

## Adjusting to the New World: A Study of Bhutanese Refugees' Adaptation in the US

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### Abstract

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Refugee resettlement is a complex process that involves adjustment from both the host community and the newly arrived refugees. Failure to adjust to the new society would develop symptoms of anxiety, depression and psychological distress. This paper discusses the challenges and opportunities experienced by the Bhutanese Nepali or *Lhotsampas* refugees resettled in the US from 2008 onwards. It discusses the result of a qualitative study of 35 resettled Bhutanese in three US cities: Madison, WI, and Scranton and Pittsburgh, PA. Findings suggest for improvement in the resettlement process at the local and national levels.

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### Introduction

More than 80,000 Bhutanese refugees have been resettled in the US since 2008. Compared to their conditions in refugee camps in eastern Nepal, many refugees are happy with the new life in the US. However, it is not a guarantee that everyone will benefit equally. Previous studies on resettlement have highlighted challenges new immigrants face in the US or other developed nation (Kenny and Kenny, 2011). This research looked at some of the adaptation strategies used by newly resettled Bhutanese refugees and challenges they encountered to integrate in the new society. There are successful stories of integration and assimilation of Bhutanese refugees with the broader society interspersed among stories of isolation, failure and desperation culminating in high suicide rates and hopelessness. The objective of this paper is to underscore the complexity of refugee resettlement and issues facing Bhutanese refugees in the US. Using qualitative research methods, the research examined their social relations, structural conditions, cultural history, metaphors and social negotiations in the new society. The paper adds to the increasing literature on refugee resettlement by highlighting the challenges and successful strategies, which would enable governments, agencies and scholars to design effective programs in the future.

The relocation of refugees from the poor living conditions in a refugee camp to an advanced country usually results in a major shift in their lifestyles. Resettled refugees have to learn the host country's language, culture and the environment to succeed in the process. They have to re-construct their reality of the above factors. Failure to adjust to the new society would develop symptoms of anxiety, depression and psychological distress (CDC, 2013). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), inability to find a job and the lack of community support were the major precursors of suicidal ideation among the Bhutanese refugees in the US (CDC, 2013). CDC reported that 16 Bhutanese refugee killed themselves between 2009 and 2012.

The above findings by the CDC suggest the need to study the adjustment process among the newly settled Bhutanese refugees with goals to identify successful strategies and obstacles to their successful adjustment in the local community. It becomes important to explore their meaning of community, natural environment and culture and how they restructure their practices and interactions pertaining to social factors in a new country. This restructuring (reconstruction) enables the refugees to participate in the new culture in the US, while not necessarily affecting their relationship with the old culture. The success of a refugee resettlement program, therefore, depends on how much they are integrated in the existing community.

## Refugee Resettlement

A person claims to be a refugee owing to a fear of being persecuted based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, membership in a particular social group and is living outside the country of his/her nationality (UNHCR, 2011a). Many times refugee populations are generated by wars, civil conflicts, ethnic persecutions and other natural disasters (Cernea and McDowell, 2000). These populations could relocate to different part of the country as internally displaced people (IDP) and/or cross national borders and become international refugees. International refugees persecuted by the government and evicted from the country are different from other migrants because of their inability to return to their country for the above reasons. In 2013, some 42.9 million individuals were of concern to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which is trying to seek durable solutions for them (UNHCR, 2013). The UNHCR recognizes seven categories of people of concern that require assistance: refugees, asylum-seekers, IDPs, stateless persons, returned refugees, returned IDPs and others of concern. One group that is of major concern to the agency is the stateless persons category, which is defined as persons who are not considered as nationals by any state under the operation of its law (UNHCR, 2014). It is this group the agency focuses for resettlement. The agency, under Article II of the 1961 Convention of the Reduction of Statelessness, functions to identify them and assist them and the States concerned to resolve the issue. In 2011, an international effort led by the agency was able to collect data from 64 countries where 3.5 million stateless persons were living. The agency recognizes this number is much higher, 12.5 million, because of lack of data from all countries and discrepancy in the available statistics.

