

**Local knowledge: Understanding the lived experiences of women from different generations in Bhutan**

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## **Abstract**

*This explorative qualitative inquiry aimed to understand the lived experiences of women of different generations in Bhutan. It is part of an exercise to develop a local knowledge base to inform a gender equality policy evaluation framework. In semi-structured interviews, 20 women from different generations were asked about their perceptions of attitudes about gender when they were growing up, in their current situation, and for future generations. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that attitudes about gender have changed over the time. Participants reported they have many more opportunities now than they did when they were growing up. However, certain things were seen as slow to change and as indicative of a systematic structure of patriarchy that persists in Bhutan. It is argued here that solutions to this systemic issue may well lie with the people themselves, as gender equitable development needs to be founded upon local knowledge and experiences if it is to be sustainable.*

**Key words:** gender equality; local knowledge; gender responsive evaluation

## Introduction

The development paradigm of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) strives to balance social, economic, environmental and cultural aspects of development to achieve poverty alleviation, sustainable development and people-centric progress.<sup>1</sup> In Agenda 2030, the principle of “*leaving no one behind*” places equality at the core of SDGs. Goal 5 of the SDGs is: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, and many development specialists identify gender equity as critical for ensuring an inclusive society that benefits all peoples. Gender responsive and equity focused evaluations are critical to assessing this inclusive development. This includes building knowledge about the varying conditions that men and women encounter in their lives and understanding the ways in which any development intervention impacts them.

The aim of this study in Bhutan was to strengthen knowledge about women’s perceptions of gender equity, with this then informing the evaluation of the country’s achievement of the SDGs. The Kingdom of Bhutan is introduced next, with a focus on development planning. After this, the experiences of other countries in South Asia are briefly canvassed before the role of evaluation is explained and the present study is described.

### Kingdom of Bhutan

Bhutan is a country in South Asia populated with 727,145 people and 48 percent of the total are female. The population grew at the rate of 1.3 percent per annum between 2005 to 2017.<sup>2</sup> The country is a developing country where resources are constrained, and most development activities are funded through grants for programs and projects. In fiscal year 2019-2020 these grants were estimated to cover 23 percent of the total resources and at least 50 percent of the capital expenditure of the country.<sup>3</sup> As Bhutan is one of the SDG priority countries, we play a significant role in committing to realization of the 2030 Agenda.<sup>4</sup> Bhutan’s development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) advocates for an harmonious balance between the material and non-material dimensions of development<sup>5</sup> and therefore complements the

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<sup>1</sup> GNHC, 2017. National Sustainable Development Goals Report of Bhutan 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) (2018). 2017 *Population and Housing Census of Bhutan*. National Statistical Bureau

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Finance (MoF) (2019). National Budget Financial Year 2019-2020. RGOB

<sup>4</sup> GNHC (2017). National Sustainable Development Goals Report of Bhutan 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) (2009). *Tenth Five-Year Plan 2008-2013*. Thimphu: Royal Government of Bhutan.

SDGs. This is demonstrated by high degree of alignment between the current national five-year plan of Bhutan and the SDGs. The 17 National Key Result Areas and the Key Performance Indicators in the five-year plan are also closely aligned to the SDGs and their targets and indicators.<sup>6</sup>

A 2017 review of the country's progress implementing the SDGs, however, noted that the goal of gender equality was at risk, with the country needing to put more effort into achieving it.<sup>7</sup> At the global level Bhutan ranks 131 out of 153 countries according to the Global Gender Gap Report 2020.<sup>8</sup> This report uses indicators of political empowerment, health and survival, education attainment and economic participation and opportunity to assess the extent of gender parity. Against this international backdrop, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2008 provides an overarching framework within which gender equality is guaranteed.<sup>9</sup> Within this Constitution Bhutan has adopted multiple legal and policy frameworks for providing women and men with the right to full and equal participation in all levels of political, civil, economic, social and cultural life.<sup>10</sup> However, despite these assurances, structural and cultural norms continue to pose barriers to the realization of broader gender equality. The 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan of the country also notes the challenges in achieving the gender equality goal and lays down the strategies to mainstream gender into policies, plans and programs alongside the implementation of specific support measures. The overall efficacy of these initiatives will be assessed against Goal 5 of the SDGs; that is, whether the country achieves gender equality and the facilitates the empowerment of all women and girls in Bhutan by 2030.

