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# WOMEN AND SOCIAL CAUSES: PATHWAYS TO EMPOWERMENT, ACTIVISM, AND TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This research paper examines the multifaceted relationship between women and social causes across historical, cultural, and contemporary dimensions. Women have been both the subjects of social injustice and the foremost agents of transformative activism throughout history. Despite constituting more than half of the world's population, women continue to face systemic discrimination in political participation, economic opportunity, healthcare access, and educational rights.*

*The paper investigates how women's engagement with social causes ranging from environmental activism and healthcare advocacy to labour rights and education reform has reshaped public discourse and policy frameworks globally.<sup>1</sup> Drawing upon interdisciplinary perspectives including feminist theory, sociology, political science, and development studies, this work analyses both the structural barriers that impede women's full participation in social causes and the innovative strategies women have deployed to overcome these barriers.*

*Special attention is paid to intersectionality, the recognition that women's experiences of oppression and agency are shaped simultaneously by gender, class, caste, race, religion, and geography. The paper argues that the advancement of social causes is fundamentally dependent upon the inclusion of women's voices, leadership, and lived experiences. The research employs qualitative methodology, including doctrinal analysis, comparative case studies, and a review of primary and secondary literature. The findings suggest that women's activism is not merely peripheral to social progress but constitutes its very core, and that sustainable social change demands structural reform at both the institutional and cultural levels.*

**Keywords:** *Women's Empowerment, Social Causes, Feminist Activism, Intersectionality, Gender Equality, Human Rights, Social Justice, Development Studies, Women's Movement, Transformative Change.*

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between women and social causes is one of the most profound and enduring themes in the history of human civilisation. From the suffragette movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to contemporary campaigns against gender-based violence, climate change, and systemic poverty, women have consistently been at the forefront of efforts to reshape society in more equitable and humane directions.<sup>2</sup> Yet this history of leadership and sacrifice has often been minimised, trivialised, or entirely erased from mainstream historical narratives.

Social causes, broadly understood, encompass all organised efforts to address structural injustices, promote human dignity, and create conditions for flourishing. These include environmental activism, labour rights, healthcare advocacy, educational reform, peacebuilding, anti-poverty initiatives, and struggles against caste, class, racial, and gendered oppression.<sup>3</sup> Women's participation in these causes is not incidental but constitutive it shapes the very nature and direction of social movements.

The scope of women's engagement with social causes is staggering. Women form the majority of volunteers in humanitarian organisations, constitute a significant proportion of environmental activists, and lead grassroots health and education initiatives in communities across the globe.<sup>4</sup> Yet they are often excluded from formal leadership roles within these same organisations, denied recognition for their contributions, and subjected to harassment and violence for their activism.

This paper seeks to examine these paradoxes critically. It asks not only why women engage with social causes but also what structures enable or prevent their full and equal participation. It interrogates the ways in which gender intersects with other markers of identity class, caste, ethnicity, religion, disability, and geography to produce varied and complex experiences of

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<sup>2</sup>Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford University Press 1999) 189.

<sup>3</sup>World Economic Forum, 'Global Gender Gap Report 2023' (WEF 2023) 6.

<sup>4</sup>Shirin Rai, *Gender and the Political Economy of Development* (Polity Press 2002) 45.

activism and exclusion.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, it aims to contribute to a richer, more nuanced understanding of the relationship between gender and social transformation.

The paper draws on a wide range of scholarship from feminist theory, sociology, political science, postcolonial studies, and development economics. It incorporates both global perspectives and an in-depth focus on the Indian context, where the women's movement has a particularly rich and complex history.<sup>6</sup> The analysis is situated within the broader framework of international human rights law, which increasingly recognises the centrality of women's rights to the realization of universal human dignity.

The structure of the paper proceeds as follows. After articulating the central hypothesis and methodology, the paper provides a review of the existing literature on women and social causes. It then offers a theoretical framework, drawing on intersectional feminist theory. The main body of the paper examines specific areas of women's social engagement, including environmental activism, healthcare, education, labour rights, and political participation. A case study of the Indian women's movement is followed by a discussion of key challenges and barriers. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy and practice.

