

“Women Empowerment through Gandhian Ideology: A Critical Evaluation”

By

KAVITA DEVI

**(Research Scholar, Department Political Science, Baba Masthnath University, Asthal Bohar
Rohtak Haryana, Gmail Id- kavitaduhan75@gmail.com)**

and

Dr. SONIKA (Assistant Prof.)

**(Department Political Science, Baba Masthnath University, Asthal Bohar Rohtak Haryana, Gmail Id-
ravindrasingh188@gmail.com)**

ABSTRACT: Women empowerment has become a major focus in contemporary society, aiming to provide women with equal rights, opportunities, and confidence to participate fully in social, economic, and political life. Mahatma Gandhi, as a social reformer and leader of India’s freedom movement, emphasized the moral, educational, and social development of women as a key to their empowerment. His ideology focused on equality, self-confidence, non-violence, education, economic self-reliance, and active participation in social and political activities.

This paper critically examines the relevance of Gandhian principles in empowering women today. It analyzes how Gandhi encouraged women to step out of traditional domestic roles, take part in movements, gain leadership skills, and develop moral and social awareness. The study also highlights the limitations of Gandhian thought, such as its emphasis on traditional gender roles and moral idealism, which may not fully address the challenges faced by women in modern society.

The paper concludes that while Gandhian ideology cannot replace modern legal, economic, and institutional measures, it provides a strong ethical and moral foundation for women empowerment. By selectively adapting Gandhian principles to contemporary contexts, it is possible to create a more inclusive, confident, and socially responsible environment for women.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Gandhian Ideology, Non-Violence, Self-Reliance, Social Participation, Gender Equality

INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment has become one of the most important social and political concerns of the modern world. It refers to the process through which women gain confidence, self-respect, equal rights and the ability to participate fully in social, economic and political life. Despite legal provisions and policy measures, women in many societies continue to face discrimination, inequality and limited opportunities.

Therefore, the search for ethical and sustainable approaches to women empowerment remains relevant even today.

Mahatma Gandhi was not only a leader of India's freedom movement but also a profound social thinker who gave special attention to the status of women in society. He believed in the moral and spiritual equality of men and women and strongly opposed all forms of discrimination against women. According to Gandhi, true empowerment of women was possible only when they developed self-confidence, moral strength and a sense of dignity. He emphasized education, self-reliance, non-violence and social participation as key means of empowering women.

Gandhian ideology encouraged women to step out of the private sphere and actively participate in social and political movements. Through methods like Satyagraha and constructive work, Gandhi provided women with opportunities to become active agents of social change. His approach to women empowerment was based more on moral reform and social awakening than on legal or institutional measures.

However, Gandhian ideas on women empowerment have also been critically debated in modern times. Critics argue that his emphasis on idealism, sacrifice and traditional roles of women may limit their freedom in a rapidly changing society. In the context of contemporary feminist thought and modern economic realities, it becomes necessary to critically evaluate the relevance and limitations of Gandhian ideology.

WOMEN'S STATUS IN PRE-GANDHIAN INDIA

Before the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi on the Indian political scene, the status of women in India was marked by severe social, economic, and educational deprivation. The Indian society of the 19th and early 20th centuries was deeply patriarchal, where women were largely confined to the private sphere of the home and had almost no voice in public life. Their identity was tied entirely to the men in their lives—first as daughters, then as wives, and finally as mothers. They were victims of rigid customs and a mindset that viewed them as inferior and dependent beings.

The lives of women were burdened by several regressive social evils. Child marriage was a common practice, which not only deprived young girls of their childhood and education but also led to early motherhood and high mortality rates. The Sati system, though legally abolished in 1829 due to the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, still lingered in certain mindsets, and the condition of widows remained pitiable. Widows were often forced to live a life of isolation, wearing white clothes, eating bland food, and being excluded from all social celebrations. Furthermore, the Purdah system (the practice of veiling) was strictly followed in many parts of India, which restricted women's physical movement and prevented them from interacting with the outside world.

Educationally, women were kept in total darkness. There was a widespread superstitious belief that if a woman learned to read and write, it would bring bad luck to her family or lead to her husband's death.

Consequently, the female literacy rate was abysmally low, with less than 1% of women having access to basic schooling. This lack of education made them unaware of their rights and kept them trapped in a cycle of dependency.

