

## A Theoretical Review on Non-Formal Education and Women Empowerment in Bhutan



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**ABSTRACT:** The exponential growth of the formal education system, albeit literacy, has remained a far-fetched ideology for many Bhutanese, especially among adult women and men in the less-sourced parts of the country. Therefore, non-formal education in Bhutan has been a critical and essential strategy for inclusion and empowerment of a sizeable population of citizens who missed the opportunity to acquire literacy due to several factors; including social, economic, and occupational circumstances at the time of their regular schooling. The non-formal education program, conducted through a somewhat structured network of learning centers across the country, has grown in relevance and popularity over the years. It is viewed as a significant enabler of learning, surpassing its original goal of promoting the national language, Dzongkha. The non-formal education programme has emerged as a veritable tool for self-realization and participation in local governance, social economic activities for the women in an increased space created by the advent of democracy. Thus, non-formal education has proven to be beneficial not only in enhancing literacy and numeracy but also as a crucial means of conveying important messages regarding issues that impact people's lives and broader societal concerns. We were able to delve into extensive research carried out by other researchers as our mode of collecting data for analysis. Our findings culminated to the fact that, till date the Non-formal Education (NFE) and Continuous Education (CE) programme have benefitted about 170,000 and 11,000 learners respectively. Numerous success stories illustrate how the program has transformed the lives of individuals, particularly in rural Bhutan.

The programme helped to read and write, take better care of family, do simple calculations and helped to establish small businesses. However, the drop-out numbers from the programme are significant and the reasons cited range from closure of centers following the departure of the instructor, competing claims of housework, distance to learning centers, shortage of helping hands, to perceptions of gender roles. Recommendations have been put forward to ensure that the programme is beneficial to the society, is viable and experiences longevity.

**KEYWORDS:** Bhutan, literacy, non-formal education, review, women empowerment

### BACKGROUND

Nelson Mandela famously stated that education is the most formidable tool we have to transform the world. In today's dynamic world, Education; the accumulation of knowledge is more often noted as a key to being prepared. People worldwide are seeking to improve their lives through formal education. However, Non-Formal Education (NFE) refers to learning that occurs outside of conventional formal education systems (Kairey et al., 2019). According to Powdyel (2016), informal education, arising from issues like poverty, ineffective government systems, and gender inequality, promotes equal opportunities for knowledge acquisition. It helps eliminate illiteracy among women and enhances their access to vocational training, as well as education in technology and science. In Bhutan most of the population have not been benefited from formal education due to factors such as scattered population and the presence of terrains. As such, the most affected group has been the women and girls. In these circumstances, informal education has therefore been a saving grace for the women and girls as a means of empowering them to have equal opportunities similar to their counterparts.

For a long time, access to education has been central to women's empowerment in Bhutan. It helps women overcome challenges and engage in broader development. Education not only equips them with skills for better health and livelihoods but also empowers them to understand their roles and strengths in society. The non-formal education offered to women in Bhutan has boosted their confidence in decision-making, which is crucial for reducing poverty. This paper aims to explore the connection between non-formal education and women's empowerment in Bhutan. Sharaunga et al., (2018), indicates that education is the most significant instrument for women empowerment and status improvement around the world. This will inevitably turn the wheels of evolution to women and their position and strength in a society that is male dominated. Therefore, women's empowerment through education is a vital role in a nation's development and economic condition. Thus, when we educate a woman, we uplift an entire nation (Sundholm, 2011).

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### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Having noted the impact or the lack of education generally, this study mainly focuses on the viability of informal learning, leading to the exploration of empowerment to women. Hence it leads to answer the following question:

- i. Is non-formal Education in Bhutan the most suitable instrument leading to empowerment for women?
- ii. Can the roles of both formal and informal education in Bhutan be precisely cut out to empower women?
- iii. Is informal learning a precursor to formal learning?

### **RESEARCH GAPS**

Warner et al., (2012) state that education for women has been linked to lower fertility rates, small family sizes, and rhetorical status of social, health, and economy. Even in suitable or conducive environments, women or girl's education is trivialized, with less formal schooling and low-quality education offered to women and girls. This research aims to identify whether this situation can be resolved through non-formal education programs and if at all the non-formal education program is effective to elevate the status of women. Do we actually need formal education for women and girls or are they working well within the realm of informal education Bhutan?

We approach this by first understanding that non-formal education has to be viewed through the participants, goals, and context. The role of non-formal education does vary from one country to another due to history, culture and purpose. For non-formal education to prevail in Bhutan with regards to empowering women, it has to blend with the social and economic activities and most importantly the financial strains of the country. It is also essential for women who are getting empowered in Bhutan to be taken through the process of assisting them in defining interests, goals, and needs on their own.

### **RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

The general research aim of this study is to determine if informal learning is vital and viable to women empowerment. The research objectives are specifically as follows:

- i. Review and analyze the different theories to establish if at all there has been a relationship between non-formal education and women empowerment and its impact.
- ii. Analyze whether the level of women empowerment in Bhutan is at all affected or elevated by the non-formal education.
- iii. Identify the gaps in the non-formal education program to which when fixed would ensure that the highly recognized non-formal education program would impact Women Empowerment.
- iv. Undertake a case study review on the impact of non-formal education on women empowerment.
- v. Draw comparison between the literature and case study and summarize key findings.

