a couple of local political leaders. Further, electrification does not specify the quality of electrification being provided, or the unequal access to energy that demarcates not only rural and urban settlements, but that exist within urban areas as well. Studies have shown that access to electrification has gone hand-in-hand with gentrification even in the urban areas of the country, especially in areas of informal settlements (Haldar et al, 2025). Absence of land titles and legal housing status are taken as guarantors of exclusion during electrification drives. The need to provide elaborate identity documents in terms of identity cards, land deeds, fixed incomes, etc. becomes a hurdle when it comes to recognizing a considerable number of people as legal consumers of electricity. One must note that residents of informal settlements (read slums) are designated as illegal encroachers in cities. The understanding of the ruling dispensation is that people residing in these sections of society, when given unfettered access to energy will misuse it by keeping their electronics or electrical devices running all through the day. It is presumed that they resort to illegal or sordid means to of seeking electricity despite such access. This is a very patronizing attitude that might also be seen to be classist and casteist in many regards, and that find reflection at the policy adjudication level.

Thus, even while technically these households are electrified, data does not specify the quality of electrification in these

households of this particular locality. It does not specify how many hours of electricity they receive in a day. Also, it could be entirely possible that resorting to illegal means of obtaining power might actually be mitigated if regular power supply was ensured. Far from overusing electricity, these households could be said to utilize it scantily. One household generally consists of 4 to 7 people living in one or one-and-a-half rooms. To put things in perspective, they use one T. V., one ceiling fan, one stove top in the same room (sometimes not even that), or have one electric light source for a family of 7. If they have access, and even if they keep their appliances on, which they do not, they still end up underutilizing electricity with respect to the number of members in their households (Gupta et al, 2025). To further consider how gender plays into this discourse, one might consider how women and girls of such households are put under duress by having to study without light or engage in related educational activities, spending more hours in grinding spices by hand rather than through electrical equipments, or bearing the brunt of cooking in heat without a fan or any other cooling equipment, etc.

The next issue to be addressed is that of procedural justice, as to who gets to decide on how energy is to be distributed or how access to energy is to be determined. Energy committees, local government structures struggle with representation when it comes to ensuring procedural justice. In the case of India, the issue has existed for a very long time. It is not surprising that in our society that is stratified around markers of caste, class, and gender, the very question of representation has come to mirror these hierarchies. Women hardly ever find place in decision-making positions when it comes to concerns of energy transition, energy equity or justice (ANDE & IDRC, 2025). There is also the problem of lack of land titles and legal ownership of resources by women, which makes them

vulnerable to compensations in cases of environment-induced displacement (WGC, 2025). Since our conceptualization of traditional households is a patriarchal one restricted to the male heads of families, women are seldom viewed to be legitimate recipients of any direct subsidy or grant. By the same token, women are not considered to have a voice distinct from the household that she is tied to, even while her independent labour contributes heavily to the sustenance of the household itself. Household level economic decisions are generally taken by the male head of a family. Even when the number of women in a household might be more than the number of men within the same household, women's opinions and choices when it comes to the choice of fuel to be used, and the necessary expenditure to be made access that particular resource, are seldom heeded. No wonder then that women are not even deemed suitable to be brought under the fold of technical training programmes involving energy transitions.

As a result, energy technologies are built around neutral bodies which inadvertently become masculinist enterprises. For example, when LPG stoves are designed, the average height of the cooking platform is rounded off to the average height of an Indian man. It is not considered that the average height of women is shorter than that of men, making stoves difficult to access for many women. Added to that, the fact that women in any household generally multitask while taking care of their children, often stirring large pots (since she is cooking for a large household) in precarious conditions. Even if the accident-proneness of the entire set-up be overlooked given her domestic skills (learned over time and through training from other women), the ergonomics of stirring large pots for a long time contributes to long-term physical ailments like chronic shoulder, neck pain, wrist strain etc. for women.

The final aspect is that of recognition justice, whereby one asks whose labour is recognised in the pursuance of sustainability, which amounts to asking who are the real actors of sustainability or its stakeholders. In the statist perspective of the security paradigm, the state is one party placed on the other side of the supposedly homogenous and neutral entity that is the public. It is regarded homogenous insofar as the public are either citizens, consumers, or customers. They cannot be all at the same time. Neither can they have fractured identities. The question of intersectionality problematizes this homogeneity at several levels. It brings in the often-elided aspects of the cost of labour and gender. Time poverty, as has been discussed, is another overwhelming constraint with a gendered dimension in Indian societies. Not only is accessing sustainable sources of energy a laborious endeavour, but it is also a time-consuming one. When undertaken only by a specific gendered body, it accentuates the disparity in access to freedom between men and women. When a girl child has to tend to domestic chores in the day, and has no access to electricity in the evening, she has no hope to transcend her circumstances in the future through education. Unsustainability and energy poverty not only take away her time for self-empowerment but also diminish her future opportunities for education and freedom from indignities of all sorts. Thus, the human security paradigm compels us to take heed of how sustainability is inextricably associated with conditions of safety, health, autonomy and dignity.

Conclusion:

Feminist Political Ecology and Gendering Unsustainability Energy and climate justice shoves sustainability into the realm of fairness and equity, which evinces it as essentially a gendered process (Robinson 2018). It is generally women who work for longer hours, often without pay, in heat, without

rest, and with no access to clean drinking water. During climate disasters like floods, women have higher mortality rates not because of lack of bodily mobility, but due to the faltered mobility of other people (like the elderly and infants) and domestic animals under her care. She is immobilized, as it were, by her responsibilities. After floods, her responsibility for care-work multiplies in the form of rebuilding, seeking, foraging for food and other resources, often while men migrate in search of employment. Women often rebuild by depriving themselves of nutrition, while taking care of the household and absorbing the relentless onslaught of such processual constraints, both physically and psychologically.

In this context, feminist political ecology demands the recognition of 'access' to resources to be an inherently political question, inseparable from the complementarity of the gendered lens (Rocheleau et al 1996). Structural changes in control of land, forests, water bodies, must coincide with access to energy systems and sustainability. Without structural changes in power structures in society, gendered access to resources will be difficult to achieve. Further, the knowledge of women garnered through generations of practice must be legitimized and given due recognition. Women's experience of labour must not only be remunerated, but also be instrumentally deployed for gaining insights. Women often have deep expertise in seed preservation, forest regeneration, water sourcing, etc., which must be brought forth under the purview of scientific erudition. Lastly, women must be included in climate, ecology and energy decision-making as a matter of necessity through advocacy, activism, and a decentralization of democracy. Only then can sustainability be a project of progress.

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Nirbachon Ar Iccha: Women as Subjects in the Bengali Muslim Ghoti-Bangal Divide

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Abstract

In the complex socio-political landscape of Bengal, the Ghoti-Bangal divide represents a longstanding cultural rivalry between natives and those with origins in East Pakistan (presentday Bangladesh). While often perceived through culinary or sporting affiliations, this divide conceals a deeper, gendered political conflict where women's autonomy becomes the primary site for asserting cultural superiority. This paper argues that within the Bengali Muslim community, women's choices, their *Nirbachon* (choice) and *Iccha* (desire) regarding education, occupation, marriage, and religious observance like the pordah, are systematically politicized to maintain and deepen this communal rift. Through a qualitative narrative approach, this study captures the lived experiences of women from both factions, revealing how the Muslim Ghoti community often frames its women's relative freedoms as markers of modernity and sophistication, while the Muslim Bangal community valorizes its women's adherence to traditional norms as evidence of superior piety and authenticity. This instrumentalization of female agency transforms personal life decisions into political statements, reinforcing internal hierarchies and social boundaries. The findings expose a pattern where women's bodies and choices are weaponized in a silent cultural war,

leading to their psychological burden, social scrutiny, and constrained autonomy. This politicization not only violates their fundamental right to dignity and self-determination but also perpetuates a cycle of inter-community gender-based discrimination. The study underscores the urgent need to depoliticize women's lives and advocates for a community dialogue that prioritizes genuine gender justice over divisive identity politics.

Keywords: *Gender Politics, Bengali Muslim Women, Ghoti-Bangal divide, Women's Agency*

Introduction

The Ghoti–Bangal divide in Bengal exemplifies a complex interplay of cultural, regional, and gender dynamics shaped by the 1947 Partition's resettlement patterns, historical migration, linguistic diversity, and culinary practices, intensifying sharply after the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. This divide is often simplified in popular discourse through humour or sports rivalries; however, within the Bengali Muslim community, it penetrates deeper into the lived experiences of women. Their roles illuminate the negotiation of cultural superiority, moral authority, and religious authenticity, making their experiences integral to understanding the divide.

Women's choices, referred to as *nirbachon* and *iccha* concerning education, marriage, professional aspirations, mobility, and religious practices, are rarely viewed as individual expressions. Instead, they become intertwined with broader community narratives that shape identities. For instance, Ghoti Muslim families might highlight women's freedoms and mobility as signs of modernization, while Bangal Muslim families emphasize traditional values like *purdah*, early marriage, and domesticity as indicators of

moral and religious superiority. In both contexts, women's lives transcend personal agency, evolving into symbols that perpetuate the Ghoti–Bangal distinction.

Literature has historically exposed this gendered erasure. In Hasan Azizul Huq's novel, *Agunpaki*, the unnamed female protagonist illustrates the lack of female subjectivity within Bengali Muslim households, where her identity is defined through relational roles daughter, wife, kin, rather than as an independent individual. This literary representation reflects broader societal structures that minimise women's presence, often relegating their choices to the dictates of family honour and community expectations.

Despite Islamic teachings promoting women's rights to education, consent in marriage, inheritance, and moral agency, societal practices frequently contradict these ideals (Mitra, 2006). For instance, the practice of *purdah*, historically viewed as a protective measure, often functions as a tool for surveillance and social regulation, limiting women's engagement in public contexts and reinforcing gendered social norms. This paper posits that within the framework of the Ghoti–Bangla divide, women's *nirbachon* and *iccha* are not merely constrained; rather, they become politicized outcomes of a silent cultural conflict where women's bodies and choices are exploited as instruments in broader ideological battles.

Nirbachon (choice) and *Iccha* (desire): Gendered Choice and Desire in Existing Scholarship

Scholarship on Muslim women in Bengal has historically remained fragmented, shaped by nationalist historiography, reformist discourse, and selective feminist attention. Early studies on women in colonial Bengal largely centred on Hindu, upper-caste experiences, treating Muslim women either as peripheral or as passive subjects bound by religious

conservatism. As a result, Muslim women frequently appeared in scholarship as problems to be reformed rather than as historical and social actors in their own right. More recent feminist and historical interventions have challenged this marginalisation, foregrounding Muslim women's lived realities while interrogating the structures that shaped their visibility, agency, and everyday practices.

A foundational contribution to this field is Amin's *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876–1939* (Amin, 1996), which provides a detailed historical account of Muslim women's lives during the late colonial period. Amin demonstrates that women's education, mobility, and public participation were mediated through family, religion, and class, even as reformist discourses increasingly addressed women's moral uplift. Importantly, Amin shows that women's "choice" was never autonomous; rather, it was negotiated within patriarchal family structures and community expectations. This historical insight is crucial for understanding the persistence of regulated femininity in contemporary Bengali Muslim society. The question of Muslim women's marginality is taken further by Sarkar (2001) in *Muslim Women and the Politics of (In)visibility in Late Colonial Bengal*. Sarkar argues that Muslim women were rendered invisible within nationalist historiography not because of their absence from public life, but because their visibility disrupted the dominant construction of the "ideal Indian woman" as Hindu, upper-caste, and middle-class. Muslim women thus became the constitutive "other" against which both Hindu femininity and Muslim masculinity were defined. Sarkar's analysis is particularly significant for highlighting how women's bodies and behaviours become symbolic sites through which community boundaries and moral hierarchies are produced. Literary and cultural histories have further

complicated understandings of Muslim women's agency. Azim and Hasan (2013), in *Language, Literature, Education and Community: The Bengali Muslim Woman in the Early Twentieth Century*, examine women's writings in Muslim-edited journals and demonstrate that women's engagement with education and self-expression was deeply constrained by religious morality, linguistic politics, and nationalist anxieties. Their work shows that women's empowerment did not follow a linear trajectory; rather, women occupied an ambiguous position between domestic religiosity and limited public participation. This scholarship is particularly relevant to contemporary discussions of *nirbachon* and *iccha*, as it highlights how women's desires were historically articulated within socially sanctioned boundaries.

While historical and literary scholarship provides crucial background, sociological studies have shifted attention to everyday practices through which gendered and communal distinctions are maintained. Sabur (2014), in *Gender, Veiling, and Class: Symbolic Boundaries and Veiling in Bengali Muslim Families*, offers an ethnographic analysis of veiling practices among Bengali Muslims. Sabur argues that *hijab* and *burqa* function not merely as religious observances but as classed and symbolic markers of respectability. Veiling becomes a means of producing distinctions within the Muslim community itself, separating "proper" women from "modern" ones. Sabur's work is central to understanding how women's bodies are mobilised to sustain both moral and class hierarchies.

Feminist theoretical interventions further complicate simplistic readings of women's agency within religious contexts. Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (Mahmood, 2005) challenges liberal feminist assumptions that agency must necessarily manifest as resistance to norms. Mahmood

demonstrates that women may actively inhabit religious practices as ethical and moral disciplines. This framework is particularly useful for interpreting narratives in which women articulate veiling and domesticity as meaningful choices rather than as imposed constraints, without denying the presence of power structures. The relationship between gender, nationalism, and community identity has been theorised by Chatterjee (1993) and Yuval-Davis (1997). Chatterjee's concept of the "inner domain" of culture reveals how women are positioned as custodians of tradition within nationalist projects, while Yuval-Davis highlights women's role as biological and cultural reproducers of the nation and community. Together, these perspectives explain why women's conduct, sexuality, and everyday choices become central to sustaining symbolic boundaries within and between communities. Within the specific context of Bengal, sociological work on migration and Partition has highlighted how identities continue to be shaped by displacement and resettlement. Studies on the Ghoti– Bangal divide demonstrate that distinctions initially rooted in geography and migration history have been sustained through everyday cultural practices and stereotypes (Bhaumik, 2022; Shamshad, 2016). However, this literature has largely treated the divide as cultural or linguistic, paying limited attention to its gendered dimensions.

Literary representations such as Hasan Azizul Huq's *Agunpaki* further illuminate the gendered erasure that accompanies these processes. The unnamed female protagonist, whose identity is defined entirely through relational roles, reflects the broader marginalisation of women's subjectivity within Bengali Muslim households. While fictional, such narratives resonate strongly with sociological findings on women's lack of autonomy and symbolic burden within family and community life.

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, significant gaps remain. Much of the literature examines Muslim women within colonial history, nationalist discourse, or broad community frameworks, often treating the Muslim community as internally homogeneous. There has been limited sociological engagement with intra-community distinctions, such as the Ghoti–Bangal divide, and with how women's everyday choices become sites for negotiating these distinctions. Moreover, while education, veiling, marriage, and mobility have been studied individually, fewer works examine how these domains intersect to transform women's *nirbachon* and *iccha* into politicised markers of community identity. This paper addresses these gaps by foregrounding oral narratives of Bengali Muslim women from both Ghoti and Bangal backgrounds. By examining how women's choices are learnt, justified, and evaluated within everyday life, the study extends existing scholarship on Muslim women, gendered agency, and identity politics in Bengal. In doing so, it shifts the analytical focus from women as objects of reform or symbols of tradition to women as social subjects whose lives reveal the intimate workings of intra-community power.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine women's *nirbachon* (choice) and *iccha* (desire) as lived and negotiated within the Bengali Muslim Ghoti–Bangal divide. Given the study's focus on everyday meanings, moral reasoning, and intra-community comparisons, a qualitative approach was considered most appropriate. Rather than treating women's choices as isolated decisions, the research foregrounds narratives as socially embedded accounts shaped by family, religion, class, and community identity.

The study is based on 78 respondents drawn from Bengali Muslim Ghoti and Bangal families.

- Ghoti families: 38 respondents
- Bangal families: 40 respondents

Participants included women across different age groups (18–70 years), marital statuses (unmarried, married, widowed), and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as a smaller number of male respondents whose narratives provided insight into gendered expectations, moral surveillance, and community norms.

The research employed a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Initial participants were identified through purposive sampling to ensure representation from both Ghoti and Bangal families and to capture variation across age, education, and marital status. Subsequently, snowball sampling was used to access additional respondents, particularly older women and those residing in more conservative family settings, where access through formal means was limited. Snowballing proved especially effective in reaching participants who were hesitant to speak openly about issues of veiling, marriage, and family control, as referrals from trusted contacts helped establish rapport and trust.

Data were collected through in-depth oral narratives, informal semi-structured interviews, and extended conversations conducted in Bengali. Interviews focused on women's experiences of education, marriage, work, mobility, veiling practices, and perceptions of the "other" group. Rather than following a rigid questionnaire, conversations were allowed to unfold organically, enabling respondents to narrate their experiences in their own terms. Special attention

was paid to moments of hesitation, justification, laughter, and silence, as these were treated as meaningful components of the narrative. In many cases, interviews took place within domestic spaces, allowing observation of family dynamics and everyday interactions that shaped women's choices.

The analysis follows an inductive thematic approach, grounded in narrative interpretation. Transcripts and field notes were read iteratively to identify recurring themes such as socialisation, surveillance, respectability, education, marriage, and moral comparison. Rather than coding responses in isolation, narratives were analysed relationally, with particular attention to how women compared themselves to others and justified their choices in relation to family and community expectations. Women's narratives were treated not merely as reflections of personal experience but as socially situated accounts that reveal broader structures of power. The concepts of *nirbachon* and *iccha* were used as analytical lenses to examine how women's choices were permitted, constrained, or redirected within everyday life.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, ethical considerations were central to the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms and removing identifying details. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Care was taken to ensure that interviews did not place respondents at risk of familial or social repercussions, particularly in discussions related to marriage, veiling, and autonomy. As a qualitative study based on non-probability sampling, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable. However, the strength of the research lies in its depth and richness, offering detailed insight into the everyday processes through which women's choices are shaped and evaluated within the Ghoti–Bangal divide.

Snowball sampling, while effective in accessing hard-to-reach participants, may also reflect existing social networks; this limitation is acknowledged and mitigated through diversity in age, location, and socio-economic background among respondents.

By combining purposive and snowball sampling with narrative analysis, this study contributes methodologically to scholarship on Muslim women by foregrounding women's voices and everyday moral reasoning. The approach enables a nuanced understanding of how gendered agency is experienced, justified, and constrained within intra-community dynamics, moving beyond binary notions of choice and coercion.

Findings and Analysis

This section analyses women's (choice) and *iccha* (desire) as they are articulated, negotiated, and disciplined in everyday life among Bengali Muslim Ghoti and Bangal families. Drawing on oral narratives collected from 78 respondents, the findings demonstrate that women's choices are rarely autonomous acts. Instead, they are socially learnt, morally evaluated, and continuously compared across the Ghoti–Bangal divide. Women emerge as symbolic sites through which families and communities articulate modernity, religiosity, respectability, and moral superiority.

Veiling practices emerge as the most visible and morally charged domain through which women's choices are evaluated. Importantly, *purdah* is not narrated as a rule imposed at a single moment, but as a moral sensibility gradually cultivated within the family.

Ruba, a college student from a Bangal family, repeatedly framed *hijab* as an inherited ethical value:

> *My family back in Bangladesh, they have always said that a hijab is the most beautiful thing because it hides something even more beautiful, my hair.*

The phrase "have always said" indicates repetition and long-term socialisation. Modesty here is not presented as restriction but as aesthetic and moral refinement. Even moments of doubt are narrated as internal negotiations rather than resistance: *Sometimes I get influenced by the Ghotis here… but my inner self keeps telling me that hijab is beautiful.*

The "inner self" functions as internalised authority, revealing how surveillance becomes self-regulation. Ruba then converts personal practice into communal comparison: *Ghotis do wear hijab, but mostly for fashion… I feel we are more aware of these norms than the other.*

Through this comparison, Bangal women are positioned as morally disciplined, while Ghoti women are implicitly framed as insufficiently religious. Thus, *purdah* operates not merely as clothing but as a moral language through which collective superiority is asserted.

Male narratives intensify this moralisation. Kamal's statement regarding marriage illustrates how women's bodies become sites of honour and control:

> *I will only marry someone who wears a burqa because only then I will know she has saved herself from the evil world.*

Here, veiling is imagined as proof of purity, loyalty, and marital worth. Notably, male piety or restraint is absent from the narrative. Moral responsibility is displaced onto women, reinforcing how *nirbachon* is evaluated through male approval and desire. Marriage becomes a reward

for discipline, further embedding control within intimate relationships.

Women's narratives reveal how restriction is internalised and retrospectively reframed as desire. Farjana, a primary school teacher from Murshidabad, narrated the incident that led to her adopting the *burqa*:

> *Abbu saw a boy looking at us when we were returning from tuition… the next day my mother told me it was the right time to wear the burqa.*

Regulation is mediated through the mother, demonstrating how patriarchal norms are reproduced by women themselves. Farjana's later reflection is particularly revealing:

> *Since that day I feel like a complete woman.*

Womanhood here is achieved not through autonomy but through concealment and surveillance. *Iccha* is reshaped; restriction becomes moral maturity. This illustrates how women learn to desire what is permitted rather than perceive it as coercion.

Ghoti women do not reject modesty but contest its rigid moral hierarchy. Dolly, a homemaker and tuition teacher, stated:

> *Be it a dupatta or a burqa, it does the same job. We are not less religious. Our parents give us freedom to choose.*

Her narrative asserts an alternative ethical framework in which choice itself becomes a moral value. Religiosity is detached from visible discipline and reattached to autonomy and intention. This reveals how intra-community difference is not about belief, but about how belief is performed on women's bodies.

Older women's narratives demonstrate how restrictions on movement become embodied habits. S. Begum, now in her seventies, recalled:

Bari gulor upor diye jetam…

ekhono ami shei bhabei jai.

(used to go through the lanes between the houses… even now,

I still go the same way)

Despite social change, her body continues to follow learned spatial boundaries. She further avoided Bangal households, describing them as loud and uncultured. These perceptions reflect long-standing Ghoti stereotypes and demonstrate how gendered mobility intersects with communal prejudice. Women's movement thus becomes shaped simultaneously by fear, respectability, and community identity.

Education emerges as a valued yet conditional aspiration. Older women like S. Begum were denied formal schooling but valued for religious knowledge, which enhanced marital prospects. Religious literacy functioned as cultural capital where formal education was unavailable.

In contemporary contexts, education is encouraged but remains evaluated through its usefulness to family and marriage. Teaching is repeatedly described as the most acceptable profession, as it aligns with domestic responsibilities. Where education threatens independence, it is curtailed. Rukaiya, who held a master's degree, narrated:

I wanted to teach but after marriage my in-laws did not allow me, even though my husband supported it.

Here, *nirbachon* is revealed as revocable. Marriage relocates patriarchal authority rather than dismantling it.

Marriage represents a critical rupture in women's autonomy. Inter-group marriages remain fraught. Kajol described her sister's marriage to a Bangal man:

> *We usually do not trust outsiders… but since it was my sister's choice, we did not object much.*

Acceptance is narrated as concession, not norm, and is closely tied to economic security and land ownership. Choice is tolerated only when buffered by class.

Age of marriage further illustrates this divide. Ghoti families frequently frame delayed marriage and consent as markers of modernity, while Bangal families facing economic precarity prioritise early marriage, limiting women's educational trajectories.

Across all narratives, women function as symbolic measures through which communities define themselves. Ghoti families present women's education, mobility, and delayed marriage as evidence of modernity. Bangal families frame veiling, domesticity, and obedience as signs of moral and religious authenticity. In both cases, women's *nirbachon* and *iccha* are transformed into collective statements.

Women thus carry the emotional and symbolic burden of representing community honour. Their lives are continuously evaluated, narrated, and compared, making everyday existence a site of moral labour.

The findings demonstrate that women's choices within the Bengali Muslim Ghoti– Bangal divide are not absent, but carefully trained, morally redirected, and conditionally permitted. Oral narratives reveal how women learn to desire what is socially sanctioned, internalise restriction as virtue, and negotiate limited autonomy within family and marriage. By centring women's voices, this study shows how intra-

community boundaries are reproduced not through overt conflict, but through everyday practices inscribed on women's bodies and lives.

Conclusion

This paper explores the dynamics surrounding women's *nirbachon* (choice) and *iccha* (desire) within the context of the Bengali Muslim Ghoti–Bangal divide, offering a nuanced understanding that transcends conventional notions of this divide as merely cultural or regional rivalry. It emphasizes the critical yet often overlooked role of gender as a significant axis through which intra-community distinctions are produced and maintained. The analysis draws on oral narratives, revealing that women's everyday decisions—encompassing aspects of education, marriage, work, mobility, and religious practices—are not solely personal choices. Instead, these decisions are socially mediated and acquire collective significance within their respective communities. The findings indicate that women's lives serve as symbolic sites for the articulation of community values such as moral superiority, religious authenticity, and modernity. The study illustrates that while Muslim Ghoti families may regard women's educational opportunities and mobility as signs of progress, Muslim Bangal families often emphasize veiling and adherence to domestic roles as indicators of piety. In both contexts, women's agency is characterized by a nuanced interplay: it is neither entirely absent nor fully autonomous, but rather selectively permitted and evaluated within familial and communal frameworks.

Crucially, the research highlights that the gendered politicization of women's choices is not solely enforced through overt coercion. Instead, it is sustained through processes of socialization, moral reasoning, and the internalization of

communal expectations. Women frequently align their desires with socially accepted norms, often reframing restrictions as virtues and perceived autonomy as a responsibility. Consequently, women shoulder a disproportionate emotional and symbolic burden, as their experiences become focal points for the reinforcement of community boundaries. By foregrounding women's voices, this study significantly contributes to the scholarship on Muslim women, gender agency, and identity politics in Bengal. It suggests a shift in perspective, advocating for understanding agency as relational, negotiated, and embedded within existing power structures, rather than depicting women solely as passive victims or fully autonomous actors.

The study calls for a re-evaluation of how gender inequality is addressed in these contexts, challenging rigid binaries of tradition versus modernity and choice versus coercion. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing women as social subjects in their own right, rather than merely as representatives of collective identity, to promote more equitable and inclusive social belonging.

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The ineffectiveness of UN Resolution 1325: The case of Afghanistan

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The primary objective of this paper is to analyze the effectiveness of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and focus more specifically on the context of Afghanistan. This paper seeks to study the failure of the WPS Agenda in a broader sense and its linkage more specifically to Afghanistan due to the growing legitimization of the Taliban regime in global politics. The paper will also take recent cases of natural disasters and study how 'human security' is doubly endangered for Afghan women during natural calamities, and the lack of humanitarian action on the same. The paper will argue that the example of Afghanistan shows that it is imperative to implement, strategise, and design the WPS agenda to suit the culture-specific context of countries in conflict. The paper will argue through examples that localising the WPS agenda rather than focusing on a rights based framework mayAfghanistan Gender Index Report 2024 released by the UN. The Gender Index Report released by the UN Women in 2024 concludes an "extreme manifestation of gender inequality, creating one of the deepest empowerment deficits and widest gender gaps in the world." (Gender Index 2024: Afghanistan, 2025) while describing the condition of women in Afghanistan.

Keywords: *WPS agenda, UN resolution 1325, norms, norm diffusion, human security*

Introduction: Scope of UN Resolution 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 was adopted in 2000 for the purpose of advancing women's participation in peace and security governance, preventing gender-based violence, protecting women's rights and safety and ensuring their needs are addressed in post-conflict relief and recovery efforts (Asante, Shepherd,2025). The passage of the United Nations Security Resolution 1325 in 2000 was a pivotal moment for peacebuilding. The resolution signaled the significance of the involvement of women in political leadership and peacebuilding as an important prerequisite for maintaining international peace and stability (Lindsey,2025). The UNSCR 1325 is crucial for the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda.

The WPS Agenda comprises of four pillars namely prevention, protection, participation and relief and recovery. Conflict must prevent all forms of violence against women and girls. This implies that Conflict should be avoided and ended. In conflict situations all parties must prevent all forms of violence against women and girls. Secondly, the rights and safety of women and girls must be protected. It should take into account how rights and safety of women and girls are impacted due to sexual violence. Third, all decisions related to peace and security from local levels to international forums must include women. Peace and security processes must be more inclusive. Lastly, the relief and recovery process post conflict must consider specific needs of women and girls. It focuses on involving women-led organisations in ensuring access to food, water and hygiene products during and post conflict to women vulnerable to getting access to basic amenities. Equal and meaningful participation of women must be ensured in peace and security processed. Lastly, the

rebuilding process after a conflict or crisis must acknowledge specific needs of women and girls. (UN Women, 2025).

Various scholars and practitioners attach differing significance to the goals enlisted within the WPS Agenda. Certain scholars and practitioners focus on addressing the 'security' aspect of women and girls during a conflict, others perceive the WPS Agenda as a mechanism for feminist mobilisation and lastly others situate the WPS Agenda in the broader process of peace building and improving the status of women's wellbeing in the world. (Lindsey,2025)

There have been some significant strides for the WPS agenda with the passage of UNSCR 1325 most notably more attention towards protection of women and girls during armed conflict. However, criticisms of the UNSCR 1325 range around lacunae in its implementation, application of gender binaries and mere diplomatic lip service to its goals. Governmental support for the WPS agenda has also increased with the passage of the resolution including the formulation of National Action Plans (NAPS) by different countries. (Lindsey,2025).

National Action Plans (NAPS) are domestic policy documents that state objectives for the implementation of the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda. Scholars have perceived NAPs as both a sign of success and failure of the WPS agenda. NAPs are domestic policy documents that articulate their commitments for the implementation of the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda providing insight into the WPS interests and priorities of states. NAPs have thus gained traction over the years for the ease of assessing funding and political will to drive implementation at the state level. (Asante, Shepherd, 2025).

NAPs show that there is no single vision of what the WPS agenda should aspire towards. NAPs often fall short due

to misalignment between NAP's principles and the values of patriarchal societies which cause exclusion of women from political, social and economic activities as well as due to the ambiguity regarding the social and political impact of implementation often leads critics to comment that the formulation of a NAP remains symbolic. (Newby & O'Malley, 2021).

The expansion of the WPS agenda is crucial for addressing emergent security risks for women in conflict settings. However states have often employed NAPs to advance national interests and foreign policy objectives instead of the WPS agenda. One of the most significant criticisms of NAPs has been the inability of states to determine the underlying causes of women's insecurity. (Asante, Shepherd, 2025).

While Europe and North America have significantly higher number of countries implementing NAPs significant criticism on the conception and the tendency of European states to project policy initiatives towards the Global South rather than evaluating domestic structural inequalities that impede the realisation of WPS have emerged. Overemphasis on traditional security such as focus on increasing the military participation, national security. (Newby & O'Malley, 2021). Despite the criticisms the NAP remains a key tool for localising the WPS agenda. In short, the NAP may be seen as a national level policy for implementation of international agenda. The perceived increased participation and access of civil society members as key actors in the NAP process is one of the most evident ways in which the WPS norms have trickled down as national priority in various countries.

The focus 2015 afterwards on women as security actors has not increased participation of women in the security arena. For example, in national militaries the participation of

women on an average is around 10% despite the adoption of UNSC 1325. The resolution went into considerable detail on how to mainstream gender in national security institutions. The Namibia Plan of Action stated explicitly that women's participation in peace operations, peacekeeping should be increased. Despite the declaration in most of these areas the countries of the Global North show no signs of performing better than the Global South. (Newby & O'Malley, 2021)

The most active implementation of the WPS has been at the level of civil society. Context specific examples of WPS in conditions of both war and peace emerge by observing the activity of civil society actors. It is often civil society actors that highlight the influence of religious, societal norms and customary laws as impediments to the realisation of the WPS agenda. Scholars have highlighted the use of sexualised violence to disenfranchise women and therefore scholars caution against adopting a purely statist approach while implementing the WPS agenda. (Newby & O'Malley, 2021). Thematically the UNSC Resolution is geared to guide the international community towards efforts to understand the gendered implications of armed conflicts. For civil society actors the UNSC 1325 has emerged as a tool to advocate relief and recovery work of civil society actors who have been engaged in addressing the needs and concerns of women in conflict rid areas. The passage of the WPS resolution in itself is seen as a testament to persistent civil society advocacy. (Basu,2025)

II. Impediments to the WPS Agenda

Scholars have noted however that states and civil society actors alike have used the WPS agenda for varying purposes such as advancing their own strategic interests alongside the implementation of the agenda. Most notably UN member

states campaigning for a non-permanent seat on the security council have showcased their commitment to the agenda to strengthen their case for election. Similarly civil society actors have used the WPS agenda to attract funds and to direct resources towards donor driven agendas rather than local concerns. (Basu, 2025).

Different scholars and practitioners attach significance to different goals within the WPS agenda. For some the focus in on addressing the insecurity of woman and girls in conflict, for others it is a mechanism for feminist mobilisation and finally for some it is a means to establish peace and improve women's wellbeing in the world. (Lindsey,2025). Another criticism of the WPS Agenda has been that the inclusion of LGBTQ community within the agenda has been limited. This lack of inclusion of the LGBTQ community is seen as limiting the transformative potential of the agenda. (Lindsey,2025)

Others have pointed towards the crisis towards the liberal framework of conceptualising peace itself. The liberal peace framework rests on three interdependent core tenets : democracy, human rights and globalised free market economies all of which must operate together. It assumes that all these three tenets together will naturally lead to peace. The most crucial criticism of the liberal framework is the over emphasis on state rebuilding efforts rather than revisiting the liberal paradigm of peace. Others have stated that the liberal peace framework does not fully capture the realities of the conflict rid societies. The liberal peace framework also reinforces binaries between the local and the global; the west and the non-west; the victim and the perpetrator. Liberal peace frameworks look at conflict in a linear manner failing to capture the complex and ambiguous nature of protracted conflict. In essence it often reinforces hegemonic forces such colonialism, masculinity and western values. (Anderson et

al., 2025). Mainstream approaches to peacebuilding efforts therefore have retained the exclusive focus on the internal and domestic dimension of governance and institutions in conflict affected societies. This has often been at the cost of negligence of local actors and dynamics of governance rooted in cultural and societal norms. The idea of security therefore has also remained largely centered around the state.

It is therefore imperative to broaden the understanding of security beyond traditional conception of security.

III. WPS Agenda: The case of Afghanistan

Following the agreement signed by the US government and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, in February 2020, known as the Doha Deal or Doha Agreement, the US and Taliban forces ended the war, established a ceasefire, and implemented several key agreements. The United States' military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 marked the conclusion of a two-decade military presence (2001-2021). Initially the WPS agenda led to greater participation of women in politics and gains made in education and healthcare between 2001 to 2021 in Afghanistan. Although Afghanistan ratified a NAP to reflect commitment to the WPS agenda the implementation remained a challenge due patriarchal nature and inter-ethnic tension of Afghan society. (True & Akbari, 2021).

The participation of women leaders during the US-Taliban peace talks resulted in targeted killing of women leaders. With this a major shift in the US approach towards Afghanistan became evident. The exclusion of the Afghan government from the peace talks by the US in the peace talks due to the Taliban's insistence was reflective of this approach (True & Akbari, 2021) During the talks the Taliban stated that women would enjoy rights to education consistent with Islamic law and Afghan culture. This view was broadly accepted by

Western states. The definition of Afghan culture or rather Taliban's definition of Afghan culture was not challenged. (True & Akbari, 2021). Further during the peace talks the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan was not captured. Another prominent criticism of the WPS agenda emerged due to the rural-urban divide. Afghan women representatives were accused of failing to represent rural gender issues. For rural women the end of the conflict carried greater significance in many areas than their rights. With the Taliban regime in power since August 2021 Afghanistan became the only country banning women's education. Further Afghanistan became a country where the UN cannot employ local women- illustrating the extent of failure of the WPS agenda on ground. (True & Akbari, 2021)

Under the Taliban 2.0 therefore Afghanistan has been witnessing an institutionalised and systematic oppression of women that has stripped them of their basic right to education, work and movement. Scholars have characterised this as a 'gender apartheid' namely a "system of governance based on laws and/or policies which imposes systematic segregation of women and men and may also have systematically exclude women from public spaces and spheres". The failure of the WPS is illustrated most prominently in the fact that despite well documented evidence of the ongoing gender apartheid in Afghanistan there is no mechanism by which to hold the Taliban accountable within Afghanistan. (Haqpal, 2025)

IV. The significance of Human Security

Traditionally the understanding of 'security' has been tied closely to the 'nation state' as such 'territorial integrity' which is a key marker of a state has led to conventionally 'threats' being understood as 'external' as originating not from within but outside the state. Realism attributes great

significance to 'rationality' guiding state behavior. Realism accords importance to infusing 'rational order' in the study of politics. (Morgenthau, 1978). However, realism is not bereft of demerits. Ken Booth identifies, realism as guiding the understanding of security being based on three elements "it has emphasized military threats and the need for strong counters; it has been status quo oriented; and it has centered on states". (Booth as cited in Wilkin,2001) Rational theories of international relations present largely a 'reductive' account of political life. They premise their understanding of politics in the "unchanging essential properties of politics. An excessive emphasis on state power (military capabilities), anarchy (absence of any authority to impose law and order in the international arena), balance of power (alliances between states to maintain equilibrium of power) and the rigid demarcation of the international arena from that of domestic politics" falls deficient to explain the role of non-state actors, non- military threats to the state such as environmental and health care threats which includes natural disasters, pandemics. (Wilkin, 2001)

A more extensive understanding of 'security' is important- as the security of the state is not synonymous with the security of the individual. A conception of security which engages with individuals and collectivities rather than that of the state and its institutions broadens the scope of 'security' beyond mere survival. It encompasses the attributes required to lead a dignified life. (Tadjbaksh, 2014). In its broadest sense, advocates of the human security approach delineate human security as comprising of- "freedom from want – conditions that allow for, protection of basic needs quality of life, freedom from fear- protection of individuals from direct threats to safety, physical integrity and various forms of direct, indirect violence and lastly, freedom from indignity- conditions that

provide for the assurance of fundamental rights, conditions to make choices and take advantage in everyday lives". (Tadjbaksh,2014).

The concept of 'human security' centers the concept of security with that of people and communities- instead of state and its institutions. Human Security highlights that the security of the state does not translate to the security of the individual. Human Security widens the concept of 'security' in recognizing a wide range of non- traditional threats. Human Security was first laid down as a concept in the 1994 Human Development Report wherein Mahbub- Ul- Haq emphasised security can be achieved through 'development not arms'. This encapsulation laid down the comprehensive, holistic view that 'human security' envisioned. Human Security therefore is a necessary condition that must be fulfilled for an individual to access means of 'development' whether socially, educationally or economically. The central concern of human security is 'human dignity' and sustenance and stability of development gains made by an individual or a community. (Tadjbaksh,2014). Although, the concept of 'human security' was explicitly outlined in the 1994 Development Report- the roots of 'human security' as a concept can be traced back to the work done by International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) during the 19th century underlying the principle- that people should be protected from violent threats and when they are harmed or injured and that the international community has an obligation to assist them. (Martin & Owen,2013). The UNDP Report of 1994 recognizes that 'human security 'is more than the mere absence of conflict. If human development is focused towards expansion of opportunities to all- human security as a concept focuses on mitigating, controlling threats from one's immediate environment that acts as a barrier to access to basic amenities.

V. Recent Indices from Afghanistan

The recently published Afghanistan Gender Index measures the current status of women in Afghanistan against the eight sustainable development goals. UN Women and UNDP jointly developed the Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) and Global Gender Parity Index (GGPI) in 2023. These indices measure the extent to which women in different countries can access and exercise their rights and opportunities. (Gender Index 2024: Afghanistan, 2025) Most significantly from 2000-2021 the gender gap in good health has deteriorated. Limited access to data since the Taliban regime's takeover makes it even more difficult to assess the impact of the collapse of the public health system. (Gender Index 2024: Afghanistan, 2025) The overall gender restrictions on health centres, ban on education further exacerbating the lack of skilled women healthcare personnel acts as a barrier for women to access necessary healthcare. Specific health concerns of women make them more susceptible to sexual and reproductive risks. (Gender Index 2024: Afghanistan, 2025) Although there has been a decline in armed conflict related deaths across Afghanistan since 2021 the gender gap in life expectancy will widen further due to restrictions on access to basic health services for women. Increased restrictions on freedom of movement including women's access to public and private transport without a male member of the family since the Taliban came to power has also impacted women's access to health. (Gender Index 2024: Afghanistan, 2025). Similarly since 2021 progress made in school enrollment for girls between 2001-2021 has been reversed. The Taliban regime secondary schools for girls remains suspended since March 2022. Since 2021, hence religious education has been the only option available for young women.

