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EMPOWERING THAI NUNS TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Thai nuns, known as Mae Chee who shave their heads, don white clothing, and adhere to a monastic-like lifestyle, have an ambiguous status among Thai Buddhist practitioners. Despite their monastic-like lifestyle, they fall under the official category of laywomen (Upasika). Nevertheless, they are sometimes treated as monastics and some government agencies see them as renunciants, hindering them from receiving full benefits from either category. They encounter societal disadvantages and adverse stereotypes. Their living conditions are inadequate, with restricted options for studying and executing tasks. Scholars think that pursuing official monastic status or reinstating bhikkhuni ordination are the most effective methods to enhance the social standing of these underprivileged women. Religious feminist researchers are leading the cause with the singular aim of attaining equal status to male monastics, without regard for the actual consequence after that goal is realized. Nevertheless, their efforts have not been successful in improving their quality of life, even though they have been struggling for a long time. This research employs critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis of qualitative data obtained through interviews and observations to analyze these efforts through the lens of sustainable development, arguing that these ongoing efforts may not only hinder sustainable development but also push them towards greater subordination within the institutional patriarchy.

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INTRODUCTION

Buddhist practitioners are typically categorized as Bhikkhus (monks), Bhikkhunis (ordained women), Upasakas (laymen), or Upasikas (laywomen). Thai nuns, known as Mae Chee, who shave their heads, don white clothing, and adhere to a monastic-like lifestyle, have an ambiguous status among Buddhist practitioners.¹ Despite their monastic-like lifestyle, they fall under the official category of laywomen (Upasika). They are sometimes treated as monastics and some government agencies see them as renunciants, hindering them from receiving full benefits from either category. Scholars have pointed out that they possess an unclear status between the laity and the Sangha, or between the religious and secular spheres.² Thai nuns (Mae Chee) have been the focus of a number of studies recently. Most of the studies have emphasized that they are outcasts in society, with a low status role and way of life, facing numerous disadvantages.³ Due to the formal inferior status of nuns, they are not well-accepted in the community and do not hold official religious authority. Thus, they are not recognized by law as a distinct legal category.⁴ Thai Buddhists consider them, at most, as devout laywomen who adhere to the eight precepts. At their worst, they are regarded with mistrust, pity, and even disdain. Numerous academic research has indicated that Mae Chee are frequently linked to negative stereotypes, portraying them as either heartbroken young ladies or old temple attendants.⁵ Reports on Mae Chee provide insights into groups of women serving as temple attendants, enduring lives characterized by hardship and poverty.⁶ They possess a significant array of responsibilities deemed 'domestic' and 'menial': they prepare all meals for the community, maintain cleanliness within the monastery, and participate in essential ritual practices.⁷

Unlike monks, due to their unclear status, Mae Chee are not eligible to receive alms during the alms round.⁸ They are not receiving any financial assistance from the Department of Religious Affairs of the Thai Government.⁹ Nevertheless, the Thai Ministry of Interior classifies these nuns as monastics, hence rendering

¹ David L. Gosling, "The Changing Roles of Thailand's Lay Nuns (Mae Chii)," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 26.1 (1998): 124, <https://doi.org/10.1163/030382498X00102>.

² Monica Lindberg Falk, "Buddhism and resilience in post-tsunami Thailand," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 22.1 (2021): 157-171. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4727600>; Tansomboon, Mae Chee Amphai, "Awakening Thai Nuns: Wisdom and Successes," *Buddhist Virtues in Socio-Economic Development* (2011) 581-588; Rachelle M. Scott, "Buddhism, miraculous powers, and gender-Rethinking the stories of Theravāda nuns," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (2010): 489-511.

³ Marjorie Muecke, "Female sexuality in Thai discourses about Maechee ('lay nuns')." *culture, health & sexuality* 6.3 (2004): 221-238. doi:10.1080/136910501141179; Scott, "Buddhism, miraculous powers" 489-511; Nicola Schneider, "Gender Asymmetry and Nuns' Agency in the Asian Buddhist Traditions," *Religions* 14.2 (2023): 285, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020285>; Lucinda Peach, "Sex or Sangha? Non-normative gender roles for women in Thai law and religion," *Mixed Blessings* (Brill Nijhoff, 2006), 53.; Lisa J. Battaglia, "Becoming Bhikkhuni Mae Chis and the Global Women's Ordination Movement," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 2015, 37.

⁴ Falk, "Buddhism and resilience."

⁵ Scott, "Buddhism, miraculous powers" 490.

⁶ Joanna Cook, "Hagiographic narrative and monastic practice: Buddhist morality and mastery amongst Thai Buddhist nuns," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15.2 (2009): 350.

⁷ Cook, "Hagiographic narrative and monastic practice," 357.

⁸ Joanna Cook, "Alms, money and reciprocity: Buddhist nuns as mediators of generalised exchange in Thailand," *Anthropology in Action* 15.3 (2008): 11, <https://doi.org/10.3167/aia.2008.150302>.

⁹ Parichart Suwanbubha, "Development and Buddhism revisited: Arguing the case for Thai religious nuns (Mae Chee)," *Development* 46 (2003): 70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1011637003046004011>

them ineligible to participate in political elections. The Ministry of Transport regards them as Buddhist lay individuals adhering to eight precepts, so excluding them from monastic privileges such as reduced fare.¹⁰

Their ambiguous status between the laity and the Sangha, as well as between the religious and secular domains, found to be impeding their life in certain ways.¹¹ Most of the literature have pointed out the ambiguity of the status of Mae Chee as the most prominent factor causing all these difficulties.¹² Many scholars believe that lack of recognition by the law as “ordained persons,” is one of the main causes of the ambiguity and wide variation in their socioreligious roles, status, and identities.¹³ The inequality in the ordination status of nuns has created a significant asymmetry between women and men, prompting the question of how to designate these female religious practitioners, who do not formally belong to the Buddhist monastic community, the Sangha.¹⁴ Moreover, as they are not entirely acknowledged as a layperson, they are prohibited from working as government teachers and other roles exclusively designated for lay individuals.¹⁵

