
Gandhi's Debt to Women and Women's Debt to Gandhi

by

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Abstract: This essay focuses on the specific ways Gandhi, in developing his campaign against the British, owed a substantial debt to women. Following that, I reflect on how Gandhi's attention to women and gender changed women's lives. In considering Gandhi's debt first, I propose that women inspired Gandhi's course of action and influenced the development of his woman-friendly political strategy.

The story of women's role in the freedom struggle is closely linked to Gandhi's leadership of the movement. History books tell us Gandhi brought women "out of their homes" to join demonstrations and become political actors. Gandhi gave, Aparna Basu wrote, "new direction, strength and inspiration to the freedom movement and drew into it women in large numbers"¹.

According to Lakshmi Menon, this was for women "an opportunity to break away from the past with all its frustrations"². Books and articles written by Indian women who themselves or their mothers joined the political movement give central place to women's participation and to Gandhi's friendships with and reliance on women. Moreover, women feature prominently in Gandhi's autobiography, newspaper articles, speeches, and letters. Despite the centrality of women and gender topics in Gandhi's own writing and that of women close to him, historians have either neglected the topic or, more recently, denounced Gandhi for his inability to accept women as equals.

Thomas Weber, in his 2011 book *Going Native: Gandhi's Relationship with Western Women*³, addressed the discrepancy between Gandhi's focus on women, attention to women's issues, and long and significant relationships with women and

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¹ Aparna Basu, *The Role of Women in the Indian Struggle for Freedom*, in Bal Ram Nanda (ed.), *Indian Women from Purdah to Modernity*, Vikas, New Delhi 1976, p. 20.

² Lakshmi N. Menon, *Women and the National Movement*, in Devika Jain (ed.), *Indian Women*, GOI Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi 1975, p. 23.

³ Thomas Weber, *Going Native: Gandhi's Relationship with Western Women*, Roli Books, Delhi 2011, p. 12.

the lack of scholarship on Gandhi and women⁴. Weber reminds us that Gandhi is inextricably linked with the story of India's freedom struggle, a story primarily about men confronting men. Moreover, the men involved, for example Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel, played monumental roles in independent India. In comparison, only a few women, such as Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Vijayalakshmi Pandit, went on to illustrious careers. While these women have received some attention from historians, most of the women involved in the freedom movement have faded from view.

This essay focuses on the specific ways Gandhi, in developing his campaign against the British, owed a substantial debt to women. Following that, I reflect on how Gandhi's attention to women and gender changed women's lives. In considering Gandhi's debt first, I propose that women inspired Gandhi's course of action and influenced the development of his woman-friendly political strategy.

Gandhi's Satyagraha

Gandhi's method of struggle – *Satyagraha* – a method that went beyond civil disobedience and non-violence to focus on the struggle for Truth, owed a debt to his childhood and adult experiences of women's strength. Among the women who greatly influenced the development of young Mohandas was his mother and child wife Kasturba, and later, in South Africa, the English suffragettes. These women taught him about strength of character, the power of self-suffering, and the impact of the performance of femininity in political arenas.

Gandhi's mother, Putlibai, his father's fourth wife and a member of an eclectic Hindu sect that was tolerant and respectful of other religious faiths, impressed him with her commonsense, devotion, self-sacrifice, and personal strength. A "saintly" woman, Putlibai visited the Vaishnava temple every day but she also visited other temples, Gandhi tells us in his *Memoir*. He also noted that she observed the most difficult vows without flinching and kept herself well informed about politics, which she readily discussed with her friends⁵. Above all, he remembered her strength of character. Kasturba, who Gandhi married when he was 12 and she 13 years of age, resisted his tyranny and established that she was a person to be reckoned with. Enamored with advice manuals that explained the ideal conjugal relationship, Gandhi explained to his child wife his plan teach her to read and write, instruct her in what he knew, and help her align her "life and thoughts" with his. The nighttime lessons didn't work: Kasturba was tired from her day's work and uninterested in learning to read and write while her instructor was more

⁴ Two excellent articles on Gandhi and women were published in the 1980s: Madhu Kishwar's *Gandhi on Women*, in "Economic and Political Weekly", 20, 40, 5th October 1985, pp.1691-1701 and n. 41, pp. 1753-1758; and Sujata Patel's *Construction and Reconstruction of Woman in Gandhi*, in "Economic and Political Weekly", 23, 8, February 20, 1988, pp. 377-387. The twenty-first century has seen considerably more attention to this topic, for example, Thomas Weber, *Going Native* cit.; Girja Kumar, *Brahmacharya Gandhi and His Women Associates*, Vitasta, Delhi 2008 and a number of articles in magazines and newspapers.

⁵ Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Beacon Press, Boston 1993, pp. 4-5; 33.

interested in romance than teaching⁶. When Mohandas tried to restrict his wife's movements, Kasturba left the house without his permission. Meanwhile, the families of the children kept them from what Gandhi called his "devouring passion"⁷.

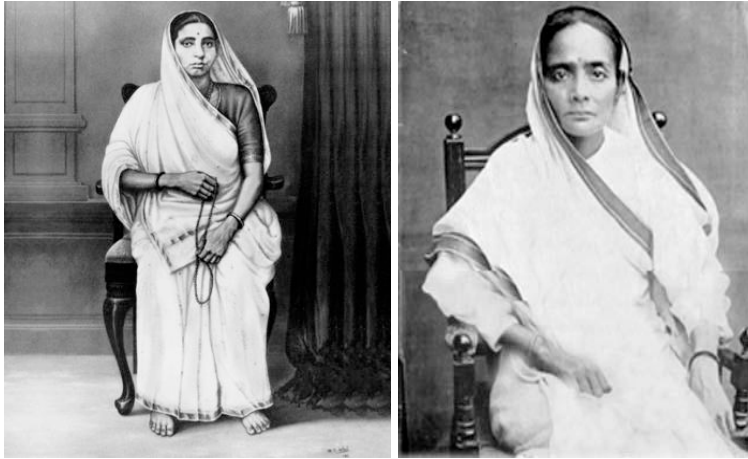


Figure 1 and 2. Putlibai Gandhi and Kasturba Gandhi, 1915⁸

Gandhi's life was shattered by the death of his father when he was 16; two years later, at age 18, he left his wife and baby son to study in England. He completed his law degree in 1891, returned to India for two years, and then traveled to South Africa, which was to become his home for the next two decades. It was in South Africa that Gandhi came face-to-face with racial prejudice and increasingly dissatisfied with his life.

