

A woman in a red sari is seen from behind, standing in a courtyard. She is looking out through a large, arched window with a complex, circular lattice pattern. The light from the window casts a pattern of shadows on the floor. The overall atmosphere is warm and contemplative.

CONTEMPORARY  
GENDER  
TRANSFORMATIONS  
IN SOUTH ASIA

*Transcending  
the Archetype  
of Womanhood*

REAZUL HAQUE

# **Contemporary Gender Transformations in South Asia**

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# Contemporary Gender Transformations in South Asia: Transcending the Archetype of Womanhood

BY

**REAZUL HAQUE**

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To*  
*Mahfuza Haque Rideta*

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## List of Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AWN	Afghan Women Network
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BISP	Pakistan's Benazir Income Support Programme
BMRF	Bangladesh Men's Rights Foundation
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CEDAW	The Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CPR	Contraceptive Prevalence Rate
CSR	Child Sex Ratio image
DB	Detective Branch
DBSS	Didi Bahini Sewa Samaj
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
DU	Dhaka University
EVAW	Ending Violence Against Women
GAP	Gender Action Plan
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
GPPAC	The Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
MARD	Men Against Rape and Discrimination
MWCD	Ministry of Women and Child Development
NFE	Non-Formal Education
NREGS	National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

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OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PBI	Police Bureau of Investigation
SANWED	South Asian Network for Widows' Empowerment in Development
SARD	The South Asia Department
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEWA	Self-Employed Women's Association
SHGs	Self-Help Groups
SIGI	Social Institutions and Gender Index
SP	Strategic Plan
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WEP	Women Entrepreneurship Platform
WHO	World Health Organization
WIG	Women in Governance
WISCOMP	Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace
WRI	The South Asia Women's Resilience Index
WVS	World Value Survey

## About the Author

**Reazul Haque** is a Professor and the Former Chair at the Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. His academic journey is adorned with significant milestones, including his roles as a Visiting Research Fellow at IDE-JETRO, Japan, and an Affiliate Faculty Member at the Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University, USA. With over two decades of dedicated contribution to the domain of gender studies, Dr Haque's expertise is widely acknowledged. His scholarly pursuits span a broad spectrum of Public Policy and Social Development, focusing on the interplay between Gender, Power, and Discrimination, the nuances of Sexuality, the ethical dimensions within NGOs and Development Management, Qualitative Research Methodology, and Diversity and Inclusion. Dr Haque's notable works include the seminal book on his PhD thesis titled *Voices from the Edge: Justice, Agency, and the Plight of Floating Sex Workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh*, published by LIT Verlag, Gmbh Co. KG: Wien (AT), CH 8032 Zurich (2015).

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## Foreword

The landscape of gender politics and feminist movements is not just evolving; it is undergoing a monumental transformation fueled by powerful economic, political, and cultural shifts that demand our immediate attention and action. In the revolutionary book *Contemporary Gender Transformations in South Asia: Transcending the Archetype of Womanhood*, Professor Reazul Haque calls upon readers to engage deeply with the multifaceted intersections of feminism, state capitalism, and market forces in South Asia. This insightful exploration reveals how feminist agendas not only interact with but also confront, challenge, and sometimes align with the entrenched power structures that dominate our societies. By championing an expression-first approach to gender, Professor Haque courageously dismantles the conventional narratives that too often reduce gender discourse to simplistic identity-based or interactional binaries. We stand at a critical juncture – now is the moment to adopt a more sophisticated understanding of gender that embraces the complexities of our world and emphasizes the urgent need for a transformative feminist perspective capable of sparking meaningful change across all layers of society.

The work presented here is both timely and necessary. As the world moves toward a more interconnected and globalized reality, feminist movements must confront the implications of state-led economic reforms, neoliberal policies, and the commodification of feminist ideals. This book critically examines these themes, offering a nuanced discussion of how feminism in South Asia has been institutionalized, politicized, and redefined through the lens of state capitalism. The text does not merely recount historical feminist struggles; rather, it interrogates how contemporary feminist activism is shaped by political hybridization, generational transformation, and digital advocacy.

