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Women's Rights in AEC: A Thai Buddhist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the status and role of women in Buddhism with the emphasis on the establishment of Bhikkhuni Sangha as the first order of nuns in the entire history of world's religions. Ethical perspective on women is presented from Buddhist Scriptures, including marriage and sexual ethics in Buddhism. A female-centered family system and a degraded religious status of Thai women (*Mae Ji*) are then presented from a Thai cultural and a Theravada Buddhist perspective. Then

women's rights in AEC, particularly the issues of poverty and prostitution, are critically viewed from a socio-political perspective. This paper concludes with a call for women's religious rights and structural solution of women's poverty and prostitution in the poorer AEC countries.

Women in almost every culture and society have been exploited or oppressed in one form or another, in a greater or lesser degree, throughout the long history of humankind. A Social Darwinist may explain that it is because women are physically weaker than men. If this is the case, then men everywhere are still in the savage stage and act according to the rule of the wild. But men and women in every society claim that they have a culture or civilization, so this kind of Social Darwinist attitude must be rejected. A patriarchalist may not recognize the exploitation of men over women, this is even a more dangerous view. Some feminist may request that women are equal to men in every aspect of life--including physical and biological. This view reflects the incomplete understanding of the biological difference between men and women. Women are biologically different from men, but difference does not mean unequal. This biological difference has long been exploited by the male bias. So the issue is not the calling for women's rights on the basis of a biological sameness, but women's rights on the basis of *non-bias* interpretation of the biological difference. Once we find a more just way of this interpretation, it is easier to define the cultural roles of men and women in a given society. In any case, the political, economic, social, and legal rights of women must be equal to those of men.

The doctrinal teachings of the world's religions usually provide the ground for the equal rights of men and women. In Buddhism, for example, women and men possess the same Buddha-nature and women, as well as men, could attain the Enlightenment--the highest spirituality. Due to male bias, however, religions at institutional level have long and continuously oppressed women. In AEC Theravada Buddhist countries, the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* (Order of Nuns) has never been given a chance to exist. There are only *mae ji* (head-shaven women in white robe) but the status of mae ji is so low that it is practically even lower than that of laywomen. The widespread of prostitution and women's poverty in Southeast Asia is partly due to the lack of a sound female religious institution--the one like Bhikkhuni Sangha--to support women spiritually and provide them socially with an alternative for a better life.

I. Women From A Religious Perspective

During the time of Siddhattha Gotama the Buddha some 2,500 years ago, the status of women in India, like in the rest of the "civilized" world which extended from China to Greece, was servile, degraded and miserable. Indian caste system was also strong and deep-rooted. As a spiritual leader and social reformer, the Buddha brought the remarkable changes to human society in regards to the annihilation of the caste system and the emancipation of women within the Buddhist world.

A. Status and Role of Women in Buddhism

Before the time of the Buddha, Brahmin hegemony had long reduced woman to a position of a menial or a chattel. According to *Manusmrti* (the laws of Manu), woman became fettered to man for life--she was confined to her home being a servant to her father and brothers, and eventually to her husband. Under Manu women have no right to study the Vedas. Faithful allegiance and submissiveness to her husband was the only way to celestial bliss. Nayaka Piyadassi, a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk, reports:

Such wifely fidelity was not confined only to the duration of her husband's lifetime. It had to be pursued even to the funeral pyre of her husband. It was expected of an Indian wife that she should follow her husband to the next world by immolating her body by flinging herself in to the burning flames of her husband's pyre. Although these barbaric practices had once been completely abolished and exterminated... [they are] a clear pointer to the debased position that women held in society in the days of long ago, and may still be held to some degree. (Piyadassi 1991, 281)

The birth of a daughter was considered a misfortune. When King Kosala was having a conversation with the Buddha, the news was brought to him that his queen, Mallika, had borne him a daughter. Noticing that the king was distressed, the Buddha remarked:

"Do not be perturbed O, King,
A female child may prove
Even a better offspring than a male,
For she may grow up wise and virtuous." (*Kindred Sayings*, I: iii)

The Buddha assured him that a female child may prove even better than a boy, becoming virtuous, wise, reverent, and respectful. He recommended to his disciple to look upon every women as if she were "your own mother or sister," and he taught lay people that "to respect one's mother and one's wife is to be blessed." (Kabilsingh 1991, 33) The Buddha pointed out that a woman is the mother of man and no person is worthy of greater reverence and veneration than one's mother. It is impossible for a child to pay off the debt he or she owes to a mother. In the Buddhist texts sometimes woman is referred to, out of respect, as a society of mothers (*matugama*). The Buddha taught men to protect their sisters, to treat their wives as equals and friends, and to allow their daughters the same opportunities in life as they give their sons.

The Buddha declares that woman was equal to man in respect of her capacity to attain Nibbana.[1] Each woman, like each man, had in her Buddha-nature, the potentiality of becoming a Buddha. Referring to the path leading to the Enlightenment, the Buddha compares it to a chariot and observes:

And be it woman, be it man for whom
Such chariot does wait, by that same car
Into Nibbana's presence shall they come. (*Kindred Sayings*, I: 45)

In Buddhism differences in sex do not obstruct the attainment of the highest spirituality. All progress and achievement, both mundane and supramundane, are within the reach of a woman.

B. Bhikkhuni Sangha: The World's First Order of Nuns

The establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha (Order of Nuns) by the Buddha over 2,500 years ago was an innovation. It conceded to women a nobility of nature, a strength of morality, and a capacity for wisdom, equal to that of man. According to Piyadassi, this event marks two historical importances. First, the Buddha permitted the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha at a time and place in history when women had been relegated to an inferior and discredited place in society. Second, although several other religious systems have flourished and blossomed in India from that time up to now, none of these other religions have established an Order of Nuns.[2]

The *Anguttara Nikaya* gives a comprehensive record of Buddhist women, *bhikkhuni* (nuns) and *upasika* (laywomen), who did splendid work not only as

followers, but as preachers of the Dhamma. The life and history of Maha Pajapati Gotami, her ordination and the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, is an illuminating story. It reveals what power and impact the determination and courage of a single woman could produce on the society of her time. It is the history of the emancipation of women in Buddhism. Gotami stands out as a figure among the women who influenced the course of feminine emancipation.

