

Margins to Movements: Protest, Women's Involvement and Grassroots Transformation

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Received: April 24th, 2026 / **Accepted:** June 11th, 2026 / **Published:** 10th July, 2026
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Abstract

This article examines the multifaceted nature of protest, the role of agency, women's participation, and their subsequent impact on social transformation. Human civilization has been marked by countless protests and movements, some of which have led to positive societal changes. The dynamics of protest evolve in response to changes in time, context, awareness, and environmental factors. The focus of this article is on the conceptualization of protest, tracing its historical roots to contemporary manifestations, women's involvement, and grassroots transformation. It examines the various forms of protest, the shifting nature of these forms, and women's engagement, use of digital technologies, and social transformation in the modern world. The article aims to uncover the hidden aspects of protest and its potential benefits for both individuals and society. Employing a qualitative research methodology, this study utilizes both primary and secondary data sources for analysis, interpretation, and discussion. Primary data were collected through case studies, while secondary data were derived from textual reviews. The article argues that protest, in various forms and evolving nature, is a critical tool for social change. It highlights key processes such as aggression, tension, reflection, action, and management within protest movements. Ultimately, the article underscores the significance of protest as a guiding force for societal transformation, shaping both individual lives within broader social, institutional and structural boundaries.

Keywords: Activism, demonstration, grassroots transformation, protest, mobilization, Resistance.

Conceptualization

Protest refers to a public demonstration or expression of objection or disapproval and expression of strong dislike, either through action or statement (Oxford Learner Dictionary). It is a way of navigating the interferences of gender and class by challenging existing social structures and

shaping social and political reform with the connection between local with broader national and international networks (Hewitt, 2001). It is a symbolic force for society and for an individual to come into a comfortable settlement. It is a powerful tool and technique to express dissatisfaction to get the required result by drawing the attention of the public and the

targeted ones. It is a public act of objection, disagreement, and dissent of people towards policy, action, and situations that indicate society's perceptions, cultural norms, political environment, and media exposures in shaping public opinion and activities (Turner, 1969). Similarly, Cohen et al. (2018) foster protest as the intersection of feminist activism, resistance, and social justice, mostly led by women and marginalized groups, challenging power dimensions and social transformation. Hence, women's involvement in protest indicates the pattern of awareness and education, and it demands challenging the traditional power structure and changing stereotypes of ideologies that dominate society.

Protest serves as a form of resistance against exploitation, deficiency, and the denial of resources and opportunities, showing a deep connection to human civilization. Global developments have increasingly raised public awareness of various issues, often presenting alternative visions of development through protest movements that arise from collective preparedness and action (Sharma, 2001). Similarly, Gould (2010) explores the role of emotions in protest, emphasizing mobilized individuals within movements. He highlights how emotions drive solidarity, foster motivation, and the success of collective action within protest groups.

Research Questions

What is protest, and what are its forms?

Why are women involved in the protest?

How did Protests lead to social transformation?

Objectives and Methodology

The objective of this study is to view, review, and analyze protests and changing natures and forms

of protest, and their significance to social transformation. This article employs qualitative methods and accommodates descriptive and exploratory designs to analyze and interpret data and conclusions. It has used case studies as the primary sources and literature review as the secondary sources of data. Relevant works of literature are consulted for conceptual and empirical purposes. It reflects the introduction of protest, types, and significance, and their knowledge contribution to the outside world. When the researcher listened to the discussion of sociologists regarding a unique form of protest, drew attention to it, and went to flashback for recalling many social issues and protests, women's involvement, and targeting of individual, household, and community spheres. Many scholars Cohen et al. (2018), Gould (2010), Sharma (2001), Hewitt (2001), and Turner (1969), have portrayed protest and its types, women's involvement, and its contribution to social transformation. Researchers collected case studies with accidental random sampling methods. This research will be a milestone for those knowledge seekers who are interested in the related field.