### **RESEARCH APPROACH**

The methodology used are review of the current literature on women empowerment and non-formal education in Bhutan. There are several researchers who have written about this and therefore there was sufficient secondary data to be reviewed related to the topic. Besides this, a case study approach of some of Bhutan was used in establishing the way in which non formal education has empowered the women in Bhutan. Theoretical approaches to non-formal education will be analyzed in response to women empowerment. Bhutan has been selected for the case study because of the dire need of women empowerment through informal education.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The rapid growth of the formal education system notwithstanding, literacy has remained out of reach for many Bhutanese, especially among adult women in the less-developed parts of the country. Non-formal education therefore signals a critical milestone in the democratization of education, taking learning from the classes to the masses in the literal as well as figurative sense of the term. This kind of education in Bhutan has been a critical strategy for the inclusion and empowerment of women and girls who missed the opportunity to acquire.

According to (Powdyel, 2016), informal education, in the wake of poverty, a failed governmental system and gender inequality, ensures equal access to accumulation of knowledge, eradicates illiteracy among women and leads to improvement for women accessing vocational training, technological and science education. This opinion is shared by theorists of women and gender development, that when increasing the level of educated girls, the end of poverty starts (Anderson, 2010). Furthermore, the incentives for a child to enroll in school increases in a family where the mother has an education. To the contrary, Rowland (1995) emphasizes that education is not necessarily the root to empowerment and that it embodies other aspects for which together are intertwined. She argues that there are three dimensions of empowerment. However, the Attribution theory tends to be a combination of thoughts from both Anderson and Rowland's point of view. The focus here is the inherent, which is concerned with how individuals interpret events and how this relates to their thinking and behaviour.

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This review focused on the validity of the Attribution theory, Women and Gender in Development Theory, Rowlands' Model of Empowerment and Self-Directed Learning Theory. We have analyzed these theories to establish if at all there is a relationship between non-formal education and women empowerment and its impact.

### **DEFINING THE TERM NON- FORMAL EDUCATION**

The Non-Formal Education Programme marked the third wave in the evolution of the education system in Bhutan (Powdyel, 2016). Over the past fifty years, the understanding of non-formal education has evolved significantly. In the 1970s, developing countries utilized non-formal learning as a strategy to alleviate poverty and improve health. Policymakers became interested after recognizing the limitations of formal education in addressing development challenges. As it became clear that formal education could not fully satisfy educational needs, non-formal learning gained considerable importance. Currently, informal learning is supported by organizations such as the World Bank, UNICEF, and UNESCO. Notably, Bhutan's NFE program received UNESCO Literacy Awards in both 2009 and 2011 (Powdyel, 2014).

We cannot ignore the reality that national development and economic progress cannot occur in the presence of challenges like illiteracy, unemployment, and poverty (Olagbaju, 2020). Under these circumstances, acquiring knowledge must remain a priority, even when faced with burdens such as gender inequality. Smith (2001, p. 196) defines Non-Formal Education as, "*any organised educational activity outside the established formal ... that is intended to serve identifiable learning clientele and learning objectives*". Further on, Coombs (1973), and Fordham et al. (1979), as cited in Smith (2001) this kind of education is termed '*informal*', and regarded as the lifelong process through which individuals acquire attitudes, values, skills, and knowledge from their daily experiences and the educational influences and resources present in their environment—including family, neighbors, work, leisure activities, the marketplace, libraries, and mass media.

Compared to formal education, Simkins (1976) as cited in Smith (2001) states that there is a characteristic that makes non-formal education stand out compared to formal education. She favours the opinion taken by Fordham (1993): Non-formal education is short-term and specific, non-credential based in purpose; follows flexible, short time-cycles; the content is practical, output-centered and individualized and entry requirements are defined by clientele; delivery is environment-based, learner-centered, flexible and community - related as well as resource saving; it is democratic and self-governing rather than externally controlled. The formal system is top-down whereas non- formal education is bottom-up.

### **DEFINING WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

Women empowerment is the process in which females are presented with the opportunity to obtain the freedom and ability to make strategic choices (Nai, 2010). Women have to attain self-identity in order to be seen as equal to men, empowerment cannot be achieved by just demanding human rights (Stromquist, 2009). UNICEF describes women empowerment through a framework which argues that empowerment is met through equality levels which include welfare, participation, access, and control (Powdyel, 2016). Women and children constitute the majority of those experiencing poverty globally, and addressing world poverty is a critical component of development (Arlesten & Leijon, 2010, p. 30). Andersson (2010) suggests that increasing girls' education is key to breaking the cycle of poverty. Additionally, in families where the mother is educated, the likelihood of a child attending school rises. Educated women are often linked to several positive outcomes, such as better health, lower fertility rates, smaller family sizes, and increased household income.

The above beckons, what then is women empowerment? Is it that educating a woman equates to empowering a woman?

According to Jacquette (2017), empowering a woman means, ensuring that women have both access to and control over resources, including property. On the other hand, Kabeer (2000) elaborates this definition and casts the net wider by stating that women empowerment is the process by which women have the ability to make "strategic life choices". This ability is in three inter-related dimensions: resources, which means access to and future claims to both material and social resources; agency, which includes the process of decision-making and negotiation, and achievements that are the well-being outcomes. In short, empowerment is therefore: "*the ability to make choices: to be disempowered, therefore implies to be denied choice*" (Kabeer, 2005).

### **THE ROLE OF NON- FORMAL EDUCATION IN COMMUNITIES**

The recipients of the non-formal education program, particularly in Bhutan, are the illiterate housewives, village adults, school dropouts and indeed anybody who missed school (Powdyel, 2016). The said program is divided into two; the Basic Literacy Course (BLC) and the Post Literacy Course (PLC). Learners who qualify from the basic literacy course proceed to the post- literacy course (Powdyel, 2016). These learners take on an intellectually more advanced programme which include health, environment, agriculture, income generation activities, socio-cultural issues, early childhood care and development, sustainable land use, disaster management, and good governance, among others. On face value, Simkins (1976) and Fordham (1993) were not incorrect in stating that a learner from the non-formal education programme is equipped with realistic life skills.

