

Gender Inclusivity: Benefits and Challenges

Dil Maya Rai

Article 7 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan grants fundamental rights to the citizens and, in particular, Section 15 of the Article states that “All persons are equal before the law and are entitled to equal and effective protection of the law and shall not be discriminated on the grounds of race, sex, language, religion, politics or other status.” Accordingly, the Domestic Violence Prevention Act of Bhutan 2013 further emphasises zero tolerance toward violence against women and children. Then there is the National Gender Equality Policy, 2020, passed under the patronage of the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC). Similarly, there are several other policies and strategy papers aiming to reduce, if not totally eradicate, gender inequality and violence in Bhutan.

Many agencies and actors have played their part in contributing to gender equality in the country. NCWC and Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women (RENEW) being the most notable promoting gender equality, Bhutan Network for Empowering Women (BNEW) also played a significant role in building the capacities of women aspiring to run for public office(s) both at the local government (LG) and national levels. Some positive impacts can be seen (although they cannot be fully attributed to any particular agency) at the LG level with the increased number of women *gups* to seven in the third LG elections in 2021 from two in the second elections in 2016. Likewise, a significant increase can also be seen in the posts of *mangmi* and *tsbogpa*. But in the fourth Parliamentary elections in January 2024, only two women were elected out of six women candidates from the two parties that contested in the general elections. This trend presented to the country the lowest women representation in the democratically elected governments since the first Parliamentary elections in 2008.

It is complex for analysts and researchers to make any concrete conclusions regarding the factors affecting the downward trend of women's representation, although the third Parliamentary election saw about 14% women being elected. There have been hypothetical views that women do

not vote for women and that our population has not yet matured enough to accept women's leadership. But the reality is that political parties, in the first place, do not present a fair number of women candidates in the run for public office.

No study has been done so far to analyse the impact of fewer women at the level of Parliament, but research conducted elsewhere in the world has shown grey areas of gender bias decision-making and that, with more equal gender representation, more social welfare acts and policies are passed. Examples include the Nordic countries, New Zealand and Rwanda.

With nearly 50-50 percent of men and women in Bhutan's population, if this trend in Parliamentary representation continues, it could have long-term, unfavourable social impacts as the policies will be skewed to favour the majority present and the voice of the other 50% may be left out.

Going by the available data and statistics, more girls are seen enrolling in schools and colleges and more girls have been graduating but, if one looks at the career ladders, the higher rungs are mostly occupied by men. The recent trend of having many women in the posts of directors and secretaries has given the government 23% females in the executive level civil servants. But it is mostly because of the appointments by His Majesty the King.¹ Similarly, in the National Council, His Majesty has always nominated two women out of five Eminent Members since the first Parliament in 2008.

Our policies and laws are gender-friendly so it is challenging for anyone to figure out why women have been lagging behind in higher rank positions in the civil service and elected posts. Although the Constitution grants gender equality,² if we dissect the data in different segments and levels of the career ladder, women are represented less than their male counterparts. The same trend applies to the third gender. We do not see them in public offices or higher positions in the formal sector. If they are there, they may be hiding their identities for fear of social stigmatisation or they do not opt for public offices because of the cultural stigma that has not been friendly to them, although the law now promotes equality. They are mostly found in art, music, and the service industry in the private sector. This trend merits a

1 National Commission for Women and Children, Gender Equality in Public Administration in Bhutan, 5.

2 Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, art. 7, sec. 15.

thorough study to understand the in-depth dynamics of being inclusive of the third gender for us to stand out as an LGBT+-friendly society.

As far as violence against women and girls is concerned, data indicates a constant rise in domestic violence; 2023 statistics showed a 40% increase in violence against women compared to 2022. Cases of rape and murder of young girls have been making headlines in the media. Despite the penalties having been made more severe in the Civil and Criminal Procedure Code and the Penal Code of Bhutan in 2021, the rape of minor girls continues to disturb our society.

Bhutan has been a signatory to CEDAW since 1981 and became a UN member in the early 1970s. We have ratified the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and we have our own Domestic Violence Prevention Act as well as national strategies for gender equality. With these laws and many ongoing initiatives by organisations like RENEW, NCWC, and now the Pema Centre, Bhutan seems to be on the right track toward achieving gender parity although it has started looking at an uphill task to achieve the UN SDG-5 goal of achieving gender parity called the “Planet 50-50 by 2030.”³ And 2030 is only six years from now. It is found that, despite faring well in health and education, female labour force participation has regressed over time. This again begs the question of where are we going wrong and leads us to the unending theory of which one came first, the chicken or the egg?

And questions remain unanswered. The questions that have constantly occupied the minds of researchers and policymakers are, what can we do to improve the numbers and trends in society? Is it not time we focused more on action than theories? Is it the implementation failure of the commendable policies in place? Is it the inaction or indifference we may have developed towards addressing the problems facing us behind the veil of “gender-neutral policies”? Or do we continue believing some baseless justification that “making special measures to improve the number of women representations may mean undervaluing and discriminating against them?”

3 Bhutan stands at a score of 0.6373 in the Gender Gap Index and ranks 126 out of 146 countries in 2022. World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2022, table 1.1.

As there is no “one size fits all” development strategy or a master plan to succeed in all endeavours, perhaps there is no one right answer to these questions. But questions must be asked and efforts to answer them must go on lest we regress more in the parity indexes.

One suggestion to improve the gender parity index in Bhutan would be to make concerted efforts and not wait for things to take their natural course. Like Rwanda and the Nordic countries, Bhutan must come up with temporary special measures to improve gender participation. An example could be to start it with the Parliamentary elections by making it mandatory for the political parties to have at least 30% women candidates when they register for campaigns. The Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) has an obligation to make this change happen. People will vote for more women only when they are presented with more women candidates. We cannot expect them to vote 50% women when the political parties present only 10% of women candidates.

And then the question of women not wanting to come out to run for public office may arise. It is then that other agencies should rise up to make the conditions conducive. Special measures like giving a leave of absence until the elections are over, and then giving them the option to choose to return to their earlier jobs if not elected. The latter suggestion is on the premise that more women are unemployed and also finding jobs seem to be more challenging for women.

So there are many actors required to work towards Planet 50-50 by 2030⁴ – ECB, employers (both civil service and private agencies), and the mindsets of the family members.⁵ Resources in the form of money also play a big role in one’s confidence to come out into the political fray. Maybe financial institutions should come up with time-bound access to credits, especially for women candidates. It is the “whole of society” approach that needs to be in play now than at any time before or later.

4 UN SDG-5 has the goal to achieve 50% of women representation in all walks of life/career by 2030. As of now, the Asia-Pacific Region is found to be 176 years behind in achieving ‘Planet 50-50’.

5 Vigorous awareness raising and capacity building of the male members required.

References

National Commission for Women and Children., “Gender Equality in Public Administration in Bhutan” (NCWC, 2023), 5. Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, art. 7, sec, 15.

World Economic Forum. “Global Gender Gap Report 2022” (Cologny: WEF, July 2022), 10.