



Peer Engagement towards Capacitating Women in Politics at the Local Level in Bhutan

Context

Bhutan transitioned from monarchy to democratic constitutional monarchy with its first parliamentary elections in 2008 and local elections in 2011. Similar to the country's approach to development, its political transition was also unique with the revered 4th Druk Gyalpo (King of Bhutan) passing down the power to the people with the drafting of the Constitution, establishment of institutions such as the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB), Anti-Corruption Commission and media houses.

The country is one of the smallest developing states in Asia with a size of 38,394 KM². It has a population of 7,35,553, of which 52.4% are males and 47.6% are females¹. Traditionally, males received preferential treatment in terms of monastic education as well as when modern education was introduced in the early 1960s. Women lagged behind in education, one of the reasons for low female representation in governance leadership positions and in executive government services. Currently, the literacy rate is 78.1% for males and 63.9% for females². Females are mostly employed in agriculture and informal sectors where the wages are low.

The representation of women in politics and governance in Bhutan is lower than the average low of 15% of 73 South Asian countries. In the Parliament, it dropped from 13.88% (after the 1st Parliamentary Elections in 2008) to 8.3%, with a drop of 5.5% after 2nd Election in 2013. The opposite is true, however, of the country's 205 local governments (LGs); there is an increase to 11.6% since the 2nd LG election (LGE) 2016 as compared to 6.9% after the 1st LGE of 2011³.

The 2018 Parliamentary Election saw the highest number of women being elected to the national assembly till date, out of 10 who contested, seven made it to the parliament (five in ruling party and two of the opposition) - taking elected women's representation to around 14.8% in the Parliament⁴. With two women appointees to the Upper House or National Council, the overall representation of women in Parliament is currently 15.1%.

Understanding the Issue

Challenges facing women's increased participation in politics in Bhutan include women's double or triple burden (i.e. jobs, childcare, and housework), cultural attitudes and stereotypes biased towards men, low self-esteem, limited access to and experience in decision-making, and low literacy and functional literacy skills among women.

1 Population & Housing Census Report 2017

2 Bhutan Living Standards Survey Report 2017

3 Election Commission of Bhutan, Election Statistics Report 2006-2015

4 Election Commission of Bhutan website

Other factors include unequal access to education and training, lack of interest and involvement in local governance due to limited understanding, and the community's biased perception of impact of women's participation in local governance⁵. Quota for women in politics has been discussed in various forums organised by national and international development organisations. However, the issue has not been taken up in Parliament or been pursued seriously. Studies reveal that country's gender neutral laws and policies do not provide a level playing field for women in politics either.⁶

In the absence of affirmative action, political parties can play a critical role in promoting reservation of seats for female candidates to increase their political participation and leadership. Media can also play an important role in catalysing discussion on the importance of women's inclusion in governance, projecting positive stories of women in leadership positions to trigger a gradual shift in mind-sets.

The Agency

Bhutan Network for Empowering Women (BNEW) is a civil society organisation that works to facilitate, enhance and strengthen women's representation in governance, leadership and politics/development, especially at the local level. Registered as an NGO in 2016, BNEW now has a membership of about 4,000 women across the 20 districts and 205 gewogs (blocks) of Bhutan. BNEW advocates for transformed societal mind-sets and attitudes to achieve gender equity in leadership.

BNEW's key areas of work⁷ are:

- Providing a networking platform for women's empowerment and leadership
- Building leadership capacity and skills
- Coaching, mentoring and nurturing potential women leaders
- Media relations, advocacy, and publicity on women's empowerment and leadership
- Resource and service centre

BNEW works on creating awareness on the importance of gender and women's participation in governance and leadership; mobilising women and building their capacity to stand for local elections; preparing women candidates for national elections too; and once elected, working to strengthen their capacity to deliver, to create strong role models for greater acceptance of women as leaders in Bhutanese society.

