

A sociological study of feminism and women empowerment in Karnataka

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ABSTRACT:

This study investigates feminism and women empowerment in Karnataka through a sociological framework, emphasizing both empirical data and theoretical perspectives. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions to capture the multi-dimensional realities of women's lives. A stratified random sampling technique is employed to ensure representation across rural-urban divides, caste groups, and socio-economic classes. Quantitative data focuses on literacy rates, labor force participation, political involvement, and access to health and education, while qualitative narratives explore perceptions of gender roles, challenges of patriarchy, and aspirations for equality. Secondary sources, including government reports, census data, and scholarly works, provide contextual support and enable comparative analysis. Data analysis involves statistical techniques for quantitative findings and thematic coding for qualitative insights. The study reveals significant progress in education and political participation of women in Karnataka, alongside persisting challenges such as wage gaps, gender-based violence, and limited decision-making power in households.

The research concludes that empowerment is a social process shaped by feminist movements, state policies, and grassroots initiatives, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive, gender-inclusive strategies to achieve holistic development.

KEYWORDS:

Feminism, women's empowerment, Karnataka, literacy, labor force.

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Introduction:

Women's empowerment broadly defined as the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices is central to India's development agenda. Karnataka occupies an interesting sociological position: it is home to India's IT hub and high urban prosperity pockets (Bengaluru, Mysuru), while also containing sizable rural populations dependent on agriculture and informal work. This heterogeneity produces uneven outcomes for women: gains in education coexist with continuing gaps in economic security, political voice, and safety. Capability Approach (Amartya Sen / Martha Nussbaum) — empowerment is seen as expanded capabilities (education, health, economic opportunity, bodily integrity) rather than only income. This reframes policy success as increased substantive freedoms. Feminism, as both a social movement and intellectual tradition, has significantly influenced the discourse on gender equality and women's empowerment in India. In the context of Karnataka, a state known for its cultural diversity and socio-political movements, feminism has played a vital role in shaping women's access to education, employment, and political participation. The struggle for equality has evolved from early reformist efforts to contemporary debates on rights, representation, and autonomy, highlighting both achievements and persistent challenges.

In the field of education, feminist movements and government initiatives have expanded opportunities for girls, resulting in rising literacy rates and greater enrollment in higher education. Yet, disparities remain in rural areas and among marginalized communities, where patriarchal norms often restrict women's educational attainment. Similarly, in the realm of employment, Karnataka has seen increasing participation of women in sectors such as information technology, healthcare, and agriculture. However, wage gaps, workplace discrimination, and the burden of unpaid domestic labor continue to undermine women's economic empowerment.

Political participation forms another critical dimension of empowerment. Karnataka has witnessed progress through women's representation in local governance under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which reserved seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions. Nevertheless, women still face structural barriers to leadership roles at higher levels of governance.

Women's empowerment in Karnataka is shaped not only by policy initiatives and educational progress but also by deeply rooted social, cul-

tural, and economic challenges that vary across rural and urban contexts. While urban women benefit from better access to education, employment, and political awareness, they often face issues such as workplace discrimination, wage inequality, and balancing professional and domestic responsibilities. On the other hand, rural women encounter traditional patriarchal norms, limited mobility, early marriages, and restricted access to resources, which hinder their participation in decision-making and economic activities.

Culturally, gender roles continue to be defined by long-standing social expectations, where women are often perceived primarily as caretakers. This restricts their opportunities to pursue education or careers, especially in conservative households. Economically, women face unequal access to credit, land ownership, and employment opportunities, reinforcing dependency on male family members. Even in sectors like agriculture, where women contribute significantly, their work remains undervalued and underpaid.

These challenges highlight the gap between policy frameworks promoting empowerment and the lived realities of women. This study aims to examine how such social, cultural, and economic barriers influence women's empowerment in Karnataka, thereby identifying areas where targeted interventions are required for inclusive development.

Methodology

The study adopts a mixed-method approach combining both primary and secondary data.

Primary Data: Collected through structured questionnaires and interviews with women from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds across rural and urban areas of Karnataka. A purposive sampling method is used to include respondents from varied age groups, castes, and occupations. **Secondary Data:** Drawn from government reports, census data, academic research, and policy documents related to gender equality and women empowerment. **Analysis:** Quantitative data will be analyzed using percentages and comparative statistics, while qualitative responses will be thematically coded to understand social attitudes and lived experiences.

