

Opening statement by Mr. Kinga Singye, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Bhutan to the United Nations and other International Organizations in Geneva before the Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women during the consideration by the Committee of Bhutan's 8th and 9th Combined Periodic Report, Geneva, 27 October, 2016

Madam Chair,

Distinguished members of the Committee,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. At the outset, allow me to convey the apologies of Her Excellency Lyonpo Dorji Choden, Minister of Works and Human Settlement and Chairperson of the National Commission for Women and Children. She was looking forward to being in Geneva today to discuss with the Hon'ble members of the esteemed Committee, Bhutan's 8th and 9th combined periodic report on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and together chart the course for the future as Bhutan continues with its earnest efforts to promote CEDAW. However, due to unforeseen last minute developments she was not able to lead the delegation and as a result this important responsibility has fallen on me.

2. It is without any doubt a distinct honour and privilege for me to lead the Bhutanese delegation. I am ably supported by a team of highly capable and dedicated senior officials from Bhutan who in their different capacities are working tirelessly to promote the cause of women in our country. Their presence makes my task all the more easy and I am confident that the Committee will find engagement with them fruitful.

3. With your permission, Madam Chair, I would like to introduce the members of the Bhutanese delegation to the Committee.

(i) Ms. Kunzang Lhamu is the Director of the Secretariat of the National Commission for Women and Children. Prior to her present job, she was a senior official in the Gross National Happiness Commission responsible for women and children's issues in the socio-economic development process. She has been associated with CEDAW for a long time and has participated in the previous consideration of Bhutan's report by the Committee.

(ii) Dasho Tshering Dorji is the Registrar General of the Supreme Court and is a member of the National Commission for Women and Children. He plays an active role in the many initiatives to empower women and strengthen gender equality in the legal system.

(iii) Ms. Tshewang Lhamo is the Program Officer in the Secretariat of the National Commission for Women and Children. She is the key person responsible for coordinating and ensuring timely submission of Bhutan's Report on CEDAW. She is in constant contact with all sections of our society towards ensuring gender equality.

(iv) Mr. Sonam Tashi is the Chief Attorney in the Office of the Attorney General of Bhutan. He is also the Gender Focal Person in the Attorney General's Office and has been instrumental in incorporating a gender perspective in the legislative drafting process. He has participated in previous Human Rights Reviews such as the UPR in 2014.

(v) Ms. Rinchen Dema is the Senior Legal Officer in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is the key person in the Ministry looking after issues related to Bhutan's treaty ratifications and ensuring the fulfillment of treaty obligations by Bhutan including the CEDAW.

(vi) Ms. Tashi Yangzom is the Sr. Planning Officer and Gender Focal Person in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests and also a member of the Gender Expert Group.

(vii) Ms. Metho Dema is the Desk Officer and the Gender Focal Person in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She coordinates all issues related to Human Rights Review mechanisms in the Ministry and participated in the UPR in 2014.

(viii) Ms. Tashi Peldon is the First Secretary in the Permanent Mission of Bhutan and she deals with human rights issues.

4. In 2008, Bhutan became a democratic constitutional monarchy and since then two general elections have been held. The current government, which came to power in 2013, has taken numerous steps to empower women. This includes strengthening the National Commission for Women and Children, enhancing the role and capacity of Civil Society Organizations working on women and children, and initiating interventions to enhance women's representation in elected offices.

5. The Constitution of Bhutan provides the overall framework for the promotion and protection of women's rights and their empowerment: fundamental rights are equally bestowed on women and men (Art. 7.15); fundamental duties require every Bhutanese not to tolerate abuse of women (Art. 8.5); principles of state policy guide actions to eliminate discrimination against women and children (Art. 9.17 & Art. 9.18), and Article 10.25 of the Constitution recognizes ratified international treaties like CEDAW as a deemed law of the kingdom.

6. Bhutan's development philosophy of Gross National Happiness articulates the idea and vision of a just and harmonious society and all development policies and programs are aimed at creating an environment where every woman, child and man are involved and benefit from development and growth. Every policy requires to be screened using a GNH policy-screening tool, which has gender equality as one of the parameters in the rating.

