

Buddhist Perspective Towards Establishing Gender Equality in Modern South Asian Societies

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Gender inequality is an enthusiastic theme among modern feminist scholars who study about the causes, consequence and solutions for the gender dissimilarity in the society. These theories of gender inequality have emerged from the beginning of the modern feminist theoretical discourse. Therefore it can be identified that most theories on gender inequality are almost contradicted and depend on contemporary social and intellectual paradigms. As example, some functionalists gave ideas on the essentiality of biological reasons, namely that women are best at such tasks in socialization. Because of they give birth and are thus naturally suited to look after children.¹ In Psychology, in the 1950's, J. Bowlby argued for 'maternal deprivation'. According to that argument, the responsibilities of mothers are complex and they should pay their keen attention to young children.² It is obvious that in History, Biology and Psychology concluded as women should give her priority to the housework and childcare instead of other professional activities.

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1. Rose Clark, Theories of Gender Inequality, Manchester, United Kingdom, <http://www.slideshare.net>

2. Bowlby, J. (1986). "Maternal Care and Mental Health" <http://garfield.library.upenn.edu/classics1986/A1986F062900001.pdf>

But few scholars pointed out opposite arguments. According to Ann Oakley apart from some anthropologists which show that gender roles are not as fixed as these writers assume, was that the mother-housewife role is a cultural construction or a social construction.³ This concept was developed in the latter half of the 19th Century. *Anne Oakley* suggests that the gender roles are not a natural occurrence. There are few ways in which gender socialisation takes. First one is 'Manipulation'. It likes dressing girls with specific choices. Another one is 'Canalisation' or pointing girls and boys towards gender appropriate things. Other important one is 'Verbal appellation' or gender labelling of appearances and tasks.⁴

There are different kinds of feminists who differ on the origins of gender inequality, why it still continues and what is to be done about it. One version is Radical Feminists who emerged in the second wave of feminism. The famous idea of their writings is 'patriarchy'.⁵ Patriarchy is a social phenomenon which systematically advantages men in the family and the society.⁶ Some Radical Feminists like Shulamith Firestone agreed with the history as a biology line of argument. Firestone argued that biology like *women's* reproductive *biology*, led to women being dependent on men.⁷ Rowbotham argued that the concept of patriarchy used by writers such as Millett to explain all history was too vague.⁸ Marxist-Feminists like Margret Benston use the concept of reserve army

3. Ann Oakley, 1974, *Housewife*. London: Allen Lane, p.49

4. Ann Oakley, *The Ann Oakley Reader: Gender, Women and Social Science*, University of Bristol, London, 2005 114-162

5. *Theory on Gender: Feminism on Theory* edited by Paula England, New York, 1993, p. 28-29

6. Lerner, Gerda (1986). *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 15-20

7. Shulamith Firestone *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Farrar Straus and Giroux, New York, 2003, p.28-30

Tong, Rosemarie (1989). *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*, Boulder: Westview press. p87

8. Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden From History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Agai*, Pluto Press, London, 1977, p 66-71

of labour.⁹ And Susan Hartmann points out that Capitalism might produce low paid jobs but this does not explain, by itself, why women take up these jobs. Therefore the society still needs to use the notion of patriarchy and discriminations on that.¹⁰ Postmodern feminism rejects the notion of a gender which shares the same interests and instead emphasises the differences between groups of women like lesbians versus heterosexual, younger women versus older women. Like most postmodernists, they want to improve the position of women by deconstructing masculine language.¹¹ Sylvia Walby's reply is to argue that this approach minimises the sharp edges of inequality or 'oppression' where it is difficult to discern the use of male violence in relationships, job segregation and the resultant low wages for women.¹² Also some feminists introduce religions as social and cultural institutes which support to spread participial values in societies. They feel all religions oppressive one way or other to women.¹³

Considering these broad theoretical approaches, it can be recognized that the main trend of Western feminism is to identify gender discriminations in education, employment, domestic life or in the traditional social attitudes and values. According to Gerda Lerner, gender stratification is visible even in modern societies. It refers to the ranking of the sexes in such a way that women are unequal in power, resources, prestige or accepted worth.¹⁴ With these theoretical aspects, scholars have developed a discourse about the role of the female and equal rights of them. Many organizations and individuals attempt to reduce gender inequality with contributing various ways. As a result of this discourse and activities of feminist waves United Nation has decided to suggest a one of their Millennium Development Goals as 'promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women'.