### **Experiences from Other Countries in South Asia**

At the core of all initiatives to achieve gender equality are the voices of women themselves. Within a gender analysis framework, the effectiveness of an intervention rests upon it being based on the needs and aspirations of women. This is the reason why it is important for evaluation to be informed by the local knowledge. This section looks briefly at how other countries in South Asia have taken this message on board.

In Nepal, culturally appropriate and locally informed feminist knowledge were ignored by the privileging of western paradigms within the gender equality discourse. This brought a negative

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<sup>6</sup> RGOB (2019). Twelfth Five Year Plan 2018-2023, Volume I: Main Document

<sup>7</sup> GNHC (2017). National SDG Report for HLPF 2018 on the implementation of the SDGs in Bhutan (Draft).

<sup>8</sup> [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan (Article 9, Principles of State Policy, Section 17)

<sup>10</sup> NCWC (2012). Study on situation of violence against women in Bhutan

influence on research and evaluation that focused on Nepalese women, leading to poorly designed interventions.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, a strong women's movement in Bangladesh has been successful in improving the lives of women. NGOs created these impacts with support from external funding and good relationships with donors. Even so, the women's movement brought little change to collective empowerment as structural changes in the patriarchy did not happen. The women's movement now suffers from a lack of an adequate knowledge base to sustain and to deepen solidarity among different women's groups, and to resolve the generational divide that arises from the differences between different generations of feminists.<sup>12</sup>

Much efforts have been made in India to make evaluation more gender sensitive and culturally responsive by using local and community knowledge and experiences. For example, the evaluation of a program for adolescent girls in India adopted a gender and equity lens, using a strength-based approach and appreciative questions. This approach recognized the strengths of the community and NGO staff and stimulated the open sharing of experiences. This, in turn, improved the validity and richness of the evaluation data, which would not have been possible with conventional evaluation.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Role of Evaluation**

In aligning practices with its development goals, evaluation plays a crucial role as a learning tool by highlighting what works and what does not. An appropriate evaluation can act as a safeguard, helping to identify problems before they become irreversible. Therefore, it is important to recognize evaluation as part of the policy formulation process and to enforce national policy for development evaluation. The research and understanding of local knowledge, culture and lived experiences of people to contribute to building evaluation knowledge base and resources are crucial to inform relevant evaluation frameworks.

From the methodological perspective, evaluators argue that the participatory research processes are compatible with using local knowledge and culturally responsive evaluation. The interactions with the locals and including their knowledge in the process leads to collaborative knowledge generations. These approaches therefore accommodate the voices of marginalized

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<sup>11</sup> Bhadra, C. (2020). Mobilizing South Asian Local Knowledge to Democratize Evaluation Theory and Practice: Elucidating the Missing Link "Gender" (draft).

<sup>12</sup> Nazneen, S. (2017). The women's movement in Bangladesh a short history and current debates.

<sup>13</sup> Nandi, R., Nanda, R. B., & Jugran, T. (2015). Evaluation from inside out: The experience of using local knowledge and practices to evaluate a program for adolescent girls in India through the lens of gender and equity. *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, 15(1), 38-47.

groups and are therefore desirable within gender sensitive evaluations of initiatives that seek to contribute to social change and gender equality. These approaches allow for contextualization, the tracing of unintended consequences, and the assessment of both progresses made and the limitations on that progress imposed by institutional, environmental and structural constraints.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Present Research**

In Bhutan the gender equality perspective in development started late and now it is increasingly gaining importance in development particularly starting with Millennium Development Goals, Sustainable Development Goals and our home-grown philosophy of Gross National Happiness. Therefore, it is important to start building the knowledge base with local experiences listening to women of different generation that are living through this transforming time. This research explored local knowledge to answer the broad question “what are the lived experiences of women in Bhutan that can inform the gender responsive evaluation framework?” The research findings will enable the promotion of locally designed and led evaluations that will help guide development initiatives within the context of the country’s aspirations for GNH, social equity, and an inclusive and gender responsive future.

