

# Mourning the 15th Anniversary of Crisis: The Plight of Bhutanese Refugee Women and Children

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## ABSTRACT

*Few women are involved in combat, but many become the victims of political upheavals. The imbroglio of over 130,000 Bhutanese refugees of Nepali origin (Lhotshampa), is a case to point. As the government of Bhutan began to forcibly evict so-called 'illegal immigrants' in the late 1980s, Lhotshampa women, as well as children, were reportedly beaten, raped, or often killed by the Bhutanese security forces. A number of articles and books have appeared concerning the Lhotshampa refugees crisis as a whole. However, a study specifically devoted to the plight of the refugee women and children is yet to be conducted. In the wake of several rape and child abuse cases in the refugees camps in Nepal, this article looks at the vulnerabilities experienced by Lhotshampa women and children, particularly since the early 1990s.*

**Keywords:** abuse; Bhutanese refugees; children; violence; women

## Introduction

The small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan has approximately one million inhabitants, consisting of three broad ethnolinguistic groups (Hutt, 1995, 1996; Saul, 2000; cf. Mathew, 1999: 22–4). First, the practitioners of Lamaist Buddhism and Dzongkha-speaking (an offshoot of the Tibetan language) Ngalung people, including the monarchy, form about 18 per cent of the total population and occupy northwestern Bhutan. Second, the Sarchhop group of Indo-Burmese origin living in the eastern region, constitute around 33 per cent of Bhutan's total inhabitants. They also practice a Lamaist form of Buddhism and speak a similar language that is spoken in the Arunachal state of India. Ngalung and Sarchhop peoples are often collectively called 'Drukpas'. However, it is clear that 'Drukpa' is used without a clear delineation of whom the term applies to. In fact, the word 'Bhutanese' is associated almost exclusively with the 'Ngalung' ruling group. Third, Nepali-speaking Lhotshampa people, who are largely Hindus, make up about 43 per cent of Bhutan's total population (Tsering, 1990: 70; Dhakal and Strawn, 1994: 46–57; Giri, 1999: 19). It should be noted that statistics concerning Bhutan's total inhabitants are highly contested, as are the

Bhutanese government's discriminatory national policies, including the expulsion of the Lhotshampa people, which are surprisingly supported by most scholars writing about the Bhutanese affairs. Mathew (1999: 126–64) argues that the Thimphu-based government introduced 'Lhotshampa' as a new term in the mid-1980s, which was intended to underplay the dynamics of the ethnic consciousness of the Nepali and to create a distinction between the Bhutanese of Nepali origin and the people of Nepalese ethnicity in India. Its usage in this research, however, is simply meant to avoid confusion for those readers who might be less familiar with the complex ethno-cultural construction of South Asia (Giri, 2003).

Since the 19th century, the British Indian government reportedly encouraged Nepali immigration to Bhutan as a counterpoise to northern influences of Bhutanese, especially Tibetans (and Chinese), sweeping down to the plains. In the 20th century, Bhutan's authorities allowed Nepali settlements in certain parts of southern Bhutan to work in commercial logging and clearing of land (Sinha, 1998; 2001: 19–25, 163–9). Citizenship to the Lhotshampa people was finally granted in 1958. Although Bhutan (falsely) presents itself as the last Himalayan Buddhist Shangri-La, its multi-ethnic, -lingual and -religious society was living in relative harmony. This situation began to suddenly change in 1988 when the Bhutanese government officially announced the so-called *driglamnamja* (or one nation, one people) straightjacket. This version of national identity exclusively revolves around the Ngalung mongoloid race, practising Drukpa Kagyu Mahayana Buddhism and wearing *gho* (a knee-length robe for men) and *kira* (ankle-length dress for women). However, the policy has to be followed by all ethnic groups, irrespective of their culture and religion. Those who wear anything other than *gho* and *kira*, for instance, face around €3.30 fine, which amounts to three days wages (Giri, 2003).

As a handful of the Lhotshampa people initiated protests, asking the Thimphu-based central government to reconsider its unduly discriminatory policies, Bhutanese bureaucracy and police not only resorted to strong-arm methods, but also branded the demonstrators as anti-nationals, which became an eventual 'justification' for the expulsion of almost one sixth of its population (Giri, 2003, 2004). Since the early 1990s, over 100,000 Lhotshampa refugees have languished in the seven United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (or UNHCR) monitored camps in the Jhapa and Morang districts of eastern Nepal. As many as 50,000 others are scattered elsewhere in Nepal and India. Moreover, several hundred Sarchhop refugees and asylum-seekers, who primarily fled Bhutan in 1996 and 1997, have reportedly arrived in eastern Nepal (Amnesty International, 1998; Mathew, 1999: 146–7; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2003: 20).

For a vast majority of Lhotshampa people, February 2005 'officially' marked the fifteenth year of their livelihood crisis in the refugee camps. The plight of Lhotshampa women and children, who were reportedly abused,

beaten, or gang raped by Bhutanese security forces prior to their expulsion from Bhutan, remains to be thoroughly investigated. Among others, Hutt (1996, 1997a, 1997b, 2003, 2005), Giri (1999, 2003, 2004), Mathew (1999), Sinha (1998, 2001) and Rizal (2004), have continued to write about the Bhutanese refugees from socio-political and anthropological traditions, using varieties of academic terminologies. Likewise, Lee (1998), Saul (2000) and Laczó (2003) have focused on the violation of international laws and the basic human rights of Lhotshampa people by Bhutan's government. Most recently, Quigley (2004) attempted to analyse 'what should be done internationally to promote progress and help both Bhutan and Nepal determine the ultimate fate of the refugees' (p. 187). Unfortunately, with an exception of Hutt (2003) in Chapter 14 of his book,<sup>1</sup> none of the authors have specifically focused on Bhutanese refugee women and children. Recently, moreover, serious concerns have been raised concerning abuse or rape of women, girls and children by the local authorities and aid workers, as well as spiralling domestic violence perpetrated by their male counterparts. Filling this gap is the prime objective of this article, which draws information from the author's own interviews with several refugees working outside of their camps in September 2003. Due to the extremely volatile political situation in Nepal, travelling around the country and conducting studies in the Bhutanese refugee camps was extremely difficult. Therefore, much of the information on the plight of women and children is also drawn from various human rights reports. Before going into detail, however, it is essential to discuss how Nepali people ended up in Bhutan and how the Bhutanese government managed to evict them back to Nepal.

