

# Pain For No Fault

Status of Human Rights in Bhutan 2025

The Bhutan Watch

ISSN 2653-4746



# **STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN BHUTAN 2025**

Published by

**The Bhutan Watch**

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Date of publication: June 2025  
Publication number: 2023/006-HR  
ISBN: 978-0-6454826-3-8  
ISSN: 2653-4746

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## ACRONYMS

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|          |  |
|----------|--|
| AI       | Amnesty International  |
| BBS      | Bhutan Broadcasting Service  |
| BICMA    | Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority  |
| BMF      | Bhutan Media Foundation  |
| BTP      | Bhutan Tendrel Party   |
| CEDAW    | Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women |
| COVID    | Corona Virus Disease -19   |
| CRPD     | Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities                      |
| CSO      | Civil Society Organisation   |
| CSOA     | Civil Society Organisations Authority                                      |
| DPT      | Druk Phuensum Tshogpa  |
| ECB      | Election Commission of Bhutan  |
| ECCD     | Early Childhood Care and Development                                       |
| GCRPPB   | Global Campaign for the Release of Political Prisoners in Bhutan           |
| GDP      | Gross Domestic Product   |
| GEF-LDCF | Global Environment Facility's Least Developed Countries Fund               |
| GNH      | Gross National Happiness   |
| HRW      | Human Rights Watch   |
| ICCPR    | International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights                       |
| IFJ      | International Federation of Journalists                                    |

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| JAB    | Journalists Association of Bhutan                |
| LDC    | Least Developed Countries                        |
| MICMA  | Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority              |
| NCWC   | National Commission for Women and Children       |
| NEP    | National Education Policy                        |
| OHCHR  | Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights |
| PDP    | People’s Democratic Party                        |
| PES    | Payment for Environmental Services               |
| RENEW  | Respect, Educate, Nurture, Empower Women         |
| RSF    | Reporters Without Borders                        |
| RBP    | Royal Bhutan Police                              |
| SDF    | Sustainable Development Fee                      |
| SOP    | Standard Operating Procedure                     |
| UN     | United Nations                                   |
| UNDP   | United National Development Program              |
| UNHRC  | United Nations Human Rights Council              |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children Fund                     |
| UPR    | Universal Periodic Review                        |
| USD    | United States Dollar                             |

## **FORWARD**

*The Bhutan Watch* acknowledges the challenges of the past two years, particularly the absence of our annual reports, which was marked by unforeseen circumstances in the team. The sudden demise of a cherished friend and esteemed member deeply affected our plans and actions. Despite this setback, we remain committed to our mission and have compiled this report to cover human rights incidents between January 2023 and December 2024. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our supporters and well-wishers for standing by us during these trying times.

The human rights situation in Bhutan continues to demand urgent attention. Over the reporting period, limited progress has been observed in government actions to advance human rights. The country notably lacks robust monitoring mechanisms and an active presence of human rights advocates, leaving critical concerns unaddressed. This vacuum underscores the need for greater accountability and transparency in governance mechanism.

The prolonged detention of political prisoners remains a significant blemish on Bhutan's human rights record. These individuals, held for decades without fair trials or clear evidence of criminal activities, represent a pressing concern for the global human rights community. Calls for their immediate release have grown louder, underscoring the need for justice and rehabilitation for those affected.

Economic challenges, including rising unemployment and underemployment, persist. These factors, coupled with limited opportunities for growth, have fuelled ongoing outmigration, particularly among the youth seeking greener pastures abroad. This trend has serious implications for Bhutan's local governance and socio-economic stability, with brain drain threatening to diminish the pool of competitive candidates for upcoming local elections in 2026.

The local elections, which serve as pivotal moments in shaping the future of grassroots governance, are expected to witness increased competition. However, the shrinking availability of skilled and experienced candidates presents challenges in ensuring the election of capable representatives to address community needs effectively.

Another critical area of concern is the alarming decline in media freedom and access to reliable information. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) highlighted deteriorating Bhutan's press freedom ranking. Journalists face mounting barriers in accessing critical information, pushing the media landscape closer to a state-controlled narrative. The decline of independent journalism threatens transparency and the public's right to free and unbiased information.

The plight of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal remains unresolved. While a small number continue to hope for repatriation, the absence of relief agencies and support exacerbate their struggles. Many rely on assistance from family members who have resettled abroad, but the lack of a sustainable solution highlights the need for international intervention and dialogue.

In the face of these challenges, *The Bhutan Watch* has persevered in its mission to uncover and highlight human rights violations within Bhutan. Despite the government's efforts to project an image of stability and progress internationally, our organisation has worked tirelessly to shed light on the realities faced by those within the country. Through rigorous

monitoring and advocacy, we aim to provide a platform for marginalised voices and foster global solidarity in support of justice and equality.

This report serves as a call to action for individuals, organisations, and forums worldwide to support efforts toward human rights, justice, and inclusivity in Bhutan. We remain resolute in our commitment to creating a more equitable and harmonious society and urge the international community to join us in this endeavour.

May this endeavour of *The Bhutan Watch* help snowball support for:

- Immediately release all the political prisoners from jails in Bhutan and rehabilitate them in their original homes.
- Improve electoral laws to allow individuals to contest the elections without being affiliated with any political parties.
- Restore government-revoked citizenship identity cards to the people living in the country.
- End gender-based violence and pave the way to end all forms of discrimination
- Repatriate Bhutanese refugees and their children from the refugee camps in Nepal and from exile, and recognise the political parties functioning in exile for contesting elections there.
- Allow for the reunion of the separated family members and the creation of an environment for harmonious coexistence among and between the people within Bhutan and the world.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Bhutan is navigating socio-political and economic challenges amidst progress in areas like political liberalisation, child welfare, and environmental sustainability. Despite steps toward democratic governance, concerns about political participation persist, including restrictions on opposition parties, media censorship, and limitations on minority rights. The electoral system, governed by the Constitution and Election Act, ensures competitive elections but faces criticisms over transparency and equal access.

Political prisoners remain a contentious issue stemming from Bhutan's history of suppressing dissent among ethnic minorities and democracy advocates. They have been held with unfair trial procedures, harsh prison conditions, and limited judicial transparency. Advocacy groups have urged Bhutan to improve its legal frameworks and ratify more international human rights treaties.

Press freedom has declined significantly, with Bhutan dropping in global rankings due to media censorship, financial instability, and editorial interference. Journalists face barriers to accessing government-held information and self-censorship amid growing political and corporate pressures. Media organisations struggle to maintain independence and stability due to government advertising censorship, where the government provides advertisement to those media outlets that are not critical of its policies.

Out-migration rates have surged, driven by economic instability and limited private-sector opportunities. Bhutan's restrictive immigration and emigration policies complicate overseas employment, raising concerns about brain drain and exploitation of migrant workers. Domestic employment challenges include weak job security and wage disparities.

Ethnic minorities, particularly Nepali-speaking Bhutanese, continue to face systemic discrimination, including difficulties in obtaining citizenship and restricted access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Statelessness remains a pressing issue, despite some efforts to provide citizenship.

Despite ratifying CEDAW, gaps in enforcement hinder progress. Women encounter barriers to leadership roles, wage equality, and protections against gender-based violence. Women leadership in political fronts continue to diminish with no clear government policy to improve gender equality. Women's representation in political bodies remains disproportionately low, and societal norms often limit their economic empowerment too.

Child welfare has seen improvements in reducing child mortality rates and expanding education access, yet challenges persist in tackling violence, substance abuse, and school dropout rates. The country has laws against child labour and is signatory to Child Rights Convention (CRC), but enforcement remains inconsistent, particularly in rural areas.

Bhutan's labour laws aim to balance growth with worker protections, but issues like workplace safety, wage disparities, and restriction on union rights remain. Migrant workers face exploitation and legal challenges, highlighting the need for better oversight.

