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Gender Inequality in the 21st Century: A Critical Review of Structural Barriers, Feminist Movements, and Policy Responses

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Abstract

This review highlights that the continuous reproduction, mutation, and persistence of gender inequality in the 21st century stem from the structural, symbolic, and biopolitical resilience of patriarchy, which, in the contemporary era, reconstitutes itself through digital, neoliberal, and technocapitalist formations. The review further interrogates the complexities associated with the diversification, globalization, and modernization of feminist movements. Internal fragmentation and external backlash are closely linked to policy responses; despite the abundance of policies, colonial, neoliberal, and bureaucratic logics often persist, limiting their effectiveness. This study integrates feminist theory, poststructural analysis, postcolonial critique, and contemporary political economy to critically examine gender inequality. It explores the practicality of achieving gender justice and argues that meaningful transformation requires rethinking structural change. The review contributes to current debates by emphasizing the epistemic dimensions of patriarchy, including knowledge systems, discourse, and digital infrastructures that reproduce gendered power.

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Introduction

Despite 21st century's unprecedented legal, technological and discursive expansions of women's agencies and rights, the issue of gender inequality stays ideologically

naturalized and structurally entrenched across the globe. Current era is paradoxical in its literary dimensions surrounding women: there's feminist vocabulary, neo liberal "empowerment" rhetoric, digital activism, high labor force participation, recognition of gender based violence, discursive tools to break the stereotypes, loud feminist voices and

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movements, yet there's persistence, mutation and reassert-ness of patriarchal power's material and epistemic configurations. This paradox needs to be deconstructed via renewed and rigorous interrogation of the mechanisms and systems through which gender inequality continues to exist and be reproduced in the present era.

Nancy Fraser (2013) claims that all this appropriation of feminist ideals that we see in contemporary era by neo liberalism particularly agency, choice and flexibility has failed to dismantle patriarchal capitalist structures. She explains that this neo liberal appropriation of feminism has rather fortified the patriarchal structures under new regimes of labor precarity and marketization.

Sara Ahmed (2017) exposes negligence towards addressing underlying hierarchies and institutions' superficial performance of diversity and gender commitment rhetorically. Crenshaw's (1989) conceptualization of intersectionality poses the notion of impossibility of understanding the gender oppression outside its entanglement with intersections of race, class, sexuality, religion, age, disability, and geopolitical location. Throughout centuries of literature and social history, the quest for gender equality has demonstrated resilience and adaptability. From the Renaissance to modern stories like Americana, heroines have always fought against oppression. Their defiance shows that justice has never been fully achieved. Patriarchy does not vanish; it evolves, assuming new manifestations via law, culture, labor, race, and technology. Theoretical frameworks, ranging from Beauvoir's existential feminism to Butler's notion of gender performativity, demonstrate that gender is not a static identity, but a social construct perpetuated through recurrent norms and behaviors. As Collins and Crenshaw have pointed out, intersectional perspectives show that women's experiences of inequality are affected by many things, including race, class, and sexuality. Literature records this ongoing struggle, showing how strong women are and how deeply rooted patriarchal power is. The bravery and independence of heroines show that there is inequality and inspire people to fight back. Feminist movements throughout history, encompassing grassroots activism as well as global and digital campaigns, illustrate that the attainment of gender justice necessitates unwavering commitment, critical analysis, and collaborative efforts.

In the end, gender equality is not a goal to reach, but a goal to keep working toward. Legal safeguards, policy reforms, and institutional measures must be complemented by cultural transformation and persistent opposition to normative hierarchies. Literature and feminist theory function as both a reflection and a roadmap: they illuminate the challenges, commemorate the victories, and delineate the pathways toward achieving justice for all women and marginalized genders.

