# Employees' Perception about Female Leadership in Government and Corporate Sectors: A Contextual Study of Bhutan

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#### **Abstract**

This paper aims at studying the perception of employees on the identified attributes associated with female leadership in government and corporate sectors in Bhutan. It was assessed with the help of variables which are closely associated with the attributes of female leadership such as affection, efficiency and collaboration. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to describe the research data and to find the perception difference between male and female employees about female leadership respectively. The research results indicate employees' perception about female leaders to be slightly more affectionate and efficient. However, they are perceived to be less collaborative across both government and corporate sectors. When compared to males, female employees rated female leadership significantly higher across all three attributes. A higher degree of perception is observed if the immediate supervisor whom employees report to is a female, and vice versa. The inferences drawn from the study may not be generalized to the whole nation as the data was collected only from government and corporate organizations. Also, given the nature of the study, the instances of social desirability bias may have occurred and the honest response might have been compromised. The outcome of this study demands educational interventions and awareness programs across organizations to eliminate the glass ceiling effect so that more females take part in leadership positions. This study could provide some key insights to the female leaders, both in-the-system and aspiring, to understand their stand and challenges in their pursuit to take up leadership roles both in and across the country. This research adds to the limited number of gender-based leadership studies in the country and therefore it could also be useful for concerned researchers, academicians and policy makers as an information input in their respective disciplines.

**Keywords:** Leadership, gender, employees, perception, affection, efficiency, collaboration

#### Introduction

Gender-based leadership is the common topic of discussion across countries among professionals, politicians and people belonging to different walks of life. The degree of such discussions varies based on the political and sociological realities of human inhabitants, in particular, the nature of countries in general. The subject of gender-based leadership has become more significant among developing countries where women participation in managerial and decision-making positions is at its nascent stage (Voss & Speere, 2014). It is generally agreed that a nation progress by materializing the intellect of its subjects and not by discriminating them based on their gender. The inclusive growth in the developing countries including Bhutan may be possible with the equal participation of both the gender in the leadership positions.

Of late, we have come across a number of women who have been playing a significant role in leadership positions. Their participation is not limited to organizations but also in the field of politics. Due to their significant contribution in different social, organizational and political roles, the perception about women and their roles have changed in many countries. Such phenomena become pivotal in the case of Bhutan that carries Gross National Happiness (GNH) philosophy to weigh the holistic development of the nation. The holistic development may well be achieved without any gender discrimination in the social, organizational and political participations.

Along with the personal will of the women to participate in leadership positions, the perception of the people regarding the female leadership also matters. Tshering (2015) also observed that women in Bhutan are faced with a range of social, political, cultural and religious barriers in their career progression. There is ample evidence that women have faced and are facing much more barriers than men in leadership positions in Bhutan (Asian Development Bank, 2014; Choden, 2012, Dhlerub, 2014). Similarly, Bhutan has 99th position in the GII index which measures the extent to which the potential human development is constrained because of the imbalance of achievements between males and females in the country (Human Development Report, 2019). Such disparities may hinder achieving inclusive growth and therefore needs special attention to address the same.

To eliminate disparities and perception stumbles that females often come across in their career, there is a need for a probe into the subject to understand perception of people regarding female leadership. Inconsistency of any sort could thus be mitigated with certain educational or policy interventions.

### **Research Objectives**

- To determine the perception of employees about the attributes of female leadership in Government and Corporate sectors in Bhutan.
- To study the influence of respondent's demographic characteristics on the employees' perception about male and female leaders.

#### Literature Review

### Leadership and Women Leadership

In the recent past, there is a deep hankering among researchers and general people across the globe to fathom the effectiveness of leadership. Notably, around four decades ago, Stogdill (1974) argued that "there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept." This would mean different people perceive leadership differently based on their experiences and expectations of the same. More simplistic and interesting of all Yukl (2010) defines leadership as "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (p. 8).

