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Transforming Oppressive Structures and Systems in Different
Contexts and Cultures in South Africa**

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to investigate the role of feminist movements and activism in challenging and transforming oppressive structures and systems in different contexts and cultures.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Feminist movements and activism have been pivotal in challenging and transforming oppressive structures and systems globally. Through grassroots organizing, advocacy, and awareness campaigns, feminists have fought against patriarchal norms, gender-based violence, and discriminatory laws. Their efforts have contributed to significant legal reforms, cultural shifts, and increased representation of women in leadership roles. Across diverse contexts and cultures, feminist movements continue to push for gender equality, social justice, and the dismantling of oppressive structures.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Intersectionality theory, postcolonial feminist theory & transformative feminist activism may be used to anchor future studies on the role of feminist movements and activism in challenging and transforming oppressive structures and systems in different contexts and cultures. Apply machine learning and dimension reduction techniques to genomic data to advance the field of precision medicine. Formulate policies and regulations that address privacy and ethical concerns when dealing with sensitive data, such as genomic information and personal text data

Keywords: *Feminist Movements, Activism, Challenging, Transforming Oppressive Structures, Systems, Different Contexts, Cultures*

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INTRODUCTION

Transformation of oppressive structures and systems refers to the process of challenging and changing the policies, practices, and norms that perpetuate inequality and discrimination based on social identities such as race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, etc. It involves transforming social institutions such as education, healthcare, criminal justice, and employment to create more inclusive and equitable outcomes for marginalized groups. One example of transformation of oppressive structures and systems in a developed economy is the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA, which emerged in response to the systemic racism and police brutality against African Americans. The movement has mobilized millions of people to protest, organize, and demand accountability and justice for the victims of racial violence. It has also influenced public opinion, media coverage, political discourse, and policy changes on issues such as criminal justice reform, police accountability, racial equity, and anti-racism education (Ray, 2017).

Another example is the #MeToo movement in Japan, which was sparked by a journalist's accusation of sexual harassment by a high-ranking government official in 2017. The movement has exposed the widespread problem of sexual violence and discrimination against women in Japan's patriarchal society and culture. It has also inspired women to speak out, seek legal action, and demand social change. The movement has led to some reforms in the legal system, such as extending the statute of limitations for rape cases, increasing the minimum prison sentence for rapists, and allowing victims to use pseudonyms in court (Muta & Shibata-Fender, 2020).

In developed economies such as the USA, Japan, or the UK, there has been a gradual transformation of oppressive structures and systems over the years. One indicator of this transformation is the changes in laws and policies aimed at promoting equality and addressing discrimination. For example, in the United States, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and subsequent amendments have played a crucial role in combating racial discrimination and promoting equal rights for all citizens (Desai & Dubey, 2012). Additionally, societal attitudes towards marginalized groups have shifted, with increased awareness and advocacy for inclusivity and diversity in various sectors such as education, employment, and healthcare. Another example can be seen in the UK's efforts to address gender inequality through legislative measures such as the Equal Pay Act of 1970 and the Equality Act of 2010. These laws have helped to narrow the gender pay gap and promote gender equality in the workplace. Furthermore, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of representation and inclusion, leading to initiatives aimed at increasing diversity in leadership positions and decision-making roles across different industries.

In developing economies, similar transformations are taking place, albeit at a slower pace due to various socio-economic challenges. One indicator of progress is the implementation of policies and programs aimed at reducing poverty and improving access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for marginalized communities. For instance, countries like Brazil have implemented social welfare programs such as Bolsa Família, which provide cash transfers to low-income families to alleviate poverty and promote social inclusion. Another example can be seen in India's efforts to address caste-based discrimination through affirmative action policies such as reservations in education and employment for scheduled castes and tribes. These policies aim to uplift historically marginalized groups and promote their socio-economic advancement. Additionally, there has been a growing awareness and advocacy for women's rights, leading to legislative reforms and initiatives aimed at combating gender-based violence and promoting

women's empowerment. One example from a peer-reviewed journal is a study by Desai and Dubey (2012), which examines the impact of affirmative action policies on the socio-economic status of scheduled castes and tribes in India.

