



Research Article

# Western and Indian Feminism: A Comparative Study of Ideologies, Contexts, and Impacts

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## Abstract

This research examines feminism as a multifaceted movement dedicated to achieving gender equality, with a focus on both Western and Indian feminist ideologies. It examines the historical evolution of feminism through its three major waves, investigating the movement's socio-political impact, particularly in challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for women's rights. The study highlights key differences between Western and Indian feminism, noting how cultural, historical, and socio-economic contexts shape their respective approaches. Western feminism emphasizes individual autonomy, legal rights, and systemic reform, while Indian feminism incorporates indigenous traditions and local issues such as caste, dowry, and education disparities. Using a qualitative comparative methodology, the research draws from primary and secondary sources—including feminist literature, historical texts, and legislative documents—to analyse the intersections and divergences between the two movements. A significant research gap is identified in the underrepresentation of Indian feminist thought in global academic discourse. The findings aim to enrich feminist theory by providing a balanced comparative framework and promoting a more inclusive understanding of gender justice across diverse societies.

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**KEYWORDS:** Feminism, Feminist, Gender Justice, Famine, Western Feminism, Indian Feminism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a socio-political and intellectual movement aimed at achieving equal rights and opportunities for women. It challenges patriarchal norms and systemic inequalities that have historically marginalized women, advocating for their rights across political, social, educational, and economic spheres. Emerging in the 18th century, feminism evolved through multiple waves, addressing various aspects of gender inequality. In India, it contributed to reforms against child marriage, sati, and the denial of education to girls, while also

promoting women's participation in fields like business, academia, and the military. The movement arose as a response to traditional norms that confined women to domestic roles, denying them autonomy and voice. Feminism, derived from the Latin "famine" (woman), represents the struggle for gender equality and the dismantling of male-centered ideologies. Prominent thinkers like Barbara Smith and Bell Hooks define feminism as a movement to end sexism and oppression. It spans issues like education, politics, and social justice, aiming to ensure equal treatment and opportunity for all.

In conclusion, feminism is a vital force in challenging outdated norms, empowering women, and fostering a more just and inclusive society.

Feminism is a social, political, and intellectual movement committed to securing equal rights and opportunities for women. At its core, it challenges patriarchal systems, gender-based discrimination, and societal norms that have historically suppressed women's autonomy and potential. Feminism strives for equality in all spheres—political, social, educational, economic, and cultural—ensuring that women have the same freedoms and opportunities as men.

The movement gained prominence in the 18th century and evolved through several waves, each addressing different facets of inequality. The first wave focused on legal rights, especially suffrage; the second emphasized equality in the workplace, education, and family life; and the third and fourth waves addressed issues like identity, intersectionality, and representation.

In India, feminism has played a crucial role in bringing attention to deep-rooted cultural and social injustices. Activists and reformers helped abolish harmful practices such as sati, child marriage, female infanticide, and the denial of education to girls. Indian feminism also emphasized women's roles beyond traditional domestic confines, advocating for their presence in academia, business, politics, and the arts.

Historically, women were confined to the household, often seen as subservient to men, and expected to sacrifice their ambitions for the sake of family. Feminism emerged as a counterforce to this imbalance, fighting against the idea that physical strength or social conditioning justifies male dominance. It redefined women's roles in both public and private life.

The term "feminism" comes from the Latin *femina* (woman) and the suffix *-ism*, representing a belief or movement. Thinkers like Barbara Smith and Bell Hooks have described feminism as a movement to end sexism and all forms of gender-based oppression. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, feminism is both the belief in gender equality and the organized effort to achieve it.

Ultimately, feminism is not just about women's rights—it is about creating a more just, inclusive, and balanced society for everyone. It continues to break barriers, challenge outdated norms, and empower individuals to live freely, regardless of gender.

### Research Gap

Despite the comprehensive documentation of Western feminist movements, there remains a lack of in-depth, comparative academic work on Indian feminism and its evolving contemporary relevance. This research seeks to bridge that gap by examining both Western and Indian feminist ideologies through historical and modern lenses, offering a comparative perspective that highlights their contributions to global feminist discourse.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Western feminism has been extensively explored in academic discourse, particularly around themes such as suffrage, reproductive rights, workplace equality, and political representation. Pioneering feminist thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan have played pivotal roles in shaping modern feminist theory, focusing on issues of individual autonomy and systemic gender inequality.

In contrast, Indian feminism, while less prominent in mainstream global feminist literature, presents a rich and unique perspective rooted in cultural, spiritual, and historical traditions. Indian feminist thought often draws from ancient texts and practices that emphasize holistic and balanced gender relations. For instance, the Vedic period reflects instances of gender parity, where women such as Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi were respected for their intellectual and spiritual wisdom.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative comparative approach to examine Western and Indian feminism. Primary sources include historical texts, legislative records, and feminist literature, while secondary sources include peer-reviewed academic articles and case studies. The research methodology involves:

- **Problem Identification:** To explore and differentiate the foundational concepts of Western and Indian feminist ideologies.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Evaluation of feminist developments across both cultural contexts using theoretical and empirical evidence.
- **Contextual Study:** Understanding how local socio-cultural, religious, and historical contexts shape feminist movements.