This article's central argument is that the continuous reproduction, mutation and persistence of gender inequality in the 21st century stems from the structural, symbolic, and bio political resilience of patriarchy, which in this contemporary era reconstitutes itself via new digital, neo liberal and techno-capitalist formations. This article further interrogates the complications linked with the capacity of diversification, globalization and modernization of feminist movements. Internal fragmentation and external black-lash of these movements are linked with policy responses: despite the abundance of policies, there's replication of colonial, neo liberal, or bureaucratic logics, limiting their capacity and effectiveness. This study integrates feminist theory, post structural analysis, post-colonial critique and contemporary political economy to offer a critical review of gender inequality in the 21st century. It opens an enquiry into the practicality of the idea of gender justice in the contemporary era and how it requires rethinking structural transformation. This review intervenes in current scholarly debates arguing that the possibility of transformation requires the foregrounding of the epistemic dimensions of patriarchal structures, including knowledge, discourse and digital infrastructures encoding gendered power.

Feminist Genealogies: From Liberalism to Intersectionality and Beyond

To understand 21st century feminist landscape it's mandatory to trace its intellectual genealogies. The infamous wave model of feminism is often critiqued because of its euro-centric western linearity, but it provides a foundation and a useful scaffold to map thematic shifts. The term first-wave feminism was coined first by journalist Martha Lear in a New York Times Magazine article in March 1968, "The Second Feminist Wave: What do these women want?". The difference between first wave and later was the focus shift from formal equality to substantive equality.

Kyla Schuller in *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex and Science in the Nineteenth Century*, states " biopower" as feminism's enabling condition. He quotes Michelle Murphy: "Historicizing feminisms as a biopolitics that has taken 'sex,' and its subsidiary, 'reproduction,' as central concerns requires that we understand feminisms in all their variety and contradiction as animated within; and not escaping from, dominant configurations of governance and technoscience." There was problem of exclusion of women of color and their experiences as well that remained main contention in feminist theory.

Second wave feminism epitomized by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) was focused on women as " other" maintained by patriarchal socialization. Imprisonment of middle-class American women in domestic ideological

domains was exposed by Betty Friedan (1963) but frameworks like these often privileged white, heterosexual, middle class subjectivities.

Third wave feminism, dominated by post structuralists like Judith Butler, challenged and deconstructed the essentialist notions of womanhood. Butler gave the theory of gender performance (1990) to expose how gender identities are reiterated via normative scripts rather than biological inherent. It negates the idea of gender being innate or internal essence and emphasizes that it is a sustained repeated performance. Introduced in *Gender Trouble* (1990), she claims that repetition makes the gender appear natural. " Gender is not something that one is, it is something that one does, an act... A "doing " rather than being " (Butler 1990, pg. 25)

The most critically acclaimed and transformative theoretical intervention, however, must be through intersectionality, a theory by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), which exposes the erasure of lived experiences and realities of women of color, migrant women, economically marginalized or racially diverse women. Intersectionality gave a corrective by differentiating multiple modes of oppression and analyzing oppression as multi-dimensional phenomenon rather than additive. Post colonial feminists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) and Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (1988) exposed western feminist imperialism. They critiqued the homogenization of " Third World Women" as victims who are waiting for liberation. Spivak asked a famous question " can the subaltern speak?" (1988) that remained crucial for 21st century feminist discourse. This was crucial particularly in context of NGO led gender initiatives that reproduce colonial epistemologies.

Feminist theoretical discourse of the 21st century assimilates all these intersectional, post-colonial, Marxist, ecofeminist, decolonial, and disability justice frameworks highlighting the intellectually plural terrain and the complexities of contemporary gendered oppression.

Power, Discourse, and Biopolitics: Post-structural Contributions

To interrogate the gender inequality in digital age, Michel Foucault's theoretical perspectives of power, surveillance, and biopolitics are significant. Foucault (1978) relates the operation of power with bodies, desires and identities, leaving behind the old notion of relation of power with coercion only. His framework is important in understanding how gender norms are encoded in institutions, public discourse and technological infrastructures. Butler further extends the Foucault's notion of power by presenting the argument of gender performance via reiterative norms (1990).