As Tomalin, pointed out the poor status is further hampered by the confusing treatment they receive from various government ministries, as there is no consensus regarding their religious or secular identity.¹⁶ Moreover, Peach argued that this results from deeply rooted androcentrism within Thai monastic organizations and the attitudes they have instilled in the laity.¹⁷ The asymmetrical reciprocity and asymmetric dependency between the two groups monks and nuns, wherein nuns are unable to manage and govern their monastic existence without the involvement of monks has been pointed out as another factor causing this issue.¹⁸ Additionally many Mae Chee have little, if any, familial, societal, or institutional support for adopting the monastic path, which contributes to their marginalized status.¹⁹

It can be traced that since the beginning of the endeavors to improve the status and living condition of Mae Chee, the ideal solution was to attempt to gain official recognition as monastics. For example, Falk states that since 1993, Mae Chee Khunying Kanitha has been advocating for a Mae Chee bill that would grant them legal status and access to government funding.²⁰ Seeger asserts that the law still does not

¹⁰ Joanna Cook, “Hagiographic narrative and monastic practice,” 350; Prapaporn et al., Lived experience of elderly buddhist nuns living alone in northern Thailand, *Suranaree Journal Of Science And Technology*, 28 (01) (2021): 2.

¹¹ Falk, “Buddhism and resilience.”

¹² Schneider, “Gender Asymmetry and Nuns’ Agency,” 2; Tomalin. “Buddhist Feminist Transnational Networks,” 84; Peach, “Sex or Sangha,” 53.; Battaglia, “Becoming Bhikkhuni,” 35.

¹³ Peach, “Sex or Sangha,”; Falk, “Buddhism and resilience.”; Schneider, “Gender Asymmetry and Nuns’ Agency,” 2.; Suwanbubbha, “Development and Buddhism revisited,”

¹⁴ Ibid, 2.

¹⁵ Parichart Suwanbubbha, “Development and Buddhism revisited: Arguing the case for Thai religious nuns (Mae chees,” *Development* 46 (2003): 70.

¹⁶ Emma, Tomalin, “Buddhist Feminist Transnational Networks, Female Ordination and Women’s Empowerment,” *Oxford Development Studies* 37 (2009): 84.

¹⁷ Lucinda Peach, “Sex or Sangha? Non-Normative Gender Roles for Women in Thai Law and Religion,” in *Mixed Blessings*, (Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2006), 53.

Lucinda, Peach, “Sex or Sangha? Non-normative gender roles for women in Thai law and religion.” *Mixed Blessings*. Brill Nijhoff, 2006. 25-60.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Battaglia, “Becoming Bhikkhuni,” 35.

²⁰ Ibid.

frequently recognize the Mae Chee as “ordained persons,” despite a long history and continuous attempts to obtain a precise legal status as monastics.²¹ The Thai Nuns Institution, wishing to improve the status of Mae Chee, is implementing approaches to centralize the system and implementing more regulations.²²

It is proposed that an alternative interpretive framework for analyzing the experiences of Theravāda nuns and their adherents is essential.²³ Proposals have been introduced that Mae Chee should be incorporated into the development process and afforded more ‘human security’ to empower them.²⁴ Some scholars emphasized that Mae Chee are deficient in sustainable development and community engagement, which are fundamental to human-centered development.²⁵ Nevertheless, very few studies have genuinely examined the feasibility of implementing these concepts devoid of the assumption that receiving official recognition as monastics is the best solution to improve their situation.

By analyzing the situation of these practitioners, some scholars have proposed that obtaining Bhikkhuni status is the best solution to empower this group of religious women.²⁶ This proposal is embedded with the concealed “religious feminist” political motivation of obtaining equal status as male monastics. Through reviewing the existing literature, it became evident that, regardless of the proposed solutions, few have transcended the assumption that attaining equal monastic status with males, either while remaining as Mae Chee or obtaining Bhikkhuni status, is the paramount objective for the empowerment and advancement of Thai female renunciants.²⁷

In general development discourse, gender equality is an essential human right and a crucial basis for a peaceful, wealthy, and sustainable world. Ensuring women and girls have equal access to education, healthcare, gainful employment, and representation in political and economic decision-making, promote sustainable economic growth.²⁸ Gender equality, defined as the equal rights, duties, and opportunities afforded to both men and women, is of paramount significance, particularly due to its interconnection with the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals.²⁹

But when we take these general explanations of gender equality, women empowerment and sustainable development discourse into consideration and compare it with recommendations rendered for the empowerment of Mae Chee in Thailand, there is a huge difference that contradicts with each other. Especially the advocates of equal status as male monastics have neglected the recommendations suggested in development discourse by focusing only on getting the religious monastic status which is “enjoyed” by

²¹ Seeger, “The Fragmentary History of Female Monasticism in Thailand,” 1.

²² Falk, Monica Lindberg. *Making fields of merit: Buddhist female ascetics and gendered orders in Thailand*. No. 2. Nias Press, 2007.

²³ Scott, “Buddhism, miraculous powers,” 492.

²⁴ Suwanbubha, “Development and Buddhism revisited,” 70.

²⁵ Suwanbubha, “Development and Buddhism revisited,” 71.

²⁶ Tomalin. “Buddhist Feminist Transnational Networks,”

²⁷ Kameniar, Barbara. “Thai Buddhist Women, ‘Bare Life’ and Bravery.” *Australian religion studies review* 22.3 (2009): 281; Ekachai, Sanitsuda 2008 Thailand: Little Hope for Nuns in New Draft Bill. Buddhist Channel, May 8.

