

Gandhi and the Role of Women as Peace Builders in the Non-Violent Action against the British Rule

Heshmat Sadat Moinifar, PhD

Associate Professor
Faculty of World Studies
University of Tehran
Iran

Abstract

The following paper presents how Gandhi was insistent on the issue of equality and empowerment of women as fundamental to the founding of a just society as well as for the development of the nation. The role played by women in various Gandhian movements, non-cooperation, civil disobedience and Quit India and Gandhi's ideas and insights about women both in society and the freedom struggle based on principles of non-violence through mobilization of people throughout the country, could fluster the British authority. This paper will conclude how Gandhi believed that women were much better situated at the moral, cultural and ideological levels to act out the method of non-violent passive resistance and how the Nonviolence which Gandhi presented to women in his war against the British rule, brought the women out in their hundreds from their homes and proved that women were as much capable as men to oppose to aggression.

Keywords: Gandhi, Women, Non-Violence, National Movement

1. Gandhi's Nonviolent Resistance

Mahatma Gandhi is a notable figure of modern nonviolent resistance who was followed by others such as Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Martin Luther King Jr. Gandhi excludes violence due to various reasons. He deeply believed that no one is capable of knowing the absolute truth and as such nobody has the right to force his or her views on others. (Gandhi, 2008, p 49) This logic leads Gandhi to have a deep respect for other people's faiths and practices. Another reason that can be mentioned is that Gandhi was influenced by Jain's concept of *ahimsa* or non-harming, which prohibits even the harming of small insects or animals. Gandhi named his type of nonviolent resistance Satyagraha. *Satya* in Sanskrit stands for truth and *Agraha* comes from a Sanskrit root meaning to hold on to. Gandhi translated this word to "soul-force," adding "It is soul force, the power of Godhead within us and we become Godlike to the extent we realize nonviolence." (ibid, p 50) In English this is known as "nonviolent action" and literally means a search for truth and a determination to reach truth. For Gandhi truth is the end and nonviolence is the means. Thus he believed in nonviolence as a way of life and also the only way in his perspective that India could gain independence from the British Empire. (ibid,p58)

Gandhi distinguished between those who were committed to nonviolence as a creed and those who used it as a policy or a form of political action (Burrowes, 1996,p 99) (as means and ends at the same time). He firmly believed that structural purification alone was not enough and self-purification was also essential. (ibid, p 107) In the Gandhian conception, nonviolence is about the use of power in a way that is both highly effective (since it has the power to resolve conflict) and highly ethical (in the sense that it does not subvert the moral autonomy of the opponent.)(ibid, p123)

1.1 Ahimsa

Gandhi's aim was to destroy the old existing society and build a new one using nonviolent resistance. (ibid, p104) However, in order for this to happen, one must practice nonviolence starting within him. As he points out "the individual stands first." (ibid, p 105) Gandhi tells us that the person practicing Satyagraha has special characteristics. The first step is to overcome anger and fear, otherwise he or she in his or her heart has not observed true nonviolence. He adds in order to have the notion of nonviolence in one's heart, we must realize God. Thus Love, for the wrong-doer is created. Gandhi believes that Ahimsa is hurt by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill to anybody.

Thus ahimsa is total absence of hatred or any other form of ill-will. The adversary must be treated with goodwill, respect and sympathy and the suffering must be borne entirely by the believer in Non-violence without the slightest feeling of anger or hatred towards the oppressor. He believes that positive character of Nonviolence injustice in any form, ought to be resisted by those who believe in it and the active state of ahimsa, requires you to resist the wrong doer but with good intentions out of love and not hatred or anger. He states: *“To forgive is not to forget. The merit lies in loving in spite of the vivid knowledge that the one that must be loved is not a friend. There is no merit in loving an enemy when you forget him for a friend.”* (Young India, 1930, p 222)

