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# NATIONAL GENDER PROFILE OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL LIVELIHOODS

## Bhutan



**COUNTRY  
GENDER  
ASSESSMENT  
SERIES**

**ASIA AND  
THE PACIFIC**



# **NATIONAL GENDER PROFILE OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL LIVELIHOODS**

**COUNTRY GENDER ASSESSMENT SERIES**

**Bhutan**

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# Acronyms and abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AMIS	Agricultural Market Information System
APA	Annual Performance Agreement
BAOWE	Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs
BDBL	Bhutan Development Bank Limited
BDFC	Bhutan Development Finance Corporation
BFL	Bhutan for Life
BLFS	Bhutan Labour Force Survey
BLSS	Bhutan Living Standard Survey
BMCI	Bhutan Media and Communications Institute
BNBL	Bhutan National Bank Limited
BNEW	Bhutan Network for Empowering Women
BNF	Bhutan Nuns Foundation
BOBL	Bank of Bhutan Limited
CARLEP	Commercial Agriculture and Resilient Livelihood Enhancement Programme
CCP	climate change policy
CCPA	Child Care and Protection Act
CDR	crude birth rate
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
CGA	Country Gender Assessment
CLC	community learning centre
COOPs	cooperatives
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CPF	Country Programming Framework
CRA	climate-resilient agriculture
CSA	climate-smart agriculture
CSI	cottage and small industry
CSMI	cottage small medium industry
CSO	civil society organization
DAMC	Department of Agriculture and Marketing Cooperatives
DPNB	Druk PNB Bank Limited
DNB	Department of National Budget
DOA	Department of Agriculture
DVPA	Domestic Violence Prevention Act
ECB	Election Commission of Bhutan
EDP	economic development policy
EU	European Union
EUTCP	EU-technical cooperation in support of RNR sector
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FHH	female-headed household
FCBL	Food Corporation of Bhutan Limited
FGs	farmers' groups



FGD	focus group discussion
FNS	food and nutrition security
FSAPP	Food Security and Agriculture Productivity Project
FYP	Five Year Plan
GBV	gender-based violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDI	Gender Development Index
GEG	gender expert group
GFP	gender focal person
GFR	general fertility rate
GGI	Gender Gap Index
GII	Gender Inequality Index
GLOF	glacial lake outburst floods
GNH	Gross National Happiness
GNHC	Gross National Happiness Commission
GEMS	Gender Equality Monitoring System
GPI	Gender Parity Index
GRPB	gender-responsive planning and budgeting
HDI	Human Development Index
ICT	information and communication technology
IFA	iron folic acid
KII	key informant interview
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LDC	Least Developed Countries
LDPM	Local Development Planning Manual
LFPR	labour force participation rate
LG	local government
MBPL	Microfinance Bhutan Private Limited
MHH	male-headed household
MOAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forests
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOEA	Ministry of Economic Affairs
MOF	Ministry of Finance
MOH	Ministry of Health
MOIC	Ministry of Information and Communication
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPI	Multidimensional Poverty Index
MSE	micro and small enterprises
NA	National Assembly
NC	National Council
NCHM	National Center for Hydrology and Meteorology
NCWC	National Commission for Women and Children

NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
NER	net enrolment rate
NFE	non-formal education
NGEP	National Gender Equality Policy
NGO	non-governmental organizations
NKRA	National Key Result Area
NNTF	National Nutrition Task Force
NPAG	National Plan of Action for Gender
NPAGE	National Plan of Action for Gender Equality
NPAPGEEEO	National Plan of Action to Promote Gender Equality in Elected Offices
NPPF	National Pension and Provident Fund
NSB	National Statistics Bureau
NWAB	National Women Association of Bhutan
RENEW	Respect Educate Nurture Empower Women
RDCCRP	Rural Development and Climate Change Response Programme
RCSC	Royal Civil Service Commission
RGoB	Royal Government of Bhutan
RMA	Royal Monetary Authority
RNR	renewable natural resources
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SME	small medium enterprises
SOE	state owned enterprise
STEM	science, technology, engineering and mathematics
T-Bank	Tashi Bank Limited
TMF	TARAYANA Micro-Finance
TTI	Technical Training Institute
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USF	Universal Service Fund
U5MR	under-five mortality rate
VC	value chain
VTI	Vocational Training Institute
WB	World Bank

# Executive summary

The Country Gender Assessment (CGA) was undertaken to analyse the agricultural and rural sector of Bhutan from a gender mainstreaming perspective in areas where the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) assists in realizing rural women's rights and potential.

The agricultural sector is the major source of income and employment with 49.2 percent of Bhutan's population dependent on it.<sup>i</sup> 57.8 percent of employed Bhutanese women are making them vital players in the food security and nutrition landscape. However, there still remain gender inequalities and constraints.

## The assessment noted the following major findings:

- Strategies, plans, programmes and guidelines do not adequately reflect gender aspects despite having clear policy directives covered in the relevant policies.
- Women's participation in decision-making is critically low therefore impeding representation of women.
- Most of the existing financial institutions do not have rural women-centric schemes. Low financial literacy amongst rural women further aggravates their accessibility.
- The existing agricultural extension centres are usually established based on the number of gewogs<sup>ii</sup> and are usually located close to the gewog offices. The numbers of villages in gewogs varies, and villages in large gewogs remain underserved. Similarly, villages located far from the extension centres are also underserved by the extension centres. In particular, the far-flung locations of such extension centres make it difficult and challenging for rural women to access and consult the extension centres and their services, and it weakens the value chain.
- Most available information gathered from the survey reports and various related studies for the assessment had limited sex-disaggregated data.
- Working-hours (combining productive, reproductive, and community work) are longer for women as compared to men. However, only the income-generating work is accounted for when considering working hours.
- Indication of low-level awareness on gender mainstreaming among the decision-makers and general public alike.
- Less or no reflection of gender-sensitive interventions in agrifood value chains.

The assessment provides recommendations for both the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) and FAO to point out the key areas for interventions to overcome the identified gaps.

## Recommendations for the Royal Government of Bhutan:

- Strategize tools and mechanisms to align any interventions, guidelines, and plans and programmes from the gender perspective to reduce or avoid implementation gaps at later stages. This could also include involving the identified Gender Focal Points (GFPs) in respective agencies in the formulation processes.
- Similar to the efforts put through Bhutan Women Parliamentary Caucus (BWPC), a network of women employed in the government's agricultural agencies could be explored to encourage tabling gender-specific issues. The network may be helpful in improving women's representation in decision-making positions through engaging dialogue and discussions centred on career barriers.
- The government could also revisit the financial legislation, legal instruments, credit policies, social protection policies, and other related policy-documents to reflect gender-friendly policies. Further, such changes in policies should trickle down, enabling easy credit access to rural women.

<sup>i</sup> National Statistics Bureau (NSB). 2021b. 2021 Bhutan Labour Force Survey Report. Thimphu, National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan.

<sup>ii</sup> Gewogs are the Administrative Subdivisions, comprising groups of villages, and currently Bhutan has 205 Gewogs.

- The Ministry of Finance could also reinforce gender-responsive planning and budgeting (GRP) to apportion budgets for gender-specific activities in addition to its overarching role of ensuring gender equality in the budgeting processes.
- Institutionalizing a monitoring mechanism to regularly assess the challenges and issues confronting rural women recognizing their potential to contribute equally in socioeconomic development, and being vital players in national food self-sufficiency.
- Investments need to be prioritized to target rural women-driven Farmer's Groups (FGs) and cooperatives (COOPs) especially after assessing gaps and lapses. Investments could be in the form of subsidized inputs, capacity development, and assistance in enhancing women's agrifood productivity.
- Develop a culture of documentation and encourage the collection of sex- and age- disaggregated data to all government agencies.
- Implement awareness programmes to promote gender equality, targeting men to share household chores and also to help empower women through advocacy programmes.
- Build stronger collaboration platforms to synergize the efforts on gender equality of various agencies with the national gender machinery. The National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) could collaborate with Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) to include gender equality related indicators in relevant ministries' National Key Result Areas (NKRAs).
- Promote and encourage more enrolment of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and vocational training, and actively engage in developing general training programmes, targeting rural women from a food security and nutrition perspective.
- Revisit strategies on interventions such as climate-smart agriculture (CSA) and climate-resilient agriculture (CRA) to explore avenues to make it more women-friendly. Explore the development of new interventions to mitigate the effects of climate change on rural women.

#### Recommendations for FAO:

- Coordinate with other UN agencies and development partners to support the government in revising policies, guidelines, plans and programmes that reflect gender aspects.
- Develop both short and long-term collaboration areas in consultation with the government to re-prioritize the assistance areas synchronizing with national priority sub-sectors.
- When FAO assists with HR development, the focus could be further extended to female farmers, and tailored to the capacity development programmes based on the female farmer's needs and requirements. Training and capacity gaps for women farmers could be studied for better understanding of training needs.
- Bring in international lessons, experiences and expertise to streamline existing national policies, plans and programmes, and other interventions on food security and nutrition to contextualize the local needs by engaging relevant agencies.
- Support CSOs and NGOs in their efforts in gender mainstreaming with special focus on rural women.
- Engage all national counterparts and implementing agencies of FAO projects at the inception phase stressing the gender-responsive targets to avoid future implementation gaps.
- Collaborate with the national gender machinery to lobby support for gender equality inclusion by sensitizing programmes under FAO's initiatives.
- Provide assistance to the government in its transition from LDC to middle-income country to ensure the efforts around CEDAW commitments and SDG goals related to gender equality are continued and achieved.
- Assist in identifying international ties and linkages to gain more visibility of Bhutan's agri-products in the international market, especially niche markets for rural women. Identify gaps in value chains to promote more participation of women.
- Strengthen the renewable natural resources (RNR) sector to carryout regional-based research to match the unique needs of each region in a geographically diverse country. Provide technical guidance and assistance to local researchers to explore gender-sensitive studies in rural women and agriculture.

# 1

## INTRODUCTION



## 1.1 Background and rationale

FAO recognizes gender equality as both a human right and an essential means in the eradication of hunger, poverty and malnutrition across the world. This includes improving the lives of rural populations by raising levels of nutrition, and improving agricultural production and productivity, natural resource management, and resilience. In enabling comprehensive and inclusive adoption of gender-sensitive plans and programmes, the FAO Policy on Gender Equality identifies gender mainstreaming and women-specific targeted interventions as a two-pronged strategy for the achievement of gender equality in agricultural and the rural sector (FAO, 2020b). In view of persistent issues related to gender, the Policy sets out a number of minimum standards, including the requirement to undertake a Country Gender Assessment (CGA) for country level planning and programming. The rationale behind the CGA requirement is to have objective and up-to-date information at hand and plan evidence-based, country level support for gender equality and women's empowerment. Both of these are key to improving food security and nutrition and helping towards poverty reduction.

Aligning with the overall CGA initiative, the objective of the Bhutan assessment is to analyse Bhutan's agricultural and rural sector from a gender perspective, especially in areas where FAO is mandated to assist to identify gender inequalities and gaps in realization of rural women's rights and potential. The assessment also identifies the roles, needs and constraints of women in comparison to men in identified areas of FAO's mandate. The document provides recommendations and guidance to enhance the visibility of gender-related issues that will allow future programmes and projects to incorporate gender-related aspects, as well as help in identifying potential partners for gender-related activities. Overall, the assessment aims to bring forth the gender issues in the Bhutanese context and should become instrumental to FAO Bhutan, the Royal Government of Bhutan, and other development partners in their continued efforts to improve gender mainstreaming while also enhancing the promotion of rural women's empowerment with the background information and baseline data on gender roles, and the status of rural women in the agricultural and rural sector.

## 1.2 Methodology of the assessment

The CGA is largely based on desktop review and analysis of data from secondary sources and studies on the status of gender equality in Bhutan with a focus on the agricultural and rural sector conducted by FAO, other United Nations agencies, development partners, RGoB and CSOs. Generally, documents reviewed include: (1) legal and policy documents on gender equality in Bhutan; (2) laws and policies on agricultural and rural development, food security and nutrition; (3) analysis and studies on the situation of gender equality and gender issues in the agricultural and rural sector; and (4) baseline survey reports – Bhutan Living Standard Surveys (BLSS), Bhutan Labour Force Surveys (BLFS), Poverty Analysis Reports, Agriculture Statistics, RNR Census Reports and others. In most of these documents, there was limited or no information on gender mainstreaming and gender inequalities in the agricultural sector of Bhutan. Where there was relevant information and data related to gender mainstreaming in agriculture, much of the available data were outdated. Such information gaps were filled where possible through qualitative processes via face-to-face interviews conducted from 18 to 21 July 2022 with eleven key stakeholders. Some of the interviews were done virtually and questionnaires were emailed where face-to-face interviews were not feasible. In addition, focus group discussions (FGD) with twenty representatives of farmers' groups (FG) and cooperatives, each from a dzongkhag<sup>1</sup> were conducted online from 27 to 29 July 2022. The details of the eleven key informants and the twenty FG and cooperatives can be seen in Annexes I and II.

## 1.3 FAO in Bhutan

Bhutan joined FAO in 1981 and a country office was established in the mid-1980s (FAO, 2011). Although initial cooperation began with on-the-ground agricultural developmental activities that were ad-hoc in nature, it has now expanded to include policy and legislative support, information exchange and capacity building, partnership building and regional collaboration, emergency and rehabilitation assistance, and natural resource management and rural development.

<sup>1</sup> Dzongkhags are the districts that is a primary sub-division of Bhutan. Bhutan has 20 Dzongkhags/Districts currently.



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The Country Programming Framework (CPF) for Bhutan 2019 to 2023 (FAO, 2020b) emphasizes supporting the RGoB's efforts on agricultural transformation moving towards a sustainable market-oriented sector and defining a long-term vision for the sector as the country transitions from LDC by 2023. Specifically, this CPF is designed to contribute to fulfilling the goals and objectives of the RNR Sector's 12<sup>th</sup> FYP (2018 to 2023), prioritizing the four programmes:

- 1) Providing strategic direction for inclusive agricultural development and leadership strengthened through evidence-based policy, planning and investment approach;
- 2) Transforming the agricultural sector towards a value chain based and market oriented sustainable system for enhanced income, gender-responsive rural livelihood and employment;
- 3) Enhancing food self-sufficiency and nutrition security; and
- 4) Enabling a carbon-neutral, climate and disaster-resilient RNR sector and farming communities.

#### 1.4 Structure of the assessment

The assessment is structured with five sections, in line with the requirements specified in the FAO Guidelines. Following this introductory section, the second section presents a brief profile of the country with information focused on the socioeconomic situation, agricultural and rural development, human development and gender. The second section includes the national policy, legislative and institutional context of Bhutan. It considers the country's constitution, international conventions including the United Nations Convention on Elimination all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the mechanisms, policies and plans pertaining to women and gender that have been put in place to ensure and encourage gender mainstreaming. The third section provides in-depth analysis of gender mainstreaming in the agricultural and rural sector in Bhutan, whilst highlighting gender inequalities in the agricultural and rural sector including gendered roles, access to land, rural finance and advisory services, forestry, and livestock and other agricultural sub-sectors. The fourth section identifies potential partners in the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women in agricultural and the rural sector. The report concludes with the fifth and final section with main findings and a list of recommendations for both FAO and the RGoB.



# 2

## COUNTRY CONTEXT



## 2.1 Overview of the agricultural and rural sector in Bhutan

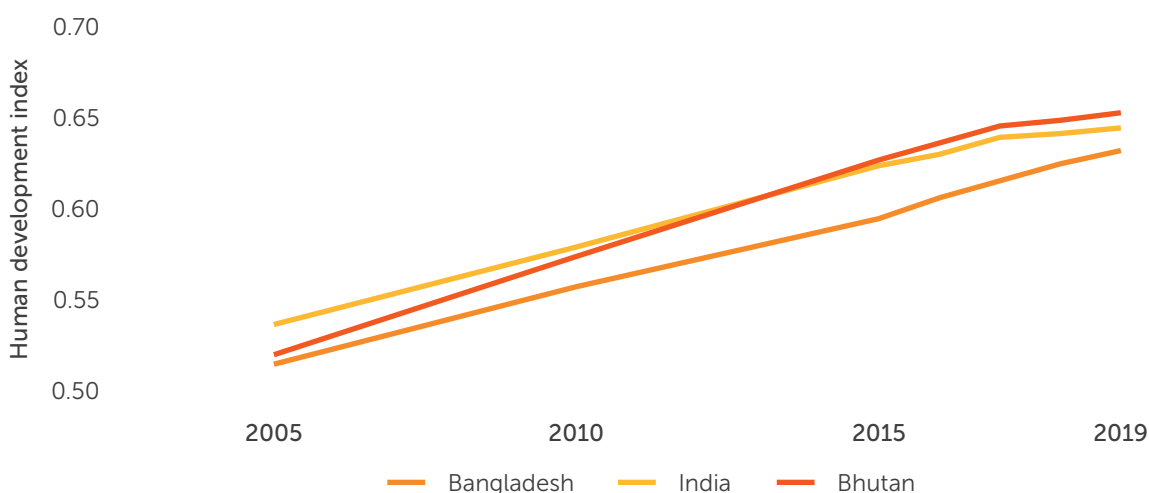
Bhutan is a small landlocked country nestled in the Eastern Himalayas between the two large neighbouring nations – China to the north and India to the south, east and west – with a total land area of 38 394 square kilometres. Forests cover over 70 percent of the country; perennial snow and glacier lakes make up 7 percent; cultivated land, 3 percent; and meadow pasture land, 4 percent (RNRSD, 2019). Protected by high mountainous ranges, Bhutan has always enjoyed political peace, stability and development progress. In terms of its human development, the country was ranked 129<sup>th</sup> of the 189 countries with 0.654 points in 2019 placing Bhutan in the medium Human Development Index (HDI) category. It also records an impressive progress with an increase of 25.8 percent achieved from the index of 0.520 in 2005 (Sen, 2020). Compared to other countries in the region such as Bangladesh and India, Bhutan has experienced different degrees of progress in its HDIs (Figure 1).

Since the introduction of planned development in the 1960s, Bhutan has made rapid socioeconomic progress. Economic growth averaged 7 percent over the decade prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly thanks to investments in the hydropower sector. With a gross domestic product (GDP) of USD 2.5 billion in 2019 (World Bank, 2021b) Bhutan

is economically classified by the World Bank as a lower-middle-income country. Agriculture is still a dominant sector of the economy, accounting for about 16 percent (as of 2019) of the Gross Domestic Product (NSB, 2020) and employs almost half of the population. Secondary sectors (manufacturing, electricity and construction) represented 36 percent of GDP, but only 14 percent of total employment; while the tertiary sector (tourism, trade and insurance) accounted for almost half of GDP and 37 percent of total employment in 2019 (NSB, 2022). In 2019, as per the RNR statistics, 66 587 agricultural landholdings cultivated 189 465 acres, leaving 66 120 acres fallow, of which about 8 958 acres were fallow wetland.

The agricultural sector is the major source of income and employment and is the vital player in the food security landscape with almost 49.2 percent of the population dependent on farming (NSB, 2021b), as shown in Table 1. Bhutan’s agricultural sector comprises mainly farming, livestock and forestry, and their respective contribution to the GDP in 2019 was 8.93 percent (crop production), 4.55 percent (livestock management), and 2.33 percent (forestry). Bhutanese farmers, in general, are smallholders who practice integrated subsistence agricultural farming with 53 percent of them producing for ‘own consumption with some sales’, followed by 37 percent producing only for ‘own consumption’, and only a handful producing for ‘sale with some

Figure 1: HDI trends for Bhutan relative to Bangladesh and India since 2005



Source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2020. Human Development Reports. Retrieved April 20, 2023. <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/BTN>

Table 1: Economic activity by area and sex

Major economic activity	Total	Area		Sex		Total
		Urban	Rural	Male	Female	
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	158 511	5.1	68.9	41.3	57.8	49.2
Mining and quarrying	1 656	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.3	0.5
Manufacturing*	21 887	13.0	4.0	4.5	9.3	6.8
Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	3 952	2.6	0.6	1.7	0.7	1.2
Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	110	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0
Construction	22 017	7.2	6.7	11.7	1.5	6.8
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	27 608	17.0	4.8	6.1	11.3	8.6
Transportation and storage	9 491	4.4	2.3	5.3	0.3	2.9
Accommodation and food service activities	8 663	6.3	1.1	1.8	3.6	2.7
Information and communication	1 946	1.8	0.1	0.6	0.6	0.6
Financial and insurance activities	3 057	2.7	0.2	1.0	0.9	0.9
Real estate activities	1 512	0.9	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.5
Professional, scientific and technical activities	800	0.7	0.0	0.3	0.2	0.2
Administrative and support service activities	1 194	0.9	0.1	0.6	0.2	0.4
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	25 791	19.4	2.9	11.9	3.8	8.0
Education	16 443	7.5	4.0	5.4	4.8	5.1
Human health and social work activities	9 917	6.6	1.5	2.9	3.3	3.1
Arts, entertainment and recreation	1 025	0.7	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.3
Other service activities	5 171	1.2	1.8	2.9	0.2	1.6
Activities of households as employers	483	0.4	0.1	0.0	0.3	0.1
Activities of extraterritorial organizations and bodies	888	0.9	0.0	0.3	0.3	0.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>322 122</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\* This includes weaving of home-based textiles, cane and wood products.

Source: National Statistics Bureau (NSB). 2021b. 2021 Bhutan Labour Force Survey Report. Thimphu: National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan.

**Table 2: Challenges in accessing important inputs and services**

<b>Irrigation</b>	Of the arable wetlands, only 18 percent are irrigated while for dry-land 61 percent has no irrigation facilities
<b>Agriculture inputs</b>	95 percent of all farm holdings use organic fertilizers while 25 percent use chemical fertilizers and 9 percent use chemical pesticides
<b>Farm mechanization</b>	Limited because of steep landscapes and small landholdings size
<b>Information and knowledge</b>	Difficulties in providing them by the extension services and agro-enterprises
<b>Credit</b>	Difficulties in finding collateral, lack of financial literacy and access to credits institutions located far away
<b>Market linkages</b>	Challenge in bringing produce to markets

Source: FAO, EU, and CIRAD. 2022. Food Systems Profile – Bhutan Catalysing the Sustainable and Inclusive transformation of Food Systems. Rome, Brussels and Montpellier, France: Food and Agriculture Organizations of the United Nations, European Union, French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development.

consumption or only for sale’ (RNRSD, 2019). As well as smallholder farmers, other important stakeholders in the Bhutanese food system also include small-scale food processors, cooperatives and state enterprises in-charge of delivering essential services and ensuring market access. The average land holding of rural farmers is just about 3.7 acres (1.5 ha) fragmented into smaller lands in different locations. The farmers grow a variety of crops under different farming practices, including rearing livestock to meet their household food security.