Economically and legally, women had no standing. They did not have the right to inherit property, and their role was restricted to domestic chores and child-rearing. While early reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Jyotirao Phule had started movements for widow remarriage and female education, these changes were mostly limited to the upper classes and urban areas. The vast majority of Indian women, especially in rural areas, remained oppressed and invisible. It was only with the emergence of Gandhian ideology that the struggle for women’s rights shifted from a few isolated reforms to a mass movement, giving women the confidence to step out of their homes and claim their place in the nation’s history.

GANDHIAN IDEOLOGY: CORE PRINCIPLES RELEVANT TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

To understand Gandhi's impact on women's empowerment, it is essential to look at the spiritual and moral principles he used to motivate millions. Gandhi did not just want to change laws; he wanted to change the way women viewed themselves and the way society viewed women.

Gandhian Principles & Women's Empowerment

Principle	Core Meaning	Relevance to Women Empowerment
Ahimsa (Non-Violence)	The practice of not causing harm and using love to solve conflict.	Gandhi believed women were the "personification of non-violence." He argued that women's natural patience and power of sacrifice made them superior leaders in a non-violent struggle.
Satyagraha (Truth-Force)	Standing up for the truth using "soul-force" rather than physical strength.	It gave women a weapon that didn't require "physical muscle." By joining protests and picket lines, women proved they were Sabala (strong) rather than Abala (weak).
Swadeshi & Charkha	Using locally made goods and achieving economic self-reliance.	The spinning wheel (Charkha) allowed women to become financially independent from their own homes. It turned them into active partners in the national economy and the freedom movement.
Sarvodaya (Welfare of All)	The belief that the progress of a society depends on the upliftment of everyone.	Under this, Gandhi fought against social evils like Child Marriage, Dowry, and Purdah. He believed society could not rise if its women were left behind or oppressed.
Equality of	The idea that men and	While he viewed their roles as different (complementary), he

Status	women are equal in value and rights.	was uncompromising about their freedom. He believed women should have the same mental and spiritual liberty as men.
--------	--------------------------------------	---

CONTRIBUTION OF GANDHI TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Mahatma Gandhi made a significant contribution to women empowerment by encouraging women to actively participate in public life. Before the national movement, most women remained confined to household responsibilities and had very limited involvement in social and political activities. Gandhi changed this situation by motivating women to join the freedom struggle and take part in constructive programmes.

One of Gandhi’s major contributions was the large-scale mobilization of women in the national movement. He encouraged women to participate in activities such as spinning khadi, picketing liquor shops, joining non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements. Through these activities, women gained confidence and began to see themselves as important contributors to the freedom struggle.

Gandhi’s ideas also inspired women to take up leadership roles. Many women leaders who emerged during the freedom movement were influenced by Gandhian ideals of service, courage and moral strength. Gandhi believed that women possessed strong moral power and were capable of leading social and political movements with determination and discipline. Another important contribution of Gandhi was the creation of political awareness among ordinary women. He addressed women not only from educated backgrounds but also from rural and poor communities. Through meetings, writings and movements, Gandhi helped women understand their rights, duties and role in nation-building. This awareness encouraged women to think beyond domestic boundaries and engage with social issues.

Gandhi’s approach to women empowerment focused more on participation than on legal or legislative reforms. He believed that real empowerment comes when women actively participate in social and political processes. By involving women in movements and constructive work, Gandhi enabled them to experience empowerment in practice rather than depending only on laws and policies. In this way, Gandhi played a crucial role in awakening women’s consciousness and laying the foundation for women empowerment through active participation, moral strength and social responsibility.

RELEVANCE OF GANDHIAN IDEOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Women empowerment is one of the most important goals of contemporary society. Although women today have better access to education, employment and political rights than in the past, gender inequality, violence,

discrimination and social pressure still exist. In this context, Gandhian ideology continues to remain relevant as it offers a value-based and ethical approach to women empowerment.

Mahatma Gandhi strongly believed in the moral and spiritual equality of men and women. He rejected the idea that women are weaker or inferior to men. In modern society, where women still struggle for equal opportunities and respect, Gandhi’s idea of equality supports the demand for equal rights, dignity and fair treatment in all spheres of life.

