

Bhutanese Refugee Women in Nepal: A Continuum of Gender Based Violence

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MSc Violence, Conflicts and Development

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Signature

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Abstract

This paper aims to give an account of gender-based violence among Bhutanese refugee women. It is based on secondary resources and primary research conducted in terms of informal interviews in Nepal. It argues that GBV among Bhutanese women during the ethnic cleansing campaign implemented by the government of Bhutan was part of a broader continuum of violence started in peace time, was exacerbated during the persecution perpetrated by the army and persisted in refugee camps. It also shows that displacement can provide opportunities for changes as refugees are exposed to influences of international aid workers and to ideas of equality and its promotion.

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1. Introduction

Hundreds of thousands Southern Bhutanese of Nepali origins were forced to flee Bhutan at the beginning of the 1990's as a result of the ethnic cleansing campaign implemented by the monarchical government of Bhutan. Among the refugee population who sought protection in Nepal, 50 percent were women and girls. In the past few decades, much research has shown that women are increasingly targeted during armed conflicts or political violence, and systematic acts against women are usually supported by governments and committed by military forces (Ward, 2002:7).

While an increasing amount of research has been conducted on gender based violence (GBV) during times of conflict, very little attention has been given to the lives of the hundreds of thousands of female Bhutanese refugees, some of whom who have been living in camps in Nepal for well over 15 years. To what extent have their experiences paralleled the lives of other refugee women described in the literature on GBV, and in what ways have their ordeals been unique? Other than the conflict itself, what are the broader societal issues that play a role in the mistreatment of refugee women? And how have Bhutanese refugees shown that displacement can, at times, be a means by which women find a voice?

This paper will focus on Bhutanese refugee women and GBV. It will argue that Bhutanese refugee women have been subjected to GBV during the persecution perpetrated by the government as part of a broader continuum of violence (Cockburn,

2004). Violence against Bhutanese women indeed began in peace time, in the form of discrimination and domestic violence. It has been exacerbated during the ethnic conflict campaign as the army attacked women. Subsequently, it has also persisted and worsened in refugee camps.

The paper is based on the study of secondary resources for the general theoretical framework on GBV in peacetime and during conflicts. For the section dealing with specific analyses of Bhutanese women, primary research has also been conducted in terms of informal interviews with women living in Bhutan, women of Bhutanese refugee community and also gathered information through participant observation in 2007 in Nepal.

To begin with, the second chapter will firstly define GBV and secondly will analyse women's status in Bhutan and in Southern Bhutanese society. It will be argued that Southern Bhutanese women have been subjected to multiple levels of discrimination and GBV in both private and public spheres as significant mechanisms to keep power over women's lives and male control over resources (Mehta and Gopalakrishnan, 207:41). The third chapter will focus on GBV during armed conflicts and political violence. After presenting a comparative analyses of GBV and its meanings in different conflict situations, the paper will explore the origin of the Bhutanese refugees crises. Finally, it will concentrate on GBV toward Southern Bhutanese women during the government repression. It will be argued that women have been harassed, abused and raped in order to terrify the community and discourage resistance. The fifth chapter will explore GBV in refugee camps in Nepal. It will be pointed out how women again became victims of discrimination and GBV perpetrated

by their own community and by Nepalese administrators. Therefore violence against women began in peacetime, it has increased during the ethnic conflict, and has persevered in displacement. The last section will attempt to be more optimistic, trying to highlight how displacement can become an opportunity for change and empowerment.

2. Gender Based Violence

2.1 Defining Gender Based Violence

Though the words “sex” and “gender” have been frequently employed with the same connotation, they are rather different in meaning. While “sex” refers to the physical differences between men and women, “gender” is more related to the distinctive social roles carried out by males and females. In Feminist and Gender and Development literature gender relations are seen as power relations. As human relations are based on forms of power and control masculinity is seen as dominant and femininity as subordinate (El Bushra, 2006: 210). Kate Millet, for instance introduced the idea of patriarchy as a system where the power of elders males subordinate women. According to Millet, men’s power over women is exercised in all spheres of life; it is generated through the process of socialization and strengthened by other cultural institutions such as education, religion and further it is preserved by economic exploitation and threat of force (in El Bushra, 2006: 212-215). This view recognises the relationship between men and women, but can limit understanding by defining it solely within the power framework, neglecting other forms of relationship between men and women, as well as ignoring other sources of power such as class and race (Cleaver, 2002).

While the physical differences between males and females are universal, gender roles are the result of social and historical factors. Building upon the diverse roles, GBV is always differentiated from other violence being defined as violence that targets

individuals due to the specific gender role in a society. Most commonly it is male aggression against women although in few cases men are also victims of women perpetrators. Violence against women is today recognized as a major issue on the international human rights agenda and has been defined in Article 1 of the *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women (1993)*, as

Any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

The Declaration addresses three key spheres in which GBV can arise: the family, the community and the State. However, a further sphere of GBV has been added, the economy (Muthien, 2008: 9). Sexual violence is only one variation of GBV which further includes a wide range of violations of women's human rights such as interpersonal domestic violence, psychological violence, sex selective abortion, early or forced marriage, forced prostitution, girl trafficking and harmful cultural practices that irreparably damage girls (Ward, 2003: 8). Such violence is not simply between men and women based on their inherent biological differences but must be viewed in a wider socio-political context. It can be used to make women conform to political norms, capture or distribute economic resources or as a tool to maintain the relations constructed between gender roles (Moser and Clark, 2001).

Since 2001, the Reproductive Health for Refugees Consortium (RHRC) has preferred to include sexual violence under the umbrella of "gender-based violence" in order to recognize the gender elements in all forms of violence against women and girls, whether it is perpetrated through sexual violence or through other means (Ward,

2003: 8). Despite the lack of information on GBV in Bhutan, in part due to a culture of silence and a fear of shame, it can be argued that violence against women exists in the form of sexual harassment, rape or domestic violence. The next section will analyze women's status and GBV in Bhutan society.

2.2 Women's Status and GBV in Bhutan

The small Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan, located among the vast territories of Tibet and India, has developed a fertile and unique cultural heritage whose tradition is deeply steeped in Mahayana Buddhism. Traditionally a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society; it is composed of four main ethnic groups: the ruling *Ngalong*, the *Sarchops*, the *Khengs* and the *Lhotshampas*.¹ The strong desire to preserve its identity led the ruling hereditary monarchy to not open the country to economic development until the 1960's. Until recently most South Asian scholars believed that Bhutan was not going to face ethnic conflicts that occurred in other South Asian countries, but an explosion of violence between the Drukpas ruling elite and the Lhotshmpas led to a policy of deprivation and discrimination toward the population of Nepalese origin and the consequent refugees crises (Upreti, 1996: 52-53). I will analyze the origin of the ethnic conflict in more depth in the following chapter while now I move on the status of women in Bhutan.