To address the problem of stateless people, the UNHCR created the *Global Action Plan to End Statelessness: 2014* with aim to end statelessness within 10 years (UNHCR, 2014). The plan has goals to resolve existing situations of statelessness, to prevent new cases of statelessness from emerging and to better identify and protect stateless persons, and ten actions: (1) resolve existing major situations of statelessness; (2) ensure that no child is born stateless; (3) remove gender discrimination from nationality laws; (4) prevent denial, loss or deprivation of nationality on discriminatory grounds; (5) prevent stateless in cases of State succession; (6) grant protection status to stateless migrants and facilitate their naturalization; (7) ensure birth registration for the prevention of statelessness; (8) issue nationality documentation to those with entitlement to it; (9) accede to the UN Statelessness Conventions; and (10) improve quantitative and qualitative data on stateless populations. Although, resettlement in another country is not in the action plan, in recent years the agency has successfully resettled thousands of individuals in third-countries. In 2013, the agency had resettled over 93, 200 refugees in 21 different countries. The top countries that accepted these people were the USA, Australia, Canada, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

There are three approaches to analyze refugee resettlement (UNHCR, 2002). The first is assimilation where new arrivals settle by adopting ways of the receiving community. The second is integration, where resettlement is seen as a two-way process in which both the newcomer and the receiving community adapt and learn each other's ways. The third is multiculturalism, which supports newcomers to retain their culture of origin, while enabling them to participate equally in the new society. Of the three approaches, majority of nations accepting refugees and international organizations use integration as a benchmark of resettlement. At the international level, integration of resettled refugees in the local society is measured using legal, economic, social and cultural indicators (UNHCR, 2014). As a legal process, refugees are granted entitlements and rights in par with local citizens that would lead them to acquire citizenship in the country of asylum. In addition, it would guarantee political rights and non-discriminatory access to institutions and services. The socio-economic integration is measured if the refugees attained self-reliance through their participation and contribution to the local economy. Finally, the cultural process looks if refugees are able to live among or alongside the local population, free of discrimination or exploitation. Therefore, successful refugee integration is an ongoing process, which continues even after refugees obtain citizenship in the host country. ChurchWorld Services, an organization working with refugees in the US defines successful refugee integration as:

Integration is a long-term process, through which refugees and host communities communicate effectively, function together and enrich each other, expand employment options and create economic opportunities, and have mutual respect and understanding among people of different cultures (Dwyer, 2010).

Since 1975, the US has accepted more than 3 million refugees from different countries through the US Refugee Admissions Program (Nezer, 2013). In recent years, US has accepted more than half of all resettled refugees (UNHCR 2014; Nezer, 2013). In 2012, US admitted refugees of more than 69 nationalities who were living in 92 different countries. The fact that the country is made up of immigrants does not guarantee a good welcome from local communities. Refugees, the American government and the people have a long and complicated relationship that can be summed up as:

The American experience with refugees over the past seventy years has ranged from acceptance to rejection, from well-wrought program efforts to botched policy decisions, from humanitarian concerns to crass politics. The U.S. Department of State has been both the fabricator of paper walls to exclude refugees and the locus of intense efforts to move them quickly into the United States. Religious and secular voluntary agencies have been lauded for their efforts on behalf of refugees and chided for providing inconsistent services. Refugees themselves have been characterized as true American success stories and criticized as overly dependent on public welfare. The American people, in turn, have often been impressively generous on their welcome of refugees but at other times neglectful, disinterested, and sometimes hostile (Haines, 2010: 1).

Despite the complicated relationship, America remains a safe haven for international refugees and attracts people of various backgrounds. A total of 69,909 refugees were admitted to the US in 2013 (Martin and Yankay, 2014). The majority of them were nationals of Bhutan, Burma and Iraq. The UNHCR and US consider the resettlement in third country as a durable solution, and perhaps, alternative, to stateless refugees (DHS, 2014). The Department of State manages a program of initial resettlement for newly arriving refugees through its Reception and Placement Program. The program in collaboration with public and private and nonprofit agencies provide refugees with initial resettlement services and referrals to other services as needed. In addition, the Office of Refugee Resettlement provides assistance to the newly arrived refugees to achieve economic self-sufficiency.

