

From Swaraj To Stree Shakti: Reimagining Women's Empowerment Through Gandhian Thought

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Abstract:

Women's empowerment has emerged as a central concern in contemporary social, political, and developmental discourse. Despite significant progress in education, employment, and political participation, women continue to face persistent challenges such as gender discrimination, economic inequality, violence, and limited access to decision-making processes. This paper revisits Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy to explore its relevance in reimagining women's empowerment in the twenty-first century. Gandhi viewed women not as passive beneficiaries of reform but as equal partners in the struggle for justice, social transformation, and national reconstruction. His concept of *Swaraj* extended beyond political independence to include self-rule, self-respect, moral autonomy, and social responsibility, providing a holistic framework for women's empowerment. The study examines Gandhian principles such as truth (*Satya*), non-violence (*Ahimsa*), self-reliance (*Swadeshi*), constructive work, dignity of labour, and ethical leadership as foundations for strengthening women's agency and participation. It argues that the transition from *Swaraj* to *Stree Shakti* represents a shift from external freedom to internal empowerment, where women become active agents of social, economic, and political change. Drawing upon historical examples of women's participation in the Indian freedom movement and contemporary challenges related to gender justice, the paper highlights the continuing significance of Gandhian thought in promoting inclusive development, grassroots democracy, sustainable livelihoods, and gender equality.

The paper adopts a qualitative and analytical approach based on the interpretation of Gandhian writings, secondary literature, and contemporary policy discourse. It concludes that Gandhian philosophy offers an ethical and human-centered alternative to purely economic models of empowerment by emphasizing character formation, community participation, equality, and non-violent social transformation. Reimagining women's empowerment through Gandhian thought contributes to a more inclusive vision of development where *Stree Shakti* becomes an essential pillar of democratic *Swaraj* and sustainable social progress.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Gender Equality, Social Justice and Constructive Programme etc.

Introduction

Women's empowerment has become one of the most significant themes in contemporary academic, political, and developmental discourse. Across the world, societies have increasingly recognized that sustainable development, democratic governance, and social justice cannot be achieved without ensuring the equal participation of women in every sphere of life. The concept of women's empowerment extends beyond providing legal rights or economic opportunities; it encompasses enhancing women's capacity to make independent decisions, exercise agency, access education and healthcare, participate in governance, and live with dignity and freedom. Despite remarkable advancements in education, employment, political representation, and constitutional guarantees, women continue to experience structural inequalities, gender-based violence, unequal access to resources, wage discrimination, and social exclusion. These persistent challenges necessitate the exploration of alternative philosophical frameworks capable of offering both ethical guidance and practical solutions for achieving genuine gender equality.

Among the many thinkers who have contributed to discussions on social justice and human dignity, Mahatma Gandhi occupies a distinctive position. Although Gandhi did not identify himself as a feminist in the modern sense, his ideas concerning women, equality, morality, and social transformation continue to inspire scholars and activists across the globe. Gandhi regarded women not as weak or dependent members of society but as embodiments of courage, sacrifice, resilience, and moral strength. His philosophy recognized that the progress of any nation was inseparable from the progress of its women. For Gandhi, the empowerment of women was not merely a social reform agenda but an essential component of national reconstruction, democratic participation, and ethical civilization.

The title "From Swaraj to Stree Shakti: Reimagining Women's Empowerment through Gandhian Thought" reflects an attempt to reinterpret Gandhi's vision in the context of contemporary gender discourse. While Swaraj is generally understood as political self-rule achieved through India's struggle for independence, Gandhi gave the concept a much deeper meaning. For him, Swaraj represented self-discipline, self-respect, moral autonomy, social responsibility, and the collective well-being of society. True freedom could not be achieved simply by replacing colonial rulers with indigenous governments; rather, it required the transformation of individuals and communities through truth, non-violence, justice, equality, and ethical conduct.

