**Career progression of women in “the world’s happiest country”, Bhutan**

Dr Mahan Poorhosseinzadeh, Australian Institute of Business

Dr Sangita De, Griffith University

Professor Emeritus Glenda Strachan, Griffith University

**Introduction**

The issue of the low representation of women in management is an internationally recognised problem. However, little is known about the circumstances and reasons for this issue in many countries, including the South Asian country of Bhutan which has a unique culture and one that is distinct from its neighbour India (Strachan et al., 2015). Bhutan is a predominantly Buddhist country with its roots as a matriarchal society (Asian Development Bank, 2014). The current national policy based on the Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index which emphasises social welfare (Reinfeld, 2003) is designed to measure the collective happiness and wellbeing of the Bhutanese people (National Commission for Women and Children, 2013).

This paper focuses on the question: What aspects of culture, national and organisational policies and practices assist or undermine women’s advancement to senior positions in the public sector? The study uses a qualitative approach with a social constructivist worldview grounded in critical social philosophy. It is an exploratory study based on ethnographic observation and interviews with female and male public servants. Preliminary findings highlight that the lack of long hours working culture is essential, as is the social support for family care promote gender equality. Family-friendly incentives such as “breastfeeding flexitime” and “bring your child to work after school” are favoured in Bhutanese culture. Using Hofstede’s Dimensions of Culture theory (Hofstede, 1984, Hofstede and Bond, 1988), how do these national characteristics translate into women’s careers? The interviews also reveal that gender stereotypes are considered as an impediment to women’s career progression. There is evidence of “competing modernities” between that “envisaged by the Bhutanese” and a “Western-style” modernity (Dayaram and Pick, 2012).

# The Research Context

Bhutan is a Buddhist nation of 768,000 (Bhutan Population, 2020) with 18 people per square kilometre, one of the lowest population densities in the world. Today, almost two-thirds of the country is rural, with just over one-third urban. Bhutan measures happiness as well as economic growth and wants to bring its citizens into the 21st-century while retaining its traditional culture. Bhutan is a Himalayan country geographically wedged between India and China. Historically a remote kingdom, Bhutan is made up of six valleys each separated by high Himalayan mountains. Prior to the 1960s, Bhutan was an entirely agricultural country with urban settlements and travel between valleys was extremely difficult and mainly on foot or with donkeys. This isolation meant the development of a unique culture(s), languages, and ways of life. Bhutan is a predominantly Buddhist country with its roots as a matriarchal society (ADB, 2014). Bhutanese Buddhism (the religion of three-quarters of the population) is unique in character (with Hinduism as the main religion in some regions of the country).

Before the 1960s, the land inheritance in Bhutan was more matrilineal in contrast to the patrilineal system in Tibet (Verma and Ura, 2018). Bhutanese women were mostly confined within their homes to take care of children and their land, and they were able to practice polygamy to keep their property (Priyadarshini, 2014). Dema (2017) highlights that there was hereditary land ownership among Bhutanese women, and the social classification was based on the quantity of land owned and matrilineal agricultural inheritance. Historically, monogamy, polyandry and polygamy coexisted in Bhutan. Wijesekera argues that the leading cause of fraternal polyandry was extreme poverty as a community of property may have led to the community of wives. Polyandry was a means of keeping the family property together.

Bhutan's development strategy began in 1961 with a series of Five-Year Plans to bring the country out of its geographic isolation. External assistance from India and international organisations has been critical in achieving change. Bhutan economy remains mostly agrarian, despite the limited amount of suitable land for agriculture. Changes in the 1960s and 70s, 'modernisation'**,**has led to more porous borders, as Bhutan moved away from its policy of isolation. This modernisation led to 'tremendous improvement' in living standards but also the introduction of modern values (Dayaram and Pick, 2012). Some scholars have said that these changes' undermine the traditional values of the Bhutanese people'. There is no doubt that these changes have brought additional cultural influences.

In order to comprehend the shift in women's workforce, it is critical to understand the cultural shift in Bhutan over the last three decades. Literature suggests varied arguments regarding the shift in cultures over the years, and there are different versions of Bhutan's history of cultural change. Wangchuk (2000), in his article discusses the different aspects of both feudal system and Tibetan cultural effect on Bhutan before 1960s. He suggested that western scholars and some Bhutanese scholars assume Bhutan to have a feudal system before the 1960s. However, Tibet's influence on Bhutan's socio-cultural systems is also likely to exist. He further highlights the fact that Bhutan is formed of several layers of culture due to arrival of people in Bhutan from different backgrounds that creates a diverse background. Women's career progression in Bhutan is also subject to cultural values and especially, Buddhist culture, due to Tibetan cultural influence on Bhutan. Studies show how Buddhism has shaped women's career progression over the years. Fernando and Cohen (2013) discussed the role of Buddhism on women’s career progression. This study indicates that Buddhist women in Sri Lankan context play an intricate role in shaping their career path by manoeuvring their religious beliefs.