A new domain of gender performativity and surveillance is constituted by algorithmic sorting, social media aestheticism, and cyber misogyny in the 21st century digital landscape. Achille Mbembe's (2003) exposes how gendered bodies especially those of poor, racialized, migrant it conflicts zone women are often disposable within global capitalist and militarized systems. In his 2019 book *On the Post Colony*, he identifies the racism as the prime driver of necro-politics exposing how the lives of people of race are systematically cheapened.

Neoliberalism, Capitalism, and the Marketisation of Feminism

There are several scholarly debates including that of Nancy Fraser (2013) that feminism in the 21st century has been co-opted by neo liberal capitalism. Fraser's concern is the appropriation of the second wave feminism's idea is autonomy and liberation by corporate culture in order to justify flexible labor markets, precarity and the demolition of welfare systems. Catherine Rottenberg (2018) calls it " neo liberal feminism" a discourse that priorities individualized empowerment rather than collective struggle. This collectively resulted in a commodified feminism, in form of empowerment branding, corporate diversity statements, state led women's entrepreneurship drives and selective representation of elite women. These forms of neo liberal feminism do not challenge the structural inequalities rather they mask them.

Digital Feminisms, Techno-politics of Gender and Postcolonial Feminist Critiques in the 21st century

The 21st century is proliferated with digital technologies, changing the horizon of feminist discourse, production and activism. Social media hashtags like #MeToo , #TimesUp , #Sayhername represent unparalleled visibility (Yin & Zhang, 2024). Yet there are problematics of reproduction of patriarchal and racialized biases within the algorithms. (Noble, 2018). While digital spaces enable voices, they also intensify cyber harassment, surveillance, deepfake pornography, algorithmic discrimination and datafication of gender forming a new terrain where gender inequality is reproduced and contested simultaneously (Bearman et al., 2025).

The 21st century gender policy is influenced by global institutions like UN bodies, NGOs, and development agencies. These bodies function within Postcolonial power stratification. Mohanty in *Feminism without Borders* (2003) advocates for a " feminism without borders" focusing on local particularities. She challenges the universalization of desires and needs of women and calls for transnational solidarity and anti-capitalist feminist practice. A 21st century gender analysis must remain attentive to the geopolitics of

humanitarianism, the racialization of gendered bodies and coloniality embedded in global development agendas.

Structural Barriers to Gender Equality in the 21st Century

There's a dire need of a 21st century feminist critique that looks beyond cultural attitudes to understand the structural architectures that contribute to the reproduction and sedimentation of gendered hierarchies especially because of historical focus on "traditional mindsets" as a basis of gender inequality.

We cannot label structural barriers as accidental or static; these structures are historically embedded, institutionally established and ideologically legitimized with the help of manipulative discourses of normality, meritocracy, and heteronormativity. This paper looks at gender inequality globally drawing on feminist political economy, post structural theory, and post-colonial criticism.

Patriarchal Institutional Frameworks: The Enduring Logic of Male Normativity

The patriarchy of the twenty-first century does not simply exclude women by decree; rather, the system continues to function through the structural mechanisms that normalize the presence of men as the norm and the presence of women as an exception. In her work *The Sexual Contract*, Carole Pateman (1988) describes how contemporary institutions are based on a hidden social contract that made women dependent beings and men dominant figures.

Leadership development systems that operate through masculine norms and expectations that reward such characteristics as aggression, competitiveness, and absence from personal commitments. Work-related assessment systems that are influenced by gender bias whereby the same characteristics are viewed much more negatively when demonstrated by women. Organizational culture and social environments that make emotional labor demands on women in terms of mentoring and instruction.

In even the most progressive settings, the patriarchal system continues to prevail because of the "affective economies" that exist where women have to adjust to a potentially difficult or discriminatory environment just to "belong." Patriarchy, therefore, is not gone but rather has become institutionalized and routinized.

