

The path to women's political participation in Bhutan

Friday 15 September 2023, by [RINZIN Yangchen C.](#) (Date first published: 8 May 2023).

In Bhutan's 2023 National Council elections, only one woman was elected to the NC from a female population of around 360,000. Despite progress in recent years, women still face challenges to political participation.

"Of course, it was also because they trusted my capability, but I have seen that the majority went by the party's popularity in the particular constituency," Norbu Wangzom, a 41-year-old former member of parliament representing Bhutan's opposition party, the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT), said. Wangzom was elected to represent the Jomotshangkha Martshala constituency, located in the south-east of Bhutan, for the second time in 2018. "As long as they like the party, they did not mind voting for a woman," she added, but they voted for her "not necessarily because they believed in a woman candidate." Regardless, Wangzom is committed to serving her constituents to the best of her ability.

Encouraged by her local community, Wangzom first contested and won a seat in Bhutan's National Council elections in 2008. As a newcomer to politics, she recalled, her initial experience was quite positive. When she contested again in 2013, she lost her seat. Wangzom ran again in 2018, ultimately winning the seat back. When we spoke in February 2023, she recognised how gender plays a role in Bhutanese politics and noted that there is a disparity between how much time and importance men are given on political platforms as compared to women. "Participation is important," Wangzom emphasised, "There are challenges, but we shouldn't give up as a woman."

The National Council is the highest legislative and policy-making body in Bhutan. In the last election, in 2018, only two women were elected to the NC, with two additional women appointed by Bhutan's king. In the recent past, there has been a shift in public perception towards women in leadership positions, with Bhutanese citizens increasingly believing that women are capable of taking on leadership responsibilities. Women occupy 18 percent of leadership positions in the civil service; comprise 3.4 percent of *gups*, or local government leaders and command 15.3 percent of seats in the NC.

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The latest NC elections were held in April 2023 and saw nominees contesting from Bhutan's 20 *dzongkhags*, or districts. Despite women outnumbering men in the country's population, only nine women registered to contest as candidates from a total of seven districts. Moreover, following the *Dhamngoi Zomdu*, or selection procedure for candidates looking to contest seats, only five women candidates made it through, as against 84 male candidates. When election results were announced, Tshering Tshomo, from Zhemgang, was the sole woman elected to the NC. It is concerning that Bhutan will only have one woman as an elected lawmaker in the NC representing a female population of around 360,000. The country now looks to the king to take the lead in appointing more

women as eminent members of the NC, using his powers of nomination under Bhutan's electoral system. The NC, as the upper house of Bhutan's parliament, comprises 20 directly elected representatives, and five eminent members nominated by the king.

While Bhutan has seen some positive changes in recent years in terms of women's representation in politics and leadership positions, the 2023 election results show that women's participation in politics is yet to become the norm in Bhutan.

More role models

In Bhutan, women have guaranteed equality in voting and in running for office, according to the country's 2008 Constitution and Election Code. Bhutan elected its first female district governor and minister in 2012 and 2013, respectively. Women have also held leadership roles in political parties, including as party presidents.

Historically, Bhutan has had a matrilineal society, where daughters inherit from their mothers and play important roles in leading families. Women are generally considered the *nangi-aum* – the lady of the house. But their responsibility in such roles is limited to land ownership and household work. Despite this, many Bhutanese men and women believe that leadership responsibilities should be held by men.

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The researcher Jamba Tobden, in a 2020 report titled “Women's Leadership Journeys in Bhutan: A Longitudinal Study”, concluded that the foundation in terms of opportunity for women aspiring to obtain leadership positions – whether electoral or in public service – largely depends on how the current group of women in leadership positions performs. Sonam Chuki's and Mark Turner's 2017 research paper “Women and politics in democratic transitions: the case of Bhutan” stated that there was a lack of role models for ordinary women to follow on the path to becoming political leaders. They also concluded that experience was the key to getting women into politics, as it allows them to break the myth of women having difficulty with the political profession.

Another study, in 2015, titled “Women in Politics (Report of the 1st Electoral Forum)”, reported that:

In terms of candidate choice, sex is not an issue (they say), with people looking for credible, competent, qualified and better candidates irrespective of their gender. Voters are more educated in urban areas than in rural areas but the perception that men are better and capable leaders than women still exist everywhere.

