# UNIT11: WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

## UNIT STRUCTURE


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## 11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to –

- know about the women's movement in India
- understand significant issues, legislations associated with the women's movement
- know initiatives taken for the cause of women in present times

## 11.2 INTRODUCTION

The issues of gender and particularly those related to women have received thoughtful attention from various sections of the society. The rise of the women's movement reflects a systematic way of highlighting women's issues. In this unit, we shall try to know about the women's movement in India, issues, and the legislations associated with it.

## 11.3 WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA: EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT

Conventionally, in India the women's uprising was less endorsed, but nevertheless have been successful in shuddering the very core of the socio-religious value system in India. It is a known fact that the position of women in India, primarily, was that of a second class citizen since time immemorial. Indian women are heirs of an extremely composite arrangement of social models and cultural principles. Some of the most aggressive and passionate debates of the 19th century specifically highlighted the plight of the women. Some inexorable pointers of women's low status were the likes *purdah* system, *sati*, female infanticide, child marriage and enforced widowhood. Social reform movements under the aegis of Brahmo Samaj(1828), the Arya Samaj(1875) or the Prathana Samaj(1867) attacked these social evils that oppressed the women from all quarters.

In India the women's movement can be divided into three waves or phases. The first wave commenced from 19th century onwards with the mass organization of women in the national movement and also through reform movements that fought for the rights of women.

The era from late 1960s onward is deemed to be the second wave, which witnessed the resurrection of political action from women. The ineffectuality of the economic strategies that resulted in unemployment and inflation led to the mass revolution. It is interesting to note that in the1960s, women were disgruntled with the status quo and they got themselves associated with the crusade of the rural poor and industrial working class. The undertakings of women during this point in time comprised of involvement in Naxalbari movement, anti- inflation protests, Navnirman movement in Gujarat and Bihar, rural rebellion in Dhule District in Maharashtra and Chipko movement.

The women's uprising in India is a rich and vivacious movement that has taken shape in various ways in the diverse parts of the country. It is imperative to acknowledge the fact that for a diverse country like India, transformation in male-female relationships and the kind of problems the

women's movement is concentrating on, will certainly not be an easy task. It is an established fact that for every step the movement takes forward, there will be potential recoil, a conceivable reversion. While this second phase of the movement witnessed mass participation in popular uprising against the administration and the power structures in general, but the third wave, which evolved in the late 1970s, had a definite feminist emphasis. By the mid-1970s, devaluing of life had become a run-of-the-mill experience for women. The main difference that can be seen in the women's movement during the 1970s and more predominantly in the mid-1980s is that women's opinion were raised precisely for women; women as a sovereign entity began to discuss matters specific to women. Thus, the women's crusade in this period had women members that cut across the class barriers and women from elite, poor and middle class sections came forward in full strength. It is evident that the concerns that united the women together was not class but gender associations. The rise of womens studies centres across the country against the backdrop of Equality Report is notable. But again it is not be misunderstood that the class character disappeared, but instead it was given a new facet. That is, women as a class was principally an economically helpless class- and that became a matter of protest as well. During this phase the problem of violence against women became a central point of many of these deliberations. Here, the government was compelled to enact varied legations pertaining to domestic violence, dowry, women and child health and more.

It is also important to note that there were many individual women in different points in time who stood up against the patriarchal society and have been an inspiration for the organised womens movement in India.

## 11.4 SIGNIFICANT ISSUES AND CONTRIBUTION BY INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS FOR THE REVIVIFICATION OF WOMENS MOVEMENT IN INDIA

- Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi is a name known to all, her valor and excellent leadership laid an exceptional model for all future

generations of women freedom fighters. It is said she used to go into the battleground clad in a man's outfit. Holding the bridles of her horse in mouth she would hold swords in both hands. She was considered by the British as the best and boldest military leader of revolutionaries, and she died a hero's death in the battleground.

- The Begum of Oudh, Begum Hazrat Mahal, took dynamic part in the defense of state of Lucknow from the British.Even though being the queen she was used to luxury, she appeared on the battleground herself to embolden her troops. Begam Hazrat Mahal held grounds against the British but eventually she had to surrender and take shelter in Nepal.
- Raja Ram Mohan Roy is considered to be the first man who spoke publicly against the injustices committed on women in the name of tradition and religion. He was instrumental in abolishing sati, he also campaigned against polygamy.
- Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar fought for the rights of the widows and was able to pursue the passing of the Widow Remarriage Act of 1956.
- Behramji Malabari, a Parsi crusader from Bombay, propelled An All-India Campaign to increase the age of consensus for marriage from 10 years to 12 years. In following years, the age of consent of marriage act as recommended by Malabari was passed in 1891.
- Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, an extraordinary woman from Poona, established a branch of the Arya Samaj and went on to set up a chain of woman's organisation in numerous towns of Bombay presidency. She also founded the Sharda Sadan that worked for providing employment and education to women, predominantly young widows.
- In the year 1908 Gujarati Stree Mandal in Ahmedabad was established and a Mahila Sewa Samaj was instituted in Mysore in 1913 and in Poona in 1916.
- Sarladevi Chaudrani founded the All-India women's organization and the Bharat Stri Mahamandal.

