



## Research Article

# Constructing Dependency: A Feminist Critique of Women's Symbolic Representation in Indian Welfare Policies

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**Abstract**

This paper critically examines the gendered character of the Indian welfare system by using Nancy Fraser's theory of recognition and redistribution, and Nivedita Menon's feminist critique of state paternalism. Fraser makes a differentiation between a masculine, individualized welfare sub-system rooted in paid employment and rights, and a feminized, needs-based welfare sub-system marked by dependency and stigma. Employing this framework, the paper investigates if Indian welfare programs targeting women and girl children position them as active, rights-bearing citizens or as dependent, passive recipients needing state protection and charity. By doing so, the study not only expands Fraser's critique to include the regions outside of Global North, but also places Indian welfare discourse within the larger feminist debates on state intervention. Furthermore, Nivedita Menon's feminist perspective reveals how gender is ideologically shaped and constructed via familial, moral, and legal norms, which are often institutionalized by the state. Menon does not deal with welfare directly, but her critical insights relating to the state's paternalistic conceptualization of gender offer a critical lens through which to examine how such policies reproduce normative femininity. Together, Fraser and Menon provide a dual lens to expose how both economic and symbolic dimensions of welfare policies often reinforce gendered dependency and conventional feminine identity, ultimately constraining women's agency within state constructs instead of wholly dismantling systemic inequalities.

**Keywords**

Nancy Fraser, Indian Welfare, Redistribution, Recognition, Nivedita Menon, Postcolonial Feminism.

## 1. Introduction

The interpretation of welfare as a concept varies across disciplines. From a social policy perspective, welfare refers to the public and subsidized services that ensure adequate access to resources, well-being of the citizens including happiness, protection against poverty through an assured minimum income, and, lastly, the capabilities of living a fulfilling life (Greve, 2008). Although definitions of welfare remain dynamic and contested, measures such as Gross National Product, public expenditure on welfare programs, levels of happiness, and poverty reduction are often used as its stable indicators. (Greve, 2008) The paper adopts the social policy understanding of welfare that is, state interventions for achieving the well-being of the people (Greve, 2008). Some popular welfare schemes by the Indian Government include Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY), AMRUT (Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation), Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana- National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), Startup India, National

Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), Integrated Child Development Services, and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) among many others ([India Brand Equity Foundation, 2025](#)).

Welfare programs have continued to remain sites of both social support and social control, particularly in relation to marginalized groups, which include women. Critical examination of welfare systems has been undertaken by several feminist thinkers for its tendency to perpetuate economic dependency and traditional gender roles. In pre-colonial India, social welfare was largely managed by the caste groups, extended family structures, and religious bodies. Organized welfare appeared only during British colonial rule, alongside growing urbanization and industrialization. Still, most welfare activities were carried out by voluntary social organizations working along communal lines, with services restricted to particular caste or religious groups. Other social measures were implemented by the British rule often reluctantly and upon insistence from reformers like Ram Mohan Roy, but their role in social welfare remained minor. However, in the industrial labor force, intervention was instigated by pressures from textile industries in England, philanthropists, and early trade union leaders. Following Independence, the refugee crisis created an urgent need for state action to provide food supplies and shelter. The adoption of the Constitution in 1950 marked a new phase of welfare. Article 38 of the Directive Principles of State Policy laid down that “the state shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life” ([Ministry of External Affairs, 2025](#)). Other constitutional provisions also mandated livelihood security, protection of children and youth, fair working conditions, and special provisions for marginalized groups, including Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes ([Sarmah, 2025](#)). In due course, a distinct phenomenon of competitive welfare politics emerged where political parties began competing through welfare promises ranging from subsidies, cash transfers, free healthcare, and educational support. Although critics characterized this practice as fiscally irresponsible populism (freebies or revdi culture) rather than sustainable welfare, such measures have actually improved conditions for many vulnerable groups and also initiated policy innovation, particularly benefiting constituencies previously neglected by the state ([Singh, 2025](#)).

