



*A Champion's Journey*

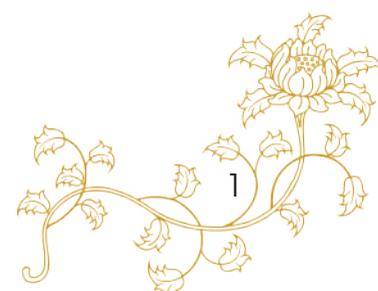
HER MAJESTY GYALUM SANGAY CHODEN WANGCHUCK



*A Champion's Journey*

HER MAJESTY THE GYALUM SANGAY CHODEN WANGCHUCK  
QUEEN MOTHER OF BHUTAN

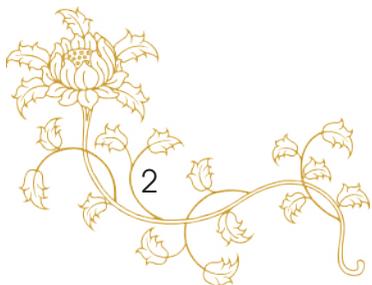




*Ministry of Health  
United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)  
2023*

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*Our Prayers to Tara,  
the Mother of all Buddhas and Goddess of Compassion.  
May her ability to act swiftly and without delay  
bring success to all our endeavors in  
championing the cause of all sentient beings,  
especially women and every girl child,  
all over the world.*





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## Dedication

We offer this book to recognize and chronicle with our deepest and heartfelt gratitude and appreciation Her Majesty Gyalyum Sangay Choden Wangchuck's transformative work in advancing the health, well-being and lives of the Bhutanese people, especially women and girls.

Her Majesty's perseverance, along with her dedicated and committed efforts, has made her a champion of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Her Majesty's Service to the Nation is an inspiration to the people in Bhutan and around the world.







## THE JOURNEY BEGINS

### The Bhutan That Was

When Bhutan opened up to the world in the 1960s, communicable diseases were widespread and over half of all children died at birth or within the first few years of their lives. The average life expectancy was about 37 years.

Under the wise and visionary leadership of the successive Monarchs, Bhutan has made great strides in public health care. Guided by the development philosophy of Gross National Happiness, high priority was given to the health sector in the development plans. The adoption of modern health care practices brought about notable improvements to primary health care and health indicators. By 1999, the average life expectancy was 66 years, and there were significant improvements in the health and quality of life of the Bhutanese people.

Despite the improvements in primary health care, many challenges remained particularly in the reproductive health of women and girls, and the emergence of infectious diseases such HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. In 1999, the maternal and infant mortality rates were high at 380 per 100,000 live births and 70.7 per 1,000 live births respectively.

Globally the HIV/AIDS epidemic had also become a massive health problem, with an estimated 34.3 million people living with the disease in 1999. In Bhutan, it had become an emerging issue with an increasing number of cases.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has been a close partner to the Royal Government of Bhutan in addressing these issues. UNFPA has supported the integration of family planning in the health care system since it first began its operations in Bhutan in 1974. Building upon this collaboration, the first Country programme started in 1988 coinciding with Bhutan's Sixth Five Year Plan. Over the years, UNFPA continues to support and advance sexual and reproductive health needs and rights of the Bhutanese population, with a focus on comprehensive sexuality education for young people in schools and monasteries enabling them to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and well-being.



## UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador to Bhutan

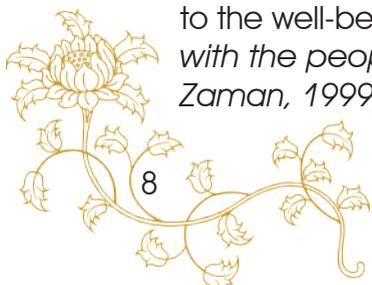
Her Majesty the Queen Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck graciously accepted the request by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to become the UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador to Bhutan during a formal ceremony on 6 January 1999.



*"I am happy to accept this honour as a tribute to His Majesty the King and the Royal Government of Bhutan for their deep commitment to improving family health, implementing sound population policies and activities, and ensuring socio-economic development." Her Majesty, 1999*

During the ceremony the Director of UNFPA's Country Support Team for South and Central Asia, Mr. Wasim Zaman, said *"Her Majesty's advocacy for gender equality and equity, and reproductive health and rights would be a tremendous service to the citizens of Bhutan."*

He added that Her Majesty's acceptance was a reflection of Her Majesty and the Royal Family's commitment to the well-being of the people of Bhutan. He described Bhutan's Royal Family as *"Royalty which is in touch with the people, Royalty which cares, and Royalty which is ready for the new millennium."* (Mr. Wasim Zaman, 1999)

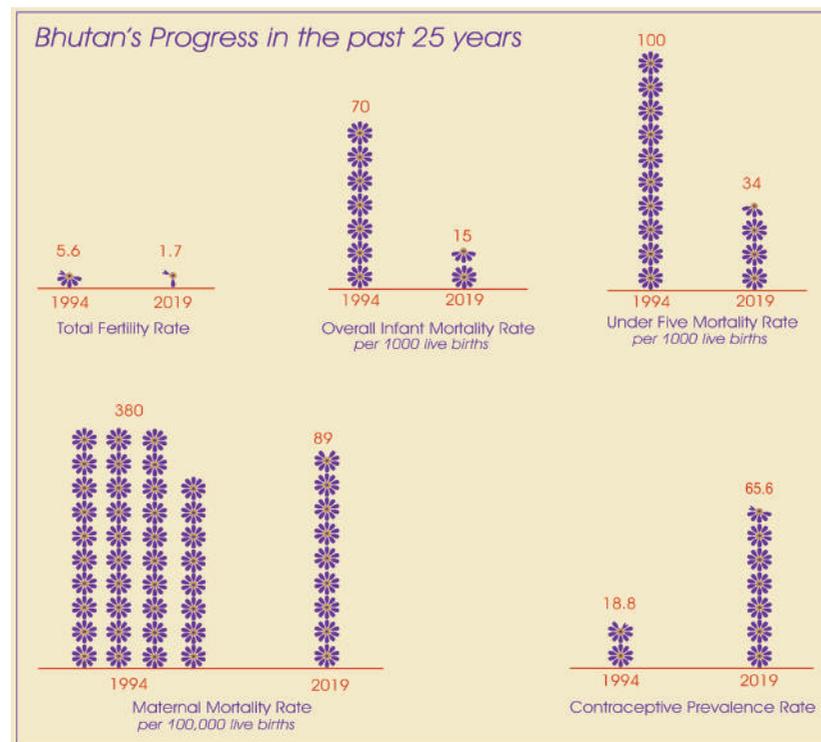


## International Conference on Population and Development

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994 was an important landmark in the history of population and development issues. With a significant consensus among 179 governments, the Programme of Action adopted at the end of the Conference was an important and farsighted plan of action that placed reproductive and sexual health needs and rights of individuals at the heart of global development agenda.

It affirmed sexual and reproductive health as a fundamental human right and emphasized the empowerment of women and girls as key to ensuring the well-being of individuals, families, nations and the world.

Since 1994, Bhutan has successfully implemented much of the ICPD Programme of Action addressing reproductive rights, safe motherhood, management and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, and comprehensive sexuality education for adolescents and youth.



The Nairobi Summit on ICPD in 2019 marked the 25th anniversary of the Conference at Cairo. The Summit was attended by over 8,300 participants from 170 countries and territories, and mobilized over 1,300 commitments,



including pledges for billions of dollars to achieve the ICPD programme of action. The commitments were centered on achieving three zeros: (1) zero unmet need for family planning information and services; (2) zero preventable maternal deaths; and (3) zero sexual and gender-based violence and harmful practices against women and girls.

Her Majesty Gyalum Sangay Choden Wangchuck led the Bhutanese delegation and delivered a statement at the high-level session on Women Leaders Dialogue, focused on the achievements and challenges related to the promotion of the rights of women and girls in the country.



Her Majesty with Dr. Natalia Kanem, UNFPA Executive Director



## ***Bhutan's Commitment at the Nairobi Summit by Lyonpo Dechen Wangmo, Health Minister***

**Recognizing the important role that women play in all facets of life, we are committed towards ensuring safe motherhood and family planning and sexual and reproductive health rights for all women and girls:**

- Bhutan will develop and implement a targeted policy to accelerated mother and child health care by ensuring optimal utilization of maternal and child health services through demand centric programming such as adoption of conditional cash transfers for socially and economically challenged women.
- Bhutan will develop and implement a strategy for reduction of incidence, mortality and morbidity due to cervical cancer through targeted flagship program.
- Bhutan will continue to strengthen and intensify efforts to improve access to information and services related to adolescent sexual reproductive health and rights through comprehensive sexuality education in schools and institutions.

**Towards ending violence against women, protecting women and children, and improving gender equality:**

- Bhutan will strengthen enforcement and implementation, of both international and national provisions related to the care and protection of women and children and ensure adequate resources are allocated to implement programs with focus on women empowerment.
- Bhutan will also develop and implement a national gender equality policy which amongst others will focus on creating a culture of prevention and zero tolerance to gender-based violence (GBV) against women and girls. Bhutan will strengthen initiatives on voter education program and civic engagement to encourage women's participation in Parliamentary and local government elections.

**Towards financing the ICPD PoA and the SDGs,** we commit to mobilize adequate resources from domestic or external resources, including through innovative financing mechanisms to finance plans and programs related to SDGs and ICPD PoA.

**Towards harnessing the demographic dividend,** we commit to develop and implement measures to reap the benefits of demographic dividend by adequately investing in health, education, and employment programs for our youth and adolescents.





TO ENJOY  
SEX WITH  
USE





## BREAKING THE BARRIERS

### The Start of The Journey

*"Her Majesty has done tremendous advocacy work in the fields of population, women empowerment and reaching out to the more vulnerable groups and the youth."- Mr. Francois M. Farah, UNFPA Representative for India and Country Director for Bhutan, 2000*

When Her Majesty started her journey as the UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador to Bhutan in 1999, she launched a nationwide advocacy program to advocate on priority health issues including sexual and reproductive health, family planning, maternal and child health, education, substance abuse, health and hygiene, and prevention of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections.



Her Majesty travelled the length and breadth of the country to meet with people of the 20 Dzongkhags (Districts). Her travels took her from urban centers to rural areas, over high mountain passes to sub-tropical forests and lowland valleys. There were no motorable roads to many remote places and her journey often involved travel on foot, horses, and even yaks as she navigated the difficult and harsh terrain.

In each Dzongkhag, Her Majesty visited schools, hospitals, health centres, and government institutions. She met and spoke at great length with local government leaders, civil servants, students, teachers, village health workers, doctors, patients, judiciary members, religious communities, armed forces, private sector and the general public.

During the initial campaign it was apparent that while Bhutan was largely an open society, issues concerning sexual and reproductive health were considered too intimate to discuss openly within households and in communities. Most people were reluctant and shy to participate in discussions related to sexual and reproductive health and sexually transmitted infections. There was also stigma and discrimination associated with these issues.

