CHAPTER IV

UNDERSTANDING EMPOWERMENT OF LAYWOMEN (UPĀSIKĀ) IN BUDDHISM

As a member of the society we have to play some roles and have to cultivate characteristics which are essential for the performance of those roles. These roles and characteristics are not part and parcel of our personality but they are social construction. In other words, these are not essential characteristics and roles of the individual but are accidental characteristics and roles of the individual. If we want to make ourselves empowered it is necessary to make the distinction between these two kinds of characteristics and roles. As the knowledge of this distinction does not create any attachment or desire in our mind regarding such roles and characteristics. Consequently, we try to create space for us where we can gloom. This idea is presupposed in the Buddhist concept of empowerment.

Buddhist concept of empowerment revolves around the self-realization of the individual and individual’s knowledge of the external world. Once we have knowledge of ourselves as well as of the external world, we realized that the characteristics that are ascribed to us and roles that are assigned to us are part of social conventions.

Once this is realized then even while living in the society and playing the roles that are assigned to us, it is possible for us to create the space for us. Although the Buddhist concept of empowerment enables us to realize ourselves and makes us free from social construction, it also teaches us how to behave in the society. It is because Buddhism as a religion is religion of morality. Though it does not accept the existence of God or authority of supernatural power or being, it teaches us morality which is based on purity of mind. It tells us further
that purity of mind is possible through self-realization. It means the Buddhist morality is and for those who are either empowered or want to become empowered. Hence, it could be said that when the Buddha tells how to play the roles that are assigned to us, he does not teach essentialism. He does not teach that man is either essentially good or bad rather he teaches us that man is an aggregation of good and bad qualities. He further teaches that it is man who has to decide whether he wants to become good or bad and accordingly, he has to cultivate the characteristics. Further, he does not teach that these characteristics and roles are essential nature of the individual rather he teaches that an individual’s nature is Pañcakkhandha. Hence, he or she should not stick to his or her roles but he or she can try for Nibbāna.

The understanding of the concept of empowerment in this way tells us that for self-realization, it is not necessary to renounce the home and social life but while living in the society and by performing our daily duties, roles and responsibilities, we can have self-realization.

Although the Buddhist concept of empowerment tells us that the performance of roles and self-realization can go together, it does not mean that the Buddhism allows us to play the roles as we like. Instead of that the Buddhism wants to tell us that if you perform the roles according to rules then only your performance of roles and self-realization will go together. When we understand the nature of roles that are assigned to men and women by Gautama Buddha while preaching his thoughts within this framework then we do not find that there are superior or inferior kinds of roles. All roles are equal and are performed according to social convention.

Although Gautama Buddha said that it is not necessary to renounce the social life for self-realization, it is necessary for an individual to follow the Buddha’s thoughts. The individual either men or women who follow the thoughts of Buddha are called Upāsaka or Layman and Upāsaka or Laywoman.
In this way any individual either man or woman has to have self-realization he/she has to follow the teaching of the Buddha. These followers are called Upāsaka and Upāsikā. When we restrict ourselves only to the self-realization and thereby empowerment of Upāsikā we have to consider how their behaviour in the family and society are governed by the thoughts of the Buddha. When we consider the self-realization of women within the framework as articulated above we have to study laywoman, her life in the family and in the society. That is we have to study her private life and social life. Her private life is related with different roles that she plays at different stages of her life like as a daughter, wife, widow, mother etc. While her social life is related with the roles that she plays in different aspects of her life, like social, religious, economic and political. But before that we have to see who is Upāsikā and how she becomes Upāsikā.

In order to have peace and happiness in the family, Gautama has elaborated how husband and wife have to behave with each other. Let us see what Gautama Buddha has talked about marriage, the relation between husband and wife.

A) Marriage

The secular nature of the marriage contract, the facility to divorce, the right to remarry, the segregation of the sexes and above all the right to inherit, own and dispose of property let or hindrance from the husband, have all contributed to improve the lot of women in Buddhist societies. The Buddhist ethos of the liberal attitude to woman is in clear contrast with the ideology of masculine superiority.

In the Buddhist ideology, marriage is a bond of partnership for life entered into by a man and a woman. Patience, tolerance and understanding are the three principal qualities that should be developed and nurtured by the
couple. Love should be the knot tying the couple together material necessities for sustaining a happy home should be made available by the male partner for the couple to share. In Buddhism, marriage is regarded as entirely a personal individual concern and not as a religious duty. Marriage is a social convention, an institution created by man for the well-being and happiness of man, to differentiate human society from animal life and to maintain order and harmony in the process of procreation. The Buddhist laity is advised to limit themselves to one life. Knowing the frailties of human nature, the Buddha did, in one of His precepts, advise His followers refrain from committing adultery or sexual misconduct. Buddhism allows each individual the freedom to decide for himself all the issues pertaining to marriage.

There were not in the Buddhist period any hard and fast rules about the age at which girls were to be married. There were not instances of early marriage. Girls were seen to have been married at the age of sixteen. In the Asilakkhana Jātaka, a princess was given in marriage when she was sixteen years old.¹ The Dhammapada commentary states that Kuṇḍalakesā a beautiful daughter of a banker of Rajagaha remained unmarried till the age of sixteen.² Limitations on marriage are conspicuous by their absence in Buddhist literature. The marriage of cousins seems to have been by no means unusual e.g. Princess Vajirā’s marriage with the son of her father’s sister Magha’s marriage with his maternal uncle’s daughter Sujāta. Marriage was usually of three forms – i) Marriage arranged by guardians of parties, ii) Svarambara marriage and iii) Gaudharva marriage. The common form of marriage was that arranged by guardians of both the parties and established between two families of the same caste and equal rank. The examples of Svayambara are in the Kunāla Jātaka of princess Kanha’s marriage and of the marriage of Vepacitti’s daughter. The third form of marriage is that in which the bride and the

¹ JTK.126. Quoted in Law, Bimala, Churn; Marriage in Buddhist Literature, in Bhatia, H.S. (ed), Political, Legal and War Philosophy in Ancient India, p. 262
² Dhm.II.217. Ibid.
bridegroom make their own choice as in the Katthahāri Jātaka. There is hardly any mention of dowry system in connection with marriage ceremonies. After marriage, the girl was sent to her father-in-law’s house with the following ten instructions: i) do not carry outside the indoor fire ii) do not carry inside the outdoor fire, iii) give only to him that gives, iv) do not give him that does not give, v) give both to him that gives and him that does not give, vi) sit happily, vii) eat happily, viii) sleep happily, ix) tend the fire and x) honour the household divinity. These instruction were interpreted as not to communicate what is talked in the family to others and vice versa, given to those who returned borrowed articles but not to give to those who don’t return, help poor kinsfolk and friends respect elders serve first all others and then eat, not to go to bed before others and give alms to the monk. Polygamy was in practice but polyandry was rare. Remarriage was not unknown in the Buddhist period.

B) The Husband – wife relation

When Gautama Buddha talked about husband and wife relation he thought that there should be mutual understanding between husband and wife. Both should have love and faith for each other. Husband should have trust over his wife and he should give all respect to her. Wife also has to behave well and trust her husband. Gautama Buddha insisted the sound, mutual and happy relation between husband and wife. It is because such happy family life is the basis of happy social life. In order to understand this thought of the Buddha, let us see what the Buddha has said about husband – wife relation.

“In five ways should a wife be administer to by her husband: by respect, by courtesy, by faithfulness, by handing over authority to her and by providing her with ornaments”

According to him, such duties of a husband towards his wife enjoin him to honour her wife, to be courteous to her, to be faithful to her, to hand over
authority to her and to provide her with ornaments. There should be mutual support between husband and wife.