Crime rates have declined, but domestic violence and substance abuse remain a concern. Collaborative programs involving schools and communities have raised awareness about crime prevention, showing positive outcomes in reducing certain offenses.

Drinking water shortages and contamination are pressing issues attributed to climate change and inadequate infrastructure. Bhutan has launched projects like ACREWAS to enhance water governance and resilience, but implementation challenges remain. Climate change has forced many natural water sources to dry up, with no alternatives in visibility.

Bhutan faced yet another gruelling session at the United Nations Human Rights Council at its periodic Universal Periodic Review of the human rights. The session assessed country's progress in human rights and made recommendations focusing on legal reforms, economic development, gender equality, freedom of expression, and environmental sustainability. Bhutan reaffirmed its commitment to human rights and sought international support to implement necessary reforms.

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## **FREEDOM TO PARTICIPATE IN POLITICAL PROCESS**

Bhutan, a constitutional monarchy in paper, has undergone significant semi-democratic consolidation in recent decades, with elections and transfers of some powers. However, the ongoing challenges related to political participation, particularly concerning restrictions on opposition parties, media censorship, and discrimination against ethnic minorities continue to question the legitimacy of a pseudo democracy. While Bhutan's electoral system ensures competitive elections, concerns remain regarding political rights, transparency, and equal access to the political process.

Bhutan's electoral system consists of a bicameral Parliament, with a 25-seat upper house, the National Council, and a 47-seat lower house, the National Assembly. Members of both houses serve five-year terms, with the king appointing five members of the National Council, while the remaining 20 are popularly elected. The National Assembly is entirely elected through periodic election, with voting held in two rounds, allowing the two parties that win the most support in the first round to advance to the second round.

In April 2023, Bhutan held National Council elections under a new law passed in 2022, requiring candidates to file documents verifying their professional and anticorruption standards. The November 2023 preliminary round of National Assembly elections saw the People's Democratic Party (PDP) receive the most votes, followed by the Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP), which was established a year earlier. PDP secured majority win (30/17 seats) in the second held in January 2024. Peculiar to the election was that the National Assembly election in 2018 had resulted in the same proportion but completely two different parties.

Bhutan's political system is governed by the Constitution of Bhutan (2008), which guarantees fundamental rights, including the right to vote and participate in political activities. Article 7 of the Constitution states that 'a Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech, opinion, and expression, including freedom of the press, and the right to freedom of association'. However, these rights are subject to limitations imposed by the

government, particularly concerning political activities and civil society organisations (CSO). The successive governments have not taken any steps for practical implementation of these right enshrined in constitution.

The Election Act of Bhutan (2008) establishes the legal framework for conducting elections, outlining the roles of the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) and the procedures for voter registration, campaigning, and dispute resolution. The Act mandates that political parties must be registered with the ECB and adhere to strict regulations regarding campaign financing and public engagement.

The National Security Act (1992) has been criticised for its vague provisions, which allow authorities to restrict political activities deemed ‘against the national interest’. This law has been used to suppress dissent, particularly among ethnic minorities and opposition groups.

Opposition parties in Bhutan have faced difficulties in organising campaign events and engaging with voters. Bureaucratic delays in obtaining permissions for public meetings have hindered political engagement. The ECB maintains that all parties are given equal opportunities, but opposition leaders argue that restrictions disproportionately affect their campaigns.

The ruling party has been criticised for its lack of progress in fulfilling campaign pledges, leading to dissatisfaction among voters. The then opposition party, Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT), has faced criticism for not effectively holding the ruling party accountable and failing to play a more active role in governance. The party was ousted first round of National Assembly election in 2023.

Efforts to enhance public participation in legislative process have been made through workshops and advocacy programs. In July 2024, a series of workshops on public hearings were organised for newly elected members of Bhutan’s National Assembly, their staff, and CSOs (IDEA, 2024). These workshops aimed to enhance awareness and capacity for public participation in the country’s legislative process.

During the first four-day workshop for CSO participants held from July 2–5, attendees learned about various opportunities and mechanisms for public participation provided through legislative and institutional provisions. The sessions highlighted existing challenges, such as the lack of awareness and capacity among CSOs and public officials regarding civil society’s contributions to the legislative process. The workshop aimed to address these challenges, including insufficient institutional cooperation, by promoting CSO participation in parliament’s work.

The instruments of public participation and direct democracy, which allow the public to participate in political decisions, are inherent in the system. Citizens and civil society organisation participants are entitled to partake in public hearings as per Article 10.2 of the Bhutanese Constitution. They can also put forward legislative suggestions as outlined in the Rules of Procedures of the Parliament’s two Houses. However, this has hardly occurred in the last 15 years of parliamentary practice in Bhutan.

Ethnic minorities, particularly Nepali-speaking Bhutanese, have faced discrimination in political participation. Individuals from minority communities encounter difficulties in obtaining citizenship documents, which restricts their ability to vote and engage in the political process. The government has been urged to implement policies that ensure equal political rights for all citizens, regardless of ethnic background.

## **POLITICAL PRISONERS AND ARBITRARY DETENTION**

Bhutan continues to detain individuals classified as political prisoners, many of whom were convicted in the 1990s for fake ‘offenses against the state’. These convictions often stem from political activities deemed anti-national by the Bhutanese government, particularly among those advocating for the rights of ethnic minorities, democracy, and freedom of expression. There are at least 35 political prisoners now, many serving life sentences without [parole](#). Their continued imprisonment raises serious concerns regarding due process, fair trials, and human rights violations within Bhutan’s judicial system.

### ***Historical Context and Background***

The issue of political imprisonment has a long story. Before Bhutan transitioned to a constitutional parliamentary system in 2008, it operated as an absolute monarchy with stringent restrictions on political dissent. The 1990s saw mass expulsions of ethnic Nepali citizens (*Lhotshampas*), many of whom were accused of subversive activities or affiliation with pro-democracy movements. Thousands were forcibly displaced to refugee camps in Nepal, while others were imprisoned under harsh conditions for their participation in demanding democracy. The arrests primarily targeted activists who challenged Bhutan absolute monarchy, many of whom were convicted under vaguely defined laws.

These political prisoners were sentenced under legislation that criminalised opposition activities, often without sufficient legal representation or fair trial procedures and under law that was designed following the arrests. Many detainees were charged under National Security Act, which prohibits activities "against the national interest," leading to broad interpretations that justified imprisoning political dissidents. Over the decades, human rights organisations and international observers have continued to raise concerns about these imprisonments, calling for judicial transparency and adherence to international human rights norms.

### ***Conditions of the Prisoners***

Political detainees in Bhutan face harsh prison conditions. Former prisoners describe overcrowded cells, inadequate food supply, and limited access to medical care. Testimonies from detainees indicate that individuals serving life sentences often suffer from malnutrition and untreated illnesses. Political prisoners are frequently placed in high-security facilities with restricted contact with family members.

Ram Bahadur Rai, a political prisoner who served 30 years in prison for distributing political pamphlets advocating democratic reforms, was released in July 2024. Rai revealed that he experienced torture while in jail, including beatings, forced confessions, and prolonged solitary confinement. His story is a testimony of long-standing concerns regarding the treatment of political prisoners in Bhutan. While the Bhutanese government denied allegations of mistreatment, independent monitoring of prison facilities remains scarce, making it difficult to verify conditions within detention centres.

Former detainees have also reported incidents of psychological coercion and intimidation, with prison authorities allegedly pressuring inmates to renounce their political affiliations in exchange for reduced sentences or better living conditions. Reports indicate that prisoners are often denied legal assistance, further exacerbating concerns about the fairness of their trials.

