



The Mask of Feminism: How Pseudo & Radical Misreads Are Hindering Real Gender Progress

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Abstract: *In June 2026, a 10-second clip from a Gurugram comedy show did what years of policy debates could not: it froze the entire country mid-scroll. A man in the audience said he had spent ₹370 on biryani, and so intimacy was “owed” to him. The video exploded. NCW filed complaints. FIRs were registered. Newsrooms ran 24-hour loops. For three weeks, India argued about ₹370, about men, about women, about who was offended and who was overreacting. But while the country fought over a plate of biryani, something quieter was happening. Consent training modules in Gurugram offices stayed un-updated. POSH complaints kept piling up in drawers. And the word “consent” itself—hard-won through decades of feminist legal work—got cheaper. It was used more, but meant less. This paper tells that story. Not just the story of ₹370 biryani, but of two other masks from the same year: a medical student’s joke about cadavers that turned medical ethics into a gender war, and a Bengaluru techie’s suicide note that was turned into a manifesto. All three wore the language of feminism—dignity, patriarchy, justice—but none delivered the boring, unglamorous work feminism actually requires: rewriting laws, auditing wages, training police, updating syllabi. Using critical discourse analysis and the idea of “counterfeit currency”, I argue that the real socio-political crisis is not feminism. It is counterfeit feminism. This paper critically examines the reconfiguration of feminist discourse within contemporary social media ecologies. Drawing upon critical discourse analysis, postfeminist theory, and media studies, I argue that platform affordances—algorithmic amplification, attention commodification, and affective virality—have catalyzed the emergence of “pseudo-feminism”: a counterfeit iteration of feminist politics characterized by symbolic performativity, lexical appropriation, and the evacuation of material praxis. When feminist words are spent for virality without material return, public trust inflates and crashes. The cost is polarization that kills coalitions, backlash that erodes trust, and attention theft that starves real reforms. The paper ends with a simple test to unmask content: does it have a policy ask, an outcome metric, and accountability? If not, it is costume, not cause.*

Keywords: *Pseudo Feminism, Radical Feminism, ₹370 Biryani Case 2026, Counterfeit Legitimacy, Gender Discourse, Affective Polarization, Post-Feminism, Platform Capitalism, Counterfeit Legitimacy.*

1. Introduction: When the Mask Speaks Louder Than the Work

Scroll through India’s digital space in contemporary time and the contradiction is immediate. A creator yells “Smash the patriarchy” into the camera, sells a t-shirt below. A man posts “Not all men” under a consent PSA and gets 20k quote-tweets. Angela McRobbie called it “masquerade” in 2009. Sarah Banet-Weiser called it “popular feminism” in 2018. The mask is old. A joke about ₹370 triggers FIRs. An insensitive comment about cadaver’s triggers ethics boards. A suicide note triggers Supreme Court remarks. All wear the

language of feminism. One vocabulary repeated in all of them: consent, dignity, patriarchy, power. This is not the first time India's internet has borrowed the language of feminism. Yet, none deliver the boring, unglamorous work feminism actually requires: drafting clauses, auditing wages, training police, updating syllabi. I use "mask" as a theoretical metaphor. A mask borrows the face of feminism — words like consent, patriarchy, dignity — while the body behind it performs for algorithmic virality, not outcome. When counterfeit content spends the trust capital built by decades of legal reform, legitimacy inflates then crashes. This paper asks: what is the socio-political cost of that crash? And how do we unmask it?

2. Literature Review: Theory, Reduction and Commodification

2.1 Radical Feminism vs Reductionist Misread: Radical feminism, from Firestone 1970 to Mackinnon 1989, locates patriarchy as a structural system organizing reproduction, labor, and law. Its method is material: change property rights, workplace codes, judicial training. The "reductionist misread" detaches this from structure and flattens it into group blame: "all men benefit, therefore all men are culpable". Judith Butler 1990 warns that when gender politics becomes fixed identity war, coalitional politics dies. The misread borrows radical vocabulary but drops its material method.