While agriculture is regarded as critical for family livelihoods and the nation’s food supply, it is also a low productivity sector partially because of limited cultivable land (almost 3 percent) despite the lush green hills. As a result, the country still depends on imports for around 50 percent of its food, mostly from India (WFP, 2021). Further, the inherent low soil fertility coupled with cold stress and frequent extreme weather events and natural catastrophes make food production and sustainability a huge farming challenge in Bhutan’s mountainous ecosystem. In addition, the geographical dispersion and fragmentation of farms limits the access to many important inputs and services, as detailed in Table 2.

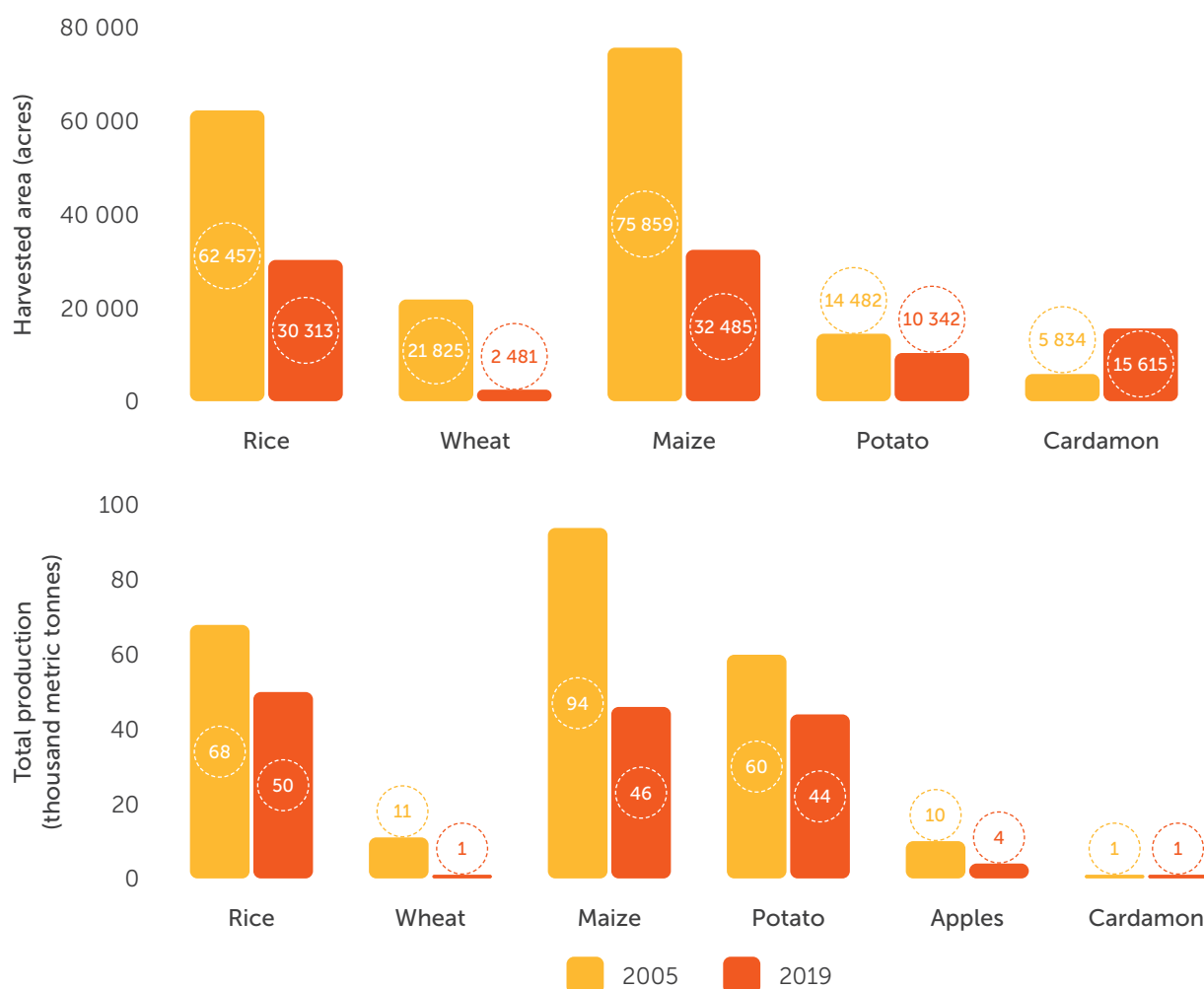
This means that food security in Bhutan is mostly equated with enhancing food availability through increased production and imports, despite both FNS policy and RNR sector 12 FYP setting targets

to achieve all other dimensions – affordability, accessibility, utilization and stability. Other factors constraining agricultural productivity include a combination of factors – increasing human-wildlife conflict, increasing farm costs and labour shortages linked to rural-urban migration.

The harvested area and the volume of agricultural production declined for several crops between 2005 and 2019, as shown in Figure 2. Production of a few crops, however, seems to have increased, such as cardamom and areca nut due to their higher commercial value. There has also been a rise in the production of poultry and eggs. Despite these increases, however, Bhutan still relies on imports of considerable volumes of dairy products and meat due to insufficient local processing capacity. Similarly, despite an increase in vegetable production over the past decade, Bhutan still depends on vegetable imports especially during the winter when vegetable cultivation is off-season in most parts of the country.

Women predominate in Bhutan’s agricultural sector – a trend that is growing as men increasingly leaving farms in search of off-farm work. This is often referred to as the feminization of the agricultural sector. 57.8 percent of employed females are engaged in agriculture while 41.3 percent of the employed males are in the sector indicating that women are now the main agricultural work force.

Figure 2: Harvested area and production of various crops (2005–2019)



Source: FAO, EU, and CIRAD. 2022. Food Systems Profile – Bhutan Catalysing the Sustainable and Inclusive transformation of Food Systems. Rome, Brussels and Montpellier, France: Food and Agriculture Organizations of the United Nations, European Union, French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development.

Women constitute 56.3 percent of the agricultural workforce as compared to 43.7 percent of the men. This underscores the importance of reaching women farmers with information and services if progress is to be made in increasing agricultural productivity and ensuring food security and nutrition.

The social expectations, inheritance practices based on the matrilineal system that bind women with an obligation to look after the aging parents, and lack of necessary skills required to be employed in urban areas pushes the majority of women into agriculture, especially in rural areas. Although productivity and earnings are low in agriculture, women are principal in food production and homestead lands that are mostly used by females which contribute a great deal to the dietary of the households. Unlike men with a higher education attainment rate, women in Bhutan face additional challenges in increasing

agricultural productivity and related earnings due to limited education and knowledge about alternatives as well as the heavy workload and drudgery related to agricultural work. They also face the issues of limited decision-making power, poor access to market and services, and labour shortages due to men-out-migration. Labour shortages are most acute for small-holder female farmers seeking to commercialize.

Climate change and its associated disasters are likely to make life even harder for all agricultural workers, with women farmers being particularly impacted because of the increased proportion of women among small-scale food producers and due to them having fewer resources, especially in male-headed households. Recent years have seen Bhutan experience rapid changes in average temperatures and precipitation patterns, as well as increased risks

of climate hazards. As per the 2019 National Center for Hydrology and Meteorology (NCHM) report, from 2021 to 2050 an increase in the annual mean temperature of 0.8°C to 1.6°C is expected across Bhutan. Such erratic extreme weather patterns and events pose a serious threat especially to climate sensitive sectors such as agriculture; loss of arable land (already in short supply), accelerated crop soil degradation and loss of soil fertility as well as increased incidences of pest and disease outbreak. These issues will impact women farmers more than men mainly because of women's substantial engagement in agriculture and the feminization of agriculture.

Consequently, it has become a critical challenge for Bhutan to achieve food security with improved nutrition and to ensure sustainable food production with resilient agricultural systems. The large pool of literature around the studies on the gender and food security interaction suggests that recognizing the vital role that women play in agriculture and making adequate investment in equipping and empowering rural women is a proven method to achieve food security and improved nutrition.

## 2.2 Socioeconomic characteristics of the country

Although Bhutan is signatory to many international conventions and agreements related to gender equality, and women's equal rights are enshrined in the constitution and other legal frameworks, the gender equality status from various reports and studies portrays a mixed picture. Over the years, remarkable progress has been made in women's and girls' education and maternal mortality. However, there are key areas where gender gaps persist with women and girls lagging behind in representation in political and public spheres and labour force participation. There are also issues with gender-based domestic violence, and other socioeconomic conditions which are highlighted below.

The GDI (Gender Development Index) value for Bhutan in 2019 is 0.921, placing Bhutan 129th of the 189 surveyed countries. In addition, the GII (Gender Inequality Index) value for Bhutan is 0.421, reflecting gender-based inequalities in three

dimensions of reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity (Sen, 2020). While progressive steps towards gender equality are in place, given Bhutan's current GDI and GII, further actions will be required to attain gender parity in human development as well.

### 2.2.1 Gender-specific social norms and practices

The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2008 provides an overarching framework and foundation on which gender equality is ensured. Despite guarantees of formal equality, the country's traditional structural and cultural norms continue to pose barriers in gaining broader ground for incorporation of gender equality. Bhutan ranks 131 out of 153 countries with a score of 0.639 for GGI 2020, reflecting women's unequal status in economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. The status of women in Bhutan is influenced by sociocultural perceptions and stereotypes that generally hold women as less confident, less capable and strong and sexually more vulnerable than men. A survey carried out as part of the NCWC study found that 44 percent of the respondents believed that Bhutanese culture considers women inferior to men – a perilous problem of social perception on gender (NCWC, 2020). The National Plan of Action for Gender Equality (2019 to 2023) has identified prejudices and stereotypes as a key area of concern and accordingly identified interventions to address its negative impact on women's empowerment initiatives.

In Bhutanese society, there is a continuous and concrete perception that women and men have specific roles to play in the family (NCWC, 2019b). Such social perceptions and traditional beliefs which regard women as homemakers, wives, and mothers are still a concern and clearly a cause of women's limited access to educational and employment opportunities. It further confines women to household and agricultural activities where productivity and earnings are low while men have more opportunities to seek off-farm non-agricultural work (Table 1). As a consequence, men have dominated the public domain, while women have been confined to private spaces, further exacerbating the existing gender gaps.

**Table 3: Agricultural and marketing activities by sex**

Production and marketing activity	Men (percent)	Women (percent)	Both (percent)
Land preparation (n=100)	38.0	19.0	43.0
Ploughing (n=97)	96.9	0.0	3.1
Cultivate cereals (n=61)	6.6	19.7	73.8
Paddy seedling transplant (n=10)	20.0	60.0	20.0
Weeding (n=29)	3.4	34.5	62.1
Cultivate fruits (n=14)	28.6	7.1	64.3
Cultivate vegetables (n=101)	1.0	72.3	26.7
Kitchen gardening (n=101)	1.0	80.2	18.8
Cultivate cardamom (n=20)	60.0	5.0	35.0
Harvest cereals (n=43)	4.7	7.0	88.4
Market cereals (n=6)	16.7	50.0	33.3
Market vegetables (n=90)	23.3	46.7	30.0
Market cardamom (n=23)	82.6	4.3	13.0
Market fruits (n=13)	30.8	30.8	38.5
Market livestock products (n=28)	3.6	89.3	7.1
Market processed home-made products (n=9)	0.0	77.8	22.2

Source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2016. Supporting Climate Resilience and Transformational Change in the Agriculture Sector in Bhutan. Thimphu, UNDP Bhutan.

Specific to agriculture, rural women are engaged in the collection of firewood, crop cultivation, vegetable gardening, yak herding, traditional weaving using vegetable dyes and other handicrafts. On the other hand, men are largely engaged with preparing land (e.g., ploughing), construction, trading and other business. Division of tasks between men and women (as indicated by the UNDP's study (2016) findings in agriculture are detailed in Table 3.

Additionally, women bear a disproportionate responsibility for domestic unpaid care work which largely goes unrecognized (ADB, 2014). The study on *Accounting for unpaid care work in Bhutan* conducted by the NCWC in 2019 found that women

perform 71 percent of unpaid household and care roles, which is 2.5 times more than men. In terms of contribution of unpaid care work to the share of GDP, women contribute around 11 percent compared to 5 percent by men (NCWC, 2019a). This is a hypothetical estimate that was calculated based on the specialist wage method – wages of specialists such as chef, child care worker, domestic helper and cleaner, dishwasher and laundryman, nurse, and primary school teachers were used to quantify the value of unpaid work. However, women's overall unpaid and domestic work is largely unrecognized. Many of the activities in which women are engaged are unpaid or low-earning (agriculture), yet are integral to the wellbeing of the households. In addition to

**Table 4: Population by area and sex**

Area	Sex		Total	Proportion to total population
	Male	Female		
Urban	111 493	120 312	231 805	33.5
Rural	223 801	237 290	461 090	66.5
Bhutan	335 294	357 601	692 895	100.0

Source: National Statistics Bureau (NSB). 2017a. Bhutan Living Standards Survey Report 2017. Thimphu, National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan.

women's substantial engagement in unrecognized domestic work and low return agricultural/economic activities, rural Bhutanese women seem to carry a disproportionate share of voluntary unpaid community work such as for farm road maintenance, thereby affirming the triple role and burden for Bhutanese women (ADB, n.d.).

The cumulative effect of all such demands of family, domestic and community responsibilities added to their agricultural/economic activities is evident in "the time-use" data collected in 2010 for the gross national happiness index (CBS, 2012), which proved that the working hours of (rural) women were considerably longer than those of men – 8 hours 43 minutes for women compared with 7 hours 46 minutes for men – suggesting that women worked almost an hour more per day than men. This time-use was one of the main findings that showed that women were less happy than men in Bhutan. The GNH Survey (2015) showed that men (49 percent) are reported to be happier than women (33 percent) with the largest gap found in working hours, literacy, schooling, and political participation.

### 2.2.2 Demography and population dynamics

In Bhutan, men and women enjoy equal legal rights over land (and other properties) as per the Inheritance Act, 1980 and the Land Act of Bhutan, 2007. Traditionally, matrilineal heritage favouring daughters in land inheritance was practiced in most parts of the country with the exception of the southern region where a patriarchal system is followed. The rationale

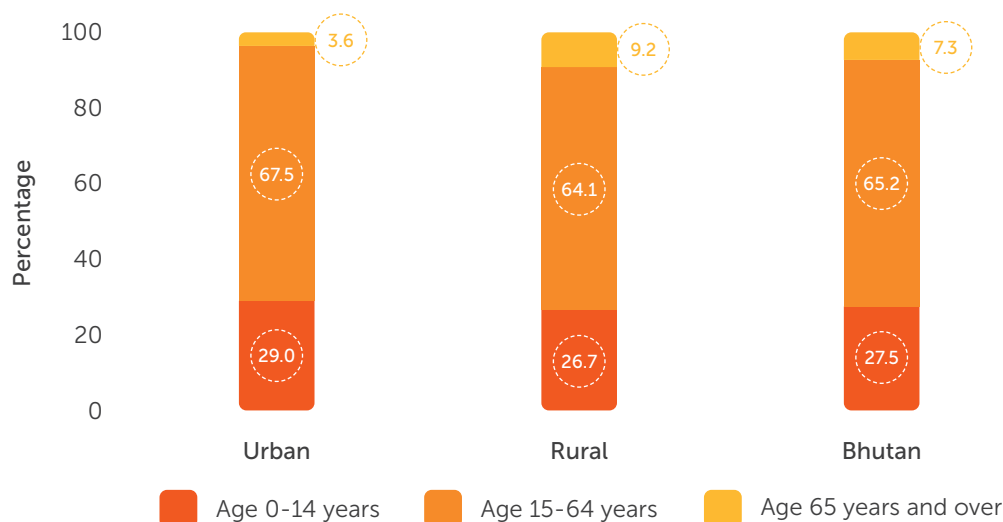
behind Bhutan's traditional matrilineal inheritance practices appears to be a form of incentives for women to take care of aging parents. Such practices have inadvertently affected women's choices and opportunities such as missing out on their education and limiting their socioeconomic options. Furthermore, despite the favouritism in land inheritance, females' decision-making power over land is regarded only in cases of an absent male. Generally, such decisions were found to be taken jointly. A study conducted in 2021 revealed that land ownership in Bhutan for women is 45.98 percent as against 54.02 percent for men (Verma and Ura, 2021).

Bhutan's total estimated population in 2017 was 692 895 as per the BLSS-2017. Of these, 231 805 resided in the urban areas and 461 090 lived in rural areas. Comparing population by sex, the female population is slightly higher than the male population in both urban and rural areas, as shown in Table 4. The overall sex ratio is 0.94, which indicates that there are more females than males in the population. The fertility rate in 2017 dropped below the replacement level (of 2.1) at 1.9.

The crude birth rate (CBR) of Bhutan is estimated at 17, meaning 17 live births in a year for every 1 000 population. As for the fertility rate, the general fertility rate (GFR) in 2017 is estimated at 60.6, indicating that there were about 61 births in a year per 1 000 women of childbearing age (15 to 49 years) (NSB, 2017a).

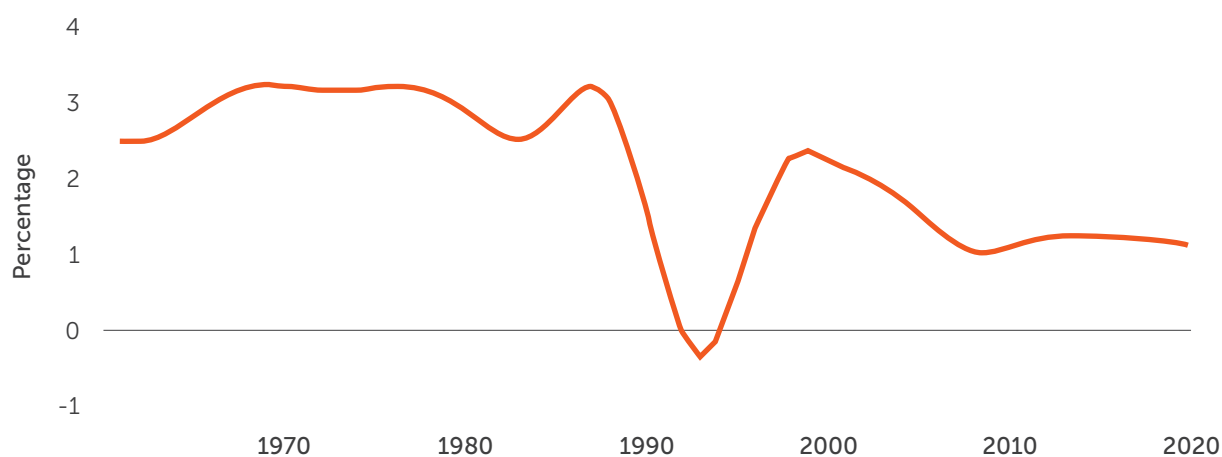


Figure 3: Population by broad age-group and area



Source: National Statistics Bureau (NSB). 2017a. Bhutan Living Standards Survey Report 2017. Thimphu, National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan.

Figure 4: Population growth rate in Bhutan



Source: World Bank. 2021. The World Bank in Bhutan. Retrieved April 20, 2023. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bhutan/overview>

As shown in Figure 3, for every 100 persons, there are 65 persons in the working-age group and the remaining 35 persons are in non-working age groups (28 children and 7 elderly persons) in Bhutan. The proportion of the elderly population (65 years and above) is higher in rural areas (9.2 percent) than in urban areas (3.6 percent). The working age population is slightly higher in urban areas (67.5 percent) as compared to that of rural areas (64.1 percent).

Overall, as per the World Bank data, the population growth rate for Bhutan is 1.11 percent (as of 2020), as shown in Figure 4.

The increased importance of migration in the population distribution of the country and the challenges that this brings – especially rural-to-urban migration – has recently received growing attention from planners and policy makers in the country. The landscape of migration in Bhutan is dominated by two flows of internal migration: rural-rural and rural-urban, however, rural-to-urban migrants are the largest category with 32.7 percent of all internal migrants and 16.3 percent of the total resident population (NSB, 2018). The migration is mostly from rural areas in eastern and central part of the country to gewogs and towns in western Bhutan. When compared between genders, the migration

**Table 5: Poverty rates for 2017**

Poverty	Number of poor (in thousands)	Rate (percent)
National Poverty Line	59.6	8.2
International Poverty Line 47.9 in Bhutanese ngultrum (2017) or US\$1.90 (2011 PPP) per day per capita	11.5	1.5
Lower-Middle-Income Class Poverty Line 80.7 in Bhutanese ngultrum (2017) or US\$3.20 (2011 PPP) per day per capita	90.6	12.2
Upper-Middle-Income Class Poverty Line 138.7 in Bhutanese ngultrum (2017) or US\$5.50 (2011 PPP) per day per capita	290.2	38.9
Multidimensional Poverty Measure		5.8
Gini Index		37.4

Source: National Statistics Bureau (NSB). 2017b. Bhutan Poverty Analysis Report 2017. Thimphu, National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan.

trend is predominant among men with a sex ratio of 118 male for every 100 female migrants resulting in the feminization of agriculture phenomenon.

The rural-to-urban migration component directly relates to the two most urgent challenges encountered in the country in terms of population distribution. On the one hand depopulation in remote rural areas – out-migration from rural areas has created a significant demographic shift, whereby generally the young, working-age population migrates and older-aged individuals stay behind. This demographic shift in the rural villages has a significant impact on individual households and the community at large with fewer people available to participate in the rural labour force. On the other hand, the stress on resources and environmental degradation are felt in urban areas with a high population influx.

