

**EDUCATION - A TOOL OF WOMAN EMPOWERMENT -  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE CONTRIBUTION OF  
MISS KATIE WILCOX TO WOMEN HIGHER EDUCATION IN MADURAI**

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**Abstract**

*Education develops the character and mental abilities of the young and promotes the child's total personality is truth beyond contention. True aim of education is not merely providing factual information to the pupil, but it consists of the process of the gradual developing of her power and capacities. Missionaries aimed at both formal and informal education for girls they very much appreciated the residential form of education in shaping the young mind. They believed education helps an individual to lead a gracious and harmonious life. They knew that education alone would eliminate negative and evil tendencies and influences, which hampered the growth of human personality and tended to disrupt the social order. They wanted an individual to lead a good and healthy life in society. If the man is educated, the benefit of education goes to one person only. American missionaries instinctively knew that if women were educated the benefit would be shared by all members of the family. They realized this fact early in their missionary career. Even though there was lot of social service in which they could be engaged they selected the cause of women's education. Dr. Katie Wilcox was a woman of strong Convictions and energies, and she devoted a rich and rewarding life time to the social advancement and empowerment of women, leading on to the opening of Lady Doak College, just a year after India gained her independence. What she did stands explained by what she believed and what she stood for. In first place she loved God, not as mere sentiments but in actual deeds. This love impelled her to become a missionary to leave behind her relatives and friends and convenience of life in her own land and choose to live in a developing country like India. Secondly she loved the Indian people, specially the women of India and laboured for them till the end of her life.*

*In this paper the life profile of Miss Katie Wilcox and her contribution to women's higher education in Madurai is discussed.*

*"Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process."  
—ICPD Programme of Action, paragraph 4.2*

**Keywords:** *Empowerment, Missionaries, Power, Education, Young mind*

**Introduction**

Education develops the character and mental abilities of the young and promotes the child's total personality is truth beyond contention. True aim of education is not merely providing factual information to the pupil, but it consists of the process of the gradual developing of her power and capacities. Missionaries aimed at both formal and informal

education for girls they very much appreciated the residential form of education in shaping the young mind. They believed education helps an individual to lead a gracious and harmonious life. They knew that education alone would eliminate negative and evil tendencies and influences, which hampered the growth of human personality and tended to disrupt the social order. They wanted an individual to lead a good and healthy life in society. If the man is educated, the benefit of education goes to one person only. American missionaries instinctively knew that if women were educated the benefit would be shared by all members of the family. They realized this fact early in their missionary career. Even though there was lot of social service in which they could be engaged they selected the cause of women's education.

### **Empowerment**

The word "empowerment" is one, which is widely used but seldom defined. It is an active, multi dimensional process which encompasses several multi reinforcing components that begin with and supported by economic independence. Power is the key word of the term empowerment. According to the International Encyclopedia (1999 p.33). Power means having the capacity and the means to direct one's life towards desired, social, political and economic goals or status. Power means control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. Webster's New World Dictionary (1982) says the prefix „em“ which attached to the noun „power“ is generally used to form verbs meaning to make, make in to etc. So the word „empower“ means to make or cause power. Empowerment literally means becoming powerful. In that perspective the empowerment of women and the improvement of their status, particularly in respect of education, health and economic opportunities is highly important. Women need to be empowered in order to become strong and ready to take up new challenges for the building up of the family, society and the nation. Infact women empowerment is human empowerment itself. According to Sushama Shay (1998, p.56.) Women Empowerment is a process which helps women to change other women's consciousness through creating awareness.

### **Importance of women empowerment**

Human development encompasses elements that contribute critical issues of gender and development. The dignity and culture of a society can be detected from the status of women in that society. According to Rameshwari Pandya (2008) Empowerment has become the key solution to many social problems. Empowerment of women is empowerment of family/household and in turn development of a nation of a country. Empowerment of women leads to benefit not only to the individual woman and to women groups, but also to the families and community as a whole through collective action for development. (2008, p.5).

### **Education and Women Empowerment**

Various writers highlight the role of education for the empowerment of women. According to the International Encyclopedia on women (1999) in the programme of action of the International Conference on population and Development education is considered as one of the most important means to empower women with the knowledge skill and self confidence necessary to participate fully in development process. The National Policy on Education (1986) emphasized the promotion of women's education in all areas of learning to eliminate any sex based stereo typing with the guarantee of equality before the law and the emphasize on girl's education. Since employment plays a vital role in improving women's status in a society education of women is of prime importance in any women empowerment programme.

