



Article

## Exploring Gender Equity Issues Facing Australian Theravadin *Bhikkhunīs*: A Preliminary Analysis of Early Respondent Data

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### Abstract

In 2009, four Australian Buddhist nuns undertook the *upasampada* ceremony at Bodhinyana Monastery in Western Australia, becoming fully ordained Theravadin *bhikkhunīs*. This was considered highly controversial in global Buddhist circles, yet there is a gap in the academic research on Australian *bhikkhunīs*, who continue to ordain and have a growing community. This article is a preliminary analysis of interviews with Australian based Theravadin nuns, monks, and laity for their perspectives on the gender issues raised in the international literature, to gain an understanding of the status of Australian nuns and the barriers that they may experience.

### Keywords

*Bhikkhunī*, Nun, Buddhism, Australia, Theravada, Gender

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### Introduction

In 2009, four Australian nuns made headlines throughout the Buddhist world by undertaking the *upasampada*<sup>1</sup>, the higher *bhikkhunī* ordination ceremony, at Bodhinyana Monastery in Western Australia. *Bhikkhunīs* are fully ordained women, nuns who take 311 precepts and devote themselves to a renunciate lifestyle. In retaliation to this progressive act of ordaining women, Bodhinyana Monastery was subsequently expelled from its conservative parent organisation, Wat Pah Pong temple, in Thailand. This was not the first *bhikkhunī* ordination in

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<sup>1</sup> See information and glossary of non-English terminology at the end of this article.

modern times, as Sri Lankan nuns have been undertaking the *upasampada* since 1996, which in itself has caused significant debate amongst the Theravadin and broader Buddhist communities worldwide. The issue being that prior to 1996, *bhikkhunī* ordination had been denied to Theravadin women for centuries. As a result, Theravadin women renunciates have historically been relegated to subservient roles and limited in their practise and status as novices, including *maechi* in Thailand, Sri Lankan *dasasilmātās*, *thilashin* in Myanmar or *siladhara* in the United Kingdom. Despite the fact that the *bhikkhunī* order was established some 2,600 years ago by the historical Buddha, it is widely accepted that the Theravadin *bhikkhunī* order effectively died out over a thousand years ago [sic] (Halafoff & Rajkopal 2015, pp. 113-114; Heirman 2011, p. 2011; Kawanami 2007, p. 226; Tathālokā 2017, p. 8). Therefore, the successful attempts to gain ordination by firstly the Sri Lankan nuns, and consequent international ordinations including Australia, are referred to as the *Bhikkhunī Revival*. Despite the excommunication of Bodhinyana monastery, *bhikkhunī* ordination in Australia continues. Nonetheless, there is little-to-no scholarly investigation into the lived experiences of Australian Theravadin *bhikkhunīs* representing a significant gap in the literature.

My project, undertaken at The University of Adelaide, uses semi-structured interviews with locally based Theravadin nuns, monks, and laypeople to gauge their views on a range of gender equity issues, as identified in the global literature, to gain perspective on the experiences of Australian *bhikkhunīs*. Notably, this is not a theological study but rather uses discourse analysis to determine the status and recognition of *bhikkhunīs* in Australia, the barriers that they face, and monastic and lay people's perceptions of agency, empowerment, and gender equality in relation to *bhikkhunīs*. The late Venerable Kusuma, the first *bhikkhunī*

ordained in the 1996 Bhikkhuni Revival ordinations, wrote ‘for I am a Sri Lankan who dared become a *Bhikkhuni*’ (Kusuma 2020, p. 10), a sentiment echoed by most interviewees. I will utilise Michel Foucault’s and Judith Butler’s theories throughout my analysis of the data, particularly around concepts of religious tutelage, Foucault’s micro-expressions of power and Butler’s performative theory. Analysing strategies that Australian *bhikkhunīs* adopt to assert their monastic legitimacy, challenge gender-based norms and navigate barriers through their daily practise, will contribute to the understanding of power and identity in religious communities.

The study is currently underway, and initial participants to date are mostly associated in some way with Bodhinyana Monastery and its allied institutions and are therefore generally pro-*bhikkhunī ordination*. This article presents a preliminary analysis of the first cohort of fourteen interview participants, both monastic and lay, to provisionally fill the gap in the literature. I compare and contrast four key aspects of inequality proposed in the international literature with participants’ responses in the Australian context. The study seeks to understand the nuances through which Australian *bhikkhunīs* assert agency and challenge long held gender norms. This preliminary analysis identifies commonalities in the participant responses that offer useful insight into how Australian renunciates navigate these issues. One observation of note is the amount of laughter and expressed joy exhibited by participants, all of whom have been eager to share their stories and openly discuss the issues.

