

The Changing Status of Women in Modern Bhutan with Relation to Education (From 1914 to 2003 A.D.)

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Abstract:

Till the middle of the last century Bhutan was isolated from the outside world and its social system was feudal. Historically, women were supposed to enjoy the same legal status as men, but after looking at the records and the practical aspects of women's lives we find that is not so true and practically their role was only of a home maker. The advancement and emancipation of women is virtually a recent phenomenon. Before the advent of modern education in the 1960s, the only form of education prevalent was traditional monastic education where few women got opportunity to educate themselves. Although the seed of modern school system to impart secular education was sown in 1914, women's entry in the formal education came about only after many years. We must, of course acknowledge that Bhutan was passing through a phase where parents preferred to send their sons to school rather than daughters not only because of harsh terrains, long distances, lack of accommodations or other general hardships but also because of the view that daughters were more vulnerable and more useful at home. In the 1960s with the Royal Government's intention to modernize the country, Five Year Plans were implemented and as a part of these plans, literacy rate was sought to be increased, and women found the doors of schools unlocked to educate themselves. Gradually the number of schools increased, so also the number of girl students. In the 1990s the government established hostel facilities for girls in the technical and vocational institutions. Non-formal system was introduced which was much more suitable for women. So, in spite of some age old gender disparity, women gradually became educated ushering increased awareness and thereby bolstering their status in the socio-economic-political fabric of Bhutanese society.

Key-words- Women, Education, Status, Literacy rate.

Bhutan was essentially an isolated and feudal society till the ascendancy of the third hereditary monarch, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck in 1952. It gradually realized the indisputable fact that human resource development and economic transformation go hand in hand and that women constitute almost half of the human resource. Women on their part are trying to strike a balance between participating in the development process,

*1914 - Commencement of the first secular/modern school in Bhutan

2003- The beginning of the 9th Five Year Plan period

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thereby challenging old myths and their present manifestations, while at the same time preserving their traditional roles in the household works since Bhutan is a religious nation where women are regarded as 'repositories of culture'.

Women in Bhutan generally have a much higher status than in many other countries and theoretically they enjoy the same status and legal rights as men in many fields of life. There is no overt discrimination on the basis of gender and women are regarded as valuable and respectable members of families and society. And this equality has undoubtedly contributed to the rapid development of the society. Keeping in mind that the country's population is basically rural, it can be claimed that for most part, women in Bhutan play a major role in retaining and propagating the traditional ethos of the nation. In an average household in Bhutan, the woman is not just a wife or a mother, but also a home maker. She bears the responsibility of a 24 hours job and shares responsibility in farming communities as she is invariably involved in paddy field works. When not in the fields she supports the family by engaging herself in weaving and other cottage industries.¹

Bhutanese women enjoy the right of inheritance and land ownership and there is no dowry system or bridal price system. Despite a broad-based equality, women in Bhutan have not set aside the traditional practices related to house-keeping, agriculture, animal husbandry and cottage industry and this is more apparent in rural economics where they appear to play an important role equal to men.² In fact, in Dukpa Kagyu school of Mahayana Buddhism, which is the state religion in Bhutan, the doctrine of Karma gives women an elevated status as they are sometimes even seen as superior to men in many ways; for example, it is said that women's thought process is clearer and that they have better discerning power. In Mahayana Buddhism³ there are many female deities such as Tara, Saraswati, Dorji Phagmo etc. and female and male principles are equally indispensable. There is a Sutra which says, "There is no difference between the sexes on the road to enlightenment."⁴

In spite of the Bhutanese women enjoying considerable freedom, a scrutiny into the day to day life presents a different picture in several aspects of living. As Bhutan was a feudal nation till very recently, traces of the feudal practices and prejudices are still visible. Feudalism discriminate Bhutanese women in almost every stage of life which was compounded by poverty, illiteracy and exploitation of. If one is to flip through the pages of Bhutan Telephone Directory of the year 1994 a rather helpless picture of women is seen to emerge. It shows that all, save for few exceptions, Ministers, Judges, Secretaries, Directors, Heads of Corporations, Authorities etc. were found to be males.⁵ Under the circumstances nothing needs to be added about women's place in the society. A noted Bhutanese female writer commented, "The government is aware of these discrepancies and serious efforts are being made to narrow the gaps."⁶ This research shows that the Bhutanese women, as a result of the existing circumstances, lacked confidence even in handling issues generally affecting themselves and their daily lives. In

fact, the situation was such that the majority of women were not even aware of their basic rights. Bhutan has, of course, marched ahead and by the beginning of the 21st century women did advance in education, business, and politics but a lot more needs to be done to come anywhere close to gender equality.

