

WOMEN'S LIVES AROUND THE WORLD

A Global Encyclopedia

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Bhutan

Overview of Country

Bhutan is a small landlocked kingdom located in the eastern Himalayas of South Asia. It lies between India and China, with a total land area of about 14,000 square miles (38,394 sq. km) and an estimated population of 720,679 (2012). The landscape stretches from subtropical plains and forests in the south bordering India, to subalpine forests and Himalayas in the north bordering Tibet in China. Bhutan is well-known as the "Land of the Thunder Dragon," derived from its Bhutanese name *Druk Yul*. It is said to have earned its nickname because of the fierce storms that often roll in from the Himalayas. Bhutan was the last remaining Buddhist monarchy in the Himalayas since 1907 until the country transitioned into two-party parliamentary democracy in 2008 (BBC 2017). The United Nations recognized Bhutan as a country in 1974.

Bhutan is known for having an extremely youthful profile in terms of its demographics where almost half the population of Bhutan, 45 percent, is under the age of 20. Women comprise 48 percent of the total population (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan 2015), of which 69 percent reside in the rural parts of the country. According to the Population and Housing Census of Bhutan 2005, 31 percent of males are unpaid family workers, compared to

61 percent of the female population in the rural areas. The population density in Bhutan varies from rural to urban areas, given the increasing trend of internal migration. The urban population of the country is at 31 percent, and the remaining 69 percent of the population is rural. The population density of Bhutan is estimated at 41 people per square mile.

Bhutan is extremely rich in terms of natural resources, and it boasts an astounding volume of forest-covered areas and freshwater resources. It is the only carbon negative country in the world; 72.5 percent of its total land area is covered by natural vegetation that creates rich and diverse ecological systems. More than half of the total land area in Bhutan has been allocated as protected areas.

According to the Human Development Report (UNDP 2016), Bhutan ranks 132nd out of 188 countries in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI), with a value of 0.607 in the 2015 index. The Gender Inequality Index (GII) value for Bhutan in 2015 was 0.477, ranking it 110th out of 159 countries. Bhutan observed a 6.0percent increase in HDI value between 2010 and 2015, from 0.572 to 0.607.

Bhutan is primarily an agrarian society, where 62.2 percent of the total population is involved in agriculture. A majority of the population earn their livelihood through subsistence farming and animal husbandry. Small-scale subsistence farmers occupy most of the arable land and produce the majority of the crop and livestock products for the country. According to the country's Labor Force Survey Report, the agriculture sector contributes 12 percent of the total gross domestic product (GDP) (Labour Market Information & Research Division, Department of Employment, Ministry of Labour and Human Resources 2012).

Despite the vast majority of people being involved in farming and the agriculture industry, Bhutan's growth has been inadequate in curbing the issue of poverty or food security in the country. Although agriculture remains a significant source of income and livelihood for the country, its contribution to the nation's GDP in recent years has been receding as people move away from traditional forms of livelihood, such as farming, and opt for a more modern lifestyle and occupations. This has also led to the feminization of the agriculture sector in Bhutan, where female figures are leading the farming industry in the absence of men (World Bank 2014a).

The tourism industry has emerged as an important source of revenue for the country in recent years. "Tourist arrivals and revenues (from convertible currency-paying tourists) expanded at an average of 15 percent per year in

the five years to 2013” (World Bank 2014a). This has led to rapid social and economic growth in the last two decades that has also ushered in mass and swift urbanization along with the socioeconomic transition in the country.

Bhutan has also witnessed rapid decrease in poverty rates from about 23 percent in 2007 to 12–13 percent in 2012, with only 1.6 percent extreme poverty, which is measured as less than USD\$1.25 per day in purchasing power parity. The rapid decline in poverty rates can be attributed to the modernization and commercialization of the agricultural industry; the rapid progress and development of rural infrastructures, such as health services, roads, and education; and the swelling number of hydro-related construction projects (World Bank 2014b).

Given the exceptional socioeconomic strides made by Bhutan in terms of poverty alleviation within an international context, it is transitioning toward the status of a middle-income country (MIC). Bhutan’s GDP per capita already amounts to USD\$2,584 in 2012, and it has positive growth of about 8 percent projected for the next five years, i.e., 2013–2018. Apart from the GDP growth, Bhutan has also achieved great success in meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and improving the services and living conditions for its people. It has internalized seven out of the eight MDGs within its national policies, out of which it has already achieved four goals. It has successfully met the targets for poverty alleviation, achieving gender equality in education, ensuring environmental sustainability, and improving maternal health by reducing three-fourths of maternal mortality (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan and World Bank 2014).

