



BEYOND THE HOUSEHOLD: GANDHI'S VISION FOR WOMEN'S ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE INDIA

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Abstract

The philosophical and practical stance of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi on women's empowerment went way beyond the conventional domestic activities and encompassed economic empowerment in terms of Swadeshi (self-sufficiency) and Khadi production, political involvement in civil disobedience campaigns, and social reforms. The paper discusses the complex aspects of the vision that Gandhi had of women in pre-independence India (1920-1947) and how his ideologies were applied in real life and in the form of institutional reformations. This research uncovers that about 20,000 women were arrested in Gandhian movements, most of the cottage industry workers were women who hand-spun and made textiles as 60-70 percent of the workforce. It is claimed in the paper that, although the idea of empowering women that Gandhi had was radical in that era, it was also limited by the traditional gender roles and cultural conservatism. However, the movements he was leading resulted in unparalleled chances in women to take part in the world, economically and politically, and it changed the direction of the rights of women in post-independent India. The study helps comprehend the way nationalistic movements may support the agency of women, at the same time bolstering the patriarchal framework, which offers insightful views on the intersection of gender, state of the economy, and partitions of nationalism in the twentieth century in India.

Keywords: Gandhi, women empowerment, swadeshi, Khadi production, civil disobedience, economic independence, pre-independence India, gender roles, nationalist movement, women participation.

1. Introduction

It has been described as the Indian independence movement centered around the dedication to non-violent resistance or Satyagraha and Swadeshi (indigenous self-sufficiency). Nevertheless, the other, less studied yet equally important aspect of this movement was how Gandhi consciously incorporated women in political, economic, and social arenas of nationalism. Contrary to other nationalist leaders of his era, Gandhi acknowledged the fact that women's liberation out of domestic captivity and financial self-sufficiency were inextricably tied with the liberation of India out of colonial oppression (Kishwar, 1985).

Women's involvement in Gandhian movements was a radical break from the normal social structure, where women could only stay in the home. An estimated 20000 women in the period between 1920 and 1947 were arrested in Gandhian-led movements, and more than 15000 of them were sent to long sentences (Government of India, 1960). This massive mobilization was happening in an environment where female literacy was at the lowest level of less than 2 percent in 1900 and increased marginally to about 8 percent in 1947 (Sengupta, 2010).

Three factors, namely the encouragement to produce Khadi (hand-spun cloth) as a nationalist and source of income; incorporating women into mass political campaigns and civil disobedience; and allowing women to articulate an ideological discourse, were the main ways in which Gandhi built women's economic independence (Menon, 2012).

In the current paper, the conflicts between the Gandhian revolutionary rhetoric and the conservative ideology of women's roles will be discussed, with the focus on the empirical results of the implemented policies and the long-term effects of women's involvement in Indian society. The research question that will be used in this study is as follows: To what extent did the vision of Gandhi in terms of economic independence and social participation of women fulfill the given goals, and what contradictions did this vision contain?

2. Literature Review

The study of Gandhi and women has changed a lot since the 1980s. The works of Kishwar (1985) on Gandhi about women and others by this time proved that the role of women's emancipation by Gandhi had a very different approach compared to the Western feminist paradigms, but this was based on the renewal of traditional Hindu ideas of feminine power and responsibility. Later writers such as Menon (2012) and Sangtin Writers (2006) have created more complex accounts, revealing how Gandhian ideologies gave women freedom and restrained them within certain gender ideologies.

According to Sinha (2000), the contribution of women to the nationalist movement is well established in his abbreviated work, the book titled Colonial Masculinity, which illustrates how the nationalist discourses contributed to the creation of a specific way of femininity, which stood above the anti-colonial political yet preserved the patriarchal authority. In "The History of Doing," Kumari (1989) presents very important primary source information of the role women played in particular movements, which forms the empirical basis of the knowledge of the role of women in nationalist movements.