Similarly, the Buddha has assigned certain duties to a wife towards her husband. As the husband is expected to be faithful to his wife, so also the wife is expected to be faithful to her husband. Mutual love and faith are the foundations of happy married life on which the structural framework of life in society depends.

He further said that, the wife has to minister her husband in five ways: “love him through the household affairs being well-managed, by being hospitable to kin of both, by faithfulness, by watching over the goods he brings and by skill and industry in discharging all business.”

The household management, hospitality towards friends and kins of both of them, faithfulness, carefulness, skilled industriousness are the qualities needed for a wife to be successful in her married life. A wife is required to be helpful in responsibility, management and control of the household management as an equal partner with her husband. She is required to carry out the work with all her potentials and with the decision-making power in the domestic matters of the control of the household. It has been stated in a Buddhist text that “wife is the best friend.” The Buddha has stated that the powerfulness of wife could distribute into the following five powers: power is Rūpa (form visible object), power is Bhoga (wealth), power is Ānāti (to relatives), power is Putra (child, son, descendent), power is Śīla (morality). The Buddha said, “Women assemble the five powers to have confidence at home, to have influential control and to take the husband in confidence. In such a case, she has not only equal authority but becomes superior to man.”

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3 Davids, C.A.F Rhys; Dialogues of the Buddha, pp. 181-182.
4 SN.484.
5 SN.486.
What is significant in the assignment of duties to the husband and to the wife is that the Buddha’s injunctions are bilateral. The marital relationship is a reciprocal one with mutual rights and obligations. In the Sigālovada Sutta, the Buddha gives the injunctions dealing with domestic duties. Every relationship is treated as reciprocal one with mutual rights and obligations whether it be between husband and wife.

Good household wives are always devoted and dutiful to their husbands. They sacrifice their personal comforts and are always ready to undergo all sorts of misery in order to wait upon their beloved husbands. They are called supreme comrades The Sambula Jātaka records an exemplary character of a devoted wife. The husband being attacked with leprosy left the city and came to a forest. The devoted wife, frustrating all attempts of her husband to stop her followed him to the wilderness to wait upon him. Daily she nursed her diseased husband. She watched over her husband in the forest till the latter was cured of leprosy. On their return to the city, the ungrateful husband took pleasure with other women and ignored the very existence of this devoted wife. She felt this dishonour strongly. She became thin and pale but her devotion did not go rewarded. At the intervention of an ascetic, the devoted wife regained her former position of honour from her husband.

The position of a wife in the Buddhist period was apparently very sound. She was respected in the family. She had the privilege of distributing money. She got the opportunity to deal with spiritual matters. Her capacity to work, management of servants, pleasant and loving behavior and capacity to guard wealth would make her a perfect housewife who could win the hearts of people. The Buddhist concept about the duties of a housewife is clearly stated by the Buddha in the Aṅguttara Nikāya: As a housewife, a woman occupied a very important position in the society. The Buddha declared that the prosperity of the family depended on the efficiency of husband and wife and said that

6 SN. I. 37. “bhariyā parumā sakhā”
7 JTK.519.
they are two pillars of the family. According to Horner, practically many of the women appear to have acquired the position of command and to have made themselves queens in their houses. It is narrated that a husband likes a wife if she is beautiful (rūpavā), worthy to enjoy (bhogavā), virtuous (sīlavā), ever attentive (dakkhā), and not lazy (anālasā). Ideal couples such as King Pasenadi and Queen Mallikā, and Nakula mātā and Nakula pītā have been respectfully treated. The Buddha laid stress on ideal married life and believed in love and co-operation between the two parties. They were respected and honoured because they were considered as the ideal couple. From the class of royal personages, King Pasenadi and Queen Mallikā are considered the ideal couple. Nakula mātā and Nakula pītā make the ideal couple from the class of citizens of the state. The due honour was given to both the ideal couples in the society.

The Kakkata Jātaka furnishes with another instance of real devotion to husband and the devoted wife succeeded in saving herself and her husband. Jātaka tells of Sujata, a faithful virtuous and dutiful woman who properly discharged her duty to her husband and parents-in-law. Asitabhu, Rahula’s mother and Kosaladevi are devoted wives that are mentioned in the Buddhist texts. A husband is a woman’s emblem and sign (bhattā paññānaṁ itthiyati). Woman is the commodity supreme (Itthi bhandānaṁ uttamatam). Asitabhu is Rahula’s mother mentioned in the Jātaka tales. She is remarkable for her devotion to her husband. She is obedient to the words and wishes of her husband. She never disobeys and considers her husband to be her supreme mark of honour. Kosaladevi too has demonstrated her devotion and obedience to her husband.

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8 I.B. Hornor; Women Under Primitive Buddhism, p. 52.
9 JTK.267.
10 JTK.194.
11 JTK. 234, 251, 239.
12 SN.1.42.
4.1 Laywomen (Upāsikā) In Buddhism

Although the path to Nibbāna which is the ultimate goal of the Buddhism in their spiritual striving is open to monk and lay adherent alike, yet due to the lesser opportunities a lay adherent has for a spiritual life, he is mostly considered to be second to the monk whose monastic life offers greater possibilities of spiritual advancement.\textsuperscript{13}

The path is to purify the mind of Buddha’s disciples which were divided into two types: lay believers and mendicants. A layman was called an Upāsaka, and a laywoman was called an Upāsikā. The term ‘Upāsaka and Upāsikā’ refers to one who waits upon or serves (another person). Thus an Upāsaka & Upāsikā served mendicants by supplying the items, such as food and robes that they required for their religious lives. The mendicants instructed the lay believers about how to practice Buddhism while living as lay devotees. A lay person became an Upāsaka by placing his faith in the Three Jewels: The Buddha, The Dhamma and The Saṅgha. Those who were particularly zealous also observed the five precepts for laymen and laywomen.

Women (Upāsikās) concerning to members of four members of Buddhist Assembles (cutus parisad) into showing the empowerment for emancipation in herself, leading to the beneficial power helping to the public in human community including valuation, suggesting and her responsibilities and powerfulness to help in Buddha’s Age.

4.2 Roles of Buddhist Laywomen (Upāsikā)

Bhikkhunī were not the only women who were important in the early years of Buddhism. Lay women were also important in the early Buddhism

along with the nuns. Many women who were converted to Buddhism did not join the order of Bhikkhunīs. Quite a number of these women gained some level of enlightenment, and a few even became Arhats. Perhaps more important to the young movement, however, was the financial support of wealthy lay women. Wealthy women gave the monastic orders mansions, money with which to construct monasteries, material for robes, bowls, food, medicine, and so forth. Historical studies have found that during the first seven or eight centuries of Buddhism in India, Buddhism was patronized by wealthy queens. These women provided a large portion of the material wealth of the monasteries, as well as probably helping the political position of the Buddhists.

4.3 The Basic Practices of Virtue for Laywoman

Hence, it could be said that in a more general sense the Buddhist Saṅgha comprises the entire Buddhist community, sanctified and unsanctified, the professed religious and the lay devotees, men and women. As such it is sometimes known as the ‘Great Assembly’. Lay devotees (upāsakas and upāsikās) are those who go for refuge to the Tree Jewels, worship the relics of the Buddha, observe the Five Precepts of ethical behaviour, and support the monks.