Historically, leadership had always been in male domain until recently when gradually the stereotypes related to gender are becoming reduced and females are actively participating in leadership positions (Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, & Woehr, 2014). However, although women are actively taking part in leadership roles in the top level of political and organizational context in developed economies, the scenario in developing economies are very different. For example, in case of India, Banerji, Mahtani, Sealy and Vinnicombe (2010) note that the participation of women in directorship positions in leading companies listed in Bombay Stock Exchange is just 5.3% as against 15% in Canada, 14.5% in United States and 8.9% in Hong Kong. Many other studies (Corner, 1997; Shanmugam, Amaratunga & Haigh, 2007; Hora, 2014 & Gobaw, 2017) observed

underrepresentation of women at executive/board positions in corporate and government organizations. Observing such differences, many researchers have done their research to unveil the reasons behind such discrepancy. Also, the present research is one of its kinds in the context of Bhutan.

Research studies vindicated gender stereotyping being the primary reason which sets women back from taking part in leadership positions. In the workplace, women are perceived as lacking focus on their career, having less potential to be a leader, less reliable and more emotional (Bass, Krusell, & Alexander, 1971). Women are stereotyped as being excessively friendlier, more emotionally expressive and more concerned about others when compared to men who are perceived as more "Agentic" (Baken, 1966). If women in leadership differ in style than what they are stereotyped to be, they will be perceived very negatively (Heilman, Block, Martell, & Silmon, 1989). All of such perceptions may discourage women to take part in leadership roles.

### **Perception about Female Leadership**

Recent studies in the field of Industrial/Organizational psychology confirm that the stereotyping about men being a better leader is falling apart. However, these studies still suggest that female managers are perceived to be more suitable in certain works than others (Szumanska & Rubin, 2018). This would mean, as suggested by Brody, Rubin, and Maume (2014), that gender stereotyping and associated expectations are embedded in different cultures. Further, as women differ from gendered expectation in leadership roles, people find it hard to accept it. The role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders suggests that when female leaders do things which are not consistent with the expected female roles, they have to suffer a negative bias (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

According to Szymanska and Rubin (2018), the negative bias could be of two types i.e., (1) perceiving women as less suitable for leadership role than men, and (2) negatively evaluating behaviour of female leaders in taking up leadership roles as against the behaviour of male leaders in taking up the same leadership roles. Because of the effect of such stereotyping and the culturally embedded perceptions of female leadership, women may have to suffer such biases even when they become a better leader than men.

Perception of people on female leadership varies based on culture, customs and economic status of the country. The study done by Hilal (2015) that investigated the perception of employees towards female leadership in Malaysia concluded that people perceive female leadership as efficient as the male leadership. The study used three term variables i.e., affection, efficiency and collaboration to measure the perception of the employees. Efficiency was rated the most common attribute related to female leadership. Author also noted that female employees had more positive perception about female leadership than the males.

Similarly, Ali, Khan, and Munaf (2013) conducted a research in Pakistan with 50 employees which included equal proportions of males and females using ATWAM Scale with the aim to study attitudes towards women in managerial positions. It was noted that there was no difference in attitude about male and female managers. Authors also reported that males who had working mothers had a very positive attitude about female managers when compared to males whose mothers were housewives.

Another study was conducted by Szymanska and Rubin (2018) in the United States with the aim to investigate the difference in which male and female managers would be evaluated by their peers and bosses about their job performance. The authors reported that the rating provided by male peers for female managers were considerably lower when compared to male managers. It was also noted that female peers as well as managers' bosses were less discriminated against in evaluating performances between genders. This indicates that males still undermine the ability and the performance of female managers.

### Methodology

### Population

The target population of this quantitative study was employees of all the government/public companies and civil servants in Chukha Dzongkhag (district) in Bhutan. Closely associated with the female leadership attributes, as suggested by Hilal (2015), three term variables, i.e., affection, efficiency and collaboration, were used to study the perception regarding female leadership.

#### **Research Instrument**

For the purpose of this study a structured instrument named as "Women Leadership Perception" questionnaire developed by Ashwi et al. (2013) was adapted. This instrument proposes three leadership attribute constructs to measure women leadership perception which includes affective, effective and collaborative attributes (Hilal, 2015). The instrument has 16 items measuring perception in terms of three constructs as indicated above. The 5-point Likert scale starting with (1) indicating strongly disagree and (5) indicating strongly agree is used to study the level of agreement of respondents with the particular statement against each construct.

