
A STUDY ON ENLIGHTENED WOMEN'S GLOBAL MOVEMENT

Dr. Amneet Gill

Faculty, Dept. Of Evening Studies, MDRC, Panjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract: Interest in women's issues was first shown in the beginning of the twentieth century when scholars turned their attention from traditional subjects of historical inquiry to investigate the lives of more ordinary people. Historians have demonstrated that there is really no historical change that does not affect the lives of women in some way. It was the educated men who started analyzing the experiences of women in different cultures. With the passage of time, some enlightened women began to raise issues concerning women and thus fuelled the global women's movement. This research paper looks at the early period of women's activism and ends with the discussion on the early twentieth century.

Keywords: Activism, History, Rights, Women.

Introduction: It is significant to understand as to when interest in women's issues first began to be shown. Beginning in the 1930s, many scholars turned their attention from traditional subjects of historical inquiry such as public, political developments, diplomatic changes, military events and major intellectual movements to investigating the lives of more ordinary people. Women's history therefore began in some ways as a sub field of social history. Historians have demonstrated that there is really no historical change that does not affect the lives of women in some way, though often very differently than it affects the lives of men of the same class or social group.¹

It was the educated men who started analyzing the experiences of women in different cultures. These men have been thinking and writing about women since the beginning of recorded history, trying to determine what makes them different from men and creating ideals for female behaviour and appearance.

Women's history of the early modern period began by asking about women's contribution to various developments that shaped society. Writer Natalie Davis² in search of these answers has coined the term "women worthies"³ as to, who were the great women artists/musicians/scientists/rulers? How did women's work serve capitalist expansion? What was the women's role in political movements such as the English civil war or other seventeenth century revolts?

Along with this, historians have investigated what effects the developments of early modern period had on women, a line of questioning that has resulted in the rethinking of several major historical issues. Joan Kelly⁴, for example, began with, a simple question, "Did women have Renaissance"⁵? Her answer of "No, atleast not during Renaissance" has led not only to more than two decades of intensive historical and literary research, as people have attempted to confirm, refute, modify or nuance her answer, but has also contributed to the broader questioning of the whole notion of historical periodization. If a particular development has little, or indeed a negative effect on women, can we still call it a period, a golden age, a 'Renaissance' or an 'Enlightenment'⁶? Can we continue to view the seventeenth century, during which hundreds or perhaps thousands of women were burnt as witches on the European continent as the period of "the spread of rational thought"⁷

However, it needs to be noted that during the enlightenment period, some philosophers defended giving equal rights to women. The most cited woman writer of the time was Mary Wollstonecraft, often characterized as the first woman philosopher. Her book, 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' (1792) is one of the first works that can unambiguously be called women centric, although by modern

standards her comparison of women to the nobility, the elite of society (coddled, fragile, and in danger of intellectual and moral sloth) may at first seem as regressive analysis. Wollstonecraft identified that education and the upbringing of women as creating limited expectations based on a self-image dictated by the male gaze.

The nineteenth century women reformers reacted to not only cultural inequities between men and women but sought greater roles for women in political and social spheres.⁸ In Scotland, Marion Reid⁹ published her influential, 'A Plea for Woman' in 1843, which proposed a transatlantic American European agenda for women's rights, including voting rights for women. Caroline Norton,¹⁰ advocated for changes in British law. She discovered a lack of legal rights for women upon entering an abusive marriage. The publicity generated from her appeal to Queen Victoria and related activism helped change English laws to recognize and accommodate married women and child custody issues.

However, these few dissenting voices of women at the outset of the nineteenth century were of little social influence. There was little sign of change in the political or social order, nor any evidence of a recognizable women's movement. Collective concerns began to coalesce by the end of the nineteenth century, paralleling with the emergence of a stiffer social model and code of conduct which was confining and repressive for women.

In the nineteenth century, the major issues highlighted for women's empowerment were educational reforms, marital and property rights and domestic violence. The interrelated barriers to education and employment formed the backbone of nineteenth century women's reform efforts. Slowly educational reform efforts of women bore fruit. Queen's College (1848) and Bedford College (1849) in London began to offer limited education to women. Efforts were made to persuade the universities to open their doors for women and thus make higher education accessible. Despite these measurable advances, few could take advantage of them and life for female students was difficult.