The foremost challenge was to de-stigmatize issues relating to sexual and reproductive health, and to create an enabling environment to encourage open dialogue and social acceptance to learn about these issues.

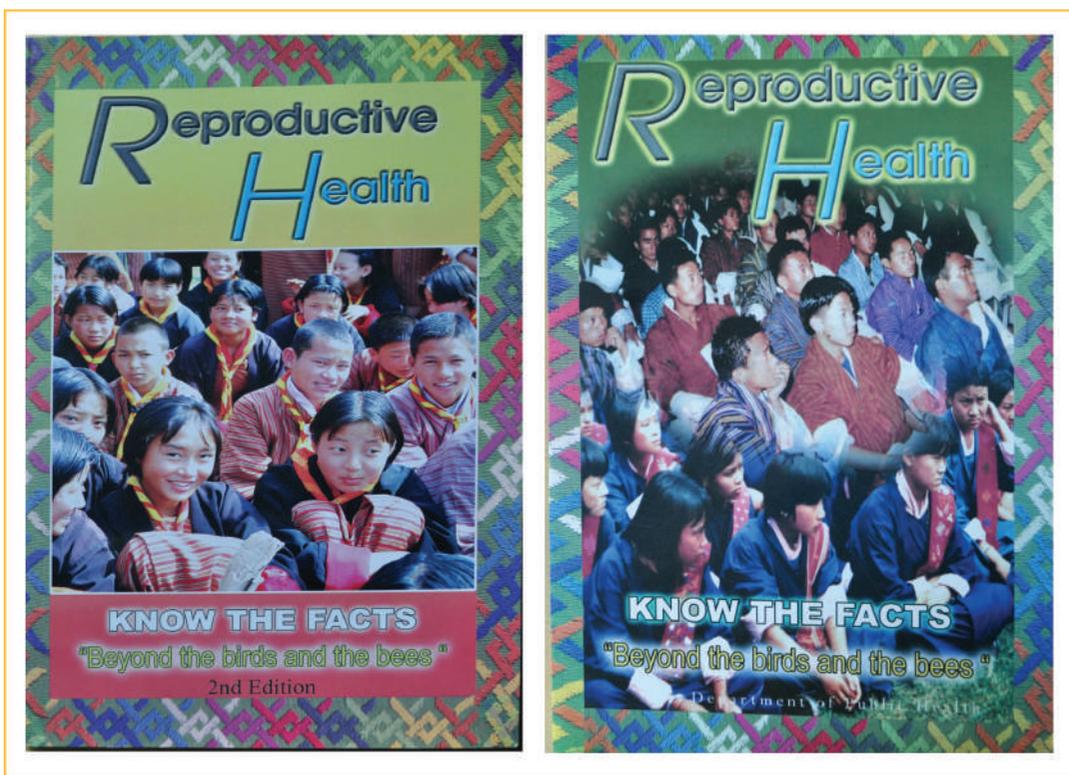
### **Know The Facts: Beyond the Birds and the Bees**

During the visits to schools, Her Majesty met with students and teachers and spoke about sexual and reproductive health and rights, prevention of HIV/AIDS, and other adolescent and youth related issues. She shared her concerns about substance abuse, teenage pregnancy and violence, and emphasized the importance of education and of being aware of one's rights and taking informed decisions.

In the beginning, there was a reluctance in schools to talk openly about sexuality education, and teachers were uncomfortable with teaching the subject. Young people were also very shy and hesitant to talk about the issues. During Her Majesty's visits, students were encouraged to write down their questions on paper and submit them anonymously. This strategy was effective, as it revealed that young people had many unanswered questions about sexual and reproductive health, sexually transmitted infections and other issues.

Drawing inspiration from Her Majesty's interaction with young people, the Ministry of Health developed a publication in 2000 titled Know the Facts: Beyond the Birds and the Bees. The book covered the questions asked by young people, and responses from health professionals on issues relating to HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, substance abuse, sexuality issues, social relationships, and adolescents' issues. Widely distributed in schools, the books helped provide reliable information to enable young people to make informed decisions.





## Reproductive Health

The Reproductive Health Programme started as the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Programme in the 1970s. Following the International Conference of Population and Development in 1994, Bhutan adopted the concept of 'Reproductive Health' to address broader aspects of health. The major components of reproductive health in Bhutan include safe motherhood, newborn care, family planning, screening and prevention of cervical and breast cancer, and sexual and reproductive health.



Over the years, reproductive health has seen good progress especially in the areas of maternal and child health. There was a significant improvement in maternal mortality rate from 380 to 89 per 100,000 live births, in 1994 and 2017 respectively. The infant mortality and under-five mortality rates had also improved significantly. The proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel has increased from 10.9 in 1994 to 98.8 in 2021, and the number of women availing antenatal care and post natal care has also improved significantly. Efforts have also been made to reduce premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment, including through screening for breast and cervical cancer. Bhutan is committed to the elimination of cervical cancer by 2030.

Her Majesty has been the strongest advocate for sexual and reproductive health and rights in Bhutan. She has traveled extensively around the country to create awareness on institutional delivery, teenage pregnancy, nutrition, and screening for cervical cancer. She continues to urge women and girls to utilize the many services that are available for better health outcomes for them and their family.

## A Champion for Health

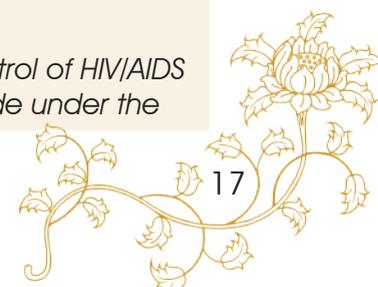
*"Her Majesty is an extraordinary champion and a great source of inspiration for the Health Family. We are deeply indebted to her for opening doors and creating an enabling environment to address sensitive issues in schools, institutions and the general population at large. This was the first major breakthrough. Earlier health care providers faced significant challenges initiating talks or discussions related to sexual and reproductive health, sexually transmitted infections, violence, drugs as well as HIV/AIDS in these communities.*

*Her Majesty's presence during the advocacy tours has always made a noteworthy impact, in terms of the turnout of people; the importance given to these vital health and social issues, as well as commitments to tackle challenges highlighted at various levels.*

*The early 1990s was marked by the peak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and worldwide paranoia. The lack of information and awareness compounded by fear, misconception and rumours led to stigma and discrimination for those infected and affected. Our country was no exception.*

*Advocacy efforts of the Ministry of Health started since 1988, but it was very difficult to reach out to the masses especially in the remote pockets of our country. This changed dramatically after her Majesty became the UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador in 1999. Under Her Majesty's leadership major effort went into breaking down barriers of ignorance, addressing the stigma and discrimination associated with the disease and garnering multi sectoral support.*

*Her Majesty was instrumental in promoting a multi-sectoral approach in the prevention and control of HIV/AIDS and priority issues of national concern. Multi Sectoral Task Forces (MSTF) were launched nationwide under the*



*patronage of Her Majesty. Seed money was given to MSTFs in all Dzongkhags to initiate activities.*

*I had the honour and privilege of participating in the first phase of Her Majesty's advocacy tours. The initial years were very challenging both in terms of the arduous terrain traveled and in getting our messages across. People were very uncomfortable and would avoid eye contact during the awareness talks. It was an uphill task to get the public to engage in discussions.*

*From the community based meetings and discussions it became apparent that lack of information, rumours and misconceptions were greatly hampering the effectiveness of the prevention programs. Some communities felt that naming and shaming was a solution, others suggested the infected should be relocated to remote settlements.*



*Her Majesty constantly advocated for those affected by the disease, the stigma, and discrimination they faced, and urged people to get tested and seek early care, treatment and support.*

*It took several rounds of advocacy for people to begin opening up and start talking about the disease and gain acceptance. During the World AIDS Day in 2011, a group of people publicly shared their status on national television. This was a significant milestone, one that resulted from Her Majesty's compassionate and persistent advocacy efforts. We have come a long way!" - Dr Sonam Ugen, Associate Professor, Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences*

## **Educating for Life**

Recognizing the importance of timely access to sexual and reproductive health-related information and services, a comprehensive school health programme was introduced in 1999.

*"With Her Majesty's support we were able to implement Life Skills Education in all schools across the country. During the school visits, Her Majesty greatly emphasized the importance of implementing this for all children in the school. Her Majesty held lengthy sessions with the teachers and highlighted the importance of understanding youth better and addressing their problems in a compassionate manner. Her Majesty would also patiently listen to students, and encouraged children and youth not to suffer in silence but to come forward and seek help. Such valuable guidance from Her Majesty greatly encouraged the teachers to understand their students better, and this further encouraged children and youth to be more open and to seek help for their problems."*

*- Karma Dechen, LSE, former MoE staff*



The Ministry of Education adopted the Life Skills Education programme in 2008 to help both teachers and students adapt to, and build positive behaviors to enable them to deal with the demands and challenges of everyday living, as well as sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Recognizing comprehensive sexuality education as an important way of addressing gender-based violence, abuse and discrimination, modules on comprehensive sexuality education were institutionalized at the Colleges of Education in Paro and Samtse in 2014.

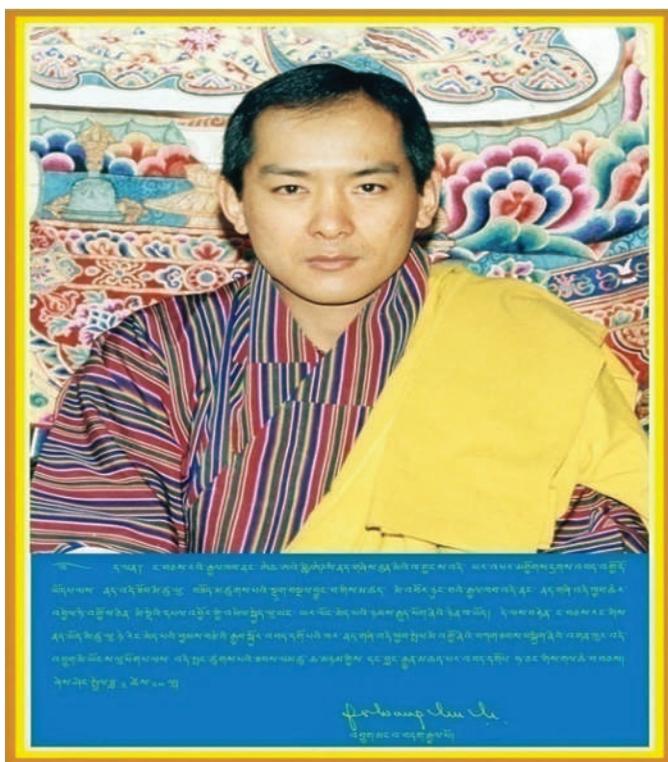
In 2019, comprehensive sexuality education was integrated into identified subjects. By 2021 comprehensive sexuality education was integrated into the seven subjects of the national school curriculum framework and embedded in the instructional guide for teachers. The National Strategic Framework for Comprehensive Sexuality Education was launched in 2022 to guide comprehensive sexuality education implementation in schools, and it is now being taught nationwide.



