Buddhist Women in Education and Leadership in Indonesia: Navigating Challenges and Advancing Religious Moderation

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Abstract

Buddhist women in Indonesia played an important but often overlooked role in religious education and leadership. This paper explores that how they navigate institutional and cultural challenges while contributing to Buddhist scholarship and community life. While Indonesia is home to Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, this study focuses primarily on the inclusive Buddhayāna movement, where greater opportunities for women's participation have emerged. Despite facing stuctural barriers such as gender bias in religious institutions and limited access to leadership, still many women actively engage in teaching, digital education and community-based organization and leadership. Groups like Wanita Buddhis Indonesia (WBI) increases women's visibility and influence in both religious and interfaith space. The absence of a rigid patriarchal monastic authority in Indonesia has also create space for female leadership, as seen in the work of Parwati Soepangat, who advanced a localized Buddhist feminist theology. Based on feminist and organizational theory, this study examines that how Buddhist women contribute to religious moderation through interfaith dialogue, peacebuilding and values-based education. Their evolving roles highlight the need for greater institutional recognition and support for women's participation in shaping Indonesia's pluralistic and peaceful religious landscape.

Keywords: *buddhist women, religious leadership, feminist theology, interfaith dialogue, inequality regimes*

Abstrak

Perempuan penganut agama Buddha di Indonesia memainkan peran penting namun sering kali diabaikan dalam pendidikan dan kepemimpinan agama. Makalah ini membahas bagaimana mereka menghadapi tantangan kelembagaan dan budaya sembari berkontribusi pada keilmuan dan kehidupan masyarakat Buddha. Meskipun Indonesia merupakan rumah bagi tradisi Theravada, Mahayana, dan Vajrayana, studi ini berfokus terutama pada gerakan Buddhayāna yang inklusif, di mana peluang yang lebih besar bagi partisipasi perempuan telah muncul. Meskipun menghadapi hambatan struktural seperti bias gender dalam lembaga keagamaan dan akses terbatas terhadap kepemimpinan, masih banyak perempuan yang terlibat aktif dalam pengajaran, pendidikan digital, serta organisasi dan kepemimpinan berbasis masyarakat. Kelompok seperti Wanita Buddhis Indonesia (WBI) meningkatkan visibilitas dan pengaruh perempuan dalam ruang keagamaan dan antar agama. Tidak adanya otoritas monastik patriarki yang kaku di Indonesia juga telah menciptakan ruang bagi kepemimpinan perempuan, seperti yang terlihat dalam karya Parwati Soepangat, yang memajukan teologi feminis Buddha yang terlokalisasi. Berdasarkan teori feminis dan organisasi, studi ini meneliti bagaimana perempuan penganut agama Buddha berkontribusi pada moderasi agama melalui dialog antar agama, pembangunan perdamaian, dan pendidikan berbasis nilai. Peran mereka yang terus berkembang menyoroti perlunya pengakuan dan dukungan kelembagaan yang lebih besar terhadap partisipasi perempuan dalam membentuk lanskap keagamaan Indonesia yang pluralistik dan damai.

Keywords: Perempuan Buddhis, kepemimpinan agama, teologi feminis, Wanita Buddhis Indonesia (WBI), gender dan agama, dialog antaragama, rezim ketidaksetaraan

INTRODUCTION:

Although Buddhism is a minority religion in Indonesia but it contributes significantly to the country diverse religious landscape. Indonesian Buddhists, particularly from Buddhayana traditions are actively engaged in promoting pluralism, moral education and interfaith collaboration. Among these contributions, Buddhist women also played important but unrecognized role in religious education, community leadership and peacebuilding. This paper focuses on how Buddhist women navigate structural and cultural constraints while redefining religious leadership in ways that align with both national values and feminist ethics under the framework of Pancasila.

