

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT DEPICTED IN GANGUBAI KATHIAWADI FILM: A FEMINIST APPROACH

Marianus Woda Liru^{1a*}, Maksimilianus Doi^{2b}, Atika Halima Tusadiah^{3b}

^{1,2,3} English Literature, Faculty of Law and Social Humanities, Flores University,
Ende, Sam Ratulangi Street, Ende, 86318

^a limanada81@gmail.com

^b macksydtory@gmail.com

^c atikahalimatusadiah@gmail.com

(*) Corresponding Author

limanada81@gmail.com

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received : 07-09-2025

Revised : 15-09-2025

Accepted : 27-09-2025

KEYWORDS

Women Empowerment
Feminism
Sex Workers
Film

ABSTRACT

This study employed women's empowerment found in the film Gangubai Kathiawadi focusing on female sex workers who are often marginalized by society. The study investigated two primary issues: the types of women empowerments and the techniques employed by the main character to empower herself, the sex workers, and their daughters. This study utilized a descriptive qualitative method grounded in feminist theory and Mandal's empowerment framework and Finnerte's empowerment techniques. Dialogues and character interactions that reflect power relations, resistance, and agency of women were identified as primary data sources. The researcher employed documentation techniques by repeatedly watching the film to capture relevant words, phrases, and scenes as linguistic units followed by transcription for detailed analysis. The collected data were then categorized according to feminist theoretical concepts. The results reveal that the film illustrates various forms of empowerment, including social, educational, and political empowerment. The main character employs empowering techniques, such as standing in women, standing up for them, giving them confidence, and acting as a sister. The upshots reveal that empowerment is a layered process starting with psychological transformation, advancing through social recognition, and culminating in collective political power. The film serves as both a portrayal of women's struggle and a critique of patriarchal injustice.

This an open access article under the [CC-BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license.



INTRODUCTION

Acknowledging and respecting women as autonomous human beings with dignity is a fundamental human right that can be inherent and inseparable from every woman. Despite global advancements in gender equity discourse, countless women worldwide particularly those engaged in stigmatized professions continue to suffer discrimination, oppression, and marginalization. One such group is female sex workers, who face the dual burden of societal shame and systemic exclusion from basic human rights, including healthcare, education, safety, and legal protection.

Female sex workers are often relegated to the margins of society, not only because of the nature of their profession but also due to persistent patriarchal norms (Ariyani & Khamidan, 2021) that label their existence as immoral or corrupt. As Eluama, et al. (2020), Boroumandfar (2022) explain that female sex workers are adult women who engage in sexual relations in exchange for money or goods, often as their primary means of survival. Despite this being a socioeconomic reality, sex workers are often dehumanized (Kaur, 2022; Farida, et al, 2025), seen

not as individuals with stories, struggles, and agency, but as societal pollutants undeserving of empathy or basic civil rights.

The portrayal of women in film is not merely about representation; it is also about the type of narrative space they are allowed to occupy. Do they merely exist to support male characters, or are they given the agency to control their own stories? *Gangubai Kathiawadi* is significant in this context, as it centers a woman traditionally ostracized by society and portrays her as an agent of change. Through this character, the film critiques the institutional neglect of marginalized women and challenges viewers to reevaluate their own perceptions.

The film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, provides a compelling counter-narrative to this stereotype. Based on the real-life story of Gangubai, a young woman sold into prostitution by her lover, the film portrays her rise from victimhood to leadership. Despite enduring unspeakable abuse and rejection, Gangubai reclaims her identity, becomes the madam of a brothel, and ultimately enters the political realm as an advocate for sex workers' rights. Her character epitomizes resilience, empowerment, and transformation making the film a rich object of feminist analysis.

This study employs feminist theory as a lens to analyze how *Gangubai Kathiawadi* represents women's empowerment. Feminist theory seeks to understand and address systemic inequalities rooted in gender. According to Turner and Maschi (2015), feminism helps women identify the social, political, and economic structures that have historically oppressed them and provides the framework for advocating systemic change. The theory is grounded in the belief that gender should not determine one's rights, opportunities, or treatment in society.

Further, the study adopts Mandal's (2013) conceptualization of empowerment, which identifies five domains of women empowerment: social, educational, political, economic, and psychological. These dimensions are essential for holistic empowerment, allowing women not only to participate in society but to shape and lead it. Mandal argues that empowerment must address both external circumstances and internal perceptions, women must not only be given access to resources but also recognize their self-worth and capacity for change.

The theoretical framework is enriched with insights from Finette's (2021) *unlocked*: how empowered women empower women, which offers practical strategies for fostering empowerment. Her framework includes actions such as 'stand behind her', 'stand up for her', 'give her confidence', and 'be the sister', simple yet profound strategies that emphasize solidarity, mentorship, and support among women. These strategies are evident in the actions of Gangubai throughout the film, making it a fertile ground for analysis. Therefore, the study investigates aimed at exploring the types of women empowerments and the techniques employed by the main character to empower herself, the sex workers, and their daughters to be free.