The grave situation was illustrated most recently during an earthquake which took place in Afghanistan in September 2025. In the aftermath of a 6.0 magnitude earthquake in September 2025 in Eastern Afghanistan women were grossly neglected during the rescue operations. Women and girls accounted for more than half of the casualties in the disaster. They also accounted for 60% of those missing in the aftermath of the earthquake. (UN News, 2025) Humanitarian and rescue workers from the ground recounted that cultural norms in certain areas translated to women not wanting men to touch and local men also refusing to touch women during the rescue operations. (UN News, 2025)

This situation highlights the double endangerment that women and girls face during crises such as natural disasters and the inherent shortcomings of the international humanitarian framework to address the crisis. Lack of legitimacy, and the power to enforce as well as lack of on ground presence coupled with adherence to Taliban enforced restrictions on mobility of women make it increasingly difficult for humanitarian workers to operate in Afghanistan. The suspension of internet and cellular networks also disrupted rescue efforts. However later the Taliban officials specifically asked agencies to send more female health workers to assist female survivors. (Hadid & Akbari, 2025) Local aid workers claimed that women were airlifted during rescue operations in adherence with the Taliban's rules. Women injured in the earthquake were left unattended in many instances until female aid workers arrived. The aftermath of the earthquake highlighted the Taliban's extent of enforcement of restrictions on women while trying to garner necessary aid and support required due to the deteriorating situation.

VI. The Way Forward

There has been increasing legitimacy gained by the Taliban regime since assuming power since 2021. This needs to be challenged. A recent example of this was the protest by women journalists during the visit of the Taliban foreign minister to New Delhi and the initial exclusion of women journalists. It should be noted that the US remains the biggest aid donor in Afghanistan since the withdrawal of the US military providing approximately 3.63 billion between October 2021 and December 2024. US engagement or rather lack of engagement will continue to shape the situation in Afghanistan. Various countries have increased outreach with the Taliban. Although most such diplomatic engagements are based on pragmatic considerations this provides the Taliban a forum to put forward their strategic interests. Domestic pressure has increased in Europe to deport Afghan refugees prompting authorities to engage with the Taliban.

It is important to note that 'patriarchal bargaining' of values often takes place in diplomatic engagements wherein considerations of protection of human rights and the women, peace and security agenda assume a backseat despite multiple countries being signatories of various international agreements towards gender equality. Recent Pakistan-Afghanistan escalation since 12 October points towards the protracted nature of the conflict being far from over. It should be noted that Pakistan has earlier deported Afghan refugees. As the humanitarian crisis edges from bad to worse it is imperative for the humanitarian frameworks to prioritise the most vulnerable women and children. Strategic interests of states will likely triumph in engagements with the Taliban which leaves multilateral efforts as the most effective means for tackling the crisis. The media has gradually forgone Afghanistan and has shifted attention towards other ongoing

crises such as Gaza, Syria and Ukraine. The decreased attention has enabled the Taliban's outreach efforts.

VII. WPS Agenda: What next?

Scholars have argued that the failure of the WPS agenda in Afghanistan highlights the overt focus of the WPS resolutions on protecting women's bodies than advancing women's minds. It failed to envision women's mind as an important tool for establishing peace in a country such as Afghanistan. (Alwis, 2022.) D'Souza in her article highlights how dominant narratives on Afghanistan in global media focus on the structural constraints of lack of human rights. These narratives do not capture the ingenious ways in which Afghan women have adapted to the Taliban regime. She highlights the example of the Afghanistan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI) founded in 2017 and its active role in promoting and supporting Afghan women entrepreneurs and businesses. The AWCCI continues to be in operation and has even expanded its scope of operation into as many as 20 provinces. The number of women doing all businesses without licenses stands approximately at 52,000 to 120,000. Most of these businesses focus on handicrafts, health, agriculture and jewellery. AWCCI has assisted 12,500, micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in accessing alternate trade routes and provided support to more than 900 women-owned businesses in digital commerce and export facilitation and provided business training to more than 5,000 women through home based online initiatives. (D'Souza, 2025). D'Souza proposes small localised interventions such as women's trade facilitation desks at border crossings to reduce barriers for women traders, support and funding for trade fairs and digital literacy programmes. (D'Souza, 2025)

One of the original intentions of the WPS agenda was the inclusion of women in the peacemaking process yet the example of Afghanistan shows us that there is a disconnect between the theory and the application of the WPS agenda. Peace deals are often relational and either empower, bolster or alternatively diminish interests and status of actors. The advancement of the WPS agenda will therefore require political bargaining to bring about impactful change. The bargaining of intentions of the WPS agenda will continue to take place. It will require advocacy, global solidarity and effective maneuvering to advance the WPS agenda.

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An Enquiry into Patriarchal Indian Jurisprudence in the Post-Nirbhaya Era

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Abstract

Rape is a word that evokes fear just by saying it. Even though it is the most violent form of crime, the stigma associated with it has persisted. The judiciary, police, and courts claim that the legal system has evolved to support women who have been victims of rape, as has been the case, allegedly, from Nirbhaya to Abhaya. The Chief Justice of India, B. R. Gavai, has drawn attention to India's developing legislative reforms intended to better protect survivors of sexual assault and redefine consent by denouncing the 1979 Supreme Court acquittal in a custodial rape case. There are additional stories of lengthy delays in starting investigations into allegations of sexual assault in India. Police delays are a common occurrence, according to Audrey D'Mello, Director of Majlis, a non-profit organisation that provides legal counselling to women and children who are victims of sexual and domestic abuse, who spoke to CNN. Ninety per cent of the 2,500 rape cases Majlisha worked on over the previous twelve years have had delayed FIRs, according to D'Mello. (Sashikala VP, CNN n.d.-b)

In 2022, there were 198,285 rape cases pending trial. By the end of the year, just 18,517 had been resolved. According

to a survey by the non-profit Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, more than 90% of cases in that year remained unresolved. This backlog in trial courts, observable for years, denies the victim justice or even closure. (Sashikala VP, CNN n.d.-b)

This paper intends to investigate the evolution of the legal system from 2012 to 2024 in India. The paper uses qualitative analysis to draw an understanding of the trajectory of anti-rape laws in India and how much successful the prevailing Indian Penal Code and Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita have been in providing justice to the victims of not only rape but also other crimes against women.

Keywords: *Rape, Nirbhaya, Abhaya, judiciary in India, delay of justice, women's bodies, representation, gender, politics of identity.*

Introduction

Since time immemorial, Western legal jurisprudence has been conceptualised through the figures of Greek and Roman female allegories, such as Goddess Justicia and Athena. But rarely has legal jurisprudence ever had a feminine lens. For centuries, women were kept outside the ambit of political, civil, economic, and most importantly, legal rights. Notwithstanding the matter of active female participation in rainbow political movements[1] like the French and the Glorious Revolutions, the politico-legal rights of women have always been ignored and purposefully suppressed by male political elites. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed an impetus for women's rights classified into three dominant waves of feminism. Among many topics of discussion, the

[1]Rainbow Political Movement, popularised in 1984 by Rev. Jesse Jackson, were aimed at uniting marginalised racial and ethnic groups within the US political landscape. These movements led by liberal integrationists, socialists, trade unionists, feminists, LGBTQIA+ advocates, and racial minorities pushed for grassroots democracy, progressive US legislation, Governmental accountability and political inclusivity. Although the movements drew inspiration from the French Revolution (which too had similar political aspirations), unlike the latter, the US rainbow coalitions had active female representation.

violation of the female body by patriarchal violence, termed gender-based violence, has drawn widespread attention among scholars, preceding the feminist waves. Although gender violence and legal representation were key issues of contention amongst feminist salons, they were restricted to merely uncovering their philosophical underpinnings. Gender violence to date gets redressed from the perspective of an all-male patriarchal legal apparatus.

This paper shall reflect upon the infructuous legal procedures, judgments, judgements and *obiter dicta delivered* by the Indian Judiciary in dealing with rape, one of the many gruesome manifestations of gender-based violence. Carole Pateman in *Sexual Contract argued* that legal rights, particularly under statist social contract theory, were never applied equally to women, and in fact engendered a "sexual contract" of sorts. This contract legitimised patriarchal domination under the guise of consent (Pateman, 1988). To address the gender-based violence borne out of such legal inequality, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics established* rape as a core component of the patriarchal social order, functioning as a form of political intimidation and social control over women (Millet,1970). Millet positioned rape as an institutionalised expression of male dominance. In this regard, the judiciary, being one such male-dominant institution, has miserably failed to curb and address gender disempowerment and violence. The Indian Judiciary is no alien to misogyny, especially when dealing with feminist movements as well as pan-Indian movements addressing rape and other *gender-based violence* (GBV)[2]. Even in the post Nirbhaya India Era, laws *judicially reviewed*[3] (Art 32, Art 137 and Art 226 of the Indian Constitution) by The

[2]In the paper, the word *gender-based violence* shall be written in the abbreviated form 'GBV'.
[3]Art 32 of IC: Empowers the Supreme Court to issue writs for the enforcement of fundamental rights.
Art 32 of IC: Empowers the Supreme Court to issue writs for the enforcement of fundamental rights.
Art 137 of IC: Grants the Supreme Court the power to review its own judgments or orders.
Art 226: Empowers High Courts to perform judicial review over administrative and legislative actions.

Supreme Court lacks gender sensitivity. Laws reviewed by the Indian judiciary have never been augmented for women's empowerment.

The paper shall discuss the gradual and moral degradation of the Indian judiciary in dealing with rape vis-à-vis expeditious and discrete justice dispensation.

Research Methods Employed

1. **Feminist Jurisprudential (Black-Letter) Analysis**: This research tool analyses the law as it is written, i.e. statutes, case laws, rules, and legal principles and the ways in which they reflect or reinforce patriarchal assumptions. This approach examines gender-biased language, judicial reasoning, and legal concepts such as the "reasonable man," neutrality, and objectivity, showing how these often distort women's lived realities (West & Bowman, 2019[4]). Feminist scholars using doctrinal analysis critique how legal provisions in areas such as rape, property, labour, or family law systematically disadvantage women or fail to address structural gender inequalities.

2. **Socio-Legal Feminist Method: move** beyond legal texts to study how law operates in everyday life and how gendered power relations shape people's experiences with legal systems. This approach uses qualitative tools such as interviews, focus groups, case studies, ethnography, and court observations to understand how women and marginalised groups encounter the law in practice. It highlights gaps between "law on the books" and "law in action," revealing how social norms, institutional practices, and power hierarchies influence access to justice, legal decisionmaking, and enforcement (MacKinnon,1983[5]).

[4]West, R., & Bowman, C. G. (2019). Research Handbook on Feminist Jurisprudence. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.
[5]MacKinnon, C. A. (1983). Feminism, Marxism, method, and the state: Toward feminist jurisprudence.

Theoretical Overview

Carole Pateman, in her book *Sexual Contract* (1988), argued that legal rights for women have been hindered because a truly "free and equal" individual, the subject of contract law, has historically been defined as male, leaving women in a subordinate position (Pateman, 1988)

Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics* (1970), argued that rape is not merely an individual act of violence, but a series of institutions that help maintain male dominance in a patriarchal society. She explained that rape functions as a form of social control by instilling fear, reinforcing women's subordination, and demonstrating the power men collectively hold over women's bodies. Millett emphasises that the threat of rape operates as a pervasive mechanism that disciplines women's behaviour, limits their autonomy, and normalises gender hierarchy. Thus, in Millett's analysis, rape is fundamentally ideological: it is embedded in cultural norms, male sexuality, and institutional structures that legitimise and reproduce patriarchy.

Justice too long delayed is Justice denied. These iconic lines were given by Martin Luther King, Jr. (*Letter From a Birmingham Jail [King, Jr.]*, n.d.-b), and have repeatedly been propagated by the Indian Judiciary as well. The Indian Judiciary has been facing a serious crisis of conscience and credibility. Its reactions to rape cases, especially those involving survivors, have frequently wavered between formalism and institutional insensitivity, occasionally descending into overtly sexist and misogynistic reasoning. Instead of continuously emphasising survivor autonomy, dignity, and constitutional rights, discourse has often perpetuated victim-blaming narratives, moral scrutiny, and patriarchal presumptions. In addition to undermining public

trust in the legal system, this inconsistency exposes a deeper failure to internalise the transformative ethos of gender justice ingrained in post-reform and constitutional rape jurisprudence.

Any kind of crimes that are committed against women, especially those that get the civil society to act on behalf of the victim, have proved that the pillars of democracy have been insatiable in their modus operandi. Apart from gender stereotyping, cases are being dragged on for years; the best example would be Nirbhaya. This paper began by tracing the case of the Nirbhaya Rape Case, which had shaken one of the pillars of our democracy. Protests, demonstrations, and marches to the President's office for seeking justice for a brutal murder, to the latest case of Abhaya Rape and Murder, which not only brought the Civil society together but questioned whether the concept of justice being delivered is just a gimmick? Another point to note is that courts are not exempt from the widespread perpetuation of gender stereotypes and misconceptions that continue throughout the prosecution, trial, and sentencing phases of sexual assault cases. Point to note is Indian Penal Code (IPC) gave way to Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), where wordings have been changed, but have the proceedings or the timeline to provide swift justice been updated?

The judiciary's patriarchal viewpoint was demonstrated in its rulings on Section 498A, Section 3 and 4 (cruelty or dowry harassment) of the IPC, where it declared that the law was being abused, Dara Lakshmi Narayana vs State of Telangana, where the court emphasised that misuse of the above-mentioned Section to harass husbands and the family had to be restricted. (Editor, 2025). In Archin Gupta vs State of Haryana, the Supreme Court held that the Section would not be applicable (Editor, 2025b). This case showed

that women have to suffer a lot if they try to get justice for themselves. It can be argued that the judiciary's increased focus on misuse of Sec 498A is because women rarely approach the police as the first step. Secondly, domestic violence occurs behind closed doors over long periods, making it difficult to keep track of specific time and date, because of which the court avoided quashing the FIR.

What again must be noted is that, according to NFHS data (Maitra & Central Sanskrit University, New Delhi, 2025), shows that 1% of abused women ever actually filed a complaint. The low conviction rate, poor investigation, hostile witnesses, and immense societal pressure force women to withdraw cases for preserving family dignity. Silencing of victims and pushing them back into such abusive marriages in the guise of saving marriages are some problems associated with such cases.

Nirbhaya Rape Case

In the case of Mukesh & Anr vs State For Nct Of Delhi & Ors on 5 May, 2017, the accused were only arrested between the 18th to the 21st of December, 2012, which gave the accused ample amount of time to escape. The police, as a machinery of the state and enforcer of the law, had failed from the very beginning to capture the accused, leaving a time gap for them to escape. The CJI had inaugurated a "fast track court," but the biggest question is that to charge the perpetrator, it took 13 days. After 4 days of her death (29th December, 2012), the Delhi police finally filed a charge sheet, and that too because of immense media pressure. Almost two months into the case, the accused were officially charged with 13 offences. The question of the hour was: "What was the judiciary doing between the period of March and August instead of going forward with trial proceedings for the victim to get justice?" (Toi-Online, 2024)

Before the 2013 amendment the Criminal Law (Amendment) Ordinance, 2013. The IPC's rape law was patriarchal because it gave women's bodily autonomy and consent less weight than male power, marital authority, and social morality. Definition, consent, and adjudication were the three interconnected levels at which this patriarchy functioned.

The pre-Nirbhaya rape law under the IPC was patriarchal in that it prioritised male authority and social morality over women's physical autonomy and consent. The definition of rape under Section 375 was limited to penile-vaginal penetration, reflecting a male-centric view of sexual injury that excludes various types of sexual abuse suffered by women. The marital rape exception institutionalised the concept of irrevocable consent within marriage, providing husbands with legal sexual rights over their wives' bodies. Consent was viewed as resistance rather than autonomy, placing the responsibility on women to establish their own scenario or cause. By focusing on the survivor's sexual background and personality rather than the accused's actions, evidentiary procedures further strengthened patriarchy. In general, the law served more as a tool to maintain patriarchal family structures, control female sexuality, and normalise male dominance than as a mechanism of justice—the Nirbhaya case compelled the legal system to address these flaws. Some things that leave a very question mark are Akshay Singh's petition on the 2017 judgement, which was duly rejected, and the order was upheld on December 19, 2019(Toi-Online, 2024) 20th March 2020 was marked as a new dawn of justice. To reach an open society where more such discussions are held just after Nirbhaya's death, discussions and debates were opened on rape culture and systematic patriarchy. (Kanga 2023)

Post-Nirbhaya rape law under the IPC marks a substantial transition from a morality based, patriarchal paradigm toward a rights-based approach to women's bodily autonomy, but remains flawed. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2013 broadened the definition of rape under Section 375 to include non-penile actions such as oral, anal, and object penetration, recognising the lived reality of sexual abuse beyond male-centric conceptions of intercourse. Permission was redefined as an unequivocal voluntary agreement, undermining previous assumptions that silence or lack of opposition indicated permission. The law also recognised aggravated types of rape, including gang rape and custodial rape, and increased sanctions under Section 376, indicating a more serious approach to combating sexual assault. Procedural improvements discouraged victim-blaming and shifted attention to the accused's conduct.

However, from a feminist jurisprudential standpoint, the continuation of the marital rape exception reflects a patriarchal prioritisation of marriage over women's independence. While the post-Nirbhaya changes constitute watershed legal breakthroughs that prioritise dignity and consent, they fall short of removing patriarchal dominance in the private realm, leaving substantive gender justice only partially realised.

Unnao Rape Case

The Unnao rape case demonstrates fundamental flaws in the operation of the Indian court, particularly in its failure to provide speedy, survivor-centric justice in a case where the accused were a powerful lot. Although the judiciary eventually delivered a conviction, its initial institutional lethargy allowed for extended injustice, undermining the transformative promise of post-Nirbhaya rape-laws. A

prominent criticism of how the case was tackled was the delay in court involvement. Despite the survivor's repeated complaints and obvious threats to her life, the judiciary took decisive action only after widespread public outcry and media scrutiny.

This reactionary strategy reflects a larger structural issue: courts frequently engage forcefully only when a case gains political or national attention, leaving less-publicised survivors exposed to the different societal conditioning, one being stigma and threats from affiliated groups that spread hate against victims. Furthermore, the judiciary originally failed to protect the survivor and her family's right to life and dignity. The death of the survivor's father in police custody, as well as the fatal attacks on witnesses, occurred under judicial supervision, indicating that witness protection and monitoring systems were not being enforced effectively. Feminist jurisprudence criticises this as a failure to recognise that sexual abuse cases are ingrained in power imbalances, necessitating proactive legal protection rather than formal adjudication. The Supreme Court's subsequent actions—CBI transfer, trial relocation, and monitoring—were praiseworthy, but they served more as remedial than preventative measures. This reveals a judiciary that is still primarily case-centric rather than system-centric, addressing injustice after it has already happened rather than eliminating the circumstances that allow it.

The Unnao case shows that although the Indian judiciary has the authority to protect the Constitution, it frequently does so selectively and belatedly. From a feminist standpoint, delaying justice in sexual assault cases—particularly those involving political power—amounts to denying justice. A more proactive, sympathetic, and power-sensitive judicial approach to sexual violence cases is

required, as evidenced by the judiciary's inability to foresee and combat patriarchal intimidation.

Pallochi Rape Case

The Pollachi rape case (2016-2019), K. Arulanantham vs State of Tamil Nadu, in which many women were sexually exploited and blackmailed by a group of men in Tamil Nadu, demonstrates how patriarchy operates through technology, social shame, and institutional apathy. The accused utilised intimate films to coerce and repeatedly abuse women, showing that sexual violence is not just physical, but can also be psychological, digital, and coercive. This case reveals that sexual violence endures not only owing to individual criminal behaviour, but also as a result of institutionalised patriarchy throughout society and the court system. Though the judiciary finally performed its responsibility, its delayed and reactive action highlights a long-standing feminist concern: justice for women in India frequently relies on perseverance, visibility, and public pressure rather than automatic constitutional protection. True gender justice necessitates a judiciary that is not only punishing in the wake of the event, but also proactive, power-sensitive, and survivor-centric.

In this case, the judiciary's initial passivity and over-reliance on procedural formalism were a major point of contention. Despite the gravity of the claims and the large number of victims, early judicial monitoring failed to secure a prompt investigation, survivor protection, and accountability from local law enforcement. The case was transferred from the state police to the CBI only after an outpouring of public anger, confirming the idea that judicial urgency is frequently influenced by media and political pressure. Despite apparent concerns of intimidation and social reprisal, the judiciary failed to establish witness and victim protection procedures

promptly. According to feminist critiques, courts cannot remain impartial arbiters in circumstances of significant power imbalance; neutrality in such cases effectively benefits the accused. (Karthikeyan 2025)

Although the subsequent verdicts and harsh punishments represented a significant vindication of justice, the judiciary's function in this case was primarily corrective rather than preventive. Courts intervened after institutional failure had already hurt survivors, rather than proactively addressing the conditions—political intervention, police involvement, and social stigma—that allowed for protracted abuse.

Even though the judiciary eventually upheld accountability, its tardy and reactive intervention highlights a recurring feminist concern: in India, justice for women frequently depends more on persistence, visibility, and public pressure than on automatic constitutional protection. A judiciary that is proactively protective, power-sensitive, and survivor-centric from the beginning is necessary for true gender justice rather than just relying on punitive measures undertaken after the fact.

Abhaya Rape Case 2024

The Alleged rape and murder incident of a trainee doctor in R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital, Kolkata and related issues vs State of West Bengal And Others- SMW(Crl) No. 2/2024, happened on August 9, 2024, while the victim fell asleep in the hospital's seminar hall following a 36-hour shift. Rape followed by murder was confirmed by a post-mortem, which showed strangulation, genital torture, and multiple areas of bleeding on the deceased's body.

Sanjay Roy, a civic volunteer with police ties, was detained as the main suspect based on CCTV footage and forensic evidence such as bite marks and DNA. In January 2025, a Kolkata court convicted him to life imprisonment without parole, fined him 50,000, and ordered 17 lakh compensation for the family. The court ruled that the case did not qualify for the death penalty as it constituted the "rarest of rare" instance. Critics of the case say in the Abhaya rape case point to the perceived leniency of Sanjay Roy's life sentence and delays in supplementary investigations. Protesters and doctors' associations said that justice was not fully served because the verdict failed to impose the death penalty despite the savagery (Sashikala VP, CNN, n.d.-b)

The January 2025 Kolkata court decision ordered life imprisonment without parole, but denied the death penalty, placing it outside the "rarest of rare" category. The victim's family and activists criticised the low compensation for the heinous crime, and the victim's parents refused to accept the 17 lakh in court. The judge chastised Kolkata Police for their apathy, citing antedated records and mismanagement of evidence from the outset. Hospital officials, including the former Principal Sandip Ghosh, were accused of concealing data and propagating a fake suicide narrative, casting doubt on institutional transparency.

The Supreme Court transferred relevant matters to the Calcutta High Court for supervision in light of ongoing investigations. Public uproar revealed systemic inadequacies to protect women doctors and provide prompt, rigorous justice.

Judicial Decisions Sparking Public Debate

Judges frequently relate victims' experiences of rape or sexual assault to give judgments based on their preconceived notion

of previous cases and frame them as the 'ideal victim. For example, in the case of Sri Rakesh B vs State of Karnataka 2020, the accused was granted bail despite the judge's remark that the victim falling asleep after the alleged rape was "unbecoming of an Indian woman". (Deswal 2024)

Similar judgments with superfluous notes about a victim's 'promiscuity' and morality, her social habits—whether she drinks or smokes—and her general demeanour have been made in cases of rape or sexual assault. This reflects a deeper issue of a specific judge's worldview or their preconceived notions about decrees, frequently at the expense of the victim and her rights.

It is especially detrimental when these ideas are joined with social practices and norms to produce a culture in specific orders or decrees. A notorious example was a decision by the Madhya Pradesh High Court last year in which the judge ordered the accused molester to tie a rakhi on the victim's hand as a condition for his bail.

It should be highlighted that the 'Rakhi defence' is completely unfounded in our legislation. Although the Supreme Court ultimately overturned the decree, it is not the only example of such an improvised, illogical and insensitive judiciary. In truth, a similar situation occurred when former Chief Justice of India (CJI) S. A. Bobde asked an accused rapist whether he would "marry the victim" as a condition for the court offering him "help" (Deswal, 2024). Again, this' judgement' was proposed only by C. J. I. Bobde is not a part of our jurisprudence. What is deemed as the 'marriage compromise 'has also surfaced in other judicial decisions. In a society that adheres to the doctrine of state decisions and judicial precedents, such observations and decisions can have a substantial impact on the action and reasoning of lower

courts. The judiciary's violation of its mission in support of regressive and patriarchal ideologies exemplifies the worst aspects of activism. (Deswal 2024)

The skin-to-skin contact judgment (Bombay High Court, Nagpur Bench). In a 2021 decision, a judge determined that "physical contact for sexual assault under Section of the POCSO Act would mean 'direct physical contact, i.e., skin-to-skin ' ". (Rajagopal, 2021)

The accused, who had touched a juvenile girl's breast and sought to remove her garments, was acquitted under the fact that there was no real skin-to-skin contact under the POCSO Act, but was eventually convicted under a less rigorous part of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), resulting in a drastically reduced punishment. The Supreme Court eventually overruled this ruling, emphasising that the intent of the conduct, rather than whether there was skin-to-skin contact, is what matters in sexual assault proceedings.

Last year, on 21st July 2025, the Supreme Court vocalised the fact that it is ashamed to hear recent incidents of crimes against women. The Supreme Court Women's Association wanted pan-India guidelines and reforms; one such suggestion was mandatory castration. They also urged that Sec 63 under Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023 shall be punished by live castration in case of horrendous rape of women and children. And these records are available to citizens, especially women, so that they can identify repeated offenders and take precautions. These records are only available to lawyers. (Bakshi and Law 2025)

The Court also mentioned the weakness that such incidents provoke public opinion, hence decentralisation of para-legal services and more awareness about the law should be made available to villagers. The Court did mention Hathras and

Unnao while giving these suggestions. Another drawback mentioned by the judiciary is the provision of ineffective assistance to victims and a deterred investigation, which makes law enforcement ineffective. (Bakshi and Law 2025)

Concluding Arguments

The case studies examined above paint a very grim picture of the Indian judiciary, despite the harrowing circumstances and tackling of the Nirbhaya case. In legal parlance, human rights violations, along with violations of the body (vis-à-vis dignity), are tantamount to executive and legislative inaction (Teltumbde,2025)[6]. Rarely does the judiciary or its gatekeepers, namely the Justices, face criticism for their repetitive proven misdealing. Indian judges have never been held accountable for the same, and on rare occasions when they have come under impeachment trials, resigning was considered the safest option. The noble purpose of this deliberation was to critique the third organ of the government, namely the Judiciary and its serious misdeeds when dealing with the issue of gender-based violence. As a conciliatory effort, the Judiciary, along with lawmakers across the country, should spend public taxpayers' money in fruitfully result-oriented Standing Committees on creating gender-inclusive socio-legal spaces.

The authors deliberating on this topic have kept the domain restricted to judicial lenses (owing to cognitive bias and paucity of time), but are hopeful of future research being conducted on GBV through intersectional analyses of race, class, caste, ethnicity, language and others. In the 1950s, Nehru had envisioned empowerment of half of the Indian population, thus"…...when she moves…. the entire nation moves", but the enlightened thought of gender inclusivity

[6]Teltumbde, A. (2025). Whither human rights in India? Viking.

slowly died its natural death over the years (Nehru, 1936[7]). With democratic backsliding since 2014 and communal policies replacing inclusive legislations, a grim question haunts us all-Is the Indian Judiciary at all neutral in its review of female-centric laws? (line rephrased)

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Kink, Crime, and the Gaze: Negotiating Gendered Power, Sexuality, Madness, and Political Resistance in Gotham's Harley Quinn and Catwoman

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Abstract:

In the history and the ever-unfolding tapestry of comic book narratives, anomalies as radiant as criminality, sexuality, and madness enacted by women, refuse to be contained within the patriarchal frames that first bore them. Harley Quinn and Catwoman, born in the shadows of Gotham, have travelled from the margins of the mainstream comics into richly textured icons of ambivalence and this paper seeks to examine the figures as political texts within the comic book medium, arguing that their representations of kink, crime, madness, and feminine spectacle participate in broader structures of gendered politics. Drawing from *Mad Love* (1994), *Harleen* (2019), *Catwoman: Year One* (1987), *Catwoman: Her Sister's Keeper* (1989), *Catwoman* (2002– 2005), *Lonely City* (2022), and *Gotham City Sirens* (2009–2011), the paper seeks to analyse Harley's relationship with the Joker which reveals the political structures that govern female deviance and her reclamation of madness which becomes a political refusal to submit to patriarchal rationality, and the Catwoman is seen to negotiate power through criminality and kink-coded performance. The paper employs Carole Pateman's sexual contract, Michel Foucault's disciplinary power, Sylvia Walby's theory of patriarchy as a multi-institutional system, Laura Mulvey's theory of male gaze, Stuart hall's cultural politics of representation, Adrienne Rich's critique of compulsory

heterosexuality, and Angela McRobbie's postfeminist politics. The argument of the paper highlights how Harley Quinn and Catwoman are not merely ironic 'bad girls', but they are political agents who are navigating and resisting patriarchal power structures through kink, crime, and spectacle, where their bodies, desires, and madness become instruments of negotiation within gendered political systems, transforming the comic page into a battlefield where power is contested and alternative feminist futures are imagined.

Keywords: *Comics, Gaze, Kink, Madness, Politics, Power, Sexuality.*

Introduction

Terminologies are markers of institution and in political science, terms such as 'madness', 'crime', and 'sexual deviance' are not neutral but they are historically embedded in patriarchal systems of control. As Foucault (1988) argues, Madness is produced when dominant institutions "draw a line between reason and unreason in order to maintain power" and for women, this line is often drawn at the point where they reject prescribed norms of obedience, emotional discipline, and sexual proprietary (p. 34). In DC Comics' Gotham, the fictional metropolitan state whose political infrastructure mirrors real world logics of surveillance, punishment, and moral regulation, figures such as Harley Quinn and Catwoman are among the most visible embodiments of gendered nonconformity.

Comics, the visual-text medium, are political texts and Stuart Hall (1977) insists that representation is not a passive reflection but "the active work of culture to make things mean" (p. 15). Gotham's narratives are political in nature as the institutions, villains, and heroes are ideological formations that map anxieties around order, deviance, gender,

sexuality, and discipline. While Batman embodies rational masculine authority which is steeped in surveillance, forensic logic, and moral absolutism, Harley and Selina embody the underside of Gotham's political consciousness, a terrain of unruly women who refuse patriarchal organisation. Harley Quinn and Catwoman are not simply deviant figures, they are political insurgents whose bodies, desires, and madness exposes the foundations of gendered governance in Gotham.

Madness and Deviance as Political Identities

Of the two most politically charged frameworks, madness and deviance produce and regulate femininity in patriarchal societies and in Gotham, these categories operate not just as descriptors of behaviour, but as instruments of governance, becoming the tools through which the state, psychiatric institutions, and cultural narrative discipline women who transgress the social norms. Although emerging from two different socioeconomic and emotional trajectories, Harley Quinn and Catwoman occupy these categories as political identities and revel how Gotham constructs deviance in gendered terms, and illustrate how such deviance becomes a potent form of resistance.

Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilisation* (1988) interprets madness as a political construct and he argues that madness is "not a natural fact but a cultural and institutional creation" (p. x). This principle is exemplified by Gotham's Arkham Asylum which is far from being a therapeutic institution, rather it produces madness through confinement, surveillance, and imposed narratives of pathology and Harley Quinn's transformation is one of the most prominent example of this mechanism. Dr. Harleen Quinzel, initially a psychiatrist trained to diagnose and manage deviance becomes ensnared within the very disciplinary apparatus she once upheld and

her descent into Harley Quinn is precipitated not by personal weakness, but by institutional violence and manipulation where the coercive environment of Arkham Asylum primarily its isolation, punitive logic, and male dominated hierarches, produces the conditions for her breakdown.

The Arkham Asylum is primarily a male-dominated in both its power structure where the doctor and administrators who are historically depicted as men and exercise their authority over inmates, making decisions about their sanity, punishment, and treatment; and its most visible "patients" who are also prominent "criminals" such as Joker, Riddler, Scarecrow, replicate the patriarchal dynamics and define the culture of the institution. Harley, as a female doctor, enters this hyper-masculine environment and is immediately drawn into its power dynamics where The Joker manipulates her, not just as a patient, but as a charismatic male figure who wields control over her emotions and further exploits her potion within a system which is already skewed against her. Harleen's descent into madness is a product and not a symptom as it is a direct outcome of patriarchal governance masquerading as psychiatric authority, where manipulation define the rules of engagement, leaving her little agency within the system.

Harleen's madness also destabilises this authority as once she becomes Harley Quinn, her behaviour turns unpredictable, and her emotions exaggerate, and this spectacular chaos resist the disciplinary function of the asylum and Foucault (1977) asserts that institutions "produce the very subjects they then seek to control" (p. 194). Harley subverts this production as she does not conform to the institution's framework of insanity, she exploits the flexibility of madness which she uses as a performative tool to evade surveillance, confound the state, and undermine the Joker's

coercive power. Harley's increasing obsession with the Joker is not be viewed as a naïve romantic illusion, but as an effective formation which is produced within the patriarchal institutional power. Their 'romantic' relationship originates within the Arkham Asylum, a disciplinary site which, as Foucault (1977) argues does not merely confine deviance but actively produces subjects through surveillance, categorisation, and emotional manipulation, and it is within a structure like this where Harleen encounters her where the structure itself positions her as rational authority and the Joker as pathological spectacle (p. 194).

The Joker, performs vulnerability, trauma, and intellectual intimacy which Pateman (1998) describes as the gendered structure of the sexual contract in which women are conditioned to provide emotional labour and care in exchange for masculine validation, thereby gradually subverting the dynamics (p. 2). The Joker, transforms into an affective magnet which Ahmed (2004) describes as emotions which circulate socially rather than privately, attaching subjects to figures that embody intensity, danger, or charisma and Harleen's fascination is intensified by the theatricality of deviance, the erotic charge of transgression, and the institutional framing of the Joker as extraordinary (p. 119). Her transition into Harley Quinn is not simply a surrender to love but a politicised rupture in the structures that define reason, authority and gendered emotional control and madness, in her case, becomes her armour where the refusal of rationality and emotional discipline, both of which are central to the acceptance of femininity in patriarchal constructions.

Gilbert and Gubar (1979) argue that patriarchal culture often renders female anger and rebellion legible only through madness, noting that "the madwoman is the woman who refuses patriarchal confinement" and Harley embodies

this figure of a "madwoman" vividly (p. 85). Her exuberant violence, glitter-coated mayhem, and chaotic speech acts are not symptoms of loss of control, but they are performances of refusal and she will not be a rational, obedient, quietly suffering, or professionally contained. Her madness acts as a critique and an escape, it becomes a mode of living outside the emotional confines imposed by patriarchal institutions.

Although distinct from Harley's madness, Catwoman's deviance functions through similar political structures and Selina Kyle is rarely described as "mad" within Gotham's diegesis but she is persistently marked as a deviant in the realms of sexuality, morality, society, and legally as Gotham's institutions interpret her refusal of feminine docility, heterosexual compliance, and economic subordination as evidence of disorder. Selina, as a sex worker, is already positioned outside normative femininity as her sexuality is rendered suspect and criminalised under the patriarchal gaze. As a thief, she also becomes subject to the criminal justice system's punitive power which, according to Foucault, constructs criminality as a political identity rather than a behavioural category. Pat Carlen's (1988) feminist criminology provides a crucial framework for understanding Selina's deviance and she argues that women's criminality often arises from "structural disadvantage, violence, and constrained choices" (p. 7). Selina's backstory in *Her Sister's Keeper* (1991) exemplifies this pattern where she underwent abuse, poverty, state neglect, and gendered violence which shaped her trajectory into crime and her deviance is not gratuitous, but structurally conditioned as crime becomes her means of survival and reclamation of agency within a city that offers her neither protection nor opportunity.

In this sense, Selina's deviance reveals the failures of Gotham's patriarchal governance of its inability to provide justice, safety, or dignity to marginalised women. Like Harley, Selina weaponises her deviance as political resistance and her thefts, surveillance-dodging, acrobatics, and moral ambiguity challenge Gotham's classed and gendered hierarchies. She steals from the wealthy, corrupt, and powerful, not out of nihilism but as a form of redistributive justice and this echoes Fraser's (1997) argument that justice requires both redistribution of resources and recognition of marginalised identities and she practices precisely this redistribution (p. 25). Her deviance becomes a method of correcting Gotham's inequalities, revealing crime not as antisocial behaviour, but as a political act within an unjust system.

Harley and Selina's political identities become particularly illuminating when examined side by side as Harley's madness emerges from the failures of institutional authority and Selina's deviance arises from the failures of socioeconomic justice. Both the forms of deviance, of psychological and criminal, are responses to patriarchal governance and both ultimately challenge the systems that attempt to define and contain them and each woman exposes a different axis of Gotham's patriarchal power where Harley reveals the violence of psychiatric and emotional discipline and Selina exposes the violence of economic and legal discipline. Their narratives also demonstrate how deviance destabilises the patriarchal rationality and Gotham relies on this rationality which can be seen in Batman's forensic logic, Arkham's psychiatric diagnoses, and the police state's bureaucratic procedures, to simply maintain control. Harley's unpredictability undermines rational governance and Selina's evasiveness undermines legal governance and it can be seen that madness and deviance function as political disruptions

which destabilises the epistemological foundations of Gotham's order.

The characters reclaim deviance to construct new forms of agency and Harley's madness enables emotional and aesthetic freedom, allowing her to operate outside the constraints of normative femininity and Selina's deviance enables economic and political autonomy, allowing her to define justice for herself and her community. They do not seek rehabilitation within Gotham's systems because these systems themselves are patriarchal and unjust and their deviance is this not a detour, but a destination to a chosen identity that resists patriarchal correction which becomes clearest in *Gotham City Sirens* (2009–2011) where madness and deviance coalesce into a shared feminist and queer alternative to patriarchal discipline and in this collective space, Harley's madness is stabilised not through psychiatric intervention but though a community of care, while Selina's deviance finds ethical grounding in solidarity. Their deviance becomes rational rather than individual, signalling a broader critique of Gotham's atomistic, punitive model.

Kink, Femininity, and the Visual Politics of the Gaze

The visual construction of Harley Quinn and Catwoman is inseparable from the politics of femininity, sexuality, and power as both the characters inhabit kink-coded aesthetic domains where Harley through parodic hyper-femininity, and Selina through dominatrix iconography, where each of them use spectacle to negotiate their visibility within Gotham's patriarchal order. Their bodies become sites of visual governance and resistance, revealing how sexuality and representation operate politically. The comic medium, with its fragmentation, framing, and stylised bodies intensifies these dynamics and by reading Harley and Selina through

the feminist theory and visual culture, kink aesthetics and the gaze function not merely as an aesthetic embellishment but they act as mechanisms through which deviant femininity resists patriarchal control.

Harley and Selina's aesthetic choices can be read through Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity as Butler argues that gender is "a stylised repetition of acts" that produces the illusion of stable identity and in this sense, femininity is not innate but performative, a role enacted through attire, gesture, posture, and visual codes (p. 25). Both the characters exaggerate femininity to destabilise it. Harley's clown aesthetics such as pigtails, glitter, heart shaped makeup, and theatrical poses, transforms normative femininity into a parody. Her playful chaos dramatises the artificiality of gender norms as she does not embody femininity but she mocks it. Selina, by contrast, performs a refined and deliberate hyper-femininity through her cat suit made out of leather or sometimes PVC, latex or other shiny and flexible material, stiletto boots, fishnet stockings and a whip, heavily drawing from the BDSM and dominatrix iconography and these choices amplify the performative quality of femininity, revealing it as a curated spectacle rather than a natural expression.

Catherine MacKinnon (1989) offers a political reading of sexuality and she argues that sexuality is "the primary sphere of male power's exercise and women's subordination" and under this framework, kink-coded femininity might seem to reinforce patriarchal aesthetics (p. 113). However, Harley and Selina appropriate these aesthetics in ways that decentre male desire and reassert female power where Selina's dominatrix-inspired outfit is not about pleasing men, but it signals towards control, authority, and erotic self-possession and she gains power through the erotic, refusing the submissive roles

typically assigned to women. Harley's excessive femininity, bordering on camp, similarly disrupts patriarchal pleasure as her glitter explosions, smudged lipstick, and unpredictable gestures makes her visually erratic, undermining the viewer's ability to consume her image comfortably. Their kink aesthetics thus function as political gestures, signalling a refusal to be visually domesticated by patriarchal codes. Laura Mulvey (1975) further illustrates the male gaze and argues that the patriarchal media position the woman as "to-belooked-at-ness", designed specifically to satisfy male spectatorship through erotic spectacle (p. 11). Early depictions of both characters conform to this structure as Selina's body used to be framed in pin-up lie poses, with panels with emphasised her curves, hips, and arched spine, and Harley's jester outfit and coquettish postures cater to similar visual appetites. Although the eroticisation of the body was visible, the medium of comics allows for disruptions unavailable in films as through fragmented panels, variable framing, and visual exaggeration, Harley and Selina can resist or destabilise the male gaze in ways that defy cinematic continuity.

