Chapter III

Gandhi’s Views on Women’s Issues
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Gandhi’s devotion to women began with his devotion to his mother and wife and particularly to women as mother. Motherhood became increasingly his model for liberation of India and his own life. His spiritual bent of mind seems to have come from his mother. As Richard Johnson puts, “The image of the new woman that he wanted to create was deeply influenced and colored by the kind of cultural and emotional environment in which he grew up.”

One needs to bear this in mind to appreciate Gandhi’s views on women’s issues, be it their role and status in family and society, education or property rights; or his efforts to fight evils of child marriage or prostitution; or his concern for widows and rape victims. Gandhi was not a feminist in the Western sense of the term, but his contribution towards liberating the Indian woman from male domination and securing for her a position of equality and reverence has been remarkable. What is more, for the first time in Indian history, he made her realize her strength and capabilities and grow into her full potential.

Gandhi was very much pained to see the degenerated condition of women. He wanted to construct a society based on
justice and equality. In the India of his dreams, he wanted women to have equal rights as men. He declared:

I shall work for an India in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country in whose making they have an effective voice, an India in which there shall be no high class and low class of people, an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony. There can be no room in such an India for the curse of untouchability or the curse of intoxicating drinks and drugs. Women will enjoy the same rights as men. Since we shall be at peace with all the rest of the world, neither exploiting nor being exploited, we shall have the smallest army imaginable. All interests, not in conflict with the interest of dumb millions will be scrupulously respected. Personally I hate the distinction between foreign and indigenous. This is the India of my dreams.²

Gandhi spoke and wrote on almost all aspects of the constraints which women faced in the society pertaining to marriage practices, child marriage, widow remarriage, question of sati, self restraint, birth control, abortion, women's education, their role in the society and gender equality.
Role and Status of Women

K. M. Panikkar rightly says, “The daughter was legislated out of existence, the wife became part of the husband’s family and the widow was presumed to have died.” This was the status of women in India in the nineteenth century. The incessant work of social reformers like Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Ranade and others brought some relief to the hapless women of India. But this improvement was restricted to the urban educated middle class families. It was Gandhi who helped women break the social bondage to a great extent and the general mass of women benefitted from his crusade against their exploitation.

Gandhi considered woman as an individual human being with full and equal right of self-development and blamed men for her inferior status. His considered opinion was that, “Woman has been suppressed under custom and law, for which man was responsible and in the shaping of which she had no hand... Woman has as much right to shape her own destiny as man has to shape his.” The most significant respect in which Gandhi went beyond the agenda of the social reformers was in his injunction that women should play an active role in their own emancipation through satyagraha. He reminded his followers of the bhakti sant Mirabai who, he said, had waged satyagraha against her husband to maintain her moral power.
Simultaneously Gandhi considered certain roles to be essentially important for women. “Motherhood, the art of bringing up the infant of the race without which the race may become extinct, is her special prerogative. It also enjoins upon women special qualities like patience, sympathy, toleration and sacrifice.”\(^5\) This fact was mainly responsible for Gandhi's objection to women's working outside home as he gave great importance to her special function of transmission of moral values to children. He thought that if they got involved in the race for jobs with men, the care and upbringing of child would suffer greatly.

Gandhi wanted women to have a strong, purifying and controlling influence on family and society. His ideal was Sita or Draupadi having all the traits of morality. He said to women, “The economic and moral salvation of India rests mainly on you. The future of India lies on your knees, for you will nurture the future generation. You can bring up the children of India to become simple, God fearing and brave men and women.”\(^6\)

Although Gandhi argued that women were best suited for domestic life, he also encouraged them to participate in political activities as the equals of men. At the Gujarat political conference in Godhra in 1917 he said that in not involving women in their movement they were walking on one leg. When Gandhi was asked to solve the dilemma where a woman was faced with the options of
domestic duties and duty towards society, Gandhi remarked that it was always wrong to run after the 'distant scene' to the neglect of the more immediate duties that might have accrued to one naturally. Neglect of present duty was the way to destruction. At the same time he felt that more often than not a woman's time is taken up not by the performance of essential domestic duties but in catering to the egoistic pleasure of her husband. He held that domestic work ought not to take the whole of a woman's time.