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In the study of I'Anson (2008), supported by UNICEF, put into perspective the benefits accruing to learners. Improved functional literacy and numeracy skills, social and cultural competency, enhanced knowledge, increased self-reliance and confidence, and greater productivity and independence as a result of life-skills training and awareness (Powdyel, 2016).

In recognizing that non-formal education has been able to make such differences in the lives of those impacted by it we however query the program referred to above. This programme sounds more or less like a formal system devoid of resources.

According to Cross (1981), the self-directed learning theory infers that individuals take on the responsibility for their own learning process by diagnosing their personal learning needs, setting goals, identifying resources, implementing strategies and evaluating the outcomes. It is an upper hand where self-directed learning can be enhanced with facilitation, particularly through providing resources but ideally, motivation is a key to a successful self-directed learning experience. The adult will upon self-analysis, discover what they need without necessarily having to be told or empowered. This theory of learning buttresses the Rowland theory that it is not only education that is crucial to an empowered woman, other factors must be considered.

### **IMPACT OF WOMEN IN POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ROLES**

The importance of considering women in development assistance was emphasized by recognizing both the harmful impacts of gender-blind policies and the need for programs and projects that benefit women. This was further reinforced by member states' commitments to the Program of Action established at the first UN Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975, along with ongoing transnational efforts by women's organizations. Poggio (2006) and Brink and Benschop (2012), as cited in Seden and Maxwell (2016), argued that gender is not fixed but is continuously redefined and negotiated through the daily interactions between individuals. It is evident that societal expectations for girls and women can restrict their opportunities in various aspects of social, economic, and political life. Fox (2013), as cited in Seden and Maxwell (2016), also noted that gender inequality is deeply ingrained in societal and workplace norms, traditional divisions of labor and breadwinner roles, established family and marriage dynamics, and a strong commitment to gender stereotypes. Maatta and Lyckkage (2011), as cited in Seden and Maxwell (2016), argued that gender differences are often viewed as natural because they are generally accepted without question.

In many parts of the world, women and girls continue to have lower status, fewer opportunities, lower incomes, less control over resources, and less power compared to men and boys. In some countries in South Asia, but less so in Bhutan, male child preference continues to deny girls the education to which they have a right. The burden of care work that women endure limits their opportunities in education and employment. In South Asia, gender discrimination remains widespread both within and outside the education system, with the resulting deprivation evident in every aspect of women's lives (Narayan et al., 2010; International Planned Parenthood Federation, 2015).

This is less the case in Bhutan though still discrimination exists in some forms. Relative to other South Asian countries, the legal status of Bhutanese women is perceived to be progressive (Wangmo, 2004; Crins, 2004). Even though Buddhist treatises treat both men and women as equal, when it comes to many facets of society including education, they are not treated similarly.

When discussing development one of the most important aspects is empowering women and the positive consequences that it brings. Education and employment are two examples of what is included in this perspective, but also attitudes from the family or community towards women engaging, and the social conditions that might enable changes of these attitudes. It is important that we consider the effects and impact of women's empowerment and whether informal education of women in Bhutan will achieve this impact.

Arguably, the most notable positive outcome of the debate surrounding women/gender and development programs has been its role in placing women's rights on the international agenda over the past three decades. This has contributed to the establishment of global norms on a wide array of issues, including labor rights, violence against women, and reproductive rights, as outlined in the introduction to this special issue (Jaquette, 2017).

International conferences such as the UN Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the Population Conference in Cairo, and the Fourth UN Conference on Women in Beijing committed to adopt more egalitarian policies and laws that, taken together, amount to normative change in the gender dynamics of power (Jaquette 2017). Indeed, implementation has been inadequate, and progress has relied on sustained pressure from women's movements and organizations (Valdés & Donoso, 2009).

Since the inaugural UN conference in Mexico City, women have progressively acquired the ideological resources to participate in the public sphere, assert a greater voice in family decision-making, and increasingly confront and resist gender-based violence. However, these 40 years of swift changes in norms and social expectations have also polarized women, both in the North and the Global South, with many expressing apprehensions about change or seeking more control over how it impacts their lives (Jaquette, 2017).

### **IMPACT OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

Attribution theory explains how individuals interpret events and how this influences their thinking and behavior. It is based on the idea that people seek to understand the reasons behind others' actions, attributing causes to behavior. The theory consists of three main elements: first, the person must observe or perceive the behavior; second, they must believe the behavior was performed

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intentionally; and third, they must assess whether the other person was compelled to act or not. To provide more detail, attributions are categorized along three causal dimensions: locus of control, stability, and controllability (Weiner, 1986).

In relation to women's empowerment, Weiner explores whether the knowledge, skills, and capacity gained by women through non-formal education contribute to their empowerment. Weiner suggests that there is a disconnect in this relationship. Supporting Weiner's perspective is Rowlands' Model of Empowerment. In this theory, Rowlands (1995) highlights that education is not always the foundation of empowerment, emphasizing that it involves other interconnected factors that work together. She argues that there are three dimensions of empowerment: – *Personal* is where empowerment is about developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity and undoing the effects of internalized oppression. A *close relationship* involves empowerment by building the capacity to negotiate and influence the dynamics of the relationship and the decisions made within it (Roland, 1995). *Collective* is where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone. This encompasses participation in political systems but can also involve collective actions rooted in cooperation rather than competition (Wash Markets, n.d.). Collective action can be centered locally, such as at the village or neighborhood level, or it can be institutional, involving national networks or organizations like the United Nations (Rowlands, 1995).

