CHAPTER – III
CONTESTING GENDER DISCOURSE: GANDHIAN OUTLOOK

This chapter is purported to examine the conceptual and theoretical aspects of gender justice and gender discrimination in the light of two sets of scholarships. First is with reference to how the discourse of feminism informs gender disparity historically and what are the broad contours of theories of gender discrimination? Here we are not confining merely to the Indian stream of scholarship on the notion of gender disparity, rather we would be delineating the broad aspects of gender discourse and its consequences for women’s liberation. The second concern of the chapter is the critical examination of the ideas of Gandhi towards women and gender justice. In other words, how women need to be treated as full-fledged human person is the paramount issue here. Consequently, it would be our task to unravel the possibility of women as an agent of social transformation. It would be interesting and intriguing task to look at Gandhian way of re-conceptualizing the notions of gender emancipation, which also includes the critique of Gandhi offered by many Indian and western contemporary scholarships. Therefore, we would be trying to develop the linkages between (a) how gender is impacted by caste, class and (b) how modernity offers the language of enlightenment and full fledged dignity, where women is treated merely as an agent and not as a subject. The issues and questions related with agency, power-hood and rights are taken into account so as to critically evaluate the ideas of Gandhi concerning the notion of gender.

Gender: Philosophical Considerations

Is gender a thing which people possess, or is it an essential attribute of a person arouses philosophical and ethical questions, which are characterized by strong ideologization and hence inclined to an apologetics? Is gender natural or constructed? Feminist theorists claim that gender is culturally constructed. If that is so, then how such a construction is valid and philosophically justified? If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently too, or how does gender as a construct imply some form of social
determinism with its further transformations? Does ‘construction’ suggest that certain laws generate gender differences? How and where does the construction of gender take place? On certain accounts that gender is a construction suggests certain determinism of gender meanings, which are inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of inexorable cultural laws. When the relevant ‘culture’ that ‘constructs’ gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is determined.

**Gender and its Construction**

French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir suggests in her book ‘The Second Sex’ that ‘one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one’.\(^1\) According to Beauvoir, gender is ‘constructed’ and argues that it is based on a *cogito*, which takes on and appropriates gender. The question that arises here is: Is gender variable and volitional as do Beauvoir’s account seems to suggest? Can construction in such a case be reduced to a form of choice? Beauvoir claims that one ‘becomes’ a woman, but always under a cultural compulsion to become one. And clearly, the compulsion does not come from the ‘sex’. There is nothing in her account that guarantees that the ‘one’ who becomes woman is necessarily female. The controversy over the meaning of ‘construction’ appears to be founded on the conventional philosophical polarity between free will and determinism. Is gender determined or free, or is it a function of discourse?

According to V. Geetha “Gender is everywhere. When we dress a girl child in soft colours and frilly clothes, buy a male child a gun, when we admonish girls for behaving like boys, or tease boys for being timid ‘like girls’, we are doing gender. That is, we are allocating to the male and female sexes specific and distinctive attributes and roles; likewise we also impose different sets of expectations on them. More important, we seem to imply that these attributes and roles may not be easily exchanged. We do all this without much thought, are not particularly self-conscious about thus ordering the world; it appears fairly commonsensical to us that boys and girls ought to be distinguished through physical markers such as clothes, that they behave differently, are raised to different things. If questioned, we answer that this is
natural, the way things are and have been, that God or Nature intended us to live thus."^2

To make sense of gender, we need to look at our lives closely and critically. Why are people expected to be exclusively masculine or feminine? We need to examine the ways in which women have been rendered subordinate to men. Equally we must understand the nature and details of male authority. How do men experience it? We need to ask ourselves whether there is anything ‘normal’ about our world being arranged this way, and if there are other ways of arranging it.

**Gender Equality and Personhood**

Gender-equality, in fact, seems to be one of the basic conditions of full personhood of both man and woman. Three things seem essential for an entity to be called a person: (a) autonomy, (b) self-respect, and (c) sense of fulfillment and achievement. The autonomy of a person would involve freedom of choice and non-instrumentality of existence. An autonomous person will have a purposive life but his own experiences, interests and capacities would shape the purposes of his life. They will not be predetermined either by any cosmic agency or by any other institution. Thus, the autonomy of a person would entail his intrinsic worth. The autonomy of a person need not be conceived on the pattern of atomistic individualism. It would indeed involve a sort of individualism because the grounds of a person’s preferences are to be found in his own experiences and priorities. But it is recognized that his experience do not exist in complete isolation from others and do not arise in vacuum. His connectedness with others and his environment too is part of his being, and shapes his perceptions and perspectives. If an individual’s life conditions are such that his connectedness with others has not been re-accommodated in his perceptions and purposes, and the institutions of society impose their own purposes on him, his autonomy, to that extent would be compromised. In such a case, the question would arise whether, in the larger interest, this individual’s autonomy and therefore person-hood is worth leaving intact. Surely, the intrinsic worth of a person covers his relationship with the world around him and therefore his moral ideal has to this ‘otherness’ in it. There would be alienation to the extent to which he does not see the
world, the relationship, which an individual has and the purposes he seeks as his. An individual's autonomy pre-requires not his monads-like existence but interactive harmony with the 'other' around him.

Self-respect involves a sense of dignity, awareness of one's autonomy and worth. It also involves consciousness of one's capacities and rights and, more importantly, his responsibilities. A self-respecting person would be able to make sober assessment of his place in the wider context of life and the world. Self-respect is the realization of a fine balance between one's worth on the one hand and smallness on the other. This is essential to prevent any confusion between self-respect and self-aggrandizement. The third feature of personhood, sense of fulfillment and achievement, is possible only for an autonomous being. It is proportionate to the awareness of one's capabilities and their realization. All these features of personhood have degrees and thus personhood also would be a matter of degree in the conceptual framework presented here.

In almost all the cultures the traditional view of woman allows no possibility of her personhood. She has no autonomy. The conditions of her life from beginning to end leave no possibility of developing self-respect. And there is no question of her sense of achievement because she is never in a position to set her own goals and to know herself. The purposes of her life are extrinsically determined and often she is seen as an inevitable (although useful) evil. In the traditional framework this extrinsicality and the extremely limited role of a woman's life massively erodes the very conditions of her personhood. The conception of male and female essences' and the resultant role-division in this framework marginalizes woman's personhood.

Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in our families, our societies and our cultures. The concept of gender also includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviors of both women and men (femininity and masculinity). These roles and expectations are learned. They can change over time and they vary within and between cultures. The concept of gender is vital because it facilitates gender analysis revealing how women's
subordination is socially constructed. As such, the subordination can be changed or ended. It is not biologically predetermined nor is it fixed forever.