Throughout much of Asia, women in Buddhism have faced exclusion from monastic and leadership roles, especially in Theravāda-majority countries where the bhikkhunī lineage has been marginalized or neglected and limiting women's participation to formal religious leadership (Seeger, 2009; Kawanami, 2007). Indonesia's context is differs due to the absence of a rigid monastic patriarchy, particularly within the Buddhayāna movement which presents a more inclusive environment. As Jack Meng-Tat Chia (2024) elaborated that the absence of a dominating patriarchal monastic structure in Indonesia enable females such as Parwati Soepangat to gain prominence. As a prominent Buddhist educator, feminist thinker and founder of Wanita Buddhis Indonesia (WBI), Soepangat promotes gender equality and religious engagement and also coined the term "Buddhist feminist theology" to show contributions of women to Dharma propagation and community development. Despite these opportunities, Buddhist women in Indonesia face challenges which are rooted in cultural norms and institutional hierarchies. Many Buddhist educational organizations remain male-dominated and leadership positions and are frequently inaccessible to women due to both implicit biases and explicit exclusion. Joan Acker's (2006) concept of "inequality regimes" helps to show that how religious organizations function as gendered institutions, where disparities in authority, recognition and access are structurally embedded. Acker's framework illustrates that even when official policies appear egalitarian, informal practices that frequently sustain male privilege and women's religious works become invisible.

However, Buddhist women in Indonesia are not passive recipients of structural inequality. Through educational efforts, digital media platforms, and community outreach, they redefining religious engagement in such ways that reflect both Buddhist ethics and feminist aspirations. According to Utomo (2020) the role of organizations such as WBI in promoting pluralism and religious harmony through informal education, interfaith activities and cultural adaptation align closely with the Indonesia national ideology of Pancasila that emphasizes on unity in diversity and religious cooperation. Moreover, new studies focused on how Southeast Asian Buddhist women engage in leadership roles outside of the monastic institutions. Gross (1993) and Lai Suat Yan (2015) note that, despite being denied formal recognition, Buddhist women frequently function as moral exemplars, teachers and community leaders. Their roles are particularly vital in promoting Indonesia's official vision of religious moderation (moderasi beragama) that aligned with the national ideology of Pancasila.

This paper explores the roles of Buddhist women in Indonesia by focusing on three interrelated areas: (1) the historical and social context of their religious participation (2) the structural and cultural barriers they face and (3) the strategies they employ to promote religious moderation, educational reform and gender-inclusive leadership. Insights from local movements like WBI are brought into dialogue with global feminist Buddhist thought (Gross, 1993; Tsomo, 2007), highlight that how Indonesian Buddhist women both preserve and transform their religious tradition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The interaction of gender, religion and leadership becomes a critical area of research in Buddhist feminist scholarship. This article uses key studies to examine the religious, cultural and institutional landscapes that shape the experiences of Buddhist women in Indonesia and in the broader Asian context. Joan Acker's idea of "inequality regimes" (2006) gives a foundational framework for understanding how organizational structures reproduce gender, class, and race-based inequalities even within religious institutions that outwardly promote moral and egalitarian values. Acker's analysis of how "organizing processes" embed inequality into seemingly neutral institutional practices helps illuminate the subtle exclusionary dynamics that persist within Buddhist organizations in Indonesia. Jack Meng-Tat Chia's study Women's Dharma: Parwati Soepangat and Buddhist Feminist Theology in Postcolonial Indonesia (2024), explores in-depth that how Parwati Soepangat, a revolutionary laywoman in Buddhayana movement developed a feminist theology on compassion (karuṇā), non-violence (ahiṃsā) and ethical leadership. Chia discuss that how Soepangat used her dual minority status as both a woman and a Buddhist in a Muslim-majority society to promote inclusive religious thought and leadership. Unlike women in Theravāda-majority countries, Indonesian Buddhist women had more freedom to establish institutional authority due to the absence of a rigid patriarchal monastic order. This space allow Soepangat to found Wanita Buddhis Indonesia (WBI) in 1973, an organization aimed to promotes women's voices and spiritual agency within the Buddhayāna movement.Complementing this narrative, Budi Utomo (2020) demonstrates how Buddhist youth, monks, and women collaboratively support interfaith harmony in Central Java. His study shows how grassroots Buddhist organizations contribute to moderasi beragama (religious moderation) through local engagement and civic education. Buddhist women, particularly those who affiliated with WBI play an important role in promoting these values operating as informal moral educators in their communities.