Gandhi held that woman's grace lay in her character and her modesty. He did not want her to be a plaything for man. He therefore was against costly clothes, jewellery and make up. He was of the opinion that real beauty was that of the heart. He was a harsh critic of woman's decorating herself with ornaments. To him it was a sign of slavery, without the removal of which she could not rise to her heights. Thus Gandhi emphasized that by getting over their own whims and fancies and freeing themselves from the slavery of ornaments, women would be able to make spiritual development of their personality.

Gandhi rebuked women for considering themselves subordinate and inferior to men. He wrote, "Somehow 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 teaching that she is inferior to him." He advised them
to resort to civil rebellion against all undesirable and unworthy restraints. Gandhi showed to the women that it was their duty to guard the characters of their husbands as they do of their wives and resist whatever evil in them may be. He knew that women did unconsciously wield influence on their husbands. But he wanted them to have that consciousness which would give them strength so that they would know how to deal with their partners.

Gandhi considered woman superior to man in many ways. He held her to be the embodiment of sacrifice and non-violence. He said, "Woman is more fitted than man to make explorations and take bolder action in ahimsa. For the courage of self-sacrifice woman is any day superior to man as... man is to woman for the courage of the brute." Hence Gandhi assigned a greater role to women, "...in the war against war women of the world will and should lead. It is their special vocation and privilege." Woman is also superior in protecting 'Dharma'. Gandhi believed that Dharma, the basic structure of life, has been safeguarded by her, as men often forget and neglect it.

Gandhi wanted women to be brave. In his opinion there is no sin like cowardice. Woman is not helpless. She should not depend on man. It is degrading for her to beg for man's mercy. He also prevented women from seeking patronage. They should seek
justice, never favour, he felt. Thus Gandhi wanted women to be fit partners of men to conduct the affairs of society.

Equality

Gandhi was against all inequality in any walk of life - political, economic or social. He held that inequality ultimately led to exploitation, which for him was violence. Gandhi made no distinction between men and women. This was in accordance with what was current in ancient times in India. In Vedic times men and women were equal in several walks of life, including the religious and the intellectual. Therefore, in proclaiming the perfect equality of men and women, Gandhi could and did claim that he was following the more ancient authorities than of the later lawgivers like Manu and others. "Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the very minutest detail in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him," he observed.

Gandhi did not approve of Indian society's preference for a boy and general neglect of a girl child. In fact in some cases a girl child is not allowed to be born. Regarding the hankering for a male offspring, he remarked, "...in the present age of sex equality this sort of invidious discrimination against the female sex is an anachronism." He was totally opposed to gender discrimination.
He made no distinction between man and woman so far as the spiritual goal and the way to it were concerned. At the same time he was not blind to the biological differences which nature has made and the consequential difference in the spheres of functions of the two sexes. While he was uncompromising in upholding the equality of the sexes and their respective rights, he was equally clear that equality did not mean either uniformity or a mechanical similarity. Equality, for him, meant equal opportunities in life. He believed that man and woman, though equal, are complementary to each other and neither was complete without the other. He asserted, "Man is supreme in the outward activities of a married couple and therefore he should have a greater knowledge there of. On the other hand, home life is entirely the sphere of woman and therefore in domestic affairs... women ought to have more knowledge." 14

But insistence on the care of home does not imply that woman should consume whole of her time in the slavery of the kitchen or bringing up children. He, instead, preferred part-time work for them, so that home is not neglected. He wanted them to take some work, which could supplement the income of the family. Spinning, according to him, was one of the best works they could undertake in those times. He described charkha as the widow's loving companion. Women could work at charkha while sitting at home. It
was both constructive as well as a remunerative work at their very doorstep.

