Research Study on Understanding the barriers to women's political participation in Bhutan

The Centre for Research on Bhutanese Society (CRBS), May 2025

Executive Summary

This research Study investigates the challenges and barriers to women's political participation in Bhutan, particularly in light of the disappointing outcomes of the 2023 elections for the National Council (NC) and National Assembly (NA), where female representation significantly declined. Despite advancements in education and over a decade of democratic governance, women's involvement in politics remains alarmingly low, with only one woman elected to the NC and two in the NA.

The Study adopts a dual approach, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative methods, including surveys, focus group discussions (FGDs), and individual interviews with current and former parliamentarians. A total of 448 completed surveys from 20 Dzongkhags (districts) were analysed, revealing that while a majority of women engage politically through voting, only a mere 2% of the female respondents have contested for political office. Key barriers identified include entrenched patriarchal norms, societal expectations, economic constraints, and a lack of confidence among potential female candidates.

The literature review highlights global trends in women's political participation, situating Bhutan within a broader context. Globally, only 23.3% of the parliamentary seats were occupied by women as of January 2024, while the figures in South Asia ranged from 5% in the Maldives to 33.1% in Nepal. Bhutan scored 17.4%. The review stresses that, despite constitutional guarantees, traditional gender roles continue to inhibit women's political engagement. Cultural perceptions prioritizing male leadership, and logistical challenges, further restrict women's access to political opportunities.

The FDGs with parliamentarians reveal shared concerns regarding the lack of support systems for women candidates, inadequate financial resources, and the necessity for community engagement to foster a more inclusive environment. The findings emphasize the critical role of family dynamics, with many women expressing a preference for male family members in politics, reflecting deep-rooted gender norms.

Based on these findings, the Study proposes several recommendations to enhance women's political participation. These include establishing financial safety nets for women candidates, mandating political parties to nominate a minimum percentage of female candidates, and implementing targeted capacity-building programs to develop essential skills such as leadership and public speaking. Additionally, it calls for increased community awareness and support, particularly from men, to create an environment conducive to women's political empowerment.

This Study underscores the need for comprehensive strategies to dismantle the barriers hindering women's participation in Bhutan's political landscape. By addressing these challenges, Bhutan can work towards achieving greater gender equality and inclusivity in its democratic processes, ultimately benefiting the nation's governance and societal development.

Acknowledgment

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1. Introduction

The research Study was initiated following the disappointing outcomes of the 2023 National Council (NC) and National Assembly (NA) elections, which revealed alarmingly low representation of women in both parliamentary houses. In the NC, only one woman was elected out of 20 seats, while the NA saw just two women elected from 47 seats. This decline in women's participation, despite increased access to tertiary education and 17 years of democratic governance, raises critical questions about the underlying reasons for such low level of women's engagement in politics.

While the project is titled "Research Study on Understanding the Barriers to Women's Participation to Politics in Bhutan," it aims to extend the inquiry beyond party-based elections for the NA and NC to include local government elections for Gups, Mangmis, and Tshogpas. These local elections, unlike their national counterparts, do not require candidates to be graduates; instead, candidates must demonstrate functional literacy as certified by the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB). This broader perspective allows for a comprehensive examination of the barriers to women's electoral participation at multiple levels of governance. Hence, the Study is meant to generally cover both national and local elections, unless specified in the write-up and interpreted as responses to questionnaires.

The Study is structured into several key sections. Section 2 delineates specific objectives of the research, establishing a clear framework for the ensuing analysis. Section 3 details on the methodologies employed to collect data and information, and highlights some limitations of the Study. In Section 4, the literature review centers on Bhutan and its regional context, providing critical insights into the existing body of knowledge related to the topic.

Section 5 presents the data obtained from the survey, accompanied by a thorough empirical analysis of the findings that highlight significant trends and patterns. Section 6 discusses findings and recommendations from FGDs and interviews with NA and former NC members, as well as current and former opposition leaders, offering valuable perspectives on the political landscape. Section 7 summarizes the Study, while Section 8 provides practical recommendations to promote women's participation in elections, a vital area for social development. Finally, Section 9 summarizes the key findings and emphasizes their implications for future research and policy initiatives.

2. Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this Study are to identify the barriers to women's political engagement in Bhutan and to propose pathways for achieving greater gender equality in electoral representation. Importantly, the aim of this project was not to produce an authoritative document addressing the challenges associated with increasing women's participation in elections. Instead, it sought to supplement and update findings from earlier studies while making practical recommendations to enhance women's electoral participation. This approach was deemed most appropriate given the constraints of time and resources that limited the feasibility of conducting a comprehensive national study.

The Study's objective is to improve women's involvement in elections in Bhutan by identifying and addressing the barriers that impede their engagement, thereby promoting increased representation and empowerment in both local and national decision-making processes.

Two key outcomes are anticipated from this Study: first, the creation of heightened awareness among policymakers and the public regarding the barriers to women's political participation in Bhutan; and second, the development of evidence-based strategies and interventions designed to enhance women's participation in elections. These outcomes are essential for fostering a more inclusive electoral and political landscape in Bhutan.

3. Method

The careful selection of research methods is a crucial aspect of achieving successful research outcomes. To capture diverse viewpoints from various audience groups, CRBS employed both qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry, including individual and focus group discussions (FGDs) with current parliamentarians from the National Assembly and former members of the National Council. Although consulting NC members was not possible due to their field tours, this limitation is not expected to significantly impact the findings. Insights gathered from discussions with other parliamentarians, including current and former Leaders of the Opposition, contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

Survey questionnaires were administered both electronically and face-to-face to gather insights primarily from female respondents aged 25 to 65. A total of 550 survey questionnaires were distributed across 20 districts in Bhutan, resulting in 448 completed responses, representing an impressive 82% response rate. The survey included participants from four regions: West, Central, East, and South. The sample sizes from each region were determined based on the population distribution within those areas. Every effort was made to encourage participation, utilizing various communication platforms such as email, messaging apps, WeChat, and telephone calls to reach potential respondents.

The survey findings were further enriched by the FGDs and individual discussions with both male and female parliamentarians, who are either currently serving or have served in previous parliaments.

To safeguard the identities of all participants and uphold confidentiality, the identities of the survey respondents and individuals involved in the focus group discussions (FGDs) have been kept confidential and are not disclosed in this report. This practice aligns with established research protocols and standards. Our commitment to confidentiality not only ensures the integrity of the research process but also fosters a trusting environment for all participants.

3.1   Limitation of the Study

This Study has some limitations that warrant consideration. Firstly, the research is primarily based on data collected through surveys and qualitative discussions conducted shortly after the 2023 elections. This timeframe may not adequately capture the evolving dynamics of women's electoral participation over a longer period. Additionally, the focus on recent electoral outcomes may overlook historical trends and systemic issues that have shaped women's engagement in elections in Bhutan.

While the survey achieved an impressive response rate of 82%, the sample size of 448 respondents may not fully represent diverse perspectives of women across various regions and socio-economic backgrounds in Bhutan. The majority of the survey respondents were from urban areas and civil servants, which may inadvertently marginalize the voices of women from rural communities and those in informal sectors, who may encounter unique challenges

in electoral participation. Nonetheless, every effort has been made to capture the prevailing views within Bhutanese society on this critical issue.

Finally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases, as respondents might be influenced by social desirability or fear of repercussions, potentially affecting the accuracy of their reported experiences and motivations. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted with caution, as they offer a snapshot rather than a comprehensive understanding of the barriers to women's electoral participation in Bhutan. Recognizing the dynamic nature of the topic and time constraint to conduct a comprehensive survey, it is clear that further research is necessary to validate and expand upon the findings of this Study. Future research could benefit from a longitudinal approach and a wider scope to provide a more nuanced perspective on this critical issue.

4. Literature Review

A comprehensive literature review was conducted on the subject, drawing from both Bhutanese and international sources, as detailed in the following segments.
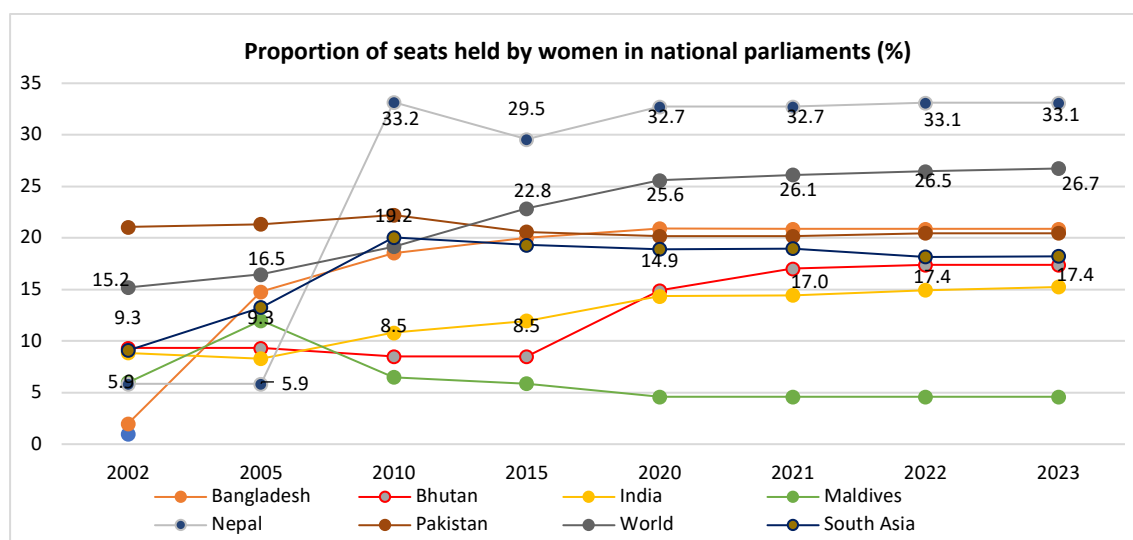
Figure 1: Proportion of women's political participation worldwide
(Source: CRBS's computation from The World Bank data, 2024

The data presented in Figure 1 above illustrates the disparities in women's political representation across some nations in South Asia, emphasizing the significant impact of socio-cultural and political frameworks on their involvement in governance. Many countries have implemented mechanism such as quota systems and reserved seats to enhance women's political participation and foster inclusivity. For example, Nepal's electoral legislation requires political parties to allocate a substantial proportion of seats for women and diverse ethnic and social groups under the proportional representation system. According to the Constituent Assembly Election Act of 2007, parties presenting more than 100 candidates are mandated to reserve 50 percent of their seats for women and ensure the inclusion of individuals from varied backgrounds on their candidate lists. This approach has resulted in a highly representative assembly, as depicted in the figure above, which not only reflects the country's demographic diversity but also ensures significant participation from women and marginalized communities. Similarly, Bangladesh has enshrined reserved seats for women in its constitution, establishing

a strong mechanism that has consistently promoted gender representation in parliament over the years. In Pakistan, constitutional amendments have progressively increased the number of reserved seats for women, demonstrating a commitment to gender equality and actively encouraging women's participation in political processes. Moreover, Sri Lanka has instituted quotas at the local government level, leading to a significant improvement in women's representation and engagement in local governance. These initiatives highlight the effectiveness of targeted policies in advancing women's political representation and underscore the need for ongoing efforts to promote gender equality within political systems in these nations.

