

REWRITING NORMS

*A COLLECTION OF NARRATIVES
IN SCALING GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL
INCLUSION*



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GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL
INCLUSION



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FOREWORD



Siok Sian Pek-Dorji
Thimphu, 23rd April, 2026

A generation back, rural Bhutan often quoted a superstition that women had to be born nine times before they could be reborn as men. This has been attributed to patriarchal interpretations of karma and rebirth. A consequence of this perceived social disparity was that women were denied full ordination as spiritual practitioners in the early years. But karma is changeable.

The broader picture, as always, is more nuanced. In parts of Bhutan, women inherited land and property while men moved to their wives' farms. Bhutanese men carried babies on their backs and were far more hands-on with infants than many of their counterparts in the region. Yet circumstances also dictated early gender inequities — girls were not sent to school as education required travel to remote places that lacked boarding facilities.

Those early conditions have perhaps shaped today's challenges. There is a lack of gender balance in leadership and governance -women remain underrepresented in parliament and management positions - and there is a disturbing degree of acceptance of violence against women. While Bhutan's gender challenges have been relatively less pronounced than in much of the South Asian neighbourhood, they are real and present.

Some of these challenges are subtle but telling. Early Bhutanese films portrayed women as objects, dancing around trees and emerging in a different kira with each turn — Bhutan had simply embraced the storytelling of its neighbour, Bollywood style. Women continue to be depicted as demure beauties in music videos while male singers express emotion and agency. Early beauty contests further perpetuated stereotyping, another import from a western world that has long moved on. Little did we realise the impact this would have on homogenising gender norms.

Yet Bhutanese women have never truly fitted this image — our women are strong, resilient, and have long held families and communities together on their own terms, as the stories in this publication show.

Beyond gender, social inclusion is gaining urgent attention in Bhutan. Late development, rural-urban divides, and a large out-migration of young people have sharpened awareness of gaps in education, healthcare, justice, and opportunity. These are not abstract challenges — they are the lived experiences that Bhutanese stories are beginning to address.

It is time to rethink the old narratives — and stories are where that change begins. Stories are powerful tools for preserving what Bhutan values and changing what must change. It is encouraging to see more women emerging in the arts, filmmaking, and fiction and non-fiction writing.

Today, Bhutan made the deadlines by beginning to fully ordain nuns.

Samtse College of Education has taken a meaningful step in encouraging new narratives — stories that capture the lived experiences of people in Re-writing Norms, as this publication is so aptly titled. And what better place than a college dedicated to teachers — those who will carry these conversations into every classroom in the country.

May the stories on gender equality and social inclusion continue to emerge, and may they trigger the reflection and dialogue the issue deserves.

MESSAGE FROM THE PROJECT COORDINATOR



Kinley Seden, PhD
Principal Investigator and
Project Coordinator

It gives me great pleasure to pen my thoughts on this book, which has been initiated as a major knowledge outcome of the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) project. This book is conceived with the intention of bringing together stories and struggles related to GESI —stories that reflect lived realities, resilience, and hope. The narratives captured here are meant to inspire individuals to confront challenges, overcome adversity, and find strength in shared experiences.

The book is founded on a simple yet powerful belief: that stories have the capacity to heal, to offer perspective, and to spark positive change. By highlighting experiences related to mental well-being, inclusion, and social challenges, this collection puts forward ideas and pathways for staying positive, handling difficulties, and supporting one another with empathy and understanding.

As the Principal Investigator and Project Coordinator, I warmly commend all contributors for their openness, courage, and commitment. I hope this book serves as a source of inspiration, reflection, and encouragement for readers, and contributes meaningfully to ongoing conversations around GESI, mental well-being, and inclusive societies.

Acknowledgement

This book, *Rewriting Norms: Narratives for Scaling GESI*, has been developed as part of the project *Promoting Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) in Schools: Building on What Children Value and Aspire to Do and Be*. The idea behind the book was initiated by Ms. Tshering Om Tamang and Kinley Seden, who are core members of the project team. Their vision and commitment inspired the creation of this collection of narratives aimed at promoting inclusion, empathy, equality, and positive social transformation through storytelling.

Project Background

The project “Promoting Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) in Schools: Building on What Children Value and Aspire to Do and Be” is funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and aims to create safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments for children. The project is led by the Kathmandu University School of Arts in partnership with Samtse College of Education and RDRS, and is being implemented over a three-year period in 25 schools across Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. The project contributes to strengthening GESI policies and practices while fostering inclusive school environments.

A key component of the project is scaling GESI in schools and beyond by building on children’s valued educational capabilities identified through the GESI Diagnostic Tool. The tool is adaptable, contextualisable, and scalable across diverse educational settings, ensuring the sustainable integration of children’s perspectives into school practices and learning environments. By centering students’ voices, the tool has supported the development of environments where all children feel valued, safe, respected, and empowered to learn and grow.

As part of the initiative, Learning Innovation Knowledge Exchange (LIKE) Clubs have been established in five schools to address the gaps identified through the diagnostic process. These clubs provide students with opportunities to actively promote inclusion, equity, participation, and positive social change within their school communities. The LIKE Clubs continue to engage students in fostering gender equality and social inclusion across their schools and beyond.

PART I:



Shaping the Future: Insights from Our Students



About the Author

Jigme Pema Selden is a student of Samtse College of Education who identifies as a feminist and is passionate about gender equality. She draws inspiration from feminist voices such as Emma Watson, Madonna, Priyanka Chopra, Audre Lorde and Emily Murphy and is deeply interested in conversations around women's rights and representation. Beyond that, she enjoys journaling, scrapbooking, and watching films. Through her story, she hopes to amplify women's voices and spark conversations about gender equality and justice.

Still here...

Jigme Pema Selden

The light from my phone was the only thing glowing in the room.

It was past midnight, and I was still wide awake. My thumb kept moving across the screen even though every comment made my chest tighten a little more.

Shameless girl.
Stop pretending to be innocent. We all know what kind of girl you are.

Attention seeker.

You ruined a good man's reputation.

Even my direct messages were flooded with strangers telling me to shut up, to disappear, to watch my back. Some of them promised they would make me regret speaking out.

Each sentence felt like a stone thrown from somewhere in the dark. The strange thing was that most of the people writing them did not know me at all.

They only knew the story they had decided to believe.

My hands trembled as I locked the phone and stared at the ceiling. Tears rolled down the sides of my face into the pillow, while the silence of the room pressed heavily around me. Somewhere outside, a dog barked and the wind rattled the window.

In that heavy silence, the words came back to me from long ago, whispered by girls I used to know.
“I wish I was born a boy.”

Now... I understand.

I don't remember when I first understood it. Maybe it was the time I danced to my favourite songs from my favourite actress's movie and my father yelled at me, calling me shameless, while my brother could do the same without a word. Or the night we watched a film in the village and everyone cheered the male lead, their voices full of life, while their whispers, sharp and bitter, clung to the female lead like shadows because she dared to want more than they thought a girl should. Perhaps it was when my father tried to force me to marry Jinda Dophu, a man old enough to be my father, saying that studying wasn't important for me, even though I had worked hard to earn a scholarship to continue my education. And yet, even in the midst of all that, my mother quietly slipped me money and whispered that I should run away, her eyes full of hope that I could have the life she never did, while my father disowned me completely, cutting me off from everything I had ever known.

Leaving home felt like walking toward a horizon I had never seen before, terrifying, yet full of promise, where fear and hope travelled side by side. All I carried with me were my mother's savings, my scholarship letter, and a stubborn belief that my life could be different.

College days were long and exhausting, yet for the first time, the life I was living felt like it was truly mine. Somewhere between lectures and late-night assignments, I started posting small videos online, dancing, laughing, being the version of myself my village had never allowed me to be. I never expected anyone beyond a few friends to notice. But one day, a message appeared from someone in the music industry asking if I would like to appear in a music video. For a moment, it felt as if the dreams I once whispered to the mirror in my childhood home had finally found their way back to me.

A few days later, I found myself sitting in a small studio, lights brighter than anything I had ever stood under before. The man who had messaged me turned out to be a director working on a music video. He told me not to be nervous, that all I had to do was be myself. So, I did.

