Chapter V

THE STATUS AND POSITION OF WOMEN IN THAI THERAVADA BUDDHISM

This chapter discusses the status and position of women from historical perspectives to the present situation within the strict boundaries of Thai Buddhism. Buddhism which rooted in India spread out on its own shrugging off the rigidities in complex Brahmanical social framework. In the initial stage the Buddha appears to be biased against the women under the influence of Brahmanism. The earlier phase of Buddhism projects this view. But a deeper insight into the study reveals different realities. Throughout the history of Thai Buddhism, there were sincere attempts from women, to emancipate their causes. As far as their status is concerned, historically, they do not look to have enjoyed a better role than their counterparts in India. No doubt Thailand had committed itself to program and practiced a religion which had came to recognize the equal roles of men and women. Therefore the historical study of the status of Thai women gains prime importance.

5.1 The status of Women in Thailand

The history of Thailand falls under four periods: Sukhothai (1253-1350); Ayudhya (1350-2767); Thanburi (1767-1782); and Ratanakosin (1782 – present).
During the Sukhothai period most of the studies made on Thai women speak about the equal status of the wives to that of their husbands. Since ancient times, roles had been assigned to men and women in different ways. The male roles were as “the breadwinner; the head of the family; the ruler; and the protector of the country,” While the women looked after the home, the children, the men folk and also managed the family budget."¹ This does not mean that Thai women enjoyed an inferior status to men. Thai women, in fact, were held, in high esteem and were treated well as shown in this illustration from the Sukhothai era:

“Women especially intelligent women should control expenditure of money, men, who are husbands should listen.” Here is another instance, a mention made on equal importance given to the women. In 1416, there was a celebration of the Great Stupa (memorial monument) Vihara (main hall) Buddha image. The king has given 190 acres. Nai Indraksakdi cleared the forest and turned it into a 500-acre rice field for the temple. Apart from this, there is no separate mention of Buddhist women from this period and it is understood that there was no ordination for women. Both men and women were invited to listen to the preaching of Dharma.

The status of women began to deteriorate in the Ayudhya period. In the 1361 Law on Husband and Wives, men were allowed to practice polygamy and wives were divided into different classes. Husbands could punish their wives physically, and the status of women was characterized by the saying, “Women are buffaloes. Men are humans.”² In Thailand,

² Ibid P.10.
Buddhist social values were again eclipsed by Brahmanic ethical codes, which restricted women to domestic life, denied them access to education, and subordinated them to male authority and power. Men sought magical powers for the arts of war and also to gain sexual access to women. These values and attitudes towards women were degrading and lessened women’s position in society.¹

In Thanburi period there is no specific reference to the status of women. When we take a stride to the current Ratanakosin period, we see the status of women was further improved when king Rama V abolished slavery. As far as education is concerned, except for women, in royalty and aristocracy, Thai girls rarely had any access to education. Saobhava, the queen of King Rama V, strongly supported the establishment of educational institution for girls. Female missionaries from abroad, or the wives of male missionaries, were hired to teach young girls of the court. For the first time, Thai women went abroad for further education. Young girls from upper-class families were educated at court along with the daughters of the royal families. Rajini, a well-known girls school was founded by Thailand’s first female teacher, Princess Pichitjirabha, King Rama IV, looking at the state of women, said, at last, “the old law was unjust, that it treated women as buffalo, men as human beings.” He introduced a Code of Law that forbade a man from selling his wife unless she agreed to it.”

Throughout the history of Thailand women were struggling hard to stand on par with men. While Thai men had an opportunity to

¹ *Buddhism in Thai History*,” Chatusmarn Kabilsingh. (Printed in the United States of Ga; 1975), P. 7
education and spiritual training, women passed through their social and cultural transition only within household. In a way, history tells us that women could not be recognized equally on the roles of religion and society, but they did make a steady upward movement in their status.

5.2 Changing scenario in the status of Thai Women

The subsistence Thai Economy has given way to a vibrant urban economy. This has helped more number of women walking out of universities with professional and technical degrees. In other words, women have multiplied their opportunities in modern economy. The inheritance pattern has gradually changed. Parents encourage daughters to obtain advanced education. The reasons, so that they can obtain jobs, in particular government or civil services, which pay regular monthly salaries, and also help to cover family expenses. This salary in turn insures the parents' economic security in their old age. A daughter's education also provide her with a more secure financial future than only farming, and doing household jobs.