Women leaders face unique challenges in balancing societal expectations with the assertiveness required in leadership. Research indicates that women exhibiting dominant traits often face harsher judgments than their male counterparts, as illustrated by leaders like Margaret Thatcher and Angela Merkel, who were criticized for their assertive styles (Eagly et al., 1992; Ridgeway, 2001). This dual expectation creates a dilemma for women leaders, as they struggle to meet both leadership and gender norms, often facing penalties when prioritizing one over the other (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

Mahmood (2004), in the article "Political Empowerment of Women: A Comparative Study of South Asian Countries" explores persistent gender inequality and limited decision-making participation of women in South Asia, despite constitutional guarantees. He argues that true empowerment requires a comprehensive approach involving social and economic initiatives, education, and cultural change.

Similarly, Banu (2016) emphasizes that South Asian women face significant barriers to political involvement due to patriarchal values and economic dependence, advocating for economic and social empowerment through education and opportunities to enhance women's political engagement. Chadha (2014), in her examination of women's political participation in India, notes their underrepresentation in legislative bodies despite matching voter turnout with men. She highlights ongoing political resistance to initiatives like the Women's Reservation Bill, which seeks to reserve one-third of seats for women, and advocates for legal reforms and a shift in societal attitudes to combat entrenched norms.

Upadhya (1996) critically examines the status of women in Nepal, emphasizing ongoing challenges in political participation and socio-economic status. He identifies entrenched patriarchal norms, low political awareness—especially in rural areas, societal disapproval of women in politics, and inadequate institutional support as key barriers. Despite some improvements since the 1980s, including increased literacy rates and reduced fertility rates, women in Nepal continue to face significant obstacles to political participation, largely due to persistent patriarchal values in both legal frameworks and societal attitudes.

4.1   Women in politics in Bhutanese context

This section of the literature review examines the progress and challenges of women's representation in Bhutan's political sphere since the transition from monarchy to parliamentary democracy in 2008.

While Bhutan has made significant strides in political liberalization and women's rights, women's presence in elections remains minimal. The political landscape has historically been male-dominated, with limited visibility of women in leadership roles.

Historically, Bhutan was fragmented under male religious leaders, with limited recognition of women in leadership. However, as Bhutan gradually opened up and embraced progressive

values like gender equality, significant changes emerged particularly through modern education. This shift empowered marginalized Bhutanese women to take on vital societal roles, as education became more accessible. Consequently, there has been an increase in women's participation in executive positions and leadership roles within ministries. Nonetheless, representation in democratic election remains disproportionately low compared to the number of female voters and the overall population.

Research into the underrepresentation of women in elections identifies patriarchal norms as a significant factor. While Bhutan may not appear overtly patriarchal, subtle forms of discrimination are evident in societal attitudes, cultural practices, and institutional frameworks. For example, phallic paintings adorning the walls of houses and monasteries, inspired by Drukpa Kunley - a 15th-century unorthodox Tibetan Buddhist monk- serve to reinforce male superiority and perpetuate masculine spaces, thereby entrenching subtle forms of patriarchy within Bhutanese society (National Commission for Women and Children, 2008).

In Bhutanese society, as in other South Asian contexts, men are expected to be providers, while women manage domestic affairs, confining them to the private sphere. Men engage in public decision-making and build social networks, while women perform household tasks, often viewed as demeaning. These societal norms discourage women's participation in public life and elections (Gurung, 2023).

Research by Chuki and Turner (2017) highlights that despite progress in health and education and government policies promoting women's issues, the underrepresentation of women in politics persists. Since the first election in 2008, female candidates and elected officials remain significantly fewer than their male counterparts. The authors also find higher female participation in politics in the neighbouring South Asian countries compared to Bhutan, attributing this to the presence of gender quotas and existing family dynasties in politics. They contend that South Asia, has remained stubbornly patriarchal where women's "natural sphere" has historically been, and continues to be private domains focused on the home and family. Compared to other South Asian countries, where gender quotas exist, Bhutan shows lower female political participation, reflecting deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs that deem women unsuitable for political roles.

4.2. Factors inhibiting greater participation of women in elections in Bhutan

The past literatures identify several factors limiting women's participation in elections. Firstly, the pool of qualified female candidates is significantly smaller than that of men, largely due to societal expectations that women manage household responsibilities, leading to higher dropout rates in education. For instance, while men comprised 23% more than women in tertiary education in 1983, this gap widened to 61% by 2006.

Additionally, the prevalence of personality-based masculine leadership hinders women's candidacy. Historical narratives and cultural myths have consistently portrayed men as central figures, fostering a preference for male leadership. This has resulted in political parties, often led by charismatic men, leaving women in roles as party workers or voters rather than as candidates.

In Bhutan, women are often perceived as inherently less capable than men in political and leadership roles, a view rooted in centuries of entrenched patriarchy. Stereotypes portray women as dependent, submissive, and physically weak—traits seen as incompatible with decision-making, which is associated with strength and firmness attributed to men. This perception is deeply embedded in traditional culture, reflected in sayings and folklore that perpetuate discrimination. For instance, a common proverb suggests that men are always

providers, regardless of their competence, while women are seen as receivers, reinforcing their confinement to domestic roles (Tshering, 2015).

Historically, Bhutanese women had significant roles, often inheriting property and participating in matrilineal traditions that allowed for more flexible gender relations. However, patriarchal norms have increasingly limited women's influence in public life, relegating them to secondary roles despite their contributions within households and communities (Chhoden & Lhamu).

In contemporary Bhutan, while severe forms of discrimination against women are rare, significant challenges remain, including domestic violence and economic dependency (Dahlerup, 2014). These issues hinder women's participation in decision-making and democratic elections. Although formal barriers to equality have been removed, structural obstacles persist, particularly in political institutions, which favour men. It is argued that proportional representation in the electoral system is more conducive for women's political participation as it allows parties to put forth many candidates on their lists. In contrasts, the plurality electoral system with first past-the-post system encourages parties to nominate one person, which in Bhutan's case often means me.

Structural barriers to women's political participation vary by country and society. In Bhutan, the requirement for candidates to have a university degree limits the candidate pool, as more men tend to have higher educational qualifications. Additionally, civil servants must resign to run for office, deterring many women from contesting elections due to the relative stability of civil service jobs. Other barriers include gender stereotypes, inadequate infrastructure for campaigning, and familial responsibilities, which often conflict with political aspirations. These factors collectively impede women's participation in politics. Women's caregiving and familial responsibilities often conflict with their work and political ambitions, leading many to forgo running for office (Dahlerup, 2014).

A significant challenge for Bhutan's emerging democracy is the lack of public awareness, especially among women, regarding the importance of female leadership and participation in decision-making. Historically, the absence of women in power has hindered societal acceptance of women in leadership roles. The gendered division of labor assigns women domestic responsibilities, perpetuating the belief that they are less capable in politics, which requires mobility and networking. This has resulted in minimal investment in women's leadership training, reinforcing the notion that women are uninterested in politics (Dema, 2024).

Cultural expectations further confine women to traditional roles, discouraging them from pursuing political careers after initial failures, while men often receive more support to try again. This disparity is encapsulated by the saying, "*kep ja thruel tong thruel; zamo chig thruel nyi thruel*" which means that men are allowed to make numerous mistakes, while for a woman even one or two are unacceptable. Such attitudes impede women's electoral participation, despite their voting rights and participates in democracy in numbers equal to or even surpassing those of men (National Commission for Women and Children, 2008).

4.3.   Electoral landscape in Bhutan, 2008-2024

The absence of reserved seats for women in Bhutan's parliament significantly contributes to the low representation of women in this young democracy. This issue is compounded by a general lack of understanding about the importance of equal representation in strengthening democracy and promoting inclusivity. Disproportionate representation at decision-making levels often leads to the neglect of issues affecting women, impacting the nation's stability and prosperity. Research indicates that countries with higher numbers of women in decision-

making roles tend to experience greater long-term stability and economic growth (Chhoden & Lhamu).

Since 2013, discussions regarding the introduction of a quota system for women in parliament have occurred, yet no consensus has emerged so far. Support for such a system remains weak, and some women oppose it, viewing it as preferential treatment based solely on gender rather than merit. However, there is a viewpoint that a quota system could serve as a catalyst for increasing women's political participation until it gains broader acceptance (BBS, 2018). Some propose that political parties should be required to nominate a certain percentage (20-30%) of female candidates, which would serve as a temporary measure until more women engage in elections. Implementing this change would necessitate an amendment to the Election Act of Bhutan 2008.

4.4.   Gender representation in Bhutan's elections (2007-2023)

Women's representation in both houses of parliament and local government positions in Bhutan has not increased since the first national elections in 2008. In fact, their presence in parliament reached an all-time low during the fourth legislative election in 2023/2024. Initially, 10 women were elected or appointed in the first election, followed by 6 in 2013, a record 12 in 2018, and only 3 in the 2024 election (Dema, 2024). This declining trend is also evident in the fourth national election and the third local government election, as shown in five tables below.

Table 1. Distribution of male and female candidates and winners in the National Council elections, 2007 to 2023.

	No. of male candidates	No. of males elected	No. of female candidates	No. of females elected
2007-2008	61	16	6	4
2013	62	20	5	0
2018	121	18	4	2
2023	84	19	5	1

Table 2. Distribution of male and female candidates and winners in the National Assembly elections, 2008 to 2023.

	No. of male candidates	No. of males elected	No. of female candidates	No. of females elected
2008	84	43	10	4
2013	84	44	10	3
2018	84	40	10	7
2023-2024	88	45	6	2

Table 3. Distribution of male and female candidates and winners for Gups, Mangmis, and Tshogpas in the first local government elections of 2011.

Elective Post	No. of male contested	No. of female contested	Total	No. of males elected	No. of females elected	Total
Gup	556	22	578	204	1	205
Mangmi	542	42	584	193	12	205

Gewog Tshogpa	1269	137	1406	895	86	981
Thromde Tshogpa	25	2	27	19	2	21

Table 4. Distribution of male and female winners for Gups, Mangmis, and Tshogpas in the second local government elections 2016

Elective Post	*No. of males elected*	*No. of females elected*	*Total*
Gup	203	2	205
Mangmi	181	24	205
Gewog Tshogpa	869	130	999
Thromde Tshogpa	13	7	20

Table 5. Number of males and females elected in the third local government elections 2021

Total Candidates	*No. of males elected*	*No. of females elected*	*Total*
3500	1252	185	1437

(Source: Election Commission of Bhutan)

National Council Elections (2007-2023)

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of male and female candidates and winners in the National Council elections from 2007 to 2023. The average number of women participating across the four elections has been just 5, compared to an average of 82 male candidates. Notably, while four women were elected in the inaugural election, the number of elected women declined sharply in subsequent elections, with no women elected in 2013 and only 1 in 2023.

