

Women and Politics in Bhutan

Karma Loday

Gender representation in Bhutanese politics has been an issue since the introduction of parliamentary democracy in 2008. Ten years later, in 2018, a recognised woman leader, Dasho Neten Zangmo, joined politics and stood for election as the president of the Bhutan Kuen-nyam Party. Despite her record as the first chairperson of the Anti-Corruption Commission and conducting a vigorous campaign, she not only lost the elections but also lost in her own constituency in the primary round of elections.

There are people who argue that a number of women candidates who have stood for elections could match their male opponents in meritocracy but did not make it. Three elections later and a fourth election for the National Council have raised a number of questions. Do people not trust women? Do women not vote for women, despite making up 50.8 percent¹ of voters? Is this discouraging aspiring women candidates from joining politics? Should there be a quota for women in Parliament?

The need for a quota for women in politics differs in different political contexts, based on cultural, social, and other factors. For instance, in Nepal, it may have been primarily aimed to give women more equality in social status, especially for those deprived by the caste system and representing minority groups.

Prior experience in the political field is not mandatory for some of these women from minority groups as explained by Gita, a Dalit woman who was elected as a panch (a community leader).² In the same research article by Punam Yadav it is said that, with Nepal's interim Constitution of 2007 increasing the women quota to 33 percent from the initial five percent, women representation is said to have increased dramatically.³ This success could be attributed to the mixed electoral system (direct election and

1 Study of the determinants of Voter's choice and Women Participation in Elective Office in the Kingdom of Bhutan – Election Commission of Bhutan

2 Punam Yadav, Do Political quotas work? Gender quotas and women's political participation in Nepal, Bristol University Press, 2023. (<https://bristoluniversitypressdigital.com/view/journals/ejpg/aop/article-10.1332-251510821X16746560835644/article-10.1332-251510821X16746560835644.xml>)

3 Punam Yadav, Do Political quotas work? Gender quotas and women's political participation in Nepal, 2023

proportional representation) adopted to help achieve one-third of women's representation in Parliament.

In Rwanda, more than 60 percent of the Members of Parliament are women, due to the fact that many men were killed during the civil war.⁴ It is the circumstance that has put women in leadership roles and not necessarily the quota system.

While Nepal may laud itself for having the highest women participation in politics in South Asia⁵, their trust in women's leadership may be far from what they propagate. According to Sabitri Neupane, a member of the women Peasants' Association in Nepal, it is said that women leaders are rarely given important ministerial portfolios such as Finance, Home and Internal Security, Foreign Affairs, Defense, Industry and Trade. Instead, they are given easier portfolios such as Women, Children, Youth and the Disabled, Social, Environment and Natural Resources and Energy.⁶ What appears like a symbolic gesture may have been mainly to fulfil the quota mandate, rather than to elect and support women leadership with equal rights and responsibilities in important decision making roles.

It is reported that more than 130 countries have adopted some form of political quota system, through reserved seats, candidate quotas, and political party quota system.⁷ Although Bhutan has not adopted a women's quota system in politics, efforts have been made to promote and encourage women leaders. Despite having no caste system or marginalised groups, and with women receiving equal Constitutional rights and opportunities, civil society organisations such as the Bhutan Network of Empowering Women (BNEW) have been encouraging women leadership through training opportunities, but records have shown that not many end up participating in the elections, citing reasons such as cold feet, lack of support from spouse and family members, and mothers' responsibilities.

These are some of the reasons cited by aspiring women leaders, from my personal interaction with them. Many women were not forthcoming about the actual reason, but what observers cited was that the lack of women's

4 Women in parliament: Nepal top, Bangladesh 4th in South Asia – Nepal in Data , 2017 (<https://nepal-indata.com/ne/Women-in-parliament--Nepal-top--Bangladesh-4th-in-South-Asia/>)

5 Women in parliament: Nepal top, Bangladesh 4th in South Asia – Nepal in Data

6 Women Struggles and Political Participation in Nepal – Sabitri Neupane (<https://capiremov.org/en/analysis/women-struggles-and-political-participation-in-nepal/>)

7 Do Political quota work? Gender quotas and women's political participation in Nepal – Punam Yadav

participation in politics could be because of the insecurity that men may end up receiving preference over women, especially in leadership roles.

Taking cognizance of the lack of women candidates, political party representatives, through the Bhutan Democracy Dialogue (BDD) forum, had also proposed that all political parties agree to nominate only female candidates in selected dzongkhags, to allow a level playing field and boost women's participation. This idea faced resistance from some political party members, citing lack of willing and qualified female candidates, while others felt it was a risk not worth taking. Eventually, the winning of elections proved to be of higher priority than the moral responsibility of promoting gender equality in politics.