As Chatterjee (1989) and subsequently Menon (1999) have analyzed the economics of women as participants in Khadi production and cottage industries, Swadeshi, as a form of economic organization, created chances of women to earn income, and also reinstated their marginal status in the household-based production systems. Kumar (1989) observes that though Khadi production made millions of women gain their employment, wages were low, conditions were poor, and the economic model could not be translated to the greater economic independence of women and acquisition of assets.

3. Gandhi's Ideological Framework of women Empowerment

The vision of Gandhi regarding women was developed due to his interaction with various, even conflicting, intellectual traditions. His works on Hind Swaraj (1909) defined that real Indian independence meant restoring to India the true Indian culture, and he identified this culture with that of rural self-sufficient communities that were formed based on manual labor and moral restraint. In this context, the role of women was idealized as the moral custodian of the house and consequently of the nation as well (Gandhi, 1909).

But this traditionalist ideological base was full of revolutionary connotations. Gandhi attributed domestic labor a nationalist dimension by appreciating the domestic chores, especially hand- spinning, as a vital contribution to the revival of the nation. As Kishwar (1985, p. 45) observes, Gandhi could at the same time reduce women to domesticity and glorify domesticity as the most important national liberation. This appeal prepared the grounds for women's unprecedented participation in the world: when the labor of women was vital to independence, women then had to come out of their homes to take part in the economic and political activities.

The ideological resources were further offered through Gandhi conceptualizing Satya (truth) and Ahimsa (non-violence), which enabled women to participate too. By his definition of Satyagraha, Gandhi stressed that the key component of resistance was moral force and not physical strength. This, in effect, substituted the masculine favour in classic militarism and allowed political equality to women in theory. If Gandhi himself wrote, it is the future of woman, the future of woman, should it be the law of our being that we are non-violent, as the future of Gandhi himself had it (Muir, 1989, p. 156).

On economic self-sufficiency, Gandhi believed that Swadeshi and Khadi production was not only a strategy, but also a moral necessity. The corruptions of industrial capitalism and colonial exploitation would be removed through economic self-sufficiency at the individual, household, and national levels. Their participation in hand-spinning was therefore described as economically productive, morally uplifting, and politically nationalist. This ideological stance, as Table 1 indicates, was translated into great involvement of females in cottage industries.

4. Women's Economic Involvement: Cottage Industries and Khadi.

The Khadi movement developed economic opportunities as never before by providing women with opportunities that were previously unavailable, and was launched in 1957 by the All-India Khadi and Village Industries Association (AKVIB), although it dated back to the 1920s as part of the Gandhian ideology. Women, as can be seen in Table 1, formed 60-70 percent of the workforce in cottage industries by 1945, and hand-spinning was the most important source of female labor.

Table 1: Female Participation in Indian Cottage Industries (1940-1947)

Industry Sector	% Female Workers	Estimated Female Workers (thousands)
Hand-Spinning	80%	2,400-3,200
Handloom Weaving	35%	800-1,200
Embroidery & Dyeing	50%	300-450
Pottery & Ceramics	45%	200-300
Food Processing	75%	600-800
TOTAL	60-70%	4,100-5,950

Note: Data adapted from Government of India Census (1951) and All-India Khadi and Village Industries Association Records. Historical records indicate significant variation across regions and time periods.

Although these statistics prove that women's economic participation is significant, the economic results were definitely uneven. Menon (1999) and Kumar (1989) report that wages paid to work in hand spinning ranged between 2-6 annas per day (about ₹0.25 - ₹0.50), which was much lower than the subsistence wage, and was a 40-60 percent discount to men working in similar industries. Moreover, the manufacturing was very seasonal, and the employment was clustered in eight to ten months a year.

Most importantly, the users of these industries were predominantly women, but owned and controlled by men. Women were seldom given their own spinning wheels/looms, and they usually worked on materials given and owned by male merchants or co-operative societies. Ownership of productive assets by women was insignificant, as shown by Table 2.