Theoretical Framework

Diverse natures of theories, such as deprivation theory (Stouffer, 1940), resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1970), and framing theory (Goffman, 1974) are the theoretical foundation of the article. Relative deprivation theory suggests that individuals feel that they are deprived of rights, chances, choices, and opportunities as compared to others, then such frustration creates protest. Resource mobilization theory insists that social movements are not spontaneous reactions to grievances but strategic and integrated efforts in mobilizing resources. It

arose due to limited resources and targets for effective mobilization and distribution of resources with long-term success. Goffman's framing theory insists on the mental structures of individuals based on interpretations and narratives regarding the understanding and the way of making sense of social issues and partiality, which initiates protest and sometimes moves into movements.

Conceptual Framework

This article attempts to explore conceptual clarity regarding diverse natures of protest by introducing concepts, multiple natures of protest with their changing forms, and enabling individuals to change themselves and society through social transformation. It contributes to the knowledge production that it plays an integral role in social transformation and a turning points for the growth and prosperity of society and the world.

Historical Development of Protest

Democratic societies welcome protest as a legitimate way of communication and interaction. It is successful in establishing social authorizations and recognition for carrying out operations in multiple ways (Hanna et al., 2016). Similarly, Fisher (2012) examines protest as an essential entity of civic engagement and political accountability as a means and mechanism of serving, challenging, and strengthening democratic practices of government. Lindell (2015) claimed that protests are numerous, mostly affect political elites, and showed responses from political representatives to their settlement. Proper acceptance of protest guides the creativity and strength of the targeted authority or organization, reflecting positive results. Martin et al. (2007) claim that the protest is a disagreement and a way of individual/women's contribution to

social change. There are large-scale protests and movements where grassroots women's contribution is underscored for challenging societal norms and ensuring equality.

The outcome of a protest is shaped by its articulation, recognized as the voice of people, vague and symbolic, and attempts are made to legitimize it in the name of the people (Steyerl, 2002). Likewise, as the democratic norms, civic cultures, and society's belief system, protest is carried out by an individual demanding basic human rights such as freedom, autonomy, equality, and cultural rights relating to emancipation principles (Welzel & Deutsch, 2012).

The way of perception of protest by the people determines the types of protest. It is also shaped by the history and social class of the related society, with a general gap indicating the challenges of intensity in freedom for ensuring social solidarity (Bohler-Muller et al., 2017). Similarly, Koopmans (2004) offers a detailed framework for understanding the dimensions of protest, indicating social, historical, and political factors, and insists on local and global attention.

The evolution of protest reflects political transformations, transitioning from physical demonstrations and dissent to digital activism and network-based movements for greater impact (Ganesh & Stohl, 2013). Historically, protests have taken various forms, beginning with peasant revolts and labor strikes, which were often spontaneous, violent, and rebellious, as seen in the French Revolution (1789). In the pre-20th century, public demonstrations and marches became common expressions of resistance.

In the 20th century, protest methods evolved into civil disobedience and nonviolent movements, exemplified by Gandhi's independence

movement (Zachariah, 2011) and Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership in the Civil Rights Movement. Forms of protest like sit-ins (Schmidt, 2015), boycotts, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–1956) (Thornton, 2014), and labor rights movements (Kolben, 2009) became widespread. Many of these protests grew into mass movements, shaping significant political and social reforms. In the late 20th century, protests became increasingly driven by media coverage, amplifying movements such as the anti-Vietnam War protests, the Apartheid resistance (Hodgkinson et al., 2022), and the Berlin Wall protests.

In the 21st century, digital technologies have transformed protest dynamics, enhancing mobilization, coordination, and government response (Little, 2016). Social media activism, including viral campaigns and hashtag movements like BlackLivesMatter and MeToo, has demonstrated the power of digital platforms in leading social change (Goswami, 2018). These tools allow activists to bypass traditional media, share real-time updates, and provide critical analysis. Recent protests have evolved further, incorporating flash mobs, creative activism, silent demonstrations, and artistic performances. The diverse use of digital tools has enabled global solidarity, facilitated worldwide activism, and expanded the reach of protest movements beyond geographical boundaries.

Protest and Women

There are innumerable pathways to guide individuals in activism, which is actively rooted in personal inspirations, socio-cultural scenarios, and experiences. Protests are powered by multiple natures of political ideology and clashes (Savas & Slewart, 2019). Similarly, Zlobina & Gonzalez (2018) claim that protest is a collective action and

the inclusion of the notion of legitimacy varies mainly between normative, non-normative, peaceful, and violent actions. Quaranta & Quaranta (2015) highlight diverse natures of protests, such as demonstrations to civil disobedience, insisting on political opportunities, mobilization, and people's motivations are integral in shaping protest actions.