1.2 No Harm

The second characteristic is that the person practicing *Satyagraha* should have no intention to do harm, thus this person must not be violent in thought, word or deed towards the ‘enemy’. The essence of violence is that there must be a violent intention behind a thought, word or act, an intention to do harm to the opponent. In this regard the concept of ‘intention’ becomes of utmost importance. Gandhi states: *“Before the throne of the Almighty, man will be judged not by his acts but by his intentions. For God alone reads our hearts.”* (ibid, p 108)

1.3 Self-Suffering

The third attribute of non-violence is to become capable of self-suffering which is one of the central tenets of Satyagraha. Self-suffering is the will to suffer the violence of others without inflicting violence and suffering in return. (Gandhi, 2009, p 79) The nonviolent resister believes that seeking suffering for a just cause has a virtue all of its own and infinitely greater than the virtue of the sword. (ibid, p337) The nonviolence that Gandhi preaches is to turn the opponent into a person who chooses to put aside violence. For Gandhi *“the Satyagrahi’s object is to convert, not to coerce.”* (Gandhi, 1939, p 28)

1-4 Self-Sacrifice Courage

The fourth characteristic of non-violence is to have self-sacrifice courage in the face of violence and be brave and fearless towards others and fearless towards death as well. Being brave is the most essential precondition of practicing nonviolent resistance and in order to be fearless as Gandhi puts it, one must only fear God. Only in this way can freedom be achieved. Gandhi tells us *“That nation is great which rests its head upon death as its pillow.”* (Gandhi, 2008, p 315) or when he states: *“There would be nothing to frighten you if you refused to be afraid.”* (ibid) He explains for his followers that they should not fear jail because this fear can become a powerful tool in the hands of the British government, which uses it to make us withdraw from our virtues and values. Gandhi explains that nonviolence is a type of resistance where an individual has a choice to resist violently but chooses not to. This is the opposite of nonviolence used by other people, in which it is adopted because there is no other way left for fighting or due to the lack of weaponry. (ibid, p 156) This is why Gandhi’s non-violence is not passive resistance due to being a coward, but rather it is a brave practice that shows no fear of death. (ibid, p 198) Gandhi totally disagrees with the notion that those who are weak are not capable of responding to violence with violence. (ibid, p 332)

1.5 No Exclusive Possession

The fifth attribute of Gandhi’s *Satyagraha* is having no exclusive possessions. The belief in God and fearing only him makes nonviolence the essence of all religions. (Gandhi, 2008, p 316) Thus for an individual who wants to practice nonviolent resistance, one of the essential elements is faith in truth and religion. A person that practices it must also be indifferent to wealth and family attachments (As Gandhi puts it, he who has given us teeth will provide us with food to eat). (ibid) Gandhi believes that clinging to worldly possessions is incompatible with Love and, therefore, with non-violence. In addition, possession necessarily includes the roots of exploitation, and since exploitation is the negation of non-violence, non-possession is an essential attribute of Non-violence. Gandhi states: *“And I said to myself: possession seems to me to be a crime; I can only possess certain things when I know that others who also want to possess similar things are able to do so. But we know.... such a thing is an impossibility. Therefore, the only thing that can be possessed by all is non-possession, not to have anything whatsoever. Or... a willing surrender.”* (Gandhi, 2002, p34) The sixth attribute of Gandhi’s Satyagraha is Brahmacharya and practicing it to the fullest. Brahmacharya means the path of God-realization (Brahma means God and charya means practice), and as Gandhi states: *“Control in thought, word and action, of all the senses at all times and all places.”* (The Gospel of Brahmacharya)

2. Gandhi's Perception of Women

"If you women only realize your dignity and privilege, and make full sense of it for mankind, you will make it much better than it is." (letter written to Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur from Wardha on 20-10-1936, Gandhi writes) Gandhi states: *"To me the female sex is not the weaker sex, she is the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering humility, faith and knowledge."* (ibid) In Gandhi's thought, women's participation in the nationalist movement was essential for ideological reasons as well as practical reasons- national movement would then be associated to every home in India. The feminine qualities were simplicity service, religion and dedication, which signified passive resistance in which war or the use of physical force had retreated into the background. In this form of non-violent passive resistance, the masses determinedly reject the oppressive, oblivious and immoral foreign authority through withdrawal of support. Gandhi believed that women were much better placed at the moral, cultural and ideological levels to challenge the method of non-violent passive struggle. Women selling the 'salt of freedom' in the course of the salt Satyagraha campaign universalized the idea. (Anup, 2005, p 36)

