

# Refleksi

JURNAL KAJIAN AGAMA DAN FILSAFAT

**“Agama sebagai Solusi dan Pemersatu  
antar Umat”**

## WACANA

**Suhaimi**

**Politik Islam Indonesia dan Demokrasi  
Pancasila di Era Reformasi**

**M. Ikhsan Tanggok**

**The Role of Chinese Communities to the  
Spread of Islam in Indonesia**

**Ida Rosyidah**

**Gandhi’s Ideas of Women in Hinduism**

**Abdul Hadi W.M.**

**Takdir Alisyahbana dan Pemikiran  
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## AGAMA SEBAGAI SOLUSI DAN PEMERSATU ANTAR UMAT

Perdebatan agama sebagai solusi bagi umat manusia atau bukan masih merupakan pro dan kontra bagi sebagian orang. Ada di antara umat manusia yang menganggap bahwa agama tidak dapat memberikan solusi yang banyak bagi menyelesaikan berbagai persoalan, dan ada yang menganggap bahwa agama dapat memberikan solusi bagi banyak persoalan yang dihadapi oleh manusia. Oleh karena itu, tidak sedikit orang yang lari ke agama atau kepada tokoh-tokoh agama untuk menyelesaikan persoalan yang dihadapinya. Sebagai contoh, banyak orang lari ke tokoh-tokoh agama untuk meminta pertolongan atas ketergantungan obat-obat terlarang yang menimpa dirinya. Contoh lain, banyak orang menggunakan lembaga-lembaga keagamaan untuk menyelesaikan berbagai konflik keagamaan. Mungkin ini yang dapat kita tangkap dari kesan yang dimunculkan dalam sebuah artikel di dalam jurnal ini.

Semua agama di dunia ini menawarkan berbagai konsep yang dapat digunakan untuk memberikan solusi bagi banyak persoalan yang dihadapi oleh umat manusia. Tentu saja konsep-konsep yang ditawarkan itu berlandaskan pada ajaran-ajaran suci yang berasal dari kitab suci masing-masing agama. Semua konsep tersebut mengarah pada bantuan yang diberikan agama untuk membawa manusia ke jalan yang benar. Konsep agama yang masih dianggap cukup jitu dalam memecahkan berbagai persoalan tersebut juga dijadikan landasan bagi banyak para ahli untuk memecahkan berbagai persoalan sosial di Indonesia.

Ada sebagian orang menganggap bahwa agama adalah dapat menyebabkan berbagai *social unrest* (kerusuhan sosial) yang terjadi di berbagai daerah di Indonesia dewasa ini dan ada juga sebagian orang yang beranggapan bahwa agama bukanlah penyebab dari kerusuhan tapi agama dapat memberikan solusi bagi berbagai kerusuhan sosial yang ada. Teori ini masih tetap dipertahankan oleh banyak sarjana yang mengkaji masalah agama, terutama Suhaimi yang dalam tulisannya menyoroti persoalan agama dalam kaitannya dengan *social unrest* dewasa ini. Dalam tulisannya, Suhaimi melihat bahwa agama bukanlah penyebab dari banyak kerusuhan

sosial, tapi justru dapat dijadikan alat untuk meredam berbagai kerusuhan sosial yang ada.