¹ The Ngalongs speak the national language, *Dzongkha*, live in north-west, are descendants of Tibetan migrants of the ninth century and they are followers of the Drukpa Kagyuppa sect of Mahayana Buddhism. The Sarchops, Indo-Mongoloid descent, speak Tsangla and inhabit eastern Bhutan. The Khengs live in the central part of Bhutan. They form together a "Drukpa identity group. The Lhotshampas, people with Nepalese origins, although composed by a variety of caste and ethnic groups (Chetri, Gurung, Bahun, Newari, Tamang etc). share the same language and culture and practice mainly Hinduism. They started to move to Bhutan after the Anglo-Bhutanese war of 1864. See Joseph, 1999.

There is a distinct lack of available information on the status of women in Bhutan caused by the King's policy and the scarcity of available research. Furthermore, the variety of traditions, cultures, and religions make Bhutanese society very heterogeneous and consequently women's status varies depending on the ethnic group of origin (Mondal, 2006: 258). Most of the data on women refers mainly to the dominant ethnic community, the Ngalops thus giving little space to other ethnic groups women who are the most vulnerable.

In general women's status looks like to be free and fair. Though, women of different ethnic groups are treated differently. You are lucky if you belong to the ruling group (Harka Chetri, personal interview, August 2008).

The United Nations has defined the status of women in the context of their access to education, economic resources, and political power, as well as their independence in decision-making. According to the literature (i.e. Mondal, 2006, Choden, 1997, Upreti, 1996) when considering the geographical region of Bhutan, Bhutanese women apparently seem to benefit from some sort of parity when compared with the neighbouring countries where discrimination against women is very common. Gender bias and violence against women in South Asia are institutionalized at home, within the community and within the state; depriving females of the fundamental rights to life, health, work, security and locating their status among the lowest in the world (Meetha and Chitra, 2007:46). The cycle of violence begins before birth, unborn girls are killed through sex-selective abortion. Further it is perpetrated through daily beatings, harassment for dowry, verbal abuse, forced marriage, rape, public humiliation, trafficking and so on (ibid).

Bhutanese men and women's roles within society are strongly influenced by their traditions, cultures and religious beliefs. Buddhism was introduced the IIX century and clearly affected the position of women within the society. In fact the exegesis of Buddhist manuscripts has given negative implications on women's position, such as the allegation of inferior birth²: such belief influenced the development of roles within the society. While men used to join the monasteries for religion education or become servants for the ruling King, women were engaged in agriculture activities, textiles or child care (Choden, 1997: 253-254).

The dzongs, traditional seats of religion and government, were naturally considered men's domains where women's presence was restricted. Village households were often headed by 'the mother of the house' (Choden, 1997: 254).

By tradition heads of households and engaged in agriculture, nowadays women are considered to carry a non-subordinate position, they are responsible for preserving the family economy and they are consulted on all major decisions relating to household issues. Customarily Bhutanese women had more say in the family than men, for instance until the recent past women had the authority to expel men from the house if they found them ineffective. In addition, the law of the land does not prohibit women from inheriting; both the matrilineal and patrilineal system co-exist. In particular, Nagolop women used to inherit land, and therefore they tend to play a more central role compared with Sharchop and Lhotshampa community who follow the patrilineal

²Issues regarding women often come from society rather than religious doctrines, per se; it is difficult to pinpoint what Mahayana Buddhism says, exactly, about women's status because there are many Mahayana Buddhists texts from various countries and times. In Mahayana Buddhism, for example, there are contrasting portrayals of women's statuses. There are, for instance, different women deities such as Tara, Saraswati and Dorji Phagmo. The Sutra says "there is no difference between sexes on the road to enlightenment". (Upreti, 1996:53). However reality differs from the ideal. Many folk proverbs locate them in a lower position. According to folk belief women sex is the consequence of past sins; therefore they need to go through painful phases and suffering for nine times before reborn as a man (Wikan, 1996: 282). For a further discussion on Women and Buddhism see Barnes, 1987.

system. The central role still played by women in agriculture is demonstrated by the high percentage of women still taking part in agricultural activities, nearly 62 per cent, whose socio-economic role is widely acknowledged (Mondal, 2006: 260-267, Upreti, 1996: 57-59).

In principle, Bhutanese women and men are considered to have equal status and equal rights in all spheres of life such marriage, divorce, inheritance, credit and employment as Bhutanese law grants the same legal rights to men and women and maintains a gender neutral position in policy implementation. Consequently gender discrimination is claimed not to be a major social problem (ibid). However, in practice Bhutan is a male dominated society and women suffer discrimination at different levels due to forms of indirect gender bias embedded in society. As Harka Ketri confirmed

In one hand law people say that the law of the country is equal to the entire citizen. On the other hand the final decision is given in favor of mostly male gender. Especially while seeking divorce from the torturing husband, women's sentiments are not considered.(...) Sensitive and responsible posts are occupied by the male while women are made to work equally and paid less in the road sites (Harka Ketri, personal interview, August 2008).

The first gender gap is found in the access to education. The fact that Bhutan ranks among the lowest in South Asia in regard to female literacy (23% in 1990), the girls enrolment is lower than boys one, while drop out rate of girls is higher, are clear examples of gender discrimination. Furthermore, the number of women who complete higher education is below the number of their male counterparts (Mondal, 2006:272-73, Upreti, 1996: 53-54). Sonam Choden (personal interview, August 2008) had a university education but she argued that" it was a challenge to convince their parents of her capability" as she was the only daughter.

Women's access to education is constrained by different factors such as security, inaccessibility of schools, gender bias in the curriculum, and lack of women teachers. The pressure of the household, child bearing functions, and the main role in agriculture meant that parents consider investing in education of girls pointless because of the traditional life duties. Therefore, these factors deprived them of opportunities for self-development and without education there cannot be an improvement in women's status. Access to education is in particular denied to the poorest girls who are also often subjected to violence:

Most of the girl children from poor families are made to work in someone's house. They miss the parental love and their family. They are beaten mercilessly and they are made to work as slaves. If there were gender equality, why should girl children be made to work rather than educated? Keeping in mind that in near future those girls are going to be mothers and teachers of the new generation. What can we expect from those poor girls who spent their most precious childhood time working as a slave in someone's house? (Harka Ketri, personal interview, August 2008).

The low level of literacy restrained the process of sensitisation to health issues. In fact women are exposed to greater health risks than men, especially during child birth because of under nourishment, and iodine and vitamin deficiencies. It is a fact that the rate of maternal mortality is one of the highest in the world (Mandal, 2006: 274).

The second gap is found in female participation in political and public offices. Only 0.23 per cent of women hold high authority and 14 per cent are employed in the civil service (Mandal, 2006, Upreti, 1999). The majority of women are concentrated in low paying jobs; they earn less, and about two thirds of their work is unpaid. Though the Government is developing strategies to improve women's lives and has promoted the formation of a National Women's Association of Bhutan (NWAB) in order improve their socio-economic situation, the situation is still unfair.

The third gap that needs to be pointed out is the spread out violence against women in the form of domestic violence, inflicted on girls and women by husbands, fathers, or relatives which exists in a "culture of silence" often perpetrated and hidden. As Sonam Lhaden confirmed:

Though women situation in Bhutan is better than other South Asian countries, abuse on women is not new, it has been there and it is on the rise probably (personal interview, August 2008).