### **Nepali Immigration to Bhutan**

By the early 19th century, Nepal's eastward military conquest had driven out rulers of Sikkim and controlled the area – hence standing in the way of British imperial interest in South Asia. For this reason, British India launched a protracted war in 1814, and eventually forced Nepal to sign the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816, which not only fixed the physical extent of what is now Nepal, but also the expansionist adventure of Nepali rulers was completely halted. However, drawing of national boundaries failed to stop the movement of Nepali people eastwards into Sikkim, Darjeeling, Assam and finally to Bhutan. This process was given impetus towards the end of the 19th century by the expansion of Gorkha<sup>2</sup> regiments in the British Indian army, and by the need for labour in the tea gardens in northeastern India. Today, an estimate ranging from two to six million people of Nepali origin are settled in various parts of India, particularly in the northeast. Likewise, an estimated 150–160,000 Lhotshampa people were living in southwestern Bhutan by the 1960s. Today, their population figure stands at about 370,000 (Dhakal and Strawn, 1994: 113–20; Hutt, 1997b: 122–3; Hall, 2001: 132–3; Sinha, 2001: 145–55).

### **State of Bhutan and its Minorities**

While a battle-weary chieftain and an aide of British imperial interests, Ugyen Wangchuck, succeeded to establish the hereditary monarchy in 1907 by exiling the family of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal,<sup>3</sup> the institution of the ancestral kingdom seemed to have not offered the new royal family satisfactory complacency of its stand. The reasons behind this are reported to be their guilt of being the usurper of the Shabdrung family, and also the presence of minority people of Nepali origin being potentially volatile to transmit the democratic idea from their kith and kin in the neighbouring India, after it became an independent country in 1947. The dilemma of the Bhutanese state is that there could be hardly any economic and infrastructural development without the labour of Lhotshampa people, who have transformed its inhospitable southern plain into the national economic powerhouse it is today. At the same time, it has always been cautious to guard the absolute economic and political power against any form of change (Dhakal and Strawn, 1994: 62–6; Das, 1996: 10–13; Sinha, 2001: 28–31). As such, application of simultaneous discriminatory provisions was probably thought to curtail the politico-economic and socio-cultural leverage of Bhutanese minorities (Giri, 2003, 2004). Of the several anti-minority policies initiated by the successive king-led governments of Bhutan, especially since the 1970s, a number of them are given priority here because they are directly related to women and children.

From the very beginning, the king-led Bhutanese authorities attempted to assimilate various ethnic groups into Ngalung cultural etiquette through religious conversion or intermarriages. However, it did not succeed a complete absorption of larger ethno-cultural groups, like Sarchhop and especially the religio-culturally distinct Lhotshampa people. After assuming the throne in 1972, the present King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck,<sup>4</sup> initiated the National Council for Social and Cultural Promotion to create a homogenous Bhutanese identity, based on Ngalung cultural norms and values. By offering small cash incentives for inter-ethnic marriages, the Bhutanese government specifically targeted the Lhotshampa population with the aim of altering the demographic structure of Bhutan in favour of Ngalung group. When the operation of coercive assimilation programs failed, reinforcing insecurity to the autocratic Ngalung authority, it rapidly unfolded into direct racist policies of deprivation, denationalization and virtual confiscation of Lhotshampa citizenship rights through the enactment of several discriminatory laws and other exclusionary policies. In particular, the Marriage Act of 1977 and the Citizenship Act of 1985 were purposely designed to reduce the number of Lhotshampa population and ultimately their mass eviction (Hutt, 1996; Giri, 1999; Sinha, 2001). If discriminatory domination can survive only when it is reproduced through multiple acts of exclusion, inferiorization or marginalization, this is exactly what Ngalung rulers attempted to achieve (Giri, 2004).

### **Arbitrary Marriage Act, Citizenship Act and Census**

In 1958, Bhutan tried to define its citizenship for the first time through the inauguration of the Nationality Law, which prescribed ‘fatherhood’ as the criteria for granting citizenship. However, the 1985 Act repealed the 1958 Law and dictated ‘parenthood’ as the sole criteria for granting citizenship. This further authorized that neither women nor men, even if they were issued citizenship under the 1958 Law, marrying outside (i.e., non-Bhutanese) could qualify for citizenship and neither would their children. The 1985 Act demanded that all people living in Bhutan must produce official documents dated prior to 1958 in order to qualify for citizenship. Many have argued that it is an impossible requirement for illiterate people to produce such documents from 30 years ago, and an equally preposterous demand of the Ngalung government, who only recently adopted administrative procedures to organize its society (see Giri, 2003; HRW, 2003: 17–18). Despite everything, the Thimphu-based government simultaneously started a census that was principally targeted against the Lhotshampa community to effectively implement the discriminatory/racist Marriage and Citizenship Acts. As noted earlier, any condemnation against the Bhutanese government’s policies is likely to outrage many pro-Bhutan scholars. For instance, while severely criticizing the author’s previous publication, Michael Rutland has gone as far as to write ‘. . . readers . . . are welcome to contact me by email . . . if they wish for a more detailed response’ (see Letters to the Editor, 2005: 210). The Bhutanese refugee is a complex issue, but the bias has by and large to do with scholars’ affinity towards Buddhism for which the Bhutanese government has tried to represent the country as the ‘last bastion’ of Buddhist kingdom whereas Lhotshampa people in its south are largely Hindus.

The Marriage Act of 1977 has been implemented extremely rigidly against the Lhotshampa group. There are no restrictions on all the Ngalung bureaucrats who have western or Chinese wives. For example, Ugyen Tshering, a Ngalung who married an Italian woman in the early 1980s, has recently been promoted as Foreign Secretary. In addition, the Ngalung authorities do not have any issues with foreigners. For example, a former *Los Angeles Times* editor and a staunch supporter to Bhutan’s government, who married a Bhutanese woman, moved to Thimphu in the mid-1990s. At the same time, the Act prescribes a number of selective criteria against the wives of Lhotshampa men from Nepal or India and their children, who are treated at par with aliens seeking for naturalization (Dhakal and Strawn, 1994: 154–5).

Ngalung conservatives also began to use euphemisms to transmit their unpleasant diatribes against ‘over-foreignization’ of their country (cf. Dhakal and Strawn, 1994: 463–79). For this purpose, a census was carried out in 1988, primarily focusing on Lhotshampa-dominated districts of southern Bhutan that dwindled Bhutan’s total population to a mere 600,000. Surprisingly, Bhutan has admitted recently that a significant discrepancy exists between the population

total reported by the United Nations standing at 1.9 million in 1997, and that provided by the Bhutanese government to be 636,499 for 1998 (Bhutan Human Development Report, 2000: 57–8). It also reported that there were 11,442 marriages between Bhutanese and non-Bhutanese during the preceding 20 years. Because of scrapping the 1958 Law, more than 60,000 children born out these marriages from 1958 to 1988 were declared non-citizens. Likewise, while depriving their right to nationality to more than 10,000 Lhotshampa wives, the census further claimed that it discovered a total of 103,000 ‘illegal’ and ‘economic migrants’ in the country (Dhakal and Strawn, 1994: 533–4; Hall, 2001: 139; cf. Hutt, 1997b: 124).