²⁸ Meenakshi and Loai, “Women empowerment: A key to sustainable development,” *The Social ION* 6.2 (2017): 27.

²⁹ Hend Hassan, “The relationship between gender equality, women empowerment and sustainable development,” *New Trends in Sustainable Business and Consumption*, (2020), 42.

the male renunciants in Thailand, making that as the ideal achievement, which the female renunciants should achieve in order to improve their living condition.

Though some has hinted and mentioned that Mae Chee are currently having a status which is partly-free from the control of the patriarchal institution, very few have systematically argued against the attempts of the stake holders to obtain the official monastic status.³⁰

By using empowerment and sustainable development goals lens, we will critically analyze that ongoing attempts advocated by religious feminist scholars and Thai Mae Chee Institute are counteracting the sustainable development goals by restricting their ability to freely engaged in any activity that they would desire and gradually pushing them into the subordinate grip of the institutionalized monastic patriarchy. Furthermore, we will explore and propose dimensions that should be advocated for the empowerment to ultimately achieve sustainable development goals.

RESEARCH METHODS

We designed this research within the qualitative research paradigm to explore ways to empower Thai Buddhist nuns (Mae Chee) towards sustainable development.

First, we applied a discourse analysis of existing literature on Thai nuns to critically evaluate the recommendations for improvement and empowerment. We then incorporated the data collected from in-depth interviews with 45 Mae Chee and observations of activities at 10 nunneries for about two years during 2023-2024, into the analysis process, applying an empowerment and sustainable development lens to critically analyze the data.

In analyzing these discourses, we adhered to the principles outlined in Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis to elucidate how language is employed to promote particular agendas, frequently obscured by layers of ideology.³¹ We also followed elements of Critical Discourse Studies advocated by Van Dijk, T. A. which extends beyond traditional analyses of the structural characteristics of text or speech, linking these discourse structures to social frameworks.³² Qualitative interviews are essential for researchers, enabling the investigation and understanding of phenomena that cannot be directly measured or observed.³³

To obtain a holistic perspective, we selected informants with different backgrounds, there were highly educated nuns and nuns who had only very minimum education levels, nuns who holds positions in Thai nuns institute and who used to hold positions, nuns who were the leaders of nunneries of both categories i.e. nunneries which are located in a temple where the abbot is a male monk and nunneries which were led by a Mae Chee. The qualitative interview approach effectively captures the nuanced, contextually rich experiences of participants, which organized surveys and quantitative methods may inadequately convey.

³⁰ Kameniar, Barbara, "Thai Buddhist Women, 'Bare Life' and Bravery,"; Lisa J. Battaglia, "Becoming Bhikkhuni Mae Chis and the Global Women's Ordination Movement,".

³¹ Norman, Fairclough, *Discourse and social change* (Polity Press, 1992).

³² Van Dijk, Teun A., "Socio-cognitive discourse studies" *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies* (Routledge, 2017), 26-43.

³³ Knott, Eleanor, et al., "Interviews in the social sciences," *Nature Reviews Methods Primers* 2.1 (2022): 73.

Taking the sensitivity of the topic into consideration, the researchers rigorously concealed the informants' identities by refraining from providing any identifiable information.

Women Empowerment and Sustainable Development

Empowerment and gender equality are mutually reinforcing phenomena that promote beneficial changes in each other.³⁴ Empowering women is crucial for achieving all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), since it impacts poverty, hunger, prosperity, and inclusivity, as emphasized in policy studies.³⁵ The new development agenda has 17 SDGs and 169 goals. Gender equality and women's empowerment constitute the fifth Sustainable Development Goal to be attained by 2030.³⁶ SGD 5's aspirations cannot be achieved easily due to gender inequality and women's and girls' disempowerment's deep and interconnected roots.³⁷

An individual's power to make decisions that better their lives and well-being is empowerment.³⁸ Empowerment is the capacity of individuals to govern and direct their life.³⁹ Empowerment entails the inclusion of women in development, facilitating their participation and enabling them to express their perspectives.⁴⁰ Women should be included into development and empowered to engage in the economic and political frameworks of society. Empowerment commences when the most disenfranchised individuals, such as impoverished and marginalized women, are afforded a space and are integrated into the development process.⁴¹ Both "practical gender needs," such as employment, education, and healthcare, and "strategic gender demands," including power, gender pay equity, bodily autonomy, legal rights, domestic violence prevention, and opportunities, are interconnected and essential.⁴² The various causes of gender disparity include inadequate legal protection, economic policies, cultural norms and attitudes, and entrenched patriarchal systems.⁴³

Empowering women include enabling them to think and act autonomously, cultivate self-worth, trust in their capacity for change, oversee their lives, make choices, recognize their potential, and attain societal equality.⁴⁴ Women must be included in all decision-making processes, including public, private,

³⁴ Raquel Lima, and Guedes Graça, "Sustainable Development Goals and Gender Equality: A Social Design Approach on Gender-Based Violence," *Sustainability* 16.2 (2024): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16020914>.

³⁵ Gupta, et al., "Women empowerment: challenges and opportunities for sustainable development goals," *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 27.4 (2024): 610, <https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-11-2023-0160>.

³⁶ Mariam A. Soharwardi and Tusawar I. Ahmad, "Dimensions and determinants of women empowerment in developing countries," *International Journal of Sustainable Development and Planning* 15.6 (2020): 957, <https://doi.org/10.18280/ijstdp.150620>.

³⁷ Sandra Fredman, et al., "Transformative equality: Making the sustainable development goals work for women," *Ethics & International Affairs* 30.2 (2016): 185, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S089267941600006X>.

³⁸ Gupta, et al., "Women empowerment," 610.

³⁹ Ebrahimi, R. et al., "Investigating the effect of vocational education and training on rural women's empowerment," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 9.1 (2022), 3, doi: 10.1057/s41599-022-01187-4.

⁴⁰ Tomalin, "Buddhist Feminist Transnational Networks," 82.

