

**MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S NOTION OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A
CRITIQUE**

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**AN ORIGINAL ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project work titled; **MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S
NOTION OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A CRITIQUE** was carried out by **OBOH**

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to God Almighty, the gracious and kind Father, whose love, guidance, and protection have sustained me throughout my academic journey.

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ABSTRACT

This project explores Mary Wollstonecraft's notion of women empowerment as articulated in her landmark work, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and offers a philosophical critique of its strengths and limitations. Wollstonecraft argued that women are rational beings endowed with reason and virtue, and thus deserve equal access to education and opportunities as men. For her, education was the foundation of empowerment, enabling women to escape dependency, achieve moral autonomy, and contribute to the social and political fabric of society. By framing women as active moral agents rather than passive ornaments, she challenged the patriarchal norms of her time and laid the groundwork for modern feminist thought. Nevertheless, her ideas were also shaped by the constraints of Enlightenment rationalism and her social context. Critics argue that her emphasis on reason reduced empowerment to assimilation into male-defined ideals, overlooking the value of emotion, care, and difference. Wollstonecraft often justified education for women in instrumental terms, linking it to their roles as wives and mothers rather than affirming it as an intrinsic right. Her focus also reflected a largely Eurocentric and middle-class orientation. This critique, therefore, evaluates her enduring contributions while highlighting the need for more inclusive, intersectional perspectives.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The question of women's empowerment has been central to debates on justice, equality, and human rights for centuries. At the heart of this discourse stands Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), widely regarded as one of the earliest feminist philosophers. Her seminal work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, challenged prevailing social and intellectual traditions that confined women to domesticity and subservience. Wollstonecraft argued that women, like men, are rational beings endowed with the capacity for reason, and thus deserve equal educational opportunities and social recognition¹. In an era dominated by Enlightenment ideals of liberty and human dignity, she extended these principles to women, advocating for their empowerment as a necessary condition for both personal development and societal progress.

Historically, women in the eighteenth century were excluded from education, politics, and public discourse, their roles largely restricted to that of wives and mothers. Philosophical traditions from Aristotle to Rousseau reinforced these limitations by

¹ Wollstonecraft, M. (1995). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (M. Brody, Ed.). (London: Penguin Classics), p. 15.

portraying women as naturally inferior or suited primarily for domestic functions². Wollstonecraft radically opposed such notions, critiquing Rousseau's view in *Émile*, where he argued that women's education should be geared toward pleasing men. For Wollstonecraft, denying women education not only deprived them of dignity but also weakened society as a whole. She believed that empowered women, educated, rational, and self-respecting, would become better wives, mothers, and citizens, enriching society through their active participation.³

Her ideas laid an intellectual foundation for modern feminism, but they also invite critique. While Wollstonecraft insisted on equality in education and rational capacity, her notion of empowerment was sometimes framed within traditional gender roles. For example, she often justified women's education on the grounds that it would enable them to be better companions to men or more virtuous mothers⁴. This utilitarian aspect of her philosophy raises questions about whether her conception of empowerment fully transcended patriarchal expectations or merely sought to reform them. A philosophical critique of Wollstonecraft's views, therefore, must assess the tension between her radical demand for equality and her occasional concessions to prevailing gender norms.

² Donovan, J. (2001). *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions* (3rd ed.). (New York: Continuum Books), p. 11.

³ Taylor, B. (2013). *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 17.

⁴ Kaplan, C. (2002). *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Language of Sensibility*, (London: Routledge), p. 34.

In addition, Wollstonecraft's advocacy must be situated within the broader intellectual and socio-political context of the Enlightenment. While thinkers like John Locke and Immanuel Kant emphasized liberty, autonomy, and dignity, their works rarely extended these ideals to women in practical terms⁵. Wollstonecraft's intervention was thus groundbreaking, as she explicitly exposed the contradictions of Enlightenment thought: men demanded freedom and equality while simultaneously denying them to women. Her philosophy highlighted that no society could claim to be just or rational while half of its population was marginalized. However, subsequent feminist theorists including Simone de Beauvoir and contemporary postmodern critics have revisited Wollstonecraft's ideas, questioning whether her rationalist and moralist approach adequately addressed issues of difference, identity, and intersectionality.⁶

The significance of this study lies in critically engaging Wollstonecraft's philosophy to understand both its enduring relevance and its limitations. On the one hand, her emphasis on education, reason, and self-respect remains foundational to feminist thought and women's empowerment. On the other hand, her reliance on Enlightenment rationalism and her framing of empowerment within socially accepted roles call for scrutiny in light of modern feminist debates on autonomy, agency, and diversity. This critique is essential not only for appreciating Wollstonecraft's historical contributions but also for addressing

⁵ Pateman, C. (1988). *The Sexual Contract*, (London: Stanford University Press), p. 45.

⁶ Beauvoir, S. de (2011). *The Second Sex*. (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). (London: Vintage International), p. 32.

the evolving challenges of women's empowerment in contemporary societies, particularly where cultural and structural inequalities persist.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the widespread recognition of gender equality as a fundamental human right and an essential component of sustainable development, women across the world continue to experience systemic marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion. The problem of women's empowerment persists in both overt and subtle forms, manifesting in economic inequalities, limited access to education, underrepresentation in politics, and persistent cultural stereotypes. Philosophically, these issues raise serious questions about the nature of justice, human dignity, autonomy, and equality. The central problem this study addresses is the persistent gap between the theoretical frameworks advocating for women's rights and the lived realities of women, especially in patriarchal and culturally conservative societies.

The philosophical traditions that have shaped much of Western thought have historically excluded women from the realm of rational and moral agency. Classical philosophers such as Aristotle viewed women as inherently inferior, both physically and intellectually, thereby justifying their subordination. This view permeated subsequent philosophical thought, contributing to a long-standing intellectual tradition that denied women equal moral status. Even modern political theories like those of Rousseau, Locke, and Hume, while advocating liberty and equality, failed to extend these ideals fully to women. The

problem, therefore, is rooted in a deep-seated philosophical bias that continues to influence contemporary structures and institutions.

Moreover, while modern feminist philosophers have made significant strides in challenging these patriarchal assumptions, there remains a lack of consensus on what constitutes genuine empowerment. For instance, liberal feminists emphasize individual autonomy and legal equality, while radical feminists critique structural power imbalances and cultural domination. Postmodern and intersectional feminists argue that empowerment must be understood through the lens of multiple identities—race, class, culture, and sexuality—which complicates the pursuit of a universal framework. This diversity of philosophical perspectives, although enriching, also presents a challenge: how can empowerment be achieved in a way that respects both universal principles of justice and the contextual particularities of different societies?

In addition, in many African societies, including Nigeria, cultural practices, religious beliefs, and patriarchal structures continue to hinder the realization of women's empowerment. While policies may exist on paper to support gender equality, they are often undermined by entrenched traditional norms that assign women subordinate roles in both the family and public sphere. The philosophical problem here lies in reconciling traditional communal values with the modern ideals of gender justice and autonomy. How can African philosophical systems, which are often communal and hierarchical, be

reinterpreted to promote women's agency and participation without losing their cultural essence?

Another layer of the problem concerns the instrumentalization of women's empowerment in global development discourse. Women are often portrayed as tools for achieving economic growth or poverty reduction, rather than as individuals with intrinsic value and agency. This instrumental view, though well-intentioned, reduces empowerment to a means rather than an end, raising ethical concerns about the authenticity of such efforts. A philosophical appraisal is needed to critically assess these approaches and to reframe empowerment in terms of dignity, freedom, and the realization of human potential.

Therefore, the problem that this study seeks to address is both theoretical and practical: How can philosophical traditions be reexamined and redefined to provide a robust foundation for women's empowerment? What values and principles must be promoted to ensure that empowerment is not just a policy objective but a lived reality? And how can philosophical inquiry inform social, political, and cultural transformations that uphold the full humanity of women?

This problem is not merely academic but has real-life implications. Without a clear philosophical grounding, efforts at women's empowerment risk being superficial, inconsistent, or culturally insensitive. A critical philosophical appraisal is thus essential to clarify the conceptual basis of empowerment, identify the root causes of gender

inequality, and provide normative guidance for achieving a more just and equitable society.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the philosophical foundations of women's empowerment
2. To investigate key feminist philosophical contributions to women's empowerment:
3. To analyze the ethical dimensions of women's empowerment:
4. To explore the cultural and contextual challenges to women's empowerment:
5. To provide a conceptual clarification of the term 'women's empowerment'

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

1. This study contributes to philosophical scholarship by expanding the discourse to include critical gender analysis.
2. The study provides a well-grounded philosophical clarification of what "women's empowerment" truly means, moving beyond its use as a development buzzword.
3. It adds to the growing body of feminist philosophical literature that questions gendered hierarchies within ethics, politics, and epistemology.
4. Particularly in African societies, this study is significant for its engagement with local traditions, customs, and religious beliefs. It critically examines cultural

practices through a philosophical lens and seeks to promote those that affirm women's dignity while discouraging oppressive ones.

5. The study's philosophical appraisal aids in linking abstract concepts like justice, freedom, and autonomy to practical matters such as education, political participation, and economic empowerment of women.

1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study explores the concept of women's empowerment through the lens of philosophical inquiry. The scope covers the practical dimensions of empowerment, focusing on how philosophical ideas, concepts, and arguments can illuminate, critique, and enhance our understanding of the role and status of women in society. It draws from a wide range of philosophical traditions—including classical, modern, contemporary, feminist, and African philosophy—to provide a comprehensive appraisal of women's empowerment, making it both globally inclusive and contextually grounded.