Bicara masalah agama dapat menyelesaikan berbagai persoalan yang ada, rasanya kurang lengkap jika kita tidak membicarakan pelaku agama tersebut. Pelaku agama adalah para penganut agama-agama yang ada yang menyebarkan dan menjalankan ajaran agama tersebut. Di pundak para pelaku agama inilah agama tersebut dapat disebarkan ke seluruh masyarakat, dan dapat diperkenalkan kepada masyarakat tentang ajaran-ajaran perdamaian yang terkandung di dalamnya. Pelaku-pelaku agama ini, tidak hanya terbatas pada satu suku bangsa, tapi terdiri dari berbagai suku bangsa. Sebagai contoh agama Islam di Indonesia tidak hanya disebarkan oleh satu suku bangsa tapi oleh banyak suku bangsa, termasuk di dalamnya suku bangsa Cina. Banyak orang beranggapan bahwa orang Cina tidak mempunyai peran dalam menyebarkan agama Islam di Indonesia. Mungkin anggapan tersebut dapat dikatakan kurang tepat. Karena berdasarkan sejarah penyebaran Islam di Indonesia, orang Cina juga dapat memiliki peranan penting dalam menyebarkan Islam di Indonesia. Dalam proses penyebaran tersebut, tidak satu pun konflik yang kita jumpai disebabkan tindakan para pelaku agama. Mungkin ada benarnya jika banyak orang yang beranggapan bahwa Islam disebarkan di Nusantara dilakukan secara damai, dan ada kalanya menggunakan kebudayaan setempat sehingga dapat dengan mudah diterima oleh masyarakat.

Jika dalam tulisannya Suhaimi menyoroti persoalan agama sumber konflik atau agama dapat dijadikan alat untuk mempersatukan berbagai suku agama dan berbagai kepentingan, namun M. Ikhsan Tanggok dalam tulisannya lebih melihat peran orang Cina dalam penyebaran agama Islam di Nusantara. Meskipun keduanya melihat agama dengan sudut pandang berbeda, namun kedua tulisan tersebut memiliki keterkaitan antara satu dengan yang lainnya. Islam dalam hal ini bukan saja dilihat dari konteks ajarannya, tapi juga dapat ditelusuri dari konteks sejarahnya. Melalui sejarah tersebut, orang dapat melihat ke belakang bagaimana pelaku-pelaku agama dapat meletakkan agama yang mereka yakini sebagai komunikasi atau penghubung antara satu dengan yang lain dan dapat membuat masyarakat berlaku damai.

Dalam tulisannya, M. Ikhsan Tanggok juga melihat betapa pentingnya melihat agama dari sudut pandang budaya atau kebudayaan. Sebab agama

tidak akan diterima dengan mudah oleh masyarakat tanpa diterjemahkan dalam berbagai kebudayaan suku bangsa. Oleh karena itu, agama dipahami secara berbeda sesuai dengan kebudayaan masing-masing suku bangsa. Namun secara teologis, ajaran-ajaran agama masih tetap dipertahankan keutuhannya. Ajaran-ajaran agama tidak semata-mata menyangkut masalah teologi tapi juga membahas tentang gender yang dewasa ini lebih banyak dibicarakan dalam diskusi-diskusi dan seminar di perguruan tinggi maupun di luar perguruan tinggi.

Sehubungan dengan gender tersebut, maka Ida Rosyida dalam tulisannya menyajikan dengan panjang lebar masalah gender, terutama pemikiran Gandhi tentang gender. Tidak ubahnya dengan tokoh-tokoh filsuf Timur, Gandhi juga melihat adanya perbedaan antara lelaki dan wanita. Wanita menurut Gandhi selalu dinomor-duakan dan lelaki memainkan peranan penting dan berkuasa atas wanita. Dalam masyarakat patrilineal, lelaki selalu di nomor satukan, tidak hanya dalam lingkungan keluarga, namun juga dalam ritual-ritual keagamaan. Hal yang sama juga dijumpai dalam agama Hindu, di mana di dalam upacara keagamaan, laki-laki memegang peranan yang lebih penting. Meskipun demikian, pemikiran Gandhi tidak terlepas dari konsep-konsep ajaran Hindu yang mereka jadikan pedoman dan acuan dalam kehidupan sehari-hari.

