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# Social Inequalities and the Promotion of Women in Buddhism in Thailand

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# Social Inequalities and the Promotion of Women in Buddhism in Thailand

Manuel Litalien<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

Studies have shown that religion can support or hinder social development (Haynes 2007; Tomalin 2013). This paper makes a case in favor of how, in Thailand, the demands for greater justice and gender equality have engaged groups of women to seek higher Buddhist ordination as a means to better promote human and social development. Equal religious philanthropic contribution between men and women is presented as a component to democratic participation in the struggling political Kingdom of Thailand. The study finds that the women's Buddhist movement in Thailand capitalizes on the limited welfare resources offered by the government, along with the current institutionalized politics of religious diversity, as defined in the Thai constitution. To present the ine-

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qualities and challenges faced by Thai Buddhist women, the function of the Thai Buddhist monastic community (*saṅgha*) will be portrayed as an organization promoting an “inequality regime.” The governing structural configuration of the *saṅgha* will be presented as reinforcing social roles divided by oppressive gender conceptions. The Buddhist institution’s inequality regime will be depicted in light of its refusal to ordain *bhikkhunīs*.<sup>2</sup> The exclusion of Thai Buddhist nuns is situated in eight different lenses: namely, biological, ritual, scriptural, cultural, political, institutional, historical, and legal contexts. Finally, the vital sustainable core to these women is introduced as both a global and a local network of Buddhist women. This is better known as a glocalization strategy for the promotion of gender equality in Theravāda Buddhism.

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<sup>2</sup> Monica Lindberg Falk explains the difference between *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* as follows. *Mae chi* is the “term used for white-robed Buddhist female ascetics in Thailand.” The term has three common spellings: *mae chi*, *maechi* or *mae chii*. For clarity, and consistency, we use *mae chi*. The term *bhikkhuni* is used for “female Buddhist monk.” It contrasts with the term *bhikkhu*, which refers to “male Buddhist monk” (Lindberg Falk 256). The expression “female monk” is avoided because it can be perceived as demeaning and misleading, since the term “monk” refers to a man belonging to a religious community.

## Introduction

*“If you educate a man, you educate an individual;  
but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation.”*

Mahatma Gandhi

Before looking at why and how some Thai women ask for structural changes in Thailand’s male-dominated monastic order (*saṅgha*), the relationship between gender and development must be clarified. The objective is to present the link between gender inequality and development, especially in a newly industrialized country (NIC) like Thailand.

In development studies, women’s recognized positions in social development brought new perspectives to inequality, poverty, and gender relations since the 1960s (Haynes 2008, 172). These views progressively made their way into international agencies like the United Nations. The organization established an important complex in Bangkok to oversee social progress, better living conditions, and human rights in the Asia Pacific region. Development, according to the United Nations Fund for Women (UN Women), is gender-determined; generally, previous human development policies failed to recognize the roles of women and religion in social development, despite women comprising 52% of the global labor force in 2010, or 46% in Thailand (DESA 2010, 76; World Bank 2014; Tomalin 2013). Additionally, women represent half of the country’s Buddhist population.

The number of women in the paid labor force is lower than men in Thailand. As a consequence, UN Women underlines that poverty affects more women. However, the Kingdom of Thailand’s economic growth and social welfare policies have reportedly reduced the “incidence of poverty from 42% in 1988 to 8% in 2009” (UNPAF 2011, 12), thus enabling women to seek further empowerment and increased social status. Women’s progress has been noticed in the labor force and in Bud-

dhism (Lindberg Falk 2007). However, despite major social progress, United Nations Partnership Framework (UNPAF) emphasizes that “the richest quintile of Thais earns 14.7 times more than the poorest quintile” (UNPAF 2011, 12). Although the nation has achieved certain economic progress, women remain overly represented in the poorest quintile. The gap is measured in income and inequality of opportunity. The relationship between poverty and gender has long been recognized, especially among single parents, the majority of whom are women (DESA 2010, 159; Chant 2008). With the comparative economic disadvantage of women, their condition in the secular Buddhist country is still a major concern (Litalien 2013). They are confronted with religious and social opportunity deficits within the male-dominated monastic order, and overall, women still lack opportunities in both secular and religious spheres.

Advocates of the secular and modernization approach to social development promised the suppression of gender inequality via secular development policies (Tomalin 2013, 151). The logic was that a Thai secular state with women-friendly welfare policies would champion women’s rights and lead to female empowerment. Through this strategy, gender inequality is addressed by the state’s secular social safety nets, promoting access to employment, fair salary, education, childcare, and healthcare. Some progress in gender equality and social justice resulted from international agency and state support. However, the Thai secular welfare regime endorses gender hierarchies currently existing within Thai Buddhism. The government maintains a status quo on the question of gender and Buddhism, endorsing the *saṅgha*’s discriminatory position. The state, at least in the religious sphere, has left the monastic order’s biased gender vision intact, despite the control it exercises over the religious institution. Past and present government actions to promote gender equality in the public sphere contrast with the state’s “neutral” stance (diverging from that exhibited by the patriarchal *saṅgha*). The

kingdom's religious institution is part of the state apparatus; this link will be clarified later in this article.

Thai Buddhist nuns (*mae chis*) and *bhikkhunīs* are excluded from the country's *saṅgha*, directly affecting their religious standing and social possibilities in society at large (Lindberg Falk 2010b, 149). This situation has repercussions over women's societal status and health (Klunklin & Greenwood 2005; Thitsa 1980). Exclusion from the monastic order supports the view of male superiority—that women should be subservient to monks (*bhikkhus*) (Tomalin 2006; Kabilsingh 1991). In endorsing gender hierarchies advanced by the *saṅgha*, the state has failed to challenge the order's patriarchal values. By refusing to challenge the *saṅgha*, women's disempowerment is left intact, and the inequality remains institutionalized in the *saṅgha*'s structure. Furthermore, state-endorsed unequal gender legislation can still be found, such as the 1928 *Saṅgha Act*, standing as a legal disposition forbidding monks to ordain nuns (Ito 2012, 65). This legislation contradicts international treaties signed on gender equality by the Thai government. The proximity between the state and the monastic order creates problems for the empowerment of women: it also illustrates the government's double standard regarding gender equality. Academics have shown that the ambiguous position of women in Thai Buddhism hinders women's social development in the kingdom (Jackson 1998; Kabilsingh 1991). The state's and the *saṅgha*'s attitudes are not without social consequences. The extent to which the state is connected to Buddhism in Thailand must be summarized to demonstrate interactions between the two institutions.