Gandhi deplored those men who treated their wives as they would an animal. He believed that woman was man's equal and both were jointly responsible for conducting the affairs of the society. He instilled moral courage in his followers to face danger. He never hesitated to place difficult, even hazardous work before women. He had confidence that they would be able to face the challenge. During his historic tour of Noakhali he sent young Abha to a village where there was bitterness between the Hindus and the Muslims, saying she is bound to succeed in her mission. Similarly, Khurshedabehn Naoroji, grand daughter of Dadabhai Naoroji, was sent to work amongst the Pathan followers of Kilan when he was in jail and Sushila Nayyar was posted in Changirgaon.15

In his own institutions and programme of work he paid equal attention and gave equal place to women. There was an air of freedom and self-confidence in the women who lived under his care whether at Sabarmati or at Sevagram. Madhu Kishwar rightly feels, “the twofold achievement of Gandhi was the loosening of the traditional biases and enabling women to reach equal position with men and making their question a moral question generating a sympathetic climate in their favour.”16
Institution of Marriage

Gandhi believed strongly in the institution of marriage, which he saw as a bastion of morality. He refused to consider the relationship between husband and wife as being in any way hierarchical, arguing that it should be considered a partnership between equals. Men had no right to make sexual claims on their wives without their consent. Gandhi saw marriage as a sacrament and union of souls. His ideal of marriage can be summed up in his own words:

Spiritual development ought to be given the first place in the choice for marriage. Service should come next, family considerations and the interest of the social order should have the third place and mutual attraction or "love" the fourth and the last place. This means that "love" alone, when the other four conditions are not fulfilled, should not be held as a valid reason for marriage. At the same time marriage where there is no love should equally be ruled out even though all the other conditions are fully complied with. 17

Gandhi was a strong believer in the sanctity of the family and saw marriage, like religion, as a force for restraint. But he was
against the domestic slavery of women. He regarded domestic slavery as a symbol of barbarism. In case of atrocities of husbands on wives, he advised such wives and her relatives not to feel helpless.

On various occasions, Gandhi expressed his views on evils associated with the marriage ceremony. He was opposed to expensive marriage celebrations. He strongly favoured simplification of the marriage rites and suggested that the religious ceremonials should not cost more than ten rupees. He said that by exercising self-restraint the rich people should lead the poor and thus be helpful in preventing the waste of national resources. The impact of Gandhi's message was felt in the movement. Congress activists in different parts of the country began to propagate simple, ritual free weddings, which came to be known as 'Gandhi Lagan'. This type of wedding involved simply the exchange of garlands by the bride and groom, while their friends and relatives blessed it by clapping their hands. Many such marriages took place even in rural India.

Regarding the ideal of husband and wife Gandhi wrote, "My ideal of a wife is Sita and a husband Rama. But Sita was no slave of Rama or each was slave of the other." Even though Gandhi's ideal of a wife is Sita he knew that every husband was not likely to be an ideal man. Therefore, in response to a question on how a wife could defy her husband to undertake national service, Gandhi
said that a wife need not suppress herself or believe in her husband's absolute claim over her. In this regard, he felt the famous sixteenth century saint poet Mirabai had shown the way. He saw her as one who had due courage to reject the confining role of wife and mother.

In any case Gandhi did not see marriage and motherhood as the only mission in life for every young woman. Any woman who chose to remain unmarried for the nobler purpose of serving society was a much more preferable ideal for self-realization. He repeatedly lamented that a vast majority of girls disappear from public life as soon as they finish the education. "Every Indian girl is not born to marry. I can show many girls who are today dedicating themselves to service, instead of serving one man." Since Gandhi gave primacy of position to everyone's right of self fulfillment, he ruled out marriage as essential for women. Marriage after all imposed certain obligations on a human being. Those who wanted to serve humanity may choose not to accept the restraints of marital and family obligations. The All India Women's Conference, the leading women's organization, adopted a similar position with respect to the rights of young people in 1930, when a resolution was passed stating that "...this conference is of the opinion that marriage should not be made compulsory for every girl
and urges upon parents the necessity of recognizing the rights of sons and daughters to decide their own career in life." 20

Though Gandhi encouraged those who wanted to live a socially useful life to stay unmarried, he did not altogether reject the institution of marriage because he realized that sexuality could not be eliminated, no matter how much he propagandized in favour of conquering it altogether. He saw marriage as the only existing, though inadequate, restraint on sexuality. He advocated a minimization of sexual contact within marriage and a complete repression of it outside marriage.