The lure of the American Dream and the prospect of a better future attracts thousands refugees every year. This influx of new people has created new challenges to the US public administration, local community and resettled refugees. Some of these challenges include the re-establishment of their disrupted social networks, teaching English and adjusting to an urban and industrial society, and turning them into functioning, successful Americans (Haines, 2010). Furthermore, the lack of a national policy on refugee integration, the lack of a standardized set of core program elements, economic self-sufficiency factors, and managing the dynamics of refugee admissions poses additional challenges to the relief organizations (Dwyer, 2010). On the other hand, the resettlement provides hopes and opportunities for a new beginning for thousands of persons and adds to America's vitality and diversity by making substantial contributions to its economy and culture. For example, in Wisconsin about 95 percent of resettled refugees in the last 30 years have achieved self-sufficiency. To minimize challenges and expand opportunities for the future refugees we can learn from the newly settled groups and make changes to improve the program.

### **Bhutanese Refugees in the US**

Bhutan is a small land-locked country bordered between China to the North and India to the South. This sparsely populated nation, with a population of 733, 033, amidst the Himalayas self-advertises as a "fairy tale land." Bhutan officially recognizes four ethnicities: *Ngalong* in the west, the central Bhutanese, the *Sharchopin* in the east, and the *Lhotsampas* or Nepali Bhutanese in the south. However, the Bhutanese commonly distinguish themselves between the Buddhist *Drukpas* of the north and the Hindu Nepali *Lhotsampas* of the south (Hutt, 2005). The history of Bhutanese Nepali can be traced to eastern Nepal from where they migrated to Bhutan in the late 1890s. Originally, the government of Bhutan recruited them to clear the jungles in southern Bhutan who later settled there and were ethnicized as the *Lhotsampas*. In 1958, they were granted citizenship by the Bhutanese government under the Nationality Law (HRW, 2003). However, in the 1970s the increasing population of ethnic Nepalese and their involvement in politics was perceived by the regime as a cultural and political threat. In 1988, the *Lhotsampas* made up 45% of the population of Bhutan (IOM, 2008). This threat amplified after the neighboring Sikkim with a Nepali majority supported a merger with India (HRW, 2003) and a growing demand for statehood by the Nepali origin people in the state of West Bengal, India. These regional events prompted the government of Bhutan to introduce laws and policies aimed to suppress any demands from the ethnic Nepalese.

In 1988, the Bhutanese government revoked the citizenship rights of *Lhotsampas* and re-classified them as 'illegal immigrants' despite their having documentation of citizenship. In 1989 King Jigme Singey Wangchuk enacted the 'One Bhutan, One People' policy that privileged Buddhist culture and religion and discriminated against Hindus of Nepali origin (Rizal, 2004; IOM, 2008). As a result of the policy, Nepali language was removed from school curricula and made it mandatory for the entire population to wear national dress of the north. The Bhutanese Nepali resisted the policy.

In response to protests and demonstrations from the minority Bhutanese Nepali, the government forcibly evicted over 100,000 *Lhotsampas* from the country (Kiptinness and Dharod, 2011; Shrestha, 2010). As India refused to accept them, the *Lhotsampas* entered Nepal as refugees in the early 1990s. The UNHCR established the first camps in Eastern Nepal in 1992 that housed over 105,000 refugees. After nearly two decades of 15 unsuccessful negotiations between Nepal and Bhutan, the UNHCR started a resettlement program in 2007 to find homes for the displaced Bhutanese (Gurung and Baidya, 2010). The United States was among the countries willing to receive them; other nations included Australia, Canada, Denmark, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and United Kingdom.

The first batch of Bhutanese Nepali arrived in the US in 2008. Between 2008 and 2015, US had resettled 80,413 Bhutanese refugees across the country (Department of State, 2015). They were resettled in 42 states, including Alaska, with the most in Pennsylvania, New York, Texas, Ohio and Georgia (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). In these states, several Voluntary Agencies (VOLAGs) coordinated with the local government to assist the newly arriving refugees. They arranged housing and food, supported them financially for eight months, and connected them with state and federal welfare programs like SNAP, WIC, Medicaid and ELS classes. In Wisconsin, qualifying individuals received \$653/month as assistance to start a new life. Other states also provided similar amount in assistance. After the initial support for six to eight months, refugees are expected to get an employment and become economically independent. Nevertheless, VOLAGs continue supporting families and individuals beyond the initial eight months. The extended support does not provide any monetary benefits to refugees who already received benefits but it is focused to assist individuals with disability and others lacking English language, and training them for employment and citizenship. In Madison, WI, community members volunteered for various agencies to act as partners in helping refugees with their needs: education, employment, health appointments, document interpretation, public transportation, and housing. The role of VOLAGs has been crucial for successful refugee resettlement in the US (Wright, 1981). The VOLAGs function as a guardian and continue their advocacy and support to the refugees for many years; however, in many communities newly formed Bhutanese Nepali organizations are becoming the primary source of information and services for their members. For example, in Philadelphia, the newly formed Bhutanese American Organization provides ESL, citizenship and Nepali language classes, religious services, youth empowerment programs and health care services. Similar organizations are active in many states assisting members to adapt successfully.