9. Margaret Benston, The political economy of women's liberation, Radical Education Project, 1969, p.2-5.

10. Susan M. Hartmann, The Other Feminists: Activists in the Liberal Establishment, Yale University Press, 1998

11. Christine Sylvester, Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 30-45

12. Sylvia Walby, The Future of Feminism, Polity press, Cambridge, 1994.

13. Voice of Women, Vol III, No.2, July, 1990, p.1.

14. Lerner, Gerda, The Creation of Patriarchy, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1986.

In 2010 the Economic and Social council of UN focused on gender equality and empowerment of women through its annual ministerial review during the high level segments. In that summit they discussed about millennium development goals and current challenges of these areas. They stressed the need to invest in women – in their education, health, social status and job opportunities. Investment of women is critically to the achievement of the MDGs. In these review progresses, there was a highlight to achieve gender equality that required a focus on role of women in countries in special situation particularly crisis and post-crisis situations. Also women participating in all stages were promoted.¹⁵ In conclusion the president of the Economic and Social council urged all member states to accelerate the advancement of women rights and gender equality.¹⁶

When consider this UN council report, it is obvious that international organizations like United Nation collectively focus their attention to develop women rights and her status. Another remarkable fact is that they hope to launch their policies in regional and country levels. According to the post structuralism feminists, women rights and their developments should address understanding the regional diversities.¹⁷ Especially the cultural and religious attitudes and social structure of regions should be understood before answering the women's problems. That UN council also stressed the importance of women participating in all stages including peace building processes. According to my personal view, the Economic and Social council has not clear idea on launching these policies in a practical way. There should be a unique plan to achieve gender equality as a Millennium Development Goal. Besides, there should be a realistic view to understand the social values and the patriarchal norms which effect to the gender equality. With specific modern planning, UN will only able to achieve one part of the MGD. That part is empowerment of women. To

15. Achieving Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Strengthening Development Cooperation, Dialogues at the economic and social council, United Nations, New York, 2010. pp. 1-3

16. *ibid* . p.6

17. Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory",

Chicago Journals, <http://www.jstor.org/discover/>

achieve the gender equality: the complex part, Council should concern about the religion and other cultural aspects. Addressing some sensitive issues like gender inequality through religions is rather easy than making systematic institutional plans.

The consciousness of gender equality is not mere a modern concept. When consider the ancient societies in Asia, some religions like Buddhism and Jainism have contributed to enhance social attitudes on gender equality. In India around 6th Century B.C., there were many philosophers who struggled to reform the traditional *Brahman* society by establishing all forms of social equalities. These philosophers attempted to emphasize biological and intellectual similarity of women and men. Before Lord Buddha established the *Bikkhuni Sāsana*, there were few female ascetic groups in India. According to Buddhist chronicle reports, there were *Paribbājikās*, *Ājivikās* and Jain nuns etc. The Buddhist story of *Kundala Keshi* shows that women had equal freedom to challenge their parallel sangha communities including male ascetic groups. Therefore it is obvious that before the Buddha established an equal intellectual opportunity to women in the Buddhist society, there are few other women ascetic groups in contemporary India.

Some scholars discussed this historical background and surprised about the limitations which were given by the Lord Buddha to women. In the beginning, the Buddha did not accept the request for ordination of Mahā-Pajāpatī Gōtamī. So she was disappointed. Then a large group of Sākyan ladies cut their hair, dressed themselves in ascetic clothes and traveled the long distance to Vesāli on foot to show their loyalty and devotion to the Buddhism. Finally Lord Buddha gave permission to women to enter the ascetic life with intervention of bhikku Ānanda. With considering contemporary social obstacles, Lord Buddha gave a limitation and Mahā-Pajāpatī Gōtamī accepted the Eight Great Conditions.¹⁸ In the first appearance, the Eight Great Conditions seems as an establishment of patriarchal values in the Buddhist Order of Nuns.

18. Mohan Wijayaratna, *Buddhist Nuns: The Birth and Development of a Women's Monastic Order*, Colombo: Wisdom, 2001, p.10

A nun, even though she has been ordained for a hundred years, must greet a monk respectfully, even if he was ordained that same day. She must rise from her seat with worshipping and pay him honour due to him.

Nuns may not spend the rainy season retreat in a region where monks do not reside.

Every fortnight, the nuns must make two requests to the Community of Monks: they must consult them about the date of the formal act of *Upōsatha* and the date that the monks would come for the exhortation.

At the end of the rainy season retreat, the nuns must make a triple invitation to both Communities: that any monk or nun accuses them of a fault if he or she has seen heard or had cause to suspect that they are guilty of offence.

