



Gender, Law, And Justice: A Comparative Study of Feminist Legal Reforms in Emerging Democracies

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Abstract- Gender equality has become an important objective for modern legal systems, especially in emerging democracies where social and political institutions are still developing. Historically, many legal frameworks were shaped by patriarchal norms that limited women's rights and participation in public life. Feminist legal reforms seek to challenge these inequalities by transforming laws, policies, and judicial practices in ways that promote fairness, dignity, and equal protection under the law. This paper examines how feminist perspectives have influenced legal reforms in emerging democratic countries and how these reforms aim to address issues such as gender-based violence, workplace discrimination, unequal property rights, and limited political representation. Using a comparative approach, the study analyzes the role of constitutional provisions, legislative actions, and judicial decisions in promoting gender justice. It also considers the contributions of civil society organizations and feminist movements in advocating for legal change. While many emerging democracies have introduced progressive laws to protect women's rights, significant challenges remain in their effective implementation. Social attitudes, economic inequality, and institutional limitations often restrict access to justice for many women. The study argues that meaningful gender justice requires not only strong legal frameworks but also social awareness, institutional commitment, and continuous policy reforms that ensure equality in both law and practice.

Keywords: Indian Literature, Rabindranath Tagore, Literature and Society, Indian Knowledge System, Interdisciplinarity, Ideology.

I. Introduction

The question of gender equality has become a central issue in contemporary legal and political discourse across the world. In many societies, legal systems were historically shaped by patriarchal structures that limited women's access to rights, resources, and decision-making power. As democratic values expanded and human rights principles gained global recognition, the demand for gender-sensitive legal reforms also increased. Feminist legal scholarship has played an important role in exposing the ways in which traditional legal frameworks often ignored or underestimated the experiences and challenges faced by women. In response, many countries have attempted to reform their laws in order to create more inclusive and equitable systems of justice.

Emerging democracies provide a particularly important context for studying feminist legal reforms. These nations are often in the process of strengthening democratic institutions while simultaneously addressing deep social inequalities. Legal reforms in such countries are not only concerned with expanding formal rights but also with transforming social attitudes and institutional practices that have historically disadvantaged women. Feminist legal reforms therefore focus on a wide range of issues



including protection against gender-based violence, workplace equality, reproductive rights, political participation, and equal access to property and economic resources.

Despite significant progress in many jurisdictions, the relationship between law and gender justice remains complex. The mere existence of progressive legislation does not automatically ensure equality in practice. Implementation gaps, cultural resistance, lack of legal awareness, and limited institutional capacity often prevent women from fully benefiting from legal protections. As a result, scholars and policymakers increasingly emphasize the importance of examining not only the content of legal reforms but also their effectiveness in real social contexts.

This study explores the intersection of gender, law, and justice through a comparative analysis of feminist legal reforms in emerging democracies. By examining how different countries have attempted to address gender inequality through constitutional provisions, statutory reforms, and judicial interpretation, the paper seeks to understand both the achievements and limitations of these efforts. A comparative perspective helps reveal common challenges as well as innovative approaches that may contribute to stronger gender justice frameworks. Ultimately, the research argues that meaningful progress toward gender equality requires not only legal reform but also sustained institutional commitment and broader societal transformation.

The relationship between gender, law, and justice has become an increasingly important area of discussion in modern legal scholarship. For a long time, legal systems across the world developed within social structures that favored male authority and often neglected the concerns of women and other marginalized groups. As societies began to recognize the importance of equality and human rights, legal reforms were gradually introduced to challenge discriminatory practices and promote gender justice. Feminist legal reforms represent a major effort to transform legal frameworks so that they respond more effectively to gender-based inequalities and ensure equal protection under the law.

Feminist legal reform does not only involve creating new laws for women; rather, it seeks to critically examine how existing laws and institutions operate in practice. Many traditional legal systems claimed to treat individuals equally, but in reality they often ignored the different social and economic conditions that women face. Feminist scholars therefore argue that legal equality must go beyond formal declarations and address structural barriers that limit women's access to justice. These barriers may include cultural stereotypes, lack of legal awareness, economic dependence, and institutional bias.