These initiatives aim to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that will empower them to realize their health, well-being and dignity, and also enable them to make informed and appropriate choices in life.

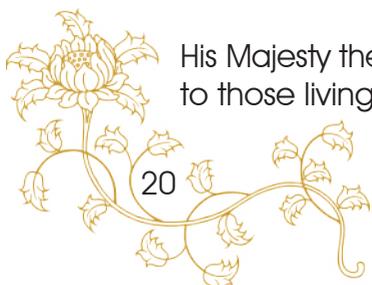
## Prevention of HIV / AIDS

The National HIV/AIDS & STIs Control Program was established in 1988, five years before the detection of the first HIV case in the country in 1993. The program worked to create awareness on HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, to educate people on transmission and prevention, encourage behaviour change, sensitize people on stigma and discrimination, and provide support and solidarity to people living with the disease. It also advocated blood screening to ensure safety and prevention of mother to child transmission, integrating management of STIs into primary health care, to improve treatment, and setting up voluntary counseling and testing facilities.



A Royal Decree on HIV Prevention by His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck in 2004 called for all citizens to participate in HIV/AIDS prevention while respecting the rights of those living with the disease. This was followed by another Royal Edict the same year to help prevent HIV/AIDS and to provide care and compassion to those infected.

His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck has also urged people to show compassion to those living with the disease.



Despite prevention efforts, the number of HIV/AIDS cases continued to rise. One of the biggest challenges in dealing with HIV/AIDS, unlike other diseases, has been the discrimination and stigma attached to it. There was social stigma as well as self-stigma that often led to feelings of shame, isolation, despair, and fear of disclosure.

Over the years, Her Majesty has strongly advocated prevention of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections, and encouraged people to break the stigma against people living with these diseases. Upon her Command, Multi Sector Task Forces (MSTF) were created in each Dzongkhag. The MSTF collaborated extensively with a network of volunteers in the community to create awareness on HIV/AIDS and other public health and social issues.



Her Majesty's continuous and persistent advocacy and engagement with people living with HIV/AIDS led to the creation of a civil society organization called Lhak-sam in 2010. Five people living with HIV/AIDS appeared voluntarily on national television in 2011 to talk about HIV/AIDS in Bhutan. This was an important step that helped change public perception of people living with the disease and contributed to greater social acceptance.

Today there are 874 reported HIV/AIDS cases in the country. While the number of reported cases is small compared to that of other countries, it is a major public health concern given the country's small population. The political will and commitment towards ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030 remain strong, but there is much to be done in order to halt or reverse the spread of the epidemic.

*"When I came out in the open about my HIV positive status in 2011, there was still a lot of social stigmatization which comes from fear and discrimination. There was distrust and fear everywhere around the world, because it was believed that AIDS was a killer disease. If detected with HIV, it was like obtaining a death sentence.*



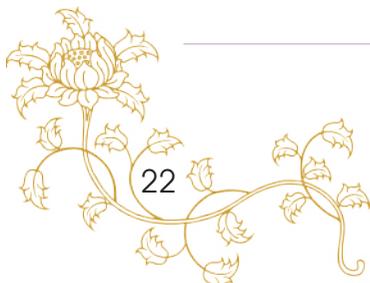
*In Bhutan also there was fear about the AIDS epidemic, as well as distrust and stigma attached to the disease and people living with it. But when we came out in the open in 2011, our journey was quite comfortable. Fear comes from people's lack of knowledge and ignorance. Her Majesty had done much to dispel ignorance. She has gone all over the country, from the Dzongkhag to the Gewog (sub-district) level, and to the remotest of villages. Everywhere she went, she created awareness about HIV, about how it spreads and how to prevent it. She strongly advocated that people living with HIV should not be stigmatized or discriminated against.*

*We, in Bhutan, are fortunate to have the support, engagement and solidarity from the highest level. That gives us confidence and hope. In 2004, His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo released a Royal Decree that people living with HIV are going through a difficult time and it is important for everyone to show compassion to them, and also that it is the joint responsibility of all citizens to prevent HIV/AIDS.*

*And above all, Her Majesty played a critical role by reaching out messages to the people, reducing stigma and discrimination on the ground, linking people to the services, including testing services. Those who are detected living with HIV are being provided with counseling and treatment.*

*My parents would always say 'Wangda, had it not been for our King and Queen, your life would have been very difficult and different. There would be no one to stop people isolating and stigmatizing against you. You are fortunate.'*

*Her Majesty has given strength to people living with HIV/AIDS. That is never forgotten. We keep it in mind as we celebrate World AIDS day and when we hold the candle light memorial. Though we don't speak about it often, we always keep in heart that where we are today, one of the most important role has been played by Her Majesty."*  
- Wangda Dorji, Executive Director, Lhak-sam.













## EMPOWERING THE COMMUNITY

### Women Volunteer Groups

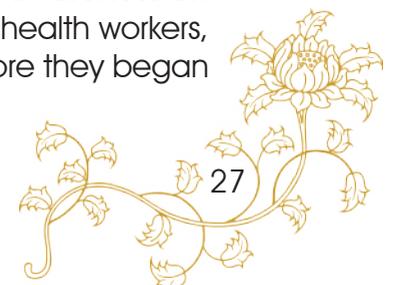
Everywhere Her Majesty went, she spent time with women and spoke to them at great lengths about their problems and challenges. She visited the homes at the family quarters of the armed service personnel to observe their standard of hygiene and sanitation, and spoke to them about a range of health and family planning issues.

The advocacy focused on the rights and choices to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing, and timing of their children in order to ensure safe and good health for both mother and child. Information on contraceptives as well as contraceptive options were made available.

Her Majesty also spoke about safe motherhood and child health, prevention of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections, importance of girls' education, women's empowerment, and adolescent health. She encouraged women to be informed and also to work with other women to share information and discuss sexual and reproductive health issues.



Inspired by Her Majesty, Women Volunteer Groups were formed in the armed forces in 1999 to promote sexual reproductive health including family planning. The groups also worked to enhance awareness on sanitation and hygiene and other public health issues. The groups collaborated closely with health workers, and received basic training to ensure that they had correct information and knowledge before they began advocating.



The women volunteer groups continue to conduct awareness campaigns and serve as focal points for sexual and reproductive health and rights initiatives.

## Multi-sectoral Partnership and Community Engagement

The HIV/AIDS epidemic had become a major global health crisis in the 1990s and it was apparent that while there were initiatives and programs in Bhutan to prevent HIV/AIDS, it was seen primarily as a health problem. Her Majesty recognized it as a larger socio-economic problem and saw the need for an efficient, effective, and coordinated multi-sectoral response to combat the growing threat of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections.

Under Her Royal Command a Multi Sectoral Task Force (MSTF) was formed in Chukha Dzongkhag in 1999. The task force was successful in getting many sectors on board and in effectively strengthening the fight against the spread of sexually transmitted infections, and associated sexual and reproductive health issues. Its primary mandate was prevention of HIV/AIDS and STIs through advocacy and increasing awareness to the general population.

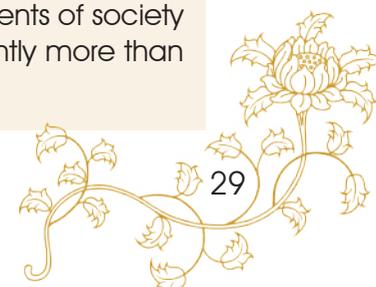


By 2001, the Multi Sectoral Task Force was replicated in all the twenty Dzongkhags. The MSTF is composed of members from diverse groups including the government, private sector, religious communities, local leaders, NGOs and community based organizations, and key affected groups. The membership is also open to including other relevant members at the discretion of the respective Dzongkhag. The Ministry of Health is the key coordinating agency for the Task Force.

The roles of the MSTF were expanded in 2012 to include other priority public health and social issues including communicable and non-communicable diseases, teenage pregnancy, unsafe abortion, cervical cancer, and mental health. Under the direction of Her Majesty, a partnership was established between the MSTF and the Community Based Support System (CBSS) with the objective to further strengthen multi-sector collaboration and coordination in combating health and social issues.



The Community Based Support System (CBSS) is a network of volunteers mobilized by RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women) in 2005 to work together to raise awareness in helping to reduce and prevent the occurrence of domestic violence, and other forms of gender-based violence in Bhutanese society. By 2011, the network was established in all the Dzongkhags. The volunteers comprised of people from all segments of society - civil servants, private sector, armed forces, monastic body, teachers and youth. There are currently more than 5000 CBSS members across the country.



*"As a member of the MSTF and also as a CBSS Focal, I engage closely with people within my community to create awareness on many issues including reproductive health, teenage pregnancy, sexual harassment, bullying, violence, mental health and prevention of self harm, alcohol and drug abuse, nutrition as well as HIV/AIDS, communicable and non communicable diseases. Principals and teachers in schools have also been sensitized on the physical, biological and mental changes that take place during adolescence so that young girls and boys can be given the right support as they make the transition to adulthood." - Changchung, CBSS Focal, Samdrup Jongkhar.*



With their joint activities mainstreamed into the annual government work plans and targets, the partnership between the two networks has been integral to the response in the community towards knowledge and prevention of HIV/AIDS, reducing the stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV, domestic and gender-based violence, and other health and social issues.



*"I have been a CBSS member since 2007. We have actively supported victims of domestic violence as well as women and children in difficult circumstances, many of whom have no where to go and no one to turn to. We provide case management, basic counseling, referral services, legal aid, and emotional and other support. People reach out to us with many different kind of problems. We sometimes see 60 to 70 cases in a year. We also focus on advocacy within the community on domestic and gender-based violence and legal provisions, HIV and AIDS, as well as on adolescent sexual and reproductive health. We work closely with the MSTF, and agencies such as Ministry of Health, RENEW, schools, local and municipal government, Royal Bhutan Police, and CSOs. One big achievement for us has been the setting up of the community service centre which was initiated by the volunteers and provides a space for people to come and seek support." – Sonam Chukki, CBSS Focal, Phuentsholing*

## RENEW

*"Always leave a place better than you have found it; this applies to everything you touch in life – be it a place, person or thing." - Her Majesty*

Long before Her Majesty became the UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador, Her Majesty had accompanied His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo and traveled extensively around the country. During those visits and later during her advocacy tours as UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador, Her Majesty was able to identify the needs of the people and witness the problems and challenges that many people, particularly women and girls, were facing. Women shared stories of experiencing domestic violence and abuse, and how they were unable to seek help because there was no support system or place where they could seek support. Many women were not educated, and were socially, emotionally and economically dependent on their spouses. Her Majesty saw that there was a culture of silence in which people treated domestic and gender-based violence as an internal or family matter.

Her Majesty was concerned not only about the magnitude of the problem, and the tolerance and acceptance of the violence in homes and communities, but also the perceptions of women themselves that condoned the violence. Her Majesty saw the need for support services to be more readily accessible for women suffering from violence, and to change women and society's attitudes towards violence.