By the late 20th century, women’s welfare found increasing visibility in policy agendas. Under the influence of expanding global feminist discourse, the National Commission for Women in India was established in 1992. The UN Decade for Women (1976–1985) with its conferences in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), and Nairobi (1985), brought the question of women to the forefront of global policy-making. ([UN Women, 2025](#)) Being a signatory to the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies, India was led to incorporate gender perspectives into its Five-Year Plans, diverting from purely protective measures to development-oriented strategies such as employment generation, skill training, and health benefits. The commitment to take affirmative action in favor of women to fight structural discrimination was further strengthened after India ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993 ([Press Information Bureau, 2021](#)). Around the 1970s, global feminists challenged the androcentric and paternalistic nature of welfare provision, arguing that the state assumed the position of a technocratic provider, treating beneficiaries as passive recipients of satisfaction rather than active subjects. However, these nuanced criticisms were misinterpreted during the 1990s when state-led capitalism transformed into neoliberalism, replacing the original public welfare provisions with market-oriented governance. In India, this resulted in the burgeoning of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and self-help groups (SHGs) that filled the vacuum left by the shrinking state role. Although these organizations provided immediate material relief, they depoliticized grassroots activism, aligned local agendas with the interests of the First World microcredit donors, and deflected the focus from macrostructural redistribution ([Fraser, 2009](#)). This conflation of feminist goals with market-friendly neoliberal policies that framed empowerment as entrepreneurship and individualized responsibility and aligned welfare with market logic drew criticism from several transnational feminists. The 1995 Beijing Platform which ushered gender to the mainstream and brought voices from the Global South, marked a further turning point in this direction ([Manorama et al., 2024](#)). In India, Beijing’s impact not only shaped numerous government initiatives like the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001), Domestic Violence Act (2005), and POSH Act (2013), but also inspired growing grassroots activism and the rise of SHGs ([Hussain, 2024](#)).

Nonetheless, an alternative viewpoint adds more nuance to this perspective. A few academics believe that liberalization in India actually boosted welfare interventions, in contrast to other Western neoliberal states that drastically withdrew welfare effort. Welfare policies became more beneficiary-focused and targeted rather than universal, with initiatives such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA), the National Rural Health Mission, and the Targeted Public Distribution System ([Singh, 2025](#)). As such, a narrow neoliberal lens of retrenchment does not adequately explain India’s welfare trajectory as it overlooks its hybrid formation where market reforms coexist with protected welfare provisions, albeit often through technocratic frameworks. Further, a study in Kerala revealed how welfare and development for women entailed their participation in panchayats as presidents. These women leaders often identified as “development agents” rather than as “politicians,” indicating that local governance was projected as an apolitical space of altruistic service, thereby legitimizing women’s participation through the figure of the self-sacrificing, apolitical nurturer of the patriarchal family, rather than as autonomous political actors ([Menon, 2009](#)). Under the guise

of empowerment, such an approach works to uphold essentialist gender roles. Gender equality was further integrated into Indian welfare policy frameworks by the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) and Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030), but often through a target-driven approach that prioritized achieving quantifiable benchmarks such as maternal mortality rates, sex ratios, and school enrollment over deeper structural transformation. This metric-based focus sometimes led to the announcement of schemes such as the creation of “cradle centers,” which sought to improve the sex ratio by allowing the abandonment of unwanted daughters instead of aborting them, reflecting the state’s preoccupation with reaching statistical targets rather than making substantive improvements in women’s lives (Menon, 2009).

