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 Royal Government of Bhutan
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 National Commission for Women and Children
 Ministry of Education and Skills Development



International Women’s Day, 8th March 2024

Women’s Day Roundtable Discussion

A Report



Women and Children Division
 Secretariat to the National Commission for Women and Children
 Ministry of Education and Skills Development
 Royal Government of Bhutan



Introduction

The Women and Children Division, Secretariat to the National Commission for Women and Children led the commemoration of the International Women’s Day(IWD) 2024. The IWD 2024 theme, “Invest in women; Accelerate Progress”, was highlighted through a Roundtable Discussion of Women Executives. The Roundtable Discussion was aimed towards cultivating an inclusive dialogue surrounding the challenges and opportunities in attaining gender equality. Women executives from diverse sectors attended the discussion, including parliamentarians, government officials, the private sector, civil society organisations, representatives of persons with disabilities, and the media. It was held on 8th March 2024 from 1:30 PM at the GCIT, Kabesa Thimphu.

Opening Session

Ms. Ugyen Tshomo, Chief Program Officer working for the Women and Children Division, Secretariat to the National Commission for Women and Children, delivered an introductory presentation during the opening session of Roundtable Discussion for Women Executives 2024. She highlighted the situation of women and girls in the country to foster a common understanding among the participants. The presentation also provided a comprehensive overview of sex-disaggregated data in social, economic, and political domains, including education, health, political participation, violence against women and girls, employment, etc. Additionally, the presentation highlighted critical recommendations from the 10th CEDAW Concluding Observations, which served as a framework to guide the discussion among the participants.

Knowledge Sharing/Best Practices by Gender Equality, Disability and Social

Dr. Anu, Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) advisor opines that female leadership has become exceptionally important in a time such as today to lead with humility and courtesy. However, having minimal women representation in leadership positions for generations, it’s been difficult for women to break the glass ceiling. Dr. Anu highlighted the importance of women role models to guide younger women aspiring to take up leadership roles. She also asserted that women in leadership positions are often being judged for being detail oriented, particular and rude despite their skills and leadership capability.



Furthermore, Dr. Anu pointed out the gender roles structured from the upbringing at home. Male counterparts are seen as risk takers from an early age. They are more likely to spend their childhood days outdoors, often doing risky jobs while female counterparts remain indoors most of their time. Such beliefs have underscored the gender norms and stereotypical roles of men and women as they become adults. During the discussion, Hon'ble Minister, Yeezang De Thapa also shared her views on the importance of education in women's lives and the transition of women's role from a confined room to a wider stage.

Interactive Session

Dasho Kesang Chuki Dorjee, an eminent Member of the National Council, moderated the interactive group workshop. Throughout the dialogue, the primary discussion was on gender parity in decision-making and women in leadership. The participants expressed their concerns regarding the challenges and opportunities in breaking the glass ceiling and balancing work life acts. Furthermore, the discussions delved into the intersectionality of gender roles and women in leadership. During the interactive session, participants were divided into four groups and were guided by the questions in *Annexure I*.

A question was posed to the floor by the moderator on why few women participate in politics? Following are the perspective responses:

- Women in Bhutan have improved so much as compared to those days where there was no progressive future due to patriarchal society, social barriers and the belief that women work within homes.
- Lack of education is the key reason why few women participate in politics. Promote education in the education system must be ensured through collaboration and support systems in place.
- Expressed issues of less women supporting women in politics and how can we as women advocate women to help women supporting themselves.
- Robust advocacy and awareness need to be initiated on the understanding of politics and how women can also contribute to nation building.

Group Presentation: Verbatim

Group 1

Firstly, I should say that we are very lucky, we do not suffer like many women do in other countries. When I say that, it's not that we are not facing any problems, but our issues are minimal in comparison. In order to overcome such challenges, we discussed encouraging our



boys and girls from a very young age. Since, every child's upbringings start from home, overcoming barriers to leadership should be taught at home. Moreover, protection of the child during their early age can also hinder their independence.

Secondly, championing role models can also help women to take up leadership roles. While every woman has their own perspective, role models or influencers have their own set of perspectives to share on these issues. Education plays a very important role in the girl's upbringing. While people treat the failure in exams as a means to discontinue education to both men and women in the communities. So, these issues should be rid off by the means of advocating on the importance of educating people.

Even for the third question, advocacy and awareness on education and gender roles will play a vital role. Moreover, making a clear distinction between the gender roles to not be biased. Furthermore, advocacy on gender related policies, gender equality is also crucial in society. This initiative will protect the rights of women and girls in the society which is critical for women in leadership roles.