In short, the revision of the Marriage/Citizenship Acts and census were intended to revoke the citizenship of the Lhotshampa minorities and, by dubious means, to denaturalize the once naturalized citizens. This is proof of the racist attitudes of the Bhutanese government, since the 1985 Act asserts to re-verify the naturalization of those naturalized according to the 1958 Law (Dhakal and Strawn, 1994: 149–55; Lee, 1998: 130–1; Saul, 2000).

### **Discriminatory Family Planning**

Meanwhile, Ngalung government imposed mandatory family planning in 1980. If a couple has more than two children, one of them must go for permanent family planning methods, like laparoscopy or vasectomy. In Bhutan, birth registration to the local chief is compulsory and as soon as the third child is born, the village chief reports to the district medical officer who then arranges to pick up the couple for the operation. This abrupt policy of permanent family planning, which is mainly implemented against the minorities, is considered as an abuse of basic human rights (Gautam, 2003; Giri, 2004). A Bhutanese journalist and broadcaster living in The Netherlands since 1998 as refugee maintains that Bhutanese government has imposed compulsory birth control, but Michael Hutt, the author of several journal articles and books on Bhutanese refugee contests this claim (see Letters to the Editor, 2005: 209).

### **Dzongkha Language**

In Bhutan, the language policy was important in the processes of ethnic and cultural changes, because when a dominant language spoken by Ngalung elites displaces other tongues, then, the ethnic identity of other subordinate groups changes. Already in the 1985 Citizenship Act, it was incorporated that all Bhutanese nationals should be able to speak, read and write Dzongkha well. In 1989, Dzongkha, which is spoken mainly by Thimphu elites, was promulgated as the only national language of Bhutan. This was a complete reverse of the policy of the late 1950s, which had encouraged the teaching of Nepali and Sanskrit languages, as well as the sending of Lhotshampa students abroad for higher

education (Hall, 2001: 139). As such, all children, students, as well as local officials and school staff in southern Bhutan, had to attend obligatory Dzongkha classes (Hutt, 1996: 404, 1997b: 107; Mathew, 1999: 174). This rigid policy was particularly distressing to the largely illiterate Lhotshampa farming community.

### **National Identity under *Driglamnamja***

The *driglamnamja* policy of 1989 required all citizens to wear *gho* (a knee-length robe for men) and a *kira* (ankle-length dress for women) in areas like Dzong premises, such as, fortress monasteries now used as centres of district administration, government offices, schools, Ngalung religious places, official functions, public congregations, and so forth (Giri, 2004). Bhutan's King continues to defend his relentless policy of *driglamnamja* in the following terms:

Being a small country, we do not have economic power. We do not have military muscle. Because of our small size and population and because we are a land-locked country we cannot play a dominant international role. The only factor we can fall back on . . . which can strengthen Bhutan's sovereignty and our different identity is the unique [Ngalung] culture we have. (Hutt, 2003: 174)

As mentioned earlier, the Bhutanese government has reportedly prohibited Lhotshampa people from wearing their own ceremonial attire required during marriage ceremonies, death rites and other religious occasions. As a result, all minorities including children have to wear the *gho* or *kira* since police are empowered to detain and even seize citizenship for non-compliance. At the practical level, even if the Lhotshampa community agrees to wear *gho* and *kira*, the clothes are incredibly thick and are not suitable for the tropical weather of southern Bhutan (Dhakal and Strawn, 1994: 201–8; Hutt, 1996: 403; Hall, 2001: 140; Sinha, 2001: 227–8). Despite that, Bhutan's government forces everyone to abide by all aspects of Ngalung cultural etiquette (see Giri, 2004, and Rizal, 2004, for most recent analysis). A Lhotshampa journalist, living in the Netherlands as a refugee since 1998, wrote:

As a [Hindu] religious heritage, I wear sacred thread around my neck to be used for everyday prayers that should never be taken off. Since my father's and my brother's was brutally torn off by Bhutanese army during their arrest, the duty for family rituals fell absolutely on me. Also, my wife wears a garment called *sindur-pote* [vermillion powder and red beads garland] that cannot be discarded but it became impossible to handle the physical torture of Bhutanese security forces to change our cultural practices into theirs. In 1998, I fled Bhutan with my wife and newborn daughter. (Gautam, 2003)

Besides unanimously adopting a resolution condemning Thimphu for 'practising racial discrimination in employment, provision of social welfare facilities like education and health and on religious freedom against non-Ngalung

citizens', the Asia Pacific NGOs' Network<sup>5</sup> meeting also acknowledged and heavily criticized Bhutan for implementing its racist *driglamnamja* policy, which has infringed upon the cultural expression especially of the Lhotshampa population. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch [HRW] have also recently re-confirmed that Nepali-speaking Bhutanese women, who are still living in southern Bhutan, continue to face restrictions under the Bhutanese *driglamnamja* doctrine, as it prevents them from wearing their traditional sari – sometimes even on their wedding day. Other women reported having their hair forcibly cut (long hair is a valued trait in Nepali or Indian culture). By enforcing the uniform dress code, the Bhutanese government infringes upon the rights of the ethnic Nepali community, including those still living in Bhutan to practice their own culture (HRW, 2003: 26; Laczó, 2003: 80–1; see also Saul, 2000).

### **Mass Eviction from Bhutan**

Unlike the autonomy status demanded by the minorities of northeastern India, Lhotshampa settlers have never tried to establish their own idioms as official ones to the exclusion of Dzongkha language, neither have they claimed a territory where they wanted to rule through their own institutions of government. Therefore, the imposition of the notorious *driglamnamja* doctrine, in particular, was asking too much – not simply because it was difficult for the Lhotshampa community to reconcile Ngalung values with their cultural traditions, but because nothing is asked of the ruling Ngalung (Baubock, 2003: 22–5; cf. Mathew, 1999: 26–7). As such, the Lhotshampa people gradually came out of their traditional passivity and started interrogating the privileged in the system. This led to the unleashing of atrocities in which a series of raids, bomb attacks and gruesome murders in the southern districts were laid at the doors of its sympathizers by Bhutanese forces (Dhakal and Strawn, 1994: 125–8, 233–6, 258–70; Das, 1996: 120; Mathew, 1999: 146–50; Hall, 2001: 140).

