

## Feminist Movements and Activism in India: Role in Shaping Social Change

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### **Abstract:**

India has witnessed a dynamic and evolving trajectory of feminist movements and activism that have significantly contributed to shaping social change. From early reform movements in the 19th century, which focused on issues like widow remarriage, child marriage, and women's education, to contemporary campaigns addressing gender equality, violence against women, and workplace rights, feminist activism in India has played a transformative role. These movements have not only challenged deeply rooted patriarchal structures but have also influenced legal, social, and political reforms. Post-independence, feminist movements gained momentum through organized campaigns and grassroots activism, leading to important legislations related to dowry prohibition, domestic violence, and sexual harassment. In recent years, digital platforms and social media have further strengthened feminist voices, enabling wider participation and awareness, as seen in movements like #MeToo. Feminist activism in India is diverse, addressing intersections of caste, class, religion, and region, thereby making it more inclusive and representative. Despite notable achievements, challenges such as gender-based violence, unequal access to opportunities, and societal resistance persist. However, feminist movements continue to act as powerful agents of change, fostering awareness, empowerment, and social justice. Overall, they have played a crucial role in advancing gender equality and shaping a more just and inclusive society.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Women's Rights, Social Change, Gender Equality, Activism

### **Introduction**

Feminism, in its broadest sense, refers to a socio-political movement and ideological framework that advocates for equality between men and women in all spheres of life—social, economic, political, and cultural. The roots of feminism can be traced back to the late 18th and 19th centuries in Europe and North America, where early feminist thinkers demanded equal rights, education, and legal recognition for women (Delmar, 2018). Over time, feminism evolved into multiple waves, each addressing different dimensions of gender inequality. Feminist activism, therefore, involves organized efforts, movements, and campaigns aimed at challenging patriarchal structures and promoting women's rights and empowerment.

In the context of India, feminist movements have a unique historical and cultural trajectory. Early reformers in the 19th century focused on issues such as sati abolition, widow remarriage, and women's education. In the post-independence period, feminist activism expanded to include concerns like dowry, domestic violence, workplace discrimination, and political representation (Chaudhuri, 2012). Indian feminism is distinct in its intersectional approach, addressing inequalities arising not only from gender but also from caste, class, religion, and region.

Women constitute nearly half of India's population, making their participation crucial for national development. However, despite constitutional guarantees of equality, the status of women in India remains unequal in many respects. Issues such as gender-based violence, limited access to education and employment opportunities, wage disparities, and underrepresentation in decision-making positions continue to persist. Marginalization is even more pronounced among women belonging to disadvantaged communities, including rural, tribal, and lower socio-economic groups.

In this context, feminist movements and activism play a vital role in highlighting these inequalities and advocating for social change. This study adopts a descriptive methodology based on secondary data and a review of previous studies to examine the role of feminist movements in shaping a more equitable and inclusive society.

## Recent Trends in Feminist Movements and Activism in India

Indian Feminist Movements Have Witnessed Remarkable Evolution In Recent Years. From 2020 To 2025, Activism Has Become More Intersectional, Digital, And Inclusive, Addressing Caste, Class, Religion, Sexuality, And Environmental Concerns Alongside Gender Issues. Amid Political Backlash And Shrinking Civic Space, Women From Diverse Backgrounds Have Emerged As Powerful Agents Of Change. These Ten Trends Reflect A Dynamic Shift Towards Broader Solidarity, Creative Resistance, And Systemic Transformation In The Pursuit Of Gender Justice In Contemporary India.