Therefore the picture of a man going out to work earning a living to support his family while his wife stayed home to take care of the household is outdated. With the present day economic pressures, men and women both bear economic responsibilities. Forty five percent of Thai women work, the highest percentage in Asia to day. A recent study found that 87.5% of the women interviewed are responsible for managing family finances.

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The first sign of equality between women and men in Thailand occurred in 1901 when the educational system was first open to girls. The four-year compulsory education act was enacted in 1921. In any event, the opportunity of education has improved the status of women significantly. It has encouraged women to take an active role in the community and later, to a limited extent in the political arena. Though it is true that Thai women manage the family finances, this does not necessarily lead to economic control. Women may hold the family “purse strings”, but in most cases, the purse is empty. Women have no real economic power, but do have the responsibility to make ends meet. This is a major facet of fact of life for most Thai women, both rural and urban.²

The year 1949 marked the first time in Thai Political History that women directly participated in Politics at the national level. However, despite improved status and increasingly active roles of women in economic and social realms Thai women have been far behind in politics. In the 1970s the Thai government began to look into women’s issues more officially, in a large part due to its own realization that an emphasis on economic growth alone could not raise the well being of the total population.

In the area of marital laws, Thai women have yet to obtain more equal rights. For instance, at present the wife needs to produce additional proof that her “husband has given maintenance to or honoured such other woman as his wife.” In Thailand’s fast changing society, roles today are

shaped primarily by economic pressure. Women are beginning to share economic responsibility, and in the process they are gaining greater access to the educational opportunities. Women are making their way in fields previously closed to them, becoming successful educators, doctors, lawyers, and businesswomen. These changing roles will definitely bring about a change in social values. But for now, there are many deep-rooted cultural values that continue to restrict women's equal participation in Thai society. Until these are replaced by egalitarian beliefs, Thai women will continue to find themselves unable to express human potential.

Women in Thailand have yet to overcome negative attitudes toward women's leadership which prevent them from obtaining more positions at the decision making level. However, the status of Thai women continues to improve, though slowly.

**5.3 The Position of Women in Thai Community**

The study of the position of women in Thai community is of utmost importance to us; in contrast, it is clear from the evidence in the Rigveda, the earliest literature of the Indo-Aryans that women held an honourable place in early Indian society. There were a few Rigvedic hymns composed by women. Women had access to the highest knowledge; and could participate in all religious ceremonies. In domestic life too she respected and there is no suggestion of seclusion of women and child marriage. Later when the priestly Brahmins dominated society and religion lost its spontaneity and became a mass of ritual, we see a downward trend in the position accorded to women. Manu, the Hindu Law giver, whose Code of Law denigrated the role and status of women says, “ Neither shame nor
decorum, nor honesty, nor timidity is the cause of woman’s chastity, but the want if suitor alone.”

Historically speaking, the training and social conditioning of Thai women has been aimed at producing “good women who are well-equipped in the traditional home sciences” - cooking, carving fruit into beautiful offering for their husbands, and maintaining the home. It has been accepted for many years that Thai women do not have critical or intellectual capacities, and that women are the “weaker sex.” “flowers of the world” to serve and please men.

The subordinate position of women in Thai society was formally maintained in its legal system. Women were explicitly assigned responsibilities and duties, while granted very few rights. Early Thai Law was heavily influenced by Brahmanism and its vigorous representation of women. In the Sukhothai period, three sources directly influenced Thai legal structure: the Manu Dharmasastra, the Arthaveda, and the Buddhist teachings. The Indian social norms represented were repressive for women in greater or lesser degrees and formed the basis of Thai social norms and law. In the Vinaya Pitaka Mahavibhanga, women were categorized as property, subject to the dominance and protection of either their husbands or other family members.