In the early 1990s, Bhutanese authorities began to expel Lhotshampa people en masse. 1992 witnessed the arrival of up to 600 persons a day to Nepal.<sup>6</sup> In particular, Bhutan's National Security Act 1992 (4) allows the police to restrict movement and to summarily detain individuals, and grant the police de facto impunity to torture and arbitrarily kill suspects. Also, the police force selectively targets 'suspected' Lhotshampa men and their families, reinforcing the already high incidence of racist behaviour in Bhutan (Mathew, 1999: 203–5; Sinha, 2001: 242–4; HRW, 2003: 17–24). Although the refugee flow from Bhutan has not stopped completely, the latest available figures show that there are 44,783 women, 46,022 men and 10,487 children below the age of five living in various UNHCR-administered camps in eastern Nepal, and some 50,000 refugees scattered both in Nepal and in India are surviving on their own (Giri, 2003, 2004).

Although a number of examples noted above already indicate the



vulnerabilities of women and children, it is important to further discuss the status of women in Bhutan in general. The problems women and children face in the refugee camps also reflect the discrimination and abuse they experienced in Bhutan. The aim of this article was to draw as much information as possible from Bhutanese refugee women and children by means of interview. In this regard, the author came to know and interview a refugee family living in the Netherlands since 1998. Unfortunately, when the author was in Nepal in September 2003, there was a state of emergency (curfew) nationwide. This made travelling and obtaining official permission to enter the refugee camps very difficult. The government of Nepal has been suspicious that some Bhutanese refugees may have been influenced by the violent Maoist insurgency that has wrecked the country since 1996. It has placed severe restrictions on movements of refugees, and to some extent the aid workers and visitors, from in and out the refugee camps. Therefore, with the help of acquaintances, informal interviews were conducted with a number of refugees (part-time manual workers) outside of the Kundanbari refugee camp in Jhapa district. The sections below primarily focus on issues concerning Lhotshampa women and children. The interview extracts drawn from other studies are provided with actual citation, and those conducted by the author are presented using pseudonyms of the participants.

### **Women's Status in Bhutan**

Many people in Bhutan are poor and live in isolated, mountainous areas. Especially in impoverished communities, many women have little or no education. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (1999) online report (Giri, 2003: 10), Bhutan's population consists of 49 per cent of women and 51 per cent men. Women reportedly own 70 per cent of the land, and 62 per cent of them work in agriculture. The literacy rate among rural women is around 10 per cent. There are no women's organizations operating independently of the Bhutanese government, and there is still little awareness about women's rights and the need for gender-specific services (HRW, 2003: 26–9). Interestingly, a spokesperson during The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW] meeting claimed that with regard to marriage, divorce, child custody and other family matters, both the law and local practices reflect freedom and flexibility and guarantee women equal rights and protection.<sup>7</sup> Besides the statement being far from true, he did not mention a single word about the Bhutanese refugee women, who (have) suffered social and domestic discriminations in Bhutan, abuses, rapes, tortures instigated by Bhutanese security forces while evicting many of them, and continuous violence in the refugee camps in Nepal (Dhakal and Strawn, 1994: 261–3).

Apart from the legal discrimination in the marriage and citizenship laws noted previously, many refugee women in the camp reported enduring domestic violence, child marriage, abandonment and bigamy, when living in Bhutan.

Although many women were farmers, men were considered the household heads and wielded primary economic power as land and property were registered under their names. A woman recounted the hardships that cultural norms posed to her as a widow:

I was age five when I got married. I first moved to my husband's house at age 15. After my husband died, when other men worked in my fields I would be accused of having special relations with them. Fields have to be ploughed with oxen by men. But because I was afraid of rumours, I ploughed the fields by myself at night with a spade. I did all the work that men did and I couldn't ask for help. (HRW, 2003: 26)

As in most of South Asia, polygamy is widespread in Bhutan where even the current King has four wives – all sisters. Likewise, abandoned women are still considered married to the first husband except in cases of *jari*, in which a woman's second husband must pay the equivalent of a dowry to the first husband. At the same time, many women whose husbands took second wives were usually not consulted, and suffered economic abandonment and loss of status in the household, which shall be further elaborated below.

### **State of Lhotshampa Women During Eviction**

When a country is undergoing political instabilities, women and children become the easy victims, as they are unable to escape readily. Lhotshampa women and children perhaps represent one of the worst examples of those who had faced inhumane treatments from Bhutan's authorities. Immediately after the protest rallies of the early 1990s, the southern Bhutanese villages were left only with women and children, as most of the male members fled the country for fear of persecution by the Ngalung government. As a result, hundreds of women were reportedly subjected to rape, while some were tortured to death at home or in custody (Dhakal and Strawn, 1994: 609–26; HRW, 2003: 17–28).

When Bhutan's government publicly denied its high-handedness, including arbitrary arrest, degrading treatment, loot, plunder, rape of women and burning down of their houses, the UNHCR Nepal office permitted sociologist Cindy Dubble in 1993 to evaluate the extent of the Lhotshampa problem and assess the needs of victims of violence in the camps. Despite its culturally and personally sensitive nature, Dubble was able to confirm that some 63 per cent of the victims of violence were raped by the Bhutanese security forces (Giri, 2003). According to Amnesty International (1992) online reports, in the early phase of eviction at least eight women were reportedly raped to death. Likewise, Kathmandu-based Centre for Victims of Torture has carried out several clinical tests with some 3000 men and women, and their findings persistently confirm that these people were brutally beaten, tortured and raped during

their eviction from Bhutan; many of the victims are still receiving psychological treatment in the refugee camps (see Van Ommeren et al., 2002).