⁴¹ Ebrahimi, R. et al., "Investigating the effect of vocational," 3.

⁴² Tomalin, "Buddhist Feminist Transnational Networks," 82.

⁴³ Fredman, et al., "Transformative equality," 179.

⁴⁴ Ebrahimi, R. et al., "Investigating the effect of vocational," 2.

political, and social ones.⁴⁵ Rather than being saved, women want tools and support to discover their agency as flourishing individuals.⁴⁶ In many studies the evaluation of women's empowerment encompassed four dimensions: economic, social, individual, and psychological.⁴⁷ Certain studies assessed women's empowerment through economic, social, and psychological variables.⁴⁸ In some studies, women's empowerment is assessed through self-esteem, decision-making authority, resource management, and mobility.⁴⁹ Contemporary theorists and social scientists assert that sustainable development cannot be attained without the active involvement of women in political, social, and economic domains.⁵⁰ Educational attainment, employment status, economic standing, and empowerment are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.⁵¹

Human rights are the foundation and goal of development, as stated in the agenda.⁵² Women experience empowerment when they make decisions informed by their awareness of available options and their rights.⁵³ The SDGs can be transformed using the human rights framework, which is underutilized.⁵⁴ The SDGs emphasize human rights and acknowledge the interconnections among inequality, marginalization, and poverty.⁵⁵ Empowerment constitutes an essential human right and a fundamental component of growth.⁵⁶ Power must be equitably distributed to enable women's full participation in citizenship and societal life.⁵⁷ Agenda for Sustainable Development promotes women's human rights because reaching full potential and sustainable development requires resolving women's human rights denial.⁵⁸

Huis et al. asserts that empowering women is seen as one of the central issues in the process of sustainable development for many nations worldwide. One outcome of this perspective is the proposed Three-Dimensional Model of Women's Empowerment that identifies personal (individual and psychological), relational (social), and societal (political) dimensions.⁵⁹

⁴⁵ Fredman, et al., "Transformative equality," 180.

⁴⁶ Lima and Graça, "Sustainable Development Goals and Gender Equality" 3.

⁴⁷ Ebrahimi, R. et al., "Investigating the effect of vocational," 3.

⁴⁸ Pratley and Sandberg, "Refining the conceptualization and measurement of women's empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa using data from the 2013 Nigerian demographic and health survey," *Social Indicators Research* 140.2 (2018): 777-793.

⁴⁹ Soharwardi and Ahmad, "Dimensions and determinants" 958.

⁵⁰ Bayeh, Endalcachew, "The role of empowering women and achieving gender equality to the sustainable development of Ethiopia", *Pacific Science Review B: Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2016, 2.1: 2, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psr.2016.09.013>; Ayesha Khurshid, "Domesticated gender (in) equality: Women's education & gender relations among rural communities in Pakistan," *International Journal of Educational Development* 51 (2016): 43-50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2016.08.001>; Ebrahimi, R. et al., "Investigating the effect of vocational," 2.

⁵¹ Arvind Kumar Yadav, et al., "Education, employment, economic status and empowerment: Implications for maternal health care services utilization in India," *Journal of Public Affairs* 21.3 (2021): e2259. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2259>.

⁵² Ibid, 180.

⁵³ Gupta, et al., "Women empowerment," 610.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 177.

⁵⁵ Valeria, Esquivel, and Sweetman, Caroline, "Gender and the sustainable development goals," *Gender & Development* 24.1 (2016): 1-8. doi:10.1080/13552074.2016.1153318.

⁵⁶ Ebrahimi, R. et al., "Investigating the effect of vocational," 3.

⁵⁷ Lima and Graça, "Sustainable Development Goals and Gender Equality," 3.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 180.

⁵⁹ Huis, Marloes A., et al. "A three-dimensional model of women's empowerment: Implications in the field of micro-finance and future directions." *Frontiers in psychology* 8 (2017): 1678.

It can be concluded that the empowerment of women for sustainable development is a multifaceted concept that encompasses four primary dimensions: economic, social, psychological, and political. In this undertaking, we will investigate the potential of utilizing this framework to empower Mae Chee in these inter-linked dimensions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Push for Formal Recognition: A Critical Assessment

As previously noted, the majority of scholars and the Thai Nuns Institute have been guiding Mae Chee towards achieving either official recognition as monastics or acquiring Bhikkhuni status which would enable them to be acknowledged as official monastics inside the existing Buddhist institution. In order to achieve that goal, the primary proposal and guidelines of scholars and advocates involve formulating additional rules and regulations that are similar to those of the monks with the intention of shaping the behavior of Mae Chee to resemble that of official monastics, thereby securing the approval of the government and the Sangha for their recognition as monastics.

Feminist scholars have deliberately excluded positive aspects of current situation, likely due to a concealed political objective, in order to portray the circumstances of Mae Chee as exceedingly terrible. Then to push their agenda of getting equal status as same as males without considering the actual nature and the consequence of that status. When considering the true nature of that “ideal status” it can be said that while feminists in general have focused on empowering women through education, liberty, political freedom, and human rights, religious feminists have had a stance of achieving equal monastic status as male monastics neglecting some of other important factors such as political freedom and human rights. Even Seeger⁶⁰ who highlighted the positive aspects of current developments, has observed that the evolution of Mae Chee as a positive aspect emphasizing that Mae Chee have prioritized monastic regulation development, adjustment, and improvement. While this phenomenon can be viewed partially as a “development”, it contradicts the objectives outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals. Many of these “developments,” from the viewpoint of Thai Mae Chee and their proponents are constraining the rights and political power that ought to be advocated in accordance with universal human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Despite prior research emphasizing the nuns’ aspirations to attain eligibility for monastic benefits akin to those granted to monks and novices, which include access to public and private services such as healthcare and subsidized transportation,⁶¹ most of our interview participants did not reference this request. There was a Mae Chee who wished that the state would place them in either category and render the associated benefits. *“Give us an either status whether as a monastic or lay person and give us full rights and benefits according to that.”* Moreover, showing Mae Chee as objects of pity and attention reduces their autonomy and subjectivity. It appears that most Mae Chee believe they are not oppressed by prejudice, inequities, or stereotypes.⁶²

⁶⁰ Seeger, “The Fragmentary History of Female Monasticism in Thailand,” 20.