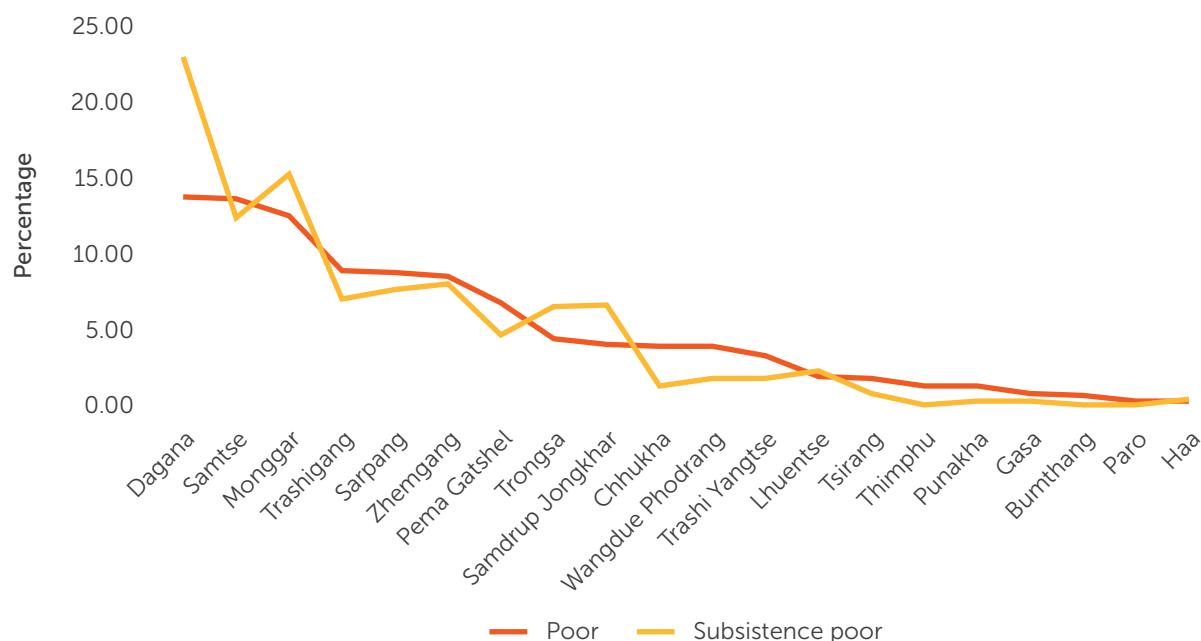
### 2.2.3 Poverty

Poverty reduction over the decades has been significant, with income poverty (at the national level) reduced from 23.2 percent in 2007 to 8.2 percent in 2017 (as per the 2017 Poverty Analysis Report). The economy recorded an average growth of approximately 7.5 percent over the last three decades and economic growth translated into significant progress in terms of decline in the incidence of

poverty from 31.7 percent in 2003 to 8.2 percent in 2017. This reduction could be attributed to the government's targeted poverty reduction programmes that were implemented during its FYPs. For the 12<sup>th</sup> FYP (2018 to 2023), the government has identified 'poverty reduction' as one of its key thrust areas/flagship programmes with a dedicated National Key Result Areas (NKRA) (NKRA 3: reducing poverty and inequality) to eradicate poverty in all its forms through improvements in health, education, and living standards.

Defining the poverty line as Nu 2 195.95 per person per month comprising basic consumption of food (BTN 1 473.45) and non-food (BTN 722.50), it is estimated that 8.2 percent of the population is found to be poor in the year 2017. As against the international poverty line, the poverty rate is at 1.5 percent (as reproduced in Table 5 for the year 2017). The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) has also improved, from 12.7 percent in 2012 to 5.8 percent in 2017. However, multidimensional poverty rates remained 10 times higher in remote districts as compared to Thimphu, often because of the lack of access to basic infrastructure. The Gini index, which measures inequality, has slightly increased in 2017 at 0.38 from 0.36 in 2012 (NSB, 2017b).

Figure 5: Poverty and subsistence poverty by dzongkhags for 2017



Source: National Statistics Bureau (NSB). 2017b. Bhutan Poverty Analysis Report 2017. Thimphu, National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan.

Poverty in Bhutan still has a rural dominance with about 11.9 percent of the rural population being poor against only 0.8 percent in the urban areas (NSB, 2017b). About 97 percent of the poor population resides in rural areas. Among the extremely poor, most reside in rural areas. While 4 percent of rural households reported food insufficiency, this was the case for just 0.7 percent of households in urban areas. Food insecurity in rural areas was particularly high in the eastern and southern parts of the country. Consequently, efforts toward poverty reduction warrant stronger commitments towards rural development to target the worst affected and more vulnerable groups.

It is observed that subsistence incidence (i.e., extreme poverty) is relatively small in the country with only around 1.5 percent of the population in Bhutan belonging to households that spend less per person per month than the food poverty line of BTN 1 473.45. While the percentile figure of extremely poor persons is insignificant in rural areas with only 0.8 percent, when compared to the urban area's extremely poor persons of 0.01 percent, it is significantly higher in the rural areas.

Further, according to PAR 2017, poverty rates are observed to be high in Dagana, Zhemgang, Mongar, Trongsa, and Pemagatshel, compared to other dzongkhags (NSB, 2017b), while Haa, Thimphu and Paro have the least poverty. It is also important to note the distribution of the poor population (Figure 5). Among the dzongkhags, Dagana (13.7 percent), Samtse (13.6 percent) and Mongar (12.6 percent) have the highest shares of the entire poor population in the country; with 40 percent of the poor residing in these three dzongkhags alone. In terms of the distribution of subsistence poor, again the Dzongkhags of Dagana (23.2 percent), Mongar (15.3 percent) and Samtse (12.4 percent) have the highest proportion of the subsistence poor population. In fact, half of the subsistence poor live in these three dzongkhags.<sup>2</sup>

More importantly, the recent COVID-19 crisis is most likely to have led to an increase in the poverty rate, mainly due to decline in the average economic growth rate to 2.3 percent (projected) in the 12<sup>th</sup> FYP period, high food price inflation (5.95 percent for 2020, as per the NSB statistics) and some disruptions in agricultural activities. Poverty is almost exclusively rural, and after the pandemic with the disruptions in

<sup>2</sup> Dzongkhags are the Districts of Bhutan, and currently have 20 Dzongkhags.

the production, transport, and sales of agricultural products could have impacted the income of some farmers that are relatively more commercially oriented. As a result, while the poverty rate is estimated to have slightly increased to 11.2 percent in 2020 (World Bank, 2021a), a clearer picture of the net impacts is expected following updated data and preparation of the next Poverty Analysis Report in 2022 to 2023.

#### 2.2.4 Health

Bhutan has made tremendous improvements in the areas of Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (RMNCH). The skilled birth attendance rate was reported to be over 97 percent by 2017 compared to 20 percent in 2000 (MoH, 2021). Subsequently, the maternal mortality ratio has also declined more than eightfold over a span of three decades, from 770 maternal deaths per 100 000 live births in 1984 to 89 in 2017. For the same time period, the under-five mortality rate (U5MR) reduced from 162 to 34 per 1000 live births. As per the current trends, Bhutan is on track for attaining the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets of reducing maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 and under-five mortality rate below 25 by 2030.

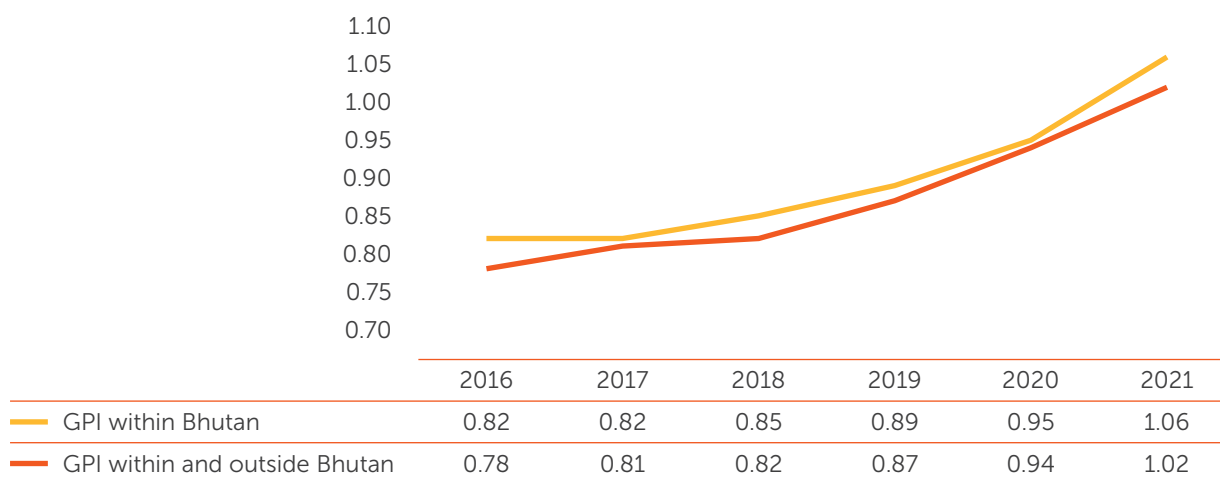
However, despite impressive progress in most of the key indicators, there are areas that will require extra focus if key targets are to be achieved. Rates of teenage pregnancies are high at 10 percent (16 years and below) and 32 percent (18 years and below) with teenage pregnancy levels being 3.6 times higher in rural areas than the urban regions (NSB, 2017a). Most pregnant women and mothers do not attend the minimum level of required number of antenatal and postnatal care visits set by the MoH. Another public health concern is child malnutrition, and exclusive breastfeeding practices. Only half of the children were exclusively breastfed and one-fifth was stunted.

Generally though, over the past 15 years, the health and nutritional status of children has improved with a steady decline in malnutrition. These benefits accrued from economic growth, considerable efforts on maternal education, provision of safe drinking water and sanitation, and the implementation of timely

health and nutrition programmes. According to the WFP's study 'Overview of Nutrition Activities in Bhutan 2019-2023,' wasting and underweight prevalence reduced to 4 percent and 9 percent respectively in 2015 and from 6 percent and 13 percent respectively in 2010. The same study revealed that stunting, however, was persistent at 21 percent while overweight and obesity are emerging and increasing in Bhutan's population with 11.4 percent of Bhutanese being obese and 33.5 percent being overweight (WFP, 2019). Micronutrient deficiencies remain a major public health issue. Anaemia, a proxy indicator for micronutrient deficiencies, is at 44 percent for children aged 6 to 59 months old. Over 35 percent of non-pregnant women and 31 percent of adolescent girls are anaemic. This not only has implications for women's health but also for Bhutan's intergenerational health status and will require coordinated and focused action.

Gender-based domestic violence affects women's quality of life as well as their economic activities. The recent study on the situation of violence against women in Bhutan (NCWC, 2017) (the first ever population-based survey using international standards of methodology) found that one in three ever-partnered women aged 15 to 64 years had experienced one or other forms of domestic violence over the previous twelve months, and 44.5 percent in their lifetime. An even more disturbing finding from the same study was the extent to which domestic violence was condoned by Bhutanese women. As of 2017, the same study found that the 53.4 percent of women aged between 15 to 64 years believed that their partners were justified in hitting them under certain circumstances and for various reasons including; neglect of children, going out without telling him, arguing with him, refusing sex, and/or burning food.

Bhutanese women commonly accept abuse as their plight or their karma whilst the culture of silence prevents them from accessing the public services such as counselling, shelter, and rehabilitation. Moreover, Bhutanese women's economic dependence on their husbands aggravates their vulnerable situation and the acceptability of domestic violence.

**Figure 6: Gender Parity Index (GPI) tertiary education level**

Source: Ministry of Education (MoE). 2021. Annual Education Statistics 2021. Thimphu, PPD, Ministry of Education, Royal Government of Bhutan.

Many women feel that such violence does not constitute abuse or a crime so they rarely report crimes to the authorities. This has resulted in inaccurate record of Bhutanese women who experience domestic violence (RENEW, 2016).

Recognizing the huge significance and negative impacts of gender-based violence (GBV), the government and relevant agencies have made a concerted effort towards addressing violence against women by amending laws and awareness training of the policemen, lawyers, doctors, educators, the media, and government officials. Through these measures, it tries to enhance relapse prevention, recognition of domestic violence as a crime, and to encourage appropriate follow-ups.

### 2.2.5 Education and literacy

Remarkable progress has been achieved in bridging gender disparities in education levels as of the academic year 2021 indicating no significant gender inequality exists in the education sector. However, when examined closely, there still exists a gender gap in specific fields of study. For example, attainment of gender parity at technical and vocational education, and in STEM courses still remains a challenge. Consequently, it has far-reaching implications on achieving gender equality in the employment sector when graduates in STEM and vocational majors are considered to have higher probability of being employed.

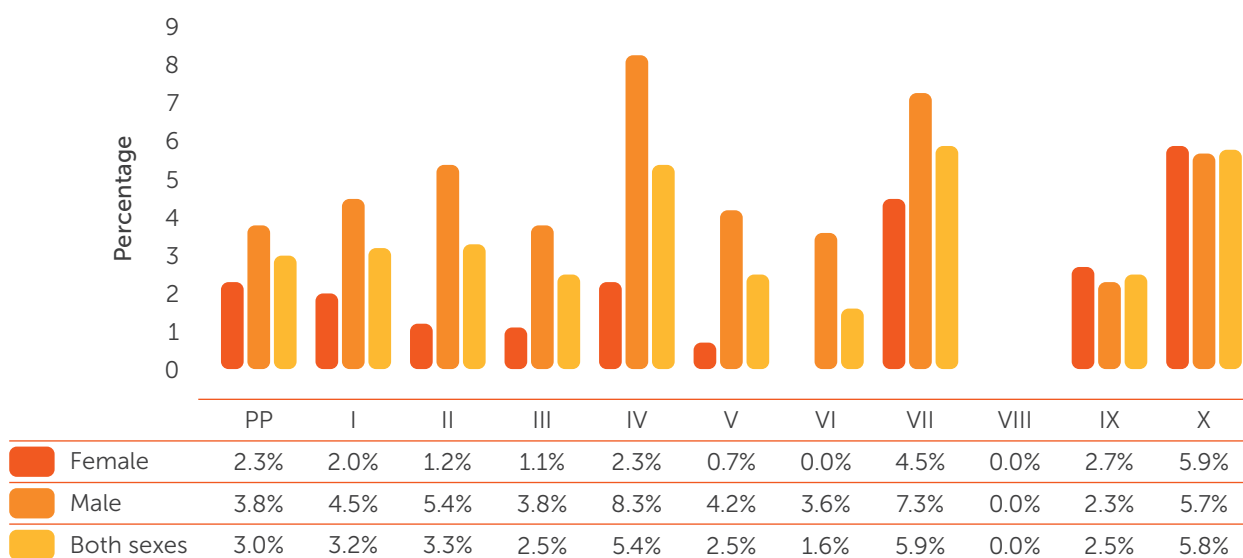
As of 2021 (MoE, 2021), the net enrolment rate (NER) for primary education stands at 93.5 percent with 92.2 percent for females and 94.9 percent for males (as per the Annual Education Statistics 2021) with gender parity of 0.96. As for secondary education, the GPI stands at 1.12 with more female students (NER at 98.3 percent) in secondary education compared to male students (NER at 86.7 percent).

The Gender Parity Index (GPI) at tertiary level favoured male students up until 2020. However, 2021 marked gender parity with the GPI for tertiary education level in 2021 at 1.02 percent as shown in Figure 6.

However, the GPI for students in technical and vocational education stands at 0.34 with male dominance in enrolment of 842 male trainees as against 283 females, as of 2021 (MoE, 2021). Most courses offered are perceived as traditionally male-specific or male-oriented in the VTIs/TTIs. As for the drop-out rates, there is no significant difference especially in 9th and 10th grades (Figure 7).

The participation of females in non-formal education (NFE) programmes and community learning centres (CLC) are higher with 3 629 and 310 female participants respectively compared with 1 439 and 34 male participants (as of 2021). CLCs offer various lifelong learning activities for those who complete Post Literacy Courses, out-of-school youth, and

Figure 7: Drop-out rates by sex and grade



Source: Ministry of Education (MoE). 2021. Annual Education Statistics 2021. Thimphu, PPD, Ministry of Education, Royal Government of Bhutan.

Table 6: Educational attainment by area and sex

Highest level attained/attending	Urban (percent)			Rural (percent)			Total (percent)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
No education	17.8	30.3	24.4	44.6	55.6	50.3	35.8	47.2	41.7
Primary	26.3	20.5	23.3	29.3	21.3	25.2	28.3	21.0	24.5
Lower/Middle secondary	24.4	24.3	24.3	15.9	15.9	15.9	18.7	18.7	18.7
Higher secondary	14.5	15.2	14.9	6.1	5.2	5.7	8.8	8.6	8.7
Tertiary	17.1	9.7	13.2	4.2	2.0	3.0	8.4	4.6	6.4

Source: National Statistics Bureau (NSB). 2017a. Bhutan Living Standards Survey Report 2017. Thimphu, National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan.

literate adults including nuns, monks and lay monks. They provide community-based development programmes such as in health, agriculture, life skills-based education and entrepreneurial skills consistent with local needs.

In terms of education levels in Bhutan, 42 percent of the population aged six and above have no formal education (NSB, 2017a). When it comes to women, this level goes as high as 47 percent. Around 25 percent of the population have completed or are attending primary school, while 19 percent have lower or middle secondary education. Only 9 percent

have completed higher secondary education, while 6 percent of the population has tertiary education. The percentage of educational attainment is generally higher in urban areas than in rural areas – a pattern observed in other sectors as well. For primary education attainment, on the other hand, the rural residents seem to do better by about 2 percentage points. However, rural women again lagged behind in the primary education attainment at 21.3 percent compared to rural men at 29.3 percent. About two in 10 persons in urban areas have no formal education compared to five in 10 persons in rural areas, as detailed in Table 6.

Table 7: Literacy rate by area and sex

Area	General literacy rate (percent)			Youth literacy rate (percent)			Adult literacy rate (percent)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Urban	75.8	81.7	88.2	95.7	96.6	97.8	71.1	78.3	86.4
Rural	50.8	58.3	66.2	88.9	91.0	93.3	41.5	50.6	60.3
Bhutan	59.2	66.0	73.4	91.6	93.1	94.8	51.3	59.7	68.7

Source: National Statistics Bureau (NSB). 2017a. Bhutan Living Standards Survey Report 2017. Thimphu, National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan.

At the national level, female literacy rates (against males) are higher (Table 7) for general literacy (66 percent against 59 percent), youth literacy (93 percent against 92 percent) and adult literacy<sup>3</sup> (60 percent against 51 percent). Further, there are marked differences between urban and rural literacy among the three types of literacy categories. Urban female literacy is 82 percent (against 76 percent), is 97 percent (against 96 percent) for youth, and 78 percent (against 71 percent) for adults.

### 2.2.6 Basic infrastructure

Bhutan has come a long way to meeting the global target of achieving universal access to safe and affordable drinking water for all by 2030. Now 99.5 percent of Bhutan's households have access to improved water sources as of 2017 BLSS. However, more than twice the number of households in urban areas (76.3 percent) have piped water in their dwellings, compared to households in rural areas (28.5 percent). Of the rural households with unimproved water sources, around one-third of such households have unprotected spring water (0.2 percent), followed by surface water (0.1 percent), unprotected wells (0.1 percent), and carts with small tank/drum (0.1 percent).

In Bhutan, 92 percent of households have improved sanitation facilities; a number higher in urban areas (97.6 percent) than in rural areas (88.1 percent). Almost all households (99.0 percent) have access to electricity in Bhutan with 100 percent of urban households connected to the grid compared to 98 percent of rural households (NSB, 2017a).

Under the Government's Road Sector Master Plan 2007 to 2027, road construction has been promoted as a means of developing rural areas and to fight poverty and promote social justice and equity. In 2016, the country's road network was 11 176 km. Despite this, in six districts, more than 15 percent of the population lived at least 30 minutes away from access to any main roads (FAO, EU and CIRAD, 2022).

### 2.2.7 Employment

The prevalence of the traditional belief that women are better caregivers in Bhutan seems to limit their access to socioeconomic opportunities by confining them to undertaking household and agricultural activities, where productivity and earnings are relatively low. As a result, men are engaged more in regular paid employment at 35 percent, a difference of 14.4 percentage points when compared to women (20.6 percent) as per the BLFS 2021.

On the other hand, women (35.4 percent) are more likely to take on the role of being family agricultural workers where earnings are nil or low. Only 17.4 percent of male workers take on these roles. This difference is more visible in rural areas with 47.6 percent female as family workers in agriculture as against 4.4 percent female in urban areas. While, only 25.4 percent male were engaged as family workers in rural areas and 1.3 percent in the urban areas as seen in Table 8. As a result, the gap in earning income is apparent: women's mean and median annual income is BTN 15 768 and BTN 10 000 respectively, which is lower than men's at BTN 20 663 and BTN 15 000 respectively.

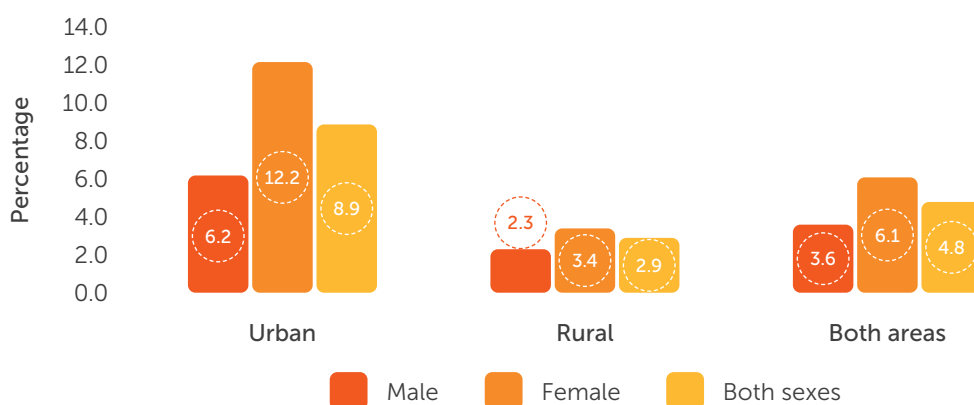
<sup>3</sup> Adult literacy as per the 2017 BLSS is defined as ability of those aged above 15 to read and write a short text in Dzongkha, Lhotsham, English and other languages.

Table 8: Employed persons by nature of employment for 2021

Nature of employment	Urban (percent)			Rural (percent)			Both urban and rural areas (percent)		
	Male	Female	Both sex	Male	Female	Both sex	Male	Female	Both sex
Employee (Regular paid)	69.2	48.9	60.3	18.0	9.5	13.8	35.0	20.6	28.1
Employee (Casual paid)	5.8	1.1	3.7	10.4	0.6	5.5	8.9	0.8	5.0
Own-account worker (Non-agriculture)	16.8	30.9	23.0	10.3	9.3	9.8	12.5	15.4	13.9
Own-account worker (Agriculture)	1.7	2.4	2.0	33.7	29.7	31.7	23.0	22.0	22.6
Employer	1.8	0.6	1.3	0.5	0.1	0.3	0.9	0.2	0.6
Family worker (Non-agriculture)	3.5	11.4	6.9	1.7	3.2	2.4	2.3	5.5	3.8
Family worker (Agriculture)	1.3	4.4	2.6	25.4	47.6	36.4	17.4	35.4	26.0
Apprenticeship/Intern	0.0	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: National Statistics Bureau (NSB). 2021b. 2021 Bhutan Labour Force Survey Report. Thimphu, National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan.