## **Methodology**

### **Design and Sample**

This research is aimed at understanding the lived experiences of women in Bhutan and it is an exploratory descriptive study and employed a qualitative research design. Several feminist researchers argue that qualitative methods are more participatory and therefore give voice to women and other marginalized groups. Data were collected through interviewing a purposive sample of women from different generations living in Thimphu, the capital city of Bhutan. The people living in the city originate from different regions of the country and the participants represented diverse socio-economic backgrounds and the regions. The interviews were conducted between September and October 2020 by the researcher. Although 22 women were interviewed, two interviews were excluded from the analysis because of lack of substantive information. The participants included two families with three women generations, three

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<sup>14</sup> Sudarshan, R. M., & Sharma, D. (2012). Gendering evaluations: Reflections on the role of the evaluator in enabling a participatory process. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 19(2), 303-320.

families of two generations and the rest are mothers, singles and young girls who are above 18 years of age. The oldest participant is 93 and the youngest 22 years.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection period coincided with the difficult time of the country being under lockdown because of the Covid-19 and, even after the lockdown ended, women were uncomfortable having face-to-face meetings. Interviews were therefore conducted according to participants' preference, with most being done by telephone. A few participants chose to write down their responses and email these to the researcher, and a few were interviewed face-to-face. Four general topics were canvassed with participants through a series of open-ended and follow-up questions: participants' perspectives about growing up, their current situation and experiences, their aspirations for future generations, and their views on topical issues such as impact of covid-19, Gross National Happiness and SDGs. The interviews lasted between 17 and 68 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts and written responses from the 20 participants were the data for analysis. A thematic analysis was used to organize and elicit meaning from the data. Reading and re-reading of the transcripts and written responses led to the generation of codes, followed by the sorting of these codes into potential themes. The finalization of these themes reflected their ability to tell a meaningful story based on participants' points of view.<sup>15</sup>

## **Findings**

The findings are presented in four themes that cover the various stages of participants' lived experiences, starting with their parental home, schools and universities, workplaces and society, and their future outlooks. As context plays important role in shaping the experiences, these themes are mainly contextually-based. Each theme contains sub-themes that speak directly to the impact of gender on participants' experiences (see Table 1 below).

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<sup>15</sup> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Table 1:

Themes	Subthemes
<b>Parental/Family Home</b>	Parental role models
	Gender differences at home
	Schooling opportunities
<b>Life at Schools and Universities</b>	Valuing education
	Gendered schools
<b>Workplace, Society and Attitudes Towards Women</b>	Changes have happened
	Changes still need to happen
<b>Outlook for the Future</b>	Self-reliance and leadership
	Gender equality as ordinary

## **Parental/Family Home**

### *Parental role models*

All participants discussed the important role their parents and families played in shaping their life and their experiences. Most participants talked about their parents being their role model or source of inspiration to become who they are at the present. For example, two participants attributed the values that inform their lives to the role-modelling of their independent mothers.

*My mother was an independent and a strong woman, she inspired me, and she is my role model I have lived up to her values in every sense (47 years old).*

*Obviously, it begins from the home and my mother was a working woman and she is also strong woman, she is my first role model (34 years old).*

Fathers were also role models for many participants.

*My father was a judge and his works and leadership inspired me and that has played a role in my professional successes today (48 years old).*

This role modelling occurred for participants across the socio-economic spectrum, with some being very clear that their families had been poor. For example, two participants drew inspiration from the disadvantage they saw around them when they were growing up.

*My parents were not educated, and I saw the disadvantages and this circumstance inspired me to be who I am now (48 years old).*

*Poverty at home when I was young drove me to be stronger and do well at schools (49 years old).*

### ***Gender differences at home***

Their home environment was described by many participants as less gendered than their school environment, particularly boarding schools. While growing up participants said they did not encounter obvious gender differences at home that prevented them from becoming who they are at present. A participant attributed this to the influence of her grandmother, who treated people equally regardless of gender.

*Family environment has lots to do with your personality development, for us we had our grandmother living with us who had strong personality. For her what is right and wrong was very important and I don't think gender made any difference to her and she treated all her children equally whether boys or girls. That had some effect on me while growing up.*

The context created by the grandmother of a younger participant went further and left her with the impression growing up that women were better than men.

*I am surrounded by strong women. My grandmother being the strongest woman I know. So, I always grew up believing in women's strengths. And as I observed in my younger days, I always felt women were more mature and were thus superior to men even (22 years old).*

Other participants reported that their family life growing up had been gendered, in subtle through to very explicit ways. Although a participant did not see her family home as gendered, this is contradicted by her description of knowing there were expectations of her as a girl.