With ongoing policy debates, the introduction of new empowerment and welfare initiatives, and evolving gender roles, it becomes increasingly urgent to study how the state invokes feminist and empowerment rhetoric while simultaneously reinforcing dependency, misrecognition, and gendered stereotypes. In this context, a Fraser–Menon lens becomes particularly relevant to reveal how welfare inadvertently sustains women’s continued dependency. Fraser bridges the economic and cultural dimensions of justice, while Menon grounds it in the particularities of postcolonial Indian realities, making this combination both relevant and uniquely suited to analyze Global South policies. Existing analyses of Indian welfare policies lack a feminist critique that integrates both redistribution and recognition. Fraser’s framework has had little application in India, while Menon’s critique destabilizes universalist categories but does not systematically theorize redistribution. The current paper addresses this gap by critically examining the gendered nature of select Indian welfare programs directed primarily at women, using Nancy Fraser’s theory of recognition and redistribution, and Nivedita Menon’s feminist insights. It investigates whether these welfare initiatives depict women as active, rights-bearing citizens or as passive and dependent recipients. It also examines how the state adopts a moral and familial approach in the way it approaches women’s welfare, and how such welfare programs sustain traditional gender roles. Through a thorough and critical analysis of welfare schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP), Sukanya Samridhi Yojana (SSY), and the Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS), the paper assesses whether these measures facilitate genuine empowerment for women or inadvertently reinforce patriarchal norms.

## 2. Literature Review

Livelihoods of many women directly and indirectly depend on social-welfare programs, as they form their principal subjects as clients, paid human service workers, and unpaid caregivers (Fraser, 1989). However, feminist scholars have long been interrogating the gendered nature of welfare systems. Nancy Fraser, an American political scientist, philosopher and feminist, exposes how programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children in the U.S. welfare system actually institutionalize the feminization of poverty by providing system-conforming benefits that uphold rather than dismantle the structural inequalities. Feminists, therefore, are neither capable of supporting nor opposing the social-welfare programs. Borrowing from Carol Brown, Fraser uses this expression to highlight the problem: “If to eliminate or to reduce welfare is to bolster ‘private patriarchy’, then simply to defend it is to consolidate ‘public patriarchy’” (Fraser, 1989). The negative connotations linked to welfare have been mostly influenced by fields outside of welfare itself. As welfare claimants are often falsely equated with addicts, this association allows the pathological framing of drug dependency to influence and contaminate how welfare dependency is perceived, thereby increasing the stigma linked to those who rely on state support as welfare beneficiaries, which is largely constituted by women. The psychological discourse has also feminized the notion of dependency by associating it with an inherent feminine trait (Fraser & Gordon, 1994).

Nancy Fraser’s analysis of welfare programs is mainly based on her differentiation between two welfare sub-systems. The first is a masculine, labor-based social insurance system that treats recipients as “right-bearing beneficiaries,” seen as receiving what they justly deserve, benefits earned through their participation in the workforce (Fraser, 1989). In contrast, the second is a feminized, needs-based model in which recipients are positioned as “beneficiaries of governmental largesse or clients of public charity,” often subjected to moral judgment, stigma, and surveillance, and sometimes even framed as “chiselers, deviants, and human failures” (Fraser, 1989). This dynamic adds an “insult of misrecognition to the already existing injury of deprivation” (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

Fraser’s broader framework of justice encompasses the dimensions of *recognition* and *redistribution* which address both cultural and economic dimensions of injustices simultaneously, without subordinating one to the other (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Central to her justice theory is the principle of *participatory parity*, according to which justice can only prevail when social arrangements enable all (adult) members of the society to engage with one another as equals. The principle of participatory parity addresses the problem of maldistribution by rejecting those economic arrangements that create dependence or inequality, and hinder one’s equal participation. Likewise, it tackles the problem of misrecognition

by demanding institutionalized frameworks of cultural value that affirm equal respect for all while rejecting those systems that systematically devalue certain groups or qualities associated with them, thereby denying them full partnership in social interaction (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