1.6 METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for this study is analytical in nature, as it seeks to examine, interpret, and evaluate the concept of women's empowerment from a philosophical standpoint. It employs the tools of critical thinking, logical reasoning, and conceptual clarification to assess the underlying assumptions, values, and arguments related to the empowerment of women in society. This involves dissecting the key terms and ideas

related to women’s empowerment—such as “empowerment,” “autonomy,” “freedom,” “equality,” “rights,” and “justice”—in order to uncover their meanings, presuppositions, and implications.

1.7 DEFINITION OF TERMS

i. **Empowerment:** Empowerment, as defined in leading dictionaries such as the Oxford English Dictionary, refers to the process through which individuals or groups gain the strength, confidence, and authority to make decisions and control their lives. It involves fostering a sense of self-worth, enabling people to identify and claim their rights, and equipping them with the necessary tools, skills, or opportunities to participate fully in society.⁷

ii. **Autonomy:** Autonomy, according to the Oxford English Dictionary and similar reputable sources, refers to the right or condition of self-government. In its most fundamental sense, autonomy is the capacity of an individual or group to make independent decisions without external control.⁸

⁷ Hornby, A. S. (2005), *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary 8th Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 100.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

iii. **Freedom:** Freedom, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint. It embodies the condition of being free rather than in confinement or under physical restraint. At its core, freedom is about the absence of coercion and the presence of choice, allowing individuals to pursue their goals, express their beliefs, and live according to their own values.⁹

iv. **Equality:** Equality, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, refers to the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, and opportunities. It signifies the principle that all individuals should be treated fairly and without discrimination, regardless of their gender, race, social class, religion, or other characteristics. At its core, equality is about ensuring that every person has access to the same legal rights and opportunities for personal and societal advancement.¹⁰

v. **Rights:** Rights, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, are defined as legal, social, or ethical principles of freedom or entitlement; that is, rights are the fundamental norms or rules about what is allowed of people or owed to them.¹¹

vi. **Justice:** Justice, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is the quality of being fair and reasonable. It refers to the principle of moral rightness and the administration of the law according to fairness, equity, and impartiality. Justice is a central concept in ethics,

⁹ Hornby, A. S. *Op. Cit.*, p. 117.

¹⁰ Hornby, A. S. *Op. Cit.*, p. 120.

¹¹ Hornby, A. S. *Op. Cit.*, p. 329.

law, and political philosophy, and it plays a crucial role in maintaining social order and human dignity.¹²

1.8 LITERATURE REVIEW

S. De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*¹³ remains a foundational text in feminist philosophy and existential thought. In this comprehensive work, de Beauvoir explores how women have historically been relegated to the position of "the Other" in a male-defined world. She draws from existentialist philosophy—especially Sartre's concept of freedom and subjectivity—to argue that women are not born but rather made through socialization processes that condition them into passive, dependent roles. This reduction of women to their biological functions (as mothers, wives, and caregivers) strips them of full personhood. De Beauvoir contends that true empowerment requires women to assert themselves as autonomous subjects, capable of transcending the roles imposed on them. Her call for women to embrace freedom, authenticity, and self-realization remains pivotal in discussions about philosophical foundations of empowerment. The book deeply

¹² Hornby, A. S. *Op. Cit.*, p. 200.

¹³ De. Beauvoir, S. (1949), *The Second Sex*. (H. M. Parshley, Trans.). (London: Vintage Books), p. 17.

informs modern understandings of gender, freedom, and the socio-cultural mechanisms of oppression.

M. Nussbaum's work redefines what development means by focusing on individuals' capabilities—the real freedoms people have to achieve well-being. In *Women and Human Development*¹⁴, Nussbaum presents a universalist approach grounded in Aristotelian ethics and liberal humanism, challenging the cultural relativism that often undermines women's rights in developing countries. She argues that a just society must guarantee a threshold level of capabilities for all, including life, bodily health, bodily integrity, education, and political participation. For women, this means not merely the removal of legal constraints, but the creation of social and economic conditions in which they can thrive. Nussbaum critiques traditional development paradigms that ignore gender inequality, positioning empowerment as a multidimensional process rooted in justice and dignity. Her work provides a practical yet deeply philosophical framework for evaluating gender-based oppression and constructing a more equitable society.

I. M. Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference*¹⁵ critiques liberal and distributive models of justice for failing to address structural and cultural forms of oppression that affect women and other marginalized groups. Young introduces the concept of “oppression” as multifaceted, encompassing exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness,

¹⁴ Nussbaum, M. C. (2000), *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 237.

¹⁵ Young, I. M. (1990), *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 79.

cultural imperialism, and violence. She argues that policies focusing solely on redistribution of resources do not sufficiently address these systemic injustices. Her advocacy for group-based representation, participatory democracy, and recognition of difference is a philosophical response to homogenizing approaches that silence minority voices, including those of women. Young's work adds to the philosophical conversation about empowerment by emphasizing the need for institutional change, cultural recognition, and inclusive political structures that allow women to articulate and realize their distinct needs and identities.

B. Hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*¹⁶ presents a bold and inclusive vision for feminist theory and practice. She criticizes early feminist movements for centering the experiences of white, middle-class women while marginalizing women of color, working-class women, and others whose oppression is shaped by intersecting factors like race, class, and sexuality. hooks argues that feminist theory must be decolonized and reoriented toward the margins where the most disenfranchised women reside. Her conception of empowerment includes not just economic and political gains, but a transformation of consciousness, culture, and community. She envisions a feminist future built on love, mutual care, and collective struggle. The work expands the philosophical foundations of empowerment by presenting it not merely as individual advancement but as collective liberation rooted in compassion and social justice.

¹⁶ Hooks, B. (2000), *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, (London: Pluto Press), p. 43.

In *Justice, Gender, and the Family*¹⁷, S. M. Okin addresses a critical gap in liberal theories of justice by examining how family structures perpetuate gender inequality. She critiques theorists like Rawls for overlooking the private sphere, where traditional gender roles and power imbalances are most entrenched. Okin argues that justice must extend into the family, advocating for a radical restructuring of domestic life to ensure that both men and women can participate equally in public and private domains. She emphasizes equal access to education, career opportunities, and shared domestic responsibilities as prerequisites for genuine empowerment. Her work is central to a philosophical understanding of women's empowerment, revealing how internalized norms and institutional frameworks within the family can either hinder or promote female autonomy and self-realization.

A. Sen's *Development as Freedom*¹⁸ revolutionized the way development is conceptualized by linking it to the expansion of human capabilities and freedoms. Sen argues that development should be assessed by the real opportunities people have to lead fulfilling lives, not just by economic growth or income levels. For women, this means ensuring access to education, health care, political voice, and protection from violence. Sen's framework highlights the interdependence of different types of freedom—economic, political, and social—and underscores the central role of agency in achieving empowerment. Although his approach is rooted in economics, it carries deep

¹⁷ Okin, S. M. (2014), *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, (London: Routledge), p. 67.

¹⁸ Sen, A. (1999), *Development as Freedom*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 90.

philosophical implications about autonomy, justice, and dignity. His work complements and informs Nussbaum's capabilities approach and provides a vital lens for understanding empowerment as a holistic and systemic transformation of conditions that limit women's freedoms.

J. Butler's *Gender Trouble*¹⁹ introduced the concept of gender performativity, challenging the assumption that gender is a natural or stable identity. According to Butler, gender is constructed through repeated social performances governed by normative expectations. Her post-structuralist critique destabilizes the binary categories of male and female, exposing them as cultural impositions rather than biological certainties. Butler's work has profound implications for empowerment, as it suggests that liberation requires subverting the norms and discourses that define and confine gender identities. This philosophical intervention compels a reconsideration of what it means to empower women if "woman" itself is a socially constructed category. Her work provides a powerful critique of essentialist feminism and offers a more fluid, inclusive approach to identity and agency.

A. Y. Davis's *Women, Race & Class*²⁰ offers a Marxist-feminist analysis of the intersections between gender, race, and class in the history of women's struggles in the United States. Davis critiques the mainstream feminist movement for its failure to address the unique challenges faced by Black women, immigrant women, and working-

¹⁹ Butler, J. (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge), p. 78.

²⁰ Davis, A. Y. (2011), *Women, Race & Class*, (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group), p. 105.

class women. She explores how capitalism, slavery, and systemic racism have shaped women's experiences and limited their opportunities for empowerment. By documenting the role of women of color in labor movements, civil rights activism, and reproductive justice, Davis situates empowerment within collective struggle and historical context. Her work contributes to a philosophical framework that understands liberation as inseparable from structural transformation and social justice.

M. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*²¹ is one of the earliest philosophical defenses of women's equality. Writing in the wake of the Enlightenment, Wollstonecraft argues that women are not naturally inferior to men, but appear so because of a lack of education and opportunity. She calls for equal education as the foundation of moral and rational development, insisting that women should be treated as full citizens capable of reason and virtue. Her work challenges patriarchal social arrangements and emphasizes autonomy, self-respect, and participation in public life. Though her ideas were radical for her time, they laid the groundwork for future feminist philosophies of empowerment rooted in equality, rationality, and individual rights.

O. Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women*²² critiques the imposition of Western gender categories on African societies, particularly the Yoruba. She argues that precolonial Yoruba social organization was not based on gender binaries but on other factors such as

²¹ Wollstonecraft, M. (1792), *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, (London: J. Johnson), p. 54.

²² Oyěwùmí, O. *Op. Cit.*, p. 89.

seniority and kinship. Colonialism and Western scholarship, she contends, introduced rigid gender roles that disrupted indigenous ways of life. Oyewumi calls for a decolonization of feminist theory, emphasizing that empowerment must be context-specific and culturally grounded. Her philosophical approach challenges universalist feminism and affirms alternative epistemologies. This work is vital for understanding how empowerment can be reconceptualized through indigenous frameworks that resist imported norms and affirm local agency and identity.

CHAPTER TWO

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT

2.1 LIFE, WORKS, AND INFLUENCE OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) is widely recognized as one of the most influential figures in early feminist philosophy and political thought. Born in Spitalfields, London, to a financially unstable and often abusive family, Wollstonecraft's early life was marked by hardship, which deeply influenced her later advocacy for women's independence and dignity. Without access to formal education, she educated herself through extensive reading and by working as a governess and schoolteacher, experiences that exposed her to the intellectual and social inequalities faced by women ²³. These early struggles gave Wollstonecraft firsthand insight into the effects of economic dependence and lack of education on women's autonomy.

Her intellectual career began with the publication of *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, where she argued that women's education should move beyond superficial accomplishments and aim at cultivating virtue, reason, and independence. She gained

²³ Taylor, B. (2003). *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 56.

greater recognition with *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, a response to Edmund Burke's conservative defense of aristocracy in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In this work, Wollstonecraft defended republican values of equality and justice, setting the stage for her more famous treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.²⁴

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman remains her most celebrated work and a foundational text in feminist philosophy. In it, Wollstonecraft argued that women are rational beings deserving of the same educational opportunities as men, and that their perceived inferiority is the result of social conditioning rather than natural incapacity. She denounced the patriarchal system that reduced women to ornaments or property and insisted that genuine social progress could only be achieved when women were educated to be virtuous, independent, and capable of participating as equal members of society²⁵. Her radical claim that reason is universal and not gendered directly challenged 18th-century assumptions about female nature.

Wollstonecraft's works also extended beyond gender issues to broader political and philosophical concerns. In *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, she blended travel writing with political commentary and personal reflection. This work revealed her romantic sensibilities and her interest in the

²⁴ Wollstonecraft, M. (1995). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, (London: Penguin Classics), p. 43.

²⁵ Okin, S. M. (1979). *Women in Western Political Thought*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 33.

relationship between individual freedom, social structures, and emotional experience²⁶
Her writings demonstrate a unique combination of Enlightenment rationalism and early Romantic subjectivity, positioning her at the crossroads of two intellectual traditions.

Her personal life, though often sensationalized, also influenced her legacy. Wollstonecraft had a relationship with the American Gilbert Imlay, with whom she had a daughter, Fanny. Later, she married the philosopher William Godwin, a key figure in political radicalism. Together they became part of the radical intellectual circles of London. Tragically, Wollstonecraft died in 1797 at the age of 38, shortly after giving birth to her second daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, who would later become Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*. Godwin's candid memoir of her life, published after her death, unintentionally scandalized Victorian society but also ensured her posthumous fame.²⁷

Mary Wollstonecraft's intellectual legacy lies in her unwavering defense of women's equality and her pioneering critique of patriarchal social structures. She argued that the empowerment of women through education and rational self-determination was essential not only for their own dignity but also for the moral and political improvement of society as a whole. Today, she is celebrated as a founding mother of modern feminism, and her works continue to inspire debates on gender, rights, and education. As scholars note, her

²⁶ Sapiro, V. (1992). *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 47.

²⁷ Tomalin, C. (1974). *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, (London: Penguin Books), p. 45.

philosophical writings anticipate many concerns of liberal feminism while also raising questions that resonate with contemporary intersectional and care-based feminist theories.²⁸

2.2 WHO IS A WOMAN?

The question of who a woman is has been a central concern in both philosophical inquiry and feminist thought. Traditionally, a woman has been defined biologically as an adult human female, distinguished by certain reproductive roles such as menstruation, childbirth, and lactation. Such a biological definition, while not incorrect, is increasingly viewed as insufficient in capturing the full complexity of what it means to be a woman. The modern philosophical appraisal of womanhood acknowledges that the identity of a woman is not merely a function of anatomy or physiology but is also deeply rooted in social, cultural, existential, and political realities.

In her groundbreaking work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir challenged the reduction of womanhood to biology by asserting that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"²⁹. This statement emphasizes that being a woman involves a process of socialization and historical conditioning. Beauvoir argued that women have been historically constructed as "the Other" in a patriarchal world that defines them in relation

²⁸ Botting, E. H. (2014). *Family feuds: Wollstonecraft, Burke, and Rousseau on the Transformation of the family*, (Albany: SUNY Press), p. 34.

²⁹ De. Beauvoir, S. (2011), *The Second Sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.), (London: Vintage Books), p. 15.

to men. According to her, society imposes certain roles, expectations, and limitations upon individuals labeled as women, shaping their identities through lived experiences of subordination and marginalization. This existentialist viewpoint positions womanhood as a condition influenced by freedom, choice, and socio-cultural constraints.

Further deepening this discourse, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* argued that “gender is performative meaning that being a woman is not a stable or inherent identity but one that is continuously constituted through actions, behaviors, and societal scripts”³⁰. From this lens, womanhood is not fixed but fluid and constructed through repeated enactments within a cultural context. This perspective opens up the category of “woman” to include those who may not conform to traditional biological definitions, such as transgender women, thereby emphasizing inclusivity and the dismantling of rigid gender binaries.

In the African context, the concept of a woman is often closely tied to community roles, motherhood, and societal cohesion. African feminist scholars like Nkiru Nzegwu have argued that traditional African societies did not always perceive women as inferior or subordinate, as colonial and Western narratives often suggest. Instead, “womanhood was understood through a relational and functional framework, where women's roles were vital to the survival and progress of the community”³¹. Women were seen not just as

³⁰ Butler, J. (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (London: Routledge), p. 56.

³¹ Nzegwu, N. (2006), *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture*, (New York: State University of New York Press), p. 16.

caregivers, but as political actors, spiritual leaders, and custodians of culture. This culturally embedded view provides a broader and more holistic understanding of womanhood that respects both individuality and communal responsibility. Therefore, a philosophical appraisal of who a woman is must engage with multiple perspectives. It must consider the biological, yet not be confined by it; it must recognize the social constructions of gender, yet not erase lived experiences; it must include diverse identities while respecting cultural differences. Such a multidimensional understanding is essential in grounding any meaningful discussion on women's empowerment, rights, and equality. It provides the necessary framework to identify systemic barriers and advocate for a more inclusive and just society for all individuals who identify as women.

2.2 EMPOWERMENT: DEFINITION AND TYPES

Empowerment refers to the process through which individuals or groups gain the ability, authority, and agency to make decisions and act independently to improve their circumstances. In the context of women, empowerment implies not only access to resources but also the transformation of societal structures that perpetuate inequality and exclusion. Philosophically, empowerment aligns with the notion of autonomy and self-realization, fundamental to human dignity. According to Kabeer, “empowerment is “the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability

was previously denied to them." This perspective emphasizes both the process and the outcome of gaining control over one's life".³²

Amartya Sen also articulates empowerment through his capability approach, which emphasizes enhancing individuals' real freedoms and opportunities to lead the kind of life they have reason to value. In this sense, "women's empowerment is about increasing their capabilities to participate meaningfully in economic, political, and social spheres".³³ Empowerment thus becomes a multidimensional construct with different but interrelated forms that are essential for achieving gender justice and equity. Economic empowerment is one of the most visible types and refers to women's access to productive resources such as land, credit, income, and employment. "Economic empowerment helps women achieve financial independence and reduces their dependence on male counterparts, thus enhancing their decision-making power within households and communities"³⁴. This form of empowerment enables women to challenge economic structures that historically marginalized them.

Political empowerment involves enabling women to take part in political processes and decision-making structures. It ensures women's participation in governance, public policy,

³² Kabeer, N. (1999), Resources, "Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment". *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435–464.

³³ Sen, A. (1999), *Development as Freedom*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 21.

³⁴ World Bank. *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

and leadership roles. Political empowerment is necessary to correct the systemic imbalance in representation and power. According to Phillips, “true democratic participation requires that all groups, including women, have a voice in shaping the laws and policies that affect their lives”.³⁵ Social empowerment addresses societal norms, traditions, and cultural practices that contribute to gender-based discrimination. It involves raising awareness about rights, promoting education, and dismantling stereotypes. Kant’s moral philosophy supports this view, as it affirms that every individual should be treated as an end in themselves, not merely as a means to an end³⁶. By changing how society perceives and values women, social empowerment fosters environments where women are respected and treated equally.

Psychological empowerment refers to the development of a woman’s inner strength, self-esteem, and belief in her capacity to effect change. Without psychological empowerment, other forms of empowerment may fail to achieve lasting impact. Freire emphasizes that “true liberation and empowerment begin with consciousness-raising, enabling oppressed individuals to recognize and transform their reality”.³⁷

³⁵ Phillips, A. (1998), *Feminism and Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 43.

³⁶ Kant, I. (1996), *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (M. Gregor, Trans.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 13.