Prior to the 1960s, there were no formal schools except for those who provided religious instruction provided through Buddhist monasteries (except a couple of private schools). Since the 1960s, education has been a significant financial commitment of the government and today education is compulsory for youth aged 6 to 16 years (Schuelka, 2012). Traditionally, women's access to education was hindered by factors like security, inaccessibility of schools and gender bias (Priyadarshini, 2014). In 2018 there were 880 schools and institutes in Bhutan and more girls than boys were enrolled in Classes VII-X in secondary education (*Annual Education Statistics, 2018, p. 18)*. Almost as many women as men (5237 women and 6074 men) are studying at university and tertiary education colleges. However, twice as many men are studying in engineering college, and only 25 per cent of students at the College of Science and Technology are women (p. 22).

Bhutan, which famously measures Gross National Happiness in addition to Gross Domestic Product, has some way to go to becoming a place where there is gender equality (Brooks, 2013). The core development philosophy of Bhutan is maximising the happiness of all Bhutanese and enabling them to gain their full and innate potential as human beings (Rinzin et al., 2007). The Gross National Happiness was initiated by the fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck in the 1970s by (UN, 2020). Gross National Happiness (GNH) is the cornerstone of Bhutan's development approach.

The current national policy is guided by the *Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index* and emphasises the social welfare and the collective happiness and wellbeing of the Bhutanese people (Reinfeld, 2003). For the first time GNH was flashed in 1999, when government visioned for the next 20 years. The language in this document used by scholars to describe alternative perspectives on development(Brooks, 2013, Rinzin, 2006, Rinzin et al., 2007). The GNG inspires from the concepts in Buddhist which is known as The Middle Path, and its primary goal is to seek and balance multiple goals which have a people-centric approach to development (Brooks, 2013, Rinzin et al., 2007). The GNH is upheld by four pillars that aspire to achieve:

* Pillar 1: Sustainable and Equitable Socio-Economic Development;
* Pillar 2: Conservation of the Environment;
* Pillar 3: Preservation and Promotion of Culture, and;
* Pillar 4: Good Governance

According to Rinzin (2006), following GNH in Bhutan, this country faced with a reduction in poverty and at the same time improvement in education, justice, basic health, gender equality, and access to clean water and sanitation. Moreover, in a short period, Bhutan became the country with the highest GDP in South Asia who meet all the Millennium Development Goals of its target and also a country with a barter economy. There is a debate that Bhutan could grow higher without the Middle Path approach, but this would likely have come with some environmental and socio-cultural costs.

## Women’s participation in the Labour Market in Bhutan

In Bhutan, women have primitively been only involved in housework, and though the land ownership in Bhutan was originally matrilineal, yet women were bound to be home carers. This scenario has shifted over the years and women are gradually transitioning into industry, governance and politics. Labour Force Survey Report (National Statistics Bureau Bhutan, 2018) shows women's participation has increased in Bhutanese workplaces and women are transitioning into professional workforce such as public sectors, and many are employed as doctors, engineers, pilots and other professions (Wangdi, 2017). Women compromise 63 per cent of the workforce in agriculture comparing to 46 per cent men; 27 per cent in service compared to 40 per cent men; 9 per cent in the industry compared to 13 per cent men. Women have been progressing at a good pace in Bhutan, and it is evident from the fact that 35.5 per cent comprise of women within the country's civil servants which is a 77 per cent rise in the last decade(Dema, 2017).

There is a phenomenal increase in women's career progression from 1981 when the National Women's Association of Bhutan (NWAB) was established. However, the question remains; whether women have progressed in their career even after much manipulation of their faith and increase in educational level in Bhutan. There is a suggested gap between education and career outcomes. According to the Ministry of Labour and Human Resource (MOLHR)(2015), women's unemployment rate was 42.9 per cent in urban areas compared to men's unemployment rate at 29.1 per cent. This indicating a rise in migration from rural to urban areas for women in search of a job, making it further difficult for them to find employment (MOLHR, 2015). However, in 2018, Labour Force Survey shows that the gap has reduced, the unemployment rate for women is at 4.5 per cent compared to male's at 10.8 per cent, and women are employed at 50 hours per week compared to 53 hours for men (National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan, 2018).