As a political epistemology, Feminism, has historically concerned itself with the interrogation of material inequities: wage differentials, legal asymmetries, reproductive autonomy, and the gendered distribution of care labor. Yet within algorithmically curated digital spaces, the signifiers of feminism—"empowerment," "consent," "intersectionality," "patriarchy"—have undergone a process of semiotic extraction. They circulate as detached signifiers, decoupled from the institutional labor that initially produced them. This phenomenon is not reducible to mere "slacktivism." Rather, it constitutes a structural transformation wherein social media platforms, operating under platform capitalism, incentivize the conversion of political discourse into affective spectacle. Feminism, consequently, risks becoming a "mask": a performative façade that retains the lexicon of liberation while abandoning its architectonic function. This article conceptualizes this transformation as the ascendance of pseudo-feminism.

2.2 Pseudo/Performative Feminism as Commodified Activism: The notion of feminism as masquerade finds its antecedents in Angela McRobbie's 2009 analysis of postfeminist culture, wherein feminist gains are simultaneously invoked and repudiated through ironic disavowal. McRobbie posits that Postfeminism operates by assuming that gender equality has been achieved, thereby rendering feminist critique redundant while appropriating its aesthetic capital.

Sarah Banet-Weiser extends this critique in *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (2018), delineating the parallel economies of "popular feminism" and "popular misogyny." She contends that both are products of visibility regimes wherein legitimacy is conferred not through political efficacy but through metrics of engagement. Within this economy, feminist discourse is commodified: it becomes content, brand identity, and affective currency. In India, this appears as "pseudo feminism" — content using consent, dignity, patriarchy without 1) policy ask, 2) outcome metric, 3) accountability. It is branding, not organizing. 2.3 Affective Polarization & Counterfeit Legitimacy.

Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012 show affective polarization reduces willingness to cooperate on policy even when ideological overlap exists. When gender discourse becomes "team men vs team women", policies requiring cooperation - gender-neutral harassment codes, shared childcare, safeguards against false cases, and protection for genuine victims' stall.

I extend this with "counterfeit legitimacy". Analogous to economic counterfeiting, counterfeit legitimacy describes the circulation of feminist terminology absent the "reserve" of material praxis—policy drafting, institutional audit, legal reform, and coalition building. The mask thus functions as symbolic capital without material backing, generating inflationary devaluation of the term "feminism" itself. Feminist legal reforms-

built trust capital: Hindu Succession Act 2005, POSH Act 2013, DV Act 2005. Counterfeit content spends that capital by using identical vocabulary. When no reform follows, public trust crashes. NGOs must then waste bandwidth proving “we are not that”. That crash is the crisis.

2.4 Data Context: Material Issues vs Media Coverage

NFHS-5 2019-2021: 29.3% of Indian women 18-49 report spousal violence, only 14% seek help. NCRB 2023: 45,683 cases under “cruelty by husband/relatives” Sec 498A IPC, conviction 13%. POSH complaints in metros average 1–2-year pendency. CMS India 2024-2025: viral gender clips get 12-20x more coverage than pending POSH cases. This disparity is “attention theft”.

3. Methodology: Qualitative critical discourse analysis following Fairclough 1995. Corpus: news reports from Mint, Lokmat Times, Scroll.in, Economic Times, India TV News; institutional statements from NCW, AIMS, Maharashtra Cyber Police; public statements by political figures.

Coding: 1) Framing of gender, 2) Policy ask presence, 3) Institutional response, 4) Discourse vs material outcome. Limitation: relies on media reports, not primary court filings.

4. Mechanisms of Transformation: Platform Affordances and Discursive Reconfiguration: Three interlocking mechanisms facilitate the metamorphosis of feminism into pseudo-feminist discourse on social media:

4.1 Algorithmic Amplification of Affective Extremity: Platform algorithms optimize for engagement, privileging content that elicits high arousal emotions: outrage, vindication, derision. Feminist discourse, when reduced to aphoristic declarations or antagonistic binaries, achieves greater virality than nuanced policy argumentation. Consequently, the discursive complexity inherent to feminist theory is algorithmically flattened into Manichean tropes. The platform does not censor complexity; it economically disincentivizes it.

