
Introduction

by

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This monographic issue sets out to shed light on the women who worked with Gandhi from the 1920s to the late 20th century, playing an active role in his movement of civil disobedience either as “social workers” or, after this “political workshop”, undertaking independent and original paths. The theme has been much debated. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, the first Health Minister and long-time collaborator of Gandhi, claimed that women – especially Indian women – owed Gandhi “a special debt of gratitude”¹, because of his protests against forced widowhood, child-marriage, polygamy and *pardah*.

Without doubt, Gandhi’s thought and experience have produced interesting writings on the role of women in India and the world², albeit with checkered results. Among the more negative aspects explored is the dramatic experience of child-marriage – a topic dealt with by DEP, especially the work of Eleanor Rathbone in India against this Indian practice³, – Gandhi and Kastur married at 13 and Gandhi himself recalls his severe and constrictive behaviour towards Kastur⁴. Other shadows were the violence against women during Partition⁵, and Gandhi’s inability to open up to women’s emancipation thus breaking the chains of tradition. Gandhi has often been accused of misogyny and male chauvinism. As Debali Mookerjea-Leonard has recently claimed in her article *To be pure or not to be: Gandhi, Women, and the Partition of India*, Gandhi failed to put forward an adequate political response to the drama of Partition, what she calls a “gender pathology”, to which men were subject but of which women were victims. Mookerjea-Leonard writes: “By focusing on the moral or purity status of the victim, Gandhi, in his public statements, failed to draw attention to the issue [the partition] because of his own participation in the patriarchal logic at work in the mass violence against women at that time”⁶. In Gandhi’s thought, the idea of woman is linked to the paradigm of two spheres, of biological difference.

¹ Rajkumar Amrit Kaur, *Gandhi and Women*, Sarvodaya Mandal and Gandhi Research Foundation, <http://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/gandhi-articles/gandhi-and-women.php>

² See Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *To the Women*, Allahbad Journal Press, Allahbad 1941; Id., *Women and Social Injustice*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad 1942; Sushila Devi, *Mahatma Gandhi’s Influence on Hindu Women*, typescript, 1922.

³ On child-marriage and the work of Eleanor Rathbone in India see Bruna Bianchi, “Piu’ numerose di tutte le croci del Fronte Occidentale”. *Eleanor Rathbone e il dibattito sui matrimoni precoci in India (1887-1934)*, and *Eleanor Rathbone. Il Minotauro indiano*, in DEP 16/2011.

⁴ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments of Truth*, General Press, London 2018.

⁵ See Debali Mookerjea-Leonard, *To be pure or not to be: Gandhi, women, and the Partition of India* in “Feminist Review”, 94, 2010, 1, pp. 38-54.

⁶ Ivi, pp. 52-33.

Gandhi wrote: “Woman is the incarnation of Ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love which again, means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure?”⁷. In Gandhi’s view, a woman is independent in the measure of her service for those close to her (her husband, her children, her country); her freedom is limited to the confines of marriage. Women’s emancipation is subordinate to the independence of India, but the link between the two struggles is tenuous; they are related but not interconnected. Gandhi’s real failure was that of not recognizing that the independence of India without women’s emancipation would not be true independence.

Despite the limitations of Gandhi’s thought and politics, the experiment of civil disobedience helped create the basis for the construction of women’s political identity in India and for the collaboration between Indian and western women. The women themselves inspired the methods Gandhi chose to use. Gandhi looked to the English suffragists who bravely undertook hunger strikes to forge his non-violent movement⁸.

Gandhi’s views on the role of women helped transform the reformist ideas of the previous century. At the same time, thanks to their mass participation in the fight for independence, women had emerged from the domestic sphere and had taken up their place in the public sphere. Sacrifice, peace, and care are values Gandhi lauded as being “feminine” and values he embraced and proposed as universal, to be followed by both men and women. “Biological difference”, however, remained as a guiding perspective. Gandhi extended the domestic sphere to public life, modifying the traditional idea of marriage, but did not free women from the need for marriage. He considered the family as the basic and important unit of society. As Sujata Patel writes in *Construction and Reconstruction of Woman in Gandhi* – which appears in this issue in Italian translation – “the new image of women that Gandhi creates is drawn from one particular historical and social setting and for one particular political goal: to unite the different strata in India against imperialism”⁹.