Since 2002, the Department of Religious Affairs has relied on the Ministry of Culture, and the National Office of Buddhism, dependent on the Office of the Prime Minister.<sup>3</sup> This provided an ambiguous structure

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<sup>3</sup>Thaksin Shinawatra was then heading the government.

for a secular political sphere (Kabilsingh 2009, 11), in addition, the institution of the Thai *saṅgha* existed parallel to these governmental structures. Despite its relative autonomy, the monastic order's rigid bureaucracy is legally bound to the state. Therefore, women's lower status in Thai Buddhism is directly endorsed by the state because of this ambiguous relationship. In the past, there were instances where the state dissociated itself from positions adopted by the Thai *saṅgha*. The Office of National Buddhism and the Department of Religious Affairs are examples of the country's current secular-religious institutions, which stand in direct contrast to the exclusively ecclesiastic body of the Supreme *Saṅgha* Council (SSC). The latter is Buddhism's governing body. In both cases, the state oversees the promotion, preservation, and support of Buddhism in the country.

Contrary to the *saṅgha*, lay Buddhist women occupy official roles within secular administrative sections of Buddhist affairs in Thailand. For example, in 2014, the National Office of Buddhism counted thirteen administrative positions. Male civil servants occupied the majority of these positions. The General Director and three Deputy General Directors are male. Of the thirteen positions, three are occupied by women: one as an Inspector General, another as the Centre Division Director, and one as a Director of Buddhism, Monastery Division.<sup>4</sup> However, the positions occupied by these women are not related to responsibilities within the *saṅgha*. Its courts and central and provincial administration exclude laywomen, *mae chis*, and *bhikkhunīs*. The same applies to the Supreme *Saṅgha* Council. Monks cite scriptural, social, and cultural sources to validate this exclusion, stating that women cannot be included since they have not been ordained, and there is no religious or legal possibility of having them ordained in the Thai Theravāda Buddhist tradition. Under

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<sup>4</sup> National Office of Buddhism. [http://www.onab.go.th/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=78&Itemid=127](http://www.onab.go.th/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=78&Itemid=127). (Accessed 24 May 2014).



current ministerial regulation (2002), the National Office of Buddhism has the authority over ecclesiastical and governmental administration to maintain and promote Buddhism.

The *saṅgha*'s exclusionary attitude underlines the challenges faced by Buddhist women as Thai monks legitimize an organized gender inequality regime.<sup>5</sup> Again, with women comprising more than fifty per cent of Thailand's Buddhist population of 57 million (NSO 2013), this unequal representation of women in Buddhism begets further questions. How can gender and development studies approach Theravāda Buddhism? Does gender equality's secular development conflict with the religious inclination of development dominated by monks? Can religiosity be positively correlated with inequitable gender attitudes? Is "religious development" politically motivated? Are religious philanthropic initiatives indicative of new forms of gender empowerment in a gender-discriminatory religious environment? Are social inequalities motivating groups to strive for gender equality between men and women in Thai Buddhism? I will attempt to answer these questions.

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<sup>5</sup> Inequality regime is defined as an "analytical approach to understanding the creation of inequalities in work organizations." (Acker 2006, 441) The concept can be useful in analyzing organizational change. The Thai monastic order is understood here as a work organization. Some monks do receive a stipend from the state according to their rank. Its creation under the 1902 Saṅgha Act, and subsequent Saṅgha Acts illustrate that the centralization of the monastic order functions as an extension of the state. It is also proof that the religious organization serves the needs of the state. This is one reason why monastic politics in Thailand reflects the country's secular politics (McCargo 2012, 641).

### **Feminism, Development, and Religion in Thailand**

In strong religious communities, secular feminist development perspectives have been met with mixed acceptance and mistrust (Peach 2000; Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska 2013). This is partly due to the early days of women in development (WID) during the 1970s, where issues regarding gender inequality—education, health care, and employment—were approached through secular means (Pearson 2000). In 1932, Thailand provided women with the right to vote and occupy political office, and it encouraged access to higher education. The strategy was to give women access to development processes, but it failed to address the structural architecture justifying gender oppression in the monastic order, as well as in traditions and superstitious beliefs about women (Tomalin 2006; Lindberg Falk 2010b). Overall, the Thai *saṅgha* did not oppose women's social progress. The development and gender model changed in the 1980s, with a focus on “gender and development” (GAD). Here, women were perceived as agents of change, and not welfare recipients of development funding (Rathgeber 1990, 494). This vision is also shared by Thailand Buddhist lay people, *mae chis*, some monks (*bhikkhus*), and *bhikkhunīs* who are engaged in philanthropic activities.

The GAD model questioned gender's social construction in its examination of potentially oppressive political, social, and economic elements. It is within these distinctive gender roles in development that we examine Thailand, where female promotion in Buddhism engages with their contributions and gender identity. Groups of Thai female Buddhists do question the structures shaping gender relations. Examples include *bhikkhunī* Dhammananda, *mae chi* Sansanee, and the late *mae chi* Khunying Kanitha Wichiencharoen, among others. The objectives are numerous but empowering women and ending gender discrimination by engaging with values endorsed by the monastic order are not foreign views to Thai Buddhist women.

Emma Tomalin describes how the ordination of some *bhikkhunīs* in Thailand is in fact related to local “religious feminism,” a strategy challenging negative social attitudes toward women (2006, 394). Following her argument, “religious feminism” is not a panacea to female empowerment and social development. It is one strategy of many to fight women’s oppression. Secular welfare policy programs work alongside Buddhist religious feminist initiatives to expand services offered to women and society at large.

