



KEY FACTS

- The population consists to 49% of women and to 51% of men
- 62% of the women work in agriculture
- The literacy rate among rural women is around 10%
- The division of labour by gender is not rigidly fixed, as men and women can take over each other's tasks, with few exceptions, and this may vary by ethnicity
- 70% of the land is owned by women
- The majority of the population follows matrilineal heritage giving women an advantage in ownership of land and livestock
- Women considerably contribute to household income through farm and non-farm activities
- Women interact closely with the natural resource environment as users of wild plants and forest products
- As managers of home gardens, women are both managers of bio-diversity as well as providers of variety to family meals
- Based on the assumption of a gender-equitable social system, gender-segregated data are not readily available

FACT SHEET BHUTAN

Women in Agriculture, Environment and Rural Production

GENERAL PROFILE

Population

Bhutan has a population of approximately 600.000 inhabitants, 15% urban and 85% rural. Exact data on population are not available, but estimates show that 49 % of the population are female, and 51% male. There are three main ethnic groups: 1) Ngalops in West Bhutan comprise 35 % of the population; 2) Sharchopas in the East comprise 50 % of the population; and 3) Lotshampas (of Nepali origin) in the South account for 15% of the population. The Ngalops and most of the Sharchopas follow matrilineal inheritance lines, while the Lotshampas observe patrilineal inheritance.

Because of the extremely rugged terrain only 8% of the land is cultivated. The vast majority of the rural population lives on these 8% of the land. 17% of the population are under 5 years old, 45% under 15 years, and life expectancy at birth is 66 years for both men and women alike. The population growth rate (1995) is 3.1% and the fertility rate is 5.6%. With this youthful age structure and high birth rate the population is expected to double in 23 years, resulting in a tremendous pressure on the scarce arable land and the fragile mountain ecosystem.

No statistics exist on women-headed households.

Education

The adult literacy rate is estimated at 46%. However, for rural women the literacy rate is reported to be as low as around 10% (Rosenegger, 1998). The government is addressing the problem through Non-Formal Education schemes, where 70 % of participants are reported to be women.

Enrolment rate in primary schools is 72 % (1995) with a boy / girl ratio of 57 to 43. The difference between enrolment by gender is decreasing rapidly, though.

Labour

85 % of the population derive a living from agriculture and other traditional activities in the rural sector. Employment in the modern sectors of the economy is limited, apart from public services of various kinds, and small-scale trade in urban areas. Women comprise 16% of the 13,500 civil servants and hold only few senior management posts. This gender gap is decreasing as more women join civil service. Although women's participation in higher levels of government and decision-making is quite limited, their participation in community meetings within their direct environment is as high as 70% (Rosenegger, 1998). Industrial development is as yet limited and does not provide significant employment. Unlike many other developing countries, unemployment is not yet a major problem.

The **Human Development Index** (HDI) rank of Bhutan is 159th of 174 countries. However, if based on recent data available, the country would occupy the 125th position among 174 countries, well ahead of neighbouring countries like India and Bangladesh. Although Bhutan remains an LDC, poverty does not take the shape of abject poverty seen in many other South Asian countries. The **Gender-Related Development Index (GDI)** rank has not yet been calculated for Bhutan.

AGRICULTURE

Although agricultural development is slowly changing the face of rural Bhutan, it is still overwhelmingly characterized by

subsistence agriculture with high demand for labour and low levels of productivity. Crop production, livestock and forestry activities are closely inter-related and interdependent. Crops account for a 20% share of GDP, livestock for 8% and forestry for 9% of GDP (UNDP 1997). More than 80% of the population depend upon agriculture and animal husbandry for their livelihood (FAO, 1996).