We can see many instances from history where women have fought to stand in line with men, with considerable success to their credit. In the first Buddhist Council, we can see evidence of prejudice against women in

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their exclusion of Bhikkunis from the Council, their treatment of Ananda, and their opposition to the Bhikkuni Order. Some examples show, however, that women, whatever their station, have accepted the idea of female inferiority. In Thailand, in 1399 A.D. the Queen Mother founded a monastery and commemorated the event in an inscription in which she requested, “By the power of my merit. May I be reborn as a male.”¹ There are different views regarding the Buddha’s perception of women. According to the Buddhist texts, Buddha repeatedly refused Mahapajapathi Gotami, his aunt and step-mother, when she approached him for admission to the Sangha. This has often been interpreted as proof that the Buddha was against the idea of women leading religious lives. Though, the Buddha may have had practical considerations for discouraging Mahapajapati Gotami and the hundreds of loyal women who followed her.

The texts state that after admitting women into the Sangha, the Buddha imposed a set of eight additional rules that they were followed. The western scholars hold these rules as proof of a negative gender bias in Buddhism. They range from requiring senior nuns to pay homage to new monks, to stipulating that a nun must never speak badly of a monk, nor admonish improper behaviour in front of a monk, although monks retain the right to criticize nuns.

The Buddha explained to Ananda his reservations about women joining his order, the texts quote, “Women are selfish, poor in wisdom, and therefore unable to assure a seat in the assembly, and that they cannot

¹ Quoted by C.J. Reynolds in “A Nineteenth Century Thai Buddhist Defence of Polygamy and some Remarks on the Social History of Women in Thailand”, a paper prepared for the Seventh Conference International Association of Historians of Asia, Bangkok, 22-26 August 1977, p. 3
work and cannot travel to distant lands.”¹ In such passages, social values and cultural norms specific to a time and place far removed from our world today.

The Gurudharma, like all Buddhist teachings, were guidelines rather than rules cast in iron to be followed blindly. The first Gurudharma stated that Bhikkunis must always pay homage to Bhikkus, regardless of seniority. But when a group of monks behaved in an unseemly manner toward some Bhikkunis, the Buddha instructed the Bhikkunis not to pay respect to them, in effect “breaking” the first rule.

Women have been seen from different angles; the Buddha’s view is also misinterpreted to some extent. The following stand makes it clear. That the Buddha himself found no need to avoid women, because women no longer appeared to him as sexual objects. He was well balanced in control of his mental processes. The Buddha recommended to his disciples to look upon every woman as if she were “your own mother or sister,” and he taught lay people that “to respect one’s mother and one’s wife is to be blessed.”²

After these different phases we now see the improvement in the position of women from what it was at earliest times to the recent times. To understand the present position of women in Thai community, different spheres wherein women are involved, can be considered.

² Anguttara Nikaya, Vol. III, Thai Tripitaka. P. 77
In that contrast with other Buddhist nations, in Thai situation, during last seven hundred years, there has never been an official Bhikkuni Sangha. In spite of this, there exists a form of religious life for Thai Buddhism women known as Mae ji. Mae jis shave their heads, wear white robes, and observe either five or eight precepts while following a form of monastic life without formal ordination or proper ordination lineage. During the Buddha’s time women who led similar life were known as Upasika (laywomen) or savika (female followers), they wore white clothing and expressed their religious commitment by observing either eight or ten precepts.

Though these women led this life in pursuit of attainment of peace, and ultimately enlightenment, their position did not allow them to carry out their ends. The majority of mae jis are not educated. The lack of education severely limits the possibilities for mae jis in both the Sangha and society. Mae jis feel that, as part of the Sangha, they should be able to teach Dharma to lay people and offer spiritual guidance. Mae jis living within temple compounds stay there with the permission of the abbot. In many temples, their standard of living is low and most are relegated to serving the temple by cooking and cleaning for the monks.

Since present women in Thai community are represented in all areas, the rate of education is also increasing at a fast pace. However, the educated mae jis who have spent considerable time in practising Buddhist principles, feel that Revival of the Bhikkuni Sangha would be very important to elevate the status of women in religious life. They suggest that the Thai Department of Religious Affairs review these issues with new insight and greater understanding. It must seriously consider the problems
faced by mae jis and reassess its position that, as they are not ordained they are not the responsibility of the Department.

A central organization is needed to help increase educational opportunities for mae jis. Long term educational planning should begin at the seventh grade level and include both general and Buddhist education. Future planning for college-level education is also necessary; So as to equip them to train effectively as spiritual counsellors.

