
WATER & OIL?

A STUDY OF BUDDHISM &
FEMINISM IN CAMBODIA

DECEMBER 2020



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GLOSSARY

AH-CHA

Lay men who do not reside in the pagoda but who lead Buddhist followers to learn about dharma and how to organise religious festivals and ceremonies

DAUN-CHI/ YEAY-CHI

Women nuns: Female ascetics who live inside the pagoda. Daun-chi refers to women who follow ten precepts of Buddhism, while yeay-chi follow eight precepts.

KARMA

The force produced by a person's cumulative actions in one life, that influences what happens to them in future lives.

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

The right to decide the number and spacing of children, and to have the information, education and the means required to exercise this right.

SEXUAL AUTONOMY

The capacity of an individual to freely make decisions about engaging in any form of sexual intimacy. Particular attention is paid to women and members of the LGBTQ community.

TA-CHI

Male nuns: Male ascetics who live inside the pagoda.

BHIKKUNI

A fully ordained woman monk. The lineage of *bhikkuni* in Theravada Buddhism is thought to have ended around the 13th century, though a revival movement has emerged recently in places such as in Thailand.

INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM

A holistic analysis recognising that barriers to gender equality vary according to other aspects of a woman's identity, including age, race and class, and so strives to address a diverse spectrum of women's issues.

NUN

English translation for Buddhist ascetics who live in the pagoda (Ta-Chi, Yeay-Chi and Daun-Chi)

SEXUAL RIGHTS

Human rights that are related to sexuality. According to IPPF, they comprise a set of entitlements grounded in human rights law. These include the rights to: Freedom, equality, autonomy, integrity, privacy and dignity.

SOCIAL & CULTURAL NORMS

Social and cultural norms are rules or expectations of behaviour and thoughts based on shared beliefs within a specific cultural or social group.

THERAVADA BUDDHISM

One of three streams of Buddhist thought. Prioritises acquiring good karma or merit and practicing meditation. Most popular in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and parts of China (Aiken and Strand, 2005).



1 INTRODUCTION

In the Cambodian context, as in most countries around the world, there appear to be significant tensions between the principles of gender equality advocated by women's rights actors (especially relating to women's sexual autonomy and reproductive rights), and those of culturally and religiously informed, 'traditional' gender norms.

These tensions have increased in recent decades, and are visible, for instance, in the difficulty that Cambodian women face in obtaining a divorce, often despite ongoing domestic abuse[1]; in the government's suspension of young women pop stars and actors from their work, for wearing outfits deemed 'too sexy' and therefore going against Khmer culture[2]; and lastly, to those everyday norms which often go unnoticed, but which consistently serve to favour men and discriminate against women. These norms reinforce the perceived validity of traditionally allocated gender norms, which prescribe roles of leadership and dominance to men, and caregiving or subordinate roles to women.

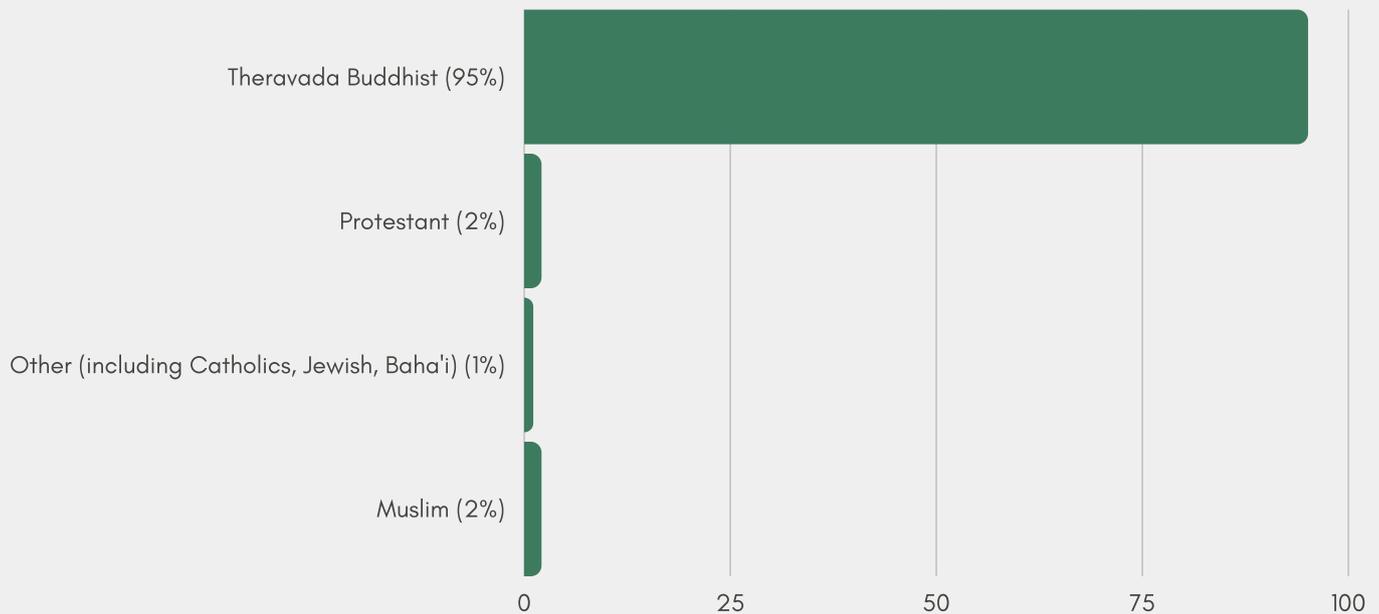
The pervasiveness of these norms remains a challenge for women's rights actors – they are a barrier to the realisation of equality in rights and opportunities between men and women (and gender nonconforming people): A national survey undertaken by the United Nations in Cambodia in 2013 found that 63 per cent of men and 58 per cent of women agreed that men should have the final say in all family matters, while 82 per cent of men and 93 per cent of women reported believing that a woman's most important role is to take care of her home and cook for her family[3].

[1] Women Peace Makers et al (2020): Preserving Harmony or Preventing Justice? online: <<https://bit.ly/37gwsrL>>.

[2] Sou Vuthy et al, 'Actress banned for sexy clothing', *The Phnom Penh Post* (online, 27 April, 2107) <<https://bit.ly/34g1qOZ>>.

[3] Emma Fulu et al, *Why do some men use violence against women and how can we prevent it?* (1 September 2013) <<https://bit.ly/3qS9FdB>>.

BREAKDOWN OF RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHICS IN CAMBODIA



Source: US State Department, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2018: Cambodia*

Some 95 per cent of Cambodians identify as Theravada Buddhist[4]. So what, then, is the relationship between Buddhism and feminism in contemporary Cambodian society? To what extent do Cambodian people from different walks of life see them as inherently contradictory frameworks? Do many perceive them to be mutually reinforcing? What are the principles of each system that appear most contentious?

This research was co-created with different communities with lived experiences of the relevant issues (young women and Buddhist monks), and attempts to make a humble contribution towards a better understanding of these issues.

1.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research are two-fold:

- 1 DOCTRINAL (IN)COHERENCE:** To examine whether observers of Buddhism and/or feminism view these frameworks as competing or complementary,
- 2 COMMON CAUSE:** To explore ways that feminists can work together with Buddhist practitioners/teachers to improve attitudes towards gender equality in Cambodia.

[4] United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Cambodia 2018 international religious freedom report* (Report, 2018) 1, <<https://bit.ly/37btHb8>>.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research has two overarching research questions, as well as a number of corresponding sub-questions:

- 1 What are the key areas of overlap and tension between Buddhism and feminism, and how do they play out in the Cambodian context?
 - 1.1 How do Khmer Buddhist observers understand and interpret religious teachings about gender equality and other relevant issues?
 - 1.2 How do feminist practitioners understand and interpret relevant Buddhist teachings: What tensions and synergies are identified?
- 2 Towards feminist Buddhism and/or Buddhist feminism in Cambodia: What are the core challenges and opportunities for ncreased collaboration?

1.3 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- 1 There appears to be significant openness from religious practitioners to collaborate with gender advocates to reduce violence in the community and teach people about the principles of gender equality that they believe are already inherent in Buddhist ideology.
- 2 While many lay observers see ta-chi (male nuns) and yeay-chi (female nuns) as having set roles, monks reported that such roles are not fixed, and that **barriers preventing yeay-chi from taking on more substantive tasks are cultural rather than religious**. This may provide an entry point to encourage yeay-chi to take on more substantive roles within the pagoda, and for ta-chi to share in cleaning and cooking tasks.
- 3 Many participants felt that not only was it possible for someone to believe in and advocate for gender equality while practicing Buddhism, but also that **Buddhism in itself promotes gender equality**. Over two thirds of respondents (68%) felt that Buddhism sees women and men as inherently equal.
- 4 The data did not reflect an ideological pushback from either laypeople or Buddhist monks to the idea of **women serving as monks**. The explanation for women not being able to be ordained centred around technicalities (the lack of women monks to ordain the next generation) and practical matters (women and men monks could not reside closely for reasons of preserving purity of mind and sexual abstinence). **The respondents in this study did not refer to any ideas of women being inherently spiritually unsuitable for ordination in Buddhism**.
- 5 All feminist practitioner respondents in this study indicated some level of discomfort or disagreement with current gendered restrictions within Buddhist religious institutions. Nonetheless, most feminist respondents (5/6) also expressed that they feel able to **use the labels of 'feminist/gender advocate' and 'Buddhist' simultaneously**.
- 6 While **abortion was viewed almost unanimously as prohibited within Buddhism**, the notion of 'sexual misconduct' seems subject to some modern interpretation. For instance, according to one lay participant, "*Buddhism does not allow sexual harassment or harming others sexually.*" This indicates that **entry points for joint action between Buddhists and feminists may be found in the area of sexual conduct**.
- 7 It appears that **sex between an unwed couple** is perceived to be looked upon within Buddhism less harshly than between those who are being unfaithful to a spouse. This may be of relevance to gender equality advocates in their work promoting women's sexual autonomy.
- 8 Not only did the empirical data indicate that there are **no perceived restrictions** on contraception in Cambodian Buddhism, but two monk respondents even proposed that **monks can be active in educating the community about family planning methods**.
- 9 All respondents who answered the question expressed views **supportive of LGBTQ inclusion with Buddhism**, though some felt that physical sex acts between gay couples comprised 'sexual misconduct' from a Buddhist lens.
- 10 **Violence against women was viewed unanimously** among respondents as being in violation of Buddhist teaching. This provides a potential entry point for gender advocates, to build on religiously-informed ideas such as precepts in interventions to end gender-based violence.



