

BUDDHISM AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

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Abstract

Buddhism emerged as a belief system that promoted the principles of equality, fairness, and moral fortitude, thereby empowering women. In today's world, it is more important than ever to promote women's empowerment. In the Buddhist age, women were fully empowered in religion and morals. Even though there was economic freedom and social equality, things stayed the same in politics and around the house. Overall, Buddhist women had more freedom, equality, better status, and a more liberal environment than women did in the past. During the Buddhist Period, women had more power. Current social concerns demand more and more empowered women in society to tackle the challenges that we face. It is a timely requirement of academia, especially in the context of Sri Lanka, to revisit and research the literature related to Buddhism and women empowerment to provide sustainable solutions to the prevailing issues in the current society. This paper aims to revisit the prevailing literature related to this area and suggest future research directions. A desk research strategy has been followed in this conceptual paper, and a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) in the PRISMA framework has been conducted in order to perform the review. VOSviewer software has been used to perform keyword co-occurrence analysis. Articles have been obtained from the Scopus database. A comprehensive framework is needed to be established in order to study the issues related to this area. More empirical studies, as well as qualitative studies, can be conducted in order to gain a clear picture of the relationship between Buddhism and Women's Empowerment.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Buddhism, Future Research Directions

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Accepted the revised version: 01 December 2023

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Introduction

Women's empowerment has gained more and more attention in the present society. It is agreed that women also need the freedom to live in dignity as their male counterparts do. Nevertheless, gender discrimination continues even in the present time. Healthcare, education, income, and social status are a few indicators that are said to be lower than those of men. Women's empowerment is considered one of the solutions to inequality that women face in society. It is still questionable to increase the ability to hold opinions, make decisions, interact with others, and give them a voice. The prevailing situation requires a change in the mentality of women and society about women. The influence of religious traditions on women's social status or economic independence has been recognised as a significant factor in women empowerment. Notably, the influence of Buddhism on the lives of women has been reviewed by prominent scholars (Tomalin, 2006 & 2009; Dhammananda, 1993).

Buddhism is a pragmatic philosophy that explains the path to liberation to free humanity from suffering by thoroughly analysing the human predicament and then offering a practical method known as "*Medum Piliwetha*". He offered this path to all. The Buddhist attitude regarding women's status can be found in the vast literature of the 2500-year-old tradition. Buddhism describes that one's sex, caste or class presents no barrier to obtaining liberation. Particularly, femaleness is no barrier to achieving the ultimate goal of Buddhism. More importantly, he claimed that no man or woman could be superior or inferior in society merely because of his or her birth, but depends on his or her behaviour (Sarao, 2010). This clearly shows the status of women at the Buddhist age and it is said that women in Buddhism enjoyed higher status, greater freedom and more equality than in the preceding ages (Sripraschayanon, 2017).

Interestingly, Buddha did not teach empowerment as a concept. However, his ideologies allow them to have control over their own life. The Buddhist teachings such as nonviolence, tolerance and sympathy towards all humankind are essential attributes that a Buddhist must practice. These are helping the position of women in society. Hence, the Buddhist ways of empowerment of human rights could be one of the solutions to the empowerment of women in society.

Accordingly, this paper aims to present a comprehensive review of literature on Buddhism and Women Empowerment through the existing studies and to recognise the research gaps in empirical, methodological, conceptual and knowledge. Finally, the paper concludes with directions for future directions.

Research Questions

1. What is the prevailing literature related to Buddhism and Women Empowerment?
2. What are the future research opportunities related to Buddhism and Women Empowerment?

Literature Review

The concept of empowerment is fundamental to the objective of sustainable development. This notion has grown in importance in recent years in order to free all humans from the demands of external forces. Hence, empowerment enables a person to achieve freedom from want and fear and the right to live a dignified life (Kumar & Varghese, 2005).

Religion was essential to every facet of life, just as the feminine principle is inseparable from the masculine principle. Buddhism began as a pragmatic soteriology, a theory of liberation that sought to liberate humanity from suffering, first by thoroughly analysing the fundamental human struggling and then by offering a practical approach or path for eliminating the cognitive and behavioural conditions

that are promoted as greed, hatred, and delusion (Cabezón, 1991). Buddha was often critical of conventional beliefs, notably those based on Brahmanic tradition. In Buddhist literature, the argument that femaleness does not hinder achieving Buddhist human aspirations takes two forms. The most popular form on this topic declares that "the dhamma is neither male nor female" and that gender is immaterial or even non-existent when one thoroughly understands Buddhist teachings.

