



Buddhism and SDG 5 (*achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*): barriers and drivers for change

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Introduction

- Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2016
- 17 global goals and 169 targets (until 2030)
- Apply as much to the Global North as to the Global South
- Underlying maxim to 'leave no one behind'
- Goal 5: **Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls**
- Keeping Faith in 2030: Religions and the SDGs



Religion and Global Development

- Global development institutions (after WWII e.g. UN, World Bank) were secular
- Assumed that as people 'develop' they will become less religious
- Modernization = secularization

Problematic assumptions

- Religion plays a role in perpetuating inequality and discrimination
- Religion does not seem to be disappearing even in places that are becoming more developed

'Turn to religion' – last 10-15 years (see Tomalin 2013)

In this presentation

- Examine the relationship between Buddhism and SDG 5 – ‘achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’ – in Thailand.
- **Gender inequality**
 - major factor in poor health and economic outcomes for many women and girls globally: domestic and sexual violence, victims of human trafficking etc.

Gender (in)equality in Thailand?

- **83 out of 189 on UN HDI**
- **93 out of 160 on UNDP GII**
- On the face of it, Thailand doesn't seem to have a gender problem
- But: A Mahidol University survey showed that 1 in 3 households in Thailand report domestic abuse.
- Only 4.8 percent of parliamentary seats are held by women
- Large and exploitative sex industry
- 'In Thailand... 42.4 percent of adult women have reached at least a secondary level of education compared to 47.5 percent of their male counterparts. For every 100,000 live births, 20 women die from pregnancy related causes; and the adolescent birth rate is 51.9 births per 1,000 women of ages 15-19. Female participation in the labour market is 60.5 percent compared to 77.3 for men'. [Click here](#) for article

Gender (in)equality in Thailand?

- The picture is less sanguine in reality. Women's access to high levels of decision making is all too limited, as seen by the few women appointed as ministers. Discrimination, in practice, is ever present, such as in regard to unequal pay. Gender-based violence rears its ugly head such as in the domain of domestic violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, forced labour and human trafficking' ([Muntarbhorn 2018](#)).

What does this tell us?

- That statistics mask inequality.
- 'Leave no one behind' – need to look beyond the statistics.

Buddhism and gender in Thailand

SDG 5	
5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere	5.1.1 Whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex
5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation	5.2.1 Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by form of violence and by age 5.2.2 Proportion of women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to sexual violence by persons other than an intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by age and place of occurrence
5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life	5.5.1 Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments 5.5.2 Proportion of women in managerial positions

5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere



1. Women must be reborn as men to achieve nirvana, women are a lower rebirth than men
2. Women can't touch monks or enter a temple when they are menstruating
3. Women are not permitted in Thai Buddhism to fully ordain as Bhikkhunis and leadership roles within the tradition are confined to men (fully ordained monks - Bhikkhus). They can only ordain as 8 or 10 precept *maeji* (see photos)

Women and the Buddha: female ordination

- Mahaprajapati (his step mother) and 500 female followers asked to join order of *bhikkhus*
- He initially refused, but Ananda (disciple) persuades him
- Perhaps these passages about Buddha's reluctance were added in later, to reflect interests of a patriarchal *sangha*?
- Lisa Owen 1998: 'On gendered discourse and the maintenance of boundaries: A feminist analysis of the Bhikkhuni order in Indian Buddhism' *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 4(3): 8-60.

5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere

- We should be concerned when religion discriminates against women as or when it does not do enough to challenge inequality in society.
- But equality is not an outside imposition, may be women have never had full equality with men in the tradition but it seems that things were more equal in the past.
- Gender not relevant in Buddha's first sermon



5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation

- **Muecke, M (1992) Mother sold food, daughter sells her body: the cultural continuity of prostitution.** Soc Sci Med. 1992 Oct;35(7):891-901
- Prostitutes in Thailand invoke the Buddhist teaching about *kamma* and the inferior status of women, to support their reasons for turning to prostitution
- Women have 'bad' *kamma* - earn money through prostitution - give money to temples and families - improve *kamma* for future life...reborn as a man
- **Key question: to what extent does religion play a role in exacerbating the suffering of women and girls?**

5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life

- “Buddhist teachings have the potential to oppose and condemn practices of sexual slavery as well as to legitimate them” (Peach 2000: 65)
- How to break this cycle?
- Lack of voice women have within Thai Buddhism has arguably made it difficult for them to challenge and transform negative stereotypes that perpetuate female oppression.
- How can Buddhism empower women?

“the replacement of mae ji by a bhikkhuni institution would greatly raise women’s status at the core of Thai culture and would begin to address many of women’s problems in Thailand – including poverty, child abuse and prostitution”

(Puntarigvivat 2001: 225)

Strategies to revive bhikkhuni ordination where it has died out



- E.g. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (*Dhammananda*)
- -see www.thaibhikkunis.org
- <http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=nMnSK8Hp-gs>

1. Texts reveal other types of ordination in addition to 'dual ordination' (e.g. Mahaprajapati receiving 'garudhammas')
2. Mahayana nuns (from the Chinese Dharmagupta tradition) can revive it since it can trace lineages back to same original source as Theravada.
3. Sri Lanka: tradition revived in 1998 by Taiwanese nuns (Thai nuns now travelling to Sri Lanka for ordination)