Rowlands' and Weiner's theories lack concrete evidence or support from statistics or case studies. However, in 2017, UNESCO acknowledged Bhutan's Non-Formal Education (NFE) program as having a positive impact on Bhutanese women (UNESCO, 2013). For close relationships and collective action to be truly effective, there must be a comprehensive alignment of women's empowerment, knowledge, and awareness, which cannot be achieved without education.

## **A CASE STUDY ON THE EFFECT OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN BHUTAN**

### **Introduction**

A conversation on the sustainability of Bhutan, it was noted that the education system has to reorient itself and that on sustainable women empowerment. It was noted that there is a need to change the outlook of women and girls especially in the rural areas and that girls and women should be educated not only because it is a right but also as a way of grooming women leaders in the socio-economic political scene.

Non-formal education in Bhutan begins with an overview of the country's non-formal education program to assess its scope, impact, and gaps, particularly in rural areas and concerning women and girls. This analysis will help us better understand whether non-formal education influences or enhances the level of women's empowerment in Bhutan.

It is important to identify the gaps in the non-formal education program, as addressing these gaps would ensure that the widely recognized program more effectively contributes to women's empowerment.

### **Choice of Study**

#### **Non- Formal Education Then**

The National Women's Association of Bhutan (NWAB) initiated the Non-Formal Education Programme (NFEP) in 1990 to provide a range of basic knowledge and numeracy materials in order to teach functionality and to empower and elevate the Bhutanese women (Dukpa, 2015). Further in 1992, the management of the programme was taken over by the Dzongkha Development Commission (DDC) and the focus of NFE moved towards the promotion of the national language, Dzongkha (Dukpa, 2015).

Non-formal and continuing education, then and now, has become a powerful tool to build and enhance literacy and empowerment. This is essentially crucial in an emerging democratic country that aspires to be a learning society by engaging the creative potential of its people (Dukpa, 2015).

The program's early success led to the establishment of a fully-fledged Non-Formal & Continuing Education Division (NFCED) in 2006, within the Department of Adult & Higher Education under the Ministry of Education. This division is recognized as a strategic lever for promoting lifelong learning (Schuelka & Maxwell (Eds.), 2016). The non-formal education program had subsequently gained immense and widespread popularity warranting the establishment of the NFCED. Further on in 2006, the Continuing Education (CE) component was subsequently added to provide opportunity to those adults who could not complete their schooling (Dukpa, 2015).

#### **Non- Formal Education Now**

A couple of milestones have been achieved by the Bhutanese people with regards the enactment of the Non-Formal Program. They are as follows: Community Learning Centers have been established, NFE Policy Guidelines have been developed enabling a standardization and quality assurance; Continuing Education was initiated in differentiation to the Non- Formal Education and a Decentralized recruitment of NFE Instructors to Dzongkhags has taken place over time. All these steps were geared towards enabling a close to seamless program with the following objectives: Providing functional and skills-based literacy to youths and adults who have missed formal education, Promoting Dzongkha, the national language, Increasing adult literacy rate and promote life-long learning programme in the kingdom, Providing platforms for promoting community vitality, and Providing opportunities for acquisition of lively-hood skills, career advancement and academic qualification up graduation for youth and adults.

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### **Women Empowerment in Bhutan**

To date, the NFE and CE programs have benefited approximately 170,000 and 11,000 learners, respectively (Dukpa, 2015). The number of NFE centers and its enrolment as of March 2015. There is however still a high dropout rate from the program due to gender inequality. The study revealed that the top five reasons for dropout of NFE learners as provided by the respondents of the nationwide survey were 'shortage of labour/due to household work', 'family problem', 'marital problem', 'lack of interest' and 'transfer'. A majority of the participants in the study by Dukpa (2015) indicated that, the shortage of labour at home, followed by family problems, lack of instructor's competency and distance to Centre as the main reasons for dropout. Many learners also highlighted the challenge of getting classrooms regularly due to clashes in programmes with the school, hence, they appealed for separate classrooms (Kuensel, 2015).

Even with these setbacks in place, the same study revealed that, on the impact of non-formal education on Bhutanese women, non-formal education empowered the woman in Bhutan going by the definition of empowerment as earlier defined by Kabeer (Kabir, 2005), that is, the ability to make choices: to be disempowered, therefore implies to be denied choice.

The impact of non-formal education has been that; the programme has helped the learners to read and write, take better care of their family, do simple calculations, establish small businesses; participate in election, participate in local government meetings and religious activities, advocate beneficial issues such as family planning, health and sanitation (Dukpa, 2015).

### **SUMMARY**

According to Kabeer (2005), in her article, 'Gender, Culture and Development', recognizes that access to education empowers women in different ways. After examination she established that the impact of education on women was that it boosted individual confidence which in turn promoted bargaining power with men, improved access to knowledge, information and new ideas as well as improving the tools to use this knowledge effectively.

Why then are we drawn to this case study if a link between education and women empowerment has already been established by Kabeer? The case is never the same due to the variables that exist in different countries including poverty, political instability, inequality and sex-based discrimination. The attribution theory and Jacquette's theory come into play.

We are drawn to this study because, similar to Wreiner and Rowlands's (1995) view, the non-formal education program is not perfect but with loopholes. There is need for more monitoring of the content of the program, enhanced infrastructure, need for separate classrooms, review of the non-formal education programme policy guidelines and need for the instructors to be given the opportunity to diversify the non-formal education programme by including ICT and functional English (Dukpa, 2015). If there are such severe gaps existing, can we therefore conclude that Rowlands (1995) was correct, that other factors aside from education empower the Bhutanese woman?

