"Girls Should Come Up"
Gender and Schooling in Contemporary Bhutan

by

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ABSTRACT

The dissertation is based on fifteen months of ethnographically-informed qualitative research at a liberal arts college in the Himalayan nation of Bhutan. It seeks to provide a sense of daily life and experience of schooling in general and for female students in particular. Access to literacy and the opportunities that formal education can provide are comparatively recent for most Bhutanese women. This dissertation will look at how state-sponsored schooling has shaped gender relations and experiences in Bhutan where non-monastic, co-educational institutions were unknown before the 1960s. While Bhutanese women continue to be under-represented in politics, upper level government positions and public life in general, it is frequently claimed at a variety of different levels (for instance in local media and government reports), that Bhutan, unlike it South Asian neighbors, has a high degree of gender equity. It is argued that any under-representation does not reflect access or opportunity but is instead the result of women's decision not to "come up" and participate. However this dissertation will dispute the claim that female students could choose to be more visible, vocal and mobile in classrooms and on campus without being challenged or discouraged. I will show that school is a gendered context, in which female students are consistently reminded of their "limitations" and their "appropriate place" through the use of familiar social practices such as teasing, gossip, and harassment. Schooling, particularly in developing nations like Bhutan, is usually implicitly and uncritically understood to be a neutral resource, often evaluated in relation to development aims such as creating a more educated and skilled workforce. While
Bhutanese schools do seem to promote new kind of opportunity and new understandings of success, they also continue to recognize, maintain and reproduce conventional values around hierarchy, knowledge transmission, cooperation (or group identity) and gender norms. This dissertation will also show how emergent disparities in wealth and opportunity in the nation at large are beginning to be reflected and reproduced in both the experience of schooling and the job market in ways that Bhutanese development policy is not yet able to adequately address.