International scholars also provide comparative insights such as Tsomo (2007) and Dugan (2007) look at how Buddhist women across Asia and the United States engage in interfaith work and moral activism, bridging the gap between religious traditions and feminist practice. Dugan, for instance, investigates that how Buddhist women in the U.S assume leadership roles in interreligious dialogue, particularly in multifaith spaces like universities and local movements. Similarly, Tsomo's reflections shows that how Buddhist women create transnational solidarity across sectarian and cultural divides. Lee and Han's (2016) typology of Buddhist women's engagement in Taiwan framing them as "Mothers and Moral activists" offers a useful comparative lens. The "mother" model is the same with traditional roles of care and moral stewardship (as seen in WBI's social outreach), the "moral activist" challenges patriarchal norms directly, as exemplified by figures like Soepangat who publicly supported bhikkhuni membership and led education reforms.

Finally, Ursula King (1987) reminds us that access to religious education for women remains central to transforming both institutional participation and theological discourse. In most world religions, education has been historically withheld from women, and where allowed, often channeled into limited, gendered functions. Buddhist women in Indonesia resist this marginalization and actively shape the religious and political landscape. These studies give the complex, evolving roles of Buddhist women in shaping inclusive religious narratives, fostering interfaith dialogue and challenging inequality. They also emphasize the urgent need to center women's lived experiences in both religious leadership and academic discourse especially in countries like Indonesia, where pluralism is both an ideal constitution and a daily struggle.

HISTORICAL SOCIAL CONTEXT

Buddhism in Indonesia has historically functioned as a minority religion within a Muslim-majority society, yet it holds a significant position in the pluralistic religious fabric of the nation. The revival of

Buddhism during the post-independence period, especially under the leadership of Ashin Jinarakkhita, marked the rise of the Buddhayāna movement, which sought to promote a unified, inclusive, and distinctly Indonesian Buddhism (agama Buddha Indonesia). Unlike the rigid patriarchal systems in other Theravāda Buddhist-majority countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia lacked a dominant monastic orthodoxy, which opened institutional space for greater lay and female participation (Chia, 2024). This absence of centralized patriarchal control allow personalities such as Parwati Soepangat to emerge as influential leaders. A pioneering laywoman educated both in Indonesia and the United States, Soepangat founded Wanita Buddhis Indonesia (WBI) in 1973 with the support of Ashin Jinarakkhita. WBI was envisioned as a platform to promote Buddhist teachings, women's leadership and gender equality. Her leadership exemplified by Chia (2024) terms as "Buddhist feminist theology," which combined the ethical values such as compassion (karuṇa) and non-violence (ahiṃsa) with feminist commitments to education and empowerment.



The development of Buddhist women's leadership in Indonesia must be considered in the larger context of Indonesian gender politics. Influenced by national feminist figures such as R.A. Kartini and by Javanese cultural norms (budaya Jawa yang luhur), women like Soepangat inherited a history of female moral authority based on education and motherhood. This aligns with what Lee and Han (2016) identify in Taiwanese Buddhism as the "mother" model of engagement, a form of social leadership where women serve their communities through moral education, caregiving and spiritual counsel. Soepangat's formative years in the Surakarta Palace, where she was immersed in Kejawèn mysticism and Javanese ritual arts like bedhaya dance, contributed to her capacity to bridge cultural, spiritual, and educational spheres. Her reinterpretation of traditional femininity became a resource for leadership rather than a limitation. Moreover, Soepangat's biography demonstrates that how Buddhist women in Indonesia did not merely inherit religious roles but they also actively shaped and transformed them. Her higher education in psychology, transnational experience in the U.S., and later academic work in Padjadjaran University positioned her as a thought leader who could integrate Buddhist values with modern education and gender theory. Her doctoral research on cultural psychology and female emancipation emphasized the intersection of motherhood, work and self-actualization in the Javanese context, an argument that resonates with both Acker's (2006) critique of organizational inequality and contemporary Buddhist feminist thought (Lithalian, 2018).