• Nature of Precepts (sīla) - Precepts are codes of moral conduct. We are essentially moral beings. As a first practical step on the Buddhist path, we put our lives in good order. Just doing this in itself makes us feel better, less ill at ease and less at odds with the world at large. We become more peaceful, more trusting, and that in turn causes good things to happen back to us – and to those around us. There are five or eight precepts for laypeople, ten for novice monks (sāmaññera) and two hundred and twenty-seven for monks (Bhikkhu).
It is mentioned in the Five Precepts are practiced by conscientious Buddhists. Upasakavaggo in Anguttara Nikaya to endow with strictly observed for Buddhist disciples. Such five precepts are:

‘Abstaining, from destroying living things, taking the not given, misbehaving in sexual desires, telling lies and taking intoxicated and brewed drinks. Bhikkhus, endowed with these five things the lay disciples become confident’

These five precepts are reflected in Buddhist rituals for acceptance of the Buddhist commandments as well as know like in below verses:

1. Pañātipātā veramaṇī: to abstain from killing.
2. Adinnādānā veramaṇī: to abstain from stealing.
4. Musāvādā veramaṇī: to abstain from false speech.
5. Surāmerayamajjapamāṭṭhānā veramaṇī: to abstain from intoxicants causing heedlessness.

The five precepts should not be violated, because it is a cause of troubles of oneself and others, if the five precepts are not offended; it is regarded as physical and verbal normality, because it is free from all troubles.

The five ennobling virtues are gracing virtues as follows:

(1) Mettā-karuṇā: Loving kindness and compassion.
(2) Sammā-ājīva: Right means of livelihood.
(3) Kāmasaṅkharā: Sexual restraint.
(4) Sacca: Truthfulness.

14 AN.V.172. “Pañātipātā pañīvirato hoti, Adinnādānā pañīvirato hoti, Kāmesumicchācārā pañīvirato hoti, Musāvādā pañīvirato hoti, Surāmerayamajjapamāṭṭhānā pañīvirato hoti. Imehi kho bhikkhave pañīcahi dhammehi samannāgato upāsako visārado hoti”
(5) Sati-sampajañña: Mindfulness and awareness.\textsuperscript{15}

These five precepts are practical that grace the man, the moral man acts rightly in bodily action and verbal action.

4.4 The Achievement of Morally Good Qualities by Laywomen

Those Buddhists who are referred to as Buddhist lay followers are considered Buddhists. They must be steadfast and firmly established in the Buddhist principles to serve as examples for Buddhists in general. Apart from observing the Buddhist’s discipline, they must possess the five qualities of excellent lay disciple followers as follows:

1. They have faith, their belief being endowed with wisdom; they are not given to blind faith; they have confidence in the Triple Gem (the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha), neither being shaken nor faltering; they adhere to the Dhamma as the principal and supreme cause.

2. They have morality; apart from maintaining themselves in the Five Precepts and righteous livelihood, they should undertake the Eight Observances on due occasions to develop themselves so that their lives and happiness depend less on material needs, thus reducing harm and increasing beneficence towards others.

3. They do not get carried away by superstition; they believe in deeds, aspiring to results from their own deeds through their own effort in a rational way; they are not excited by wildly rumored superstition, talismans or lucky charms; they do not achieve results by praying for miracles.

\textsuperscript{15} DN.III.235; AN.III.203, 275.
4. They do not seek the gift-worthy outside of this teaching; they do not grasp at fields of merit, miracle workers or holy personalities that are outside the Buddhist principles.

5. They apply themselves to supporting and helping the Buddhist cause; they attend to, initiate and support charity work in accordance with the teaching of the Perfectly Enlightened One.  

In fact, the purpose of householder’s life is the happiness in society also the internal happiness in mind. The common need is to have the greatest pleasures for the benefit of social being. The term Attha means benefit which can be translated as “spiritual welfare or spiritual acquisition”. There are three levels of attainment, attainment in this very life (diṭṭhadhammikattha), attainment in life to come (samparāyikattha), and the final goal (paramattha). So that, detail of Three Objectives. One should conduct one’s life so as to attain the three levels of objectives (attha) as follows:

1: Diṭṭhadhammikattha, i.e. the temporal objective or present benefit:
   A) Enjoying good health, physical fitness, freedom from maladies, and longevity.
   B) Having work and income, having honest livelihood, and being economically self-reliant.
   C) Having good status, and gaining the respect of society.
   D) Having a happy family, establishing a good reputation of one's family.

   All the four objectives above should be righteously achieved and utilized for the sake of oneself and others.

2: Samparāyikattha, i.e. the spiritual objective or further benefit:


\[\text{AN.III.206.} \]
\[\text{Remon, Joaquín, Pérez; Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism, p 93.}\]
A) Being endowed with warmth, deep appreciation and happiness; being not lonesome or infirm; having an ideal to adhere to so as to be strong with faith.

B) Being proud of a clean life, of having done only wholesome deeds with virtue.

C) Being gratified in a worthwhile life, in having always done what is beneficial with sacrifice.

D) Being courageous and confident to resolve problems as well as conduct one’s life and duties with wisdom

E) Being secure and confident in having a guarantee for the future life in consequence of having done only good deeds.

3: Paramattha, i.e. the highest objective or greatest benefit:

A) Having a secure, peaceful and stable mind, unshaken even when affected by the ways of the world or confronted with vicissitudes or change.

B) Not being so distressed by clinging or attachment as to feel disappointed or sorrowful; having a mind that is relieved, clear, buoyant and free.

C) Being refreshed, cheerful, not sullen or depressed; being radiant and free from suffering; enjoying genuine bliss.

D) Being well aware of causes and conditions and acting accordingly; leading a life that is impeccable and bright; conducting oneself with wisdom.

One who is able to attain from the second level of benefit upwards is known as a wise man.

B. Three fronts of objectives. Three Fronts of Objectives: The Three Levels of Objectives are: i) Diṭṭadhammikattha which means attainment in this very life, the temporal or present benefit in life, ii) Samparāyikattha which
means attainment in life to come, the spiritual or further benefit in future, and iii) Paramattha means the highest objective or greatest benefit. These three levels of objectives such as attainment in this very life, attainment in life to come and the spiritual, highest and greatest benefit are to be realised in the three fronts which are: i) attattha which means one’s own benefit, ii) parattha which means other people’s benefit, and iii) ubhayattha which means mutual benefit or benefit to both parties, the collective benefit.

This means the householder laywoman should make use of life for one’s own, for other’s or for the mutual collective benefit of all the concerned. Good health, sufficient and steady wealth, good status in society and good reputation should be attained in the present life for personal, for others and for mutual collective benefit and happiness, peace of mind, wholesome clean life. Worthwhile useful life and wisdom, courage and confidence in discharging duties and attaining future benefits in life to come should be attained. Stability of mind, firmness, cheerfulness and spotlessness of character will help in attaining mutual benefits.

1st front: attattha, i.e. the objective for oneself or one’s own benefit; the three levels of benefits explained above. The three benefits which are attainments in this very life, attainments for life to come and highest benefit of spiritual attainment for oneself which one should realize for oneself or develop one's life to attain.

2nd front: parattha, i.e. the objective for others or other people’s benefit; i.e. the three levels of benefits explained above. The three levels of benefits are the present benefit, the spiritual benefit in the future life and the greatest and highest benefit for others, which one should help other people successively achieve by guiding and encouraging them to develop their lives.

3rd front: ubhayattha, i.e. the mutual objective or benefit to both parties; the collective benefit, happiness and virtue of the community or society,
including environmental conditions and factors, which we should help create and conserve in order to help both ourselves and others advance to the three levels of objectives mentioned above. The three levels of benefits are the present benefit, the spiritual benefit in the future life and the greatest and highest benefit for mutual benefit or benefit to both parties.

