4. **Land Tenure Systems and Women’s Empowerment in Bhutan**

I want to share my story on women and their engagement in the socio-economic development of Bhutan, in particular, rural women’s role, responsibilities and landholding ownership. During the summer 2015, I visited a number of remote villages in the four regions of Bhutan as part of my preliminary research on “land tenure systems and women’s empowerment.” During this time, I met and talked to many women and I want to present their stories through the women’s eyes.

In particular, I will share Nim Dem’s story and her struggle as the head of a household in rural Bhutan:

_I am Nim Dem from Geptay Village under Paro District. I am 49 years old with three children, 2 daughters and a son. My husband died a few years back and as such, all the responsibilities fell on me to raise my children, work in the field and also to attend village meetings. This has given me an extra burden. I am illiterate, but due to the media and other forms of information, I can understand the current situation of my country. I work hard so that I can raise my three children to be better citizens. My dream is to make them serve our Kings, the Country and the People of Bhutan with dedication and sincerity. I have 23 decimals dry land and_
23 decimals wet land. This small piece of land is inherited by my late husband from his parents. In tradition, daughters inherit the majority of land with a small portion given to sons. However, I will divide the land equally among my 3 children.

For rural women like Nim Dem, life is becoming challenging due to different climate threats. For the past 5 to 7 years, they have seen a decline in their agricultural productivity and crops have decreased in terms of quality and quantity. She explained that the area has suffered from unexpected hailstorms, unpredictable rains and other weather events. During my visit, it was clear that all the villagers were worried. I was told that last year there was a strong storm during the rice harvesting season which damaged their entire crop output. Due to excess rains, the rice paddy got destroyed and couldn’t dry properly, hence the harvest was small and almost inedible. This situation left them with no income. While climate has become a problem, women farmers also have to confront numerous treats (environmental and social) related to conservation issues in their small plots.

Bhutan is well-known for protecting the environment and the wildlife, however, the forest protection and conservation policies has exacerbated the number of wildlife that is directly affecting many farmer’s plots like Nim Dem’s. She added in that sense:

*It is good to protect our wildlife but at the same time it is also creating many problems. Due to such policies, wildlife has increased over the last 10 years. We have to protect our crops all year from monkeys, wild boars, birds and other animals that keep destroying and eating our crops. Since I am all alone, all the works is done by me. I have to do the planting, harvesting, guarding the crops, looking after my children and all other works.*

In Bhutan, most of the agricultural work is done by the women, while men are mostly engaged in other economic activities and migrate at times. Women in Nim Dem’s village work extremely hard, whereas the men do business, and most of them play archery. Besides work related and environmental problems, women are confronting other social problems. Archery, the country’s traditional and national sport, has become “a social problem” as rural women mentioned that men are addicted to it and do not work as hard. They tend to play almost everyday. This is also effecting the family lives, since males are out most of the time engaged in competitions, returning home drunk oftentimes. While this situation does not affect Nim Dem directly, she fairs for her children as it is difficult not to be affected by social customs, as well as, the environmental problems they face as she comments:

*I am waiting for all my children to get married and be fully settled. My son is going to be an engineer and he will work in the capital city. My eldest daughter is about to finish college and my youngest daughter is soon going to college as well. I have few more years to struggle. I constantly think of their future because our country is developing very fast, we now have roads, electricity, hospitals and many other things, but I feel sometimes that there are inequalities between men and women.*

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7 Dry land in Bhutan means, a land where we can construct house and do any economic activity while wetland refers to land, where only cultivation is allowed
Our culture and tradition also plays an important role in this fast changing world. I think it is creating problems for us women. That is why I want to make all my children aware of all these social and environmental problems and to be conscious of their responsibilities as citizens while respecting women’s needs.

In rural areas, due to traditional rules, women were made to stay home to look after their parents while their brothers went to school and became educated. Things are changing in the villages and women like Nim Dem want a better future for their daughters and also secure land tenure rights for their sons. Today, most of the village population is represented by women, as men are on the move. Because of this, women are still compelled to look after their children, land, and also attend community events and gatherings. However, it is in the Bhutanese tradition to make decisions jointly and work together with the husbands. Something important to mention is that the government of Bhutan has stepped up to provide its people with the basic needs that the citizens of other neighboring countries do not enjoy. Because of this government commitment, women enjoy a different standard than women in other developing countries. Nonetheless, there is much to be done for women to reach equality and be able to enjoy as men do in this society.

I am happy that our government, especially our Queen Mother is helping women with empowerment. I am able to understand many issues. I can say that women are playing a very important role in the conservation of our natural environment. While most of the land ownership is in the name of women, the right over the land should be equal between husband and wife. The decision making on agriculture is done jointly which is very important to maintain harmony and satisfy everybody’s needs in the household.

While life is difficult in rural areas, the recollection of women’s stories in four regions of Bhutan is also consistent and they mention that they felt truly blessed to have been born in a country where the King, (especially the fourth King of Bhutan) has been very progressive, taking care of people’s lives including educational and health needs. Nim Dem’s children are going to school and she does not have to pay fees and in times of sickness, free medical facilities are also provided; such caring gives women in Bhutan more hope and peace.

I want my daughter to complete her college and work for the Government. I want her to be equally strong and powerful. In the past, we worked hard, looking after children mostly by ourselves, doing domestic work and agricultural work, while our men do little work. However, to maintain a good balance, I believe that the inheritance of the land should be equal for our sons’ and daughters’. In this way, our society will provide an equal opportunity and land ownership to our children and the society as a whole. I have seen on TV that women in many developed countries are more powerful, rich and highly educated. Most of the women in these developed countries are equally contributing to income generation. In my village we need more education in agricultural production, vocational trainings and other competencies that will help women become skillful. Further exposure and visits to other countries to share our stories with other women will also be very helpful and will greatly increase our skills and knowledge.
As a young researcher who has had the possibility to visit remote areas of my country, I feel that we should give more attention to women’s empowerment. This will help women tremendously and it will impact our socio-economic development and environment. I personally feel that women’s empowerment should be a priority, by introducing different safeguards or systems, including shared land ownership and educational opportunities at the village level, so that, women become equally important and influential to our government. During my visits many interesting stories with similar situations are being heard from women living in remote villages. This exposure has given me more wisdom and encouragement to work towards giving voice and further empowering women in my country of Bhutan.