Everything felt unreal. The cameras, the music, the quiet instructions from people moving around the set, all of it seemed to swirl together, and I couldn't help but feel a thrill I had ever known before. I wasn't thinking about fame or followers then. I was simply enjoying the strange, thrilling feeling of being part of something I had only ever seen on a screen.

The first time I watched the finished video, I had to pause it halfway through.

There I was.

For a moment, I just stared at the screen, hardly recognizing the girl looking back at me. The same girl who once danced alone in a quiet village room was now part of something the whole world could see.

People began to recognize my face, my phone buzzed constantly, messages arriving one after another, each brimming with excitement. With each new follower, more opportunities came my way, and suddenly the dreams that once felt distant began to feel almost within reach.

It was around that time that a message arrived from a name almost everyone in the industry knew. A well-known film director said he had seen the music video and wanted to meet me to discuss a role in his upcoming film.

For a moment, I simply stared at the screen, hardly believing it.

Back in the village, his films were the ones people gathered to watch together, the kind that filled small rooms with laughter and applause. The idea that someone like him even knew my name felt unreal.

I remember standing outside his office, staring at the name on the door, trying to steady my breathing. My hands felt cold as my mind raced with possibilities. At that moment, it felt as if everything I had worked for had led me to that very door.

I just didn't know what waited behind this one.

His office was larger than I expected, its walls lined with framed posters from films I had seen long before I ever imagined meeting him. He greeted me with a warm smile and gestured for me to sit. At first, the conversation felt normal. He spoke about the music video, about how he thought I had “a natural presence on screen.” Hearing those words from someone like him made my heart race with excitement.

Then the conversation slowly began to change.

His compliments lingered a little too long. His questions stopped being about acting and started becoming personal, about where I lived, whether I had a boyfriend, whether I was willing to “do whatever it takes” to succeed in the industry.

A strange uneasiness settled in my chest.

When he leaned closer and suggested that success sometimes required “special understanding” between a director and an actress. “You’re a beautiful girl,” he said. “Stay close to me, and I’ll make sure you go far.” He said it as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

I finally understood what he really meant.
My stomach turned.

I stood up quickly, my voice shaking as I told him I needed to leave. The warmth in his face disappeared almost instantly. Before I could reach the door, he stepped in front of me.

His hand caught my arm, gripping it tightly. I froze for a moment, the shock stealing the words from my throat. He laughed softly, as if my discomfort was nothing more than a joke.

“You’re overreacting,” he said.

When I tried to pull away, his grip tightened. His hands moved where they shouldn't have, trying to hold me closer, trying to pull at my clothes as if my refusal meant nothing. Panic rushed through me. I pushed against him, my voice breaking as I told him to stop.

I remember hoping desperately that someone outside would hear me, that someone would come in, that someone would help.

No one did.

I finally managed to pull the door open, a few people from his team were standing outside in the hallway. For a brief moment, our eyes met. I must have looked terrified, my clothes dishevelled, my hands shaking.

They looked at me.

And then they looked away.

No one stepped forward. No one asked if I was alright. I pushed past them and rushed down the hallway, my heart pounding so violently it drowned out every other sound.

I didn't stop until I was far away from that place.

I didn't know where to go or who to tell. My hands still shook, my chest ached, and every step felt heavy. I wanted to disappear, to hide somewhere no one could find me. The thought of speaking out felt terrifying.

Slowly, shakily, I gathered the courage to go to the police and tell them everything. Every word, every moment, every sharp, suffocating second in that office.

I expected them to act, to protect me, to see the truth.

But what followed was nothing like I had imagined.

The director denied everything. His reputation shielded him. Then his wife came to me, her eyes cold and accusing, telling me I had “led him on.” The whispers started soon after, at college, in the streets, online. People I had never met passed judgment without knowing the truth. Even some of the police and the judge seemed to doubt me, their questions sharp as knives.

Messages flooded my phone with threats, insults, accusations, all echoing the same idea that I was to blame. I became careful in public, afraid of the stares and whispers. Even my classmates began talking behind my back, sharing rumours I could hardly bear to hear.

Days turned into nights filled with messages, whispers, and questions I didn’t want to answer. And here I am now, alone in my room, the phone buzzing endlessly beside me. The world outside hasn’t stopped, and neither have the voices, but somehow... I’m still here.





About the Author

Sonam Cheki Wangmo is a second-year Bachelor of Education student specializing in English/Geography. Originally from Sangkama under Jurmew gewog in Mongar, she completed her higher secondary education at Mongar Higher Secondary School. Growing up within a conservative yet evolving society shaped her awareness of the silences that often remain unquestioned. She has come to realize that we are not always who we claim to be, and what we see in others is also shallow and often fake. Even those closest to us know only fragments of our story. Therefore, she considers herself a quiet scribbler who finds small bits of magic in everyday words.

Behind the Cracks in the Wall

Sonam Cheki Wangmo

It is seldom that rare people like me secure a quiet exclusion rooted in childhood trauma.

A modest house, a conservative family, and familiar faces around create an appearance of stability.

Yet, something feels queer. Not overtly violent, perhaps, but persistently unsettling, like a wall repeatedly repainted to conceal the cracks beneath.

My mother, now forty, fingers the white strands of hair and asks me to remove them with tweezers. In doing so, she recalls her childhood with disarming casualness, how she and her little sister stayed behind to sweep courtyards and wash dishes, while their brothers walked past them to school, books tucked under their arms.

This division required no justification. It was normalized, unquestioned, and unanalyzed.

She recalls a wrinkled yet handsome and powerful man, who once came riding on a horse, and left in the blink of an eye, leaving behind a piece of tattered letter. The daughters, hiding behind the pillar, quietly listened to their parents reading it aloud. None of them approved of him. Decisions about women's futures were made in rooms they were not permitted to enter.

My mother smiles at me, of course, after realizing how she was sued by a layman from the same village after repeated proposals. She left her house and married him, with nothing more than her clothing. Choice, in this context, was constrained by social pressure and patriarchal surveillance. Consent existed, but only within limits already drawn by society.

I sometimes have nightmares of six, where I was caught in a strange feeling that left me hooked.

Some nights, I return in dreams to the age of seven, caught in a strange, suffocating tale. I stand there, peeking through the cracks, quietly listening with tears streaming down my face.

My mother was not home, and the whole family argued and fought for my life. My otherwise loving grandma dragged her son, accusing him of his irresponsibility.

"This is not your child. We don't welcome a fatherless child into a blessed family," Grandma exclaimed.

My father, frantic and anxious, took hold of his daughter and threw her away several times, as if physical rejection could erase social stigma. The daughter helplessly landed on the ground, learning too early that survival sometimes requires wordlessness.

My mother came, but she had no obligation to stop them.

Another loving couple from the family, married for decades with no child, summoned up enough courage and held her.

“No problem. She is the only daughter. We are sure she will not ask you for land or any belongings.

When she grows up, she can educate herself and be independent. So, no objections. We will raise her whatever it costs.”

Even praise, in this context, reinforces gendered expectations rather than dismantling them.

Still, I survive under the same crystal blue sky and breathe the same clean atmosphere.

Growing up, my little brother and I were constantly compared: academically, socially, morally, at home, at school, and, obviously, everywhere else.

Sometimes, the elderly and even the passerby would remark.

“You are fortunate enough to have a daughter who will be a good asset in looking after the parents. While sons, once they marry, leave home and have their own families and responsibilities.”

Ultimately, I am in favor of all children.

My father is a loving and caring man. He wakes early, so my mother does not have to. He prepares breakfast, washes dishes, and shields her from colds.

Equally, my mother works to the limits of her strength. Neither dominates. Neither retreat. Their partnership quietly resists the norms that shaped them.

No doubt, their children look upon them and take after them. From them, my brother and I learned that equality does not always arrive through policy, but is lived through daily practice.

Unlike my mother, who watched her brothers walk to school while she remained behind, I walked to school each morning beside my brother. We carried the same books, wore the same uniform, and returned home with the same assignments. No one told me that education belonged to him more than to me. In that quiet difference lies a generational shift: not dramatic, not loudly declared, but deeply felt. What my mother witnessed as exclusion, I experienced as inclusion. Yet the memory of her standing still while her brothers move forward lingers within me, reminding me that progress is not accidental, but earned across time.