Harley is particularly effective a subverting viewer control and in many modern comics, she frequently breaks the fourth wall by staring directly at the reader, and commenting on her own objectification, or mocking the narrative herself and this direct gaze reverses the visual power dynamic Mulvey outlines by forcing the reader into a self-conscious position and the viewer becomes the one watched. Mulvey notes that the male spectator's pleasure depends on maintaining "distance and control" and Harley collapses this distance by disrupting the fantasy of stable erotic objectification (p. 14). Her madness, here, becomes a visual tactic as much as a narrative theme and her maniac expressions of wild laughter, sudden stillness, and erratic shifts refuse the viewer's stability

and rather than inviting desire, she provoke disorientation. The spectacle becomes political insubordination. Catwoman resists the gaze more subtly but equally powerfully as she counter-gazes with direct looks, smirks, lifted eyebrows, and breaks the illusion of passive erotic display. Her gaze challenges the viewer as she knows she is being looked at and refuses to remain a complaint object and moments like these reflect Butler's performative model where Selina's gender is an intentional performance and she controls the conditions under which it is viewed, allowing her kink-coded ensemble to enhance this control. While fetish imagery is often used to eroticise women for male spectators, Selina's self-framed dominatrix aesthetic signals for agency and not availability and she chooses when and how she is seen.

The political implications of kink aesthetic, furthermore, shift dramatically in scenes of conflict and movement as Harley's gestures are chaotic, unpredictable, and often violent while Selina's movement are graceful, controlled, and strategic. These contrasting bodily rhetorics reveal different modes of resisting patriarchal visual discipline as Harley resists through excess where her body refuses to stay still, refuses to maintain composure, and refuses to be consumed neatly, while Selina resists through mastery where her movements are exacting and self-possessed, denying the viewer the ability to collapse her into mere erotic spectacle, and together they expand the political possibilities of kink-coded femininity. The visual irony also further complicates their relationship to the gaze as it was seen in Darwyn Cooke's *Catwoman* (2002–2005) where Selina's silhouette may initially appear sexualised but when juxtaposed with action panels in which she apprehends predators or rescues vulnerable residents of the East End, the iconography of eroticism transforms into one of protection and power. In Hall's (1977) term, representation becomes "a

site of struggle" where Selina negotiates and redefines the meaning of her body and similarly Harley's costumes often employ bright colours and theatrical exaggeration, but within the context of violence or resistance, these aesthetics signal disruption rather than erotic availability (p. 25).

Kink, also becomes a way of articulating political autonomy as in Gotham's patriarchal environment, where women's bodies are policed through legal, psychiatric, and visual mechanisms, kink-coded aesthetics allow Harley and Selina to reclaim control over their representation and their bodies become self-authored which rejects both normative femininity and patriarchal sexual scripts. By evidently exaggerating, parodying, or stylising the erotic, they reclaim agency over its political meaning and their aesthetics communicate that femininity is neither natural nor passive but a performative field open to reinterpretation, resistance, and subversion.

Crime, Agency, and Resistance in Gotham's Political Order

Crime is traditionally understood as a violation of law, but within feminist political theory as it is also a site where power, inequality, and resistance converge and in Gotham which is a deeply unequal and patriarchal city, Harley and Catwoman occupy criminal identities not simply because they violate legal codes, but because they disrupt the political structures that depend on disciplining deviant femininity. Their crimes, whether anarchic violence or precision theft, are responses to structural injustice, economic precarity, emotional coercion, and institutional betrayal and more importantly, these acts reveal how deviant women repurpose criminal identity to assert agency and challenge state power and Gotham's legal, social, and vigilante systems define both Harley and Selina as criminals and their resilience lies in refusing the moral hierarchy that criminalises the while legitimising patriarchal violence.

Par Carlen's (1988) landmark study on feminist criminology argues that women's criminality often emerges from "constrained choices shaped by poverty, violence, and structural disadvantage"s and Selina exemplifies this pathway as *Her Sister's Keeper* presents her as a woman who grows up amid poverty, abuse, and state neglect, conditions that create the structural preconditions for her later deviance (p. 7). Her thefts are not expressions of inherent criminality but they are direct responses to systemic deprivation and Gotham's institutions fail her long before she ever steps outside the law and in tandem with Carlen's model, Selina's criminality becomes a political commentary on the failures of the state to provide safety, economic stability, and justice for its most vulnerable women. Harley's trajectory differs but the political logic remains comparable as her criminality emerges not from economic deprivation, but from institutional violence, manipulation, and emotional exploitation within the Arkham Asylum.

Foucault (1977) argues that institutions such as prisons, asylums, and hospitals produce the very deviance they claim to contain, through surveillance, coercion, and the imposition of rigid norms and Harley's criminal identity is inseparable from her professional role in Arkham where her emotional vulnerability is weaponised by the Joker and enabled by institutional dynamics that normalise patriarchal authority (p. 194). Once she 'becomes' Harley Quinn, her crimes such as bombing, chaotic violence, subversions of state control, reflect a politicised rejection of the legitimacy of Gotham's disciplinary institutions and her criminal identity is thus both produced by and resistant to patriarchal power.

Nancy Fraser's (1997) model of justice is essential in interpreting Selina and Harley's criminality as resistance as Selina's thefts often target the wealthy and corrupt,

redistributing wealth and destabilising Gotham's economic hierarchies and her action aligns for Fraser's call for economic justice that addresses "the structural inequalities embedded within capitalist societies" (p. 25). Selina steals not to enrich herself but to survive, protect vulnerable communities, or to punish those exploit the poor and her vigilantism in Brubaker's *Catwoman* run further positions her as an alternative provider of justice in a political system that abandons marginalised neighbourhoods and in this sense, her crimes function as radical interventions in Gotham's unequal political economy.

Harley's criminal actions which are more chaotic, also challenge the state's monopoly on legitimate violence as her attacks on police stations, psychiatric institutions, and corrupt officials reveal the limits of Gotham's legal authority and her violence is not moralised, but it is a political theatre. Harley is Ahmed's (2017) "feminist killjoy", a figure who refuses to maintain social harmony and instead exposes the violence beneath patriarchal order, and this is seen in her explosions, pranks, and destructive mania which reveal the instability of Gotham's institutions (p. 51). Her crimes refuse the emotional and behavioural discipline that patriarchal governance demands and through chaos, she disrupts the aesthetic of rational, masculine authority that Batman represents.

Agency, however, manifests differently for each character as in Selina's case, her agency is rooted in skill, precision, and calculated autonomy where her burglaries require mastery, discipline and knowledge of Gotham's spatial and institutional vulnerabilities. Her crime, is a strategic intervention, a feminist reworking of the city's economic logic. Meanwhile, Harley's agency emerges from her rejection of normative rationality and her anarchic violence challenges the very framework that defines legitimacy demonstrating Foucault's (1988) madness' ability to "speak the truth of

power" and her unpredictability becomes a tool that denies Gotham's disciplinary infrastructures the ability to govern her (p. 35).

Both the women articulate a critique of the state's monopoly on moral authority as the Batman, police officers, and Gotham's legal apparatus all operate as patriarchal enforcers, determining which acts constitutes legitimate violence, Selina and Harley expose this moral double standard. Batman's vigilantism is seen as noble while Selina's is criminal and the police brutality is ignored while Harley's retaliatory violence is pathologised. This asymmetry revels the patriarchal foundation of Gotham's political order and transgressing legal boundaries, Harley and Selina demonstrate that these boundaries are not neutral, rather they are gendered.

Their participation in *Gotham City Sirens* demonstrates how crime can become collective resistance rather than individual deviance and together Harley, Selina, and Ivy form an alternative micro-political community grounded in queer kinship, mutual protection, and shared survival strategies. In this space, crime becomes cooperative rather than antisocial as it becomes a means of resisting patriarchal vulnerability rather than succumbing to it and their homes becomes a sanctuary from the disciplinary forces that see to correct them. Crime, in their hands, becomes a political language, a way of refusing patriarchal discipline while rafting new forms of belonging. Crime is not incidental to Harley and Selina's identities but it is central to their political significance as their criminality reveals the failures of Gotham's patriarchal order and challenges the legitimacy of its institutions and constructs alternative models of agency, justice, and solidarity.

Conclusion

Harley Quinn and Catwoman emerge from the world of Gotham's comics as two of the most politically charged embodiments of deviant femininity in contemporary visual culture and their narratives reveal that madness, kink-coded aesthetic, crime, and alternative kinship structures are not narrative ornaments but political language through which marginalised women articulate resistance to patriarchal governance. Taken together, Harley Quinn and Catwoman demonstrate that deviant femininity is not merely a threat to Gotham's patriarchal order, but it is a profound critique of it and their madness, kink aesthsetics, criminality expose the contingent nature of gendered discipline, offering alternative ways of being, feeling, and belonging. In their resistance, they illustrate that the margins where the deviant women reside, are sites of political imagination where new forms of justice, solidarity, and freedom can emerge.

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Feminist Foreign Policy: A Comparative Analysis Of The Swedish And The Indian Foreign Policies

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Abstract

The traditional feminist outlook was ineffective in stimulating the de-masculinization of the political frameworks of States. Power structures founded on patriarchal normativism conventionally systematise "Othering" in policy making. Such exclusionary susceptibilities gave rise to a paradigmatic shift. Informed by feminist voices and global civil society actors, gender mainstreaming gained traction in the 20th century. 'Women, Peace, Security' Agenda, engendered by the United Nations Security Council Resolution, invigorated progressive governments to incorporate a feminist facet to their foreign policies. What compelled the feminists to deconstruct this structural isolation of women? What are the factors that led to the substantial reorientation of foreign policies? In fact, in a major first move, the Swedish coalition government initiated a radical policy change by incorporating a feminist agenda which addressed the gendered problems of inequality, discrimination and violence. Contrarily, to date, statistics on India's diplomatic cadre highlight a problematic masculine alignment. It becomes imperative, here, to examine the vulnerabilities that obstruct India from institutionalising a comprehensive gender-sensitive policy structure despite being a rising geopolitical force. Alongside, it also becomes a matter of inquiry whether the Indian scenario narrates a 'masculine' problem of the Third-world countries or is it

just a country-specific issue? A qualitative content analysis highlights that Swedish foreign policy discourse has taken great strides to transform the 'male' institutionalised structures, taking intersectionality into account. Conversely, in the Indian context, gender parity has been restricted to only numerical connotations instead of a strong rhetorical framework and institutional modifications. Moreover, in India, there is a wide gap between planning and execution, which makes it difficult to enhance the prominence of women in the international domain. Therefore, it can be concluded that access and influence in global decision-making spaces are yet a yearning for Indian women, whereas Sweden has already achieved it.

Keywords: *Feminist foreign policy, power structures, security, political participation, Swedish foreign policy, Indian policy*

A Gender-(Ed) Lens on Foreign Policy

The lack of women in international politics showed that many groups and feminists were aware of how gender-based violence was a major problem. Violence was no longer viewed as merely individual acts but as a broader issue called "structural violence," rooted in unfair systems and unequal power and resources (Adebahr, 2022). Institutional biases and the struggle for power between groups have inevitably created an "Othering" effect in policymaking. Intersectional identity has further accentuated the division by bringing into prominence the domain of "us" and "them." Such divisions have ineluctably embedded the notions of domination and the dominated, leaving no space for negotiation, understanding, rethinking, or restructuring. Globally, this systemic exclusion of women from domestic political processes, rooted in postcolonial ideas of staying at home, garnered acceptance and was considered normal. Eventually, this 'accepted' exclusion

became the functional norm of international organisations as well.

The women's movement of the twentieth century initiated its march for justice by critiquing the gender-blindness of foreign policy. It became the primary agenda of the feminists to condemn and unravel the deep-rooted gender disparities in institutional set-ups and temperament. They began seeking answers to the questions: "Who holds the power?" "Why are they unwilling to give it up?" They questioned the traditional perception of peace and security, which discerned security as something that only men can enforce. They also rejected the notion that peace is inherently feminine and weak, requiring protection from men. These entrenched patriarchal conventions and practices were covertly implicated in attitudes, behaviour, language and policy. The society and the leaders, in turn, overtly constructed the hegemonic masculine conception of security. This affected what was considered "normal" security and whose insecurity was seen as a problem (Adebahr, 2022). It came to be reckoned that women, as one of the core marginalised communities, had little control over themselves and their surroundings due to this norm-based patriarchal regime. As per the data available, out of all the neglected groups, women turned out to be the most vulnerable on all fronts. Consequently, there was heightened awareness that groups facing multiple forms of discrimination need attention not only on humanitarian grounds but also because more egalitarian societies fare better on both humanitarian and economic fronts.

By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the feminist movement gained considerable momentum. Feminist scholars and practitioners nobly enhanced the ideations of peace and security in international relations. They advocated for the alteration of the trajectory by decisively moving beyond mere

inclusion of women to voicing their empowerment as active participants in peacebuilding and negotiation. By challenging the widely accepted idea of portraying women as only victims, they stressed the importance of gender equality. Feminists ardently urged a reframing of foreign policies to make them inclusive in nature and orientation, so that the diplomatic domain no longer remains confined to men. They called for reforming the diplomatic domain so that they no longer so that women's perspectives and problems are not only heard but acknowledged, so that diplomacy no longer remains male-dominated. It was strongly reasoned by the feminists that the involvement of women in peace negotiations and diplomatic discussions can generate greater durability and effectiveness in peace agreements (Adebahr, 2022). They highlighted that the incorporation of women in central roles for persuading peace talks, drifts focus towards political, social, and economic reforms that support sustainable peace rather than relying on military solutions. Scholars like Cynthia Enloe and J. Ann Tickner have explored how gendered perspectives shape international relations by emphasising that traditional approaches often reinforce inequality and patriarchy (Saikia). Enloe's conceptualisation of "Feminist curiosity" encourages scholars and policymakers to examine gendered dimensions of global issues such as conflict, security, and economic development (Saikia).

On account of a growing global emphasis on women's rights, Feminist Foreign Policy emerged as a diplomatic approach grounded in values of equality, justice and respect for women's rights in international relations. A Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) elucidates a bottom-up re-thinking of traditional power structures and encapsulates an intersectional ideology to broaden the understanding of the term 'Feminist' (Parekh et al., 2022). Such accommodative policies enable vulnerable

groups to make their stance more affirmative, alongside ensuring that policies formulated accommodate these demands holistically. Feminist Foreign Policy underscores the importance of integrating gendered perspectives into foreign policy decisions to address constructively the inequalities and challenges faced by women worldwide. It aims to transform the power structures and norms that perpetuate gender inequality in international affairs by embarking upon shared understanding and collaborative policies among nations. And at the crux of every such policy, core feminist values are emphasised. This approach rests on two important pillars: (I) Enhancing not only numerical representation in decision-making, but also creating conducive environments that encourage innovative thinking and diverse participation, (II) Aiming at policy outcomes that take into account the lived experiences of women and other marginalised groups.

The international agenda of the 1970s and 1980s was heavily influenced by the women's liberation movement and feminist activism. With the United Nations declaring 1975 as the International Women's Year, the groundwork was laid for subsequent global conferences and initiatives focused on women's rights and gender equality (Saikia). The Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979, built upon it by promising a global commitment to combating gender-based discrimination. The declaration of the United Nations Decade (1976-1985) was a major icebreaker. This significant declaration foregrounded the international community's honest recognition of the importance of women's rights and gender equality. The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 further emphasised the need of integrating a gender perspective into all aspects of policymaking, including foreign policy (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022). The United

Nations Security Council Resolution 1325[1] on Women, Peace and Security in 2000 was another landmark moment. It reaffirmed the essentiality of incorporating women in preventing and resolving conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction (United Nations Security Council, n.d.).

Recent years have witnessed an increasing number of "women-friendly states" taking the lead in promoting gender equality in geopolitics. A visible perceptual change has enabled the advancement of women's issues, thereby allowing the domains of representation, gender equality, empowerment, and leadership to be incorporated within the arena of "smart diplomacy" and economics. Gender parity has thus been labelled as a primordial Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Foreign aid given by economically powerful countries specifically aimed at gender equality has "quadrupled. . . to $10 billion in the past decade" (Aggestam & True, 2020).

A small group of countries, starting with Sweden in 2014 and followed by Canada, France and Mexico, have espoused a feminist approach as a core element of their foreign policies, to varying degrees. Other countries, like Spain, are following this trend or at least considering the inclusion of feminist elements in their foreign policy agendas. However, India portrays a different picture. While there

[1] The Security Council adopted resolution(S/RES/1325) on women, peace, security on 31st October 2000. It stressed the equal participation of women and their full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. Resolution 1325 urges all the actors to incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts. It also calls on parties to conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict. The Resolution provides a number of important operational mandates, with implications for Member States and the entities of United Nations System. United Nations Security Council. (n.d.). *S/RES/1325 (2000) - Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) [on women and peace and security] - UN Documents: Gathering a body of global agreements.* http://un-documents.net/sr1325.htm

are increasing public discussions and debates focused on eliminating discriminatory practices and socio-cultural barriers that contribute to inequality, concrete society-level transformation is far from being achieved. The Indian society continues, and in states rigidly explicates patriarchy-based discrimination, the caste-class discrepancies and religious prejudices. The formulation and the effective implementation of a comprehensive feminist foreign policy, therefore, stand as one of the major hurdles for India in its goal to become panoramically developed. Accordingly, while Sweden has firmly translated into reality its normative commitment of promoting gender equality, human rights and the "3Rs" framework, Indian foreign policy is yet to comprehensively accommodate a gender-sensitive dimension within the realms of development partnerships, peacekeeping contributions, and South-South cooperation. In fact, India's foreign policy does not explicitly carry the tag and to a great extent, the baggage of 'feminist', unlike Sweden. This contrast provides a productive basis for examining how feminist principles travel across diverse political, cultural, and geopolitical contexts.

Investigating the trajectories and orientations of the foreign policies of India and Sweden on the basis of their feminist tendencies and policies stands valuable as it juxtaposes a Global North normative with a Global South emerging power. Sweden's gains from its strong institutional mechanisms and political consensus on gender equality in contrast to India's internal diversity and uneven gender outcomes, influence the scope and articulation of their respective international commitments. A critical comparative examination of the varying foreign policy scenarios of Sweden and India, thus, allows for a nuanced understanding of the interaction between gender politics and foreign policy behaviour. Moreover, it would also make a significant

contribution to broadening the conceptual boundaries of feminist foreign policy beyond Eurocentric frameworks, offering insights into plural pathways of integrating gender into global governance.

Ideation Of A Feminist Foreign Policy In Sweden And India

A comparison of Swedish and Indian Foreign Policies constructs the colonial 'Self-Other' image by creating a binary division between the North and the South. Sweden's stature as a developed welfare state with a good enough gender equality index stands in high contrast to India's developing country status. Moreover, the Indian scenario is wrought with more complex socio-economic constraints and diverse cultural contexts compared to Sweden. Such differences pivotally influence the shaping of a country's foreign policy. Thus, the contrast between India and Sweden paves the way for a broader understanding of how feminist principles are negotiated, adapted, or constrained across multiple developmental trajectories. This process of contrasting and "othering" holds similarity in the way gender roles and differences between men and women are described (Wallström et al., n.d.).

Sweden, as the proud champion of gender equality in its foreign policy, has won in terms of mastering its 'Self-image'. Swedish official documents highlight that the foreign policy of Sweden has systematically integrated a gender perspective (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2019, 4). By becoming the first country to adopt a feminist agenda in its foreign policy, Sweden has become a leading force in the struggle for attaining gender equality. Swedish feminist foreign policy's working method is based on three Rs- Rights, Representation and Resources- and is grounded on the fourth R, which is Reality. This implies that the Swedish Foreign Service not

only aims to strengthen the rights and representation of women in foreign policy but also strives to make resources available to all women and girls, based on their lived realities. Sweden's FFP is transformative and not rigid in nature. It aims at change for the good- it thrives on the core agenda of fostering changes in structures and decisions to increase the visibility of women and girls as active participants. Margot Wallstrom, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden's claim, "Throughout the world, women are neglected in terms of resources, representation and rights. This is the simple reason why we are pursuing a feminist foreign policy – with full force, all around the world" holds in this context (Wallström et al., n.d.).

Sweden's commitment to gender equality, anti- racism and anti-colonialism essentially hints at its internal self-identity and external branding as a progressive "humanitarian superpower" (Nylund et al., 2022). The FFP has contributed significantly in this respect. It has traced the path for Sweden to erase its historical guilt of colonialism by counteracting discrimination within the framework of intersectionality.

India's position as a key global player has been gradually affirmed with its increasing regional and global influence, ambitions of great power status, and the development of a strong affirmative voice on some of the most pressing global challenges. To a great extent, in the political, economic and cultural spheres, India has been able to zealously deconstruct its 'Other' image as was constructed by the Global North. Nonetheless, India's Third World imagery has not subsided entirely, especially when it comes to overcoming discrimination internally, and substantially assimilating an inclusionary lens in policies and institutional structures. As a result, discourse on FFP in India has, largely, remained a far-fetched aim.

In 2021, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S Jaishankar, acknowledged the need for a "gender-balanced" foreign policy by stated that India needs to look at the world from the perspective of women because a gender balanced foreign policy is the need of the hour (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2024). India has, since then, adopted a more proactive approach to amalgamating a feminist perspective in international development projects. A prominent example of this initiative was particularly visible during India's G20 presidency in 2023. During the conference, India decisively vouched for women-led development by highlighting the underlying aim to harness the potential of women to actively contribute to economic, social and political progress at all levels of governance. This was definitely a paradigmatic shift and a significant contribution on the part of India in the realm of gender- based policymaking.

- **The environmental domain**

In the environmental domain, the disproportionate effects of climate change on women and the lack of women's representation of women in climate-related decision-making processes are increasingly being recognised. This form of climate injustice goes against the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capacities (CBDR-RC), which is central to climate diplomacy.

Sweden's policy for Global Development (the Policy Coherence for Development from 2003), its climate policy framework and its feminist foreign policy have remained important areas for creating a holistic view that integrates a feminist perspective into climate-related policies and actions. However, Sweden's action plan for FFP until 2018 had largely ignored climate issues. In the context of women's and girls' political participation and influence, it emphasised

the importance of strengthening gender perspectives in global climate funds and adaptation measures supporting agricultural programmes (CONCORD Sweden et al., 2020). It was the 2020 action that paid attention to the rights of women and girls in all climate-related issues, the protection of female environmental activists and the strengthening of support for promoting gender equality. Examples include the preservation of biodiversity, renewable energy and the sustainable use of natural resources. Definitely, Sweden has made significant progress in developing a gender-climate nexus.

Disaggregating the 2025 data on representation shows that Swedish climate institutions are over-represented by women both at employee and leadership levels. The only exception is the Swedish Energy Agency (SEA), wherein men hold 40% of the leadership positions.[2]

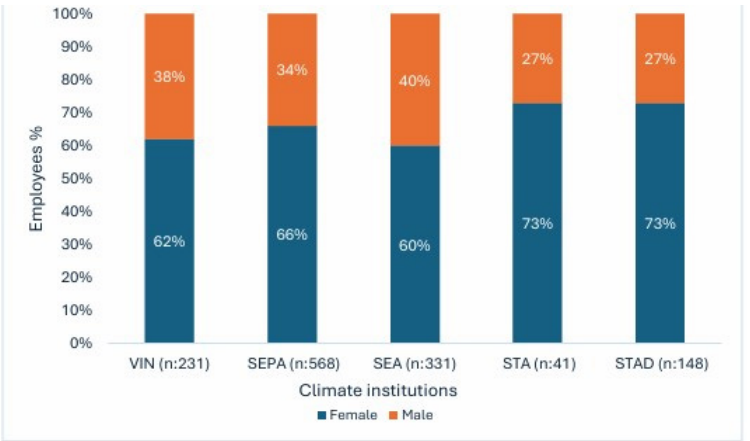


Figure – Gender distribution in % in the climate institutions of Sweden.

[2]Henning, W., Šatienė, V., Lahtinen, V., Saviolidis, N. M., Magnusdottir, G. L., & NORDFORSK. (2025).

Gender representation in climate institutions in Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Finland and Lithuania. In *Research Brief in the NORDFORSK Project: Gendered Norms and Practices in Nordic and Baltic Climate Policy Institutions: Implications for the Climate Transition* (Report No. 180198). https://www.divaportal.org/smash/get/diva2:1964739/FULLTEXT01.pdf The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA)

The Swedish Transport Administration (STAD)[3]

In India, there has been a noticeable change in the frequency and nature of extreme weather events which has increased the country's vulnerability. Women, in particular have been affected in the most harmful ways. Moreover, due to absence of clear guidelines for initiating integration of gender considerations into climate policies, it becomes quite arduous to evaluate the effectiveness of India's inclusive climate diplomacy efforts (Parekh et al., 2022). One major achievement in India's aims of gender sensitive climate diplomacy is the creation of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) in 2015. It is focused at promoting clean, affordable solar energy. Although the ISA does not explicitly state measures to address gender issues, it has substantially contributed to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment in several ways. For example, it supports the "Solar Mamas" initiative by Barefoot College in Ajmer, Rajasthan. Under this initiative, women from countries with high solar potential, such as India, are trained to make and maintain solar panels (Parekh et al., 2022). These initiatives draw a connection between climate action and gender parity.

[3]Henning, W., Šatienė, V., Lahtinen, V., Saviolidis, N. M., Magnusdottir, G. L., & NORDFORSK. (2025). Gender representation in climate institutions in Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Finland and Lithuania. In *Research Brief in the NORDFORSK Project: Gendered Norms and Practices in Nordic and Baltic Climate Policy Institutions: Implications for the Climate Transition* (Report No. 180198). https://www.divaportal.org/smash/get/diva2:1964739/FULLTEXT01.pdf

India has also tried to integrate the interconnected Sustainable Development Goals through its 2008 National Action Plan for Climate Change (NAPCC). The NAPCC has overtly conceded the disproportionate effects of climate change on women, especially their health, and has pointed out the urgency to acknowledge gendered problems in climate policy. For example, NAPCC claims that more women should be employed as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) and Anganwadi workers as they can play a key role in voicing the difficulties faced by local-level women. This can in turn, emphatically reorient the formulation and implementation climate and health policies at the local level, making it more gender balanced. Additionally, coupled with its own experiences and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, India has included provisions to systematically reduce discrimination on all grounds and delineate special attention to the needs of women and children. These policies also focus on protecting women and girls from sexual violence and offering psychological and physical support. However, many scholars have claimed that the Sendai Framework is a missed opportunity given that it has failed to outline concrete strategies for implementation at different levels of governance (Parekh et al., 2022). The efforts taken by India so far are appreciative since all of them individually as well as collectively aim at bringing about change. Yet, Indian diplomats need to engender the simplistic or infantilising approach of treating all vulnerable groups as one and instead harbour on the distinct roles of women in foreign policy domain. (Parekh et al., 2022).

Gender-related concerns are explicitly included in India's subnational climate policies such as the SAPCCs[4], although their implementation is far from satisfactory[5]. India is trying to make its policies more gender sensitive by raising awareness about gender issues within the policy field, rather than through gender mainstreaming. Thus, a major requirement to make it successful is to integrate women as active participants. Also, eradicating male-dominated traditional and cultural attitudes should be emphasised to prevent them from negatively influencing international diplomacy practices.

- **Gender-security Nexus**

Sweden's adoption of a unique feminist foreign policy in 2014 can be seen as an attempt to repoliticise the connection between gender and security. The policy emphasises that gender equality is essential for achieving peaceful and politically meaningful changes in international security structures. Sweden employs a critical approach to dismantle existing gender-based power structures in global politics. This policy shift is defined by concepts such as 'gender cosmopolitanism' and the protection of women and other marginalised groups across borders. The undoing of de-politicisation of the gender security connection was clearly witnessed as Sweden got involved in the ISAF-led mission in Afghanistan (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). Sweden's

[4] State Action Plans on Climate Change.

[5] Most SAPCCs still frame women as vulnerable and not as actors and/or stakeholders in decision-making. Other reasons for the slow progress in gender mainstreaming within climate policy in India include: equating gender with women, without paying much heed to men's vulnerabilities; the lack of gender-disaggregated data on gender-based vulnerabilities; and lack of consideration of gender throughout the policy process. Parekh, N., Bokaap Design, Kubernein Initiative, The Asia Foundation, Jayaram, D., Prabhu, S., Xavier, C., Sinha, R., Yadavar, S., Taneja, N., Joshi, S., Prakash, S., Mattoo, A., Deb, D., Baruah, N., & Bhide, P. (2022). *Applying a Feminist Lens to India's Foreign Policy*. Kubernein Initiative and The Asia Foundation. https://kuberininitiative.com

military involvement in Afghanistan was driven by a desire to build relationships with local women to expand their legal, economic and political rights and ensure their bodily integrity (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). The Swedish armed forces, for that purpose, employed women in dialogical roles in Afghanistan.

Sweden's FFP and the Women, Peace, Security (WPS) agenda is reflective of a normative ideal of gender-just inclusion. Sweden's development of a feminist foreign policy has been gradual but meaningful – it has shaped international agendas, mobilised support and promoted gender sensitive initiatives (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). For instance, during the elections of 2014-2018, a team assigned at the Swedish Foreign Ministry, led by Anne Bernes, played a pivotal role in reframing foreign policy along feminist lines. Again, the Stockholm Forum on Gender Equality, established to enhance global commitment to gender equality, peace and security, also added momentum to strengthening Sweden's commitment to the WPS Agenda. The conference also adhered to the ethical values and practices of Sweden's FFP, as noted by the Swedish government:

'…more rights, representation, and resources for women and girls' means more peace, se- security, and prosperity for the world. A feminist foreign policy is the way forward. With this conference, we create a possibility for grassroots and high-level participants from all over the globe to meet, share knowledge, and inspire political leaders (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018).

There fore, the government of Sweden has been an active player in promoting women's participation alongside their inclusion in peace processes. Accordingly, it has initiated several proposals to reframe and restructure the nature of local and global peace negotiations. Sweden has also ramped

up its efforts to increase women's involvement in discussions, negotiations, drafting, interpreting and implementing of resolutions and key documents related to disarmament and non-proliferation (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). For the purpose, Sweden launched a mediation network[6] in 2015. The network seeks to address the lack of women's representation in peace-making processes (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). The Swedish Government is also working on the perception front aimed at increasing awareness of the different intersecting factors which shaping gender issues. Sweden's diplomatic endeavours have, in addition blatantly challenged destructive traditional male norms by promising to encourage men to play an optimistic role in promoting gender equality[7].

Swedish self-narrative is rooted in a sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of both, its own citizens and those of other nations. This encapsulates addressing of detrimental impacts that patriarchal structures and militarised masculinity have on women's safety and their bodily integrity (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). Sweden's National Action Plan on FFP for the period 2015-2018 is supportive of this stance as it emphasises the country's commitment to protect women migrants, refugees and survivors of sexual violence in conflict (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). The leadership of Margot Wallstrom has enabled Sweden to adopt an activist political position on women's human rights and the elimination of sexual violence in conflict. Sweden has also pitched to safeguard women and girls (in particular) from the harmful effects of gender-based violence, as women often

[6] This network coordinates its activities with the Nordic and Global South networks of women mediators. The Swedish network is politically committed to women's meaningful participation in peace processes and seeks to embed it within international law, human rights and the rule of law more broadly. The network also builds on the assumption that women's participation in peace processes will increase the likelihood that peace agreements will be reached and sustained.

[7] The #HeForShe campaign pursued by Sweden in tandem with the UN Women is an illustration of how men in Sweden adopted non-conventional role of demanding gender equality.

viewed as weapons of power and are inevitably considered as objects upon whom power can be asserted. (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). This approach has legitimised Sweden's efforts to promote and re-politicise gender just protection and security on a global scale. In consequence, Sweden has been politically active to include more women in its national armed forces and in international operations. This inclusion is based on the belief that the presence and communication skills of women are central to ensuring the protection of women in conflict-prone zones and poverty-ridden areas (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018).

South Asia as a region itself posits great difficulty for India in the context of implementation of a more inclusive and gender-sensitive foreign policy. The South Asian region is characterised by perpetual conflicts, border disputes and militarisation, giving rise to hard security strategies driven by threat perceptions. Although traditional and non-traditional security challenges are often viewed as separate, there is an overlapping area where both dimensions intersect. These rigid distinctions, which are very much a part of South Asian states have led to a neglect of other important perspectives, like gender. Studies have pointed out that this neglect has resulted isolation rather than inclusion of gender rights as human rights into the peace and security discourse of India. Given India's big brother attitude and considerable sway in South Asia, the South Asian problems have inevitably become India's problems. Moreover, India's domestic political, religious, economic, cultural and social complications have been pretty overwhelming throughout history. Collectively, these have pushed the issue of gender parity in Indian foreign policy on the fringes.

Therefore, as stated by the former Foreign Secretary, Nirupama Rao, India's South Asia policy has so far adopted a hard security approach featuring the use of military, police, intelligence, and other political tools (Parekh et al., 2022). Nevertheless, its global diplomatic initiatives have been more progressive and flexible in nature. For example, India has earnestly supported the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which aims to develop sustainable peace and security efforts. Recently, India also participated in the sixth IndiaBrazil-South Africa (IBSA)Women's Forum meeting, which was a three-track dialogue platform among democracies on gender equity and equality. Although the Indian Foreign Policy establishment has multiple opportunities to fathom a feminist approach at multilateral forums or in distant regions like Latin America and Africa, the real test lies in its own neighbourhood. Furthermore, the initiation of a Feminist Foreign Policy in India faces hurdles from its own conservative population, where intersectional dynamics are intertwined with gender considerations. Two additional factors constrain India's regional cooperation policies. Firstly, the male- dominated diplomatic, military and security institutions that restrain the implementation of a more robust feminist foreign policy. Secondly, India's aspirations to become a leader in regional cooperation efforts create anxiety among its South Asian neighbours.

Eventually, conflicting power politics and inevitable security concerns have always taken precedence, thereby pushing India towards a hard security approach, especially in the South Asian case. The reinvigoration of women's roles in varied spheres, including foreign policy, has been sidelined throughout history. Since its inception, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has played a pioneering role in providing opportunities to women to not

only shape regional development but also engage in security discussions. The SAARC Decade of the Girl Child (1991) and the SAARC ministerial conferences on women are a testament to this fact. However, the marginalisation of SAARC since 2016 has stagnated the organisation's efforts to enforce these women-centred initiatives to empower women, thus creating an institutional void. (Parekh et al., 2022).

India has always been a haven for refugees from almost all its neighbouring countries, particularly Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. And a significant number of these refugees are/have been women. Hence, the Indian policy towards these refugees has since time immemorial, been addressing the two-fold problems of refugee influx and rehabilitation of women refugees. Women refugees in India often find themselves "alone in a foreign land without a voice" facing isolation, discrimination, exploitation and violence in patriarchal societies (Parekh et al., 2022).

Tamil, Tibetan and Burmese women exiled in India often face isolation and ignorance. Ministries often withdraw their support or neglect these communities, leading to marginalisation. Although India does not have an asylum law of its own, it has signed the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in 2018, pledging to "implement policies and programmes to empower women and girls in refugee and host communities, and to promote full enjoyment of their human rights, as well as equality of access to services and opportunities" (Parekh et al., 2022). However, India's approach towards these refugees, especially women refugees, still contains several loopholes. As feminists point out, India needs to address the numerous genderblind aspects in its dealings with the women refugees.

In situations of active conflict or emergency, India employs medical personnel and field hospitals overseas, but

the number of female nurses and staff is relatively low. India has also remained on the edges when it comes to the adjustment of its post-disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction policies to address the needs of women specifically. India has expanded the scope of its development cooperation so that the inclusion of small-scale development projects (High Impact Community Development Programme, HICDP), humanitarian aid, cultural and heritage conservation, and new guidelines for its lines of credit becomes possible (Parekh et al., 2022). Nonetheless, there remains a void in all of these initiatives as each one of them fails to highlight a comprehensive feminist approach towards solving the issues in question. Moreover, these initiatives are clearly devoid of contributing a fair share of seats to women in the forefront in the context of decision-making and policy framing. A feminist focus, thus, remains far off the core priorities of India's broader development cooperation, unlike Sweden, which has decisively injected a feminist approach into its national development policy.

To date, women represent only 37.8% of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) and hold just 20% of senior diplomatic positions globally. These figures are reflective of the limited presence of Indian women in policy-making roles. These numbers emphasise the deprivation that Indian women still face in the 21st century in the foreign policy context and thus indicate the strong need to integrate feminist perspectives in the diverse socioeconomic and cultural background of India (*Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP): The Scope of Integrating Gender Sensitivity into Indian Foreign Policies | Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict*, n.d.). Only upon implementation of such behavioural and attitudinal changes can strong feminist policies be implemented at the foreign policy level. According to the official data of 2024, only 13.5 per cent of women are a part of the Ministry of External Affairs. At

the Under Secretary level, it is only 29 per cent, and at the heads of divisions and the head of mission level, it is only around 13-15 per cent (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2024). These percentages are enough to prove that the domain of foreign policy is still heavy on the side of the male population. It is because of a multitude of factors at play, and not only due to constricted space for women in foreign policy. Coming to India's international gender commitments, they appear to be quite impressive on paper, but upon closer investigation, critical policy as well as implementation level shortcomings can be traced. For instance, India repeatedly made commitments verbally to promote the WPS agenda, yet a National Action Plan is lacking for implementing the agenda domestically. (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2024). Similarly, despite the ratification of the CEDAW in 1993, the Optional Protocol of CEDAW has failed to receive ratification yet. The Optional Protocol allows individuals to directly approach the CEDAW committee if national systems fail to uphold the principles of the agreement (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2024). Hence, it goes without saying that efforts have been made, but they have not been fully materialised. And in most of the scenarios, core problem areas have not been addressed; as a result, policies and decisions formulated have been superficial in nature. And in selected contexts, perceptual change and, therefore, policy/ provision-centric changes are yet to be made.

The Reality and Way Forward

Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy has pioneered a new, novel trajectory and is moving towards a more transformative and intersectional discourse. Nonetheless, its tendency to essentialize women's desires and concerns overlooks the historical and political context. In consequence, Sweden's FFP fails to provide accurate accounts of actors and events

responsible for perpetuating unequal power relations, sustained by essentialism. While the initiatives of Swedish embassies and public authorities to promote equality between the sexes have been enhanced with the formulation of FFP, strong vertical guidance and additional funding constrain its comprehensive implementation. Unfortunately, the feminist 'label' has become majorly politicised. Yet, at the same time, government efforts to acknowledge gender concerns have heightened the ambition and amplified Sweden's international leadership in promoting gender equality within the foreign policy context. On one hand, thus, Swedish FFP demonstrates optimism by transforming gender-blind areas of foreign policy. On the other hand, questions concerning the consistency of the Swedish government in upholding progender norms in the coming decades linger strongly among the feminists and the Swedish population.

India, comparatively, is positioned at the confluence of significant contextual challenges and intersectional dynamics that restrain its movement from a 'feminist fatigueness' to a comprehensive feminist agenda in its foreign policy. India's colonial past has further reinforced patriarchal divisions, thereby hindering the de-masculinization of structures. Although current domestic and international initiatives, such as the women's reservation bill and the G20 Working Group on Empowerment of women, respectively imply increasing attempts at promoting inclusivity in foreign policy. India's geographical position and growing geopolitical influence hinder the adoption of a transformative foreign policy with noteworthy attention to women and their needs. It may not be explicitly labelled as feminist, but it definitely should look into what women need, what women think about global issues, and how they can be inducted into core foreign policy domains.

It is also important to note that the barrier called colonialism in the formulation of a Feminist Foreign Policy is purely country-specific. On one hand, India is still grappling with the effects of its colonial past, while on the other hand, some nations in the Global South with postcolonial histories have adopted or are actively pursuing feminist foreign policies, including Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Vietnam and Libya. This challenges the notion that pursuing a feminist foreign policy is exclusively a concern of the Global North.

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Mata Hari vs the State: Inside the Androcentric Intelligence

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Abstract

An abused wife, a beaten mother, the most wanted courtesan of her time and then a woman on death row.

Mata Hari, born as Margaretha Geertruida Zella, lived a life that unfolded like a succession of identities, each so different from the other, meticulously framed and ultimately destroyed by politics and narratives by people in power.