Creating a safe space to share women's opinions and views in both their professional and personal settings will enable their potential in exchanging views. Highlighting programs connecting experienced women in leadership and inexperienced ones for experience sharing. This will help aspiring women in leadership to contribute to their personal growth and learnings about leadership. These will support women in career development and growth.

Integrating technology to deviate gender inequality while supporting equality. Through AI and virtual tools, many things can be unlocked that will enable gender equality.

Whole women face many unconscious or unnoticed biases, criticism and lack of opportunities, we have progress to make in terms of overcoming them. To make change in the society, collaboration between relevant agencies will help tackle gender related issues.

While people with disabilities in the country overcome many issues, they continue to encounter issues related to their representation in the decision making process. Opportunities that are aligned to their unique skills are not readily apparent and accessible.. It is imperative to implement inclusive decision making policies and their inclusion in the system.



I would like to conclude by saying, we have been listening and now we wanted to be heard. Thank you

Group 2

Generally in terms of conducive and inclusive work environment, the group discussed the need to invest in infrastructure development. A separate washroom in a workplace, a creche centre for the kids. Having the provision of all such services contributes to an inclusive work environment.

Harassment in the workplace is another important agenda to be discussed. A safe process and a forum for women to make women feel comfortable and confident to work. On the question, what can a community do to contribute to a conducive working environment, we discussed that advocacy in the communities should happen even before going into what the communities could do. Actionable programs, the policies, rules and regulations should be in place. Everything placed should be gender sensitive and it should show consciousness about the different needs of women.

While women elected representation in politics is minimum, it is imperative to look into situations of those not elected individuals. We should have a specific program for these women who stepped forward in the past to contest in both the local government and national elections, irrespective of their political parties or level of elective office. The advocacy and mobilisation of women candidates should happen in a comprehensive and well thought-out manner in between elections and not simply on the eve of elections. Education could include topics such as “what is necessary to be a legislator and the needs of the local government leader” and should happen before the election and in between the elections. Moreover, how can the political parties be encouraged and supported to select women candidates? It should be a shared responsibility that those women who participated in earlier elections are groomed and supported through a public program to encourage future participation. Political parties can also take this initiative to support and encourage women to her candidature in the future elections.

It is imperative that gender stereotypes are addressed. The onus is also on the women already in leadership positions to contribute towards overcoming these stereotypical gender roles assumptions e.g. offering of the Marchang.



Women are always in caring and nurturing roles, reproductive roles while male counterparts take care of income generating roles. Are these being perpetuated by the advocacy materials such as in education textbooks? What if we can switch roles? As a practical and doable immediate action, can each of us in the room review whatever advocacy materials we have in our offices and areas of responsibility to see if these could highlight the potentiality of women in leadership roles?

Roles Models: We already have women in leadership positions and this should help leverage aspiring women in other sectors to follow the path. Though it seems like getting ourselves out of our comfort zone, it is imperative that we question those stereotypes and step up.

It is of utmost importance that when budgets are allocated, formulation of legislation, bylaws and policies in place, a gender perspective is a must-have lens to look through. Moreover, capacity development of women is also necessary for them to rise beyond their expectation. Having had the minimum representation of women in politics, it is imperative that we encourage, support and prepare those women who were not elected, besides others, for the next elections irrespective of political party or LG/Parliamentary office being sought. This sort of scheme should be supported for the betterment of women’s representation in elected leadership roles. Supporting such schemes will help women network and boost their confidence.

While there are a number of women in leadership roles such as today’s women participants, we have the responsibility to be worthy role models for our younger generations.

Another group member further recalled the 40*40 initiative of Meghan Markle, the Duchess of Sussex. During her 40th Birthday, she launched the 40*40 initiative inviting 40 friends, activists, Athletes and world leaders to help kick off a global effort by contributing 40 minutes of Mentorship to support women re-entering the workforce. Likewise, mentoring and coaching is something that we should do to uplift women in leadership roles. While mentorship and coaching happens in metro-cities and government institutions, we should also institute a culture of mentoring and coaching system to help groom our women in the private sector. The group gathered today has the potential to become a mentor for our younger folks. Thank You and Happy International Women’s Day



Group 3

One of the barriers that women in politics face in the first place is being able to even think about or consider participating. This is because they have to think about a lot of things such as, who will take care of their family? If she is a working woman, then will her husband's salary be able to sustain the family? And when she is not home, who will take care of her kids, her home? Women have to think twice as much as men before they take one step forward. So that's one of the first and biggest challenges and barriers that they face.

Further, if the family members are not supportive, they have to give up. Many times, a lot of women get discouraged by family members, by their spouses, parents, children. Even if they are interested and they come forward, the community sometimes does not accept their candidature. For example, a political party had to change a candidate due to the fact that the candidate was a female and the community did not accept her. So things like that still prevail even now. Acceptance and support by society, community and family to women in politics are very important, especially considering the vital role they play in the parliament in representing women and addressing women's issues.