1906 was momentous for many reasons: Gandhi took the vow of *brahmacharya*, read Tolstoy, Thoreau and Ruskin, explored religious texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Christian Bible, and visited England to lobby against the Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance of 1906.

Between his trip to England and launching of the campaign against the Black Act in 1907, Gandhi wrote about the militant Women's Social and Political Union whose members had chosen "Deeds not Words" as the motto of their campaign for

⁶ Arun Gandhi, *Kasturba: a Life*, Penguin Books, New Delhi 2000, p. 20.

⁷ Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, cit., pp. 12-13.

⁸ Putlibai Gandhi. By Unknown.gandhiserve.org. Public Domain.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=169924>; Kasturba Gandhi, 1915. Photographer Unknown. Public Domain. <http://www.mkgandhi-sarvodaya.org/gphotgallery/1869-1914/images/b.jpg>

⁹ Rajmohan Gandhi, *Gandhi: The Man, His People and the Empire*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2007, pp. 117-120.

women's suffrage in England¹⁰. In a number of articles in the Gujarati paper *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi praised the actions of these women, many of them well educated and from respectable families, who defied social norms by demonstrating in public for the right to vote. Refusing orders to retreat, they were arrested and jailed when they refused to pay their fines. Using words like “brave”, “remarkable”, “courage,” and “tenacity” to describe these English women and their actions, Gandhi made no effort to hide his admiration. Even though people laugh at them, they are “undaunted” he wrote, and “work on steadfast in their cause”¹¹. Gandhi expressed great faith in the outcome: “They are bound to succeed and gain the franchise for the simple reason that deeds are better than words”¹².

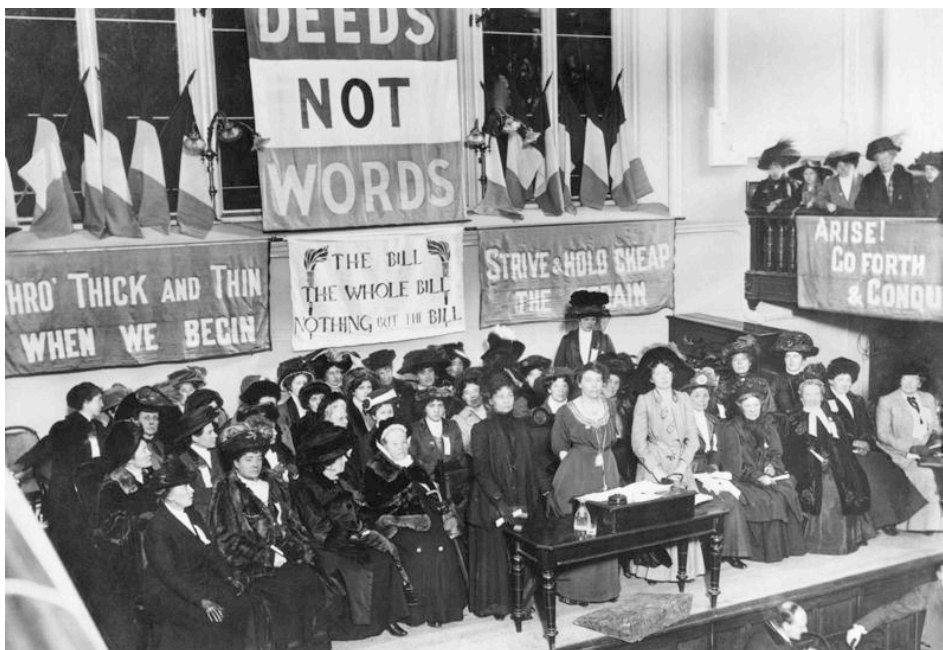


Figure 3. A suffragette meeting in Caxton Hall, Manchester, England circa 1908¹³.

¹⁰ The Women's Social and Political Union was cofounded by Emmeline Pankhurst in Manchester in 1903.

¹¹ “Deeds Better than Words”, *Indian Opinion* (Oct 26, 1906), in Pushpa Joshi (ed.), *Gandhi on Women: Collection of Mahatma Gandhi's Writings and Speeches on Women*, Centre for Women's Development Studies & Navajivan Trust, New Delhi & Ahmedabad 1988, p. 3.

¹² *Ibidem*. See also: “Brave Women”, *Indian Opinion* (Dec. 12, 1906), in Pushpa Joshi (ed.), *Gandhi on Women*, cit., p. 4. “When Women are Manly, Will Men be Effeminate?” *Indian Opinion* (Feb 23, 1907) in Ivi, pp. 6-7. “Brave Women of Britain”, *Indian Opinion* (Mar 3, 1907), Ivi, p. 6; “Brave Women of England”, *Indian Opinion* (Jun 29, 1907), Ivi, pp. 6-7.

¹³ A suffragette meeting in Caxton Hall, Manchester, England circa 1908. The New York Times photo archive, via their online store, here, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2953666>

These influences – mother, wife, and the suffragettes – played an important role in Gandhi’s first *Satyagraha* against the “Black Act” to restrict Indian immigration to the Transvaal and require Indians to register for and carry passbooks. Speaking out against the draft of the Asiatic Registration Ordinance at the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg in September 1906, Gandhi urged his audience to oppose these laws and continue protesting when threatened with imprisonment¹⁴. When Abdul Gani, Chairman of the Transvaal British Indian Association, spoke, he was clearly aware of Gandhi’s admiration for the tactics of the Women’s Social and Political Union: “This is for us the time for deeds, not words. We have to act boldly; and in doing so, we have to be humble and non-violent”¹⁵. In his *Indian Opinion* article “Deeds Better than Words”, Gandhi directly connected the South African struggle and that of the suffragettes. If the Transvaal Indians emulated these women and courted arrest, Gandhi predicted, “the bonds” of Indians would snap by themselves¹⁶.