Thailand has many different types of feminism; the two extremes could be identified as secular and Buddhist. These two poles often converge in their goals, providing different value systems for women to identify themselves with. For example, *bhikkhunīs* seek full recognition and inclusion in the monastic order. The *mae chis* have adopted a different strategy of seeking recognition as religious persons by the *saṅgha* without full ordination. Feminists in political and religious spheres are not independent from one another and do influence each other frequently, especially in a country where political and religious spheres are deeply connected. Consider the case of *bhikkhunī* Dhammananda working with senator Ms. Rabiaprat Pongpanit, a lay Buddhist woman, who sought to address the *saṅgha*’s structural gender inequalities by establishing the *bhikkhunī* order in 2002 via the political sphere. Supporters in that sphere included the Senate Subcommittee for Women’s Affairs and the Committee for Women, Children, and the Elderly. Despite exploring various ordination possibilities for *bhikkhunīs*, the subcommittee failed to demonstrate the validity of the options to the satisfaction of the *saṅgha* and to the state (Ito 2012, 61-67).

Historically, religious, and secular feminisms offered two discursive modes in which gender equality is central. The two paradigms lead to various forms of women’s activism (secular and religious). Both forms are now rooted in a social-cultural context defined by Buddhism, with

more than 94 percent of the population identifying themselves as Buddhist (NSO 2013, 17). Religious Buddhist feminists in Thailand create an important social discourse, taking into account religious and cultural factors behind development. Their contributions to development studies avoid essentialist assumptions pertaining to religion's negative influences on women's development. They recognize how certain values empower women socially and economically, without discarding religious and cultural factors.

Generally, religion's promotion is not associated with women's empowerment; in fact, studies support the opposite. Consider, for example, the famous World Values Survey, demonstrating that religiosity is correlated with unfair gender attitudes worldwide. Stephanie Seguino presents different results. Overall, no religion is better than another in promoting women's equity (Seguino 2011). Our case study indicates that growth in Thailand was accompanied by some levels of equity, companioned with Buddhist women's claims for gender equality in the religious sphere, though the latter was met with opposition. Seguino's study points to the progress in terms of development and equity, but many areas are still affected by gender inequality, including education, economic security, and gender-related violence.

Is gender equity and growth possible in Thailand? To attempt an answer, Seguino's work is key. She provides ample evidence that, generally, mass values have not converged, and gender equality is not a direct result of a democratization process. To fight gender inequality in social development, the recent focus has been on institutions perpetuating gender stratification (Seguino 2011, 1308). With respect to Buddhism, the Thai *saṅgha* is an example of a stratified institution. The institutional context behind the promotion of Thai society's and Buddhism's rigid gender roles must be regarded as deeply intertwined. Seguino correctly points out that religious institutions "shape cultural norms, social rules,

and behaviours” (Seguino 2011 1308; Inglehart and Norris 2003). The next section will provide the grounds to comprehend how the Thai *saṅgha*, as a religious organization, is a key promoter of cultural norms, while perpetuating negative attitudes toward women in Buddhism.

### The Thai Buddhist *Saṅgha* as an Inequality Regime

The Thai *saṅgha* is not a monolithic institution.<sup>6</sup> It does not stand against the role of women in Buddhism or social development; however, to date, the organization firmly opposes the establishment of a *bhikkhunī saṅgha*. The monastic community hosts a multiplicity of voices that, at times, on an individual level, support the introduction of a female order. Nevertheless, the institution’s official position remains opposed, citing historical, scriptural, and social reasons.

The current hierarchical and high social positions of monks in the *saṅgha* confirm unequal power relations that place monks above women in Thai Buddhism (Kabilsingh 1991). In this section, I argue that the Thai *saṅgha* is a socially-constructed organization that projected a hierarchical definition of gender into Buddhism. Instead of opting for a “flat team” structure to share positions of power with Buddhist women (ordained *bhikkhunīs* or *mae chis*), the *saṅgha* adopted a hierarchical bureaucratic structure that leaves women inferior to men. To reflect on how organizational context shapes the way gender is socially constructed, Joan Acker’s notion of “inequality regime” will be applied (Acker 2006; Cadge 2004). According to Bhikkhunī Dhammananda, who supported Acker’s inequality regime argument, “The Thai *saṅgha*, unlike the

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<sup>6</sup> In Thailand, this institution is composed of only monks (*bhikkhus*). Reasons why the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* were never established remain to be clarified (Battaglia 1998).

*saṅgha* which the Buddha established, is hierarchical” (Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2010, 119).

Feminist scholar Joan Acker asks why in certain organizations, relations of gender inequality are replicated and perpetuated. By analyzing organizational structures, it is possible to determine various barriers to the creation of gender equality (Acker 2006).

Revisioning ongoing gender perspectives is one step to fighting the suppressive knowledge system institutionalized in the Thai monastic order. Currently, the *saṅgha*'s structure offers no administrative positions to Buddhist women (*bhikkhunīs* or *mae chis*). The organization's structure is based on a top-down mode of governance that does not reflect equal management principles. Additionally, the religious discourse constructed on gender by Thai monks imposes a male-oriented value system on Buddhist women. The result is a psychological building of “normalcy” rooted in gender hierarchy (Ahmed 1997, xi). The Thai *Mae Chi* Institute cannot constitute a counter example, since the *saṅgha* still refuses to officially recognize the *mae chis* as an ascetic category, despite the *saṅgha*'s help to establish the institution in the late 1960s. The frequent absence of the *mae chis* at international Buddhist workshops or conferences organized by the *saṅgha* illuminates this.

Scholars agree that women's inferior position in Thai Buddhism is not limited to the religious sphere; it causes serious consequences on women's health, psychology, and social status (Tomalin 2006; Lindberg Falk 2007; Klunklin & Greenwood 2005; Khuankaew 2002; Esterik 1996; Kabilsingh 1991; Thitsa 1980). Because of Buddhism's recognized social effect on human and social development, there is a consensus that religion is part of politics (Ahmed 1997). The “migration of values” from one sphere to the next is an integral part of culture and identity formation. For example, women are not always perceived to attain merit by the lay society, since they cannot be ordained in the Thai tradition. This is re-

flected by the lack of donations and ultimate financial difficulties faced by *mae chi* and *bhikkhunī* communities. The male-dominated value system in Thai Buddhism marks the psychological formation of males and females. In turn, this defines social behavior that suppresses gender equality nationally and in the Thai diaspora (Demian 2008, 434; Cadge 2004). The current Thai Buddhist feminists, *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* challenge the organized gender-biased religious knowledge structures and value systems with their philanthropic initiatives and ordination of *bhikkhunīs* (Tomalin 2006, Lindberg Falk 2007).