³⁷Freire, P. (1970), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Herder and Herder), p. 34.

Educational empowerment is foundational because it equips women with knowledge and critical thinking skills necessary for social and economic participation. Education expands life choices, enhances employment opportunities, and increases civic engagement. It also serves as a tool for challenging oppressive structures and cultivating intellectual autonomy.

2.3 HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The evolution of women empowerment has been marked by significant social, political, and cultural transformations, shaped by a series of historical, intellectual, and political movements. The notion of empowering women has developed over time, from being a concept largely unheard of in ancient times to becoming a central aspect of modern social and political discourse. The evolution reflects changing ideas about women's rights, roles in society, and their access to power, education, and opportunities.

In ancient societies, women were generally regarded as subordinate to men, their roles confined to the domestic sphere. In many cultures, women's rights were severely restricted, and they had little agency in public life. In Ancient Greece, thinkers like Aristotle believed that women were inherently inferior to men and were thus naturally destined to play secondary roles³⁸. This view prevailed through much of history, forming the philosophical foundation for patriarchal structures that kept women in positions of

³⁸ Phillips, A. (1998), *Feminism and Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 114.

inferiority. Similarly, in Medieval Europe, religious doctrines reinforced the subjugation of women. Christianity, while offering some recognition of women, often placed them in roles of passivity, particularly in relation to their relationship with men. The church, as the central institution, promoted values that emphasized women's roles as caregivers and moral exemplars, rather than active participants in the broader political and social spheres. Women were excluded from most forms of leadership and intellectual activity, which were deemed the domain of men.

The Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries marked a critical turning point in the history of women's empowerment. Enlightenment thinkers emphasized the importance of reason, individual rights, and equality. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is often considered one of the first feminist manifestos. In this work, Wollstonecraft argued that "women were not inherently inferior to men, but rather lacked education and opportunities. She advocated for women's access to education and full participation in society, challenging the prevailing notion of women as passive beings"³⁹. This was a radical departure from the traditional view and laid the groundwork for future movements.

The first wave of feminism emerged in the 19th century, focusing on legal inequalities, especially women's suffrage. The suffrage movement, with key figures like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Emmeline Pankhurst, sought to secure women's

³⁹ Wollstonecraft, M. (1995), *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (S. Tomaselli, Ed.), (London: Penguin Classics), p. 31.

right to vote. This wave also focused on other social issues such as property rights, the right to education, and access to professions traditionally reserved for men. In the United States, “the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 marked a formal beginning to the organized women’s rights movement, and women began winning the right to vote in several countries by the early 20th century—first in New Zealand, and later in the United States and the United Kingdom”.⁴⁰ In this period, the notion of empowerment was primarily centered around women’s rights to participate in the political and public spheres. Activists fought against both legal and social barriers that restricted women’s autonomy. The broader goal was to secure basic civil rights for women, ensuring their recognition as equal citizens under the law.

The second wave of feminism emerged in the 1960s, focusing not only on legal rights but also on cultural and social issues. This period witnessed the expansion of the feminist agenda to include reproductive rights, workplace equality, sexual autonomy, and the dismantling of traditional gender roles. The publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was a catalyst for this wave, highlighting the dissatisfaction of many middle-class women who felt confined to their roles as housewives. Friedan’s work questioned the dominant cultural ideal of women’s fulfillment through domesticity and marriage, advocating for broader opportunities for women in the workforce and public life. Simone

⁴⁰ Offen, K. (2000), *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. 67.

de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, another influential work, critiqued the patriarchal structures that defined women's roles as secondary to men's. She argued that "women had been historically constructed as "the Other," and their emancipation required a radical shift in the societal understanding of gender".⁴¹ This period also witnessed significant legislative gains, such as the passage of the Equal Pay Act (1963) in the U.S., the legalization of birth control, and the right to abortion in several Western nations, all of which were critical steps toward women's empowerment.

The third wave of feminism, which emerged in the 1990s, responded to criticisms of the second wave's perceived focus on the issues of primarily white, middle-class women. This wave emphasized diversity and intersectionality, recognizing that women's experiences of oppression varied widely based on race, class, sexuality, and other social factors. Feminists like Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality to describe how multiple axes of identity and oppression intersect to shape women's lived experiences.⁴²

The third wave was also marked by the global reach of feminist activism. The use of the internet and social media as tools for organizing and advocacy became a hallmark of this wave, making feminist issues more accessible and visible. In particular, campaigns like *#MeToo* brought attention to issues of sexual harassment and violence, highlighting how

⁴¹De. Beauvoir, S. *Op. Cit.*, p. 20.

⁴² Crenshaw, K. (1989) "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique" *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 3(1), 139–167.

women's empowerment in the 21st century involved both reclaiming agency and challenging widespread cultural norms of patriarchy and abuse.

The fourth wave of feminism, which began in the 2010s, continues to build upon the previous waves, but it is distinguished by its use of technology, social media, and globalized activism. Issues such as sexual harassment, body shaming, gender violence, and workplace inequality remain central to feminist discourse. The #MeToo movement, which gained prominence in 2017, served as a global moment of reckoning for sexual violence and harassment, sparking conversations across industries and cultures. Feminism today also addresses the challenges of gender fluidity and non-binary identities, broadening the scope of empowerment to include all genders. In addition, the fourth wave places significant emphasis on achieving economic equality, tackling the gender pay gap, and addressing the systemic barriers that prevent women from accessing opportunities in politics, business, and other areas of power. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5, which aims to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls," has become a global framework for gender equality and women's empowerment, reflecting the ongoing international commitment to advancing women's rights and opportunities.

2.4 THEORIES UNDERPINNING WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Women empowerment is a concept, shaped by various theoretical perspectives that help explain and justify the need for gender equality and the advancement of women's rights.

These theories reflect diverse views on power, identity, and social structures, as well as how these intersect with the lived experiences of women. The following are some of the key theories that underpin women empowerment, each offering different insights into the barriers and opportunities that women face in their quest for equality and autonomy.

1. Feminist Theory: Feminist theory is perhaps the most comprehensive and widely recognized framework for understanding and promoting women's empowerment. It critiques the historical and systemic oppression of women and advocates for a radical restructuring of society to ensure gender equality. Feminist theory is not a monolithic body of thought, but rather encompasses a range of approaches, including liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, intersectional feminism, and postcolonial feminism.

- **Liberal Feminism** focuses on legal equality and individual rights. It seeks gender equality through reforms in laws, policies, and institutional structures, advocating for women's access to education, voting rights, and participation in the workforce. Key thinkers include John Stuart Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft, both of whom argued that women should be treated as equals to men within the social, political, and economic domains.
- **Radical Feminism** emphasizes the need for a fundamental transformation of society. Radical feminists argue that patriarchy is deeply entrenched in all aspects of social life, and thus, women's liberation requires more than legal or

institutional reforms. It calls for the dismantling of patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality. Figures such as Simone de Beauvoir and Andrea Dworkin challenged societal norms and questioned the roles assigned to women within a male-dominated world.

- **Marxist Feminism** links women's oppression to the capitalist system. Marxist feminists argue that women's exploitation is tied to economic structures, particularly capitalism, which perpetuates gender inequality through the commodification of women's labor, both domestic and industrial. Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* laid the foundation for this argument by "demonstrating how the family unit and private property were central to women's subjugation".⁴³
- **Intersectional Feminism**, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, acknowledges that women's experiences of oppression vary based on their intersecting identities, such as race, class, sexuality, and nationality. This theory stresses that the empowerment of women must address not only gender inequality but also other forms of systemic oppression that marginalized women face.
- **Postcolonial Feminism** critiques both patriarchy and colonialism, highlighting the unique experiences of women in formerly colonized societies. It challenges

⁴³ Engels, F. (1884) *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, (New York: Routledge), p. 100.

Western feminist perspectives that fail to account for the histories of colonization, imperialism, and the ongoing effects of these legacies on women in the Global South. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders* offers a framework for understanding women's empowerment in a global context, emphasizing solidarity across cultures and nations.

2. Capability Theory: Developed by economist and philosopher Amartya Sen and further advanced by Martha Nussbaum, the Capability Approach is a significant theory in the field of women's empowerment. This theory argues that empowerment is not merely about access to resources, but rather about expanding individuals' capabilities to live the life they have reason to value.

In the context of women, the capability approach emphasizes the importance of giving women the freedom and opportunities to exercise their own choices and make decisions that affect their lives. Nussbaum, in her book *Women and Human Development*, suggests that "women's empowerment is about providing access to key capabilities such as life, health, education, control over their environment, and participation in political and economic life".⁴⁴ The theory places a strong emphasis on the inherent dignity and agency of individuals, and it advocates for social policies that enable women to develop their capabilities and enhance their well-being. This theory links empowerment to human

⁴⁴ Nussbaum, M. (2000), *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 51.

development by viewing women not merely as passive recipients of aid but as active agents capable of making meaningful contributions to society. The capability approach has been used as a framework to evaluate various gender-related policies and interventions aimed at improving women's lives, including education, healthcare, and political representation.

3. Social Feminist Theory: Social feminist theory integrates feminist ideas with social and political analysis, focusing on the importance of social structures and systems in shaping women's lives. This theory argues that women's oppression is rooted in the structure of society, which shapes gender roles and expectations. Unlike liberal feminism, which emphasizes individual rights, social feminism highlights collective action and social change. Social feminists, such as Nancy Fraser and Iris Marion Young, argue that empowerment can only be achieved through the transformation of social institutions, including the family, labor market, and political structures. Their work calls for greater recognition of social justice, the redistribution of resources, and the recognition of cultural diversity as integral parts of women's empowerment.