The study conducted by Dukpa (2015) indicated that, upon review of the program, it revealed that: The programme helped to read and write, the programme helped to take better care of family, The programme helped to do simple calculations and that the programme helped to establish small businesses. The same study indicated severe gaps which also included; a need to enhance the infrastructure and classrooms at 57%, the need to create advocacy programmes at 31%, the requirement for an adequate budget at 15%, and the need to diversify the NFE Programme seating at 39% (Dukpa, 2015).

The program has transformed many lives, particularly in rural Bhutan, with numerous success stories. Some participants have passed the Election Commission of Bhutan's literacy test, enabling them to take part in local government elections, while others, such as mothers studying alongside their kindergarten children, represent common success narratives. This is a program that thousands of underprivileged individuals are grateful to the government for (Kuensel, 2015, April 21).

The study of Jurmi (2012) indicated that more than 170,000 citizens out of a population of less than one million have benefitted from basic literacy and numeracy skills; 80 % have acquired life skills education; 20 % of the NFE learners have been trained in vocational skills like tailoring, weaving, carpentry, and entrepreneurship.

Due to the knowledge gained and development, there has been a significant rise in the use of technology in the rural areas of Bhutan. There is more use of power tillers especially among the richer sections. This has led to less use of traditional methods such as oxen ploughing the fields. Rice and wheat threshing are done by machines and in the villages. Consequently, it has reduced the labour requirement and most especially, the traditional women who normally stayed at home now venture out to the towns to sell agricultural products at the weekend markets (Yangden, 2009).

The impact of literacy and numeracy gained by participants is evident in their improved quality of life, better hygiene practices, and increased involvement in the country's newly established democratic process. A particularly gratifying aspect of the NFE program is that women make up at least 70% of its participants, and they are increasingly taking on leadership roles in local communities (Schuelka & Maxwell (Eds.), 2016; UNESCO, 2013).

This chapter has explored the history of non-formal education program in Bhutan and its impact on the women of Bhutan. It has further examined its gaps if at all they can be considered as gaps to justify Rowlands' theory but has also established the recorded impacts of the non-formal education program. This has led to a better understanding of the non-formal education program and a conclusive statement that in Bhutan, non-formal education has empowered the women in Bhutan.

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### DISCUSSION

The premise of this research was to investigate the plausible impact on non-formal education in Bhutan having noted the impact of the lack of education generally among the Bhutanese Women. The objective of the study was to determine the viability of informal learning in leading to women's empowerment in Bhutan. The study aimed to explore whether non-formal education in Bhutan is the most suitable instrument for empowering women. If it is found to be effective, further necessary steps can be taken to ensure that more women and girls are empowered in Bhutan.

To this end, it correlates the lessons learned from previous chapters by comparing findings from the literature review to those in the case study. This part answers the research questions and bring to perspective the case study as well as discuss any current shortfalls of the non- formal education system.

#### **Can non-formal education in Bhutan pave the way for women's empowerment?**

Non-formal education in Bhutan has served as a crucial strategy for the inclusion and empowerment of a substantial and vulnerable population that missed out on formal education due to various factors, such as social, economic, and occupational challenges during their school years. Delivered through an extensive network of learning centers across the country, the program has grown in relevance and popularity over time. Beyond its initial purpose, it has become a key driver of learning, notably promoting the national language, Dzongkha (Powdyel, 2016).

Non-formal education has become a powerful tool for self-realization and active participation in local governance, especially with the broader opportunities created by the advent of democracy. Beyond promoting literacy and numeracy, it has served as a vital platform for conveying important messages about issues affecting individuals and society as a whole. This program has empowered Bhutanese women to make informed decisions about their personal lives, families, children, finances, and even their government. In essence, it has played a key role in empowering Bhutanese women (Powdyel, 2016).

Literature states that empowering a woman means, ensuring that women have both access to and control over resources. (Kabeer, 2000). This definition casts the net wider by stating that; women empowerment is the process by which women have the ability to make "strategic life choices". This ability as stated earlier is in three inter-related dimensions: resources, agency and achievements that are the well-being outcomes. In short, empowerment is therefore: "*the ability to make choices: to be disempowered, therefore implies to be denied choice*" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 13).

Indeed, non-formal education in Bhutan has the potential to pave the way for women's empowerment. It denotes a greater voice for women in the management of the land they own and access to an effective secondary and higher education along with skills training will go a long way in addressing gender gap concerns in Bhutan (Jamtsho, 2013). The Labor Force Survey of 2011 show that although there was little gender disparity in terms of overall employment, 72 % (percent) males and 67% (percent) females (Jamtsho, 2013).

#### **Did non- formal education impact women in the Political, Social and Economic Roles?**

In developing countries, it is generally observed that women actively participate as responsible citizens, exercising their newly acquired democratic rights at the polls in numbers comparable to men (Chuki & Maxwell, 2017). But they do not move into political leadership roles in significant numbers even when they have played significant roles in the democratization process (Alvarez 1990; Aquino 1994; Waylen, 1994).