A number of testimonies expressed below shall exemplify the extent to which women's rights have been violated by the Bhutanese government. A 23-year-old woman explained what happened to her in November 1990:

My husband and I had heard that the armies were coming to confiscate our goods, so we both went to take our valuables to my parents' house. On the way back, we were arrested by about ten army personnel and asked if we had gone to see the party people and where the leaders were. They asked us about the campsites of our party people. As soon as we said we did not know, the soldiers tied our hands behind our backs. Then we were dragged about 30 km away from home, we were relentlessly kicked by army-men with their boots on, beaten by gun-butts and shackles. We were kept separately in a school that had been turned into an army barrack for about a month. Every night two or three soldiers came and raped me, which happened every night for about a month. I was given food at about midnight but if I asked for water, I was beaten with chains that the soldiers used to tie on their guns. When I was released . . . I stayed for one month in Bhutan until I realised I was pregnant. I was so ashamed that I could not face the other villagers so I fled in early January 1991, leaving my children with my mother-in-law. I went alone through a vast jungle hoping I would die there. By chance a male relative came to Kachugaoan (Assam) where I was staying with some relatives, and paid for me to come to Maidhar. As a result of rape, I had twins, one of which died and one survived. I do not know if I will see my husband again. (Refugee Watch [RW], 2000: 11–13)

Another woman in her late thirties recounted her sufferings in 1992 in the hands of the Bhutanese authorities:

My husband had taken a second wife and left me. I had three children, two daughters and one son. At the time of the census, the district official called me to bring proof of my citizenship. I brought proof, but the district officer said it's not right. After two days, the army was brought by the local official. At night-time they knocked on the door. I didn't open it and then they forcibly entered. They told me, 'We have heard your brother comes to your house. Is this so?' I said, 'I don't know where he is.' Then they hit me with the gun. They kicked me and I fell down. I stood up and then they kicked me again, and I fell down again. They said we have to torture you, and then only will you tell us where your brother is. Then the army tore my clothes. It was torture; they raped me. It was the army; two of them raped me while the others held me down. The next morning I went to my relative's house, but they told me not to stay with them because maybe the army would come and do the same thing to them. One week later I fled to Nepal. (HRW, 2003: 18)

South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation [SAARC]<sup>8</sup> jurists, who documented refugees' cases in 1992, have noted a refugee man telling them of Bhutanese security forces demanding a supply of young girls for their personal pleasure:

My father, who is 63 years old now, was born in Bhutan. Every day the office bearers used to come and threaten me to leave the village. They not only intimidated me, but the Bhutanese army one day suddenly came and burnt all the 27 houses of the village. They accused me of being a Nepali citizen and asked me to hand over our girls and wives to serve them. They demanded that 15–20 ladies be handed over. In these circumstances, we abandoned our village. Our relatives are still there and we have our registered land there. (RW, 2000: 11)

Before fleeing himself in 1998, a journalist for the Bhutan Broadcasting Corporation aired an interview with two couples, who had spoken about their horrifying working condition under the National Work Force, in May 1997. He wrote:

[B]esides the Bhutanese police chasing me to imprison or kill for trying to escalate a sense of disaffection towards [government's] development policies, the woman I have interviewed told me that her husband and her child died in the following December, and the other man went missing as a result of the harsh treatment for speaking with me. (Gautam, 2003)

### **Social Implication of Rape**

The trauma of rape and torture is compounded with great shame and stigmatization, especially for traditional Hindu women (Giri, 2003). That is because 'you rape them, you force them into pregnancy, you totally dishonour them . . . you are breaking up the fabric of a family, so you are going right to the heart and soul of a community'<sup>9</sup> (Associate Press, 2000). Dubble had concluded in her study that while some women were rejected by their husbands and families, many others had to survive with pregnancies and children resulting from rapes. A refugee woman gave an account of atrocities against innocent women:

My husband had been involved in the [political] demonstrations. When the Bhutanese army was dispatched to arrest the demonstrators, he had already fled to the hills. While I was staying with my parents, the army came and dragged me away and raped me. When I fled Bhutan and finally ended up in the refugee camp, I realised that I was pregnant. Now, I have a daughter. When I found out that my husband had also managed to escape to Nepal and was living in another refugee camp, I tried to contact him but he refused to visit due to the illegitimate child. (Giri, 2003: 33)

In short, several reports, including clinical tests have confirmed that Bhutanese women who fled to Nepal said they were raped in front of their families and children 'to create fear' and to force the population to flee Bhutan (HRW, 2003: 17–40). Like the case above, many refugee men also described that they were often compelled to take their own wives, sisters and daughters to the army camps for soldiers' pleasure and to save themselves from the threats of mutilation or execution (Gautam, 2003). The following section discusses an even more disturbing situation for refugee women, as well as children.

### **Fifteen Years in Crisis**

Currently, the Lhotshampa population in the camps stands at 101,283, which excludes up to 50,000 people living elsewhere. Due to a 2.2 per cent annual birth rate, today 21 per cent of the total refugee population has been born in the camps. Nepal's government and aid organizations have raised concerns over such a rapid population growth, but the statelessness,<sup>10</sup> continuous abuses, discrimination and rapes experienced by women and children have yet to attract enough attention. The following section discusses these issues.

### **Legal/Institutional Discrimination**

Based on interviews with 112 refugees and other officials in the refugee camps, *Trapped by Inequality: Bhutanese Refugee Women in Nepal* (HRW, 2003) is perhaps the only comprehensive report that discusses vulnerabilities of Lhotshampa women and children.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, it too acknowledges that the plight of non-registered women and children has been excluded. In this regard, the South Asia Forum for Human Rights has charged the UNHCR and Nepali government with showing unwillingness towards registration of around 25,000 Bhutanese refugees, who have arrived in the camps in recent years.<sup>12</sup> If this statement is correct, then there are several thousand women and children, who have no legal recognition anywhere. Moreover, it is maintained that there are cases where refugee women failed the 'refugee status determination interview' at the screening post at Kakarbhitta on the India–Nepal border, possibly because of their unfamiliarity with and fear about the screening procedures.

In the camps, the UNHCR and the government of Nepal have implemented a registration system based on household cards listed under the name of the male household head. This discriminatory policy denies women and children rations of food, clothes and other services. The practice of allowing refugee men to register children born of non-refugee women, but not allowing the same for refugee women with children fathered by non-refugee men, may also violate children's right to acquire a nationality and render them stateless. Like in Nepal, Bhutanese citizenship by descent came through the father, but

the enforcement of a new Citizenship Act in 1985 requires both parents to be Bhutanese – the children of Bhutanese fathers and Nepali (or Indian) mothers are apparently citizens of neither Nepal nor Bhutan (Hutt, 1997a: 147; HRW, 2003: 61–63). A 27-year-old woman, who was unable to register her child conceived as a result of the rape because she could not name the father, expressed her sorrow:

I was raped. The problem is that the child is not registered in the camps because she doesn't have a father. She doesn't get clothes. I have submitted a number of applications to the camp management committee. When I even went to the CDO [chief district officer], they said they would reply, but they haven't replied. It was last year that I visited. (HRW, 2003: 29–30)

