Women's Leadership Journeys in Bhutan: A longitudinal Study

Jamba Tobden

Abstract

While much has been said and discussed about questions concerning Bhutanese electorate and increased participation of women in leadership roles, both in the national parliament as well as in the local governance, a lot of what is discussed, published and informed often comes in the form of general commentaries without practical projects. This study is a longitudinal design narrative of implementing this significant agenda seriously, through a real project with impact pathways and targets set. This was done in collaboration with people in professions that are engaged in helping and supporting women, such as, government institutions, research institutions, policy makers, parliamentarians, Civil Society Organizations, UN systems, International and National Non-Governmental Organizations, Election Commission of Bhutan, etc. The research question seeks answers to the serious decline in the number of women representatives both in National Council and National Assembly from the first elections in 2008 to the second elections in 2013. Will the local government elections in 2016 not repeat this scenario? Seeking what is to be done and how it is to be done.

Keywords: Women, leadership, elections, happiness.

Introduction

The Royal University of Bhutan: The Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) is an autonomous public higher education institution in the Kingdom of Bhutan. A key mandate of the university is "to promote and conduct research, to contribute to the creation of knowledge in an international context and to promote the transfer of knowledge of relevance to Bhutan" (The Royal Charter of the Royal University of Bhutan, 2003, p. 3). As an autonomous knowledge institution, RUB is poised to become a leading research institute in Bhutan's knowledge-based society and

fortunately, the policy environment for the university to take on this role is conducive. The government expects that RUB should "work towards initiating key policy debates and formulation of government policies in future" (Mid Term Review Report, 2011, p. 68) providing ample political will and support.

The institute for Gross National Happiness Studies (iGNHaS): The extent to which the holistic and sustainable approach to development that aims to enhance the wellbeing of the people in relation to the nine domains of Gross National Happiness (GNH) will be determined by the extent to which independent ideas, analyses and informed opinions influence and shape policymaking in Bhutan. Therefore, the institute for Gross National Happiness Studies (iGNHaS), established as an integral part of the Royal University of Bhutan is an ideal organizational response to this situation. More importantly, women's participation in governance and political leadership is one of the eleven thematic areas iGNHaS identified as priority research areas of research in Bhutan.

Women: At the time this project was conceived and implemented in 2014, various institutions have placed priorities in support of women's leadership positions in Bhutan. The Royal Government of Bhutan's 11th Five Year Plan, under the Good Governance pillar, has one of the National Key Results Area (NKRA) as 'creating a gender friendly environment for women's participation', with four Key Performance Indicators (KPI), targeted towards women's participation in elected offices including the local governments; Output 4.3 of UNDP's "one program indicators", highlights that, "Women and youth have increased opportunities to participate in leadership as well as in policy making, planning, and implementation of development plans". These indicators enforces the institutions to focus on implementation of activities to achieve increased percentage of women in parliament, and percentage of elected women in local governments; The Swiss Development Cooperation's (SDC) Local Governance Initiative and Network (LOGIN); HELVETAS's transversal themes of gender, governance, knowledge and capacity development; The Liaison Office of Denmark's (LOD) interest in governance and democracy are indicative of how important this issue is.

In light of the role of RUB and iGNHaS to engage in research, and the priorities set by these institutions in empowering women, this project titled, the Women's Leadership Journeys was implemented with much curiosity and enthusiasm. The table below describes the stages of the longitudinal milestones of this research:

Table 1: Stages of the longitudinal milestones of this research:

Sl. no	Program/activity/research	Timeframe
1	Study on Improving Women's Participation in Local Governance: An Explorative Study on Women's Leadership Journeys in Bhutan	2013
2	Women Leadership Journeys Training	2014
3	Impact Assessment of the Training	2014
4	Local Government Elections	2016
5	Impact Assessment of the Intervention on the Intended Results	2016

Literature Review

Gender equity is an unfinished business of our time. The full equality of rights and opportunities between men and women begins with the landmark declaration of 1948 (UN General Assembly, 1948). Since then, 143 countries have guaranteed equality between men and women in their constitutions as of 2014, and in 2016 the number increased to 184 (UN Women, 2019). Yet discrimination against women persists in areas of laws and policies, gender-based stereotypes, and social norms and practices (UN Women, 2019). Besides the establishment of several institutional arrangements, and commitment to research and funding, both by the international institutions as well as the national governments, gender-inclusive language guidelines were also developed. However, women represent two thirds of the 750 million illiterates globally, are found three times more than men in unpaid work, and occupy only 24% of parliamentary seats worldwide (UN Women, 2019).