## Gender Equality Goals in Bhutan

Dema (2017) stated, women generally face difficulties in breaking the glass ceiling in the corporate world, however, in the context of Bhutan, there is a commitment in Bhutan to fulfil the Sustainable Development to "Achieve gender equality and empower all girls and women." The National Commission of Women and Children has a strategic policy and advisory role in support of gender equality to create an enabling environment and provisions for increasing women's participation in decision making and the workforce. The policy for gender equality and mainstreaming of gender began in the 10th Plan (2008-2013). In 2004, the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) was established to fulfil the obligations of the government towards the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). With the mission to protect and promote the rights of women through gender-responsive interventions, NCWC reviews, reforms, initiates and supports policies, plans, projects and activities from a gender equality perspective. According to NCWC, "women continue to shoulder the burden of home, care-work and employment" and "the persistence of gender stereotypes". As a result, NCWC engaged with business associations to design Gender Equality Policy which facilitates women representation at in nontraditional positions and high level of management. The Gender Equality Policy focuses on reducing women's triple burden through: "institutionalizing six months of maternity leave to new mothers and designing incentives for the private sector to follow suit; encouraging longer paternity leave to inspire work sharing at home between men and women; creating a strict zero-tolerance policy on sexual harassment and creating caregiving support structures such as fully serviced creches and nursing rooms for mothers".

# Research Methodology

To explore how the national policies, which are based on Gross National Happiness (GNH), translate into women’s careers in Bhutan, we adopt a qualitative approach with a social constructivist worldview. Thus, this study adopts the qualitative approach to understand the social constructed nature of reality (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). This approach is considered a suitable and valuable tool for analysing and interpreting human activities (Tracy, 2013).

From a constructivist point of view, knowledge is not something that researchers can easily describe or explain, rather they view it as socially constructed through interactions and language and reality as linked and identified through society’s cultural and ideological categories(Tracy, 2013, Burr, 1995, Schwandt, 2000). Human invents the concepts, models, and patterns to make sense of experiences, and we persistently change these constructions through the light of new knowledge (Schwandt, 2000). For this reason, this research firstly analyses the fieldnote created by researchers through ethnographic observation which then assisted them to interpret the perspectives and the day-to-day experience of both women and men senior managers in private and public sectors.

Human activities are not tangible material realities and cannot be measured but can be interpreted and analysed through “text” (Tracy, 2013). Geertz (1983)describes the researcher as “cultural interpreters” who provides vivid descriptions that reveal beliefs, values and action in the society and organisation. In addition, social constructivists analyse how culture has been symbolically constructed and reconstructed (Tracy, 2013, p. 50). Consequently, through the observation and semi-structure interviews with 27 female and male public and private senior mangers, we aim to develop a better understanding of nature of the ‘reality’ as socially constructed through the interaction of social and national beliefs, values and actions into the broader society.

## Data Collection

### Phase 1: Ethnographic Observation

In 2018, a group of Bhutanese Awardees undertook an Australia Awards South and West Asia (AASWA) Short Course Award (SCA). AASWA is an Australian Government initiative, managed by Scope Global Pty Ltd and funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The Australia Awards are an important part of the Australian Government’s focus on public and economic diplomacy. All researchers were involved in designing and delivering this program in all component of the program. The first step was to establish connections with the Bhutanese cohort who visited Australia for three weeks. The researchers spent the whole three weeks with the Bhutanese Awardees during their visit in Australia. As one of the main requirements of the program, one of the researchers (Mahan), as a Gender and Social Inclusion Specialist (GESI) attended in most of the workshops to ensure that the gender perspective and relevant gender theories were embedded into the content. GESI also delivered sessions specifically targeting gender mainstreaming. In addition, the purpose of researchers was to observe the Awardees and collected field notes. Therefore, data gathering shaped by the tools of institutional ethnography, which includes observing the members of a society uncover the culture shared within the broader social context (Creswell, 2014). The two other researchers were also involved in all three components of the program. Therefore, all researchers were able to observe and take notes at different stages of this program which then assisted them with the interpretation of data.