In the context of social welfare programs, extending economic assistance alone without addressing the cultural devaluation of roles for which economic reform is initiated can generate misrecognition dangers. For instance, public support for single mothers may be viewed as undeserved charity rather than as wage for socially necessary labour, due to deeply ingrained cultural devaluation of care work largely performed by women (Fraser, 1989). In this case, economic welfare reforms must therefore be joined by recognition struggles that seek to revalue caregiving and the feminine associations attached to it. Conversely, Fraser also warns that even recognition-based reforms can negatively affect redistribution. For example, campaigns to ban pornography and prostitution, aimed at elevating women's symbolic status, often harm the economic interests of sex workers, and no-fault divorce laws to bring gender equality may negatively impact the economic status of certain divorced women. In such cases, recognition attempts must be aligned with redistributive efforts to produce successful results. Thus, Fraser calls for integrated reforms, ones that do not separate recognition-based struggle from demands of material redistribution (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Through this analysis, Fraser shows how welfare programs for women often reinforce their economic and social dependency within capitalist societies, instead of dismantling the very structures that give rise to it.

Moving this critical perspective to the Indian context, Nivedita Menon's feminist perspectives further explain how the state tends to construct women within traditional and familial roles as wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, instead of as autonomous, rights-bearing citizens. This not only internalizes and reinforces patriarchal presumptions within policy structures, but also reifies normative femininity (Menon, 2012). Menon (2004) mentions how law inherently blocks open-endedness, and relies upon certainty and creation of uniform categories for its functioning. She then condemns the patriarchal rhetoric of "protecting" women which often actually serves as a mechanism of control and regulation, especially over women's bodies and sexual agency (Menon, 2024). In Menon (2009), she expresses how women often gain access to rights through the very language that define them as vulnerable and in need of protection, thus reproducing gendered dependency and limiting real empowerment. Even Mukhopadhyay (1998) observes that when women appeal to state or move to courts in order to escape the web of social relations that define them primarily as wives and seek recognition as citizens equal to their male counterparts, the legal apparatus not only ends up reaffirming their traditional gender identity and roles, but also rearticulates and legitimizes them in new ways. However, the problem faces a critical dilemma as while the feminists of the liberal strand advocate for women to be recognized as gender-neutral legal citizens, other strands within feminism oppose it on the grounds that the so-called neutral norm is essentially masculine in nature and as a result, would inevitably lead to further marginalization of women and render their unique experiences invisible (Menon, 2004). This paper brings Fraser and Menon together to provide a dual lens for critically analyzing existing government-backed Indian welfare schemes designed for women.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1. Nancy Fraser's Theory of Recognition and Redistribution

Fraser's theory of recognition and redistribution provides a bifocal lens to examine both economic and symbolic dimensions of justice. Justice demands fairness in both economic distribution and recognition of social identities. When redistribution and recognition are not integrated simultaneously in welfare structures, it may inadvertently uphold rather than challenge prevailing gender hierarchies. For the current paper, Fraser's framework allows for a critical interrogation of how redistributive welfare interventions unwittingly diminish women's symbolic status by often framing them as passive recipients of protection and charity, undermining women's agency as independent rights-bearing political subjects. Additionally, it also analyzes certain schemes that solely focus on women's symbolic injustice while keeping its structural economic cause intact. Such single-dimensioned affirmative action instead of transformative ones which fails to integrate both recognition and redistribution can result in welfare models that sustain rather than dismantle gendered dependency.

#### 3.2. Nivedita Menon's Feminist Critique, Identity Construction and State Paternalism

Menon's writings provide insights on how the Indian state, via familial, moral, and culturally charged narratives, constructs "woman." Menon does not directly analyze welfare systems, but her critique of state's paternalistic and regulatory approach equips one to investigate how state policies often frame women within roles such as daughters, mothers, and moral subjects who need protection. This same rationale is visible in legal codes, such as rape laws and personal laws



that extend special protections to women by presuming their vulnerability. Such welfare measures also reflect the heteronormative assumptions of the state, restricting access to welfare for only normative ideals.

