

Buddhist Response to Gender Discrimination

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Abstract

This study delves into the contribution of Buddha, his teachings and Buddhist principles to gender equity through textual analysis. Buddhism, a revolutionary religion that emerged in India, rejected the gender discrimination prevalent in contemporary Indian society. The authority of society was held by the Brahmins who enjoyed numerous privileges. Women were relegated to an inferior position compared to men and were denied opportunities to participate in social, political or religious events. In contrast, Buddha, granted women full freedom to engage in religious life by allowing them to join the monastic community. In Buddhism, the Noble Eightfold Path can be practiced by anyone, regardless of gender, and it does not hinder the attainment of the ultimate goal of *Nibbāna*. The *Therī Gāthā* found in the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, is a collection of verses recited by Arahant bhikkhunīs who lived during Buddha’s time, providing ample evidence of the freedom they enjoyed as Buddhist nuns. However, it is noteworthy that Buddhism does not regard biological gender differences manifested in the physical human body as significant, but rather sees attachment to worldly objects as an obstacle to spiritual development. The *Aggañña Sutta in Dīga Nikāya* points out that due to the development of craving, ones gender occurs. Gender is perceived as a mental factor intertwined with one’s mental state, which can be altered by changing the mental states. Ultimately, gender is also subject to impermanence, as is everything else in the world.

Key words: Buddhism, Gender Discrimination, Gender Equity, Khuddaka Nikāya, Therī Gāthā, Women

Introduction

Buddhism arose in India more than 2,500 years ago, at a time when society was strongly influenced by Brahmanical traditions. The authority of the Brahmins shaped almost every aspect of life, and they enjoyed many privileges that were denied to others. Within this social structure, women were placed in a secondary position. They were not given equal opportunities in education, politics, or religion. Their voices were often silenced, and their lives were controlled by rigid social expectations. In this environment of inequality, the teachings of the Buddha brought a new and revolutionary perspectives.

The Buddha rejected the idea that spiritual potential depends on gender or social status. He recognized that both men and women are capable of walking the path of Dhamma and attaining liberation. One of his most remarkable contributions was the decision to allow women to enter the monastic order. By establishing the Bhikkhunī Sāsana, the Buddha offered women the chance to live a life of renunciation, discipline, and spiritual practice equal to that of monks. This was a bold step in a culture that often considered women unfit for religious life.

The Buddha also emphasized that the Noble Eightfold Path can be followed by anyone, regardless of gender. It is a universal path that develops morality, concentration, and wisdom, leading to the ultimate goal of *Nibbāna*. The lives and verses of early Buddhist nuns, preserved in the *Therīgāthā*, provide clear evidence of this truth. These poems express the experiences of women who achieved enlightenment, providing that spiritual attainment was not limited to men. Their voices stand as strong testimony to the equality that Buddhism made possible.

Furthermore, Buddhist philosophy looks beyond external differences. It teaches that clinging to the body or to worldly identities is a cause of suffering. Gender, like all conditioned things, is impermanent and subject to change. The texts explain that attachment and craving give rise to distinctions such as male and female, but these are not fixed realities. In this way, Buddhism presents a vision of human identity that transcends biological differences and focuses instead on inner transformation.

This study examines the contribution of the Buddha and his teachings to gender equity through a closer reading of Buddhist texts. It highlights how Buddhism challenged social norms,

gave women the opportunity to pursue spiritual life, and provided a philosophical foundation for equality that remains meaningful even today.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach through textual analysis of primary Buddhist sources such as the *Therīgāthā*, the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* and other texts from the *Suttanta Piṭaka*. The *Therīgāthā*, was examined to highlight the spiritual voices of early Buddhist nuns, while other canonical texts were analyzed to understand the Buddha's views on gender, craving and impermanence. In addition, secondary sources including books and scholarly articles were consulted to provide historical context and interpretive insights.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study show that Buddhism made a remarkable contribution to gender equity when compared with the social situation of India during the time of the Buddha. Society was dominated by Brahmanical authority, which gave men almost all the power in political, social, and religious life, while women were kept in a lower position. Against this background, the Buddha's teachings appear revolutionary. He recognized the equal capacity of women to practice the Dhamma and to achieve liberation. By giving ordination to women and establishing the Bhikkhunī Sāsana, the Buddha challenged the accepted customs of his time. This decision allowed women to leave behind household life, to train in discipline, and to dedicate themselves fully to spiritual development.