### **Exploring the global issues facing Bhikkhunīs**

A search of academic databases, primarily ProQuest, found scholarly literature identifying gender issues facing *bhikkhunīs* and Buddhist women in general. The literature covers all

major Buddhist schools. Despite obvious cultural and theological differences, there are common trends of gender barriers across traditions. The research questions in this study have been generated from these trends. Regarding Theravadin *bhikkhūnīs*, the majority of fieldwork studies centre on Buddhist populations in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, where the Theravadin tradition is dominant (Cheng 2007; Lehrer 2019; Lindberg Falk 2007; Mrozik 2009; Salgado 2013; Tsomo 2010). Southeast Asian Buddhism is infused with long held local cultural standards, often reinforced by secular State institutions, particularly where Buddhism is considered the official national religion (Dhammadinnā 2010; Salgado 2017, p. 374). By and large, traditionally Buddhist countries tend toward conservative values, and have entrenched patriarchally dominated institutions. It is not surprising that studies on Buddhism and gender, across Buddhist traditions, often associate these patriarchal values as a “Buddhist patriarchy” and that this assumption is overwhelmingly reflected in and challenged in the literature. Nonetheless, there is excellent scholarly work examining gender inequality in Buddhism, notably Susanne Mrozik (2009, 2014, 2020), Amy Langenberg (2018, 2020; 2021), Monica Lindberg-Falk (1989; 2007), Anna Halafoff (2013a, 2013b; 2012; 2015) and Wei Yi Cheng (2007, 2011) whose works have greatly influenced this study. Given the preponderance of studies set in conservatively-Buddhist<sup>2</sup> Southeast Asian countries, supported by studies on Buddhist women globally, my project seeks to determine if any of these Southeast Asian conservative-Buddhist practices and norms have an impact on Australian Theravadin nuns.

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<sup>2</sup> Conservatively-Buddhist countries are characterised by long held, usually patriarchal, customs and norms. These norms are enforced through secular state authorities in consultation with appointed monastic advisory councils. Examples include the Thai National Office of Buddhism, the Sri Lankan Maha Sangha Buddhist Advisory Council and Myanmar State Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka Committee, all of whom oppose *bhikkhūnī* ordination.

The key problems identified in the international literature as contributing to gender inequalities in monastic communities are:

- Issues specifically relating to ordination (Heirman 2011, p. 610; Ito 2012, p. 61; Mrozik 2009, p. 369; Sati 2013; Sujato 2009; 2012a, p. 149; Tsomo 2007, p. 104),
- Disciplinary rules that disadvantage women and impact on monastic recognition (Heirman 2011, p. 610; Ito 2012, p. 61; Mrozik 2009, p. 369; Plank 2015, p. 209; Sati 2013; Sujato 2009; 2012a, p. 149; Swanepoel 2015, p. 115; Tsomo 2007, p. 104; 2020, p. 123)
- Access to essential resources (Sujato 2021at 10:45; Wangmo, Edo & Fadzil 2018, pp. 159-161; Yeshe 2016 at 4:00), and
- The silencing of women's voices and role models (Bowen 2011, p. 113; Byrne 2013, p. 2; Heikkilä-Horn 2015, pp. 186-187)

These are consistent with the obstacles identified by Banks-Findley (2000). In addition to these, my study examines the impact of multiculturalism and religious plurality, issues that an Australian renunciate may experience in a way not generally identified in studies undertaken in Buddhist-dominant countries.

### **Australian Multiculturalism**

The first part of the questionnaire in my Australian *Bhikkhunī* study sought the participants' views on the dominant themes in the international literature, broadly corresponding with Banks-Findley's (2000) views on monastic repression of Buddhist women. Respondents to date generally considered the Australian environment as being largely supportive of *bhikkhunīs*.

The second part of the interview sought to explore the lived experiences of Australian women

renunciates. Scholarly work on Australian Buddhism to date has been broadly multidisciplinary and dominated by historical studies and examinations of the Buddhist immigrant experience (Spuler 2000). Of the published Australian works, perhaps the most recognised are Paul Croucher's early work *Buddhism in Australia 1948-1988* (Croucher 1989) followed by Rocha and Barker's *Buddhism in Australia: Traditions in Change* (2011), both works describe the plurality of Australian Buddhism. Plurality and multiculturalism are of course not unique to Australia, and even within dominantly Theravadin countries there will be various schools and sects, some which support *Bhikkhunī* ordination. Some minority Mahayana communities also exist in Theravadin-dominant countries, and *Bhikkhunīs* are recognised in the Mahayana tradition. The plurality of Australian Buddhism however is visibly and linguistically diverse. This is demonstrated by the number of Buddhist registered organisations in Australia, currently sitting at more than 500 of which 160 identify as Theravadin (BuddhaNet 2022).

A general theme of Rocha and Barker's book is the expansion of Buddhism in Australia, characterised by a dichotomy of traditional Buddhists immigrating to Australia during the 1970s, and Western converts mostly comprised of middle-class university-educated European-Australians. There is some evidence in Rocha and Barker's work, suggesting that as more orthodox monks were brought into Australia, many disenfranchised Western converts moved towards a secular insight meditation practise. This produced multiple yet parallel Buddhist communities, few of which were particularly conducive to supporting monastic women. Nonetheless, in the succeeding decade since Barker and Rocha's work, women renunciates in Australia have developed a strong foothold. A gender equality statement has been released by the Australian Sangha Association, which represents monks and nuns from

many traditions (Australian Sangha Association 2018). There are certainly many temples and organisations that cater exclusively to immigrant communities in their own languages, and others serve a broader Australian congregation in English. My study questioned participants on how Australia's multicultural makeup impacts on the daily lives of nuns.

