



PERSPECTIVE OF GANDHIJI ON THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhiji's ideas on women's role in public life differed from those of 19th-century reformers. During the war, he saw women as a force to construct a new social order and advocated for women's economic autonomy. However, the current state of affairs is far from Gandhiji's vision for the future. India views women as primary caregivers responsible for population development and educating about gender equality. Gandhiji played a significant role in eliminating long-standing social ills associated with women, despite insisting that their sphere of responsibility was at home. He also developed requirements to help women break free from domestic constraints. His faith in women and their potential resonated with them, leading them to join him. This article analyses and discusses Gandhiji's writings, speeches, and correspondence on violence against women, women's empowerment, and the future of Indian women. The purpose of this paper is to understand the perspectives that Mahatma Gandhi held regarding women.

Keywords: Gandhiji's thoughts, Women's Rights, Women's Empowerment, Education, Social customs.

❖ Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi's lifework led to the enlightenment of women, transforming their sense of inferiority and dignity through education. He emphasized the importance of women's education for equal rights and status in a male-dominated society, and for turning their children into responsible citizens. Gandhi's lifework aimed to revolutionize women's status by emphasizing the need for education. As he has written in a journal named 'Harijan', "I believe in the proper education of women." (Sharma, 2007). Gandhiji argued that women's marginalization and perception of being male slaves are largely due to their religious beliefs, traditions, and laws. He urged women to be aware of their rights and equal status with men, believing that men and women are complementary. He also believed that education empowers women to assert their indigenous rights. Gandhiji believed men are superior in visible activities, but women's influence is created by their domestic life and affairs. He emphasized the importance of education in promoting gender equality and empowering women to assert their rights. Gandhiji believed that education

should be tailored to the life stages of both men and women, as they both have responsibilities within the household. He believed that women's illiteracy was not due to their lack of ability or interest in learning, but rather their social standing. He believed that women should have more knowledge based on family ideals and that girls were inferior to men due to their immense self-sacrifice and misery power. Gandhiji believed that education provides women with the ability to exert influence over decision-making processes and strengthen social and economic justice, thus giving them eternal strength. Both men and women are responsible for responsibilities within the household, such as education and child rearing. Gandhiji urged women to embrace their own inspiration and promote legal education, while also challenging sacred texts and social traditions that devalued their status. Women can contribute to a more equitable society by advocating for social, political, and legal equality, as well as supporting education. Mahatma Gandhi believed that women, through their progressive ideas and actions, could significantly contribute to social change. His radical views align with Gandhi's emphasis on education as a means of bringing about significant social, political, and moral changes in Indian culture. Gandhiji's radical views demonstrate the potential of women in achieving significant social, political, and moral transformation.

❖ Review of Related Literature

Bhattacharyya M. (2016), examined the extent of economic empowerment gained by women engaged in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in the district of Goalpara, Assam in the article "Drawing a Link—Women's Empowerment and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: A Study Conducted in the Goalpara District, Assam". The research has compared the extent of women's empowerment before and after an engagement in MGNREGA based on nine variables and calculated by using the empowerment index. The findings indicate that, while MGNREGA is an important step toward ensuring rural women's economic empowerment, it was not properly implemented in the area — men and women with no 100 working days, irregular mode of pay, very steady development, and poor quality of work.

The researchers **Campbell and Dass (2019)** studied Mahatma Gandhi's Views on Women, Gandhiji's views on Social Issues Against Women, the Role of Women in Creating Future Citizens of India, the Present Scenario of Women in India, and Efforts for Women Empowerment in Post-Independence India in their paper "Mahatma Gandhi's Thoughts on Women Empowerment and Present Scenario." They found that Mahatma Gandhi believed in economic independence for women. For Gandhiji, women are the nurturers responsible for preparing potential citizens of India. The onus for imparting and inculcating gender equality in society lies with them. Women's empowerment should not be limited to family members but should apply to all women in society.