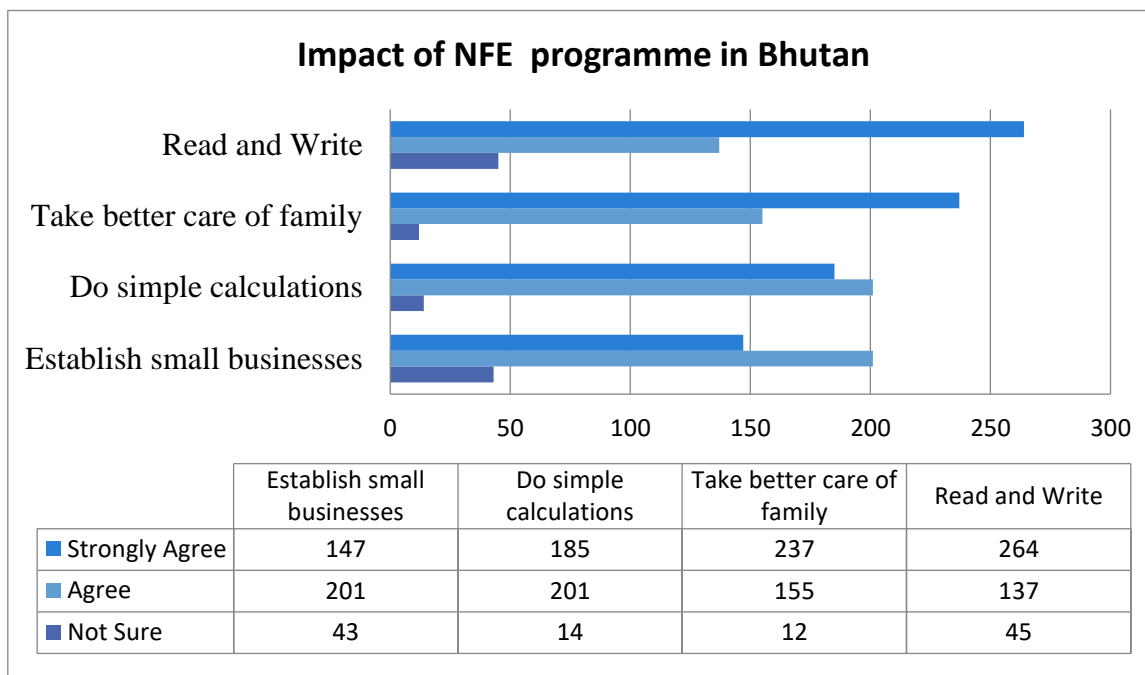
According to Bhutan's Constitution and Electoral Law, women have equality with men. In political terms, this means that women and men have the same rights for voting and for standing in elections (Chuki & Turner, 2017).

In any event, when discussing issues on development one crucial aspect is empowerment of women and the positive consequences that it brings which include a Bhutanese woman that engages the social, economic and political aspects of life.

In the case study, it was determined that the impact of the non-formal education program was that it evoked not only the ability of the woman to make choices, but also enabled the woman to perceive or observe their behaviour, have a locus of control, stability, and controllability (Weiner, 1986).

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**Table 01: Positive impact of the non- formal education programme to the Bhutanese woman and gives an overall impact of the non-formal program (Dukpa, 2015)**



While analyzing the impact of non-formal education, we again have to bear in mind our conclusion above on whether the non-formal education has impacted the empowerment of women in Bhutan (**table 01**). I recall the analogy by Rowland (1995), who emphasizes that education is not necessarily the root to empowerment and that it embodies other aspects for which together are intertwined. Her argument was that full empowerment is innate. Education just does but spark the fire in the woman to be able to develop a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, undo the effects of internalized oppression and develop the ability to negotiate, influence the nature of the relationship and decisions made within. Furthermore, the Bhutanese woman can work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had individually.

This can be seen by their involvement in political structures, the ploy for good governance and establishment of small businesses among others.

### The Gaps

The non- formal education programme has triumphed. According to the national newspaper, *Kuensel* (2015):

*“There are many success stories of the programme changing lives of people, especially in rural Bhutan. While some have passed the Election Commission of Bhutan’s literacy test to participate in local government elections, mothers studying with their kindergarten children are a common story. This is one programme thousands of unfortunate people will thank the government for.”* (p. 3)

As we acknowledge the significant role the non-formal education program has played in uplifting the status of Bhutanese women and commend the progress achieved, a few shortcomings remain. Despite the program's positive impact, there continues to be a high dropout rate among participants, and the job opportunities available to women who have completed the program still lag behind those of men (Powdyel, 2015).

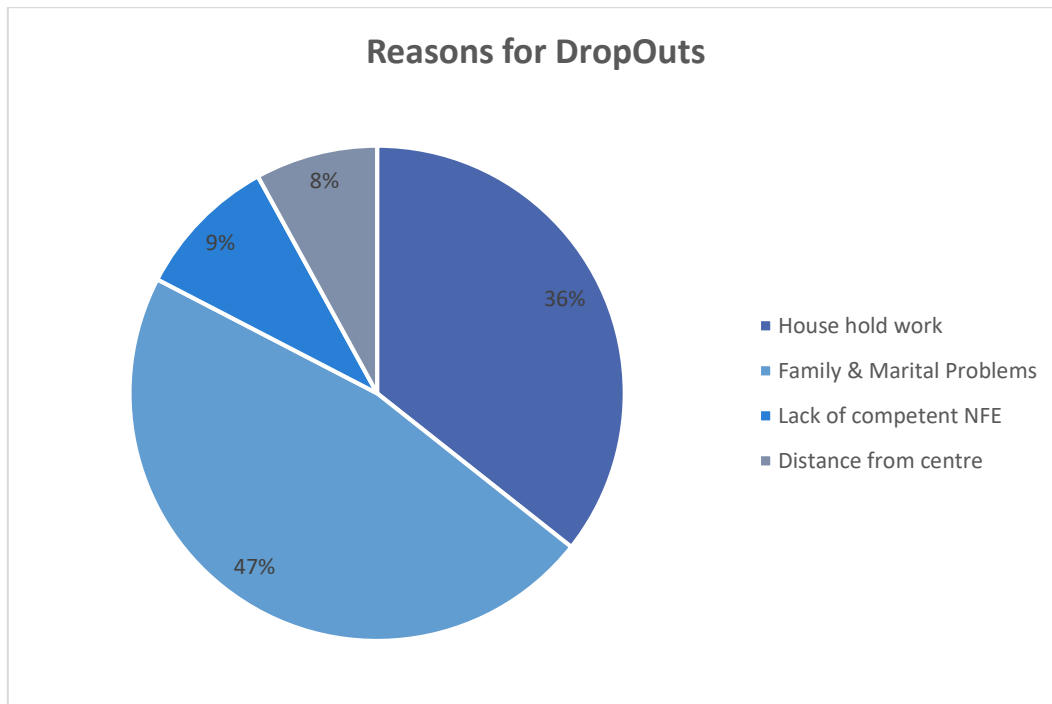
The impressive achievements made under challenging circumstances seem, however, to be threatened. As indicated above, the drop-out numbers are significant to the extent that *Kuensel* reporter Pokhrel (2015) wrote that as many as 1142 learners dropped out of the programme in 2014 alone, 666 of them being women. The reasons cited range from closure of centers following the departure of the instructor, competing claims of housework, distance to learning centers, shortage of helping hands, to perceptions of gender roles.