Agama bukan saja bicara tentang teologi, gender sebagaimana dijelaskan di atas, tapi agama juga bicara tentang perbedaan. Bicara tentang gender sama artinya bicara mengenai perbedaan, yaitu perbedaan antara laki-laki dan perempuan. Dalam pandangan agama-agama besar di dunia, perbedaan bukanlah “musibah” tapi “*rahmah*” atau dapat membawa keberkatan apabila kita dapat memahami arti dari perbedaan tersebut. Karena adanya perbedaan antara lelaki dan perempuan, maka populasi di dunia ini selalu bertambah atau berkembang. Dalam konsep agama Islam juga dikatakan bahwa berbagai macam suku bangsa yang berbeda-beda diciptakan oleh Tuhan di muka bumi ini, adalah agar umat manusia yang berbeda tersebut dapat saling kenal-mengenal dan bekerja-sama satu dengan yang lainnya untuk mencapai satu tujuan yang mulia. Inilah makna dari adanya perbedaan, dan bukan perbedaan tersebut dijadikan alat untuk memusuhi satu dengan yang lainnya dan juga melahirkan kelompok-kelompok yang tujuannya untuk menjatuhkan satu dengan yang lainnya.



Dalam ajaran agama Islam juga, Tuhan sangat menghargai adanya perbedaan, lihat saja ada ayat dalam al-Qur'an (*lakum dinukum waliadin*) yang cenderung mengakui adanya perbedaan. Dalam al-Qur'an Tuhan mengakui adanya agama di luar agama Islam. Jika Tuhan sendiri mengakui keberadaan itu, kenapa umat manusia tidak mau mengakui keberadaan yang ada di luarnya. Inilah yang mungkin sangat disoroti oleh salah satu artikel dalam jurnal ini. Dalam jurnal ini, Nanang Tahqiq, melihat bahwa perlu mengkaji ayat al-Qur'an, terutama "*lakum dinukum waliadin*" sebagai alat untuk menghargai adanya perbedaan, terutama menghargai agama di luar agama Islam itu sendiri. Nanang melihat bahwa ayat tersebut tidak dipahami oleh sebagian umat Islam sesuai dengan misi ayat tersebut yang sangat menghargai adanya perbedaan. Ayat ini juga mendorong umat Islam untuk menciptakan toleransi sesama umat beragama, sehingga di antara agama-agama yang ada di dunia ini dapat saling menghargai dan bekerja sama. Oleh Karena itu, sangat tepat jika tema terbitan jurnal **Refleksi** kali ini adalah "Agama Sebagai Solusi dan Pemersatu Antar Umat". Tema ini bermakna agar agama dapat dijadikan sebagai penyelamat dan mempersatukan berbagai umat manusia di dunia untuk tujuan kemanusiaan dan persatuan.

Jakarta, Desember 2006

*Redaksi*

## GANDHI'S IDEAS OF WOMEN IN HINDUISM

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**Abstract:** *Similar to Eastern philosophers, Gandhi also perceived differences between men and women. According to Gandhi, women are often marginalized while men play significant and dominant roles over women. In a patrilineal society, men are always prioritized, not only within the family but also in religious rituals. The same is found in Hinduism, where men hold more prominent roles in religious ceremonies. However, Gandhi's thoughts are not detached from the Hindu teachings they use as guidance in daily life.*

**Keywords:** *Gandhi, Hinduism, Gender, Guidelines for Life.*

**Abstrak:** Tidak ubahnya dengan tokoh-tokoh filsuf Timur, Gandhi juga melihat adanya perbedaan antara lelaki dan wanita. Wanita menurut Gandhi selalu dinomor-duakan dan lelaki memainkan peranan penting dan berkuasa atas wanita. Dalam masyarakat patri-lineal, lelaki selalu di nomor satukan, tidak hanya dalam lingkungan keluarga, namun juga dalam ritual-ritual keagamaan. Hal yang sama juga dijumpai dalam agama Hindu, di mana di dalam upacara keagamaan, laki-laki memegang peranan yang lebih penting. Meskipun demikian, pemikiran Gandhi tidak terlepas dari konsep-konsep ajaran Hindu yang mereka jadikan pedoman dan acuan dalam kehidupan sehari-hari.