Gandhi had no objection to inter-caste or inter-religious marriages. In response to angry protests on Indira Nehru’s engagement with Firoz Gandhi, he said, “It would have been cruelty to refuse consent to this engagement. As time advances such unions are bound to multiply with benefit to society...” 21 He even regarded an inter-religious marriage as a welcome event whenever it took place. Nevertheless Gandhi did not advocate conversion in such cases. Both husband and wife could profess their own faith and should retain their own religion. In fact, Gandhi recommends inter-caste marriages to poor parents to get their daughters suitable husbands. He felt, breaking down the barriers would widen the range of choice. For Gandhi, the true purpose of marriage was intimate friendship and companionship.
between man and woman whether it was inter-caste or within the same caste.

**Dowry**

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 dishonoured by marrying men who demanded dowry. He found dowry marriages heartless. He firmly believed that “The system has to go. Marriage must cease to be a matter of arrangement made by parents for money.” He advised parents to go outside their castes and secure husbands for their daughters.

Gandhi scorned young men for this social evil. “Any young man who makes dowry a condition on marriage discredits his education and his country and dishonours womanhood.” Gandhi called upon the many youth movements to deal with the dowry question. He held that young men soiling their fingers with dowry should be excommunicated from society. A strong public opinion condemning dowry would help remove this evil practice. Criticizing the degrading practice of dowry Gandhi held that merit and mutual love are the sole tests for marriage contracts.

**Divorce**

In spite of his idealization of the married state as a partnership, Gandhi was emphatic that marriage did not give
either partner the right to coerce the other against her or his will. In such situations, a wife need not and must not obey the husband against her own conscience. If the husband ill-treated the wife, she had every right to break the bond. “If divorce was the only alternative I should not hesitate to accept it rather than interrupt my moral progress.”\(^24\) However, even while he agreed that divorce should be granted in extreme cases, he would never project it as a desirable thing. He could never think of carrying on propaganda in favour of divorce.

Though Gandhi felt that “The facility for divorce proved no protection against a brutal husband for a pliant wife incapable of asserting...”\(^25\) he recommended it in unavoidable circumstances. Gandhi was convinced that most Hindu divorced wives would not want to be remarried after one bad experience. Therefore he suggested:

Friends and relatives in such cases (should not) be satisfied with the mere negative result of isolating the victim from the zone of tyranny. She should be induced to qualify herself for public service. This kind of training would be more than enough compensation for the doubtful privilege of a husband’s bed.\(^26\)
Child Marriage

In Gandhi's view one of the glaring abuses of India's womanhood was the custom of child marriage. He saw this evil as related to that of child widow. Strongly denouncing this custom he said, "It is irreligion, not religion to give religious sanction to a brutal custom."27 He added, "By countenancing such custom we recede from God as well as Swaraj. A man who has no thought of the tender age of a girl has none of God."28 Thus the question of women's oppression was linked to religion and national health.

To those defending child marriage as prescribed in the Smritis, Gandhi said, "But even if the texts ordering child as opposed to early marriage be found to be authoritative, we must reject them in the light of positive experience and scientific knowledge."29 When the Sarada Act sought to raise the age of consent to fourteen, Gandhi felt it should have been raised to sixteen, even eighteen. He extended full support to the demand to raise the age of consent.

A marriage without consent in Gandhi's opinion was no marriage at all. In response to an attempt to justify child marriage on the basis that the sexual drive of women could lead them to indulgence and sexual malpractices before marriage, Gandhi retorted, "And why is there all this morbid anxiety about female purity? Have women any say in the matter of male purity?... why
should men arrogate to themselves the right to regulate female purity?"\textsuperscript{30} Hence in case of forced marriages he had no inhibition in advising the boys and girls to resist their parents resolutely and in case of already married couple, to break the bond. Answering a question on how society should deal with old men wanting to marry girls of tender age, he said, "The rule about not giving in marriage any girl below twenty and against her will should be rigorously enforced."\textsuperscript{31} Thus he would not hesitate to raise the age of consent to even twenty.

To combat the evil of child marriage he suggested, "Young men of undoubted characters should form themselves into bands of mercy pledged by all just and legitimate means to prevent child marriages and to promote remarriage of child widows."\textsuperscript{32} At the same time he cautioned them to be patient and self-restrained lest the very object might be frustrated. Gandhi was well aware of the ill consequences of child marriage like the premature death of child wives, child mothers and birth of weaker children. The women's movement leaders were in line with Gandhi in this regard. They were of the opinion that the early marriage of girls was one of the causes of the excessively high maternal and infant mortality rate in India. They also conformed to the view of Gandhi that early marriage resulted in curtailing of the girl's educational opportunities. The All
India Women's Conference passed a resolution condemning child marriage during its annual session held in January 1927.