It is common knowledge that education equips one for a better life, better income, enhanced ability to feed one's family, fight for one's rights etc. But, the country was almost devoid of any modern schooling facility till the beginning years of the development of the country. To be more specific, till the early 1960s there were virtually no modern educational facilities inside Bhutan and all that the country had was the traditional education given in the monasteries. Monastic education, gave men a significant advantage over women in religious, political, social and economic contexts.⁷ In the monastic education system, literacy as limited to certain groups of people, mainly the male clergy and a select group of elite and thus literacy and religion were seen as being synonymous. Though theoretically, the spiritual path was open to both men and women, religious and cultural prejudices presented various obstacles and hindrances in the women's way because of their gender.⁸ It cannot be said that there were no nunneries for women but it can be stressed that the number of nunneries and the number of nuns or *Anims* (female celibate monks) were very few.⁹ Consequently, there were no women in position of influence in the religious hierarchy.

Although the seed of modern primary schools was planted in 1914 in the Haa valley and gradually in other parts of the country, women hardly got the opportunity to be admitted in these schools. Moreover, in the past, families preferred sending boys to schools not only because of harsh terrain and long travel distances, the lack of accommodations or hostel facilities and other general hardships but also because of the traditional view that daughters were vulnerable and were needed at home.¹⁰ The female child was also in disadvantageous position due to the lack of schools and women teachers, poor classroom facilities, the absence of girls' hostels, lack of separate toilets, inaccessibility of schools because of roads and transport, rigid school rules etc. To aggravate this there was the general phenomenon of girls dropping out of school earlier leading to feminization of poverty or in simplified form it can be explained as a case of "learn less - earn less". It might be added that Bhutanese women also married early making them even more vulnerable. A Bhutanese lady scholar also adds that since even the facility for monastic education was abundant for men it was just a transition from an old system to a new one when they entered modern schools. Whereas the same did not apply for women for whom going to a modern school was a pioneering effort.¹¹

The above conditions made girls' enrolment in the schools altogether negligible. Though there were scholarship system for study in the schools of Kalimpong and Darjeeling in India, yet very few girls were selected. According to Dasho Gagey Lhamu, Bhutan's first lady High Court judge, the few selected girls had to be actually 'pulled away' from their parents to be sent to schools in India. To quote her, "During my time

(early 1950s) it was not common for a girl child to go to school. About ten girls, including myself, were selected for admission to Haa primary school. In 1956, there were seven girls from Haa who were selected to be sent to schools in India after completing our class three in Bhutan, and the journey was tough."¹² "There were no motorable roads so the prospective students had to walk to Samtse town which took seven days, and then catch a train followed by a bus to reach Kalimpong. Even at home the walk from the house to the local school took a lot of time...it was only later, with improved road conditions, that more girls were enrolled into schools."¹³ Thus the physical facilities were also not favourable for the girls in any conceivable way. Of course, we do find an exception in a pioneer Bhutanese female student, Miss. Chandrakala Gurung, became the country's first graduate in 1956 which would mean that she must have joined school around the latter half of 1930s.¹⁴

Enrolment of girls at different levels was almost non-existent prior to 1960. With the commencement of the Five Year Plans, the Royal Government realized the shortage of working manpower as the main constraint on the overall development process, so funds were allocated for extending the network of primary, secondary and central schools. There is no data available on the number of girls receiving education in the First and Second Five Year Plan periods though there must have been some female students. In 1977 the total number of girls who received formal education was 5,420 out of a total 19,973 students (or 27%) and by 1984 girls accounted for at least 33 percent of a total enrolment of 47,883 students.¹⁵ Despite the enormous increase in the enrolment of girls into schools the literacy rate amongst women remained lamentably poor. The data for 1979 reflects that only 10% of the female population was literate compared to 36.8% in males. The figures show even more alarming details of illiteracy amongst women in Eastern Bhutan (6%) and Western Bhutan (6.6%).¹⁶

The following tables show the enrolment of girls in comparison with boys in different levels of educational institutions of Bhutan-

Table 1: (April 1989)

Schools and institutes	No	Boys	Girls	Total
Schools				
Extended classrooms	30	1755	055	2810
Primary schools	152	29028	17256	46284
Junior high schools	21	7140	4761	11901
High schools	10	2887	1651	4538
Sub-total	213	40810	23723	65533
Institutes				
Sherubtse College	01	379	74	543
National Institute of Education	01	102	63	165

