



International Journal of Economic Research

ISSN : 0972-9380

available at <http://www.serialsjournals.com>

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Volume 14 • Number 20 • 2017

The Participation of Women in Local Government in Bhutan: A Study of Sarpang District

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ABSTRACT

Bhutan has been part of democracy for nearly two decades and since then, women's passive role in government formation has become the serious concern. Women started to take part in the decision of government policies since its inception but in negligible numbers only. The aim of the present study was to examine the reasons behind the passive participation of women population in Local Government activities of Sarpang district. Both qualitative and quantitative method of the investigation were used for the study. The Field Questionnaire Survey (FQS) was used to unveil the reasons for women taking less participation in government formation. The study was conducted on 80 women respondents and was divided into 10 respondents equally as per eight sub-districts of Sarpang district. The age range of the participants was ranging from 20-70 years.

The findings of the study revealed that reasons like the financial problem, lack of support from the family, lack of knowledge, lack of information, social discrimination, domestic responsibilities, fear and shame of losing the election restrict their active participation in the establishment of government. Few of the suggestions put forward to encourage more participation of women was by providing them with free social skills training, conducting free workshops on political education, seminars on awareness of women rights and the role of women in making government.

Keywords: Local government, Women participation, Issues related to less participation, Recommendations.

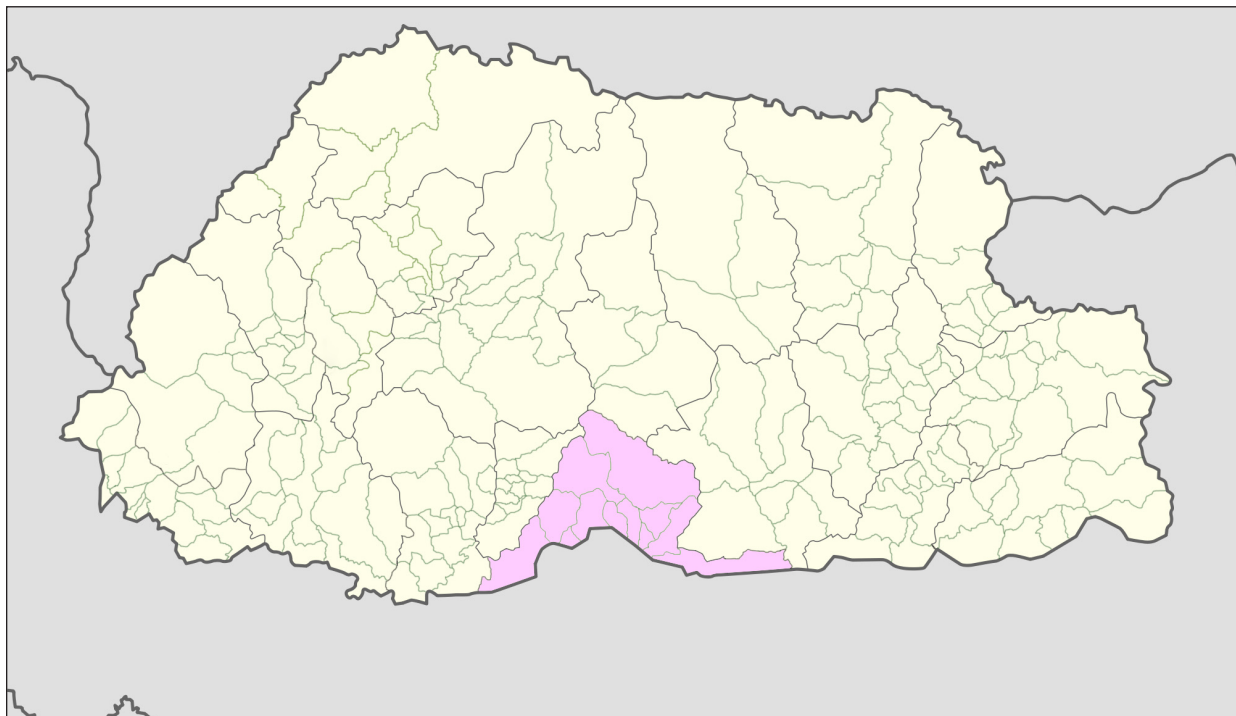
1. INTRODUCTION

The institution of Local Government in Bhutan that began in 2011 started to bring women from the grass-root level to the forefront of the decision-making forum and it became the area of concern of every