This presentation examines how the presence of an erotic dancer became the battleground where gender, surveillance and nationalist anxiety converged. Drawing from intelligence files, wartime journalism and literature about her, the gunshot on Mata Hari pans out as an engineered downfall through androcentric state mechanisms that interpreted her practice of autonomy and liberty as a threat. Her erotic self-fashioning, transnational movements and refusal to succumb to patriarchal moral conventions made her susceptible and an ideal vessel for wartime paranoia.

Intelligence institutions vilified her; her gender was her evidence; newspapers amplified orientalist fantasies to orchestrate public fear and cultural narratives reduced her to myth, denouncing her historical agency. Through layered narratives, this study argues that she didn't just fall prey to

the espionage accusations but was consumed by a larger political system that needed to blame a woman to sanitise itself, doubly victimising her, both in the hands of Germany and France alike. Her story exposes the endured structures of states that rewrite female autocracy into symbols of danger, cracking the shallow walls of masked protection, revealing how gendered suspicion remains central to the performance of national power.

Keywords: *Gendered scapegoating, war mechanism, androcentrism*

Introduction

From celebration to conviction, Mata Hari's trial and fate is one of the most prominent cases of political and gender scapegoating discussed in the public domain. She became the symbol onto whom two collapsing nation-states projected their fears and failures. Despite the fascination with Mata Hari in popular culture and academia, existing works and research have remained largely confined to three dominant trajectories:

1) construct of espionage

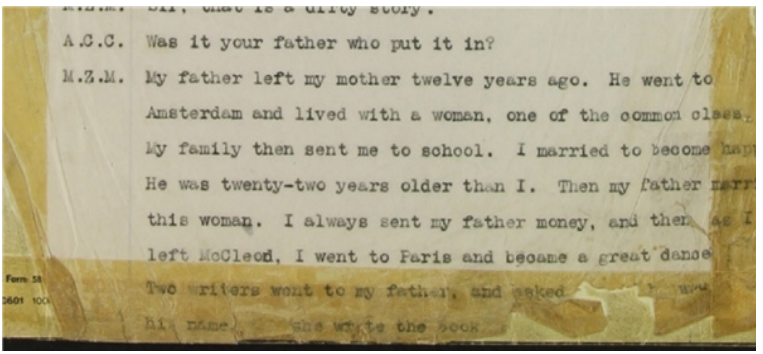
2) biographical reassessment of her guilt

3) feminist reception that frames her as a misunderstood woman.

While these approaches have been a way to challenge the myth of the femme fatale, they often fall short of exploring the structural logic that entails her vilification. In particular, there remains a significant void in scholarship that places Mata Hari's prosecution within the framework of androcentric intelligence culture, where state security, masculinity, and moral discipline converged to a national crisis.

While historians and popular commentators increasingly acknowledge the absence of concrete evidence against Mata Hari, academic discussions have yet to fully account for why her execution was politically necessary. Existing literature often isolates her case as an anomaly or gendered moral tragedy, rather than as a symptom of a broader structural wartime intelligence crisis within the two nations during the time of her acquittal. There is a notable gap in examining how gender, affect, and state insecurity operate together to produce scapegoats during periods of military failure.

Early life and rise of Mata Hari:



A.C.C. Was it your father who put it in?

M.Z.M. My father left my mother twelve years ago. He went to Amsterdam and lived with a woman, one of the common class. My family then sent me to school. I married to become [illegible] He was twenty-two years older than I. Then my father marr this woman. I always sent my father money, and then as I left McCleod, I went to Paris and became a great danse Two writers went to my father, and asked [illegible] his name) [illegible] she wrote the book

Source : The National Archives (under the Crown copyright) https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/filesonfilm/mata-hari-alias-mcl eod-margaretha-geertruida-marguerite-gertrude-kv-2-1.pdf page 70

Her father's gambling addiction caused her small family to crumble, which landed her in the hands of a relative who took her responsibility in her teens. As a student, she was a victim of forced sexual advances from her headmaster that tainted her stance about education. A few more years added and an 18-year-old Margeretha answered a newspaper advertisement to be married to 38-year-old Dutch colonial army captain, Rudolph MacLeod, who promised happiness but Mata Hari lived in the misery of an abusive wedlock and the tragic loss of several of her children. The only surviving

child was her daughter, Louise Jeanne, whom she had to give up to Captain MacLeod when she escaped the marriage.

Margaretta ran to Paris with an empty hand, no financial security, no clothes other than what she was wearing. It was a survival instinct that pushed her to run away from Captain MacLeod's humiliation, and it was the same instinct that gave birth to the most celebrated entertainer of the time, Mata Hari.



Margaretta Zelle as Mata https://pin.it/1P7x9bT7V (Accessed 23Nov.2025)

In escaping the domestic confinement, Mata Hari embodied what Carole Pateman terms a challenge to the "sexual contract". The fluidity in her movements pushed her outside the expectations of respectable femininity, and added to that was the fact that she enacted a marginalized and orientalized model of sensual womanhood that seduced elite men. She had been conducting Pan-European shows that made her visible, mobile, independent and sexually aware, all of which are traits that placed her on the margins of female obedience and national loyalty.

National anxiety and the upcoming upheaval:

Unfortunately, the rise of World War 1, a period of national anxiety and Mata Hari's success coincided. France and Germany were losing manpower to the war alongside their moral, reputation and political authority. National intels suffered from discrepancies, mismanagement and internal rivalry. In such circumstances as Sara Ahmed theorises in her research "theory of Affective economies", emotions like fear, suspicion and xenophobia circulated rapidly, attaching themselves to bodies already coded as foreign and deviant (Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective Economies. Social Text 22(2), 117-139. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/55780) . Mata Hari was an ideal victim of such a concept - sensual, eroticised and without one fixed country to root herself to.

This is where the "scapegoating" mechanism emerged. What she had become was the perfect formulation of sacrificed victim as defined by Ren Girard, the state redirected its own incompetence onto a single figure. Article by Hugh Schofield on BBC News, the case revisited on 16th October 2001, he cites historian and scholar of wartime trials Leon Schirmann,

"Mata Hari was not made to be a spy. They used her as part of an anti-German propaganda campaign. She was simply a woman who liked to get the most for life, and she didn't realise that with the war everything changed ".- (Mata Hari was framed, BBC News, October 16, 2001)

On his own research, Schirmann discovered two very prominent discrepancies in the archives:

1) First German Military attaché Major Kelle deliberately handed Margaretha to the French since he was aware that his telegram, the infamous H-21 telegram, was intercepted by the French, conveniently almost as soon as it arrived, given the

ironic slow process of Information and the lack of technology of the era.

2) Second, Mr Schirmann stated that they accused Mata Hari of fabricating some of her testimonies, even though they were aware it was true. The officials had testified under a false oath.

> First he claims he can show that the German military attache - Major Kelle - deliberately delivered Mata Hari to the French.
>
> He knew that his telegram would be intercepted by the French, so he filled it with incriminating information, implying that she was an extremely valuable German source - even though intelligence reports from Berlin showed she was almost useless.

Clipping of an Article called "Mata Hari was framed" published in BBC on October 16, 2001. This segment discusses the claims of Historian Leon Schirmann.

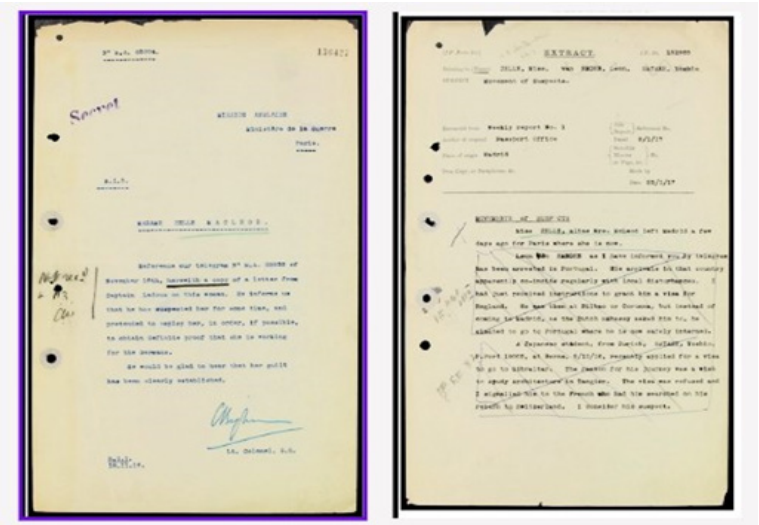
(reported by: Hugh Schofield)

What essentially stood to be the problem was the sexual fluidity and promiscuity of the officials and her irresistible charm of pulling people in, which resulted in physical intimacy, multiple of them, which could be a space for Margaretha to use the vulnerability and extract information if she wanted to. It was the loose resolve and the lack of control on the part of the officials that made it an important agenda for both the French and German States to remove her and also get up, not because there was solid evidence, but because her freedom would cost both the Nations' safety if at all she did have information.

The underlying political theatre can be categorised as group masculine narcissism. World War 1 had shattered the masculine ideals that the nation depended on - strength, rationality, invincibility and strategic mastery. The humiliation from the French war and military blunders produced a crisis in the "national masculine ego". To preserve the illusion of disciplined masculine order, a female needed to absorb the failure. Mata Hari, already ostracised by liberal sexuality and foreignness, became the perfect vessel for this projection for both the patriarchy and the state agendas. In 1917, her trial exemplified gender criminalisation. The French media described her as the seductress whose body was a weapon, a narrative that weaponised morality against her. CIA (https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90-00965R000100120015-5.pdf) and MI5

(https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/filesonfilm/mata-hari-alias-mcleod-marg aretha-geertruida-marguerite-gertrude-kv-2-1.pdf) later reviewed archival documents and concluded that neither of the countries had evidence against her to prove her guilty of what she was being accused of. She was executed not because she was a dangerous agent but because she was symbolically useful to keep the flags of masculinity held high, safeguarding their own secrets and narratives.

Declassified Intelligence Files and the Absence of Substantive Evidence



Original files, mentioning assumptions and optimism to be proved true https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/filesonfilm/mata-hari-alias-mcleod-margaretha-ge ertruida-marguerite-gertrude-kv-2-1.pdf page 43 & 14 .

The declassified intelligence files concerning Mata Hari, particularly British and French counterintelligence correspondence, are frequently invoked as retrospective "proof" of her espionage. However, a close reading of these documents reveals not confirmation of guilt, but rather the persistent failure of intelligence agencies to produce substantiated evidence, coupled with an increasing determination to justify their suspicions. These files do not document espionage activities in any verifiable sense; instead, they expose a pattern of conjecture, surveillance, and narrative persistence that substitutes suspicion for proof.

The intelligence memoranda repeatedly frame Mata Hari as a suspect-in-progress rather than as a confirmed agent. Language such as "suspected" and "possibly employed"

dominates the correspondence, underscoring the speculative nature of the accusations. Notably absent are concrete intelligence tags: coded transmissions directly authored by her, corroborated witness testimonies, or material evidence of information transfer that could withstand juridical scrutiny. Rather than resolving uncertainty, the files reveal an intelligence apparatus trapped in circular reasoning—where suspicion itself becomes the justification for continued investigation.

What is particularly striking is that these documents often acknowledge the lack of definitive proof while simultaneously recommending intensified surveillance and interrogation. This contradiction exposes a critical flaw in wartime intelligence logic: the transformation of uncertainty into incrimination. Mata Hari was not pursued because evidence accumulated against her; she was pursued because the intelligence community had already invested symbolic capital in her guilt. To abandon the accusation would have required acknowledging the systemic failures of intelligence coordination during World War I—a concession the state was unwilling to make amid military losses and declining public morale.

The persistence of surveillance despite evidentiary insufficiency reflects what can be termed institutional confirmation bias. Once Mata Hari was classified as a potential threat, every aspect of her life—her mobility, sexuality, foreign contacts, and financial instability—was reinterpreted through a lens of suspicion. Neutral actions became coded as suspicious; intimacy accounted in intelligence; performance labelled as deception. The files show that rather than testing hypotheses against evidence, intelligence officials repeatedly adjusted interpretations to sustain the original assumption of guilt.

Moreover, the declassified materials reveal a notable preoccupation with her character rather than her actions. Reports linger on her lifestyle, relationships, and perceived moral laxity, reinforcing the argument that her prosecution was driven less by espionage than by gendered anxieties. The intelligence discourse pathologises her sexuality as a national risk, suggesting that her access to male officers constituted a form of espionage in itself. This reflects an androcentric intelligence culture in which male indiscretion is rendered invisible, while female sexuality is criminalised as inherently manipulative.

Equally revealing is the way intelligence agencies appear to pressure Mata Hari into self-incrimination. Interrogation records and intelligence notes suggest that officials repeatedly confronted her with allegations framed as facts, despite their own awareness of evidentiary gaps. This tactic, persistently demanding confirmation of an already assumed guilt, illustrates how the intelligence process became performative rather than investigative. The objective was no longer to determine whether Mata Hari was guilty, but to extract a narrative that would legitimise the state's prior accusations.

This dynamic transforms the declassified files into evidence not of espionage, but of epistemic coercion. Mata Hari was placed in an impossible position: expected to disprove allegations that were never concretely articulated, while being denied access to the very information needed to refute them. Her continued interrogation, despite the absence of new findings, suggests that the intelligence community was attempting to produce guilt rather than discover it.

Crucially, the files also demonstrate that intelligence authorities were aware of the fragility of their case. References to intercepted telegrams—most notably the H-21

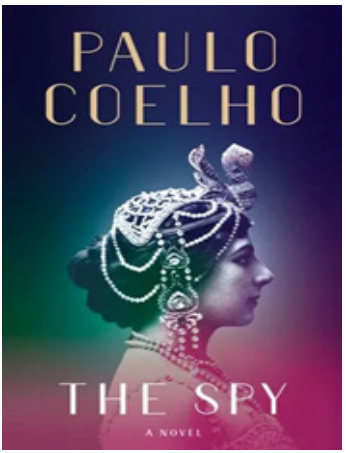
transmission—are presented without corroboration, and later archival analysis has shown that these messages were either misinterpreted or deliberately manipulated. That officials proceeded regardless underscores the political utility of Mata Hari's prosecution. Her execution provided narrative closure, offering the public a tangible enemy at a moment when the real causes of military failure were diffuse, structural, and deeply embarrassing.

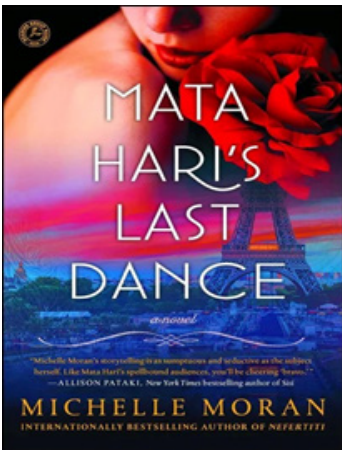
Thus, the declassified intelligence files do not vindicate the state's actions; they indict them. They reveal an intelligence regime more invested in preserving masculine authority and institutional credibility than in adhering to evidentiary rigour. Mata Hari was not relentlessly pursued because she was proven dangerous; she was pursued because her existence—mobile, autonomous, sexually nonconforming—embodied a threat to an intelligence system predicated on control, secrecy, and masculine discipline.

In this light, the files stand as archival proof of absence masquerading as certainty. They document not espionage, but the gradual solidification of a myth—one that transformed suspicion into fact through repetition, authority, and ultimately, execution. Mata Hari's guilt was not discovered in the archives; it was manufactured within them.

Executed by a French firing squad in 1917, assumptions of espionage deemed as final with no solid evidence ever backing the claims, her legacy has been solidified in the public's imagination as the archetypal femme fatale- an alluring courtesan who bartered military secrets for riches and romance. This viewpoint, however, is a carefully constructed narrative, which historians largely agree was politically motivated to portray her as a scapegoat for the French Army's catastrophic military failures during World War I.

Literary narratives





Cover pages of "The Spy" by Paolo Coelho and "Mata Hari's Last Dance" by Michelle Moran

The persistent fascination with this persona is apparent in the multitude of her fictional 'afterlives.' This analysis will conduct a comparative examination of two modern historical fiction novels: Paulo Coelho's The Spy (2016) and Michelle Moran's Mata Hari's Last Dance (2016). By exploring their unique narrative frameworks, philosophical aims, and character representations, this section of the paper will clarify how each text interacts with, contests, or reinforces the foundational myth. The central thesis is that the disparity in their representations arises from the authors' selected emphasis: Coelho highlights the ideological symbol of the liberated woman, while Moran focuses on the personal tragedy of Margaretha Zelle, with both ultimately supporting the assertion that her conviction was a profound injustice rooted in the political necessity to vilify an unconventional woman.

The most notable differences between The Spy and Mata Hari's Last Dance stem from the author's decision regarding narrative voice and the resulting portrayal of Mata Hari.

Coelho's work is presented as an extensive, fictional final letter from Margaretha to her lawyer, Édouard Clunet, penned during her time in prison. This epistolary approach prioritizes her internal, philosophical journey over adherence to historical accuracy.

Ideological Focus: Coelho utilizes Mata Hari as a conduit for his distinctive philosophical reflections on fate, bravery, and freedom. The primary crime, as she articulates, is not treason:

"The crimes I did commit, I escaped, the greatest of which was being an emancipated and independent woman in a world ruled by men."

This quotation encapsulates Coelho's thesis: Mata Hari is a martyr for women's liberation, a "precursor of the second wave of feminism" (Naeem & Ali, 2024). Her execution serves as a punishment for her defiance against the patriarchal societal structure: "You are born, go to school, and attend university in search of a husband... You get married - even if he is the worst man in the world" (Coelho, The Spy). By illustrating her choice of an alternative path, Coelho characterizes her as an unyielding hero.

By emphasizing her final reflections, the novel often sacrifices the detailed historical context of her struggle. Critics have remarked that Coelho's portrayal makes her seem "shallow and stupid" and "downplay[s] the complicated reality of a woman for whom survival came from rage at how she was downtrodden" (Penslips Magazine, 2019). The Mata Hari depicted in The Spy is a self-assured libertine who rarely dwells on her past traumas, thus simplifying the complex,

driven woman into a refined, two-dimensional icon of defiance.

Moran's literary work employs a more standard historical fiction technique, utilizing a third-person perspective that chronicles Margaretha's life from her early years in the Netherlands to her sorrowful conclusion. This format enriches the narrative backdrop and allows for a more intricate analysis of her motivations.

Moran's primary distinction lies in her unwavering attention to the economic and emotional turmoil that forged Mata Hari. The story illustrates the sexual abuse she faced, her disastrous and abusive marriage to Rudolf MacLeod, the devastating loss of her son, and the heart-wrenching decision to give up custody of her daughter, Non, due to her financial constraints. This shifts the narrative of a greedy courtesan into a poignant account of a woman battling for survival.

Moran thoroughly investigates the burden of self-creation. Mata Hari is not inherently free but is perpetually performing a role to survive. The dance and opulent lifestyle are portrayed as a fragile disguise over deep-seated loneliness and financial worry. Moran's Margaretha is depicted as constantly calculating yet profoundly naive about the political perils of her lifestyle, suggesting that her greatest failing was not treasonous intent but rather a reckless indifference and naïveté in a time of conflict. This subtle representation of her self-deception as a tragic flaw amplifies the poignancy of her execution, emphasizing the argument that she was a victim of circumstance, as one reviewer noted, questioning "whether she was truly a spy or whether she merely got caught up in all the glitz and glamour and, ultimately, chose the wrong paramours" (What's Better Than Books, 2016).

Both novels explicitly explore the manipulation of the historical narrative that transformed Margaretha Zelle into the nefarious Mata Hari, yet they attribute the underlying motivations in distinct ways.

The historical backdrop of World War I is crucial. The French military sought both a morale boost and a scapegoat. The reliance on fragmented, coded German telegrams, which were either misinterpreted or intentionally fabricated by French authorities to accuse Mata Hari of being the German spy H-21, highlights the misleading nature of her trial. While both authors put forward the idea that the trial had been politically motivated, neither of them systematically analyse the telegrams — likely because Mata Hari would not have been aware of this information and both novels follow her point of view.

Moran emphasizes the external pressures that rendered Margaretha a target: her ability to traverse borders due to her Dutch neutrality, her ongoing financial struggles, and her history of relationships with high-ranking officers from various nations. In Moran's perspective, her lifestyle rendered her a convenient liability poised to be exploited Consequently, the trial is portrayed as a judicial farce, focused less on factual evidence and more on the French establishment's need to rid itself of a perceived 'moral menace.

Coelho adopts a more expansive and less historically focused perspective on the conspiracy, presenting it as a fundamental human flaw rather than a necessity arising from wartime conditions. For Coelho, the system's imperative to punish Mata Hari is merely the expected outcome of her refusal to conform.

"Sin was not created by God; it was created by us when we tried to transform what was inevitable into something subjective" (Coelho, The Spy).

This statement implies that the so-called "crime" of espionage is simply a subjective designation imposed by a patriarchal society to penalise a woman who dared to establish her own standards of behaviour. From this standpoint, her trial and execution are seen as an inevitable result of her boldness, serving as a cautionary narrative enforced by the system against any woman who seeks self-determination.

Both novels concur on her innocence regarding treason; however, they diverge on the primary reason for her persecution: Moran highlights the specific political and military necessity for a scapegoat, whereas Coelho underscores the enduring ideological drive to suppress the liberated female spirit.

The examination of Paulo Coelho's The Spy in conjunction with Michelle Moran's Mata Hari's Last Dance highlights two distinct yet complementary efforts to challenge the lasting myth of the seductive traitor.

Coelho utilises the epistolary style to bestow upon Mata Hari the philosophical voice that was denied to her in her lifetime, portraying her as an archetypal representation of female bravery whose true transgression was "being an emancipated and independent woman." This depiction, while captivating, often reduces the intricate historical and personal layers of her suffering. Conversely, Moran, through a careful historical narrative, anchors Mata Hari in her trauma and despair, effectively portraying her as a tragic scapegoat-a vulnerable woman whose fabricated identity and reckless lifestyle rendered her the perfect victim for a nation eager to obscure its military failures.

Ultimately, both novels engage in a significant act of literary redemption. They shift the emphasis from the sensationalised allegations of supposed espionage (of which she was almost

certainly innocent) to the profound injustice of her conviction. They remind readers that the powerful, enduring myth of the femme fatale was intentionally constructed by a frightened and failing political system to defame an inconvenient, unconventional woman. Mata Hari's most significant "afterlife" is not the myth, but the ongoing literary effort to dismantle it, revealing the narrative of Margaretha Zelle: the independent spirit who paid the ultimate price for her autonomy in a world dominated by men.

Conclusion

Literature does not merely reflect history; it actively reshapes it, producing counter-archives that challenge or reconfigure dominant narratives. By comparing Paulo Coelho's *The Spy* and Michelle Moran's *Mata Hari's Last Dance*, this paper treats fiction as a critical site where gendered history is contested, reimagined, and ethically reframed.

The comparative approach allows for an analysis of how different narrative strategies—epistolary confession versus realist biography—generate divergent ethical and political interpretations of the same historical figure. Coelho's philosophical abstraction transforms Mata Hari into an ideological symbol of liberated womanhood, while Moran's materialist realism foregrounds economic precarity, trauma, and survival. Reading these texts together reveals not only contrasting literary aesthetics but competing feminist interventions: one that mythologises resistance, and another that insists on the lived cost of autonomy under patriarchy.

The femme fatale as state myth is central to this analysis. Rather than understanding the femme fatale as a timeless archetype, this paper conceptualises her as a state-produced narrative used to discipline non-conforming women. In Mata Hari's case, the femme fatale myth transformed a woman's

survival strategies into evidence of treason, recoding sexuality as sabotage and desire as deception. This myth allowed the state to collapse complex geopolitical failure into a morally legible story of female betrayal.

Taken together, these frameworks enable a reading of Mata Hari's life, trial, and literary afterlives as part of a broader political grammar in which women's bodies are mobilised to stabilize masculine authority during moments of crisis. By integrating feminist historiography, gender and security studies, and comparative literary analysis, this paper demonstrates that Mata Hari was not executed for what she did, but for what she represented: the intolerable visibility of female autonomy within an androcentric system struggling to preserve its legitimacy.

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Gender Quotas and Political Representation: Successes and Paradoxes Across Democracies

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Abstract

Over the past three decades, gender quotas have emerged as a key international policy instrument for increasing women's political representation. The recognition that representative democracy lacks legitimacy when half of the population remains structurally excluded has driven demands for gender equality in political participation. Today, more than 110 countries have adopted gender quotas in various forms, including legislative quotas, reserved seats, and voluntary party quotas. These mechanisms have significantly enhanced the descriptive representation of women and, in many cases, strengthened the substantive articulation of gender-sensitive policies (Paxton, Hughes & Painter, 2009). However, despite their widespread adoption, the impact, enforcement, and design of quotas vary considerably across regions, producing notable paradoxes such as tokenism, elite capture, proxy representation, and resistance that limits women's effective participation.

Gender quota adoption is more common in democratic systems, where normative commitments to inclusivity

provide women's movements with opportunities to demand reform. Empirical research demonstrates a positive correlation between democracy and quota adoption, though informal norms often weaken quota effectiveness even when women gain access to political office. Legal frameworks addressing gender discrimination are frequently necessary to challenge entrenched male dominance.

The effects of gender quotas differ significantly across democracies due to variations in patriarchal values, party systems, electoral rules, and enforcement mechanisms. Through a comparative analysis of quota models in India, Rwanda, Latin America (Argentina, Mexico, Bolivia), and Europe (Sweden, Norway), this article evaluates both the transformative potential of gender quotas and the paradoxes they generate across political contexts.

Keywords: *Gender Quotas, Women's Political Representation, Comparative Analysis*

Introduction: an overview of gender quota and its historical context

Rights, liberties, and institutions cannot exist without political representation, which is a fundamental component of democracy. In the past, a lack of access to resources or unofficial networks has frequently been blamed for women's low political engagement in democracies. Policies known as gender quotas are intended to boost the number of women in positions of political authority. Depending on how they are implemented and at what level, these quotas can be divided into various categories. Reserved seats, party quotas, and legislative quotas are the main categories of gender quotas. In a legislative body, **reserved seats** refer to the allocation of a certain number of seats solely for women. Election laws or constitutional amendments are frequently used to impose

this kind of quota. Reserved seats have been successfully introduced in nations like Rwanda and Uganda. **Party quotas** are voluntary strategies used by political parties to boost the proportion of female candidates. These quotas can differ greatly between parties and are frequently impacted by the party's commitment to gender equality and philosophy. In nations like Sweden, where political parties have embraced strong feminist agendas, party quotas have been crucial. All political parties are required by law to run a specific proportion of female candidates under **legislative quotas**. Because it applies to all parties and ensures a wider impact, this kind of quota is thought to be more resilient than party quotas. Women's representation has significantly increased as a result of the implementation of statutory quotas in nations like France and Belgium (Lee, 2025).

Gender quotas are a relatively new practice in politics, having gained traction in the latter half of the 20th century. Gender quotas were first implemented mostly in Latin America and Europe. A number of international agreements and conventions, including the 1979 United Nations General Assembly Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), have impacted the development of quotas. Despite women's consistent political advancement, there is significant variety in development and change patterns at the national level. This study examines the effects of electoral systems, national-level gender quotas, and the expansion of democracy, including civil liberties and political rights, on the paths of women's legislative representation at the national level (Paxton, Hughes, & Painter, 2009).

Cross-national analysis

India: Based on the constitutional principles of justice, equality, and inclusion, India's efforts to achieve gender equality in political representation have developed gradually. The ratification of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992 and 1993 marked a significant turning point in this journey. These changes established a decentralized structure of government and required women, especially those from Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), to hold one-third of the seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (village-level councils) and urban local bodies. By allowing women to actively participate in grassroots decision-making, where genuine democratic engagement frequently starts, these changes sought to address historical gender disparities. Millions of women, many from underprivileged and rural backgrounds, entered politics for the first time as a result of these reforms, which had a revolutionary effect and produced a new group of female leaders. These women started to question long-standing patriarchal conventions in addition to bringing new viewpoints to administration. Their presence enhanced the provision of public services, especially in areas like sanitation, health, and education. However, the higher levels of political power did not share this bottom-up success. From approximately 5% in the first Lok Sabha in 1952 to only over 14% in the 17th Lok Sabha in 2019, women's representation in the national Parliament remained remarkably low. The Women's Reservation Bill, which proposed a 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, was tabled in 1996 to address this ongoing discrepancy. In order to address the gender disparity at higher levels of political authority, the measure was a bold step. But there were several difficulties along the way. It encountered strong opposition from a

number of political circles despite being revived several times throughout the years. Progress was halted by worries about upsetting established political hierarchies and the absence of sub-quotas for OBC and minority women. Despite being in legislative limbo for almost thirty years, the bill became a symbolic touchstone for gender justice. However, the bill's 2023 passing restored optimism and confirmed India's dedication to inclusive democracy. Gender quotas' historical trajectory highlights both the difficulties and the tenacity of initiatives to strengthen women's political empowerment in India. With 454 votes in favour and just two against in the Lok Sabha, the bill was unanimously approved in the Rajya Sabha. On September 28, 2023, President Droupadi Murmu signed the legislation into law. The reservation is anticipated to take effect with the 2029 general elections, but its implementation is dependent on the completion of the next census and delimitation process, which is anticipated after 2026 (Sawant, 2025).

Rwanda: Rwanda is notable worldwide for its efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE), especially in the areas of leadership and political engagement. After the genocide in 1994, the Rwandan Patriotic Front established norms and a United Nations-sponsored peace accord that controlled Rwanda. In order to guarantee women's involvement in decision-making, President Paul Kagame's administration enacted a new constitution in 2003 that contained a gender quota in Article 10. Only 19% of Rwandan political leaders were female prior to the genocide, and women's access to education and employment prospects was restricted. Increased female participation in governance was essential due to the post-genocide demographic change, when women comprised up 60–70% of the population (Dutta, 2023). At the national and subnational levels, Rwanda's two-

chamber parliament includes mandatory quotas for women's representation in both the lower and upper houses. According to the law, women must hold 30% of all elected posts in national and subnational decision-making organizations, including 24 of the lower house of parliament's 80 seats. A special electoral college made up of voters from district and local women's councils selects the lower house's reserved seats. District executives nominated by the National Women's Council and National Bureau of Sectors (a division of districts) elect local women's councils and district councils. In Rwanda, women are represented at the community level by the National Women's Council, a grassroots group whose members are chosen locally through a democratic process. The government promised to appoint women to leadership positions (such as ministers, local authorities, and police chiefs), and there are optional gender quotas for political parties. With the results of its most recent 2024 legislative election, Rwanda has once again shown its persistent commitment to gender parity in a historic step towards gender equality. In the Chamber of Deputies, the proportion of female seats rose from 61.3% in 2018 to 63.8% in 2024. The Constitution mandates that women make up at least 30% of the legislators in the lower chamber. Given that the Chamber of Deputies has 80 members overall, the percentage quota allotted to women is equivalent to 24 MPs (UN, 2024).

Latin America: The 1980s redemocratization of Latin America had primarily benefited men. After electoral politics resumed, women who had spearheaded pro-democracy protests were marginalized. In the first post-transition elections, women won just roughly 5% of legislative seats. In the years that followed, progress hardly changed throughout the region. Women made up less than 10% of the lower or unicameral legislatures in the region on average during the 1990s. The

representation of women in Latin American nations varies significantly. Argentine women started to change electoral politics in Latin America and around the world in 1991. Congresswoman Luz Salgado stated that "a patriarchal, machista political culture is to blame for the fact that out of 2,013 parliamentarians, only 84 are women" when Peru passed its quota law in 1997. Women lobbied for quota systems to expedite their entry into elected offices rather than waiting for gender bias to go away on its own (Piscopo, 2020). That objective has been furthered by gender quotas. From 9.1 percent in the early 1990s to 26.7 percent in the early 2010s and 36.8 percent in 2023, the proportion of female legislators in the region's lower/single chambers climbed. Women make up about half of the legislature in Bolivia and Argentina. In the upper houses of parliament, the average percentage of seats held by women is 34.1%. Argentina is unique in that more than 40% of these posts are held by women. Gender parity has been attained in Bolivia and Mexico, which means that women are more represented in their upper houses than in their lower or only legislative chambers. In comparison, less than 20% of upper-house seats are held by women in Brazil and the Dominican Republic. In contrast to Guatemala and Uruguay, where there is only one speaker and none in the other countries, Argentina and Mexico have both female speakers in the lower and upper chambers. In Latin American local government, women make up 32.7% of council members and 15.4% of mayors. Over 40% of ministers are women in Peru, Costa Rica, and Mexico. With less than 15% of female ministers, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Bolivia, and Uruguay have the lowest percentages of female ministers in their presidential cabinets. Well-crafted quota laws with placement mandates that prioritize female representation on ballots and strict enforcement of the regulations (with

penalties for disobedience) are essential to their greater representation (Chaves, Ribas, & Lovenduski, 2024).

Europe: Gender quotas have significantly increased the representation of women in politics in Sweden. The Swedish strategy, which combines statutory requirements and party quotas, has successfully boosted female involvement and encouraged more inclusive policy-making. With their welfare systems and political and legal frameworks supporting women's rights and gender equality, the five Nordic nations—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden—are frequently seen as some of the most gender equal nations in the world (Dyvik, 2024). The implementation of gender quotas is frequently credited to the Scandinavian nations, especially Sweden and Norway (Kavita, 2023). In 1993, Sweden's Social Democratic party centrally adopted a gender quota and imposed it on all its local party groups, which led to a significant rise in the proportion of female lawmakers. Women make up 47% of the Swedish Parliament (Riksdag) as of 2022 (IPU, 2022). Political parties' dedication to gender equality and the power of powerful women's movements pushing for reform are partly responsible for this success (Freidenvall, 2006). In a similar vein, women now hold 45% of parliamentary seats in Norway thanks to the country's implementation of party quotas, which has greatly increased their representation in political positions (IPU, 2022).

Research methodology

This study employs a comparative analysis approach, relying on secondary sources such as scholarly articles, government reports, and data from international organizations. The analysis focuses on the implementation and outcomes of gender quotas in selected countries, including Sweden, Rwanda, India, and Mexico. Data on women's political

representation is sourced from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and other reputable databases.

Key findings and analysis

Rwanda's legislative quotas and India's reserved seats stand in stark contrast to Sweden's and Norway's voluntary party quotas. Gender quotas have been implemented successfully in a number of nations. Bolivia and Mexico, in addition to Rwanda and the Scandinavian nations, have shown that well-crafted and implemented gender quotas can result in notable gains in the representation of women in politics. Bolivia's lower house of parliament now has a majority of women thanks to the implementation of legislative quotas and more extensive political reforms. In a similar vein, women's representation in political offices has increased dramatically in Mexico as a result of constitutional changes requiring gender parity (Piscopo, 2016).

Women's engagement at the grassroots level has greatly risen because to India's designated seats for women in local administration (Panchayati Raj institutions). But national representation is still low; as of 2022, women made up just 14% of the Indian Parliament (IPU, 2022). Progress is nevertheless hampered by political opposition, patriarchal views, and cultural hurdles.

As of 2022, women had 61% of the lower house seats in Rwanda thanks to legislative quotas that were implemented in 2003 (IPU, 2022). This accomplishment is mostly attributable to the post-genocide dedication to gender equality and the need to include women in the country's reconstruction.

Through legislative quotas and constitutional amendments requiring gender parity, Mexico has achieved notable progress in women's political representation. Consequently,

as of 2022, 48% of seats in the lower house of Congress are held by women (IPU, 2022). The efficacy of integrating quotas with more comprehensive political changes and enforcement measures are demonstrated by Mexico's achievement (Piscopo, 2016).

Women now make up 53% of Bolivia's lower house of parliament as of 2022 thanks to legislative quotas that were put into place in 1997 and strengthened over time (IPU, 2022). This accomplishment has been largely attributed to the political resolve to promote gender equality and the efficient execution of these quotas.

The use of gender quotas differs greatly between Sweden, Norway, and Argentina, indicating distinct strategies for attaining women's political representation. With around 46–47% of women in the Riksdag (IPU 2024–25), Sweden has one of the highest levels of representation in the world. In 1993, the Social Democratic Party in Sweden adopted the zipper system, a gender quota system whereby women and men are placed alternately on all party lists. In a similar vein, Norway does not enforce state-mandated quotas; instead, internal 40% gender guidelines have been adopted by political parties, most notably the Labour Party, resulting in around 45% women in the Storting. On the other hand, Argentina was the first country to enact legislative quotas with its 1991 quota law. Later, the country passed the Gender Parity Law in 2017, which required 50% of men and women on all electoral lists with a zipper-style alternation. This resulted in around 45% of women in the Chamber of Deputies and 50–51% in the Senate. When taken as a whole, these examples show how high levels of women's parliamentary participation may be achieved using both legally enforced parity frameworks and voluntary party processes (Kavita, 2023).

Prevalent challenges

Despite their achievements, gender quotas have a number of drawbacks. The fact that quotas would not always result in a significant rise in women's political power is one of the main worries. Women elected under quotas may encounter obstacles in their political parties or legislative bodies, which would restrict their capacity to bring about change. Furthermore, elements including the election system, political culture, and the existence of other discriminatory practices might compromise the efficacy of quotas. For instance, women who are elected using quotas may encounter prejudice inside their political parties or be viewed as tokens in certain nations. The institutional political background, structural problems including poverty and violence, and male-dominated political, economic, and social environments continue to impede women in positions of power.

Numerous institutional and cultural barriers continue to limit women's political presence. Physical, psychological, and online violence against women in politics fosters a hostile climate that deters involvement. It is challenging for women to enter and prosper in political organizations and practices because they frequently mirror standards of conventional masculinity. Women legislators are often ignored or marginalized in decision-making processes, even when they are elected. Many women's access to networks, resources, and campaigning is further hampered by entrenched socioeconomic disparities. For women from minority ethnic, sexual, and class backgrounds who experience overlapping kinds of discrimination, these obstacles are considerably more severe. Additionally, attempts to increase the number of women in politics frequently result in opposition, which strengthens opposition to gender equality and slows the advancement of inclusive representation.

Conclusion: probable prospects

One important tactic for advancing gender equality in politics is the implementation of gender quotas. The data indicates that quotas can greatly boost women's representation and promote more inclusive decision-making processes, notwithstanding their drawbacks. Understanding the function and effects of gender quotas will continue to be crucial as the world works toward greater gender equality.

Gender quotas' future depends on resolving the issues and objections raised by their application. It is crucial to make sure that gender quotas are complemented by more extensive political and cultural reforms in order to increase their efficacy. This entails fostering social views that respect gender equality, overcoming patriarchal norms and opposition from political elites, and offering resources and assistance to women elected through quotas. Furthermore, it is essential to make sure that gender quotas are created and used in a way that takes into account the distinct political and cultural circumstances of every nation. This might entail implementing a mix of party quotas, legislative quotas, and reserved seats that are adapted to local circumstances. Legislative quotas with strong enforcement mechanisms, for instance, could be advantageous in nations with strong patriarchal histories, but voluntary party quotas might be more successful in nations with more egalitarian political cultures.

Other nations may make great progress toward attaining gender parity in political representation by taking note of the lessons learned from nations that have effectively implemented gender quotas and resolving the issues related to their implementation.

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The Aesthetics of Resistance: Digital Feminism, Visibility, and Backlash in Contemporary Gender Politics

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Abstract

Digital platforms dazzle with feminist promise— hypervisibility igniting resistance against entrenched patriarchies, yet conceal a **digital visibility paradox**: brighter spotlights cast deadlier shadows, especially over Global South movements. Paris Paloma's #Labour surges 15 million TikTok views with celebrity retweets fuelling rage against domestic drudgery, facing zero reprisals, while Iran's #MahsaAmini's 2.1 billion impressions unleash 2026 Tehran hair-cutting defiance met by NoorNet — Iran's AI-powered state surveillance system deploying facial recognition to identify and arrest protesters — arrests and Farsi shadow bans cutting reach by 37–52%.

Case studies reveal stark contrasts: India's #WhyLoiter turns 5K nighttime walks into women-only parks plus 33% parliamentary quotas; Nigeria's #BringBackOurGirls sustains 1.2M tweets despite 82 girls still captive; Indonesia wins marital rape criminalization via #RUUPKS; Netflix's *Adolescence* traces a 13-year-old's "girls don't like me" searches morphing through 4chan into fatal blackpill violence.

Mixed-methods analysis of 2,700 artifacts unmasks platforms as digital sovereigns reveals English misogyny thrives freely while Southern resistance suffocates. UN audits, Mastodon sanctuaries, and hashtags elevated as statecraft could transform hypervisibility from lethal trap into revolutionary force.