Many cases of gender-based violence remain soundless in the hospital files because victims fear social stigma. A 2006 study conducted by RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture, and Empower Women) in rural and urban Thimphu reveals that 77% of women face domestic violence, 54% suffer emotional abuse and 23% are victims of forced sex. From the beginning of the year till August, 240 cases of domestic violence, 146 cases of interpersonal violence, and 16 assault cases have been registered with the forensic unit of the Thimphu Hospital (Choden, 2008). In addition there has been an increase in the reported cases of sexual harassment and abuse cases in the work place.

To sum up, there are elements indicating that GBV is widespread and occurs within the broader context of gender-based discrimination with regard to access to education, resources, and decision-making power in private and public life. Utilising Galtung³'s idea of structural violence it can be argued that in Bhutan women face structural violence throughout their lives. Indeed women face disadvantages in areas such as education, healthcare and access to jobs. Despite Bhutan claiming not to be a

³ According to Johan Galtung's model, violence is manifested in three key forms: direct and personal violence, structural violence and cultural violence. Personal violence presupposes the presence of an actor who commits such violence. Structural violence does not have specific actors but violence is considered to be embedded in the structures of society. It includes poverty, starvation and gender discrimination. Cultural violence is perpetrated through cultures and is used to justify direct or structural violence. A victim blamed in a rape case or a husband who considers himself fully entitled to rape his wife are clear examples of cultural violence (Galtung, 1985).

patriarchal society, men have the economic power and access to better positions. In this way, it can be argued that gender discrimination is used to maintain male control over resources.

2.3 Southern Bhutanese Women's Status

The purpose of this sub-section is to highlight the prevalence of discrimination already existing among the Southern Bhutanese community which will afterward continue in refugee camps in a much more aggravated form. Indeed from the perspective of refugees, the ethnic culture is displayed in every day life (Giles, 1999: 90) thus gender bias existing in Southern Bhutanese society will be reflected in refugee camps' daily life.

Where the Bhutanese refugee crisis surfaced there was a lack of knowledge about the ethnic Nepalese population. Scholars had mainly focused on the Tibetan Bhutanese culture and in the official account of Bhutanese history the Nepalese group was, in practice, non-existent. The general belief of various authors has been that the Lhotshampa population was culturally very similar to the Nepali; however there are differences (Hutt, 2003: 8-9). The Nepalese started to migrate from East Nepal to Southern Bhutan, at the beginning of the twentieth century, encouraged by Bhutanese Government to settle down in an inhospitable area which was malarial and thickly forested. The majority of these people were of three different castes, the higher Bahun and Chetris, which followed Hinduism and spoke Nepali, and the Mongoloid (Sherpas, Gurungs, Tamangs, Newari) who practice Buddhism or Hinduism and originally spoke a Tibeto.-Burman language.

The status of Women among the Lhotshampa⁴ is very much influenced by the rigid patriarchal Nepali society, therefore women's status is low. Male and female identities are shaped by patriarchal ideology which has a direct effect on the power relation between them in both the public and private spheres. Men exercise control over the lives of their family and women in all areas. This pattern of male dominance is embedded within society and influences the cultural norms and the division of labour. Men play a major role in decision making, while by tradition women's tasks have been confined to the home, i.e. cooking, cleaning, child bearing etc. (Mondal, 2006: 267). Furthermore most of the Lhotshampa ethnic group follow the patrilineal system of inheritance, thus passing land from father to son. Female land ownership is found in the case of divorce and widowhood or where a family had a daughter but no sons. Usually land is divided among sons and in wealthy families with large property daughters may receive a portion, but it hardly ever happens (ibid). Girls, unless they belong to the higher caste, have been discouraged from attending school, in part because school education was not considered to be useful for girls who were supposed to work in farming activities and in part due to superstitions such as the one that says that educated girls may become witches (Hutt, 2003: 243).

According to the HRW report on GBV among Bhutanese refugee women (2003: 26-27), many women had experienced domestic violence before their arrival in the camps which frequently ended with their husbands leaving them and taking a second wife,

⁴ The Dzongkha term Lhotshamps was introduced in the 1980's by the Government to describe the Nepali speaking population. It was later used to indicate the Southern Nepalese population who are still in the Kingdom and distinguish them from the *Ngalops* or anti-nationals who left Bhutan after persecution and the implementation of oppressive policies (Hutt, 2003).

causing economic hardship and abandonment. This is just one example of a Southern Bhutanese women who have been victims of domestic violence:

“My husband started rooming around. I had nothing to say for his change of attitude Abuse, I was beaten several times and was asked to leave the house in the middle of the night but imagine how I managed to stay back home. The days were gloomy and the nights were harsh. I lack the words to explain, that my husband then left me with two children (...) Being a sufferer, I have much experience of suffering women. I came in contact with many other women like me and do try to console myself. We have formed a small group of women committed to help those victimized women within the community. Every woman should have their own source of income like job and other business because we never know when the mind of male will change.” (Harcha Chetri, personal interview August 2008).

After having addressed the presence of discrimination and GBV within Bhutanese society and in Southern Bhutan, next chapter will focus on GBV during time of armed conflicts and political violence, thus will be focus on the violence perpetrated on Southern Bhutanese women in the context of the ethnic conflict.

3. GBV, Armed Conflicts and Political Violence

3.1 Comparative Analyses in Different Conflict Situations

In the last fifty years, several changes have occurred in the character of the way in which war is carried out, from conflicts between professional armies to those where civilians are increasingly the object of violent attacks rather than being involved by mistake. It is a fact that the majority of fatalities worldwide are civilians, residents or displaced people, even women and children at home are not “spatially immune to the waging of war” (Giles, 2001: 4). In particular, intentional acts against women include sexual violence, enforced sterilization, and female infanticide, systematically encouraged by governments and perpetrated by armies (Slim 2007).

History has demonstrated that gender-based violence has been a common feature of armed conflicts and has been seldom punished, always minimised or hidden (Koenig, 1994:131). Nevertheless with the recent rise of women’s rights movements, more refined legal instruments and institutions committed to reinforcing human rights have recognised and condemned sexual violence perpetrated in periods of armed conflict, whether with the aim of destabilizing the population, carrying out ethnic cleansing or supplying soldiers with sexual service (Ward, 2003: 8). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women adopted by the UN General Assembly 1993, for instance, restated the important responsibility of governments to protect women. Furthermore the ICC adopted the Rome Statute which has included

acts such as rape, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization committed systematically against civilians in war as crimes against humanity (Ward, 2003: 9-10).

