



# DURGA'S FEMINIST DICTIONARY

**for collective action towards a  
just and equitable world**



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# Introduction

## what's a feminist dictionary?

This feminist dictionary is a 40-word resource to understand the systems that shape the world we live in and experience, and also to grasp concepts and ways of thinking to challenge these systems that hurt us.

This dictionary is one way for us to reclaim language as a political tool for feminist thought, consciousness-raising, and reshaping how we understand the world we live in.

The way that this is structured is not in a traditional alphabetical order but instead in a manner where each concept should enable the understanding of the following one!

Of course there are a lot more concepts and ideas for one to explore, this is just a beginner's guide, definitely a work in progress!

Tip: Read this in the order it's presented for better understanding (or DON'T!)



# SYSTEMS, STRUCTURES & EXPERIENCES





# power

[pau·uh]

*noun.*

Power is the capacity to influence or control people, institutions, and narratives. Feminists understand power not only as domination but also as relational, circulating through social structures and interactions. Intersectional feminism examines how power operates differently across gender, race, class, sexuality, caste, and ability.



# gender

[jen-duh]

*noun.*

*A socially and culturally constructed* system of roles, behaviours, expressions, and identities associated with being a man, woman, non-binary. Gender differs from sex and varies across time and cultures. Remember, there's no one specific way of being a certain gender because it means different things for different cultures and deeply intersects with other social identities that one possesses e.g. race, gender, caste, class etc. This means gender is NOT binary. Some people identify with the gender assigned at birth (called cis-people) and some people do not identify with the gender assigned at birth (called trans, nonbinary etc)

Some examples of how people identify themselves - cis-woman, cis-man, trans-woman, trans-man, non-binary (nb), agender, gender fluid, trans masc nb, trans-fem nb, hijra and many more! Remember, how someone identifies themselves is their business and figuring out who identifies as what is none of our business, let people live, find joy and experience gender euphoria.



# sexuality

[sek·shoo·a·luh·tee]

*noun.*

A broad term encompassing sexual orientation, desires, behaviours, identity, and experiences. It includes how individuals understand and express their sexual feelings and who they are attracted to. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, demisexual, heterosexual are some ways of expressing sexuality.



# caste and casteism

[kaast] [kah-stiz-uhm]

*noun.*

Caste systems are a form of social and economic governance that is based on principles and customary rules. It involves the division of people into social groups (castes) where assignments of rights are fixed by birth, often includes an occupation and are hereditary. In simpler terms, caste is where society is divided up into different groups, with those who have more power at the top and those who have little or no power at the bottom. You inherit your caste and it cannot be changed. Even worse are those deemed so inferior as to be out of the system altogether – previously known as *outcasts* or *untouchables*.

In South Asia caste discrimination is traditionally rooted in the Hindu caste system. Supported by philosophical elements, the caste system constructs the moral, social and legal foundations of Hindu society. Dalits are 'outcastes' or people who fall outside the four-fold caste system consisting of the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Dalits are also referred to as Panchamas or people of the fifth order. However, caste systems and the ensuing caste discrimination have spread into Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and Sikh communities.

Adherence to the caste system is casteism. Casteism is a violent practice that causes harm. Whether you're practising untouchability, ascribing to "pure" diets, not making friends from marginalised castes, etc are also examples of casteism.



# racism

[ray·suh·zm]

*noun.*

Racism is a system of power that structures society to privilege some racial groups while oppressing others through laws, institutions, culture, and everyday practices. It operates both overtly through discrimination, violence, and exclusion—and covertly, through implicit bias, representation, and structural inequality. Intersectional feminism understands racism as intertwined with patriarchy, classism, casteism, and other hierarchies, shaping how different groups experience oppression. Rather than being just individual prejudice, racism is systemic and it organises access to resources, opportunities, and belonging, reinforcing who is seen as fully human, deserving, and “normal” within social, political, and economic orders.



# patriarchy

[pay·tree·aa·kee]

*noun.*

A social system in which men hold primary power and dominate in roles of leadership, moral authority, and control over property. Patriarchy reinforces gender inequality and often intersects with other forms of oppression. Patriarchy is not unilateral and is not experienced the same by everyone. Works differently in different contexts. For eg in India, we experience something called Brahmanical patriarchy - a term coined by feminist scholar Uma Chakravarti, Brahminical patriarchy refers to the *interlocking system of caste-based and gender-based oppression*. It describes how the control of sexuality and labour is central to maintaining caste purity and hierarchy. Keeping in mind Brahmanical patriarchy, some men and women because of caste power, hold more power. Depending on the context, how power is experienced and expressed due to Brahmanical patriarchy may shift.