*Though there were social dynamics and expectations being a girl, while growing up in early 90s I did not see it as gender segregated at home as I grew up with my older brother (34 years old).*

Such expectations of what it meant to be a girl were described more fully by two other participants, who talked about being sanctioned by their family for voicing their opinions when they were growing up. This had not stopped them from doing so.

*Society expected women and girls to be obedient, and soft spoken. I was none of that and got into trouble because of that. I was not liked by my relatives for speaking my mind out. Not that I stopped doing it (40 years old).*

*In my teens I was free-spirited person, but my family often reminded me to conform to the mainstream girls and be less opinionated. I did not like when I was asked not to be free-spirited and be myself, so I went through a rebellious teen (22 years old).*

A few participants described other limitations on their freedom when they were growing up, including more restrictions on their freedom of movement than their brothers.

*My parents were very strict about sending me for sleepover at other's home. I used to envy my brothers who had the ample freedom in such discipline (48 years old).*

### ***Educational opportunities***

Most of the participants got the opportunity to attend schools alongside their male siblings, except for some participants of older generations. They said they did not get the opportunity to go to school with their younger siblings as they were the oldest in the family and had to share the responsibility of caring for their younger ones. The oldest participant shared that her aspirations were set aside when her father passed away and she assumed caretaking responsibilities within her family.

*My father being a Lama<sup>16</sup> himself helped me achieve my dreams of learning to read and write. My mother didn't fail to support me in that line. But my dreams of being single and becoming an accomplished Buddhist practitioner got hampered when my father passed away quite soon. Being an elder daughter, I had to be responsible for the wellbeing of my mother and sister (93 years old).*

Another participant (55 years old) also shared how she aspired so much to go to school and to get a job after studying but her parents did not let her go to school as she was the oldest and had to look after her younger siblings.

Participants shared their aspirations in life when they were young. Many wanted to become medical doctors, engineers and architects, and expressed their interest in hard sciences. All participants wanted to become independent and useful citizens, with this suggesting that they enjoyed the freedom to aspire to be somebody.

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<sup>16</sup> The head of the monastery or Buddhist teacher

## **Life at Schools and Universities**

### ***Valuing education***

Education was recognized as an important tool for empowerment and many participants acknowledged how their parents knew the value of education and inspired and supported them to get schooling.

*My father enrolled all my siblings in school he thought education is important (57 years old).*

Participants described their mothers as valuing self-reliance and as seeing education as the pathway to this for their daughters.

*My mother valued education highly. Self-reliant was very important to her, do well in school, get a job and be independent (47 years old).*

*I remember my mother always used to emphasized on education. She used to say education can make you self-reliant and independent, and do not have to depend on men (35 years old).*

Some participants were aware that their parents' valuing of education for girls was out-of-step with commonly held attitudes at that time. For example, a participant described being one of only a few girls in the community who was enrolled in school even though the opportunity was there for all.

*During my childhood time, government officials used to visit homes in the countryside to enroll children to schools, parents particularly for girls used to request the officials not to enroll them to school. Many parents during those day thought education was not for girls, I was one of the few children and only girl who attended school from my village (60 years old).*

There were also physical and geographical barriers to girls attending school, particularly in remote areas where there were no boarding facilities. A participant described the distance that needed to be walked to get to her school as a reason for many girls dropping out.

*We used to walk long hours to get to school, so many of my girlfriends dropped off schools, I was the only one who was consistent and continued into higher education from the group (47 years old).*

### **Gendered schools**

The expectations of how girls should behave that some participants had felt at home when they were growing up was felt by other participants when they were in school. For example, two participants felt their confidence was not seen as befitting a girl.

*I studied my early education in an international school in India and returned to Bhutan to study my high school years, that's when I felt the gendered expectations. I felt like an outcast and realized that my confidence, achievements and abilities were not be exhibited as a girl (38 years old).*

*I remember at my schools in past and now in the university, my male friends could be loud and dress untidy and no one really pay any mind, but if I were loud and voiced out any opinion openly I was labelled as too confident because I am a girl and I am expected to be timid and shy (22 years old).*

Another younger participant who did her schooling both in Bhutan in other countries said she had also found that schools in Bhutan were much stricter with girls, including what was acceptable by way of both behaviour and appearance.

