

Women in Bhutan : the Gender Discussion

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It is spring – a time of hope and optimism. The flowers are in bloom, dry grasses are turning green, trees are sprouting new leaves, fresh vegetables and fruit are coming into season, winter is behind us. Our spirits are high.

There is something else enhancing these colours this year. About 300 women gathered in a resort on the banks of the Thimphu River. Like the progress of seasons, these women – from the parliament, local government, political parties, civil societies and media – were gathered to herald change, to inject fresh ideas and meaning into the role of the “fairer gender” in society. Participants from the region joined Bhutanese women for a conference on “Women in governance, leadership and politics in Bhutan with a regional dimension” to bring new energy to the gender discussion in the country.

A handful of Bhutanese women were particularly visible in the crowd.

Gup (elected *gewog* leader), Namgay Pelden of Dagana, personifies the hardship of rural life, spending most of her time walking from village to village, taking services to the people in the absence of proper road connectivity in her *gewog*.

Gup Namgay Pelden, who was elected in a landslide victory against a male opponent, enjoys the full trust of her constituency. She is popular among civil servants for effective service delivery, her straight forwardness, honesty, and her willingness to go all out to help people.

“Our rural children have someone to look up to,” a voter, Tshering, said.

Gup Namgay Pelden is one of two women *gups* among 205 *gups* in the country. The other woman *gup* is also from Dagana but was not at the conference. *Gup* Namgay Pelden said the other *gup* worked as a Non-formal Education instructor in her *gewog* before joining politics. “We discussed and shared our ideas during the campaign,” she said. “I intend to encourage more women to contest so that we have a better representation of women decision makers.”

Tsirang *dzongda*, Nawang Pem, is the first woman *dzongda*, (district administrator) in Tsirang. Talking about her experience, she said it was difficult being a woman and a leader since she was always compared with male counterparts in whatever she does even by her own *dzongkhag* staff.

“I have to keep telling them that I am in no competition with anyone and I do things in my own capacity,” she said, also incidences when she was not allowed to attend some religious functions where police had allowed male dzongdas. “We need more women in leadership to break away from the stereotype.”

Women are moving beyond household chores and fieldwork and becoming main income earners in the family. In recent years women have also been moving into governance and politics. There have been a number of senior government officials, including Red Scarf *Dashos*. *Lyonpo* Dorji Choden became the first woman minister in 2013. There are women doctors and dentists, engineers, pilots, law enforcers and other professionals, and a growing number in administrative support categories. Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay, during a “meet the press” session said that, of the 26,954 civil servants in 2016, 35.5 percent were women. That is an increase of 77 percent in the past decade.

However, the female unemployment rate, at 4.5 percent compared with male unemployment at 1.8 percent, is high and those who are employed have poor career advancement prospects. Also, although women account for 35.3 percent of the total civil service, only 10 percent (25 women to 228 men) held executive and specialist positions. The 2015 labour force survey report stated that there were about 159,919 women labour contributors compared with 184,574 men. The survey also found gender disparity in terms of overall employment, as the labour force participate rate is 71.2 for males and 55.9 for females. The report states that quality of jobs held by women tends to be inferior to that of men, as women work in low-paying sectors such as agriculture and forestry, which accounts for 30.5 percent of female work-force.

There is no overt gender discrimination in Bhutan. Women in Bhutan enjoy more social freedom and equality compared with women in the region and the Constitution guarantees equal rights to women and men. The electoral laws also provide equal rights for women in politics. There is commitment in Bhutan to fulfil the Sustainable Development Goal 5 to “Achieve gender equality and empower all girls and women.”

The conscious inclusion of women in development in Bhutan dates back to the Fifth Plan (1981-1987) with the National Women's Association of Bhutan (NWAB) established in 1981. The NWAB aimed to empower women by encouraging women entrepreneurship, cooperatives, and economic community groups.¹ It started training weavers and still has projects to support and help women take up economic activities.

In 2012, Bhutan Network for Empowering Women (BNEW) was registered as a civil society organisation and it plays an active role networking and strengthening capacity and leadership of women to participate as equal partners in governance, leadership and development in Bhutan.

The policy for gender equality and mainstreaming of gender began in the 10th Plan (2008-2013). In 2004, the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) was established to fulfil the obligations of the government towards the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). With the mission to protect and promote the rights of women through gender responsive interventions, NCWC reviews, reforms, initiates and supports policies, plans, projects and activities from a gender equality perspective.²

In the same year, a non-governmental organisation Respect, Educate, Nurture, Empower Women (RENEW) was also established. RENEW deals with domestic violence cases nearly every day today and its community based support system extends to district level domestic violence and sexual and gender based violence survivors.