The history of civilization is nothing but a record of mankind’s struggle to overcome natural behaviors of various types. The claim that males and females are by nature different unquestionably is inadequate to justify the further claim that they ought to be brought up differently. There are obviously some biological and psychological differences between boys and girls that set broad limits on what they could respectively do. Women have to bear children, even if in other respects, their lives are indistinguishable from those of men. But even the impressive efforts of those such as Stephen Goldberg, who have tried to show that there is an inevitable psychological bases for male dominance, cannot justify conclusions like ‘girls’ are born to do the homework, while boys are born to go out and earn money. 3

Gender Outlook: Parameters

Masculinity and Femininity are not aspects of biology or physiology. Neither is they god-given. Instead they are parts of systems of thought and action, which human beings have constructed over centuries. This means that their meanings and significances are myriad, dependent on time and place, influenced by facts of both geography and history. Marxist theory of gender emphasizes that gender is not an isolated piece of reality; it has to be seen in relation to the social whole, to what Marxist refers to as totality. That is, ideas of masculinity and femininity are neither normative, as religious doctrine would have us believe, nor do they exist as categorical imperatives. Male and female roles and functions are not just functional—they do not merely reflect social expectations. They exist as aspects of social and economic system. In this sense, they reflect, express as well as influence social and economic realities of economic power, social dominance and cultural authority.

Being a man also means that one is rational, always in control, unemotional and consistently strong. Being females requires that she is patient, understanding, emotionally expressive and compassionate. Roles and emotions do not always exist in a perfect fit—there are irritable and impatient mothers, timid and self-effacing men who are uneasy in their professions. Yet
both men and women strive to be as typical as possible, convinced that these are their natural modes of being, often suppressing or downplaying contrary emotions.

Very few girls dare to ask why their ultimate destiny is linked to the institution of marriage and motherhood; or why their inner lives should heed the virtues of patience and sacrifice. Similarly, very few boys imagine a life for themselves that is not related to a profession of one kind or another. Neither do they ask themselves as to why they have to be consistently tough and brave. Even those men and women who are convinced that women need to be educated and economically independent, or who feel that men can and must share housework and parenting, seldom interrogate what is commonly regarded as the destiny of the sexes: that Nature intended women to be mothers and men to be protectors, that a woman’s place is the home and a man’s the world; that ultimately women are responsible for the kitchen and the children, whereas men are accountable chiefly to their public roles, as wage-earners and heads of families. An important question that arises here is pertaining to the norms and who sets them? Who defines social expectations? Why do we follow?

Norms that sets standard of typical and ideal male and female behavior favor different roles and responsibilities for men and women. These norms usually have to do with patterns of work, modes of feeling and relating style of clothing, systems of learning and communication and, most significantly, assess to resources and power. Norms and expectations exist in almost all societies, to greater or lesser degree. They are, however, not unchanging. Nor are they consistent and uniform. Certain norms may be found in one historical period and discredited in the next. During the same period they may apply to certain sorts of women and not to certain others. Expectations are defined in different ways in different societies. With the same society there may exist different sorts of expectations. Let us consider how some well-known feminine and masculine norms work in specific social and historical contexts. In the Indian context, a woman has necessarily to be a good wife and a mother but does this norm work the same way for middle class, upper caste and poor dalit women? The latter cannot and do not devote as much
time to wifely duties and responsibilities. They spend a lot of their time working outside the house, alongside their men or separately. Child-care and housekeeping amongst the poor are shared responsibilities. Neighbours, younger women and girls often help out with these things. It is not that poor women do not heed the norm of wifehood and motherhood, but clearly they experience it differently. They are neither obsessed nor paranoid about good housekeeping and mothering. Their primary concerns have to do with food security, survival and safety: is there enough food to the last monsoon months? Will the husband survive yet another season of unemployment and drinking? Will they be able to live without fear of displacement or eviction is the troubled questions that bother the poor women.

**Gender and Justice: Aristotle and Rousseau**

Western philosophical thought on justice seems to be biased upon in the context to gender. Aristotle and J.J. Rousseau can be taken as instructive examples for detailed analysis. Human nature, as discovered by these philosophers, is intended to refer only to male human nature. Consequently, all the rights and needs that they have considered for the making of a just society have not been perceived as applicable to the female half of the human race. Thus, within the traditions of political philosophy and culture, there has been a pervasive tendency to make general statements as if human race were not divided into two sexes. They have either ignored the female sex altogether or have proceeded to discuss it in terms not at all consistent with the assertions they have made about ‘man’ and ‘humanity’.

Let us take Aristotle first. Aristotle uses the Greek word ‘anthropos’ for man, meaning ‘human being’. He says that man requires not only his reason, but also certain essential external goods, if he is to live a good life. He cannot be happy without assets such as riches, friends, good children, leisure, noble birth and beauty. In accordance with his characteristic teleology, Aristotle argues that not only the entire animal kingdom but the vast majority of humans as well, are intended by nature to be the instruments, which supply the necessaries and comforts to the few to enable them to be happy in their contemplative activity.
Thus women, slaves, artisans and traders are all subsidiary instruments for the achievements of the highest happiness of man. Human good and human happiness have been defined in such a way that the vast majority of the human race is necessarily excluded from the achievement of either. Aristotle argues that in the relationship between soul and body, masters and slave, that which uses it benefits the latter in each case.

In a parallel manner, he argues that husband and wife have a beneficial relationship that ‘they help each other by throwing their peculiar gifts into the common stock’ and that it is in fact the woman who is the beneficiary and the man the benefactor of their relationship. In a context that explicitly includes reference to the rule of men over women, he says, “the ruled may be compared to flute-makers. Rulers are like flute players who use what the flute makers make”.4

Aristotle asserts that women are ‘naturally’ inferior to men, and that they are, therefore, naturally ruled by them. Aristotle writes, ‘A women is as it were an infertile male. Even in regard to reproduction, he writes, “a male is male in virtue of a particular ability and a female in virtue of a particular inability”. 5 In spite of her widespread inability, woman is necessary for the reproduction of man, and this is therefore, seen by Aristotle as her natural function. Aristotle argues, “...not only for the sake of reproduction, but also for the various purposes of life, for, from the start the function are divided, and these of man and woman are different. While it is the man’s function to acquire, it is the woman’s to keep and store.”6 These assumptions lead Aristotle to regard the entire conventional division of labor between the sexes as strictly in accordance with nature. Aristotle regards that the private family and household are the natural and necessary bases for social life. Aristotle’s assumption that woman is defined by her reproductive functions and her other duties within the household permeates everything he has to say about her. Because he perceives women as naturally inferior to man, Aristotle asserts that all relationships between them must acknowledge this inequality and in so far as possible compensate for this inequality.

Aristotle establishes the standards of physical, mental and moral excellence in woman according to the functions she performs for man. To be
the best woman, she must have many qualities, such as quietness and modesty that are undesirable in man. On the other hand, she must not have many qualities, such as manliness, strength or cleverness that are required of a good man.