Some of the barriers and challenges women face are not physical and are intangible like the fear of losing, embarrassment, insecurity. Women generally do not have the same level of self-confidence as men do and one needs to have a very high level of confidence to be able to get into politics. Women need to overcome these inner fears and build self-confidence. To help overcome these insecurities and encourage more women participation, safety nets could be created. One suggestion is for women civil servants who leave their jobs to participate in politics to be reinstated if they are not elected. If the Civil service rules have such provision, it could potentially encourage women's participation in decision making and leadership roles.

There are always speculations about why other women do not support women candidates. Perhaps, this is due to the lack of faith in women's leadership(?). Though the number of women in leadership positions have increased, the number is still too less. Therefore, it is the responsibility of these women in leadership positions to build that trust and faith in women's leadership, pave the way for future generations and create avenues for more women to take leadership positions by being role models and taking mentorship roles. The onus also lies on women themselves to come forward to take leadership positions and for others



(both women and men) to support and encourage women to come forward. If a community rejects a woman’s candidacy, it could be because they don’t have the faith in women’s leadership. Women leaders have to prove that women are as capable as men and that in fact, some even more. Further, advocacy and education should begin in schools and young girls should be inspired and groomed to take up leadership roles including in politics.

It is imperative to recognize the importance of having more women in the legislature to address women’s issues and represent 50% of the population. However, having a quota system for women in parliament could undermine the potential of women candidates and make the situation worse for women. Instead, it should be made mandatory for political parties to have a minimum number of women candidates so that the pool of women candidates increases and there is a higher probability of more women getting elected. Additionally, political parties should, during campaigns, support women candidates by ensuring that they have companions and take care of their safety as well. To build the self-confidence of women candidates, programs and activities to enhance their soft skills such as communication, campaigning, debates, etc. could be organised.

There is a general lack of acknowledgment and acceptance that there is gender disparity. Though the laws and policies are clear on gender equality, there still prevails subtle gender disparity within the society, at all levels. For this issue to be addressed, there is a need to first recognise the presence of gender inequality by both women and men. For this, advocacy and awareness should be carried out.

Group 4

First point we would like to bring forward is women, we need to overcome our own inhibitions, we need to put ourselves forward. If we take a backseat, people will never pull you out and put you in the front, so we need to stand firm in what we believe and the belief is, we will never be equal to men. We believe that it should be equity, gender equity.

Gender equity, women will never be physically, psychologically equal to men. So that’s one point we would like to bring here. And again, when it comes to taking the gender forward, gender inclusive forward, let’s not just take the women’s agenda forward, let’s tag along other minorities as well. LGBTQTI+, whatever, let’s tag them along, let’s fight along, and let’s bring change.



And again, another point we personally felt, right now we think that men are against us. While some are, most of them are not, because we are different. The challenges that we face are different. It's different to what men have to face. So it's our assumptions that they are against us, when we are against us. Probably that's not 100% true. When we bring gender forward, let's buy in men, buy in everybody, and let's fight, fight it together.

When it comes to the workplace, a conducive, a parent conducive, a gender conducive environment is needed. At one point I would like to bring here that women usually are the mothers who look after kids. And as Thinley Yangchen Dorji has raised it earlier on, a creche is a must. Because that's the place where your kids can be kept, and you can work with a cool mind. Otherwise half of your mind is at home, worrying about whether your babysitter is looking after your baby or not. So likewise, that can go to fathers as well.

And another very important point to be brought about is on awareness and education. Harassment in any form, especially gender-related harassment, should be a zero tolerance policy. Because if that is there, Women victims will not think twice about coming out and reporting it. So the more women come forward, the less the crime will become which can be achieved through awareness and education.

As for future changes regarding gender equality, I would like to, if I'm allowed to call it, equity now. Stay positive. Bhutan, we are very fortunate. We've come a long way. And historically too, as our Honourable Prime Minister has mentioned, we've been very lucky. Think about some other countries where women have to be covered from head to toe with a net on their eyes. If we are to think of such a situation, we are very lucky. But let's not stay happy. We have miles to go, and we will get there some day.

And last, I think insights on women and decision-making and work-life balance. Though we may say that you have to balance it for now. But for the younger folks (women), if you want balance, if you want support, know what you want and choose the right partner. Maybe somebody who is willing to chip in a 50% of child labour, maybe that's the way to go.

"I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept" by Angela Davies. Thank You and Happy International Women's Day.