Likewise, a 23-year-old refugee woman, who had married a local Nepali man and has two children, faced a similar problem when she came back to the refugee camp after facing difficulties in her marriage, including her husband's refusal to register the children and herself as Nepali citizens. While her own rations were reinstated, the Refugee Co-ordination Unit (RCU) had kept her application for the children to be registered as Bhutanese refugees 'pending' for the last three years. She complained:

I have rations, but my children don't. I have to look to the future of my children and would like to go back [to Bhutan] with my family. It's my husband's choice if he wants to join us or not. In the camps, the children's registration is not done. I couldn't get them admission to the nursery school. Their birth registration is not done outside [in Nepal] or here [in the camps]. . . . I applied two or three years ago for the children to be registered in the camps, and it has been kept pending since. (HRW, 2003: 30)

Meanwhile, after hearing rumours that some refugees may have been influenced by Nepal's violent Maoist movement, the government of Nepal started to distribute food on the basis of individual head count from May 2002. Under this rule, everyone must personally appear to collect their food items (except camps' students, teachers, internal labourers, disabled and elderly people). Approximately 5000 refugees, who were previously not prevented from doing odd jobs outside their camps, are being called back (Dubey, 2002). This policy of movement or work restriction is likely to create more trouble through the multiplication of communal and domestic quarrels. The main victims will again be women and children, who have already grievously suffered sexual assault and domestic violence perpetrated by other refugees, local Nepali residents, intimate partners, and then by the minimal response by the government of Nepal and UNHCR (HRW, 2003: 39–40).

### **Victims of Aid Workers**

Due to rampant poverty, lack of awareness about deceptive and coercive methods employed by girl smugglers, and an open border between Nepal and India, Lhotshampa refugee girls are reportedly being trafficked for sex work and forced labour in India. It is being speculated that some refugees and aid workers may be cooperating with the human traffickers from India and Nepal, who traffic hundreds of poor Nepali village girls annually, taking advantage of the deteriorating situation in the refugee camps.

In 2002, several aid workers have been accused of almost two dozen cases of rape and child abuse in the camps. The UNHCR finally sent an investigation team to analyze the claims. The findings, which became public in November 2002, reported that the team found at least 18 cases of sexual abuse of female Bhutanese refugees, including a girl of seven, between June 2001 and October 2002. The alleged perpetrators of the crimes were 16 employees of the aid agencies working in the camps. An aid worker reported that the two government officials involved in the sexual exploitation were a police officer stationed in one of the camps, and an RCU official stationed outside the camps. While the motive is unclear, the police officer allegedly encouraged a local man to rape a refugee woman in early 2002, and received a bribe to rape her himself. Apparently, he did not rape the woman, but beat her at her home and then again at the police station, where he threatened to charge the woman with prostitution. The official, who was in a managerial position, was allegedly sexually harassing refugee women in his office. There was also a case of repeated rape of a disabled girl by an aid worker. All these personnel, who fell under UNHCR's suspicion, were dismissed from their jobs (HRW, 2003: 32–5). However, the final report of the UNCHR released in 2004 apparently revealed that 'there had been no wrongdoing on the part of the staff members, that no instructions had been willfully disregarded, and that therefore the conduct of the staff members did not justify disciplinary action' (Muggah, 2005). Unfortunately, media reports suggest that the misery suffered by Lhotshampa women and children has not improved much, even after UNHCR and Nepal's government introduced a new 'reporting and referral system' to pursue investigations through the Nepal's criminal justice system following the 2002 findings (HRW, 2003: 32–5).

### **Domestic Violence**

Over a decade of psychological susceptibility, combined with joblessness, has created a deep sense of anger among Lhotshampa males in which women often become the target of domestic violence, such as quarrelling or beatings. UNHCR's investigation team noted in November 2002 that there were many cases of gender-based violence within the refugee community, including rape,

attempted rape, sexual assault, child marriage, forced marriage and domestic violence. HRW (2003) interviewed several dozens of local Nepali women and not only confirm UNHCR's findings, but also report married women experiencing psychological and physical abuse from their husbands, and often from their husbands' families who view them as burdens on the household's resources.

Since most of the adult refugees (largely men) have little to do during the day, they spend their time gambling or drinking and in the evening abusing their wives and children (Giri, 2003). Sometimes even (unknown) misfortunes are also blamed on women. A mother of three children described how badly her husband thinks of her, when all she wants is to stop him from drinking alcohol by selling family rations given by the UNHCR:

My husband frequently comes home stinking of *raksi* [local vodka-like drink]. If I tell him about his drinking habits, he first bangs his head on the wall and points a finger at him to say: 'Its [drinking] because of you. If I was alone, I'd go everywhere to earn money. I'd live happily. Now, I can't find anything else, I've to live with you and your *santan* [offspring]. So why do you complain when I drink?' I can't argue even when he is spending ration money on *raksi*. I can do nothing but cry.

Other times, a number of women reported horrendous stories of physical torture. A woman in her mid-20s broke into tears when telling how badly she was beaten for an incident that had hardly anything to do with her:

I went to take part in our relative's *ratauli* [wedding party night at groom's house]. My husband had allowed me to go there. I have two children [9, 11] at home. They also told me I could go. They'd study together for a while and go to bed. But my kids fell asleep without turning off the kerosene-fed lamp. In their sleep one of them kicked the lamp, and fire erupted. When I came home at about 4 am, my husband suddenly got out of bed furiously calling me '*kukurni*' [literally 'female dog', but implying 'bitch'], why did you go without taking care of children?' He first slapped hard on my face by pulling my hair, and then kicked everywhere with his feet. He left me hoping that I was dead for good only when I had fainted. My children were frightened to death. When my husband had left home at around 7 am, my children managed to wake me up. They told me what happened. I was so happy they were unhurt, but I still collapse when I think of that unfortunate morning.

Young children are also not spared from abuse and violence. A 12-year-old primary school student shared his experience with his father when he wanted to tell him about his torn clothes:

My classmates started to tease me because of my torn clothes. So, one evening, after coming from school, I told my father about it. He was really mad at me.



He said, 'You donkey, you need [clothes] like everyone else. Where should I go to steal?' Then, he pushed me out [from the main door]. I smashed on the ground receiving a deep cut on my forehead, and scratches on my face, palms, and knees. My mother rushed and picked me up. Now I regret that, and I wish I never mentioned it to him.