To conclude, in Thai community more number of women are coming forward to take up roles at all levels. The society is bent toward a transformation.

5.4 Impact of rituals on the Thai Women

Thai society in the present context has transformed world of Buddhist ideologies. Much of Thai Women’s attitude owes its base to the earliest rituals influenced by Brahmanism. Even at present, when Thai women look more advanced in their outlook, the rituals observed do cause a great impact on the psyche and life of Thai women. Thai women are bound by certain rituals that bind them throughout their life at different stages.

Many Buddhist temples in Thailand, especially in the northern provinces, do not allow women to circumbulate the stupa or enter the main hall. Local Monks justify this by explaining that sacred relics are usually placed in the centre of the stupa at the time of construction. If women were allowed to circumbulate the stupa, they would be walking above the
sacred relics, which is considered disrespectful. This is also because women are believed to be not clean.

Thus women come within the purview of rituals under the monastic order. Despite the absence of Bhikkuni Sangha, the women known as mae jis observe some rites. They attend temple services. Some women in this order go on begging rounds and they also give lectures to the followers. The rituals that influenced women to perform their roles as child bearers, homemakers, caring for the husband and the children, at later stages became helpless but to suffer the rigours of life. There are instances in the course of history that women who spent their life as prostitutes, believed in the practices as part of sacrament. Prostitution as a religious ritual developed and denigrated into an international “flesh trade” that destroys the value of women as human beings.

Since Buddhism allows women to think progressively, besides the principles and tenets laid down, Thai women are able to see better prospects in life. Women born into male-dominated society will tend to internalise the beliefs and accept them as valid. With restricted access to positions of public authority, women have been taught to channel their interests and abilities into such superficial preoccupations. For now, there are many deep-rooted cultural values that continue to restrict women’s equal participations in Thai society. Until these are replaced by egalitarian beliefs, Thai women will continue to find themselves unable to express fully their human potential. However, the impact of rituals has not guided women to find solutions to their problems.
5.5 Perspectives on Thai women

To have a crystal idea of the position and problems of Thai women in Buddhism, it is necessary to thoroughly understand the social and cultural roles of women in Thailand. In the past, Thai women were considered as “good women” based on their well-equipped in the traditional house works such as cooking, taking care of husband and children and maintaining the home. Thai women have been accepted for many years that they do not have intellectual or critical capacities. They were only seen as “weaker sex” who had to serve the needs of stronger sex as men.

In the villages, although women were perceived as “weaker sex”, they had to work side by side with men in the fields. They also had to cook, take care of children and house after working in the fields while men can relax.

In the thirty years, industry has played a vital role in Thai society, offering higher income compared with agriculture sector. This has driven many village women to seek employment in urban industrial areas, especially Bangkok and suburban. Many textile factories prefer to recruit women because they work better with less trouble to the factories and less payment, compared with men.

Although Thai women once were suppressed in economics, politics and culture, their positions in the society have been heightening gradually, especially, in the new century.
5.5.1 Education

In the past, Thai women's education was based on the social values of women's roles. Its framework was influenced by social attitudes which expected women to be good housewives. Therefore, they were trained only in the home sciences and barred from other social roles. Women were not encouraged to express their critical thought. Women in Thai society had subordinate position and they were considered as the hind legs of the elephant while men were the front legs. But this belief has been faded away day by day because Thai women had secured better positions in the society.

For example, Thai women, today, are high-ranked executives in the both private and public organizations.

In the Sukhothai period, Lady Srichulalak, a consort of King Ramkhamhaeng, recorded in a text that upper-class women had the same education as men in literature, drawing, astronomy and astrology. In contrast, women from lower class did not receive education because the only education centre in that period was temple. The Buddhist monks taught only male students, because they are not allowed to have direct contact with women, based on the Vinaya. In the Ayudhya period, it could be said that women did not receive appropriate education and they were trained only to become good wives and mothers.

During King Narai's reign (1649-1681), the palace became the educational institute for the daughters of upper-class families while women
from lower-class families still had limited education. Women did not have an opportunity to study language or literature because it was believed that this would encourage them to communicate with men through love letter.