Visākhā is one of the most honored laywomen. The Lord told Visākhā that capacity to work, management of servants, pleasant and loving behaviour to husband and capacity to guard wealth are the four qualities that will make a woman a perfect housewife.\(^{18}\) A wife should not do the things her husband does not relish. Suppiyā, Nakulamātā and others were the other lay devotees who led a happy life on account of the Lord’s advice to be obedient to the husband, respecting those whom the husband respects, managing the household alongwith the management of servants with care and kindness, helping the husband in home industries and keeping watch on money and other valuables. The Queen of King Esukavi of Benares is said to have given helping hand to her husband and taught him the truth. Queen Mallikā proved a helpmate to King Pasenadi. She often helped, encouraged, and whenever necessary advised him. She often guided him on the right track. Nakulamātā and Nakulapitā were an ideal couple. The attachment and affection between King Bimbisara and his Queen Videhi is well-known. After the death of his wife, tarita Brahmin sought refuge in renunciation. Dhaniya prayed to the God of Rain saying “dutiful is my wife, not wanton is she”\(^{19}\) and this gives a picture of happy married life and happy family life.

\(^{18}\) AN. Vol. IV., p.270. “Idha visakhe matngamo yam bhatth amana-passam khatam tam jivitahetu piha ajjhacavati”\
\(^{19}\) Sn. p.7.
4.5 Laywomen and Their Position in Saṅgha

It is well-known that the social matrix in which Buddhism arose was one that accorded to women an inferior position and the approximation of equality of women with men indicates that women, throughout the history of mankind was given very little to choose from. As a result of the overwhelming male dominance, women were almost always associated with imperfection, wickedness, baseness, deceit, destruction and almost everything bad. Sexual life has been considered as causing impurity of soul and body. Woman has been invariably made the target by religions of being the haven of sex and sensuality as if men had no sexual desires. The patriarchal system tended to keep the status of women at a low level, and the emergence of the joint family with special property rights for the male members reinforced male dominance. In comparison to the Hindu tradition, the Buddhist tradition however showed greater liberality to women. The proprietary rights of women were hardly recognized in a well methodical manner. Significant variations are evident in both their social status and economic empowerment. There was a gradual withdrawal of women from public life and economic production coupled with increasing dependence on male kinsmen. A very different, if not altogether reverse, trend is perceptible, however in the development of women’s right to own property.

Laywomen appear often time in the Vinaya, where they function as helpful critics of the conduct of monk and nuns. Visākhā, the wealthy, generous and intelligent matriarch of a prominent merchant family in the city of Śāvatthi, figures prominently in the Vinaya and in several other texts. She was born into a Buddhist family, and remained a major supporter of the saṅgha during her whole long life. On occasion, she also tactfully offered suggestions to the Buddha about ways to help the lives of Buddhist monastics run more

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20 Dixit, Shailini; Patriarchy and Feminine Space: A Study of Women in Early Buddhism, p. 59.
21 Ibid., p. 99.
smoothly in a society that was not predominantly Buddhist. Visākhā is the archetype of the devoted laywomen in Buddhist literature.\(^{22}\)

Her relationship with different people from varies section of society was cordial. She was a possessor of wisdom and wealth.

She was born in a wealthy family, surrounded by good environments. She was gifted with a good brain and intelligence. She was beloved to everybody, e.g., parents, relatives as well as all subordinates. Having brought up amid the circle of learned people gives her a chance of being developed. Most importantly, she had attained Sotapanna (Stream-Enterer) since her childhood at the presence of the Lord Buddha.

She was empowered and adored by the people from all walks of life in all places. She was an exemplified person in behavior and moral conduct. She knew very well about what to do in dealing with different societies. In her distinct role of donation, she set herself as a good example, i.e., she inspired others by her action. She had devoted her time and strength in doing well for the society for her entire life.

As a Buddhist, Visākhā contributed immensely for the growth of Buddhism since her childhood. She had initiated offering the four appropriate necessities to monks e.g. porridge for breakfast, Bubpharam Monastery, medicines and bathing robes. Her exemplified actions become a model of the offering for all lay Buddhists by giving, upholding the precepts and doing meditation. Furthermore, she was wise and capable in dealing with some monks who behaved improperly. For instance, with her kindness and sound oratory, the stubborn monk Udayi was brought to the right track by her.

In her role as a consultant to the Saṅgha, there was a case of pregnant Bhikkhunī who was expelled by Ven. Devadatta. This Bhikkhunī appealed to

\(^{22}\) Sharma, Arvind; Women in Indian Religions, p. 41.
the Buddha and insisted upon her purity. Buddha ordered the Saṅgha to reinvestigate and Visākhā was invited to the newly appointed committee to give advice to the Saṅgha. Visākhā came from a large family. She herself had many children and grand children, hence an experienced household. Upon her investigation she found out that the Bhikkhunī was pregnant before being ordained. When the purity of this Bhikkhunī came to light, the Buddha allowed her to remain without having to disrobe and the baby was later adopted by the royal family.

Visākhā played a very significant role as a lay female disciple; she indeed met the requirement of an established Buddhist who was responsible for propagating and establishing Buddhism in the early period and she was the prominent Buddhist, shining amid the non-Buddhist faiths. She took the role of a missionary and convinced them into following Buddhism. Among them, it was her own father-in-law, the millionaire Migāra. She interacted and empathized with people of all classes.

Altekar A.S. in his famous work on “The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization” speaking of Buddhism and Jainism has stated; both these were ascetic religions, and they have not devoted much attention to the duties and ideals of laywomen. The founder and leader of both these movements showed the indifference to, or contempt of women which is almost universal among the advocates of the ascetic ideal.23 This is a grossly unfair remark to say that the Buddha did not devote much attention to the duties and ideals of laywomen and that he showed indifference to women. The Buddha, on the other hand, has repeatedly criticized and challenged on numerous occasions any hostile attitude towards woman both in religion and in society. The Buddha pointed out clearly that woman had a dignified and an important part to play in society and he defined it with great insight, fitting her harmoniously into the social fabric. She is a loveable member of the household, held in place by numerous relationships

and respected above all, as the mother of worthy sons and daughters. The sex
did not matter, the Buddha argued, and added that in character and in her role
in society, she may even rival men.

The Buddha defines and describes on numerous occasions the duties of
woman in society. The Buddha recognizes that the duties of women in society
do not constitute the whole of her life. It is not with a view to limiting their life
solely to the secular affairs of the household that the Buddha laid down a code
of good life already enjoined in his religion to all his followers, irrespective of
their sex. A host of these considerations, as they are addressed to women are
grouped together in the Saṇyutta Nikāya in a chapter solely devoted to them.

A good laywoman endowed with religious devotion, moral virtue and liberality
as well as wisdom and learning makes a success of her life in this world. For it
is said:

“Such a virtuous lady who possesses religious devotion,
cultivates virtue, in endowed with wisdom and learning and is
given to charity makes a success of her life in this very
existence.”

Her virtuous character gives to her life in the household poise and
dignity. The virtues by means of which she can make her life fruitful, both here
and hereafter are. Saddho (religious devotion), hirimā ottapī (sense of shame
and fear), akkodha’no anupanahi (not given to anger), anissukī (not jealous),
amachari (not niggardly), anaticārī (chaste in behavior), sīlavā (virtuous),
bahussuto (learned), āraddhavirinya (zealous), uppaṭṭhita-ssatī (mentally alert),
paññavā (wise). All these virtues enumerated are within the reach of a woman
living in the household. She is not rooted out of her domestic setting. The good
and successful life of the laywoman, as much as of the layman seems to have

24 AN. IV. P. 265.
25 SN.IV. 328.
26 SN.IV.250. “Saddhāya sīlana ca y’idha vaḍḍhati, paññāya cāgena sutena cūṭhīyaṁ; etādisī sīlavatī
upāsikā, ādiyati sāram idheva attano ti.”
loomed large in the ethics of Buddhism. In the Aṅguttara Nikāya, two sets of virtues are given whereby a woman is said strive for success in this world as well as in the world hereafter.