Still, individual goodness cannot undo structural imbalance.

Gender inequality in Bhutan is not always visible. It often operates invisibly, through silence, tradition, and normalization.

This is where literature exists precisely to make the invisible visible. To write about gender equality is not to reject culture, but to examine whether its progress has truly reached those still standing behind the cracks in the wall.





About the Author

Premika Ghalley made her writing debut at the age of ten with the children's book *How to Save My Father's Hair*, published in collaboration with Save the Children. She is a feminist who is passionate about addressing gender inequity. Through her work, she aims to highlight women's struggles and the ways patriarchy affects people of all genders.

Silenced before Seventeen

Premika Ghalley

Part One: The Girl Who Dreamed of Mountains

You are twelve years old, studying on the roof of your mud-brick home. The air smells of wood smoke and dung cakes. Down below, your mother calls, “Taru! Come down. There is work.”

Work is always there, fetching water from the distant tap, scrubbing clothes on the stone slab, grinding maize until your arms ache and many more. You are a daughter, a sister, and soon you will be a wife. This is your life, drawn by the hands older than yours, said your mother as she ground the spices with her rough hands.

At fifteen, you are standing at the edge of the mustard field behind your house. The yellow blooms stretch to the foothills, a sea of gold under the vast blue sky. Beside you is Babita, her hand brushing your hair as you both watch the clouds.

Her touch was a spark that made your heart perform a frantic, joyous dance against your ribs. When the two of you were together, you were not future wives, not vessels for honour, but simply yourselves. Together, you would talk about dreams of a city, a home, a life that had no place in your parents' minds.

You feel warmth when you watch the way the sun kissed her beautifully tanned skin. You let go of a soft chuckle, saying 'beautiful' underneath.

“What are you grinning at, silly?” Babita asks, but she’s grinning too.

“Nothing”, you say.

The words are light, but the feeling is so strong and precious that it has no name, or rather, has a name you dare not learn. You know, without being told, that this feeling is a dos, a sin. The aunties say it’s a sickness brought by foreign TV and speaks to you of purity, of a woman’s duty to become a wife, a mother, and a vessel for a family lineage.

You realise your feelings have no place, so you put them away and bury them deep, because what use is a girl’s heart if it points in the wrong direction?

At sixteen, the boy from the higher caste starts to wait for you by the water pump. His name is Anand. He has a loud laugh and eyes that stick to you like burrs.

One afternoon, he blocks your path, the metal pot heavy in your hand “Why do you ignore me? My family has good standing. It would be an honour for you.”

You are polite and distant. Your throat is dry. You think of Babita’s laugh. “No,” you say, the word as small as a pebble. “I am not interested.”

His smile fades, “You will be,” he says, and walks away.

A week later, he finds you alone in a dark alley. The darkness closes in, pressing against you until your voice feels trapped. When it finally lifts, it leaves bruises where light used to live.

The next day, you become the talk of the town. “She must have led him on. Why was she walking alone? Pride in a girl can be dangerous”. The fragility of your life is now visible through the punishment for a crime you did not commit.

Your mother’s face is tight with worry. “Why did you shame him?” she asks, not unkindly, but bewildered. The failure of his pride has become your fault. Yet, this is another lesson that you have learned as a woman that a man’s disappointment is a woman’s responsibility.

Your father sighs, “What will we do with you now?” The question is not about your pain, but about your diminished value.

Anand got away because he was a man. And in the eyes of your neighbours, the real crime is the disruption you represent. A woman who said ‘no’ and created a ripple of violence.

You find solace in the small temple, where there is a gentle aroma of marigolds and sandalwood. You pray for clarity, for peace. But the baun sees you kneeling and says, “A woman’s highest dharma is to serve her husband. Pray for obedience.” Even here, the gods seem to speak with a man’s voice, caging your spirit in a way you never wanted.

Part II: The Anatomy of a Cage

The proposal comes before your final exams. A family from a town a day's journey away. His family needs a hardworking girl, and yours needs a daughter settled.

"A good match," your father says, his decision a closed door. Your mother pleads with her eyes: "Do not argue. This is our only way." You think of your books, of the teacher who said you could be a nurse. You try to speak up, but your opinion is a vessel that no one will accept. "Speak less," my father advised, his eyes avoiding mine. "Listen to your new family. Bring them honour."

Rudra was a silent, sullen man. His eyes held no warmth, only a cold assessment. I was not a wife; I was an acquisition, a servant who came with a bed. His mother, Ama, was the true master of the house.

Even after working tirelessly, Ama would complain endlessly, "Look how slowly she sweeps. The curry has too much salt or not enough." "The buhari is lazy," she'd announce to the people over the walls. You cook, you clean, you serve, but that was not enough. Your whole body aches from overworking, but your opinions are irrelevant.

"Why are you so useless? My son works hard, and this is what he comes home to?" shouted Ama, throwing the dal you made at your face.

You are not Taru anymore, you are a buhari, a daughter-in-law. A pair of working hands. A womb waiting for use.

You try to speak to Rudra once, your voice trembling. “Your mother... she is always angry with me.”

He doesn’t look up from his phone. “Learn to be careful, Taru. My mother has managed this house for forty years without such drama. She is teaching you. A good wife listens. Don’t stir up trouble.”

His misogyny is not loud; it is a quiet, solid wall, built brick by brick by generations. You see the pressure on him too. To provide, to never show fatigue, to be the unfeeling pillar. Patriarchy, you realise, has made him hollow and you, invisible. It kills him softly with duty, and kills you loudly with silence.

One market day, a man stumbles into the shop, reeking of cheap whisky. He leers at you as you stack tins of ghee. Rudra does not look up from his accounts. Later, when you whisper your discomfort, he frowns. “Why were you smiling at him? You must have encouraged him.” The blame settles on your shoulders, familiar and cold. His failure to protect is your failure to be invisible.

The years fold into one another, a grey sameness. You hear horrific news: a girl in the next district, a college student, rejected a suitor. He threw acid. Her face is gone. You touch your own cheek in the dark. That could have been you. A woman's 'no' is a risk that can melt her skin. Your life, you see, is a fragile thing, held in the palms of men's tempers.

You bear a son. For a moment, you are a queen. Then the work doubles. Now you are a mother and a maid. Ama's demands grew even sharper. Even Rudra, when he holds his son, looks at you with a vague disapproval, as if you are merely the vessel that delivered his heir.

You perform daily rituals. You light the incense at the family altar, as religion is used to push you to scrub pots blackened by meals you did not sit long enough to enjoy, kneading dough while important conversations about money and land happen in the room next to you.

Years pass. One afternoon, you stand at the doorway of the shop-house, looking at the narrow street. You see a young girl walking freely down the street, books in her hand, heading to a school you were pulled from. A sound escapes you, and you pray their life wouldn't turn out like yours. You do not cry. You simply turn and go inside, back to the scrubbing and serving in silence.

That night, you lie beside Rudra, who sleeps the untroubled sleep of a man. You stare at the ceiling. The daring girl from the beginning, the one who felt emotions, is dead. She was killed by social expectations, by the relentless weight of aru ley kay ban cha, what will other people say? She was killed by a society that blamed her for a boy's violence, by a marriage that demanded her erasure, by a world that saw her role as always less than. You are alive. But you have been dead for a very long time.





About the Author

Ugyen Cheki, a college student from Bhutan, values family, friendship, and personal growth. Thoughtful and empathetic, she treasures her close bond with her parents and fond memories of her late grandfather. Grateful for the support she has received, she approaches life with humility and kindness. College has helped her build friendships, gain confidence, and learn important lessons about communication and understanding. Though uncertain about the future, she hopes to grow into an independent, responsible individual who continues to learn and support the people she loves.

The Strength of Sonam Dema: A Story from Trashigang

Ugyen Cheki

In the eastern hills of Trashigang, before electricity reached most villages and before roads connected every settlement, life followed the rhythm of the mountains.

The mornings began with the distant ringing of cowbells and the crowing of roosters. Mist floated gently above the terraced fields, and the cold air carried the smell of damp earth and wood smoke.