There are only a few studies looking at Bhutanese refugees' resettlement in the US. Early health screening studies revealed a low level of psychiatric and non-communicable diseases among them (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). However, in the short period in the US several cases of suicide and mental health issues have been reported. Between 2009 and 2012, 16 suicides were reported by the Department of the Health and Human Services (highest for any refugee groups). An investigation by the CDC found that the most common post-migration challenges contributing to mental health issues were language barriers, worries about family back home, separation from family and difficulty maintaining cultural and religious traditions (CDC, 2012). The report mentioned high level of anxiety, depression and distress among the surveyed refugees. In a study, looking at the factors associated with symptoms of depression by Vonnahme et al (2014) found more women than men reported depression symptoms. Factors associated with depression symptoms were not having enough income, poor health and inability to read and write. Another study by Kumar et al. (2014) found nearly 59 percent of Bhutanese Nepali visiting a clinic in Atlanta had at least one chronic disease. Their analysis further found a high level of overweight, obesity and diabetes among the refugees (52 percent).

Looking at the dietary practices of Bhutanese Nepali refugees, Kiptinness and Dharod (2011) found many families depended on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to buy food items. They reported the majority of Bhutanese women continued preparing traditional meals with rice and lentils. The authors see dietary habits and food types as an important indicator of acculturation process for new refugees. However, globalization and interconnectivity has made easier for immigrants to buy and consume their traditional foods.

As a result, food habits may not be an indicator of acculturation anymore. In Scranton and Pittsburgh, there were Nepali grocery stores selling all kinds of food including the most traditional food like *ghundruk*, *masaura* and *gabat*.

Benson et al. (2011), examined the relationship between religious coping and acculturation stress among the newly settled Bhutanese refugees in southern US. Their research found that religious coping among Hindu Bhutanese was positively associated with environmental and social stress. Higher level of English proficiency and higher levels of education were associated with lower levels of stress. Age, marital status and employment were also significantly associated with social stress. Strong religious and cultural values could also affect the acculturation process. The study recommends health workers to understand these values and to tailor interventions and programs to the specific needs of Bhutanese refugees.

Ott (2011) reported an increase in secondary migration among the Bhutanese refugees, in pursuit of better life, during the early years of resettlement in the US. He found that more and more Bhutanese were moving to Pittsburgh from other states and the city has become the preferred choice among the newly arrived refugees. Similar secondary migration of a group of Bhutanese families resettled in New York City to other states was reported by Semple (2010). As a result of such migration, several cities in the US have become a hub for Bhutanese. Employment opportunities, proximity to family members and strong community support attract them to these cities. The prevalence of depression or mental health problems among the refugees is not unique to the Bhutanese Nepali. Other refugees resettled in the US reported a higher prevalence of depression and anxiety, compared to national average. Traumatic events, displacement and initial adjustment challenges contribute to depression symptoms (Vonnahme et al., 2014). However, the high prevalence of depression symptoms among the Bhutanese refugees (21 %) compared to other refugees resettled in the US (5%) is a major concern. Lack of appropriate support and treatment could lead to a bigger health problem for this group. The connection between adaptation to the new society and mental health issues suggests the need for more research to identify successful strategies and implementing them. This study will contribute to the increasing literature on refugee resettlement in developed countries in general and strategies for successful adjustment among the Bhutanese refugees in US.

### **Research Methodology**

The study participants consisted of a sample of 35 adult Bhutanese Nepali refugees living in three cities: Madison, WI; and Scranton and Pittsburgh, PA. The majority of the respondents were male, married, employed, and with limited education and English language skills. Participants included: 15 people (11 male and 4 female) in Madison, 10 people (8 male and 2 female) in Scranton and 10 people (all male) in Pittsburgh. The age range of the participants was from 20 to 80 years and they had arrived between 2008 and 2011.