4.6 The Virtues of Laywomen

The good laywoman had also her duties for the development of her religious life. It is a course of graduated training which does not conflict with her household life; it in fact, integrates women into it. Religious devotion (Saddhā), moral virtue (Sīla), and a generous disposition (Cāga), form a part of it. This healthy combination of social and religious virtues of woman is further witnessed in the Aṅguttara Nikāya where it is said that the following eight virtues pave the way for her to proceed to heaven. They are: i) organizes the work of the household with efficiency, ii) treats the servants with concern, iii) strives to please her husband, iv) takes good care of what he earns, v) possesses religious devotion, vi) virtuous in conduct, vii) is kind and viii) is liberal.

4.7 The Status of Woman in Buddhism

The Buddhist woman was bold enough to demand the right to become a nun. This act must have influenced all the other women – directly or indirectly. The missionary spirit of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and Sanghmittā must have raised the position of woman in the society. The greater exposure to social life by the Buddhist women gave her greater confidence in her household activities. The women now enjoyed greater freedom in term of matrimony (in selecting a life partner) or in taking the path of nunnery. The traditional role of a mother was held in higher reverence in the Buddhist society.

The awareness of her individual identity marks a great difference for the woman in the Buddhist period. Her self-pride, self-esteem and self-identity was
aroused. She was no more helpless and dependent upon men for her individual betterment. The Buddhist woman as a product of ancient Indian society does not appear to vary much from her fellow sisters, but she does differ in degree if not in kind she is more awakened as a human being. At times she had courageously fought with traditions and customs. She had definitely elevated the position of woman in the society. She had voiced her feelings and achieved rights in religious and social matters. This is the great contribution of Buddhist woman to womankind. The ancient Indian culture is elevated due to the endowment of Buddhist woman.

The mother has always been the pivot of the family and she is revered throughout the ages of Indian civilization. Motherhood was the most honoured phase of woman’s life. A mother’s love knows no bounds. She looks after the child at the cost of her life. The mother’s compassionate heart is often recognized in the Buddhist literature. The mother is the force behind all the achievements of the child.

The Buddha felt the need to accord highest respect to the role the woman plays as mother of children as noticed in the Angulimāla Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya.\(^\text{27}\) This was more than twenty-five centuries ago, long before the initiation of worldwide movements like the women’s liberation and feminist activists. This was, of course, introduced to mankind in the oriental civilization of India. The dignified role of mother is assigned to the woman by Buddha for respect of a woman meant growth – physical, moral and intellectual growth – of humanity. The mother is the friend in one’s own home.\(^\text{28}\) The woman, as the growing up young girl in the home is guarded with serious concern as the future wife and would be mother. She must be fit and qualified enough to stand up to the count down before being launched into the challenging role of multi-purpose womanhood.

\(^{27}\) MN.II.97 – 105.
\(^{28}\) SN.I.37. “Mātā mittam sake ghare.”
The respect for motherhood noticed in a civilized social set-up is already noticed in the Buddhist thinking to be actively practiced. The Buddhist thinking has made adequate and graceful preparations for preliminaries of maternal care. Physical ease and comfort of a pregnant woman would – be mother and her clinical mental grooming for motherhood are very much part and parcel of a well-run household with generous and well-meaning in-laws. The use of Angulimāla Sutta for this purpose dates back to the time of the Buddha himself. Angulimāla was the robber of former times who put around his neck the necklace of the fingers of men he killed as a robber. After his ordination as a disciple under the Buddha, reported of a woman he has seen during his alms round suffering severe pains owing to her pregnancy. The Buddha advised him to go to that woman in pain and to wish her well and pray for the safety of her unborn babe through the asseveration of his personal purity. Angulimāla acted accordingly and she is said to have been immediately relieved of her pain. In the years that followed, this incident in its entirety simulated others and motivated them to assert the power of the Buddha, Dhamma and the Saṅgha – The triple gems – Triratna. This Buddhist concern for pre-natal maternity care of both the mother and the unborn child which is a basic and fundamental humanitarian concern is still in existence in the practices followed in the countries like Sri Lanka, Japan and other countries of the East. This practice helps in building up confidence and comfort in the mind of the “would be mother”. This kind of religious solace the presence of comforting religious grace of the tisarana must necessarily come to all areas of life in society well before the outburst of critical situations.

29 MN.II. 97 – 105. “Atha kho sotthi itthiyā ahosi sotthi gabbhassa.”
4.8 Social Life of Woman in Buddhism:

For Buddha, all women were equal. There was no distinction between an Upāsikā (Laywomen), dāsī, dancer and musician. Under the fold of Buddhism, the dancing girls and dāsīs also were empowered. The dancing girls and dāsīs were empowered also.

Ambapālī of Vaisālī, was known as the girl brought up by mango-gardener. She was beautiful, graceful, pleasant, gifted with the highest beauty in complexion. Well versed in dancing, singing and lust-playing, she was much visited by men. The king of Magadha, Bimbisāra remained with her for seven days at Vaisālī. She bore him a son named Abhaya. At her garden in Vaisālī, the Buddha preached Dhamma to her. When she heard her son preaching the norm, she tried to acquire insight. She saw that every phenomenon of the universe was transitory. At last she attained Arhatship.\(^{30}\)

The story of another courtesan Padumāvatī of Ujjain has similar incidents as in the life of Ambapālī, the courtesan of Vaisālī. The sons of both these courtesans were known as Abhya. The King Bimbisāra was the father of both the boys. Later, both courtesans renounced the world and with thorough grasp of the Dhamma both attained Arhatship as both their sons became monks.

Aḍḍhakāsī as told in Jātaka tale, in her previous life had once reviled a woman renunciant, calling her a prostitute. For this wrong of act of speech, she was reborn as prostitute in the kingdom of Kāśī, a riverport of major significance. Aḍḍhakāsī’s name relates to this affluent economy. The revenue of Kāśī was one thousand pieces of money per day and Aḍḍha meant one half. She was called Aḍḍhakāsī, because a night with her would cost her patron half of the daily revenue of Kāśī. Once Aḍḍhakāsī heard the Buddha preaching and

\(^{30}\) Davids Rhys; *Psalms of the Sisters*, p. 25.
on the basis of it, she decided to join the community of nuns. Later on, she attained full ordination, she used to be as valuable as the revenue of Kāśī but then the tale in Jātaka, tells us about Sirimā and Sulasā who worked as maid servants in their early life but were set free after they attained knowledge.

4.9 Concept of Ideal Women in Buddhism

The Buddhist literature gives a vivid picture of the inherent nature of the tender sex. The brightness of feminine virtue is reflected specially in the lives of Bhikkhunīs and Therīs. It is indeed remarkable that tenderness of women could endure the hardship of religious life. The Account of women who came under the influence of Buddhism shows that they could follow religious teaching and were not ignorant. Some women of the Buddhist period were not behind their male brothers in education. The Mījhima Nikāya speaks of Dhammadinnā, a learned woman well-versed in Buddhist Philosophy. Lata, daughter of an upāsaka of Sāvatthī was learned, wise and intelligent. Saṅghamittā possessed the three-fold science and was capable of teaching Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka and the Seven Treatises – the Abhidhamma to others as she did in Anuradhapur in Sri Lanka.