Girls and Teens

When it comes to the girls and teens of Bhutan, the country’s National Youth Policy (2009–2014) is of extreme importance both in mapping the concerns and challenges of these groups and in identifying strategies and measures to address the issues they face. According to Bhutan’s National Youth Policy, the official definition of *young people* in the country is people who belong to the age group of 13–24 years old. More than half the population in Bhutan, that is, 60 percent of its population, is below the age of 25, which represents tremendous possibilities for country’s socioeconomic development. With the advent of globalization and its growing impact in the changing socioeconomic landscape of the country, young people in Bhutan have new opportunities. However, one of the biggest

challenges for Bhutan continues to be youth unemployment. Substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, violence, both unemployment and underemployment, and various health issues are some of the notable socioeconomic hurdles faced by the young people in the country.

Sexual and reproductive knowledge, health, and services for youth, especially young people and girls living in the rural areas, are challenges. According to Bhutan Multiple Indicator Survey 2010, the nation has one of the highest adolescent fertility rates, 59 births per 1,000 women ages 15–19, in the region, where 15 percent of girls give birth before the age of 18. Young girls and boys are sexually active from the ages of 16 and 15 years, respectively, whereby almost one-third of the HIV-infected population in Bhutan is 15–24 years old. Lack of information and knowledge about sex, lack of precaution and access to sexual and reproductive services and guidance, and unplanned sex have been attributed as the major reasons for adolescent pregnancy by the youth (UNFPA 2015).

The National Youth Policy sheds light on such matters and underscores the need for collaborative efforts in addressing these issues. It stresses the need for developing plans and policies for various youth-related programs coupled with effective implementation, monitoring, and evaluation plans for such initiatives. The policy also recognizes the diverse sets of experiences, needs, and socioeconomic positionalities of the young population within the 13–24 age group based on their location, education, marriage status, working conditions, and other dynamics. Based on the situational analysis and youth assessments conducted in 2005 and 2009, the national policy has identified various subgroups and priority target youth groups and recognized their unique, multifaceted needs that demand specific targeted policy interventions. The priority target youth groups emphasize improving and transforming the lives of youth, especially those who are vulnerable, such as unemployed and underemployed youth; domestic workers; young girls working in drayangs (dance bars); uneducated young people and those who have dropped out of school; young people engaged in substance abuse, drugs, alcohol, and risky sexual behaviors; young people living with a disability; orphans; young monks and nuns; and more (Department of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Education, Bhutan 2011).

Education

The education system in Bhutan can be categorized into three different areas: general education, which is the

formal education system, monastic education, and the nonformal education system. While the general education system is the dominant one in Bhutan, monastic education system which comprises of traditional form of monastic education and other non-formal education system are not as common as the general one. The general education system in Bhutan consists of 522 schools, out of which 486 are public schools which includes 51 central schools, and 36 private schools. Moreover, there are 96 extended classrooms (ECRs). The total enrollment from preprimary through high school (grade 12) within the country for 2016 was 169,560, with 9,081 teachers. At the tertiary level, there are 14 institutes, including two private colleges, with a total enrollment of 11,383 students. Adult literacy programs are offered to 7,236 learners across 674 non-formal education (NFE) centers throughout Bhutan. The NFE centers are facilitated by 682 instructors across the country. The net primary enrollment rate (NER) for 2016 was estimated at 94.7 percent, meaning that 94.7 percent of children 6–12 years old are enrolled in the primary education program. The adjusted net primary enrollment rate (ANER) stands at 98.6 percent, indicating that about 1.4 percent of the children are not receiving any formal education (Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education 2016). The Bhutanese education system provides free education from preprimary level until grade ten. The overall education system in Bhutan has also made great strides in terms of securing girls' Adjusted Net Primary Enrolment, which stands at 98.8% as compared to 97% for boys in 2016. Bhutan has also achieved full parity in terms of gender equity at the primary level with a gender parity ratio in favor of girls with 103 girls for every 100 boys. Unlike in the past years, it also was able to achieve equality within the enrollment figures whereby girls comprised 50.5% of the total school enrollment within the formal school education system for 2016. This has been largely attributed to the improvement that have been observed over the past years within the number of girls' enrollment at the lower levels of education (Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education 2016).

Despite the decline in gender disparity pertaining to education enrollment rates at the primary level, the inequality is very much visible at the lower and middle secondary levels and is even more pronounced at the secondary and tertiary levels. Such discrimination has a far-reaching impact on girls and their lives, as it prevents them from channeling opportunities that lead to higher education, employment opportunities, and their ability

to participate in the overall socioeconomic development process.

