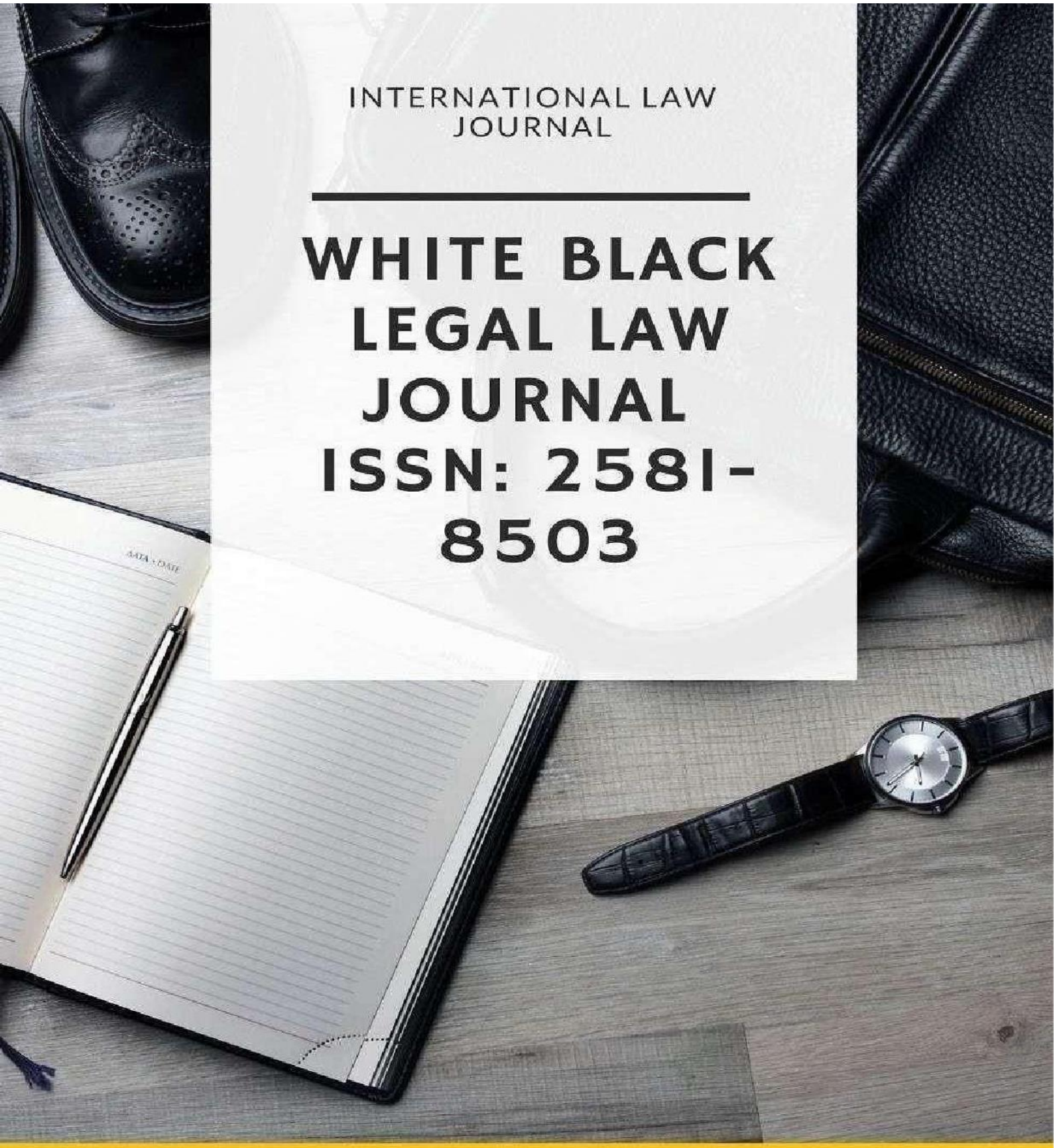


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A STUDY ON FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY IN INDIA

A Socio-Legal and Jurisprudential Treatise on Structural Deprivation, Gender Disparity, and Constitutional Guarantees

AUTHORED BY - C.RAHUL

ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of the "feminization of poverty" describes not merely a statistical concentration of income deficits among women, but an entrenched, structural paradigm wherein systemic gender biases, institutional exclusion, and patriarchal socio-cultural frameworks perpetuate multi-dimensional deprivation. In the contemporary Indian socio-economic milieu, despite sustained macro-economic growth and comprehensive constitutional guarantees of equality and affirmative state action under Articles 14, 15, 21 , 38, 39, and 42 of the Constitution of India, women continue to bear a disproportionately severe burden of persistent impoverishment. This multi-layered vulnerability manifests through severe time-poverty driven by uncompensated and unrecognized domestic reproductive labor, systemic exclusion from tangible asset ownership—most acutely agricultural land—labor market segregation within volatile informal and care economies, asymmetric wage differentials, and exacerbated deprivation among female-headed households, rural widows, and marginalized caste and tribal communities.

Adopting a robust doctrinal and feminist socio-legal methodology, this study critically interrogates the Indian legislative and institutional matrix governing economic rights. The investigation examines the practical efficacy of statutory enactments including the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA), the Code on Wages, 2019, the Code on Social Security, 2020, and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. Integrating the Capabilities Approach formulated by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum with Bina Agarwal's foundational gendered asset framework, this study demonstrates that formal legislative parity fails to translate into substantive distributive justice in the absence of robust tenure security, institutional credit democratization, uncompromised public social infrastructure, and gender-responsive fiscal auditing. The monograph concludes by formulating transformative institutional remedies, statutory reforms, and programmatic imperatives designed to dismantle the structural architectures of gendered destitution, thereby translating constitutional guarantees ofhuman dignity into lived realities for Indian women.

KEYWORDS: Feminization of Poverty, Substantive Equality, Feminist Jurisprudence, Capabilities Approach, Unpaid Care Work, Land Tenure Rights, Informal Economy, Female-Headed Households, MGNREGA, Distributive Justice.

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KEY INDIAN JURISPRUDENTIAL PRECEDENTS AND THEIR DOCTRINAL RELEVANCE

S.NO.	NAME OF THE CASE	CITATION	DOCTRINAL RELEVANCE TO FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY
1	Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation	(1985) 3 SCC 545	Expanded Article 21 to encompass the right to livelihood as an indissoluble facet ofthe right to life; foundational for informal female street vendors and slum dwellers.
2	Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma	(2020) 9 SCC 1	Affirmed retroactive coparcenary birthrights for daughters under amended Section 6 ofthe Hindu Succession Act; critical milestone for female agrarian property entitlements.
3	Rajnesh v. Neha	(2021) 2 SCC 324	Comprehensive guidelines remedying judicial delays, overlaps, and non-enforcement of maintenance awards, addressing chronic economic destitution following marital breakdown.
4	Mackinnon Mackenzie & Co. Ltd. v. Audrey D'Costa	(1987) 2 SCC 469	Pioneering interpretation ofequal remuneration for equal work; invalidated discriminatory wage structures based on gendered employment classifications.
5	Air India v. Nergesh Meerza	(1981) 4 SCC 335	Struck down gender-discriminatory service conditions regarding termination upon pregnancy under Articles 14 and 15, advancing substantive equality in labor participation.
6	Municipal Corporation of Delhi v. Female Workers (Muster Roll)	(2000) 3 SCC 224	Extended maternity benefits to daily-wage and muster-roll casual female workers, anchoring social security firmly within the constitutional mandate ofArticle 42.
7	Secretary, State of Karnataka v. Umadevi (3)	(2006) 4 SCC 1	Examined contractual public employment, shedding light on the precarious condition of low-paid frontline female scheme workers (Anganwadi, ASHA).
8	Swasthya Adhikar Manch v. Union of India	(2013) 7 SCC 634	Addressed health rights and reproductive exploitation ofsocio-economically marginalized women participating in unethical clinical trials due to extreme poverty.
9	Badshah v. Urmila Badshah Godse	(2014) 1 SCC 188	Affirmed a purposive, social-justice-oriented interpretation ofmaintenance under Section 125 CrPC to prevent female destitution and vagrancy.

S.NO.	NAME OF THE CASE	CITATION	DOCTRINAL RELEVANCE TO FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY
10	Madhu Kishwar v. State of Bihar	(1996) 5 SCC 125	Addressed constitutional equality regarding customary tribal land tenures excluding women, affirming their primary right to livelihood and usufructuary survival.

CHAPTER - I: INTRODUCTION

"Poverty is not merely a lack ofmoney; it is the systematic deprivation ofhuman capability to realize full personhood, security, and equal citizenship under the law."

