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Bridging Gender Gap in Bhutan: CSOs' Response to Gender Disparity

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Introduction

Bhutan is globally known for its philosophy of gross national happiness (GNH), a holistic development paradigm that puts peoples' wellbeing at the centre of development. In 2017, Bhutan had a total population of 7,27,145 individuals, of which 52.3% are males and 47.8% females (National Statistics Bureau [NSB] 2018). Rural population makes up 62.2% of the total population (NSB 2018) who are directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture and livestock-related activities for livelihood. Until the 1960s, Bhutan remained off the global stage owing to its self-imposed isolation, and gradually opened itself to the outside world. The fact that Bhutan had never been colonized in its entire recorded history and that Bhutan remained in isolation for most of its history enabled the Bhutanese to inherit and preserve much of its traditional value systems even to this day. Socio-cultural notion about the roles and position of

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men and women in the society is one such traditional value system that has been passed down for generations.

Traditionally, social relationship between men and women in Bhutan is characterized by gender equality which is distinctive in South East Asian region where discrimination against women is quite common. In addition, gender equality is ensured by the national laws and policies of Bhutan that accrue equal rights and status to both men and women in all aspects. However, disparities exist especially in decision making, labour force participation and tertiary education amongst others. Recognizing the need to address such disparities, responses from various ministries of the RGoB,¹ commissions and civil society organizations (CSO) has been rapid (Verma and Ura 2015).

Civil societies' response to gender disparity in Bhutan is diverse in scope. Amongst other aspect of women empowerment that the civil society plays a role in, this exercise explores five significant areas such as education and skills development, entrepreneurial support, micro-finance for women, leadership capacity building, and awareness and advocacy. These five aspects play a strategic role in reducing gender gaps in Bhutan.

This exercise attempts to provide an analysis of synthesized information about the role of civil society and its significance in narrowing gender disparities in Bhutan. The author does so by aggregating scattered information from different organizations' reports and augmenting the discussions and analysis of these information with literature reviews. But first, the author explores the current state of gender gaps and also the traditional notions about men and women in Bhutanese society.

Socio-Cultural Notions About Women in Bhutan

The basic value systems in Bhutan are generally believed to have been influenced by Buddhism and pre-Buddhist ancient values (Crins 2004). But, several religious practices coexist in Bhutan, and as such, the value systems differ among communities of different cultures and religion.

¹ RGoB: Royal Government of Bhutan.

Thus the perception about men and women also differ between different regions and cultures. Generally in Bhutan, women are not allowed to enter the *Goenkhang*² due to their menstrual cycles (National Commission for Women and Children [NCWC] 2008). On the contrary, the core teachings in Buddhism do not discriminate individuals based on gender (NCWC 2008). Moreover female symbolism is an important aspect in Tantric Buddhism which “offers a variety of ideas about the role and philosophy of the female, both in terms of the place of women within its theocracy, and the esoteric meaning of female being” (Crins 2004).

According to Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC³), socio-cultural perceptions see women as less capable and less confident compared to men in terms of “governance and interactions with external agencies” (2001). This notion attributes male to public sphere and female to private sphere (NCWC 2008), because women are considered physically weak and unsuitable for leadership role like that of a *Gup*⁴ which is thought to be physically demanding (GNHC 2001). Such socio-cultural notion about women persists especially in rural areas where men performs most of the physically labour-intensive and necessary tasks, such as tilling land and carrying heavy loads. Yet, there is no sharply defined male or female domain in the Bhutanese society (Choden 1999, as cited in Crins 2004).

Division of Labour

Division of labour between men and women is not sharply defined in Bhutan. In general, both men and women supplemented and shared their work. But, certain differentiation in the kind of work between men and women exists based on their physical strength (GNHC 2001). Agricultural activities such as digging, planting, weeding and harvesting

² *Goenkhang*: a room, in Buddhist temples, reserved as the place for deities.

³ Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC): a govt. body, previously known as Planning Commission, that ensures policies and plans are formulated and implemented in line with GNH principles.