Figure 8: Unemployment rate by sex and area for 2021



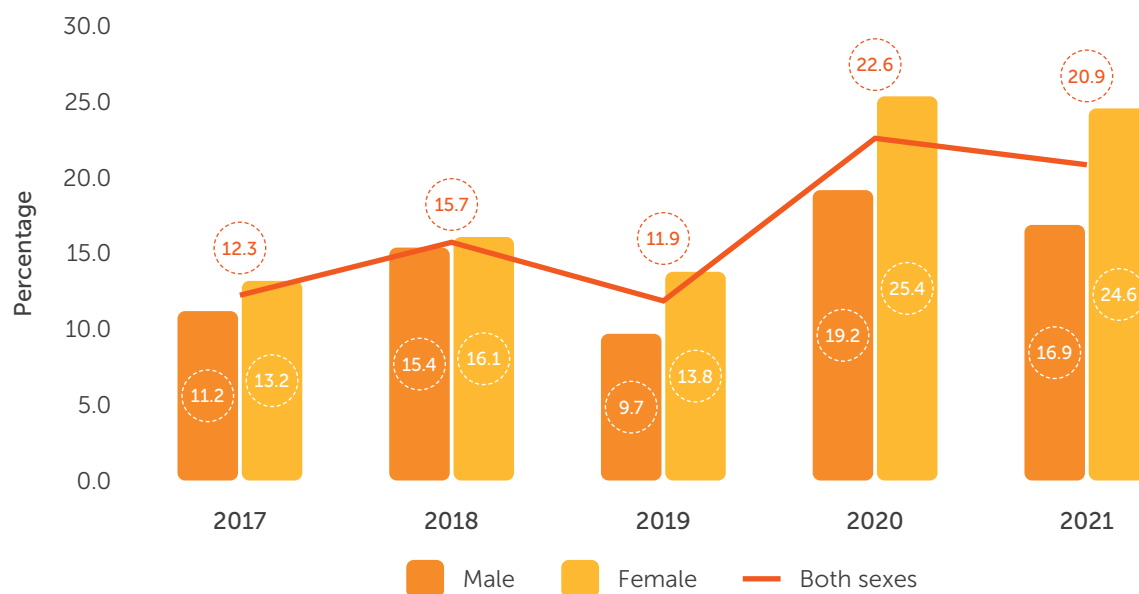
Source: National Statistics Bureau (NSB). 2021b. 2021 Bhutan Labour Force Survey Report. Thimphu, National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan.

As per the BLFS 2021, the unemployment rate in 2021 stood at 4.8 percent (a decrease of 0.2 percent from the previous year) with an unemployment rate that is 1.7 times higher for women at 6.1 percent and lower for men at 3.6 percent. In urban areas, the unemployment rate is 8.9 percent, which is

three-times more than that of rural (2.9 percent) areas (in Figure 8 below). For urban women, the unemployment rate is significantly high at 12.2 percent as compared with 6.2 percent for urban men. Unemployment for rural women at 3.4 percent was relatively higher than for rural men at 2.3 percent.

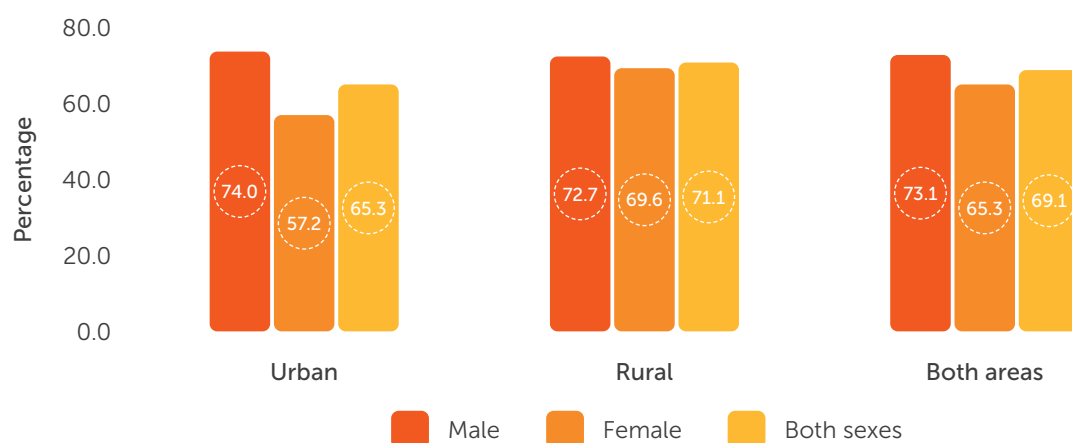


Figure 9: Unemployment trend over the years by sex



Source: National Statistics Bureau (NSB). 2021b. 2021 Bhutan Labour Force Survey Report. Thimphu, National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan.

Figure 10: LFPR by area and sex as of 2021



Source: National Statistics Bureau (NSB). 2021b. 2021 Bhutan Labour Force Survey Report. Thimphu, National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan.

In terms of youth unemployment,<sup>4</sup> the same labour force survey estimated it at 20.9 percent in 2021, a reduction of 1.7 percentage points as compared to the 2020 levels of 22.6 percent. The decrease in youth unemployment could be attributed to the various programmes and interventions initiated by the government to target unemployed youth to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. The youth unemployment rate is higher for women at 24.6 percent than men at 16.9 percent. Youth unemployment is an urban phenomenon with levels of 28.6 percent in urban areas, almost double than that of rural areas

(15.8 percent). It is concerning to note that the female youth unemployment rate has long been higher than the male rate over the years as seen in Figure 9.

The consistent pattern of higher unemployment rate for women and female youth might likely suggest the prevalence of gender discrimination in the labour market and require further examination and attention to promote equal opportunities in employment. It could also possibly indicate the lack of gender-responsive labour market intervention. Overall, the labour force participation rate (LFPR)

<sup>4</sup> As per the BLFS, youth unemployment refers to those unemployed persons aged 15–24 years.

for 2021 is at 69.1 percent, up by 1.3 percentage points from the previous year. Generally, the LFPR for women is lower at 65.3 percent than that of men at 73.1 percent a difference of about 7.8 percentage points. The LFPR is higher in rural areas (71.1 percent) than in urban areas (65.3 percent). Furthermore, the male LFPR is higher in urban areas (74.0 percent) than in rural (72.7 percent) areas; while the female LFPR is higher in rural (69.6 percent) areas compared to urban areas (57.2 percent) (see Figure 10).

Evidently, women are more likely to be unemployed and underpaid in rural areas. This means that promoting women's participation in economic activities is one of the key gender issues in Bhutan.

### 2.2.8 Political rights and women's participation and representation

Recognizing the importance and benefits of women's participation across all sectors and at all levels, emphasis has been placed on increasing women's representation in decision-making positions in politics and public spheres. The Constitution and Electoral Law provision provides the gender equal legal right to vote and to participate in any lawful profession as a fundamental right of every Bhutanese citizen. However, women's participation and representation in political and public spheres has been dismally low as elaborated in the following paragraphs.

Women's representation in the parliament has not been encouraging. The percentages have only slightly increased from 13.8 percent in 2008 to 15.3 percent in 2018 (as detailed in Table 9); and at the local government level, there was an improvement from a single female gup<sup>5</sup> in the first elections (2011) to two women gups which was 0.98 percent in the second LG elections (2016), the third (2021) elected seven women gups, making it 3.41 percent (Kuensel, 2021c).

The low representation in the parliament can be attributed to the widespread discriminatory view that politics is a male-favoured activity where there is only a small pool of women in the senior public service to provide for electoral candidates, and a lack of confidence in women taking public roles. Another factor could be that local elections bring heavy responsibilities, adding on to their already overburdened workload. Given that women are

shouldering a disproportionately high level of unpaid domestic work and childcare, a job demanding full time and commitment might not be an attractive option for women.

Similarly, women are also not well represented in the civil service, especially at the upper decision-making positions that are perceived to have the most influence on decisions about policy. Although the composition of women in civil service has increased from 34.68 percent in 2015 to 38.16 percent in 2018, they are still underrepresented at the leadership and management levels with 13.88 percent women against the 86.12 percent men. Further, women's representation in decision-making positions in other professions are equally low; women comprise 14.5 percent of the judges, 2.9 percent of CEOs in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and 9.9 percent of corporate board memberships.

On the other hand, women are found more active in decision-making at the private and micro level compared to men, who are dominant in decision-making in the public domain. The existence of gender-based sociocultural attitudes, stigmas and political patriarchy, which views men as better leaders than women, hinders women's participation in governance and leadership roles. Therefore, the glass ceiling for women is evident by their absence or very low representation in higher decision-making positions across all spheres. As a result of this extremely low political participation of women, the Global Gender Gap Index 2020, which focuses on the gender gap in economic and political life, Bhutan ranks 131 out of 153 countries with a score of 0.639 (WEF, 2021).

## 2.3 Policy and legislative context and institutional and financial arrangements for gender equality and women's empowerment

Overall, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2008, provides the legal framework for women's empowerment guaranteeing equal fundamental rights of all citizens regardless of sex. The Constitution, under Article 7, bestows equal Fundamental Rights for both women and men. Further, under Article 8 Fundamental Duties, every Bhutanese citizen is mandated to prevent and not tolerate amongst

<sup>5</sup> Gup is the elected local government head in gewogs (administrative division comprising a group of villages)

**Table 9: Women's representation in the National Assembly and the National Council, 2008, 2013 and 2018**

Year	2008			2013			2018		
	Total number	Number of women	Women (percent)	Total number	Number of women	Women (percent)	Total number	Number of women	Women (percent)
National Assembly, Elected	47	4	8.5	47	4	8.5	47	7	14.9
National Council, Elected	20	4	20	20	0	0	20	2	10
National Council, Appointed	5	2	40	5	2	40	5	2	40
National Council, Total	25	6	24	25	2	8	25	4	16
Parliament, Total	72	10	13.8	72	6	8.3	72	11	15.3

Source: National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC). n.d.b National Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2019-2023. Thimphu, National Commission for Women and Children, Royal Government of Bhutan.

others, abuse of women and children. Specifically, the Fundamental Rights enshrined in the Constitution, Article 7 (15) to (21) guarantee equal protection before the law as a Fundamental Right. Further, Article 7 (23) confers the right to initiate proceedings at the higher authorities of justice such as the High Court and the Supreme Court for the enforcement of rights conferred upon as fundamental rights with prescribed conditions.

Article 9 (17) of the Constitution, Principles of State Policies states that, "The State shall endeavour to take appropriate measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination and exploitation against women including trafficking, prostitution, abuse, violence, harassment and intimidation at work in both public and private spheres", reflecting the state's commitment on gender discrimination. Article 9 (18) of the Constitution provides the same protections for children. It provides the legal basis to protect women and female children against all forms of discrimination. Article 10 (25) of the Constitution recognizes CEDAW, and other relevant conventions that Bhutan is a party to as deemed by the law of the Kingdom.

The RGoB signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on 17 July 1980, and ratified it on 31 August 1981 (NCWC, 2019b). In addition to CEDAW, Bhutan is a signatory to many other international and regional gender conventions and agreements. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights as well as the United Nations Charter was signed in 1971. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation's (SAARC) Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Trafficking of Women and Children for Prostitution was signed in 2002. The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and Agenda 2030 with its SDGs are also important international frameworks that Bhutan adheres to. As of September 2016, RGoB has agreed with the following three indicators of Goal 5 *Gender Equality* (NCWC, n.d.b):

- 5.3.1:** Proportion of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18;
- 5.4.1:** Hours spent in unpaid chores and cares; and
- 5.5.1:** Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments.

As mandated by the Constitution, under Article 9.2 Bhutan's development is guided by the concept of gross national happiness (GNH) that strives to create an environment inclusive of every man, woman and child and benefits from development and growth. It is a holistic development framework that provides guidance for policies and programmes based on the four pillars of sustainable, equitable and socioeconomic development; environment conservation; preservation and promotion of culture; and good governance. The GNH development framework aligns with the United Nations 2030 Development Agenda and the SDGs by prioritizing a holistic approach to development that prioritizes people and the planet, with the main goals of eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable development.

Bhutan's FYP directs the development process in Bhutan and is integral for initiating all developmental activities in the Country. Since the Fifth FYP (1981 to 1986), with the involvement of women in development, gender equality and women's empowerment started gaining emphasis. However, since the tenth FYP (2008 to 2013), major focus has been on gender mainstreaming in the plans with the development of the National Plan of Action for Gender (NPAG) (2008 to 2013), which served as an overall strategy for gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment. The current twelfth FYP (2018 to 2023) adopts a two-pronged approach to promoting gender equality through a dedicated National Key Result Area (NKRA) 10 'Gender Equality' and mainstreaming gender as a cross-cutting theme into all other NKRA. Inclusion of specific NKRA demonstrates the government's continued commitment and efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Specific to the agricultural sector, the NKRA 8 'Food and Nutrition Security' ensured in the twelfth FYP, mandates the MoAF to increase production for enhancing food self-sufficiency and nutrition security for women and children in order to reduce prevalence of malnutrition.

Currently, there is uneven mainstreaming of gender issues across legislations, policies, programmes and projects with minimal accountability, and most of the existing policies have minimal reference to gender. To address this issue, the National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP) 2019 was envisaged and endorsed by the government as an overarching policy directive for the government to promote gender

equality and gender mainstreaming in legislations, policies, plans and programmes. This policy explores gender equality through the lens of three domains (i.e., political, social and economic). The aims of NGEP 2019 include:

- Provide a coherent strategic framework for the government's priorities on gender equality;
- Strengthen accountability and operational strategies to address priority gender issues; and
- Facilitate deeper collaboration across sectors and stakeholders towards a common vision of gender equality.

The statement 6.6 of the NGEP 2019 establishes the link to rural women in agriculture – *enhance access to finance and market opportunities, and provide capacity and skills development support for women including rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged women*. Accordingly, the NGEP Implementation Plan (2019) further identifies actions for statement 6.6 as follows:

- 6.6.1:** Initiate discussions with financial institutions to provide low interest loans to women entrepreneurs and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, including single parents;
- 6.6.2:** Scale up women's access to microfinance interventions
- 6.6.3:** Provide gender-friendly agriculture technologies
- 6.6.4:** Build capacities of women entrepreneurs on business development, marketing, value chain and information technology
- 6.6.5:** Conduct regular conferences, workshops, business fairs and networking forums among women to increase their commercial network
- 6.6.6:** Strengthen women's participation in existing farmers' groups and cooperatives

Specific to food security and nutrition, a sole activity 5.8.4 (Set up initiatives to prevent anaemia in adolescent girls aged 10 to 19) is identified against its *Outcome 2* (Improved access to and utilization of health services that respond to the needs of women and girls).

To support the effective implementation of the NGEP, the government developed a new National Plan of Action for Gender Equality (NPAGE) (2019 to

**Table 10: Activities identified against the outcomes**

Activity Code	Activity Details
6.2.1.1	Initiate discussion with the RMA and financial institutions to provide low interest loan to women entrepreneurs and those from low socioeconomic background
6.2.1.2	Create mechanisms to increase women's access to collateral free loans
6.2.1.4	Build capacities of women on financial management
6.2.1.5	Monitor and provide support to small business women owners to reduce loan default
6.2.1.6	Provide gender friendly agriculture technologies
8.2.1.1	Build capacities of women farmers on agriculture production technology
8.2.1.2	Form self help group and cooperatives for women from low socioeconomic background
8.2.1.3	Assess the gender differentiated impact of human-wildlife conflict
8.2.1.4	Implement innovative and effective human wildlife conflict mitigation measures targeted to female-headed households
8.2.1.5	Provide access to sufficient water resources and construct climate friendly irrigation channels for women farmers

Source: National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC). n.d.b National Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2019-2023. Thimphu, National Commission for Women and Children, Royal Government of Bhutan.

2023) based on review of the NPAG (2008 to 2013), gender interventions in the eleventh FYP, concluding comments from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> CEDAW periodic report, 12<sup>th</sup> FYP and other relevant documents. The NPAGE (2019 to 2023) outlines strategies to promote gender equality in political, public, social and economic domains. It seeks to address gender issues across ten critical areas including; good governance, health, aging, mental health and disabilities, gender-based violence, gender stereotypes and prejudices, economic empowerment, education and training, women in poverty, media and sports, the environment and climate change. For each of these areas, the progress, gaps, challenges as well as result-based actions are identified in the action plan.

Under its economic domain, the action plan recognizes the constraints to the economic empowerment of women brought upon by discriminatory practices in employment and gender stereotypes. These stereotypes potentially hamper the choices and positions of jobs for women, limiting

their access to education and economic activities and thus confining the majority of women to the agricultural sector. Therefore, the NPAGE (2019 to 2023) sets goals of achieving gender parity and economic empowerment of women by building the capacities of women, increasing access to and control over economic resources including finance to increase opportunities to promote women's entrepreneurship. It also advocates for gender-inclusive policies and budgeting, enhancing social protection programmes for women from low socioeconomic backgrounds, policy direction and alignment with clear recommendations for concerted efforts to address women in poverty, improved evidence-based information and analysis of poverty data from gender perspectives, among others. Relevant expected outputs identified in the Action Plan are; *Outcome 6* – Enhanced economic empowerment of women, and *Outcome 8* – Reduced proportion of women and girls living in poverty. Activities identified against these outcomes in the NPAGE are shown in Table 10.

Specific to the FSN, the following activities are identified against its *Output 2.2* Preventive measures to reduce gender specific health issues strengthened:

- Activity 2.2.5.1** Review and strengthen dietary/nutrition counselling package at Mother and Child Health clinics;
- Activity 2.2.5.2** Advocate with schools on dietary diversity in the school feeding programme; and
- Activity 2.2.5.3** Implement iron and folic acid (IFA) supplement programme for girls and pregnant women.

Other relevant policies that ensure gender equality or at the least are gender-responsive include:

- 1) Food and Nutrition Security Policy 2014 which requires all programmes implemented in achieving food security and nutrition to be gender-sensitive and socially inclusive;
- 2) National Forest Policy 2011 that aims to promote sustainable and equitable management of Bhutan's forest resources for the optimal benefit of all citizens including women;
- 3) RNR Marketing Policy 2017 that aims to enhance RNR marketing through product value additions where gender mainstreaming is considered as one of the important goals and guiding principles;
- 4) Renewable Natural Resource Research Policy of Bhutan, 2011 that intends to ensure participation of women in RNR research and decision-making, including their needs into it;
- 5) CSMI Policy 2012 in line with the EDP 2010 targets to implement effective Microfinance Institutions that is consistent with the RGoB's Financial Inclusion Policy, especially with a focus on economic development, gender equality and poverty reduction in the rural areas;
- 6) Economic Development Policy (EDP) of Bhutan 2010 with a special focus on women's enterprises to be given within the CSMI industries development framework;
- 7) National Human Resource Development Policy 2010 that aims to address the specific needs of women to ensure that they participate and benefit from the technical and vocational training programmes; and

- 8) National Health Policy that intends to establish user-friendly facilities and adequate infrastructure including women's needs.

In Bhutan, GNHC has come up with a screening tool in 2007 (Penjore, 2008) that requires every policy to be screened prior to enactment of the proposed policy. The GNHC is the lead agency for the screening process, and is supported by the domain experts from ministries, and other relevant agencies, usually the proponents. The GNH Policy Screening Tool has gender equality parameter as one of its 26 screening items that enforces policies to avoid oversight of gender mainstreaming. This at the least eliminates the emergence of gender-blind policies, and to a large extent ensures that any negative impact of a policy on gender equality is eliminated. It stipulates those policies are evaluated and categorized in the following four degrees:

- 1) Will increase gender inequality;
- 2) Do not know the effects on gender equality;
- 3) Will not have any negative effects on gender equality; and
- 4) Will promote gender equality.

In addition to screening policies, the government in collaboration with the national gender machinery has also come up with a tool to mainstream gender equality in the process of financial and budget planning. The gender responsive planning and budgeting (GRP) implemented in 2014 provides a strategic approach to gender-responsive planning and budgeting, identifying institutional arrangements, advocacy, awareness-raising and capacity-building, collection of sex-disaggregated data, gender analysis of sectors, and development of gender-sensitive indicators as key strategies. The Guidelines for Preparing the Budget for the FY 2019 to 2020 and the Budget Call Notifications of the MoF emphasize alignment with the 12<sup>th</sup> FYP and APA targets, and explicitly states that "As the 12<sup>th</sup> FYP calls for mainstreaming cross-cutting themes, the budgetary agencies must ensure that budget proposals are inclusive of gender, environment, climate change and disaster". Also, the National Gender Mainstreaming Guidelines formulated in 2014 by NCWC provides for a common approach and procedures for gender mainstreaming in each sector with a checklist on the process of planning and implementing projects,

and law and policy development. However, there is no significant adoption of the guidelines as per the key informant interview conducted.

At the local level, the Local Development Planning Manual (LDPM) 2014 includes several references to gender elements in order to mainstream gender aspects at local levels – involvement of women in the planning process (at the local level) and also recognizing the differing needs of women from those of men. Additionally, the GFPs assigned at the district and zone level are to provide suggestions on gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment. The Dzongkhag/Thromde Women and Child Committees also assist in provision of services to women and children in need of care and protection, and the implementation of DVPA and CCPA.

At the national level, National Commission for Women and Child (NCWC) is the country’s gender machinery established in 2004 under the Health Ministry (NCWC, 2022). However, in 2008, NCWC was upgraded to a fully autonomous government organization, as its tasks and roles increased, further solidifying their strength and mandates. NCWC is the leading agency for gender mainstreaming in Bhutan by developing gender-responsive legislation and policies, coordinating gender mainstreaming efforts of various government agencies through their GFPs, and monitoring and reporting on gender equality results. NCWC also coordinates, monitors and reports on international conventions such as CEDAW and women and children’s rights to the government to inform policy and legislations. In order to provide technical support to NCWC, a gender expert group (GEG) comprising six members with well-established gender expertise from the government, CSOs and private agencies was established.

A GFP network was established in 2005 (NCWC, 2020) as a network of people in charge of gender mainstreaming in government organizations, NGOs and the private sector such as the media. GFPs play diverse roles, such as awareness-raising and sensitization on gender issues and initiatives, to create a gender-friendly and enabling workplace. GFPs are required to integrate gender perspectives into policies and plans for each sector, submit a progress report to the NCWC periodically, and participate in general meetings twice a year.

Since most GFPs have limited understanding about gender issues, the NCWC revitalizes the GFP network with capacity building and consultation programs at regular intervals. The GFP network now includes representation from all ministries, as well as from government and autonomous agencies, academia, NGOs, the armed forces, the business community, and the National Assembly. However, appointment of GFPs at the gewogs (blocks) level is yet to be achieved. With at least GFPs in 10 ministries and 20 dzongkhags and few additional agencies, it is estimated that 40 to 50 GFPs are functioning in various agencies.