Poverty in the modern socio-economic paradigm can no longer be conceptualized merely as an aggregate deficit of caloric intake or an arbitrary shortfall below a designated monetary income threshold. In contemporary jurisprudential and sociological analysis, poverty represents a complex, multi-dimensional deprivation encompassing the systemic denial of fundamental human capabilities, institutional exclusion, physical insecurity, and an enduring lack of real freedom to achieve valued human functioning When examined through the prism of gender, poverty reveals an profoundly asymmetric character. Worldwide, and most acutely within the developing economic landscape of India, women bear a qualitatively more severe, enduring, and structurally intransigent experience ofimpoverishment than men.

The phenomenon identified as the "feminization of poverty" signifies both an empirical reality and a deep structural critique. It reflects not solely that women constitute a numerical majority among the impoverished, but that the mechanisms producing, reinforcing, and perpetuating poverty are deeply embedded within patriarchal structures, unequal property regimes, and systemic labor-market segregation While India has registered remarkable macro-economic GDP growth over recent decades and has lifted millions out of extreme income poverty, the structural vulnerability of women has remained persistently entrenched. Women face systematic discrimination in the allocation of food, healthcare, and educational investments within the household, are excluded from productive asset ownership—most notably land—and perform the vast majority of socially necessary but economically uncompensated domestic care labor.

1.1 Background and Historical Genesis of the Study

The historical emergence of the feminization of poverty discourse originates in the late twentieth century, when feminist scholars began interrogating the gender neutrality of standard macroeconomic indicators and neoclassical development theories. In India, the landmark publication of the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, titled *Towards Equality* (1974), served as a watershed moment. The report unmasked the reality that decades of planned development had failed to improve the material, health, and legal condition of the vast majority of Indian women, and had in many sectors accelerated their displacement from traditional economic activities into precarious, low-wage informal work

Over the subsequent decades, the structural adjustment policies and economic liberalization initiated in 1991 transformed the Indian labor landscape. While liberalization expanded opportunities within certain high-skilled urban enclaves, it simultaneously intensified the informalization and contractualization of labor across agriculture, traditional crafts, and informal urban manufacturing. Women were disproportionately absorbed into precarious informal roles lacking statutory contracts, minimum wage guarantees, health insurance, or maternity protections. Furthermore, continuous agrarian distress, recurrent ecological shocks, and male out-migration from rural distress zones generated a profound structural shift termed the "feminization of agriculture," wherein rural women increasingly perform the primary operational labor of agriculture without possessing title deeds, institutional credit access, or access to agricultural extension services

1.2 Significance of the Study

The socio-legal and jurisprudential significance of investigating the feminization of poverty in India lies in bridging the persistent abyss between constitutional guarantees of substantive equality and the lived realities of institutionalized economic subjugation. The Constitution of India contains a radical charter of social justice. Articles 14, 15, and 21 guarantee equality before the law, non-discrimination on grounds of sex, and the inviolable right to life with human dignity. Furthermore, the Directive Principles of State Policy—enshrined under Articles 38, 39, 41 , 42, and 43—mandate the State to direct its policy toward securing adequate means of livelihood, equal pay for equal work, humane conditions oflabor, and a living wage for all workers.

Despite these constitutional solemnities, mainstream jurisprudence and public policy design have predominantly operated under a gender-blind paradigm. Conventional economic metrics treat the "household" as a harmonious, unified utility-maximizing unit, completely obscuring the profound intra-household hierarchies and nutritional, health, and educational deprivations experienced by women. Consequently, this study is vital because it establishes that feminized poverty is fundamentally a violation of constitutional equality and human dignity. By subjecting economic deprivation to a rigorous feminist jurisprudential critique, this study demonstrates that genuine economic empowerment requires dismantling the structural barriers to property ownership, restructuring labor laws to recognize the informal and care economies, and reforming maintenance and social security frameworks.

1.3 Review of Literature

The scholarship addressing gender, poverty, and legal institutions spans diverse disciplines. An exhaustive examination ofexisting literature reveals foundational paradigms, institutional analyses, and empirical insights:

1 Foundational Conceptual Works on Feminization of Poverty: The conceptual genesis is widely credited to Diana Pearce (1978), who demonstrated that in the United States, poverty was rapidly becoming feminized due to the proliferation of female-headed households combined with an entrenched gender wage gap and a punitive welfare system Subsequent scholars, notably Sylvia Chant (2006, 2008), substantially broadened the concept for the Global South. Chant demonstrated that the feminization of poverty cannot be reduced simply to income statistics or household headship; it represents a "feminization of responsibility and obligation," wherein women bear a continuously escalating share of familial survival labor while facing severe constraints on resources, assets, and leisure

1. Amartya Sen, Development as Freedom (Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 87-110.

2 **Capabilities Approach and Human Development:** Amartya Sen's seminal works, including *Poverty and Famines* (1981) and *Development as Freedom* (1999), revolutionized development economics by shifting focus from gross national product or individual income to the substantive freedoms—"capabilities"—that people possess to lead lives they have reason to value. Martha Nussbaum (2000) extended this framework into a deeply feminist constitutional philosophy in *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Nussbaum established a cross-cultural normative threshold of central human capabilities, arguing that unequal social and political institutions across countries like India treat women not as ends in themselves, but as instruments for the support and care ofothers, directly perpetuating their economic subjugation

3 **Property Rights and Land Ownership:** Bina Agarwal's masterwork, *A Field ofOne's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (1994), represents the preeminent legal and economic treatise on women's material deprivation. Agarwal convincingly argues that the single most decisive factor contributing to the economic and social subordination of rural South Asian women is their lack of independent rights in arable land. Agarwal demonstrates that while employment and micro-credit provide subsistence relief, only secure, statutory ownership and effective physical control over land provide enduring economic resilience, bargaining power within the marital home, and protection against extreme poverty upon widowhood, desertion, or divorce

4 **The Care Economy and Time-Use Studies:** Scholars such as Nancy Folbre (2001) and Diane Elson (2002) have extensively deconstructed the systematic erasure of the care economy within orthodox national accounts. Their work conceptualizes the "unpaid care burden" as a massive indirect subsidy extracted from women by patriarchal capitalism. In the Indian context, Indira Hirway (2014, 2021) has pioneered empirical investigations into time-use statistics, demonstrating that Indian women dedicate ten times more hours to uncompensated domestic and care chores than men, thereby precipitating chronic "time poverty" that structurally precludes women from pursuing educational advancement, formal employment, or political mobilization

5 **Intersectional Deprivation and Structural Identity:** Scholars of Dalit and indigenous feminist jurisprudence, including Sharmila Rege (1998) and Gopal Guru (1995), have critiqued the universalizing tendencies of upper-caste feminist analyses. They demonstrate that poverty in India is profoundly mediated by caste, ethnicity, and geography. Dalit and Adivasi women endure triple marginalization—by virtue of gender, caste untouchability, and class exploitation—manifesting in their over-representation as landless agricultural laborers, manual scavengers, and bonded workers who face institutional violence when asserting statutory economic rights

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1.4 Research Gap

While significant economic literature has documented macroeconomic poverty rates and legal scholars have commented on individual women's rights statutes, there remains a critical research gap in synthesizing these domains into a cohesive, doctrinal, and feminist jurisprudential framework. Existing studies frequently treat poverty as an empirical economic phenomenon and women's rights legislation as an isolated legal field. There is a marked absence of comprehensive legal analysis investigating how the structural failures of property inheritance regimes (specifically post-2005 implementation of the Hindu Succession Amendment Act), the procedural bottlenecks in family court maintenance jurisprudence, the systematic under-enforcement of the Code on Wages, and the budgetary contraction of public employment schemes (such as MGNREGA) coalesce to structurally reproduce feminized poverty. This study directly addresses this void by offering an integrated doctrinal, constitutional, and empirical inquiry into the systemic legal architecture of gendered destitution in contemporary India.

1.5 Research Objectives

The central objectives ofthis comprehensive study are:

1. To theoretically deconstruct the concept of the feminization of poverty, examining its genesis, multidisciplinary evolution, and manifestations beyond simple income deficits into multidimensional capability deprivations.
2. To apply the critical frameworks of feminist jurisprudence, the Capabilities Approach, and gendered asset theory to expose the patriarchal biases embedded in orthodox economic metrics and Indian legal institutions.
3. To rigorously evaluate the constitutional architecture under Articles 14, 15, 21 , and the Directive Principles of State Policy, determining how substantive economic equality can be judicially enforced.
4. To critically appraise the statutory matrix governing women's economic entitlements in India, including the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, MGNREGA, 2005, labor codes, maternity benefit enactments, and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005.
5. To empirically interrogate the structural drivers of female impoverishment, including the feminization of agriculture, the collapse of female labor force participation, uncompensated care labor, and the vulnerabilities ofsingle, widowed, and marginalized caste women.
6. To formulate actionable, transformative legislative reforms, judicial doctrines, and policy interventions capable ofsecuring distributive economic justice and eradicating the feminization ofpoverty in India.

1.6 Research Questions

This research study systematically investigates and resolves the following primary legal and socio-economic inquiries:

1. How does the "feminization of poverty" in India transcend conventional monetary metrics to encompass time poverty, asset dispossession, and the systematic denial ofcentral human capabilities?
2. To what extent have the constitutional mandates of substantive equality and human dignity under Articles 14 and 21 been actualized to secure economic rights for marginalized women?