Study respondents to date have mostly been associated with Bodhinyana Monastery and Venerable Ajahn Brahm's network and all have agreed that the multicultural makeup of their collective sangha covers a wide range of ethnicities. The presence of a large contingent of Sri Lankan Australians is particularly significant, as the modern *bhikkhunī* revival started there, and several respondents have identified this community as being particularly supportive of *bhikkhunīs* in Australia. Furthermore, respondents have identified the emergence of a uniquely Australian *sangha*, made up of Chinese, Malaysian, Singaporean, Burmese, Thai, Laotian, Vietnamese, Singhalese, and European-Australian practitioners, as well many others. This developing Australian *sangha* communicates predominantly in English and has a large web-based presence. I asked participants on the sustainability of their livelihood, assuming that the plural and competitive environment of Australian Buddhism may be insufficient to support a newly introduced *Bhikkhunī sangha*. On the contrary, participants perceived the small but growing Australian *bhikkhunī* community to represent opportunities that may not otherwise be available to them in other countries. When questioned on the effects of multiculturalism on their practise, respondents generally reacted with joy, explaining that immigrant Australians wanted their children to experience a Buddhism with the faces that reflected their adopted land. Interviewees also identified a fear amongst immigrant communities that their children may perhaps reject a Buddhism that more resembles the old world of their parents, one that is not in synch with their own Australian lives. The

multiculturalism afforded to Buddhist youth within the Australian *sangha* [at least as represented in the Bodhinyana network] is important to their Australian identity, and this includes the acceptance of *bhikkhunīs*, their status and agency as women renunciates, reflecting a broader concept of Australian egalitarianism.

### **Bhikkhunī Ordination**

Overwhelmingly, the dominant issue debated in the international literature is *bhikkhunī* ordination. The modern *Bhikkhunī* Revival, where women are reclaiming their monastic rights as established by The Buddha, is considered to be a revolutionary act by the established orthodox patriarchy, and this opinion is not solely restricted to Theravadins. As far back as 2007, a conference was held at the University of Hamburg to debate the possibility of re-establishing a *Bhikkhunī* order. The conference was organised by an activist organisation for Buddhist women called Sakyadhita International under the auspices of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, of the Vajrayana tradition. The Hamburg conference failed to achieve any real reform but instead highlighted the level of resistance to *bhikkhunī* ordination from many orthodox Buddhists, both monks and nuns (Mroziak 2009, pp. 369-372). Attended by Buddhists from all major traditions and invited Buddhist scholars, the conference also established that a Western feminist influence was perceived by many orthodox participants. Martin Baumann considers this type of anti-Western criticism to be primarily a schism between traditionalist and modernist or global actors, rather than an East versus West issue, noting:

‘Certainly, “global” does not equal “West” for globalization processes of cultural and economic flows have markedly affected all nation-states,[...] rather, the designation is meant to point to and conceptually capture the transnational and transcontinental flow of Buddhist ideas and practices and the global travel of Buddhist teachers and students.’ (Baumann 2001, p. 5)



Nonetheless, the contaminant of Western feminism pervades much of the debate over the past three decades, particularly in response to Rita Gross' seminal publication *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (1993) which is both lauded for speaking out, but widely criticised for its orientalist position (Kawahashi 1994; Langenberg 2019; Salgado 2013; Sasson 2007; Yeng 2020). Discounting the arguments over the applicability of feminist theory, the debate over the legitimacy of Buddhist *bhikkhunī* ordination falls into two camps. For the conservative orthodox Buddhists, generally portrayed as patriarchal, the argument is largely a "legal" one. Buddhist life is generally guided by the *tripitaka*, a series of rules and guidelines ostensibly set down by The Buddha and subsequently codified by Buddhist councils, comprised of monks, throughout the centuries. Central to this is the *vinaya*, which establishes the rules, norms and penalties pertaining to monastic life, including the *Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha* specific to nuns. In the course of my interviews, any hierarchy appears to be inconsistent with the *vinaya*:

'[...] what's interesting is that when modern-day monastics do institute hierarchies, they do so by going extra to the *vinaya*, and in fact quite against the *vinaya*. So, you look at say Thailand, there's an *Act of the Sangha*. It's an act of parliament. Then it's the act of parliament that then imposes the hierarchy because you can't infer a hierarchy from the *vinaya*. It's the same thing in Sri Lanka. You organise all of these *nikāyas* and you have all these titles and levels and things like that, and that all not in the *vinaya*. Because the *vinaya* does not have a hierarchy.' Venerable M2210 (Australian *bhikkhu*, July 2022)