Key stakeholders like the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB), the Department of Local Governance (DLG) and the Parliament among others acknowledge the role of BNEW in motivating, mobilising and building the capacity of women to participate in politics. BNEW also organises forums to dialogue with elected women representatives (EWRs), political parties and media on the issue of women in politics. Bhutan's Non-Formal Education (NFE) programme, addressing the challenge of low literacy among women, has also contributed to capacitating large numbers of rural women who have the possibility to contest in local elections as candidates. As per ECB statistics, more than 74% of adults who follow NFE programmes⁸ were women. Majority of the women who eventually sat for the functional literacy test (FLT) conducted by ECB to be eligible to contest in local elections were NFE literate, who had been further prepared by BNEW through capacity building workshops.

5 Study of the Determinants of Voter's Choice and Women's Participation in Elective Offices in the Kingdom of Bhutan 2015, by Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy, Election Commission of Bhutan & UN Women

6 Women in Politics, Report of the 1st Electoral Forum 2015, by Election Commission of Bhutan & International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

7 BNEW website: <http://bnew.bt>

8 Women in Politics, Report of the 1st Electoral Forum 2015, by Election Commission of Bhutan & International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

Exposure to Impactful Strategies for Political Empowerment of Women

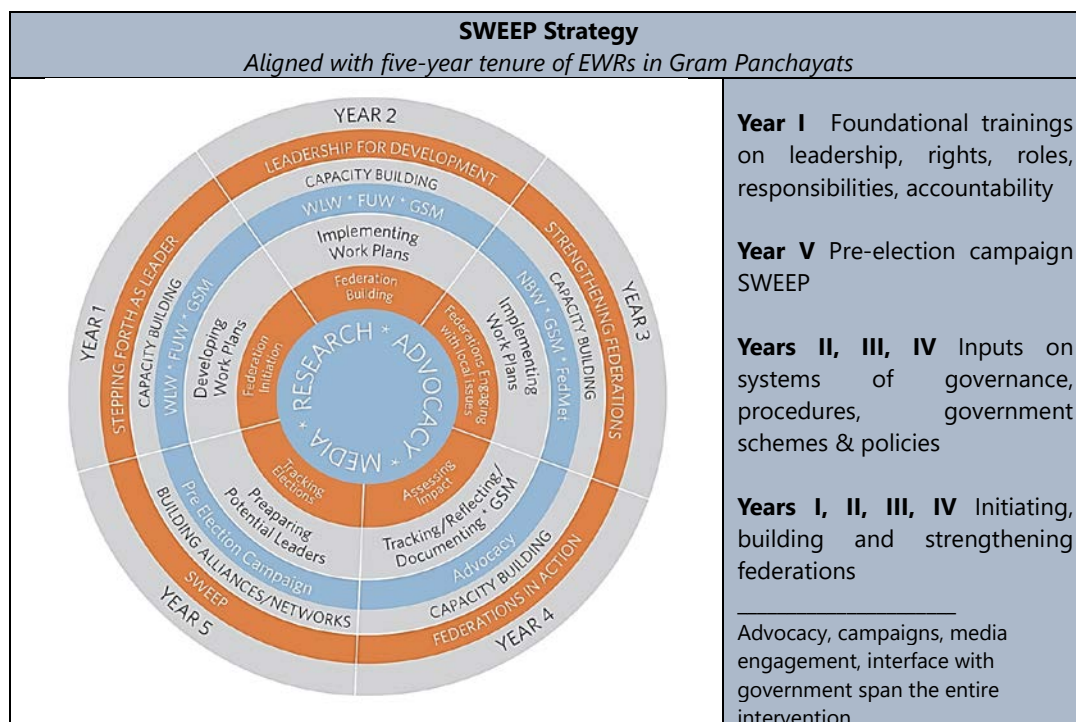
In 2014, BNEW Coordinator and a few EWRs from Bhutan participated in a regional travel workshop on Federating Local Governments organised by LOGIN. The travel workshop spanned three states of India – Gujarat, Maharashtra and Kerala⁹.