Despite disparities between genders within the lived tradition, Buddha's teachings might be taken to reinforce the concept that men and women are equal (Tomalin, 2009). Buddhism may, therefore, give "sources of empowerment and liberation for women" (Peach, 2000). A gender perspective of Buddhism has been the topic of several publications and essays from various Buddhist traditions (Tomalin, 2009). These studies emphasise men and women's equal potential to attain enlightenment (Murcott, 1991; Shaw, 1994; Sponberg, 1992), favourable depictions of women and the feminine in the literature (Murcott, 1991; Peach, 2000), and the presence of the bhikkhuni ordination during the time of the Buddha (Owen, 1998). For example, one widely held opinion, both in academic literature and in practice, is that Buddhist teachings are inherently gender-neutral and that any patriarchal impacts are later corruptions of the tradition.

Tomalin (2009) asserts that a discrepancy exists between the number of monastic regulations that men and women are required to adhere to. The topic of the differential imposition of regulations on Buddhist nuns compared to monks has garnered significant scholarly interest in the existing literature. Some proponents assert that this viewpoint indicates the Buddha's first hesitance in granting women the opportunity to be ordained. As per Owen's (1998) findings, it can be inferred that Buddha's initial reluctance to grant permission, although being asked three times, suggests a potential scepticism regarding the ability of women to pursue a monastic lifestyle compared to their male counterparts effectively. Others, however, claim that the garudhammas, for example, were later additions to the tradition and did not represent the Buddha's intentions. The garudhammas, for example, are "eight special rules" that fully ordained women are obliged to observe in addition to the Vinaya ("monastic discipline") rules. Gender differences may be apparent in the fact that men do not follow the garudhammas, essentially making the bhikkhunis submissive to the bhikkhus (Owen, 1998).

Methodology

Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology along with Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Dogra & Priyashantha, 2023) has been used in this paper to conduct the literature review and four papers were downloaded from the Scopus database related to the keywords "Buddhism" and "Women Empowerment". The review protocol has been developed according to the PRISMA guidelines. Keyword co-occurrence analysis has been performed using VOSviewer software (Version 1.6.19). The review protocol and PRISMA article selection flow diagram are shown below.

Table 1: Review Protocol

Article selection method	PRISMA guidelines
Search strings	Buddhism, Women Empowerment
Inclusion criteria	1. Year range: All
	2. Subject area: All
	3. Language of article: English
	4. Keywords: Buddhism, Women Empowerment
	5. Source type: Academic Journals
	6. Type of Study: Literature Review
	7. Methodological quality: Articles that followed the quantitative/qualitative methodology
Databases	Scopus
Analysis Method	Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis,
Reporting structure	PRISMA guidelines
Search strategies	Buddhism AND Women Empowerment

