

Gender Equality and Women Empowerment through Education: Relevance of Teachings of Swami Vivekananda

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Abstract

“The idea of perfect womanhood is perfect independence ”– Swami Vivekananda.

This paper takes a look at how modification of traditional roles, particularly through education, can impact on gender equality and more emphatic participation of women in the affairs of mankind which are of relevance to the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. Nature has empowered women by presenting them with the greatest gift of procreation, along with others like nurturance, tolerance and above all super sensitivity. It is for humanity to take advantage of these strengths of women for its betterment as a whole. It is believed, and probably rightly so, that a woman is her own biggest enemy because she fails to realize her inner strengths and weaknesses when her super sensitivity overpowers her.

Keywords: Traditional roles, Gender equality, Sensitivity.

Introduction

“There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on” – Swami Vivekananda

Vivekananda strongly reasoned the cause of such degradation of Indian women “The principal reason why our race has so degenerated is that we had no respect for these living images of Shakti. Manu says,” Where women are respected, there the Gods delight, and where they are not, there all work and efforts come to naught.¹” There is no hope of rise for that family or country where they live in sadness ².Vivekananda favored gender equality.

Women constitute half of humanity and probably the better half represents the status of women in society. In the absence of gender equality, humanity is depriving itself of a substantial strength from fifty percent of its constituents. It has been the case almost from the beginnings of civilized society that women were cast in specifically discriminatory roles and thus have never been empowered to contribute their best to the advancement of the society.

Gender Equality & Empowerment of Women

“Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them. In matters concerning them, who are you? –Swami Vivekananda. Gender equality implies a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. A critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, identifying and redressing power imbalance and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives.

Vivekananda firmly believed in the equal rights and opportunities for women in perfect consonance with the Indian view. As a matter of fact, it is one of the strongest phenomena in the history of the mankind, that India, which, since time immemorial had honored woman as *shakti* incarnate, the living embodiments of the Universal Supreme Mother, could even think it fit, to deprive them of their legitimate birth rights to education, freedom, property and what not, as bracketed with *Shudras* (Nari-Sudra).³ But such a strange thing really happened in India and that is why Swami Vivekananda linked the downfall of India with the degradation of condition of woman. However, at that time, there was no feminist movement, but Vivekananda supported their cause declaring that though outwardly there may be difference between men and women, in the real nature, there is none.⁴ As said by Vivekananda Although women may have many interests in common with men, their lives and the choices available to them may vary widely. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian constitution in its preamble. The Constitution not only grants equality to women but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women.

About a century ago, As Swami Vivekananda had envisioned a vision on education and He suggested, was to be done with the help of 'Western science coupled with Vedanta ... and faith in one's own Self. Education is recognized as a crucial measure: "Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process" - ICPD programme. More than two thirds of the world's 960 million illiterates are women. In India, literacy rates are 39 per cent among women and 64 per cent among men. In Egypt, only 27 per cent of females are literate, compared to 63 per cent of males. That presents a clear case per se for more education for women, but more importantly, the education should lead to empowerment.

To make a beginning in women's education, Swamiji argument centred on chastity because it is the heritage of Hindu women. Firstly, "intensify that ideal within them above everything else, so that they may develop a strong character by the force of which, in every stage of their life, whether married or single if they prefer to remain so, they will not be in the least afraid even to give up their lives rather than flinch an inch from their chastity". (Vol.5, 542). Therefore he advised, "Women must be put in a position to solve their own problems in their own way. Our Indian women are as capable of doing it as any in the world. Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them. In matters concerning them who are you? Liberty is the first condition of growth". He advised the Indian women to believe in India and Indian faith. Be strong and hopeful and unashamed, and remember that with something to take, Hindus have immeasurably more to give than any other people in the world".

A recent literature review by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), entitled 'Impact of Investments in Female Education on Gender Equality,' shows that education is a necessary but not sufficient investment to achieve gender equality. For higher levels of education to have the greatest payoff, investments also are needed that address the social and economic constraints, in the form of dis-empowering roles, since most advantages of education are lost when women are relegated to traditional roles which stifle their creativity, block their progress and diminish their contribution to the society at large. Education is significant for girls and women because it is an entry point to other opportunities and the educational achievements of women can have ripple effects not only within the family but for many generations to come.

Educated women recognize the importance of health care and know how to take care of themselves and their families. Education helps to know their rights and they get the confidence to claim them. An educated mother plays a greater role in household negotiations and she secures more resources for her children. An educated mother can pay more attention to her children.