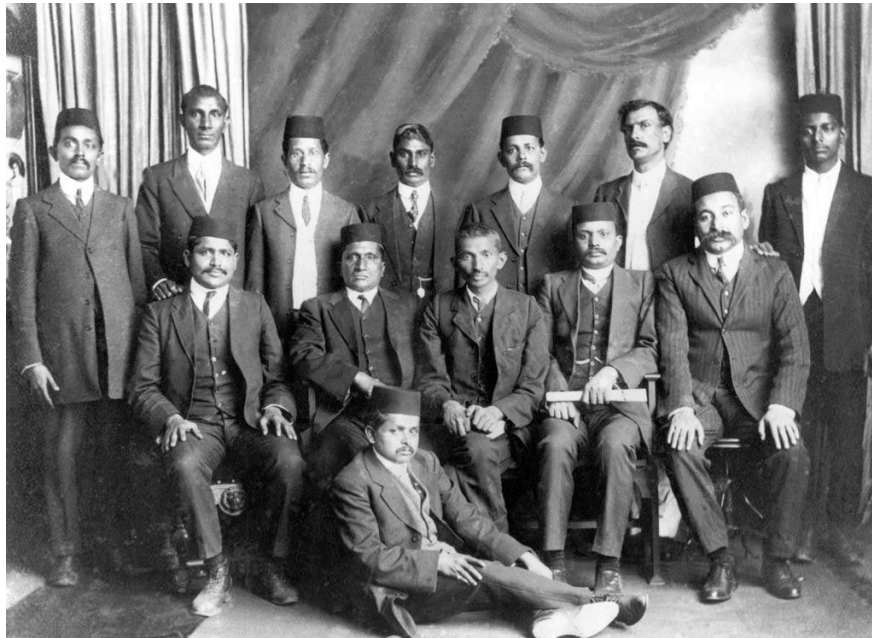


Figure 4. Gandhi with the leaders of the non-violent resistance movement in South Africa¹⁷.

¹⁴ “The Mass Meeting”, Johannesburg (September 11, 1906), *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (hereafter CWMG), v. 5, Government of India, Publications Division, Electronic Version, 1999, p. 333. <http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/VOL005.PDF>

¹⁵ “Johannesburg Letter” (Sept. 11, 1906), *Indian Opinion* (Sep 15, 1906), in CWMG, v. 5, 1999, pp. 338-342.

¹⁶ “Deeds Better than Words”, *Indian Opinion* (Oct., 26, 1906), in Pushpa Joshi (ed.), *Gandhi on Women*, cit., p. 3.

¹⁷ Gandhi with the leaders of the non-violent resistance movement in South Africa. Photographer Unknown. http://web.mahatma.org.in/pictures/images/piccat0007/sa_1024_0023.jpg, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=169972>

This was Gandhi's first call for *Satyagraha*, or truth force, the militant non-violent strategy for political, social and moral change, which has continued to influence movements for social justice around the world. He called on men, challenging them in gendered terms: "Hence we ask: will Indian men be effeminate? Or will they emulate the manliness shown by English women and wake up?"¹⁸. While Gandhi admired English women for demonstrating in the streets, he did not envision Indian women marching in public and going to jail.

What Can Women Do?

From very early in his political career, Gandhi was aware of Indian women's participation in politics but he did not imagine them going beyond supportive roles until women joined demonstrations and courted arrest. In India in 1901, he attended the Calcutta meeting of the Indian National Congress where he listened to a chorus of 56 young women sing a patriotic song composed by Saraladevi Ghosal. Reading about the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, he could not have missed the activities of women who introduced spinning wheels and looms into their homes and those of their neighbors and urged women to produce their own Durga puja saris. Other women were encouraged to take the vow of *Meyer Kanta* [woman's chest] to daily set aside a handful of rice for the motherland¹⁹. While he was fully cognizant of women's support of the Swadeshi movement and impressed by the political activities of the English suffragettes, he did not encourage women to become political activists until they stated their willingness to join the *Tranvaal satyagraha* of 1913.

In the years between 1907 and 1911, Indian men fought discriminatory laws in South Africa by lobbying in England, rallying support in India, courting arrest, and suffering imprisonment. In October of 1912 Gopal Krishna Gokhale, the much respected leader of the Indian National Congress and founder of the Servants of India Society, arrived in South Africa to discuss Indian grievances. Received as a state guest, Gokhale returned to India full of hope that the situation would improve²⁰. To Gandhi it was clear that the "unwritten pledge" was broken when the government of South Africa decided not to repeal the £3 tax on Indians who had served their contracts and wished to remain in Natal²¹. The immigration bill that emerged in March of 1913 imposed restrictions on individual unable to read and write in a European language and those who seemed "unsuited" on economic or other grounds to live in South Africa²². Further restricting the rights of indentured

¹⁸ "When Women are Manly, Will Men be Effeminate?", *Indian Opinion* (Feb. 23, 1907) in Pushpa Joshi (ed.), *Gandhi on Women*, cit., pp. 5-6.

¹⁹ These examples of women's participation in the Swadeshi Movement are listed by J.C. Bagal, *Jattiya Andolane Bangla Nari*, Vishva-Bharati, Bhadra 1361 B.S., Calcutta 1954.

²⁰ Robert A. Huttenback, *Gandhi in South Africa: British Imperialism and the Indian Question, 1860-1914*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1971, pp. 300-30.1

²¹ "£3 Tax Disappointment", *Indian Opinion* (Apr. 26, 1913), in CWMG, v. 13 (GOI: 1999 Electronic version), p. 89. <http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/VOL013.PDF>

²² Robert A. Huttenback, *Gandhi in South Africa*, cit., p. 304.

laborers, one section of the new legislation stated that the wives and children of residents would be allowed only from monogamous marriages that had been “duly celebrated according to the rites of any religious faith” prior to entering the Union of South Africa²³.

The courts followed suit, first denying entry to wives in polygamous marriages. This was followed by other rulings: that all polygamous marriages were illegal and only Christian marriages or those registered by the Registrar of Marriages were legal²⁴. This meant, Gandhi wrote in *Indian Opinion*, that Indian wives were reduced to the status of “concubines”²⁵. While he frequently referred to women’s anger at this declaration, he did not encourage them to join public demonstrations. There was no need for women to put themselves in harm’s way, Gandhi argued: “Cannot men go to goal for women’s honour and their own?”²⁶.

