



LOCATING EQUALITY AND JUSTICE IN THE DISCOURSE ON WOMEN'S EDUCATION BY MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND SAVITRIBAI PHULE

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Abstract

Since historical and structural injustices have long limited women's access to educational opportunities, equality and justice continue to be central to the conversation about women's education. Education serves as a potent tool for social change in addition to being a means of empowering individuals. This review is a critical analysis of the ideas of equality and justice in women's education from the viewpoint of two prominent intellectuals from different socio-cultural settings, Mary Wollstonecraft and Savitribai Phule. The study draws on existing philosophical, historical and educational literature to examine the advocacy of Wollstonecraft for moral and rational education as the basis of gender equality and the emphasis of Savitribai Phule on education as a means for social justice and emancipation of marginalized women. Wollstonecraft's focus was on intellectual equality, within a framework of liberal humanism. Savitribai Phule's educational advocacy challenged the confluence of gender, caste and class. The study shows the continued relevance of their ideas for current debates on inclusive and equitable education, and comments on similarities and differences in their ways of approaching the subject. The study argues that, for the successful integration of these perspectives to overcome persistent gender inequalities, a thorough comprehension of women's education that encompasses equality and social justice is a necessary prerequisite.

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Introduction

The discourse on human rights and social development is shaped by the fundamental principles of equality and justice, especially when it comes to women's education. Due to the systematic denial of women's access to education throughout history, social injustice and gender inequality have become deeply ingrained. Hence, education has become a powerful tool of women empowerment and led to the transformation of society and equal participation in public and private spheres. A study of the philosophical and reformist views on women's education gives a good idea of how equality and justice are being interpreted. The pioneering Enlightenment feminist thinker Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) and the Indian visionary social reformer and educator Savitribai Phule (1831-1897) are two important but different voices in the advocacy of women's right to education. In her seminal book *A Vindication of the Rights of the Women* Wollstonecraft argued that the subjugation of women was not natural but the result of unequal and inadequate education. She stressed that the foundation of justice is reason, moral autonomy and intellectual equality. However, Savitribai Phule actively opposed the patriarchal and caste-based oppression through educational practice and believed education to be a vital tool of social emancipation, especially for women from marginalized castes and communities. Though they hailed from different socio-cultural backgrounds, the two intellectuals were united in their conviction that denial of education is a fundamental injustice and that without education, and empowerment through education, true equality cannot be achieved. The goal of this review paper is to critically analyse and summarise Savitribai Phule's and Mary Wollstonecraft's views on justice and equality in relation to women's education. The paper seeks to demonstrate their significance in current discussions on gender equality, inclusive education, and social justice by analysing the body of literature on their educational philosophies and reformist contributions. In addition to enhancing feminist educational discourse, this kind of comparative analysis provides a comprehensive framework for resolving enduring disparities in women's education today.

Review of Related Literatures

Review of related literatures about Mary Wollstonecraft in India

Ray (2012) studied on globalization and human rights of women with reference to Mary Wollstonecraft's vindication of the rights of women. This study threw historical insights on the theoretical perspectives of rights of women since the birth of the concept of human rights. The study attempted to analyse the works on human rights that neither recognized the rights of women nor considered the intellect and rationality of women noteworthy. Guho (2017) explored on the exploration of Mary Wollstonecraft's writings Mary, a fiction, and letters written during a brief stay in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. In this study, the researcher looked at Mary Wollstonecraft as a liberal feminist writer. The researcher examined her Vindication of Women's Rights since she focuses on women's education and individuals. Thakar and Singh (2021) looked at Mary Wollstonecraft's perspective on patriarchal society in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. In this study the researchers showed that how Mary Wollstonecraft's explored concept of 'woman's role' within society as well as argued that, rather than merely being considered like domestic housewife dwelling into shadows of their husband, woman may become "companions" with their men equivalents through equal education, which would benefit everyone of society. Adhikari and Saha (2023) studied on educational philosophy and practices of Mary Wollstonecraft and Nel Noddings. The study has provided how education was viewed centuries ago by Wollstonecraft, the first feminist and a compelling case for Noddings' Theory of Care's influence in the areas of moral education and educational philosophy. Though Wollstonecraft and Noddings were born centuries apart, both the educators have paved very deep impact on today's education, its policies and technicalities. Adhikari and Saha (2023) explored on Mary Wollstonecraft's reflection on life and society. In this study, researchers looked at Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792). Wollstonecraft battled the traditional beliefs she was raised with in England throughout her writing career and her life, as well as those she adopted in response to her surroundings, primarily in France during her protracted relationships and the French Revolution. She developed a tension as a result of this fight that is evident in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Adhikari and Saha (2023) attempted to investigate Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Women, highlighting how males viewed women in the 18th century. The study has clear analysed of women's subordinate status and the overall view of the female world from the perspective of the 18th century, from the viewpoint of a woman.