The gender division of tasks in agriculture is not very clear in Bhutan. While some tasks are generally allocated by gender, others may be performed by both men and women, and men and women can to a large extent take over from each other. Bhutanese women are usually engaged in firewood collection, crop cultivation, vegetable gardening, yak herding, traditional weaving using vegetal dyes and other handicraft making. Men, by tradition, are engaged in ploughing, construction, trading and other business or manual activity (Gurung, 1997). The division of labour by gender also differs between ethnic groups, so that it is most pronounced among Lotshampas, and least among Sharchopas. Women in Bhutan have traditionally been involved in activities related to house-keeping, agriculture, animal husbandry and cottage industry, and would appear to play an important role equal to men in rural economics. But in all ethnic groups it is men's task to plough the fields with oxen.

Unlike most other South-Asian countries, Bhutanese society is mainly matriarchal and women have equal status to men not only in the eye of the law but also in the home. Land ownership in Bhutan is officially registered by gender and it appears to be gender-biased in favour of women. Women own 70% of the land. This pattern holds true in the ownership of the livestock as well. Most decisions are made jointly by women and men and in many areas such as spending of money earned from kitchen gardening and farm labour, women are free to decide independently (Ehsan, 1993).

Crop production

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Forestry

Around 70% of the country is covered by forests. A total of 26% of the country is now protected area, and 13% of the forest are under management. Wood and wood products accounted for 11.9% of total exports in 1994 and forestry for 9.2% of GDP in 1995.

Bhutan's forests are among the most important remains of natural Eastern Himalayan forests. They are characterized by exceptional biological diversity and Bhutan is considered one of the world's ten most important "hot spots". Forest in Bhutan is state owned, but rural people have traditional user rights for grazing, collection of fuelwood and non-wood forest products, and thus the forest is an important resource base for the rural communities. Forests provide over 90% of the domestic fuel in the rural areas as well as timber for rural housing and farm buildings (Rosenecker, 1998). Forests also play an important role in food security in Bhutan. Food from the forests becomes critical to the rural areas when transporting food to these areas is difficult, when people do not have money to buy food and when there is crop failure. Farmers collect 164 different plants from forests, including 22 types of mushrooms, 16 medicinal plants, 11 cash-generating non-timber forest products, 14 species for home use, 6 wild fruit species, 15 food and 8 beverage species (Namgyal, 1996).

Fuelwood and water collection is often undertaken by women. However, men sometimes take on fuelwood and water collection, and even child care. House-husbands are common in many communities in Bhutan (Gurung, 1997). Heavy work like felling trees for house construction is done by men. Mushroom collection provides a sizeable income to many women and their families. About 45% of the medicinal plants collectors are women. Some have even traditionally been involved in cultivating and harvesting medicinal plants (Gurung, 1997).

Livestock

Livestock is an integral part of farming systems in Bhutan. 86% of farmers own livestock. Almost every household maintains at least a few cattle for draft power, animal products and for manure. Horses are kept as pack animals, pigs and poultry for meat and eggs. Sheep and goats are also raised. In the alpine zone yaks replace the cattle and horses.

The primary gender division of labour in livestock management is somewhat blurred. However, usually women tend small stock, especially poultry. Though men contribute their labour in caring for the livestock, it is women who share more responsibility for caring for livestock by collecting fodder and water, cleaning stalls and milking (Gurung, 1997). Women also feed the cattle, while men usually take cattle for grazing.

ENVIRONMENT

The environment in Bhutan is still relatively intact. This is partly due to the recent start of the development process, and partly to the high priority given to environmental sustainability and conservation by the Royal Government of Bhutan. The Government has declared its firm intention to maintain a 60% forest cover and 26% in the form of protected areas, even at the cost of economic opportunities foregone. Moreover, the Buddhist philosophy of love and respect to nature has greatly influenced people's attitude to the environment.

People in Bhutan live in harmony with nature in a symbiotic relationship that goes back to untold centuries. The rural community's relationship with environment is reflected in the abundant use of various kinds of plants for medicine, essential and vegetable oil, traditional paper, natural vegetable dyes, etc. Domesticated ornamental plants are widely known to Bhutan's rural folk. For the various ethnic groups livelihood strategies in the mountains depend largely on their knowledge and management of its diverse genetic resources. Women provide much of the labour for natural resource management which

sustains the family (Ehsan, 1993; Shrestha, 1997; Thapa, 1997). Seed management is one particular area of women's work which is of great significance to biodiversity. Women have traditionally been the custodians of crop germplasm and their diversity for generations. As women play a leading role in the fields as well as in communities they are in position to gather new varieties through farmer-to-farmer exchanges (Gurung, 1997).