4.2 Lexical Appropriation and Decontextualization: Social media enables rapid semantic drift. Terms originating within feminist jurisprudence—“consent,” “agency,” “intersectionality”—are extracted from their theoretical architectures and deployed as rhetorical talismans. This process of decontextualization produces what Judith Butler termed “citational misfire”: the repetition of terms without the citational chain that imbues them with political force. The result is lexical abundance concomitant with conceptual hollowing.

4.3 Commodification of Identity and the Spectacle of Authenticity: Under platform capitalism, identity itself becomes a marketable asset. Feminist self-presentation often converges with brand logics: the curated performance of “wokeness” functions as cultural capital. This commodification does not invalidate individual political commitment; however, at the aggregate level, it incentivizes the prioritization of visibility over verifiability. The metric of success shifts from policy outcomes to follower counts, thereby reorienting feminist practice from transformation to representation.

5. Consequences: The Hindrance of Material Feminist Praxis

The proliferation of pseudo-feminist discourse engenders three interrelated consequences for gender politics

5.1 Epistemic Dilution and Semantic Inflation: When “feminism” denotes simultaneously corporate branding, individual lifestyle aesthetics, and structural critique, the term undergoes semantic inflation. As Nancy Fraser argues regarding recognition politics, the proliferation of identity claims without redistribution can evacuate the political economy of gender from feminist discourse. The mask, by substituting representation for redistribution, obscures the material conditions that necessitate feminist intervention.

5.2 Polarization and the Erosion of Coalitional Capacity: Affective polarization, exacerbated by algorithmic filter bubbles, bifurcates the digital public sphere into antagonistic epistemic communities. Feminism, which historically derived its political potency from coalition building across differential

positionalities, finds its coalitional capacity attenuated. Pseudo-feminist discourse, by prioritizing boundary maintenance over bridge building, renders unlikely the cross-gender, cross-class alliances necessary for reforms in labor, care, and legal infrastructure.

5.3 Attention Diversion from Institutional Reform: The economy of attention is zero-sum. Discursive resources expended on performative contestation are resources not expended on policy advocacy, institutional monitoring, or empirical research. Thus, the mask does not merely misrepresent; it misallocates. The temporality of viral discourse—ephemeral, reactive—stands in antithesis to the temporality of institutional change—incremental, deliberative.

6. Toward Discernment: Toward a Taxonomy of Authentic Praxis: To mitigate the ascendancy of the pseudo-feminist mask, this article proposes a tripartite heuristic for discursive discernment: Material Referent: Does the discourse articulate a specific institutional locus of intervention—legislative clause, organizational policy, budgetary allocation? Metric of Efficacy: Does it propose a falsifiable outcome measure by which success can be evaluated? Accountability Structure: Does it identify agents responsible for implementation and remediation? Discourse that satisfies these criteria retains fidelity to feminist praxis; discourse that does not, irrespective of its lexical fidelity, operates within the register of pseudo-feminism.

7. Case Analysis: Three Masks, One Wound

Case 1: 370/- Biryani Case, Gurugram, June 8, 2026: Transactional Consent & Binary Amplification

Comedian Pranit More is doing crowd-work at a packed hall. He asks the audience: “What’s the most you’ve spent on a date?”

A voice from the crowd, 27-year-old Himanshu Jangra, answers: “₹370. On biryani. And she still said no to intimacy. I kept chasing her.”

Ten seconds of audio. By June 11, the National Commission for Women takes *Suo motu cognizance*, citing trivialization of “consent, dignity, bodily autonomy”, writes to Haryana’s DGP for “stringent, time-bound action”. By June 12, Gurugram Police have an FIR under IT Act Sec 67 and BNS Sec 294, 353, 75. By June 14, news reports say Jangra has lost his job.

Discourse Framing: Pseudo mask: Accounts brand male audiences as inherently entitled. Group attribution error. Uses “consent” as condemnation, not education.

Reductionist mask: Counter-accounts frame outrage as “over-sensitivity”, reducing radical feminism’s structural focus to “women vs men”.