### Phase 2: Semi-structured interviews

In phase 1 in Australia, researchers built relationship with Bhutanese cohort and through the snowballing sampling method, researchers approached potential participants when visited Bhutan for the post-program component and they conduct semi-structured interviews (Noy, 2008). Australian Awardees assisted researchers to approach senior managers in private and public sectors. The interviews were in English, took around one hour each and was recorded and transcribed.

Consequently, triangulation used to collect data for this study. Triangulation is based on the idea that no single method ever sufficiently solves the problem because each method uncovers different aspects of the empirical reality, “multiple methods of data collection and analysis provide more grist for research mill” (Patton, 1999, p. 1192). In this study, researchers used not only data sources triangulation (use different methods of collecting data), but also methodological triangulation that is achieved by combining different qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews with ethnographic observation (Nippert-Eng, 2015).

## Data Analysis

In the first phase of coding, the researchers started with the ‘primary cycle coding’ of both field notes and interviews. This stage is also called the initial stage of coding (Tracy, 2013). In the secondary cycle of coding which is ‘focused coding’, researchers examined the primary codes and started organising and categorising them into interpretive concepts (Tracy, 2013). Then, we used “analytical coding” or “thematic coding” which includes interpreting the codes based on the theories, as Tracy (2013) believes that this is the creative process of coding. In addition, in the cultural exploration stage, we started with analysing, describing and interpreting the culture shared between the Awardees as an educated sample of their society. Finally, we implement the “fidelity testing” to check the assurance of saturation and to check the inter-coder reliability between researchers (Belotto, 2018).

# Preliminary Findings[[1]](#endnote-1)

Following the review of literature, national policies which focuses on social welfare, collective happiness and wellbeing of Bhutanese people, Bhutan might be expected to be Utopia for Bhutanese’ women. However, data shows much more complicated picture which will be elaborated in more detail in this section.

## Region, Religion and ideologies

75 per cent of the population of Bhutan follow Buddhism. However, our finding indicates that there is a considerable difference between Eastern and Western part of Bhutan’s ideologies. People in Eastern Bhutan are predominantly Buddhist who are believed to be “the ancestors of earliest resident of Bhutan”. Same as other Buddhism regions specifically Tibetan regions, the child is seen as the child of the woman, and matriarchy is not questioned- the wife is the permanent resident and central figure of the family, so all interests pivot around her. According to the interviewees, women in the Eastern Bhutan usually are the mostly educated, head and breadwinners in the family and they Inherit properties. Most of female political leaders are from this part of the Bhutan. Anushri (female manager from EB) stated:

In our culture, Buddhist culture, there is culture of after marriage, the man goes to woman’s house. I think that there is some impact on the gender whereas, in Hindu culture, what I have noticed woman goes to man’s house after marriage

He also believes that:

in Hindu culture in India and some part of Western Bhutan, there is like more dominance of men, that is not prevalent in most parts of Bhutan I think, that is what I feel.

Raju (male manger from EB) also reiterated that:

In the southern part of Bhutan, for example, it’s like that, the wife has to work and if you have a daughter in law, she has to serve husband, or mother or father but for us, I am from Eastern Bhutan. We don’t have that tradition because it all depends on the mutual understanding between the partners… I can do what the spouse can do, sort of sharing the responsibilities.

In comparison, Southern Bhutan has been influenced by Hindu culture and based on interviewees’ statements male children have significant role in the family, dominance of men is common in this area and women move to their husband’s house. For example, Kanil (male-SB) believes that:

we are actually from the southern part of the country, so basically we are Nepalese in origin and we, most of the Nepalese origin follow Hindu religion and so Hindu driven prospective of the society is that role of women is insignificant… In the Hindu with tradition it is seen as the female girls will marry and husband’s parent side will take care of her and even if she doesn’t study [is ok]. but for male, they have to study and get the job, so that they can again, be able to survive with his wife, so that is how it is seen. Most of the parents do not put their resources and capital in educating their daughters… but in the Eastern context now, women are not illiterate, they are educated, they head the family and they are the breadwinners

Binsa (woman from SB) believes that there are some exceptions, but she believes that this is changing:

In southern region men are mostly dominant, we have values that are similar to Hindu and Nepal and because of that, we are expected to move into the husband’s house but through education level this has changed. Most of the educated couples start to live separately but usually we move into husband’s house… In our family is different we have some properties, me and my sister, so basically, it is like you know, more emphasis is given on the male child, like male has to inherit the property, and something like that but it also might depend on the parents also, my parents say that they will divide everything equally but we [women] are still expected to cook meals…

## Gender Stereotypes in Bhutan

Sometimes no matters whether you are from southern or eastern part, there are some gender stereotypes that hinders women’s career progression. Ashika (an executive woman from EB) stated:

There is a common belief in the society that men are powerful and women are the weaker ones, so that is always there in society… everybody expects that woman to be at home cooking, looking after the kids, washing, taking care of the house, so that is always there and they feel that men should go out and work and look after the family.