Culture and religion are not fixed entities: they should not be used to promote gender compliance in Thailand. This stands in direct opposition to wider social welfare projects and development. Following this logic, when religion and politics intertwine, the social development process is hindered if these institutions work to suit particular gender interests, rather than improving the quality of life for society at large. In this context, social activities aiming to empower Buddhist women provide a space to struggle against gender hierarchies in the kingdom. Overall, the religious intellectual center constituted by the Thai *saṅgha* is being pressured to change its position to include a feminist perspective, as philanthropic activities demonstrate that *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* are comparable fields of merit to monks.

Despite recent attempts at reform, the current *Saṅgha Administration Act* dates back to 1962.<sup>7</sup> It established the various roles assumed by the monks, but it failed to recognize potential administrative roles for

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<sup>7</sup> The first *Saṅgha Act* was enacted in 1902. The king of Thailand was to appoint the supreme patriarch. The Act was initiated by Prince Wachirayan (Ishii 1986, 102). The following *Saṅgha Act* was passed in 1941. Overall, there have been three *Saṅgha Acts* (SA) adopted: SA 1902; SA 1941; SA 1962, as well as unsuccessful reform attempts (Lindberg Falk 2007, 173). The subordination of the *saṅgha* to the state is clear in all these acts (Ishii 1986, 102).

women by refusing the admission of women in key divisions. According to the Buddhist scriptures, this *Saṅgha Administration Act* contradicts one ancient rule of the *Vinaya* (monastic code), whereby any group of monks of five or more could be considered a free community (Lindberg Falk 2007, 229). Absolute power vested in the Supreme *Saṅgha* Council by the *Act* was therefore controversial, and the Council was subsequently accused of reflecting the view of military strongman Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who took power via a coup in 1957. The Thai monastic order was then transformed to reflect a feudal structure, rather than a democratic one.

The Supreme *Saṅgha* Council heads the order's administrative body. It reflects a specific age group and male vision of Buddhism. The Council is comprised of monks from 60 to 90 years of age (Na-rangsi 2002, 71). In 2013, the death of the 100-year-old 19<sup>th</sup> Thai supreme patriarch is a testament to the long-lasting position of monks heading the *saṅgha*. McCargo argues that the monastic order works as a gerontocracy system where age and seniority relate to positions of authority (McCargo 2012, 636). The recent death of the supreme patriarch may bring potential reforms in the *saṅgha*, though the interim patriarch shows no sign of acceptance and recognition for Buddhist women in the organization. Candidates have not yet been officially announced, but some prominent monks have voiced support for the *bhikkhunīs'* order, despite a recent call to reinforce the 1928 *Saṅgha Act* by the interim patriarch.<sup>8</sup>

The Council functions as a top-down institution with a small committee of senior monks formulating the voice of Buddhism in Thai-

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<sup>8</sup> The king appoints the supreme patriarch. However, his declining health has been a source of concern in the kingdom and might explain why well after the death of the supreme patriarch, the country is yet to be found with a new monk at the head of the *saṅgha*.



land. The structure of the Thai *saṅgha* resembles that of the state bureaucracy, with provincial governors reporting to this central administrative body. Unelected abbots, provincial monastic heads, and high-ranking senior male monks “who are an unaccountable elite” rule the monastic order (McCargo 2012, 633). The institution is, nevertheless, not immune to the political crisis and reforms advocated in the kingdom; examples illustrating this include monks who have joined the (anti-government) Red Shirts movement, thus eroding the monks’ role in legitimizing state power (McCargo 2012, 628). However, this does not suggest the *saṅgha*’s dislocation from the monarchy. Nonetheless, monks occupying lower positions are opposed to a nominated Council that is dominated by a small group of older monks who are perceived to be out of touch with modern Thai society.<sup>9</sup> It is well known that the majority of Thai monks come from the same rural region as the Red Shirts activists who advocate for the democratic reforms in the political system (McCargo 2012).

The monks’ feelings of disempowerment by the current national religious organization reveal a growing discomfort with the traditional religious mode of governance institutionalized by the *Saṅgha Acts of 1928*. The monks’ recent mobilization indicates an enfeebled gerontocracy as the new supreme patriarch’s succession is being debated (McCargo 2012, 629). The parallel with the notion of Acker’s inequality regimes is striking: power is derived by a dominant religious order that is taken for granted (Acker 2006, 454). For the Thai monastic order, social status, religious identity, and economic advantages rely on male-dominant sys-

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<sup>9</sup> Information varies on the structure of the Thai *saṅgha*, whereby some documents confirm that the supreme patriarch is helped by the Supreme *Saṅgha* Council which consists of eight permanent members and twelve rotating members. Data from <http://www.dhammadai.org/e/thailand/contemporary.php> (last accessed May 30, 2014).

tems that can survive as long as members perceive the bureaucratic structures and rules as legitimate. The demands for greater visibility of lower-ranking monks in the *saṅgha*'s administration may also create pressure for greater inclusion of Buddhist women in the *saṅgha*. The National Office of Buddhism,<sup>10</sup> directly under the office of the Prime Minister, works as a secretariat for the *saṅgha* (Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2010, 120). Reforms could expand the role of the National Office to include similar legal responsibilities for *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* to those of monks (ibid. 124-125). The work of Senator Paiboon Nititawan from the current National Reform Council should also be noted.