The director for NCWC, Kunzang Lhamu, said the increase in maternity leave for civil servants from three to six months and establishment of crèches helps women civil servants because women can now have more time for their children and also concentrate on their work. She also said that the 11th Plan called for a gender friendly environment for women's participation, and legislation for women in elected offices including the parliament and Local Government.

Development efforts of recent decades have seen a visible impact. Maternal mortality has decreased drastically in the past two decades, from 255 per 100,000 live births in 2000³ to 86 per 100,000 live births in 2016. This is attributed to the increase in institutional deliveries, which increased to 74.6 percent in 2012 from 24 percent in 2000, overcoming very difficult terrain and scattered settlements.

Until the 1960s, Bhutan only had monastic education, which still continues, and modern education system was introduced as a part of the development process in 1961.⁴ In the 1970s, with the male-female student ratio at 50:1, few girls went to school.⁵ Modern education played a pivotal role in changing the status of women in the country. Bhutan today has more girls in school, 87,070 girls compared to 85,849 boys.⁶

Challenges, however, remain. NCWC's Bhutan Gender Policy Note 2013 states that a number of analyses consider household and community factors affecting girl's participation and performance, including housework responsibilities and incidence of early pregnancies. The policy note also calls for strategies to improve educational outcomes for girls, including the environment in schools, teacher attitudes, and classroom management. It goes on to state: "A further issue is the extent to which school curricula and teaching practices promote positive views on the capacities of women and girls and their role in society."

Bhutan achieved the Millennium Development Goals target for gender equality in school with progress in tertiary enrolment but there is a gender gap in education and its outcome. The survey found that, with 6.5 percent boys to 5.8 percent girls in high school and 3.9 percent boys to 2.2 percent girls, the number of girls in high schools and colleges are comparatively fewer than boys.

Statistics indicate that Bhutan has much to do in terms of gender parity. The country's ranking in terms of gender equality internationally has been dropping. The Global Gender Gap Index 2016 ranked Bhutan 121 out of 144 countries.⁷ This was a drop of almost 29 countries from 2013 when Bhutan was ranked 93 out of 136 countries. The report found significant disparity against women in health, education, economy and politics in Bhutan.

A study conducted by the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) in 2015 indicated that women were less happy than men. The GNHC's index methodology explains that the conclusion was based on the responses of survey questionnaire using 33 indicators underlying the nine domains of GNH. "The standard indicators like income and years of schooling and innovative indicators like those measuring the strength of community relationship and family relationship were included."

Traditionally, cultural beliefs and practices posed inherent discrimination against women in education, employment, health, politics, and rule of law.

When the Prime Minister, posted a photograph of a woman *gup* offering the wine oblation, locally known as the ‘*Marchang*’ in his Facebook, there was criticism because this was traditionally the role of male officials. The superstition that men are higher than women by nine noble human births still exists in some rural areas and women are derogatorily referred to as *Aumsu mo rem* (helpless women) and men are referred to as *kep phoja* (superior male).

The use of the phrase, ‘*Am-tsu mo-rem no-med chen* (stupid, ignorant woman) in a national report by the National Assembly’s (NA’s) public account committee during the 85th session is an indication of gender insensitivity. However, the fact that women and the public criticised and objected to the usage of the phrase also shows that society is changing and it will no longer accept such stereotypes.

That gender issues still need to be worked out culturally and politically, may also be seen in how The Marriage Act, as far back as 1980, has been sensitive to the situation of women especially in terms of child support, whereas The Citizenship Act of Bhutan, favours children born of Bhutanese fathers.

Then there is the issue of women not being allowed to enter a *Goenkhang*, an inner sanctum of a temple or monastery. Many Bhutanese women appear to have accepted it even though a few have questioned the rationality of such practices.

The culture of night hunting, a tradition of courting a girl where boys enter her house at night is still practised in remote parts of the country. While such practices are cited to help men find their partners, it has also led to some exploitation of rural women by civil servants and others who visit the rural villages for official and personal work. The practice has left many women to fend for themselves with children born out of wedlock.

A research on violence against children in Bhutan by UNICEF states that commercial sexual exploitation has emerged as an issue in southern and south-eastern *dzongkhags* and girls are understood to experience sexual violence and harassment.⁸

The National Assembly’s women, children and youth committee’s report states that in 2015, 1,556 women had undergone abortion in Bhutan. World Health Organisation defines abortion as a termination of pregnancy before 20 weeks of gestation or a foetus born weighing less than 500 grammes. The abortions were either reported by mothers or recorded in health centres. The real number of abortion cases is believed to be much higher.

The emergence of *drayangs*, where women dance in bars to entertain men and cajole them to request songs has been criticised as institutionalised prostitution. The issue has been raised during NA sessions. According to the Bhutan Infocomm and Media Authority (BICMA) records, there are 42 *drayangs* in the country today providing employment mostly for women. While the *drayang* owners deny the practice of commercial sex, people who visit the *drayangs* report otherwise.

