Women in Politics in Democratic Transition – The Case of Bhutan.

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Abstract

In 2008 Bhutan became the world’s new democracy. Such a momentous occasion offered a unique opportunity for research to explore the changes that universal suffrage would bring to a society dominated by the monarchy for more than one hundred years. In particular this study set out to investigate the way in which alterations to the political landscape would impact on Bhutanese women. As a traditional society Bhutanese women’s lives were dominated by their biology and their work in the domestic sphere. This shift in the way Bhutan was governed provided women, for the first time, with the prospect of moving to the public and political arena, an area usually reserved for men.

Data for this study were obtained from three sources – semi-structured interviews with 26 women and 17 men throughout Bhutan, analysis of public documents, and observations in the field during the election campaign and later parliamentary sittings during the course of 2012.

This study exposes the patriarchy which is embedded in Bhutanese society and reinforced through cultural practices and the legal framework. Further it examines the public/private dichotomy, the low educational attainment of girls and women and the gendered division of labour which derails women’s public life. It reveals a masculine driven election campaign, women’s marginalised position in political parties, impediments to their seeking candidature, hurdles in their entry to the parliament.
itself and the challenges of being a woman in the world of men. Feminism as an agency of women is yet to take off in Bhutan.

Nonetheless, the first ten women parliamentarians were trailblazers who were able to demonstrate a principled, feminine, political leadership in a masculine environment. They contributed to Bhutan’s development by enabling legislation which directly impacts on women and children (rape and domestic violence) in their first term.

Bhutanese society was challenged by women’s entry into the public domain. In doing so, women have demonstrated that societal structures are not static and that 2008 was a year of not only political but societal transformation for Bhutan.