In May, the Transvaal Satyagraha Association and the British Indian Association promised *Satyagraha* if the Government did not accept its demands²⁷. The next day, May 4th, members of the Transvaal Indian Women’s Association sent a telegram to the Minister of the Interior promising that they would offer “passive resistance” unless the ruling regarding Indian marriages was changed²⁸. Gandhi, who had written a month earlier to Gokhale about Kasturba’s resolve to join the struggle²⁹ and reminded his readers of the bravery of the English suffragettes³⁰, now praised “our plucky sisters who have dared to fight the Government.” At the same time, he urged men to come forward and end the struggle before women had to step forward³¹. Privately he warned Kasturba that she should not commit to the movement unless she was certain she could live up to his expectations³².

The Immigration Act that came into effect in August of 1913 did not solve the issue of immigration, the £3 tax, or Indian marriages. In response, Gandhi initiated a new campaign on September 13th and women responded³³. On September 15th, 12 men and four women, including Kasturba, Chhaganlal Gandhi’s wife Kashi, Maganlal Gandhi’s wife’s Santok, and Dr. Pranjivan Mehta’s daughter Jeki, left Phoenix Farm to cross the Transvaal border. Kasturba and her companions were

²³ Ivi, p. 306.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 307; Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas: A True Story of a Man, His People, and an Empire*, Penguin Books India, Delhi 2006, pp. 157-160.

²⁵ “The Marriage Imbroglio”, *Indian Opinion* (Apr. 12, 1913), in CWMG, v. 13, cit., pp. 55-56.

²⁶ “Indian Marriages”, *Indian Opinion* (Mar. 29, 1913), in CWMG, v. 13, cit., p. 26.

²⁷ “The Campaign”, *Indian Opinion* (May 3, 1915), in CWMG, v. 13, cit., pp. 112-116.

²⁸ “Indian Women as Passive Resisters”, Telegram dated May 4, 1913, *Indian Opinion* (May 5, 1913), in CWMG, v. 13, cit., pp. 121-122.

²⁹ “Letter to G.K. Gokhale”, (Apr. 19, 1913), in CWMG, v. 13, cit., pp. 85-86

³⁰ “Mrs. Pankhurst’s Sacrifice”, *Indian Opinion* (Apr. 19, 1913), in CWMG, v. 13, cit., pp. 81-82; “Letter to Hermann Kallenbach”, (Apr. 25, 1913), in CWMG, v. 13, cit., pp. 87-88.

³¹ “The Women’s Resolution”, *Indian Opinion* (May 5, 1913), in CWMG, v. 13, cit., p. 123.

³² Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas: A True Story of a Man*, cit., p. 171.

³³ Robert A. Huttenback, *Gandhi in South Africa*, cit., p. 314; “Letter to the ‘Natal Mercury’”, *The Natal Mercury* (Sept. 25, 1913), in CWMG, v. 13, cit., pp. 312-313.

detained and later sentenced to three months in prison³⁴. Less than a month later, 11 women from Tolstoy Farm entered Natal and walked to Newcastle to persuade mine workers to protest the tax imposed on ex-indentured workers³⁵. They were arrested and sentenced to join their sisters in Pietermaritzburg jail. Notable among the women courting arrest was Bai Fatima, the wife of Gandhi's nemesis Sheikh Mehtab, who left Durban and was arrested with her mother Hanifa Bai and seven year old son³⁶.

News of the imprisonment of women and the hardships they endured mobilized public opinion and brought support for the cause. Sadly, prison conditions gave the movement its first female martyr: Valliamma Moonsamy Mudaliar who died shortly after her release from prison³⁷. Gandhi wrote in 1914 that women "were fired with the desire to be in gaol"³⁸. Observing their actions and resolve, he praised their strength and fortitude, characteristics he had been observing in women since childhood.

Return to India

When Gandhi returned to India in 1915, he was reunited with women like Ramabai Ranade, Dr. Kadambini Ganguli, and Jaiji Jehangir Petit who had supported his work in South Africa. These women, long engaged in efforts to ameliorate the sufferings of women and encourage social change, were keenly aware of the importance of political action. While male reformers organized the first women's associations, women soon arranged their own meetings to discuss social issues. The Bharata Mahila Parishad, the Indian Women's Conference of the National Social Conference, first met in 1904. The meeting was arranged by women who decided men would not be allowed to enter the hall. At the 1904 meeting, Ramabai Ranade, the widow of the well-known reformer Justice M. G. Ranade, urged women to work together for the regeneration of the nation³⁹. The next year, women discussed the need for education, the lack of medical care, early marriage, and child welfare⁴⁰. Saraladevi Choudhurani used the Women's Conference to propose the formation of a women-only organization: Bharat Stree Mahamandal [The Great Circle of Indian Women] that held its first meeting in Allahabad in 1910. A few years later, a branch of the Mahamandal, called the Tamil Women's Association, merged with a women's improvement society begun

³⁴ Ramchandra Guha, *Gandhi Before India*, Penguin Books, Gurgaon 2013, pp. 464-467.

³⁵ Martin Green, *Gandhi: Voice of a New Age Revolution*, Axios, Mount Jackson VA 2009, p. 283; Joseph Lelyveld, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*, Vintage Books, New York 2011, p. 109.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ "Letter to Hermann Kallenbach", (Feb. 22, 1914), in CWMG, v. 14, Electronic version, 1999, p. 74. <http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/VOL014.PDF>

³⁸ "The Last Satyagraha Campaign: My Experience", Golden Number, *Indian Opinion* (1914), in CWMG, v. 14, cit., p. 268.

³⁹ *The Indian Ladies Magazine* (Feb, 1904), p. 259.

⁴⁰ *The Indian Ladies Magazine* (Jan, 1905), pp. 219-220.

by two foreign women belonging to the Theosophical Society to form the Women's Indian Association [WIA]. The aim of the new organization, according to one of its founder members, Kamalabai L. Rau, was to educate women and make them "conscious of their place in the growing society of the land"⁴¹. In 1917 a delegation of women activists met with Edwin Montagu to ask for the vote for women. By this time there were women's organizations throughout India capable of articulating women's issues and launching projects to achieve their goals.