National Assembly Elections (2008-2023)

Table 2 presents comparable insights regarding the National Assembly elections, indicating that the number of female candidates contesting for the 47 seats remained at 10 in the elections of 2008, 2013, and 2018. However, this number declined to 6 in the most recent election. Throughout the four National Assembly elections, an average of only 4 (7 in 2018 and 2 in 2023-2024) women have been elected, underscoring a persistent issue of underrepresentation.

Local Government Elections (2011, 2016, 2021)

In contrast, the data from local government elections (Tables 3 and 4) presents a more positive picture. In the first local government elections of 2011, women held 12 Mangmi and 86 Tshogpa positions. By the second local government elections in 2016, these numbers increased significantly to 24 Mangmis and 130 Tshogpas. However, this upward trend was not sustained in the third local government elections in 2021, where the number of successful female candidates declined significantly. While exact candidate numbers were not available for 2021, Table 5 indicates that out of 1,437 total elected officials, only 185 were women, representing 12.87%.

The analysis reveals a lack of consistent progress in women's participation and success in both national and local elections in Bhutan. While local government elections initially saw improvements in female representation, these gains have not been consistently maintained across subsequent elections. The overall trends underscore the need for targeted measures to enhance women's electoral participation and ensure sustained representation in decision-making positions.

5. Empirical Analysis

The following section offers empirical analysis and findings from the data and information collected from survey questionnaires, FGDs and individual interviews.

A. Sample Demographic:

Table 6: Sample distribution by region, age and education level

Region	Freq.	Percent
West	142	31.7
Central	44	9.8
East	150	33.5
South	112	25.0
Age		
25 - 35	289	64.5
35 - 45	120	26.8
45 - 55	30	6.7
55 - 65	9	2.0
Education Levels		
Bachelor	200	44.6
Less than bachelor	188	42.0
Masters	53	11.8
Ph.D. and above	7	1.6
Total	**448**	**100**

The Table 6 provides insights into the demographic composition of the survey sample. Given the nature of this survey, participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a balanced representation based on region, age, and education level. The survey included participants from four regions: West, Central, East, and South. The sample sizes from each region were determined based on the population distribution within those areas.

The questionnaires were circulated on-line via google form to approximately 550 participants across 20 districts in Bhutan, with a total of 448 responses collected. Of the respondents, 33.5% (150 participants) were from the East, followed by 31.7% (142 participants) in the West. The South had 125 respondents or 25% and finally the Centre saw only 44 respondents or 9.8%. Notably, the majority of participants fell within the 25 to 35 age group, comprising 64.5% (289 participants), indicating a strong interest and willingness among younger individuals to engage in this survey.

In terms of educational attainment, 44.6% (200 participants) of the respondents held a bachelor's degree, representing the largest group within the sample. Conversely, only 1.6% (7 participants) had a Ph.D. or a higher level of education. These highlight the higher interest of younger women possessing bachelor's degrees in engaging in elections and surveys alike.

There is a notable underrepresentation, however, of older participants and those with advanced degrees. While the regional distribution reflects overall balanced representation, the Central region is less represented compared to the others.

Table 7: Sample distribution by occupation

Occupation	Freq.	Percent
Civil service	228	50.9
Corporate employee	37	8.3
Non-Governmental Organization	13	2.9
Private sector	75	16.7
Retired person	5	1.1
Self-employee	26	5.8
Unemployed	64	14.3
Total	**448**	**100**

The most significant portion of the sample (50.9%) is engaged in civil service, with 16.7% respondents in the private sector, followed by 14.3% unemployed (Table 7)

5.1   Bhutanese women participating in Politics

Survey question: Have you ever participated in any political activities?

Table 8: Political participation

Political participation	**Freq.**	**Percent**
No	122	27.2
Yes	326	72.8
Total	**448**	**100**

Table 9:   Types of activities respondents have participated

Types of Political Participation	**Freq.**	**Percent**
Attending political parties' meetings	6	2
Campaigning	6	2
Running for office	4	1
Volunteering for political parties	1	0
Voting	320	95
Total	**337**	**100**

Survey question: Did you ever stand as a candidate in election?

Table 10: Standing as a candidate in election

Stand as Candidate	**Freq.**	**Percent**
No	437	97.8
Yes	11	2.2
Total	448	100

5.2   Reasons for Bhutanese women not participating in Politics

The survey revealed that a significant majority of women, 72.8%, are actively engaged in political activities. Among these participants, nearly 95% reported having voted, with 60% indicating that they have voted more than three times. However, only 2% (11 respondents) stated that they had run for office in leadership positions, including local leaders (Gup, Mangmi, and Thromde) as well as NC and NA members. Notably, almost 95% of these women were aged between 25 and 45 years.

The most commonly cited reason for women's lack of participation in politics is the presence of fulfilling jobs or businesses, with approximately 35% of respondents (158 individuals) indicating this as their primary reason. This suggests that many women prioritize their professional responsibilities over political engagement.

The second most prevalent reason, cited by around 21% of respondents (92 individuals), is a perceived lack of qualifications. Notably, 85% of these women possess an education level below a bachelor's degree, and 73% are aged 25-35. This highlights the critical role of education in empowering potential candidates and boosting their self-confidence.

Reasons for Bhutanese women not participating in politics as a party condidate (%)

Reason	%
I have a good job/ business at hand	35
Lack of education qualifi cation	21
Lack of personal confidence	18
Never got opportunities from any party	12
Cannot spare time from my household chores	6
Discouraging socio-cultural environment for women…	5
Gender biases society	4
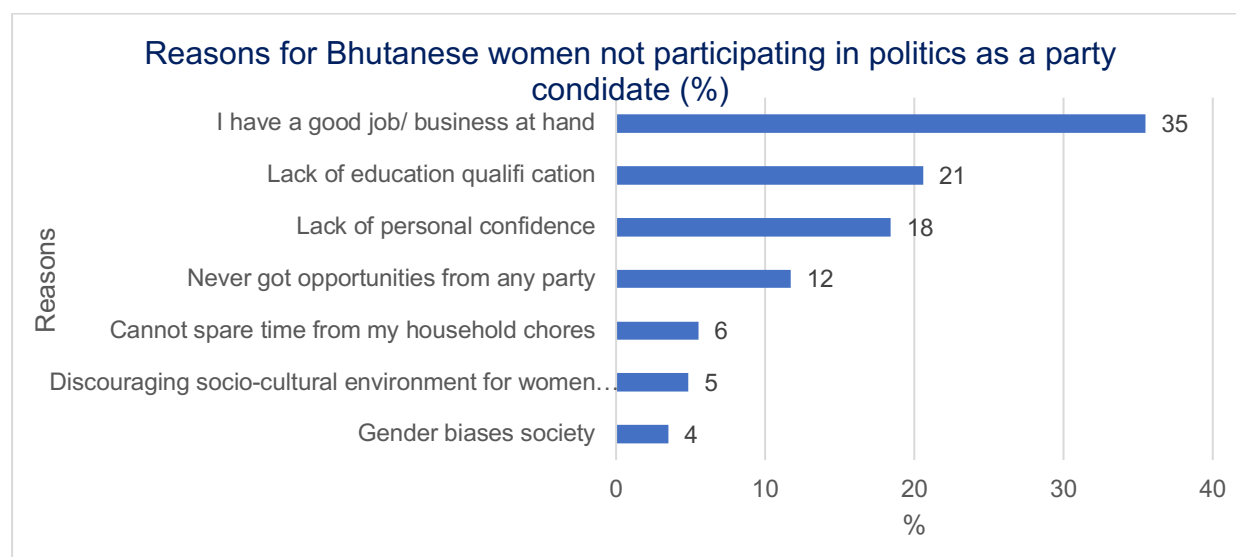
Figure 2: Reasons for Bhutanese women not participating in Politics as a party candidate

Additionally, approximately 18% of respondents (83 individuals) report a lack of personal confidence as a barrier to political participation. Among these women, 50% have less than a bachelor's degree, 81% fall within the 25-35 age range, 45% are civil servants, and 21% are unemployed. This underscores the need for confidence-building programs and support systems designed to encourage greater political involvement, particularly among young women. Other barriers include a lack of opportunities to participate (12%), time constraints due to household responsibilities (6%), a discouraging socio-cultural environment for women (5%), and societal gender biases (4%). To enhance women's political participation, it is essential to implement initiatives that directly address these challenges.

5.3   Interest in political participation

Approximately 30% (133 responses) of respondents expressed an interest in participating in politics. Notably, 97% of these interested women are aged between 25 and 45, with 92%

holding a bachelor's degree or less. Furthermore, 60% of those indicating an interest in political participation are currently unemployed. This data highlights a significant opportunity for initiatives designed to empower and engage this young and unemployed demographic in political processes, potentially enhancing women's representation and influence in the political sphere in the future.

Reasons for favouring male over female to join politics

Table 11: Preferred family member (male vs female) to join politics

	Freq.	Percent
Female	325	72.54
Male	123	27.46
	448	100

Interestingly around 27.5% (123) women respondents said that they prefer male member of their family to join politics. Among those who preferred male member to join politics, 65% of respondent were between 25-35 ages, 54% were civil servant, and 81% have bachelor degree or less.

5.4   Why women favour male over female family member to join politics?

Figure 3 below illustrates the statistical responses from women who prefer male family member into politics.

Responses from women who preferred a male family member to participate in politics have been categorized into eight thematic areas. These includes: 1) Confidence; 2) More capable, 3) Cultural and societal norm, 4) Higher interest and qualification, 5) Stability, resourceful, and more success rate, 6) Family dynamics, 7) Availability and more focused, and 8) Better decision-making.