Children living with their fathers and stepmothers may also face difficulties obtaining their share of full food rations. The refugee-run organizations highlight abuse from fathers and stepmothers as one of the most pressing problems for children in the camps. A refugee mother, who works as an agricultural labourer outside of the camps in order to earn extra money to buy food for her children living with their father and stepmother, expressed her problem:

My first husband took [an ethnic] Tamang girl as a second wife. Now he beats my four children. They are treated badly by the second wife and are not given their share of food. My son says he doesn't get food. I cut rice in the village [outside the camp] from 07:00 to 16:00 and I get 50 Nepali Rupees [or €0.62]. I have to work all day long in the heat, for the benefit of the children. (HRW, 2003: 35)

There were many cases of (refugee) teachers being involved in coercive relations with their students. They would impregnate the girls, who were then kicked out of school. Nothing would happen to the teachers; they would continue to teach and go out with other girls. A young refugee woman emphasized the impact of the school-based sexual exploitation cases:

In one case, a twenty five-year-old teacher made a 14-year-old student pregnant. The community does not like it because then they will feel afraid to send girls to school. In other cases, the camp management committees or the parents of the student and teacher would 'settle' the case by encouraging their marriage. (HRW, 2003: 38-9)

In order to understand why so many men indulge in gambling, drinking raksi, divorcing their wives, beating their children and wives, and so on, the author approached a group of men sitting in a tea hut after finishing their part-time work in the local Nepali's field. Although it is hard to accept their household behaviour, these men seem to honestly express their personal problems:

You see, we're deeply ashamed of our lives in this dusty camp. We've lived here for 14 years. We were victimized [by Bhutan's government], but nobody is really helping us, not Nepal government, nor others especially influential [in Bhutanese affairs], India government is deaf towards our misery. We've no work or future. Even our [exiled] leaders do not get permission or visa to travel. So, we are very angry and frustrated. This is probably why we've often been in difficult relations with our family and neighbours. And we unknowingly become

addicted to bad behaviours. You may be thinking we are bad men, but we can't stop being angry. Most of the time we realise [for instance after beating our child], and ask 'why did I do that act?' By then, it's like *aaja maryo, bholi ausadhi* [one dies today, search for medicine tomorrow].

### **Lack of Psychosocial Support**

As noted elsewhere, thousands of refugee women suffer from psychological disturbances, such as sleeplessness, flash backs, depression and anxiety (Giri, 2003). Also, the situation of many orphan children, who have often witnessed the murder, torture and rape of their parents, is not positive either. Especially, while very little information exists on the extent of suffering experienced by Lhotshampa women and children in the hands of Bhutanese authorities, the camp management committee and counselling board reported to be severely lacking in appropriate training, gender-sensitivity, or legal authority to resolve gender-based violence, even today.

According to the Camp Rules, reports HRW, any minor dispute among refugees will first be referred to the sub-sector head, sector head, camp management committee, camp secretary, or counselling board in that order. In case of violation of Nepali law, the case is to be referred to the camp supervisor or to the police in charge. In practice, the camp management committee addresses most cases of gender-based violence even if they violated Nepal's law (HRW, 2003: 40). For instance, a refugee woman, who escaped years of abuse from her husband and her co-wife, and remarried reported the following:

Now, I live on the ration card of my second husband but he refuses to apply for my children [from former husband] to switch to their ration card. Because of the current camp registration policies, I am unable to obtain my own ration card and to ensure independently that my children receive their aid entitlements. (HRW, 2003: 35)

In another instance, the UNHCR investigation team reported cases where rape victims, including children as young as five years old, were given public apologies and a token compensation of only 10 Nepali Rupees (€0.13). By regularizing into a social situation, more than 30 cases where young girls were raped were settled by turning them into early marriages with their assailants (HRW, 2003: 41). Had the rape victim, parents or RCU head approached a Nepali court, especially when the case fall outside of Camp Rules, complains HRW, the legal action would have been harsher and would be less attractive to the rapists.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, the victims of violence are often too ashamed to seek external assistance due to insensitivity towards their problems. For example, a refugee woman, who along with her co-wife had suffered chronic emotional

abuse and threats of murder from her husband, started to live separately from him and recalled the shame she felt about how her case was handled:

The RCU and counselling board assumed our problems were because we were not having enough sex. They advised my husband to spend fifteen days with each wife. But I didn't want that, I just wanted him to care for me. They told me if I want a husband, I need to cook food for him. He came to me because he was forced [by the RCU], he was angry, and I wanted a happy atmosphere. We shared a bed but we didn't have sex. And people laughed at this situation, they laughed at me, saying that I wanted sex. When the case was taken to the counselling board, they said we have to stay together. I didn't agree because I knew everything would just repeat. I told my story first, we argued there [in front of the counselling board], and he denied everything. The sector head was there, the sub-sector head was there, there were lots of people listening. For them, it was a comedy. (HRW, 2003: 40)

As a result of hardship, rapes, stigmatization and violence many Lhotshampa women, especially young girls, have attempted to kill themselves. It is reported that 24 refugees have committed suicide since June 2001 and another six have attempted suicide. By comparison, the incidence of suicide in the refugee camps is approximately four times than that in the local Nepali population (HRW, 2003: 21).

### **Meanwhile, Back in Bhutan**

A large section of the Lhotshampa population who still live in southern Bhutan are reportedly required to secure official 'no-objection certificates' from the Bhutanese authority in order to enter schools, take government jobs, or sell farm products (Sinha, 2001: 241). In this way, Bhutan's government and its security forces are able to plunder people's homes, torture, intimidate and rape helpless women with total impunity. For instance, when the government officials pay visits to districts or villages, people must provide a pony where roads are not suitable for motor vehicles, transport personal luggage and cook food for them. By the early 1990s Bhutan's armed forces were stationed in every district of southern Bhutan; the military officers have been reportedly forcing the village headmen and locals to coerce local (teenage) girls for their sexual entertainment. Likewise, the Lhotshampa people are also forced to cultivate food and cash crops for the newly settled Ngalung members from northern Bhutan. Due to severe restrictions imposed on international organizations, the true nature of southern Bhutan is difficult to ascertain (Giri, 2004).