The challenges affect not only the learners but also the non-formal education program itself. In research conducted by Dupka (2015), majority of the respondents stated that the distance to the non-formal education programme center is close to the community, however, about 7 percent of the existing PLC learners, 3 percent of existing BLC learners, 2 percent of the NFE instructors, 4 percent of the principals and 3 percent of the local leaders respectively disagree with the statement that the NFE Centre is close to the community (**figure 01**) (Dupka,2015).



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Figure 01: Graph representation of the reasons for NFE students' dropouts in Bhutan (Dukpa, 2015)



### SUMMARY

It is undeniable that Bhutanese women are still predominantly employed in low-paying agricultural jobs, and those working in the non-agricultural sector earn nearly 25% less than their male counterparts. Women still bear the primary responsibility for household chores and childcare, which prevents them from obtaining the necessary education and skills training for better job opportunities (Jamtsho, 2013; World Bank Group, 2013).

Women should take an active role in managing their land to enhance business opportunities and achieve economic empowerment. Girls should be encouraged and supported to complete their secondary and tertiary education. Additionally, they should have access to vocational and life skills training specifically designed for women, which can lead to better job quality. It is also essential to address social norms regarding gender roles within households (Jamtsho, 2013; World Bank Group, 2013).

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Dukpa (2015) found that 91 percent of current BLC learners, 88 percent of current PLC learners, 80 percent of NFE graduates, 39 percent of NFE dropouts, and 92 percent of NFE instructors expressed satisfaction with the content of the NFE program.

Addressing ongoing gender inequalities is essential not only for reasons of fairness and equity but also due to economic necessity (WHO, 2006). In this 21<sup>st</sup> century where technology is evolving, women need to come forward and take advantage of it to progress economically, politically and socially. To achieve this, women must be educated, as education is crucial (Kinley & Seden, 2016). In Bhutan, where Gross National Happiness (GNH) is prioritized over GDP as a developmental philosophy, education has been designated as one of the nine domains of GNH to help attain its goals (Kinley & Seden, 2016).

The increasingly worrying state of the once-award-winning programme led the *Kuensel* editorial to comment: *It is a shame that the education ministry's most successful programme, the non-formal education, is in dire need of attention.* (*Kuensel* editorial, 2015, 21 April)

Establishing more non-formal education programme centers closer to the communities thereby reducing travel distance and time, posting more regular instructors with better incentives, allocating dedicated budget at the *dzongkhag* level, providing adequate learning resources and ensuring their timely supply, and enforcing better accountability would be some of the measures to help in reducing drop-out rates (Powdyel, 2016).

### THE ROAD AHEAD

Due to the popularity, traction and quality of learning have become a representation of the non- formal education programme, despite the concerns indicated above, the non- formal education programme as we have indicated time and again is still a win but leaves much more for improvement (Powdyel, 2016).

A couple of factors can be considered to make the non- formal education programme a ratified and sought-after learning system that is almost equally recognized to the formal education programme.

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Increased efforts could also be made to:

- i. Enhancing the participation rate.
- ii. Ensuring completion by those who enroll by mounting effective interventions.
- iii. Greater flexibility in class timing; the programme is targeted to adults who have other responsibilities such as family to consider. Having the learner's life situation in mind and providing friendlier timing would see a reduced number of dropouts.
- iv. Proximity to learning centers to learners is crucial to encourage a learner to attend classes.
- v. Providing continuous monitoring and support.
- vi. Improving the infrastructure/need for separate classrooms.
- vii. Reviewing the NFE policy guidelines.
- viii. Providing development and training opportunities to the NFE instructors and diversifying the NFE Programme by including ICT and functional English.

These pertinent issues would be areas that are likely to increase the participation rate (Powdyel, 2016).

### SYSTEMS CHANGE

Key areas of the non-formal education programme need to be addressed. Most importantly, the allotment of increased resources by the government, especially dedicated to the non-formal education programme at the *dzongkhag(basic)* level is required. This is crucial essentially in communities where resources are scarce. For any programme to be effective, there is a need to have the working documents in place for guidance and reference. From a syllabus being created to guide trainers and learners to documentation of learning progress made by the participants needs to be systematized (Powdyel, 2016).

Vocational and technical training for students could serve as a strategic approach to building professional skills and tackling employment challenges, provided the learning is relevant and timely. A key intervention should focus on improving the quality, quantity, and sustainability of non-formal education instructors (Powdyel, 2016).