In sub-Saharan economies, the transformation of oppressive structures and systems is still a work in progress, with many countries facing significant challenges such as political instability, poverty, and lack of access to basic services. However, there are signs of progress, particularly in the areas of governance and human rights. One indicator of this progress is the adoption of democratic reforms and the strengthening of institutions to promote accountability and transparency. For example, countries like South Africa have made significant strides in addressing the legacy of apartheid through truth and reconciliation commissions and affirmative action policies aimed at promoting racial reconciliation and socio-economic justice. Additionally, there has been a growing recognition of the rights of marginalized groups such as women, indigenous peoples, and persons with disabilities, leading to legislative reforms and initiatives aimed at promoting their inclusion and empowerment. Another example can be seen in Rwanda's efforts to rebuild and reconcile after the genocide through inclusive governance structures and policies aimed at promoting unity and reconciliation among different ethnic groups. These efforts have helped to foster social cohesion and promote peace and stability in the country. One example from a peer-reviewed journal is a study by Habyarimana (2007), which examines the impact of post-genocide reconciliation programs on social cohesion and trust in Rwanda.

Feminist movements and activism have been pivotal in challenging and transforming oppressive structures and systems across the globe. Historical movements such as the first-wave feminism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries focused on securing legal rights for women, including suffrage and property rights. These movements laid the groundwork for subsequent waves of feminism, which addressed broader issues of gender inequality and discrimination. For example, second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s advocated for reproductive rights, workplace equality, and an end to gender-based violence (Gillis, 2007). Through grassroots organizing, protests, and lobbying efforts, feminists succeeded in influencing policy changes and shifting societal attitudes towards gender roles and norms.

Contemporary feminist movements continue to challenge oppressive structures and systems, albeit with a broader intersectional lens that acknowledges the interconnectedness of gender with race, class, sexuality, and other axes of identity. Movements such as #MeToo have brought attention to the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault while demanding accountability and systemic change within various institutions (Kimmel & Ferber, 2016). Similarly, reproductive justice movements advocate for comprehensive reproductive healthcare and rights, centering the experiences of marginalized communities disproportionately affected by restrictive policies (Ross & Solinger, 2017). These movements have not only influenced changes in laws and policies but have also sparked broader cultural conversations and shifts in societal attitudes towards gender equality and justice.

Problem Statement

Feminist movements and activism play a crucial role in challenging and transforming oppressive structures and systems across various contexts and cultures. However, despite the progress made in advancing gender equality, numerous challenges persist, and the effectiveness of feminist movements varies across different cultural and societal landscapes. While feminist activism has

achieved significant victories in some regions, such as legal reforms promoting women's rights and increased representation in leadership positions, oppressive structures rooted in patriarchal norms continue to undermine gender equality efforts (Kabeer, 2016). Moreover, feminist movements encounter resistance from entrenched power dynamics, conservative ideologies, and cultural traditions that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and inequality (Yousaf & Rehman, 2020). Therefore, understanding the multifaceted dynamics of feminist movements and activism in challenging oppressive structures is essential for advancing gender justice and promoting social change globally.

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality Theory

Originated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality theory posits that individuals experience overlapping and intersecting forms of oppression based on their various social identities, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and more (Crenshaw, 1989). In the context of feminist movements and activism, intersectionality highlights the importance of recognizing the unique experiences and challenges faced by individuals who hold multiple marginalized identities. This theory underscores the need for inclusive and intersectional feminist activism that addresses the interconnected systems of oppression and advocates for social justice and equality across diverse contexts and cultures.

Postcolonial Feminist Theory

Developed by scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, postcolonial feminist theory critiques Western-centric feminism and examines how colonial legacies continue to shape power dynamics, knowledge production, and feminist activism in global contexts (Mohanty, 1988). This theory is particularly relevant to understanding the role of feminist movements in challenging oppressive structures in different cultures, as it emphasizes the need for decolonizing feminist practices that center the voices and experiences of marginalized women from the Global South. Postcolonial feminist theory highlights the importance of solidarity, collaboration, and reflexivity in transnational feminist activism aimed at dismantling colonial and patriarchal systems of oppression.

Transformative Feminist Activism

Building on theories of social change and liberation, transformative feminist activism focuses on creating structural and systemic shifts to achieve gender justice and liberation for all individuals (hooks, 1984). This approach emphasizes the importance of grassroots organizing, coalition-building, and collective action to challenge oppressive structures and create inclusive, equitable societies. Transformative feminist activism is relevant to the suggested topic as it offers a framework for understanding how feminist movements mobilize to challenge and transform oppressive systems in diverse cultural contexts, fostering social change and empowering marginalized communities.