A nun who has committed a serious fault must undergo a period of *mānatta* of half a month before both Communities

The higher Ordination should not be requested from both Communities until a postulant has spent two years of training observing the six precepts.

A nun should on no account rebuke or abuse a monk.

Nuns do not have the right to teach monks, but monks have a duty to teach nuns.¹⁹

Also there are other controversial statements of the women ordination which were identified as made by Lord Buddha. After offering Bhikkuni ordination, Lord Buddha stated that the existence of Buddhist dispensation has been reduced by half. He has introduced the new formation as crop dieses in a rich paddy land.²⁰ With highlighting these statements, some modern scholars like Rita M. Gross, Diana Y. Paul and Kathrayan Blackstone have debated about patriarchal attitudes in ancient Buddhism and Buddhist institutions.²¹ Also they consider the actual practice in

19. Mohan Wijayaratna, *Buddhist Nuns: The Birth and Development of a Women's Monastic Order*, Colombo: Wisdom, 2001, p.19

20. Chulla Wagga Pali chap. 10

21. Kathrayan Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therigata*, Motilal Baransidass

Buddhist societies. Especially Rita M. Gross offers an engaging survey of the changes feminism has wrought in religious ideas, beliefs, and practices around the world, as well as in the study and understanding of religion itself. She has a different argument on the relationship between the Buddhism and patricidal concepts. She has rationalized the Buddha's teaching which introduced female birth as an obstacle to the wisdom with her own experiences.

“Buddhist teachings recommend appreciating obstacles because they are helpful to our practice. Without obstacles we would never develop profound understanding or compassion. Buddhists have also frequently claimed that female rebirth is an obstacle. If obstacles are of great benefit, shouldn't women, who encounter more obstacles than men, rise to the top of the hierarchy of revered Buddhist teachers? But that has not happened. Is this obstacle actually of benefit to women, as teachings on the helpfulness of obstacles would suggest? After practicing Buddhism for almost forty years, I have come to appreciate how much the many obstacles I faced over the years have taught me.”²²

In many *suttas* Lord Buddha showed his concepts of gender equality. He always admired the intellectual capacity of women. In Verses of the Nuns Bhikkuni Dhammānanda was appreciated by Lord Buddha for her intellectual achievements. He advised to her husband Sujāta to respect her as a sophisticated woman. In Mahāwāchchagotta *sutta* Buddha admired about the female community of Buddhism.

“I have not just one hundred two, three, four or five hundred, but a very great number of nuns, my female disciples, who have attained liberation of mind and liberation of trough of Wisdom, having destroyed the mental taints through their own superhuman knowledge so that they, in this very life, can enter and abide in these mental states that are free from taints.”²³

This statement also reflects the equal attitude of Lord Buddha on wisdom without gender bias. In the *Ariya Piyasana Sutta of Majjhima*

Pub., Delhi, 2000.

22. <http://feminismandreligion.com>, Working with Obstacles: Is Female Rebirth an Obstacle? by Rita M. Gross, 06-02-2013

23. ‘Mahawachchagotta Sutta’, Majjhima-nikaya, 1942, p. 73,

nikāya, the lay men were divided in to two groups considering their spiritual character as *Apparajaḥkha* and *Maharajaḥkha*.²⁴ That shows he did not consider the sexuality of human being. Lord Buddha always encourages the achievements of four groups of Buddha Order. The two main groups of Buddhist community are *Bhikkuni Snaga* and *Upāsikā* or lay Buddhist women. They are represented gender equality of Buddhist dispensation. Also the Lord Buddha kept the separation of *Vinaya* (Discipline) and *Dhamma* (Doctrine) from the beginning. As mentioned above, in *Dhamma* or Doctrine, he always conceptualized about the validity and capacity of human being without considering the gender. According to Buddhist *Suttas* and *Abhidhamma* the consciousness of femininity or machismo is a phenomenon which is constructed socially and culturally. Sexual category is not an obstacle to achieve wisdom and the goal of liberation.