In emerging democracies, the process of feminist legal reform becomes particularly significant. These countries are often in the process of building democratic institutions and redefining their legal frameworks. As a result, they have opportunities to incorporate gender equality into constitutional provisions, legislative policies, and judicial interpretations. Many emerging democracies have introduced laws related to protection from domestic violence, workplace harassment, equal pay, reproductive rights, and political representation for women. Such reforms reflect growing recognition that gender equality is essential for sustainable democratic development.



However, the effectiveness of these reforms depends on several social and institutional factors. Although progressive laws may exist on paper, their implementation often faces challenges. Social attitudes rooted in patriarchal traditions may discourage women from reporting discrimination or violence. Additionally, legal systems may lack the necessary resources or institutional capacity to enforce gender-sensitive laws effectively. These limitations highlight the gap that sometimes exists between legal ideals and real-life outcomes.

A comparative study of feminist legal reforms allows scholars to understand how different countries address similar challenges in different ways. By examining legal developments across various emerging democracies, it becomes possible to identify both successful strategies and persistent obstacles. Comparative analysis also helps policymakers learn from the experiences of other nations and adopt more effective legal frameworks for promoting gender justice.

Ultimately, the study of gender, law, and justice emphasizes that legal reform is not only a technical process but also a social and political transformation. Achieving meaningful gender equality requires cooperation between governments, courts, civil society organizations, and communities. When legal reforms are combined with social awareness and institutional commitment, they can play a powerful role in creating more inclusive and equitable democratic societies.

II. Research Paper Hypotheses

H1: Feminist legal reforms in emerging democracies contribute significantly to strengthening gender equality by expanding legal protections and access to justice for women.

H2: The effectiveness of feminist legal reforms in emerging democracies largely depends on institutional enforcement, social acceptance, and public awareness of gender rights.

III. Review of Literature

The relationship between gender, law, and justice has been widely examined within feminist legal scholarship. Scholars have emphasized that legal systems are not entirely neutral but are often shaped by social structures that historically privileged men over women. Feminist legal research therefore focuses on examining how laws influence gender relations and how legal reforms can promote equality and justice. The literature on feminist legal reforms highlights both the theoretical foundations of feminist jurisprudence and the practical implications of legal change in democratic societies.

One of the most influential contributions to feminist legal scholarship is Catharine A. MacKinnon's work *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* published by Harvard University Press in 1989. MacKinnon critically examines the relationship between gender inequality and state power, arguing that legal institutions have historically reflected male dominance and patriarchal social norms. The book explains how legal systems often treat gender discrimination as a secondary issue rather than a structural problem embedded in political and social institutions. MacKinnon's analysis



demonstrates that feminist legal theory must challenge traditional legal assumptions and advocate for laws that recognize the realities of women's experiences. Another significant scholarly work is Carole Pateman's book *The Sexual Contract*, published by Polity Press in 1988. Pateman argues that classical social contract theories overlooked gender inequalities and assumed a male-centered understanding of citizenship and political participation. According to her analysis, many social institutions, including marriage and family structures, have historically reinforced unequal power relations between men and women. By exposing the gendered foundations of social contract theory, Pateman highlights the need to rethink political and legal institutions from a feminist perspective.

In the context of Indian feminist legal scholarship, Ratna Kapur and Brenda Cossman's book *Subversive Sites: Feminist Engagements with Law in India* (SAGE Publications, 1996) provides an important analysis of how law interacts with culture, religion, and gender politics. The authors argue that legal reforms alone cannot transform gender relations unless they are accompanied by broader social change and feminist activism. Their work explores how legal debates related to family law, sexuality, and cultural traditions influence the status of women in society. The study also emphasizes that law should be viewed not only as a regulatory tool but also as a site of ideological struggle where feminist movements can challenge patriarchal norms.