Widow Remarriage

Gandhi was very much against enforced widowhood. He disliked all social and religious barriers to widow remarriage. In case of adult widow, especially those with children, he wanted them to remain true to their married vows rather than remarry. But according to him this must apply equally to men. If a widow could not or did not wish to live alone, she had every right to remarry and society must not look down upon such marriages. Remarriage was better than the suppression of a legitimate desire for fear of misguided public opinion. Gandhi felt that the injunctions in the Shastras prohibiting widow remarriage are against reason and humanity.

Gandhi refused to consider child widows as married at all, as they never experienced married life. Such girls should be duly married off. "Parents who committed the sin of marrying their daughters of tender age should expiate for the sin by remarrying those daughters, should they become widowed while they are yet in their teens."33 If the girls become widowed at a ripe age, it is their concern whether they would remarry or remain widowed. Gandhi felt that the presence of thousands of widows in any society was a
serious menace. Gandhi felt that same rules must apply to women as to men:

If a fifty years old widower may remarry with impunity, it should be open to the widow of that age to do likewise. That in my opinion, both will be sinning by remarriage is quite another matter. I should any day subscribe to a reform in the Hindu law making sinful the remarriage of a widow or a widower who voluntarily marries after maturity. 34

He saw voluntary enlightened widowhood as a great social asset and believed that a real Hindu widow is a treasure. However Gandhi wanted men to follow the same ideal. He held that Hinduism would remain imperfect as long as men did not accept suffering as some of the widows did. He wanted the widowers to withdraw their interests from the pleasures of life. Gandhi emphasized the potential of widows as servants of the nation. "It is worth considering carefully what way the country can avail itself of the services of hundreds of widows young and old." 35 In case of ill treatment of widows he said, "A widow deserves to be looked upon with reverence. It is a sin to despise her. The sight of a pure widow is a good omen." 36
In Gandhi's view, the remedial measures to fight the evil of enforced widowhood were enlightened public opinion among the Hindus and parents marrying their girl widows. He also urged young men to marry only widows. Addressing the students of Pachiappa College at Madras he said, "I want you to make this sacred resolve that you are not going to marry a girl who is not a widow."  

Prostitution

The evil of prostitution received Gandhi's bitterest attacks. He wrote, "The beast in man has made the detestable crime a lucrative profession." In his 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 women have to sell their chastity for man's lust." He attacked man for his abuse of the better half of humanity.

To remove this social evil he suggested to men and women that the prostitutes must be persuaded to give up their immoral trade and find suitable employment for them like spinning. But Gandhi was well aware of the fact that spinning could not secure a living for them. He also recommended other occupations like weaving, tailoring or fancy work on khaddar, lace work, embroidery and other handicrafts, which can easily provide them an income. At
the same time "He felt that work among the unfortunate sisters must be left to experts because he was not sure whether all of the Congress men who began to take up the cause with enthusiasm were themselves inspired by the right motive and were equipped to handle the problem." Instead he suggested that they work among those who visited prostitutes and brought shame on society.

The fight against prostitution and the rehabilitation of the fallen sisters was an integral part of the programme of national reconstruction and purification, which Gandhi urged women to take up. He asked them to form a women's volunteer league for the reclamation of the prostitutes. Madhu Kishwar points out, “There are quite a few instances of prostitutes, young and old, having given up their calling and taken to charkha as a means of livelihood in response to Gandhi's call. This happened at Madaripur and Noakhali in Bengal.”

When Gandhi heard that the prostitutes had undertaken social work under the banner of Congress at Barisal, he called it a disgrace. He declined to accept them as Congress members or even to accept their service unless they gave up being prostitutes. The prostitutes were told "None could officiate at the altar of Swaraj, who did not approach it with pure hands and a pure heart." He would not even accept donations or services from them so long as they continued the life of shame.
Though Gandhi was harsh upon the prostitutes, he had immense sympathy for rape victims. He held, “A woman is worthy of condemnation only when she is a willing party to her dishonour. In no case are adultery and criminal assault synonymous terms.” Gandhi condemned the large-scale atrocities on women during Hindu Muslim riots before and after partition. When Gandhi came to know that the victims were unwilling to return to their homes for fear of disgrace and humiliation, he assured them, “A woman who was forcibly molested had nothing to be ashamed of. She was in no way unchaste or immoral.” Gandhi lashed out at the parents and husbands who were not willing to receive back the abducted women. “It would be a barbarian husband or a barbarian parent who would say that he would not take back his wife or daughter.”