⁴ *Gup*: Head of a local govt.

were mostly considered to be women's task while land preparation, ploughing and firewood collection were men's (ibid.). In addition to agricultural works, women were also tasked with cooking, cleaning house, washing clothes and caring for their children (ibid.), while the traditional role of tilling the land with oxen was regarded as a man's job (Priyadarshini 2014). This notion of differentiation in tasks might however evolve with the farm mechanizations, diversifying economic activities and education.

Policy Impetus Towards Gender Equality

Bhutan's national laws accord equal status and rights to both men and women. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2008, which provides an overarching foundation, ensures gender equality at all levels. It safeguards fundamental rights of all Bhutanese citizens irrespective of gender, religion or ethnicity, to voting, access to join public services, equal pay for work of equal value and property ownership without any discrimination. The philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) guides all national policies and governmental actions in Bhutan. To ensure tangible manifestation of the central tenets of GNH, all proposed policies and projects are scrutinized using GNH Screening Tool.⁵ The screening exercise provides a systematic appraisal of the potential effects of proposed policies and projects and it ensures compliance with GNH principles (Ura and Penjore 2008). Discrimination based on gender, ethnicity or religion is one of the indicators on the screening tool thus ensuring policy impetus towards promoting gender equality.

However, certain gender gaps still exists against women in the tertiary education, labour force participation and decision making.

⁵GNH Screening Tool: a systematic tool that ensures all development policies and projects of Bhutan are reviewed under the lens of GNH.

Gender Parity

In 2016, Bhutan ranked 121st from among 144 nations on the Global Gender Gap Index which used four indicators such as political participation, health, education and economic empowerment to assess gender parity (Leopold et al. 2016). The report highlighted a significant disparity against Bhutanese women on most of the sub-indices used to assess gender parity except for enrolment in primary and secondary education and healthy life expectancy where the gender parity is in favour of women. Disparity against women in three prominent areas such as tertiary education, labour force participation and decision making are discussed further.

Gender Gaps in Education

Bhutan has achieved gender parity with regard to school enrolment in the primary and secondary level education. In 2016, female to male ratio for enrolment in primary and secondary education was 1.02 and 1.14, respectively (Leopold et al. 2016). However, this ratio decreases for women in the tertiary-level education. In 2018, female enrolment in the tertiary education both within and outside the country on scholarships and self-funding was lower compared to male (Ministry of Education [MoE] 2018). Proportionately, tertiary-level educational attainment by female was also found to be lower compared to male (NSB 2017). Financial barriers, family problems and lack of support are some reasons that were found to be constraining female students' progression to higher-level education (J-F. et al. 2015) and also the parental notion, especially in rural areas, that girls needed less education than boys (GNHC 2001). Whatsoever, gender gaps in education is an important issue, as it is a major impediment in achieving gender equality in Bhutan (Wangmo 2004).

Gender Gaps in Labour Force Participation

A significant gender gap exists in terms of labour force participation in Bhutan. In 2017, Bhutan's working-age population was estimated at 506,611 persons, of which female comprised 51.9% (NSB 2017). However, the labour force participation rate for female at 49.6% was considerably lower than males which stood at 73.6% (ibid.). Factors that impede women's participation in the labour force are the domestic role of women as mothers and caregivers, and lack of skills, education and financial barriers. These are some aspects that the civil societies in Bhutan have recognized as crucial for women empowerment as discussed later.

Women's representation in the civil service is another aspect of gender disparity that solicits emphasis. In 2017, female constituted 36.43% of the 28,070 civil servants in the country (Royal Civil Service Commission [RCSC] 2017). In 2014, women's share of civil service was lower compared to men at all levels of position and this gap was particularly marked at the executive level in which women comprised 6.5% and men 93.4% (RCSC 2013, as cited in NCWC 2014). Women's highest share in the civil service was in the supervisory and support category constituting 37.7% (ibid.). This could be due to women's lack of higher education. On the other hand, the pattern could also suggest societal notions that undermine women's leadership capabilities.