During the New Order period (1966–1998), the state's emphasis on Pancasila and religious harmony which provided both opportunities and constraints for Buddhist women. While state policy also supported religious tolerance that pressured religious minorities to conform to specified roles but organizations like WBI strategically aligned their work with state narratives of national development and harmony, thereby gaining recognition without overtly challenging political hierarchies. As Budi Utomo (2020) has shown, WBI and similar groups played key roles in fostering interfaith peace, especially in Central Java, by promoting harmony through education, ritual and community outreach. More recently, the influence of global Buddhist women's networks such as Sakyadhita enriched the Indonesian context. According to Karma Lekshe Tsomo (2007) the creation of transnational platforms enabled Buddhist women from diverse traditions to share strategies for institutional inclusion and

interfaith engagement. While Indonesia has not yet institutionalized full bhikkhunī ordination, the leadership of laywomen such as Soepangat reflects the growing significance of non-monastic leadership in shaping Buddhist discourse. Thus, the historical and social context of Buddhist women's leadership in Indonesia show a unique combination of indigenous cultural values, feminist innovation and strategic adaptation within a pluralistic society. These women, who operate at the intersection of religion, education and political life, challenge not only religious patriarchy but also dominant narratives that marginalize religious minorities. Their contributions expanded the possibilities for women to be a religious leader, a feminist and an Indonesian citizen.

BARRIERS AND STRATEGIC ACTIVITES

Despite inclusive nature of Indonesia's Buddhayāna tradition, Buddhist women continue to confront structural and cultural constraints in religious institutions. These problems are not only about formal exclusion from leadership roles but also the invisible norms and practices that influence who is perceived as authoritative, spiritual and capable for leading. According to Joan Acker (2006) institutions often operate under "inequality regimes" which are systems of interconnected practices that create and maintain power differentials based on gender, class, and race. While Buddhist institutions in Indonesia appear to be open, they remain gendered settings molded by these entrenched hierarchies.



Although the Theravāda tradition in Indonesia is influenced by its Thai counterpart, both countries' Buddhist authorities still do not officially recognize bhikkhunī ordination. This reflects a broader issue in the religious structure, where leadership and legitimacy remain heavily gendered. However, women like Ven. Dhammananda in Thailand and Ven. Santini in Indonesia both challenges these restrictions by receiving ordination abroad and restoring the bhikkhuni lineage in their countries. Their actions representes religious innovation that rooted in Buddhist scripture. By referencing early teachings that support bhikkhuni ordination these women recover their spiritual authority and religious heritage. and despite resistance they are widely recognized as spiritual leaders, ritual experts and agents for changes. They expand women's access to monastic life and made Buddhist practices more inclusive by offering temporary novice ordinations (samaneri) and community activities to them.

Ven. Santini's leadership, for instance, includes organizing humanitarian relief for both Buddhist and Muslim communities, managing an environmentally friendly monastery and support social outreach for marginalized groups. These efforts not only improve women's roles within Buddhism but also reflect a growing societal acceptance of female religious leadership. Their ability to work across religious boundaries and maintain international support which further legitimized their positions as respected leaders in modern Theravada Buddhism (Lai, 2015).

Institutional Exclusion and Doctrinal Gatekeeping

In most Buddhist temples and councils in Indonesia, religious authority continues to be concentrated in the hands of male pandita (teachers) and monks. Although full bhikkhunī ordination has not been institutionalized in Indonesia, even non-monastic leadership is largely male-dominated (Kawanami, 2007; Tsomo, 2007). Women are often limited to auxiliary duties such as arranging events, making offerings and teaching children, rather than affecting doctrinal interpretation or temple governance (Utomo, 2020). Even within WBI, which was designed to empower women but formal recognition of their spiritual authority frequently falls behind from their actual contributions.