2 METHODOLOGY

This research has applied Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) principles at all stages of its design and development. According to the APWLD, who have pioneered FPAR research praxis in the region, FPAR is a method of investigating social issues that directly involves the participation of oppressed and ordinary people in problem posing and solving. It is a "way for researchers and participants to join in solidarity to take collective action, both short and long term, for social change"[5]. FPAR also thoroughly integrates feminist perspectives and processes, as well as capacity building and knowledge sharing.

Interviewees:

Respondent type	Number
Monks	16
Lay people	27
Yeay-chi	8
Ta-chi	2
Gender advocates	6
Total	59

To this end, a team of local researchers was engaged to co-design the research. The action research team was composed of two interns in Phnom Penh (both women), three young women students from Battambang province and four monks, also from Battambang province. The action research team were trained in ethical research principles and data collection techniques, and participated in the entire process of the study. A qualitative approach used both interviews and focus group discussions, photos, and recorded voices. This approach allowed the research team the opportunity for informal discussions and a deepening relationship with their peers.

The participatory action research team members were actively involved in all stages, not just as 'enumerators' who might be handed surveys to conduct and resubmit. A practical training on thematic data analysis was conducted in Phnom Penh, and the interview data was analysed and coded by the young researchers themselves.

[5] Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), 'Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR)', APWLD <<https://apwld.org/feminist-participatory-action-research-fpar/>>.

3 INHERENT GENDER EQUALITY(?)

**Overall
compatibility between
feminism and Buddhism**



3.1 INHERENT GENDER EQUALITY(?) PERSPECTIVES FROM THE LITERATURE



When seeking ways to put Buddhist and feminist sources in conversation, it is first essential to acknowledge that the range of Buddhist doctrine, interpretation and practice is incredibly diverse. As Gayley argues, even if we boil Buddhism down to focus only on its sacred texts, "...still there is no coherent whole that we can point to" as the 'one true' Buddhism[6].

For our research, the fact that Buddhism is subject to multiple interpretations is a challenge made more difficult by a significant gap in the literature. As Kanukollu and Epstein-Ngo put it, "There is sparse literature with, at times, conflicting messages on the topics of gender, gender roles and gender violence within Buddhism"[7].

There are very few studies concerning specifically Theravada Buddhism (and even more specifically, Theravada Buddhism as practiced by some 95 per cent of Cambodians today), and its intersections with women's rights.

Much of the secondary literature included in this report has therefore been written by scholars who make broader observations as to Buddhism's compatibility with feminism, making generalisations so as to cover multiple geographic contexts.

In order to avoid risking an essentialist, or shallow assessment, and to ensure the research is fully situated in the Cambodian context, we also include Cambodia-specific research where available, along with the empirical data gathered during our own field research in Phnom Penh and Battambang throughout 2020. The empirical findings are set out in sections 3.2, 4.2, 5.2 and 6.2 of this report.

[6] Holly Gayley, 'Where do we look for Buddhist Feminism?', (September 2016) 3(1) *The arrow: Buddhism & Feminism* 14.

[7] Shanta N Kanukollu and Quyen Epstein-Ngo, 'Violence against women through a Buddhist lens' in Andy J Johnson(ed), *Religion and men's violence against women* (Springer Science Business Media New York, 2015) 343, 346.

Intersectional feminism is the [type of feminism] most compatible with a Buddhist approach to addressing suffering and harm.

SHOTWELL, 2016

Just as it is important to acknowledge multiple forms of Buddhism, we should also clarify which form of feminism we are discussing. Shotwell breaks down several different schools of feminism (namely liberal, radical, and intersectional feminism), and assesses the compatibility of each with Buddhist teaching. She ultimately finds that intersectional feminism “is most compatible with a Buddhist approach to addressing suffering and harm”[8].

In line with this analysis and our own approach to feminist practice, we will explore Theravada[10] Buddhist practice as it aligns with *intersectional* feminism. Intersectional feminism is a holistic analysis recognising that barriers to gender equality vary according to other aspects of identity, such as age, race, class and religion[9]. It addresses a diverse spectrum of women's issues, and is explicitly inclusive of transgender, intersex, and non-binary people.

This report will move thematically through some of the key ‘flashpoints’ between Cambodian Theravada Buddhism and intersectional feminism. We begin in this section with an assessment of broad notions of gender equality in Buddhist doctrine and practice.

A natural starting point for such an assessment might be the following question: *Are women and men considered inherently equal within Buddhism?* Considering Gayley’s observation that Buddhism has no coherent whole that we can label as Buddhism writ large, and that “there is little agreement across traditions regarding what is canonical,” this question is difficult to answer[11].

In this section, we begin by examining the views of scholars who argue that feminism and Buddhism are to a large extent, ‘in sync,’ before moving on to others who warn that without including localised (e.g. country-specific) interpretations of Buddhism, such sweeping assertions of compatibility risk making generalised assumptions that are insufficiently grounded in the real world.

[8] Alexis Shotwell, ‘If Buddhism, Then Feminism. But What Sort of Feminism?’, (September 2016) 3(1) *The arrow: Buddhism & Feminism* 4, 12.

[9] Dictionary.com (online at 17 December 2020) ‘international feminism’ (def 1), <<https://bit.ly/3oVAdJn>>.

[10] Buddhists are generally identified as belonging to one of three streams of thought, Theravada (“Teaching of the Elders”), Mahayana (“Great Vehicle”), and Vajrayana (“Diamond Vehicle”). In this stream, a Buddhist member’s role is to acquire good karma or merit by supporting the spiritual leader’s role through donations, financially or otherwise. Theravada Buddhism is most popular in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and parts of China. (Aiken and Strand, 2005).

[11] Gayley, (n 6).



'Water Into Water...'

The arguments for Feminism and Buddhism as ideologies seamlessly aligning

For some scholars, Buddhism and feminism are significantly and observably aligned. According to Tsomo, Buddha is recorded as having "explicitly affirmed the potential for women to achieve the highest spiritual goal, in saying that all sentient beings have equal potential for enlightenment"[12].

Tsomo extends this spiritual logic to social analysis, arguing that Buddhist teachings are inclusive in scope, and thus should be equally accessible to women and men. For Tsomo, this invokes a 'rhetoric of spiritual equality' in the Buddhist texts, despite the fact that women continue to face many obstacles in their efforts to gain access to Buddhist education and full ordination in many places[13].

Prominent feminist academic and Buddhist devotee Rita Gross claimed that merging Buddhism and feminism is like pouring "water into water", implying that they seamlessly merge into one another. Even more boldly, Gross argued that commitment to the core principles of Buddhism commits one also to core principles of feminism[14].

Gross discusses how Buddhism and feminism have a number of important similarities, including the following:

- Both Buddhism and feminism hold on to important truths and have the capacity to go "against the grain" at any cost.

[12] Karma L Tsomo, *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 2004) 2.

[13] Tsomo (n 12) 2.

[14] In Shotwell (n 8) 4.

Commitment to the core principles of Buddhism also commits one to the core principles of feminism.

DR RITA GROSS

- Both feminism and Buddhism explore how mental constructs have the power to perpetuate problematic barriers to liberation. In Buddhism, the ego and its habitual tendencies are examined, while in feminism social conditioning and conventional gender roles are explored.
- Feminism and Buddhism share similar ideas of liberation for a certain existence. In Buddhism, liberation is conceptualised as freedom from the world and its inherent suffering. Feminism sees liberation as freedom from gender roles, gender stereotypes, and oppression.

Shotwell goes on to apply Gross' framework to build the case for a *feminism informed by Buddhism*, and conversely, a *Buddhism informed by feminism*. She argues that the Buddhist instruction to practice compassion must also require believers to examine "suffering along gender lines, and to do what we can to reduce it"[15]. Finally she says that in order "to be good Buddhists, we ought to practice Buddhism authentically, which implies being good feminists as well."

Kanukollu and Quyen Epstein-Ngo also argue that "Feminism fits nicely within the framework of Buddhism"[16]. And lastly, Howes argues too that intersectional feminism is compatible with a Buddhist approach to addressing suffering and harm:

"Intersectionality fits seamlessly with the [Buddhist] view that... work to relieve suffering grows from basic goodness, and that limitless compassion means that we need to address the suffering of all beings"[17].

[15] Shotwell (n 8) 8.

[16] Kanukollu and Epstein-Ngo (n 8) 347.

[17] In Shotwell (n 8) 12.



Not so fast...

Arguments in favour of contextualisation over generalisation

Gayley takes a different approach in assessing feminism's compatibility with Buddhism. She argues that because there is no set 'canon' of Buddhist texts, it cannot be simply assumed that 'to be Buddhist is to be feminist'[18]. Gayley also warns against relying exclusively on doctrinal texts to assess gender equality within Buddhism.

This is because when attempting to define the "core" principles of Buddhism, we must take into account the wide range of Buddhist interpretations and styles of practice in numerous contexts. If not, we risk "reducing the diversity of perspectives and voices of Buddhists across Asia to a homogenous, uni-vocal Buddhis[m]... which is decontextualised and ahistorical"[19]. Not only does this go against a feminist approach, it "risks reproducing a colonial and orientalist legacy of prioritising textual Buddhism" as more authentic than contemporary practices in Asia[20].

Gayley also highlights that even within the texts themselves, there are a range of views expressed – some of them supportive of feminist principles, and others not so: "Within early Buddhist sources, there are multiple attitudes expressed regarding women, ranging from robust inclusion in the project of liberation to misogynist marginalisation"[21].

Simmer-Brown also agrees that there is no single version of Buddhism, and so the essentials of Buddhism cannot be found or generalised. To attempt to do so, Simmer-Brown argues would "assert a privilege from the perspective of white, middle-class, western Buddhism that disrespects and disempowers the many Buddhisms of the world"[22].

[18] Gayley (n 6) 14.

[19] Gayley (n 6) 15.

[20] Gayley (n 6) 15.

[21] Gayley (n 6) 15.

[22] Judith S Brown, 'What water? Feminism, Shambhala Buddhism, and the Feminism Principle' (2016) 3(1) *The arrow: Buddhism & Feminism* 22, 23.



“To understand gender inequality in Buddhism, it is necessary to examine not only the texts and structures of Buddhist institutions, but also the attitudes and patterns of socialisations that have evolved within these institutions”

TSOMO, 2004, P. 5.