It was also clear that some of the main barriers towards accessing the existing sexual and reproductive health services were not the non-availability of services but rather were social issues relating to economic dependence, domestic violence, and gender-based violence.

In 2004, Her Majesty founded a non-profit organization called RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women) with the aim to enable women to make informed decisions in every sphere of their lives, and become independent and socially and economically productive members of their communities.

Recognizing the interconnected relationship between violence and socio-economic factors, RENEW provides multi-dimensional services which include prevention and advocacy, counseling, safe home, legal aid, livelihood skills training, micro finance and scholarships.

RENEW provides a safe home for survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse, as well as vulnerable children in the form of the Gawailing Happy Home. Since its inception in 2013, the Home has provided shelter to more than 1300 clients. The Happy Home offers counseling, legal aid, emergency medical aid, crisis intervention, meditation practices, education for the children of survivors of gender-based violence, and livelihood training.

*"I am most grateful to Her Majesty for being the beacon of light, and for bringing hope into my life and giving me a second chance. Without Gawailing Happy Home my life would have been very different. It was my home for more than 12 years. I studied at a boarding school and went back to Gawailing every summer and winter holiday. The atmosphere is peaceful, quiet and we felt safe. They took care of me and I did not have to worry about anything. We had access to lots of books and I could also focus on my studies. There are good services to help girls and women, including counseling. They also organized vocational training courses. To keep myself busy and engaged I learnt many skills such as tailoring, weaving and knitting. I am grateful to all the people who have walked with me and helped me become an independent person. I am now a teacher teaching Math and English in a primary school." Nidup, Teacher (former Gawailing resident)*

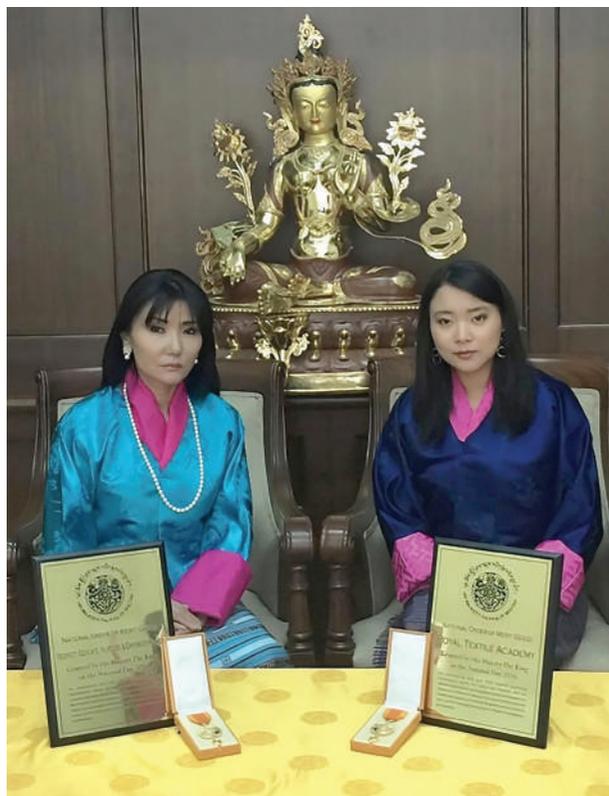
Counseling services for victims of gender-based violence is one of the core services provided by RENEW. In collaboration with the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) of the United States, RENEW developed the standards for the certification of the counseling profession and professionals in Bhutan. The Bhutan Board for Certified Counselors (BBCC) was launched in 2013 by Her Majesty with the aim to professionalizing the counseling profession. The impact of the counseling profession has had a profound impact on the people with need for mental health care support and services.

Years of persistent advocacy against domestic violence and gender-based violence also saw a new chapter in Bhutan through the enactment of the Domestic Violence Prevention Act in 2013. The Act brought all the key actors together and is an important milestone in the efforts to address domestic violence by providing a legal framework to enhance access to justice for victims of violence.



## National Order of Merit (First Class)

Her Majesty receives the National Order of Merit (First Class) for RENEW and the Royal Textile Academy from His Majesty the King of Bhutan Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck in December 2016.

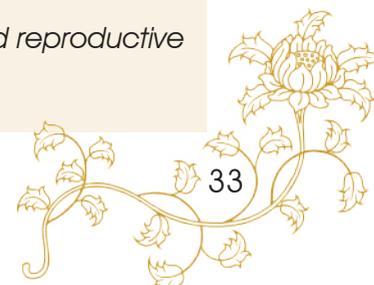


Her Majesty with HRH Ashi Eeuphelma Choden Wangchuck

*"Her Majesty is an inspiration and role model to all Bhutanese women and girls. Her steadfast determination and compassionate leadership has enabled Bhutan to take up and address many social issues that impede development, including domestic violence and gender-based violence. I feel truly blessed and fortunate to have had the opportunity to serve Her Majesty in various capacities since 2002, and in being a part of RENEW's journey to prevent and eliminate gender-based violence, and to improve the lives of the Bhutanese people.*

*During the COVID-19 pandemic, I witnessed Her Majesty's genuine concern about the increasing reported cases of domestic violence. Her Majesty addressed the nation on BBS national television and appealed to all individuals and families to be responsible, demonstrate solidarity and take care of each other. Her Majesty also urged policy*

*makers to provide support and protection for vulnerable populations, ensure access to sexual and reproductive health services, and to work towards prevention of gender-based violence.*





*RENEW worked in close collaboration with national Domestic Violence Response Team, and established a 24 hour help desk to facilitate access to relief services for vulnerable people. Advocacy campaigns which included video clips related to domestic violence and sexual abuse, and contact information of service providers, were also continuously aired on national television. RENEW also provided livelihood skills training to provide alternative income generating opportunities and to engage women and girls who had lost their jobs.” - Tshering Dolkar, Executive Director, RENEW*

## Engaging Men and Boys

Engaging men and boys as partners has been seen as an effective strategy to challenge social norms, change attitudes, and support the empowerment and advancement of women and girls. Efforts have been made in Bhutan to engage with and encourage men and boys to fight gender inequality and participate in raising the visibility of gender issues and working towards ending gender discrimination. Men and boys have been increasingly coming forward to challenge social norms, advocate for change and stand in solidarity with women.



*After attending a workshop at RENEW two years ago, we were motivated and inspired to do our part in contributing to a better world. We are a group of motorcycle enthusiasts and we travel frequently to different parts of the country. During our tours, we meet with people and talk about prevention of domestic violence, and promotion of gender equality. We also create awareness about RENEW and the helpline services available. I think our sensitization has been impactful, because during the lockdowns we even received some calls for help, and we connected the callers with RENEW counselors. I think it is important to engage men and boys because not only does change begin with us, but also when we talk about these issues people listen with an open mind and are more attentive.” - Leewang Tobgay, President, The Badgers Motorcycle Club*



## Engaging with Youth

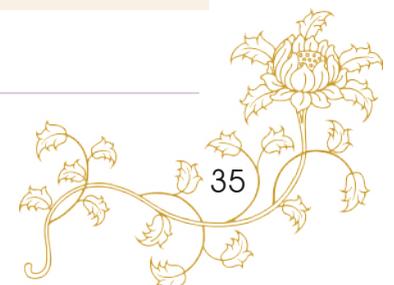
Adolescents make up a significant proportion of the Bhutanese population. Recognizing the importance being a part of the conversation that has a significant bearing on their lives, DAISAN (Druk Adolescent’s Initiative for Sexual Awareness Network) was founded in 2011.

Initiated and managed by the RENEW youth volunteers, the main objectives of the initiative are to spread awareness about adolescent sexual and reproductive health rights, promote gender equality, advocate against gender-based violence, encourage meaningful participation and strengthen youth-adult partnership in schools.

There are currently 906 DAISAN members in 38 schools around the country.



*“I became a member of DAISAN at the age of 12. In addition to learning about sexual and reproductive health, we also learnt about menstrual hygiene, sexual harassment and prevention of HIV/AIDS. Along with the other DAISAN members we create awareness among other students in our school on these issues. I have also been able to share this knowledge with some of the uneducated family members in my village. Knowing about these things, we are able to support friends with teenage pregnancy issues, and also help younger girls to understand about menstruation and menstrual hygiene.” - Rigden Dema, 15 years old, Student at Tashidingkha Higher Secondary School, Punakha*



















## AGENTS OF CHANGE

### Partnering with the Religious Institutions

Religious leaders have considerable influence in shaping the cultural and lifestyle beliefs of the people and in transforming attitudes to sexuality. As agents of change, they play an important role in educating the community and creating awareness on priority health and social issues.



### Life Skills Based Comprehensive Sexuality Education

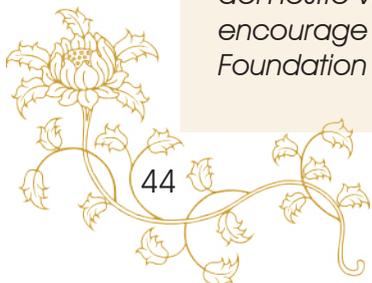
To address issues related to sexual and reproductive health as well as adolescent issues and other social issues, religious leaders have been engaged as partners. More than 1500 nuns across 26 nunneries have



been sensitized on sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender-based violence. This has brought about more openness in discussions about sexual and reproductive issues, including menstruation. The nuns have also been able to share critical health knowledge to rural women on the importance of cervical cancer screening, menstrual hygiene, contraceptives, and family planning.



*"The life skills and comprehensive sexuality trainings been very informative and useful for us. In addition to getting knowledge and skills, we have become more open to talk about issues related to reproductive health. Nuns are respected in the communities and rural women listen to us when we share important health and social messages such as the importance of pap smear, regular antenatal and postnatal health check ups, menstrual hygiene and domestic violence. We also advocate against teenage pregnancy and encourage children to stay in schools." – Ani Namgyal Lhamo, Bhutan Nuns Foundation*

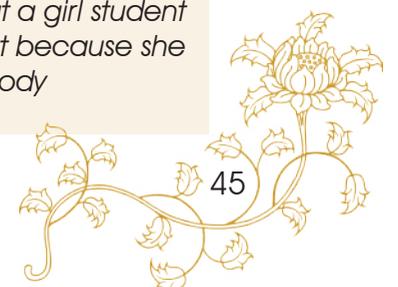




Life skills based comprehensive sexuality education has also been expanded to include male monks. Since 2014 more than 350 head of monastic institutions and 80 nuns have been trained as trainers to impart life skills to other teachers in monastic institutions and nunneries. The trainings covered issues related to gender inequality, domestic violence, gender-based violence, violence against children, sexual reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, and substance abuse. The knowledge has enabled the religious community to understand their reproductive health and gender-based violence. Topics that would otherwise be difficult and uncomfortable to discuss became easier to talk about after the introduction of life skills education to the monastic institutions. This has been an important step since they are highly respected and influential agents of change who can disseminate important information on social and health priorities.



