

Culture, Values, Sexuality, and Development: An Interwoven Narrative

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Background

Bhutan provides an intriguing case study examining the intricate interplay between culture, values, sexuality, and development. Bhutan's culture is deeply rooted in its Buddhist heritage and spiritual beliefs, which profoundly influence societal norms and practices. Such cultural foundations contribute to shaping attitudes towards sexuality, relationships, and gender roles, influencing how Bhutanese individuals navigate these aspects of their lives

The principles of compassion, interconnectedness, and mindfulness underscore Bhutanese culture, fostering a sense of communal well-being and collective harmony. Such cultural foundations shape attitudes towards sexuality, relationships, and gender roles, influencing how Bhutanese individuals navigate these aspects of their lives. (Thin, Verma & Uchida (n.d.))

Values of sustainability, conservation, and respect for the environment are integral to Bhutan's cultural ethos. This value system aligns with the nation's developmental approach, as evidenced by its commitment to maintaining a carbon-neutral status and prioritizing environmental preservation. The interconnectedness between Bhutan's cultural values and its development strategies exemplifies how a harmonious relationship between culture and progress can be fostered. (The Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH. (2017))

In terms of sexuality, Bhutan's cultural norms emphasize modesty, privacy, and the preservation of traditional values. These norms affect discussions around sexual expression, reproductive health, and gender equality. The juxtaposition of Bhutan's traditional values with evolving notions of sexual identity and expression presents a dynamic arena in which the tension between cultural heritage and modernity plays out.

The Bhutanese government's efforts to balance tradition with progress are evident in its policies and initiatives. While upholding cultural values, the government has made significant strides in addressing gender disparities and promoting women's empowerment through education and economic opportunities. Furthermore, the gradual opening of public discourse on sexuality reflects Bhutan's willingness to engage with evolving social paradigms while respecting its cultural heritage.

However, despite these governmental efforts, deeply ingrained cultural norms persist in certain segments of society, particularly in rural areas. In these communities, women—regardless of their strength and independence—are often still viewed through a traditional lens. This is reflected in local attitudes, where it is commonly said that "it is better to have an old sick man in the house than a strong young woman." Such beliefs continue to undermine the progress being made, revealing the complex challenges that remain in changing societal perceptions about gender equality.

This paper explores the complex interrelationship between a country's culture, values, and sexuality and its collective impact on its developmental trajectory. The discussion seeks to uncover how Bhutanese cultural norms and values influence societal perceptions of sexuality, relationships, and gender roles, and how these dynamics contribute to or hinder the nation's overall development. By exploring these intricate connections, we can understand how culture and values interact with sexual norms to shape developmental outcomes. The paper seeks to inform the policymakers, scholars, and advocates to promote inclusive and sustainable development that acknowledges cultural contexts while championing individual rights and liberties in a rapidly changing world.

Problem Statement

In today's interconnected and globalized world, the intricate interplay between a country's culture, values, and sexuality has emerged as a significant yet complex factor influencing its developmental trajectory. As societies evolve and progress, understanding the multifaceted relationships between these elements becomes imperative for policymakers, academics, and social advocates alike. This literature review investigates how a country's cultural norms, values, and expressions of sexuality collectively influence its development, highlighting the importance of understanding these interconnected elements in shaping societal progress.

The report "Bhutan: Critical Development Constraints" identifies several key factors that have hindered Bhutan's developmental progress, particularly highlighting the role of gender inequality and social norms. The report states, "The status of women in Bhutanese society remains lower than men in many areas, resulting in lower levels of education, employment, and political participation" (p. 71). It also notes, "Traditional gender roles and societal norms restrict women's participation in the labor force and limit their opportunities for economic advancement" (p. 71). These gender-based constraints significantly impact the country's ability to achieve inclusive growth and development. The report emphasizes that addressing these issues is crucial for Bhutan to realize its vision of balanced and sustainable development. (Asian Development Bank, Australian Agency for International Development, & Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2013)

Culture and values profoundly influence societal norms, behaviors, and institutions, shaping development in various areas like education, governance, and social equality. Sexuality, intertwined with personal identity and societal structures, is also crucial in this context. However, there's a lack of comprehensive research that examines the interconnected dynamics between culture, values, sexuality, and development. Most studies address these elements in isolation, highlighting the need for a multidisciplinary approach that integrates insights from social sciences, cultural studies, developmental economics, and public policy.