Hindrance: Polarization kills policy questions on venue consent training, POSH applicability to events. Attention theft diverts NCW/police cycles while 67% of Gurugram POSH complaints stay pending.

How it wears feminism: The clip is framed as “entitlement culture violating consent”. The rebuttal is framed as “feminist overreach killing free speech”. Both sides are fluent in feminist vocabulary. Neither side tables a draft amendment to POSH Act for live events.

Case 2: Dr. Sejal Pawar Cadaver Remarks, June 2026: Ethics Framed as Gender War

After, the viral reactions from netizens about the 370 rupees Biryani case, internet becomes once again topsy-turvy. Another clip from the same show hits ‘X’ and, goes viral post-biryani row.. KEM Hospital student Dr. Sejal Pawar is asked about anatomy lab. She describes joking about male cadavers’ genitalia to “deal with the fear”.

By June 11, the All India Medical Students' Association (AIMSA) writes to Maharashtra CM: "Cadavers are not merely educational tools, they represent noble individuals, not objects of mockery". Maharashtra Cyber Police FIR under BNS Sec 75(1)(iv), 75(3), 294, 353(2), IT Act Sec 67 for "obscene and insulting comments regarding cadavers". Reports state Pawar received suspension. Maharashtra Cyber Police register FIR under BNS Sec 75, 294. Pawar is suspended from hospital duties.

Discourse Framing:

Pseudo mask: Posts defend as "women breaking taboos". Branding shields lack of ethics analysis.

Reductionist mask: Posts use it as proof "women doctors lack empathy". Flattens universal medical ethics into gender trait.

Hindrance: Backlash erodes trust in women medical students. Real issue — curriculum gaps on donor dignity — buried. Ethics loses neutrality when framed as "feminist issue".

How it wears feminism: Defenders call it "women claiming space in male-dominated field". Critics call it "violation of donor dignity". Both use the word "dignity". The Medical Council's ethics syllabus does not trend. Even, the males accused law and Government, that they go easy on women, when it comes to punishment. If Himanshu Jangra, lost his job, because of his derogatory remarks, then why Dr. Sejal Pawar couldn't lose her licence? This debate, raised another famous case and its judgement, The case of Atul Subhas from 2024.

Scene 3: Atul Subhash Case, Bengaluru, December 9, 2024: Legal Grievance vs "Fake Feminism" Generalization

Techie Atul Subhash, 34, is found dead in his apartment. On his laptop: an 81-minute video, a 24-page note. He alleges his divorce became a chain of legal cases, demands for ₹3 crore, and blocked access to his child. "The system is making my enemies stronger," he says.

Within a week, his wife Nikita Singhania and two relatives are arrested for abetment. In December, the Supreme Court observes a "growing tendency to misuse cruelty law by married women", while warning courts to protect genuine victims. Media reports note wife retained job during legal process.

How it wears feminism: Online, the video becomes "proof patriarchy oppresses men". The counter becomes "don't generalize, believe women". Both sides wield "law, power, oppression". The discursive transformation of feminism within Indian social media is acutely indexed by the semantic shift toward what a renowned public figure Kangana Ranaut has addressed "fake feminism ka dhandha" ["the business of fake feminism"] (Ranaut qtd. in India Today 2024). This lexical formulation, in response to the Atul Subhash case, crystallizes a broader cultural diagnosis: that feminist terminology has been extracted from its materialist moorings and re-circulated as symbolic capital within a platform economy of outrage and visibility. The findings of this study indicate that such recirculation produces three interlocking effects: (1) the evacuation of structural critique through lexical appropriation, wherein terms like "consent," "patriarchy," and "empowerment" are decontextualized from policy referents and deployed as affective triggers; (2) the hindrance of coalitional politics via algorithmic polarization, as platform architectures incentivize Manichean binaries that render cross-gender collaboration on issues such as paternity leave, wage equity, and male mental health discursively untenable; and (3) the misallocation of discursive resources through attention theft, whereby viral contestation over symbolic infractions supersedes sustained engagement with institutional reforms in legal, medical, and labor domains. Thus, the "dhandha" of "fake feminism" functions not as an anomaly but as a structural outcome of platform capitalism, wherein the mask of feminist performance accrues engagement metrics while the architectonic work of gender justice is deferred. The historical genealogy of such containment—from nineteenth-century reformist constructions of

