

Women in Governance: Empowerment from Within

Chayku (Bhutan)

‘Experienced a landslide victory after beating 12 male contestants.’

A small country, which is about the size of Kyushu in Japan, Bhutan has been able to maintain its uniqueness over the centuries in the face of the world, relatively because of its isolation.

Even though the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan treats men and women equally, and they enjoy more freedom and equality in all spheres of life than in many other developing countries, Kuensel¹ of 16th December 2015 edition reports that ‘Bhutan is one of the worst in South Asia in terms of gender disparity.’

The Royal Decree in 1998 underlined the importance of women’s participation in politics, but their leadership position and participation in decision making remained significantly low in Bhutan.



Women’s representation in the parliament

The first parliamentary election in 2008 saw that only 14 percent of those elected were women, and very dismal number of just

8 percent of those elected in the second parliamentary election were women with the first female minister.

Starting with the first female Gup² elected in the first local government election, there’s a steady rise in the women’s representation in the second LG election with two Gups and 24 Mangmis³ being elected. This is attributed to the immense contribution made by Non-Formal Education (NFE) Program because NFE literate became the qualifying educational criteria to stand for LG elections.

BNEW⁴ also contributed immensely to motivating and building the capacity of women at the grassroots level across the country.



During public campaigns and common forums

The trend has been almost the same for National Council with only six women contestants in 2008, four in 2013, and eight in 2018. But only two were elected in the recent election. Sonam Pelzom from Mongar, one of the six eastern districts, won a landslide win after beating 12 male contestant.

¹Kuensel – national Newspaper

²Gup - Elected Executive of Gewog Administration Office

³BNEW – Bhutan Network for Empowering Women

⁴Mangmi - Elected Deputy Executive of Gewog Administration Office

The downward trend in women's participation is predominantly based on the societal, cultural and traditional beliefs which are bound by stereotypical notions of the people. Even though discriminatory beliefs such as 'Ke-Rub-Gu'⁵ diminishes with people's understanding and education, women in Bhutan are still believed to be less capable of assuming a leadership role or participating in politics.

But for Sonam Pelzom, the beliefs didn't deter her from fighting for the right.

"My concern over the equality of women and men as a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice gave me enough confidence to come forward to represent people," she said.

People's considerations are still deeply rooted in the beliefs, and Sonam was quite skeptical about convincing them. It was even harder for her to undertake the journey during the campaign and common forums since it demanded unimaginable physical strength to walk from place to place. Mongar dzongkhag (district) consists of the largest number of gewogs⁶, mostly unreachable by pliable road.



Women participation in the public meetings

"Taking along my seven-month-old infant throughout the campaign tour was the hardest, but I took it as a strength. And even if I had lost the election, it would have

impacted on the enhancement of women's visibility."

The NC member-elect said that she had to work hard as people were initially not so forthcoming; but through the election race, people were convinced that women can be as capable as men. And her strategy to run her own race in the service of the King, country and the people let them believe her.



During the *Dhar*⁷ ceremony

If women's participation in the policy and decision making as well as in the leadership positions improves now, the credit goes to their male counterparts, too.

Sonam's father had been very supportive in her venture. He accompanied her during her familiarization tour until his demise after a couple of weeks. Tshering Dorji, her husband said that he had always wanted her to do something that would impact the society at large.

"I didn't feel right about keeping a capable woman with so much potential at home, so I decided to support in every way possible in the election race," he said.

Today, women make up half the population of the country, and Sonam believes that bringing their perspective into the political arena will ensure a more representative democracy.

⁵Ke-Rub-Gu – Men being considered nine generations superior

⁶Gewog - Lowest administrative unit in Bhutan's three-tiered governance system

⁷Dhar – Sacred scarf consisting of five auspicious colours

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Representing people in the highest decision-making body, the NC member-elect aims to give importance to the promotion and review of agricultural policies, looking into substance abuse, youth unemployment issues, and women's under-representation in politics, among others.



Sonam's first visit to the constituency

Bhutan is among 73 countries in the world with less than 15 per cent of women in the parliament, but women in Bhutan are relatively in a better position compared to many other developing countries in the region. Sonam Pelzom, who will be serving the country for the next five years, inspires lots of Bhutanese women, urging them to come forward to make important decisions and act on them.



After receiving sacred *Dhar* from His Majesty the King