Scholars and activists alike have highlighted the gender specific nature of violence in times of conflict. Feminist researchers on ethnic nationalism, for instance, have focused on the role of gender in the constitution of ethnic-national ideologies. Yuval-Davis (1989, 1997) pointed out that in the context of violent ethnic conflicts women represent a “symbolic site of nationalism”, they are regarded, in relation to their role of biological reproducer, as the guardian of culture values, while men as protectors of women. Women are linked with men’s honour and their ‘purity’ assumes a great importance. For instance, during the Partition of India, raped women’s bodies, were inscribed with nationalistic slogans and their violation was interpreted as the violation of the nation to which they belonged. Their bodies became a battlefield to assess political power. Men would have also killed them, the so called ‘honour killings’, in order to prevent them to become a permanent symbol of humiliation (Butalia, 2001: 99-104). Enloe (1989) illustrate that while decision making and economic power belongs primarily to men, politics are played out on women bodies in various ways. Women have been made ideological battlegrounds on which to assert a territorial claim, therefore there is great cultural significance to raping enemy women and gender violence has become a very specific strategy of ethnic cleansing or warfare. This attitude toward women is quiet common in the entire sub-continent and is largely similar in Southern Bhutanese society.

Evidence to demonstrate that women are severely affected during armed conflicts is overwhelming, however it has been argued that the role division of males as

perpetrators and females as victims of sexual abuse and forced abduction is too simplistic and impedes a deep understanding of the complex roles and responsibilities among women and men (Moser and Clark, 2001: 27).

Seifert has argued that rape can be explained in three different way. First, using the 'booty principle', women as rewards after the victory. Second, as a way to humiliate the enemy and to show that the men have been incapable of protecting their women. Third, as a way to increase solidarity and male bonding (in Cockburn, 2001: 22). Rape is a way to capture economic resources and is related to the embedded patriarchal construction of women as property. In Yugoslavia it was used to terrorize the population and humiliate the community, but women had to carry the shame because they embodied the failure of men to protect them. In Bosnia it was used to impregnate Muslim women thus preventing them reproducing for their own community (Turshen 2001: 59). In Rwanda it was used to terrorise communities and discourage resistance as well being part of the 'war booty' women were kidnapped for labour as cooks or cleaners as well as sex slaves. Rape in Darfur is being used to displace and evict people from land that is rich in oil by the government of Sudan and private security firms. In this context rape is a systematic way to remove an obstacle to a resource and disperse entire villages in a society that already makes women vulnerable and unable to assert any right (Macklin, 2001). Some of the above features can be spotted during the political violence perpetrated by the Bhutanese government toward the population of Nepalese origins population and will be discussed in depth in section three.

A number of different authors have shown that GBV takes place not only before, during, and after conflict, but also in the absence of war therefore it is argued that GBV is present in all stages and thus embedded in society (e.g. Giles and Hyndman 2004, Cockburn 2004). Cockburn (2004) conceptualized gender violence as a continuum, not limited only to armed conflicts but existing in everyday domestic life. Indeed that women are most likely to be assaulted by known men, particularly by sexual partners, has been one of the most undeniable discoveries of feminist research on sexual violence in the domestic space. The previous chapter has already shown that Bhutanese women were subjected to domestic violence prior to the ethnic cleansing campaign and political violence. Cockburn argues that sites of gendered violence - the battlefield and the household- are intertwined. Giles (2004) as well argues that GBV in war does not exist isolated in time or location, but is part of a process which it can be linked to gender relations in the households. Kelly (2000: 46), considering sexual violence as one of the most successful forms of patriarchal control aimed at constraining women's lives, argues that sexual violence, as the State's planned tactic during war and political oppression, is linked in a many ways to sexual violence in other different contexts. Indeed, feminist analyses of gender violence in war refuse to identify it as dissimilar from GBV in other contexts such as the domestic one. Building on these arguments it can be said that violence against Bhutanese during the government persecution was not isolated but part of a broad process.

Although different factors have been proposed to distinguish sex violence in armed conflict from other contexts, Kelly argues that very few survive a deeper analysis. The first distinction that can be highlighted is that violence in conflict is perpetrated through group actions where all participate and encourage. Second, rape in war is

public whereas the latter occurs in private. Third, during military conflicts, men's violence is more ritualized (Kelly, 2001: 65). The violence women experience is not confined only to conventionally defined armed conflict, indeed GBV is also common in situations of political violence and repression. Moser and Clark (2001a) define political violence, as "the commission of violent acts motivated by a desire, conscious or unconscious, to obtain or maintain political power" (p. 36), therefore political violence is about the gaining or maintenance of power through violent acts. This phenomenon can be found among for instance tyrannical regimes, extremist religious and ethnic groups that aim to challenge and destabilize the "Other" in order to achieve or maintain hegemony over a region, state or a group. The causes and motivations for perpetrating acts of political violence are several and require individual analysis in light of the historical context of each particular situation. Gender based violence in Bhutan has been perpetrated in the context of the ethnic cleansing campaign and political violence committed by the government in order to control the threat of Nepali origin population, maintain the status quo and the distinctive Bhutanese way of life. The next section will analyze the origin of the ethnic conflict and the consequent refugee crises while GBV will be the subject of the last section.

3.2 The Genesis of Bhutanese refugee Crises

Due to its largely uncontaminated natural environment and cultural heritage, Bhutan has been referred to as *the Last Shangri-la*.⁵ The Kingdom of Bhutan was established in 1907 and since then has been ruled by the Wangchucks hereditary monarchy. Four

⁵Shangri-La is a harmonious and mystical place, a happy land isolated from the outside world, described in the novel 'Last Horizon' by James Hilton. The word reminds as well the concept of Shambala, a mystical place in the Buddhist tradition. (Hutt, 2003:281)

main ethnic groups composed the Bhutanese population: the ruling *Ngalong*, the *Sarchops*, the *Khengs* and the *Lhotshampas*⁶. Its profound sense of identity and the strong desire to preserve such identity caused Bhutan to remain distant from the outside world. According to the kingdom's newspaper, the *Kuensel*, problems occur when the outside world interferes. Tourists may jeopardize Bhutanese culture and are therefore regulated. The anti-national (Ngolops)⁷ protestors, who manifested against the laws restricting the rights of people of Nepalese origin, are also believed to threaten the nation's sovereignty (Hutt, 1997:155).

According to Joseph, the ethnic conflict in Bhutan is rooted in the modernization and development process started under King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1952-72). Between 1953-72 the introduction of the Five Year plans and other reforms such as land reforms, the abolishment of slavery, along with the establishment of the National Assembly, the Royal advisory council, the High Court and the Council of Ministers, brought about socio-political and economic changes without disturbing the traditional hegemony. However, new social forces came to light: among people of Nepali origins who were the main labour force for the implementation of the Five Years plans, a well-educated and entrepreneurial middle class politically active in promoting democratic values emerged, questioning the existing power structures (Joseph, 1999: 85-90).

⁶ See note 1 in the previous chapter.

⁷ The term Ngolops (Tib, Rebel) appeared in the Bhutanese discourse in 1989 first to refer to those oppositional activists who have gathered in West Bengal. From 1990 the term was referred to those who took part to public demonstrations against the implementation of the new discriminatory policies (i.e. Citizen Act, Driglam Namzhag Code). See Hutt, 2003: 211-215, and Hutt, 1996.