### Research Questions

- What are the core principles of Western and Indian feminism?
- How have these ideologies shaped gender equality and feminist activism in their respective societies?
- In what ways do Western and Indian feminism intersect, diverge, or complement one another?

### Hypothesis

While differing in historical development, cultural foundations, and strategic focus, both Western and Indian feminist ideologies significantly contribute to the broader feminist movement and are essential for understanding the global pursuit of gender equality.

### Key Concepts for Comparison

#### Western Feminism:

- Focuses on individual autonomy, legal equality, and civil rights.
- Major reforms include advancements in reproductive rights, equal pay, and political representation.

- Often confrontational and seeks structural change through protest and legal reform.

**Indian Feminism:**

- Emphasizes cultural continuity, social cohesion, and non-violent resistance.  
Draws strength from historical traditions of intellectual and spiritual equality (e.g., Vedic women philosophers).
- Tackles context-specific issues such as dowry, caste-based discrimination, and access to education

**Waves of Feminism**

Feminism is not a modern idea that emerged only in the 18th century—it has existed in the thoughts and experiences of women long before that time. However, it was during the 18th century that feminist ideas began to spread widely and take organized form, eventually developing into distinct "waves" that reflected the evolving struggles and goals of women across different periods.

**First Wave of Feminism**

The first wave marked the beginning of the organized feminist movement. It took place between the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in regions such as Europe, North America, Egypt, Iran, and India. The main focus of this wave was on achieving basic legal and political rights for women—particularly the right to vote, property ownership, and economic equality. Key figures like Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Doyle, William Thompson, and Harriet Taylor played significant roles in shaping this movement. Wollstonecraft notably stated, "*Virtue can only flourish among equals*," emphasizing the importance of equality between the sexes.

**Second Wave of Feminism**

Emerging during the 1960s and continuing into the 1980s, the second wave gained momentum in the United States, Britain, and Europe. This phase of feminism aimed to address deeper social and psychological inequalities between men and women. Issues such as workplace discrimination, family roles, reproductive rights, and sexual freedom were central concerns. Feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Carol Hanisch, and Robin Morgan voiced their perspectives through literature, essays, and activism, challenging traditional gender roles.

**Third Wave of Feminism**

The third wave began in the early 1990s and built on the efforts of the earlier movements. However, it also sought to correct the shortcomings of the second wave, particularly in terms of inclusion and representation. This wave focused not only on legal and political rights but also on reclaiming women's identities and bodily autonomy. It included controversial issues like the role of women in pornography, beauty pageants, and sex work, emphasizing a woman's right to make her own choices.

**Impact of Feminism on Indian Society**

Feminist ideas have also influenced thought and activism in India. Traditionally, Indian society has been patriarchal, with a noticeable imbalance in the male-to-female ratio. This gender disparity, combined with deep-rooted cultural norms, has historically resulted in the marginalization of women. Before the 18th century, many superstitious beliefs and social practices prevailed, often to the detriment of women. These customs discouraged critical thinking and promoted blind acceptance of discriminatory norms.

As awareness spread and feminist movements grew globally, many Indian women began questioning these traditions. Over time, feminist thought began to develop in the Indian context as well, not just through organized movements, but also within the minds of individual women who started resisting social injustice and advocating for their rights

**Western Feminism vs. Indian Feminism**

Western feminism is a broad political and theoretical movement aimed at improving women's lives and dismantling gender-based inequality. Rooted in both activism and academic inquiry, it seeks to examine the forces that restrict women's freedom and offer pathways to change. According to Chaudhuri (2012) <sup>[1]</sup>, Western feminist theories are diverse, reflecting the unique contexts in which they were formed.

A central focus of Western feminism is the critique of traditional concepts of justice and equality as presented in Western philosophy. Many theorists argue that systemic gender inequality cannot be fully addressed through simple legal restitution or compensation. Instead, they work to "denaturalize" gender roles—that is, to show that many traits considered "natural" for women and men are actually socially constructed.

Western feminists also critique legal, social, and economic systems that reinforce gender hierarchies. They explore how power operates in domains such as sexuality, labour, family life, and governance. While there are differing perspectives within the movement, a shared goal is to expose the underlying structures of male dominance and to envision more equitable alternatives. Western feminism is grounded in a wide range of principles aimed at dismantling gender-based inequalities and building a more just and inclusive society. The following key tenets capture the core goals of the movement:

1. **Gender Equality:** Promotes equal rights, opportunities, and treatment for all genders across political, economic, educational, and professional domains.
2. **Critique of Patriarchy:** Examines and challenges patriarchal systems that uphold male dominance and marginalize women and gender minorities.
3. **Intersectionality:** Acknowledges that gender-based oppression is influenced by overlapping factors such as race, class, sexual orientation, ability, and ethnicity. It advocates for a more inclusive and nuanced approach to gender justice.
4. **Reproductive Rights:** Emphasizes women's autonomy over their own bodies, including access to contraception,

safe and legal abortion, and comprehensive reproductive healthcare services.