*I think middle school years girls tend to get sexualize a lot, people are more judgmental about how girls act and how she looks. They put lot of attention on physical attributes of a woman; growing up through that was not easy. I felt these things more in Bhutan (27 years old).*

When the majority of staff in a school or university are men, the confidence of women can be undermined by the pressure of gendered expectations. For example, a participant described her university experience as very gendered, putting this down to society itself being gendered.

*High schools were good with balance gender in term of number. In tertiary it wasn't, women lack confidence. There was no gender-based lenses to encourage girls even with teachers. Even though I was good but still lacked confidence compared to men, that's growing up in the men's society (47 years old).*

Even so, the impacts of gendered ideas about how girls should behave can be moderated by having a number of outspoken young women in a class. For a younger participant, this was a sign that girls were getting more confident and consequently achieving academically.

*I feel the bigger difference in confidence level now. Girls were not able to lead the projects in high schools. In my college, I do not feel much difference, in fact girls are doing way*

*better than boys. In my class there are many strong opinionated girls and we lead the projects as per our aspirations. We are doing well academically (22 years old).*

Participants also talked about how boarding schools used to be stricter with girls than boys, including placing more restrictions on their freedom of movement whereby “*girls used to have very limited outing hours compared to boys.*” For an older participant, these restrictions were also applied to the subjects girls were encouraged to take and the aspirations for their future that were considered appropriate.

*Girls were considered good at arts and language where boys were good at math and science, and girls were often associated with secretarial jobs like typist after getting their education (57 years old).*

### **Workplace, Society and Attitudes Towards Women**

Participants expressed their experiences on how times have changed in Bhutan regarding the role of women, their positions in the workplace, and society’s outlook and attitudes towards women. Diverse views were expressed by the participants, with some saying that there has been dramatic change while others felt that more needs to be done and the country is on a journey of change.

#### ***Changes have happened***

Older participants said that they have seen dramatic changes in women’s roles across their own lifetimes. These changes ranged from small improvements, such as women now being offered equal seating at gatherings, to more women now having leadership roles within government, organisations and in the villages.

*Earlier women were always treated as secondary to men. In gatherings irrespective of women’s position, men were offered higher seats than women, but this practice has changed now (47 years old).*

*Now everywhere we see the participation of women in full swing. For instance, we have a woman for Health Minister and many leading female figures in other organizations. Even at village level, women are playing developmental roles now (48 years old).*

As another participant (48 years old) said, years back when she was the principal at a high school, a parent came and asked her “*where is the principal sir?*” People used to see leadership roles as only for males, but this has changed.

Change was also seen within policies and planning, whereby gender equality was being explicitly considered when it had not previously been.

*It had been very difficult to incorporate women's issues in the plans and policies of the government. But today, in two consecutive plans, gender equality was included as a National Key Result Area. The GNH philosophy which places people at the center of development, MDGs and SDGs played a pivotal role (49 years old).*

### **Changes still need to happen**

There was, however, discontent among younger participants that women still did not have equality of opportunity within society, in spite of there being a lot of talk about it. Society's preference for men in leadership roles and the broader acceptance of men's outspokenness were seen as deeply rooted.

*There is a lot of talk about the change and acceptance of women's choice, but actually the community still prefers to take orders from a man. If a comparison is sought, a man with the same caliber, attitude, approach towards work and life would be applauded for their single-mindedness (40 years old).*

*Men make all the decisions and resource planning and they still use gender sensitive languages, where women are devalued. I believe men and women are different but equal (47 years old).*

*In Bhutan there is no rule that excludes women from any opportunity, but we have very settled gendered expectations or comments around how women should be, which I find very difficult and challenging to put across to other people, in some situations it looks inappropriate also. Settled gender differences are deeply rooted not only in men but in women ourselves, which is a big setback (38 years old).*

These deeply held beliefs impact on women in both subtle and explicit ways. Participants reported that women are still expected to cook and look after the household, and that the expression of bold opinions and ideas by women was still frowned upon.