While Gross and Shotwell may be right that there are potential theoretical convergences between feminism and Buddhism, through Gayley's analysis we can also see that things are inherently more complex in practice.

Simply saying 'to be Buddhist is to be feminist' provides insufficient insight into the interrelationship between these ideologies in the lived experiences of women's (and men's) lives within specific contexts. We must therefore consider localised (in this case Cambodian) interpretations of Buddhism. Such interpretations are heavily influenced by and interpreted through cultural norms, especially Khmer constructions of gender[23].

Gender roles in Cambodia are in many ways similar to those in Thailand, in that they are “molded by a hierarchy of social rules which play a large role in family structure, habits, and social interactions from early childhood”[24]. Such rules have been informed by, but are not necessarily directly part of Theravada Buddhism as interpreted in the Cambodian context.

For instance, Kent writes that the 14th century Cambodian code of conduct for women, the *chbab srey*, was composed by Khmer Buddhist monks and portrayed “the ideal Khmer woman as virtuous and self-sacrificing for the welfare of her family or society”[25]. A Cambodian woman's virtue, particularly concerning sexuality, remains crucial to her own status and that of her male relatives[26].

So, we can see that Buddhism has, over time, influenced the construction of modern Cambodian culture and society – which in turn now influence how Cambodians practice their religion. The ways that religion and culture are closely entwined in Cambodia, to the extent that it is often unclear where one ends and the other begins, will be explored throughout this report.

[23] Alexandra Kent, 'Sheltered by dhamma: Reflecting on gender, security and religion in Cambodia' (2011) 42(2) *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 193.

[24] Areewan Klunklin and Jennifer Greenwood, 'Buddhism, The Status of Women and The Spread of HIV/AIDS in Thailand' (05 August 2006)

26(1) *Health care for women international* 46.

[25] Kent (n 23) 197.

[26] Kent (n 23) 197.

3.2

INHERENT GENDER EQUALITY(?)
PERSPECTIVES FROM RESPONDENTS

Having examined numerous scholarly assessments of how well feminism and Buddhism can be seen to align, we might now say the following:

*Are Buddhism and feminism **capable** of significantly aligning in terms of their broad, **overarching** principles?*

Yes.

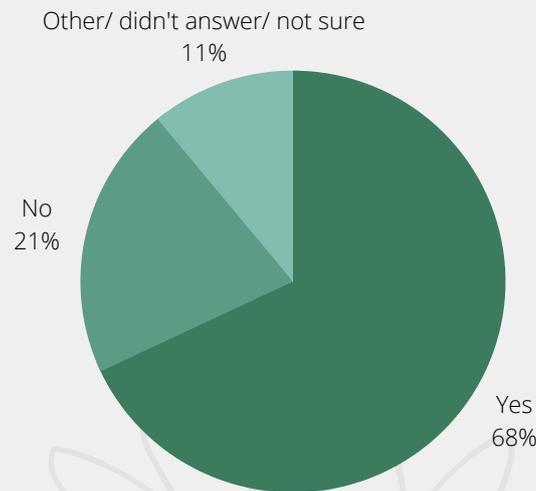
So then, do Buddhism and feminism align in terms of interpretation, practice and observance in any given context?

Not necessarily.

We turn here to explore the attitudes and perceptions of different types of Khmer Buddhist religious observers towards feminist principles of gender equality. Participants were asked a series of questions asking them to reflect on how they felt Buddhism treated questions of gender equality.

It is important to note that what we are assessing is not whether Buddhism *does* or *does not* consider women to be equal. Rather, we wish to learn whether everyday observers and practitioners *perceive* this to be the case. This is therefore a perception study rather than an empirical assessment of whether Buddhism is ideologically gender responsive.

Section summary: This section explores respondents' perceptions of gender equality within Buddhism in Cambodia. We might start by saying that these findings tell a complicated story: Firstly, many participants felt that not only was it possible for someone to believe in and advocate for gender equality between both sexes while practicing Buddhism, but also that Buddhism in itself *promotes* gender equality. Others felt that Buddhism contains too many problematic rules to be considered emancipatory for women.



DO YOU THINK BUDDHISM CONSIDERS MEN & WOMEN TO BE INHERENTLY EQUAL?

Does Buddhism consider men and women inherently equal?

Responses in the affirmative:

The respondents who reported the view that Buddhism actively promotes gender equality included a number of currently serving monks. The rationale provided by such respondents usually centred around the notion that, as one monk put it: *“Buddhism supports women rather than constrains them.”* Another advised that Buddhism promotes women’s rights, and does not restrict their freedom of expression, education or debate. Another monk pointed to the fact that women can participate in society through Buddhism in a positive way, such as through charity work, to argue that women can gain valuable knowledge and information through their religion.

Many laypeople and religious personnel (monks, senior monks, yeay-chi and ta-chi[27]) also articulated their belief that Buddhism as a religion carries strong underlying principles of **non-discrimination**, and that this carries across to questions of gender equality. For example, one monk stated that he felt that *“Buddhism can help realise gender equality in society because everyone has the same responsibilities. Anyone can practice Buddhism and contribute to society.”*

Similarly, another monk said that *“Buddha supports equality between men and women in all matters, such as taking care of the family,”* while a layperson respondent said that *“I think Buddhist teaching can help Cambodia achieve gender equality by bringing inner peace to all and teaching people not to discriminate against each other.”*

Also in the affirmative camp on the question of whether Buddhism supports the feminist principle of inherent gender equality, were those respondents who indicated that while Buddhism has the *potential* to be a force for gender equality, this can be dependent on certain variables.

[27] Yeay-chi and ta-chi are translated into English as female nuns and male nuns respectively.

“Buddhism supports women,
rather than constrains them.”

MONK RESPONDENT

For instance, as one monk respondent put it: *“Buddhist teaching can lead to gender equality but it also depends on the teacher to have full knowledge.”* Another respondent, a layperson, observed that religious principles of gender equality and kindness are only useful where they are put actively into practice by an adherent:

“Buddhist teachings promote gender equality by teaching that women and men have equal rights, and that couples should help one another. But at the end of the day, this depends on the commitment of the individual towards Buddha as well.”

Many respondents pointed out that there is a distinction between Buddhist religion and Khmer culture when it comes to the treatment of women in contemporary society. One monk advised that *“Gender discrimination is not a Buddhist issue, it is a social issue.”*

Similarly, another stated that *“Buddha teaches people not to discriminate against others based on status; everyone can learn and work equally. Buddhism never sets out that women have to do household chores, rather it is the societal norms and customs that dictate this.”* Going further, one lay respondent argued that *“Teaching Buddhism can 100% help gender equality. Buddhism does not limit women... It is the society that divides gender roles. The origin of this division is perhaps from Brahmanism, which influenced Cambodian society before Buddhism.”*

These questions of culture and religion, and the blurred lines between them, are explored in each subsequent section of this research. This is because they are pivotal in conducting a meaningful exploration into Cambodians' understanding of Buddhism in contemporary society.

Does Buddhism consider men and women inherently equal?

Responses in the **negative**:



It is important to reiterate that the majority of respondents who participated in the study *do* feel that Buddhism is in line with and even promotes gender equality and other feminist principles.

However, some also observed that there are some tensions between the ideologies. For instance, one monk stated that: *“I think Buddhism limits women’s rights, as it limits women’s actions, for example in engaging with monks. Also, Buddhism constrains the way that women dress at the pagoda, and they are not allowed to talk to monks in private far from the eyes of other people.”* A lay respondent raised a similar point, what they called “gender restrictions” such as women not being allowed into the pagoda during their period.

While these views may hold truth, it is worth noting that it is arguably not Buddhist ideology at its core that is being said here to be in opposition with gender equality. Rather, it reflects a perception that some customs and practices around the pagoda may indicate a gender preference towards men. Whether this reflects an external societal influence on Buddhist religious institutions, or whether it displays a projection of internalised sexism within the religion, or somewhere in between, is a complex question that requires further research.

Two laypersons expressed more serious doubts about the complementarity between Buddhist and feminist ideologies. The first stated that *“Current Buddhist teaching cannot help promote gender equality, but it could nurture the mind.”* The other argued that Buddha does not in fact hold men and women to be inherently equal: *“Buddha teaches that men and women are not born equal, but are valued equally in work.”* This shows us that some Buddhists perceive the religion to be in opposition with ideas of gender equality.

The current practice of Buddhism here in Cambodia is mixed with culture in such a way that it facilitates patriarchy. And this makes it difficult for us as feminists in our work – especially when we seek to challenge domestic or sexual violence.

FEMINIST RESPONDENT

The Cambodian feminists[1] in this study were also split on the question of whether they thought Buddhism embraced ideas of inherent gender equality, with one answering:

“Does Buddhism clash with feminism? I think one issue is control over our bodies and decision making. That’s a huge clash. And belief it’s somehow karma when domestic violence happens to us. In fact, people often say that just being born a woman is a result of karma.

So this clashes with feminism because it doesn’t reflect equality. And having our own power – being the master of our own destinies. And you can see a real clash with feminism when Buddhism is combined with traditional local practices. Religious concepts and traditions always give so much more value in society towards men.”

Another feminist respondent answered similarly, while raising additional examples such as women not being able to stand close to monks as they might contaminate them. The respondent felt that this displayed *“a women-blaming culture in Buddhism,”* and that *“women should not be blamed for men’s behaviour.”*

Myths of desire within Buddhism were also raised, with participants explaining that while it is believed that men's desires include wisdom and helping others, women are said to desire beauty and a good husband. There is also the notion that by becoming a monk in only a short period of time, you are only able to repay your mother's deeds. To also repay the father's deeds, one has to become fully ordained. One participant explained that this seemed to her to *“promote toxic masculinity.”*

Religious fables and mythology also tend to reflect patriarchal beliefs, according to several feminist respondents. Examples raised included stories of male gods having 10,000 wives in heaven.

[27] It should be noted that one participant preferred the term ‘gender advocate’ over the term feminist.

Again raising the issues of blurred lines between culture and religion, one feminist respondent expressed concerns that the practice of certain traditions in Cambodia that are *perceived* as Buddhist, run counter to feminist values. These include, for example, the cosmological practice of sanctioning or disallowing couples' marriages according to interpretations of their birth dates. As one respondent summarised:

I think because Buddhism has been so central to Cambodian life for centuries, it was localised in a way that all of our cultural practices, are intertwined with Buddhist ideas. So, Buddhism in Cambodia is different from that [practiced elsewhere]. I think that the chbab srey is not 'true' Buddhism. And these fortune tellers who have the power to tell women their supposed destinies, and leave some women disgraced... Is that Buddhism? I really don't like this.