This broader understanding of Swaraj provides an important foundation for conceptualizing Stree Shakti, or women's power. Stree Shakti is not confined to physical strength or political representation; instead, it encompasses women's intellectual capabilities, moral leadership, economic independence, emotional resilience, social participation, and spiritual confidence. Reimagining women's empowerment through Gandhian thought therefore involves recognizing women as active creators of democratic society rather than passive beneficiaries of welfare policies. It seeks to establish a framework in which women possess the freedom to shape their own lives while simultaneously contributing to the welfare of their families, communities, and the nation.

Historically, the status of women in India has undergone considerable transformation. Ancient Indian traditions contain examples of women scholars, philosophers, and leaders who enjoyed significant social respect and educational opportunities. However, over time, patriarchal customs, rigid social hierarchies, child marriage, purdah, dowry, restrictions on education, and economic dependence significantly reduced women's autonomy. During the nineteenth century, social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, and

others initiated movements against social evils and advocated women's education and legal reforms. Gandhi inherited this reformist tradition but transformed it by integrating women directly into mass political movements.

One of Gandhi's most remarkable contributions was his ability to mobilize women from diverse social, economic, religious, and regional backgrounds during India's freedom struggle. Prior to Gandhi's leadership, political participation was largely restricted to educated urban elites. Gandhi expanded the democratic space by encouraging ordinary women—including homemakers, rural women, widows, and women from marginalized communities—to participate in non-cooperation movements, civil disobedience campaigns, the Salt Satyagraha, constructive programmes, spinning khadi, village development, sanitation campaigns, and social service. He believed that women possessed extraordinary capacities for patience, compassion, endurance, and non-violent resistance, making them natural leaders in movements based upon Ahimsa.

Unlike many contemporary political leaders who viewed women primarily as supporters of male leadership, Gandhi emphasized their independent moral authority. He consistently argued that women should receive equal educational opportunities, enjoy equal respect within the family, and exercise independent judgment in public affairs. He opposed practices such as child marriage, dowry, untouchability, purdah, and the denial of education to women. Gandhi also criticized social customs that reduced women to objects of pleasure or confined them solely to domestic roles. Although some aspects of his views remain subjects of scholarly debate, his overall philosophy challenged prevailing patriarchal assumptions and created opportunities for women to emerge as visible participants in public life.

The Gandhian understanding of empowerment differs significantly from many contemporary development models that primarily emphasize economic indicators such as income generation, employment, or entrepreneurship. While economic independence is undoubtedly essential, Gandhi argued that genuine empowerment begins with inner transformation. Self-confidence, moral courage, ethical awareness, self-reliance, and social responsibility constitute equally important dimensions of human development. According to Gandhi, individuals become truly free only when they overcome fear, dependence, injustice, and exploitation. Therefore, women's empowerment must include psychological, ethical, cultural, political, and spiritual dimensions alongside economic advancement.

An important principle within Gandhian philosophy is Ahimsa or non-violence. Gandhi regarded non-violence not as passive submission but as active moral resistance against injustice. In contemporary societies where women continue to face domestic violence, workplace harassment, trafficking, discrimination, and structural inequalities, Gandhian non-violence offers a framework for peaceful resistance, legal justice, community solidarity, and ethical transformation. Similarly, the principle of Satya (truth) encourages honesty, transparency, accountability, and the courage to challenge oppressive social structures. Together, Satya and Ahimsa provide a moral foundation for creating gender-just societies based upon dignity rather than domination.

Another significant contribution of Gandhian thought is the concept of Swadeshi and self-reliance. Gandhi advocated decentralized production, village industries, handicrafts, and local economies as means of reducing poverty and strengthening community resilience. In the present context, these ideas remain highly relevant for promoting women's entrepreneurship, self-help groups, cooperative institutions, sustainable livelihoods, financial inclusion, and rural economic development. Numerous women's collectives across India continue to embody Gandhian principles by combining economic self-reliance with community service and participatory decision-making.

The relevance of Gandhian philosophy extends beyond economic development into democratic governance. Gandhi envisioned democracy as a participatory process rooted in local communities, ethical leadership, and collective responsibility. Women's active participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions, local governance, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and community development initiatives reflects the realization of Gandhian ideals of inclusive democracy. Constitutional provisions such as reservations for women in local bodies have significantly increased women's political representation, yet challenges related to effective participation, leadership training, financial independence, and patriarchal resistance continue to persist. Gandhian thought emphasizes that political empowerment must be accompanied by moral confidence and social transformation.