- The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) is a non-governmental organisation which was started in 1927 by Margaret Cousins. It played a dynamic role in instigating and campaigning for social legislation that would develop the position of women. Owing to the efforts of AIWC the following legislations were enacted- Hindu marriage and divorce act 1955,Sarda act 1929, the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act 1956,Special Marriage Act 1954, the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act 1956 and Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women Act 1956. Additionally, the AIWC established a number of innovative institutions, a number of which in the present day operate as autonomous apex bodies in their individual domains. Some such institutions are: the Lady Irwin College for home science, New Delhi, which is now an institute offering graduate and post- graduate courses. The Family planning centers has now become the Family Planning Association of India. Also, Save the Children Committee, now operates as the Indian Council of Child Welfare.
- Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, was one of the founders of the AIWC, a courageous freedom fighter devoted to constructive work, contested the election to the Madras legislative assembly as an independent candidate.
- Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, the first woman medical graduate of Madras and also one of the founding associates of the AIWC, was nominated to the legislature by the government.
- A historic episode was the First All India Women's Conference on Educational Reform which was held at Poona from 5th to 8th January, 1927. The conference gave a platform for women from different parts of India belonging to all castes and communities to come together. The main worry of all the women who gathered there was women's education.
- The crusade for women's education was pioneered by Mahadev Govind, Ramabai Ranade, Jyotiba Phule, Ramabai Saraswati and Maharshi Karve, all of them famous social reformers of the late 19$^{th}$ and early 20$^{th}$ centuries.

## 11.5 WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND ROLE OF LEGISLATIONS

Domestic violence has been an inherent part of the society we are living in. Domestic violence can be categorised as physical violence, economic violence, sexual violence and emotional violence. Women across generations have been victims of domestic violence and never found a voice to express themselves. When women movement gained momentum and welfare organisations were formed, women got a platform to discuss their issues and seek solutions. Many such women came under salvage of women welfare organizations like Women Welfare Association of India (WWAI), Army Woman Welfare Association (AWWA), Woman's Emancipation and Development Trust (WEDT) and several others. It is seen that victims of domestic violence who are compelled to leave the house fall prey to women trafficking and pornography. Additionally, the children are also the victims of the after effects of domestic violence. When such concerns began to be deliberated in the public forums owing to mobilisation of women the government of India initiated several legislations including Dowry Prohibition Act and Protection Against Domestic Violence Act. In 1983, domestic violence was acknowledged as a definite criminal offence with the inclusion of section 498-A into the Indian Penal Code. This segment deals with vindictiveness by a husband or his family towards a married woman.

Also, central legislative actions at the national level came into effect for the children who were a victim of child labor with the enactment of The Child Labor Prohibition and Regulation Act -1986 and The Factories Act - 1948. The first act prohibited the employment of children below 14 years of age, and recognized 57 processes and 13 occupations which were deemed to be dangerous to the well-being and lives of children. The Factories Act again forbids the engagement of children less than 14 years of age.

Also, the Government of India approved a Domestic Violence Bill, 2001, which stated to protect the rights of women who are victims of violence of any kind occurring within the family and to provide for matters connected

therewith or incidental thereto. An act called Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 also has been passed.

## 11.6 CURRENT INITIATIVES TOWARDS THE CAUSE OF WOMEN

Other than government legislations there have been social organisations that have spearheaded the womens movement and have been fighting for women's causes. Some noteworthy examples of such initiatives that emerged post-independence are highlighted below.