After analyzing Aristotle's assumptions and their implications for the conception of women and her role, we can take Rousseau's philosophy as our second example. Rousseau writes in the beginning of the Discourse on The Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men that, "It is of man I am to speak." It subsequently becomes clear that it is only the inequality between males that is the subject of his investigation, and the inequality between the sexes is assumed in passing. A grand summary of his view of the place of the natural woman in the patriarchal world is found in the beginning of Book 5 of Emile: "Man and women are made for each other but their mutual dependence is not equal. Men are dependent on women on account of their desire; women depend on men on account of both their desire and their needs. We could do without them better than they could do without us. In order for them to have what is necessary for their situation in life, we must give it to them. We must find them worthy of it. They are dependent on our feelings, on the price that we place in their worth, on how we esteem their charms and their virtues. By the law of nature herself, women as much for themselves as for their children are at the mercy of man's judgement."7

The whole issue of whether or not the patriarchal family is natural or conventional is therefore, of critical importance for Rousseau's treatment of the subject of women. Thus, when Rousseau refers to the natural man and to the natural woman he has two distinct reference points in mind. Natural man is man of the original state of nature, totally independent of his fellows, devoid of selfishness, equal to anyone else, and imbued to natural goodness of pity for any suffering fellow creature. Natural woman however, is a woman defined in accordance with her role in family-dependent, subordinate and naturally imbued with shame and modesty. These minimum functions would necessarily follow from the physiology of females. Rousseau thus accepts entirely different modes of perfection for women and for men. Consequently, he advocates radically different methods for socializing the two sexes.
Rousseau felt it necessary to postulate a contractual origin for the first time that civil society, in order to refute the idea that 'proud and unconquerable man' would ever have rushed into slavery. However, he does not feel at all compelled to explain why proud and unconquerable women should have done that same unreasonable thing. Rousseau treats intellectual capacities also with a similar bias. His emphasis on the importance of education and environment does not apply to women, despite his isolated assertions that the ability to think is, in both sexes, almost entirely the result of education. He writes that, "Women in general, do not like any art, know nothing about any, and have no genius. They can succeed in little works which require only quick wit, taste, grace and sometimes, even a little bit of philosophy and reasoning but they never have the celestial flame of genius."

We see clearly that Rousseau simply failed to apply in the case of women both types of argument that he had used to define the natural man. Instead, he finds her naturally located in her subordinate role in the patriarchal family and naturally endowed with all those qualities considered essential to her functioning in that role. From the analysis of the argument and conclusions of both Aristotle and Rousseau concerning women and their social and political role, there emerge two themes. First and the most important factor, which influences the conception of woman, has been their view about the family. Both of them have regarded the family as a natural and necessary institution. So, both of them have defined women by their sexual, procreative and child-rearing functions. This leads to the prescription of a code of morality and conception of rights of women distinctly different from those that have been prescribed for men.

From early childhood, a woman is taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. She comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her the two constituents, yet she always feels a distinct element of her identity as a woman. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others and ultimately how she appears to men is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of her identity and success of her life.
In the context of women’s rights and the manner in which women’s agency have been perceived in the writings of western thinkers including Aristotle and Rousseau, is not devoid of patriarchal biases and images in terms of which women have been conceived. Therefore, it would be pertinent to point out how women need to dismantle these historical injustices through which patriarchy has been practiced beyond the borders of cultural and national locations. It is striking to notice how Gandhi as a political activist and leader of Mass National Movement, looked at the issue of women’s agency, and rights of women, beyond the boundaries of nation state.

Gandhi’s Views on Gender

Gandhi’s own emphasis was centered on women’s effort for their emancipation. He decried men’s attitude of regarding women “as a property”. Gandhi advocated the self-activity of women is of greater significance and insisted for equality between men and women. He focused on feminine qualities as having the strength and moral courage. His ideal is an emphasis on women’s superior capacity for suffering rather than forceful intervention to protect their interest. Gandhi also insisted on the absolute personal dignity and autonomy of women in the family and society. He does not accept all that is given in the scriptures as the word of God. Instead, Gandhi suggested thus: “an authoritative body should discard such texts as have no moral value or are against the fundamentals of religion”.

Gandhi made a radical critique of the contemporary social practices like sati, child marriage, enforced widowhood, prostitution, dowry etc. He succeeded in mobilizing Indian women to fight for independence. Though Gandhi affirmed the formal equality of men and women, yet he did not pay sufficient attention to the economic, political and cultural preconditioning for their emancipation. Consequently, his solutions to the problem of women’s oppression tended to be moralistic and pedagogical.

Gandhi finds that the contemporary status of women reflects historical and thereby affirming men who do not address the issue of equality, made those traditional views of gender relations. “The ancient laws were made by seers who were men. The women’s experience therefore, is not represented
in them. Strictly speaking, as between man and woman, neither should be regarded as superior or inferior.\(^9\) He finds that many reasons for the subordinate condition of women like the traditional practice of dowry etc. treats women as commodities. “The dowry system has to go. Marriage must cease to be a matter of arrangements made by parents for money. The system is intimately connected with caste. So long as the choice is restricted to a few hundred young men or young women of a particular caste, the system will persist, no matter what is said against it. The girls or boys or their parents will have to break the bonds of caste, if the evil is to be eradicated. All this means the education of a character that will revolutionize the mentality of the youth of the nation.”\(^10\)

The way to change the status of women, Gandhi insists, is to demand that they be treated as equals and with dignity. Thus he writes: “I passionately desire the utmost freedom for our women. I detest child marriages. I shudder to see a child widow, and silver with rage when a husband just widowed contracts with brutal indifference another marriage. I deplore the criminal indifference of parents who keep their daughters utterly ignorant and illiterate and bring them up only for the purpose of marrying them off to some young man of means. Notwithstanding all this grief and rage, I realize the difficulty of the problem. Women must have votes and an equal legal status. But the problem does not end here. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nations.”\(^11\)

**Absolute Will, Love and Humanity**

Gandhi’s understanding of women is markedly different in fact, almost a break from that of other reformers. Gandhi works at an altogether different plane. This is a plane from where woman can only be seen as born for love and respect; this conception is steeped in the understanding of absolute will, absolute love and absolute humanity. There is no place for inequality and oppression. Gandhi admits of difference between male and female but the differences are to be appreciated and respected not in anyway hailing them as the grounds for oppression. Infact, for Gandhi, the end of oppression is only the beginning here and this is what makes Gandhi’s perception of the status and standing of women so exclusive.
“When women whom we call abala becomes sabala all those who are helpless becomes powerful” this message of Gandhi to the All India Women’s Conference in 1936 reflects the crucial importance Gandhi gave to the issue of women’s freedom and strength in the struggle to build a humane and exploitation free society. Gandhi saw women not as object of reform and humanitarianism but as self-conscious subjects who could, if they chose, becomes arbiters of their own destiny. In this way, Gandhi represents a crucial break from the attitude of the many of the leaders of the reform movements of the late 19th century, who tended to see women as passive recipient of more humane treatment through the initiative of enlightened male effort.