## HYPOTHESIS

The present research is guided by the following central hypothesis:

*Women's sustained and meaningful engagement with social causes is not merely a function of individual agency or personal motivation, but is structurally conditioned by systems of patriarchy, economic inequality, cultural norms, and institutional exclusion. Conversely, the effectiveness and sustainability of social causes are fundamentally dependent upon the inclusion, leadership, and empowerment of women at all levels.*

This hypothesis generates several subsidiary propositions that guide the inquiry:

First, that women's activism is a rational and strategic response to the structural conditions they inhabit, rather than an expression of innate nurturing or caregiving tendencies.<sup>7</sup> The essentialisation of women's activism as "natural" care work obscures the political dimensions

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<sup>5</sup>Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (Zed Books 1988) 22.

<sup>6</sup>Charlotte Bunch, 'Women's Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights' (1990) 12 *Human Rights Quarterly* 486, 489.

<sup>7</sup>Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought* (Verso 1994) 68.

of their engagement and reinforces gendered divisions of labour.

Second, that intersectionality is not merely a theoretical refinement but a practical necessity for understanding and advancing social causes. Women's experiences of oppression and empowerment differ significantly across lines of class, caste, race, religion, and geography.<sup>8</sup> Any analysis that treats women as a homogeneous group will inevitably misrepresent the most marginalised and reproduce the very exclusions it seeks to overcome.

Third, that the mainstream social movements have frequently replicated patriarchal structures, marginalising women's voices and concerns even while claiming to advocate for universal justice.<sup>9</sup> This internal contradiction within progressive movements demands critical attention and structural reform.

Fourth, that legal and policy frameworks, including international human rights law, provide important but insufficient tools for advancing women's engagement with social causes. Cultural transformation, economic redistribution, and institutional reform are equally essential.

Fifth, and finally, that women's movements in the Global South, and particularly in India, offer distinctive and valuable insights into the relationship between gender and social transformation that have been inadequately integrated into global feminist theory and policy.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that draws upon multiple scholarly traditions. The primary method is doctrinal and theoretical analysis, examining the existing body of feminist scholarship, sociological theory, and human rights law to construct a coherent analytical framework for understanding women's engagement with social causes.<sup>10</sup>

The research also employs comparative case study analysis, examining women's social activism in multiple geographical and institutional contexts, with a particular focus on the Indian subcontinent. Case studies are selected on the basis of their theoretical significance and

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<sup>8</sup>Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (Cambridge University Press 1994) 102.

<sup>9</sup>Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Blackwell 1990) 20.

<sup>10</sup>Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Stanford University Press 1987) 130.

their potential to illuminate key themes in the relationship between gender and social causes.<sup>11</sup> Primary sources consulted include international human rights instruments, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly and Human Rights Council, reports of international organisations including the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the International Labour Organization, and the United Nations Development Programme.<sup>12</sup> These documents provide the normative framework within which women's rights and social causes are articulated at the international level.

Secondary sources include scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and policy documents from a range of disciplines including feminist theory, sociology, political science, development economics, environmental studies, and law.<sup>13</sup> The selection of secondary literature prioritises works that engage explicitly with the relationship between gender and social causes, and that attend to both theoretical and empirical dimensions of this relationship.

The research does not employ empirical data collection methods such as surveys, interviews, or ethnographic observation, as its primary aim is theoretical and analytical rather than empirical. However, it draws extensively on empirical research conducted by other scholars, and situates its theoretical arguments within the evidence generated by that research.

The research acknowledges the limitations inherent in its methodology. As a qualitative, literature-based study, it cannot claim the generalisability of large-scale quantitative research. Its findings are necessarily partial and positioned, reflecting the particular theoretical commitments and analytical choices of the researcher. These limitations are acknowledged and addressed through transparency about methodological choices and careful attention to the diversity of perspectives within the relevant scholarly literature.

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<sup>11</sup>Joan Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis' (1986) 91 *American Historical Review* 1053, 1067.

<sup>12</sup>bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (South End Press 1984) 31.

