

Swami Vivekananda And Empowerment of Women: A Vision Ahead of Its Time

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Abstract

Swami Vivekananda, one of the great religious and social thinkers of India, thought about the empowerment of women in the context of traditional Indian philosophy. His thoughts found its manifestation throughout his work and speeches, which are much more realistic mingled with spirituality rather than religious in nature. He was of the opinion that in the future Indian women would achieve the lost glory and find way forward. Every manifestation of power in universe is “Mother”. He tried to enhance awareness, develop and empower women not only through education but also by enlightening them through the philosophy of Indian spiritualism, which might be considered as an effective system or approach in the process of empowering women. Swamiji’s words echo a deep understanding of the inherent strength and spirituality that women possess. He emphasised the importance of chastity as a powerful virtue, recognised the sacredness of marriage and motherhood, and pondered the unique qualities of Indian womanhood.

Key words: Indian philosophy, women, motherhood, empower, spiritualism, vedantic

Introduction:

Swami Vivekananda held progressive and respectful views on women, especially for his time. He did put emphasis on the dignity, education, and spiritual equality of women. His views were rooted in Vedantic philosophy, Indian cultural heritage, and his personal observations of the status of women in both India and the West. Swami Vivekananda was of the firm opinion that women should be put in positions of power to solve their own problems in their own way. The welfare of the world is dependent on the improvement of the condition of women. Vivekananda repeatedly told that India’s downfall was largely due to her negligence of women. The great images of Brahmadattinis like Maitreyi and Gargi of the Upanishad age, and women missionaries like Sanghamitra carrying Buddha’s message to Syria and Macedonia, all were lying buried deep due to millennium of foreign domination. The mid-nineteenth century India saw women, the great mother – power shackled and degenerated to mere “child producing machines” as Vivekananda saw it.

Key Aspects of Vivekananda’s Views on Women:

1. Spiritual Equality between Man and Women:

Swamiji was a powerful proponent of spiritual equality between men and women. He believed that both genders are equally divine, capable of attaining the highest spiritual realization, and deserving of equal respect and opportunity in the pursuit of truth. Swamiji believed that men and women are equal in the eyes of the Divine. He frequently cited examples from Hindu scriptures where women like Gargi, Maitreyi, and Sita were shown as spiritually enlightened and powerful.

a. The Divine Nature of All

Swamiji's philosophy was deeply rooted in Advaita Vedanta, which teaches that the soul (Atman) is beyond gender, caste, or class. He often said, "All differences in this world are of degree, and not of kind, because oneness is the secret of everything." Since every soul is divine and the goal of life is to realize this divinity, man and woman are spiritually the same.

b. Women as Spiritual Leaders

He often referenced women saints and scholars like Gargi, Maitreyi, Sita, and Sarada Devi as examples of supreme spiritual knowledge and purity. He said: "If ever any religion approached this equality in an appreciable manner, it is Hinduism." Vivekananda highlighted that in ancient India, women were rishis (seers) and teachers of the Vedas, and he wanted modern society to reclaim this heritage.

c. Equal Right to Worship and Realization

He rejected the idea that women are somehow spiritually inferior or less capable of renunciation or realization. He saw renunciation and self-realization as not limited to men alone but as open paths for women as well.

d. The Ideal of the Divine Feminine

Swami Vivekananda deeply revered the Divine Mother (Shakti), seeing the feminine not only as equal but as the creative, sustaining force of the universe. He regarded womanhood itself as sacred, seeing women as manifestations of Shakti.

e. Critique of Gender Bias in Religion

He vehemently challenged the practices that were responsible for the exclusion of women from spiritual life or treated them as impure or incapable. Swamiji said, "The best guide in life is strength. In religion, as in everything else, discard everything that weakens you. Discard all doctrines that make you feel weak and sinful." He believed that religious restrictions based on gender were man-made distortions, and no way divine laws. Swami Vivekananda believed in the complete spiritual equality of men and women. To him: a) both are equally capable of attaining the highest truth, b) The soul has no gender, c) Women should have equal access to education, renunciation, and spiritual life, d) Society can only progress when both men and women grow spiritually, side by side. His views were revolutionary and continue to inspire conversations around gender and spirituality today and ever.