The *Therīgāthā*, preserved in the *Khuddhaka Nikāya*, offers strong evidence for this transformation. This text records the verses of enlightened nuns and provides an authentic account of their experiences. Many of these women came from lives of suffering, including poverty, widowhood, and family tragedy. Their verses reveal how they used their difficulties as motivation to follow the path of practice and ultimately reached arahantship. For instance, Soma Therī, who directly confronted Māra, when he tried to discourage her from practicing by claiming that women lacked the wisdom to reach enlightenment. In reply, Therī Soma declared;

*“Itthibhāvo no kiṃ kairā - cittamhi susamāhite
ñānaṃhi vattamānamhi - sammā dhammaṃ vipassito”*

“What does womanhood matter at all, when the mind is well-composed in knowledge, when one rightly sees the Dhamma, with clear understanding?” (*Therīgāthā* 61).

This bold response highlights the Buddhist view that liberation is not bound to gender but to the cultivation of insight and wisdom. Soma’s verses clearly reject the idea of female inferiority and affirm that spiritual realization is possible for anyone who follows the path with determination. Her testimony is a strong reminder that the distinction between male and female is secondary to the higher goal of awakening, and it serves as a direct challenge to the gender discrimination common in the religious culture of her time.

Another notable example is Rajjhumālā as recounted in *Vimāna Vatthu* (Vv 4.12 – *Rajjhumālā Sutta*). She was once a servant who endured great suffering and, in despair, attempted to take her own life. At that moment, the Buddha compassionately addressed her, calling her “Rajjhumālā” and advising her to take refuge in the Triple Gem. Upon hearing his gentle and reassuring words, her sorrow and despair were completely alleviated.

*“So maṃ mudūhi vācāhī - ālapitvā tathāgato
Rajjhumāleti maṃvoca - saraṇaṃ gaccha tathāgataṃ”*

The Buddha then taught her the Dhamma, and through her faith and wholesome deeds, she was later reborn in a celestial mansion, enjoying divine bliss. This account demonstrates that in Buddhism, spiritual protection, guidance and the fruits of merit are accessible to all individuals, regardless of social status or gender.

In addition to these individual testimonies, the *Mahāvaccagotta Sutta* (MN 73) in the *Majjhima Nikāya* records the Buddha directly affirming that many Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunīs had reached full liberation. The Buddha addressed the Venerable Vaccha, saying that not only one hundred, two hundred or even three hundred, but far more Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunīs had become Arahants. This explicit recognition demonstrates that liberation was not a rare achievement among women but a widespread reality, further emphasizing that the Dhamma was equally accessible to both genders.

The Buddha's teaching of the Noble Eightfold Path was universal. It was not restricted by gender, caste, or social position. Women, like men, practiced morality, meditation and wisdom, and many achieved the highest goal of Nibbāna. The case of the Arahant Therī Dhammadinnā is another important example. She was so skilled in explaining the Dhamma that devotees sought her guidance, as recorded in *Cūlavedalla Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 44)*. This account shows that women were not only practitioners but also respected teachers in the early *saṅgha*. Their ability to guide others in the Dhamma proves that spiritual authority was not limited to men alone.

Taken together, the findings highlight that the Buddha not only provided women with opportunities for religious life but also offered a deeper philosophical foundation that regards gender as impermanent and non-essential. The *Therīgathā* gives voice to women who achieved liberation, confirming that spiritual attainment was not confined to men.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant contribution of Buddhism to promoting gender equity and recognizing the spiritual potential of women. Through the Buddha's teachings and the establishment of the Bhikkhunī Sāsana, women were provided with opportunities to pursue a life of renunciation, ethical discipline, and spiritual growth, equal to men. The experiences of early Buddhist nuns illustrate that liberation and enlightenment were not limited by gender, social status, or past circumstances. Buddhism emphasizes that the highest spiritual achievements are determined by mindfulness, wisdom, and moral conduct rather than physical identity or societal roles. Additionally, the tradition recognizes that acts of faith, devotion, and ethical living enable individuals to cultivate merit and attain favorable outcomes, demonstrating that spiritual growth and moral excellence are accessible to all. Overall, the findings of this study underscore that Buddhism offered a revolutionary perspective on equality in its historical context and continues to provide a meaningful framework for understanding the universal potential of every individuals. This timeless vision of inclusivity and empowerment remains highly relevant for contemporary discussions on gender equality and the role of women in spiritual and social life.

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