

# **Gender Violence Within the Bhutanese American Community**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Gender violence is an old problem worldwide. It is not an exception in Bhutanese Community. However, severity of the problem has grown substantially within the Bhutanese American Community following resettlement. In most cases the victims are women and girls. A deeper investigation and historical authenticity might require finding the cause – whether the problem has grown following resettlement, or it was subdued while living in exile. This research was aimed to dig out the causes of growing gender violence in a newly resettled community and seek solution to the problem. Anonymous survey was conducted, and author held conversation with number of community members and victims. Educating the victims to speak against their perpetrators while still providing social and other support would change the way the newly established community prosper. A dedicated service and support are required from local law enforcement agencies to encourage them to tell their stories. They need easy access to and guarantee of privacy and security from police department, sexual assault hotline, medical practitioners, school and community organisations.

**Keywords:** girls, sexual assault, women,

## **Introduction**

Violence against women is not an isolated case of a particular community but an issue that affects most communities globally. They historically appeared in different contexts, scenarios and situations. We heard, read and saw these. The consequences of

these incidences could be in the form of health complications, mental disorder, anxiety and intense fear (Pettrak, 2003). WHO's 2013 study on the health burden associated with violence against women found that women who had been physically or sexually abused were 1.5 times more likely to have a sexually transmitted infection including HIV compared to women who had not experienced sexual violence. They are twice as likely to have an abortion<sup>1</sup>.

Governments, organisations and communities made attempts to address it, be it at local, state or national level, but with little or no success. The #MeToo movement took the issue to a new height. It widened the dimensions, invoked seriousness on policy makers and law enforcement agencies and challenged the stubborn psychology of the perpetrators that they are superior.

In 1994, the US Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). This act, and the 1996 additions to the act, recognise that domestic violence is a national crime and that federal laws extend support to states and local judicial administrations to address the issue. Every state has its separate law. However, these laws are ineffective.

According to National Organisation of Women (NOW), on average three women/girls are killed every day in domestic violence in the USA. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, which includes incidences not reported to the police, 232,960 women in the U.S. were raped or sexually assaulted in 2006. That's more than 600 women every day<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> WHO, LSHTM, SAMRC. Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health impacts of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence. WHO: Geneva, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics (table 2, page 15), Criminal Victimization in the United States, 2006 Statistical Tables (<https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/cvus0601.pdf>)

While these are alarming situations at the national and international level, this article investigates situation of gender violence within the Bhutanese American community, understand communication perceptions towards this issue and the possible alternative that community members and local authority may use to address the situation. The victims not always come public to name and shame the perpetrators. They may not be as strong as Dr. Christine Ford (Edwards, 2018) to speak against the perpetrators but the stories spill into public gradually.

### **Bhutanese Americans**

Exiled Bhutanese started resettling in the US in 2008, the majority of the population has made the states of Ohio and Pennsylvania homes. There are Bhutanese folks in other states too, but majority migrating internally to these two states. The community has now settled well – economically, professionally and socially (Tran & Lara-García, 2020). Larger population concentration means larger prospects of social and cultural support – critical need of a new community in a new country.

To understand the community perspective and seek their views on possible solution on growing cases of gender violence, author did a survey in Bhutanese American community. A total of 80 individual responded to the survey. There were 10 questions on family nuclearisation, reasons for families to split and their relationship with growing gender violence in the community. Some questions had options of multiple answers.

The exiled Bhutanese after living in refugee camps in eastern Nepal for over two decades were successfully resettled in the US and other developed countries. The family structure of the Bhutanese following resettlement is changing (Chart 1). Seventy percent of respondents to the survey conducted by author believe that families have gone nuclear. Less than 4% believe otherwise whereas 26% were not sure. Most of the respondents believe the causes of split and formation nuclear families were family disputes

and feeling of being independent. Over 60% respondents believe the family disputes and splits have affected female members of the community most.

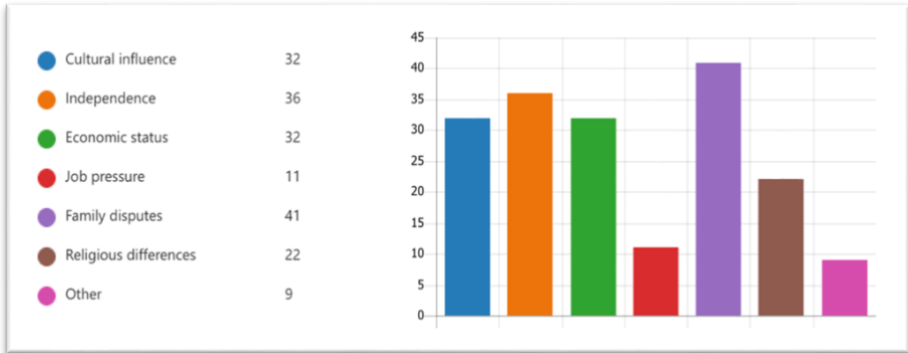


Chart 1: Survey responses on cause of family split

With larger congregation, community has also experienced social problems including gender violence. Despite being in a country that is leading the ‘right to expression movement’, Bhutanese American community members fear discussing/disclosing incidents of gender violence – residual of the social, religious or cultural beliefs. Not just community members and their leaders but the victims too are hesitant to speak their issues. Further, the parents and elders stop them from speaking against their perpetrators. Most of the sexually exploited victims this author interviewed were underaged.