Research Question: How will a country's Culture, Values, and Sexuality inform its development?

- a) How does a country's cultural diversity impact its development policies and strategies?
- b) To what extent do societal attitudes towards sexuality and gender roles affect a country's developmental path?

Literature

The intersection of sexuality, culture, values, and development presents a complex web of dynamics that significantly shape societal norms, individual identity, and progress. These interconnected dimensions have been studied extensively to understand their profound influence on various aspects of human life.

Culture: Culture is a dynamic construct encompassing customary beliefs, social forms, material traits, and shared ways of life (Merriam-Webster). It plays a pivotal role in shaping societal norms, values, and attitudes, thereby influencing perceptions of sexuality and development. Appadurai (1996) emphasizes the significance of culture in shaping individual experiences and interactions within societies, particularly in the context of globalization. As Giddens (1992) discusses, cultural norms serve as guiding principles for human behavior, including expressions of sexuality, which have evolved in modern societies towards more diverse and individualistic forms. Bourdieu (1990) also highlights how these cultural practices, including those related to sexuality and gender, are deeply embedded in social structures and are reproduced through individual behavior. These cultural frameworks inform attitudes towards sexuality, relationships, and gender roles, shaping how individuals and societies navigate these aspects of life.

Sexuality: Sexuality is a multifaceted aspect of human identity. It encompasses the capability of sexual feelings, sexual identity, and the distinctions between sexes (Etymology Online). Herdt (1997) emphasizes that cultural norms and values play a pivotal role in defining and regulating sexual behaviors and identities. Sexuality, thus, emerges as a dynamic construct influenced by cultural norms, which impact individual well-being and societal development.

Cultural values and sexual norms: Cultural values are intrinsic to the discussion on sexuality and development. Norms and values, often shaped by religion, laws, and social customs, influence views on gender and sexuality (Worthy et al., 2020). Inequalities rooted in cultural beliefs can result in limited life choices for women, perpetuating poverty and vulnerability (Worthy et al., 2020). Gender-based violence is an example of how cultural norms can lead to inadequate legal safeguards and limited avenues for seeking justice (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, 2018). On a global scale, recognition and legalization of

same-sex marriages in multiple countries reflect the evolving influence of cultural values on sexual diversity (Worthy et al., 2020). Sexual norms refer to the socially and culturally defined expectations and rules that dictate appropriate sexual behaviors, attitudes, and practices within a given society or community. These norms influence what is considered acceptable or unacceptable sexual conduct, the roles and responsibilities of different genders in sexual relationships, and societal views on issues such as premarital sex, homosexuality, and sexual orientation (Gagnon & Simon, 1973).

Sexual norms are shaped by various factors, including religious beliefs, cultural traditions, legal frameworks, and social dynamics (Foucault, 1978). They can vary widely across different societies and even within subgroups of the same society. Over time, sexual norms can evolve in response to changes in cultural values, increased awareness of human rights, and shifts in public opinion (Weeks, 2010).

Development implications: The interplay between cultural values, sexuality, and development has profound implications for both individual empowerment and societal progress. Gender equality is crucial for women's empowerment; without it, women are unable to fully contribute to a country's development and labor force. When society continues to view women through traditional lenses that see them as the weaker sex, women remain marginalized, confined to the home, and excluded from economic and social opportunities.

True gender equality means valuing all genders equally, both in principle and practice. Empowerment occurs when women's decisions are respected both at home and in public spheres. This respect enables every citizen to contribute productively to society.