**Kata Kunci:** Gandhi, Hindu, Gender, Pedoman Hidup.

## Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), the founding father of the Indian independence, is one of the most popular and influential leaders in the twentieth century. Some of his ideas, such as of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *satyagraha* (truth force), are popular enough around the world, moreover, these ideas have inspired other leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela in their struggle against injustices in their own countries, the United States and South Africa. However, Gandhi has many other impressive ideas that are less popular. His ideas of gender equality, liberation through self-reliance, and tolerance among religious persons, for example, are only a few examples of these impressive and yet not so popular ideas.

Here I will discuss and analyze Gandhi's ideas of women in Hinduism. The special emphasis will be given to Gandhi's discussion and criticism of the position of women in the Indian Hindu tradition, child marriage, the relation between men and women, and birth control. In addition, I will discuss feminists' debate around these Gandhi's ideas. Before that, to provide the context of his ideas, I will give a short biography of Gandhi. My overall goal is to describe and discuss how a secular scholar such as Gandhi interpreted his religious traditions in a way that was supportive to his humanistic appeals.

## A Short Biography of Gandhi

A reformer and politician, Gandhi was born at Porbandar in western part of India in 1869. While his mother was a devout Hindu, his father was a merchant who was actively engaged in politics. Gandhi took his formal education, from elementary through high schools, in Rajkot. When

he was thirteen years old, his family arranged his marriage with Kasturba. Gandhi had a very dramatic experience that later would determine his decision to live a life in celibacy. At the age of sixteen, Gandhi left his father who was ill - and then died - to make love to Kasturba. This shameful experience would remind in Gandhi's memory throughout his life: he was of the opinion that sexual intercourse had made him careless about his obligation to his father and family. Gandhi could never forgive himself for this, and he named this experience "double shame" (Gandhi, 1969, p. 31). To pay his debt of honor to his father, Gandhi later decided to live a life in celibacy.

After graduation from high school in 1887, Gandhi left for England to study law. He graduated from the Law School of London University in 1890. In 1891 he returned to India and practiced law in Bombay, but his desire to be a successful lawyer in India was not fulfilled. In 1893, he went for a legal case to South Africa. During that time, apartheid (racial discrimination of whites over blacks) had been a big issue in South Africa. His painful experience of being racially discriminated by whites encouraged Gandhi to engage in political activities and to actively campaign against discrimination among Indian diasporas in South Africa.

In 1894, the government of South Africa implemented a new policy of racialism which required the non-white citizens to register their finger print in 1894. As his expression against this policy, Gandhi founded Natal Indian Congress Party and published a weekly newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, to empower the Indian community in South Africa. He also introduced *ahimsa* or nonviolence movement and *satyagraha*, a strategy to struggle against oppressor by using the power of love. In 1904 Gandhi established Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm in 1910 for African Indian poor communities. By so doing, he made intensive contact with the poor, something that he never did in India.

Those experiences had brought about dramatically changes in Gandhi's life. He began to live a modest life and to rely on himself. His *satyagraha* and the 16 years old experience made him vowed to live in *brahmacharya*, a complete celibacy in 1906. To express her dedication to her husband, Kasturba also committed celibacy. There are no references that explain clearly how Gandhi has contributed to Kasturba's decision. Regarding his celibacy decision, Gandhi believes that "husband and wife do not have to obtain each other's consent for practicing *brahmacharya*" (as cited in Lal,

200, p. 111). The other part of the literature mentions about his consistent statement regarding celibacy that “a husband cannot take the vow of *brahmacharya* without consent of his wife” (p. 111).