Singh N. (2015), in her paper "The Women's Question: Participation in the Indian National Movement and its impact" studied the involvement of women in the National Movement, the women's organization that came into the picture in the early twentieth century and the role of women during the partition of India in 1947. The study reveals that colonial history showed that in India the contemporary concept of sex rights in the public realm had a public-private split, masking and reinforcing the granting of public rights to private

disenfranchisement and the subservience of Indian women. Even after Independence, laws could not change societal views and attitudes toward women.

❖ Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to:

- Study Gandhiji's views on social customs.
- Influence of women on Gandhiji's life.
- The development of Gandhiji's aspirations for the future of women.

❖ Discussion

➤ Gandhi's Views on Social Customs

During the Vedic period in India, women's status was considered acceptable due to equal sex, education, marriage, love marriages, and widowhood. However, the status of women has deteriorated over the past two thousand years. Gandhiji, a prominent Indian philosopher, focused on cultural rejuvenation and criticized social evils plaguing Indian womanhood. He believed that social reforms were crucial for reorganizing social values that had monopolized Indian women's perceptions. Gandhiji criticized various social practices and evils, such as child marriage, widowhood, Sati Pratha, dowry, and prostitution, which were justified based on their conventional sanctions. Gandhiji's work aimed to restore the value of the individual and promote cultural rejuvenation. (Ganguli, 1972)

- **Sati Pratha:** Gandhiji criticized Sati Pratha, arguing that it was a sign of spirituality but ignorance of the soul. He believed that the soul is immortal, immutable, and imminent, and does not perish with the physical body but with the path from one moral chasis to another. Gandhiji proposed that women demonstrate Sati hood through renunciation, sacrifice, self-denial, and dedication to their husband, family, and country. However, he did not challenge the unequal relationship of property, which left widows access to sustenance resources.
- **Child Marriage:** Gandhiji opposed child marriage, arguing that it was immoral and inhuman, causing physical degeneration and undermined morals. He argued that early marriage bans did not represent the true essence of Hinduism and should be rejected as interpolation. He advocated for a 16-year age for girls, ensuring both boys and girls were fully developed and had a voice in their life partner choices. Gandhiji believed that women's upliftment was possible only through radical reforms in the marriage system, as most disabilities were due to the evil within the marriage institution. He advocated for the establishment of Mahila ashramas to rescue young girls who had fallen victim to lustful men or were sold by their parents. He encouraged educated women to work with girl wives and widows to create a social climate where small girl marriages were no longer acceptable. [5](#)

- **Purdah:** Gandhiji was criticized for the custom of Pardha, which he believed was not a safeguard against temptations. He urged men to be true to themselves and believe their women, even when forced to do so. He believed that Rama's freedom and independence depended on Sita, and he opposed Purdha as an Indian tradition. He believed that humanity would decline if women were enclosed in their homes, and recommended that every Indian demolish the Purdah with the lord. [6](#)
- **Dowry System:** Gandhiji opposed the dowry system, arguing it was a "hatred system," "marriage by purchase," and a dehumanizing practice. He criticized the traditional age at which girls are married and argued that dowry undermines women's education and dishonors womanhood. He called for educated men and women to take action against evil, advocating for women to wait until they find grooms who wouldn't ask for favors, and young men not to marry until 25 or 30. He also recommended arranged marriages, but advised parents to discuss it with their children over 25. [7](#)
- **Widowhood:** Gandhiji criticized the oppressive conditions faced by Indian widows, particularly those who were considered children of slaves. He believed that their parents should marry them off, and young widows should be free to choose whether to marry again or remain a widow. He viewed consensual widowhood as a blessing in Hinduism, while forced widowhood was seen as a curse. He argued that forced widowhood was an unendurable yoke, defiled by hidden vices and debased by religion. [8](#)
- **Prostitution:** Gandhiji opposed prostitution, arguing it was moral leprosy, but did not condemn it. He believed men visiting these places were equally responsible for spreading evil. He acknowledged that men would fall as low as women if the profession expanded. He believed all men should bow their heads in embarrassment as long as single women devoted themselves to lust. [9](#)
- **Divorce:** Mahatma Gandhi emphasized the importance of simple marriages and viewed marriage as a state of practice, requiring respect for morality and repentance. He believed that divorce is not the only solution to reestablish a married relationship, and that moral restraint should be observed to prevent unexpected divorces and maintain a healthy marriage. [10](#)