Bhutan, a country that has always taken pride in being a matriarchal society, now seems to be failing its women. Special measures have comparatively advanced women's representation in some countries, as demonstrated by the percentage of women in national parliaments in Timor-Leste (38.5%), Nepal (29.6%), Afghanistan (27.7%) and Pakistan (20.6%). In South Asia, women's representation in national parliaments is otherwise extremely low, with the following representation in India (11.8%), Sri Lanka (5.8%) and the Maldives (5.9%), (IPU, 2015). Bhutan is among the bottom of pyramid, with only 8% and 8.3% of representatives in the upper house and lower house respectively. Correspondingly, Bhutan's 11th Five Year Plan (2013 – 2018) has incorporated priority indicators for women's participation in elected offices including the local governments.

Women's leadership and political participation are restricted from the local to the global level, and face several obstacles to participate in political life. This is evident from the UN General Assembly (2011) resolution which notes that, 'Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women." (p.2). Literature review and reports published by UN supports this statement. On the contrary, as a result of training female candidates and encouraging voters to vote for women, number of women legislators doubled in Kenya in 2003 elections. This is a good illustration that the issue of women leadership is not an intractable problem and specific, targeted support for women's political engagement can make a real difference. Towards this end, the UN women is increasingly engaging in providing training for women political and leadership positions candidates to help build their capabilities.

If this has worked well elsewhere, why does Bhutan not do it, more precisely in the Bhutanese way? This question inspired iGNHaS to undertake a research project to explore the conditions that enables women to participate in leadership positions in Bhutan in 2013. The findings from the study revealed that

feelings of incompetency, rather than any socially accepted view that women are not as capable as men, is the reason why women do not participate in leadership positions. The study recommended that women should be empowered through training programs focusing on areas such as effective oral communication skill, knowledge and skill of Bhutanese cultural and traditional protocols, cultural competencies, mediation skills, knowledge of current issues of national concern (for example Anti-corruption Laws, the Tobacco Act, Electoral Laws, Rural Urban Migration) and knowledge of government policies, among others (Thinley, et al, 2014). Bhutan's lack of women in government is reasonably easy to solve, unlike in other countries where challenges cited were of discriminatory laws, practices, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women (UN General Assembly, 2011). The findings of the research were so intriguing, that iGNHaS decided to implement its findings in practice.

Methodology

Exploratory sequential mixed method design was applied for this longitudinal research. The mixed methods research which is the integration of qualitative and quantitative data yields additional insight beyond the information provided by either the qualitative or quantitative data alone (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Further, the purpose of longitudinal studies is to gather and analyse data which is quantitative, qualitative or both, on growth, change and development over time (Lavrakas, 2008). The intent and scope of this research is to engage in multiple follow-ups on the same subjects (respondents) over time to study their behavior, attitude, performance and achievements, with intervention. In this design, the findings of the 2013 research on Women's Participation in Local Governance in Bhutan was implemented through training and advocacy programs in 2014, followed by the quantitative survey on the impact and effectiveness of the training in 2014, and followed by qualitative interviews after the 2016 Local Government Elections in 2016.

The longitudinal research is best suited for this study as it involves social inquiry with time as an important dimension of enquiry, with emerging transitions and causality (Neale, 2011). This longitudinal research spreads over a period of four years from 2013 to 2016. For the quantitative part, survey design was applied to provide numeric description of growth, trends, development, attitudes or opinions of the respondents, from the target sampling of the 34 women who participated in the Women's Leadership Journeys Training program. Structured questionnaires were used, to address the descriptive questions. For the qualitative part, in depth interviews (to explore individual experiences and perceptions in rich details), was conducted with these participants. The questions were semi-structured open ended, non-directive, and probing. Qualitative data were collected from the same respondents used for the quantitative data, through telephone calls for 26 participants, and face-to-face interview with 8 participants. For ethical reasons, respondents who provided qualitative data are acknowledged in the presentation of results as P1, P2 and so on. Further details on the sampling, data collection, data analysis and findings are discussed in detail in the results and discussion section below.