Aspect of Gandhian Ideology	Gandhi’s Core Idea	Contemporary Relevance to Women Empowerment
1. Equality of Men and Women	Gandhi believed that men and women are morally and spiritually equal, even if their physical roles differ.	In today’s society, gender equality remains a major challenge. Gandhian belief in equality supports women’s right to equal education, employment and participation in decision-making. It reinforces the idea that empowerment begins with recognition of equal worth and dignity.
2. Moral and Inner Strength	Gandhi emphasized self-confidence, self-respect and moral courage over physical power.	Modern women empowerment is not only about laws but also about confidence and self-belief. Gandhian focus on inner strength helps women resist discrimination, violence and social pressure with dignity and courage.
3. Non-Violence (Ahimsa)	Non-violence was the foundation of Gandhi’s social and political philosophy.	In contemporary times, women face domestic violence, harassment and social injustice. Gandhian non-violence promotes peaceful resistance, dialogue and ethical protest, which are widely used in women’s rights movements today.
4. Satyagraha and Peaceful Protest	Gandhi encouraged oppressed groups to assert their rights through truth and non-violent resistance.	Women’s movements today often use peaceful demonstrations, campaigns and advocacy. Gandhian Satyagraha provides a moral and democratic method for women to demand justice without violence.
5. Education of Women	Gandhi supported education that develops character, skills and self-reliance.	Education remains the strongest tool for women empowerment today. Gandhian emphasis on value-based education supports holistic development rather than only career-oriented learning.

6. Economic Self-Reliance	Gandhi promoted self-employment and dignity of labour, especially through cottage industries.	In present times, women's economic independence is essential for empowerment. Gandhian ideas are reflected in Self-Help Groups, micro-finance, skill development and rural entrepreneurship programmes.
7. Participation in Public Life	Gandhi encouraged women to step out of homes and take part in social and political movements.	Today, women's participation in politics, local governance and civil society is increasing. Gandhian ideology supports active involvement of women at grassroots and leadership levels.
8. Social Responsibility and Service	Gandhi viewed empowerment as service to society rather than individual dominance.	Contemporary empowerment models often stress individual success. Gandhian ideology balances this by emphasizing collective welfare, social responsibility and ethical leadership among women.
9. Dignity of Women	Gandhi strongly opposed practices that humiliated women, such as untouchability and exploitation.	Respect and dignity remain central issues in women empowerment debates. Gandhian thought strengthens campaigns against gender violence, exploitation and objectification of women.
10. Decentralization and Grassroots Empowerment	Gandhi supported village-level self-governance and community participation.	Women empowerment today is strengthened through Panchayati Raj Institutions and local leadership. Gandhian decentralization helps women gain power at the grassroots level.
11. Empowerment through Participation	Gandhi believed empowerment comes from action, not only laws.	Even today, legal provisions alone are insufficient. Gandhian emphasis on participation encourages women to become active agents of change rather than passive beneficiaries.
12. Ethical Leadership	Gandhi advocated leadership based on values, honesty and service.	Women leaders today face ethical and political challenges. Gandhian leadership ideals provide an alternative model based on integrity, empathy and social justice.
13. Simplicity and Sustainable Living	Gandhi promoted simple living and rejection of excessive consumerism.	Modern empowerment faces pressure of materialism. Gandhian simplicity supports sustainable development and balanced lifestyles for women.

14. Social Reform and Awareness	Gandhi focused on changing social attitudes along with political change.	Social awareness is crucial in combating patriarchy. Gandhian emphasis on social reform complements legal and institutional efforts in women empowerment.
15. Inclusive Empowerment	Gandhi worked for empowerment of ordinary and marginalized women, not only elites.	Present empowerment initiatives aim to include rural, poor and marginalized women. Gandhian ideology supports inclusive and equitable empowerment.

Gandhian ideology remains highly relevant to contemporary women empowerment because it addresses both the external and internal dimensions of empowerment. While modern approaches often focus on laws, policies and economic growth, Gandhi emphasized moral strength, social participation and self-respect. His ideas help women develop confidence, dignity and leadership qualities, which are essential for long-term empowerment. At the same time, Gandhian ideology encourages a balanced approach. It promotes empowerment without violence, without exploitation and without domination. In an era of rapid globalization and social change, Gandhian values offer ethical guidance and sustainability to women empowerment efforts.