Das (2023) studied on Wollstonecraft's contribution to the education and empowerment of women in the modern era. The objective of this study was to explore the significant contributions of Mary Wollstonecraft to the education and empowerment of women in the modern era. The study investigated the applicability of Wollstonecraft's ideas to the empowerment of contemporary women. This study highlighted the continued relevance of Wollstonecraft's ideas to modern issues and the struggle for gender equality. Iqbal and Bhattacharyya (2023) investigated a new vision for women's empowerment in the context of Wollstonecraft, Nivedita, and Noddings. The goal of this study was to create a thorough grasp of a new vision for women's empowerment that incorporated their thoughts. The study finished with observations on the new vision for women's empowerment resulting from the synthesis of these significant ideas. Roy (2023) studied on women and society in the light of education. The current study attempted to investigate women's engagement in transforming society by eradicating social illnesses and inequities. In the study, the author has revisited the efforts of Savitribai Phule, Maria Montessori, Mary Wollstonecraft and Nel Noddings in encompassing the development of wellbeing for the overall reformation of orthodoxy-based, patriarchal society. Tripathi (2023) looked into Mary Wollstonecraft, an early advocate for girls' education and rational thought. The study's goals were to examine Mary Wollstonecraft's perspective on women's empowerment and education in the 18th century. Studying Mary was an eye-opening experience; her thinking went beyond modernism and was just rational. All of the major aspects of the school system that Mary Wollstonecraft identified are examined. The study aimed to compare Wollstonecraft's schooling with 21st-century education. Farooq and Peerzada (2024) discussed on revolutionizing women's education of Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist vision. The report said she was fighting for education and gender equality. The paper examined her contribution to feminist philosophy and to educational change, and highlighted her continuing presence in current debates about gender equality and women's empowerment.

Tribhuwan (2024) discussed comparatively the impact of Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex on the feminist thought in the different historical and intellectual contexts. The study looked at the socio-political conditions of their emergence, the philosophical and sociological theory underlying their work and their ideas on gender, oppression and liberation. Gope and Baidya (2025) analysed the educational ideas of Tagore, Gandhi, Noddings and Wollstonecraft in context of liberty and equality in education. The paper set out to examine the gaps in the educational system when compared to the social reality and the commonalities of these thinkers. The researchers have discussed in this paper Wollstonecraft fought against denial of education to women and gender-based discrimination and seeks to elevate women by granting them equal education. Kurrey and Bhattacharya (2025) investigated virtue, education, and equality, which are the foundations of feminist philosophy, in Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Women." The aim of this study was to provide an overview of the socio-cultural status of women in the 18th century and the factors that contributed to the subjugation of women. This research offered a detailed study of the literary achievements of Mary Wollstonecraft and more particularly her most important work, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women". It looked at the significance of Wollstonecraft's writing and her own life in relation to the women of her own time and the ongoing importance of these issues in today's world.