Among the female respondents who expressed a preference for male family members to engage in politics, a notable majority (26%) indicated that they perceive men as more confident and decisive than women. Additionally, approximately 17% (21 respondents) believe that men are better equipped to fulfil the role of a politician. Around 15% of respondents noted that men generally demonstrate higher levels of interest and qualifications, while 12% highlighted men's resourcefulness and greater likelihood of electoral success compared to their female counterparts. Furthermore, 9% of respondents mentioned family dynamics as a contributing factor, citing a lack of female candidates within their households. Surprisingly, 15% (18 respondents) identified cultural and societal norms as primary reasons for their preference for male family members in politics. Lastly, 7% of respondents pointed to men's superior decision-making abilities as a significant factor, while another 7% noted that men are often more available and focused on pursuing political careers than women.
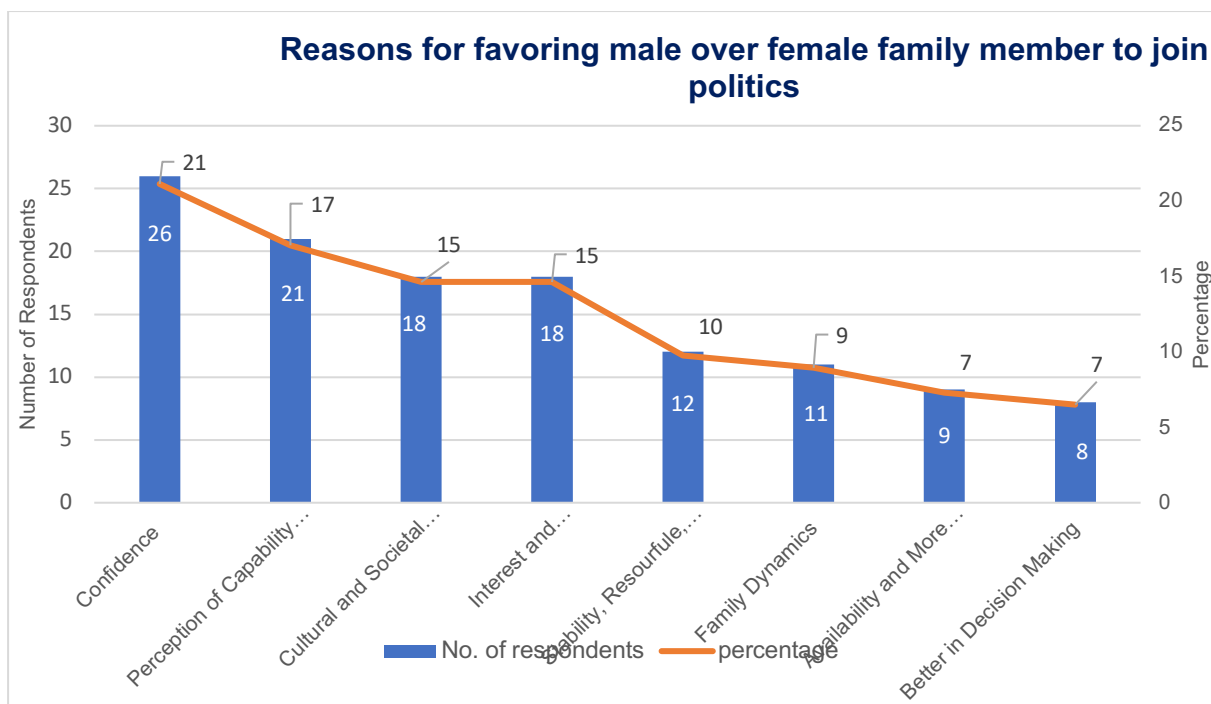
Figure 3: Reasons for favouring male over female family member to join politics

The preferences expressed by female respondents for male family members to participate in politics reveal underlying perceptions of gender roles and capabilities within the political sphere. The belief that men are inherently more confident, decisive, and qualified underscores the challenges women face in gaining recognition and confidence support for political engagement. Additionally, the influence of family dynamics and the availability of male candidates further perpetuate the gender disparity in political representation. This data and analysis highlight the need for targeted initiatives to empower women and foster a more inclusive political environment that values the contributions of all genders.

The data reveals significant insights into the perceptions and barriers faced by women regarding political participation across different age groups (Figure 4a). Approximately 70% of respondents, within the age group of 25-35, who favoured male participation in politics were predominantly influenced by the belief that men exhibit greater confidence, are more qualified, are more politically stable, resourceful, and higher chances of success in political arena. This suggest that younger women often perceive men as more capable leaders. This prevailing notion that men possess superior qualifications and interest in political affairs is particularly pronounced among this demographic.

In the 35-45 age group, the emphasis on societal norms, the perception that men are more available and focused, and beliefs surrounding superior decision-making capabilities persist, albeit with a notable decrease in intensity compared to the younger cohort. The perception of male confidence relative to females is significantly lower in this age group, indicating a potential shift in perspective as women mature. Nevertheless, the underlying belief in male superiority, particularly regarding decisiveness and commitment to political engagement, remains prevalent.
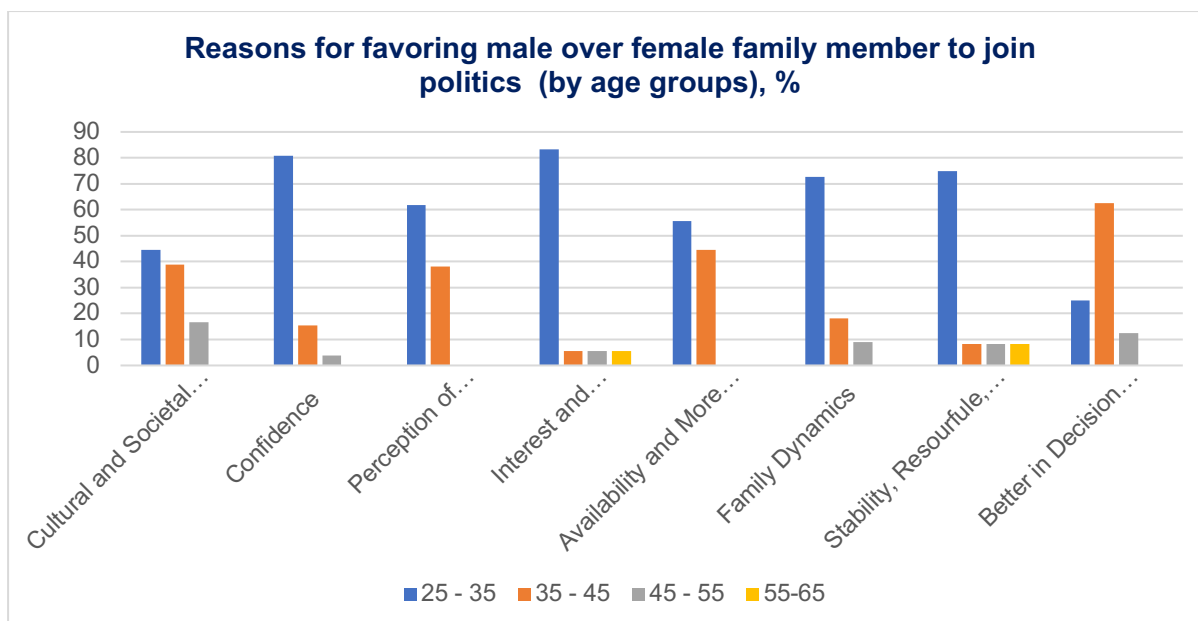
Reasons for favoring male over female family member to join politics (by age groups), %

Figure 4a: Reasons for favouring male over female family member to join politics (by age groups and percentage)

Responses from the 45-55 age group reflect a diminishing belief in male superiority regarding political capability. This shift may indicate a growing awareness and challenge to traditional gender roles among older women, although the perception that men are better decision-makers and hold societal superiority over women persists, albeit to a lesser degree.

Interestingly, within the 55-65 age range, data reveals a marked decrease in responses across all categories, suggesting possible disengagement or acceptance of the status quo regarding women's political roles. This age group did not identify cultural norms, male confidence, or perceptions of male superiority in decision-making as barriers, indicating a potential shift in focus or an acceptance of existing societal structures. However, this cohort still acknowledges a belief in the higher success rates of men in political roles compared to women.

Family dynamics - specifically the presence of more capable male members within households - emerged as a common factor highlighted by most respondent cohorts.

Overall, the analysis underscores a pervasive belief across all age groups that men are more capable and qualified for political roles, driven by deep-rooted cultural and societal norms. Younger women, in particular, exhibit a strong perception of male confidence and capability, which is compounded by family dynamics favouring male participation in politics.

To enhance women's political participation, it is crucial to implement targeted mentorship and empowerment programs across age groups. These should include confidence-building workshops for younger women (25-35) to develop self-esteem and leadership skills. Establishing a mentorship network connecting these women with successful female leaders can effectively counter perceptions of male superiority by providing relatable role models. Additionally, educational campaigns must challenge societal norms and highlight women's qualifications in politics. Finally, workshops focused on family dynamics can empower women to advocate for their political involvement and cultivate supportive home environments.
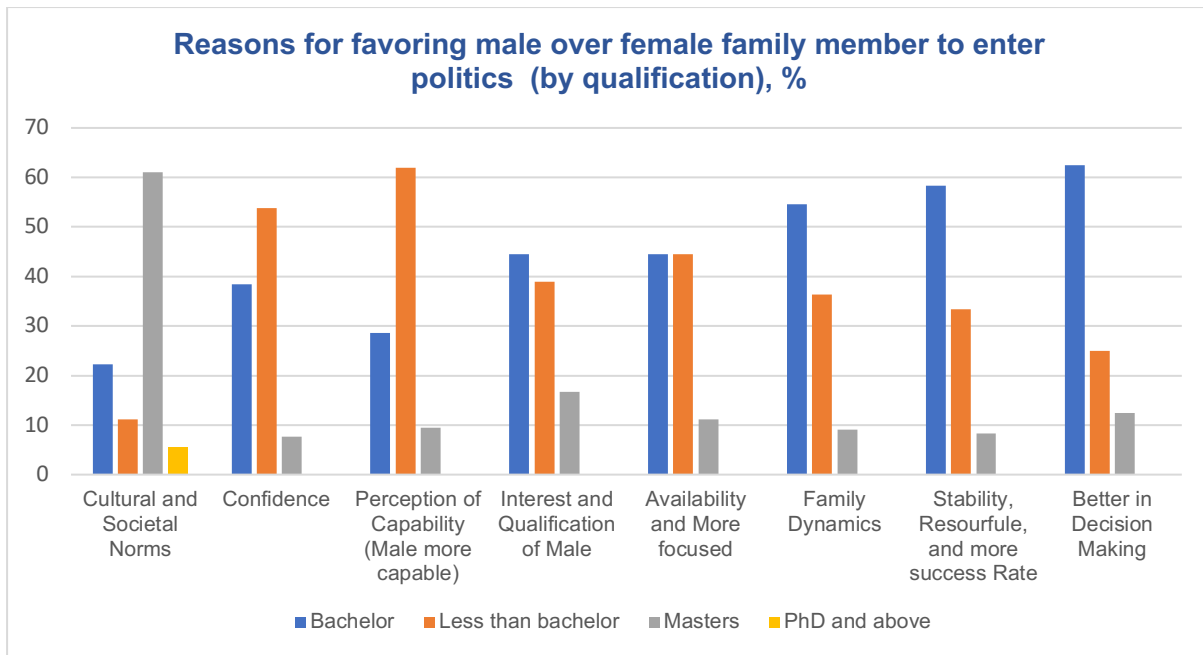
Figure 4b: Reasons for favouring male over female family member to join politics (by qualification and percentage)

The data provides valuable insights into the perceptions of political capability and gender dynamics among women across various educational backgrounds.

The prevailing belief that men exhibit greater confidence and capability in political affairs is particularly pronounced among women with educational attainment of less than a bachelor's degree. In this demographic, approximately 54% attribute confidence as a significant factor, while a substantial 62% perceive men as more capable. These findings suggest that lower educational attainment may correlate with a stronger adherence to traditional gender norms.

In contrast, women holding a master's degree demonstrate a more nuanced relationship with cultural and societal norms. While 62% of these women acknowledge the impact of such norms, their belief in male superiority regarding capability declines significantly compared to those with lower educational levels. This shift indicates that increased educational attainment fosters a questioning of traditional beliefs, leading to greater confidence in their own capabilities.

Among women with a Ph.D. or higher qualification, there is a marked absence of belief in male superiority in terms of confidence, capability, or decision-making. This suggests that advanced education, coupled with maturity, empowers women to cultivate confidence and challenge societal norms more assertively.