2. Importance of Women in Society

Swami Vivekananda placed immense importance on the role of women in society, considering their upliftment essential for national progress, social harmony, and spiritual advancement. He was of the strong opinion that a society or nation cannot progress without empowering its women. He famously said: "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved." He emphasized that educating women would bring about regeneration in India.

a. Foundation of a Nation's Progress

Vivekananda firmly believed that the condition of women determines the strength of a nation. Swamiji said, "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved." He argued that no civilization progress unless women are given their rightful place as equals and contributors to every field—social, educational, economic, and spiritual.

b. Women as Educators of the Nation

He considered mothers and women as the first teachers of society. Their education and empowerment were, in his view, the key to the shaping future of the generations to come. Swamiji said, "Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them." He emphasized that through women's education, the entire society can be uplifted.

c. Moral and Spiritual Strength of Women

Vivekananda admired Indian women for their moral courage, sacrifice, and inner strength, even in difficult social conditions. He saw women as natural embodiments of compassion, purity, and resilience, which are the pillars of a healthy society.

d. Reclaiming the Glory of Ancient India

He pointed out that in ancient Indian society, women were highly respected, educated, and spiritually advanced. He believed that the decline of India began when the status of women declined, and therefore, reviving that dignity was central to India's renaissance.

e. Equality and Dignity

He rejected the idea of women being subservient to men. He argued for equal rights, respect, and opportunity for women in all aspects of life. Swamiji said, "The idea of perfect womanhood is perfect independence." For him, women were not meant to be confined to domestic roles alone but to actively participate in building society.

f. A Call for Action

Vivekananda did not just philosophize; he called on society, especially Indian youth, to work toward women's emancipation. He encouraged women to be self-reliant, strong, and educated, capable of standing on their own feet without depending on anyone. According to Swami Vivekananda, the importance of women in society lies in their:

- Role as nurturers, educators, and moral leaders
- Equal potential for intellectual, economic, and spiritual contribution
- Power to uplift the entire nation through their empowerment

He envisioned a new India where women stand shoulder to shoulder with men, free, strong, and enlightened.

3. Role of Education for Empowerment

Vivekananda advocated for the education of women not just in academics but also in self-reliance, character, and spiritual ideals. He urged for a strong, holistic education system that would help women become confident and independent. Swami Vivekananda strongly believed that education is the most powerful tool for the empowerment of women. His views on women's upliftment were rooted in Vedantic philosophy, where he saw the divinity and potential in every human being, regardless of gender. According to Vivekananda, empowering women through proper education was essential not only for their own progress but also for the progress of society as a whole.

Here are the key aspects of the role of education in empowering women according to Swami Vivekananda:

a. Education as the Means of Self-Realization

Swamiji said: "Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them." He emphasized that true education should help women realize their innate strength, divinity, and dignity. Education, in his opinion, should not be about rote learning but about developing self-confidence, will-power, and spiritual consciousness.

b. Equality Through Education

Vivekananda believed in the essential equality of men and women. He argued that if given the same opportunities, women can achieve everything that men can. "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved."

c. Moral and Spiritual Education

Vivekananda believed that moral and spiritual values must be central to women's education. He vehemently opposed purely materialistic or ornamental education for women. He said, "What we want are Western science coupled with Vedanta, and Brahmacharya as the guiding motto."

d. Practical and Character-Building Education

He advocated for practical education that teaches women life skills, self-reliance, and strength of character. Women should be trained to be strong, fearless, and independent—not submissive or dependent.

e. Educated Women as Nation Builders

Vivekananda believed that without upliftment of women a nation cannot progress. He opined that, "With five hundred men the conquest of India might take fifty years; with as many women, not more than a few weeks." He saw educated women as key agents of social change, who would raise intelligent and moral future generations. Swami Vivekananda's vision of women's empowerment through education was holistic: combining intellectual, physical, moral, and spiritual development. He wanted women to be self-reliant, confident, courageous, and spiritually awakened—not merely educated in a conventional sense, but in a way that would allow them to transform society.