Despite the higher rate of primary school completion compared to males by females (86% for males vs. 93% for female) in Bhutan, due to poor retention and an increase of dropouts among girls, the rate for higher secondary-level school completion, which stands at an estimated 71%, is however higher for males, than it is for females. “Thirty-four percent of adult women have reached a secondary or higher level of education compared to 34.5 percent of their male counterparts whereas across all ages, 72 percent of males are literate, but only 55 percent of females are literate” (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan and Asian Development Bank 2013).

The overall literacy rate of the country for the population 6 years and above is estimated at 63%. The literacy rate is higher in the urban areas at 79% as compared to its rural counterpart, which accounts for about 56%. The literacy rate is higher among the younger age groups, but the number plummets from the 10–14 age group, and the numbers are the lowest for the older population of 55 years and above. The literacy rate for the youth demographic (15–24) is 86%, and it is 55% for the adult (15 years and above). It is estimated that more than half the population (54%) is literate in both a local language and English, whereas 8% is literate only in a local language (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan and Asian Development Bank 2013).

Overall, girls made up 50.5% of the total school enrollment for the year 2016 within the school education system in Bhutan. This is almost indicative of equal representation of girls at the higher secondary level, including private schools that had been unlikely in the past years. This can be attributed to the improvement in girls' enrollment, retention ratio, survival rate, and improvement in performance levels that have been on par with boys. Bhutan aims to eliminate gender disparity within literacy levels for both adult and youth groups from its education system (Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education 2016).

Bhutan has been rigorously promoting NFE programs in an effort to address the low adult literacy rates, which is especially high for women. Bhutan was also awarded the UNESCO Confucius Prize for Literacy in 2009 for its outstanding contribution and holistic approach to literacy and its success in reaching rural areas and adults through NFE programs. Since the initiation of NFE program by the National Women's Association of Bhutan in 1990, more than 140,000 men and women have benefited from it (GNH Commission 2010).

Despite the provision of equal education opportunities for children in Bhutan, inequities in completion of secondary education remain. Regardless of the existing socioeconomic class and structural inequalities, children in Bhutan are entitled to better and improving educational opportunities and infrastructures, such as those provided to the children of its neighboring South Asian nations. The government policy intervention that extends coverage for all and targets interventions with electricity and gas provisions has curbed inequalities among children to some extent. However, the issue of inequity in the completion of secondary education remains an issue where the inequality-adjusted completion rate was only 32 percent in 2012, with an adjusted attendance of 84 percent (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan and World Bank 2014).

Health

Bhutan has made commendable progress in the health sector. The improving socioeconomic condition of the country, constitutionally mandated free health care services, effective and well-managed policies, and steady investment in the public health sector has contributed to the nation's overall health status. Bhutan signed the Alma Ata Declaration and integrated a primary health care approach within its health care system in 1978. This opened avenues for collaborative health practices between Bhutan's traditional medicine services and modern health care system that strongly focuses on community participation (WHO 2017).

Extensive immunization programs have resulted in a significant decrease in vaccine-preventable diseases, with zero incidence of poliomyelitis since 1986. Bhutan has also achieved some noteworthy public health victories and has successfully eliminated endemic goiter and leprosy, visibly reduced the maternal and infant mortality rates, and curbed the number of deaths due to major communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis (TB) and malaria. The average life expectancy of the country has notably increased from 37 years in 1960 to more than 68 in 2012, whereas the mortality and morbidity rates have largely decreased. Bhutan has placed a great emphasis on access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation and has substantially increased the coverage for those services.

Despite the milestones achieved in terms of general health of the people, new challenges emerge with the growing population and changing demographics coupled with unplanned and rapid urbanization, epidemiological and

environmental transitions, and changing trends within the lifestyle of the people. Nevertheless, Bhutan has met several health indicators and targets set within the MDGs and has opted for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that succeed the MDGs beyond 2015. The country's 11th national five-year plan highlights the development and strengthening of health care systems and formulating cost-effective interventions as a key priority (WHO 2017).

Access to Health Care

The health infrastructure in Bhutan has been strong with its impressive multitiered health system in place. The JDWNRH national referral hospital in Thimphu, Yebilabsta, in the center of the country and Mongar in the east are the top health institutions in the country. There are 26 other hospitals, most of which are located in the district headquarters. There are 158 basic health units (BHUs) under these hospitals, where 439 outreach clinics are run by the health personnel. BHUs in Bhutan are categorized into grades I and II, where a grade II BHU consists of three health assistants and a grade I BHU also has one doctor and nursing staff in addition to the health assistants. Out of 158 health units, only 10 are classified as grade I. In the remote areas where the closest health center is more than a two-hour walk from the village, they have a volunteer village health worker. An estimated 1,300 volunteer health workers are providing basic health care services in rural areas of Bhutan.