Furthermore, the perception of men's interest and qualifications as contributing factors for political engagement diminishes among women with higher education levels; only 17% of master's degree holders acknowledge this belief. Similarly, attributes such as stability, resourcefulness, and success rates in politics are viewed as less significant in the higher education cohorts compared to those with lower educational attainment.

Family dynamics also influence preferences for male candidates, with 54.6% of women with a bachelor's degree emphasizing the presence of capable male family members as a significant factor. However, this sentiment wanes among higher educational groups, highlighting a shift away from reliance on familial structures in shaping political aspirations.

In summary, the data reveals a clear trend: as educational attainment increases, women are more likely to challenge traditional perceptions regarding the capabilities and roles of men in politics. While cultural and societal norms continue to shape beliefs across all educational levels, the degree of adherence to these norms diminishes significantly among women with higher educational qualifications.

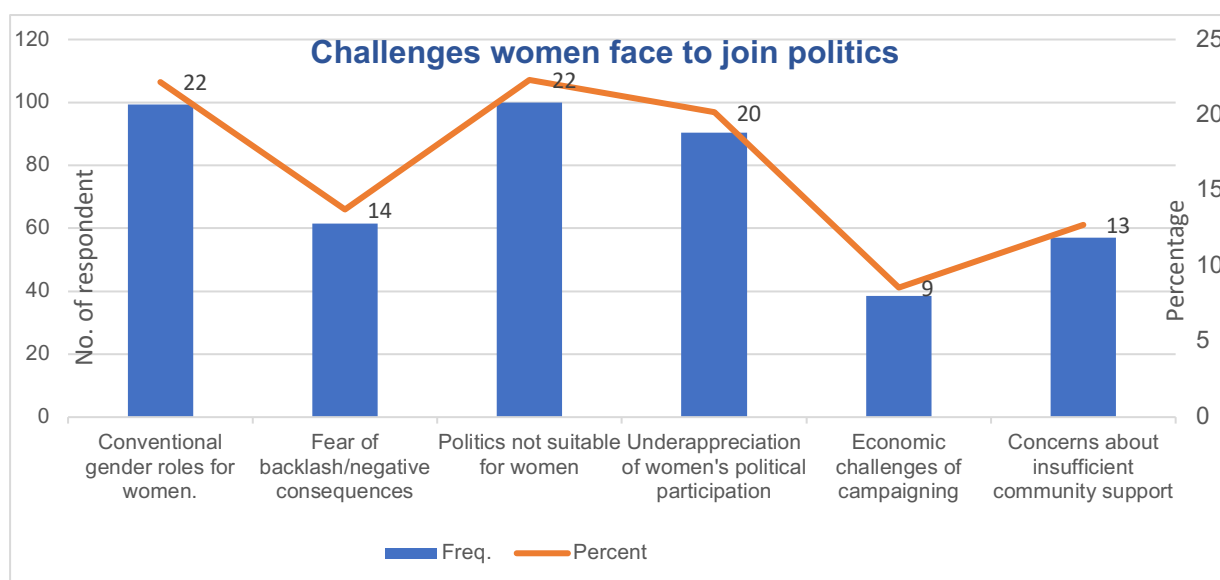## 5.5   Challenges women face to join politics

Figure 5: Challenges women face to join politics

Around 80% of the respondents think that there is no gender discrimination in political sphere in Bhutan, that men and women have equal opportunities in politics. Around 96% of the women respondents said that their family members are very supportive towards them joining politics. Around 70% of the participants said that the women in Bhutan face unique challenges to join politics compared to men.

The survey data reveals significant barriers to women's participation in politics, primarily influenced by conventional gender roles and societal perceptions. Notably, 22% of respondents (99 individuals) indicated that traditional expectations for women play a crucial role in discouraging political engagement, while another 22% believe that politics is an unsuitable arena for women. This underscores a pervasive mindset that undermines women's capabilities and potential contributions to political discourse. Furthermore, approximately 20% of respondents highlighted the underappreciation of women's political participation, reinforcing the notion that their involvement is neither valued nor recognized.

Concerns regarding backlash or negative consequences, expressed by 14%, illustrate the fear women face in navigating a male-dominated field. Additionally, around 9% (38 respondents) cited economic challenges, such as the costs associated with campaigning and the time required away from work, which add another layer of complexity to their political aspirations. Finally, approximately 13% of respondents voiced concerns about insufficient community support, suggesting that without robust backing, women may feel even less empowered to pursue political roles.

Collectively, these factors depict a multifaceted landscape of challenges that impede women's political participation, underscoring the urgent need for targeted initiatives to dismantle these barriers and cultivate a more inclusive political environment.

5.6 Knowledge about political programs or workshops

More than 50% of participants indicated that they are unaware of any existing programs or initiatives designed to promote women's political participation. Notably, approximately 50% of this group consists of women with education levels below a bachelor's degree. In contrast, women with higher educational qualifications demonstrate a greater awareness of such initiatives.

This data underscores a significant need for targeted initiatives aimed at enhancing awareness of programs that promote women's political participation, particularly within the private sector, among unemployed individuals, and corporate employees. Elevating the visibility and understanding of these initiatives is essential for fostering increased engagement and support for women's roles in politics. Furthermore, it is imperative to develop specific outreach strategies that effectively engage and inform less-educated women, ensuring their full participation in the political landscape.
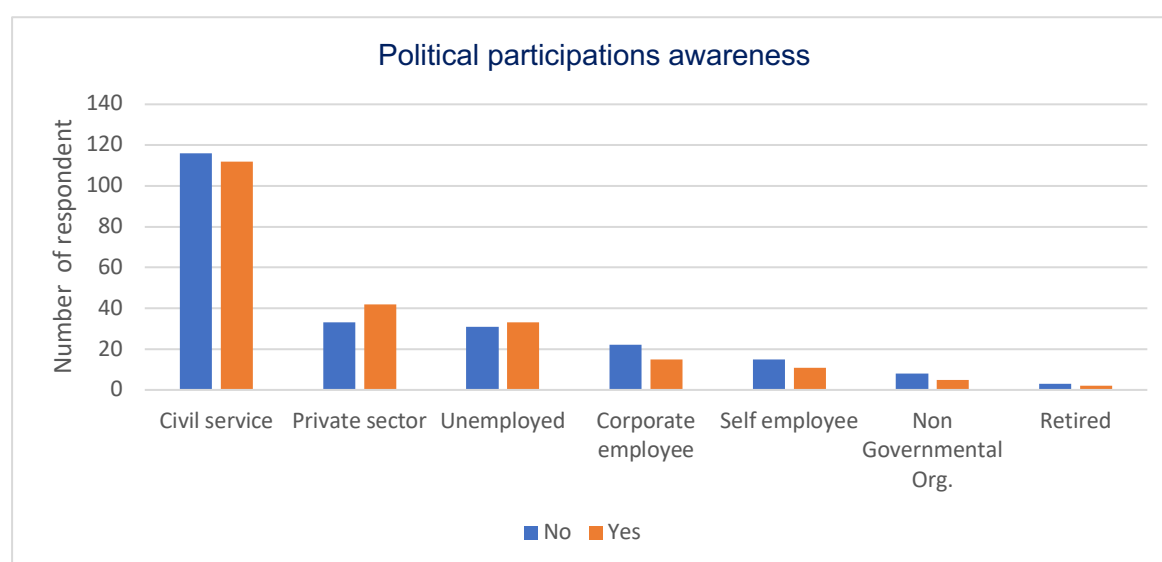
Figure 6: Political participation awareness

Nearly 70% of respondents who are aware of initiatives promoting women's political participation reported knowledge of a limited number of government-led programs. In contrast, 25% indicated awareness of community-based initiatives, while fewer than 10% recognized initiatives undertaken by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Among those aware of such initiatives, 50% are civil servants, 17% work in the private sector, and 12% are unemployed.

To enhance awareness of initiatives promoting women's political participation, it is crucial to develop targeted campaigns that showcase government, community, and NGO programs through diverse communication channels, including social media and local events. Collaboration between government entities and NGOs can create a unified platform for sharing information, while educational workshops can engage women with lower educational backgrounds. Implementing a feedback mechanism will provide insights into participants' awareness and perceptions, guiding future efforts. Additionally, establishing a centralized online portal for regular updates on initiatives and success stories will serve as a valuable resource for those seeking to engage in political activities
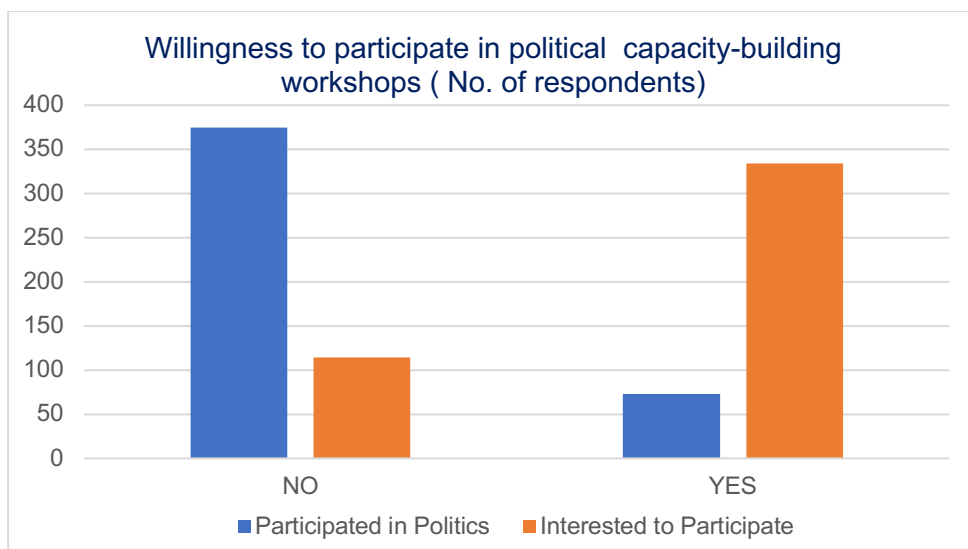
Figure 7: Willingness to participate in political capacity-building workshops (No. of respondents)

Almost 83% of the respondents said they have not participated in any kind of capacity-building political programs before while 17% said they have participated in some kind of such programs. Interestingly, around 74% (334 respondents) said that they are interested in participating in some-kind of capacity-building political programs, and 26% are not interested to participate in such capacity-building program.

5.7   What discourages women from participating in political trainings workshops?

Over half of the participants (271 respondents) identified several factors that hinder women's participation in political capacity-building programs. The predominant barrier, cited by around 34% of respondents (92 individuals), is time constraints attributable to work or family commitments. Additionally, approximately 21% (56 respondents) noted that the distance and location of the training venues significantly impede their ability to attend.