Economic Inequality and the Feminization of Precarity

Women continue to be over-represented in poorly paid, informal, and precarious employment, a phenomenon referred to by feminist economists as "feminization of precarity."

Let's have a look at the Global trends:

Predominance in care industries like domestic services, teaching, nursing, and childcare characterized by low salaries

and little social security (Folbre 2001). Prevalence of informal employment in the Global South, where millions of women work without employment contracts, social security, and other job protections.

Wage differences in all geographic areas with the intersectional gender pay gap affecting racialized and migrant women more (ILO 2020). Preference in precarious forms of employment such as part-time and gig work. As Nancy Fraser (2013) contends, neoliberal capitalism has been clever enough to absorb feminist demands for autonomy and flexibility and turn these into structures which have ended up exploiting women much more than men. In this way, the discourse of empowerment has become a veil which hides the realities of labor market inequality and legitimates the absence of welfare provision by the state.

In this context, we can draw on Federici's (1975) important discussion of women's unwaged reproductive labor.

Reproductive Labor and Biopolitical Control

Some recent examples are:

The US Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* in 2022

More laws against abortion in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America

Conservative states make it harder to get birth control

These policies exemplify Foucault's concept of biopower (1978): states govern populations by regulating bodies and overseeing reproductive capabilities.

Medical and Scientific Discourses

Medical systems are supposed to be fair. They often have biases against women. Women's pain is not taken seriously it is underestimated or just ignored. Issues with women's health are seen as something that needs to be fixed like they are a problem. For a time, medical tests were done on men's bodies.

Things like menopause and menstruation are not studied enough. The way women's bodies are treated by doctors and medicine is a kind of harm that affects what women know about their bodies like what Gayatri Spivak said in 1988. This is especially true for women who are already treated unfairly.

Women are not given the respect they deserve to make decisions, about their bodies and what happens to them.

Gender-based violence (GBV) continues to be one of the most enduring and entrenched structures inhibiting equality. GBV includes physical, emotional, economic, symbolic, and technological violence.

Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence

In a worldwide statistic, one in three women are subjected to intimate partner violence (WHO 2021).

Nevertheless, the framing of GBV tends to individualize GBV by ignoring patriarchal privilege

socioeconomic dependency, legal immunity, cultural expectations of female subordination, Gender-based violence (GBV) continues to be one of the most enduring and

entrenched structures inhibiting equality. GBV includes physical, emotional, economic, symbolic, and technological violence.

Public and Workplace Harassment

Female employees are subjected to harassment not only in workplaces but also in educational settings, during travel on public transportation, and online. According to feminist scholars such as Ahmed (2017), the systems in place to address harassment tend to victimize the victim once again by exposing them to institutional betrayal.

Digital and Technological Violence

Examples of new forms of GBV include:

1- Online harassment: Example 1: Gamergate (2014)

A harassment campaign aimed at female video game enthusiasts such as Anita Sarkeesian and Zoë Quinn.

Example 2: Leslie Jones (2016)

The comedian received both racially and sexually abusive messages on Twitter.

2- Cyber-stalking

Example 1: In a certain case, an individual was sentenced to prison for stalking a female through the internet through false identities.

Example 2: United States v. Cassidy (2011)

A pioneering case of online stalking through tweets and blogging.

3- Doxxing

Example 1: Boston Marathon Bombing Suspect Misidentification (2013)

Reddit users published incorrect personal info of an innocent student (Sunil Tripathi).

Example 2: Gamergate Doxxing Waves (2014)

Women writers, developers, and critics had home addresses and private data posted online.

4- Deepfake pornography

Case 1: Deepfake of Indian Journalist Rana Ayyub (2018)

A deepfake sexual video targeted her to silence political commentary.

Reference:

Case 2: Taylor Swift Deepfake Scandal (2024)

Explicit deepfake images circulated widely on X (Twitter), sparking global debate.

5- Image non-consensual sharing

Case 1: Hunter Moore & IsAnyoneUp (2012–2015)

Moore ran a revenge-porn site sharing images without consent; jailed in 2015.

