



# Mahatma Gandhi: A True Believer of Women Empowerment

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**Abstract:** Mahatma Gandhi is known as one of the prominent figures of India who envisioned the progress and development of modern India. He presented his ideological views regarding reformation of Indian society, culture, education and women empowerment. Empowerment means to motivate and to develop self-confidence. In his opinion women should have equal rights in society and other fields also. Women empowerment which is very necessary for social, economic and national upliftment refers to the process by which women attain equality with men to participate in the development process of the society as well as the nation.

This paper examines the relevance of Gandhian ideological views on women empowerment for social reformation highlighting the concepts of self-esteem, self-realization and self-service. Gandhiji advocated that these are the keys to justice for all human beings irrespective of their gender, class and society.

**Key words:** Envisioned, Reformation, Empowerment, Upliftment.

The empowerment of women has been in the agenda of almost all the leaders of the nation and is still a burning issue of our times. It is observed that still women suffers due to various social evils prevalent in our society though we have formulated multitudes of rules to empower Indian women ,we are far away from the real empowerment of women. Women still continue to suffer and are considered as the weaker sex and face discrimination in all fields of life.

The question arises that whether women really feels empowered in 21<sup>st</sup> century? The answer is probably no as still they don't feel empowered in the real sense of terms. They face gender discrimination, exploitation, become prone to the social evils prevalent in our country. The

subjugation and marginalisation of half of the population of our country is partially due to lack of facilities , prevalent customs and traditions that binds them and the patriarchal mind set which gives them equal status with men but in theory only but withheld in practice. Undoubtedly it has become a sad reality of Indian women that she is and has been a victim of the age old customs and patriarchy from ages.

Moreover women herself has internalised the role of being inferior to men .It is a matter of grave concern and the great leaders of India as Rajaram Mohan Roy ,Swami DayanandSaraswati ,Swami Vivekananda , Rabindranath Tagore and above all Mahatma Gandhi , father of our nation, has stepped in to work for the progress and development of women . But the strategies and plans made and implemented for women's emancipation or empowerment are failure till women realise their true strength and break the shackles of patriarchy. They have to compel men to introspect their behaviour, attitude and mannerism with women. Men should realise that women who are mothers, wives, daughters, sisters and a lot more to them, commands the same respect and privileges as they do.

Mahatma Gandhi, a social and political reformer, realised fully that women can be empowered by hammering out this patriarchal set of mind inhibited by men from generations. Women cannot attain empowerment till men unburden themselves with the heavy load of patriarchy. Women should be given freedom to acquire education, knowledge and skill to be self-reliant beings in society. They can earn self-respect for themselves and this can lead to their holistic development. Gandhiji motivated Indian women to come forward and get inspired by the ancient role models of empowered women as Draupadi ,Savitri, Sita and Damayanti etc to show that women have equal mental capacities as men and thus deserves



equal rights to freedom. He took practical measures regarding the development of women through the aid of education and skill development. He believed that this is the only way to bring out women from centuries of old age customs, rituals and rules followed in the society resulting in the social and mental slavery of women. So, the leader of the nation Gandhiji pioneered the cause of women's emancipation through education and skill development among women as he says:

As for illiteracy among women, its cause is not mere laziness and inertia as in the case of men. A more potent cause is the status of inferiority with which an immemorial tradition has, unjustly branded her. Man has converted her into a domestic drudge and an instrument of his pleasure, instead of regarding her as his helpmate and, better half, the result is a semi paralysis of our society. Women has rightly been the mother of the race. We owe it to her and to ourselves to undo the great wrong that we have done her (GaraiSubhas 106).

Gandhiji puts his views that for social, economic and political development of the nation we should work in unison whether rich or poor, upper caste people and low caste people and both men and women shedding our pride and prejudices. He gave a strong fight for the equality among Indians and played a vital role to remove the social evils committed against women through ages. Gandhiji, being a social and political reformer, considered social freedom as crucial as economic and political freedom for every woman as he remarked:

My contribution to the great problem (of women's role in society) lies in my presenting for acceptance of truth and *ahimsa in every walk of life, whether for individuals or nations* I have hugged the hope that in this, women will be unquestioned leader and, having thus found her place in human evolution, will shed her inferiority complex. Women's entry in national politics through non-violent methods brought miraculous results. On the one hand, women became aware of their inner strength and on the other, the process brought human and moral elements into politics. (Thakkar, Usha 2016)

Gandhiji strongly advocated for women's rights during his leadership. He expressed his deep concern for the fundamental inequality and injustice done to women in Indian society who were even denied the basic human rights. Gandhiji worked ceaselessly to enhance the social, economic and political status of women and empower them by providing them their genuine rights, honour and their privileges. Gandhiji under his able leadership,

made it a point to work for the most depressed and the deprived section of society i.e. women. He followed the principle of 'Sarvodaya' – which means comprehensive progress of all both men and women. He made a clarion call for the liberation of women from the shackles of household chores. He stated "Womanhood is not restricted to the kitchen only, when the woman is liberated from the slavery of kitchen that her true spirit may be discovered" (Burman, Pinkumari 42). He does not mean that women should get rid of household chores but he means that responsibilities should be shared by men, women and children equally. Gandhiji himself was a role model for men as we get evidences that he always shared the duties of the house with her wife, Kasturba. He never considered women as slave and held them in high esteem be it her wife or women friends that visited her ashram or participated in the freedom struggle of the country. For him women were co-workers, equal in status, and moreover best friends and companions of men.