Aarshi (senior manager- woman) believes that there are still some gender roles that impedes women’s career progression:

There is no discrimination as such but culturally, the stereotypes, they still feel that it’s the role of the woman or women are best in childcare and household chores… women are still considered as a homemaker… women started the race later because earlier with the household chores and the family care, everything was left for a woman and even to the extent that women were left back home to take care of family and household until the child admitted to school

According to the interviews there is a common belief/stereotype between all Bhutanese people that heavy and physical work is for men and “men are nine lives ahead of women”. There is a delusion that “men are higher than women by nine noble human births still exists in some rural areas and women are derogatorily referred to as Aumsu mo rem (helpless women) and men are referred to as kep phoja (superior male)”(Dema, 2017).

## Family friendly Incentives and culture

Despite persistence of gender stereotypes in Bhutan such as women are homemakers, men are breadwinners, most of the interviewees both women and men referred to their society collectivist approach. Social support for family care is important to promote gender equality which are favoured in Bhutanese culture. Some of the interviewees mentioned that they live with their extended family take care of the children. Those interviewees who do not live in the same house they have the support of their parents for childcaring. Although family support is very important specially in the childcaring, most of the interviewees also mentioned that they need to take care of their older parents as well. Lili mentioned that:

We have extended family system and after I gave birth to my son he is five years now, my mum stayed with me and looked after my son but now my mum is 74 years, she had a brain surgery and she is not that strong anymore, so she cannot take care of my daughter who is just 9 months now… I need to take care of her and my children.

As a new generation, most of young (25- 40 yo) female interviewees referred to their husband support. Although, it is good to be mentioned that all female interviewees are educated, employed and they are from urban areas and the situation might be different in rural areas:

I would say that before, it was more like **women were expected to be more homemakers**…but now that is changing. We have to work as well as attend to all of these responsibilities, but I have the support of my husband.

Her husbandcame to Melbourne when she did her master’s degree and looked after their baby.

Almost all interviewees referred to some of their social values that support social welfare and the women’s engagement in the workplace. Bhuti (an executive man) talked about the culture of bringing the children to the work after school:

In our country it’s an accepted norm that people bringing their children to work…your partner is working as well and you need to bring your child in, we don’t mind if you keep your kid in the corner, as long as they are not running the halls dancing but if something happens, it’s yeh that is ok, that is fine. Or even during exam time, if the child has to leave school early, we see kids waiting in the office for their parents and no one **bats an eyelid**, it is not something we complain about. Oh, ok, they have finished school early, they are waiting for their parents, no problem, it’s very understanding.

Bhuti mentioned that for children who are not still in school age all government workplaces have free onsite childcare and some of the private sectors also provide the same facilities:

that people are able to bring their children to work so that they can work and, it will be a room the building or just outside, where mothers can run out twenty minutes, do their feeding in necessary, make sure the kid is ok, go back.

Jarina (female executive) also stated:

It is quite normal or accepted that if there is an emergency or something, you can bring your children into the office… our manager even provides some juice or boiled egg in the evening for the children.

Flexible work arrangements is a common practice in public sector, which is mainly based on the discussion between employee and their direct manager. Dana (a senior female human resource manager in public sector) referred to implementation of flexitime for professional jobs including breastfeeding flexitime:

Flexible schedules where women could come in, maybe in the morning but then leave early. They maybe come, like do their work, if it is possible through the internet, some emails, or do they work at home or stay at home in the morning, then come in the afternoon, then hand in their work, do their work, telephone, email, computer, even if it is production, we are looking at, could be able to do some of their work at home, then come back in.

Dana also mentioned that according to the Labour and Employment Act, in the public sector maternity leave is currently two months and parental leave is three days. However, she referred to discussion in the parliament on the extension of parental leave two months to six months for women and ten days for men. They also encourage longer parental leave in private sectors.

Long working hour is not a common practice in Bhutan and all interview participants women and men mentioned that working hours in Bhutan is 9am-5pm and 9am-4pm in winter in both public and private.

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1. \*Information gathered from the interviews was de-identified using a pseudonym\* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)