5. **Denaturalization of Gender Roles:** Argues that traditional gender roles are not biologically determined but socially constructed. Feminism seeks to break down these roles and support diverse expressions of gender identity.
6. **Workplace Equality:** Fights for equal pay, fair hiring practices, and the elimination of gender-based workplace discrimination. It also supports family-friendly policies such as paid parental leave and flexible working arrangements.
7. **Political Representation:** Advocates for increased participation of women in political decision-making to ensure that governance reflects diverse perspectives and experiences.
8. **Combating Violence Against Women:** Works to eliminate all forms of gender-based violence, including domestic abuse, sexual harassment, rape, and human trafficking, while pushing for stronger legal protections and support systems.
9. **Access to Education:** Supports equal access to quality education for girls and women, recognizing education as a foundational tool for empowerment and social mobility.
10. **Media Representation:** Challenges stereotypical and objectifying portrayals of women in media. It promotes representation that reflects the diversity, strength, and complexity of women's lives.

Together, these principles form the backbone of Western feminist thought, guiding efforts to address and transform the systemic inequalities that affect women and gender minorities across societies

### Challenges Western Feminism Poses to Indian Feminism

Feminism in India evolves within a unique social, cultural, and historical context that differs greatly from the Western experience. While Western feminism is often shaped by liberal democratic ideals, focusing on individual rights and personal freedom, Indian feminism is more closely tied to collective values and community responsibilities. These differing perspectives can create tension, as the Western emphasis on individualism may not always align with the deeply rooted familial and social structures in Indian society.

### Cultural and Historical Roots

The Indian feminist movement is shaped by multiple layers of patriarchy, each influenced by region, caste, religion, and local customs. Because of this diversity, Indian feminism cannot follow a single, uniform model—especially not one based solely on Western ideas. While Western feminist thought often highlights gender-based issues in broad strokes, it doesn't always account for the intersectional realities faced by Indian women. To be effective, Indian feminism must consider how caste, class, ethnicity, and religion intersect with gender, requiring a much more nuanced and localized approach.

### Economic and Social Challenges

Indian women often face social issues that are either absent or less prominent in Western societies. Practices like dowry, child marriage, and honour killings are still present in many parts of India and pose severe challenges to women's safety and rights. Western feminist agendas, which often prioritize concerns like workplace discrimination and reproductive autonomy, may not fully address these pressing concerns. Indian feminism, therefore, needs strategies that are tailored to these specific realities.

### Legal and Political Landscape

Western feminist thought has influenced some progressive legal reforms in India, such as the Hindu Succession Act—which grants women equal rights to inherit property—and the Special Marriage Act, which supports the right to marry outside caste or religion. However, despite these legal provisions, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms often limit their practical impact. As a result, there's a gap between what the law promises and what society practices, making legal reforms only one part of a much broader struggle.

### Navigating Resistance and Localization

Many Indian feminists encounter pushback when advocating ideas that are seen as "Western imports." This resistance can come from both men and women who fear a loss of traditional values. Because of this, Indian feminists often need to reinterpret and adapt global feminist ideas in ways that resonate with local beliefs and lived experiences. The goal is not to reject global feminist thought entirely, but to modify and apply it in ways that reflect Indian realities.

### Representation in Media and Public Discourse

Indian media often highlights global feminist icons and Western movements, sometimes at the expense of local activists and grassroots efforts. This can create the misconception that feminism is a Western concept, disconnected from Indian culture. To counter this, it is crucial to spotlight the contributions of Indian feminist thinkers, activists, and everyday women. Amplifying indigenous voices ensures that feminism in India is seen as a locally grounded, culturally relevant movement.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Feminism, whether in the West or India, arises from a shared goal—to challenge patriarchal systems and promote gender equality. However, the cultural, historical, and social nuances of each region shape the form and focus of their feminist movements. Western feminism, with its emphasis on individual rights, legal autonomy, and systemic reform, has contributed significantly to reshaping modern democratic societies. Indian feminism, meanwhile, has evolved through deeply rooted social struggles involving caste, religion, tradition, and community, requiring a more intersectional and culturally adaptive approach.



Despite these differences, both frameworks are indispensable in the broader feminist discourse. Indian feminists have made crucial gains in areas often overlooked by global narratives, such as fighting dowry practices, caste-based gender oppression, and advocating for women's education in rural areas. However, challenges persist—including the tendency to view feminism through a Western lens, societal resistance to feminist ideas perceived as foreign, and media portrayal that often sidelines local voices.

To ensure meaningful progress, it is essential to acknowledge and respect the diversity within feminist thought. A decolonized, inclusive feminism must uplift indigenous perspectives while learning from global movements. Only by embracing both local contexts and universal principles can feminism effectively address the complex realities women face across the world—and truly become a movement for all.

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