

## **EMPOWERING VOICES: WOMEN BREACHING TABOOS IN POLITICS, SEXUALITY, AND FEMINISM**

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### **Abstract:**

Women have always been brutally stereotyped as the embodiment of feminine characteristics, denoting submissiveness, docility, and divine qualities. Men have traditionally been the ones who articulate their sexuality; women have never been permitted to talk in order to satisfy their biological demands. It is undisputed, nonetheless, that suppressing one's biology and basic needs might obstruct a person's healthy psychological growth. The only political goal that drove feminism, particularly its early forms, was to provide women the right to vote, proper representation, and equality in the political sphere. It is impossible to overstate the importance of feminism in the establishment of democracy in its purest form. Women have triumphed in political, economic, and social spheres, shattering the stereotypes that formerly defined them. The main focus of the essay is feminism's contribution to the belief in gender equality and the reversal of the traditional binary opposite's hierarchy. The Indian constitution's guarantee of equality for all citizens calls for reducing the gap between the sexes and promoting women out of their subordinate roles in comparison to males. Up until now, Indian women who were embarrassed to admit their own sexuality have remained fearless in questioning customs and voicing their desires, even if they are sexual.

**Keywords:** Reform Acts, Coverture, Sexuality, Feminism, Suffrage

### **Introduction**

Globally, feminism emerged as a political movement in the 1960s. The well-known figures associated with 19th-century feminism were Caroline Norton, who suggested that changes to the British legal system were necessary to provide women equal rights. To all the women hiding in the shadowy caves of oppression, degrading treatment, and apartheid, feminism was a resounding appeal. It shook them up and lifted them out of their dehumanising situation. The concept of feminism sprang from the thoughtful and perceptive minds of people who laboured over the problems that plague women generally and were grieved to see the appalling state of women. The world is aware of the poor status of women, not just in India.

Feminism serves as a wake-up call for women to fight for their rights. Feminism may be described as an expression of dissatisfaction against any unfair treatment that women have received. In

literary terms, it describes any technique that takes a book and prioritises considering the character of the female experience. Feminists have used their voices to resist legal, economic, and social restrictions on women's fundamental rights—inequalities that have persisted throughout history in all civilizations.

Feminism aims to investigate how, throughout human history, males have come to hold power and authority while females have been subjugated to a position of helplessness. Divergent social, political, and moral philosophical perspectives are present in feminism. In terms of society, feminism focuses on the idea that eradicating inequality and advancing their rights and interests should be the main priorities. While feminist theorists in the academic community focus on identifying and explaining the ways in which gender inequality manifests itself in society and the victimisation of women via stereotypes. In line with Simon de Bevoir's assertion that "one is not born rather becomes a woman; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine," some feminists argue that sex is not something that is born, but rather is produced by social standards.

### Definition of taboos in politics, sexuality, and feminism

**Taboos in Politics:** The term political taboo refers to the unwritten, implicit or social prohibitions against certain types of behaviour or roles assigned to people in the domain of politics. Taboos are often related to gender norms including notions like women should not be leaders and some issues are too sensitive for ladies. Political taboos also may refer to prohibitions related to one's race, tribe, religious affiliation or any other sociocultural considerations that tend to limit the involvement and influence of those who come from the underside of society in politics.

**Taboos in Sexuality:** The term sexual taboo refers to various societal prohibitions on atypical sexual behavior, desire, or identity among those who comply with customary rules. Premarital or extramarital sex, same sex practice, BDSM behavior, non-binary or transgender identities may be classified as taboo sexual acts in these cultures. Cultural and historical sexual taboos depend on highly rooted beliefs, ethical standards and religion. Sexual taboos should be challenged by campaigning for sex liberation, education, and acceptance.

**Taboos in Feminism:** Taboos involve social conventions and prohibitions which stop or limit talk about as well as support for female-related issues or aims within the framework of feminism. Such areas may cover issues like sexual rights, domestic violence, female marginality, and women's emancipation among others. Other feminist taboos involve body image, intersectionality, and a critique on masculinity./ They break the female stereotype through a discussion on issues like gender equality, ending sexism in the society, and the disintegration of male dominance.