*"The life skills education approach has been useful for us. In addition to learning about the important skills to manage oneself and one's interpersonal relationships, it also covers many important areas including reproductive health and rights, growing up, sexuality, HIV/AIDS, violence and healthy lifestyle. Those who have been trained have been able to incorporate the knowledge within the monastic institutions. This has helped to change mind-set of monks and brought in new ideas and knowledge. We are also able to more openly discuss and talk about things that are considered sensitive and not so easy to talk about before. There is also more understanding about women's health and related issues. For example a male principal in one nunnery said that he now understands that a girl student may not go to class sometimes due to menstrual cramps, and not because she does not want to study."* – Lopen Sherab Dorji, Central Monastic Body



## Advocating Change

Over the years, Her Majesty has engaged regularly with religious leaders to discuss social and health issues, and also to engage them as partners to address issues related to sexual and reproductive health and rights, and prevention of gender-based violence. MSTF-CBSS members and religious heads also began to work together towards creating a redress mechanism to respond to gender-based violence, with religious heads and MSTF-CBSS members as first points of contact in the community, creating a support mechanism and effective service delivery points on any health or social issues. Sensitization workshops for Hindu religious leaders were also conducted to engage them to play a role in preventing gender-based violence, as well as addressing social issues such as alcohol abuse and suicide.

Recognizing tshechus (festivals) as a strategic opportunity to share important public health and social messages, a guideline book titled *Tsechui Garcham Gyi Shepa* was launched in 2017 by His Holiness the Je Khenpho Trulku Jigme Choedra on integrated social messaging through local and national festivals. This joint initiative of RENEW, Department of Culture and UNFPA seeks to engage the religious body to be a part of the change and to involve them to promote family values and advocate messages on prevention of domestic violence, gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy, sexual harassment, and gender inequality.





*A visual feast, the beautiful elements in their splendor,  
Endowed with love and compassion, by the great Queen Mother,  
Beloved to the Great Fourth, a treasure to behold,  
Reincarnation of the Great Dakini, Yeshe Khandro, so wise and bold.*

It is a profound honour for the Central Monastic Body and religious institutions across the country to offer our warmest felicitations on the auspicious occasion of Her Majesty Gyalyum Sangay Choden Wangchuck's Birth Anniversary.

Her Majesty is the descendant of the Speech and Mind lineage of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, and thus personifies the noble qualities of Zhabdrung. Since the era of His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, a revered descendant of Guru Rinpoche, Tertön Pema Lingpa, and Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in human form, Her Majesty has wholeheartedly supported His Majesty's vision for the progress and development of the nation, with the ultimate goal of benefiting the people. Her Majesty's invaluable contributions have been instrumental in achieving remarkable accomplishments for the country.

Her Majesty, imbued with boundless compassion and love for the people, keenly grasped the challenges and struggles faced by people. There was a dire need to address social issues such as domestic violence, which was considered a sensitive topic and was not talked about openly. Her Majesty's timely intervention helped to bring attention to this issue, and to support victims of domestic violence. Her Majesty's Noble Vision led to the establishment of RENEW, in response to her deep concern for the welfare and empowerment of women and children in the nation. RENEW has been at the forefront of numerous social initiatives that have greatly benefited the people.

Her Majesty has also been a custodian of promoting religion and culture. In addition to her benevolent support for religious institutions, Her Majesty built the Tara Zhingkhām, a sacred temple, for the accumulation of merits by the Bhutanese people and prosperity of the nation.

Moreover, Her Majesty has been a distinguished Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) since 1999. Her Majesty has initiated and spearheaded numerous awareness programs addressing critical health and social issues such as HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, domestic violence, mental health, and comprehensive sexuality education.

Her Majesty was awarded the individual laureate for the 2020 UN Population Award to recognize her outstanding contribution to raising awareness and devising solutions to population and reproductive health issues. We honour and rejoice for Her Majesty's accomplishments.

Her Majesty has played a pivotal role in the prevention and reduction of domestic violence. Her Majesty's compassionate efforts have brought immeasurable relief and support to the affected individuals, earning



the endearing title of “parent” for the women and children of Bhutan. Her Majesty’s dedication to addressing these issues has been a true blessing for the nation, fostering a safer environment for vulnerable members of society.

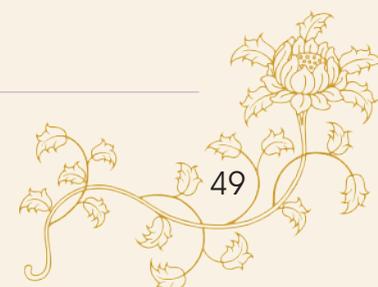
Her Majesty also encouraged the monastic community to join the mission in ending gender-based violence. The monastic community has engaged in creating awareness on important health and social issues through messaging during the tshechus (festivals), as well as through life skills and comprehensive sexuality education in monastic institutions.

The Central Monastic Body and religious institutions would like to wholeheartedly thank Her Majesty for her tireless efforts and dedication, and for her invaluable contributions for the welfare of the Nation. We remain grateful, and offer prayers for good health and long life of Her Majesty and the Royal Family. May Her Majesty and the Royal Family’s unwavering dedication continue to bring abundance and well-being to Bhutan and its people for generations to come.

*Wishing Your Majesty youth that’s everlasting,  
Vibrancy that shines, like a teenager’s casting,  
With compassion and creativity, touching every heart,  
A beacon of inspiration, a leader’s virtuous art.*

*Like Jetshen Dolma, Queen of Bhutan, so revered,  
May Your Majesty’s heart be always kind and endeared,  
Blessings for the beloved country, ever to remain,  
A joyous and undoubtable Happy Birthday, we proclaim.*

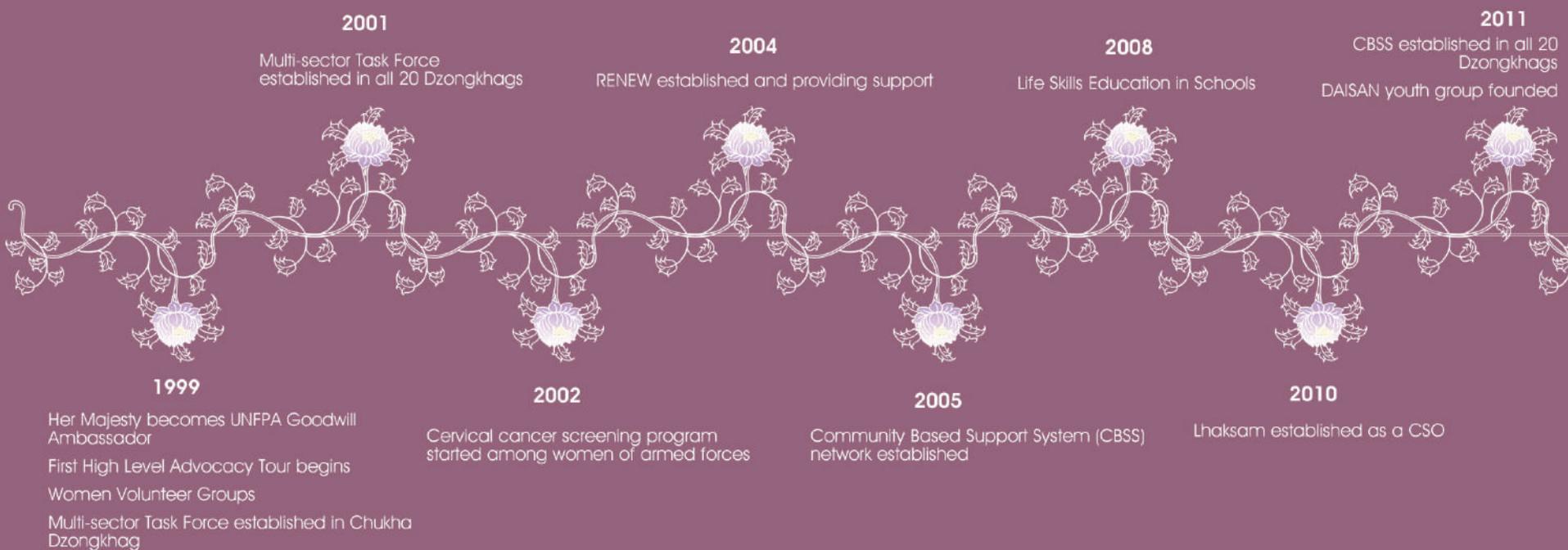
Sangay Dorji  
Leytshog Lopen  
Chairman, Monastic Council for Administration and Development Affairs  
Central Monastic Body

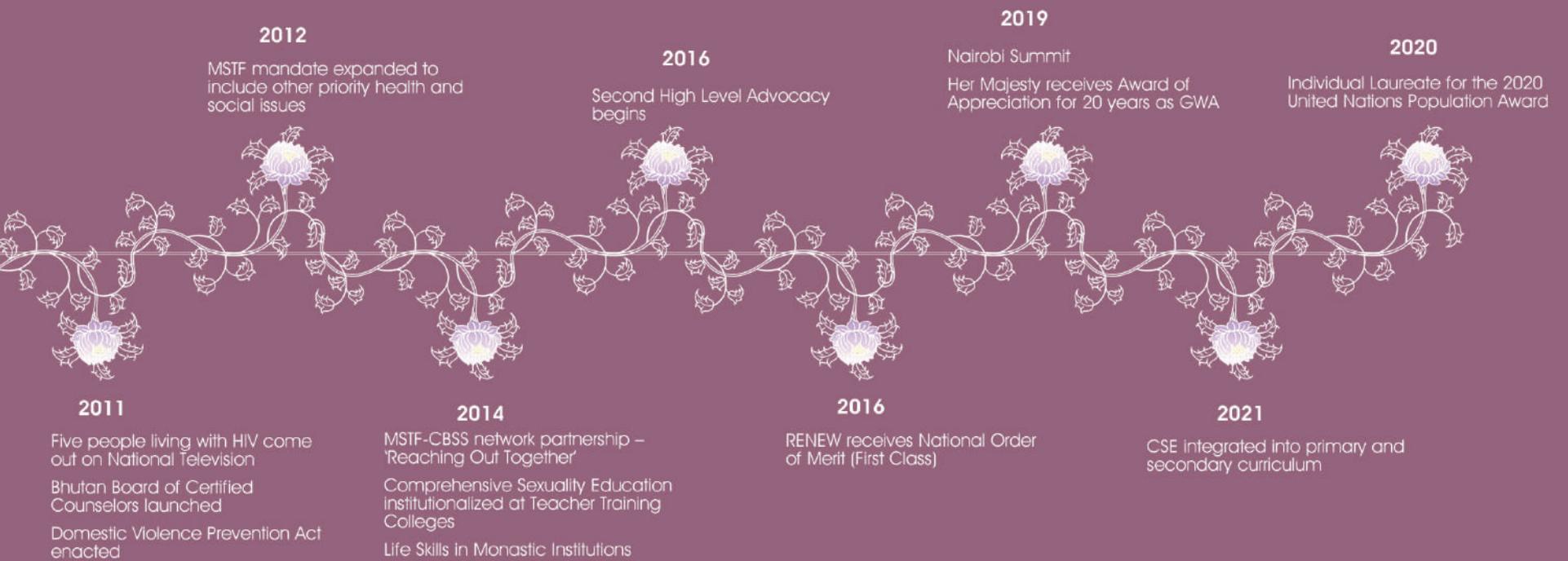






# Timeline





## Tribute by Lyonpo Dasho Dechen Wangmo, Minister of Health



Looking back nearly 25 years ago when Bhutan, along with 178 other countries, joined the International Conference of Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, it's impressive to see how far the country has come. Health in Bhutan has been predominantly public financed, and universal in scope in line with the Alma Ata Declaration signed in 1979. Health services are provided free at the point of care from primary to tertiary level including referrals outside the country thanks to our beloved successive monarchs who believed in providing the best quality health services for its people. Extensive early expansion in primary healthcare services has led to a substantial improvement in access throughout the country with Bhutan achieving universal child immunization in 1991. Maternal deaths dropped by 88% from 255 per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 89 per 100,000 in 2017, and we have seen significant decrease in infant and under-five mortality rates, resulting in more

children celebrating their fifth birthday, and more mothers surviving childbirth complications today.