Review of Related Literatures about Mary Wollstonecraft in Abroad

Duan (2012) investigated the origins of modern feminism through Mary Wollstonecraft and the French Revolution. The research, which focused on Wollstonecraft's image of women and her thoughts on the French Revolution, will be conducted in three phases. In this respect, the relationships she established between freedom, equality, morality, reason, and genders, as well as her criticism of her era's society, are significant. Abbott (2018) did research on Mary Wollstonecraft and the feminization of elocution. The study aimed to determine the impact of Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas on the development of women's writing. Her

work "The Female Reader" has received relatively little recognition. However, that text is the first elocutionary text produced by a woman, expressly for women, and it includes numerous excerpts from works by female authors. Thus, Wollstonecraft and her Female Reader helped to establish a tradition of women's involvement in rhetorical theory and teaching. Bezari (2020) did a study on Mary Wollstonecraft's definition of female education. The study's goals were to investigate Mary Wollstonecraft's beliefs about female education and the engagement of eighteenth-century women in public discourse. It centred on the vindication of women's rights in reaction to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's reflections on the ideal woman. An analysis of the literary salons will help trace the premises of the ideological conflict which was created after Rousseau's death in 1778 and marked the long eighteenth century.

Uzomah and Uzomah (2024) explored Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist theory of education. The study critically examined the philosophical discourse around Mary Wollstonecraft's educational feminist philosophy. The primary goal of this research was to investigate the underlying causes of girls' educational disadvantages. The study discovered that Wollstonecraft's feminist educational concepts are intelligent, sharp, objective, and long-term pragmatic. Based on these findings, the study concluded that men and women are born equal, with equal reasoning potential for education, and that individuals should be educated based on their natural dispositions rather than their sex or gender. Candra and Azani (2025) studied on gender equality in Mary Wollstonecraft's thought in women movement for advancement. The aim of this study was to offer an Islamic perspective from Aisyiyah that addresses the challenges posed by Western secular thought. This article explored Aisyiyah's perspective as a progressive women's movement to critically analysed Mary Wollstonecraft's concept of gender equality, which is often perceived as being incompatible with the Islamic worldview. Ohanuma (2025) did research on an analysis of Mary Wollstonecraft's key work, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman." This study highlighted A Vindication of the Rights of Woman's dual function as a product of its period and a revolutionary criticism of gender discrimination by placing it within larger discussions about contemporary subjectivity. Kharkongor and Sousa (2025) conducted research on reason, education, and equality in Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Women.

This study provided a critical reading of Vindication through the intertwined themes of reason, education, and equality. The paper demonstrated how Wollstonecraft's thought anticipated later feminist philosophies, from liberal to intersectional approaches. Miasco (2025) studied on Mary Wollstonecraft's political education as the foundation for women's emancipation in society. In this study the researcher showed that emancipation in society is not only for men but also for women. This liberation is not merely a means to an end but this is concrete evidence in treating everyone in the society equally.

Review of Related Literatures about Savitribai Phule in India

Somkuwar (2014) has discussed the evolving themes and perspectives in Dalit women's poetry, contextualizing it within the broader framework of Dalit literature and feminist discourse. The research highlights the power of Dalit women's poetry in resisting social hierarchies and speaking for the voiceless. It reflected on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's assertion that the progress of a community can be measured by the progress of its women, highlighting the pivotal role of Dalit women writers in advancing the Dalit movement. Goure (2016) studied on feminist philosophical thought in colonial India. In this study, the researcher like to focused on the feminist philosophical aspect of Savitribai Phule's thought in society and the educational perspectives in colonial India. Patel (2017) worked on the contributions of Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule in educational field. The researcher mentioned here, Savitribai Phule was one of the most important personalities who contributed considerably in adding glory to the mission of the modern Indian social scenario. Mangala (2018) focused on Savitribai Phule's revolutionary work and literary contributions, emphasizing her role as a catalyst for social transformation. The study shed light on Savitribai's educational philosophy and her commitment to the empowerment of marginalized communities, particularly women and Dalits. It emphasized the instrumental role of education in developing social awareness and liberation as evidenced in the pioneering efforts of Savitribai. Kamei (2019) worked on contribution of Savitribai Phule and Pandita Ramabai for women Education in India. This study portrayed Phule as a radical reformist of social traditions that tried to suppress a larger section of society from getting education. She fought for equality on the ground of gender. This study also dealt with ideals of liberty, equity and brotherhood in a society affected by Patriarchy and Brahminical System and highlighted education as the way to emancipation. Pandey (2019) explored into the feminist dimensions of Savitribai Phule's thought and activism, situating her within the trajectory of global feminist thought. The study found elements of first, second and third wave feminism in Savitribai's fight for women's education, empowerment and social justice. Her unorthodox choice to light the funeral pyre of her husband was also studied as an assertion of agency and autonomy. Chitnis (2019) explored a historical study on Phule's challenge to caste and gender discrimination, by establishing schools for girls and lower caste students at a time when education was largely inaccessible to them. This work remains important to understand the background and importance of her contributions. Katke (2019) has elucidated on Savitribai Phule's pivotal role as a social reformer and educator in 19th century India. The researcher underscored her trailblazing work with her spouse Jyotirao Phule in founding Pune, Maharashtra' inaugural girl's school. Study highlighted Phule's efforts in promoting women's rights, such as her opposition to child marriage and widow remarriage, as well as her fight against caste and gender discrimination.