This situation is compounded by limited access to advanced Buddhist education. As Gross (1993) states, exclusion from scriptural learning, linguistic training (e.g., Pali or Sanskrit), and meditative practice have historically been used to justify the marginalization of women in Buddhist leadership. In Indonesia, although women have increasing access to Dharma education, their roles are still categorized as "supportive" rather than central. King (1987) also emphasizes that male control over theological education restricts women's interpretive agency and reinforces the perception that they lack doctrinal legitimacy.

Cultural Norms and Gender Inequality

Beside institutional barriers, Buddhist women also face societal assumptions based on gender. In many Indonesian communities, particularly in rural areas, women are expected to prioritize family and domestic duties over public leadership, religious authority is culturally associated with men because of their traits such as rationality, scriptural knowledge and charisma and women are considered as emotional and more suitable for care rather than leaderships (Acker, 2006; Lee & Han, 2016). This dichotomy makes women's religious works both visible and invisible. Visible in its contributions to community harmony and education but invisible in its institutional valuation. Parwati Soepangat herself noted in her writings how often women's voices were dismissed unless mediated through male endorsement (Chia, 2024). These dynamics are not only specific to Buddhism but also reflects on broader Indonesian gender politics which are shaped by nationalism, religion and patriarchy (Blackburn, 2004; Martyn, 2004).

In both religious and cultural contexts, gender roles in Indonesia reinforced the idea that women are inherently less suited for leadership, independence or spiritual attainment. This is especially evident in Theravada Buddhism, where women's exclusion from full ordination which are historically supported by the interpretations of the Vinaya (monastic code). The extinction of the bhikkhuni lineage in Theravada Buddhism, which dates back over two millennia, effectively denied women the possibility of attaining higher levels of spiritual recognition and leadership (Liswindio, 2015). Women were not allow to lead or even make autonomous spiritual choices, sometime also restricted to secondary roles both

within the home and religious life and Cultural norms framed them as irrational, emotionally weak, and dependent on men, limiting their access to education, public participation and monastic life. As Liswindio (2015) notes, that religion and culture have historically positioned women as extensions of men or, in worse cases, as male property thus deeply constraining their agency.

However, the case of Ayya Santini, Indonesia's first bhikkhuni in the Theravāda tradition, represents a significant breakthrough. Ordained in 2000 with the support of Mahayana and Theravāda clergy, Santini challenged these gender norms despite facing institutional resistance. Although some Theravāda communities in Indonesia did not recognize her ordination as legitimate, the international Buddhist community, including the United Nations, honored her contributions by naming her an "Outstanding Woman in Buddhism" in 2007 (Liswindio, 2015). Her recognition, and the 2015 Upasampada ordination of nine novice nuns, marked a turning point not only in the religious life of Theravada Buddhists in Indonesia but also in the national conversations on gender equality in spirituality. The Buddha acknowledged that Vinaya rules might need contextual revision to suit the realities of changing times (Liswindio, 2015). This example powerfully illustrates that Buddhist leadership is not inherently male, but rather culturally constructed. Women like Ayya Santini opened pathways for others to pursue religious life on equal footing with men, reshaping that how gender and authority are imagined within Indonesian Buddhism.



Ven. Bhikkhuni Santini Theri

Strategic Agency and Leadership Models

In response to these constraints, Buddhist women in Indonesia employed creative and strategic forms of activities. Rather than directly challenging male authority, they created parallel spaces of influence in education, social work and interfaith activism where they practice what Gross (1995) calls "ethical authority". This form of leadership is grounded in compassion, consistency and community trust rather than institutional position. Parwati Soepangat represents a prime example. Rather than seeking ordination or institutional office, she built networks of female Buddhist leaders through WBI, promoted religious literacy among women, and pioneered a contextual form of Buddhist feminist theology. Her approach reflects what Lee and Han (2016) describe as the "moral activist" model a leadership form that uses moral persuasion, community service, and relational ethics to drive change without direct confrontation.