The most crucial difference is that he does not see woman as object of reform, as helpless creatures, deserving charitable concern. Instead, he sees them as active, self-consciousness agents of social change. His concern is not limited to bringing about change in selected areas of social life such as education and marriage as a way of regenerating Indian society, as what that of 19th century social reformers. He is primarily concerned with bringing about radical social construction. The political movement for national liberation was a means, a weapon to achieve that end. And he saw women playing a major role in the task of social reconstruction. He thought that in the process of reconstructing society, they would also free themselves from the specific forms of bondage that affects them as woman.

Gandhi never considered the woman to be weak. Women are in fact, not weak – there is no reason why she should be dependent on man, there is no eternal rule that leadership in society should always remain in the hands of men. Women can shape and develop herself, and thus only can she help in achieving human progress. In an annual gathering at Bombay Bhagini Samaj held in February 20, 1918, Gandhi delivered in his presidential address the following:

“It is necessary to understand what we mean when we talk of regeneration of woman. It presupposes degeneration and if that is so, we should further consider what led to it and now... Legislation has been mostly the handiwork of man, and men have not always been fair and discriminate in performing that
self appointed task. The largest part of our effort in promoting the regeneration of women should be directed towards removing these blemishes, which are represented in our shastaras as the necessary and ingrained characterization of women. Who will attempt this and how? In my humble opinion, in order to make the attempt, we will have to produce women pure, firm and self-controlled as Sita, Damyanti and Draupadi their words will have the same authorities as the Shastras...Women are the companion of man gifted with equal mutual capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest detail of the activities of man, and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in him. This should be the natural condition of things and not of learning to read and write. By sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying superiority over women, which they do not deserve and not to have. Many of our movements stop half-way because of the conditions of our women...There is no justification for men to deprive women of or deny to them equal rights on the ground of their illiteracy. But education is essential for enabling women to assert these natural rights, to exercise them wisely, and to work for their expansion; the true knowledge of self is unattainable by the millions who lack such education. It is no exaggeration to say that a human being without education is not far removed from an animal. Education, therefore, is necessary for women as it is for men ...Man and women are equal in status, but are not identical. They are peerless pair being complementary to one another, each helps the other, so that without the one, the existence of the other cannot be conceived; and therefore, it follows as a necessary corollary from these facts that anything that will impair the status of either of them will involve the equal ruin of both. Women are the embodiment of self-sacrifice. But at present, her self-sacrifice is restricted to her family. Men made the ancient laws. Though these men were sages and seers, they show a lack of real knowledge of women. I feel if Mirabai cannot get salvation, no man would ever get it.12

Here we can notice that Gandhi evolves a deep sentiment towards the position of women in the Indian society and claims a strong view of women’s dignified status in the society. Gandhi seems to believe the values which women bring to human interaction are necessary to the proper functioning and advancement of modern society, and that qualities that have formerly been associated with the feminine sides of our natures—such as compassion, nurturing, cooperation and empathy—will be increasingly important in creating a peaceful, just, and sustainable world civilization. Gandhi no doubt strongly
condemns the patriarchal structure, which control and limit the space of women but his views on women autonomy is a matter of debate and research. Strikingly enough, if we read Gandhi's ideas carefully, we find that Gandhi advocates the removal of patriarchal values and creation of just society where women are treated as agent with dignity but he ceases to look at the more critical aspects of his thought where women are always looked at from the perspective of idealized mythological world views of characters such as Damyanti, Draupadi, and Sita etc. Therefore, many scholars find Gandhi's these ideas problematic and non-pragmatic. Gandhi and his ideas on women's liberation have been critiqued by liberals and post modernist thinkers where women are being treated with a difference in carving out her own space, agency, rights and personhood, not merely as puppet of the history where women are idealized in the images of Devi, Lakshmi and Durga. It is a different question as to how these critiques of Gandhi are justified, valid and logical. Nevertheless, Gandhi's ideas offer fresh insights to re-conceptualize women's freedom and re-interpret Gandhi in the light of experiences of struggle which women folk have waged in the contemporary times.

**Gender Justice**

Gandhi refers to the equal valuing of the roles of women and men. He argues that women are no way inferior to men. He gives the historical account of women to support his firm conviction that women are capable of doing any thing, which men could do. Gandhi is of opinion that that one should overcome the barriers of stereotypes and prejudices so that both sexes are able to equally contribute to and benefit from economic, social, cultural and political developments within society. When women and men have relative equality, economies grow faster and there is less corruption. When women are healthy and educated, their families, communities and nations benefits.

In Gandhi’s opinion it seems that gender equality can be interpreted to have the same meaning as the emerging concept of gender justice. Gandhi, in the pursuit of gender equality and gender justice focuses on effective methods of change in the thinking and opinion of the common people and put more efforts on the empowerment of women to achieve gender justices.
Gandhi seems to acknowledge that ensuring equity, equality and gender justice in all of the critical areas of the lives of women and men is a moral and ethical imperative as well as fundamental to human rights in all its forms.

If women were to be free they had to be fearless. Gandhi rightly realized that it is more psychological fear and helplessness, culturally imposed upon women by society, than physical weakness which kept women crippled. According to Gandhi:

"Rules of social conduct had to framed by natural co-operation and consultation, not forcibly imposed on women from outside. But men had reduced women somewhat to the position of the slave of old who did not know that he could or ever had to be free since legislation has been mostly the handiwork of men... Men have not always been fair and discriminate in performing that self-appointed task." \(^{13}\)

The fact that women had been so long caged and confined in their houses and little courtyards had a ruinous effect on their personality, narrowing their vision and stunting their interest to petty things. Gandhi felt that women created an unbearable din, and it was difficult to interest them in problems larger than their immediate lives, because they know nothing of them having been never allowed to breathe the fresh air of freedom. This kind of denial of freedom to women leading to their infantilization had to be put an end to not withstanding the religious scriptures that legitimate such denials since they are repugnant to the moral sense.\(^{14}\)

In fact, according to Gandhi, the essential postulate of Hinduism was the absolute freedom of every individual, man or woman, to do whether he or she liked for the sake of self-realization for which alone every human being was born. But then, this absolute freedom was supposed to function within the well-defined boundaries.

For Gandhi, women were not to combine their concern only to what are normally seen as women’s issues but to have a say in the rebuilding of the whole society. For that, he insisted the few educated women in India would have to descend from their western heights and come down to Indian plains. This question of liberation of women, liberation of India, removal of untouchability amelioration of the economic condition of the masses and the
like resolve themselves into penetration into the villages, reconstructing on or rather reformation of the village life.