policymaker, every authoritative body and every government agencies about bringing women fully in equal to that of men to take part in every sphere of the fields especially in politics. Equal participation of women in all spheres of development activities is a must for the upbringing of the nation.

The study which is focused on Sarpang district centered on reasons for less participation of women in the decision making level, the changing scenario of female representatives especially in regards to the two ever election held so far. The difficulties and challenges faced by women in politics and the measures and actions for the improvement of their participation in the local government. This study will pave more ways for further research on this subject and will open various methods and solutions for better representation of women in Local government especially in regards to Sarpang district.

Location of Sarpang District within Bhutan



(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarpang_District from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)

The research methodology used was both qualitative and quantitative which involves descriptive as well as analytical research. The descriptive statistics were used to find the frequency and percentage of the samples collected. The information was collected through distribution of 36 field questionnaires and was evaluated based on the answers given by the respondents.

Sarpang also was known as Gelephu is one of the districts among 20 districts of Bhutan. The district is divided into twelve sub-districts. The region is mostly inhabited by Lhotshampa and due to the presence of a majority of Lhotshampa (1), the participation from their part in the Local Government election was very less. Those who participated were mostly who were the resettled population who came from East and Northeast parts of Bhutan.

⁽¹⁾ Lhotshampa who migrated from Nepal through Sikkim and West Bengal in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century. (Basu, n.d.) 2008.

There was extreme under-representation of women at the highest local position (head of the county) compared to other posts in the local government because of few candidates that stood for the election. Sarpang district witnessed a good figure of improvement of women's participation in election 2016.

There were only about few numbers of women who participated in the post of a village representative and four of them got elected. Whereas only one woman contested for the post of deputy county head and wasn't through. But for the post of county head, no women participated. (Table 1.1). In 2016, forty women took part in the election, among which only eight got elected. (Table 1.2). The number of women who got elected was less but their participation has drastically increased.

An article written by Shilpa Rina (2014) on 'Bhutanese women in politics: Victims of prejudices', has highlighted about a statement given by Bhutanese filmmaker Kezang Chuki Dorjee, who has documented on women's participation in the country's 2013 elections that, "there is no gender discrimination in Bhutan but, when it comes to the representation of women in politics, socio-cultural prejudices prevent them from playing a larger role in policymaking'. Further, she said, 'the socio-cultural perception that a women candidate isn't capable of serving the people, they are only for the kitchen and social service, and general myths like Bhutanese women aren't interested in politics restrict their participation, and when people come with preconceived notions, it becomes very difficult for people to accept a women a candidate'".

A study conducted by NCWC in 2012 on Women's Participation in 2011 local government elections found out that, in which a society where gender stereotypes and attitudes have got deep-rooted, women are depicted as being less capable than men and therefore a large number of women seem to believe to be the fact and hence leads to women often having lower self-esteem. This leads to less involvement of women in outdoor activities.

Another source from Kuensel online, 16 October 2012, states that the study by NCWC on Participation of Women in 2011 Local Government Election, that voters significantly voted for male deputy county head candidates and not at all for female county head and Municipality head, which indicated that voters were willing to vote for female candidates at the lowest positions in the Local government offices, there is very reluctance on the part of the same voters to elect female candidates for the more coveted Local government positions.

Some of the reasons behind of low representation of women in local government of Sarpang district founded by the study are because of lack of confidence, lack of interest, lack of support from families, lack of role model, illiterate, low self-esteem etc. It was pointed out that reservation of seat was one of the solutions to the problem other than providing the women with refreshing programs and courses on building up confidence and capacity in public speaking and providing them with basic education like Non-Formal Education.