Under the monastic order's current administration model, *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* can operate as social service providers. Administrative roles in the Thai *saṅgha* are left to the monks. This denotes the "glass ceiling" metaphor, used to illustrate gender barriers created by an underrepresentation of women in top management positions in financial, religious, or social organizations (Acker 2009, 199). Instead of promoting gender equality, Thai Buddhism's organizational culture adopts an institutionalized pattern of gender inequalities, where women are under-represented in these positions. Nuns remain subordinate to monks because they cannot enter the formal Theravāda Buddhist domain in Thailand. Engaging in social work and facilitating projects to fight this subordinate position is one way to confront the exclusionary

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<sup>10</sup> This office has been called both the National Bureau of Buddhism and the Department of Buddhist Affairs. It functions as a liaison between the Thai *saṅgha* and the state. It looks after the well-being of the monks and monasteries by managing governmental funds and assisting with administrative obligations. Data from <http://www.dhammathai.org/e/thailand/contemporary.php> (last accessed May 30, 2014). Debates on the possibility of delegating authority to a new committee is currently under way, where the power of the Council would no longer be absolute.

patriarchal values perpetuated by the *saṅgha*. The development of welfare programs to empower women has proven to be an area of opportunity for Thai *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* aiming for social and religious legitimacy.

### Capitalizing on Limited Welfare Resources Offered by the Government

Thailand was among the first countries in Asia to recognize women's constitutional equal rights. Thais elected their first female prime minister in July 2011 (subsequently ousted by a military coup in May 2014). While in power, Shinawatra's government established a children and women's welfare policy as a social priority, leading to The Thai Women Empowerment Fund's initiation in 2012. The objective was to make women active in national development processes, to protect their rights, "improving legislation in addressing domestic violence, and increasing accessibility of women to education, funds, and healthcare."<sup>11</sup> However, Yingluck's political programs neglected to address the empowerment of women in the religious sphere. The state's cultural and religious positions allow the *saṅgha*'s patriarchic vision to persist.

Historically, the Thai government has often demonstrated its commitment to gender equality. In 1975, the proclamation of the International Year of Women by the United Nations resulted in the government's cessation of limiting the place of female lawyers in courts. Additionally, political authorities legally accepted the notion of gender equality a year before the International Year of Women, in 1974 (Litalien 2011). Later, Thailand ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All

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<sup>11</sup> Data from <http://www.thaigov.go.th/en/the-prime-minister.html> (Last accessed May 20, 2014).

Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The CEDAW's Optional Protocol was adopted by Thailand in June 2000, underlining the political authorities' commitment to the promotion of gender equality, in contrast to the *saṅgha* (Litalien 2011).

State secular welfare policies are actively used for national development and integration in Thailand, especially with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)'s economic community meeting, held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2015.<sup>12</sup> As the free flow of workers among different Southeast Asian countries becomes more widely accepted, welfare policies in Thailand are sought after to create a sense of national belonging, especially among ethnic minority groups of various faiths.<sup>13</sup> The gender difference is still clear: secular welfare policies are not meant to deal with female religious empowerment; they create a sense of national belonging in a time of increasingly economically porous national frontiers. In sum, commitments and progress toward gender equality in the secular sphere have not been met with the same enthusiasm in the religious sphere. The equity espoused in secular policies then becomes questionable.

In its failure to address religious gender discrimination, secular welfare policies are avoiding the root cause of some human and social development inequalities in the kingdom. If religion is a “defining force within culture,” then Buddhism influences all significant areas of society (Selinger 2004, 523). Thai Buddhism is an integral part of the identity

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<sup>12</sup> These initiatives from the government are reminiscent of famous Buddhist programs of the Dhammatuta and Dhammajarik from the 60s. Monks were sent to the North and the Northeast to fight communism and encourage national integration of ethnic minorities (Suksamran 1993, 68-71).

<sup>13</sup> Interview with civil servants at the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS), May 31, 2013.

impacting social and economic development. The Thai welfare state's development policies must confront vertical and patriarchal welfare systems embodied by the *saṅgha* if one wants to fully appreciate religion's role in social and human development. Although Buddhist women occasionally assumed prestigious roles in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in regional Buddhist communities—before the first *Saṅgha Act*—the dominance of state-led Buddhism post-1902 resulted in a decline in Buddhist women's recognition (Tiyavanich 1997, 284). This modern-day exclusion is not representative of a sustainable development strategy on the part of the government and the Thai *saṅgha*. Sustainable development cannot rely exclusively on economic growth and secular social safety nets. In order for Buddhism to be fully engaged in its politically assigned role in human development, the Thai government must address the current configuration of gender discrimination and division within the *saṅgha*.

Selinger argues that religion's role in social development must be recognized as inseparable from economic and political spheres. Inequality regimes structured within the *saṅgha* have contributed, to a certain extent, to slowing the state's secular human development strategy that promotes gender equality in the country with access to education, health care, and mental and physical counseling; all areas currently covered by philanthropic activities of *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs*.

Limited access to social programs and the inadequate role of monks in providing social services to women have prompted Buddhist laywomen, *mae chis*, and *bhikkhunīs* to offer better adapted services to women in the country. Diverse services are now offered, including rehabilitation homes for sexually abused women, education, community services, homes for victims of HIV/AIDS, and homes for women with unwanted pregnancies. These philanthropic initiatives are not meant to replace secular welfare policies, but rather add and extend current services. *Mae chis* offer more services than *bhikkhunīs* simply because of the

smaller number of the latter. The *mae chis* numbered roughly 20,000 in the kingdom in 2007, in contrast to approximately 100 Theravāda *bhikkhunīs* spread in 20 provinces in 2015. Thailand also has communities of Mahāyāna *bhikkhunīs*, whose numbers were as high as two hundred in 2008, according to Fo Guang Shan Thailand (Bhikkhuni Dhammananda 2010, 107). The success of *bhikkhunīs* and the *mae chis* at providing social services locally is overlooked in the shadow of the ambiguous position they hold for the Thai government. For example, the government provides free education, free medical care and reduced fares for public transport to monks. *Mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* receive no such assistance. The Thai government regards them as laywomen for these services. When it comes to the right to vote, nuns and monks are forbidden to exercise their electoral rights; they are treated as ascetics by the government. The Ministry of the Interior defines *mae chis* as ordained, or candidates for ordination, thus denying them their rights to vote. The Ministry of Communication and the Department of Religious Affairs consider *mae chis* as laywomen. Additionally, the Department of Religious Affairs sponsors the education of monks and male novices, but not *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs*. The Ministry of Communications provides travel funds for public transport to monks but denies them to *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* (Lindberg Falk 2010b, 162; Tomalin 2006, 387; Kabilsingh 1998, 43-46).