Inside the small wooden farmhouse of Sonam Dema's family, mornings began even earlier.

Before dawn, her mother would light the bukhari (traditional wood burning stove) the fire crackling softly in the quiet house. A pot of rice simmered slowly, and the smell of suja (butter tea) filled the room.

In the evenings, when darkness covered the hills, the house was lit by a bathi (a small kerosene lamp) casting a soft golden glow on the wooden walls. The flame flickered gently, sometimes trembling whenever the wind slipped through the cracks of the house.

It was under that dim bathi light that Sonam Dema spent most of her life working.

A Childhood Without Rest

Sonam Dema was the eldest of many children.

Eight younger siblings depended on her.

While other children might have had time to play near the streams or run through the fields, Sonam's days were filled with work.

One cold morning, before the first light of dawn touched the mountains, her mother called softly.

"Sonam... wake up, ani (A term used to express indulgence or annoyance). The cows must go to the pasture."

Sonam stirred beneath her blanket.

"Ama (Mother)... it's still dark."

Her mother chuckled while stirring a pot over the fire.

"The cows don't know what time it is. Dozho! (Hurry!)"

Sonam wrapped her worn out kira tightly around her body and lifted her youngest sibling onto her back, tying the baby securely sari (A long strip of cloth used to carry babies).

Outside, frost covered the grass like tiny crystals.

Holding a wooden stick, she guided the cows along the narrow mountain trail while her baby brother slept quietly against her back.

Sometimes she watched boys from the village walking down the path with books tucked under their arms.

Their laughter carried through the morning air.

One afternoon while helping her mother grind chilies and cheese for ema datshi (a spicy stew made from hot chilli peppers and cheese), she asked softly, “Ama... why do they go to school?”

Her mother paused.

For a moment she said nothing.

Then she replied gently, “They are boys, Sonam. Boys must study. Our family needs you here.”

Sonam nodded slowly.

And never asked again.

Learning the Work of Women

Instead of books, Sonam learned the work that kept families alive.

Her mother taught her how to weave kiras on a traditional loom. Colorful threads stretched across the wooden frame, forming beautiful patterns. “Pull the thread slowly, Sonam,” her mother instructed.

“This is how you weave the patterns...”

Sonam’s fingers grew skilled over time.

Soon she was weaving bright, beautiful kiras that women proudly wore during village gatherings and festivals.

But weaving alone could not support the family.

So, Sonam also learned to brew ara (traditional alcohol), the strong rice alcohol that villagers often bought after long days working in the fields.

Large wooden buckets sat in the corner of their house, filled with fermenting rice used to make the ara.

The smell of grain and alcohol filled the room.

One evening her mother lifted the lid of one bucket and said, “If we sell this ara tomorrow, we can buy salt and cooking oil.”

Sonam nodded.

“I will help you carry it to the village, ama.”

A Bride at Fifteen

When Sonam turned fifteen, her parents arranged her marriage.

The man’s name was Sherub Dorji.
He was twenty-eight.

On the night before her wedding, Sonam sat beside her mother near the flickering bathi lamp while her mother weaved.

The room glowed softly in the dim light.

“Ama... I’m afraid,” Sonam whispered.

Her mother paused and slowly turned her head towards her. Thousands of unspoken words in her eyes yet the only words that left her lips were:

“Every woman must walk this path, Sonam. I was able to do it and you will too.”

The next morning she left her childhood home.

Not long after, she gave birth to her first child – a daughter named Karma.

But fate was not kind.

Sherub Dorji soon became very ill.

The Night Sherub Dorji Was Dying

The rain fell softly against the wooden roof of the house. Inside, the room was dim. The only light came from the small bathi kerosene lamp flickering on the table. Its weak glow stretched shadows across the walls.

Sherub Dorji lay on the bed, his breathing slow and uneven.

Sonam sat beside him, her young daughter Karma asleep in a blanket near the fire. The smell of herbs and smoke filled the small room.

Earlier that afternoon, the villagers had gone to call Meymey Seyhab.

He was known throughout the area as the healer. Some people said he had studied medicine somewhere far away, beyond Bhutan. Because of that, villagers respectfully called him “Babu” or “Meymey Seyhab.”

He was not truly old, but in the village anyone knowledgeable and respected was called Meymey.

After checking Sherub Dorji, he could only sigh helplessly and shake his head. A gesture that meant that he couldn't save Sherub even if he tried and left.

Sherub's voice was weak.

“Sonam...”

She leaned closer.

“Yes?”

“Take care of Karma...”

Sonam nodded slowly.

But her heart was pounding.

It wasn't because of love.

Sonam had never loved Sherub Dorji. In truth, she had barely known him when they were married. Their marriage had not been about love or choice.

To Sonam, marriage had simply been something women did.

A duty.

A life they entered and endured.

Like working in the fields.

Like cooking and raising children.

Like carrying responsibilities without question.

It was a life she had accepted quietly.

But now, as Sherub's breathing grew weaker, fear crept into her chest.

Not the fear of losing a husband.

But the fear of being alone.

In those days, becoming a widow meant something terrifying.

It meant no protection.

No financial support.

No one to rely on.

She looked at her sleeping daughter.

Little Karma's small chest rose and fell softly as she slept.
A heavy thought filled Sonam's mind.

What will happen to us now?

Her fingers tightened around the edge of her kira.
Sherub coughed weakly.

"Sonam... are you there?"

"Yes. I'm here."

But inside, her thoughts raced.

How will I feed Karma?

Where will we go?

Who will help us?

For the first time in her life, Sonam felt truly frightened. The bathi lamp flickered, its flame trembling in the quiet room.

And sometime during the night, Sherub Dorji's breathing stopped.

The room fell silent.

Sonam sat still for a long time.

Not crying nor moving.

Just staring at the dim light of the lamp.

Because she knew that from that moment on, the life ahead of her would be even harder than the one she had already endured.

And she would have to face it alone.

A Marriage That Surprised Everyone

Years later, something unexpected happened.

Sonam remarried.

Her new husband was Lobzang Dorji, a young man known for his intelligence.

But there was one thing that shocked the entire village.

He was only sixteen years old – ten years younger than Sonam.

Villagers whispered in the fields and outside the Lhakhang (monastery).

“Did you hear?”

“Sonam Dema married that school boy!”

But Lobzang Dorji had big dreams.

He loved studying and was ambitious.

One evening while sitting outside their home watching the sunset over the mountains, he said,
“Dema, our children must study. Education will change their future.”

Sonam looked down at her hands.

“I cannot even read...”

Lobzang smiled gently.

“That is why they must learn.”

A Father Leaves

Years passed and the family grew.

Sonam gave birth to five children.

She continued working every day – brewing ara in large wooden buckets, weaving kiras late into the night under the flickering bathi lamp.

But in 1997, Lobzang Dorji received an opportunity to continue his studies abroad.

Before leaving, he gathered the children.

“Listen carefully. Study hard. Education is important.”
He turned to Sonam.

“Please send them to school every day.”

And then he left.

The Daughter Who Stepped Forward

Without Lobzang, life became even harder.

The family struggled with poverty.

Although the children went to school, there was no one to guide them with their studies.

One evening, the eldest daughter Dechen Chimi returned home quietly.

“Ama... I have something to tell you.”

Sonam looked up from her loom.

“What is it?”

Dechen took a deep breath.

“I will stop studying.”

Sonam froze.

“No! Your apa (father) wanted you to study.”

But Dechen shook her head.

“Our family needs money. I will work.”

After ninth grade, she left school.

And like her mother before her, she stepped into the world of work.

She repaired electrical appliances, helped construct houses, cooked in hotels, cleaned rooms as a housekeeper, and eventually even became a hotel manager.

Every job she did helped support her family.

One evening Sonam said quietly,
“Chimi... you carry too much responsibility.”

Dechen smiled.
“Ama... I learned it from you.”

The One Who Continued

Among the siblings, only Nidup, the third child and second son, continued his studies.

He was quick with his lessons and loved reading.

Teachers often told Sonam,
“This boy is very bright. Support him if you can.”

So, the family tried.

Even Dechen helped pay for his education.