### Sources of Data - Baseline and Secondary Data

Primarily, the baseline data was used in this study. The data was collected from 357 samples with the help of a questionnaire from their respective offices. In addition, secondary sources were used to validate the findings that were arrived from the analysis of the primary data.

### Sample

Actual population of this study is 5106 represented by 2201 civil servants, 453 employees of other government agencies and 2452 individuals working in public/government companies (corporations) in Chukha Dzongkhag (National Statistical Bureau, 2018). The research is solely focused on the study of civil and corporate employees and therefore does not include individuals working in agricultural and private sectors.

The sample size of 357 was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula from the population closer to 5000.

It was not possible to form the group of subjects in accordance with the principle of randomness given the difficulty in obtaining information about the employees in different organizations. Therefore, the study used a convenient sampling technique. However, the credibility of the study is not compromised as the organizational representation and the sample requirement were sufficient.

### **Statistical Tools used for Data Analysis**

The data which were collected from 357 samples is tabulated, analyzed and interpreted with the help of various statistical tools. Descriptive statistics was used to describe the characteristics of different variables and dimensions undertaken for the study. Mean values and standard deviations of the term variables were computed to analyze perception of employees about female leadership. Independent sample t tests and ANOVA were also used to test the significance of the relationship so discussed.

# **Data Analysis and Interpretation Reliability**

In reliability analysis, internal consistency of all the 3 term variables that measure perception about women leadership is used to measure the reliability of a summated scale where several items under each variable are summed to form a total score. The three term variables are affective, effective and collaborative attributes and each one of them has Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.710, 0.765 and 0.706 respectively.

Cronbach (1951) suggested purifying the instrument before using a construct for the purpose of the analysis; therefore, after calculating the coefficient alpha, the garbage items were identified. One weak item under effective attribute i.e., 'women in leadership positions treat women employees worse than men employees' and another item under collaborative attribute i.e., 'women in leadership positions assist me in being successful more than men' were removed as the Cronbach's Alpha value was below 6 when these items were considered. Cronbach's Alpha is used to determine the reliability of the questionnaire where multiple Likert scale questions are used.

Table 1
Reliability Statistics

Constructs	No of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Affective attributes	3	0.710
Effective attributes	6	0.765
Collaborative attributes	5	0.706

Source: Calculated from primary data

#### **Sample Description**

The total size of sample in the study was 375 which include 213 male respondents and 144 female respondents. If not an equal distribution of samples across gender, there isn't significant difference either. There are a greater number of male respondents to females because the government and corporate offices in Chukha Dzongkhag have a greater number of male employees than females (Labour Force Survey Bhutan, 2018). The largest proportion of employees (45.1%) fall in the age group of 26-33 years, followed by 24.4% in the age group of 34-41 years, 14% in the age group of 18-25 and the rest fall under the age group of 42 and above.

87.6% respondents work under male leaders and 15.4% of respondents work under a female leader. Similarly, 92.2% of respondents have male supervisor and 7.8% of respondents claim that they report to a female leader. The association of employees with the organizations suggests that 41.2 % of them are associated with government offices and the rest (58.8%) work in various corporations.

### **General Perception about Female Leaders**

Table 2 represents mean and standard deviation values for each of the attributes associated with female leadership (5-point scales). Respondents perceive that the most common attribute associated with female leadership is 'affection' indicated by mean and standard deviation values of 3.35 and 0.80 respectively followed by 'efficiency' (M = 3.08, SD = 0.60) and 'collaboration' (M = 2.92, SD = 0.64). In general, employees perceive female leaders to be more affectionate and efficient than collaborative.