Digital tools have further increased women's religious agency. Online Dharma classes, YouTube teachings, webinars and social media become platforms for women to bypass traditional hierarchies and share interpretations, teachings, and practices with broader audiences (Lai, 2015; Kawanami, 2013). These platforms facilitate peer-to-peer learning, cross-national dialogue (e.g., with Sakyadhita), and translocal solidarity. Additionally, Buddhist women emerged as important figures in peacebuilding and religious moderation. Through interfaith programs, humanitarian outreach, and grassroots conflict resolution efforts particularly in multireligious regions like Central Java and Yogyakarta women have put Buddhist ethics into civic action (Utomo, 2020; Azra, 2006). Their leadership reframes religious authority in relational and inclusive terms. Buddhist women in Indonesia are positioned within a complex matrix of institutional exclusion and cultural expectation. However, they are not merely passive

participants within this system. They are alternative models of leadership rooted in ethics, compassion, and community engagement by which they are changing what it means to be a religious leader and their strategic agency expressed through education, digital innovation and interfaith activism offers both a critique of existing hierarchies and a vision for more inclusive and transformative forms of religious leadership.

BUDDHIST WOMEN AND RELIGIOUS MODERATION IN INDONESIA:

The concept of religious moderation (moderasi beragama) in Indonesia reflects on state's commitment to preserve pluralism, interfaith harmony and national unity and as a central value in Indonesia's religious discourse, it promotes peaceful coexistence among the country's six officially recognized religions and numerous belief systems. Buddhist women particularly those who aligned with Wanita Buddhis Indonesia (WBI) and the Buddhayana tradition played a vital role in advancing this vision. They contribute to reshape a society where religious diversity is not merely tolerated but actively nurtured.

Indonesia's approach to religious coexistence is based on Pancasila, the national ideology that promotes belief in a single divine being, humanitarianism, national unity, democracy and social justice. These principles serve as the ethical and political foundation for moderasi beragama, a framework that also now institutionalized by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Scholars such as Azra (2006) and Hefner (2011) states that Indonesia's model for religious pluralism is distinctive for its combination of state engagement and grassroots civic involvement. Within this framework, Buddhist women found strategic space to contribute as educators, moral leaders and peacebuilders. Unlike in some more sectarian religious traditions, Buddhism in Indonesia especially within the inclusive Buddhayana movement does not position itself as a dominant or hegemonic faith. This relative marginality, combined with its ethical emphasis on karuṇa (compassion), metta (loving-kindness) and ahiṃsa (non-violence), enables Buddhist women to operate as mediators and bridge-builders. They represent a model of religious engagement based on mutual understanding and shared ethical concerns.

Compassion, Peace and Ethical Education

Buddhist women demonstrate religious moderation through their work in moral education, social service and community harmony. based on the Buddhist ideal of the bodhisattva, the compassionate being who seeks to alleviate suffering, women leaders organize public Dharma classes, youth programs, and community meditation events that emphasize moral values and interpersonal harmony. These programs serve not only for Buddhist audiences but also engage non-Buddhist participants, especially in diverse areas like Central Java and Yogyakarta (Utomo, 2020).

WBI's collaborates with schools and interfaith NGOs to promote peace education, where students learn about empathy, non-violence and respect for religious differences. These efforts are frequently described not as theological debates but as shared ethical practices, aligning Buddhist teachings with national goals of coexistence. Tsomo (2007) argues that such community-level activities are one of the most impactful ways that Buddhist women worldwide practice feminist ethics by transforming spiritual values into public good. Soepangat herself



emphasized that religious leadership must begin with self-cultivation and progress with community service by reflecting a vision of leadership as an ethical responsibility. Her approach aligns closely with what Gross (1995) calls "Buddhist feminist ethics in action" where leadership is not tied to status, but to lived commitment to the alleviation of suffering. Through her writings and programs, she encourages women to build harmony through everyday acts of care, mutual aid and spiritual mentorship by redefining religious leadership in a multifaith society.