**Gandhi and Patriarchy**

Patriarchy, by its nature, allows at best only a limited degree of dialogue, whether between husband and wife, father and child, or elder and younger. Patriarchy is characteristically a monologue. M.M. Bakhtin has defined the monologue as the voice of an entrenched authority that denies any meaningful dialogue with another person or group. Even when equality is accepted in theory, in practice it perceives the other as 'merely an object of consciousness', in the process denying that the other has 'equal rights and equal responsibilities. Monologue is deaf to the other’s response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge it in any decisive force. Monologue pretends to be the ultimate word. It closes down the represented world and represented persons.¹⁵

According to Brian Martin, “patriarchy can be seen as a set of social relationships which provide for the collective domination of men over women. Patriarchy is manifest in unequal salaries for similar work, in discrimination, in inequality, in unequal expectations, in patterns of interpersonal dominance and submission, and in patterns of rape and other direct violence.”¹⁶

While Gandhi’s support for women’s equality was genuine, his vision on female autonomy was limited. He was a product of a rigidly patriarchal society in which women had little or no education or independent identity. Gandhi espoused greater political independence for women, but he saw a more limited social role for women. He supported education for women but favored a very narrow curriculum. His notion of female education was confined to home economics and family health. At an educational conference in Gujarat in 1917, he declared, “As Nature has made men and women different, it is necessary to maintain a difference between the education of the two. True, they are equal in life, but their functions differ. It is woman’s right to rule the home. Man is master outside it. Man is the earner, woman saves and spends. Woman looks after the feeding of the child. She shapes its future. She is her children’s educator, and hence, mother to the nation...If this is the
scheme of Nature, and it is just as it should be, woman should not have to earn her living. A state of affairs in which women have to work as telegraph clerks, typists or compositors can be, I think, no good, such a people must be bankrupt and living on their capital.”

Gandhi deplores the custom of child marriage that stood in the way of the education of women. The young wife became merely a household drudge and was unable to provide adequate companionship to a husband. He deplored those men who treated their wives as they would an animal and condemned the complete attribute to Tulsidas: ‘The drum, the fool, the sudra, the animal and the women— all these need beating, arguing that it was either a later interpolation or the poet was merely mouthing the prejudices of his time without any reflection and opined thus: “We must fight this impression and pluck out from its very root the general habit of regarding women as inferior beings.”

Women’s Rights and Empowerment

Gandhi’s beliefs on gender were a unique, sometimes- contradictory, blend of modernity and tradition. On the one hand, he companied vigorously for women’s legal and political rights. Gandhi did more to advance women’s freedom in India. He prompted equality for women as one of the essential pillars of his agenda for India’s advancement. Gandhi wrote: “I have ever believed, that the salvation of India lies in the elevation of her women”. Thus, Gandhi supported and broadened the campaign for women’s rights, extending to all classes and communities and linking it to the demands for independence. Freeing women from the bondage of traditionally prescribe roles was essential to his vision of social change.

Gandhi’s attitudes towards women were as much shaped by his innate sense of compassion and justice as they were by the patriarchal albeit benevolent conservatism that was the sheet anchor of his cultural and social discourse. The contradiction between his liberal feminist pronouncements, his egalitarian, loving and respectful concern for women, his belief in their role in politics and in society is sometimes difficult to reconcile. Yet Gandhi, more than anyone else, struggled with these paradoxes in the existing social milieu.
Comparing his vision of women with the current status of women and the ongoing struggle for women's empowerment will provide a measure of what has been achieved.

This is particularly clear in his response to a question asked of him in an issue of the Harijan in 1934, in which described the ideal within which he placed as the real "What would determine a woman's varna? Perhaps you will answer that before marriage a woman would take her Varna from her father; after marriage from her husband. Should one understand that you support Manu's notorious dictum that there can be no independence for woman at any stage of her life?" In his reply Gandhi analyzed the prevailing social situation and went on to state an ideal objective and finally reiterated the reality embedded within the question. He says: ..Owing to the confusion of varnas today, the varna principle has ceased to operate. The present state of Hindu society may describe as that of anarchy; the four varnas exist today in name only. If we must talk in terms of varna there is only varna today for all, whether men or women; we are all shudras. In the resuscitated varna Dharma, as I conceive it, a girl after her marriage, would naturally adopt her husband's varna and relinquish that of her parents. Nor need . . . any such change... imply a slur since...the age of resuscitation would imply absolute social equality of all four varnas." (Harijan, October 1934). Does Gandhi automatically accept the secondary status of the woman vis a vis the social identity of her husband or father but he goes on to say, "I do not envisage the wife, as a rule, following an avocation independently of her husband."

But Gandhi revealed a deep understanding of the pulse of society, and reflected its rhythm. He offered spinning and the salt agitation as nonviolent ways for women to join the political movement for swaraj. He saw it as right as well as possible for women at that time in history. By 1940, he had provided modifications to his earlier more generalized approach to women's contribution to public life. In an issue of the Harijan of that year there are questions about the rising participation of women in activities outside the home.
Awakening Political Consciousness

The question of awakening civil and political consciousness among Indian women has created a conflict between their traditional domestic duties and their duty towards society. If a woman engages in public work, she may have to neglect her children or her household. How is this dilemma to be solved? In order to respond, more often than not a woman's time is taken up, not by the performance of essential domestic duties, but in catering for the egoistic pleasure of her lord and master and for her own vanities. This domestic slavery of the kitchen is a remnant of barbarism mainly. It is high time that our women kind was freed from this incubus. Domestic work ought not to take the whole of a woman's time.

Despite a change in attitude, Gandhi seems to have the middle class woman rather than the poor one in mind, and adheres to the position that a woman should be able to order her household duties in such a manner as to complete them and yet have enough time for public work were she to abjure vanities. The onus is still on the woman. However, Gandhi was always willing to modify his own stated positions. He simply resolved his contradictions by responding instinctively and practically to a situation as he saw it.

Liberation of woman as Gandhi saw it, was linked to a deep-seated malaise. Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy wrote a long letter to Mahatma Gandhi as far back as 1929, in which she raised some fundamental issues concerning social reform. She also questioned him as to why the Congress, which was fighting for the freedom of every nation and the individual, should not first liberate their women from the evil customs and conventions that restricted their healthy all-round growth. Although Gandhi agreed with her in a rather perfunctory way, he was not prepared to tackle the issues of social and religious customs so directly at that point of time, he observed that men are undoubtedly to blame for their neglect, nay their ill use of women, and they have to do adequate penance, but those women who have shed superstition and have become conscious of the wrong have to do the constructive work of reform. The question of liberation of women, liberation of India, removal of untouchability, amelioration of the economic condition of the masses and the like, resolve themselves by penetration into the villages, reconstruction or
rather reformation of the village life. To achieve one's goal of liberation from the various shackles of society he believed that had to work for total change starting in the villages.