### ***Advocacy and International Pressure***

The Global Campaign for the Release of Political Prisoners in Bhutan (GCRPPB) has consistently advocated for the recognition of political detainees and their immediate release without conditions. In February 2024, the GCRPPB submitted a report to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, presenting concerns raised by the families of political prisoners. The report highlighted Bhutan's failure to provide fair trials, its reliance on confessions obtained through coercion, and the absence of external oversight in political detention cases.

Bhutan has ratified only two of the nine core international human rights treaties, limiting protections for minority rights and political dissidents. The country has yet to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees fundamental freedoms, including protection against arbitrary detention. The UN Human Rights Council has urged Bhutan to ratify additional treaties and implement legal reforms to ensure due process and fair trials for all detainees.

The Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and CIVICUS have all condemned Bhutan's continued imprisonment of political dissidents. CIVICUS Monitor's 2024 review of Bhutan raised concerns about the judiciary's lack of independence, noting that politically motivated arrests continue despite Bhutan's democratic transition. The UN Human Rights Council has urged Bhutan to ratify additional international treaties to ensure compliance with global human rights standards.

### ***Legal Framework and Challenges***

Bhutan's judicial system remains opaque, with limited avenues for appeal in political imprisonment cases. The country's legal framework primarily relies on interpretations of national security laws that do not align with international human rights treaties. The National Security Act (1992) allows broad discretionary power to detain individuals deemed a threat to national stability. However, the law lacks precise definitions what constitute a threat to national stability, enabling the Bhutanese government to imprison individuals engaged in peaceful political activities.

In December 2023, Freedom House listed Bhutan's judicial transparency as a key concern, noting that legal proceedings for political prisoners frequently occur behind closed doors. The report indicated that defendants are rarely granted access to independent lawyers, and trial outcomes are often predetermined. Ironically, very small number of lawyers with private practice are intimidated and coerced not to advocate in favour of those involved in 'anti-national' activities. While Bhutan's constitutional framework guarantees basic rights, the country has yet to implement

sufficient legal reforms to safeguard detainees from politically motivated charges.

### ***Official Position***

The Bhutanese government maintains that all prisoners are treated in accordance with international human rights standards. It stated political detainees were convicted based on lawful procedures, and that allegations of arbitrary detention are exaggerated. However, the lack of independent monitoring mechanisms and restrictive policies on media access make it difficult to verify such claims.

Further, no significant action has been taken toward releasing detainees or reforming judicial processes. The government's reluctance to engage with international human rights bodies on this issue suggests that meaningful reform remains unlikely in the near future.

### ***Prison Conditions and Treatment of Detainees***

Prison conditions in Bhutan have been a subject of concern. Prison facilities suffer from inadequate food provisions, poor medical care, and a lack of independent oversight. While Bhutanese authorities maintain that prison conditions meet legal standards, testimonies from former detainees and our primary sources suggest otherwise. The absence of external monitoring mechanisms further exacerbates concerns about transparency and accountability in Bhutan's prison system.

Former prisoners have described overcrowded cells, insufficient bedding, and poor sanitation in Bhutanese detention facilities. Chemgang Prison, one of the country's most dangerous detention centres, has been repeatedly cited for inadequate food supply and poor healthcare services. A former prisoner released in 2023 reported that inmates often received meagre rations, leading to malnutrition and deteriorating health conditions (HRW, 2024). He also described a lack of access to clean drinking water and basic hygiene products, forcing prisoners to rely on makeshift solutions.

Access to healthcare within prisons remains limited. Prisoners suffered from chronic illnesses often receive delayed or inadequate treatment. Former detainees have described instances where inmates were denied medical attention for prolonged periods, leading to severe health complications. In Chemgang Prison, prisoners reportedly relied on traditional remedies due to the lack of proper medical supplies. Political detainees face particularly harsh conditions and mistreatment. They are often subjected to solitary confinement, restricted communication with family members, and limited access to legal representation (HRW, 2024).

Ram Bahadur Rai said he experienced torture during his trial and imprisonment, including beatings, forced confessions, and prolonged isolation. His testimony has raised concerns about the treatment of other political detainees still held in prisons.

One of the most pressing concerns is the absence of independent monitoring. Unlike many countries that allow human rights organisations to inspect detention facilities, Bhutan has not permitted external observers to assess prison conditions since 2019. There were very limited access to foreign monitors prior to that. Detainees were strictly instructed to provide positive feedback on such monitoring visit or else face harsher treatment following the departure of the monitoring teams. The foreign inspectors are not always permitted to hold private and confidential conversation with the prisoners. This lack of oversight makes it difficult to verify government claims about the treatment of detainees. There are no human rights organisations within the country to advocate for the rights of these detainees and on other human rights issues.

There's need to improve prison conditions and allow independent monitoring. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has recommended that Bhutan implement legal reforms to protect detainees from mistreatment and ensure fair trials for political prisoners. Despite these calls for reform, Bhutan has yet to take any steps toward improving prison conditions. The reluctance raised question about its commitment to upholding fundamental rights.

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## CIVIL LIBERTIES

### ***Freedom of media and right to expression***

Freedom of expression and press freedom in Bhutan have faced significant setbacks in recent years, with increasing restrictions on access to information, declining financial support for independent media, and growing concerns about self-censorship. The country's press freedom ranking dropped dramatically from 33rd in 2022 to 90th in 2023, and further declined to 147th in 2024. And further down to [152 in 2025](#). This decline reflects broader challenges within Bhutan's media industry, including legal barriers, economic instability, and editorial pressure from political and corporate entities.

Bhutanese journalists face obstacles in accessing state-held information. The Bhutan Civil Service Rules and Regulations 2018 and Section 37 (g) Civil Service Act 2010 prohibit government employees from engaging with the media, restricting transparency and [limiting public discourse](#). These regulations prevent journalists from obtaining critical information on governance, policy decisions, and public sector accountability.

In 2023, the Department of Media, Creative Industry, and Intellectual Property introduced a [Standard Operating Procedure](#) (SOP) for Sharing Public Information to streamline access to government-held data. However, reports indicate that journalists continue to struggle with bureaucratic delays and selective disclosure of information. The [Anti-Corruption Commission's 2024](#) report on media integrity highlighted how financial dependency and weak internal controls leave Bhutanese media organisations vulnerable to undue influence, further inhibiting press freedom.

Financial constraints have severely impacted Bhutan's media industry, leading to staff reductions and weakened investigative journalism. The *Bhutan Broadcasting Service* (BBS) lost 60 employees between 2023 and 2024, while *Kuensel* reported a 37 per cent decline in working journalists over the same period (IFJ, 2024). Many journalists cited low salaries, job insecurity,

and lack of professional development opportunities as reasons for leaving the industry.

A [survey](#) conducted by the Bhutan Media Foundation<sup>1</sup> (BMF) in September 2023 found that nearly two-thirds of journalists identified lack of access to information as the primary challenge in their profession. The report also noted that Bhutan's media sector has struggled to maintain financial independence, with many outlets relying on government advertisements to sustain operations. This dependency has led to concerns about editorial bias and self-censorship, as media organisations fear losing financial support if they publish critical reports on government policies.

Self-censorship remains a pervasive issue. A report by the Journalists' Association of Bhutan (JAB) in April 2024 found that nearly 90 per cent of journalists rated the media environment as 'average' or 'poor'. Many admitted to avoiding politically sensitive topics due to fear of legal repercussions or management disapproval.

The Anti-Corruption Commission's 2024 assessment of media integrity highlighted how editorial pressure from advertisers and political actors influences news reporting decisions. The report noted that even subtle pressures, such as the threat of withdrawing advertisements, can lead to biased coverage and reduced investigative journalism. Additionally, the dissolution of the Bhutan Media Council in 2023 removed a key regulatory body that previously provided oversight and support for press freedom. The National Council recommended re-establishing the council (National Council, 2024).