7. The Government attaches the highest importance to the CEDAW. Each arm of the government from the Judiciary to the Parliament to the Executive is fully committed to ensuring that our women enjoy equal rights and opportunities and that all societal prejudices and barriers that hinder their role and progress in society are removed. At the 135th General Assembly of the Inter Parliamentary Union, which is currently taking place in Geneva, the Speaker of the National Assembly of Bhutan reaffirmed the commitment of our Parliament to human rights and to the dignity and worth of every Bhutanese citizen.

8. Despite our strong commitment and efforts, Bhutan continues to encounter numerous challenges in implementing CEDAW. The challenges arise from the constraints we face as a small least developed and landlocked country with scarce resources amidst competing priorities and other factors. They impinge on our ability to find the necessary financial, human and other resources to smoothly implement policy decisions and initiatives but we are confident that our efforts will bear fruit, however gradual, with the goodwill and support of the international community.

9. The Bhutanese delegation would like to convey its deep appreciation to the Committee for the invaluable work it is doing to promote and protect women's rights worldwide. The Committee's vigilance and frank appraisal of situations faced by women is contributing immensely to peace, security and development.

10. In our view, the CEDAW is one of the most widely referenced of all the international treaties, and Bhutan is proud to be a State Party to it. Our experience with the Committee is highly positive and we always welcome the opportunity to interact with the honourable members and benefit from your wisdom, knowledge and experience.

11. As submitted in our combined 8th and 9th periodic report, the Government has ensured constant follow up and implementation of the concluding observations from the last review through appropriate interventions. We are happy that today's session will provide us another opportunity to strengthen our resolve and to correct any shortcomings and oversight that may have occurred in the midst of many ongoing interventions.

12. In addition to our responses to the advance list of issues, please also allow me to briefly highlight some significant achievements made during the period under review, most of which are a direct outcome of the concluding observations and its subsequent implementation.

Local Government Election

Madam Chair,

13. Bhutan successfully conducted its second local government elections last month. While below our expectations, the outcome of the elections has at least shown incremental progress. Two women were elected as heads of block compared to one in 2011; 24 female deputy heads of block were elected compared to 12; and we now have 129 women village representatives compared to 96. There has been a 100 percent increase in woman's participation at the candidature level from 236 in 2011 to 476 in 2016. This is an outcome of the various interventions including outreach programs conducted by the Government and CSOs to encourage woman's participation.

14. Overall, we have achieved a 3% increase in woman's representation in local government. The voter turnout of women continues to be higher than men. These are modest gains, but significant nonetheless, given the constraints in a society that is deeply entrenched in traditional norms and beliefs. Continued efforts are being made to address these constraints and combat societal prejudices and other barriers to increasing women's representation at both the local and national level.

Policy Reforms and Development Plans

Madam Chair,

15. The Government's overall goal of development is happiness and well being for its people. We are clear that this goal can only be realized in an inclusive and harmonious society, built on the foundations of equality and non-discrimination.

16. In this context, the Government has already started working on a national gender equality policy. The National Commission for Women and Children has prepared a concept note through multi-sectoral consultations. This policy will be instrumental in providing clear policy directives towards strengthening gender-mainstreaming initiatives in the country.

17. Further, as required by the Policy Protocol of the Government, the National Commission for Women and Children and Gender Focal Persons in the various ministries and agencies continue to review new policies from a gender equality perspective; notable among them is the revision of the Economic Development Policy 2010. The revised policy will bring about economic reforms and opportunities particularly for rural women and women entrepreneurs.

18. Bhutan continues to strengthen its endeavors in mainstreaming gender concerns in the National Development Plans. The 11th FYP has a dedicated National Key Result Area, i.e 'Gender Friendly Environment for Woman's Participation' and gender focused targets on employment, health, education, participation, protection, and awareness. These have led to significant outcomes like effective partnership and policy reforms.

19. A midterm gender appraisal of the 11th FYP has been conducted in some sectors to assess the progress made in institutionalizing processes for gender mainstreaming. A Gender Expert Group with representatives from government and non-government agencies has also been formed. The expert group, besides supporting the National Commission for Women and Children to review legislations and policies, also supports sectors in implementing gender related interventions.