Similar findings were founded by Thinley, D. et. al., (2014) on Improving Women's Participation in Local Governance- an Explorative study of Women's leadership Journeys in Eight Districts of Bhutan that education, prior political leadership experience, communication skills, family and community support and good character are key factors that lead to women's success in local government elections. In order to strengthen the ability of women in the decision making bodies, they need to provide enough training and programs on building self-confidence, communication skills, good knowledge of electoral process etc. The Institute of Management Services (2010) in Thimphu organized a program mainly to influence more

women to contest in the election. The program also aimed to boost self- confidence among women and teach them campaigning and communication skills. The then opposition leader Tobgay also persuaded women to take part and require boosting self-confidence and taking rest. He added saying, “No man can represent for women as women’s way of looking at the world is different from men”.

The Election Commission of Bhutan on the study of Determinant of Voter’s Choice and Women’s Participation in Elective Offices in the Kingdom of Bhutan (2014), has found that sex was not the issue for the voters while choosing for their candidate but of competent, qualified and better candidates irrespective of their gender. They also pointed out that political parties play a very important role in enhancing women in politics.

The presence of gender disparity, a strong presence of cultural beliefs in biological inferiority and vulnerability of women were the results found out from the study done by National Commission for Women and Children (2008) on the Gender Stereotypes and Women’s Political Participation. (Women in Governance).

Table 1.1
Local Government election held in Sarpang Dzongkhag

Post	2011 election		2016 election	
	Contestants	Elected	Contestants	Elected
Gups (Chair)	0	0	2	0
Mangmis (vice-chair)	1	0	5	0
Tshogpas (councilors)	6	4	33	8
Total	7	4	40	8

Source: Electoral Office, Sarpang District

Following Table 1.2 is the list of women who participated in eight sub-districts of Sarpang, Local government election, 2016.

Table 1.2

S. No.	Gewog	Aspiring			Primary round (Nominated Candidate)			General round (Elected)		
		Gup	Mangmi	Tshogpa	Gup	Mangmi	Tshogpa	Gup	Mangmi	Tshogpa
1.	Chhudzom	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2.	Chuzangang	0	1	6	0	0	6	0	0	0
3.	Jigmechhoeling	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
4.	Samtenling	0	2	3	0	1	2	0	0	1
5.	Senggye	0	0	5	0	0	5	0	0	3
6.	Serzhong	1	0	6	1	0	6	0	0	0
7.	Tareythang	1	0	6	0	0	6	0	0	3
8.	Umling	0	1	7	0	0	7	0	0	1
Total		2	5	33	1	1	32	0	0	8
Grand total			40			34			8	

Source: Election office, Sarpang District.

2. METHODS

Sample

The field questionnaire survey was employed. The total number of sample was 80. The participants selected for the study were taken from 8 sub-districts of Sarpang. The age of each participant ranged from 20-70.

Procedures

The participants were asked to express the opinions on the basis of questions framed. Each participant was provided suitable time to express the opinion for every statement. The information was also collected through interviewing the District Electoral Officer of Sarpang district. The officer shared his experiences and views regarding the participation of women in the local government of the district and provided some authentic data of women participation in the second local government election held in 2016.

3. RESULT AND FINDINGS

About 30% of the responses expressed that domestic responsibilities restricted women from participating in the election and this was the variable which scored the highest. Women are having the multiple burdens like taking care of household chores, child care, working in the farms, family responsibilities; all these restricted them to take part in the election even though they are interested in it.

The monthly income plays a vital role in restricting women from taking part in the election. 86% of the family monthly income falls below Nu.15,000 in which 4 to 6 family members needed to survive their livelihood. It is very much clear that they are being restricted to join election because of lack of resource.