Although the presence of the NCWC and the GFP network offers important starting points for gender-sensitive governance, the limited institutional capacity connecting Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) priority areas including agriculture and gender issues makes gender-responsive policy development and implementation a challenge. Also, although gender-related initiatives are carried out through project-tied activities, gender integration through FYPs is a challenge due to inadequate knowledge and skills on gender tools. As such, effective implementation of gender mainstreaming is hampered, despite the available guidelines, tools and strategies. More importantly, gender-disaggregated data on agriculture, and related research and expertise are still limited. As a result, there is uneven mainstreaming of gender issues across policies, plans, programmes and projects in the country. Overall, there is an extensive institutional framework, but only a few recent policies, plans and strategies specifically mention gender issues. Therefore, gender mainstreaming in its priority area, agriculture, is limited in Bhutan.

## 2.4 Impact of COVID-19 pandemic

Bhutan has managed to mitigate the direct health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic better than many other countries. However, the economic and social effects are significant and more visible for vulnerable lower income groups with increased food vulnerability and higher exposure to social harms. Restrictions on movement have limited the ability of rural producers to grow and sell their produce.

Rural women in particular, who are often employed informally with no social protection, have faced higher job loss, whilst also experiencing an increase in unpaid domestic workloads including caring for sick family members and children not in school.

An impact assessment of COVID-19 on women and children conducted by NCWC revealed that around 19 percent of households reported a loss of income from jobs or businesses and 59 percent reported lesser household income after the pandemic (NCWC, 2021). More importantly, the assessment revealed that the impact has been severe on rural households. The same study revealed an increase in unpaid domestic work especially for women, strongly reinforcing the traditional social and cultural gender norms where women and female children are expected to work more doing unpaid household chores. Therefore, women were found spending more time on unpaid care work than men.

School closures and online-learning/self-study methods presented additional difficulty and challenges particularly in rural areas. Some of these challenges included limited access to the internet and affordability of data packages and devices such as smartphones. As a result, the number of students dropping out increased; while boys dropped out of school due to non-affordability of data packages, devices, and relocation of schools, girls dropped out due to academic pressure, difficulty in adapting to online classes, economic situations, and teenage pregnancy. Also, children in rural areas spent more time helping family members with household work and less time studying than urban children.

Additionally, the national lockdowns caused by COVID-19 in Bhutan have affected school feeding programmes with schools remaining closed for

almost the entire academic year in 2020. Almost 71 percent of the school children missed out on the fortified school meals – an essential source of nutrition especially for children from rural backgrounds. Altogether about 74 726 school children missed out on regular school feeding in 2020. Additionally, a total of 9 188 pre-school children with early learning needs faced difficulties in terms of home-based early learning programmes across the country (Kuensel, 2021a).

Moreover, the pandemic and multiple lockdowns have led to a surge in gender-based violence against women and girls as during the lockdowns the victims of partner violence found themselves trapped at home with their abusers. In Bhutan, GBV and protection issues emerged as a “shadow pandemic” and have reportedly increased by 36.6 percent and 53.5 percent in 2020 and 2021 respectively as per the records maintained by RENEW (Kuensel, 2021b).

COVID-19 pandemic further threatened the country's food security and nutrition as Bhutan's food shortage is supplemented by imported food, which is at a staggering figure of 50 percent import dependency. Imports were hampered with closed borders and a series of lockdowns that were imposed, and the local smallholder farmers struggled to meet the market demand. Food prices increased by approximately 15 percent (UNICEF, 2021) (a 7-year high) over the last year and have cast a shadow on food security, nutrition and livelihoods of vulnerable impoverished (including displaced) people. With the loss of jobs and income from COVID-19, the poorest and most vulnerable populations have fewer resources to cope with the increase of food prices and the instability of food availability and accessibility, and therefore have less ability to adapt to the crisis.



# 3

## GENDER ANALYSIS OF THE AGRICULTURAL AND RURAL SECTOR/ RURAL LIVELIHOODS



### 3.1 Gender mainstreaming in FNS, agriculture and rural development policies, strategies and investment plans

In general, there seems to be a strong commitment towards gender equality through development and the adoption of gender-sensitive policies and programmes as reflected in numerous documents. There is also an acknowledgement of gender inequality in Bhutan amongst policymakers to a certain degree. The most recent joint initiative undertaken by the NCWC and Bhutan Network for Empowering Women (BNEW) in their formation of Bhutan Women Parliamentary Caucus noted that there was general consensus to focus efforts on women's empowerment and promoting gender equality in the country. The participation of ministers, commissioners, members of parliament, and other high-profile dignitaries in the forum indicate strong political will in supporting women's empowerment and gender equality at the national level (DIPD, 2019).

However, all efforts so far, as evident in the proportions of budgets and implementation of programs and interventions which have been focused to fast track the overall agricultural development, limited corresponding efforts and interventions were made to bridge the gender inequality gap.

Mainstreaming gender equality has been driven strongly by NCWC in line with the country's commitment to fulfil the obligations of the government towards the CEDAW. Inclusion of gender equality aspects in every policy framework is ensured through the identified gender focal point – a network institutionalized across sectors and organizations, and an individual responsible within an organization by act of official appointment or nomination.

With rapid growth of feminization of agriculture, mainstreaming gender aspects has become ever more important to not only create an inclusive and conducive environment for women, but also to promote the mainstay economy of agriculture as women are prominently seen to become active players if the feminization trend continues to grow at the current rate.

In 2018, 54 percent of the population was employed in the agricultural sector, of which 52.8 percent were female and 47.2 percent were male. The recent survey conducted in 2021 observed that the employment in agriculture overall had reduced to 49.2 percent suggesting the shift in the employment opportunities. In terms of gender disparity, the employment representation of women was recorded at 57.8 percent while that of men employed in the sector was 41.3 percent in 2020 (NSB, 2021b).

There is a gradual improvement in bringing the gender equality perspective in policy formulations. The Food and Nutrition Security Policy of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2014 – in its efforts to achieve the four envisaged goals – has women's active participation as one of the enablers in meeting its target. However, there are no supporting policy action plans or implementation strategies focusing on gender equality as shared during the key informant interview (KII).

The policy further emphasizes on the food security and nutrition programmes to be gender-sensitive. In recognition of the potential contribution women have in agriculture, the policy succinctly underlines an actionable item targeting the rural women to enhance their access to resources and business through facilitation of microcredit programmes.

Gender mainstreaming as a core concept has also gained some level of traction in agriculture-related policies. However, there is no specific stand-alone agricultural policy as such; rather few relevant policies are framed centred on agriculture: FNS Policy 2014; RNR Marketing Policy 2019; National Irrigation Policy 2012; RNR Research Policy of Bhutan 2011; and Forest Policy of Bhutan 2011.

All of the policies recognize the significant role of women in agriculture, and gender equality and women's empowerment are visible in their policy objectives. Other key national development policies that include gender mainstreaming: Economic Development Policy, 2016 and the 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan 2018 to 2023, National Climate Change Policy 2020, National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2019, Food and Nutrition Security Policy 2014, National Employment Policy 2013, National Youth Policy.

Table 11: Three KPIs for the NKRA-10

No.	KPI	Description	Unit	Baseline year	Baseline	Target	Source
10.1	Women's representation in the parliament	Number of women parliamentarians in the National Assembly and National Council as percentage of total parliamentarians	Percent	2018	15.20	>15.20	Admin Data, ECB
10.2	Gender parity index in tertiary education	Proportion of females to males in the tertiary education institutes in Bhutan	Ratio	2018	0.85	0.89	Annual Education Statistics
10.3	Prevalence of violence against women/girls	Physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in the last 12 months	Percent	2017	6.10	<6.00	Study on Violence Against Women/Girls in Bhutan

Source: Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC). 2019. 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan Document. Thimphu, Gross National Happiness Commission, Royal Government of Bhutan.

During the KII with the MoAF, it was shared that the revised FNS Policy 2022 is in the process of review which has larger coverage and prominence in gender equality, especially inclusion of an additional theme on "Agency, Gender and Social Inclusion".

The supporting agricultural strategies are aligned to the aforementioned policies. Further, the strategies are also gender-sensitive. For example, the Agriculture Research Strategy 2018 to 2028 includes "Design, modify and promote efficient and gender-friendly agricultural tools and implements" to enable women in the farm mechanization initiative. Agriculture Extension Strategy 2019 to 2028 incorporates the need to engage grass-root level organizations – gewog extension centres – to ensure gender mainstreaming perspectives are well documented in policies and programmes from the farmer's point of view. On nutrition, the National Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan 2021 to 2025 also aims to create a gender-responsive health system.

Bhutan's national investment plans and programmes adopt a five-year development and financial plan. Currently, the government is in the last and the final

year of its 12<sup>th</sup> FYP. In terms of the total budget outlay for the agricultural sector, BTN 1 025.04 million is allocated for 12<sup>th</sup> FYP with priority assigned to Food Self Sufficiency and Nutrition Security programme (MOAF-12FYP).

Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) is the central planning agency for coordination of the programmes ensuring its alignment to the goals of both national interest and international commitments. In the 12<sup>th</sup> FYP, the government identified 17 National Key Result Areas (NKRA), of which NKRA-8 (Food and Nutrition Security) and NKRA-10 (Gender Equality) indicate the serious concerns shared at the national level in these domains. These NKRAs are linked to the fulfilment of the SDGs.

In pursuit of realizing the goals set forth in the NRKA-8 (GNHC, 2019), three programmes are identified:

- 1) Food and Nutrition Security,
- 2) Value Chain and Enterprise Development, and
- 3) Research and Extension Service.

More importantly, the NKRA-10 (Gender Equality) places mainstreaming gender into policies, plans, and programmes as one of its strategies in achieving its goals. However, the primary focus has been limited to three success indicators;

- 1) Women's representation in the parliament,
- 2) Gender parity index in tertiary education,
- 3) and prevalence of violence against women/girls as illustrated in Table 11.

Besides the three indicators, the current FYP falls short of stressing the critical gender mainstreaming necessary for agriculture and rural development at the national level.

The country's National Gender Equality Policy 2019 outlines three specific domains for gender equality: political and public; social; and economic. The government is mandated by the NGEF to ensure that policy provisions achieve gender equality under these three broad domains. However, the policy provision requirement for agricultural and rural development is limited to only:

- Improve gender-friendly facilities in rural areas;
- Implement interventions to reduce the burden of care and domestic responsibilities, and advocate for equal sharing of such responsibilities within the family; and
- Enhance access to finance and market opportunities, and provide capacity and skills development support for rural women and socially-economically disadvantaged women.

According to the policy provisions requirements set by NGEF-2019, the relevant policies have inadvertently set unforced limitations in bringing gender mainstreaming to the forefront. For example, the FNS Policy limits its coverage to only making microcredit funds available for women.

The government in its 12<sup>th</sup> FYP has strategically included plans and programmes for promotion of gender equality. However, ADB noted that the resources to implement gender-responsive interventions are insufficient (ADB, 2019). It further recommends strengthening of institutional capacities of both central and local government agencies in analysing gender issues to help the government take adequate corrective actions in mainstreaming gender

equality aspects.

### 3.2 Institutional and financial arrangements for gender mainstreaming in agricultural and rural development

MoAF and all other ministries have an appointee taking up the responsibilities as gender focal point (GFP). Their authority is usually downplayed as these officers perform dualistic roles and multiple functions, leading to divided attention between their primary responsibility as sector-specific programme officer and additional roles of GFP. The GFPs are periodically invited for training and workshops related to gender that provide platforms for their capacity development. There is no budget apportioned specially for GFPs to carry out gender-related activities as reported in the KII. In addition, the interview also learned that within the limited allocated budget, the priority has always been on their core mandates – gender mainstreaming is considered the core mandate of the national machinery. Further, most of the key informants reported that the gender aspects are considered only when the requirements of donor-supported projects are implemented.

In addition, the planning process provides a broad framework for the distribution of budgetary resources across all government agencies. When it comes to budgeting, there are various phases in the budget cycle. These include budget preparation, budget approval, budget management and budget implementation. All the phases provide potential entry points for GRPB. Again, several developments have enabled the adoption of GRPB across the budgetary process in the country.

National Gender Equality Policy 2019 stipulates the need to implement GRPB through the introduction of mandatory gender analysis and encouraging a minimum percentage of budget allocation to ensure the integration of gender at the time of submission of budgetary proposals. The Ministry of Finance is identified as the key implementer of the GRPB. In that capacity, the training and guidelines are developed in close consultation with the NCWC. It was, however, noted that the scope and extent of integration at the MoF need further clarity and conformance.

The agricultural sector, compared to the education and health sectors, is at a completely different stage with respect to the introduction of GRPB. While

formulating programmes, it is often assumed that they are gender-sensitive and would impact on men and women equally. Furthermore, a workshop conducted for “Gender Responsive Planning and Budgeting in Bhutan: From Analysis to Action” also noted various suggestions made regarding the creation of enabling conditions for implementing GRPB in Bhutan (Thakur and Jhamb, 2016). There were two very specific recommendations which found resonance with almost all the participants.

First, the need for clear guidelines from GNHC and MoF on engendering the process of planning and budgeting; and second, the need to strengthen the information system on gender by collecting and generating sex-disaggregated data at all levels of implementation of programmes. This would enable programmes to be designed more in accordance with, and in response to, the local needs.

The government also has a mechanism to strengthen the relationship between the GFPs and GEG through a twinning and mentoring process to provide GFPs with necessary support to fulfil their responsibilities. GEGs and Gender Monitoring Tools are also put in place to enhance the visibility of gender mainstreaming initiatives. However, there seems to be a gap in the coordination between the GEG and GFP. The coordination is limited to developing gender-related materials and awareness programme as reported during the KII.

In Bhutan, there are 42 civil society organizations registered with the Civil Society Organizations Authority, out of which Respect, Education, Nurture and Empower Women (RENEW), Bhutan Network for Empowering Women (BNEW) and Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs (BAOWE) have gender equality in their core values and mandates. The national machinery identifies the CSOs, in particular, the ones dealing with issues of women’s rights, like the RENEW, BNEW, Tarayana Foundation, SAARC Business Association of Home-Based Workers, Bhutan (SABAH-Bhutan), BNF (Bhutan Nun’s Foundation), Bhutan Media and Communications Institute (BMCI) and BAOWE as their key partners (NCWC, n.d.a).

In addition to civil society efforts to advance gender equality in agricultural and rural development and rural women’s rights, there are also commendable progresses achieved by the initiatives undertaken by

the CSOs. BAOWE has conducted various programmes targeting rural women such as capacity development with support from development partners, including ADB, Enhanced Integrated Framework. Fountain Effect is a concept created in response to the challenges faced by farmers including low volumes of produce and lack of marketing networks thereof. Another programme worth noting is BAOWE-Pelzing, Microfinance Institute established to provide additional support to the women entrepreneurs.

Similarly, Tarayana Foundation also provides financial support through its TARAYANA MICROFINANCE (TMF) initiative to rural communities. In addition, the programme also facilitates the communities to connect with relevant government entities, banks and investors to promote small and medium enterprises (SME).

In terms of loans and financial arrangements for rural development, Bhutan Development Bank (BDBL) with support from ADB offers credits targeting rural women through the Rural Finance Development Project and its covenant for gender inclusion in its contract and also has spelled out the Gender Action Plan.

In Bhutan, since the signatory status of CEDAW convention, gender mainstreaming has gained traction in most aspects of government policies, plans and programmes. Gender inequality has been improved with institutionalizing the National Commission of Women and Children. The NGEF has also created opportunities to overcome obstacles by engaging government agencies, CSOs, and international development partners.

There is improvement in the education sector, where gender inequality in tertiary education has improved up to 1.02 percent (GPI) from primary education (MoE, 2021). Advancement in gender equality and women’s empowerment has also received support from the government wherein programmes on gender-responsive action plans are framed.

As experienced in other countries, adopting gender mainstreaming in Bhutan is also a progressive journey. There is a general sense for the need to have gender equality, but there are also some areas for further improvement. As such, there are no agencies or actors appearing to oppose the efforts of gender mainstreaming. Instead, the limited available resources prioritized for other developmental activities

reduces the financial support required for gender mainstreaming. However, it does not necessarily indicate gender equality getting pushed back to the secondary list. Where plausible, there is a strong drive for it as evident from the list of projects and programmes initiated by all stakeholders.

There are also collaborations amongst the stakeholders in promoting gender equality. The working relationships between the stakeholders are either at the agency-to-agency level or through the already established GFP network. Although there is no explicit mention of the national machinery, the NFSP-2014 does point out the multi-sectoral involvement requirement to achieve the goals defined and commits engagement of each actor within the scope of respective sectors. The policy also specifies collaborative arrangements required between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry as part of their joint and shared mandates. In its continued efforts, the national machinery also assists in such areas where their expertise is identified.

### 3.3. Gender inequalities in the context of agricultural and rural development and food security and nutrition

#### Gender roles and dynamics

Legally, women and men have equal rights as enshrined in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan. In rural areas where the traditions pertaining to gender roles are less exposed to foreign influence, the practice and perception that household chores are strictly for women is still prevalent.

It can be challenging to determine a strict division of labour based on gender in agriculture as certain tasks may be taken up by gender, and other tasks may be performed by both men and women. It is a common practice in the rural areas where men involve themselves in labour-intensive works while women attend to menial work. Historically by division of labour, women were expected to stay back at home catering to the well-being of family, and thus to this day the term “Nangi-aum” is used to refer to the caregiver (usually a mother) of the house. Conversely, men were expected to go outside of their villages to trade with neighbouring villages that involved negotiation and decision-making. These traditions and practices may

be attributing to implicit gender biases towards women in the rural areas.

Despite limited available data on gender-specific work in rural settings, there are commonalities across the western and eastern parts of the country where matrilineal communities are predominant. In these regions, tasks such as collection of drinking water, cooking and collecting firewood, providing care, planting and harvesting, weaving, managing manure, and selling agricultural products in nearby informal markets are often taken up by women. Men usually work on ploughing, irrigation, construction, logging, decision-making, attending meetings, and other economically-oriented activities.

In the southern part of the country, where the culture has influence of the Hindu religion and neighbouring countries’ traditions, there could be wider gender inequalities as can be found in any patriarchal communities. A study carried out by UNDP on enhancing sustainability and climate resilience of forests, agricultural landscapes and community livelihoods in Bhutan (2016) reveals that the division of tasks between men and women also vary by crops. Commercial crops such as cardamom and potatoes are managed by men, while fruits and vegetables cultivated on small-scale are produced and marketed by women. Table 12 presents the summary of activities by gender.

#### Food security and nutrition

Food security and nutrition are areas of concern for Bhutan with heavy reliance on the importation of food. Prior to COVID-19, the country’s import for agriculture and livestock products in 2018 was BTN 3.83 billion and BTN 1.94 billion respectively. In the same year, the agricultural sector’s contribution to the national GDP was recorded at 15.89 percent. The country was 46.7 percent self-sufficient in rice, 86 percent in maize and vegetables (average production of 2015 to 2017) (GNHC, 2019). The country is self-sufficient in fruits as there is low internal consumption and 80 percent of what is produced is exported.

However, stockpiling efforts in response to the COVID-19 situation resulted in an increase of import for edible essential items such as rice, edible oil and dairy products by 22.4 percent, 12.3 percent and 10.01 percent respectively as compared to the previous year (GNHC, 2021). The country’s dependency

Table 12: Participation in different activities by gender

Activity	Participation rate in different activities		
	Male (percent)	Female (percent)	Both sexes* (percent)
Cooking	67.51	94.41	83.32
Cleaning the house	42.87	62.42	54.36
Collecting water	12.25	12.63	12.47
Water filtration	24.55	31.77	28.79
Bathing/personal hygiene	78.59	73.90	75.84
Bathing children	17.61	41.63	31.72
Working outside home (office, labour, etc.)	73.50	74.43	74.05
Shopping	91.99	85.34	88.09
Selling produce	48.68	44.45	46.19
Farming (including rice cultivation, orchard)	58.34	52.15	54.71
Managing a kitchen-garden	66.41	71.13	69.18
Tending livestock	56.67	62.37	60.02
Collecting firewood	53.08	54.65	54.00
Collecting medicinal plants	4.58	3.92	4.19
Sleeping time	100.00	100.00	100.00
Meditation/prayer time	38.61	43.20	41.31
Leisure time	85.31	85.00	85.13
Community events	68.16	58.57	62.53
Participation in projects	47.38	28.34	36.19
Other	2.79	1.51	2.04

\* Both sexes are averages of all the respondents

Source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2016. Supporting Climate Resilience and Transformational Change in the Agriculture Sector in Bhutan. Thimphu, UNDP Bhutan.

on imports to ensure food sufficiency still remains high despite numerous interventions put in place to achieve food self-sufficiency.

The recent BLSS 2017 revealed that purchased food items, including both domestically produced and imported products, account for at least 80 percent

of the total consumption expenditure of households. But the proportion purchased is lower for vegetables (68.2 percent), dairy products (73.9 percent), rice (68.9 percent), and alcoholic beverages (70.3 percent). In comparison of consumption expenditure between rural and urban households, the survey also reported the proportion of food items traded in the market is

**Table 13: Distribution of food consumption expenditure (BTN)**

Area/Sex of Household Head		Monthly household food consumption expenditure		Monthly per capita household food consumption expenditure	
		Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Urban	Male	18 364	15 134	4 503	3 495
	Female	18 984	15 228	5 104	3 953
	Total	18 544	15 142	4 667	3 642
Rural	Male	11 915	9 783	2 731	2 169
	Female	13 696	11 246	3 139	2 500
	Total	12 606	10 356	2 889	2 298
Total	Male	14 430	11 504	3 394	2 583
	Female	15 244	12 168	3 651	2 771
	Total	14 718	11 783	3 484	2 651

Source: National Statistics Bureau (NSB). 2017a. Bhutan Living Standards Survey Report 2017. Thimphu, National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan.

greater in the urban areas than in the rural areas. The same survey also noted that food insufficiency was experienced by 4 percent of households (about one in 25 households) in rural areas. FGD also noted that the food insufficiency is experienced by vulnerable groups such as households headed by single women and impoverished families.

Table 13 presents the distribution of food consumption expenditure at the national level. The data shown also highlights food consumption distribution in urban and rural areas. From the table, it is also noted that female-headed households tend to spend more on food than male-headed households, especially in rural areas.

There is no data available for overall food sufficiency between men and women in Bhutan. As the management of food usually lies with the head of the household, a comparison usually is made between FHH (female-headed household) and MHH (male-headed household). In Bhutan, the FHH is around 35 percent, out of which 39 percent is in rural and 29 percent is in the urban region (Dzed et al., n.d.). In comparison, the MHH seems to be slightly better

than FHH in terms of food sufficiency. The difference could be explained in the varying earning opportunities between FHH and MHH. Earning opportunities are less for women as they are confined to specific tasks, whereas men seem to make income from other non-agricultural sources such as construction labour, carpentry and others. In Bhutan, the triple burden of malnutrition with co-existence of under-nutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and over-nutrition is one challenge faced by the health sector in Bhutan. Micronutrient deficiency still remains a challenge despite the gradual decline of the double burden of malnutrition owing to the economic growth, improvement in maternal education, and implementation of health and nutrition programmes. 34.9 percent of women in reproductive age (15 to 49 years) were found to be anaemic (MoH, 2016), and it was found to be more prevalent among urban women at 35.9 percent as compared to their counterparts in the rural areas at 33.8 percent.