In 2014, the unemployment rate for women was higher than men at all levels of education and this gap was even wider for those with tertiary education (Asian Development Bank [ADB] 2014). This difference was particularly striking in urban areas, where 6.6% unemployment rate for women was significantly higher than their male counterparts, 1.4% (NSB 2017). The overall national unemployment rate in 2017 was 2.4%, of which female comprised 2.9% and male 2.1% (NSB 2018). The aggregation of these patterns suggests that women could be facing certain discrimination in the labour market (ADB 2014). Women comprising higher proportion of unemployment rate could also be due to lack of required skills and education, which is one aspect of CSOs' engagement that seeks to empower women.

Gender Gaps in Decision Making

The form of governance in Bhutan peacefully transitioned to Democratic Constitutional Monarchy with the signing of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2008. This transition to democracy allowed for a fair participation of both men and women in the electoral process. Despite equal opportunity being guaranteed by law, women representation in the electoral politics was lower compared to men. Bhutan's parity score for political empowerment index on the Global Gender Gap Index 2016 was 0.06 indicating a very high disparity against Bhutanese women, the perfect parity score being 1 (Leopold et al. 2016). Women's representation in the parliament⁶ was significantly lower than men in all the three parliamentary terms as shown in Tables 32.1 and 32.2.

In the 2008 parliamentary elections, 16 women candidates contested and 8 were elected; 4 for National Council (NC) and 4 for National Assembly (NA). Two females were nominated as Eminent Members⁷ in the NC by his majesty the king. The significantly lower female representation in the parliament signposts that the decision-making power could be skewed towards men. Female representation was not only lower in the parliamentary sitting, but it was also significantly lower in the number of women candidates who contested for parliamentary elections⁸ compared to men as shown in Table 32.2.

Table 32.1 Male and female representation in the Parliament of Bhutan

Year	Male	Female	Total
2008	62	10	72
2013	66	6	72

Source: ECB (2013, as cited in Chuki 2015)

⁶Parliament of Bhutan: Composed of His Majesty The King of Bhutan, National Council and National Assembly. Parliament of Bhutan convenes at least twice a year and the term is for five years.

⁷Eminent Member: Five eminent persons nominated by the King of Bhutan as members of parliament in the National Council.

⁸Parliamentary Election: Held every five years. For NA, two rounds of elections occur, first (primary) round selects two highest voted parties, and second (general) round elects members from 47 constituencies. The party with highest elected member forms the ruling govt. For NC, 20 non-partisan members are elected from each *Dzongkhags* (districts) in a single round of election.

Table 32.2 Male and female composition in the Parliamentary Elections 2018

Year	Gender	National Council			National Assembly			Total elected
		Contested	Elected	Eminent members	Contested (primary round)	Contested (general round)	Elected	
2018	Male	121	18	3	170	84	40	58
	Female	6	2	2	18	10	7	9

Source: Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB 2018a, b)

In the 2018 NA elections, 18 women candidates contested in the primary round and 10 in the general round, of which 7 were elected (ECB 2018a). For the 2018 NC elections, 6 women candidates contested, of which 2 were elected (ECB 2018b). Some factors that constrained women from participating in the political and public sphere were women's traditional roles as housewives, caregivers and even income earners in some cases (NCWC 2008).

In 2018 parliamentary elections, female voters who actually cast their votes comprised a majority although marginally; 50.8% for NA elections and 51.13% for NC elections (ECB 2018a, b). Despite women voters comprising marginally major population of the voters who actually cast their votes, the significantly lesser number of women candidates who contested for the elections did not get elected. This pattern could confirm not only societal notions and attitudes against women but also women's notions about their role in the public sphere and decision making. This also confirms the findings by GNHC (2001) that women are viewed as less capable for responsibilities of governance and leadership. The traditional notion that undermines women's leadership capabilities still exists in Bhutanese society.