Gandhi's first long and well-developed speech on women in India was made in 1918 to the Bhagini Samaj, a Gujarati women's organization founded in 1916 in memory of Gokhale. In this talk, Gandhi argued that efforts for "women's regeneration" were necessary to overcome the subordination of women supported by religious texts, laws, and customs. Drawing on his experience traveling in Bihar, Gandhi asserted that women understood and abhorred customs that prevented them from enjoying equal rights and participating in "the activities of man". As a remedy, he prescribed: education, awakening women to their condition, nurturing women leaders, and encouraging women to fight for their rights – issues that women's organizations had been discussing for over a decade. Seconding the resolve of women's organizations to solve their own problems, Gandhi talked about Bihari women who observed purdah but neither liked nor believed in the custom. He said "I wanted them to have the strength themselves to win their freedom"⁴². In other writings and speeches, he echoed the sentiments of women like Ramabai Ranade and Saraladevi Chaudhurani who asserted men were to blame for keeping women subordinate. When women were no longer "dolls or slaves," Gandhi predicted they would take their place side-by-side with men as full actors in the new nation⁴³.

Despite his rhetoric about women working side-by-side with men, Gandhi's first efforts to involve women in the freedom struggle were consistent with essentialist gender roles: they would spin and wear Khadi. Paying close attention to the sequence of events between 1918 and 1920, we can observe the evolution of Gandhi's ideas about women's activism. When Gandhi delivered his first formal address to a women's organization, he chastised them for placing men in executive roles and urged them to fight for their rights. Advocating the importance of *swadeshi* to the nation in 1919, Gandhi exhorted women to take the *swadeshi* vow – to no longer wear foreign cloth and switch to cloth produced in the country. Explaining that *Satyagraha* meant more than disobeying laws, Gandhi met with women's groups in the Punjab and western India to reiterate that nation building required women's participation. The economy of India could never advance, Gandhi told his women audiences, until women gave up foreign textiles and began

⁴¹ Kamalabai L. Rau, *Memoirs of a Brihan Maharashtrian*, Trans. Indirabai M. Rau, Unpublished manuscript, 1972, p. 14. This was later published as *Smrutika: The Story of My Mother as Told by Herself*, Dr. Krishabai Nimbkar, Pune 1988.

⁴² "Speech at Bhagini Samaj, Bombay", (Feb, 20, 1918), in Pushpa Joshi (ed.), *Gandhi on Women*, cit., pp. 17-21.

⁴³ "Address at All India Social Service Conference", Calcutta (Dec, 17, 1917), in Pushpa Joshi (ed.), *Gandhi on Women*, cit., p.17.

wearing cloth produced in India. The home was the site of domestic consumption where women were in charge; in this battle, women were more important than men⁴⁴.

Speaking mostly to middle- and upper-class women, Gandhi reproached them for their ignorance of poor women for whom spinning could be a lifeline and chastised them for complaining *Khadi* saris were heavy and uncomfortable. Gandhi reminded them that women joyfully carried extra weight during pregnancy and then suffered giving birth. “This is the time for the birth of a new India,” he told them, “You can make India free only if you bear this burden”⁴⁵.

After Congress declared April 6-13, 1921 *Satyagraha* Week, women across the country held meetings to show their support. At one of the several meetings Sarojini Naidu addressed, women decided to form their own independent political organization, Rashtriya Stree Sangha [RSS], which required its members to join District Congress Committees. Speaking to this group in August, Urmila Devi, the widowed sister of the Bengali Congress leader C. R. Das, urged women to be ready to leave their homes to serve the country. By November, 1,000 Bombay women were demonstrating against the Prince of Wales’ visit to India⁴⁶. In Bengal, events took an even more dramatic turn. C.R. Das, the most important Congress leader in eastern India, decided volunteers should sell *Khadi* on the streets of Calcutta to test the government’s ban on political demonstrations. After the first batch of volunteers, including C. R. Das’ son, were arrested, his wife Basanti Devi, sister Urmila Devi, and niece Suniti Devi, were arrested selling *Khadi*. Word of their arrest resulted in a huge crowd of “Marwaris, Muslims, Bhattias, Sikhs, coolies, mill-hands and school boys” who milled around until the police released the women. One man said he felt women from his own household had been arrested. The next day, December 8, 1921, the whole city was in commotion⁴⁷. As had been the case in South Africa, Gandhi quickly recognized the value of having women join public demonstrations. Writing in *Young India*, he urged women from other parts of the country to follow the brave example of Bengali women. More than a decade earlier, Gandhi had evoked the “manliness” of English women who courted arrest and taunted his male readers with the label “effeminate.” As had been the case in South Africa, the arrest of respectable Indian women brought men into the movement. Less predictable was the way these arrests affected women who were thrilled by images of women engaged in political action. Reading Gandhi’s many speeches, it is clear that women’s actions pushed him to expand his message to them about what they could do. Always asking for money, Gandhi reported that he was surprised when a woman, one who ground flour to make a living, took off her

⁴⁴ “Speech at Women’s Meeting, Bombay”, (May 8, 1919), in *Kheda Vartaman* (May 21, 1919), in Pushpa Joshi (ed.), *Gandhi on Women*, cit., pp. 22-24; “Speech at Women’s Meeting Surat”, (May 26, 1919), CWMG, v. 18, Electronic version 1999, pp. 60-62. <http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/VOL018.PDF>

⁴⁵ “Speech at Women’s Meeting, Dakor” (Oct 27, 1920) in *Navajivan* (Nov. 3, 1920), in Pushpa Joshi (ed.), *Gandhi on Women*, cit., pp. 52-55.

⁴⁶ Gail O. Pearson, *Women in Public Life in Bombay City with Special Reference to the Civil Disobedience Movement*, Ph.D. Thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1979, pp. 175-184.

⁴⁷ *Indian Annual Register*, II (1922), p. 320.

earrings and gave them to him. Henceforth, he asked for jewelry as that was what women had to give. And, Gandhi reported, women “showered” him with rings and bangles.

As the movement progressed, Gandhi continued to push women to take the vow of *swadeshi* and abandon their foreign-made saris. However, when women in Bengal were arrested for selling *Khadi* in the streets, Gandhi followed their lead and urged other women to come forward. “I had hoped,” he wrote, “. . . women would be spared the honour of going to jail.” But now these women had been arrested, he urged everyone to “welcome this innovation.” Henceforth, “the women of India should have as much share in winning swaraj as men. . . I hope that the women all over India will take up the challenge and organize themselves”⁴⁸.