Source: Authors developed based on PRISMA guidelines

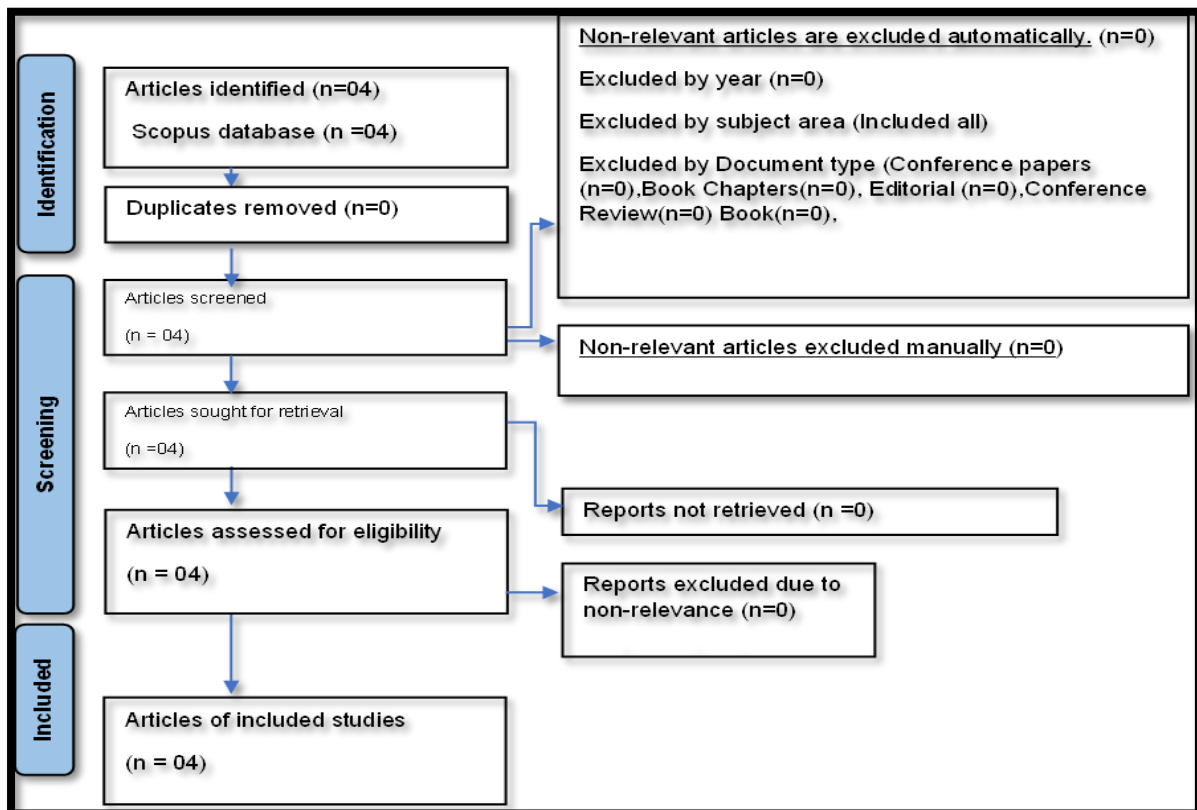


Figure 1: PRISMA Article Selection Flow Diagram

Source: Authors developed based on PRIMA Guidelines

Data Analysis and Findings

VOSviewer software has been used, as explained in Dogra and Priyashantha (2023). Keyword co-occurrence analysis has been used to generate results. As shown in Fig. 2, VOSviewer has grouped keywords into 1 cluster. Clusters are indicated in different colours, which indicates that keywords in a particular cluster are connected.

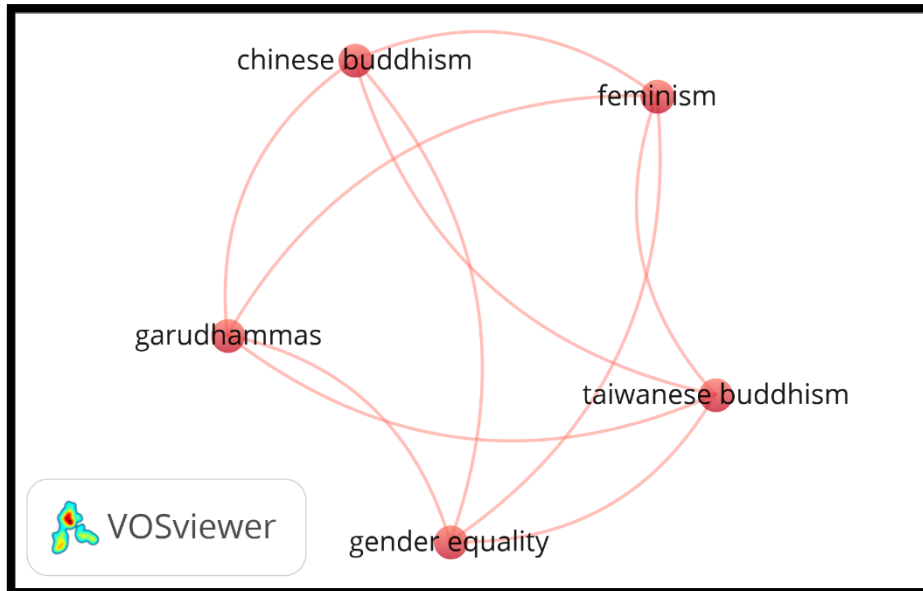


Figure 2: Keyword co-occurrence network visualisation

Source: VOSviewer output

The density visualisation map (Fig. 3) shows that the keywords in the yellow and green areas have been researched on a smaller number of occasions and need to be researched more. It further indicates that the knowledge related to these keywords is minimal; therefore, more opportunities exist to conduct research in this area. If the keywords are in a red area, extensive research has been done, and sufficient knowledge is available (Dogra & Priyashantha, 2023).