The prevalence and tolerance of domestic violence is an issue. There is no accurate data on gender-based violence and due to under-reporting, information available from police and hospital sources is not truly indicative of the overall domestic violence situation.

The Bhutan Multiple Indication Survey (BMIS 2010) found that 68 percent of women between 15 and 49 years reported that they believe a husband is justified in beating his wife or partner under some circumstances: if she goes out without telling him; if she neglects the children; if she argues with him; if she refuses sex with him; or if she burns food.

A policeman was recently seen carrying a pressure cooker during a case in the Thimphu district court. It was evidence in a domestic violence case where the man had hit his wife with a hot pressure cooker because the rice was not cooked.⁹ While he was in custody the wife had appealed many times to withdraw the case because she was struggling to look after the children.

Women and Politics

Globally, there are 13 women who serve as heads of state and 12 who serve as government heads. There are about 17 percent women government ministers. With 63.8 percent seats in the lower house, Rwanda has the highest number of women Parliamentarians. There are 41 single or lower houses that comprise of more than 30 percent women representatives, including 11 in Africa and nine in Latin America. What makes for interesting dialogue is that out of the 41 countries, 34 applied some form of quota to open space for women's political participation while others opted for seat reservations, legislated party quotas, voluntary party quotas and proportional representation systems.

The first national conference for women, held in 2014, made a bold statement that, in the 2016 local government elections and 2018 parliamentary elections, the

number of elected women should be increased by reserving 20 to 50 seats for women parliamentarians. Three years later, this was changed to a declaration that all political parties should ensure 33 percent of female candidate nominations.

However, a pledge by the government to introduce a 20 percent quota for women in all elected offices has been shot down. The chairperson of the NCWC, *Lyonpo* Dorji Choden, said that during a 2014 conference on women in politics in Bhutan, many participants, including women, had reservations against a quota. She said that the government is now focused on education, creating awareness, and conducive capacity building for women to contest in elections. However, the quota issue is still controversial.

Analysis

While the first protest for equal rights for women dates back to the 1960s in America, where the ‘Miss America Protest’ and ‘Burn the Bra movement’ brought many women together to assert themselves, there was international recognition for women’s rights only after the adoption of the first international treaty, Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. Bhutan ratified CEDAW in 1981 and the 53rd session of the National Assembly of Bhutan identified the need to form a women’s association to enhance the role of women in the national development process.

Reports claim that women have been an integral part of development in Bhutan but if the representation of women in politics, governance and leadership is an indication, there is much more to be done. It is evident that gender-neutral laws have never provided a level playing field and women’s participation in politics has not at all been encouraged.

The Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB), in partnership with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) held an electoral forum with the theme “Women in Politics” in 2015 in Thimphu where they presented an ECB study that found 66.9 percent of women believe that men were better leaders. The survey report also states that a sense of social and economic insecurity impedes women from taking part in politics. Most women say they cannot take the risk of leaving their job to contest in elections.

The election commissioner, in the forum, highlighted that unless a “leap frog” mechanism to improve women’s representation is put in place, the situation might

not change. He urged political parties to at least have 30 percent of women's representation as candidates.

However it is not yet certain whether political parties can raise 30 percent women candidates, when past experiences show that political parties struggle to find candidates from the 47 constituencies.

Although the Cabinet issued a directive in 2015 on the need to develop workplace childcare in respective offices, only a handful of agencies have child care centres in the office premises. Agencies attribute their inability to develop the centres to a lack of resources such as space and financial constraints.

While women's labour force participation has always been reported to be lower than that of men, it is time there are policies in place that establish that women's contributions in running the household and taking care of family should be remunerated or considered as productive work. Women in Bhutan are doing more than their share of unpaid work, especially in rural homes where women run homes, work in agriculture farm, collect firewood, produce food and rear livestock.

Way Forward

In an ideal world of gender equality, women should work and should also be economically empowered. There should not be any inherent discrimination. A society should accept women as equals and this should be naturally accepted in homes, schools, and work spaces.

Girls should be protected from harmful cultural practices such as night hunting, and from teenage pregnancies, and abortions and from all forms of violence. The establishment of a Women and Children bench at the Thimphu district court should be used as the context for a baseline framing of gender friendly policies.

Our education system should also have gender sensitive curricula and vocational training to empower our girls when they graduate from schools and training institutes. Despite the current resistance, a temporary measure should be put in place to have fair representation of women in politics, governance and leadership. The temporary measure, perhaps in the form of a fixed quota, should not discriminate against women but compensate women for the actual barriers that prevent them from career advancement or contesting in elections