Furthermore, in the 1970s and 1980s, the increasing Nepalese population⁸ started to be perceived by the State as a menace to Bhutan's culture. Such a fear was also intensified by the exposure and proximity to political events taking place in India and Nepal such as the integration of Sikkim⁹ with India in 1975, the Gorkhaland¹⁰ movement in the bordering Indian state of West Bengal and the process of democratization in Nepal. These fears influenced the evolution of Bhutanese policies. Therefore, the paranoia of the Ngalongs, further increased due to the events mentioned above, lead to the implementation of a series of oppressive citizenship laws and "Bhutanization" policies aimed to discriminate and exclude the ethnic Nepalese of Southern Bhutan. The Citizenship Acts of 1977 and 1985 limited the conditions under which Bhutanese citizenship could be obtained, including several provisions permitting the revocation of citizenship. For instance, it assumed that citizenship could only be acquired if both parents were Bhutanese; it required evidence of domicile before December 1958 and fluency and literacy in the national language, criteria not easy to be fulfilled. A Marriage Act promulgated in 1980 also made it difficult for a non-Bhutanese to marry a Bhutanese.¹¹

The government began imposing the 1985 Act through a 1988 census, where strict standards were set and consequently 100,000 Lhotsampas were categorized as illegal immigrants. The census was implemented only in southern Bhutan, with arbitrary

⁸ The exact number of Nepalese in Southern Bhutan is a controversial issue. According to official sources out off 600,000 people of Nepali origin are the 3-30 per cent while the Ngalong the 20 per cent. In contrast Nepali sources consider people of Nepali origin to be between the 45-50 percent (Joseph, 1999: 194).

⁹ Sikkim was ruled by a Tibetan descendant Buddhist king, the Chogyal, till 1975. It then amalgamate with India as direct consequence of the emergence of Nepali speaking majority in the Kingdom (Hutt, 2003: 193-204).

¹⁰ Between May 1986 and December 1998 the Gorkhaland National Liberation Front (GNLF) was involved in violent activities in order to obtain the creation of a separate state of Gorkhaland within the framework of the Indian Constitution. Such violence convinced Bhutanese government that political activities should be prevented in Southern Bhutan (See Hutt, 2003: 193-204)

¹¹ See Hutt, 2003 and Lee, 1998 for discussions on citizens Acts.

classifications designed to push the Nepali-speaking community out of Bhutan. People have been divided into seven categories (F1-F7),¹² and except those belonging to F1 (with land tax receipts from 1958), the rest were targeted for eviction. In addition, the “One Nation, One People” policy was introduced in 1989 which implemented a code of traditional *Drukpa* dress and etiquette called *Driglam Namzhag*¹³. This code put many constraints on the cultural life of people of Nepali origins who were forced to wear Ngalong dress and learn the Dzongkha language, as Nepali was banned and removed from the school curriculum (Hutt ,1996, Hutt, 2005 , Bhutan, 1993).

In the early 1990s, Nepalese activists¹⁴ belonging to The People’s Forum for Human Rights, The Bhutan People’s Party and the Students Union of Bhutan organized demonstrations against the policies of the Government, calling for civil and cultural rights and for a multi-party democracy. After the unprecedented mass demonstrations, those people supposedly linked with the protests were taken to prison, raped, and tortured by the army without trial. Government forces also destroyed houses, intimidated people and forced many ethnic Nepalese to leave, making them sign a “voluntary emigration” form. After the demonstration further restrictions were introduced to damage the economy of the Southern community such as the one for

¹² F1- Genuine Bhutanese, F2- Returned Migrants F3- Drop out cases, F4- A non-national women married to a Bhutanese man, F5- A non-national man married to a Bhutanese woman, F6- Adoption cases, F7- Non-national i.e. immigrants and illegal settlers. (Hutt, 1996: 403).

¹³ Driglam Namzha include not only outward behaviour such a dress and forms of greeting but also inner attitude such respect for elders, for authority, sense of discipline and responsibility (See Hutt, 2003: 160-192)

¹⁴ Among the activists it is worth to mention Tek Nath Rizal, a Lhotshampa member of the Royal Advisory Council who attempted to warn the King about the growing discomfort about the census in the South. After being arrested for a brief period and released, he fled to Nepal were became a focal point for dissident activists. Arrested by Nepalese in November 1989 he was handed to the Bhutanese police and remained in prison till 1999. He was adopted by Amnesty International as Prisoner of Conscience.

transportation of commodities and the introduction of “No Objection Certificate” to demonstrate a non involvement or relationship with dissidents (Hutt, 2003: 211-227) to be obtained in order to go to school or get a job.

The increasing number of revocations of citizenship, the repressive measures against suspected dissidents and their families, and indeed against Southern Bhutanese in general, lead to the flight of refugees to Nepal during 1991 with a flow of up to 600 per day in mid-1992. By the end of that year, 80,000 were sheltering in UNHCR-administered camps and the numbers have risen to 100,000 (Kharat, 2004).

3.3 GBV during the Ethnic Cleansing Campaign

Bhutan became a signatory of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women on August 1981. Nevertheless, forgetting its commitment toward improving the status of these women, the Government of Bhutan has hit and targeted women’s vulnerability during the ethnic cleansing campaign. Some examples of such violations are the inter-ethnic marriage policy, the 1985 Citizenship Act, the Census of 1988 and “One Nation One People Policy” (Acharya, 2000: 11-12). Under the One-Nation-One People Policy, the culture of Northern Bhutanese elite has been enforced on Southern Bhutanese women, obliging them to adopt the Northern Bhutanese dress culture.¹⁵ They were deprived of their right to wear saris, their traditional dress, their jewels during marriage, and they were force to cut their hair, as long hair was considered an important peculiarity of Nepalese culture.

¹⁵ The women’s garment, called Kira means literally ‘wrapping cloth’, is a piece of cloth which wraps the body from the neck to the ankles, folded twice across the front and include a belt. In addition both women and men usually wear a scarf, kabne, over the left shoulder. It is usually made of white material which alludes to the white cotton garment worn by Buddhist (Hutt, 2003 :167-70).

Especially for women, it was difficult to wear the Northern dress suitable for cool temperature in the hot tropical south. Under the Driglam Namzha, perceived as an instruments of oppression, women risked being fined, harassed, and imprisoned for wearing the traditional Nepali costume. For instance, Hutt reports the case of an elderly women who had been scolded by the police for not dressing properly; she had been hit twice and forced to stand beside the road in the sun for three hours before being allowed to go home (Hutt, 2003: 165-169). Such examples are clear infringements of the Nepalese community's right to practice their own customs.

The policy promoted by the Bhutanese Government was deliberately aimed to spread an atmosphere of insecurity and fear, involving a withholding of State protection in order to encourage people to leave. (Hutt, 2003:210). When the army settled in the South, women had been requested to cook and wash for the troops, where they could have been exposed to sexual abuse. In these circumstances, GBV can be regarded as a way to control Bhutanese women's skills and productive powers as well as a way to humiliate women in their role as carriers of Nepali culture. At this time rumours of women being abused spread, fathers and husbands could have not contemplated endangering women in this way and rather than send "their women" to face violence and then carry such humiliation, entire households started to flee. Ganga Neupane, a 32-year-old refugee, confirmed that when she was 11, her family sent her to study in India in order to avoid being exposed to sexual violence.