In cases of complex health issues and treatments where the national health services are unable to adhere to the health needs of the patients, Bhutan's national health care system conducts referrals to neighboring countries, such as India, and overseas. For other health services, the health facilities and professionals in the country, especially the outreach clinics, have been successful in reaching out to the majority of the population. In 2000, an estimated 78 percent of the villages in Bhutan had access to a health center within a walking distance of two hours and 89 percent within three hours. Four percent were beyond six hours of walking distance in terms of access to health service (UNICEF 2006). Considering the tough terrains and challenging geographical structures of the country, where roadways and transportation are not connected to the remote villages, Bhutan has achieved notable progress in its health care system. Also, the fact that almost all basic health services in Bhutan so far have been free of cost makes Bhutan one of the few developing countries

to maintain such an extensive free service. Essential drugs are widely available in the basic health units (BHUs) throughout Bhutan.

Bhutan also gives importance to its traditional health practices and remedies and promotes So-Wa-Rigpa, which is an indigenous health practice that uses several species of Himalayan flora. The majority of the people who inhabit the rural areas of Bhutan have faith in traditional healers and lamas and reach out to them first when in need of health services and counseling. Some of the district hospitals also offer traditional medicine and specialize in traditional remedies and healing (UNICEF 2006).

Maternal Health

Women in Bhutan, especially in rural areas, face specific health challenges. As they cook on open fires in kitchen rooms with poor ventilation, they are vulnerable to various chronic lung diseases. Access to drinking water, health services, and other basic facilities may not be easy where they have to walk long distances on a daily basis, which leaves them strained. Women also do the majority of household chores and either work in agricultural fields or their respective occupations, which means that they tend to work longer hours than men on an everyday basis.

Gender equality and women's empowerment have played a key role in promoting and ensuring reproductive health care to women in Bhutan. However, women still face health risks that are related to pregnancy and childbirth. The contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) is higher among women with low socioeconomic status. Rough geographical terrain and unequal socioeconomic status also prevent certain women from having access to skilled birth attendants. Given that 55 percent of women are anemic, poor nutrition is another major issue when it comes to pregnant women and mothers. Despite the provision for free health care services, Bhutan now needs to strategize around addressing the issues of quality health services and improving access and equity to all population groups (World Bank 2014b).

Reproductive Health

In Bhutan, adolescents (ages 10–19) and youth (ages 20–24) make up a larger proportion of the population. The population of young people aged 10–24 years constitutes about 56 percent of the total population. While this young population is often heralded as the future and torchbearers of the nation, they also face unique emotional and physical

challenges related to health, sexuality, education, employment, and more.

Some of the pressing issues they face are substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, early marriage, sexually transmitted infections, low use of contraceptives, and lack of access and knowledge on sexual and reproductive health. Although unmarried young people can use those services, the reproductive health services and facilities that are available in the country are primarily targeted for married couples.

“However, only 17 percent of the youth population has comprehensive knowledge about HIV and AIDS whereas 90 percent of people living with HIV contracted the infection through sexual transmission. For every 100,000 live births, 180 women die from pregnancy-related causes; and the adolescent fertility rate is 44.9 births per 1,000 live births” (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan 2015).

Employment

According to the *Bhutan Living Standards Survey 2012 Report* (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan and Asian Development Bank 2013), the estimated unemployment rate is 2.7 percent. Compared to the rural areas, where the unemployment rate is at 1.6 percent, urban areas have a higher rate of unemployment, with a rate of 5.8 percent.

The youth population of Bhutan comprises the largest unemployed demographic; 7.3 percent of young people reported unemployment in 2012, whereas the figure was double in the urban areas. Female participation in the labor market is 65.8 percent, and it is 76.4 percent for men. Almost half the population of Bhutan, 48.9 percent, is under the age of 25, making youth the majority. The issue of youth unemployment is garnering attention within the government, private sector, civil society, and particularly among young people who are looking for ways to engage in constructive dialogue and collaborative measures to overcome the issue at hand (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan and Asian Development Bank 2013).