King Suddhodana, who ruled the Sakyans at Kapilavattu, married both Maha Maya and her sister Gotami. Such a marriage was quite in conformity with the social traditions of the day. When Queen Maya died seven days after the birth of Prince Siddhattha, Gotami took the responsibility of raising the child. In so doing, she not only earned the gratitude of the Buddhist world but also put Siddhattha in a position of obligation to her. On the death of Suddhodana, Gotami decided to renounce the world. After a long and difficult journey on foot to see the Buddha, Gotami asked the Buddha for ordination but it was not granted. Affected with pity at this painful sight, Ananda, the faithful disciple of the Buddha, requested the Buddha for Gotami's ordination three times without success. Then he thought of a different approach and had the following conversation with the Buddha:

'Lord, are women capable, after going forth from the home unto the homeless life under the Norm-Discipline set forth by the Tathagata,--are they capable of realizing the Fruit of Stream-winning, of Once-returning, of Never-returning, of Arahantship?'[3]

'Women are capable...of doing so, Ananda.'

'Then, Lord, if women are capable...of so doing, inasmuch as Maha-Pajapati, the Gotamid, was of great service to the Exalted One,--for she was aunt, nourisher, and milk-giver, on the death of his mother she suckled the Exalted One,--well were it, Lord, if women were permitted to go forth from home unto the homeless life under the Norm-Discipline set forth by the Tathagata.' (Woodward 1979, 80-1)

Facing such a strong appeal by Ananda, the Buddha then granted full ordination to Gotami under the condition that she kept the Eight Important Rules (gurudharma). Those rules are:

'A sister, even if she be a hundred years in the robes, shall salute, shall rise up before, shall bow down before, shall perform all duties of respect unto a brother, even if that brother have only just taken the robes. Let this rule never be broken, but be honoured, esteemed, reverenced, and observed as long as life doth last.

Secondly, a sister shall not spend the rainy season in a district where there is no brother residing. Let this rule never be broken...

Thirdly, at the half-month let a sister await two things from the Order of Brethren, namely, the appointing of the Sabbath and the coming of a brother to preach the sermon. Let this rule never be broken...

Fourthly, at the end of keeping the rainy season let a sister, in presence of both Orders, of Brethren and of Sisters, invite inquiry in respect of three things, namely, of things seen, heard, and suspected. Let this rule never be broken...

Fifthly, a sister guilty of serious wrong-doing shall do penance for the half-month to both Orders. Let this rule never be broken...

Sixthly, when a sister has passed two seasons in the practice of the Six Rules she may ask full ordination from both Orders. Let this rule never be broken...

Seventhly, a sister shall not in any case abuse or censure a brother. Let this rule never be broken...

Eighthly, henceforth is forbidden the right of a sister to have speech among brethren, but not forbidden is the speaking of brethren unto sisters. Let this rule never be broken, but be honoured, esteemed, reverenced, and observed as long as life doth last.' (Woodward 1979, 80-1)

Gotami agreed to the rules, thereupon she was ordained the first bhikkhuni in Buddhism. Thus, for the first time in the history of religion an Order of Nuns was established and women were admitted to the monastic life. Then the Buddha replied:

'Ananda, if women had not been permitted to go forth from the home unto the homeless life under the Norm-Discipline set forth by the Tathagata, then would the righteous life last long, the Good Norm would last, Ananda, a thousand years. But now, Ananda, since women have been permitted to go forth from the home unto the homeless life...not for long will the righteous life prevail; only for five hundred years, Ananda, will the Good Norm stand fast. ...

'Now just as, Ananda, a man should cautiously build an embankment to a great waterwork, to prevent the water from flowing out,--even so, Ananda, have I cautiously proclaimed these Eight Important Rules, not to be broken as long as life shall last.' (Woodward 1979, 82)

After the establishment of Bhikkhuni institution, a large number of women were drawn to the Sangha. It was recorded in the Therigatha (Psalms of the Sisters)[4] that thousands of bhikkhuni and laywomen attained various levels of spiritual

development. Among the bhikkhuni, at least thirteen were praised by the Buddha, including Gotami, foremost in seniority; Patacara, foremost in *Vinaya* (discipline); and Dhammadinna, foremost in giving dharma talks. (*Anguttara Nikaya*, IV: 347) Many laywomen were also praised for their spiritual qualities, including Visakha for generosity, Samavati for compassion, and Katiyani for unshakeable faith. These successes of women represented the completion of the four groups of Buddhists as instituted by the Buddha: *bhikkhu* (monk), *bhikkhuni* (nun), *upasaka* (layman) and *upasika* (laywoman).

The question is often asked whether the Buddha's hesitation in granting permission for women to enter the Sangha was because he regarded woman as inferior to man and thought them to be unfit for such a high vocation. According to Piyadassi, the Buddha's hesitation can be explained on the basis that he was able to perceive that if women entered monastic institutes, the cardinal quality of celibacy, which was fundamental to the functioning of a monastic institution, would be influenced and affected. And it is because of this that he proceeded to lay down the eight important rules or safeguards.

These eight conditions have often been cited by Western scholars as proof (by current standards) of a negative gender bias in Buddhism. They range from requiring senior nuns to pay homage to new monks--a rule that reverses the usual hierarchy of seniority in the Sangha--to stipulating that a nun must never speak badly of a monk, nor admonish improper behavior in a monk, although monks retain the right to criticize nuns. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, a female Buddhist scholar, interprets the imposing of the eight rules as the Buddha's strategy to the establishment and protection of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. She claims that in order to facilitate their acceptance into the Sangha, the Buddha needed to assure the bhikkhu that they had nothing to lose by the admission of women. Given the social climate of the time, the bhikkhuni's subordination to bhikkhu can be seen as a strategy to insure their protection in the Sangha. (Kabilsingh 1991, 28-9)

According to Chatsumarn, it was not intended that bhikkhuni were to serve bhikkhu. When bhikkhu began to take advantage of their superior position and required the bhikkhuni to spend their time on chores and services rather than spiritual practice, the Buddha established rules forbidding this. Although the eighth *gurudharma* forbade bhikkhuni from criticizing the behavior of bhikkhu, Buddhist laywomen (and men) were allowed and even encouraged to do so. While the Buddha

was alive, recurrent abuses of male privilege and power in the Sangha were kept in check. (Kabilsingh 1991, 29)

Buddhist scriptures are believed to be recorded more than four hundred years after the passing away of the Buddha. They are usually regarded as historical records based on memories, beliefs, faiths and interpretations. They went through several major revisions in various Buddhist Councils throughout history and all those revisions were done solely by males. Therefore some passages could be added later on by male bias--particularly the eight rules and the prediction of the life of Buddhism. The prediction that the life of Buddhism would be a thousand years old without women's ordination and would be shorten to five hundred years old with women's ordination into the Sangha was historically proven wrong.