### **Aims of missionaries in women's education**

The missionaries had definite aims in starting girl's schools and colleges. When the Christian missionaries began their work in India, they realized that "No stable and certainly no Christian community could be built up under conditions where women were incompetent to teach the young". The missionaries found that education was one of the means to raise women from their low status in society. So throughout their tenure, the Board of directors of the missionary societies as well as missionaries regarded female education very important. Therefore girl school's primary object was to impart a plain education, united with religious instruction. The aim of education can be summarized as humanitarian and religious concern. Missionaries believed that if higher education for women was thought of in the proper light, it would be a blessing not only to women and home but also to the whole world. A home managed by educated women can be easily distinguished from others. Children cling to their mother more than to their fathers.

### **Contribution of Dr. Katie Wilcox to women's Higher Education**

Dr. Katie Wilcox the founder of the Lady Doak College, Madurai, was born on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1889 in Chester, Connecticut, USA. While serving as a teacher she got a call from the American Board of Commissioner for Foreign Mission offering her an opportunity to go to India to serve as a missionary. With indomitable faith in God trusting that the lord will do only the best for her, she embarked to go to India and landed here on 11<sup>th</sup> December 1915 at the age of 26. Dr. Katie Wilcox poured out her creative energy in founding and building Lady Doak College as the crowning task of her dedicated service in India for nearly half a century. When the young independent nation was in the making she helped young women to emerge from the ancient patterns of seclusion to make use of fresh opportunities and rise to new responsibilities. She realised education was the main spring of economic and

social progress and so she called womanhood to prepare itself for great conflict and vast reforms in life for noble achievements.

Lady Doak College, a premier Christian institution and the first women's college in Madurai was founded by Miss.Katie Wilcox, the American Missionary, with dedicated zeal and vision. At that time the condition of women was miserable. Women were prohibited from going out to study, to go for jobs or enjoy equal rights with men. They were given rights and freedom within their houses only. They were expected to be good house-wives. It was the condition of women in Madurai when Miss Wilcox came to Madurai.

As soon as she reached Madurai, she immediately began to work and plan, which eventually resulted in starting the girls residential High School. By raising funds in Madurai itself and also by getting economic aid from the USA, OCPM School was started in 1938 in the Noyes Memorial Garden. She again started Noyes English School as a Kindergarten for children. Capron Hall School was also expanded.

Apart from all these, her great achievement was starting a college for women in Madurai. It was however destined that Miss Wilcox was not to rest on her oars. The OCPM School was making steady progress. The students in the city were seeking college education in increasing numbers. The American College was accommodating girl students only to a limited extent. Girl students and parents entreated Miss Wilcox to start a Women's College in Madurai. Miss Wilcox was a pioneer and she decided to go ahead with the new project but starting a new college for women was not an easy matter. It needed raising of huge funds, construction of buildings, approval of the University and the Government and the like. Miss Wilcox fought against all odds and kept on despite numerous pitfalls and disappointments. She writes thus of a time when she was at Capron Hall High school in Madurai. "Sometimes I get a bit discouraged and I wonder why I am here but these moments are few and far between". When she went abroad to collect funds for her project, the American Mission refused to let her have the money until she collected at least a third of that sum from India itself.

The public looked up to Katie to start women's college and clamoured for such a facility for their daughters. There was no women's college in the three districts to Tanjore, Madurai and Ramnad and not many would endeavour to send their daughters to a predominantly men's college. Katie had many good friends who understood her determined drive towards this goal. To name a few of her loyal friends, Sir James and Lady Doak, Rev. J.X.Miller and Mrs.Martha Miller, Dr.Grace Kennet and Miss. Kesia Devamani may be mentioned.

A deep committed Christian missionary, Miss Wilcox presented her proposal for a women's college in Madurai, to the Indian Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. She urged that the board should stand behind her

financially. Secretary Dudley replied that the board agreed that such a college would enhance Christian witness in Madurai but the funds were not available for such a large undertaking. He agreed to release her service to the college, continuing to pay her salary as a Member of the Mission. That was the extent of the financial aid that the board could promise but it could give her moral support. The World War caused her sponsors to withdraw their pledges but Katie did not wish to give up her project. However she patiently waited until the 1940's and then her dream was realised. When the world was struck by the depression of the 1930's, then the World Wars, in the dark corner of India, a dedicated soul had blistered her feet walking from door to door, collecting funds in a desperate attempt to make her dream come true. She lit the candle that led millions of South Indian women into enlightenment.]

After 20 years of dreaming and planning, 3 years of funds raising and preparing plans and estimates and three months of actual building operations. The university approval was sought. A university commission led by Sir.A.Lakhmanaswamy Mudaliar, Vice Chancellor of the Madras University, inspected the college grounds and scrutinised the plans. Those days were full of strain and stress for Miss Wilcox. In February 1947 a carnival called the Magic Garden was organised Her excellency Lady Nye, besides opening the carnival laid the foundation stone for Van Allen Hall. In 1948, the "two lakh" campaign was launched the public gave generously. She also had to make plans to open the college in July 1948.

