

# **ELECTION COMMISSION OF BHUTAN**

Keynote Address

at

**Launch of “*La, Aum Lyonchhen*” Media Advocacy Campaign,**

by

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Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan

Terma Linca Resort, Babesa

(1<sup>st</sup> of September, 2012)

**“In politics, if you want anything said, ask a man, if you want anything done, ask a woman.” Margaret Thatcher.**

**Your Royal Highness,**

**Mr. Bjorn Forde, Director, Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy,**

**Representatives of Danish Aid Agency in Bhutan,**

**Supreme Court and High Court Judges,**

**Resident Coordinator of UN systems,**

**Resident Representative, UNICEF,**

**Dy. Resident Representative, UNDP,**

**Dashos,**

**Aums,**

**Aum Kesang Chuki Dorje of KCD Productions, Hon’ble MPs,**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Members of the Bhutanese Media,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

1. I am honoured to be given this privilege of delivering a statement at this very important and timely initiative of the Bhutanese Multi-media company, the KCD Productions, on a subject that is very dear to every person - *WOMEN*. She is known by different names – *angay, aie, ama, ashim, sim, noom, boom, nangi aum* and *nying-drog!* Today we celebrate and rejoice in the possibility of having her as an *Hon’ble Aum Lyonchhen*, the highest possible title of merit and recognition a Bhutanese can aspire in Democratic Bhutan.

2. We must together pave the path to get there. I am excited that today, with the formal launching of the Media Advocacy Campaign materials created over the past eight months by KCD Productions, we will be taking steps towards such a wonderful possibility. I would on behalf of the women and men of Bhutan and on my own behalf like to congratulate the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy and Kesang Chuki for the bold undertaking.
3. We wish the documentary film, radio drama series and the TV Public Service Announcements being launched today help Bhutanese women ponder the benefits of taking active part, including in the forthcoming Parliamentary Elections in 2013, and the Danish experience to encourage and inspire capable women to come forward to participate in politics, governance and decision-making.

**Your Royal Highness,**

**Ladies and Gentleman,**

4. It is true that there is equality of opportunity for both men and women in Bhutan to vote, contest and participate. It is also true that working women in Bhutan face inherent challenges of the choices that need to be made between home, children and work.
5. It is a fact that where women play an active and major role, the family and the home do well. When homes are better managed, communities tend to do well. Where communities do well, a Nation certainly enjoys political stability, economic prosperity and better wellbeing of the people. In all these, it is the women who make the most difference.
6. We know that a woman is generally more committed to overall well-being than men. We find that a woman devotes more care and dedication to all causes. So it goes without saying that if more women take leadership roles and positions of authority and influence, the progress of nation building, would be even easier. Not only our homes but also our communities and the Nation itself would benefit from the care and intelligent love of the women in our lives.

7. There has been a sea change in the lives of the Bhutanese with strides in education, road networks, advancement in ICT, availability of labour saving home appliances, cheaper energy resources and technologies, with commensurate improvement in lives, lifestyle and working environments. The state of development and progress of Bhutan has resulted in elimination of many factors that kept women behind. Gaps that differentiated and divided women from men, girls from boys are becoming narrower every year.
8. The traditional, geographical and physical barriers that challenged and inconvenienced girls several decades ago no longer exist except perhaps in a few corners of the Kingdom. The days when Bhutanese had to trek to school and employment crossing mountains, wading through rivers and sleeping in the forests and meadows carrying one's own bedding and provisions for days are long gone.
9. So now we must shift our attention and do more in areas such as promotion of crèche and child care facilities, optional long term child-raising-leave for either the father or the mother, flexible working hours etc.. These have contributed to freeing and encouraging an increasing number of women in many societies to be part of the political and economic mainstream.

**Your Royal Highness,**

**Ladies & Gentlemen**

10. In many democracies and societies where barriers are overt and entrenched there is much discussion on Quota, considered as a necessary intervention to jumpstart the process of elevating women to positions of elected leadership and decision-making. However, such a move is not useful for all systems. It is not a practical solution at this point of time for Bhutan. It also requires major legislative changes.
11. Dasho Gagey Lham was the first lady Judge at the High Court, then the highest judicial body and the first woman to be awarded the red scarf by His Majesty the King. From 1979 to 1984 we had two women representatives in the erstwhile national bodies: Dasho Dawa Dem from Haa in the Royal Advisory Council and Hiran Maya Lama from Samtse, serving in the

National Assembly. Since then in over 30 years, we had 120 women elected to leadership positions in the erstwhile National Assembly, Royal Advisory Council and Local Governments.

In the last four and half years of elections under the Constitution, starting with the elections to the National Council in 2007, we have 110 women in elected positions. This is a very steep rise in numbers and we hope this trend will continue in future.

12. More women are graduating from our educational programmes every year. More and more girls are academically and professionally prepared to occupy different positions traditionally taken by men. More women qualify to seek employment in the world of work in the modern sector. To augment the positive trend of increasing numbers of women in leadership positions, it is relevant and pertinent that we give the needed impetus to the process of further empowering women who form more than 50 percent of the population and the electorate.