*Contemporary Gender Transformations in South Asia* provides a compelling academic framework that adeptly intertwines feminist theory with the pressing realities of governance, economic policy, and transnational activism. It courageously tackles profound questions: Can feminism truly thrive within state-controlled capitalist structures without being co-opted? In what ways do neoliberal and authoritarian regimes in South Asia decisively shape gender politics? Furthermore, can market-driven feminist initiatives genuinely achieve gender equality, or are they merely reinforcing systemic disparities? These inquiries are complex and nuanced, and this book not only confronts these dilemmas head-on but also offers critical insights that empower readers to navigate the intricate landscape of contemporary feminism. By engaging with these challenges and

opportunities, readers will gain a robust, informed perspective on the transformative potential of feminist movements in South Asia.

Beyond theory, the book adopts an analytical approach to understanding gender expressions in South Asia by examining the historical and cultural contexts that shape feminist discourse. It critiques the dominant archetypes of womanhood traditionally used to define gender roles and challenges readers to embrace a more intersectional, inclusive, and dynamic understanding of gender. By deconstructing these established paradigms, Professor Haque fosters a space for discussing alternative pathways to gender inclusivity and equality that do not rely solely on state intervention or market forces.

This book serves as an invaluable resource for scholars, activists, and policy-makers. It unpacks the complex relationships between feminism, state structures, and market-driven reforms. Additionally, it offers a compelling critique of feminism's institutionalization, cautioning against the potential dilution of feminist ideals while also exploring ways activism can be harnessed to achieve meaningful change.

In an era where feminist movements are increasingly shaped and reshaped by political and economic systems, *Contemporary Gender Transformations in South Asia: Transcending the Archetype of Womanhood* emerges as an indispensable guide. This compelling work not only deepens our understanding of the evolving dynamics of gender advocacy but also challenges us to reconsider and expand our definitions of feminism beyond traditional boundaries. It dares us to envision a future that is not just inclusive but transformative, urging everyone to engage actively in the quest for true gender equality. For anyone eager to grasp the intricate complexities of feminism in the 21st century – especially within the rapidly evolving sociopolitical landscape of South Asia – this book is an essential read that promises to inspire and provoke critical thought.

Helal Hossain Dhali<sup>1</sup>

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## Preface

In a perfectly rational world, the “what” questions, which imply a value-neutral perspective on gender dynamics, would have minimal discrepancies between radically theoretical ideals and practical realities. However, the identities and interactions among different genders are less predictable because the broader human society mediates them. Due to this interactional characteristic, gender is more than an essentialist identity; it is simultaneously fluid and intersectional, reflecting agency and influence from broader discourses. In this context, “agency” signifies that individuals have the power to define and express their gender identities, yet dominant historical patterns influence these identities and interactions. The broader discourse – including societal norms, cultural narratives, and political and economic structures – plays a vital role in shaping gender identities and dictating how they are perceived and interacted with. Fluidity and intersectionality offer us a framework of equilibrium concerning the demand- and supply-side dynamics of gender identities and interactions within and between agencies and broader discourses. Aligning with Sandra Bem’s Gender Schema Theory and Judith Butler’s Theory of Performativity, these equilibria, being both mobile and elastically cyclical, introduce intersubjectivity between the post-structural realms of feminism and postfeminism. Contemporary feminist scholarship often gravitates toward the supply-side dynamics of gender interactions, even when there is frequent acknowledgment of reciprocity from poststructural perspectives. While deficits on the demand side are commonly justified due to their interpretive intangibility within fluid intersubjectivity, they encourage us to ask some “why” and “how” questions regarding gender expressions. The “why” questions explore the variations of expressions within relatively similar post-structural frameworks of feminism, while the “how” questions consider how these expressions can be utilized through various forms of agency. This discussion leads us closer to postidentities of gender as a bounded rational paradigm, where demand-side reciprocity transcends beyond the relative essentialism of identities.