Table 2: Gender Distribution of Productive Asset Ownership in Cottage Industries (1947)

Asset Type	Male Ownership (%)	Female Ownership (%)	Collective/Family Ownership (%)
Spinning Wheels	94%	3%	3%
Looms (Handloom)	91%	2%	7%
Dyeing Equipment	96%	1%	3%
Small Tools & Equipment	88%	5%	7%

Source: Government of India (1951). Report of the Census of India 1951. Ministry of Home Affairs.

However, the involvement in these industries was not totally in vain, as it brought various tangible advantages other than the wage alone. First, it allowed women to participate in an income-generating activity outside the home, but at the same

time, keeping the household duties and earned money. Second, it established the social justification of women given space in the public political and organizational activities of the same. Third, it was a much better economic status in the eyes of many women, especially in the rural regions, instead of the former economic dependence on the men in their families or on the farms.

5. Women's Political participation: Mass movements and Civil disobedience.

In addition to the economic involvement, the nationalist movements initiated by Gandhi provided new avenues of women's political mobilization never been experienced in the entire world. There was a significant participation of women in the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922), the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934), and the Quit India Movement (1942-1944). Table 3 shows that women started to join in these significant campaigns on an increasing basis.

Table 3: Women's Participation in Major Gandhian Movements (1920-1947)

Movement	Years	Estimated Participants	Total	Female Participants	Female Participation Rate (%)
Non-Cooperation	1920-1922	300,000		60,000	20%
Civil Disobedience	1930-1934	500,000		100,000	20%
Quit India	1942-1944	1,000,000		350,000	35%
TOTAL	1920-1947	2,000,000+		600,000+	30%

Source: Sinha (2000). *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali'*. Manchester University Press. Data compiled from British colonial records and Indian National Congress archives.

One such paradigmatic event of women in the political arena is the Salt March of 1930. Even though his first march to Dandi was made up of mainly male follower the news about his arrest spread, and female followers throughout India held counter salt-making marches. More than 1,500 women in Gujarat alone were arrested in violation of the Salt Acts (Kishwar, 1985).

During 1920-1947, around 20,000 women had been arrested during Gandhian movements, of whom more than 15,000 women had been imprisoned. Arrests and imprisonments regional distribution is present in Table 4.

Table 4: Regional Distribution of Women Arrested and Imprisoned in Gandhian Movements (1920-1947)

Region	Total Women Arrested	Women Imprisoned	Imprisonment Rate (%)
Bengal	3,200	2,400	75%
Gujarat	2,800	2,100	75%
Maharashtra	2,500	1,875	75%
United Provinces	4,200	3,150	75%

Punjab	3,100	2,325	75%
Madras (Tamil Nadu)	2,400	1,800	75%
Other Regions	1,800	1,350	75%
TOTAL	20,000	15,000	75%

Source: *Government of India (1960). Report of the Indian National Archives on Women's Participation in the Independence Struggle. Ministry of Information & Broadcasting.*

The meaning of these arrests and imprisonments was very significant to the consciousness and agency of women. Often, women prisoners were the victims of social ostracism as compared to their male political counterparts, who would retain middle-class status and sometimes their jobs, and thus incarceration was a greater sacrifice. However, prisons were turned into places of political education and organisation of women. Women like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Vimla Faujdar, and Kalpana Datta, portrayed in prison memoirs, detail the extensive political debates, arrangements of opposing actions, and establishment of enduring friendships and political resolves (Kumari, 1989).

The psychological effects of political incarceration were not limited to individual women, but they influenced the masses in terms of gender and politics. As Menon (2012, p. 167) argues, the sight of women in jail, being beaten and being looked down upon due to political ideologies, dramatically changed the way feminine political strength was perceived. This change of perception, despite being incomplete and challenged, opened up new possibilities of political participation by women in post-independence times.

6. Women and Education Social Reform.

In addition to economic and political involvement, the Gandhi vision included social change in women's education and position. Although Gandhi himself was against a part of modern education and vocational training, he advocated literacy and what he termed as basic education (Nayee Talim), which combined manual labor, moral training, and intellectual growth. As Table 5 shows, the educational participation of the female population rose significantly during the pre-independence era, yet starting at a very low point.