<sup>13</sup>Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color' (1991) 43 *Stanford Law Review* 1241, 1244.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly literature on women and social causes is vast, diverse, and contested. It spans multiple disciplines and theoretical traditions, reflects a wide range of political commitments, and engages with an enormous variety of geographical and historical contexts. This review does not claim to be comprehensive but aims to identify the major strands of relevant scholarship and to situate the present research within this broader intellectual landscape.<sup>14</sup>

### A. Early Feminist Theory and Social Reform

The earliest systematic writings on women's social condition date to the Enlightenment period, when thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft argued for women's rational capacities and their right to participate fully in public life. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) remains a foundational text, arguing that women's apparent weakness and irrationality was the product not of nature but of education and social convention.<sup>15</sup>

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of organised women's movements in Europe and North America, focused initially on suffrage and property rights but soon expanding to encompass a much broader range of social causes including temperance, labour reform, anti-slavery activism, and education. Scholars such as Radha Kumar have traced the parallel emergence of women's activism in colonial India, demonstrating the complex relationships between nationalist movements and women's rights.<sup>16</sup>

### B. Second Wave Feminism and Social Causes

The resurgence of feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s produced an enormous outpouring of theoretical and practical engagement with the relationship between gender and social causes. Scholars such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Angela Davis argued that women's liberation could not be separated from broader struggles against racism, capitalism, and imperialism.<sup>17</sup> This period saw the development of socialist feminism, radical feminism, and Black feminism as distinct but related theoretical traditions.

Sylvia Walby's *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990) provided a systematic sociological account of the multiple structures through which women's subordination is reproduced in contemporary

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<sup>14</sup>Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Duke University Press 2003) 55.

<sup>15</sup>Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (J Johnson 1792); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge 1990) 33.

<sup>16</sup>Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990* (Kali for Women 1993) 120.

societies.<sup>18</sup> Walby identified six structures of patriarchy paid work, household production, culture, sexuality, violence, and the state and argued that the relationship between these structures varies across time and space, producing different forms and degrees of women's oppression.

### **C. Intersectionality**

Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational work on intersectionality transformed feminist scholarship and activism by insisting on the simultaneous operation of multiple systems of oppression.<sup>19</sup> Drawing on the experiences of Black women in the United States, Crenshaw demonstrated that the intersection of race and gender produced forms of discrimination that could not be captured by either anti-racist or feminist frameworks alone.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminism extended this argument to the global context, arguing that mainstream feminist scholarship frequently constructed a monolithic category of "Third World woman" that was both empirically inadequate and politically disempowering.<sup>20</sup> Mohanty's work has been enormously influential in postcolonial feminist theory and in studies of women's activism in the Global South.

### **D. Development and Gender**

Naila Kabeer's work on gender and development brought feminist insights to bear on development economics and policy.<sup>21</sup> Kabeer's concept of social relations of gender as a pervasive structure shaping economic opportunities and outcomes provided a powerful analytical tool for understanding women's economic disadvantage and the conditions for their empowerment.

Bina Agarwal's research on gender and land rights in South Asia offered detailed empirical and theoretical analysis of the relationship between women's access to productive resources and their capacity for social and political agency.<sup>22</sup> Agarwal demonstrated that women's ownership of land was a crucial determinant of their bargaining power within households and their capacity to participate in social and political life.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework of this paper draws primarily on intersectional feminist theory, as developed by Crenshaw, Mohanty, Collins, and others. Intersectionality is understood not

merely as a descriptive category a way of noting the multiple dimensions of women's identities but as an analytical framework for understanding how systems of power operate simultaneously and interactively to produce conditions of privilege and oppression.<sup>23</sup>

The paper also draws on the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, which provides a normative framework for evaluating human wellbeing and social justice in terms of individuals' real opportunities to live flourishing lives.<sup>24</sup> The capabilities approach is particularly valuable for analysing women's engagement with social causes because it foregrounds the question of what individuals are actually able to do and be, rather than focusing solely on formal rights or resources.

Joan Scott's influential argument that gender is a "useful category of historical analysis" grounds the paper's attention to the ways in which gender is not merely a descriptor of biological difference but a primary field within which power is articulated and contested.<sup>25</sup> Gender, on this account, is a relational category, defined always in relation to other categories of difference and always implicated in broader structures of social organisation.