This book investigates this complex phenomenon in South Asia, critiquing the conventional woman-centric narrative in understanding gender dynamics. While womanhood – a construct that defines roles and behaviors based on sex, often relegating women to subordinate societal positions – is significant, it fails to capture the region’s gender diversity adequately. By adopting an expression-first approach instead of focusing solely on identity-interaction conflicts, we aim to move beyond this archetypal view and acknowledge the varied experiences and roles shaping gender dynamics. From a contemporary sociological standpoint,

the quest for remodeling inclusivity as an alternative paradigm for empowerment presents challenges. First, when recognized as acknowledging postidentity and integrating simultaneously, inclusivity risks overlooking specific issues relevant to niche groups, potentially leading to discrimination. Bounded rationality, being such “inductive essentialism,” could inadvertently create a form of “incompatible universalism.” Second, treating inclusivity as an expansionary adjustment to intersubjectivity may fail to address the underlying historical patterns entrenched within existing institutions, resulting in radically theoretical ideals that do not translate into radically practical changes. The archetype of womanhood in South Asian gender discourse often remains confined to dominant narratives, neglecting the value of inclusivity resulting from these politicized adaptations. Therefore, deconstructing the womanhood archetype in South Asian gender discourse requires exploring intersectionalities as “intersectionalities of expressions” in postidentities of gender. Furthermore, to counteract the historical patterns influenced by existing institutions – mainly how traditional and contemporary power structures may distort gender expressions in South Asia – it is essential to re-evaluate relational embeddedness in a transformative manner to ensure that all dimensions of womanhood are adequately represented.

In analyzing this transformation, it is vital to recognize what it means to be part of South Asia, extending beyond stereotypical characteristics. Functionalist factors often shape these characteristics, playing a latent role in social, cultural, and institutional expressions. As Sylvia Walby notes, gender discourse in South Asia features diverse gender politics and activism significantly influenced by the state-capitalist system, creating a blend of state and market feminism. Notable indicators regarding sociocultural and political-economic institutions suggest that South Asia is increasingly positioned at lower ranks concerning strong and democratized regimes and the functional liberty of markets. Such conditions often promote the populist development rhetoric in feminism with branding nominal improvements in some gender equity and women empowerment indicators, camouflaging the prevalence of informal institutions with regional ethno-demographic diversities. This system significantly impacts the behaviors and moral codes associated with different gender identities, interfacing between the state and its citizens. In a parallel vein, the competitive political landscape in South Asia ideologically influences this mosaic of ethno-demographic diversities. It can be tangible spaces associated with class, caste, religion, geography, or intangible temporal dimensions related to generations. To counter this complexity, we attempted our discourse analysis as an event-focused, happening “inside” the “geographically” and “ethno-demographically” constituted South Asia. However, these efforts often align with specific strategies and interests and stop short of precipitating a radical shift. Instead, it perpetuates existing power relations, avoiding a direct challenge to the entrenched structures of the archetypes of womanhood.

The book consists of 10 chapters, which evolved from macroscopic realities toward microscopic cognition as we progressed; in other words, from more control tools to more agentic approaches to gender expressions. The first three chapters focus on the broader poststructures that control the projections and

interpretations of all gender identities. They mainly cover the integration, disparity, and maintenance of sustainable power relations and explore why certain gender expressions of responses are prevalent in the region. They also formulate the base for the womanhood-deconstructing argument of this book by primarily examining the explicit woman-tilted discourse of gender discrimination. The fourth chapter works as a mediator to intersubjectivity of postidentities, showcasing the transition of individuals' agency within broader institutions toward niche social issues. From here on, the central argument takes over to demonstrate relatively neutral alternative paradigms that implicitly exist but simultaneously deconstruct in the womanhood transformation. The following four chapters, therefore, focus more on how individuals respond and interact while dealing with specific domains of gender expression in South Asia. In these chapters, we want to explore the bounded rational attributes of value neutrality in stereotypes with freedom, objectification and reciprocity, masculinity with religion, and violence with media. Drawing from postidentities views, the last two chapters, as consequences and a way forward of the outcome of their predecessors, have discussed the potential of reconstructing optimally neutral alternative paradigms against established narratives. They reflect the intersectionalities of expressions against the elastic structures of how individuals optimize their relational embeddedness by rethinking empowerment and what can be done through cultural engineering with education. The mosaic is a dynamic arena where these diverse genders and their expressions negotiate, adapt, and sometimes compromise. This interaction fosters the emergence of new subjectivities, stereotypes, and forms of objectification, reflecting the complex survival and growth strategies within these societies.