What touched Gandhi even more deeply than the arson, murder and loot was the cry of outraged womanhood. His heart was wrung in agony. He remarked at one of his prayer meetings, “It is not death that matters but how you meet death. To die at the hands of one's brother is a privilege, provided you die bravely. But what about women who are being abducted and forcibly converted? ...Why should Indian women feel so helpless? Is bravery the monopoly of men?”

The question of the protection of the honour of women from criminal assaults in terms of non-violence had long engaged
Gandhi's attention. Kishwar writes, “He had come to the conclusion that in the ultimate analysis it is not their physical weakness that encourages assaults on women or makes them fall a victim to the same but a defect in will to resist. When a person wants to be violent, physical weakness does not come in the way of its effective use even against a physically powerful opponent.”

To many a query like what a woman is to do when attacked by miscreants, and does not resistance amount to violence, Gandhi replied:

When a woman is assaulted, she may not stop to think in terms of himsa or ahimsa. Her primary duty is self-protection. She is at liberty to employ every method or means that comes to her mind in order to defend her honour. God has given her nails and teeth. She must use them with all her strength and, if need be, die in the effort.

Obviously Gandhi preferred violence to cowardice. He would have a woman kill herself rather than surrender. In Gandhi's view a pure and chaste woman who is fearless can never be dishonoured.

**Purdah**

Gandhi's opposition to purdah, the seclusion and veiling of women, was absolute and unequivocal. He denounced purdah as a
barbarous custom, which does incalculable harm to the country. He had no faith in the argument that purdah protects the virtue of women. He said that chastity must grow from within and added, "to be worth anything it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation."49 He admonished men, for not trusting their women. "...men, to be men, must be able to trust their womenfolk, even as the latter are compelled to trust them."50 Gandhi firmly believed that the purdah crippled not only the free movement of women but interfered with their advancement and their capacity for doing work useful to society. He insisted on his being taken to the sanctum sanctorum of the family, the ladies quarters. Meeting with the women of the house was necessary, as Gandhi wanted them to participate along with men in satyagraha.

Gandhi appealed to the Indians to "tear down the purdah with one mighty effort."51 This appeal of Gandhi and his other utterances from time to time brought about miraculous changes in the thinking of the people and provoked them to action. Consequently in Bihar there was a movement against the purdah system and the pernicious practice was put to an end. With his unsparing denunciation of this evil Gandhi "...stands out in modern India as the champion of free and equal womanhood."52
Birth Control

The leaders of the women's movement were divided over the issue on birth control. Those opposed to artificial means of birth control argued that self-control is the only legitimate method of population control. Their contention that the use of artificial means would destroy both religion and morality was similar to the position taken by Gandhi.

Rameshwari Nehru, a staunch follower of Gandhi said that although self-control is undoubtedly the best means of birth control, it is not a practical solution to the problem for millions of Indian men and women. The poor and ignorant that suffer from frequent births need it more. Barbara Southard remarks, "Although Gandhi was sensitive to the arguments of those favouring contraception that it would alleviate the suffering of the poor, the argument against the use of artificial means of birth control weighed more heavily with him." To Gandhi artificial control of birth was an immoral practice.

After talks with Mrs. Margaret Sanger, the famous leader of the birth control movement in 1936, Gandhi expressed admiration for her sincerity but he stuck to his stand that self-control is the only legitimate means of birth control. He firmly believed that:
Birth control by contraceptives no doubt regulates to a certain extent the number of new comers, and enables persons of moderate means to keep the wolf from the door. But the moral harm it does to the individual and society is incalculable. For one thing the outlook upon life of those who satisfy the sexual appetite for the sake of it is wholly changed. 54

Moreover Gandhi was of the opinion that birth control by artificial aids was an impracticable thing among the millions of people in India. He felt it was easier to induce them to practice self-control than control by contraceptives.