Swami Vivekananda glorified Indian women of the past for their great achievements as leaders in various walks of life. He proudly states that “Women in statesmanship, managing territories, governing countries, even making war, have proved themselves equal to men, if not superior. In India I have no doubt of that. Whenever they have had the opportunity, they have proved that they have as much ability as men, with this advantage – that they seldom degenerate. The Indian scenario has provided enough role models that stand out as icons of gender equality. Maharani Lakshmi Bai, Rajia Sultan, Indira Gandhi, Kiran Bedi, Medha Patkar, Sania Mirza, Sonia Gandhi, Kalpana Chawla and Sunita Williams are but a few names which highlight the heights women can achieve

However, to achieve gender equality widely, it is most essential to educate both men and women about the changing roles. Men even more than women need to be made aware of gender equality issues. These attitudinal changes need to be incorporated right from the beginning of the socialization process. Men and women must be rightly educated to modify a woman’s traditional roles so that there is awareness of women’s basic needs for fulfillment – psychological and financial as well as biological.

Men and women must value a woman who is able to:

1. Use existing laws for her benefit
2. Be self-reliant in all situations to get equal rights in the family, society and at work place
3. Love her and be her own friend
4. Be full of positive self-esteem and extra vigor
5. Be optimistic to self and fellow women
6. Learn to live the life of respect for oneself as well as all those around
7. Be ready to change and accept challenge
8. Have courage to go against the current
9. Search out opportunities
10. Search, locate and expand the extraordinary potential that is hidden in them
11. Break all stereotypes, especially those which are degenerative in nature
12. Learn to be assertive in all situations, in decision making and planning for managing future
13. Examine oneself critically with respect to finances as well as relationships
14. Prove by action what one says; *Purushartha* be made the way of life with innovative solutions of day to day problems
15. Be a change agent

Women today, by following the above mentioned steps will definitely secure economic empowerment by becoming self-dependent. They will also attain educational empowerment by upgrading their minds and obtaining political empowerment by taking their own decisions.

Gender Gap

A first attempt to calculate Gender Gap was made by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2005 .The WEF report 2005 on Women’s Empowerment (As shown in Table.1) shows, in measuring the Global Gender Gap, that countries which do not capitalize on the full potential of one half of their societies are misallocating their human resources and compromising their competitive potential. Despite world-wide evidence of low levels of female participation in economic, social, political, educational and health spheres, only a limited number of countries see this as a problem. The reality remains no country in the world, however advanced, has achieved true gender equality, as measured by comparable decision making power, equal opportunity for education and advancement, equal participation and status from all walks of life.

Table.1 Comparative Overview of selected gender Gap Rankings

Country	Overall rank	Overall	Economic	Economic	Political	Educational	Health and
		score	Participation	opportunity	empowerment	attainment	well-being
Sweden	1	5.53	5	12	8	1	1
United Kingdom	8	4.75	21	41	5	4	28
United States	17	4.40	19	46	19	8	42
Japan	38	3.75	33	52	54	26	3
India	53	3.27	54	35	24	57	34
Pakistan	56	2.90	53	54	37	58	33
Egypt	58	2.38	57	50	55	56	49

Overall scores are reported on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing maximum gender equality .And out of the survey done in 58 countries, not a single country achieves an overall score of 7.

The Global Gender Gap Report 2012 reveals the trends observed in the data over the past seven years and seeks to call attention to the need for more rapid progress in closing gender gaps. Out of the 111 countries covered in 2006–2012, 88% have improved their performance, while 12% have widening gaps. In some countries, progress is occurring in a relatively short time, regardless of whether they are starting out near the top or the bottom of the rankings, and independent of their income. If we compare ourselves in India with the Gender Gap Rankings we find that in developed countries, women are more empowered through measures to increase social, economic and political equity and broader access to fundamental human rights, improvements in nutrition, basic health and above all education.

In other words, men and women both realize their full potential. Whereas in India, gender equality, however is a grindingly slow process. One positive trend is that in various nations, women are encouraged to become entrepreneurs. They are supported by their family and people at work to grow. They are treated as leaders. This is now picking up in India though at a very slow and small pace.