Further, the Ministry of Health also estimated anaemia prevalence using data from Bhutan's National Nutrition Survey 2015. It was observed that anaemia affected 42 percent, 29 percent, 36 percent, and 28 percent



of children, adolescent girls, and non-pregnant and pregnant women, respectively. Vitamin-A deficiency is around 17 percent in women. In its response to address the prevalence of anaemia and the general health improvement of women and children, the ministry has also drafted the Accelerating Mother and Child Health Policy. However, COVID-19 has compelled the ministry to shift its priorities to the initiatives surrounding COVID-19 resulting in deferment of the policy implementation.

The prevalence of hidden hunger or malnutrition is quite high; 21.2 percent of children below the age of 5 years are stunted and 9 percent underweight. Stunting is high in poor and rural households, concentrated in the eastern part of the country. Further, about 44 percent of children (below 5 years and 35 percent of non-pregnant women between 15 to 49 years) are suffering from iron deficient anaemia. Similarly, 22 percent of pre-school children and 17 percent pregnant women are vitamin A deficient (GNHC, 2021).

Nevertheless, the government has institutionalized the “National Nutrition Taskforce” since July 2021 with members from various agencies such as MoAF, MoE, MoEA, FAO, DRC, MoH and other technical expert agencies. The NNTF provides a platform to collaborate on nutrition-related concerns and issues. MoH also identifies food diversification and fortifications to improve nutrition in Bhutan as reported in the interview conducted with the Department of Public Health as part of the assessment.

### **Gender in agricultural and rural employment**

Most Bhutanese depend on agriculture for their livelihood. The latest survey conducted on the labour force revealed that the “agriculture, forestry and fishery worker” occupational group provided the highest employment with 48.7 percent (NSB, 2021b). In terms of residence, most reside in rural parts of the country (65.9 percent) with the female working-age population at 51.1 percent in the rural area and men at 48.9 percent. On the outset, it would be assumed that both men and women share equality given its almost comparably equal ratio of working-age population. The figure, however, does not necessarily indicate that rural women enjoy equal footing as men.

In fact, women spend more time on unpaid tasks such as household chores, collecting firewood, caring for elderly family members and children, and other menial jobs considered too trivial for men. Most money-making jobs are usually taken up by men, rendering women economically dependent on their partners. Financial independence of women is one area that would, therefore, warrant further studies to examine the correlation between being financially independent and its influence on other dynamics of women’s equality. According to NCWC (2019b), women in Bhutan perform 71 percent of unpaid household and care work. On average, men spent 1 hour 25 minutes (or 85 minutes) more on paid work compared to women; by contrast, women spent around 2 hours 11 minutes (or 131 minutes) more on unpaid work, which includes both care and household work.

The prevalence of traditional beliefs and perceptions of women being better caregivers restricts them from exploring better opportunities, while men can afford to migrate seeking better employment.

Bhutan is also promoting commercial farming to meet self-sufficient food, keeping it aligned to the SDG on Zero Hunger. However, agricultural practices are labour-intensive and the increase in the population and continuous land fragmentation threatens the small holder farmers and the agricultural sector in producing enough food, especially when the land available for cultivation is minimal. As per the 2017 BLSS, the average farm size in Bhutan is 0.87 hectares (2.16 acres), which is further fragmented into smaller pieces of land, which is a limiting factor in large scale production. Moreover, women have lower access to and limited control of productive resources such as agricultural machinery, as well as training and extension services when compared to men. Consequently, fewer women are likely to get into commercial farming as compared to men.

According to the BLFS 2021, men working as contributing family members were 29 142, while the statistics were 54 607 for women in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. As contributing family workers are those working without payment, while workers

in agriculture are male-dominated (38 691 males vs. 33 918 females), this suggests that males are more inclined towards income earning jobs, while females take up informal jobs that provide less wages or salary. In terms of regular and casual paid jobs in agriculture, they are male dominated with 690 and 529 compared to females, with 552 and 70 respectively.

The NDC report (NCWC, 2020) revealed that women also actively participate in agriculture-related cottage and small industries (CSIs), including agri-businesses and the marketplace. The contributing family worker is defined as a household member who is engaged in a family business or farming activity without any payment. The proportion among females (35.4 percent) is higher than males (17.4 percent) in contributing as family workers in agriculture. The difference is more visible in rural (36.4 percent) than in urban (2.6 percent) areas.

### Gender and land and water for agriculture

Bhutan's agricultural lands are degrading with adverse effects of climate change. Bhutan's policy to maintain forest coverage of 60 percent at all times has helped to remain carbon-sinking, but the country is susceptible to other natural disasters such as soil erosion owing to its land slope, glacial outbursts, floods, and other socially-induced factors, such as land fragmentation, fallow land with shortages of human resources due to rural-urban migration. These factors contribute to reduction in arable land.

The Inheritance Act-1980 and the Land Act of Bhutan-2007 provisions equal legal rights over land to both men and women. Matrilineal heritage as practiced in most parts of the country – comparatively more predominant in rural regions – favours women in inheritance of land and other family properties. In Bhutan, 45.98 percent of the land is owned by women while men's proportion is 54.02 percent (Verma and Ura, 2021). On the superficial surface, it might appear such practices favour women over men in inheritance of land. However, the caveat lies in examining the opportunity cost associated with such practices. In reciprocation to the inheritance, women are also expected to look after the welfare of her family members, especially aging parents. Consequently, women miss out on opportunities because of their confinement to their place of inheritance and also

on socioeconomic choices sacrificed to take care of their parents and family members. Moreover, land is considered family property wherein decision-making power over land is jointly taken by both men and women. It is only when males are not present that females become the sole decision-maker.

As discussed in the earlier sections, Bhutan is in a paradoxical state where commercialization of agriculture integrated with organic agriculture is put forth as one of the top featuring agendas in the development plans and policy of MoAF, while land degradation is a common sight of concern for policymakers, farmers, potential investors, and stakeholders alike. In addition, the labour shortage owing to out-migration further aggravates the challenge to meet the goals for agriculture including food sufficiency and promotion of rural enterprises. At the centre of it lies the slightly higher populace of women in comparison to men that are most likely to become integral parts of the solution to address the issues and challenges. Yet, there are gaps in empowering and equipping female farmers to harness the full potential by not confining them to household unpaid jobs, menial tasks, and caregiving tasks. In order to integrate early on into the solution taking into account the feminization of agriculture, it may be recommended to carry out research on women-friendly methodology and consider women as an equivalent contributor while planning on agricultural development.

Bhutan is rich in water resources with a record of 94 500 m<sup>3</sup>/capita/annum, making it one of the highest per capita water resource availabilities in the world. However, poor water resource management allows the country to use only 1 percent of its total generated annual freshwater (NEC, 2016). In addition, the geographical terrains and locations of farmlands in the valleys render the river water quite challenging for these agricultural purposes. Water as recognized by the Bhutan Water Vision and Bhutan Water Policy, is the most important natural, economic and life-sustaining resource that must be protected and managed properly, not only to adequately meet today's need, but also be able to address future demand. Moreover, the Watershed Management Division under the Department of Forest and Park Services (DoFPS) has also come up with a Roadmap

Table 14: Loan holdings by sector

Sector of loan	Amount of loan (in million BTN)	Percent of holding loan
Agriculture/Animal husbandry	6 392.00	3.83
Production/Manufacturing	24 488.00	14.67
Tourism related	24 980.00	14.96
Contract (construction based)	6 607.00	3.96
Others service	10 785.00	6.46
Trade/Commerce	20 257.00	12.13
Loan to financial institutions	284.00	0.17
Home loans	9 045.00	5.42
Commercial housing loans	34 529.00	20.68
Commercial transport	5 313.00	3.18
Non-commercial transport	1 165.00	0.70
Personal loan	14 677.00	8.79
Staff loan	1 530.00	0.92
Education loan	4 098.00	2.45
Loan against fixed deposit	1 308.00	0.78
Loans to government	27.00	0.02
Other	1 497.00	0.90
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>166 982.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>

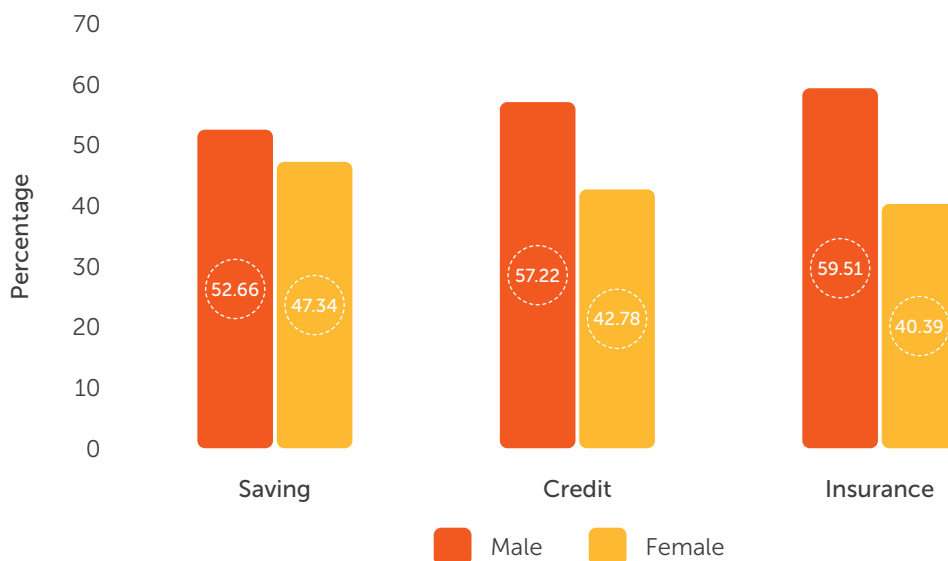
Source: Royal Monetary Authority (RMA). 2021. State of the Financial Inclusion 2020. Thimphu, Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan.

for Watershed Management in Bhutan 2011 (Tshering, 2011) that intends to address the management of water resources.

The policy promotes equal participation of men and women in water resource management to enable equal access to water resources. By virtue of women's additional role as domestic caregivers, women's dependence and need for water resources appear to be more than for men.

There are a diverse group of stakeholders and sectors dependant on water in Bhutan. However, coordination and collaboration amongst the stakeholders leads to mismanagement of water resources. In addressing the identified lapse, FAO supported development of the National Integrated Water Resources Management Plan (2016) that will enable bringing all sectors under one umbrella to synergize their efforts. This plan also promotes equitable access taking into consideration gender issues. In Bhutan, water was seldom a resource

Figure 11: Ownership of financial products and services by sex



Source: Royal Monetary Authority (RMA). 2021. State of the Financial Inclusion 2020. Thimphu, Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan.

for contention in rural areas, where it existed in abundance. Thus, there was no gender disparity as such in access to water. However, as water emerges as a 21<sup>st</sup> century problem affecting all countries across the globe, the IWRMP and similar plans and programmes are one step forward towards incorporating gender perspective in water resources.

### Rural finance

There are two forms of rural finances – informal and formal. In rural areas, informal credits are usually for the short-term, and borrowers arrange to repay either in cash or in kind. Informal arrangements are popular in situations where the tenure is short and outweighs the hassle of formal bank procedures.

A case study carried out in Bikhar village under Trashigang Dzongkhag (Yoezer, 2015) to examine the determinants of access to credit by women from both formal and informal borrowings pointed out that mortgage requirements significantly affect access to credit. The gender of the head of the household also determines Bikhar women's credit accessibility from the local moneylender. Moneylenders seem to prefer men over women in lending money, as men make timely repayment of loans. In addition, men are found to have more sources of income to make loan repayments.

When it comes to formal finances, the financial institutions in Bhutan offer non-preferential lending and equal savings interest rates irrespective of gender while requiring mandatory collaterals. In addition, the government also targets financial inclusions through priority sector lending introduced in December, 2017, with the main objective to help the CSI sectors advance into larger enterprises. These efforts are expected to result in a reduction of imports by replacing them with domestic production, and gradually evolved into a strong driver for Bhutan's economic transformation. In the same year of its launch, the program supported 533 projects out of 1 577 proposals received (RMA, 2021).

Despite highest priority accorded to the agricultural sector and the lending interest at 8 percent, the scheme could not attract rural farmers to avail the facility with the total credit for the agricultural sector standing at 3.83 percent. The detail of the sector-wise loan and its percentage holding is presented in Table 14. These loans are provided by the Financial Institutions – BOBL, BNB, BDBL, DPNB, MBPL, T-Bank – and two CSOs – BAOWE and RENEW.

Limited access to financial support and assistance is one major constraint that impedes women's empowerment and development in Bhutan despite non-discriminatory procedures adopted by financial

Table 15: Details of saving and credit initiatives provided to women

Name of the financial institution or civil society organization	Details of the financial scheme	Beneficiaries
Bank of Bhutan Ltd.	'Ladies Plus' loan offered to women in all spheres for a period of three years with an annual interest rate of 8.5 percent in the first year followed by 9.5 percent in the second year and 10 percent in the third year	Benefited more than 1 000 women, out of which 51 percent comprised of housewives
BCCI in collaboration with BDBL	Financial support to the micro enterprises known as 'micro and small enterprises (MSEs) development loan scheme'	Benefited over 3 187 micro and small enterprises with 90 percent of the beneficiaries being women (as of August 2014)
RENEW	Micro-finance and group saving/lending scheme with trainings on financial literacy	4 000 women (as of 2014)
BAOWE	RORUM (meaning support/help in English) credit cooperatives, providing opportunity for access to finance (savings and credit facilities) to its members	38 members, of which almost 90 percent are women
TARAYANA Foundation	Pilot micro-credit programme to enable community members to establish small enterprises	A total of 127 individuals and 22 groups, of which 70 percent beneficiaries are women (as of December 2013)
Royal Government of Bhutan (Ministry of Finance)	Employment generation programmes – Credit Guarantee Scheme (CGS) and Income Generation StartUp Support Programme (IGSP) – supporting their access to credit	86 females against 100 males have availed such services
Royal Government of Bhutan (Ministry of Finance) with three state owned banks	National Credit Guarantee Scheme (NCGS), launched in 2020 as a counter-cyclical policy measure aimed at countering the COVID-19 induced economic disruptions in the country	As of May 2021, approved loans amounting to Nu. 274.5 million for 29 projects from production and manufacturing, 30 from the agriculture sector, and 22 from the service sector from 15 Districts. (No data on gender-disaggregated data)

Source: Choedey, K. D. 2021. Nu. 274.5 mn approved loans under the National Credit Guarantee Scheme. Retrieved March 24, 2022. <https://thebhutanese.bt/nu-274-5-mn-approved-loans-under-the-national-credit-guarantee-scheme/>.

institutions. One explanation for the low number of women loan borrowers lies in the FI system of using the value of land as a screening device for collateral to reduce risky borrowers and also reduce the risk of defaults. First, the commercial value of lands in rural areas are far below the rates of the same size of the land in urban locations, which reduces the borrowing capacity of rural landowners, resulting in less capital for investment for farmers. Second, despite rural women owning land, the decision is also influenced by their husbands, which does not provide women with

full decision-making authority in availing loans. Third, the decision to take loans comes with a certain level of financial education and awareness, which appears to be limited amongst rural women. A gender difference observed in account ownership of financial products and services is presented in Figure 11.

In addition to the financial schemes – savings and credit – provided by the formal banking and financial institutes, private companies and NGOs also target rural agricultural sectors. In Bhutan, public sector

institutes such as BDBL manage and operate microfinancing. BDBL (erstwhile BDFC), in coordination with NWAB, previously offered microfinancing to rural women on a group loan scheme, which could be Bhutan's first ever women-targeted credits.

BDBL with support from ADB is implementing a "Rural Finance Development" project of five years duration (2019 to 2024). It is envisaged to transform the operation of BDBL's function with incorporating gender mainstreaming in disbursement of loans and other credit schemes. One component is to train the employees of the bank on gender mainstreaming.

World Food Programme (WFP), in addition to their assistance extended to prevent and manage malnutrition in Bhutan, also works closely with the MoAF to increase production of nutritious crops and explores avenues to assist farmers to establish market linkages. Prior to execution of any projects by WFP and other international development partners, the gender equality assessment is carried out to streamline the programmes for inclusion of gender perspectives. Table 15 depicts the summary of the various loans and financial support provided to women.

### Gender in crops, livestock and forestry

Significant imports of food and its effect on Bhutan food security has warranted the government to prioritize the agricultural sector as the main driver of economic growth in the primary sector. There is drastic reduction in the overall contribution of agriculture to GDP from 45.1 percent in 1981 to 15.82 percent in 2020. Crop production contributed 8.93 percent of GDP in 2020, livestock management 4.55 percent, and forestry 2.33 percent (NSB, 2021c).

Livestock is one of the key components identified to support the goals of Food and Nutrition Security for Bhutan, as reflected in the Department of Livestock's Annual Performance Agreement (APA) with the objective "to enhance Food Self-Sufficiency and Nutrition Security". The APA further stipulates the target of meeting meat and dairy production of 2MT each, and 2 million eggs. Simultaneously, numerous programmes are introduced to improve the production capacity of livestock through research and development centres (DoL, 2019), including animal stock improvement programmes.

Livestock in the lowlands are used for complementary sources of income to the mainstay income from crop production. The majority of the highlanders are dependent on livestock for their livelihoods. Until recently, the highlanders derived meat, animal of labour and dairy products to support them. The government has allowed the highland dwellers to forage cordyceps *sinensis* (locally known as **yartsa-guenbup**) to address the hardship of their living in extreme weather conditions and transhumance practices. The highlanders of eastern Bhutan have polyandry marriage, suggesting gender equality in the community would exist to certain level. However, no studies have been conducted so far to establish the prevalence of gender inequality.

There are many challenges faced by the livestock farmers, such as predation, lack of adequate pasture, and shortage of labour (Tshering and Thinley, 2017). Given the labour shortage affecting the livestock farmers, the division of labour is not segregated gender-wise in the livestock subsector. Generally, both men and women are equally involved in rearing livestock animals. For example, women are involved in processing dairy products while men attend to gathering fodder. The government also provides support to livestock farmers such as piggery, poultry, fishery and goat enterprise, as observed in the data shared by DoL for KII. The same data also shows that only 14 of the beneficiaries are female farmers from the total 111 beneficiaries of the government-supported programmes.

Forests have always been an object of reverence since time immemorial for the Bhutanese as remnants of the **Bon-Choe** religion. It is, in fact, ingrained in Bhutanese culture to pay respect by not exploiting the forests, and it could have contributed to the pristine environment for which Bhutan is known for to the rest of the world. Equally, the importance of forest conservation was also a shared common goal. Foraging for wild vegetables and firewood used for cooking is gradually being replaced with biogas, and timber use is on the rise to meet the demand for construction of houses. Bhutan pledged to maintain its forest coverage of 60 percent coverage at all times. Forests can also provide a source of income for local communities through community-managed forests. There seems to be no relationship between the gender and the membership of community forests. Instead, it depends largely on personal interests of the individual members (Buffum, Lawrence and Tempel, 2010).

Most rural households depend on crop and livestock production, as well as forest products for their livelihoods. Agriculture is practiced on difficult terrain, with more than 30 percent of cultivated land located on slopes of more than 50 degrees (Wangmo, 2020). Forests in Bhutan are used for the collection of timber, grazing and leaf litter collection being one of the key benefits for farming communities. With focus on crops and commercial value, the output value of crops grew at 71 percent between 2012 and 2016. However, the contribution of livestock and forestry declined significantly.

The Gender Diagnostic study (NCWC, 2020) revealed that men are more interested in economically inclined activities such as planting and marketing bamboo for commercial purpose, stone quarrying, and venturing into furniture production, while women engage themselves in collecting medicinal plants, ferns, wild asparagus, and weaving. The differing ideas and interests appear to suggest the differentiated knowledge and skills in Bhutanese women and men.

The study has shown that, on average, women's voices are more recognized in decisions regarding crop production than males', while males' voices are stronger in decisions regarding animal production. As for the benefits accrued from forestry and agriculture, a study carried out by UNDP for its project "Enhancing sustainability and climate resilience of forest and agricultural landscape and community livelihoods in Bhutan 2016" found out they are equally shared between men and women.

### **Gender and rural advisory services**

The agricultural extension services in Bhutan date back to the very first implementation of the five-year plan in 1961 and had a top-down approach, wherein the central government managed the entire processes to interface with rural farmers (Duong, n.d.). The decentralization of extension services started during the fifth FYP (1981 to 1986), with the appointment of dzongkhag agricultural officers and extension agents that made extension services more accessible to farming communities. Today, the services are segregated into two functions – national and regional, and dzongkhag and gewogs. Technical expertise lies with the national and regional agencies, and thus provides technical advisory to the dzongkhag and gewog level.

The dzongkhag and gewog extension offices interface with the farmers as the change agent in the whole chain of service delivery. However, there still appears to be a gap in the clear distinctive line of roles and responsibilities of extension service delivery between the national/regional and dzongkhag/gewog extension agencies. In addition, the extent of gender-responsive service delivery incorporated by the extension agencies is guided by their own moral principles, and no specific requirements are spelt out as observed from the KIIs. The services offered include advisory services, input supply, promotional programmes, project-based services, agricultural infrastructure development, and capacity building of farmers (Tobgay, n.d.).

The Agriculture Extension Strategy 2019 to 2028 formulated with the vision of a "dynamic, well-structured, coordinated and effective agricultural extension system for an inclusive economically viable and sustainable agriculture" places importance on gender mainstreaming in achieving its objectives. While the coverage and presence of the extension centres network demonstrates a strong commitment to enhance the accessibility of services, the sparse geographical area of Bhutan that has villages in pockets of far-flung valleys from the extension centres make it challenging for the farmers to avail the extension services. It becomes more difficult for women farmers to avail these services due to traveling distances and already limited mobility.

The study of extension services revealed that female farmers are more likely to consult with female extension officers on matters related to agricultural techniques. However, the low numbers of female extension officers, with a ratio of 2:9 (Nilsson and Chopel, 2022), further hinders women farmers seeking services from the extension centres. The pattern is similar at the positions of regulatory, advisory, and teaching capacities, making women underrepresented in the decision-making and informational feedback loop that could bring the local needs and the gender-suitability of programmes to the agenda board (ADB, 2014). The male gender preference for field offices is mainly because of the longer working hours and walking distances of days to reach the fields from the offices, as noted during the KII.