⁶¹ Prapaporn et al., “Lived experience of elderly buddhist nuns,” 7.

⁶² Battaglia, “Becoming Bhikkhunī,” 38.

The exclusion of women from the official Sangha is frequently perceived as “evidence” of their spiritual inferiority.⁶³ During our interviews, one Mae Chee expressed the view, *“It has always been like this and I don’t feel inferior.”* Another Mae Chee declared, *“anyone can attain Enlightenment regardless of their gender.”* A Mae Chee confided, *“For me, I am focused on my practice so nothing else is really relevant.”* This is in conformity with findings of other scholars who found that many Mae Chee adhere to the belief that one’s position in the social hierarchy does not necessarily reflect their capacity or potential for enlightenment.⁶⁴ One of our initial interviews with a Mae Chee on the subject of the empowerment and her own religious aspirations yielded the following response: *“I don’t think we should get involved in the quest for gender equality or any other gains. We have become renunciants to practice Buddhism. So, we should focus only on that.”*⁶⁵ This illustrates their genuine motivation for being a nun; nevertheless, it may also be interpreted as acquiescence to the established system and a lack of awareness of their rights.

The Limitations of Regulatory Imposition

Pointing out the positive aspects of current development, Seeger⁶⁶ has hailed the numerous additional precepts and monastic regulations that Mae Chee have established. For example, in the 1975 edition of the Regulations of Practice, the rule stipulates that ordination must occur within a complete sangha of four or more monks.⁶⁷ The introduction of regulations of this manner can be perceived as an element that drives the autonomy and agency of the Mae Chee into further subordination of institutional patriarchy. If Mae Chee implement new ordination procedures that can be carried out solely with the participation of Mae Chee, they may feel more liberated and independent. As these rules and regulations were created by Mae Chee themselves, likely by following the rules and regulations of the Bhikkhunis and hoping that one day they will be admitted into the Sangha as a substitution for the Bhikkhuni institution, changing these regulations may not spark criticism or controversy. However after a long period of time there remains no indication that that acceptance of Bhikkhuni will happen in the near future. A Mae Chee who is involved in taking care of an orphanage mentioned *“if there will be rules that will prohibit nuns to engage in other activities rather than meditation and chanting, we will not be able to engage in social services like this.”*⁶⁸

Ambivalence Toward Bhikkhuni Ordination

Gosling, D. L. stated that the emergence of new Mae Chee roles prompted an inquiry into the complete ordination of women.⁶⁹ Only thirty-four percent of his informants supported this, although the majority were generally satisfied with their existing status. His study also found that merely 12 percent of the more progressive scholar monks at Mahachulalongkorn University support the ordination of women. He concluded that it seems likely that significant change in the current status quo will be delayed.

⁶³ Battaglia, “Becoming Bhikkhunī,” 48.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 48.

⁶⁵ Interview With a Mae Chee, 20 September, 2023.

⁶⁶ Seeger, “The Fragmentary History of Female Monasticism in Thailand,” 20.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 14.

⁶⁸ Interview With a Mae Chee, 14 October, 2023.

⁶⁹ Gosling, “The Changing Roles of Thailand’s Lay Nuns,” 140

Moreover, the motivation for seeking Bhikkhuni ordination is seen as an attempt to advocate for women's rights. Scholars, such as Tomalin, have hailed the status of monks saying that lay Buddhists give generously to monks because donations to Mae Chee generate less merit as a major benefit of being a monk,⁷⁰ while ignoring other human rights-related restrictions such as the right to vote, limitations on education and occupation, and prohibitions on handling money, which even monks face.

The discourse on religious women prioritizes the Bhikkhunī movement over Mae Chee status. Some scholars asserted that replacing Mae Chee with a bhikkhuni institution would elevate women in Thai culture and address many of their issues.⁷¹ It is important to acknowledge that efforts by Thai Buddhist women to reform gender-related Buddhist practices are sometimes perceived as attempts to “Westernize” the tradition. Moreover, the Bhikkhuni movement has been criticized as a “Western feminist imposition.”⁷² Anyhow, none of the participants referenced the term Bhikkhuni, nor did they consider Bhikkhuni ordination as a viable possibility when we inquired about improving the status and livelihood of Mae Chee without mentioning the name Bhikkhuni. This is consistent with the findings of other studies which found that many are content being a Mae Chee and do not desire to become a Bhikkhuni.⁷³ This is supported by Peach, L. J.⁷⁴ and Cook⁷⁵ who found that a considerable number of Thai women, particularly monastics, oppose the reinstatement of female ordination within the formal Sangha, as they perceive greater autonomy outside of it.

Tomalin asserted that feminist religious change has the potential to alleviate global women's subjugation and suggested that for ‘religious feminism’ to empower grassroots women, it must reconcile feminist interpretations of tradition with the limiting practices of Thai Buddhism.⁷⁶ Feminist transformation of religion can enhance women's empowerment, which includes their ability to act, perceive themselves as capable, hold opinions, use time effectively, control resources, interact with others, initiate activities, and respond to events. She is also motivated by the ambition to point out the importance of global networking for Buddhist feminism and local initiatives aimed at revitalizing the bhikkhuni lineage as a method to address women's strategic gender demands through the change of patriarchal religion. As we pointed out earlier, this scholar hasn't thoroughly investigated the consequence of obtaining Bhikkhuni status as a way that could push the already independent group of women into the subordination position in a male dominant institution. Additionally, none of the Mae Chee we interviewed expressed the desire to obtain Bhikkhuni status.