COMPARATIVE & CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

1. Gandhian Ideology vs Modern Feminist Thought

Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on women empowerment were based on moral strength, non-violence, self-reliance, and social participation. He emphasized equality, but also encouraged women to follow traditional roles such as nurturing and service to society. In contrast, modern feminist thought focuses more on legal rights, social justice, personal freedom, career opportunities, and challenging structural patriarchy. Feminism often demands radical changes in social norms, while Gandhi focused on gradual moral reform and ethical awakening. Thus, while both aim for women empowerment, Gandhi emphasized ethical and moral development, whereas feminism emphasizes rights, equality and systemic change.

2. Selective Relevance Rather Than Total Acceptance

Not all aspects of Gandhian ideology are fully applicable in the modern world. For example, his emphasis on traditional domestic roles for women may not align with women pursuing careers, higher education, or leadership roles in professional sectors. However, many Gandhian principles, such as self-confidence, moral courage, non-violence, participation in social life, and economic self-reliance, remain highly relevant today. Therefore, Gandhi's ideas should be

adapted selectively, applying those principles that support contemporary women empowerment while modifying or reinterpreting those that are outdated.

3. Need for Reinterpretation

The challenges faced by women today, such as gender discrimination, workplace inequality, and social violence, are different from Gandhi's time. Hence, Gandhian ideology needs to be reinterpreted in the context of modern society. This reinterpretation involves integrating Gandhian ethics with modern education, legal rights, economic independence, and social justice. By doing so, women empowerment can be made both morally grounded and practically effective, combining the best of Gandhi's vision with contemporary feminist ideas.

CONCLUSION

Mahatma Gandhi played a vital role in shaping the ideas of women empowerment in India. His ideology emphasized moral strength, self-confidence, non-violence, education, social participation, and economic self-reliance as the key tools for empowering women. Gandhi encouraged women to step out of domestic spaces, take part in social and political movements, and contribute actively to nation-building. Through these efforts, women not only gained confidence and leadership skills but also became aware of their rights and social responsibilities.

At the same time, Gandhian ideas have certain limitations. His focus on traditional gender roles, moral idealism, and voluntary social reform may not fully address the structural inequalities and modern challenges faced by women. Therefore, while Gandhi's principles provide a strong ethical foundation, they need to be reinterpreted and adapted to contemporary contexts, integrating legal frameworks, economic opportunities, and feminist perspectives.

In conclusion, Gandhian ideology serves as a moral compass for women empowerment, offering valuable guidance on self-confidence, ethics, and social participation. When combined with modern policies, education, and economic measures, it can contribute significantly to creating an empowered, inclusive, and socially responsible environment for women in the 21st century.

REFERENCES

Journal Articles & Research Papers

- Campbell, D., & Dass, P. L. (2025). Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts on women empowerment and present scenario. *Think India Journal*. Retrieved from <https://thinkindiaquarterly.org/index.php/think-india/article/view/12383>
- Shriwastav, M., & Maurya, N. (2024). [A study on Mahatma Gandhi's views on women empowerment]. *Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education*. Retrieved from <https://ignited.in/index.php/jasrae/article/view/15598>

- Bhakhara, R. (2025). From Gandhian thought to grassroots action: Ruma Devi's role in women's empowerment in the Thar Desert. *Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary*, 10(9), 346–352. Retrieved from <https://rrjournals.com/index.php/rrijm/article/view/2452>
- Verma, J. (2017). A Gandhian philosophy and Mahatma's views on women question. *VEETHIKA: An International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 3(3), 142–148. Retrieved from <https://qtanalytics.in/journals/index.php/VEETHIKA/article/view/663>
- Singh, A. (2025). Gender equality and women empowerment from Gandhian perspective. *International Journal of Scientific & Innovative Research Studies*. Retrieved from https://www.csirs.org.in/uploads/paper_pdf/gender-equality-and-women-empowerment-from-gandhian-perspective.pdf
- International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research. (2020). Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on women empowerment. Retrieved from <https://www.ijstr.org/final-print/apr2020/Relevance-Of-Mahatma-Gandhis-Ideas-On-Women-Empowerment.pdf>

Books

- Kumar, R. (1993). *The history of doing: An illustrated account of movements for women's rights and feminism in India 1800–1990*. Kali for Women.
- Jayawardena, K. (1986). *Feminism and nationalism in the Third World*. Zed Books.
- Malik, S. (2024). *Feminist issues in Gandhian thought*. Rawat Books.



Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.