Still, the orthodox viewpoint is that the *vinaya* calls for a dual ordination ceremony comprised of senior monks [*bhikkhus*] and nuns [*bhikkhunīs*] in order to be valid (Kawanami 2007, p. 235; Mrozić 2009, p. 369; Sujato 2012a, pp. 149-150; Tomalin 2009, p. 93). Opponents to *bhikkhuni* ordination in both the Theravada and Vajrayana traditions argue that since there are no extant *bhikkhunīs* in their lineage to act as preceptors, valid ordination is therefore not possible [sic]. By denying the validity of ordination, the protections afforded to *bhikkhunīs* under the *vinaya* are voided, placing women in a vulnerable position. *Bhikkhunī* supporters however offer multiple arguments to counter this orthodox legal position. While the

conservative argument is simplistically dogmatic, *pro-bhikkhunī* counterarguments are more complex. These also incorporate *vinaya*-legal rebuttals, but research extend to linguistic analysis, citing historical-archaeological-religious evidence, and many incorporate modern political and gender positive theory. The work of Venerables Sujato and Analayo provide excellent overviews of the arguments (Analayo 2013b; Sujato 2012a). These *pro-bhikkhunī* arguments are often presented interchangeably in the literature. In the lived experience of renunciates however, defending the validity of their ordination is important to the *bhikkhunī*'s acceptance by the lay *sangha* [community], and the performative ritual lives of the nuns, is essential in creating and maintaining the *bhikkhunī* identity. The discourse is essential in instituting authority, central to which is the undisputed fact that the historical Buddha did establish a *bhikkhunī* order.

Modern monks supportive of *bhikkhunī* ordination have several approaches to the *upasampada* to satisfy perceptions of legitimacy. There is the argument that the Buddha allowed for *bhikkhu*-only ordination of the *bhikkhunīs* (Analayo 2013a, pp. 325-327). This type of ordination does not require the dual-*sangha upasampada* insisted upon by modern orthodox monks, and since this rule has never been revoked is still argued to be valid. To address dual-ordination protocols, particularly in the early days of the *Bhikkhunī Revival*, nuns from the Mahayana tradition joined with Theravadin monks in the *upasampada* ceremonies noting that the Mahayana *bhikkhunī* order has never died out. This approach was particularly contentious with each side debating 'purity of lineage' but now that there are sufficient new-generation Theravadin *Bhikkhunīs* to act as preceptors and fulfil the various *upasampada* roles, dual ordination is becoming more accepted (Tathālokā 2017, p. 17). The participants of

the 2009 Australian *upasampada* at Bodhinyana Monastery cited these arguments to legitimize their ordination in 2009 and continue to ordain *bhikkhunīs* today.

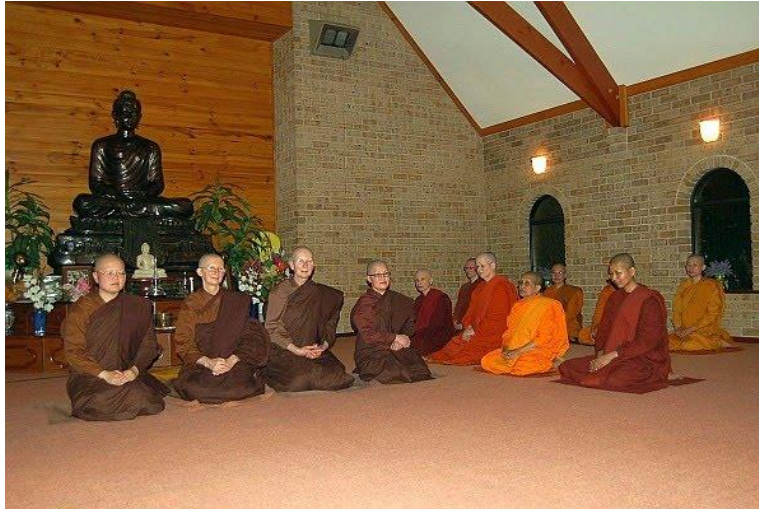


Figure 1: The 2009 Bhikkhunī Ordination in Western Australia. Copyright The Buddhist Society of Western Australia (Inc), used with permission, no edit/modifications allowed.

Respondents in my study to date have all indicated the importance of the *bhikkhunī* ordination to their practice, have recognised the ongoing difficulties faced by *bhikkhunīs* internationally, and collectively consider their ordination to be legitimate, as do their lay supporters and many monks. This is not to say that *bhikkhunī* ordination is universally endorsed by Australian Buddhist communities. There is evidence that some orthodox monks and lay groups actively oppose fully ordained nuns, however, there also appears to be sufficient support to enable a small but growing community of nuns in Australia, quietly yet determinedly reclaiming their *bhikkhunī* order.

### **Disciplinary rules**

From the data available from early participants in the study, there is a discrepancy in how lay scholars and renunciates perceive agency, often relating to the understanding of monastic discipline and rules. *Bhikkhunīs* undertake 311 precepts, whilst the male *bhikkhus* only take

227 vows, a clear discrepancy. *Bhikkhunīs* are also subject to the eight *garudhamma* – the “heavy rules” which do not apply to monks, the most contentious of which reads: ‘Though a *bhikkhunī* be ordained for a hundred years, she should bow down, rise up, make anjali, and behave properly towards a *bhikkhu* ordained that very day’ (Sujato 2012a, p. 47).