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Professor Reazul Haque, PhD

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## Chapter 1

# State, Market, and Contemporary Feminism: A State-Capitalist Synthesis

### Abstract

As the introductory chapter, this chapter explores the evolution of feminist movements in South Asia within a state-capitalist framework. It highlights the larger realities of gender politics influenced by state and market forces. The chapter discusses how integrating feminist goals into market policies has blurred the lines between the state and the market, creating opportunities and challenges. South Asia's state-capitalist feminism employs intersectional, interfaith, and intergenerational approaches shaped by the interactions among the state, market, and feminist groups. Unlike Western liberal feminism, it emerges within authoritarian neoliberalism and social development, focusing on economic growth and professionalization. The chapter examines how feminism has been institutionalized through the creation of departments, policy reforms, and welfare programs. While these initiatives advance women's rights, they risk co-opting feminist ideals and diluting their political impact. These dynamics elevate the visibility of feminist issues in both politics and economics, yet they also commodify feminism, potentially weakening its critical edge. Considering generational transformations, the chapter assesses whether this institutionalization effectively addresses gender inequalities or merely reinforces existing power structures. It also explores how transnational feminist movements and digital activism generate new opportunities for mobilization and funding. By analyzing the conflicts and compromises involved in feminist engagement with state-capitalist structures, the chapter reveals how these interactions shape expressions of gender and inclusivity within gender politics.

*Keywords:* State capitalism; contemporary feminism; activism; transnational feminist movements; gender expression; market feminism; institutionalization; political hybridization; nonfemale gender

### 1.1 Introduction

Neoliberalism posits that individuals can improve their lives by harnessing their creativity and ambition to establish businesses within a framework that safeguards individual freedom, with the government playing a crucial role in maintaining this robust system (Harvey, 2005). However, modern feminist activists may expand their efforts beyond these traditional boundaries when necessary market conditions arise, and the state's involvement in these activities is often influenced by the need to attract foreign investors (Elson & Pearson, 1981; Safa, 1981). Focusing specifically on South Asian governments, we observe that they have actively pursued resource acquisition through state capitalism, integrating informal institutions while promoting market activities. In this context, feminism has transcended the state and the market dichotomy, as seen in state-capitalist regimes. We do not assert that state-capitalist feminism (see Walby, 2011) is entirely distinct from state-manufactured feminism. Instead, it facilitates the integration of feminist goals into a market framework established by the state, which may not fully capture the desired expressions from that market framework. This chapter explores the complex interplay between feminism, the state, and the South Asian market, examining how feminist activism adapts within the region's state-capitalist structures. Our inquiry begins with the effectiveness of South Asian feminist strategies, particularly regarding inclusivity and addressing intersectional issues. This line of questioning, inspired by Harvey (2005), allows us to assess the strengths and weaknesses of these strategies in a system where expressions of gender neutrality beyond identity constructs are frequently overlooked.

This analysis such as female workers in free trade zones, as discussed by Jeffery and Basu (2012), examines the tension between state policies promoting women's empowerment and the ongoing exploitation of these laborers. Scheurman (2001) highlights the necessity to reconsider the demand side of gender expression and the evolving feminist thought in the region. South Asian feminism faces challenges, particularly with top-down policy approaches and limited grassroots involvement (Ruwanpura, 2023). The chapter explores the influence of globalization and digital platforms on feminist movements, advocating for a bridging approach between poststructuralism (addressing the "why" questions behind gender expressions) and intersectionality (exploring how different groups interact with these expressions) to promote relative value neutrality. This perspective facilitates an examination of institutionalization and political hybridity within feminism. Despite challenges, opportunities for coalition-building among government, economic stakeholders, and grassroots movements exist, as suggested by Gupta and Sharma (2006) and Kumar (2011, pp. 175–193), requiring a commitment to structural reforms for social justice (Karim, 2022). It will be interesting to see how feminist movements interact with state-capitalist structures and the representation of dominant masculinities within them.