4. Human Rights Framework: The Human Rights Framework underpins many of the international and national legal instruments that have promoted women's rights globally. This framework argues that women's empowerment is integral to the realization of human rights. The United Nations' Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination

Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) are key documents that recognize the human rights of women and outline measures to prevent discrimination and promote gender equality. This theory connects empowerment to the broader struggle for universal human rights, where the empowerment of women is seen as essential for the fulfillment of human dignity and equality. The emphasis is on both protecting women from violence and discrimination and ensuring their active participation in all spheres of life. The human rights framework thus frames women's empowerment as a matter of social justice, equality, and freedom from oppression.⁴⁵

5. Empowerment Theory: Empowerment theory, especially as developed by scholars like Julian Rappaport, focuses on the process through which individuals or groups gain control over their lives and environments. It is an approach that emphasizes the importance of self-determination, autonomy, and the capacity to influence one's circumstances. In the context of women, empowerment is about providing opportunities for women to build confidence, assert control over their personal and social environments, and challenge existing power dynamics. This theory suggests that empowerment is a process that involves building awareness, gaining knowledge, and cultivating self-efficacy. Women's empowerment, according to this theory, is not simply about increasing women's access to resources but also about fostering a sense of agency and self-worth.

⁴⁵ Fraser, N. (1997), *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Post-Socialist" Condition*, (New York: Routledge), p. 56.

Empowerment theory is often applied in social work and community development, emphasizing the role of women in collective action and social change.

6. Critical Feminist Pedagogy: Critical feminist pedagogy, influenced by the work of Paulo Freire and bell hooks, advocates for an educational approach that challenges traditional power dynamics in the classroom. This theory views education as a transformative process that can empower women by encouraging critical thinking, self-awareness, and activism. Through critical feminist pedagogy, women are encouraged to question existing structures of oppression and learn how to challenge these structures in order to promote social change. This approach focuses on creating a learning environment that is inclusive, participatory, and centered on the experiences and perspectives of marginalized women. By empowering women through education, critical feminist pedagogy aims to foster greater social justice and gender equality. The theories underpinning women empowerment are diverse, offering different perspectives on how to understand and achieve gender equality. From feminist theory to the capability approach, social feminist theory, and human rights frameworks, each theory contributes to a deeper understanding of the systemic barriers that women face and the ways in which their empowerment can be achieved. “These theories not only provide the intellectual foundation for feminist activism and policy-making but also serve as tools for promoting

practical change, fostering equality, and enhancing the dignity and agency of women around the world”.⁴⁶

CHAPTER THREE

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT’S NOTION OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A CRITIQUE

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT’S NOTION OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

⁴⁶ Freire, P. *Op. Cit.*, p. 39.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) is widely regarded as one of the earliest and most influential philosophers of women’s rights and empowerment. Her landmark text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, challenged the dominant patriarchal ideologies of her time by arguing that women are not naturally inferior to men but have been made so by lack of education and social opportunity⁴⁷. For her, women’s empowerment could only be achieved through the recognition of women as rational beings, equally capable of reason, virtue, and civic participation as men.

Central to Wollstonecraft’s philosophy is the conviction that women must be educated not merely to please men, but to cultivate their own minds and moral capacities. She criticized the prevailing cultural norms that confined women to domesticity and frivolity, calling such restrictions a form of oppression that reduced women to mere ornaments of society. According to Taylor, empowerment begins when women are provided with the same intellectual opportunities as men, thereby enabling them to develop autonomy and independence.⁴⁸ Education, therefore, was not simply a means of personal advancement but a pathway to moral and civic empowerment.⁴⁹

Wollstonecraft’s notion of empowerment also extended to the moral and political domains. She argued that women, as rational agents, should participate fully in public life,

⁴⁷ Wollstonecraft, M. (1995). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, (London: Penguin Classics), p. 34.

⁴⁸ Taylor, B. (2003). *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 32.

⁴⁹ Wollstonecraft, M. *Op Cit.* p. 67.

including politics and civic duties⁵⁰. Denying women the right to engage in political life not only dehumanized them but also weakened the moral fabric of society, since half of humanity was excluded from contributing to justice and progress. In her view, empowering women was not simply a matter of fairness but of necessity for the flourishing of the whole human community.

Another vital aspect of her empowerment philosophy is her critique of gendered socialization. Wollstonecraft observed that women were taught from childhood to value beauty, charm, and obedience over reason and independence⁵¹. This cultural conditioning perpetuated their subordination and dependency on men. By exposing this injustice, she sought to redefine empowerment as the capacity of women to reject superficial roles imposed by society and to live according to reason and virtue. In this sense, empowerment was not only institutional but also psychological and moral: it required a transformation of women's self-perception and aspirations.

Wollstonecraft laid the groundwork for feminist theories of equality and autonomy. Her insistence on rationality as the foundation of empowerment connected her to Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and human dignity. Yet, she also critiqued Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, who excluded women from the social contract

⁵⁰ Botting, E. H. (2014). *Family Feuds: Wollstonecraft, Burke, and Rousseau on the Transformation of the Family*, (Albany: SUNY Press), p. 50.

⁵¹ Kaplan, C. (1986). *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism*, (London: Verso Books), p. 90.

by idealizing their subservience⁵². By demanding equal recognition for women as moral and political beings, Wollstonecraft provided one of the earliest systematic arguments for gender equality and women's empowerment in Western philosophy.

3.1 MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S PHILOSOPHY OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Mary Wollstonecraft is often regarded as the *mother of modern feminism*, and her philosophy of women's rights laid the foundation for subsequent debates on gender equality. Her most influential work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, was written in the context of Enlightenment thought, where ideas of liberty, rationality, and equality were being championed but largely limited to men. Wollstonecraft boldly extended these principles to women, insisting that women, too, are rational beings who deserve equal rights in education, morality, and social participation.⁵³

At the heart of Wollstonecraft's philosophy is her belief in women's rationality. She rejected the notion, dominant in her time, that women were naturally inferior to men or destined only for domestic roles. Instead, she argued that women appeared weak and dependent not because of nature, but because they were denied access to education and opportunities⁵⁴. To her, women's rights could only be secured if women were recognized as capable of reason and provided with the tools, especially education, to cultivate their

⁵² Okin, S. M. (1979). *Women in Western Political Thought*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 76.

⁵³ Wollstonecraft, M. *Op Cit.* p. 70.

⁵⁴ Taylor, B. *Op Cit.*, p. 49.

intellectual and moral faculties. This placed her philosophy squarely within Enlightenment ideals, but also made it radically progressive by challenging entrenched patriarchal structures.

Education occupies a central role in Wollstonecraft's vision of women's rights. She maintained that the purpose of education should not be to make women more attractive to men but to prepare them as independent moral agents and responsible citizens. Denying women education, she argued, not only degraded them but also undermined society as a whole, since women as mothers are the first educators of future citizens⁵⁵. In this sense, the empowerment of women through education was not simply a private good, but a public necessity for building a just and virtuous society.

Wollstonecraft also advanced a moral and political argument for women's rights. She claimed that virtue is universal, not gendered; hence women should be held to the same standards of morality as men. To deny women the opportunity to exercise reason and virtue was to treat them as mere objects or ornaments, which she described as a form of tyranny. She extended this reasoning to political life, arguing that women should have the right to participate in civic affairs, since their rational capacities made them equally responsible for shaping the moral and political order. Although she did not explicitly demand full political rights such as suffrage, her work planted the seeds for later feminist

⁵⁵ Botting, E. H. *Op Cit.*, p. 65.

struggles for political equality⁵⁶. Her philosophy also critiqued the social construction of gender roles. Wollstonecraft condemned the way women were socialized to prioritize beauty, charm, and obedience over reason and independence. This, she argued, perpetuated their subjugation and reinforced male dominance. True women's rights, therefore, required dismantling these cultural norms and redefining femininity in terms of autonomy, rationality, and virtue.⁵⁷

3.1.1. Key Themes in Mary Wollstonecraft's Notion of Women

1. Education:

Mary Wollstonecraft placed education at the center of women's emancipation, arguing that ignorance and lack of intellectual training were the main causes of women's subordination. In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she criticized the prevailing view that women should only be taught superficial accomplishments, such as music, embroidery, or beauty etiquette to make them pleasing companions for men. For Wollstonecraft, such a system degraded women into ornaments rather than rational beings, and perpetuated a cycle of dependence.⁵⁸

She insisted that women are equally rational beings and thus deserve the same rigorous education as men. The denial of educational opportunities, she argued, was not a reflection of women's natural inferiority but a deliberate cultural limitation that stunted

⁵⁶ Okin, S. M. *Op Cit.*, p. 89.

⁵⁷ Wollstonecraft, M. *Op Cit.* p. 79.