# misogyny

[muh·so·juh·nee]

*noun.*

Misogyny is the hatred, fear, or devaluation of women+ and femininity, expressed through cultural norms, institutions, and individual behaviour. It enforces patriarchal power by punishing women+ who challenge gender roles and rewarding those who conform. Intersectionally, it manifests differently across race, class, caste, and sexuality.

# class

[klaas]

*noun.*

Karl Marx defined class by one's relationship to the means of production (their relations of production). A class-based society is one organised around the unequal ownership of property, wealth, and the means of production. In such a system, these economic factors determine how power and privilege are distributed. Those who control greater wealth and resources occupy higher social positions, while those lacking access to the means of production are placed lower in the social hierarchy. This structure implicitly divides people into distinct social strata, often described as social classes or castes.



# objectification & male gaze

[ob-jek-ti-fi-cay-shun] and [mayl gayz]

*noun.*

Objectification is the process of treating a person, usually a woman or marginalized body, as an object rather than a subject with agency and autonomy. It reduces individuals to their physical or sexual attributes. Feminist scholars highlight how this operates through media, labor, and everyday interactions to sustain gender hierarchies.

This objectification can happen through something called the male gaze. Coined by Laura Mulvey, the male gaze describes how visual culture positions women as objects of heterosexual male desire. It reflects broader patriarchal structures that frame women as passive and men as active viewers. Feminist critique expands this to other gazes shaped by race, class, and colonial power.



# heteronormativity

[het-uh-roh-nor-muh-tiv-uh-tee]

*noun. adjective.*

Heteronormativity is the assumption that heterosexuality is the default, normal, and superior mode of sexuality and that there are only two genders (male and female). It privileges cisgender, heterosexual relationships, treating them as natural or ideal. It marginalises queer, trans, non-binary, and same-sex identities and relationships.

Heteronormativity is embedded in institutions like law, education, media, caste, religion, and the family, often invisibly reinforcing gender roles and expectations.



# queerphobia

[kweer-FOH-bee-uh]

*noun.*

Queerphobia is the fear, hatred, or discrimination against queer identities and expressions that challenge heteronormativity. It manifests through violence, exclusion, and policies that police bodies, relationships, and identities. Queerphobia interacts with racism, casteism, and classism to shape distinct experiences of oppression.



# bullying

[bu·lee·uhng]

*verb.*

Repeated, intentional, and aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance, aimed at hurting, humiliating, or intimidating another person. It can be physical, verbal, social, or digital.



# sexual harasssment

[sek·shoo·uhl huh·ra·smuhnt]

*verb.*

Unwanted or unwelcome sexual behaviour—verbal, non-verbal, or physical—that violates a person's dignity, creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment, or exploits power imbalances. It includes actions such as catcalling, inappropriate touching, lewd comments, or coercive advances.



# gender-based violence

[jen-der-bayst vy-uh-luhns]

*verb.*

Gender-based violence refers to harm inflicted on individuals because of their gender or gender expression. It includes physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse and is rooted in unequal power relations. Intersectional feminism highlights how GBV is shaped by race, caste, class, sexuality, and disability.

# communalism

[ko·myuh·nuh·li·zm]

*noun.*

Communalism is an ideology and practice that divides society into separate, often antagonistic communities based on religion or ethnicity, and how this division exacerbates patriarchal power structures and gender inequality. Communalism prioritises religious or ethnic group interests over universal human rights. Communalism also can get violence. Example: Hijab row in Karnataka that intervened with the bodies and access to education for Muslim girls.



# capitalism

[ka·puh·tuh·li·zm]

*noun.*

Capitalism is an economic system where the means of production (like land, factories, tools, and resources) are privately owned, and goods and services are produced for profit in a competitive market. Individuals or corporations own assets and businesses i.e there's private property, people sell their labour to survive, while capitalists profit from this labor, market-driven economy i.e prices and production are largely determined by supply and demand and the main goal is to generate financial gain (profits). It often exploits labour, especially that of women, marginalised castes, indigenous people, and workers in the Global South. It depends on unpaid or underpaid care work (e.g., domestic labour, child-rearing), mostly done by women. It can intensify inequality by prioritising profit over people, and often intersects with patriarchy, casteism, racism, and colonialism.



# colonialism

[kuh·low·nee·uh·li·zm]

*noun.*

Colonialism is the practice of domination and control by one country over another territory, politically, economically, culturally, and often militarily. It involves settling, exploiting resources, and subjugating people, often justified through ideas of racial, cultural, or civilisational superiority. Colonisers take land and natural resources for their own gain. The colonised lose sovereignty (that is, control over their own land) and are ruled by foreign powers.

Indigenous (local) languages, religions, and knowledge systems are often suppressed or replaced. Local economies are restructured to serve the coloniser's interests (e.g., cash crops, forced labour). Military force, legal systems, and psychological tactics are used to maintain control.