Contemporary feminist scholarship presents diverse perspectives regarding Gandhi's ideas on women. Some scholars appreciate his efforts to challenge gender discrimination, mobilize women politically, and promote equality through non-violent activism. Others argue that Gandhi occasionally reinforced traditional notions of femininity by emphasizing qualities such as sacrifice, motherhood, and moral purity. These debates are valuable because they encourage critical engagement with Gandhian philosophy rather than unquestioning acceptance. Reimagining women's empowerment through Gandhian thought does not imply reproducing every historical opinion expressed by Gandhi; instead, it involves interpreting his enduring principles—truth, equality, dignity, justice, self-rule, and non-violence—in ways that address contemporary gender realities.

The twenty-first century presents new opportunities as well as new challenges for women's empowerment. Globalization, digital technologies, climate change, migration, urbanization, and changing labour markets have transformed women's lives in complex ways. While access to education, digital communication, entrepreneurship, and leadership opportunities has expanded, new forms of cyber violence, online harassment, economic insecurity, environmental vulnerability, and social polarization have also emerged. Gandhian philosophy, with its emphasis on ethical technology, decentralized development, environmental sustainability, community cooperation, and human dignity, offers valuable insights for responding to these emerging challenges.

Furthermore, international commitments such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5 on Gender Equality, highlight the importance of eliminating discrimination, promoting equal participation, ensuring access to education and healthcare, ending violence against women, and recognizing unpaid care work. Many of these objectives resonate strongly with Gandhian ideals of justice, equality, service, and human welfare. Thus, Gandhian philosophy continues to possess both national and global relevance in shaping inclusive development strategies.

This study seeks to examine the intellectual relationship between Swaraj and Stree Shakti by analyzing Gandhian thought as a dynamic framework for women's empowerment. It argues that Gandhi's philosophy should not be viewed merely as a historical legacy associated with India's independence movement but as a living tradition capable of addressing contemporary social inequalities. By integrating ethical leadership, self-reliance, participatory democracy, non-violence, constructive action, and gender justice, Gandhian thought provides a comprehensive vision of empowerment that transcends narrow economic definitions.

In conclusion, the journey from Swaraj to Stree Shakti symbolizes the evolution of freedom from national liberation to human liberation. Women's empowerment, viewed through the Gandhian lens, is not simply the acquisition of rights but the realization of dignity, equality, responsibility, self-confidence, and social participation. It calls for transforming both institutions and individual

consciousness so that women become equal partners in creating peaceful, democratic, and sustainable societies. Revisiting Gandhi in the present century therefore offers not only historical understanding but also practical inspiration for building an inclusive future in which Stree Shakti becomes an indispensable pillar of democratic Swaraj and holistic human development.

Literature Review

Gandhi, M. K. (1927)¹ autobiography provides the philosophical foundation for understanding his ideas on women's dignity, self-discipline, truth (Satya), and non-violence (Ahimsa). Gandhi consistently argued that women possess greater moral courage than men and should enjoy equal rights in society. He rejected social customs such as child marriage, dowry, and purdah, emphasizing women's education and participation in public life. His concept of Swaraj extended beyond political independence to include individual self-rule, ethical conduct, and social responsibility. This work forms the primary source for interpreting Gandhian thought on women's empowerment and remains highly relevant in contemporary gender discourse.

Gandhi (1941)² in Constructive Programme, Gandhi identified women's upliftment as an essential component of nation-building. He believed that true social transformation required women's equal participation in education, sanitation, village industries, khadi production, literacy, and community development. Rather than treating women merely as beneficiaries of reform, Gandhi regarded them as leaders capable of transforming society through constructive action. The text demonstrates how economic self-reliance, dignity of labour, and grassroots participation contribute to women's empowerment, making it highly relevant for understanding the transition from Swaraj to Stree Shakti.

