

A ‘successful’ refugee resettlement programme: the case of Nepal

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More than 100,000 Bhutanese refugees have been found homes in third countries. The other side to the story of this successful resettlement programme, however, is the failure to tackle the impact it has had on the remaining camp populations.

At present, the refugee camps in eastern Nepal are composed of both first-generation and second-generation refugees. Despite not being party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Nepal has hosted refugees from Bhutan for more than two decades. In 2007, a group of eight countries – Australia, Canada, Denmark, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States – agreed to take their share of international responsibility for the Bhutanese refugees and resettle them. However, there are more than 10,000 remaining who are either ineligible for resettlement or not willing to be resettled in a third country; they remain in the refugee camps, living with the consequences of the resettlement programmes.

As the Bhutanese refugees and the host community of Nepal share cultural, linguistic and ethnic affinity, some people chose to marry outside the refugee community; the result is commonly known as a ‘mixed marriage’. According to the prevailing resettlement standard operating procedure applicable in Nepal, a refugee man of a mixed marriage is eligible for resettlement whereas a female refugee of a mixed marriage is not, unless she is divorced. This situation reflects the Nepali Citizenship Act 2006 which states that a foreign woman married to a Nepali man can acquire citizenship but there is currently no provision for citizenship for a foreign man who marries a Nepali woman.¹

On the other hand, being female tends to offer better opportunities for being resettled. One of the categories for submission for resettlement² is ‘women and girls at risk’, giving priority to women and girls being submitted for resettlement over boys and men at risk. Cases of female survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and cases

of female-headed households are submitted as high priority, whereas male survivors are often overlooked in a patriarchal society like Nepal. The same is true for survivors of domestic violence, where female refugees have more chance of being submitted as ‘survivor of violence and torture’ than do male survivors of domestic violence.

Effects on the remaining refugees

It is generally older persons who are not interested in third country resettlement and are being left in the refugee camps, lacking family support and income and facing difficulties in reaching service centres for food rations and health services. When other family members get resettled these older people are isolated, which has led to an increase in cases of depression, suicide and substance abuse in the camps. UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, has launched suicide prevention projects, with psychosocial counselling, and the help of the local police force in controlling the supply and consumption of harmful substances, especially locally made alcohol and harmful drugs.

Resettlement has also caused frequent turnover of the schools’ teaching staff in the camps since it is the policy to recruit all the teachers from the refugee community itself. When a teacher is resettled, students frequently face long gaps before a new teacher, perhaps with new teaching methods, is appointed and both the teacher and students need time to adjust. The process repeats when another teacher gets resettled. Many students lose interest in education and drop out while they are waiting to be resettled³ and many young people doubt that the camp education prepares them

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Older Bhutanese refugee in one of the refugee camps in Nepal.

well for resettlement anyway. To counter the high dropout rate, the schools in the camps have school counsellors to motivate the children. Drop-in-centres and 'youth-friendly' centres have been established to help dropouts to rejoin school and to prevent them from becoming involved in gambling, drug supply and abuse, thieving or fighting. The activities of drop-in centres have no doubt changed some young people but are not able to make a significant change to the overall camp situation.

The resettlement of the refugees from Nepal does increase the income of some families in the camps. Remittances from the resettled relatives enable some families in the camps to achieve a better standard of living, for the children to go to a good school, for the sick to get better health care, and for families to get access to modern technology such as smart phones and computers. Yet the same flow of money has also changed their life style; they no longer go to work but depend on the remittances. Conversely, there are many families who

do not get any support from their resettled relatives. Households headed by old people or women become more vulnerable after the resettlement of their relatives if they cannot work or do not have skills that will enable them to earn. In this situation they become dependent on the support of agencies.

Finally, asylum seekers from other parts of India or Nepal have started coming to the refugee camps in significant numbers – knowing that the resettlement process is open, that their children can have free schooling and that they can get free primary health-care services – and this has consequences for services and security in the camps.

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1. The issue of a Nepali woman marrying a foreign man is under consideration in the new constitution but this has yet to be finalised and put into practice.

2. UNHCR (2011) UNHCR Resettlement Handbook, www.unhcr.org/46f7clee2.pdf

3. Marschilok C (2013) *Resettlement, Education and Anxiety*, Duke University Uprooted/Rerouted report <http://bit.ly/Marschilok2013>