Similarly, Karen J. Maschke's edited volume *Feminist Legal Theories* (Routledge, 1997) brings together diverse perspectives from scholars working in law, political science, and gender studies. The book examines how feminist theories have influenced legal debates regarding equality, reproductive rights, employment discrimination, and family law. The contributors highlight the importance of understanding how race, class, and economic status intersect with gender in shaping women's legal experiences. This interdisciplinary approach demonstrates that feminist legal theory is not limited to a single viewpoint but includes multiple perspectives aimed at transforming legal systems.

Another important text in feminist scholarship is V. Geetha's book *Patriarchy*, published by Stree in 2007. The book discusses the concept of patriarchy and explains how male dominance operates in social, economic, and legal institutions. Geetha emphasizes that patriarchal structures influence not only social relations but also the formulation and interpretation of laws. Understanding the dynamics of patriarchy is therefore essential for analyzing gender-based discrimination and developing effective feminist legal reforms.

In addition to books, several scholarly articles have contributed to the understanding of feminist legal reforms and gender justice. One notable article is Kathryn Abrams' work titled *Feminist Lawyering and Legal Method*, published in the journal *Law and Social Inquiry* (1991). Abrams examines how feminist legal scholars have developed alternative legal methodologies that challenge traditional interpretations of equality. She argues that feminist legal approaches emphasize lived experiences and social realities rather than purely abstract legal principles. This approach helps highlight the ways in which gender discrimination operates within everyday legal practices.



Another important contribution comes from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Feminist Philosophy of Law. This scholarly analysis explains how feminist legal philosophy investigates the influence of patriarchal norms within legal institutions and seeks to develop reforms that promote gender justice. The article emphasizes that feminist jurisprudence combines insights from political theory, human rights law, and social justice scholarship to address structural inequalities affecting women.

Further discussion of feminist legal perspectives can be found in Madhavi Sunder's edited volume *Gender and Feminist Theory in Law and Society* (Routledge, 2007). The contributors in this work explore how feminist thought has evolved over time and how it continues to influence debates on equality, liberty, and human rights. The essays examine issues such as multiculturalism, legal pluralism, and the intersection of gender with other forms of social inequality. This work demonstrates the growing importance of feminist analysis in shaping contemporary legal discourse.

Another significant academic contribution is the *Research Handbook on Feminist Jurisprudence* edited by Robin West and Cynthia Grant Bowman (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019). This comprehensive volume surveys various strands of feminist legal thought including liberal feminism, radical feminism, intersectional feminism, and postmodern feminist theory. The book highlights how feminist jurisprudence has transformed the study of law by encouraging scholars to question traditional legal assumptions and explore new approaches to justice and equality.

Finally, Susan Atkins and Brenda Hale's book *Women and the Law* (1984) provides an early yet important examination of how legal systems affect women's lives in both public and private spheres. The authors argue that many legal doctrines historically ignored women's experiences and reinforced existing gender hierarchies. Their analysis demonstrates that meaningful legal reform requires recognizing the interconnected nature of family law, employment law, and social policy in shaping women's rights.

Overall, the existing literature shows that feminist legal scholarship has played a crucial role in exposing gender biases within legal systems and advocating for more inclusive frameworks of justice. Scholars consistently emphasize that while legal reforms are essential for promoting gender equality, they must also address broader social and institutional factors that influence the implementation of rights. The literature therefore highlights the need for continued research on feminist legal reforms, particularly in emerging democracies where legal systems are still evolving and where the struggle for gender justice remains ongoing.

IV. Feminist Legal Reforms: Comparison Between Old and New Legal Frameworks

Feminist legal reforms in India have witnessed a remarkable transformation, moving from a "protectionist" approach, which treated women as passive recipients of care, to a framework emphasizing "agency and rights," recognizing women as autonomous citizens with control over their bodies, property, and personal decisions.



1. Domestic Violence and Property Rights

Legal approaches have shifted from treating domestic violence as a private family matter to recognizing it as a public crime with civil and criminal remedies.