Sulak Sivaraksa, a well-known Buddhist activist in Thailand, has advocated for the reintroduction of the *bhikkhunī* monastic order to fight the growth of prostitution. In his opinion, female renunciants would be better suited to offer spiritual guidance to women than male monks, a view shared by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. Temples and Buddhist organizations in the country have acted as de facto halfway houses, helping women from all walks of life. The social and psychological impact these Buddhist women have in empowering other women is not trivial.

Concretely, the level of institutionalization for *mae chis* did help them to achieve some level of social recognition and opportunity. The Thai *bhikkhunīs* are also seeking some form of central institution to help advance their social and religious status. Current social initiatives are possible for a reason. Indeed, *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* have been able to operate their social services freely, as they were perceived to be outside of the *saṅgha*. Capitalizing on the limited state welfare resources available for women has been possible by the increasingly laid-back attitude on religious diversity held by Buddhist and political authorities. Bhikkhunī Dhammananda, for example, now writes frequently in the newspaper and gives televised interviews. This contrasts with the attitude of the Thai authorities in early 2000s that forbade one of Bhikkhunī Dhammananda's interviews from being aired. She was the first Thai woman to get a Theravāda *sāmaṇerī* ordination in Sri Lanka in 2003, defying the 1928 *Saṅgha Act*. Earlier, authorities thought the interviews could potentially encourage social unrest, despite the country's constitutional commitment to freedom of speech.

### **Institutionalized Politics of Religious Diversity**

The *saṅgha*'s resistance and the ambiguous state position in recognizing *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* as ascetics opposes some of the country's constitutional dispositions on religious freedom. A lack of official recognition is a denial of religious freedom, contradicting the long history of religious diversity in Thailand, where the first Christian missionaries were welcomed in the kingdom in the mid-sixteenth century, despite the long political and religious tensions with the Thai Malay Muslims in the South, or the state's control of religious organizations during the Cold War. Nevertheless, certain accommodations on religious diversity is not a foreign notion in Thailand.

This section will contrast the state's legal position on religious freedom and diversity with the Thai *saṅgha's* gender inequality regime. At times, the *saṅgha's* religious value system attributes the "lower karmic" status of women to their gender. This patriarchal interpretation of karma benefits monks while deemphasizing *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs*. For both the *mae chis* and the *bhikkhunīs* to benefit from religious freedom, the concerned authorities should adopt a democratic system of values. The *saṅgha* and the state could promote and protect religious freedom by adopting a gender equality policy.

The political authorities have enshrined freedom of religion in the 2007 Thai constitution (it has been a part of almost all 17 constitutions since 1932). The state legally respects religious and ethnic minority groups. Historically, religious, and ethnic minority groups have been a source of great concern to the kingdom. The question relates to national security and territorial integrity, specifically in the case of some Thai Malay Muslim secessionist groups in the South. The authorities' position on integrating religious diversity reflects a fragile democratization process, where democratic institutions and notions of equity are not always reinforced. This points to the authorities' deficient institutional capacity, as notions of gender inequality are tolerated in the Thai *saṅgha*. The state's deficient interest in the legal ambiguity suffered by the *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* is an illustration of lacking commitment to democratic principles and social and human development.

Under the 2007 constitution of Thailand, men and women have the same rights. Part 2 of the Thai Constitution stands in direct opposition to the absence of women in the *saṅgha's* key administrative positions and the Supreme *Saṅgha* Council. Gender inequality regimes are currently illegal under the 2007 constitution. The official document reads:



Unjust discrimination against a person on the grounds of the difference in origin, race, language, sex, age, disability, physical or health condition, personal status, economic or social standing, religious belief, education or constitutionally political views, shall not be permitted. (Thai Constitution, Part 2. Equity 2007, 12)

How, then, can the Thai government not enforce these legal principles on a socially-constructed organization such as the *saṅgha*? The Thai government is legally bound to the principles of freedom of religion and gender equality under its constitution. However, these two principles have not been enacted in the religious sphere. The *mae chis* and the *bhikkhunīs*' marginalized social position illustrates the difficulty of deconstructing the patriarchal value system adopted by the Thai monastic order, despite the government's commitment to gender equality. What will become of these articles on equity and religious freedom, quoted from the 2007 constitution, remains to be seen, as the latest coup d'état in May 2014 has partially repealed the Thai Constitution.

### **Buddhist Movement and Limited Secular Welfare Resources**

Literature on the relationship between religion and welfare has acknowledged both indirect and direct results of religious norms and practices on individuals' health (Adamczyk 2010; Hall et al. 2008). Klunklin and Greenwood argued that women's inferior and marginalized status, promoted by aspects of Thai culture and Buddhism, directly contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS in the kingdom (2005). This view is contested by other academics, as *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs*' exclusion from the *saṅgha* allows for their self-emancipation from the *saṅgha*'s patriarchal values (Lindberg Falk 2010a, 112-113). Many *bhikkhus* support the idea that women's marginalization in Buddhism does not contribute to

the spread of HIV/AIDS. These two observations taken together demonstrate that opportunity inequality within the *saṅgha* does not prevent *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* from building their unique social roles as providers of social services for women (Gosling 1998). However, these two positions do point to gender inequality within the Thai *saṅgha*. According to Harding, in a world increasingly advocating for the respect of human rights, organizations capable of accommodating gender equality have a better chance of survival. Therefore, the very survival of the Thai monastic order could be at stake if it continues to endorse a gender inequality regime. Harding claimed, “We do better to try to agree on the content of human rights rather than on the justification for their observance,” regardless of its presence in industrialized, newly industrialized, or developing countries (Harding 2007, 21).

The Thai government now projects a universal comprehensive social protection system by 2017, inspired by the United Nations’ Social Protection Floor Initiative (SPF-I), (UNDP 2014, 34). The plan is to reduce poverty among disadvantaged groups, such as single-parent women and the elderly, by addressing inequalities beyond the workforce. Parallel to this secular initiative by the state - in the promotion of a more extensive welfare system - there is growing interest for women and monks to define their identity in relation to other social institutions. Monks and nuns have been increasingly pursuing social and community roles in the Thai kingdom (Gosling 1998; Lindberg Falk 2010b). However, challenges are predominantly faced by *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* who have less social recognition and fewer resources.