Even so, emerging environmental problems like degradation of forests close to settlements cause longer working hours for the rural people, as they have to walk longer distances to collect fuelwood. These emerging problems may not be gender-biased, though.

RURAL PRODUCTION

Off-farm activities are undertaken by both men and women. Women are traditionally engaged in weaving and petty trade. Cloth weaving is an important economic activity in the central and eastern regions. Basket- and shoe-making, portering and carpentry work are some of the non-farm income earning activities that men undertake. Producing fine bamboo baskets and other containers is a specialty of the people in the eastern districts, which are now becoming very popular among tourists. Bhutan has numerous family-operated traditional paper-making units. In the Bhutanese farming community the system of exchange labour is widely practiced. Both men and women work on another's farm as part of the labour-for-labour exchange. In this system men's and women's work are accounted as equal. Both men and women also take up jobs in road construction, but for unskilled labour men are paid higher daily wages than women.

The **National Women's Association of Bhutan** (NWAB) was established in 1981 with the objective of "encouraging women to take an active part in the implementation of socio-economic development programmes and in all other nation-building activities" and "improving the socio-economic status of women, especially rural women".

NWAB is an NGO and receives government financial support. It had about 400 members nationwide in 1993. It carries out social work in a number of areas and provides handicraft training for women and credit to assist women in setting up their own businesses.

FOOD SECURITY

Even though Bhutan is classified as a Low Income Food Deficit Country, poverty does not take the shape of abject poverty seen in many other South-Asian countries. Subsistence agriculture at low productivity is still sufficient to provide for household food security in most regions of the country. This appears to be related to the small size of the population and relatively equitable distribution of landholdings. Coupled with this, a traditional extended family system provides security for the most vulnerable groups, and a system of lending/borrowing food among rural households during the lean season helps the poorer families. The forest also provides a buffer for food security during the lean season. The profile of gender roles in Bhutanese farming systems bears evidence that women are key contributors to household food security.

A study leading to the formulation of a Comprehensive Food Security Programme was carried out by FAO in 1994. Nine Dzongkhags (districts) were identified as food-insecure requiring remedial policies and measures.

POLICY AND PLANNING FOCUS

Policy makers and planners in Bhutan need to:

- ✓ develop an agro-ecosystem-specific information based on gender-differentiated roles and knowledge in agriculture, livestock, and biodiversity as well as forest resource use;
- ✓ develop a support services policy to assist women in managing ecologically sustainable practices of harvesting natural resources for

Women in Agriculture, Environment and Rural Production - Bhutan

commercial purpose to reach both national and international markets;

- ✓ support policies encouraging women's participation in the biosphere management and develop suitable education and outreach programmes;
- ✓ support measures to improve the rural women's access to education and information, taking advantage of advanced communication technologies; and
- ✓ continually monitor development interventions to ensure no negative consequences for the current asset ownership advantages enjoyed by women through matrilineal lineage occur.

PROGRAMME FOCUS

Agricultural and rural development programmes in Bhutan need to include the following areas of intervention to become gender-sensitive in order to achieve the ultimate goal of development:

- ✓ develop programmes to educate rural women through distance education modalities for both formal and non-formal learning;
- ✓ develop intervention measures to address the fuelwood crisis that impact household food security;
- ✓ develop home garden programmes that support both biodiversity and household food security;

- ✓ develop training programmes to develop ecologically sustainable livestock management practices;
- ✓ develop community-based seed and bio-diversity management programmes; and
- ✓ develop programmes to assist women in taking advantage of emerging industries of ecotourism, export industries in forest bio-products and horticulture products.

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