Gandhi believed in the equality and empowerment of women, thus leading to a just society and eventually to the progression of the nation. Stating: *"I have brought the Indian women out of the kitchen, it is up to you (the women activists) to see that they do not go back."* (Statement to Mridula Sarabhai, a prominent woman freedom fighter) Through the idea of Satyagraha which negates the aggressive, masculine stereotypes of human potential while incorporating the gentle, peaceful and communitarian aspects normally associated with women, non-violence and passive resistance was achieved whereby Gandhi's ideology and perception of women both in society and freedom struggle led to the role played by women in different Gandhian movements, non-cooperation, civil disobedience and Quit India. Gandhi alleged that only a powerful, mass movement based on principles of non-violence is through mobilization of people all over the country could shake the British authority and it is through this concept that the significance of women's participation in this movement plays a vital role. Thus, women had better capacity to fight the temptation of foreign rule and to suffer non-violently for their theories. He states: *"If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women."* (Gandhi, 1983, p 24)

Although some criticize Gandhi stating that on the one hand, emphasis on women's participation in Satyagraha had to safeguard that the movement stayed non-violent, while on the other hand, accent on non-violence made it possible for larger numbers of women to partake. In fact, Gandhi's non-violence was an influential revolutionary weapon because it shapes the favorable atmosphere for participation of many people, particularly women, giving them all a significant place in the struggle. Factually, men have come to acquire an almost exclusive monopoly over weapons of destruction and over organized social violence. Then, it was out of that faculty which was previously considered the source of women's powerlessness that Gandhi copied an effective weapon for political action. In this kind of Satyagraha, women in large numbers could contribute and even lead, more naturally than men. (Kishwar, 1985, p 43)

2.1 Gandhi's Disapproval of Social Evils against Women

Gandhi raised his voice against, infanticide, child marriage, widowhood, sexual harassment of women and domestic violence against women. He condemned the various social evils which made the condition of women even more tragic. He appreciated the birth of a girl as much as a birth of a boy and criticized the system of dowry: saying: *"that even though women are the ard hangini or the better half, yet they are 'reduced to the position of a mere chattel to be bought and sold and.... those men who demanded dowry should be excommunicated."* (ibid, p 55) And also saying: *"That even though women are the better half, yet they are 'reduced to the position of a mere chattel to be bought and sold."* (ibid, p 56)

He also criticized child-marriage, and called it 'an immoral and inhuman act' and he considered it a crime against god and man to call the union of the children a married state." *"This custom of child marriage is both a moral as well as physical evil. For it undermines our morals and induces physical degeneration. By countenancing such customs, we recede from God as well as Swaraj."* (ibid, p 78) He felt that the enlightened public opinion would be effective and could not be cured through mere legislation. *"This custom of child marriage is both a moral as well as physical evil. For it undermines our morals and induces physical degeneration. By countenancing such customs, 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. And undergrown men have no capacity for fighting battles of freedom or having gained it."* (Young India, 1930, p6)

He was completely against the purdah stating: “.....by seeking today to interfere with the free growth of the womanhood of India we are interfering with the growth of free and independent men...it (i.e., purdah) accounts for our own weakness, indecision, narrowness and helplessness. Let us then tear down the purdah with one might effort.” (Gandhi, 2008,p 87)