Cultural and societal norms, along with insufficient family support, continue to be substantial obstacles for women aspiring to engage in politics. Notably, 26 respondents specifically mentioned the lack of familial encouragement as a critical issue. Furthermore, around 5% of participants indicated that low confidence levels and insufficient educational qualifications deter them from participating in these political programs. Only 3% of respondents pointed to financial constraints as a limiting factor.
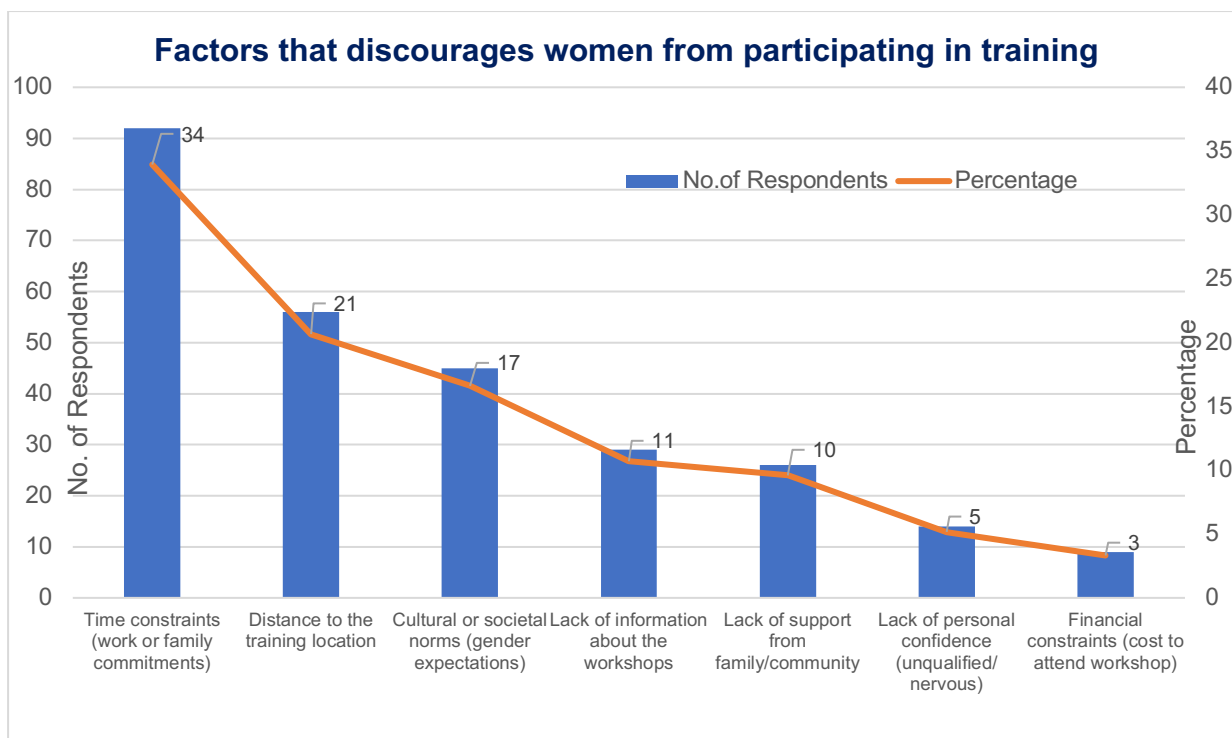
Figure 8: Factors that discourages women from participating in training

To enhance women's participation in political capacity-building programs, it is essential to implement flexible training options, including online modules for self-paced learning. Establishing training venues in rural and safer locations can mitigate travel barriers, while family awareness campaigns can foster supportive environments. Furthermore, confidence-building workshops and partnerships with educational institutions should be explored to empower women and enhance their qualifications. Mentorship programs that connect aspiring leaders with experienced female politicians will provide invaluable guidance, and offering financial support will help overcome economic barriers, ensuring greater participation of women in political programs.

5.8 Preferred training and skills that women want to learn during training and workshops

The survey data also offers valuable insights into the preferences of respondents regarding the topics they wish to see covered in political capacity-building workshops and programs.

A significant majority of respondents (89%) expressed a strong preference for including leadership skills in Workshops, underscoring the critical importance of effective leadership in political contexts. This overwhelming interest highlights the necessity for training programs that cultivate leadership abilities among participants.
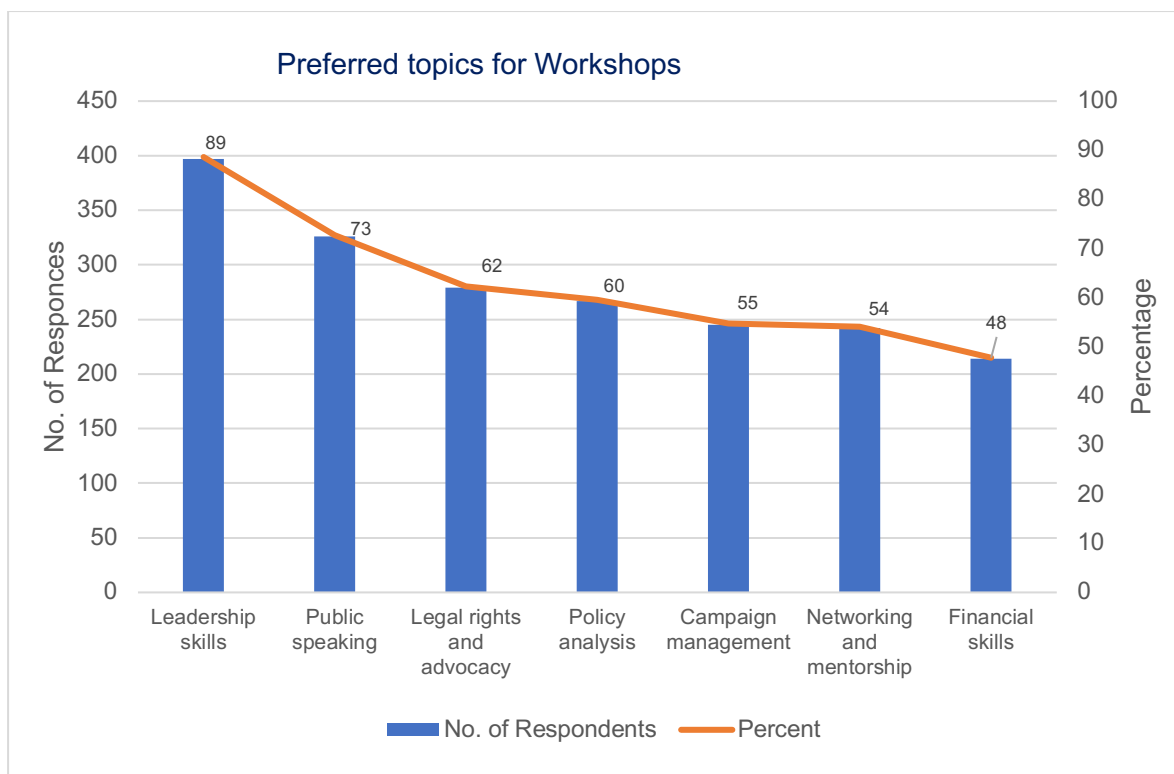
Figure 9a: Preferred topics for Workshops as indicated by respondents

Additionally, public speaking emerged as a prominent area of interest, with 73% of respondents indicating a desire for this topic to be included. This reflects a recognition of the essential role that communication skills play in political engagement and advocacy.

Other important topics identified include legal rights and advocacy, with 62% of respondents expressing a demand for this subject to be covered in the Workshops. This interest suggests a pressing need for a deeper understanding of the legal frameworks and rights that govern political participation. Similarly, analytical topics such as policy analysis garnered attention from 60% of respondents, demonstrating a clear demand for skills in evaluating and formulating effective policies.

Furthermore, campaign management and networking and mentorship were highlighted by 55% and 54% of respondents respectively. This shows a recognition of the value in acquiring the skills necessary to successfully manage political campaigns and to cultivate professional networks that can provide support and guidance for women's participation in politics.

Lastly, the need for financial skills was noted by 48% of respondents, pointing to an awareness of the financial dimensions that often underpin political activities and campaigns.

In summary, the data illustrates a clear demand for comprehensive training in leadership, communication, legal advocacy, policy analysis, campaign management, networking, and financial skills, each of which plays a pivotal role in enhancing political efficacy and fostering greater participation of women in politics.
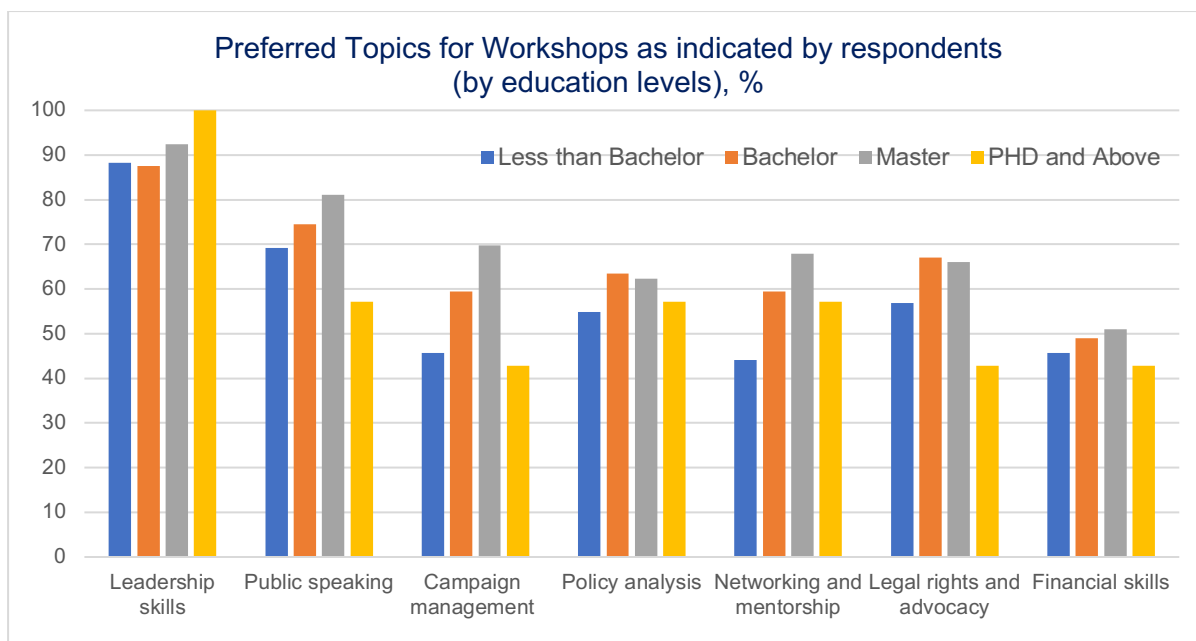
Figure 9b: Preferred topics for Workshops as indicated by respondents (by education levels & percentage)

Topics related to leadership skills have emerged as the most sought-after training areas across all educational backgrounds, underscoring a widespread recognition of their vital importance for women in political contexts.

Public speaking is also a highly demanded workshop topic, with interest levels varying among different educational tiers. This reflects an increasing awareness of the significance of effective communication skills for women seeking to advance in political careers.

Training in campaign management is another area of demand, particularly among individuals with advanced degrees, such as Master's degrees. In contrast, respondents with lower educational qualifications, such as Bachelor's degrees or below, show relatively less interest in this topic. This disparity suggests differing perceptions of the relevance of campaign management skills based on educational attainment.