This affects women much more [than men]. Because women, traditionally, are supposed to succumb to this idea of being the perfect wife and bringing harmony. These ideas have a huge impact. Women cannot be in control of themselves. Having a belief is okay – but when that belief affects the rights of others – I feel like that's not right.

It is important to note that most feminist respondents (five out of six) also expressed that while navigating these complex issues, they can still use the labels of 'feminist/gender advocate' and 'Buddhist' simultaneously:

"My feminism overlaps with Buddhism in a positive way. We can interpret being Buddhist as simply being encouraged to always try to do something good for others. It's all about interpretation. I think Buddhism can improve and reinforce feminist practice in this way."

FEMINIST RESPONDENT



Among participants, perceptions varied as to how openly Buddhism embraces those who are diverse in their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Perhaps surprisingly, **no respondents** expressed the view that those identifying as LGBTQ are prohibited from practising Buddhism. Many expressed views along the lines that "Buddhism does not prohibit people from loving the same sex," because "Buddhism is about a state of mind and it does not discriminate. As long as they have good intentions."

Among monks, ideas of support within Buddhism for the LGBTQ community were also expressed: "Buddhism does not discriminate against LGBTQ community, it is the society that serves as the barrier. Buddhism treats everyone equally." One gave the practical example that "LGBTQ people can also study with monks – there is one at my pagoda." Some monks however, expressed the view (problematic from a feminist perspective) that being queer was a result of karma: "Buddha's teaching does not discriminate against LGBTQ, but they cannot realise peace because the group is considered to have bad karma."

Also less progressive were those who said that while Buddhism is supportive of LGBTQ people, sex outside a heterosexual marriage was considered 'sexual misconduct' and so was not strictly permitted.

Nonetheless, it is significant that a majority of religious respondents expressed views largely supportive of LGBTQ inclusion with Buddhism. While reflecting only a small sample, it presents an important area for further research: If a large proportion of religious personnel do indeed consider Buddha to have been inclusive of the LGBTQ community, there may be potential to engage them in efforts to promote queer and trans rights in Cambodia.



*Buddhism values LGBTQ the same as everyone else.
It teaches people not to hate or discriminate against another.*

MONK RESPONDENT

4 INSTITUTIONAL GENDER ROLES

Women's roles and representation in Buddhist religious institutions in Cambodia



4.1

Having examined perceptions of gender equality within Buddhism in the Cambodian context, we turn now to examine a number of specific issues. The first of these concerns the roles and representations of women within Buddhist institutions. As in the previous section, we look first briefly to the academic literature, before moving on to detail the findings of our research conducted in field settings.

INSTITUTIONAL GENDER ROLES: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE LITERATURE



The available literature discusses women's role and representation in Buddhism in various ways. Some argue it is futile for women to struggle for equal representation in Buddhist institutions, since most (like those of most world religions) are "hierarchically organised and emblematic of male authority"[28].

In conducting an assessment of women's status within religious institutions, it is important from a feminist perspective not to undermine the agency behind many Cambodian women's decision to reside within them. Such women are entitled to their own self-determination, and as Tsomo argues, despite nuns not usually enjoying equal access to the benefits of monastic life as monks, monastic life has been meaningful and beneficial for countless women. It offers women "an alternative to marriage and procreation. It provides knowledge, independence, a sense of community, and the spiritual benefits of Buddhist practice – mental clarity, balance, inner peace, wisdom, and loving-kindness"[29].

Kent reiterates this notion of the pagoda as providing a potential refuge for Cambodian women in her 2011 article, "*Sheltered by Dhamma*". Many women in her study were survivors of abuse and neglect, and found solace and security within the walls of the temple.[30]

Despite the potentially beneficial and emancipatory aspects of women's monastic lives in Cambodia, the fact remains women nuns have a lower status in the temple, cooking and cleaning for the monks[31]. Monks are regarded as a superior "field of merit" and their needs are given priority over the needs of women[32].

[28] Tsomo (n 12) 6.

[29] Tsomo (n 12) 6.

[30] Kent (n 23).

[31] Klunklin & Greenwood (n 24).

[32] Tsomo (n 12) 15.

[33] Emily Wight and Vandy Muong, 'Gender politics in the pagoda: the female voices who call for change', *The Phnom Penh Post* (9 November 2013) <<https://bit.ly/3mv2NiS>>.

In Theravada Buddhism, monks study morality and meditation, as well as preside over communities as spiritual teachers and leaders[33]. Nuns are not ordained, and are divided according to gender, with male nuns called *ta-chi*, essentially a male Buddhist ascetic who lives in the pagoda. The female equivalent is either *daun-chi*, for women who follow ten precepts of Buddhism, or *yeay-chi*, for women who follow eight[34].

While full female ordination is no longer generally considered available in Theravada Buddhism[35], this was not always the case. The Buddha himself granted the first female ordination for his aunt Mahaprajapati, after she and her followers boldly shaved their heads, donned monks' robes, and demanded equal ordination rights[36].

While Buddha consented, female ordination came with restrictions. The *bhikkhuni* lived under the supervision of male monks. All *bhikkhuni*, even the most senior, were required to bow down to monks, even newly-ordained ones. Lee argues that such rules show "despite universalism inherent in the Buddha's teaching, women had trouble gaining parity with men in early Buddhism"[37]. Nonetheless, for many women of this period, monkhood represented an escape from the repressive Brahmanic patriarchy of the day. *Bhikkhunis* avoided arranged marriages and could pursue mental development through study and meditation[38].

Over time, the *bhikkhuni* sangha faded in the Theravada tradition, and around the 13th century, the lineage became extinct. The generally accepted position is that the present circumstances do not allow for the ordination of *bhikkhuni* because there are no longer any *bhikkhuni* available to grant that ordination (five are required to be present for the ceremony)[39].

In the Cambodian context, Lee argues that women's lower rank is reinforced in Theravada Buddhism by the importance placed on hierarchy: Senior monks above junior monks, older siblings above younger ones, husbands above wives. Khmer Buddhist ceremonies provide a visual example of the subordinate role of women in Theravada Buddhism, with the worship experience of women (even *daun-chi*) being that they sit physically lower and reverence men, seated higher[40].

Nonetheless, Lee explains that "despite the inferior rank of women in Theravada Buddhism, there are many ways that women can earn merit and advance in spiritual worth," including motherhood, alms giving and offerings of food to monks[41].

[34] Wight and Muong (n 33).

[35] The *Bhikkuni* tradition isn't completely dead in Theravada Buddhism, as an unofficial monastery operates in Thailand under the Venerable Dhammananda, who was herself ordained in Sri Lanka (Wight & Muong, n 33)

[36] Nathaniel Adams, 'Cambodia's "Quiet Movement": Buddhist Women in Development', *World Faiths Development Dialogue* (2 May 2011) <<https://bit.ly/37rc1sr>>.

[37] Susan H Lee, 'Ideological Inequalities: Khmer Culture and Widows' Perception of Remarriage' (May 2018) 19(5) *Gender, poverty and inequality: Exploration from a transformative perspective of the journal of International women's studies* 29, 33-34.

[38] Adams (n 36)

[39] Adams (n 36)

[40] Lee (n 42) 36.

[41] Lee (n 42) 36.

4.2

INSTITUTIONAL GENDER ROLES:
PERSPECTIVES FROM RESPONDENTS

Key findings: The findings that emerged from the data contain a range of views towards women's roles and representation in Buddhism. While some respondents, (particularly lay women and feminist participants) expressed dismay over the fact that women are not able to access opportunities and roles within Buddhist institutions in the same way as men, others saw this simply as reflecting a natural order based on gender hierarchy that also protected both women and men from unvirtuous sexual thoughts and conduct.

There seems to be a degree of interpretation about what roles women are presently permitted to hold within the Cambodian Buddhist context, with two respondents suggesting that women could already be ordained. Some respondents, especially monks, hypothesized that it may be possible to ordain women in future, but also expressed some concerns about practicalities such as living arrangements.

Lay respondents:

Some lay respondents expressed approval of current institutional practices of dividing roles by gender, including simply for the sake of clarity. As one male lay respondent put it, "*Monks and Daun-Chi should not be equal... Roles should be clearly divided between Daun-Chi, Ah-Cha[42], cleaners, and monks.*" The same respondent appeared to 'play down' the gender gap: "*Buddhism provides the same right to education. It's just that women cannot serve as monks and can only serve as Daun-Chi.*"

This 'playing down' of the different statuses afforded to men and women inside the pagoda was a theme running through many lay participants' responses, particularly among men:

"There is no division of hierarchy or ranking in the pagoda, it just seems that way because women lack the motivation to participate. Women do not have the courage to lead the crowd, so instead take up chores like washing dishes."

[42] Ah-Cha refers to lay men who do not reside in the pagoda but who lead Buddhist followers to learn about dharma and how to organise religious festivals and ceremonies

Without equal opportunities for women to become monks, we cannot say that Buddhism has gender equality.

WOMAN LAY RESPONDENT

One older lay respondent gave a different analysis, explaining the split between genders was simply because this had been the way for centuries: *“I think it is a fair ranking because it has been a custom since a long time ago. People need to respect monks more than Yeay-Chi, but this does not mean to discriminate against Yeay-Chi.”* Another offered that any division in roles is simply to provide the pagoda with an infrastructure and social order, improving its function.

However, another lay respondent pointed to the fact that ta-chi, the male equivalent of yeay-chi/daun-chi, also do not involve themselves with such tasks as cleaning up, cooking or washing dishes. This indicates that, as one respondent put it, *“there are still these perceptions that men are superior,”* even outside the hierarchical relationship between monks and nuns.

Reflecting further on the distinction between male ta-chi and female yeay-/daun-chi, some lay respondents viewed these roles as being at least roughly equal, saying that they were both respected as elder members of the community. Others perceived them to reflect quite different tiers based on gender, as the following quote from a male layperson demonstrates:

“Both nuns and ta-chi have to serve the monks, but in reality, mostly women and nuns serve the monks because they know their role as a woman. Under the law, both men and women can take the role as ta-chi, which involves some religious teaching. But the reality is that women cannot perform the role of ta-chi, since they lack the ability and knowledge.”