These achievements are largely due to the guidance and support of Bhutan's visionary monarchs, who have prioritized the health of the people. The resolute engagement of Her Majesty Gyalum Sangay Choden Wangchuck, who became the UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador in 1999, has been instrumental in advocating for sexual and reproductive health and rights. Her Majesty has been a driving force in creating an enabling environment that encourages open discussions about sensitive issues related to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Through her tireless efforts, Her Majesty has actively promoted many health and social causes in Bhutan, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, women's empowerment, adolescents and youth, and life skills education. Her advocacy visits to every corner of the country have made a positive impact on the attitudes of the people towards these taboo issues. Additionally, her innovative initiatives, such as the establishment of RENEW (an NGO), the creation of a multi-task force, and support systems in the community, have provided a holistic system approach that has worked well in Bhutan and could be replicated elsewhere in the world.

The Ministry of Health expresses its deepest appreciation to Her Majesty the Gyalum for her significant contributions to improving the health and well-being of the people of Bhutan, both as the UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador and as the Queen Mother of Bhutan. Under her guidance, the Ministry of Health has been able to address many priority public health and social issues critical to fulfilling the overall national goal of 'GNH.' The Ministry will continue to work to protect the progress and achievements made under Her Majesty's patronage.









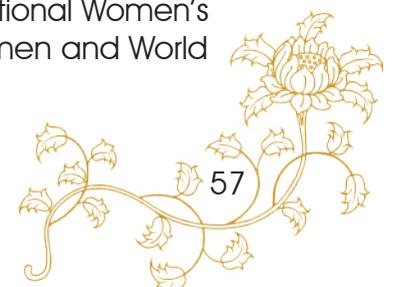
## LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

### High Level Advocacy

The First High Level Advocacy began in 1999, when Her Majesty became the UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador. In the months and years that ensued, she toured the entire country and met with people everywhere and advocated on sexual and reproductive health, prevention of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as other priority health and social issues.

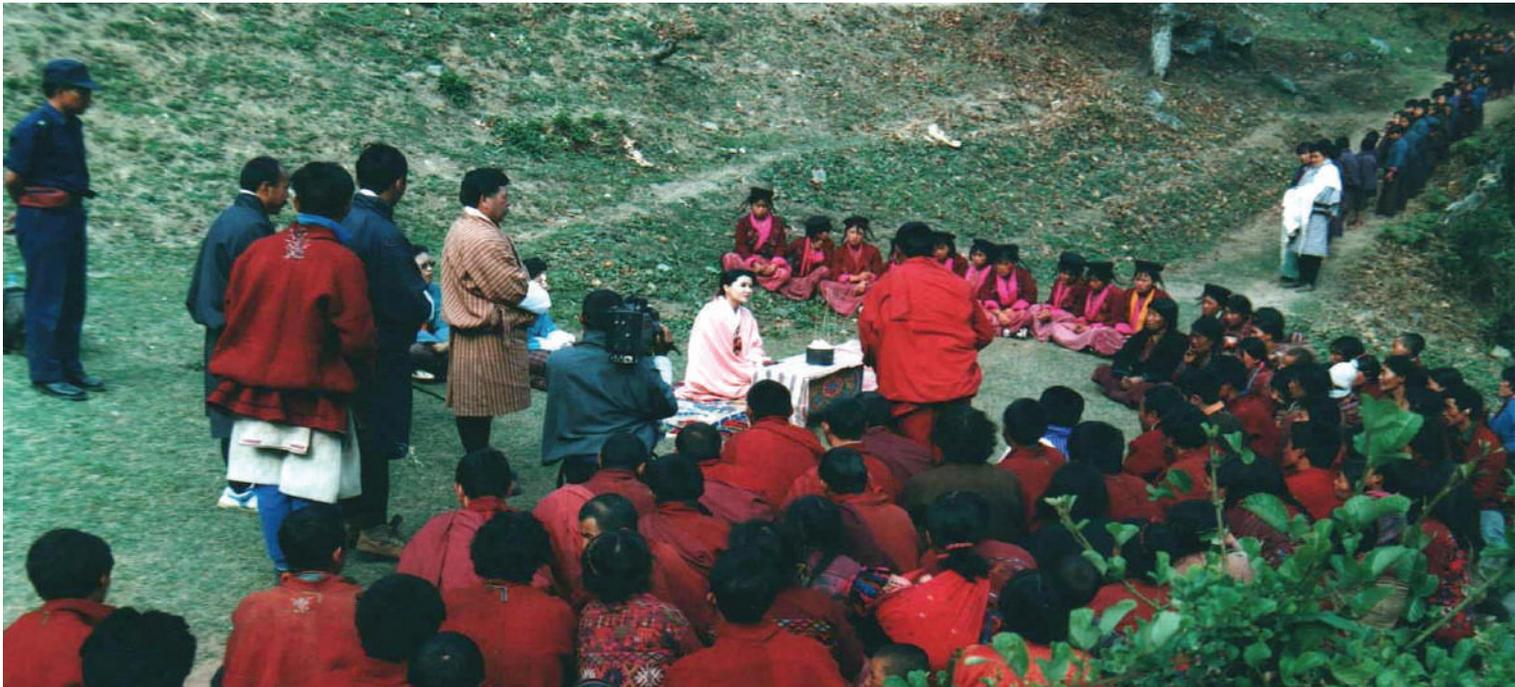


Over the course of the next two decades, Her Majesty continued to visit different Dzongkhags numerous times to meet with people, as well as oversee initiatives towards improving their lives and well-being. She also advocated on pertinent and emerging health and social issues, and marked the International Women's Day, International Population Day, International Day on Elimination of Violence against Women and World AIDS Day with the people.





The Second High Level Advocacy began in September 2016 and by December 2017 all the Dzongkhags had been covered. Representatives from relevant agencies such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, National Commission for Women and Children, RENEW, and people living with HIV/AIDS accompanied Her Majesty and shared their knowledge and experience.



Awareness was created on priority public health and social issues like mother and child health, adult and adolescent reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and STIs, substance abuse, mental health and suicide prevention, teenage pregnancy, gender-based violence, as well as other important issues faced by respective Dzongkhags.

Her Majesty has been able to get people to openly talk about sensitive issues, address social stigmas, and through information and awareness give people the opportunity to make informed choices.

The High Level Advocacy tours successfully brought together all the stakeholders to address health and social priorities in their lives and communities, and has helped to greatly improve public health outcome in Bhutan. By traveling to the remotest communities in all the Dzongkhags, Her Majesty has been a catalyst for change by inspiring local leaders, service providers, and community volunteers to take health and social priorities as an integral part of their work.



*"Her Majesty's advocacy tours were instrumental in supporting the health ministry to promote awareness and knowledge about health issues as well as communicable and non-communicable diseases like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malnutrition. Three important things that the tours helped to do include (1) to create awareness and educate people on health; (2) take stock of the services on the ground and to see its relevance and how it can be improved; and (3) to identify health and other issues at the community level and to see what new services needed to be introduced.*

*During the tours, Her Majesty worked long hours and followed a full and tiring schedule that began before 8 am and sometimes went on till past 11 pm. Throughout the day she visited places and met with people - students, teachers, members of the religious community, security personal, vulnerable groups as well as the private sector, government officials and the general public. She spent a lot of time with people from vulnerable groups like women working at drayang (entertainment centers) to understand their problems. The advocacy tours gave the Ministry of Health and other sectors a better understanding of the issues and problems that community faced including substance abuse, suicide, and violence.*

*It takes years to see the impact of advocacy programs. During the second high level advocacy tours, it was clear to see the results that the first high level advocacy tours as well as Her Majesty's regular visits to the different Dzongkhags every year had made possible. There were improvement in the health infrastructure, and more uptake of services. There was also more openness and readiness to talk about sexual and reproductive health, less discrimination and stigma, and more acceptance of people living with HIV/AIDS." - Dr. Ugen Dophu, former Health Secretary*



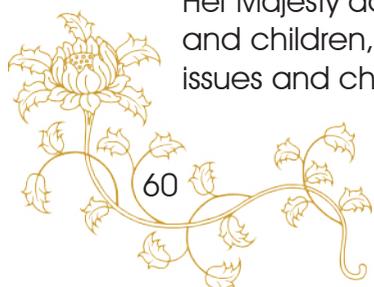
## Reaching the Unreached

In October 2022, Her Majesty made a high level advocacy tour to Lunana in Gasa Dzongkhag, which is one of the remotest places in the world. At an altitude of over 4,000m above sea level and with extreme weather conditions, Lunana is snow bound and inaccessible most times of the year. The journey to Lunana takes eight days by foot from the closest motorable road.



With a population of less than 800 people, Lunana is secluded, relatively untouched and more isolated than the rest of the world. The community faces many health and social issues including timely access to health services, teenage pregnancy, early marriage, alcoholism, single mothers and domestic violence. As a society in transition, there are opportunities as well as new risks and challenges.

Her Majesty advocated for the timely utilization of health services to improve health and well-being of mothers and children, the importance of cervical cancer screening, prevention of STIs and HIV/AIDS, priority youth issues and challenges, and gender-based violence.





Awareness was also created among the public on communicable and non-communicable diseases, importance of education, gender equality, child and women protection and rights, prevention of violence, sexual and reproductive health, and maternal health care. The mobile medical team organized a camp to screen for cancer and other communicable and non-communicable diseases. During the visit, 145 women were screened for cervical cancer and 95 women screened for breast cancer. The students in the three schools were made aware about comprehensive sexuality education.



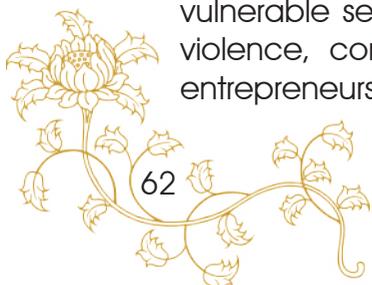
Following the high level visit, an Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Ministry of Health and RENEW on strengthening existing collaboration to upscale health and social priorities across Bhutan. Work has been initiated in Lunana towards improving the health, education and social well-being of the people. Programs to uplift and empower the community are being initiated, including livelihood and skills development programs.