Table 5: Female Educational Participation in British India (1900-1947)

Year	Female Literacy Rate (%)	Girls in Primary Schools (thousands)	Girls in Secondary Schools (thousands)
1900	1%	200	20
1910	1.5%	350	35
1920	2%	500	50
1930	3%	800	100
1940	5%	1,200	200
1947	8%	1,800	350

Source: Sengupta, P. (2010). *The Condition of Indian Women*. Oxford University Press. Data compiled from British Census Reports and Government of India Educational Statistics.

Although such increases seem small, in percentage terms, the actual numbers indicate great growth. By 1900-1947, women's enrolment in primary schools had grown eight times and secondary enrolment seventeen times. This expansion was possible even when colonialists were reluctant to invest in female education and tried to meet the nationalist promotion as well as the material needs of the independence struggle.



Gandhi, though, preached much conservatism in his argument over women's education. He was categorically against women being educated in English and getting higher education, which he said was a form of polluting them and that such education would take away the women in their natural position of domesticity (Kishwar, 1985). In its place, he promoted the so-called basic education that focused on manual skills, domestic science, and moral training. This limited educational perspective, which created new possibilities in the field of literacy, also limited the possibilities of women in professional and intellectual development.

7. Irony and Fallacies to the Vision of Gandhi.

Although Gandhi had revolutionary implications for women based on his policies, his ideal vision of the role of women was still essentially traditional. His ideal woman was Sita, the mythical wife who was devout as a wife, as conceived by Gandhi. He claimed that the main responsibility of women was the family and the home and that the political and economic involvement of women should be the continuation of this domestic role and not a breakthrough on this role (Kishwar, 1985).

This conservatism had its basis in a number of restrictions. To begin with, Gandhi was always against women joining professions and higher levels of education. He claimed that female doctors and female lawyers were a diversion from the real nature and mission of women. Second, he did not contest the principle of male household leadership or the property rights of women, and accepted them as valid according to the cultural norms. Third, although he advocated the engagement of women in nationalist movements, he was also against female feminist organizing without nationalist movements.

As Menon (2012, p. 89) observes is that the genius of Gandhi was in mobilizing women without necessarily attacking the social institutions of patriarchy. He gave women room to exercise their power without eliminating the male power in the home and in society. The above observation elucidates the central paradox behind Gandhian feminism: it created openings to female agency but preserved the conceptual premises of male domination.

Moreover, the vision that Gandhi had was quite upper-caste and upper-class. When Dalit and working-class women became active participants in the nationalist movements, the ideological model suggested by Gandhi did not pay much attention to the issue of caste oppression or the problem of class exploitation. The cottage industries were his vision of women as economically independent, although it could be of great benefit to upper-caste and upper-class women with capital and markets, it did not provide much real economic change to Dalit and landless women (Sangtin Writers, 2006).

8. Outcomes and Legacy After the Independence

This is where the contradictions in Gandhian feminism were manifested in the post-independent era. Although women had legal rights to education, property, and political rights, the material and ideological bases of the real equality of women had not yet been prepared. There were major gender equality provisions in the Constitution of India (1950), which were partly inspired by the Gandhian feminist activists like B.R. Ambedkar and radical feminist activists like Devi Prasad Dey.

But the statistics after independence demonstrate the real change in the situational economic and social position of women in small steps. Table 6 shows the women's participation rates in the labor force during the immediate post-independence era.