As per the finding, the contestants perceived that education and experiences don't at all count to win the election, even a minimum qualification is enough to run the election and win it. The reason behind lesser participation of women as compared to men is mainly due to lack of support from the people. Very fewer women voluntary come forward to take part in the election as they feel lack of confidence and fear of losing the election. Family support, especially the husband has a significant role in inspiring their wives in taking part in the election. Their husband never restricts them in taking part in the election instead they are the main driving force behind them who encouraged them to participate in the election.

Another reason behind for the less participation of the women in the election is, most of them failed to take part in activities or programs related to the election. 41% of the women said they weren't aware of such activities. The traveling issues also constitute the problem.

(Figure 1.1) According to the electoral officer of Sarpang District, Mr. Sonam Wangdi, it was a good figure of women participation in Functional Literacy Test (FLT) compared to the last FLT held. The reasons for not being able to appear for the test was, most women are not that aware of the importance of FLT and also are not confident enough to sit for the test. Therefore in order to attract more women and also to make sure all registered women to appear for the test, they are educated on the importance of FLT and also the support, encouragement, and inspiration from the family is a must.

4. CONCLUSION

In Bhutan, the Local government takes every issue of the communities and solves at Gewog level. They also take issues to the higher authority for proper solutions. It works as per the power and authority granted by "the Local Government Act of Bhutan, 2009", in implementing the development plan.

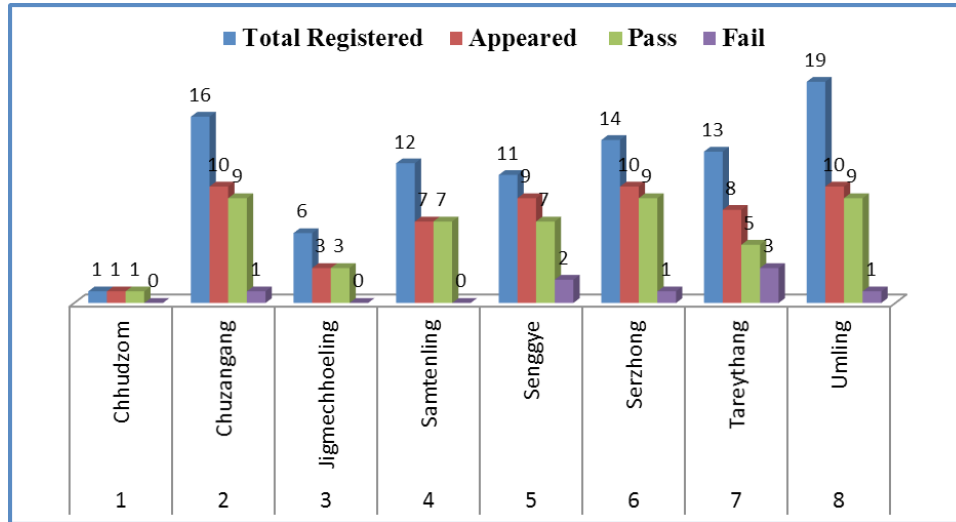


Figure 1.1: FLT, Sarpang District, April 30, 2016

A long time before, prior to the introduction of local government in 1991, usually, local leaders were dominated by male representatives. However, in later stages, women too started to show their strength and enthusiasm to participate in local government. Thus, in 2011 local government election that was first held in the country saw 99 elected women and similarly, in second local government election 2016, there were 155 elected women.

The research finding indicates that women’s ability to participate in politics fields of life is equal to that of a man with the passage of time. What women needed was motivation, just infuse in them confidence and make them realize their full strength and power that they can and are not less capable than a man.

In order to encourage and inspired more women in the election, the women candidates are needed to be provided with a certain amount of concession to run the campaign and the elected women must be conferred with training and seminars on how to keep up with the political activities. Rest of the women are given enough educations and training in public speaking and building self-confidence and also awareness of the importance of doing Functional Literacy Test. People are also given some kind of alertness campaign on women capabilities and abilities.

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