Thus, lay respondents' views on women's representation in Buddhist institutions varied. Perhaps unsurprisingly, women lay respondents appeared to view the notion of women monks more favourably than men did. They also saw women's commonly assigned tasks within the pagoda, such as cooking and cleaning, as more problematic than men did. For example, one woman lay respondent lamented that *“Without equal opportunities and outcomes for women to become monks, we cannot say that Buddhism has gender equality.”*

There is a division of roles [between men and women], but this division is in order to have respect for each other, not to discriminate against one sex.

MONK RESPONDENT

Religious 'clergy' respondents:

The issue of 'cultural custom versus religious practice', and the blurred lines in-between was raised again by a number of monk and yeay-chi respondents when discussing women's roles inside the pagoda. For instance, one monk stated that Buddhism does not discriminate between genders, it is rather *"the traditional norms that influence structures in the pagoda."* Echoing this idea, another monk reflected on their own perception of gender equality within the religion: *"There is a division of roles, but this division is in order to have respect for each other, not to discriminate against one sex."*

These quotes reflect a significant idea: If Buddhism is indeed perceived by monks to be accepting of ideas of gender equality, and it is rather society that reinforces any gender-based discrimination, then this may present an opportunity for religious practitioners such as monks, senior monks, ta-chi and yeay-/daun-chi to integrate gender equality into their religious practice and teaching. Such activity could be as simple as encouraging husbands in the community to treat their wives with respect, as Buddha's teaching also considers women and men to be inherently equal.

Yeay-chi women respondents, were also asked to reflect on the gendered division of roles inside the pagoda. They raised that while both men and women can serve on the local pagoda committee, the role of ah-cha, (lay men who do not reside in the pagoda but who lead Buddhist followers to learn about dharma and how to organise religious festivals and ceremonies), is usually exclusively filled by men. The reason for this, they perceive, is that lay women *"do not have all the knowledge yet"* and are busy taking care of the children and housework. Therefore, *"women have little time to learn about dharma while the men have enough time to study to become Ah-Cha."*

Monks, too, were asked about the rigidity of the task division between yeay-chi and ta-chi, and whether there is some formal teaching that women nuns, rather than men nuns, should carry out the tasks of cleaning. One answered:

*"The role of ta-chi is to lead the sermon for other laypeople, while yeay-chi is to manage the food and keep the pagoda grounds clean. But **Buddha did not set out that yeay-chi have to serve monks and ta-chi**, it is because of social conditioning, and because most yeay-chi did not get much education, so do not have sufficient management skills."*



If the above discussion is reflective of a wider view among monks, then it stands to reason that there is some 'wobble room' for yeay-chi to take on different roles in the pagoda, if they wish to, and that this shift would not go against any Buddhist teachings. As another monk put it, *"The work that yeay-chi and ta-chi do is according to their own wishes. Buddhism does not tell them to wash the dishes or clean the pagoda grounds."*

Another monk suggested that they would welcome women being ordained as monks again in the future:

"Women can also become monks, but this does not happen currently due to concerns about the possibility of violations of conduct between genders. I think that women should be allowed to become monks if they want to."

It is worth noting that many monk respondents demonstrated a firm grasp of issues relating to gender inequality. For instance, consider the following response from one monk, arguing that there are only structural impediments to female ordination, rather than notions within Buddhism of women being unworthy of ordination:

"The division between men and women in the pagoda is such that men lead religious ceremonies, while women do not. I think this is unfair and reflects discrimination. This division is due to customs and norms. Women can also become monks, but there is a risk that it could cause chaos to the religion as it is hard to nurture calm when men and women stay close together. Also, in order for women to become a monk, she needs to be baptised by both senior monks and senior female monks."

Finally, one monk respondent suggested that women simply do not wish to become monks: *"Women can also become monks, it is just that there are no women wanting to be monks."* The fact that some monks advised that there are already women monks in Cambodia, and others advised that there were not currently but there may be in future, is interesting. The purpose of this research is not to report what is 'right', but rather, what religious observers perceive to be the case. And, from the above section, we can draw two key findings.

The first finding is that lay people seem to believe that ta-chi and yeay-chi have set roles, while monks view their tasks as more fluid. Monks also reported that any barriers preventing yeay-chi from taking on more prominent roles were cultural, rather than religious.

The second finding is that the data did not seem to reflect an ideological pushback from either laypeople or Buddhist monks to the idea of women serving as monks. The explanation for women not being able to be ordained centred around technical issues (the lack of women monks to ordain the next generation) and practical (women and men monks could not reside in the same pagoda dormitories for reasons of preserving purity of mind and sexual abstinence). Unlike, say, Catholicism, which invokes divine law to preach the spiritual unsuitability of women to serve as priests, the respondents in this study did not refer to such ideas of women being inherently spiritually unsuitable for ordination in Buddhism.

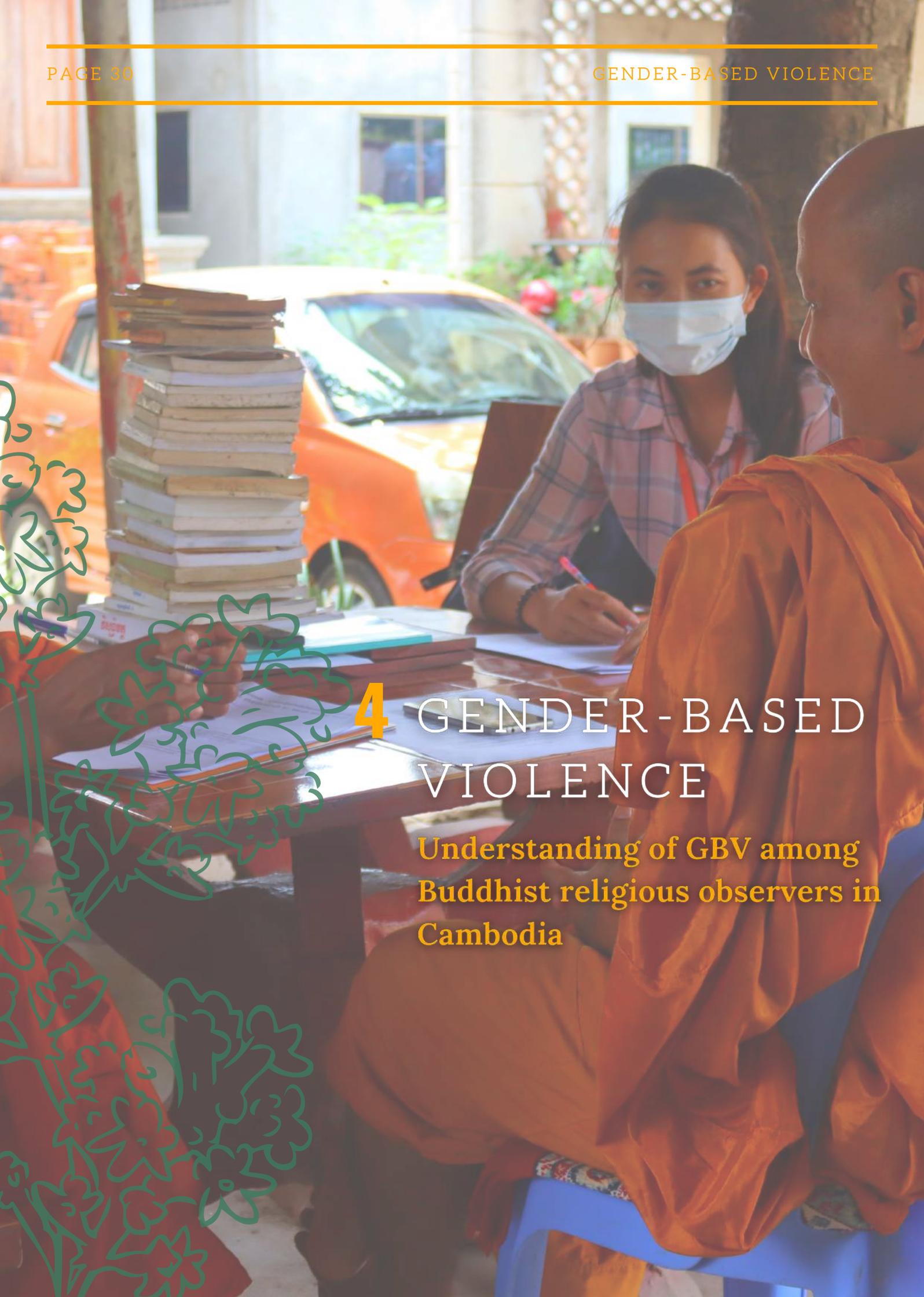
Further research should be done to establish whether this is a widespread view among monks and practicing lay people in Cambodia, and what the entry points are for a respectful conversation about the possibility of women becoming monks, or at least, supporting yeay-/daun-chi to find ways to take on more substantive roles inside the pagoda should they wish to. This is not to diminish the important and vital work that yeay-chi currently do, but rather to suggest that such a conversation might increase the agency of both yeay-chi and ta-chi to undertake tasks beyond those that are currently allocated by gender.

Feminist respondents:

All feminist respondents in this study indicated some level of discomfort and disagreement with the current gendered division of labour within Buddhist religious institutions. One respondent explained that the ordination of women monks was an issue she personally struggled with despite her own faith:

...the absence of the women monks is troublesome to me. I personally question the claim that bhikkhuni have lost the lineage to their origin. I think Buddha has so, so, so much compassion and mercy. If Buddha were alive right now, he would definitely allow women to become bhikkhuni.

Another respondent told that she made effort to involve nuns on an equal footing to monks: "I started to question why nuns have to eat after the monks and wash the dishes. Now, at home, when I have a ceremony, I also invite nuns and treat them as equal to monks."



4 GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Understanding of GBV among Buddhist religious observers in Cambodia



If we can remember that at the core of Buddhism... are the ideals of love and compassion... then that is the seed that can be nurtured to heal the wounds of [GBV] and prevent cycles of violence from continuing.

KANUKOLLU & EPSTEIN-NGO (2015).

This report has examined overarching perceptions of gender equality within Buddhism (Section 3), and women's roles within Cambodian Buddhist institutions (Section 4). We now turn to look at the perceptions of Cambodians towards gender-based violence (GBV) in a Buddhist context, with Buddhism being a religious tradition well known for strong principles of non-violence.

5.1

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE LITERATURE

Kanukollu and Epstein-Ngo explain that there is scarce research on the topic of applying Buddhist values or teachings to prevent and interrupt the cycle of GBV[43]. There is also a gap in available literature on the topic of GBV in Buddhist communities.

