



## Opportunities and challenges of women academics of Samtse College of Education

Kinley Seden and Yangdon

Samtse College of Education, Royal University of Bhutan, Thimphu, Bhutan

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### ABSTRACT

Employing a narrative approach, the aim of this study was to contribute to an understanding of how women academics experience career success and challenges, what factors impact success, and how their choices and challenges impact on their career advancement. To investigate the experiences of women academics, a thematic analysis was used in the analyses of six audio-recorded interviews from six women academics consisting of early, mixed and experienced careers in one higher education institute. The findings disclose that women's academic experiences of success were mostly attributed to both hard work and karma (past deeds), and challenges were mostly related to balancing their personal and professional responsibilities. However, the study also reveals that women academics manage their challenges by sharing, staying emotionally stable, and being strictly professional. The findings also indicated that certain religious and spiritual beliefs affect their decision; for example, the adoption of particular practices influence their decision in terms of availing opportunities or overcoming obstacles.

### KEYWORDS

Women academics;  
opportunities; challenges;  
religious beliefs; gross  
national happiness; higher  
education

## Introduction

Today, an increasing number of women enter the academic workforce. They are an asset and an important part of any organization; they contribute to the growth and progress and bring about diversity in the organization. Over the last few decades, women have achieved intellectually, socially, culturally, economically, and politically. These achievements are celebrated by observing the International Women's Day on March 8<sup>th</sup> every year. The number of women academics working in higher education institutions around the world is gradually increasing (Calderon, 2022; UNESCO IESALC, 2021). Similarly, Samtse College of Education (SCE), one of the teacher education colleges in the country under the Royal University of Bhutan, is committed to promoting academic growth and research and has attracted a diverse community of students and faculty members from various parts of the country and beyond. The College offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs, specializing primarily in secondary teacher education. As of 2023, SCE has a total student enrolment of 398 and employs 35 teaching faculty members who play a crucial role in shaping the academic experience and knowledge dissemination for the students. SCE has witnessed a gradual

growth in female academic representation over the last few years. Currently there are 15 women academics from 12 in 2015. Some of these women work as Programme Leaders, Head of Departments and Coordinators. All these women are active researchers contributing to the body of literature and knowledge both nationally and internationally on a wide spectrum of topics. Since women play a critical role in the overall growth and health of the organization, it is imperative to understand the opportunities and challenges they encounter in their professional lives. Although there is literature available on this topic in the international arena, not a single study has explored this topic in the context of Bhutan, nor specifically for SCE. Therefore, further research on this topic is warranted to comprehensively understand the opportunities and challenges faced by women academics. Such research can offer valuable insights that may assist women in overcoming obstacles in their career development and lead to increased representation of women in academia. Ultimately, this improved representation can have a positive ripple effect, not only within academia but also in society and the world at large. It may also enable relevant stakeholders to develop and implement strategies to ensure these women progress and thrive in the world of academia. Further, chronicling both opportunities and challenges of these women will empower them to safely navigate the academic world.

## Research questions

The research was guided by the following main and sub-questions.

### *Main research question*

What are the experiences of women academics of Samtse College of Education?

### *Research sub-questions*

- What are the successes of women academics?
- What are the impacts of these successes?
- What factors account for these successes?
- What challenges do women academics face?
- What are the impacts of these challenges?
- What are the enabling factors/strategies that could help overcome these challenges?

## Literature Review

### *Successes of women academics*

Literature shows that women academics are progressing in the world of academia. This progress is attributed to factors at the personal, interpersonal, and organizational levels. The personal factors include education, hard work, dedication, commitment (Rab, 2010); work-life balance (Santosh, 2016); and self-efficacy, confidence, perseverance and resilience (Zeldin et al., 2008; Zeldin & Pajares, 2000). Interpersonal factors comprise support from family members (Polnick, 2004) and organizational factors consist of conducive workplace environment, opportunities for upgradation (Rab, 2010); and mentoring and supportive environments (Christiansen & Slammert, 2006). These factors enable women to overcome hardships, be persistent and resilient in overcoming obstacles (Zeldin & Pajares, 2000). In conclusion, the literature indicates that women academics are making notable strides in academia, and their progress is influenced by a combination of personal, interpersonal, and organizational factors. Creating inclusive and supportive environments will be

crucial in nurturing the continued advancement of women in academia and contributing to a more diverse and vibrant scholarly community.