In 1914 Gandhi and his family left South Africa and back to India. Similarly, he applied *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* to struggle against British colonialization in India. Gandhi soon gained many supports from Indian politicians, peasants and religious leaders. He trained many volunteers to be *satyagrahis* in his ashrams, a special institution that teaches students brave, truthful and to live in celibacy. His first great achievement in employing *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* was to combat the British policy of salt tax. When he was imprisoned because of his protest against the policy, his disciple, Sarojini Naidu, took over the leadership and continued with the “raid” or non-violent battle against British troops in Dharasana. Many Gandhi's *satyagrahis* died and injured in this battle (Kinsley, 1993).

Gandhi never gave up encouraging Indians to fight against British. He dedicated his entire life for building tolerance and creating egalitarian society among Indians at the same time fighting for Indian independence. Gandhi was killed by Nathuran Vinayak Godse, a Hindu fanatic who was against Gandhi's attempts to reconcile Hindu and Muslim conflict in January 1948. Although the reconciliation was not successful, his strong commitment in applying *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* has been a strong foundation for peace and tolerance not only in India but also around the world.

### **Women's Position and Role in Hindu's Scriptures and Epics**

Most Hindu scriptures such as the *Laws of Manu*, *Smriti*, *Yajnavalkys*, *Atri* and *Vahista* place women in the lower position than men in family, rituals or public. Women are always under the control of men, without which women are considered potentially dangerous. The *Laws of Manu*, the most popular Hindu Law Book, says that “in the childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her son, a women must never be independent” (Manu, 1971, p. 195). The *Ramayana* epic also places women in the second position. This epic depicts Sita as a wife who always obeys her husband. She had never rejected her husband wills but not *vice versa*. She always maintains her dignity as a devout wife. Rama's attitude to question and ask proofs of her wife purity, Sita, after she was kidnapped by Ravana, clearly points the injustice against women. Sarabhai says that this epic is an example of how

religious culture maintains gender inequality (as cited in Narayanan, 1999). Even though most Hindu scripture and epics position women inequality, Narayanan (1999) explains that there are a few texts like *Naradan Smriti* that place women in an equal position. Unfortunately, they are not popular. The question is: who is responsible to promote gender inequality among Hindus? According to Kinsley (1993) and Narayanan (1999), male Brahmin is the one who promoted male's predominance over women among Indian society through religious texts.

Hindu's scriptures divide women's roles in three stages: unmarried young women or childhood, married women, and widow. In each stage, a woman has different duties. In the first stage, girls should learn how to be a future good wife which can please their husband. The goddess Sita, Rama's wife, for example, is the ideal of Hindu image for this stage. The childhood age is ended when a girl reaches her puberty marked by her first menstruation. Girls also learn that menstruation and childbirth is the most polluted substances; so that, during that time, women are forbidden to engage in religious activities and to have contacts with the kitchen (Souza, 1980; Kinsley, 1993). But Narayanan states that there are several texts which mention the contrary statement. The Mahabharata, for example, tells that Drupadi surrender her life to Lord Krisna when she is menstruating (Narayanan, 1999, p. 68). In addition, Sunithi/ goddess Persona allows menstruating women to undertake worship. Now days, many Indian women still practice traditional rules for menstruating women.

The second stage is the stage of a married woman. This period is known as "the mother in law's Kingdom" (Souza, 1980, p. 297). At this stage, wives are subject to nurturing children and obeying their husband. The *Yajnavalkya* obliges wives to obey their husbands and treat them as God regardless of whether he is a good or bad husband (as cited in Gandhi, 1958, Manu, 1971). This dogma seems irrational and contrary to the moral values. It may be difficult to imagine how a wife must obey the husband when he is rapist or a killer. However, in Hinduism, obeying to husband's will is more important than worshipping God. According to the *Laws of Manu*, "no sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be performed by women a part (from their husbands), if a wife obeys her husband, she will for that (reason alone) be exalted in heaven" (Manu, 1971, p. 196). The Atri, another Hindu scripture, also suggests that the best way for a woman to gain the highest place in heaven is by washing their husband's feet or the whole

body with the sacred water and drink the water (as cited in Gandhi, 1958, p. 14). On the other hand, some Hindu texts curse women who disobey with their husband. The *Vahista* says that women will not be in heaven if they displease their husband (p. 14). Hindu traditions, based on the *Angiras* scripture, also ban people to eat foods that are cooked by women who disobeyed their husband (p.14). Those Hindu texts only require women to obey their husband but not *vice versa*.