The research employed qualitative methods like observation, key informant interviews, and secondary data analysis to collect and analyze information. Key informants for the research were selected using snow-balling sampling technique. After an initial contact with the community leader, the research proceeded by identifying other informants until their responses were saturated or repeated. For the interview, the author tried to ensure participants represented both gender and people from various social statuses in the community such as age, income, caste and number of years in the US. Study design and procedures were reviewed by the university institutional review board.

Both the interview and group discussion were conducted in Nepali language. Responses were audio recorded and later transcribed and translated to English for analysis. Participants were handed a confidentiality form and informed on the various procedures to keep the information confidential. Questions for interviews and group discussions related to refugee's adjustment in the new society: How frequently you meet other members of the community? When was the last time a community gathering of Bhutanese held? Do you participate in community activities organized by non-Bhutanese members? What major strategies did you apply to adjust to the new society? What are the major challenges for your successful resettlement in the US? What are the areas the resettlement program needs improvement?

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Balancing the Relationship with two Communities**

A community is defined as a geographical location where a group of people live and interact with each other towards a collective action. To the refugees there are two communities they have to navigate. One is the local community in which they live and the other is the ethnic community (in this case the Bhutanese) they belong to.

Participants in all three cities expressed mixed feelings about the local community. In all three cities, participants' response to the question on the local community began with positive views on the weather, diversity, people, roads and infrastructures, schools and quality of life. When it came to discuss their interaction and assimilation in the local community, their views and experiences differed with the location. For example, in Madison all respondents were mostly appreciative of the local people for their friendliness and openness towards them. As one resident stated;

The weather is good and has good transportation. People are friendly and we sometimes invite them to our cultural events and local families and agencies help us with lot of things like job training, English language and kids education. But there are also issues with local neighbors with cooking and smell. There are also issues with housing and jobs (Madison).

However, in Scranton and Pittsburgh participants had very mixed feelings about the local community. Respondents mostly complained about their challenges adjusting to the community.

We are not able to understand everything about local people. There is little interaction with them. We had number of issues with smoke and smell from our cooking with the neighbors. As a result, we have not been able to do any rituals outside the apartments (Scranton).

There is no direct or open discrimination against us; however, some parts of the city are still not open to outsiders. They do not want to interact. Otherwise, most people are welcoming and we even do multicultural activities in the city. In some parts we are targeted by some people and assaulted verbally and physically. One of the Bhutanese killed himself as a result of such incidents (Pittsburgh).

Several reasons could be contributing to these reactions. Foremost is the socio-economic background of the local community having a big influence on people's values and attitudes towards outsiders. The Bhutanese resettlement began in 2008, when the financial crisis started, and continued through the recession. Many communities in the US were coping with impacts of the crisis that affected individuals and families as they lost jobs, income and homes. A comparison of the unemployment rate during the recession (2008, 2010 and 2013) in these cities explains people's attitudes to the refugees- Scranton (6.2, 10.5 & 7.6); Pittsburgh (4.6, 8.6 & 6.3); and Madison (3.5, 6.9 & 3.9) (<https://research.stlouisfed.org/>). As a result, resentment towards outsiders especially the new refugees was high in areas with high unemployment rate. In addition, household income and employment opportunities would have added towards their dislike of outsiders. For example, Madison is an emerging center of technology, bio-medical and education opportunities with an average household income of \$54,000. Whereas both Pittsburgh (\$40,000) and Scranton (\$37,000) are previous industrial town with many social issues which would have fueled such resentment towards outsiders. Other reason for antipathy from the local people could be the refugees' rural background and its associated adjustment to the modern life style. Local integration of refugees is considered as one of the key indicators for successful refugee resettlement (UNHCR, 2013). In the case of Bhutanese refugees, it is too early to conclude if they are integrated. Social integration is a long process, as proven by the early refugees from South East Asia (Lee and Green, 2010.). However, it is important to establish a way to evaluate this process with goals to create a diverse community. Otherwise we will end up with ethnic enclaves, like in the cities, that are isolated from the larger community, are less contributing to the diversity and become source of various social problems.