Settler colonialism is a distinct type of colonialism that functions through the replacement of indigenous populations with an invasive settler society that, over time, develops a distinctive identity and sovereignty. Settler colonial states include Palestine, Canada, the United States, Australia, and South Africa.

Colonialism and capitalism go hand-in-hand.

# climate change

[KLye-muht chaynj]

*noun.*

Climate change refers to long-term shifts in global or regional climate patterns, primarily caused by human activities such as burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial production that increase greenhouse gas emissions. Beyond environmental impacts, intersectional and feminist perspectives emphasize that climate change is a social and political crisis that deepens existing inequalities. Marginalised communities, especially women, Indigenous peoples, and those in the Global South, bear disproportionate burdens despite contributing least to the crisis. Feminist approaches to climate change call for climate justice: addressing not only environmental degradation but also the structural injustices that shape vulnerability and resilience.



# mental health

[men·tuhl helth]

*noun.*

Mental health refers to a person's emotional, psychological, and social well-being, shaping how they think, feel, and act. Mental health is not only an individual concern but also a political and structural issue shaped by gender, race, class, caste, sexuality, and systemic oppression. Social inequalities, violence, and marginalization can profoundly affect mental well-being, while dominant models of mental health often ignore these contexts. Feminist approaches emphasise collective healing, community care, and challenging stigmas, advocating for mental health justice that recognizes lived experiences and the right to accessible, inclusive, and culturally sensitive care.



# structural inequality

[struk-chuh-ruhl in-ee-kwol-uh-tee]

*noun.*

Structural inequality is the systemic and embedded bias in social institutions (gender, sexuality, caste, religion, class, ability, etc) that disadvantages certain groups of people while benefiting others. This occurs through unequal relationships in areas like roles, rights, and opportunities, which are perpetuated by established practices, laws, and policies, leading to disparities in access to education, healthcare, employment, and other resources.



# marginalisation

[mar-ji-nuh-ly-zey-shun]

*noun.*

Marginalisation is the process by which individuals or groups are pushed to the edges of society, denied access to resources, rights, and recognition. It operates through intersecting systems like patriarchy, racism, casteism, and capitalism, producing social exclusion and inequality.



# privilege

[pri·vuh·luhj]

*noun.*

Privilege refers to unearned advantages and access afforded to individuals based on social identities such as gender, race, class, or sexuality. Intersectional feminism highlights that privilege is relational—existing only in contrast to systemic disadvantage—and that individuals can simultaneously experience privilege and oppression.

# POSSIBILITIES & ACTION





# equality

[uh·kwo·luh·tee]

*noun.*

The state of being equal, especially in status, rights, or opportunities.



# equity

[eh·kwuh·tee]

*noun.*

Fairness in access to opportunities and resources, recognizing that different individuals may need different supports to achieve equal outcomes. Equity involves addressing systemic barriers and historic disadvantages based on religion, caste, class, sexuality and disability.



# agency

[ay·juhn·see]

*verb.*

Agency refers to the ability to act, make choices, and effect change within constraining social structures. Feminist and postcolonial theorists challenge Western notions of individual autonomy, emphasizing how women and marginalized people exercise agency in contextually specific, often subtle or resistant, ways.



# consent

[kuhn·sent]

*noun.*

The *informed, voluntary, and mutual agreement* between participants to engage in specific actions, especially (but not limited to) in sexual or intimate contexts. Consent must be freely given, reversible, enthusiastic, specific, and informed.



# solidarity

[so·luh·da·ruh·tee]

*verb.*

Active support and unity with others especially marginalised or oppressed groups based on shared goals or mutual recognition of injustice. It goes beyond empathy to include action and accountability. Solidarity building is integral for systemic change against injustice.

# queer

[kweeuh]

*noun. verb.*

An umbrella term used by individuals who reject normative categories of gender and sexuality. It can mean not heterosexual, not cisgender, or both. It is also used politically to challenge heteronormativity and binary thinking. Queer is a way of being, it's political and is a way of resisting normative/restrictive ways of being. This would also mean resisting caste and communalism that persist in India.



# accountability

[uh·kown·tuh·bi·luh·tee]

*verb.*

A feminist definition of accountability involves taking responsibility for one's actions and the harm they cause, being critically aware of one's power and privilege, and actively working to make amends and change harmful behaviors and systems. It is a proactive practice that centres the needs and perspectives of those harmed, rather than focusing on intentions, and is a collective, context-dependent process rooted in care, connection, and transforming power dynamics.