The Bhikkhuni Sangha in India had been continuously passed on until the tenth or eleventh century, when Indian Buddhism as a whole was eclipsed by the invasion of Islam. During King Asoka's reign in the third century B.C., Sanghamitta Theri and a group of learned bhikkhuni went to Sri Lanka and established a Bhikkhuni Sangha there, which was to last for more than a thousand years. In the eleventh century, political turmoil and the invasion of South India's Chola dynasty brought on the disappearance of the Buddhist Sangha in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Bhikkhu Sangha was later revived by receiving the ordination lineage from Thailand, but the Bhikkhuni Sangha was less fortunate and was never revived in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan bhikkhuni lineage, however, has survived in China. A group of Sri Lankan nuns were invited to help give ordination to a group of Chinese women in the year 433. This lineage, the Dharmagupta sub-sect of the Theravada tradition, is still active in China, and has been transplanted to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. (Kabilsingh 1991, 30-1)

II. Women From An Ethical Perspective

A Buddhist passage states that women are subject to five woes: she must leave her family at marriage; she must suffer the pain of menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth; and she must always work hard taking care of her husband. (*Samyutta Nikaya*, XVIII, 297) Three of these "woes"--menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth--are simply properties of the female body. The Buddhist attitude is that men should

have sympathy with women on these regards. Men should particularly share the sufferings--at least mentally--and take care of women on their pregnancy and childbirth. Pregnancy and childbirth are the mutual responsibilities of both sexes. The other two "woes" were social conventions about roles and behavior which should be changed in contemporary society on the basis of the equal rights of men and women. While the text speaks of the "five woes" of women, it also states that women bring five strengths to a marriage: attractiveness, wealth, virtue, vigor, and the ability to bear children.

A. Buddhist Ethics towards Marriage

Even though Theravada Buddhists tried to describe love and marriage in the bleakest possible terms, we can find plenty of love stories and examples of happy marriages in the Buddhist literatures. For a successful marriage, the Buddha suggests the well matching of a couple in five ways:

'This husband and wife are indeed well-matched--well-matched in faith, well-matched in virtue, well-matched in generosity, well-matched in goodness, well-matched in wisdom. A perfect pair and a wonderful example of wedded bliss, surely they will be together for eternity, enjoying great felicity.' (Woodward and Hare 1979, 69-70)

So, true love prevails in Buddhism too.

1. The Duties of Husband and Wife

Instructions to girls about to marry are recorded in *Anguttara Nikaya*. The Buddha advised them to rise early, work willingly, order their affairs smoothly, and to cultivate gentle voices. They should honour and respect all persons honoured and respected by their future husbands, whether parents or recluses, and on the arrival of these should offer them a seat and water. Other instructions were similar to those given to wives, namely, skill in the various handicrafts, care of servants and sick people, and care of the wealth brought home by the husbands. (Saddhatissa 1970, 135)

The *suttanta* gives five ways in which a wife should be ministered to by her husband:

(i) by being courteous to her,

(ii) by not despising her,

(iii) by being faithful to her,

(iv) by handing over authority to her, and

(v) by providing her with necessary adornments. (Saddhatissa 1970, 134)

In return, the wife should minister to her husband:

(I) by ordering the household well,

(ii) by hospitality to their relatives,

(iii) by fidelity,

(iv) by taking care of his wealth, and

(v) by her industry. (Saddhatissa 1970, 134)

2. Women's Qualities to Win Power

In *Anguttara Nikaya* the Buddha enumerates the four qualities by which woman wins power in this world and has this world in her grasp. These are as follows:

She is capable in her work; whatever her husband's home industries, whether in wool or cotton, she is skillful, gifted with an inquiring mind into the work, and able to carry it out. She is able to manage her servants, knowing the duties of each and seeing these are carried out; further, she knows something of sickness and is able to allot the food suitably. She studies the approval of her husband and keeps safe whatever money, corn, silver or gold he brings home. (Saddhatissa 1970, 135)

With these qualities, said the Buddha, 'she wins power and this world is within her grasp'. (Saddhatissa 1970, 135) The Buddha suggests further that woman may win power in the world beyond by establishment in confidence, virtue, charity and wisdom:

For confidence she knows the arising of a Tathagata and such and such is so. She is accomplished in virtue by the keeping of the Five Precepts. She is accomplished in charity, living at home with thought free from avarice, delighting in alms-giving. She is wise in the penetration into the rise and fall of things and in the complete destruction of suffering. (Saddhatissa 1970, 135)

It should be noted here that Buddhism arose in the agricultural age within the Indian socio-cultural context. As a human being, the Buddha was partly influenced by the culture and society of his time. Some of his ethical teachings, therefore, may seem to be not so relevant to the post industrial age of today.

B. Sexual Ethics of Buddhism

One of the most basic teachings of the Buddha is "to refrain from sexual misconduct." Its widely-accepted meaning is to have no sex outside of one's marriage. Another text states, "to be content with just one wife." (Stevens 1990, 137) So, monogamy is recommended in Buddhism. In contrast to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in which sexual relations are regulated in detail. Buddhism focused on the essentials. It is the motive, not the act itself, which must be ethical. John Stevens claims that:

If the act of sex is consummated selflessly and with compassion, if it is mutually enriching and ennobling, if it deepens one's understanding of Buddhism, promotes integration and spiritual emancipation, and is, above all, beneficial to all the parties involved, it is "good." If, on the contrary, sex erupts from animal passion, is based purely on physical pleasure, and originates in the desire to possess, dominate, or degrade, it is "evil." (Stevens 1990, 140)

According to Steven's research, although there may have been superstitious or cultural reasons for avoiding certain kinds of sexual behavior in some Buddhist communities, there are no formal prohibitions against sex acts, conducted between consenting, nonmonastic, heterosexual adult couples. (Stevens 1990, 137) There is, however, a special Buddhist hell reserved for adulterers, rapists, and other sex criminals. Divorce is rarely mentioned in Buddhist literature. Since most Buddhist countries have become more modernized, divorce is more and more acceptable among Buddhists. In Thailand, the Sangha hierarchy does not set any rule against divorce.

Since birth control could be interpreted as an interference with the law of karma,[5] there was a tendency in Buddhism to discourage artificial contraception. However, the necessity of birth control in contemporary Buddhist countries has been tacitly recognized. Today most Buddhist countries have open policy on birth control without any interference from the Sangha.