3 What are the critical statutory ambiguities, customary barriers, and procedural bottlenecks that hinder Indian women from exercising de facto coparcenary rights in agricultural land pursuant to the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005?

4 How do macroeconomic shifts, informalization of labor, and the systemic neglect of the care economy reproduce gender wage disparities and depress Female Labor Force Participation in India?

5 What structural reforms in maintenance jurisprudence, social security architectures, gender responsive budgeting, and public employment schemes are required to break the intergenerational cycle of female impoverishment?

1.7 Research Methodology

The methodology adopted throughout this monograph is predominantly doctrinal, analytical, and socio-legal. Doctrinal legal research entails the systematic examination and rigorous conceptual analysis of primary legal sources, statutory frameworks, constitutional texts, legislative debates, and binding judicial precedents delivered by the Supreme Court of India and various High Courts. The research incorporates:

- **Primary Legal Sources:** The Constitution of India; the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 (and the 2005 Amendment); the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005; the Code on Wages, 2019; the Code on Social Security, 2020; the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 (as amended in 2017); the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005; and international human rights conventions including CEDAW (1979) and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995).
- **Secondary Literature & Empirical Datasets:** Scholarly treatises on feminist jurisprudence, peer-reviewed economic and legal journals, and official governmental reports. Empirical evidence is drawn from authoritative public repositories, including the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4 and NFHS-5), the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) Time-Use Surveys, the NITI Aayog Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Reports, and the Economic Survey of India.

The study employs feminist legal methods, specifically "asking the woman question"—a method designed to identify and expose gender implications embedded in legal rules and practices that appear objective and neutral on their face—and feminist practical reasoning to critique formalistic statutory interpretations.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

The present study operates within specific academic and structural boundaries:

1 The geographical and jurisdictional scope is confined primarily to the Indian Union, though comparative insights and international conventions are referenced to establish normative standards.

2 The research methodology is doctrinal and socio-legal, synthesizing verified secondary statistical datasets and case law; it does not encompass primary multi-state ethnographic fieldwork or empirical village-level survey sampling.

3 Given the rapid evolution of digital welfare governance, the study addresses legal and administrative mechanisms currently operative, recognizing that technological delivery architectures (e.g., Aadhaar-based payments, algorithmic welfare profiling) continue to undergo systemic administrative iterations.

2. Sylvia Chant, 'Re-thinking the "Feminization of Poverty"' (2006) 7(2) Journal of Human Development 201-220.

1.9 Scheme of the Study

The monograph is structured into eight organically linked chapters: **Chapter I** provides the introductory framework, literature review, research gap, objectives, and methodology. **Chapter II** deconstructs the conceptual, theoretical, and historical dimensions of the feminization of poverty. **Chapter III** establishes the theoretical foundations of feminist jurisprudence, the Capabilities Approach, and Bina Agarwal's asset model. **Chapter IV** conducts a comprehensive doctrinal audit of the constitutional, statutory, and international legal matrix in India. **Chapter V** examines the empirical drivers of female deprivation, including agrarian distress, time poverty, and informalization. **Chapter VI** delivers a jurisprudential critique of institutional bottlenecks, maintenance jurisprudence, and budgetary gaps. **Chapter VII** articulates major findings, answers research questions, and presents comprehensive policy recommendations. Finally, **Chapter VIII** compiles an authoritative compendium ofjudicial precedents, statutes, and bibliographic references.

CHAPTER - II: CONCEPTUAL, THEORETICAL, AND HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS OF FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

"Women perform two-thirds ofthe world's work, produce halfthe world's food, yet receive only ten percent of the world's income and own less than one percent ofthe world's property."

2.1 The Conceptual Evolution of "Feminization of Poverty"

The term "feminization of poverty" was initially formulated in 1978 by Diana Pearce to describe the evolving demographic profile of poverty in the United States, where social, economic, and institutional factors were causing women to constitute an increasingly disproportionate share of the poor population Pearce identified two primary engines driving this transition: the systemic gender wage gap in the formal labor market and the increasing prevalence of female-headed households resulting from marital dissolution, desertion, and unwed motherhood, where women were forced to support dependents without adequate male economic contributions or state child-care infrastructure.

When transferred to the developing economies of South Asia, and India in particular, the concept required profound epistemological refinement. In the Indian context, the feminization of poverty cannot be understood simply as a demographic phenomenon driven by divorce or lone motherhood, because the traditional joint and patrilocal family structure often suppresses visible female headship while internally subordinating women. In India, the phenomenon reflects an enduring structural reality wherein economic development patterns, agrarian changes, and cultural practices disproportionately consign women to the bottom tiers of socio-economic well-being Sylvia Chant's intervention became critical here: she proposed that scholars must examine the "feminization of responsibility and obligation," recognizing that women are compelled to compensate for state welfare retrenchment and household poverty by expending extraordinary physical, emotional, and economic labor, often without possessing commensurate command over assets or decisions

2.2 Deconstructing the Income Paradigm: Multidimensional Poverty and Gender Invisibility

For decades, national poverty lines in India—from the Dandekar-Rath methodology to the Planning Commission's Tendulkar and Rangarajan Committees—defined poverty almost exclusively through the narrow lens of per capita household expenditure required to purchase a minimum basket of food calories and basic non-food essentials. This monetary and household-level focus fundamentally obscured the gendered dimension of poverty. By presuming that household income is pooled harmoniously and distributed equitably among members according to individual need, standard economic models rendered female deprivation completely invisible

The advent of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) and adapted by NITI Aayog in India, has significantly advanced poverty discourse. The National MPI assesses overlapping deprivations across three equally weighted dimensions: Health (nutrition, child and adolescent mortality, antenatal care), Education (years of schooling, school attendance), and Standard of Living (cooking fuel, sanitation, drinking water, electricity, housing, assets, bank accounts). When disaggregated by gender, multidimensional poverty demonstrates that women bear the brunt of nutritional deprivation (over 53% of Indian women aged 15-49 are anemic according to NFHS-5), lack access to clean cooking fuel, and suffer physical weariness from collecting fuel and water. Thus, income sufficiency at the household level often coexists with acute multidimensional female deprivation.

2.3 The Structural Division of Labor and the "Care Economy"

At the core of the feminization of poverty lies the patriarchal division of labor, which bifurcates human productivity into the "productive" economy (monetized, male-dominated, market-recognized goods and services) and the "reproductive" or "care" economy (uncompensated, female-dominated domestic maintenance, child-rearing, elder care, cooking, and sanitation). Classical economics and standard national accounting systems, including the United Nations System of National Accounts (SNA), have historically treated domestic and care labor as "non-economic" activity, assigning it a zero value in calculations of Gross Domestic Product

This systemic erasure creates a double penalty for women. First, the uncompensated nature of reproductive labor deprives women of independent financial autonomy, rendering them economically dependent upon male earners. Second, the overwhelming time burden imposed by these chores prevents women from participating in formal education, career upskilling, or formal wage employment. When women do enter the wage market, they are forced to seek flexible, hyper-exploitative, informal jobs near their homes to balance their primary domestic responsibilities, thus cementing their location within the lowest-paid strata ofthe working poor.

2.4 Intra-Household Inequalities and Asymmetric Resource Allocation

Orthodox economic theory treats the household as a black box—a unitary collective actor where an altruistic household head maximizes collective utility. Feminist economists, most prominently Amartya Sen through his model of "cooperative conflicts," have decisively debunked this unitary myth Sen demonstrated that the household is characterized by simultaneous cooperation (to increase aggregate resources) and conflict (over the distribution of those resources among members). In South Asian societies, the outcome of these internal bargaining processes is profoundly biased against women.

3. Diana Pearce, 'The Feminization of Poverty: Women, Work and Welfare' (1978) 11 Urban and Social Change Review

An individual's bargaining power within the household is determined by their "fall-back position" or "breakdown position"—what they would have if the household cooperation collapsed. Because women typically lack independent land ownership, marketable professional skills, inheritance entitlements, and parental safety nets, their fall-back position is extraordinarily weak. Consequently, women accept highly inequitable intra-household distributions: they consume food last and least, receive delayed medical intervention during illness, and bear the greatest physical sacrifice in times of famine or economic inflation.