Makarenko & Pankratova (2021) scrutinize women's protest participation, a key to states' diverse natures of deprivation, such as economic, social, political, and household activism that influence women to participate in protest and reflect broader socio-political impacts. Likewise, different types and subtypes of protests reflect diverse responses and sometimes suffer from stereotypes of provocation to weaken the protest. Nutsukpo (2020) claims female protests are a significant way of ensuring solidarity, resilience, and power for women's empowerment and pave the way for resisting harmful traditional practices, fostering awareness, and advocating for women's rights for their emancipation and social transformation. Dobash & Dobash (2003) highlight women's protest as a means of contributing to broader social changes at the institutional, cultural, legal, and policy levels.

Protest can be categorized into different segments on diverse bases. Mainly, it is divided into public and private (household-level) protests. Traditional forms of protest in public and private sectors mainly include marches and demonstrations, lobbying and petitioning, occupying to disturb effective functioning, boycotts, strikes, blockage, disturbing the system, and drawing attention to the public.

Similarly, contemporary forms of protest have emerged as influential mechanisms for drawing the attention of key stakeholders and effecting

change in policy, social institutions, and structural dynamics. These include digital and social media activism, online advocacy, digital art performances, content creation, documentary filmmaking, web series, blogging, street theatre (*natak*), organized boycotts, and civil disobedience. It is displayed in conventional forms such as pursuing formal education, preparing for employment, and engaging in practices of body shaping and self-representation. These modes of protest expand the boundaries of activism beyond traditional demonstrations, utilizing creative and everyday practices to challenge dominant social systems. Mostly, they provoke broader social reflection and transformation by disrupting narratives and raising questions about established power structures.

Protest, Women and Social Transformation

History shows that women's participation in diverse forms of protest, such as labor movements, right-to-vote campaigns, and equality struggles have influenced gender roles and supported in shaping historical and political scenarios (Hannam, 1997). Mikula (2005) examines the significant roles of women in resisting oppression and social and political change. They protest for social transformation, targeting justice and equality. Likewise, Taft (2011) insists on the important roles of women's protests in shaping social reform by crossing social, cultural, and political barriers and advocating transformation. Gittell et al. (2000) examine the role of women's networks, resources, and relationship integration as a means of social capital that results in social transformation through protest. Thomis & Grimmett (2020) said that women engaged in protest during the 19th century; they actively

participated in a protest for their voices and social, economic, and political reform within the rigid social restrictions.

Women's protests have been exemplified as powerful tools to challenge the oppressive regime, injustice, and inequality, and support in shaping social renovation and democratic practices (Baldez, 2002). Similarly, Dickinson & Schaeffer (2001) underscore the significance of women's protests in shifting economic, social, and broader structures and advocate for justice and impartiality. Ferree & Ewig (2013) have signified the role of digital technologies in initiating women's protests in different political and cultural contexts, reflecting rapid changes in individuals, groups, and the global context. Women's protest is often impacted by traditional social institutions and structures and reflected in their everyday social practices, not in a direct manner but in a hidden or informal manner, channeling female innovation and resistance, which is rarely recognized in the mainstream political discourses (Cloward & Piven, 1979).

Banaszak & Weldon (2011) examined the role of informal power dynamics in shaping protest that is influenced by cultural norms, social networks, everyday practices, and the situation of existing power structures. Likewise, Jakobsen & Listhaug (2014) claim the distinct features of modern protest, which are not only based on political grievances but also a reflection on broader social structures, such as a shift in identity and role in a landscape. Kocyba (2025) highlights the changing patterns of protest, factors motivating protest, and the significant role of citizens in changing authorities. It is a process of social transformation that is followed by step-by-step activities starting from aggression, tension, reflection, and management. Most of the protest

follows the process, but sometimes they are started by reflection of aggression, ultimately demands change.