Abortion was traditionally an abomination--it was viewed as a violation of the precept against killing a living being. But precept itself cannot be considered outside of a social context. If pregnancy will eventually lead to the mother's death, earliest stage of abortion is desirable and acceptable among Buddhists. The same may be applied to the case of impregnation by rape, if the woman concerned so desires. In contemporary social context, therefore, abortion should be reconsidered on the basis

of woman's rights. Woman has the rights to obtain all the necessary informations, medically and ethically, regarding her own body including the abortion issue. Well-informed woman herself is the person who knows what is best for her: to have the baby and socially take the responsibility for it; or to have an abortion--release herself from having a child at the time she is not ready--and take the moral or psychological responsibility for it. Woman as a subject should have the rights to make decision on her own body, because it is she who takes the consequent responsibility. Society as a whole should not make the decision for her and should not make the judgement on her.[6]

According to Chatsumarn, bhikkhuni in the West have been doing good work for society. For rape victims and women who have had abortions, bhikkhuni can perform religious rituals that help to reestablish them mentally and spiritually. This has a great psychological effect on women who have experienced trauma and suffering. Ven. Sangye Khadro, an American nun ordained in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, has suggested purification practices involving four steps, by adopting four mental attitudes: regret, refuge, resolution, and counter-measure. By generating these four states of mind sincerely with compassion, women can help to heal the pain and guilt experienced after an abortion. (Kabilsingh 1991, 84)

Although homosexuality may have been officially proscribed, John Stevens (1990, 139) reports that it in fact flourished in Buddhist monasteries throughout the centuries. Whenever there is a sex scandal in a Buddhist community--and there have been many over the centuries--the primary cause of the trouble is to be deceit: people deceiving their disciples, families, and friends, deceiving their communities, and lying to themselves. Therefore, one absolute standard is that no one involved be harmed or deceived in any way. Regarding the ethics of sex, love, and marriage, good Buddhists have always relied on this essential moral standard: "If your heart is pure, all things in your world will be pure." (Stevens 1990, 140-1)

III. Women From A Cultural Perspective

Like in any society, family--the most basic social unit--play an important role in Thai culture. There were many attempts among anthropologists to define the Thai family system, but without a clear structural explanation. The most influential was

John Embree's "Loosely Structure" theory. He defined that the Thai family was so loosely structured that "considerable variation of individual behavior was permitted." (Embree 1950, 4) It was a social system relatively lacking in social roles and hence in forms of social organization, any attempt to elucidate Thai social structure would prove fruitless. Embree's theory was so influential in the 1950s and 1960s that it obstructed any kind of structural analysis.

In 1977 Sulamith Heins Potter presented her "Female Centered" theory of the Thai family system. It was a break through of Embree's theory. Potter points out that northern Thai family structure can be understood as a system in which lineality is traced through women, rather than men, and authority is passed on affinally, from father-in-law to son-in-law, by virtue of their relationships to the line of women. The key factor in understanding the system is the recognition of the structural importance of women; without that, the system is unintelligible. (Potter 1977, 123)

During seven hundred years of Buddhism in Thailand, there has never been an official Bhikkhuni Sangha. However, there is a form of religious life for Thai Buddhist women, known as *mae ji*. Mae ji shave their heads, wear white robes, and observe either five or eight precepts. They follow a form of monastic life without formal ordination or lineage. According to historical records, mae ji have existed in Thailand for at least three hundred years. The Thai female-centered family system which places women in an important position and the Mae Ji institution which places women in a low religious status in Thai society will be analyzed in this section as two trends of the indigenous Thai cultural perspective towards women.

A. A Female-Centered Family System in Thailand

The Thai family is ordered in a delicate and complex way. It is based on the dynamic interplay of two factors: the relationships between women which define the social structure and determine the important relationships between men, and the higher social status and formal authority of the men. Authority is passed from man to man, but by virtue of relationships to a line of women: it is passed affinally, from father-in-law to son-in-law. It is a sort of mirror image of patriliny, in which the important consanguineal links are between mother and daughter rather than father and son. Potter (1977, 20) says:

I am describing a system in which the people who are redistributed in affinal groups are men. The structurally significant people are female, not male. I call this a

female-centered system in contrast to patriliny and matriliny which, as they are understood currently, would both be male-centered systems.

Another important element is the cultural expectation that marriage will be matrilocal for at least a token period. This means that a married man is living with his wife's consanguines, who are his own affines. The important other men with whom he is likely to reside are his wife's father and brother-in-law, all of whom have also married in. Chatsumarn explains how this type of family structure was formed:

Under the system of corvee labor in the Ayudhya period, men would be away from their homes at least every other month, sometimes for as long as three months. During their absence, women took care of the families. Because of this, it was customary for newly married couples to live with the wife's family. This led to a matrilineal social system and also to relative financial independence for women. (Kabilsingh 1991, 18)

According to Potter, social relationships in the northern Thai family are ordered on three important principles. First, formal authority belongs to men rather than women. Second, juniors must defer to seniors, and seniors take responsibility for the welfare of juniors. Third, family relationships are a lineality traced through women, where men are merely affinal members of a matriline of which women consanguineally related to one another are the core. (Potter 1977, 99) As far as marriage is concerned, parents may make suggestions and apply pressure, but it is the custom for a man and a woman to choose one another, and marry for love. In a system like this, the wife is in a most important position. Her husband's status in the family is conferred by her. The effect of all this is to give a woman an important voice in the management of family life, a position of power which comes from her place in the structure of the family. However, the rule of respect for seniors tends to reinforce the position of the husband. (Potter 1977, 101)

It is also important that inheritance rules in northern Thailand divide property equally among all children, both male and female, with the house usually goes to the youngest daughter. John E. deYoung (1958, 23) reports:

Both sons and daughters inherit rice land equally, but the house and house compound frequently are inherited by right of succession by the daughter who with her husband expects to make her home in the family household. The custom of one married daughter remaining in the house of her parents and inheriting the family house is so widespread throughout the north that it suggests a system of specialized

matrilocal residence at an earlier period, although at present the system no longer is consistent.

According to deYoung, the social position of the Thai peasant woman is powerful. She has long had a voice in village governmental affairs. She often represents her household at village meetings. Through their marketing activities Thai farm women produce a sizable portion of the family cash income, and usually act as the family treasurer and hold the purse strings. But deYoung observes that in the commercialized delta area in central Thailand where large amounts of money are brought in by the sale of rice, the farmer seems to keep control of this rice income himself.