➤ Influence of Women on Gandhiji's Life

Gandhiji, inspired by his mother Putlibai and wife Kasturba, married at thirteen. As a devoted and independent woman, she defended his initiatives and taught him valuable lessons. Gandhiji stepped out of her spiritual inclination and became an equal partner and defender of his initiatives. Motherhood has become a model for India's liberation, as a mother selflessly dedicates herself to her child until they become independent. Despite their growth, they continue to work together. In his social reform work, he realized that cultivating his mother's heart was crucial for societal reform and desalination from evils. This model demonstrates the importance of motherhood in achieving social change. (Mehta, 2013). Geraldine Forbes discusses the framework Sarojini Naidu established as President of the Indian National Congress, focusing on India as the "house," the Indian people as "members of the common family," and the Indian woman as the mother, influenced by British feminist militant Annie Besant and Gandhiji co-worker

Sarojini Naidu, Naidu, Gandhi, and other women's and national liberation advocates agreed that India and women would work together towards implementing India's national model. Gandhiji believed women could significantly reshape India, and while equal rights were necessary, they were not sufficient for a just social structure.

➤ **Development of Gandhiji's Aspirations for the Future of Women**

Gandhiji, a virtuous man, held a unique perspective on women's issues in society. His non-violent philosophy, which was not new, became revolutionary under his mentorship. His sanctity of thought and honest aspirations made him one of the most honest and divine historical figures in the contemporary age. Gandhian literature will continue to provide a clearer perspective for both men and women, fostering a better understanding of one another and life. Gandhiji's non-violence is a powerful tool against violence, while the weak use it less effectively. It allows humanity to transition from despair to reflection and bondage to freedom. The strength of non-violence lies in the human spirit, and Gandhiji is the largest architect of this spirituality, making non-violence the main and best sculptor of this spirituality. (Nadkarni, Sivanna, & Suresh, 2017). Gandhiji's approach to women differed from other progressive reformers, who saw women as equal to men. He believed education was crucial for women's moral development and competence in achieving the same goals as men. Gandhiji emphasized the importance of women's qualities in satyagraha ethics and believed they could only endure pain and misery effectively. His doctrine of ahimsa emphasized the perversion of suffering, which women find challenging. Gandhiji believed women played a crucial role in non-violence development. Mahatma Gandhi believed Satyagraha was the most effective non-violent weapon, but it presents challenges. "Violation of the law" refers to peaceful and unjust actions, such as picketing and campaigning. Women could have used this to fight for justice and equality, but Gandhiji's vision of a holistic society has not been realized. Satyagraha serves as a signifier for academics, elites, and middle-class feminists, whose dialectic differs from those of Gandhiji's underprivileged women. Gandhiji, a friend of marginalized groups, was deeply understanding of women's problems and empathy. He addressed caste and gender truths in a religious pantheon, despite being liberal or conservative. His vision was influenced by women leaders, emphasizing the importance of understanding and supporting marginalized communities. Gandhiji envisioned India's independence struggle as a strategy for women's empowerment. Despite societal injustices, men and women are equal. Gandhiji believed Satyagraha was the only solution to societal problems, including between capitalists and workers and men and women. Women's problems cannot be solved through a single strategy, and they must reframe their goals through satyagraha. Gandhiji demonstrated understanding of societal dynamics by offering a non-violent way for women to participate in the swaraj political movement by 1940. Women's content focuses on their needs and values, transcending selfishness. They must actively participate in decision-making bodies, perform for parties, and create manifestos reflecting their needs. Women play a crucial role in economic and social development, and are active in political bodies like India's Mahatma Gandhi. However, men in politics often fail to recognize social justice-gender relations, and women outside the political system struggle to effectively implement these agendas. Gandhiji's works revitalized Indian