- **Rise of Intersectional Feminism Centering Caste, Religion, and Marginalized Identities-** Indian feminism has increasingly embraced intersectionality, moving beyond a universal “woman” category to address how caste, class, religion, and sexuality compound gender oppression. Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and queer feminists highlight unique forms of violence and exclusion. Campaigns now routinely link gender justice with anti-caste struggles and minority rights (Menon, 2015). This shift critiques savarna-dominated feminism and amplifies voices like Dalit trans activists. However, mainstream movements still face internal challenges in fully integrating these perspectives, leading to more nuanced but sometimes fragmented activism. The trend strengthens solidarity across movements but demands deeper structural changes within feminist organizing itself (Haq, 2013).
- **Digital Feminism and Hashtag Activism as a Fourth Wave-** Social media platforms have become powerful tools for Indian feminists, enabling rapid mobilization, storytelling, and accountability. Hashtags like #MeTooIndia, #PinjraTod, and #WhyLoiter continue to evolve, with new campaigns against workplace harassment and campus rape culture. Digital spaces allow survivors to share experiences anonymously and build transnational solidarity. Yet challenges persist: online abuse, algorithmic biases, and the exclusion of women without reliable internet access. Despite these, digital activism has pressured institutions and amplified marginalized voices, making feminism more accessible to younger, urban, and semi-urban women while creating hybrid online-offline protest strategies.
- **Women-Led Protests Against Citizenship Laws (Shaheen Bagh Model)-** The 2019–2020 Shaheen Bagh protests, led primarily by Muslim women, emerged as a landmark in feminist activism. Women organized peaceful sit-ins against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC), blending gender, religious identity, and constitutional rights. This model inspired similar women-led demonstrations across India, showcasing non-violent resistance and everyday women’s political agency. It challenged stereotypes of Muslim women as passive and highlighted intersectional resistance against majoritarian policies. Though disrupted by the pandemic, it left a lasting legacy of women as visible leaders in defending secular democracy (Jain, 2020).
- **Wrestlers’ Protest and Fight Against Sexual Harassment in Sports-** In 2023, prominent female wrestlers, including Olympic medalists, protested against sexual harassment by a powerful federation chief. Their sustained demonstrations, including threats to discard medals, drew national and international attention to institutional impunity in sports. The movement highlighted how even successful women athletes face gender-based violence and highlighted caste and class dimensions in sports governance. Despite police action and delays in justice, it galvanized public support and sparked discussions on workplace safety for women in male-dominated fields. It underscored the need for stronger implementation of sexual harassment laws (Soni, 2024).
- **Response to High-Profile Gender-Based Violence Cases -** Incidents like the 2024 rape and murder of a trainee doctor in Kolkata triggered widespread protests demanding safer workplaces, better hospital security, and faster justice. These movements blend street protests with social media campaigns, focusing on systemic failures in addressing sexual violence. Activists criticize slow judicial processes and victim-blaming. Such campaigns have pushed for improved implementation of existing laws and workplace safety protocols. They also reveal ongoing gaps in support for survivors, particularly in public institutions, while reinforcing calls for cultural shifts against rape culture in professional and educational spaces.
- **Queer and Trans Feminist Activism Amid Legal Setbacks -** Despite the 2018 decriminalization of homosexuality, the 2023 Supreme Court refusal to legalize same-sex marriage highlighted limits of legal progress. Queer and trans feminists, often intersecting with caste and Dalit struggles, continue advocating for recognition,

anti-discrimination measures, and healthcare access. Activists critique the Transgender Persons Act for its medicalizing approach. Movements emphasize joy, solidarity against war and imperialism, and community support networks. Trans Dalit leaders have gained visibility, pushing mainstream feminism to address caste within queer spaces and challenging both patriarchal and majoritarian norms.

- **Resistance to Shrinking Civic Space and Anti-Feminist Backlash** - Feminist organizations face growing challenges from restrictive foreign funding laws (FCRA amendments), criminalization of dissent, and state surveillance. Women human rights defenders, especially from Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim communities, encounter targeted harassment. Right-wing narratives sometimes co-opt or counter feminist demands, promoting selective “women’s empowerment” while attacking progressive voices. Activists respond through underground organizing, alliances with broader democratic movements, and creative digital resistance. This trend has forced feminism to become more resilient and intersectional, linking gender rights with larger struggles for civil liberties and minority protections.
- **Focus on Economic Justice and Labor Rights** - Feminist activism increasingly addresses women’s low workforce participation, unpaid care work, migration, and impacts of neoliberal policies (Sen, 2014). Reports and campaigns highlight gender-responsive budgeting, taxation reforms (including removal of “pink taxes”), and challenges in informal sectors. Post-COVID economic distress amplified demands for better social security and skilling programs tailored to women. Movements link economic marginalization with gender-based violence and caste discrimination. Grassroots efforts by women in MSMEs and agriculture push for policy changes, emphasizing that true empowerment requires addressing structural barriers beyond legal rights.
- **Campus-Based Activism Against Patriarchy and Institutional Violence**- Universities remain key sites of feminist resistance through groups like Pinjra Tod, which challenge restrictive hostel rules and Brahminical control over women’s mobility. Campaigns against sexual harassment in academia, inspired by LoSHA lists, continue to demand accountability. Students use digital tools alongside protests to expose rape culture and demand gender-sensitive policies. These movements often intersect with anti-caste struggles and critiques of institutional complicity (Thapliyal, 2021). While facing administrative backlash, campus feminism nurtures young leaders and keeps debates on consent, safety, and inclusion alive in higher education.
- **Emergence of Hybrid and Joy-Centered Feminist Futures** -Recent activism blends traditional protest with creative, joyful expressions — art, storytelling, and community-building — to sustain long-term engagement. Feminists emphasize “radical joy” alongside resistance, creating inclusive spaces for healing and imagination. Hybrid models combine online amplification with offline solidarity networks. There is growing focus on transnational links, environmental justice, and decolonizing feminism. While challenges like polarization and resource scarcity persist, this trend signals a maturing movement that values emotional well-being, diversity, and sustainable activism. It aims to build feminist futures rooted in care, equity, and collective liberation.
- **Rise of Eco-Feminism Linking Gender Justice with Environmental Struggles**-Eco-feminism has gained renewed momentum in India, connecting patriarchal exploitation of women with the domination of nature (Rao, 2012). Women from rural, indigenous, Dalit, and Adivasi communities lead protests against deforestation, large dams, mining, and climate impacts that disproportionately affect them as primary users of forests, water, and land. Building on the legacy of the historic Chipko movement, contemporary initiatives include women-led mangrove restoration in Odisha, seed sovereignty through Navdanya, and resistance to Himalayan dams by groups like Maati Collective. These movements emphasize that environmental degradation worsens gender inequalities in food security, livelihoods, and disaster vulnerability. Activists advocate for women’s leadership in climate policy, sustainable agriculture, and rights of nature, creating powerful alliances between feminist and ecological justice. In 2025, amid extreme weather events, such activism highlights the need for gender-just climate action and challenges development models that ignore women’s lived relationship with the environment.