“better wives” to post-independence print modernism’s marginalization of female poets—reveals a persistent pattern: the aestheticization of women’s emancipation without the redistribution of material power (Ray 34–35; Bhattacharya 97). Contemporary social media thereby intensifies a *longue durée* of discursive containment, reconstituting feminism as a commodified spectacle whose counterfeit legitimacy threatens the epistemic and political coherence of the movement itself. The boring question — what judicial training, and data can reduce misuse without chilling real DV complaints — gets 2% of the screen time.

People criticising, Atul Subhash’s estranged wife Nikita Singhania’s job retention in Accenture after being arrested on abetment charges. Aligning Jangra’s job loss to argue “law is biased toward feminism”. This borrows feminist language “accountability” but applies it selectively — demanding punishment for one person while ignoring due process for others. It spends the legitimacy of “equality before law” without engaging how labor law, criminal law, and institutional codes actually work.

People are actually ignoring the algorithmic logic of consequences, that Jangra’s clip was framed as “entitlement and consent violation” — a topic platforms and employers now act on quickly due to POSH/PR risk. Subhash’s case involved ongoing legal proceedings and abetment allegations, which employers typically handle through “innocent until proven guilty”, and labor law procedures.

Dr. Pawar’s case was an ethics issue within a hospital/student code, which usually starts with suspension/inquiry before termination. Different institutions, different rules, different timelines.

But a real policy question arises despite all these arguments about logic, do institutions apply consistent standards for speech/conduct that affects workplace dignity, regardless of gender?

When consequences feel unequal, public trust drops. People stop asking “how do we make rules fair?” and start asking “whose team is winning?”. That kills the coalition needed to reform 3 things at once:

- 1) faster due process for false cases, 2) stronger protection for genuine DV victims, 3) clear institutional codes for speech/conduct across all professions.

8. Findings: Four Mechanisms of Social Hindrance

8.1 Mechanism 1: Polarization Over Policy: All cases collapse into “Team Men vs Team Women”. Consent becomes “are men trash?”. Ethics becomes “are women doctors unethical?”. Legal grievance becomes “are laws evil?”. Radical feminism’s structural method disappears. Coalition policies — gender-neutral POSH codes, shared parental leave, fast-track courts for both false cases, and genuine DV — become impossible in a war room.

8.2 Mechanism 2: Backlash & Trust Erosion: Consequences triggered the trust crisis. Himanshu’s reported job loss vs Subhash’s wife retaining job vs Pawar’s suspension made netizens ask: “Is the system on one side?” Public stops asking “how do we design fair rules?” and asks “whose team wins?”. Survey trends 2022-2026: Gen Z support for “gender equality” >70%, but trust in “feminist activism” drops when content feels hostile/unaccountable. Distrust hits real reforms before they are read.

8.3 Mechanism 3: Attention Theft: Algorithms reward outrage. NCW, police, media spent weeks on FIRs/summons for biryani/Pawar clips. Meanwhile NCRB 2023 workplace harassment pendency, NFHS-5 underreported DV, underfunded shelter homes got fractions of coverage. The mask absorbs oxygen needed for material change.

8.4 Mechanism 4: The Consequences Paradox / Perceived Double Standard: This is the academic core of the comparison netizens raised. Institutional logic: Jangra faced quick employment action because clip was framed as consent violation with PR risk for employer. Subhash’s wife faced criminal process with “innocent until proven guilty”, and labor law timelines. Pawar faced academic suspension per MCI/student

code inquiry procedures. Three institutions, three rules, three timelines. Discourse logic: Public saw 3 faces, 3 genders, 3 outcomes. Pseudo content framed it as “law biased toward feminism”. Reductionist misreads framed comparison itself as “false equivalence”. Both are masks. The crisp academic question is not “who lost job”. It is: Do we have clear, gender-neutral, transparent standards for speech/conduct across employment, criminal, academic institutions? Without them, every case becomes tribal fuel. With them, consequences are predictable, not partisan. The paradox is that the mask makes us debate “which gender got punished” instead of “are our rules fair and equally applied”.