The third stage is the stage of a widow woman. Widows are not only forbidden from wearing jewelry and fancy cloths, but also, they are not allowed to mention the name of other men after her husband died (Manu, 1971, p. 197). Hinduism also recognizes *sati* or suttee which says that if widows want to be in heaven with their husband, they must be willing to be burn together with their husband's corpse. *Sati* is criticized by feminist such as Ram Mohun Roy as a dangerous practice because it perpetuates patriarchal ideology and violate against human rights. In the past, *Sati* was practiced by many middle-class women in India as a final devotee of a wife to her husband.

### **Gandhi's Ideas of Women's Empowerment**

Gandhi considered many Hindu's scriptures and texts as strongly promote gender inequality and torture women. Some texts in *Shastras*, for example, show male-oriented practices. He emphasized that such texts should be analyzed in their historical context, because those texts were produced in a period when the need of male dominance was inevitable due to the high demand of survival. For the reason, polygamy was allowed in order to increase the number of sons in India. But Gandhi disagreed if male dominance was subjected to religious teachings. He argues that male dominance was not relevant to current situation. Therefore, he recommended a reformed interpretation of Hindu's texts. And reformation should be done by authoritative institutions.

Gandhi also offered new interpretations of Hindu's traditional symbols in order to promote gender inequality in society. The figure of Sita, for example, is used to symbolize *swadeshi* (self-made) and a message of struggle against colonialism. According to him, Sita wore "cloth made in India" to maintain the purity of her of soul and body (as cited by Kiswar, 1985, p. 1691). This symbolic meaning was taken from the *Ramayana* texts when

Sita changed her luxurious cloths with the modest one before accompanying Rama to move from palace to live in forest. Sita in Gandhi's perspective was a powerful woman who was able to say "No" to Rama, if Rama demanded something that was contrary from her willingness. In Gandhi's view, "Sita was no slave for Rama" (Gandhi 1958, p. 1691). Gandhi's new interpretation of Sita encouraged Indian women to struggle against colonialism and male dominance.

Gandhi also criticized unequal right between husband and wife in family. He criticized Hindu's scriptures that positioned women as *ardhangana*, who have only half of the husband's rights and *sahadharmini*, the husband's maid (Gandhi 1958, p. 17). This description represented ignorance of Hindu tradition to women's existence. According to Gandhi, husband and wife are equal partners because "men and women are one, their problem must be one in essence...The one cannot live without the other's active help" (p. 25).

Gandhi challenged the *Laws of Manu* by encouraging women not to worship their husband but God, by saying that "women should depend on God and their own strength and not to others" (p. 196). For a long time, the *Law of Manu* has promoted male hegemony over women. This male hegemony has also hindered women from being recognized by public, so that, the women saints, gurus and recites of Vedas were seldom known. Gandhi saw that gender inequality was not a psychological but a cultural problem. For the reason, Gandhi recommended that the best way for women to struggle against patriarchal ideology are by developing self-reliance, independence and bravery as what had been done by Sita, Draupadi and Damyanti. From Sita, Hindu women can learn about the self-reliance and purity. Her purity disarmed the most power *rakshasa*, Ravana, so that he had never touch Sita although he was able to kidnap her and was really in love with her. Draupadi represented women's self-independence that she showed "when the Pandavas failed to protect her, she saved herself by an appeal to Lord Krishna" (as cited in Kishwar, 1985, p. 1691). By doing so, women have independence to choose their own destiny or way.

