

## Bhutan

Bhutan is a small, Buddhist-majority country in the Eastern Himalayas which transitioned to being a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy in 2008, and whose leaders and thinkers have pioneered the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as an alternative indicator of development. In 2006, 37.7 percent of the labor force was female, and the life expectancy of women at birth was 66.85 years. Women are almost half the population of under a million people. Most people live in rural areas, engaged in agriculture and related activities, with women participating equally. However, the significant trend of rural-urban migration has resulted in a more traditional gendered division of labor in the cities. Women in urban areas (as opposed to rural women) have higher levels of literacy and better health facilities but own less property.

Compared to other countries in the region, women in Bhutan present a contrast: they don't take their father's name on birth or husband's name upon marriage, they own and run businesses, rural land is often registered in women's names, the inheritance systems are matrilineal (a man may have to work in the household of the prospective wife), and there is no dowry. There is some prevalence of polyandry, alongside the more common polygamy, but there is little social stigma associated with divorce and women have a significant degree of sexual freedom, a rarity in south Asia.

No legal discrimination exists against women; there are some customary practices (such as wearing of the national dress-*kira* for women and *gho* for men-to government offices) which affect men and women equally. Nonetheless, there are traditional gender hierarchies that associate men and women with different social activities and reward them differently, for example, female weavers and male archers. Patriarchal norms controlling women are stronger in the south of the country due to the Hindu religious ethos there, while problems compounded by alcoholism and poverty are more predominant in the east.

In the formal political arena, women are a minority, although addressing this issue is gaining momentum with ongoing discussions in the media (e.g., about the benefits of quotas for women in parliament). Also, debates over the Constitution resulted in amendments to use a gender-neutral language (he/she). In 2008, about 30 percent of 19,516 civil servants were women. There are no women ministers in the current government cabinet, four of 47 Members of Parliament (MPs) in the National Assembly (the lower house) are women, all belonging to the ruling party (DPT or Druk Phuensum Tshogpa). In the politically unaffiliated National Council (the upper house), the candidate (Pema Lhamo) who won with the largest vote margin was a woman. Bhutan is a signatory to two United Nations' programmes, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). International Women's Day is marked every year. Women play an active role in media, constitutional bodies, and civil society organizations: for example, novelist in English (Kunzang Choden), Managing Director of the national Bhutan Broadcasting Service (Pema Choden), head of the Anti-Corruption Commission (Neten Zangmo). There is a National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC).

The royalty of Bhutan (such as wives and sisters of the monarchs) have been pro-active in social welfare organizations, including those concerned with women's rights and empowerment, like the National Women's Association of Bhutan (NWAB), set up in 1981, or Respect, Educate, Nurture, and Empower Women (RENEW), set up in 2004. This latter organization focuses on sexual assault and domestic violence victims, who may otherwise suffer in silence. 233 domestic violence cases were recorded in Thimphu hospital in 2007. Raising consciousness on gender issues is often linked to development partners (such as UN agencies) and there is an enlightened domestic trend of progressive change in direction and scope of laws. A wider collection of gender-segregated statistics is called for to enable more targeted policy on women's issues.

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### [Further Readings](#)

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