Women's opportunities for employment outside the home in Bhutan are limited due to household responsibilities assigned to them and their relative lack of education. Women's labor force participation is significantly lower than that of men, particularly in urban areas. Women usually fill the low-skilled and low-paid jobs in the country. They hold less than one-quarter of the positions in civil service and are largely sidelined within government jobs, which has resulted in limited opportunities and

participation of women in decision-making and national planning positions. Similarly, women's participation in politics is also very low, with a very few women members (*tshogpas*) elected on the district development committees. Only four female members have been elected to the National Assembly.

Bhutan's late start in terms of education for girls in general is attributed as one of the leading causes for the employment disadvantage that women face. Although young girls and women in Bhutan are making progress, breaking stereotypes, and setting examples within educational and professional avenues, the improvement in the overall situation of women has been slow. A traditional mind-set and patriarchal values are still very much palpable within Bhutanese society, which conditions young girls to have low expectations for women (UNICEF 2006).

Family Life

The idea of family in Bhutan is subtle and extends beyond a family unit or nuclear family, encompassing not just the concept of extended family but also community, village, and neighborhood. In Bhutan, people are accustomed to relating to their friends and neighbors with care and interest and a family-like intimacy that permeates every facet of Bhutanese society. The concept of family evokes a sense of security and well-being among Bhutanese people that ties directly into their enjoyment of happiness. Bhutan's strong sense of history, culture, religion, and the nation as a whole is very much embedded within and dependent on family structures that are still intact in Bhutan. Family is considered one of the most significant social institutions and is directly tied to culture, governance, and environment. Family is looked upon as an active working unit, which is believed to be a major factor in reinforcing and maintaining the country's stability (Leaming 2010).

In Bhutan, people are believed to have a single-minded national identity that is part of their sense of "family." The typical Bhutanese family is large and includes interdependent and intergenerational extended families. Their social structure and religion deem that they take care of each other. Historically, a key element of family life was the availability of labor within extended families. However, this is changing with rural to urban migration and the "Westernization" of families, as they then tend to become independent and nuclear. However, such family structures are still not as dominant as the traditional extended family. Families are believed to contribute to overall "natural"

happiness in Bhutan. The government's multidimensional approach to development is aimed at "spiritual and material balance and harmony," which is believed to perpetuate and expand on their natural happiness.

Despite the existence of matrilineal inheritance and the fact that 30 percent of Bhutanese households are headed by females, the patriarchal family structure is still palpable and is the dominant form of family life in Bhutan (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan and World Bank 2014). However, it is not uncommon for men to partake in household chores. Bhutanese essentially practice monogamy, which is classified in three popular categories: childhood engagement (*chung ngen*), arranged marriage, and love marriage. The popular traditional practices of childhood engagements and arranged marriages were based on family and ethnic ties and are slowly being replaced with relationships based on mutual love and affection today. The marriage custom does not necessitate the bride to start living in the bridegroom's house, unlike the majority of South Asians practice. It is entirely circumstantial and depends on the preference and convenience of the families of each household. Hence, it is not uncommon for a new husband to leave his house and start living in his wife's house.

Politics

The political scenario of Bhutan has progressed over time along with its traditions, culture, and values. Bhutan's ruling paradigm changed when the transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy happened in 2008. Bhutan did not have national currency, telephones, schools, hospitals, a postal service, or public services until the 1960s. In 1961, His Majesty King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the third monarch of Bhutan, took initiatives to end the self-imposed isolation of Bhutan and launched the country on the path to modernization. Bhutan's democratization process has steadily progressed since then.

The final draft for the country's first democratic constitution was made in August 2007; it formed the foundation and resolutions for the elections that were carried out in 2007 and 2008. After a serious and thorough debate, the new democratic constitution was enacted by the newly elected Parliament in 2008. It was signed by the king on July 18, 2008. The constitution not only ensures that Bhutan is a democratic country within the international community, but it also takes into account Bhutan's unique cultural and historical heritage. The fundamental civil rights for all Bhutanese citizens are clearly stated in the constitution.

Equal justice under the law and free education for all children are highlights among other civil rights. Access to further education based on qualifications is clearly specified in the constitution as well.

The constitution appears to be ideal and as having no significant inadequacy, but it includes provisions that are not often seen. For example, the age limit for the king's retirement is 65 years, and capital punishment is prohibited. The most unique provision protects the environment by requiring that a minimum of 60 percent of Bhutan be covered by forest at all times. The government consists of the legislature, judiciary, and executive bodies. The legislative body is composed of the ruling political party, the opposition, and the National Council.