Gandhi was of the opinion that the above-mentioned social transformation cannot be undertaken only by empowering women. Gender awareness should be promoted among men too. Here he explained that a husband also shares workload in the household and the roles of husband and



wife in the household should not be strictly divided as what the tradition have done for years. While men can nurture their children, women can be managers of their household (Gandhi, 1958).

Gandhi was also against the child marriage. Based on his experience as a young parent (his first child was born when he was 16), Gandhi attacked the practice of child marriage. The reason was to decrease the number of child widows. During that time, there were thousands of child widows. He cursed child marriage as “a crime of physical and moral” (Gandhi, 1958, p. 33). According to him, the parents who encourage child marriage are sinners. Gandhi regarded that the child marriage is the serious problem that should be resolved soon. However, this custom has strongly rooted in the Indian society and it was difficult to be eliminated.

The attempt to abolish the practice of child marriage was conducted by a few women before Gandhi, but they failed to conduct social reformation in India. Ramabai (1858-1922), a woman known as Pandita (learned lady) in 1878, endeavored to propagate the ban of child marriage based on her own experience of getting divorced. Due to the failure in promoting adult marriage, she converted to Christianity. The other woman who struggled against child marriage are Ramabai Ranade (1862-1924) and Swarna Kumari Devi (1856-1932) who built Sakhi Samiti, an institution that assisted child widows and poor women (Narayanan, 1999).

Gandhi saw many disadvantages in the practice of child marriage. Many child widows were divorced in their teens. While men can get married with other women soon after the divorce, women must stay as widow in the rest of their lives. Therefore, Gandhi advocated a remarriage for widows to avoid free sex and to provide widows a freedom to decide the future of their life. He emphasized that it is “better that Ja widow) married openly than that she should sin secretly” (as cited in Kishwar, 1985, p. 1693). On the other hand, Gandhi appreciated if widows choose to be widows. He argued that the “voluntary enlightened widowhood” as social access because they are “gift of Hinduism to humanity” (p. 1693). This access is an opportunity for a widow to be trained for public service interest, so she becomes a national asset.

In addition, widows who select widowhood as a way to ascetic life have “learnt to find happiness in suffering and have accepted suffering as sacred” (p. 1693). However, Gandhi demanded men to adopt the same suffering as women did. He said that men must “withdraw their interest from the

pleasure of this life” because “Hinduism will remain imperfect as long as men do not accept suffering” (p1693). He recognized that he learned how to feel suffering from his wife, Kasturba, when they lived in South Africa. This experience formed the basis of his idea of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*, which he then applied in political actions as non-violent activist.

On the subject of divorce, Gandhi allowed women to leave their husband if the husbands treated their wives in an unjust way. Even though he supported divorce in such cases, he had never advocated divorce among Hindus. His idea was contrary with Hindu’s scripture, particularly the *Law of Manu*, which requires a wife to obey her husband in any situation.

For Gandhi, the best way to encourage women to be equal with men is to promote women’s education. Gandhi argued that the first subject that must be taught for women is some skills such as spinning and weaving (as cited in Kishwar, p. 1695). These skills would empower women to have independence to manage their own money. Women’s education is also crucial since women are direct educators of their children. For this reason, he mentioned that a better education for women will determine a better mankind of future generation (Gandhi, 1958, p. 33).

Gandhi also encouraged women to be active in politics not only as voters but also as decision makers. He emphasized that “women must have votes and an equal legal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation” (Kishwar, 1985, p. 1697). In this context, Gandhi educated his wife, Kastuba, to be a political actor. She had engaged in political activities since she was living in South Africa. Her political activities rose when Gandhi was imprisoned several times in India. She came to political meetings when Gandhi was unable to attend (Lal, 2000). Gandhi also appointed Sarojini Nandu for the president of Congress Party in 1925, long before women’s participation was seen as important aspect in politics (Kishwar, 1985).