This section of the article examines how socially-engaged Thai Buddhist women rely on their social entrepreneurship and networks (national and international) to provide philanthropic services despite their marginalization. Past limited secular welfare provisions have had no success in addressing the lower welfare standards of the *mae chis* and

the *bhikkhunīs*. The latter are exclusively dependent on donations from the lay community to survive, and do not receive salaries from the state, unlike the monks.<sup>14</sup> Some studies on the role of secular welfare policies and women insist that women must be incorporated into the paid workforce to benefit from welfare programs (Pearson 2004). Women's empowerment and emancipation depend on the health of global and national economies to provide jobs. Problems with this approach include a lack of emphasis on possible contributions of religious institutions in offering welfare services, the dependence on the workforce for the emancipation of women, and the social development of women. The gender-specific elements behind the market's structure may not be conducive for the empowerment of women, even if they are included in the job market. The market cannot solve inequality issues related to culture and traditions.

The multiple social initiatives established by *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* across the country are empowering women, even as unpaid workers who are outside of the workforce. They provide a model of "Buddhist economy" whereby Buddhist teachings; volunteer social activities; and dedication to alleviating poverty and inequality promotes a religious-supported social safety net. These actions are referred to as "informal sectors" or "informal welfare" systems, or parallel economy systems. Women's empowerment, in this context, relies on *mae chis'* and *bhikkhunīs'* dedication to fighting social and gender inequalities. Here, religion is directly related to removing gender inequality and providing essential services to the population.

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<sup>14</sup> In 1998, the monthly salary for monks varied from 22,000 baht (\$685 CAN) for the supreme patriarch to as low as 500 baht (\$15 CAN) for a lower rank monk. The monthly wage for a blue-collar worker was around 4,500 baht a month (\$140 CAN) (Gabaude 2001, 158).

Development studies have shown that economic growth alone cannot eliminate poverty (Sze Yuk-Hiu 2008, 30). Globalization is also insufficient in fighting social inequalities. Roads to permanent and universal solutions for ending poverty are paved with stereotypes and wish lists that rest on simplistic economic solutions (Peet & Hartwick 2009, 101). The expanding secular welfare provisions, such as the ones announced by the United Nations Development Programme and the Thai government, address only one aspect of poverty and inequality in Thailand. Both institutions fail to include the roles of religious organizations and the social impacts facilitated by the promotion of an inequality regime supported by the Thai monastic order. The Thai Buddhist model of economics, adopted by *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs*, illustrates the complexity behind the economic variable and the socially constructed modes of religious discrimination. Studying the disadvantage, the benefits, and the sustainability of a parallel religious form of economy will ameliorate the social status of women in Thai society.

In the case of the *mae chis*, financial support to their welfare projects stems primarily from national and local contributions, as is seen in the case of Mae Chi Sansanee in Bangkok. A closer examination of some of these nuns' communities also reveals the support from national and international communities, demonstrated by the case of the late *mae chi* Khunying Kanitha Wichiencharoen. Furthermore, few communities of *bhikkhunīs* have benefitted from international networks' mass support, as seen with Bhikkhunī Dhammananda. However, some of these women were well-known professionals and public figures before becoming women ascetics. Bhikkhunī Dhammananda inherited a community from her mother, Bhikkhunī Voramai Kabilsingh, who was a successful *bhik-*

*khunī* in Thailand.<sup>15</sup> The achievements of these *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* also rest on the resourceful networks of their supporters.

### **Transnational and Local Networks of Buddhist Nuns as a Sustainable Core**

The social reality defining Buddhist women's networks is complex, going beyond the notions of local and transnational networks. Binary analyses of these networks are insufficient, as they risk essentializing Thai Buddhist women's social relations. The organizations' social conditions are complex and multidimensional, as some of these religious communities reach out on social media to build awareness and support for their work. Consequently, the notion of "translocalism" can describe the behavior of certain Thai Buddhist organizations. However, the term "glocalization" will be retained to describe Thai Buddhist women's organizations and management. The notion defines local actions as embedded in global realities. Glocalization represents the global meeting the local, or the local encountering the global (Roudometof 2003; 2008), leading to the production of interactions where the religious sphere meets the secular, and where a national Thai patriarchal Buddhist system meets with the transnational values of Buddhist gender equality (Litalien 2011).

In 2001, the ordination of Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (Bhikkhunī Dhammananda) also received some negative social responses. Bhikkhunī Dhammananda had support from *bhikkhunīs* in Sri Lanka, as well as a global network of supporters of a *bhikkhunīs* order in Theravāda Buddhism. The same observation can be made on the ordination of a Theravāda *bhikkhunī* in the northern Phayao province in May 2013, where

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<sup>15</sup> Bhikkhunī Voramai Kabilsingh became fully ordained in Taiwan, as this option was not available in Thailand.

hundreds of Buddhist laypeople attended, along with secular authorities, including the province's governor. Here, instead of negative reactions, media and authorities were supportive and paid tribute to the newly-ordained *bhikkhunī*. For the occasion, monks and *bhikkhunīs* from Sri Lanka were invited to perform the ordination. A Vietnamese *bhikkhunī* also joined the ceremony, making this ceremony truly a glocal event. This Theravāda *bhikkhunī* full ordination ceremony was the first one to be held on Thai soil in the history of the country. The second one was held in December 2014, for Bhikkhunī Dhammananda's completion of her 12 *vassa*. In 2015, the Buddhist religious authorities in Thailand reacted negatively to these transnational collaborations for *bhikkhunī* ordinations.

Previous examples illustrated how social interactions from different countries produce specific social values, unique organization strategies, and glocal identities. Secular education, new interpretations of Buddhist scriptures, and welfare activism of socially-engaged women highlight the exchange of ideas, structures, and practices beyond national borders. Buddhism is a transnational religion in constant change. Thai Buddhism, according to Pattana Kitiarsa, "since the late twentieth century[,] has emerged out of global cultural junctures, where missionary intent and monastic networks have joined forces" (Kitiarsa 2010). Those forces include monks, Buddhist laywomen, and female Buddhist ascetics of various ages, backgrounds, and traditions.