To the lay scholar this might envision some sort of patriarchy enforced tutelage, however discussions with monastics, both in my study and within the literature, tend to provide more nuanced understanding within the monastic lived experience. Wei Yi Cheng’s (2007) fieldwork in Taiwan and Sri Lanka specifically focussed on this *garudhamma* rule, recording a broad range of responses from *bhikkhunīs* on how they each observed this rule. Several respondents in my Australian study noted that seven of the eight *garudhamma* are already in the *Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha* and so it is only this first of the *garudhamma*, requiring bowing to monks, that is contentious. There is a general understanding that this rule was originally applied by the historical Buddha on the *bhikkhunī* ordination of his aunt/stepmother Mahāpajāpatī, as a means to curb her royal pride within the greater monastic community. Since this is accepted as part of the Buddhist canon, it is now broadly applied to all *bhikkhunīs*.

To be sure, there are orthodox monks including some Australian monks across many traditions who will interpret these rules as a way to assert authority. Importantly, there are monasteries, both male and female, that interpret the rules differently. Respondents in this study emphasised that this ability for each monastic community to interpret and apply the rules is hard-wired into the *vinaya*, allowing nuns to exercise significant agency within their monastic lives. It was also made respectfully clear that monks have no say in how the nuns’ monasteries are run, and that the *Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha* rules were developed by women for

women, which is often overlooked in the academic studies, Venerable N2203 (Australian *bhikkhunī*, June 2022) Venerable M2210 (Australian *bhikkhu*, July 2022).

The literature often also points to monastic practices such as gender segregated seating, the order of receiving food, delegation to traditionally gendered duties, and lack of recognition as endemic in Buddhist societies. Participants in this study acknowledge that some monasteries in Australia do still engage in this behaviour, but also point out that this is not universal and is changing. Bodhinyana Monastery for example has abandoned the practice of “nuns go to the back of the lunch line” and now serves the daily meal in order of monastic seniority, ranked by years of *vassa* experience and not by gender. I witnessed this during recent fieldwork in Perth.

Overwhelmingly, participants are keen to point out that the *Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha*, the rules for *bhikkhunīs*, are not being abandoned and are indeed central to their practise. In applying scholastic theories to the nun’s order, academics sometimes overlook the whole purpose of monastic life, which is to work towards “enlightenment”, and that renunciates live within this framework. In my study, participants have likened the rules of the *Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha* to “etiquette for living in a monastic community”, “tools to help curb defilements”, “guardrails to assist in our practice”, “a professional code-of-conduct” and generally assert that these rules exist to protect the nuns. It is particularly important to remember that a *bhikkhunī’s* livelihood is dependent on the support of the lay community, and that by observing and performing within the rules of the *Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha*, the community subsequently recognises the status and identity of their *bhikkhunīs*. When interviewed about the differences in the number of rules between monks and nuns, participants were happy to explain that many of the additional rules were developed to meet the needs of women. A

male *bhikkhu* has no need for a breast cloth, or for menstrual hygiene. Indeed, Amy Langenburg discusses how the historical development of monastic menstrual rules was revolutionary compared to accepted lay practises that periodically shunned women, suggesting that Buddhist nuns were able to exercise considerably more agency than many lay women in their time (Langenberg 2020).

Far from being oppressive, most of the participants in this Australian study emphasised were keen to emphasise *garudhamma* #3, which they find particularly beneficial in the Australian context: 'Each fortnight the *bhikkhunīs* should expect two things from the *bhikkhu* Sangha: questioning regarding the *uposatha* [observance] and being approached for teaching' (Sujato 2012a, p. 59). This rule is also reflected in the monks' *bhikkhu pācittiya*, and essentially legislates a regular educational interaction between monks and nuns to discuss the *dhamma*. During the interviews in my study, I asked participants on the differences between the lives of monks and nuns. Overwhelmingly, the nuns expressed a desire for teaching, and the need for experienced role models. It is critical here to remember that the first Theravadin *bhikkhunī* ordination in Australia was in 2009, and therefore our most experienced nun is only thirteen years old [counting by the number of *vassa* rain's retreats as a *bhikkhunī*]. By comparison, some Australian monks have forty *vassas*, and they in turn were trained by senior monks with forty-plus *vassas*, and the gravitas and combined experience of these monks is constantly available to the junior monks living at their monasteries. Australian nuns, by and large, cannot experience this immersive gravitas, as their own monastic practise and identity is still developing. The *garudhamma* rule that obliges male and female monastics to interact through the *ovada* is therefore highly valued, particularly given the great distances and isolation that many Australian *bhikkhunīs* face. This raises another characteristic of the lived

experience of Australian nuns, the dependence on technology. Unlike many studies that are undertaken in traditionally Buddhist countries where temples and monasteries are plentiful, the Australian Theravadin landscape is sparse and widely dispersed. Participants in my study have repeatedly commented on the use of Zoom™, YouTube™ and online discussion groups such as Sutta Central to connect with Australian and international Buddhists and how this in turn impacts their identity as part of a global *sangha*.