B. *Mae Ji*: A Degraded Religious Status of Thai Women

The existence of *mae ji* is not supported in the Buddhist Scriptures or by Thai law. Mae ji are usually regarded as *upasika* (laywomen) who live in temples. An abbot is responsible for mae ji only on the basis that they are residents of the temple. Yet mae ji are denied the right of a civilian such as the right to vote, as are monks in Thailand, because they are culturally expected to have renounced worldly concerns. Chatsumarn evaluates the status of mae ji as follows:

As mae jis do not have an official legal position in the Sangha, the laity does not feel obligated to support them... Monks, as fully ordained members of the Sangha, are seen as worthy "fields of merit"[7] for offerings, but mae jis are not... Mae jis' lack of self-esteem, coupled with negative social attitudes, have resulted in their extremely low status. Marginalized, undereducated, and economically unsupported, mae jis are alienated in Thai society. (Kabilsingh 1991, 39)

In 1969, the Sangharaja initiated a national meeting of mae ji, and the Institute of Thai Mae Ji was formed with his support. A foundation was also founded in 1972 to support the institute. The institute has attempted to establish administration for registering and organizing mae ji, but it has met with only partial success. (Kabilsingh 1991, 39-40) Chatsumarn reports:

Many older mae jis have taken up begging in the belief that people would prefer giving money to them rather than ordinary beggars. Unfortunately, this has contributed to the poor public image of mae jis. Members of the Institute of Thai Mae Jis are particularly concerned about this practice and try to discourage it by placing older, destitute mae jis in old-age homes. But this does not address the root

cause of the problem, which is the poverty of many mae jis due to the lack of institutional and societal support. (Kabilsingh 1991, 41)

As part of the Sangha, mae ji should be able to offer spiritual guidance to lay people, but the lack of education limits the possibilities. Women should be given full support to bring forth their strength in Buddhism. They should receive proper education within the Sangha and should be encouraged to become ordained if they so wish. Chatsumarn argues:

In the Buddha's time, there were many successful role models for women in the Sangha. However, through the long history of Buddhism in Thailand, these positive role models have been actively suppressed. Revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha would be a very important way to elevate the status of women in religious life. (Kabilsingh 1991, 42)

The replacement of mae ji by Bhikkhuni institution would greately raise women's status at the core of Thai culture and could help solve many of women's problems in Thailand--including poverty, child abuse, and prostitution.

IV. Women From A Socio-Political Perspective

Third World's underdevelopment and First World's development are not two isolated phenomena; they are organically and functionally interrelated. Underdevelopment is the result of the long history of exploitation, unequal terms of trade, and of dependency relationships. Third World economy is designed to produce only a limited number of commodities demanded by the global market, rather than overall development to meet the needs of local people. The nature of Third World can be understood only if it is viewed as this set of relationships: the relationships between controlling First World center and dependent Third World peripheries, whether they are former colonies or the neocolonial independent states of today. This dependency relationship has been one of the major causes of the chronic and massive poverty within the Third World. It is extremely difficult, or in some cases impossible to overcome the problem of underdevelopment unless there is a structural change in this dependency relationship. As John Raines and Donna Day-Lower (1986, 13) has pointed out, ethics must seek a comprehensive basis for its analysis. What is good for the developed world cannot be at the expense of underdeveloped nations,

anymore than what is good for international capital can be at the expense of local communities in the First World.

As Third World people, women in the underdeveloped countries--including Thailand[8]--have been exploited by the global economic structure on the one hand. As female sex, women have been exploited or oppressed by the male bias on the other hand. As a result, women in the Third World have been doubly exploited or oppressed by the combination of global economic and gender structures.

A. Women in the Third World

Since multinational corporations go overseas for cheap labor and workforce which is docile, easily manipulated and willing to do boring, repetitive assembly work, Third World women are their natural choice. They use those women's lower social status to pay them less than men by claiming that women are only supplementary income earners for their families. Multinationals prefer single women with no children and no plans to have any. Pregnancy tests are routinely given to potential employees to avoid the issue of maternity benefits. The companies prefer to train a fresh group of teenagers rather than give experienced women higher pay. Annette Fuentes and Barbara Ehrenreich (1987, 18) point out:

The great majority of the women earn subsistence-level incomes, whether they work for a multinational corporation or a locally-owned factory. While corporate executives insist that their wages are ample in view of lower standards of living, the minimum wage in most East Asian countries comes nowhere near to covering basic living... Meager as their wages are, however, most women are important wage earners for their families... And there is a growing pressure on women of both farm and lower-income urban backgrounds to postpone marriage and find work to help out their families.

Most women work under conditions that can break their health or shatter their nerves within a few years, often before they have worked long enough to earn more than a subsistence wage. Fuentes and Ehrenreich (1987, 20) report:

Electronics companies require perfect vision in new employees, but most women need glasses after a few years on the job. During the bonding process women peer through microscopes for seven to nine hours a day attaching hair-like gold wires to silicon chips.

According to Fuentes and Ehrenreich's research, women factory workers are in a precarious situation, treated like temporary workers, always under the threat of layoffs. Sick leave, holidays and vacations are almost unheard of. A probationary or apprenticeship period of six months or so, during which pay is only three-quarters of the regular wage, is common. By laying off workers just before the end of their probation, companies save the expense of a full wage. They report:

Stress and high anxiety permeate the women's work lives, contributing to health problems. Most factories operate several shifts, requiring workers to rotate day and night shifts every week or two. These irregular schedules wreak havoc with sleep patterns and foster nervous ailments and stomach disorders. Lunch breaks may be barely long enough for a woman to stand in line at the canteen. Visits to the bathroom are treated as a privilege. (Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1987, 23)

Women all over the world are becoming a giant reserve army of labor at the disposal of globe-trotting multinationals. No woman can feel job security on the assembly line as long as the profit motive guides multinational activities. Faced with sexual and racial discrimination, women will be further hurt as remaining technical and managerial jobs go mainly to white men. As Saralee Hamilton points out, "the multinational corporations have deliberately targeted women for exploitation. If feminism is going to mean anything to women all over the world, it's going to have to find new ways to resist corporate power internationally." (Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1987, 59) One way to resist that power is to use organized pressure in specific cases of corporate abuse. The boycott of Nestle products to protest their infant formula promotion in Third World countries is a good example of a successful consumer action. Another important strategy is to foster an information exchange between Third World activists and their counterparts in the industrialized countries. Sharing the knowledge that will empower women workers in their struggle is a priority of solidarity work. Fuentes and Ehrenreich (1987, 59) conclude:

The most difficult, yet most important task in confronting multinational domination, is to create direct links between women workers around the world... It may take years before international links are extensive and powerful enough to challenge successfully multinational corporations and the governments which support them, but women's lives grow closer all the time.