Dhammadinnā’s scholarship, Lata’s wisdom and Saṅghamittā’s learning were commendable. The expertise in the Buddhist philosophy is attained most proficiently by Anjali, Uttara and Kālī. They were well-versed in all the treatises within and all the sermons delivered by the Buddha and his disciples, Sapatta, Channa and Upali have proved their learning of the Buddhist texts through their comments on these works, Revati, Sīvala and Mahāruhā were the wise scholars of the Buddhist theology, their writings are remarkable on account of the side and wise scholarship contained in them, Samuddanāvā, Hemā Aggimittā, Cūlanāgā and Dhannā have demonstrated their
argumentative and debating skills in the discourses delivered by them, Sonā Mahatissa, Cūlasumanā, Mahasumanā and Nanduttarā have written their hymns which have become the part and parcel of the Therīgāthā and the Buddhist literature in general, the treasures of knowledge have been amassed by the Buddhist women like Paṭācārā through their wide reading and enlightened writing, Uppalavaṇṇā, Sobhitā, Isidāsikā and Visākhā are well-known for their charity. They have studied the Buddhist philosophy thoroughly. Moreover, their management skills and administrative abilities have been praised. Sabalā, Samghadasī, Nandā, Mallā, Pabbata Pheggu and Dhammadasī are those who are distinguished on account of their vast reading and distinguished learning. Their works in particular, their verses are included in the major Buddhist literary texts. Their works and their sermons are outstanding in their contents and their scholarly deliberations. Moreover, Pāsadapāla, Sadhammanandi, Soma, Giriddhi, Dāsī and Samanā are the other ladies which have contributed splendidly to the Buddhist writings and sermons. The Buddhist female scholars Mahilā, Mahadevī and Padumā and the laywomen like Hemasā and Divyāvadāna are also famous for their wide reading and sharp scholarly intelligence. The laywomen and the Therīs in Buddhism have enhanced the quality and have added to the quantity of the Buddhist literature by writing their verses and delivering their speeches. The laywomen who were either well-read and learned or well-versed in Buddhist philosophy have been mentioned from Sapatta to Paṭācārā in the first list of sixteen names and also in the second list of twenty-one names from Uppalavaṇṇā to Divyāvadāna. Including the first three names of Anjali, Uttara and Kāli, the list is about forty names of laywomen.
4.10 Contribution of Buddhism to the Empowerment of Laywoman

The Buddha’s doctrine produced a marvelous effect on many women, rich or poor, married and unmarried; who were moved by the attractive power of the Buddha’s Dhamma and renounced the world to lead a pious life. There are many instances cited as the Buddha’s benign influence on household women. Sumanā, sister of the King of Kosala, Sujata, the daughter of a banker from Sāketa, Vaddamātā, others Sujata, daughter of the Chief of Senānigāma near Uruwela, Mutta, the daughter of a poor Brahmin named Oghākaka in the country of Kosala, the daughter-in-law of a family in Sāvatthī, the wife of Punna and Suppriyā, the wife of a householder at Benares and her daughter Uttara were blessed by the Buddha’s influence through his sermons or teachings. This account shows that women were not a negligible factor in the ancient Buddhist community of India. Women in the Buddhist period were equal in status in religious aspect but in the social aspect the status of woman was dependent.

4.11 Empowerment of Laywomen in Buddhism

From 5th century B.C. to the present times, Buddhism has prevailed in the regions of Asia. It is clear from the presentation of facts and textual readings from the Buddhist works that the Buddha was the first to bring out a revolutionary change in the status of womanhood as a whole. The Buddha was the first to propagate the existence of the society which was not disintegrated by the caste and class structure but which was homogeneous. Even the gender difference in no way segregated the sexes in the society that the Buddha maintained.
4.11.1 Spiritual Empowerment of Laywomen

The Buddhist concept of empowerment of women includes the concept of spiritual empowerment. What is meant by spiritual empowerment is to possess the power to attain spiritual emancipation. To be able to get liberated from the material and physical constraints of the existence in the material world and to be able to get into the spiritual attainment is spiritual empowerment. The entry to this state of attainment and reaching this stage of empowerment is opened up for women by the Buddhist way of thinking about life and of emancipation from sufferings.

This is the most significant contribution of Buddhism to the status and dignified position of woman. The Buddha condemned the caste structure,\textsuperscript{31} denied the existence of Godhead accepted the principle of attainment of liberation and emancipation through individual efforts and not through the rituals such as funeral rites and the sacrificial fires. Excessive insistence on the son’s role in redemption was removed and both the daughter and the son belonged to the same level of significance as offspring. The removal of the partial and biased attitude made the one-sided structure of emancipation crumble down. This opened the way for direct spiritual emancipation for both men and women. The indirect effect of the husband’s emancipation on wife practiced and preached in the Pre-Buddhist era had brought in the awareness that “the better half” or “the fair sex” in the social community suffers due to the dependence.

Buddhism has accepted that women are as eligible for spiritual emancipation as men and women both can follow the Four Noble Truths.\textsuperscript{32} Follow the Right Eightfold Path. Surrender to the three – the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha. Cultivate the Pañcasīla and possess the three Jewels of Śīla, Samādhi and Paññā. Become eligible to emancipate through meditation.

\textsuperscript{31} Maung Myo Sein; \textit{The Founding Principles of Buddhism}, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{32} Merriam-Webster; \textit{Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of World Religions}, p. 1120.
and prayers. The simple logical and scientific path of salvation embraced the entire human population without anybody being superior to nor anybody else or being subordinate to anybody else. The distinction of high and low, rich and poor and “big gun” and “small one” was abolished. Both men and women can attain the goal of spiritual attainment through right thinking. The consciousness can be enhanced by the right thinking. This has brought spiritual empowerment within the reach of any devout worshipper and practitioner of Buddhism. The Sāsanā of Buddhism (organization) includes monks (Bhikkhus), Nuns (Bhikkhunīs), Laymen (Upāsaka) and Laywomen (Upāsikā).

Spiritual empowerment for laywomen is a notable achievement in thinking, in liberating men and women to offer and to pray in the most practical way. Enabling all women to participate in religious worship, allowing them to ordain themselves, raising their status to equality according women dignity, assigning duties for faithful, loving and responsible livelihood and honouring motherhood are the benefits that women in Buddhism have derived. They have been awakened, make aware of their status and hence become qualified to attain spiritual empowerment. This is the noblest gift women had received through the liberal, compassionate and rational vision of mankind as seen by the Buddha.

4.11.2 Social Empowerment of Laywomen

Social Empowerment is getting the status of equality, the prestige and honour due to a person to be accorded to a woman. The attitude to a woman in the society had been prejudiced, biased and one-sided, partial and discriminatory but the socially empowered woman would be above the prejudiced and biased view and attitude of impartiality, balanced and the treatment that will be without discrimination of any kind.
The Buddha has proclaimed that the female child may prove nobler than a male child. This pronouncement was the beginning of the end of lamentations; weeping, tears and sufferings were reserved as the lot of women in the Pre-Buddhist era. Lament for the girl born. Lament for the dowry demanded. Lament for the choice of the husband. Weep if she becomes a widow. Keep the woman inside the kitchen. Direct all her energies to the fire-place in the kitchen and the cradle in the “delivery room”. Tie her knot to a male and make her dependent either on the father, or the husband or the son. Segregate the sexes. The world outside to be gifted to man and the world in the domestic circle of in-laws to keep the woman chained to her domestic duties and endless daily chores from dawn to midnight and the same to be continued as the routine on every coming and passing day. The life dependent, the pleasures restricted, the conduct controlled and the duties unlimited – that was the story of a woman’s life. In such circumstances, the Buddha arrived. The dawn of freedom came. Women could breathe openly and freely. They moved out, assembled, offered, meditated and prayed as single individuals. What a difference from the dependent, segregated, secluded life of cooking the food and rocking the cradle. What a joy in being both free and as a welcome member of the family and the society.