The literature that does exist discusses GBV and Buddhism in a number of ways. In Kanukollu & Epstein-Ngo's own study, they observe that GBV occurs in Buddhist communities "despite the basic tenets of love and compassion taught within Buddhism." They also argue there is insufficient scholarship on how to support Buddhist survivors in ways that are spiritually relevant.[44]

One proposal in their study was to examine how The Eightfold Path, (an important piece of Buddhist practice across all traditions)[45], and other basic principles within Buddhism may be used to address GBV at both the individual and community levels:

[43] Kanukollu and Epstein-Ngo (n 8) 353.

[44] Kanukollu and Epstein-Ngo (n 8) 353.

[46] The avenues offered to rectify the experience of suffering are described in The Eightfold Path, which encourages Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration, Right View, and Right Resolve (Aiken and Strand 2005).

[45] Kanukollu and Epstein-Ngo (n 8) 353.

Working with local cultural brokers and religious leaders is essential to advance culturally informed strategies to prevent GBV.

EISENBRUCH, 2018

"That [GBV] is incongruent with the teachings of the Buddha is supported by the Right View on the Eight-Fold Path... If we can remember that at the core of Buddhism... are the ideals of love and compassion, or right-mindedness and right action, then that is the seed that can be nurtured to both heal the wounds of [GBV] and prevent the cycles of violence from continuing"[45].

Eisenbruch's 2018 study asks the difficult question of "whether Cambodian Buddhism contributes to... gender inequality, and therefore to GBV"[46]. Eisenbruch finds that religion can act as a double-edged sword in the fight against GBV: While religious institutions can be vital allies in shifting norms around violence, he argues they can equally be responsible for defending or justifying violations of women's rights.

As we have explored in earlier sections, Kent's 2011 *Sheltered by Dhamma* study shows us that the Buddhist temple grounds provide some opportunities for abused women to seek refuge and recovery[47]. Eisenbruch contends that:

*"If [Buddhist institutions in Cambodia] are to do more, by shifting norms of violence, the best way for this to happen is by understanding the good they can do and **encouraging them to do so, rather than by criticising Buddhism as a conservative force for gender inequality**"[48].*

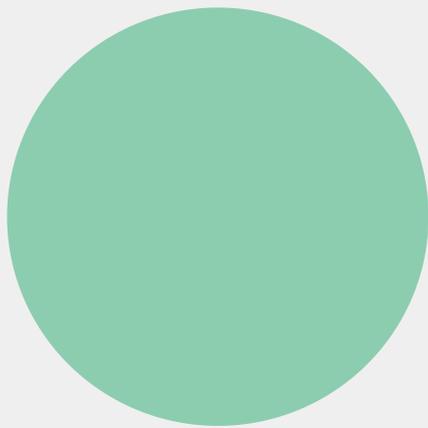
For Eisenbruch, therefore, to successfully combat GBV in Cambodia, advocates must develop interventions that work with tradition and culture rather than only highlighting these in problematic terms. Eisenbruch's ultimate deduction is that "working with local cultural brokers and religious leaders is essential to advance culturally informed strategies to prevent GBV"[48]. This notion may prove relevant and beneficial to any future GBV interventions that actively engage religious institutions.

[46] M Eisenbruch, 'Violence Against Women in Cambodia: Towards a Culturally Responsive Theory of Change' (2018) 42 *Cult Med Psychiatry* 350.

[47] Kent (n 23).

[48] Eisenbruch (n 46).

[49] Eisenbruch (n 46).



Percentage of lay and clergy respondents who report that Buddha's teaching prohibits GBV

Yes
100%

5.2 GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: PERSPECTIVES FROM RESPONDENTS

Lay respondents:

Several lay respondents explained that to them, Buddhism gives its followers a strict imperative not to commit GBV. For example, one reported that *“Buddhism protects women from any violation or abuse. Because if you are a Buddhist, this religion teaches us not to harm others.”*

Expanding on this concept, some lay respondents suggested that monks have the capacity and influence to play an active role in the prevention of GBV. As one lay woman proposed, *“To end violence against women and girls, we could educate people through religious events and monks’ teaching.”*

A focus group discussion of young lay followers provided valuable insight into how GBV can be seen and explained through a Buddhist lens, using religious concepts and language, while still adopting what can be considered a ‘rights based lens:’

“The teaching of the control of mind, rights, and freedom can help to reduce the misunderstanding of the perspective of one’s deeds and the outcome of one’s deeds.”

Alternatively, the causes of violence are because of the lack of control over the mind, and a lack of integrity, patience, self-control and generosity.”

The above discussion arguably shows us that the tensions between Buddhism and feminism on the issue of GBV, where they do exist, are not so great that at least some ideas on violence prevention cannot readily coexist. A feminist analysis and intervention could perhaps build on these religiously-informed ideas, adding concepts of power and patriarchy, where possible and appropriate.

Lastly, one male lay participant explained the approach taken to educate young children about non-violence, through the language and teachings of Buddhism:

“Buddhism teaches people to love one another and refrain from using violence. I have used Buddhist teachings to educate my children, for example to be tolerant and solve problems through non-violent ways such as discussion. When there is a problem in the family, I use peaceful means by discussing to solve the problem.”

This, too, displays powerful anti-violence principles inherent in Buddhism that Cambodians can and do utilise to prevent violence in their families and communities.

Buddha's lessons can help fight GBV, but the teaching methodology should be changed and updated to spread the message.

MONK RESPONDENT

Religious 'clergy' respondents:

In terms of monks' own responses, several indicated that they would be interested in becoming more active on issues related to violence prevention. One particularly noteworthy perspective here, is that of a monk reflecting that Buddhism, through monks, can act as a vehicle for promoting non-violence in the community, but that room for improvement exists:

"In the past, there have been many cases of men using violence against women, but monks were not very active in educating men to change their behavior much. That's maybe why there is the misunderstanding that Buddhism does not support women's rights.

Buddha's lessons can help fight GBV, but the teaching methodology should be changed and updated to spread the message."

The above findings indicate that not only do there exist both foundational concepts in Buddhism that can be mobilised to fight GBV and debunk cultural/societal notions of impunity and male entitlement, but also a willingness from some practitioners inside religious institutions to take on an active role in this pursuit.

Feminist respondents:

Feminist respondents were split in their views on Buddhism's influence on levels of GBV in Cambodia. One argued that while the normalisation of GBV has been unfortunately deeply rooted in Cambodian society for centuries, this was not an effect of or related to religion:

I think that [normalisation of] GBV is not reflective of Buddhism. This is something that came up around the time of the Chbab Srey, which brought so many rules and became so entrenched during that historical period.

But the Chbab Srey did not come from any foundation of Buddhism. It's standalone. It was to regulate women and ensure that they perform their roles – give birth, cook and so on. But all of this came after the time of Buddha. I don't think that real Buddhists would teach this.

In practice, the saying 'it is karma' is just a way to make the victim feel less suffering. But in fact, people who use violence are behaving wrongly and against the five precepts.

YEAY-CHI RESPONDENT

Four of the six feminist respondents also raised issues with the notion of karma (the idea that the degree of merit accrued throughout one's actions determines their fate in future existences) as it is currently understood by many Cambodians.

In particular, concerns were expressed regarding the impact that belief in karma has on the normalisation of GBV, especially inside the home. According to these participants, karma is often offered up by religious practitioners and lay followers alike as an explanation for why a woman suffers ongoing domestic abuse. The following respondent explained the issues with karma in the following personal account:

Before I knew about feminism, I felt so much of my life was left up to destiny, and so much was based on karma. I thought that everything was based on my past life. And so if you did wrong in your past life, that's why things are not going well for you now.

My family still believes this. One of my sisters was in a situation of domestic violence. When they got divorced, some in the community saw this as a disgrace to our family. There is still a lot of stigma about this.

When people see domestic violence, they just say "this is your karma!" And they made my sister believe that this was her karma. And I feel like saying "No. This belief has to be changed."

On karma, another feminist participant offered up the following suggestion, perhaps echoing Eisenbruch's earlier outlined approach of combating GBV while working with tradition and religion:

"We should unpack and debunk the concept of karma for the public: We should engage monks as messengers to clarify certain myths, for example, to explain that domestic violence is not the result of bad Karma."

6 SEXUAL & REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS

Perceptions of abortion, contraception and extra-marital sex among Cambodian Buddhist followers



6.1

SEXUAL & REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS (SRHR): PERSPECTIVES FROM THE LITERATURE



Abortion: There is a notable gap in the research on contemporary Cambodian Theravada Buddhism and its interpretation of SRHR issues. In particular, as Keown observed in 2017, compared to the West, there is comparatively little published on abortion from a Buddhist perspective.[50].

What we can say, is that Cambodian lay Buddhists, like all Theravada lay followers, are encouraged to live life according to **five key precepts**. These are, in short:

1. Refraining from harming living beings/practising loving-kindness
2. Refraining from taking the non-given/practising generosity
3. Refraining from committing sexual misconduct/practising contentment
4. Refraining from false speech/practising truthful communication
5. Refraining from intoxicants/practising mindfulness[51]

According to Higgins, these precepts “take the form of voluntary, personal undertakings.” Unlike commandments, they express basic principles as opposed to fixed, legalistic rules that any one action falls inside or outside of [52]. Buddhism provides general guiding principles, but also requires believers make appropriate moral judgements in each morally significant situation.

This idea – that moral judgement is never a question of blindly applying a rule – is of significance when considering whether certain acts (using the morning-after pill, or having an abortion) are subject to some degree of leniency, for instance the context, or one’s intention.

For instance, Keown notes that the first of the five precepts followed by the laity prohibits the taking of human life, and so abortion is generally regarded as falling under this prohibition and thus considered morally wrong. Nevertheless, “large numbers of abortions –both legal and illegal–are performed each year by Buddhists throughout Asia”[53].

[50] Damien Keown, ‘Buddhism and abortion’ (10.1093/OBO/9780195393521-0198, 29 November 2017) <<https://bit.ly/3nsLFMc>.

[51] Winton Higgins, ‘Buddhist Sexual Ethics’, *BuddhaNet’s magazine articles* (article, n.d) <http://www.buddhanet.net/winton_s.htm>.

[52] Higgins (n 51).

[53] Keown (n 50).

Due to the lack of Cambodia-specific literature, we turn to Suwanbubbha's account of Thai Theravada approaches to SRHR issues. While these can appear to be broadly applicable in the Cambodian context, we would encourage further local research in this area. According to Suwanbubbha, in order to enjoy a normal life, lay followers of Buddhism must abstain from killing. However, while this sounds like "absolutist ethics and would seem to end all discussion of a just and moral abortion decision," he explains that what is really absolute is the law of **karma**[54].

