Women’s Contribution to Gross National Happiness: A Critical Analysis of the Role of Nuns and Nunneries in Education and Sustainable Development in Bhutan

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Abstract

Since the declaration of Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien in 1990 which was reaffirmed in Dakar 2000, it has become widely accepted that education for girls has a profound effect on sustainable development. More importantly women’s education has been linked to low maternal and infant mortality rates in Third World Countries. Studies carried out by a number of scholars established significant correlation between a woman’s schooling and her children’s learning opportunities (Stromquist, 2005, p. 142). They contend that intergenerational benefits resulting from female schooling are considerably higher than from male schooling hence increasing girls’ education and women’s literacy provides enormous benefits to individuals and families. As a result, literacy for women and girls has become a major focus of attention in many developing countries. Notwithstanding this renewed focus on girls’ education and the role of women in development, country strategies such as Bhutan’s Ninth Five-Year National Development Plan have not made significant attempts to adequately define the role of women, and particularly nuns in the pursuit of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Bhutan’s development philosophy, GNH which focuses on social indicators was proclaimed by the King in juxtaposition to the global economic indicator Gross National Product (GNP) as the road map to its mode of development. Ten years after its introduction, the role of women in Bhutan’s development agenda and the pursuit of gross national happiness remain undefined and marginal. This study therefore seeks to examine the existing gaps in Bhutan’s development philosophy with a focus on the role of nuns in national development. Drawing on feminist and critical theories grounded in discourses on gender equity, this study questions whether countries, and specifically Bhutan, have the political will and commitment to transform the lives of rural women, including nuns, by redefining their role in the 21st century focusing on their educational and literacy needs. The study, utilizing frameworks grounded in Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), and Gender and Development (GAD) discourse, highlights significant gaps in the education sector in terms of support, management, coordination, supervisions, and oversight of the quality of learning at nunneries with a view to drawing attention to critical gender equity issues in Bhutanese society. It concludes by proposing specific recommendations and programmatic actions to address the situation.