A formal survey, community consultation or open discussion is unlikely to reveal the true picture of the severity of the issue. Author decided to have one on one interview with victims and girls who were vulnerable – through social media and phone. Approximately 10% of those who came into author’s contact revealed that she was the victim of sexual assaults.

The incident not only adds trauma to the victims but helps spread of the sexually transmitted diseases in the community. Among

more than 2000 resettled Bhutanese screened in Texas between 2008–2011, only 0.5% were positive for HIV infection and Syphilis. The survey has not been repeated to assess the current situation.

### **Findings and opinion**

Majority of the survey respondents pointed out the need for education and awareness and this must be carried out by the community organisations and their leaders. The respondents pointed out the fact that despite growing number of community organisations, none of the organisation ever initiated such programme. Survey respondents said the community organisation must engage in providing confidential counselling and mental health support to the victims through professionals and experts.

Other suggestion that most respondents included was to report the incidents to the law enforcement agencies as soon as possible. Role of parents in taking confidence of the victimised girls encouraging them to come out in public was another suggestion. The respondents believe naming and shaming in public will have greater impact on the perpetrators.

While family split has increased after resettlement, respondents feel family reunion and living in larger family would be one solution to this issue. Creating more employment opportunities and empowering females would address the problem to a greater extent, respondents say.

There could be several reasons why the victims within the community feel it uneasy to come forward and tell the story of being sexually assaulted or facing gender-based violence. The circumstances and severity could vary but the nature through which victims are tortured, community and legal support is required. Let's look at some of the social barriers that stops victims from coming into public and how these barriers create environment perfect for the perpetrators.

## **Cultural Beliefs**

Sex is not just private affairs but talking about sex is culturally discouraged. The community lacks sex education and awareness on sexuality. Discussion on sex is a taboo and talking anything related to sex is treated as unsocial. The individuals who discuss sex are treated not cultured. Individuals publicly talking about their sexual life or history are seen as bad examples. Bhutanese Americans are not different to many other communities when it comes to sex. In fact, many people find it extremely impossible to talk about sex; it can be a sensitive and awkward topic that raises feelings of embarrassment, shame or inadequacy (Silver, 2014).

The issues are more severe when it comes to underage girls. Child sexual abuse are influenced by sensitivity, fear, taboo, attitude, acceptable practices and prejudices; also, community passivity, legal system inadequacies and weaknesses, and the general perceptions and attitudes toward sexual offences against children contribute to a much-muted response (Kisanga, 2011). The cultural behavior observed within the Bhutanese American community is not different. Sometimes, children are culturally obliged to obey what their seniors tell them and keep silece to all abuses as a respect to their seniors. Further, young girls remain stressed that they might be rejected for marriage if the issues were revealed, and people knew about the incident.

## **Religion activities**

Sixty percent of the resettled Bhutanese are Hindu, 27% are Buddhists, 10% are Kirats, and the remaining refugees are Christians (Ranard, 2007). They are forgiving and believe on *karma*<sup>3</sup>. Parents and senior members of the family frequently visit temples and attend religious events like *bhajan*<sup>4</sup> and *puran*<sup>5</sup>. Children usually don't follow parents to these events. While the

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<sup>3</sup> Concept in Hinduism referring to fate based on actions of previous life

<sup>4</sup> Religious chanting.

<sup>5</sup> Hindu religious texts

religious events are long processed and parents are busy, children are likely to be abused back at home by the perpetrators. Parents remain unaware. Gap of friendship between children and parents makes children hesitant to discuss their difficulties with parents. The youngsters tend not to report to authorities as well.

Religious leaders tend to discourage this issue being discussed in public domain. They avoid it because they believe this is not part of their domain – rather part of the individual and family affairs. Young girls whom this author talked to said ‘priest’ occasionally teased them for how they look and what they wear.

### **Economic condition**

It’s been a decade of resettlement but struggle for economic stability continues. The dream of the resettled Bhutanese is to have a car, a house and some savings in bank account. But their relatives back in Nepal or Bhutan have bigger dream of getting financial support. Not all adult members of the family tend to find a decent job. Further young people prefer to continue their studies as long as their parents can help them achieve bigger dream of becoming a professional. The dream put more pressure on parents, mostly father, to stay away from home – working longer hours. Such an environment provide opportunity for abusers.