Bhutan's declining press freedom ranking has drawn criticism from international organisations. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and Freedom House have expressed concerns about increasing restrictions on journalists

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<sup>1</sup> BMF was established through royal decree. A parallel institution was established by the elected government – Bhutan Media Council. Council was shut later due to lack of funding while BMF continued to be funded.

and the lack of independent oversight mechanisms. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) released a country report in May 2024, warning that Bhutan’s media sector is being “hollowed out” due to financial instability and declining journalistic independence.

Domestically, media advocacy groups have called for reforms to improve transparency and protect journalists from undue influence. The Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA) has been urged to adopt stronger safeguards, including mandatory conflict-of-interest declarations and clearer separation between editorial and sponsored content.

### ***Travel and Migration***

Migration rights in Bhutan have been a subject of increasing concern. Economic challenges and labour market instability have driven a big number of Bhutanese to seek opportunities abroad. While Bhutan has historically maintained strict immigration and emigration policies, the period between January 2023 and December 2024 saw a surge in outward migration, raising questions about labour rights, economic security, and the government's response to migration trends.

Bhutan has witnessed a sharp increase in migration rates, particularly among young professionals and skilled workers. *The Bhutanese* reported that the number of Bhutanese migrating abroad rose to over 5,000 per month in early 2023, compared to fewer than 500 per month before the COVID-19 pandemic (Dema, 2024). This trend has been attributed to rising unemployment, limited private-sector job opportunities, and dissatisfaction with wage structures.

The World Bank’s report on Bhutan’s labour market (World Bank, 2024) highlighted several key issues contributing to migration, including weak employment quality outside the public sector, lack of job security, and a preference for government jobs over private-sector employment. Many Bhutanese workers, particularly in urban areas, lack formal contracts, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and uncertain working conditions

in private sector. We shall discuss more about labour rights in separate section.

Bhutan's legal framework governing migration remains restrictive, with stringent visa policies and limited protections for migrant workers. The country does not have a comprehensive migration rights policy, and Bhutanese citizens seeking employment abroad often face bureaucratic hurdles. There's widespread concerns about brain drain (Dorji & Hosoe, 2025), particularly as skilled professionals leave for better opportunities in Australia, Canada, and the Middle East.

In response to the rising migration trend, Ministry of Labor and Human Resources introduced new guidelines in mid-2023 to regulate overseas employment. These guidelines aim to ensure that Bhutanese workers receive fair wages and legal protections while working abroad. However, critics argue that the policies do not adequately address the root causes of migration, such as domestic employment instability and wage disparities.

There are restrictions on freedom of movement in Bhutan, particularly concerning political dissidents and ethnic minorities. While Bhutanese citizens generally enjoy the right to travel, reports indicate that certain groups—especially those from the *Lhotshampa* community—face difficulties in obtaining travel documents and citizenship recognition.

Bhutan enforces strict travel regulations, particularly for international visitors. The Ministry of Finance issued a notification on updated travel rules in February 2024, removing the mandatory travel insurance requirement for tourists (Department of Immigration, 2024).

Bhutan continues to enforce the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF) for tourists, which was introduced in 2022. The fee is set at USD 200 per person per night, aimed at promoting high-value, low-impact tourism. In April 2024, the government announced an SDF waiver for up to 24 hours for visitors to border towns such as Samtse, Phuentsholing, Gelephu, and

Samdrup Jongkhar to facilitate short-term visits to boosts local economies (Ministry of Finance, 2024).

Bhutan has introduced new visa categories for business travellers and long-term visitors. The Department of Immigration has streamlined the visa application process, allowing online submissions for tour operators and business professionals.

The Immigration Rules and Regulations (2023) specify that non-Bhutanese individuals must obtain work permits through an official recommending authority. Foreign workers are [required to register](#) with the Department of Immigration, and their permits are subject to renewal based on employment status.

The government has also imposed restrictions on dependent permits, limiting the ability of foreign workers to bring family members to Bhutan unless they meet specific criteria. Additionally, Bhutanese citizens who marry foreign nationals must undergo a [lengthy approval process](#) before their spouses can obtain residency (Bhutan Travel, 2024).

In July 2024, Bhutan introduced new labour migration policies aimed at regulating the influx of foreign workers. The policy mandates that all foreign employees must undergo background verification and obtain clearance from the Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Employment before securing a work permit.

Bhutan has strengthened its border security measures, increased surveillance along key entry points. Reports indicate that Bhutanese authorities have deported over 200 undocumented migrants in 2023 and 2024, citing violations of immigration laws (Bhutan Travel, 2024).

Bhutan has implemented biometric verification systems at major border crossings to track visitor movements and prevent illegal entry. The government has also increased penalties for individuals found violating visa and residency regulations.

### ***Statelessness and Citizenship***

Statelessness remains an issue in Bhutan. According to a *Nationality For All*, Bhutan continues to deny citizenship to thousands of individuals of Nepali origin, many of whom were expelled in the 1990s (Nationality for All, 2024). The report highlights that Bhutanese authorities have systematically excluded ethnic minorities from nationality rights, citing concerns over national identity and cultural preservation. There are still thousands of *Lhotskampas* in the country who have been denied citizenship. A small number of them have been given the citizenship in recent years.

The US Department of State's 2023 Human Rights Report notes that Bhutanese law allows individuals to obtain citizenship after residing in the country for 15 years. However, many stateless individuals face bureaucratic hurdles, including difficulties in proving continuous residence and meeting language proficiency requirements.

Discrimination against stateless individuals extends beyond legal barriers. Reports from Amnesty International (AI, 2023) indicate that ethnic minorities face challenges in accessing education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. The CEDAW Committee (2023) raised concerns in October 2023 about the lack of political participation among ethnic minority women, recommending measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination.

The Bhutanese government has taken some steps to address statelessness, but progress remains slow. In March 2024, the government announced a National Citizenship Verification Program, aimed at reviewing citizenship applications from long-term residents and collecting biometric data such as fingerprints and photographs of the citizens. However, human rights organisations have criticised the program for its lack of transparency and restrictive eligibility criteria (US Department of State, 2023).

Official government data indicates that approximately 1,200 individuals (Department of Civil Registration and Census, 2024) received Bhutanese citizenship between January 2023 and December 2024. However, reports

suggest that the majority of these individuals were northern Bhutanese, with only a small fraction belonging to the *Lhotsampa* community, a large section which remain stateless for years.

The issue of statelessness in Bhutan has drawn international attention, with human rights organisations urging Bhutan to adopt more inclusive policies. The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has repeatedly called on Bhutan to implement nationality determination procedures that align with international human rights standards (OHCHR, 2024).

### ***Freedom of Association and Assembly***

Bhutan witnessed several incidents related to restrictions on freedom of association and assembly within the monitoring period. While the Bhutanese constitution guarantees these rights, there were interference by authorities, particularly concerning political gatherings, labour movements, and civil society activities. The government has justified these restrictions under national security and public order concerns, but critics argue that such measures disproportionately target opposition groups, activists, and independent organisations.

The Constitution of Bhutan (2008) guarantees the right to peaceful assembly and association under Article 7, which states that ‘a Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech, opinion, and expression, including freedom of the press, and the right to freedom of association’. However, these rights are subject to limitations imposed by the government, particularly concerning political activities and civil society organisations.

The Civil Society Organisations Act (2007) regulates the formation and operation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Bhutan. The Civil Society Organisations Authority (CSOA) oversees the registration and functioning of NGOs, but the government has used bureaucratic hurdles to delay or deny registration for organisations advocating for human rights and political reform.

The Bhutanese government has maintained strict regulations on political activities, limiting the ability of opposition groups and activists to organise public demonstrations. Rally and demonstrations are banned.