4. Respect for Motherhood

Swami Vivekananda held motherhood in the highest regard and considered it a divine and sacred ideal. His views on motherhood were deeply rooted in Indian spiritual tradition, especially the worship of the Divine Mother (Shakti).

Some of his key perspectives on respect for motherhood are:

a. Motherhood as Divine

Vivekananda saw motherhood as an embodiment of divinity. He often spoke of the Divine Mother (Durga, Kali) and believed that every mother reflects this divine power. He said: “The ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood — that marvelous, unselfish, all-suffering, ever-forgiving mother.”

b. Mother as the First Teacher

For Vivekananda, the mother is the first guru (teacher) in a life of a child. He emphasized the educating and nurturing role of mothers as the foundation of strong character and moral values in society.

c. Supreme Respect for Mothers

He strongly condemned any disrespect or mistreatment of mothers and women. He believed that a nation cannot rise unless its women — especially mothers — are respected, empowered, and given their rightful place.

d. Personal Devotion to His Own Mother

Swami Vivekananda had profound respect and love for his own mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi. He often mentioned how her strength, spirituality, and discipline shaped his own values and spiritual path.

e. Motherhood Beyond Biology

He also expanded the concept of motherhood to include spiritual motherhood — nurturing not just through birth but through love, service, and guidance. For Vivekananda, motherhood was sacred, powerful, and central to both spiritual life and national development. He urged society to honour, uplift, and support mothers, seeing them as pillars of strength and sources of divine inspiration.

5. Opposition to Oppression and Blind Tradition

Swami Vivekananda was a strong opponent of the oppression and blind traditions that subjugated women in Indian society. His vision for women’s upliftment was rooted in spiritual equality, rational thought, and social reform.

Here are the key aspects of Vivekananda's opposition to the oppression and blind traditions regarding women:

a. Opposition to Blind Social Customs

Vivekananda criticized immoral customs and superstitions that suppressed women's rights and freedom, such as:

- Child marriage
- Widowhood restrictions
- Denial of education to women
- Seclusion and social exclusion

He believed these were man-made distortions, not supported by true religion or spirituality.

Swamiji said, "The uplift of the women, the awakening of the masses must come first. Then only can real good come about for the country."

b. Criticism of Orthodox Interpretations

He openly challenged orthodox religious interpretations that were responsible for justifying the subjugation of women. Vivekananda emphasized that Hindu scriptures, when rightly interpreted, actually uphold the dignity and power of women, especially through the ideal of Shakti (divine feminine energy).

c. Support for Women's Education and Empowerment

Vivekananda strongly advocated for women's education — not only religious or domestic, but also modern and scientific education. He believed that empowering women through knowledge was essential for the progress of the nation.

d. Equality and Respect for Women

He viewed men and women as equal in all respects — spiritual, intellectual, and moral. He vehemently condemned any ideology that treated women as inferior or merely as dependents.

He was of the opinion that there is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved."

e. Glorification of the Indian Woman's Inner Strength

While he was critical of oppressive customs, Vivekananda deeply respected the inner strength, sacrifice, and moral purity of Indian women. He encouraged Indian women to be bold, self-reliant, and spiritually awakened — like the ideal figures of Sita, Savitri, and Gargi. Swami Vivekananda strongly opposed the oppression of women and blind traditions that denied them their rightful place. He firmly believed that without women's liberation, there could be no real progress — either spiritual or social — for India. Vivekananda's ideal woman was strong, pure, self-sacrificing, and full of compassion. He admired Sita (from the Ramayana) as a symbol of inner strength and purity, and Lakshmi Bai (the Rani of Jhansi) as a model of courage. He praised Western women for their confidence, education, and public participation. However, he also admired Indian women for their spiritual strength and moral character. He envisioned a synthesis—

where Indian women would gain the outward strength of the West while retaining the spiritual depth of the East.

Conclusion:

Swami Vivekananda was a strong advocate for women's rights, education, and empowerment, long before these became common themes in social discourse. He saw women not as dependents or subordinates, but as equals and essential to the progress of civilization. His thoughts continue to inspire feminist and spiritual movements in India and beyond.

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