### **Recognition and Identity**

Recognition is critical to the identity of a *bhikkhunī* as it both cements their role within the fourfold *sangha* [*bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs*, lay-men and lay-women as per the historical Buddha's design]. It allows them to fully devote themselves to renunciate practice, being enabled by the material support of the lay-community. Returning to Banks-Findly's (2000) model of the monastic repression of women, a key detrimental impact of monastic rules is the effect that these rules have on a *bhikkhunī's* recognition. The international literature is littered with examples of how the misapplication of monastic rules can undermine the position of women, restrictions on how and when nuns can participate in the daily alms round are common (Carbonnel 2009, p. 268; Cheng 2011; Kawanami 2007, p. 240; Seeger 2009, p. 813; Shizuka 2004, p. 184; Sujato 2012a, p. 74; 2012b, p. 210; Tsomo 2010, p. 87).

Within the Buddhist identity, there is a clear division between the monastic and the secular, with particular tasks such as the handling of money and the preparation of food being both identifiably secular and frequently gendered. When the rules are manipulated to force a nun to engage in secular activity, this impacts her perceived monastic identity within the community. Such is the situation for the *maechi* [Thailand], *dasasilmātās* [Sri Lanka], *thilāshin*

[Myanmar], and *siladhara* [United Kingdom], where *bhikkhunī* ordination is either forbidden or unrecognised by authorities. Participants in my study have expressed how their own *bhikkhunī* status is well recognised and supported by their local *sangha*, and in the broader Australian non-Buddhist community. However, some have noted that they are not welcome in all Australian temples. Most participants also recognise the risk when travelling overseas whilst wearing *bhikkhunī* robes. Also, regarding secular activity, many respondents expressed concern about Australian *bhikkhunīs* living outside of the established monasteries, those in smaller hermitages that are still being established. This however was not generally considered to be misuse of monastic authority, but rather a resourcing issue which will be discussed below that impacted the nuns' ability to devote herself to their spiritual practise. Indeed, all respondents expressed gratitude towards those monks in Australia who publicly and vocally call to their lay communities to support *bhikkhunīs*. One Australian *bhikkhunī* related the story of her introduction to a local suburban Sri Lankan community by their senior monk 'He stood me up in front of 400 people and he said - "This is our nun, look after her" - and they have' Venerable N2203 (Australian *bhikkhunī*, June 2022).

The wearing of robes is an important aspect of monastic identity, so much so that the act of leaving monastic life, whether voluntarily or enforced, is referred to as 'disrobing' (Sujato 2012a, p. 120). For the Theravadin *bhikkhunī* in Australia this is a brown robe, hues ranging from dark brown to orange, the wearing of which is governed by the *Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha*. A robe of another colour or cut would identify the nun as a *bhikkhunī* from another tradition such as Mahayana, or the nun may even be mistaken for a novice. The previously mentioned *maechi*, *dasasilmātās*, *thilāshin* and *siladhara* are forbidden from wearing the brown to reinforce their lesser status thus placing them outside of the monastic *sangha*. The



importance of the robe was made apparent to me when interviewing one *bhikkhunī* in Australia who undertook her novice ordination in Myanmar, where the *thiláshin* wear pink. On return to Australia, this nun was gently advised by local *bhikkhunīs* that the wearing of pink robes in Australia was a tacit endorsement of an anti-*bhikkhunī* regime, upon which said nun undertook full *bhikkhunī* training and now wears brown. Monastic robes are not simply vestments of office rather they are part of the discourse constructing the *bhikkhunī's* sense of identity. And while the ordination event is vital to the identity and legitimacy of the *Bhikkhunī*, it is through living the daily rituals of the *Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha* that we see evidence of Judith Butler's performative theory in action.

'The understanding of performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names [ordination], but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse [*robes and pātimokkha*] to produce the phenomena [*bhikkhunī*] that it regulates and constrains' (Butler 1993, p. 2) [bracketed terms relevant to my study]

I would emphasise that Butlerian terminology is not the language that the participants use, rather my own observations from early analysis of the data. Given the opposition to *bhikkhunīs* in many parts of the world, Butler's theories like Foucault's, are often applied to studies involving *bhikkhunīs* (Langenberg 2018, p. 13; Lindberg Falk 2007, p. 131; Yeng 2020, p. 26), and I agree with this assessment. The gap that these nuns are filling, the reiterative performance of *bhikkhunī* existence, the indisputable agency of re-establishing the *bhikkhunī* order and producing alternative modalities of power within the monastic system, are subtle contestations of power.

### **Resources and Voicelessness**

The most applicable of Banks-Findly's (2000) model to participants in my study involves access to resources and response to voicelessness. These issues are also prevalent in the

international literature and adequately resourcing women, particularly in regard to accommodation, is a critical issue. The first issue with resourcing is that traditionally it is believed that to provide material support to a monk will give greater spiritual merit to the lay-donor than it is to support a nun. It is, therefore, not uncommon for monasteries and Buddhist organisations to attain considerable wealth, and yet this is often not redistributed to support women. Furthermore, the literature reports of land-grabs and the dispossession of nuns' property for monks' use (Wangmo, Edo & Fadzil 2018). This behaviour was even seen following the 2009 *bhikkhunī* ordination at Bodhinyana in Western Australia, where there was clear albeit unsuccessful attempts by the Thai monasteries to seize the Australian assets.

