

Why Educating Women is Educating the Nation : A Journey from Past to Present

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**If you educate a man, you educate an individual.
But if you educate a woman, you educate a nation.**

Dr. Kwegyir Aggrey

Education is the most powerful and useful weapon for all the underprivileged, the oppressed, and the marginalized. It is the means that frees one from the shackles of the societal barriers put in place by the privileged. Women, being among the most oppressed since the dawn of humanity, need this weapon the most. What Dr. Kwegyir Aggrey says, and what we have been told since very early times, is not free from critique. Even this quote, which seems to be very progressive and appears to advocate women's education, subtly carries the same patriarchal undertones it seeks to challenge. The idea behind it often assumes that women must be educated because they are the "housewives," the "homemakers," the "caretakers." It values their education not for their own growth or empowerment, but for the service they provide to others. Why, one might ask, is educating a woman said to educate a nation, while educating a man educates only an individual? It is because women were traditionally expected to stay at home, raise children, and nurture families, and hence, their learning was seen as beneficial only through its effect on others.

This quote, therefore, though considered progressive for its time, also reveals the subtle way in which women's education has long been framed as instrumental rather than natural. But that does not mean education is any less important for women. As stated earlier, it remains the most powerful and transformative tool for the underprivileged and the oppressed, and therefore, it is essential for women too.

To understand why women's education matters so deeply, we need to look at how far we have come. In ancient India, history tells us that it was not always the case that women were denied education or confined to domestic life. Women like Gargi and Maitreyi were scholars in the Vedic age, respected for their intellect and wisdom. They were celebrated figures from whom

both men and women sought guidance. Gargi was a philosopher who debated the sage Yajnavalkya, while Maitreyi, his wife, participated in profound philosophical dialogues with him in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Both exemplify the elevated status of learned women during the Vedic period, a time when education was open to all who sought knowledge, regardless of their gender. But this situation did not last. Over time, especially during the later Vedic period (after 1000 BCE) and into the early medieval period (around 500–1200 CE), society began to change. It became more rigid and patriarchal, and the focus shifted from equality to control. Women were gradually confined to domestic roles, and their access to education declined. Religious interpretations, foreign invasions, and growing social insecurities made these restrictions deeper. By the medieval period, the very society that had once celebrated learned women had now silenced their voices. Education became a privilege reserved for boys, while girls were taught only household skills.

Yet even in those dark times, voices of resistance and reform began to rise. By the later medieval period, India saw the growing dominance of the British, which eventually culminated in colonial rule. British governance introduced modern schooling, but, unfortunately, it was designed primarily for men. This shows that the so-called "progressive" West was no different in curbing women's educational opportunities. As India's movement against British rule grew stronger, several brave reformers realized that a nation could never progress by keeping half its population uneducated. They believed that the upliftment of women was essential for social reform and national awakening. Among them were Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule, who together challenged rigid social customs and opened India's first school for girls in Pune in 1848. Despite facing abuse and opposition, Savitribai

continued to teach young girls, becoming India's first female teacher and a symbol of courage and change. Joining their mission was Fatima Sheikh, one of India's earliest Muslim women educators, who worked shoulder to shoulder with the Phules to bring learning to girls from marginalized communities. At the same time, reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Pandita Ramabai fought tirelessly against child marriage, sati, and the neglect of widows, promoting education as the true path to women's empowerment. Their efforts laid the foundation of a new India, one that slowly began to see women not as dependents, but as individuals capable of thought, knowledge, and leadership. With the efforts and sacrifices of our freedom fighters, India soon witnessed independence. After 1947, the leaders of the new nation recognized that true freedom could not be achieved without education, especially for women. The dream of equality and progress demanded that every citizen, regardless of gender, have access to learning and opportunity.

The Indian Constitution laid the groundwork for this vision. It gave equal rights for men and women and made education a fundamental right. Later, through Article 21A, the state made free and compulsory education available to all children between the ages of 6 and 14. This was a turning point; education was no longer a privilege but a right for every Indian child.

To put this vision into action, several government schemes and programs were launched over the decades. The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya initiative established residential schools for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, ensuring that poverty or distance would no longer stop them from learning. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) aimed at achieving universal elementary education, with special emphasis on enrolling and retaining girls in schools. In recent years, the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) campaign has sought to challenge gender bias and promote the education and well-being of the girl child.

These efforts have achieved remarkable results. The female literacy rate in India has risen from just 8% in 1951 to over 70% today. Women have not only entered classrooms but have gone on to break barriers in every field imaginable, from science and technology to politics, literature, business, and sports.

Today, women like Kalpana Chawla, who journeyed beyond Earth's atmosphere, and Sudha Murty, who uses her pen and philanthropy to inspire millions, embody the triumph of women's education in India. They are joined by countless others, including teachers, doctors, scientists, entrepreneurs, athletes, and leaders, who continue to prove that when women are educated, the entire nation rises with them. This long and hard-fought journey, starting from the wisdom of Gargi and Maitreyi to the courage of Savitribai Phule, and from colonial restrictions to constitutional rights, shows that the struggle for women's education has never been only about access to schools. It has always been about access to freedom. But after tracing this history, one question naturally arises: why does women's education matter so deeply even today?

The importance of women's education cannot be limited (as the quote at the beginning says) to what it offers to others. To society, to families, or to the nation. It matters, first and foremost, because women are human beings, with intellect, curiosity, and dreams of their own. Education is their right, not their reward. It is the means through which they can explore the world, discover themselves, and live with autonomy and dignity.

Education gives women the ability to think, to question, and to choose. To build lives defined not by tradition or expectation, but by choice and determination. It opens doors to independence of all sorts, be it economic, emotional, or intellectual, and allows women to stand as equals in a world that has long tried to make them secondary. From a social perspective, yes, women's education has broad and undeniable benefits, healthier families, more stable economies, and fairer societies, but these are consequences, not justifications. The true justification lies in the belief that knowledge belongs to everyone. To educate women is not to prepare them for service to others; it is to restore to them what was always theirs, the right to learn, to think, and to lead their own lives.

Today, in classrooms across the nation, every girl who opens a book writes her own story, one that generations before her could only dream of. Each educated woman is not a tool of progress, but a symbol of what justice and equality truly mean. The history of women's education in India, then, is not just the story of social reform, but of reclaiming humanity itself.