⁷⁰ Tomalin, “The Thai *Bhikkhuni* Movement,” 387.

⁷¹ Ekachai, “*Keeping the Faith*”; Tomalin, “The Thai *Bhikkhuni* Movement,” 388.

⁷² Battaglia, “Becoming Bhikkhunī,” 45.

⁷³ Ibid, 48.

⁷⁴ Lucinda Joy Peach, “Human rights, religion, and (sexual) slavery,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (2000): 71.

⁷⁵ Cook, Joanna. *Meditation in modern Buddhism: Renunciation and change in Thai monastic life* (Cambridge University Press, 2010)

⁷⁶ Tomalin, “The Thai *Bhikkhuni* Movement,”

Agency and Empowerment Beyond Institutional Validation

The potential for Mae Chee to evolve within the current system, owing to their unique attributes, has been highlighted by several scholars.⁷⁷ This is exemplified by the lives of Mae Chee Thosaphon and Khun Yay Ubasika Chandra Khonnokyoong. These nuns already wield authority inside their separate groups. Their authority derives not from ordination, education, or asceticism; instead, it is communicated and validated through their supernatural abilities.⁷⁸ Aligning with the observation of Cook, J.⁷⁹ we are also suggesting that the participation of Mae Chee in the instruction and practice of meditation is facilitating the integration of women into religious and monastic positions and Mae Chee can articulate their identity and be recognized by others as monastics. We furthermore would like to make the distinction that enhancing monastic status through the evolution of monastic roles is crucial; however, efforts to achieve this status via centralization and institutionalization may result in greater subordination to patriarchy and a loss of agency and autonomy over their institutions.

Mae Chee's behaviors and attitudes may not align with progressive secular Western ideals, nor are they aimed at fulfilling this criterion. The Theravāda bhikkhunī movement and international Buddhist-feminist networks advocate for egalitarian ordination within Buddhist traditions; nonetheless, the ambiguity of Mae Chee towards this issue jeopardizes their principles and narratives.⁸⁰ The evident doubt that Mae Chee display toward Bhikkhuni ordination is exacerbated by the independence and authority they derive from their intermediary status, which many Mae Chee are hesitant to forfeit.⁸¹ We think this contributes to our assumption that advocacy for institutional validation is based on religious feminist needs of getting what the males have regardless of their consequences and that there is this possibility of creating agency and empowerment beyond that attainment.

Cook⁸² suggests we could contend that regardless of these women's intentions, their actions may be evaluated based on their efficacy in either sustaining or subverting male dominance structures. Among the Mae Chee we interviewed, posing a non-directive question such as "how do you think the situation of Mae Chee can be improved?", not a single one expressed the intention, implicitly or explicitly, to use their ordination and practice to challenge or change patriarchal dominance in Thai monastic sphere. Most of them asserted that their religious life is carried out for the sake of spiritual advancement. Our findings align with Cook's⁸³ statement saying that the monastic practice is not perceived as a challenge to male authority or as a pursuit of gender equality.

⁷⁷ Collins, Steven, and Justin Mcdaniel. "Buddhist 'Nuns' (Mae Chi) and the Teaching of Pali in Contemporary Thailand." *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 6 (2010): 1373–1408; Scott, "Buddhism, miraculous powers."; Seeger, Martin. "The changing roles of thai buddhist women: obscuring identities and increasing charisma 1." *Religion Compass* 3.5 (2009): 806-822.

⁷⁸ Scott, "Buddhism, miraculous powers" 500.

⁷⁹ Cook, "Hagiographic narrative and monastic practice," 355.

⁸⁰ Battaglia, "Becoming Bhikkhunī," 55.

⁸¹ Ibid, 51.

⁸² Ibid, 357.

⁸³ Ibid, 357.

As we pointed out earlier obtaining official recognition through a bill would cause this group of partly-independent women further into a more subordinate position within the existing religious institution. This finding is supported by several other scholars who had a similar positioning about this matter.⁸⁴

Spiritual Authority Outside Formal Ordination

There is the possibility of increasing spiritual authority and agency within the current status. Mahmood⁸⁵ theorized that the meaning of an action is not universal but contingent upon circumstance. What may appear as acquiescence or passivity from one viewpoint can signify agency from another. Cook, J. elaborated that agency encompasses not just the resistance of norms but also the meaningful engagement with them within particular cultural and historical situations.⁸⁶ Mahmood's argument questions the traditional perspective that agency exclusively involves resisting or departing from norms, exerting individual will, or pursuing autonomy. Agency may also be manifested through activities that conform to and embrace cultural or religious norms. This aligns with Tansomboon's conclusion⁸⁷ that Mae Chee need not participate in political conflicts for social equality. Numerous opportunities exist to acquire wisdom and attain enlightenment while advancing along Lord Buddha's Noble Path, with many successful examples demonstrated in this pursuit.

Peach's postulation that the rationale behind monks' refusal to permit nuns to attain full ordination is rooted in the monks' vested interests in maintaining a status quo that subjugates nuns, thereby ensuring their servitude in domestic tasks and other services,⁸⁸ appears somewhat irrational and lacks empirical substantiation. As pointed out earlier, if analyzed critically, giving full ordination will put these female renunciants under patriarchal institution more than the current status. Our inductive analysis also revealed that formalizing women's status within the Sangha will re-establish their subjugation to the rule and authority of male monks. We found that there were other researchers who found similar concerns regarding this matter, though some of them deliberately chose to ignore that point.⁸⁹ Our observations and interviews revealed that claims by scholars such as Peach⁹⁰ asserting Mae Chee are not considered disseminators of the Dhamma and are forbidden from interpreting Buddhist literature, formally teaching Buddhism, or conducting religious rites are no longer the case and sound exaggerating. Hence, based on our observation and interviews, we believe that Mae Chee still possess the potential to claim spiritual authority within the current system.