While the Australian respondents of this study were overwhelmingly positive about the support and lodgings available to them, the single largest issue raised was accommodation. All participants agreed that their material needs were more than adequately seen to. One nun even joked about the COVID lockdowns, 'When no one else had toilet paper, people were bringing us toilet paper which is amazing and we already had cupboards of toilet paper' Venerable N2201 (Australian *bhikkhunī*, June 2022). Nonetheless, while monks have options to visit many monasteries throughout Australia, Theravadin *bhikkhunīs* are restricted to three monasteries and a handful of hermitages. Several participants commented that it is common for nuns to continue living with their parents due to a shortage of monastic residences. It was also noted however, that the growth in available nuns' housing since 2009 in Australia is significantly greater than most Western countries.

On the issue of voicelessness and role models, I have already noted that a key issue facing Australian nuns is the sheer newness and inexperience of our female renunciates. The issue of experienced and visible monastic female role models is generally recognised, although

attributed to this critical early stage of developing an Australian *Bhikkhunī Sangha*. The international literature tends to focus on how the history of Buddhist women has by and large been written by Buddhist men, and how female representation is either presented from the male perspective or is totally absent (Sujato 2012a, p. 142). When interviewing participants on the issue of voicelessness, responses were mixed. While some agreed with the scholarly literature, others chose to stress the importance of the extant ancient Buddhist women's texts, particularly the existence of the *Therīgāthā*, the *Therī-Upādānas* and the various suttas given by early *bhikkhunīs*. The argument being that these ancient women's voices are retained in the *Tripitaka*, and that it would have been a relatively easy task for a monk's council to simply delete them some time over the past 2,600 years had that been their intent.

Regarding silencing, some participants expressed distress over the recent scandal involving the *Therīgāthā*, which poems of the elder *bhikkhunīs* contemporary to the historical Buddha. The issue involved a publication by Matty Weingast, an American Caucasian man who rewrote these original texts and marketed these to a Western audience in the guise of "translations" (Weingast 2020), effectively stealing the voices of these revered Asian women. Both male and female respondents in my study considered this form of modern silencing to be particularly significant to *bhikkhunīs*. Further information on the Weingast scandal is available on Bhikkhu Akālika's blog (Akālika 2021).

When specifically discussing the visibility of *bhikkhunīs* with participants, the Australian situation is complex. While acknowledging the international patriarchal systems that actively constrain *bhikkhunī* activity, the Australian participants were pragmatic about the local situation. They explained that excellent teachers attract lay followers, who in turn provide the material support, and that Australia has some globally recognised teachers such as

Venerables Ajahn Brahm, Ajahn Brahmali and Bhante Sujato, all named by study participants and all of whom are *pro-bhikkhunī* monks. These *bhikkhus* are adept in modern communications such as podcasts, websites, live events, blogs, and travel extensively and present *dhamma* talks in English. They are highly visible and there are some limited opportunities for *bhikkhunī* participation in these teachings.

Many participants have expressed a desire to engage more with the community, however there is no doubt that the Australian monks are more visible. Study participants have a simple explanation for this, and it is the same reason that impacts role-models and *bhikkhunī* life in general. The Australian *bhikkhunī sangha* is still in its infancy. Some *bhikkhunīs* referred to their situation as “bootstrapping” and demonstrated a clear understanding of the irony of their visibility situation. *Bhikkhunīs* are still learning, they are still mostly junior, and the key focus for them is currently their monastic practise. Indeed, they have expressed how the monks and more senior nuns are sheltering them while they develop as *bhikkhunīs*, but this of course has the short-term effect of limiting their public visibility. This in no way reflects negatively on the *bhikkhunī’s* perceptions of their agency, but rather represents a reasoned and deliberate long-term strategy. Participants have expressed that it is expected that as the *bhikkhunīs* emerge as senior practitioners, some of the nuns will engage in more visible teaching and will attract followers of their own.

During conversations with participants, this complex situation raised some compounding issues. The first being the necessity of appointing junior *bhikkhunīs* to roles that no junior monk would be expected to fill. Nuns with only a few *vassas* must step up to become abbots and spiritual advisors simply because there are no other women available to fill the role. Only monks with decades of experience would be considered for similar situations. Another

complicating factor is the unrealistic expectations of many “Western Buddhists”, i.e., practitioners from non-traditionally Buddhist backgrounds including the children of traditional Buddhists who have grown up in Australia. “Eastern Buddhists” by and large, are quite happy to support a monastic as part of their religious practice, with the pay-off being spiritual merit. According to the experience of some study participants, many Westerners tend to hold a more transactional expectation, demanding teaching schedules, meditation retreats, *dhamma* talks and similar services, even from the most newly ordained nun. So, in sheltering *bhikkhunīs* from the demands and expectations of public engagement, despite the resulting low visibility, the conditions of Australian Theravadin women should be considered as enabling rather than oppressive. When asked about the longer-term situation for the Australian *Bhikkhunī Sangha*, participants were universally enthusiastic, and were grateful for the support and breathing-space that they receive while they grow and develop.