The nineteenth century also saw concerted efforts on part of women to forge international alliances. For example, as a part of the continuing dialogue between British and American women, Elizabeth Blackwell¹¹, one of the first American women to graduate in medicine (1849), lectured in Britain. Campaigns gave women opportunities to test their new political skills and to conjoin disparate social reform groups.¹² Their successes include the campaign for the Married Women's Property Act¹³ (passed in 1882) and the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869¹⁴, which united women's groups and utilitarian¹⁵ liberals like John Stuart Mill¹⁶. Generally, women were outraged by the inherent inequity and misogyny of the legislation. For the first time, women in large numbers took up the rights of prostitutes. The most influential women's writer of the time was the colorful journalist Margaret Fuller¹⁷. Her book, 'Woman in the Nineteenth Century' was published in 1845. Her dispatches from Europe for the New York Tribune helped to synchronize the women's rights movement. Elizabeth Cady Stanton¹⁸ and Lucretia Mott¹⁹, two eminent American women activists, held a woman's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, where a declaration of independence for women was drafted.

The main issues addressed by what she called the 'Declaration of Sentiments' are as follows:

- Women were not allowed to vote
- Women had to submit to laws when they had no voice in their formation
- Married women had no property rights
- Husbands had legal power over and responsibility for their wives to the extent that they could imprison or beat them with impunity
- Divorce and child custody laws favoured men, giving no rights to women
- Women had to pay property taxes although they had no representation in the levying of these taxes
- Women were not allowed to enter professions such as medicine or law
- Women had no means to gain an education since no college or university would accept women students
- With only a few exceptions, women were not allowed to participate in the affairs of the church

Activism for the equality of women was not limited to Britain and United States but spread to other countries as well. In mid nineteenth century Iran, TahiriĤāhiriĤ was active as a poet and religious reformer and is recorded as proclaiming the equality of women at her execution. She inspired later generations of Iranian women. Louise Dittmar campaigned for women's rights, in Germany, in the 1840s. Her contemporary, Fusae Ichikawa, was the first woman to campaign for women's suffrage in Japan. Mary Lee was active in the suffrage movement in South Australia, the first Australian colony to grant women the vote in 1894. In New Zealand, Kate Sheppard and Mary Ann Muller worked to achieve the vote for women by 1893.²⁰

In the early twentieth century, attempts were made to replace androcentric (male-centered) theological tradition with a gynocentric (female-centered) view. The major issues highlighted by women in the 1910s and 1920s included suffrage, economics and employment, sexualities and families, war and peace, and a constitutional amendment for equality. American women took the lead in organizing themselves, as is evident by the formation of various organizations like the National Women's Party, suffrage advocacy groups such as the National American Women's Suffrage Association and the National League of Women Voters, career associations such as the American Association of University Women, the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs and the National Women's Trade Union League, war and peace groups such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the International Council of Women, alcohol-focused groups like the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform and race and gender centered organizations like the National Association of Colored Women.²¹

References:

1. Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, London, 2000, p.4
2. Twentieth century American Historian of early modern period.
3. Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, US, 2000, p.5
4. Twentieth century American Historian who wrote on Italian Renaissance.
5. Cultural movement in Europe (fourteenth century to seventeenth century) that marked the beginning of early modern age.
6. Philosophical movement that dominated Europe in Eighteenth century, centering on rationality
7. Merry E. Wiesner, *Op.cit.*, p.77
8. Anne Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, Oxford University Press, UK, 1982, p.34
9. Nineteenth century influential Scottish woman writer.
10. Nineteenth century English author and social reformer.
11. Nineteenth century British born physician, who became the first woman to receive a medical degree in the US.
12. Karen Offen, *European Feminisms 1700-1950-A Political History*, Stanford University Press, California, 2000, p.2
13. British legislation that allowed married women to own and control property in their own right.
14. British legislation that allowed police officers to arrest women suspected of being prostitutes and were then subjected to compulsory medical tests for venereal diseases.
15. Theorist of ethics holding that the best moral action is the one that maximizes utility.
16. Utilitarian theorist focused on rules instead of individual moral action.
17. Nineteenth century American journalist and advocate of women's rights.
18. Nineteenth century American social activist and suffragist.
19. Nineteenth century American social reformer.
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