women, enabling them to reclaim their individuality and reconnect with the national movement. His transformative views led to a new tradition, allowing indigenous women to leave their homes and contribute to the nationalist movement. Their active participation in freedom, on equal footing with men, generated trust and empowered them to combat patriarchal domination. Gandhiji's fight for women's rights and efficiency was fueled by her belief in ethical behavior. The 1931 Fundamental Right Resolution of the Indian National Congress aimed for equal opportunities for men and women, emphasizing equal salary distribution. Gandhiji proclaimed women's freedom and worked towards political emancipation for all oppressed segments of society. Her life's purpose was to enlighten women and boost their self-esteem. Indian heroines like Gandhiji and Khadi played significant roles in the struggle for independence, teaching women about liberation and fighting injustice. Gandhiji's life sketches and Swadeshi strength have resonated with women across India, while Khadi's non-violent opposition to foreign rule revolutionized women's understanding of reality and participation in national politics. Gandhiji and Khadi, both women's freedom fighters, have fought against injustice and inequality through life sketches and clothing, respectively. Gandhiji's appeal has reached women across India, while Khadi's non-violent approach revolutionized women's understanding of reality and participation in national politics. Gandhiji's call for women to participate in the fight for freedom led to significant changes. Women learned to protest against injustice and not conform to men-dominated politics. Initially struggling due to lack of knowledge and freedom, their determination and strength allowed them to emerge. Gandhiji's philosophy inspired thousands of women in India, fostering a new identity. **(Gandhi & Dalton, 1996)**

❖ Conclusion

Gandhiji's condemnation of social evils and belief in women's moral fortitude significantly influenced women's rights and equality in the fight for national independence. Women participated in Gandhiji's mass moves, making a difference in Indian women's lives. The Indian National Congress was established in 1885, and Jawaharlal Nehru, influenced by liberal views, agreed that economic liberty was necessary for women's legality. The researcher argued that women's struggles would remain limited to the upper classes if they remained isolated from political, economic, and social struggles. The 1931 Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress affirmed equality between men and women, leading to the formation of organizations like the Women's India Association, Indian Women's National Council, and All India Women's Conference. **(Kuriakose & Gandhi, 1995)**. In the 1920s and 1930s, women participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement, leading to thousands being detained. Gandhiji's patriarchal system blurred women's roles, viewing them as mothers and wives. Despite acknowledging women's roles, he believed societal division into varnas only referred to labor divisions, and distinctions between men and women were within their functional departments. Gandhiji advocated for equal rights and potential for both men and women, emphasizing their roles in domestic issues and diverse training. He emphasized that women should not solely focus on household management or raising children, and offered part-time employment. Gandhiji aimed to make women economically self-sufficient and contribute to family income through activities like spinning and housework. He established an elementary

school with a mother teaching child and emphasized the dignity of household work and equal education for both men and women. Gandhiji advocated for men to take on domestic work to alleviate women's workload, valuing women's right to choose their work style and recognizing their natural inclinations. He viewed women as more righteous and disciplined due to their male sexuality, but opposed contraceptives, arguing female sexuality was less powerful than males. Rather, he felt that the woman, the very incarnation of Shakti, had to recognize the hidden moral potential in her so she and her husband could live a life of restraint. Gandhiji's conception of a woman is a "long-suffering, selfless and self-effacing being." But this capacity for silent suffering which Gandhiji idealized may be one of the key symptoms of her subordination and a significant cause of her exclusion from decision-making processes within the family and outside it, "a glorified cult of Eternal Womanhood." (Prabhath, 2010)

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