The second community refugees deal with is their own ethnic community. Even though, they originate from the same country, they differ in many ways. As a result, intra-community relationship among Bhutanese was different in the three cities. In Madison, the Bhutanese community was in the formation stage with no clear direction and leadership. Many efforts to bring people together had failed mainly due to low commitment, lack of time and employment challenges. Several residents were concerned with the absence of educated leadership in the community and the attitude among the Bhutanese wanting to become a leader but failing to lead. In Pittsburgh, the sense of community was very strong, at least in the group the author interacted. The leaders were engaged with member issues and had solved some of the issues. To assist local Bhutanese with issues on religion, yoga, community activities, social service resources, citizenship preparation and English language a local nonprofit organization has been established. The Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh (BCAP) is a 501(c)3 registered organization committed to serve the community through education (<http://www.bhutaneseacap.org>). The BCAP is recognized by the Pittsburgh City Council that proclaimed December 9 as the Bhutanese Community Day. This recognition by the city is an achievement for the Bhutanese and the city in strengthening diversity in the area. There are now a number of Bhutanese organizations active in Texas, New Hampshire, Vermont, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Iowa and Ohio.

In Scranton, attempts to establish a community organization have halted because of factions within the community. According to one resident, the initial community organization was challenged by a group of people who went on to establish a second organization in the city. As a result, the community was divided and there have not been any social activities in recent years. One of the major reasons for such faction in the community was due to the lack of leadership and differences among people coming from different refugee camps. Another resident added, as the number of Bhutanese has increased in the area it has been difficult to arrange an event that fits with the schedule of all. The lack of solidarity within the Bhutanese community and the resentment from the local population might have contributed to the secondary migration to places where the refugees were more united, Pittsburgh.

### **Challenges for Successful Integration for Bhutanese Refugees**

Like any migrants in a new country, the Bhutanese Nepalese resettled in the US face many challenges. These challenges are as simple as paying utility bills to the impact of immigration policy. Some of the challenges identified by the respondents included: English language skills, Nepali language centers, home ownership, rental issues, unemployment, discrimination, religious and cultural opportunities, mental health, support for elderly, access to higher education, citizenship process and assimilation in the community. In addition to the above issues, there were deep concerns with newer challenges in the Bhutanese community related to alcoholism and drunk driving, domestic violence, gambling, low-skilled employment and financial mismanagement.

The number one concern for the Bhutanese was English language proficiency. They believe solving this would address almost all other issues. Lack of English language skills, many Bhutanese were struggling to communicate in their neighborhood, workplace, and during travel. Overall, it was inhibiting them from becoming a member of the community. Only the young and middle age members, who had some education in the refugee camps, were successful in acquiring the language skills, which enabled them to advance. They were able to enroll in colleges and find jobs in hospitals and other establishments. Many Bhutanese without English skills were, therefore, working in the low skilled jobs. The elderly and women with no formal education were the most affected. These folks in their late fifties or older were apprehensive about their prospects of living the US without any English skills. They were frustrated with their inability to grasp the language and as a result were going through social and psychological issues. Majority of the elderly and other participants cited the high suicide rate by Bhutanese as an example of desperation borne out of their inability to live up to the expectations. Furthermore, the older members, in all three cities, were equally concerned with the challenge of attaining the citizenship without any language skills. Several older women had lost hope of learning the language and passing the citizenship test. Even though they were taking English language classes, which were for many elderly their first literacy class, they were not near to the level to pass the citizenship test. Even the younger people were skeptical of the elders passing the test and sounded worried. The only hope the older folks had was the support from the community and family members. Without a citizenship, many fear they will be unable to receive social benefits and become dependent on their family. As one participant made it clear:

If I do not pass the citizenship test, I will lose all social welfare benefits, because of English I cannot find a job, and in the end only option for me is to kill myself. I am very serious about it and I am not alone. If the US government does not address this, it will witness a mass suicide among the Bhutanese in coming years.

The above statement imposes seriousness of the issue which has been confirmed with recent suicide among the Bhutanese (CDC, 2012). Almost everyone was concerned with the mental health issues among the 50-65 years old members of their community, which was affecting the younger generations as they had to take in and support their parents.