Civil Society and Women Empowerment

The formalized Civil Society Organization, although a recent development in Bhutan, carries out a wide range of activities to fill the gaps that are not addressed in the government's overall plans. Functioning under

the overall governance of Civil Society Organization Authority (CSOA), Bhutan Network for the Empowerment of Women (BNEW), Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs (BAOWE) and Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women (RENEW) are some of the CSOs particularly focused on reducing gender gaps in Bhutan. The following sections explore five prominent aspects of women empowerment where the CSOs in Bhutan have intervened.

Education and Skill Development

Before the 1950s when monastic education was the only form of formal education in Bhutan, families preferred to send only boys, which accrued men significant advantage in the religious, politics and socio-economic aspects of society (Sinha 2009). Girls on the other hand were retained back home where they are needed and also because of the traditional notion that considered daughters vulnerable to be sent away from home (Wangmo 2004). Today, in the modern education system as well, gaps between men and women manifests particularly in tertiary-level education.

Women's lack of education and skills especially in rural areas accentuates the traditional view that considers women inferior to men. Lack of education and skills are the main factor that makes women less employable, which consequently incapacitates their earning capabilities (GNHC 2001). Providing education and skills for women is one strategic area where CSOs intervened to enable women to venture out of the domestic bondage. For example, the Livelihood Skills Training Program organized by RENEW in 2017, that trained 367 women on tailoring, fabric printing, dyeing, embroidery and ginger candy making enabled women to not only acquire skills but also enabled them to showcase and sell their products through the RENEW's Souvenir Shop (RENEW 2017). This is just one example of the skills development intervention initiated by the civil society. Education and trainings specifically tailored to suit the needs of women play a critical role in economic and social empowerment of women. Ensuring women's access to education and skills development

programmes increases their feeling of self-worth, and even develop confidence and bargaining power in the household and societal decision-making process. It is therefore imperative that the CSOs identified education and skills for women as strategic measure for empowering women in Bhutan.

Women Entrepreneurship

Considering the increasing youth unemployment rate and the potential of entrepreneurship to gainfully employ self and others, the Bhutanese government is progressively encouraging youths to venture into entrepreneurship. This is another crucial aspect of civil societies' engagement towards empowering women in Bhutan.

Women entrepreneurship in Bhutan is an important untapped potential for poverty reduction and economic growth. BAOWE works towards promoting women entrepreneurs at the grassroots level to contribute towards poverty reduction, self-reliance and empowerment. Advancing Economic Opportunity for Women and Girls⁹ was one such project initiated by BAOWE, which is aimed at positively changing livelihood practices of women and girls through promotion of groups, especially in deprived rural areas where large segment of the population are small and marginal farmers (BAOWE 2017). This intervention is significant considering that more than 60% of the total Bhutanese population resides in rural areas and are dependent on agriculture and livestock for livelihoods. Specifically to facilitate women's social empowerment in group-based enterprises that are facilitated by BAOWE, more than 90% women membership is encouraged (BAOWE 2017).

Women who venture into entrepreneurship not only become economically independent, but it also enhances their social interactions and decision-making capacity at the household and community level (Sharma et al. 2012). The targeted economic and social development interventions by CSOs that particularly focuses on women empowerment not

⁹ Advancing Economic Opportunity for Women and Girls: Project initiated by BAOWE which facilitates formation of self-help groups (SHG) and farmer's cooperatives to enable production and marketing of products as an income generating basis.

only supplements governmental works but also fills the gap that government cannot address in its overall plans. However, for some potential women entrepreneurs, lack of access to credit facilities is one main factor that incapacitates their ability to venture into entrepreneurship.

Microfinance Services for Women and Girls

The financial institutions' requirement for collateral and high interest rates particularly hinders individuals from availing credit services, which incapacitates aspiring entrepreneurs from being able to start-up businesses. Today, the Bhutanese government has introduced affordable and accessible micro-financing schemes specifically targeted to benefit aspiring entrepreneurs. In addition, CSOs also play an important role in this aspect specifically towards empowering women.