Sen's capabilities approach underscores the importance of agency and individual freedoms in development, aligning with the notion that societies that embrace progressive sexual norms tend to promote gender equality and overall well-being (Sen, 1999). Bhutan's concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) illustrates how cultural values can be integrated into development paradigms, guiding holistic initiatives that ensure the well-being of individuals and communities (Ura et al., 2012).

Changing Norms and Attitudes: Cultural norms and values are dynamic, continuously evolving, and shaping societal attitudes toward sexuality and gender roles. Baldwin and Baldwin (1989) highlight cultural contexts in which exclusively homosexual behavior is considered a natural part of development. Moreover, attitudes toward sexuality can vary significantly both within and across cultures. Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb (1998) underscore this diversity, illustrating variations in perspectives on premarital sex and homosexuality across different countries.

Discussion

Impact of sexuality, culture, and values on Bhutan's development: The discussion is around Bhutan's developmental path and how it is intricately woven with the influences of sexuality, culture, and values. The major cultural and social factors that shape views on gender and sexuality, including laws, religion, and social norms, can significantly impact Bhutan's development.

Cultural Influences on Gender and Sexuality: Bhutan's cultural fabric is deeply intertwined with values and norms that shape attitudes toward gender and sexuality, particularly within the context of marriage (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2022). Sexual activities within marriage are morally accepted, reinforcing the sanctity of marriage as the foundation for sexual relationships. This cultural perspective not only guides individual behavior but also strengthens the emotional connections between partners, contributing to their overall well-being,(Tshomo et al 2021).

However, as Bhutan navigates modernity and global influences, these cultural norms are evolving (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). The balance between tradition and change creates a complex environment where historical values interact with contemporary perspectives. Despite these shifts, Bhutan's cultural identity continues to profoundly shape attitudes towards gender and sexuality, blending tradition with emerging modern values.

Laws and social norms: Laws and social norms, as powerful determinants of societal frameworks, intricately shape Bhutan's course towards achieving gender equality and upholding sexual rights (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2022). Globally, laws and policies have often acted as conduits for perpetuating gender disparities and limiting women's access to power and opportunities (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). In Bhutan, the legal landscape reflects a unique interplay between traditional norms and evolving principles, underscoring the nation's commitment to addressing gender-based inequalities and safeguarding women's rights.

While Bhutan's legal framework may diverge from the global norms, it remains crucial to assess how Bhutan's laws intersect with the broader societal context to address gender-based violence and ensure the empowerment of women. Gender-based violence, which affects approximately 30% of women worldwide (Worthy et al., 2020), casts a shadow over the potential of women's participation in development endeavors. In Bhutan's context, the exploration of its legal safeguards against gender-based violence becomes a critical lens through which to gauge the nation's commitment to fostering an environment of equality and justice.

Bhutan's legal responses to gender-based violence and the empowerment of women are pivotal factors in shaping the nation's development trajectory. By

enacting legal safeguards that criminalize and address various forms of gender-based violence, Bhutan's legal framework provides a shield against these violations (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2022). This proactive approach is a testament to Bhutan's commitment to upholding the dignity and rights of all individuals, irrespective of gender.

Moreover, the empowerment of women within Bhutan's legal and societal framework holds profound implications for the nation's progress. Laws that promote women's access to education, health, and economic opportunities can catalyze their participation in development initiatives (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). Bhutan's commitment to gender equality aligns with its broader goal of holistic well-being, as encapsulated in the GNH framework. The empowerment of women, both legally and socially, becomes a pivotal stepping stone towards achieving this holistic vision.