Keywords: *digital visibility paradox, Global South feminism, algorithmic colonialism, incel radicalization, intersectional resistance, platform sovereignty*

Introduction

Digital platforms have revolutionized contemporary gender politics, emerging as pivotal arenas where womanhood, resistance, and power dynamics are contested and renegotiated. With over five billion global internet users in 2025, women constitute a disproportionate share of active participants, particularly on visually driven platforms like TikTok and Instagram, which now serve as political public spheres fostering unprecedented feminist visibility and transnational solidarity (Statista, 2025). Yet, this hypervisibility is inherently double-edged: while Western digital feminism leverages celebrity virality and algorithmic favouritism to amplify messages of empowerment, movements in the Global South grapple with entrenched structural barriers, including state surveillance, platform biases, and what scholars term "digital colonialism" (Kwet, 2019; Gurumurthy & Chami, 2023). These asymmetries not only hinder Southern voices but also underscore a broader geopolitical tension in the digital age, where technology ostensibly democratizes discourse yet reinforces imperial hierarchies.

This paper employs a **transnational intersectional feminist framework** to dissect these dynamics. Intersectionality, as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1989), illuminates

how overlapping oppressions—race, class, gender, and postcoloniality shape lived experiences, while Mohanty's (1984, 2003) transnational lens critiques Western feminism's universalizing tendencies, advocating instead for situated analyses of Global South agency amid neocolonial structures. Linking to International Relations (IR) theory, this approach draws on constructivism, which posits that digital spaces function as norm-entrepreneurial sites where identities and interests are co-constituted through discursive practices like hashtags and memes (Wendt, 1992; Adler, 2010). In IR terms, platforms are not neutral infrastructures but contested terrains of "virtual statecraft," where algorithms act as gatekeepers akin to traditional power asymmetries in realist paradigms (Krook & True, 2012).

Guided by this framework, the analysis addresses two core research questions:

1: How do platform algorithms perpetuate digital colonialism, amplifying Western narratives while suppressing Global South feminist activism?

2: In what patterns does heightened visibility trigger misogynistic backlash, and what offline material outcomes emerge from these digital struggles?

Through comparative case studies spanning India (#MeToo, #WhyLoiter), Iran (#WomanLifeFreedom/#MahsaAmini), Nigeria(#BringBackOurGirls), Brazil/Latin America(art collectives), and Western exemplars (Paris Paloma's #Labour, incel subcultures), the paper argues that while digital platforms catalyse profound social transformations and intersectional solidarities, they simultaneously engender novel vulnerabilities—algorithmic erasure, targeted harassment, and state reprisal, necessitating redesigned, equitable digital governance. The study foregrounds urgent

policy imperatives for transparent algorithms, decentralized alternatives, and IR-informed multilateral norms to bolster Global South resistance.

Methodology

This study adopts a **mixed-methods comparative approach**, integrating qualitative media analysis, thematic discourse analysis, and secondary quantitative data to examine digital feminist activism across Western and Global South contexts from 2022–2025. Case selection prioritizes movements with **demonstrated virality and impact**: Western cases include Paris Paloma's #Labour (15M+ TikTok uses, 2024–25) and incel-related content from the *Adolescence* docuseries; Global South cases encompass India's #MeToo/#WhyLoiter (500K+ Instagram posts), Iran's #MahsaAmini/#WomanLifeFreedom (2B+ global impressions), Nigeria's #BringBackOurGirls (sustained 10-year hashtag lifecycle), and Brazil/Latin America's Instagram art collectives (#NiUnaMenos derivatives). These were chosen purposively based on Statista/DataReportal metrics for engagement volume (>100K interactions), cross-regional diffusion, and documented offline outcomes, ensuring theoretical saturation across visibility-backlash-outcome cycles (Statista, 2025; Data Reportal, 2025). **Data sources** comprise: (1) **primary digital artifacts**—archived hashtags, viral posts, memes, and protest imagery scraped from TikTok, Instagram, X/Twitter (2022–Jan 2026), accessed via platform APIs and tools like Crowdtangle; (2) **secondary quantitative indicators** from GSMA (mobile gender gaps), Amnesty International (harassment metrics), and World Bank (internet access disparities); and (3) **qualitative materials** including activist interviews (Eltahawy, Soundararajan), news coverage (NYT, Economic Times), and scholarly analyses (Kwet, 2019; Noble, 2018). Approximately

1,500 digital items were coded, focusing on peak activity periods (e.g., Mahsa Amini: Sep 2022–Mar 2023).

Analysis proceeds in two stages: First, **thematic qualitative coding** (NVivo-assisted) identifies recurrent patterns—self-expression forms, algorithmic interventions, backlash types, intersectional negotiations—across cases, guided by transnational intersectional feminism. Second, **comparative pattern-matching** juxtaposes Western/Southern trajectories against constructivist IR expectations of norm diffusion versus structural constraint. Limitations include platform ephemerality (deleted content), English-language bias in accessible archives, and ethical constraints on activist doxxing risks; future work could incorporate multilingual AI translation and participatory methods with Southern feminists. This rigorous design ensures transferability while centering Global South epistemologies over Western universalism.

The rise of digital self-expression: comparing global south and western approaches

Digital feminist expression today leverages shared platform infrastructures yet crystallizes into profoundly **context-specific projects**, revealing both solidaristic potential and fragmenting asymmetries. In the West, Paris Paloma's 2024 anthem "Labour" exemplifies algorithmic serendipity: blending folk-punk aesthetics with lyrics decrying unpaid domestic labour and "female rage," it amassed **15.2 million TikTok uses** and **8.7 million Instagram Reels** by mid-2025, as users overlaid the track onto personal "day-in-the-life" videos chronicling emotional exhaustion in heterosexual partnerships (Statista, 2025). This virality transformed intimate grievances into a hyper visible, transnational archive of structural patriarchy, amplified by celebrity shares

(e.g., Billie Eilish) and Western media ecosystems, fostering ephemeral solidarity without immediate state reprisal (DataReportal, 2025a).

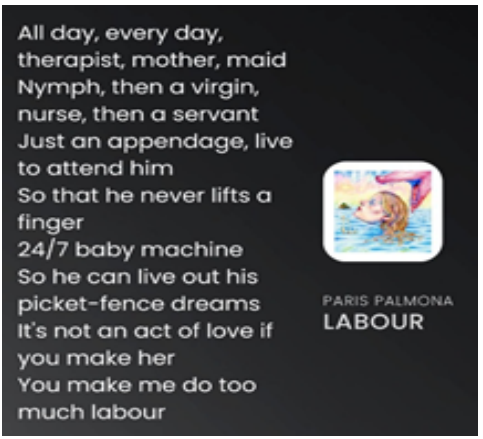


Figure 1 - Excerpt from the song "Labour" by Paris Paloma, illustrating feminist critiques of unpaid emotional and domestic labour within patriarchal social structures. Source: Paris Paloma, Labour (2023), music lyrics and promotional artwork.

Contrast this with the Global South, where innovation persists amid precarity. India's #MeTooIndia (2018–ongoing) exposed workplace harassment via **WhatsApp forwards and 450K+ Instagram posts**, catalysing FIRs against high-profile abusers, while #HappyToBleed (2017–) amassed **300K interactions** challenging menstrual taboos through product boycotts (Menon, 2023). Iran's #WomanLifeFreedom/#MahsaAmini, erupting post-Mahsa Amini's 2022 custody death, achieved **2.1 billion global impressions** across X/Twitter despite VPN crackdowns, with Farsi memes bridging diaspora solidarity (Amnesty International, 2023). Nigeria's #BringBackOurGirls (2014–25 resurgence) sustained **1.2 million tweets**, evolving from Chibok kidnappings to broader anti-gender violence advocacy, while Latin American Instagram collectives (#NiUnaMenos Brazil variants) and Indonesia's TikTok protests (#TolakRUUPKS) mobilized **500K+ youth**

views amid platform bans (GSMA, 2025). Yet, GSMA data underscores the "15% mobile gender gap" in low/middle-income countries, throttling Southern reach (GSMA, 2025).

Movement	Platform Peak	Reach (2022–25)	Gender Gap Impact	Key Fragmentation
#Labour (West)	TikTok/IG	15M+ uses	Minimal (high access)	Ephemeral; commodified
#MahsaAmini (Iran)	X/Twitter	2.1B impressions	VPN-dependent; 20% Farsi shadow ban	State censorship
#MeTooIndia	WhatsApp/ IG	450K posts	14% gap; rural exclusion	Elite urban bias
#BringBack OurGirls (Nigeria)	Twitter	1.2M tweets	17% gap; data costs	Donor co-optation

Table 1 ***Comparative Metrics: Virality and Infrastructure Gaps***

Note. Data compiled from Statista (2025), DataReportal (2025), and Amnesty International (2025).

Analysis reveals solidarity versus fragmentation: Western cases exhibit **homogenizing amplification**, where English-centric algorithms propel individualistic "rage therapy" into global trends, fostering affective solidarity but risking neoliberal co-optation (e.g., Labour-branded merch). Southern movements, conversely, demonstrate **resilient hybridity**, blending local idioms (Farsi poetry, Hindi memes) with global hashtags, yet suffer **infrastructural fragmentation**: mobile gaps exclude rural women, language biases demote non-English content (37% less visibility; Noble, 2018), and transient virality yields uneven offline traction. Activists like Mona Eltahawy and India's Kafila collective exemplify "intersectional critique," using platforms to weave caste/ race into feminism, as #MahsaAmini memes fused grief with strategic power (Eltahawy, 2024; Kafila, 2025). Ultimately, while platforms enable cross-border emotional contagion,

they fragment along colonial lines, privileging Western legibility over Southern depth—a constructivist irony where digital "connection" reproduces material divides (Adler-Nissen, 2014).

DIGITAL FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN GLOBAL SOUTH: VISUAL SNAPSHOTS OF RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

INDIA



Figure 2 ***#MeToo India (workplace abuse exposure) Sra, G. (2018).***



Figure 3 ***#HappyToBleed (menstrual taboo and bodily autonomy)***



Figure 4- #BringBackOurGirls (Campaign against girl kidnapping and gender violence)

INDONESIA



Figure 5 Indonesia witnessed TikTok-driven digital protests against sexual violence, prompting the government to suspend live features to curb online mobilization.

Algorithmic power, amplification, and erasure

Social media algorithms wield architectural power in feminist activism, dictating visibility, voice, and marginalization, a process termed "digital colonialism" wherein US tech giants (meta, x, byte dance) impose western-centric priorities, obscuring global south grassroots efforts (Kwet, 2019;

Milan, 2022). Noble's (2018) audits reveal quantified biases: non-English content receives 37–52% less recommendation weight on Google/TikTok, while Benjamin (2019) documents beauty AI systems misclassifying black/indigenous women at rates 34% higher than white counterparts, embedding racism/sexism in "neutral" code. TikTok's 2025 search engine analysis shows hateful terms (e.g., anti-feminist slurs) yielding degrading results for marginalized queries 68% more often in non-English languages, per ISD metrics, prioritizing engagement over equity (institute for strategic dialogue, 2025; noble, 2018).

Algorithmic and State Suppression in Iran and Nigeria

Iran's #WomanLifeFreedom/#MahsaAmini movement (2022–26) illustrates the dangerous partnership between platforms and government repression. The campaign initially reached 2.1 billion impressions through Farsi memes and VPN circumvention, but Meta and X throttled Farsi content with a 22% shadow ban (posts hidden from feeds) rate, making posts invisible in feeds. Simultaneously, Iran's "Noor Plan" surveillance sent over 1 million SMS warnings to women and confiscated 2,000 cars for hijab violations by 2025. After the 2025 elections, authorities escalated with AI detection of deepfake protest videos to identify and arrest creators. Kurdish women's posts suffered 45% higher suppression, combining platform language bias with Iran's ethnic discrimination (Amnesty International, 2023; UN Fact-Finding Mission, 2025; OONI, 2025). The 2026 protest wave exemplifies the intensification of the digital visibility paradox.

Videos of **Iranian women publicly cutting their hair and lighting cigarettes on burning portraits of Ayatollah Khamenei** proliferated across X (formerly Twitter), amassing thousands of reposts and reviving the 2022 mourning symbolism from the Mahsa Amini uprising (Euronews, 2026). These acts provoked immediate algorithmic and state responses: Iran's NoorNet surveillance system upgraded its AI capabilities, deploying CCTV-facial recognition hybrids to detect "defiant hair flow" and other non-compliance markers, resulting in over 1,500 morality police arrests within weeks despite the content's sustained global impressions (Human Rights Foundation, 2026). Platforms amplified these viral spectacles without accountability mechanisms, entrenching digital colonialism's vicious loop where Southern hypervisibility accelerates neocolonial repression rather than emancipation.



Figure 6. Iranian woman publicly cuts her hair during a 2026 #WomanLifeFreedom protest in Tehran, exemplifying the digital visibility paradox: viral defiance amplifies repression via NoorNet surveillance (Euronews, 2026)



Mahsa (Jina) Amini, born September 1999 in Saqqez, Kurdistan Province, was a 22-year-old Sunni Kurdish university student. Arrested on September 13, 2022, in Tehran by Iran's morality police for allegedly improper hijab, she was reportedly beaten in custody. Medical scans showed skull fractures and brain trauma, contradicting official claims of death by heart failure. Her death on September 16 sparked nationwide protests against enforced veiling.

Nigeria's #BringBackOurGirls campaign (2014–25 resurgence) faced similar suppression dynamics. Its **1.2 million tweets** linked Chibok kidnappings to broader gender violence advocacy, but **shadow-banning** and **network fragmentation** worsened by a 17% gender data gap, severely limited reach. **Donor co-optation** (NGOs pay leaders to write funding reports instead of protesting) further undermined momentum as international funding pushed organizers toward grant reporting instead of street protests. Meanwhile, **82 girls remained captive** in Borno's controversial "rehabilitation" camps, rendering 2025 grants (₦1.85B) meaningless against leaked military warnings of continued Boko Haram attacks (Amnesty International, 2024).

On April 14, 2014, Boko Haram militants stormed a government girls' boarding school in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria under cover of night, abducting 276 students at gunpoint for daring to pursue Western education—loading them onto trucks and vanishing into the Sambisa Forest. The brutal attack ignited worldwide fury and birthed #BringBackOurGirls.

Post-2025 Indian elections escalated **hybrid censorship**: Modi's **Sahyog portal** authorized district officers to issue **1,300+ content removal orders** (Mar–Jun 2025), targeting #MeToo resurgence amid Pakistan border tensions. **70% flowed through Amit Shah's Cyber Coordination unit**, bypassing judicial review. X contested 1,000+ orders as free speech violations (Freedom House, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

Western contrasts underscore hegemony: #Labour's optimized English hashtags evaded bias (zero reported throttling), but deepfakes proliferated unchecked. Analysis reveals **patterned inequities**: Southern cases endure compounded suppression (combined government censorship plus platform algorithms cut audience reach by 40-60% for

Global South feminist posts) and fragmenting solidarity, while Western virality hinges on "respectability" norms, perpetuating colonial legibility (Noble, 2018). Mitigation demands **IR interventions**—algorithmic audits (EU DSA analogs), decentralized protocols (Mastodon), and feminist tech redesign targeting exclusion as structural violence, not "glitches" (Benjamin, 2019; Gurumurthy & Chami, 2023). Absent this, platforms risk entrenching a "high-tech war on women," from Tehran's Noor to New Delhi's Sahyog (Stimson Center, 2025).

Backlash and the politics of digital misogyny

Digital misogyny manifests **transnationally yet contextually**, fuelling backlash that transforms visibility into peril across West and Global South. In the West, **incel ideology**, rooted in male entitlement and "blackpill" resentment (incels' **nihilistic belief** that women only want genetically "perfect" men – "Chads", so unattractive men are **doomed forever.** This creates hopeless rage blaming feminism, and often glorify violence) drives normalized violence via memes and forums (4chan, incels.is), with 2025 FBI data linking it to 12% rise in misogynist threats (FBI, 2025). Netflix's *Adolescence* docuseries exposes algorithmic funnels drawing isolated youth into echo chambers, where for 'feminist critique' searches, TikTok recommends misogynistic videos 68% more frequently (ISD, 2025).

Contemporary Case Analysis - Navigating Toxic Masculinity

Netflix's Adolescence (Barantini, 2025), a critically acclaimed four-part docudrama filmed in single continuous takes per episode, chronicles 13-year-old Jamie Miller's harrowing radicalization into incel ideology after stabbing classmate Katie to death in a school bathroom. The series masterfully traces

his algorithmic descent : innocuous searches like "girls don't like me" or "why am I invisible" funnel him from YouTube to 4chan's /r9k/ boards, then incels. is echo chambers preaching the "80/20 rule" (80% of women desire only 20% genetically superior "Chads"), blackpill fatalism ("it's over for betabux"), and redpill manifestos that normalize violence as righteous rebellion against hypergamous feminism.



Figure7. Adolescence (Barantini, 2025, Netflix) promotional poster: Jamie Miller's incel radicalization under algorithmic nurture.

Through raw family interviews and Jamie's bedroom webcam confessions, Adolescence exposes recommendation algorithms as radicalization accelerators, TikTok's for You page surfaces "looksmaxxing" tutorials alongside Elliot Rodger tribute edits, while Instagram Reels blend gym motivation with femoid dehumanization. This Western case echoes the paper's digital visibility paradox: Jamie's bedroom echo chambers receive zero state interference (unlike Iran's NoorNet), thriving on algorithmic amplification rather than suppression. Where #MahsaAmini's 2.1B impressions trigger 1,500 arrests, Adolescence exposes how platforms nurture toxic masculinity as commodified content, evading postcolonial realism's repressive dynamics.

Global South parallels intensify intersectionally: Iran's post #MahsaAmini repression saw 500+ arrests for "propaganda," blending misogyny with ethnic cleansing (UN, 2025); Indonesia/Brazil's anti-LGBTQ+ bans dox activists via leaked Telegram lists. India's **2025 "auction app" resurgence**, right-

wing "Sulli Deals/Bulli Bai 2.0" apps auctioning Muslim women via WhatsApp garnered 2M views before takedowns, fusing Islamophobia with caste rage amid election fervour (Amnesty India, 2025).

Dr. Rana Ayyub as centrepiece

This Indian journalist exemplifies **hybrid digital-physical misogyny**. Since 2018 leaks of her number by BJP affiliates, Ayyub endures 10K+ monthly rape/death threats, deepfake porn (circulated on Telegram), and sedition FIRs for Manipur coverage, escalating post-2025 polls with "anti-national" smears (Ayyub, 2025; The Wire, 2025). Her 2026 TEDx talk quantifies: 87% threats Islamophobic, amplified by X algorithms favouring Hindi hate (42% more reach). Ayyub's doxing intersects race (Muslim), gender, and indigeneity critiques, silencing via "lawfare" (40+ cases pending).

Incel-Southern linkages: Western incel rhetoric claims **"feminism stole my future"** (young men blaming women), while Indian "sulli" auctions label feminists **"jihadi breeders"** (Muslim women as traitors). Both get **algorithmically amplified**: TikTok promotes hate speech 52% more in Hindi/Urdu than English (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018).

78% of Global South women face online abuse vs. **42% globally**, but underreporting hides the true scale (Amnesty, 2025).

Constructivists explain: Misogynists create new social rules, incels call it "beta uprising" (men as victims), India calls it "national honour" (patriarchy as patriotism), making hate normal even as feminists gain visibility (Kwet, 2019; Manne, 2018).

Multi-level interventions are imperative: platform geo-fencing for threats, IR digital covenants (UN Women protocols), and Southern feminist coalitions. Without them, backlash transmutes empowerment into existential risk, from incel manifestos to Ayyub's exile threats (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2023).

Negotiating belonging, authenticity, and intersectionality

Marginalized women encounter conflicting pressures in online spaces: mainstream platforms dilute their radical messages through algorithmic moderation, while their own communities often dismiss them as insufficiently militant. Instagram and TikTok emerge as performative battlegrounds where a single selfie or Reel assert political space amid these tensions. Hashtags like #DalitWomenFight cultivate counter-publics—alternative forums that resist erasure (Fraser, 1990)—yet necessitate "algorithmic palatability": content sufficiently mild to evade platform bans, yet radical enough to secure community respect (Bailey, 2021). This dual bind, illuminated by intersectional frameworks, reveals platforms as contested terrains where Dalit feminists like Thenmozhi Soundararajan negotiate caste, gender, and digital colonialism to forge authentic resistance. Intersectionality reveals why this matters (Crenshaw, 1989): caste, trans identity, and colonial legacies overlap, creating unique experiences no single category captures.

Three activists illustrate this resistance:

- **Kalki Subramaniam** (Sahodari Foundation cofounder) blends trans rights advocacy with caste critique, instrumental in India's 2014 NALSA third-gender verdict. Her workshops reached 1M+ students: *"I fight not just for trans bodies, but Dalit-trans intersections crushed by Brahmanical norms"* (Subramaniam, 2024).

• **Thenmozhi Soundararajan** (Equality Labs) documents discrimination: their 2023 survey (n=1,476) found **67% Dalits faced workplace bias, 37% lived in poverty**. Her 2025 California caste ban advocacy won federal court victories: *"Dalit women die at 39 from compounded exclusion"* (Soundararajan, 2025a). #DalitWomenFight (50K+ posts) reframes trauma: *"Storytelling is survival technology"* (Soundararajan, 2019).

• **@renaestancia_** uses Adivasi art Reels against "green colonialism" mining.

Activist Praxis in Context: The Work of Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Thenmozhi Soundararajan is a Dalit American activist and artist whose digital work powerfully demonstrates the negotiation of intersectional identity. As the founder of Equality Labs, she leverages platforms like Twitter and Instagram to combat caste apartheid, using hashtags like #DalitWomenFight to build a global counter-public.



Figure 8. Thenmozhi Soundararajan protesting against caste discrimination, The Wire (2025).

Her assertion that "for us, storytelling is a survival technology" encapsulates her methodology: using digital narratives to challenge both Brahmanical supremacy and Western feminist erasure. Her activism, which has prompted corporate policy discussions on caste discrimination, exemplifies how

marginalized feminists create authentic space and drive tangible change from a deeply intersectional position.

Theoretical frameworks illuminate these activists' strategies. Postcolonial feminists like Mohanty (2003) and Spivak (1988) frame their resistance as decolonial pushback against Western feminism's oversight of caste dynamics. IR constructivists, following Wendt (1992), interpret digital identities as emergent norms that reshape power relations through online discourse. Bailey's (2021) concept of misogynoir evolves into "caste-noir," where Dalit women's content gains hypervisibility online yet faces institutional erasure, as in Soundararajan's 2022 Google backlash. A Southern queer feminist encapsulates this tension: "Content must be mild for algorithms, radical for community—belonging stays conditional" (anonymous, 2025). These approaches recast authenticity as networked resistance that dismantles colonial structures (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2023), though algorithms fragment coalitions and demand IR treat digital resistance as valid knowledge production.

From online to offline: material outcomes

Digital activism produces **concrete policy victories**, though invariably accompanied by violent backlash. India's #WhyLoiter campaign (2014–25) transformed urban spaces through 5K+ "loiter walks," prompting Mumbai's BMC to establish **12 women-only 24/7 parks** and illuminate **2.5M km of streets**, directly supporting the 2023 Women's Reservation Bill's passage (33% parliamentary quotas) (Phadke et al., 2023). Iran's #MahsaAmini generated 2.1B impressions that compelled a 2022 parliamentary hijab law review (Fassihi, 2022). Indonesia's #SahkanRUUPKS (1M+ posts) secured the 2022 Sexual Violence Law, criminalizing marital rape for the first time (Melbourne Asia Review, 2021). Nigeria's

#EndSARS disbanded SARS units and redirected **₦38B** to police reforms, despite subsequent backsliding.

Table 2 Outcomes of Selected Digital Feminist Campaigns: Scale, Achievements, and Costs

Campaign	Policy Win	Scale Reached	Backlash Cost
#WhyLoiter	Parks/Bill (33%)	5K walks	Doxing threats
#MahsaAmini	Hijab review	2.1B impressions	500+ deaths
#RUUPKS	Marital rape law	1M posts	Cleric opposition
#EndSARS	SARS dissolved	Nationwide	70+ killed

Note. Compiled from Phadke et al. (2023), Fassihi (2022), and Melbourne Asia Review (2021).

Corporate platforms also responded: **Meesho's Project Suraksha** blocked 12K abusers and delisted 5.2M harmful listings following #CreatorSafety advocacy, while Unilever revised influencer guidelines and Natura diversified casting in response to #NiUnaMenos pressure (Economic Times, 2025).

Yet these gains exact brutal costs: Iranian online protesters faced 500+ NoorNet executions, Dr. Rana Ayyub endures 10K monthly threats alongside 40+ FIRs, and Egypt's Sarah Hegazi died by suicide after arrest for displaying a queer flag. These **hybrid outcomes** demonstrate digital activism's norm cascade potential (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) while underscoring visibility's lethal risks.

Reclaiming Public Space through Digital Activism: #WhyLoiter

The #WhyLoiter campaign, originating in India, powerfully transitioned from a book to a viral digital movement challenging the gendered use of public space. Initiated around 2014, the campaign encouraged women to simply "loiter" in public places, parks, streets, and markets without a productive purpose, and to share their photos and experiences online (Sharma, 2023).



Figure 9. #WhyLoiter "Walk for Peace" nighttime procession, reclaiming urban streets against gendered violence.

This simple act was a radical reclaiming of bodily autonomy and a direct challenge to patriarchal norms that dictate women's safety is contingent on their absence from public life after dark. The hashtag became a digital archive of resistance, showcasing countless women claiming their right to be present without justification. It moved beyond online discourse to inspire real-world "loitering" meet-ups, making the digital a direct catalyst for offline action and fostering a tangible sense of solidarity and collective courage, demonstrating how a decentralized online idea can materialize into a potent, embodied feminist practice.

Navigating future gender politics

The 2026 digital gender landscape reveals dual trajectories: expanding transnational solidarities alongside intensifying technological threats. Cross-regional hashtag synergies flourish—Latin America's #UnVioladorEnTuCamino inspired Indian adaptations generating 800K cross-posts, demonstrating affective contagion across borders (Moloney &

Chen, 2020). Yet coordinated hate speech surged 25% through AI-generated slurs on Grok/X platforms, while Iran's 2026 protests faced weaponized deepfakes (21M verified fakes distorting NoorNet surveillance narratives; BBC Verify, 2026).

Resistance strategies evolve rapidly: **Mastodon feminist instances expanded 40%** (10K users migrating post-X moderation failures), offering decentralized moderation free from corporate bias. Signal encrypted lists proliferate among West African feminists and Dalit organizers circumventing Hindi-language algorithmic demotion (OONI, 2026). Trump's 2025 TikTok policy reprieve benefits Western campaigns but exacerbates Global South data sovereignty concerns amid US-China platform competition.

Critical questions demand urgent attention: How will generative AI and opaque algorithms reshape non-Western feminist visibility? Effective pathways require **cross-regional intersectional coalitions** dismantling digital colonialism through Dalit alternative media, African encrypted networks, and Mastodon-based norm creation. IR constructivism conceptualizes these developments as **digital norm spirals**, where hashtags evolve into multilateral governance frameworks (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

Future research must examine underexplored adaptations— West African encrypted listservs versus algorithmic circumvention strategies, indigenous virtual reality resistance. The central tension remains: Can digital solidarity dismantle colonial power structures rather than reinforce them? Equitable platforms necessitate UN Global Digital Compacts, mandatory algorithmic audits, and feminist technology governance—converting visibility from vulnerability into legitimate statecraft (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2023; Nakamura, 2022).

Conclusion

Digital platforms emerge in this paper as ambivalent infrastructures of power: they open unprecedented avenues for feminist visibility and cross-border norm diffusion while simultaneously reproducing colonial hierarchies through code, moderation, and market logics. The comparative cases—from #Labour's frictionless virality in the West to the throttling of #MahsaAmini posts, from #WhyLoiter's partial policy gains to the relentless targeting of Rana Ayyub—show that the same infrastructures that can deliver reservation quotas, police reforms, and corporate self-regulation also enable executions, doxing, and the systematic silencing of Southern dissidents. What looks like "global feminism" from a distance fracture on closer inspection into uneven regimes of access and risk, where Southern movements pay a far higher price for visibility than their Western counterparts.

Seen through International Relations, these asymmetries are not technical glitches but questions of order and authority. Hashtags act as norm entrepreneurship, but they operate inside an ecosystem where a handful of corporations and states exercise something close to sovereign control over infrastructure. Constructivist hopes about bottom-up norm cascades collide with realist facts about platform and state coercion; postcolonial feminism identifies who is consistently sacrificed in that collision. The spread of deepfakes around Iranian protests and the tactical migration to Mastodon and encrypted channels underline that "digital solidarity" is not automatically emancipatory; it can harden colonial power unless it is consciously designed and governed otherwise.

Against this backdrop, the policy agenda cannot be a technical afterthought; it is core to feminist strategy and IR scholarship. A meaningful UN-level digital compact would need to tie

algorithmic audits and gender-disaggregated transparency to enforceable consequences, not voluntary reporting, and to link these to existing human rights and cyber norms frameworks. Multilateral agreements with platforms should treat language parity (for Farsi, Hindi, and other marginalized tongues) and transparent appeal mechanisms for shadow bans as non-negotiable baselines rather than "corporate goodwill." Funding decentralized infrastructures (feminist Mastodon instances, community-run Signal servers) is not just a technical fix but a redistribution of communicative sovereignty towards movements that currently depend on hostile platforms. Likewise, foreign and domestic policy need to treat hashtag publics as real political constituencies whose safety and privacy are matters of security, not branding.

At the same time, the analysis suggests a reflexive task for scholars and activists. Research agendas that centre localized epistemologies, study AI and moderation not in the abstract but in their caste, race, and language effects, and trace online–offline circuits of repression and care are crucial if scholarship is not to mirror the same Euro-American bias it critiques. Movements, in turn, must continue experimenting with hybrid tactics: using high-visibility platforms strategically while building slower, safer infrastructures for deliberation and care. The central claim that emerges is not that digital feminism is doomed or saved by technology, but that its transformative potential hinges on whether governance, infrastructure, and knowledge production can be reoriented from extraction to reciprocity. Without that shift, digital gender politics will extend colonial logics into a new domain; with it, the same infrastructures might yet turn hypervisibility from a site of peril into a resource for durable, situated feminist power.

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The Weaponization Of Women's Bodies: Systemic Gendered And Intersectional Violence In The Conflict-Ridden Area

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Abstract

From time immemorial to the present, women have endured violence, whether ethnic, religious, national, or gendered, perpetrated by both state and non-state actors. Partition, often framed as a geopolitical event, was fundamentally a feminist issue, where women suffered not a single instance of violence, but an unending torment. India's social and political fabric is woven with threads of diversity-caste, tribe, and gender being the most defining strands. Despite modernization and democratization, caste continues to shape political behaviour, electoral outcomes, and patterns of representation. Women from backward classes, particularly Dalits, bear the heaviest burdens of intersectional discrimination, on the grounds of caste, class, and gender. In Panchayati Raj elections, they are often pushed as 'benami' or proxy candidates.

The violence in Manipur, highlighted by the July 2023 viral video of two Kuki women being paraded naked and assaulted by Meitei men, represents the weaponization of women's bodies as manifestation of power and an attack on enemy communal identity. Applying Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989), the vulnerability of women is understood

through the confluence of their subordinate gender identity and ethnic minority status, significantly amplifying the risks they encounter in the socially fragmented conflict landscape. This paper explores the intersection of gender, conflict, and state-sanctioned violence, focusing on poignant case studies: the Kunan Pashpora mass rape in Kashmir (1991), the ongoing Manipur conflict and its implication on women survivors and peace makers and violence against Palestinian women.

Keywords: *Borders and Boundaries, caste, feminist historiography, gender, gendered violence, identity and dignity, intersectional discrimination, Palestinian women, political-communal devaluation, proxy candidates, systemic violence, tribe, women of Indian subcontinent, women's trauma.*

Section I: Introduction

Rape became a political weapon, with women bodies marked as battlegrounds for communal aggression, symbolizing the honour of entire communities. Regardless of religious or national affiliation, women bore the brunt of this violence. The Partition left a trail of unspeakable suffering, as violence, displacement, and forced migration uprooted millions. The hastily drawn boundaries, apathy of the British rulers, and the subsequent carnage marked the beginning of a long-lasting trauma for the women of the subcontinent, whose suffering continued well beyond the end of the conflict. Social control refers to the foundation of social order as well as to the definition of and response to crime and / or deviance. Subsequently, the concept was redefined in critical-sociological terms to refer to the coercive mechanisms of order. The state and communal society has weaponized gender oppression specifically targeting women as a tool of coercive social control, utilized in times of both conflict and stability. Women are frequently treated as symbolic objects of

"honour", as a result, their conquest or humiliation is used to force the submission of one group to another. This mind-set often results in unchecked sexual violence, mass murder, and the strict confinement of movement.

In Panchayati Raj elections, they are often pushed as 'benami' or proxy candidates, a primary tool used by the patriarchs and upper-caste candidates of the village to control and exploit the elected Dalit women. Various methods of obstruction are employed, including sexual assault, restricting their physical movement, allegations of immoral behaviour, and enforcing untouchability and promoting paternalist behaviour. This paper aims to study how the intersectional disadvantages faced by Dalit and other backward-class women manifest in India's political and social structures. The conflict between the Kuki-Zo and Meitei tribes stems from long-standing disputes over land, identity, and politics, exacerbated by the Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe status. Gender norms position women as bearers of cultural identity, making them primary targets for violence, which is systematically documented in reports by groups like Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) is framed not as "rape out of control", but as "rape under orders," a strategic act of political-communal devaluation, a principle recognized globally and by figures like Dr. Denis Mukwege. Despite International Humanitarian Law's mandates to protect women, official National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) data for 2023 showing a decrease in rape cases from 42 to 27 sharply contradicts the exponential surge in general conflict related offenses, such as arson from 27 to 6,203 and rioting from 84 to 5,421. The Supreme Court deemed the numerous incidents of gender violence as "systemic violence". In Kashmir, state-perpetrated sexual violence has survivors battling systemic impunity and societal stigma, with the Kunan Pashpora case emblematic of

broader patterns of abuse. Similarly, Palestinian women have borne the brunt of collective punishment, with their bodies targeted in the context of ongoing conflict. From being denied humanitarian aid to facing deliberate killings, these women's suffering remains largely unreported, yet their resilience in the face of violence persists.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, integrating both inductive and deductive reasoning. The methods include comparative analysis, document review, and observation, utilizing resources like examining government records, refugee camp reports, and personal letters to uncover the lived experiences of Partition and Manipur conflict survivors. Oral Histories involve engaging with survivor testimonies and family accounts to reconstruct the fragmented narratives of displaced women. This study utilizes oral accounts from Dalit female electoral candidates to examine the barriers and hardships they face, specifically analysing how intersectional discrimination rooted in caste, class, and gender shapes their political experiences. Through comparative analysis, the research studies contemporary reports on gendered violence in Palestine to trace historical continuities and divergences while also investigating state-sponsored gendered violence in Manipur, tracing the use of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) as a strategic tool for social control . Also by analysing novels, memoirs, and films depicting women's experiences during and after Partition, this research explores how cultural memory preserves these histories. Furthermore, it critically examines documentaries and short films featuring women protesters and survivors in Manipur to extract and analyse deeper real-life narratives.

Partition Of India From Her Perspective

When a daughter of the fabled Punjab wept

He gave tongue to her silent grief.

Today a million daughters weep

But where is Waris Shah To give voice to their woes?

Arise, O friend of the distressed! See the plight of your Punjab. Corpses lie strewn in the pastures and the Chenab has turned crimson.

Amrita Pritam, Ajj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu

Partition, Vibhajan, Batwara or Taqseem these words carry very grave implications. People were separated overnight, friends became enemies, Amitav Ghosh, millions were left "with no home but in memory".

While the 'ruling' or privileged class of politicians were celebrating the joys of freedom, the 'refugees' were unable to do so. For them, it was a question of survival, independence meant struggling to live. Most of the literature on partition discuses experiences of 'ordinary people', today we understand the experiences of women in this historical context who battled for their identity & dignity. This is not to say that the history of women cannot in any circumstance, ever be the same as that of men, simply that it cannot be subsumed in the history of mankind.

From time immemorial to the 21st century, women have borne the brunt of violence. Whether it has been etheno religious national gendered violence, whether it was perpetrated for the state or by the state, they have been vulnerable, yet never weak. Partition was no exception. Often framed as a geopolitical event, it is, at its core, a feminist issue. For men, it was a one-time death; for women, it was an unending

torment. Entangled in the interplay of social and religious forces, thousands endured unspeakable violence. Rape as a political weapon "weapon of war"; women's bodies became battlegrounds for communal aggression, branded with slogans like Pakistan Zindabad or Hindustan Zindabad and marked with symbols such as the crescent moon or trident. Women were no longer seen as living breathing individuals but as objects of honour, their violation bringing shame upon entire communities. Regardless of religious or national affiliation, it was women who bore the ultimate suffering.

Section II : The Narratives Of Violence

But the most striking feature of the event was the unprecedented violent character of the event that left people dead, raped, uprooted and transformed into refugees. The implications of communal strife, the hastily drawn and executed boundary award, the apathy of the departing British rulers, the unplanned mass migrations and the carnage that followed the announcement of independence marked just the beginnings of the trauma that lay ahead for women of the subcontinent.

As Faiz Ahmed Faiz has stated, ये दाग़ दाग़ उजाला, ये शबगज़ीदा सहर वो इन्तज़ार था जसि का, ये वो सहर तो नहीं ये वो सहर तो नहीं (This is not that Dawn for which, ravished with freedom, We had set out in sheer longing).

For their independence they had to pay an enormous price. The division of lands, the surrender of identities, the blurring of faiths, the dislocation of nationalities and, above all, the humiliation of honour strippings mingled hazily with the joys of independence for countless women who had little to rejoice as they crossed into new unknown territories to reconstruct the demolished structure of their lives. Unfortunately, the conventional historical accounts tend to overlook this almost altogether.

Ayesha Jalal writes, "Men of all three religions delighted in their momentary sense of power over vulnerable women. These women, became bearers of their religion, its honour and sanctity They were subjected to such violence which not only violated their dignity but also the honour of their religious community. The most predictable form of violence was rape, this was one act which, in a single blow, destroyed the self-esteem of a woman, the honour of the community and the prestige of the family. The most gruesome aspect is the celebration which accompanied such acts. Shorish Kashmiri informs that women were stripped just like bananas are peeled". Satish Gujral, a prominent artist and survivor of Partition, documented one such harrowing event: An attack on the Muslim Girls Hostel in Amritsar where inmates were stripped and forced to march to the main market called Hall Bazaar. There they were openly gang-raped, subjected to the most perverse treatment that the worst sadistic imagination could conceive, and finally murdered.

Amputation of breasts was another form of violence enacted against women. The doctors at the refugee camp in Jhang testified that "six such cases of chopped breasts were brought to the refugee camp and all of them proved fatal." This act symbolized the destruction of victim's community of its nurturing prowess. A religion whose female adherents are no longer fit to be wife and mother is forever destroyed.

In some cases, the women were raped and deliberately made pregnant by the enemy so that the progeny of that religion could be of mixed and polluted blood. It serves the dual purpose-one, to "pollute" the woman's body and two, to avoid the raped woman going back to her family as she was no more pure and had no way she could face her own men-folk.

While these above mentioned attacks were only external-by men of other community, women were not spared even by the men of their own community. So powerful and general was the belief that safeguarding a woman's honour is essential to upholding male and community honour that a whole new order of violence came into play, by men against their own kinswomen; and by women against their daughters and sisters.

In the villages of Head Junu, Hindus threw their young daughters into wells, dug trenches and buried them alive. Some were burnt to death; some were made to touch electric wires to prevent Muslims from touching them.

Oral testimonies states that they had tooth-marks all over them. Their families said," How can we keep them now? Better that they are dead. Mothers telling their daughters they were ruined, saying it would have been better if they hadn't been born in the first place. Many of them were as young as 18, 15, 14 years old ".

These women, had this notion so deeply ingrained in their minds that instead of falling into the hands of the enemy and thus defiling themselves, they preferred to embrace death. It was made abundantly clear to them that death was preferable to dishonour. These suicides were called 'sacrifice' and several men recounted with pride how their women came under the sword without uttering a word of pain or disagreement.

Women were no more the living and breathing human beings but had suddenly turned into objects who symbolized the honour and 'manhood' of the males of their family and community and their desecration was a matter of great shame and dishonour. The target of such revenge would of course be the women of the other community. Yet, this community or that, it was ultimately the women who were at the receiving end.

