

Gender Equality in Theravada Thai Society today: An Overview

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One of the most interesting issues among the public in Thai society is the gender equality between male and female. There are many debates related to this issue in the present society. For instance, there is an amendment to or a revision of laws about woman. Many debates have been alive in the public through various media including newspapers, televisions, etc.

In Theravada Buddhism, the conceptual equality between women and men could be summed up as under:

The primary differentiation between women and men:

Firstly, from the physiological, a woman is not as stronger as a man. Women could not shoulder hard work as men could. Moreover, women have also some physical differences; they have menstruation, they can be pregnant and have babies, and they can provide breastfeeding for their children¹.

Secondly, in mentality, women are different from men. Although women have high tolerance, they have gentle mind, sensitive and could easily worry, and not tough as men.

However, this differentiation is natural. On this basis it could not be summarized whether women or men are inferior or superior to each other. Women can do something better than men, while men can do something better than women. Those differences are rather to support and complement each other.²

Equality:

Women and men live in value and social environment, which were created by human; men, by virtue of their stronger physical structure could be superior to women. Yet, women's intelligence ability is not inferior to men. At present, following changed social circumstance, many women have been ranking on top in political positions, for example, Mrs. Indira Gandhi former Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher the British Prime Minister, Ms. Yingluck Shinawatra, Thailand's former Prime Minister and Theresa Mary May, the current prime minister of U.K. They are examples of women, who could achieve in their career, the top position.

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Indigenous, women are inferior to men in physical whether by the nature of femininity or by the nature of parenting. Women could face some difficulty or confront unsafe environment because women are not as fast or enduring as men. Thus, women need to have higher perseverance compared to men in order that they can achieve the enlightenment.

In the Buddha era, many women were ordained to the monkhood and meditation to achieve the enlightenment. This had shown that women have high tolerance, perseverance, and intelligence not less than men. Nowadays, it can be observed that women have also paid higher interest in making meditation compared with men, indicating that women have stronger intention and utmost efforts in achieving Dharma.

The precepts, which a female Buddhist monk has to observe are 331, while a monk observes 227 precepts. However, in principle, both monks and female monks have to undertake the same practices which mean to purify their body, speech, and mind for achieving Dharma and for reaching the enlightenment.

Female monks have to adopt more precepts following their physical and mind conditions, which are different from men. It was also to ensure their safety. During the Buddha's lifetime, although women could be ordained and entered in to the monkhood, there were still inequalities in monks in some aspects, due to some social rules, cultures, and beliefs at that period. They environment and time could also influence to alleviate the women status in the society.

Although women are physically inferior to men, in knowledge and intelligence, women and men are equal. In Buddhism, each gender is equalized under the karma (law of action), happiness, suffering and the way to achieve nirvana.

The Theravada Buddhism admits that women are superior to men in some aspects. Women and men have been respected for their fatherhood and motherhood. Yet, women have been shouldering more hardship than men as women give birth, devote their love, sacrifice their lives and show kindness to their children.

The Theravada Buddhism had thus elevated the stature of women in society. It can be called as the era of liberty and equality, which directly benefited women. Thus Theravada Buddhism is widely open, impartial and reasonable.

Note and Reference

1. Lucksawat Palarat, *View on Women in Buddhist Philosophy*, Bangkok, Chulalongkorn University Printing House, 2002 P.236
2. Ibid p. 237

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