Case 2: Australian "4Corners" High School Image-Sharing Ring (2017)

Thousands of girls' images were traded without consent.

ABC News (2017). Girls' explicit images traded online without consent.

6- Algorithmic discrimination

Case 1: COMPAS Algorithm Bias (U.S. 2016)

Risk-assessment software showed racial bias against Black defendants.

Case 2: Amazon AI Hiring Tool Bias (2018)

Amazon scrapped its AI recruiting system after it discriminated against female applicants.

Noble's Algorithms of Oppression (2018) illustrates the ways in which search engines objectify or sexually commoditize women, particularly women of color. Female employees are subjected to harassment not only in workplaces but also in educational settings, during travel on public transportation, and online. According to feminist scholars such as Ahmed (2017), the systems in place to address harassment tend to victimize the victim once again by exposing them to institutional betrayal.

Persistent Patriarchy and the Illusion of Gender Justice in Literary Heroines (16th–21st Century)

The role of the heroine, in the past five centuries of literary history, has been widely appreciated as an indication of female autonomy; however, upon closer inspection, a disturbing continuity comes to light. Progress is a reconfiguration of patriarchal control rather than a dissolution of the system. Heroines throughout the centuries in literature are not significant in their portrayal of gender equality being achieved but rather reveal how consistently this is not the case.

Early modern drama features the likes of Shakespeare's Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), representing an era where male dominance is the norm. The plays from a time ago like the ones by Shakespeare have characters like Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* from 1596. This was a time when men were in charge and women did not have the power. When Portia goes into the courtroom she has to dress up like a man to be taken seriously. This shows that then women had to give up being themselves to have any say in the law. *The Merchant of Venice* is an example of this and Portia is a big part of it. She has to pretend to be a man to get what she wants which's not really fair to women like Portia.

The story of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* is still important today because it reminds us of how far we have come and how far we still have to go to make sure that women have the same rights, as men like Portia wanted. Similarly, *Macbeth* (1606) features Lady Macbeth, whose desire for power can only be expressed in the negation of femininity. Her plea to "unsex me here," highlights the cultural conviction that power and masculinity are intertwined. However, while the discourse around women may change in the nineteenth century, the underlying hierarchy remains intact. For example, Jane Austen's character, Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), is frequently used as an example of proto-feminist awareness; however, the independence displayed by the heroine is confined strictly within the limits of the marriage

market and is influenced heavily by economic factors created by patriarchy itself. In the case of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), Jane makes a bold declaration about her equality with men; however, her reunion with Rochester restores the benevolent patriarchal order, wherein a woman can demand respect as long as she is granted such by the man in question. Even Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), with its heroine who exhibits strong independence, shows that inequality between genders continues to prevail: a woman is punished openly, while the male culprit receives immunity due to her public punishment. The connection between gender and the issues of race, class, and political power is particularly prominent within twentieth-century literature. Within Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), the protagonist, Janie Crawford, not only fights against patriarchy but also against the intersectionality that renders her doubly subordinate by the means of defining the Black female body. Margaret Atwood presents a dystopian scenario, which can be considered an ultimate form of patriarchal society, in her book *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Within such narrative context, women are turned into the instruments of reproduction, their identity becomes manipulated, monitored, and ideologically constructed by state power. What makes this story truly powerful is its ability to imply that patriarchal society does not go away, but merely finds new tools to survive. The novel by Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987), goes even further, revealing the ways enslaving women exacerbates violence within the family sphere, thus transforming motherhood into the field of struggle for possession over the children.

Instead of breaking with this tradition, modern fiction keeps it going. In *Americana* (2013), Ifemelu faces patriarchal oppression that is shown through globalization, sexual and economic desires, consumerism, and visual politics. The stress on Ifemelu's hair, accent, and body shows that patriarchal oppression is still around, but it has changed to fit the aesthetic ideas of neoliberalism and racial capitalism. The pressure put on Ifemelu's hair, her accent, and her body show that patriarchal oppression has not disappeared but instead been fused with the aesthetic principles of neoliberalism and racial capitalism. Mariam and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) by Khaled Hosseini encounter institutionalized patriarchy through the force of law, culture, and warfare. Even apparently strong heroines, such as Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* (2008), end up being utilized by state authorities for purposes of propaganda.