**Your Royal Highness,**

**Ladies and Gentleman,**

13. In terms of electoral duties, more women were forthcoming and we observed better systems put in place where there were women leadership on Polling duty.

14. It is evident that the last election was a success because women members played the lead role in reaching the message across and motivating electorate giving 80 percent voter turnout in this day and age when the world is witnessing waning voter participation in elections.

15. We wish the majority participation by women as voters would lead to higher representation of women in decision-making positions so that the Nation benefits from women's perspectives and insights which are different from those of their male counterparts. The answers to issues of gender balancing and mainstreaming can be found easily in democracy and elections. The door of possibility is open for women to enter in terms of number and choices.

**Ladies, here today as well as all others in the country!**

16. I dare you, all accomplished Bhutanese women, to stop highlighting stereo-typical arguments on what has been in the past. Rather embody and demonstrate the present potential and be forward-looking, deriving moral strength from the values enshrined in our Constitution and legal power from the Laws made there under. Set new trends where you do not agree with any practice, value or system. Voluntarily take the lead to reform, change or undertake a path-breaking course of action.
  
17. For instance, take the much touted discrimination, if I may be permitted to use the term, between a man and woman today in Bhutan in visiting a *Goen-khang*. I believe women must make the decision to do something about it. Mere voicing of opinion as a big issue of discrimination and condemning the society at large is not fair if you are not willing to take that bold step forward yourself. Charity has to begin at home and you must be prepared to take that step yourself.
  
18. At the same time, I urge the Bhutanese society and particularly the men, as fathers, brothers, husbands and friends, to help and support any and all barriers to be crossed and broken so that we can leave behind as our collective legacy, a truly egalitarian and enlightened society and polity in keeping with the Far-Sighted Vision of Our Monarchs.

**Your Royal Highness,**

**Ladies and Gentleman,**

19. In the political field, the ECB cannot impose or prescribe any role or obligation on political parties more than the Constitution and electoral laws require. But we are aware of our current context and would continue to urge and encourage Parties to introduce measures that could invite increased participation of women in party activities such as introduction of intra-party

quotas. Spelling these out in the Party Charters and integrating in the Party strategy as an immediate measure, is a more viable option than trying to change the laws.

20. On the other hand, we would like to equally urge voters to insist upon political parties that capable women members be nominated and given tickets as a priority. Once elected, parties must consider women for Cabinet portfolios.
21. I cannot emphasize enough the usefulness of Networking amongst women. Everyone here would agree, networking and sharing experiences at all levels- local, national and international will go a long way to inspire, motivate as well as support in a practical manner. These would do a world of good to help new comers while it would also help to demystify or bust myths that hold back woman from venturing to assume elected and leadership positions and roles in the Bhutanese polity.
22. Let us today throw a challenge that all women of substance and purpose should be determined and be willing to make the difference themselves. Educated and capable women themselves must come forward to remove or cast away the fictional shackles and forge ahead accepting challenges and prepare to compete to take up important and bigger roles and positions. As an Indian lady CEO said, “leave the issue of women-hood at the gate”.
23. I have confidence in Bhutanese women that you could do more than to plead for the sympathy vote for being a woman in uncharted terrain. My sincere advice to women who aspire to be candidates is that she should campaign as a candidate in her own right, putting forward articulate and well thought-out positions and proposals on all pertinent issues and policies and compete on equal footing with men as a qualified professional and not solely as a champion of women’s issues.

**Your Royal Highness,**

**Ladies and Gentleman,**

24. It is a pleasure to inform you that the initiatives of ECB to take polling stations closer to homesteads and the Common Forum being arranged by election officials for public addresses by parties/candidates, not only contributed significantly to strong and consistent female voter turnouts in the elections so far but targets the concerns raised on difficulties in accessing the public especially by women candidates and voters.
25. We find that the importance of role models and trendsetters cannot be over emphasized. Towards this, the ECB has been making concerted efforts to promote and portray the image of women as candidates as well as voters in our voter awareness initiatives including in posters, documents etc. We are glad as the Media Products being launched today would contribute, complement and supplement our efforts manifold.
26. To translate our aspirations into substance and create a long term impact, in addition to the voter awareness, education and information programme, we will undertake two big projects of national significance. The first is the establishment of an Electoral Training and Resource Centre (ETRC) and second is project to help schools and institutions introduce Democracy Clubs to engender democratic culture and values in and for future voters.
27. Here we look to the women leaders of tomorrow to benefit from their participation. We also count on teachers and parents to play a big persuasive factor in grooming and guiding more girls for leadership roles. We hope these initiatives would lead to help growth in meaningful political participation and sensitize future leaders, at an early age.
28. Lastly, may I say how fortunate we are, for this special occasion, to have as the Chief Guest Her Royal Highness who is the epitome of Grace with Talent, a role model and an inspiration for Bhutanese women to scale greater heights.

**Thank you - Your Royal Highness! Thank You- KCD Productions!**

**Thank you-everyone!**