Even the retribution theory does not seem to stand its grounds. They attacked the women of other religion not just to avenge the abduction or defiling of their own womenfolk. It was perhaps, more of their extended and inflated male egos which made them to do so. Its "my" religion which has been attacked, "my" woman who has been defiled, and "my" community which has been made to look down upon. Therefore, "I" have to avenge it and if "I" fail to do so, "my" manhood and its honour will forever be gone. They felt their anger brewing up inside them at the sight of all the mayhem around them and when these emotions of anger and helplessness were whipped up by some speech or sight of brutality by others, religion was forgotten and pure animal instincts came to the fore. In this whirlwind of emotions, women were the easy targets as they carried the honour of the enemy community and could also be easily overpowered.

Although religion was the triggering factor which started the violence but beyond a certain level, it ceased to exist. People once caught up in the whirlwind, were now no more the Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs but just the bodies of men and women-one offensive, another defensive. Raw animal instincts were unleashed which even religion could not control. Although it was a temporary phase of extreme brutality, as long as it lasted it was monstrous.

Section III : Recovering The Abducted: The State's Attempt And Its Shortcomings

Leaders expressed their concern and anger at the moral depravity that characterised this "shameful chapter in the history of both countries, the fact that our innocent sisters had been dishonoured was an issue that could not be looked upon with equanimity. An MP stated in the parliament, "We can forget all the properties, even territory but this cannot be

forgotten And as descendants of Ram we have to bring back every Sita that is alive!".

Feroz Khan Noon Former Prime Minister of Pakistan on a visit to Bihar, made a public announcement that if women were returned within a week it would be assumed that those returning them had been protecting them and had not committed any offence.

On December 6, 1947, an Inter-Dominion Conference was held at Lahore at which the two countries agreed upon steps to be taken for the implementation of recovery and restoration with the appointment of Mridula Sarabhai as chief social worker. Between December 1947 and July 1948 the number of women recovered in both countries was 9,362 in India and 5,510 in Pakistan, eventually The Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Bill 1949 was moved by Gopalaswami Ayyangar.

However utopian it may sound, the recovery did not proceed as smoothly as planned due to various hindrances. Most of the women, though nostalgic and distressed at not being able to meet their natal family, seemed to be settled and held in regard both by the community and their new families. And there were a few among them whose circumstances had in fact improved. "After all", she remarked "where is the guarantee of happiness in a woman's life any way?".

A social worker who was the superintendent at Gandhi Vanita Ashram, Jalandhar states that "Some time in 1950, I was required to escort 21 Muslim women who had been recovered to Pakistan. They did not want to return, but the Tribunal had decided". They believed "Who are you to meddle in our lives?", it was a challenge directed at the state itself, a state that had already lost any legitimate claims it might have made to intervene in their lives by its complete failure to prevent the brutality and displacement that accompanied

Partition. "There was so much distrust and loathing for us in their hearts".

While Mridula Sarabhai believed that no woman could be happy with her abductor, Rameshwari Nehru advised the government to stop the project altogether she was convinced that "we have not achieved our purpose as figures alone are not the only criterion against which such work should be judged", there was no way of ascertaining what happened to the women once they were recovered and returned. And finally, the woman's will was not taken into consideration at all; she was once again, reduced to the goods and chattel status without having the right to decide her own future or mould her own life.

State-Sanctioned Violence: The Kunan Pashpora Tragedy

In February 1991, the villages of Kunan and Poshpora in Kashmir became the site of a brutal act of state-perpetrated violence, with Indian Army soldiers accused of raping over thirty women and torturing local men. This atrocity, known as the Kunan Pashpora mass rape, remains one of the most horrific examples of sexual violence in the Kashmir conflict. The incident, however, is not an isolated case but part of a larger pattern of sexual violence used by both state and non-state actors in Kashmir. The survivors of Kunan Pashpora have faced immense challenges in seeking justice, as the legal system has largely failed to hold perpetrators accountable. Stigmatization and societal honor norms further complicate the pursuit of justice, as rape victims are often seen as dishonored, leading many women to avoid reporting their experiences. In 2013, a group of women petitioned the Indian Supreme Court to reopen investigations into the case, resulting in a reinvestigation and an order for compensation to the victims, though state and military efforts to block

these measures persist. The broader impact of such violence has been deeply demoralizing for the Kashmiri community, particularly women, who have seen their freedoms restricted and their movements controlled. The observance of Kashmiri Women's Resistance Day on February 23 each year honors the resilience of survivors, who continue to demand justice and recognition, despite ongoing challenges. The Kunan Pashpora case highlights the intersection of gender, conflict, and impunity in Kashmir, and the enduring struggle of women in the region for justice and dignity.

Bleeding Behind The Blockade: The War On Palestinian Women

On August 14-15. 1947 the Indian subcontinent and nine months later on May 14, 1948, Palestine were partitioned to resolve the most contentious issue of postcolonial governance in the then British territories.

While a great deal of scholarship has been produced around the sovereign states of India, Pakistan, and Israel over the years, the Palestinian national narrative remains in a state of fluidity, as it has yet to culminate in an independent state of its own. The 1948 Al-Nakba (catastrophe) continues to serve as the foundation of the Palestinian national liberation movement, for whom liberation and redemption remain elusive. Palestinians are considered complicit in the violence despite age, gender or civilian status.

Palestinian women have also been a specific target of such incitement. Major General Giora Eiland of the Israel Defense Forces, has emphasized the need to treat Palestinians in Gaza collectively, particularly referring to Palestinian women and the need to cut humanitarian aid; "After all, who are Gaza's elderly women the same mothers and grandmothers of Hamas fighters who committed the horrific crimes on 7 October. In

this situation, how can you even talk about humanitarian considerations".

From using tent scraps as sanitary napkins to pulling their children out of rubble and burying them with their own hands, these women have truly seen it all. With journalists and reporters being deliberately targeted literally burnt by the occupying forces, very little news reaches the outside world. As a result, we rely heavily on the oral testimonies of Palestinian women themselves to understand their plight. These testimonies have been published by "Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

A witness from al-Awda hospital in Gaza stated that "I saw a pregnant woman who was shot and killed as she was approaching the hospital. She was left there bleeding. Nobody managed to rescue her as the Hospital was under siege by the Israeli forces. She was found in a decomposed state about 20 days later".

The Commission has verified cases of deliberate targeting and killing of civilian women and girls by members of the ISF in Gaza. On 12 November 2023, Hala Abd Al-Ati, an older woman, was shot and killed in the Al-Rimal neighbourhood of Gaza City as she attempted to evacuate with her family. In a video viewed and verified by the Commission, Al-Ati is seen holding the hand of her young grandson, who is waving a white flag. The group is walking on the road through a built-up area and reaches an intersection. Her family members can be seen following a few metres behind when a gunshot is heard, and she falls to the ground. Evidence reviewed by the Commission indicates that Ms. Al-Ati was shot by a sniper despite not posing any threat. CNN's investigation confirmed the presence of the IDF to the west and south of the street intersection where the incident occurred.

Section IV: The Weaponization Of Women's Bodies: Systemic Gendered And Intersectional Violence In The Manipur Conflict

On July 2023, a video clip of two Kuki women being paraded naked and assaulted by a mob of Meitei men went viral. The Supreme Court deemed it 'deeply disturbing,' but the crux of this issue remains the perpetuation of violence against women as a manifestation of power. The trajectory of women's evolution in Indian society has been marked by a paradoxical narrative, oscillating between empowerment and marginalization. Despite occupying the same geographic space, men and women inhabit distinct social, cultural, and economic realities.

Gender norms and patriarchal power structures view women as bearers of cultural identity and possessions within their communities. This framing leads to women being targeted in communal violence, as assaulting them is perceived as the most effective way to directly attack the honour and identity of the enemy group (Newsreel Asia, 2024) . The tensions between the Kuki and Meitei Tribes of Manipur involve a long history of land, identity, and political disputes. The immediate trigger for the violence in 2023 was the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, which the Kuki-Zo community feared would allow the majority to purchase land in the protected tribal hills and erode their political and economic safeguards. Adding to the friction, the Meitei-led state government's aggressive "war on drugs" and anti-encroachment drive, which primarily targeted settlements in the Kuki-dominated hills, created a perception of state-sponsored vilification and exclusion. The document, "*Crimes Against Kuki-Zo Women by The Meiteis Since May 3, 2023,*" released by the Indigenous Tribal Leaders' Forum (ITLF), based in Churachandpur district, Manipur, provides

a sobering documentation of systematic sexual violence and assault perpetrated against Kuki-Zo women during the ongoing conflict in the state. This report underscores the historical and persistent use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Historical precedents cited include documented incidents of Meitei extremist targeting of Kuki-Zo women, notably a 2005 case involving the mass rape of over **21 Hmar tribal women** across all age groups. The heightened vulnerability of women in conflict zones is often attributed to socio-familial constraints, which limit their ability to migrate compared to men, confining their survival strategies to local neighbourhoods. The phenomenon of weaponization of women's bodies is profoundly interconnected with political and military objectives, evidenced globally in conflicts such as the Rape of Nanking, the World Wars, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the violence in Manipur.

A critical distinction in conflict studies identifies **Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV)** not as 'rape out of control,' but as 'rape under orders,' executed as a strategic means of pursuing military, political, or economic ends (Desai & Sidhu, 2024). Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dr. Denis Mukwege has characterized conflict-related rape as fundamentally non-sexual, asserting it is a cruel and deliberate act intended to obliterate an individual's humanness, devalue them, and collectively negate the existence of their entire community (European Parliament, 2014). This perspective frames sexual violence as a purposeful strategy of political-communal devaluation. International Humanitarian Law (IHL) explicitly addresses these atrocities. The Geneva Convention of 1949 mandates that "Women shall be treated with all consideration" (Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 1929, art. 12). Specifically, it requires women to be "especially protected against any attack on their

honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution or any form of indecent assault." These stipulations, along with the Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict (1974), emphasize the global criminality of all acts of oppression, cruelty, and inhumane treatment against women and children, underscoring the imperative of upholding human dignity and rights in conflict. The documented acts in Manipur have elicited unequivocal condemnation from prominent International Organizations. The United Nations has expressed grave concern regarding the alarming and gross abuse of human rights, noting a "slow and inadequate response" on the part of the Government of India. UN experts have urged the Supreme Court of India to "*continue monitoring the response of the Government and other actors, with a focus on justice, accountability and reparations.*" However, a persistent pattern observed in the context of mass violence is the failure of legal and accountability frameworks to adequately protect women. The recurrent scenarios of cases being suppressed or the absence of prompt judicial action stem from a confluence of factors, including the insufficiency of existing legislation, mismanagement of institutional responses, and pervasive societal ignorance concerning the gravity of these crimes. While the official National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) data for 2023 reported a 30% decline in registered crimes against women, including a reduction in rape cases from 42 to 27, this figure stands in stark contradiction to the unprecedented surge in general conflict-related offenses. Specifically, arson cases increased exponentially from 27 in 2022 to 6,203 in 2023, and rioting cases rose from 84 to 5,421. This statistical anomaly fueled widespread suspicion, culminating in a protest by the Kuki Women Organization for Human Rights on July 21. Protesters explicitly demanded the resignation of Chief Minister Singh

(Meitei community), accusing his administration and the state police of institutional complicity, stating they were "mere spectators to rape" of Kuki women. The gravity of the situation was affirmed by the Supreme Court of India, which, following a petition filed by the victims of a widely circulated video, categorized the numerous instances of gender violence not as isolated incidents but as **"systemic violence."** The court subsequently issued a stern censure of the state police and called for immediate steps towards reconciliation in Manipur (Diplomat, 2023).

Standing as a crucial analytical perspective, Intersectionality Theory investigates the complex dynamics of women's experiences. Developed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, the theory posits that an individual's challenges are not determined by gender alone, but by the simultaneous interaction of multiple social identities, including race, class, ethnicity, ability, and age. (Crenshaw, 1989). Within the framework of intersectionality, caste and patriarchy occupy a pivotal position by upholding male dominance and perpetuating gender-based hierarchies. Patriarchy, as a social system, intersects with other axes of oppression, creating unique and complex dynamics of marginalization for individuals. In Manipur, women have disproportionately borne the burden of pervasive structural violence since the country's independence. The state's consistent and primary emphasis on "security issues" has resulted in the double marginalization of women. This dual burden is a consequence of two interacting factors: first, the patriarchal role of the state, which prioritizes security concerns over gender equality, and second, the deeply ingrained patriarchal structures within society. The specific confluence of a woman's subordinate gender identity with her ethnic identity establishes vulnerable pathways to violations. This overlapping of identities thus

functions as an "accessible avenue" for various forms of violence, significantly amplifying the risks women encounter within the socially fragmented landscape. These incidents underscores the power dynamics at play in India, especially the north-eastern region in conflict. The scars inflicted upon the individuals and the community as a whole extend far beyond physical harm. The Manipur violence of May 2023 stands as a stark reminder of the power dynamics at play in the region and the vulnerability of women, especially those from minority communities.

Badnami To Benami: Proxy Politics And The Subversion Of Dalit Women's Representation In Indian Political Scenario

India's social and political fabric is woven with threads of diversity—caste, tribe, and gender being the most defining strands. Despite modernization and democratization, caste continues to shape political behaviour, electoral outcomes, and patterns of representation. Women from backward classes, particularly Dalits, bear the heaviest burdens of intersectional discrimination, on the grounds of caste, class, and gender.

In Panchayati Raj elections, they are often pushed as 'benami' or proxy candidates, a primary tool used by the patriarchs and upper-caste candidates of the village to control and exploit the elected Dalit women. Various methods of obstruction are employed, including sexual assault, restricting their physical movement, allegations of immoral behaviour, and enforcing untouchability and promoting paternalist behaviour. Elected Dalit women representatives face significant resistance to their constitutional roles, highlighting a profound disconnect between legal mandate and social reality. They articulate that the system forces them to endure "the brunt of double discrimination unlike our male counterparts," a disadvantage

stemming from their intersecting identities. This structural barrier manifests as a complete lack of respect from colleagues, as representatives from **Thirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu**, stated, "*As we are Dalits and women, we are forced to bear the brunt of double discrimination unlike our male counterparts. Other members of the panchayat neither show us respect nor are willing to work under our leadership, primarily because we are Dalit and female. Owing to this prejudice, a few of them have begun working against us and are actively instigating other men in the village*".

Dominant caste men actively undermine their ability to function, perpetuating derogatory stereotypes that dismiss women as incompetent or as mere "proxies," and going as far as labeling women who engage in public life as "immoral women." This resistance is a direct effort to maintain the existing caste and gender hierarchy. As the Thirunelveli representatives concluded, they are subjected to such intense discrimination because the dominant groups "*cannot bear the sight of a Dalit woman occupying a position of governance over them.*" (Mangubhai et al., 2009). This hostility renders the political reform largely symbolic, leading Dalit women representatives in Ahmedabad district, Gujarat, to observe that, "*Reservation has meant little difference other than formal elections, it has not meant any real change except for the fact that they are allowed to move outside their house*". Thus, the empowerment promised by reservations remains largely confined to the formal sphere, failing to translate into genuine political authority. The outcome is a structural reinforcement of pre-existing patriarchal and caste-based interests while simultaneously nullifying the constitutionally mandated political autonomy of the elected Dalit women. This systemic denial prevents their substantive and empowered participation in local self-governance.

The success of this phenomenon is predicated upon the meticulous exploitation of the intersecting vulnerabilities inherent in the socio-economic positioning of Dalit women representatives. These vulnerabilities stem from their cumulative marginalization across stems of caste, gender, and class status, encompassing factors such as economic dependence within kinship networks, low educational attainment, and reliance on wage labour. Furthermore, the selection process strategically targets individuals characterized by reduced political assertiveness, such as those of advanced age or widowhood status. Politically influential groups also actively engage in intra-Dalit cleavages, fostering sub-caste factionalism to mitigate the threat posed by more vocal or independent candidates.

Section V : Conclusion

In the words of French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir, the history of humankind has come to be equated with ―mankind where the man stands for all-encompassing universal identity. Accordingly, everything and anything that women do or aspire to do is under constant surveillance, scrutiny and regulations. Therefore, during heightened conflict situations, these patriarchal attitudes surpass their normative anchors and result in mass-scale sexual assault, physical abuse, abduction, and murder of vulnerable women. It is to be noted that, such attitudes against women do not come out of thin air. As the smallest unit of social organisation, families are breeding grounds for gender inequality and the first sites of violence. Thus, forms of violence like domestic abuse, verbal abuse, psychological manipulation, coercion, neglect, deprivation, physical abuse, and even sexual abuse are not unheard of in the familial spaces. According to Scott's Dictionary of Sociology, social control is defined as "any social or cultural means by which systematic and relatively

consistent restraints are imposed upon individual behaviour and by which people are motivated to adhere to traditions and patterns of behaviour that are important for the proper functioning of a group or society." Since time immemorial, the state has weaponized gender oppression specifically targeting women as a tool of social control, utilized in times of both conflict and stability. Women are frequently treated as symbolic objects of "honour"; as a result, their conquest or humiliation is used to force the submission of one group to another. This mind-set often results in unchecked sexual violence, mass murder, and the strict confinement of movement. During periods of conflict, women's migration is further limited by their roles as primary caregivers. Because they carry the weight of protecting and sustaining their families, they ultimately bear the deepest brunt of the struggle. Thus, often women's bodies and minds are marked as the site of patriarchal violence.

This historical pattern of social control extends into the modern realms of power. When political participation for women is introduced, "inclusivity" often remains a reality only on paper, while actual implementation remains largely theoretical. Dalit women, in particular, face intersectional discrimination due to their gender, caste, and identity. This often results in them being used as proxy candidates, where they hold the official title while others exercise the actual authority. Due to a systemic lack of education and sensitization, this narrative remains side-lined, further repressing their agency and ensuring that the traditional structures of social control remain unchallenged.

The main purpose and objective of this soul-searching endeavour was, to use Joan Kelly's famous writing, "to restore women to history and to restore history to women," not only to challenge conventional history writing but also

to emphasize that a representative history cannot be written without taking into account the experience and status of one half of mankind as an integral part of the story. There is a need to create a perspective that sees women at the intersection of the interplay of forces and not at the periphery.

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Impact of Self-Help Groups on Women

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Abstract

A democratic system can function meaningfully only when individuals are aware of their rights and possess the capacity to exercise them.

Women, especially in India lack the basic means to stand up for their rights. Even if they are given some political voice, most of it is actually exercised by their husbands or some other patriarchal figure. Giving a woman the mere right to vote or reserving seats is not enough.

Women will have their voices heard in politics only when they are empowered, not only politically but also economically and socially.

Self-Help Groups (SHGs), promoted by NABARD since the early 1990s, represent a significant institutional mechanism aimed at enhancing women's access to credit, savings, and collective organization. Operating largely on trust and without collateral, these groups have evolved into an important instrument of microfinance and grassroots mobilisation.

The paper examines the impact of SHGs on women's empowerment in Kolkata, focusing on economic, social, familial, and political dimensions leading to political empowerment. The study uses both primary and secondary data. Survey was conducted over 50 Self-Help Groups in Kolkata City. SHGs existing for at least three years were chosen for the study. Interview was taken with a framed questionnaire.

The findings indicate that while SHGs have contributed substantially to familial and economic empowerment, their impact on political participation remains limited. Nevertheless, they play a crucial role in fostering confidence, solidarity, and gradual transformation among lower class women living in Kolkata.

Keywords: *Women empowerment, Self-Help Groups, socio-economic empowerment, familial empowerment, political empowerment, measures to better the SHG initiative.*

Introduction.

Empowerment may be understood as the expansion of an individual's capacity to make choices and act upon them. The United Nations (2001) conceptualises it as a process through which individuals gain control over their lives by enlarging their opportunities and decision-making abilities.

A democratic system can function meaningfully only when individuals are aware of their rights and possess the capacity to exercise them.

Women historically especially in India have been ill-treated, ostracized and tortured, through various institutions like "sati", "dahej" (groom price) etc. Discrimination has plagued the Indian socio-economic and political landscape. Women have always been seen as liability to their fathers and property to their husbands. Many women even today are left with limited education because "why invest in someone whom the father has to give away". This leads to their poor employability, especially in the organized sector. Women are left at the mercy of their husbands or fathers as if they are the masters and the women have to adhere to their every whim and fancy.

When a woman is not free even to wear anything, she wants, or eat or has no say in family purchases and affairs how can she vote with a rational conscience and take intensively logical political choices. Women are allured to either dole politics or usually follow whatever their fathers or husbands do.

It is only when women are independent financially like teachers or even mid-day meal workers where they do not have to beg to their "masters" for every rupee they spend, can they have a clear political right. Asha Workers in West Bengal for example, in spite of being low waged workers, could stand up for their rights only because they were economically empowered. Contradicting such an achievement are countless women who have to slave away under their husbands, afraid of getting beaten or worse abandoned per chance they fail to obey the command of their masters.

Hence, better economic policies and prospects for women are quintessential to making women politically aware, independent and active.

NABARD introduced one such concept, SHGs and launched the Self-Help Group (SHGs) movement in 1996. NABARD, had initiated the pilot project in 1992 and set up a Credit and Financial Services Fund in 1996 for extensive capacity building to support the national implementation of SHG banking. The initiative was designed to improve the socio-economic condition of women belonging to both rural and urban areas. Over time, it has developed into one of the most extensive microfinance efforts globally, contributing to women's empowerment and enhancing income opportunities through broader financial inclusion.

The present study seeks to examine the role of SHGs in empowering women, which is essential for ensuring their more meaningful and active participation in Indian

politics. To capture the actual conditions and experiences of participants, primary data has been collected and analysed.
Aims and Objectives:

- To examine the demographic and socio-economic profile of SHG members.
- To assess the level of empowerment among women participating in SHGs in Kolkata.
- To understand the challenges and limitations experienced by these women.
- To suggest possible measures to address these issues and strengthen the effectiveness of SHGs.

Methodology

Kolkata has been chosen as the study area due to its complex socio-economic structure, which makes it suitable for examining the functioning of SHGs in an urban setting. The SHGs included in the study were selected from officially listed groups under Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), specifically those promoted under the DAY-NULM scheme, based on data provided by SUDA, West Bengal.

Groups with at least three years of continuous existence were selected for the research. This study is based on primary data collected through a field survey conducted in Kolkata, covering 50 Self-Help Groups. A retrospective approach has been adopted, where respondents were asked to recall their situation before joining SHGs and compare it with the changes they experienced afterwards. In order to analyse these experiences more systematically, qualitative responses were converted into measurable indicators. Participants were asked to identify positive changes across different aspects of their lives after joining SHGs. Each response was recorded in binary form, where '1' indicates a positive change and '0' indicates no change. These responses were used to understand

the influence of microfinance on different dimensions of empowerment. The study considers multiple dimensions, including economic, social, familial, legal, political, and psychological aspects.

Hypothesis

SHG meetings create a space where women can interact, share their experiences, and reflect on their social conditions, enabling them to collectively express concerns against inequality and injustice. Regular savings practices help develop financial discipline, while access to microcredit opens up opportunities for small income-generating activities. As a result, SHGs have contributed positively to improving the living conditions of poor women in urban areas of West Bengal.

Self-Help Group and Women Empowerment:

Self -Help Groups are generally small, relatively homogeneous groups, usually consisting of up to 20 members, who come together voluntarily for the purpose of savings and accessing credit. These groups typically operate without the requirement of collateral and allow flexibility in the use of loans. They function through agreed rules and procedures, conduct regular meetings, maintain records of transactions, follow financial discipline, and are expected to operate in a democratic manner (NABARD, 1996).

In the context of Self-Help Group (SHG) members, empowerment may be understood through several key dimensions:

a. Greater control over family resources and active involvement in economic decisions, such as the use of loans, household improvements, major purchases, occupational choices, and handling of assets.

b. The ability to participate in decisions concerning one's work, education, and overall personal development.

c. Involvement in local governance and socio-political processes, including participation in SHG activities, meetings, and institutions like Panchayats and local elections.

d. Influence over broader family-related decisions, including those affecting general welfare and matters concerning children.

e. Enhanced interaction and engagement with other members within the group and the wider community.

f. Development of technical, organisational, and managerial skills among members (MYRADA, 2002).

Among these, the first, second, and fourth dimensions relate primarily to decision-making within the household, while the third reflects participation in the public and political sphere. Improvement in any of these aspects contributes to a higher level of empowerment among women.

Analysis:

The indicators of empowerment have been drawn from various researches by eminent scholars and compiled in the study.

Indicators of Economic Empowerment include:

- Control over personal income
- Ability to handle financial crises within the family
- Capacity to carry out banking transactions
- Ownership of assets

Indicators of Social Empowerment include:

- Ability to access medical facilities independently

- Freedom to visit parental home
- Confidence to move beyond the immediate place of residence
- Willingness to speak out against social issues such as dowry

Indicators of Familial Empowerment include:

- Participation in decisions regarding major household purchases
- Involvement in decisions related to daily food and grocery needs
- Say in matters related to contraceptive use
- Experience of reduced or no domestic violence

Indicators of Political Empowerment include:

- Ability to vote independently
- Awareness of current political developments
- Participation in political activities
- Representation in local governing institutions

The respondents were asked whether they experienced any positive changes across the sixteen indicators of empowerment discussed above. Each positive response was assigned a value of '1', while a negative response was marked as '0'. For each dimension of empowerment, an average score was calculated, and these averages were then compared to identify the area in which women showed the highest level of improvement. The individual scores were further combined to estimate the overall empowerment level of each respondent. Based on these total scores, the women were grouped into three categories low, medium, and high levels of empowerment.

Major Findings:

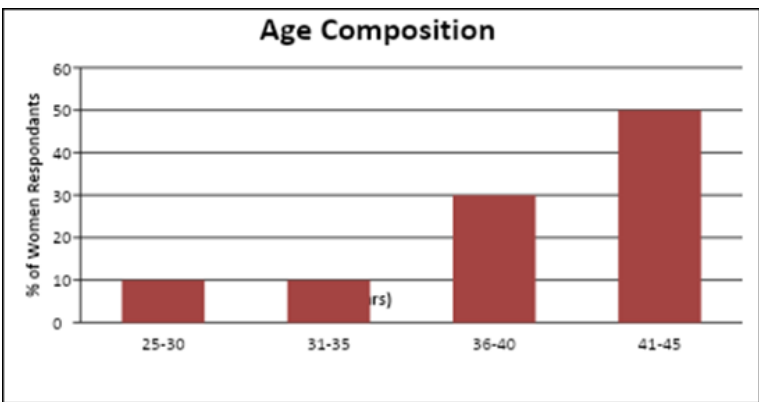
Demographic and socio-economic profile of women participating in SHGs.

Age:

It was found that most of the women respondents belong to 41-45 years age group followed by 36-40 years and 31-35years age group (Fig.1). The mean age of the women respondents is 38.9 years.

Age Group	% of Women
25-30	10
31-35	10
36-40	30
41-45	50

Fig.1

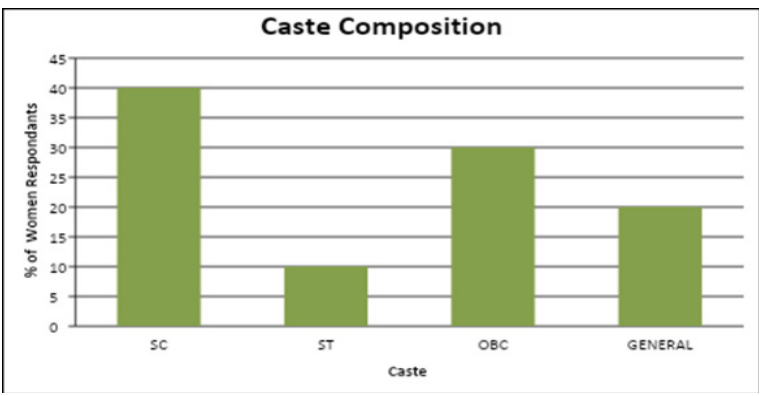


Caste:

The findings indicate that nearly 40% of the respondents belong to the Scheduled Caste category, followed by 30% from Other Backward Classes (OBC). Women from the general category constitute around 20%, while only 10% belong to Scheduled Tribes (Fig. 2). This distribution suggests that SHGs have a relatively inclusive character, bringing together women from diverse social backgrounds, particularly those from disadvantaged sections of society

CASTE	% of Women
SC	40
ST	10
OBC	30
GENERAL	20

Fig.2

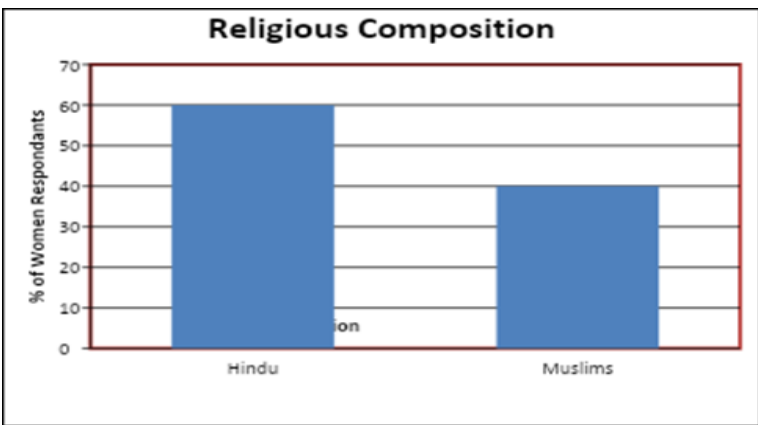


Religion:

The data indicates that a majority of the respondents are Hindu (60%), while the remaining 40% are Muslim. (Fig.3).

Religion	% of Women
Hindu	60
Muslims	40

Fig.3



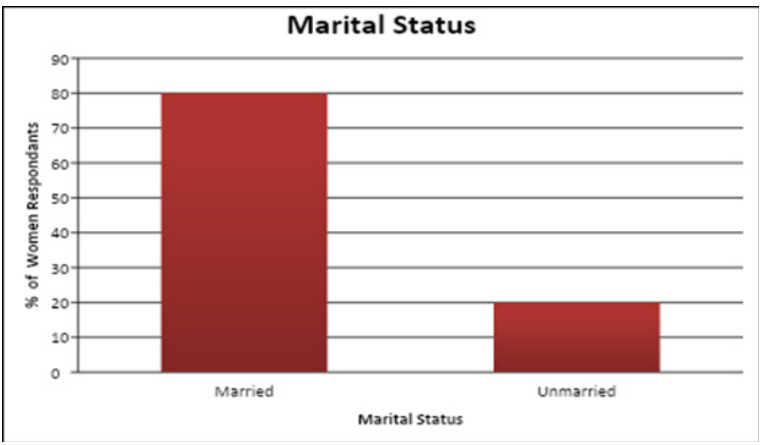
Marital status:

The study has found that most of the SHG members are married (80%) (Fig.4). Unmarried women are less in number. Many Self-Help Groups are generally reluctant to include unmarried women as members. The reason is that unmarried women will change their place of residence after marriage.

Very little number of SHGs include women irrespective of their marital status.

Marital Status	% of Women
Married	80
Unmarried	20

Fig.4



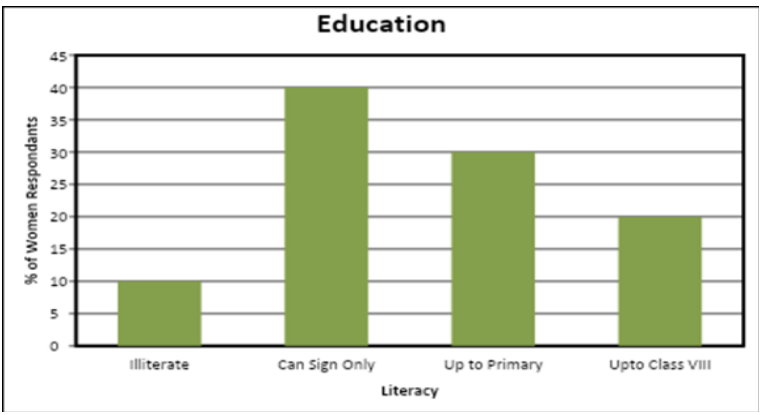
Education:

The educational level of the women members is generally low, with none of the respondents having completed the 10th standard. However, the proportion of completely illiterate women within SHGs is relatively small. This may be attributed to the exposure members receive through various training programmes (Fig. 5). After joining SHGs, many women learn

basic skills such as signing their names, and group meetings also provide opportunities for sharing ideas and experiences.

Literacy Level	**% of Women**
Illiterate	10
Can Sign Only	40
Up to Primary	30
Up to Class VIII	20

Fig.5



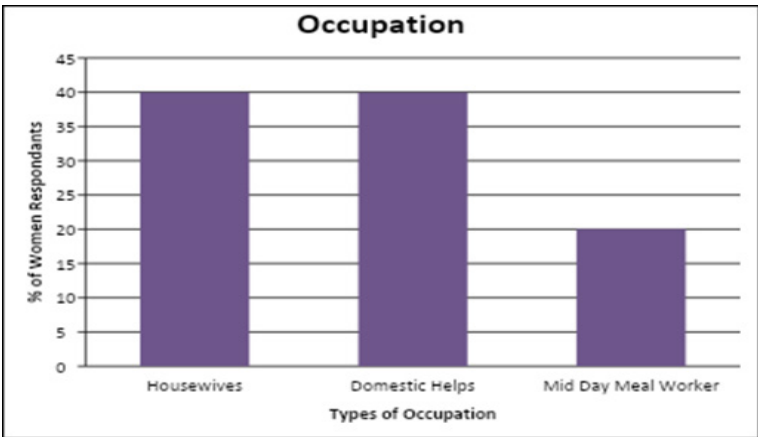
Occupational structure:

The occupational distribution of the respondents shows that 40% are housewives, another 40% are engaged in domestic work, and the remaining 20% work as mid-day meal workers (Fig. 6).

Occupation	**% of Women**
Housewives	40

Domestic Helps	40
Mid-Day Meal Worker	20

Fig.6

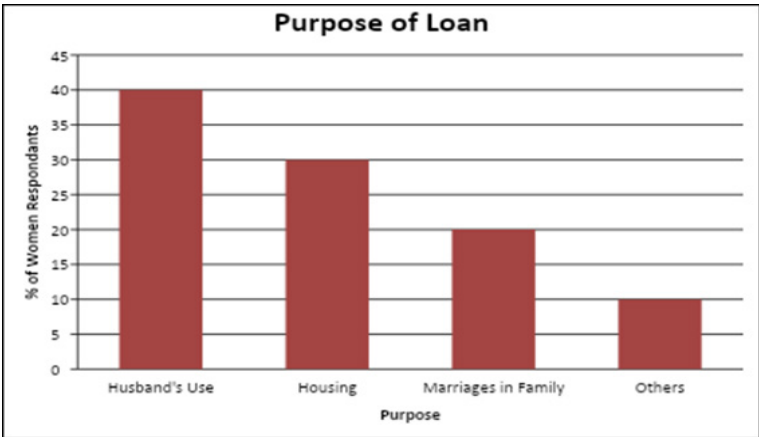


Purpose of loan:

The findings indicate that 40% of the women took loans for their husbands' use, while 30% used the loans for construction and repair of their homes. Another 20% borrowed to meet expenses related to family marriages. (Fig.7).

Purpose of Loan	% of Women
Husband's Use	40
Housing	30
Marriages in Family	20
Others	10

Fig.7



SHG members are offered different types of training programmes. Among the respondents, 50% have received training in tailoring, while 20% have undergone courses in beauty treatment. The remaining 30% have not participated in any training (Fig. 8). It was also observed that the timing of these training sessions is often not commensurate for many women.

Types of Training	% of Women
Tailoring	50
Beautician Course	20
No Training	30

Fig.8



Empowerment After Joining Self-Help Groups

Economic empowerment index:

Four indicators have been used (mentioned earlier) to measure economic empowerment.

About 50% of the respondents reported a positive change in their ability to handle financial crises within the family. However, the results for the other three indicators are comparatively less satisfactory (Fig. 9).

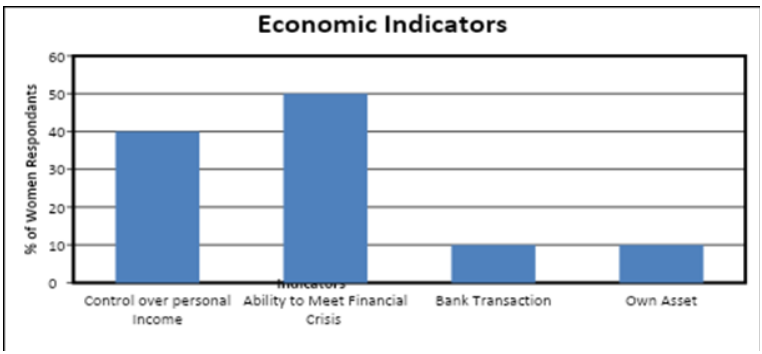


Fig.9

Social empowerment index:

Participation in group meetings has enabled women to step outside their homes more frequently. Over time, this has helped them gain confidence to visit places based on their needs and preferences. However, collective resistance against social issues such as dowry and alcohol consumption remains relatively limited (see Fig. 10).

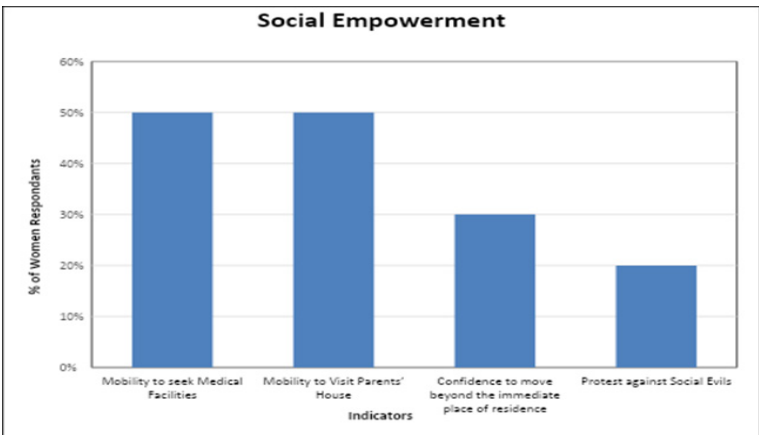
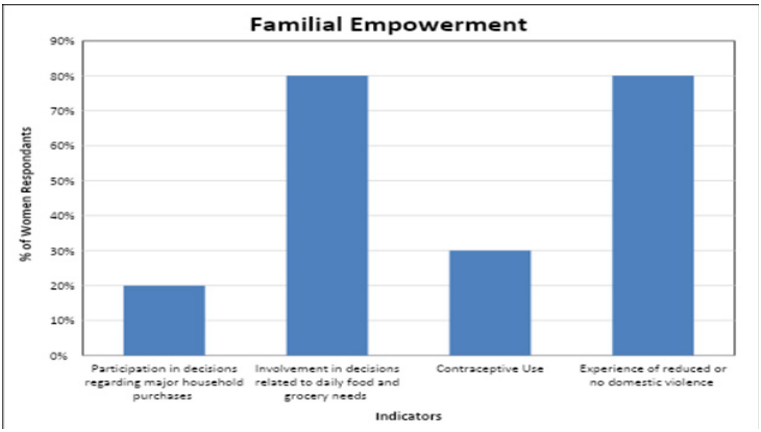


Fig.10

Familial empowerment:

Around 80% of the women reported an improvement in their decision-making ability in everyday household matters. A similar trend is observed in the case of reduced domestic violence. However, only a small proportion of women indicated any positive change in decisions related to major household purchases and contraceptive use (refer Fig. 11).

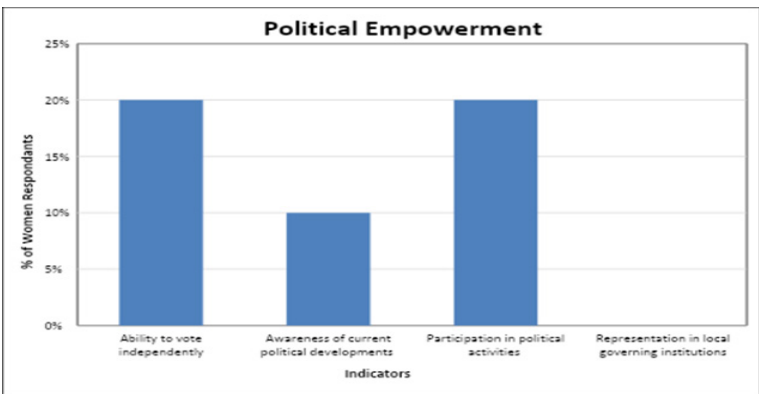
Fig.11



Political empowerment:

The majority of women reported no noticeable improvement across the four indicators of political empowerment. Additionally, none of the respondents have representation in local governing bodies.