*"My deepest gratitude to Her Majesty for helping the women of Lunana get pap smears, check ups, medicine and for Her Endless Generosity. To thank Her Majesty, I would like to offer my prayers for Her Majesty's long life and overall well being." - Angay Dorji, Resident, Lunana*



## **Towards An Inclusive Society**

Towards creating a society that is inclusive and leaves no one behind, RENEW has been reaching out to vulnerable sections of society to create awareness and build capacity on prevention of gender-based violence, comprehensive sexuality training, mental health facilitators' training, financial literacy and entrepreneurship trainings.



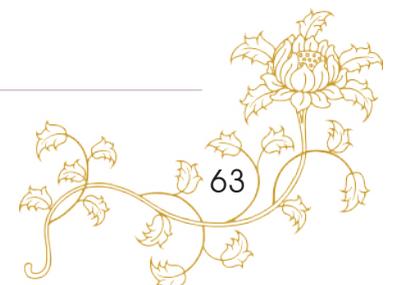
RENEW engages with vulnerable women and girls, including women working at drayangs (entertainment centers), as well as LGBTQ+ community, and persons with disability as they are more vulnerable to gender-based violence, and their sexual and reproductive health are often neglected. Support is also provided to men and boys who are victims of gender-based violence, and they are given equal access to counseling, legal aid and shelter in case of emergency, and livelihood skills training.



*"I live in a remote village in Tang valley, Bumthang. I became physically impaired at the age of five, and since then movement has been difficult. I attended a tailoring program organized by RENEW in 2019 which taught me new skills. I learnt to make coin purses, hand bags and mobile phone covers. After the training, RENEW further supported me with few tailoring materials and tools so that I could work from home. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I made face masks which were bought by the people in the village and school students. I am thankful to RENEW for giving me an opportunity to be productive and to be able to generate some income." - Pema Yuden, Person Living with Disability*

*"Over the years, RENEW and UNFPA have provided us with training on livelihood skills, comprehensive sexuality education, and other training based on the needs of our community. Their consistent support is one reason why our community in the country is vibrant today. We have also partnered with the Ministry of Health, particularly the Adolescent Friendly Health Services (AFHS), to bring health services to the community that typically does not access healthcare due to fear of stigma and discrimination.*

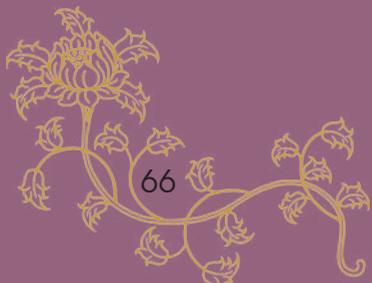
*During the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women in 2021, Her Majesty advocated for supporting the LGBTQ+ community, providing hope for our community in Bhutan. This was a significant and meaningful moment for us, as it not only ensured the responsibility and accountability of people in society, including those in the bureaucracy, to keep us safe, but it also gave us immense relief and comfort. Furthermore, during Her Majesty's High-Level Advocacy tours, the topic of the LGBTQ+ community is always represented to create awareness about our community and brought visibility to our issues." - Tashi Tsheten (He/They), Queer Voices of Bhutan*







*Her Majesty's Footsteps*





## Tribute to Her Majesty Gyalyum Sangay Choden Wangchuck from Dr. Natalia Kanem, Executive Director, UNFPA



I am honoured to present this tribute to Your Majesty in recognition of more than two decades of unwavering commitment and effort to advance the ICPD agenda and enhance the health and wellbeing of all people in Bhutan, particularly women and children.

As the UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador to Bhutan since 1999, Your Majesty has been the driving force behind our advocacy efforts in the country. Traversing the length and breadth of Bhutan and speaking to people on a range of sensitive issues, including safe motherhood; sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS; and the prevention of gender-based violence, Your Majesty's commitment has made a huge impact on people's lives.

Indeed, your tremendous contributions to saving and transforming the lives of women and young people, both in Bhutan and globally, were recognized by the international community in 2020, when you were awarded the United Nations Population Award in the individual category for your work on sexual and reproductive health and ending violence against women and girls.

UNFPA has been extremely fortunate to have Your Majesty champion efforts to achieve our 'three zeros': zero unmet need for family planning; zero preventable maternal deaths and zero gender-based violence and harmful practices. Bhutan's progress on each of these fronts is an inspiration to the rest of the world. The right of women in Bhutan to determine their family size is now valued and upheld, with widespread availability of contraception and counseling services. Deaths in pregnancy and childbirth have decreased by 75 per cent over the past two decades. Your Majesty has also pioneered a number of successful initiatives to end gender-based violence and harmful practices, including the RENEW programme, which helps women become socially and economically independent.

Bhutan has experienced a significant transformation in attitudes and approaches when it comes to sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence and women's and girls' empowerment. Today, sexual and reproductive health is not only openly discussed, but also regarded as an integral aspect of a peaceful, dignified and fulfilling life. This shift is in large part thanks to Your Majesty's tremendous advocacy efforts in these areas. You are a powerful role model for women and girls in Bhutan and all over the world.

On behalf of UNFPA, I thank Your Majesty for all that you have achieved for women, girls and young people, and I salute you for your strong, compassionate leadership; your heartfelt empathy and your steadfast support.





Her Majesty with Ms. Andrea M. Wojnar, UNFPA Country Director for Bhutan, and officials from Gyalyum Charitable Trust, UNFPA and RENEW, Aug 2022

Her Majesty with Mr. Gerald Daly, Resident Coordinator of the UN in Bhutan, and UNFPA staff, Oct 2021





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## THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

### **Award of Appreciation: UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador to Bhutan for 20 years**

In recognition of her work as UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador to Bhutan for 20 years, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) presented an Award of Appreciation to Her Majesty Gyalyum Sangay Choden Wangchuck.

During the presentation of the award, Dr. Natalia Kanem, the UNFPA Executive Director, acknowledged the significant contribution made by Her Majesty in helping advance the rights of women and girls in Bhutan and for being the driving force behind UNFPA's advocacy efforts in Bhutan. She commended Her Majesty for being a strong role model for women and girls in Bhutan, and traveling to remote villages of the country to raise awareness on issues ranging from safe motherhood to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.



*"I am extremely touched and honoured to receive this recognition for my role as UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador. I most humbly accept this award on behalf of all who have tirelessly worked along with me to advance the rights and provide choices for women and girls in Bhutan." Her Majesty, 2019*





Her Majesty with the Prime Minister, Venerable Lopens of the Central Monastic Body, Speaker of the National Assembly, Chairperson of the National Council, Cabinet Ministers, and Heads of UN Agencies in Bhutan, Dec 2020

## Individual Laureate for the 2020 United Nations Population Award

Her Majesty Gyalyum Sangay Choden Wangchuck was awarded the Individual Laureate for the 2020 UN Population Award, in recognition of her outstanding contribution in raising awareness and devising solutions to population and reproductive health issues.

"Her Majesty is a long standing champion of sexual and reproductive health and rights and the need to end violence against women, girls, and children in Bhutan. Among her many achievements in recent decades, she has helped to create an enabling environment to openly discuss sexual reproductive health in the kingdom and founded a volunteer organization called "Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women" (RENEW) in 2004. She has also been UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador to Bhutan for more than 20 years." - UNFPA website



Award of certificate by Mr. Gerald Daly, Resident Coordinator of the UN in Bhutan to Her Majesty on 10 Dec 2020

*"This Award is deeply significant to me as it not only represents a subject very close to my heart but it also represents the hopes and aspirations of women and children from the most vulnerable sections of society. Furthermore, it represents the amazing endurance and the united spirit in all of us." – Her Majesty, 2020*

About the Award: The United Nations Population Award was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1981. Each year, the Committee honours an individual and/or institution in recognition of outstanding contributions to population and reproductive health issues and solutions. The Award in 2020 was awarded to Her Majesty the Gyalyum Sangay Choden Wangchuck, Queen Mother of Bhutan, in the individual category, and HelpAge India, in the institutional category.



## The 54th Session of the Commission on Population and Development

Her Majesty gave the Keynote Address at the 54th session of the Commission on Population and Development.



*"Global initiatives to advance women's rights to promote social and economic development have yielded significant result in the last 25 years since ICPD. Maternal mortality has dropped by nearly half and contraceptive use is higher than ever been. Expanded access to antiretroviral therapy and declining incidences of HIV infections have greatly reduced the number HIV related deaths. Introduction of HPV vaccines has addressed the pertinent public health problem of preventable diseases such as cervical cancer. Global gender gap in education has narrowed. Women are rising to top of their fields and their political participation worldwide continues to grow.*

*While we celebrate these achievements, we must recognize the challenges that remain. Too many women and girls around the world are still marginalized living on or below poverty level with far too little control over reproductive health and choices. Maternal mortality is still leading cause of death and gender equality and women rights continue to remain a global issue...*

*...To shift the dynamics by 2030, we need to move beyond counting, quantification and assessment efforts. Now is no longer the time to ask if there is a problem. Now is the time for solutions. We need bold and courageous initiatives to inspire innovative actions to promote women's rights. The enormity of our challenge is to create a world in which women's equality is guaranteed not granted." - Her Majesty, 2021*



## The Way Ahead

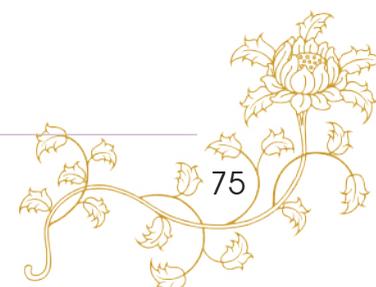
Public health in Bhutan has come a long way since the 1960s. The commendable improvements since 1999, particularly in areas of sexual and reproductive health, attests to the unparalleled impact Her Majesty's leadership and dedication has had on the sector. There are now open discussions in Bhutan on previously sensitive and taboo subjects, and a strong commitment to continue to address issues such as prevention of HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence.

While the progress already made is significant, much remains to be done. Maternal and infant mortality rates are still below global targets. Many women do not access antenatal and postnatal services on time. The participation of women and girls in governance is still low, and domestic and gender-based violence continues to be prevalent. These and other issues continue to persist despite effort and commitment.

Her Majesty's journey as champion has transformed the lives of many Bhutanese people, especially women and girls. The journey goes on, and under Her Majesty's leadership and guidance, efforts will continue to be made in Bhutan until the unreached are reached, and the rights of all the women and girls are guaranteed.