Since the Ratnakosin period, Thai women have had greater opportunities for higher education, but in the beginning of this period, this was still limited to royal families and women from upper-class families.

King Rama IV (1851-1868) of Ratnakosin dynasty was the first to attempt to modernize his country, women were gradually encouraged to take part in social activities. This started in high society first. Educational opportunities were offered to women of high ranks. Foreign missionaries' wives and female missionaries were hired to teach young girls of the court. Young girls from royal families and those from upper-class families were educated at court. Thai women went to study in abroad for the first in this period. Princess Pichijirabha, Thailand's first female teacher, founded Rajini, a well-known school for girls.

In the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), Queen Saovabhapongsri was the first woman in Thai history who was designated as regent and was assigned full authority to administrate public affairs during the king's visit to Europe in 1896. The queen proved herself to be able to work effectively like men especially in the aspects of women's status, women's education, and medicine. This was a good sign of the development of women's status.

Thanking to the founding of Chulalongkorn University, Thailand's first institution of higher learning in 1917, Thai women, for the first time, had an opportunity to study in university; seven women studied both the
arts and sciences. However, even until late 1952, there were a small percentage of Thai women studying beyond the primary school, compared to the majority of Thai boys.

In the new era, based on the statistics on women and men in Thailand, National Commission on Women's Affairs, generally, women have less education and fewer opportunities for higher education than men. Half of the female population finishes only primary education. In 1994, the percentage of female and male population aged 13 years and over who were illiterate was 62 and 38 respectively.

In vocational education, women are more likely to select subjects related to their traditional roles, e.g. home economics and commerce, while most men choose industrial and agricultural subjects.

At the university level, a similar situation applies. In the field of engineering, female students represent only 15.7 %, compared to 78.8% in humanities, religion and theology.

Despite the fact that the ratio of male to female doctors in 1996 is almost 3:1 (15,572 to 5,535), a quota is in force which restricts women to 50 percent of entrants for medical degrees. In fields such as forestry, veterinary services and animal husbandry, men are given a higher quota than women are.

In 1997, the proportion of females participating in non-formal education was 53 percent compared to 47 percent for males. The disparity is quite large for the short term vocational course (65% are female) and for vocational certificate curriculum (67% female).
According to the report on the State of Women in Urban Local Government Thailand by UNSCAP in 2000, more than 90 percent of the population has primary education, while 74 percent have lower secondary education and only 25 percent have upper secondary education. Educational opportunities and access to educational benefits have increased for women. However, Thai girls from poor families often drop out after six years of schooling to help their families earn a living and loose their chance to continue in higher education. However, some of them have alternative opportunities to study in a vocational school, which are cheap or to join the non-formal educational schools.

5.5.2 Thai Women and the Law

The subordinate status of women in Thailand was formally maintained in its legal system. Although women have had responsibilities and duties, they have been granted few rights in the society. Brahmanism had high influence to the early Thai law and the position of women in the country. Three sources: the Manu Dharmasastram the Arthavaedas and the Buddhist teachings directly influenced Thai legal structure during Sukothothai period. These formed the norm and basis of Thai society. Women were categorized as property or subject under the protection of either husband or male family members, based on the Vinaya Pitaka Mahavibhanga. Also, the Mangrai Sastra mentioned that wives and children could be sold to repay a loan. For the Thai Northern people, Lanna law placed the material value of a girl as exactly half that of a boy. During King Uthong’s period, matrimonial law was based on the Dharmasatra. It mentioned that a husband legally owns his wife and can treat her the way he treats farm animal. King Rama I of the Ratnakosin dynasty used Dharmasatra as a model for new legal standards.
The old legal system was changed in the period of King Rama IV as he thought it was unjust because it treated women as buffalo, men as human beings. He issued a new law which did not allow men to sell his wife unless she agreed or she was a slave. A man could beat his wife, but if she got serious injury, he could be fined. In the old days, a woman could not select her own spouse but her parents would make an agreement with the parents of a man they thought good for their daughter in the aspects of the social and financial status. But this new law allowed women to choose her husband on her choice.

The first Thai monarch studying abroad was King Rama VI. He went to study in England in 1893, and returned home in 1903. The King had a chance to observe the advancement of women in the Western world. So, he introduced a campaign to promote the rights of Thai women, but it was limited to high society members.