9. Socio-Political Crisis: The Counterfeit Currency Model

Model: Feminist terms = currency. Real praxis = gold reserve. Pseudo content = counterfeit notes. Inflation: “Patriarchy”, “consent” appear 1000x/day, semantic value drops. Devaluation: NGOs spend time stating “we are not viral feminists”. Governance distortion: State reacts to viral clip, not dataset. Result: Legitimacy deficit. Real gender justice work operates where its vocabulary is distrusted. A tired public does not reform laws. It scrolls.

10. Policy Recommendations: Unmasking Through Institutional Standards

10.1 3-Point Content Standard for Public Discourse: Policy Ask: Names specific law, budget head, institution. “Amend POSH to include gig workers” vs “all men are trash”. Outcome Metric: Success measurable beyond likes. “Increase POSH audits by 20% in Gurugram in 12 months”. Accountability: Named individual/organization responsible for claim accuracy + follow-up. Media literacy curricula should teach this test from school level.

10.2 Legal & Institutional Reforms: POSH Act Expansion: Amend to cover audience interaction events, comedy venues, digital crowd-work. Mandate annual consent training for venue staff. Judicial Training on Misuse + Protection: National Judicial Academy modules distinguishing false cases from genuine DV without weakening Sec 498A. Data-driven guidelines, not viral-driven. Medical Ethics Curriculum Update: Mandatory MCI module on “Dignity of Body Donors” with case studies. Public mockery of donors = professional misconduct, gender-neutral.

11. Conclusion: From Costume to Cause: Feminism is not a trend or team. Historically it is slow, institutional work: drafting BNS clauses, auditing wages, training police, funding shelters, updating medical ethics curricula. Anything that creates enemies without building solutions is costume, not cause. The standard should be: Does this content have a policy ask, measurable outcome, and accountability? If not, it is masking. Naming the mask restores space for real currency — unglamorous work that makes laws fair, homes safer, and conversations honest.

Radical feminism and pseudo feminism are not the same. Radical feminism is structural theory + policy work. Pseudo feminism is branding + outrage. Both, when combined with reductionist misreads, produce polarization, backlash, and attention theft. The socio-political crisis is legitimacy erosion. Unmasking requires moving discourse from “team war” to “policy workshop”. Feminism’s future is not in louder posts, but in boring work: drafting clauses, auditing wages, training police, updating medical ethics syllabi.

The story of ₹370 biryani, cadaver jokes, and Atul Subhash’s note is not a story about feminism failing. It is a story about masking. Radical feminism is structural work. Pseudo feminism is branding. Reductionist misreads are identity war. Together they produce polarization, backlash, attention theft, and the consequences paradox.

This is not an attack on feminism. It’s a defense of it. Feminism built the POSH Act, the 498A law, the right to ask for childcare. Those were built by women and men sitting in rooms, reading drafts, fighting over commas. Boring work. The internet makes us think change happens in the comments. It doesn’t. Change

happens in committees. So the next time you scroll and feel that exhaustion — that “why is everything a fight?” feeling — pause. Ask the 3-second test. If there’s no policy ask, no metric, no accountability, scroll past. Save your energy for the rooms where commas get decided. Because the mask will always be louder. But the work is what lasts. And the work needs all of us. Men, women, students, bosses, police, parents. Not as teams. As a coalition. Unmask the content. The political task ahead is not to retreat from digital spaces, but to insist upon standards of discursive accountability within them. Feminism’s emancipatory potential resides not in the ubiquity of its slogans, but in the specificity of its institutional interventions. To reclaim feminism from the mask is to reorient discourse from performance to praxis, from virality to viability, from representation to redistribution. Only then can the lexicon of liberation recover its architectonic function. Reclaim the work. Or the next viral clip will not lead to reform. It will just lead to more noise.

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