20. The network of Gender Focal Persons has been expanded in all 20 districts and currently there are 46 of them throughout the country. The Gender Focal Persons support implementation of gender related interventions at the local and national level. The National Commission for Women and Children is working towards strengthening the capacity of Gender Focal Persons and supporting development of Gender Action Plans in the selected districts in the 12th Five Year Plan Period (2018-2023).

21. In addition to this, the Government has taken the initiative to mainstream gender in the overall planning and implementation process through inclusion of sector specific gender equality indicators for Ministries of Education, Health, Agriculture and Forests and the National Statistics Bureau.

22. Coordination meetings between the National Commission for Women and Children and various government agencies and CSOs are being conducted regularly with the objective of instituting a proper coordination and collaboration mechanism.

Legal Reforms

23. In the area of legal reform, major achievements after the last review are the enactment of the Child Care and Protection Act 2011 and the Domestic Violence Prevention Act 2013.

24. The government is working towards establishing institutional mechanisms to ensure effective implementation of these Acts. The Child Care and Protection Rules and Regulations and Domestic Violence Prevention Rules and Regulations were endorsed in 2015. Further, various Standard Operating Procedures and Guidelines have been finalized in consultation with all relevant government and non-government partners.

25. The need for harmonization of laws is an area of priority and concern for the Government, and therefore discussions are being undertaken at various levels on legal reforms. In particular, the Women, Children and Youth Committee of the National Assembly has initiated consultations with various agencies on amending and harmonizing contradictory provisions pertaining to women and children. The outcomes of these consultations will be submitted to the Parliament.

Creating an enabling environment for working women

Madam Chair,

26. In the field of employment, the Government extended maternity leave for women in public service from 3 months to 6 months and paternity leave from 5 working days to 10 working days with effect from March 2016.

27. In addition to this, the Government is also exploring possibilities of creating a gender friendly work place in corporate and private sectors. The Ministry of Labour and Human Resources has recently issued a notification to corporate and private sectors to increase parental benefits, particularly maternity leave and providing childcare facilities. Accordingly, the private and corporate sectors are in the process of developing modalities for enhancing parental benefits.

28. Further from July this year, mandatory indicators on gender equality have been incorporated in the 2016-2017 Annual Performance Agreements of all government ministries and autonomous agencies signed with the Hon'ble Prime Minister. These indicators require all government agencies to provide child care facilities to their employees and to develop internal frameworks to address gender issues faced by employees within their respective agencies.

29. The internal framework, amongst others, requires agencies to develop mechanisms to prevent sexual harassment at the work place and ensure implementation of the six months maternity leave.

Improving access to employment opportunities

Madam Chair,

30. Recognizing the particular problems faced by women and the significant roles they play in economic development, the Government has undertaken a number of initiatives to increase job opportunities and employability for women. As of June 2016, a total of 3681 female youths as compared to 2407 male youths have been trained and employed through various government schemes like Employment Skills Scheme, Overseas Employment Scheme, and Direct Employment Scheme.

31. The government collaborates with CSOs working at the local level to build skills of rural women and provide various support to increase their income. Based on the findings of the impact assessment of Cooperatives and Self Help Groups, continued support is being provided to form such groups at the local level. As of 2016 there are 388 registered farmers' groups and cooperatives of which 45 % of the members are female.

Improving access to education

Madam Chair,

32. On girl's access to education, the Ministry of Education has adopted the concept of gender responsive pedagogy and trained teachers towards this end. In addition, targeted interventions to provide sanitary napkins to girls enrolled in boarding schools is being continued to make the school environment more conducive for girls.

33. Similarly, efforts are ongoing to implement the recently developed Technical and Vocational Training blueprint to increase girl's participation in Technical Training Institute.

Combating violence against women

Madam Chair,

34. A pre-trial detention and rehabilitation centre for women and girls has been established within the Royal Bhutan Police. The Royal Bhutan Police has a Woman and Child Protection Division at the headquarters and established Units/Desks in ten districts. There are plans to expand these in the remaining districts. Further, as required by the Domestic Violence Prevention Act, the government will establish Woman and Child Committees in a few districts, which will also include the appointment of Protection Officers to support victims of violence against women at the local government level.