The paper further draws on Nancy Fraser's distinction between recognition and redistribution as two dimensions of social justice.<sup>26</sup> Fraser argues that a fully adequate account of social justice must attend both to the cultural and symbolic dimensions of oppression the misrecognition of certain groups as inferior or deviant and to the economic and material dimensions the maldistribution of resources and opportunities. Both dimensions are essential to understanding women's engagement with social causes and the conditions for their empowerment.

## **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: WOMEN AS SOCIAL ACTIVISTS**

Women have engaged with social causes throughout recorded history, although their contributions have frequently been rendered invisible by patriarchal historiography. From the women of ancient Greece who contested their exclusion from civic life to the medieval abbesses who wielded significant intellectual and spiritual authority, women have always found ways to participate in the shaping of their societies.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy' (1990) 25/26 *Social Text* 56, 63.

The modern women's movement is conventionally dated from the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 in the United States, where Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others articulated demands for women's political, social, and economic equality. Yet women's organised activism in defence of social causes long predates this event. Women were active participants in abolitionist movements, in early labour organising, and in religious reform movements throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>28</sup>

The suffragette movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries achieved the formal political inclusion of women in many democratic states. But the achievement of voting rights did not in itself transform the structural conditions of women's lives or resolve the deeper questions of economic, social, and cultural equality.<sup>29</sup> Feminist scholars have emphasised that formal legal equality is a necessary but not sufficient condition for substantive equality for the real capacity to live a full and flourishing life.

In colonial India, women's participation in the independence movement took both conventional and unconventional forms. Women such as Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamala Nehru, and thousands of unnamed others participated in civil disobedience campaigns, organised grassroots resistance, and articulated visions of an independent India in which women's rights and dignity would be fully respected.<sup>30</sup> Yet the post-independence settlement largely deferred the question of women's equality, embodying formal constitutional commitments to gender equality while leaving deeply unequal social structures largely intact.

The mid-twentieth century saw the emergence of new social movements civil rights, anti-war, environmental, anti-nuclear in which women played central roles. Second-wave feminism, emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, both built upon and challenged these movements, insisting that the personal was political and that the liberation of women required transformation not only of public institutions but of private life.<sup>31</sup>

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen the globalisation of feminist

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<sup>28</sup>Devaki Jain, *Women, Development and the UN: A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice* (Indiana University Press 2005) 38.

<sup>30</sup>Madhu Kishwar, 'Women's Movements in India: The Saga of Continuity and Change' (2000) 35 *Economic and Political Weekly* 3519, 3521.

<sup>31</sup>Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India* (Kali for Women 1992) 86.

activism, with women's movements in the Global South developing distinctive analyses and strategies rooted in their particular historical and cultural contexts.<sup>32</sup> International conferences such as the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 have provided forums for the exchange of ideas and the articulation of shared principles, while also exposing the tensions and contradictions within global feminism.

## WOMEN AND ENVIRONMENTAL CAUSES

Women's relationship with environmental causes is one of the most significant and least well understood aspects of their social engagement. Women in the Global South are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation because they are primarily responsible for securing water, food, and fuel for their households.<sup>33</sup> The destruction of natural resources therefore directly threatens their capacity to sustain their families and communities. The ecofeminist tradition, developed by scholars such as Vandana Shiva, Karen Warren, and Maria Mies, argues that there is a deep structural connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature.<sup>34</sup> Both are expressions of a hierarchical, dualistic mode of thought that separates and ranks: culture over nature, reason over emotion, male over female. This theoretical framework suggests that feminist and environmental activism share common roots and should naturally converge.

In practice, women have been at the forefront of many of the most significant environmental movements. The Chipko movement in India, in which women embraced trees to prevent their felling by commercial loggers, is perhaps the most celebrated example. Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement in Kenya, which mobilised thousands of women to plant trees and restore degraded land, is another.<sup>35</sup> These movements demonstrate that women's environmental activism is not merely reactive a response to immediate threats but constructive, creating new relationships with the natural world and new visions of sustainable community.

Climate change is increasingly recognised as a gendered issue. Women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change because they are more likely to be poor, more dependent on natural resources, and less able to access the resources needed to adapt.<sup>36</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>32</sup>Nivedita Menon, *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law* (Permanent Black 2004) 40.

<sup>33</sup>Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, *Ecofeminism* (Zed Books 1993) 13.