Nallamuthu (2020) underscored on the extensive reformative endeavours of activists such as Savitribai, Jyotiba Phule, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Thanthai Periyar on many aspects such as financial, educational, social equality, liberty, fraternity and women's empowerment in Indian society. The social scientific study expounded how the progressive endeavours of these stalwarts for social and gender equality have contributed greatly to the formation of modern Indian ethos in the larger Hindu cultural setting.

Das and Das (2021) have studied on educational contribution of Savitribai Phule in 21st century India, to portrayed her as a social reformer. In this study researchers tried to briefly cover Savitribai Phule's contributions to education and her role as a social reformer. This historical investigation conveyed that Phule endeavoured to dismantle the conventional system and rebuild a universal education system for everyone.

Biswas and Bhattacharya (2022) conducted a study on Savitribai Phule's on women education. The present research article tried to find out the role of Savitribai Jyotirao Phule in the perspective of Indian women education. The principles of humanity, equality, liberty and justice were of ultimate importance to her. Her intensity on secular education for social emancipation in India is the marker of her significant personality. Das and Halder (2023) has focused on Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule's role in education and empowerment of backward class people of India. The study emphasised Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule's contribution to education, women education, and welfare of backward classes for their self-reliance. This documentary study examined that Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule's primary objective was to provide education for everyone. And to achieve their goal they set up numerous schools, and to retain the students in schools, they offered a stipend. They endeavoured for education and equal rights for the disadvantaged group. Kasera (2023) investigated on Savitribai Phule's influence on education in modern India. The goal of the current study was to understand how activist Savitribai Phule has influenced female education in the modern India. Savitribai Phule started a wave of change in the modern era of numerous sectors of education; hence her ideas and principles should be implemented into education. She made an effort to overthrow the society's predominately usual educational system and aspired to rebuild it as a free and open system for everyone. Singh (2023) conducted a study on role of Savitribai Phule in breaking gender barriers through education. The study's primary objective was to examine Savitribai Phule's contributions to women's education and empowerment through education. To attain this objective, the researcher employed a qualitative method rooted in historical study. In 19th century India, Savitribai Phule played an important role in promoting women's education and empowerment. She set up schools for girls and promoted literacy among women. She also promoted women's empowerment through education and equality.

Mondal and Farabi (2023) elucidated Savitribai Phule's contribution to education with special reference to Dalit education. The study aimed to investigate Phule's contributions to education and asses the state of Dalit education. To reach the goal, researchers utilised the qualitative content analysis technique. As a Dalit woman, Phule recognised the importance of educating the Dalit community. She endeavoured to promote education among women and set up schools for them. Her input in the field of education is revolutionary and worthy of praise. Roy (2023) discussed on Savitribai Phule's contribution towards education and Indian society. This study centred on Phule's life journey as a reformer, educationist, and feminist. She campaigned for human rights and the right to education. She was convinced that women must be educated in order to eradicate social discrimination. She served as a role model in the social reform movement of Maharashtra. Varma and Jain (2023) elucidated on the invincible spirit of Savitribai Phule. This study aimed to bring into notice the contribution of Savitribai Phule in fields of education, women empowerment, lower caste upliftment, and literary initiatives; and give her the right place in the pages of history and literary works. Savitribai Phule played eminent role in the fields of women empowerment and upliftment of the downtrodden.