Teachers' Training Centre	01	41	17	58
Royal Bhutan Polytechnic	01	185	11	196
Royal Technical Institute	01	308	16	324
Simtokha Rigney School	01	531	33	564
Zangley Muenseling School	01	19	08	27
Sanskrit Pathshala	05	372	160	532
Sub-total	12	1937	382	2319
Grand total	225	42747	24105	67852

(Source-*General Statistics*, Ministry of Social Services, Department of Education, July 1989, Thimphu. P)

Table 2: (April 1994)

Schools and Institutes	No	Boys	Girls	Total
Schools				
Community schools	100	5404	4021	9425
Primary schools	145	26155	19782	45937
Junior high schools	18	4902	3968	8870
High schools	08	2579	1606	4185
Private schools	07	386	330	716
Sub-total	278	39426	29707	69133
Institutes				
Sherubtse College	01	438	95	533
National Institute of Education	01	114	46	160
Teachers' Training college	01	109	37	146
Royal Bhutan Polytechnic	01	168	23	191
Royal Technical Institute	01	191	42	233
Simtokha Rigney School	01	337	99	436
Zangley Muenseling School	01	24	09	33
Sanskrit Pathshala	01	14	07	21
Sub-total	08	1395	358	1753
Grand total	286	40821	30065	70886

(Source-*General Statistics*, Ministry of Health and Education, Education Division, Thimphu, June 1994, p.3)

Table: 3(April 1997)

Schools and Institutes	No	Boys	Girls	Total
Schools				
Community schools	107	6137	4606	10743
Primary schools	150	28914	22862	51776
Junior high schools	25	9571	8336	17907
High schools	13	4889	3639	8528
Private schools	07	740	684	1424
Sub-total	302	50251	40127	90378
Institutes				
Sherubtse college	01	414	82	496
National Institute of Education	01	99	100	199
Teacher Training College	01	125	81	206
Royal Bhutan Polytechnic	01	224	34	258
Royal Technical Institute	01	221	68	289
Semtokha Rigzhung Institute	01	224	81	305
Trashiyangtse Rigney Institute	01	21	-	21
National Institute for the Disabled	01	18	10	28
Surye Sanskrit Pathshala	01	26	16	42
Dhoban Sanskrit Pathshala	01	45	-	45
Sub-total	10	1417	472	1889
Grand total	312	51668	40599	92267

(*General Statistics*, Ministry of Health and Education, Education Division, Thimphu, June 1997, p.4)

Through these tables attempt is made to show the rate of enrolment of girls in comparison with boys during the period of Sixth Five Year Plan (1987-1992) and Seventh Five Year Plan (1992-1997) periods. It is found that the girls' enrolment in the school levels in various plan periods was quite satisfactory. As the number of schools increased around the country the number of girls students did too. Extended classrooms, later known as Community Schools, were introduced in the Sixth Five Year Plan and were established within easier reach of communities and it contributed to an increase in the number of girl children attendance.¹⁷ A Bhutanese report states that "between 1984 and 1993, the enrolment of girls in primary to high school increased by 68%, as

compared to only 11% increase for boys.”¹⁸ Despite this fantastic success the canvas is not the same where post-school education is concerned. If we note the enrolment of girls in institutional level we will find that their number was less than half of the boys. The possible causes may be the long distances between the college and their residence, the unwillingness of their parents to part with girls because of safety concerns, unawareness about the utility of higher education, early marriage customs, pressure in household activities, and practicality of certain courses for girls etc.

The Royal Government of Bhutan was concerned about the inequitable position of women in society and tried to develop strategies and programmes which might bring about significant improvement in the quality of life of women. On April 9, 1981, National Women’s Association of Bhutan was set up as a non-governmental organization for the improvement of socio economic conditions of women by identifying the constraints that women face and to suggest appropriate solutions.¹⁹ This NWAB also works for women’s participation in developmental activities. Dasho Dawa Dem, Secretary of NWAB said in 1987 that “Bhutanese women, especially the capable and educated, must work on equal footing and even compete in their profession”.²⁰ NWAB is trying to promote socio-economic conditions of disadvantaged women through promoting economic opportunities, developing capability and raising awareness of the rights and potential of women.²¹