Capacity building for instructors should be more regular and systematic. Instructors also need job security and fair compensation to remain motivated and accountable for their performance. Furthermore, a well-structured system for recruitment, training, and retention would help attract motivated young Bhutanese, many of whom are seeking employment. This approach should come close to, but not necessarily include, implementing performance contracts for non-formal program instructors.

Equally important is the need for more accountability in the non-formal education programme. Regular monitoring and inspection of non-formal education centers is required along the lines of the Education Monitoring and Support Services Division under the Department of School Education in the formal education sector. Accountability at all levels to include instructors, heads of parent schools, local leaders, *dzongkhag* education officers and their deputies, district administrators and non-formal education officials at the headquarters – needs to be enforced. Similar to every community or social impactful project, community engagement of all stakeholders is crucial for the success of the non-formal education programme (Powdyel, 2016).

The reason for the above recommendations is that, about 25% of the non-formal education program centers are housed either in temporary sheds or in people's houses that can be too small to accommodate the learners. In addition, most of these centers lack basic facilities such as a blackboard, lights and furniture. These dilapidated situations are making it difficult for facilitators to conduct effective literacy classes.

A major constraint faced by the programme has been the lack of accurate data on the number of learners, including enrolment and completion rates, functional and non-functional learning centers, availability of recommended learning materials at the centers, and duration of actual attendance by learners and instructors. An important intervention to address this gap was launched in 2009 to develop a reliable NFE- MIS (NFE-Management Information System) database with support from UNESCO (Hüfner, 2010). Given the lack of reliable data on various aspects of the program, it is essential to recognize and utilize this resource for effective planning, monitoring, and development of the NFE program in the country. Along with addressing accountability concerns, there should also be regular assessments of the learning programs.

### CURRICULUM/ SYLLABUS CHANGE

Attention should be given to learning standards, resource integrity, the availability and relevance of learning materials, and the recognition of both student achievements and the performance of successful instructors (Powdyel, 2016). An important observation from instructors and program evaluators is that non-formal education learners often express a desire to learn basic English in addition to Dzongkha literacy. As noted earlier, a comprehensive English course for non-formal education learners was developed and piloted in 2011 with the assistance of a UNESCO consultant. The draft was intended to undergo thorough review, with necessary revisions to ensure curriculum integrity and effective implementation strategies, while prioritizing a context-sensitive approach.

What has fallen short of execution is that the draft non-formal education programme learners' course should be revisited, and its currency reviewed for possible implementation in response to an expressed need of learners. For instance, that is, the popularly demanded but long delayed functional English course calls for due consideration to attract learners to the non-formal education programme. So far, the major share of support to augment the government's efforts in the promotion of the non-formal education

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programme has come from UNICEF followed by UNESCO, with some assistance from some other agencies. Efforts must be made to expand collaboration with other relevant institutions and agencies including non-governmental organisations to stabilise the progress made and to broaden its reach (Powdyel, 2016).

The recommendations in this paper are not novel we must admit, with those made in the RUB study (2014) which stated the need to:

Link non-formal education program with local governance training, a goal from this could be to incentivize community members to participate in non-formal education, and to increase community participation, development and learning at the local level. Further perks would be that if one excels in the non-formal education programme, then there would be an opportunity for that community member to attend a short course in local leadership and governance skills offered by interested organizations thereby enhancing the opportunity to be a capable local government leader eventually supporting the empowerment of the community to participate in community affairs. (p. 139)

What this paper aims to put across is that a review of non-formal education program is needed. While Bhutan is performing relatively better than most of the Asian countries such as Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (UNESCO Pacific-Asia), more can be done. This includes working on policies, assessment of current needs, programme development, delivery including recruitment and retention of instructors, resourcing of learning centers and information gaps. Engaging all stakeholders and addressing accountability issues will facilitate the necessary interventions to achieve the desired outcomes from the NFE program. This will support the country's efforts to cultivate a literate and empowered citizenry capable of fully participating in the progressive knowledge society that Bhutan aims to become (Schuelka & Maxwell, Eds., 2016).

### **STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS**

This study reveals a number of challenges facing the most deprived section of the country in the quest to become literate by willingly sacrificing their time, effort, responsibilities of home and family among others. Not surprisingly, shortage of labour to do household work, marital and family problems were the top three reasons contributing to the dropout of the NFE learners. Dukpa (2005) asserts that recognizing the ongoing dropout rates and the necessity to represent the underserved, silent, and voiceless populations, it is crucial for the NCFED to establish partnerships with relevant stakeholders (such as BBS, UN, etc.) to create and deliver home-based learning materials and resources through radio and television programs.

### **CONCLUSION**

The educational progress has been seen as an important factor contributing to the attainment of the country's cherished goal of Gross National Happiness. This should not be despaired. Overall, the non-formal education program has indeed made a significant contribution. Establishing supportive conditions for everyone to benefit from learning through formal, non-formal, and informal methods will greatly advance progress toward that goal (Powdyel, 2016).

The gains made by the non-formal education programme for vulnerable citizens(women) must be sustained and enhanced by efforts made to address the challenges. Opportunities for employment creation through income-generating activities should be given proper consideration, in addition to focusing on social, cultural, civic, and sustainability education objectives (Powdyel, 2016). The realization of the full potential of the non-formal education programme requires a close assessment of the achievement's vis-a-vis its intent together with a thorough examination of gaps that have hindered progress. The visible empowerment of disadvantaged communities through literacy and numeracy, life skills education, the promotion of the national language, and increased participation in local governance—particularly by women—are all positive outcomes of non-formal education (Powdyel, 2016). Furthermore, enhanced understanding of health and hygiene issues, deeper appreciation of environment, and land management concerns has indeed improved the standard of living and been some of the deeply gratifying outcomes of the non-formal education programme.

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