Key themes

Following key themes are identified through the round table discussion:

1. Legislation and Policy change
2. Challenges and barriers to achieving gender equality
3. Capacity building and training to aspiring women candidates
4. Awareness and advocacy on women leadership and women in politics to general public
5. Community engagement and support to enhance women leadership
6. Economic stability and economic security of women

Key Recommendations

Following are exhaustive list of key recommendations identified following the Roundtable discussion. The action points are clustered under social, economic and political domains.

Sl.no	Key Actions	Timeline	Responsibilities
Social			
1	Establishment of creche services at workplace	Mid-term	All Agencies
2	Establish gender friendly infrastructure-separate toilet for men and women	Mid-term	All agencies
3	Establish a safe space at workplace to address harassment, creating a safe space to share women's opinions and views in both their professional and personal setting	Mid-term	All agencies
4	Creating awareness and educating people on Harassment (A Zero Tolerance Policy)	long-term	WCD, RBP, RENEW



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5	Mainstreaming gender into policies and plans	Short-term	WCD, RBP, RENEW
6	Create an inclusive environment to promote participation from minorities including disability, LBGT+ groups	Short-term	WCD, Cabinet , All agencies
7	Create an inclusive environment to promote participation from minorities including disability, LBGT+ groups	Mid-term	WCD, DPO, Pride Bhutan
8	Creating awareness on gender equality situations to acknowledge gender disparity issues, stereotypes and norms hindering gender equality goals	Short-term	WCD
9	Enhance practice of Parental leave in public and private sectors	Mid-term	WCD, RCSC, DHI, BCCI
Economic			
10	Create a network of safety measures to ensure economic stability for aspiring women candidates	Mid-term	WCD, BAOWE, RENEW, private sectors
11	Conduct a specific program targeting women who came forward to contest in the local government and national elections.	Mid-term	WCD, ECB, BCMD, political parties
12	Skills Development for PwDs (A policy driven system for Inclusive society)	Mid-term	DPOB



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13	Acknowledge unpaid care burden borne by women	long-term	All
Political			
14	Championing women role models in leadership position	long-term	WCD, ECB, RCSC, DHI, BCCI
15	Support women candidates during their campaign (companionships)	Mid-term	WCD, ECB, BCMD, Political Parties
16	Explore possibility of making it mandatory to have minimum number of women candidates in political parties to increase the pool of women candidates	Mid-term	WCD, ECB
17	Institute democracy clubs in schools	Short-term	WCD, MoESD
18	Advocacy and educating women before the elections.	Mid-term	WCD, BCMD, Political parties
19	Conduct programs to groom women candidates who participated in their earlier elections mainly to support and encourage women to her candidature in the future elections.	Mid-term	Political Parties



Annexure III – List of Participants

1. Lyonpo Yeezang De Thapa, Minister for Ministry of Education and Skills Development
2. Hon'ble Tashi Chhenzom, Eminent Member, National Council
3. Hon'ble Kesang Chuki Dorjee, Eminent Member, National Council
4. Hon'ble Dorji Wangmo, Chairperson, Women, Children and Youth Committee, National Assembly
5. Dasho Kesang Deki, Cabinet Secretary
6. Dasho Karma Hamu Dorjee, Chairperson, Royal Civil Service Commission
7. Dasho Deki Pema, Chairperson, Anti-Corruption Commission
8. Dago Zam, Director, Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport
9. Ngagtsho Dorji, Director, Department of Culture, Ministry of Home Affairs
10. Chimi P Wangdi, General Secretary, Tarayana Foundation
11. Tomoko Manabe, Project Formulation Advisor, JICA
12. Aum Phub Zam, Yarkay Proprietor, Private Sector
13. Thinley Yangchen Dorji, General Manager, BBS
14. Tshering Lham Dorji, Chief Program Officer, Cabinet Secretariat
15. Tandin Wangmo, Executive Director, BCMD
16. Kinley Choden, Yeega's Chocolate
17. Duptho Zangmo, Royal Academy of Performing Arts
18. Phub Gyem, Shelter Manager, Nazhoen Lamtoen
19. The Bhutanese Newspaper
20. Tshering Dolker, Executive Director, RENEW
21. Anu Rai, RENEW
22. Lobzang Dorji, BEST Project
23. Nalini Andrade, BEST Project
24. Dr. Anu, Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion, Australia Awards (Virtual)
25. Ugyen Tshomo, Chief Programme Officer, WCD
26. Yeshi Lham Dorji, Chief Programme Officer, WCD
27. Yeshey Lham, WCD
28. Wangchuk Zangmo, WCD
29. Kinley Dorji, WCD
30. Deki Yangzom, WCD
31. Sonam Darjay, WCD



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