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Q1(c)

According to you, which social reform movement has played the most effective role in uplifting the status of women? Explain.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Sociology GS 2 · 10 marks · Social Movements in Modern India

Social Movements in Modern India: Peasants and farmers movements; Women's movement; Backward classes and Dalit movement; Environmental movements; Ethnicity and Identity movements.

Core demand of the question

- Name one social reform movement as the most effective in raising women's status
- Justify with legal, educational and cultural effects, not a list of every campaign
- Acknowledge limits so the claim stays sociological
- Relate later moments (**Hindu Code**, **Shah Bano**, contemporary feminism) as heirs, not rivals, if needed

Revision summary

The most effective women's social reform is the **Phule-Ambedkar** anti-caste line, not only bhadralok campaigns.

It tied girls' education, a critique of endogamy, and constitutional legal personhood.

Sati abolition and widow remarriage opened the public question but had a narrower class-caste base.

Hindu Code, later feminist litigation and **Shah Bano** debates inherit that citizenship frame.

Patriarchy continues; effectiveness means a changed legal and educational grammar, not a finished utopia.

Introduction

- **Many campaigns touched women's lives:** Brahmo reform, widow remarriage, temple entry, the **Hindu Code**, and post-1970s feminism. The **most effective** single movement, in structural reach, is the **anti-caste educational and legal reform begun by Jotirao and Savitribai Phule and carried into the Constitution by B. R. Ambedkar**. It treated women's uplift as inseparable from caste, labour and the right to learn, not as a polite correction of custom.

Body**Why this line, not only bhadralok reform**

Nineteenth-century elite reform-Rammohan on sati (1829), Vidyasagar on widow remarriage (1856), the Age of Consent debate (1891)-mattered. It made the "women's question" public. Its social base was often upper-caste and urban. **Savitribai Phule's** school (1848) and the **Satyashodhak** attack on Brahmanical marriage rules reached labouring and Dalit-Bahujan women whom the Brahmo salon did not organise. **Ambedkar** made that programme constitutional: **Article 15**, the **Hindu Code** Bills (1955-56) on marriage, succession and adoption, and a politics that named endogamy as the engine of caste (Castes in India, 1916).

Effectiveness is measured by **durable rights and institutions**. Girls' schooling as a public duty, legal personhood in marriage and property, and the idea that the state may override custom are now common sense. Later feminism-towards equality, against dowry, **Shah Bano (1985)** and the contested 1986 Act, **Vishaka (1997)**, POSH, and the demand to reform personal laws-walks on that floor. Without **Phule-Ambedkar**, reform remains charity to "our women."

Limits

Law did not abolish patriarchy. Female labour-force participation is uneven; sex ratio and unpaid care persist. Muslim, Christian and customary personal laws still fragment rights. Elite feminist NGOs can speak past rural and Adivasi women. The claim is not that suffering ended. The claim is that **this movement changed the terms**: education plus legal equality plus a critique of endogamy, rather than a plea to restore a golden shastric womanhood.

Flow diagram

Phule schools and Satyashodhak -> Ambedkar Hindu Code and Constitution
Elite 19th c reform -> Ambedkar Hindu Code and Constitution
Ambedkar Hindu Code and Constitution -> Later feminist law and movements

Conclusion

The **Phule-Ambedkar** reform movement is the most effective because it joined women's education to anti-caste democracy and to statute. Nineteenth-century elite reform opened the file; this line made women's status a question of citizenship. Later judgments and movements extend it; they do not replace it.

Facts & figures

Savitribai Phule

Opened a girls' school in Pune in 1848; with Jotirao, treated women's learning as anti-caste work.

Hindu Code

Hindu Marriage, Succession, Minority and Guardianship, and **Adoptions and Maintenance Acts**, 1955-56, recast women's civil status.

Shah Bano (1985)

Supreme Court upheld maintenance under **Section 125 CrPC**; the 1986 Act then recast Muslim divorced women's remedy, showing the unfinished personal-law battle.