Results and discussion

Stage 1: Study on Improving Women's Participation in Local Governance: An Explorative Study on Women's Leadership Journeys in Bhutan in 2013.

The institute for Gross National Happiness Studies (iGNHaS), Department of Research and External Relations (DRER), Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) identified eleven thematic areas of research, one of which is Women and Leadership (iGNHaS Strategic Plan, 2014). iGNHaS, soon after its establishment engaged in its first research project titled, 'Women's Participation in Local Governance in Bhutan', funded by UN Women, SARO, New Delhi, and supported by UNDP Bhutan. The study was intended to see the enabling conditions for local women to participate in leadership positions. The findings of the research recommended interventions in the form of training opportunities on various

educational programs and building confidence for aspiring women candidates. The entire recommendation of the research was implemented in stage 2 below.

Stage 2: Women Leadership Journeys Training in 2014

iGNHaS initiated the program S-STAR (Strengthening Support to Analysis and Research) to implement the findings of the research. A documentary analysis was carried out to find out the hard facts and figures, as follows:

Table 2.1: Percentage of Women representatives in the parliament in Bhutan (ECB, 2015)

Year (Election Cycle year)	2004 (pre-democracy)	2008 (First Democratic Election)	2013 (Second Democratic Election)
Percentage of Women representatives	13%	13.9%	8.3%

Table 2.2: Percentage of Women representatives in Local Government 2014 (ECB, 2015)

Positions in the Local Government	Local Leader (Block)	Deputy Leader (Block)	Village Leader (village)
No. and Percentage of Women representatives	1(out of 205)	12 (5.9%)	84 (8%)

Based on the figures above, iGNHaS argued as follows:

"While much has been said and discussed about questions concerning Bhutanese electorate and increased participation of women in leadership roles, both in the national parliament as well as in the local governance. However, a lot of what is discussed, published and informed often comes in the form of general commentaries without practical projects. Hence there is need to take-up this significant agenda seriously, through real project with impact pathways and targets set, in collaboration with people in professions that are engaged in helping and supporting women, for example,

government institutions, research institutions, policy makers, parliamentarians, Civil Society Organizations, UN systems, International and National NGOs, Election Commission of Bhutan, etc. Do we have the right answers to the serious decline of women representatives both in National Council and National Assembly from the first elections in 2008 to the second elections in 2013? Will the local government elections not repeat this scenario?"

Accordingly, iGNHaS organized several rounds of stakeholders' consultative meetings and agreed to train 40 women (two from each district) for seven weeks. The participants were selected based on their interest and commitment to contest in the 2016 local government elections. The theme of the training was, 'Women's Leadership Journeys training program: 'Me-dhey Gakid GiTswa Sheywen', loosely translated as, 'knowledge, the key to community happiness'. The training was conducted in partnership with Bhutan Network for Empowering Women (BNEW), and Labshey-Ngenshey (a private institution), and the program was executed in partnership with all the relevant partners. A two-pronged approach to training was designed; A class room based training program from Monday to Friday, to equip the participants with knowledge and skills required of a local government leadership; and a confidence building program where the participants make presentations and debate live on the national television on Saturdays and Sundays. This was critically designed to build the confidence of the participants to stand for election,and also to build the confidence of the general public in women's leadership.

In-house Training: The relevant organizations/institutions, such as Bhutan National Legal Institute, Election Commission of Bhutan, Department of Local Governance, Anti-Corruption Commission, Royal Audit Authority, Anti-Corruption Commission, NCWC, and the relevant Ministries were training the participants. On-Air Shows: The participants appeared on the National TV BBS over the weekends (Saturdays and Sundays) from 5 PM to 8 PM to debate, discuss and deliberate the subjects of relevance. A total of 15 episodes were broadcast LIVE.

