THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE

The Tibetan Buddhist Refugee Women in Bylakuppe, Karnataka, India

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Introduction

Forced Migration has become a global phenomenon especially in the twentieth and early twenty first century. People are forced to leave their nation, their identity and relocate to a place/space unknown to them. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) defines a forced migrant as any person who migrates to 'escape persecution, conflict, repression, natural and humanmade disasters, ecological degradation, or other situations that endanger their lives, freedom or livelihood' (Hugo, 2005). It has affected the lives of people across age, gender, and social backgrounds. However, gender is a critical factor that shapes the experiences and outcomes of forced migration. This article, based on the interview conducted with the Tibetan Buddhist refugee women, will explore the causes and experiences of forced migration from a gendered perspective, highlighting the differential impacts on these women, who seek refuge in the Bylakuppe region of Karnataka, India.

Causes of Migration – Case of Tibetan Buddhist Refugee

The Tibetan refugee, the majority of whom have lived in India, is one group that has experienced prolonged displacement since 1959. The invasion of Chinese inside Tibet, in the early 1950s, reduced the latter into a colony, labelling the independent people of Tibet as 'second class citizens.' Since then, the autonomy of Tibet has remained a contentious and emotionally charged topic. However, China's position remains steady claiming Tibet to be an inalienable part of it (Sperling, 2004).

The mass departure of the ethnic Tibetans began in 1950 as a result of the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the accompanying genocide (Roy, 2001). The continuous abuse of human rights by People's Liberation Army (PLA) compelled the Tibetans to seek asylum in India, Nepal, and Bhutan. After 1959, Chinese powers drastically reduced Tibetans' chances for development and stopped the flow of Tibetans into Nepal and India. By doing this, the Chinese border police prevented Tibetans from fleeing to India to escape persecution during the time when Chinese authorities subjected Tibetans to the most blatant violations of order and human rights, which occurred from the middle of the 1960s to the late 1970s. However, a period of relative liberalisation in China began in 1979 with the passing away of the leader Mao Zedong, the cessation of the social turmoil (Tibet Justice Centre, 2011).

As a result of this, many people fled their homeland to join their relatives and associates in India, where they could eventually enjoy considerably greater opportunity, security, and human rights, education despite the fact that they needed recognised legitimate status. Some of the respondents from the community crossed border only a decade and half ago. They narrated their lived experiences of Tibet and how life has been different and much better in India. However, the fear of staying in a different country and not having the 'citizen' identity always daunts them.

Tibetan Refugee Women – Agents of Change

The Tibetan Buddhist women refugees relatively hold a strong position, unlike many South Asian communities. This is because of the matriarchal and matrilineal patterns of descent that has been followed by the community in certain regions (Wang et.al., 2019). Having almost equal say within the community, the Tibetan refugee women challenge the dominant representation of refugee women as marginalised, having no voice of her own and alienated in both her native and host country. They along with sharing their stories of vulnerabilities have also been active agents of transformation (Bose, 1997). They have been able to empower themselves within the constrained

spaces available to them in exile and the role of Tibetan Women Association (TWA) is significant in this regard.

Moreover, the Tibetan government-in-exile taking the issue of women seriously, initiated a Women's Empowerment Desk (WED) in the CTA, which has been fully dedicated for empowering the Tibetan women. Amidst all the challenges that the Tibetan community faced during their plight and in exile, the Tibetan women played extraordinary role as they began to support their families by starting their own businesses, working for themselves, and engaging in a variety of entrepreneurial endeavours that could preserve their rich Tibetan culture. Also, the Tibetan women are politically active in exile. Though they have been assertive even before, but it has only grown and multiplied in the political domain. This also comes from the fact that the Constitution of the Government-in-exile, states equality among the sexes. They are highly active in the governance process, beginning from the grassroot level to the highest level in the Tibetan Parliament (*Kashag)*.

Although Tibetan women have participated in politics and are members of a number of governmental, social, and political organisations, there are not many women in leadership positions. It was only for the first time that three women were approved as *Kalons* (heads) of the 17th Tibetan Parliament, at Dharmsala. Further, out of the 23 camps in both the settlements in Bylakuppe, only two camps have women leaders. All the others are headed by men. It is believed that taking up such roles is not an easy task. This is also because of the conventional gendered roles that are assigned to the women of the community. This narrative became very clear during both the focus group discussions and the interviews. For instance, when enquired about becoming camp leaders during focus group discussion, a majority of them stated, that they would want women to take up such roles. However, they also stated that 'We would not be able to, since the position demands a lot of work and it's difficult to carry it out alongside the responsibilities at the home front.' Thus, the socially constructed gender roles and the economic aspect creates hurdles for women to take up these roles (Balasubramanian and Lathabhavan, 2017; Moua and Riggs, 2012).

Despite facing challenges, the Tibetan women are examples of both change and continuity. They have managed to keep their memories of Tibet alive and at the same time have become accustomed to the lives in exile. Though there is a sense of loss, of being uprooted but the community life and

identity is what has made them feel India – a home away from home. As many of the respondents echoed how 'India has been their second home.' For these refugees, unlike many other, it is relatively trouble-free to maintain their allegiance and commitment to the places that they belong to and the one that they are in.

Though they all aspire to go back to Tibet, but the truth is that they all have made peace with their lives in India. Given the fact that the idea of home is determined by the continuous process of homemaking (Duyvendak, 2011; Smets and Sneep, 2017). By staying in these camps, the community feels secured and have a sense of belongingness, similar to that of life in Tibet. In such cases, the community itself becomes home, being 'both a site and a set of meanings/emotions (Blunt and Dowling, 2006: 22).

Conclusion

In conclusion, forced migration is a complex phenomenon that affects individuals and communities in diverse ways. Addressing the differential impacts of forced migration and its implication, Tibetan refugee women demonstrates resilience, resourcefulness, and the ability to adapt to new environments. It is thus, important to recognize and address the gendered implications of forced migration to ensure that the rights and needs of all individuals are met, regardless of their gender identity. The focus should be more on promoting their rights, education, health, and overall well-being.

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