### **Caveats**

This paper represents an early analysis of study participants to date and must recognise some clear shortcomings. Early recruitment through the respective Buddhist Societies who by and large support *bhikkhunī* ordination demonstrate a clear selection bias. The second stage of the study seeks to recruit participants including monks, nuns, and laity from the wider Theravadin Buddhist communities. The scope of the study, largely due to resource restrictions, excludes Australian Buddhists outside of the Theravadin tradition. Much of the available international literature is relevant across traditions, and like the 2007 Hamburg conference, raises commonly faced gender issues. Similarly, gender bias affects LGBTQI+ Buddhists, and while there is excellent research and evidence of outreach to Buddhists in the

Australian LGBTQI+ community, the direct connection to *Bhikkhunīs* in the literature is vague and considered out of scope. Nonetheless the issues facing LGBTQI+ Buddhists were mentioned by several participants in my project indicating that further study in this area is warranted. The preliminary analysis outlined in this paper is a result of communication with twenty four respondents of which fourteen full interviews are complete (eight nuns, four monks and two lay-people), nonetheless there are definitely patterns emerging that would challenge the international scholastic literature.

## Conclusion

According to the literature, there are many countries in the world where gender bias towards *bhikkhunīs* and Buddhist women in general is problematic. This includes many Western countries where support for *Bhikkhunīs* is either quashed, as it is the case of the United Kingdom, or simply fails to thrive as seen in the United States. Emerging from this Australian study, there are suggestions that the Australian political and religious landscape is such that there is a combination of supportive monks, a multicultural *sangha*, and a growing egalitarian Australian Buddhist identity, that is enough to provide Theravadin *bhikkhunīs* a sufficient foothold to establish themselves. This study focusses on comparing the gender asymmetry reported in the international literature to the lived experiences of Australian nuns. This is one of very few studies that documents this important and historically and culturally significant group of Australian women, highlighting a significant gap in the academic record, and indicating that further research is warranted.

## Notes on Language

This article uses phonetically anglicised Theravadin text, however the international literature frequently utilises text most relevant to the paper in question, be it Theravadin, Mahayana, Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese characters etc. Thus, *bhikkhunī* may also be referenced in some literature as *bhikṣuṇī*, *bhikkhuni*, *beiʔk<sup>h</sup>ynì*, *bǐqiūní*, *bikuni*, *phikkhonei*, *biguni*, [p<sup>h</sup>iksuni]. I have adopted terminology commonly found in the international literature, and acknowledge that my use of non-English terms may be questioned by some readers. Similarly, Anglo-European terms such as “nun”, “canon”, and “ordination” have been used interchangeably with their Pali and Sanskrit terms, and I recognise that the use of the Western idiom implicitly imposes Western constructs. Given that the study is set in an Australian context with the complexities of pluralistic Buddhist practices, I have opted for this mixed nomenclature for readability and understanding. Except where specifically quoted, all interpretation and use of the varied Buddhist terminology, is my own.

## Glossary

<i>Anjali</i>	A greeting by placing the hands together.
<i>Bhikkhu</i>	A fully ordained male renunciate, a monk.
<i>Bhikkhu pācittiya</i>	The monastic rules of conduct for monks.
<i>Bhikkhunī</i>	A fully ordained female renunciate, a nun.
<i>Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha</i>	The code of discipline used by <i>bhikkhunīs</i> .
<i>Dasasilmātās</i>	Women renunciates taking eight – ten precepts. (Sri-Lanka)
<i>Dhamma</i>	The teachings of The Buddha.
<i>Dhamma-talk</i>	Public talks on the Buddhist teachings.

<i>Dual-Sangha upasampada</i>	A <i>bhikkhunī</i> ordination ceremony comprised of both <i>bhikkhus</i> and <i>bhikkhunīs</i> .
<i>Garudhamma</i>	Eight rules specific to <i>bhikkhunīs</i> , attributed to the ordination of Queen Mahāpajāpatī by the Buddha.
<i>Maechi</i>	Women renunciates taking eight – ten precepts. (Thailand)
<i>Nikāya</i>	Collections of Buddhist texts, often regarding monastic lineage.
<i>Sangha</i>	The Buddhist community. The monastic <i>sangha</i> comprising <i>bhikkhus</i> and <i>bhikkhunīs</i> . The “fourfold <i>sangha</i> ” includes <i>bhikkhus</i> , <i>bhikkhunīs</i> , lay-women and lay-men.
<i>Siladhara</i>	Women renunciates taking ten precepts. (United Kingdom)
Theravada	A major school/tradition of Buddhism widely practiced in South East Asia.
<i>Therigatha</i>	Poems of the elder nuns dating back 2600 years.
<i>Thilashin</i>	Women renunciates taking ten precepts (Myanmar)
<i>Tripitaka</i>	A term for the collected canonical Buddhist writings
<i>Upasampada</i>	The higher <i>bhikkhuni</i> ordination ceremony
<i>Uposatha</i>	A fortnightly meeting of observance
<i>Vassa</i>	The annual rains retreat
<i>Vinaya</i>	The rules and procedures governing monastic life



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There are no conflicts of interest. The author reported to the HREC that he is a subscribing member of both the Buddhist Society of South Australia and the Buddhist Society of Western Australia and that there is no conflict or gain, perceived or real, from his involvement in the study.

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