Kishwar, Madhu (1985)³ critically evaluates Gandhi's contribution to women's emancipation by arguing that he transformed women's role in Indian politics without advocating violent confrontation. According to Kishwar, Gandhi recognized women's moral strength and encouraged their active participation in the freedom struggle through non-violent resistance. While acknowledging certain traditional elements in Gandhi's thinking, the study concludes that his political philosophy substantially expanded women's public participation and leadership opportunities. The article remains one of the most influential feminist analyses of Gandhian thought.

Bhikhu Parekh (1989)⁴ examines Gandhi's political philosophy within the broader framework of ethics, democracy, and social justice. He argues that Gandhi's vision of Swaraj included equality, decentralization, moral responsibility, and participatory democracy. Parekh emphasizes that Gandhi challenged hierarchical social structures by advocating equal respect for women and marginalized communities. His analysis demonstrates that women's empowerment in Gandhian philosophy is closely connected with ethical citizenship and community participation rather than merely legal equality.

B. R. Nanda's (1995)⁵ biography highlights Gandhi's practical efforts to involve women in India's national movement. The study documents the participation of women in the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement under Gandhi's leadership. Nanda argues that Gandhi transformed Indian politics by encouraging ordinary women to become agents of social change rather than passive observers. The work illustrates how Gandhian leadership contributed significantly to women's political awakening and democratic participation.

Although Amartya Sen's (1999)⁶ work is not exclusively focused on Gandhi, it provides an important theoretical framework for understanding empowerment. Sen argues that development should be measured by expanding people's capabilities and freedoms rather than simply increasing economic growth. His capability approach complements Gandhian ideas of self-rule, human dignity, education, and social justice. The study suggests that women's empowerment requires access to education, healthcare, political participation, and economic opportunities, all of which resonate strongly with Gandhian principles of holistic development.

Krishna Kumar (2006)⁷ discusses Gandhi's educational philosophy, emphasizing Nai Talim (Basic Education) as an instrument for equality and social transformation. He argues that Gandhi viewed education as a means of developing character, self-reliance, productive skills, and democratic values. Kumar notes that Gandhi advocated equal educational opportunities for girls and women, believing that education would strengthen their confidence, independence, and leadership abilities. This perspective contributes significantly to understanding education as a central pillar of Stree Shakti.

The United Nations' (2015)⁸ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 on Gender Equality, emphasize ending discrimination, ensuring women's participation in leadership, eliminating violence, and promoting equal access to education and economic resources. Although developed in a global context, these objectives align closely with Gandhian ideals of equality, justice, non-violence, and human dignity. The SDGs provide a contemporary framework through which Gandhian concepts of women's empowerment can be reinterpreted to address present-day developmental challenges.

Objectives

1. To examine Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of *Swaraj* and its relevance to women's empowerment in contemporary society.
2. To analyze the role of Gandhian principles such as *Satya*, *Ahimsa*, *Swadeshi*, and Constructive Programme in promoting *Stree Shakti*.
3. To evaluate Gandhi's contribution to women's participation in India's freedom movement and democratic development.
4. To explore the applicability of Gandhian thought in addressing contemporary challenges related to gender equality, social justice, and women's leadership.
5. To propose a Gandhian framework for reimagining women's empowerment as an ethical, social, economic, and political process in the twenty-first century.

Women's empowerment is widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic development, social justice, and sustainable progress. While contemporary debates often focus on legal rights, economic opportunities, and political representation, Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy offers a broader and more holistic understanding of empowerment. Gandhi believed that true empowerment begins with self-realization, moral courage, self-reliance, and active participation in the welfare of society. His concept of *Swaraj* was not limited to political independence from colonial rule; it signified self-governance, ethical responsibility, social equality, and the liberation of every individual from fear, exploitation, and injustice. Reimagining women's empowerment through Gandhian thought therefore requires connecting the ideals of *Swaraj* with the concept of *Stree Shakti*, where women emerge as equal partners in shaping a just, democratic, and compassionate society.

