Bhutanese women in politics: Victims of Prejudices

There is no gender discrimination in Bhutan but, when it comes to the representation of women in politics, socio-cultural prejudices prevent them from playing a larger role in policy making, says a Bhutanese filmmaker who has documented women's participation in the country's 2013 elections.

The dismal performance of women when elections were first held in the world's youngest democracy in 2008 made Kesang Chuki Dorjee wonder what prevented them from helming decision-making positions.

"When the 2008 elections happened, there weren't enough women in high decision-making positions. Around 14 percent of women had made it to parliament," Dorjee told IANS in an interview here.

"It was then I got interested in understanding from these women candidates what continues to be barrier that keeps them away from politics," she added.

This quest led Dorjee to shoot a 35-minute documentary, "Bhutan Women Forward" that was screened at the just-concluded Mountain Echoes 2014 literary and cultural festival. It covered the journey of women candidates from different constituencies and parties in the run-up to the 2013 elections - and the many stereotypes associated with them.

"The socio-cultural perception that a woman candidate isn't capable of serving the people, they are only for the kitchen and social service, and general myths like Bhutanese women aren't interested in politics restrict their participation," said Dorjee, who took two years to make the film.

"When people come with these preconceived notions, it becomes very difficult for people to accept a woman as a candidate," she added.

This became evident in the 2013 election, when the representation of women in parliament halved from 14 to seven percent.

"Sadly, these seven percent of women hold the lowest posts," Dorjee pointed out.

Even so, despite the drawbacks, Lyonpo Dorji Choden became the first woman minister to be inducted into the Bhutanese cabinet.

Also, Bhutan got its first woman governor and first woman justice of the Supreme Court.

These are positive beginnings in the landlocked Himalayan kingdom, where women have been playing an active role in fields like teaching, the hospitality sector, writing, journalism, traffic management and the fire department - balancing it well by also donning the hat of a perfect homemaker.

But, Dorjee felt efforts should be made to create a conducive environment for women to be a greater part of parliament.

"The biggest challenge lies in getting woman with sufficient experience into politics. As the educated and qualified women are doing other jobs, they can't be persuaded to resign and enter politics," she said.

"And when women with no electoral experience and lesser educational qualifications fight the elections, the people completely dismiss them," she added.

Even though she felt these roadblocks could be overcome by introducing a quota system for women where they can come on board for short durations, learn the basics of politics and then emerge as more confident and qualified women candidate, this also has its drawbacks.

"The quotas can be misused by many who would want women in their families to get its benefit," she pointed out.

This is why Dorjee, who has been a filmmaker for almost 15 years, has documented the first national and local government elections as well as presented profiles and experiences of Bhutan's women elected leaders into an educational resource-book - "Raise Your Hand".

"I hope this book reaches out to more students who continue to discuss role of women in politics and aim to be a part of that process by becoming better informed," she pointed out.

"Women can be effective leaders and their equal representation is necessary to address many issues," Dorjee concluded.

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