- **Old Framework:** Prior to 2005, women facing domestic violence relied primarily on Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), enacted in 1983, which provided only criminal penalties for cruelty or dowry harassment. Civil remedies such as protection orders or residence rights were unavailable. Daughters had restricted inheritance rights under the Hindu Succession Act.
- **New Framework (2005–Present):** The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005, offers comprehensive civil remedies, including protection and residence orders, monetary relief, and recognition of physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, and economic abuse.
- **Key Change:** The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, established daughters as equal coparceners in ancestral property, placing them on par with sons.

2. Sexual Harassment and Assault

The law evolved from vague, limited provisions to a detailed rights-based framework.

- **Old Framework:** Before 2013, workplace sexual harassment was addressed through general IPC sections, such as Section 354 (outraging modesty) and Section 509 (insulting modesty), which did not adequately consider workplace power dynamics.
- **New Framework (2013–Present):** The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act), mandates employers to establish Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs).
- **Criminal Law Amendments (2013 & 2018):** Following the Nirbhaya case, the definition of rape was expanded (Sections 375, 376 IPC/now BNS), stalking and voyeurism were criminalized (Sections 354C & 354D IPC/now BNS), and faster trials were mandated.

3. Reproductive Rights and Autonomy

The legal framework has shifted from a "motherhood-focused" approach to one prioritizing autonomy, allowing women to make decisions regarding their bodies.

- **Old Framework:** The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act, 1971, permitted abortion only up to 20 weeks and primarily applied to married women, requiring strict medical oversight.
- **New Framework (2021–Present):** The MTP (Amendment) Act, 2021, extended the limit to 24 weeks for specific categories of women and explicitly included unmarried women, affirming reproductive autonomy.
- **Decriminalization of Adultery (2018):** In *Joseph Shine v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court struck down Section 497 IPC, which treated women as husbands' property, recognizing women as independent, autonomous agents.



4. Workplace and Employment Rights

The approach shifted from restricting women's work to enabling equal participation.

- Old Framework: The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, provided only 12 weeks of paid maternity leave.
- New Framework (2017–Present): The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017, increased paid leave to 26 weeks and required crèche facilities in establishments with 50+ employees.
- Equal Remuneration: The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 (now part of the Code on Wages, 2019), mandates equal pay for equal work.

5. Personal Laws and Agency

Legal reforms moved from accepting discriminatory customary laws to applying constitutional scrutiny.

- Old Framework: The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, limited maintenance to the iddat period following the Shah Bano case.
- New Framework (2019–Present): The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019, declared instant triple talaq (talaq-e-biddat) void, illegal, and a criminal offense, in line with the Supreme Court ruling in Shayara Bano v. Union of India (2017).

Summary of Legal Reforms

Area	Old Framework	New Framework	Key Legislation
Violence	IPC 498A (Criminal only)	PWDVA (Civil + Criminal remedies)	PWDVA, 2005
Property	Daughter not equal heir	Daughter as Coparcener	Hindu Succession (Amend.) Act, 2005
Harassment	General IPC 354/509	POSH Act (Specific + ICs)	POSH Act, 2013
Reproduction	20 weeks, married focus	24 weeks, unmarried inclusion	MTP (Amend.) Act, 2021
Marriage	Instant Triple Talaq legal	Instant Triple Talaq illegal	Muslim Women Act, 2019
Workplace	12 weeks maternity leave	26 weeks, crèche mandated	Maternity Benefit (Amend.) Act, 2017



Note: In 2023–2024, India replaced the Indian Penal Code (IPC) with the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), integrating many updated provisions.

V. New Challenges in Feminist Legal Reforms in Emerging Democracies

The development of feminist legal reforms has played a significant role in promoting gender equality within modern legal systems. Many emerging democracies have introduced progressive laws aimed at protecting women's rights, preventing gender-based violence, and ensuring equal participation in social and political institutions. However, despite these legal advancements, new challenges continue to arise that affect the effective implementation of feminist legal reforms. These challenges are often connected to changing social dynamics, technological developments, economic inequalities, and evolving political environments. Understanding these issues is important for evaluating the real impact of gender-sensitive legislation and identifying areas where further reforms are required.