*"My long association with people from all walks of life across the country has left an indelible impact and gives me the strength and purpose to continue to strive to make a difference in their lives..."*

*...Bhutan today is very different from what it was 20 years ago. Our social indicators have surpassed our expectation. Maternal and infant mortality rates have declined. Almost all our girls are in schools and female literacy has improved. But much more needs to be done and we pledge to persevere relentlessly till every girl child and woman can hold their head high as equal partners in every sphere." - Her Majesty, 2019*











## **Questions & Answers with Her Majesty the Gyalyum Sangay Choden Wangchuck, Queen Mother of Bhutan**



### **☞ What was Your Majesty's motivation for becoming a Goodwill Ambassador for UNFPA?**

During my travels with His Majesty the Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, I witnessed the challenges that women and children in the remote areas of Bhutan faced. These experiences compelled me to recognize the importance of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, along with improving access to health services.

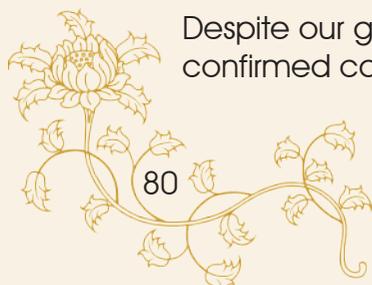
In 1999, I accepted the role of the UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador with the aim of increasing awareness and accessibility to reproductive health services, specifically for women and young people. Although Bhutanese women enjoy more rights than our counterparts within the region and beyond, there is still a disparity in the value placed on the roles of women and men. UNFPA provided an international platform to advocate for issues related to reproductive health, maternal and child health, gender equality, and youth empowerment.

As the UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador, I am deeply committed to enhancing the health and well-being of women, young people and children. I remain steadfast in being an advocate for gender equality and women's empowerment which serves as a constant source of inspiration and motivation.

### **☞ Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and HIV/AIDS are generally sensitive topics, particularly in the 1990s. What inspired Your Majesty to take on the responsibility of advocating on these issues?**

Being a woman and a mother, I understand the significance of addressing issues related to sexual and reproductive health and HIV/AIDS, which are associated with stigma and neglected in many societies, including Bhutan in the 1990s. As a conservative society, Bhutanese culture prioritizes respect for elders and avoids open discussions of taboo subjects, particularly those pertaining to sexual and reproductive health.

Despite our geographic isolation, Bhutan was not impervious to the global HIV/AIDS epidemic, with the first confirmed case being detected in 1993. Recognizing the potential for an increase in HIV infections due to



cross-border migration, international travel, and risky behaviors, taking proactive measures to prevent the spread of HIV in a population of less than 700 thousand was crucial to avoid a catastrophic situation.

I was privileged to wield influence and gain acceptance to address these sensitive issues and drive positive change in society. I believe that it was imperative to raise awareness and provide access to information and family services related to SRHR and HIV/AIDS, to promote the well-being of women and children in Bhutan.

☪ **How did Your Majesty navigate the tension between traditional views and a more open approach to SRHR?**

I am deeply grateful for the trust and support accorded to me by the highest authority in the country Their Majesties the Kings of Bhutan, as well as the Chief Abbot, and the Royal Government of Bhutan. It was recognized that there was an urgent need to address the SRHR needs of the people, which led to the adoption of a pragmatic approach that combines both traditional values and modern methods.

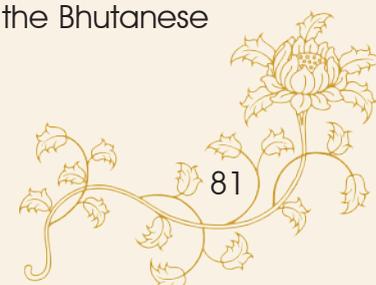
This was made possible through the concerted efforts of the Ministry of Health, UNFPA, RENEW, relevant organizations, stakeholders and other development partners who worked together to implement a comprehensive approach that emphasized the importance of education and communication in raising awareness and promoting SRHR.

In my capacity as the UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador, I personally led two nation-wide advocacy tours in the twenty districts of Bhutan, including the most remote communities, to educate and raise awareness on SRHR. Working with religious leaders, educational institutions, and communities, we encouraged an open and respectful dialogue about these sensitive issues.

☪ **Bhutan is well known for being a 'happy' country. What are some of the challenges this identity presents when talking about complex issues like gender-based violence (GBV) and gender inequality?**

Bhutan's identity as a 'happy' country presents challenges when talking about complex issues like gender-based violence and gender inequality. The emphasis on happiness can create a perception that these issues do not exist or are not as significant in Bhutanese society. Furthermore traditional cultural norms can perpetuate gender inequality and restrict discussions about sensitive topics like GBV.

I am a firm believer that where there are human beings, invariably problems related to being 'only' human co-exists along with all the good represented by 'being' human. It is important to recognize that these problems exist, and addressing them is crucial for the overall well-being and happiness of the Bhutanese society.



The birth of RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women), a Civil Society-Organization, took place under my patronage to provide holistic services to women from vulnerable and marginalized sections of society, and victims of domestic and gender-based violence.

☞ **What are some of the main challenges that were faced on this journey?**

Among the challenges, one main challenge has been the difficulty posed by the geographical terrain during the advocacy tours to the remote areas. I recently completed an advocacy tour to Lunana, which is situated in the extreme northwest region of Bhutan at an altitude of 13,675 ft. above sea level, and accessible through a eight-day trek from the nearest motorable road.

Due to Bhutan's mountainous landscape and lack of proper infrastructure, accessibility to remote communities is challenging, requiring travel by foot, ponies and even yaks in the higher altitudes to reach the remote communities. Harsh weather conditions, such as heavy rainfall and even snow accompanied by landslides often made travel difficult and dangerous. Moreover, some remote areas lacked basic facilities such as electricity and access to clean drinking water which made it very challenging for the team to conduct awareness programs and deliver messages effectively.

Conservative attitudes towards sex, reproductive health and gender equality posed some level of challenges to raise awareness on sensitive issues. Although, the national language Dzongkha is widely spoken, language barriers still presented a challenge in some communities that required the use of interpreters to ensure the accurate delivery of messages.

Despite the challenges, my role as the UNFPA Ambassador has been a highly rewarding journey.

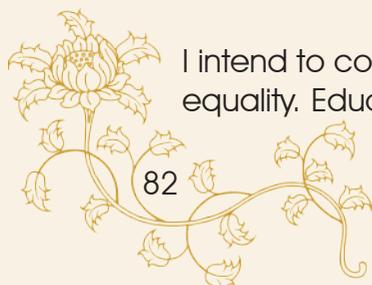
☞ **What are some things Your Majesty feels most happy about in terms of accomplishment?**

I am deeply humbled and get a sense of fulfilment to have been able to make a positive impact in various areas that have contributed to the development of Bhutan.

As the Goodwill Ambassador of UNFPA, I feel a great sense of accomplishment knowing that the advocacies on sexual and reproductive health and rights have raised awareness on gender-based violence and HIV-AIDS.

☞ **What is Your Majesty's vision for the relationship with UNFPA? What more can be done to expand the reach of your message?**

I intend to continue working with UNFPA to further expand the reach of the messages on SRHR and gender equality. Education and awareness raising initiatives are the strongest tools to challenge harmful attitudes



and beliefs, and to promote positive change. We should aspire for increased collaboration with other like organizations, relevant stakeholders including governmental agencies, civil society organizations and development partners.

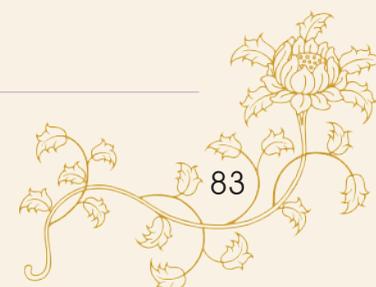
☪ **Your Majesty's advocacy and dedicated service has accomplished so much for the Bhutanese people. What next? What would Your Majesty like to see taken forward?**

While we acknowledge the laurels of our achievements there is still much more to be done. At this juncture, we cannot risk complacency as it could very easily undermine all the advancements we have made so far. I believe that we must continue to focus on promoting women's empowerment, gender equality, and SRHR in Bhutan and beyond. I fully intend to collaborate with UNFPA and other organizations to expand the reach of our message and advocate for policy changes that improve the lives of women and girls.

☪ **Is there any story Your Majesty would like to share or any words of advice?**

Amidst many tales of struggles and perseverance, there is one particularly poignant story that deeply resonates with me, and the mission that holds a special place in my heart. A young girl, who had endured physical and sexual abuse at a tender age, was referred to RENEW as she was deemed vulnerable to further victimization. Upon her arrival at RENEW she had lost all hope including the will to live. Under the dedicated and passionate care of RENEW's service providers, I had the privilege of witnessing her growth and transformation at the Gawailing Happy Home, where she found a home and family among other victims of various atrocities. Her remarkable journey culminated in the attainment of an undergraduate degree and the establishment of a successful business. Her story is a testament to the power of perseverance, hope, and determination in the face of adversity.

I would like to share some of my thoughts and insights. To those who are suffering silently, I urge you to seek help, believe in yourself and trust your instincts. For those who are facing failure, know that it is temporary and embrace it as an opportunity to learn and grow. To those who are struggling, maintain a positive attitude, for positivity is a prerequisite to overcome challenges to achieve your goals. It is vital to care for your physical, emotional and mental health, and surround yourself with positivity. Above all, be kind to others and treat them with respect and compassion. We must remember that a little kindness can go a long way.







## About Her Majesty Gyalyum Sangay Choden Wangchuck

Her Majesty the Gyalyum Sangay Choden Wangchuck, Queen Mother of Bhutan, was born on 11th May 1963 in Thimphu, Bhutan. Her Majesty has been actively involved in promoting the rich cultural heritage and in supporting various causes in Bhutan, and has been a strong advocate on social causes particularly those related to health and education.

Her Majesty graciously accepted the role of United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Goodwill Ambassador in 1999. As Goodwill Ambassador, Her Majesty traveled extensively throughout the country visiting remote communities and interacting with all segments of the Bhutanese population. She actively advocated for the sexual and reproductive health and rights of Bhutanese women and girls, and also the prevention of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections. She has also been a strong advocate on girls' education, and adolescents' health and well-being.

Her Majesty's immense concern and compassion for the wellbeing of the people, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized, as well as her deep personal commitment to improve and promote the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of the country led Her Majesty to initiate numerous initiatives:

- ☞ RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture, and Empower Women)
- ☞ Royal Textile Academy
- ☞ Gyalyum Scholarship Fund
- ☞ Dharma Initiatives
- ☞ Tara Lhadron Zhingkhram Lhakhang at Pangrizama, Thimphu

The Gyalyum Charitable Trust was established in 2016 as the umbrella organization that works to ensure the long-term sustainability of the charitable organizations so that the indispensable services they provide continue to benefit all sections of society.

### Honors:

- ☞ Commemorative Silver Jubilee Medal of His Majesty the Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, 1999
- ☞ His Majesty the King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck Investiture Medal, 2008
- ☞ NBCC (National Board for Certified Counselors) International Award of Excellence for Mental Health Awareness, 2008
- ☞ National Order of Merit (First Class) for RENEW and Royal Textile Academy, 2016
- ☞ Award of Appreciation for 20 Years as UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador, 2019
- ☞ Individual Laureate for the United Nations Population Award, 2020