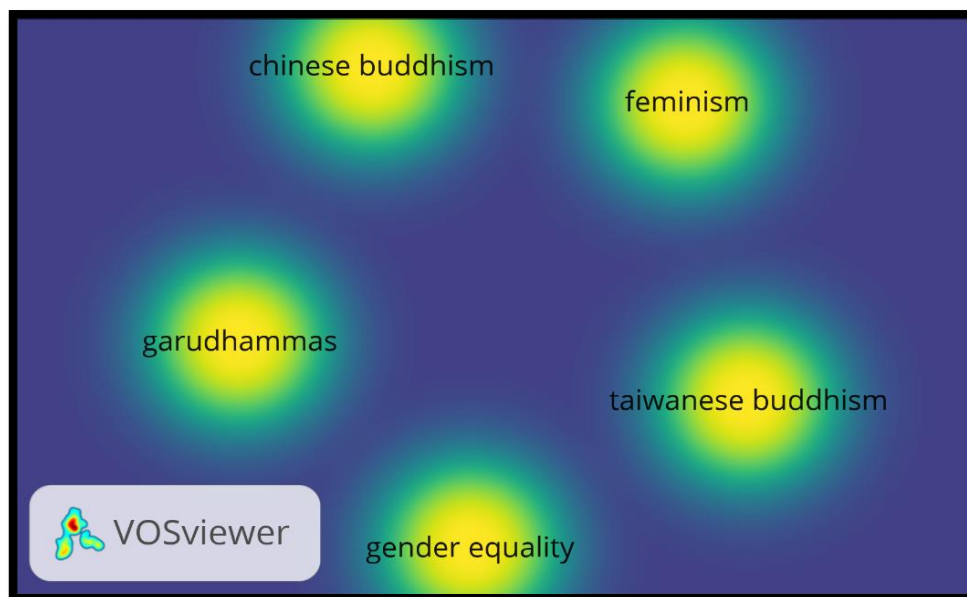


Figure 3: Density Visualisation Map of Keywords

Source: VOSviewer output

Further data analysis has been performed using the Scopus database, and the graph below shows that very few articles have been published in this area.

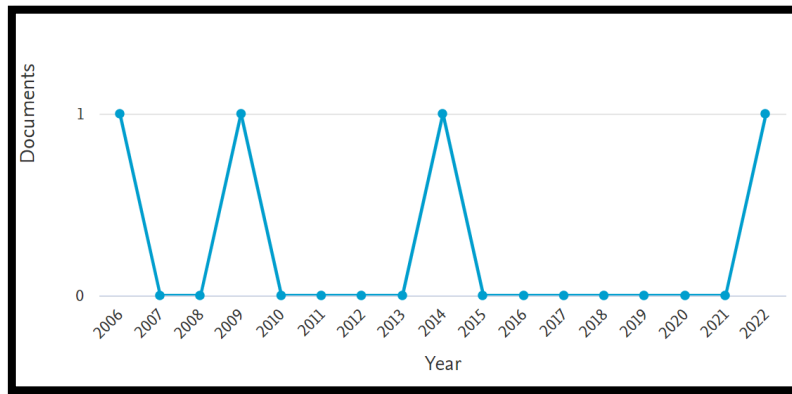


Figure 4: Article Publication Trend

Source: Scopus Database

The below graphs show country-wise article publication and subject-wise article publication. Very few countries have published articles in this area.