The second biggest challenge Bhutanese were facing was related to housing and renting property. All refugees were put in a rented property, mostly in a public housing or low cost apartments, by the VOLAGs when they arrived in the US. Many of these properties were located in poorer parts of the city with limited access to transportation and other services. This limited their mobility to find employment and other services. Many families in the early months of resettlement also had issues with modern lifestyle, especially with using appliances, waste disposal, cooking and plumbing. Some families were evicted for destroying property and not paying the rent in time. Some of the most common “wrongdoings” were putting hot pans in kitchen counter tops, clogging toilet and bathroom drainage, and breaking doors and windows.

If not for the sponsor families and the VOLAGs, lot more families would have been evicted. Although, many of the above issues have been solved; however, there were still issues with cooking style that uses too much spices and oil. The pungent smell of spices mixed with sanitation and hygiene, many Bhutanese were snubbed by their neighbors and co-workers. As a result, early-arrived refugees make sanitation and hygiene the number one priority to teach newly arriving refugees.

The third biggest challenge was employment. Majority of Bhutanese in the study areas were employed in low-skill jobs earning minimum wage with few or no benefits. These jobs were not enough to cover basic expenses and many families relied on public assistance to cover their expenses. Despite the lower income, many respondents were happy with the life in the US compared to their life in refugee camps in Nepal. For many families this was a major improvement to their camp life; however, as time progresses living pay-check to pay-check would become the biggest issue for the Bhutanese. How long can they survive on minimum wage? Is this enough to achieve the 'American Dream'? Some have even started to look into the future and ask the above questions. Others are putting off that topic for the future. They all agree it is an important issue requiring a solution. Lack of English language skills, discrimination and low-skill jobs correlate to mental health issues among the Bhutanese.

In addition to the above issues, number of participants expressed concerns with newer social problems within the Bhutanese communities. These problems stemmed from their poor understanding of financial realities of the society. For example, participants in Pittsburgh and Scranton reported how several individuals had borrowed large loan amount to buy expensive vehicles and homes but were unable to make regular payments. Similarly, many young people had gotten into gambling and were bankrupt. There were also cases of domestic violence because of alcoholism, drug abuse and financial insecurity in those areas. Bhutanese community leaders and VOLAGs leaders were alarmed with the rise in cases of domestic violence and arrest for driving under the influence of alcohol. They complained how the new problems were undermining the efforts of other members in succeeding in the society. Despite the above challenges, there were successful stories of individuals as a testimony under the right conditions that hardworking people can succeed in the US.

### **Successful Strategies and Examples of Integration**

In the short time in the US, several Bhutanese were successful in the areas of employment, education and business. People behind these stories attributed their success to hard work and taking advantage of the opportunities available to them in the US. There were also questions about the subjective nature of success in the society. What is success? How do we measure it? Should we compare within the Bhutanese community or compare with the broader society to measure success? These questions posed by the respondents connected well with the larger question of measuring successful resettlement of refugees in advanced countries. Even though, the UN and the host nations have their own interpretation and measurement of success, the refugees' understanding is very subjective.

Here are some of the statements Bhutanese considered as indicators of success: owning a house, stable employment, college education, US citizenship, mastering English language, owning a business, educating children, not depending on welfare, being accepted in the society, support the family, and practicing Nepali culture. To support these interpretations the respondents provided examples of people who had achieved one or more of the above indicators of success. For example, many people in Pittsburgh mentioned how few Bhutanese have been employed in a good company or office. In Scranton, several participants looked towards those who owned house as success. Some provided examples of their children enrolled in college and the prospect of good employment as a result of that education as success. In Madison, employment and house ownership were top of their list as an indicator of success. The majority of respondent in the area identified the same few individuals, who were employed in the health sector, as being successful.

The above subjective interpretations of success are critical for successful resettlement of refugees; however, the key for the resettlement process to succeed is to tie those interpretations within the larger picture of success as identified by the UNHCR: assimilation, integration and multiculturalism. America is a nation of immigrants; nevertheless, recent backlash from local communities against outsiders (recent immigrants) casts doubts in the resettlement process. The examples of discrimination and discriminatory incidents in the study areas raise questions if the Bhutanese will fully integrate in the society. There were reports from across the country where local people were protesting against the influx of refugees in their communities and demanding to stop the process (Goodnough, 2011).