⁸⁴ Boss, Lowell W. "The Female Renunciates of Sri Lanka: The Dasasilamattawa." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (1987): 7-31.; Kameniar, Barbara. "Thai Buddhist Women, 'Bare Life' and Bravery."; Battaglia, "Becoming Bhikkhunī,"

⁸⁵ Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202-36, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/656537>.

⁸⁶ Cook, "Hagiographic narrative and monastic practice," 358.

⁸⁷ Tansomboon, "Awakening Thai Nuns," 588.

⁸⁸ Peach, "Sex or Sangha," 53.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 56.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 53.

Structural Barriers: Legal, Educational, and Economic Marginalization

Most of the scholars agree that Mae Chee are marginalized, alienated and uneducated.⁹¹ As a result of poor education Mae Chee frequently lack the same expertise as their male counterparts, which subsequently impacts their economic conditions.⁹² Viewed through a sociological lens Peach, claimed that Thai law has historically institutionalized discrimination against women, endorsing male supremacy in marriage, divorce, and the distribution of marital assets, so entrenching the subordinate status of nuns inside Thai culture. Furthermore, she points out that half of the female population does not complete primary school, and women generally have a lesser level of education compared to men.⁹³ This indicates that the status and position of nuns are directly influenced by the norms of Thai society as a whole, as well as the significance of education in enhancing their status and role. Therefore, this issue should be examined from a collective sociological perspective rather than as an isolated phenomenon.

Thai Nuns Institute is hailed as an organization which is supposed to support Mae Chee in their livelihood. When enquired about the support Mae Chee had received from Thai Nuns Institute, most of the informants had never actually received any kind of support from the organization. As said by a nun, *"I have never received any support from the Thai Nuns Institute or any other organization...I had to look after and support myself in my whole life as a Mae Chee"*⁹⁴. Another nun mentioned *"Thai nun institute would only ask for our support when they are organizing different ceremonies"*⁹⁵. There were several Mae Chee who had been invited to participate in group-lunches where they received some small amount of donations after the meal. *"I hope they will support our education to study in universities both in Thailand and abroad"*⁹⁶ added a Mae Chee who had to self-fund her education in a university in India.

Even though there were initiations by Thai Nuns Institute to establish a school and education centers, in reality they are not especially designed for Mae Chee, in our recent visits to Dhammacarinii School at Ratburi Samnak Chii which have been hailed as an initiation that will empower Mae Chee, we observed that the school has become a girl-only school and neither the students nor the teachers were Mae Chee. Our visits to Mahapajapati College in Korat also revealed that there aren't many Mae Chee studying at the college. It is obvious that despite all these previous attempts the situation has not improved significantly as expected. Therefore, it is imperative to take innovative initiatives to address this inadequacy.

⁹¹ Kabilsingh, Chatsumarn. *Thai Women in Buddhism*. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991.

⁹² Schneider, "Gender Asymmetry and Nuns' Agency," 2.

⁹³ Peach, "Sex or Sangha," 35-36.

⁹⁴ Interview with a Mae Chee, 20 January, 2024.

⁹⁵ Interview with a Mae Chee, 13 January, 2024.

⁹⁶ Interview with a Mae Chee, 09 December, 2023.

Recommendations for Sustainable Empowerment

Re-evaluating their contribution

The volunteer service performed by Mae Chee at the monastery is considered by numerous scholars as a menial endeavor that made their lives unpleasant⁹⁷, we feel that this is an exaggeration of the situation and devaluing the contribution Mae Chee render for the functioning of the organization. This “service” in many Mae Chee’ idea is a valuable service they render “*for the existence and preservation of the religion which will generate merits.*”⁹⁸ Informants of Cook’s study also mentioned that they were very proud of their contribution and service.⁹⁹ Although Falk hinted that the domestic work as a symbol of subordination,¹⁰⁰ she also found that Mae Chee who were the subject of her study assert that their labor in the monastery fosters an experiential comprehension of non-self, rendering gender inconsequential through such awareness.

Moreover, it is essential to take into consideration that male monks also participate in temple cleaning, and at certain temples, a woman or man who is not a Mae Chee may assume the responsibility of cooking for the residents. Especially in temples where there aren’t any resident Mae Chee, these tasks are performed voluntarily by a male or female as a part of the functioning process. Hence, even though many have attempted to portray this as a symbol of oppression and subordination of Mae Chee, it seems to us that it is not really the case as they are not forced to perform these tasks. Instead of denigrating their contribution, re-considering the way we assess these phenomena is essential.

Citizenship and Political Rights

Mae Chee could be encouraged to claim full citizenship with all the associated rights and benefits. Giving the political power back to the Mae Chee, who still lack full recognition or given the benefits of monastics, is essential in making them stronger and more valuable in the eyes of the politicians. We propose that they should be given the full rights and powers as all other women in the society. It is irrelevant whether they utilize political power or not. As citizens, individuals possess the right to be eligible to vote and engage in political activities if they so desire. This would compel politicians to consider the interests of the electorate, as they are potential voters. Otherwise, Mae Chee may be entirely disregarded as lacking significance for the politicians. Gaining political power will increase their value and the agency to negotiate with the government to represent their real needs.

They must be provided more perspectives about their status and roles, so they would be able to decide by themselves how to navigate their position in the society. It is important to note that all of the empowerment and sustainable development discourses emphasized the importance of civic and political rights.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Gosling, “Thai monks and lay nuns,” 20.; Falk, Monica Lindberg, “Gender, Buddhism and social resilience in the aftermath of the tsunami in Thailand,” *South East Asia Research* 20.2 (2012): 175-190.

⁹⁸ Interviews with many Mae Chee in several occasions.