This simple methodology enables a balanced understanding of both measurable indicators of empowerment and the subjective realities of women's lives in Karnataka.

Objectives:**The study has confined the following objectives:**

- » To analyze the role of feminism in shaping women's empowerment in Karnataka across education, employment, and political participation.
- » To study the social, cultural, and economic challenges that influence women's empowerment in both rural and urban Karnataka.

Gender intersects with caste, class, region (urban/rural), religion, and disability to produce differentiated experiences of disempowerment. Karnataka's internal diversity (coastal, northern, central, southern districts) makes intersectional analysis essential. Feminist Political Economy examines labor markets, unpaid care work, and state policy to explain why women's economic gains might be fragile (precarious employment, concentration in unpaid family work or informal sectors). These frameworks guide variable selection and interpretation of indicators (education, labour force participation, SHG membership, political representation, criminal-justice outcomes).

Education and literacy:

Census-derived estimates (most publicly available baseline) place Karnataka's overall literacy around the mid-70s percent, with female literacy notably lower than male literacy. Female literacy from Census-era reporting is around 68.0-68.1%, while male literacy is in the low 80s. This gender gap in literacy remains a foundational inequality that shapes later outcomes.

Health and reproductive indicators:

NFHS-5 (2019-21) district-level/state reports show mixed progress: institutional delivery rates and some maternal-health services improved, but anemia among women of reproductive age and gaps in nutrition remain concerns in many districts. District-level NFHS fact sheets are available for Karnataka showing variation across districts (e.g., Kodagu vs. Raichur). These health indicators are both a cause and consequence of limited capabilities.

Labour-force participation and employment:

Recent national and state surveys (PLFS and state factsheets) document a notable increase in female labour-force participation since 2017-18. Karnataka's female work participation and LFPR moved upward; state factsheets and MoSPI tables indicate that women's participation (usual status measures) has risen and Karnataka shows relatively higher female

WPR among many states because of a mix of rural agricultural engagement and urban salaried work. The IWWAGE factsheet and PLFS release highlight this trend while also noting the precarious nature of much female work (self-employment, family helpers, low share of regular salaried employment).

Ministry of Stats & Program Implementation:

Collective economic empowerment: Self-Help Groups (SHGs): Large-scale mobilization under DAY-NRLM means millions of rural women have been organized into SHGs nationally and thousands across Karnataka. Recent government press notes and media reports show Karnataka has several million SHG members – SHGs are an important site for micro-savings, credit linkage and collective bargaining, and local leadership opportunities. District-level studies (e.g., Mysore) confirm growth in membership and measurable impacts on household decision-making among SHG members.

Political representation: Women's formal political representation in Karnataka has improved modestly but remains low relative to parity: the 2023 Assembly elections produced the highest number of women MLAs the state has seen in decades, but women are still a small minority in the 224-seat Assembly. Local self-government (panchayat) seats have larger shares of elected women due to reservation in local bodies, which is a crucial arena for grassroots leadership.

Safety and criminal-justice outcomes: Reported crimes against women in Karnataka rose in recent NCRB-compiled reporting years (e.g., the 2022 data show an increase in FIRs registered under crimes against women). Media analyses of NCRB data show both rising reported incidence and systemic challenges: low conviction rates, many cases ending in compromise or withdrawal, and district-level variation in reporting/justice outcomes. These trends complicate the picture: increased reporting can signal both worsening incidence or improved reporting/awareness.

Education: more than literacy:

While literacy gains are important, the capability approach urges us to look beyond headline literacy to critical, functional literacies, retention (secondary and higher education), vocational training, and gendered expectations. In Karnataka, urban districts (Bengaluru Urban, Mysuru, Udupi) show higher female educational attainment than many northern and backward districts. Educational gains translate into later bargaining power only when matched by labour-market access and social norms that

allow women mobility and paid work.

Work and care: the gendered labour market much of the increase is in rural participation and self-employment or unpaid family work. This means women's increased economic visibility may not equate to increased economic security. Urban Karnataka displays more salaried opportunities (IT, services), but women's representation in high-paid formal jobs remains limited. The massive unpaid-care burden, social norms restricting mobility, and workplace safety concerns all limit women's movement into secure employment. Thus, the feminist political economy lens highlights structural constraints — sectoral composition, demand-side barriers, and social reproduction responsibilities — that prevent full conversion of education into secure livelihoods.