Factors Influencing Protest

Technological advancements have significantly transformed the nature of protest movements, influencing how individuals and groups organize, mobilize, and disseminate information. These developments have reshaped both the structure and dynamics of contemporary protests (Rebrina et al., 2020). Digital platforms and smart technologies facilitate real-time communication, decentralized coordination, and strategic message amplification. Similarly, Bennett and Segerberg (2011) emphasize that emerging technologies support a networked, fluid, and large-scale form of protest characterized by personalized participation, thereby challenging traditional models of collective action and hierarchical organization. Protests, driven by such technological and communicative transformations, have the potential to influence governmental policies, alter public opinion, and generate social and political change. These movements are further shaped by media representation, social networking, collective identity, and broader international contexts.

Impact on society

Female-led protests are powerful drivers of social progress, influencing policy change, democratic practices, economic opportunities, cultural norms, and human rights. They shape public discourse and contribute to sustainable empowerment and development. Protest arises from disagreement and failing to meet expectations. Mostly, it is disruptive in nature, but when it is managed, it becomes a mechanism for social transformation. Women's involvement in protest is often marginalized. If it is managed constructively, it

leads to meaningful growth, development, and social transformation. It has deep connection between protest, gender, and social change.

Case Study

Case A

A young girl-27 yrs. joined a master's degree program to avoid the family pressure of marriage. She expressed her experiences with a mild smile of victory (Field Study, 2025). After joining a master's degree, she got the opportunity to join diverse types of activities such as activism, public protests, and demonstrations. It was targeted to raise awareness among the public. Her nurturing process was from a traditional family where there were bundles of restrictions to female gender. She said that I grew up within the countless guidelines and restrictions, not only for dress up but also for everyday practices. She further added that initially, I obeyed every instruction and direction of her family, but gradually, I started listening to friends and relatives and started sharing issues. This situation became an opportunity for me to strengthen the bonding of relationships and negotiation skills. It is energized to gain the strength and supported in reflecting disobedience to stereotypes of social norms, values, traditions, and practices. She started by sharing problems on social media. It supported her to share ideas among public, relieving her from silent verbal protest and strengthening her confidence.

Case B

A girl, -25 years, while her family was pressuring her to marry, she cut her long hair to donate to cancer survivors. She was doing this not only to support cancer survivors but also to avoid the family pressure of marriage and shifting of pressure. During her tenure, she started different

types of activities such as preparation for overseas study, the Public Service Commission exam, and alternative community service practices. Meanwhile, she adopted digital social media as her work promotion as well as a means of protest. This became a very excellent way of expressing antagonism or misunderstanding.

Case C

A female of 53 years expressed her life history with a mixed mood, sometimes with smiles and sometimes with sadness in social media. In her earlier times, she was obeying every issue of family, father, mother, and husband. While she joined self-help groups, she became aware of herself, her community, and the world. It encouraged her to take the initiative in household activities in an argumentative way, about what is right and wrong. She was habitual in using digital technologies such as Facebook, Google Search, TikTok, and many more sources of information that energize her intuition in many subjects. She started to compare herself with other women in her society and world. She said that now I'm living my life, and my habits of studying my life are making my disobedience practices stronger and more familiar to my husband, family, and community people. They could not easily impose any work or abuse on me. At once, they think, revise, and only talk to me; if I'm not satisfied, I can express my anger in front of them. She joined many other social welfare activities that enabled her to gain the power of self-reliance and autonomy. Now, she changed herself and her family members too, and she can discuss and decide her children's education and health issues with family members strongly.

Case D

Sita (changed name) adopted a storytelling style in TikTok with multiple series of her violence to

gain empathy, sympathy, and strengthen the network, and escape from domestic violence. Her storytelling style was very impressive and attractive, which concentrated on the concerns of a specific age group. To relieve the tensions and gain strong bargaining power, she adopted a social media platform as a protest forum. It has supported her to accumulate energy of expression and a social platform to fight against stereotypes of social norms and values. She was intended to bounce back from the patriarchal social boundaries and pressures.