*Even now I feel that there are certain things very implicit and unsaid subconsciously, we still expect if you are the girl, you are expected to know how to cook and household chores (34 years old).*

*There are my women friends who don't feel comfortable with women who are bold, who have seen the better part of the world, they are not considered mainstream women. They put*

*you in certain box, no matter how well educated they might be, their gender bias attitude comes out at certain times, they might try to hide it from a gender equality point that is being politically correct. It's ingrained in them and very difficult to change. In our generation, it would be hard to change (57 years old).*

Finally, in this section, even when women are in roles of leadership and responsibility there are ways in which they are undermined by small, day-to-day insults.

*There is still certain circumstance that are awkward to say it, at the back the mind there are some prejudice though we do same job; people are reluctant to address a woman with same title as they do for men (48 years old).*

### **Outlook for Future**

Participants had very positive outlooks for future generations of women in Bhutan. Many participants set big dreams, talking about younger girls getting good educations and having equal social standing with their male counterparts.

#### ***Self-reliance and leadership***

Like some of their mothers and grandmothers, participants saw self-reliance as important for women and education as the means to achieve this.

*Besides education our values are important, and I always tell my daughters to be good human being with values, right attitude and believes (47 years old).*

A participant (49 years old) said her expectation was that young women would become whatever they aspired to be without any restrictions and taboos. While another described an aspiration of women being both national and global citizens.

*Young Bhutanese must be both national and global citizens. Young girls of Bhutan must be nationally rooted and globally competent (47 years old).*

The political support for young women to achieve these aspirations was described as strong, with a participant seeing lots of opportunities.

*They need to focus on strengths they have and capitalize on those strengths rather than copying others who you are not going to be exactly. I do see lot of opportunities for younger women, get your target correct, once get it work toward it. When it comes to environment and support for women, there is strong political support (48 years old).*

Participants also talked about the need for more women role models for younger generations, with these role models representing a diversity of ways that women can express themselves and be in the world.

*There are very few role models for girls in Bhutan. I think we need a few more categories of women role models. That women can be pretty, but also assertive, that women can be tomboyish, but still be gentle, that women can and should use our femininity in tandem with hard work and skills to achieve goals (40 years old).*

This was complemented by another participant who also saw the need for women to be able to express their power in a multitude of different ways.

*They still have to act in the men's world, one has to be assertive and strong almost like a man to fit into the positions, which I feel that needs to be change slightly. A woman can still be powerful being a feminine. We can still have confidence in our own knowledge as a female (34 years old).*

### **Gender equality as ordinary**

When it came to the comparison with how men were doing, some participants wanted to reduce the impact of gender on the identity and lives of women. A younger participant shared her aspirations for a future where girls and boys would respect one another and be more tolerant of diversity.

*I want them to be confident and independent. I aspire that in the time of younger generation girls, boys too will know how to treat a girl rightfully. That he should not feel any lesser just because a girl his age is doing better. Both girls and boys should have mutual respect and I want the future generations to have a more open, more tolerant of differences and more courageous (22 years old).*

Gender equality for some participants was about women's achievements being seen as normal because there were few barriers in their way because of their gender.

*I aspire that in future the appointment of women in different positions should not be a big accomplishment to celebrate, it should become a normal activity as it is with men (35 years old).*

*...never have to think about gender, that would be a hindrance to what they want to achieve. Gender should be very small part of their identity who you are (27 years old).*

## Discussion and Conclusion

The SDGs are about sustaining development intergenerationally. Thus, in order to bring effective change, it is important to understand the perspectives of people from different generations. For instance, gender equality is crucial for achieving a real transformation that is inclusive of everyone, however achieving gender equality could be difficult without knowing the reality of what women are experiencing. Therefore, this study dives into understanding the lived experiences of women from different generations in Bhutan.