Impressed by the functioning of the LGs /Panchayats and women’s participation in local governance in these states, BNEW requested the LOGIN Secretariat to organise a similar exposure/learning event for its EWRs with a peer organisation; The Hunger Project (THP) India was identified as the relevant peer partner.

THP India, working in six states, engages with EWRs of Gram Panchayats (village councils), using a strategy in sync with the five-year tenure of a EWR’s term. This includes a pre-election campaign strategy as well as capacity building initiatives through the tenure of a EWR. The two-pronged Strengthening Women’s Empowerment through Electoral Processes (SWEEP) strategy aims to:

- A** - Build leadership of EWRs in Panchayats so that they are empowered as public office holders
 - Strengthen capacity of EWRs to mobilise communities to raise awareness & access their rights and entitlements; and
- B** - Foster an enabling environment where EWRs are accepted as leaders in their communities and among other stakeholders
 - Advocate for responsive and inclusive governance by forging alliances

The overall objective of SWEEP is to increase the visibility of women through the entire electoral process – as citizens, voters, candidates and electoral officers and polling agents¹⁰.



⁹ LOGIN Asia Report on Collectivisation/Federating Local Governments Travel Workshop (2014)

¹⁰ THP India website: www.thp.org/our-work/where-we-work/india/empowering-women-electorate-india/

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) Bhutan and the LOGIN Secretariat arranged for a face-to-face interaction between BNEW and THP teams in 2015 in Delhi. The BNEW team also visited THP's project sites in Bengaluru, Karnataka, to observe the functioning of THP-supported federation of EWRs called Sugrama.

The EWRs from Bhutan were inspired after meeting their peers, while the BNEW staff took away valuable learnings from THP to enhance their own strategy to empower women for politics and governance.

In particular, what caught BNEW's attention was THP's pre-election SWEEP strategy, given the upcoming elections in Bhutan at the time of the study visit. The 2nd Local Government Elections of Bhutan was due to be held in fall 2016.

Partnering to Strengthen Women's Participation in Local Governance

With Bhutan's 2nd LGE 2016 round the corner, BNEW was in the process of mobilising, creating awareness and advocating to strengthen women's participation in electoral processes. Informed by the insights from the study visit, BNEW adapted THP's SWEEP strategy to augment its own programming aimed at capacitating women candidates to be effective leaders.

Key takeaways from the SWEEP Strategy:

1. Conduct a pre-election campaign to mobilise women to contest for elections
2. Facilitate capacity building and leadership development of EWRs and create a cadre of trainers
3. Build community support structures for elected and non-elected women candidates
4. Engage with and sensitise media on gender-sensitive reporting of elections

Adapting and localising SWEEP for Bhutan across 20 districts

A scoping visit was organised by THP in Bhutan to adapt and localise the SWEEP strategy to the country's socio-political and cultural context. A two-pronged strategy was adopted aimed at preparing potential women leaders for interacting with the media confidently and to sensitise the community that women can communicate effectively and be capable leaders. Key components of the new strategy included:

1. The first SWEEP **Gender Training and Training of Trainers (ToT)** was conducted to sensitise BNEW team, Election Officers and Dzongkhag Council Secretaries, on the need for gender sensitivity which was facilitated by THP resource persons.
2. In consultation with THP resource persons, BNEW designed and rolled out a series of 20 **Potential Leadership Workshops (PLWs)** focusing on women with the most potential to be active and productive leaders and most likely to stand for elections. The PLWs covered all 20 districts and around 1,500 potential women leaders.
3. THP's **Media Preparedness** session was adapted by BNEW and developed into a detailed module with its scope expanded to incorporate awareness raising and capacity building whilst preparing potential women leaders to engage with the media. BNEW carefully crafted and conducted a 4-day module based on its previous experience of 2014 (the *lap-shay-nen-shay* programme/a reality show on TV) and organised a series of 4 Regional Media Preparedness Workshops covering 200 potential women leaders from the 20 districts.