This is how the empowerment of woman even as an infant was guaranteed by the Buddha. The treatment of equality given to a girl-child in childhood and maidenhood is another significant change brought about by the Buddha’s teaching. Open and free domestic atmosphere, the opportunity to learn arts, crafts and domestic skills was provided to a young woman. Marriage ceremony became a simple affair. Dowry system was not in practice. Marriages were arranged but the choice of the girl was taken into consideration. On account of the relaxation of the caste-based structure of the society initiated through the teachings of the Buddha and the permission given to women to join the monastic order, the institution of marriage became smooth in its running. This was due to the social empowerment of woman in
the young marriageable age. Women found themselves empowered to a great extent in their married life. It was enjoined to a wife to perform the wifely duties of love, hospitality, faithfulness, care, industry and skilled management. There was a reciprocal mutually responsible relationship between the husband and the wife. The equality of both as joint partners of life with due respect, love and faith for each other was the watchword of domestic life. The woman held a central position in the household matters and domestic obligations towards relatives, in-laws, friends and the other members of the community. It was expected of a woman of the household to treat all fairly.

The illustrative cases of Visākhā and Nandā show how the woman in the family acquired prestige and honour due to the able discharge of her responsible role. Visākhā’s life – history shows her ability to discharge all her responsibilities of managing the household, helping her husband, keeping the wealth secure, respecting the elders, encouraging the youngsters, treating with kind care and loving tenderness the equals, discharging the family, the social and religious duties in a responsive and responsible manner. This earned her due prestige and honour. Nandā’s case is similar to the accomplishment of Visākhā. Both Visākhā and Nandā proved to be ideal women, model as wives, honourable as mothers and devout in the religious affiliations.

The most honorable person was the mother. Motherhood is the stage that brings out the significance of the social empowerment of womanhood to hold their accustomed position of prestige. Widowhood became tolerable as widows were not deprived of their belongings their participation in social life and could continue either through remarriage or by joining the order. Choice was given to the widows to choose whatever pattern of life they desired to lead. Divorce was allowed. There was no practice of self-immolation (Sati) after the husband’s death. Free conduct, liberal attitude, choices at every stage of life made women empowered in the social spheres. Women’s social empowerment from the dependence of the past was a revolutionary change for
Women as an infant, a girl, a maiden, a bride, a wife, a mother and a widow was capable of making free choices, making independent decisions and enjoying position, prestige and positive side of life.

4.11.3 Economic Empowerment of Laywomen

Economic Empowerment means the freedom to earn and to spend. The financial transactions are very difficult and complicated but an empowered person either man or woman – manages these affairs most efficiently and independently. The right to dispose of wealth and property in its own right rests with the woman who has attained economic empowerment. The right, the freedom and the decision-making of utilizing wealth or property for the constructive purposes are the marks of the economic empowerment. The Buddhist concept includes economic empowerment in its total plan of empowerment of women.

In this aspect we basically deal with three issues: namely, 1) whether she could claim on the property of her parents, husband or in-laws family 2) whether she has right to earn money that is whether she is economically independent 3) whether she has right to give her property to any welfare activity or any religious institution.

Women had the right to inherit to own and to dispose of the property without the interference of her husband or any other person. The right of property is the mark of economic empowerment of women in the Buddhist era. Women of higher strata enjoyed a more comfortable and decent life. These women got more scope to educate and elevate them. They were more generous, religious, intelligent and possessed a breadth of vision. Intelligence of Dhananjani Brâhmanî, faithful devotion of Sakulâ Therî, forbearance and adjustment of Bhaddâ Kapilânî are praised in these respects. The women of Kshatriya (warriors) and Vaisya (Merchants) classes enjoyed more comforts.
and more freedom. They were seen enjoying picnics and sports for day. They were generous as was Visākhā and Queen Mallikā. These women were skilled in the arts, domestic duties and orderly in conduct. The life they were leading was possible for them because of their financial competence and circumstances. They were not required to work for securing either the necessities of life or for enjoying comforts.

In the Buddhist society, since woman could move about freely, she got the facility of making herself economically independent. She was not caged within the four walls of the house to be a burden to the members of the family, but she could earn her livelihood. They pushed different professions such as working in a family as a maid-servant. Punnikā fetched water from the river, Khujjutarā brought flowers and Candakali looked after household work. Maid-servants received both fair and unfair treatment. Anāthapiṇḍika was a very compassionate and liberal master. Dancers, musicians, hawkers, nurses and prostitutes were the other categories of women who earned money working for livelihood in different professions.

Economic empowerment of women in the Buddhist era is noted in the expenditure incurred by women on comforts and household matters, they were free to spend. Women enjoyed the right of inheritance, ownership and disposal of property. They had the freedom to work professionally for earning livelihood in professions related to service, nursing and artistic accomplishments.

4.11.4 Political Empowerment of Laywomen

Political empowerment is the freedom in decision making in the administration and governance of the social, political and religious institutions. Counseling and consultation have been of great significance in the affairs of
the state. Political tie-ups, political bonds and treaties and political campaigns have been fixed by the emancipated women.

The political set-up in the days of the Buddha was that of monarchy and each monarch ruled as a king in a small state. The king ruled the kingdom with the help of his ministers and the power of his army led by the commander of the army. Women in royal household and women belonging to the families of the ministers, courtiers and commanding officers of the army did take part in the discussion on the political issues. There was no official status or recognition to these mutual consultations. The Queen or the mother of the king used to guide the king in the running of the state. Queen Mallikā is seen to be involved in the political counseling to her husband. Saṅghmitrā spread the Dhamma to Sri Lanka. Diplomacy and courage in dealing with the people in a foreign land were necessary for such an undertaking.

Sri Lanka has remained a Buddhist country through the course of time is itself a testimony of the efficiency of the princess of King Asoka in carrying out the task assigned to her. Many times the mother of the monarch has acted as a chief counselor to the king. Political empowerment for women was involved in another direction. The princess or some other lady from the royal or aristocratic family, if or marriageable age, was many times employed as a person involved in politically arranged marriage. Some of these marriages were arranged in order to please a more powerful king sometimes that was the arrangement as a token of friendship and in some cases it was a more to annexes the other kingdom.

Political empowerment of the woman involved remained at stake in such marriages as the woman to be married was required to perform a pre-fixed role of an ambassador of good-will or negotiator of compromise or an agent for annexure, expansion or integration of one kingdom with another.
4.12 Eminent Laywomen (Upāsikā)

There were many female patrons and benefactors whom the Buddha often mentioned and applauded their dedication, devotion and practice.

1. Visākhā - Lay devotees formed one of the greatest assets of the Saṅgha – as they shared the burden of the Saṅgha and helped it for its prosperity. The Buddha was always grateful to them and valued their opinions. Their suggestions were invited and carried out. No distinction was made between the male and female devotee. Visākhā was a prominent lady among female lay devotees. This benefactor of the Saṅgha directed it on the right path and secured a very honourable position among he Upāsikās (laywomen).

Visākhā was born in the Anga Rattha, as a daughter of the wealthy merchant, Dhananjaya setthi and a granddaughter of the renowned merchant, Mendaka Setthi. She happened to meet the persons, who were on a mission to search for a maiden for Punnavadhana Kumara, the son of Migara Setthi of Savatthi. They were pleased by her prompt answers and smartness. She was married to the son of Migara Setthi – Punnavadhana. Her father-in-law was reminded of her doing noble deeds in the present life and he expressed his gratitude to her by placing her in his mother’s position and Visākhā came to be known as Visākhā Migaramātā. She became the most prominent lay devotee who helped the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha. This wealthy lady spent lavishly for the cause of Saṅgha. She looked after the welfare of the Saṅgha with great vigour and energy. She was most enthusiastically active and therefore the most popular in the order of both the monks and the nuns. Her opinions and suggestions were valued and respected and she proved to be greatest beneficial factor to the Saṅgha. She helped them, instructed them, advised them and when necessary seriously admonished them. Visākhā was the great benefactress and the chief patroness of the Saṅgha. She was the
“Conscience-Keeper” of the Order. The ten maxims her father gave her as the model code for any daughter-in-law in her in-laws’ house. The Blessed One explained to her the eight principles which are the wifely duties. The Blessed One told her that the qualities a woman needed most were industry, care for her servants, love for her husband and guarding his property, and the faith, virtue, generosity and wisdom in dealing with all others. Despite her busy schedule of household responsibilities, Visākhā found time to feed the monks every day to visit the monasteries, and to ensure that none of the monks and nuns lacked food, clothing, shelter, bedding and medicines. Above all she still found time to listen to the teaching of the Blessed One again and again. Therefore, the Blessed One said about her: “Visākhā stands foremost among women lay supporters who serve as supporters of the Order”.