In 2023, during the first round of National Assembly elections, media reports indicated that opposition parties faced difficulties in organising campaign events. Several candidates reported bureaucratic delays in obtaining permissions for public meetings (Kuensel, 2023), limiting their ability to engage with voters. The ECB claimed to have provided all parties were given equal opportunities, but opposition leaders argued that restrictions disproportionately affected their campaigns.

CSOs faced increasing scrutiny, with reports of government-imposed restrictions on their operations. They can't hold public forum where critical voices against the government can be raised.

NGOs advocating for labour rights and environmental protection faced difficulties in renewing their registrations. Bureaucratic delays and unclear legal requirements hindered their ability to operate effectively, raising concerns about the government's commitment to civil society engagement.

Bhutan does not have strong legal protections for labour unions, and workers attempting to organise have faced challenges. Any attempts to form a labour union to negotiate better wages and working conditions are intervened and workers warned workers that unauthorised union activities could lead to legal consequences. Workers' collective bargaining rights were severely restrained, even though the law allows to form union with the participation of at least 12 employees from single workplace.

### ***Freedom of Religions***

Bhutan's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but there ongoing restrictions on religious minorities. While Buddhism is recognised as the country's 'spiritual heritage,' religious institutions are required to remain 'above politics,' and laws restrict speech that promotes enmity among religious groups. Religious organisations must obtain licenses to hold public

gatherings, and unregistered groups face limitations in property ownership, fundraising, and outreach activities.

Christian groups in Bhutan continue to face challenges in obtaining official recognition. No churches have received state recognition, meaning Christian worship gatherings remain technically illegal. Christian communities have reported difficulties in acquiring burial plots, as there is no formal governmental process for securing land for religious purposes. Some Buddhist monks have pressured Christian converts to return to Buddhism, citing concerns about preserving Bhutanese cultural harmony.

Hindu communities, primarily composed of ethnic Nepali Bhutanese, also face restrictions in practicing their faith openly. While Hindu temples exist, public Hindu religious events require government approval, limiting their ability to organise freely. Hindus also face difficulties in obtaining registration of religious organisation or state support for public events or establishing a new temple.

Under Bhutan's National Security Act (1992), it is considered treason to speak against the king, people, or country. This law has been used to suppress religious dissent, particularly among converts to Christianity. The Penal Code (Amendment) Act of Bhutan (2011) criminalises 'compelling others to belong to another faith' through coercion or inducement, but the terms remain vaguely defined, allowing authorities to restrict religious conversions if this was to convert to Buddhist. Converting to Buddhism is not considered proselytising.

## **DISCRIMINATION AND ABUSES IN SOCIETY**

### ***Women and Girls***

Women continue to face significant barriers in political participation, economic empowerment, and social inclusion. While the country has made progress in improving women's access to education and healthcare, gender disparities persist in leadership roles, wage equality, and legal protections. The country's ranking in the Global Gender Gap Index (WEF, 2024) remains low, primarily due to limited political representation and structural inequalities in governance and employment.

Bhutan ratified the CEDAW in 1981, making it the first international human rights treaty the country adopted. However, despite this commitment, gender-based discrimination remains prevalent in various sectors. The UN Committee on the CEDAW has repeatedly raised concerns about gender stereotyping and the lack of affirmative measures to promote women's political representation.

Women's representation in Bhutan's political sphere remains disproportionately low. In the National Council elections held in April 2023, only one woman was elected. The National Assembly elections in January 2024 saw fewer than 10 per cent of candidates being women, highlighting the structural barriers that discourage female participation in governance. Following latest parliamentary elections, less than 7 per cent of parliamentary seats were held by women. National Assembly has only two elected female members (Lhamo, 2024).

The CEDAW Committee has urged Bhutan to introduce gender quotas to increase women's representation in political bodies. However, Bhutanese policymakers have yet to implement such measures. Societal expectations often prioritise domestic responsibilities over political engagement, limiting women's ability to pursue leadership roles. The National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) has advocated for policy reforms to encourage female participation in governance, but progress remains slow. The government is reluctant to improve women empowerment.

Women continue to experience economic inequalities, particularly in employment opportunities and wage distribution. Gender disparities in economic participation remain significant too. Bhutan's Gender Gap Index score of 0.634 (WEF, 2024) ranks it 103rd out of 146 countries, with political empowerment being the [weakest dimension](#).

Structural and cultural norms obstruct full realisation of gender equality in the workplace. Women are underrepresented in senior management positions, and gender-based wage gaps persist across industries. Additionally, women spend significantly more time on unpaid domestic labour compared to men, further limiting their [economic independence](#).

Gender-based violence remains a critical issue. Even though latest data is not available, UN Women Data Hub reported that in 2018, 8.6 per cent of women aged 15–49 reported experiencing physical or sexual violence by a current or former partner in the previous 12 months. The NCWC launched initiatives to combat gender-based violence, including awareness campaigns and legal reforms. However, enforcement mechanisms remain weak, and survivors often face social stigma when seeking justice.

The Domestic Violence Prevention Act of Bhutan (2013) provides legal protections for victims, but gaps in implementation hinder its effectiveness. Reports indicate that many cases of domestic violence go unreported due to fear of retaliation, lack of institutional support or social stigma to incarcerate vulnerable women and girls.

### ***Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights***

Bhutan has made significant strides in economic development and social welfare over the past few decades, yet gaps remain in ensuring equitable access to economic, social, and cultural rights for all citizens. Vulnerable populations—including persons with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and economically disadvantaged groups—continue to face systemic barriers in accessing social protection programs. The absence of a comprehensive

social protection policy exacerbates these challenges, leaving many without adequate support.

In June 2023, the National Assembly adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), marking a step toward recognising the rights of persons with disabilities. However, Bhutan included four reservations, limiting the scope of the convention's implementation. These reservations have raised concerns as they restrict the full realisation of disability rights in areas such as accessibility, employment, and legal recognition.

*Economic Rights and Social Protection:* Bhutan's economic policies have focused on sustainable development and Gross National Happiness (GNH), yet economic disparities persist. The country lacks a universal social protection framework, leaving many vulnerable groups without financial security. According to the [\*BTI 2024 Bhutan Country Report\*](#), Bhutan's economic transformation index stands at 5.71 out of 10, indicating moderate progress but highlighting ongoing challenges in market organisation and welfare regimes.

The absence of a structured welfare system disproportionately affects low-income families, informal workers, and rural communities. While Bhutan has implemented targeted social programs, such as free healthcare and education, these initiatives do not fully address economic vulnerabilities. The [\*UNICEF Bhutan Country Office Annual Report 2023\*](#) notes that children and adolescents in Bhutan face significant economic hardships, with 20.7 per cent of all children living in moderate multidimensional poverty.

The government plans to establish a social protection system under the 13th Five-Year Plan (RGOB, 2024). This initiative aims to address pressing welfare issues by integrating social protection mechanisms into government programs by 2029. The plan includes improvements to national life insurance coverage, pension schemes, and emergency response systems, but challenges remain in ensuring universal coverage and addressing gaps in existing policies.

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*Rights of Persons with Disabilities:* The adoption of the UN Convention on the CRPD in June 2023 was a milestone for disability rights in Bhutan. However, the four reservations placed on the convention limit its effectiveness. These reservations pertain to legal capacity, accessibility, employment rights, and independent living, restricting the full implementation of disability protections.

Persons with disabilities in Bhutan face challenges in accessing education, employment, and healthcare. Many public spaces remain inaccessible, and there is a lack of specialised services to support individuals with disabilities. The [\*Amnesty International Bhutan Report 2023\*](#) highlights concerns about the limited scope of disability rights protections and calls for stronger enforcement mechanisms.

National Council of Bhutan in June (2024) reported that approximately 48,000 persons with disabilities live in the country, a significant increase from the 15,567 reported in 2017. Most of these individuals reside in rural areas, where poverty and disability are often interlinked. The report emphasised the need for inclusive education, improved healthcare accessibility, and economic security measures for persons with disabilities.