Topic on policy analysis has been highlighted by respondents across all educational levels, emphasizing its importance in political training. Additionally, workshops focused on networking and mentorship are particularly sought after by nearly 60% of respondents with Master's degrees, indicating a strong demand for these topics compared to other educational groups.

Conversely, interest in financial skills is notably lower across all educational group. This may reflect a perception that financial skills are less critical or necessary for women to engage effectively in political activities.

The findings overall illustrate a clear prioritization of leadership, public speaking, and campaign management skills, while highlighting the need for targeted training that addresses the diverse interests and educational backgrounds of women in politics

6. Findings from FGDs and Individual interviews

This section of the report presents the findings from both group and individual discussions conducted through structured questionnaires. The group discussions occurred in three distinct

settings: i) current members of the National Assembly, ii) former members of the National Assembly and National Council, and iii) present and former Leaders of the Opposition.

6.1. Focus groups discussion with NA members

A focus group discussion (FGD) was held on 30 August 2024 in Thimphu with four Parliamentarians (NA members) - one female and three males - from the southern, western, northern, and central parts of the country. The discussion centred on key three questions.

1. *How do we assess the participation of women in elections since the introduction of democracy in 2008?*
2. *What are the major factors that constrain women from participating in elections?*
3. *What should be done to make it easier for women to participate in elections more actively?*

First respondent

The first male respondent highlighted the historical dominance of men in society, attributing this to traditional roles where males were seen as providers, thereby elevating their status. He noted that cultural norms have perpetuated a male-dominant society, encapsulated in the saying, "*pho jow dra, mo doeb dra,"* which suggests that men can venture out while women must remain. He pointed out that elections pose significant physical challenges for female candidates, particularly in rural areas where access to roads is limited and basic amenities are lacking. This is particularly evident in NC elections, where candidates must cover vast constituencies. Harsh winter conditions further complicate outreach efforts, as women may not be as familiar with local terrains as their male counterparts.

Furthermore, he characterized entering politics as akin to gambling, citing the 2022 NC elections, where only one woman was elected from five candidates. Candidates also face financial instability, as their salaries cease upon resignation while campaign expenses continue to mount. The support from the ECB is often insufficient, leaving candidates without a financial safety net if they are not elected. Language barriers, especially in southern Bhutan, add another layer of difficulty, as candidates must navigate diverse linguistic backgrounds to communicate effectively with voters. Despite female voters outnumbering their male counterparts in the 2023/2024 elections, their support for women candidates from women voters is limited, underscoring the need to evaluate not just the number of women elected, but their overall participation in the electoral process.

Second respondent

The second male respondent noted that success in the NC elections is primarily based on individual candidates, as the process lacks the teamwork characteristic of NA elections. Voters can choose any candidate they prefer in the NC elections, whereas party affiliation and its Presidents plays a crucial role in NA elections, influencing votes for both male and female candidates. The second male respondent added that, in his constituency, while education levels are improving, only 33 female voters participated, with only 11 voting for his female opponent, indicating women's support to female candidate is relatively lower. However, other factors, such as capability of candidate may have led to such voting results, for which there is

a lack of data to provide robust analysis. Surprisingly, neither he nor his female opponent campaigned on gender issues; however, his opponent highlighted the importance of women's participation during a debate. Despite his female opponent efforts to connect with voters through familial terms like "*cheli*" (daughter in Nepali-Lhotshamkha), she ultimately received the fewest votes.

Third respondent

A female respondent reiterated that NC election operates as a "one-man army." For example, in the 2018 election in Mongar in 2018, there was only one female candidate out of 13. Her effective campaigning led to her election, particularly among women supporters. In contrast, the NA election is heavily influenced by party affiliation, with candidate eligibility depending on party nominations, making gender a prominent factor.

She noted that women's participation in election remains low. In 2018, only six women contested the NC elections, and the number has always been low. In the 2008 NA election, there were 10 women participants, 11 in 2013, and five for the NC election that year. Surprisingly none of women were elected. She continued that, may be factors such as cultural norms and dual responsibilities of women in homemaking is hindering women's participations in politics.

She emphasized that a strong family support and financial stability are crucial for women to engage in elections. In her own experience, the backing of her family and her stable job as a middle-level public servant allowed her to campaign effectively without worrying about her children. Her motivation stemmed from a desire to demonstrate to her constituency and to her daughters that women are equally capable of holding public office. She raised concerns about the lack of female candidates, arguing that low participation limits the chances for more women to be elected. Advocating for women during her tours to the Gewogs, she stressed that their involvement is vital for the growth of democracy in Bhutan. She noted that many women lack the confidence to take risks in politics, but organizations like Bhutan Network for Empowering Women (BNEW), a civil society organization, have provided valuable communication training. She underscored the need for ongoing support to empower women to participate in elections.

Fourth respondent

The third male respondent expressed that women's participation in elections may be hindered by religious sentiments and traditional beliefs. In his district, there exists a prevailing notion that women's involvement in public affairs could lead to unnatural calamities. Additionally, candidates, including women, face skepticism if they have resigned from their jobs or lack strong ties to their constituencies. This perspective was echoed by another respondent.

6.2.   Discussion with former parliamentarians

An FGD was held on 11 September 2024 in Thimphu with three former parliamentarians in the NC and NA representing from the eastern, western, and southern Bhutan (2 females and 1 male). Simultaneously, 11 questions were circulated to three (one male, two females) former NA and NC MPs to provide written answers as it was not possible to meet with them together.

Two of them were former NA members while one was an NC member. One female respondent did not provide answer to the last two questions.

The discussion on structured questions and the consolidated responses from the written answers revealed several motivations for participation in politics.

6.2.1. Factors that can motivate women to join politics

One participant shared that her decision was influenced by her grandfather's dying wish; he had served as a Gup and Chimi for 15 years, and her father had also held the position of Gup. This family legacy instilled in her the belief that community service is the most meaningful way to contribute to the nation. Additionally, she noted that there had never been a female candidate from her district, which motivated her to set an example for future generations of women. Another participant mentioned the influence of "*push and pull*" factors, as a former minister from her constituency had personally approached her to replace him.

When discussing the recommendation of women from their families for political involvement, responses varied among participants. Two respondents, one male and one female, expressed their reservations, citing the challenges of politics and the emotional strength required to navigate its demands. They emphasized that political participation necessitates resilience and a "thick skin." In contrast, four participants (one male and three females) supported the idea, with one acknowledging the significant financial resources needed to enter politics. Another female respondent highlighted the importance of encouraging women to embrace such challenges, while the male participant noted that political engagement could provide invaluable experience for women in their lives. Overall, all participants acknowledge the fact that the families and communities were generally supportive of women's participation in elections.

Several key factors were highlighted while discussing challenges faced by women to enter into politics.

One participant shared that women face numerous challenges in entering politics, primarily stemming from societal attitudes and expectations. A significant obstacle is the low acceptance of women as leaders, coupled with a narrow societal perspective that expects politicians to be actively present in their communities. Many women also bear the additional burden of family responsibilities and household chores, making political participation more difficult. Support from their spouses is crucial for those considering a political career. Logistical issues, such as the inability to drive long distances alone during campaigns, further complicate their efforts.

Persistent stereotypes contribute to the perception that men are inherently better leaders, contributing to a lack of confidence among women voters in female candidates. Economic barriers also play a role, as women often prioritize job security and stable incomes, fearing that political participation may jeopardize their current employment. Cultural norms in Bhutan reinforce the expectation for women to focus on domestic responsibilities, hindering their political engagement. Finally, the challenging geographic terrain of the country makes campaigning difficult, often favouring physically fit male candidates. Without addressing these multifaceted challenges, the level of women's participation in elections is likely to remain low.

6.2.2 Reasons for poor electoral success for women

While discussing the poor electoral success for women, participants highlighted several key practical and ground reality factors in Bhutan.

One of the participants mentioned that the issue of poor electoral success for women may not be as dire as it appears; rather, it stems from the limited number of female candidates fielded by political parties. When the pool of candidates is predominantly male, it stands to reason that fewer women will be elected. Specific hurdles that women face include their traditional roles at home as mothers, which can limit their availability for political engagement. Furthermore, the environment for women's empowerment within the electoral system is lacking, with inadequate facilities to support childcare and other responsibilities.

Women also encounter significant physical challenges, such as the necessity of walking long distances during late-night campaigning, which places additional burdens on them, said another participant. The need for more supporters and coordinators can make their campaigns more costly compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, the physically demanding nature of election campaigns, coupled with concerns about personal safety, creates a heightened sense of vulnerability for women candidates. As a result, they often face a compounded burden that hinders their participation and success in the political arena.

The discussion further revealed that the confidence among women in leadership roles is influenced significantly by societal perceptions. One participant emphasized that while women possess the confidence to lead, it is society's acceptance that remains a critical barrier. Another participant acknowledged that women are indeed capable leaders, but highlighted the need for a shift in societal mindsets regarding gender superiority and inferiority. Additionally, a third participant pointed out that there tends to be a general lack of confidence in female candidates among the public, further underscoring the challenges women face in gaining recognition and support as leaders.

6.3   Discussion with Opposition Leaders

Individual discussion was held with the present Opposition Leader on 11 September and with the former on 20 September 2024 based on a set of questions. Three other political parties did not respond to our contact. The outcome of the two discussions is tabulated below in Table 12.

Table 12: Comparative responses from present and former Opposition Leaders (OLs)

Sl. #	Questions	First Respondent	Second Respondent
1.	*Are you satisfied with the participation of women in your political Party?*	Yes	No
2.	*Do you believe that strategies, such as keeping a certain percentage of a political Party's candidates for women?*	Yes, for political parties, but no quota in parliament	Yes, for political parties, but no quota in parliament

3.	*What challenges do women face when participating in politics?*	• Social barriers, such as women being unable to campaign with male friends as helpers. • Many parents do not accept their children's involvement in politics, especially women. • Society's general lack of support for women to contest elections.	• Traditional view on women as home makers • Lack of support from their families • Financial insecurity • Physical challenge – the rigor of tours in the constituency for familiarization and campaigning in rural areas. In the urban areas, we see more women taking part like in LG elections.
4.	*What should be done to encourage women?*	ECB should conduct frequent advocacies and awareness programs	Improving education and financial security are the two most important issues to be addressed
5.	*Should there be an organization to help women during elections?*	- CSOs would be more effective than government organizations in supporting women in elections - ECB to do its part, not just prior to elections but on a regular basis	There is a need for a concerted program for building women's capacities with guidelines from government and implementation by CSOs
6.	*Is there less confidence among women compared to men to contest an election?*	Yes, many women who are interested in politics doubt their abilities and are hesitant to take risks.	Yes
7.	*What criteria do you use to select party candidates?*	• Capability • Track record • Connection to the community	Winnability
8.	*Is there anything else you would like to add on this topic?*	Dire need to create awareness among the people regarding women's participation in politics.	As an example, his Party has appointed a woman Secretary-General as a measure to promote women's participation in politics.