Besides economic exploitations, Third World women, especially in Southeast Asia, have been facing gender oppression in its crudest form--prostitution--both at a regional scale and increasingly a global scale.

B. Prostitution: A Third World Phenomenon

Prostitution in Asia involves the influences of the economy, sex, class, race, military and imperialism. Although forms of prostitution have existed in Asia for centuries, the growth of mass prostitution was linked to the entrance of Western powers and their armies. By the early twentieth century, Japan had begun to replace Europe as the major power dominating Asia. According to Elizabeth M. Bounds, the Japanese armies at first brought their own women, who were bonded servants purchased from Japanese peasant families. By the 1920s, when the empire was prospering, laws were passed banning Japanese women from prostitution, which meant the substitution of women from Japanese-occupied Asian territories. During World War II, an estimated 50,000 to 70,000 Korean women were sent as comfort troops to the Japanese front. Most of these women were killed during the war or by the Japanese at the time of their surrender to the Allied forces. (Bounds 1991, 134-5)

After 1945, the United States replaced Japan as the major military presence in Asia and the Pacific. The Korean and Vietnam wars brought thousands of soldiers not just to Korea and Vietnam but also to the rest and recreation (R and R) centers in Japan, Okinawa, the Phillipines, and Thailand. Elizabeth Bounds (1991, 135) reports:

The support bases spawned a parasite culture of bars, clubs, and hotels. At the height of the Vietnam War, there were estimated to be half a million prostitutes in Saigon. At the same time, R and R outside Vietnam had to be offered. The United States developed alternatives in Thailand, where 50,000 to 70,000 soldiers visited annually, and around its bars in the Phillipines, where 100 troop ships (each carrying hundreds of solders) docked each year at Subic Bay. For both areas, the United States presence and expenditures (probably $5 billion on the Thai bases alone) meant the creation of a new industry: drinks, dancing, and sex.

In Thailand, prostitution was mentioned during King Rama I's reign (1782-1809). There was taxation of prostitutes and brothels called "tax for the road." Prostitution was legalized in 1934 by the Thai government. The "Prevention of Venereal Disease Act B. E. 2477" (1934) requested prostitutes to be registered so

that they could receive regular and medical care. Thailand remained under this act until 1960, when the United Nations declared the abolition of prostitution. The Thai government responded the UN policy by replacing the 1934 law with "The Act to Deter Prostitution," making prostitution illegal. (Kabilsingh 1991, 71-72)

Thailand's prostitution escalated dramatically during the 1960s when the United States established military bases here during the Vietnam War. Even after the bases were dismantled, prostitution continued to spread in various guises--bar-girls, singers, partners, and other "cover" occupation--serving foreign tourists as well as local men. Chatsumarn comments that Thailand has sacrificed its women along with social and cultural values for a short-lived economic boom. (Kabilsingh 1991, 72-73) Besides imperialism which usually comes together with military power, prostitution has also embodied racism. Bounds (1991, 139) points out:

Racism lies behind the images of exotic and alluring Asian women (evident in the British soldier's song and the Norwegian tour brochure) and of docile and dexterous Asian women workers... And racism lies behind the historical substitution of other Asian women as Japanese army prostitutes and the present-day substitution of other Asian women for Japanese women as prostitutes for Japan's new business army in the downtown clubs in Tokyo and Osaka.

Asian countries were seen to have the "comparative advantage" of beautiful beaches and low-wage service workers. Much of the tourist infrastructure--hotels, planes, tour packages--is foreign-owned and foreign-operated so that between 40 percent and 75 percent of the profits eventually leave the country. Management jobs often go to foreign workers, leaving domestic workers to serve the needs of foreigners in the lowest-paid and lowest-skilled jobs. Bounds (1991, 136-7) comments:

Sexuality is sold as one of a country's natural resources, whether through the implied sexuality of airline advertisements or the explicit inclusion of sexual services within package tours for Western and Japanese men. Although the Phillipines, Thailand, and Korea all have legal bans on prostitution, they have supported it as a large tourist industry and use the law only against the prostitutes, not against the owners of bars and brothels... Prostitution is a key sector of the economies of these countries, turning the state into a pimp.

Asian women feel responsibility for the welfare of their families. For almost all Asian prostitutes, the major reason for working is to send money home. In

Thailand, the young women who became prostitutes, usually the eldest daughters, were made to bear a heavy financial burden to see the families through.[9] This is the distorted ethical value of "filial piety" responding to the economic pressure. Chatsumarn comments:

Other girls become prostitutes out of a sense of duty or obligation to their parents, to share the family's economic burden. When the family is in great debt resulting from failure in agricultural production, or even simply from the father's gambling losses, the eldest daughters are asked to "sacrifice" for their parents and their younger siblings. There are cases where fathers sold and re-sold their daughters into prostitution to buy extra cows for farming. This is done in the belief that children must show "gratitude" to their parents. (Kabilsingh 1991, 78)

In its effort to help prostitutes in Thailand, EMPOWER, a non-governmental organization, believes that the first step must be a recognition of the important role prostitutes already play as economic agents, as "they are the major productive force of the state entertainment industry...the largest [source of] income of the country." (Bounds 1991, 141) So the organization offers English classes because they believe that knowledge of English would help the women gain more control over their conditions of employment, with the possibility of the eventual creation of a prostitutes' union. But all these assistance might prove to be too late, because the deadly disease HIV/AIDS has been overwhelmingly threatening the Thai and other Southeast Asian prostitutes. A more helpful strategy is to find a more effective way to alter women from resorting to prostitution. The empowerment of women is needed and must be an integral part of the overall struggle for social justice within the global context.[10]

V. Women's Rights in AEC

We have looked at the issues of women in various aspects--religious, ethical, cultural and socio-political--from a Third World Buddhist perspective and out of the Southeast Asian experiences. As Karl Marx (1975, 243) has pointed out, "the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism." Since religion is the root of a culture or a society, the oppression of women's religious rights represents the essential oppression men have done to women. Other forms of ethical, cultural, and

socio-political oppression of women could be simultaneously worked out, both from a societal context and a global context.