Table 2

Descriptive Results

Leadership Attributes	Mean	N	Std Deviation
Affection	3.350	357	.805
Collaboration	2.928	357	.641
Efficiency	3.086	357	.608

Source: Calculated from primary data

# Perception about Attributes of Female Leadership based on Respondents' Gender

As indicated in Table 3, the mean values across all attributes are above 3 (3.43, 3.08 and 3.21 respectively) for affection, collaboration and efficiency. These values indicate that female employees generally perceive all the leadership attributes are common with female leaders. They have rated affection as the most common traits of female leaders (M = 3.43) followed by efficiency (M = 3.21) and collaboration (M = 3.08). Similarly, male employees also perceive that female leaders are mostly affectionate (M = 3.29). However, the male employees perceive that attributes such as collaboration and efficiency are least common among female leaders (M = 2.82 and 2.99).

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics

	Affection		Collaboration			Efficiency			
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Mean	3.29	3.43	3.35	2.82	3.08	2.92	2.99	3.21	3.08
SD	.84	.73	.80	.68	.53	.64	.65	.50	.60
N	213	144	357	213	144	357	213	144	357

Source: Calculated from primary data

To find whether the mean value between male and female is significant towards the test variables i.e., affection, collaboration and efficiency, an independent t-test was run. The result shown in Table 4 indicates the following:

Table 4 *T-test Results* 

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for	t-test for Equality of	
		F	Sig	T	Df	Sig (2-tailed)
Affection	Equal variances assumed	4.284	.039	-1.600	355	.111
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.643	333.018	.101
Collaboration	Equal variances assumed	13.735	.000	-3.826	355	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.007	347.210	.000
Efficiency	Equal variances assumed	12.497	.000	-3.451	355	.001
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.619	347.790	.000

Source: Calculated from primary data

Note: \*The mean difference is significant at 5% level

The independent samples t-test results presented above (Table 4) indicates that the mean values between genders (male vs female) are statistically significant towards all the term variables except for one variable i.e., affection (p > 0.05). This suffices the fact that there is significant difference between gender's (male and female) perception about female leadership towards collaboration and efficiency.

# Employees' Perception of Female Leadership based on the Gender of their Supervisors

Table 5 represents perception of employees about female leadership based on the gender of their immediate supervisors. The employees in the organization with

male supervisors rated affection to be a common attribute (M = 3.34) among female leaders. Efficiency and collaborative attributes were rated low (M = 2.98 and 2.93). Similarly, employees in the organization led by female supervisors rated female leaders to have all the attributes common to female leadership. Effective and collaborative attributes were rated almost equal with the mean value of 3.27 and 3.32 respectively.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics

Immediate Supervisor's Gender		Affective	Effective	Collaborative
Male	Mean	3.318	2.983	2.931
	N	329	329	329
	Std Deviation	.800	.552	.716
Female	Mean	3.726	3.270	3.327
	N	28	28	28
	Std Deviation	.775	.490	.694
Total	Mean	3.350	3.006	2.962
	N	357	357	357
	Std Deviation	.805	.552	.721

Source: Calculated from primary data

The independent samples t-test as shown below also supports this proposition. There is a difference in perception about female leaders and the difference is defined by the gender of the immediate supervisor to whom employees report to. If the employees report to male leaders, their perception about female leadership is not very positive. On the other hand, if the employees report to female leaders, they have considerably positive perception about female leadership.

For Affection: t(355) = -2.595, p < 0.05 (0.010)For Collaboration: t(355) = -2.656, p < 0.05 (0.008)For Efficiency: t(355) = -2.817, p < 0.05 (0.005)

# Employees' Perception about Female Leadership based on the Nature of Organization

The Table 6 is indicative that there is not much difference in the way employees of government and corporate sectors perceive female leadership. Employees of both government and corporate sectors rated affection as the most common attribute associated with female leaders as indicated by mean value of 3.35 and 3.34 respectively, followed by efficiency (M = 3.16 and 3.03). They have rated collaboration as the least common attribute associated with female leaders (M = 2.98 and 2.88) for employees of the government and corporate sector.