3. The Role Played by Women in Different Gandhi an Movements

Gandhi thought that non-violence and passive resistance were basically feminine traits which women had absorbed as a result of long tradition of sacrifice and suffering within the home. It is for this reason; he felt that women were perfectly suited to participate in the national movement, the basic ideals of which were ahimsa and Satyagraha. According to Gandhi advancement in civilization consisted in the introduction into human life and social institutions of a large measure of the law of love or self-suffering which woman represented best in her own person. Gandhi took up subjects like swadeshi and prohibition and tried to motivate women to fight for them. He also expected women to play leadership roles. He tried to make the most of on women’s feminine traits and traditional qualities by encompassing their traditional roles into the political sphere. It was Gandhi who pervaded a new life and gave a new course to the freedom movement and drew into it women in large numbers. In fact, Gandhi was so intensely respected that even the custodians of women (fathers, husbands, and brothers) encouraged them to extend their passionate cooperation to Gandhi in his mission. Women became objectives as well as instruments of social reform. (the realization of Swaraj, first from within, then from outside, social reform after personal reform). (Anup,2005, p 87-88) One of the most lifelong contributions of Gandhi to the women's cause was that he gave it a moral lawfulness. He helped to form a tradition and a social-political atmosphere in which even today, hardly anyone will openly stand up and explicitly oppose women’s fundamental rights or will negate their participation in politics. (Kishwar, 1985, p 50)

Anup believes that women’s politicization is associated with the non-cooperation movement which saw the contribution of women on a large scale in constructive programs put by Gandhi like spinning and khadi work. By the time the first phase of civil disobedience movement ended in 1931-32, women were firmly entrenched in the mass movement which united various sections of women from the urban rich to the rural poor. Although this opinion has been criticized by scholars such as Kishwar. Kishwar believes that the moral lawfulness that leaders like Gandhi shaped for the cause of women made entry into politics as 'equal' partners for women without much obvious conflict and resentment. The tradition was set for supported entry of a few urban middle-class women into politics and for fitting the movement in such a way that some women’s issues could simply be kept within the parameters of male domination and power without throwing a serious challenge to it. Slowly, this legitimacy had disintegrated into token representation of women, with handful of urban, educated, middle-class women being the receivers while the mass of women remain voiceless with no access whatsoever to political power at any level, particularly no access to power at the village level. Women’s representation in parliament has never surpassed five per cent of total seats and has been on a decline, lately settling down to about three percent. (Kishwar,1985,p 49).

The Gandhian formula of feminine traits of sharing and sacrifice, simplicity service, religion and dedication, attracted millions, and women’s politicization was achieved through spinning and khadi work, the salt satyagraha campaign. Thus he states: “*Women have to be conscious and aware to feel and realize at every step of their life that they are builders of their nation and the peaceful world.*” (Young India, 1930, p 5) Again this thought has been criticized by authors such as Kishwar stating that Gandhi's overemphasizing the image of woman as the 'embodiment of sacrifice' and praising the strength that comes from sorrow, helped reinforce the dominant tyrannical stereotype of woman as self-sacrificing acquaintances and providers to a social cause defined by men, in the tradition of Sati. Essential to the image of women as the moral force in society, as the 'embodiment of sacrifice' was the impression of woman having to exceed her sexual needs so that she does not become a 'slave to any man'. (Kishwar, M. 1985, p 52) Critics believe that Gandhi did not perceive the sexual life of women as very central. In his mind, women's needs seem to exist in reply only to men's needs. Women are to say 'no' to men when the latter behave 'carnally', like 'beasts' This is to help men become better human beings. Its best if women reject sexual contact altogether in order to set freemen's vitalities for higher goals. In all this, there is no place for women's own sexual expression. Notwithstanding the stereotype of women as running the household while men govern the affairs of the outside world, in practice Gandhi fortified a breaking away from these stereotypes. This is most apparent in his belief in the dominance of non-violent Satyagraha a weapon of struggle.