To begin with, three large sheds were constructed. L.D.C had a humble beginning. One of these shed served as an Assembly Hall and Chapel. Van Allen Hall and Harilakshmi Hall were still under construction. At this juncture Miss Wilcox had to go home on furlong. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 1948, the day Miss Wilcox landed in America, the College was formally opened. 89 Students were admitted in the first intermediate class. After a short period of well-earned rest, Miss Wilcox launched a financial campaign in the states. On her return from America in 1950, she found herself as the acting Principal and Bursar of the College. During this period the college was raided to the first -grade level.

The College started in 1948 as the second Grade College in three small sheds which stands before us today in quite a different form. It started with 89 and now there are more than 3000 students. Katie Wilcox did much of the work to build the college. She was often seen measuring different places on the college grounds and making the architectural plans for the college hostels and buildings. Katie appreciated beauty and wanted to build a college with pleasant trees, garden and foundations for students and staff to enjoy. Every seven years, Katie had a furlough of a year, but did she rest? Rest is not a word she recognised. She spent her time in the states, speaking and travelling to raise funds for school and college.

Miss Katie Wilcox was never actually Principal of the college she founded. Rather she was teacher and Bursar of the college until she retired in 1958. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 1961, the Founder of Lady Doak College Miss Wilcox came to India to visit the college. The staff and students of Lady Doak College had opportunity of welcoming the Founder which, they had been looking forward for a long time.

Miss Katie Wilcox did not name the college after her own name. Two people gave lot of money to fund the college. These two people were Sir. James and Lady Helen Doak. The College was named after Lady Doak. Even though she had retired and moved back to Chester, Katie was often travelling and raising money for Lady Doak College. People in Chester who knew her in her later years say that one saw more of her outside Chester collecting funds than in the town. On December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1974 Dr. Katie Wilcox went to be with the Lord.

The Motto of the College is “Semper pro veritate” which means “Always for the Truth” with the accompanying Lamp, jasmine and Palmyra emblem. Nobody can think of Lady Doak College without centering their thoughts on Miss.Katie Wilcox. She moves about the compound in quite ways, a living example of the beautiful and old prayer, “Serving and being served, Loving and being loved, Blessing and being blessed “. From small beginnings, the college has expanded in its physical and academic spheres. The College has achieved a position of leadership among colleges in South India, because the college has an obligation not only to impart the best ideas and wisdom that man has accumulated, but to be force in the growth of knowledge and its creative application in Social organisation.

### **Conclusion**

Dr. Katie Wilcox was a women of strong Convictions and energies, and she devoted a rich and rewarding life time to the social advancement and empowerment of women, leading on to the opening of Lady Doak College, just a year after India gained her independence. What she did stands explained by what she believed and what she stood for. In first place she loved God, not as mere sentiments but in actual deeds. This love impelled her to become a missionary to leave behind her relatives and friends and convenience of life in her own land and choose to live in a developing country like India. Secondly she loved the Indian people, specially the women of India and laboured for them till the end of her life. It was this concern for the people that made her work so hard. Third, she respected and believed her colleagues and co-workers in India. They in turn gave her their full measure of devotion and co-operation. Dr.Katie’s life is a monument to the fact that “It is better to light one little candle than to curse the darkness. She wanted to see the Underprivileged exploited and downtrodden women of India to be freed from the shackles as they are also “The daughters of Abraham”. In this, she succeeded by starting and running

many schools and a college for women in Madurai. Her name will ring through the corridors of history as a daughter of God who has done her best to the cause of women's education specially in the backward region of Tamil Nadu. Her unshakable faith in Christ Jesus stands fully vindicated and a large number of women who had the privilege and pleasure to pass through the portals of the educational edifices which she so fondly and avidly built, will bless her for the valuable service she has rendered to the cause of women's education in Tamil Nadu. Her educational efforts did not follow the stereotype but she blazed a new trail to enable women to face life's struggle with indomitable courage and confidence. Her contribution to the cause of women's education is more an enablement and at the same time a ministry of deliverance of women who had suffered long in bondage of superstition and inferiority complex. Many a women who studied at these institutions testify to the fact that they were freed from age long injustice and they had tried to make their contribution to their families and their nation.

“She was sincere and dedicated to her work  
and from her responsibility never did shrink,  
As a very good example before us she shone,  
and for the loss of her, we now sincerely mourn”.

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