*LGBTQ+ Rights:* Bhutan decriminalised same-sex relationships in 2021, marking progress in LGBTQ+ rights. However, legal protections for LGBTQ+ individuals remain limited, and discrimination persists in social and institutional settings. The lack of anti-discrimination laws means that LGBTQ+ individuals face barriers in employment, healthcare, and legal recognition.

Social stigma continues to affect LGBTQ+ communities, with many individuals experiencing exclusion from family and community structures. Advocacy groups have called for stronger legal protections and awareness campaigns to promote inclusivity. The *BTI 2024 Bhutan Country Report* notes that while Bhutan does not legally discriminate based on gender or social status, practical inequalities remain.

A report in *The Bhutanese* in August 2023 (Dema, 2023) highlighted ongoing challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, including bullying in schools, lack of representation in media, and workplace discrimination. While Bhutan has made strides in LGBTQ+ rights by repealing Sections 314 and 315 of the Penal Code, further legal protections are needed to ensure equal rights and opportunities.

### ***Child Rights***

Bhutan has made significant progress in child welfare, particularly in reducing child mortality rates and expanding access to education. Despite the progress, there are ongoing concerns regarding violence against children, school dropout rates, substance abuse among minors, and inadequate child protection mechanisms. The UN Child Rights Committee and UNICEF have highlighted key areas where Bhutan needs to strengthen its legal framework and social services to ensure the full realisation of children's rights.

*Violence:* The UN Child Rights Committee's findings on Bhutan, published in May 2024 (OHCHR, 2024), expressed concern about the prevalence of violence against children and a culture of silence and stigma that discourages reporting of such cases. The Committee recommended that Bhutan effectively implement its legal framework to tackle violence against children and ensure that all victims or witnesses of violence have prompt access to child-sensitive interventions and support. The sexual violence against children (Samdrup, 2024; Darjay, 2023; Lhadon, 2024) are on the rise too.

According to the *National Health Survey (2023)*, more than 80 per cent of children aged 1-14 years reported being disciplined using violent methods over the past month, with 73.5 per cent subjected to psychological aggression. The survey also found that 60.1 per cent of children experienced physical punishment, with 18.3 per cent subjected to severe physical punishment, including being hit or slapped on the face, head, or ears.

*Kuensel* and *The Bhutanese* reported child abuse cases, particularly in rural areas, often go unreported due to social stigma and lack of awareness. The

NCWC has been working to improve child protection services, but challenges remain in ensuring timely intervention and legal accountability for perpetrators.

*Substance Abuse:* A *Bhutan Broadcasting Service* report in May 2025 highlighted a concerning rise in drug abuse among students. While student drug arrests have slightly declined, the number of minors abusing narcotic drugs such as cannabis and solvent drugs like thinner has increased. In 2023, more than 470 students were arrested for drug-related offenses, with the number slightly decreasing to 445 in 2024 (Dekar, 2025).

Cannabis remains the most abused drug among students, with nearly 200 cases reported in 2023, increasing to 225 in 2024. Thinner abuse also saw a rise, with 128 cases in 2023 and 129 in 2024. Authorities attribute the trend to the easy availability of these substances and a general lack of awareness among guardians. Schools have emphasised counselling and awareness programs, but the continued abuse of easily accessible substances calls for sustained vigilance and intervention.

*School Dropout:* Bhutan has made significant strides in expanding access to education, but dropout rates remain a concern. The UN Child Rights Committee noted high dropout and repetition rates, particularly among children living in monastic or boarding schools. The Committee urged Bhutan to adopt legislative measures to ensure that primary education is compulsory and to address the root causes of school dropouts.

A report from *UNICEF Bhutan* in 2023 highlighted that 20.7 per cent of the Bhutan children live in moderate multidimensional poverty, which affects their ability to continue schooling. Economic hardship, lack of transportation, and family responsibilities are among the primary reasons children leave school early.

Concerns about disparities in education access were raised in *Asia News Network* in December 2024 (Sharma, 2024), which reported that the government's plan to revive central schools could deepen inequalities

between central and non-central schools. While central schools receive superior facilities and infrastructure, non-central schools rely on districts and village-blocks funding, leading to disparities in learning opportunities. This preferential treatment could demotivate teachers and students in underfunded schools.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2024 aims to address rural-urban disparities in education access. The policy introduces school consolidation into central clusters, offering integrated services from Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) to Grade XII. However, concerns remain about whether the policy will effectively bridge the gap between rural and urban education.

*Child Labour:* While Bhutan has laws prohibiting child labour, enforcement remains inconsistent. Children in rural areas are often engaged in agricultural labour, sometimes at the expense of their education. The government has pledged to strengthen monitoring mechanisms, but gaps remain in identifying and addressing child labour violations.

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## EMPLOYMENT AND WORKERS' RIGHTS

Bhutan's labour laws aim to balance economic growth with worker protections, ensuring fair treatment, safe working conditions, and equitable employment opportunities. Despite these progress, there are ongoing challenges related to workplace safety, wage disparities, labour rights enforcement, and rising unemployment. The government has not taken adequate steps to improve labour conditions, particularly in informal sectors.

*Legal Framework:* Bhutan's labour laws are primarily governed by the Labour and Employment Act of 2007, which outlines fundamental rights for employees, including fair wages, safe working conditions, and protections against unfair dismissal. The Department of Labour under the Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Employment oversees labour regulations and workplace inspections.

According to the *Annual Report for the Financial Year 2023-2024* by the Department of Labour, the government conducted 3,874 workplace inspections to ensure compliance with labour laws. These inspections focused on occupational safety, wage fairness, and adherence to employment contracts. The report highlights efforts to improve mediation processes and enforce labour laws. The ongoing challenges are in addressing worker grievances effectively.

*Rising Unemployment and Migration:* Bhutan has witnessed a sharp increase in migration rates, particularly among young professionals and skilled workers. The number of Bhutanese migrating overseas increase to unexpected level in recent years, particularly post-COVID. This trend has been attributed to rising unemployment, limited private-sector job opportunities, limited quota and criteria in public service jobs and dissatisfaction with wage structures.

There are several key issues contributing to migration, including weak employment quality outside the public sector, lack of job security, and a

preference for government jobs over private-sector employment. Many Bhutanese workers, particularly in urban areas, lack formal contracts, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and uncertain working conditions.

*Workplace Safety and Compliance:* Workplace safety remains a critical concern, particularly in industries such as construction and manufacturing. *Kuensel* reported that workplace accidents increased by 12 per cent in 2023, with many incidents linked to inadequate safety measures and lack of proper training. The government has introduced stricter safety regulations, but enforcement remains inconsistent, especially in smaller businesses and informal sectors.

The Department of Labour's 2023-2024 report noted that occupational health and safety violations accounted for 28 per cent of all labour-related complaints. Workers in hazardous industries have called for better protective equipment and stricter enforcement of safety protocols.

*Wage Concerns:* Bhutan does not have a standardised minimum wage, leading to disparities in earnings across different sectors. Wage inequality remains a significant issue, particularly for workers in agriculture and informal employment. Many employees in these sectors earn below the living wage, making it difficult to sustain basic needs. There is significant [wage disparity](#) between male and female and between regions, according to an undated document from the parliament.

Bhutanese workers earn an average of 400 per day for non-skilled and 500 for skilled per day. But wage disparities persist between urban and rural areas. The government has been urged to introduce a formal minimum wage policy to ensure fair compensation for all workers.

*Union Rights:* Bhutanese law prohibits discrimination in employment for their involvement in unionised activities, or based on their political opinion or social origin. However, workers have faced difficulties in organising labour unions due to restrictive policies. There are no formal labour unions in the country who can collectively represent the workers. Any potential

attempts towards this is likely to result in harsher legal consequences. Bhutan's restrictive labour policies prohibit workers to have formal mechanisms to collective bargaining restricting their ability to negotiate for better pay.