### Feminism: A Political Movement

Feminism is primarily a feminist political movement that has as its only goal the granting of political rights to women. In its capacity as a political movement, it works assiduously to eliminate sexual harassment of women, eliminate sexual violence against them, provide women the right to maternity leave, abolish domestic abuse, and achieve equal pay for equal labour. So, feminism and politics go hand in hand as, at its core, feminism was a political movement that emerged in the

19th century to provide women political rights, particularly "suffrage," or the ability to vote. In the 1960s and 1970s, feminism gained enormous popularity and became a household term.

Given that it was effective in granting women the right to vote in several nations, the first wave of feminism was very successful. For instance, New Zealand granted women citizens the right to vote in 1893. Likewise, it achieved more popularity in 1895 when South Australia made it available to its female inhabitants, and Australia did the same in 1902. The United Kingdom made a revolutionary step towards ending discrimination against women by granting them the right to vote through the Electoral Reform of Representation of the People Act 1918, which was later modified and renamed the Representation of People Act 1928, which ensured that women were granted this right to vote to an adequate degree. The Sex Disqualification Act of 1919, which gave women equal professional rights, was another significant achievement of feminism.

The first wave of feminism was led by Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who advocated for the abolition of slavery in America. Later, they shifted their focus to obtaining the right to vote for women, and they successfully achieved their goals. With the conclusion of the first wave of feminism, slavery was abolished and equality was achieved in America. A statement of women's freedom and two main concerns were expressed during the conference for women's rights that Mott and Stanton staged in New York: 1) Man has been cruel, and he has denied women the ability to vote 2) Because women own no property, males have limited their freedom. In order to introduce democratic principles, feminism did so. A democracy that did not include feminism would have been biased towards males and would not have been a real democracy. Because of feminism's emphasis on closing the gap that separates the sexes, new opportunities for democracy have been opened up.

### **Reproductive Rights and Legal Changes**

These are the rights that are based on some of the universally recognised human rights that are endorsed by several nations. The United Nations provided the blueprint for reproduction rights in 1968 at one of its sessions on human rights, as it articulated the significance of these rights in a clear and concise manner. The first formal document to record and include reproduction rights was the Proclamation of Tehran, which came after. Reproductive rights are as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO): Reproductive rights are based on the understanding that every couple and individual has the fundamental right to choose freely and responsibly how many, how often, and when to have children, as well as the right to the best possible level of sexual and reproductive health and the resources to make such decisions. They also include everyone's freedom to make reproductive choices free from violence, coercion, and discrimination.

The following legal rights for women are included under reproductive rights.

1. Legalised right to have the will to decide abortion and to undergo safe abortion
2. Right to birth control
3. Right to go for willing sterilisation. No one force and coerce to undergo sterilization.
4. Right to sex education and knowledge about STD (Sexually Transmitted diseases).

Reproductive rights are almost non-existent in nations like India, where women still lack access to safe abortion techniques and contraception. In India, there is still more work to be done to secure the right to procreate.

### Ending Legal Subordination: The Abolition of Coverture

A common legal practise in England throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, known as "coverture," allowed a woman's husband to usurp her ability to engage into any transaction involving her property since a woman and a man were considered to be one soul. William Blackstone focuses on Coverture in the following manner:

In our legal system, a woman who marries is referred to as a feme-covert, meaning that she is under the protection and influence of her husband, baron, or lord. She is also known as being covert-baron, meaning that her condition during her marriage is known as her coverture. This means that the woman's very being or legal existence is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection, and cover she performs everything. Nearly all of the legal responsibilities, privileges, and limitations that either spouse gains via marriage are based on this idea of a union of persons in husband and wife. I'm talking about rights that are just personal right now, not property rights. As a result, a man cannot give his wife anything or make a covenant with her since doing so would imply her independent existence, and making a covenant with her would mean making a covenant with himself alone. As a result, it is also typically true that any agreements made by a husband and wife when they are single are nullified upon getting married.

### Feminism's Impact in India

According to Nayantra Sehgal, "feminism is making tremendous impact in India with less noise and drama than in the West."<sup>5</sup> The mid-1800s saw the emergence of feminism in India.