1. Gandhian Concept of Swaraj and Women's Freedom

Gandhi interpreted Swaraj as the freedom of individuals to govern themselves through truth, discipline, and moral responsibility. Political independence, according to him, would have little meaning if society continued to tolerate discrimination, inequality, and social injustice. Women, therefore, occupied a central position in his vision of Swaraj because no nation could claim to be free while half of its population remained marginalized. Unlike many reformers of his time who viewed women primarily as recipients of social welfare, Gandhi regarded them as equal citizens capable of independent thinking and leadership. He believed that women possessed immense moral strength, patience, and resilience, qualities essential for creating a peaceful and democratic society. Thus, Swaraj represented not only national liberation but also the emancipation of women from oppressive customs, social dependency, and psychological subordination.

2. Stree Shakti as Moral, Social, and Political Empowerment

The idea of Stree Shakti extends beyond physical or economic empowerment. It represents the complete development of women's intellectual, ethical, emotional, economic, political, and spiritual capacities. Gandhi argued that women should not imitate men in order to achieve equality; instead, society should recognize and respect women's unique strengths and leadership abilities. For Gandhi, empowerment meant enabling women to participate in decision-making, public service, education, economic production, and nation-building. He emphasized dignity rather than domination, cooperation rather than competition, and service rather than exploitation. These principles remain highly relevant in contemporary discussions of gender equality because they promote inclusive leadership and ethical governance instead of power based solely on authority or wealth.

3. Women's Participation in the Indian Freedom Movement

One of Gandhi's greatest contributions was transforming the Indian freedom struggle into a mass movement that actively included women. Before Gandhi's leadership, political participation was largely confined to educated men from urban backgrounds. Gandhi encouraged women from villages, towns, and diverse social communities to join movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Salt Satyagraha, and the Quit India Movement. Women like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali, Usha Mehta, Sucheta Kripalani, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Matangini Hazra, and thousands of unnamed rural women demonstrated extraordinary courage during these struggles. Their participation challenged traditional gender roles and established women as active participants in public life. Gandhi's leadership thus created new opportunities for women to develop confidence, organizational skills, and political awareness. The inclusion of ordinary women in national movements also strengthened the democratic character of India's struggle for independence. Gandhi believed that political freedom could only become meaningful when women exercised equal responsibility in shaping the nation's future.

4. Gandhian Principles Supporting Women's Empowerment

Several principles of Gandhian philosophy continue to provide valuable guidance for women's empowerment. Truth (Satya) encourages honesty, transparency, and the courage to confront injustice. Women who speak against discrimination, violence, corruption, and inequality embody the Gandhian spirit of truth. Non-Violence (Ahimsa) promotes peaceful resistance to injustice. In the context of

domestic violence, workplace harassment, human trafficking, and gender discrimination, non-violent collective action remains an effective instrument for social change. Swadeshi and Self-Reliance encourage local production, entrepreneurship, and economic independence. Gandhi believed that productive work enhanced dignity and reduced dependence. Today, women's self-help groups, handicraft cooperatives, micro-enterprises, and rural industries reflect this philosophy. Constructive Programme emphasized literacy, sanitation, health, village development, communal harmony, and social service. Women's leadership in these fields continues to demonstrate the practical relevance of Gandhian ideas for community development.

5. Education as the Foundation of Empowerment

Gandhi regarded education as one of the strongest instruments for achieving social equality. His concept of Nai Talim integrated intellectual development with productive work, ethical values, and community service. He believed that education should prepare both men and women to become self-reliant citizens capable of contributing positively to society. Women's education has become one of the most important indicators of empowerment in modern India. Increased literacy has expanded opportunities for employment, political participation, healthcare awareness, financial inclusion, and leadership. Nevertheless, disparities in educational access continue to exist in rural areas and among marginalized communities. Gandhian educational philosophy reminds policymakers that education must develop character, confidence, and social responsibility in addition to academic knowledge.

6. Economic Self-Reliance and Sustainable Development

Economic independence remains essential for meaningful empowerment. Gandhi strongly advocated decentralized production, village industries, khadi, handicrafts, and cooperative economic systems that generated employment while preserving human dignity. In contemporary India, women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs), rural entrepreneurship initiatives, microfinance institutions, digital financial inclusion, and cooperative enterprises reflect Gandhian ideals of self-reliance. Economic empowerment enhances women's bargaining power within households, improves family welfare, increases children's educational opportunities, and strengthens local economies. Furthermore, Gandhi's emphasis on sustainable production and responsible consumption aligns closely with modern concerns regarding environmental protection and inclusive development. Women play a significant role in environmental conservation, organic farming, water management, and sustainable livelihood programmes, making Gandhian principles increasingly relevant in the era of climate change.