2.5 The Vulnerability Paradigm of Female-Headed Households

Female-Headed Households (FHHs)—comprising households headed by widows, divorced or separated women, unmarried mothers, or wives of chronically disabled or long-term out-migrated men—represent one of the most economically vulnerable demographic cohorts in India. According to recent census estimates and sociological assessments, FHHs constitute between 12% and 15% of all Indian households, and their proportion is growing

FHHs face compounded economic penalties:

- **High Dependency Ratios and Single-Earner Trap:** FHHs typically rely upon a single female income earner who receives lower wages in the market, while supporting children or aging in-laws.
- **Absence of Tangible Collateral:** Lacking title to land or ancestral homes, female heads cannot secure formal bank credit, forcing them into reliance on predatory informal moneylenders charging usurious interest rates exceeding 36% to 60% annually.
- **Customary and Social Ostracism:** Widowed or deserted female heads in rural communities frequently face accusations of witchcraft, bad omen, or moral impropriety, which are often weaponized by male kin to forcibly dispossess them oftheir marital or parental residences

CHAPTER - III: FEMINIST JURISPRUDENCE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC JUSTICE

"Law is not an autonomous, neutral instrument ofsocial ordering; historically, it is the codification ofmale power, institutionalizing patriarchal privilege under the guise ofobjective rationality."

3.1 Foundational Tenets of Feminist Jurisprudence

Feminist jurisprudence emerged as a distinct, rigorous philosophical discipline during the latter third of the twentieth century, seeking to deconstruct the gendered foundations of legal thought, statutory codification, and judicial interpretation. At its core, feminist jurisprudence challenges the foundational claim of classical jurisprudence that the law is neutral, objective, and universal. Feminist legal theorists demonstrate that traditional law was constructed by men, from the perspective of male power, reflecting male life experiences and protecting male economic and property interests

4. Sylvia Chant, Gender, Generation and Poverty (Edward Elgar, 2007), pp. 34-

In the context of economic justice and poverty, feminist jurisprudence asserts that statutory rules that appear neutral on their face—such as property inheritance laws, contract principles, and labor regulations—systematically generate discriminatory outcomes because they operate within a social matrix that has already subordinated women. Therefore, the discipline insists upon dismantling the false dichotomy between the "public sphere" (the arena of statecraft, commerce, and wage labor, historically protected by formal law) and the "private sphere" (the arena of family, home, and unpaid care, historically left unregulated, thereby insulating domestic economic exploitation from legal scrutiny).

3.2 Schools of Feminist Legal Thought Applied to Economic Subordination

Feminist legal theory encompasses multiple distinct philosophical schools, each offering profound analytical insights into the legal and structural mechanisms ofthe feminization ofpoverty:

3.2.1 *Liberal Feminist Jurisprudence*

Liberal feminism grounds its critique in the classical ideals of individual autonomy, formal equality, and equal opportunity. It argues that women's economic deprivation stems from discriminatory statutory barriers, institutional exclusion from educational and vocational training, and unequal treatment under the law. In the Indian legal landscape, liberal feminism has driven pivotal statutory reforms aimed at removing overt gender bars, such as demanding equal pay through the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, and challenging discriminatory workplace rules (as seen in the landmark case of *Air India v. Nergesh Meerza*) However, liberal feminism is constrained by its primary focus on formal equality; by assuming that women merely need an equal starting line in an otherwise fair market, it fails to challenge the deeper structural and patriarchal architecture that devalues care work and reproductive labor.

3.2.2 *Radical Feminist Jurisprudence*

Radical feminist jurisprudence, articulated by theorists such as Catharine MacKinnon, posits that gender is not merely a biological distinction but a system of power and dominance. Male dominance, according to MacKinnon, is fundamentally institutionalized through the sexual, reproductive, and physical control of women's bodies In the domain of poverty, radical feminism argues that economic subordination is deeply intertwined with physical subjugation. Economic dependence renders women incapable of fleeing domestic violence, marital rape, and sexual harassment. The threat or reality of male physical violence operates as an enforcement mechanism that maintains women's economic subordination within the domestic sphere and limits their physical mobility to access safe, dignified public employment.

3.2.3 *Socialist and Marxist Feminist Jurisprudence*

Socialist and Marxist feminism integrates historical materialism with gender analysis to demonstrate that capitalism and patriarchy operate as mutually reinforcing systems of exploitation. Capitalist accumulation depends essentially upon the unpaid reproductive labor performed by women in the domestic sphere. By cooking, cleaning, providing emotional sustenance, and raising the next generation of laborers without monetary compensation, women dramatically lower the reproduction costs of labor, thereby generating surplus value appropriated by capitalist enterprises In post-colonial economies like India, socialist feminism illuminates how multinational corporations and domestic industries systematically exploit women through home-based piece-rate production, unorganized textile sweatshops, and informal agricultural supply chains, keeping wages below subsistence levels under the pretext that women are merely "supplementary" household earners.

5. Bina Agarwal, A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia (Cambridge University Press,

3.2 *Intersectional Feminist Jurisprudence*

Pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw and substantially enriched by Dalit and tribal feminist scholars in India, intersectional jurisprudence rejects the monolithic categorization of "woman." It demonstrates that gender inequality does not operate in a social vacuum; rather, it intersects inextricably with caste (varna and jati), socio-economic class, religious identity, and geographical location In India, a Dalit or Adivasi woman does not experience poverty in the same manner as an upper-caste woman facing domestic subordination. The Dalit woman faces the simultaneous, compounding violence of structural landlessness, historical untouchability, precarious sanitation labor, and institutional apathy from upper-caste dominated law enforcement and judicial apparatuses

3.3 The Capabilities Approach: Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum

The Capabilities Approach offers an indispensable normative framework for re-conceptualizing the feminization of poverty as a profound legal and constitutional injustice. Amartya Sen established that welfare evaluations must focus on "functionings" (the various things a person may value doing or being) and "capabilities" (the substantive freedom a person has to achieve those functionings). Poverty, within this framework, is defined as a "basic capability deprivation"—a condition where an individual is deprived of the real opportunities to attain fundamental states of being, such as being adequately nourished, possessing bodily health, obtaining education, enjoying bodily integrity, and exercising political agency

Martha Nussbaum advanced this framework into a deeply normative constitutional paradigm by identifying a universal list of ten Central Human Capabilities, including: Life; Bodily Health; Bodily Integrity; Senses, Imagination, and Thought; Emotions; Practical Reason; Affiliation; Other Species; Play; and Control over One's Environment (both political and material). Nussbaum argues that any constitutional democracy committed to human dignity must guarantee every citizen, as a fundamental constitutional entitlement, a minimum threshold level of these ten central capabilities In India, the feminization of poverty is precisely the systematic suppression of women's capabilities below this foundational threshold—most acutely the capability to exercise "Control over One's Material Environment" through holding property, enjoying equal land tenure, and participating as equal citizens in the wage labor market.

3.4 Bina Agarwal's Foundational Paradigm: Gender, Land Rights, and Economic Agency

Professor Bina Agarwal's ground-breaking scholarship represents the preeminent socio-legal theoretical framework regarding women's economic emancipation in agrarian South Asia. Agarwal established that the historical focus of development policies on wage employment, self-help group microcredit, or anti-poverty welfare transfers is fundamentally insufficient to eradicate female impoverishment. She argues that *direct, independent ownership and effective control over arable land* is the single most critical determinant of women's material security, social status, and personal empowerment

Agarwal articulates a vital four-fold conceptual distinction between:

1. *Formal legal rights* to land (statutory entitlements written into law);
2. *Effective, customary rights* to land (the social ability to actually claim the asset);
3. *Ownership rights* (holding registered legal title); and
4. *Control rights* (the practical authority to determine crop selection, mortgage, lease, or alienate the land).

6. Sharmila Rege, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently' (1998) 33(44) Economic and Political Weekly WS39-

In India, even when formal statutory rights are conceded—as in the 2005 Hindu Succession Amendment—women face pervasive customary barriers that prevent them from translating formal title into de facto control. Agarwal demonstrates that independent land rights: (a) directly mitigate female poverty by providing subsistence production and collateral for credit; (b) dramatically reduce women's vulnerability to domestic violence; (c) enhance intra-household bargaining power; and (d) systematically improve child survival, health, and education, because women prioritize household nutritional expenditure far more than men

3.5 Critique of Formal Equality: Transitioning to Substantive Distributive Justice

Traditional legal systems adhere to a model of *formal equality*, encapsulated in the Aristotelian dictum that "likes must be treated alike." Under this formalist paradigm, the law considers its duty discharged if it enacts facially neutral rules that treat men and women identically. However, feminist jurisprudence has demonstrated that when an inherently unequal society treats historically subordinated and marginalized groups identically to historically privileged groups, the law effectively perpetuates and legitimizes the underlying inequality.

Consequently, feminist legal theory demands a transformative shift toward *substantive equality*. Substantive equality looks beyond the facial wording of statutory texts and focuses on the real-world impact, lived conditions, and structural outcomes of legal regimes In the context of economic deprivation, substantive equality requires affirmative state action, structural redistribution of productive assets, recognition and compensation for care work, and the targeted dismantling of social barriers. This substantive paradigm is directly rooted in the Indian constitutional vision, which empowers the State to enact protective and affirmative legislation under Articles 15(3) and 21 to dismantle the structures ofsystemic disadvantage.