## 4. Methodology

The paper employs a qualitative and interpretive research methodology to investigate how Indian welfare programs symbolically construct women's identities and roles applying Nancy Fraser's theory of recognition and redistribution, and Nivedita Menon's feminist critique. Critical discourse analysis is conducted to investigate how state policies and narratives generate gender-based hierarchies and reinforce traditional gender roles under the guise of empowerment and protection. The paper links symbolic discourse with institutional design, relating Indian welfare policies to the broader debates on gender, recognition, redistribution and state power in a neoliberal context. Primary sources include official policy documents, policy guidelines, press releases, and implementation frameworks of Indian welfare schemes aimed at women such as *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, *Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana*, *Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana* and *National Social Assistance Programme* to identify recurring linguistic patterns, moral framings, and normative assumptions about femininity, agency, and citizenship. Books and articles published by Nancy Fraser and Nivedita Menon, their interview reports and video lectures. Scholarly articles, papers, and feminist literature relating to welfare policies and gender justice.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1. Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY)

Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) was first implemented on 1st January 2017 and was later revised under *Mission Shakti* from 1st April 2022. It is a centrally sponsored scheme that offers financial assistance to pregnant and lactating mothers with the objective of enhancing maternal and child health, ensuring adequate nutrition, and partially compensating for their wage loss due to pregnancy, allowing their adequate rest during both the pre-natal and post-natal periods. PMMVY offers ₹5000 maternity benefit for the first child (in two installments), along with additional incentives under *Janani Suraksha Yojana* (JSY) to reach an average of ₹6000, and provides ₹6000 for the second child post-birth in one installment, *only if the second child is a girl*, in order to encourage positive social attitude towards the girl child. Socially and economically disadvantaged women, including those from marginalized groups, are its eligible beneficiaries. The scheme treats cases of miscarriage or stillbirth as fresh cases entitled for benefit in the case of any future pregnancy. It also allows access to such benefits without requiring the husband's Aadhaar ([Press Information Bureau, 2022](#)). Above 18 years and 7 months and less than 55 years at the time of birth is the eligibility age limit for the beneficiary under PMMVY. All pregnant women and lactating mothers in regular employment with the Central Government, State Government, Public Sector Undertaking, or those availing similar benefits under existing laws, shall not be eligible for benefits under PMMVY ([Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2025](#)).

The importance of the initiative lies in the fact that India accounts for 17% of all maternal deaths worldwide. The country's maternal mortality ratio is 97 per 100,000 live births, while the infant mortality rate is 28 per 1,000 live births. Nutritional deficiencies and lack of proper medical care during pregnancy and childbirth are among the primary causes for high maternal and infant mortality ([Times of India, 2016](#)). As per information in the PMMVY Portal, during the FY 2023-24, 5, 376, 728 beneficiaries were covered under PMMVY scheme ([Press Information Bureau, 2024](#)).

It cannot be denied that PMMVY provides indispensable financial help to pregnant and lactating mothers. However, a critical look reveals a case of symbolic misrecognition in the scheme. PMMVY provides a cash incentive only if the second child is a girl, framing gender equality not as an intrinsic right but as a rewarded behavior. In its attempts of reinforcing positive attitude towards the female child, it ends up treating the birth of a girl child as something that deserves monetary compensation and consequently, produces a problem of misrecognition. This aligns with Fraser's argument of a feminized model of dependency where recognition is conditional and instrumental rather than based on the affirmation of equal membership in society.

Additionally, utilizing Menon's approach, it can be seen that PMMVY frames women primarily through their maternal and familial roles, making biological reproduction the ground for state welfare support. This limits women's empowerment within socially accepted gender roles of mothers and caregivers, reducing them to their reproductive functions rather than recognizing them as autonomous individuals.

