

## Status of Females in the Time of Buddha

The status of females at 2,500 years ago was very low.

The society was mainly patriarchal. One of man's main wishes was to beget as many sons as possible to further their land conquests and to perform the necessary rituals to send their souls after death to the next world. The birth of a male newborn was a joyful occasion and was lifted for the all the world to see. The Atharveda mentioned that there were special mantras and rites to be performed for obtaining a male child.

But the **birth of a female** was not a happy one. The midwife would quietly keep the female newborn aside. Neither mantras nor rituals were performed. Even King Pasenandi, the wealthy king of Kosala was visibly upset when told that Queen Mallika had given birth to a female.

Buddha was said to have consoled him,

*“A woman child, O lord of men, may prove  
Even a better offspring than a male.  
For she may grow up wise and virtuous,  
Her husband's mother reverencing, true wife.  
The boy that she may bear may do great deeds,  
And rule great realms, yea, such a son  
Of noble wife becomes his country's guide”*

*(Kindred Sayings I, p.111)*

The female child received **no education**. Unlike their brothers of the upper 3 castes, who were schooled in the Vedas, the females were treated in the same status as Sudras. They were not allowed to learn the Vedas, as they had no need for religious learning.

Being obedient to their husbands would be their only path to heaven. *‘Woman does not need to perform sacrifices or religious rites. Obedience to husband alone is sufficient for them to be born in Heaven.’ Manusmriti*

### Females are to be guarded

1. **‘Manusmriti’** the Hindu Law Code, compiled between 500 BC –300 BC, devotes 9<sup>th</sup> chapter entirely to laws pertaining to women.
  - *‘Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and her sons protect her in old age. A woman is never fit for independence.’*
  - *Women have to be guarded, as they are prone to sexual misconduct. Women do not care for beauty or age. It is enough that he is a man and they give themselves to the handsome and the ugly*
  - *Through their passion for men, they became disloyal towards their husbands, however carefully they were guarded.*

Manu allotted to women (love of their) beds, seats, and ornaments; inspire desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct.

**2. 'Bhagavadgita':** Women are born of evil.

**3.**The position of women in **Jainism** is summed up as follows:

*“Right in the earliest portions of the Canon, a woman is looked upon as something evil that enticed innocent males into a snare of misery. They are described as ‘the greatest temptation’, the causes of all sinful acts’, ‘the slough’, and ‘demons’ etc. Their passions are said to destroy the celibacy of monks like a pot filled with lac near fire”*

### **Married lives of female**

**1.** Even though their husbands were unfaithful, they would have still to serve them like gods. *‘Husband may be immoral, lustful in behaviour and devoid of good qualities; the wife should wait on him, always regarding him highly as a god’.* *‘Manusmruti’*

**2. Polygamy** was practiced:

- a. Theri Uppalavanna recollected how both mother and daughter live as co-wives of a husband.
- b. Theri Isidasi related how she was driven away by several husbands and finally wedded to a polygamous husband.
- c. Theri Kisagotami declared that woeful was a woman’s lot - having to share homes with hostile wives and to give birth in bitter pain. Some seek death.

**3. Female** was confined to the household life, and many had to put up with the drudgery and hard work of domestic chores.

### **Physical suffering**

Females had a great deal of physical suffering -menstrual cramps, pains of delivery and the diseases of the female reproductive organs.

Females with low dowry were often physically mistreated by their husbands and in laws.

### **Intellect and wisdom**

Females were inferior to man in intellect and wisdom. Mara expressed thus to Soma Theri ‘It is not possible for a woman with her two-finger- wisdom to attain the highest, that attained by the sages.’

### **Buddha’s views on women**

Buddha did consider the dangers of attraction of a female as woman can provide the full satisfaction of the 5 sense bases.

*Women ensnare a man of heedless mind with their glances and smiles or with artful grooming (dunnivattha = inadequately clad) and pleasing words. Women are such that*

*one cannot approach them in safety though they may be stricken and dead'*

*Gradual Sayings III, 57*

Buddha advised Venerable Ananda on how to behave towards female:

1. Don't look at them.
2. If you have to look, don't talk.
3. If you have to talk, make sure that your mindfulness is present all the time.