CHAPTER - IV: CONSTITUTIONAL, STATUTORY, AND INTERNATIONAL LEGAL MATRIX IN INDIA

"Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base ofit social democracy... which recognizes liberty, equality, and fraternity as the principles oflife."—Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

4.1 The Constitutional Architecture of Economic Justice in India

The Constitution of India is an inherently transformative legal instrument. Framed in the wake of centuries of colonial exploitation and thousands of years of entrenched caste and patriarchal hierarchy, the Constitution was deliberately designed to facilitate a radical socio-economic revolution through the rule of law. The Preamble explicitly guarantees to all citizens "JUSTICE, social, economic and political" and "EQUALITY of status and of opportunity." These values form an interrelated constitutional canopy designed to protect marginalized populations from the depredations ofunchecked private power and systemic impoverishment.

4.1 Article 14: Substantive Equality and the Doctrine ofReasonable Classification

Article 14 guarantees that the "State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India." The Supreme Court of India has progressively departed from the rigid, formalistic "reasonable classification" doctrine (laid down in early cases like *State of West Bengal v. Anwar Ali Sarkar*) toward a robust substantive equality paradigm founded upon the non-arbitrariness doctrine articulated in *E.P. Royappa v. State ofTamil Nadu*

In the context of the feminization of poverty, Article 14 demands that the State recognize the structural disadvantages faced by women in economic markets. A statutory or administrative framework that fails to account for women's disproportionate burden of uncompensated care work, physical vulnerability, and systemic exclusion from credit markets constitutes arbitrary and unconstitutional state action. Formal equality that ignores these deep-seated material inequities reproduces structural poverty and violates the core guarantee ofArticle 14.

4.2 *Article 15: Prohibition ofDiscrimination and Affirmative Action*

While Article 15(1) strictly prohibits the State from discriminating against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, Article 15(3) represents an indispensable constitutional engine of substantive equality. Article 15(3) explicitly provides that "Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children."

The Supreme Court has consistently held that Article 15(3) is not a mere exception to the non-discrimination rule, but an affirmative authorization of protective discrimination designed to redress the historical and social subordination of women. In *Government ofAndhra Pradesh v. P. B. Vijayakumar* the Supreme Court affirmed that the State is empowered under Article 15(3) to enact positive measures, including reservations, preference policies, and targeted asset distributions to eliminate the socio-economic imbalances burdening women. In addressing the feminization of poverty, Article 15(3) provides direct constitutional authority for state policies mandating joint land titling, preferential agricultural subsidies, and subsidized institutional credit programs designed to build female asset autonomy.

4.3 *Article 21: Expanding the Right to Life, Livelihood, and Human Dignity*

Article 21 provides that "No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law." Through one of the most remarkable judicial evolutions in global constitutional history, the Supreme Court of India transformed Article 21 from a procedural due-process protection against physical incarceration into a rich charter ofsocio-economic human rights.

In the historic ruling of *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation* (1985) a Constitution Bench led by Chief Justice Y.V. Chandrachud established that the right to livelihood is an integral and indissoluble component ofthe right to life:

> *"The sweep of the right to life conferred by Article 21 is wide and far-reaching. . . If the right to livelihood is not treated as a part ofthe constitutional right to life, the easiest way ofdepriving a person ofhis life would be to deprive him ofhis means oflivelihood to the point ofabrogation... That which alone makes it possible to live, leave aside what makes life livable, must be deemed to be an integral component ofthe right to life."*

This doctrine was further deepened in *Francis Coralie Mullin v. Administrator, Union Territory ofDelhi* where the Court affirmed that the right to life includes the right to live with human dignity, encompassing the bare necessities of life such as adequate nutrition, clothing, shelter, and facilities for reading, writing, and expressing oneself. When marginalized women are trapped in intergenerational destitution, denied basic healthcare, clean water, and nutritional security, their deprivation constitutes a direct violation of their fundamental right to life with dignity under Article 21 .

7. Air India v. Nergesh Meerza (1981) 4 SCC 335.

4.1 *Directive Principles of State Policy: Articles 38, 39, 41, 42, and 43*

Part IV of the Constitution sets forth the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSPs), which, while non-justiciable under Article 37 in terms of direct mandamus, are declared "fundamental in the governance of the country." The Supreme Court, in landmark cases including *Minerva Mills Ltd. v. Union of India* established that Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles are mutually complementary, forming the core constitutional commitment to social revolution.

The economic provisions of Part IV are critical to dismantling feminized poverty:

- **Article 38:** Mandates the State to secure a social order for the promotion of the welfare of the people and to minimize inequalities in income, status, facilities, and opportunities.
- **Article 39(a):** Directs the State to ensure that citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood.
- **Article 39(d):** Enjoins the State to secure "equal pay for equal work for both men and women."
- **Article 41:** Mandates the right to work, education, and public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness, and disablement.
- **Article 42:** Commands the State to make provision for securing "just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief."
- **Article 43:** Obligates the State to secure to all workers a "living wage, conditions of work ensuring a decent standard of life and full enjoyment of leisure."

4.2 Statutory Legal Enactments and Economic Protections

To translate constitutional guarantees into tangible socio-economic realities, the Indian Parliament has enacted multiple statutes that directly impact women's economic entitlements, assets, and labor conditions.

4.2.1 *Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005*

Prior to 2005, the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 codified severe gender discrimination within the Mitakshara coparcenary system. Daughters were denied coparcenary birthrights, could not demand partition of ancestral property, and were completely excluded from agricultural land inheritances where state-level agrarian land tenures (such as the Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act) granted exclusive devolution to male agnates.

The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 (Act 39 of 2005) enacted a major legislative reform. By substituting Section 6, the Amendment declared that the daughter of a coparcener shall by birth become a coparcener in her own right in the same manner as the son, possessing identical rights and subject to the same liabilities. Furthermore, the 2005 Act deleted Section 4(2), which had previously exempted agricultural land from the gender-neutral devolution rules of the central Act.

The legal reach of this enactment was decisively affirmed by the Supreme Court of India in the landmark judgment of *Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma* (2020) Resolving conflicting three-judge bench decisions in *Prakash v. Phulavati* (2016) and *Danamma v. Amar* (2018), a three-judge bench headed by Justice Arun Mishra held that the coparcenary right of a daughter under Section 6 is an inherent right created by birth. The Court held that this right is retroactive: the father did not need to be alive on September 9, 2005 (the date of the Amendment's enforcement) for the daughter to claim her rightful share, provided the ancestral property had not been partitioned by a registered deed or final court decree prior to December 20, 2004.

4.2 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA)

The enactment of MGNREGA in 2005 marked a paradigm shift from discretionary welfare assistance to a legally enforceable, rights-based entitlement to work. The statute guarantees at least 100 days of wage employment in every financial year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work at statutory minimum wages

MGNREGA incorporates progressive gender-specific statutory mandates:

- **Mandatory Female Quota:** Schedule II, Paragraph 6 stipulates that priority shall be given to women in such a way that at least one-third of the total beneficiaries participating in the scheme must be women. In practice, women's national participation has consistently exceeded this threshold, reaching over 57% in recent financial years.
- **Gender Wage Parity:** Section 6 mandates absolute statutory parity between male and female wages for manual labor, eradicating the rampant private rural wage differential where women are routinely paid 30% to 50% less than male laborers for comparable work.
- **Worksite Welfare Facilities:** The Act mandates the provision of safe drinking water, shade for resting, first-aid kits, and, critically, crèche facilities where more than five children below six years of age accompany working mothers.
- **Proximity of Employment:** Works must be provided within a five-kilometer radius ofthe applicant's village; if employment is provided beyond this radius, an additional 10% wage allowance must be paid to compensate for transportation and displacement costs.

4.3 Labor Law Frameworks: Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 to Code on Wages, 2019

The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 was enacted to implement Article 39(d) and India's international obligations under ILO Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100). In the landmark precedent of *Mackinnon Mackenzie & Co. Ltd. v. Audrey D'Costa* (1987) the Supreme Court affirmed that employers cannot practice discriminatory wage suppression by creating artificial job classifications (e.g., classifying female stenographers as "confidential lady stenographers" to pay them lower wages). The Court affirmed that if the broad duties and physical labor are substantially similar, equal remuneration is an inviolable legal mandate.

Under the ongoing consolidation of 29 central labor statutes into four comprehensive Labor Codes, the Equal Remuneration Act was subsumed into the Code on Wages, 2019. Section 3 of the Code on Wages prohibits discrimination on the ground of sex in matters relating to wages in respect of the same work or work of a similar nature. However, feminist legal scholars have expressed grave concern that the Code omitted specific statutory protections previously available under Section 5 of the 1976 Act, which prohibited gender discrimination in recruitment, training, promotion, and transfers, thereby creating potential statutory loopholes in corporate and informal employment

8. Minerva Mills Ltd. v. Union of India (1980) 3 SCC 625.

4.4 *Social Security Architectures: Code on Social Security, 2020*

The Code on Social Security, 2020 purports to extend social security protections to all employees and workers across both the organized and unorganized sectors, explicitly incorporating unorganized workers, gig workers, and platform workers. The statute provides for the constitution of the National Social Security Board for Unorganized Workers to formulate welfare schemes addressing life and disability cover, health and maternity benefits, and old age pensions. However, because funding allocations are contingent upon executive notifications and fiscal discretion, informal female laborers continue to face precarious, non-justiciable social security nets.