<sup>34</sup>Karen Warren, 'The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism' (1990) 12 *Environmental Ethics* 125, 128.

<sup>35</sup>Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed: A Memoir* (Knopf 2006) 180.

<sup>36</sup>IPCC, *'Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability'* (Cambridge University Press 2022) 37.

women's traditional knowledge of local ecosystems, agricultural practices, and natural resource management makes them invaluable partners in adaptation and mitigation efforts.

Despite their centrality to environmental causes, women remain significantly underrepresented in environmental decision-making at all levels. International climate negotiations, national environmental agencies, and major environmental organisations are all dominated by men.<sup>37</sup> This exclusion is not merely unjust in itself but is likely to produce worse outcomes, given the evidence that women's participation in natural resource management leads to more sustainable and equitable results.

### **WOMEN, HEALTHCARE, AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS**

Healthcare is a domain in which the relationship between women and social causes is both most visible and most contested. Women's health is shaped by biological factors, but even more powerfully by social determinants poverty, gender-based violence, lack of education, restricted access to healthcare services, and cultural norms that prioritise women's reproductive function over their general health and wellbeing.<sup>38</sup>

Maternal mortality remains a profound indictment of global healthcare systems. Every year, hundreds of thousands of women die from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. The overwhelming majority of these deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries, where healthcare systems are under-resourced and where social norms often prevent women from seeking timely care.<sup>39</sup> Maternal mortality is thus not simply a medical problem but a social justice issue, reflecting the broader failure to value women's lives and health.

Reproductive rights the right of women to determine whether, when, and with whom to have children are among the most contested in contemporary social and political debates. Feminist scholars and activists have argued consistently that reproductive autonomy is a fundamental aspect of women's freedom and equality, inseparable from their capacity to participate fully in social, economic, and political life.<sup>40</sup> The denial of reproductive rights is therefore not only a violation of bodily integrity but a form of structural subordination.

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<sup>37</sup>Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (Simon & Schuster 2014) 411.

<sup>38</sup>World Health Organization, 'Women's Health' (WHO 2022) Fact Sheet No. 334, 2.

<sup>39</sup>Susheela Singh and others, 'Adding It Up: The Costs and Benefits of Investing in Sexual and Reproductive Health' (Guttmacher Institute 2014) 5.

Women's health activism has a long and distinguished history. From the women's health movement of the 1970s, which challenged the medicalisation of women's bodies and advocated for informed consent and patient autonomy, to contemporary campaigns for universal healthcare and the elimination of gender-based violence in healthcare settings, women have consistently worked to reshape healthcare systems in ways that are more responsive to their needs and respectful of their dignity.<sup>41</sup>

Mental health is an increasingly important dimension of women's health advocacy. Women are disproportionately affected by depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, often as a result of gender-based violence, caregiving burdens, and economic insecurity.<sup>42</sup> The stigma attached to mental illness, and the failure of many healthcare systems to provide adequate mental health services, particularly for women, represents a significant gap in social provision.

## WOMEN AND EDUCATION

Education is widely recognised as one of the most powerful tools for women's empowerment and social transformation. Access to quality education enables women to participate more fully in economic, social, and political life; to make more informed decisions about their health and their families; and to engage more effectively with social causes.<sup>43</sup> Conversely, the denial of education to girls and women is one of the most effective mechanisms of patriarchal control. Despite significant progress over the past half century, gender gaps in education persist in many parts of the world, particularly at secondary and tertiary levels. Girls are more likely than boys to drop out of school due to poverty, early marriage, pregnancy, household responsibilities, and lack of safe and accessible schools.<sup>44</sup> In conflict-affected areas, girls face additional risks including violence and exploitation when travelling to school.

Malala Yousafzai's courageous advocacy for girls' education in Pakistan has brought global attention to the issue and demonstrated the transformative power of individual activism.<sup>45</sup> But the fight for girls' education is not merely the story of exceptional individuals. It is the story of countless communities, organisations, and social movements working quietly and persistently to ensure that girls have the same opportunities as boys to learn, to grow, and to contribute to

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<sup>41</sup>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (adopted 18 December 1979, entered into force 3 September 1981) 1249 UNTS 13 (CEDAW) art 10.