Although numerous studies examine the part played by Indian women in the civil disobedience and Gandhi’s thought on the role of women¹⁰, the theme continues to

⁷ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Woman and Social Injustice*, cit., p. 21.

⁸ On the links between Gandhi’s methods and English suffragism, see the essay by Geraldine Forbes, *Gandhi’s Debt to Women and Women’s Debt to Gandhi* in this issue and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Deeds Better than Words*, “Indian Opinion”, 26 October 1906, in *Gandhi on Women: Collection of Mahatma Gandhi’s Writings and Speeches on Women*, Centre for Women’s Development Studies & Navajivan Trust, New Delhi 1988, p. 3.

⁹ Sujata Patel, *Construction and Reconstruction of woman in Gandhi*, “Economic and Political Weekly”, 20 February 1988, p. 378.

¹⁰ On Gandhi’s ideas on the role of women, see the article by Sujata Patel, *Construction and Reconstruction of Woman in Gandhi*, cit., Sita Kapadia *A Tribute to Mahatma Gandhi: His Views on Women and Social Change*, Vol 1, Nov. 29th, 1995, “Journal of South Asian Women’s Studies”; Madhu Kishwar, *Gandhi on Women*, “Economic and Political Weekly”, 20, 40, 5 October 1985, pp. 1691-1702; more generally on the role of women in the independence movement, see Radha Kumar, *A History of Doing. An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women’s Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990*, Zubaan, Bombay 1997; Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012; Aparna Basu, *The Role of Women in the Indian Struggle for Freedom in Indian Women from Purdah to Modernity*, ed. B.R. Nanda, Vikas, New Delhi 1976; on the relationships

invite debate. We have therefore chosen to devote this issue to the women who worked alongside Gandhi in the fight for independence and for the construction of a culture of peace. These are women to whom historiography has paid little attention or who have been “idealised”, which risks undervaluing the complexity of their involvement, and the independent roles they managed to carve out for themselves in the great political movement Gandhi set in motion. Many women worked actively in the social, political and cultural fields, gaining important experience on which Indian feminism drew. This issue cannot hope to provide a full coverage of the complex and rich picture, both in terms of historical reconstruction and of the relationship between Gandhian thought and Indian feminist reflection. Nevertheless, the articles published here have the advantage of continuing a line of research that deserves further study using interdisciplinary approaches and studies that permit documentation of the history of women in India in the 20th century.

Some articles focus on the work of a single figure; others provide a wider view, such as the study by Geraldine Forbes (Oswego University), and the analysis of the collaboration between Gandhi and several western women by Thomas Weber (La Trobe University) from his *Going Native: Gandhi's Relationship with Western Women*, which is published here in Italian translation. The article by Sujata Patel (Hyderabad University), published in Italian translation, is a detailed overview of Gandhi's thought and his conception of the role of women throughout his political activity. Sharon MacDonald (Saint Mary's University), Bidisha Mallik (Tacoma University) and Holger Terp provide biographical studies that explore the theme of the collaboration between western women and Gandhi, in particular the individual experiences of Marjorie Sykes, Sarala Behn and Ellen Hørup. The article by Chiara Corazza (Ca' Foscari University of Venice) is a post-colonial analysis of the work of Sarojni Naidu, the “Nightingale of India”, while Julie Laut (Illinois University) looks at the experience of Vijayalakshmi Pandit, sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, of “gendered politics” in the international discussion at the United Nations Conference. The issue also publishes a chapter from the autobiography of Sarala Behn, translated from Hindi David Hopkins. The issue closes with a recollection of Kastur, Mahatma's wife, written for DEP by Aaron Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma, and the contribution of Radha Baht, Chipko activist and spiritual heir of Sarala Behn, who has written a reflection on her experience and her collaboration with Sarala.

between Gandhi and western women, see Thomas Weber, *Going Native: Gandhi's Relationship with Western Women*, Roli Books, Delhi 2011, of which the chapter “Gandhi and Western Women” is published in this issue in Italian translation.