According to this teaching, performing abortion produces retribution. It produces a shortening of the performer's life, as well as proneness to disease, and exposure to constant grief and fear. This is because Buddhism traditionally conceptualises a foetus or even embryo as "a being waiting to be born," which is capable of transmitting his or her own karmic energy. Suwanbubbha explains that according to the law of karma, **intention is key**[55].

As a result, abortion where there is a threat to the life of the mother may be considered as less severe karma, as long as this action is not based on bad intentions, such as greed, hatred, anger or delusion. Abortion with good intentions may be considered a forgivable sin, one that could even be superseded by the accumulation of good karma from other good deeds. Suwanbubbha provides the example of a woman who was raped, or where the pregnancy was not viable, would face less negative karma effects than one who aborted a foetus due to "self-indulgence." Even further, a person who seeks an abortion due to economic hardship or unreadiness for childbearing would face less karmic punishment than someone who felt hate or anger toward the foetus[56].

Thus, we can see that in the available literature, some scholars argue that despite a strong morally negative view of abortion, there is some scope within Buddhism for a "less bad" abortion. This notion, along with ideas of "self-indulgent abortion," certainly still present a clash with feminist principles of full bodily autonomy and reproductive choice. However, it is a useful starting point from which to explore the empirical responses concerning abortion later in this section.

[54] Parichart Sumanbubbha, 'The right to family planning, contraception, and abortion in Thai Buddhism' in Daniel C Maguire (ed), *Sacred Rights: The Case for Contraception and Abortion in World Religions* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2003) <<https://bit.ly/3peixJ9>>.

[55] Suwanbubbha (n 54).

[56] Suwanbubbha (n 54).

...good sexual conduct [within Buddhism] is based on loving kindness, generosity, honesty, and mental and emotional clarity - conduct that has good results.

HIGGINS, 2010

Contraception: Suwanbubbha argues that Buddhism actually encourages women “to exercise the right to family planning and contraception”[57]. A woman’s reproductive right concerning family planning and the use of contraception appear welcome in Buddhism, though certain methods are advised over others. This is because, as discussed earlier, Buddhism holds that life begins at the very moment of conception.

This is why “some birth control methods, such as the IUD, which act by killing the fertilised egg and preventing implantation are unacceptable”[58]. However, when the life of a “being waiting to be born” is not ended, such as when using condoms or the contraceptive pill, no immorality is seen as taking place, as long as sexual misconduct is not present.

Sexual (mis)conduct: As well as reproductivity, Suwanbubbha explains that passion and sexuality are also respected in Buddhism. He does not go into questions of sexual orientation or gender identity, and more research on LGBTQ acceptance within Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia is needed (the empirical findings captured earlier in this report show that there is a variation of opinion among lay persons and ‘clergy’ in this area, but interestingly, the majority of views were of acceptance or tolerance). Higgins summarises the third precept, of refraining from sexual misconduct, thusly:

The five precepts constitute an integrated set - each precept supports the others. To know what 'sexual misconduct' means, you look at the other precepts. 'Sexual misconduct', in the spirit of the precepts, means any sexual conduct involving violence, manipulation or deceit - conduct that leads to suffering and trouble. By contrast, good sexual conduct is based on loving kindness, generosity, honesty, and mental and emotional clarity - conduct that has good results[60].

Notably absent from the above summary is the permissibility of pre-and extra-marital sex, which are of significant relevance in a country like Cambodia where these norms remain influential. Again, further research is needed here.

[57] Suwanbubbha (n 54).

[58] BBC, ‘Buddhism and contraception’, BBC (online, 23 November 2009) <<https://bbc.in/34hUX67>>.

[59] Suwanbubbha (n 54).

6.2 SEXUAL & REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS (SRHR): PERSPECTIVES FROM RESPONDENTS



Having briefly explored what the limited scholarly literature tells us about Buddhism and SRHR in the Southeast Asian context, we move again to examine the findings that emerged from the data gathered as part of this research. It is worth noting again that what we seek to understand is not which acts are technically considered ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ for instance in the canonical texts, but rather: What do Cambodian Buddhists *perceive* to be considered right and wrong within their religious tradition?

Abortion:

As per previous sections, responses by participants provided a range of different opinions and standpoints on these issues. Where there was near total agreement, however, was on the question of abortion. Every participant interviewed or surveyed, who answered the questions on this topic (apart from two feminist respondents), gave the view that Buddhism considers abortion to be morally wrong. As one lay respondent summarised: “Buddhism prohibits abortion because of the teaching of abstaining from killing life.”

Another lay respondent reflected the idea explained by Sawanbubbha: that the extent to which abortion is subject to karmic retribution can be impacted by the nature of one’s intention: “If they carelessly or intentionally miscarried the baby, then it is against the teaching of no killing of life and the right to life of the child.” The same respondent raised the exception of when the expectant parent’s life was at risk due to pregnancy: “In the case that it is the choice to save the life of the mother, I think Buddhism does not and cannot prohibit that. It is a choice of the individual.”

Each of the 12 monk respondents reported that Buddhism does not generally permit abortions. One monk explained this with the following rationale:

“Buddhism prohibits abortion because it means to kill a formed living being. If someone commits abortion, [the embryo/foetus] would be born as a ghost (ប្រុស). But, Buddhism does not prohibit contraception since the lives are not formed yet.”



An interesting finding indicated by several lay and religious respondents was that not only does karmic retribution befall a pregnant person, but also relevant medical or other practitioners, a husband if he agrees to or encourages the abortion, and even supportive bystanders. One yeay-chi explained this idea in detail:

...individuals that support women in abortion are not good Buddhist followers because they are taking part in the killing or supporting the killers.

Another monk echoed the ideas of karma, and the possibility of collective punishment based on contributory actions by multiple individuals:

Abortion is a sinful act because of the killing of life. Monks will not punish women or their families, but they will receive the karma on their own. No one can know what kind of karma they will receive because it depends on the intention of the individual. If the husband is the one who coerces women to kill the child, the husband will suffer the most. If the woman intentionally kills the child, then she will be sinful.

Readers from Western contexts may find this notion of interest, as abortion-related shame and stigma is less often apportioned to male partners in Western contexts. The findings of this research, however, appear to reflect that in the Cambodian context, as one monk put it, “If the decision to commit abortion is a joint decision between the husband and wife, **both of them will receive bad karma equally.**”

One feminist respondent reflected that while the belief that abortion brings karmic penalty is widespread, it is nonetheless commonly practiced: “From a practice perspective, especially those I know personally, abortion is fine. But they do still believe that it is taking a life. And then when you experience something negative, that is your karma.”

Lastly, one feminist respondent reflected a view that perhaps Buddhism is not opposed to abortion, but rather cultural norms have become so embedded within the practice of the religion, that it is mistakenly considered Buddhist: “I’m not personally convinced that a total ban on abortion would come from the real Buddhist tradition. It may have come from rules that were subsequently set up.”

There is no restriction on birth control within Buddhism... Monks can help women by informing young couples about family planning.

MONK RESPONDENT

Contraception:

Perceptions of whether contraception is permitted were slightly more mixed than for abortion, but generally leaned towards the affirmative. Interestingly, a number of lay respondents couched the discussion of contraception in decidedly human rights-based language:

“Buddhism does not prohibit contraception. It is a socio-economic issue that should be allowed because it concerns an individual’s health rights and their freedom.”

Significantly, during his response on the permissibility of contraception in Buddhism, one monk not only advised that there is “no restriction on birth control in Buddhism,” but also proposed that “Monks can help women by informing young couples about family planning.” A senior monk echoed this idea in his own response:

*“Everyone should participate in spreading the safe and effective methods of using contraceptives which is better than promoting abortion. **Prevention is better than treating.**”*

One elderly lay respondent added a caveat, namely that contraception was prohibited when involved in situations of sexual misconduct, referred to as “*when doing bad deeds*”. The notion of ‘sexual misconduct’ within Buddhism seems more readily subject to modern interpretation than abortion, and so perhaps entry points for gender equality advocates can be found more readily in this area. For instance, one lay participant mentioned “*Buddhism does not allow sexual harassment or harming others sexually, and I support this.*”



Pre- and extra-marital sex

Ideas of sexual misconduct for some respondents extended to pre- and extra-marital sex. Responses on this subject varied widely. Some argued that Buddhism expressly prohibits such conduct, others argued it was permitted but not encouraged, and a large number felt it was somewhere in between, such as the following response from a lay respondent demonstrates:

“Buddhism does not expressly prohibit sex outside marriage, it’s a matter for the individual. But when you mix social norms with Buddhism, then we see the view that sex outside marriage is bad.”

One lay respondent reflected on double standards between men and women having sex outside marriage: “Most men have sex with other women before getting married. It is okay for the men, but if women did the same thing, people would speak negatively about them.” A feminist respondent, however, argued that **virginity culture sits firmly outside Buddhist religious teaching**: “I think that [virginity culture] is not a Buddhist issue. It's definitely not. That's part of the rules and traditions that came afterwards.”

Lastly, some lay respondents suggested that pre-marital sex between a steady couple was permitted, but that extra-marital affairs involving those already married was strictly forbidden, as it is considered an immoral act of betrayal that reflects unwholesome intentions. The yeay-chi also drew this firm distinction in their focus group discussion:

*If the individual is still single, they have this freedom. But if the man has a family and betrays the wife, he is wrong based on religious teaching. They will be **punished by nature** and the principles of merit-sin, as well as karma-consequences.*

Thus, from this data emerges a suggestion that sex between an unwed couple is perceived to be viewed within Buddhism less harshly than those who are married to others. This may be of relevance to gender equality advocates in their work promoting women’s sexual autonomy. However, further research with a larger sample size would be needed to confirm whether this apparent trend is representative of the wider population.



7 REFLECTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS
Pathways towards greater collaboration between feminists and Buddhists in Cambodia

If we can remember that at the core of Buddhism... are the ideals of love and compassion... then that is the seed that can be nurtured to heal the wounds of [GBV] and prevent cycles of violence from continuing.

KANUKOLLU & EPSTEIN-NGO (2015).

Tsomo argues that rather than levelling criticism at the religion and its institutions, perhaps a more effective tactic for gender advocates is to respectfully ask questions to gain a clearer understanding of different viewpoints, and to subtly open up new avenues of Buddhism, rather than appearing to pose any kind of threat. He suggests that:

“Most dialogue partners are quick to recognise that, if Buddhist practice is beneficial for men, it must be equally beneficial for women. And, if Buddhist practice is beneficial, women deserve to have equal access to it.”