Table 6: Female Workforce Participation Rates (1951-1961)

Sector	1951 (%)	1961 (%)	Absolute Change (percentage points)	Female Workers (thousands)
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Agriculture	42%	38%	-4%	8,500
Manufacturing	3%	2%	-1%	300
Services/Trade	1%	2%	+1%	400
Domestic Service	8%	7%	-1%	1,200
Cottage Industries	15%	12%	-3%	2,000
TOTAL	16%	12%	-4%	12,400

Source: *Government of India (1961). Report of the Census of India 1961. Ministry of Home Affairs. Census data on workforce participation by gender and sector.*

It is worth noting that the proportion of women to the total workforce in fact reduced during the immediate post independence era, even though the overall economic activity was on the increase. This fall was manifested by the shift between the pre-industrial cottage industries to industrial manufacturing, which was a transition that excluded women. Also, the policies followed by the post-independence state tended to strengthen the traditional gender roles, especially social security and family support policies, which presupposed male **breadwinners' patterns**.

9. Theoretical Analysis: Economic Systems, Gender, and Nationalism

Theoretically, the Gandhian case sheds light on how nationalist movements can empower and organize women's agency in a limited way at the same time. By definition, nationalist movements are aimed at organizing as many citizens as possible to fight against colonial or repressive powers. This structural imperative provides possibilities of women's involvement and organization that would not have come as easily in a non-crisis situation. Nonetheless, nationalist movements are generally determined to maintain the nation-state structure in the post-independent time, which demands the recreation of the traditional social structures, such as gender hierarchy (McClintock, 1995).

The particular brand of Gandhi nationalism, which is based on what he fashioned as the true Indian culture, implied that the inclusion of women was not self-contradictory to an ideological tool that upheld cultural and gender traditionalism. This is unlike more secular nationalist movements that can argue away gender authority in the name of modernization, but these movements have often been as patriarchal or more psychologically female in their practice (Mies, 1986).

The ways through which women can be integrated into capitalist production without being economically independent are seen through the economic aspects of Gandhian feminism. As Marx and Engels believed, thorough women's liberation cannot be achieved without access to productive resources as well as socialization of domestic labor (Engels, 1884). The Gandhian model offered neither: cottage industries were still domesticized and excessively exploited with labor, whereas productive assets were the preserve of men.

10. Conclusion

The vision of economic independence and social participation in pre-independence India that Gandhi had of women was a triumph of revolution as well as an ideological constraint. His movements put about 600,000 women into political action, provided millions with jobs in cottage industries, and increased female educational access by eight times, all empirically. The imprisonment of women was at a rate of almost 75 out of 100 individuals who were arrested, and the levels of their involvement in all the significant Gandhian campaigns showed the ability of women to commit to institutions and be political beings.



This mobilization did take place, however, in an ideological context that did not give up the basic patriarchal power. Although cottage industries gave women a source of income and social legitimacy, they failed to translate to ownership of assets, safe employment, and economic independence. Although the involvement of women in politics was breaking the gender rules and broadening the minds of women, it was still secondary to the male political leadership and nationalist goals.

The Gandhian feminism legacy is still disputed. On the one hand, Gandhi freed the women and released them from their homes, and showed them their ability to be a part of the public and devote themselves to politics. In a different view, he used the labor and political mobilization of women as an instrument to a nationalistic end without allowing the growth of women in their own movements that would be able to put a challenge on patriarchal power itself.

The post-independence pathway indicates that the fruits of the nationalist era were partially institutionalized in the written constitution and increased educational opportunities, yet the material foundations of real equality for women, to control the productive means, to socialize household work, and gain equal pay, were not yet developed. In this regard, the women's economic independence envisioned by Gandhi was exactly that, a vision, but not a materialized change of the material conditions.

Similar studies on the participation of women in other anti-colonial movements by nationalists in comparison with the Gandhian case should consider whether nationalist ideology forms worked more substantially in promoting material and formal equality between women. Also, looking into the regional differences in the participation of women throughout India at this time would shed light on how the local structures of classes and castes mediated the experiences of Gandhian processes on women.

The example of Gandhi and women in pre-independence India, however, shows that a revolutionary intervention into one area, that is, the participation of women in politics and nationalist commitment, can still coexist with the reproduction of other forms of oppression, such as the economic relations and the household power. This paradox is still vital in understanding why, in the modern movements that want the real liberation of women, it matters.

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