“Let Nidup study, ama. One of us must succeed.”

The Return

After six long years, Lobzang Dorji finally returned home.

The children had grown.

Some were already working.

But Nidup was still studying.

Lobzang looked around the house quietly.

The loom.

The wooden buckets used for brewing ara.

The flickering bathi lamp.

And the tired but strong woman who had held the family together.

“You carried everything alone, didn’t you?” he said softly.

Sonam only smiled.

“What else could I do? They are our children.”

A New Chapter

Years passed slowly in the quiet hills of Trashigang.

The small wooden house where Sonam Dema had spent countless nights weaving kiras and brewing ara still stood between the terraced fields. The large wooden buckets she once used to ferment rice for ara rested quietly in the corner, worn by years of use.

For many years, the family had lived under the faint glow of a bathi.

Under that dim light, Sonam had raised her children. She had watched her eldest daughter Dechen Chimi give up her education after ninth grade to support the family. She had seen her children struggle through poverty and uncertainty.

But life slowly began to change.

A New Life in Paro

In 2004, the family made a life-changing decision. They left the hills of Trashigang behind and moved west to settle in Paro.

Paro was a very different world. The streets were wider, houses were lit with electricity, and schools were nearby. Children walked to class every morning carrying books and backpacks. For the first time, girls were not questioned for attending school – they simply went, as everyone should.

Sonam Dema, who had spent decades under the dim glow of a bathi lamp weaving kiras and brewing ara, could hardly imagine such a life. The hills of Trashigang were still in her heart, but Paro offered something she had never seen before – a world where her children and grandchildren could grow freely without the weight of her struggles.

The First Grandchild

In 2005, a year after moving, Dechen Chimi gave birth to a baby girl – the family’s first grandchild.

When Sonam held the tiny child in her arms, she felt a warmth she had rarely allowed herself to feel before. Hope.

The baby wrapped her tiny fingers around Sonam’s hand, and for the first time, Sonam could imagine a life completely different from her own.

“Look at her, Lobzang... she’s so small.” Sonam whispered.

Lobzang Dorji leaned over, smiling softly.
“She will grow strong.”

Unlike the hardships Sonam had endured raising her own children, this little girl entered a family that had already weathered many storms. Sonam and Lobzang showered her with love and care, guiding her gently and making sure she had everything she needed – even the gift of education that Sonam herself had never received.

A Grandmother’s Pride

As her granddaughter grew, Lobzang would sit beside her in the evenings, helping with her homework. By then he worked as a government official, respected for his knowledge and patience.

“Write it like this,” he would say, pointing at the notebook.

“See? You can do it.”

The little girl tried again, concentrating hard, while Sonam watched quietly from the side.

One day the child ran to her with excitement.

“Mummy (That’s what their granddaughter called her)! My teacher said I did very well today!”

Sonam smiled softly, placing her hand on the girl’s head. “Study well. Education is very precious.”

The Meaning of Her Life

One evening, Sonam sat outside the house, the sun slowly disappearing behind the mountains. Children walked home from school nearby, laughing and talking. Among them was her granddaughter, happily carrying her books.

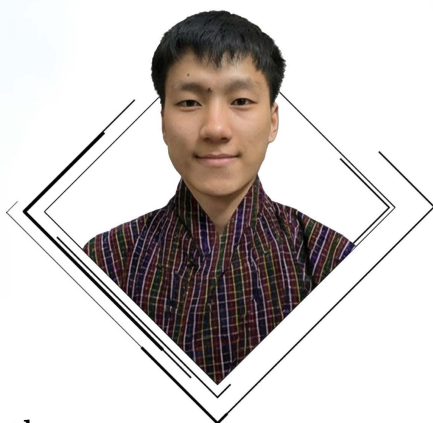
Memories came flooding back: the cows she herded as a child, the heavy baskets she carried, the endless work under the flickering bathi lamp, and the responsibilities she had shouldered for her children.

She had never entered a classroom. She had never learned to read or write.

But now, through decades of sacrifice, her grandchildren could walk freely toward their dreams; not carrying burdens like she once did, but carrying books.

And in that, Sonam found peace. Her life of hardship had built a future stronger than she could have ever imagined.





About the Author

Dorji Tshering is currently a second-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) student specialising in English and Geography. He has a strong interest in literature and enjoys exploring themes. In this particular piece of writing, he centres the story around the theme of Gender equality and social exclusion and inclusion. Beyond academics, he finds pleasure in what he calls as the "art of life", finding inspiration in everyday stories and observations of society. Through his writing, he hopes to inspire young writers like himself to be "woke" and encourage thoughtful reflection among the readers.

Stitches of Becoming

Dorji Tshering

Mornings in Lodrai Army Camp always began with the same sound- the consistent scraping of the brooms as the housewives of the army's colony cleaned the drains along the footpath.

This particular activity turned out to be a monotonous routine where they began the cleaning at exactly 7:00 am.

Amongst the many housewives stood Aum Sangay, who believed in living life with sheer grit and determination.

One morning, while sweeping the drains, one of the women sighed and said, "Every morning the same work...sometimes I wonder if our lives will ever change".

Aum Sangay simply smiled and replied softly, "Maybe one day it will. We just have to keep trying".

Like many other housewives, Aum Sangay lived in a community where traditional expectations quietly defined what women could and could not do.

Although Aum Sangay was a seemingly audacious woman with a bold personality, she was always challenged within the confinement of her community with regard to gender expectations. She lived quite a stressful life- one that would drain her out from the early dawn till the impending dusk. Within the cramped room of two, she lived with a family of five.

Her husband, Aup Kuenzang. Although a financially supportive and caring father always questioned Aum Sangay's potential and gaslighted her into thinking that she was not capable of being one of the breadwinners of the family, and making ends meet.

One evening, while she spoke about wanting to work, Aup Kuenzang shook his head and said, "You should just focus on the house. Earning money is not something you can handle".

Aum Sangay lowered her eyes but quietly responded, "But why not? I can try".

Years went on, but there was no change in the mindset of Aup Kuenzang. As a woman who was groomed in the absence of education, being a housewife in a community where she faced daily assumptions against her gender was the biggest hardship of her life. Aum Sangay did not just settle for the household chores.

One day, within her locality, she was abruptly notified of the general skill training that was offered to the women of the Lodrai Army Camp to equip them with the relevant skills such as electrical work, bakery training, tailoring and cooking.

One of the organisers announced, "This six-month training program is for women who want to learn new skills and become financially independent. "

Hearing the news, Aum Sangay's face beamed with excitement, she immediately applied for the six-month training programme.

As months passed by, Aum Sangay found herself enjoying working with the sewing machine. At first, she practised by stitching small pieces of cloth during the training sessions.

After returning home from the training each day, she began practising with old fabrics and worn-out clothes in her confined room.

Gradually, her confidence began to grow as the stitches became neater and the designs more defined and detailed as it was required.

From sewing a simple cloth piece to bringing tegos to creation, she eventually mastered the skill.

After the completion of 6 months programme, she realised something, and it was this- that there's nothing she could not achieve if she puts her heart and mind to it. Gradually, with the acquisition of the new skill, Aum Sangay started earning some income from it. She first began by repairing torn clothes and stitching basic garments for her neighbours within the colony.

Slowly, word spread about her tailoring business, and more people started bringing their clothes to her. As she progressed financially with the tailoring skill, she was reminded that she was also capable of a lot more.

She started venturing into the local business, learned how to make fast foods such as momos, veg-sausages and all kinds of food that were locally in demand.

This, however, came with a challenge as people, especially males, started judging her actions.

They muttered that a woman should focus only on household chores rather than trying to earn money.

Some even deemed her "money-minded" and mocked her for what they perceived as greediness.

Though the whispers and judgments from others did not disappear entirely, they no longer held the same weight.

Aum Sangay had learned to focus on her progress rather than their opinions.

She no longer worked to prove others wrong, but to prove to herself that she was capable.

At home, subtle changes began to unfold. Aup Kuenzang, who once dismissed her ambitions, started noticing the difference.

The children were better cared for, their needs met with greater ease, and the household felt a little more secure than before.

He would occasionally watch her work in silence, a quiet acknowledgement replacing his earlier doubts.