This supports the notion discussed earlier in this research, put forward by Eisenbruch, that to successfully combat GBV in Cambodia, advocates must develop interventions that work with tradition and culture rather than only highlighting these in problematic terms. Eisenbruch’s ultimate deduction is that *“working with local cultural brokers and religious leaders is essential to advance culturally informed strategies to prevent GBV.”*

At the end of each interview and focus group discussion, participants were asked to reflect on ways that feminists and religious practitioners in Cambodia can work better or more closely together to benefit society. The responses were overwhelmingly positive and constructive, with many expressing openness to personally become engaged in any such initiatives. A summary of responses capturing the range of ideas is provided below.

1. Encourage the integration of positive Buddhist practices and concepts into gender advocates’ daily routines

Some Buddhist ideas, of staying calm, using mindfulness, and staying present in the moment... I feel like these are the types of rituals that as a feminist I can really embrace. Because it has helped me to stay true to myself. Relevant Buddhist practices can help us live better lives.

– Feminist respondent

[60] Tsomo (n 12).

[61] Eisenbruch (n 46).

What if monks took on board and preached both feminist and Buddhist concepts? That would be a powerful thing, and would have the potential to change a lot.

FEMINIST RESPONDENT

2. Reciprocal learning opportunities through closer collaboration between monks and gender advocates

There is close cooperation between monks and NGOs, but we don't work much on women's issues since monks often do not have the opportunity to be educated on this. I think there should be more awareness-raising activities regarding domestic violence so that people do not have hatred towards one another.

- Monk respondent

I think we can go to meet some prominent monks who are known for being progressive. And we can learn from them about the true Buddhist principles, and maybe we can discuss how we can engage with each other. Maybe they can also support us, act as champions. They could speak about and really try to elaborate on the obstacles or the root causes of the issues that women face.

- Feminist respondent

3. Feminists can respectfully discuss key concepts that reinforce gender inequality

Once we discussed the chhab srey on a radio show. But we didn't say 'this is bad, you should not practice it'. We brought it for discussion. For example, the idea of "don't bring the fire from inside to outside". We asked listeners "What does this mean in practice? What is the impact that this idea has on women?"

When you bring traditional and cultural ideas to the public for discussion, you need to be careful. It's best to ask for opinions, and just ask open questions. Maybe they don't agree with you on the spot, but you can plant the seeds.

- Feminist respondent

4. Encourage Buddhist practitioners to integrate gender equality principles into their public outreach work

I really see the potential of these traditional cultural practices, including Buddhist ones, to be used as powerful, transformational tools. What if monks took on board and preached both feminist and Buddhist concepts? I think that would be a powerful thing, and would have the potential to change a lot.

- Feminist respondent

Monks should run a training course on issues of violence, gender discrimination, and other social issues.

- Monk respondent

Monks should educate in schools and communities about refraining from the use of violence in the family, in order to change people's perceptions.

- Yeay-Chi respondent



8 CONCLUSION & SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



Despite certain areas of tension... the findings of this study have indicated to us that feminism and Buddhism in the Cambodian context appear to share significant, fundamental complementarities.

Key Findings:

We conclude this report by providing a summary of its key findings and areas where responses indicated a need for further research. We can start, however, by emphasising that despite certain areas of tension such as the permissibility of abortion, **the findings of this study have indicated to us that feminism and Buddhism in the Cambodian context do appear to share significant, fundamental complementarities.**

For example, such foundational **notions as inherent gender equality, social justice, purity of intention and harm-free conduct towards others can to a large extent be considered readily cross-cutting concepts between the two systems.** This provides a good deal of common ground upon which feminists, Buddhists, and those in between might come together to strategise possible collaborations, including reciprocal learning opportunities and even joint advocacy and community education initiatives.

Other findings from this research included the following:

- 1 There appears to be **significant openness** from religious practitioners to collaborate with gender advocates in order to reduce violence in the community and promote principles of gender equality that they believe are already inherent in Buddhist ideology (see previous section for specific ideas).
- 2 While many lay observers see ta-chi (male nuns) and yeay-chi (female nuns) as having set roles, monks reported that such roles are not fixed, and that **barriers preventing yeay-chi from taking on more substantive tasks are cultural rather than religious.** This may provide an entry point to encourage yeay-chi to take on more substantive roles within the pagoda, and for ta-chi to share in cleaning and cooking tasks.

Many felt that not only was it possible for someone to advocate for gender equality while practicing Buddhism, but also that **Buddhism in itself promotes gender equality.**

- 3 Many participants felt that not only was it possible for someone to believe in and advocate for gender equality while practicing Buddhism, but also that **Buddhism in itself promotes gender equality. Over two thirds of respondents (68%) felt that Buddhism sees women and men as inherently equal.**
- 4 The data did not reflect an ideological pushback from either laypeople or Buddhist monks to the idea of **women serving as monks**. The explanation for women not being able to be ordained centred around technicalities (the lack of women monks to ordain the next generation) and practical matters (women and men monks could not reside closely for reasons of preserving purity of mind and sexual abstinence). **The respondents in this study did not refer to any ideas of women being inherently spiritually unsuitable for ordination in Buddhism.**
- 5 All feminist respondents in this study indicated some level of discomfort or disagreement with current gendered restrictions within Buddhist religious institutions. Nonetheless, most feminist respondents (5/6) also expressed that they feel able to **use the labels of 'feminist/gender advocate' and 'Buddhist' simultaneously.**
- 6 While **abortion was viewed almost unanimously as prohibited within Buddhism**, the notion of 'sexual misconduct' within Buddhism seems subject to some modern interpretation. For instance, one lay participant mentioned "Buddhism does not allow sexual harassment or harming others sexually." This indicates that **entry points for joint action between Buddhists and feminists may be found more readily in the area of sexual conduct.**
- 7 It appears that **sex between an unwed couple** is perceived to be looked upon within Buddhism less harshly than those who are being unfaithful to a spouse. This may be of relevance to gender equality advocates in their work promoting women's sexual autonomy.
- 8 Not only did the empirical data indicate that there are no perceived restrictions on contraception in Cambodian Buddhism, but two monk respondents even proposed that **monks can be active in educating the community about family planning methods.**
- 9 All respondents who answered the question expressed views **supportive of LGBTQ inclusion with Buddhism**, though some felt that physical sex acts between gay couples may comprise 'sexual misconduct' from a Buddhist lens.

- 10** **Violence against women was viewed unanimously** among respondents as in violation of Buddhist teaching. Many responses displayed powerful anti-violence principles inherent in Buddhism that Cambodians can and do utilise to prevent violence in their families and communities. This provides a potential entry point for gender advocates, to build on religiously-informed ideas such as precepts, adding concepts of power and patriarchy where possible and appropriate.

Conclusion

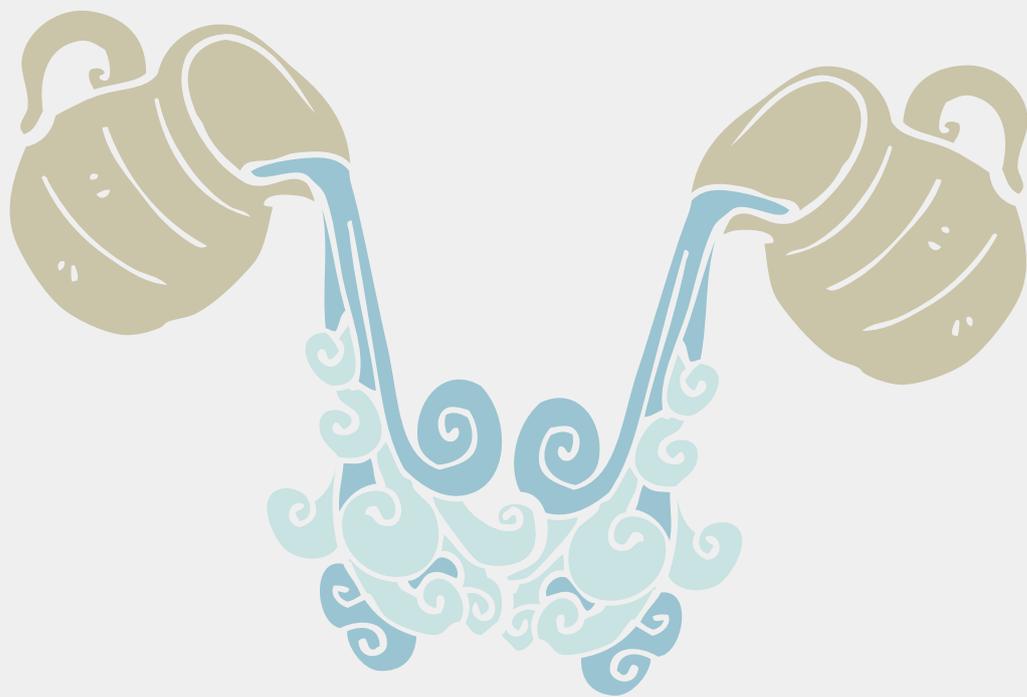
This research set out to examine two key issues:

- 1 To what extent do observers of Buddhism and/or feminism view these frameworks as competing or complementary?
- 2 Are there appropriate and effective ways that feminists can work together with Buddhist practitioners/ teachers to improve attitudes towards gender equality in Cambodia?

The research has found that many areas of Theravada Buddhism as practiced in Cambodia are already in clear alignment with feminist principles. For example, such foundational notions as inherent gender equality, social justice, purity of intention and, harm-free conduct towards others can to a large extent be considered readily cross-cutting concepts between the two systems. Other areas were found to have potential for modern interpretation and application to feminist issues – 'sexual misconduct' as prohibiting street harassment, for instance.

This foundation, by extension, supports the second notion – that despite some areas of tension (e.g. abortion), there appears to be sufficient common ground for feminists and Buddhists to come together to strategise possible collaborations. These might include reciprocal learning opportunities, and even joint advocacy and community education initiatives.

Even on issues such as abortion or pre-marital sex, both the literature and empirical data suggest there is arguably a degree of scope for modern reinterpretation of norms and precepts, as what is *truly* fundamental to Buddhist practice are the doctrines of **intention**, and **loving kindness**. In this sense, perhaps Buddhism and feminism in Cambodia can in many ways be seen as pouring "water into water."



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intersectional feminist organisation
working for a more equitable and just
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