Through micro-financing schemes, CSOs in Bhutan aim to improve the living status of women and their families. RENEW's Micro-Finance Project (MFP) initiated in 2012 and BAOWE-Pelzing launched in 2017 are two such schemes. MFP consists of micro loans, savings opportunities, credit facilities and insurance services and as of December 2017, MFP benefited 11,543 members (RENEW 2017). BAOWE-Pelzing is a micro finance institution that supports infrastructure and skills development especially for single mothers, general women and disadvantaged youths to help them grow their business (BAOWE 2017). These interventions are geared towards addressing problems of access to finance, youth unemployment and gender disparity.

The accessibility to affordable micro-finance for women plays a significant role in empowering women in Bhutan. Lack of financial capital was one main issue faced by aspiring entrepreneurs. However, with CSOs micro financing schemes especially designed for women and girls, it offers them the opportunity to shed their domestic shackles and venture into income generating tasks. Earlier studies concluded that when women have access to loans, they not only become able to contribute economically to their household but also bring about positive change in the household decision making (Kabeer 2001). The study also suggested that women's access to loans could result in a long term reduction in domestic

violence as well (ibid.). As such, the civil societies' intervention with micro-financing schemes for women entrepreneurs is another strategic measure to addressing gender disparity in Bhutan.

Leadership Capacity Building

Despite having equal access and opportunity to compete for leadership roles, women's composition in leadership category is significantly lower compared to men. Cultural and stereotypical notions against women pertaining to women's leadership capabilities were common barriers that impede women's progression to responsibilities of leadership. The notion that men are more capable leaders for decision making at higher level resonates with women as well (GNHC 2001). This view constrains gender parity in leadership and governance.

Enhancing women's leadership capacity is another aspect where the CSO's intervention is crucial in Bhutan. By conducting workshops and conferences for aspiring women candidates for electoral politics, BNEW equips women with the knowledge and skills needed to equally participate in a male dominated politics. Civil societies engage elected women leaders, from local government and parliament in a dialogue to advocate for women's issues and also to prepare them for male dominated work environment. When women are provided such platform to come together and discuss on issues of significance especially pertaining to women, a common understanding of significantly critical issues can be developed for advocacy. Such activities can also morally inspire women to come forward and partake in electoral processes and to address women's issues.

Awareness and Advocacy

One important factor contributing to gender gaps was the stereotypical mindset against women. A study has concluded that women in Bhutan believe men to be superior and better equipped to comprehend and participate in matters of governance (GNHC 2001). This view, especially among women, clearly explains the comparatively lesser number of

women coming forward as candidates for local government and parliamentary elections. Awareness, advocacy and education are therefore crucial in changing traditional mindset and encouraging women to enter public sphere.

CSOs play a crucial role in raising awareness on gender stereotypes in Bhutan. By providing networking platforms for women, BNEW encourages women of different background to come together and engage in dialogue for promoting women empowerment. Such platform offers women from diverse background a platform to share their stories of discrimination, violence, challenge, struggles and of successes to inspire each other and to advocate for more gender equality in the society. CSOs also advocate for gender sensitive policies to address issues of gender disparity. Transforming societal mindset and attitudes towards women's leadership role is an important aspect of women empowerment strategy that the civil societies in Bhutan are engaged in.

Conclusion

Bhutan's national policies and laws are gender neutral and do not discriminate individuals based on any differences. However, gender disparities exist against women in tertiary education, labour force participation and decision making. The amalgamation of patterns emerging out of gaps in employment, labour force participation and leadership suggests that women in Bhutan still face challenges stemming from gender stereotypes. The significantly lower number of women participating in the electoral process and representation in the leadership positions signposts that the decision making could be skewed towards men. This pattern suggests that the traditional notion which attributes men to the public sphere and women to the domestic sphere and the notion that considers women as less capable still exists in Bhutan.

The civil societies' recognition of gender disparity was rapid and their response covers a wide range of interventions. Amongst many other responses from the civil societies towards empowering women in Bhutan, this exercise highlighted five prominent areas such as education and skills enhancement, entrepreneurship development, micro-financing for

women, leadership capacity development and awareness and advocacy. By intervening in these five strategic areas, civil societies are playing a significant role in challenging and overcoming gender stereotypes in Bhutan.

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