Many of the parents do not speak English. And have not owned a car. They require assistance from community members for transportation. Abusers often take undue advantage of this informal community support system.

Survey respondents also pointed that being independent and economic improvements to be some of the reasons for living single or nuclear. With reduced social support and community congregations, members of the nuclear families become more vulnerable.

## Family disputes and nuclear families

Following resettlement, many Bhutanese families have gone nuclear. We now rarely see any extended family. Nuclear families have a few mutual support mechanisms. As they spend more time in work and fail to meet expectations of each other, family disputes are likely the result. The survey result shows young and older parents are most affected by the increasing sexual violence. Disputes further divide the family and make women and girl children vulnerable. The disputes encourage people to live separately and create nuclear families. The split families become more vulnerable. Respondents to author's survey also believe that known individuals within the community, family members and close relatives are the perpetrators. Some believe unknown people are the perpetrators (Chart 2).

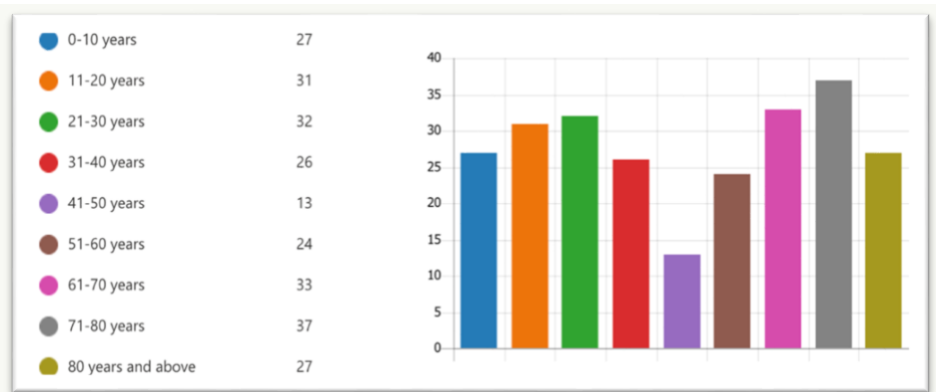


Chart 2: People affected by sexual violence by age group, based on respondents' view (multiple answers)

## Alcohol and Drugs

Over consumption of alcohol and illicit drugs is unsocial and illegal. Open access to alcohol has been an advantage for many community members – especially those who were restricted to drink while in Nepal – be it due to social values or economic condition. The culture of alcohol or illicit drug parties have become the norm of a generation. Those heavily drunk are then sexually



abused. People I chatted pointed out that youngsters of 18-30 years are mostly abused in such gatherings. People who attend such events tend to mis-inform their parents. Parents are either told they are going for the job, or friend's house or have a school function.

## **Social media**

We have access to so many new social media. Or we even do not know what our kids are using. Social media has been the greatest tool for abusers to get access to children and eventually sexually abused them. Sexual abuse isn't always sex – it can be any form of sexual activity – physical, verbal, or emotional. Offer of money has become the most effective tool in influencing children through social media. While parents are still learning use of social media, providing guidance to children in proper use of the media is a bigger challenge.

## **The Story**

One morning, I wore black tee and pink shorts. My mother walked into my room, yelling at me that I should not wear shorts.

'Go change,' she said. I refused.

She angrily added, 'Wear one that reaches below your knee'. I wondered why I should wear that long.

The dress I wore, as a naive eight-year-old, was below my knee. That pink dress, with plaid patterns, was below my knee. But the long dress did not stop me being abused. If concealing clothes were to protect me, why was I regularly abused in those concealing clothes?

Even after a decade since those incidents, questions still rumble my head, although some are unanswerable. The days are haunted, and trauma makes everyday life painful, downtrodden. I need courage every minute to heal the wound.

I am not ready to tell my story to my parents and family members. The things will get more complicated if story gets spilled over as the abuser was part of my extended family.

Everyone sees him to be educated and polite. Little do they know that he is a predator under a mask. Little do they know that he is an abuser, who preys on little girls. He is a pedophile. He is an abuser. He is a predator.

## **Conclusion**

The sexual abuse of women and young girls in the Bhutanese community has grown bigger and wider. The male-dominated community organisations have not come up with any programmes to address the issue. The problem is unlikely to received national attention like mental health. The patriarchal system promoters believe the problem is with the females. It's time the community and its leadership make collective approaches. Legal avenues are solution when trauma is already inflicted. The community leaderships have the responsibility to teach the perpetrators that their action is a crime.

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