In 2014, the People's Democratic Party suggested introducing a quota for women in parliament and local government bodies. It was also deliberated in parliament, where the proposal was to reserve 30 percent of the 47 seats for women and incorporate this in the Election Act. However, this never materialised because the National Assembly did not amend the Election Act. There were many opposing views regarding the quota system. Tashi Dema, a former journalist, stated at the time in the *Druk Journal*, “Despite the current resistance, a temporary measure should be put in place to have a fair representation of women in politics, governance and leadership. The temporary measure, perhaps in the form of a fixed quota, should not discriminate against women but compensate women for the actual barriers that prevent them from career advancement or contesting in elections.”

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Norbu Wangzom said that while she respects the idea of having a quota for women, she is not personally in favour of it. "Like many, I would also like to believe that a quota might underestimate women's potential and capabilities or take women's participation for granted," she explained. Wangzom believed there is a need for more opportunities for women to participate, and for experienced women candidates to come forward for election. She acknowledged that it is not always easy to find female candidates who are willing to come forward and run for political office.

Wangzom shared that many assume that women cannot stand against men in politics. When she first contested the election in 2008, apart from the challenge of contesting against men, she worried about hurting her parents if she lost the election. "I have two children and I was worried about what if I lose because people preferred men, I was worried about how will I raise my children," she added. "However, my husband believed in me and believed that I must take up the challenge." She believes that, even if she ultimately lost the election, her participation was a strong enough example to build confidence in many other women thinking of contesting. "Even if you don't win, you might someday," Wangzom said. "What is important is to hold confidence in yourself ... This is why young women must take up the challenge and take part in the election."

Going beyond nangi- aum

Another candidate for the NC this year, 46-year-old Dorji Wangmo, was confident that there has been a change in people's perceptions. Wangmo received positive responses to her candidature and did not regret leaving her job to contest. She contested against an incumbent female NC member, Sonam Pelzom, in the Mongar district. "More than worrying about contesting against another woman, I am focused on how I can serve my community after I have served the nation as a civil servant for 21 years," she said. "I have the zeal in me and all I need is people's support." Despite her positive outlook and dedication to serving her community, Wangmo was not able to secure a seat.

Tshering Tshomo, from Zhemgang district, said that she had decided to contest because she believed that it was a woman's time to represent her district. She explained, "times are changing, and we just have to grab the opportunity. I wanted to contest because I felt I could do better." In post-election interviews with local media, she said that it is now time to introduce a quota for women.

Many advocates of increased female political participation have emphasised the importance of women supporting and empowering each other to run for political office. The first 10 women parliamentarians have been part of initiatives such as enabling laws that have a direct impact on women and children. They act as role models to encourage many young women to follow their lead.

As much as political parties need to urge women to join the electoral process, the government and other agencies need to empower and encourage women to go beyond the role of the nangi-aum. For decades, the Bhutan Network of Empowering Women (BNEW) has encouraged women to participate in politics and represent women in leadership roles. Capacity-building efforts have helped several women become leaders at the organisation, and it has trained most female parliamentarians and seven gups.

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Phuntshok Chhoden, the executive director of BNEW, and Kunzang Lhamu, the former director of Bhutan's National Commission for Women and Children, stressed in the *Druk Journal* that three National Consultations and two conferences on women in politics have identified the need for a strategy and workable action plan. Under the National Plan of Action to Promote Gender Equality in

Elected Office, one initiative was to focus on interventions such as creating awareness and building capacity while providing the necessary support to create a level playing field and ensure that a consistent and adequate number of women contest elections.

Speaking from experience, Norbu Wangzom said she believes that it is vital to create more advocacy about women's participation as voters first and foremost, because ultimately, they are the ones who elect candidates. Often, such advocacy happens only among candidates or those women who are interested in elections. "We must move beyond and there is also a need for a kind of financial support from the government," Wangzom said.

The recent election results reveal that there is still a long way to go in increasing women's participation in Bhutan's politics. As more agencies like BNEW are established and the government takes more initiative, there is hope that women will continue to hold a growing number of leadership positions.

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