### *Challenges of women academics*

There are studies that depict that women academics encounter challenges in their professional careers. These challenges include heavy workload and balancing academic duties and parental responsibilities (Comer & Stites-Doe, 2006; Ergöl et al., 2012), stress and multiple identities and lack of advancement opportunities (Percheski, 2008), low self-esteem (McDaniel & Pettijohn, 2013), and lack of administrative support (Gizem et al., 2017). Further research indicates that women academics experience isolation and lack of security especially in a male dominated profession (Humm, 1996). They also face the challenge of lack of support from their female colleagues (Başarir & Sari, 2015; Ledwith & Menfredi, 2000). In a study by Thanacoody et al. (2006), it was found that many female academics have little influence on organizational decision-making. They are also either invisible or under constant 'surveillance' by their watchful managers (Kemp et al., 2015). Women tend to suffer in silence in the face of discriminatory practice (Morley & Crossouard, 2015; Nooreen, 2011). These push and pull factors propel women to quit their career (Percheski, 2008). This body of research underscores the need for continued efforts to address gender disparities and support women academics in their careers. Creating more inclusive and supportive environments that offer equitable opportunities for advancement and decision-making can help retain talented female academics and foster a more diverse and thriving academic community.

### *Ways to support women academics*

Women academics face various challenges in academia, and providing them with adequate support is crucial for their success and advancement. Mentoring and a supportive environment have been identified as essential factors that can motivate and empower women academics (Christiansen & Slammert, 2006). Effective mentoring relationships can aid in their professional development, fostering growth and confidence in their academic pursuits (Schulze, 2010). In addition to mentoring, support from the social environment, the organization, and administrators is vital in creating a conducive atmosphere for women academics to thrive (Gizem et al., 2017). Offering opportunities for capacity-building and networking can further enhance their skills and broaden their professional networks, facilitating their progress (Sen, 2020). Recognizing and valuing the contributions of women academics are equally significant. Acknowledgment of their achievements and efforts not only boosts their morale but also reinforces the importance of their work within academia (Francis & Stulz, 2020). Furthermore, visionary leadership, effective policies, and inclusive practices are instrumental in encouraging women academics and promoting gender equity within academic institutions (Sen, 2020). In summary, literature shows that women in academia face numerous challenges, making it crucial to provide them with adequate support to thrive and progress. This support encompasses mentoring, a conducive environment, recognition of their contributions, and visionary leadership. Effective mentoring relationships and a supportive atmosphere foster professional development and confidence in academic pursuits. Encouraging networking opportunities and capacity-building further enhance their skills and expand professional networks. By nurturing and empowering women academics, an environment that promotes their success and advancement in academia can be fostered.

## **Methodology**

### *Conceptual/theoretical framework*

The study was guided by social constructivism/interpretivism whereby individuals seek to understand their world and develop their own particular meanings that correspond to their



experience (Creswell, 2013). Simons (2009) asserts that an interpretive research framework is appropriate when one wants to find out more about certain structures of experience, the subjective perspectives of the research participants, and specific interrelationships between participants and their environment. Since the study aims to understand the world from the point of view of the individual, applying the social constructionism framework was the most useful approach in gaining access to the views and nuances of the research participants.

### *Research design*

The study employed a narrative design to study the successes and struggles of women academics of SCE. A narrative design was employed as it allowed the researchers to focus on the study of experience, inquiring into the storying and re-storying of their lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 2012). Further, it enabled the unravelling of significant stories of people's lives as told by them in their own words and worlds since people understand and give meaning to their lives through the stories they tell (Andrews et al., 2013).

