

Gender Balance in Leadership - A Woman's Experience

*The Druk Journal interviews a former member of
the National Council, Lhaki Dolma*

TDJ: Out of many aspiring female candidates in the 2023 National Council election, only one made it. What are your thoughts on this?

Lhaki: The under-representation of female candidates in the 2023 National Council election highlights ongoing challenges and the need for progress towards achieving gender equality in Bhutan. While Bhutan has made progress in enacting legislation and policies to promote gender equality, the results of the election indicate that there is still a long way to go in terms of practical acceptance and mindset change among the population.

The fact that only one female candidate succeeded in the election suggests that barriers and biases persist, hindering the equal participation of women in the political sphere.

People do not mention it but somewhere down the line, there is something wrong. Either we (women) are not performing well or people do not trust us. I am confused myself.

TDJ: In the past, Bhutan saw several attempts to introduce a quota system for women in elections and Parliament. You have, yourself, talked about believing in the ability of women rather than having a quota. Can you explain your rationale?

Lhaki: As I mentioned in my debate, I know some may not be happy with my answer but I am someone who believes in my capabilities. I believe that if women are elected through the quota system, people will not trust their confidence and capabilities. People will just look at us and say that we are there because of the quota system, not because we are capable and confident enough to be leaders. And because of that stigmatisation and judgment, I feel that capable and confident women would not want to come forward to join politics. For these reasons, if we support the quota

system, I feel that future generations of women leaders will not be happy to make that stand.

TDJ: Can we ever hope for more gender balance without a quota system, imperfect as it is?

Lhaki: It's a little tricky. First of all, people do not trust women. Secondly, we women ourselves do not come forward. We talk about gender inequality but not many come forward. They just want to sit back and observe what those who came forward are doing. So, I feel like the first step is to come forward. Then we talk to people, and advocate on the issue so that people will understand the problem. Of course, CSOs (Civil Society Organisations) have tried their best to educate voters, but I feel we have not educated them enough and we need more educated women to come forward, rather than saying that women need to vote for women.

TDJ: There are concerns about women not supporting women candidates in politics. What are your thoughts on that?

Lhaki: The concern regarding women not supporting women candidates in politics is a complex issue that merits careful consideration. While it is important to acknowledge that there may be instances where women do not rally behind female candidates, it is crucial to avoid making broad generalisations about women's voting patterns and behaviour.

I would like to believe that women's under-representation in politics is not solely a result of women's lack of support for each other. It is a multifaceted issue that requires comprehensive strategies to address the systemic challenges and biases that hinder women's political participation.

TDJ: You have said that there should be... "practical acceptance and mindset change amongst Bhutanese" when it comes to gender and politics. What specifically are you suggesting?

Lhaki: Politics is something that is very hard to understand, especially in Bhutan. You do whatever you can in your own capacity and, at the end of the day, I question myself: "How will I make my people happy and build that confidence to trust me to be their voice?" When I look back on the

past five years, I have done everything in my power and capacity for the people of Punakha.

And, at the end of your term, you give people the choice but you do not know what people are looking for. So, I do not know if I am the right person to even suggest any specific recommendations. All I can say is that we all need to come together to understand the issue.

Punakha has 1,000 more female voters than males and I was trying to convince them that this was the only chance they had to vote for a woman. In the National Assembly elections, all political parties I know have male candidates so this was the only time Punakha could vote for a woman... they did give me the opportunity during the 3rd elections and I thought that, by being here, I could encourage more women leaders to come forward. But then, as I said, politics in Bhutan is complicated. You can never understand and cannot pinpoint where the problems are.

TDJ: Is there anything you would like to say to women out there who may be considering joining politics?

Lhaki: I definitely want more women to come forward. My dream is that maybe 10 to 15 years down the line, we will have 50-50 male and female MPs in Parliament. And to all the girls who are thinking of and who wish to become one of our women leaders, I would say we should not be disheartened if we do not win the first time. We should keep trying.

And also, not just women and girls but because charity begins at home, parents should push and encourage the girls to come forward. In my case, I was very lucky because I had a father, husband, grandfather, and uncles who pushed me forward. I have met young girls who say they are interested in politics but one of them said that her father says it's not for women: "Let men take the lead and you just don't worry about joining politics".

So, I want to make this request to all parents to support any female who wishes to come forward. I know that we may not be able to break this gender stereotype soon but it's always good to start. I have a very positive feeling about the future. But, as I said, it's a little complicated to even comment at this juncture.

TDJ: Why is it so important to have women leaders in politics? How would you explain the need for more women?

Lhaki: My understanding of women is that, because we have a motherly nature, whatever policies or legislations we make, we are very considerate and inclusive. We are very sensitive to the needs of everyone.

Also, it's important for women to have their voice and representation, not because women are better than men but because we are generally very good at multitasking and understanding the situation and condition of everyone around us.

When I moved the motion to increase the felony of rape cases in the penal code, I clearly remember it was a one-and-a-half-year battle and we really had to go through a lot, officially and unofficially, we had to lobby our male counterparts to stand behind us.

So, I came to know that when we have more women, we can understand women's problems better than men do. In a way, we are more compassionate, considerate, and inclusive which allows us to make better policies and legislation for the future. When we talk about gender, we are not just talking about women, we are also talking about the third gender. Women in leadership are very crucial.

TDJ: Are male parliamentarians sensitive to gender issues? In your opinion, do men in politics accept that there are barriers to women in any field due to traditional gender roles?

Lhaki: The sensitivity of male parliamentarians to gender issues can vary significantly among individuals. While some elected representatives may demonstrate a genuine commitment to addressing gender disparities and promoting gender equality, others may have differing levels of awareness or engagement with these issues.

In the context of Bhutan, where traditional gender roles may still be prevalent, it seems there is a deeply rooted belief among both men and women that women cannot be as good as men. Some men hold the viewpoint to "let women be women". This perspective can imply a resistance to change or a reluctance to challenge existing gender norms and structures. This is a

barrier and stigma that needs to be cleared if we are to make any headway. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that there are also men in politics who actively advocate for gender equality and recognise the importance of breaking down barriers faced by women. These individuals play a significant role in advancing gender-responsive policies, promoting women's empowerment, and advocating for equal opportunities in various fields.

TDJ: Will you contest again, and why?

Lhaki: First, I believe in destiny. Holding such an important position does not only depend on me. I will go wherever my destiny takes me. Second, I will let the people and my country decide. If I am called to duty, I will not let anyone down.

While I am grateful for the opportunity to serve as the voice and representative for Punakha for the past five years, I have decided that it is time for me to take a break from politics and focus on my family. Throughout my term, I dedicated myself to fulfilling my responsibilities, and in doing so, I may have unintentionally neglected the needs of my own family.

At this moment, my priority lies in reconnecting with my loved ones, strengthening those bonds, and providing the support and care they deserve.

While I have no immediate plans to re-contest, I remain immensely grateful to the people of Punakha for entrusting me with their representation and allowing me to be their voice. The experience has been rewarding and fulfilling, and I cherish the relationships and connections I have formed with the community members.

For now, I am grateful for the opportunity I had and am excited about this new chapter of focusing on my family's needs.