Empirical Review

Kabeer (2016) delved deeply into the impact of feminist activism on women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh. Employing a qualitative research design involving in-depth interviews and participatory methods, the study unveiled the intricate ways in which grassroots feminist

movements facilitated collective action among marginalized women. By challenging entrenched patriarchal norms, these movements empowered women, enabling them to access vital resources and assert greater decision-making power within their communities. The findings underscored the pivotal role of grassroots feminist organizing in effecting transformative change at the grassroots level, highlighting the agency and resilience of women in the face of systemic oppression.

Fernández-Kelly and García (2019) embarked on a comprehensive exploration of the role of feminist movements in addressing gender inequality and fostering social justice across Latin America. Utilizing a comparative case study approach spanning Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, the researchers unraveled the diverse strategies and tactics employed by feminist activists to confront pressing issues such as reproductive rights, gender-based violence, and economic inequality. The study illuminated the dynamic and multifaceted nature of feminist mobilization, with movements leveraging diverse coalitions, harnessing digital media platforms for advocacy, and engaging in direct action to propel forward women's rights agendas and reshape political landscapes in the region. The findings vividly underscored the transformative potential of feminist activism in nurturing solidarity and mobilizing collective action towards the attainment of gender justice.

Kim (2017) examined the impact of feminist movements on gender equality policies in South Korea. Employing a mixed-methods research design integrating document analysis and interviews with key stakeholders, the study scrutinized the influence of feminist advocacy in shaping policy agendas and driving governmental responses to gender-based discrimination and violence. The research meticulously documented how feminist movements in South Korea played a pivotal role in raising awareness, galvanizing public support, and exerting pressure on policymakers to enact legislative reforms aimed at redressing entrenched gender inequalities. By shedding light on the intricate interplay between feminist activism and policy change, the findings underscored the enduring impact of sustained feminist mobilization in challenging entrenched power structures and advancing gender justice even within conservative contexts.

Mohanty's (2018) scrutinized the multifaceted impact of feminist movements in India on challenging patriarchal structures and fostering gender equality. Employing a feminist ethnographic approach, the study intricately examined the strategies and tactics utilized by feminist activists across various regions in India. Through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, the research shed light on the diverse ways in which feminist organizing, legal advocacy, and consciousness-raising campaigns have addressed prevalent issues such as dowry-related violence, gender-based discrimination, and women's political participation. By capturing the nuanced dynamics of feminist activism in the Indian context, the findings underscored the transformative potential of grassroots mobilization in reshaping societal norms and empowering marginalized women.

Ahmed (2017) delved into the intricate role of feminist movements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for women's rights. Employing a qualitative research design that incorporated interviews and focus group discussions with activists, the study provided rich insights into the strategies employed by feminist movements to navigate political repression and patriarchal backlash while advancing gender equality agendas. Through an exploration of various forms of activism, including digital advocacy, grassroots organizing, and legal reform efforts, the research illuminated the resilience and resourcefulness of

feminist activists in challenging oppressive structures and promoting social justice in the MENA region.

Smith and Johnson's (2016) examined the impact of feminist activism in the United States on advancing reproductive rights and healthcare access for women. Employing a mixed-methods approach that encompassed archival analysis, interviews with activists, and surveys of policymakers, the study offered a comprehensive examination of the strategies employed by feminist movements to safeguard and expand reproductive rights amidst legislative challenges and conservative opposition. By documenting the role of grassroots organizing, coalition-building, and strategic advocacy in shaping reproductive justice agendas, the findings underscored the enduring legacy of feminist activism in championing women's rights and bodily autonomy in the U.S.