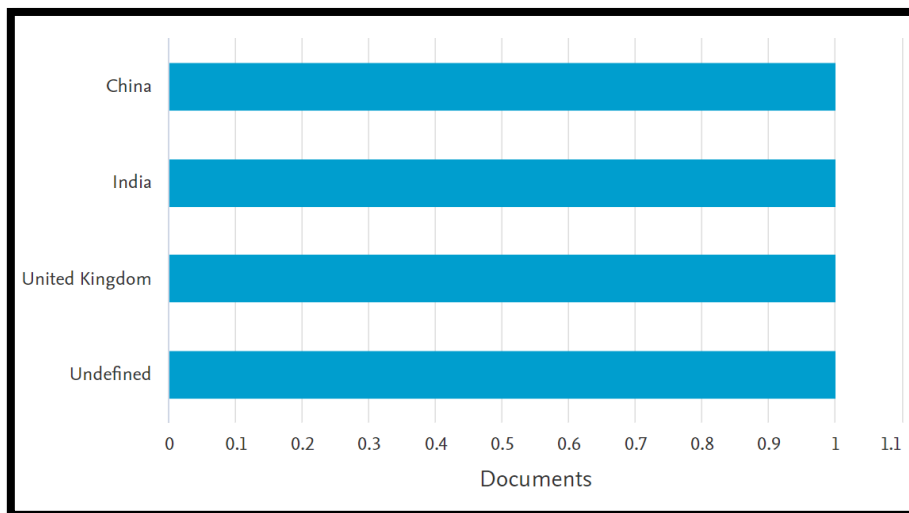


Figure 5: Country-wise article publication

Source: Scopus Database

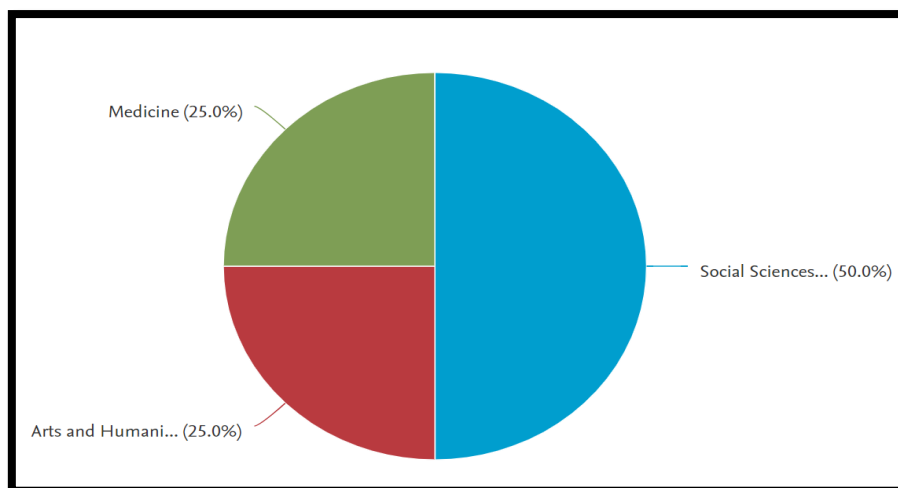


Figure 6: Article Publication by Subject Area
Source: Scopus Database

Some Major Research Gaps and Future Research Directions

Contextual gap

There is a contextual gap in research related to Buddhism and women empowerment. Studies related to a few countries such as Africa, Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka. Some studies have been conducted in rural areas of some countries. In the story "Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist," Evans (2015) used the southern perspectives of women in Africa to show how a place can influence women's experience and identity development through Buddhism. Consequently, it is essential to expand the investigations to different regions worldwide. To extract additional layers of meaning, geographical analysis can be reproduced by analysing the northern, Caribbean, or African roots of Black women writers in the Diaspora.

Spirit mediums, unlike magic monks, do not own professionally organised public locations. In the cosmological and practical Buddhist universes, female and male spirit mediums were subordinate to the monk (Kitiarsa, 2005). This provides the opportunity to consider the rationale for these gender discriminations and how they are exposed in various countries and locations.

Traditionally, most female spirit mediums in Thailand came from rural origins. Spirit mediumship has been a sacred sanctuary for women's religious empowerment for millennia (Kitiarsa, 2005). Future studies can be conducted to understand the issue in different demographic contexts. Thus, it is essential to examine how the economic background influences the selection of Buddhism among women in the workforce and how these factors relate to other countries and areas.

In Thai culture, most active responsibilities in the Buddhist Sangha are generally reserved for men, while women are typically involved in spirit worship. It reflects the commonly adopted and practised norm of gender formation. Additionally, Thai women have religious and spiritual difficulties (Kitiarsa, 2005). It leaves the door open for future research on the impact of these disadvantages in other countries and religions, particularly in the Sri Lankan setting.

The link between indigenous culture and economic practices in Burma is complex. Myanmar's prosperity Buddhism serves individual and societal objectives, and women's agency is derived from their dreams (Kitiarsa, 2005). It provides the opportunity to examine how these linkages function in various nations and locations.