### **Role of Feminist Movements and Activism in Social Change in India**

Feminist movements have played a transformative role in driving **social changes** in India. By challenging deep-rooted patriarchal norms, these movements have shifted public discourse from viewing women primarily as victims to recognizing them as active agents of change (Jamshed, 2022). Intersectional approaches that link gender

with caste, religion, class, and environment have broadened the scope of activism, making it more inclusive and impactful. Digital platforms have amplified voices that were once marginalized, enabling rapid mobilization and sustained pressure on institutions. High-profile protests have not only highlighted specific injustices but also questioned societal attitudes toward women's safety, mobility, and autonomy. This period has seen feminism evolve into a vibrant force that intersects with larger democratic struggles, fostering gradual but visible shifts in how society perceives and treats women across urban and rural landscapes.

One of the most significant contributions has been in raising awareness and influencing policy responses to gender-based violence. The Shaheen Bagh protests demonstrated Muslim women's leadership in defending constitutional values, inspiring nationwide women-led resistance and challenging stereotypes about minority communities. Similarly, the 2023 wrestlers' protest against sexual harassment exposed institutional failures in sports, while the 2024 Kolkata doctor rape and murder case triggered massive "Reclaim the Night" marches and strikes by medical professionals. These movements have pressured governments to strengthen workplace safety protocols, improve implementation of existing laws like the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, and prioritize faster justice mechanisms. Beyond immediate demands, they have sparked wider conversations on consent, victim-blaming, and the need for cultural change, gradually eroding silence around violence and encouraging more families and communities to support women's right to safe public and professional spaces.

Feminist activism has also contributed to long-term social transformation by promoting economic justice, political representation, and environmental awareness. Campaigns focusing on unpaid care work, low female labour force participation, and rights of women in informal sectors have influenced discussions on gender-responsive budgeting and social security (Bhattacharjya, et. al. 2013). Eco-feminist efforts led by rural and indigenous women have linked gender equality with climate justice, advocating for sustainable practices and women's leadership in resource management. Through campus activism, digital campaigns, and alliances with queer and Dalit movements, feminism has nurtured a new generation of leaders who question traditional family structures and societal expectations. While challenges like backlash and uneven implementation persist, these movements continue to chip away at patriarchal barriers, fostering greater acceptance of women's education, mobility, and decision-making roles. Ultimately, feminist activism in contemporary India serves as both a mirror reflecting societal inequalities and a catalyst pushing the nation toward a more equitable and inclusive social order.

## **Conclusion**

Despite remarkable progress, feminist movements in India continue to face serious challenges that threaten their effectiveness and sustainability. Restrictive regulations like amendments to the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) have severely limited funding for women's rights organisations, especially smaller groups led by Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim women, leading to reduced advocacy and grassroots work. Rising backlash from conservative and majoritarian forces, combined with digital harassment, online trolling, and algorithmic amplification of anti-feminist narratives, creates a hostile environment for activists. Internal issues such as caste and class hierarchies within the movement, uneven digital access, and the digital divide further marginalise voices from rural and underprivileged communities. Persistent gaps in law enforcement, slow justice delivery in cases of gender-based violence, and shrinking civic space add to the strain, making sustained organising increasingly difficult.

To overcome these obstacles, feminist movements must prioritise deeper intersectionality and genuine inclusivity. Building stronger alliances across caste, class, religion, and queer identities will help address internal hierarchies and create more unified fronts. Investing in grassroots leadership, especially among young women and marginalised groups, through skill-building, digital safety training, and community-based networks is essential. Movements should push for better implementation of existing laws while advocating for stronger protections against online violence and workplace harassment. Greater focus on economic justice, unpaid care work, and eco-feminist approaches can link gender struggles with broader issues of livelihood and climate justice, widening public support.

Looking ahead, the future of Indian feminism depends on resilience, strategic collaboration, and creative resistance. Sustained pressure on policymakers for genuine reforms, coupled with efforts to influence public opinion and cultural norms, can drive lasting change. By nurturing solidarity, securing diverse funding models, and blending online mobilisation with offline action, feminist activism can continue to challenge patriarchy and contribute

meaningfully to a more equitable and democratic India. The journey remains arduous, but the collective strength of diverse women's voices offers real hope for transformative social progress

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