### *Data collection tool*

A semi-structured interview was conducted with six female teacher educators separately to gather information on their success and struggles as teacher educators. A semi structured interview was employed to pursue in-depth information around the topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Additionally, this tool also allows informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms and provides reliable, comparable qualitative data (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

### *Population and sample*

Women academics of SCE was the population of the study. The sample was selected using purposive sampling as it allows the researchers to select participants based on their own judgment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Six women academics from five different departments comprising early, mid, and experienced careers were chosen as participants for the study.

### *Data collection procedure and analysis*

A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared to get the opinion and detailed information from women academics on their success and struggles as women academics.

A narrative analysis of the data was carried out following the four stages propounded by Newby (2014):

- (1) preparing the data,
- (2) identifying basic units of data,
- (3) organizing data, and
- (4) interpreting the data.

These stages of data analysis provide a systematic and rigorous approach to analyzing narrative data. Moreover, they help the researchers make sense of complex information, identify important elements and draw meaningful conclusions.

### *Ethical consideration*

The study sought approval from the office of Dean Research and Industrial Linkages in conducting this study. Pseudonyms such as P1, P2, etc., were used to protect the confidentiality of the research participants. All research protocols were adhered to including getting consent from the research participants during the course of the study. The transcripts were read and reread several times by the researchers to avoid false interpretation of the data and also to ensure the credibility of the results.

### **Opportunities**

The research findings indicate that women academics in Bhutan perceive several advantages in their career paths. These advantages are closely associated with opportunities for growth and development. Participants mentioned that they have been able to upgrade their qualifications and expand their expertise through attending various educational programs, seminars, and workshops. For instance, it was acknowledged by participants that this exposure has contributed to the enhancement of their knowledge and skills, allowing them to become more competent and effective educators and researchers. As a result they are able to teach and guide their students better (P1, P4, P5), engage in research (P4, P2), use research-informed skills and strategies in the class (P1, P2), develop modules and professional development packages leading to both personal and professional achievements (P4, P5, P2). An additional professional achievement identified by one of the participants included the opportunity to work as a Dean of Academic Affairs and an external examiner.

Moreover, the women academics mentioned that these opportunities have not only enriched their professional capabilities but also facilitated the establishment of valuable networks. They have built social capital by connecting with colleagues and experts both within and outside Bhutan. These networks play a significant role in fostering collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and support within the academic community.

Interestingly, the participants frequently related these opportunities and achievements to the concept of karma, which holds profound significance in Bhutanese culture due to its influence on the interconnectedness of actions and consequences. For the women academics, this belief in karma seems to serve as a framework for understanding the positive outcomes of their efforts. Most of the participants (P1, P4, P5) attribute their successes to their past good deeds, hard work, dedication, and integrity, suggesting a sense of personal responsibility and accountability for their achievements.

Additionally, the participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6) recognized the importance of external factors in their accomplishments, such as luck, support from family members, and the interplay of invisible forces. These acknowledgments reflect the cultural influence of interconnectedness and the acknowledgment of the collective contributions to individual success.

The study also revealed that the advantages and achievements experienced by the women academics have contributed significantly to their overall contentment, happiness, and well-being. This sense of fulfilment positively affects their performance as educators and researchers, leading to a ripple effect on others, as mentioned by one participant (P2).

In conclusion, the participants' perceptions of the advantages of being women academics in Bhutan reflect the impact of opportunities for growth, the establishment of networks, and the association of these achievements with the concept of karma. This belief in karma provides a meaningful lens through which they view their successes, personal responsibility, and interconnectedness within their cultural context. Ultimately, these positive experiences contribute to their happiness and overall well-being, contributing to a more fulfilled and effective academic community.