One evening, as Aum Sangay carefully counted the day's earnings, she placed a portion of the money beside her husband.

There was no trace of hesitation in her voice as she said, "This is for the household expenses."

Aup Kuenzang looked at the money, then at her.

For a moment, he said nothing. But this time, his silence was different; it was no longer filled with doubt but with understanding.

He gave a small nod, one that carried more meaning than words ever could.

In that quiet moment, Aum Sangay realised something far greater than financial independence.

She had not only changed her own life but had also begun to shift the mindset within her home.

The boundaries that once confined her no longer seemed as rigid and suffocating as before.

And as the mornings in Lodrai Army Camp continued with the familiar sound of brooms sweeping the drains, Aum Sangay walked with a renewed sense of self.

She was no longer just a housewife bound by expectations, but a woman who had risen beyond them.





About the Author

Kinley Zam is a second-year college student at the Samtse College of Education, pursuing a degree in English and Geography. With a foundation in literature from her high school years as an active member of the literature club, she has nurtured a deep passion for journaling and creative expression. She is a firm advocate for equal rights, particularly women's rights, and hopes to use her voice to inspire awareness and meaningful change. Her work reflects both personal insight and a commitment to creating a more inclusive society.

The Village Meeting

Kinley Zam

Have you ever been underestimated for what you can do and achieve simply because of who you are? I had never experienced such a moment until one day I was quietly challenged and overlooked in a room full of voices, all older, all more certain than mine. Yet in that moment, I chose to speak and the subtle sense of my presence or perhaps my voice was not entirely anticipated.

One fine summer, my Ama requested me to attend a local village meeting on behalf of her as she was feeling unwell. I felt both excited and anxious since it was my first time attending such a gathering.

I wore my favorite Kira and practiced several greetings to hide my awkwardness. When Ama's friend, Aum Pem arrived, I quickly picked up a notebook and pen and followed her to the meeting venue, which was at the local school.

Many people had already gathered and were sitting in a large circle.

At the front, the Tshogpa, Chipoen and the gewog Lopen occupied the chairs, set slightly apart from the rest.

I along with Aum Pem went to find a seat around the circle and waited for the meeting to begin.

The meeting started with the three officials introducing themselves and welcoming everyone.

The purpose of the gathering was to discuss a water shortage in the village and select three villagers to attend an upcoming agricultural workshop.

As the discussion progressed, I noticed most of the men were actively talking and providing their opinions.

The women, however, remained silent.

I was surprised, not a single woman was speaking up and just kept fiddling with the grasses beneath them.

Curious, I leaned towards Aum Pem and whispered,

“Why are none of the women sharing their opinions?”

She gave a quiet laugh before replying, “Kinley, we are used to listening.

Speaking rarely changes anything for us.”

Her response confused me, but I thought to shrug it off.

After a while, a middle-aged woman finally gathered the courage to suggest an idea for solving the water problem.

Before she could finish, a man interrupted with a light chuckle, “Oie, you seem to have given this quite some thought, though Nang ghi Aum already have enough to manage at home.”

A few men around laughed softly. Another added, in a casual tone, “Kephoja ghi la Kephoja lu zhagay. These matters can be complicated, perhaps it is better left to those who deal with such concerns regularly.” Once again, laughter spread across the circle, even reaching the officials while the women remained silent.

The woman’s suggestion drifted away, dismissed without acknowledgement. Watching this unfold stirred a quiet but growing frustration within me. There was nothing overly harsh in their jokes, but the meaning was unmistakable.

My Ama had always advised me to control my emotions and respect the elders in a social circle, so I tried to remain calm. Still, the frustration continues to build, pressing against the silence I was expected to keep.

Eventually, it was time to select three participants for the agricultural workshop. To my disappointment, all three names announced were men.

The decision was explained in practical terms, someone mentioned the journey would be long, and another added that the women had many responsibilities at home and might find it difficult to attend.

The reasons were easily accepted, even though I knew many of the women worked just tirelessly in the fields as the men.

I usually avoid speaking in large settings because I struggle with social anxiety. However, that day I felt something was off, even with all this freedom and rights I felt that women in my village were still being oppressed and overlooked. Gathering my courage, I calmly raised my hand and asked, “Why were no women selected for the workshop?” One of the officials replied casually, “No women volunteered, so we selected the participants ourselves.”

“Aum and others also work in the fields everyday”, I said, trying to keep a steady voice. “Wouldn’t it be helpful to at least discuss their names before deciding?” A silence followed after that, but I continued, “If the workshop is meant to help the village, then perhaps everyone who contributes should have the chance to learn as well.” The villagers didn’t take it the right way, they accused me of disrespecting the elder officials and questioning their authority. Some women even sided with the men, saying I was creating unnecessary issues out of something so small. One lady shouted, “Ahh...Why to make a fuse out of this?” and others nodded in agreement. I couldn’t blame the women entirely; they were raised in a society that never allowed them to imagine equal opportunities.

The world outside had progressed, but the people of my village were still rooted with the traditional mindset. During the lunch break, several women approached me and advised me to remain quiet. When I asked why, one of them replied, “Sodey Kam Wong” meaning that speaking up against elderly men would bring bad luck or diminish my luck. I just smiled and asked them who worked more in the fields, their husbands or them. Most of them replied saying that they work equally in the field, if not more. They managed household chores, looked after the kids and then had to work in the fields, yet they were not taken into consideration. I told them that they were as capable as the men were and that they were setting a wrong example for future generations. However, it seems stubbornness runs within the villagers.

To my surprise, one of the officials, Lopen Chador, later approached me. He asked with a smile, "Are you still not satisfied with the selection?" I nodded. Lopen Chador laughed warmly and said that I reminded him of his daughter, who was around my age. Then he added, "Bumchu, if you have something to share, you may share it". Nervous, but feeling encouraged I spoke more openly. "I only feel that the women were not really considered," I said. "They work in the fields just as much, and sometimes even more. If given the opportunity, they could benefit from the workshop in the same way." Unlike earlier, he did not laugh or dismiss my words. Instead, he listened carefully with a thoughtful expression. After some seconds, he said, "You have raised a fair point. These decisions are often made out of habit, not always intention. I will bring this up with the others." The meeting ended soon after, though I could sense murmurs following me as I left. They questioned my boldness and attitude. Later, I learned that my mother had also faced some criticism because of me. Yet, she remained supportive.

Weeks passed, and my summer vacation came to an end. When I returned to school, the incident slowly faded from my mind. Then, one Sunday, my Ama called me with some unexpected news. The three village officials had revisited their earlier decision and this time, two women and one man had been selected for the workshop. Hearing this, I felt a sense of fulfillment. Whether it was my words, or the willingness of someone who truly listened, something had changed and for me that was enough to begin with. Something had shifted not in a loud gesture or a dramatic speech, but in a quiet acknowledgment of voices that had long been overlooked. I realized then that change often starts with a single voice that is willing to speak even when the world expects silence from you.





About the Author

Dai Tshering Doya is a passionate writer who enjoys expressing his emotions and thoughts through storytelling and poetry. He is also an avid reader who often invests his time exploring emotions, ideas, metaphysical reflections and love through the works of other writers resting on dormant pages. Besides writing and reading, he enjoys playing games, most often football and a few screen-based ones. In this piece, he has penned a story that revolves around gender inequality, though it is fictionalized. Currently he is pursuing a Bachelor of Education in English and History, fulfilling his dream that he has long carried close to his heart.

Women at the Threshold

Dai Tshering Doya

The mountain was beautifully capped by snowfall, propelling the cold zephyr into the village perched below the highway of the Samtse and Chukha district. Known for its rich tradition and culture, these districts shaped the lives of the people and silently left an indelible mark of its perennial presence. The farmers had harvested a substantial yield of paddy in the preceding years.

As the days passed by, the mountain was embroidered with snow, the grass showered with the dripping of dew making the ground cold, and the freezing wind dominated the village. People started to stitch the woolen clothes, and beside each house there piled up the stack of firewood, and the field once brimmed with previous paddies that wore the golden hues had turned quiet, and the persistent blow of the gusty breeze reminded each farmer that winter was not far away.