Stage 3: Impact Assessment of the Training in 2014

To assess the impact of the training on the participants, the feedback of the participants on the trainers and training was collected using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions of which four were open ended. Including the demographic data, the questionnaire addressed 17 variables. The first eight questions focused on confirming their level of agreement with the training program on three attributes. Factor analysis of the eight items was conducted to reduce the dimension of the data into one or two variables. The result of the factor analysis is presented in the following Table. Although the items were grouped into four factors, the values of the loading on factor 3 and 4 are not shown as values below 0.4 were suppressed. Since factor two had only 2 items, the factor was not considered for further analysis.

Table 3.1: Factor analysis of the 8 items

Variable	Factor1	Factor2	Factor3	Factor4	Uniqueness
q1	0.4145	0.5049			0.5630
q2					0.7996
q3	0.4339				0.6287
q4		0.4768			0.6188
q5	0.6967				0.3610
q6	0.8044				0.3052
q7	0.5585				0.5774
q8	0.6986				0.4711

(Blanks represent abs (loading)<.4)

Since the 6 items correspond to quality of training, a new variable using simple aggregation method of the six items was created. In order to check the internal consistency of the items grouped in factor 1, reliability test of the items was conducted. The test showed Cronbach's alpha of 0.75 indicating a high reliability. The inter items covariance of the 6 items were also conducted to test the relationship between the items.

Table 3.2: Cronbach's alpha of the 6 items

Average inter item covariance:	0.492432
Number of items in the scale:	6
Scale reliability coefficient:	0.7465

A summary of the new variables on quality of training was conducted. Since the maximum attainable is 5, the mean of 4.9 is high indicating the quality of training was very high. This can be further validated through the frequency tables on each question which is provided as Annexure. The standard deviation is 0.25 indicating that the quality of training ranged between 4.40 and 5 at 95% confidence level.

Table 3.3: Summary statistics of quality of training

Variable	obs	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
tra	153	4.892157	.2568297	3.333333	5

Analysis of variance was conducted to see if the quality of training differed among the training in the opinion of the participants. One-way ANOVA was conducted and the resulted in the shown in the following Table. The p value is less than .05 indicating that there is difference in perception among the trainers and the training module.

Table 3.4: ANOVA for the trainer

Analysis of Variance					
Source	ss	df	MS	F	Prob > F
Between groups	1.1520158	5	.230402516	3.82	0.0028
Within groups	8.87413152	147	.060368242		
Total	10.0261441	152	.065961474		

The summary statistics of quality of training by Trainer and the Topic is given in the following Table. Although the significance level is in the acceptable region, the difference on closer inspection is not much. The average score for the trainers is above 4.7 indicating high quality of training. It may also be worth noting that the minim for DLG and NEWC is 3.33. On the whole it may be concluded that

the overall quality of training, according to the participants was excellent given that the overall average is 4.8 and the lowest average for a trainer or the topic is 4.7.

Table 3.5 Quality of Training by stakeholders

Trainer	Quality	Max	Min	Std
Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy	4.88	5	4.33	0.19
Bhutan Opportunity and Information Centre &Ministry of labor and Human Resources	4.96	5	4.17	0.16
Dzongkha Development Commission	4.95	5	4.83	0.08
Department of Culture	4.97	5	4.67	0.08
Department of Local Governance & National Commission for Women and Children	4.73	5	3.33	0.46
iGNHaS&LorigMunsel	4.91	5	4.33	0.17

Table 3.6 Quality of training by topic

Row Labels	Quality	Std
Communication	4.88	0.19
Culture	4.97	0.08
National and International Policies and Programs	4.73	0.46
Experience, Employment and Entrepreneurship	4.96	0.16
Labshey Nyenshey skills (Comprehension)	4.92	0.15

The impact assessment indicated that the training program was timely, relevant and functional, and that the participants are, as a consequence, better educated, highly motivated and have the required confidence to contest in the upcoming local government elections in 2016.