The following dates correlate to its division into three phases:

**First Phase:** Started off in 1850 and continued till 1915. Bringing about social equality for women was the main focus of this period. During that time, several societal ills, including child marriage, Sati, and Jauhar, were wished to be eradicated. Removal of Sati: Only referring to our nation, India, feminism gave women a lot of optimism. From historical accounts, we may infer that the Indian feminist movement arose from the desire to eradicate societal injustices such as child marriage, Sati Pratha, and the prohibition on widow remarriage. These practises are all like a foul-smelling dead corpse in the community. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda, and others opposed these customs and worked to promote awareness among the populace, encouraging an end to these outmoded and decaying rites. Their efforts resulted in a significant political change, leading to the passing of The Bengal Sati Regulation on December 4, 1829, which outlawed the burning of sati in any state of British India.

**Second Phase of feminism & Gandhi:** coincides with that of the freedom movement of India and continues till 1947. It was Gandhi's arrival on the political scene. Gandhi was a feminist because he advocated for women and supported their education, although to a different extent. Along with believing that women and men should be treated equally, he also made sure that women could

participate in the political campaign he led against the British government. In praising the qualities of women, he remarked, "To me, not the weaker sex, but the better half of humanity—the female sex—none is so degrading, so shocking, or so brutal as his abuse of that better half of humanity." Being the living example of selflessness, patience, humility, faith, and wisdom, it is the more honourable of the two. The All India Women's Conference, which worked closely with the Indian National Congress to advance several political changes for women, was established. In Cochin and Travancore in 1920, as well as in the Madras Presidency in 1921, women were granted the ability to vote.

**Third phase:** The post-independence period was the third phase of feminism. Women worked to find solutions to specific problems. Following independence, it was political activity. rights such as equal pay for equal labour and the ability to work in professions where men may work without facing discrimination, while women were hired in fields requiring no technical or skill-specific training. Through their efforts, they were able to obtain several rights for themselves. In effect were the Hindu Marriage Act of 1956, the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, and the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971.

**Hindu marriage Act (1955)-** Hindu weddings were made more standardised as a result of this ordinance. It was passed to put a stop to certain inconsistencies in Hindu weddings and to explicitly state that marriages are lawful. This deed enhanced women's integrity. A few provisions are outlined in the statute.

- The woman's age cannot be less than 18 and the man's age must be less than 21.
- Nobody ought to get married when they should.
- No one ought to be powerless.
- Consent should not be impossible for any party to provide. They need to be of sound mind.
- When marrying another guy, the woman shouldn't be expecting a child.

The marriage age for women was set as a result of this statute. Women's consent to marriage was made mandatory; otherwise, the forced union would be deemed invalid.

Analogously, the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, heralded equality by requiring gender parity and granting women ownership of the acquired property, so eliminating the restricted ownership status. The statute was revised in 2005, confirming that girls have the same right to inherit their dead parent's possessions as males have in the event that the deceased passes away without leaving a will. The 1971 Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act provided women with more support by outlining the precise circumstances under which a pregnancy might be terminated and prohibiting a woman's husband or in-laws from forcibly ending her pregnancy. Pregnancy cannot be terminated if it lasts longer than 12 weeks. Under this statute, a certified medical practitioner is the only person authorised to terminate a pregnancy under two circumstances:

1. If the gestational age is under 12 weeks.
2. If there are certain requirements met and the pregnancy lasts more than 12 weeks but less than 20 weeks:

- If two licenced medical professionals concur that extending the pregnancy would negatively affect the woman's health (either physically or psychologically).
- To save the woman's life as soon as possible. Mental health indicates whether or not rape, or forced communion, was the cause of the pregnancy.

The couple's inability to utilise contraception leads to pregnancy since they do not desire a kid, which would psychologically burden them upon the child's birth.)

### **Breaking Barriers: The Abolition of Triple Talaq in India**

In the Muslim community, triple talaq, also known as quick divorce, is a popular divorce method whereby a man may end a marriage by pronouncing the word "Talaq" three times, either vocally, in writing, or via the use of an electronic device. Indian feminists have often contested this Muslim edict, and the issue has been discussed. The Supreme Court of India found triple talaq to be unlawful and an oppressive method of oppressing women on August 22, 2017, which was a significant victory.