It was winter vacation, and students had come back home with immense excitement to help their parents.

The summer rain had showered the land, readying the land for cultivating crops. Farmers, men and women, were engaged in rhythms of cutting and uprooting grass before ploughing, a communal dance, witnessed by the seasons.

Sonam Lhaden, a beautiful twelve-year-old girl, was known for her loquacious personality, a trait that was enshrined in her since birth. She grew up with a peculiar interest of working in the field; the muscle laden male centric task of ploughing.

So, she could not hold herself back from making her dream of ploughing a reality. Her heart had been eagerly carrying for years, the dream to ready the hand with her bare hands, and could not wait for it to come true.

One day, she snuck into the field, as the sun loomed over her head, she tepidly went on an escapade. The two oxen stood ready under the shade of a tree with the burden of a yoke placed upon their necks, waiting unwillingly, the plough dipped into the land.

Before the ride of the oxen and the pleasure of the plough could ensue, her father intervened with a harsh voice.

“Sonam, what are you doing here? Are you supposed to do this as a female?”

Sonam froze and could do nothing other than bow down meekly with teary eyes and broken hope. In a low trembling voice, she responded, “Apa, I wanted these oxen to pull me toward a desired direction as they do to you every time you strike them with a stick.”

“What did you say?” her father blurted out.

“The plough that seems easy actually demands strength in the arms and command in the voice, qualities that are embedded only in man’s nature.

A girl’s place and voice work not behind the plough but kitchen, so controlling oxen is a burden only the man can uphold.” he commanded.

Sonam was lost into a world of introspection, about father’s comment on; strength and command of the voice, making her ponder whether a female might possess those two qualities.

Suddenly a hoarse voice of her father brought her back to reality. “Sonam, where are you lost? I said, “Did you get me?”

“Yes, Apa,” Sonam responded quietly, frantically nodding.

“Get lost from here, and do not dare touch the plough, your mother needs you at home more than I need you here” her father declared.

She ran toward home, desires diminished, carrying the trails of her father’s truth, rubbing her eyes. Her mother saw her weary daughter; her eyes had turned red due to the repeated rubbing of the eyes, in attempts to wipe away her despair.

Her mother, seeing her, said, “Chey Chey (beloved), come here. What happened to your eyes? Did something happen?”

Sonam gingerly sat beside her mother, shedding out tears indicating her disappointment. Her voice whispered coarse from the crying:

“Ama, I have been sent off from the field by Apa when I was just trying to help and do as he did.

Apa scolded me saying that my voice is so weak that it holds no strength for command to direct the oxen with hands clutched upon the handle that controls the plough, and so I suit to be a chef in the kitchen than the toiler on the field.”

She continued, “What does that mean, and why are girls not allowed to plough the field? What is the reason behind it?”

The mother, a woman herself, felt a sense of guilt having silently lived through such a reality.

She mustered her courage and said,
“Our people believe that letting women plough a field would bring a curse to the family, and it would bring bad Karma to the whole community.”

“Moreover, people believe that women are not born equal, and because of this they cannot alter the faith that has been assigned to them. So that is why we are restricted from holding a plough,” the mother claimed in a low voice, patting her back in an attempt to console her.

Sonam nodded frantically, but the expression on her face indicated that she had deciphered little of what her mother told her.

Winter vacation then ended, and Sonam went to school with the hope to learn new things, a trait that defined her curious soul. Time then made her nineteen.

During one of her classes, she heard her teacher say, “Gender equality is what matters for a harmonious life, and being devoid of it makes living hell.”

All of a sudden, a very fundamental yet bracing insight struck Sonam's heart, leading her to retrospect on what had happened to her in the field that day. Time had taken flight before she could entirely understand the real sense behind the words she heard in class, and she went back to her village for summer vacation.

Once home, Sonam saw that some parts of the roof in the village houses had been replaced by banana leaves, blending the houses with nature when viewed from the highway above.

Soon after her arrival, Sonam and her family, along with some villagers, were invited to attend Ap Dawa Penjor's ritual. This revered man was customarily referred to as Tha in the local dialect, a name given to a grandfather by the people of the community.

He had been a ritualist by practice for decades, but now he had to rely on others to perform his own rituals. Despite his age, he dwelt in the heart of the people and was a revered figure in the community. Moreover, he was also considered a palmist (Bhaidhangi) and people in the village would go to him for physical ailments.

During the ritual, he welcomed all the guests with humility and everyone bowed to him in respect. Women were engaged in kneading dough to make effigies for the rituals, cooking, and carrying firewood.

When it was time to kill the pigs and recite prayers, Ap Dawa Penjor, in his hoarse voice, proclaimed, "Every woman, as usual, must stay away from this.

If not, the rituals will not be successful" As the announcement was made, Sonam felt a strange familiar feeling that had accompanied her always, a feeling just under her nose .

Instinctively, she leaned toward her close friend Kelzang Namgyal, her voice low and meek yet thoughtful.

“It is strange” she murmured, “that women are not allowed to fully take part in this offering, even though the kneading of the dough to make effigies is done by them”.

This moment added further reservations to her mind about the society, the contradiction between words and actions, the divide between the gender and inequality that persisted.

At the end of the ritual, Sonam, out of curiosity, went to Ap Dawa Penjor and inquired once again, “Agay (Grandpa), why are women restricted from taking part in offerings and rituals when tasks for the rituals are done by them?”

Ap Dawa Penjor blinked his eyes twice and stared directly into Sonam’s eyes—perhaps a stare of anger or surprise, she could not be sure. He then cleared his throat, stuck by a snort, and responded, “Since the time we existed on this earth, the demigods disguised themselves as muscular men and ordered one of the ritualists that the privilege of offerings must be given to men and women must be kept away because they are impure. I loathe it when someone with impurity makes an offering to me.”

He continued, “We are doing this according to what has been passed down from generation to generation, and breaching this belief would result in bad luck for the family.”

“Then why are women not restricted from making effigies that are offered to demigods believed to have existed since time immemorial?” Sonam retorted with a gist of anger and frustration.

Ap Dawa Penjor opened his betel-nut pouch, pulled out a piece of betel nut, wrapped it in a betel leaf and threw it into his mouth, revealing his reddish teeth. He coughed a little and continued, “It was not prominent in earlier days. It has come into practice recently—maybe decades ago—mainly due to the decline in population.

Did you see the girls washing their hands twice or thrice before kneading the dough and doing it outside the altar room meant for offerings?” Sonam nodded and said, “Yes, I did.” “That is because we believe washing hands twice or thrice would cleanse the impurity for a certain period,” added Ap Dawa Penjor.

“Don’t you think we use tradition as a scapegoat for what is unfair?” Sonam interrogated.

“We do not care about being biased or not when it comes to preserving the purity of our demigods,” exclaimed Ap Dawa Penjor. “Your schooled mind and heart know nothing about what we have been practicing for decades, and we do not want your educated mind to degrade our rich culture and tradition.”

“We have already placed our trust on the demigods, so we couldn’t care less about what you have to say. So, go and do your own task rather than interfere in the matter of what men are doing because we clearly know what we are doing, and we will continue with it for generations to come.” added Ap Dawa Penjor, with rigidity and arrogance in his voice. That was the end of Sonam’s inquiry, an end to her desire to seek answers.

When lunch arrived, everyone was called to eat the pork that had been sacrificed as a ritual offering. The conversation had ended, Sonam became more thoughtful, and after being exposed to her own community’s practices, started believing in the justifications of women’s place in the society.

When Sonam turned thirty-four, her beauty had stayed with her, and had returned to her village to address a matter on the family inheritance.

It was a freezing winter then, but the village where she grew up had transformed into a bustling space with signs of prosperity.

Her village, once filled with huts, had turned into concrete houses, but the colossal betel-nut trees still adorned the landscape adding flavour to the village.

After completing her Bachelor's degree from a college, Sonam had joined the civil service as a teacher in one of the high schools in western Bhutan.

She was married and had two children.

At night after dinner they gathered around for a conversation, and her father gently said, "Chey Chey, we have given all the five acres of land to two of your brothers leaving nothing for you, because you are now married to a working man from another village"

"Moreover, you also know that we have to keep our property in our own hands rather than give it to someone not of our blood."