Buddha had said that, "Whatever beautiful things there are in the world, they are not, in themselves, lustful things (*kama*). It is the greedy thoughts of man, which makes them lustful (sankapparago).  
SN. I.22

Buddha showed respect in the following:

1. Woman has a dignified and important role to play in society. Mother concept is given a holy place in Buddhism.
2. Advice to man on their responsibilities to his wife in the Sigalovada Sutta, reflects Buddha's respect for woman as a wife in the household and society. The relationship between husband and wife is bilateral and reciprocal.
3. Advice to woman on "How to be a good wife." A good wife is considered a devi (goddess).
4. There is no double standard of chastity for husband and wife. Both male and female are advised to observe the fundamental 5 precepts, which include abstinence from sexual misconduct. Sigala was advised that husband and wife have to be faithful to one another.
5. Males are not permitted to have sexual relationships with women who are protected by mother, father, mother and father, brother, sister or relatives, who have a husband, who are protected by law, who are betrothed. (Saleyyake & Sevittabbasevittabba Suttas in Majjhima Nikaya)
6. Woman is capable of realizing the different stages of sainthood.

Buddhism does not encourage war and violence and hence has no demand for sons to fight. Buddhism does not advocate that the religious rite of transferring merits to departed fathers could only be done by sons.

### **Bhikkhuni Sangha**

The first female lay disciples (upasika) were Yasa's mother and former wife. At the first year after returning to Kapilavattu, and preaching to his father and stepmother, his father was established in the second stage of sainthood, while his stepmother was established in the first stage of sainthood. It was only in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of Buddha's ministry, Mahapajapati Gotami requested for entry into the Sangha at Nigrodha Park at Kapilavattu. She was refused thrice, "Alan, Gotami." (Enough, Gotami)

Buddha proceeded to Versales and settled down at Kutagara sala.

Mahapajapati Gotami with large company of Sakyan ladies shaved their heads and donned yellow garments, made their way to Versales. Dust-stained and feet swollen, they

were a pitiable sight as they sat at the entrance of the Kutagara Hall. Venerable Ananda saw their sad faces and decided to request on her behalf but was turned down 3 times. He asked Buddha whether a female could attain the different stages of sainthood. Buddha was affirmative. Buddha finally agreed to accept Mahapajapati Gotami into the Sangha provided that she was able to accept 8 strict conditions (atthagaruda dhamma).  
**Cullavagga Pali:**

1. A nun, who is ordained even for a century, must greet respectfully, rise up from her seat, salute with joined palms, do proper homage to a monk ordained but one day.
2. A nun must not spend the rains in a residence where there are no monks.
3. Every fortnightly, a nun must request from the monks, the Observance Day and formal confessional meetings.
4. After the rainy retreat, a nun must invite both orders and confess to any offences.
5. A nun, on committing an offence must undergo disciplinary action before both orders.
6. A novice has to be trained for 2 years before she could seek higher ordination from both orders.
7. A monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun.
8. Admonition of monks by nuns is forbidden. Admonition of nuns by monks is not forbidden.

Ananda reported to Mahapajapati Gotami, "If you accept the 8 conditions, it will be your higher ordination." Mahapajapati Gotami and the 500 Sakyan ladies accepted and the Bhikkuni order began then.

Buddha's initial reluctance to accept female into the order is for practical reasons of:

1. Social patriarchal environment
2. Problem of accommodation
3. Problem of protection against men and beasts

He laid down rules to ensure healthy continuation of the monastic institution rather than to assert spiritual dominance of monks over nuns. Buddha wanted at the formative period of the nun order to thrive on the guidance, supervision and protection of the monks' order. Monks were more long-standing and experienced in guiding the newly established order of nuns. Because of this reason, the monks were entrusted with the task of conferring higher ordination on nuns and nuns were instructed to discipline themselves in the precepts.

Nuns were taught in stages on the procedures of fortnightly patimokkha recital, formal confessional meetings, procedures to be followed in disciplinary acts and settling of disputes.

Nuns were given authority of conferring higher ordination on nuns, but Buddha did not revoke the original permission given to monks to confer higher ordination on nuns and this remain in force up to this day.

In accepting females into the order, he promoted the cause of rights for female for emancipation. Just as the great ocean has one taste of salt, doctrine and discipline have the taste of emancipation for both male and female. He had no doubt that females could attain emancipation, as Theri Soma so succinctly responded to Mara's assessment of female wisdom to be 2 fingers deep,

“ When one's mind is well concentrated and  
wisdom never fails  
Does the fact of our being women make  
any difference?”

Society remained so steep in male chauvinism that Buddha had to ask Mahapajapati Gotami to display her powers before she passed away:

*“ O Gotami, perform a miracle in order to dispel the wrong views of those foolish men who are in doubt with regard to the spiritual potential of women.”*