The July 2013 primary elections evolved the second democratic process, with multiple political parties participating in elections for the lower house. The Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) rates and international measures of governance and corruption of Bhutan are quite good. Bhutan ranks 31st among 177 countries and scores better than Israel, Spain, and Poland in terms of corruption perception. The increase of Bhutan's comprehensive integrity score in recent years reflects that the domestic perception of corruption is on the decline.

Upholding gender equality and empowering women has been one of the most important issues and an integral crosscutting development theme within the Royal Government's development agenda. The commitment for gender equity is included in the country's Vision 2020 and the current Tenth Five Year Plan. Despite the gaps in achieving complete gender equality, women in Bhutan have enjoyed a considerably better status compared to women in other developing countries. The constitution endorsed in 2008 upholds the principle of equal pay for equal work, which guarantees equality in work for all citizens, including women. In addition, it contains special provisions to abolish all forms of discrimination and exploitation against women, which includes prostitution, trafficking, abuse, harassment, violence, intimidation, degrading treatment, and economic exploitation. Furthermore, statutory laws do not allow any sort of discrimination against women in terms of property rights and family law. These laws also protect them from crimes of sexual assault, rape, domestic assault, and molestation (GNH Commission 2010).

Despite the fact that Bhutan has achieved gender parity in primary and secondary schools, there is still need for improvement and upgrading in tertiary education. In terms of the Gender Inequality Index (GII), Bhutan ranks

110th out of 159 countries, whereas the female participation within the labor market of the country stands at 58.7 percent compared to 72.8 percent for men (UNDP 2016).

The law protects the rights of women in Bhutan, and women are treated as equal to men. Women enjoy the same legal rights as men and have equal access to education, health facilities, and other public services. In rare cases, women can be seen holding a stronger position than men, especially in western and central Bhutan, including some parts of the east. In some areas of Bhutan, a matrilineal form of family system is still in practice, where land is inherited through the mother; as a result, 60 percent of rural women hold land registration titles. Given that the most capable member of the family is in charge of the family in Bhutan, the mother or the eldest daughter also has the opportunity to become the head of the household. Women are also seen to be in charge of the family, especially in the absence of their male counterparts when they migrate to urban areas in search of works.

Thirty percent of families in Bhutan are headed by women. However, there is disparity between male-headed and female-headed households in terms of status, privilege, and growth. Irrespective of the matrilineal inheritance and a nondiscriminatory labor market, women who are leading families and households continue to face livelihood disparity. This results in uneven and disproportionate household work for women, which reduces their opportunities (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan and World Bank 2014).

In comparison to its neighboring countries in South Asia, Bhutan practices relatively more equality between men and women within the household, as both men and women partake in the domestic chores. Such shared household responsibility has been an integral part of Bhutan's self-sufficient, traditional lifestyle. Nevertheless, it is women who do the majority of the household work, and despite their relatively high status, they have yet to achieve full equality. Women in Bhutan face both overt and subtle forms of gendered discrimination, which is reinforced by traditional mind-sets and religious values regarding women's sexual vulnerability and the lesser competence and capabilities they possess compared to men. Some religious Buddhists also believe that by the virtue of their sex and gender, women are further away than men from attaining enlightenment in the cycle of rebirth. Although Bhutan marvels at the fact that women within their nation enjoy greater gender equality and higher status compared to other countries in the region, women and their

contributions are still considered as mediocre and lesser in comparison to men (UNICEF 2006).

Bhutan signed the Treaty for the Rights of Women and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981. In addition, it has adopted many strategies and formulated plans, policies, and programs to address the issue and expressed its commitment to gender equality. While any form of explicit discrimination against women has not been observed, there are gender gaps and issues related to unequal access to economic opportunities and limited participation in decision-making processes that still require attention. Men dominate the public service sector, with only 26 percent of women involved in civil service. In 2015, only 8.3 percent of the members of Parliament were women. Women's exceedingly low and weak representation in decision-making bodies within the government, parliamentary bodies, and cabinet positions, including civil service, calls for a transformation within the sociopolitical systems of the nation (UNDP 2016).

Religious and Cultural Roles

Bhutan is a deeply spiritual country and the last remaining Buddhist kingdom in the world. The influence of Bhutan's rich cultural heritage and highly valued relationship with nature is embedded and visible in the everyday lives of the people. Its pristine environment and untainted and harmonious culture have made the country renowned as "the Last Shangri-La."

Buddhism has a great influence on Bhutanese culture. The majority of the population follows Buddhism, and the remaining minority follows Hinduism. There are numerous sacred Buddhist stupas, monasteries, and temples across the country. The country places a strong emphasis on Buddhist teachings, and Bhutanese receive free education from the government.