7. Summary of Main Findings

The empirical analysis and qualitative discussions reveal a complex landscape regarding women's political participation in Bhutan, highlighting significant barriers and societal perceptions that influence engagement in politics.

7.1 Findings from empirical (quantitative) analysis

The empirical analysis conducted through surveys offers critical insights into the political participation of Bhutanese women.

The Study gathered responses from 448 participants from different regions of Bhutan. The demographic analysis reveals a strong representation of younger women aged 25 to 35, with a significant majority (64.5%) falling within this age bracket. Most respondents (44.6%) hold at least a bachelor's degree, indicating a robust interest among educated, younger women in engaging with political matters.

Despite this engagement, the data highlights a significant disparity between participation in voting and candidacy. Approximately 72.8% of respondents reported active political involvement, primarily through voting, with 95% having participated in past elections. However, only 2% of women have run for political office, underscoring the barriers that hinder their candidacy. Key obstacles identified include traditional gender roles, a lack of personal confidence, economic constraints, and familial responsibilities, which collectively discourage women from pursuing political leadership.

Additionally, many women perceive themselves as lacking the qualifications necessary for political roles. This perception correlates with the barriers of low confidence and educational limitations, which contribute to their reluctance to seek candidacy. Family dynamics also play a crucial role in shaping women's political aspirations, as the survey reveals a notable preference for male family members to engage in politics. This preference is influenced by entrenched gender norms, with many women citing perceptions of male confidence, capability, and societal expectations.

Furthermore, there is a strong desire for capacity-building programs aimed at empowering potential female candidates. Respondents expressed interest in workshops focusing on leadership, public speaking, and policy analysis, highlighting a clear demand for targeted initiatives that can enhance women's political efficacy and representation. However, the survey indicates that over 50% of participants were unaware of existing programs designed to promote women's political participation, emphasizing the need for increased awareness and outreach.

The findings from empirical analysis highlight a complex interplay of educational attainment, societal norms, and personal barriers affecting women's political engagement. While there is notable interest among women to participate in politics, significant barriers remain. Addressing these challenges through targeted capacity-building initiatives and increasing awareness of available resources are essential steps toward fostering greater political and electoral participation among women in Bhutan.

7.2   Qualitative findings through FGDs

The FGDs with current and former parliamentarians highlighted cultural expectations that prioritize male leadership, logistical challenges in campaigning, and insufficient support systems for female candidates. The discussions underscored a need for targeted capacity-building programs, financial support, and advocacy for greater representation of women in political positions.

- **Cultural norms:** Participants emphasized the historical dominance of men in politics, attributing low female participation to cultural norms that prioritize male leadership. They noted societal expectations that reinforce the belief that women should focus on domestic responsibilities.

- **Logistical challenges:** Physical barriers, such as poor infrastructure and harsh weather conditions, were highlighted as significant challenges for women candidates, particularly in rural areas where campaigning can be particularly demanding.

- **Support systems:** The need for financial and logistical support for women candidates was identified, alongside the necessity for community engagement to foster an environment where women feel empowered to participate.

- **Motivations for participation**: Former female parliamentarians cited personal motivations, including family legacy and community service, as driving factors for their political engagement. This contrasts with the broader challenges faced by potential candidates, as many women lack these motivating factors.

- **Societal acceptance**: The discussions highlighted the need for societal acceptance of women as leaders. Participants noted that despite potential capabilities, societal attitudes often hinder women's confidence and willingness to run for office.

- **Challenging political environment**: Similar to the FGDs with NA members, former parliamentarians pointed out the economic and cultural barriers that women face, emphasizing the need for supportive structures to encourage more women to enter politics.

The present and former Opposition Leaders emphasized the importance of community support and the necessity for changes in societal perceptions to enhance women's confidence and willingness to engage in politics.

- **Recognition of barriers**: Opposition leaders acknowledged the entrenched societal perceptions regarding gender roles and the challenges faced by women in achieving political success. They stressed the importance of addressing these perceptions to enhance women's participation.

- **Support for initiatives:** While there was support for initiatives aimed at increasing female representation, there were also concerns that quotas could lead to perceptions of women being less deserving of their positions, echoing sentiments from other discussions about the need for merit-based recognition.

- **Community engagement**: Leaders highlighted the importance of community support and the involvement of men in advocating for women's political participation, echoing the need for a more holistic approach to encourage women in politics.

7.3. Comparison of Findings from quantitative and qualitative analysis

- **Common themes**: Across all findings, cultural norms and societal expectations emerged as significant barriers to women's political participation. The emphasis on traditional gender roles is consistent, with both quantitative and qualitative data highlighting the perception that women should prioritize domestic responsibilities over political ambitions.

- **Logistical and economic challenges**: Both the empirical analysis and FGDs with parliamentarians emphasized on logistical and economic barriers that hinder women's ability to campaign effectively. This underscores the need for reforms in the political and electoral systems that address these challenges.

- **Support and capacity building**: The desire for support systems, whether through training programs or community engagement, was a recurring theme. The empirical analysis shows a clear interest in capacity-building initiatives, which aligns with qualitative findings that stress the need for mentorship and training to empower women.
- **Divergence in perspectives**: While empirical data focuses on the statistical representation of women's participation and barriers, qualitative discussions provide deeper insights into personal motivations and societal perceptions, highlighting a gap between the aspiration for political participation and the realities faced by women.

8. Recommendations

Based on the Findings and discussion presented in the report, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance women's participation in politics in Bhutan.

1. **Awareness and capacity building**: Implement comprehensive awareness and capacity-building programs targeting women, beginning at the primary school level and extending through community workshops. These initiatives should focus on the significance of women's political participation and equip potential female candidates with essential skills to navigate the political landscape. Educational institutions should integrate political education into their curricula, featuring guest speakers from diverse backgrounds including current and former parliamentarians to inspire and motivate young women. Community workshops should be organized to raise awareness about the vital role of women in governance, highlighting the positive impact of female leadership on societal development.

    Furthermore, skills training in areas such as leadership, public speaking, confidence building, networking and negotiation, and electoral processes should be readily available, ensuring that women are not only aware of their rights to participate but are also adequately prepared to do so effectively. Targeted capacity-building programs should be developed, focusing on electoral processes tailored to meet the diverse needs of women candidates based on their unique backgrounds and experiences.

2. **Financial support systems for women candidates**: Establish robust financial support systems that address campaign costs and job security for civil service employees, including women participating in elections. This initiative should include the creation of a dedicated fund to assist with campaign-related expenses, such as hiring personal assistants and managing logistical needs for women participants. Policies must also ensure job security for women who run for office but do not win, protecting them from economic hardship resulting from their political participation. Additionally, financial assistance for household help should be considered to alleviate domestic burdens, enabling women to focus on their campaigns. Furthermore, addressing personal security is crucial; provisions such as childcare services are necessary to support women candidates in overcoming unique vulnerabilities they face.

3. **Enhancing women's participation through quotas and nominations**: A comprehensive review of the electoral system is needed to improve women's participation in politics. This should involve institutionalizing gender equality measures, including quotas and reserved seats for women within political parties while maintaining a gender-neutral

participation. Additionally, consideration should be given to amending the Election Act to mandate political parties to nominate at least 20-30% female candidates as a temporary measure to enhance representation and create an environment that fosters women's active involvement in the political arena.

4. **Political Party initiatives for gender representation:** Establishing clear guidelines and monitoring compliance will hold Parties accountable for their gender representation commitments. Additionally, training programs within Parties should be developed to prepare women for candidacy, focusing on building confidence and addressing barriers to entry. This initiative aims to diversify the political landscape and foster a culture of inclusivity within political institutions.

5. **Mentorship and networking for aspiring female politicians:** A structured mentorship network should be established to support aspiring female politicians, connecting them with experienced leaders for guidance and support. A dedicated nodal agency within civil society organizations (CSOs) can facilitate these relationships by organizing regular networking events, workshops, and mentorship sessions that promote knowledge sharing and collaboration. Additionally, online platforms should be created and utilized to enhance accessibility and engagement for women across various regions, creating a more inclusive environment for their political development.

6. **Community engagement and support for women's political participation**: It is vital to foster community support by engaging men and families in advocacy efforts that emphasize shared responsibilities. Community programs should educate men on gender issues and the significance of women's leadership. Initiatives such as workshops can showcase the positive impacts of female leaders and promote the necessity of shared household responsibilities. By creating a supportive environment, families can play a crucial role in encouraging women to pursue political careers, thereby increasing female representation in governance. Additionally, men should be encouraged to actively support women in politics by sharing household duties, educating peers on gender issues, and advocating for female candidates. Collaborative initiatives with women's groups can cultivate a more inclusive political environment.

7. **Addressing logistical challenges for women candidates**: It is essential to enhance logistical support and infrastructure, particularly in rural and remote areas. This includes providing transportation services, safety measures, and campaign materials to ensure women can effectively reach their constituents. Political organizations and CSOs should collaborate with local governments to improve infrastructure, such as roads and communication systems, making voter engagement more accessible for women. Addressing these logistical barriers can create a more equitable political landscape that fosters greater women's participation in the democratic process.

8. **Apex organization for coordination:** Establishing an apex organization dedicated to coordinating efforts to increase women's political participation is essential. This organization must facilitate women's involvement and actively influence election processes to enhance representation, ensuring a more inclusive political landscape.

9. Conclusion

This Study presents a comprehensive analysis of the barriers to women's political participation in Bhutan, particularly in the light of the disappointing outcomes of the 2023 N.A and N.C elections. Despite significant progress in educational attainment and the establishment of democratic governance over the past decade, women's representation in political roles remains critically low, underscoring the urgent need for sustained interventions.

The Findings indicate that entrenched patriarchal norms, societal expectations, economic constraints, and a lack of confidence among potential female candidates are significant impediments to women's full engagement in the political sphere. Additionally, cultural perceptions that prioritize male leadership, along with logistical challenges related to campaigning, further exacerbate the underrepresentation of women in decision-making processes.

To address these challenges, the Study emphasizes the necessity of implementing targeted strategies that foster an inclusive political environment. Recommendations include establishing financial safety nets for women candidates, mandating political parties to nominate a minimum percentage of female candidates, and enhancing community awareness and support for women's political empowerment. Furthermore, capacity-building initiatives focused on leadership, public speaking, and advocacy are essential to equip women with the skills and confidence needed for active political participation.

In conclusion, achieving greater gender equality and inclusivity in Bhutan's political landscape is not only a matter of social justice but also a critical component of effective governance and sustainable development. By dismantling the barriers that hinder women's participation, Bhutan can harness the full potential of its diverse population, enriching its democratic processes and promoting a more equitable society. This responsibility lies in the Bhutanese society at large with support of the government and non-government sectors.

A word of caution is in order regarding this Study which has limitations, particularly on its reliance on data collected shortly after the 2023 elections. A study with the longitudinal (long-term) data would provide deeper insights into the evolving dynamics of women's political participation and better strategies for empowerment. Nonetheless, the recommendations in this Study serve as a roadmap for policymakers, CSOs, and community leaders to collaboratively promote gender parity and empower women in Bhutan's political and electoral landscape.

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