In conclusion, therefore, it would be wrong to claim that literature reflects the move towards gender justice. The reality is that no straight line can lead to a society based on equality because there are continued evolutions of patriarchy and its oppressions rather than their demise. Structures of patriarchal oppression that have persisted for centuries continue to

transform into new kinds of oppression that could be domestic, racial, biopolitical, neoliberal, or digital in nature. Heroines from the distant past and the modern times should not be regarded as proof of the achievement of gender justice. Instead, they symbolize women's fight against injustice.

On the whole, in order to advance the cause of gender equality in the 21st century, we need structural and cultural change to go hand in hand. While legal rights, policy measures, just employment conditions, and a proper school curricula are all vital tools of the struggle, they will amount to nothing without analyzing the rhetoric, ideologies, and symbols that contribute to oppression. This is why scholars such as Butler, Crenshaw, and Mohanty and others say that gender justice implies not only the end of oppression but also prevention of its persistence through constant transformation.

In five centuries of literary history and present-day socio-economic conditions, gender inequality has become an adaptable and enduring phenomenon. Through examining the history of structural obstacles including patriarchal systems, poverty, biopolitical regulation of reproductive practices, and cyber violence, it becomes clear that gender inequality is far from being a remnant of past societies or an accidental factor in modern society; rather, gender inequality is consciously maintained through the law, culture, and knowledge hierarchy, which devalue women and people who do not identify themselves as strictly male or female. Feminist theory, specifically post-structural feminist critique such as Judith Butler's gender performativity, helps to understand how gender identity is performed, not essentialized. Third-wave feminism and intersectional feminism have highlighted the diversity of women's experiences, noting the intersectionality of oppression through such factors as race, class, sexual orientation, nationality, and disability. The realities of globalization, digitalization, and neoliberalism in the 21st century complicate these conflicts even further, as women face issues connected with precarious employment, distorted ideals imposed by the media, algorithmic discrimination, and international policy differences. However, the persistence of feminist activism from the grassroots level, international movements, and the digital sphere indicates the resilience of women's agency and the need for continuous resistance.

The literary canon is the reflection of all these problems and struggles. Heroes from different periods from the Renaissance to modern literature resist domination, challenge authorities, and assert themselves, while at the same time revealing the existence of patriarchy and its evolution. Literature shows that gender equality is an on-going project that requires constant vigilance and critique of the system that seeks to keep women in a subordinate position. Literary heroines represent both an example of female agency and persistent inequality, as well as

inspiration for current feminist practices (Richardson et al., 2024).

Conclusions

In response to these inequalities that just do not go away people have been trying to make changes at the international levels to make things fair for women. There are rules like CEDAW from 1979 and the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal 5 that provide a standard for stopping discrimination getting more women involved in decision making and protecting women from violence. At the level countries have been trying to make a difference with things like affirmative action equal pay laws, education that is fair to women and social programs that help women. They also use technology to help women with websites where women can report if they are treated unfairly and apps that track violence against women and programs that help women start their businesses. All these efforts notwithstanding, however, we still have a very long way to go. For one thing, even though many rules and laws have been put in place to ensure justice, they are not sufficient to shift people's attitudes towards one another. There are many lapses when it comes to enforcing such regulations, besides the fact that there is huge resistance from people in making any changes to what is going on. Women who have already marginalized, such as women of color, women living in poverty, women with disabilities, as well as immigrant women, seem always to be forgotten. In order to bring forth gender justice, it is not only necessary to introduce some rules but to make a paradigmatic shift of people's minds, in addition, to engage women in such process, and also to continue discussing gender justice issues.

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