Interfaith Dialogue and Women's Collaboration

Buddhist women are becoming more visible in interfaith forums, they contributes to promote mutual understanding between different religions. Unlike many male-dominated religious dialogues that focus on doctrinal alignment, women-led interfaith engagement tends to emphasize shared values such as family welfare, education, health and environmental sustainability (Dugan, 2007; Lai, 2015). In these contexts, Buddhist women frequently work alongside Muslim, Christian, and Hindu women on practical issues for their communities.

For example, interfaith workshops led by WBI have focused on themes like maternal health, food security, and disaster response, especially in regions prone to conflict or natural calamity. These collaborations reinforce idea that the religious moderation is not only about abstract tolerance but also about shared responsibility and ethical solidarity across faiths. Buddhist women's participation in such spaces challenges the idea that authority in religious pluralism belongs solely to institutional elites. Instead, it shows the grassroots contributions of women as moral and relational leaders. This form of participation also challenges exclusionary tendencies within their own tradition. By taking part in state-initiated religious events or national holidays (e.g., Waisak, Hari Kebangkitan Nasional), Buddhist women also assert their visibility as citizens and religious participants which expanding the definition of who gets to represent Buddhism in the public sphere (Hefner, 2011).

Spiritual Agency as a Tool for Peacebuilding

The peacebuilding role of Buddhist women in Indonesia goes beyond interfaith events. It extends into spiritual counseling, trauma healing, and emotional resilience, especially in post-conflict or disaster-struck areas. Through their involvement in caregiving and community rituals, women embody what Lee and Han (2016) refer to as "mothers of moral society" figures who restore balance and wellbeing in times of disruption. In these contexts, their spiritual work becomes a quiet but powerful form of resistance to violence, asserting Buddhist values as tools for healing and justice and the lack of clerical status does not limit their influence. In fact, as Gross (1993) points out, some of the most radical forms of spiritual leadership are exercised not in temples but in homes, schools and community centers where women teach by example, guide others through suffering and create ethical networks of support.

Buddhist women in Indonesia played a significant role in advancing religious moderation through their work in moral education, interfaith dialogue and community peacebuilding. They challenged both religious and societal hierarchies that exclude women based on Buddhist value and feminist ethics and simultaneously contributes to national goals of unity, compassion and pluralism. Their leadership is not institutional in the conventional sense, but is deeply spiritual, civic and transformative. As agents of harmony, they redefine what it means to be both religious and feminist in a multi-religious nation.

CONCLUSION

Buddhist women play an important role in shaping Indonesia's religious landscape. In a society that values peace yet follows patriarchal norms, they have redefined leadership through education, peacebuilding, and ethical activism. Their work demonstrates that Buddhist leadership can be inclusive and transformative when grounded in lived experience and moral responsibility. Even within the more

inclusive Buddhayana tradition, patriarchal hierarchies persist but Indonesian Buddhist women exercise strategic and relational agency by core values such as compassion (karuṇa), wisdom (prajna) and non-violence (ahiṃsa). Figures like Parwati Soepangat and organizations like WBI exemplify feminist religious innovation rooted in cultural tradition rather than opposing to it. Their leadership by offering grassroots education, digital teaching and interfaith engagement offers a model that is ethical, community-based, and spiritually authoritative. By promoting religious moderation and interfaith harmony, they contribute not only for gender equity but also for the broader goals of national peace and pluralism.

In conclusion, Indonesian Buddhist women demonstrate that religious authority can be reshaped from the margins. Their example shows that how spiritual leadership, gender justice and social transformation intersect each other. Moving forward, institutional recognition and scholarly engagement are important to fully support this evolving and powerful form of feminist religious agency.

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