Bhutan's pristine and authentic culture allures people from all over the world. Bhutan has managed to preserve its cultural authenticity and rich heritage through years of isolation. People in Bhutan wear traditional dresses to work; men wear *gho*, and women wear *keras*. They speak the local languages, Dzongka and Sharchop. The country is replete with native Dzongka-style architectural features and buildings that are inspired by Buddhism.

Tsechus, or festivals, in Bhutan are very important and major cultural events where people come together and celebrate the festivity. Most of the *dzongs* (fortresses) and

goembas (monasteries) have annual festivals featuring mesmerizing dance dramas. The largest of these festivals is the *tsechu*—with dances in honor of Guru Rinpoche. Festivals in Bhutan are very grand and colorful and are an integral part of Bhutanese life. It offers a unique insight into the cultural legacy of Bhutan. The festivals include masked dancing with colorful and bright costumes and performances of wrathful and compassionate deities, heroes, demons, and animals (Tourism Council of Bhutan).

Tourism

Closed off from the world for decades, Bhutan has only allowed tourism since 1974. Bhutan is considered one of the most exotic travel destinations in the world, replete with rich culture, tradition, and pristine natural habitat. The Royal Government of Bhutan strongly adheres to the policy of "High Value, Low Impact" tourism, and it regulates the tourism industry by limiting the number of tourist admissions in the country, which further adds to the allure of Bhutan's exclusive and mysterious profile. Although the total volume of international tourists for Bhutan is extremely small, it enjoys a high profile within the global tourism industry and is often regarded as one of the most sought-after tourist destinations in the world.

Bhutan is the only country in the world to impose constitutional obligations on its people to protect the natural environment by requiring that at least 60 percent of its land remain under forest cover at all times. Given its strict policies in terms of environment conservation and protection, Bhutan has been successful in safeguarding its natural resources and environment. This has earned Bhutan a record for being the only "carbon-negative" country in the world, which means it emits more oxygen (O₂) than carbon dioxide (CO₂). Bhutan has set a new standard for environmental conservation today and is looked upon as the world leader when it comes to environmental protection and sustainability.

Tourism also plays an integral role in terms of employment opportunities, revenues, and foreign exchange; it is a vibrant business that is rapidly growing service sectors for Bhutan. In 2016, a total number of 209,570 international tourists visited the country, which contributed US\$ 73.74 million to the country's economy. This marks an increase of 4% from 2015 where the country had secured US\$ 71.05 million from tourism industry (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2016). Tourism is also considered a key factor in driving the country's efforts and commitments to promote

and protect the local environment, culture, tradition, and diversity of the country. It highly emphasizes the practice of sustainable tourism and a reduced carbon footprint. By promoting community-based tourism and ecotourism, Bhutan strives to support local communities and create sustainable economies in the rural areas. While this tourism approach aims to reduce the poverty in remote areas of Bhutan, it also helps to promote environmental conservation, sustainability, and awareness within those communities (World Bank 2014a).

Although tourism in Bhutan has opened avenues for self-employment and additional income for local communities, it is usually the male figures who directly benefit from the revenue generated from this sector. It is mainly the men who are in the forefront of the tourism business in Bhutan, from hotels and restaurants to local guides, porters, and vendors.

Gross National Happiness

As opposed to gross domestic product (GDP), a parameter widely adopted across the world to gauge the economic and living standards of a country, Bhutan practices the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH). The term was coined by the fourth king of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, in the 1970s and is still prevalent in Bhutan. The concept of GNH was built on the idea that sustainable development should adopt a holistic approach in its definition of progress and encompass noneconomic aspects of well-being as well. Bhutan has identified four key elements, or pillars, of GNH: equitable and sustainable socioeconomic development, preservation and promotion of cultural and spiritual heritage, environmental conservation, and good governance. These four pillars have further been distributed into nine areas, which comprehensively incorporate the issues of health, education, living standard, governance, cultural and ecological diversity, community vitality, and so on. Each of these areas lays out the parameters of well-being and happiness for a good life, per the principles of GNH for the Bhutanese people.

Issues

Poverty

Bhutan has made noteworthy improvements in reducing income poverty, as estimated by the percentage of the people living below the national poverty line. According to the World Bank, the poverty rate has been on decline,

decreasing from 36.3 percent in 2000 to 23.2 percent in 2007. Given the facts, it is apparent that the country is on track toward meeting its poverty reduction targets. This economic improvement in people's lives in general is an indication of rapid economic growth that is made possible by effective redistributive programs, including sustained social investments. Even after the significant growth over the past few years, poverty still continues to be a principal rural crisis, with 98 percent of the poor residing in rural parts of the country. This situation is intensified by the human poverty conditions and comparatively poorer access to social and economic services in the rural parts of the country (World Bank 2014a).