⁵⁸ Wollstonecraft, M. *Op Cit.* p. 84.

their intellectual and moral development.⁵⁹ By keeping women ignorant, society encouraged weakness, vanity, and frivolity, traits mistakenly taken as natural feminine qualities. Wollstonecraft's vision of education was not merely academic but moral and civic. She believed education should cultivate virtue, independence, and reason, enabling women to be responsible individuals, good wives, and above all, effective mothers. Since women are often the first educators of children, Wollstonecraft argued that denying them intellectual growth was detrimental not only to women but to the entire nation. Educated women, she maintained, would raise virtuous citizens, thereby strengthening the moral and political fabric of society.⁶⁰ Her educational philosophy also emphasized co-education, a radical idea for her time. She suggested that boys and girls should be educated together, rather than segregated, so that both sexes could learn the same subjects and interact as equals. This would prevent the reinforcement of gender hierarchies from an early age and promote mutual respect between men and women⁶¹.

Wollstonecraft believed education was the pathway to women's independence. An educated woman could support herself financially, exercise critical judgment, and resist being reduced to mere dependence on a husband. In this sense, education was both a

⁵⁹ Taylor, B. *Op Cit.*, p. 78.

⁶⁰ Botting, E. H. *Op Cit.*, p. 71.

⁶¹ Kaplan, C. *Op. Cit.*, p. 95.

practical tool for self-reliance and a philosophical affirmation of women's dignity as rational beings.⁶²

2. Critique of Gender Norms

Feminist critiques of gender norms center on the idea that societal expectations of gender roles are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Gender norms prescribe specific behaviors, responsibilities, and ways of being for individuals based on their assigned sex at birth, often limiting personal freedom and reinforcing hierarchical social structures. Feminist theorists argue that these norms sustain patriarchy by positioning men and masculinity as dominant, while women and femininity are often subordinated. By interrogating these norms, feminism seeks to expose the arbitrary nature of gendered expectations and challenge the power dynamics they uphold.

One key aspect of the critique is that gender norms are restrictive and prescriptive, leaving little room for individual expression or deviation. For instance, women are often expected to be nurturing, passive, and emotionally expressive, while men are encouraged to be assertive, rational, and dominant. Such norms not only limit personal development but also perpetuate social inequalities by shaping opportunities, career paths, and social recognition. Feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* highlight that these expectations confine women to an "othered" status, where their identities are defined in relation to men rather than autonomously. Gender norms are critiqued for their

⁶² Okin, S. M. *Op Cit.*, p. 97.

role in reproducing systemic oppression across social institutions. Educational systems, workplaces, family structures, and media representations all reinforce normative ideas of masculinity and femininity, shaping perceptions from an early age. The concept of “doing gender,” as proposed by West and Zimmerman illustrates that gender is performed through repeated social behaviors and interactions. This performative aspect of gender highlights that norms are not natural but socially enforced, making them malleable and contestable.

Another important dimension of feminist critique is the intersectional analysis of gender norms. Intersectional feminism, as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw emphasizes that gender norms do not operate in isolation but intersect with race, class, sexuality, disability, and other axes of identity. For example, the expectations placed on women of color may differ significantly from those placed on white women, reflecting broader societal hierarchies. By examining these intersections, feminists reveal how rigid adherence to gender norms disproportionately disadvantages marginalized groups, exacerbating inequalities and limiting social mobility.

3. Equality

Mary Wollstonecraft’s philosophy was fundamentally grounded in the principle of equality, which she considered both a natural right and a moral necessity. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she argued that women, like men, are rational creatures endowed with reason, and therefore should enjoy equal rights and opportunities. For Wollstonecraft,

the perceived inferiority of women was not due to nature but rather to oppressive social structures and educational inequalities. She rejected the dominant 18th-century belief advanced by thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau that women were naturally subordinate, destined to serve men or exist merely as companions. Instead, Wollstonecraft insisted that rationality is not gendered, and thus justice demands that both men and women be treated as equals in moral, social, and political spheres⁶³.

Wollstonecraft particularly emphasized equality in education as the foundation for broader gender equality. Denying women access to serious intellectual training forced them into dependency and frivolity, reinforcing stereotypes of female weakness. She maintained that only by educating women equally with men could society develop a citizenry based on virtue, reason, and mutual respect. Equality was, therefore, not just a women's issue but a social good necessary for the progress of the entire community. Her vision of equality extended into the private and public spheres. In the family, she called for marriages based on companionship and respect rather than domination and submission. In politics, she argued that women's voices must be heard, since excluding half of humanity from civic participation undermines the principles of justice and freedom. Thus, Wollstonecraft's call for equality was not simply about personal liberty but also about re-imagining society on the basis of fairness and inclusivity.

⁶³ Taylor, B. *Op Cit.*, p. 100.

At its core, Wollstonecraft's idea of equality challenged the notion that women should be valued only for their beauty, sexuality, or utility to men. Instead, she demanded recognition of women as autonomous moral agents, capable of rational thought, independent judgment, and civic responsibility. By insisting on equality, she laid the philosophical groundwork for later feminist movements, which continued to expand on her principle that without gender equality, there can be neither justice nor true human progress.

3.2 IMPLICATIONS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

3.2.1 Reduction in Vices

One of the significant contributions of women's empowerment is its role in the reduction of vices in society. Vices such as prostitution, human trafficking, drug abuse, gender-based violence, and certain forms of corruption often find fertile ground in environments where women are marginalized, disempowered, and denied access to opportunities. Disempowerment fosters vulnerability, as women with limited economic or educational opportunities may be coerced into exploitative practices to survive. Empowering women through education, employment, and political participation provides them with alternatives to such destructive paths, thereby reducing the prevalence of social vices.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Nussbaum, M. (2000), *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 59.

Empowerment encourages the cultivation of virtue and rational agency, which are crucial for moral development. Aristotle emphasized in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that the flourishing of a society depends on the cultivation of virtues among its members⁶⁵. Women, when given access to education and resources, are able to exercise autonomy and moral reasoning, which enables them to resist exploitative systems and engage in virtuous practices. This empowerment not only enhances their own lives but also positively influences families and communities, reducing the spread of vices that erode social harmony.

Women play a pivotal role in shaping the moral fabric of society, particularly through family and community responsibilities. Empowered women are more capable of guiding younger generations toward values such as honesty, responsibility, and discipline. As Kant's Practical Imperative suggests, individuals must be treated as ends in themselves and not merely as means.⁶⁶ Recognizing the dignity of women through empowerment acknowledges their capacity as rational and moral agents, enabling them to act as role models and moral educators. This reduces the likelihood of vices taking root within families and communities.

⁶⁵ Aristotle, (2009), *Nicomachean Ethics* (W. D. Ross, Trans.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 65.

⁶⁶ Kant, I. (2012), *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (M. Gregor, Trans.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 79.

Economic empowerment also plays a critical role in curbing vices. Poverty has long been identified as a root cause of crime, prostitution, and trafficking⁶⁷. By creating opportunities for women through entrepreneurship, access to credit, and stable employment, societies weaken the structural conditions that perpetuate vice. Sen's *Development as Freedom* highlights that genuine development occurs when people gain the capability to make meaningful choices⁶⁸. Empowered women, therefore, not only escape cycles of exploitation but also contribute to community stability and ethical growth.

Political empowerment contributes to the reduction of systemic and institutional vices. Research shows that countries with higher female participation in governance often exhibit lower levels of corruption and stronger accountability mechanisms⁶⁹. This can be philosophically interpreted through the ethics of care, which emphasizes empathy, fairness, and responsibility qualities that women often bring into leadership roles⁷⁰. By diversifying decision-making structures, women help to dismantle entrenched systems of greed, corruption, and injustice, thereby promoting integrity in governance.

⁶⁷ Sen, A. (1999), *Development as Freedom*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 78.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

⁶⁹ Dollar, D. Fisman, R. & Gatti, R. (2001), Are women really the "fairer" sex? Corruption and Women in government. *Journal of Economic Behaviour & Organization*, 46(4), 423–429.

⁷⁰ Gilligan, C. (1982), *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. (Harvard: Harvard University Press), p. 90.

Another dimension of women's empowerment in reducing vices is its impact on domestic violence and abuse. Societies where women lack empowerment often record higher rates of intimate partner violence because women are unable to negotiate their rights within relationships⁷¹. Empowered women, however, gain not only economic strength but also legal awareness and confidence to resist abusive situations. This empowerment also enables them to advocate for institutional reforms and stronger legal frameworks that discourage domestic vices such as spousal abuse and marital rape. In this sense, empowerment functions as a protective mechanism against violence and exploitation within the private sphere.

Empowerment further reduces vices by challenging harmful cultural practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and honor-based violence. These practices persist largely because women lack decision-making power and are often excluded from cultural and religious dialogues. When women are educated and empowered, they are able to question oppressive traditions and advocate for reforms that promote dignity and well-being. From a philosophical perspective, this aligns with Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, which insists that every human being should have the freedom to develop bodily integrity, emotional well-being, and political participation⁷². Thus, empowerment not only reduces visible social vices but also dismantles entrenched cultural vices disguised as tradition. At the community level,

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁷² M. Nussbaum, *Op Cit.*, p. 65.

women's empowerment fosters social cohesion and ethical participation, thereby reducing criminal activities. Empowered women tend to be more active in grassroots organizations, civil society groups, and peace-building initiatives.⁷³ Their involvement often emphasizes collaboration, fairness, and inclusiveness, values that counteract vices like exclusion, marginalization, and political violence. This supports the philosophical idea of communitarian ethics, which stresses the importance of collective responsibility in shaping a virtuous society. By empowering women, communities are strengthened against divisive and destructive practices.