### 1.2 State in Feminism

State feminism, as described by Walby (2011), refers to the government's effort to promote gender equality and women's rights through its policies. A critical

question arises: How effective is state feminism in bringing about fundamental changes for gender equality? [McBride and Mazur \(2008\)](#) note that the political dynamics of state feminism in the South Asian context operate within an environment where resources and social hierarchies are unevenly distributed. This framework establishes the state as the driving force behind the outsourcing and rebranding of feminist agendas and activities. At the same time, the market acts as a controlled mechanism facilitated by the state. This perspective challenges us beyond simplistic evaluations of whether state feminism is good or bad. Instead, it encourages exploration of how the expressions of feminist movements interact with these entities. We are prompted to adopt a poststructural feminist lens to examine “why” these multifaceted expressions allow power to operate. This examination requires scrutiny of the limitations of the state as an agent for social change while remaining vigilant about attempts to dilute feminist language in pursuit of agendas that do not align with the transformative vision of gender equality. Consequently, this situation leads to a blend of cooperative and coercive alliances among critical institutions that extend into both political and nonpolitical realms.

We need to investigate whether state feminism ultimately supports coercive patriarchal systems as a provocation or reciprocity when it aims to change, reduce, or reinforce gender inequalities. Beyond identity or interaction, the concept of “expression” is significant when considering how terms like “empowerment” may be repurposed to serve other agendas within the patriarchal bargain. This co-optation occurs when concepts such as “empowerment” and “choice” are used to support neoliberal and consumerist agendas or when “equality” and “diversity” obscure ongoing structural inequalities and oppressions. To determine whether state feminism serves everyone, including marginalized groups, we must examine how gender neutrality is practically applied in these policies. This examination is crucial when gender stereotypes and objectification are perpetuated in a hegemonic environment. The influence of state feminism on the broader feminist movement is also worth investigating, particularly the shift from collective change to an emphasis on individual rights. State feminism may depoliticize feminist movements, prioritizing individual rights and legal solutions over community-based and structural changes. Regarding the roles of neoliberal authoritarian regimes in South Asia in matters of gender expression, it is also essential to explore how state feminism interacts with neoliberal ideas – especially in terms of contestation from state capitalism in market development – and how this interaction uses feminist education. This area of inquiry could either dilute or enhance the effectiveness of state feminist initiatives. By facilitating or hindering cultural shifts through educating different ethno-demographic groups and generations, we should evaluate how effectively state feminism addresses deeper social issues related to gender inequality, which may require potential cultural engineering. The role of state feminism in promoting gender-inclusive policies is an essential aspect of this evaluation.