Listening to the lived experiences of women suggests that perceptions of gender equality have changed a lot in the country. Most changes are in terms of opportunities that have opened for women; for instance, access to education for women has changed which has brought several other developments into their lives. More women are in former workplaces and holding leadership roles, which are good indicators of how individual lives of women have progressed. However, the findings also clearly indicate certain things are slow to change, many participants talked about settled differences between men and women, and unsaid expectations that constrained women compared to men. This suggests the existence of the systematic and structural issues that build around patriarchal system. This is consistent with the other reports on gender issues in Bhutan where deep-rooted power relations between men and women are seen as the main cause of gender-based violence.<sup>17</sup>

Bhutan's socio-cultural scenario is similar to the international state of deep-rooted power relations between men and women. The patriarchy exists in countries globally and it is embedded in super structure that encompasses cultural, political, legal and social systems.<sup>18</sup> A more substantive gender equality that is collective empowerment can be created only through creating structural changes in the patriarchy rather than believing in sameness of men and women.<sup>19</sup> Most often the inclusivity policies may wrongly prescribe sameness between genders as achieving gender equality, which is not a sustainable solution. The principle of sameness assumes that when women and men are given the same opportunity and treated similarly,

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<sup>17</sup> NCWC (2012). Study on situation of violence against women in Bhutan

<sup>18</sup> Bhadra, C.(2020). Mobilizing South Asian Local Knowledge to Democratize Evaluation Theory and Practice: Elucidating the Missing Link "Gender" (draft)

<sup>19</sup> Sonal, Zaveri (2020). Gender and Equity in Openness: Forgotten spaces In Making Open Development Inclusive

equality will be achieved<sup>20</sup> however, the fact is men and women are dissimilar but equal at the same time.

The findings of this study suggest that women of all generations consistently believe in the value of education and the evidence also suggests that much has been changed in terms of opportunities for women due to improved access to education. Therefore, education is recognised as an effective way to achieving equality in the society. Although education system in Bhutan is becoming increasingly female-dominant sector than before, the school is the place where pupils are exposed to learnings beyond the prescribed curricula. A transformative change in the society may require the education system to evolve and to be more gender sensitive than before.

Family is another important structure beside schools that play potential role in enabling gender equality in the society. The findings from this study suggest families of women participants have played enabling role in shaping their experiences. Any intervention by the government and the change makers must include families in the process of transformation. The strategies to achieving gender equality better rest with people themselves so it is important to communicate with the people, listen and understand their experiences. The solutions based on the local knowledge and experiences can bring sustainable change.

Finally, evaluation plays critical role in ascertaining what interventions work and not. Any attempt to facilitate gender-based transformative change in the society will require incisive evaluation and knowledge generation. In this context, evaluation informed by local knowledge becomes crucial in fostering an equal society that benefits everyone.

### **Limitation**

This study focused only on women and it would be interesting to conduct a similar study to listen to stories of men from different generations, as they need to be accomplices in Bhutan's journey to full gender equality. Further, some parts of the data have not been analysed due to the time constraints and I hope to undertake more analysis in the near future.

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<sup>20</sup> Muthey and Kappen (2017). Gender Equality and Sustainable Development Goals: A Trainer's Manual. Bangalore, India: Visthar.

## Annexure

### Interview protocol for understanding the lived experiences women in Bhutan

1. Can you tell me briefly about yourself?

Your name:

Age:

Birthplace:

Family, siblings, growing up time

#### Growing up

2. When you were young, what did you want to be when you grew up?
  - a. Was this the same as what your family wanted for you?
  - b. What about your community? What were their expectations of women when you were growing up?
  - c. Were there challenges for you in achieving your dreams?
  - d. Where did your inspiration come from? Did you have role models or supporters?

#### Current situation

3. Are you employed in any organization? (government/private sector/ corporate bodies/ NGOs/)
  - a. What sort of roles do women have in your organization?
  - b. Are women in decision-making roles? Are you?
4. If you are self-employed, what kind of decisions do you make?
  - a. Do you know other women who are self-employed like you?
5. Do you think your community's perception of women has changed over the years?  
Elaborate with an example.

#### Future generations

6. What are your expectations or aspiration of your daughter/granddaughter? (If you are not a mother, what are your aspirations of younger generation girls?)
7. Is this how you have always thought about what women could achieve, or have your perceptions changed over the years?
  - a. What changed your perception, any examples or incidents?

#### Topical issues (additional questions to ask depending on the responds on the above questions)

8. What is your perspective of impact of Covid-19? How do you think that women are impacted by the pandemic?
9. GNH is the overarching philosophy of the development in Bhutan, how has this philosophy influence gender-inclusive practices in the country?
10. SDG and GNH share many common grounds, in your opinion how have SDGs influence in shaping gender lenses in the country.

11. Can you share your opinion on the role of development policy evaluation on changing gender and equity lenses?