**Table 16: Buckwheat distributors by dzongkhag and sex**

Gender	Count and percent	Dzongkhag				Total
		Bumthang	Trongsa	S/jongkhar	Thimphu	
Male	Count	3	0	1	2	6
	Percent of total	10.3	0.0	3.4	6.9	20.7
Female	Count	10	1	4	8	23
	Percent of total	34.5	3.4	13.8	27.6	79.3
Total	Count	13	1	5	10	29
	Percent of total	44.8	3.4	17.2	34.5	100.0

Source: Department of Agriculture and Marketing Cooperatives (DAMC). 2019. Report on the Evaluation of Farmers Groups and Cooperatives. Thimphu, Department of Agricultural Marketing and Cooperatives, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Royal Government of Bhutan.

Considering all of these issues, the government highlighted increasing the female-male ratio of extension workers to 2:5 and the attendance of women in training and capacity development programmes organized by the extension centres in the National Plan of Action for Gender, 2008 to 2013. Further, the Agricultural Extension Strategy 2019 to 2028 also targets all of the 205 gewogs to have at least one extension centre.

#### **Agrifood systems, infrastructure, markets and agro-food trade**

The need to improve the agrifood systems for Bhutan has remained a challenge in spite of various efforts implemented at multiple levels. Bhutan's limited arable land of only about 3 percent, labour shortages due to declining rural populations coupled with rural-urban migration, weak market linkages, less adoption of technology, access to credit, effects of climate change, and the low literacy and education of farmers are some of the major barriers to the food system of Bhutan. In addressing these issues, it is critical to understand the varying geographical terrain and landscape of Bhutan to strategically leverage interventions to the varying needs. For example, the high-north region where farmers predominantly rely on livestock could benefit in strategizing a yak value chain. On the contrary, using these interventions would not be much help to the farmers of the southern part of the country where production of commercial crops such as mandarin, cardamom and ginger are the main sources of income (FAO, EU and Cirad, 2022).

It appears that the contribution of women in the overall agrifood system is overlooked when the four value chains (Potato VC, Apple VC, Honey VC and Buckwheat VC) initiated by DAMC are examined. It is only the buckwheat value chain plan that stresses involvement of women's participation in the value chain. As seen from Table 16, 20.7 percent buckwheat distributors were males compared to 79.3 percent female distributors.

Excluding women from the value chain implementation would result in huge gaps in meeting the goal of a better agrifood system, where 86 percent of rural women are employed in agriculture in Bhutan. The government also should facilitate and support engagement of development partners with dedicated gender expertise in the relevant field. For instance, the support of WFP on the Government's Economic Contingency Plan helped women farmers overcome gender-based barriers to agricultural productivity (Shenoy, 2021).

Bhutan has seen significant progress in rural infrastructure development in the last few years. The government investment in infrastructure accounts for major budget allocation. As of April 2017, the gewog connectivity road stretches a significant distance of 7 052 kilometres (including farm roads) of the total road network of 12 204 kilometres (Table 17). The Public Health Center (formerly called Basic Health Unit) has been established in almost all gewogs. Similarly, electricity is provided in almost all gewogs powered by hydro plants.



Table 17: Road network as of April 2017

Sl. No.	Road type	Length (km)
1	Primary national highway	1 818.53
2	Secondary national highway	871.53
3	Dzongkhag roads	618.87
4	GC roads	2 002.42
5	Urban roads	436.2
6	Farm roads	5 049.65
7	Access roads	1 406.24
<b>Total</b>		<b>12 204.05</b>

Source: Department of Roads (DOR). 2017. Road Classification System in Bhutan. Thimphu, Department of Roads, Ministry of Works and Human Settlement, Royal Government of Bhutan.

In some parts of the country, other sources of environmentally friendly electricity such as wind and solar are also being piloted to assess the feasibility of it. Telecommunication services have also established its presence across the country, with a mobile subscriber base of 778 008 (MoIC, 2022). The government also recognizes the potential of ICT in bridging the gaps between rural and urban, and harnesses the cross-sectoral benefits of ICT in socioeconomic development of the country. There are numerous efforts put in place to bridge the digital divide. Community centres (CC) are present in almost all gewogs serving as a single window for delivery of ICT services. For underserved places where business viability hinders the penetration of mobile services, the universal service fund (USF) is subsidized to connect places.

The development of rural infrastructure has helped in uplifting the lives of rural people. Rural people are now better connected and well-informed, empowering them to proactively participate in decision-making processes. However, there still remains an underserved segment of rural society, especially women. Low ICT literacy rates may impede them to take full advantage of ICT technologies. The survey conducted by MoIC revealed that about 66 percent of rural people feel that they do not have the competency to and 30 percent in urban areas feel that they do not have the competency to “conduct transactions on the Internet” Internet” (MoIC, 2021).

Lack of market access for agriculture is a perennial problem in Bhutan. In order to encourage farmers, the government introduced a buyback scheme through FCBL. The scheme, however, often resulted in heavy losses to the government because of limited market access. The other factor attributing to the losses is a lack of adequate cold storage that could extend the lives of products. Table 18 depicts the market infrastructure spread across the country.

The government has recently replaced the buyback scheme with incentives to reduce compensation losses for the government. The new scheme incentivizes farmers to produce renewable natural resource (RNR) commodities that contribute towards achieving national food security. In addition, the FGs and COOPs led by women are also given priority in linking to school linking and feeding programmes.

The DAMC operates AMIS (Agricultural Market Information System) – an online platform that provides essential information on commodity prices, which are collected weekly on average in 26 markets across the country (MoAF, 2022). The system also hosts commodity prices of 4 auction markets, where information is collected daily by the FCBL. However, information might favour only those literate segments of farmers and cooperatives. As noted in the earlier section, the digitally illiterate portion of rural farmers would not be able to make use of the information.

**Table 18: Market infrastructure across country**

Market infrastructure	Quantity (number)
Agro-processing units	23
Cooperative shop	4
Cold stores	10
Collection centres	76
Farm shops	126
Farmers group or cooperative sales outlets	9
Flour mills	2
Large market facilities	26
Milk processing units	42
Naturally ventilated store	1
Oil expellers	4
Pack houses	16
Processing units	6
Rice mill	1
Roadside market facilities	108
Sales outlets	31
Warehouses	6
Zone markets	12

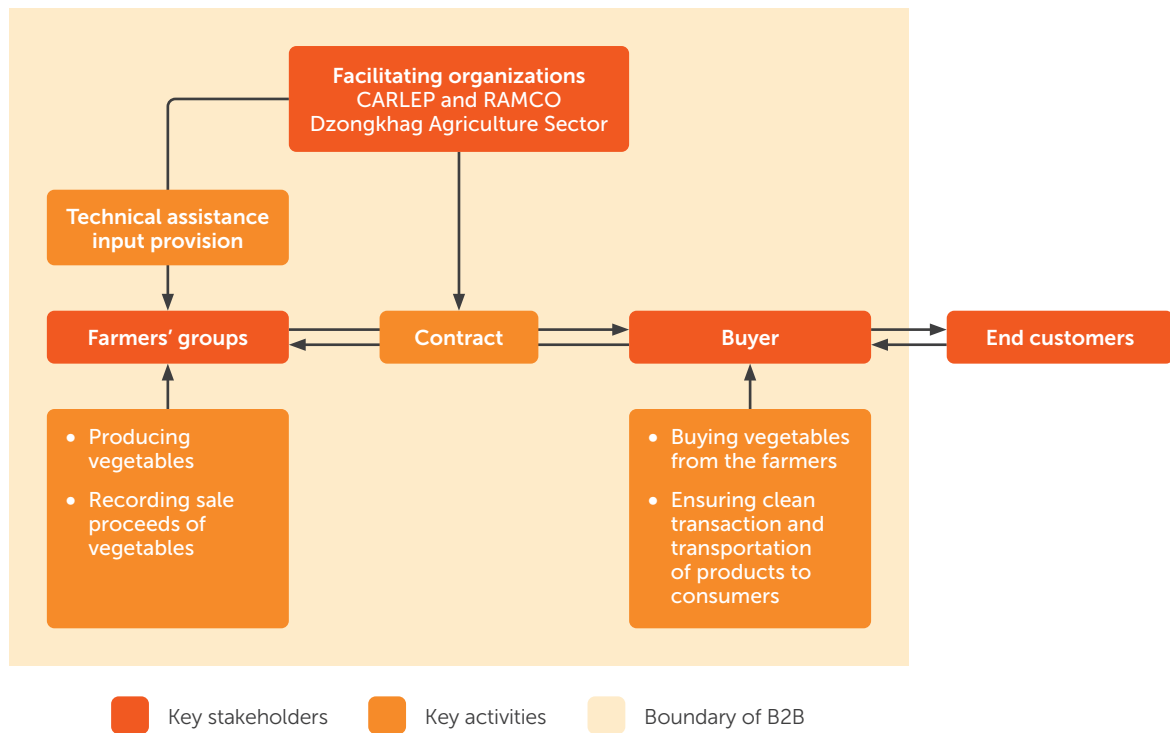
Source: Department of Agriculture and Marketing Cooperatives (DAMC), 2022b. Market Infrastructure Inventory.  
<https://www.damc.gov.bt/market-infrastructure-inventory/>

This would be more prevalent where the digital literacy rate is slightly lower in rural females. Instead, the initiative could be further augmented by disseminating crucial information via other media platforms such as TV and radio. This would also contribute to addressing the inadequate access to domestic markets.

A case study carried out in Balam Gewog under Monggar Dzongkhag recommends adjustment of collection schedule, definition of quality and quantity in the contract, improvement of support services, and active monitoring of the contract. The study further noted certain shortcomings of the business-to-business (B2B) marketing model, including through cooperatives and farmers'

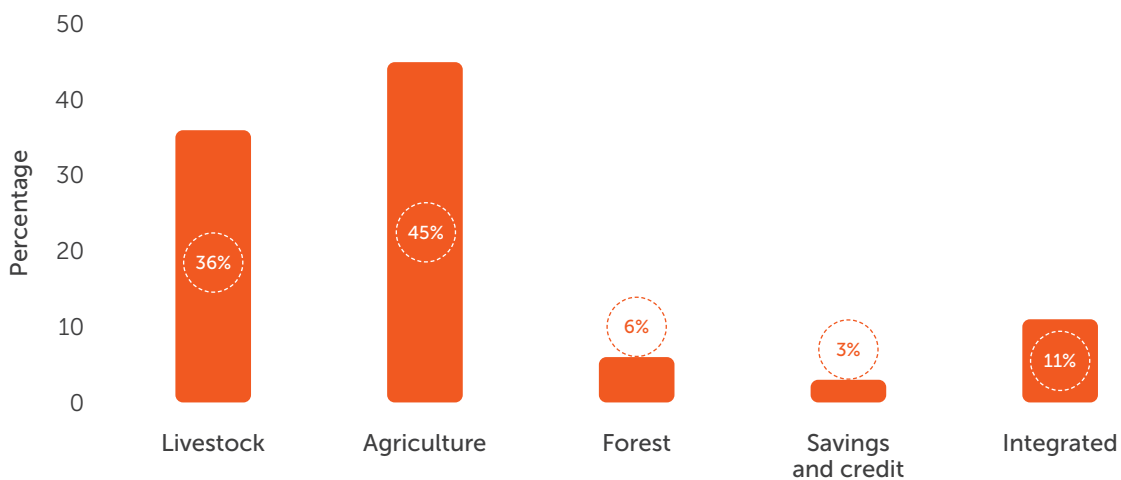
organizations, adopted as shown in Figure 12. Another shortcoming included mismatch between vegetable production and collection schedules, leading to late delivery of the vegetable produce, and thereby causing inability to fetch the deserved prices. Mutually agreed standards of quality and quantity were also not included in the contract signed between the farmers' groups and the buyer that created issues in the mismatch of their respective expectations. Input support in the form of seeds, fertilizers, and water pipes were found inadequate resulting in low production. Lack of monitoring by the facilitating organizations to ensure amicable contract execution was limited, and thus missed opportunities to help the FG and the buyer to improve on the contract relationship.

Figure 12: B2B model adopted in Balam Gewog



Source: Pema, K., Dendup, T., and Chhetri, R. 2020. Business to Business Marketing in Bhutan, A case study from Balam Gewog under Mongar Dzongkhag. Bhutan Journal of Natural Resources and Development.

Figure 13: Percentage of farmers' groups and COOPs by sector



Source: Department of Agriculture and Marketing Cooperatives (DAMC). 2019. Report on the Evaluation of Farmers Groups and Cooperatives. Thimphu, Department of Agricultural Marketing and Cooperatives, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Royal Government of Bhutan.

Since most of the vegetable FGs are operated by women, the challenges are more prone to women-managed enterprises. Therefore, revision and adoption of new models might also help to address the problems associated with the niche vegetable market.

The DAMC also facilitates development of cooperatives (COOPs) and farmers' groups (FGs) to enable individual

smallholders to enhance their production capacity collectively in response to the market. As of June 2019, there were 509 registered FGs and 71 registered COOPs (details in Figure 13). Assessments carried out on the evaluation of FGs and COOPs noted varying size with the largest membership of 170 and the average number of members of 22. Female membership was 49 percent of the total of 2 535 members (MoAF, 2019).

**Table 19: Women in civil service by position level**

Position level <sup>5</sup>	2008 (percent)	2019 (percent)
Ex1-Ex3	5.3	10.2
Es1-Es3	12.5	19.1
P1-P5	30.3	37.6
S1-S5	31.7	40.4

Source: Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC). 2019. Civil Service Statistics 2019. Retrieved April 20, 2023. <https://www.rcsc.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Civil-Service-Statistics-2019.pdf>

The government also ensures equal participation of women in the FGs and COOPs by providing priority to women led FGs and COOPs as reported during the KII with DAMC. The overall membership in the 14 FGs and 6 COOPs from all twenty dzongkhags identified for the assessment also indicate that there are more female farmers registered with 415 compared to 364 males. However, the gender disparity is noted in leadership roles, where only 5 females were found leading the FGs/COOPs against 15 male chairpersons. On further discussion, it was revealed that most women are reluctant to take up the lead role despite providing equal platforms and opportunities. Some women reported that their female colleagues resign from the FGs and COOPs to focus on their primary role as caregivers.

CSI (cottage and small industry) markets are also gaining popularity as the largest dedicated platform for products made and grown in Bhutan. A joint collaboration between Drukcell and the Department of Cottage and Small Sector Industry, it is a platform with potential to tap into the agrifood value chain.

#### **Women's representation in rural organizations and their decision-making**

The overall gender composition in the Civil Service is not an issue, as 42.10 percent of the civil servants are female per the Civil Service Statistics 2020. However, up the ladder in the hierarchical position of the civil service system, women at executive and specialist positions stood at 14 percent in 2019 (average of Ex and Es as detailed in Table 19).

On a positive note, Bhutan is witnessing an improvement in gender disparity in civil service. Currently, women's representation in parliament is

15.2 percent, which constitutes 8 out of 47 in the National Assembly and 3 out of 25 in the National Council.

At the local governance level, the posture of women representation is also improving but at a negligible scale. From a single woman gup in the first LG elections to two women gups in the second elections, the third elected seven women gups, representing 3.41 percent in the third LG elections.

The gender disparity in women's representation is significantly large at the decision-making positions despite almost equal representation at the entry-level of positions. The launch of Bhutan Women Parliamentary Caucus is a platform aimed to improve the gender disparity at the decision-making positions.

While gender equality represented at the upper leadership and management level is vital, it is also equally important to have equal participation in local groups, associations and cooperatives to contribute to the overall system's feedback chain. Equal participation at all levels ensures that a gender perspective is not ignored, and rather promotes gender equality in access to resources and opportunities. NDC survey findings, however, revealed that women's memberships in various groups varied by the type of groups and associations. In the forestry associated groups, men's representation was higher, with 55.7 percent and women's at 48.1 percent. A similar pattern was noted in groups and associations related to climate initiatives or project groups with men's proportion of membership at 10.3 percent and women's at 3.5 percent. Women's membership was higher in groups associated with "trade or business" and "farmers" groups than men at 24.48 percent and

<sup>5</sup> Ex1-Ex3: Executive level 1 to 3; Es1-Es3: Specialist level 1 to 3; P1-P5: Professional level 1 to 5; and S1-S5: Support level 1 to 5.

15.81 percent respectively. Membership alone does not indicate active participation of women. The same survey revealed that men are more open and comfortable to share their views and opinions in group meetings while women are generally shy and hesitant to speak up to raise gender-related issues. When a group of Dagana Dzongkhag residents were interviewed, a similar finding was revealed that suggested most women attending the meeting remained silent. Further, women are often forced to attend meetings when men are not available to attend them because of their busy engagement with their paid jobs.

A study conducted in 2001 by GNHC (Planning Commission then) found that Bhutanese women are more actively involved in decision-making at the private and micro level while men are more proactive in making decisions in the public domain. A similar study conducted by the same agency after a decade revealed almost identical findings where men were still seen as the dominant figures in decision-making in public spheres while women's decision-making authority, as mostly involved unproductive and unpaid domestic spheres, were limited to household decisions. Conclusively, men are more engaged in the plans and programmes at the local governance level.

Generally, women tend to favour agricultural products that support household food security when women have control over assets and decision-making power (Schutter, 2013). However, less asset ownership and low education levels among rural Bhutanese women poses a major barrier in their empowerment of decision-making authority. It is, therefore, not very clear if women's involvement in the decision-making at the community level and the extent of women's needs are captured and reflected.

### **Gender and climate change**

Bhutan, despite being a carbon-neutral country with a pristine natural environment, is highly vulnerable to the impact of climate change. In recent years, Bhutan has started experiencing erratic changes in average temperatures and precipitation patterns and has also been witnessing escalated risks of climate hazards. As per the 2019 Bhutan's National Center of Hydrology and Meteorology report, by 2021 to 2050, an increase in annual mean temperature of 0.8°C to 1.6°C is expected all over Bhutan.

The 2020 NDC survey also reported 96 percent of the respondents experiencing warmer weather and unpredictable weather, indicating Bhutanese people are already being affected by climate change. Simulated projections have also shown rising trends in temperature and precipitation in both winter and summer with large anomalies during the monsoon season in Bhutan. Such reports and empirical evidence raise concerns for the agricultural sector that is highly climate sensitive.

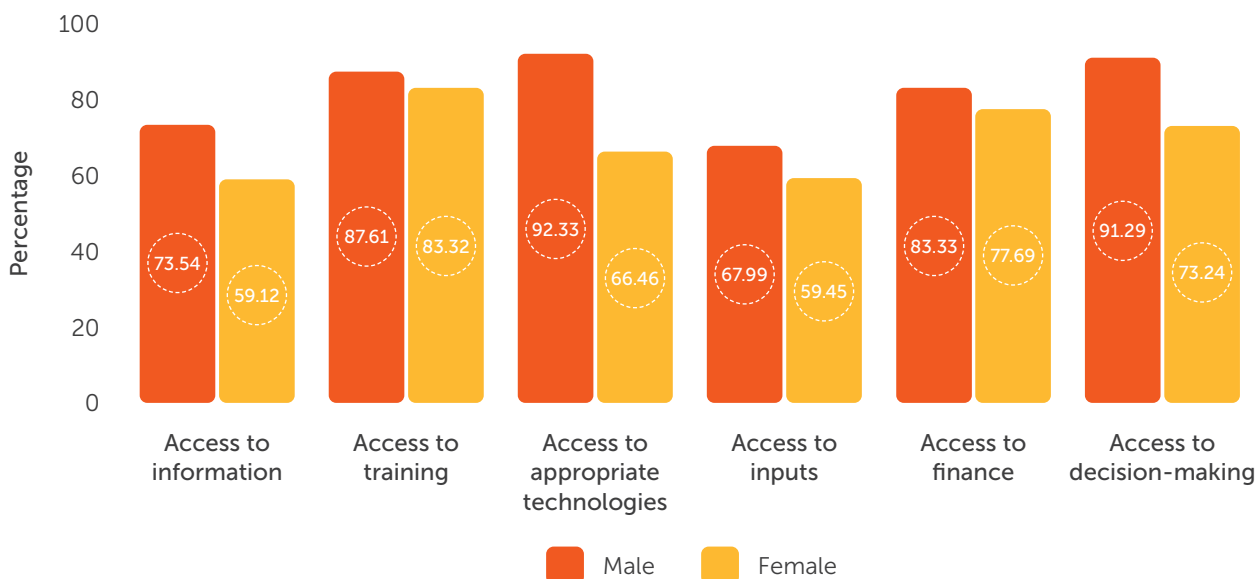
Further losses of arable land might become imminent owing to the reduced water resources for rain-fed crops, accelerated soil degradation, loss of soil fertility, and increased natural calamities leaving agriculture an economically deprived sector. In addition, effects of climate change would impact smallholder farmers the most significantly. Even worse, women would become more vulnerable to climate change as they are engaged substantially more than men in agri-dependent jobs.

Women in Bhutan are more vulnerable and affected by climate change compared to men due to their substantial engagement in agriculture and increasing feminization of the agricultural sector. Moreover, climate change impacts are more pronounced for Bhutanese women due to the existing discriminatory, patriarchal laws, norms, customs and institutions. In addition, since the effects of climate change are different for women and men, they respond and adapt to climate change impacts differently.

As measures to alleviate climate change impacts, men are more inclined to 'look for alternative employment' and 'migrate to city'; while women reported alternatives including 'change in consumption patterns', 'changing farming practices', and 'taking children out of school', as reported in the 2020 NDC survey report. Bhutanese women, in particular rural women, are therefore more susceptible and vulnerable than men to climate change impacts. Lower adaptive capacity among women stems from prevalent gender disparity in access to climate change information and productive resources, limited opportunities for training and capacity development, and adoption rate of climate-smart technologies.

The government's blanket approach with extensive promotion of CSA/CRA in response to mitigate the impact of climate change has failed to incorporate gender-responsive interventions and initiatives

Figure 14: Proportion of people (by sex) reporting CSA and its support system are gender-responsive



Source: National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC). 2020. Gender and Climate Change in Bhutan with a focus on Nationally Determined Contribution Priority Areas: Agriculture, Energy and Waste. Thimphu, National Commission for Women and Children, Royal Government of Bhutan.

as reported in the NDC survey. Figure 14 further illustrates the varying gender disparity in access to the facilities offered as part of the CSA/CRA programmes. While a higher proportion of women are engaged in agricultural activities, in practice access to information, training and the other CSA support systems are limited among Bhutanese women as compared to men.

**Gender and technology in agriculture**

Bhutan’s rugged terrain and its limited areas for agriculture pose challenges for agricultural development, hindering the national goal for food self-sufficiency. Commercial agriculture is identified as one the key enablers in pursuit of its food self-sufficiency goal and leveraging technologies in agriculture will help to maximize production capacity of the already limited areas for agriculture. In the RGoB’s strategy for agriculture, female farmers are not given equal attention. Gender inequality is reflected in the adoption of technologies amongst women. For example, during the focus group discussion conducted as part of the assessment, it was found out that power-tillers are used by female farmers only when there are no male farmers to operate them.