⁹⁹ Cook, Joanna. *Meditation in modern Buddhism: Renunciation and change in Thai monastic life* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁰⁰ Lindberg Falk (2007), 25.

¹⁰¹ Gupta, et al., “Women empowerment,”; Fredman, et al., “Transformative equality,”; Valeria, Esquivel, and Sweetman, Caroline, “Gender and the sustainable development goals,”; Ebrahimi, R. et al., “Investigating the effect of vocational,”

Reassessing Advocacy: A Call for Grassroots-Centered Reforms

Moving forward, the voice of the all the Mae Chee should be taken into consideration before taking any action that would affect them all. We contend that the efforts of the Thai Nuns Institute and their vociferous advocates to regulate the conduct of nuns and to formalize their status via royal decree will ultimately subordinate them and restrict their potential for empowerment. Consequently, we propose that Mae Chee and their supporters adopt a new position, reassess, and reformulate the objectives of their efforts to guarantee that the Mae Chee, as a collective of marginalized women, attain full human rights, citizenship, and access to all benefits available to other women within society. Statements such as “*increasing rules and regulations will make our life more complicated*,¹⁰²” “*I am happy with this simple life style*,¹⁰³” and “*we don’t need anyone creating more rules than we already have*”¹⁰⁴ exemplified that they do not see implementing stricter rules and regulations is what they really need.

Our findings support Lisa Battaglia’s argument that Thai Mae Chee often do not seek full ordination, not out of ignorance or oppression, but because their religious goals and cultural values lead them to find meaning within their current roles, challenging Western feminist assumptions about religious agency and equality.¹⁰⁵ Sustainable empowerment requires moving beyond symbolic recognition to address structural inequities.

Education and Economic Opportunities

Upon analysis, it became evident that nuns receive a very limited set of knowledge specifically designed for monks. Therefore, even after receiving education, there are few opportunities for them to elevate their social standing. Providing aid for education to Mae Chee, at least by Thai Nuns Institution, would be immense support for their education. Instead of solely relying on the education offered by the male Sangha, Mae Chee could rather develop a curriculum that meets their specific needs and foster empowerment. It is imperative that all parties promote the development of education and skills that will be advantageous to them upon completion. To qualify for numerous occupations, it is important to have knowledge and education across many fields. Thus, promoting diverse fields of study for individuals instead of adhering to traditional schooling similar to that of monks will facilitate their opportunities. The Thai nuns’ institute ought to concentrate on securing scholarships and educational funding to enhance the education of nuns, rather than enforcing regulations to limit their conduct and performing rituals while seeking financial donations from its members.

Mae Chee need to adhere to the advice of many intellectuals and attempt to expand educational opportunities. It is worth considering support for individuals who take up these roles, along with appropriate recognition or compensation for their contributions. The lack of proper compensation would be a factor that deter them to engage in those social services. Creating a program to recognize their contributions,

¹⁰² Interview with a Mae Chee, 02 March, 2024.

¹⁰³ Interview with a Mae Chee, 17 February, 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with a Mae Chee, 02 November, 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Battaglia, Lisa, *Women Who Have Gone Forth: Thai Buddhist Nuns and the Debate Over Women’s Ordination* (Saarbrücken: Scholars’ Press, 2014).

perhaps through public acknowledgment when monetary support isn't possible, could be a constructive step. Our interviews suggested, Mae Chee are feeling that their voluntary service is not appreciated.

Role Diversification

Following suggestions rendered by scholars, they would benefit if they were encouraged to take up different roles than what they are limited to perform right now. As observed by Gosling, D. L.¹⁰⁶ that traditionally for Mae Chee teaching responsibilities are considered appropriate, especially for youth; however, other activities, including leadership training, television sermons, female inmate visitation, and drug prevention, were also recognized as suitable for Mae Chee, as all of these jobs were regarded as congruent with ideal "Buddhist" ideas.

Mae Chee would benefit greatly if they were permitted to engage in any economic activity, as they are not yet formally acknowledged monastics entitled to the advantages of a monk. Consequently, if individuals aspire to engage in any vocation that generates income, they should not be restricted by being classified as renunciants. These advanced female practitioners could at least be eligible for government positions as teachers, counselors, or nurses, provided they possess the requisite qualifications. Moreover, it would be beneficial to ensure they have access to education and are encouraged to explore a variety of income-generating opportunities. Seeger also pointed out that there are nuns who are well-known for their work as dhamma teachers, social activists, or Buddhist "saints" show that women's religious duties are becoming less strict and broader.¹⁰⁷ Aligning with his findings we suggest that their responsibilities should not be confined to those of a temple attendant or a renunciant. It may be appropriate to allow them the autonomy to pursue roles of their choosing and engage openly with others, without imposing the obligations associated with monastic renunciation. The efforts of Thai nuns to implement restrictions similar to those governing monks would restrict the nuns from their existing positions. Advocacy for restrictive enforcement should be avoided.

CONCLUSION

The true liberation and empowerment of Thai nuns requires a re-evaluation of the viewpoints advanced by the Thai Nuns Institute, scholars, and other concerned parties. Revising their cause in order to change the goal which would put them in a subordinate position within the current religious institution, would truly liberate this group of marginalized people from patriarchal dominance. As demonstrated, centralization should be avoided as that might limit their freedom and liberty. If all the relevant parties push for attaining full citizenship with all the rights and benefits, Mae Chee will gain more agency. It would be beneficial if the nuns possessed complete agency and the privileges that should be afforded to every citizen of the country. It is important that the nuns are liberated from additional unnecessary rules and regulations so that they can freely undertake any roles they prefer. This development will facilitate their whole potential and capabilities through the enhancement of various options in education, employment, and economic dimensions which will ultimately empower them towards sustainable development and stable future.

¹⁰⁶ Gosling, "The Changing Roles of Thailand's Lay Nuns," 133.

¹⁰⁷ Seeger, "The Changing Roles of Thai Buddhist Women".

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