**Satyagraha and Non-violence**

Gandhi believed that *satyagraha* was the most powerful weapon in a nonviolent struggle. Satyagraha involves defiance. It involves the willful, peaceful, breaking of laws that are unjust. It means picketing, protesting, squatting, obstructing, challenging and publicly resisting wrongs. Since women were the most nonviolent and ardent lovers of peace, it could be sharpened and extended as a weapon in women's struggles for justice and equality. To him the ultimate *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* was when women, in vast numbers, rose up to put an end to the destructive aspects of male dominance in society. Had the momentum of freedom struggle not been slowed down, such mobilization could have attracted many more women into public life. Political activity geared towards the transformation of society into the holistic, integrated entity as Gandhi had visualized but has not yet crystallized. Satyagraha is now just a word, a mere symbol, that serves no purpose for the academic or the elite, or even the middle class feminist whose dialectic emerges from a theoretical background far removed from Gandhi's poor women who act because they have no use for words to explain themselves.20

The collective or individual work of women in the political arena in the post independence era has been unremarkable. Unfortunately, the women of the rural classes are subjected to the same oppression as before, not only by the men within their caste but by upper caste communities who carry, out reprisals on communities from the under castes.

Gandhi worked not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but also for liberation of all the suppressed and oppressed sections of society. One of the noteworthy results of his life-work has been the awakening of women, which made them shed their deep-rooted sense of inferiority and rise to dignity and self-esteem. The welfare of the weaker sections of society was dear to his heart. He had no qualms about the
priority of social over political ends. In his opinion, to postpone social reform till after the attainment of Swaraj was not to know the meaning of Swaraj.\textsuperscript{21}

Women, urban and rural, educated and uneducated, Indian and foreign, were attracted to his ideas and deeds. While some like Sarojini Naidu, Lakshmi Menon, Sushila Nayyar and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur rose to prominence, there were thousands of unsung and unnoticed heroines of India who learnt the meaning of liberation from him and contributed with all their energy to the struggle for independence. Life sketches and reminiscences of women freedom fighters give us glimpses of their crusade against injustice and inequality. Hence, we make an attempt in the thesis to understand Gandhi's views on women in the context of social, economic and political issues.

**Social Regeneration**

Gandhi respected traditions of the society, but not at the cost of loss of individual dignity. His practical and dynamic advice was it should be centered on tradition, but to sink in them is suicide. He never hesitated to criticize the evil, which had gripped the Indian society, and tried to mobilize public opinion against such evils. He realized that there were deep-rooted customs hampering the development of women, and women's freedom from such shackles was necessary for the emancipation of the nation.

According to Gandhi, the *purdah* system was vicious, brutal and barbarous. He questioned the basis of the practice of pushing women in seclusion: "Why is there all this morbid anxiety about female purity? Have women any say in the matter of male purity? We hear nothing of women's anxiety about men's chastity. Why should men arrogate to themselves the right to regulate female purity?"

Gandhi viewed marriage as a sacrament imposing discipline on both the partners, not a license for physical union and emphasized spiritual union in marriage. He insisted on monogamous marriages and put forward a plea for inter communal marriages between caste Hindus and Harijans.

For him, sexuality ought to be kept at the minimum inside marriage and totally eliminated outside it. The method of birth control, he favored, was by
exercising self-restraint in life and restricting physical union only for getting children. Referring to his own life, he observed that he began to enjoy his married life only after he abandoned sex. For him, "the conquest of lust is the highest endeavor of a man's or a woman's existence whereas physical union for the sake of carnal satisfaction is reversion to animalism which has to be avoided by both."\textsuperscript{22}

Gandhi realized the miseries of widowhood for a woman as "men have ordained perpetual widowhood for women and conferred on themselves the right to fix marriage with another partner on cremation-ground itself". For him, "Voluntary widowhood consciously adopted by a woman who has felt the affection of the partner, adds grace and dignity to life, sanctifies the home and uplifts religion itself. Widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unbearable joke and defiles the home by secret vice and degrades religion. He believed that it is better for a widow to remarry openly rather than commit sin secretly.

These considerations of Gandhi obviate the necessity to argue that Gandhi seems too much under the influence of Puritanism. He does not recognize the sexuality of women as one of the important basic attribute as a human being. His ideas about women's sexuality are not only traditional but also carry the Brahminic worldview where celibacy is regarded as virtue. Therefore, the feminist scholars like Nivedita Menon and Uma Chakravarty in their works have critiqued Gandhi’s obscurantism towards women’s sexuality and his not being mindful of the women’s urges and aspirations.

Gandhi sees the widows as a strong reservoir of energy, which could be put to use to bring light to the dark corners of the nation. Gandhi respected widows who dedicated themselves to the service of humanity; he had great regard for women who chose the path of staying single to serve society and the nation. In his opinion, not every Indian girl is born to marry. There are many girls willing to dedicate themselves to service instead of servicing one man.

Gandhi had visualized a great role for women in eradicating the evil of communalism. His appeal to women was to refuse to cook, and to starve
them in protest so long as their men "do not wash their hand of these dirty communal squabbles". Gandhi's appeal reached women everywhere in India.

Gandhi's own experience of Kasturba's resistance to acceptance of untouchables as members of the family perhaps made him aware of the role that women can play in the removal of untouchability. "If the Hindu heart is to be cured of the taint of untouchability, women must do the lion's share of the work". His appeal to women was: "If you consider Harijans as untouchables because they perform sanitary service, then what mother has not performed such service for her children."

When Gandhi told women that the economic and the moral salvation of India rested mainly with them, he was not paying mere lip service to them. He was evoking a creative and constructive spirit that was suppressed in them. Gandhi transformed a simple factor like their choice of clothes and jewellery into a force for Swadeshi. Khadi came to be identified with opposition against foreign rule and love for the nation, and giving away her jewellery means that a woman is shedding her own shackles.

**Political Emancipation**

Gandhi revolutionized not only Indian politics, but also the whole perception of life for women. In his words, "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, woman will be the unquestioned leader and, having thus found her place in human evolution, will shed her inferiority complex. Women's entry into 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.

Gandhi had tremendous faith in women's inherent capacity for non-violence. And his experience of participation by women in politics from his days in South Africa till the end of his life bears testimony to the fact that they never failed his expectations. With Gandhi's inspiration, they took the struggle right into their homes and raised it to a moral level. Women organized public
meetings, sold Khadi and prescribed literature, started picketing shops of liquor and foreign goods, prepared contraband salt, and came forward to face all sorts of atrocities, including inhuman treatment by police officers and imprisonment. They came forward to give all that they had - their wealth and strength, their jewellery and belongings, their skills and labor-all with sacrifices for this unusual and unprecedented struggle.

Gandhi’s call to women to involve themselves in the freedom struggle had far-reaching results in changing their outlook. "The cause of Swaraj swept all taboos and old customs before it". Many women in their individual lives shed their age-old prejudices against the caste system. They had no hesitation in leaving the boundaries of their protected homes and going to the jail. They even broke their glass bangles (a sign of ill omen for married women) when they were told that they were made of Czechoslovakian glass. Women's participation in the freedom struggle feminized nationalism and the nationalist struggle helped them to liberate from age-old traditions.

Though Gandhi never challenged the traditional set up, he inspired women to carve out their own destinies within it, and thereby changing its very essence. Women learnt from Gandhi that one can be strong, even if seemingly weak, to protest against injustice. They realized that they do not have to accept the norms of male-dominated politics. They evolved their own perspectives and formulated their own methods. In a way they presented a critique of the colonial unethical state.