Fig.12



The impact of SHGs appears to be mixed in nature. They have been particularly effective in strengthening women's

empowerment within the familial sphere. Improved access to financial resources has enhanced women's role in household decision-making. In addition, the collective support and mutual accountability within SHGs have contributed to a reduction in domestic violence in many cases. However, their influence in the public sphere remains limited. Women have not shown significant improvement in their awareness of political affairs or government programmes. Full control over family resources and assets is also yet to be achieved by many members. Despite these limitations, it is evident that collective cooperation and mutual support among women can play a crucial role in breaking the cycle of oppression and marginalisation in society.

Mean level of empowerment:

The present analysis measures empowerment across four dimensions, with an average score calculated for each. The four means were then compared. The result showed that women are most successful in attaining familial empowerment in comparing to the other three dimensions. In political dimension, women have failed to achieve much empowerment (see Fig.13).

Economic Empowerment	Social Empowerment	Familial Empowerment	Political Empowerment
1.1	1.5	2.1	0.5

Fig.13

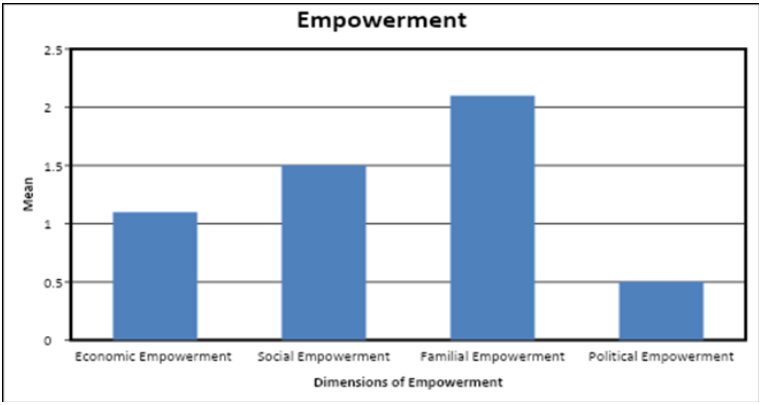


Fig. 13

Levels of empowerment:

The individual scores of each respondent were combined to assess overall empowerment across the four dimensions. The scores ranged from a minimum of '0' to a maximum of '15'. Based on their total scores, the women were classified into three categories—low, medium, and high levels of empowerment.

The results indicate that only 10% of the respondents fall into the high empowerment category, while 30% are moderately empowered. A majority, exceeding 60%, remain in the low empowerment group (Fig. 14).

Levels of Empowerment	Score	% of Women
Low	0 - 5	60
Moderate	6-10	30
High	11-15	10

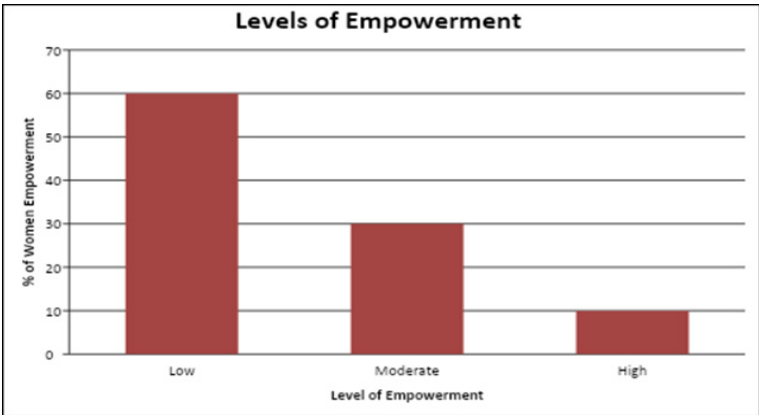


Fig.14

Limitations:

This study has found that women members have to face the following problems:

- Inadequate Capital
- Inadequate Knowledge in Marketing
- Paucity of common work shed
- Lack of Coordination among the SHG members
- Competitions with other SHGs
- Lack of adequate training
- Problems of understanding Government Orders

Suggestions:

Immediate Suggestions for SHGs to overcome their problems.

- Provision of adult literacy
- Awareness programmes and management training workshops
- Regular Group Meetings

- Innovation of new livelihood activities
- Permanent centre of exhibition cum sale
- Coordination among SHG members and SHGs
- Government Orders and other instructions must be made in Vernacular languages
- Convenient timings of Training
- Motivational speech sessions:
- Tie up with Private Enterprise
- To Manage CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) for SHGs

Conclusion:

The study revealed that women who felt attracted to SHGs were not only poor but also belonged to that social stratum that does not have access to other means of empowerment like social capital, education or specialized skills. They perceive that they have been empowered to a great extent after joining SHGs though often objective parameters may not substantiate their subjective perception. These women have developed a sense of self-esteem which will surely lead them to higher degree of empowerment in future.

In recent times, there has been a growing demand for justice, dignity, and safety for women. Events such as the Abhaya incident in Kolkata and its aftermath have exposed not only the violence women face but also the troubling tendency of society to engage in victim-blaming and insensitive commentary. Merely ensuring representation of women in politics is not sufficient. There is an urgent need to equip women with the social, economic, and psychological resources necessary to challenge deeply rooted inequalities. True empowerment must begin within the household, where many forms of control and oppression are first experienced,

and extend into the public sphere where women should be able to move freely without fear of violence or harassment. Political equality can only be realised when equality exists in both status and opportunity, not just in principle but in practice. Ensuring equal pay for equal work across all sectors is a crucial step in this direction, as it strengthens the material foundation required for genuine and meaningful participation of women in political life.

Politics is not merely limited to elections and votes but rather it is an integral part of life where every individual must navigate their means and opportunities in such manner as to gain the maximum amount of power in every aspect of their lives. Women are the most disadvantaged in such cases, as they are stuck in an archaic patriarchal system that works in favour of only the rich and neither man not woman is advantaged by it. SHGs are an attempt to bolster the voice of women in cooperative societies where they can table a common demand and ask for it either from their family heads and eventually the political leaders who control the nation.

It is evident from the study that SHGs are yet to achieve that goal. Further, it must be kept in mind that success is not always absolute. The SHGs are a great leap forward in psychologically empowering the members. Many members have been freed from the horrors of domestic violence. The women have achieved a greater voice in at least trivial familial matters. SHGs are not pathbreaking improvements but gradual steps towards empowering women on an individual level. This, psychological support and co-operation is the creed of the SHGs. Microfinance loans and collective operation are the means to those ends.

Appendix.

Questionnaire:

Name:

Age:

Religion:

Caste:

Educational Status:

Marital Status:

Occupation:

Have you got training after joining SHG?

Do you perceive any positive change in the following:

1. Control over personal income: Yes/No
2. Ability to handle financial crises within the family: Yes/No
3. Capacity to carry out banking transactions: Yes/No
4. Ownership of assets: Yes/No
5. Ability to access medical facilities independently: Yes/No
6. Freedom to visit parental home: Yes/No
7. Confidence to move beyond the immediate place of residence: Yes/No
8. Willingness to speak out against social issues such as dowry, etc: Yes/No
9. Participation in decisions regarding major household purchases: Yes/No

10. Involvement in decisions related to daily food and grocery needs: Yes/No
11. Say in matters related to contraceptive use: Yes/No
12. Experience of reduced or no domestic violence: Yes/No
13. Ability to vote independently: Yes/No
14. Awareness of current political developments: Yes/No
15. Participation in political activities: Yes/No
16. Representation in local governing institutions: Yes/No

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India's LGBTQIA+ Community : A Peculiar Paradox.

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Abstract:

Amidst the diverse population of India lies the increasingly visible LGBTQIA+ community, driven by the collective demand for efficient policy formulation and resource allocation.

Often dismissed as a product of western narratives, this community is perceived to be a "liberal" weapon, intent on destroying the "core" cultural and religious values of the country. Yet, it is our inevitable reality that this community is a key demographic with regard to both electoral politics and political capital, legally recognised but materially deprived. This paper argues that the paradoxical life of the LGBTQIA+ community is not a coincidence but instead, a byproduct of the politics of policymaking in India, ridden with theoretical and practical fault lines. Drawing primarily on Carl J. Friedrich's Policy Analysis framework, and Nancy Fraser's Theory of Justice, this paper demonstrates the existing policy gaps as strategic political decisions rather than knowledge deficits. Employing theories of identity politics, and an intersectional lens of analysis, this paper connects the intersectionality of caste, class and gender identities to the differentiated spectrum of rights and political protection, within the LGBTQIA+ community. Against this backdrop, built on a theoretical and qualitative methodology, the

paper examines key policy domains of politics, economics, security and legality, while also creating a comparative analysis between India and the United States of America, with respect to the strategic advantage of electoral inclusion of the community, realised, and wielded in politics across both the countries. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the intersectional discipline of Gender and Politics, by reframing existing debates and focusing on the dual lens of strategic exclusion as well as, inclusion of the community in Indian politics and policy making. It reveals the Indian state's bifurcated approach of governance that allows for symbolic recognition, without strategic transformation.

Keywords: *Public Policy, LGBTQIA+ Politics,Queer Rights, Caste, Class, Gender Intersectionality, Recognition and Redistribution, Identity Politics, India.*

Introduction:

As it goes with social evolution, one observes political and perhaps even cultural shifts in society. Such has been the case with the visibility and political presence of the LGBTQIA+ community in Indian polity, society and culture. While we may cite the growing doctrine of liberal judicial activism undertaken by the apex court of the country, and a certain globalised modernity that has enveloped Indian consumption and way of life as reasons ; largely this visibility of the community has been conditional and superficial with rarely any effective bottom-up policy driven approach. Given the abstract of this paper, it is crucial to discuss in this context, the literature it evaluates to substantiate the core argumentation of the paper. The theories referred to, are as follows : Carl J Friedrich's Policy Analysis Framework, Nancy Fraser's Theory of Justice, Kimberle Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory, Crenshaw and Mansbridge's Identity Politics and Descriptive Representation and the Marxist Conflict Theory.

Public policy in this regard, is the most crucial dimension of this paper's analysis, given the role that it plays in determining the extent of structural positioning and visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community. Policy is a direct outcome of politics, and is instrumental in the lived realities of the community at hand. When one speaks of public policy, there develops a spontaneous disparity regarding the proper analysis of its efficacy with certain implicit and explicit political narratives playing an instrumental role in determining what is objective and efficient. It is owing to these glaring inconsistencies that this paper seeks to employ the foundational economic conceptualisation of a policy as laid out by scholars like Carl Friedrich in *"Man and His Government : An Empirical Theory of Politics"* in 1963, who described a policy as a set of goals or directives that proposes a set course of action seeking to achieve a specific end or goal, for the community it was formulated for. This definition is monumental, as it not only situates public policy within the theatre of politics but also acknowledges that these policies do not arise in a vacuum but in an ecosystem of electoral incentives, judicial activism, institutional barriers, societal pressure, prejudice and political narratives. Therefore, Friedrich's view of a public policy, is a course of action constituting laws, regulations, administrative guidelines, procedures and funding criteria established by the government, generated by the collective force of the various political actors in the landscape, designed and designated for a specific community. Friedrich further notes that public policies are not mere agents of bureaucratic institutionalisation, rather they are the tangible byproducts of the ways of thinking, dogma and bias in the minds of political leaders who bring these policies to life. Thus, when we incorporate this imagination of a policy in our argumentation, we are met with the sound reminder of the fact, that the lived

realities of the community in question, are deeply influenced by the politics of the state.

The primary understanding of this paper is simple : it argues that the LGBTQIA+ community may enjoy symbolic recognition but most certainly, does not receive the structural reform that it requires to live a life of dignity. In this context, Nancy Fraser, an American philosopher, feminist scholar's seminal concept : the *Theory of Justice* that can be found across her body of work is of note. Fraser uses a three-dimensional analysis, examining redistribution, recognition and representation. The first dimension, redistribution concerns the political and economic setup of society that is rife with inequalities, structural marginalisation and deprivation. Recognition deals with cultural justice, dignity and integration of fringe communities into the cultural and social mainstream. Lastly, representation delves into political justice in terms of electoral politics, political inclusion that directly impacts the rights of all, especially those who are marginalised in society. Fraser argues that any existing feminist theory which posits the role that women play in politics, must account for both economic and cultural perspectives as related to identity politics and visibility in policy making. Simply put, Fraser refers to the structural dimensions as well as the social epochs of discrimination that one faces, in the current neo liberal capitalist global order. Here, one is not discriminated against, simply because of their gender in terms of social exclusion, but also they are disproportionately and negatively affected by state policies, governance and welfare modules which systematically discredit the specific and intersectional needs of these groups.

Using, this theory we may argue, that to attain the broader goal of political justice for the LGBTQIA+ community in policy making and representation, we require **redistribution**

that is, economic justice in the form of resource availability - creation of livelihood, ample scope of banking and financial management, housing and institutional safeguards ; **recognition** that is, cultural justice through the allocation of dignity and social inclusivity, legal protection from discrimination and effective grievance redressal platforms and, **representation** that is, effective and meaningful political representation, electoral and legislative inclusion alongside meaningful authority positions allotted to the community. When related to the subject of the paper we are confronted with the fact that while to an extent, recognition is awarded to the LGBTQIA+ community, they are not provided with the efficient political representation and institutional support which they would get through efficient policy formulation.

In the current political climate of our country one could easily juxtapose Karl Marx's influential analytical framework that conceptualises the division of the masses into two halves - on the basis of economic and capital availability and ownership. In this context, Marx identifies two classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, as the only real communities present, while the rest are known as imagined communities, whom Marx refuses to grant a tangible acknowledgement. Although, this theory has its limitations when we discuss crucial stratifications of Caste in the Indian Society, one could still argue that the relationship shared, between bourgeoisie and proletariat is quite like that, between a cisgendered heterosexual Indian and a queer, non-binary Indian. The bourgeoisie who are the owners of the modes of production and politically powerful are known as the "haves" and the Proletariat, who are the wage earners or laborers are referred to, as the "have nots". The core idea of Marx's theory posits that given the limited resources in society, there is intense competition between the two classes wherein the bourgeoisie

enjoy a seat of unparalleled power while the proletariat is perpetually disadvantaged. This classification of the "Haves or the Bourgeoisie" and "Have nots or the Proletariat" can be used to assimilate Marx's theoretical conceptualisations, with the lived realities of the average cisgendered Indian and a queer or non-binary Indian who in spite of an equal footing in the eyes of the constitution live drastically different lives, with respect to not only financial status, but also social acceptance and inclusion - left to compete over limited resources and an even more limited access to the same.

Furthermore, a core argument of my paper is that the LGBTQIA+ community in India suffers from symbolic recognition and not effective representation that comes armed with rights, substantial policy shifts and alleviation of the current shortcomings. This idea is further perpetuated by Crenshaw and Mansbridge's contribution to the discussion of Identity Politics. Both Kimberle Crenshaw in the 1991 essay, *"Mapping the Margins"* and June Mansbridge in her 2003 article *"Rethinking Representation"* collectively agree, that voters often align on the basis of shared political beliefs and identity categories and feel adequately represented in politics by those - who come from similar backgrounds and ardently support the causes these communities support. Later, in the paper this theory finds its practical application when we deliberate on the political and electoral advantages of recognising and mobilising the LGBTQIA+ community as a key electoral demographic. Hence, the larger discourse of Identity Politics with a special emphasis on the work of Crenshaw and Mansbridge is also, referred to, in this paper.

Lastly, while this paper argues that the LGBTQIA+ community is fundamentally disadvantaged in comparison to their cisgendered heterosexual counterparts, it simultaneously takes cognisance of the notion of privilege and the role it

plays on the lived realities of the members of this community. The intersectional lens employed in this paper draws on the foundation of Kimberle Crenshaw's landmark essays *"Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex"* published in 1989, and *"Mapping the Margins* :

Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Colour" published in 1991, that establishes intersectionality as an analytical framework for situating the complex relationship arising out of overlapping social identities. In India's case these complexities arise out of the graded stratifications of caste, class, economic footing, education, place of birth among others which influences the kind of discrimination queer people may experience in India, simply by virtue of the access to the financial and political resources available. Here, caste is the most formidable classification that determines the varied degree of marginalisation and discrimination that one may face by virtue of the same. Therefore, the paper also refers to Nivedita Menon's work in 2009, where she discusses functioning of caste as the epicentre of the trifold axis of social, political and economic structures that shapes access to resources and rights. In tandem with Crenshaw's work the intersectionist analysis, notes that the systems of oppression do not function independently, but interdependently whereby they mutually intersect and constitute one another, generating qualitatively varied direct experiences of marginalisation, in proportion to the degrees of privilege that one enjoys.

Legislative and Judicial Policy Implications:

The Transgender Persons Act, 2019.

Passed on 17th December, 2018 the Transgender Persons Act is considered to be a double edged sword - noted for making some due changes and improvements while, simultaneously eroding the basic rights of transgender persons in India. A

celebrated aspect of the bill prevented discrimination of transgender persons in relation to education, employment, healthcare and housing, but within the same legal framework, it also mandated a District Magistrate's certification when one wishes to declare their gender identity, which would be provided only after proof of a sex reassignment surgery is produced. To be legally recognised as their desired gender, they were expected to have the financial capacity to afford expensive medical surgeries - which displayed the classist sentimentality of policy makers, and actively eroded the need for intersectional policy making, given the significantly more difficult lived realities of Dalit and Bahujan and other lower caste trans persons, who may not be able to afford said surgery, even if a well placed upper caste, trans person in a Tier 1 city, could. In theme of the superficial pacifications that this act made, it misplaced emphasis on only transwomen and "hijras'' (a derogatory term used for a traditional South Asian Third Gender community) ignoring other non-binary identities such as queer and transgender men. With no effective policy directives that can be implemented with the existing and available resources, the glaring loopholes of the act are reflective of the lack of awareness and ignorance of policy makers and the broad generalisation and concentration of the existence of this community into a few relatively well known specific identities. To wit, policy makers in India indulged in the age-old practice of catering only to the needs of those that they were aware of without any prior research, survey or analysis to thoroughly conclude the objective goals of an act such as this. This strengthens Nancy Fraser's articulation of material deprivation through a lack of institutional support that can structurally transform the lives of the transgender community of India, alongside Friedrich's admission of the fact that policy gaps are often intentional political decisions

rather than knowledge gaps, while it also violates his core conceptualisation of what a policy is, that is - something which must achieve community oriented ends, which with respect to the act under investigation, does not adequately do.

Economic and Material Deprivation:

International and Regional Reports and/or Surveys.

Fraser argues that economic impediments are crucial in understanding the living conditions of marginalised groups. At par with our methodology, the lives of the LGBTQIA+ community are also affected by the rampant absence of equitable distribution of resources and livelihood opportunities, in clear violation of both Part III and IV of the Constitution. It is indeed, the politics of India and Indian sentimentality, that policy making follows the fault lines of most top down approaches of welfare modules, without solving the grassroots issues at hand, at a more foundational level. According to a National Human Rights Commission report, 96% of trans persons are denied employment and 92% are denied participation in both the organised and unorganised, or formal and informal sector of the Indian economy owing to stigma, improper or absent inclusivity guidelines and the culture of hatred towards the LGBTQIA+ community. India being the fourth largest economy in the world, growing at an astonishingly fast pace suffers inadvertently by not including the community in its economy and loses out approximately 1.7% of its GDP every year as per a 2014 World Bank study. Another set of statistics derived from a 2022 study conducted by a Human Resource firm by the name of "Randstad India" reveals that 53% of Indian companies lack career development opportunities for people of the LGBTQIA+ community, and only 9.5% of corporate organisations made an effort to be inclusive. As per the 2011 population census, the transgender

population in India approximates to about 490,000 but only a few of them are eligible for employment, leaving them to fend for themselves and seek a livelihood by begging on the streets and even resorting to petty crime. And in the rare instance of them gaining employment, they are faced with other issues such as the acute unavailability of accommodation - something we were witness to in 2017, when Kochi Metro Rail Limited of Kerala employed 23 trans persons only for them to be forced to resign when the local landlords of the area denied them a place to live. Yet another detriment of this concerning lack of economic empowerment is its extended and perhaps both intended and unintended impact on the quality of healthcare available to the transgender community in India. In the capital city of West Bengal, a study by Chettiar (2015) reveals that the transgender and hermaphrodite ("hijras") individuals are subjected to a structural inequality in the healthcare system wherein the healthcare personnel of Kolkata denied them treatment and misallocated them in male wards where they are subjected to harassment, without any protection. The community is therefore, dependent on the labour economy that is unregulated and in dire need for reform, where they are mistreated and left underpaid which causes them to be economically marginalised further that, then pushes them into the cycle of poverty, sex work, homelessness and beggary thereby, creating a toxic cause and effect cycle of economic deprivation, in India. This too, falls in line with Fraser's redistribution component of her three dimensional theory of justice that critiques the absence of adequate economic safeguards and resources.

Social and Cultural Marginalisation:

The intersectionality of caste, class and gender identity.

Employing an intersectionalist lens to ascertain whether there is a variation in the life of an upper caste and lower

caste, LGBTQIA+ person, we find that in India the caste and achieved status dictates the social reception to one's gender identity. On one hand, one can often chance upon expensive cafes and restaurants in South Kolkata, West Bengal, and be privy to "open mic nights" and "pride brunches" hosted by these capitalist establishments inviting members of the LGBTQIA+ community to share their experience with the audience ; and on the other, impoverished and Dalit LGBTQIA+ members are forced to live a marginalised life bereft of safety and security. This is found in the brutal and inevitable reality for 26 year old Dalit transgender women Udaya, from Panakudi in Tamil Nadu's Tirunelveli district, who was brutally assaulted, sexually and verbally harassed by her partner's family for daring to fall in love with their son. The intersectionality of caste and one's gender identity or sexual orientation alongside their status is found in multiple folds of the social fabric. It is noted that those LGBTQIA+ persons belonging to the upper castes and strata of society have better access to healthcare, psychological and legal assistance and sex-reassignment surgery given their economic capabilities born out of the unfair advantages they receive by virtue of their caste status.

In recent years, a novel discourse has emerged in India discussing the potential fluidity of sexual identifications and the linking of sexuality to other forms of identities, as a politically productive stance. In this context, the term 'queer' has been adopted and popularised by activists in academia and politics, but the connotations of being queer has far surpassed the realm of sexuality and as previously mentioned, found itself in an unusual fusion with caste and class, community and religion (Gupta, 2005; Narrain and Bhan, 2005). The available literature which examines queer politics further locates the intersectionality of one's queer identity. One such

example may be found in an introspective essay written by a Dalit gay man Sumit Baudh, whose father hid his Dalit identity from society by giving him a surname of an upper caste, reflected upon the nexus of caste and class with the LGBTQIA+ community in India, writing "'Thus, I remained a closeted Dalit man all through school and college" (Baudh, 2007: 33) . Another aspect of this argument is found in the conceptualisation of "gender inclusivity" in India, wherein it is presumed that the mammoth challenge of inclusion may be bested by including women, but the conceptualisation of who a "woman" is, has been confined to only, biological females. The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women in 2001 while prioritising its objective of establishing a woman's perspective in policy formulation perceived women a gender to be synonymous with biological sex and only recognised and consequently included cisgendered heterosexual females within the ambit of deliberations. An interesting study detailing the depoliticisation and feminisation of gender inclusivity and development akin to that of the NPEW 2001, from Kerala by Devika and Thamoi, n.d, shed light on what is known as development altruism wherein, in the rare exception of the inclusion of women in politics there is firstly, a flawed conceptualisation of the gender "woman" as only biological females, leading to the exclusion of transgender women, queer women, hermaphrodites and intersex women from panchayats and higher decision making spheres ; and secondly a reduction of the already limited participation of women, to the status of the self-sacrificing and apolitical centres of the patriarchal polity where they are treated unequally owing to their identity as "development agents'' rather than "politicians''. Intersectional ignorance is not the only reflection of the acute social exclusion that this community faces in India. Although the state has decisively

banned, forced conversion and therapy clinics in India, like Fraser had noted once again, structurally once again there is a huge vacuum of effective instruments to prevent the crisis of forced conversion. In June 2020, when Meenakshi Sajeesh of Angamaly, Kerala, was forcefully taken to the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church Medical College in Kochi, for a reversion to "normalcy", the country was reminded of the state apparatus's distinct failure in protecting a class of people it legally recognises. Despite the availability of data proving the widespread practice of forced conversion and instances of "corrective rape" and physical, sexual and psychological violence, policy makers in the executive as well as the legislature have failed to contain and rectify the situation. This devastating policy vacuum with direct ramifications on the quality of life of this marginalised community, is the kind of nuance that is often lost when academicians focus on independent silos of feminist and dalit literature, rather than employing intersectionist approaches, as pointed out by both Crenshaw and Menon.

The Advantages of Strategic Political Inclusion:

Crenshaw, 1991 and Mansbridge, 2003 notes that voters align politically based on shared identity categories such as sexuality, gender, caste or race. This has an enormous bearing on voting behaviour, meaning that by appealing to certain causes or communities, electoral support may be gained. Therefore, supporting the idea of a strategic political inclusion of marginalised communities by effectively mobilising them into viable political demographics. In light of this, I undertake a comparative analysis of electoral politics in India and the United States of America with respect to the hypothesis this paper makes.

The United States of America with all its partisanship, may be the most significant example of what a political party can do, when it begins inclusion. The formidable opponent of the right wing, conservative Republican Party, is the Democratic Party in the USA, known for championing the cause of inclusion of America's LGBTQIA+ community. In doing so, the party has greatly benefited from its pro-LGBTQIA+ stance, with over 46% of Americans supporting the Democrats and their policies according to a survey conducted in 2021. President Joe Biden - the Democratic Presidential candidate for the 2020 elections, who had won by 51.3% of the votes cast in the 2020 elections, demonstrated the shift of the American voter population towards the liberal Democrats caused by their policies which supports equality of all citizens and calls for the end of perpetration of violence against the LGBTQIA+ community. It was during the tenure of the Obama administration that the legislation banning hate crimes against the LGBTQIA+ community was passed, leading to the increased popularity of President Barack Obama. With 2/3rd of the Democratic party supporting same-sex marriages, and a 48% approval and 44% rejection from the American population of the same, when President Obama endorsed same-sex marriage in USA, during his tenure at the White House, it set a historical precedent and led to a larger percentage of Americans favouring his administration. This political victory was made possible by the Democratic Party's historical allegiance to the LGBTQIA+ community. Yet another statistical evidence that substantiates this argument, is the increase of the African American approval of Obama's pro same-sex marriage endorsement from 21% in 2004 to 28% in 2008, to 40% in 2012, further validating the prevalence of the distinct political advantage that comes from supporting the LGBTQIA+ community, as Obama had done. Similarly,

President Biden's pro-LGBTQIA+ policies have garnered him financial support from America's largest LGBTQIA+ group - The Human Rights Campaign, in the form of a 15 million USD contribution to Biden's 2024 presidential campaign. Additionally, this group had planned on covering the states of Pennsylvania, Georgia, Michigan, Wisconsin, Arizona and Nevada to campaign for the Democrats and Biden, with the intention of locking down the swing voters who they seek to secure for the Democratic Party. In general, this organisation estimated that in the 2024 Presidential elections, there would be 75 million "equality voters'' who would vote for the Democrats given their pro-LGBTQIA+ stance, a marked increase from the 62 million voters in 2020 and 52 million voters in 2016 who had also voted for the Democrats owing to their stance with regard to the community. While the Democrats lost the 2024 elections, it is important to note that the LGBTQIA+ community is still a strong vote base for the party, especially in light of the conservative policies adopted by the Republican Party. A similar trend had been detected in India, wherein in the 2024 Congress manifesto, provisions to legally recognise civil unions between LGBTQIA+ individuals in India were included, marking a historic shift in the Congress's prior stance of neutrality and silence. What is more interesting is the growing support of the historically neutral and ambiguous parties, which was witnessed as India readied itself for the 2024 General Elections. Parties such as the Communist Party of India (Marxist), National Congress Party (SP) and the Trinamool Congress championed the cause and ensured policies for the community both in public as well as the Parliament - with TMC MP Derek O Brien calling for the legalisation of same sex marriages in India, in clear contradiction to the ground reality of the states they are in power in, insofar that the living conditions of

the LGBTQIA+ community have remained the same or worsened as discussed in the thematic section of the paper, with few exceptions. Suddenly, in stark contradiction to the Bharatiya Janata Party's Hindutva politics, the opposition had begun to reshape their political narrative to cater to the more progressive and "woke" voters of the country, notably the younger generations. In a politicised and polarised India, 53% of the adult Indian population supports the legalisation of same-sex marriages with 28% strongly in favour, 25% somewhat in favour, according to a survey conducted by the Pew Research centre in 2023. Meaning that by advocating for the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community, these parties are gaining the favour of those Indians who wish for a more equitable society and are already disgruntled by the current government's lack of constructive policies. And the fact that the aforementioned political parties have begun to utilise this issue to gain the electoral and political allegiance of the younger generations is reflective of the practical application of the same rationale used by the Democrats in the USA. Hence to answer the question, in the evolving landscape of political awareness and politics, it is indeed strategically useful to include the LGBTQIA+ community, which must come with tangible policy shifts and an effective structural transformation.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, drawing upon the theoretical frameworks discussed above, the paradox of the symbolic recognition and material deprivation of the LGBTQIA+ community becomes a glaring reality. The structural theatres of legislative measures, economic safeguards and societal reception provide us with a clear picture of the existing policy gaps, despite the presence of sufficient literature on the subject. As established before, policies are not merely bureaucratic

tools but rather, embodiments of political narratives and sentiments. In light of this analysis, we must admit that the existing discriminatory legislative measures and top down policies developed are intentional political decisions and not byproducts of knowledge gaps. Contrary to popular opinion, this crisis has been the unspoken omnipresent entity across years of policy gaps in our country, that has only now in the last five years - come into the limelight of the mainstream national awareness owing to the intentional subordination of the community in question. In a country like India, where Gender Justice as a concept is limited to a narrow definition of female representation, the LGBTQIA+ community suffers from a multidimensional institutional marginalisation in the caveats of polity, society, economy and culture. Although there exists a vast reservoir of literature pertaining to this subject matter, a significant area also remains localised within the realm of academia, often inaccessible to the larger masses. Thus, it is imperative for academicians and policy makers alike to not only conduct proper investigations into the demands and needs of this community, but also create an awareness of the same. Only through institutional and structural changes to the current paradigm can the larger goal of bridging the gap between symbolic recognition and structural inclusion can be achieved, alongside the aim of ensuring an upliftment of the political, economic, social and cultural conditions of the LGBTQIA+ Community.

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The Underrepresentation Of Dalit Women In Indian Electoral Politics Before Mayawati: Analysing The Social Response Of The General Mass Through The Lens Of Casteist and patriarchal structures

Aive Chakraborty

Abstract

This paper traces back to pre-Mayawati 'the absence' of Dalit women in Indian electoral politics. It explores how casteist and patriarchal structures shaped the public space of the mass, triple-oppressed based on caste, gender, and class, while Dalit women occupied the bottom in this hierarchy, seldom being able to participate politically. Caste norms in rural and urban India constituted political leadership as a domain reserved for men from dominant caste groups, while patriarchal values often limited women's mobility, education, and public visibility. The social imagination of leadership, therefore, systemically excluded Dalit women who were seen by the political masses as lacking "authenticity" and "respectability" along with political acumen. Empirical cases provide illustrations of how such constructions functioned.

For instance, Dalit women who attempted to challenge panchayat elections experienced harassment, social ostracism and male violence: sexual harassment by dominant castes in some North Indian villages in the 1970s and in the 1980s as symptomatic of the resistance to their political positioning. Even where constitutional caveats, enabling Dalit women to assume a local office, though even while functioning,

provoked escort "proxy candidates," as male kin or dominant-caste elites ran for real control, they showed how formal representation was indeed subverted by structural patriarchy.

Leaders of the Dalit political formations were mostly men, while a mere sector of the Dalit women were in some inferior position or another. The media and public discourse also cemented these exclusions through the expunging of Dalit women political actors and a conception of leadership that was framed in terms of upper-caste, male centred power.

Keywords: *caste, dalit, elections, patriarchy, masculine, hierarchy*

Introduction

Before Mayawati's political rule in the late 20th century, Dalit women were one of the most underrepresented groups in Indian electoral politics. Their marginalisation cannot simply be viewed as a gendered political exclusion; instead, it arose from the combination of caste, patriarchy, class, and political restriction of not letting a Dalit woman participate in elections. This analysis will dive deep into the historical and structural elements that hinder Dalit women from accessing political arenas and will investigate the societal reactions of the broader population—both from dominant castes and male Dalit constituents—through sociological lenses of caste hierarchy, purity-pollution, gender norms, and political economy. By examining patterns of legislative representation, party dynamics, social stigma, the sexual-violent disciplining of Dalit women, and the restricted mobility available to them within Panchayati Raj reservations, this paper underscores how politics has been preserved as a realm for the "twice-born" and subsequently for male Dalit elites. Utilising examples such as the Devadasi system, the Bhanwari Devi case (1992), the lack of Dalit women in significant electoral parties before the 1990s, and the emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP),

this study highlights how casteist-patriarchal structures have actively opposed the political assertion of Dalit women. The emergence of Mayawati was thus not a natural progression but a radical rupture that challenged both caste hegemony and patriarchal limitations embedded in political institutions.

The Triple Burden Theory by Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru

Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru's Triple Burden Theory refers to the challenges faced by Dalit women in India, who have to deal with the oppression related to caste, gender, and class. (Guru,1995; Rege,1998). The practice of untouchability, living in separate areas, and sexually abusing Dalits are how their dignity and bodily autonomy are violated. Men of dominant castes often sexually abuse Dalit women to confirm their dominance over the society, and thus, after that, they use control over their bodies as a weapon of terror against the whole Dalit community. (Guru, 1995) This is the first and the most serious layer of their marginalisation. The second burden is based on patriarchal norms that dominate Indian society in general. Like all women, Dalit women have to live under male control of their lives in areas such as mobility, sexuality, and decision-making. Nevertheless, the Dalit women's experience of patriarchy is more complex because it happens both inside and outside their communities (Rege, 1998). In Dalit communities, they are usually compelled to conform to traditional gender roles with hardly any voice in family or public matters. However, outside their communities, they suffer from increased sexual exploitation and social stigma, which are the results of dominant, caste patriarchal structures. Unlike dominant, caste women who may have restrictions but also social protections, Dalit women are often neglected in political contexts (Rege,1998).

The Dalit Massacres, which changed the Indian feminist environment

One of the ' *sada-pane* ' cases would be that of Bhanwari Devi in Rajasthan, 1992—historic rulings in the narrative of India's gender justice. Bhanwari Devi, a Dalit woman, worked as a grassroots worker in the Women's Wing of the Rajasthan State Government's Development Programme, where she worked to end child marriage. When she stopped the marriage of a girl to the old son of some upper-caste Gujjar family, the dominant caste men responded with violence. They perceived her intervention as a serious social transgression, but also one against her caste and gender; they vented their anger on her (Guru, 1995; Rege, 1998). By confronting the patriarchy and casteism entrenched in grassroots systems, she set it up so that her public body was a defiance in its own right.

In September 1992, Bhanwari Devi was gang-raped by five upper-caste men for her activism, reportedly in the presence of her husband. The act of violence was not merely sexual in nature but also served as a symbolic assertion of caste dominance, intended as a corrective measure against a Dalit woman who had "crossed boundaries." (Guru, 1995; Human Rights Watch, 1999).

After the rape incident, Bhanwari was subjected to demarcation that was systematised against her in different situations, from medical negligence to police apathy, which indicated that indeed the state institutions themselves were embedded with casteist and patriarchal impulses. (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

The bar worsened the injustice by its process. In 1995, the original court cleared all the indicted men in a caste, hackneyed and patriarchal supposition, grounded judgment, one of the hypotheticals being that a group of upper-caste men would

not force a Dalit woman. This decision sparked a viral kick across the country by women's groups, Dalit activists, and intellectuals. As a result, a Public Interest Action was filed by Vishaka and others, seeking women's protection in the plant. The immediate effect of this was the Vishaka Guidelines in 1997 that opened the way for the first set of rules in India to address the forestallment of sexual importunity at work, later included in the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal. Act, 2013. Thus, indeed, though Bhanwari Devi never got proper justice, her case changed Indian legal and feminist history.

The Bhotmanges family passed on 29 September 2006 in Khairlanji village, Bhandara quarter, Maharashtra. The victims were a Dalit Buddhist family, the Bhotmanges. There was Surekha Bhotmange with her son, Priyanka, and her sons Roshan and Sudhir.

Their assertion of quality, especially as Dalits who had converted to Buddhism, was seen as defiance. The dominant Kunbi community couldn't tolerate it. Priyanka's education, Surekha's independence, and the family's attempt to cover their land further boosted the resentment. (Pai,2002) On the day of the butchery, a mob of dominant estate townies severely attacked the family. Surekha and Priyanka were intimately stripped, paraded, sexually assaulted, and boggled; Roshan and Sudhir were beaten to death. The violence was an attempt to terrorise Dalit assertion and reinstate estate scale. The sheer brutality against the two women is symbolised. The intersectionality of estate abomination and patriarchal control — chastising Dalit women both as women and representatives of an " uppity " Dalit ménage (Guru, 1995; Rege, 1998; Chakravarti, 2003).

The police response in the first case was marked by deeply hardwired caste bias. The police portrayed the murders as a fallout of a property disagreement, outrightly denied that a sexual assault had taken place, and didn't register the case under the slated gentries and slated lines (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Dalit groups and especially Ambedkarite associations from each over Maharashtra protested roundly, and it was only after their demurrers that the caste's grounded nature of the violence was conceded. The public upsurge forced a disquisition from a different angle, and the matter was brought before a presto, track court. Many of the indicted were doomed to death; their rulings were, still, later changed, and some were doomed to life imprisonment. Still, the courts controversially refused to fetter the butchery "as caste atrocity" and rather is redundant, labelled it as a revenge attack. Numerous scholars still believe that this was a great injustice. It marked a turning point in Dalit politics of the present time, as it made the brutal caste violence against Dalit women indeed more visible (Pai,2002).

Dalit women had been the most marginalised in terms of political representation despite an indigenous pledge of equality and political participation for the first several decades after India's independence. India's constitution outlawed caste- grounded demarcation in 1950, along with introducing reserved seats for SCs in Parliament and state houses. Nonetheless, these advantages were substantially taken up by Dalit men; the patriarchal trend of Dalit men was strengthened indeed within their own communities (Rege, 1998; Pai, 2002). Political elites regarded Dalit men as the main" representatives" of the community, while social norms kept Dalit women confined to the private sphere. Thus, indeed, though the popular frame theoretically gave access to participation, deeply confirmed estate and gender scales still

determined who had the right to enter the electoral spaces (Kabeer, 2002; Jeffrey et al., 2001; Jhajharia, n.d.).

How were Dalit women not allowed to take part in the election process?

Dalit women faced a dual marginalisation: as Dalits in a caste-stratified society and as women in a deeply patriarchal socio-political environment (Rege, 1998; Chakravarti, 2003). The dominant caste ruled over village institutions in most rural regions during the 1950s–70s made Dalit women's access to even basic resources difficult, let alone political forums(Pai,2002). Restrictions on mobility, lack of education, wage discrimination, and threats of sexual violence constituted mechanisms of social control. These constraints severely limited the visibility of Dalit women in political mobilisation. (Guru, 1995; Human Rights Watch, 1999). The emergence of Dalit women even as potential leaders remained unimaginable, at times even for progressive reformist movements, such as the early phases of Ambedkarite politics and socialist movements themselves.

In this period, electoral politics was monopolised by upper- and middle-caste men, who prevented Dalit women from emerging as candidates or decision-makers (Pai,2002). The nomination of candidates in political parties, whether the Congress, Left parties, or regional groups, depended heavily on caste networks and financial resources. Very few Dalit women who were deficient in both the social capital and economic independence were treated as 'winnable'; Even when SC reserved seats were there, those positions predominantly went to Dalit men with education or local influence. This very position was also being confirmed by the party stereotypes vis-à-vis Dalit women that they did not have a ″public presence″ nor ″political maturity″ requisite

in the candidature for elections, hence making the political institutions perceivably patriarchal. Low literacy rates and inadequate access to formal education constituted basic issues hindering women's participation in electoral politics. For a majority of rural India from 1950 to 1990, Dalit girls were much less likely than boys or non-Dalit girls to complete their higher studies. Families living in abject poverty prioritised the education of boys or exploited all children without considering that it led to premature withdrawal of Dalit girls from school, early marriages, and a lifetime of domesticity and menial labour. The result of this state of affairs is an ongoing low level of basic literacy and numeracy, which renders most Dalit women unsuitable for effective engagement in electoral processes or even for serious consideration as potential political actors (Rege,1998).

Schools as institutions often operated their children as Dalits, and they also maintained hostility. This was done by the caste system of segregation, mistreatment and discrimination of educators and Dalit history being omitted in curricula impeded learning.