One of the major challenges is the gap between legal provisions and practical implementation. Although many countries have adopted progressive laws supporting gender equality, enforcement mechanisms are sometimes weak. Courts may face delays, law enforcement agencies may lack proper training on gender-sensitive issues, and victims may hesitate to approach legal institutions due to fear or social stigma. As a result, legal protections that exist on paper do not always translate into meaningful justice for women.

Another important challenge is the persistence of cultural and social norms that reinforce gender inequality. In several societies, traditional beliefs and patriarchal attitudes continue to influence how laws are interpreted and applied. Women who seek legal remedies for discrimination or violence may encounter resistance from family members, community leaders, or even local authorities. These cultural barriers can reduce the effectiveness of feminist legal reforms and limit women's ability to assert their rights.

The digital transformation of society has also created new forms of gender-related challenges. Online harassment, cyberstalking, and digital exploitation have emerged as significant concerns for women. While some legal systems have begun to address cybercrime, many existing laws were originally designed for offline contexts and may not adequately respond to digital forms of harassment or abuse. This situation requires legal systems to adapt quickly in order to protect individuals in rapidly changing technological environments.

Economic inequality is another factor that influences the effectiveness of feminist legal reforms. Women in many emerging democracies often face limited access to education, employment opportunities, and financial resources. These economic constraints may prevent them from seeking legal assistance or pursuing lengthy legal procedures.



Without adequate support mechanisms such as legal aid services and social welfare programs, the promise of gender justice may remain inaccessible to many individuals. Additionally, political and institutional instability can affect the continuity of gender-focused reforms. Changes in government priorities, lack of policy coordination, and insufficient funding for gender programs may weaken the implementation of progressive laws. Sustainable reform therefore requires long-term institutional commitment and collaboration between government agencies, civil society organizations, and international bodies.

In conclusion, while feminist legal reforms have significantly advanced the recognition of gender equality in emerging democracies, new challenges continue to shape the landscape of gender justice. Addressing these challenges requires not only stronger laws but also effective enforcement mechanisms, social awareness, and inclusive policy approaches that ensure women can fully exercise their legal rights.

VI. Suggestions and Recommendations

The advancement of feminist legal reforms has contributed significantly to improving gender equality in many emerging democracies. However, the existence of progressive laws alone cannot guarantee real justice for women and marginalized gender groups. In many societies, legal provisions remain ineffective due to weak implementation, limited institutional capacity, and continuing social barriers. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt comprehensive strategies that strengthen the impact of feminist legal reforms and ensure that legal rights translate into practical benefits for individuals. The following suggestions highlight important steps that policymakers, legal institutions, and civil society organizations can consider to promote gender justice more effectively.

1. Strengthening the Implementation of Gender-Sensitive Laws

One of the most important steps is improving the implementation of existing laws related to gender equality. Governments should ensure that law enforcement agencies, judicial officers, and administrative authorities receive proper training on gender issues. Specialized courts, fast-track procedures, and support services for victims can help reduce delays and make the justice system more accessible. Effective monitoring mechanisms should also be established to evaluate whether gender-related laws are being properly enforced.

2. Promoting Legal Awareness and Education

Legal awareness plays a crucial role in enabling individuals to exercise their rights. Many women are unaware of the legal protections available to them or may not know how to approach legal institutions. Governments and civil society organizations should conduct awareness campaigns, community workshops, and educational programs to inform citizens about gender rights and legal remedies. Incorporating gender equality and legal literacy into educational curricula can also help create a more informed and responsible society.