Gandhiji gave very radical views about the emancipation and empowerment of women. He firmly retaliated and raised his voice against various issues and problems related to women as female foeticide, infanticide, child marriage, widowhood, sexual harassment of women, domestic violence against women, discrimination against girl child, dowry system etc. Almost all these issues still exist in our society which needs to be eradicated urgently. Gandhiji's experiences and experiments led him to conclude that our society should be sensitized regarding these issues and strict measures should be taken to create public awareness to improve the condition of women. Gandhiji condemned the maltreatment of women at the hands of men as he considered that man himself is responsible for degrading, the better half of the humanity. Therefore we should reconsider Gandhiji's ideology and philosophy for empowering women to achieve success in our goal.

Gandhiji trusted the capabilities, calibre and the talent of women and advocated to bring forth their hidden potential for the upliftment of society instead of treating them as only homemakers. He assigned high place to woman and declared, "Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man and she has the same right of freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his." (Sain, Renu 151) However Gandhiji knew she has never got due recognition for her services and contributions towards family and society. Men



should realize that by empowering women they upgrade their families as well as nation. For Gandhiji, empowerment of women meant a prerequisite to strengthen democracy and fight against injustice and oppression. So he insisted on equal rights and opportunities to be given to women. In a letter to Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur from Wardha on 21 October 1936, Gandhiji mentions:

If you women would only realize your dignity and privilege and make full use of it for mankind, you will make it much better than it is. But man has delighted in enslaving and you have proved willing slaves till the slaves and the slave – holders have become one in the crime of degrading humanity. My special function from childhood, you might say, has been to make women realize her dignity. I was once a slave – holder myself but Kasturba proved an unwilling slave and thus opened my eyes to my mission. Her task was finished. Now I am in search of a woman who would realize her mission. Are you that woman, will you be one?" (Burman, Pinkumari 42)

In a nutshell, he desired for the peaceful co-existence of man and woman with positive change in attitudes, behaviour, values and beliefs of men towards women. Gandhiji believed that real empowerment of women can be achieved through their own efforts. Women are supposed to lead the organisations that are meant for their own welfare. Their representation in such bodies and organisations can help bridging gap between men and women. The question of women's progress and development being a big challenge for the humanity Gandhiji made significant contributions for the development of the status of women in India. He helped women in every possible way to re-establish their identity and position in the society. He encouraged them to participate in the freedom struggle of the country:

According to Gandhiji, the role of women in the political, economic and social emancipation of the country was of overriding importance. Gandhiji has immense faith in the capability of women to carry on a non – violent crusade. Under his guidance and leadership, women shouldered critical responsibilities in India's struggle for freedom. Women held public meetings, organised picketing of shops selling foreign alcohol and articles, sold khadi and actively participated in National Movements. They bravely faced the baton of the police and even went behind the bars. Gandhi's urge to women to join India's struggle for independence was instrumental in

transforming the outlook of women. Swaraj uprooted age old taboos and restrictive customs. Through their participation in Indian struggle for freedom, women of India broke down the shackles of oppression that had relegated them to a secondary position from time immemorial.

(<http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/mahatma-and-women.html>).

Gandhiji perceived that women are intellectually, mentally and spiritually equivalent to male in all spheres of activity. For him women were not merely toys or dolls in the hands of men. He asserted that in many matters as tolerance, patience and sacrifice, the Indian women are far superior to the male. Gandhiji devoted himself to the mission of empowering all aspects of woman's life, be it political, social, domestic and even personal. He laid emphasis on the role of women in politics as under his guidance women came out from their houses and joined India's struggle for independence to name a few like Sarojini Naidu, Lakshmi Menon, Sushila Nayyar and Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur and thousands of their followers who contributed in the Indian freedom struggle directly or indirectly by breaking the conventional role assigned to them by men. For economic independence of women, Gandhiji felt that female folk can engage themselves in cottage and small scale industries of the village such as spinning, broom, basket and rope making, oil processing so that they can contribute to the family income and be economically independent.

The relevance of Gandhiji's ideology in the present times as well as in his own times cannot be underestimated. His adherence to the three fold path for women empowerment as education, employment and change in social structures made drastic changes in the status of women folk in his times and has continued to be so in our times as well. It can be concluded that Gandhiji has undoubtedly shown the way for the empowerment of women and for the overall improvement in the status of women in the country. But then why do we come across a completely opposite picture where women are exploited by the social evils like dowry system, prostitution, restrictions on doing jobs etc? The answer lies in the fact that empowerment is not something that can be attained in one day. It is a gradual process and takes its due time to bring an overall change. The candle of hope lighted by Gandhiji has helped dispelling the darkness of ignorance from the minds of men. Gandhiji's aim to teach men to trust the potential of women and for women to trust themselves can be visualised through the marked positive changes that we can see in our



society .We are on our way to women empowerment and emancipation. But there is no denying the fact that a lot remains to be done and it is high time to acknowledge and follow Gandhiji's ideology of women empowerment for the social reformation of the country. If Gandhian ideas are strictly followed the day is no far that our country can flaunt in the matter of women's rights. According to Gandhiji:

I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. I have always had a passion to serve the woman kind ever since my arrival in India. The women have come to look upon men as one of themselves. I hold radical views about the emancipation of women from their betters, which they mistake for adornment. My experience has confirmed me in the view that the real advancement of women can only come by and through their own efforts (Aloo ,J.Dastur and Usha ,H.Mehta 18)

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