## Religious and spiritual practices

Religion and spirituality are important aspects of Bhutanese culture and many people associate it with the pursuit of opportunities. While religion and spirituality hold significant importance in the lives of many Bhutanese individuals, their beliefs and practices vary among participants. In this study, the participants had mixed opinions with regard to using them in seeking and availing opportunities. Some participants, such as P4 firmly believe in the power of religious practices in influencing their professional endeavours positively. This belief is rooted in the cultural and spiritual tradition of seeking blessings and guidance from religious figures, such as priests, Lamas, or gurus, before embarking on significant activities. The act of offering prayers and performing rituals is seen as a means to invoke divine assistance and good fortune. However, the participants' opinions about the effectiveness of religious practices in gaining opportunities are diverse. While some, like P4, find solace and peace of mind in these practices, others, like P2 do not perceive a direct correlation between religious rituals and professional outcomes. This divergence in beliefs reflects the complexity of how religion and spirituality are perceived and integrated into personal and professional life.

P3's decision to pursue her PhD based on the advice of a priest, who informed her that everything would go well, exemplifies the influence of spiritual guidance on major life choices. For some individuals, seeking reassurance or predictions from spiritual figures may play a role in shaping their career decisions and providing them with a sense of confidence and direction. The belief in the blessings and protection of a 'root guru' or higher power, as mentioned by P4, can serve as a source of comfort and assurance during professional pursuits. This sense of divine support may instil greater confidence and reduce anxiety related to career goals as she believes that the blessings of her root guru are always with her both directly or indirectly.

The presence of two participants who do not engage in religious practices due to their young age reflects a generational shift in beliefs and values. Younger generations may be influenced by modernization, globalization, and changing societal norms, which could lead to different perspectives on the role of religion and spirituality in personal and professional life.

The use of rituals, such as rolling dice before undertaking professional activities, illustrates the deep-rooted cultural significance of traditional practices in Bhutanese society. These rituals are seen as ways to seek divine guidance, protection, and luck. The participants' beliefs and practices are reflective of their individual agency and faith. While some find strength and motivation through religious acts, others may rely more on their own abilities and skills, without discounting the potential influence of spirituality.

In conclusion, the complex interplay of religion, spirituality, and seeking opportunities in Bhutanese culture reveals a diverse range of beliefs and practices among the participants. While some individuals draw on religious rituals and guidance for professional pursuits, others may not view them as directly impacting their opportunities. These beliefs are deeply ingrained in cultural traditions and can coexist with modern perspectives. Thus, understanding these dynamics is crucial in creating an inclusive and supportive work environment that respects diverse beliefs and values.

## Challenges

The analysis of the data showed that some participants did not face challenges while others have identified challenges of being women academics. Two participants have stated that they did not face any discrimination at their workplace. For example, P4 said, 'equal opportunities were given and there wasn't a discrimination like saying that this is a man's job, or this is a woman's job. And so, I did not face that discrimination.' However, other participants have asserted that working as women academics entailed both personal and professional challenges. For example, it was stated by P4 and

P5 that striking a balance between personal and professional lives was a challenge and this affected their career trajectories. Further, P5 said that owing to the obligations and commitment of being a woman academic, one cannot 'climb the ladder of success and that will take away your happiness, your inner peace.' P4 highlights a significant challenge that women face when they assume leadership positions in certain contexts. She said that when one is in a leadership role, 'getting everybody (50-60 people) to cooperate and collaborate is a nightmare.' The difficulty in gaining the attention and cooperation of a sizable group (50 to 60 people) was attributed to several factors, some of which are influenced by societal norms, stereotypes, and preconceptions. For example, she explained that being in a male dominated society, men cannot take women holding leadership positions; thus, women face resistance and scepticism from men.

Further, P6 stated that most of the leadership roles are taken by men and there is no woman role model to look up to. Lack of role models has led to the perception that women are not fit for leadership, thus, making it difficult for a woman leader to gain credibility and cooperation from them.