4.5 *Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017*

The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 progressive expanded paid maternity leave for organized sector female employees from 12 weeks to 26 weeks, while mandating that every establishment employing 50 or more employees must provide mandatory crèche facilities within a prescribed distance. In *Municipal Corporation of Delhi v. Female Workers (Muster Roll)* (2000) the Supreme Court held that the benefit of maternity relief must be extended to daily-wage and casual muster-roll workers, holding that the natural biological function of motherhood cannot be used as an excuse for termination or wage forfeiture under Article 42.

However, the profound socio-legal limitation of the 2017 Amendment lies in its structural exclusivity: over 90% of working women in India reside within the unorganized and informal sectors, entirely beyond the operational reach of the Maternity Benefit Act. The state-run cash-transfer scheme for informal mothers, the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), provides a modest cash transfer of ₹5,000, which has historically been restricted to the first live birth, providing insufficient income replacement and failing to prevent informal female workers from returning to manual labor immediately following childbirth

4.6 *Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005*

The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA) is a path-breaking civil enactment providing immediate remedies to women facing abuse within the shared household. Sections 12, 18, 19, and 20 authorize magistrates to issue protection orders, residence orders, and monetary relief. In *Rajnesh v. Neha* (2021) the Supreme Court addressed the chronic procedural hurdles and overlapping claims in maintenance jurisprudence across Section 125 CrPC, the PWDVA, and personal laws. The Court laid down mandatory guidelines requiring both parties to file detailed Affidavits of Assets and Liabilities, establishing that maintenance must ensure the woman lives with dignity comparable to her marital lifestyle, explicitly curbing systemic post-separation female destitution.

4.3 International Human Rights Conventions and Supranational Obligations

India's international treaty obligations provide authoritative normative standards that domestic courts are bound to incorporate into constitutional interpretation, as affirmed in *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan*

- **CEDAW (1979):** India ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1993. Article 14 explicitly commands states to eliminate discrimination against rural women, ensuring their equal right to participate in development planning, access healthcare, benefit from social security programs, and enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly housing, sanitation, electricity, water supply, and agrarian land redistribution. CEDAW General Recommendation No. 34 (2016) specifically emphasizes rural women's rights to land and natural resources.

9. Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma (2020) 9 SCC

- **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995):** Strategic Objective A.1 commits governments to "review, adopt and maintain macroeconomic policies and development strategies that address the needs and efforts of women in poverty," calling for structural agrarian reforms, social security guarantees, and the elimination ofwage disparities.
- **Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030):** India is a signatory to the UN SDGs, notably SDG 1 ("End poverty in all its forms everywhere") and SDG 5 ("Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls"). Target 5.a explicitly requires member states to undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance, and natural resources.

CHAPTER - V: STRUCTURAL DRIVERS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC REALITIES OF FEMALE DEPRIVATION IN INDIA

"Women are the backbone ofrural agricultural production, yet in the official registers ofthe State, they exist merely as 'unpaid family helpers,' invisible to the revenue collector and dispossessed by custom."

5.1 Agrarian Crisis and the "Feminization of Indian Agriculture"

A central structural development in contemporary rural India is the growing "feminization of agriculture." Driven by chronic agrarian stagnation, fragmentation of land holdings, climate shocks, and the unviability of smallholder farming, working-age rural men are increasingly migrating to urban centers in search of construction, transportation, and low-skilled service employment. Consequently, rural women are left behind to manage agricultural operations, performing intensive manual labor such as sowing, weeding, transplanting, harvesting, and livestock management

According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), over 73% of rural working women in India are engaged in agriculture, compared to approximately 55% of rural men. Yet, despite performing the bulk of physical labor, only 13.9% of operational agricultural land holdings are legally owned by women, according to the Agriculture Census Because land ownership remains the sole administrative criterion for being officially recognized as a "farmer" (Kisan), millions of rural women are legally classified merely as "unpaid agricultural laborers." They are consequently excluded from institutional credit, subsidized agricultural inputs, direct farmer cash-support schemes (such as PM-KISAN), crop insurance (PM Fasal Bima Yojana), and compensation following climate disasters, leaving them in extreme economic precarity.

5.2 Female Labor Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) Deficits and Gender Wage Asymmetry

India's Female Labor Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) presents an acute developmental paradox. Over recent decades, while female educational attainment has expanded significantly and fertility rates have dropped to replacement levels, female labor force participation rates dropped to historic lows (hovering between 20% and 30% according to PLFS metrics), though recent post-pandemic data reflects a distress-driven return to low-productivity rural agriculture

10. National Sample Survey Office, Periodic Labour Force Survey Annual Report 2022-23 (MoSPI,

The structural drivers of this deficit include the lack of safe public transportation, harassment in the informal workplace, social policing of women's physical mobility, and the "income effect" in rising households where patriarchal prestige dictates withdrawing women from the wage market. Furthermore, where women are employed, the gender wage gap remains entrenched: across the informal manufacturing, construction, and agricultural sectors, women earn between 25% and 40% less than male workers for equivalent working hours, reinforcing female dependence and impoverishment

5.3 The Informal Sector Trap: Domestic Workers and Home-Based Exploitation

Over 94% of employed Indian women work in the unorganized and informal economy, characterized by the absence of written employment contracts, zero statutory employment security, lack of minimum wage compliance, and complete exclusion from occupational health and pension schemes

Two sub-sectors illustrate this informal exploitation:

- **Domestic Workers:** Millions of urban women work as domestic maids, cooks, and caretakers in affluent households. The domestic sphere is excluded from the majority of labor statutes (such as the Factories Act or the Industrial Disputes Act). Domestic workers face arbitrary wage deductions, excessive working hours, lack ofleave, and physical or verbal abuse, remaining in chronic urban poverty.
- **Home-Based Piece-Rate Workers:** Across industries such as beedi rolling, agarbatti manufacture, garment stitching, and zari embroidery, women work from home for middleman contractors. They are paid negligible piece rates, bear the costs of electricity and workspace themselves, and develop chronic occupational health disorders (e.g., respiratory disease, visual degradation) without access to worker compensation or healthcare.

5.4 Time Poverty and the Unpaid Care Deficit: Insights from Time-Use Surveys

The release of the National Time Use Survey by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) provided concrete empirical validation of the profound "time poverty" experienced by Indian women. The survey established that Indian women spend an average of 299 minutes (nearly 5 hours) per day on unpaid domestic services and caregiving for household members, compared to merely 25 minutes spent by men. In rural areas, women spend additional hours collecting firewood, fetching potable water across long distances, and tending livestock

Time poverty operates as an invisible structural barrier that prevents women from escaping economic destitution. When a woman spends 14 to 16 hours a day performing survival domestic labor and manual field work, she suffers from severe physical exhaustion and lacks the time required for formal education, skill training, political participation, or restorative rest. Time poverty directly limits women's economic opportunities, anchoring them within low-productivity subsistence activities.

5.5 Intersectional Vulnerabilities: Dalit, Adivasi, and Religious Minorities

The experience of the feminization of poverty is profoundly shaped by caste and social hierarchy. Dalit (Scheduled Caste) and Adivasi (Scheduled Tribe) women reside at the absolute base of India's socio-economic hierarchy. According to the NITI Aayog Multidimensional Poverty Index Report (2023), multidimensional poverty rates among SC and ST households are nearly double the national average

11. International Labour Organization, India Wage Report (ILO, 2018), pp. 32-

Dalit women are overwhelmingly landless (over 70% of Dalit rural households own no arable land) and are structurally compelled to work as low-wage agricultural laborers or perform hereditary manual scavenging tasks. When Dalit women attempt to organize for statutory minimum wages or assert land claims under state tenancy laws, they frequently face violent retaliation, including sexual assault, physical violence, and social boycotts enforced by dominant-caste landholders Similarly, Adivasi women endure catastrophic displacement from their ancestral forest habitats due to mining concessions and infrastructure development, losing access to Minor Forest Produce (MFP) which serves as their primary source ofnutrition and subsistence income.

5.6 Widowhood, Desertion, and Elderly Women's Destitution

Widowhood in India represents a severe economic and personal crisis. India is home to over 50 million widows. Due to patrilocal marriage customs, when a woman's husband dies, she often has no established property base in her natal village and faces hostility in her marital home. Customary practices such as *Haq-Tyag* (voluntary relinquishment of inheritance rights under family coercion) are weaponized to force widows to surrender their statutory inheritance shares

Single, deserted, and elderly women face extreme poverty. State-provided widow and old-age pensions under the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) offer as little as ₹200 to ₹300 per month in central contributions—an amount that has remained unchanged for over a decade and is wholly inadequate to cover basic food and medicine costs As adult children migrate or abandon aging parents, elderly women, who live longer than men on average and have spent their lifetimes performing uncompensated domestic labor without pensions, are disproportionately represented among the destitute and homeless.