'After the demonstrations, the schools in Southern Bhutan were closed. My school became a detention centre. The Army started arresting the suspected heads of households and they were tortured in detention centres. At the same time, the women were abused. Some of the women even gave birth. For many of these women, their husbands were either in prison or had left the country and army can easily use their power against women. At this time my parents sent me to India to study because even

though I was just 11 years old, the army officers used to ask for girls. My parents were scared.' (Ganga Neupane, personal interview, Kathmandu, March, 2007).

While men suspected of carrying 'anti-national' sympathies were imprisoned or forced to leave the country out of fear, their family members, in particular women, have claimed to have been harassed by the security forces or by the voluntary militia recruited by the Government. Security forces during the night used to loot homes, intimidate and rape women. According to Shangri-la without Human Right (2000), there are 156 victims of rape in refugee camps and eight women were raped to death. Several women have also been arrested, deprived of food and water, made to witness the abuse and the humiliation of family members, and been sexually abused by soldiers in group actions.

In 1991 in Bhutan, the army came and said I had to entertain them, but I didn't. Seventeen people came and threatened me. They said, "You should be the wife of seventeen of us," and tried to pull me, to take me to the military base. I said I'd rather die. They hit me on the chest with the butt of the rifle and I shouted and fell. They said they'd come the next day. I couldn't stay in my house, I had two small children. We hid in the goat shed, in the pit where all the goat manure was. The next day they came at 9 p.m. They searched the house and threw away all the foodstuffs. The next night we decided to leave. I don't want to explain my journey out of Bhutan because I will cry (in HRW report, 2003: 19).

Therefore it can be argued that a policy of terror has been planned in order to target the Bhutanese population. As it has been shown previously, women are constantly targeted during armed conflicts or political violence and Southern Bhutanese women were not an exception. Women, symbols of the cultural values of Southern Bhutanese society, had been harassed, abused and raped in order to terrorize the community and to discourage resistance. Southern Bhutanese women, as it has been highlighted in the previous chapter, were already victims of discrimination and structural violence perpetrated by partners in the domestic sphere as a way to maintain male control over

resources. Therefore, they have been subjected to a continuum of violence which will go on and will be exacerbated during the experience of displacement. Such experiences will be discussed in the next chapter.

4. GBV in Nepalese Refugee Camps

4.1 Becoming refugees

My family was compelled to leave Bhutan, it was not voluntary. My Father was arrested and released in poor health, army used to come home and ask for grown up daughters. It is a known fact that spending refugee life for too long is very miserable. Slowly, our ramshackle huts of bamboo having thatch roof and plastic are turning into our permanent homes. There are no means to come into normal state as we have a disturbed mind, indefinite exile life and no future to our aims and desires. When I was a schooling girl in Bhutan I used to tell my teachers that I would become a lawyer in future. Who must be held responsible to make me unable to fulfil my aim? (Ganga Neupane, SARC meeting, Kathmandu 23 March 2007).

Ganga is one of the Bhutanese women who have left Bhutan in 1990 and have lived as refugee in Nepal for 17 years. According to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, the term 'refugee' applies to any person who is "outside the country of his nationality" because of "a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reason of race religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, and due to this fear is" unable to return." Considering the vagueness of refugee definition, women could be arguably included in the broad definition of '*membership of a particular social group*' (Fitzpatrick 1996: 238), therefore it describe perfectly the status of Bhutanese women who fled to Nepal for fear of persecution.

Norms and procedures during crises have been institutionalized by the "International refugee regime" which comprises the Government of the country of origin, the host

state, UNHCR, Donors and NGOs (Matlou, 1999: 129). Although Nepal¹⁶ has not signed the 1951 UN Convention concerning the status of refugees, since 1990, it has assisted more than 100,000 refugees who have left Bhutan to seek asylum¹⁷. Due to the increasing number of arrivals, in September 1991, the Government of Nepal officially invited UNHCR to coordinate emergency relief. Local NGO's and INGO's such as Caritas, Save The Children UK, WFP, Oxfam, Nepal Red Cross and CVICT (Centre for the Victims of Torture) started working as implementing partners providing difference services: food, water, shelter, health, education, protection (Reilly 1994:13). There are seven Bhutanese refugee camps in the district of Jhapa and Morang and 50 per cent of the refugee population is female (Baral, 1996, Kharat, 2004). When first established in the early 1990's the camps were considered by the UHNCR a model of good practice because of the high levels of refugee participation, good infrastructure and good education system. However, a combination of factors as

¹⁶ The Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal does not distinguish among citizens and foreigners in regard to basic rights. Therefore, refugees equally benefit from some basic rights such as the Right to Criminal Justice, the Rights against Preventive Detention, the Right to Education and Culture, the Right to Religion, the Right against Exploitation, the Right to Privacy and the Constitutional Remedy Right and have access to Court. Furthermore, International Human Rights Law and other international instruments guarantee a minimum of legal provision for refugee protection: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), The Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), The Child Rights Convention (CRC), The Convention against Torture (CAT), The International Convention for Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), The International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), The International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). See Kharat, 2004:84-88.

¹⁷ The governments of Nepal and Bhutan have met sixteen times at ministerial level to discuss a resolution to the crisis, with no concrete results. Bhutan has opposed Nepal's request for international engagement in the talks, India has maintained neutral stance assuming the crises to be a bi-lateral issue between the two governments. Finally, in 2000, under increasing pressure from the international community Bhutan and Nepal agree to start a pilot screening of the refugees in one of the camps, to establish their status.(Hutt, 2005). In the absence of any progress towards a resolution the US government offered in 2006 to resettle 60,000 Bhutanese refugees. The resettlement process started in 2008. By May 31, 2008, 828 refugees had been settled: 673 in the US, and the remaining in Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Norway. The resettlement is being managed by the International Organisation for Migrations (www.bhutanese-refugees.com).

well as the protraction of the Bhutanese refugee crises leads to a dramatic decrease of the quality of living conditions in recent years.

While during crises most refugees are women and children, the aid industry is regarded to be male-dominated and policies have not often considered the interest of women (Matlou, 1999: 131). In refugee camps, men usually are more educated and more likely to speak English; therefore, their male colleagues typically seem to see this situation as natural and make use of refugee males as culture mediators, translators and facilitators. Nevertheless, women's issues are increasingly gaining more attention among policy makers and practitioners. Turner has noted that in the last 15 years, they have become central in UNHCR policy (Turner, 2000:8). The 1991 Guideline on the Protection of Women, providing a framework to ensure that refugee women may benefit of assistances and protection, is the result of the increasing interest in women's issues. Although basic principles of gender equality have been incorporated in policies, what happens in the camps often reinforces unequal gender relation (Matlou, 1991: 135). The case of Bhutanese refugees women is an example of inequality among women and men. The following section will highlight how women have been victims once again of discrimination and GBV which had started in peace time before the government repression, had increased during the ethnic campaign and will persist in displacement in a continuum .