*Foreign Workers:* Bhutan employs a significant number of foreign workers, particularly in construction and hospitality. The government has introduced new regulations to ensure fair treatment of migrant workers, but enforcement remains inconsistent. Foreign workers often face challenges related to contract disputes, wage delays, and lack of legal protections (Dorji, 2023).

The Department of Labour's 2023-2024 report emphasised efforts to improve foreign worker management by advocating labour laws and enhancing mediation efforts. However, there remain needs for stronger oversight to prevent exploitation and ensure fair working conditions for migrant labourers.

## **CRIMES**

According to the Royal Bhutan Police (RBP), crime rates in Bhutan declined in 2024 compared to 2023. In 2024, a total of 2,153 crime cases were recorded, compared to 2,352 cases in 2023. The highest number of criminal activities were reported in Thimphu, followed by Phuentsholing and Gelephu, indicating that urban areas experience higher crime rates due to population density and socio-economic factors.

Substance abuse remained the most reported crime, with 1,512 cases recorded in 2024, showing a slight decrease from 1,571 cases in 2023. Battery, a form of physical assault, accounted for 519 cases in 2024, marking an increase from 491 cases in 2023. Domestic violence incidents also showed a rise, with 428 cases reported in 2024 compared to 415 in 2023. Larceny, or theft of personal property, decreased from 287 cases in 2023 to 259 cases in 2024. Meanwhile, illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances (NDPS), including cannabis, saw a decline, with 243 cases reported in 2024 compared to 322 in 2023.

Despite an overall reduction in crime rates, several offenses showed an increase during the reporting period. Cases of child molestation rose from 21 in 2023 to 39 in 2024, raising concerns about child protection mechanisms. Reports from the NCWC suggest that societal stigma and lack of awareness contribute to underreporting of child abuse cases, making intervention difficult. Voluntary manslaughter cases increased from four in 2023 to twelve in 2024, pointing to rising interpersonal violence. Instances of theft of services also saw a rise, with reports indicating an increase from fifteen cases in 2023 to twenty-three cases in 2024.

Certain crimes saw a decline in 2024, suggesting positive impacts of awareness campaigns and policy interventions. Deceptive practices decreased from 141 cases in 2023 to 98 cases in 2024, likely due to stronger enforcement of consumer protection laws. Reports of rape involving minors above the age of twelve dropped from seventy-six cases in 2023 to fifty-three in 2024. Burglary rates showed a slight decline, decreasing from

219 incidents in 2023 to 202 cases in 2024. Meanwhile, obstruction of lawful authority, a charge typically associated with resistance to law enforcement operations, fell from twenty cases in 2023 to just four cases in 2024, indicating improved community relations with the police.

The RBP credited the rise in reported domestic violence cases to increased public awareness campaigns and improved victim support services. In 2024, the RBP conducted sensitisation programs for 21,596 individuals, including students, law enforcement officers, and community members, compared to 15,556 participants in 2023. These programs focused on domestic violence prevention, drug abuse awareness, and crime reporting mechanisms.

Thimphu, which has historically recorded higher crime rates, saw a reduction in violent crimes due to proactive community engagement efforts. The police department emphasised preventive policing strategies, including increased patrolling in high-risk areas, stricter drug control measures, and enhanced neighbourhood watch programs.

Law enforcement officials and non-governmental organisations, including RENEW, PEMA, and the NCWC, have emphasised the need for a multi-sectoral approach in addressing substance abuse and domestic violence, two of the most pressing issues affecting Bhutanese society. Collaborative programs involving schools, healthcare institutions, and community leaders have been instrumental in raising awareness about crime prevention.

## **DRINKING WATER PROBLEMS**

Bhutan has experienced increasing water shortages due to changing climate patterns, deforestation, and urban expansion. According to the [Water Flagship Program Support Project Report](#) (2024), the country has faced declining water sources, particularly in the districts of Gasa, Punakha, and Tsirang, where climate change has led to reduced rainfall and drying water catchments. The report highlights efforts to develop climate-resilient drinking water supply infrastructure, but implementation challenges persist.

A [study by SNV Bhutan](#) found that more than 50 per cent of residents in Haa and Dagana districts consume unsafe drinking water during the dry seasons. This raises concerns about the effectiveness of water treatment practices. The research emphasised the need for improved filtration systems and behavioural change campaigns to promote safe water consumption.

Water contamination remains a pressing issue, especially in rural areas where households rely on untreated water sources. The *Annual Drinking Water and Quality Surveillance Report*, published by Royal Centres for Disease Control, reveal that many communities lack proper filtration systems, leading to increased cases of waterborne diseases. The report identified bacterial contamination as a major concern, due to inadequate sanitation infrastructure contributing to poor water quality.

In response, the government introduced Water Safety Planning (WSP), aimed at educating communities on safe water practices and improving local water management systems. However, challenges remain in scaling these initiatives nationwide.

*Bhutan Broadcasting Service* reported in February 2023 (Wangda, 2023) raising concerns about water contamination in Thimphu, where residents reported murky and foul-smelling tap water. The Thimphu Municipality acknowledged the issue, attributing it to aging pipelines and sediment buildup in water reservoirs. Efforts were made to flush the system and improve filtration, but residents continued to face water quality issues.

In Punakha, residents faced severe water shortages in early 2023 due to damaged pipelines and insufficient water storage capacity. [Kuensel reported](#) that several villages had to rely on water tankers for daily consumption, raising concerns about long-term sustainability. The local government pledged to expedite pipeline repairs and explore alternative water sources, but progress remained slow due to budget constraints.

The government efforts to improve the drinking water supply continue. In September 2023, Bhutan launched an USD8.9 million (Nu 762m) project supported by the Global Environment Facility's Least Developed Countries Fund (GEF-LDCF) and UNDP to address water shortages and declining water quality. The project, known as [Advancing Climate Resilience of the Water Sector in Bhutan](#), aims to benefit more than 37,000 people in the climate-vulnerable regions of Gasa, Punakha, and Tsirang. The initiative focuses on restoring and managing water catchments, introducing climate-resilient agricultural practices, and promoting resilience in water and irrigation infrastructure.

The government has allocated USD25 million (Nu 2.14b) in co-financing to strengthen water governance and infrastructure. Efforts include the introduction of Payment for Environmental Services (PES), which incentivises farmers to manage water resources sustainably.

The Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport reported that approximately Nu 5 billion had been invested in water projects across Bhutan by the end of 2024. These projects focused on improving water distribution networks, upgrading filtration systems, and expanding access to remote communities. However, implementation delays and logistical challenges have hindered progress in several districts.

## **UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

The fourth cycle of Bhutan's [Universal Periodic Review](#) (UPR) session, held on 6 November 2024 in Geneva. This session was part UPR mechanism through which UN member states undergo a peer review of their human rights records every 4-5 years. Bhutan presented its fourth national report, outlining the progress made since its third UPR cycle in 2019, while also addressing ongoing challenges and new developments.

### ***Comparison with Previous UPR Cycles***

Bhutan's third UPR cycle in 2019 resulted in 220 recommendations, of which Bhutan accepted 157. Many of these recommendations focused on strengthening fundamental rights, enhancing judicial independence, improving gender equality, and expanding civic space. Since then, Bhutan has made notable progress, including public sector reforms, graduation from the UN's Least Developed Countries (LDC) category, and the successful conclusion of its fourth general elections in January 2024. The 13th Five-Year Plan (2024-2029) was introduced as a transformative strategy aimed at quadrupling the income of the bottom 40 per cent of the population by 2030 and significantly increasing GDP per capita.