# intersectionality

[in-ter-sek-shun-AL-uh-tee]

*noun. intersectional - verb*

The term intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black feminist legal scholar, to address the inadequacies of the U.S. legal system in supporting women of colour. Crenshaw observed that when women of colour sought justice, their experiences were often categorized either as racial discrimination or as gender discrimination—but not both. This fragmented approach effectively re-marginalized them, leaving their intersecting experiences of oppression unrecognized and unprotected by the law.

Since its introduction, intersectionality has become a key analytical framework for understanding how multiple forms of identity and oppression overlap. It highlights how individuals who are marginalised in more than one way experience these dimensions simultaneously, rather than as separate or isolated forms of discrimination.



# transnational

[tranz·na·shuh·nuhl]

*noun. adjective.*

This refers to processes or activities that extend beyond national borders. In feminist and activist contexts, the term underscores how global power relations, colonial histories, and neoliberal economic systems shape struggles for gender justice in varied regional contexts. Adopting a transnational perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of globally interconnected social, economic, and political phenomena.



# positionality

[puh-zish-uh-NAL-uh-tee]

*noun.*

Positionality refers to how one's social and political identity—such as gender, race, class, caste, sexuality, and ability—shapes their perspective, access to power, and experience of the world. Recognising positionality allows feminist scholarship to acknowledge partial, situated knowledge rather than claiming universal objectivity.



# justice

[juh·stuhs]

*noun.*

The pursuit and realisation of fairness, equity, and accountability in society. Justice goes beyond legal remedies to address structural inequalities, restore dignity, and ensure that individuals and communities can thrive.



# resistance

[ruh·zist·uhns]

*verb.*

Resistance refers to acts, overt or subtle, that challenge and subvert systems of domination. Feminist and intersectional perspectives view resistance not only as protest but also as everyday practices of survival, creativity, and solidarity that destabilise power from within oppressive contexts.



# movement-building

[mu:v.mənt-bil.duhng]

*noun.*

political organising for a more just and equal world.



# abolition

[a·buh·li·shn]

*verb.*

Abolition, in feminist and social justice contexts, refers to the movement to dismantle oppressive systems, such as prisons, policing, borders, and carceral institutions that sustain racial, gendered, casteist and economic violence. Rooted in Black feminist thought and activism, abolition is not merely about tearing down institutions but about building life-affirming alternatives grounded in care, accountability, and community. It envisions collective liberation through transformative justice, mutual aid, and the redistribution of power and resources. Abolition feminism, in particular, connects the struggle against carceral systems with the fight against patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism, emphasising healing and solidarity over punishment.



# collective care

[kuh-LEK-tiv kair]

*verb.*

Collective care is the practice of communities coming together to sustain one another's wellbeing, safety, and survival, especially in the face of systemic oppression and neglect. Rooted in feminist, queer, and activist traditions, it challenges the individualist and patriarchal systems by centring interdependence, reciprocity, and solidarity. Collective care extends beyond self-care. It recognises that care is political and that liberation requires shared responsibility for each other's emotional, physical, and social needs. It is both a strategy of resistance and a vision for building more just, compassionate, and sustainable communities.



# queer joy

[KWEER JOI]

*verb.*

Queer joy is the celebration of queer existence, love, creativity, and community in defiance of systems that marginalize queer and trans lives. It is both an act of resistance and a form of healing, affirming the beauty, pleasure, and resilience found in living authentically. From a queer-feminist perspective, queer joy disrupts narratives that center queer pain or tragedy, instead foregrounding desire, connection, and collective liberation. It thrives in chosen families, art, activism, and everyday moments of affirmation, reminding us that joy itself is political and a radical assertion of life, love, and possibility beyond heteronormative and oppressive boundaries.



# feminism

[feh·muh·ni·zm]

*noun. verb.*

Feminism is a social, political, and intellectual movement that seeks to dismantle all systems that are organised hegemonically through gender, caste, class, sexuality, religion, the state, etc. and to build conditions that are just for everyone. Feminism is not one-size-fits-all. It exists in many forms, shaped by context and identity.

It's important to understand feminism as a movement, a way of being and doing (politically) that challenges, heteronormativity, coloniality, caste, the nation-state, borders, prison and military systems, climate change and any other structure that oppresses people and communities. Fighting for gender justice is not separate from challenging all of the above systems.

# queer-feminist futurity

[/kwɪər/fem.I.nɪs/fyoo-TYOOR-uh-tee]

*noun. verb.*

Queer-feminist futurity imagines futures beyond heteronormative, patriarchal, casteist, racist, colonial and capitalist structures. It envisions worlds built on care, fluidity, and collective liberation rather than hierarchy and exclusion. Drawing from queer and feminist theory, it reclaims imagination as a radical political practice for justice and transformation.



# way forward

**Knowledge is power.  
Let's dismantle these harmful systems together  
and create a just world!**

**Remember, none of us are free  
until all of us are free.**