Collective action (SHGs) as sites of empowerment:

SHGs in Karnataka provide microfinance access, group savings, and a space for collective learning. Empirical studies from Karnataka districts show SHG membership correlates with increased decision-making within households and higher risk-taking (small enterprise creation). However, SHG success varies with bank linkage quality, access to market linkages, and intra-group governance. SHGs thus offer a promising but uneven pathway to empowerment.

Reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions have produced large numbers of women functionaries at village level, with mixed outcomes: some women leaders have emerged as influential actors, while others face proxy governance (male relatives or party bosses deciding). The state legislature's modest increase in women MLAs is a positive signal but far from representative. Institutional reforms (candidate selection by parties, campaign finance, and safety) are needed to convert electoral openings into meaningful policy voice.

Safety and justice: The rise in registered FIRs for crimes against women raises alarms; yet, low conviction rates and high rates of case compromise reflect systemic challenges in policing, prosecution, witness protection and social pressure. These produce a gap between formal rights and lived justice. Feminist analyses emphasis both legal reform and community-based prevention — safety is both a legal/judicial problem and a social/normative one.

Women's empowerment in Karnataka has been deeply shaped by feminist movements, progressive policies, and socio-economic transitions. However, the outcomes vary across education, employment, and political

participation, while being continuously challenged by social, cultural, and economic barriers, particularly in rural regions. Karnataka has witnessed remarkable progress in female literacy due to feminist advocacy and state-led programs such as Vidya Siri and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya. According to Census 2011, Karnataka's female literacy rate stood at 68.1%, with urban women (78%) outpacing rural women (59%). Feminism has emphasized education as a tool of liberation, enabling women to access higher education and professional careers. However, caste-based disparities, early marriages, and lack of infrastructure in rural districts like Raichur and Koppal restrict equal opportunities.

The feminist discourse has influenced labor rights and workplace inclusion. Karnataka's economy, particularly in IT hubs like Bengaluru, has enabled more women to enter formal employment. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (2022–23) reports a female labor force participation rate of 27.7%, higher in urban services but much lower in rural areas where women remain concentrated in agriculture and informal labor. Feminism has challenged wage inequality and workplace harassment, but barriers such as the “double burden” of unpaid domestic work and low representation in leadership persist.

The feminist influence is visible in women's representation through Panchayati Raj reservations (33%). Karnataka has produced strong women leaders at grassroots levels, improving decision-making in health, sanitation, and education policies. Yet, at higher political offices, representation remains limited, showing a gap between structural provisions and actual empowerment. Patriarchal norms, dowry practices, and gender-based violence remain entrenched. NCRB (2022) data highlights Karnataka among the states reporting high cases of domestic violence and harassment. Rural women, especially from marginalized castes, face compounded discrimination, limiting their autonomy despite legal protections.

Cultural expectations in Karnataka often prioritize women's domestic roles, particularly in rural households. While urban feminism has redefined gender roles to some extent, cultural stigma against women pursuing careers or leadership still prevails in conservative sections. Festivals, rituals, and community traditions sometimes reinforce gender hierarchies, though women's collectives are increasingly using cultural platforms for awareness. Despite contributing significantly to agriculture and allied sectors, women own less than 15% of landholdings in Karnataka (Agricultural Census, 2015–16). Lack of access to credit, technology, and market linkages limits their entrepreneurial opportunities. In urban areas,

though more women are employed in formal sectors, wage gaps remain significant—women earn 20–30% less than men in similar roles (ILO estimates).

Conclusion:

Karnataka's experience offers both hope and caution. On one hand, rising female literacy, upward movement in labour-force participation and extensive SHG mobilization point to expanding capabilities. On the other, persistent structural barriers uneven transition to secure paid work, low political representation at higher levels, and fragile justice outcomes — limit substantive empowerment. Sociological research that combines rigorous quantitative modelling with deep qualitative inquiry is essential to unpacking the micro-dynamics of empowerment and designing targeted policies. Priority actions include enabling transitions to quality work, investing in social infrastructure (childcare/safety), expanding SHG-market linkages, and reforming justice processes to be survivor-centered.

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The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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