He expressed his dissatisfaction with the status of Thai women in several articles and mentioned that men and women should have equal rights in the society. He strongly believed that some old beliefs, values and traditions that made women inferior to men must be changed.

Since Thai society has become semi-industrial, the status of women has been improved. They have had greater participation in economic production and better educational opportunity.

In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declared that men and women are equal in their rights and honor. Later in 1967, the United Nations disestablished any practice or tradition based on the suppression or exploitation of women, and it declared 1975 the
“International Year of Women. In Thailand, the equal rights for men and women in Thailand were established in 1974.

The Thai government also answered the mission of the United Nations by establishing the right for Thai women to travel abroad with or without the permission from their husbands, and allowing women to secure leadership position in village societies. At the same time, the restriction on female lawyers in the courts has been lifted.

According to The Women’s Movement and Legal Reform in Thailand by Virada Somswasdi (2003)\(^1\), the 1974 Constitution revised all laws that were contradictory to the equal rights protection clause between men and women. Several new legislations were introduced. For example, women are allowed to sit as judges in the court of justice and as public prosecutors and male and female workers are provided equal wages. Although parts of the Family Law were revised, a lot of provisions still maintain gender inequality and a violation of women’s human rights. The 1995 Constitution put the gender equality clause into the Section on Rights and Freedom of the People.

After the 1992 Black May, there was an attempt to push for a drafting of a new constitution to safeguard. The women’s groups working on “women and law” were successful in changing the laws to extend maternity leave from thirty to ninety days; gain nationality for children of foreign fathers born to Thai mothers in Thailand; and they were able to revise laws regarding prostitution and anti-trafficking to reflect harsher punishment for procurers, pimps, brothel owners and sellers. Male clients will be punished if found with child prostitutes under 18 years old.

In current 1997 Constitution, other topics regarding equality between men and women were added. It withholds the principle of gender equality and builds grounds for positive action to realize that equality. It includes a provision on protection from domestic violence. It requires one third of the Parliament extraordinary committee to be constituted by women’s organizations when the agenda is relevant to women’s issues.

5.5.3 Thai Women and Politics

Although Thai women were granted voting right earlier than some European countries, their lack of education regarding democratic process made their right to vote carrying little political weight. The first female member of parliament was elected with only two women were appointed senators in 1949. Thirty years later, nine women were elected to parliament out of 301 seats.

According the report of United Nations Development Programme, “Women’s Right to a Political Voice in Thailand” in 1996, about 64 percent of women exercised their right to vote compared with 60 percent of men. However, women have not achieved equality with men in terms of being elected to public offices. The number of elected female MPs has increased, but slowly and has only surpassed 10 percent. Between 1952 and 2005 the proportion of elected MPs who were women increased from 3.3 percent to 10.6 percent.

Status in Thai politics depends on a significant extent on seniority and few women have been around long enough to establish a strong

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1 Women’s Right to a Political Voice in Thailand, Millennium Development Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower, United Nations Development Programme
position. As a result, there are too few women to build up a critical mass of power within the parties and until recently the parties have not had women’s wings or groups to bargain for positions in the nomination. Consequently, political party strategists have not been under much pressure to take gender issues into account.

Thailand’s number of women parliamentarians compares unfavorably with that in other countries. For the world as a whole the average of women in the lower houses of parliament is 16 percent and in the upper house is 15 percent, while for Thailand the proportions are 10.4 percent and 10.5 percent, respectively.

Among those women taking prominent roles in politics, Ms. Rabiabrat Pongpanit, a senator from the Northeast is a good example. She is a strong advocate on women’s rights. She argued for women to have a right to be ordained as Buddhist monks.

Although Thai politics have taken a significant development in the last two decades and women have had increasing roles in this cycle, but there is a long way to go to reach the critical mass needed to level a political playing field that remains decidedly male-oriented.

5.5.4 Thai Women and Economic Responsibility

In the olden days, only men took responsibility for the household finance while women took care of household activities. But today, both men and women have to earn a living to support the family. And women have become a major finance support in some families as they can earn greater income, compared to their husbands.
In Ayudhya period, men would work away from homes at least one month per year or in some cases, they had to be away from homes as long as three months while women took care of the families. To reduce the financial burden and maintain the security of families, most of newly married couples would live with the wife’s family. At that time, Chinese traders did big business, the king controlled foreign trade, Thai women started a small-scale business, earning some income to support their families.