When some political leaders support and add fuel to the anti-immigration sentiments it raises questions if the American society is really open to assimilation, integration and multiculturalism. Prevalence of such values in the society has a polarizing effect in the resettlement process resulting in ethnic enclaves that are isolated from the larger society. Although there are clear benefits to the ethnic members from living in groups, it also poses challenges and undermines the goal of establishing a multi-ethnic society. The purpose of current and future resettlement of refugees must be to reduce the level of isolation and promote integration of refugees and local population.

Such integration is critical to the older age group who has limited access to employment and relocation to new areas. They being part of the society is vital for their well-being, which in turn will allow younger people to seek opportunities away from their parents. Furthermore, integration of older people would make them less dependent on their family members. To accomplish a true multi-culture and multi-ethnic society requires several changes in the host communities and within the refugee communities as well. Some of the issues identified by the research participants that require solutions included: space or infrastructure to practice their religion and culture, adequate training in language and job skills which would lead to long-term employment opportunities, legislative changes to enable uneducated middle aged people to obtain citizenship, Nepali language classes or schools, and affordable housing and extension of welfare benefits to elderly people.

### **Conclusion**

Refugee resettlement process is a complex process, which present challenges to host communities and the refugees. As a nation, the US has considerable experience with resettlement beginning in the early 1970s and has successfully resettled thousands of refugees in the last five decades. However, as this research showed each group of refugee present new challenges to the process. The Bhutanese Nepali refugee crisis started in the early 1990s when the Bhutan government revoked their citizenship and evicted most them out of the country. After living in refugee camps in western Nepal for 20 years, several developed countries agreed to resettle them and the US was one of them. Starting in 2008, Bhutanese refugees began to arrive to the US. So far, more than 80,000 of them have been resettled in multiple cities in the US.

The goal of any resettlement program is to fully integrate refugees in the host society. This integration can occur at different levels like financial independent, employment, education and the ultimate goal to achieve citizenship of the host nation. This research showed that the Bhutanese Nepali refugees in the US have been successful in transitioning to the newer society and have achieved success in several areas. However, the rate of success is correlated with their age and background. As discussed above, age and gender of refugee is a strong determinant of success. Similarly, education and past occupation influence their chances of success. As a result, younger and educated, mostly male, Bhutanese are no different from the local population in their lifestyle. They own homes, have a stable income, ride cars and consume things as local people. From their point of view, the whole resettlement process has succeeded. However, a larger section of the Bhutanese refugees are middle aged or older and lack skills the younger group possesses. As a result, many are struggling to meet their daily needs, not able to understand local culture, unsuccessful in adopting the modern lifestyle and confronting challenges in every aspect of their life. Unable to adjust to the new life, many elderly have killed themselves in the US. Many old participants commented about the uncertainty of living in the US and even compared to living in another refugee camp as dependents. From their perspective, the whole resettlement process is a failure.

Overall, the refugee resettlement program has provided Bhutanese Nepali a future, where everyone has equal chances to succeed. Majority of the Bhutanese were happy to have resettled in the US as a prospect for the younger generation. Even the older people are happy, despite all the challenges, living in the US. As one elderly participants said, "we are happy, we don't have to wait anymore for food aid." This study presented insights of the resettlement process from as experienced by the newly resettled Bhutanese refugees. The small sample size and few study areas may not represent all Bhutanese Nepali in the US; however, from the conversation with the research participants and informal contacts in other cities where Bhutanese refugees were resettled, the whole adjustment process is very similar- the young and educated are doing well while the older and uneducated are struggling. This research confirms the complexity of the resettlement process and hopes to expand the study in other areas. It is also hoped future resettlement programs would restructure their agendas to match the socio-cultural backgrounds of the incoming refugees. Below are some of the recommendations identified by the Bhutanese refugees that could benefit the concerned agencies:

- Start English language classes in refugee camps to make at least one family member proficient in English;
- Include local people or refugee member in the training and orientation programs in the US and in refugee camps;
- Encourage informal interactions with the training instructors;
- Extend financial and other support for at least a year;
- Facilitate or establish a community space where refugees and local people can interact;
- Provide support for continued practice of religion and culture; and
- Change the legislation to enable the less educated and older people to attain citizenship.

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