He learnt this from his wife and it is a form of resistance more often practiced by women. Gandhi realized that the empathy of 'manliness' with violence was likely to lead humanity to annihilation. Men needed to rival women's quiet strength and their resistance of injustice without resorting to violence. Likewise, Gandhi asserted on every Congressman taking to spinning, previously considered a women's occupation, as a necessary qualification. This in spite of resistance from within the Congress on the ground that this amounted to wasting the energies of men. This was indeed a radical step in violating the hold of repressive stereotypes and in weaning men away from violent 'manliness'. It was a vital step in removing violence out of society.(ibid, p 45)

4. Women as Peace Builders

"We record our deep admiration for the Womanhood of Indian how it hung failing courage and endurance stood shoulder to shoulder with their men-folk, in the frontline of India's national army to share with them the sacrifices and triumphs of the struggle." (Morton, 1954, p 107)

Sati personified the spirit of sacrifice, fidelity, suffering and moral strength typical of Indian womanhood. *"The insignificant role, hence was to lead the powers of revolutions against discrimination, mistreatment and social injustice, not only for women, but for all oppressed groups in society."*(The Gospel of Brahmacharya) Gandhi believed that social change could take place only if efforts made for the inspiration of all- principally the Harijans and the women- led to the rebirth of the Indian society. He consequently, encouraged women to take part in the freedom movement, apart from working for their liberation at the social level. AmritKaur, one of Gandhi's closest women associates remarked: "when he (i.e., Gandhi) called on Indian to join his arm for the freedom fight, he stresses that women would be just as acceptable to him, if not more so than men, because he desired moral courage far more than physical prowess. This was I felt an irresistible call to my sex and something which threw a new light ... on how whilst fighting for freedom women would also, under his leadership, be able to fight against many of the outgrowths (sic) that had crept into our society, including the subjugation of women. Undeniably, political freedom for him was only the first phase towards the building up a new order of society. (Anup, 2005, p132) Thus by absorbing the virtue of Satyagraha and playing a role in India's independence struggle, women entered India's nationalist movement in numbers.

On the other hand, Kishwar argues that women were more noticeable in running the Ashram on a day to-day basis by their constant services. They were involved in decision-making only at rare and exceptional moments. Kishwar States: "This is partially because Gandhi saw important role for women not in political decision-making but in those parts of the movement which addressed themselves to the task of changing people's ideas and lives as. For instance, participants in demonstrations, Satyagrahis, boycott organizers. Furthermore, even within the movement, women were encouraged to be more active in the 'constructive' program, which had to do with social transformation and social service. Gandhi saw the world of politics and power as too brutal and immoral for women." They were to be the moral force in the movement by staying away from the fight for power and by changing people's hearts through their quiet, nonviolent forte. The very existence of women was seen as a disciplining force in tensions and fights. (Kishwar, 1985, p 55)

5. Conclusion

"Perhaps only a Hindu wife would tolerate these hardships, and that is why I have regarded woman as an incarnation of tolerance." (Young India, 1930, p5)

Even Gandhi's simple philosophy of Satyagraha is said to disprove the aggressive, masculine stereotypes of human prospective whereas incorporating the gentle, peaceful and communitarian aspects generally associated with women. While emphasizing the complementary roles of men and women, Gandhi made it absolutely clear that women were in no way inferior to men. The very idea of calling woman the weaker sex was not acceptable to Gandhi. He proclaimed that women were blessed with immense spiritual strength and they were not weak though men were stronger at the physical level. While giving his consent to the traditional role differential between man and woman, he also wanted to break the traditional stereotypes. This he did by recommending equal rights to both, by emphasizing that women were in no way inferior to men and by encouraging women to fight for their rightful place in society. *"Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows his capacity in the largest measure? It is given to her to trade the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for nectar. She can become the leader in Satyagraha which does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith."* (Gandhi, 2009, p 43)