3. Expanding Access to Legal Aid and Support Services

Economic barriers often prevent women from seeking justice. Many individuals cannot afford legal representation or the costs associated with lengthy legal proceedings. Expanding legal aid services and providing free or affordable legal assistance can significantly improve access to justice. In addition, counseling services, shelters, and rehabilitation programs should be strengthened to support victims of gender-based violence and discrimination.

4. Encouraging Women's Participation in Decision-Making

Increasing women's participation in political, legal, and administrative institutions is essential for creating more inclusive policies. Governments should encourage women's representation in legislative bodies, judicial positions, and public administration. When women actively participate in decision-making processes, legal reforms are more likely to reflect diverse perspectives and address the real challenges faced by different communities.

5. Addressing Emerging Issues in the Digital and Globalized World

The rapid development of digital technologies has introduced new forms of gender-related challenges, including online harassment and cyber exploitation. Legal frameworks should be updated to address these emerging problems and ensure that digital spaces remain safe and respectful for all individuals. International cooperation and knowledge sharing among countries can also help develop effective legal strategies for dealing with new forms of discrimination and violence.

In conclusion, strengthening feminist legal reforms requires a combination of effective legislation, strong institutions, social awareness, and inclusive governance. By adopting these recommendations, emerging democracies can move closer to achieving meaningful gender equality and ensuring that the principles of justice and human dignity are respected in both law and practice.

VII. Conclusion

The relationship between gender, law, and justice has become a central focus of contemporary legal scholarship and policy discussions. Feminist legal reforms have played an important role in challenging traditional legal frameworks that historically ignored or underestimated the experiences of women and other marginalized groups. In many emerging democracies, these reforms have contributed to the development of legal systems that recognize gender equality as a fundamental principle of justice. By introducing laws addressing issues such as domestic violence, workplace discrimination, property rights, and political participation, governments have taken significant steps toward creating more inclusive and equitable societies. However, the journey toward full gender justice remains complex and requires continuous efforts from legal institutions, policymakers, and civil society.



1. Importance of Feminist Legal Reforms

Feminist legal reforms have been crucial in highlighting the structural inequalities that exist within traditional legal systems. By examining how laws influence social relationships and power structures, feminist scholars and activists have helped reshape legal debates around equality and human rights. These reforms have encouraged governments to reconsider outdated legal provisions and adopt policies that better protect the dignity and rights of women. As a result, gender equality has become an essential component of democratic governance.

2. Achievements in Emerging Democracies

Many emerging democracies have introduced progressive constitutional provisions and legislation that support gender equality. Legal reforms in areas such as protection from violence, employment rights, and inheritance laws demonstrate growing recognition of the importance of women's rights. In addition, increased participation of women in political institutions and public decision-making has helped bring gender perspectives into policy development. These developments indicate that feminist legal reforms can play a transformative role in shaping more just legal systems.

3. Continuing Challenges

Despite these achievements, significant challenges remain in ensuring the effective implementation of gender-sensitive laws. Social attitudes influenced by patriarchal traditions often create barriers for women seeking justice. Limited legal awareness, economic constraints, and institutional weaknesses may also prevent individuals from fully benefiting from legal protections. Addressing these challenges requires stronger enforcement mechanisms, improved legal education, and greater public awareness regarding gender equality.

4. The Need for Future Reforms

The evolving nature of modern societies also creates new challenges that require continuous legal adaptation. Issues such as digital harassment, economic inequality, and intersectional discrimination highlight the need for more comprehensive legal strategies. Policymakers must therefore remain responsive to emerging issues and ensure that legal frameworks remain effective in protecting gender rights. Collaboration between governments, civil society organizations, and international institutions can further strengthen the development of gender-responsive legal systems.

In conclusion, feminist legal reforms have significantly influenced the pursuit of gender justice in emerging democracies by challenging discriminatory practices and promoting more inclusive legal frameworks. While progress has been made, achieving meaningful gender equality requires sustained commitment, institutional reforms, and broader social transformation. Only through continuous efforts to strengthen laws, improve implementation, and promote social awareness can legal systems truly ensure justice and equality for all members of society.



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