## 4 *Contemporary Gender Transformations in South Asia*

### **1.2.1 *Contestation From Neoliberalism and State-Capitalism***

The critique of neoliberalism and state capitalism by feminist scholars, as highlighted by [Larner \(2000\)](#), [Peck and Tickell \(2002\)](#), and [Walby \(2011\)](#), raises questions regarding the impact of these economic systems on feminist movements and their objectives. This inquiry explores how these ideologies influence feminist thought and action. Concerning state capitalism, as described by [Treat \(1983\)](#) and [Ahroni \(1994\)](#), the responses of feminist groups to the challenges posed by this alignment with the patriarchal bargain are particularly emphasized. The patriarchal bargain pertains to how these organizations consciously or unconsciously adapt their strategies in the economic environment. As [Walby \(2011\)](#) suggested, this adaptation often manifests in incorporating feminist ideals into state policies. Considering the expression of these ideals as a construction of identities and interactions, the effectiveness of supply-side strategies from feminist perspectives can influence government decision-making. This raises questions regarding the interpretation of state involvement in a bounded rationale of value neutrality within these economic frameworks. The adoption of a dominant male proposition as an archetype in developing a gender-neutral perspective proves critical in shaping policies informed by the South Asian definition of neoliberalism and state capitalism. Furthermore, as noted by [Laforest and Orsini \(2005\)](#), the inclusivity of feminist movements within these systems merits examination, particularly regarding how well these movements represent diverse gender identities and experiences. Additionally, the demand side necessitates an investigation into the transformational capacity of feminist groups within these frameworks, drawing insights from [Mazur \(2020\)](#) and [Squires \(2007\)](#). This involves assessing whether neoliberalism and state capitalism reinforce or diminish the radical potential of feminist activism while also examining the possibilities for co-optation and compromise as feminist movements engage with dominant economic systems and analyzing the language, concepts, and beneficiaries of perceived “feminist progress” within these frameworks.

### **1.2.2 *Development of Market in State Feminism***

Marketization in state feminism involves integrating market principles into state policies to achieve gender equality. This approach raises concerns about diminishing the diversity and autonomy of feminist groups while reinforcing inequalities associated with neoliberalism and state capitalism, as discussed by [Brenner and Theodore \(2002\)](#) and [Rai \(2008\)](#). This strategy influences women’s roles in the workforce, impacting the development and structure of capitalism. It seeks to balance mutualism and commercialism in intimate relationships, highlighting the interplay between legal systems and market dynamics. It is crucial to remain vigilant to ensure that feminist efforts do not inadvertently strengthen the power imbalances they aim to dismantle. Therefore, we call for understanding market development through a responsive, expression-centric approach to exploring feminist adaptability within state capitalism. The evolution of markets in feminist

efforts can help determine whether there are any depoliticizing effects or potential for complementary action within state feminism.

The interaction between state and market feminism creates an essential relationship, often called state-capitalist feminism. As [Elman \(2003\)](#) describes, this blend unites policy agencies and activists through shared strategies and resources. The close relationship between state and market feminism is evident, as state feminism aligns with entrepreneurial principles in a flexible patriarchal environment. The effectiveness of women’s policies within this framework often depends on the strength and connections of women’s movements to policy agencies, which raises questions about the ability to reconstruct existing paradigms. Research by [Friedman \(2000\)](#), [Baldez \(2010\)](#), [Weldon \(2006\)](#), and [Kantola and Lombardo \(2017\)](#) indicates that well-connected women’s movements can significantly enhance policy success. The way the state exerts control and the responses from feminist groups also play a crucial role in understanding the power dynamics involved in the state’s implementation of marketization strategies. Consequently, this chapter aims to examine how women are integrated into neoliberal policies and how contemporary feminist activism responds. This investigation will look at the implications of these policies on political dynamics and the movement to redefine traditional views of womanhood toward a more value-neutral perspective in feminist activism and policymaking. My analysis will delve into the influence of neoliberalism and state capitalism on the connection between state and market feminism to synthesize policy formulation and the interrelationships among different stakeholders (see [Fig. 1](#)).

