



UN Statement on Gender and Governance 11th Round Table Meeting, Thimphu, September 01, 2011

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Bhutan became one of the world's youngest democracies following its first parliamentary elections in 2008. Leading up to this, Bhutan has embarked upon a number of local government reform measures over the last forty years. The broad underpinning of the current local governance structure has taken root since 2002, with the establishment of local elections, and has gained momentum throughout the 10th Five Year Plan period.

Representation of women in governance – as agents of change and actors of Gross National Happiness - is an area of optimism which could usher in major changes in Bhutan in the future. It however requires further facilitation. At the national level, a modest beginning has been made in the first democratically elected Parliament: In the National Council, women account for 24 percent of members, and 8.5 percent in the National Assembly.

Women voters' turnout in the 2008 national elections (54% of voters) reflects the success of our collective support to voter education and strengthening of the Electoral Commission and the media; in the future, the United Nations will need to capitalize on this positive experience.

At the same time, women are under-represented in *gewog tshogdues* and *dzongkhag tshogdues*, a situation which the recent local government elections did not ameliorate; one woman Gup was elected, leaving the representation of women at this level as it was. There are no women Cabinet Ministers and few women serve at the apex levels of the civil service.

This situation conveys a strong message about the need for affirmative action to encourage gender balance and equity. In countries in the Asia-Pacific region, affirmative action for women's representation in local bodies as an interim measure has led to women being elected to almost 50 percent of the seats. Another lesson from the recent local elections in Bhutan is the need for deeper advocacy and civic education to address the voters' lack of confidence in electing women leaders. *[Yet, studies show higher numbers of women in Parliament generally contribute to stronger attention to women and children's issues. Women's political participation is thus a fundamental prerequisite for gender equality and genuine democracy. It facilitates women's direct engagement in public decision-making and is a means of ensuring better accountability].*

Improving women's literacy is essential for their active participation in politics, both as informed voters and as eligible candidates for public office. Potential exists for promoting this goal through formal and non-formal education systems. The NFE-expansion needs to be supported to further empower women in this regard.

The UN is already responding to these challenges. We are working closely with the Royal Government of Bhutan National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) on a large scale survey of women's political participation to identify specific bottleneck and measures to address them. We are also supporting the Government to take forward gender responsive budgeting.

The CEDAW Concluding Observations recognize that Bhutan has taken into account women's voice and formal rights; but it also highlights the urgency of explicit focus on women's political participation and on protection measures for women and Children. In this light, the passage of the Child Care and

Protection Act (2011) is a milestone in Bhutan's efforts to embed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child within national legislation and to frame a national child protection system. A similar endorsement of the Domestic Violence Bill is pending - as a complement to women and children's access to justice. Access to justice for women and children is also facilitated through the Royal Bhutan Police's Women and Children's Police Units with support from the UN System.

It is important for development partners to continue to support Bhutan in all of these endeavours which ultimately will strengthen the foundations of democracy in this country, and we affirm the UN's commitment for joint support in these critical areas.