METHOD

This research employed a descriptive qualitative design with narrative and semiotic analysis. The primary data were taken from dialogues, monologues, and visual scenes of *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022). Data collection was conducted through repeated viewing of the film, followed by transcription of significant dialogues and identification of scenes related to power relations, resistance, and agency. The data analysis followed three systematic stages, namely categorization that each transcript was categorized into the five domains of women empowerment according to Mandal's (2013) concepts of social, educational, political, economic, and psychological; coding that data were manually coded by marking words, phrases, and actions that represent empowerment strategies (Finette, 2021); thematic Analysis that patterns were examined across categories to identify which forms of empowerment were dominant and why. The results were then interpreted using feminist theoretical perspectives (Turner & Maschi, 2015; Kindersley, 2019) to understand how the film critiques patriarchy and positions marginalized women as agents of change.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

DATA DESCRIPTION

Five Domains of Empowerment

The film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* draws multiple dimensions of women's empowerment through the protagonist's journey from victimhood to leadership. The data were categorized based on Mandal's (2013) five domains of empowerment and Finette's (2021) four empowerment techniques.

Social Empowerment

Gangubai is shown fighting stigma and asserting dignity for sex workers. Her declaration of a Sunday holiday for brothel workers challenges the normalization of exploitation, *'If every profession in the world gets a Sunday off, why not us? Are we not workers too?'* She publicly confronts a community leader who refuses to let his children study with those of sex workers: *'It's not the children who are dirty, it's the way you think.'* She even appeals to national leaders, asking for the legalization of prostitution to ensure protection of sex workers' rights; *'We may be in this line of work, but we're not criminals. Don't strip us of our humanity.'*

Educational Empowerment

Education becomes a powerful symbol of change. Gangubai insists that children of sex workers must have equal rights to schooling; *'We have sold our bodies, not our wombs. Our children have every right to dream.'* Despite school rejection, she walks the children to school herself, turning education into a public demand for justice: *'If education is the right of every child, then why are our children being punished for our lives?'*

Political Empowerment

Gangubai's decision to run for the presidency of Kamathipura signals her transition into political activism; *'I'm not standing for power, I'm standing for their respect.'* Her campaign emphasizes her identity and lived experience: *'If I can survive being sold, beaten, and broken, I can survive politics too.'*

Economic and Psychological Empowerment

Gangubai negotiates for safer working conditions and fair wages; *'We don't need charity. We need safety and respect. That's our price.'* Her personal transformation from a betrayed young woman into a confident leader shows psychological empowerment, inspiring other women to embrace dignity and solidarity.

Empowerment Techniques

In addition to the five domains of empowerment proposed by Mandal (2013), the film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* vividly portrays empowerment techniques as articulated by Finette (2021), namely stand behind her, stand up for her, give her confidence, and be the sister. These techniques are expressed through concrete scenes and dialogues that show how Gangubai supports, advocates for, and uplifts other women in Kamathipura.

Stand Behind Her

The technique of 'stand behind her' is visible in several moments where Gangubai consistently offers her support to fellow sex workers, both emotionally and structurally. For instance, when the brothel workers are harassed by men in the street, Gangubai takes the initiative to confront the perpetrators and seeks justice. She also ensures that the women under her care have a weekly holiday, which symbolizes humane working conditions. This support is not only verbal but also practical, demonstrating her willingness to provide a safety net for her peers. A notable scene shows Gangubai gathering the women and assuring them that their dignity matters as much as anyone else's: *'No one has the right to strip us of our humanity. We deserve rest, we deserve respect.'* This statement demonstrates her role as a backbone for the community, giving the women the courage to continue working without shame.

Stand Up for Her

The film also provides powerful illustrations of "stand up for her." Gangubai takes active steps to confront social stigma and defend the vulnerable. One example is her decision to walk the children of sex workers to school when they are refused admission. This public act challenges discrimination and makes a statement that these children are not to be hidden or shamed. Another striking moment is when Gangubai rescues Madu, a young girl forced into prostitution, and confronts the traffickers: *'No girl should be forced to do what we were forced to do. Let her go.'* Through such actions, Gangubai positions herself as a protector who does not hesitate to face danger in order to secure justice for others.

Give Her Confidence

Gangubai also uses affirmation and motivation to empower others psychologically. She frequently reassures the women and their children that they are capable of achieving more than what society dictates. In one scene, she tells

Roshni, the daughter of a sex worker: *'You can dream of a future beyond Kamathipura. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.'* Her victory speech after being elected as president also serves as a motivational message: *'When women are the embodiment of power, wealth, and intelligence, what makes these men feel so superior?'* These words elevate the women's sense of self-worth and inspire them to imagine possibilities outside of the brothel.