- **Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)**

  Self Employed Women's Association (SEVA) is a trade union registered in 1972. It was founded by Ela Bhatt who was a noted Gandhian and civil rights leader. The headquarters of SEWA is located in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, and it operates in numerous states of India. The member of SEWA comprised of women who earned a living through their own labour or small business and did not have a regular salaried occupation with welfare reimbursements like workers in the organized sector have. They were the undefended labour force of India comprising 93% of the labour force. Thus, women workers as a whole remain uncounted, undercounted and imperceptible. SEWA emerged out of the Textile Labour Association (TLA), India's oldest and biggest union of textile workers established in 1920 by Anasuya Sarabhai. In 1954 TLA established its Women's Wing with the aim to support women belonging to families of millworkers and its work was focused fundamentally on training and welfare undertakings. In order to meet the objectives of the organisation the following sister concerns were established:

**SEWA Bank:** In a bid to tackle the problem of lack of facilities for opportune and efficient savings, credit amenities and to free themselves from the malicious cycle of external debt, SEWA members founded a bank of their own. Around 4,000 women members of SEWA funded sharecapital of Rs.10 each to institute the Mahila SEWA Co-operative Bank in May 1974.

**SEWA Academy**: SEWA Academy was established in 1991 which was responsible for basic education and for capacity building ventures, leadership training,communications and to boost research.

**SEWA Communication**: Through this wing SEWA strengthened its communication network reaching out to more number of people. A fortnightly newsletter, a monthly magazine for adolescent girls, an electronic newsletter are published by this wing. Video SEWA was founded in the year 1984 in a bid to facilitate the members of SEWA and to stimulate, organize and strengthen the existing membership of SEWA.

**SEWA Research**: Trustworthy, scientific based research has been an important tool in SEWA's advocacy struggles. Through research, SEWA endeavors to gather its members, the self-employed women into the mainstream of the world of information.

**SEWA Housing:** In 1994, the Gujarat Mahila Housing SEWA Trust (MHT) was establihsed with the aim of improving the housing and living conditions of poor women in the informal sector.

- **SAKHI**

  The organization Sakhi was established in the year 1989, for South Asian Women led by a group of five South Asian women belonging to diverse professional domains like banking, film, law, and public health. In simple words the term Sakhi implies a female friend. The organization was instituted to empower women to raise their voice against domestic violence within the South Asian community. The indicated mission of Sakhi for South Asian Women is to terminate domestic violence against women creating a union of survivors, communities, and organizations. Sakhi uses an assimilated approach that syndicates support and enablement through service delivery, community participation, media activism, and policy initiatives. Sakhi has been working as a safe outlet to provide South Asian women with continuing emotional support, culturally thoughtful and language-specific support in order to face the vehemence in their lives. The stratagy used by Sakhi comprises of the following:

- **Crisis responses :** It responds to appeals from Asian nations with matters related to women
- **Case management :** It includes translation services, convoy to courts, public benefits agencies, health care stopovers, recommendations for health, housing, legal aid, and job training and placement for women.
- **Distinctive curriculums :** They have been developed and customized by Sakhi to empower the survivors which includes computer classes, monthly support groups, financial literacy workshops and endowments for educational advancement.

- **Kali For Women: Zubaan**

  In the year 1984, Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon instituted the Kali for Women, India's first feminist publishing house. This was started with the aim to print eminent work, keep expenses low, and guarantee that not only the content, but also the form of what they published was of international standards. Over a period of time Kali has come to be known as one of the most noteworthy publishing houses operating in India and across the globe. It's name is synonymous to quality, editorial thoughtfulness, fineness of content, and, most significantly, a platform for women's voices and concerns to be heard and represented. Started in a Delhi garage, Kali has been providing a worthwhile publishing ambassador to Indian feminism.

- **The Centre for Women's Development Studies**

  The Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) was set up on 19th April 1980, in the middle of the International Women's Decade, by a assemblage of men and women, who were engaged with the groundwork of the first ever all-inclusive government report on the status of women in India titled 'Towards Equality' (Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, (CSWI), Government of India).They later allied with the Women's Studies Programme of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). The Advisory Committee on Women's Studies programme of the ICSSR endorsed

the need for an independent institute to construct on the knowledge already produced, but with a broader mandate and funds to expand its undertakings in research and action.

- **National Commission For Women**

  The national commission for women was established as a statutory body in January 1992 under the aegis of Commission for Women Act, 1990 of government of India, to evaluate the constitutional and legal protections for women, mention corrective legislative measures, expedite redressal of complaints and counsel the government on the policy matters impacting women.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q1.** Women's movement in India is classified into how many waves?

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**Q2.** When did legislation against domestic violence come into effect?

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**Q3.** What is Economic Violence?

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**Q4.** What is the full form of WWAI?

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**Q5.** What is **SEWA Bharat?**

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## 11.8 LET US SUM UP

- In India the women's movement can be divided into three waves or phases: first wave commenced from 19th century onwards with the