In the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) context, the central issue is men's refusal of women's religious rights--the rights to ordination--hence men's refusal of women's rights in other aspects. Prostitution is an obvious and systematic gender oppression, especially in the Third World, and particularly in Southeast Asia. The grant of women's religious rights--the revival of Bhikkhuni Sangha--is seen as a structural solution for prostitution, sexual abuses, and child abuses in AEC.

A. Women's Religious Rights: The Root of All Rights

Buddhism as a religion or doctrine--the teachings of the Buddha--elevated the status of women equal to that of men. In the "Buddha-nature" theory, the Buddha points out that all human beings, both male and female, possess the same Buddha nature--the original nature of pureness, calmness, and brightness, the potentiality to become an enlightened person. Both women and men have the same chance to attain Nirvana or Enlightenment, the highest mental stage in Buddhism. There were many examples of women's spiritual success in the Buddhist literatures. The establishment of Bhikkhuni Sangha was the witness that, for the first time in the world's history, women were given the equal religious rights to that of men.

Buddhism as an institution, however, has been oppressing women religiously by taking away their rights to ordination granted by the Buddha in most Southeast Asian Buddhist countries. At the first Buddhist Council, right after the passing away of the Buddha, women were not represented and Ananda was charged with the offense of introducing women to the Order. This reflects the male bias towards women in the religious realm. The anxiety that women's ordination would cause decay to the religion was proved wrong. In the long history of the Bhikkhuni institution in Buddhist cultures, including India, Sri Lanka, and China (including Taiwan), there was no historical evidence that the Bhikkhuni Sangha has caused Buddhism depressed. Instead, it has become a significant educational source for women throughout the history. In Taiwan--probably the strongest hold of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in the world today--the Bhikkhuni Sangha has significantly contributed to both the religion and the society.

The often excuse for not allowing the revival of Bhikkhuni Sangha in the Theravada countries in AEC is that the Bhikkhuni Sangha no longer exists in the

tradition. According to the tradition, a women needs to be ordained by a bhikkhuni preceptor (*Pavattini*) first, and then by a bhikkhu preceptor (*upachaya*), in front of the assembly of at least five bhikkhu and five bhikkhuni. Since there is no more Theravada bhikkhuni, the ordination is argued to be impossible. The ordination ceremony is, however, a form of rituals created by human beings--a social norm to be applied or not applied by the agreement of the society's members. It is unlike the biological species which could not be revived once they were extinct. The Bhikkhuni Sangha still exists in the Mahayana traditions in China, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore, whose original lineage came from the Dharmagupta sub-sect of the Theravada tradition in Sri Lanka. There were several attempts of Thai women to have ordination with the presence of Taiwanese Bhikkhuni Sangha, but they were persecuted by the Thai authority and Sangha hierarchy. The refusal of the chance for the establishment of Bhikkhuni Sangha--in the cases of Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia[11]--and the revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha--in the case of Sri Lanka--represents the male religious bias towards women.

Women's rights to ordination was replaced by the low-status mae ji institution in Thailand. Legally, mae ji have never been recognized as part of the ordained Sangha. As the ordained, monks enjoy the legal privileges such as paying half a fare for all public transportations in Thailand, while mae ji do not have the same privilege. The Thai laws prohibit the ordained people to vote in an election. Mae ji are, however, refused the rights to vote because they are ironically supposed to renounce worldly concerns as are monks. Mae ji are not allowed to go for alms round in the morning for their daily food and are not offered the necessities by people as are monks. All they have received are the left-over (of food and necessities offered by people) from monks. The social status of mae ji is so low that they are treated almost like the homeless who happen to be living under the certain rules in Buddhist monasteries.

Originally, the status of Thai women was probably the highest in Asia, owing to the female-centered family system in the Thai society. Exploitation and oppression of women, however, has come later, on the one hand, from the class structure within the Thai society and, on the other hand, from the dependency relationship between Thailand as the Third World and the United States, Western Europe, and Japan as the First World. The overall result of these impacts has pushed

the status of Thai women to the lowest, particularly when it comes to the issue of prostitution.

There is a resemblance in the reasoning of both prostitutes and mae ji for their life choices. Chatsumarn argues that due to "gratitude" or obligation, some women become prostitutes to repay their parents materially, while others choose to become mae ji to repay their parents spiritually, offering them the merit of their religious activities. (Kabilsingh 1991, 78)

B. Bhikkhuni and Prostitution: A Structural Solution

Thailand, in connection with her neighboring countries, has world-wide fame, or rather shame, for having a well-established sex industry. A great nuumber of young women have been structurally oppressed through prostitution, a form of neo-slavery.[12] Although prostitution is illegal, most Southeast Asian governments, because of their inefficient and corrupt bureaucratic system, cannot solve the problem. Prostitution is, of course, against the teachings of the Buddha, but Theravada Sangha hierarchy in Southeast Asia basically keeps silent on the issue.

Economic hardship in most AEC rural areas, caused by unjust tenancy, agribusiness, and the lack of governmental interest in improving agriculture, has driven rural young people to migrate to towns and cities in search of jobs. Most of them become cheap laborers in construction, factories,[13] and service businesses. A large number of young women, particularly from northern Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, become prostitutes or work in the sex-related service business. They are pressured by structural poverty, consumerism, and the distorted traditional value of "filial piety" that daughters should pay gratitude to parents by supporting their desperate families. Some of those unfortunate young women from AEC rural areas, however, were deceived and forced into prostitution in Japan and Taiwan by the illegal works of mafia gangs.

Some may argue that those young women could live a simple life at home in the country by working at their traditional jobs in the household and rice fields without having to resort to prostitution. However, time has changed. Under the development projects from the central governments, road, radio, television, popular magazines and social media have reached the villages. With them the religion of consumerism has spread and people are no longer happy with their traditional values. (Sivaraksa 1992, 3-9) On the one hand, their traditional life has been threatened with

desperate poverty by unjust tenancy and agribusiness. On the other hand, consumerism brought by radio, television and social media increases their demand for consumer goods. Today most rural families in AEC are torn apart by these two forces. Under these circumstances, it is hard for young men and women to stay home and be happy in the rural areas. Today most rural villages are in effect populated only by those left behind, old people and children.