Through the THP experience, BNEW also learned to use its existing theme song as an advocacy tool to reach out to the public. The theme song was used in different ways: radio jingles and distributed all over the country including taxi and bus drivers to spread the BNEW message.

4. The second **SWEEP Gender Training** was conducted for more partners on the ground as BNEW felt the need to sensitise and gain support of the officials deployed before/during elections. A total of 41 grassroots level officials from 20 districts were sensitised. These trainings strengthened the officials' understanding of the importance of women's participation and representation as elected leaders in Bhutan and generated a greater degree of gender sensitivity in their discharge of roles and responsibilities in the lead up to the 2016 polls.

The Partnership

THP played a vital role through the adaptation of SWEEP to the Bhutan context in terms of sharing resources and assisting in contextualising and adapting training modules. The customised training-workshops were always conducted with the support of THP's Master Trainers in partnership with BNEW team.

While the LOGIN Secretariat supported the resources and expertise provided by THP, SDC Bhutan together with the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD) which is the primary funding partner of BNEW, supported the PLWs, SWEEP-ToTs & Media workshops.

BNEW's adaptation of the SWEEP strategy combined with its own ongoing interventions and experiences resulted in the mobilisation of more than 3,000 women for the 2nd LGE of 2016. BNEW's preparation and community-level efforts towards the 2nd LGE were enhanced and strengthened by the partnership with THP facilitated by the LOGIN Secretariat. The learnings from the site visits and interactions with EWRs, discussions with THP team, and localisation of the SWEEP strategy lent a fresh perspective and impetus to BNEW's work.

For THP, the successful adaptation of its strategy to build the capacity of elected women leaders in a different cultural-socio-economic context was a validation of its approach to political empowerment of women in local governments as well as the scalability of its model. The LOGIN platform provided visibility to THP in the region and the organisation was able to showcase the importance of women's political empowerment to member countries at the Network's General Assemblies. The Network's thematic learning community on women's political empowerment enabled THP to facilitate a dialogue with various member countries.

Asia has a rather low representation of women in politics – both at the Parliament (19.4%¹¹) and at the local governance level (proportion of elected women representatives in local governments is unknown since this data is not collected regularly at the global level). As a member of LOGIN, THP could contribute, facilitate and further sharpen/strengthen strategies and ways forward of advancing the women's political empowerment agenda in local governance in the region.

¹¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union. "Women in national parliaments, as of 1st November 2018"

Impact

Marked improvement in women's representation in local politics after the 2016 elections

Results of Bhutan's 2nd LGE of 2016 revealed a marked improvement in women's representation in local politics. The number of women Gups (Chairs) and Mangmis (Deputy Chairs) doubled in the 2nd LGE in 2016 compared to the 1st LGE of 2011: 2 women Gups and 24 women Mangmis were elected in the 2nd LGE compared to 1 Gup out of 205 and 12 Mangmis out of 205 in 2011. The overall number of EWRs in the LGs increased from 98 (2011) to 174 (2016)¹².

Additionally, the number of women who took Functional Literacy Tests¹³ (FLT) in 2016 and those that passed was also twice that of 2011 (624). In 2016, 1,156 women sat for FLT and 1024 passed (more than 88%), compared to 2011 when 624 women sat for FLT, with 564 passing the test, thereby increasing the pool of women who were eligible for running for elections. The number of women who contested for the LGE also increased from 166 in 2011 to 579 women in 2016¹⁴.

Continued engagement with EWRs post 2017 elections

Post-2016 LGE, the BNEW & THP peer partnership continued, with the adaptation of THP's post-election capacity building module for EWRs in Bhutan. THP trainers together with BNEW co-facilitated and conducted Women's Leadership Workshops (WLWs) for 161 out of the 174 EWRs.

A monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system was developed, a baseline study was conducted for 161 out of 174 EWRs, and a pool of enumerators was trained. The baseline study was designed to track and capture capacity-related gaps of the EWRs; the findings would inform course correction of BNEW's programming to better address the needs of the EWRs. The M&E/tracking tool will be administered again with the same group of EWRs towards the end of their term to track progress/changes¹⁵.

Conclusion and Way Ahead

Among other factors¹⁶, the number of women elected into the highest levels of local governance in Bhutan's 2nd LGE of 2016 getting doubled can be attributed to BNEW's sustained efforts supplemented by the strategic partnership with THP close to the election period. Since its very inception in 2012-13, BNEW has been preparing for the 2nd LGE, mobilising, capacitating and facilitating women's participation in politics.

Overall, there was increased gender awareness reinforced by the sensitisation workshops conducted at various levels by BNEW for the media, Election Officers and LG officials from 20 Dzongkhags and requisite media coverage etc.¹⁷

¹² ECB election statistics

¹³ Tests that assess the reading and writing abilities of candidates "to manage daily living and employment tasks that require reading skills beyond a basic level."

¹⁴ BNEW records

¹⁵ BNEW-THP WLW Training Report 2017

¹⁶ In 2013, the very first female minister was appointed by the ruling government, an important step to create visibility of women as potential leaders and build their confidence to aspire for such positions.

¹⁷ Media coverage: <http://www.businessbhutan.bt/businessbhutan/face-to-face-bnew-advocating-women-participation-in-the-elections/>
<https://www.pressreader.com/bhutan/business-bhutan/20180203/281517931566160>

The increase in women's representation in local governance is a positive indicator of the gradual transformation of the people's attitudes and perception in terms of becoming more accepting of female leaders.

Transformation in women leaders themselves is a bit early to assess. Successful women leaders can serve as role models. For example, the people of Tashidhing gewog of Dagana elected the first female Gup/Chairperson (1/205) in 2011. Her performance facilitated not only her own re-election in 2016, but also led to the election of a second female Gup in the neighbouring gewog. Also, during the 2nd and 3rd National Conferences on Women in Politics that BNEW organised in partnership with NCWC in 2017 and 2018, it was a matter of pride for BNEW to observe the heightened level of confidence with which EWRs and other BNEW members participated, impressing the 150+ other participants representing all key national stakeholders including the government, Parliament, civil society, media etc.

THP and BNEW continue to share exchanges on possible future collaborations to further capacitate EWRs in Bhutan. One such programme under consideration is an 'Accelerator Leadership Programme' for currently elected EWRs. In terms of institutional impact and way ahead, BNEW now has an effective capacity building strategy and monitoring and evaluation system in place.

The BNEW-THP partnership illustrates the importance of strategic twinning and matching of peers to augment capacity-building and collective learning. Overcoming socio-economic and cultural differences, the commonality of issues and the approach anchor the BNEW-THP partnership.

Clarity in identifying the problem and opportunity coupled with a firm resolve to take the learnings forward and adapt them in practice is key for a successful peer exchange, as demonstrated by the partnership. Localisation or contextualisation at every stage has been critical to the successful application of learnings in addition to the trust, openness and confidence in the relationship. The partnership also serves as proof-of-concept for the potential of peer to peer exchange to enable transformative change.

Ultimately, the ongoing BNEW-THP peer partnership has successfully contributed to creating an enabling environment for women's empowerment in Bhutan through the electoral process for local governance.

Karma Choden from Nahi gewog in Wangdiphodrang has decided to stand as a Mangmi candidate after attending a Regional Media Preparedness Workshop facilitated by BNEW:

"Elevating my confidence level was the most important thing for me and now I am confident about my confidence to speak with the crowd. Until this workshop, my stand for the LG election wasn't confirmed. With the encouragement and energy I gained here, I have now fully decided my stand."

Source: BNEW

<http://www.bbs.bt/news/?p=68171>

<http://www.kuenselonline.com/women-in-the-changing-world-of-work-planet-50-50-by-2030/>

<http://www.kuenselonline.com/a-more-gender-sensitive-media/>