Awareness

All adolescents, both boys and girls, today need to be informed and empowered to delay pregnancy until they are physically mature and married. Health education needs to be reoriented to bring awareness about family planning, gender relations and sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS, sexual abuse etc. Women should improve their communication levels with the opposite sex on issues of sexual health and understanding of their joint responsibilities. They should encourage men's responsibility for sexual and reproductive behavior in participation in family planning.

Discrimination

From womb to tomb women is under various kinds of discrimination and injustice. Subordination of women is now a universal fact and the measures for their empowerment is discussing worldwide included in all the development agenda. In such discourses it is important to notice Swamiji's argument that, men and women are equally good in her or his way, When judging them, it should be by the standard of their respective greatness.(CW., Vol. 2: 26).Gender disparity manifests itself in various forms, the most obvious being the declining female ratio in the population over the past few decades. Social stereotyping and violence at the domestic and societal levels are some of the other manifestations. Discrimination against girl children, adolescent girls and women persists in many parts of the country. Women must stand together against such disparity, and definitely must not exemplify woman-woman rivalry.

The gender biased role allocations in society have been patently discriminatory and oppressive of women. For example 'Gender-specific education; high professional qualification is important only for the man', 'The workplace is not the primary area of women; career and professional advancement is deemed unimportant for women', 'Housekeeping and child care are the primary functions of the woman; participation of the man in these functions is only partially wanted', 'Woman takes care of the largest part of these functions; she educates children and cares for them in every way' – and yet 'In case of conflict, man has the last say, for example in choosing the place to live, choice of school for children, buying decisions'.

Within the framework of a democratic polity, our law, development policies, plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. From the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards there has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In recent years in India, the empowerment of women which Vivekananda believed that following these new ideals of education, a race of 'Supermen' and 'Superwomen' would merge in future who could combine perfect freedom with perfect authority.¹⁰has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women.

Swami Vivekananda desired woman social workers who would work consistently, unselfishly, in full spirit with the doctrine of *Karma*. He even wished to start *Maths* for women. According to him, such *Maths* for women will solve a double purpose. First, these training centers will be for *Brahamcharnis* or dedicated women workers who will live the lives of self-sacrificing nuns, serving all.

Secondly, these will also serve as schools for girls, who will be taught the secular and spiritual matters by these dedicated women workers. Then they can, at will leave the *Math* or stay back.¹⁰ It will help them gain courage, confidence and self-respect and will liberate them from the sense of dependency and a life of subservience. In order to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women, The National Commission for women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of *Panchayats* and *Municipalities* for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels.

The goal of this policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women by:

1. Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for development of women enabling them to realize their full potential.
2. The enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres – political, economic, social, cultural and civil.
3. Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation.
4. Equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc.
5. Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.
6. Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
7. Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.
8. Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child.
9. Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly Women's organizations.

Without discarding our precious heritage. Some position indicators of women's development can be seen in the female literacy rate which increased from 8 per cent in 1947 to 68 per cent in the 2011 census & Laws for gender equality.

Gender Quality & Law in India

Briefly the following Acts can be categorized:

Women's issues	Relevant Acts
Marriage	Hindu Marriage Act
	Dowry Prohibition Act
	Maintenance Act
	Criminal Procedure Code
Divorce	Indian Divorce Act
Restitution of Conjugal Rights	Hindu Marriage Act
	Special Marriage act
	Indian Divorce Act
Dowry	Dowry Prohibition Act
	Indian Penal Code
Maintenance & Alimony	Hindu Succession Act
Right in Property	Hindu Succession Act
Abortion	Indian Penal Code
Employment	Equal Remuneration Act
	The Maternity Benefit Act
Menace of Prostitution	The Immoral Traffic Act
Prevention of sati	The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act

Thus, women's equality in power sharing and active participation in decision making that includes decision making in political processes at all level will ensure the achievement of the goals of empowerment.

Role of Government & Non Government Agencies in Achievements of Goals of Empowerment

All measures will be taken to guarantee **women equal access to and full participation in decision making bodies** at every level including the legislative, executive, judicial, corporate, statutory bodies, as also the advisory commissions, committees, Boards, Trusts etc. Affirmative action such as **reservation, quotas**, including in higher legislative bodies will be considered whenever necessary on a time bound basis. Women friendly personnel policies will be considered whenever necessary on a time bound basis. **Women friendly personnel policies** will also be drawn up to encourage women to participate effectively in the developmental process.

In the report of United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), in its October 2004 issue, **capacity building** for women's NGOs has been supported. CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women) has provided legally-binding bases for the realization of women's rights – political, economic and cultural – in the 179 countries which have ratified it.