Bera and Pramanik (2024) studied on Savitribai Phule as an Indian pioneer in women's education. This study tried to established Savitribai Phule's feminist ideology and impact on women's education in the twenty-first century. She was regarded as an icon of the Dalit Mang caste and was a key player in Maharashtra's social reform movement. She actively participated in the fight to remove caste and gender-based discrimination and ran a campaign against untouchability. Bhesera et al. (2024) discussed on Savitribai Phule's educational contributions to girls' education in India. The paper highlights the ongoing significance of Savitribai Phule's contributions and assesses her impact on societal attitudes toward girls' education, pedagogy, and policy, as well as the continuing challenges in attaining gender equity in education. Her pioneering work established the foundation for modern educational practices that empower women. Chavada (2024) studied on Savitribai's social work. The goal of this study was to promote education and empowerment for marginalized populations. This study highlighted the life and the transformative contributions of Savitribai Phule as a social worker, educator and reformer, whose legacy continues to inspire the efforts for social justice and equality. Her work in education, gender equality and caste reform established the groundwork for many progressive movements in India.

Ghorai (2024) studied on contribution of Savitribai Phule social and educational reformer. Savitribai Phule was a trailblazing advocate for women's rights and social transformation. Aimed of this study to study the Savitribai Phule's contribution to the development of women's education and empowerment. This study focused on contribution her human causes like equality, truth, and humanity as well as rationality. Kusuma and Ramaniah (2024) assessed on the influence of Savitribai Phule's social reforms on the advancement of women in Indian society. The objective of this study was to emphasize the continuing relevance of her ideals and contributions to the struggle for gender equality and social justice in India. The study said Savitribai's legacy is a reminder of the power of grassroots movements and the importance of collective action in advancing women's rights and social justice. Pandey and Murmu (2024) investigated educational legacy of Savitribai Phule in modern day India. The primary aim of this study was to examine the significance of Savitribai Phule's perspectives of education for women's education and empowerment. The study stressed the continued importance of addressing the enduring issues of educational equality and inclusivity. Phule's initiatives like starting girl's schools and advocating social reforms through education are great templates for current educational programs. Kumari (2024) focused on the contribution of Savitribai Phule to Dalit society and women education. The research emphasised education system of Phule concerning Dalit and women education. This qualitative study examined how Savitribai Phule advocated for women's and Dalit' education to foster their self-awareness. She emphasised the

significance of education and established schools for women and Dalits. Pal (2024) studied on Savitribai Phule's role as social reformer and women's educator. The present paper examined the role of Savitribai Phule, a renowned social reformer, in women's education and empowerment in India in the 1880s. In addition to speaking out against child marriage and Sati Pratha for the sake of society, she was a powerful force for an active part in campaigns to end untouchability, gender-based discrimination, and caste. Paswan and Gupta (2025) examined a study on women's new education policy (NEP) from a Savitribai Phule view point on empowering through education. The present study is a critical study on the position of women in India, especially Dalit women, through the teaching of Savitribai Phule. This research is an analysis of the failure of present policies in meeting the Phule's vision of an empowered and socially conscious female population based on secondary data. It also indicated a more inclusive and revolutionary approach toward the education of Dalit women.