5.7 Financial Inclusion Realities: Microfinance, Self-Help Groups, and Debt Traps

Over the past two decades, successive governments have promoted microfinance and the Self-Help Group (SHG) bank linkage model—most notably through Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana - National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM)—as the primary policy mechanism for female economic empowerment. While SHGs have fostered collective social solidarity and enhanced basic access to savings, relying solely on micro-credit as an anti-poverty strategy presents serious structural problems

Commercial Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) frequently treat low-income women as reliable credit consumers due to high social repayment peer-pressure. In the absence of comprehensive agrarian reforms or stable market integration, micro-loans taken by women are often used for family medical emergencies, consumption, or passed directly to male kin for their businesses. When families face crop failures or income shocks, women are forced to take multiple loans to repay existing debt, trapping them in compounding cycles of over-indebtedness. In multiple states, aggressive and coercive loan recovery practices by predatory private MFIs have led to severe emotional trauma, public humiliation, and farmer suicides among impoverished rural women

CHAPTER - VI: JURISPRUDENTIAL APPRAISAL, INSTITUTIONAL BOTTLENECK ANALYSIS, AND LEGAL GAPS

"The gap between the law on paper and the law in practice is nowhere wider than in the enforcement ofsocio-economic rights for women, where customary patriarchy routinely overrides statutory mandates."

12. Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex' (1989) University of Chicago Legal Forum 139-

6.1 The Failure of Formal Law: Customary Hegemony and De Facto Dispossession

The landmark progressive reforms introduced by the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 and affirmed in *Vineeta Sharma* remain largely inaccessible for millions of rural women. A critical doctrinal and empirical gap exists between *de jure* statutory coparcenary entitlements and *de facto* land ownership. Sociological and legal investigations reveal that less than 15% of Hindu women actually inherit their statutory share ofparental land

This massive failure ofstatutory enforcement stems from systemic customary and institutional dynamics:

- **Coerced Relinquishment (The Custom of Haq-Tyag):** In rural communities, customary norms dictate that property should pass exclusively through male lines to prevent land fragmentation and avoid transferring land out of the patrilineal clan. A sister or daughter who asserts her statutory coparcenary share is accused of destroying family ties and forfeits parental protection and support in times of marital distress. Consequently, young women are coerced into signing unregistered or notarized deeds of relinquishment, surrendering their land rights to their brothers under social duress.
- **Revenue Administration Apathy:** The lower tiers of the state revenue bureaucracy—Patwaris, Talathis, and Revenue Inspectors—are deeply steeped in patriarchal biases. When updating land mutation records upon the death of an ancestral landowner, revenue officials routinely record only the names of surviving sons, actively colluding with male relatives to omit daughters and widows from the official *Khata* (land title registers)

6.2 Judicial Inconsistency in Maintenance Jurisprudence: The Execution Bottleneck

For a woman facing desertion, domestic abuse, or divorce, obtaining maintenance from an estranged spouse is an essential legal lifeline preventing destitution. However, the Indian family court system is plagued by debilitating procedural delays and execution hurdles. Although Section 125 CrPC was enacted as an expeditious, summary remedy to prevent female vagrancy and destitution—as emphasized in *Badshah v. Urmila Badshah Gods* —maintenance proceedings routinely languish for five to ten years across multiple levels ofthe judiciary.

Even when a magistrate issues a maintenance award, execution of that order remains a major hurdle. Husbands routinely conceal their true professional incomes, operate in the cash economy, transfer properties into the names of relatives, or default on payments. When recovery warrants are issued, police departments assign lowest priority to maintenance recovery. In *Rajnesh v. Neha* (2021) the Supreme Court acknowledged this reality and mandated structured Affidavits of Assets and Liabilities, but family courts continue to lack automated mechanisms to garnish bank accounts, intercept tax refunds, or place statutory liens upon defaulting husbands' properties, leaving thousands ofwomen in protracted financial destitution while litigating.

6.3 Structural Gaps in MGNREGA Implementation

Although MGNREGA has provided critical employment for rural women, the scheme suffers from institutional and budgetary constraints that undermine its poverty-alleviating potential:

13. Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine S. Newman, Blocked by Caste (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 112-

1. **Chronic Budgetary Under-Funding and Rationing:** Real, inflation-adjusted central budgetary allocations for MGNREGA have declined relative to national demand. Consequently, local administrations ration available work, failing to guarantee the statutory 100 days of employment. The national average days of employment generated per household consistently hovers between 45 and 52 days, far below the statutory guarantee
2. **Severe Wage Payment Delays and Digital Exclusions:** Section 3(3) of MGNREGA mandates that wages must be disbursed within 15 days of work completion, failing which workers are legally entitled to compensation for delayed payment. In reality, delays in central administrative fund releases leave rural women unpaid for months. Furthermore, the mandatory introduction of algorithmic and biometric surveillance architectures—specifically the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS) for digital attendance and the Aadhaar-Based Payment System (ABPS)—has disenfranchised thousands of vulnerable women. Poor cellular connectivity at rural worksites, biometric fingerprint failures among elderly female manual laborers, and discrepancies between spelling in Aadhaar and bank databases lead to uncompensated labor and arbitrary deletion ofactive job cards
3. **Absence of Worksite Crèche Facilities:** Despite the mandatory statutory requirement under Schedule II, fewer than 5% of MGNREGA worksites across the country provide functioning, shaded, safe crèche facilities with dedicated caretakers. As a result, nursing mothers are either excluded from work or must leave young children unattended under extreme weather conditions.

6.4 Institutional Failures of Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB)

In 2005, the Government of India formally adopted Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) as an administrative tool to align fiscal allocations with gender equality commitments. The Union Budget includes an annual "Gender Budget Statement" divided into Part A (schemes with 100% allocations for women) and Part B (schemes with at least 30% allocations for women)

In practice, Gender Responsive Budgeting has largely become a bureaucratic, accounting exercise rather than a transformative policy mechanism. The total Gender Budget has remained stagnant at approximately 4% to 6% of the total Union Expenditure, with less than 1 % allocated to targeted female-empowerment schemes in Part A. Major line ministries systematically over-report Part B allocations by claiming broad infrastructure or general rural development schemes are "pro-women" without conducting genuine gender impact evaluations. Crucially, the administrative machinery lacks mandatory institutional mechanisms to audit state-level expenditures, verify whether allocated funds actually reach women, or evaluate whether fiscal policies alleviate the unpaid care burden.

CHAPTER - VII: FINDINGS, COMPREHENSIVE RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

"True justice will be realized only when the law stops viewing women through the lens ofwelfare and benevolence, and recognizes their unconditional claim to property, dignity, and economic sovereignty."

7.1 Major Empirical and Doctrinal Findings of the Study

Based upon an exhaustive synthesis of constitutional doctrines, statutory frameworks, judicial precedents, and empirical datasets, this study establishes the following primary findings:

1. **Multidimensionality of Deprivation:** The feminization of poverty in India cannot be assessed solely through household income deficits. It operates as an entrenched multidimensional capability deprivation characterized by severe nutritional deficits (over 53% female anemia rates), extreme time poverty, systemic exclusion from tangible asset ownership, and disproportionate exposure to environmental, health, and economic shocks.
2. **The Dispossession Paradox in Agriculture:** While rural women perform more than two-thirds of the operational manual labor in Indian agriculture, they legally own fewer than 14% of agricultural land holdings. This institutional mismatch deprives them of the status of "farmers," excluding them from agricultural subsidies, institutional credit, disaster compensation, and cooperative governance.
3. **Entrenched Informalization and Wage Exploitation:** Over 94% of female wage earners are trapped in the precarious informal economy, lacking written employment contracts, minimum wage enforcement, maternity protections, or social security safety nets. The national gender wage gap persists at 25% to 40% across informal manufacturing and agrarian sectors.
4. **Structural Failure of Property Reforms:** Despite the progressive amendment of Section 6 of the Hindu Succession Act in 2005 and its retrospective affirmation in *Vineeta Sharma* (2020), customary barriers such as *Haq-Tyag* and the patriarchal collusion of grassroots revenue administrations leave fewer than 15% of rural daughters in effective possession oftheir coparcenary agricultural property.
5. **Inadequacy of Current Social Assistance:** Central social protection floors—including the ₹200-₹300 monthly pensions provided under the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) for destitute widows and elderly women—are deeply inadequate and have not been indexed to inflation for over fifteen years.

7.2 Findings Pertaining to Constitutional Protections and Substantive Equality

The study finds that the Indian legal system's commitment to substantive equality under Articles 14, 15(3), and 21 remains unrealized in economic life. While the Supreme Court of India has articulated progressive human rights jurisprudence—linking the right to life with livelihood and dignity in *Olga Tellis* and *Francis Coralie*—subordinate courts, family courts, and administrative enforcement machineries continue to operate under a formalistic, patriarchal mindset. Consequently, constitutional guarantees of economic justice are systematically neutralized when confronted with deeply entrenched customary property practices and private market forces.