Be the Sister

Finally, Gangubai's compassion and solidarity embody Finette's "be the sister" technique. She not only leads but also nurtures. She shares food with the women, helps them write letters to their families, and comforts them in times of grief. Her empathetic leadership is most evident when she gathers the women during a crisis and reminds them that they are not alone: *'We are in this together. Hold your head high. We will survive this.'*

This sisterly bond creates a sense of community and emotional safety, allowing the women to face social stigma with strength. Overall, these empowerment techniques are not merely symbolic but are enacted through concrete actions, dialogues, and decisions that highlight Gangubai's dual role as both leader and caregiver. The film's narrative repeatedly shows that empowerment is not only about achieving individual success but also about lifting others, building solidarity, and creating a shared vision for change.

DISCUSSION

The upshots of this study show that *Gangubai Kathiawadi* portrays a multilayered process of women's empowerment that moves from individual transformation to collective action. Among Mandal's (2013) five domains of empowerment, social and political empowerment emerge as the most dominant, indicating that the film prioritizes structural recognition and representation over economic or individual success. This dominance is not incidental but rather reflects a feminist approach to systemic change.

Primacy of Social Empowerment

Social empowerment appears first and most frequently in the narrative. Gangubai challenges stigma, fights for dignity, and frames sex work as legitimate labor. Her initiative to declare a weekly holiday for sex workers is symbolic: it humanizes women in prostitution and places them within the larger labor rights discourse. Feminist theory emphasizes that empowerment begins with reclaiming humanity and visibility (Turner & Maschi, 2015). Without social recognition, sex workers remain invisible in policy and legal frameworks, regardless of their economic contributions. By publicly confronting community leaders and demanding educational equality for children of sex workers, Gangubai disrupts the transmission of stigma across generations. This is critical because social marginalization often perpetuates cycles of poverty and exclusion. Mandal's framework identifies social empowerment as a prerequisite for other forms of empowerment because it provides the collective solidarity necessary for structural change. In the film, Gangubai not only asserts her own dignity but also mobilizes others to see themselves as worthy of respect and protection.

Centrality of Political Empowerment

Political empowerment becomes a natural extension of Gangubai's social struggle. Once dignity is asserted, the next step is to institutionalize that recognition through formal power. Gangubai's decision to run for the presidency of Kamathipura marks a turning point: she transitions from individual advocacy to systemic representation. Her campaign is not based on promises of economic gain but on restoring respect to her community: *'I'm not standing for power, I'm standing for their respect.'* This aligns with Mandal's (2013) argument that political participation allows marginalized women to shape decisions that impact their lives, moving beyond passive recipients of policy to active agents of change. Gangubai's eventual victory legitimizes sex workers' presence in the political sphere, challenging a patriarchal society that traditionally excludes women, especially those from stigmatized backgrounds from leadership.

Feminist theory supports this reading, as politics is often a site where patriarchy is reproduced through laws and governance. By entering this arena, Gangubai symbolically and practically disrupts the gendered hierarchy. Her leadership also transforms public perception, proving that women with stigmatized identities can hold positions of authority and enact change.

Relative Silence on Economic Empowerment

Although the film includes economic negotiations, such as demanding fair wages and safer working conditions, these scenes are less prominent than those addressing dignity and political representation. This suggests that the filmmaker views economic empowerment as secondary or consequential rather than foundational. In feminist economics, economic independence is essential, but without protection from stigma and violence, women's earnings

remain vulnerable to exploitation (Kaur, 2022). Gangubai's repeated insistence that what women need is safety and respect underscores that material gains mean little without structural security. This sequencing is important: economic empowerment is portrayed not as the first step but as a result of social and political victories. By framing it this way, the film argues that empowerment must address structural injustice before focusing on financial outcomes.

Role of Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment forms the emotional core of Gangubai's journey. Her transformation from a betrayed young woman to a confident leader provides a model of resilience for other women in Kamathipura. Finette's (2021) strategies; *stand up for her* and *give her confidence* are vividly enacted when Gangubai rescues a trafficked girl, motivates mothers to educate their children, and reminds her peers of their worth. Psychological empowerment is not merely personal; it is contagious. Gangubai's courage inspires collective confidence, enabling others to speak up and fight for their rights. In this way, psychological empowerment is the catalyst for both social mobilization and political engagement. It reinforces Mandal's view that empowerment must address internal perceptions of power as well as external access to resources.