For girls, gendered norms compounded these barriers: schools located far from villages, a lack of safe transport, and the absence of separate sanitation facilities discouraged parents from sending daughters. Even when Dalit girls attended, the quality of education was frequently low, with rote learning, poor pedagogy, and language. Barriers (if the medium differed from the home dialect) limited real literacy outcomes. Thus, by the time electoral politics began to matter at the local and state levels, a large proportion of Dalit women lacked the educational foundation to read party manifestos, understand ballot procedures, write nomination papers, or follow legislative debates. Political recruitment and candidate selection are in themselves literacy-biased processes. Political

parties rely on written communications (appeals, forms, affidavits), policy documents, and constituency data; they cultivate cadres through meetings, training, and printed materials (Jeffrey et al., 2001). Illiteracy excludes women from these informal pipelines. A woman who cannot read an application for candidacy, sign an affidavit, or interpret electoral rolls is unlikely to be nominated. Even more subtly, parties assess "electability" partly through perceived ability to campaign-to speak coherently in public, handle media, and engage with bureaucrats. Educational deprivation undermines the communication skills and institutional fluency, which parties seek, reaffirming the preference for male candidates, often more educated than female candidates, even when seats are reserved for the Scheduled Castes. Literacy gaps also influence political agency post election. Occupying an office required more than just having a job, popular legitimacy, but also institutional competence: drafting questions, reading policy papers. This includes serving on committees and hashing out policies with administrators. Women Dalit elected through exceptional ways like widow succession or through token nominations often it's seen depend on themselves, male relatives, or party handlers to perform these tasks. This was as if the dependency on others' wealth (Jeffrey et al., 2001; Jhajharia, n.d.).

In local administration, leadership was vested in people who were perceived to be 'figureheads" rather than substantive leaders. In local governance too, illiteracy stood as a barrier to smooth operations, effective utilisation of development funds, record-keeping, and interfacing with government schemes, practical hurdles that reduced the material benefits of representation and discouraged future candidacies. Education also serves as the agency through which political socialisation and awareness are mediated. Literacy makes people aware

of the issues through advertising products, newspapers, pamphlets and political debates; it is an avenue through which citizens become aware of their rights, privileges and duties through the technical aspect of democracy. Knowledge networks are areas in which Dalit women are excluded meant that the awareness of the reservation provisions, legal protection and grievance redress were/ was relatively low. Their limited awareness also made it more difficult for them to demand party tickets, mobilise segments, or express/ voice issues relating to Dalit women specifically (land rights, sanitation, labour reforms, anti-atrocity measures) (Kabeer, 2002; Pai, 2002).

In the realm of local governance, illiteracy similarly obstructs the effective use of development funds, accurate record-keeping, and interaction with government initiatives— practical challenges that diminish the tangible benefits of representation and deter future candidacies.

The cultural and symbolic aspects of education are also significant. During the post-colonial era, modern political legitimacy was frequently associated with Western-style education and "respectable" behavioural norms — qualities esteemed by political parties and the media. (Rege, 1998; Chakravarti, 2003)

Since they had very little formal education, Dalit women were easier to dismiss as unfit for legislative positions (they did not have the polish that "decorum" would require)! This was a delegitimisation that was both accomplished through dominant-caste prejudice and internalised among Dalits, where male elders were typically decision-makers, whilst also doubting women's capability to be the face of the community.

Lastly, attempts to increase political inclusion — whether adult literacy programmes, women's political training or the

later Panchayati Raj reservations — were relatively ineffective before 1990. Where programs like this existed, they were typically short, poorly funded and unable to address the broader structural issues of caste-based discrimination in learning environments or long-term economic empowerment.

The formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party and Mayawati's entering UP's political scenario

In Uttar Pradesh in the 1980s, the Congress and the rising OBC-led formations were in power but gave no substantive political space to Dalit women. The Congress relied heavily on local intermediaries from dominant castes and had no incentive to promote Dalit women as candidates(Pai,2002). Meanwhile, the rise of OBC assertion, as manifested through the rise of Charan Singh and later Mulayam Singh Yadav, focused on the upward mobility of middle peasant castes. These movements expanded the political opportunities available to backwards-class men, but Dalit women remained on the periphery. Unlike Maharashtra's urbanised Ambedkarite circles, UP did not provide strong Dalit intellectual hubs or autonomous women's wings that could push Dalit women into mainstream politics. Thus, even as social justice rhetoric gained momentum, Dalit women remained supporters rather than leaders(Pai,2002). The 1993 alliance of BSP and SP, after the Ram Mandir demolition, which stopped BJP's rise, the famous slogan "*Mile Mulayam–Kanshi Ram, hawa mein ud gaye Jai Shri Ram*," became one of the pivotal slogans of the decade, which attracted chaos as well as praise.

The lack of literacy, economic independence, and institutional support meant that Dalit women rarely appeared as viable candidates. Even in constituencies reserved for Scheduled Castes, political parties mainly favoured Dalit men, whom they considered more 'public-facing' or easier to manage

politically(Pai, 2002; Jeffrey et al., 2001). As a result, there was almost no representation of Dalit women as MLAs or MPs from Uttar Pradesh before the 1990s.

While the women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s had a significant impact at the national level, it did little to enhance the representation of Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh. Mainstream feminist organisations often concentrated on issues such as dowry, domestic violence, and equal rights framed within urban and middle-class contexts, which led to the neglect of caste-based sexual violence, bonded labour, and the political invisibility of Dalit women. (Rege, 1998; Chakravarti, 2003). Dalit women activists repeatedly emphasised the lack of intersectionality within the feminist movement. Therefore, notwithstanding the growth of feminist talk in India, Dalit women were largely excluded from leadership positions in Uttar Pradesh, unable to translate social consciousness into electoral representation.

In the late 80s, at a time Congress was on the decline, Mandal politics had taken shape, and so did estate-based mobilisation, thunderbolt political changes were taking place in UP. But the political assertion of Dalits remained isolated—largely because of the marginal role played by the Republican Party of India(RPI) there. Dalit-led political parties did not have the leadership of Dalit women as one of their priorities and were not interested in addressing the issues of Dalit women at all. The very idea of a Dalit woman rising to such status, and that too in the overwhelmingly patriarchal political frame of the state, was unimaginable. In most instances, political parties approached them under exceptional circumstances or during the performative training they received from the early symbolic function of gendered and masculine- dominated power relations. This atmosphere/scape, of course, serves to stress out the simple fact that Mayawati's ascendance occurred in

the early 1990s. For she burst as a rise not only of an individual but also a rupture on the ground that had explicitly (up until then) marginalised Dalit women many times over(Pai,2002). Before Mayawati, the political rhythms of Uttar Pradesh would not accommodate any conduits in between grass-roots agitation and formal power for Dalit women to travel through. Even though social justice movements by the 1980s raised awareness, they didn't succeed in dismantling the estate and gender walls within party politics. Accordingly, despite an increase in activism, substantial electoral representation for Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh remained exceedingly limited until Mayawati's appearance reshaped the geography for their political engagement.

Before Mayawati's appearance on the political scene in Uttar Pradesh and her contribution to the Dalit women's movement, Dalit women used to be completely excluded from electoral politics by virtue of obstacles related to caste, gender, economic deprivation and lack of education (Rege, 1998; Pai, 2002).

Her success in being selected as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh showed that not only had an individual found victory, but also highlighted a general and contextual transformation in politics for Dalit women in India. Mayawati was effectively the first to challenge this dominant dogma of who could lead and speak on behalf of the oppressed. From her origins as a teacher, she later became the chief minister of the largest state in India.

One of the ways Mayawati changed the terrain for Dalit women was by struggle, the former against the high caste political elite and the latter to defeat patriarchal structures within Dalit politics itself. Until the late 1980's, political discourse in Dalits—despite some Ambedkarite influence—

had been dominated by male figures who did not see Dalit women as important political agents. In the BSP, it was the firm leadership of Mayawati that went against these traditions. The ideology of Kanshi Ram's tactical advice to Mayawati, Mayawati's muscular oratory and administrative discipline made it possible for a brotherless Dalitwoman in Débéli (the agrahárí's walled village) to climb to the peak in a dog-eat-dog world. Such visibility made it clear that Dalit women could assert power, to negotiate and press the agenda of Ambedkarites in the public domain (Rege, 1998; Chakravarti, 2003).

The political language of Mayawati laid a strong emphasis on the dignity, self-respect and cultural assertion of Dalits and transformed images of passive reservoirs (or instruments) to active subjects in her political vocabulary. What she did in building parks and memorials, statues to Babasaheb, Periyar and other Dalit icons was more than symbolic: It marked the transition from invisibility to half-visibility, non-invisibility.

For Dalit women, they were the harbinger of political consciousness. They were acts of asserting that they, too, had a place in public spaces, that their bodies, identities and histories mattered and with them came the right to political agency. And Mayawati herself - with short hair, a lack of apology or submission, and an unapologetic contempt for the upper castes - offered an alternative model to fit Dalit women's experiences.

In the realm of practical politics, Mayawati has turned opportunities for Dalit women into actual gains in party organisation, candidate lists and bases among grassroots women's groups. She ensured that a large number of electoral tickets for local bodies, state assemblies and party positions were given to Dalit women among all national parties

during her tenure as party general secretary. By expressly including this queer person, the cycle of excluding Dalit women because of their supposed "inexperience" was denied privilege, since real political experience can only be gained by practising politics. Mayawati encouraged Dalit women to take up leadership positions, even in conservative rural areas, challenging male-dominated political structures at the village level (Jhajharia, n.d.; Jeffrey et al., 2001).

Dalit upliftment in Mayawati's era-

Yet another radical step taken by Mayawati was the restructuring of power and alliances in terms of resource-rich areas to expand political spaces for Dalit women indirectly. She implemented various affirmative action programmes for the Dalits/ While in government, she initiated targeted welfare schemes for Dalit. Lots of aspects like land distribution, scholarship housing schemes, such as Manyavar Kanshi Ram Shahri Awaas Yojana, and improved access to education. On the one hand, these measures were beneficial for Dalit women who had earlier been caught in a cycle of economic dependence. "*Behenji tum sangharsh karo; hum tumhare saath hain*". If you offer a Dalit woman land, schooling or even some steady source of income, her political agency rises: she has something to contribute at meetings. GenerationType, as we observed for Uttar Pradesh. face down dominant-caste authority, and start thinking about a political future. Mayawati understood that empowerment could not simply be symbolic, but something real had to change(Pai,2002)

Mayawati's beginning in mainstream electoral politics was the result of dedicated support given to her mentor, Kanshi Ram and his Bahujan Samaj Party. The BSP built a disciplined, cadre-based mass support among Dalits, with particular attention to mobilising the Jatav community. The party used

the invasion of Ambedkarite ideology, symbolic assertion and mass mobilisation for converting social humiliation into political consciousness (Pai,2002). When the BSP's percentage of votes went up in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Mayawati emerged as Kanshi Ram's heir apparent with a reputation for strident oratory and uncompromising dignity for Dalits. This ideological and organisational foundation proved crucial to her subsequent electoral successes. For the first time, Mayawati became Chief Minister in 1995, but not by an electoral majority.

It was through a dramatic coalition. Although BSP and SP had formed a post-Babri Masjid alliance to defeat the BJP in the 1993 elections, the partnership fell through due to internal pressures, which eventually led to the "Guest House Incident." The BJP thereafter extended an offer to BSP for external support in forming a government after the breakdown of the SP-BSP alliance. With this unexpected coalition, Mayawati was elected as the leader of the legislature and was invited by the Governor to establish the government. Her ascent to the position of Chief Minister was historic, as she became the first Dalit woman to occupy such a role in India (Chakravarti, 2003; Pai, 2002).

Her second term in 1997 was made possible by a carefully laid out power-sharing arrangement with the BJP, following the 1996 elections that led to a hung assembly. None had a majority, and the BSP/BSP-ally BJP coalition agreed to alternate between the chief ministership of Mayawati for six months and then Kalyan Singh/another BJP leader. This gave her a chance to take office, and shows that during this time coalition politics as well as legislative bargaining were important to her ascent. This term alludes to the fact that her leadership was often the product of strategic compacts rather than pure electoral wins.

Mayawati's third term in 2002 was also a fractured electoral mandate. The state assembly elections also resulted in no party having a clear majority, requiring negotiations for a coalition government. Despite not winning an absolute majority, the BSP formed a government with the outside support of the BJP. Mayawati was named leader of the coalition and became Chief Minister. This government was short-lived, as squabbling within the coalition partners brought it down in 2003.

Her most eloquent and transformative palm chanced in 2007 when she was tagged as Chief Minister with a full maturity accreditation, marking the first time the BSP won such a position. This election represented a vital moment in the political geography of Uttar Pradesh. Mayawati constructed a new model of social coalition nominated" social engineering, which embodied the BSP's conventional Dalit support base with respectable assistance from Brahmins and other upper-estate groups(Jeffery, 2001). By allowing tickets across colourful estate lines and giving herself as a leader for all communities, she disassembled the conception that the BSP could solely depend on Dalit votes. It was this party of multiple gentries that secured the party a decisive majority in the Legislative Assembly, allowing her to take office without the need for coalition mates. This was the moment when Mayawati was authentically tagged grounded on her party's independent electoral strength. As a Dalit woman holding the loftiest office in the state, her leadership symbolised a significant rupture of the estate scale. For numerous Dalit individuals, especially within the Jatav- Chamar community, her ascent signified the eventuality for social mobility and political agency that had long been denied. Her presence in power questioned the supremacy of upper- estate elites in governance and fostered a sense of pride, quality, and cerebral

emancipation among Dalits throughout both pastoral and civic Uttar Pradesh.(Rege, 1998; Pai, 2002).

Conclusion

One major win for Dalits under her rule was the ending of lawlessness, especially in terms of the government's response to caste-based violence. The Mayawati administration is known for the strict implementation of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. The policemen were being suspended or receiving departmental actions if they dithered or delayed in registering FIRs of crimes against Dalits. This generated an atmosphere where Dalits felt safer, especially in areas dominated by castes that would traditionally abuse their power. Many Dalit jatis reported to her that, for the first time, her government was something they had really believed in because of the ease with which they were able to obtain state assistance and not be terrorised or exploited by other castes.

Dalits benefited from certain welfare and development programmes introduced by her. One of the programmes was the Ambedkar Village Development Scheme for flood-affected rural areas, which strengthened infrastructure in villages densely populated by scheduled castes (SC).Under the programme, a large number of new.infrastructures like metalled roads, power, hand pumps, drainage systems, medical sub-centres and pucca schools. This infrastructural advancement significantly eased rural isolation and dramatically improved the availability of state services to tens of thousands of destitute Dalit families, often changing their lives daily. Housing schemes, scholarships, pensions, and subsidies were allocated in a more organised way since it was understood that Dalit households would have. 21 to have smaller loopholes often neglected by previous administrations. Moreover, Mayawati's emphasis

on redistribution of land and economic support further reinforced the social position ofThousands of Dalit families were awarded land pattas, granting them ownership of agricultural land, which improved their economic stability. Land ownership holds particular significance within rural caste structures, and these pattas enabled Dalits to reduce their reliance on dominant caste landlords. Furthermore, her administration expanded employment opportunities in public works, educational institutions, and government sectors by ensuring stricter enforcement of reservation policies than had been the case in the past. This provided a reliable income for Dalit youth and assisted them in breaking the cycle of generational poverty. Another crucial aspect of Dalit empowerment during Mayawati's tenure was the focus on symbolic representation through the establishment of monuments, parks, and memorials honouring leaders such as Babasaheb Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram, Periyar, and other figures from anti-caste movements. Although these projects were often criticised by detractors as being extravagant, many Dalits viewed them as public affirmations of dignity and historical acknowledgement.

Her governance also marked a significant impact on the political participation of Dalit women. As an authoritative Dalit woman leader, she shattered many gender and caste barriers at once, mobilising Dalit women into public life. During her tenure, more Dalit women contested panchayat elections, joined political mobilisation, and became more visible in administrative spaces. Her success showed that Dalit women could indeed manage state institutions, contest caste patriarchy, and also mobilise against gender violence with the facilitation of the state machinery. Rege and Guru together claim that the oppression of Dalit women cannot be understood by simply adding the experiences of caste, class,

and gender; rather, these categories intersect to produce a qualitatively different form of marginalisation. Mainstream (savarna) feminism, for instance, often erases this difference by treating women as the same group, whereas Dalit political movements, as a rule, prioritise caste issues as if they were affecting all Dalit people equally. Hence, the triple burden theory is about insisting on the recognition of Dalit women as political and theoretical knowledge agents who are also the first-hand sources of experience, and their experiences should be the ones to lead the feminist and anti-caste movements. Rege and Guru, by putting forward their point of view, locate Dalit feminism as a separate intellectual and political space that not only questions upper-caste feminism but also male-dominated anti-caste politics.

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Gender And Politics: Get Real About Power, Who's Represented, And Fighting Back Today

Shreya Roy Chowdhury

Quick Summary

This paper digs into how gender and politics are all tangled up, looking at who has the power, who gets a voice, how things are run, and how people are pushing back. Using ideas from feminist thinkers – like different types of feminism and how they all connect – I argue that women being underrepresented in politics isn't just a numbers problem. It's built into the system because politics has always been a man's world. By looking at ideas and real-world examples from around the globe and in India, like those big changes to the constitution (the 73rd and 74th Amendments, and the Women's Reservation Act of 2023), I want to show how changes to the rules can help but also hold things back. I also look at the stuff that keeps women out, like how parties pick candidates, violence in politics, money problems, and online harassment. By seeing how all these things connect, I argue that to make things really fair, we need to change the system, change how people think, and keep fighting for what's right.

Keywords: *Gender, Feminism, Political Voice, Intersectionality, How Things Are Run, Democracy*

What's This All About?

Gender and politics are super connected when it comes to deciding who has the power, who's in charge, and who gets to be a citizen. Way back when, politics was set up to be a man's game, favoring things like being logical, bossy, competitive, and being a

leader in public – things that were usually linked to men. Even though democracies today say

everyone is equal, women and people who don't fit the typical gender roles still get shut out when it comes to truly being involved in politics.

The fact that women are still not equal in politics makes you wonder if democracy is really working. If democracy means everyone gets a voice, then keeping half the population on the sidelines messes with the whole idea. I think that gender inequality in politics isn't just a coincidence; it's baked into the system, the ideas people have, and the culture we live in.

Thinking It Through: Feminism and Power

To really get what's going on with gender and politics, you need to look at it through the lens of feminist thought. Liberal feminism says everyone should have the same rights and be able to get involved in politics. They push for things like changing laws, stopping discrimination, and setting quotas for elections to fix the imbalances. But, while these kinds of changes can get more women in office, they might not fix the deeper issues of sexism in the system.

Radical feminism questions the very base of sexism. They argue against the idea that women should be stuck at home while men run the world. They see political institutions as not just neutral places, but as places built on male dominance.

Post-structural feminism, especially the ideas of Judith Butler, messes with the idea that gender is fixed. Butler says that gender is something we create through our actions. In politics, leadership is often seen as a masculine thing, putting women in a tough spot: either act like a man or risk being ignored.

Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, makes things even more complicated by showing how different types

of oppression overlap. Gender mixes with things like class, race, religion, and where you live, creating different experiences of being shut out of politics. Intersectionality stops us from thinking of womanhood as one thing and asks us to pay attention to the different layers of inequality.

All these ideas together show that being underrepresented in politics isn't just about numbers; it's about the system, people's beliefs, and how all these things intersect.

How Power Works in Politics – And Who It Favors

Historically, places like parliaments, government offices, and parties have been run by men. Even though things have slowly changed, women are still underrepresented in national governments around the world. The idea that leaders should be masculine still affects who gets picked, how they're judged, and how the media portrays them.

Political parties are like the gatekeepers of who gets to be a representative. The way they pick candidates often favors men who are already connected, have money, and know the right people. Women often don't have the same access to campaign funds or mentors in politics.

Also, women politicians are often judged more harshly on their looks, whether they're married, and their family life – things that men rarely have to deal with. These kinds of expectations reinforce the idea that men are on top in democratic systems.

Representation and Elections: What Works?

Lots of countries have used quotas to try to fix the problem of underrepresentation. For example, Rwanda has one of the highest percentages of women in parliament because they have quotas in their constitution. Nordic countries have also used quotas within parties, which has helped get more women elected.

But, just getting more women in office doesn't automatically change things. The culture of these institutions, what they focus on, and party rules can still limit how much women can influence decisions. The difference between just having women present and them actually having power is still a big issue in feminist political analysis.

Gender, Policy, and How Things Are Run in India

In India, changes to the constitution have been important in getting women more involved in politics. The 73rd and 74th Amendments said that one-third of the seats in local governments had to be reserved for women. These changes made local politics more democratic and brought millions of women into formal political roles.

Research shows that this has led to improvements in things like access to water, sanitation, education, and health at the local level. on the other hand, the issue of proxy representation – where male relatives are really in charge – shows that sexism is still a problem.

At the national level, the Women's Reservation Act of 2023 suggests reserving one-third of the seats in parliament and state assemblies for women. While this is a good sign, there are still debates about when it will actually happen and how it will work with reservations for other groups based on caste. These discussions highlight that it's important to think about how all these things connect when making policies.

Intersectionality: Understanding the Different Ways People Get Excluded

Intersectionality shows why some women, usually those who are rich and upper-class, might be visible in politics while women who are already marginalized stay excluded. In India, caste and class have a big impact on who can get involved in

politics. Women from lower castes and minority groups often face even more discrimination.

Similarly, around the world, things like race, immigration status, and money problems all intersect with gender to shape who can participate in politics. Without understanding intersectionality, changes to help women could end up just helping those who are already privileged instead of fixing the system.

What's Holding Women Back Today?

Even with legal changes, there are still big obstacles:

Sexist Political Culture: Leadership is still seen as a masculine thing.

Parties as Gatekeepers: The way candidates are picked favors men who are already in power.

Money Problems: Women often don't have the same access to campaign funds.

Violence and Harassment: Women face threats and intimidation.

Online Harassment: Social media makes it easier to spread sexist abuse.

Burden of Care: Women still do most of the work at home, limiting their time for politics. To fix these things, we need to hold institutions accountable, have the political will to change, and transform society.

Fighting Back: Feminist Resistance

Feminist movements have always pushed for more rights through resistance. From fighting for the right to vote to using digital activism today, feminist politics challenges sexism and imagines new ways of governing that are fair and prioritize care.

Feminist networks around the world have built connections, focusing on issues like reproductive rights, equal pay, and violence against women. Resistance is not just about saying no; it's about creating new, inclusive ideas of what it means to be a citizen and a leader.

Conclusion

Gender equality in politics is vital for democracy to really work. Even though changes to constitutions, quota systems, and policies have helped get more women involved, inequality still exists in institutions and how people think.

This paper says that to really make a difference, we need:

* To have clear ideas
* To understand intersectionality
* To ground our ideas in policy
* To change the system
* To keep fighting for what's right

Democracy can't be legitimate if it keeps excluding people based on their gender. True inclusion means not just having a seat at the table, but changing the power dynamics themselves.

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Bureaucracy, Gender, And State: A Critical Study Of Women's Vulnerability In Assam's NRC Regime

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Abstract

This study explores how women were unnecessarily excluded and threatened with the fear of exclusion by the state during the National Register of Citizens (NRC) process in Assam and their importance in the gendered nature of citizenship and bureaucracy in India. Even though the NRC was presented as an unbiased administrative exercise to recognize "genuine citizens" but in reality there exists social and gender differences in this practice. During the process, women were asked to produce lineage proofs which was found difficult especially for the rural, widowed, poor women and those from marginalized sections.

My research revolves around the particular question that in what ways did the bureaucratic process of Assam NRC make citizenship gendered and how do these difficulties produce deeper structural inequalities within the Indian state.

By using empirical examples drawn from case studies, field reports, observation, the paper examines patterns of gendered exclusion. For example, it has been found that many married women in Barpeta district in Assam could not produce their official legacy documents since they moved to their husband's place after marriage at a very young age and during that time such documents for women were not given much importance by the women's house. Then widows from families in

Dhemaji and Morigaon were regarded as "doubtful" voters since their property papers were destroyed during the floods. There exists several women who appeared before Foreigners Tribunal were regarded as "non citizen" because of little disparities in their father's document like spelling mistakes, in such cases where men were less like to be penalized for.

By tracing these lived examples, it is clear that the NRC process was more hazardous for women as the bureaucratic authority favoured written records over social reality. Verification camps, lineage proofs, tribunal hearings not only reflect the gendered nature but also emphasized it. The study, thus calls for rethinking citizenship process so they could consider the structural barrier faced by women during NRC rather than reproducing them.

Keywords: *Gender, women, citizenship, Assam, NRC, bureaucracy, exclusion, structural inequalities, state, South Asia, intersectionality*

Introduction

The issue of belongingness to the nation-state is not only an administrative process but also a deeply political process designed to determine identity conflict, historical account and institutional power expression of citizenship verification in contemporary history. Although it's declared purpose was to recognize "genuine citizens", the Bureaucratic process through which recognition took place immensely disadvantaged women. This paper argues that NRC is not simply a bureaucratic process but a place where gender, citizenship and state power together intersect.

According to Marshall (1950) and Yuval Davis (2011) establishing on political science scholarship that envisage citizenship as both a formal status and a lived condition, it

asserts that bureaucratic process often strengthen structural inequalities rather than correcting them. Women faced distinguishing difficulties due to patriarchal norms ruling inheritance, marriage and documentation. Many lacked formal educational certificates, property titles and birth records- these are the documents considered as central to NRC verification. This gendered gap was further intensified for Muslim, Adivasis, and riverine-island communities whose life conditions make document retention difficult. By analyzing these dynamics, this paper argues that NRC must be seen as a political process of state categorization which is enormously incriminated in gendered form of elimination.

My research question emerged from this concern that in what ways did the bureaucratic process of Assam NRC create gender-based barrier to citizenship, and how does these barriers reveal deeper structural inequalities within the Indian state. This question is important not only because it focuses on the results of NRC but the political logic deeply rooted in the bureaucratic structure themselves. Bureaucracy is often seen as unbiased and rule-bound, but political scientists like Hannah Arendt (1973) argues that citizenship is not merely a legal categorization but the "right to have rights" which can be eroded by administrative procedures. In a similar way, scholars like Akhil Gupta (2012) in his book *Red Tape*, shows that state is accomplished through everyday interaction with the bureaucratic agents and not really through the constitution. When we apply these logics to NRC, it becomes clearer that citizenship was not only determined by constitutional rules but by the specific documents like birth records, education certificates and so on, to prove their citizenship which majority of them simply did not have due to long history of gender inequalities.

Theoretical Framework – The Gendered State and Citizenship

Political science has questioned the gendered nature of state institutions. According to Charlesworth (2000, pp.190-212) and Chinkin (2000, pp.5-9), feminist political science theorists argue that the modern state - in no way a neutral mediator – reflects masculine norms in its structure, categories and bureaucratic logic. Gender becomes integral part of the administration and policy-making through everyday routines from documentation to classification.

Nira Yuval Davis (1997) conceptualized citizenship as multi-layered surrounding legal status, rights and political conditions which is enormously important to understand why the NRCs disproportionately impaired women. Citizenship is not merely something that one own but something one must constantly perform and prove through state- declared documents (pp.9- 12). When women lack such documents due to patriarchal social structure, citizenship become doubtful.

The classic work by T.H Marshall (1950) on citizenship recognizes social, political and civil dynamics, but feminist theorists have expanded his model by revealing that access to each dimension is regulated by gender inequalities. It is gender that determines who should own land, who gets educated and who controls household documents. These everyday structural factors regulate a women's ability to "perform" citizenship in bureaucratic spaces such as NRC hearings.

Partha Chatterjee's groundwork on "political society" also provide perception suggesting that marginalized communities communicate with state institutions through unstable negotiation of identification and not through formal citizenship (2004, pp.38-43). Women in Assam especially rural and Muslim women ended up navigating this unsettled

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Documentation regimes are not gender- neutral. According to scholars like Fox et.al, 2010, Brandt (2014) and Krishna (2002) have revealed that administrative system in developing democracies generate exclusive results when marginalized communities lack documents, literacy and institutional access. These structural difficulties in the context of Assam were intensified by patriarchal norms that confine women's public mobility and documentation ownership.

Thus, NRC must not be seen as an administrative process but also as political technology of state power that produce gendered hierarchy through apparently neutral bureaucratic process.

Historical -Political Context of citizenship in Assam

The politics of citizenship in Assam is somewhat attached to the regional histories of migration, ethnic mobilization and linguistic identity. The emergence of NRC traces back to the decades of controversy around the presence of Bengali speaking population. The Assam Movement (1979-1985) by All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the later Assam Accord institutionalized the demand for recognition of "illegal migrants", shaping the political discourse of belonging. These political conflicts fabricated an environment where bureaucratic mechanisms, such as the NRC became an instrument of policing.

If we go back to the history, women had limited participation in this political mobilization, yet they became very susceptible during bureaucratic Citizenship determination. Scholars like Hassim (2006, pp.145-168) argues that women in societies where they have less access to formal institutions, drawing of state boundary disproportionately harm them. The NRC, in Assam, enlarge this dynamic by involving documentation of lineage which a biased process against women who lost their houses in natural calamities or changed their residence during marriage.

In this respect, the NRC should be seen not only as an administrative procedure but also an political indicator that signifies historical concerns over migration, ethnic identity and social control. It epitomizes how citizenship verification, though drafted as an unbiased technical process, reproduces historical inequalities and structural biases, particularly along the lines of gender. Political scientists note that these bureaucratic mechanisms often operate as a form of "categorical state power" where the definition of belonging is shaped as much by historical narratives and political priorities

as by legal frameworks (Gupta.2012, p.17). Thus, women's exclusion from the NRC cannot be separated from Assam's historical-political landscape; it is an outcome of decades of regional politics, social hierarchies, and state attempts to enforce a particular conception of citizenship.

Bureaucratic Documentation and Gendered Vulnerability

Citizenship verification under NRC is highly dependent on what the state defined as "acceptable documents" which includes birth certificate, voter list, land records, school certificate and legacy documents connecting individuals to ancestors listed before 1971. It is argued by the political scientists that bureaucratic process shaped inclusion and exclusion not only through rules but also a typical assumption of the state about what a "typical citizen" look like (Lipsky.1980, pp.27-31). In the NRC, the "model citizen" was tacitly imagined as one who possessed stable property, long- term residence and continuous documentation which were common among men in Assam.

There were many women who did not have the birth certificate because institutional birth became common only in 2000s in Assam. Marriage migration meant that a woman often moved to a new village, abandoning her natal home documents. According to Agarwal (1994, pp.58-61), Land titles intensely favor men due to patriarchal inheritance norms. Thus, women were unable to produce primary documents. Secondary documents such as Panchyat certificates were acknowledged but exposed to special verification process, generating an additional bureaucratic obstacles that disproportionately affected rural women.

Many studies shows that around 19 lakh people were excluded from the final NRC list including women who used Panchayat-issued certificates as evidence of linkage (Human

Rights Law Network, 2019). These certificates were questioned even when they were legally valid. Thus, Bureaucratic suspicion became gendered: women's documents were considered as weak, risky and less authentic. " Street - level bureaucrats" in Lipsky's term used discretionary power that led to propagation of structural inequalities. These designs explain that the NRC was merely a documentation practice but a political process that systematized patriarchal biases into the very procedure of citizenship verification.

Intersectionality: Gender, Religion, Class, and Geography

The concept of intersectionality as the term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is critical for understanding why women's rejection from Assam's NRC cannot be described by gender only. It points to how important multiple axes of identification such as religion, gender, class, and location interact to give rise to layered form of deprival (Crenshaw.1991, p.1244). In the NRC process, women's vulnerability is further heightened by intersecting gender with poverty, minor religious communities and ecological insecurity.

Muslim women and the Politics of Suspicion

Muslim women in Assam were inaccurately affected by the NRC process because of the long- lived political tradition of demographic tension that shapes Bengali-speaking Muslims as "outsiders" or "suspect citizens". According to Yuval-Davis (2011, pp.23-26), feminist scholars argue that gendered exclusion is expanded when women belong to marginalized communities as their claims to citizenship are strained through communal stereotypes. There are many Muslim women who lacked formal educational certificates, birth records or property rights due to early marriage which forced them to rely upon certificates as given by the Panchayat which was often looked down with mistrust.

Adivasi and Tea Garden Women

Adivasi women who were working in Assam tea plantations suffer from distinct form of rejection. In spite of being the resident for generations, many were there who lack legacy documents as their ancestors were appointed as a migrant laborers during the colonial times without any formal recordings (Xaxa.2008, pp. 141-145). Their labor contribution to the regional economy has not translated into documented citizenship, this signifying how class and labor history intersect with gender to frame exclusion.

Char and Riverine population

Women living in Char (riverine island) areas suffered typically due to frequent flooding and erosion, which regularly destroyed home and documents. Scholars like Ribot (2008, pp. 204- 212) studying environmental governance argue that bureaucratic system often overlook ecological vulnerability, leading to displacement of population. For women, who simply do not control documentation leading environmental loss into legal invisibility.

Together, these intersections show that NRC exclusion was not arbitrary but overlapping system of power. Gender interacted with religion, class, geography to form distinct type of citizenship hazards strengthening the point that the NRC functioned as a political mechanism of stratification and not just neutral governance.

Empirical Illustrations from Assam: District level patterns

A comprehensive picture emerges when we look into district -level patterns, where gendered exclusion was clearly visible. Following are the examples drawn from publicly documented reports and field studies.

Barpeta District

In Barpeta, repeated flooding led to displacement of families for number of times. It has been found that during such situations, women lost their documents because men generally controlled document storage (Deccan Herald Report, 2019). In households,where men usually leave

for work seasonally, women were left alone to handle the NRC hearings even without having any guidance. According to Ribot (2008, pp. 204-212), it is argued by political scientists studying disaster -prone regions that administrative procedures often fail to account for environmental hazards. The rigid documentary requirement of NRC ignored the fragile material condition of char and riverine population further intensifying gendered vulnerability.

Nagaon and Morigaon District

Reports reveal that many women who used Gaon Panchayat secretary certificate faced huge delays or re verification processes. In many cases, discrepancies in spellings - a widespread phenomenon in transliteration were served as proof of suspicious identity. According to scholars like Krishna (2002, pp. 79-84) bureaucracy often mistaken minor error as identity discrepancy affecting women with limited literacy.

Dhubri District

Dhubri, which has one of the highest concentrations of Muslim women population with low formal literacy saw thousands of struggles to produce birth or school records. There were cases like many were married off early or dropped school before class V. Without these certificates, they had to depend only on Panchayat linkage certificate but they are frequently questioned by NRC authorities. Even women who migrated

after marriage to different districts faced additional residency complications which aligns with the concept how marriage practices intersect with bureaucratic democracy.

Comparative Perspective: Gendered Citizenship in South Asia

Assam 's NRC is not unique. Citizenship verification in South Asia has often resulted in gendered exclusion. According to Hossain (2017, pp.112-118) in Bangladesh, the voter issue list faced similar discrepancy where women lacking land rights faced difficulties in proving their identity. Studies on the Rohingya crisis by UNHCR also explain how women fleeing persecution often did not have any legal documents making them more susceptible to statelessness.

According to Ghimire (2017, pp. 44-52), the 2006 citizenship act in Nepal required paternal proof for citizenship by descent, making many women's children stateless. In Tamil Nadu, many women failed to produce documents for re-citizenship due to the displacement during civil war.

According to scholars like Yuval Davis (1997, pp. 23-29), modern documentation regimes accept stable surname, fixed border, and patrilineal lineages, emphasizing the idea that men anchor the family 's political identity. In South Asia where women often change their name and address after marriage, their bureaucratic logic of citizenship clashes with social reality.

Pakistan also reveals a similar pattern where the National Database and Registration Authority frequently rejected application from women who does not have a male guardianship documentation. These examples shows that gendered exclusion from citizenship is not unique to Assam but a part broader system of South Asian political pattern in

which bureaucratic state render women's identity through patriarchal suppositions. What makes Assam particularly significant is that exclusion did not occur from such margins but through state -recognized project that claimed legality and neutrality.

Sri Lanka's perpetual civil war and internal displacement provide us a crucial insight into how conflict aggravate gendered Citizenship vulnerabilities. Women who were displaced as a result of war causing destruction of house, forced migration leading to the loss of identification documents. Studies reveal that post - war document recuperation procedures were often not available to women because of complex bureaucratic structure, language barriers and the assumption of household documents to be under the control males (UNHCR,2015). Widows were particularly affected since the authority preferred document related to male kin. This experience coincidences with the char and Riverine population of Assam, where environmental displacement caused documentary loss, highlighting how both conflict and ecological instability overlap with gender to erode official citizenship claims.

Thus, the comparison suggests that NRC is a part of a broader system in which state -led citizenship verification disproportionately affected women's belonging, particularly in society with strong patriarchal tradition. This, Assam's case became a crucial case for grasping how administrative procedures can erode the democratic promise of equal citizenship.

Political Consequences of Exclusion

According to Das (2007, p.40) being left out of the NRC does not make someone stateless but it places them at a risk of being identified as "foreigners" in the tribunal court.

Excluded women found themselves in long standing battle with the fear that they might be excluded from getting the right to vote, getting access to welfare schemes or securing their children's future. For poor and marginalized women, exclusion intensified existing vulnerabilities. The political climate encompassing the NRC, especially anti -migrant rhetoric, increased the fear. This seems to appear not only a bureaucratic exercise but a political protect that louden the concern over identity, nationhood and belonging.

The Citizenship Amendment Act added further political complexities by giving access to the non Muslim communities to obtain citizenship while, in actuality, the NRC's main aim was to recognize migrants without proper documentation. According to Sharma (2019), this meant that Muslim women were more severely affected by this documentation failures. The integration of CAA and NRC created a risk by distinguishing Citizenship regime, when legal rights stands on both religion and paperwork. According to Saika (2019. P, 900), the exposure of women at the intersection of gender and religious vulnerabilities mirror South Asian regional trends: Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Myanmar show similar selective citizenship practice based on the gendered nature.

Democratic Implications of Gendered Citizenship Regimes

The NRC poses fundamental question equality, democracy and political membership. According to liberal democratic theory, citizenship promises equal protection and rights under the law. However, feminist political theorists argue that formal equality often conceals significant inequality when institutions fail to think for social hierarchy (Lister.2003, p.75) Formal Equality vs. Substantive citizenship

Even though, women are officially equal citizens under the Indian constitution, the NRC imposed a gap between legal equality and lived citizenship. When access to rights rely on documentation and not on substantive belonging which is based on only legal documents and no meaningful inclusion in the society, citizenship becomes restricted and uneven. As a result, it suppresses the democratic promise of equal citizenship as said by Menon (2012, p.29).

Bureaucracy and the erosion of Democratic Inclusion

The NRC epitomizes how bureaucratic rationality can erode democratic inclusivity by changing political queries into technical processes. According to scholars like Ramanathan (2009, pp.118- 121), when citizenship verification heavily burdens on document, the state shifts control onto individual while hiding it's own role in giving rise to inequality.

Rise of Statelessness and Democratic Backsliding

The chances of detention, disfranchisement or Statelessness particularly for women points to a hazardous shift from welfare -oriented governance to coercive state power. Political theorists like Hannah Arendt (1973, pp.296-302) alert that those practices regularize exclusion and undermine democratic accountability.

Rethinking citizenship in Democratic States

From a political science perspective, the NRC compels a rethinking citizenship keeping behind the legal formalism. Citizenship must be acknowledged as a political relationship shaped by power, history and social structure. The gender inequalities remain unaddressed implanted in documentation regime, as a result democratic risk producing exclusion under the form of administrative order.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that NRC process in Assam offers a revealing case of how bureaucratic system propagate gendered exclusion. While the NRC presented itself as a neutral administrative practice, it's reliance on inflexible documentary norms- birth certificate, property titles, school records, lineage proofs was profoundly disordered with women's socio-economic realities. Patriarchal inheritance systems, marriage migration, limited educational access, and environmental vulnerabilities combined to position women as disproportionately at risk of exclusion.

My research question about how do gendered system of documentation, mobility, inheritance communicate with bureaucratic structure to disproportionately make women vulnerable to exclusion in the NRC process clearly find its answer that the interaction between gendered life path and bureaucratic logic of the state produces structured inequality. Thus, the NRC becomes a political tool of categorization rather than a neutral tool of governance.

From a political science perspective, this case provides broader theoretical insights that is citizenship is not simply a legal categorization but a product of history, power and administrative pattern. The gendered state, according to political feminist theorists, remains deeply rooted in the everyday functioning of political institutions. Understanding Assam's NRC through this lens exposes the limits of bureaucratic rationality and make us to rethink how democracies define membership in ways that do not propagate inequalities.

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