7. Political Participation and Democratic Leadership

Political empowerment constitutes another essential dimension of Stree Shakti. Gandhi believed that democracy required the participation of every citizen irrespective of gender, caste, religion, or economic status. Women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions, municipal bodies, legislatures, civil society organizations, and social movements represents the realization of Gandhian democratic ideals. The constitutional reservation for women in local governance has significantly increased women's representation in grassroots democracy. Many women leaders have successfully addressed issues related to education, sanitation, drinking water, healthcare, nutrition, and social welfare. However, challenges such as proxy representation, limited financial autonomy, inadequate leadership training, and patriarchal attitudes continue to affect effective participation. Gandhian thought emphasizes that genuine political

empowerment requires not only constitutional provisions but also moral confidence, education, and public accountability.

8. Contemporary Relevance of Gandhian Thought

Despite significant progress in gender equality, contemporary societies continue to face multiple challenges including gender-based violence, unequal wages, cyber harassment, trafficking, discrimination, limited property rights, and underrepresentation in leadership positions. Globalization and technological advancement have created new opportunities but have also generated new forms of inequality. Gandhian philosophy provides an ethical framework for addressing these issues through peaceful dialogue, social responsibility, community cooperation, and inclusive development. His insistence upon equality, compassion, dignity of labour, decentralized governance, environmental sustainability, and moral leadership complements modern national and international initiatives such as Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality).

The transition from Swaraj to Stree Shakti therefore represents more than historical continuity; it signifies the evolution of democratic values toward gender-inclusive development. Women's empowerment becomes not merely an issue of rights but also a process of building ethical citizenship, social harmony, and sustainable progress.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy continues to offer a profound and relevant framework for understanding women's empowerment in the twenty-first century. His concept of Swaraj transcended political independence by emphasizing self-discipline, moral responsibility, equality, and human dignity. Within this broader vision, women occupied a central place as equal partners in the creation of a just and democratic society. Gandhi challenged prevailing patriarchal norms by encouraging women to participate actively in the freedom movement, public life, education, constructive programmes, and community development. His belief in women's moral strength and leadership significantly expanded their role in India's national awakening.

The idea of Stree Shakti complements Gandhian thought by recognizing women's intellectual, economic, social, political, and spiritual capabilities. Empowerment, from this perspective, is not limited to employment or legal rights but includes self-confidence, ethical leadership, education, economic self-reliance, and meaningful participation in decision-making. Gandhian principles such as Satya, Ahimsa, Swadeshi, constructive work, and decentralized democracy continue to provide valuable guidance for addressing present-day challenges including gender discrimination, violence against women, economic inequality, and social exclusion. At the same time, the contemporary application of Gandhian philosophy requires critical reinterpretation. Modern gender issues such as digital exclusion, cyber violence, workplace inequality, reproductive rights, environmental justice, and intersectional discrimination demand responses that combine Gandhian ethical values with constitutional guarantees, feminist scholarship, technological innovation, and inclusive public policies. Rather than viewing Gandhi's ideas as fixed historical doctrines, they should be understood as dynamic principles capable of adapting to changing social realities.

Ultimately, the journey from Swaraj to Stree Shakti symbolizes the transformation of freedom into empowerment. It calls for a society where women enjoy equal opportunities, exercise independent agency, participate fully in governance and development, and contribute to the moral and democratic

progress of the nation. Reimagining women's empowerment through Gandhian thought therefore enriches contemporary discussions on gender justice by integrating ethics, equality, self-reliance, and social responsibility into a comprehensive vision of inclusive and sustainable human development. Gandhi's enduring message reminds us that no nation can achieve true Swaraj unless every woman experiences dignity, equality, freedom, and the opportunity to realize her full potential.

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