Buddhism in delivering many community services. Girls are not permitted to live in temples as temporary monks, where they receive free religious and general education, as do many young males. It is thought that this increases the risk of young girls being trafficked for sexual exploitation. However, cultural constraints make it difficult for women to seek spiritual and practical assistance from male religious individuals, especially on sexually related matters (Tomalin, 2011). Thus, it is essential to investigate the cultural obstacles women face in their pursuit of Buddhism. In Thai society, prostitutes are not universally seen negatively, and in Buddhist literature, prostitutes are frequently depicted as Buddha's associates. In addition, as Peach (2000) informs us, one prevalent view of prostitution in Thailand is that it allows women to earn money that they can donate to monks. However, this view may differ in other countries (Tomalin, 2011). Consequently, this necessitates research into the cultural and ritual consequences in various national contexts.

Empirical gap

There is an empirical gap in research on Buddhism and women empowerment. The impact of Buddhism on women empowerment can be studied and empirically tested.

Wicha Duangtham (Dhammic crystal) practitioners can find their calling in arahants, who can use their magical abilities to help laypeople through magical performances and services. This process applies to both male and female individuals, not just monks. However, lay practitioners and monks must follow specific rules and moral codes of professional conduct, such as abstaining from alcohol, raw meat, worship offerings, funeral food, and sexual misconduct. It is crucial to evaluate the evolution and practicability of these practices.

With duangtham (Dhammic crystal) and knowledge, it is possible to predict the future and deliver logically solid and credible information. Magical monks and spirit mediums provide solutions to all types of customer difficulties. The most frequent requests for this service involve fortune-telling, commercial decisions, occasional merit-making, health, and lottery numbers. However, her strength and magic cannot always benefit all her disciples. This can be explored in further depth (Kitiarsa, 2005) to determine which requests will be granted and which will be denied, the criterion for spirit mediums.

Due to the feminine capacity to menstruate, women are linked to this magical power, which is said to be able to destroy some of the beneficent force of Sangha members; menstrual blood is considered highly charged with magical power and may be employed in some of the most potent types of love magic (Kitiarsa, 2005). This gives rise to the study of the link between biological and spiritual phenomena and their interrelationship.

As a result of donating to Buddhist organisations, these women gain autonomy and social status (Foxeus, 2017). Therefore, it is essential to investigate the relationship between this adaption of Buddhist practices and the benefits it provides to women.

While institutional religion can legitimise norms and rules that disempower women, the significance of religion in the lives of millions of poor women around the world means that secular feminism is sometimes viewed as not only Western but also culturally irrelevant (Tomalin, 2011). Examining the relationship between religion and legislation and its applicability is important.

Methodological gap

There is a methodological gap in research on Buddhism and women empowerment. Very few studies have been conducted using both qualitative and quantitative methodology. More case study-type research can be conducted to understand the issue under concern.

Knowledge gap

There is a knowledge gap in the research related to Buddhism and women empowerment. A comprehensive framework is needed to capture the big picture of the issue. Balance, Reflection, Energy, Association, Transparency, Healing, and Empowerment are all components of the BREATHE model poetry therapy for Black women's mental health, incorporating Buddhist-themed poems (Evans, 2015). Thus, there are possibilities to analyse how various creative writing styles, such as essays, short stories, and research papers on Buddhism, benefit women.

In Thailand, the majority of spirit mediums are women, and they must experience both psychological and physical tribulations before becoming authentic spirit mediums (Kitiarsa, 2005). This allows examining these psychological and physical obstacles in Buddhism, which empowers women.

In communities outside Mandalay, Myanmar (Burma), primarily ordinary women undertake violent possession ceremonies by rolling about on the floor in temples. In the larger culture, these practices are frequently stigmatised and criticised. (Foxeus, 2017) Therefore, it is essential to examine how these practices apply to today's religious culture as the generation has evolved.

Nuns are held to stricter standards than monks. Some believe it reflects the Buddha's early reluctance to allow women to become ordained. Others contend that the garudhammas were later additions to the tradition and did not reflect the Buddha's intentions. In this context, are feminist readings of Buddhist texts and history applicable? Or do they represent elite viewpoints that have arisen within the context of Western feminist criticism but have little relevance at the grassroots level? (Tomalin, 2009). This should be thoroughly investigated through a comprehensive framework to convey the issue's big picture.