Gandhi could see woman as connected with service and not with power. When a woman wrote to him in 1946 about the political scene and the paucity of women in it, he wrote: "So long as considerations of caste and community continue to weigh with us and rule our choice, women will be well-advised to remain aloof and thereby build up their prestige Women workers should enroll women as voters, impart or have imparted to them practical education, teach them to think independently, release them from the chains of caste that bind them so as to bring about a change in them which will compel men to realize women's strength and capacity for sacrifice and give her places of honor. If they will do this, they will purify the present unclear atmosphere." His advice to women was to teach people in village’s simple lessons of
hygiene and sanitation. Seeking power would be, for them, "reversion of barbarity". And still Gandhi believed that, "Women must have votes and an equal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation." \(^{24}\)

**Economic Self-reliance**

Gandhi visualized a humane society, free from exploitation and in justice, built by responsible men and women. Gandhi, however, maintained that the spheres of work for woman and man were different. "She is passive, he is active. She is essentially mistress of the house. He is the breadwinner. She is the keeper and distributor of the bread. She is the caretaker in every sense of the term." Gandhi was of the firm opinion that if women have to work outside the home, they should do so without disturbing it. They can take up some work, which would supplement the income of the family, and spinning, according to him, was perhaps the best work they could undertake. Spinning and weaving for women were "the first lesson in the school of industry". The spinning wheel can be the "widow's loving companion", of livelihood for the poor family and a means to supplement the income of the family of middle class, and for the well-to-do women, it would be a means to relate their lives to those country's poor women.

In the context of women's empowerment specifically concerning their economic rights Gandhi was ardent supporter of their economies and self-reliance. However, we find Gandhi's outlook towards women still imprisoned in the institution of traditional family structures and the boundaries of domesticity and domestication processes. This argument can be further substantiated by feminist and political theorist Anupama Roy's work *Gendering Citizenship*, \(^{25}\) where she has critiqued the Gandhian framework in which women's agency is valorized but not practically given space for realization of actual freedom in the domains of Indian democracy. Therefore, it is still question begging, how far Gandhian traditional frame work is practically feasible in the creation of transforming the women from subject to agent. \(^{26}\)

Though women had no direct control over economic matters, they were the managers of homes. Gandhi was quick to grasp this fact. Hence, to
popularize the message of Swadeshi, a cardinal economic principle for him was the support of women. In his opinion, the Swadeshi vow cannot be kept without the help of women. "Men alone will be able to do nothing in the matter. They have no control over the children that is the woman's sphere. To look after children, to dress them, is the mother's duty and, therefore, it is necessary that women should be fired with the spirit of Swadeshi.

Ideal Models

It is interesting to note that Gandhi does not advise a woman to be an ideal wife or ideal mother. Deviating from the traditional framework, he advises women to be sisters. Pointing out the greatness of a sister over a wife, he maintained that a sister is to the entire world, while a wife hands herself over to one man. Moreover, it is possible to become the world's sister only by making Brahmacharya "a natural condition" and being 'fired by the spirit of service". Women have the potential to do immense service to the unfortunate, by doing this they can be "Sisters of Mercy".

Though Gandhi gave the traditional role a new vigor, he had undaunted faith in the chastity and purity of woman. He was sure that the "dazzling purity" of a woman could disarm even the most beastly of men. In his opinion, an ideal woman would rather give up her life than her purity. Construction of the woman in such terms seems to be at times too idealistic in contemporary times. According to Madhu Kishwar, Gandhi's very vocabulary, in its exaggerated idealization of women as 'sisters of mercy' and 'mothers of entire humanity' reveals the bias of a benevolent patriarch.27

And yet, there is something in his ideas that is essentially radical. He did not see women as helpless objects of reform. Neither did he think of bringing change only in some spheres of life, such as marriage or education. His vision of change was comprehensive. He connected the moral with the political, the social and the economic, presenting an eclectic view of life. For him the means had to be identified with the ends; similarly, he did not differentiate between the private and the public worlds of women. He also enhanced the dignity of woman's housework, advising his men followers to take to spinning and to do ordinary works in everyday life. He himself imbibed so many of a woman's qualities, that he became 'mother' to many.
Gandhi saw that the low status of women was the result of prejudices and adverse traditions, which were centuries old. It was difficult to get women interested in the larger problems of life and society because they knew nothing of them, having never been allowed to breathe the fresh air of freedom. The only factor that would enable women to come out of this situation was the determination and strength of the women themselves. Though men should help in the cause of women, ultimately women will have to determine their destinies. Gandhi sympathizes with women, but he does not want to pity them all the time. Neither does he want them to be irresponsible, pleasure-loving beings. Thus Gandhi says:

"Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none in so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity-to me, female sex, not the weaker sex. It is the nobler of the two, for it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge."28

On the notions of public and private sphere and the range of activity women are supposed to participate, has been subject matter of explanation for the political theorist and philosophers from time immemorial. But when it comes to Gandhi’s remark concerning his theory of human nature and his understanding of how women have been subjugated and dominated by the patriarchal norms, values, beliefs and structures of the society, Gandhi supports the principles of equality before the law and in the practice of society where both men and women should be treated as equal. Unlike other great philosophers of western political philosophy such as Aristotle and Rousseau, Gandhi advocates the basic rights to be given to women. However, Gandhi does not transcend the dichotomy of public and private spheres of life. In this regard, several Indian scholars including Margaret Chatterjee and Uma Chakravarty have criticized his consideration of metaphysical understanding of spirituality where most of the time Gandhi idealizes the image of women as mythological representations. Therefore, we need to re-read Gandhi and the limitations of Gandhian hermeneutics in the context of understanding the all pervasive power relationships which the institutions of family, marriage and nation holds.29
To make the point more clear we may again look at Gandhi’s original ideas where he says that:

“My own opinion is that, just as fundamentally man and women are one, their problem must be one in essence. The soul in both is the same. The two lives the same life, have the same feelings. Each is a compliment of the other. The one cannot live without the other’s active help. But some how or other man has dominated woman from ages past, and so woman has developed an inferiority complex. She has believed in the truth of man’s interested teachings that she is inferior to him. But the seers among men have recognized her equal status. Nevertheless there is no doubt that at some point there is bifurcation. Whilst both are fundamentally one, it is also equally true that in the form there is vital difference between the two. Hence the vocations of the two must also be different. The duty of motherhood, which the vast majority of women will always undertake, requires qualities which man needs not possess.  

Gandhi emphasizes

“To call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man’s injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then, indeed, are women less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, than women is immeasurably man’s superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman...who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than women?”

We find very radical departure in Gandhi’s thought where he has been sensitive and intellectually stimulating by the first phase of feminism, where women are continuously trying to grapple with basic rights equal to men; Gandhi was of the opinion that women should not be shadow of men rather they should celebrate their gender differences and go beyond the men versus women equality frame work. Though these ideas of Gandhi were articulated way back in early twentieth century political thought, there are many feminist scholars who have appreciated the strength of Gandhian argument, where women and the nature and their differences are respected and recognized vis-à-vis men.