The expressions "think globally but act locally," or the opposite, "think locally and act globally," help define the *bhikkhunī* movement's emergence. However, a new expression could state: "think and act glocally for a sustainable religious gender environment tomorrow." The re-establishment of a *bhikkhunīs'* order in Sri Lanka in the late 1990s, for example, was made possible only by the joint efforts of an international network of Buddhist women, and with the support of some local monks.

Assistance came from the Korean order and the Taiwanese Buddhist organization *Fo Guang Shan*. At the beginning, only a few *bhikkhunīs* were ordained. Currently, Sri Lanka is estimated to have over 1,000 *bhikkhunīs*, and the female order is continuing to develop (Ito 2012, 56; Salgado 2013). This progress allowed for Dr. Kabilsingh to be fully ordained as the first Thai Theravāda *bhikkhunī* in 2003, in Sri Lanka.<sup>16</sup> The absence of Thai Theravāda *bhikkhunīs* required transnational support from *bhikkhunīs* in other countries.

The glocal reality of the *bhikkhunī* movement expresses both empowering and constraining forces locally and globally. Globalized networks of Buddhist women are apparent in associations, such as the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women, and the Alliance for *Bhikkhunīs*.<sup>17</sup> Aside from the support to Buddhist ascetic women in these organizations, local support is also capital for *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs*. They rely mainly on donations from local communities to feed themselves. Local acceptance also promotes a strong, positive image, changing the negative cultural and religious stereotypes that Buddhist nuns face in Thailand. The transnational networks of *bhikkhunīs* also promote women as proper fields of merit.

In sum, in this social context, glocalization has been used in other settings and is not limited to newly industrialized or developing countries. The notion has been applied to European socioreligious realities, such as the interplay between the modern conception of church and state. Whether in Europe or in Thailand, a “glocal religiosity” defines a hybrid form of global and local forms of religiosity. In our case, it illustrates how global and local Buddhist women’s discourses transcend the linear gender hierarchical narrative endorsed by the Thai monastic or-

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<sup>16</sup> Her first lower ordination took place in February 2001 in the same country.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.sakyadhita.org/> or <http://www.bhikkhuni.net/>

der. To this day, the Thai *saṅgha* continues to argue that it cannot ordain new *bhikkhunīs* because its order was never established in Thailand.

Women fighting the *saṅgha*'s patriarchal views are faced with hostile arguments against their gender and the re-establishment of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*. Arguments include the negative karma associated with being born as a woman; lack of gender equality support in Buddhist scriptures (Eight *Gurudharmas*; the hesitation of the Buddha to ordain women); in Theravāda, the difference in the number of precepts required by the *pāṭimokkha* (the code of monastic discipline) followed by *bhikkhunīs* (311) to monks (227); the idea that female bodily fluid is unclean and threatening to the monks; the prediction of the shorter life of Buddhism if women are ordained; and the capacity to pursue enlightenment without ordination. The official stance of the *saṅgha* is that the re-establishment of the *bhikkhunīs* order was made impossible after it disappeared from the Theravāda tradition. This is due to the requirement for both monks (*bhikkhus*) and *bhikkhunīs* to be present; because there is no female order, *bhikkhunī* ordination cannot occur. Ito points out that the Supreme *Saṅgha* Council will likely be offended if it is forced to change its views on women's ordination by secular authorities (Ito 2012, 59).

Along with the question of pride lies an important economic argument that monks are perceived to be fields of merit whereas *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* are not. Favoring donations to monks is slowly changing, as successful philanthropic projects by *mae chis* and *bhikkhunīs* change local mentalities. According to Tomalin, projects by the *bhikkhunīs*' movement—and successful *mae chis*—operate as local religious feminist strategies to challenge negative social attitudes encouraging gender-based oppression (Tomalin 2006; Lindberg Falk 2007).

Because the *mae chis* and the *bhikkhunīs* remain marginalized in Thai society, glocal networks operate as “sustainable cores” for these



women. Transnational and local connections of Buddhist women are not transitory strategies, but rather long-term visions of sustainable social welfare projects. They bring together various individuals, male and female, who share a vision of Buddhism as a religion promoting gender equality and fighting social discrimination. Sakyadhita and The Alliance for *Bhikkhunis* are not competitors: they are allied in the promotion of Buddhist gender equality in Thailand.

### Conclusion

The Thai Buddhist monastic community functions as an inequality regime and presents an important institutionalized challenge for women practicing Buddhism. The pro-gender equality Buddhist movement capitalizes on limited welfare resources offered by the government to fight the male Thai Buddhist clergy. Gender inequality structures based on the current politics of religious diversity were presented to demonstrate this argument. Finally, the vital “sustainable core” of the pro-gender equality Buddhist movement, comprised of transnational networks of Buddhist nuns, monks, and lay communities, was described as a sustainable strategy to empower women in Thai society.

Overall, in spite of the progress of economic development, secular social safety nets, international trade, human rights advocates, and the refusal to officially include women in the organizational structure of the Thai *saṅgha*; all have had an impact on women’s empowerment. They have actively and successfully battled with religious and cultural oppression. The limited success of the *bhikkhunīs*’ ordination movement can be rooted in the lack of reforms in the Thai *saṅgha*. In turn, this lack of gender inclusion by the monastic order adds to the progressive decline of the institution’s legitimacy in the face of a growing number of secularly educated women seeking a religious representative venue. This study

laid out the relevancy of the institutional configuration of the *saṅgha*, culture and the context of inequality when looking at Buddhist women in Thailand.

Does secular development of gender equality conflict with a more religious inclination of development dominated by monks? In Thailand, the answer is not simple, but the evidence indicates this to be the case. A supportive, gender-equal *saṅgha* would be more in line with the wish for Thailand to be a democratic beacon in Southeast Asia, despite the current crisis of governance in the country. Again, the *saṅgha* reflects a top-down mode of governance, depicting a traditional form of politics in the kingdom. The increased demands in the political sphere to respect electoral results are indicative of a tension between an old form of governance and a new democratic one. With the mobilization of some monks in favor of political reforms, the country may yet see a *saṅgha* inclusive of Buddhist women.

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