Another important idea of Gandhi is about birth control. Gandhi realized that *brachmacharya* is the best method to family planning. According to him, the birth control by using modern tools such as condoms and pills is an artificial method that will degrade women’s dignity. The important thing is that birth control must be undertaken at all time and in all situations. The intercourse is a sacral only for the purpose of reproduction. Therefore, any sexual intercourse which is based on desire is sinful. The

true love of husband and wife will flourish if both are free from any desire (Kishwar, 1985). So, living together in *brahmacharya* way will decrease the growth of population. If a husband needs a wife only to *satisfy* his desire, he treats his wife as a prostitute. According to Gandhi, “the difference between a prostitute and women using contraceptives - that the former sell her body to many men, while the latter sell it to one man (p. 1755). However, Gandhi argued the birth control will be effective if wives can say “No” to their husband, when they “approach them carnally” (p. 1755). In this context Gandhi also encourage women not to always follow their husband’s will.

### **Gandhi: A Feminist or not?**

Gandhi brought new values and ideas of gender equality in India. However, feminists around the world have different opinions about Gandhi. Some feminists consider Gandhi as a feminist and the others view him as a traditional reformer. Kumar argues that Gandhi positioned women to be equal with men. His attempts to involve women in non-violent movements enabled women to engage in public sphere. In this context, Gandhi has “resubjected” women, because he called women to go out from house to street (as cited in Legg, p. 7). Kishwar also regards that Gandhi has provided a great chance for women to be engaged in political practice. Gandhi’s appeal to boycott the European products and to wear *khadi* (national cloths mostly produced by women) has enabled women to create home as a political sphere. Kishwar, then, analyzes that “*khadi* was designed to bring the spirit of nationalism and freedom into every home” (as cited in Legg, 2003, p. 13). In doing so, Gandhi has transferred abstract political ideas such as the struggles against colonialism into political practices which can be comprehended by people even the ones at the grassroots level. Rama (1970) also views that Gandhi has strongly influenced women’s lives in the period after him. She recognizes that the number of women in educational and political spheres in India increased and the child marriage decreased significantly. Silvia (1987) notes that in twenty years after Gandhi mobilized civil obedience in 1921, the number of women in the Indian House of Representatives had radically increased from zero to the third rank in the world in 1937. During that time, the percentage of women at the top political level in India was even higher than in the US, Japan and Russia. On the other hand, Patel views that

Gandhi's ideas of gender equality are not radical enough for him to be considered a feminist. Patel claims that Gandhi's ideas still legitimize traditional concepts on femininity and womanhood (as cited by Legg, 2001, p. 13). This may be because, in several writings and speeches in the beginning of his career, Gandhi used gender stereotypes in describing the two sexes, the stereotypes that are attacked by feminist as perpetuating gender-biased inequality. For example, Gandhi said that "there is vital differences between two...she is passive, he is active. He is the bread winner, she is the keeper and distributor of the bread" (Gandhi, 1958, p. 25). Because of this idea, Fox also argues that Gandhi still maintains patriarchal ideology. Fox emphasizes that "although not representing another 'repressive regime', Gandhi's writings did not attempt to overturn the patriarchal ordering of domestic space" (Legg, 2001, p. 13). Some Indian feminists consider that Gandhi's ideas of women seem to be ambiguous: on one side he allowed women to be engaged in public, but on the other side he neglected women's sexual desire when he experimented his celibacy by sleeping with the naked women (Lal, 2002). This argument is supported by Alter in his book *Gandhi's Body*, in which he argues that Gandhi's experiment of celibacy would cause *unsatisfactory* for the women concerned. He identifies that one of them went temporarily mad (Zinkin, 2001).

I would suggest that Gandhi ideas and experiments should be put in their own context and cannot be judged by the standard of contemporary Western discourse on feminism. To suggest otherwise is unfair to Gandhi and his achievement. What Gandhi did was to reform his society from the inside, by accommodating and reinterpreting Hindu tradition. Looking at his endeavor from this perspective, I should say that Gandhi is a great contributor to women's empowerment in India.

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