7.3 Findings Pertaining to Statutory Gaps and Institutional Failures

The analysis identifies critical statutory and institutional gaps:

- **Labor Law Rollback:** The consolidation of labor statutes into the Code on Wages, 2019 and the Code on Social Security, 2020 has removed explicit statutory prohibitions against gender discrimination in recruitment and promotions previously guaranteed under the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976. Furthermore, social security protections for unorganized and gig workers remain dependent upon discretionary, unnotified executive schemes without guaranteed central fiscal funding.
- **Maintenance Enforcement Bottlenecks:** Despite the comprehensive procedural guidelines issued in *Rajnesh v. Neha*, maintenance jurisprudence remains characterized by multi-year trial delays, widespread concealment of assets by defaulting husbands, and an absence of automated execution mechanisms, forcing estranged and deserted women into destitution.

14. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, s. 3.

- **Surveillance and Exclusion in MGNREGA:** The arbitrary imposition of biometric surveillance and the Aadhaar-Based Payment System (ABPS) under MGNREGA has disenfranchised thousands of the poorest rural women due to biometric mismatches and weak technological infrastructure, undermining the statutory right to work guaranteed by Parliament.

7.4 Strategic Policy Recommendations and Legislative Interventions

To dismantle the structural architecture of the feminization of poverty in India, the study presents the following actionable policy, legislative, and institutional recommendations:

I *Reforming Land Tenure and Enforcing Property Rights*

1. **Mandatory Joint Land Titling:** Enact central and state-level legislation mandating that all land titles distributed through government land redistribution, housing programs (e.g., Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana), and agricultural resettlement schemes must be registered exclusively in the joint names of both spouses, or in the sole name ofthe woman in female-headed households.
2. **Automated Revenue Mutation Reforms:** Amend State Land Revenue Codes to require that upon the death of a Hindu, Muslim, or tribal landholder, the names of all surviving daughters and widows must be automatically entered into the land mutation records by revenue authorities. Any deed of relinquishment (*Haq-Tyag*) must be executed before a Judicial Magistrate First Class following private, independent legal counseling, rather than before a local Patwari.
3. **Tribal Women's Land Rights:** Amend personal and customary laws, in accordance with the constitutional principles articulated in *Madhu Kishwar v. State of Bihar*, to grant equal agricultural inheritance and usufructuary land rights to Scheduled Tribe women, protecting them from customary dispossession while maintaining community land integrity.

II *Restructuring the Care Economy and Valuing Unpaid Labor*

1. **National Care Economy Infrastructure Policy:** Formulate a comprehensive National Care Infrastructure Policy. Expand the network of public crèches under the National Crèche Scheme, mandating free, state-funded day-care facilities in every village panchayat and urban municipal ward to liberate women from extreme time poverty.
2. **Universalization of Maternity Entitlements:** Amend the Maternity Benefit Act and the National Food Security Act, 2013 to remove all parity restrictions (such as limiting benefits to the first child), ensuring a non-conditional, inflation-indexed universal maternity benefit of at least ₹10,000 to all pregnant and lactating women in the unorganized and informal sectors.

III *Labor Market Reforms and Social Security Guarantees*

1. **Statutory Recognition of Domestic and Care Workers:** Enact a specialized comprehensive Central Statute for Domestic Workers, guaranteeing mandatory minimum wages, maximum working hours, weekly paid rest, safe working conditions, registration with the Social Security Board, and specialized fast-track dispute-resolution tribunals.
2. **Revision of Social Assistance Pension Floors:** Substantially reform the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) by raising the central old-age, disability, and widow pension contribution from the archaic rate of ₹200-₹300 per month to a meaningful, living floor of at least ₹3,000 per month, indexed annually to the Consumer Price Index (CPI).

3. **Overhaul of MGNREGA Execution:** Increase the statutory employment guarantee from 100 days to 150 days per household for vulnerable single and female-headed households. Immediately suspend mandatory biometric attendance and Aadhaar payment requirements at remote rural worksites, reverting to verified physical muster rolls to prevent wage denial.

M. Strengthening Judicial and Maintenance Mechanisms

1. **Fast-Track Enforcement of Maintenance Awards:** Create dedicated Maintenance Enforcement Units attached to Family Courts and Chief Judicial Magistrate Courts. These units should be empowered with automated electronic access to banking databases, income tax filings, and vehicle registration systems to immediately garnish wages and seize assets ofdefaulting respondents.
2. **Comprehensive Gender Responsive Budgeting Audits:** Transform Gender Responsive Budgeting from a voluntary accounting exercise into an enforceable statutory mandate. Legislate a Gender Budgeting and Audit Act requiring every line ministry to undergo mandatory annual gender-impact auditing by an independent body, with results tabled directly before Parliament.

7.5 Exhaustive Answers to Core Research Questions

1. How does the feminization of poverty transcend monetary income to encompass multidimensional deprivation?

This study demonstrates that the feminization of poverty in India cannot be captured by household monetary income thresholds. The phenomenon manifests fundamentally as an acute "capability deprivation"—an enduring denial of basic nutritional security (severe female anemia), structural time poverty driven by uncompensated domestic chores, lack of access to clean energy and sanitation, and systemic exclusion from the ownership of productive assets. Even in households that cross arbitrary income poverty lines, women routinely endure nutritional, educational, and physical deprivations due to patriarchal intra-household resource allocation.

2. How have constitutional mandates of substantive equality been actualized to secure economic rights?

While Articles 14, 15(3), and 21 provide an expansive constitutional framework for social justice, their implementation has remained deeply fragmented. While the higher judiciary has articulated progressive rights-based jurisprudence in decisions like *Olga Tellis* and *Vineeta Sharma*, the state administrative apparatus and subordinate courts continue to apply formalistic approaches that fail to dismantle systemic patriarchal hurdles, leaving millions ofwomen outside the practical protection ofthe law.

3. What statutory ambiguities and customary practices hinder women from exercising coparcenary land rights?

The primary barriers undermining the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 are not statutory ambiguities in Section 6, which was authoritatively clarified by the Supreme Court in *Vineeta Sharma*, but structural and customary resistance. The pervasive rural custom of coerced relinquishment (*Haq-Tyag*), the constant threat of familial abandonment, and the institutional reluctance of village-level revenue officials (Patwaris) to record female heirs combine to neutralize women's statutory land inheritance rights.

4. How do macroeconomic informalization and neglect of the care economy reproduce wage gaps and depress FLFPR?

Macroeconomic growth patterns have failed to generate formal, safe employment opportunities accessible to women. Over 94% of female workers are crowded into low-productivity, precarious informal labor where minimum wage laws and equal remuneration protections are largely ignored. Simultaneously, the complete absence of affordable, state-funded child-care infrastructure leaves women burdened with uncompensated domestic work, making it impossible for them to enter or sustain formal wage employment.

5. What structural reforms are required to break the cycle of female impoverishment?

Breaking the cycle requires: (a) statutory joint land titling and automated land inheritance recording; (b) a national care infrastructure policy providing free universal public crèches; (c) universal maternity benefits and indexed social pensions of at least ₹3,000 per month; (d) automated maintenance enforcement mechanisms in family courts; and (e) transforming gender budgeting into an enforceable statutory obligation across all tiers of government.

7.6 Comprehensive Conclusion

The feminization of poverty in India represents one of the most profound structural and constitutional crises of the modern republic. It exposes the acute contradiction between a nation projecting global economic leadership and the lived realities of its women, who remain disproportionately dispossessed, under-compensated, and socially marginalized.

This study has established that female impoverishment is neither accidental nor an inevitable consequence of resource scarcity. It is the direct product of institutional design—codified in patriarchal property laws, reinforced by an unacknowledged care economy, and perpetuated by state policies that treat women merely as passive recipients of targeted welfare rather than equal, sovereign economic citizens. The eradication of feminized poverty requires moving decisively beyond welfare paternalism toward transformative constitutionalism. Substantive equality, as envisioned by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and enshrined in the Constitution of India, demands the radical restructuring of property ownership, the institutionalization of the care economy, and the democratic empowerment of marginalized women. Only when women gain independent command over land, labor, and their own futures will India truly realize the promise ofconstitutional democracy and human dignity.

7.7 Scope and Trajectory for Future Academic Inquiries

Future socio-legal and empirical research should explore: (a) granular, village-level longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impact of joint land titling on female intra-household bargaining power; (b) the economic and human rights impacts of algorithmic welfare governance and biometric surveillance on informal female workers; and (c) comparative studies examining customary tribal property systems and constitutional equality across diverse indigenous communities in Central and Northeast India.

15. LibTech India, Engineered Exclusion: Biometrics, Digital Attendance and Payment Crises in MGNREGA (2023), pp. 14-38.

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