Such an attitude may not only pertain to the political parties but the electorates in general who support their own candidates. The election of a lone female candidate during the recent National Council election is a testament that we may be going backward in terms of our general moral responsibility to uplift women leaders. The 2018 National Council elections saw two female candidates being elected. The 2018 parliamentary elections saw the highest female candidates of seven national assembly members, with five from the ruling party and two from the opposition, compared to only three female elected members in the 2013 parliamentary elections.

With more than 90 percent of the National Council members being replaced by new faces, including the female candidates, our electorates may still be in the trial-and-error phase of our transition into democracy, and the women's quota may not be an issue for now. Some may believe that we need to first strengthen our democratic system with increased accountability, since the priority of every elected government seems to be to undo and redo policies to suit their expediency, rather than benefit the nation at large.

With national issues growing by the year and national debt compounding, many electorates may be gradually losing confidence in our elected governments, with their repeated failure to bring promised positive changes to the economic and social wellbeing of the people and nation.

At a time when the population is still grappling to come to terms with the shortcomings of elected governments and their failed experiments,

that have led the economy to the brink of collapse (with the nation's debt hitting a record high of 267.4 billion Ngultrums), five male dominated political parties, including two new ones, are set to hit the political arena for the 2023-2024 parliamentary elections.

Some netizens have questioned the value of this, considering the billions of Ngultrums that will be spent from the nation's exchequer as campaign funds and election expenditures. Many seasoned politicians and capable leaders, especially women, are scattered among the five political parties when they could have joined hands and worked together in the interests of the nation. This suggestion could immensely benefit Bhutan as well as bolster women's leadership, but the political parties are determined to stand their own ground, as they aggressively continue to campaign, despite facing challenges in getting capable candidates.

While proposing a quota system may be one way of encouraging women's leadership, it may also undermine the capabilities of our women in general. Nevertheless, compared with Nepal's circumstances, Bhutan may have a huge potential in invoking the leadership qualities of our women through the quota system in politics. We have highly educated and very capable women leaders but they lack support and trust from the society at large. The quota system may give women a platform to prove wrong the general perception that men are better leaders than women. However, unless it is imposed by law, expecting political parties to honour such a system by choice may be a long shot.

With no substantial developments and contributions to the economy, post-covid, and with only a few months left for the third male dominated government and the opposition party, their focus now may be set on preparing for the upcoming elections, thereby leaving the nation vulnerable to further peril.

With the rest of the world aggressively engaged in post-covid recovery initiatives, for Bhutan it has been His Majesty in the forefront, shouldering the biggest burden to revive Bhutan's economic and social conditions by venturing into very big and bold initiatives, from specialised economic zones to block chain technology, crypto mining, and artificial intelligence, amongst others. Given the demanding nature of such initiatives for technocrats and modern technologies, Bhutan is also undergoing

unprecedented transformation, including civil service reforms, to align itself with the goals.

As no transformations are smooth and fast, and with the benefits yet to be realised, some believe that the immediate impact of such initiatives has been on the attrition rate, especially among civil servants. This is attributed to the developed countries liberalising their visa and immigration policies to address the shortage of their workforce, while also providing opportunities for further studies and investment through permanent residency policies. Such initiatives, coupled with comparatively lucrative wage rates, have drawn many Bhutanese overseas.

The attrition rate is further exacerbated by a lack of practical intervention strategies from the government, leading to overburdening of remaining civil servants, thereby forcing them to also resign due to work pressure and accountability concerns.

At times like this when the nation's calling is the loudest and most urgent, we just cannot remain spectators while different governments try their hands on our democracy and play with our future and the future of our children. Citizens have a huge responsibility to keep a check on the government through meaningful engagement and constructive criticism wherever and whenever necessary, either through direct engagement or social media platforms.

It is the responsibility of citizens to acknowledge and give credit to the government where it is due. The government has an even bigger responsibility to listen to the people and not consider their engagements as a threat. At the end of the day, for democracy to work, the government and people must work together.

References

Election Commission of Bhutan, Study of the Determinants of Voter's Choice and Women Participation in Elective Office in the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2014

Punam Yadav, Do Political quotas work? Gender quotas and women's political participation in Nepal. <https://bristoluniversitypressdigital.com/view/journals/ejpg/aop/article-10.1332-251510821X16746560835644.xml>

Women in parliament: Nepal top, Bangladesh 4th in South Asia – Nepal in Data. <https://nepalindata.com/ne/Women-in-parliament--Nepal-top--Bangladesh-4th-in-South-Asia/>

Sabitri Neupane, Women Struggles and Political Participation in Nepal. <https://capiremov.org/en/analysis/women-struggles-and-political-participation-in-nepal/>