In the process of raising the human capability, Gandhi has given the utmost importance to women’s education. Gandhi states:
"I believe in the proper education of women. But I do believe that woman will not make her contribution to the world by mimicking or running a race with men. She can run the race, but she will not rise to the great heights she is capable of by mimicking man. She has to be the complement of man."33

Gandhi was critical of the traditional sense of morality in which women folk have been imprisoned. In one of the interesting dialogue with some writers, in the context of morality and women’s empowerment Gandhi responded to the question raised by the writers.

"Some people oppose a modification of laws relating to the right of a married woman to own property on the ground that economic independence of women would lead to the spread of immorality among women and disruption of domestic life.

I would rather answer the question by a counter question: has not independence of man and his holding property led to the spread of immorality among men? If you answer ‘yes’ then let it be so also with women. And when women have rights of ownership and the rest like men, it will be found that the enjoyment of such rights is not responsible for their vices or their virtues. Morality which depends upon the helplessness of a man or woman has not much to recommend it. Morality is rooted in the purity of our hearts."34

The main contribution of Gandhi to the cause of women lay in his absolute and unequivocal insistence on their personal dignity and autonomy in the family and in society. Personal and social experience had convinced him that hitherto ‘man has regarded woman as his tool. She has learnt to be his tool and in the end found it easy and pleasurable to be such, because when one drags another in his fall the descent is easy...’35 Gandhi emphasized that women needed to take the task of their upliftment in their own hands. "No doubt man is primarily responsible for this state of things. But many women always throw the blame on men and slave their consciences? Do the enlightened among them not owe it to their sex, as also to men whose mothers they are, to take up the burden of reform? ... But where are the brave women who work among the girl-wives and girl-widows, and who would take no rest and leave none for men, till girl marriages becomes an impossibility, and till every girl feels in her self strength enough to refuse to be married.

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except when she is of full age and to the person about whom she is given the final choice? Though men owed it to themselves to help in the cause of women, “Ultimately women will have to determine with authority what she needs”.

Women must protest against being treated as sex objects: ‘if you want to play your part in the world’s affairs, you must refuse to deck yourself for pleasing man’ and revolt against ‘any pretension on the part of man that woman is born to be his plaything’ Gandhi insists on the inviolability of the personal dignity and autonomy of women. She had the right to say ‘No’ even to her husband. ‘I want woman to learn the primary right of resistance. She thinks now that she has not got it’. The woman has the right to her own body which she does not surrender for a life time with marriage. However, this view is intimately linked with his view of a noble woman as a sexless being and legitimate sex as only that which is meant for the purpose of procreation.

In Gandhi’s view, one of the glaring abuses of the Indian womanhood was the custom of child marriage. He saw this evil as intimately related to that of child widowhood. ‘It is irreligion, not religion, to give religious sanction to a brutal custom’ and by countenancing them ‘we recede from God as well as Swaraj’ Thus the question of women’s oppression was linked to social degradation. The oppressive custom of dowry too came under fire from Gandhi. He preferred girls to remain unmarried all their lives than to be humiliated and dishonored by marrying men who demanded dowry. Gandhi found dowry marriage “heartless”. "... The system has to go. Marriage must cease to be a matter of arrangement made by parents for money. The system is intimately connected with caste. So long as the choice is restricted to a few hundred young men or young women of a particular caste, the system will persist no matter what is said against it. The girls or boys or their parents will have to break the bonds of caste if the evil is to be eradicated. Then the age for marrying has also to raised and the girls have to dare to remain spinster, if need be, i.e., if they do not get a suitable match." In Gandhi’s philosophy, the women of India found a new identity. His words and deeds have inspired thousands of women, and will continue to do so, in their struggle against injustice and inequality.
Gandhi saw education as an essential means for ‘enabling women to uphold (their) natural rights’, to exercise them wisely, and to work for their expansion.\textsuperscript{42} Yet much good and useful work could be done ‘without a knowledge of reading and writing’ and he insisted that ‘there is no justification for men to deprive women or to deny them equal rights on the ground of their illiteracy’.\textsuperscript{43} More over, ‘what is all the education worth if on marriage they are to become mere dolls for their husbands and prematurely engaged in the task of rearing would-be manikins?’\textsuperscript{44}

The evil of prostitution received some of his bitterest diatribes. “The beast in man has made the detestable crime a lucrative profession”. \textsuperscript{45} In Gandhi’s view, it degraded men no less than it did women.

“It is a matter of bitter shame and sorrow, of deep humiliation, that a number of woman have to sell their chastity for man’s lust. Man, the law-giver, will have to pay a dreadful penalty for the degradation he has imposed upon the so-called weaker sex ... It is an evil which cannot last a single day, if we men of India realize our own dignity. If many of the most respectable among us were not steeped in the vice, this kind of indulgence would be regarded as, a greater crime than ... the picking of a pocket by a youngster who is in need of money ... let me not be told that the public woman is party to the sale of her honor, but not the millionaire on the racecourse whose pocket is picked by a professional pickpocket ... Does not man, by his subtle and unscrupulous ways first rob woman of her noblest instincts and then make her partner in the crime committed against her.”\textsuperscript{46}

But despite his protest against all social evil including prostitution, he had no clear programme for these women and their rehabilitation nor did he put forth any ideas about how to combat the institution. Therefore, he could only ask the women to give up their “unworthy profession” and become “sannyasinis” of India.\textsuperscript{47} But still there is little doubt about the sudden resurgence of interest in Gandhi, and in reading about and rethinking his ideas and legacy for contemporary relevance. The contemporary interpretations seem to have come as a defense on discovering a quintessential Gandhi lost to the myriad of contingent political critiques by the various social groups.

So far we have been trying to appropriate and examine the arguments purported by Gandhi in delineating the structures of patriarchy, domination...
and subjugation of women in Indian society. There are multi layered accounts
where Gandhi emerges as strong supporter of women freedom and
personhood but at the same time there are many contradictions in Gandhi,
specifically in his views on women’s sexuality and the principles of celibacy
and issues related to the notions of public and private good. However,
Gandhian approach towards the gender justice and elimination of
discriminations based on caste, class and religious denominations offer
creative and fresh insights about Gandhian methodology of gender and
women empowerment. Nevertheless, Gandhi in his own way enables us to
have alternative modernity that does not allow us to be subsumed in the
western scientific, rationalistic modernity.

How far Gandhi’s analysis is fair to the questions of social justice,
equality and the foundation of solidarity in transforming the women’s
movement is a question under concern. In the next chapter on modernity, we
intend to critically engage Gandhian thought on the dichotomy between
tradition and modernity and its efficacy for human emancipation. We have
also drawn the linkages among analytical categories of caste, gender and
modernity. In turn, we analyzed the strength and weaknesses of Gandhian
modernity vis-à-vis western modernity.

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