### 1.3 State-Market Feminism: The Synthesis

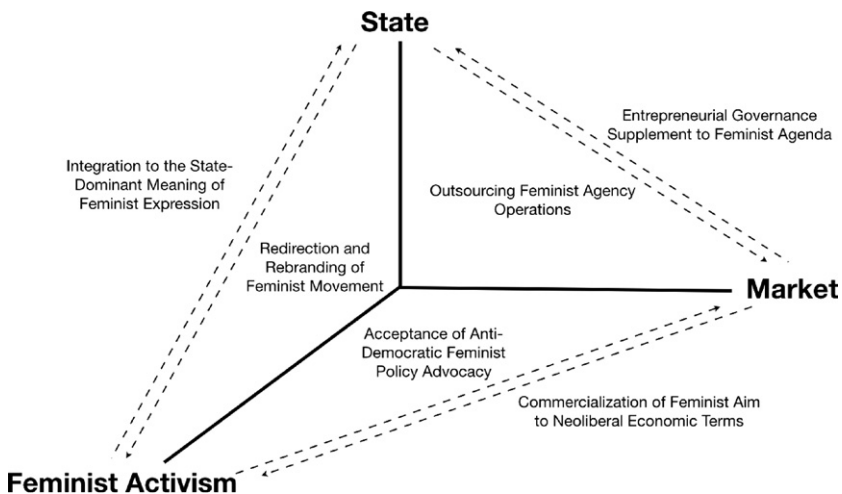


Fig. 1. Evolution of State-Capitalism in Agency and Movements of State, Market, and Feminist Activism From [Walby \(2011\)](#).

### ***1.3.1 Dimension 1: State Being the Initiator***

The state's initiation of the transformation process marks the point where neoliberalism shifts feminism from relying on governmental intervention to adopting market-oriented approaches to tackle gender and economic disparities. Now, we must be mindful that this initiation by the state involves a simultaneous emergence of complementary and conflicting structural (or poststructural) processes rather than entirely a new development or merely imported ideals of feminism. The legacy of authoritarian regimes is a significant indicator of "stability" in South Asian history. It is essential to recognize how the state, as an institution, combines both complementary and conflicting processes within a contested space, interacting with other formal and informal institutions. Therefore, the transformation of feminism under state influence, particularly in South Asia, driven by some form of authoritative Neoliberalism, has two significant aspects. Firstly, shifting from government-led initiatives to market-driven methods allows NGOs to dominate policy activities, affecting women's movements dependent on institutional stability and financial resources (Bose, 2023; Madhok, 2014). Second, there is a preference for technocrats over grassroots groups, governments, and international organizations, with NGOs acting as intermediaries, a concern highlighted by Alvarez (2018) and Kantola and Lombardo (2017). This creates a hierarchy, as NGOs may not be directly accountable to states or international bodies. The patriarchal state often outsources women's project management to external entities, integrating gender equality with market systems while prioritizing technical aspects (Schild, 2000; Franceschet, 2011).

### ***1.3.2 Dimension 2: Market in Action***

The second axis examines the interplay between government authority and market mechanisms in the context of feminist objectives. The transition from state to market-oriented feminism can alter how feminist goals are pursued, as market feminism typically advocates for a limited government role, contrasting with individualistic approaches (Teghtsoonian, 2003). In South Asia, the market often operates imperfectly, potentially leading to monopolized forms of influence. This local market context can reshape feminist objectives by reframing equality in terms of competition and productivity within a hegemonic society. Relying on flawed institutions for commercial ends could hinder gender mainstreaming amid patriarchal structures. The effectiveness of women's policy agencies in achieving gender equality depends on how much various interests and dynamics shape the market. Policies must align with feminist values and utilize strategies like inter-ministerial collaboration for effective gender mainstreaming (Goetz, 2009; Staudt, 2008). However, rapid economic growth under state capitalism may undermine feminist objectives and the relevance of these agencies (Lombardo, 2005; Stratigaki, 2012). The rise of market feminism could weaken the authority

of state women's policy agencies, and poststructuralist critiques might render radical feminist critiques less effective. If "gender-equal" neoliberal reforms allow for external agency participation and promote decentralized resource and governance mechanisms as a response to the inefficiency of the state, influenced by Marxist feminism, then market mechanisms might challenge the norms of Neoliberalism enforced by the state.