It was Gandhi’s firm conviction that women in general have more self-control than men, and in particular they have more control over sexual desire. Instead of looking to artificial means to limit their families, Gandhi therefore suggested that wives should exercise their right to say no. He pointed out that women were not slaves of men. If only women would get enlightened on this matter there would be no birth control problem, and thus help men to conquer their animal passions. Women were thus handed the additional responsibility of sexual restraint in marriage.
Gandhi's very philosophy of life sought to lay down that the achievement of control over the passion is necessary to achieve self-realization. Southard rightly feels, "It was therefore consistent for him to conclude that even the laudable goal of limiting poverty and the suffering of the poor should not be something through the use of artificial means of contraception, which in his view would encourage unbridled expression of sexual passion." 55

**Property Rights**

Although Gandhi said little on the problem of independent incomes for women, he definitely advocated fundamental changes in Hindu inheritance laws to give men and women equal property rights. He declared himself ".... uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man." 56 The All India Women's Conference took the same position as that of Gandhi, and declared in 1931 that there should be complete equality between the sexes in the matter of inheritance of property.

But Gandhi rightly realized, "...to remove legal inequalities will be a mere palliative. The root of the evil lies much deeper than most people realize. It lies in man's greed of power and fame and deeper still in mutual lust. Man has always desired power. Ownership of property gives this power." 57 To the objection to
married women owning property on the ground that economic independence of women would lead to the spread of immorality among women, he quipped, "Has not independence of man and his holding property led to the spread of immorality among men? If your answer is yes then let it be so also with women." However Gandhi was basically against owning property. With his belief in trusteeship and non-possession, he felt that it is better to have no ancestral property at all. The real property that a parent can give, in his view, was character and educational facilities. It is the responsibility of the parents to make their sons and daughters self-reliant and earn their livelihood by hard work.

Gandhi's attitude towards the problem of economic independence for women was complex. Although he was aware that the vast majority of women would marry and be mothers, he hoped that a few would choose not to marry in order to serve humanity. M.S. Patel states, "He however advocated women entering professions such as teaching to serve society, rather than for the purpose of gaining access to an income which would lead to economic independence." 

**Education**

Gandhi gave greater priority to women's education. In his Basic National Education Scheme he proposed free and
compulsory education for boys and girls from ages seven to fourteen. Gandhi saw education as an essential means for enabling women to uphold their natural rights and to exercise them wisely. With regard to the type of education girls should receive, Gandhi felt that the educational curriculum should be adapted to the special needs of girls in order to prepare them to be mothers and home makers. Gandhi was a severe critic of modern English education imparted to boys and girls. He was convinced that English education was not at all necessary for men and women. He put greater emphasis on education in the vernacular. English education only served to alienate boys and girls from the realities of Indian life, he believed.

The distinction in the field of activity requires that education of the two has to be different. The educational system for women should emphasize household management like upbringing and education of children and other related matters. Though he did not believe in the division of knowledge into watertight compartments, he warned, "unless the instructions are based on a discriminatory appreciation of these basic principles, the fullest life of men and women cannot be developed." It did not mean, he added, that the work of one is superior and that of the other inferior; the spheres of the two are complementary.
Most women educators in the early twentieth century agreed with Gandhi that women's education must respond to the needs of their different social roles. Though they were unanimous in this, there was no consensus as to the way in which the education of women should differ. While some believed that the special needs of women would be served by adding home science course to the curriculum, others favoured the restructuring of the entire syllabus for girls. Also there was considerable difference of opinion among women educators with regard to the propriety of co-education.

Though most educators favoured co-education in the primary grades, they were doubtful about the relevance of co-education in the adolescent years of secondary school and college. Those totally opposed to co-education argued that co-education was a Western concept not suitable to Indian culture. In any case it would be impractical if a separate syllabus was adopted for girls. In the face of all this controversy Gandhi attempted to take a flexible approach to the subject of co-education. He felt that co-education was generally desirable and education should be universal in the pre-adolescent years. According to Gandhi, as far as possible boys and girls should be educated together up to the age of sixteen and should be given the option to decide whether they prefer to study together or in separate institutions in later years.
Gandhi's advice to the educated women was to understand the realities of life and serve the women. He lamented, "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." Though Gandhi never placed an unnecessary higher value on the knowledge of reading and writing still he believed that education is essential for enabling women to uphold natural rights, to improve them and to spread them. Gandhi exhibited a fine understanding of women's problems when he said, "...the way to women's freedom is not through education, but through the change of attitude on the part of men and corresponding action."