Bhutan's National Assembly adopted a revised Rape Act in 1996. The law contains a clear definition of criminal sexual assault and specifies penalties. In cases of rape involving minors, sentences range from five to 17 years. In extreme cases, a rapist may be imprisoned for life. However, there is little

indication that the government has investigated adequately or punished any security force officials involved in torture, rape and other abuses committed against Lhotshampa residents.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, a 15-page paper titled *Women's Anti-discrimination Committee Takes up Report of Bhutan* neither acknowledges anything about the Bhutanese government's crackdown on Lhotshampa people nor about rapes or abuses of women and children.<sup>15</sup>

The UNHCR has maintained that the overwhelming majority of Bhutanese refugees who entered camps in Nepal have documentary proof of Bhutanese nationality. Unfortunately, even the 15th round of the Nepal–Bhutan ministerial joint meeting, which was concluded in October 2003, has not offered any green signals as to whether the refugees will eventually be going back to Bhutan. Regional experts argue that the Nepalese government has failed in terms of diplomacy with Bhutan, and that without the trilateral (i.e. Bhutan, India and Nepal) efforts the Bhutanese refugee imbroglio will be difficult to settle (Muggah, 2005). In March 2005, the Bhutanese authorities announced a new Constitution that has only 34 Articles. If it is approved by a referendum at the end of the year, Bhutan reportedly will become 'a two-party state' (*BBC News*, 2005a). Lhotshampa refugee leaders in exile have been requesting Bhutan's absolute monarch, Jigme Singhe Wangchuk, for their involvement in the framing of the constitution with the representation of all sides, but there is no word from Bhutan regarding one-sixth of the country's population exiled since the late 1980s. In early August 2005, about 300 desperate refugees from the Beldangi (Jhapa) camps attempted to reach Bhutan by crossing some 45km Nepal–India border. The Indian security forces blocked them, and some 'unknown elements' beat a number of refugees. Several days later the Nepali authorities brought the refugees back to their respective camps. In response to this development, the UNCHR Nepal office reportedly requested 'the Bhutanese refugees to wait for right opportunity to go home and not to initiate repatriation process on their own', and added that 'efforts are underway to resettle some of the refugees in Western countries' (*BBC News*, 2005b). However, it is not clear whether refugee women and children were also involved in the 'voluntary repatriation' nor is the sense priority of women and children in the UNHCR's resettlement plan.

## **Conclusion**

In any kind of natural or human-made disasters, children and women become the most vulnerable group. Even if we are less bothered about whether Lhotshampa refugees are illegal or not, it is extremely difficult to ignore the inhumane treatment of several hundred women and children by Bhutanese security forces. Many Lhotshampa women who fled to Nepal reported that they were raped in front of their families 'to create fear' and force the population to flee. Several reports have verified this claim. For instance, a clinical study

identified and documented 2402 cases of physical torture among 90,000 refugees, and found that the most commonly reported techniques against women were severe beatings, verbal sexual humiliations and rapes (see Giri, 2003). In the refugee camps, women and children are still prone to domestic violence by their husbands, as well as rape and abuse by aid workers or locals outside the camps. Recently, it is claimed that the UNHCR has introduced a 'codes of conduct', in order to bring the perpetrators to justice, provide prompt psychosocial rehabilitation and redress for the victims and to prevent the reoccurrence of rape and abuse (HRW, 2003: 73). Since there are no signs as yet of a dignified repatriation or a settlement plan, it is doubtful whether the new rules will be able to provide any comfort to Lhotshampa women and children.

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### NOTES

1. By using life history narratives, this chapter titled, 'Dil Maya: Fragments of a Life', provides a detailed account of the vulnerabilities experienced by a woman because of displacement, which is discussed in the latter part of the article.
2. Gorkha (often Gurkha) is a small Nepali mountain district from where King Prithibi N. Shah began his 32 years of military campaigns, forming what is Nepal today. During the 1814–16 war, British India forces were reportedly so impressed with the fighting skills of Nepali fighters that they agreed to permanently recruit Nepali men into their armed force after signing the Treaty of Sugauli. See Hall (2001: 131–41) for details.
3. He was a religious refugee who fled Tibet in 1615 and subsequently founded Bhutan and spread the *Drukpa Kyagu* sect of Mahayana Buddhism throughout the country. He is often called the Dalai Lama of Bhutan, whose family lives in exile in India. See Giri (2003) for details.
4. The King, *Jigme Singye Wangchuck*, who has four wives, all sisters, has been in power for three decades and rules from a monastery-fortress on the outskirts of Thimphu, the capital.
5. The Asia Pacific Networking Meeting, having representatives from more than 50 Asian countries, was held in Kathmandu (Nepal) between April 27–9 2001; five months prior to the World Conference Against Racism to be held in Durban, South Africa.

6. In the relentless crackdowns, a stage arrived where Lhotshampa people had no alternative but to flee the 'peaceful dragon' kingdom. Upon arriving in India Lhotshampa people were not only denied to put up camps, which Indian police destroyed, but also some refugees were abducted from Assam. The police and the civil administration of Assam reportedly visited Bhutan often, where they were bribed by the Thimphu government. In return, Bhutan's police officers were allowed to come to Assam and arrest dissidents freely. Initially, the government of Nepal expressed its unwillingness to allow asylum seekers into the country, but responding to the appeals made by (human rights) activists the border was opened in February 1991. See HRW (2003), Giri (2004) and Rizal (2004) for details.
7. 'Representative UN agencies Bhutan, for Commemorating Beijing IV', statement by Dr. Orapin Singhadej in Bhutan 19–21 May 2003 (available at <http://www.unct.org.bt/docs/Statement%20by%20WHO%20Representative.pdf>). Meanwhile, it is interesting to note here that although Bhutan ratified CEDAW in 1981, it has yet to submit an initial country report (HRW, 2003: 26).
8. SAARC includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
9. Sanam Anderlini from the British-based International Alert group – an organization that tries to focus world attention on the effects of war (Associate Press, 6 October 2000).
10. While Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that all children have the right to a nationality, children born in the refugee camps are effectively stateless.
11. Due to lack of research related to the Lhotshampa refugee women and children's experiences, this section largely draws information from HRW and the author's own short interviews with about a dozens of refugees. It should be noted that all the names used in the article are pseudonyms.
12. See <http://Kantipuronline.com>, 27 November 2003.
13. Nepal Civil Code Act, 2059 (Eleventh Amendment 2002, which modified Nepal's Muluki Ain 2020 or 1963 Country Code) protects the inheritance rights of daughters and widows, the property rights of divorced women and the unrestricted right to an abortion up to the twelfth week of pregnancy. It has also increased the punishment for rape up to 15 years and removed several provisions discriminatory toward women from the 2020 Muluki Ain (HRW, 2003: 27–8).

14. See Amnesty International (1998, 2000), Human Rights Watch (2003) and US State Department (2002) for in-depth coverage of these issues. Amnesty International has repeatedly said that Bhutan's government has not allowed any independent organizations to visit its southern frontier to inspect the situation of the Lhotshampa people.
15. See CEDAW 636th Meeting, 16 January 2004. Available at: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/wom1426.doc.htm>

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