Stage 4: Local Government Elections 2016

The Local Government (LG) Elections was held in two phases (January 2016 and September 2016). The first and the second phases of election called for 1499 posts for various local government positions. A total of 3391 candidates contested the elections, from which, 1439 contestants have been elected. The results of the elected positions show that 65% were men elects, and 35% were female elects. Out of the 492 women who contested, only 164 won the elections, as compared to 1275 men elected out of 2900 contestants. The details of the election results are illustrated in table 4 below:

Table 4: Second Local Government Election results (ECB, 2016)

Position	Male Elected	Female Elected	Total positions
Gup	203	02	205
Mangmi	181	24	205
Gewog Tshogpa	129	864	993
Thrompon	4	0	4
Thromde Tshogpas	13	7	20
Thromde Ngotshabs	10	2	12

A few months after the elections, in December 2016, a qualitative in-depth interview (to explore individual experiences and perceptions in rich details with semi-structured open ended, non-directive, and probing was conducted to investigate the performance of women contestants in the elections. Given the complex phenomenon, broad questions, and diverse background of the respondents, requiring different forms of exploration and measurement, a qualitative inductive approach was designed, to address the social constructivism philosophical perspective (Mertens, 2014).

Stage 5: Impact assessment of the intervention on the intended results in 2016

In the second Local Government Elections (2016) a total of 113795 female voters and 110892 male voters turned out to vote. There were around 3000 more female voters than male voters. A total of 3391 participants contested against 1499 seats. However, 1439 candidates have been elected, since there was negative voting in ten seats. This is a scenario, where a lone candidate is received a greater number of 'no' votes (Election Commission of Bhutan, 2016)

In the first local government elections held in 2011, 166 women contested in the LG elections, out of which 76 were elected (Election Commission of Bhutan, 2011). Where as in the second Local government elections 492 women contested, out of which 164 were elected. It is evident that the number of women who contested in the Second LG Elections increased by three times, and the number of women who were elected increased by more than two times, as compared to the first LG Elections held in 2011. The survey reveals that the interventions provided, particularly that of the Women's Leadership Journeys' programme had created an impact both on the voters as well as on the voted. The multi-perspective findings were recorded as follows:

Thirty-four (34) Women who attended the Women's Leadership Journeys, confirmed that they were feeling highly competent after attending the training to stand and compete with the men competitors, and that they voted for women candidates who were contesting for any other positions in the Local Government functionary, as against men competitors. About 20 respondents (more than half of the respondents) claimed that they campaigned, supported and voted for Women candidates, considering the national effort to increase the participation of Women in elected office. The training programs run by iGNHaS is an effort to change the mindset of the voters and recommended similar programs to be implemented on a continual basis. About 30% (10 respondents) claimed that women do not support

women, and that until females begin understanding their need to support each other, 'politics will be a male dominated arena'.

The data analysis was done based on data-driven emerging themes. One of the most intriguing themes that emerged from the interview was the significant success of the current women leaders. The respondents (P1, P5, P6, P11, P12, P18) questioned, that the future success and succession of Women in leadership will depend significantly on how the current batch of Women in leadership positions deliver. Are these Women capable of delivery, and an example for upcoming and future Women leadership? If so, the inspiration and political culture for Women is being built on a stronger foundation. If not, why even discuss empowering Women. Further, some respondents (P4, P23, P31, P33) feel that the nature of women having to engage in household matters, including caring for children hinders their commitment and confidence to deliver while serving in leadership positions. While there are no studies done on the effectiveness, challenges and opportunities, and barriers of women versus men leadership, Appelbaum (2003) states that women leaders are more considerate, transformative, participative, socio-expressive and people oriented, while men leaders are generally structural, authoritative, transactional, instruction giving and business oriented.

Some respondents even cited the lack of support from the men leadership towards women leadership. Men leaders and management in big organizations as well as in political environment believe that women do not fit the image of the ideal leader (P11). However, several studies suggest that there is no difference between women and men leadership (Ciolac, 2013; Powel, 1990). Therefore, it would be worth taking up a separate study on this believe and see if it exists in the Bhutanese social fabric?