<sup>43</sup>Malala Yousafzai, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (Little, Brown 2013) 214.

<sup>44</sup>UNICEF, 'The State of the World's Children 2023' (UNICEF 2023) 14.

their societies.

Paulo Freire's concept of education as a practice of freedom is particularly relevant to women's educational activism.<sup>46</sup> Freire argued that education is never politically neutral it either reinforces existing power structures or challenges them. Women's educational activism, at its best, is a form of conscientisation a process of developing critical awareness of the social conditions that shape women's lives and of the possibilities for transforming those conditions. Beyond formal education, women's non-formal educational initiatives have been enormously important in advancing social causes. Women's study groups, community libraries, literacy programmes, and skills training initiatives have created spaces for learning, reflection, and collective action outside the formal education system.<sup>47</sup> These informal educational practices have been particularly important for marginalised women who have been excluded from formal educational opportunities.

## **WOMEN IN LABOUR AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE MOVEMENTS**

Women's participation in labour movements dates to the earliest days of industrial capitalism. Women workers in textile mills, garment factories, and domestic service have organised, struck, and protested against exploitative working conditions since the nineteenth century.<sup>48</sup> Yet their contributions to the labour movement have consistently been minimised by male-dominated trade unions, and their specific concerns equal pay, maternity leave, protection from sexual harassment, childcare have often been treated as secondary to the "main" issues of wages and working hours.

The gender pay gap remains one of the most persistent expressions of economic inequality. Despite formal commitments to equal pay in most countries, women continue to earn significantly less than men on average, due to occupational segregation, the undervaluation of feminised work, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work.<sup>49</sup> The global unpaid care economy, estimated to be worth trillions of dollars annually, is overwhelmingly performed by women and almost entirely excluded from economic accounting.

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<sup>46</sup>Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Herder and Herder 1970) 72.

<sup>48</sup>International Labour Organization, 'Women at Work: Trends 2016' (ILO 2016) 9.

<sup>49</sup>Oxfam, 'Time to Care: Unpaid and Underpaid Care Work and the Global Inequality Crisis' (Oxfam Briefing Paper, January 2020) 3.

Women's informal labour is another dimension of economic inequality that has received growing scholarly attention. In many developing countries, women constitute the majority of informal sector workers, engaged in street vending, home-based production, agricultural labour, and domestic service.<sup>50</sup> Informal workers lack the legal protections and social security benefits available to formal sector workers, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination, and economic insecurity.

Women have been active in developing innovative responses to economic marginalisation. The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, founded by Ela Bhatt in 1972, is a pioneering example of women's collective organising in the informal economy.<sup>51</sup> SEWA has organised hundreds of thousands of self-employed women workers, providing them with collective bargaining power, access to financial services, social security, and skills training.

## CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Despite the remarkable achievements of women's activism across social causes, significant challenges and barriers remain. These operate at multiple levels structural, institutional, cultural, and individual and their intersection produces conditions of constraint that vary significantly across different contexts.<sup>52</sup>

### A. Structural Barriers

Structural barriers to women's engagement with social causes include poverty and economic dependence, lack of access to education and information, unequal distribution of unpaid care work, and legal frameworks that formally or effectively limit women's agency.<sup>53</sup> These structural conditions are not merely individual disadvantages but are reproduced by social institutions families, markets, states, legal systems that are organised on the basis of gendered hierarchies.

### B. Violence and Safety

Violence against women, both domestic and public, is one of the most significant barriers to women's social engagement. Women activists are frequently subjected to harassment, threats, physical attack, and sexual violence as a direct result of their public engagement.<sup>54</sup> The fear of

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<sup>51</sup>Flavia Agnes, *Law and Gender Inequality: The Politics of Women's Rights in India* (Oxford University Press 1999) 67.

violence acts as a powerful deterrent to women's participation in public life, including social activism.