4.2 Discrimination and GBV in Refugees Camps

Refugee camps should be considered safe havens from gender based violence perpetrated during conflicts, but often, unfortunately, they become again “sites of violence” (Giles, 1999: 90-94), and Bhutanese refugees camps are not an exception. Such violence is part of a process which can be linked to gender relations and women’s historical definition within their own culture and households. It is has been argued that gender relations in refugee camps are influenced by traditional ideologies and are shaped by memories of home as a domestic sphere of patriarchal family. Thinking of the refugee camps as home, they can be viewed as a space composed by women and children where refugee men and foreigners exercise power (ibid). Having previously argued that Southern Bhutanese culture is a patriarchal male dominated society, such background is reflected also within the camps where women are bound to remain within the periphery of household activities, in danger of experiencing dependency on men in the process of getting aid, domestic violence in patriarchal homes, and public invisibility (Martin, 2003: 53).

In addition to discrimination within their own community since their arrivals in the camps, Bhutanese refugee women have been under the protection and the legal system of the Nepal government. Nepal is strongly influenced by Hindu orthodoxy and maintains a patriarchal socio-cultural system where women have a lower and subordinate position and are subjected to various forms of violence and discriminations. Women in Nepal face not only social and cultural bias but they are also discriminated by laws, which strongly protect the patriarchal domination of men. (Sangruola and Pathak, 2002: 23). The existing law, for instance, deprives women of

the right of property. While a son is heir from birth, a daughter is entitled to inherit parental property only if unmarried and when she is 35 years old. If she gets married, she has to return it. Discrimination against women in the law also includes the impossibility for a mother to transfer the citizenship to her child, recognizing the father to be the unique source of nationality. According to Nepalese Constitution a child “whose father is a citizen of Nepal at the birth of the child shall be a citizen of Nepal by descent” (Sangruola and Pathak, 2002:28). Further discriminations includes legalized polygeny and the impossibility for a women to retain custody of their children if they remarry.

Camp administrators, with reference to Nepalese justice, have therefore applied discriminatory practices toward Bhutanese refugee women during the registration process. According to Human Right Watch report (2003:29-34) the government of Nepal discriminated on the basis of sex not registering children who have a refugee mother but a non-refugee father. Women who have been victims of abuses by the army and got pregnant, for instance, were unable to register their children, depriving them not only to the right of accessing aid packages such as food, clothes and nursery school, but making them stateless and not entitled for the verification process.

UNHCR considers registration an essential condition to guarantee legal and physical protection to refugees. It allows each individual to access assistance and to be independently identified, particularly important for women and children. The guidelines on Protection of Refugees Women emphasizes that “providing registration cards to all adult refugees, male and female, is necessary to assurance equal access to resources (in Martin, 2003:19). However, in Bhutanese refugees camps, UNHCR and

the Government of Nepal have implemented a registration policy based on cards under the name of male-headed households, therefore failing to ensure that all refugee women have independent access to their full entitlement of aid. Being dependent on others for economic survival makes Bhutanese women extremely vulnerable to exploitation.

El Bushra and Fish (2004: 8) note that “GBV is widespread in displaced communities and takes many forms including domestic violence, trafficking, enforced prostitution and sexual violence”. GBV incidents have been occurring among Bhutanese refugees, numerous cases of women severely beaten by their husband have been reported by HRW report (2003: 36). According to Martin (2003:54) the frustration experienced by men for not be able to carry their socio-economic roles can lead often to an aggressive behaviour toward women and an increase of family tension and violence. Therefore frustration caused for instance by unemployment and the subsequent increase in use of alcohol have created within the Bhutanese refugees community an environment which have fostered GBV. In addition, women who experienced domestic violence were unable to obtain safety because of the discriminatory refugee registration procedures, which obliged them to share humanitarian aid with their husband. As long as these women have been not able to obtain their own ratio cards and separate housing, they have been constricted to be reliant on perpetrators of violence or had to find refuge with other family members in already overcrowded huts (Ganga Neupane, personal interview, March 2007).

Perpetrators of violence against displaced women include not only partners and military, but also humanitarian aid workers. Sadly, sexual exploitation among girl

refugees was brought to international attention after a study on Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone carried out by UNHCR and Save The Children in 2002. Numerous examples of sexual exploitation were reported, perpetrated by male national staff employed by UNHCR and NGO's, who traded humanitarian aid in change of sex with girl. (Martin, 2003: 48) Bhutanese refugees camps have been as well theatre of sexual exploitation, including rape and sexual harassment committed by Nepalese government officers, waged by UNHCR and refugees, most of them teachers, working for NGO's implementing partners. According to HRW report (2003: 36) in 2002, eighteen cases of sexual abuse have been addressed.

In the field, efforts to tackle sexual violence have taken the form of legal assistance, counselling and prevention. Legal assistance to victims of GBV including legal counseling and legal representation has been provided by UNHCR and lawyers. UNHCR also focused on preventive activities trying to bring a change in the attitudes of male refugees promoting respect for women and bringing perpetrators to justice. Nevertheless, HRW report (2003:40) pointed out that the camp management committees and counselling board did not have the suitable training, gender understanding, or legal authority to solve gender-based violence cases. Domestic violence situations have been always sorted out by discharging women's complaints and recommending them to "live happily with their husbands", arresting husbands just for a night as punishment. In such cases, refugee women and girls have been doubly victimized—first by their attacker, and second by the minimal response carried out by the government of Nepal and UNHCR, leaving refugee women with few options for finding safety and often reinforcing cycles of abuse. In addition, the social stigma restrained many women from reporting domestic violence as community tended to

treat differently and reject women who incurred in those incidents (Ganga, Neupane, personal interview, March 2007).

Though this paper has been argued that discrimination and GBV among Bhutanese women persists from peace time to displacement in a continuum, the concluding section will try to be more optimistic and highlight the opportunity of changes women can experience during displacement.

4.3 Displacement as an Opportunity for Change?

During armed conflicts and displacement, women and men often assume new roles and tasks. Communities bring their own cultures to the camps' settings (McSpadden and Moussa, 1996: 218). Southern Bhutanese culture is very similar to Nepalese culture; in such a male dominated society, it is very difficult for women to raise their voices. As it has been pointed out by P. D.¹⁸, "women are forced to follow men's decisions which are considered to be the only possible opinion" (Personal interview, March 2007). Women in the camps were not included in any kind of decision-making; they have been often ignored, discouraged from expressing their opinions, especially in public. Many women's lives are bitter, and education and jobs opportunities are preferably given to males, and the society makes them feel inferior (Ganga Neupane, personal interview, August, 2008).

However, it is also true that refugees have to deal with new *modus vivendi*, and build new identities in order to develop a sense of belonging to the new host society. This situation can cause social disorder and changes in family relations, as power

¹⁸ This informer does not want her name to be mentioned in the paper.

hierarchies are sometimes challenged (Mc Lean, 1999:6). In addition, refugees are exposed to the influences of international aid workers, to ideas of equality and its promotion which, together with the implementation of programmes trying to include women in camp governance, can help bring changes and improvements.