2. Suppiyā Upāsikā: She was born in a noble family at Benares. She became a lay devotee of the Buddha. She was very popular among of the members of the Saṅgha. She was a mother to everyone. She offered visited the financial support monasteries and inquired after sick monks. Once she happened to visit a monk, who was ill. The monk needed meat soup and Suppiyā promised to give it to him. She could not get any meat that day and therefore she cut off a piece of flesh from her thigh. That soup was given to the ill monk. She made such a unique and immortal sacrifice to that moved by her act and the Buddha praised her saying: “Suppiyā is the chief amongst these who look after the sickly ones”. The lay devotee proved a silent worker and helpmate to the Buddha.

3. Supparasa Koliyadhita: She was a Khattiya maiden of Koliyanagara. She was married to one of the Sakyas. She was a lay devotee, who worked in silence. It is said that she became pregnant after seven years. Her son was named Sivalī. Once young Sivalī was talking to Sāriputra upon

33 AN.8.47.
34 AN.8.49.
35 AN.1.14.
inquiry, she came to know that her son desired to renounce the world if she gave her permission to him to do so. She gave her consent and Sivali her son, became a monk. Thus she sacrificed her only son. The Lord said, “Supparasa gives meal, which consists of fire things: life, complexion, happiness, strength and flashing wit. This is how she helped Buddha’s disciples. Supparasa’s supreme sacrifice was commendable and was a great incentive to propagate the Dhamma.

4. Katiyāni: She was born at Kururajharanagar. She often listened the sermons delivered by the Buddha or his disciples. Once while she was listening to a sermon, her maid-servant reported to her that her house was broken into by a gang of dacoits. Katiyāni silenced her servant and asked her not to create an obstacle in her listening of the sermon on a serious religious matter. The chief of the dacoits heard this and went to Katiyāni to seek her pardon. She took the dacoits to Kutakinna Sona Thera, who ordained them. This staunch believer and devout laywoman transformed the life of dacoits later by the Buddha praised her for her unswerving loyalty.

5. Queen Sāmāvatī: She was the beautiful loving daughter of her parents, who led a happy and harmonious life. Pestilence broke in their town and the couple with their daughter, left for Kosambi to seek support from Ghosaka, the finance minister of the King Udena of Kosamb. The orphaned daughter was adopted by Ghosaka’s manager initially later by Ghosaka himself. King Udena had two chief consorts – Vasuladatta and Magandiya. King Udena expressed his desire to marry Sāmāvatī but Ghosaka refused to be parted from his foster-daughter. Ghosaka was dismissed and lost his home and belongings. Sāmāvatī voluntarily decided to become the king’s wife and Ghosaka was restored to his former position and his home and belongings returned to him. Sāmāvatī had great love for everyone.
6. Queen Mallikā. In Sāvatthī, a daughter was born to the foreman of the guild of garland makers. Mallikā was beautiful, clever, well behaved and a source of joy. She went to the public flower gardens every day. One day, when she offered all the food in her basket to the leader of a group of ascetics. That great ascetic was the Buddha and the Buddha told Ānanda that Mallikā would reap the benefits of her gift on the same day by becoming the queen of Kosala. It sounded unbelievable but while returning from a battle King Pasenadī was attracted by the melodious singing by a girl singing in the flower gardens. She consoled him about his ill-luck in battle and he in return made her his principal life and queen. From then on she was the beloved of the king and also of his subjects. After she became the queen, she visited the Buddha to ask something that puzzled her. The Buddha explained to her in details the moral nature of deeds performed by men. She took refuge in the Triple Gem and remained a faithful disciple for the rest of her life. Mallikā showed her great generosity. She proved that she was free of jealousy for her co-wife, who gave birth to a son. Her daughter Vajirā later on became the queen of Magadha. Upon the interpretation and explanation of the Kings’ dreams by the Buddha, the King became a devoted lay disciple of the Buddha. The flower-girl queen Mallikā is one of the most generous; most devoted lay disciples of the Buddha.

7. Khujjutarā; Queen Sāmāvatī of Kosambi had a large retinue of maidservants in her palace. Khujjutarā was one such servant who was outwardly ugly and ill-formed but otherwise quite capable. Every day the queen gave her eight gold coins to buy flowers for the women’s quarters of the palace. Khujjutarā always bought only for coins’ worth of flower and used the remaining four coins for herself. She became a totally changed person when one day florist invited her to his house to listen to the sermon by the Buddha. The first thing she did after this spectacular inner transformation was to buy flowers for all of the eight coins. Queen Sāmāvatī questioned her and she confessed everything. The queen forgave her and appointed her as her personal
attendant. She told her to visit the monastery everyday and to listen to the Dhamma sermon. Khujjutarā with her outstanding memory could repeat whatever she had heard. After her return, form the monastery. She delivered the discourse word by word and made a collection of the short discourse of what she had heard from the Buddha. This collection became the book called the Itivuttaka (The Buddha’s Saying) composed of 112 suttas in mixed prose and verse. 

Besides these eminent Upāsikās, there were other Upāsikās as well their contribution to Buddhism is also worthwhile. The caliber of the Upāsikā Nandamātā was so high that she could talk to a deity like Vessavanna. She kept her mind purified and unwavered even when calamities had fallen on her. Upāsikā Migasala was bold enough to ask a question to Ānanda who had to take help from the Buddha to known her equality. The Buddha told Nakulapitā: “Oh, Upāsaka, it is your gain that you have got wife like Nakulamātā. She is compassionate, well learned and a good adviser. She is different from my female-disciples.” Nakulamātā had the capacity to converse convincingly, Uttarā. Nakulamātā is praised for her meditative powers women devotees do illustrate what empowers women as the generosity of Visākhā, loving-kindness of queen Sāmāvatī, Khujjutarā’s intelligence and Mallikā’s devotion shows in the pursuit of the Dhamma as established by the Buddha through his teachings. Sirimā, Paduma, Sutana, Uttarā, Muta, Ruci, Cundi, Bimbi, Sumana, Tissa, Tissamātā, Sona, Sutana, Manuja and Sonamātā are the other lay devotees mentioned in Aṅguttara Nikāya by the Buddha as he felt it was a matter worthy to be known to all the members of the Saṅgha in order to acknowledge their helpful contributions, sincere services, and mobility of devotion. This acknowledgement was meant to encourage womenfolk and to empower them duly in the righteous path.
A Leap Ahead

While studying the empowerment of Upāsikās we have seen that they made important contributions in the growth and development of Buddhism. Although they had not renounced the home and family, yet they had no attachments towards worldly life and their family. It is because they had realized themselves and had realized their nature as well as nature of society. Their self-realization was reflected in the roles that they performed for their family, society, monks and for the development of Buddhism. Now time has come to see whether the Buddhist concept of empowerment helps us to solve the problems that women are facing today. Let us see this issue in more detail.