Gandhi had faith in the capacity of women to carry on a nonviolent movement. Under his supervision and guidance, women carried critical responsibilities in India's struggle for freedom. Gandhi's encouragement of women to join India's struggle for independence was influential in transforming the outlook of women. Although some like Kishwar argue and criticize Gandhi's legacy and his beliefs and state that the contemporary political culture has been distorted to mean encouraging "tokenism" at the very top without bringing about any real change at the bottom. Therefore, the myth has come to attain powerful hold that Indian women have equal rights in every domain and that if things are erroneous, it is because women choose not to make use of their rights. Critics believe that regardless of great concern for women's rights, Gandhi did not inspire women to organize as a political force in their own right around their own issues. They were to see their liberation by serving the national cause, in the tradition of selfless social workers. Consequently, women never came to obtain any real political power within the Congress. Even the most noticeable of women leaders remained peripheral to the hardcore decision-making within the Congress for the reason that they were not seen as representing any organized population of women. Even as women's participation raised statistically in the national movement, women did not come to play a bigger role at decision-making levels." (Kishwar, 1985, p 58) But many accomplishments have been achieved that denying them or negating their affects is with no doubt with prejudice and preconceptions. Gandhi's action, in bringing women dignity in social life, in breaking down some of the prejudices against their partaking in social and political life, and in endorsing an atmosphere of sympathetic awareness of their matters are undeniable. Firstly, Gandhi believed that women were much better situated at the moral, cultural and ideological levels to act out the method of non-violent passive resistance. Secondly, he brought the women out in their hundreds from their homes and proved that women were as much capable as man to oppose to aggression. Thirdly, a gift of consciousness and awareness was given to women to realize at every step of their life that they are builders of their homeland and can informally and formally engage in complex ranges of peace process including peace marches and protests and empowered ordinary women in economic, social, cultural and political spheres. Fourthly, Gandhi's faith in women's capacity helped to carry a non-violent movement. And last but not least, Gandhi transformed the outlook of women. Breaking down the chains of cruelty and repression that had downgraded women to a secondary position and actively participated in peacemaking, peace-building and the prevention of the outbreak, reappearance or continuation of armed conflicts in the struggle for independence.

6. References

- Anup, T., (2005). *Gandhi, Women and the National Movement*, Aar-an and Publications.
- Burrowes, R. J. (1996). *The strategy of Nonviolent Defense*. State University of New York Press.
- Dalton, D., (1996). *Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Political Writings*, Hackett Publishing,
- Dastur, A., Mehta., U.J., and Damodar Thackersey., S.N., (1991) *Gandhi's Contribution to the Emancipation of Women*, Women's University, South Asia Books.
- Gandhi, M.K., (2009). *Gandhi: 'Hind Swaraj' and Other Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gandhi, M.K., (2008) *The Essential Writings*. Oxford University Press.
- Gandhi, M.K., (2002) *The Essential Gandhi: An Anthology of His Writings on His Life, Work, and Ideas*, Vintage.
- Gandhi, M.K., (1993). *An Autobiography*, Beacon Press.
- Gandhi, M.K., (1983). *An Autobiography*, The NavajivanThust,
- Gandhi, M. K., (1964) *The Role of Women*, edited by A.T. Hingorani, Mumbai, Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan publishing.
- Gandhi, M.K., (1942). *Women and Social Injustice*, Navjivan, Publishing House.
- Gandhi, M.K., (1939) *Harijan*, in Collected works.
- (1932). *India in 1930-31: A Statement Prepared for Presentation in Parliament*, Calcutta: Government of India Central Publishing Branch.
- Joshi, H., (1986). "Women and Indian Nationalism: A theoretical Framework-feminism, Mass movement and Gandhian Ideology", paper presented at the 3rd national Conference on Women's Studies, Punjab University, Chandigarh
- Kishwar, M., (1985) "Gandhi on Women", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 20, No. 41, pp. 1753-1758, accessed on 5 Dec 2017 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4374920> .
- Morton, E. (1954). *Women Behind Mahatma Gandhi*, London, Max Reinhardt.
- The Gospel Of Brahmacharya*, accessed on 16 January 2018 from www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap56.htm
- Young India*, (10 April 1930), CW, Vol. XLIII