Combating violence against children

35. The first nationwide study on violence against children was finalized and launched coinciding with the International Day of the Girl Child on 11th October 2016. This report has provided the much-needed data on violence against children to formulate appropriate interventions. Bhutan also plans to conduct a similar study on violence against women in 2017 and we are hopeful that this study will provide comprehensive data on it.

Trafficking in Person

36. A dedicated project to combat trafficking in persons is currently being undertaken. The project has resulted in formulation of Standard Operating Procedures, legal and policy review on the issue and capacity building of law enforcement agencies.

37. A proposal for identifying a government lead agency on preventing and combating trafficking in persons in the country has been finalized and submitted to the Cabinet. The proposal was prepared through a consultative

process with all agencies including CSOs. We are confident that this initiative will lead to stronger coordination and cooperation between agencies and strengthen our efforts to prevent and respond to trafficking in persons

Awareness and Advocacy

Madam Chair,

38. Recognizing inadequate awareness and lack of capacity as two of the most pressing challenges, Bhutan continues to carry out at all levels, awareness and sensitization activities on gender concepts and other social issues such as alcoholism, sexual and reproductive behavior, suicide etc. In August 2016, a high-level gender sensitization workshop was conducted for members of the Parliament.

39. Similarly, a nationwide advocacy program on HIV/AIDS, gender issues including violence against women, child marriage, teenage pregnancy and existing services for women and children in difficult circumstances, led by Her Majesty the Queen Mother, Gyalyum Sangay Choden Wangchuck, is currently underway. Relevant agencies like Ministries of Health and Education, National Commission for Women and Children, and relevant CSOs like RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women) are taking part in the Program. It is targeted at district officials, employers and employees of the entertainment sector, teachers, students and the general public. Likewise, various gender related trainings have been carried out for the Gender Focal Persons, law enforcement agencies, attorneys and service providers.

Commitment to international goals

Madam Chair,

40. Bhutan stands committed to uphold and implement the 2030 agenda on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and appreciates the stand-alone goal on gender equality. Work is in progress to align the 12th Five Year National Development Plan to the SDGs. The Gross National Happiness Commission is spearheading this initiative and has carried out several consultations to incorporate SDG indicators in the 12th Five Year Plan.

41. Bhutan remains committed to implementing the outcomes of the 60th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. We understand the need to collect and use sex-disaggregated data for better planning and strengthening accountability. I am pleased to report that the National Statistics Bureau and the National Commission for Women and Children are working together to review the draft Gender Indicator Handbook to incorporate the SDGs and global core set of indicators. Plans are in place to build the capacities of statistical officials on sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics. Similarly, the government has mandated the National Statistics Bureau to collect sex-disaggregated data through inclusion of a mandatory indicator in the Annual Performance Agreement.

Conclusion

Madam Chair,

Distinguished Members of the Committee,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

42. I would like to express our deep gratitude to the Committee for providing us this opportunity to present the status of women in Bhutan and outline the gains we have made in recent years and the challenges that still lie ahead. We are aware of the hurdles we face in implementing policy decisions due to limited resources and competing priorities. However, the Government has over the years made increased allocations to the National Commission for Women and Children and other relevant stakeholders. We are also aware of the slow pace at which we are able to carry forward certain initiatives because of cultural perceptions in a highly traditional society. The Government is working hard to overcome these perceptions through awareness programs. The 12th Five Year Plan has identified close partnership with CSOs as one of the key strategies and accordingly we remain fully committed to enhancing our collaboration with the CSOs and relevant stakeholders in Bhutan, and our partners in the international community, to realize, step by step, all our targets for women and girls.

43. Allow me to conclude, by reiterating the Government's commitment to CEDAW and our desire to continue working with the Committee. We look forward to today's interaction with the esteemed Committee – to listen to your guidance and counsel, to learn from best practices in other parts of the world and together strive towards our common goal of eliminating all forms of discrimination against women.

Thank you for your kind attention.