Women as Leaders

Gandhi was raised in a world where only lower-class/caste and “unfortunate” women, especially widows, worked outside the home. Their jobs were menial, the pay poor, and they were subject to sexual harassment. This was a world where the Hindi word for widow became a synonym for prostitute⁴⁹ and city surveys inform us that the majority of prostitutes were widows⁵⁰. Respectable women worked within their homes and moved within circumscribed spaces that included their neighborhoods, religious sites, and the extended family.

When Gandhi first encouraged women to join public demonstrations and court arrest, he had to confront three issues intimately connected to women’s sexuality. First, he had to overcome the widely-held belief that women were easily seduced and needed surveillance and protection. In a society where males and females generally occupied different spaces, the idea of men and women working together raised the threat of sexual encounters – forced and consensual. Finally, if arrested and sent to jail, women faced the possibility of sexual harassment and assault.

Gandhi examined these issues in a series of articles that linked women’s participation in the movement to the larger issue of an India free of communalism, caste discrimination, hunger, drunkenness, and violence against women⁵¹. Taking on the issue of women provoking lust, Gandhi asserted it was men’s problem, not women’s. It was not women who needed to change but rather those men who looked upon women lustfully, forgetting their mothers and wives. He reminded his readers that English women worked in many jobs without harassment. Unfortunately, in India girls were raised to think they needed the protection of

⁴⁸ “Women’s Part”, *Young India* (Dec, 15, 1921), in Pushpa Joshi (ed.), *Gandhi on Women*, cit., pp. 93-95.

⁴⁹ Sarah Lamb, *Being a Widow and Other Life Stories: The Interplay Between Lives and Words*, in “Anthropology and Humanism”, 26, 1, 2001, p. 19.

⁵⁰ By the middle of the 19th century there were over 12,000 prostitutes in Calcutta (out of a total population of 400,000) and it was estimated that approximately 90% of them widows. Janet Harvey Kelman, *Labour in India*, George Allen and Unwin, London 1923, pp. 222-223.

⁵¹ “Women of Gujarat”, *Navajivan* (Jan, 15, 1922), in Pushpa Joshi (ed.), *Gandhi on Women*, cit., pp. 95-97.

men. Once they overcame their fear of death, Gandhi claimed they would be able to protect themselves. Praising a girl who sold *Khadi* caps on the street, Gandhi exclaimed: “She knew that all men were her brothers. If one is good oneself, so is the world”⁵². And finally, if a woman’s purity was threatened, she could exercise “the power to die,” that is, commit suicide to save herself from violation⁵³. Although Gandhi advocated the “nuclear option,” I do not believe he was encouraging young women to commit suicide. Rather, he wanted to convince society that women who took part in political demonstrations were respectable women.

In addition to encouraging girls and women to join public demonstrations, Gandhi was concerned about nurturing women leaders. In his 1918 speech to the Bhagini Samaj, Gandhi denounced the “blemishes” in the *shastras*: child marriage, enforced widowhood, and restrictions that marked women as subordinate, and argued that society had to produce women who were as “pure, firm and self-controlled as Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi”⁵⁴, legendary heroines who “filled the wicked with awe”⁵⁵. The women Gandhi envisioned coming forward would have authority in the society and their example would erase the impression left by erroneous *smritis*⁵⁶.

One of his chief supporters in convincing women to adopt *Khadi* was Saraladevi Ghosal Chaudhurani, the niece of Rabindranath Tagore. Well-educated and patriotic, Saraladevi was not married until she was 33 and then it was to Rambhuj Dutt Chaudhary, a nationalist and member of the Arya Samaj from the Punjab. Gandhi met her in 1901 but only became a good friend in 1919, when he came to Lahore as part of the Congress investigation of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. As he got to know her better, he discovered she embodied the characteristics of Sita, Damayanti, and Draupadi and had the potential to become the leader of Indian women. In one extraordinary letter to Rambhuj, he called Saraladevi “the greatest Shakti” and wrote about her becoming one with India in heart and soul⁵⁷.

In a series of letters to Saraladevi, written mostly in the 1920s, it is clear Gandhi was “dazzled by her personality”⁵⁸, delighted she could help make *Khadi* fashionable, and impressed by her ability to move crowds with words and music. However, she was not yet perfect. From the early days of their friendship, Gandhi encouraged her to spin every day, learn to write and speak in Hindi, and become less self-centered⁵⁹. In these letters, one can note a deepening relationship as Gandhi moved from addressing Saraladevi as “Dear Saraladevi”, to “Dear Sarala”,

⁵² “My hope”, *Navajivan* (Jan, 1, 1922), in Pushpa Joshi (ed.), *Gandhi on Women*, cit., p. 100.

⁵³ “The Need for Fearlessness”, *Navajivan* (Jan. 1, 1922), in Pushpa Joshi (ed.), *Gandhi on Women*, cit., p. 99.

⁵⁴ “Speech at Bhagini Samaj”, p. 18.

⁵⁵ “Duty of Women”, *Navajivan* (Jul. 18, 1920), in Pushpa Joshi (ed.), *Gandhi on Women*, cit., p. 48.

⁵⁶ “Speech at Bhagini Samaj”, p. 18.

⁵⁷ Gandhi to Saraladevi (May 2, 1920) Dipak Chaudhury Collection.

⁵⁸ Rajmohan Gandhi, *Gandhi: The Man, His People and the Empire*, cit., p. 216.