The Department of Education in the 1980’s had encouraged women to apply for training as Bhutanese Language teachers. The department pointed out that there was no discrimination between men and women and women interested in serving as Bhutanese language teachers might apply for the training.²² Being aware that only a negligible number of girls received technical and vocational education priority was given for the establishment of girls hostels in Royal Bhutan Polytechnic and Royal Technical Institute to increase the enrolment of girls during the Seventh Five year Plan period. As a part of the programme to provide basic education to all Bhutanese by the year 2000 the Royal Government of Bhutan began in 1992, as an alternative system, offering six months course named as non-formal education programme. The course concentrated on the ability to read and write simple letters, maintain basic accounts in *Dzongkha* (the national language) and English, knowledge of health and hygiene and the achievement of self sufficiency through cottage industries. The classes also helped to acquire knowledge about relevant issues like family planning and child care. In the year 1994 there were altogether 33 non-formal education centres in the whole country with 1700 learners among whom 69% were women and thus the non formal education scheme has enhanced their ability to understand better the art of reading and writing.²³ Education statistics of the year 2003 shows that among the total learners in non-formal education of 12,838 in the country, 8674 were women.²⁴ There was a growing response in the women to participate in this system as the classes were held mostly in the evenings which was convenient for them to attend and the course bridged the gap of women lagging behind men in formal education.

Nevertheless, in the formal higher education sector the picture changes dramatically. We can look at the status of education in 2003 (beginning of 9th Five Year Plan period) to compare the male-female ratio-

Table 4: (2003 A.D.)

Schools and institutes	no	male	female	Total
Schools				
Community primary schools	188	11949	10553	22502
Primary schools	90	13850	12318	26168
Lower secondary schools	77	23968	22888	46856
Middle secondary school	23	9319	8416	17735
Higher secondary schools	16	6388	4880	11268
Private schools	18	2363	2268	4631
Sub-total	412	67837	61323	129160
Institutes				
Sherubtse College	01	565	263	828
Institute for Language and Culture Studies	01	152	73	225
National Institute of Education , Samtse	01	195	149	344
National Institute of Education, Paro	01	247	239	486
National Institute for the Disabled	01	26	9	35
Jigmochooling (Surey) Sanskrit Pathshala	01	19	11	30
Dhoban Sanskrit Pathshala	01	13	-	13
Royal Bhutan Institute of Technology	01	341	88	429
Vocational Training Institute, khuruthang	01	42	30	72
Vocational Training Institute, Rangjung	01	75	37	112
Vocational Training Institute, Samthang	01	73	11	99
Construction Training Centre , Kawajangsa	01	126	108	234
National Institute for Zorig Chusum	01	78	23	122
Trashiyangtse Institute for Zorig Chusum	01	40	12	52
sub-total	14	1992	1053	3081
Grand total	426	69829	62376	132241

(Source-*General Statistics*, Ministry of Education, Policy and Planning Division, Thimphu, 2003, p.7)

The above statistics show the percentage of girls in comparison boy students in 2003 to be almost at par as far as education in school level was concerned (male: 52.52%; female: 47.48%). However, the same cannot be said of higher education and as an example Sherubtse College shows male enrollment of 565 (68.24%) and female students numbering 263 (31.76%). Girl student ratio suffers even in the technical education, Sanskrit Patshalas, Institute for the Disabled, and even in the two traditional craft institutes.

In conclusion, it could be postulated that by the beginning of 21st century the Bhutanese women realized that they should have an identity besides that of a wife and mother. But a large chasm can still be visualized across gender and it is ever more distinct and deep when the issue of rural women is taken under consideration. This shadow of inequality between men and women is grave, insufficiently addressed, and often overlooked when education comes to the picture. Since modern education has an all pervasive influence over all professions and walks of life, full gender equality in Bhutan is, in a polite sense, about the biggest constraint and if one is to be blunt it is one of the major failures of the government. There is no denying that the government has done much but as I mentioned earlier “a huge amount needs to be done to come anywhere close to gender equality.” I believe that any upward mobilization of women as a community will ultimately emanate from their own ideals and perceptions of the importance of a girl child’s education, their values regarding the status of women and their role as an engine of socio- economic and political change. In a country which is basically rural and the way of living traditional, a heightened sense of awareness must be created amongst the women and this cannot be achieved without the conscious and concerted effort from the government. The need is for sustained and proactive programmes towards a rapid emancipation of women for after all they constitute about half of the nation’s population. The policy makers and government officials will make tall claims, as it is being done right now, and despite my desire not to point fingers, the statistics speak for themselves. Just like the gap in gender equality there is a gap between good intention and good implementation. One cannot doubt the good intention or aim of the government but somewhere down the line implementation and performance have not kept pace with well wished aim and genuine intent which resounds in the words of Milan A. Harper who said, “Women of Bhutan have come a long way and they are still striving.”²⁵

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