### ***1.3.3 Dimension 3: Feminist Activism in Evolution***

The third axis highlights the rapid expansion of feminist responsiveness as feminist activism aligns more with government authority, shifting from local to global networks (Bagguley, 2010; Dean, 2010; Ryan et al., 2011; Threlfall, 1996). If we consider that the state and market are not inherently agents of change in the most optimally defined value-neutral way, feminist activism emerges as more than just reactive. Investigating the proactive potential of gender expression, particularly about state and market integration, becomes crucial. Transnational groups play a key role in promoting gender equality (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), influencing how women engage with state institutions and challenging stereotypes in a state-capitalist context (Karim, 2011; Loomba & Lukose, 2012; Madhok, 2014; Rai, 2008). Feminism advocates for women's inclusion in the workforce and equal treatment, raising concerns about whether state-led "feminism" serves market interests and undermines true equality (Bose, 2023; Madhok, 2014; Walby, 2011). It compels us to consider the extent to which state-initiated "feminism" risks co-optation by market interests, potentially undermining efforts toward true equality. Here, feminist movements can strategically engage with the state while preserving independent critical voices and grassroots power. Now, the question is whether the neoliberal "reforms" provide entry points for feminist influence or if they ultimately subvert larger goals of systemic change. The inherent tensions within the framework can affect the decentralized mechanisms that often promote "gender-equal" neoliberal reforms on the state-feminism dynamic since the role of external agencies would be highly necessary to confront the possibility that market feminism might inadvertently contribute to a reconfiguration of patriarchal power structures disguised as progressive change.

## **1.4 Feminist Activism in South Asian Context**

The feminist movement in South Asia has transformed significantly in between globalization and privatization, and ethnic and religious nationalism. Menon (2009) and Madhok (2010) highlight this evolution as a blend of state feminism and market expansion, prompting feminist organizations to adopt strategies that address gender equality amid pressures from government and global development. The implementation of state capitalism has reshaped the societal and civil order, especially after adopting neoliberal economic measures in many

South Asian countries (Bose, 2023; Rajan, 2003; Walby, 2011). In India and Bangladesh, women's activism has emerged alongside a shift from nationalism to neoliberalism (Azim et al., 2013; Loomba & Lukose, 2012). The dynamics in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal are further complicated by military involvement in ethnic and economic issues (Chaudhuri & Gangadharan, 2003; Gangoli, 2011; Karim, 2011; Menon, 2009; Priyashantha et al., 2023; Tharu & Niranjana, 1994). Balancing market-oriented feminist goals with democratic advancement is essential for achieving gender equality and addressing human rights. Feminist groups have thus restructured to tackle contentious issues like institutionalization, political co-optation, and generational transformation (Azim et al., 2013; Gangoli, 2011; Karim, 2011; Priyashantha et al., 2023; Rai, 2008; Sangari, 2015). Incorporating expression-first angle against socially formed realities, this tense exchange reveals sharp fault lines within the movement's revolutionary spirit and independence, as the growing formalization reflects a more integrated approach with markets and governance, albeit with uncertainties about future generational shifts in feminist perspectives.

#### ***1.4.1 Institutionalization of State-Capitalist Feminism***

The institutionalization of feminism, as outlined by Roy (2012), Menon (2009), and Karim (2011), involves embedding feminist principles into governmental and economic frameworks. This approach aims to challenge prevailing power dynamics and societal norms, navigating between integrationist and radical expressions that transcend traditional archetypes of womanhood. However, it often manifests as a top-down, reactionary narrative stemming from the supply-side of feminist activism – potentially the strongest response that state capitalism can muster against the demand-side, which may express antihegemonic radicalism. A significant concern, raised by Madhok (2010) and Kotiswaran (2021), is that this institutionalization might weaken the revolutionary capacity and diversity of feminist movements. Whether this process is more inclusive or exploitative often depends on the dominant gender expressions associated with formal institutions; informal institutions may hinder progress within a state-capitalist system. For instance, the debate over the taxation of sanitary products illustrates the disconnect between feminist ideals of equality and institutionalized practices. The demand-side feminist perspective challenges the classification of essential items as taxable rather than as “medical necessities,” demonstrating how state policies and societal norms can reinforce gender-based disparities. Inadequate radicalization regarding gender expressions from the demand-side reveals that men often dominate decisions surrounding women's bodily autonomy and healthcare, which reflects lingering institutional sexism. Similarly, reliance on acceptance or conformity within judicial biases may uncover inconsistencies in the practical implementation of feminist-driven legal reforms.