Today, agriculture is still the primary work of three-fourths of Thai women, working with their husbands or male relatives. Women who work in the fields also take care of children and housework. About 81 percent of Thai women aged 15 and older work while the percentage of working women aged between 44 and 49 touches 87 percent. It is difficult to specify exact percentage of working women who provide financial support to the families, but it can be said that without women’s assistance, many Thai families would face financial problems.

Women in different regions participate in different types of work. In the north and south, women prefer agriculture work, while women from central region, especially urban areas, prefer small businesses and service work. Women from the northeast work in cottage industries.

The survey conducted by MasterCard International found that in 2005, women in Thailand enjoyed a higher socio-economic status than

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2 Ibid. P 26
3 *Report on Survey of Problems and need of Women in Rural Area according to Project on developing Women* (Bangkok: Ministry of Internal Affairs, Research and Evaluation department, 1981) P 36
their counterparts in other Asia-Pacific countries. This survey sampled 300-500 women in each of the 13 countries and regions in Asia and the Pacific, rating labour force participation, level of education, managerial positions and income.

Thailand topped the study with highest overall index of 92.3, partly due to the high literacy rate among its women. Thai society provided ample opportunities to women to participate in business. Women accounted for 66 percent of the total staff in the country’s medical sector.

It can be said that women have greater economic responsibility from time to time because of the present-day economic pressures and better job opportunities have been offered to women.

### 5.5.5 Women and Social Perception in Thai Society

In the past, Chinese and Indian beliefs influenced the negative perception of women in Thailand. During the reign of King Rama II, the kingdom had an active trade relationship with China, a lot of Chinese got married with Thai women and settled down in Thailand since then. As a result, Thai beliefs were integrated with Chinese cultural values. Traditional Chinese thought mentioned five negative characteristics of women: women are easily manipulated, always unsatisfied, jealous, insulting and of lesser intelligence. In traditional Chinese and other eastern societies, the status of women was subordinated to men in many aspects including social, political, economic and cultural life.

Like Indian culture, women lived in patriarchy society where male members of a society tend to predominate in positions of power. Women
were always under the guidance and protection of the male family members. For example, daughters were in the guidance of fathers, wives followed the guidance of husbands while mothers were under the protection of sons. In this society, women were considered as the possessions of men, not independent human beings.

In Thailand, women’s images and their capabilities have been affected by the prejudices of women’s mental and physical inferiority. Too often, the beauty of physical appearance is the only thing for which women can gain attention from the society.

However, women of the upper classes in Thai society who receive greater opportunity may believe that they have equal rights, thanks to their wealth and high social status which protect them from obvious and economic difficulties.

At present, economic pressure is a major factor shaping the roles of people in fast-changing society like Thailand. Women, today, are sharing the economic responsibility and in many cases, they become the major financial supporters of the families. Women are gaining greater educational opportunity that helps them to get better access to future job opportunity. Women have become successful businesswomen, educators, doctors, lawyers and executives. These changing roles bring the great changes in Thai social values.

This chapter has attempted to study the position and status of Thai women elaborately, delving deep into the history and emerging with the survey of present situations. It unravels the complex social order: women gradually liberating themselves from the male predominance and the social stigma attached to them. In contrast to the earlier subsistence Thai
society, at present due to cash economy has created unlimited opportunities for the women.

The instances, of pioneer Thai women who paved the way for the succeeding generations to build a strong society well-balanced by the equal roles played by women parallel with men further give impetus for more research in this area. In addition, the Buddhist Order is still at bay as far as admission of women is concerned, and accordance of Bhikkuni Order remaining still a distant dream make the whole study relevant in the pressing situations.

Notwithstanding, some practices that are yet to find a rational base pose stumbling blocks to a growing society that is committed to practising and preaching the teachings of the Buddha. However, the chapter may be closed on a positive note that Thai women are at the dawn of a new era that heralds them the equal status in the society. They are dedicated to making inroads into the realms of humanity.