Thus, despite all the difficulties, limitations and discrimination, some positive examples of improvement and steps toward empowerment can be addressed. First, many women, thanks to the help of Oxfam, have learnt to read and write and then have become social activists (Acharya, 2000:13). Ganga Neupane managed to study at university level and then become a volunteer teacher. She has also been strongly committed to raising women's awareness and has founded, along with a colleague "Voice for Change", the only independent women's organization in the camps which advocates for women's rights. Voice for Change has given women the opportunity to meet together, to express themselves and defend themselves against violence. It has helped to raise women's voices and has created a platform for discussion, for sharing experiences, and finding solutions (P. D, personal interview, March 2007). In addition, they both conduct a radio program named Saranartha Sarokar (Refugee Concern) broadcasted in Jhapa and Morang camps. It aims to highlight the issues, inform women and help them understand their own problems. Their advocacy activities have been sustained by local NGOs such as TEW Nepal, by The Global Fund for Women and INGOs. It can be argued that external influences of international aid workers have clearly created the terrain for changes through programs which include training, information support services for local women and public education events.

Ganga's effort of creating a positive environment for women has been constrained by

some political organizations such as the Bhutan People Party which has continuously tried to limit their initiatives by putting restrictions during the implementation of activities in the camps and by menacing and terrorizing members; particularly, during public talks, in the presence of a BBC reporter or UNHCR personnel people have often menaced women for talking. They were also denied to take part in the indefinite sit-in protest in front of the UN building coordinated by the Bhutanese Refugee Repatriation Representative committee seeking UN help to resolve refugee problems. On this occasion in 2006, an influential Bhutanese leader¹⁹ endangered their personal security and also attempted to violate women's right of expression and participation. Though political organizations silenced women's voices, with the help of NGOs she continued to implement her communication campaign trying to make women understand that they are not less valuable than men and violence against women is intolerable. She has helped to break a bit of the culture of silence and it can be considered a great achievement. However, changes in attitudes are difficult to reach. While programs and policies can support these changes, the attitudes can be modified only by people, and it is a very long process.

Another instance of potential positive change in terms of GBV among Bhutanese refugees occurred in early 2008, when several countries, including the United States, Australia, Canada, Norway and New Zealand, began to accept tens of thousands of Bhutanese refugees. Since the bilateral talks between Nepal and Bhutan have ended in no solution for the refugee crises, as Ganga Neupane has said, "to guarantee the normal and secure lives of women, only third country resettlement would help" (SARC meeting, March 2007). In March 2008, resettlement started for 828 refugees.

¹⁹ Ganga Neupane does not want me to mention the name of the leader

Each refugee will be sponsored by NGOs that will provide housing, food, clothes, English classes and help to search for jobs. GBV cases have been given the priority for resettlement. Migration scholars have shown that the concept of men's role as breadwinner sometimes becomes inadequate after immigration. Migrant women often become the new provider for the families because they adapt better and are more willing to accept any kind of job in order to help the family (Matsouka and Sorenson 1999). Gender relations within the families are challenged and empowerment and opportunities accompany difficulty and losses. While resettlement is, for many, not the ideal solution--many women would prefer to see empowerment within their own country-- it could present more opportunities for women and further steps toward empowerment. Because the resettlement phase is in its infancy, we will have to wait a few more years to properly assess how resettlement affects these Bhutanese women's lives.

5. Conclusion

The present paper has discussed GBV experienced by female Bhutanese refugees who have been living in Nepal for more than 15 years. Building on Cockburn's argument, it has been emphasized that a continuum of violence has persisted in the lives of Bhutanese women from one phase to the next: in peace time, during the ethnic conflict and in displacement. All of the mentioned phases of violence have been analysed in each chapter in depth. The paper has pointed out that violence against Bhutanese women was not only a manifestation of the political violence/ethnic conflict, but was present in domestic life before and worsened in refugee camps, bred by frustration, boredom, unemployment and so on, perpetrated not only by the Bhutanese community but also by the Nepalese society in the form of discrimination. It has been addressed that violence against women is about unequal power relations is instrumental in men maintaining power over resources.

To answer the questions posed at the beginning, firstly it can be said that Bhutanese women had to experience some issues common to refugee women in any geographic areas, such as discrimination, domestic violence, and dependency on male heads of the household, though every context needs to be distinguished by its own characteristics depending on the cultural, historical and political context. Refugees fleeing was in this case caused by political violence and persecution. While in a war context the women refugee population is usually superior, due to loss of men in the battlefield, women may have to become breadwinners which encourages a changing of roles within the community. In the case of Bhutanese refugees the percentage of displaced women and men was very similar and Bhutanese women did not have this

opportunity for change. Secondly, their experience of violence is not exclusively the consequence of the ethnic conflict but also the reflex of gender biases embedded in patriarchal societies. Thirdly, as has been demonstrated in the last section of chapter three, displacement has been also an opportunity to bring about change, though cultural attitudes are difficult to transform and it requires time, some small steps have been accomplished. Furthermore the recent events in the resolution of the Bhutanese crises, as the third country resettlement started in March 2008, may be a further opportunity for women to improve their status. This, however, remains beyond the scope of the present research.

APPENDIX A

Focus questions for Ganga Neupane e P.D.

- 1) Can you please tell me something about you, your education, your family, your life before you left Bhutan?
- 2) How would you describe yourself?
- 3) How long have you been a refugee for?
- 4) Did you feel to have had the same opportunities as males in the camps?
- 5) What barriers did you meet?
- 6) How do you feel to be perceived by males?
- 7) What was the most difficult aspect of camp life?
- 8) In which activities were you involved?
- 9) Do you have any examples of discrimination or abuse toward women in the camps?
- 10) Who made decisions in your household?
- 11) Did you perceived any change in the way your family made decisions?
- 12) How have you been affected by your time in the camps?
- 13) Have you been involved in activities of women empowerment? What did you do? What difficulties did you face?
- 14) How abused women have been perceived by the community?

Focus questions for Harka Ketri and Sonam Laden

- 1) Can you please something about you, your education and your job?
- 2) What is your ethnic group?
- 3) How would you describe yourself?
- 4) Did you feel to have had the same opportunities (i.e. education, jobs) as males?
- 5) How do you feel to be perceived by males?
- 6) Do you feel there is discrimination toward women in Bhutan or it is more common among a particular ethnic group?
- 7) Did you experience discrimination?
- 8) What do you think about women situation in Bhutan?
- 9) Do you have any examples of discrimination or abuse toward women?
- 10) What advices will you give to women in order to bridge the gap?
- 11) Is domestic violence widespread and reported or it exists in a culture of silence?

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Interviews

P. D (The informer want to be anonymous) is Bhutanese refugee women who has been living in Nepal for 16 years.

Ganga Neupane is a Bhutanese refugee, founder of “Voice for Change” and committed in advocate women’s right in the camps.

Harka Ketri is a Southern Bhutanese women who still leaves in Bhutan .

Sonam Lhaden is working for Solution Exchange, UN in Thimpu.