The RGoB provides subsidies and initial setup costs for machines to the farmers’ groups and COOPs. CSOs also provide assistance to the groups to encourage adoption of technologies. Training on operation and maintenance of equipment are also provided to the

farmers, however, most of these trainings are attended by male farmers. In order to encourage female farmers’ uptake of technologies, lightweight power tillers and chaff cutters, gender-friendly food processing units, and closed-pipe irrigation are some of the technologies targeted for women as noted in the FGD. However, the farmers reported that there is a compromise in the efficiency of the machines when designed for female farmers. In addition, it was also revealed during the discussion that machines were discontinued due to no expertise or resources to repair them.

The government also recognizes the potential benefits of adopting technologies, and immense efforts are put into mechanizing agriculture. New gender-friendly technologies are introduced to allow women to adopt these technologies and also to reduce the drudgery. However, technological adoptions would only be realized to their full potential if women are equally provided adequate training and resources. There is also a need to study the sustainability model when introducing technologies for women mainly because, unlike men, women farmers do not provide paid services. For example, male farmers offer hiring of machines, while female farmers operate machines for their own consumption as reported in the FGD.

**Gender and social protection**

Long before the establishment of any formal institution existed, Bhutanese social protection was based on



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community level social support that provided social security. The informal social support still exists today catering to promotion of individual, family, and community welfare. Prior to 2005, there was no explicit definition of social protection in Bhutan and no national study on social protection (ADB, 2012).

Given the late introduction of the social protection concept in Bhutan, there has been steady progress achieved through initiatives and schemes designed by various players. However, there still exist gaps for improvements. For example, the National Pension and Provident Fund (NPPF) schemes are open to only formal employees with conditions requiring employees to have one-year contracts, or employees of firms requiring to have at least five employees or firms with fewer than five employees having to rely on voluntary coverage. The scheme, therefore, benefits a subsidy of formal workers, and marginalizes informal workers.

Bhutan has low social insurance coverage. In terms of figures, Bhutan has a low social insurance coverage comprising of the Rural Insurance Scheme, with membership of about 60 000 rural households, the Group Insurance Scheme, and the NPPF. It is only about 9.1 percent from the working-age population that contributes to pension schemes and only 3.2 percent out of the total population are covered in the retirement age scheme. In 2020, there were only 62 834 pension contributors in Bhutan, out of which 80.66 percent were civil members and

19.34 were armed-force members. By gender, 72.1 percent of pension-contributors were male while females were 27.9 percent (RMA, 2021).

In addition to the community-based social support system, Bhutan also has a *kidu*<sup>6</sup> system under His Majesty's benevolent initiative that offers social assistance to the destitute. Kidu comprises cash and in-kind transfers to Bhutanese citizens. The system has immensely benefited Bhutanese citizens. The assistance can be in the form of land grants to the landless, monthly allowances for disabled parents, or scholarships for children without financial support to attend school – among others. For example, the Kidu provided a monthly allowance to the employees who lost their job due to COVID-19.

COVID-19 hit the vulnerable groups, including women and the informal employment sector, the hardest. Social effects of COVID-19 manifested not just in the form of job displacement, but also compelled a revisiting of the social protection system of Bhutan. A lesson learned was that the current social protection system needs to expand its floor coverage to include the non-formal sector. A gender-specific instrument targeting vulnerable groups including women also needs to be explored since there are no programmes solely targeted towards men or women, and the majority of the social protection programmes have a high probability of having an equal number of women and men as beneficiaries.

<sup>6</sup> *Kidu* refers to the relief or welfare or wellbeing of the people that is traditionally a Royal Prerogative and enshrined today in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan.



# 4

## STAKEHOLDERS ANALYSIS



Table 20 includes details on potential stakeholders with whom FAO Bhutan may consider engaging to strengthen gender equality and rural women’s empowerment in the agricultural and rural sector.

**Table 20: Details of potential stakeholders**

NGOs and CSOs		
Name of stakeholder	Description of stakeholder	Relevant initiatives and reasons for recommendations as FAO’s potential partner
Tarayana Foundation	Bridging the gaps of larger national initiatives and local grassroots requirements to improve rural livelihoods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commercial Agriculture and Resilient Livelihoods Enhancement Programme (CARLEP) (2015 to 2022)</li> <li>• Drudgery reduction in activities predominantly carried out by women</li> <li>• Encourage women’s leadership in community institutions under the programme</li> <li>• Women trained in production practices and/or technologies</li> <li>• Rich in-depth knowledge of rural development and vast outreach presence in rural communities</li> </ul>
BAOWE	Promotion of women entrepreneurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women-focused capacity development programmes and trainings</li> <li>• Assist FAO for effective delivery of trainings designed for rural women’s empowerment</li> <li>• Stimulate investments in rural women’s enterprises</li> <li>• Since its establishment in 2010, the CSO has proactively engaged in creating conducive opportunities for women entrepreneurs Through its project (Advancing economic opportunities for women and children) in rural areas of Zhemgang and Trashigang</li> <li>• FAO could link up with the CSO for promotion of rural women’s entrepreneurship in strategizing market-driven products</li> </ul>
SABAH BHUTAN (established in 2012)	Promotion of home-based workers and their welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shechok Women’s Group</li> <li>• Currently, working in Pemagatshel and Gelephu, Bhutan. Benefited women in these places</li> <li>• Partner with FAO to identify rural women’s market niche to come up with effective interventions, especially in home-based workers</li> </ul>

International development partners		
Name of stakeholder	Description of stakeholder	Relevant initiatives and reasons for recommendations as FAO's potential partner
European Union	International organization with members comprising European countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Global Climate Change Alliance (GCCA) involved with projects that target rural farmers including women to adapt climate change adaptation measures</li> <li>• Collaborate on emerging challenges that are common to both FAO's and EU's interest in consultation with RGoB to ensure the priority needs are included in the scope to enable inclusion of gender perspectives with FAO's support</li> </ul>
World Bank	International financial institution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food Security and Agriculture Productivity Project (FSAPP) – implemented in 5 south-western dzongkhags and 16 schools to reduce food insecurity and malnutrition</li> <li>• Partnered with RGoB on agricultural productivity and increasing farmers' access to local and export markets which will ensure at least 30 percent women beneficiaries, as targeted by the project</li> </ul>
Asian Development Bank	Promote socioeconomic development in member countries by providing loans, technical assistance, grants, and equity investments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural Finance Development Project (2020 to 2025) – a specific target to enhance financial literacy of rural women as one of the components</li> <li>• Collaboration with BDBL for CSI loan scheme</li> <li>• FAO may collaborate on the ongoing project to explore special lending schemes for rural women-led focus groups and COOPs</li> </ul>
UN Country Agencies	International organization with multiple specialized agencies in various assisted fields	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School Nutrition Programme (WFP)</li> <li>• Potential entry point for FAO to collaborate and/or coordinate with WFP to promote food security and nutrition systems, recognizing women's role and contribution to food security and nutrition</li> <li>• FAO may work with WFP to explore areas of collaboration on fortification of foods beyond rice and expand to other institutions</li> <li>• Gender Responsive Nationally Determined Contribution Implementation in Bhutan (UNDP)</li> <li>• Collaborate on the identified areas of NDC from gender perspective in the agriculture sector</li> </ul>
JICA	Official development assistance agency of Japan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project for Improvement of Farm Machinery for Hiring Services of Tillage (2016 to 2018)</li> <li>• Benefited in farm mechanization and allowed women to hire services when women could not operate the machines</li> <li>• FAO could partner with JICA to complement each other's efforts in overall development of rural infrastructure with focus on gender-friendliness</li> </ul>
National Commission for Women and Children	National gender machinery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All programmes and initiatives are women and children centric</li> <li>• Gain insights and expand FAO's visibility of the country's gender landscape</li> </ul>

Government and state-owned agencies		
Name of stakeholder	Description of stakeholder	Relevant initiatives and reasons for recommendations as FAO's potential partner
National Statistical Bureau	Central authority for the collection, compilation and release of any official data and its custodian thereof	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surveys related to food security and nutrition</li> <li>• Engage for collection of sex-disaggregated data especially in the agricultural sector</li> </ul>
Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry	Key driver for development of agrifood system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All programmes and initiatives are agri-food system centric</li> <li>• Key counterpart in the domain of food security and nutrition</li> </ul>
Ministry of Finance	Nodal agency for budgetary planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender Responsive Planning and Budgeting (GRPB)</li> <li>• Explore avenues for any supplementary budget requirements to support gender mainstreaming in agriculture</li> </ul>
Ministry of Economic Affairs	Government's nodal agency for development and promotion of country's economic growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cottage and medium industry projects targeting business development of rural farmers (CSI Market)</li> <li>• Vital player in the overall value chain of agrifood system</li> </ul>
Ministry of Health	Mandated to ensure access, equity, and quality health services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women and children nutrition related programmes</li> <li>• Potential strategic partner to collaborate on concerted efforts in improving nutrition for rural women</li> </ul>
Gross National Happiness Commission	Central planning agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GNH Screening Tool</li> <li>• Incorporate and improve the existing GNH screening tool</li> </ul>
Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan	Bhutan's central bank	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priority lending schemes</li> <li>• Assist in formulating rural women centric loans and credits</li> </ul>
Food Corporation of Bhutan	Centralized procurement and distribution system for supply of essential food across the country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vital marketplace for rural farmers</li> <li>• Managing the National Food Security Reserve</li> <li>• FCBL can play a role in the overall initiative of food security and nutrition supported by FAO, especially in the reservoir and storage segment of the value chain</li> </ul>

# 5

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



## 5.1 Major findings

Gender equality in its formal sense might be relatively new, but most Bhutanese hold the perception that gender mainstreaming is engrained in Bhutanese culture and traditions. To some extent, Bhutanese women do enjoy gender parity in all socioeconomic development levels. However, there remains a gap in gender disparity in various aspects of lives when examined closely.

The assessment uncovered gaps in policy measures, institutional interventions, on-ground practices, and societal support for gender equality in the field of agriculture, food security and nutrition of Bhutan. These gaps translate into lapses that hinder the accomplishment of Bhutan's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals related to food security and nutrition, and national aspirations for food self-sufficiency.

Major findings of the assessment are presented below:

1. **Policy and implementation gap:** Most policies incorporate gender mainstreaming by the virtue of enforcing the GNH Policy Screen Tool that mandatorily requires every policy for screening prior to its enactment. However, strategies, plans, programmes and guidelines do not adequately mainstream gender perspectives. In worst cases, it completely misses inclusion of gender aspects leading to gender-blindness. The screening process does not always translate into the gender-responsive policy, although gender equality parameters are included.
2. **Low representation of women at all levels:** Women's representation in decision-making positions is generally low across all levels in the agricultural sector. Consequently, the feedback systems fall short to capture women's input for improvement of the agri-ecosystem. Notable observations found in the assessment is that women are shy and hesitant to share their views and comments in meetings, further reducing the means to integrate gender aspects. On the other hand, rural females are more open and comfortable to consult female extension service officers.
3. **Low financial support and credit access:** Most of the existing financial institutions do not have rural women-centric schemes. In addition, the information of such schemes is less accessible to women especially when dissemination is channelled via social platforms. Low financial literacy amongst rural women further aggravates their accessibility.
4. **Lack of gender-sensitive budget and resources:** Gender-responsive planning and budgeting (GRPB) is implemented at the Ministry of Finance to bring about gender components in budget proposals. However, the extent and scope of the integration is missing. In addition, despite having identified GFP in all government agencies, the GFPs lack budgetary support to initiate any programmes related to gender mainstreaming.
5. **Inadequate extension service support and facilities:** The agricultural extension centres have benefited to improve agricultural productivity. However, the location of these service centres being far from some of the villages has made it more challenging for women to consult the centres and weakens the value chain. Less markets and cold storage also hamper rural women's agricultural incomes. There is also inadequate staffing at the extension services, hampering the delivery of services. The assessment also noted weak monitoring and mismatch of adoption of B2B models. Even market-related information services are disseminated via online platforms that marginalize the ICT illiterate rural women and community at large.
6. **Lack of sex-disaggregated data and outdated information:** All available information gathered from the survey reports and various related studies for the assessment had limited sex-disaggregated data. This also includes the annual statistical reports published by the relevant agencies. In addition, some of the key findings from the relevant studies had no follow-up studies carried out rendering most relevant data outdated.
7. **Overwork state of women in agriculture:** Despite women's significant contributions to the overall agricultural sector, it is hardly acknowledged. Worse, working-hours combining paid and unpaid jobs are more for women. The drudgery of agricultural jobs take an extra toll on their health as it is women who are involved in it.

8. **Lack of stronger collaborations and awareness of gender mainstreaming:** Certainly, a low level of general awareness on gender mainstreaming amongst the general public coupled with age-old perceptions of women being better caregivers have been found to limit rural women in exploring better socioeconomic avenues and opportunities. There is also a lack of stronger collaborations between relevant stakeholders on gender mainstreaming. For example, the GEG is supposed to mentor the GPFs, but it is almost non-existent. The linkages even among the GPFs are weak and poor.
  9. **Low employment in income generating fields:** Although there is no significant gender disparity in primary and secondary education, and further improvement is also visible in tertiary education, female enrolment in STEM fields and vocational institutes is still low. In addition, men have higher participation in training and capacity development programmes related to agricultural sectors.
  10. **Gender disparity in CSA/CRA:** The government's efforts to implement CSA/CRA in response to climate change are highlighted as a positive note. However, there are fewer women participating in the initiative as most of the interventions and measures are designed without considering gender aspects.
2. Similar to the efforts put through the Bhutan Women Parliamentary Caucus (BWPC), a network of women employed in the government's agricultural agencies could be explored to encourage tabling gender-specific issues. The network may be helpful in improving the proportion of women's representation at decision-making positions by engaging dialogues and discussions centred on career barriers.
  3. Government could also revisit the financial legislations, legal instruments, credit policies, social protection policies, and other related policy-documents to reflect the gender-friendly policies. Further, such changes in policies should trickle down in enabling easy credit access to rural women.
  4. The Ministry of Finance could also reinforce GRPB to apportion budget for gender-specific activities in addition to its overarching role of ensuring gender equality in the budgeting processes.
  5. Institutionalizing a monitoring mechanism to regularly assess the challenges and issues confronting rural women all in appreciation of their potential to contribute equally to socioeconomic development, and a vital player in national pursuit of food self-sufficiency.
  6. Investments should be prioritized to target rural women-driven FGs and COOPs especially after assessing gaps and lapses. Investments could be in the form of subsidized inputs, capacity development, and assistance in enhancing their agrifood productivity.
  7. Develop a good culture of documentations and encourage collecting sex- and age- disaggregated data to all government agencies.
  8. Implement awareness programmes to promote gender equality targeting men and women to share household chores and also to help empower women through advocacy programmes.
  9. Build stronger collaboration platforms to synergize the efforts on gender equality of various agencies with the national gender machinery. NCWC could collaborate with GNHC to include gender equality related indicators in relevant ministries' NKRAs.
  10. Promote and encourage more enrolments of women in STEM and vocational training, and actively engage in developing general training programmes targeting rural women from a food security and nutrition perspective.

## 5.2 Recommendations

The assessment has identified the following set of recommendations for both RGoB and FAO based on the major findings with the objective to improve the food security and nutrition landscape by promoting gender equality and empowering rural women.

### Recommendations for the Royal Government of Bhutan

1. Strategize tools and mechanisms to align any intervention, guideline, plans and programmes from the gender mainstreaming perspective to reduce or avoid implementation gaps at later stages. This could also include involving the identified GFP in respective agencies in the formulation processes.

11. Revisit the strategies on interventions such as CSA/CRA to explore avenues to make it more women-friendly. Explore to develop new interventions to mitigate the effects on climate change on rural women.
12. A study exploring the avenues on any intervention to reduce women's unpaid care work burden, for example, provision of creche services, in the rural economic empowerment programs and projects.

### Recommendations for FAO

1. Advocate in collaboration with other UN agencies and development partners to support the government in revising policies, guidelines, plans and programmes that reflect gender equality aspects.
2. Develop both short-term and long-term collaboration areas in consultation with the government to re-prioritize the assistance areas synchronizing with national priority sub-sectors.
3. Promote gender-sensitive investments in HR development and other facilities targeting the grass-root level based on their local requirements. The training and other capacity developments for farmers are usually project-tied. In the process, the actual capacity requirements for female farmers are inadvertently missed out. It is, therefore, recommended that the training needs are properly studied and managed based on the needs of the female farmers.
4. Bring in international lessons, experiences and expertise to streamline the existing national policies, plans and programmes, and other interventions on food security and nutrition to contextualize the local needs by engaging relevant agencies.
5. Support CSOs and NGOs in their efforts in gender mainstreaming with special focus on rural women.
6. Engage all national counterparts and implementing agencies of FAO projects at the inception phase stressing the gender-defined targets to avoid future implementation gaps.
7. Collaborate with the national gender machinery to lobby to support for gender equality inclusion by sensitizing on programmes under FAO's initiatives.
8. Provide assistance to the government in its transition from LDC to middle-income country to ensure the efforts around CEDAW commitments and SDG goals related to gender equality are continued and achieved.
9. Assist the government to identify international ties and linkages to gain more visibility of Bhutan's agri-products in the international market, especially market niche for rural women. Identify gaps in the value chains to promote more participation of women.
10. Strengthen the RNR sector to carry out regional-based research to match the unique needs of each region in a geographically diverse country. Provide technical guidance and assistance to the local researchers to explore gender-sensitive studies in rural women and agriculture.



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# ANNEXES

## Annex 1: Details of KII with the key informants

Sl. No.	Key informant interviewees	Time
18 July 2022		
1	Sonam Pelgen, PO (FAO Focal); Sonam Euden, PO; Tashi Yangzom, ICT Officer; and Kinlay Wangmo, Statistician, PPD, MoAF	09:30–11:00 AM
2	Kunzang Om, Dy. CAO, DoA, MoAF	11:25–11:55 AM
3	Yonten Gyamtsho, Director, DoA, MoAF	12:00–13:20 PM
4	Offg. Director, NCWC	15:10–16:10 PM
19 July 2022		
5	Mr Phub Sangay, Offg. Director and Mr Rinchen Dorji, Dy. Chief GIS Officer, Agriculture Statistics Division, NSB	10:40–11:40 AM
6	Mr Naiten Wangchuk, CEO and Mr Lakpa Sherpa, Director, FCBL (Virtual)	15:30–16:30 PM
20 July 2022		
7	Sonam Lhaki, Marketing Officer, DAMC, MoAF	10:40–11:40 AM
8	Mr Hari Prasad Pokhrel, Nutritionist, Nutrition Programme, MoH	12:00–13:00 PM
9	Sonam Pem, Executive Director, Tarayana Foundation	14:30–16:00 PM
21 July 2022		
10	Sonam Yangchen, Dy. Chief Livestock Production Officer (Gender Focal) and Ms Ganga Maya Rizal, Principal Feed and Fodder Development Officer – DoL, MoAF	14:30–16:00 PM
11	DNB, MOF	NA (via email)

## Annex 2: Details of FGD with the 20 Chairpersons of FGs and COOPs

Sl. No.	Registration number	Farmers group	Location	Sector	Chairman	Date and time
1	FG/48	Dhur Kewa Gongphel Detshen	Bumthang, Choekhor	Agriculture	Tshewang Pelden	28-7-2022/ 4:30-5:30 PM
2	FG/45	Sacha Kuenphen sheyul kewa Detshen	Chukha, Chapcha	Agriculture	Rinzin Dorji	28-7-2022/ 6:30-7:30 PM
3	FG/392	Tsenda-gang chuthuen Om Thuenkey Detshen	Dagana, Tsendagang	Livestock	Hochu Leki	27-7-2022/ 10:30 AM
4	FG/280	Gasa Rangshin Sonam Detshen	Gasa, Khatoed	Agriculture	Tashi	27-7-2022/ 9:30AM
5	FG/551	Lhakangchen Norlha Detshen	Haa, Samar	Livestock	Tshewang Namgyal	27-7-2022/ 5:00 PM
6	FG/449	Maenbi Gonor Thoenkey Detshen	Lhuentse, Maenbi	Livestock	Sangay Khando	29-7-2022/ 12:00-1:00 PM
7	FG/41	Jangdung Gayza Doejung Detshen	Mongar, Saling	Agriculture	Kinzang Tobgay,	27-7-2022/ 11:30 AM
8	FG/62	Shari Lhothuen Omgil Detshen	Paro, DopShari	Livestock	Ugyen Tshering	28-7-2022/ 5:30-6:30 PM
9	FG/450	Norbugang Zambalha Om Detshen	Pema Gatshel, Norbugang	Livestock	Pema Wangda	27-7-2022/ 12:30 PM
10	FG/02	Dampola Gongphel Detshen	Punakha, Limbukha	Non-RNR	Sangay Dorji	27-7-2022/ 2:30 PM
11	FG/493	Bazor Tshesey Detshen	Samdrup Jongkhar, Gomdar	Agriculture	Yonten Jamtsho	27-7-2022/ 3:30 PM
12	FG/32	Penjorling Milk Supply Detshen	Samtse, Tashicholing	Livestock	Dawa Zangmo	27-7-2022/ 6:00 PM
13	COOP/02	Chuzagang Sonam Nyamley Tshogdey	Sarpang, Chuzagang	Agriculture	Lungten Wangdi	29-7-2022/ 2:00-3:00 PM
14	COOP/57	Tshaluna Namlay Tshokpa	Thimphu, Mewang	Livestock	Sangay Penjor	29-7-2022/ 9:00-10:00 AM
15	COOP/27	Tashi Tagay Nyamley Tshogdey	Trashigang, Yangtse, Yangtse	Non-RNR	Karma Wangchuk	29-7-2022/ 3:00-4:00 PM
16	COOP/80	Tashi Tagay Nyamley Tshogdey	Trashigang, Samkhar	Livestock	Tashi Wangdi	28-7-2022/ 12:30 PM
17	COOP/16	Nubi Menchong Nyamley Tshogdey	Trongsa, Nubi	Forestry	Jambay Wangmo	28-7-2022/ 2:30 PM

Sl. No.	Registration number	Farmers group	Location	Sector	Chairman	Date and time
18	FG/376	Kikhorthang dairy group	Tsirang, Kikhorthang	Livestock	Rinchen	29-7-2022/ 10:00-11:00 AM
19	FG/655	Habesa Ngochang Sanam Detshen	Wangdue Phodrang, Gastshowom	Agriculture	Lekimo	28-7-2022/ 3:30 PM
20	COOP/26	Tama Cardamom Nyamley Tshogdey	Zhemgang, Trong	Agriculture	Tshering Lhadon	29-7-2022/ 11:00-12:30 PM









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