### 5.2. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)

The *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (BBBP) campaign was launched on 22 January 2015, by the central government to spread awareness amongst citizens against gender discrimination and address the issue of declining child sex ratio (CSR). Run jointly by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Ministry of Human Resource Development, the slogan *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* translates to "Protect the girl child, educate the girl child" in English. The primary objectives of BBBP are to improve the child sex ratio, encourage gender equality and women empowerment, prevent discriminative sex-selective elimination, safeguard the survival and well-being of the girl child, and promote her education and active participation in society (IBEF, 2025). Declining ratio of girl infants vis-à-vis the boys has become a widespread concern in several Indian states. Advances in technology now allow pregnant women and their families to determine the sex of a foetus during pregnancy, and this has led to an alarming increase in abortions of female foetuses during ultrasonic testing, due to discrimination against girl child for several reasons (Goodkind, 1999). Dowry system in India is one such cause, as the prospect of future financial burdens associated with providing heavy dowries for daughters during marriage often compels families to eliminate female foetuses (Ghansham, 2002). Smriti Irani, former Union Minister for Woman and Child Development, stated that National Council of Applied Economic Research's (NCAER) evaluation of Beti Bachao Beti Padhao initiative shows a positive behavioral change in society towards girls. The positive influence of BBBP is made evident in the national Sex Ratio at Birth which has improved to 930 in 2023-24 from 918 in 2014-15. An improvement in girls' enrollment in secondary education has also been seen, with the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for girls rising from 75.51% in 2014-15 to 78% in 2023-24. Better institutional deliveries ensuring safer childbirths for mothers and infants and reducing maternal and infant mortality rates have also been observed. Awareness campaigns like 'Selfie with Daughters' targeted at fathers with girl child and community-based initiatives such as 'Beti Janmotsav' for celebrating the birth of daughters have achieved nationwide popularity, along with skill development among young girls and women, to enhance women's economic empowerment (Press Information Bureau, 2025).

Such achievements of BBBP to empower girl children are undoubtedly praiseworthy and deserve commendation. But if one adopts a critical look into it through Fraser's framework of recognition and redistribution, it is revealed that the campaign is primarily concerned with the problem of symbolic recognition without efforts to bring structural socio-economic change, which Fraser often argues, can prove counterproductive. In the case of BBBP, initiatives like 'Beti Janmotsav,' 'Selfie with Daughter,' and tree-planting rituals at the birth of a girl child act as cultural compensations for deeply rooted social neglect. Although BBBP works to improve the status of the girl child, it does not question or challenge the underlying socio-economic factors that lead to preference of male child, female child elimination, and female disempowerment, such as inheritance laws, unequal access to resources, and economically-unproductive domestic and care labour largely performed by women.

Drawing from Nivedita Menon's feminist critique, it can be further argued that the girl child in BBBP is primarily portrayed and celebrated as a source of familial and national pride, rather than as an independent rights-bearing political citizen in her own right. The campaign itself is loaded with morally and emotionally driven narratives, placing empowerment within familial sphere and cultural sphere. This shifts the attention away from redistributive justice or public entitlements, and promotes a familial model of recognition where women and girls acquire value primarily for their roles within the family, and not as autonomous citizens entitled to equal rights.

### 5.3. Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana (SSY)

The Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana (SSY) is a government-backed small savings scheme to encourage parents to save up money for their daughters' education and marriage. It offers tax rebates and an attractive interest rate to incentivize saving. The tenure of the account maturity is 21 years from its opening or until the girl child gets married, whichever is earlier (ICICI Bank, 2025). Parent or a legal guardian can open the account for the girl child from the time of her birth till she attains 10 years of age. Only one account per child and a maximum of two accounts per parent can be created, with the exception of allowing for more accounts in case of twins or triplets. As of November 2024, over 4.1 crore Sukanya Samriddhi accounts had been created, which stands as a testament to its ambition and impact towards building an equitable and secure future for every girl child in India (Press Information Bureau, 2025).

However, despite being a highly positive initiative for girls' welfare, a critical feminist reading of Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana exposes the underlying traditional assumptions about the role and future of the girl child. In Fraser's view, dependency and subordination happen when certain groups are symbolically associated with identities and roles coded with dependency and powerlessness. SSY reproduces dependency and misrecognition for girls by associating girlhood with future marriageability and protection, as it considers saving money for the girl's marriage as one of its goals. This acts as a source of misrecognition for the girl child portraying her as a future financial burden requiring savings. Moreo-

ver, treating their financial needs as a private family burden, it moves the attention away from the broader political problem of systemic economic inequalities present in accessing education and employment. As such, SSY depicts how a redistributive intervention can perpetuate misrecognition and sustain a dependency model for women.