Prostitutes in Southeast Asia face not only structural gender oppression but also the deadly disease HIV/AIDS.[14] Prostitution is basically a byproduct of unjust economic and social structures. It is the most obvious form of gender oppression and the most basic violation of women's rights. Prostitution is a well-known fact in Southeast Asia, but very few people talk about it in public. Feminists and Buddhist social activists in AEC are beginning to speak up and defend the rights of their mothers, sisters and daughters taking seriously the fact that prostitution represents a distortion of local cultural values caused by modern structural poverty.

The unequal opportunity and inefficiency in providing education of most Southeast Asian states to their people have resulted in a large number of uneducated and undereducated children in the region. There is, however, a Theravada custom of ordination for boys as *samanera* (novices) and for men as *bhikkhu* (monks) for their religious trainings and education. Using this ordination channel for education, parents in remote areas have been sending their sons to get ordained and educated at the nearby temple. Those boys have become the majority of monks and novices in Theravada Southeast Asia. They have gradually moved to a bigger temple closer to town and city for higher education and trainings. When these ordained people disrobe, as the Thai tradition allows, they have turned into an educated adult who is usually well accepted in the society. For those who continue their ecclesiastical career, they have become educated monks guiding people spiritually. The Bhikkhu Sangha is, therefore, a necessary institution for those less fortunate boys to have education and a chance to be incorporated into the society.

The less fortunate girls in Theravada Buddhist countries unfortunately do not have the same chance as do the boys. If these girls were lucky enough, they would receive support from some private organizations, such as the Children Foundation, for their education and professional trainings. But most girls were not that lucky. Many of them have become laborers in the local and transnational factories, working extremely hard for the extremely low wages. Pressured by poverty, the distorted

cultural value of "filial piety," and consumerism, many of them resort to prostitution or sex-related business.

For those "lucky" girls who receive some kind of support from a monk or a religious organization, they may face sexual abuses from the authority. The urging question now is that how these girls from the countryside could receive their education and trainings safely and securely without being the victims of sexual abuses. In a way, the replacement of mae ji by the Bhikkhuni institution would be a solution. The Bhikkhuni Sangha would provide the chance for those less fortunate girls in AEC to be ordained and educated in the temples of bhikkhuni the same way the boys have already enjoyed in the temples of bhikkhu.

The revival of Bhikkhuni Sangha in Theravada Buddhist countries would elevate women's religious status to the level equal to that of men. On the one hand, when women have faith in the religion, they could study dhamma directly from a female teacher without having to gather around the monks--the way from which a lot of sexual abuses and scandals have occurred. On the other hand, women could become a preceptor (*pavattini*) who has her own rights to ordain a *samaneri* (female novice) or a bhikkhuni. According to the tradition, women who have kept the Six Rules for two years can be ordained first by a female preceptor (*pavattini*) and then by a male preceptor (*upachaya*) in the presence of at least five bhikkhu and five bhikkhuni.

The Bhikkhuni institution would alleviate the problems of prostitution and child abuse in Southeast Asia. When those less fortunate girls and women have access to a better life in ordination, the chance they would resort to prostitution or subject to child abuse would be greatly reduced. They could obtain education and trainings in the bhikkhuni monasteries and have become educated adults. If they so wish, they could disrobe and have a family. This is allowed in the Thai Buddhist tradition. If they continue to be bhikkhuni, they could become a spiritual leader of the community.

Sexual misconducts or abuses in religious institution may be individualistically viewed as misbehavior caused by greed of an individual monk. But from a structural perspective, the lack of religious institution for women themselves--the Bhikkhuni Sangha--is the root cause of the problem. When women are refused the rights of having their own proper religious institution, they need to rely on the male religious institution for their spiritual life or their chance in the

society. The completion of the Four Buddhist Sangha, namely, *bhikkhu* (monks), *bhikkhuni* (nuns), *upasaka* (laymen), and *upasika* (laywomen), is needed in modern Southeast Asia no less than in ancient India during the Buddha's time.

ENDNOTES

1 *Nibbāna* is a Pali word equivalent in meaning with *nirvāna* in Sanskrit. It is the highest stage in Buddhist psychology.

2 According to Anantanand Rambachan, Jainism--a religion in India established by Mahavira, a contemporary of the Buddha--also has an order of nuns although it is not a world religion within today's context.

3 The four stages of achievement of the highest perfection in Theravada Buddhism.

4 These psalms recite the great ecstasy and rapture the nuns obtained by their becoming ordained and thereafter attaining sanctity.

5 "Karma" means action. The law of karma in Buddhism is, therefore, the "law of action" in such a way that one action is the cause for another action. The effected action is then the cause for still another action. It goes on in this way as the chain of cause-and-effect of one's own activities. There is, however, a belief in popular Buddhism that one's own actions in the previous life was the cause for one's social status in this life; and one's actions in this life will effect the social status in next life.

6 It is generally accepted that where abortion was illegal, the number of women who suffered from abortion because of the ill-treatments by non-professionals was high. But where abortion was legalized, that number decreased significantly. This social reality should be taken into account in considering the issue of abortion.

7 "Field of merit" (*na-bun* in Thai) is a metaphor in Buddhism that bhikkhu is like field (*na*) in which a Buddhist could throw seeds of merit (*bun*) and yield the result of the harvest (merit).

8 Forty-five percent of Thai women work, the highest percentage in Asia.

9 Peasant girls in Thailand are sold by their struggling parents into "contracts," or bonds, which mean that the girl is at the mercy of the owner until she has earned the contract payment. Some of these bonded women are kept in their room in chains, as was tragically revealed in a club fire at a Thai resort, which killed several women imprisoned in a back room. (Bounds 1991, 134)

10 For more details on prostitution and its liberation, see Brock and Thistlewaite 1996.

11 The Bhikkhuni Sangha has never been given a chance to exist in these four Theravada countries until recently.

12 Although prostitution and the international sex industry exploit adults and children of both sexes, the vast majority of prostitutes and sex workers in Southeast Asia are women and girls.

13 Young women make up about 80 percent of Thailand's low-wage factory workforce. The fire on May 10, 1993, at Kader Industrial (Thailand) Co. Ltd., a factory in the Phuttamonthon area 15 miles west of Bangkok, which killed at least 213 and injured 500 workers--most of them were young women--revealed what the working conditions and safety standards in factories are like for most rural women. The blaze may have been the deadliest factory fire in history, far surpassing the 146 killed on March 25, 1911, at the Triangle Shirtwaist Co. factory in New York City. (Philadelphia Inquirer, May 12, 1993)

14 For more details about the AIDS crisis in Thailand, see Bonacci 1992.

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