The father added confirming the social beliefs and realities that now she lived in.

Her father's words were like daggers stabbing her heart from all directions.

Yet, Sonam accepted these words thinking that her words would mean nothing, droplets of water in an ocean of despair.

Although Sonam had come back home with the intention to stay with her parents, her father's decision compelled her to leave the village and return to her husband.

Her heart weighed down with melancholic feelings dragging her to the depths, yet she accepted the fate that now separated the souls that were once inseparable.

Carrying both love and sorrow within, she decided to raise her children with empathy and courage, so that they would grow into individuals who would value understanding over rigid customs.

A dwindling yet hopeful action to guide her two daughters out of the miseries women have to face in the world.





PART II:



Lessons Beyond the Classroom: Stories from Our Teachers



The Distance Between Hearing and Listening

Part I: The Duet Begins

The first time I heard your voice, it was not the words I remember. It was the pause before them.

“I am scared to love,” you told me. Not dramatically. Not as a performance. Simply as a fact. “My heart is a locked room. I don’t know if I have the key.”

You did not look at me when you said it. You looked at the mist rolling over the hills, where the light gently slides, over the landscape’s silhouette, gentle, warm, delicate, and ephemeral.

I answered quickly, too quickly perhaps. I promised to love loudly enough for the both of us.

But you smiled and I took that for a win.

“You don’t have to love loudly,” you said. “Just don’t leave. Be there for me”

It was such a small sentence. I did not understand then how heavy the weight of the words were.

Part II: The Geography of Absence

When I left to pursue my dreams, you did not protest. “You should go,” you said, rocking our daughter to sleep. “This is important.”

But later, when the camera angle slipped and you forgot I was watching, I saw you press your face into her hair and stay there longer than necessary. The rhythm of your saddened shoulders and sound of muffled hurt I could not see.

The calls began as rituals. Morning check-ins. Night updates.

“You ate?” you would ask.

“Yes.”

“You’re sleeping enough?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t drink too much!”

“Ok”

“You sound tired,” you would say.

“I’m fine.”

You were consistent.

One evening, when the internet lag made your face freeze mid-expression, your voice continued without the picture catching up.

“Do you know what today was?” you asked.

I searched my calendar. Nothing significant.

“It was the first time she called for you and you weren’t there,” you said quietly. “She kept pointing at the door.”

I apologized. I said all the right things.

You nodded.

“I know you’re doing this for us,” you said. “I just wish ‘us’ included being here.”

You did not accuse. You did not shout.

You grew quieter.

Part III: The Accusation

“You don’t listen to me.”

This time you did not say it softly.

We were in the kitchen. I was distracted. You had been speaking about something, your sister, your work, your exhaustion.

“I heard you,” I insisted.

You put the cup down harder than necessary.

“No,” you said. “You heard the topic. You didn’t hear me.”

“What does that even mean?” I asked.

You looked at me, not angry, but tired.

“It means when I say I’m tired, you tell me to rest. When I say I’m overwhelmed, you suggest a solution. When I say I’m lonely, you remind me of our future plans.”

You paused.

“I don’t need plans. I need you to sit in it with me.”
Your voice broke slightly then.

“Sometimes I feel like I am reporting my life to you, not sharing it.”

That sentence stayed in the room long after the conversation ended, longer than I dare admit.

Part IV: Her Inventory

You began to speak differently after that.
Not louder.
Clearer.

“Do you know what it feels like,” you said one night, “to carry everyone’s expectations and still try to be soft when you’re exhausted?”

You listed them not as complaints but as facts:
“I am someone’s wife. Someone’s mother. Someone’s daughter. Someone’s daughter-in-law. Someone’s colleague. Someone’s sister.”

Then you added quietly:
“But sometimes I don’t feel like I am someone’s partner.”

You explained the invisible labor, the scheduling, the remembering, the emotional cushioning between relatives, the school meetings, the illnesses, the ceremonies.

“You send money,” you said gently. “You call. You try. I see that. But trying from distance still leaves me alone at the end of the day.”

You were not dismissing my effort.

You were describing your reality.

“Do you know what I miss?” you asked once.

“What?”

“Not the big things. Just... being able to sigh and know you’re in the same room.”

Part V: Her Fear

Your fear finally surfaced one evening when the house was quiet.

“I’m afraid of becoming strong without you,” you admitted.

I didn’t understand.

“You’re already strong,” I said.

“That’s not what I mean.”

You took a breath.

“I’m afraid I’ll learn how to live without expecting you. And one day I won’t miss you the same way.”

That was the first time I saw your own terror.

“I don’t want to stop loving you,” you said. “But sometimes loving from distance feels like loving a memory.”

You looked at me carefully then.

“Are you still here with me? Or just near me?”

Part VI: Her Grace

Despite everything, you did not withdraw.

You still hummed while cooking. You still called my mother. You still made space for me at the table, in decisions, in stories.

But you began to ask for something different.

“Don’t fix it,” you would say gently when I started offering advice.

“Just listen.”

And sometimes, when I actually stayed silent, not defensively, not impatiently, you would soften.

“Thank you,” you whispered once after a long pause. “That’s all I wanted.”

I am beginning to understand that your grace was not passive endurance.

It was an invitation. Invitation to show up differently.

Now when you speak, I try to let the words land before I respond.

When you say, “Today was hard,” I ask, “Tell me what made it heavy.”

When you say, “I’m tired,” I sit closer.

When you say, “I don’t need advice,” I nod.

And sometimes you test me gently.

“Are you listening?” you ask.

“Yes,” I answer.

“Then don’t say anything yet.”

So I don’t.

You breathe.

And then you continue.

“I don’t want perfect love,” you told me recently. “I want present love.”

That is the duet we are learning again.

Not volume. Not solutions. Not proof of calls made or sacrifices counted.

Just presence.

And when you say now, “I’m here,”

I answer,

“Tell me more.”

And you do.

- *Red*



About the Author

Sapna Thapa is a faculty at Samtse College of Education , Royal University of Bhutan. She holds a Master of Science in Data Science and Artificial Intelligence from the Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand. She has been teaching IT and Teaching Methods modules since 2019. Her research interest revolves around Educational Technology, Generative AI in Education, and technology integration in school curriculum.

My Experience in STEM

Sapna Thapa

My journey in the field of science began during my high school years. Like many students at that stage, I had to choose subjects that would shape my academic path.

I opted to take Mathematics, which led me further into the science stream. It was during this time that I first noticed the relatively small number of female students in the field. In a class of 25 students, there were only five girls.

Although the representation of women was limited, we were never treated differently.

Neither favoritism nor discrimination was evident; everyone was expected to perform based on their ability and commitment.

When I later joined an engineering college for my undergraduate studies, the situation was quite similar.

The ratio of female to male students was roughly 1:4. Despite this imbalance, gender never became a concern in the academic environment.

Teaching, learning, and assessment were conducted purely on the basis of competence and performance. What mattered most was one's skill and dedication to learning. Gender was simply not a factor in academic expectations or evaluation.

After graduating and entering the job market, my experience continued along the same lines.

I personally did not encounter any opportunities that favored one gender over another. As long as an individual was capable and competent, the competition remained open and fair.

The emphasis was always placed on knowledge, ability, and professional readiness.

However, when I began my professional career, particularly in the field of IT education, I noticed that the number of women became even smaller. There were very few women working in this area.

Perhaps because I had already become accustomed to seeing fewer women in science classrooms and academic environments from a young age, this situation never felt unusual to me.

Being part of a male-dominated field simply became my normal experience.

In terms of workload and professional responsibilities, gender has never played a role in my career.

Tasks, expectations, and responsibilities were distributed without regard to whether someone was male or female.

While there may be many factors that influence gender representation in STEM fields, in my experience as both a student and now as a working professional, gender equality has largely been present in the environments I have been part of.

Therefore, my journey has always been centered on competence, knowledge, and professional growth rather than gender differences.

Overall, I believe that choosing to pursue a career in STEM particularly in Information Technology has been a rewarding and empowering decision.

Being a woman in this field has allowed me to grow academically and professionally, and it continues to be an experience that I value greatly.







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