Menon's feminist critique of how well-meaning state initiatives may inadvertently support patriarchal expectations is also relevant in this context. SSY is based on heteronormative and patriarchal presuppositions. Its focus on saving money for the girl child's 'education and marriage' implies that these are the two acceptable and expected trajectories of a girl's future. Presuppositions of such kind limit the girl's identity to the domestic and reproductive roles, and fail to challenge the prevailing strict gender norms. Thus, the scheme institutionalizes gendered expectations through financial policy and reinforces the state's narrow construction of womanhood. It also promotes a conservative vision of family, where the father is expected to save for the daughter's dowry or marriage-related expenses.

#### 5.4. National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP)

The National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) was introduced by the central government on 15 August 1995 in order to provide a basic level of financial support to the destitute: the elderly, widows, persons with disabilities, and bereaved families and is a significant step towards the fulfillment of Article 41 of the Directive Principles of State Policy which prescribes the state to take several welfare measure within the limits of its economic capacity and development. NSAP includes the following sub-schemes:

- Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS)
- Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS)
- Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme (IGNDPS)
- National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS)
- Annapurna Scheme ([MyScheme, 2025](#)).

The program aims to build a society where everyone is free from unjust deprivation and want, and can lead a dignified life ([Department of Social Welfare, Nagaland, 2025](#)).

While the NSAP is presented as gender-neutral, the Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS) adds a distinct gendered layer to it. IGNWPS is offered to widows belonging to the Below Poverty Line Category who are 40 years or above of age. The pension amount is Rs. 300 per month, which is increased to Rs. 500 per month once the beneficiary attains 80 years of age ([Department of Social Welfare, Nagaland, 2025](#)). While the program provides the needful financial aid to the widows, Fraser's critique of two-tiered welfare systems consisting of a masculine, wage-based model and a feminized, dependency-based model, is quite relevant here. The widow pension scheme places women in the latter category, characterizing them as bereaved dependents and acknowledging their vulnerability only in the absence of male breadwinners. And instead of conferring these women with extensive economic entitlements for their unpaid domestic household and care work or unemployment compensation by the virtue of them being independent and deserving political citizens, it only intervenes for financial assistance on the occasion of the death of male head in the family, hence reinforcing gendered dependency. This demonstrates a needs-based rationality which offers a very minimum-required redistribution while keeping the gender hierarchies intact, and accepts women's continued dependency on male-centered family structures.

Drawing on Nivedita Menon's framework, the widow pension scheme constructs the woman as a passive subject, deserving aid only in the moralized condition of widowhood. Instead of recognizing female widows as autonomous political agents entitled to social security, the aid provided to them is based upon the widow's moral condition of loss, sacrifice and purity. Such an approach reflects a paternalistic logic, where state support is extended only under specific circumstances, which sustains traditional gender expectations and norms rather than subverting them. As such, it does not support women's broader empowerment and fails to challenge their subordination within familial and societal relations.

## 6. Recommendations

Welfare policies should be framed as entitlements and not as mere charity. Due recognition, in the welfare structures, should be accorded to care work, domestic work, and reproductive roles, and the essential contributions they make to the society. Pension should be extended to housewives and caregivers too, acknowledging their labor as economically valuable. There is also a need for increased gender sensitivity in bureaucratic training and in policy-making procedures, with a focus on intersectionality, gendered dependency, and dimensions of gender justice. Most crucial is the need for re-