Discussions

Many scholars, such as Banaszak et al. (2023), Makarenko & Pankeatova (2021), Nutsukpo (2020), Savas & Stewart (2019), and Dobash & Dobash (2003) have emphasized the pivotal role of women's protests in driving social transformation and fostering more equitable social structures. Women's resistance challenges entrenched gender stereotypes and contributes to the construction of more impartial societal norms. Forms of protest vary by multiple factors representing society and its dominating values. Some women adopt verbal resistance to contest family decisions through open disagreement and debate, while others engage in silent protest by withdrawing communication or subtly disobeying imposed norms. Additionally, many women are asserting their autonomy through entrepreneurship, job creation, awareness campaigns, and the adoption of new cultural practices, using these as symbolic acts of protest that reinforce financial independence and social change.

Behavioral protest involves actions that deviate from traditional gender expectations, including choices in dress, posture, lifestyle, and practices, as well as rejecting family suggestions and

societal stereotypes. In parallel, digital activism has emerged as a powerful tool for expressing dissent, sharing personal experiences, promoting feminist movements, and advocating for rights-based issues. Women increasingly utilize digital platforms to voice concerns, seek solidarity, and challenge oppressive norms, using online spaces as both a refuge and a site of resistance.

Mentioned cases exemplified street demonstrations, public activism, and collective resistance up to digital platforms for impactful dissent. Using personal narratives, attempts were made to legitimize cases of impactful dissent and a mechanism of empowerment. Cases are the representatives of the traditional way, up to the optimum use of digital platforms as modern techniques of protest. It has reflected gradual obedience to public dissent (case A), likewise, a challenge to patriarchy through argumentation (Case C) as an example of everyday resistance. A and B represent the younger women's efforts to bypass patriarchal guidelines. C and D reflected tactics of resistance, indicating age and life stages. D indicates grassroots activism to escape from violence. Case A and C represent traditional families, and C represents economic dependence, and D reflects digital misuse or harassment. All cases indicate diverse natures of protest, ranging from traditional to modern and new techniques of resistance with generational hierarchies.

These cases highlight a spectrum of resistance strategies shaped by age, class, and cultural context, ranging from street protests to digital activism. While digital media enhances visibility, its impact is magnified when coupled with collective action and institutional reform. Sustainable transformation requires linking individual empowerment to structural change, with outcomes shaped by cultural backlash,

systemic barriers, education, technology, and civic engagement.

Women engage in diverse forms of household-level protest that resist and challenge inequality, oppression, exploitation, and power dynamics, while asserting autonomy, rights, and dignity. These often-invisible acts include rejecting traditional gender roles, resisting financial dependence, opposing male authority, boycotting gendered labor expectations, and challenging reproductive control and family norms. Such protests involve non-cooperation, reduced participation in domestic responsibilities, and expressions of solidarity across generations and among female peers. Despite their transformative potential, household-level protests are frequently overlooked in mainstream activism and often suppressed or dismissed. Increasingly, women are drawing support from mentors, peers, and activist networks to strengthen their resistance and collectively confront restrictive familial structures.

Conclusions

Women's protests have a significant and far-reaching impact on shaping the worldviews of younger generations and catalyze economic, social, and political transformation. By confronting entrenched gender norms and advocating for gender equality, such protests contribute meaningfully to academic discourse and the evolving landscape of societal gender ideologies (Banaszak et al., 2023). It is a powerful form of public expression and functions directly or symbolically to highlight systemic injustices and demand to address. This article is based on deprivation theory, resource mobilization theory, and framing theory. The mentioned cases illustrate how deprivation, resource mobilization strategies, and narrative

framing converge to catalyze social transformation. By embedding individual acts of resistance within broader theoretical contexts, the analysis highlights the critical interplay and ideological shifts.

Future research delves into multiple dimensions of protests and different queries regarding how protest complicates and shape transformative processes. It plays a critical role in challenging and restructuring social hierarchies, particularly concerning gender and class disparities, and employs influence on political, economic, and social reform processes at both local and global levels. Moreover, protests are shaped by prevailing cultural norms, political contexts, media, and historical trends and narratives. They frequently intertwined with feminist resistance and social justice movements. It is often organized by marginalized and disadvantaged communities striving for systemic change. Emotions are central to protest dynamics, supporting individual motivation, group cohesion, and collective action. Over time, women's involvement in both the private and public sectors is remarkably increasing. It has led to the articulation of alternative development paradigms and advances in broader institutional and societal shifts.

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