Education, in particular, stands out as a central empowerment tool in reducing vices. Studies show that women with higher levels of education are less likely to engage in or tolerate behaviors linked to vice, such as early pregnancies, substance abuse, or dependence on exploitative labor. Education equips women with critical consciousness, a term popularized by Paulo Freire, which enables marginalized groups to become aware of oppressive structures and actively resist them. For women, this means not only resisting personal exploitation but also contributing to societal change by discouraging others from engaging in immoral or harmful practices.⁷⁴

Empowerment promotes the reduction of vices through role modeling and intergenerational influence. Empowered women often become community leaders,

⁷³ Cornwall, A. & Rivas, A. M. (2015), From "gender equality and women's empowerment" to global justice: Reclaiming a transformative agenda for gender and development. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(2), 396–415.

⁷⁴ Freire, P. (1970), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (London: Continuum Books), p. 49.

educators, and mentors, inspiring younger generations to pursue education and productive ventures rather than destructive alternatives. This intergenerational transmission of values creates a cultural shift where virtues are normalized, and vices lose their grip. Such influence resonates with African feminist philosophy, which highlights the communal role of women in nurturing society's moral and cultural identity⁷⁵. In this way, empowerment is not simply individual freedom but a ripple effect that gradually transforms society into a more virtuous and just community.

3.2.2 Restore Self Respect and Dignity

One of the most profound outcomes of women's empowerment is the restoration of self-respect and dignity. For centuries, women in many societies have been subjected to cultural, social, and institutional practices that relegated them to subordinate positions, often eroding their confidence and sense of self-worth. Empowerment initiatives, whether through education, economic independence, political participation, or legal reforms, challenge these oppressive systems by affirming the value of women as equal human beings deserving of respect and recognition⁷⁶. When women gain access to opportunities previously denied to them, they not only acquire tangible benefits but also reclaim their dignity, which had long been undermined by systemic discrimination.

⁷⁵ Nzegwu, N. (2006), *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture*, (New York: State University of New York Press), p. 48.

⁷⁶ Nussbaum, M. C. *Op. Cit*, p. 101.

The restoration of dignity comes through the recognition of women as autonomous moral agents, capable of making rational decisions about their lives. Philosophically, thinkers like Immanuel Kant emphasized that every human being possesses intrinsic worth and must be treated as an end in themselves rather than as a means to an end. Applying this principle to women's empowerment highlights that women are not objects of domination or instruments of patriarchal interests, but subjects of equal moral standing. When women are empowered to assert their rights, whether in the workplace, family, or community, they move from positions of marginalization to recognition as full participants in human society. This recognition restores their sense of self-respect and strengthens their identity.

Dignity is closely tied to economic independence. Historically, dependency on male figures for economic sustenance often subjected women to exploitation and abuse. Empowerment through vocational training, entrepreneurship, and access to credit systems provides women with financial autonomy, which in turn fosters a renewed sense of self-worth⁷⁷. A financially independent woman is less likely to tolerate degrading treatment, as she has the capacity to sustain herself and her family without subjugation. This empowerment translates into dignity because it disrupts cycles of poverty and dependence that had previously undermined women's self-esteem.

The restoration of self-respect and dignity is evident in the psychological transformation that occurs when women gain access to education. Education not only imparts knowledge

⁷⁷ Sen, A. *Op. Cit.* p. 45.

but also instills confidence, critical thinking, and the courage to challenge oppressive norms. For instance, educated women often become advocates for justice, equality, and social reform, breaking barriers that previously restricted their voices. This intellectual empowerment builds self-confidence and redefines women's place in society, ensuring that they are respected not only as mothers or caregivers but as intellectual and civic contributors.

Empowerment also fosters dignity by reshaping cultural narratives about women. In societies where traditions have historically portrayed women as inferior, empowerment initiatives challenge stereotypes and promote new cultural models of respect and equality. When women occupy leadership positions, excel in professions, or contribute to innovation, they redefine societal perceptions of femininity and worth. This cultural shift elevates women's dignity at both the personal and collective level, ensuring that respect for women becomes embedded in social consciousness.⁷⁸

The restoration of self-respect and dignity among women is an essential dimension of women's empowerment, as it moves beyond material and political liberation to address the psychological, cultural, and moral aspects of womanhood. Self-respect is the internal acknowledgment of one's worth, while dignity reflects both internal self-perception and external recognition by society. For centuries, patriarchal structures and systemic inequalities have undermined these values by relegating women to inferior roles.

⁷⁸ Hooks, B. (2000) *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, (London: South End Press), p. 89.

Empowerment, therefore, seeks not only to provide women with rights and opportunities but also to transform their self-image and societal perception into one of equality, capability, and worth. A crucial way of restoring dignity lies in women reclaiming their voices in social, political, and intellectual spaces. Historically, women's contributions to knowledge, governance, and culture were either ignored or minimized, thereby distorting their self-image. By reasserting themselves in these areas through education, scholarship, political leadership, and activism, women dismantle stereotypes of inferiority and prove their ability to shape history. For instance, the increased visibility of women philosophers, scientists, and leaders demonstrates that intellectual and creative excellence transcends gender. This visibility restores not only individual dignity but also collective recognition of women as equal agents of progress.⁷⁹

Another element in the restoration of self-respect is women's ability to define their identities beyond the confines of traditional gender roles. Societies have often equated a woman's worth with her ability to serve as wife, mother, or caregiver, limiting her self-perception to roles defined by others. Empowerment, however, allows women to embrace diverse identities, professional, spiritual, intellectual, and political thereby broadening the scope of what constitutes female dignity. This liberation from restrictive definitions

⁷⁹ A. Sen, *Op. Cit.* p. 77.

fosters an authentic sense of self-respect, as women recognize that their worth does not depend on conforming to patriarchal expectations.⁸⁰

Dignity is restored when women are free from degrading practices and cultural traditions that strip them of agency. Practices such as child marriage, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, and workplace harassment erode a woman's sense of worth by reducing her to an object of control or exploitation. Addressing these issues through legal reforms, education, and social awareness ensures that women are treated as full human beings. When women no longer endure these injustices in silence but resist them through activism and solidarity, they reclaim dignity for themselves and their communities.

On a deeper philosophical level, restoring dignity also implies reinterpreting the moral and ethical place of women in society. Thinkers such as Immanuel Kant emphasized the inherent dignity of every human being, grounded in their rationality and autonomy. When applied to women, this means recognizing them not as means to an end but as ends in themselves, fully capable of rational decision-making. Women's empowerment thus becomes a moral obligation for societies committed to justice and equality, since any denial of women's dignity undermines the ethical foundation of human coexistence. Restoring self-respect and dignity has intergenerational effects. Empowered women serve as role models, shaping the aspirations and self-image of younger generations. When daughters observe their mothers and other women holding positions of authority, making

⁸⁰ Hooks, B. *Op. Cit.* p. 95.

independent choices, and commanding respect, they internalize a sense of worth and possibility. This breaks cycles of subordination and ensures that dignity is not only restored for present women but preserved for the future.

3.2.3 Enriches the Society

Women's empowerment enriches society by fostering inclusive participation in social, economic, and political life. When women are granted equal opportunities to develop their potential, they contribute fresh perspectives and innovative ideas that expand societal possibilities. For instance, in governance, women often emphasize policies related to education, healthcare, and social welfare, which are crucial for human development and social stability. Their participation ensures that the concerns of half of the population are not overlooked, thereby strengthening democratic values and fairness in society.⁸¹

Economically, women's empowerment creates a more balanced and productive workforce. Studies reveal that empowering women to pursue education and professional development significantly boosts GDP growth and reduces poverty levels. By participating fully in economic activities, women not only uplift themselves but also provide financial stability for their families and communities. This multiplier effect contributes to the overall progress of society, creating environments where future generations can thrive. Socially, empowered women serve as role models, inspiring

⁸¹ Sen, A. *Op. Cit.* p. 105.

younger generations to aspire beyond traditional limitations. Their visibility in leadership, academia, and entrepreneurship challenges entrenched stereotypes, thereby creating a culture of equality and respect. Such changes enrich the moral fabric of society, where both men and women are valued not by gender but by their contributions and capabilities. This promotes justice and fairness while reducing discriminatory practices.

Women's empowerment enriches society by preserving traditions while also encouraging reform where necessary. Women often play key roles in passing down cultural values, but when empowered, they can balance preservation with progressive change. This balance fosters a more dynamic and adaptable culture, capable of responding to global changes without losing its identity. Furthermore, empowered women actively promote peace-building, mediation, and community solidarity, which are essential for a stable and harmonious society. Empowering women enhances the human community by affirming the intrinsic worth and dignity of all persons. Thinkers like John Stuart Mill argued that societies that restrict women's freedom impoverish themselves by excluding half of their intellectual and moral⁸². By contrast, when women are empowered, society benefits from their moral insights, creativity, and leadership, thereby enriching collective human existence. In essence, women's empowerment enriches society by advancing social justice, economic growth, cultural dynamism, and moral development. It transforms society from a hierarchical system of exclusion into a more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous community where everyone can flourish.

⁸² J. S. Mill, *Op. Cit.*, p. 61.