The interaction between laws, social norms, and development is a dynamic one. Bhutan's journey to harmonize cultural values with progressive legal measures underscores the nation's dedication to crafting a developmental narrative that is both unique and inclusive. The synergy between legal safeguards against gender-based violence and the empowerment of women forms a cornerstone of Bhutan's endeavor to create a just and equitable society. Thus, the interplay of laws and social norms in Bhutan reverberates deeply in the realm of gender equality and sexual rights. While global trends have often perpetuated gender inequalities, Bhutan's legal framework stands as a testament to its commitment to fostering an environment that safeguards the rights of all individuals. The nation's legal safeguards against gender-based violence, coupled with the empowerment of women, intricately influence its journey toward holistic development, as envisioned through the Gross National Happiness framework.(UNFPA,2023).

Cultural Values and Gender Equality: Bhutan's Buddhist cultural values, centered on compassion and interconnectedness, shape attitudes towards gender equality (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2022). While these values offer a foundation for inclusive development, they can also impede progress. The emphasis on traditional roles and the sanctity of marriage, individual sexual orientation, and not having a sexual relationship before marriage or a child before marriage, may reinforce outdated gender norms, limiting women's empowerment and participation in various spheres of society. Sometimes societal value and norms is a double-edged sword, as much as they announce respect for women that much they seem to limit women's freedom. For some who are deeply rooted into age old patrician cultural norms they lay barriers to every effort woman puts in. They still view women as weaker sex limiting to few chores. This cultural framework can hinder efforts to challenge discriminatory practices and promote gender equality, as it may prioritise preserving traditional values over addressing gender disparities. As Bhutan navigates modern development, balancing cultural values with progressive

gender equality initiatives remains a critical challenge (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). It is essential to recognize that norms should not be perceived as static or confused with deeply rooted values, where any change is mistakenly viewed as potentially harmful.

Sexuality, Gender Norms, and Development in Bhutan: Sexuality and gender norms are pivotal in shaping societal development, with Bhutan's cultural landscape deeply rooted in Buddhist values. While these values can offer an inclusive framework for gender relations, they also perpetuate traditional norms that hinder progress (Mizuno, 2019). Buddhist teachings emphasise compassion and equality, but their application often reinforces restrictive gender roles and expectations (Tobgay, 2016).

Bhutan's commitment to human rights and gender equality is evident in its rejection of harmful practices like female genital mutilation (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2008). The Constitution and international agreements reflect the nation's dedication to gender equality (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). Initiatives such as the National Commission for Women and Children aim to integrate gender perspectives into policies. Despite these efforts, traditional gender norms continue to impede development. Persistent expectations and perception limit women's participation in the workforce and political arenas (Tobgay, 2016). Additionally, insufficient access to comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive health services constrains progress (Dayaram & Pick, 2012). The impact of urbanisation and globalisation further complicates gender dynamics, requiring careful consideration (Mizuno, 2019).

The intersection of sexuality and gender norms in Bhutan is a dynamic process with significant implications for development. While strides have been made in rejecting harmful practices and promoting gender equality, challenges remain due to entrenched traditional norms. Addressing these issues requires a multidimensional approach that balances cultural heritage with the evolving needs of modern society. Continued efforts are essential to ensure that Bhutan's development aspirations align with its commitment to a more inclusive and equitable society. As Weeks (2010) suggests, certain sexual and gender norms must adapt over time, particularly when they impede individual rights and limit full participation in the country's development. Because societal expectations shape both individual behavior and broader social dynamics.

Attitudes Toward Sexuality and Development in Bhutan: Attitudes toward sexuality significantly impact a nation's developmental path, with norms varying across cultures and influencing outcomes in diverse ways (Diener & Suh, 2000). In Bhutan, where Gross National Happiness (GNH) measures progress, the interplay between sexual attitudes and overall well-being is particularly significant (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2022). Bhutan's GNH framework, which includes physical, mental, and emotional well-being, underscores the importance of addressing sexual norms and encourages open

dialogue about sexuality as part of fostering individual and societal advancement (United Nations Development Programme, 2019).