### **Unveiling Hidden Trauma: Addressing Marital Rape**

Marital rape is one of the frequent crimes against women. Due to the widespread attention that feminism has received for this particular topic, marital rape has been deemed illegal in many nations. Following their marriage, a guy begins to see his wife as his property and takes advantage of her, whether or not she gives her permission. In most Western nations, this is considered offensive as it produces a lasting negative imprint on the woman's mind, which she probably finds quite enjoyable to keep controlling her life. Feminism made the argument that a man's marriage does not provide him the right to satisfy his sexual desires with his spouse without her agreement, and they asked that this behaviour be labelled as rape and unconstitutional. Marital rape was deemed to violate the most basic human rights by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in 1993, who also released a Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Women's sexuality and reproductive roles are often connected to human rights violations, according to a 2012 declaration made by High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillai. (..) Married women sometimes lack the right to avoid sexual intercourse with their spouses and are frequently unable to choose whether to use contraception. (..) The first vital step towards attaining meaningful equality between men and women is to guarantee women's complete sovereignty over their bodies. The core of leading a dignified life is addressing personal matters, such as when, how, and with whom they choose to have sex and when, how, and with whom they choose to have children.

Marital rape was made illegal in the Soviet Union in 1922, and it was also made illegal in New Zealand in 1985, Ireland in 1990, New South Wales in 1981, Canada in 1983, Austria in 1989, Switzerland in 1992, and Germany in 1997. In India, there is no legal definition for marital rape. Marital rape is considered illegal under Section 375 of the IPC if the victim is a woman under the age of fifteen. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), which was implemented in India in 2006, is where the victims are transferred. As per the opinion of a



renowned Indian counsel, it is presumed that a woman who marries a guy consents to engaging in sexual relations with him at any point. Because her agreement is presumed, even if he pushes himself on her, he is not committing a crime (or rape). The woman's movement has continuously called for changes to the legislation regarding rape. A recent ruling by an English court suggested that rape committed inside a marriage may constitute a crime. Many states in the United States have specifically altered their original laws to make it illegal.

### **Defying Social Norms: Challenging Sexual Taboos**

As Kate Millet put it in *Sexual Politics*, "sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power, however muted its present appearance may be." The political game has been played by the sexes, with women being marginalised via shrewd political moves. Feminism, or the women's movement, worked tirelessly to change this tightly knit political structure. As a result, women have evolved from being passive, subjugated, and subservient to being confident and selfassured. They have left their little, cramped environment behind and entered a wide, vibrant, and enthusiastic world. They've been taken advantage of by the manner they were so stereotypical. They have experienced appropriate empowerment and have realised their whole potential. Previous generations of women have fully embraced every facet of their bodies and sexualities, despite their extreme shyness in doing so. Thanks to the marriage rape laws, which have so strongly established their rights that women may reject their husbands' approaches and choose whether or not to satiate them, they have chosen for themselves when and with whom to fulfil their biological requirements. The topic of sexuality has been addressed by several Indian women authors. Padma Shree Shashi Deshpande deserves particular recognition despite the fact that many authors have written on Indian women and how they are coping with their circumstances. She does a great job of accurately defining the woman and her situation. Not only that, but she has accurately portrayed many facets of her life. For example, Sarita, the lead female character in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and Mira, the lead female character in *The Binding Vine*, are victims of marital rape. Sarita finds it impossible to suppress her psychological pain:

The horrifically familiar body was attacked by a hideous creature with ferocious jaws and painful hands. Above me, I couldn't identify the face. I was immobilised for a moment by my total lack of understanding and astonishment. Then I was having trouble. Despite my physical discomfort, I was unable to stop the overwhelming force that overcame me.