History tells us that in many cultures, the discrimination against girls that begins at infancy affects them throughout their lives. A healthy support during initial stages has always resulted in progressive female personalities. For these reasons UNFPA has taken up a **life cycle programming approach**, focusing on key messages that can empower both men and women at all stages of their lives.

Special efforts have been made by China and many other countries for developing **integrated health programmes**. Integrated reproductive health education and services for young people include programmes such as family planning information, counseling on gender relations, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS, sexual abuse and reproductive health.

Efforts need to be targeted towards adolescent girls around the world who have little or no say in their marriage to older men, who put them at higher risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease or making them victims of AIDS, and early widowhood, etc.

Since woman has a prolonged role in procreation, emergency obstetric help must be rendered to all women who experience complications during their pregnancies. At the same time men must be encouraged towards responsible sexual and reproductive behavior. They must be encouraged to participate more actively in family planning programmes.

In ONGC, Mahila Samiti (Ladies Club) has been operating with great ideals and high aims since 1988 to **empower house wives and girls**. Special courses have been set-up for them such as cutting and stitching, beauty culture, interior decoration, home science, language course, computer education, dress designing, cookery, home management, advertising and public relations, textile designing, nursery teachers training, fashion designing and adult literacy classes to make them economically independent.

The Women's Development Forum has been established in all regions / projects / work centres of ONGC for the **professional development redress of individual and general grievances** and to discuss matters like improvement of working conditions etc. of women employees. The Ladies Social Welfare Association, especially house-wives' association, is also working for social development. Women in the Public Sector, another Forum of women employees, is also working for **better working conditions for women employees** in all the public sectors. It has a strong network of over 15000 professional intelligent and dedicated women from wide and varied backgrounds covering aviation, engineering, computers, coal, gas, fertilizers, HRD, law, oil, petroleum metallurgy, airlines, trade, tourism, hotel management, shipping and retail etc.

“Women will work out their own destinies -- much better, too, than men can ever do for them.” –Swami Vivekananda

Recommendations

1. Total attitudinal change in the country towards the purpose of education, no discrimination in the girl child's education by parents. Talking about equality and providing equal opportunities is not enough. The mindset of people needs to be altered. This can be done by educating society about gender equality. In schools, colleges and offices both men and women should be made aware of the rights of women. If we start this from the beginning attitudinal change is bound to occur.
2. Equal job opportunity for women as well as status and power distribution. Along with being given equal opportunity, women also need to be given power to make decisions. They should be provided with responsibilities as challenging as those of their male counterparts. A woman's judgment needs to be valued.

3. Corporations must come forward with their funds for the development of women, especially in rural areas.
4. Government should take action towards implementation of the law in approach and practice at the school level.
5. Public awareness in the villages should be raised by dramatic performances against dowry/ bride burning/ female feticide etc. In a country like India, the majority of the populations still reside in rural areas. Here the maximum reach of communication can be through Nukad Natak or street theatre. The performers of the play impart a social message and at the same time involve the audience. Street plays can be used in a productive way to impart education for gender equality and empowerment of women in all corners of the country.
6. Mentoring for women to provide advice and develop their professional skills;
7. The appointment of corporate officers in the personnel departments of enterprises with responsibility for monitoring and promoting equal opportunities throughout the enterprise; and
8. The adoption of appropriate steps by enterprises, institutions and governments to ensure that employees are aware of obligations and rights, including those stemming from equal employment laws where applicable;
9. Positive action and equal opportunities policies to level the playing field and ensure equal opportunities and treatment for women in recruitment and promotion;
10. Non government activity should be promoted.
 - a) Women in India should be encouraged to become entrepreneurs, as is already happening in other countries.
 - b) Access of women to business skills-training and entrepreneurship development to help them run their own businesses.

“All nations have attained greatness by paying proper respect to women. That country and that nation which do not respect women have never become great, nor will ever be in future”- Swami Vivekananda

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10. Swami Vivekananda Centenary Memorial Volume, p. 409. Swami Vivekananda had great respect and honor for women. In London when a Christian scholar in a seminar stood up and started saying that womankind has no soul. Swami Vivekananda retorted that I had read the holy Quran twice and nowhere it is written like that; rather it is written that womankind has same soul as men. After the seminar, someone asked Swami Vivekananda why you interfered as

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