Below are some major findings related to the current knowledge.

According to Foxeus (2017), Burmese women must engage to maintain their Buddhist tradition, and merit-making is a main part of their traditional role. Burmese Buddhist imagery helped Burmese women break their chains and negotiate a way to be alternatively modern. Further, it enhances their ability to cope with challenges in their everyday lives. Their support for the Buddha's dispensation provided them with agency empowerment and a route to social prestige. A significant finding of the articles is that Buddhist imaginaries and novel cults are able to enhance the status of women of the predominantly lower middle class in Upper Burma.

Katiarsa (2005) discussed the magic monks and spirit mediums in Thailand and how these concepts are linked with their religious domain. According to Katiarsa (2015), spirit mediumship is defined as the beliefs and rituals of humans who serve as agents on behalf of his/her super agency. Further, it highlighted that most of the spirit mediums are predominantly women, and they have to suffer both psychological and physical hardship before they become true spirit mediums. A fact highlighted by Kabilsih is that women received a limited place in the Buddhist structures, and Buddhism prohibited women from becoming monks. This is directed towards more women being encouraged to participate actively in spirit cults in Thailand. Even as nuns, they have not received any merit like monks.

On the other hand, Buddhist practice in Thailand does not provide much space and privilege to Thai women. The study further identified that most magic monks and spirit mediums emerged from lower social rank in Thai Buddhist culture. One of the significant findings of the study is that Thai men have a greater role compared to Thai women in Buddhist institutions and public regions, and Thai women are more engaged in domestic region domains such as spirit cults. It will be interesting to focus on Thai women's religious and spiritual disadvantages in the Buddhist structure.

On the other hand, the study conducted by Tomalin (2006) indicates that many gender-related issues, such as domestic violence, sex trafficking, and HIV transmission, have religious and cultural aspects in Thailand, and the establishment of the bhikkhuni Ordination impacted the reduction of those. According to the study, two themes emerged in Thailand concerning the social benefit of bhikkhuni ordination. Under the first theme, the study highlighted the role of Buddhism in providing community services such as free religious education, informal counselling, advice and support to overcome the various issues Thai women face. The second theme identified by the study is the status of women in Thai Buddhism. Theme described that Thai Buddhism has a negative influence on gender roles and reinforces the social attitude which women have lower rebirth compared to men because of *karma* obtained by previous life. Even though it has a negative influence, studies conclude that feminist transformation can mitigate the issues faced by women worldwide.

Tomalin (2009) focuses on assessing the significance of translational networking to Buddhist feminism, and the study highlighted that these feminist networks attract scholarly input compared to prioritising the Buddhist practice. Furthermore, the study indicates that these Buddhist feminists have a strong theme which aims to improve the lives of ordained women and encourage the social benefit of ordaining. These transnational feminist networks help them to achieve strategic gender needs and spiritual development.

Sripraschatanon (2017) found that Buddhism as a first ideology enhances women empowerment in all aspects such as social, political, economic, cultural, legal, ethical, religious and spiritual. Further, the study highlighted that Buddhism empowered women by removing the lack of knowledge and power. Through this knowledge, women can gain self-realisation, realisation of the social world, and society's realisation and power to destroy the negative forces of ignorance. On the other hand, from the Buddhist era to the present, women's contribution to the Buddhist community has been significant. Buddhism has never limited women's freedom to merit activities and the right to have every role equally. (Magee & Purisuttamo, 2020)

These findings indicate that Buddhism's structure differently impacted women's empowerment worldwide. Most researchers, such as Sripraschatanon (2017), Magee and Purisuttamo (2020), Tomalin (2009), Foxeus (2017), and Tomalin (2006) conclude that Buddhism and its ideology helped to empower women by solving the common issues faced by them in the society even though it will be interesting to focus on the aspect of religious and spiritual advantages and disadvantages, changes of status faced by women in different countries due to the effect of the Buddhism.

Conclusion

The systematic literature review has yielded some important aspects related to the research on Buddhism and women empowerment. There is significant room for new avenues and research in this area since the status of women empowerment, as a variable, changes, and it will have some interconnections with Buddhism. Very few research studies have been conducted in this area, and more empirical research can be conducted to understand the relationship between Buddhism and women's empowerment. Research in the respective suggested areas can close the above-identified knowledge, contextual, methodological and empirical gaps.

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