Obviously in *Vinaya pitaka* the Buddha kept the distance between male and female. Many oppression ideas which charged Buddhism as a patriarchal religion depend on *Vinaya pitaka*. The first thing we should understand Buddhism is not depending on disciplines. Lord Buddha also stated '*Vinayō nama Sāsanassa Āu*' or 'the disciplines mean the lifetime of the Buddhist dispensation. The achievement of wisdom and the existence of dispensation are totally different phenomenon. First one is spiritual and second one is physical. Like a community of monks nuns also had a very precise judicial system. The nun's right to activate in judicial system of monasteries, show another dimension of women right in Buddhism. It elaborated with the right to participate, way of *prove* the guilty or *innocent* and the collective decision makings. According to this procedure, a member who was guilty of an offenses could not be punished without examine and approval of the other members at a formal meeting. All the activities of community were very democratic. Every evidence and facts are considered in a formal systematic manner.'²⁵

With comparing these facts with the UN discussion of gender equality as a Millennium Development Goal, there can be emphasize few other

24. 'Ariya Priyesana Sutta' Majjima nikāya Vol. I, 1941. p.179

25. Mohan Wijayaratna, Buddhist Nuns: The Birth and Development of a Women's Monastic Order, Opcit, pp. 2-3

things. One of the important leadership dialogues is ending violence against women and girls.²⁶ Moreover in Buddhist societies men are respected for their decent manners on women. Lord Buddha never encouraged any form of violence and harassments including sexual harassments. A story of the Uthpalawannā Bhikkuni is a famous example. Lord Buddha concerned about the security of women as nuns and that may be the primary reason to refuse the first requests of Bhikkuni ordination.²⁷ As the Buddha predicted the great disciple *Uṭṭapalawānṇā* who reached the first place of irdi faced tragic situation of sexual harassments. After that incidence Lord Buddha showed compassion on nuns and requested from the king to facilitate bhikkuni monasteries only in urban areas.²⁸ Similarly a poor servant girl called Raṅgumāla who experienced much harassment from her masters and finally tried for committed suicide was helped. The Buddha involved solving her problem and supported to achieve the wisdom. Also some *theri gāta* show the relief which obtained by women who faced many domestic violence. The poem belongs to the nun called Muttā is a great example. She has mentioned that she released from three obstacles named the pestle, the waking stick and her handicapped husband. They are symbols which reflect the duties of a woman in household, domestic violence and an unpleasant marriage life. In few *suṭṭa* Lord Buddha advised lay persons to respect their mothers, wives and daughters. He didn't encourage polygamy and tried to emphasise of the benefit of limited on one spouse. According to Buddhism keeping illegal female or male partners and continue sexual relationships and cheating legal spouse is a sin. From the fundamental Buddhist rules called five Precepts or *Panchasēla*, the sexual misconduct is discouraged. In the *Sigālowāda sutta* Lord Buddha admired lay persons who respect their wives and provide them necessities. He declared duties of a husband. The Buddha's consciousness of the gender equality and violence against women in an early age like 6th Century B.C. is a marvellous fact.

26. "Engaging Philanthropy to Promote Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment", Final

Report, United Nations, Feb 2010, pp.8-11.

27. The Pali Commentary on Theri Gāta (Singhla Translation), Royal Asiatic Society, Sri Lanka, 1999.p. 58-60.

28. *ibid.* p. 135

In United Nation level there are many modern suggestions to promoting women's economic empowerment. When consider ancient South and South East Asian Buddhist societies, women were encouraged and participated for economic activities. In Sri Lankan ancient women showed their talents in education sector as teachers, medical sector as nurses and attendance. In hospitals for nuns female doctors worked. There were many employments in herms and other court premises. Women gave remarkable contributions to the agricultural and commercial sector of these countries. The most attractive fact is, they have been treated with sufficient wage and social status similar to their men.²⁹ Therefore, it is clear that women enjoyed similar economic situation in ancient Buddhist societies in Asia. Considering ancient Sri Lankan context, many scholars have proved the equal land rights of women. Women showed their property rights and freedom to donate lands to the monasteries with mentioning their name and social hierarchy. Lord Buddha's great influence has changed these society and mild the patriarchal values of the community.

Finally it can be concluded that there is necessity for re-establishing women's rights and attitudes toward gender equality in societies like South Asia. There are values and ethics that are already rooted in Buddhist minds on the rights of women. The philosophy of Buddhism always encourage women's intellectual career and equal social behaviors as well as property rights. According to historical researches, there were women who belonging to various social levels and castes who had achieved wisdom and secular prosperity. Some women leaders were able to dominate institutes related to religious and economic fields and some were able to rule the country. As emphasized above, these equalities in social status were acquired through changing people's thoughts according to Buddha dharma. Therefore modern activists on rights of women and feminists can return to the Buddhist perspective to promote gender equality and empower women in the new millennium than importing Western theories to Asian societies.

29. Indrani Munasinghe, Sri Lankan woman in antiquity : 6th century B.C. to fifteenth century A.C, Colombo, 2004, p.35-48

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