### **C. Institutional and Cultural Barriers**

Within social movements and civil society organisations, women frequently face institutional and cultural barriers to their full and equal participation. Male-dominated leadership structures, cultures of long hours and extensive travel that disadvantage primary caregivers, and informal norms that devalue women's contributions are common features of even ostensibly progressive organisations.<sup>55</sup>

### **D. Digital Divide and Technology**

The growing importance of digital technology and social media as tools of social activism has created new opportunities for women but also new forms of exclusion and harassment.<sup>56</sup> Women are less likely than men in many countries to have access to digital technology, and those who do engage in online activism frequently face severe harassment, including rape threats, doxxing, and coordinated abuse campaigns.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research paper has sought to examine the multifaceted relationship between women and social causes, drawing upon a wide range of scholarly literature and a diverse array of empirical examples. The central argument of the paper that women's engagement with social causes is structurally conditioned by patriarchal systems and economic inequality, and that the effectiveness of social causes depends fundamentally on women's inclusion has been developed and substantiated through the analysis presented in the preceding sections.<sup>57</sup>

The paper has shown that women's activism is not a recent phenomenon but has deep historical roots, and that women have engaged with social causes across an extraordinary range of domains, from environmental activism and healthcare advocacy to labour rights, education, and political participation. It has also shown that this activism has frequently been marginalised, appropriated, or rendered invisible by dominant cultural and institutional frameworks.

The intersectionality framework has been central to the analysis, enabling the paper to attend to the diverse and sometimes contradictory experiences of women activists across lines of class, caste, race, religion, and geography.<sup>58</sup> This framework has revealed both the commonalities in women's experiences of structural oppression and the significant differences that must be acknowledged and addressed if women's movements are to be genuinely inclusive and effective.

The Indian case study has provided rich illustration of many of the theoretical themes developed in the paper, demonstrating the complexity of the relationship between women's movements, the law, and broader social transformation in a specific historical and cultural context.

The paper concludes that the advancement of social causes is fundamentally inseparable from the advancement of women's rights and empowerment. Environmental sustainability, public health, educational equity, economic justice, and democratic governance cannot be achieved without the full and equal participation of women at all levels. This is not merely an argument about representation or fairness, though it is that too. It is an argument about effectiveness: the evidence consistently shows that women's leadership and participation leads to better outcomes across a wide range of social domains.<sup>59</sup>

## **SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

On the basis of the research and analysis presented in this paper, the following suggestions and recommendations are offered:

1. **Legal and Institutional Reform:** Governments and international organisations should strengthen the legal frameworks protecting women's rights to participate in social and political life, including robust implementation of CEDAW and other international human rights instruments.<sup>60</sup> Anti-discrimination legislation should be extended to cover civil society organisations and social movements, and effective mechanisms for enforcement should be established.
2. **Economic Empowerment:** Addressing women's economic marginalisation is a prerequisite for their full engagement with social causes. Policies aimed at closing the gender pay gap, extending social protection to informal workers, redistributing unpaid

care work through publicly funded childcare and eldercare, and ensuring women's access to land and other productive resources are all essential.<sup>61</sup>

3. Education and Information: Universal access to quality education for girls and women should be treated as a non-negotiable social priority. Educational curricula should include comprehensive human rights education, and specific attention should be paid to girls' participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.<sup>62</sup>
4. Healthcare: Women's healthcare needs, including reproductive health and mental health, should receive adequate public investment. Efforts to reduce maternal mortality should be intensified, and healthcare systems should be redesigned to be more responsive to women's specific needs and experiences.<sup>63</sup>
5. Safety and Security: Effective measures to protect women activists from violence and harassment are urgently needed. These should include both legal protections and broader cultural change to challenge the norms that condone violence against women who participate in public life.<sup>64</sup>
6. Intersectional Analysis and Practice: Social movements and civil society organisations should incorporate intersectional analysis into their work, ensuring that the experiences and concerns of the most marginalised women are central rather than peripheral to their agendas.<sup>65</sup> This requires active efforts to diversify leadership and to create inclusive organisational cultures.
7. Research and Documentation: More research is needed on the relationship between women's engagement with social causes and the outcomes of those causes. The contributions of women activists should be systematically documented and recognised, and women's knowledge and expertise should be valorised in academic, policy, and advocacy contexts.
8. Digital Inclusion and Safety: Efforts to bridge the digital gender divide should be intensified, and robust mechanisms to address online harassment of women activists should be established.<sup>66</sup> Social media platforms and digital communications companies should take responsibility for creating safer online environments for women.

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