Bose (2025) studied on Savitribai Phule as a pioneer of modern education in India who played a transforming role in challenging social inequalities through education. The study has analysed her contributions particularly in relation to National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The research studied the applicability of her ideas in the contemporary educational setting. Savitribai Phule redefined education as a form of empowerment by promoting access for women and marginalized groups and by promoting dignity, equality and critical awareness. The study concluded that the educational philosophy of Savitribai Phule is very relevant today. To achieve the objectives of NEP 2020, it requires not only policy alignment but also a deeper commitment to social justice with education acting as a vehicle for real transformation and inclusive growth. Singh and Kumar (2025) studied on Savitribai Phule's progression in women's education in India. The research was based on the life and work of Savitribai Phule, a trailblazer in women's education and social reform in India. This study aimed to explore her educational philosophy, her feminist thought and her role as a social reformer. It also considers the relevance of her work in the 21st century. Her values of equality, justice and inclusion can make today's education system more meaningful and helpful for all. Her life and work can help us to move toward a more equal and educate.

Critical Note

According to Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist theory, education is both a way of achieving equality and justice for women and a fundamental human right. She contested the widely held belief that women are inherently inferior to men in her ground breaking treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), arguing that this perception was caused more by a lack of logical education than by an inherent difference. Wollstonecraft stressed that women should have the same thorough education as men, including rigorous intellectual teaching in the sciences, critical thinking, and practical skills, rather than only decorative or domestic training. Her theory asserts that women's full involvement in public and social is crucial for a just society and connect education with autonomy, moral reasoning, and economic independence. Social reform and structural justice served as the foundation for Savitribai Phule's effort in colonial India. Her advocacy with beyond theoretical claims to institutional practice, operating amid a rigorous patriarchy and profoundly divided caste structure. Some of India's first schools for girls, often facing violent opposition from traditional culture, were established by her. Phule believed that through education women could be freed from the oppression of caste and gender. She linked women's education and social justice by challenging existing hierarchies and advocating for the education of vulnerable girls as a way to eliminate systematic inequity. Her education included community awareness, literary expression of culture and structural interventions like building women's collectives and shelters. Wollstonecraft argues that justice is achieved through recognizing women's capacity to reason and affording them equal opportunity in the economic and educational spheres. Her method is based on the ideas of human liberty, universal rights and reason, from enlightenment. For Phule, justice was to be found at the intersection of the axes of oppression of gender and caste. Phule believed that social freedom and equality are inseparable. Education is a vehicle that challenges gender prejudice as well as caste hierarchy and the conventions of society. While radical for Europe at the time, Wollstonecraft's ideas sometimes rely on liberal individualism and might not adequately address intersectional social inequalities such as caste or class in non-Western contexts. Phule's writing, though firmly rooted in strong activism, also often deals with social barriers that theoretical frameworks such as Wollstonecraft's do not fully consider, including institutional necklet, violence, and illiteracy.

Conclusion

The comparison of Mary Wollstonecraft and Savitribai Phule demonstrates how their ideas about justice, equality, and women's education are still relevant in a variety of sociocultural circumstances. Although separated by time, place and social structures, both philosophers agreed that education was the most effective instrument for eliminating discrimination based on gender and ensuring social justice. Working within the deeply stratified Indian caste and patriarchal system, Savitribai Phule turned education into a useful tool of social emancipation for women and marginalized groups. Wollstonecraft, writing in an enlightenment-era Western framework, argued for rational education to establish women as equal moral and intellectual beings. This study indicates that both reformers challenged the restriction of women's educational opportunities as a fundamental injustice that maintained inequality. They had ambitions not only of personal empowerment but also of wider social change, pointing to the contribution educated women make to a more equitable, logical and compassionate society. Wollstonecraft's philosophical critique and Savitribai Phule's grassroots activity together provide a thorough comprehension of women's education as both a practical necessity and a theoretical right. Their ideas are still relevant today, particularly in discussions about social justice, inclusive education, and gender equity. Wollstonecraft and Savitribai Phule show that real equality can only be achieved when education is accessible to the masses and institutional barriers based on patriarchal and social hierarchy are eliminated. Thus, their work is at the heart of feminist theory and educational change, strengthening the notion that education is a precondition for social justice and equality and not just a vehicle for individual advancement.

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