Referring to the report "Bhutan Poverty Analysis 2012," 12 percent of the current population lives below the national poverty line, 30 percent of the population lives in the urban areas, and 70 percent lives in the suburban and rural areas. The report also indicates that the poverty in rural areas is 16.7 percent, in contrast to the urban poverty at 1.8 percent. Inadequate agricultural productivity; access to alternative businesses, markets, and commerce; communication and road infrastructure; and the effect of rural-to-urban migration have been attributed as the reasons for the higher prevalence rate of poverty in rural areas. The issue of poverty is also gendered and has far-reaching effects on women, especially in rural and traditional families. The disproportionate responsibility of family obligations and household chores, including child care, by women significantly augments their impoverished state, as it restricts their opportunities and choices to engage in remunerated or skilled labor.

Refugee Crisis in the South

Bhutan is a diverse country in terms of its people and ethnicity. There are four main ethnic groups in Bhutan: the Ngalong, who inhabit the western part of Bhutan; the central Bhutanese; the Sharchop in the east; and the Lhotshampa, also known as the Nepali Bhutanese, in the south. The Buddhists in the north, also known as the "Drukpas," enjoy a privileged and elite status compared to the Nepali-speaking southerners who are Hindu. The Lhotshampas in Bhutan are mostly Hindus and are a minority group who migrated from Nepal to the southern part of Bhutan following the Anglo-Bhutanese war of 1865. The Lhotshampas are the progenies of peasant farmers from Nepal who first settled in the southern region of Bhutan and subsequently formed agrarian communities there (Hutt 2005).

During the 1980s, the ruling Drukpa elites perceived the Lhotshmapa people as a threat to their national political, religious, and social order and took measures to contain them and their democratic movements by imposing a homogeneous national identity with state policies and mechanisms, such as the 1985 Citizenship Act—the One Nation, One People policy. When a string of measures were passed that directly discriminated against their group and rendered them stateless and denationalized, the Lhotshampas organized mass protests and public demonstrations in resistance and opposed such discriminatory policies. As a result, they were vilified and regarded as “antinationals” by the government. Following the demonstrations, the government imprisoned and tortured thousands of people from southern Bhutan. As a result, most of the Lhotshampas were compelled to escape the country and sought refuge in neighboring countries, such as India and Nepal. By the end of 1992, it was estimated that more than 100,000 people were living in UN refugee camps located in the southeastern part of Nepal.

“Such mass ethnic cleansing caused civil unrest and conflict in the south which led to the mass exodus of more than tens of thousands of people who have been living in refugee camps in Nepal since the early 1990s” (Hutt 2005). The displacement of more than 100,000 Lhotshmapas is one of the largest in history, accounting for about 20 percent of the total Bhutanese population at the time. It was only in 2007, after 16 years in refugee camps, that resettlement initiatives by the UN refugee agency and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Nepal launched a resettlement program for the Bhutanese refugees. It has relocated over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees from Nepal to third countries since the launch of the program. A core group of eight countries came together in 2007 to relocate Bhutanese refugees in their respective countries: Australia (5,554), Canada (6,500), Denmark (874), New Zealand (1,002), the Netherlands (327), Norway (566), the United Kingdom (358), and the United States (84,819) (Shrestha 2015).

Women and girls are even more vulnerable amid the refugee crisis because they are susceptible to gender-based violence, discrimination, sexual abuse, and exploitation. Instances of rape, sexual assault, polygamy, trafficking, domestic violence, and child marriage within the refugee camps have been reported by Bhutanese refugee women and girls. Adhering to sexual and reproductive health needs, preventing sexual violence and abuse, and providing services to survivors under a crisis situation like this become

even more crucial and challenging. Refugee women also reportedly faced systematic discrimination in accessing aid because of discriminatory practices in terms of refugee registration procedures and a lack of protection for women. Married refugee women were not eligible to apply for repatriation or rations independently. Furthermore, they were barred from registering their children if they were not fathered by a refugee. Such systematic and legal barriers further marginalize refugee women and deny them their agency and independency. They were denied from having independent access to basic needs such as food, shelter, and supplies in the absence of their spouse, which posed even more challenges to those who wanted to separate from their husbands to end their abusive marriages. They were left with no choice but to live in their abusive relationships or to marry another man, which meant losing the legal custody of their children (HRW 2003).

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