Final Analysis

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore was right when he wrote, "...in fact his (Gandhi's) tenderness to women is one of the noblest and most consistent traits of his character." Gandhi had a rare insight into women's problems, as he could enter into their feelings as no man could ever do. He had come in contact with lakhs of women who told him that they found a fellow woman in him and not a man. And Gandhi thought they were right. He took a mother's interest in the private life of those who were close to him. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur provides the testimony, when she says, "We found in him not only a "Bapu" - a wise father, but what is more
precious, a mother, before whose all embracing and understanding love all fear and restraint vanish.” 65

Gandhi's heart ached for the suppressed half of humanity. He held men to be largely responsible for the tragedy. In the course of his social reform work he realized that if he wanted to purify society of the various evils he had to cultivate a mother's heart. “And so partly to expiate for a state of things in which as a man he had a share he became a mother to thousands of girls.”66

The measures that Gandhi adapted to reform society were very much down to earth. Regarding the remedies for many of the evils Gandhi favoured creation of public opinion as well as legislation. In his opinion legislation alone could not be effective unless people were for such reforms. Though he had immense faith in the wisdom of Hindu Shastras he believed in the application of reason on each and every issue. He even went to the extent of rejecting those religious texts, which went against the moral code. Gandhi claimed himself to be a practical idealist. He would not be content with mere generalities. So he took care to specify how exactly woman can meet the needs of humanity, like ridding it of violence, once she comes to realize her tremendous advantage over man. When Gandhi spoke or wrote on purely mundane matters such as widow remarriage or reclamation of fallen sisters he took care to focus on details of action and practical management. “And as for
the higher ideals of life he made them appear feasible and perhaps even winsome by struggling to live up to them visibly and surely not without an impressive measure of success." 67

Gandhi wanted women to participate along with men in satyagraha, the non-violent fight for the freedom of the country and to carry on the Constructive Programme, which was an integral part of that movement. He believed that women had a moral power that was practically suited to satyagraha. Gandhi involved women in every activity that he undertook. Women were not to confine their concern only to what are normally seen as women's issues but have a say in the rebuilding of the whole society. He employed some of them in his secretarial work. He did not hesitate to send them to face difficult situations. This was manifested in South Africa and again when he asked some of them to live with the villagers, unattended by men in riot affected Noakhali. He had full confidence and trust in their capacity to defend themselves and their honour and if required to lay down their lives for its protection.

Gandhi was a ceaseless crusader of women's equality. He brought women out of their homes and made them equal participants in all walks of life - social as well as political. His entourage always consisted of several women. Under Gandhi's leadership thousands of women took leading roles in several
movements. Gandhi never considered women to be unfit for any position or task. Because of Gandhi's support, women's groups were formed all over India and there was hardly a week when Gandhi did not address them.

Gandhi formulated India's freedom struggle as a comprehensive plan for women's development. Today even though a lot of inequalities remain in our society, there is a fundamental agreement that men and women are equal. As we look back at the Indian history and compare the conditions of women before Gandhi's rise, and now, the progress that has been made is quite significant. A whole generation of women leaders came up influenced by Gandhi's vision. If today in India so many women can go to work in offices, educational institutions, and factories without fear or hesitation, the roots for such system were laid ninety years ago by Gandhi and his followers.

Gandhi rested high hopes on women in constructing a Rama Rajya. If they wished they could establish non-violence, help the poor through charkha, bring about Hindu-Muslim unity and remove untouchability. He instilled a rare courage in them. He believed that ultimately it is women who would bring about the emancipation of women. As a result of Gandhi's crusade against women's oppression, most of the restrictions on women were relaxed. They could breathe freely. Though patriarchy was not done
away with completely there was considerable relaxation in the hold of men on women. Gandhi was instrumental in getting women their due place in society. In the ultimate analysis Gandhi emerges as one of the greatest emancipators of women.
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