Intersectional Perspective and Feminist Resistance

The film also demonstrates an intersectional approach to empowerment by considering how gender, class, and occupation intersect to compound oppression. Sex workers are marginalized not only because they are women but also because of their profession and socioeconomic status. Gangubai's advocacy seeks to dismantle this multilayered exclusion. From a feminist theoretical standpoint, the narrative represents a form of resistance literature: it refuses to portray sex workers as passive victims and instead positions them as agents of change. This is a significant intervention in Indian cinema, which has often depicted women in prostitution through a lens of pity or moral judgment. Gangubai's portrayal challenges these stereotypes and calls for systemic change.

Empowerment as a Layered Process

Taken together, the film suggests that empowerment is neither linear nor confined to one dimension. It is layered: beginning with internal transformation (psychological), moving into recognition and solidarity (social), progressing to collective representation (political), and finally enabling material improvements (economic). This trajectory aligns with Mandal's multidimensional model and demonstrates that empowerment must be holistic to be sustainable.

In sum, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* goes beyond telling a story of individual triumph. It illustrates how empowerment can dismantle structural patriarchy through a combination of inner resilience, collective solidarity, and institutional participation. Its emphasis on social and political empowerment signals that systemic change must precede economic uplift, making the film a compelling feminist statement that calls for justice, dignity, and agency for all marginalized women.

CONCLUSION

The film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* offers a powerful and multidimensional representation of women's empowerment, illustrating how one woman's transformation can ignite collective change. Through Mandal's (2013) five domains, the film highlights that social and political empowerment are the most dominant, emphasizing the urgency of reclaiming dignity and institutional recognition for sex workers before pursuing economic improvement. Gangubai's advocacy for weekly holidays, education for children, and political representation demonstrates that empowerment is not limited to personal survival but extends to structural reform. Finette's (2021) empowerment techniques, such as *stand behind her*, *stand up for her*, *give her confidence*, and *be the sister* are enacted through Gangubai's concrete actions, showing how empowerment is sustained through solidarity, protection, and emotional support. These techniques foster psychological strength, enabling women in Kamathipura to see themselves as worthy of respect and capable of leading change. Ultimately, the film suggests that empowerment is a layered process, beginning with psychological transformation, advancing through social recognition, and culminating in collective political power. *Gangubai Kathiawadi* thus functions as both a cinematic narrative and a feminist manifesto, challenging patriarchal structures and offering a vision where marginalized women become active shapers of their destiny and their community's future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

All praise and gratitude are extended to God Almighty for His blessings and guidance that made it possible to complete this article entitled “*Women Empowerment depicted in Gangubai Kathiawadi Film: A Feminist Approach.*” This work was written as a contribution to the field of literary and gender studies, particularly in exploring how cinema represents women’s empowerment and challenges patriarchal structures. The writers would like to express sincere appreciation to all individuals who have provided support, feedback, and encouragement during the preparation of this article. Their contributions have been invaluable to the completion of this work. Also, the writer fully aware that this article is not without limitations. Therefore, constructive criticism and suggestions are highly welcomed for future improvement. It is our hope that this article may serve as a useful reference for researchers, academics, and readers interested in feminist studies, film analysis, and women’s empowerment.

REFERENCES

- Ariyani, L.D., Khamidan, F. 2022. Marginalization of female character under patriarchal system in Craig Brewster’s *Coming 2 America*. *Metaphor*, 4 (2), 1-22.
- Boroumandfar, Z., Esmaili, R., Mohaghegh, N. (2022). The story of female sex workers in the shadow of sex work coercion: a qualitative study. *Iranian Journal of Nursing and Midwifery Research*, 27(3), 243-249. DOI: 10.4103/ijnmr.IJNMR_387_20.
- Eluama, L. O., Anis, W., & Febryana, N. (2021). Adolescent phenomenons that work as female sex workers in Kupang city on May - October 2019. *Indonesian Midwifery and Health Sciences Journal*, 4(2), 137-149. <https://doi.org/10.20473/imhsj.v4i2.2020.137-149>.
- Farida, F., Brumadyadisty, G., Prakoso, R. A., Suhesti, N., Putro, H. E. 2025. Sex workers still human? reading dehumanization in photo-journalism. *International Journal of Humanities Education and Sociel Science*, 4 (6), 2860-2874.
- Finette, J. (2021). *Unlocked: How empowered women empower women*. Amplify Publishing Group.
- Kaur, A. 2022. A general overview of theoretical approaches on sex work: heating debates among various strands. *International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)*, 2 (4), 347-351.
- Kindersley, R. (2019). *Feminism: A short introduction*. Penguin Books.
- Mandal, K. C. (2013). Concept and types of women empowerments. *International Forum for Research and Development*, 1(3), 1-6.
- Turner, F. J., & Maschi, T. (2015). *The social work dictionary*. (6th ed.). NASW Press.