Bhutan's approach highlights the link between personal fulfillment and societal progress, recognising that suppressing discussions about sexuality can hinder holistic development (United Nations Population Fund, 2015). By openly engaging in conversations about sexual attitudes, women's contribution in the labour force Bhutan challenges taboos and promotes an environment where individuals can explore their identities without stigma or discrimination. This openness is crucial for enhancing mental and emotional well-being and contributes to a more vibrant society (Diener & Suh, 2000).

Furthermore, Bhutan's commitment to holistic well-being and inclusivity supports dialogue on critical issues like gender equality, reproductive health, and sexual rights (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). This progressive stance fosters a culture where diverse sexual orientations and expressions can coexist within the cultural fabric, allowing for informed choices and personal empowerment (United Nations Population Fund, 2015). By aligning with global movements for gender equality and sexual rights, Bhutan's approach exemplifies how addressing evolving sexual norms can transform societal development.

Cultural Identity and Development in Bhutan: Cultural identity is crucial as Bhutan advances in its development, balancing the preservation of heritage with the adoption of progressive values. This challenge is exemplified by Sweden, where integrating sexual openness into development policies has led to significant benefits and reduced social issues (Grose, 2007). Sweden's experience highlights how aligning cultural values with progressive ideals can foster holistic development.

For Bhutan, the task involves navigating tradition and modernity while safeguarding its cultural heritage rooted in Buddhism and principles of compassion. This cultural foundation can guide the nation toward equitable and inclusive development, ensuring that progress is both meaningful and sustainable.

Bhutan faces the challenge of harmonising its rich cultural heritage with global expectations. The country's unique cultural tapestry, characterised by spirituality and communal harmony, must be complemented by modern values. Lessons from Sweden suggest that tradition need not be discarded but can be enriched with contemporary thought.

Integrating cultural identity with progressive values can drive sustainable development. By embracing gender equality, diversity, and open dialogue about sexuality, Bhutan can create an environment that empowers its citizens and supports their growth. This approach not only respects Bhutan's heritage but also fosters an inclusive and prosperous society. By recognising and integrating

cultural norms with progressive values, Bhutan can continue towards a more equitable future, serving as an example of how culture and development can coexist for a collective betterment.

Conclusion

The interplay between culture, values, sexuality, and development remains a critical area of study in social sciences and development research. Culture serves as a foundational framework, influencing societal norms and individual experiences. Early concepts, such as those by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), laid the groundwork for understanding how deeply ingrained cultural norms shape perceptions of sexuality, relationships, and gender roles. Gupta and Ferguson (1992) further stressed the importance of cultural context in shaping individual interactions. Sexuality, an intrinsic part of human identity, is significantly impacted by cultural norms. Herdt (1997) highlighted how cultural values regulate sexual behaviours and identities, while Nanda (1999) revealed the diverse manifestations of sexual expression across cultures. The integration of cultural values with sexual norms has direct implications for individual empowerment and societal progress. Sen's (1999) capabilities approach and Kabeer's (2005) work on women's empowerment illustrate how progressive and inclusive sexual norms contribute to gender equality and overall well-being.

However, rigid cultural norms that stigmatise sexual diversity and gender equality can impede personal and societal growth. Herek (2004) discussed how negative attitudes towards non-conforming sexual identities perpetuate discrimination and exclusion. Bhutan's unique context, with its Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework, provides a distinctive perspective on balancing cultural preservation with modern values. Ura et al. (2012) examined how Bhutan's GNH integrates cultural values into development, reflecting the nation's effort to address gender disparities while honouring its heritage.

In conclusion, recognising and addressing the complex relationship between culture, values, sexuality, and development is essential for fostering inclusive and sustainable progress. Societies must navigate these interwoven threads by promoting open dialogue, embracing progressive values, and ensuring that development agendas are sensitive to diverse cultural contexts. By doing so, we can advance toward a more equitable, compassionate, and prosperous future, where cultural values contribute positively to societal development and individual well-being.

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