evaluation and reformation in the way women are constructed and framed in policy language and campaigns. Phrases like 'save the girl child' or welfare 'for marriage' should undergo rethinking, or perhaps be avoided, where women's rights come in conditional terms and in ways which render them in dependent positions. In its place, narratives of women as independent, rights-bearing citizens should be encouraged. Lastly, the welfare policies should aim to narrow the gap between enhancing symbolic representation and improving economic conditions of women by designing welfare schemes in a way that is transformative, and not just affirmative. Economic assistance has to be combined with gender justice education, equity, and psychosocial care for holistic welfare and development of women.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper has critically examined how Indian welfare policies aimed at women and girls often reinforce, rather than resist, patriarchal and gendered assumptions through Nancy Fraser's theory of recognition and redistribution along with Nivedita Menon's feminist critique. Using Fraser's lens, the study reveals that although the aim of these policies is to attain women's welfare, it constructs women in ways that position them in dependent roles and reinforce their identities as passive beneficiaries rather than as active, rights-bearing citizens. Most of these welfare schemes cater to only and either of the recognition or redistribution dimension without sufficient effort for holistic structural transformation, thereby continuing women's dependency. Nivedita Menon's perspectives further expose the state's construction of 'woman' as a moral and familial subject embedded in the private domain of family and care and not as an independent political subject. Even the economic support provided to them is often mediated by cultural scripts of motherhood, widowhood, or girlhood, rather than universal entitlements or efforts for structural empowerment. It also reinforces the traditional gender roles by often defining women as mothers and caregivers in the welfare programs. Thus, while these welfare efforts are often well-intentioned, they fall short of a truly emancipatory politics. However, the critique does not intend to overlook the crucial part these policies have played in providing immediate financial support and survival security to women nor does it deny the necessity of these initiatives. Instead, it questions the symbolic and structural limitations embedded within these policies. Finally, for welfare to serve as a road to genuine empowerment, it must shift its approach from a needs-based, moralistic and paternalistic one to a rights-based approach that affirms women beneficiaries as independent political agents equally entitled to social and economic justice.

### 7.1. Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to feminist political theory by demonstrating how many Indian welfare schemes address either redistribution (through conditional material assistance) or recognition (by valorizing women as mothers, widows, or daughters) without integrating both for a holistic transformation. Fraser's framework shows how such a one-sided approach, in turn, works to reinforce women's continued dependency. Through Menon, the study further reveals the way in which the state constructs the identity of women as familial-moral subjects rather than as independent political agents, linking eligibility to roles rooted in care, reproduction, or widowhood. Such an approach not only recycles subordination, but also forecloses alternative subjectivities. The study thus illustrates how incomplete approaches to justice perpetuate gendered dependency instead of enabling genuine parity of participation.

### 7.2. Practical Implications

The study highlights the necessity for policymakers to move beyond paternalistic and needs-based welfare to universal, rights-based entitlements, such as universal child benefits provided directly to primary caregivers as a matter of right. Welfare must be decoupled from heteronormativity by giving due recognition to alternative identities such as single women, queer and trans people, and those falling outside traditional familial norms as legitimate recipients of entitlements. A more emancipatory framework would require designing policies with women rather than for them, while also investing in basic public goods such as health, education, childcare, safe transport, and decent work opportunities that create conditions for women to act as independent, rights-bearing citizens.

### 7.3. Limitations

The study focuses primarily on how the welfare programs symbolically construct women through policy texts, guidelines, and language, and does not assess the applied effectiveness of these schemes. Additionally, the study does not capture the differences in lived experiences of women across diverse lines of caste, class, and region. Although these limitations restrict the scope of analysis, they also highlight the necessary areas that call for a more in-depth empirical engagement.

### 7.4. Future Research



Future scholarship can look into how women themselves interpret, negotiate, or resist the dependency frames imposed by welfare programs by conducting ethnographic and participatory research with diverse groups (e.g., tribal women, trans women, single women). Comparative policy analysis across different countries and regions can be conducted to identify shared patterns of gendered dependency in welfare and to gather deeper insights toward a more emancipatory welfare system and genuine participatory parity.

## Declarations

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### Conflict of Interest

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