Table 6 *Group Statistics* 

	Nature of Organization	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Affection	Government	147	3.351	.841	.069
	Corporation	210	3.349	.781	.053
Collaboration	Government	147	2.983	.615	.050
	Corporation	210	2.889	.657	.045
Efficiency	Government	147	3.162	.637	.052
	Corporation	210	3.034	.582	.040

Source: Calculated from primary data

The independent samples t-test also confirms the same. The result indicates the following:

For Affection: t(355) = 0.026, p > 0.05 (0.979)For Collaboration: t(355) = 1.367, p > 0.05 (0.173)For Efficiency: t(355) = 1.965, p > 0.05 (0.50)

The result shows that the test is not significant, and there is no significant difference between the perception of government and corporate employees regarding the attributes related to female leadership.

#### Discussion

Going by the respondents' gender, the significant difference in perception about female leadership is observed. Females perceive that all the attributes of leadership are common in case of female leadership which was not true for male respondents. Except for the affection attribute, in which case the perception was not significantly different and was rated high by both the genders, the analysis revealed that male employees rated other attributes such as efficiency and collaboration significantly lower than the female respondents. The finding is consistent with the study conducted by Szumanska and Rubin (2018) which observed that the performance of female managers were rated low by the male respondents. Hilal (2015) also noted that when compared to male employees, female employees perceived female leadership more positively.

Another interesting observation was that the employees' perception is determined by the gender of immediate supervisor whom they report to. As suggested by Hilal (2015), more positive perception about female leaders is observed if the immediate supervisor whom employees report to is a female, and vice versa.

Another noteworthy observation of the study is that employees, irrespective of the nature of organization they work in, rated affection and efficiency attributes of female leadership higher than the collaborative attribute. Female leaders in general are, thus, perceived to be less collaborative but considerably affectionate and efficient.

Similarly, the analysis also indicated that there is not much difference in perception about female leaders going by the nature of organization the respondents work in. This outcome is in line with the study conducted by Hossain and Noor (2018) which supports that there is no perception difference about female leadership by the nature of organization respondents work in. However, unlike the study by Hilal (2015) which revealed that efficiency attributed was perceived to be most commonly associated with female leadership followed by collaboration and affection, the employees of both government and corporate sector rated affection as the dominant attribute associated with female leadership, followed by efficiency. They have rated collaboration as the least common attribute associated with the female leaders.

#### Conclusion

The study concluded that female leaders are more affectionate and least collaborative. This is because affection as an attribute associated with female leadership was rated highest, followed by efficiency and collaboration. This result holds true across both government and corporate sectors.

The result is also indicative that female employees generally have more positive perception about female leadership when compared to male employees. It is also noted that there is no significant difference between employees of the government and corporate sector regarding the perception about female employees.

### **Key Recommendations**

Based on findings of this study, key recommendations are mentioned below:

- To overcome the perception bias about female leadership, there may be more discussion and debate on this topic in different forums and/or organizations/workplace.
- This research explored the corporate leadership of females and associated perception of employees of the same. The perception of employees about female leadership in politics as decision-maker as well as female entrepreneurship was not covered. The study recommends conducting further research on this
- A concerted effort may be put by the government towards framing policies
  of achieving an equal representation of females in leadership positions as
  males do. The current state of affairs puts into perspective that there is less
  motivation or a system in place to encourage females to participate in
  decision-making positions.
- This study is focused on employees' perception of female leaders, and leaves out the general social perception about females in leadership positions. Future research may consider these variables to bring more inclusive results as compared to the present one.
- Many key variables that have a potential to influence perceptions such as employees' leadership positions, level of education and professional development were excluded from the analysis. Future research may include these variables to have a broader sense of the phenomenon.

### **Scope for Further Research**

This research explored the employees' perception about female leadership across government and corporate sectors in Chukha Dzongkhag (district). The perception of employees about female leadership in politics as decision-maker as well as female entrepreneurship and female leadership across private sectors was not covered. Moreover, this study is focused on employees' perception of female leaders, and leaves out the general social perception about females in leadership positions. Future research should set a broader scope by taking these aspects into consideration.

Many key variables that have a potential to influence perceptions such as employees' leadership positions, level of education and level of professional development was excluded from the analysis. Future research may include these variables to have a broader sense of the phenomenon.

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