The majority of the participants also attributed these challenges to their past deeds or karma. For instance, P4 said, 'If there are challenges coming in, which are not working, then I always say maybe in my previous life, I might have done something.' Similarly, P1 said, 'Sometimes the situation comes like you have worked very hard but you don't seem to get that or you may not be so successful in that. Then I say this must be my karma.' These challenges have impacted their mental health and immediate environment.

Participants have tried to overcome these challenges by sharing with family and friends, ignoring, staying emotionally stable and intelligent, and drawing lines by being strictly professional. Further, P6 stated, 'I have learned to pick my battles. So, if there is something that I feel very passionately about I will hold my ground. I will argue with them. That is the mountain I am willing to die on. I will not budge on the issue.'

The majority of the participants have said that women academics need to work hard and show people that they are capable. This will help build trust and confidence and establish credibility. Additionally, they need to be positive and not focus on things that cannot be materialized. Although the participants have used these strategies to overcome their challenges, there is a need for broader efforts to promote gender diversity, inclusivity, and equal opportunities in leadership positions.

## Discussion

One of the findings of the study is that the success of women academics manifested in their opportunity to upgrade their qualification and expand their knowledge and skills. They have attributed this success to intrapersonal and interpersonal factors. Research studies show that both personal (Rab, 2010) and interpersonal (Polnick, 2004) factors contribute to the progress of women. Another finding shows that the success of women has contributed to Gross National Happiness as it has positively impacted themselves, their students, family members and community. The majority of the participants have credited their success to both hard work and karma (past deeds). Contrary to literature that shows that women suffer in silence in the face of discriminatory practice (Morley & Crossouard, 2015; Noureen, 2011), the findings of the present study indicate that women have not faced any discrimination at the workplace. This could be because the College acknowledges the importance of female academics and ensures to create a conducive environment for women academics to flourish.

The findings also show that women face the challenge of balancing personal and professional responsibilities. This findings corroborate with the study that reveals that one of the challenges women face is balancing academic duties and parental responsibilities (Comer & Stites-Doe, 2006; Ergöl et al., 2012; Gupta & Sharma, 2002). This brings us to conclude that women must work hard to establish their credibility. Notably, one of the key challenges that women academics claim is getting



men to cooperate when they are in a leadership position. Such findings denote the need for recognizing and addressing power dynamics for promoting empowerment and inclusion in the workplace. Fostering a culture that values diverse perspectives and equal participation can lead to greater engagement and contribution.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to contribute to an understanding of how women academics experience career success and challenges, what factors impact those success, and how their choices and challenges impact their career advancement. The findings reveal that women attribute their academic success to a combination of hard work and karma (past deeds), while challenges primarily revolve around balancing personal and professional responsibilities. Coping strategies employed by women academics include sharing their challenges, maintaining emotional stability, and maintaining a strictly professional approach. The study also highlights that religious and spiritual beliefs play a role in shaping women academics' decisions. For instance, adopting certain practices influences their choices in terms of availing opportunities and overcoming obstacles. The study acknowledges certain limitations in terms of its design and sample size. To address these limitations, the researchers recommend conducting in-depth mixed-method studies with a larger sample size. Additionally, exploring secondary sources could further enrich the understanding of the complex dynamics involved in women academics' career trajectories.

## Notes on contributors

**Kinley Seden** (PhD) is a lecturer at the Department of Arts and Humanities Education, Samtse College of Education. Her research interests include psychology of teaching learning and assessment practices, gender and education, teacher education, and professional development.

**Yangdon** (PhD) is a lecturer at Samtse College of Education, Royal University of Bhutan. She did her Master's from the University of New Brunswick, Canada, and her PhD from the University of New England, Australia. She teaches English and Professional modules. She also supervises M.Ed. English students' dissertations. Her research interests are education, literacy, and green school.

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