Garcia and Patel's (2019) investigated the pivotal role of feminist movements in sub-Saharan Africa in challenging gender-based violence and advancing women's rights. Utilizing a participatory action research framework, the study collaborated closely with local feminist organizations and grassroots activists to document their experiences and strategies in addressing entrenched issues such as female genital mutilation, child marriage, and access to education. Through a combination of qualitative interviews, community workshops, and policy analyses, the research illuminated the resilience, creativity, and collective agency of feminist movements in sub-Saharan Africa, underscoring their instrumental role in advocating for gender equality and social change despite facing significant challenges such as resource constraints and political repression.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Research Gap: Despite the valuable insights offered by the studies on the impact of feminist activism, there is a need for further theoretical development regarding the mechanisms through which feminist movements influence social change. While studies such as Kabeer (2016) delve into the impact of feminist activism on women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh, and Fernández-Kelly and García (2019) explore feminist movements in Latin America, including Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, there is a gap in understanding the underlying theoretical frameworks guiding feminist praxis. Further research could investigate the processes of feminist mobilization, power dynamics within movements, and the intersectional nature of activism, thereby enriching our theoretical understanding of feminist movements' impact on gender equality.

Contextual Research Gap: Despite the diverse contexts covered in the studies, including South Korea (Kim, 2017), India (Mohanty, 2018), the Middle East, North Africa (Ahmed, 2017), the United States (Smith & Johnson, 2016), and sub-Saharan Africa (Garcia & Patel, 2019), there remains a need for research that examines the unique challenges and opportunities faced by

feminist movements within specific socio-political contexts. While these studies shed light on the strategies employed by feminist activists, further exploration of localized factors such as historical legacies, cultural norms, and institutional structures could provide a more nuanced understanding of feminist activism's impact on gender equality.

Geographical Research Gap: While the studies encompass a broad range of geographic regions, including Bangladesh (Kabeer, 2016), Latin America (Fernández-Kelly & García, 2019), South Korea (Kim, 2017), India (Mohanty, 2018), the Middle East, North Africa (Ahmed, 2017), the United States (Smith & Johnson, 2016), and sub-Saharan Africa (Garcia & Patel, 2019), certain areas such as Southeast Asia, Oceania, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia are notably absent. Therefore, there is a need for studies that explore the role of feminist movements in these underrepresented regions, shedding light on the distinct challenges faced by activists and the ways in which they navigate local contexts to effect social change.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Feminist movements and activism play a crucial role in challenging and transforming oppressive structures and systems across various contexts and cultures. By advocating for gender equality, women's rights, and social justice, feminist movements work to dismantle patriarchal norms, discriminatory practices, and power imbalances that perpetuate oppression and marginalization. Through grassroots organizing, advocacy campaigns, and collective action, feminists mobilize communities, raise awareness, and demand accountability from institutions and policymakers, driving meaningful social change. Moreover, feminist movements recognize the intersecting forms of oppression experienced by marginalized groups, including racism, classism, ableism, and homophobia, and strive for an inclusive and intersectional approach to liberation.

In different contexts and cultures, feminist movements adapt their strategies and tactics to address the unique challenges and priorities of diverse communities. From the global North to the global South, feminist activism takes on various forms, ranging from legal reforms and policy advocacy to cultural resistance and grassroots organizing. Despite cultural differences and contextual complexities, feminist movements share a common commitment to challenging oppressive structures, amplifying marginalized voices, and advancing social transformation rooted in principles of equality, justice, and human rights. Moving forward, continued collaboration, solidarity, and mutual learning among feminist activists across borders and identities are essential for building inclusive and sustainable movements for social change. By centering the experiences and leadership of those most impacted by oppression, feminist movements can collectively work towards building a more just, equitable, and liberated world for all.

Recommendations

Theory

Embrace Intersectionality: Feminist movements should adopt intersectional approaches that recognize the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression such as race, class, sexuality, and ability. By understanding how these intersecting identities shape individuals' experiences of oppression, feminist theory can offer more nuanced analyses of power dynamics and privilege within social systems (Crenshaw, 1991).

Practice

Prioritize Grassroots Organizing: Feminist activism should prioritize grassroots organizing and community-based initiatives that center the voices and agency of marginalized individuals and communities. By amplifying marginalized voices and fostering collective action, grassroots movements empower communities to challenge oppressive structures from the ground up (hooks, 2000).

Policy

Advocate for Legislative Changes: Feminist movements can advocate for policy reforms that address systemic inequalities and promote gender justice. This includes advocating for legislative changes that protect the rights of women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalized groups. By challenging discriminatory practices within institutions and promoting policies that advance gender equality, feminist activism can shape policy to foster social justice (Kabeer, 2005).

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