⁵⁹ Gandhi to Saraladevi (Mar 22, 1920) Dipak Chaudhury Collection.

to “Dear Sister,” and then “Dearest Sarala.” While a number of authors have characterized this as an “infatuation,” suggesting a sexual longing, I propose a different reading of Gandhi’s comment that he considered Saraladevi his “spiritual wife”⁶⁰. Vinay Lal called Gandhi’s experiments “sexual celibacy or celibate sexuality” – experiments that fit with his advocacy for celibacy but not sex segregation. Brahmacharya for Gandhi, according to Lal, did not entail avoiding desire but rather facing, overcoming and controlling it⁶¹. Personally attracted to Saraladevi, who was cultured, extroverted, intellectual, politically active, and attractive⁶², Gandhi tried shaping her to become his ideal female leader. In addition to informing her about her son Dipak’s progress, filling her in on political news, and discussing health issues, Gandhi’s letters are full of instructions: wear Khadi, live simply, write and speak in Hindi, come to live and work in the Ashram, and dedicate yourself heart and soul to the movement. He called his letters to her “love letters” but at the same time refers to himself as her “brother” and “Law Giver”. It is clear Gandhi wanted Saraladevi to give up her lavish life style and marriage to dedicate herself to the cause.

Although Gandhi wrote in *My Experiments with Truth* that he remained extremely healthy once he had mastered the art of eating, his letters to Saraladevi in 1920 tell a different story. Then 50 years old, Gandhi wrote about illnesses, aches and pains, and difficulty walking. He appeared tired and in need of her sympathy and pampering. Traveling together to promote *Khadi* and the *swadeshi* pledge, Gandhi admired Saraladevi’s public persona and may have imagined that “a merger with her might bring him closer to winning all of India to satyagraha”⁶³. Gandhi’s description of the women leaders needed for India was based on his reading of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The legendary women he mentioned – Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi – were revered for their courage, determination, moral strength, and fortitude. It was only when he met Saraladevi that he found someone who embodied the characteristics needed to lead women and at the same time, could cause men to rethink their ideas about women. While this was his ideal, it was not to be. The details are lost to history but Rajmohan Gandhi claims Gandhi’s son Devdas, Mahadev Desai, and others objected to the closeness of their relationship. By the end of 1920, Gandhi had begun to lecture Saraladevi, leaving her annoyed she had changed so much to try to fit his model. Rambhuj died two years later and Saraladevi returned to Bengal where she dedicated her life to writing, girls’ education, feminist politics, and spiritual discipline. While Rajmohan Gandhi and other authors believe Gandhi initiated the break, there is ample evidence Saraladevi was becoming annoyed with Gandhi’s efforts to shape her and his reliance on the views of his entourage.

⁶⁰ “Letter to H. Kallenbach”, (Aug. 10, 1920), in CWMG, v. 21, Electronic version 1999, pp. 130-131. <http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/VOL021.PDF>

⁶¹ Vinay Lal, *Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharyi: Gandhi’s Experiments in Celibate Sexuality*, in “Journal of the History of Sexuality”, 9, 1/2, 2000, pp. 119-123.

⁶² Thomas Weber, *Going Native* cit., p. 31.

⁶³ Rajmohan Gandhi, *Gandhi: The Man, His People and the Empire*, cit., pp. 214-215.



Figure 5. Gandhi with Sarojini Naidu, 23 April 1930⁶⁴.

In another publication, I have described Saraladevi's 1931 speech to a meeting of women delegates from District Congress Committees in Calcutta as the most forceful feminist speech of the 1930s. After listening to the other delegates, Saraladevi explained why women needed a separate Congress for women. She acknowledged men's role in bringing women into the freedom movement, but chided them for not improving the lives of women. From birth, females were treated as inferior.

As girls, they were denied sweets while their brothers ate their fill; as adults they were exploited; and as political actors, their needs were ignored. Summing up women's experiences with politics, she said Congress "assigned to women the position of law-breakers only and not law-makers". Now was the time to join the worldwide women's movement and demand equal treatment and equal status⁶⁵. United they would impress Congress leaders and perhaps move Jawaharlal Nehru to give "teeming womenfolk" the same attention he accorded the "teeming masses". Saraladevi concluded with a call for legal, economic, social, and educational equality⁶⁶. After Saraladevi disappeared from the national stage, Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), the "Nightingale" of India, emerged as the most significant woman associated with the Indian National Congress and Gandhi. Sarojini met Gandhi in 1914 and from this time on, her life was dedicated to the cause of India's freedom. In 1925, she became the first Indian woman president of the Indian National Conference. Speaking from the platform, Sarojini thanked the delegates for electing her and told them they had reverted to an old tradition and

⁶⁴ Gandhi with Sarojini Naidu, 23 April 1930. By Agence de presse Meurisse - Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, EI-13(2866), Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=30358953>

⁶⁵ "Srimati Saraladevi Chaudhurani's Speech at the Bengal Women's Congress", *Stri Dharma*, 14 (Aug 1931), pp. 506-510; "Women's Congress", *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (May 3, 1931), p. 7.

⁶⁶ "Bengal Women's Conference", *The Hindu* (May 3, 1931), p. 9.

restored to Indian woman the classic position she once held in a happier epoch of our country's story: symbol and guardian alike of the hearth-fires, the alter-fires, and the beacon-fires of her land⁶⁷.

Although Sarojini did not agree with Gandhi on everything and did not live as a Gandhian, she was his loyal and devoted lieutenant. In her speeches, she imagined an India that was ancient and modern, culturally sophisticated and proud of its culture, while part of a world community. When Gandhi was arrested on May 5, 1930 for making salt, Sarojini stepped up to lead the movement until she too was arrested, and command passed to the next leader. From this time on, Sarojini was always next to Gandhi. Like him, she was imprisoned until 1931, and then went to the Round Table Conference. Back in India, she supported his causes, was there when he fasted, and used her vote on the Working Committee to support Gandhi's position. While we might contrast these two women in terms of how they performed as activist leaders and articulated women's position in new India, they both taught Gandhi that he could not decide who would be a leader and how she would lead.

Women's Debt to Gandhi

Gandhi's embrace of women's issues combined with his message that they had a role to play in securing the country's freedom opened the door for women who were keen to take part in the nationalist movement. Especially important was Gandhi's non-violent strategy that placed feminine characteristics – self-suffering, endurance, and everyday actions – above masculine violence. By making spinning and the wearing of *Khadi* key elements of the movement, he feminized the nationalist movement and opened it to women's participation. And women responded. While the number who publically demonstrated were relatively small until the 1930s, those who took the *Swadeshi* vow, spun in their homes, gave up jewelry, and supported the movement was significant. Women were part of every aspect of the movement, including the destruction of property in 1942.