However, despite these advancements, several challenges remained, leading to renewed recommendations in the 2024 UPR session. Many of the recommendations from 2019 were reiterated, particularly those concerning ratification of key human rights treaties, freedom of expression, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. The 2024 session also introduced new recommendations, reflecting Bhutan's evolving socio-economic landscape and the impact of global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Key Recommendations from the 2024 UPR Session***

During the UPR session, Bhutan received a total of 203 recommendations from reviewing member-states. Bhutan accepted 124 recommendations, partially accepted 11 of them and only noted (declined) 68 of the recommendations.

One of the most significant recommendations made to Bhutan in 2024 was the need to strengthen its legal framework to align more closely with international human rights standards. Several member states urged Bhutan to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which would enhance protections for freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Additionally, there were calls for Bhutan to improve judicial independence, ensuring that all citizens have equal access to justice without discrimination.

Human Rights Watch and FORUM-ASIA underscored Bhutan's failure to address decades of systematic discrimination against *Lhotsampa*. Nepali-language education remains prohibited in schools, depriving communities of cultural expression. Land seized during the 1990s eviction has not been returned or compensated. Over 6,500 Bhutanese refugees remain in limbo in camps in Nepal, with Bhutan offering no plan for voluntary repatriation. The Gelephu Mindfulness City, a flagship development project, is being constructed on land historically owned by evicted *Lhotsampa* families.

Other important issues raised in the UPR was Bhutan's continued imprisonment of peaceful political activists. HRW documented cases of individuals imprisoned since the 1990s under laws that do not meet international standards. Prisoners were convicted without due process, often under broad national security charges or for exercising freedoms of expression and association. Detainees are held in prolonged solitary confinement, many suffer from chronic health issues, and families have been denied visitation rights since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Economic and social development remained a central focus. Bhutan's 13th Five-Year Plan (2024-2029) was widely praised, but member states encouraged Bhutan to implement policies that would reduce economic disparities and strengthen social protection programs. The ambitious goal of quadrupling the income of the bottom 40 per cent of the population by 2030 was supported, with recommendations emphasising the importance of inclusive economic policies that prioritise marginalised communities.

Freedom of expression and civil society engagement were also key areas of concern. Some countries urged Bhutan to expand civic space and allow greater participation of civil society organisations in governance. There were recommendations to reform media laws to ensure press freedom and protect journalists from undue restrictions. Additionally, calls were made to remove barriers to peaceful assembly and association, allowing citizens to engage more freely in political and social discourse.

Bhutan was criticised for its narrow civic space and restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly. The CSOA maintains strict control over registration and funding, stifling independent voices. Defamation remains criminalised, discouraging journalists and activists from engaging in public criticism.

Human Rights Watch and several UN states called for Bhutan to amend vague laws that allow for arbitrary interpretation of dissent as criminal behaviour to improve freedom of expression.

Gender equality and women's rights featured prominently in the discussions. Bhutan was encouraged to strengthen legal protections for women and take more decisive action against gender-based violence. Several member states recommended increasing women's representation in leadership roles and ensuring equal pay across all sectors.

Environmental sustainability and climate action were highlighted as crucial areas for Bhutan's continued development. Given Bhutan's commitment to GNH, recommendations supported sustainable development policies that balance economic growth with environmental conservation. Member states urged Bhutan to enhance its environmental policies, protect biodiversity, and strengthen disaster preparedness and mitigation strategies to address the growing challenges posed by climate change.

Bhutan was appreciated for this achievement in health and education. Bhutan has free and universal primary healthcare and high rates of immunisation.

School enrolments have significantly improved with near gender parity. The education has become more inclusive for children with disabilities. The child and maternal mortality rate reduced.

Bhutan stands tall on environmental leadership. Many countries recognise Bhutan for its carbon-negative initiatives, through constitutional requirements to have at least 60 per cent of the land being forest cover at all times.

Member states in the review session also appreciated Bhutan for expansion of legal aid centres, introduction of specialised family and juvenile courts and launch of e-litigation services, improving access in remote districts.

These successes reflect Bhutan's capacity for progressive governance when aligned with internal priorities and state planning.

### ***Bhutan's Response to the Recommendations***

Bhutan reaffirmed its commitment to human rights and expressed its willingness to work with international partners to implement necessary reforms. The Bhutanese delegation, led by Lyonpo D.N. Dhungyel, Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade, emphasised Bhutan's progress in addressing recommendations from the 2019 UPR cycle and highlighted new initiatives under the 13th Five-Year Plan. Bhutan acknowledged the challenges it faces, particularly in economic development, governance, and environmental sustainability, and sought technical and financial support from the international community to implement the recommendations effectively.

Bhutan accepted recommendations that aligned with its existing development plans, particularly in education, healthcare, digital governance, and environmental protection. However, the government rejected or deflected recommendations deemed politically sensitive—those relating to ethnic discrimination, statelessness, prison conditions, and the

establishment of an independent national human rights institution. The government has pledged to enhance transparency and professionalism in media.

Beneath positive narrative from Bhutan on several recommendations, a different picture emerged through the lens of civil society and international human rights experts. Prominent concerns raised by HRW, Forum-Asia, and GCRPPB, along with numerous UN Member States, focused on the government's continuing marginalisation of ethnic minorities, longstanding statelessness, arbitrary detention, and its refusal to recognise political prisoners or to ratify core human rights treaties.

Despite repeated appeals by UN states and civil society, Bhutan did not accept recommendations calling for restoration of citizenship, repatriation of the refugees, or protection of minority rights.

Bhutan also denied the existence of political prisoners and did not accept recommendation to improve prison oversight. It also declined recommendations to decriminalise defamation or revise laws constraining civic participation.

Bhutan remains one of the few countries without a national human rights institution (NHRI) aligned with the Paris Principles. The HRW and others advocacy groups stressed that this institutional vacuum prevents effective monitoring and limits accountability, particularly in politically sensitive cases. Bhutan declined recommendations calling for the establishment of an NHRI, claiming that existing government structures are sufficient.

The UPR Working Group adopted the final recommendations on 13 November 2024. Bhutan will submit a follow-up report detailing its progress in addressing the concerns raised during the session.

The 2024 UPR of Bhutan unveiled a clear contrast between impressive gains in development and persistent repression in political and civil spheres. While Bhutan has made laudable strides in health, education, and

environmental sustainability, it continues to evade responsibility for ethnic discrimination, political imprisonment, and institutional accountability. Continued denial of its past wrong doing or existing critical issues does not benefit in its international standing. Bhutan must accept the mistakes and work to repair those.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Establish a comprehensive migration policy to safeguard the rights of migrant workers and streamline visa procedures.
- Foster domestic employment growth by increasing investment in private-sector development and job creation initiatives.
- Strengthen child protection laws and intervention frameworks to ensure timely responses to cases of abuse and neglect.
- Implement education reforms aimed at reducing dropout rates and enforcing compulsory primary education.
- Enhance child labour regulations by improving enforcement measures to prevent economic exploitation.
- Expand substance abuse prevention initiatives by integrating school-based counselling programs and awareness campaigns.
- Reinforce labour union protections to safeguard workers' rights to organize and engage in collective bargaining.
- Improve child rehabilitation programs and strengthen protective policies for vulnerable youth affected by abuse.
- Enhance community-led crime prevention efforts to reduce violence and promote public safety.
- Ensure the immediate release of political detainees, guarantee fair trial proceedings, and strengthen judicial oversight mechanisms to prevent arbitrary detention.
- Reform restrictive laws to promote media independence and establish sustainable revenue models for media organizations. Strengthen legal protections for journalists and reinstate an autonomous media council to uphold press freedom.
- Promote gender inclusivity in governance through affirmative action policies that increase women's political representation.
- Strengthen legislative frameworks to prevent gender-based violence and workplace discrimination, ensuring equitable protections for all individuals.

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