Conclusion

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index ranks Bhutan at a mere 132 out of 144 countries, with a political empowerment index of only 0.056, where a score denoting parity is 1 (Cited in IPU, 2015). Indeed, women's representation

is only 8% and 8.3% in the National Council and National Assembly respectively. A mere 11.5% of representatives in local government elected offices are women.

With the adoption of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, governments unanimously agreed that advancing women's political participation and representation is crucial for delivering on the SDGs. In recognition of the limited number of women in political leadership, the government, through the NCWC has developed "Bhutan's National Plan of Action for the Promotion of Gender Equality in Elected Office" (NPAPGEEO) through a process of broad stakeholder consultations. The question is, is this enough? While this may enhance women leadership friendly programs and budgeting, this is yet another bureaucratic argument for women's participation. Through the entire project, from conducting research, to providing training and educational programs, to participation process, and evaluation, what is missing is a stronger, more ethical one that; 1. Women are entitled to take part in leadership by virtue of being human; 2. Harnessing the capabilities of women in all regards, including but not limited to leadership, is good for the country as a whole?

Therefore, it is all the more relevant for higher institutions like the Royal University of Bhutan to engage in research and promote women's leadership journeys in Bhutan. It is evident from this study that such interventions have significant influence on increased women participation in elected positions. The emphasis, however, must be more on election cycles, and not a one-time intervention as run-up to the elections. It may be noted, that the very foundation of upcoming and aspiring Women for leadership positions both in elected positions as well as in public service, depends largely on how the current batch of Women in leadership positions deliver. In addition, research institutions such as the Royal University of Bhutan should conduct research on a stronger, more ethical element in our own social fabric that harness the capabilities of women in all regards.

References

Appelbaum, S. H., Audet, L., & Miller, J. C. (2003). Gender and Leadership? Leadership and gender? A Journey through the Landscape of Theories. Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 43-51

Ciolac, M. (2013). Male and Female Leadership: Similarities and Differences. Network Intelligence Studies, 37-46.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (5th. ed.): Sage.

Election Commission of Bhutan (2016). Declaration of Results of Second Local Government

Election Results on 28th September 2016. https://www.ecb.bt/local-government-elections-2016/

Gross National Happiness Commission (2011) The Mid Term Review of the Royal Government of Bhutan (2011). Retrieved   www.gnhc.govt.bt

iGNHaS (2014). iGNHaS Strategic Plan. www.rub.edu.bt/iGNHaS

IPU (2015). Women in Politics. Inter-parliamentary Union. http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm

Lavrakas, P. J. (2008). Encyclopedia of survey research methods (Vols. 1-0). Sage Publications, doi: 10.4135/9781412963947

Mertens, D. M. (2020). Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (5 ed.): Sage.

NCWC (2013). National Consultation on Gender Equality in Elected Office (December 2013).Retrieved from www.ncwc.gov.bt/publications

Neale, B. (2011). What is longitudinal research? [SAGE].

Powell, G. N. (1993). Women & Men in Management (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, Canada: Sage

Royal University of Bhutan (2003). The Royal Charter of the Royal University of Bhutan. www.rub.edu.bt/downloads

Thinley, D., et. al. (2013). Women's Participation in Local Governance: An Explorative Study on Women's Leadership Journeys in Bhutan in 2013. Kuensel, Thimphu Bhutan

UNDP (2015). Sustainable Development Goals. https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html

UN Women. (2019, December 6). Infographic: Human rights of women.

https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/multimedia/2019/12/s

UN General Assembly (2011) Resolution adopted by the General Assembly. Agenda item 28 (a). https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/66/130&Lang=E

About the Author

Jamba Tobden worked as the Manager and Deputy Chief Research and Development Officer with the institute for Gross National Happiness Studies (iGNHaS), Royal University of Bhutan from 2013 to 2018. He is currently working as the Chief Researcher with the institute for Sustainable Development Research (iSDR), a private research institute based in Thimphu Bhutan. He has Masters in Social Science from the University of Newcastle, Australia and is currently a PhD student.