As mentioned earlier, nineteenth-century reform efforts had laid the groundwork by educating women and sponsoring social reform measures to ameliorate the sufferings of women. By the first decades of the 20th century, there were women all over the country primed to serve the country. Manmohini Zutshi, a student leader who was arrested in 1930, wrote: "We were excited and enthusiastic about being taken to prison. We felt as if a great honor had been conferred on us... In fact, the three of us, my sisters and I, dearly hoped to be imprisoned three times so we would be termed "habitual offenders"⁶⁸. Working for the country's freedom provided opportunities for these young women to prove they were just as brave and committed as young men. The real measure of what women gained emerges from oral histories, autobiographies and memoirs. Shrimati Ambujammal, one of Gandhi's loyal followers from Madras, said Gandhi "touched the hearts" of women

⁶⁷ Hasi Banerjee, *Sarojini Naidu: The Traditional Feminist*, K.P. Bagchi, Calcutta 1998, p. 38.

⁶⁸ Manmohini Zutshi Sahgal, *An Indian Freedom Fighter Recalls Her Life*, edited and introduced by Geraldine Forbes, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, New York 1994, p. 73.

when he asked them to join the movement and expressed his faith in their courage. “Do what you can” Gandhi advised women, emphasizing that every act counted⁶⁹.



Figure 6. Women released from prison, Lahore, March 7, 1931⁷⁰.

Because he did not condone rebellion against the family, few “left the house” unless their fathers and husbands agreed. However, this did not stop patriotic women from supporting the movement from within the household in defiance of their families. Suruchi Thapar Bjorkert wrote about her maternal grandmother who “overcame the restrictions and oppositions imposed by her husband, [and]. . . created a nationalist environment within the home and infused her children with patriotic feelings”⁷¹. Other women gained a sense of self and of self-worth when they joined the movement. Ambabai, from Karnataka, was married at age 12 and widowed at 16. Childless, she was sent back to Udipi to live with her parents and spend her days praying to Krishna. Allowed to join other women picketing foreign cloth and toddy shops, Ambabai was arrested and sentenced to four months in

⁶⁹ Gandhi, “Speech at Women’s Meeting Bombay”, pp. 290-292, “Speech at Women’s Meeting, Surat”, pp. 322-326, in CWMG, v. 15, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Delhi Government of India 1958, p. 15; “Speech at Women’s Meeting Dohad”, pp. 79-80, “Speech at Women’s Meeting, Godhra”, in CWMG, v. 16, 1958, p. 168.

⁷⁰ Women released from prison, Lahore, March 7, 1931. From Geraldine Forbes Collection (MZS4.89.023).

⁷¹ Suruchi Thapar Bjorkert, *Nationalist Memories: Interviewing Indian Middle Class Nationalist Women*, in “Oral History”, Autumn 1999, p. 36.

prison, released, and re-arrested. Between prison terms, she made speeches, taught spinning, and organized *prabhat pheries*. Recalling her political activism, Ambabai proclaimed them the happiest days of her life⁷². Gandhi's program transformed her desolate life into one of vital engagement and commitment.

Gandhi's reach also included women marginalized by middle-class society. Speaking passionately and often about child marriage and the plight of widows, he maintained there was "beauty in widowhood" and urged widows to devote their strength and souls "to the motherland"⁷³. Although he emphasized sexual "purity," he held men to blame for women's transgressions and welcomed into the movement women who had been branded immoral. Visiting East Godavari District in 1921, Gandhi met with over 1,000 *devadasis*, women dedicated to the gods who practiced prostitution. Gandhi did not accept the work of *devadasis* or of prostitutes as legitimate labor but he did not condemn them. Instead, he blamed society and lustful men and suggested alternative employment.

What did women gain from their involvement? They were not included in the Congress Working Committee at the time leaders of the Indian National Congress and other political parties were negotiating with the British, but they were included in the Constituent Assembly, which first met in December 1942, to draft a constitution. The Indian Constitution, based on British and American principles, made women equal to men in matters of politics. This equality was not because a few women were part of the Constituent Assembly (six women out of a total of 299 members), but the result of years of making what Gandhi thought were the ills of Indian society – caste/class prejudice, communalism, and gender discrimination – integral to the platform of the Indian National Congress.

Conclusions

A discussion of Gandhi and women must acknowledge feminist discontent with Gandhi's "conventional views about the relative duties of men and women,...failure to recognize female sexuality, and for his apparent willingness to have women confined to the prescribed realms of marriage, wifedom, motherhood, and domesticity"⁷⁴. At the same time, feminist scholars have recognized Gandhi's role in bringing women into the nationalist movement, making it respectable for them to remain single, focus on the equality of men and women, and for holding men to the same moral standards as women⁷⁵. Additionally, Gandhi's insistence on non-violence combined with his focus on the regeneration of the entire society, including caste/class, communalism, poverty and gender relations, were key to women's involvement.

While there is no denying that Gandhi played a key role in bringing women into the freedom movement – through his statements that they had a role to play,

⁷² Ambabai, Interview, Udipi, (May 24, 1976).

⁷³ "Speech at Foundation Laying of Vanita Vishram, Ahmedabad", (June 29, 1919), in Pushpa Joshi (ed.), *Gandhi on Women*, cit., p. 25.

⁷⁴ Vinay Lal, *Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharyi*, cit., p. 109.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

decision to make spinning and wearing *Khadi* key elements of the *swadeshi* movement⁷⁶, insistence on speaking to women's groups as often as possible, and choice of women leaders to work with him – one cannot overlook the way in which his agenda developed in tandem with women's own aspirations. Women's organizations date from the nineteenth century and long before Gandhi returned to India, women were becoming educated, entering the professions, writing about their issues in novels and magazines, and forming organizations to push for reform. Gandhi's faith in women and attention to their presence and potential struck a chord and they "flocked" to join him. Women pushed Gandhi to see them in a new light and when he urged women to come out of their houses, demonstrate in the streets, and court arrest, he was following, not leading, women into political action. The give and take between Gandhi and women benefitted both.

⁷⁶ See Lisa Trivedi, *Clothing Gandhi's Nation: Homespun and Modern India*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2007, pp. 80-89. Trivedi argues that "Khadi allowed women to radically change their participation in the nation in part by transforming their manner of dress" (Ivi, p. 88).