The humiliation and suffering associated with rape, particularly in marriage, are intolerable for a woman. The idea that her greatest love is also her nighttime rapist is too much for Sarita to grasp. Shashi Deshpande notes that Mira expressed the same anxiety in poetry in a different book, stating that "a strong, clear thread of an intense dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion from the man she married" throughout all of her work. Because women were seen as submissive and passive entities in old Indian culture, it was seen as very inappropriate for a woman to express her emotions for sexual fulfilment. However, women have risen from the background to the forefront and are no longer embarrassed to claim their sexual orientation as they have been progressively placed on an equal footing with males. They get the same treatment as males even

in married life, on average. They are speaking out and expressing themselves about all aspects of their sexuality as a result. Sharupnakha was the first to express her sexuality, but she felt ashamed since society was so startled to see her do so. According to Greer, one of the most deceptive features of groups such as the National Organisation of Women is that it is often believed— even by feminists—that sexuality is the adversary of a woman who really wants to develop these components of her identity. It was the American woman student's emphasis on a passive sexual role, not her insistence on having sex, that undermined her ambition to make a success out of her study.

Given that women have contributed to their own victimisation by refusing to accept their own femininity and sexuality, the majority of feminists' opinions regarding the roles that women have succinctly chosen to play in society are somewhat justified. Women have been conditioned to create negative and inferior feelings about their own sex because they have been so socialised that it is imprinted in their inner awareness that they are women because of their sexuality: the way their bodies are. Because they are missing certain reproductive organs, they have accepted that they are female. Women have spent the most of their time thinking that they are women. The way their bodies behaved throughout puberty made them feel humiliated, they were unable to handle the traps others put in their path, and they were never comfortable with the parts of their developing bodies, much alone the idea of coming out as gay. Society has been outraged by women expressing their sexual wants, especially when they do so in front of their husbands. This makes the guy agitated and makes him wonder how his submissive and bashful wife could possibly think that way. It's time to reflect and reconsider:

Men are educated early into their life to be visually attracted by women's bodies and less sensitive to being aroused by women's personalities; women, on the other hand, are programmed to be less visually aroused and more emotionally aroused. Men's dominance in the myth is maintained by this imbalance in sexual education: they see women's bodies, assess them, and move on, but they do not observe, assess, take, or ignore their own bodies.

That being said, there is no "rock called gender" to blame for it; instead, true mutuality—an equal gaze, same vulnerability, and equal desire—can cause heterosexual men and women to come together.

But as time has passed, profound changes are becoming apparent in society. Western nations have already transformed; their women have broken free from the chains that bound them for so long. India is battling a few problems. I will not dispute that women have not changed. Indian women have even rejected the stereotype of them as timid, submissive, and subdued. They have faith in who they are. To sum up, the following quotation drives home the point home: although there is still more to be done to advance women's rights, feminism has made a significant contribution to political rights that should not be undervalued.

It still amazes me, as the year 2000 draws near, that I have been a part of a movement that has changed American culture in less than 40 years, to the point where young women nowadays seem unable to comprehend that women were not always viewed as persons in their own right and as equals to men.



## Conclusion

Conclusively, feminism has been instrumental in transforming cultures worldwide by championing women's rights and questioning deeply ingrained gender stereotypes. The movement's historical trajectory, from the 19th century to the present, demonstrates its many accomplishments and the revolutionary influence it has had.

With the help of activists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the first wave of feminism was able to win women's suffrage and other political rights in a number of different countries. The groundwork for gender equality in a variety of fields was laid by this first wave, which also tackled important concerns including the eradication of slavery and equal professional rights.

Reproductive rights, which support a woman's freedom to decide when and how to have children as well as her access to safe abortion, contraception, and comprehensive sex education, have evolved into a central component of feminism. Even while there has been progress in many regions of the globe, there are still issues in nations like India where efforts to protect fundamental rights are still continuing.

India's feminism has undergone many stages as it has worked to eradicate social inequities and guarantee women's political and legal rights. This advancement was made possible in large part by the initiatives of organisations like the All India Women's Conference and individuals like Mahatma Gandhi.

In addition, feminism has pushed back against the idea of coverture, eliminated harmful customs like triple talaq, combated marital rape, and given women the confidence to own their bodies and express their sexuality.

All things considered, feminism has played a major role in advancing gender equality and tearing down patriarchal systems. The fight for women's rights and empowerment is still ongoing, despite significant advancements, in order to guarantee that everyone has the freedom to make decisions about their bodies, lives, and futures without facing violence or discrimination.

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