3.3 A CRITIQUE OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S NOTION OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Mary Wollstonecraft's conception of women empowerment, articulated primarily in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, remains one of the earliest and most influential philosophical defenses of gender equality. Her insistence that women are rational beings deserving of equal rights in education, morality, and civic life broke significantly with the patriarchal structures of her era. However, while her philosophy represents a groundbreaking step toward feminism, it is not without limitations and critiques. One of the main critiques of Wollstonecraft's notion of empowerment is that it was largely limited to a middle-class, Eurocentric framework. Although she demanded equality for women, her vision did not adequately address differences of class, race, or social position. Poor women, for example, were often excluded from her discussion, as her arguments centered on women who had the opportunity to pursue education and refinement. Later feminist theorists argue that empowerment must be intersectional, taking into account multiple forms of oppression that go beyond gender alone.⁸³

A second critique lies in the instrumental justification of women's education. Wollstonecraft often emphasized that educated women would be better wives, mothers, and contributors to society. While this was a powerful argument in her time, it risks subordinating women's empowerment to their roles within the family, rather than

⁸³ Okin, S. M. *Op Cit.*, p. 115.

affirming education and independence as valuable ends in themselves. Critics suggest that such reasoning, though strategic, inadvertently reinforced women's domestic identity, rather than fully liberating them from it.⁸⁴

Wollstonecraft's idea of empowerment was deeply rationalist, equating dignity and equality primarily with reason. While this challenged the stereotype of women as irrational beings, it also neglected other dimensions of human existence such as emotion, embodiment, and care, qualities that later feminist philosophers, especially in the ethics of care tradition, would argue are essential to a complete understanding of human flourishing⁸⁵. Thus, her framework can be critiqued for reproducing Enlightenment biases that privileged reason over other valuable forms of human experience. Another critique arises from the political limitations of her vision. Wollstonecraft demanded equality in education and social respect but did not fully articulate a demand for women's political rights, such as suffrage. Although her ideas implicitly support political equality, she often stopped short of direct advocacy for women's active participation in governance. Later thinkers like John Stuart Mill explicitly developed the political dimensions that Wollstonecraft only hinted at. This makes her empowerment project appear somewhat incomplete in retrospect. Some critics point out that Wollstonecraft's notion of empowerment was framed in terms of assimilation to male standards. By emphasizing

⁸⁴ Taylor, B. *Op Cit.*, p. 112.

⁸⁵ Held, V. (2006). *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 35.

rationality, independence, and civic responsibility in traditionally masculine terms, she may have unintentionally implied that empowerment requires women to adopt male-defined virtues, rather than redefining social values to include traditionally feminine perspectives. This raises the question of whether true empowerment should mean equality by sameness or recognition of difference.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

4.1 EVALUATION

The subject of women empowerment has become a central discourse in philosophy, social sciences, and development studies, as it speaks to the quest for justice, equality, and human dignity. From a philosophical standpoint, empowerment is not merely a political or economic agenda but a moral imperative grounded in the recognition of

women as rational beings with intrinsic worth. Women empowerment refers to the process of enabling women to realize their potential, make autonomous decisions, and participate equally in the social, economic, and political life of their communities. Philosophically, this stems from the principle of human dignity articulated in Kant's moral philosophy, where every individual is considered an end in themselves, not a means to another's end⁸⁶. Thus, denying women empowerment is not only a social injustice but also a moral contradiction.

Historically, philosophy has often mirrored the patriarchal structures of society. Classical thinkers like Aristotle placed women in subordinate roles, regarding them as naturally inferior to men in rational capacity⁸⁷. However, modern and contemporary philosophers have challenged such views, emphasizing equality and human rights. John Stuart Mill, in *The Subjection of Women*, argued that the subordination of women was one of the chief hindrances to human improvement. Mill insisted that women must enjoy the same liberties and opportunities as men, since justice demands equality of treatment. This philosophical defense of women's rights laid a foundation for contemporary feminist thought, which views empowerment as liberation from both structural and cultural oppression.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Kant, I. (1997), *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (M. Gregor, Trans.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 99.

⁸⁷ Aristotle (1996), *Politics* (E. Barker, Trans.). (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 29.

⁸⁸ Tong, R. (2018), *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, (London: Routledge), p. 77.

Women empowerment is also intrinsically linked to the reduction of social vices and the restoration of dignity in society. Empowered women are more likely to resist exploitation, challenge discriminatory practices, and contribute positively to community life. Martha Nussbaum's *Capabilities Approach* highlights that human development must be measured not only by economic growth but also by individuals' ability to live meaningful lives⁸⁹. Applying this to women, empowerment involves expanding their opportunities in education, healthcare, and governance so that they can actualize their potential. Philosophically, empowerment here becomes a means of fostering human flourishing, aligning with Aristotle's idea of *eudaimonia* (happiness or well-being).

Moreover, women empowerment enriches the society at large. Studies reveal that communities where women are empowered tend to experience higher levels of development, lower rates of corruption, and stronger democratic⁹⁰. This reinforces the philosophical view that justice and equality are not zero-sum values but mutually beneficial principles. Empowering women not only corrects historical injustices but also strengthens the moral and civic fabric of society. In African philosophy, the idea of communalism (*ubuntu*) also supports this view, stressing that the well-being of the individual is tied to the well-being of the community. Therefore, disempowering women weakens the very foundation of communal existence.

⁸⁹ Nussbaum, M. C. (2011), *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press), p. 95.

⁹⁰ Sen, A. (1999), *Development as Freedom*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 79.

From a philosophical appraisal, women empowerment transcends mere activism; it is a fundamental ethical concern. It questions the moral validity of systems that perpetuate inequality and affirms the human capacity for rationality, autonomy, and moral agency. By grounding women empowerment in philosophical principles such as justice, dignity, and human flourishing, it becomes clear that empowering women is not optional but necessary for a just society. The appraisal thus demonstrates that women empowerment is both a moral duty and a practical pathway to social transformation.

The philosophical appraisal of women empowerment reveals both strengths and challenges in the discourse on gender equality. On the positive side, grounding women empowerment in philosophy provides a strong normative framework that goes beyond policy or activism. Philosophical reasoning, especially through the works of Kant and Mill, affirms that the call for empowerment is not merely a social trend but a moral imperative based on justice, equality, and dignity⁹¹. By situating empowerment within universal moral principles, the project demonstrates that gender equality is essential for human flourishing and not simply a Western liberal value. This universality strengthens the legitimacy of women empowerment as a global concern.

Another strength of this appraisal is its capacity to connect theory with practice. The integration of Nussbaum's *Capabilities Approach* and Sen's developmental philosophy

⁹¹ Kant, I. *Op. Cit.*, p. 105.

makes empowerment measurable and actionable, not just abstract.⁹² This demonstrates that philosophy can guide practical interventions such as education, healthcare access, political participation, and economic inclusion. The emphasis on communal well-being from African philosophical traditions like *ubuntu* also enriches the discussion by showing that women's empowerment benefits entire societies rather than being an individualistic pursuit. Thus, the project balances Western liberal philosophy with African communal thought, creating a more holistic and culturally relevant evaluation.

However, there are also limitations in the philosophical appraisal of women empowerment. One weakness lies in the historical marginalization of women in mainstream philosophy itself. Thinkers like Aristotle reinforced patriarchal hierarchies by portraying women as naturally subordinate. This raises a critical question: can the same philosophical tradition that excluded women serve as a sufficient foundation for empowerment? While modern philosophers like Mill and feminist theorists have reinterpreted or challenged these views, the legacy of exclusion still haunts philosophical discourse. Thus, women empowerment requires not only reinterpreting classical ideas but also creating new frameworks that genuinely reflect women's lived experiences.⁹³

Another limitation is the gap between philosophical ideals and socio-cultural realities. While philosophy provides universal principles, local customs and traditions often resist

⁹² Sen, A. *Op. Cit.* p. 89.

⁹³ Tong, R. (2018), *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, (London: Routledge), p. 89.

change. In many African societies, patriarchy is deeply embedded in religious, cultural, and political structures. Philosophical appeals to justice and dignity may not be persuasive without concrete strategies for dismantling structural barriers and addressing economic inequalities⁹⁴. Hence, the evaluation highlights that philosophy alone is insufficient—it must work hand in hand with policy, activism, and grassroots movements to make empowerment real.

4.2 CONCLUSION

The philosophical appraisal of women empowerment demonstrates that the pursuit of gender equality is both an ethical necessity and a practical pathway to societal progress. Women empowerment is not simply about granting privileges but about restoring the dignity, freedom, and agency of half of humanity that has historically been marginalized. It is rooted in principles of justice, equality, and human flourishing, which affirm that every individual deserves the opportunity to realize their potential without discrimination.

The discussion shows that empowering women contributes not only to individual well-being but also to the enrichment of society as a whole. When women are given equal access to education, healthcare, political participation, and economic opportunities, communities experience greater development, stability, and social harmony.

⁹⁴ Obiora, L. A. (2020), *Patriarchy and Women's Rights in Africa: Philosophical and Legal Perspectives*, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing), p. 97

Philosophical thought also makes clear that empowerment is inseparable from human dignity, and denying it undermines the moral foundation of any society.

Nevertheless, the journey toward genuine empowerment requires confronting both historical legacies and cultural barriers that continue to reinforce inequality. It demands a transformation that goes beyond abstract principles into practical actions that challenge existing structures of patriarchy and exclusion. Thus, women empowerment should be viewed as an ongoing process that combines philosophical reflection with social, political, and economic reform. Ultimately, the appraisal highlights that the empowerment of women is not a favor or concession but a moral duty and a collective responsibility. By ensuring that women are fully recognized as equal participants in the human community, society moves closer to justice, harmony, and a more meaningful realization of human potential.

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